Detecting the Dane: re-creating Shakespearian genre in A level literature

Victoria Elliott, Department of Education, University of Oxford, Oxford, UK.

Abstract

There is a well-established practice in schools in England of 'retro-fitting' genre to Shakespeare's plays, namely, considering them within a genre which did not exist at the time of writing. This article explores a contemporary example: Hamlet studied as crime writing. The justification for studying the play through this lens is explored, and the ways in which this relates to concepts of genre. While rejecting the justifications offered by the syllabus in which this play is set, a presentist approach suffices to allow the consideration of Hamlet as crime. The article considers the possible insights offered into the play, and reciprocally into the genre, by using the lens of crime writing to consider Hamlet. The enjoyability of such an approach is acknowledged, but the potential downsides for students who encounter the play in this way are also considered.

Keywords: *Hamlet*, genre, curriculum, crime writing

There is a long and honourable tradition of retro-fitting genre to Shakespeare in schools. By retro-fitting I mean taking a genre which did not exist at the time of the play's writing and considering that play within it. So rather than being among the genres acknowledged by Polonius in *Hamlet* itself, that is, "tragedy, comedy, history, pastoral, pastorical-comical, historical-pastoral, tragical-historical, tragical-comical-historical-pastoral, scene individable or poem unlimited" (2.2.398-401), a different, more modern genre is applied. This paper deals with a specific example of retro-fitting within a new A level English Literature syllabus published by AQA: *Hamlet* as an example of crime writing. Mentioning this generic attribution at various events with school teachers and with English scholars I have been greeted with

surprise, if not incredulity[1]. (Although it is interesting to note that John Scaggs includes *Hamlet* in his historical account of *Crime Fiction*[2].)In this article I will consider the theoretical justification for such an attribution, before turning to consider how fitting *Hamlet* within this genre re-creates the play and what, if any, fresh insights it offers.

Historically, that is reaching back at least fifteen years in secondary schools in England, the genre which has been 'retro-fitted' to Shakespeare's plays in this way is that of the Gothic, usually applied to *Macbeth* but also to some extent to *Hamlet*. Yet this is not quite a retro-fitting, for the originators of the Gothic genre drew deeply on Shakespeare as a 'legitimising strategy' through his 'authority' as John Drakakis has said[3]. Walpole himself in his introduction to *The Castle of Otranto* tell us:

> The very impatience which a reader feels, while delayed by the coarse pleasantries of vulgar actors from arriving at the knowledge of the important catastrophe he expects, perhaps heightens, certainly proves that he has been artfully interested in the depending event. But I have higher authority than my own opinion for his conduct. That great master of nature, Shakespeare, was the model I copied.[4]

The originators of the Gothic drew on Shakespeare's use of magical plots, dark settings, supernatural devices and 'paraphernalia of death'[5] to both legitimise and create their genre. While *Macbeth* sits easily within this frame, with its witches, castle setting, foreboding of the raven croaking Duncan's fatal entrance and much else, *Hamlet* can also be clearly fitted within the genre. As Drakakis argues '*The Castle of Otranto* is a version of *Hamlet*, and the secret

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[1] Victoria Elliott, 'Genre as a threshold concept', unpublished paper delivered at the conference 'English Shared Futures' (Newcastle, 5–7 July 2017); 'Shoehorning Shakespeare into genre studies in the new A level', unpublished paper delivered as part of the Sidelights on Shakespeare seminar series (University of Warwick, 10th March 2016); 'Retrofitting genre to Shakespeare in A level English', unpublished paper presented at Shakespeare and Education conference (University of Brighton, 28th-29th April, 2016).
[2] John Scaggs, *Crime Fiction* (London, 2005).
[3] John Drakakis, 'Introduction', in *Gothic Shakespeares*, eds. J. Drakakis & D. Townshend (Abingdon and New York, 2008), p.1.
[4] Horace Walpole, *The Castle of Otranto* (Oxford, London and New York, 1969) p. 8.
[5] Drakakis, *Gothic*, p. 1.

passageways, ghosts and general atmosphere of foreboding have informed performances of the play up to and including Laurence Olivier's 1947 film."[6]

With Gothic the precedent was set for considering Shakespeare within genre studies at A level in English secondary schools. The new AQA English Literature 'B' syllabus, taught for the first time from September 2015, first examined in 2017, is a syllabus built around genre studies: 'Genre study is at the heart of English Literature B.'[7] In the first year this involves the studying of Comedy or Tragedy, which even Polonius would have recognised as genres, but in the second, students study a unit called 'Elements of Crime Writing' or 'Elements of Social and Political Protest Writing'. Among the text options for the former are *Hamlet* and for the latter *Henry IV pt ii.* AQA themselves acknowledge this with the statement that:

> 'Just as meanings of texts are not fixed, neither are definitions of genre, which frequently change and become blurred. The texts offered, therefore, are not necessarily classic examples of established genres, and this is reflected in the modifying words 'aspects of' and 'elements of'.'[8]

It is at this point that we must consider the nature of genre in relation to literary texts. The traditional, 'Aristotelian' model considers genre as a taxonomy, a system of categorisation in which texts belong in specific genres. (In truth the taxonomic application of genre has gone far beyond what Aristotle suggested in *On Poetry*, and the categories have gone far beyond his. I shall continue to describe this model as 'Aristotelian' for ease of reference, however.) In this model 'genre comes to be seen as a rigid trans-historical class exercising control over the texts which it generates."[9] This is certainly the perception of genre which operates in schools, in which genre theory has been a predominant system for the teaching of text-types in writing for some years. That is, a model in which the features of different kinds of texts are taught and writing is

[6] Drakakis, *Gothic*, p. 4.
[7] AQA, *AS AND ALEVEL ENGLISH LITERATURE B œSpecification*, (Manchester, 2014), p. 19.
[8] AQA, *Specification*, p. 19
[9] John Frow, *Genre* (Abingdon and New York, 2015), p. 24.

assessed in relation to text types and genres (such as ' to describe, narrate, explain '[10]). In a chapter in the foundational text for genre approaches in school teaching, Mary Macken and Diana Slade describe a unit on fairytales, in which 'the students had spent quite a lot of time considering the structure of narrative, the kinds of characters and events possible in the world of the fairytale.... when it came to writing their own fairytales, therefore, they had a basic knowledge of the criteria against which these would be assessed.'[11] Genre theory approaches to teaching, therefore, operate both in terms of the larger genres or purposes, and on the smaller level, in terms of specific text types and what we might call literary genres. Informed by the requirements of the now defunct National Literacy Strategy Framework for Teaching English, which included objectives such as: 'R14 Recognise the conventions of some common literary forms, e.g. sonnet, and genres, e.g. Gothic horror, and explore how a particular text adheres to or deviates from the established conventions'[12], teachers' guides have suggested activities which draw on this approach, which 'identify key features' or

> 'ask the students to write short text extracts in the style of other genres (e.g. romantic fiction, science fiction, historical fiction, fantasy, epic). Can other members of the group correctly identify the text type they have written?'[13]

For the most part texts taught up to the age of 16 are placed in generic categories and taught as such, based on their main storyline or subject, with Gothic and crime being particular favourites at Key Stage 3, as the *Times Educational Supplement* resources website will attest. A taxonomic generic approach persists even at GCSE, where poetry is typically taught in theme based groups such as 'war and conflict' or 'love and relationships'. I recently interviewed some

[10] Department for Education, *English language GCSE subject content and assessment objectives* (London, 2013), p. 5.
[11] Mary Macken and Diana Slade, 'Assessment: A Foundation for Effective Learning in the School Context', in *The Powers of Literacy: A Genre Approach to Teaching Writing* , eds. Bill Cope and Mary Kalantzis (London and Washington, 1993), 203–230, p. 215.
[12] Requirement given in Department for Education and Skills *Framework for Teaching English: Years 7, 8 and 9. The National Literacy Strategy* (London, 2001), p. 29. Quoted extensively in teachers' guides such as Geoff Reilly & Wendy Wren, *Framework English Teachers' Guide 2* (London, 2003), p. 48, and Simon Adorian, Beth Brooke & Lyn Caudreau, *101 Red Hot English Starters* (London,2002), p. 82.
[13] Adorian *et al. Red Hot English Starters*, p. 82.

teachers about their poetry teaching, and they suggested that such a clustering approach acted asa scaffold for students to undertake unseen analysis, in effect by giving them a sense of generic features to look for, a system which was eminently familiar from their previous English curriculum. At A level it has also been common to see a strong generic identification used to group texts for study; I have in my past taught 'The Gothic' and 'Dystopia' for qualifications which required students to assess to what extent an individual text conformed or contested the generic features expected of it.

Genre-based approaches originated in Australia and aimed to promote socio-economic parity by explicitly teaching the kinds of generic knowledge which some children assimilated from their home environment.[14] This related not only to reading but also to writing, with specific text types forming the model for learning to write and for the assessment of writing. The genre approach to writing has been criticised because it is 'dominated by learning the rules of a genre rather than focusing on what the pupils wish to express'[15] but critiques of this sort are widely found because the approach remains widespread. The conventions of genre are regarded as rules, to which one adheres or deviates, rather than as aspects which may be manipulated or combined. Within this context, in the absence of some substantial and deliberate reconfiguring of the concept, it is inescapable that teachers and students should continue to regard genre as a taxonomy as they proceed to the study of literature at A level .

The second model of genre challenges the Aristotelian one. Anne Freadman identifies two false assumptions within a taxonomic view of genre:

1. That a text is 'in' a genre, i.e. that it is primarily or solely describable in terms of the rules of one genre

[14] Claire Wyatt-Smith & Judy Murphy, 'What English counts as writing assessment? An Australian move to mainstream critical literacy', *English in Education*, 35:1 (2001), 12–31.
[15] Bethan Marshall, 'What does it mean to 'know' in English?' in *International Perspectives on Teaching English in a Globalised World*, eds. Andrew Goodwyn, Louann Reid & Cal Durrant (Abingdon, 2015), 13–24, p. 21.

2. That genre is 'in' a text, i.e. that the features of the text will correspond to the rules of a genre.[16]

The alternative to the taxonomic model then, draws on Derrida, who suggests that 'a text would not *belong* to any genre. Every text *participates* in one or several genres, there is no genreless text, there is always a genre and genres, yet such participation never amounts to belonging.'[17] Frow, drawing on Derrida, Freadman and Schaeffer, makes the case for this conception of genre as a 'more reflexive model in which texts are thought to use or perform the genres by which they are shaped.'[18] There is a relationship between text and genre, but it is not a one-way, hierarchical relationship: texts shape genres just as genres shape texts, and a text may draw on many genres in its make-up. This does not, however, mean that a text can be all things to all people: 'genre is not a property of a text but a framework that we impute to it; but this imputation is neither arbitrary nor idiosyncratic, since the conventions of genre are shared by members of a discourse community.'[19] One cannot simply assign a text to any genre one chooses; such assignations depend on common understandings of texts. This Derridan model is one which has become more resonant with A level study of English Literature in recent years; the reform of the qualifications included an overhaul of the 'assessment objectives' which govern all specifications. AO4 is now 'explore connections across literary texts'[20] which includes generic connection without reinforcing a taxonomic view.

So if genre is not a taxonomy, but a relationship in which texts and genres shape one another, is it reasonable to retro-fit the genre of crime writing to *Hamlet*? Crime is not a genre of writing which drew on Shakespeare for legitimacy; indeed, as Laura Marcus argues, 'although the turn to mythic and pre-modern texts as foundations for the detective genre, *Oedipus Rex* paramount among them, has been central to some of the most important

[16] Anne Freadman, 'Untitled: (On Genre)', *Cultural Studies*, 21:1 (1988), 67–99, p. 73.
[17] Jacques Derrida, 'The Law of Genre', *Critical Inquiry*, trans. Avital Ronell, 7:1 (1980), 55–81, p. 65.
[18] Frow, *Genre,* p. 27.
[19] Frow, *Genre*, p. 133.
[20] https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/assessment-objectives-ancient-languages-geography-and-mfl/gcse-as-and-a-level-assessment-objectives#english-literature-1

accounts of the detective genre, there are compelling arguments for situating the emergence of detective fiction in the modernity of the early to mid-nineteenth century.'[21] According to most accounts, indeed, the 'detective story was invented in 1841 by Edgar Allan Poe' as Martin Priestman tells us in his introduction to the *Cambridge Companion to Crime Fiction*.[22] The writing of *Hamlet* cannot have been shaped by crime writing, because such a concept did not exist. While it is evident that the origins of the Gothic novel drew on specific Shakespeare plays and on his works in general, the same is not true of the rise of the crime genre. There are specific examples of crime writing which draw on Shakespeare in general, and *Hamlet* in particular (Michael Innes' *Hamlet, Revenge!* and Alan Gratz's young adult novel *Something Rotten* for example) but this influence is not fundamental to the development of the crime genre. Indeed, if we were to consider Shakespeare's plays as belonging happily to any genre in which they had influenced the writing of later texts, generic identification would soon cease to have any meaning at all.

Neither of these approaches, however, describes the way in which the A level syllabus which prompted this paper purportedly treats genre. The specification for the qualification describes 'elements of crime writing' in the following way:

> In the case of Elements of crime writing, many of the texts pre-date the crime fiction genre that emerged as a recognisable literary genre in the mid-19th century and with academic recognition in the 20th century. However, in all the texts a significant crime drives the narrative and the execution and consequences of the crime are fundamentally important to the way the text is structured.
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> All set texts are narratives which focus on transgressions against established order and the specific breaking of either national, social, religious or moral laws.

[21] Laura Marcus, 'Detection and Literary Fiction', in *The Cambridge Companion to Crime Fiction*, ed. Martin Priestman (Cambridge, 2003), 245–67, p. 246.
[22] Martin Priestman, 'Introduction' in *The Cambridge Companion to Crime Fiction*, ed. Martin Priestman (Cambridge, 2003), 1–6, p. 2.

> The focus in this component must be on 'Elements' and students need to consider the elements that exist in each of their texts.[23]

This is a severely weakened version of generic identification. The approved textbook which supports this A level course draws for legitimacy on Bible stories from Adam and Eve, Cain and Abel, to Joseph's imprisonment and goes on to mention *Oedipus Rex*, Beowulf (who avenges the 'foul crimes' of Grendel and his mother, revenge tragedies, *Dr Faustus* and Gothic fiction which 'could not exist without notions of crime and punishment'.[24] It also warns students 'all set texts have a crime at their heart but writers work creatively within literary genres, so don't be surprised to find that texts you study play with, directly challenge or even totally ignore some of the elements of crime writing that we explore.'[25] The authors also warn that 'crime writing is not the same as crime fiction',[26] deliberately eschewing the more narrowly defined modern genre. Can generic identification be built around such a wide textual characteristic as simply having a crime as part of their narrative? Generic characteristics do include specific narrative content: a revenge tragedy, to pick an example not quite at random, must have a crime in it, of some description, it must also have at least one avenger, is likely to include multiple deaths of some gore, but it is also likely to centre around a sense of catharsis and possibly justice, and to share in a set of tonal characteristics. Generic characteristics are complex sets of relations, 'a set of conventional and highly organised constraints on the production and interpretation of meaning.'[27] This view of crime writing is just one driving force, and is hardly a constraint of any sort on the 'production and interpretation of meaning' – it is almost as meaningful to suggest that we should consider as a group all texts which contain food and drink as a key element of

[23] http://www.aqa.org.uk/subjects/english/as-and-a-level/english-literature-b-7716-7717/subject-content-a-level/texts-and-genres
[24] Carol Atherton, Andrew Green and Gary Snapper, *English Literature B A/AS Level for AQA Student Book* (Cambridge, 2015), p. 161.
[25] Atherton et al., *English Literature*, p. 160.
[26] Atherton et al. *English Literature,* p. 161.
[27] Frow, *Genre,* p. 10.

their plot (thus *Titus Andronicus* and *Hamlet* brought together with *Like Water for Chocolate* and *Alice in Wonderland*).

The question of why *Hamlet* should be included at all is an interesting one. I have argued elsewhere for the role of market demand in dictating set text choice for GCSE specifications[28]; Shakespearean texts carry with them 'an unimpeachable source of cultural capital'[29] and a high likelihood of schools already owning the right texts. Adding a Shakespeare text to the list allowable for the genres intended to be studied in the second year of the A level also means that students can study two plays - one in each year, which has the potential to be popular with both teachers and students. As Sarah Olive has demonstrated Shakespeare has been deemed valuable by both policy-makers and educators for over a century.[30] 'Traditionally taught texts such as *Hamlet* also carry with them vast quantities of supporting material (though perhaps not as 'crime writing') which is an incentive when choosing texts in the light of extensive curricular reforms throughout secondary education, as was the case when this specification was introduced. Other more obvious crime texts on the specification such as Agatha Christie's *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* have very little supporting study material available to go with them. As Terence Hawkes has argued:

> 'In the case of Shakespeare, our sense of the role offered by his theatre and his plays seems almost literally up for grabs. Economic pressures, political processes, educational programs all want a piece of the Bard.'[31]

Both politically in the light of a curriculum which was intended to be 'the best that has been thought and said' (pace Matthew Arnold)[32], and economically in the light of a competitive examinations market in which schools choose examination specifications from a range of

[28] Victoria Elliott, ' Gender and the contemporary educational canon in the UK', *International Journal of English Studies*, 45–62, p. 58.
[29] Lisa Hopkins, *Shakespearean Allusion in Crime Fiction: DCI Shakespeare* (London, 2016), p. 8.
[30] Sarah Olive, *Shakespeare Valued* (Bristol, 2015).
[31] Terence Hawkes, 'A Bigger Splash', in *Shakespeare and the Urgency of Now: Criticism and Theory in the 21st Century,* eds. Cary DiPetro and Hugh Grady (Basingstoke, 2013), viii–xviii, p. ix.
[32] Department for Education, *National Curriculum for England* (London, 2013), p. 6.

providers, the choice of *Hamlet* as crime writing demonstrates the continual appropriation and re-appropriation of Shakespeare in educational contexts.

Despite the self-identification of this specification as a generic-based one, I think we must actually look elsewhere for a coherent justification for the inclusion of *Hamlet* within crime writing, and it is to presentism that I think we must look. Hawkes reminds us that 'a fully paid-up presentist will always feel entitled to ask how the influence of Shakespeare on Marx or Freud matches up to the influence of Marx or Freud on Shakespeare.'[33]

> We cannot separate Shakespeare form the literature that came after (as well as before) him in our culture and that makes us respond to him as part and parcel of what that literature in the end involved.[34]

Hawkes also tells an interesting anecdote of post-war Berlin in which the Office of Military Government of the United States in the American sector circulated lists of works which were proscribed and of those which were 'deemed to be of benefit to a defeated, traumatised populace in need of radical political re-education... The white list contained *Macbeth* and *Hamlet*, the former held brusquely to affirm that 'Crime Does Not Pay', the latter's inclusion more curiously justified on the basis of its alleged treatment of 'corruption and justice'.'[35] *Hamlet* in particular has a vast and vibrant afterlife, as it is 'reinvigorated and re-interpreted from one age to the next as societies, culture and aesthetics change in an interconnected historical process.'[36] This then, seems to fit with AQA's claim that in this unit 'texts are grouped together as having elements of more modern genres: either crime writing or political and social protest writing. These genres, which are heavily influenced by culture, are continually evolving.'[37]

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[33] Terence Hawkes, *Shakespeare in the Present* (London, 2002), p. 4.
[34] Hawkes, 'Bigger Splash', p. xi.
[35] Hawkes, *Shakespeare*, p. 66.
[36] Hugh Grady, '*Hamlet* and the present: notes on moving the aesthetic 'now", in *Presentist Shakespeares*, eds. Hugh Grady and Terence Hawkes, 141–163, p. 142.
[37] http://www.aqa.org.uk/subjects/english/as-and-a-level/english-literature-b-7716-7717/subject-content-a-level/texts-and-genres

The value of presentism, however, lies in its refusal of an approach that 'collapses past and present into a transcendant timelessness', instead acknowledging a 'process and practice' of 'dialogue with the past.'[38] To read *Hamlet* through a presentist lens of crime writing is not to lose sight of the historical context nor of the context of that reading. The very presence of *Hamlet* (and *Henry IV*) in the list of set texts for AQA B's genre studies is in itself evidence of the value of a presentist understanding of Shakespeare as text and as phenomenon: 'far from creating a sense of timelessness, the omnipresence of Shakespeare in our multicultural present bespeaks instead something more remarkable: our ability to reshape and rethink Shakespeare across time and space, to turn the reading and the watching of the plays into a creative encounter between 400-year-old texts and active, creative readers and audiences in the present, passionately involved in appropriating and reunderstanding these "timeless" works.'[39]In this frame, therefore, we can use crime writing as a tool to examine *Hamlet* and *Hamlet* as a tool to examine crime writing, with a reasonable justification for our actions. The approach promoted in AQA B therefore, is presentist rather than generic, and it is perhaps appropriate, given the historicist label adopted by contrast in the sister qualification of AQA A. However, we must also be aware that the fit is not perfect in the case of the exam board specification; DiPietro and Grady suggest that presentism requires ' a self-conscious positioning of the perceiver in the present'.... 'deliberately choosing to highlight our presentness, whether as a methodological starting point, the inevitable horizon of interpretation, or its enabling condition.'[40]

Having said all this, then, let us examine the case of *Hamlet*.. *Hamlet* is, I would suggest, more typically considered within the genre of the revenge tragedy than as crime, but I was interested to discover from Mary Cowden Clarke's concordance that the word 'revenge'

[38] Hawkes, 'Bigger Splash', p. xii.
[39] Cary DiPietro and Hugh Grady, 'Introduction', in *Shakespeare and the Urgency of Now*, eds. Cary DiPietro and Hugh Grady, (Basingstoke, 2013), 1–8, p. 1.
[40] DiPietro and Grady, 'Introduction', p. 4.

and the word 'murder' appear the same number of times in the play: 12.[41] It is clear that murder is at the centre of the plot, or even murders, and the desire for punishment of the 'villain' is at least part of the driving force behind Hamlet's actions. So, even while denying the legitimacy of crime writing in terms of generic identification for *Hamlet*, for the remainder of this article I intend to accept the presentist argument and use the lens of crime writing to consider the play, and the play as a lens to consider crime writing. I consider it essential, however, in doing so to consider 'what is gained or lost by bridging the 400 years of chronological distance that separate us from Shakespeare as a historical object and addressing Shakespeare in the urgency of now?'[42] In particular, I think that it is valid to question whether the frame of crime writing is making explicit what would have seethed under the surface in the 'complexities of reading in the present'[43] or if crime writing would not have formed parted of that complexity, lying outwith the terms of reference of the play. DiPietro and Grady challenge the idea of the 'timelessness' of literature in that it can be a 'façade concealing unspoken assumptions from our own time'[44]; in reading *Hamlet* we do have to consider our own assumptions about murder and punishment, even heroes and villains, but the question remains whether making those assumptions explicit challenges them or merely validates them in the context of AQA B.

In 1928 S.S. Van Dine (the crime-writing pseudonym of American art critic Willard Huntington Wright) published 'Twenty rules for writing detective stories', a rather prescriptive list which has been 'frequently reproduced ... and frequently contested' as Todorov notes, and which does refer to detective fiction rather than 'crime writing' more generally. (This is another a challenge for the endeavour of regarding *Hamlet* through this lens: since 'crime writing' is not a widely acknowledged genre, much of the literature on this field refers rather to detective fiction, and sometimes to the thriller or perhaps true crime.) Introducing his rules, Van Dine refers to the detective story as a sort of 'intellectual game' which has somewhat of a resonance

[41] Mary Cowden Clarke, *The Complete Concordance to Shakespeare* (London, 1881)
[42] DiPietro and Grady, 'Introduction', p. 2.
[43] DiPietro and Grady, 'Introduction', p. 4.
[44] Cary DiPietro and Hugh Grady, 'Presentism, Anachronism and *Titus Andronicus*', in *Shakespeare and the Urgency of Now*, eds. Cary DiPietro and Hugh Grady, (Basingstoke, 2013),9–37, p. 9.

with the way that many secondary students regard the decipherment of Shakespeare today, albeit a game with more similarities to *The Hunger Games* than to the Times crossword. It would be both churlish and tedious to match Van Dine's rules one by one with *Hamlet*, but it will be of interest to consider a handful. Rule seven includes the warning that 'No lesser crime than murder will suffice', which itself reflects the requirements of revenge tragedy, with its focus on murder, but also more generally of Shakespearean tragedy, in which the play is concerned with the actions of kings and generals, not 'lesser' mortals. Rule three dictates 'there must be no love interest. The business in hand is to bring a criminal to the bar of justice, not a lovelorn couple to the hymeneal altar.' A particular irony arises in relation to this role in the form of the crime novels of Georgette Heyer, contemporaneous with Van Dine, in which a lovelorn couple always features, and whose own 'master text' is *Hamlet*, quotations from which form intricate patterns of allusion, revealing truths about characters, allowing points of introduction between them, adding comic relief or conversely gravitas.[45]

Rules one and six complement each other:

> 1. The reader must have equal opportunity with the detective for solving the mystery. All clues must be plainly stated and described.
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> 6. The detective novel must have a detective in it; and a detective is not a detective unless he detects. His function is to gather clues that will eventually lead to the person who did the dirty work in the first chapter; and if the detective does not reach his conclusions through an analysis of those clues, he has no more solved his problem than the schoolboy who gets his answer out of the back of the arithmetic.

And in addition, a rule which *Hamlet* breaks from the outset:

> 8. The problem of the crime must he solved by strictly naturalistic means. Such methods for learning the truth as slate-writing, ouija-boards, mind-reading,

[45] Lisa Hopkins, Hopkins, Lisa. "Shakespearean allusion and the detective fiction of Georgette Heyer." *Palgrave Communications* (2016) 2:16052, 1–7, p. 1.

> spiritualistic se'ances, crystal-gazing, and the like, are taboo. A reader has a chance when matching his wits with a rationalistic detective, but if he must compete with the world of spirits and go chasing about the fourth dimension of metaphysics, he is defeated ab initio.

Imposing this restriction on *Hamlet* conversely highlights the Shakespearean conventions in this matter. Where there is murder, there are frequently ghosts, often haunting the guilty, such as Banquo in *Macbeth* or Richard III's night-time visitations. Even Desdemona's last words, some time after her apparent death, exonerating Othello, thwart the intent of this rule. The 'fourth dimension of metaphysics' is a near constant presence for Shakespeare's characters and audience, who would have been 'keenly aware' of 'the geography of the supernatural and the afterlife, the geography of heaven and hell.'[46]

Is Hamlet a detective? The figure of the detective, and indeed the structure of the detective novel, has changed somewhat since Van Dine's day. It is possible to see in Hamlet a sort of maverick Columbo-like figure, and the play structured as an episode of that series: namely we know from the start who did the murder, and the tension lies not in the revelation of the killer but in the proving of their guilt, and their bringing to justice. In *Columbo*, of course, it is only the audience who knows the identity of the killer and part of the tension is in waiting for the expected but strangely uncertain moment at which the detective makes his move with 'just one more thing.' Conversely, *Hamlet* fulfills Van Dine's Rule 1, from a strange direction: the audience and the detective (accepting Hamlet as such for the moment) have an equal set of knowledge. They both know the Ghost has accused Claudius, and, in that moment, neither knows if the Ghost is really Hamlet Senior or not, accurate or not. Through the machinations of the performance of *The Murder of Gonzago* or *The Mousetrap* as it becomes, we gain a

[46] Kristen Poole, *Supernatural environments in Shakespeare's England: spaces of demonism, divinity, and drama*. (Cambridge, 2011), p. 3.

surer knowledge of the villain's guilt, but still do not know for certain that justice will be reached. Perhaps we know even earlier, getting a clue which the detective does not, in the lines Claudius utters which were omitted in the first Quarto and which are usually omitted from performance,[47] which confirm that he is guilty of something, though what that 'deed' is remains unspecified:

> How smart a lash that speech doth give my conscience.
> The harlot's cheek, beautied with plast'ring art,
> Is not more ugly to the thing that helps it
> Than is my deed to my most painted word.
> O heavy burden!
>
> (3.1. 52-6)

The use of the play as a device to establish guilt of a murderer through the facsimile of events is a version of the traditional belief that a corpse touched by its murderer will begin to bleed anew: bring the villain face to face with his crimes and all will be revealed. Why Claudius reacts to the actual play but not to the dumbshow that precedes it has been the subject of much debate. Nosworthy suggests that this scene in fact represents a quartet of tests of Claudius's guilt, worthy even of Columbo himself: the dumbshow, the play, Hamlet's comments during the play, and the inserted lines.[48] He notes that a hardened villain, capable of murder, usurpation and marrying his victim's wife, would be unlikely to blench at a single one of these ploys, but that their cumulative effect is to provoke Claudius's guilty conscience. It should also be noted that Nosworthy takes the name of 'mouse trap' as an indication that it is perhaps a trap for Gertrude rather than Claudius, since 'mouse' is used elsewhere in *Hamlet* as a pet name for women.

It is this scene which ties with the phrase 'murder most foul' as the single most important contribution which *Hamlet* has made to the crime genre – the title of Agatha

[47] Ann Thompson and Neil Taylor, eds., *Hamlet (The Arden Shakespeare)* (London and New York, 2006), p. 283.
[48] J. M. Nosworthy 'A reading of the play-scene in *Hamlet*', *English Studies*, 22 (1940), 161-170

Christie's play *The Mousetrap*, which bears little or no resemblance to its namesake. The fact that I am able to write a sentence claiming those two phrases as *Hamlet*'s contribution to crime might be a signal about the question raised in this paper as to the pointfulness of considering this play through this lens. However, when asked to consider *Hamlet* as detective fiction, there is an obvious candidate for Van Dine's Rule 6, in the person of the Prince of Denmark, and an obvious candidate for the villain, who even fulfils Van Dine's rule 11, that he must be a 'decidedly worthwhile' person. A servant cannot be the villain; for Van Dine there is no 'the butler did it.'

But is Hamlet a detective? Or even, *the* detective? It is arguable that there is a mystery in the play that is a great deal more mysterious and more thoroughly considered both by characters within the play and by scholars and audience members outside it: is Hamlet actually mad? There are a number of clues which are 'plainly stated and described' within the play in reference to this. There is Hamlet's own speech to Horatio and the guardsmen in Act I:

> As I perchance hereafter shall think meet
> To put an antic disposition on—
> That you at such time seeing me never shall,
> With arms encumbered thus, or this headshake,
> Or by pronouncing of some doubtful phrase
> As 'Well, we know' or 'We could an if we would',
> Or 'If we list to speak', or 'There be, an if they might',
> Or such ambiguous giving out, to note
> That you know aught of me
>
> (1.5.172-80)

There is the argument by Polonius that love for Ophelia has turned Hamlet's head, and the subsequent scene of attempted entrapment, in which Hamlet eludes understanding and so the

mystery continues, although Claudius is in no doubt that 'His affections do not that way tend,/ Nor what he spake, though it lacked form a little,/ Was not like madness' (3.1.165-7). Whether that mystery is entirely solved is debatable: different productions and audiences will have their own views both as to Hamlet's actual mental state and whether it is made entirely clear. After Polonius's death few are concerned to actually discern the truth of his madness or not, in any case, as the play's inevitable bloody trajectory accelerates.

It is in this also, that we see a challenge to the Dane's status as detective. There is a clear distinction between criminal/ murderer and detective/ hero in crime writing. Van Dine's Rule 4 comes into play here: 'The detective himself, or one of the official investigators, should never turn out to be the culprit.' There have obviously been notable exceptions to this rule in later crime fiction: Christie's *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd,* itself another set text on the AQA B syllabus, is the best known example of this in which the narrator, assisting Hercule Poirot, turns out to be the blackmailer and murderer for whom everyone is searching. He is the very definition of an unreliable narrator. In our text, Hamlet commits murder, and it is not a justifiable homicide when he stabs Polonius behind the arras, either in the context of 16th century morality and justice, or in our own. Hamlet is therefore indirectly more or less responsible also for the death of Ophelia, depending on whether you perceive it to be her father's death or her erstwhile lover's mistreatment of her that leads to her suicide. He is more directly, and callously, responsible for the deaths of Rosencrantz and Guildernstern, whom he sends to the execution block in his place without remorse. Can Hamlet be the detective/ hero, then, when he is so clearly a flawed one, with a crime of his own – or perhaps more appropriately in the context of the revenge tragedy, a sin of his own? He is by no means alone as the protagonist of a Shakespearean tragedy who commits an unjustifiable murder, and he pays the appropriate price like many others, in his eventual death. A protagonist in Shakespearean tragedy need not, though, be a hero. In some ways therefore, the question 'Is

Hamlet a detective?' is merely the 21st century iteration of the more enduring 'Is Hamlet a hero?'

There is a modern model of the flawed detective: the hard bitten PI of the noir genre is frequently violent, drunken, but nonetheless honourable. Hamlet on the other hand seems to be flailing about in his grief, oscillating between holding back from revenge, and impetuously killing the wrong person in seeking it. But if Hamlet is not detective, is Claudius villain? Terry Hawkes sees the play scene as a key point at which we can consider their characters, and the balance between them anew:

> In short, *The Mousetrap* sets in motion a new and intricate see-saw. For if *Hamlet* shows us anything at this point, it shows us a highly complex villain whose corruption demands to be viewed in the light of, if not to be mitigated by, the pitiable human situation it generates: that of a man torn by the conflicting demands of criminal passion and remorse, and held to the flames by an obduracy that is also self-control. In addition, and by the same token, it presents us with a no less complex and increasingly reckless protagonist who, in the name of 'justice', will impulsively commit violent murder before our eyes: the same crime that he is dedicated to revenge. Hamlet's role as both killer and avenger, an identity clearly symbolised by the figure of Pyrrhus, cannot but complicate the play.[49]

He draws on the characterisation which appears in Michael Innes' 1937 novel *Hamlet, Revenge!* of the play as a 'battle of mighty opposites',[50] in which Claudius and Hamlet become a matched pair, balanced and 'far from representing corruption on the one hand, and justice on the other.'[51]

[49] Hawkes, *Shakespeare,* p. 74.
[50] Michael Innes, *Hamlet, Revenge!* (Looe, 2008), p. 61.
[51] Hawkes, *Shakespeare*, p. 74.

It is this question, of Dane as detective, that is reflected in the sample assessment materials for Elements of Crime Writing, provided by the exam board to help students and teachers prepare for a new syllabus:

> 'Hamlet is more the detective figure than he is the avenging murderer.'
>
> To what extent do you agree with this view? Remember to include in your answer relevant detailed exploration of Shakespeare's dramatic methods.' [25 marks][52]

This question does at least provoke a discussion of the extent to which Hamlet does fit the stereotype, which is welcome. The phrasing of the question notwithstanding, I suspect most candidates would fall on the side of the avenging murderer.

There are other stereotypes in detective fiction of course, and particularly in the PI noir genre: the hard-bitten femme fatale and the innocent, beautiful damsel in distress, which for a certain reading of the play actually work quite well. Gertrude is the older woman, glamorous, for whom man is willing to commit murder, living the high life; Ophelia the damaged, vulnerable girl who has the potential to be the love interest, in need of rescuing, who sadly slips beyond the reach of the hero of the piece. So it occurs, that perhaps the lens of the stereotypical character from crime writing can be of interest in considering the central figures in *Hamlet*. Is Gertrude simply the femme fatale? It is towards Gertrude that some of the most pointed lines in the play-within-a-play are directed: 'None wed the second but who killed the first' (3.2.171) says the Player Queen. Yet during the scene in her chamber, she is wracked with guilt as she begins to see her actions through her son's eyes, and it is easy to interpret her response to Claudius injunction against drinking - 'I will, my lord, I pray you pardon me' (5.2.244) - as a statement of suicidal intent, of one who has realised what her husband is doing. For all these characters, the detective, the culprit, the femme fatale and the damsel, the shoe

[52] AQA, *Paper 2A specimen question paper* http://www.aqa.org.uk/subjects/english/as-and-a-level/english-literature-b-7716-7717/assessment-resources.

does not quite fit. There are elements of them that work, and more elements of them that do not. Perhaps this is an interesting exercise, then, a way to open up consideration of the characters, to prompt questions that encourage an oblique look at the play. It might also make for an interesting production to frame it as a crime noir, which for some reason - I think because to frame Hamlet as a detective requires the framing of the maverick - I feel is most akin to the play from the whole genre of crime writing. The vision comes easily of Hamlet in his belted mackintosh and trilby pulled low over his eyes, while Gertrude smokes a cigarette in a holder, bright red lipstick in tow.

There is, therefore, at least one aspect in which it might be of interest to use crime writing as a lens through which to view *Hamlet*. There is another aspect in which there is an interesting parallel, at the very least, between a generic convention and the play. *Hamlet* is a play which thematises performance and performativity, concerned with the play within the play - both the actual literal performance of the Players, but also Hamlet's own performance to the court around him, and to Claudius in particular, a focus on 'seeming' (the 'seeming-virtuous queen' (1.5.46); 'to be or not to be' and others). The performance of *The Mousetrap/ Murder of Gonzago* is the central part of this double playing, highlighting to us the audience as we watch the audience of another play, the double nature of the narrative. Kate Flaherty asserts that

> As an impromptu, the First Player's performance activates the manifold nature of play: 'play' as a game, 'play' as performance, and even 'play' in its technological meaning, as the space allowed for a moving part in machinery. It is a staged moment in which both the fiction and the power of performance can be acknowledged simultaneously.[53]

[53] Kate Flaherty, 'Theatre and metatheatre in Hamlet', *Sydney Studies in English* 31 (2005), 3–20, pp.3–4.

She invokes W.B. Worthern's concept of 'double-vision' in 'theatrical seeing'[54] to see the character as both actor (within the play) and (secondary) character; the difficulty of the character of Hamlet is separating Hamlet-as-actor and Hamlet-as-character, and it is this which gives us the mystery of his madness discussed above.

In parallel to this, the double narrative is a key characteristic of the detective story. Todorov, in his 'Typology of Detective Fiction' notes there are two stories in a detective novel, one the story of the murder, that occurs before the novel begins for the most part, and which is slowly pieced together through the second narrative, that of the detective.

> This second story, the story of the investigation, thereby enjoys a particular status. It is no accident that it is often told by a friend of the detective, who explicitly acknowledges that he is writing a book; the second story consists, in fact, in explaining how this very book came to be written. The first story ignores the book completely, that is, it never confesses its literary nature (no author of detective fiction can permit himself to indicate directly the imaginary character of the story, as it happens in "literature"). On the other hand, the second story is not only supposed to take the reality of the book into account, but it is precisely the story of that very book.[55]

Peter Hühn suggests the reconstruction of the 'hidden or lost story (that is, the crime)'[56] is the narrative strategy which drives the story which we see in front of us; according to Hühn the two narrative layers are the layer of action and the layer of knowledge. The action occurs before the novel begins; the knowledge comes as the process of investigation. Significantly, Todorov alleges ' The status of the second story is... a story which has no importance in itself, which

[54] W. B. Worthen, 'The Weight of Antony: Staging 'Character' in *Antony and Cleopatra', Studies in English Literature 1500-1900* , 26 (1986), 295–308.
[55] Tzvetan Todorov, *The poetics of prose* trans. Richard Howard (New York, 1977), p. 45.
[56] Peter Hühn, 'The detective as reader: Narrativity and reading concepts in detective fiction', *Modern Fiction Studies* 3 (1987), 451-466, p.451.

serves only as a mediator between the reader and the story of the crime.'[57] Despite the parallels between the interest in narrativity on the one hand and the metatheatre of *Hamlet* on the other, therefore, there are limitations to the analogy. *Hamlet* is critically concerned with the second story: the story of the crime is of interest only as a tool in the story of his decision of what to do about it, and how to ensure its truth.

As the field of crime fiction has moved on and away from Van Dine's twenty rules, the story of the investigation has become more narratively inventive, more challenging, and preoccupied with different ways of creating the dual narrative. Chris Brookmyre's *Dead Girl Walking*, for example, brings the two stories in parallel, told by two different narrators, in alternating chapters, until near the end an explanation is given for how the detectives came to find the account of the story leading up to the murder, the story which is usually hidden. This double plot structure, the concern with two timelines, is illustrative insofar as *Hamlet* is not concerned with it. There is no investigation, no careful reconstruction of clues, as I have said before in dealing with Van Dine's Rules 1 and 6. The structure of the revenge tragedy is not the structure of the crime novel: the fact of the crime is past, and now is the time for consequences. In detective fiction those consequences usually come at the very end of the story, or after the closure. There are exceptions, such as Christie's *Ordeal by Innocence*, but for the most part, the discovery and arrest of the culprit is the end of the story. In *Hamlet* almost the entire play rests between discovery and punishment.

The nature of the punishment, or rather of the concept of punishment, has also changed substantially between Shakespeare's day and the 'invention' of crime fiction in 1841. In *Hamlet* the significance of the Ghost's being in purgatory, and his son's refusal to avenge his death by murdering his uncle while he is praying, is immense.

A villain kills my father, and for that

I, his sole son, do this same villain send

[57] Todorov, *Poetics*, p. 46.

To heaven.

O, this is hire and salary, not revenge!

(3.3.76-79)

Justice is eternal, not temporal, although this begs the question why that death needs to be avenged at all - perhaps the answer lies in the problems a kingdom suffers while there is unrest at the top. There may not be horses eating each other in Denmark, as in Macbeth's Scotland, but there is an invading army and a general sense of deep unease. Even Claudius tells us 'madness in great ones must not unwatched go' (3.1.191). But crime writing post 19th century dwells on a temporal rather than religious punishment, although the shadow of the hangman - notably death by state not by individual - dissipated as the twentieth century wore on. The thriller (a development of crime fiction in which the two narratives are compacted, and in which the detective is potentially under threat, unlike the classic detective) might involve the personal violent intervention of the hero against the culprit, though likely in self-defence. It is tempting, however, to see the bloody mess of bodies at the end of *Hamlet* as paralleled by the modern action film: John McClane laying about him in an attempt to punish the guilty? This, however, is where the problem with the weakened generic category emerges: it is possible to reach and identify more and more exciting and tenuous parallels, but do they really tell us more about the play. Although the parallel between the thematisation of narrative in the detective genre, and the thematisation of the play in *Hamlet* is interesting, it does not in fact push us further in our understanding of the meta-theatre in *Hamlet*. It sheds no further light on the play within a play, and nor does the double narrative of crime and of detection fit the play, so it cannot be a further lens for us.

The obverse of what we have done so far is the use of *Hamlet* as a lens for looking at crime writing. Can doing so tell us anything interesting? These are the sample questions from the examining body:

'In crime writing there are always victims.'

Explore the significance of the ways that victims are presented in **two** crime texts you have studied. [25 marks]

or

'Plotting and calculation are central ingredients of crime literature.'

Explore the significance of plotting and calculation as they are presented in **two** crime texts you have studied. [25 marks][58]

While I can easily imagine an essay discussing the presentation of victims in *Hamlet* - or even the significance of plotting and calculation therein, and even in comparison to another text, the presence of the third element, the 'crime literature' is a bridge too far. The weakened generic category that must be adopted to even allow *Hamlet* to fall within it can have no such universal features as are suggested here. But still, to address it on its own terms, and within the presentist framework which I have suggested: what can we see? I see the potential for the use of the way that Hamlet reacts to the death of his father as a model for the understanding of the way grief affects the family of victims in other crime writing; I see the idolisation of the late King - Hyperion himself, according to young Hamlet - as a model for the innocence of the victim in some crime writing, a way to consider how we memoralise the dead. I am indebted to Thomasin Bailey of Warwick University for pointing out that the victim is another way in which *Hamlet* does not resemble crime writing; in writing focusing on the crime, the context is personal, not always domestic, but usually on a small scale. The repercussions are on families and friends, not states and countries. In *Hamlet* as in other revenge tragedies the greater victims of the crime are the entire population of Denmark, who suffer war and instability as a result. This is perhaps a way in which *Hamlet* can be a lens for considering crime writing.

[58] AQA, *Paper 2A specimen question paper* http://www.aqa.org.uk/subjects/english/as-and-a-level/english-literature-b-7716-7717/assessment-resources.

If I had taken as my topic *Henry IV Part II* and its relation to social and political protest literature I suspect this exercise would be considerably less easy. *Hamlet* is perhaps of all the plays of Shakespeare the most influential, the most long lasting. The authors of the AQA text book mention 'murder most foul' as justifying the contribution of *Hamlet* to crime literature. In truth this play has dominated far more than that culturally, even if it is a dominance which began in the early 1800s;[59] has any other play contributed so many words, phrases and sayings to the English language? In other work I am considering young adult novels rewriting *Hamlet* - five of which have been published within the last ten years. *The Lion King* is famously based on the Prince of Denmark. The play has even been translated into Klingon.

I must conclude, therefore, that while this is has been an interesting, even thought-provoking exercise, it is ultimately not particularly enlightening for A level students. There are pleasing parallels that can be drawn, particularly for students of adaptation and appropriation. But as I suggested at the start, the fact that it is possible or even common to draw on Shakespeare as a source for modern fictions in the crime genre is not necessarily significant for how we can regard that source material. In writing this paper and exploring questions of presentism, I find that the *case* of the inclusion of *Hamlet* as crime writing is a far more interesting topic for presentist analysis than the text itself. 'Presentism has become,' argues Egan, 'a way of doing literary criticism by explicitly evoking the present concerns that motivate a desire to reread old literature (especially Shakespeare)'[60]; students of A level English Literature will not be carrying out such a project, but run the real risk of collapsing the distinction between past and present that Hawkes warns against. It is, however, noteworthy, that the inclusion of *Hamlet* on this particular syllabus demonstrates the ongoing desire to revisit Shakespeare and to absorb him into literary study in whatever form is possible. The 'unimpeachable cultural

[59] Grady, *'Hamlet'*
[60] Gabriel Egan, 'The Presentist Threat to Editions of Shakespeare', , in *Shakespeare and the Urgency of Now*, eds. Cary DiPietro and Hugh Grady, (Basingstoke, 2013), 38–59, p. 39.

capital"[61] Shakespeare is bringing is not only to the students studying him and to the specification as a whole, but specifically to the study of crime writing as an appropriate topic for A level students. The presence of murder as a thematic concern does not make for a generic identification, but there seems little reason why this syllabus should claim genre rather than theme for its approach to the grouping of texts, other than the neat parallel with Aspects of Comedy and Aspects of Tragedy in the first half of the specification, and the desire for a snappy summary for marketing purposes.

To return to the original context of this paper, it seems appropriate to finish by considering the pedagogical implications for this exercise. At the end of 2015 I held a seminar on this topic in Oxford, attended by English teachers, some undergraduates, and some other interested parties. We came to the conclusion that it was a fun exercise to consider the characteristics of crime writing, and to work out to what extent they fitted with *Hamlet*. We might do the same for *Henry IV Part ii* and social and political protest writing, although I suspect that might be less enjoyable both for reason of the Shakespeare text and of the putative generic context. However, we agreed, that one of the reasons why this might be so interesting was because we already knew the play. We had a basic understanding of *Hamlet*, had seen it, potentially studied or taught it, but had certainly considered questions of revenge, of madness, and of guilt. To have considered it primarily in the context of crime would have been limiting and limited, however. It would have damaged our understanding of the play as a whole and would have steered us away from certain considerations. To this challenge it is easy to say that of course one would teach the play at A level on its own terms, only then considering the crime aspect, but it is a sad fact that curriculum is driven by assessment, and the questions which could be asked on this play firmly drive the way it will be considered in the classroom, re-creating its generic context for a generation of students. The implications for these students progressing through from this specification to university study are, I think, worrying. Quite

[61] Hopkins, *Allusion*, p. 8.

apart from having been taught within a peculiar definition of genre studies, which will complicate further the Aristotelian model of genre which is embedded in the average school leaver, their understanding of one of the most influential texts in modern literature will be compromised, and they may have no understanding of how compromised it is. Although I have suggested that using the framework of the stereotypical characters from crime fiction might be an interesting way to address the characters in *Hamlet*, the risk is always that the consideration does not go beyond that stereotype. In this I might be opening myself to the charge of simply worrying that this will not be taught well - but there are ways of making it more difficult to teach something well, and previous experience of A level teaching suggests that students will latch on to ideas which they perceive as 'truth' and will doggedly retain those despite more nuanced teaching to the contrary. I am thinking of a class I recently saw in which the students were studying *Sense and Sensibility* and were tenuously pursuing Elinor as sense and Marianne as sensibility despite all hints, suggestions and outright lecturing to the contrary.

My recommendations to teachers on this topic therefore would have to include the importance of challenging the elements of crime writing as much as they employ them. Teachers must ensure that students understand the more specific generic context of the play – as revenge tragedy - and problematise the question of *Hamlet* as crime, and the whole notion of genre.