

**IN OUR OWN IMAGE: FICTIONAL REPRESENTATIONS
OF WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE**

David Livingstone
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Livingstone's book is an apt and enjoyable summary of the fictional accounts of Shakespeare's life from the 20th and 21st centuries. Partly due to recent popular cultural works such as the British sitcom *Upstart Crow* (2016-) and the award-winning *Shakespeare in Love* (1998), the topic has received the attention of critics in recent decades (Buffey 2020; Lanier 2007; O'Sullivan 2005; Sawyer 2016), but book-length discussions are still rather rare (Franssen 2016). Livingstone's *In Our Own Image* fills a few gaps, but still leaves plenty of room for investigation.

The book more or less follows a chronological order, insofar as it mentions a few 19th century texts in its Introduction, starts its analytical sections with early 20th century texts in Chapter 1, and gets to Robert Nye's *Mrs. Shakespeare: The Complete Works* (1993) and *The Late Mr. Shakespeare* (1998) in Chapter 5. Chapters 6 and 7 are to some extent exceptions, as they give an overview of the popular cultural and filmic treatments of the topic. The volume is relatively chatty and anecdotal when analyzing its works, in a way similar to O'Sullivan's Introduction (2005) in his anthology of fictional treatments of Shakespeare's life, which admittedly served as an inspiration for Livingstone (17). Nevertheless, *In Our Own Image* is based on a number of interesting and far-reaching assumptions, and although these ideas are not entirely demonstrated and are not always thoroughly analyzed, they are explored to an extent which gives the reader plenty of food for thought.

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First, already the initial pages of the book reveal that, according to Livingstone, many fictional biographies of Shakespeare should be primarily read as autobiographies of the historian-writer-biographers (for the sake of simplicity hereafter referred to as “biographers”) themselves. A similar assumption can be traced back to post-structuralist and feminist theories (Helms 1995: 339), but Livingstone takes this concept from Robert Nye’s novel *The Late Mr. Shakespeare* and critics such as Sonya Freeman Loftis (9-10). Loftis observes that both George Bernard Shaw and Tom Stoppard continuously “create a history that conflates his own biography to that of Shakespeare”, resulting in “a fusion of personalities” (2011: 115-116). Perhaps to avoid falling into the trap of intentional fallacy, Livingstone imagines this fusion in most cases as a half-conscious, or mostly unintentional, phenomenon, as he tries to find psychological or psychoanalytical connections between the biographer and Shakespeare. This can involve rivalry and a love-hate relationship with the “literary father”, as in the case of Shaw (35) and perhaps, to some extent, Edward Bond’s political morality play *Bingo* ([1974]; 146).

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Another psychological parallelism may be “Shakespeare suffering from an inferiority complex, a chip on his shoulder, usually in relation to Marlowe” (42), which is similar to how a biographer such as Shaw or Stoppard supposedly feels in the fictional presence of the Bard (36). Such an assumption may indicate that Shakespeare potentially borrowed ideas or lines from the University Wits, especially Christopher Marlowe (see also Sawyer 2016). This viewpoint leads to the question of Shakespeare’s questionable authorship and his potential plagiarisms, which is presented in *Shakespeare in Love*, a film which itself became the object of accusations as Marc Norman and Tom Stoppard’s screenplay is supposedly “heavily influenced if not plagiarized from Shaw’s *The Dark Lady of the Sonnets* [1910]” (249; see also Loftis 2011) and the novel *No Bed for Bacon* (1941) by Caryl Brahms and S. J. Simon. This leads to further thoughts on the collaborative background of Shakespeare’s plays: “how the canonical text came into being, including the role of actors, colleagues, collaborators, the authors of the Quarto editions and eventually the editors of the First Folio” (274).

In other cases, Livingstone detects a somewhat postmodernist, playful, and self-conscious attitude behind the “autobiographical” traits of the works that he analyzes. Robert Nye’s *The Late Mr. Shakespeare* and Anthony Burgess’s *Nothing like the Sun* (1964) provide good examples here. As Livingstone observes, “at times [...] we are not sure who is speaking: Shakespeare, [the persona of] Burgess, [or] both” (103).

The second thoughtful assumption is that fictional biographies freely disregard the boundaries between historical sources, quotes from Shakespeare, and their own

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fictionalizing strategies. As Livingstone says, “practically all of the works here make use of lines within the narratives from the plays and poems either assigning the quotes to Shakespeare himself or to one of his fellow characters” (311). In a way similar to Robert Zemeckis’s film *Back to the Future* (1985), whereby Marty McFly plays and “gives” the song “Johnny B. Goode” (1958) to Chuck Berry, time-traveller characters repeatedly—for example, in the British comedy film *Time Flies* (1944)—provide his own famous lines for Shakespeare (236-238; see also Lanier 2007: 96). The language of these works is often heterogenic, as it can alternate between a quasi-Elizabethan language, a humorous and parodying approach to such a language variation, and a complete disregard of diachronic linguistics, adding contemporary vocabulary to the linguistic repertoire (313). Furthermore, writers such as Burgess and Nye also incorporate the style of previous fictional Shakespearean biographies and contain allusions to such works. For example, they refer to James Joyce’s *Ulysses* (1922), which itself presents a satirical and parodying attitude to Shakespearean plays, criticism and biographies (81; see also Benstock 1975: 396). Hence, multiple layers of intertextuality, pastiche, and parody are detected in these texts in a palimpsest-like manner.

The third important assumption of the book is that many of the analyzed works mix “high-brow and low-brow”, insofar as the biographer “ventures into genre literature (detective, thriller, suspense, science fiction and horror novels)” (312). Accordingly, Livingstone boldly treats texts of high culture, literary pieces of popular culture, as well as entertaining television and cinematic films, on the same level. Chapter 6 focuses on written science fictional, fantastic, and erotic texts or thrillers which portray Shakespeare “as an Elizabethan super hero, detective, spy, ladies’ man or general righter of wrongs” (17). Chapter 7 analyzes comics and films, both on the big and small screen. What is more, Livingstone aptly cross-references popular treatments such as *Shakespeare in Love*, the series *Dr Who* (1963-), and the *Blackadder* franchise throughout the book, even in those chapters which mostly discuss high cultural works. This seems to confirm Douglas Lanier’s apt description of the complex love-hate relationship between popular culture and the classics, especially Shakespeare, whose persona “comes to signify what modern popular culture defines itself against, becoming in effect popular culture’s symbolic ‘Other’. And, as is often the case with the cultural ‘Other’, in many cases Shakespeare also becomes an object of ambivalent desire for popular culture—a source of still potent cultural capital and thus of legitimation” (2007: 95).

Livingstone detects feminist traits in some of the fictional biographies and refers to Virginia Woolf’s famous parable on Shakespeare’s imagined sister Judith in “A Room of One’s Own” (1929), but never really delves deep into feminist theories. In general, relatively complex analyses are rare; instead, review-like summaries

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saturate the book, occasionally peppered with informal and personal opinions. For example, Livingstone argues about a passage quoted from Nye's *The Late Mr. Shakespeare* that "I am, to be honest, not really sure what this is supposed to mean, but it certainly sounds profound, or perhaps tells us, once again, something about Nye's personal sexual preferences" (171). Charles Williams's *A Myth of Shakespeare* (1928) is described as "not good theatre, although it does have its moments" (77). Thus, unfortunately, the reader's overall impression is that subjective sentiments and passionate—or in some cases painful—reading experiences serve as the somewhat rickety foundation, and the theoretical observations and analytical sections only become icing on the cake. This would be more forgivable if the book worked better as an encyclopedic volume whereby the reader can quickly find rudimentary and intriguing information on a particular fictional biography. For this, the addition of a detailed index would be indispensable, as without this tool using the volume becomes relatively inconvenient. Luckily, the illustrations, which usually contain book covers of the analyzed pieces, help to a certain extent.

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For the interests of a more theoretically involved reader, a similar book-length study (Franssen 2016) or Lanier's short but complex overview (2007) probably serve better. Nevertheless, Livingstone's volume raises relevant contemporary questions, and outlines answers to a certain degree in an entertaining manner, about (auto-)biographies, high and popular literature, as well as filmic treatments of Shakespeare's life.

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