



Shakespeare's Eternal Voice: Fictional autobiographies of the Bard¹

by Tomasz Kowalski²

Every attempt to describe Shakespeare's life is inherently linked with a need to face a paradoxical situation referred to in almost all his biographies. On the one hand, biographers keep assuring us that our knowledge of Shakespeare's life is more extensive than that of any other of his contemporary playwrights (one possible exception being Ben Jonson, according to some), but on the other – as pointed out by David Bevington (2010: 2) highlighting the “biographical problem” – “the information we have is disappointingly thin regarding him as a person”. Although archival records which provide confirmation of certain facts from the life of the author of *The Tempest* are invaluable, Katherine Duncan-Jones (2010: xiii) rightly reminds us that “[s]urviving documents don't take us far in answering the kind of questions that Romantic and post-Romantic readers may want to pose – did Shakespeare love his wife? who was the ‘dark lady’? what was his religious position – or his overall vision of the world?”.

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Hence if a parallel can be drawn between biography and a net, as Julian Barnes suggests in *Flaubert's Parrot* (1985: 38), Shakespeare's life should rather be depicted by its reverse definition phrased by a "jocular lexicographer", who called the net "a collection of holes tied together with a string". It is certainly a truism that every biography relies, to a greater or lesser extent, on conjectures, however in the absence of any letters or personal notes which could reveal Shakespeare the private man, in this particular case the net mesh size seems to be enormous. Ironically, the only chance to hear at least an echo of Shakespeare's own voice bears no relation to his personal life. The only authenticated record of his words which is available to us comes from the records of *Belott v. Mountjoy* suit from 1612 and concerns the dowry of the defendant's daughter. The playwright's documented testimony is limited to evasive answers regarding the subject matter and claims that he cannot remember any details of the case (Cf. Nicholl 2008: 289-290).

The gaps in factual data which for researchers present a problematic limitation, have given rise to various popular biofictions which keep re-constructing the writer's life story anew. They make use – more or less liberally – of historical sources as the basis, to create their own visions of Shakespeare equipped with emotions, moods, likes and dislikes, something which documented facts cannot provide (Cf. Lanier 2002: 116). Amid numerous works of this kind, particularly noticeable are those which attempt to restore Shakespeare's voice by assuming the form of fictional autobiographies and becoming an extreme illustration of the essential problem of life writing: "to what extent and how one person might participate in the range of experiences that make up another person's identity and distinguish the other from everybody else" (Schabert 1990: 1).

John Peter Wearing's *The Shakespeare Diaries: a Fictional Autobiography* (2007) is an interesting example of literary ventriloquism which appears to be unique in terms of form, which is precisely named in its title, with the intention of giving the readers an impression of an opportunity to listen to Shakespeare's own voice from the grave. The effect is achieved not only through the use of first-person narration typical of the convention, but also the use of "virtually every known fact about Shakespeare", in order to add credibility to the illusion of direct access to the sphere of the playwright's personal experience. For that reason, entries which make up this literary attempt at conceiving "what Shakespeare might have penned had he indeed kept a diary" (Wearing 2007: 5) are irregular and cover the period from 1582 to the last days of the playwright's life – the last entry is dated on 20 April 1616, that is three days before his death. The choice of the year in which the narration starts is by no means accidental. On the one hand, Shakespeare was eighteen at the time, that is mature enough not to discredit the whole idea of keeping a diary and, on the other, he had just married Anne Hathaway who was pregnant with his baby. Such an opening reflects a wider trend in popular representations of Shakespeare's life of which many "flesh out the depictions of his romantic life", a long-time focus of attention of his broad audience (Cf. Lanier 2002: 117-118).



In the case of Christopher Rush's *Will* (2007), another work dealt with herein, the use of the term "fictional autobiography" might seem less obvious, yet it finds justification in the starting point of the narration. The action – with the exception of the last chapter and the epilogue – takes place during a single day on 25th March 1616, when the playwright on his death bed meets his lawyer, Francis Collins, to set out the final will. While dictating it, Shakespeare recounts his past life in a long monologue from time to time interrupted by the scribe. The use of direct speech in Rush's novel serves the purpose of creating a compelling illusion of direct contact, therefore Shakespeare's "captivating voice" – as the blurb on the book's cover claims – "speaks to us across 400 years" sounding even stronger than in Wearing's writing. The autobiographical intent is clearly declared by the main character himself: "To know exactly what death is we must therefore know precisely what it is taking away. And so it is with me, in this my last performance. I must curl up once more and go to sleep in the womb. I must be born again. I have to go back to the beginning" (Rush 2008: 4). Indeed, the playwright's tale of life for which writing out the will is only a pretext, takes a form resembling a cradle-to-grave biography, although the very idea of creating a full picture of his life is recurrently challenged by using metafictional devices, as discussed in more detail later.

If we look at both autobiographies using a criterion which systematizes fictional representations of Shakespeare's life proposed by David Ellis, that is "the extent to which their authors were willing to ignore or stray from the known facts" (Ellis 2005: 252), they will be equally close to the conservative extreme of the continuum. Deeply rooted in the documented facts, they explore the themes which are commonly being investigated in narratives of this kind and which appear to be crucial for the understanding of Shakespeare the man. In "pursuit of the answers to the unanswerable" (Wearing 2007: 5), both authors aspire to fill in the blanks of his biography and satisfy the curiosity of readers. As a result, their works address almost all subjects of interest to a contemporary mass audience, of which just a few examples were mentioned at the beginning.

A significant difference, however, emerges between the two, as we look at the resulting portraits of the writer, since they belong to two different types of representations found in "Shakespop biographies", to use Douglas Lanier's term. While Wearing's diary is an example of more typical "attempt[s] to preserve Shakespeare's traditional cultural authority while exploring his engagement with popular, everyday experience", Rush's novel fits in the category of works which "lean in the direction of demystification, replacing the idealized Shakespeare with an anti-heroic, coarse or ordinary man of foibles and failings" (Lanier 2002: 116). In the latter case, first-person narration also serves purposes which are much more complex than the mere "suspension of disbelief". It offers a possibility to read "ironically, with a constant awareness of the narrator's bias" (Rozett 2003: 37), which in this case unfolds as a reiterated desire to preserve "the false face of no man, everyman" (Rush 2008: 199) and may imply a game played with the audience by a superconscious character. Wearing's narrative hardly offers a chance for such reading, particularly when viewed from the perspective of a reader not acquainted with the complexities of Shakespeare's



biography. This is true, since the author's primary intention was to create a credible and coherent portrait of the playwright which, without undermining the conviction that he was for all time, depicts him as a man of an age and generates interest in his everyday life. Therefore, Wearing immediately draws on a combination of two motifs which strongly appeal to the imagination: love and ambition.

"Satisfaction. I crave satisfaction" (Wearing 2007: 7) are the first words which Shakespeare writes in his diary. Hence, from the very beginning, Wearing portrays the playwright as a man for whom his current life and the prospects of continuing his father's trade are not enough. Although the strength of passion which brought together William and Anne Hathaway is beyond doubt, the idyll ends abruptly with the news of pregnancy. "So we are married, and I am the coney snapped tight in a snare" (10) – Shakespeare notes in December of 1582 and recollects how he sat on his father's lap as a child, watching the performance of a travelling theatre company and dreaming about joining them, as the life of the actors seemed to him synonymous with freedom. Family life is one of the reasons for young Will's growing frustration and so at the beginning of 1587, sick and tired of Stratford, he decides to seek his fortune in London. His journey, however, turns out to be futile. Having found out that Edward Alleyn and the Lord Admiral's Men have left for a tour through the country, after a few months he goes back to Stratford. Shortly afterwards fate smiles upon him. The Queen's Men who arrive in Stratford are one actor short and so he takes his place despite an argument with his father and Anne.

The decision brings both relief and excitement, however, after a while his longing grows stronger. The family which he tries to go and see from time to time becomes an increasingly important point of reference. Satisfied with the success of one of the parts of *Henry VI*, he writes: "Now I can stand before father, mother, Anne, & all the rest, & know my success hath justified leaving them & coming to London" (65). By no means, however, is he free of doubt. For the first time in his life, the playwright seriously begins to consider whether he has made the right choice at the time of Hamnet's death. The son's picture haunts him many times during his work on *Hamlet* – as Wearing tends to associate the content of Shakespeare's plays with his life experience, which is characteristic of this type of narrative. The suggestion that the plays reflect the writer's personal feelings returns in the notes on the origins of *Othello*, when influenced by Thomas Heywood's *A Woman Killed with Kindness* he ponders on the nature of the relationship with his wife. "I have banished my own Anne" (251), he writes at the time. His marriage might not be the happiest, but there is no hatred in the relationship.

Wearing does not elaborate too much on Shakespeare's love affairs in London, although his Shakespeare is plagued by guilt due to his infidelity. The diary includes entries pertaining to his affair with Emilia Lanier (née Bassano) who admits to maintaining a relationship with Southampton, with whom Shakespeare also has had sexual relations, although he only tends to vaguely allude to this: "What else passed between us may not be set down on paper" (Wearing 2007: 86). Shakespeare does not seem to feel homosexual desire and he describes his intimate encounter with Christopher Marlowe in a rather grotesque way. They are both drunk and Marlowe



takes the playwright by surprise, which the latter subsequently comments in this words "I'll ne'er be drunk again whilst I live, but in honest, civil, godly company" (39). The next time Marlowe wants to spend a night with him, he has "nor strength nor inclination to do it" (54), which seems to indicate that Wearing's Shakespeare "prefers" to be perceived as an adulterer rather than a homosexual.

In fact, in the diary romantic affairs quickly fade and give way to the work on new plays, the circumstances of their staging and publishing and daily experiences of rather down-to-earth nature. Particularly in the initial stage of his career, Shakespeare suffers from lack of money when theatres get closed because of the plague, from cold in his lodgings and a very modest diet based mainly on bread and cheese. With time his situation improves, although he still lives in rather basic conditions – he finds a rat under the bed in his room on Silver Street. He also likes to spend time with his fellow dramatists with whom he regularly drinks. This could be an indication of his friendly and sociable nature, but we should bear in mind that such a conception of Shakespeare the private man is an outcome of the author's conscious choice. As Ernst Honigmann argued in the past, the analysis of early records which could throw a light on Shakespeare's personality resulted in two contradictory, although equally substantiated pictures. He might have been either "convivial, everyone's friend, familiar with the inside of taverns, quick in repartee, witty, a fluent writer, an extrovert", or "fastidious, sometimes unapproachable, sometimes tongue-tied, 'with what I most enjoy contented least', an introvert" (Honigmann 1998: 4). Like many other authors, Wearing disregards the latter option. He also refrains from creating a portrait of a writer deeply engaged in business dealings.

The trajectory of Shakespeare's life once again leads him to his home town which he over time comes to perceive differently, appreciating more than anything else the opportunity to repose: "I am blessed with healthful, peaceful ease, & am not empoisoned by the stench of London" (Wearing 2007: 370). Wearing's narrative fits perfectly the pattern described by Paul Franssen who notes that "Shakespeare's coming to London was often interpreted as a necessary move for his talent to blossom; his retirement to Stratford, as an acknowledgement that true happiness can only be found in the country after all" (Franssen 2016: 77). At the end of his life, he distances himself from the quest for fame and satisfaction which he had already experienced. The prevailing feeling now is contentment. The charms of urban life do not appeal to him anymore and instead he focuses on interpersonal relationships. The last sentence which he records is: "Little there is in this life that surpasseth the company of good friends" (Wearing 2007: 396).

The portrait drawn by Wearing brings to mind compelling associations with the Janssen Monument found in the Holy Trinity Church in Stratford. Hence, despite its coherence, it can seem disappointing, particularly with regard to the late years of the playwrights' life. No matter how probable this construct may be, it evokes reactions similar to those which Schoenbaum had towards the monument mentioned above: "Can this be a true likeness of the Bard? Surely not – this must be some affluent burgher of Stratford, confronting us with his sleek, well-fed, middle-aged prosperity" (Schoenbaum 1970: 6-7).



The image of Shakespeare emerging from the other fictional autobiography is much more varied, as a result of a different strategy adopted by its author. He devotes much more space to religious and political aspects largely disregarded by Wearing, despite mentions of the father's troubles related to not attending church, fears caused by executions held in London and concerns that the next ruler may turn out to be a Catholic, giving rise to new turmoil. Unlike in the diary, the most important theme of the novel is Shakespeare's sexual life, as Rush clearly follows the path set by Anthony Burgess in *Nothing Like the Sun*. Before passing on to details, however, one other important difference between the two fictional autobiographies needs to be highlighted, namely the language in which they are written. Rush's Shakespeare only occasionally uses old forms and resorts to quotes from his own plays, while generally using modern English, whereas Wearing makes use exclusively of words which can be found in dictionaries from Elizabethan and Jacobean times.

While for Wearing the reason for Shakespeare's return to Stratford in the last years of his life is to search for a quiet retirement after his long theatre career, Rush attributes the move to a venereal disease which the playwright (just like Southampton) contracted from Emilia Lanier (née Bassano). The lawyer listening to Shakespeare gets to hear detailed accounts of his sexual intercourses with the "Jewish-Italian whore", as he refers to her, suffice it to say that they "did everything a man and woman could do together" (Rush 2008: 328). The list of the dramatist's London lovers is actually much longer and includes such names as Jacqueline Vautrollier, Elisabeth Daniel or Mary Mountjoy at whose place he resided on Silver Street... "I was up to my ears in them" (404), he adds. The picture would not be complete without mentioning frequent visits to the brothel run by Lucy Negro, "the self-styled Abbess of Clerkenwell", where he enjoyed the company of "Moorish whores", who "spice[d] themselves up for [him]" (195, 301, *resp.*). Paul Franssen accurately observes that "[l]ike Burgess's hero, Rush's Shakespeare prefers dark women", however the preference does not boil down to an erotic fantasy only, but – as he argues – fits in a broader context of "the idea of the Dark Lady as a 'racially other'" (Franssen 2016: 158, 159, *resp.*). In the novel, all Shakespeare's lovers bear some resemblance to the Dark Lady, "all of them are [also] the objects of his boundless desire as well as his intense hatred" (158).

Considering the misogyny of the Shakespeare depicted in Rush's novel, it comes as no a surprise that the relationship with his wife should be much worse than in Wearing's diary. It begins similarly with a passionate feeling combined with adolescent lust satisfied in the meadows around Stratford. But Anne's pregnancy and the ensuing marriage make William aware of the fact that he hardly knows his wife "except as Adam knew Eve and she conceived" (Rush 2008: 149). So just like in Wearing's writing, leaving Stratford is a great relief for Shakespeare. As he runs away from his crowded household at Henley Street he also gets away from the whining of his wife who has been constantly blaming him for neglecting marital and family duties. The bridge spanning the Avon River which he crosses on his way to London becomes "the crossing point between youth and everything else that was left to come" (169).



As Wearing's novel develops on two planes – the initial situation of dictating the will and Shakespeare's recounting his whole life – we find out that Anne's pragmatic approach to life does not change. She appears in her husband's room a few times to urge the conversing men to finalize the last will or to suggest specific solutions. And Shakespeare's aversion towards her does not change either. Separation does not help their marriage and more creaks come in when they learn they won't have more children, a fact which becomes particularly painful after Hamnet's death. In Rush's view, Will and Anne are a couple who are completely incompatible and who have different tempers, aspirations and life attitudes. The understanding between them is made additionally difficult by the fact that Anne, "almost illiterate" on her wedding day, "is still unable or unwilling to read" (343), as mentioned by Shakespeare a few times in different contexts. All that makes Shakespeare conclude: "I slipped into a seventh age of my own, listening to the wife who didn't know who I was" (459). This inference is reflected in the bequest which Shakespeare makes in favour of his wife which will be discussed in detail later as the comment made by the Shakespeare's character in the novel is an excellent example of metafictional devices used by the author.

The dramatist lying on his death bed feels aversion not only to his wife, but to the whole world. The return to Stratford in this case is not the crowning of a successful career but rather an outcome of the growing awareness of his approaching death. One of the reasons for Shakespeare's melancholic mood is certainly the disease, although the overall disappointment and exhaustion seem to prevail. He sent all his life energy on writing, consumed by the work in which he sought consolation, and when he could not work anymore there was nothing else left. "I'd traded a family in Stratford for success in London, and had become father to a family of shadows, sons and daughters of the stage given life for a brief hour or two on the wooden boards. Walking illusions" (317), the playwright recapitulates. When he was leaving his hometown he left behind not only the family life which he perceived as oppressive, but also the magic place which fostered his imagination during his childhood and the setting of his first erotic experiences. London, the city he was heading for so enthusiastically, for some time made his artistic fulfilment possible, stimulated him intellectually and offered opportunities for numerous love affairs. In the end, however, the dramatist discovered the true nature of the capital: "I loathed London. She made me and unmade me. She was the real Dark Lady. She was a Muse – of hellfire" (413).

The time spent in London, the executions held in Tyburn, and the heads of decapitated traitors displayed on the London Bridge reconfirmed Shakespeare's conviction that "silence keeps man alive" (40). He learned about it for the first time while listening about pyres burning during the Bloody Mary's rule but an equally strong influence came from his father's Catholicism, as Rush presents the playwright's religious background. It was his father who used Polonius' words (or maybe it was Polonius who later spoke in his father's words? – the novel includes many more intertextual games of this kind) to preach to young William: "Give every man thy ear but few thy voice" (104), showing him his hidden copy of spiritual testament, received from Edmund Campion in 1580 in the presence of his son who accompanied him on



that occasion. This scene brings to mind the famous sentence written by Stephen Greenblatt in *Will in the World*: "Let us imagine the two of them sitting together then, the sixteen-year-old fledgling poet and actor and the forty-year-old Jesuit" (Greenblatt 2004: 108). Remembering the controversies which arose around it, we can get an impression that Rush not only refers to the book, but is also amused by its reception. In his novel, the playwright meets *Campion* once again, during his stay in Lancashire, where he works in Alexander Hoghton's household. Although the author seems to follow the path of the so called "Shakeshafte theory", his Shakespeare remains so effectively silent that it is difficult to say anything about his personal religious beliefs. He distances himself from all martyrs whom he calls "suicidal freaks, holy soldiers" (Rush 2008: 107), but he also bids his lawyer not to mention the church in his will. And on another occasion he recalls that in London he attended only funerals and baptisms. Gary Taylor once wrote: "I can't prove Shakespeare was a Catholic. But then, if he were one, he would have strong incentives to prevent *anyone* from being able to prove it" (Taylor 1994: 298). One could probably use these particular words to epitomise the attitude of Rush's Shakespeare in the novel, were it not for the fact that – considering the author's extensive use of secondary sources – such a depiction may be based exactly on them.

In fact, it is an element of a game in which the author involves readers aware of the intricacies of Shakespeare's biography. As mentioned before, Rush's novel can be read not only as a narrative account of events, but also ironically, bearing in mind the fact that all that the Shakespeare created by Rush has to say about his life is only an outcome of recycling of the available evidence, fictional supplementation, a polemic with the interpretation tradition or an expression of our helplessness in the absence of information. The dramatist's character has been equipped by the author with superconsciousness – in other words Shakespeare depicted by Rush knows very well what has been written about himself after he died.

And so when Collins wants to make sure that *Hamlet's* author does not want a mass after his death, he hears in reply a question: "Would you have me die a Papist?" (Rush 2008: 14), which is an obvious reference to Richard Davies' famous note. Actually, at the end of the novel Shakespeare's addresses the subject once again: "And so, Francis, if I were to name a priest for you to call, you'd know what I really thought, wouldn't you? And why should you – when I may not even know for sure myself?" (475). Similarly, the bequest in favour of William's wife made in his will, namely the "second best bed" has given rise to controversies for a long time. In Rush's novel Shakespeare explains to his lawyer: "Take it as an apology, then, of sorts, for never having shared it with her for much of our marital time. [...] Or take it as a dead man's hint that I found a better bed than hers elsewhere [...]" (470). Hence, he suggests different possibilities without giving an explicit answer.

Yet Shakespeare's ghost who speaks to us directly in the novel's epilogue reaffirms our intuition that no definitive answers will be offered: „If you really want an image of me as I was, look in the mirror and there you'll see me [...]" (485). The statement reflects a general principle to which the playwright's fictional representations are subordinated, and which can be understood – as advocated by



Douglas Lanier – when due attention is paid to “those collective ideals, desires, and anxieties to which Shakespeare’s life and his formidable poetic power have been made to give voice. For a portrait of Shakespeare to be compelling and relevant to the mass audience – in a word, popular – it must above all address those shared fantasies” (Lanier 2002: 141-142).

The Shakespeare who speaks to us from the pages of Wearing’s diary is a restless young man who leaves a provincial town to seek fortune in a metropolis, where he develops his talent which, in combination with hard work, brings him fame, respect and money, although at the expense of a happy family life. When the playwright realizes that as his theatre career proceeds, it gives him less and less happiness, he gives up his shares, withdraws from the theatre and returns to his quiet life in Stratford, where he enjoys his well-deserved rest. Hence, his story is a tale of success to be expected of anyone so keen to climb the social ladder. Rush’s novel challenges this optimistic message showing the dramatist as a man who at the end of his life struggles with a feeling of utter failure. He can hardly pride himself in his deeds and his decisions often lead him astray. This is obviously only a literary construct, nevertheless, each of his portraits is in fact our own self-portrait: “[h]e is ourselves, ordinary suffering humanity, fired by moderate ambitions, concerned with money, the victim of desire, all to mortal... We are all Will” (Burgess 1970: 261).

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