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**Time Travel and the Return of the Author: *Shakespeare in Love*, ‘The Shakespeare Code’, and *Bill***

**Abstract:**

In the latter part of the twentieth century Roland Barthes’s reader orientated theory ‘the death of the author’ seemed to signal the end of biographical literary investigation. And yet by the end of the twentieth century, fuelled in part by the rising wave of celebrity culture, a new strategy in relation to canonical texts emerged: the resurrection of the author via the biographical film.

This paper examines the extent to which this ‘time travel’ via contemporary film, to the early career of Shakespeare in the 1590s, has been driven by a search for images of the playwright relevant to modern audiences, whether that be romantic bard or rock star hero. It explores versions of the author Shakespeare in Madden’s *Shakespeare in Love* (1998), the BBC’s *Dr Who: Shakespeare Code* (2007), and Bracewell’s *Bill* (2015). The paper explores the significance of these travels through time and place and, by linking them to literary tourism, examines how these ideas are utilised to create personal and national memories. It also shows how time and place, in representations of the author Shakespeare, have become a means to establish contemporary connections that impinge on central questions in adaptation studies about the authenticity and fidelity of texts and performance.

## I: Introduction

This essay explores a number of filmic texts: *Shakespeare in Love* (1998), the *Dr Who* episode 'The Shakespeare Code' (2007), and *Bill* (2015) which offer their audiences varied representations of the author Shakespeare. Contemporary film and television have had an enduring fascination with the idea of the author, and this has resulted in a 'marked surge in the popularity of the literary biopic' (Buchanan 2013, 4). And yet Shakespeare, offers particular challenges to those film and television makers, because while comprehensive biographical information is available 'the main deficiency in the available data consists in the fact that [it] is public not private' (Holderness 2011, 2) in the sense that it reveals little about Shakespeare's emotions and feelings. However, the texts to be discussed here appear undaunted by these challenges and via the technologies of contemporary film and television offer the opportunity for their audiences, in imagination, to meet the author as they travel back in time to the sixteenth century.

It is that notion of the films as time travel, and the interaction of the past and present, that this essay wishes to explore. In one of the texts discussed here, the *Dr Who* episode 'The Shakespeare Code', time-travel is clearly the main narrative thread. In the other texts, there are similar attempts to recreate significant places and times from Shakespeare's life, although in these instances no character is designated as the time-traveller. While, as Brooks Landon notes, 'the primary effect of film is always one of time travel or time manipulation' (Landon 1992, 76), this essay will argue that in these particular texts, the intermingling of past and present is more overtly foregrounded, particularly through the use of comedy. Arguably, with all filmic historical recreations of the past there are residual traces of the present, the film's

moment of production and consumption, but the texts discussed here make deliberate dramatic capital out of the *co-existence* of different time periods. These texts explicitly, and coterminously, in their reading of Shakespeare, see the author as someone both ‘of his time’ and also ‘out of time’. Often the presence of this double time enables the films to assert the playwright’s ‘genius’, as an author for ‘all time’. The films, moreover, rely upon, and indeed exploit, modern audiences’ assumptions about Shakespeare’s iconic status. In their depiction of the events of the sixteenth century, ‘his time’, they work to provide ‘evidence’ for, and of, his burgeoning talent. More controversially they also, often playfully, provide largely fictional explanatory ‘evidence’ in Shakespeare’s time for some of those gaps and blanks in the author’s life identified by contemporary critics. Two of the films discussed here, for example, make merry with Shakespeare’s life in 1593, as he emerges from the gap constituted as the ‘lost years’ by academic criticism. Moreover, these comic interpolations, which often highlight moments of frisson between past and present, also make the audiences more aware of their role as observers and travellers to a different place and time.

## II: Contexts

But why should one wish to travel to that place and time in search of the author? Part of the answer may lie in the extent to which such biographical films have in themselves become acts of literary tourism. The history of Shakespearean ‘bardolatry’ has certainly included the development of literary sites deemed significant to Shakespeare. Harald Hendrix illustrates how place provides an opportunity for acts of memorial and ‘an intellectual exchange beyond the grave, a “conversation with the dead”’ (Hendrix 2009, 14). In the twenty-first century, travel

to Stratford-upon-Avon, and visits to the tourist sites such as the Shakespeare Birthplace, continue to play an important part in those conversations. The nature of the conversation in 2015 was made clear in a banner across Henley Street which proclaimed “‘Explore” Shakespeare’s Birthplace: uncover the stories behind the world’s greatest storyteller.’ These literary places, including the Birthplace, employ guides in character and staged dramatic scenarios to carry the visitors back in space and time to Shakespeare’s world. We may well ask, with Alison Booth, ‘in what ways does literary tourism serve as time travel?’ (Booth 2009, 151). Booth also goes on to argue that ‘time travel is by no means uni-directorial’ (Booth 2009, 151), suggesting, as we shall see in these texts, that the creation of literary space is not simply defined within a specific time, but may occupy a complex mixture of past, present and future. It is only a short step from these kinds of literary tourism to the film and television texts under discussion here. In film and television, although experienced virtually, the place and time of the author become the springboard to access the significance of the life. These texts provide the opportunity for a different type of what Kennedy calls ‘cultural tourism’ or ‘edutainment’ (Kennedy 2008, 175) and as Anderegg asserts ‘the cinema cultural tourist travels in time’ (Anderegg 2004, 34).

The earliest biographical film concerning Shakespeare is, as Lanier notes, Georges Méliès’ 1907 film *La Mort de Jules César*. In it, Shakespeare, suffering from writer’s block, falls asleep. As he does, he dreams of the assassination scene from *Julius Caesar*’ (Lanier 2007, 61), with the dream being both Gothic premonition, and also suggesting that the source of inspiration is Shakespeare’s subconscious (and not his research of historical sources). The latest example, at the

time of writing, of such a biographical film about Shakespeare, is *Bill* (2015), which will be discussed below. What unites these biographical films with literary tourism is the same ‘desire to find a satisfying synergy between the life and the work’ (Buchanan 2013, 15), and in particular a desire to pinpoint the inspiration giving rise to the works. It is clear that such interests fuelled earlier films, and this has been intensified in more recent films by a contemporary preoccupation with celebrity culture and fame.

In addition to the contexts provided by popular culture, tourism, celebrity culture, and, arguably, science fiction and time travel, the films are obviously positioned, sometimes rather knowingly, amidst the frameworks of academic literary criticism. The opportunity provided to audiences to access the ‘life of the author’ in these texts seems at times a deliberate rebuff to Barthes’ mid-twentieth century claims about the ‘Death of the Author’ (1967). As Buchanan notes of Barthes’ essay:

No longer was a written text understood as simply a transmission vehicle for a settled and stable meaning determined by an author and awaiting decoding in those terms ... (Buchanan 2013, 17)

These films, together with a wealth of biographies about Shakespeare<sup>1</sup>, which initially began to appear in a flurry of new millennium reassessment, seem anxious to reassert the centrality of the life to the works. In these academic biographies, in what seems to be an extension of new historicist methodology, the ‘life’ becomes a contemporary text to be derived from, and placed alongside, historical sources from the early modern period. The markers of this re-association of the life, works, and historical documentation, can be seen in the title of James Shapiro’s book - *The Year of Lear*:

*Shakespeare in 1606* (2015). And yet, as Shapiro noted, in a pre-publication article in *The Guardian*:

Biographers like to attribute the turns in Shakespeare's career to his psychological state... While his personal life must have powerfully informed what he wrote, we have no idea what he was feeling at any point during the quarter-century he was writing. (26<sup>th</sup> September, 2015)

While Shapiro recognises that historiographical investigation can reveal significant events in the life of Shakespeare – the return of the plague, the death of Marie Mountjoy, his landlady in Silver Street – and while he posits that these brushes with death are likely to have informed the writing of *King Lear*, he also notes the lack of a personal record, with no first hand evidence of the precise nature of any emotional impact of these events on the author. M G Aune, exploring the critical reception of Stephen Greenblatt's biography of Shakespeare, *Will of the World*, suggests that this 'biography relies on conventional biographical strategies, most noticeably the use of conjecture and supposition' (Aune 206). It is as Aune notes the extent of that conjecture and supposition which was significant to the academic reviewers of Greenblatt's biography, which most also felt, ironically given the nature of Greenblatt's previous academic engagement, went beyond the parameters of new historicism. In the late twentieth and early twenty-first century, both literary biographies and films continue to employ such apparently imprecise biographical strategies as they attempt to resurrect the idea of the author. Yet arguably film and television versions of the author's life, within their fictional context, have a greater freedom to operate in the gaps and blanks, to explore the emotional catalysts for the production of the literary works.

Before examining these three films, which all present versions of Shakespeare's life, a brief word about audience. All three films employ humour, and, of course, not all members of the films' audiences will respond in the same way to comedy. More importantly, we should not assume a homogenous audience for these, or indeed any, films. While there is no 'text' against which to measure representations of Shakespeare's life, it is certainly the case that audiences for these popular cinematic versions of his life will bring different 'knowledge sets' or 'baggage' on their time travel to the sixteenth century. Some will see them as an opportunity to exercise (and maybe display) their academic abilities; others will treat them as introductions to the milieu and plays; while others already interested in the drama may be more interested in the speculations about the author's life. They may even simply be interested in a particular genre of film, such as those to be discussed here, romantic comedy or science fiction. The designated rating of the films also has an impact both on the production and consumption of a text. Two of the texts discussed below might be said to be designed for a young, or family audience, while the first, *Shakespeare in Love* with a 15 rating, is aimed at young adults and older.

### **III: *Shakespeare in Love***

*Shakespeare in Love*, released in 1998, presents an imagined context for the writing, rehearsal and performance of *Romeo and Juliet*, which aims to reveal the author's emotional catalyst for the play's production. The film, set in London in 1593, quite clearly seeks to illustrate parallels and analogies between sixteenth century life and 1990s Britain. The publicists for the film proclaimed that 'Refreshingly contemporary, *Shakespeare in Love* is ultimately the tale of a man and

woman trying to make love work in the 90s – the 1590s’. This notion of the ‘contemporary’ implies that the film will transcend distinctions of time by celebrating universal values. Its aim, as Anderegg notes, is ‘to bring Shakespeare to us, to collapse past and present, to deny there is such a thing as “pastness”. “History,” from this point of view, is always now.’ (Anderegg 2004, 43)

There are, however, numerous paradoxes in the interpretation of ‘Shakespeare’ offered here. The ‘Will’<sup>2</sup> of this film may be ‘like us’ in his attempts to understand his unfulfilled and complex life in his visit to the astrologer/psychiatrist in the opening scenes, or in his frustrated attempts to make his way in the world, but the film also seeks to affirm the uniqueness of Shakespeare the genius poet. This genius is signalled to those in the audience in the know as they see snatches of language from the Elizabethan street (such as the anti-theatrical cleric proclaiming ‘And the Rose smells thusly rank by any name! I say a plague on both their houses’) registered by Shakespeare and then transformed by the creative powers of the poet into the speeches of Juliet and Mercutio in *Romeo and Juliet*. There is thus a contradiction wittily played out in Norman and Stoppard’s<sup>3</sup> script for this film, as the audience are engaged by Will’s similarity to themselves, while he is at the same time marked out as different and separate from them by his transformative genius.<sup>4</sup> It is this focus on the genius literary figure which has been a part of most academic attacks on the film, typified by Burt’s comment that the film is a ‘blunted critique of literary authorship’ relying ‘on outmoded academic scholarship’ (Burt 2000, 222).

The paradox of engagement with, and separation from, the representation of Shakespeare is reinforced in terms of the visual and verbal recreation of the world of the film. There is on the one hand a meticulous attention to detail in the creation of



the costumes and setting of the city of London and its playhouses which draws us via its apparent verisimilitude into the world of the film. In this we see the influence of the heritage film with its use of spectacle and the pictorial creation of an idealised past. Yet this engagement is frequently undercut by anachronistic moments, as when the camera focuses on a mug in Will's lodgings which bears the inscription 'A present from Stratford upon Avon'. Later we hear the fanciful description of 'Today's specials' given by the tavern keeper which in its parody of the 1990s vogue for *nouvelle cuisine* signals the audience's temporary participation in, but also our separation from, this historical recreation. Klett, noting this contradiction of 'anachronism and accuracy', goes on to comment that it 'is evident that *Shakespeare in Love* is creating a dialectical relationship between past and present. This dialectic is predicated upon audience awareness of Shakespeare and his works, and upon the dearth of biographical data on Shakespeare's life. The result is a virtual palimpsest of texts and contexts' (Klett 2001, 25-6).

One thing that emerges from this palimpsest is the anachronistic representation of Shakespeare as a Romantic poet, struggling in his garret with the temporary failure of his imagination until it is reignited by his muse in the person of the non-historical figure of Viola de Lesseps. This fictional interpolation seemingly deemed necessary as what we 'know' about Shakespeare's love life is not sufficiently exciting, and would contribute little to the desired romantic arc of the narrative. The film suggests that Shakespeare, through a combination of these intense romantic experiences and inherent genius, is able to express on the stage, in the words of the character Queen Elizabeth, the 'very truth and nature of love'. Howard notes that the film invites the audience to subscribe 'to the myth that Great Art is the direct product of a Great Writer's extraordinary experience' (Howard 2000, 310). Being a 'Great Writer',

Will is able to use his extraordinary experience with Viola to break out of the romantic comedy straitjacket in which he finds himself in the film. He transforms his play 'Romeo and Ethel, the Pirate's Daughter' ('comedy, love and a bit with a dog, that's what they want') into the serious tragedy anticipated by the film's audience - *Romeo and Juliet*.

Thus during the course of the film the 'traditional' hierarchies of drama are re-established, with tragedy reasserted as a superior genre to comedy. *Romeo and Juliet* brings Will commercial success and artistic acclaim. Yet it is one of the paradoxes of the film that the genre of tragedy is lauded in a comic film, with ironically the performance of Will's tragic play providing the carnivalesque moment where a woman becomes a player on the Elizabethan stage. More importantly, the film suggests that the intensity of Will and Viola's love gives rise to the writing of the tragedy and the charged performance of the play in the film which:

...only concerns itself, rather significantly, with scenes that illustrate the social and cultural forces that ensure the lovers' undoing. Norman and Stoppard demonstrate the mergence of Romeo and Juliet's fate with that of Will and Viola – indeed the actual coalescence of art and life (Davis and Womack 2004, 159)

Despite the foregrounding of the tragedy as a product of, and a revealing commentary upon the final separation of Will and, the now married, Viola, the film itself ends with the imagined projection of Viola's future transfigured by Will into another comedy, *Twelfth Night*.

Moreover, this film, and 'The Shakespeare Code' as we shall see, assert the primacy of the theatre itself. The camera lovingly lingers over the Rose playhouse at the beginning of the film, tracing a slow path over its wooden structure from sky to stage, in an opening which echoes the beginning of Olivier's *Henry V*. Accept here the

discarded playbill advertises *The Lamentable Tragedy of the Money-lender Reveng'd* and not *Henry V*. This theatrical “real presence” in implicit or explicit contrast to the showiness and make-believe of film’ (Hopkins 2009, 82) is focussed on the representation of actors working within a ‘real’ theatre space. The centrality of specific places to the films underlines how they are kinds of literary tourism using place to initiate ‘conversation with the dead’. In *Shakespeare in Love*, a version of the Rose playhouse was constructed for the film, whereas in the later texts discussed here, an actual theatre and literary tourism site, the reconstructed Globe, was utilised. The connections with literary tourism do not end there. Judi Dench apparently bought the filmic reconstruction of the Rose playhouse, with the intention, sadly never realised, of opening it to the public and using it as a theatre space. In these texts, however, it is, as Hopkins notes, the filmic frame which gives the theatre added significance. In the theatre adaptation of the film *Shakespeare in Love* (2014, Noel Coward Theatre London), the absence of that filmic frame meant the scenes in the Rose became metatheatrical and self-conscious, rather than being displayed as a contrastive ‘real presence’ and a significant transformative experience.

The conversation between past and present, somewhat antithetically, also resulted in ‘Stoppard and Norman rethron[ing] a traditional Shakespeare – unproblematic, heterosexual and apolitical.’ (Howard 2000, 310). The ‘heterosexuality’ of Madden’s Shakespeare is signalled to the audience through the unflinching focus on the romantic Will-Viola courtship. It is also suggested in the film that Sonnet 18, ‘Shall I compare thee to a summer’s day?’ is written for Viola. She receives this poem in a letter from Will, which although read while she is dressed as Will Kent, contradicts the long held view that this poem is addressed by

Shakespeare to the ‘Young Man’ of the Sonnets. This suggests a return in the film to a conservative reading of the playwright’s sexuality, and as Iyengar argues:

both the writer’s block and his impotence are cured by Will’s love for Viola. Heterosexual intercourse produces children, not biological offspring, but children of the mind, poetic posterity’ (Iyengar 2001, 125)

A similar conservative reading is presented here of the historical and political context of the 1590s. Queen Elizabeth is represented as benign *dea ex machina* who ensures ‘fair play’ (here represented as financial reward) by ensuring that Tilney’s accusations are not upheld. Yet at the same time, as Burt, commenting on Elizabeth’s decision making with the film, notes, ‘the theatrical arena ... has the effect of significantly shrinking what kinds of effect female agency can have’ (Burt 2000, 211). In the film all actors, playwrights (Marlowe’s death goes unexplored beyond the angst it provides for Will who believes he has caused his murder), and playhouse managers remain unfalteringly loyal to the Queen, largely because of her fondness for theatre not her political acumen. The film audience are also encouraged to remain sympathetic towards the queen because of her complicity in the deception perpetrated during the stage performance of *Romeo and Juliet* which, it is suggested, is born out of personal experience when she remarks that ‘I know something of a woman in a man’s profession – by God I do’.

*Shakespeare in Love*, then, despite containing some intelligent and witty dialogue and visual images, remains an essentially conservative example of time-travel in its representation of the figure of Shakespeare and the world of the 1590s. The intention seems to have been through the popular medium of film to make the high cultural works of Shakespeare more emotionally relevant to a modern audience.

In its depiction of the early career of Shakespeare, who at the film's conclusion emerges as a celebrity who has 'won' a significant sum of money (which enables him to buy a share in the Lord Chamberlain's Men), there is perhaps more than a hint of the aspirations of a late twentieth century Elizabethan age, rather than those of the sixteenth century. The film is, of course, designed for a multi-national audience (although particularly British and American) and the representation of Shakespeare and the Elizabethan period is intended to pique the interest of those familiar, and less familiar, with the life and times of the author.

The mix of high culture and popular culture aided this endeavour, and encouraged engagement and assessment of the premise that Shakespeare was 'like us', which we might say is a rather teleological reduction of the idea that he might be 'for all time'. The time travel in this film and the intermingling of past and present offers the opportunity for its audiences to take stock of their historical and cultural credentials as it neared the end of the century. In this it shares a common interest with other films of the 1990s. Some went to considerable pains to recreate historical moments for further examination (*Schindler's List*, 1993; *Titanic*, 1997; *Saving Private Ryan*, 1998; *Elizabeth*, 1998), while others assessed the impact on individuals of specific historical periods (*Forrest Gump*, 1994; *The English Patient*, 1996; *Pleasantville*, 1998). *Shakespeare in Love*, like these other box-office successes, utilises CGI (computer generated imaging), which gives greater verisimilitude to the creation of historical moments, and gives further veracity to the time travel offered by film. The final sequence of the film with Viola de Lesseps shipwrecked on some distant shore reinforces the coalescence of past, present, and future. Shakespeare, while mourning the loss of Viola, creates for the audience a fictional future for her beyond the end of

the film, which has another effect of also suggesting to its American audience their own beginnings linked to the ‘genius’ of Shakespeare and the Elizabethan period. The Director’s commentary on the DVD of *Shakespeare in Love* reveals how in earlier versions of this ending, Viola met two strangers (one of whom appears to be native American) while traversing the expansive sea shore, and in response to ‘What country friends is this’ was told ‘This is America’. (This deleted scene is also included in the DVD extras.) In the end an image of the solitariness of Viola was deemed more acceptable than the possible political fallout from such a staging as Blakeley comments:

The encounter on the beach suggests an open and harmonious, multi-racial land of opportunity, and one can well imagine why, given its glib erasure of the complex, often bloody, history of American racial conflict and assimilation, the producers felt uneasy about it. (Blakely 2009, 250)

However, John Madden’s commentary also reveals that a further addition was planned but not executed:

There was always a potentially rather wonderful idea, which we got some way towards exploring—which was an idea of Tom Stoppard’s ...that during the course of this shot, very, very, very, gradually, and imperceptibly, the ghostly outline of modern Manhattan would become visible beyond the tree-line—there for those to see who wanted to see it, and not for those who didn’t, but somehow production schedules overtook us, and we never really had the chance to try that out. But the notion that she was walking away into history is still what I hoped the shot would mean and feel. (Transcript in Blakeley 2009, 250)

Here the Shakespeare Myth of an iconic genius would have been extended to embrace a myth of the creation of American nationhood. Instead, the solitary wanderings of Viola on the beach, echo the opening (well the second scene) of *Twelfth Night*, a text from the past, involving ideas of rebirth from the sea, created in the film with underwater scenes which reference both Trevor Nunn’s film version of *Twelfth Night* (1996), and another pre-millennium film, *Titanic* (1997). The contemporaneous

juxtaposition of *Titanic* and *Shakespeare in Love* also contrasts the hubris of scientific and engineering advancement, with the positive cultural longevity of Shakespeare's plays. Moreover, this alignment of past, present and future is made possible by the time travel of film, and yet in this instance, time travel has become the means of eliminating questions and fissures from the historical sequence, which in turn contributes to what is a rather conservative reading of Shakespeare as an author for 'our time'.

#### **IV: *Dr Who* – 'The Shakespeare Code'**

The second text to be explored here is an episode from the long-running UK television series *Dr Who*. The episode 'The Shakespeare Code' was first broadcast on 7 April, 2007. As noted earlier, this is the only text under consideration here where the narrative is concerned specifically with science-fiction time travel. In this episode the time-travelling Doctor and his new companion, Martha Jones, arrive in London in 1599, and meet Shakespeare. Since the revival of the *Dr Who* series, there have been a number of encounters between the Doctor and historical personages, including Queen Victoria, Charles Dickens and Madame de Pompadour, all of whom battle with creatures from other worlds and beyond their time. This in itself is a departure from the very early *Dr Who* series, where the companions were teachers of science and history who facilitated the series' Reithian aim to 'educate and entertain' and 'would draw lessons from their journeys into the future and the past' (Leach 2014, 184). In these early days, the historical and the science fiction encounters were kept in separate story lines, and the combination of these in the more recent series marks a significant change to the programme's conception of time travel, and complicates the

historiographical enquiry. In the ‘Shakespeare Code’, Shakespeare, as with the representation of Dickens in Series Two, affirms his ‘genius’ and intellectual powers by his ability to comprehend the complexity of the Doctor’s thoughts, and ultimately to assist him in vanquishing his alien opponents.

The adversaries in this episode are ‘deadly witch-like creatures’ who, while resembling the witches from *Macbeth*, are Carrionites, intergalactic travellers intent on bringing about the end of the world. As the plot unfurls it transpires that Shakespeare and the Globe Theatre have inadvertently been the catalysts for the Carrionites’ arrival on earth. The focus of the Carrionite power lies, the Doctor tells us, in ‘words and shapes’. The science fiction narrative here utilises known historical detail. The Carrionites have entered the sixteenth century by utilising the power of the fourteen-sided Globe, which they have instructed (the historical) Peter Street to construct; they have also been able to harness the power of Shakespeare’s grief-ridden words on the death of his son Hamnet. Having thus gained access to Earth, the Carrionites plan to utilise the power of words embedded in Shakespeare’s *Love’s Labour’s Won* to open up a portal through which the rest of their race may join them, and colonise the planet and destroy all human life.

The original title for this episode was, in fact, ‘*Love’s Labour’s Won*’, a possible ‘lost’ Shakespearean play, which has exerted an influence over a number of fictional revisitings of Shakespeare’s life and work.<sup>5</sup> However, Russell T. Davies, the series producer, reveals on the BBC *Dr Who* website that this was rejected because the original title was ‘too academic’, and replaced by ‘The Shakespeare Code’, with an ironic intertextual allusion to Dan Brown’s bestselling novel, *The Da Vinci Code*



(2003) and film of the same name (2006). This change in title reveals some of the challenges, and the potential paradoxes, that are implicit in the inclusion of the figure of Shakespeare in a prime-time, popular television series. It is a paradox expressed succinctly in another millennium-inspired television programme, *Blackadder: Back and Forth* (1999). Blackadder, now a late twentieth century entrepreneur, travels to Elizabethan England in Baldrick's unreliable time-machine, in search of a signed copy of a Shakespearean play, and literally bumps into the author.



During their brief conversation, Blackadder persuades Shakespeare to sign the title-page of his new play, *Macbeth*, and then says:

Blackadder: And just one more thing [punches Shakespeare to the ground]: that is for every school boy and school girl for the next four hundred years. Have you any idea what suffering you're going to cause? Hours spent at school desks trying to find one joke in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Years wearing stupid tights in school plays and saying things like 'what ho my lord!' and 'oh look - here comes Othello talking total crap as usual'. Oh and that [kicking Shakespeare's foot] is for Ken Branagh's endless uncut four hour version of *Hamlet*.

Shakespeare: Who's Ken Branagh?

Blackadder: I'll tell him you said that. And I think he will be very hurt.

The paradox acknowledged here is that Shakespeare, while an unmistakable iconic figure, whose rare signature would certainly be bankable, is at the same time associated, in the minds of many in the *Blackadder* television audience, with a boring educational experience. (Interestingly, this same attitude was noted by Marc Norman

in relation to the figure in *Shakespeare in Love*, noting, in the DVD commentary, that the audience may have ‘ambivalent feelings about Shakespeare .. the guy the teacher made them read at school’.) The switch of title for the *Dr Who* episode from that of a ‘lost’ play (bad) to one incorporating the name of the author (good) reflects this ambivalent view of Shakespeare and his works in the modern period. The ‘Code’ in this episode has a genuine narrative function as described above: words are power. Yet the reference to code could also allude to the modern audience’s concern that the plays are written in a kind of incomprehensible linguistic code, which has to be cracked. (As Blackadder says ‘Hours spent at school desks trying to find one joke in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*.’) The Doctor’s willingness to embrace that ‘code’ and celebrate it in this programme, as well as the fact that Shakespeare is on the side of the Doctor as he saves the world, is a positive reinforcement of Shakespeare for the modern audience. It represents an attempt to re-read the signs/codes of the visual and verbal representations of the high-culture icon Shakespeare, and re-sequence these into a different more popular signifier.

As with *Shakespeare in Love*, the historical context of the *Dr Who* episode is established very quickly in its depiction of bustling street scenes. Yet instead of empathising with Shakespeare’s subject position in those streets, as is the case *Shakespeare in Love*, we hear the Doctor’s commentary as we accompany him and Martha on their journey along Bankside. We are televisually stitched into their conversation, as we share her point of view as a novice time traveller. As Andrew Hartley notes ‘the tone of the episode owes much to *Shakespeare in Love* and is similarly playful in its teasing out of Shakespearean issues and problems’ (Hartley 2009). The Doctor’s guidance to his twenty-first century companion, and the

audience, is based on drawing analogies between 1599 and 2007, finding equivalencies between what they see and ‘recycling, water-cooler moment, global warming, and entertainment’. The Doctor’s anticipated pleasure of seeing Shakespeare at the Globe is important, as the authority of his point of view is crucial in this series in shaping the audience’s own expectations. He describes Shakespeare as a genius:

Genius. He’s a genius, *the* genius. The most human, human there has ever been. Now we are going to hear him speak. Always he chooses the best words. New, beautiful, brilliant words.

This image of the high cultural icon is deflated by Shakespeare’s actual first words, ‘Shut your big fat mouths’, which visibly disappoints the Doctor. Martha’s comment, ‘you should never meet your heroes’, could have signalled the end of this iconic treatment of Shakespeare. However, the writer Gareth Roberts cleverly repositions his portrayal of Shakespeare as the episode develops. Initially Shakespeare is presented as a loud-mouthed rock star, somewhat weary of his celebrity image – ‘no autographs, no you can’t have yourself sketched with me, please don’t ask where I get my ideas from’. This conception may owe something to TV biographies of Shakespeare screened in the early years of the twenty-first century. Both *Great Britons* (2002) and *In Search of Shakespeare* (2004) had been at pains to establish Shakespeare as a young celebrity at the heart of a dynamic historical moment. As Michael Wood asserted in the latter series:

You have to think away that image of Shakespeare, the balding, middle-aged man in a ruff, the gentle bard, the icon of English heritage. This is a young blade in his mid-twenties. This is a young man, bold, ambitious in his art.

He's funny, streetwise, sexy and by all accounts extremely good company.

(Wood 2003)

This is in effect what we get in 'The Shakespeare Code' and it is endorsed by Martha's anti-iconic comment that Shakespeare is 'a bit different from his portraits!'

Nevertheless the main preoccupation of the episode is 'words'. Shakespeare despite his roguish image is presented as a collector and transformer of words and phrases. He is intrigued by the Doctor's vocabulary which playfully includes many phrases we know to be Shakespeare's. The running joke of the episode is the Doctor indicating whether Shakespeare 'can have that' (e.g. 'the play's the thing', 'all the world's a stage', 'Sycorax') or 'you can't, it's someone else's' ('Rage, rage against the dying of the night'). Or alternatively we see the Doctor encouraging Shakespeare to capture his own thoughts such as 'to be or not to be' – 'you should write that down!'. Alongside this celebratory affection for words, there is also praise of 'theatre's magic' – 'oh you [Shakespeare] can make men weep. Or cry with joy. Change them. You can change people's minds just with words in this place.' This Shakespeare may initially disappoint and be unlike his portraits but his genius resides in his love of language and theatre. He is also marked out as separate from his age in that he is not deceived by the Doctor's 'psychic paper'<sup>6</sup>: he deduces that Martha is from the future and the Doctor from another time and place. As Hartley observes of the representation of Shakespeare:

one gets a sense that his separateness, like the doctor's, comes from knowing and feeling too much, however flippant he seems superficially. Both figures are thus rendered Hamletic according to a specific Romantic model (Hartley 2009)

The episode aims to explore the affinity and parallels between the two central characters, built on a sense of loss (the Doctor's of Rose, his previous travelling

companion, and Shakespeare's of his son). While the play staged in the episode is the supposed lost play *Love's Labour's Won*, Shakespeare is being edged by the Doctor towards writing *Hamlet*. Like *Shakespeare in Love*, comedy is forsaken in favour of tragedy and in the 'end roots the episode in Shakespeare's repudiation of the frivolity of comedy for something of more weight' (Hartley 2009). It also ironically marks the trajectory of Tennant's own migration from the popular culture of *Dr Who* to his performance of *Hamlet* for the RSC in 2008 (see Hartley 2009b).

The resolution of the episode depends on Shakespeare's open-minded modernity and his recognition of the power of words. In the final scene the Doctor says:

Come on Will, history needs you! ... you're the wordsmith, the one true genius, the only man clever enough to do it...you're William Shakespeare... Trust yourself. When you're locked away in your room, words just come: they are like magic. Words of the right sound, the right shape, the right rhythm – words that last for ever. That's what you do Will, you choose perfect words. Do it Will – improvise!

And once Shakespeare has found the words the aliens are defeated.

We see here a subtle mutation, from the Romantic image of an emotionally inspired poet, as in *Shakespeare in Love*, to the intelligent wordsmith and theatre practitioner in *Dr Who*. This may partly reflect Roberts' awareness of his audience, particularly the children and young adults who made up a large percentage of the 6.8 million who first watched the programme. A focus on the excitement and power of language chimed well with the aspirations of the UK educational system at that time,

which emphasised the significance of ‘language’: from the literacy hour in primary schools, to GCSE English Literature programmes which stress the need ‘to explore how language, structure and forms contribute to the meaning of texts’ (WJEC GCSE English Literature, 2007). Moreover, the episode made a number of knowing intertextual allusions to J. K. Rowling’s *Harry Potter* series. As Peter Holland comments:

The modern and the classic prove to harmonize, and the text that represents the contemporary excitement of publication proves to complete, complement, and re-energize the early modern excitement of performance. (Holland 2012)

The references to Rowling’s wizard engage the young audience, reminding them of the underlying message in her novels that language is powerful. It is Harry Potter’s curse ‘expelliarmus’ which brings past and present words and worlds together in the final expulsion of the Carrionites from the Globe.

Though the initial representation of Shakespeare in Roberts’ text is more as rock star than as traditional icon, it does show awareness of some key debates about the biography of the playwright, and also alludes to Shakespeare’s iconic representation in the visual arts. For example, it is less conservative in its representation of Shakespeare’s sexuality than *Shakespeare in Love*. At one point, the Doctor says, ‘Come on, we can all have a good flirt later’, to which Shakespeare responds, ‘Is that a promise, Doctor?’. The Doctor’s subsequent comment - ‘Oh – fifty-seven academics just punched the air’ - momentarily draws attention to, the academic debates around Shakespeare’s sexuality, and maybe even the responses to the resolute heterosexuality of *Shakespeare in Love*, which some of his time-travelling audience may be aware of. Nevertheless, in the final moments of the episode the iconic image of Shakespeare is re-codified, albeit rather ironically. First Martha tells

Shakespeare a joke which he fails to understand, involving Shakespeare being “barred”; then she calls him a ‘great genius’, but refuses to kiss him because his breath smells. Next the Doctor then offers him a ruff from the stage properties to wear as a neck brace for a few days, but adds ‘you might want to keep it – it suits you’. Shakespeare is thus ironically reaffirmed in his traditional pictorial image before reciting his latest sonnet, ‘Shall I compare thee to a summer day’ to his twenty-first century ‘dark lady’, causing the Doctor literally to raise an eyebrow. All this detail appears to parody much that appears in *Shakespeare in Love*, including the appearance of Queen Elizabeth I who has heard about the previous night’s performance. One senses the writer’s tongue is firmly in its cheek at this point. Yet the ending does not subside into an inferior historical pageant: rather it plunges into a Carroll-esque conclusion, as Elizabeth is turned into a Queen of Hearts calling for the head of the ‘pernicious Doctor’. The topsy-turvy world of time-travel is revealed as the Doctor does not know how he has offended the Queen because he has yet to meet her. This mystery plays self-consciously with the time-travel motif and its scrambled sequencing, as we see the consequences of an action that the Doctor has not yet experienced. It creates a loose-thread, not explained for another two years of the programme, when in the Christmas 2009 special, and Tennant’s last appearance as the Doctor, it is revealed in a complex story about alien duplications of Elizabeth, that he was married to Elizabeth, albeit briefly.

### **V: *Bill***

The final text to be considered here is the recently released (September 18<sup>th</sup> 2015) BBC Films/BFI production of *Bill*.



“ London is not going to know what hit it!”

Mark Kermode writing in *The Observer* commented ‘the players of TV’s terrific *Horrible Histories* romp their way through this entertaining mash-up of *Shakespeare in Love* and *Blackadder II*’ (Kermode 2015). Most reviews of the film reference these texts, with some also suggesting influences from ‘The Shakespeare Code’. The *Horrible Histories* franchise, which has connections with this film, is an educational entertainment company which includes numerous books, television programmes, stage productions and assorted merchandise. *Bill* is directed by Richard Bracewell, but written by members of the writing team of the CBBC *Horrible Histories* television programme, Laurence Rickard and Ben Willbond, with cast members also from the television team. In style *Bill* replicates the fondness of the *Horrible Histories* for visual and verbal puns, scatological humour, and musical numbers. This film, like ‘The Shakespeare Code’, is predominantly attempting to appeal to a young, or family audience. In *Bill*, as well as the *Horrible Histories*, the audience travel to the past, but there are constant reminders of the present. While set in the past, the details of that past are presented within a recognisable framework from the present. This technique somewhat paradoxically ensures that the audience take away some knowledge of the historical situation being presented. In the film *Bill*, for example, the audience is presented with a scene representing Shakespeare’s first acting job. He



is dressed as a tomato, and works alongside Marlowe dressed as a leek, promoting the consumption of vegetables - 'Are you getting your two a week?'. In terms of plot it is blatantly fictional, yet it succeeds in suggesting that, because of the closure of the playhouses due to the plague, out of work actors and playwrights had to find alternative employment. The ridiculous, and anachronistic, promotional work is amusing, but it depicts the playwrights' insecure financial situation and their frustrated ambition. While not founded particularly on historical facts, the film, perhaps more than one might expect, seems in an entertaining way to teach the audience something about the material conditions surrounding playwriting in Renaissance London.

These material conditions include discovering, in general terms, something about the background of social, religious and political intrigue. The film is set in the same year as *Shakespeare in Love*, 1593, at the end of the so-called lost years. The opening credit notes it is a 'time of war and plague, but mostly war'. One of the main themes of the film, which is comically reprised throughout, is the fear of Catholic plots. It is even proposed that the spymaster Walsingham has been pretending to be dead for three years, but he has really been undercover investigating these plots. He has, in one of the running jokes of the film, been 'hiding in plain sight', and is seen hidden in a pie, and then later in a cart full of plague victims (allowing the cast, perhaps for the benefit of the adults, to draw on the 'bring out your dead' joke from *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*, 1975). While comically presented, the film uses modern terminology to suggest a correlative between these earlier Catholic plots and contemporary concerns about terrorism. There are security checks around the court, and a security level of 'dark woad'.

Interestingly the lessons taught embrace not only historical contexts but also issues around authorship. First, the film suggests that the writing of Renaissance drama was often a collaborative affair. In this it develops the idea of the Doctor helping Shakespeare fine-tune his word choices in 'The Shakespeare Code'. In *Bill* we see the would-be playwright meeting with Christopher Marlowe in the 'Quill and Rapier', and being chastised for including 'dance moves'. Marlowe later appears as a ghost to help him re-write the play for Elizabeth's political summit. This scene has a number of postmodern borrowings with Bill's address to the ghost 'I charge thee speak' and the appearance of a ghostly quill hanging in the air. There are obvious intertextual references here to Will's discussions with Marlowe about 'Romeo and Ethel, the Pirate's daughter' in *Shakespeare in Love*. However, it has closer parallels with the stage version of *Shakespeare in Love* which opened in London in July 2014. This production placed greater emphasis on the collaboration between Marlowe and Shakespeare, framing the play with Marlowe, in the opening scene, assisting with the writing of 'Shall I compare thee to a summer's day', and then appearing as a ghost, to comfort the distraught Will, at the end of the play, by helping him begin to write *Twelfth Night*. *Bill* also includes the ghostly figure of Marlowe standing with Elizabeth in the closing scenes. In both of these versions Marlowe is a shaping influence on the work of Shakespeare, with the possible suggestion that he is 'reborn' in Shakespeare. It seems possible that *Bill* and the stage version of *Shakespeare in Love*, are acknowledging the anti-Stratfordian theory that Marlowe did not really die (like Walsingham in this film) but after staging his death, he began to write the plays under Shakespeare's name. Nevertheless, the presence of Marlowe as a ghost seems eventually to debunk the theory, and emphasise his role as mentor.

The film rather knowingly even creates humour around its interpretation of Marlowe's death, when he is stabbed to death in the Bull Tavern. In this interpretation it is Philip II and his accomplices who kill Marlowe while he is trying to sell Shakespeare's play. The Spanish steal the play and leave Marlowe dying calling out for 'Bill' (Shakespeare) yet he is presented with the bill for the meal. This word-play entertains its young audience, and yet there are additional levels to the joke to be accessed by members of the audience who are aware that the official Elizabethan report of Marlowe's death alleged he was killed following an disagreement over 'the reckoning'. The tragedy of Marlowe's death is mitigated with the Pythonesque body collector trying to load him onto to the cart before he is dead. The scene reveals further playfulness around the idea of authorship, when it is later revealed that Marlowe did not give Philip the play, and we see the innkeeper throwing the discarded collaborative 'lost' play into the fire.

The film also seems to parody another anti-Stratfordian theory, through its inversion of the plot of *Anonymous* (2011). The suggestion in that film is that the erudite Earl of Oxford writes the plays, and then employs the drunken actor Shakespeare to disguise his involvement. This is comically inverted in *Bill*. In this film the Earl of Croyden, having claimed in a drunken boast to Elizabeth that he has written a play, needs to acquire one quickly. Having failed to write his own, because plays turn out to be not 'just talking written down', Bill is cajoled into giving him his play. So in double comic inversion of the Oxfordian claim, in *Bill* it is the Earl who claims to have written Bill's play, but it is the aristocrat who is also the ignorant buffoon.

But what of the representation of the author Shakespeare in this time-travelling film? In general terms the film follows the same narrative arc of the

previous two texts, with the author rising to a challenge and receiving recognition and reward. However, Bill, perhaps to encourage empathy in the young audience, is presented as initially much more immature and less formed as a writer. He is first seen in the film at a desk, quill in hand, in the conventional pose of a writer in biopics, but he is interrupted and the iconic image is broken as he shouts ‘What?’ in response to his wife’s call. In the early scenes he seems mostly driven by a desire to be famous. He performs with his lute playing ‘boy-band’, ‘Mortal Coil’, who soon ‘shuffle off’ following a showboating performance from Will. Anne interprets his decision to be a playwright as another example of his rather dilettante behaviour, following as it does his interests in music, acting, and ‘interpretative dance’, and remarks that play writing is not a proper job in Stratford. Before departing for London, he protests with rather knowing irony that ‘twenty years from now they will remember my name!’ Once in London, a Dick Wittington figure, worldly goods in a handkerchief on a stick, oblivious to the crimes being committed around him, Bill seeks his fortune. Yet throughout the film, the audience see little evidence of his skill as a playwright. He explains to Marlowe that he writes plays where ‘people get hit with sticks’, and the actual examples of his work given show a fertile, but unstructured imagination.

Bill is very much shown to be an apprentice writer. His first play, ‘A Series of Comic Misunderstandings’, is prefaced by a musical song which outlines a plot formed from the half-formed motifs of plays to come— pairs of twins, jilted brides, bodies hidden by monks, star-crossed lovers, bride brought back from the dead with a donkey’s head etc. All of which leave the Earl of Croyden, who hopes to pass the play off as his own, insisting ‘I am dead’. Following Marlowe’s guidance to ‘write what you know’, the play performed to Elizabeth is a bowdlerised mixture of *Macbeth*

and *Hamlet*, with a smattering of famous phrases and lines. The Queen's critical response is that there are 'many ideas', and that in future these should be introduced 'one at a time, as it is a bit dense'. Bill's reward for the play, and helping to foil the Spanish plot, is that he gains financial support for his future career when Elizabeth recommends that Southampton become his patron.

In the closing moments of the film, the film audience is reassured that Bill has made it. This scene echoes the end of 'The Shakespeare Code'. As Bill, behind the scenes at the 'Rose theatre', confirms the title of the play as *The Comedy of Errors*, he turns towards the camera, and we see, he has been recrafted as something approaching the iconic Droeshout image of Shakespeare - hair tamed, earring inserted. He walks onto the stage as someone intones 'World ready for Shakespeare'. These conversations in the wings of the playhouse mirror contemporary reality shows and offers the young audience a rather X-Factor definition of celebrity fame, which is the product of overcoming adversity. In this film, the texts of the plays are always fragmented, and never experienced on the public stage, and so unlike in the previous texts, there is no celebration of the power of theatre itself. The narrative of success has been charted, yet here, there is no celebration of his 'words', little sense of his craft as a writer, and so far no-one has been affected by his plays.

The consequence of time travel in this film is thus different. Here we see the postmodern irony which is present in the earlier films, and which often signals the overlaying of past and present, moving from the periphery to dominate centre stage. Paradoxically, in a film which plays so fast and loose with historical accuracy, it does quite successfully deal with the underlying social, cultural and political movements of the time. Curiously the absurdity of its reconstruction serves to parody, and thus make visible, several of the underlying questions that have preoccupied critics. The

film's dominant ironic tone means that it avoids the stereotypical image of the Romantic playwright, but the downside, perhaps, is that the audiences (both of the film and on-screen) are left anticipating what is to come. Yet maybe that is the point –the film, like the *Horrible Histories* books and television programmes, is intended to stimulate interest and provide, via its 'mash up', an entertaining hook which will bring children and young adults enlivened to their further study of history and literature. This film is one of several late 2015 texts anticipating the commemorations in 2016 of the 400<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Shakespeare's death. In response to this, it proposes ends in the beginnings of the author's life, but perhaps more importantly it creates a springboard for teachers in 2016 to explore that life, and its ends, in the sense of the plays, in the modern classroom.

## VI: Conclusion

To conclude, all of the texts considered in this essay indicate at their ends an uncertainty about what happens next. Two texts, *Bill* and 'The Shakespeare Code', pull apart the narrative of Shakespeare's life, only to reconfigure him visually as the conventional figure in a portrait. In all of the texts, as in the ending of the *Dr Who* episode, there are things 'to look forward to', which seems an apt metaphor for the representation of the person of Shakespeare in contemporary film. Like the time travelling Doctor, the audience of these films is given an experience which is partial: both in the sense that it is incomplete, and in that it reveals a bias in its characterisations of the author. In the early days of cinema screenwriters relied on the authority of the book and the 'author's voice-over' to give authenticity to their creations. In contemporary cinema there is more confidence in the medium's ability to narrate its own stories. Yet this discussion has shown that, as Wittenberg observes, 'in time travel fiction, the fundamental historiographical question [is] –how is the past

reconstructed by or within the present' (Wittenberg 2013, 13). These texts are undoubtedly the product of different presents, even within the short span of less than twenty years, and reflect a range of social, cultural, political, educational and filmic contexts. Yet there is one context which seems to have influenced them all, and that is the modern preoccupation with fame and celebrity. The structuring narrative of the 'life journey' is dominant, and yet inconclusive, perhaps because the very notion of 'celebrity' is itself dependent on, and forever flirts with, the idea of knowing and yet not knowing about the object of one's fascination. These biographical representations of the rather elusive figure of Shakespeare feed that craving for speculation and information; they also paradoxically ensure that the questions will continue to be asked and the debate will go on. Meanwhile, we can be grateful for the fact that in a predominantly visual and public medium, each film has found images and narrative devices which encourage us to rejoice in the private creative act of authorship.

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<sup>1</sup> Recent biographical studies of the playwright, many with 'celebrity' undertones in their titles, include *The Genius of Shakespeare* (Jonathan Bate, 1997), *Shakespeare: the Invention of the Human* (Harold Bloom, 1999), *Ungentle Shakespeare* (Katherine Duncan-Jones 2001), *Will in the World: How Shakespeare Became Shakespeare* (Stephen Greenblatt, 2004), *Secret Shakespeare: Studies in Theatre, Religion and Resistance* (Richard Wilson, 2004), *Shakespeare: The Biography* (Peter Ackroyd, 2005), and *A Year in the Life of William Shakespeare: 1599* (James Shapiro, 2006). Shakespeare was voted 'Man of the Millennium' in a Radio 4 'Today' programme poll, featured in a BBC1 television

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series *Great Britons* (2002), and was the subject of Michael Wood's *In Search of Shakespeare* (2003) for BBC2. These last two programmes have been discussed by Pearson and Uricchio, who suggest that 'both *In Search of Shakespeare* and *Great Britons*... sever Shakespeare from heritage and... argue for his relevance to the twenty-first century' (214).

<sup>2</sup> I follow the protocol adopted by many commentators on this film here by referring to the character in the film as 'Will' and the historical personage as 'Shakespeare'. When discussing 'The Shakespeare Code' I will revert to Shakespeare for both character historical figure, and in *Bill*, resume referring to the character 'Bill' and Shakespeare for the author.

<sup>3</sup> Lisa Hopkins notes 'there has been a steadfast refusal of the part of those involved in *Shakespeare in Love* to clarify the precise nature of Tom Stoppard's involvement' (83) which heightens the issues around authorship in the film itself.

<sup>4</sup> For a different reading of the film as postmodern metanarrative employing multivocality and heteroglossia that 'demonstrates the synergistic role of cultural, social and historical conditions in the act of composition' (157) and ultimately limits the role of Shakespeare as unifying genius, see Davis and Womack.

<sup>5</sup> For example A J Hartley's *What Time Devours* (2009)

<sup>6</sup> One of the Doctor's tools – a kind of business card which enables him to gain access to individuals or buildings by persuading the reader that they see the verification they need to see.