



Kirwan, Peter (2014) "You have no voice!": Constructing reputation through contemporaries in the Shakespeare biopic. *Shakespeare Bulletin*, 32 (1). pp. 11-26. ISSN 1931-1427

Access from the University of Nottingham repository:

<http://eprints.nottingham.ac.uk/30865/1/Kirwan%20-%20You%20have%20no%20voice.pdf>

Copyright and reuse:

The Nottingham ePrints service makes this work by researchers of the University of Nottingham available open access under the following conditions.

- Copyright and all moral rights to the version of the paper presented here belong to the individual author(s) and/or other copyright owners.
- To the extent reasonable and practicable the material made available in Nottingham ePrints has been checked for eligibility before being made available.
- Copies of full items can be used for personal research or study, educational, or not-for-profit purposes without prior permission or charge provided that the authors, title and full bibliographic details are credited, a hyperlink and/or URL is given for the original metadata page and the content is not changed in any way.
- Quotations or similar reproductions must be sufficiently acknowledged.

Please see our full end user licence at:

http://eprints.nottingham.ac.uk/end_user_agreement.pdf

A note on versions:

The version presented here may differ from the published version or from the version of record. If you wish to cite this item you are advised to consult the publisher's version. Please see the repository url above for details on accessing the published version and note that access may require a subscription.

For more information, please contact eprints@nottingham.ac.uk

"You have no voice!":
Constructing Reputation through Contemporaries in the Shakespeare Biopic

PETER KIRWAN
University of Nottingham

The title of this special issue, "Not Shakespeare", carries a potential double meaning. Taken one way, it invites consideration of the (hyphenated?) category "not-Shakespeare", the compound adjective evoking Shakespeare as absent presence in a way that arguably haunts all treatments of Shakespeare's contemporaries. Taken another way, the phrase evokes the polemic of anti-Stratfordianism, the school of thought that insists William Shakespeare is himself, in fact, Not Shakespeare.¹ Both meanings problematically assume a clear and defined sense of what "Shakespeare" is, even if that "is" is simply a sense of Shakespeare's exceptional status.

These two strands of thought come together in Roland Emmerich's 2011 film *Anonymous*, the historical fiction proposing Edward de Vere, 17th Earl of Oxford, was the true author of Shakespeare's plays, presented to the public via the proxy of the illiterate, alcoholic and money-grabbing actor Shakespeare. The film prompted widespread academic backlash in the media, including articles with such headlines as "Hollywood Dishonors the Bard", "Shakespeare—a fraud? Anonymous is ridiculous" (both Shapiro) and "People Being Stupid About Shakesp... Or Someone Else" (Syme). Articles such as these served at the time as significant counter-polemics to the wave of popular support for the anti-Stratfordian position given a platform by the film, as well as drawing attention to the "educational packs" being sent into schools by Sony Pictures. In the event, the impact of the film, whose critical and commercial impact was muted at best, was not long-term, and with hindsight *Anonymous* offers useful material for serious discussion of the cultural politics regarding filmic representations of Shakespeare.

This paper therefore attempts to perform two functions. Firstly, by examining Emmerich's film with reference to John Madden's better-known 1998 *Shakespeare in Love*, I attempt to see what the modern Shakespeare biopic has to say about Shakespeare's contemporary writers, several of whom feature prominently in both films. However, I would also like to pick up on the hint laid down but unfulfilled in Pascale Aebischer's recent observation that "Ben Jonson, Christopher Marlowe, Thomas Dekker and Thomas Nashe are drafted into a plot [*Anonymous*] that was meant to put the final nail in the coffin of William Shakespeare" (217). They are not merely drafted in, but used deliberately and systematically to lay the foundations for treatments of Shakespeare as exceptional and also to articulate a very particular sense of what "Shakespeare" and "Not Shakespeare" mean, a strategy apparent also in *Shakespeare in Love*. Both films are involved in work of authorial construction, and both situate their author in relation to the surrounding intellectual, creative and professional contexts of the early modern London theatre scene. In making their claims for Shakespeare, both films reveal the perceived place of Shakespeare's contemporaries in this relationship.

Introducing the contemporaries

Anonymous, as pointed out by both Aebischer (218-20) and Douglas Lanier (216), the two critics who have taken the film seriously, takes its cues from Kenneth Branagh's *Henry V* by beginning with a framing device that is triple-layered. First we see Derek Jacobi arriving late at a modern-day Broadway theatre by yellow cab, running breathlessly through backstage and directly into performance. Then we see the beginnings of a play, apparently also called *Anonymous*, which from what we see consists of Jacobi standing on stage questioning the veracity of the conventional narrative of Shakespeare's authorship, while actors prepare in the wings. Then, disappearing through the stage curtain, the scene switches to Ben Jonson (Sebastian Armesto) running through the streets of London, hiding in the Rose Theatre, being arrested as the

playhouse burns to the ground and shortly thereafter being questioned aggressively by Robert Cecil (David Thewlis) and his men. The question of why Jacobi was late for his curtain is one to which I would like to return below, but the very presence of the framing device, as Giselle Bastin argues about the genre of biopic in general, places “emphasis on verisimilitude in costuming and setting, and on the production’s ‘truth value.’” (34). It “emphasises the constructed nature of the image” (47) while at the same time acting to assert a hierarchy of levels of truth within the film’s world. A productive tension is generated through the juxtaposition of a framing device that fictionalises a moment of arrival, an inner framing device that presents a fictional piece of docu-theatre with actors, a further inner framing device that establishes a naturalistic early modern London where the actors have become “real” characters, and the primary plot of the play that is presented as taking place in flashbacks in Jonson’s mind generated by and experienced between punches to his head. This tension serves to complicate the viewer’s sense of a fixed reference point, meaning that Jacobi’s assertion that this will be the “true” story is contested, knowingly, from the start.

The framing device is significant, but the main action of the film takes an immediate turn for the obscure. The establishing scene of the main plot features Act 2 Scene 1 of Ben Jonson’s *Every Man Out of His Humour* being performed at the Rose Theatre in 1599. The scene is significant in all respects: it is chronologically the starting point for the main action (barring flashbacks to de Vere’s youth), it is the scene that establishes almost all of the major characters, and it is the scene that establishes the basic principles of early modern dramatic authorship that will prove essential to the play’s plotting. The question, then, is why begin with a scene that is undoubtedly alien to a popular audience from a play that Helen Ostovich reports has been considered “unperformable” for much of its critical history (38)?

Ben Jonson is the audience identification figure of *Anonymous*, the only character who regularly moves between the worlds of the theatre, the tavern, the civic authorities and the court, and the one whose perspective is privileged throughout. He is an enabler of activity in others rather than a driver of the play, and in fact only makes two decisive interventions during the play to disrupt the otherwise inevitable order of events: he betrays the Essex rebellion, leading directly to the execution of Essex and the disgrace of de Vere, and then shortly after he acts to hide and then salvage de Vere’s complete works from the ruins of the destroyed Rose. In cinematic terms, he undergoes the classic sidekick arc of initial uneasy alliance, betrayal at a moment of crisis and climactic return to save the day; he is the Han Solo to de Vere’s Luke Skywalker.

Jonson is central to this film because one of his primary roles in literary history has been as the producer of a particular conception of “Shakespeare”, most obviously in the First Folio, a publishing act that has yoked Shakespeare and Jonson in perpetuity. Mark Robson concludes that “in critical terms the ‘and’ in ‘Jonson and Shakespeare’ indicates not equivalence but co-dependency. Jonson may always be defined by a certain vision of Shakespeare, but that ‘Shakespeare’ is itself the product of a comparison with Jonson” (62-3). Certainly the phrases coined by Jonson in his poem to Shakespeare (“Sweet Swan of Avon”, “Soul of the age!”, “my gentle Shakespeare”) have become endemic to ideas of Shakespeare, frequently forming the basis of titles of biographies and reinforcing what would later become a Romantic connection between author, soul, birthplace and temperament.² It is this series of connections that *Anonymous* wishes to disrupt, and it is therefore fitting that Emmerich’s film chooses simultaneously to redraw Jonson, reproducing Shakespeare through direct comparison.

Jonson is, of course, a notable absentee from Madden’s film, set before Jonson had emerged on the professional theatrical scene. It is significant to the project of that film, a film concerned as Michael Anderegg suggests to present a Shakespeare who “lives out the Romantic image of the writer who seeks and sometimes is given inspiration from a variety of sources” (66). For this film, the image of a Shakespeare accessed directly via the camera rather than mediated by another figure is essential, whereas the polemic of *Anonymous* depends on a critical distance

that avoids identification with Shakespeare. By making explicit the subjective nature of any representation of Shakespeare, elided in Madden's film, Emmerich denies his audiences the direct access that might align the viewer with his villain.

It is significant, then, that the main body of *Anonymous* begins with Jonson. The text of *Every Man Out of His Humour* itself is deprioritised within the clip, in four distinct ways:

1. it is entered into at a midway point, halfway through 2.1, frustrating any possibility at contextualisation or understanding of who the characters may be;
2. the stage is frequently cut away from, shifting the cinema audience's attention to other characters and conversations;
3. The text is subordinated in the sound mix to the surrounding sounds of the theatre environment, thus prioritising the play's *effect* (it is hysterically funny to the groundlings) over its *content*;
4. The words are buried under the exaggerated performances of the actors, which draw attention rather to the funny voices, physical business and interactions with the audience than to the words or plot.

The last is particularly significant, as the scene is intercut with a view of Jonson standing just behind the curtain of the tiring house, holding his own copy of the text and mouthing the words along with the actors, much as Gwyneth Paltrow's Viola de Lesseps does in *Shakespeare in Love* while watching the court performance of *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*. The joke is, of course, that *Every Man Out of His Humour* is of no importance to anyone apart from to Jonson, his eyes fixed on the page rather than the stage. It is a light entertainment, against which we are invited to understand the weight of de Vere's work later. When Shakespeare's plays begin to be performed, in a montage that takes in *Twelfth Night*, *Julius Caesar*, *Macbeth* and *Hamlet* following the runaway success of *Henry V*, the presentation is quite different. Text is foregrounded, presented in coherent fragments that include instantly recognizable scenes or famous quotations. The audience is hushed, and cutaways are to a rapt and responsive audience. The performances of the actors are muted, serving the words or illustrating the action with spectacular effects (the pyrotechnics of a midnight performance of *Macbeth* standing in sharp contrast to the rough set cobbled together for *Every Man Out*), and even the weather acts in service of the play, offering a light rain to accompany Hamlet's soliloquy.³

So far, so obvious; "Shakespeare" trumps Jonson. The choice of *Every Man Out of His Humour* is more significant, however, than merely as a conveniently obscure play with which to set up a comparison. Jonson is particularly useful to anti-Stratfordian polemic because of his association with the idea of application, the word he uses in the preliminaries to *Epicoene* and *The Alchemist*:

If any yet will (with particular sleight
Of application) wrest what he doth write,
And that he meant or him or her will say:
They make a libel which he made a play. (*Epicoene* 2 Pro. 11-14)

For here, he doth not fear, who can apply.
If there be any, that will sit so nigh
Unto the stream, to look what it doth run,
They shall find things they'd think, or wish, were done. (*The Alchemist* Pro. 19-22)

While Jonson, exercising politic caution, protested against the belief that his plays were satirising real individuals, arguing that it was the audience who turned a play into a libel through their wilful misinterpretation and "application" of the fictional characters to real persons, he

nonetheless provides a template for reading early modern drama as a (not-so-) veiled allegory of political and social events. Regardless of authorial intention, plays can be used to comment on current affairs. We see this in the brief extract from *Every Man Out*, where Carlo's gaze during his mocking of Fastidius is moved vertically upwards to implicate a noble in the Gentleman's Room, who happens to be dressed identically to Fastidius and who storms out angrily on being noticed and laughed at by the audience. It is this act that de Vere, during his first snobbish outing to a public playhouse, notes as powerful and that informs his subsequent writing, in which Polonius and Richard III are imagined as explicit representations of William and Robert Cecil.⁴

In presenting de Vere with a methodology for social and political criticism, the film's Jonson once again produces Shakespeare. By silently introducing this method of reading drama as standard through Jonson, the film cannily sets up the convention that close attention to allegorical reading is key to interpretation and expression of the authentic "Shakespeare". It is this that, interestingly, causes de Vere to approach Jonson to be his avatar, the writer of "Shakespeare" recognising a kindred spirit in Jonson that will become crucial to the film's conclusion.

Shakespeare's contemporaries as fanboys

Jonson is only the most significant of the contemporaries portrayed in *Anonymous*. Beginning c.1599, *Anonymous* imagines a small writing community made up of Jonson, Christopher Marlowe, Thomas Dekker and Thomas Nashe, all of whom are introduced in this scene.⁵ The very presence of a writerly community here is telling: *Shakespeare in Love*, a film dependent on the romantic isolation of its Shakespeare (most frequently photographed in Byronic pose, with open shirt and quill poised at the lips, as on the cover of Edmondson and Wells's *Shakespeare Beyond Doubt*) separates its writers, permitting meetings only with the young John Webster and, in a single scene significant for its anomalous encounter, Marlowe. I shall return to Marlowe below, whose presence in both films speaks to his cachet for a modern cinematic audience, but the inclusion of the relatively little-known Dekker and Nashe in *Anonymous* is initially confusing. Their own work is not portrayed, nor is the audience required to know anything of their literary reputations, save the sneers of Marlowe (Trystan Gravelle) at the relative failure of *The Shoemaker's Holiday*. So what are Dekker and Nashe doing here?



Thomas Dekker (Robert Emms), Thomas Nashe (Tony Way), Kit Marlowe (Trystan Gravelle) and Ben Jonson (Sebastian Armesto) in *Anonymous* (2011)

Dekker (Robert Emms) spends the majority of *Anonymous* giggling. Of all the dramatists, he is the one whose reactions to "Shakespeare's" plays are most in tune with the amphitheatre

audience. He laughs louder and longer than anyone else, to Marlowe's disdain and the rolling of Nashe's eyes. Nashe (Tony Way), in contrast, spends the film drinking. He is slow to react and inscrutable during the play performances, and is blunt and pragmatic throughout. The two are drawn upon here to represent the breadth of de Vere's impact. Dekker is swept along emotionally: he weeps, he laughs, he leaps to his feet during *Julius Caesar* and calls with Mark Antony for "Freedom!" He represents what Darryll Grantley refers to as "the spirit of the new commercial theatre" (84), in a way that might remind an audience of John Webster's approval of *Titus Andronicus* in *Shakespeare in Love*: "I like it when they cut the heads off". This is a significant aspect of what Lanier identifies as the problematic cultural politics of a film that considers the audience as unthinking, homogeneous mob: "For all of Oxford's initial dismay at the prospect of puppets, *Anonymous* conceives of Oxford the author as an aristocratic puppet-master, manipulating the (heart)strings of the commons with populist sentiments so that he can use 'the mob' for his own interests", treating "his mass audience as enthusiastic if unwitting pawns" (222). While Lanier does not pick up on the co-option of Dekker into this, the significance of aligning a playwright with the "mob" cannot be understated, as it acts to legitimise and give personality to the mass reaction.

Nashe, conversely, stands for the critic. He is convinced after *Henry V* that "Shakespeare" is a "one trick pony", and is the one to point out that *Romeo and Juliet* isn't even entirely in iambic pentameter, as the others believe. During the montage of Shakespeare plays, however, it is Nashe's slow immersion in the fictions that becomes important, as the tankards are laid aside and the man becomes more rapt. At the end of *Henry V* it is Nashe who begins the anachronistic shouting for the author, demanding that their silent colleague reveal himself, prompting Will to make the sudden decision to take credit for the play. In *Anonymous*, it is Nashe who produces the Shakespeare literary celebrity.

Dekker and Nashe are, however, confined to the world of the playhouse, as is made apparent in their final appearance. During the performance of *Richard III* that is designed to draw together a mob ahead of the Essex rebellion, the crowd sweeps out of the new Globe theatre to march to Essex House. At this point Dekker and Nashe become divorced from the crowd. Dekker asks "How do you think it ends?" and Nashe, swigging from his tankard, announces portentously "No doubt tragically". The two minor dramatists have, at this point, quite literally lost the plot, unable to make the connection between the world of the play and the wider world that the groundlings have insisted on responding to, and as a result have no existence outside of the literary and theatrical appreciation of the texts that they believe to be Shakespeare's. That is, their ultimate function is as fans of the work, their critical faculties limited by their inability to see beyond the fiction.

The only man who does not appreciate Shakespeare's works is Kit Marlowe. Both biopics feature Marlowe's murder as a significant plot device, and the respective presentations of the character bear consideration. Richard Wilson argues that "Shakespeare was haunted by Christopher Marlowe more than by any other Elizabethan writer . . . blaming this for his late start" (34), and suggests that perhaps "he was stunned by Marlowe's authorial personality" (35), an observation perhaps borne out by recent work on Shakespeare's corpus that notes the high incidence of collocations drawn from *Tamburlaine* and arguments that Shakespeare in fact collaborated with or rewrote Marlowe in the *Henry VI* plays.⁶ The concern of both films is to establish the pre-eminence of Shakespeare among dramatic authors of the period, and it is fascinating that both choose to exorcise this particular ghost through his murder.

In *Shakespeare in Love*, Marlowe's presence in the person of Rupert Everett is benign. In his first appearance, he emerges from nowhere at a bar, adding an ethereal nature to his authorial presence, as if he literally haunts Shakespeare, appearing at exactly the right moment to dispense wisdom, set Shakespeare on the correct path to writing what an audience knows must be *Romeo and Juliet*, and disappearing again. By coincidence or design, the framing of his appearance is identical to the manifestation of Sam Elliott's narrator 'The Stranger' to Jeff Bridges' 'The Dude' in

the same year's *The Big Lebowski*, blocked and shot to mirror this contemporary pop-cultural representation of the benign, omniscient and ephemeral companion. While Marlowe's subsequent appearance to interrupt Richard Burbage's tryst with Shakespeare's "muse" Rosalind gives him a more substantive presence in the world of the play, the film concentrates on Marlowe as, in Anderegg's words, "a crucial if vaguely defined presence" (66) that becomes ghostly. His offscreen death, while prompting confusions and revelations, is played as unfortunate accident. His haunting casts a long shadow, most explicitly in the audition scene that sees all but one recite the Helen of Troy speech from *Faustus* (the exception, of course, being Viola, already revealed as connoisseur through her appreciation of *Two Gentlemen*).



Kit Marlowe (Rupert Everett), *Shakespeare in Love*; The Stranger (Sam Elliott), *The Big Lebowski*

In *Anonymous*, Trystan Gravelle assays Marlowe quite differently. Marlowe here is an arch, theatrical villain, twirling his mustachios and wearing a fixed sneer. Here, the mighty line is subordinated to an antisocial personality that extends to an uncomfortably homophobic performance. Where Marlowe's sexuality is implicit in *Shakespeare in Love* through the casting of Everett (whose name, notes Anderegg [66], is effaced from the end credits, meaning that Everett's is a performance doubly dependent on a felt presence), in *Anonymous* it is made explicit through Marlowe's scorn of women, his open lusting after the Earl of Southampton and a performance that moves into camp that is pantomimic in its effete villainy. The arrogance that leads him ultimately to his offscreen murder by Will leads to Jonson's telling warning "Careful Kit, you're beginning to sound like one of your plays". Marlowe, that is, is becoming ever more authentically Marlovian, embodying what Leah S. Marcus describes as the "Marlowe effect": "watching 'Marlowe' meant watching a theatrical event balanced on the nervous razor edge between transcendent heroism and dangerous blasphemy – transgression not only against God but also against cherished national goals and institutions" (42), the "blasphemy" here resulting in Marlowe taking on the qualities of "theatrical", inauthentic and camp that code him (negatively) as gay.⁷ Emmerich's film is one that recreates literary identities as biographical personalities, leading directly in this case to the death of the author.

The death of Marlowe is essential to the Oxfordian theory of authorship because, of course, Marlowe has to be dead in order that he cannot be a contender for Shakespearean authorship himself. In death, Marlowe is identified emphatically as Not-Shakespeare. *Shakespeare in Love* allows him to be Shakespeare's most significant influence, whereas *Anonymous* positions him as a threat to the Oxfordian mythology, literally in terms of his attempts to disrupt the career of "Shakespeare" and in a broader sense in terms of his dominance of the literary cabal. In both films, he detracts from the pure adulation of Shakespeare, and his death creates a space which Shakespeare, now unchallenged, expands to occupy. As Gravelle's Marlowe hisses to Jonson, "It's difficult to write after something like *Hamlet*, isn't it? It eats at your soul". Spoken in 1599, five years after the historical figure died, Marlowe becomes momentarily a Queen Margaret figure (appropriately, given recent authorship scholarship, a figure collectively authored by Nashe, Marlowe and Shakespeare), hissing apocalyptic prophecies from a physical and temporal standpoint he has no right to occupy. Of course, his apocalyptic warnings are correct. The Rose

burns down on the night of de Vere's death in 1604, the overwhelming impression being that Oxford's work and death marks an end to the progression of theatre itself.

Soul of the age

The purpose of *Anonymous* is to remove all challenges to Shakespeare. In a pivotal scene, Jonson is summoned to explain why, in an Esau-like bargain, he gave away his stake in Oxford's plays to Shakespeare. Stammering, Armesto's Jonson tells Rhys Ifans's de Vere that "My lord, I felt that my voice . . ." at which de Vere interrupts, roaring, significantly, "Voice? You *have* no voice. That's why I chose you."

The notion that Jonson has no distinctive voice of his own has been a bugbear of Jonsonian criticism for many years, the idea being that he refracts his own time in opposition to Shakespeare's transcendent verse. As T.S. Eliot suggests, "The characters of Shakespeare are such as might exist in different circumstances than those in which Shakespeare set them" whereas Jonson's characters are "bounded by the scene in which [they are] played . . . the life of the character is inseparable from the life of the drama" (qtd. in Robson 61). Eliot's defence of Jonson was that he was not more superficial, but rather his *superficies* extended to the creation of an entire world to which his characters were organically connected. Yet the preference for a Shakespearean characterisation that transcends plays and achieves a deeper complexity is difficult to ignore; as we overhear an anonymous actor say in the film, "Jonson's good for scallywags and rascals, but Shakespeare has it all." Earlier in the film, Jonson tells Will that "I came to London to be a great and soaring poet, to be the conscience of our times, the soul of the age, to change the world." De Vere's damning assessment of Jonson's authorship reminds us of the subordination of Jonson's text within the playhouse scene that introduced the men. His role is intended to be a platform for de Vere/Shakespeare's voice. And yet, at the film's climax, Jonson's true role becomes apparent. The screenplay with its additional directions is revealing:

OXFORD

You alone watch my plays and know them as mine. When I hear the applause, the cheering, of the audience, all those hands clapping, they are celebrating... another man. But in that cacophony of sounds, I strained to hear the sound of two hands only. Yours.

(beat)

But heard them, I never did.

Jonson stares at him.

OXFORD (CONT'D)

Death takes away all pretense and demands honesty from its target. You, you have never told me... never told me what you thought of my work...

To answer is not an easy task for Jonson's ego. He hesitates.

JONSON

(almost a whisper)

I find... your words... the most wondrous ever heard on our stage. On any stage... Ever.

The two men now looking each other in the eye.

JONSON (CONT'D)

(sotto)

You are the soul of the age...

Oxford smiles at the thought of it.

(Orloff 135-36)

The film's climactic moment turns on Jonson's ability to recognize and appreciate good work. He came to London to be the "soul of the age", but now he turns that compliment back onto Oxford. The two men engage in a moment of intimacy made possible by Jonson's combination of rare honesty and hyperbolic praise, spoken in Armesto's performance amid the choking back

of tears. It is Jonson's approval that de Vere ultimately seeks, recognising a value to appreciation by Jonson that exceeds the popular and immediate impact we see demonstrated throughout the film by implicitly lesser figures such as Dekker. This acknowledgement of connoisseurship is the same privilege granted to Viola de Lesseps, the only auditioning actor who sees something special in "Shakespeare" as opposed to Marlowe, and whose critical taste is therefore implied to exceed that of the masses. In *Shakespeare in Love*, it is the actor and lover who is positioned as the most sensitive appreciator of Shakespeare. In *Anonymous* it is the fellow writer who is best positioned, and those who are Not Shakespeare can therefore serve as guides to an understanding of "Shakespeare's" worth.

Reputations

At the close of the film's *Hamlet*, Will Shakespeare indulges in some anachronistic crowdsurfing, literally riding the applause of the groundlings. Dekker, Jonson, Nashe and Marlowe stand together, frowning, watching as the new theatrical world embraces this charlatan and the Shakespearean mythos is consolidated in the relentless and indeed inevitable tidal wave of history (the thrill of the origin myth, of course, being the same as watching Anakin Skywalker become Darth Vader in the *Star Wars* prequels or Elphaba becoming the Wicked Witch of the West in *Wicked*). Although there is an attempt to create a happy coda for Jonson – Derek Jacobi, in the film's epilogue, tells the theatre audience that Jonson became the first poet laureate – Jonson remains constrained by Shakespeare. De Vere, on his deathbed, tells Jonson that "Shakespeare vexes you, but he is not your burden", but posterity was to prove precisely the opposite, continually judging Jonson against a Shakespearean standard.

Anonymous exemplifies the utilisation of Shakespeare's contemporaries to uphold the presumption of Shakespeare's exceptionalism in yet another time-honoured trope of the biopic, from F. Murray Abraham's Salieri in Milos Forman's *Amadeus* (1984) to Zac Efron's Richard Samuels in Richard Linklater's *Me and Orson Welles* (2008). The less famous figure is permitted to achieve on a modest level, conditional on their ultimate recognition of the genius in whose shadow they operate. The hero of this story – Jonson – is ultimately judged not on the quality of his own work but on his connoisseurship, his ability to humble himself before true greatness (despite the "ego" specified in the screenplay) and to appreciate the literary legacy of a man who dies penniless and disgraced.

As such, it is not Shakespeare or even de Vere himself who becomes the hero of the anti-Stratfordian cause in *Anonymous*, but Jonson. For as the underappreciated connoisseur, ignored by the literary and political establishment, yet the only man able truly to recognize and appreciate great art and interpret its origins correctly, he becomes the avatar for the anti-Stratfordian sense of self. De Vere is too remote from the viewer to engage fully, his creative inspiration coming from voices in his head rather than from his engagement with the world as in *Shakespeare in Love*. As he tells his wife:

The voices, Anne... The voices. I, I can't stop them... They, they come when I sleep, when I wake, when I sup, when I, I, I walk down a hall! The sweet longings of a maiden, the, the surging ambitions of a courtier, the foul designs of a murderer, the wretched pleas of his victims. Only - - only when I put their words—their *voices*-- to parchment are they cast loose, freed... Only then is my mind... quieted... at peace. (Orloff 57)

De Vere is the type of the tormented artist, plagued by inspiration and driven to near-madness by his genius. The viewer is not invited to share in his vision or his encounter with the mystical. Instead, the film's concern is to share with its audience the experience of being the underdog, the hardworking but overlooked critic, the true lover of literary work and, ultimately, the conspiracy theorist to whom the establishment refuses to listen. That is, the film asks us to consider what it

means to be permanently in the shadow of something calling itself Shakespeare, the same scholarly question being asked by those critics seeking to resituate Shakespeare's work within that of his contemporaries.

Derek Jacobi (the character) arrives late for his introduction to the stage version of *Anonymous* because his project is an urgent one. He, like a Jonson who also spends much of the film running to intervene urgently, does not have time to prepare (he goes on stage wearing the clothes in which he arrived), but needs to react instinctively, from the heart, from a place of inspired genius. It is no coincidence that Armesto/Jonson is cut to in the wings, panting and waiting for his cue, while Jacobi addresses the theatre audience; his run to the deserted Rose to save "Shakespeare's" works is a direct continuation of Jacobi's urgent march into the Broadway theatre. It is also no coincidence that Jacobi's performance begins, as Aebischer points out, with Jonson's lines:

Soul of the age!
The applause! Delight! The wonder of our stage!
Our SHAKESPEARE RISE! (218)

Jacobi's semi-fictional performance of himself acts to bring together de Vere's spontaneous poetry and Jonson's role as the builder of reputations; the combination of careful preparation and the honesty of an off-the-cuff delivery are designed to create a confidence in the truth of this speaker, whose choric function has already been established by the actor's recognisability from Kenneth Branagh's 1989 *Henry V*. In returning to Jacobi for the film's conclusion, however, his final flourish ends with the closing of the curtain and, in a particularly canny decision, a lack of applause. As the end credits roll, the audience begin putting on their coats and leaving, murmuring to one another. There is no triumphant conclusion, no ovation (such as the one orchestrated by Mark Rylance during his anti-Stratfordian stage show *I Am Shakespeare* [2007], which asked audience members to leap to their feet at the conclusion of the play screaming "I am Shakespeare!"), just the murmur of people considering what they have just heard. While Dekker and Nashe were looked to for their applause, and Marlowe was killed for his refusal to engage, the closing credits of *Anonymous* align its audience with Jonson as the appreciative critical thinker who does not applaud, but takes time to come to his (correct) conclusion.

Notes

¹ I retain "anti-Stratfordianism" and "anti-Stratfordians" despite the recent calls of Paul Edmondson and Stanley Wells to use the term "anti-Shakespearean" (Edmondson 234). The defence that "Our rationale is that artists cannot truly be separated from the social, cultural, economic and political contexts which make them unique" (*ibid.*) acts as a misrepresentation of the anti-Stratfordian position, for whom these contexts are similarly inseparable from their author; the dispute is over the identity of those contexts. As "anti-Shakespearean" seems to me to imply a disdain/antipathy towards text and author which is usually not expressed in these discourses, I retain the established term.

² Such titles include Robin P. Williams, *Sweet Swan of Avon* (2011); Jonathan Bate, *Soul of the Age* (2008); and Katherine Duncan-Jones, *Ungentle Shakespeare* (2001).

³ It is worth noting that the roles of Hamlet and Henry V are played by Spencer (Alex Hassell), while Chorus and Richard III are performed by Condell (Mark Rylance). In Mark Rylance's anti-Stratfordian polemic play, *I Am Shakespeare* (touring 2007), Rylance played a contemporary anti-Stratfordian who is visited by ghosts of Shakespearean claimants, including de Vere, who was played by Hassell.

⁴ For further discussion, see Shapiro, *Contested Will* 222-24, which notes that the Oxfordian cause aligns the Stratfordian ideology with a Tudor policy invested in cover-ups and self-preservation.

⁵ The easy jibes at historical inaccuracy, which might begin with Marlowe's survival to 1599 and extend to concerns over chronology, the use of *Richard III* rather than *Richard II* as the play sponsored by the Essex rebellion; the conflagration of the Rose in 1603 and so on, have been dissected in detail by critics looking to score easy victories against the film. It is worth remembering that Shakespearean history plays also rearrange chronology freely in the

service of a greater “truth”, and to point out what are clearly deliberate inaccuracies in a fictional film that *frames* itself as a fiction is neither generous nor productive.

⁶ On the recurrence of collocations from *Tamburlaine* throughout the Shakespeare corpus, see Merriam. On Marlowe’s authorship of parts of 1 and 2 *Henry VI*, see Craig.

⁷ I am grateful to Jem Bloomfield for this observation and for incisive comments throughout this article.

Works Cited

- Aebischer, Pascale. *Screening Early Modern Drama: Beyond Shakespeare*. Cambridge: CUP, 2013. Print.
- Anderegg, Michael. “James Dean Meets the Pirate’s Daughter: Passion and Parody in *William Shakespeare’s Romeo + Juliet* and *Shakespeare in Love*.” *Shakespeare The Movie: II*. Eds. Richard Burt and Lynda E. Boose. New York :Routledge, 2003. 56-71. Print.
- Bastin, Giselle. “Filming the Ineffable: Biopics of the British Royal Family.” *Auto/Biography Studies* 24.1 (2009): 34-52. Print.
- Craig, Hugh. “The Three Parts of *Henry VI*.” *Shakespeare, Computers, and the Mystery of Authorship*. Eds. Hugh Craig and Arthur F. Kinney. Cambridge: CUP, 2009. 40-77. Print.
- Edmondson, Paul. “‘The Shakespeare Establishment’ and the Shakespeare Authorship Discussion.” *Shakespeare Beyond Doubt: Evidence, Argument, Controversy*. Eds. Paul Edmondson and Stanley Wells. Cambridge: CUP, 2013. 225-35. Print.
- Grantley, Darryll. “Thomas Dekker and the Emergence of City Comedy.” *The Cambridge Companion to Shakespeare and Contemporary Dramatists*. Ed. Ton Hoenselaars. Cambridge: CUP, 2013. 83-96. Print.
- Lanier, Douglas. “‘There won’t be puppets, will there?’: ‘Heroic’ Authorship and the Cultural Politics of *Anonymous*.” *Shakespeare Beyond Doubt: Evidence, Argument, Controversy*. Eds. Paul Edmondson and Stanley Wells. Cambridge: CUP, 2013. 215-24. Print.
- Marcus, Leah S. *Unediting the Renaissance: Shakespeare, Marlowe, Milton*. London: Routledge, 1996. Print.
- Merriam, Thomas. “Tamburlaine Stalks in *Henry VI*.” *Computers and the Humanities* 30:3 (1996): 267-80. Print.
- Orloff, John. *Anonymous*. Screenplay, n.d. *Simply Scripts*. January 17 2012. Web. August 2 2013.
- Ostovich, Helen, ed. *Every Man Out Of His Humour*. Manchester: Manchester UP, 2001. Print.
- Robson, Mark. “Jonson and Shakespeare.” *Ben Jonson in Context*. Ed. Julie Sanders. Cambridge: CUP, 2010. 57-64. Print.
- Shapiro, James. *Contested Will*. London: Faber & Faber, 2010. Print.
- Shapiro, James. “Hollywood Dishonors the Bard.” *New York Times*. October 16 2011. Web.
- Shapiro, James. “Shakespeare – a fraud? *Anonymous* is ridiculous.” *The Guardian*. November 4 2011. Web.
- Syme, Holger, “People Being Stupid About Shakesp... Or Someone Else.” *Dispositio*. September 9 2011. Web.
- Wilson, Richard, “‘The words of Mercury: Shakespeare and Marlowe’”. *The Cambridge Companion to Shakespeare and Contemporary Dramatists*. Ed. Ton Hoenselaars. Cambridge: CUP, 2013. 34-53. Print.