Shakespeare's Life and Suspicion in between *Anonymous* and *All is True*

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Introduction

The real events in Shakespeare's life, particularly those taking place while he was in London writing his world-renowned plays, have been highly debated. Discourses on what really happened during the Bard's life are interspersed with doubts and suspicion. The most uncertain period, and the one which sparks the most interest, is the so-called "lost years" from 1585 to 1592, a period about which "no documentary evidence has survived" (Holderness 2). The discourses on Shakespeare's "real" life in this period, thus, tend to rely on the only available proof of his existence, that is, "two literary dedications, a few personal comments from his contemporaries, [and] just a handful of anecdotes from the decades following his death" (Wells 110). A tendency can also be observed in research and in popular approaches to try and find hints on Shakespeare's life in his works. However, since these are "in the self-concealing form of drama" (Wells 110), they cannot be trusted as containing incontrovertible truths.

Graham Holderness suggests that it is not the lack of information about Shakespeare's life, but the nature of the information available that disappoints contemporary audiences who want to know the "real" Shakespeare: "the main deficiency in the available data consists in the fact that it is public and not private" (Holderness 2). The documents available on Shakespeare describe his life's public side: "We know when and where Shakespeare was baptized, who his parents and siblings were, whom he married and when, how many children he had and when they died. We know about his success as a writer, and much about his professional career. We know about his property dealings and the contents of his will" (Holderness 2). However, many details escape the historical records and little is known about the playwright's character, internal disposition, and the events and encounters which might have influenced and inspired his writing:

> But we do not know exactly (only approximately) when he was born; where, when or even if he went to school; what he was like as a child; if his family was very poor, or reasonably well off. We do not know if he worked for his father as a young man, or did something else; what happened to him in the "lost years;" how he became an actor and writer; if he stayed in London to keep away from his family in Stratford. We don't know for sure if he had to get married; if he loved his wife; if he ever lived anywhere but Stratford and London; if he had sexual relations with other women, or men; if he was religious, and if so of what persuasion; if he loved his children; how much he cared about his writing. We know when and where he died, but not what he died from. (Holderness 2)

The main issue, which is at the core of this paper, is that "we know nothing for certain about the relationship between his writing and his life" (Holderness 2-3), and it is this information gap that cinema uses to create stories based on suppositions and personal interpretations.

The lack of evidence concerning authorship is one of the reasons why an Anti-Stratfordian trend has developed through the years (see, among others, Bate 1997). The Anti-Stratfordians oppose the Stratfordian position—which maintains that the William Shakespeare from Stratford-upon-Avon is the author of the plays people deem him famous for today—calling into doubt the authorship of such a figure, associating the works instead with other writers of the time such as "Christopher Marlowe, Francis Bacon, and the Earls of Derby, Oxford and Rutland" (Love 195).

This paper aims at showing how cinema has dealt with the suspicion regarding Shakespeare's life in two opposite ways, by eliciting how two films defend alternatively the positions of the Anti-Stratfordians and the Stratfordians. The film *Anonymous* (2011), by Rolland Emmerich, which builds upon doubts concerning the actual genius of Shakespeare and on the paternity of his plays, states that the actual author of the works attributed to William Shakespeare is Edward de Vere, 17th Earl of Oxford. Then, Kenneth Branagh's *All Is True* (2018), conversely states that "all" information associated with William Shakespeare from Stratford-upon-Avon as the author of the plays by William Shakespeare, is true.

The latter position is that the more academically sanctioned, but the former still holds some fascination, particularly at the level of popular culture. Moreover, since many details concerning certain phases and aspects of Shakespeare's life are still missing, a perspective involving suspicion can be adopted when looking at both theses, in order to unveil the rhetorical strategies employed to make both appear acceptable. The Shakespearean case demonstrates the malleable nature of truth discourses, which in recent decades have involved debates about the fabrication of news and the validity of documentary evidence. Both films are the epitomes of an era—the contemporary mediatised one—in which personal convictions are based more on choice than on actual facts, and the individual is left with a sense of undecidability and uncertainty. The aim of this article is to show how popular culture has been able to use suspicion in order to produce two opposite positions. Both are connected with the affirmation of a truth which seems to be ultimately unattainable, in a context in which "the real—as spread across our vast media landscapes—has become a turbulent, exciting, and sometimes silly field of different practices [...] in which the status of the real is continually adapted, redefined, and debated" (Corrigan 14).

As the title indicates, *All Is True* is based on the affirmation of what is real, what is true, and it is apparently a response to doubts that have emerged through the ages concerning the identity

of Shakespeare. In doing so, however, the film delves into reflections on the unattainability of truth, and its intrinsic subjectivity. The film *Anonymous*, on the other hand, is based on a discourse of suspicion, giving voice to suppositions and doubts regarding the traditional depiction of Shakespeare. As the two case studies will show, both positions might be plausible, and "truth" can be invented, so everything and its contrary can be believed, as suspicion is part of our everyday lives. Comparison of the two films serves to "explore the difficult terrain of demarcating the real across the shifting and unstable grounds of uncertain evidence" (Corrigan 14). Popular culture in general, and cinema in particular, can demonstrate to people how they experience suspicion in their lives, how they look at things and other people. Popular culture records people's sentiments; it displays the trends which characterise culture both on a high and on a low level. The films, based on the little evidence at our disposal, "become the centre of a complex shifting between adapting reality and the real, between [...] decreating and recreating evidence of the real" (Corrigan 14).

Shakespeare, particularly at the level of popular culture, is often not a person, an author, but he is configured as a narration, a story, a cultural icon, that people can choose to believe in or not, a "subjugation of the actual to the narrative 'real'" (Cartmell and Polasek 9). I postulate that the unknown about Shakespeare is what makes him fascinating to audiences of all eras, through the undecidability of his personality and the possible identification of any individual with his persona. As Stanley Wells claims, Shakespeare does not have a well-defined personality, he is simultaneously "everything and nothing" (110). The two films taken into consideration are examples of this: through the use of actual evidence along with deductive processes they sustain opposite positions in what can be seen as a cultural trial to assess the truthfulness of the details of William Shakespeare's real life. Cinema becomes the court in which the two films confront one another to establish the "real" story of Shakespeare, and the ground upon which to determine how popular culture manages suspicion. The two films engage in a battle between who uses the most "appropriate arguments, figures of speech, and topics [...] in a particular kind [...] [of] persuasive discourse" (Hudson 1): each one in order to convince the audience of the validity of its own thesis.

Anonymous

The thesis defended by *Anonymous* is that the author of the plays that today go under the name of William Shakespeare is not, indeed, William Shakespeare. The film claims that William Shakespeare was only an actor who covered for the Earl of Oxford, who actually wrote all of Shakespeare's works. As is well-known, "a" William Shakespeare was born in 1564 in Stratford-upon-Avon, he went to London to become an actor and returned to Stratford in 1613 to live there until his death in 1616. Shakespeare is attested as an actor in London at the end of the

sixteenth century (Holderness 2), and the dedications of his poems testify to the presence of a poet William Shakespeare in London in the same years (Holderness 3). Besides this evidence, the only documented phases of his life are the early stages (his birth and marriage) and the last part, after his return to Stratford-upon-Avon (the purchase of a house, the marriage of his daughters, and his death), periods during which he apparently did not write. Other evidence for the existence of "a" William Shakespeare, though sparce, ranges from literary references, commentaries by contemporary writers and acting notices, to tax records, lawsuits to recover debts, and real estate transactions.

Both films, *Anonymous* and *All Is True* make use of this evidence to deliver two contrasting messages. *Anonymous* constructs its strategy of suspicion. The film introduces doubts on the traditional representation of Shakespeare's story, whose reliability is put into question. This strategy based on suspicion also challenges the traditional idea of Shakespeare as a playwright and produces new interpretations. The Anti-Stratfordian position taken by the film is based more on the lack of evidence than on documentary proof, in particular, it is grounded on the fact that no personal letters or literary manuscripts by Shakespeare have been found, and the only testimony of his will is, precisely, his will, in which he makes no reference to his works, and just a few to his fellow actors. More significant opposition to the Stratfordian thesis concerns Shakespeare's low origins. The fact that he did not attend university, that he had "small Latin and less Greek," that he did not travel, and was not raised in a noble environment cannot tally, according to some, with the genius expressed in his works. Further, his creation of new words—including words with Latin or Greek roots—and the use specific legal language, which "a butcher's apprentice" (Ogburn 237) or a "grain-dealer" (Ogburn 240) could not possibly be well acquainted with, are also grounds for suspicion and doubt on his account. How could someone with so little education write about such powerful feelings, in such an intricate way, using all sorts of metre, and on such disparate subjects as Roman and English history, folklore, love, death, battles, kings and much more, being inspired by the techniques of his contemporaries but also, among others, by the *commedia dell'arte*, and by Italian, French, Latin, and Greek drama? The answer given by the Anti-Stratfordians is that he simply did not, that probably someone else, a nobleman or somebody who went to university, did.

In the film *Anonymous*, the writer of Shakespeare's plays is the Earl of Oxford. He knew Greek and Latin, his family had fought in battles such as Agincourt and Bosworth—which appear in Shakespeare's plays—he had "spent three years at Gray's Inn and was a life-member of the two most important Law Committees of Parliament" (Ogburn and Ogburn 293) and, as the film gives the audience to understand, he was in love with Queen Elizabeth 1st. Two of the main supporters of this thesis are Dorothy Ogburn and Charlton Ogburn Sr. who in 1952 published the novel, *This Star of England*. The film reproduces many of the theories put forward by the

Ogburns in their novel and in various articles, including one where they claim that Henry Wriothesley, 3rd Earl of Southampton, traditionally recognised as the "fair youth" of the sonnets,[1] was actually the son of Oxford and the Queen, and that Shakespeare's plays were written by Oxford to memorialise his affair with the Queen and its outcome: "the sonnets reveal poignantly and lucidly the love of De Vere for the Fair Youth, his son" (Ogburn and Ogburn 294). According to the Ogburns, this was an Elizabethan state secret which was hidden behind the words in the plays and poems as well as behind the name William Shakespeare: "the motive behind the anonymity was the suppression of the revelations in his plays and poems; a state secret was involved" (Ogburn and Ogburn 293). According to this thesis, William Shakespeare from Stratford-upon-Avon was just an actor who claimed the authorship of the plays in order to cover for the Earl, and to earn money.

Ogburn begins questioning Shakespeare's identity on the ground of the playwright's thorough knowledge of the law which emerges from the plays. In the article "A Mystery Solved: The True Identity of Shakespeare" Ogburn enquires "how a butcher apprentice, with little or no schooling, certainly none after he was thirteen, could have acquired this fundamental legal knowledge" (Ogburn 237). As Ogburn underlines, "Shakespeare never makes a mistake in the use of legal terms, as a layman trying to use them would be bound to do [...] It is fantastic to attribute such a capacity to the grain dealer of Stratford" (Ogburn 241). This claim denotes a negative and classist perspective on Shakespeare's low origins, his lack of a university education, and of economic means, which all apparently concur to the impossibility for him to have written such witty works. The Ogburns believe that "the true Shakespeare" could not be other than the "scion of a long line of feudal lords, nephew of the poets Surrey and Lord Sheffield, [who] had a background of culture and rank: he was learned, travelled, experienced" (Ogburn and Ogburn 290).

Ogburn addresses the counter argument that Shakespeare "could have learned his law in being sued and in suing his malt customers" (Ogburn 238) by refuting that "the dramatist was obviously a trained lawyer" (237) and that he could not have been the man from Stratford, since he could never have been admitted to the Inns of Court. However, the observation of Shakespeare's *modus operandi* in writing, his tendency to re-write previous works, and to habitually use historical and literary sources as inspiration for his plays, might suggest that his

[1] On this see Holderness: "The depiction of the 'fair friend' with his 'woman's face' clearly suggests the Earl of Southampton. In addition, the opening sequence of sonnets constitutes a persuasive case for a narcissistic young man to marry, and this also perfectly fits Southampton's own biography. Some scholars have argued, for all or part of the sonnet sequence, that they also fit William Herbert, Earl of Pembroke; but there is no link between Shakespeare and Pembroke comparable to the factual connection embodied in those two dedications (the posthumous First Folio is dedicated to the Earls of Pembroke and Montgomery). The sonnet collection was dedicated to a 'Mr W. H.,' a cryptic allusion and source of enormous historical interest, possibly alluding to 'Wriothsely, Henry' (or more naturally, though more speculatively, 'William Herbert')" (Holderness 114).

was a bookish knowledge which included the legal field and other elaborate subjects which were thus simply derived from his access to books available at the time—which he might also have gained thanks to his acquaintances or his patrons.

The Oxfordian position presented by the film *Anonymous* is based on what could be considered two sets of evidence, of which the first is represented by the paucity of information concerning Shakespeare from Stratford-upon-Avon:

> A letter signed in March, 1956, by twenty-one distinguished Americans, including nine lawyers, which was published in the *New York Herald Tribune*, contains the following statement: "There is no evidence, apart from the hoax inserted in the First Folio, seven years after the latter's death, no evidence which would be accepted in a court of law or by a body of informed and unprejudiced scholars to indicate that the Stratford man had any part in the authorship of Shakespeare's plays, poems and sonnets." (Ogburn 240)

The second set consists of circumstantial evidence, and, in particular, the similarities between the characters and events portrayed in Shakespeare's works and the biography of Oxford—as is clearly shown in the film—and by what the Oxfordians consider as allusions hidden in Shakespeare's own works and in works by his contemporaries.

The beginning of the film *Anonymous* sets the tone for the rest by opening on the entrance of an actor (played by Derek Jacobi) on a theatre stage from whence he asserts that "our Shakespeare is a cypher, a ghost," and that the audience—the one visible in the fictional theatre of the film and the real one in the cinema watching the film—will witness a "different *story*" (00:03:22 [My emphasis]). The actor does not say he will be telling the "truth" but that he will tell a "story," thus something reported and possibly fabricated. The actor's claim also might mean that the one he is going to tell is different from the traditional "story" usually associated with Shakespeare, thus considering it as yet another fabricated narration. Another element contributes to render the foundations of the film unsteady from the beginning: the "different story" is told by someone who is evidently an actor playing a role, since his presence is also shown outside of the theatre—he arrives by car to the theatre—and the theatre space is represented in its entirety, with the main stage, as well as the backstage and the theatre audience, from an all-encompassing perspective which, together with the presence of the actor playing an actor, enhance the perception of fictionality of the whole scene. While Jacobi is on stage, the film shows the actor who will be playing Ben Jonson behind the scenes, getting ready to go on stage; this detail hints once again at the fictionality of the scenes that are about to be represented on screen. The idea prompted by the initial scenes is that the film does not start by portraying real life (the first scenes, which frame the whole film, are those portraying Jacobi in contemporary clothes in a car going to the theatre—this, in the film construction, should be the "reality"), but a performance. The performative dimension is clearly perceived along the

narrative one (the actor telling a story) in the representation of what is announced to be the "real" version of the story of Shakespeare.

To support its position, *Anonymous* challenges the conventional way of representing Shakespeare: in the film, William Shakespeare from Stratford-upon-Avon is an illiterate and drunken actor who takes advantage of an agreement—which the Earl of Oxford had initially proposed to Ben Jonson—to stage Oxford's plays under his own name. When Jonson does not agree and Shakespeare sees the success of the anonymous author, he claims paternity for Oxford's plays in exchange for payment.

Following the Ogburns' thesis, the film tries to prove a correspondence between Shakespeare's words and concrete information about Shakespeare's life. In the film, the concept of the power of words is often underlined, as well as the political nuances of Shakespeare's plays. By doing so, the film highlights the correspondence of episodes in the life of the Earl of Oxford and his political endeavours with episodes and references in the plays. Oxford's knowledge of various subjects, which Shakespeare must have had according to the Anti-Stratfordian claims, is shown through a flashback about the moment when Oxford is welcomed in Sir Cecil's house and introduced to tutors who will teach him "French, Greek, cosmography, history, and fencing" (00:24:14). The film here implies that only a person with such erudition could have introduced all those aspects into their plays, and thus that the son of an illiterate "farmer" or "tanner" or "glover" (Holderness 3), a person who had not been to university and was not acquainted with the court, could not claim such knowledge. In the same scene, Oxford emphasises his poetic vein by asking if he will also be assigned a tutor in "composition poetry" to which sir Cecil replies that "poetry is sin" (00:24:47). This seems to be one of the first reasons for the secrecy surrounding Oxford's poetic work which, as the film shows, continues from his younger years, despite Cecil's disapproval. In a significant episode of the film, a spy sent by Cecil to try and steal some of Oxford's works hides behind a curtain when Oxford enters the room, but he is discovered and killed by the Earl. Oxford kills the man as Hamlet kills Polonius in the eponymous play. The thesis of the film is clear, the works of Shakespeare contain hints to his "real" life.

The scene in which Oxford offers his plays to Jonson shows that he is intent on choosing among a vast pile of manuscripts, and some are shown such as *Julius Caesar* and *Macbeth*. Oxford seems to be deciding which of the plays he has already written is more fitting to be performed at that particular moment. The scene insinuates that most of the works by Shakespeare had been written by Oxford, and released with Jonson's help. The fact that the plays had already been written during Oxford's life and then handed in to Jonson also justifies the fact that some of Shakespeare's works appeared after Oxford's death in 1604.

Oxford's desk is then shown covered with various sheets of paper, on which the sketches of the titles of famous Shakespearean plays appear; in the following scene, Oxford is shown practicing the signature "Shake-speare." The latter remark is in line with the theory implying that the name of Shakespeare from Stratford-upon-Avon was actually spelled differently from the name of the playwright, which very often appeared hyphenated (Shake-speare) in print, "a telling sing, for skeptics, of pseudonymous publication" (Shapiro 226). . For what concerns the former: "the only writing of his known to exist are six signatures spelled 'Shaksper' or 'Shakspe,' the scrawls of an illiterate man, with someone apparently holding his hand while he wrote" (Ogburn 241). To underline the illiteracy of the character, the film shows the episode of Shakespeare from Stratford buying a coat of arms (one of the documented parts of Shakespeare's life); in this case the real-life episode is exploited to show the actor's greed—when he blackmails Oxford for more money—and ignorance, when he does not manage to read and pronounce the motto "non sans droict"[2] on the coat itself.

The film suggests that various reasons might have brought Oxford to choose the name Shakespeare or Shake-speare: "as he was Her Majesty's champion spear-shaker on the jousting field, so he shook the spear of his wit, or his sword (words) in her service in the field of literature" (Ogburn and Ogburn 292). In addition, "Edward de Vere's boyhood crest was a Lion Shaking a Spear" and "in 1578, in a Latin oration, Gabriel Harvey addressed the Earl thus: 'Thine eyes flash fire, thy countenance shakes spears'" (Ogburn and Ogburn 292).

Parts of works by Shakespeare are shown in the film to elucidate their connection with Oxford's life. For instance, when *Hamlet* is performed the character of Polonius is dressed like Sir Robert Cecil, in order to underline the political meaning of the plays and give voice to Oxford's hatred for his tutor's son. The story of the impossible love of *Romeo and Juliet* is paralleled in the film with that of Oxford and Queen Elizabeth. Oxford's love for Southampton, on the other hand, is not passional and homoerotic as supposedly suggested in the sonnets, but depends on his strong friendship with the young man, whom he had discovered to be his and the queen's son. Oxford is also shown to have travelled to Europe and been inspired by the *commedia dell'arte,* which is also said to have influenced many of Shakespeare's plays (see, among others, Nicholson and Henke 2016, Marrapodi 2016, and Henke 2002). Robert Cecil is also called "the hunchback" in the film and seems to provide the inspiration for the villainous and ruthless character of Richard III. The film insinuates that the negative portrayal of Richard was provoked by Oxford's hate against the Cecils and his wish to cast Robert Cecil in a bad light in the Queen's and people's eyes. This is an example of the connection the film endeavours to establish between Shakespeare's words and their personal and political meaning in Oxford's life. Among the many examples in the film, Essex's plot to talk to the Queen to gain her favour

[2] Old spelling used in the film.

shows the power of the theatre as a political tool. The mob gathered by Essex to impress the Queen is made up of theatregoers who were watching Shakespeare's (thus Oxford's) *Richard III*. Essex had managed to inflame their hearts with rage against Cecil and convince them to follow him to the Queen's palace. Drama and real life intertwine in Oxford's experience. Drama is a means for him to express his hidden feelings, to recall events from his life, and to influence the political situation.

Oxford's story is again undermined when the film draws to its conclusion, as it goes back to the initial frame with Jacobi telling the story on a stage. The actor concludes saying that Shakespeare's "monument is ever-living, made not of stone but of verse" (*Anonymous*). Again, this gives an air of fictionality to the film the audience has just witnessed. The story which was meant to convince the audience that Shakespeare was not who he is usually thought to be and lived a different life is reduced to a narration, and its protagonist to a monument made of poetry, that is, not a real man. The fictionality of the account is confirmed by the people shown leaving the theatre in which they have been told this "story" about Shakespeare.

In the film, therefore, Shakespeare consists of "ink, blood and power" (*Anonymous* 00:03:28). *Anonymous* shows that the Shakespeare who is famous today is a constructed image, which the film deconstructs, trying to give a different perspective. Here suspicion questions the traditional narration and constructs a parallel version. Ultimately, *Anonymous* presents a "story" about Shakespeare in a context where the truth can hardly be established. In this sense, suspicion and reality live together in the realm of narration. The story can be true not because it is based on evidence but because people decide to believe in the narrator's words.

All Is True

On the other hand, according to Paul Ricoeur, "the hermeneutics of suspicion produces a more authentic world, a new reign of Truth" (33). The film *All Is True*, which is apparently based on assessing what is true, ends up discussing the nature of truth and, like *Anonymous*, concluding that the truth of a story is actually constructed via the teller's and receiver's perceptions of it.

Unlike *Anonymous*, which is based on deductions and circumstantial evidence, *All Is True* relies on documentary evidence such as the entries in official records: "the outline of Shakespeare's life is marked out by a number of recorded 'facts,' such as: birth, marriage, children, acting, publication, theatre management, business dealing, property acquisition and speculation, death" (Holderness 6). The presence and work of Shakespeare in London is also testified to by title pages bearing his signature: "The early published texts of the plays [...] did not carry Shakespeare's name. This was not unusual, since the plays were the property of the

theatre company. But in 1598 the quarto editions of *Richard II* and *Love's Labour's Lost* were the first plays to exhibit his name on the title page, and later play-texts usually bore the authorial name (Holderness 29).[3] The declarations of other contemporary poets and historians, players and playwrights, on Shakespeare can be added to the number of testimonies about his life:

> by the early 1590s, Shakespeare, despite his humble origins and lack of higher education, was recognized as a writer by other professional writers, as well as by the public who came to see his plays [...] We know that by 1592 he was writing for the theatre, and had achieved enough success to arouse jealous resentment among competitors. (Holderness 27)
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> [...]
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> The first source for Shakespeare as actor is also the first source for Shakespeare as writer, namely Robert Greene's *Groatsworth of Wit,* where Shakespeare was attacked for being an "upstart" player turned playwright. (Holderness 56)

In 1598, "Francis Meres in *Palladis Tamia* celebrated Shakespeare both as a poet and a dramatist" (Holderness 29), also associating some plays with his authorial figure. Other documentary sources regard his highly debated signature: "Of his handwriting we have six indisputable signatures, all on legal documents. One is to the deposition in the court proceedings of the Mountjoy marriage; one to the deed of the house he bought in Blackfriars in 1613; one to the mortgage-deed on the same house, executed on the day after the purchase; and one on each of the three sheets of paper containing his will (Holderness 27).

All this information is available about William Shakespeare from Stratford-upon-Avon. His authorship was never questioned during his lifetime, nor for centuries after his death.

The suspicion discourse began in the 19th century (see, among the many authors who wrote about the question Hastings 1959, who responded to the Ogburns' thesis; and more recently, Kathman 2003) and it was mainly based on the idea that a man of such low origins could not be the genius who wrote the famous works. However, all the information that the detractors of the Stratfordian position deem so difficult to find about a man of Shakespeare's time—the British legal system, foreign languages and the influence of foreign theatre, disciplines such as fencing—might have been found in the works of Shakespeare's predecessors and contemporaries. For instance, most of the stories Shakespeare told in his plays were available in English, or French—a language that Shakespeare probably knew. The stories on the Romans were available in North's English translation of Amiot's French translation of the Latin *Lives* by Plutarch, and English history was contained in Holinshed's *Chronicles*. The Ogburns

[3] For the information on Shakespeare's life, I am following Holderness's *Nine Lives of William Shakespeare* (2011), in which he gives an account of the most accredited academic positions on the subject.

themselves claim that "he had an intimate acquaintance with writers of the Italian Renaissance, Ariosto, Castiglione, Bembo, Guazzo, as well as with the earlier Petrarch, Dante, Boccaccio, and, too, with the French D'Aubigné, Ronsard, Du Bartas, Du Bellay" (Ogburn and Ogburn 292). Although this assertion might seem in favour of the Anti-Stratfordian position, it could actually be seen as simply describing the wealth of material Shakespeare had at his disposal—not to mention that he might have come into contact with books and manuscripts via his wealthy patrons. Hence, Shakespeare did not need to travel around Europe to find his stories: his could have been a bookish knowledge, accompanied by his talent for composition and a sensitivity to human emotions.

While *All Is True* presents the last, and most documented, part of the Bard's life, the considerations on Shakespeare's disposition and on his thoughts in the film are guided by suppositions. This atypical biopic retraces the most decisive and debated phases of Shakespeare's life through brief and passing allusions. The presence in the film of very famous Shakespearean actors also demonstrates that reality and truth are often grounded on fictional presuppositions stemming from popular culture. The construction of the narration depends on the audience's capacity to decipher the various levels of meaning, which inevitably depends on the dialogue with previous films as well—for instance, *Anonymous*. In this sense, what is not there, the unsaid, acquires a crucial signifying potential in the construction of the film's message.

All Is True also tries to tackle the tricky question of Shakespeare's vast knowledge in many different fields and his brilliant grasp on human nature. In one film scene, for instance, a young man asks Shakespeare "how [he] knew everything" (00:33:05) and the playwright replies: "every corner of the world [...] every geography of the soul [...] I have imagined [...] from myself, [...] search within, if you're honest with yourself, then whatever you write... *all is true*" (00:33:58 [My emphasis]). The Bard's response seems to be challenging the elitist Anti-Stratfordian thesis that all of Shakespeare's knowledge was only made available by his high social rank.

Many parts of the film refer to events in Shakespeare's life and to his works. No flashback is provided about his life before he returned to Stratford; the events of his life in London, his works and his career as an actor and playwright are only mentioned in dialogues. For instance, the main occupation of Shakespeare in the film is making a garden in honour of his dead son, Hamnet. In a scene, Shakespeare compares the garden to a stage, and then to a play. In this scene he speaks of his fellow actor Burbage, of the difficulty of constructing a play, and of the dream of the theatre. The connection of drama with reality is essential for the Shakespeare of *All Is True,* and the ideas of truth and reality are the main concerns of the film. For instance, as he is speaking to his wife, Shakespeare says: "I once moved an entire forest [...] across the

stage to Dunsinane" (00:09:28). And she replies: "It's a bit different in real life" (00:09:59). When he is asked why he has gone home, he replies: "I've lived so long in imaginary worlds [...] I've lost sight of what is real, what is true" (00:11:22). To this and other claims, Judith, Shakespeare's daughter, replies that "nothing is true" (00:11:34) thus providing a counterargument to the all-encompassing truthfulness postulated by the film.

One scene in particular summarises the ambiguity about Shakespeare and his reality. The idea of truth and pretence is questioned by Shakespeare himself when his daughter tells him that her husband thought he liked him, to which Shakespeare replies: "I'm a good actor" (00:19:24). The claim, which is based on one of the few historically documented facts about Shakespeare's life, his acting career, puts everything he might have said in a different light, thus adding a performative and fictitious perspective to another historically documented event of his life, i.e., his daughter's marriage.

The title of the film itself sets the tone for the ambiguity of it all, since it also refers to the alternative title of *Henry VIII*, the last Shakespearean play performed at the Globe before Shakespeare retired to Stratford-upon-Avon. This title, seemingly indicating that all the audience is going to witness in the film is true, also refers to a theatrical production, and in particular to a fictional depiction of historical facts, as might be the case for the film's depiction of Shakespeare's life. In the film, theatre and performance intertwine with other real-life events of which documentary evidence is available. When treating the trial following John Lane's accusation of slander against Susanna Shakespeare—which did actually take place—the film shows that Shakespeare had intimidated John Lane by speaking to him of the "magnificent and terrifying" (00:26:03) actor who had played Aaron in *Titus Andronicus*, who had been in love with Susanna and was ready to defend her in any possible way. While Shakespeare is talking, an actor performing the speech "To kill a man" from *Titus Andronicus* is shown, as if he were present during the dialogue between Shakespeare and Lane, convincing him to refrain from going to the trial, leading to all charges being dropped. The circumstances surrounding Lane's motivations are unknown, but it is historically accurate to say that all charges were dropped. This proves both the power of theatre to influence reality and Shakespeare's persuasive power. Once again, performance and reality intertwine, and the concept of truth is made malleable. It is even more so when Shakespeare's wife says that she had met that actor and he was "the sweetest chap you'd ever hope to meet" (00:27:35); and Shakespeare replies: "I've never let the truth get in the way of a good story" (00:28:06). These remarks on reality and truth play a role in the construction of the narration of the film, which, although bound to tell the truth (right from the beginning, from its title whose repetition at the end seems to frame the whole story), is actually speculating on the ontology of truth.

Other documented events from Shakespeare's life are accounted for in the film, such as his daughters' marriages, the writing of his will, the licence of his marriage with Anne Hathaway, and the death of his son Hamnet. While the latter is documented in Stratford's Parish register[4]—the film shows the actual document reporting the death of Hamnet Shakespeare in August 1596—the death of Shakespeare's son in the film allows for yet another speculation on truth: the film shows that various truths can exist depending on the narrator of the story. The story Shakespeare is told by the family is that the boy died of the plague, but when Shakespeare examines the register, he observes that only five people were buried that year. He thus soon realises that his son's death could hardly have been caused by the plague, which usually killed a great number of people. The family later confess that Hamnet had drowned. When the truth is finally revealed to Shakespeare, various possibilities arise: the death could have been accidental, or the boy could have committed suicide fearing the return of his father who would have found out he had told him a lie about writing poems. Anne and Judith tell Shakespeare what for them is the truth, that is, the personal truths they have constructed to face the tragic situation. Anne defends the narration she has fabricated as truth bearing, because it was accepted by society: "I say he died of plague, the vicar declared it, God accepted it" (1:22:50). The semantic field of narration is enhanced: she "say[s]," a legal authority "declared" it and the spiritual authority "accepted," somehow validating the story. The truth communicated to the society and validated by its institutions is, for her, valid. Judith has her own narration, too, as she believes that through her words—concerning her brother's relationship with their father—she might have induced her brother to commit suicide, and thus "killed" him. The various versions of the story show the malleability of truth, and its final subjugation to a credible narration. The episode is closed by Shakespeare's vision of Hamnet, who thanks his father for finishing his story. Truth is not the main focus anymore, there are only stories—Hamnet's, Shakespeare's in *Anonymous*, and also in *All Is True* too. The audience, like Shakespeare in the film, can form their own idea of how the story actually went, thus choosing which truth to believe in. Hamnet himself acts out a part of Prospero's speech from *The Tempest*: "we are such stuff/ as dreams are made on/and our little life/ is rounded with a sleep" (4.1.187-9). The speech, which already refers to the dichotomy between what is real and what is not, becomes a metatheatrical indication of the fictionality of the scene, and is charged with further levels of interpretation. Firstly, it refers to the undecidability of Hamnet's story; secondly it refers to the story of Shakespeare which the film is based on. Underlining yet again its fluid nature, by referring to one of Shakespeare's plays, it also obliquely endorses the thesis that Shakespeare from Stratford-upon-Avon is the writer of the plays he is traditionally known for.

[4] The document is still available today, see for instance: "The story behind Sir Kenneth Branagh's Shakespeare biopic All Is True", available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4WDW8vtCB0s. Accessed 03 Mar. 2022.

Shakespeare also says that he knew his son through the poems the boy wrote—which were actually written by his daughter—as people today tend to identify details about Shakespeare's personality in his works. As Graham Holderness claims, the biography—as well as the biopic—is "a narrative that seeks to explain the relationship between writing, and the self who writes" (Holderness 1). The film itself, a biopic, with the reference to the son, dismantles this rhetoric and proves it wrong, arguing that what Shakespeare knew about his son were only presuppositions coming from his reading of what he believed to be his son's words.

In the film, Shakespeare himself tells the audience what his idea of reality is and of its relationship with the fictionality of performance. For him, reality is a "veil of tears" (1:13:16) from which theatre and the "pretty thoughts" (1:13:08) he has written down bring "diversion or respite" (1:13:15). At the same time, the Earl of Southampton tells Shakespeare that he is "the son of Apollo, god of poetry, god of *truth*" (00:39:55, *my emphasis*). When the Earl recalls a poem Shakespeare had dedicated to him, he provocatively accuses the poet of "flattery;" but Shakespeare replies that it was "truth," once again intermixing the plans of reality between his work and his life.

The various levels of reality and truth in the film also intertwine with popular culture and create a feeling of recognition, connection and detachment for the audience. The film plays on the casting of Shakespearean actors in order to create metafilmic innuendos which might arouse the interest of the audience. At the end of the film, for instance, Shakespeare is ill and Susanna asks: "what would you like to do today?" He replies: "I know a bank where the wild thyme blows […]" from *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, then looks at Anne and says, "you probably know the rest" and she continues: "and there the snake […]" (1:33:59). Shakespeare's remark to his wife, who might have known his plays, breaks the fourth wall and reveals his real identity, that of the acclaimed Shakespearean actor and director Kenneth Branagh, who is thus seen talking to Judy Dench, the Shakespearean actress who acted in various productions of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. The affirmation that she "probably knew the rest" is both true in the fictionality of the film—as said by Shakespeare to his wife—and in the real world of the actors Branagh and Dench talking to each other in the scene. The claim that she might know the rest of the lines is thus doubly true: at the level of the film's story and in the real world of the audience. On the other hand, the play on the recognition of the two characters being in fact actors underlines the fictionality of the scene, thus somehow questioning the whole story presented so far. Similarly, the presence of Kenneth Branagh as Shakespeare in the film and his remarks on acting and directing are also representative of the continuous game played with the audience of attribution of the words pronounced alternatively to the actor and the character, in an infinite intertwining of the plans of reality and fiction.

Interestingly enough, famous Shakespearean actors have been cast in *Anonymous,* too, such as Derek Jacobi, Vanessa Redgrave—whose daughter Joely Richardson plays her younger self—and Mark Rylance, to mention only a few. In both films, the Shakespearean actor can be seen as "a site of adaptive encounter [which] embodies the cross-cultural, intertextual and frequently circular exchange of cultural capital" (Blackwell 86). Those actors "serve as a conduit through which the transferable commodity value of 'Shakespeare' may be relayed, adapted and reasserted" (78). The Shakespearean roles endow the actors with a Shakespearean aura, linked to the characters they have impersonated, whose memory lingers in the audience's perception of these performers.

Conclusion

Both films use the same strategies to try and defend their thesis on what the truth is about Shakespeare's story. At the same time, they use Shakespeare's works as if they were bearers of hints to the author's life. Although sustaining that each is portraying the "true" story of Shakespeare, they both present their narratives as fictional endeavours, since they actually elaborate discourses on what the truth is and on the power of words to manipulate it, and on the relationship between reality and theatre. Historical and biographical details, as well as quotations from Shakespeare's plays (shrewdly adapted to the thesis they want to endorse) are used by both films to convince of the validity of their postulates. What can be derived from the two films, however, is that what is real depends on who narrates the story and on what the receiver decides to believe, thereby making that truth transient.

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