

# ‘the dreamscape of nostalgia’: Shakespearean Biography: Too Much Information (but not about Shakespeare)

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## *Abstract*

Shakespearean biography has a long and colourful history, with a new edition of the life of the world’s greatest ever poet published at least once a year. Yet, the records are hardly full with details of his life and are indeed almost non-existent with regard to his *writing* life. If this is the case, then what are these various biographies made up of? What are they constituted by given that, it seems, their basic foundations are absent? This essay considers these questions in the context of the most important intervention in the field of Shakespearean biography in recent years, Brian Cummings’ essay ‘Shakespeare, Biography and Anti-Biography’. The conclusion it reaches is that the entire sub-genre can be regarded as ‘the dreamscape of nostalgia’, constituted by works of fictional narcissism.

*Keywords:* Biography, Everything, Narcissism, Nostalgia, Nothing

## 1. *Introduction*

In what is perhaps the most significant intervention in recent years in the scholarly study of Shakespearean biography, in his Folger Institute Shakespeare Birthday Lecture, 2014, entitled ‘Shakespeare, Biography and Anti-Biography’, Brian Cummings ponders at length the relation of biography to literature. His desire is, he says, through the consideration of the sub-genre of Shakespearean biography, to ‘have something to say about the art of biography ... and certainly about the art of literary biography in particular’ (1).<sup>1</sup> He articulates this desire in broadly philosophical terms:

<sup>1</sup> Page numbers as given in this article refer to the printed version of Cummings’ lecture that was readable at the address given in the ‘Works Cited’ section by the time the link was accessed (September 2014), and that was later substituted by an audio version.



It is in the desire to memorialise life through writing, and the simultaneous apprehension that memory is withdrawing from us all the time, such that memory is synonymous with loss, that the oblivion that surrounds Shakespeare comes to have its most painful meaning. We mourn for Shakespeare even as we are surrounded by him; we cannot get rid of him, and yet we have forgotten almost everything about him. (2)

Cummings goes on to say, albeit in ambiguous terms, that this desire to remember Shakespeare can lead to a reliance on ‘what psychologists call “false memory.” We remember things not the way they were, but the way we want them to have been’ (2). He proceeds to demonstrate his point by suggesting that certain ‘monuments’ commemorating Shakespeare embody this will to false memory, such as the Birthplace in Stratford-upon-Avon and the Globe Theatre in London. He considers also as his third monument the very building in which his talk is taking place, the Folger Shakespeare Library in Washington D.C. His conclusion regarding this particular monument is that, of all three it gives us the greatest access to Shakespeare as it ‘lays its foundations on the First Folio’ (3). This monument is, he feels, for this reason the most significant as the ‘First Folio outgrew its author. It is the First Folio that now best represents the life’ (4). As such, he continues,

the life of Shakespeare is posthumous. As an act of homage and mourning, his friends turned him into a book, and the book still lives among us. My argument, in brief, is that we respect this fragmentariness of historical memory, and also return to the literary, return to the book itself. (4)

Cummings makes two multi-dimensional and critically important points in this opening of his talk, both of which I will argue define the constraints of Shakespearean biography as a sub-genre today. The first is that captured in this ‘return to the book’ as he calls it, this ‘retreat’ to the First Folio and the ways in which biographers now regard this version of the collected works as the ‘best [way to] represent the life’ of Shakespeare. I will argue that confusion between the literary output and the factual life of Shakespeare is not quite, as Cummings puts it, founded in this will to ‘false memory’, but rather in a conscious will to mythologise. The difference between the two is crucial as, in this mythologising process, we witness the ‘nothing’ that is Shakespeare’s recorded writing life being constituted by the ‘everything’ that is contained in his plays and poems. I shall return to this point. The second linked argument of Cummings lies in this idea of the literariness of the form and the ways in which this allows biographers to ‘remember things not the way they were, but the way [they] want them to have been’. This, I will argue, gives rise not only to a will to mythologise, but also to a trend in which we see the substitution of the biographer him/herself for Shakespeare, in the process producing a defining generic characteristic of

this sub-genre: a tendency to narcissism. In this process, we see the 'nothing' of Shakespeare's recorded writing life filled with the 'everything' of the respective biographer's narcissistic urges. I will argue that these two points are implicit in the perceptions of Cummings and enable us to say something valid about the sub-genre of Shakespearean biography as a whole. It is interesting to note that, in his formulation of the various arguments in his talk, Cummings finds himself dismissing much biographical writing itself and instead considering what novelists have said regarding Shakespeare's life. It is to this fiction that I will first turn my attention.

## 2. *Everything and Nothing*

In his short 2009 article, entitled 'What Was He Really Like', which ponders the true nature of Shakespeare as an artist, Stanley Wells quotes Keats' famous analysis of the character of the poet: 'It is not itself – it has no self – it is *everything and nothing* – It has no character – ... A poet is the most unpoetical of any thing in existence, because he has no identity – he is continually in for – and filling some other Body ...' (109; my emphasis). Wells goes on to say that if 'Keats is right in his assessment of what makes a poet, encapsulated in his famous phrase "negative capability", we might well throw up our hands in despair before the task of trying to discover what Shakespeare was really like' (109). Wells plays with the idea of there being little or no point pursuing any kind of biography of Shakespeare given that there is essentially no information to go on, that there is 'nothing' there. But then, like so many biographers of Shakespeare who suggest the same, just one page later he puts that 'nothing' to one side and imagines Shakespeare growing up:

As a boy he howled and wept, smiled and laughed. He played games with his siblings and was irritated when they could not keep time in their recorder playing. He walked to and from school with his satchel on his back, he learned to read and write, to swim and to ride a horse, and he struggled with Latin grammar. He went regularly to church, and thought, as any intelligent boy would, about what he heard there. He ate and drank, belched and farted, urinated and defecated (you can substitute the Anglo-Saxon terms if you wish). As adolescence came on he began to experience erections and to feel desire. He masturbated and, earlier than most of his contemporaries, copulated. He suffered from headaches and toothache ... (110)

And on he goes, taking us right through in fact to Shakespeare's death. Wells provides a lot of information here about this Warwickshire lad, and much of it is very personal; but of course, as we know, it is all made up. None of what Wells says is recorded and none of it can be verified. As the passage progresses we could indeed wish that Wells would resist his imaginative urge as we feel that perhaps there is, as the modern everyday parlance would have it, 'too much information'. Perhaps; but none of this information is

about Shakespeare. Rather, it could be surmised that this ‘information’ is about something else and informs us about the very practice of producing Shakespearean biography itself.

What Wells has produced here and the motivation for its production is, I would suggest, a microcosm of the entire sub-genre of Shakespearean biography. The vast majority of biographers of Shakespeare would also admit that there is ‘nothing’ (or almost nothing) there – and then proceed, normally over hundreds and hundreds of pages to articulate the fact that there is in fact ‘everything’ needed for a comprehensive biography of Shakespeare. Anthony Holden provides us with an excellent example in the opening sentences to his 1999 biography of 366 pages, entitled *William Shakespeare: His Life and Work*:

There are no great biographies of Shakespeare, according to the American scholar Harold Bloom, “not because we do not know enough, but because there is not enough to know”. Such resonant truths have never deterred well-meaning bardolaters, both amateur and professional, from climbing on each other’s shoulders ... (1)

Or perhaps we need look no further than Stephen Greenblatt’s famous opening to his own 2004 biography, *Will in the World: How Shakespeare became Shakespeare*, ‘Let us imagine ...’ (23), as he begins his 430 page journey. This is indeed a most strange phenomenon, not least because the problems involved in attempting to write a biography of Shakespeare have been well-rehearsed over the years. There unquestionably are ‘profound lacunae in the biography of western civilisation’s greatest writer ... [which] produce enormous difficulties when attempting a coherent narrative tracing the life and work of this individual’ (Leahy 2010, 116). Some of these difficulties, such as the fact that we have no records for Shakespeare at all between his baptism and his marriage some eighteen years later should certainly, I would suggest, give Wells pause for thought; we have nothing on record for the period he imagines above. There are other profound difficulties when considering a biography of Shakespeare and none of the records which do exist help us to understand his life as a writer. There are no records of his receiving payment for writing, no manuscripts, diaries or letters; indeed, even trying to get some idea of the correct chronology of the plays is doomed to failure. As Diana Price has shown, when we examine the records of Shakespeare’s life, we generally find him deeply involved in business dealings and not in literary pursuits. Thus, the very first record in existence of ‘Willelmus Shackspere’ in London in 1592, has him lending £7 to John Clayton (Price 2001, 15). In 1597, he is listed as ‘owing taxes’ in Shoreditch, London, and as purchasing ‘New Place, a big house, for at least £60 in Stratford-upon-Avon’ (15-16). In 1598, he is ‘listed as owing taxes ... in Bishopsgate’, and in Stratford is ‘cited for hoarding grain during a famine’ (16). In the same year he is recorded ‘as a tax defaulter’ and as receiving ‘ten pence for selling a load of stone’ (16).

In 1599, he becomes a shareholder in the Globe theatre and in 1600 'takes action to recover his 1592 loan to John Clayton' (16). In 1602, he buys land and a cottage; in 1604 he 'sells malt to Philip Rogers' and lends him two shillings. He then 'sues Rogers to recover the amount owing plus damages' (17). In 1605 he 'invests £440 in tithes' (17) and in 1608 he 'sues a man named John Addenbrooke for a debt of £6 plus damages' (18). In 1614 he 'is listed as a landowner in Stratford, and his name appears in a series of documents concerning the proposed pasture enclosures in nearby Welcombe' (19). Finally, in 1616, 'Lawyer Francis Collins draws up and witnesses Shakspeare's last will, which makes detailed provisions for the distribution of real estate, clothes, silver, and other assets. Shakspeare's wife is left "the second best bed"' (19). These are just some of the business dealings on record for Shakespeare, where we see him speculating, buying and selling property; constantly busy as a money-lender; willing to go to court to claim any money lent that was not repaid on time and with interest; evading tax; hoarding grain and enclosing land. We do not find him, in the records at least, writing plays.

The problems in composing a biography of Shakespeare the writer are thus legend and some of the most important Shakespearean scholars have acknowledged this. Samuel Schoenbaum raised the matter nearly 50 years ago: 'Perhaps we should despair of ever bridging the vertiginous expanse between the sublimity of the subject and the mundane inconsequence of the documentary record. What would we not give for a single personal letter, one page of diary!' (1991, 568). E.K. Chambers likewise avoided any attempt at a life of Shakespeare, as many years before him did the great Edmond Malone. Despite this acknowledgement by some of the most influential scholars, biographies of Shakespeare have always been popular and continue to appear regularly; indeed, nowadays at least one is published every year. In the last fifteen or so years we have seen such books by Michael Wood (2003), Stephen Greenblatt (2004), Peter Ackroyd (2005), James Shapiro (2005), Bill Bryson (2007), Charles Nicholl (2007), René Weis (2007), Jonathan Bate (2008), William Baker (2009), James Shapiro (2010), Catherine Alexander (2011), Lois Potter (2012) and many more. This list contains, broadly speaking, scholarly biographies; there are also any number of children's editions, exhibition editions, fictionalised versions and so on. Indeed, the field is so densely populated that leading Shakespearean scholar David Bevington felt moved enough to produce a history of the form in his book, *Shakespeare and Biography* (2010). No doubt, the year 2016, the 400<sup>th</sup> year since Shakespeare's death will see this output reach some kind of peak. One would assume, given the fact that the basis for any coherent narrative of Shakespeare's writing life (such as records) does not to any extent exist, that the production of biographies of this kind would be next to impossible. Such seems not to be the case, however, and one ponders why this should be so. Perhaps the consideration of the dichotomy of what Keats calls the 'everything' and the

‘nothing’, so common when authors and scholars consider Shakespeare, will enable us to understand this phenomenon more clearly.

In *Bingo* (1974), his play about the last days of Shakespeare, Edward Bond depicts a disillusioned and unhappy husband and father, a man so dissatisfied with his life achievements that he finally kills himself. It is a grim play and the portrayal of Shakespeare is so unremittingly unsympathetic and unflattering, that we can perhaps understand why this work by one of the most highly respected playwrights of the last 50 years or so is rarely performed and discussed. It is an original and convincing piece of theatre all the same and does give us a picture of Shakespeare very different to that imagined by any other writer, whether fictional, critical or biographical. Michael Coveney, writing in *The Independent* newspaper in 2010 captures this, reviewing a rare revival of the play in Chichester, UK, where he says that Shakespeare ‘is frozen immobile in a Warwickshire landscape of domestic unhappiness, civil riot and dispute over the enclosures. He has 100 acres and many rents, and he does nothing. He writes nothing. He cares for no one. He kills himself’ (Coveney 2010). While the play says something quite profound about (this version of) Shakespeare and the society in which he lived, it is its final traumatic moments which are of interest in this essay. I reproduce them at length:

*Shakespeare.* How long have I been dead? When will I fall down? Looking for rings on beggars’ fingers. Mistakes ... mistakes ... Was anything done? (*He takes another tablet.*) Years waiting ... fed ... washing the dead ... Was anything done? ... Was anything done? (*He looks at a tablet in his hand.*) Dead sugar. (*He swallows it.*) Was anything done?

*He falls from the chair onto the floor. JUDITH comes into the room. She sees SHAKESPEARE. She controls her panic. The funeral bell begins to toll. It is close, but not so loud as in the garden. JUDITH goes to SHAKESPEARE and quickly makes him comfortable on the floor. He twitches and jerks.*

*Judith.* Nothing. A little attack.

*She hurries to the bedside stand. She searches through it agitatedly. She throws papers aside. She tears some. SHAKESPEARE whimpers and shivers.*

*Judith.* (*to herself as she searches*): Nothing, Nothing.

*JUDITH runs to the door and shouts up.*

Nothing. If he made a new will his lawyer’s got it.

*JUDITH runs back to the bed. She is crying. She searches under the pillows. SHAKESPEARE has killed himself.*

*Judith.* (*crying*): Nothing.

*JUDITH searches under the sheets. She kneels down and searches under the bed. She cries. She stands and searches under the mattress.*

END

(Bond 1974, 51-52)

This is a depressing end to a surprising and disturbing play, structured by Shakespeare’s constant refrain of ‘Was anything done?’ This becomes

Shakespeare's mantra in his dying moments, the final mundane words of a man who produced so many words of so much beauty in his life. They form, along with their further articulation earlier in the short final Act – where they are repeated another four times; thus eight times in all – the final poetic repetitions of this greatest of all poets. Yet, as in so many of the words produced by Shakespeare, they resound with ambiguity and with potential meaning. On the face of it, they would seem to refer to his doubt as to the impact of his life's work – which he probably regards as 'civilising' – on a society (as depicted in the play) that is wholly divided and debased. This point is made especially clear in Judith's actions as her father lies dying, searching desperately for a revised will that she could financially benefit from. However, given the use of the passive tense, Shakespeare's words are rich in potential. The answer to his repeated rhetorical question: 'Was anything done?' within the confines of the play is precisely that which Judith herself repeats a number of times; 'Nothing'. Indeed, this is the most commonly used word in the play, as demonstrated, for example, in Shakespeare's earlier dialogue with a visiting Ben Jonson:

*Jonson.* What are you writing?

*Shakespeare.* Nothing.

*They drink.*

*Jonson.* Not writing?

*Shakespeare.* No.

*Jonson.* Why not?

*Shakespeare.* Nothing to say.

*Jonson.* Doesn't stop others. Written out?

*Shakespeare.* Yes.

*They drink.*

*Jonson:* Now, what are you writing?

*Shakespeare:* Nothing. (29-30)

Given that 'nothing' (spoken by Judith) is the final word of the play, as well as its repetition throughout, Bond wishes to communicate something important through its repeated use. He seems fixated on this word when considering Shakespeare, determined to clarify that the richness of the plays and the poems, their depth, breadth and profundity are hard to connect with this desolate and desperate man, this being suffused with 'nothing'. As Bond says in his introduction to the play:

Shakespeare's plays show this need for sanity and its political expression, justice. But how did he live? His behaviour as a property-owner made him closer to Goneril than Lear. He supported and benefited from the Goneril-society – with its prisons, workhouses, whipping, starvation, mutilation, pulpit-hysteria and all the rest of it. (ix)

For Bond, a Marxist playwright working in a modern, capitalist society, Shakespeare the man appears at odds with the Shakespeare who wrote the plays and poems. For Bond, these great works of literature are ‘everything’, the man himself ‘nothing’. This dichotomy/contradiction would seem to be the very reason Bond attempted such a play; as some kind of rationale for the unbridgeable gap between the literature and the man, between this ‘everything’ and this ‘nothing’.

The same dichotomy that Edward Bond feels defines Shakespeare is interestingly mirrored by Henry James in his 1903 short story, ‘The Birthplace’ (2001). In the story, Morris Gedge, the custodian of the said Birthplace (clearly modelled upon the Shakespeare Birthplace in Stratford-Upon-Avon) begins to doubt the ‘bardolatrous’ truth of what he is required to tell visitors to the attraction as he shows them around. These doubts crystallise over time and he begins to articulate them in a way not too dissimilar from Bond, in trying to make sense of the difficulty apparent when trying to match Shakespeare the man to his writings. This comes to a head when Gedge, conversing with a sympathetic visitor, says: ‘all I want – [is] to let the author alone ... there *is* no author; ... There are all the immortal people – *in* the work; but there’s nobody else’ (486-487). The dichotomy is clear in this exclamation and James delineates this, though more enigmatically, in an earlier exchange which closes section three of the story in a dialogue between Gedge and his wife. Gedge begins:

“Do you know what I sometimes do?” And then as she waited too: “In the Birthroom there, when I look in late. I often put out my light. That makes it better”.

“Makes what-?”

“Everything”.

“What is it then you see in the dark?”

“Nothing!” said Morris Gedge.

“And what’s the pleasure of that?”

“Well, what the American ladies say. It’s so fascinating!” (475)

In his Folger Shakespeare Library talk, Brian Cummings is very exercised by this particular exchange and by what he perceives as Gedge’s ‘moment of crisis’ (2014, 16). He writes:

Gedge ... is tragically caught up in the paradox of reading, of sharing at once the astonishing proximity with the writer that reading brings, and yet with it also the haunting sense of absence. The birthroom is an empty shell, yet it is also the place where Gedge’s imagination is brought to life. Sitting with his eyes closed, this is the one place where his mind is free and most full, he says. (17)

Cummings believes that for Gedge the birthroom is a ‘place of mystical sanctity ... an empty tomb ... and now the Gedges come to the terrible



conclusion that not only is nothing there, but nothing, especially not the birth of the master, ever happened there' (16). While this is all evidently true, and it is worth noting Cummings' repeated use of the word 'nothing', I do not believe that Cummings goes nearly far enough in this analysis. For it would seem that Gedge's realisation that 'nothing' is there is in fact liberating; it is not a crisis that he experiences, as Cummings would have us believe but rather an epiphany. Gedge is 'freed' by this understanding, not cast into a pit of depression by it. And though there is an air of the mysterious in James' story, it would seem that Gedge seeing 'nothing' makes 'everything' better. Or, more precisely, Gedge's recognition that there is 'nothing' in the sense that the author 'does not exist' makes 'everything' possible, and the dark emptiness that is the birthroom enables him the space, the intellectual freedom to see the truth. And so, for Gedge, most clearly, the thoughts of Keats are crystallised and the birthroom enables his understanding that the author 'is not itself – it has no self – it is everything and nothing' (Keats quoted in Burwick 2001, 40). And it could be possible to surmise that Cummings' perception of a crisis rather than an epiphany is perhaps his own contribution to the will to mythologise.

The phrase, 'Everything and Nothing' is, of course, the title of a famous short parable by Jorge Luis Borges, published in 1960. It is clear that Keats is the major influence on Borges in this piece, as Shakespeare is described essentially (according to Cummings' reading of Borges) 'as a cipher or an Everyman' (17). The strange dichotomy between the profound richness of Shakespeare's works and the profound absence of the author is something I have imagined elsewhere as a dichotomy characterised by there being two William Shakespeares; one who we could call 'Will of the Works' and the other 'Will of the Records' (Leahy 2014). In Borges' story, it is captured in the opening sentences:

There was no one in him; behind his face (which even in the poor paintings of the period is unlike any other) and his words, which were copious, imaginative, and emotional, there was nothing but a little chill, a dream not dreamed by anyone. (1964, 46)

Borges tells us that Shakespeare was all of his characters, was 'so many kings who die by the sword and so many unhappy lovers who converge, diverge, and melodiously agonize' (47). This echoes Gedge, of course, as does Borges when he says that as a man, a real human being, Shakespeare is nothing. At the end of his parable, Borges has him meeting God who, it seems has also read Keats when he says that Shakespeare is 'many persons – and none' (47).

In these great fictional contemplations of the clear tension between the richness of the works and the emptiness of the life of Shakespeare there is a recognition that there is perhaps 'no author' as it were. By this, I mean

there is a recognition that in biographical terms at least, 'Will of the Records' lacks significance when related to the works of literature he produced. It is clear that the received relationship between the two Wills is almost impossible to make or, as in Bond, the writer is devoid of the humanity that defines the works. Of the two Wills, the one is 'nothing' (Records) and the other, the one who 'does not exist' (Works) is 'everything'. Given this, it would seem, as Cummings says, that it 'is the First Folio that now best represents the life' (4). And *this* is the critical intersection when it comes to Shakespearean biography. For it is *here*, in this moment, at this interface of 'everything' and 'nothing', that the sub-genre of Shakespearean biography is brought into existence. It is here, as the richness of the works meets the poverty of the recorded life, where the complexity of the plays and poems meets the empty vessel that is the life of the author, that the sub-genre is born. And it is here that the empty vessel becomes filled with details, filled with anecdotes, filled with life events that did not, as far as we know, happen. It is here, for example, that Stephen Greenblatt (2004), Richard Wilson (2004) and Michael Wood (2003) fill the empty vessel with Catholicism; here that Katherine Duncan-Jones fills it with ungentle and unrecorded 'scenes from his life' (2001); here that Carol Chillington Rutter fills it with 'the [unevidenced] mental imprint of the grammar school' (2013, 144); here that René Weis (2007) fills it with a profound relationship with the Earl of Southampton; here that Stanley Wells (2009) has the empty vessel masturbating and copulating. And so on. But why is this? Why do biographers admit to the emptiness of this vessel and then proceed to fill it with supposition, anecdote, academic guesswork and aspects of their own obsessions? In the remainder of this essay I will attempt to answer this question.

### 3. The Tragedy of Arthur

Apart from the public appetite for biographies of Shakespeare, which seems to be almost insatiable and which cannot be underestimated as a driver for such output, biographers who together produce the works that make up the sub-genre of Shakespearean biography look to the plays and poems for biographical detail. In short, they build the life of Shakespeare from his surviving literary works. Indeed, these biographers have little choice but to do so if they wish to produce a biography of any length. As the actual records do not exist but the plays and poems do, the real literary life of the Bard is built from the imaginative literature he left behind. This point is perhaps most pointedly made by Park Honan, the author of the well-respected *Shakespeare: A Life* (1998), who states: 'my understanding of his [Shakespeare's] growth or development was helped by research, but as much as anything else by his plays' (2009, 106). It would be possible to claim that such reference to the creative works of a writer is both a normal and an appropriate methodology when writing a biography. However, the problem for Shakespearean biographers is that the factual context within

which this use of the creative works can be structured is simply not there. As Scheil and Holderness remind us, 'the confessional material that is their [biographers'] stock-in-trade is virtually absent: there are no letters, diaries, or directly reported conversations; no testimonies from family, friends, and neighbours...' (2009, 1). This being the case, the orthodox scholarly biography – like those listed earlier – can be said as a general rule to be characterised by its use of the fictional to construct the real.

This is not the only fictional element that characterises Shakespearean biography, however. One other element that typifies the form is the use that is made in the construction of his real life of anecdotes that are widely accepted as either having no basis in truth or which can in no way be verified. Certain examples, such as the idea that Shakespeare was a Catholic are central to Michael Wood's biography, to Stephen Greenblatt's and Richard Wilson's. This is the case, despite the fact that there is no evidence that Shakespeare was a Catholic at all. Or the argument, central to the René Weis' biography that the Earl of Southampton paid Shakespeare £1000 for writing *Venus and Adonis*, which again has no basis in fact. Indeed, there is no record that the two men knew each other, ever met or ever spoke. The most important point here, however, is that *Weis knows this* and yet continues to build a significant aspect of his biography around the argument that the payment took place. Likewise, the case with the anecdote of Shakespeare being caught deer-poaching on the land of Sir Thomas Lucy as a young man; with his drinking bouts in the company of Ben Jonson; with his relationship with the 'Dark Lady' of the sonnets; with his (sexual) relationship with the Earl of Southampton; with his (non-sexual) relationship with Queen Elizabeth I; and so on. As one wades through these sorts of claims, one cannot help but be reminded of Michel de Certeau, describing contemporary mediated reality: 'Fiction defines the field, the status, and the objects of vision' (2002, 187). Yet, Shakespearean biography is supposed to be a field determined by the interpretation of facts, one where truth and accuracy – at least broadly speaking – are important. But, as Certeau continues and as can be applied to this field of study: 'fiction claims to make the real present, to speak in the name of the facts and thus to cause the semblance it produces to be taken as a referential reality. Hence those to whom these legends are directed ... are not obliged to believe what they don't see ... but rather to believe what they see' (187). In Shakespearean biographical writing, we are presented with a Shakespeare who is not real, but it would seem we believe what we see. The sub-genre of Shakespearean biography is therefore, I suggest, characterised by the constant iteration of fictional forms and what could be regarded as simulations. In order to investigate this further, I will follow Cummings' example and enlist fiction itself to help understand and explain Shakespearean biography. Rather than turn to any of his examples, I will look at a recent novel by the American writer Arthur Phillips, *The Tragedy of Arthur* (2011).

In order to fully grasp the relevance of this novel to the subject under scrutiny in this essay, it is worth outlining its (convoluted) plot in some detail. The title of the novel, *The Tragedy of Arthur* refers to the novel itself, to a newly discovered five act play by William Shakespeare which is reproduced in full in the book and, this being a quintessentially postmodern work of fiction, also to the upbringing of the narrator, naturally enough named, like the author himself, Arthur Phillips. The title also refers to the adult life of the narrator's father, the central figure in the novel and who is also named Arthur Phillips. The topic of the novel is clarified for us in that Arthur (the narrator) shares a birthday with Shakespeare (though 400 years apart), has a twin sister (twins of course being important in a number of Shakespeare's plays), has a mother who is called Mary Arden Phillips and is a writer. The novelistic aspect of the book essentially forms the introduction to the newly discovered play which as a whole is supposed to replicate a typical scholarly edition. The publishers (Random House both in reality and in the novel) have asked the narrator to write this introduction although he is not a scholar; he is a novelist. He does not do this easily, but it is essential for the novel as a whole to work. The narrator explains: 'I admit that this seems a long way from an Introduction to a newly discovered Shakespeare play; the essay is fast becoming an example of the most dismal genre, the memoir. All I can say is that the truth of the play requires understanding the truth of my life' (35). This last sentence touches on our subject for this essay, the 'truth' of the life in relation to the 'truth' of the play(s) and I shall return to it. Before doing so, more explanation of the actual story is needed.

The main thrust of the plot lies in two things: the deep and pervasive love of Shakespeare expressed by the narrator's father and sister and the fact that the father is a con-artist who spends most of the narrator's formative years in prison on various charges of fraud. Near the end of his life and in prison, Arthur senior shares with his son a secret treasure that he has kept for over 50 years; a previously unknown play by Shakespeare, *The Tragedy of Arthur*. The narrator, his father and his sister wish to publish the play and reveal it to the world – which they do as part of the novel, faithfully and with full scholarly annotations provided by one Professor Roland Verre (a jokey reference no doubt to the Shakespeare Authorship Question and the championing of Edward De Vere, 17<sup>th</sup> Earl of Oxford, as the author of the Shakespeare canon) and the introduction takes us through the uncertainties of the narrator in relation to the authenticity of the newly discovered play, given his father's history of fraudulent practices.

The play itself, which takes up the latter quarter of the book, is presented as being proven as a Shakespeare play in a clever move by the author concerning the tricky matter of verification. The Random House editors preface the entire novel with this justification:

Many people have worked with great dedication to make this book possible. It could not have come to pass without the academic leadership of Professor Roland Verre, who has overseen the research and tests that have confirmed the play's authenticity and William Shakespeare as its sole or primary author. Professor Verre submitted the text to a battery of computerized stylistic and linguistic examinations, solicited the critical opinions of his peers on three continents, and supervised the forensic study of the 1597 document's paper and ink. (viii)

They go on to thank their advisory board which consisted of 'dozens more professors of English language and literature, theatre directors, linguists and critics, historians and Shakespeare experts', and include among these actual living academics: 'The contributions of Professors David Crystal, Tom Clayton, and Ward Elliott (whose Claremont Shakespeare clinic conducted the stylometry tests) demand particular recognition' (viii). An accurately reproduced title page to the 1597 quarto is also lovingly included.

The novel as a whole is an interesting and supremely clever consideration of a number of themes, from truth and authenticity to familial love and betrayal. Each of these themes (and more) is considered with a good deal of complexity and without definitive answers or sentimentalism. The narrator is surrounded by lovers of Shakespeare but says about himself: 'I have never much liked Shakespeare' (1). This allows him to examine with great clarity 'the daffy religion that is the world's mad love of him [Shakespeare]' (2) and his conclusions here are interesting. For he feels that it is we, Shakespeare's readers, who find ways through endless discussion to 'justify' Shakespeare's writing. In a good example of this, the narrator quizzes his sister Dana, an actor, when she and her fellow actors discuss the motivation for Gertrude in *Hamlet* to insert an inappropriate sexual innuendo in one of her speeches in the play:

Look, look: you have a weak spot where Will's not thinking very clearly, and the character rambles on, and Will sticks in a joke ... [that] ... doesn't belong there. Any editor would cut it. It breaks the rhythm and the logic of the scene.... If I wrote it, they'd send me home to re-work it. Instead, what do you all do? You talk it out until you make it make sense for him. He wrote it, so he must be right.... You ... form a committee to offer him your help, and when you've done the best you can, consulting old books of other would-be helpers, when you actually come up with some clever solutions, you marvel at *him* for composing such a subtle moment. (94)

While this, one of the book's central themes, is a satire on academic and scholarly readings of Shakespeare's works, it also functions to explain the trend which, over years, has led to the mythologisation of Shakespeare. He continues: 'You're part of a vast, unconscious conspiracy of enablers, all of whom operate without central control but to the same end: to make a man who died four centuries ago into a god' (95). Phillips (the author) plays this out in the reproduction of the play itself, where the scholarly footnotes by Professor

Verre are full of such circular arguments and justifications. In this example, the text of the play does not scan, leading Verre to write in footnote 23:

Arthur's mysterious business in York is never entirely clarified in the text. I can see four alternative explanations for this: (1) The 1597 text is corrupt. (2) We are meant to see the arrival of Philip in Act IV as the denouement to a sexual adventure here in Act II. (3) There was some stage business in the original production which is now unclear to us (and modern directors will no doubt find their own interpretations). (4) Shakespeare allowed a mystery to sit at the heart of his character's behaviour, as he later did in *Othello*, for example [RV]. (298)

The novel is interesting in a wider sense on the very nature of academic work in the field of Shakespeare studies and how, historically, this sort of questionable analysis and circular reasoning has become both accepted and orthodox. Arthur, the narrator, will have nothing to do with it: 'These professors! Once they wager their egos, they never quit. More than a reputation or tenure is at stake. They bet their souls' (238). The narrator simply cannot abide what has happened: 'William Shakespeare was ... a man, a working writer, one of many. So why is he now forced on us as the single greatest? How did he pull this scam, and who abetted?' (225). His answer to this is clear: the scholars. And this will to mythologise, so clearly outlined by Phillips in his novel goes part of the way to explain the everything/nothing dichotomy discussed earlier, in the sense that in these analyses the understanding of the works is immersed in the proposed intentionality of Shakespeare. The text is discussed and then its perceived dynamics transplanted onto the author's intentions, discussed in terms of what the man was attempting to say and, finally, in the belief that what he was saying (and the way that he said it) was always, in some sense, perfect. But this is only part of our explanation. The other part is explained by considering the central structuring element of Phillips' novel: a father who is defined by his pathological narcissism.

Very early on in his 'Introduction', Phillips captures the essence of the rediscovered Shakespeare play and, by extension, of his novel itself:

In *The Tragedy of Arthur*, King Arthur is portrayed as a charismatic, charming, egocentric, short-tempered, principled but chronically impulsive bastard. He is a flawed hero, at best, who succeeds then fails as a result of his unique personality. Unable to find a solid self upon which to rely, he ricochets from crisis to crisis, never quite seeing how he caused the crisis until it is too late, and then flying so far to the opposite extreme in a doomed effort to repair his mistakes that he inevitably makes things still worse. This description also fits my father, Arthur Edward Harold Phillips. (9-10)

In essence then, this is not primarily a play about Shakespeare, or even about a lost and found Shakespeare play. It is a novel about the character of Arthur

Edward Harold Phillips, the narrator's father. More concisely, it is a novel about a character who is the embodiment of this pathological narcissism. It is a novel about this aspect of pathology traced through the impact the chaotic life of this character has on those around him and his inability or unwillingness to recognise this impact. It is not in the manifestation of this chaos that Shakespeare is important in the novel, but rather in a further aspect of the narcissistic tendency that he becomes significant. As Lasch writes: 'According to Kernberg, [narcissists] "often admire some hero or outstanding individual" and "experience themselves as part of that outstanding person." They see the admired individual as "merely an extension of themselves"' (1979, 84-85). Arthur senior identifies very closely with Shakespeare his hero, to the extent that he lives his life according to the nobility and creativity he finds in the works and, in the end, to the extent that he wishes to pass off his own creative work as that of Shakespeare. He aspires to emulate Shakespeare and, in doing so, in the classic way of narcissists, he believes himself to be more noble, more creative, more special than those around him; indeed, more special than most of humanity. To be precise then, *The Tragedy of Arthur* is a novel about Shakespeare to some extent, about Shakespearean scholarship to some extent, but especially it is a novel about narcissism. This is why it is so pertinent to the argument of this essay regarding the nature of Shakespearean biography and the tendency for biographers to find their (heroic) selves in Shakespeare's unrecorded writing life.

#### 4. 'the dreamscape of nostalgia'

When considering writing his own biography of Shakespeare in the late 1960s, Samuel Schoenbaum says the following:

I embarked on my work without any preconceived theme or thesis ... But I quickly recognized the truth of the observation that biography tends towards oblique self-portraiture. How much must this be so with respect to Shakespeare, where the sublimity of the subject ensures empathy and the impersonality of the life-record teases speculation! I remember once mentioning this pattern to the late John Crow in the familiar columned portico of the British Museum, and he reminded me that Desmond McCarthy had said somewhere that trying to work out Shakespeare's personality was like looking at a very dark glazed picture in the National Portrait Gallery: at first you see nothing, then you begin to recognize features, and then you realize that they are your own. (1991, viii)

Schoenbaum goes on to find that Shakespeare 'biographers' recurring self-identification with their subject' supplied him 'with a leitmotif' (viii), one which begins indeed with Shakespeare's first biographer, Nicholas Rowe; 'Is it too fanciful that perhaps this author ... is gazing into his own mirror and finding there his subject's reflection?' (89) When the Romantics looked

at Shakespeare, it would be fair to say that what they essentially found was themselves – thus the obsession with Hamlet; marginalised, melancholic and misunderstood, like them a poet of nature rather than artifice. Schoenbaum makes the point forcefully when considering Thomas Carlyle’s famous lecture on Shakespeare, ‘The Poet as Hero’ (1840): ‘Carlyle fixed on Shakespeare . . . and . . . created a polemic – it is no biographical sketch in the usual sense of the term – memorably devoid of facts and dates’ (188). But even more important in this current context is what Schoenbaum goes on to say: Shakespeare ‘has always been a spring in which men discover, Narcissus-like, their own reflection, and so we need feel no surprise that Carlyle, who came from Ecclefechan peasant stock, should seize on the myth that Shakespeare was a “poor Warwickshire Peasant”’ (188).

This ‘Narcissus-like’ process is one we see continue today. One need only consider *Will and Me: How Shakespeare Took over My Life* (2006), the autobiography of the Artistic Director of the Globe Theatre, London, Dominic Dromgoole. The back cover blurb reads: ‘Shakespeare has always been a big part of Dominic Dromgoole’s life. This is the story of how he stumbled, shambled and occasionally glided through the years with the bard as his guide . . . Along the way he shows us what Shakespeare’s rough-and-ready genius can teach us . . .’. What we find in this book is a rough-and-ready (though romantic at heart) Dromgoole finding a rough-and-ready (though romantic at heart) Shakespeare – built up through reading the plays and poems. Gary Taylor, reviewing Stephen Greenblatt’s *Will in the World: How Shakespeare Became Shakespeare* writes: ‘What purports to be an image of Shakespeare is really an idealised image of the biographer himself’ (2004, 9). Graham Holderness has noticed this tendency and considers it thoughtfully: ‘Restless under the constraints of the historical record, biographers end up telling us about many things besides Shakespeare, and filling the empty spaces with their own preoccupations’ (2011, 9). Holderness notices how Jonathan Bate describes a ‘rustic Shakespeare’ in his biography *Soul of the Age* (2008), much as the biographer sees himself (10). In contrast, he believes Peter Ackroyd depicts a Shakespeare whose temperament is ‘urban, secular, modern, rather than rural, pious and medieval’ (10). Ackroyd had earlier written *London: The Biography* (2001) and Holderness sees his Shakespeare as ‘more like a modern professional writer than an early modern dramatist; more like Peter Ackroyd himself, than like William Shakespeare’ (10). Holderness’ biography of Shakespeare, *Nine Lives of William Shakespeare* (2011) in which these views are expressed, is itself a case in point. Holderness attempts something different (he says) as the book consists of a scholarly essay on each of nine significant moments in Shakespeare’s life, followed by nine fictional narratives re-imagining these moments. The book is offered as a negotiation of the problematic nature of the sub-genre of Shakespearean biography itself, but could rather be seen as Holderness ‘filling the empty spaces with his own preoccupations’ (9). In 2002, Holderness attempted a fictional prose re-



writing of *Hamlet*, entitled *The Prince of Denmark* and his biography can be regarded as an opportunity for him to continue with his creative ambitions. In this scenario then, it becomes clear that when biographers look for the man Shakespeare they often find themselves in a narcissistic identification with the object of their admiration. They find, as Schoenbaum tells us, 'Narcissus-like, their own reflection' (1991, 188).

It is worth pointing out here that Schoenbaum and indeed all those critics who believe that biographers and scholars find themselves in Shakespeare are referring to the ways in which they find themselves in aspects *of the works*, not in the man; which they then transfer and project onto the emptiness that is the recorded writing life of Shakespeare. Graham Holderness demonstrates this at length in his contemplation of Stephen Greenblatt's reading of *Hamlet* in relation to the death of Shakespeare's son Hamnet in his essay 'Shakespearean Selves', where we see a close connection between Shakespeare's grief at a dead son mixed up with Hamlet's grief at the death of his father *and* Greenblatt's grief at the death of his own father (2010, 104-113). Given all of this, my contention then is that the crucial and defining aspects of Shakespearean biography as a sub-genre are twofold. Firstly, they rely on the fictional in building a life from the works, and secondly they are structured by the (often unconscious) narcissism of the individual biographer. Such would seem to be a common reality in the sub-genre of Shakespearean biography, the 'nothing' of the empty vessel of Shakespeare becoming filled with authors' fictionalised and idealised extensions of their own egos.

In his talk 'Shakespeare, Biography and Anti-Biography', Brian Cummings believes that we 'have constructed a biography ... of Shakespeare not so much to explain him, as to explain our relationship to him, his relationship to us' (17). If we return to our theme, for Cummings it seems that the 'everything' that fills the 'nothing' of Shakespeare is our culture's need for explanation of our relationship to and with him. That is no doubt true. However, again I do not feel that Cummings goes far enough. For although in his allusion to the significance of the place in which he is speaking, the Folger Library, now regarded as the 'home' of the First Folio, what he does not say, but what is clear is that we are actually involved in a process – the biography – that attempts to explain not our relationship to Shakespeare, but rather our relationship to Shakespeare's works. More specifically, it is a process that attempts to explain our relationship to and with the works *and* their relationship to and with us. We want to explain the works – their depth, their broadness, their intellectual span. This essentially is the driving force for Shakespearean biography then: to explain the works. Majorie Garber evocatively captures this drive for unity and wholeness in Shakespearean criticism as whole when she writes: 'What is it about ... Shakespeare ... that calls up this nostalgia for the certainties of truth and beauty – a nostalgia which, like (I would contend) *all* nostalgias, is really a nostalgia for something that never was?' (2008, 110). Garber goes on

to suggest that 'Shakespeare is the dream-space of nostalgia' (111), a phrase, I wish to claim, that captures the over-riding characteristic of the sub-genre. The suggestion is that the Shakespearean biographer, in their 'dreamscape of nostalgia' mirrors that realist process perceived by Linda Hutcheon as *Narcissistic Narrative*: 'The classic realistic novel's well-made plot might give the reader the feeling of completeness that suggests, by analogy, *either* that human action is somehow whole and meaningful, or the opposite, in which case it is art alone that can impart order or meaning to life' (2006, 19).

Thus Shakespearean biography is about bringing order to the 'chaos' of literary work, or at least, in Foucauldian terms about assigning 'truth' and thereby constraining the 'proliferation of meanings' (Foucault 1987, 119). It is about a desire for wholeness and bringing order and comfort. As Andrew Bennett writes, 'if authors don't exist ... we have to invent them ... we make them in the image of our desire for transcendent originary unity' (2005, 35). Marjorie Garber agrees; 'Shakespeare is ... the fantasy of originary cultural wholeness, the last vestige of universalism ...' (2008, 111). Shakespearean biography does not, in any way explain the life; it cannot. It is rather an attempt to explain the 'chaos' or the plenitude of the works, their amazing depth, breadth and diversity. The end product is, as we have seen, a genre which does not attend to its own constraints; it is not, essentially biography at all, but something rather more akin to that perception of Garber's 'dream-space of nostalgia' (2008, 111). *There* is the moment where we understand the dichotomy of the 'everything' and the 'nothing', where the overwhelming desire for order meets the narcissistic tendencies of the author, there where the plenitude of the works meets the emptiness of the life, there where as Arthur Phillips (the narrator) coins it, 'Shakespeare [becomes] the greatest creator of Rorschach tests in history' (94).

Before ending with a final statement regarding Shakespeare biography itself, I wish to suggest that this understanding of the narcissistic drive at the heart of this sub-genre can perhaps tell us something greater about Shakespeare studies as a whole and of the way in which Shakespeare is used in our culture. This suggestion is alluded to by Cummings, when he says that 'Shakespeare's life has always been a construction after the fact' (2014, 5). However, it is in fact Marjorie Garber who, once again, articulates it most perceptively. In her essay 'Shakespeare as Fetish', she writes:

But what makes Shakespeare fetishized and fetishizing, a scenario of desire that has to be repeated with exactitude for every generation, is the way in which he has come to stand for a kind of 'humanness' which, purporting to be inclusive of race, class and gender, is in fact the neutralising (or neutering) of those potent discourses by appropriation ... (2008, 118)

In this fetishisation perceived by Garber we see an important defining aspect of Shakespeare studies as social practice, in this use of Shakespeare as a register

of our contemporary concerns. As Michael Bristol says, 'the real Shakespeare ... doesn't actually exist at all, except as the imaginary projection of an important tradition of social desire' (1999, 490). And so Shakespeare becomes this register, this smorgasbord of contemporary social desire, through which we critical narcissists ponder those concerns which are pertinent *to us*, here, now. For us, Shakespeare is the 'ventriloquized voice of us all', or, to put it another way, we speak through Shakespeare, 'Narcissus-like' *about ourselves*. In terms discerned by Bourdieu (1993), Shakespeare becomes the legitimising cultural authority through whom we talk about ourselves to ourselves in a process which allows us to agree with Lasch (1979), that the Shakespearean scholarly community can be determined as being defined by its 'Culture of Narcissism'. In this process, the 'nothing' that is the recorded writing life of Shakespeare becomes filled by the 'everything' of the contemporary 'issues' of the scholar, issues filtered through the themes and characters of the works. The 'everything' is thus, in one sense, 'nothing' to do with Shakespeare at all, and each consideration of Shakespeare is merely an exercise in atomised and narcissistic ventriloquism. And when each paper ends it has no effect other than the beckoning of the next paper, which beckons the next and so on. Such is true, most particularly of the sub-genre of Shakespearean biography.

Arthur Phillips (the narrator) rejects all this. He writes: 'I don't hate Shakespeare ... But I cannot find myself in his works. I identify with none of them, no matter how many fawning critics bleat to me that he captured all of humanity in his eye and pen' (2011, 232-233). One need not hate Shakespeare to reject the narcissism at the heart of much Shakespeare criticism and which forms the very basis of the sub-genre of Shakespearean biography. But one must be brave to resist this dominant form of Shakespearean biography or, as I term it (with due acknowledgement of its reliance upon the idea of 'bardolatry'), 'bardography'. 'Bardography' is reverential and uncritical; is characterised by fictional, religious and narcissistic elements and tends towards a hero worship of its (reflecting) object of desire. Park Honan admits to 'Having a crush' on Shakespeare (2009, 103); Harold Bloom (1998) famously believed that Shakespeare 'invented the human'; Stephen Greenblatt exemplifies the form when he says that the 'work is so astonishing, so luminous, that it seems to have come from a god and not a mortal' (2004, 13). And, to end where I began, we can see this at work in that passage by Stanley Wells, with his dreamscape of Shakespeare farting, defecating and masturbating. To complete Wells' description of Shakespeare moving through life that began this paper:

He suffered from headaches and toothache, from bereavement and, no doubt, many of the other ills that flesh and spirit are heir to. He grew bald. He experienced joy and grief, envy and lust, boredom and ambition, pride and shame. He worried about money and how to earn his living, he had to make himself agreeable to people he disliked, to accept responsibility for his dependents, and to order his affairs. (2009, 110-111)

Wells does not, in this passage, look to the works for his man (though he does, brilliantly, elsewhere; see 2001); nor does he reiterate the same (fictional) story (though he does elsewhere; see 2002). Nor, indeed does he explicitly find himself in his subject of study (though he does elsewhere; 2008). Rather, in this passage I would argue that Wells, as is typical of this sub-genre, captures the true overarching reality of ‘bardography’, in the sense that imaginative prose is mobilised in order to fill page after page with information that tells us *nothing* of the subject being written about. It tells us something about its author and something too, about the nature of Shakespeare studies at this moment in time. It tells us what concerns this author and that there is nothing to say about the writing life of Shakespeare. It tells us that there is nothing and there is everything, and that this nothing (the man) does not exist except as a fictional product of the everything (the works). In ‘bardography’, this ‘dreamscape of nostalgia’, there is always a lot of information. Indeed, there is too much information – but not about Shakespeare.

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