

## **Imagining Shakespeare: Fact and Fiction in *Shakespeare in Love***

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### **Abstract:**

**Despite his centrality in the English literary canon, William Shakespeare's life and work remains, in many respects, an enigma. The paper will attempt to analyze multiple layers of the relationship between creative imagination and reality in the film script *Shakespeare in Love*, written by Tom Stoppard and Marc Norman.**

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In the beginning, there was a schoolboy's curiosity. One day, Marc Norman's son would return from school and began to question his father: surely *Romeo and Juliet* can only be a product of an artist who was madly and hopelessly in love himself? (Pechánková 1999:143) Norman's answer took the form of a film script, which he offered to *The Universal* film company in 1991, which then approached Tom Stoppard for revision. The resulting *Shakespeare in Love* (1998) is Stoppard's rewrite of Norman's original script, which speculates about what may have prompted Shakespeare to write his most romantic tragedy.

*Shakespeare in Love* does not aspire to be a historical film. In a Hollywood's rendezvous with the classic, Shakespeare is a construct rather than a reconstruction. Depicting a transformation of a talented writer into a genius through passion and love, it is a piece of speculative fiction, informed of four centuries of Shakespearean studies, which turns it into a popular study guide to Elizabethan theatre and a very useful teaching tool indeed.

The plot, unrolling within three summer weeks of 1593, employs a number of facts and assumptions generally held of Shakespeare and his times, embroidered with imaginary detail and woven into a fictional frame. Historical figures are brought to act alongside fictional ones, in a series of events which have no factual grounding but which generate a sense of "maybe". With its meticulously constructed narrative and the immediacy of the film medium, it attains a degree of authenticity: "History is fictionalized and fiction becomes history" (Lukeš 1999:128).

Will Shakespeare is portrayed as a budding writer, a genius in the making, who is desperate for a break-through hit and both jealous and admiring of his elder colleague, Christopher Marlowe. The latter is acknowledged as the most popular playwright of the day, whose ripening career is aborted by a tragic and trifling death, here likewise recorded. Marlowe's influence on Shakespeare has long been taken for granted, although the idea that it was he who outlined the central conflict of *Romeo and Juliet* is of course imaginary, as is Will's mistaken belief that he is culpable in the killing of Marlowe.

Rivalry rules among actors, too, among whom the two most prominent are Edward Alleyn of the Lord Admiral's Men, residing in The Rose, and Richard Burbage, leading the Lord Chamberlain's Men with The Curtain as home stage. Both Alleyn and Burbage testify to a frequent Elizabethan complaint that actors are proud (Skura 1993:40) but both come to show a true generosity of spirit and dedication to their vocation when called for. Albeit grudgingly, Alleyn forgoes his primacy and takes on the exquisite, but supporting role of Mercutio, which appears to have been inspired by his own person, and participates on the play's formation. He warns against prolix sentimentality: "Suffering cats!" (Norman, Stoppard 1999:74), and identifies gaps in the play's structure: "But there's a scene missing between marriage and death." (Norman, Stoppard 1999:115) When Master of the Revels Tillney declares The Rose closed on charges of indecency, Burbage opens his theatre for Henslowe's team in a gesture of collegiate loyalty: "We are a brotherhood, and we will be a profession. Will Shakespeare has a play. I have a theatre. The Curtain is yours." (Norman, Stoppard 1999:125)

Will Kempe, another eminent Elizabethan player famed for his dance from London to Norwich in 1600, is portrayed as a rising star, whose comical talent is applauded by the Queen herself, but who aspires to the role of a tragic hero:

KEMPE: When will you write me a tragedy, Will? I could do it.

WILL: No, they would laugh at Seneca if you played it (Norman, Stoppard 1999:13).

Kempe left the company in 1599, possibly because of disputes with Shakespeare. Although the circumstances remain unclear, scholars draw evidence from *Hamlet*, where the prince mocks such improvisations that were in Kempe's trade. Interestingly, the exchange above does carry a reference to this one of Will's future plays as Will has just caught sight of Kempe, pensively staring at a skull.

Squabbles and vying among theatres spill beyond the stage: the "literary feud" (Ibid: 100), as Will calls it, materializes in a spectacular physical *melée*, which is apparently "quite normal" (Ibid). The liberal treatment of authorship, effected by lack of copyright laws, is parodied, too:

WILL: I am still owed money for this play, Burbage.

BURBAGE: Not from me. I only stole it (Norman, Stoppard 1999:14).

The poster advertising Will's new play documents the fact that Elizabethan theatre management formed an intricate web of relationships, combining royal patronage with capital investments:

*By permission of*  
*MR. BURBAGE*  
A  
*HUGH FENNYMAN PRODUCTION*  
OF  
*MR. HENSLOWE'S PRESENTATION*  
OF  
*THE ADMIRAL'S MEN IN PERFORMANCE*  
OF  
*THE EXCELLENT AND LAMENTABLE TRAGEDY*  
OF  
*ROMEO AND JULIET*  
With Mr. Fennyman as the Apothecary (Norman, Stoppard 1999:126)

The fact that Will's name is missing from the playbill provides an ironic commentary on the status of the author but is also indicative of the collaborative nature of Elizabethan drama. Will does not write in isolation but mines inspiration from the creative energy of the rehearsals:

WILL (*to THOMAS*): What will you do in Act Two when he meets the love of his life?

VIOLA AS THOMAS (*timidly, looking through his few sheets of paper*): I am very sorry, sir, I have not seen Act Two.

WILL: Of course you have not! I have not written it! (Norman, Stoppard 1999:57)

The film illustrates both reputation and ill repute of the playhouses. Teetering between Art and popular entertainment, they are at the mercy of the authorities, braving constant plague threats and ever more frequent accusations of public indecency directed at them particularly from the ascending Puritan movement: "The theatres are handmaidens of the devil!" (Ibid:8). Not only the Church but also the City of London officials objected to the increase of crime and bawdiness of some of the plays, to the drinking, fighting and thieving and the risk of bubonic plague wherever large crowds gathered. Since 1596 the public presentation of plays and all theatres were banished from within the limits of the City. (Skura 1993)

Elizabethan actors were subject to a considerable ambiguity of status. Mr Fennyman refers to actors as “dregs”(Norman, Stoppard 1999:50) and in the same breath bows to Alleyn’s talent: “I saw his Tamburlaine, you know. Wonderful.” (Norman, Stoppard 1999:53) Viola addresses Will as “Master Shakespeare” (Ibid: 43); he describes himself to her as “a lowly player” (Norman, Stoppard 1999:46).

As transpires from Henslowe’s surviving diary, Elizabethan theatre business attracted managers and investors for “the chinks” it promised. The manager of The Rose would self-pityingly point out that his job is no bed of roses, but it is well known that Shakespeare’s career turned out to be very profitable indeed. But actors and authors seek not only success but also fame and artistic eternity. On discovering that Rosaline will not do as his muse after all, Will tells her dejectedly: “I would have made you immortal.” (Norman, Stoppard 1999:26), and when his play is put on for the court, he displays impatience with the audience’s coughs.

Humble or highly born, the spectators favour performances in the comic vein, involving love, intrigue and adventure. Henslowe describes Will’s new show as “a crowd-tickler – mistaken identities, a shipwreck, a pirate king, a bit with a dog, and love triumphant.” (Norman, Stoppard 1999:3). At the same time, the gradual darkening of taste, characteristic of Jacobean theatre, is foreshadowed. John Webster, who may have been about thirteen in 1593, is portrayed as a measly boy who likes to play with rats and who admires the brutality of *Titus Andronicus*: “Plenty of blood. That is the only writing” (Norman, Stoppard 1999:54). Queen Elizabeth, present at the first night of *Romeo and Juliet* in disguise, requests Will to write: “something more cheerful next time, for Twelfth Night” (Norman, Stoppard 1999:150). Although the monarch would never have made an appearance in the public theatre, historians do believe that Shakespeare received royal orders for *The Twelfth Night*. The Queen’s remark addressed to him: “Next time you come to Greenwich, come as yourself and we will speak some more” (Norman, Stoppard 1999:149) alludes to their presumed acquaintance. The courteous gesture of Sir Francis Drake, who is reported to have spread his coat over a puddle of water before the Queen so that she might pass dry-footed, finds its ironic counterpart here: the Queen pauses before the puddle and seeing no reaction, marches right through it as cloaks descend behind her (Ibid:150). Shakespeare’s alleged and much discussed troubled marital relations and separation from home allow him to love Viola without appearing promiscuous: “Four years and a hundred miles from Stratford. A cold bed too, since the twins were born. Banishment was a blessing” (Norman, Stoppard 1999:12). His experiments with signatures in the opening scenes indicate a crisis of identity but also refer to the fact that in the surviving historical documents Shakespeare’s name is preserved with varied spellings, from “Shakspere” in the register of the Stratford church to “Shakespeare” and “Shackspere” in the playwright’s will.

The film registers the transforming social structures of the era. The Queen is depicted as the sovereign monarch, who supervises key decisions of her courtiers: “Her majesty’s consent is requisite when a Wessex takes a wife, and once gained, her consent is her command” (Norman, Stoppard 1999:59). Yet, the influence of traditional aristocracy wanes and increasingly, the court comes to rely on the up and coming bourgeoisie. Viola’s nurse argues that “well-monied is the same as well-born” (Norman, Stoppard 1999:21). Lord Wessex does not refrain from reminding Viola that her father “was a shopkeeper” (Norman, Stoppard 1999:60) but considers her as an advantageous match nevertheless. Wessex hopes to retrieve his fortune by investing into tobacco plantations in Virginia. The first permanent settlement in the colony would only come about in 1607 but news about the voyages and discoveries excited the Elizabethan imagination and exploded contemporary notions about the globe.

Stoppard uses history as a point of departure but abandons facts for the sake of the story and its dramatic tension, a method not unlike Shakespeare’s. *Romeo and Juliet* was most probably written later than 1593 and over a much longer period of time. However, the temporal condensation allows Stoppard to incorporate a satisfying twist with Marlowe’s death and present Shakespeare as a common actor. A year later he became a shareholder in the Lord Chamberlain’s Men. Further, a greater dramatic effect has been achieved by establishing a parallel between the fictional and “real” lovers, whose relationship is equally intense and doomed. Like in Shakespeare’s dramas where events are cumulated in order to be resolved in the final scene, the production of *Romeo and Juliet* opens on the very day of Viola’s wedding and her voyage across the ocean. Both Will and Viola come to realize to what extent Romeo and Juliet act as mouthpieces for their own passion. When Will confides to Viola

that the play he is writing is no longer a comedy, Viola reacts by a commenting on their own predicament:

WILL: [...] A broad river divides my lovers – family, duty, fate – as unchangeable as nature.

VIOLA (*sobered*): Yes, this is not life, Will. This is a stolen season.

(Norman, Stoppard 1999:88)

Conversely, Viola quotes Juliet's words in anticipation of their separation: "I am afeared/Being in night, all this is but a dream/ Too flattering-sweet to be substantial" (Norman, Stoppard 1999:84).

The link between stage and off-stage is further enhanced by the fact that Viola appears as an actor in Will's play. Their passion feeds the play but through Romeo and Juliet their relationship, too, is relived, rectified and immortalized. At times, fiction and reality blend so easily that we can hardly tell one from the other. The film opens with a close-up on a playbill advertising *The Lamentable Tragedie of the Moneylender Reveng'd*, accompanied by screams of torture from the voice-over. The next scene reveals the theatre manager Philip Henslowe on the stage of his Rose, being assaulted by his creditor, Mr Fennyman. It takes us a little while before we realize this is in fact not the advertised play but "reality". Similarly, lines from *Romeo and Juliet* take turns as dramatic speeches to be recited on the stage and as intimate conversations between Will and Viola. In the first public performance, chance casts Will as Romeo against Viola as Juliet. At this point, art and life merge.

On the other hand, art is being put to test against life and must prove its worth. Viola criticizes the contemporary theatrical convention, complaining that: "stage love will never be true love while the law of the land has our heroines played by pipsqueak boys in petticoats!" (Norman, Stoppard 1999:20) Queen Elizabeth argues that "playwrights teach nothing about love, they make it pretty, they make it comical, or they make it lust. They cannot make it true" (Norman, Stoppard 1999:94), and Lord Wessex would wager his non-existent fortune that "nature and truth are the very enemies of playacting" (Norman, Stoppard 1999:95). Even Will, abandoned by his Muse, despairs that writing is nothing but: "words, words, words" (Norman, Stoppard 1999:9), and when Viola must be wrenched from him, he vows that he is "done with the theatre" (Norman, Stoppard 1999:151). In the end, however, Queen Elizabeth declares Will's victory in the wager, the Puritan Makepeace, who has been swept with the eager crowds inside the playhouse and forced to watch the play, applauds in ecstasy, and Viola departs for Virginia cherishing a consolation that in the world of fiction, their relationship will meet a different, happy end.

Fiction helps dreams become real: Viola assumes male identity to be liberated from the constrictions of her gender and class where: "playhouses are not for well-born ladies" (Norman, Stoppard 1999:21). Thomas Kent, her disguise, can live a life that Viola de Lesseps can only dream of. (Norman, Stoppard 1999:40). Writing gives Will strength to survive a broken heart. The film comes full circle with a close-up on Will working. This time however, it is a different scene altogether: Will writes with concentration, humility and sober gratitude: Viola will be his "heroine for all time" (Norman, Stoppard 1999:154). This end opens into a new beginning: Romeo and Juliet are dead but Viola and Orsino will live and love.

Will comes in for a lot of ridicule, being called a "Warrickshire shithouse" (Norman, Stoppard 1999:86) by Alleyn, an "upstart inky pup" (Norman, Stoppard 1999:118) by Wessex and most ironically, a "nobody" (Norman, Stoppard 1999:50) by Henslowe. Unlike Romeo, he ingloriously falls from Viola's balcony and is chased away by guards and dogs. He assumes Marlowe's name before the threatening Wessex, which is both cowardly and malicious. Most importantly, the opening scenes capture Will, the classic, the greatest ever playwright, experiencing a profound writer's block. As the film progresses, however, it becomes apparent that the film is essentially conceived as a salute to art and artists.

The film both illumines the creative process of writing and preserves its partly irrational character. Will treats his Muse as an unpredictable visitor, who needs to be wooed, by magic, a writing ritual, an earthly lover and even opiates. Fragments of everyday life as well as dreams are sieved into his art. Sleep unlocks the next stage of the play: "I have found something in my sleep. The Friar who married them will take up their destinies" (Norman, Stoppard 1999:88). Makepeace's assaults that: "the Rose smells thusly rank by any name" and that God should send "plague on both their houses",

i.e. the playhouses (Norman, Stoppard 1999:8), find their way into the play, though in radically different contexts. Viola, her cold-hearted parents and the grandiose Alleyn are recreated into Juliet, Lord and Lady Capulet and Mercutio, respectively. On the other hand, Paris has none of Wessex's crudity and the pious and detached Rosaline shares no more than a name with the Rosaline she was modeled on. Occasionally, it is his own words that hit Will in the eyes: when Juliet ponders that: "if he be married,/ my grave is like to be my wedding bed" (Norman, Stoppard 1999:77), Will is suddenly struck by a foreboding of the end that both his play and relationship with Viola will meet.

Will's ego of the artist constantly cleaves his priorities. When Marlowe dies, Will declares that he would exchange all of his plays for all those that Marlowe will never write. This does not deceive Viola: "You lie" (Norman, Stoppard 1999:111). Stoppard's script contained a scene in which Will, passing a poster advertising his play, takes out his quill and adds his missing name on it. The scene was dropped as the director John Madden decided that at this moment, Will is so devastated by the loss of Viola that he cannot possibly appear vain. The final cut shows Will passing by, buried in thought. Tom Stoppard reportedly did not approve of the change (Nadel 2002) but unsurprisingly, in the Hollywood boxing ring, love would always conquer artistic ambition.

Such interpretation of Shakespeare is obviously removed from the canonical straitjacket. It is a crossbreed of many Shakespeares: of the Shakespeare of his day, the Shakespeare filtered through centuries and of Shakespeare the contemporary. Rather than drawing on the vague and unreliable portrait of an ageing man with receding hairline which we have come to accept as Shakespeare's likeness, Will appears as a handsome young man in the push and pull of life, a man with a "tiger's heart", as his elder colleague would jeeringly describe him (Greene 1999:108). Shakespeare's very embodiment into flesh clearly deposes him from the throne of an untouchable classic. The author, whose life remains largely obscured and whose manuscripts have been irretrievably lost in time, is captured in the very process of writing his, now sacred, texts. The same author, whose invention and genius inspires and intimidates generations of writers, is deserted by his gift, unable to write. Healing methods of Doctor Moth, Will's spiritual consultant, are remarkably akin to Freudian psychoanalysis and Will's cup inscribed "A present from Stratford" represents a memento of Shakespeare as a tourist industry.

Like in all Stoppard's works, postmodern ideology is both exploited and finally rejected. "The real thing" is always detectable and language does not represent an obstacle to reality: through Romeo and Juliet, Will and Viola can communicate "the unsayable". "The real" is a mystery, as Henslowe repeats throughout, which art is capable of appropriating.

In its outcome, the film highlights the importance of art and upholds Shakespeare as its symbol. As Henry says in *The Real Thing*, Stoppard's 1982 play which also deals with the equation between life and art: "I don't think writers are sacred, but words are." (Stoppard 1999:207), and as the character of Joyce says in another Stoppard's work, *Travesties*: "An artist is the magician put among men to gratify – capriciously – their urge for immortality. [...] What now of the Trojan War if it had been passed over by the artist's touch? Dust. A forgotten expedition prompted by Greek merchants looking for new markets" (Stoppard 1975:42).

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