

Anna Blackwell, De Montfort University

“Sympathy for the loser: Performing intellectual loserdom in *Upstart Crow*”

In comparison to the largely uncontested status he now enjoys in British culture and cultural establishments, the William Shakespeare depicted in BBC comedy series, *Upstart Crow* (TV 2016-) is a maligned figure. His down-to-earth family are, in turn, baffled by the cuckoo in their midst and frustrated by the tediousness and obscurity of his verse; John Shakespeare dismisses his son in the series’ distinctive and playful pseudo-early modern vernacular as nothing more than a ‘turning-chomping country bum-shankle’ (S1E3). In doing so, the show’s creator and writer, Ben Elton, aligns Shakespeare with other ‘intellectual losers’ like his own Blackadder or Mark Corrigan in *Peep Show* (also played by *Upstart Crow*’s star, David Mitchell).

This paper will explore the example of *Upstart Crow* and the performance of Shakespeare by Mitchell in order to propose that intellectual loserdom only reifies the privileged position of men like Shakespeare or Mitchell, however. While the ‘intellectual loser’ archetype might seem to challenge the association of Shakespeareanism with success, skill or sophistication, it is a powerful and complex manoeuvre that claims social and cultural capital even as it performatively ‘fails’ to do so. Both Mitchell and *Upstart Crow*’s Shakespeare can thus be read as examples of the continuing valorisation of a particularly pernicious and disingenuous type of middle-class masculinity.

Clara Calvo, Universidad de Murcia

“*All is True* and the Shakespeare Documentary Tradition”

Kenneth Branagh and Ben Elton’s Shakespeare biopic, *All is True*, premiered in 2018 to rather lukewarm reviews. Peter Bradshaw in *The Guardian* sanctioned it as ‘unfashionable’ and Jeannette Catsoulis in *The New York Times* described it as ‘more country soap than biopic’. Given its director’s experience in Shakespeare both on the stage and the screen, its all-star cast which included Dame Judi Dench and Sir Ian McKellen, and its scriptwriter’s prior engagement with Shakespeare as a character in the *Upstart Crow* series, the film’s shortcomings are not easy to pinpoint. Shakespeare’s daughters – their problems and difficulties in the constrained rural world of Stratford – often steal the limelight, and the scenes dealing with Shakespeare’s relation to Anne Hathaway or his interview with Southampton don’t make up for its structural defects. Most important, Ben Elton’s script ultimately fails to please and convince in the same measure as his *Upstart Crown* has delighted audiences, as I will argue, because the film is too much like a documentary and not enough like a biopic. The film’s use of conventions we associate with the biographical documentary – such as reenactment and the use of heritage drama locations – may explain why *All is True*, in spite of its blurring of the divide fact/fiction, is flawed both as a biopic and as a feature film.

Douglas M. Lanier, University of New Hampshire

“Schlubsppeare: *Upstart Crow* and the Return of the British Bard”

The comedy series *Upstart Crow* has been something of a surprise hit for the BBC, generating three seasons and several Christmas specials (including a 2020 lockdown Christmas special) of material from its rather meager premise - Shakespeare as a schlubby wannabe playwright, struggling again and again to maintain his place in the Elizabethan literary pecking order as well as in his extended household, the Homer Simpson of early modern England. This approach to repackaging a quasi-historical Shakespeare as a television character differs markedly from other recent reconceptions of the Bard, as, say, a dashing hipster in the short-lived series *Will* (2017), a hapless lover in *Shakespeare in Love* (1998) and *Miguel y William* (2007), a bumbling up-and-coming writer in *Bill* (2015), or an underhanded schemer in search of a hit in the musical *Something Rotten!* (2015). *Upstart Crow*, built upon the armature of the old-fashioned sitcom, instead views Shakespeare through the lens of British middle-class domesticity, a theme which Ben Elton, the series' main writer, also explores in a different key in the film *All is True* (2019). My interest in this essay is in how this (re)incarnation works to reassert Shakespeare's essential Englishness in an era in which elsewhere in the world adaptation of Shakespeare's works has fundamentally loosened their association with British culture. To be sure, this ideological operation is done under the veil of irony, the characteristic loveable loser frame within which popular culture has presented Shakespeare the character for a generation. But the means by which the series reassociates Shakespeare with Britishness and ironically recuperates both in the process is well worth exploring, especially in the context of the nationalist discourse of Brexit.

Kendra Preston Leonard, PhD, Executive Director, The Silent Film Sound & Music Archive

“Listening to *Will Shakespeare* (1978)”

Shakespeare’s life has always been popular fodder for the screen, starting with the 1907 silent film *Shakespeare Writing Julius Cesar*. While many scholars have published work on these depictions of Shakespeare’s life, few consider the role music plays in these productions. As part of my ongoing work in examining how music is used to depict the English early modern period on screen, I engage here in close reading of the music used in John Mortimer’s 1978 six-part mini-series *Will Shakespeare*, which stars Tim Curry in the title role. The series focuses on Shakespeare’s life from his arrival in London to about 1603. Each episode centers around the development of a single play, and Mortimer uses both factual information and speculative theories about Shakespeare and his life to create a rich and detailed biography that includes thoughtful treatments of class, sexuality, and gender. The series’ score, composed by Richard Hill, offers deft support and commentary on these issues. Written for wind- and brass-heavy ensemble during a time when period instruments were far less used than they are today for scoring screen works, Hill’s score asks modern instruments to mimic the timbres and textures of early modern instruments in order to provide a simulacrum of the early modern London soundscape. By using methods from musicology and theory, film studies, and gender studies; as well as Umberto Eco’s theorization of imaginary worlds within re-enactments and recreations and Claes Schaar’s theory of infracontexts, I analyze the ways in which music is used to identify and communicate information about the characters and settings: how it signifies gender, religion, and power differentials; how it indicates political distinctions between characters and factions; and how it helps depicts historical events.

Richard O'Brien, Northumbria University

“No one... yet”: *Secret Millionaire* Shakespeare and the Arc of the Bill-dungsroman

In the closing sequence of the 2015 biopic *Bill*, Mathew Baynton stands backstage before the premiere performance of *A Series of Comedy Errors* [sic] and asks ‘Is the world ready for Shakespeare?’ The scene of revelation and recognition which will implicitly follow marks the teleological endpoint of one narrative model common to stories about the young playwright which might be termed ‘*Secret Millionaire* Shakespeare’. Like his counterpart in TNT’s 2017 miniseries *Will*, who admits to Richard Burbage’s sister Alice that he is ‘no one... yet’ when the door to the Theatre is slammed in his face, Baynton’s Bill is only now emerging into the light of his fame after a period of toiling in anonymity, of being ‘in the world’ while ‘the world knew him not’ (John 1:10).

Given that Shakespeare’s genius is regularly coded as godlike, however, writers of biofiction face the challenge of explaining what factors in his early career keep him from immediate success. In response, the teams behind *Bill* and *Will* each develop their own version of a parallel narrative structure: one I am terming the ‘Bill-dungsroman’ arc, in which the writer has to overcome a series of external and internal obstacles that stand in the way of his own eventual iconization. This paper will examine the kinds of character development each of these biofictional Shakespeares undergoes, in response to issues ranging from marital strife to religious oppression, and their implications for Shakespeare’s image and impact in wider culture.

Aaron Proudfoot, University of Connecticut

“Screening Unknowable Pasts: The Speculative Scholarly Affordances of Shakespearean Biofiction”

Given the relatively small amount we know about the day-to-day details of Shakespeare’s life and the extremely large interest in those very details, scholars often turn to informed speculation as they explore and attempt to reconstruct the material conditions and various other contexts of the bard’s life and work. The field of early modern repertory studies, typified by the work of Roslyn Knutson and Leah Marcus, provides a taste of the complex and productive readings that arise when scholars use a trail of historical evidence and scaffolded conjecture to reverse-engineer the conditions of a play’s composition and production.

This paper will argue that Shakespearean biofiction performs similar speculative work and that the genre’s more liberal relationship with truth makes it an indispensable supplement to scholarly conversations because it affords the exploration of possibilities that might otherwise go unconsidered. Using *Will* (TNT, 2017) as my primary example and taking an adaptation studies approach that calls for the flattening of the hierarchical relationship between criticism and adaptation, I will demonstrate how a serial television program aired in conscious competition with the likes of *Game of Thrones* (HBO) and *Claws* (TNT) attempts to answer some of the biggest questions that early modern scholars have posed about the biographies of Shakespeare and his contemporaries, the collaborative and competitive nature of Elizabethan playing companies, and the development of the economics and politics of the English theater industry. Very much in the spirit of repertory studies, *Will* is as much a show about the company of actors and other contributors who worked at The Theatre in 1589 as it is a show about Shakespeare. With the single season of their show, Shekhar Kapur and Craig Pearce self-reflexively invite comparisons between the popular culture of our time and Shakespeare’s and create a space for their audience to continue the unending quest, taken up for centuries by literary critics, biographers, and documentarians alike, to know Shakespeare and his network of family and associates in new ways.

Katherine Scheil, University of Minnesota

“Father Shakespeare”

The 1999 Hollywood film *Shakespeare in Love* depicts a fictional scenario of Shakespeare’s romantic life through his illicit love affair with the upper-class woman Viola de Lesseps. The film only mentions Shakespeare’s family very briefly, when the character Dr. Moth questions him, “You have a wife, children...” Shakespeare dismisses his family as an impediment to his ability to write, remarking that he has experienced “a cold bed too, since the twins were born.” While *Shakespeare in Love* represents a particular (and popular) biographical construction of Shakespeare-as-lover, several works within the last five years demonstrate a resurgence of interest in Shakespeare as a family man, hearkening back to texts such as the 1869 illustration of “Shakespeare with his family, at Stratford, reciting the tragedy of Hamlet,” and James Walter’s 1890 work *Shakespeare’s True Life*, among many others.

This paper will explore a variety of recent works that focus on imagining Shakespeare as a father, and in turn, depict his relationship with his children. The Irish company Dead Centre theatre’s 2017 stage play *Hamnet*, for instance portrays the afterlife of eleven-year old Hamnet, allowing him to engage with the ghostly presence of his famous father. Likewise, Kenneth Branagh’s 2018 film *All is True* centers on Shakespeare as a middle-aged father, returning home to Stratford where his family life is at the center of the plot, and he faces up to the grief of losing his only son and is reunited with his two daughters. The paper will take a brief detour to consider how biographies portray Shakespeare’s paternal side; Stephen Greenblatt, for example, in *Will in the World* (2004), asserts that Shakespeare “managed even to transform his grief and perplexity at the death of his son into an aesthetic resource, the brilliant practice of strategic opacity.” I will sneak Maggie O’Farrell’s recent novel *Hamnet* (published as *Hamnet and Judith* in Canada) into the paper as a coda, since of course it’s neither stage nor screen, but seems impossible not to discuss given the subject matter.

Austin Tichenor, Playwright, Actor, co-Artistic Director, Reduced Shakespeare Company

“My Will:’ Patching the Quilt of Shakespeare’s Life”

The impulse to depict William Shakespeare in fictional works is animated by the same impulse behind fan-fiction: To fill in the blanks of the story. Using my own experience co-authoring the 2016 stage comedy, *William Shakespeare’s Long Lost First Play (abridged)* — aka *Long Lost Shakes* — my paper will explore the ways in which the scarcity of documented evidence makes Shakespeare’s life as compelling a source for imaginative speculation as the characters in his plays.

Long Lost Shakes began as a traditional fan-fiction exercise that imagined every character in Shakespeare’s plays as being part of a single fictional universe, and the comedy that would arise out of characters from different plays coming together in unexpected combinations. In imagining the origin of this fictional long-lost-but-recently-discovered manuscript, co-author Reed Martin and I had to make biographical assumptions about an inexperienced 17-year-old Shakespeare who was blessed by genius but untempered by craft, and naive about what could be safely said onstage. Landing quickly on magic as both plot engine and metaphor, we imagined a “merry war” and “ancient grudge” between Puck (from *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*) and Ariel (from the *The Tempest*) that would accelerate out of control, climaxing in the appearance (as a “post-modern and meta-theatrical *coup d’ theatre deus ex machina*”) of “the most powerful wizard-magician-genius-author-god in this or any universe — William Shakespeare himself.”

Citing examples from *Long Lost Shakes* and my latest script, *Hamlet’s Big Adventure (a prequel)*, I’ll also examine how crafting new narratives featuring Shakespeare’s characters can perhaps provide insight into Shakespeare’s creative process.

Ramona Wray, Queen’s University, Belfast

Seminar Respondent