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**From Ink to Film: How Cinematic
Representations of William Shakespeare
Perpetuate his Idealization**

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Resumen

Este trabajo analiza las representaciones de Shakespeare en el cine y como su personalidad es creada a pesar de la carencia de datos precisos en sus biografías, esto contribuirá a la mitificación e idealización del Bardo. La creación de las biografías de Shakespeare a menudo tiende a la especulación debido a la insuficiencia de documentos acerca de William Shakespeare, lo cual llevara a una variedad de interpretaciones de su vida. Este contexto, es perfecto para los cineastas que influenciados por discursos académicos crean narrativas donde contextualizan esos debates académicos. Películas como *Shakespeare in Love*, *Bill* y *All is True* representan diferentes fases de la vida de Shakespeare, mezclando hechos históricos con licencias creativas para crear una imagen grandiosa del bardo. Estos biopics no solo entretienen si no que contribuyen a perpetuar el mito de William Shakespeare y solidificar su estatus como figura cultural y cimentar la bardolatría.

Palabras clave: Shakespeare, Biopic, Bardolatría, Idealización, Biografía, Mito, Academia

Abstract

This dissertation analyses the portrayals of William Shakespeare in film and how his personality is crafted despite the limited factual data in his biographies which will contribute to the mythification and idealization of the Bard. The crafting of biographies about Shakespeare often lead to speculation due to the insufficient documents regarding the life of William Shakespeare, leading to a variety of interpretations. This environment is perfect for filmmakers that influenced by academic discourse create narratives that contextualize those scholarly debates. Films like *Bill*, *Shakespeare in Love*, and *All is True* portray different phases of Shakespeare's life, blending historical facts with creative liberties to shape a grandiose image. These biopics not only entertain but also help to perpetuate the myth of Shakespeare and solidify his status as a culture figure and perpetuate the concept of bardolatry.

Keywords: Shakespeare, Biopic, Bardolatry, Idealization, Biography, Myth, Academia

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I. Introduction

William Shakespeare widely acclaimed as one of the most influential literary figures in history. His life and oeuvre have captivated scholars and the general public alike. Consisting of 39 plays, 154 sonnets and various other poems Shakespeare's works have been the foundation of English literature studies and the Literary canon. Nonetheless, Shakespeare himself has become a captivating figure in his own right. The intrigue regarding his life has given rise to numerous biographies that attempt to put together a narrative, despite the insufficiency of concrete details about the Bard. However, these biographies often rely on subjective narratives based on speculations to fill in the gaps of Shakespeare's life. This intrigue for Shakespeare managed to permeate different mediums, which led the bard from written biographies to biographical films or biopics. Film, as a medium of popular culture, offers a unique platform for reimagining historical figures, and Shakespeare is no exception. The mystery of Shakespeare's life has led to the inspiration of filmmakers to bring him to the big screen where they try to make sense of Shakespeare's experiences, relationships, scandals and more. Movies featuring Shakespeare as a character offer a unique lens through which to examine the man behind the myth. These cinematic portrayals dive into the historical, personal, and fictionalized aspects of Shakespeare's life, providing a rich tapestry of interpretations that blend fact with fictional speculation. The lack of extensive biographical data on Shakespeare provides filmmakers with a broad canvas on which to project their ideas, allowing them to take significant creative liberties. This freedom has led to a diverse range of portrayals, from the struggling young playwright in *Shakespeare in Love* to the reflective and retired Shakespeare in *All Is True*. Moreover, most of the characterizations of William Shakespeare come from pre-established ideas from academic and scholarly sources. The academic world offers a deep analysis of Shakespeare which will provide a framework for filmmakers to anchor their portrayals of the character. This exchange between academia and

film highlights their dynamic relationship and reinforces each other. The depictions of Shakespeare in film contribute to the ongoing idealization of the Bard. These portrayals often elevate Shakespeare to a mythical status with the dramatization of his creative genius, presenting him as a figure who transcend ordinary contexts. The representation of Shakespeare often links his personal experiences with his literary works, so as to acquire some type of insight into Shakespeare's inner thoughts. Biographies typically focus on documented facts, historical context, and critical analysis, offering a sober and sometimes speculative exploration of his experiences and influences. In contrast, cinematic depictions may take significant creative liberties, prioritizing dramatic appeal and storytelling over historical accuracy. This divergence can lead to portrayals that emphasize or invent certain aspects of Shakespeare's character and life events, thereby shaping public perception to their liking.

This dissertation will explore the multifaceted depiction of Shakespeare as a character in film, analysing how different directors and screenwriters have interpreted his life and legacy. Using *Shakespeare in Love* (1998), *Bill* (2015) and *All is True* (2018) as case studies. Through this examination, we will gain insights into the ways in which Shakespeare's persona is crafted regarding the lack of biographical information available. By examining these portrayals, we can observe the creative liberties taken by filmmakers as they contextualize Shakespeare's life and works inside of a mold already pre-established by academic studies. Furthermore, we will examine how these cinematic representations contribute to the ongoing idealization of the Bard reinforcing his status as an elite icon. This essay will begin by exploring how biographies are constructed despite the lack of factual information, laying the foundation to unretarding the challenges of depicting him in film. We will continue with the analysis of the crafting of the character of William Shakespeare in movies, focusing on how filmmakers contextualize and reinterpret the rumours and legends that have emerged over the centuries of Shakespearian studies. Finally, we will consider how the myth of Shakespear has been constructed and treated

in academies spheres, and how this myth is perpetuated through film solidifying Shakespeare
prestige.

II. Theoretical framework

Shakespeare has been studied in the academic setting for hundreds of years. William Shakespeare and his oeuvre have been studied from many different perspectives and interpretations. With the roll of the new millennium and its new technologies it is no wonder that Shakespeare managed to introduce himself to new mediums. Adapting the Bard's plays to the big screen, with *Henry V* (1944) directed by Laurence Olivier, being the first sound film of a play by Shakespeare. Many more adaptations of his plays came after that, moving from film to Broadway with musicals such as *Kiss Me Kate* (based on *The Taming of the Shrew*, directed by George Sidney in 1953, or *West Side Story* (based on *Romeo and Juliet*, 1961, directed by Robert Wise). In the last decade of the twentieth century, many other movies have adapted William Shakespeare's works with a modern setting, creating a renewed interest in the works of the bard, such as *William Shakespeare's Romeo + Juliet* (Baz Luhrmann, 1996) or *10 Things I Hate About You* (*The Taming of the Shrew*, Gil Junger, 1999) that gained a lot of popularity amongst the young public. In spite of this new market for Shakespeare adaptations, an interest in William Shakespeare himself emerged, with movies such as *Shakespeare in Love* (1998) dominating the box office. Although a great number of adaptations of Shakespeare's works have been made, the most popular Shakespeare films are not those about his works but about Shakespeare himself. According to Deborah Cartmell in her essay "Marketing Shakespeare Films: From Tragedy to Biopic" "Shakespeare flourishes most on screen, not in comedy, tragedy, or romance, but in the genre of biopic" (58). Therefore, a new current of Shakespearean films appeared this time not with stories by Shakespeare but about Shakespeare. For academics like Deborah Cartmell "It seems that the 'presence' of Shakespeare, or rather Shakespeare as movie star, rather than Shakespearean content, seems to be what sells Shakespeare on screen." (59) as she states in her essay. Considering Shakespeare as a character rather than a writer of stories, supposed a change in perspective and in the study of the Bard within academia, for Emma French in her book *Selling Shakespeare to*

Hollywood “film marketing provides a valid and productive new angle from which to approach the complex cultural phenomenon that is Shakespeare” (2). As Shakespeare has always been considered an “international high culture icon” (102) as Ana-Maria Iftimie determines, the act of portraying Shakespeare in mass media productions such as Hollywood films is a way to return “Shakespeare back to the masses, where he belongs.” (103). When studying Shakespeare in film many scholars seem to agree that there is a clash between high and low culture. French mentions that there is a “high/low hybridity in global consumer culture” (1) when referring to the marketing of Shakespeare in Hollywood. With academics like Harold Bloom giving Shakespeare the status of the higher culture writer, portraying him within the genre of biopic usually considered as “low-brow culture” (Iftimie, 103) often culminates in the idea that these adaptations are “dumbing down” (French 7) Shakespeare. Shakespeare on film combines these two dualities of high and popular culture in the descriptions of Shakespeare. As Shakespeare becomes more notorious in the popular film genre might cause the reduction in his status as a high culture privileged icon, which for French leads to “a seemingly inexhaustible variety of instances of parody, quotation, displacement, translation and travesty” (16) nonetheless, this appropriation of the image of the bard in the film popular genre does not diminish his status of privilege even when he is being mocked as we will see with the film *Bill* (2015).

Using Shakespeare’s image in film has proven to be a rich source of inspiration for creative writers who wish to re-interpret William Shakespeare’s identity. However, as Ronan Hatfull mentions these reinterpretations “often reflect writers’ own personal identities as well as cultural zeitgeist in which they operate” (160), in other words, the visions of Shakespeare inside of popular culture tend to turn the lack of knowledge about Shakespeare’s life into an opportunity to exploit the gap for artistic license. Although screenwriters take these artistic licenses when writing the character of William Shakespeare, Richard Burt argues that these narratives “do not really alter anything we know and instead fall back on the more common romantic view of Shakespeare’s life

as a mystery” (215) For Burt films fail to imagine an alternative vision of the more traditional accounts of Shakespeare. This is probably due to the fact that even if the medium in which Shakespeare is represented, film in this case, is considered a popular and mass culture narrative they still rely on dated scholarship about Shakespeare. For other scholars such as Iftimie, “although based on facts, does not solely rely on them” (107) as the historical facts are only used in order to provide a coherent story inside the context of Shakespeare’s life. Every Shakesporean movie not only takes academic data of Shakespeare’s life, such as the important dates of his very limited biography, but also seems to take into account debates and questions that have plagued academic studies of Shakespeare for decades. When studying the representation of Shakespeare in biopics, academics notice that the movies took influence regarding the Anti-Stratfordian debate, and the theories about the authorship of Shakespeare’s plays. For Seth Lewis, in his article “The Myth of Total Shakespeare: Filmic Adaptation and Posthuman Collaboration” this authorship question influence in *Shakespeare in Love* comes with the portrayal of a revision of the relationship between Marlowe and Shakespeare, when in the movie, as Lewis states “The most notable moment of revisioning comes in the scene in which Marlowe refines Shakespeare’s ideas into the plot that would become *Romeo and Juliet*” (59). The movie *Anonymous* (2011) was very criticised by academics in its treatment of the Anti-Stratfordian debate, according to Peter Kirwan “the historical fiction proposing that Edward de Vere, 17th Earl of Oxford, was the true author of Shakespeare’s plays, and that they were presented to the public via the proxy of the illiterate, alcoholic, and money-grabbing actor Shakespeare.” (11) It appears as if making a film about Shakespeare and not mentioning the debate regarding the authorship of his oeuvre is impossible. For Lewis “in terms of Shakesporean cinema, the idea of a Total Shakespeare, [...] is evolving and reconfiguring” (67), cinema is attempting to portray Shakespeare not as a poet in a tower, alone and able to write with just his genius but as a man that took inspiration from other writers and the world that surrounded him. However, portraying this pluralistic Shakespeare seems to

come with tremendous backlash from the academic spheres, with articles such as “Hollywood Dishonors the Bard,” “Shakespeare—a fraud? Anonymous is ridiculous” (Shapiro), and “People Being Stupid About Shakesp... Or Someone Else” (Syme), as academics try to claim that their version of William Shakespeare is the correct one.

The angle that most academics seem to take when discussing about William Shakespeare representations on film is that the screenwriters try to humanize him. Trying to take him away of the conception of Shakespeare as a god-like writer and move him toward the idea that he was a human being with problems. For Ronan Hatfull this humanization of Shakespeare comes by “creating an origin myth for him and showing his initial struggles as an aspiring playwright” (164), movies such as *Shakespeare in Love* and *Bill* show this side of William Shakespeare, as a man that can also struggle to write. For others, the depiction of Shakespeare on film goes beyond the struggles of the creative process and into the deeper emotional and psychological aspects of his life. Some films explore Shakespeare as an “ordinary man who struggled to cope with guilt and grief” (Iftimie 113). *All Is True*, for example invites viewers to see Shakespeare not just as the brilliant author of timeless works, but as a father, a husband, and a man facing the universal human experiences of loss, regret, and the search for meaning. For academics like Iftimie, Shakespeare on film is often depicted as a complex individual, showing his personal struggles and desire. This portrayal aims to make the audiences see Shakespeare as more than just his works; he has become a character in his own right with a life full of ambition, dreams, failures, love and grief. By doing so, academics see how filmmakers invite to a more humane understanding of Shakespeare. A representation of William Shakespeare that is acknowledged by his extraordinary talent and his humanity.

III. Analysis

3.3 The Man

This project needs to consider the definitions and practices of biographies, as to provide basic context to whether a biography of Shakespeare is feasible, consequently, the accuracy of movies depicting Shakespeare's life is debatable. According to the Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms (2008) a biography must give “a narrative history ...of the life of a notable individual from birth to death” it is important to make emphasis on the idea that this type of narrative describes the trajectory of a subject’s life. The sheer number of modern biographies written about William Shakespeare as a subject is set to astonish any person trying to learn about the life of the Bard. The estimated number of books written about William Shakespeare’s life is over a hundred, not only that but since the release of the movie “Shakespeare in Love” in 1998, over twenty-five new biographies of Shakespeare have been published by a variety of biographers such as Katherine Duncan-Jones (2001) or Lois Potter (2012). These is an impressive number of biographies, if we take into account that no new contemporary document mentioning Shakespeare has been discovered since 1931 when Leslie Hotson published his transcription of the newfound documents of Langley writ of 1596¹. The continuous creation of biographies about the life of Shakespeare regardless of the lack of new information about him draws attention to the fact that the life of the Bard is of great interest to academics and the regular public. However, to appeal to the public the biography has to be well constructed and researched, in other words, it needs to provide factually– based accounts of a life in a linear narrative. This will pose a problem with the life of Shakespeare since there are a small number of documents regarding his life. According to John Garry in *The Nature of Biography* (1957), a biography must be based on primary accurate sources from which a

¹ Langley writ of 1596 is a document in which William Wayte craves sureties [guarantees] of the peace against William Shakspere, Francis Langley, Dorothy Soer wife of John Soer, and Anne Lee, for fear of death, and so forth. Writ of attachment issued by the sheriff of Surrey, returnable on the eighteenth of St Martin [November 29, 1596].

narrative can be constructed (115). To be able to construct an accurate and factual biography the biographer needs suitable materials. The type of data used for biographies has been a topic of discussion, David Schwalm in *Locating Belief in Biography* (1980) created a list of those aspects that a biography must take into account. It goes as follows:

(i) autobiographical documents (e.g. letters, diaries, literary works); (ii) testimony of witnesses; (iii) official documents (e.g. parish registers, county records, contracts); (iv) physical objects (e.g. clothes, furniture, residences, neighbourhoods, institutions); (v) images (e.g. portraits, photographs); (vi) biographer's first-hand experience of the subject e.g. private interviews (unless deceased or unreachable)." (26)

Nonetheless, these documents account are not always reliable or accurate and it is the job of the biographer to judge the veracity of the documents and evaluate every detail. According to researcher Robert Bearman, the handwritten records that mention William Shakespeare are less than eighty. (*Shakespeare in the Stratford Records*, vii). The small number of historical documents with mentions about Shakespeare consist mainly of legal documents, whether if it is about his birth, his marriage certificate, the baptism of his children, etc. There are also very few allusions of his work in printed text, which makes it difficult to organize his work chronologically. All these aspects and primary sources offer little to no insight into the writer's thoughts or motives. Autobiographical documents such as diaries or letters are essential to understand a subject's character and experiences. However, Shakespeare left none of those things. Therefore, biographical inferences remain entirely subjective due to the lack of testimony by the bard or his family, which will lead to a lot of speculation.

For the most part, biographies follow the linear stages of life, from childhood to adulthood and end with the death of the subject. James Stanfield, outlined the structure for a biography (1813, x-xi), beginning with a historical review of the period, followed by an account of the subject's life, following the stages of life: infancy; childhood; adolescence; youth; adulthood and declining

age. Other scholars such as Charlotte Bühler, followed a similar pattern of phases, her division goes from Youth; Trials; early Maturity; full Maturity and Decline (1935, 405-9). Even if the division is a little different every biography follows the linear path of the life of the subject, in addition, biographies will conclude with the subject's career and contribution to their field, discrete analysis of the subject literary works will also be provided when dealing with a critical literary biography.

However, following Shakespeare's life from beginning to end, supposed a challenge for academics and biographers alike, due to the insufficient data about Shakespeare constructing a precise linear biography of his life it's almost impossible and biographers tend to fill the gaps with their own speculations and hypothesis. Even though there are instances which are documented, shaping them into a narrative will lead to their fictionalization. Thus, creating fictional biographies about Shakespeare which as Erling A. Erickson states, come from the use of "factual materials about real people and events and developing them by applying fictional narrative techniques" (313-4).

William Shakespeare's life allegedly began the 23rd of April in Stratford-upon-Avon, however this date might not be the exact date of his birth. Lois Potter in "The Life of William Shakespeare" explains that Shakespeare was "baptized into the Church of England on Wednesday 26 April 1564" (1). Traditionally, his date of birth was estimated to be on the 23rd of April, without any type of factual proof since the only documented date is the one of his baptism. This date of birth is an estimation made by numerous academics that ended up being accepted by the public. It is important to note that the 23rd of April is also the day of Saint George, the saint patron of England. The selection of this date as William Shakespeare's date of birth, would be in the interest of making his date of birth the same as his date of death, 23rd April 1564 -23rd April 1616, making it interesting and easy to remember. Making Shakespeare share his birthday with the patron of England will reinforce this idea of Shakespeare considered as "equally mythical" (2) as the Saint

by Lois Potter and even called “a mortal God” for academic such as Harold Bloom, who denominates Shakespeare as such in his book *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human* (1998).

The absence of material regarding Shakespeare opens the door for a million different interpretations about William Shakespeare’s life. Sharing his birthday with a saint is only the point in the iceberg, of the possibilities of Shakespeare. His name does not appear in any of the records of schools in Stratford or the surrounding area. So, it is a mystery where did he learnt how to read or write, which makes his success as an avid playwright even more surprising and interesting. Portraying him as someone who came from nothing and managed to become one of the biggest writers ever. To the point of being considered by critics such as John Dryden in his *Essay of Dramatick Poetise* as the pinnacle of the English theatre stating that “Shakespeare was the Homer, or Father of our Dramatick Poets” (1668) His fame only continued to rise as the centuries went by, in the eighteenth century critics praised his greatness as a poet being called “ the glory of his age and of his country” (106) by Joshep Towers in *British Biography* (1766), and “the great poet of nature, and the glory of the British nation” (160) by George Sael in *Moral Biography* (1798) marking Shakespeare as the pride of the British empire. His popularity grew so much he became a cultural phenomenon; Richard D. Altick described this phenomenon as “poet- worship” (42) to the point that nowadays Shakespeare can be considered a celebrity. Samuel Schoenbaum accounted the term “Shakespeare industry” not only to refer to the newfound popularity of Stratford and its commercialization but also to the abundance of studies about Shakespeare’s work and life (754). This “Shakespeare industry” did not stop only with the publication of essays about the author, or more biographies about him, but it also migrated to the big screen. A great number of Shakespeare’s works have been adapted to film and TV. However, the big screen public also took interest in knowing about the author himself. Therefore, movies about the life of Shakespeare started appearing.

For the creation of these movies, it is also important to mention that there is no known

record or physical description of Shakespeare, however there are at least two important portraits said to be of Shakespeare. Both appear to be posthumous but in none of them Shakespeare's identity has been proven. It is another instance of information about Shakespeare that has been accepted by the public but lacks verification. The portraits are very well known, they were sold to the National Gallery, and they are key in the portrayal of Shakespeare in the media since they have very distinctive traits. The films we analyse will try and follow these visual representations of Shakespeare with the hair, the small beard and the clothing. Due to this lack of surviving records of Shakespeare's private life there has been a considerable speculation about such matters as his physical appearance, his sexuality, his religious beliefs, and even certain theories about the authorship of his plays as to whether the works attributed to him were written by others. All of this creates a perfect environment for the creation of William Shakespeare as a fictional character, everything seems to be possible, an imaginative version of Shakespeare is easy to create since there is little to no real evidence of his life. Authors and filmmakers can give Shakespeare any characteristic they might want because there is no authentic testimony of the real character of William Shakespeare.

3.2 The character

Due to this lack of accurate data about Shakespeare, his portrayals in the media tend to widen the public's perception of Shakespeare. Douglas Lanier suggests that "because they are tantalizing lacunae in Shakespeare's biography, two episodes have been favourites: the 'lost years' (including his marriage to Anne Hathaway and early family life) and his relationship with the Dark Lady of the Sonnets." (116) For this project I have chosen three movies in which William Shakespeare went from being a writer to becoming a character. Each one of the movies *Bill* (2015), *Shakespeare in Love* (1998) and *All is True* (2015) focuses on different periods of Shakespeare's life. His beginning as a writer, an already established Shakespeare who struggles to keep on writing and a Shakespeare that stops writing altogether and retires back to his hometown. Choosing to adapt a historical character to the big screen might come with some troubles, as Emily Sutherland in her essay "Historical Lives in Fiction, characters in Fiction: are they the same people?" mentions that "the historical character featured in a novel is a 'created fictional character' although one which relates to reality." (5) although we analyse movies, the basics are still the same. Shakespeare in the movies might have little to no resemblance to the real Shakespeare and they are based on the vision the director and screenwriter want to give him. Moreover, the lack of specific details about Shakespeare's personality makes him the perfect case to create fictional movies about his life. The only thing that needs to be accurate would be the time in which Shakespeare existed, and other historical facts to make it seem more real. For Sutherland "Writers of historical fiction have the freedom to exercise imagination, but within the confines of a credible scenario." (6) the historical and social context is crucial to shaping how the characters will be portrayed. Ana-Maria Iftimie in her essay "No Cultural Icon, Just a Man: Representing Shakespeare in Kenneth Branagh's Biopic *All Is True*" states that "some of the main features of the biopic, starting with the opening, given that most biopics begin with title cards or voice-overs whose role is to provide the historical context of the film and assert the "veracity" of what the

viewers are about to witness.” (104) filmmakers attempt to assert some type of truth to persuade viewers to accept their representations of the historical characters. *All is True* will provide this contextualization in the first seconds of the film, where they show title cards explaining Shakespeare’s situation before the rest of the movie and story continues. Biopics often start in media res; the screenwriter chose that moment of Shakespeare’s life they think is relevant depending on the message they want to convey, and they will construct William Shakespeare’s character following that vision. None of the movies will begin with Shakespeare’s birth and follow his life linearly until it ends with his death.

3.2.1 *Bill* (2015)

The first movie, *Bill* (2015) directed by Richard Bracewell is set in between 1985 and 1592, a seven-year period known as the “lost years” by Shakespeare scholars, where Shakespeare leaves no historical traces until Robert Greene alludes to him as part of the London theatrical scene in 1592 in his humorous pamphlet *Greene's Groats-Worth of Witte, bought with a million of Repentance*. Due to the absence of source material, early biographers wove tales from local lore, while modern researchers have meticulously combed through texts, bibliographies, and playbills from acting companies of the era, piecing together a fragmented timeline. Since there is no record of what happened to Shakespeare during these “lost years” setting a movie in this period of time allows for narrative licenses since the story does not have to be contained by the historical facts. This movie will create a Shakespeare that we are not used to seeing, *Bill* will get the status of “Shakespearean origin movie” (162) by Ronan Hatfull. The movie begins with Shakespeare being kicked out of his music band, which will be the reason why he decides to start writing and move to London. This William Shakespeare does not seem to be able to keep a stable job and simply decides to start writing because there is nothing else for him to do, in contraposition to the Shakespeare that Lois Potter portrays in her biography. In the biography Potter talks about how

Shakespeare might have “a good deal of theatrical experience, since Stratford was large enough to be a venue for traveling players” (14) during his childhood, making Shakespeare interested in becoming an actor and later a playwright since he was able to attend plays at a young age.

The movie decides to portray not a genius Shakespeare that was born to write but a simple man that struggled to make ends meet and decided to follow an aimless dream, or his came to be as a writer coming from a small town without apparent education. According to the official synopsis, the film will tell the "real story" of what happens when hopeless lute player Bill Shakespeare leaves his family and home to follow his dream. It's a tale of murderous kings, spies, lost loves, and a plot to blow up Queen Elizabeth I. Although this Shakespeare might not be portrayed as a genius writer, the synopsis still tries to sell this story as true, because there is no accurate source that will dismiss or confirm the story that the director is trying to tell. This lack of accurate facts makes the last years the perfect environment to take as many narrative licenses as possible and take William Shakespeare on a ridiculous journey that will end with him becoming the renowned author that the public knows. In this journey into the origin of Shakespeare, the physical portrayal does not follow the image of the portraits which are what the public are used to see. Instead of the balding Shakespeare, Richard Barcewell opted to have a Shakespeare with a fuller head of tousled hair. Visually representing that he is not yet the famous William Shakespeare. However, by the end of the movie Shakespeare has suffered a transformation, from a messy haired and clueless man towards a self-assured playwright. Janice Wardle observes that the image of Shakespeare changes in “the closing moments of the film [as] the film audience is reassured that Bill has made it.... he turns towards the camera, and we see that he has been recrafted as something approaching the iconic Chandos image of Shakespeare—hair tamed, earring inserted.” (18) as to make Shakespeare's evolution towards fame more visual. In contrast, the representation of Shakespeare in the film *All is True*, set after Shakespeare decided to retire, he is already the famous writer we all know and therefore his visual appearance is always

the same, and an almost exact copy of the appearance off the painting in the national gallery. In *Bill* we can see a physical transformation, as Bracewell says, showing how Shakespeare became the writer everyone knows, the one who managed to impress the queen of England and was able to keep writing plays for a broader public. The lost years serve as a motive for the character development of Shakespeare, these years without information about Shakespeare's whereabouts are responsible for his transformation from common man from Stratford to the most revered writer of Britain. In addition, the movies establish Shakespeare's level of fame by visually portraying him as similar as the portrait of the national gallery, which is how the public is used to imagining the appearance of William Shakespeare.

3.2.2 *Shakespeare in Love* (1998)

In contraposition to this funny, non-achiever and clueless Shakespeare we will find a more serious, intense, and profound Shakespeare in the movies *Shakespeare in Love* (1998) and *All is True* (2018). In both movies he is already an established writer, but each movie portrays different periods of his career. In *Shakespeare in Love* (1998) directed by John Madden, the Bard has already written more plays, but he now finds himself unable to write anything else. Set in 1593, Shakespeare is already a prolific writer that seems to be able to save The Rose theatre. However, he is currently suffering from writer's block and is unable to finish the play. Once again, there is no proof of Shakespeare ever having writer's block, this seems to be a choice made by the director to make Shakespeare more human, not just a brilliant writer, but one that not always has the inspiration to write. He only seems to be able to write when he falls in love with Viola, even though he was already married to Anne. This aspect of the movie emphasizes the belief that "Shakespeare's writing has its sources in his personal experiences" (113) as per Lanier comments in his book *Shakespeare and modern Popular Culture*. It is very common for academics, biographers and the broader public to try and find the missing pieces of Shakespeare's life inside

of his plays and sonnets. Shakespeare's oeuvre are used for inspiration in the construction of the author's biopics. For instance, *Shakespeare in Love* decides to play into the rumours of Shakespeare constant infidelities and his supposed bisexuality. These rumours came from the various interpretations of his Sonnets, since Shakespeare wrote about a "Dark Lady" and a man referred as the "fair youth". In *Shakespeare in Love* the director decided to portray Shakespeare's bisexuality by playing with the character of Viola dressing as a man and audition for a role in Shakespeare's play. Shakespeare seems to be as obsessed with Viola as a woman and as a man. However, the movie never explicitly addresses Shakespeare as bisexual, in fact it gives context for the writing of Sonnet 18, which is one of the Sonnets referring to the "fair youth". In the movie, Shakespeare writes Sonnet 18 to Viola and send it to her via Thomas of Kent. Richard Burt states that "Shakespeare can remain heterosexual in this film only by repressing any notion that he may have been bisexual" (215) by giving a contextualization to Shakespeare's sonnets. This film attempts to give explanations to Shakespeare's myths and rumours about his personality and his life, based purely in the re-interpretation of the director and screenwriter of the movies.

It is also important to note that *Shakespeare in Love* addresses the question of authorship. Every character and even the election of making the film surrounding the creation of *Romeo and Juliet* will be a device to defend the bard from the Anti-Stratfordian rumours and all the question of the authorship of his plays. First of all, Shakespeare's struggle to write *Romeo and Juliet* portrayed in the movie was most likely not a real event since the plot of the play is heavily influence by the Italian play *The Tragical History of Romeus and Juliet* by Arthur Brooke written in 1562, which is 32 years before Shakespeare wrote his *Romeo and Juliet*. A fact that is completely ignored in the film. *Shakespeare in Love* decides to represent the inspiration for *Romeo and Juliet* with the love story between Shakespeare and Viola, writing the dialogues based on the conversations they have. Making him, and his life, the sole inspiration for this play. The movie also serves an explanation as to why the Marlovian theories are not true, this theory proposes that

Marlowe faked his own death and started writing under the pseudonym of William Shakespeare. The movie denies this theory by creating a scene in which Marlowe helps Shakespeare refine his ideas for the play. Transforming Marlowe and Shakespeare “into congenial, and even collaborative rivals” (289) as Robert Sawyer calls them in his book *The Critical Rivalry*, denies the possibility of Marlowe being Shakespeare, something that gets reinforced after his death. This use of the character of Marlowe to deny the theories of other possible authors for Shakespeare’s plays also appears in the movie *Bill*. *Bill* presents the meeting between Shakespeare and Marlowe highlighting their differences, Shakespeare as the naïve young writer and Marlowe as an elder more experienced one. Even when historically Marlowe and Shakespeare were the same age. According to Hartfull “Modern representations of the two playwrights in bio-fiction often distort facts such as these to cast Marlowe as Shakespeare’s superior in age and/or class, presenting him variously as a mentor, companion, or rival” (172) however, even if they use Marlowe as a mentor figure for Shakespeare by the end of every movie, Shakespeare is the only one who remains alive. The movie tries to hint into the Marlovian theory by making Marlowe steal Shakespeare’s play and trying to sell it to the king of Spain so he can infiltrate Elisabeth court. However instead of paying Marlowe for the play the king kills him. The portrayal of Marlowe’s death in both of the movies serve as a negation of the authorship question. By the end of both movies, Shakespeare is the survivor, and it is his name in the plays. *Bill* even manages to highlight Shakespeare as the sole author with a post credit scene where you see a collection of papers in a fire with “A Series of Funny Misunderstandings: An Original Work by ~~Bill~~ William Shakespeare” written on them.

3.2.3 *All is True* (2018)

The last movie *All Is True* (2018) directed by Kenneth Branagh, released 20 years after *Shakespeare in Love* shows that the interest in Shakespeare’s life is always present. Unlike, *Shakespeare in Love*, which romanticized Shakespeare’s rise in fame, *All is True* examines the

aftermath of his successful career, focusing on the life of Shakespeare after The Globe burned down in 1613, and the emotional turmoil that followed after going back home to his family. The set of the film is contextualizing the closing of the most important chapter in Shakespeare's life, his writing and his job. Now he has to move back from London to his family home. The elimination of his distractions as a playwright seems to be the catalyst for his grief over the death of his son, Hamnet, who had died many years earlier. Shakespeare gets consumed by this grief for the boy he barely knew. The film takes inspiration from the play *Hamlet*, which at the same time it is believed to be written because of the death of Shakespeare's son Hamnet. In the movie, when Shakespeare comes back to home, he finds a boy in the forest, later one the audience discovers that the boy is the ghost of Hamnet. The film draws a parallel between Shakespeare's personal loss and the themes of his work, particularly the play *Hamlet*, which many scholars believe was written in response to Hamnet's death. Stephen Greenblatt in his book *Will in the World: How Shakespeare Became Shakespeare* (2004) does not claim that *Hamlet* is directly about Hamnet, but he suggests that the play's themes of loss, grief, and the complexities of father-son relationships could reflect Shakespeare's personal experiences.

The ghost of the boy asks Shakespeare to find the reason why he died, just like King Hamlet asks his son to do in the play. The ghost can be seen as an "embodiment" of Shakespeare's regret for his son death and the abandonment of his family. The search for the reason of Hamnet's death, is another instance of creative license in which the director tries to give reason to aspects of Shakespeare's life and a more contextualized vision of how his plays came to be. However, this portrayal of a grieving human Shakespeare comes with problems. The movie seems to suggest that Shakespeare's primary concern is still his legacy rather than the wellbeing of his family. The use of Hamnet's death as a plot device to show his human side, is eclipsed by the fact that Shakespeare gets obsessed with the poems his son supposedly wrote, at least in the movie. Shakespeare's obsession over the poem of his dead son who seemingly aspired to follow his father

steps as a writer reveals the image of a man that was only preoccupied by the fame, which is what led him to abandon his family in the first place. As Iftimie notes, Shakespeare was “perhaps, even wistful, as he would have had a male heir to carry on both his legacies: his name and his fame.” (109) With that Shakespeare humanity reduced to the mere fact that he only thinks about his legacy as a writer and the fame that his name carries now. His focus on his legacy stains his family relations to the point in which his return to his family home does not bring a reconciliation between Shakespeare and his wife and daughters, instead it accentuates the tensions between them. The family resents his long absence and his sudden attempt to reassert himself into the family life, Anne declares in the film “Twenty years, Will. We’ve seen you less and less.” (00:03:56) for them Shakespeare at this point is simply a guest. Shakespeare’s attempts to fulfil his role as a father and husband after years of neglect come across as hollow and belated, highlighting the failure of his marriage and familial relationships. However, by the end of the movie, Shakespeare manages to gain back the trust and affection of his family. Branagh depicts this reconciliation with the help of William Shakespeare’s testament. Since his will is probably one of the very few documents that Shakespeare wrote based on his preferences it gives insight to his thoughts in a way. Branagh contextualizes the fact that Shakespeare left the second-best bed to Anne. In the movie Anne states, “to us, you are a guest., And a guest must have the best bed” (00:04:14) implying that the second best-bed is the matrimonial bed, which Anne is using. Despite knowing that Anne will get a third of his belongings after his death, he decided to leave a record of his decision to leave that bed to Anne specifically. Schoenbaum comments on this two-fold situation: it could have been derision for Anne on Shakespeare’s part, but, at the same time, perhaps it was a sentimental decision, as the second-best bed held emotional value to them (21). Shakespeare’s marriage has been the focus of many rumours. While *Shakespeare in Love* disregards completely the fact that William Shakespeare had a wife, Branagh makes Anne an essential part of why William Shakespeare was able to become the biggest writer in England. Even though the characterization of

Shakespeare might change slightly from film to film, Shakespeare becoming the greatest writer of a nation is the common theme in all of them.

3.3 The Myth

As we have seen in all the movies William Shakespeare ended up having a curated personality that fit the story the directors wanted to tell, fictionalizing even further biographical accounts. By denying or contextualizing rumours of Shakespeare they try to convey the message of how grandiose Shakespeare managed to become. The absence of autobiographical resources helps with the creation of the Bard as a myth and the foundation of Bardolatry, a term coined by George Bernard Shaw, that describe the excessive admiration and veneration of William Shakespeare. One significant discussion of bardolatry can be found in Gary Taylor's *Reinventing Shakespeare: A Cultural History from the Restoration to the Present* (1989), where Taylor explores how Shakespeare's reputation was constructed and elevated over time. Taylor argues that Shakespeare's rise to pre-eminence was not solely based on the intrinsic qualities of his works but was also a result of cultural, political, and educational forces that positioned him as the supreme figure in English literature. The creation of biopics about William Shakespeare plays a significant role in perpetuating bardolatry. This is a form of propaganda when films are used to spread and promote specific ideas. Gary Jason in "Film, and Propaganda: The lessons of the Nazi Film Industry" states that "all mass media [...] can be used for propaganda, that is as tools for getting a message (anything from a specific idea to general ideology) broadly accepted in a target audience" (203). All three movies previously discussed depict Shakespeare as a romantic, tortured genius. *Bill* serves as an exemplification of Lanier's description of the term "Shakespop" biography which states that "The myth of Shakespeare the self-made author, a man whose literary stature springs not from divine inspiration, patronage connections or classical education, but rather from the productions of his own formidable brain" (110) it is just an indication of the great and superior intellect of Shakespeare. The movie, *Bill* centres the narrative that Shakespeare's plays are simply crude humour and lack deeper meaning, which is an argument that has been made aiming to discredit Shakespeare's works. The film implicitly defends the intellectual and artistic

merits of Shakespeare's works, which helps reaffirm Shakespeare's status as a masterful writer. In addition, contextualizing Shakespeare's potential questionable characteristics — such as his alleged extramarital affairs, the speculation regarding his bisexuality, and the enduring question of authorship — within film can be regarded as a method to mitigate the negativity of those rumours. In the case of the rumours of infidelity, *Shakespeare in Love* turns them into a favourable light, since his romantic affair develops into inspiration for his plays, once again allowing the reinterpretation of negative traits which will contribute further into the idealization of Shakespeare. Another instance is the speculation of his “lost years” since they allow screenwriters to model the narrative into one that fits into encouraging the mythic portrayal of Shakespeare that will keep fuelling bardolatry. In *Bill*, the main narrative is about the origin story of Shakespeare, an origin story similar to the one of heroes: how a Shakespeare that came from nothing, managed to become the greatest of writers. Movies are used as a tool for mythmaking. Selling these propagandistic ideas to the broader public of Hollywood. Broadening the reach of Shakespeare into audiences that might not engage with his works through academic channels, helps to preserve this hero-worship ideas of William Shakespeare, ensuring that Shakespeare's mythical status is maintained, not only in academia but also in popular culture. Thomas Cartelli and Katherine Rowe discuss how contemporary screen adaptations and biopics can promote a romanticized version of Shakespeare, making him more accessible but also more mythologized (*New Wave Shakespeare on Screen*). However, this romantization comes also by the hands of the academic spheres. Comparing Shakespeare to a god is a common trope in discussions about the bard, which will clearly affect in the veneration of the bard. This comparison will elevate Shakespeare from a historical figure to a quasi-divine status. In *All is True*, Shakespeare is referred to as “the son of Apollo” (00:39:00) putting him in the status of the descendant of a deity. This god-like status reinforces the idea that his works and himself contain universal truths and making them seem almost secular. The Victorians were the first to treat Shakespeare's works as a secular replacement

to the Bible (2003), as per Robert Sawyer observations in his book *Victorian Appropriations of Shakespeare*. Victorians made Shakespeare the symbol of their cultural superiority, portraying Shakespeare as the National hero in charge of spreading their national identity and the British values. In *All is True* Shakespeare is called “the greatest man of the kingdom” (00:40:00). These ideas prevailed with Harold Bloom in his book *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human* (1998) where he calls Shakespeare “a mortal God” and claims that bardolatry "ought to be even more a secular religion than it already is." William Shakespeare becomes a cultural deity for academics. These ideas will inevitably influence the representations of Shakespeare, which at the same time will perpetuate the image of Wiliam Shakespeare as the centre of the literary canon and the poet of a nation. Michael Dobson, in his account of *The Making of the National Poet*, is aware of this when he writes, “That Shakespeare was declared to rule world literature at the same time that Britannia was declared to rule the waves may, indeed, be more than a coincidence.” (7), having a national author creates a sense of community, and may serve as an affirmation of nationhood. It is also important to note that most of the biopics of Shakespeare portray him as having a close relationship with Queen Elizabeth. This relationship, however, lacks any evidence. According to Helen Hackett in her book *Shakespeare and Elizabeth*

“[This pairing is] one of England’s, and Britain’s, most entrenched and persistent cultural myths. ... The double myth of Shakespeare and Elizabeth brought together a man claimed as the greatest writer of all time with a woman claimed as one of greatest rulers of all time to create a potent and irresistible image of the pre-eminence of the British nation.” (3-4)

This pairing is more representative of the British need for a cultural hegemony rather than anything else. Shakespeare was more prominent as a writer during the reign of King James I, however Shakespeare is always portrayed during the Elizabethan Era, since it is one of the most popular eras in Popular culture regarding the history of Great Britain. By putting Queen Elizabeth

and William Shakespeare side by side in a movie, and interacting, they manage to convey two messages, one of Elizabeth as a more human and down to earth person, who went to the theatre and enjoyed plays just like any other townspeople, and secondly, they elevate Shakespeare's status to one of being at the same level to be able to associate with the aristocracy. The representation of Elizabeth in film is often considered as "a point of historical recognition" (Norrie 181). In *Shakespeare in Love* Elizabeth is keen on watching Shakespeare's play, she helps Shakespeare and Viola by the end of the movie, and even offers input for Shakespeare's future plays. In *Bill* there is a murder plot against Queen Elizabeth, which includes using Shakespeare's play to infiltrate the castle to kill her. However, the movie ends with Queen Elizabeth admiring Shakespeare's play and deciding to make him the playwright to entertain her court. Their relationship is one of patron/protegé. The queen is depicted enjoying watching Shakespeare's play surrounded by a crowd, Aidan Norrie explains this image as the Queen "instead of being "the loneliest person in the realm," she cannot help but be "the happiness of England" when Mr. Shakespeare is by her side. (196) This representation not only enhances the mythologization of Shakespeare but also solidifies the cultural and historical significance of the Elizabethan Era in British identity. The portrayal of their relationship as one of patron and artist further reinforces the notion of Shakespeare as a figure of national importance, integral to the cultural fabric of England.

IV. Conclusion:

This project has analysed how biographies about Shakespeare are created even with the lack in factual data, followed by the creation of representations of William Shakespeare as a film character and how the myth and idealization of Shakespeare is constructed and affected by those movies. The life of the Bard has always been a point of interest for the public, which is made apparent with the constant writing of biographies about his life. There are very few official documents regarding William Shakespeare and none of them give any insight to the motives and thoughts that the Bard might have had. Biographical creations remain a subjective matter since there is no firsthand testimony. Due to all these peculiarities, many biographies of Shakespeare lean into fictionalization, which open the door for a million interpretations about Shakespeare's life. This environment encourages filmmakers to create stories about William Shakespeare making him the main character and boarding the public that has access to the life of Shakespeare. However, Academia influences the representations of Shakespeare since most of them focus on discussions previously researched scholarly. Filmmakers often take these discussions and portrays them in their desired setting, in the making of the film, it is necessary to have details that set the historical character inside of a truthful period, to make the movies seem real, and persuade the viewers into believing the portrayal of Shakespeare. As we have seen this can be done by begin the movies in medias res, filmmakers chose a specific period of time which will allow their narrative licenses, and they will construct the desired message in that context. The analysed movies are set in different periods of Shakespeare's life, *Bill* is an origin story; *Shakespeare in Love* portrays the author trying to keep creating and *All is True* gives a retired Shakespeare an end. One of the most important aspects represented in the movies is the contextualization of Shakespeare's oeuvre inside of his life, since the lack of biographical data many scholars have lean into his plays in search for details about Shakespeare. Another important aspect is the fact that the movies give re-interpretations of the less desirable criticisms that have plagued

Shakespeare's life and work. The contexts of the films manage to negate the questions about the authorship of the plays, killing the character of Marlowe negates the Marlovian theories, they negate the supposedly bisexuality of Shakespeare by situating his Sonnet 18 inside of the love story of *Shakespeare in Love*. The movies contextualize the less desired characteristics of William Shakespeare which helps prevail his romantic persona. Ultimately, these biopics contribute to the ongoing process of idealizing Shakespeare, portraying him as a model figure whose life and works transcend ordinary historical constraints. The personality of William Shakespeare is curated following academic studies in each of the movies to fit into the recontextualization of the rumours and therefore to fit the message of grandiosity that the filmmakers are trying to convey. This idealization reflects a calculated effort to maintain Shakespeare's cultural relevance and ensure that his image remains influential in the public consciousness. The biopics not only entertain but also contribute to the ongoing process of mythologizing Shakespeare, presenting him as a transcendental figure, that has been able to maintain popularity for centuries. This bardolatry will continue to be relevant since filmmakers, writers and biographers continue to create accounts of William Shakespeare's life, with books such as *Hamnet* by Maggie O'farrell, or even the adaptation to film of said book that it is being made.

In conclusion, the cinematic representations of William Shakespeare reveal how the absence of factual biographical details has been exploited to create an idealized and mythic image of the Bard. The lack of factual information about Shakespeare makes him the perfect target of speculation. Filmmakers often draw upon scholarly interpretations of Shakespeare's life and work and adapting these observations into a narrative that fits a specific idea. The real Shakespeare remains a mystery to both the public and scholars which is a key reason for his enduring status in academic fields. Film plays a pivotal role in shaping and sustaining public perceptions of historical figures. Biopics of the bard are a great marketing tool that will continue to solidify the Bard status in the academic and public spheres. Film portrayals of Shakespeare while created to entertain and

attain appeal from the masses are deeply entwined with the intellectual frameworks regarding the Shakespeare that academic scholarship has established. The desire to understand Shakespeare's works and also his inner thoughts and motives have persisted for over four centuries, and academics continue to find new ways to study the Bard. This is a cycle of speculations and studies will perpetuate the myth of William Shakespeare reinforcing his status as a legend. These academic studies will continue to inspire new representations of Shakespeare that will lead to new biographies, or new biopics. Further studies can be made about this idea of higher status regarding Shakespeare and his studies, even how worship celebrity started with the comparison of Shakespeare to God. Further research could explore the elevated status associated with Shakespeare studies, examining how the phenomenon of "bardolatry" parallels other forms of celebrity worship, such as Beatlemania in the 1960s or Bieber Fever in the 2010s. The study of William Shakespeare is open to be disclosed with broader perspectives which will offer distinct insights into his life and work. However, challenging academic norms surrounding Shakespearean studies can be difficult, and will suffer an even bigger scrutiny. Nonetheless, engaging with Shakespeare in a way that challenges these entrenched academic norms is essential for unveiling the complexities of his contributions and ensuring that his work remains relevant and accessible to diverse audiences.

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