

NO CULTURAL ICON, JUST A MAN: REPRESENTING SHAKESPEARE IN KENNETH BRANAGH'S BIOPIC *ALL IS TRUE* (2018)

Ana-Maria IFTIMIE

*PhD Candidate, "Alexandru Ioan Cuza" University of Iași, Romania
Junior Lecturer, "Dunărea de Jos" University of Galați, Romania*

Abstract

While mainly addressing the masses and the simpler tastes of his time, Shakespeare's plays have long been considered emblematic for high culture, which calls into question whether their author should still be regarded as representative for the elites or whether his life and personality should be demystified and brought back to the people. An attempt in this respect, showcased by this paper, seems to be Kenneth Branagh's biopic *All Is True* (2018), which portrays Shakespeare as an ordinary man rather than as an illustrious playwright, allowing the public to see the human being behind his almost god-like façade. The film, however, reasserts the Renaissance dramatist's position as the greatest poet and playwright by interrogating some of the most persistent theories on his biography and authorship.

Keywords: *Shakespeare, biopic, representation, reception, high culture, popular culture*

INTRODUCTION

For a long time, Shakespeare has been considered an international high culture icon, a paragon of high-brow literature, particularly for the academics, who undertook the task of dissecting his plays and poems and disseminating the collected knowledge to young learners in institutions of higher education. Yet, it

is a well-known fact that Shakespeare's plays were addressed mainly to the masses who would gather for hours to watch the actors' performances. Therefore, where does Shakespeare really stand?

More and more writers and filmmakers have been adopting a global marketing strategy that relies on consumerism in order to bring Shakespeare back to the masses, where he belongs. This strategy usually involves relying on what is considered low-brow culture, specifically adapting his plays in various forms (i.e. films, musicals); recently, however, there has been an increase in depictions of Shakespeare as a character in cultural forms such as biofiction or the (literary) biopic.

This association of Shakespeare with popular culture, although despised or ignored by scholars, and the study of the relationship between them, has made "an increasingly significant contribution to our understanding of how Shakespeare's works came into being, and how and why they continue to exercise the imaginations of readers, theatregoers, viewers, and scholars worldwide." (Shaughnessy 1) Thus, the consumer can get a better understanding of the Bard's work; at the same time, the effect of such a connection is one of "humanising" Shakespeare by depicting him not only as a poet and playwright—or as an international cultural icon—but also as a man, by (supposedly) portraying his life and relationships.

One of the forms this depiction can take is the biographical film—or, the biopic: a form that is usually dismissed as low-brow culture, popular due to the contemporary public's desire to pry into other people's lives and for offering a more accessible version of history (Custen 34).

THE BIOPIC

It is perhaps suitable to start the discussion on the biopic as a genre with George Custen's book *Bio/Pics: How Hollywood Constructed Public History* (1992), which is considered to be a foundational work on this matter, focusing on the evolution of the biographical film from the 1930s to the 1950s. In the introduction he claims that the biopic, which reached its pinnacle in the 1950s, before it came to be regarded as an inferior form of culture, "played a powerful part in creating and sustaining public history" by providing the viewers with "the version of a life that they held to be the truth." (2) Hollywood biopics especially prided themselves on offering "a true portrait, or at least a singularly or true version or the accurate characterization of a person" by laying emphasis on the extensive research that was done in order to produce such films—mostly for marketing reasons. However, this research was partly done by taking into account the expectations regarding what historical errors might be spotted by the viewers and critics, and the ones

that might be overlooked (34-35). While there were critics and viewers waiting “to catch the slightest slip,” most of them tended not to react, unless the error was an outrageous one; thus, most sets, costumes, manners and narratives of biopics were characterized by “an odd mixture of careful research, of compromised whimsy, and of outright fabrication.” (37)

Structurally, Custen provides 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. In addition, biopics usually start *in media res*, presenting the moment when the birth of a star takes place, and seldom with the subject’s birth. In some cases, where there is no assertion of “truth,” the film starts with some other “signifier” of this so-called “truth,” such as a photograph (e.g. *The Actress*, 1953), or a series of portraits of the historical figures (e.g. *Madame Du Barry*, 1934) (51-53). These openings have the role of persuading the viewers—more or less successfully—that what they are about to watch is actually the “truth,” especially since these techniques of using titles or voice-overs are perhaps borrowed from the early documentaries (53-54).

In terms of narrative components, George Custen also provides a few examples of how the life narrative is constructed in biopics. For instance, there are biopics which start at a specific point in the life of the subject or even at birth, thus shaping “differing discourses about the role of family in the life of a valorized figure.” (67) The achievement of fame is, therefore, supported either by “a biological predisposition (a gift)” or by the environment the subject was raised in (67-68); or the subject may as well be aided by a close friend, a guide, on the road to fame (69). In other cases, the question of “fortune and misfortune” is also raised, as “any mythology of fame consists of the biographee coping with the misfortune that can level any elevation” (75); most of the time, salvation comes to the subject “in the form of the very institutions that the famous share with most members of the audience: family, community, and home.” Thus, besides rendering the subject’s life more relatable to the public, biopics may as well shape “the lessons of fame,” by emphasising the tensions “between home and public, between opposing communities, and between definitions of family.” (76)

Starting from Custen’s work on Hollywood biographical films, Hila Shachar goes even further and discusses the biographical portrayal of authors under the label of literary biopic, daring to call it a “genre” of its own, albeit an unstable one (Shachar 9-10). Even though the literary biopic has become increasingly popular since the 1990s, it is only recently that it has become a cinematic trend, with “its own particular tropes and screen ‘language’.” (1-2) Shachar also argues that literary biopics actually expand upon heritage cinema through the use of “representational politics and strategies”: some of them “are conservative in tone and effect,” similarly to earlier heritage cinema, while others

make use of “postmodernist and intersectional approaches” in representing the self, history, as well as the biographical subject, through a “preoccupation with the cultural persona of the author.” Thus, postmodernist discourse interrogates the way in which history is understood, represented, received and interpreted in the present, and it also represents “a process of deconstruction of the idea of objective ‘truth’ and data in historical inquiry, in favour of recovery of lost and untold stories.” (7)

In her book, Shachar also refers to a template upon which the literary biopic relies, featuring the “genius” at work, creating in the “small room,” in an attempt to catch a glimpse of the inner world of the author’s psychology and individuality via a series of repetitive images (25). Judith Buchanan succinctly lists these images in the Introduction to her volume *The Writer on Film: Screening Literary Authorship*:

Literary biopics make a feature of shots that lovingly fête the writing process. We are familiar with aestheticized views of desk, quill, parchment, inkpot, typewriter, the writer in a moment of meditative pause, the evocatively personal oddities that adorn the space of writing, the view from the window as a reflective space that feeds the imaginative process. (Buchanan 5)

Indeed, in the past twenty years there has been a “surge in the popularity of the literary biopic,” (Buchanan 4) which continues to be a prevalent genre. Lives of prominent authors such as William Shakespeare, Jane Austen, Virginia Woolf, and many others, have been dramatized in numerous biopics, each offering a different perspective on their subject, in order to raise awareness of their literary genius, and not only. Recently, it can be said that the interest in prying into the private lives of such authors has increased, as biopics have started to tackle more than just the authorial body at work, caught in the process of creation. There are filmmakers who are now attempting to bring these authors closer to the public, by providing some insight into the personal relationships with their families and friends, instead of focusing solely on their careers or offering romanticised versions of their lives that would only alienate them from the masses.

SHAKESPEARE, CULTURAL ICON OR ORDINARY MAN?

One such example is the renowned actor and director Kenneth Branagh, a well-established figure in “Shakespeareana” on film, who has either appeared in or directed and produced numerous adaptations of the plays for the big screen, his greatest achievements and the most popular being *Henry V* (1989), *Much Ado About Nothing* (1993) and *Hamlet* (1996). Therefore, it is only natural that the

next step would be a biographical film on the great playwright around whom he has shaped his career, both on stage and in the film industry.

Kenneth Branagh's 2018 biopic *All Is True* is not a "typical" one, as it does not adhere to the "template" that Hila Shachar discusses in her book (2019) and it does not rely on the tropes proposed by Judith Buchanan (2013), either, although it does depict a literary figure that holds great cultural significance to the contemporary public and whose representations can act as a cultural map that can help the viewers explore both themselves and the society in which they live (Shachar 18-19). Unlike biopics that provide romanticised versions of the Bard such as *Shakespeare in Love* (1998) or *A Waste of Shame* (2005), *All Is True* paints him as an ordinary man struggling with universal issues to which viewers can relate. However, given that there is little biographical information on Shakespeare, the boundaries between fact and fiction are often blurred. Thus, the gaps are filled in an attempt at reconstructing the years following Shakespeare's retirement—or, more precisely, Shakespeare's final years. In the end, despite the (in)accuracy of detail, an image of what the man behind the "genius" could have been is created.

Reverential in his approach, Kenneth Branagh manages to bring a different side of Shakespeare to the public, namely William Shakespeare the man, by tackling the years after his retirement at Stratford after his beloved Globe had burned down during a performance of *Life of Henry VIII* in 1613, until his death in 1616. The Bard is "humanised," as his career is over and his mantle of cultural icon is removed, revealing the human being underneath it. What is more, he is shown trying to cope with his son's death, struggling with family problems that arose from his abandonment of his loved ones in order to make a name for himself in London, reputation issues, and the end of his career.

Although most reviewers have a rather low opinion on Branagh's biopic, some claiming that it depicts a "walking cliché" (Jones 2018) and others berating its "inaccuracies" (LaSalle 2019; Bond 2019; Winkler 2019), while also comparing it to the ever-famous *Shakespeare in Love* (1998), Kenneth Branagh never claims that his film represents the "truth." In fact, he explains in an interview for *Variety* that his aim was to do what Shakespeare himself did in his historical plays, giving the example of *Julius Caesar*: "he didn't know anything about what went on behind closed doors in Julius Caesar's house, but he did know what the dates of his life were and he filled in the rest of it." ("Kenneth Branagh on Shakespeare & All Is True")

"Borrowing" the technique from Shakespeare, Kenneth Branagh draws on the existing facts and records in order to provide the public with a more "accessible" version of Shakespeare, devoid of almost every trait that makes him the timeless genius for which he is praised, with a few small exceptions. In addition, Branagh justifies his choices in the film through Shakespeare's own writing:

So, in the plays he writes about twins so often, he writes about the loss of children so often and, particularly at the end of his life, he wrote plays about problems with daughters, and the loss of daughters and the desire to reunite a family. So, all of that seemed to be wrapped up in those last three years, somehow. (Branagh, *Kenneth Branagh on Shakespeare & All Is True*)

Therefore, he makes it clear that his biopic, although based on facts, does not solely rely on them, as he resorts to the aforementioned gap-filling in order to provide a coherent story, and that his main focus is on Shakespeare as an ordinary man trying to find his place in his family after years of estrangement.

The concepts of “truth” and “reality” are tackled and challenged in the film as the fine line between fact and fiction is blurred, the two of them melting together in this new version of Shakespeare’s life story. As such, when watching *All Is True*, one should keep in mind that it is not a documentary film, therefore what is presented on screen should not be taken for the “ultimate truth.” The very first level where the process of deconstruction begins is the title of the film, which is actually the alternative title of Shakespeare’s play on Henry VIII, a beautiful play on intertextuality. While it boldly asserts the “veracity” of the events presented in the film, it does so ironically, as the “truth”—whatever that is—may not ever be wholly known. Not even Shakespeare himself seems to know it, as he declares to a very surprised Susannah:

[Susannah] So why are you come home? No more stories left to write?
[Shakespeare] Susannah, I’ve lived so long in imaginary worlds, I think I’ve lost sight of what is real. What is true.
[Susannah] Judith says “Nothing is true.” (00:11:16-00:11:33)

Therefore, the film constantly plays on “truth”: Shakespeare, still rooted in his imaginary worlds, always claims that “all is true,” while Judith, who is more down to earth and bound to reality, dismisses and denies this notion. Shakespeare’s truth, however, is a relative construct: it is mostly a product of his own imagination, but nevertheless it is real, even if perhaps just for a moment.

Furthermore, when asked by a young man—an admirer—how come he knew everything, he replies:

[Shakespeare] Just, what I know, if I know, and I don’t say that I do, I... have imagined.
[Young Man] But they say that you left school at 14. You never travelled. Imagined from what?
[Shakespeare] From myself.
[Young Man] Yourself?

[Shakespeare] Yes. Everything I've ever done, everything I've ever seen, every book I've ever read, every conversation I've ever had [...]. If you want to be a writer and speak to others and for others, speak first for yourself. Search within. Consider the contents of your own soul... your humanity. And if you're honest with yourself, then whatever you write, all is true. (00:33:29-00:34:32)

As such, while Shakespeare's genius is brought into discussion and attempts are made at understanding it, following the postmodernist trend, truth is also deconstructed and defined as a subjective notion that is made up not only of experiences and extensive research, but also imagination, creativity and originality.

As previously outlined, this analysis relies mostly on George Custen's identification of the features and structure of biopics (1992). Thus, it is important to mention that the film opens with a representation of the Chandos Portrait, attributed to John Taylor and "regarded as authentic within the living memory of the playwright." (Cooper qtd. in Benton 104) It is perhaps one of the most striking images in the film, given that Kenneth Branagh used it as inspiration for his role as well as a reference for the make-up designers to transform him into the Bard. Branagh himself remarked, in an article published in *The Telegraph* that his interest in the painting was aroused by the fact that some believe it is "the nearest likeness we may have of William Shakespeare" and that Shakespeare himself is likely to have sat for it. So, gazing upon it for hours, Branagh prepared himself to "become" Shakespeare by focusing on the eyes of the figure in the painting: "The eyes themselves seem intelligent, wry, full of warmth but enigmatic—cheeky, perhaps." What is more, although he resorted to prosthetics in order to recreate the look, he chose not to use contact lenses despite the different eye colour. Instead, Branagh claims to have allowed his eyes "do the work that this image presented so intensely" to him ("What inspired Kenneth Branagh's portrayal"). Indeed, the actor's transformation is a remarkable one: he is now almost unrecognizable, having put on the dramatist's persona, and his eyes manage to convey exactly the feelings that were probably envisaged: pain and loss. Shakespeare the man is, therefore, haunted by the untimely death of his son, Hamnet, and by the abrupt end of his career, issues to which the viewers would be able to relate. In this way, the first step is taken towards "humanising" Shakespeare and bringing him closer to the masses.

Subsequently, title cards announce the historical context, thus reaffirming the film's belonging to the biopic genre and reinforcing the "authenticity" of the events that follow: on June 29th 1613 a performance of *Life of Henry VIII* was taking place at the Globe in London, "advertised under its alternative title: *All Is True*," (Branagh, *All Is True*) which also announces the title of the film. Unfortunately, a cannon misfired during Act 1 Scene 4, causing a fire that burned

down the theatre. The images that follow are dramatic to the core: the establishing shot shows the Globe burning in the distance, the light produced by the fire in deep contrast with the darkness of twilight and the black smoke that emerges.

The establishing shot is followed by a medium long shot of Shakespeare's silhouette outlined against the background of the burning Globe and juxtaposed with the haunting score composed by Patrick Doyle—with whom Branagh has worked before on many other projects—in order to convey the despair and the sense of loss that Shakespeare must have felt. The end of Shakespeare's career is announced by another set of title cards which inform the viewers that "William Shakespeare never wrote another play" (Branagh, *All Is True*) and, a few moments later, by another medium long shot, this time Shakespeare's figure set against the background of the setting sun: the Bard is now only a shadow of what he has once been.

Following this tragic event, Shakespeare returns to Stratford where he has a brief, but ominous conversation with a boy who, in a moment's inattention, seems to vanish into thin air:

[Boy] You're Shakespeare. The poet. You tell stories.

[Shakespeare] I used to.

[Boy] I had a story, but it was never finished. Will you finish it for me, please?

[Shakespeare] I'm done with stories, lad, I wouldn't know how to finish yours.

[Boy] Yes, you would. (00:02:30-00:03:00)

The boy's words, as well as his sudden disappearance from Shakespeare's side, foreshadow the unveiling of the biopic's greatest mystery: adding a quite supernatural touch to the film by taking advantage of the lack of detailed records on Hamnet's death, it is later revealed that the boy is actually the "ghost" of Hamnet, perhaps an "embodiment" of Shakespeare's guilt at the abandonment of his family and regret for his son's death which keeps haunting him. The repeated encounters with the ghost, which most likely take place only in Shakespeare's mind as a result of grief, might bring to the foreground two ideas: one is a play on intertextuality, a hint at Hamnet having an unfinished business in the world of the living, similarly to King Hamlet's ghost which appears to his son in Shakespeare's own play, and the other is Hamnet's faith in his father's creative genius to "finish" his story. Both ideas are actually proven to be true later in the film.

In his moments of intense sorrow, Shakespeare is repeatedly shown clutching a handful of papers, poems written by Hamnet, the Bard being proud of his son who seemed to be following in his footsteps—he is, perhaps, even wistful, as he would have had a male heir to carry on both of his legacies: his name and his fame. However, Judith is revealed to actually be the one who came up with the poems, Hamnet only writing them down, as Judith herself did not know how to

write. Indeed, in his *Shakespeare's Lives*, Schoenbaum mentions that it can be gathered from Shakespeare's will that Susanna was the favourite daughter, for she was "witty beyond her sex" and she could sign her name, unlike Judith, who never learned to do so (13). In Branagh's biopic, the same idea is conveyed, as Judith admits being jealous of Hamnet and seeking her father's approval, so much that she threatened to tell their father who the real author of the poems was. Following Shakespeare's inquiries about Hamnet's cause of death, it is then revealed by Judith that Hamnet had actually drowned himself in the greenwood pond—much like Ophelia had in *Hamlet*—probably out of fear of losing his father's respect and attention. However, Anne coldly dismisses the story, still claiming that Hamnet had died of plague, so that his death would not be considered a suicide, lest Hamnet's soul would not go to heaven. While the real cause is unknown, the biopic manages to twist things in such a way that Hamnet's passing is rendered even more painful, thus emphasising once again the struggles of Shakespeare as a man and, more precisely, as a father.

Unable to bear his grief any longer upon hearing the truth, the Bard rushes to the greenwood pond where he once again sees Hamnet's "ghost": "You finished it. Thank you. My story's done. I can rest." he says (1:26:02-13), preparing to turn around and leave Shakespeare alone in the dark, but not before quoting Prospero's lines in *The Tempest*: "We are such stuff / As dreams are made on and our little life / Is rounded with a sleep." (1:26:23-38) Hamnet's words may hint at the fact that he, or more precisely his death, is the inspiration for the lines Shakespeare wrote in the play. Nevertheless, Shakespeare is doomed to "lose" his son once again, bringing him such unbearable pain that he even remains by the lake until the next day, thus catching a severe cold which would eventually lead to his death.

Regarding Shakespeare's relationship with his family, it is important to notice that, having spent so much time away from home, the family's reaction to Shakespeare's return does not come as a surprise: he is greeted by his wife and his two daughters, none looking too delighted to see him after feeling abandoned by him. One of the most striking scenes might be that between husband and wife as, when he heads towards his and Anne's bedroom, Shakespeare is met with coldness, and Anne simply declares: "Twenty years, Will. We've seen you less and less. To us, you're a guest. And a guest must have the best bed." (00:03:56-00:04:14) Here, Branagh beautifully plays on the issue of Shakespeare's will, in which he left Anne his second-best bed after his death, implying thus, that if the best bed was for the guests, the second-best was their matrimonial bed. The film also depicts the moment when Shakespeare summons Francis Collins, his lawyer, in order to make amends to his will: first, to include his new son-in-law, Thomas Quiney, and secondly, to make sure that Anne would get their second-best bed after his death, despite knowing that a third of his belongings would go to her anyway, if she were to outlive him: "A specific piece of furniture which, when it

is no longer ours, must be hers, and when she is in it, I hope she will smile and think of me.” (1:05:58-1:06:14) 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); therefore, Branagh’s approach might not be simply “a cheekily imagined backstory.” (Bradshaw 2018)

It might be true that Shakespeare spent little time at home and more in London, away from his family and dealing with his career, as Schoenbaum writes that there are no references to Anne or his children in London (18). However, it is not known how frequently he would travel back home. Thus, once again the untouchable Bard is “reduced” to a human being who, most likely, chose his career over his family, his ambition for fame and reputation leading to estrangement from his wife and children and, in turn, to hostility upon his arrival back home.

Besides the cold welcome he receives, the family meals do not seem to be very friendly either: Shakespeare, Anne and Judith look rather gloomy around the table, none of them very comfortable with the “new reality” just yet. Family issues are taken even further, as Shakespeare faces a scandal involving his daughter, Judith. Shortly after her marriage to Thomas Quiney, a vintner and town servant (Honan 391), in 1616, it is revealed that Quiney had taken a lover, Margaret Wheeler, who was pregnant with his child and died in childbirth. This might have prompted Shakespeare to make alterations to his will, namely to remove Thomas Quiney (393). Indeed, the film plays upon this speculation: Judith gladly reveals that she is pregnant with Thomas’s child, the joy being quickly soured by the distressing news of Margaret Wheeler’s death in childbirth.

After learning the truth, Shakespeare has an argument with Sir Thomas Lucy, who mocks him for the scandals in which his family is involved and even compares Judith’s “rushed” wedding to William’s, declaring that “the apple doesn’t fall far from the tree.” (1:12:01-05) This most recent scandal, thus, brings disgrace to the Shakespeares so, in response, the Bard chooses to remove Quiney from his will.

In addition to bringing up the scandals in Shakespeare’s life, Sir Thomas Lucy also attacks William’s former occupation, that of a poet, claiming that he himself has actual business to take care of (i.e. maintaining the Charlecote estate), which prompts a long and bitter reply from the Bard:

[Shakespeare] Oh, I thought real business. Like building, owning and operating London’s largest theatre, for instance. Actors, carpenters, seamstresses, crew to pay, bribes to pay, security to mount, politics to navigate, 3000 paying customers to be fed and watered every afternoon, each promised a spectacle greater than the last. One hundred and seventy royal command performances for our queen and

our king. [...] And yet, in all the years that I have run my vast, complex and spectacularly successful business, Thomas, I have indeed found the time to think and to write down the pretty thoughts you mention and which, in my experience, bring immense pleasure to those who seek mere diversion or respite from this vale of tears ... (1:12:32-1:13:23)

Shakespeare's whole career is, therefore, summarised in one long reply to Sir Thomas Lucy's downgrading of his business. This rather passionate recounting of Shakespeare's greatest achievements might also be an oblique attack on those looking down on his works or dismissing the so-called low-culture as pointless—which, obviously, it is not, as it has the power to entertain the masses and perhaps to educate them.

More issues of reputation are brought under the spotlight. Shakespeare's desire to make a name for himself in London, and perhaps to escape the stigma that his father's actions attached to their name, made him quite literally forget to live, as he dedicated so much of his time to pleasing the crowds and acquiring fame; and even when he got fame he still did go as far as paying for the title of gentleman. Theories of authorship are also alluded to, as Shakespeare himself suggests he will "always be suspect" and his genius questioned for ages to come, an oblique attack on the anti-Stratfordians:

[Shakespeare] I care because it matters, Your Grace. Well, in England, it matters. I have what I have upon my own merit, and for that I'm suspect. Well, perhaps I'll always be suspect. But I have my money, and I have my houses, and I have my coat of arms.

[Southampton] And you have your verses. Great Christ, man, you have your poetry. Such poetry. Such beautiful... beautiful poetry. (00:43:00-29)

Speculations surrounding Shakespeare's sexuality are also tackled, as William seems to confess his feelings to Lord Southampton reciting Sonnet 29 to him. The latter takes his words as mere flattery and dismisses Shakespeare's declaration of unrequited love: as a poet, Southampton holds the Bard in highest esteem, but as a man, he declares "it is not your place to love me." (00:46:51-54) The rumours are thus dispelled, letting on that there was never anything going on between the two of them—perhaps just a poet-patron relationship or one-sided love. Actually, there are no records of the two of them ever meeting and Schoenbaum calls it a mere "pleasant aristocratic thought." (33)

Branagh's biopic ends with Shakespeare's death in 1616, after having suffered, most likely, from pneumonia following the night spent by the pond. There have been speculations about the cause of his death, but not much is known about it. Perhaps Branagh was inspired by the tradition according to which "the poet fell into a decline not long after his retirement from the stage." (Schoenbaum

77) The choice of including his passing in the film might reinforce the idea that, in spite of his “immortality” as a literary genius, Shakespeare was only human, after all.

During Shakespeare’s funeral, Anne, Susanna and Judith recite the first three stanzas of the song from his *Cymbeline*, “Fear no more the heat o’ the sun.” (1:35:02-1:36:55) While this is unlikely to really have happened as, according to tradition, Susanna was the only one of the three women who could read and write, the act in itself seems like a beautiful tribute to both Shakespeare’s life and genius: although the Bard does not have to fear the hardships of earthly life anymore, his legacy will live on through his creations.

Given the relationship between the biopic and the heritage of cinema, also worth mentioning is the recurrent imagery of the English landscapes. Through images of the various landmarks and trademark greenery, nostalgia for “Merrie England” is woven into the representation of England’s greatest poet and playwright to reinforce the idea that he is, first and foremost, an English cultural icon, although Branagh’s creation seeks to bring him down from his pedestal and among the masses, where he belongs. These green, bright images are, however, juxtaposed with the dark, gloomy landscape of the greenwood pond, which used to be Hamnet’s favourite place, as well as the place of his death, and which Shakespeare frequently visits at night. The two contrasting images might be symbols of the two major aspects of Shakespeare’s identity: the national poet, who will, most likely, always preserve his canonical status, and the grieving father, the man who has to deal with the consequences of his actions and desires, and with the tribulations of life itself.

CONCLUSIONS

Kenneth Branagh’s biopic offers, via a popular culture device, a glimpse of what Shakespeare’s life might have been, shedding off his cultural icon persona, portraying instead an ordinary man who struggled to cope with guilt and grief. In other words, instead of applying the literary biopic “template” which Hila Shachar discusses in her book, and romanticising the author through various recurring tropes such as the quill, the writing desk, the image of the hand in the process of creation, Branagh chose to tackle a less-known, and also a less-discussed, aspect of Shakespeare’s life with a view to presenting Shakespeare the man to the public.

The notion of “truth” is deconstructed and the gaps are filled, for the sake of recovering the untold story of Shakespeare’s life beyond his career as an actor, poet and playwright. Thus, *All Is True* provides a different perspective on William Shakespeare to the public at large, enabling them to see the human being behind the god-like façade of the Bard, while also reasserting his position as the greatest

poet and playwright, through the artistry of Kenneth Branagh's directing and acting

Works Cited

- Benton, Michael. *Literary Biography. An Introduction*. UK: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009.
- Bond, Matthew. "All Is True begins as a comedy of errors, but great performances by Judi Dench and Kenneth Branagh mean all's well that ends well... eventually." *Daily Mail*, 9 February 2019. www.dailymail.co.uk/home/event/article-6674501/Kenneth-Branaghs-True-begins-comedy-errors-eventually-alls-ends-well.html. Accessed 20 February 2021.
- Bradshaw, Peter. "All Is True review – Kenneth Branagh and Ben Elton's poignant Bard biopic." *The Guardian*, 21 December 2018. www.theguardian.com/film/2018/dec/21/all-is-true-review-ben-elton-kenneth-branagh-shakespeare. Accessed 20 February 2021.
- Branagh, Kenneth, director. *All Is True*. TKBC, 2018.
- . "Kenneth Branagh on Shakespeare & All Is True – Variety Screening Series." By Andrew Wallenstein. *Variety*, 11 December 2018. www.youtube.com/watch?v=dt8oCwrT3i4. Accessed 21 February 2021.
- . "What inspired Kenneth Branagh's portrayal of Shakespeare in new film All Is True?" *The Telegraph*, 17 December 2018. www.telegraph.co.uk/films/all-is-true/kenneth-branagh-playing-shakespeare. Accessed 21 February 2021.
- Buchanan, Judith. "Introduction – Image, story, desire: the writer on film". *The Writer on Film: Screening Literary Authorship*. Ed. Judith Buchanan. UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013. 3-32.
- Custen, George. *Bio/pics. How Hollywood Constructed Public History*. New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1992. <https://archive.org/details/biopics00geor>. Accessed 16 February 2021.
- Honan, Park. *Shakespeare – A Life*. New York: Oxford University Press Inc, 1999.
- Jones, Oliver. "If Kenneth Branagh's All Is True Is Accurate, Then Shakespeare Was One Giant Walking Cliché." *Observer*, 20 December 2018. www.observer.com/2018/12/all-is-true-movie-review-kenneth-branagh-cliche. Accessed 24 February 2021.
- LaSalle, Mick. "Review: Something wretched this way comes." *Times Union*, 9 June 2019. www.timesunion.com/living/article/Review-Something-wretched-this-way-comes-13964165.php. Accessed 20 February 2021.
- Schoenbaum, Samuel. *Shakespeare's Lives*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991.
- Shachar, Hila. *Screening the Author: The Literary Biopic*. Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019.
- Shaughnessy, Robert. "Introduction". *The Cambridge Companion to Shakespeare and Popular Culture*. Ed. Robert Shaughnessy. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007.
- Winkler, Elizabeth. "In Shakespeare's Life Story, Not All Is True. In Fact, Much Is Invented." *The Atlantic*, 10 May 2019.

Ana-Maria IFTIMIE

www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2019/05/all-true-and-problem-shakespeare-biography/589018. Accessed 20 February 2021.

BIONOTE

ANA-MARIA IFTIMIE is currently a Junior Lecturer at “Dunărea de Jos” University of Galați and a first-year PhD student in English and American Literature at “Alexandru Ioan Cuza” University of Iași. Her doctoral thesis, entitled *Fictionalising William Shakespeare’s Life on Page and Screen*, focuses on various representations of the Bard in written and filmic sources and aims to analyse the way in which they help shape the public’s perception of Shakespeare.
Email: ana.iftimie@student.uaic.ro

