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"SHADOWS LIKE TO THEE"

Modern Writers on the Character of William Shakespeare

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ABSTRACT

A swarm of books boasting William Shakespeare as a central character have hit the bookstands in recent years. The question is, why? In some books, he is rather insipid, as if his brand is too hot to tamper with, and he is reduced to the status of a sacred cow. In other books, he is too busy fighting for truth and justice to be bothered with taking up the quill, while in others, he is an opportunistic "Shake-scene" who has no qualms about "beautifying" himself with his contemporaries' feathers. I propose to look at such works in the aggregate and determine the basic physical and character traits that modern scribes attribute to our Will. My journey will take me primarily to novels (of the historical fiction school), but I shall be stopping along the way to consider works in other media, including a recent TV series, that also features the Bard. Among the novelists included in my study are Patricia Finney (The James Enys Mysteries), Rory Clements (The John Shakespeare Mysteries), Benet Brandreth (The William Shakespeare Mysteries), and Leonard Tourney (The Mysteries of Shakespeare).

GLOBAL KNOWLEDGE ACADEMICS

No one can deny that William Shakespeare's brand burns hotter than ever—his name is attached, not only to his own plays, both on stage and on film but also to the plays and films of countless others. His works continue to inspire cinematic appropriations such as Warm Bodies (a zombie-fiend Romeo and Juliet) and TV series such as Sons of Anarchy (a biker Hamlet), and his life has proved the impetus for such diverse fare as Ben Elton's sitcom Upstart Crow, which just completed its third season (topped off by a Christmas special) on BBC, and the short-lived TNT potboiler, Will. Even the sonnets have been filmed—all 154 of them—by the New York Sonnet Project. Shakespeare is back with a vengeance, not just in his own write, but also, as it turns out, as a character in the novels and novel series of lesser (and, let's face it, we are all lesser) writers, specifically those of historical fiction. As in his own career as an actor in Renaissance drama, Shakespeare does not always take center stage but is often cast in subordinate roles, as a love interest to the heroine in a romance novel or a sidekick to the gumshoe in a detective series. The writers who appropriate Will are not so much interested in his creative genius as they are eager to exploit the more lurid aspects of his celebrated, but for the most part feverishly imagined, love life. So little is known of Bard's personal history (apart from what may be inferred from the sonnets) that it may come as a shock that these grave-robbing novelists and playwrights are likely to agree on certain particulars of Bard's persona. For example, they mostly view him as feckless, whether in the sack or out, and something of a nerd. And, while it's true that in at least one writer's (Benet Brandreth's) hands, he is a swashbuckler and a bit of a rogue, the writer of this series tends to downplay his accomplishments as a poet. In this paper, I shall be taking a look at the various literary shadows that attend Shakespeare's ghost, most particularly in the novel, but on stage and film as well. My object is to come up with a composite of "Will" as a character and to examine the motivations of those scribblers who insist on re-inventing him in their works. I shall confine myself to the past twenty or so years, but I do not propose to lose sight of earlier writers in this field such as Anthony Burgess (Nothing Like the Sun) and Robert Nye (The Late Mr. Shakespeare: A Novel).

I will start with a look at detective-cum-spy Shakespeare, who has turned up in a number of novel series both as a star player and in supporting roles. The series I will be focusing on are those by Patricia Finney (*The James Enys Mysteries*), Rory Clements (*The John Shakespeare Mysteries*), Benet Brandreth (*The William Shakespeare Mysteries*), and Leonard Tourney (*The Mysteries of Shakespeare*). I have read all the books in these series, so I begin to fancy myself as something of an expert in this field.

To give them their due, these writers know their Shakespeare and have a pretty clear grasp of the period and its history. Take, for example, Patricia Finney's James Enys mysteries, which are so fraught with period detail that one wishes, often in vain, that she might return to the story at some point. Her detective is actually a lawyer, or at least the sister of one, as small-pox scarred James is really smallpox-scarred Portia, a widow who has stepped in to fill her missing brother's shoes as a man-at-law in what is emphatically a man's world. The only ones who share her secret are gal pal Ellie Briscoe and sidekick Will—Shakespeare, that is. In this series, Shakespeare is always bald, drunk, and horny—but mostly bald. And of course, he has a thing for Portia, who, in spite of her ruined complexion, rocks a sexy pair of man's breeches. In 'Do, We Not Bleed?', she investigates a series of deaths that takes her into the seedier haunts of London, where she is approached by prostitutes. Cross-dressing and whoring are major themes in nearly all our authors' books. Meanwhile, there has been an outbreak of plague, and with the theatres closed, Shakespeare has to eke out a living by writing a poem (Venus and Adonis, for purposes of the plot) for his new patron, the Earl of Southampton. Alas, theirs is strictly a financial arrangement, or so it would seem. [Finney's characterization of Will extends to his role as sidekick to Robert Carey (Lord Hunsdon's youngest son), in the mystery series of that name, where he continues to be bald and horny, but, in general, less bibulous.] Like most of her cohort, Finney tends to find Shakespeare an

object of fun: in Priced above Rubies, for instance, she has him packing to leave the hovel where he has been sharing a room with a flock of chickens and plotting a move to Southampton House, as the Earl's "house poet." He commissions a cart and piles in his possessions: "...especially all his notebooks, including the half-finished romantic tale about a mad old knight that he had wasted so much time on, and his printed books which were a great deal more numerous and heavier than he had thought and had white smears on them from the chickens" (2017, loc. 5124).

Shakespeare as a character, however, doesn't exist only for comic relief.

Once you accept the conceit that Shakespeare might have had an older brother John (he did not), Rory Clements serves up an exciting mélange of Tudor-era intrigue, as well as a Bard who is mostly sober as a judge. Clements' background in journalism helps him keep to the facts, while he expresses a "passion" for thrillers. In his two most recent novels, he turns aside from the Elizabethan era to write about an American spy, Thomas Wilde (who is also a Cambridge don), in the days leading up to World War II, but he is much more convincing (at least to this reader) when he is on the trail of Elizabethan plotters and recusants. Shakespeare is a peripheral character in this engaging series, and, in The Queen's Man, chronologically the first of the books but sixth (of seven) in terms of publication, we get a look at the poet in the early stages of courtship in Stratford. The novel begins: "She was twenty-six; he was eighteen. They lay naked on a mattress made from hay with a covering of canvas that they had found on an old cart. Had stolen from an old cart" (2014, loc. 63). Will plays a larger role here than he does in the other books, but the focus soon shifts to brother John, a man of law who has entered the service of spymaster Francis Walsingham and must balance his Catholic sympathies against his allegiance to the Anglican Queen. In the novel, Will can be a bit of a loose cannon, but he remains the loyal husband-to-be of Anne Hathaway, who harbors a secret she and Will would prefer to keep from John. It seems she has been flirting with Catholicism, to the point that she has signed a Spiritual Testament (known as the Last Will of the Soul) that has since disappeared: "Anne recalled with horror and shame the mad night she had signed the Testament. She knew now it was a death warrant, a pathway to martyrdom for a cause in which she did not believe" (2014, loc. 3567). She has also stumbled across a "secret" letter (signed Marie R) from none other than Mary, Queen of Scots, but it's the Testament she and Will are most concerned about. The Spiritual Testament is of a type with the one supposedly signed by John Shakespeare, père, and reprinted by James Edward Malone in his 1790 edition of Shakespeare's works. The original has since disappeared. Other legends come into play here, including the poaching incident involving Sir Thomas Lucy, an allegation that Will denies: "I did not poach deer on Lucy's estates. I have never poached deer in my life" (2014, loc. 2963). Take that, Nicholas Rowe!

Shakespeare is the central player in the following two series, although their authors' characterizations of him couldn't be more diverse.

Benet Brandreth, son of Gyles (himself the writer of a series of books featuring Oscar Wilde as a quasi-consulting detective) is the rhetoric coach for the Royal Shakespeare Company (Sweeney, 2019). Thus he comes by his muse honestly. His Bard is both young and impulsive, and, while married, he is not averse to bodice-ripping. His first appearance, in The Spy of Venice, is as a Stratford youth who is something of a puzzle to his family. He works as a glove-maker in his father's business, but he daydreams of becoming a poet and player. Both of his parents are exasperated with their "wayward, unmannerly boy"—his father's words—and even his wife Anne dreams of "the quiet days to come" when the fallout from a scandal forces Will to relocate to London, but not before his mother, Polonius-like, gives him a bit of advice that he will promptly ignore: "Do not spend all your thought on proving yourself clever if that cleverness cuts. A sharp tongue has two edges. . . . Choose your friends in London with care. Trust your own judgment first and do not give yourself over to care of the judgment of others. . . And do not borrow money. That has been your father's undoing. Nor lend it either should you get any"

(2016, p. 61). He is driven from Stratford by the irate father of yet another "lovesick girl" (many will follow) and ends up in company with a pair of London-based players with suspiciously familiar names: Nicholas Oldcastle and John Hemminges (one assumes the latter is a reference to the actor and co-editor of the Folio, usually known as Heminges). The former is a "tun of man" whose face "was dominated by a nose that had been generously given by nature and then much enlarged and reddened by drink's careful nurture" (2016, p. 17), while the latter is "square-set" with a no-nonsense attitude and a shady past. In the novel, young Shakespeare will play a sort of Hal to Oldcastle's Falstaff and will learn fencing and fisticuffs, dancing and derring-do, from the Mr. Miyagi-like Hemminges. The pair accompany Will to Italy and play a pivotal role in his adventures there. Brandreth wastes little ink in describing Will, but one gets the impression that he is handsome if only to judge from his amorous conquests; however, after he takes a particularly severe beating, Oldcastle proclaims that William "was not pretty, to begin with" (2016, p. 123). He's not really very nice either. By the end of The Assassin of Verona, the second book in the series, he and his companions reach a parting of the ways. Hemminges is disappointed in his protégé, to the point of accusing Will of having gotten a young man killed; he goes so far as to compare him to the titular villain of Brandreth's novel, an assassin named Prospero. When Will glibly suggests that "there's nothing good or evil but thinking makes it so," Hemminges rejoins, "You are Prospero.

You are not the player of a part. You are the assassin" (2017, Epilogue). The subject of William's hair, or lack thereof, is not broached.

American Leonard Tourney wrote a series of eight Tudor-era detective novels in the 1980s and '90s that focus on the husband-and-wife team of Matthew and Joan Stock. Matthew is a small-town (Chelmsford) constable and clothier whose penchant for finding murder victims anticipates that of Chief Inspector Barnaby of Midsomer. One of these novels, The Player's Boy is Dead, looks proleptically to 2015, when Tourney began publishing his The Mysteries of Shakespeare series, three novels so far, with the Bard taking center stage. These tales jump around in time, with the first concerning a 19-year-old Will and the last two placing him in middle age. The author's take on Shakespeare is problematic. While the stories are exciting as mysteries, and no doubt of interest to students of the period, the character of the playwright is somewhat of a cold fish. One pictures him in green eyeshades rather than buskins. When, years after their affair has ended, Will is contacted by The Dark Lady, in Time's Fool, he is at first reluctant to meet with her. Surely, he thinks, she is after money. Yet he overcomes his scruples and is even moved to a degree of pity when he finds that she is half-dead of the plague. When a fire starts, he does what he can to rescue her, but without success. Later, when he learns that she has faked her death, and is bent on revenge for his unflattering portrayal of her in the sonnets, Shakespeare reverts to his earlier contempt. All the while, he seems more concerned about his reputation than with his own lapses in judgment. It should further be noted that there are occasional inaccuracies in the series: Tourney, who claims to specialize in the "atmospheric resuscitation of the Elizabethan age," seems to think, in Falstaff's Murder, that a 19-year-old Will Shakespeare might have seen a performance of Marlowe's Doctor Faustus (Marlowe's play is believed to have been first produced circa 1589, at which time both Shakespeare and Marlowe would have been at least 24). In another book, a middle-aged Shakespeare (the series' narrator) reminisces about the time he spied on his brother and a "loose maid" in the barn, with the implication he learned about sex by watching one of his younger brothers at play. Perhaps, like Clements, Tourney fancies that Will had an older brother named John? In The Conjuror's Daughter, he has The Tempest being staged at the Globe, rather than at Blackfriars (the daughter of the title is one of John Dee's eight children, here called Marina). Tourney generally handles the historical stuff well, but, like his cohort, he is hardly one to let facts get in the way of a good read. In truth, what makes Shakespeare's biography so alluring is not the particulars, but the lack thereof.

I wonder whether these (and other) writers may have taken as inspiration for their

descriptions of William Shakespeare, character, the various "portraits" of the Bard that are alleged to exist. I put the word "portraits" in quotations because none has been authenticated, although some have more claim to legitimacy than others. No less an authority than Katherine Duncan-Jones has vouched for the authenticity of, not only the Droeshout engraving from the Folio but also the Holy Trinity Church bust and the Chandos Portrait, only the last of which can claim to have been "done from life." In 1977, Leslie Hotson (who had earned a reputation as a "Shakespearean detective" by establishing the identity of Kit Marlowe's killer, Ingram Frizer, and of uncovering the "real-life" inspiration for Justice Shallow—not Thomas Lucy, but William Gardiner—in 2 Henry IV) argued that a miniature by Nicholas Hilliard ("Man Clasping a Hand from a Cloud") was actually a portrait of the young William Shakespeare. In Shakespeare by Hilliard, he contends that the poet was "a blonde Englishman, handsome, sensitive, thoughtful. . . . an alert, hazel-eyed young man with fair curling hair, mustache, and a slight beard" (1958, p. 10). Like it or not, writers who draw Shakespeare as a character have had to take this possibility, along with a host of others, into account when composing their own portraits of the poet in words. In Nothing like the Sun, Anthony Burgess writes of Shakespeare's "auburn hair" and "spaniel eyes." This description is echoed in the novel Mistress Shakespeare, by Karen Harper, in which the author speculates that Shakespeare was married twice, once in church to Anne Hathaway, and once in a "handfast" ceremony (legally binding) to Anne Rosaline Whateley, whose only historical link to Shakespeare is an Episcopal document that announces the impending marriage of one Anne Whateley, of Temple Grafton, to a William whose last name, Shaxpere, maybe a variant spelling of the Bard's name. It predates a similar announcement of William Shakespeare's marriage to Anne Hathaway but is generally thought to be either a clerical error or a case of mistaken identity. In the novel, Harper claims Shakespeare has "auburn hair" (reddish-brown) and "bright hazel eyes so alert in his pale face" (2010, p. 21). She elaborates on this depiction when she has Anne Whateley confess, "I did want to keep him. He looked fine with his auburn hair gleaming in the light and his hazel eyes clear and piercing. His face and form had filled out in manly fashion; muscles molded his loosely laced shirt and swelled his breeches. And tall—so much taller. He was quite well dressed for a rural walk. . . ." (2010, p. 66). None of this is directly contradicted by Hilliard's miniature, except perhaps the hair color (one is tempted to call the sitter in Hilliard's miniature a strawberry blonde); however, it must be said, the description might just as well apply to another contender in the Portraits wars, the so-called Sanders Portrait, as well as to others of the residuum of anonymous portraits of young men that survive from the time. Were Benet Brandreth ekphrastically inclined, he might have elected to base his portrait of the young Will Shakespeare on either the Hilliard or Sanders painting.

Modern writers tend to be overly-cautious when committing to specifics in their descriptions of the physiognomy of William Shakespeare, but they can be quite generous in describing those of others, including the poet's famous contemporaries. For example, following a night of heavy drinking, Harper's Anne wakes up in Christopher Marlowe's bed and finds herself staring at a portrait of Marlowe in which "he looked bored and daring . . . with his arms crossed and one corner of his mouth quirked in dislike or disdain. He wore the same black and red-slashed doublet from the first time I'd seen him" (2010, p. 166). This is obviously a reference to the famous Cambridge portrait that is alleged to be a likeness of Marlowe but which, like those of Shakespeare, has never been authenticated.

At least one writer may be channeling the Chandos Portrait, painted sometime between 1610 and 1615, according to Duncan-Jones (2015, Portraits, p. 89), when describing the Bard. Bernard Cornwell, in Fools and Mortals, sets up a comparison between Shakespeare and Shakespeare's younger brother, Richard, whom Anthony Burgess calls Dickon, and who, for the purposes of the novel, is also a player. In truth, we know nothing of Richard's life, beyond the fact that he died, age 39, in 1613. An even younger brother, Edmund, was indeed a player, but he died at age 27 and wouldn't make a very

fruitful subject for a series of novels. Richard is the narrator of this novel, in which the author's conceit is that Richard is constantly having to prove himself to his aloof older brother. Richard is eventually accused of stealing a prompt book (of A Midsummer Night's Dream) from the Globe and must find the real culprit before his brother either expels him from the King's Men or beats him to a bloody pulp. Richard describes his brother thus: "He [Shakespeare] wore a thick woolen cloak and a dark hat with an extravagant brim that shadowed his face. I look nothing like him. I am tall, thin-faced, and clean-shaven, while he has a round, blunt face with a weak beard, full lips, and very dark eyes. My eyes are blue, his are secretive, shadowed, and always watching cautiously" (2017, p. 15). He's not someone you would like when he's angry.

However, the point is that, although the "full lips" are perhaps more reminiscent of Droeshout, this might well be a description of Chandos' Shakespeare, minus the earring of course (the earbob is a staple of Tim Curry's 1978 television portrayal of Shakespeare, as it is of Rupert Graves' in A Waste of Shame, and it proves to be a key plot point in Tourney's The Conjurer's Daughter, but is perhaps most essential to Sally O'Reilly's picture of Will as a dandy in Dark Aemilia). William Shakespeare is ten years his brother's senior, so Cromwell's portrait is probably that of a man in his prime. We infer from the sonnets, however, that the poet already thought of himself as old at thirty or thereabouts ("bare ruined choirs" and all that), so he quite likely carried himself with a certain gravitas. In the novel, this translates into a near-brutal disregard for his sibling.

This brings us to the Droeshout Portrait itself. As already noted, the sitter's lips are rather full; otherwise it's hard not to think of the painting as a cartoon. The original was used as an engraving to adorn the First Folio (1623), and we have it on no less authority than Ben Jonson that the likeness is accurate: "O, could he [the engraver] but have drawn his Wit / As well in Brass, as he hath hit / His face." Of course, Jonson then goes on to suggest that the Reader "look / Not on his picture, but his Book," so perhaps his endorsement is less than whole-hearted. If we look to Leonard Tourney's Time's Fool (2018), we find a Shakespeare that dates to the time of Measure for Measure, when he was about 40 years old and at the top of his game. This figure is an easy one to reconcile with the Droeshout painting (although it should be noted that Katherine Duncan-Jones sees it as the likeness of a somewhat younger man, still in his thirties). Tourney's protagonist is a bit of a bore, really. He's in the middle of writing one of the problem plays, this one dealing with a hypocritical judge, but he seems to be more concerned with the practical side of theatrical life, the business end, than with casuistry. Money is no longer an object, and he leads a relatively sedate existence, just living out his days until his retirement to Stratford. Until disaster strikes, that is. The problem with Time's Fool is that it's told from the first-person perspective by none other than Shakespeare himself. So we don't get a whole lot in the way of description of the man. However, just as there is little about the Droeshout Portrait to suggest the passion of the poet, Tourney's playwright/narrator isn't much of a rouser either. He describes himself as "a countryman at heart, more thrilled by bird's call and a pretty prospect of stream or heath than by the siren voices and vices of the court" (2018, loc. 5140); indeed, it is even suggested that, although he has been a seducer of women and even a bit of a cad, those days are now so far behind him that he's forgotten whether he might have bedded a young woman once in Stratford and fathered a bastard on her: "I never lay with your mother," he tells Thomas Stanleigh, who claims otherwise, "I knew her, not well, but as God is my judge, I never knew more of her than her name, and hardly that. It's been years since I thought of her." Later, he's not so sure; he recalls a drunken night in Shottery (Stanleigh's home) when he slept with a girl "whose face I can no longer see. . . . Stanleigh's dead. His mother likewise. Some things are best lost in oblivion." All's well that ends well? Of course, it may be unfair to read such callousness into the character of the subject of the Droeshout Portrait. But the sitter does have a somewhat oblivious look, at least to this observer. He is even closer in some ways, however, to David Mitchell's comic portrayal of Will on the BBC "sitcom" Upstart Crow. With his comfortable paunch and receding hairline, Ben

Elton's Shakespeare is harmless enough, a bit of a wanker but capable of the occasional line of genius verse or the Quixotic gesture. Dubbed "Master Shakey Poet" by Robert Greene, the Master of the Revels, he often finds himself on the offensive. When he's accused of having a crush on the Earl of Southampton, he counters, "Just because I write 126 sonnets to an attractive boy, I must be some kind of be chambered hugger-tugger" (Lipsey, 2016). When his wife advises him to steer clear of comedy in the plays, he replies, "If you do your research, my stuff is actually really funny." And when he's told he's going bald, he says, "I'm not going bloody bald. I have a very big brain." The show is meant for laughs and rarely ventures beyond the comic, but in its third series, tragedy strikes. Hamnet dies, and the family is distraught. Rather than stare hopelessly into space, Shakespeare rallies his household and reflects on the injustice of a young life (Hamnet was 11 years old when he died) cut tragically short. Mitchell may take his tonsorial cues from Droeshout's Shakespeare, but he suggests much greater depths of character.

Meanwhile, the urge to build a better Shakespeare persists. Take, for example, Kenneth Branagh's impersonation of the poet in All Is True, directed by the actor and written by Ben Elton (once again, the ghost of Hamnet haunts Elton's script). The film follows Will's career from the time of the Globe fire to that of his retirement and death, when he leaves his second-best bed to Judi Dench. To judge from what I've seen, Branagh takes his cue for his impersonation of the Bard from Chandos. He wears a bald cap for much of the film and a prosthetic nose but is sans earbob (his mustache too is without personality and, mercifully, it borrows nothing from his Poirot). In a recent article in the Guardian, another actor weighs in on the bald facts of Shakespeare's life and comes up empty. Mark Rylance doesn't believe in the Man from Stratford, but, surprisingly, and in spite of having appeared in Anonymous, he doesn't subscribe to the Prince Tudor theory (the one that holds that the works of Shakespeare were written by Edward de Vere, the Earl of Oxford, who was the illegitimate son of Elizabeth and who fathered Southampton on her) either. He is a Bacon man (perhaps someone should tell him that, in the Bacon universe, only six degrees separate us from everybody else), and he's a bit prickly when challenged on his beliefs: "The Stratfordian response to our question about the authorship has usually been to lampoon the questioner. They can't answer the question or make it go away, so they try to make us go away" (Alberge, 2019). Rylance, then, has his own idea of what the Sweet Swan might have looked like, and, according to him, he looked a lot like Sir Francis Bacon: no earring, but no lack of hair either (unless Bacon's hiding something beneath that ubiquitous hat). We may have to agree to disagree on what the man looked like, but, when it comes to the kind of man he was—his character—I side with David Bevington, who claims, in Shakespeare and Biography, that the "persona that emerges from Shakespeare's writings and from biographical studies is a better man than Oxford could have imagined" (2010, p. 160). Perhaps, to misquote Gore Vidal in Duluth: "We all get the Shakespeare we deserve." He wasn't much of one for self-promotion, and he wasn't at all forthcoming regarding his "lost years," and we really haven't a clue what he looked like, but then—looks aren't everything. I don't care if he was a country bumpkin, a spy, an Earl, or a transvestite.

The Man from Stratford rules.

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