

FICTIONALISING SHAKESPEARE'S 'LOST YEARS': WILL'S RISE TO FAME

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Abstract

While the lack of information on Shakespeare's life poses a great challenge to biographers in their pursuit of compiling the poet's definitive Life, it is the early years of his career—the so-called 'Lost Years'—which represent perhaps the biggest mystery to historians. Consequently, biographies fill in this gap by relying mostly on speculation and theories rather than hard facts. For this reason, this period seems to be a favourite for fictional representations of William Shakespeare's life, offering the most space for creativity for the authors. Craig Pearce's TV series *Will* (2017) specifically brings to the public a version of Shakespeare's 'Lost Years.' Thus, the gaps in the poet's life are filled in by setting his story in a rather dystopian England and by incorporating anachronistic elements in the historical narrative. For instance, Will's arrival in London and his struggles are juxtaposed with a soundtrack that is comprised of modern rock songs, while the characters' costumes, make-up, colourful hair and tattoos are reminiscent of popular culture films such as *The Hunger Games* or *Star Wars*, as well as of the punk rock culture of the 1970s. This way, the young man's journey to fame is associated with the modern-day equivalent of a rock star's ascension.

Keywords: *Shakespeare, biography, biopic, the Lost Years, fictionalisation*

INTRODUCTION

Shakespeare has long eluded his biographers, who are ‘constrained by a lack of personal data’ (Holderness 2) in their (fruitless) pursuit to compile the definitive Life of William Shakespeare. In fact, Holderness even gives a brief example of what the biography of Shakespeare would look like if ‘based purely on these historical documents, and drawing no inferences at all about any autobiographical content in the writing’ (2), and the result is a two-page account that highlights some aspects of the Bard’s life. However, it is perhaps the early years of his career which are mostly a mystery to historians, since there is virtually no information that has survived about them. Thus, the period between 1585-1592 has been appropriately termed ‘the Lost Years’ and biographies deal with these seven years more through speculation and theories than hard facts, some of them based on supposed accounts of Shakespeare’s contemporaries or early biographers.

Therefore, it is only natural that writers of biofiction, or directors and producers of biopics, have taken the bits and pieces that might reflect some form of ‘truth’ and spun them into fictional adventures, aiming to fill in the gaps in Shakespeare’s life narrative through these products of popular culture, the lack of information offering them even greater freedom in their portrayals, without fearing the potential inaccuracies that might arise in the process. It is precisely ‘the Lost Years’ that actually offer the most ‘material’ for selling Shakespeare as a cultural product.

Craig Pearce’s 2017 TV series *Will*, running for just one season and comprising of ten episodes, brings to the public yet another version of Shakespeare’s ‘Lost Years.’ Pearce fills in the gaps in the Bard’s life narrative by setting his story in a dystopian England and relying on the Catholic Shakespeare theory, juxtaposing the historical time with anachronistic details—more precisely the modern songs that can be heard on the soundtrack, the characters’ costumes, make-up, colourful hair and tattoos, among others. The protagonist is depicted as a young man who, ‘though he [Laurie Davidson] seems almost a bit too pretty to play a penniless playwright, in attitude he seems a close enough approximation of what Shakespeare himself might have been like when arriving in London in the 1580s—bright-eyed and romantic’ (Nevens), and so is the character of Christopher Marlowe, the modern-day equivalent of a rockstar on

the Elizabethan stage, adored by everyone, yet untouchable. The incorporation of anachronistic elements may also be explained through Pearce's previous works. For instance, he is the co-writer of Baz Luhrmann's 1996 *Romeo+Juliet*, *The Great Gatsby* (2013) and *Elvis* (2022), all of which include various anachronisms, from misplaced objects to soundtrack.

A DYSTOPIAN BIOPIC

There are two great categories of biopics: one is the 'classical' Hollywood biopic proposed by George Custen in his foundational work *Bio/Pics: How Hollywood Constructed Public History* (1992), and the second, more recent, is the literary biopic, a concept forwarded by Hila Shachar in *Screening the Author: The Literary Biopic* (2019).

The 'Hollywood template' usually includes openings in the form of title cards or voice-overs that provide the historical context of the film as a manner of asserting the 'veracity' of the story presented; the title cards may as well be replaced by a series of other 'signifiers' of the 'truth,' such as photographs, portraits of historical figures, or even a narration. Biopics also normally start *in medias res*, with an event of great importance in the life of the subject, which has shaped the person's life and/or career, instead of beginning with the subject's birth, emphasising the exact moment when the 'star' is 'born' (Custen 53-55). The life narrative is structured in such a way to shape 'differing discourses about the role of family in the life of a valorized figure' (67), therefore showcasing the element(s) which supported the rise to fame of the subject, be it their inborn talent or the environment the subject was raised in (67-68). Moreover, the portrayal of tensions 'between home and public, between opposing communities, and between definitions of family' (76) is another important feature, offering further insight into the life and career of the subject by allowing associations between certain events and their source.

On the other hand, the literary biopic, focusing on the figure of the author, features a series of different characteristics, including 'its own particular tropes and screen "language"' (Shachar 1-2) and it draws heavily on the heritage film mode (7) in order to shape the identity of the literary figure. Shachar argues that the aforementioned 'Hollywood template's' use is mostly to 'venerate the biographical subject through a mould of "exceptional" and "gigantic" genius in

various social, cultural, familial, and political “trials” (13), therefore she advances the concept of a literary biopic which is supposed to bring to the foreground a sort of Romantic ‘prototype’ of the author in question, who is portrayed as a ‘solitary figure’ (16). In Shachar’s conception, the literary biopic focuses on the image of the ‘genius at work’ (25) aided by the use of repetitive images such as various emblematic writing paraphernalia which are meant to shape the author’s identity (17). In the Introduction to *The Writer on Film: Screening Literary Authorship* (2013), Judith Buchanan mentions those recurrent tropes that play an important role in the modelling of the author’s ‘cultural allure’ (5) and puts forward the very essence of literary biopics: ‘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’ (5).

In short, the literary biopic does not only emphasise the social, familial, cultural contexts in which the author’s status is elevated until he or she reaches fame and fortune, but it also points out the very process of creation, with the aid of recurrent images that symbolise the writer in one way or another.

The first episode of Pearce’s series opens with an image of Will’s hand holding a quill and writing diligently, the sound of scribbling drawing the attention of the viewer to the process of creation, therefore setting the series in the category of the literary biopic. The biographical and historical details are twisted, especially with the introduction of Alice Burbage’s fictional character—similar to *Shakespeare in Love*’s (1998) Viola de Lesseps—who will serve as a love interest for the eponymous character, but also with the decor and costumes which seem out of place in 16th century England, i.e., the playgoers at Burbage’s theatre are sporting extravagant make up and wearing either punk or very colourful outfits. This is evocative of the punk rock culture of the 1970s, as well as reminiscent of the Capitol’s fashion in *The Hunger Games* trilogy, one of the pop culture products that are alluded to in Pearce’s series, which also belongs to the aforementioned category of popular culture.

Although the series takes a few darker twists and turns, combining Will’s story with the historical context of religious persecution and even with the dark reality of poverty and filth, the tropes that Judith Buchanan lists, ‘desk, quill, parchment, inkpot’ (5), are still scattered throughout the episodes: Marlowe struggles to write at his own desk adorned with skulls and other writing

paraphernalia, Will is depicted in his dark inn room (the author's 'mind prison' that the room might be associated with), pacing back and forth with the quill and paper in his hands or writing by candlelight with his 'muse' close by. At the same time, some features of the biopic listed by Custen are also present, i.e., the series portrays Will in a series of various social, cultural, familial and particularly political contexts, which shape his personality and life.

Consequently, taking into account the characteristics displayed by Pearce's TV series, *Will* may be categorised as a dystopian literary biopic, since it portrays the genius at work and the way in which the world around him shapes his personality, as well as the harsh, albeit distorted reality of life, in spite of the historical inaccuracies.

'REMEMBER THY TRUE FAITH, WILL.'

Faith and family play an important role in the shaping of Will's identity and career, especially since his parents are fervent Catholics and push him to keep his faith no matter what, even urging him to risk his life in order to deliver a letter to a relative in London. Consequently, the series relies on the Catholic Shakespeare theory: Will is haunted by his family's teachings and he even works secretly with his cousin, Southwell, in service of the Catholic faith, while also seeking to atone for his sins, despite continually making mistakes. For instance, he has a brief romantic moment with Burbage's daughter, Alice, in which the two of them share a kiss, but he quickly recovers, thinking of his duties first. After his momentary lapse of judgement, Will hears a ghost—most likely his uncle's, who had been executed for his faith—seeking to bring him back to the right path:

Ghost: She is beautiful. But you already have a wife. This will lead to damnation.

Will: I do this for my family.

Ghost: For yourself. God gives us rules, not choices.

Will: Is it such a sin to want to be who I am?

Ghost: You're the son of a glover. Go home and live by your commandments.

Hell is real. And eternal. Remember thy true faith, Will. (Episode 1 - 00:44:00-00:44:37)

It is unclear whether it is solely his faith or perhaps his own feelings for Anne that brings a pang of guilt to the young poet, yet one would be inclined in

favour of the former, since it seems that his whole being revolves around the religious teachings he received. Nevertheless, he does not allow faith to dictate his journey through life. Instead, he focuses on what he wishes, pursuing his dream.

Torn between the life of a playwright climbing the ladder of fame and the life of a married Catholic man, Will decides to put his writing skills to use and help his cousin with a manifesto. Later on, when Marlowe takes Will to a secret gathering where men of great importance partake in what seem to be occult activities, the latter—under the influence of some kind of drug—has visions of ghosts coming to drag him to hell and accusing him of being a Catholic spy. In a fit of paranoia caused by these hallucinations, which are spurred by his constant fear of being discovered, Will sets the Catholic manifesto on fire. Guilt at trampling over his belief and this persistent fear both prevent Will from reconciling the two sides of his life. If in other texts, such as Jude Morgan's *The Secret Life of William Shakespeare* (2012), the Bard is depicted in his attempt at bringing together Shakespeare the man and Shakespeare the artist, Will puts forward another issue, namely the incompatibility between Will the man of faith and Will the artist.

As faith represents one of the main themes of the series, Will is caught between his Catholic cousin and the Protestant Queen's torturer, Richard Topcliffe. The former urges the aspiring playwright to use his skills in the service of God, while the latter wishes to employ him to write a play against Southwell. He oscillates between the two, especially since he and Southwell share the same faith and the same blood, and Topcliffe threatens his loved ones. Eventually, it is only hypocrisy that surfaces from their actions and words—Southwell uses Will's love for Alice against him, attempting to coerce the young poet into doing his bidding; Topcliffe tortures and kills people, claiming that he is enacting God's will, while also engaging in activities of sodomy and even paedophilia. Ultimately, Will writes *Richard III*, basing the eponymous character on Topcliffe, thus intending it as an attack towards him, in an attempt at taking him down:

Richard: And the lead character is evil. [...] What uplifts the play?

Will: Nothing but his death.

Richard: Who will see such a play? [...] This is very new. Very daring.

Will: More than you realise. And that is why I must confide in you. Thou the play purports to offer the life of long-dead King Richard III, it is, in fact, a play concerning the darkest man in our present world—the Queen’s own torturer.

Richard: Richard... Topcliffe? You plan to write a play about the most dangerous man in England?

Will: Yes. And if Topcliffe does anything about it, he will be owning to the fact that he is precisely such an evil, power-hungry murderer. (Episode 8 - 00:41:42-00:42:35)

As such, due to his parents’ and his cousin’s urges to use his talent in the name of God, Will does precisely that, yet he does it in his own way, by putting his experience into plays.

Not knowing about the plot devised by Will and the players, Topcliffe joins the gentry at the first performance of *Richard III*, even letting his peers know that the main character is a representation of himself: ‘Today, you shall see the very portrait of a fine, Protestant hero’ (Episode 10 - 00:35:17-00:35:28). It is hypocritical that Topcliffe calls himself ‘a fine, Protestant hero’ when he tortures, maims and kills people, yet also ironic, as he has no clue what is waiting for him. It may as well be delusion on his part, his childhood trauma making it seem like he is a real hero of the Elizabethan world and of the Protestant faith. Upon seeing the gruesome scenes of murder in the play, Hunsdon is shocked and turns to an equally appalled Topcliffe:

Hunsdon: Modelled on you, you say?

Topcliffe: No, I misspoke. (Episode 10 - 00:39:15-00:39:20)

The play has the desired effect: the crowd jeers and Hunsdon cancels Topcliffe’s appointment with the Queen: ‘Do you think the Queen will appoint a mockery as her most trusted advisor? You can no longer flout England’s laws, Mr. Topcliffe. In fact, you will be lucky if we do not withdraw your commission entirely’ (Episode 10 - 00:46:36-00:46:54). Therefore, *Will* suggests that Shakespeare’s plays do not only have the role to entertain the masses, but they also serve political purposes.

'UPSTART CROWS, BEAUTIFIED WITH OUR FEATHERS, THEY FLOCK TO LONDON TO APE THEIR BETTERS.'

Some of Shakespeare's fellow playwrights, such as Marlowe and Greene, are also portrayed in Pearce's series. For instance, Will's encounter with Robert Greene is depicted, their interactions being short-lived as Greene makes an appearance only in the first two episodes:

Richard: You are a genius, Will Shakespeare.

Greene: A genius of birds, so I hear. Caw! Caw! Master Shakespeare... I hear you're quite the birdsmith.

Will: Don't believe I've had the pleasure. [...] What's your business, Master...?

Greene: Robert Greene, founding member of the University Wits. And my business is to inform you that you have no business imagining that all one needs to become one of us is a few of your provincial stage tricks. [...] A true writer needs an understanding of the classics. A university education.

Will: Then I must write false, which I hold as no great sin, as lies are to a writer what wood is to a carpenter... material. (Episode 1 - 00:32:38-00:33:46)

Although Will has just made his debut on the London stage, Greene seems rather threatened by him, especially when Will's last line elicits laughter from the crowd, angering Greene even further as this 'pretender' has the ability to please the public with his words. Spurred by the onlookers, the two playwrights engage in a battle of wits, an iambic pentameter battle, similar to how musicians nowadays have rap battles, the tavern seemingly turning into an underground meeting spot for writers in yet another reference to popular culture:

Greene: Lord, save us from these troublesome fellows, country bumbling, rude mechanicals.

Upstart crows, beautified with our feathers, they flock to London to ape their betters.

They know no classical allusions, no quotes Ovidian nor Zeno-lluvian.

To wit, their wit is bald-faced counterfeit.

Be it caviar to the commoner, to those of taste, it is mere fodder! (Episode 1 - 00:35:02-00:35:46)

Thus, Greene starts the battle, stealing the scene with his lines that incorporate allusions to Shakespeare's lowly education and his ambition to overcome the University Wits, despite coming from a small village, and even the famous 'upstart crow' attack from his *Groatsworth of Wit*: 'for there is an upstart Crow, beautified with our Feathers, that [...] supposes he is as wel [sic] able to bombast out a blank verse, as the best of you' (Greene). This leaves Will speechless for a moment, struggling to find his words, much to Greene's delight, only to come back with a worthy reply that riles up the audience and increases his adversary's irritation, by bringing up precisely the fact that Greene is fearful of an 'uneducated' newcomer whom he looks down on:

Will: So why take offense that this dull brain doth foolishly wish to entertain?
I make no claim to fame, hold none in disdain.
Why dost thou fear this humble, rustic swain? [...]
Thy hair is wild, but thy wit is tame.
Lame as an old nag, thou rides it for shame!
Thy wit is so stale, worms would not eat it.
It cannot be spoken, only... Excreted! (Episode 1 - 00:36:17-00:37:04)

In the end, Will receives all the ovations of the public, while Greene is further humiliated by having ale poured on his head, thus fuelling his hatred for the cheeky newcomer even more. An interesting point to mention is that, unlike *Upstart Crow's* Greene, who is ridiculous in both costume and conduct, Pearce's version is reminiscent of a villain in a superhero film, specifically the Riddler as portrayed by Jim Carrey in Joel Schumacher's *Batman Forever* (1995), with his red hair and green costume, as well as the maniacal laughter. Therefore, besides featuring a rock and roll soundtrack and characters that are inaccurately depicted from a historical point of view, *Will* is also scattered with allusions to present-day popular culture. Nonetheless, as he does not represent an evil opponent for Will, this portrayal may be an attempt at mocking Greene: besides these few instances, the writer is never heard of again in the series, probably highlighting the fact that, although he could have been a rival to Shakespeare, his fame did not last long in the face of this 'upstart crow.'

Peter Kirwan's essay "You Have No Voice!" Constructing Reputation through Contemporaries in the Shakespeare Biopic' (2014) may also account for Greene's brief appearance in Pearce's series. Kirwan provides examples from two

well-known Shakespearean biopics, i.e., *Shakespeare in Love* (1998) and *Anonymous* (2011), in order to emphasise the fact that Shakespeare's value may be understood in relation to 'those who are Not Shakespeare' (22), namely his fellow playwrights, such as Marlowe, Jonson, Nashe and others. Shakespeare's contemporaries are actually used in fictionalisations of the Bard's life, 'deliberately and systematically to lay the foundations for treatments of Shakespeare as exceptional' and to differentiate between 'Shakespeare' and 'Not Shakespeare' (12).

Consequently, Greene is proven wrong when Will showcases his talents, demonstrating that a University education is not compulsory to succeed in the art of writing or in entertaining the masses. Similarly, Marlowe is also used in Pearce's *Will* in order to construct Shakespeare. Although he is an already established playwright, he is portrayed as struggling with the process of creation and resorting to various unconventional methods in order to enable himself to write. For instance, Marlowe eventually sells his soul to the devil so that he can pen *Doctor Faustus*, as opposed to Will who finds inspiration in everyday life and in the people around him. Thus, Will's ability to create timeless art is emphasised by drawing parallels between the two contemporaries.

'INVENT SOME MORE WORDS?'

Will's talent for writing is further showcased in Pearce's series. At first, Will is not particularly well-received on the London stage, yet James Burbage accepts his *Edward III*, despite not thinking very highly of it and asking Baxter to rewrite it together with Will. In this scene, the first comment on the (future) poet's ability to invent new words is made:

Baxter: 'She doth bedazzle gazers like the sun'? Your schooling was obviously very rustic. 'Bedazzle' is not a word. The word is 'dazzle'! Change it.

Will: 'Bedazzle' sounds better. It fits the rhythm and the meaning's clear. [...]

Baxter: You can't just make up words!

Will: Well, someone must! Otherwise, we'd still be grunting or speaking Latin.

Baxter: Yes, educated people must, not farmboys from Warwickshire. (Episode

1 - 00:26:32-00:27:04)

Here, similarly to Greene, Baxter comments that uneducated people must not come up with inventions, but instead leave that task to the schooled ones. What is more, in spite of his acceptance, Burbage is still not content with the play, asking the two writers to make more changes to it, on which Baxter comments once again: 'I'm sure our young genius can think of something. Invent some more words?' (Episode 1 - 00:28:43-00:28:54).

Nevertheless, despite his initial shortages as a writer, some of his peers, especially Richard Burbage, already repeatedly call Will a 'genius,' and Christopher Marlowe goes as far as recognising his potential as a playwright and saving him from religious persecution, using Baxter as a scapegoat:

Marlowe: I saw greatness. That's why I saved you. Topcliffe was coming for someone, and the lesser of two evils was the lesser of two poets.

Will: The lesser of two poets?

Marlowe: A perfectly valid argument if you're a theatre lover.

Will: A man's life is not a toy. [...]

Marlowe: Greatness comes at a cost. Yours is to endure your guilt. (Episode 2 - 00:22:27-00:24:24)

Therefore, Will is once again described in relation to one of his peers, a 'Not Shakespeare,' as Kirwan puts it. This way, he is enabled to thrive as a writer through the sacrifice of another, lesser playwright.

Kit Marlowe is not the only one who sees Will's talent—James Burbage also notices it, consequently trusting the young man to write a new, good play for him and promising to pay for it:

Burbage: Your play's a penny a dozen. It was mainly Kemp's tricks and jigs that made the crowd happy. You know, he is our greatest asset. And instead of criticising him, you should be grateful. Audiences want to be entertained. And I suspect you have some talent. Write me a new play. If it's good, I'll pay. (Episode 2 - 00:10:22-00:11:15)

In spite of claiming to sense Will's talent, Burbage and his men are dissatisfied with the young playwright's new play, driving him to try his luck with Henslowe, who also rejects it, saying that Burbage is right. Moreover, while others see Will's potential, disappointing as it may be at first, Henslowe downright claims that Will is completely lacking in writing skills: 'Go home to

whatever backwater spawned you. That is your only chance' (Episode 3 - 00:14:19-00:14:45). These scenes serve to highlight the fact that Shakespeare may not have been born a genius, but that he became one. In Pearce's series, he starts off as a seemingly mediocre writer who is constantly learning from the people that surround him and from his own experiences, therefore leading him to become one of the most appreciated playwrights on the London stage.

With no money for his play, Will cannot afford to pay the rent for his room at the inn, so he gets kicked out. As a last resort, he asks his cousin, the Catholic priest, for help. For a moment, it seems that Will has been convinced by the Ghost haunting him to give up his fruitless pursuit of fame and, instead, embrace his faith and do the right thing, but he suddenly gets an idea and returns to the Rose, seeking Alice's aid: 'All things have a code, a pattern whereby the obscure becomes clear. If I can study enough plays, I can crack their code' (Episode 3 - 00:25:21-00:25:30). Therefore, he is confident that by studying other playwrights' writings he could better understand what makes them so entertaining to the public:

Will: I was right. They all share a common pattern! [...] A hero with a quest or a dream. And then an obstruction which the hero must remove to achieve his goal. [...] The hard part is finding the hero and the quest and the setting.

Alice: Steal them. [...] All the writers do it.

Will: Even Marlowe?

Alice: Yes, even Marlowe. (Episode 3 - 00:26:56-00:27:20)

With the girl's help, Will ends up stealing a book from the market, a translation from Spanish that is supposedly a page-turner. Moreover, he also receives ideas and suggestions from Alice and even takes notes of interesting things he hears around him. This way, he writes *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*, which gains him a little praise from Burbage himself, the ovations of the audience, as well as recognition on the streets of London. Despite not being educated enough, Will could find details in other texts and in the events unfolding around him and make use of them in the writing of his masterpieces, dispelling the idealised image of the genius and proving that constant learning is essential in the creation of timeless art.

As aforementioned, the series is scattered with references to pop culture, from the *The Hunger Games* trilogy and *Batman Forever* to the *Star Wars* franchise.

For instance, Will attempts to write a sequel to his *Henry VI* and Alice suggests that he write the ‘prequel’ (Episode 6 - 00:07:57), inventing a new word in the process. While Will looks taken aback by the idea of writing a series of plays in a random order, it is either a reference to the suppositions that the *Henry VI* plays were not written in the order of their historical chronology, or an allusion to the famous *Star Wars* films which appeared in inverse order, the prequel following the original first three parts. Moreover, they come up with ridiculous names such as *Henry VI, Part 2: Return of the Roses* (Episode 6 - 00:05:55) or *Henry VI, Part 1: Rise of the Dauphin Menace* (Episode 6 - 00:18:16), referring to the 1983 *Star Wars: Return of the Jedi* (Episode VI) and the 1999 *Star Wars: The Phantom Menace* (Episode I), respectively.

As previously mentioned, Will manages to write yet another brilliant play, namely *Richard III*, which he uses to undermine Topcliffe, basing the leading character off him:

Will: The audience can't like him. It's Topcliffe.

Alice: No, but they can understand him. If you really want to terrify the audience, make us see ourselves in him.

Will: Make the monster... human. That's it. I have to show how a boy named Richard became Topcliffe. You are a genius, Alice Burbage. (Episode 9 - 00:11:56-00:12:32)

Alice comments on this portrayal, bringing to the foreground one of the roles of Shakespeare's plays: even if they are set in the past, they reflect human issues and they allow the audiences to relate to the characters and situations that are presented.

'YOU MADE A VOW. WE NEED YOU.'

The Dark Lady and the Fair Youth are not present in Pearce's TV series. Instead, the two are merged into a single fictional character, Alice Burbage, with whom Will falls in love and has an adulterous affair. Similar to John Madden's version of the Bard in *Shakespeare in Love*, who falls in love with the fictional Viola de Lesseps, Will finds his inspiration—and even assistance in writing his plays—in Alice. This way, another feature of the literary biopic emerges in Pearce's *Will*,

namely the image of the creative genius torn between socially sanctioned happiness and immoral passion.

Anne Shakespeare is not content with Will's leaving for London in search for a trade, and would much rather prefer him to stay at home and keep his job as a glovemaker. Nonetheless, she takes the children and visits him in London, taking the poet by surprise and almost walking in on him and Alice, if it were not for the landlady announcing their arrival. Although there is no historical evidence of Anne's travel to London, the series includes this imaginary situation perhaps to hint at the theories revolving around their rocky relationship, just like Jude Morgan does in his novel. In spite of being upset with his decision, she seems to be a supportive wife, visiting her husband who is supposedly working hard for their family.

The Shakespeares' visit is mirrored in a scene where Topcliffe himself is visited by his own wife and children, all of them sitting at the table and enjoying a copious meal in his big house, therefore putting forward the image of a father who can provide for his family, unlike Will who has only little money to support his family and a rented room, on which Anne comments: 'This room's so small' (Episode 5 - 00:04:12). Will's reply 'It's big enough for one' (Episode 5 - 00:04:14) might suggest the fact that there is a vast difference in fortune between the writer Will and Topcliffe who is in service of the Queen, hunting Catholics on her behalf. Moreover, a desire to be free from his family might also be what prompts Will to utter these words, since they have not been supportive of his choice of trade. He also felt trapped at home, in Stratford, forced to follow in his father's footsteps and work as a glover while he actually hungered for adventure, for fame and fortune.

Despite finding himself in an awkward position, the young man seems to be more preoccupied with Alice's reaction, who claims that 'Now she [Anne]'s real, and I've vanished' (Episode 5 - 00:11:27), rather than with spending time with his family after having been away from them for so long. Alice's words might have dispelled the illusion created by London, where Will does not belong to anyone and is free to love whomever he chooses, thus reinforcing the image of the romanticised genius that the literary biopic puts forward, as the distance between him and his wife makes Anne feel somewhat surreal. Trying to pacify her, Will replies 'You are more real to me than life itself. They are my children, and Anne is their mother' (Episode 5 - 00:11:30-00:11:36). Consequently, Anne's

position as a wife is diminished, or completely removed, leaving her with just being the mother of Will's children. She is given quite a marginal role in young Shakespeare's life, mirroring, at least partly, the condition of John Madden's Anne Shakespeare who is completely absent from the Bard's life in *Shakespeare in Love*.

Anne decides to stay around for a while and, spurred by the long blonde hairs she finds in her husband's bed, she decorates Will's room with the landlady's help, trying to make the 'squalid room' look more 'homelike' (Episode 5 - 00:20:23) and capable of accommodating her and the children. Perhaps this is Anne's attempt at winning her husband back, knowing very well that he might have sought intimacy in someone else's arms.

Further on, Anne reveals the real reason why she has come to London:

Anne: Your father has run his business into the ground, but he's agreed to retire and hand it over to us. I have plans...

Will: Anne, I cannot make gloves. I will succeed. You must believe in me.

Anne: I cannot believe in a dream! [...] Well, then accept your responsibilities.

Will: I have been accepting my responsibilities since I was eighteen years old!

Anne: You ran off to London.

Will: I send money.

Anne: Not enough. Do you have any idea what my life is like in Stratford? Your parents treat me like an unpaid servant. And if you have so little regard for me, what about your children? [...] You made a vow. We need you. (Episode 5 - 00:38:03-00:38:55)

Their heated conversation may hint at the marital problems that Shakespeare supposedly had, which are not, however, confirmed by biographers. The fact that Will reminds Anne that his responsibilities began when he was just eighteen years old, therefore when he married her because she was with child, may suggest that their life together was not necessarily prompted by their great love, but by necessity, as the child needed a father and Anne's reputation could not be stained, giving birth to a child outside of marriage. Furthermore, it is suggested here that Anne does not have a good relationship with her parents-in-law, similarly to Anne Shakespeare and Mary Arden of *Upstart Crow*, who make snarky, yet funny, remarks to each other, and contrary to Jude Morgan's representation of the family in *The Secret Life of William Shakespeare*, where John Shakespeare in particular seems to care for Anne, or at least to accept her.

Aware that he must put his family first, Will talks to Alice who would not let him leave London, but would also not hold him in her loving embrace anymore. They settle on a ‘marriage of minds and souls’ (Episode 5 - 00:43:49-00:43:53), promising to be equal partners when Alice will run the theatre—a bold ambition for a woman of the age. Alice would marry her suitor and Will would stay in London with his wife and children, neither of which happens in the end, as Anne returns to Stratford and Alice leaves England with Southwell.

Given that the real Shakespeare is considered an elusive person, as biographers have only managed to compile few hard facts about his life, it can be said that Pearce’s Will also eludes his family, especially his wife:

Will: Success may not come in a fortnight, but all things worth doing take time and struggle.

Anne: And yet you do not talk of your struggles with me.

Will: I do not wish to burden you.

Anne: I am here to listen and ease your burdens, as a wife should, if you would share with me. [...] You cannot or you will not? You never tell me what’s inside you.

Will: I cannot speak of what’s inside me. That is why I write.

Anne: But I can’t read, Will. (Episode 6 – 00:26:04-00:27:12)

Will is reluctant to express his worries and concerns verbally, choosing instead to convey his emotions through his writings, yet he shares more of his struggles with Alice than he has ever shared with Anne. It may be that he feels more comfortable with Alice than with his wife, whom he might have been forced to marry. Moreover, the fact that she belongs to the world of the theatre and to the bustle of London makes Alice more desirable to the poet, since she is able to understand him and his trade, as well as share ideas with him. His wife, who cannot even read, is therefore the opposite of what Burbage’s daughter represents and what Will desires.

Having finally reached success and hearing his name acclaimed at the theatre does not bring much joy to the young playwright anymore. While his career is taking off and soaring, his private life is falling apart. He is forced to break things off with Alice for her own sake and for his family, and his relationship with Anne is none the better, for she senses that his heart lies somewhere else. This might be proof that Pearce’s Will cannot reconcile the

private and the public, his career being incompatible with his personal life, in contrast to Jude Morgan's Will Shakespeare, who eventually manages to keep a balance between the two of them.

Later on, it appears that Anne has finally attended the performance of one of Will's plays and, having seen with her own eyes that he can be successful, she decides to take the children and go home:

Anne: No. I leave you free to succeed. You will support your family in Stratford. Send money home, help your father's business. Also, Susanna and Judith must have their education. I will not allow them to end up like their mother. You will always be my husband and the father to our children. But this is your world, not mine. I leave you free to be what it is you wish to be. (Episode 6 – 00:45:38-00:46:13).

Thus, Anne realises that Will's world and her own are all too different, and that the theatre will always come first for him. She also admits that her daughters need an education, despite the poor condition of women who are supposed to merely look pretty and care for their households, perhaps indirectly saying that they should be more like Alice than like herself.

Despite receiving some screen time in Pearce's series, Anne is still not given much of a voice in this portrayal of Shakespeare's 'Lost Years.' She is a marginal character, inferior to the fictional Alice Burbage, who seems to have a greater impact on Will's career and life. Consequently, the 'wife-shaped void' (Greer 4) in Shakespeare's biography remains unfilled in Pearce's representation of the Bard's life.

CONCLUSION

Craig Pearce's *Will* tackles Will Shakespeare's story upon his arrival in London, in search of fame and fortune as an actor and playwright. It approaches multiple aspects of Shakespeare's life, against the backdrop of a dystopian London reminiscent of the punk rock scene of the 1970s and of fictional societies and characters depicted in popular culture films such as *The Hunger Games*, *Batman Forever*, and even the *Star Wars* franchise. Although the series is berated for going overboard with the punk-rock music (Nevins, Saraiya) and the 'psychedelic vibe' (Nevins), part of it is considered 'smart and novel, including the way it gives real

shape to the religious persecution of Elizabethan London, and how it embraces the crude, debauched spirit of the Globe with a mosh pit of cockney theatregoers who turn on the actors with just one ill-conceived performance' (Nevins). Moreover, the use of a modern soundtrack, the fancy, bright costumes of the gentry and even of the masses, the colourful hair and flashy make-up, all bring the events and characters depicted in the series closer to modern-day audiences, making them relatable. After all, Shakespeare was 'not of an age, but for all time' (454, line 43) as Ben Jonson remarked.

Will's relationship with his family, particularly with his wife and children, is briefly portrayed, and the family eventually understands that Will's calling is to write and allow him freedom to do so; his relationship with Christopher Marlowe is also addressed, although Marlowe is depicted as a queer character, engaging in homoerotic activities, as well as occult practices meant to stimulate the process of creation, and he attempts, without success, to seduce Will a couple of times.

Religion is also one of the central themes of the series, driving all the other elements in place. Although not much is known about Shakespeare's faith, *Will* depicts him as a born and raised Catholic who is torn between his duty and his calling, all the while trying to hide his beliefs and protect his loved ones. He is caught in the plots of both Catholics, led by his cousin, Father Southwell, and the Protestants, led by the torturer Richard Topcliffe, yet he manages in the end to do what is right and, using his artistry with words, he puts on a perfect play to show the public who Topcliffe actually is—similarly to the mousetrap in *Hamlet* that has the purpose of catching the murderers red-handed.

In terms of Shakespeare's writing and career, at first, he is a goodish writer, his plays needing some improvements to be fit for the stage. He soon develops into an acclaimed playwright, gaining more and more recognition as his name is on the lips of every inhabitant of London, the public flocking to watch his plays performed by Burbage's men. His predilection for inventing new words is initially briefly mocked at, although later his peers call him a genius and they even start inventing words together, such as Alice's 'prequel.' The plays' lengths or the intricacy of Shakespeare's language are not mentioned at all, unlike in Ben Elton's *Upstart Crow* which constantly parodies their structure and the difficulties they may sometimes cause to the readers.

There is almost no rivalry depicted in Pearce's version of Shakespeare's life, either. The only hint is at the 'quarrel' between Will and Greene, which starts with the Elizabethan version of a modern-day rap battle and ends with Will's outwitting the flamboyant writer. The relationship with Marlowe is not much represented as a rivalry. Instead, it is rather a sort of love-hate relationship, prompted by their different personalities, yet it is from Marlowe that Will receives help, as the former sees the young man's potential and believes in him. Thus, the inclusion of Shakespeare's contemporaries helps shape the Bard's evolution and his reception as an exceptional figure (Kirwan 12).

In short, *Will* takes advantage of the lack of biographical information, providing the public with an 'updated' version of the story of the Bard's rise to fame. Even if the protagonist is romanticised in terms of looks and personality, the story that the TV series brings to the foreground is an enticing one, appealing to the younger generations who seem to prefer a romantic or a thrilling story to a serious one. This way, they are also acquainted with the historical context of Shakespeare's life and plays, with the aim of raising their awareness of the poet. Despite the inaccuracies in the representation of Shakespeare, Pearce's series may succeed in raising the viewer's interest into finding out more about the Bard and his works, as well as of the times and the society in which he lived.

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BIONOTE

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