

Postmodern recreations of the Renaissance: Robert Nye's fictional biographies of William Shakespeare¹

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ABSTRACT

William Shakespeare has been present as a character in works of fiction since the eighteenth century and his life as a Renaissance playwright has been re-imagined in fictional biographies since the nineteenth century. The present article analyses the recreation of the Bard in Robert Nye's *Mrs Shakespeare: The Complete Works* (1993) and *The Late Mr Shakespeare* (1998), two novels that articulate in fiction the renewed fascination with Shakespeare's life at the turn of the millennium that has produced several new scholarly biographies. Both novels were published in the nineties, the decade of the Shakespeare film boom that popularised his work in the mass media and produced the most widely popular recreation of his life to date, the Hollywood success *Shakespeare in Love* (1998). These two novels participate in the demystification of Shakespeare the man generally found in contemporary fictional recreations of his life that react against the reverential idealisation of the Bard in nineteenth-century fictional biographies. They provide a humorous and irreverent portrait of Shakespeare as a man of failings and rotten teeth, while their vibrant celebration of his language and the evocation of the sights and sounds of his time contribute to the circulation and visibility of his words in contemporary culture. While professional biographers strive to create a portrait of the author that readers may accept as the true one and their effort is guided by plausibility, Robert Nye's kaleidoscopic portraits of the playwright through the gaze of his wife and a former boy actor of his company in these two novels celebrate the impossibility of ever writing a definite biography of William Shakespeare, since no hard fact can ever bring us closer to the playwright than the works themselves, which are inevitably mediated by the present and by the cultural construct that has been erected around him through the ages.

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A reviewer of Park Honan's *Shakespeare: A Life* (1998) expresses his surprise at the contemporary fascination with the playwright's life that has produced in the last decade of the twentieth century several new biographies by writers as diverse as Anthony Holden, Eric Sams, Garry O'Connor and Stanley Wells: "It is a strange thing, at the turn of the millennium," he says, "that something as creaky and unreliable as Shakespeare's biography should be a hot property again" (Hampton-Reeves). In spite of post-structuralist insistence that the author is no more than a way of characterizing the circulation and interaction of different discourses in his/her own time, the attraction for the elusive subject of William Shakespeare the man has not abated in the academic world, and surely popular culture "remains invested in authorship and particularly Shakespeare the author" (Lanier 2002: 114). The sketch of what borrowing the title of Samuel Schoenbaum's (1977) biography could be called the Bard's *documentary life* has required the effort of generations of scholars who have weeded out of the meagre garden of Shakespearean fact numerous legends, anecdotes and tall tales. Ambivalence towards conscious fictions is understandable among those whose effort is directed to identifying and correcting the biographical fictions (O'Sullivan 1997: 1), and few biographers would voice an appreciation of fiction as an imaginative exploration of the Bard the way Stephen Greenblatt does in *Will in the World* (2004: 392): "Though by definition unreliable and often wildly inaccurate, some of the most searching reflections on Shakespeare's life have come in the form of fiction."² Fictionalised biographies generally produce unease among Shakespearean scholars and this may in part explain the relatively little interest in the appropriations of Shakespeare as a literary character until recent years, when studies on the deployment of the Bard in fictional works are beginning to appear. Douglas Lanier analyses some fictionalisations of his life in contemporary popular novels and the mass media in a chapter of his *Shakespeare and Modern Popular Culture* (2002) significantly entitled "A Will to Invent: Biography and Mythology." The editors of *The Author as*

² He mentions Anthony Burgess's *Nothing Like the Sun: A Story of Shakespeare's Love-Life* (1964), Edward Bond's *Bingo: Scenes of Money and Death* (1974), the "Scylla and Charybdis" chapter of James Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922) and Marc Norman and Tom Stoppard's screenplay for the film *Shakespeare in Love* (1998).

Character (1999), Paul Franssen and Ton Hoenselaars, stress the need for studies of the imaginings of real-life authors in works of fiction and include two chapters on the playwright, one of them by Paul Franssen, who has published several articles on fictionalisations of the Bard and is preparing a full-length study of fictional Shakespeare. Martha Tuck Rozett dissects diverse recreations of Shakespeare and his contemporaries in fiction of the last decades in *Constructing a World: Shakespeare's England and the New Historical Fiction* (2003). She focuses on novels of the eighties and nineties that she calls *new historical fiction* and defines as the fictional counterpart to developments in history writing in the last decades. The *new historical novels* share with the New Historicists "a resistance to old certainties about what happened and why [and] a recognition of the subjectivity, the uncertainty, the multiplicity of 'truths' inherent in any accounts of past events" (2). Maurice J. O'Sullivan selects nineteen relevant pieces in *Shakespeare's Other Lives: Fictional Depictions of the Bard* (1997) and provides an overview of major tendencies among writers.³ The website *Shaksper: The Global Electronic Shakespeare Conference* <http://www.shaksper.net> offers an extensive bibliography, "Shakespeare, the Character" (last updated in 2000), with over one hundred references to international works in poetry, fiction, drama and film with Shakespeare as a fictional character. Despite its deficiencies (some entries only provide a title), the *Shaksper* catalogue serves, together with the references provided in O'Sullivan's bibliography in his anthology and Rozett's listing of relevant works in her study, to give an indication of the widespread use of Shakespeare as a character in literature since he first appeared as a ghostly presence in prologues and epilogues to eighteenth-century versions of his plays (Dobson 1992: 154), beginning with Dryden's adaptation of *Troilus and Cressida* in 1679 (Schoenbaum 1970: 365), and later as a character in nineteenth-century novels and plays.⁴

³ He refers to recreations of the Bard for children, explorations of his life in love or in the theatre, and works that try to present him as the contemporary of their readers (or audiences). He sets apart two categories that can overlap the others and to which he gives the rather fanciful names "the Obsessed" and "the Wits": the former turn their exploration of Shakespeare into a life-absorbing quest and the latter are succinctly described as "those who succeed where their betters fail" (2).

⁴ In his original 1970 edition of *Shakespeare's Lives* Samuel Schoenbaum devotes part of his chapter on the earlier nineteenth century to fictional biographies, although he stresses that he has been forced to endure them as a necessary part of his scholarly task. This section is not included in the 1991 edition of the book.

Two recent contributions to this corpus of fictional Shakespeares are Robert Nye's novels *Mrs Shakespeare: The Complete Works* (1993) and *The Late Mrs Shakespeare* (1998), which provide an outrageous portrait of the playwright in the voices of his wife and a former boy actor. Nye's imaginative reconstructions of the Bard in these two novels of the nineties articulate the unremitting fascination with Shakespeare the man beyond academic circles and exemplify the renewed interest in fictionalising the past in recent British fiction. Nye is the author of several novels that re-imagine the late Middle Ages and the Renaissance: *Falstaff* (1976) allows Shakespeare's character to speak for himself as a Gargantuan creature at the centre of a carnivalesque world of popular energy and excess,⁵ *Faust* (1980) recreates the figure of the German necromancer from the perspective of his servant Wagner, and *The Voyage of the Destiny* (1982) spins a tale about the last of Sir Walter Raleigh's enterprises through the protagonist's diary. These are not conventional historical novels; in their use of recorded events and exploration of notions of historical truth they are better described as examples of *historiographical metafiction* (Hutcheon) or *new historical fiction* (Rozett). Nye's novels *Mrs Shakespeare: The Complete Works* and *The Late Mrs Shakespeare* participate in the demystification of Shakespeare the man generally found in contemporary fictional recreations of his life that react against the idealisation of the playwright in nineteenth-century fictional biographies, texts that were crucially ruled by the reverence for their subject so that "[the novelist] was as much caught in the toils of piety as the writer essaying a fictionalized account of Jesus for devout Christians" (Schoenbaum 1970: 368). In their celebratory tone Robert Nye's novels are close to Anthony Burgess's exploration of the Bard's sex life in *Nothing Like the Sun* and removed from Edward Bond's denunciation of Shakespeare as a bourgeois egoist in *Bingo*, a play that re-imagines his last days in Stratford and condemns him for his inability to hold up principles of justice. Nye's novels do not offer a moral judgement of Shakespeare the man; they provide a humorous and irreverent portrait of the Bard as a man of failings and rotten teeth, while their vibrant celebration of Shakespeare's language and the evocation of the sights and sounds of his time contribute to the circulation and visibility of his words in

⁵ For an attentive reading of carnival inversion and excess in the novel, see de la Concha (2004).

contemporary culture. This celebration of his work continues to dominate popular culture, even as the postmodern paradigm in Renaissance studies (which has replaced since the seventies previous humanist readings) has favoured the development of what Pilar Hidalgo calls the school of *bardophobia*, the tendency to consider that Shakespeare's status as an international cultural icon is the result mainly of chance and ideological forces (162-63).

Robert Nye's two fictional biographies of Shakespeare have received little critical consideration as postmodern deployments of the Bard that connect high and popular culture and pay a tribute to Shakespeare's works as they play with the factual evidence of his life. As the several bibliographies mentioned above indicate, his fictionalising of Shakespeare is not unique, but part of a tradition that started in the eighteenth century and remains largely to be explored. Both novels were published in the nineties, the decade of the Shakespeare film boom that popularised his work in the mass media and produced the most widely popular recreation of his life to date, the Hollywood success *Shakespeare in Love* (1998) as well as a number of different scholarly biographies. Nye's novels are steeped in Shakespeare's language and forcefully evoke the aural and visual texture of Renaissance England through their first person narrators, a common strategy in historical fiction since "[t]hird person narrators are less likely to capture the sounds of the past than first person ones, for they are not as convincingly rooted in the novel's time and place" (Rozett 2003: 28). In both novels the narrative voice addresses the reader in a conversational familiar tone as it spins tales of the private Shakespeare, in the case of the novella *Mrs Shakespeare: The Complete Works* the voice of Anne Hathaway who writes her memoirs seven years after her husband's death, and in *The Late Mr Shakespeare* that of a boy actor of his company called Robert Reynolds, alias Pickleherring, who now in his old age in Restoration London is carefully assembling evidence and memories for his work.⁶ *The Late Mr Shakespeare* was published the same year that the most popular fictional biography of Shakespeare appeared with the release of the award-winning film *Shakespeare in Love*, at the end of the decade that has been called the Kenneth Branagh era given the role of this director in starting a widespread popularization of Shakespeare's plays in film. In their

⁶ The boy actor as narrator has been used in other recreations of Elizabethan England, including Anthony Burgess's *A Dead Man in Deptford* (1993).

own fictive universe *Mrs Shakespeare: The Complete Works* is the complement of *The Late Mr Shakespeare*, since it introduces the point of view of Anne Hathaway, the only direct witness that the biographer in the other novel has been unable to get fully involved in the project. Shakespeare's wife has indeed been a mystery for serious biographers (Schoenbaum, for example, indicates that "of Anne Hathaway we know almost nothing – not even the day of her christening" [1991: 11]). Pickleherring mentions all the family members he has interviewed for his project in a chapter of acknowledgements that parodies the academic penchant for thanking colleagues, and he refers to the enigmatic Anne Hathaway as "a woman whose serene silence on the subject of her husband should have taught me at least to hold my tongue" (2001: 11). The working imaginative principle of *Mrs Shakespeare: The Complete Works* is that Anne Shakespeare herself was the Dark Lady of the sonnets, a humorous upturning of the general view among biographers of the Bard's cold relationship with his wife. The novella gives to understand that he wrote the sonnets as an earnest compliment to this woman who thought that poets lie, make farfetched comparisons, and are too self-centred, since when "[they] are not caressing themselves with their own words, they're busy a-courting posterity" (2000: 103). The domestic sphere of Shakespeare's life has been explored in fiction since the early nineteenth century, and Maurice J. O'Sullivan's brief survey in *Shakespeare's Other Lives* distinguishes between anti-Annians, "a group especially prominent in the twentieth century" (4), and supporters of Anne, who altogether constitute the larger group. If required to side with one of the two camps, Nye's story would easily inhabit the territory of the latter. To the silent and most likely illiterate Anne Hathaway of history Nye grants a voice to represent herself and her husband. The fictional portrait she paints in her memoirs ostensibly demotes Shakespeare's stature from literary genius to common man, and it can disturb for some readers what Douglas Lanier considers the common association of the playwright with certain values such as "*gravitas*, trustworthiness, Britishness, antiquity, cultural sophistication, intellectuality, and artsiness" (112). Although there is no clear feminist agenda behind this playful re-invention of the Bard through the eyes of his wife, Anne Hathaway's newly created voice could be seen in the context of the contemporary search for the perspectives of silent or stereotyped female characters in Shakespeare's plays that has

guided recent Feminist readings of his work, an attempt to complement New Historicist and Cultural Materialist readings, which have been attentive to the workings of power and the perspective of marginal or subjugated characters but blind to gender marginalisation. Female silence and stereotypical representation have also been contested by contemporary women writers in their fictions about Shakespearean female characters, from Hamlet's mother in Margaret Atwood's short story "Gertrude Talks Back" (1992) to Goneril and her sisters in *A Thousand Acres* (1991) by Jane Smiley or the female figures of *The Tempest* in Gloria Naylor's *Mamma Day* (1988) and Marina Warner's *Indigo, or Mapping the Waters* (1992).⁷

Robert Nye imagines Anne Hathaway recording her memories of her visit to London for her husband's thirtieth birthday in April 1594 after seven lean years living in Stratford "on very little more than a diet of promises" (2000: 59). While the biographer in Nye's other fictional biography writes from an admiration for a crafter of words, Mrs Shakespeare knows nothing about her husband's work and has a no-nonsense attitude toward what she calls the big talk of poetry. Significantly enough, she is sketching her intimate portrait of the Bard at the time when his portrait appeared for the general public in the First Folio. Precisely in the spring of 1623 she is writing down her memoirs in a bound blank volume that she has entitled "Anne Shakespeare: Her Book," and an important section is devoted to her reconstruction of the week she spent in London, when a huge four-poster bed in his room above a fishmonger's became the private "playhouse" for their passion and their newly discovered love-making ("the biggest of Mr Shakespeare's little secrets" [2000: 68]), inspired in its most particular details by her husband's relation with his patron. The novella turns on its head Shakespeare's passing reference to his wife in his will with a sentence inserted as an afterthought stating that to her he left his "second-best bed." The association of this bed with passionate love between them in the novella is in line with Carol Ann Duffy's imaginative recreation of this item in the sonnet "Anne Hathaway" in her collection *The World's Wife* (1999): "Romance / and drama played by touch, by scent, by taste. / In the other bed, the best, our guests dozed on, / dribbling their prose"

⁷ For analyses of a wide selection of women's rewritings of Shakespeare see Sanders and the several volumes edited by Novy.

(30). Robert Nye is humouring with his novella the long tradition of speculation about the private life of the artist that produced the fictional Shakespeares of the nineteenth century. Mrs Shakespeare's text is the kind of private document related to the Bard that for many years after his death Shakespearean scholars searched for in their desire to reach further into the mind of the writer, a longing for insight into his private sphere that produced bizarre episodes of forgery in the nineteenth century, among them one of the most famous forgery stories in literary history, the fabrication of Shakespearean manuscripts (including a love note to Anne) by the young William Henry Ireland in the 1790s.⁸

The novella is a postmodern artefact that flaunts its own textual nature as it glides from factual territory into the land of outrageous invention, from factual details such as the weather in April 1594, on a day "unable to make up its mind whether to be spring or to stay winter" (2000: 8), a description which is indeed true to fact (Honan 1998: 196), to outrageous envisioning of Shakespeare's erotic rituals. The irreverent look into the Bard's imagined sexual preferences has been disturbing for some readers, and the sequence of criticism and rebuttal between Eric Sams and Robert Nye after the novel was reviewed by Sams in *The Times Literary Supplement* is clearly indicative of the dispute for the cultural capital of Shakespeare. The review attacks the novella mainly for factual inaccuracy in the spelling of Shakespeare's son's name and for the inadequate use of two linguistic items: the word "recusant" as Nye uses it for John Shakespeare's missing from church in 1592 and the phrase "the running of the reins" as referring to a symptom of clap. Sams's review also criticizes the characterization of Anne for her unconvincing speech (although there is also an implicit criticism of her often shrewish character analysis of her husband): "She affects to be quite unfamiliar with all his published works, while demonstrating a detailed textual knowledge of them in dozens of deliberate allusions" (Sams 1993: 21). Robert Nye's several responses to Sams's review insist on the accuracy of the factual details but, above all, assert that the novella is a piece of fiction that requires to be judged as such. Sams is a Shakespearean biographer and his criticism shows his

⁸ In *The Lambs of London* (2004) Peter Ackroyd recreates the nineteenth-century fascination with Shakespearean documents in his fictionalization of William Henry Ireland's famous forgery of manuscripts.

apprehension that fictions may dissolve the few *facts* about the playwright that can be safely held in place⁹. Taking the novella to task because Mrs Shakespeare does not know the name of her own son (she “continually miscalls him ‘Hamnet’, although he was of course baptised Hamlet after his godfather” [21]) is an indication of Sams’s obsession with factual accuracy. But factual accuracy is a slippery concept when dealing with Elizabethan spelling and the *fact* in this particular case is that both spellings (and other variants) were interchangeable, and that the parish register shows the names of Shakespeare’s twins as Hamnet and Judith (while his friend’s name appears as Hamlet in Shakespeare’s will). The reviewer also insists that a novel which derives much of its marketability from the fame of its subjects has a debt with them, “and this debt has to be *repaid* with at least *a measure of plausibility*” (21; emphasis added). What he may mean by plausibility in this context is beyond this discussion, but clearly intertextual games with the Bard’s works such as those in Anne’s allusions which Sams finds inappropriate are precisely a way of foregrounding the very fictive nature of a text which does not claim to be more than a fantasia about his life. And *Mrs Shakespeare: The Complete Works* is indeed a fabrication about Shakespeare’s life, but also an act of homage to the playwright’s works through the pastiche of Nye’s invented character, whose network of allusions re-inscribes Shakespeare’s language into contemporary culture.

The narrator in Robert Nye’s second fictional biography, *The Late Mr Shakespeare*, worked as a boy actor with Shakespeare and is writing close enough to his time to have interviewed all the relevant people and checked all the records. We know that in the seventeenth century the so-called Shakespeare documents were unavailable (Schoenbaum 1991: 22), but in the fictional world of the novel this biographer is well acquainted with all of them and aware of their potential. (“It is wonderful what you can prove with the facts in parish registers” [2001: 54], he says.) He is writing in 1666, around the time of the first attempt at a formal biography of Shakespeare in an entry in Thomas Fuller’s *History of the Worthies of England* (1662), a “remarkably deficient” sketch (Schoenbaum 1991:

⁹ The reviewer’s attitude brings to mind Samuel Schoenbaum’s description of Anthony Burgess’s magnificent *Nothing Like the Sun* – even as he acknowledges its “redeeming Joycean gift for language” – as “an absurd gallimaufry of invention and (to put it mildly) dubious biographical theorizing” (1991: 562).

57) that barely got beyond the basic information that the playwright had been born in Stratford. The fictional biographer Robert Reynolds, alias Pickleherring, does not resemble the careless Thomas Fuller but appears rather as a sort of composite between two early biographers, John Audrey and John Orchard Halliwell-Phillipps. Audrey interviewed people in Stratford and proposed the idea that Shakespeare worked as a school teacher in the country during the so-called "lost years." Although his work was not published until 1898, Audrey wrote down this information around the time of Fuller's *History* (and Robert Reynold's biography) in the early 1660s. The nineteenth-century antiquarian Halliwell-Phillipps produced a vast amount of writing on the Bard and remains to date "the most productive Shakespeare scholar and biographer" (Honan 1998: 418). Nye's depiction of Pickleherring in his room dutifully at work surrounded by one hundred boxes brimming with notes, mementos and diverse documents related to the Bard brings to mind the massive legacy of ledgers, manuscripts and scrapbooks devoted to the most diverse aspects of Shakespeare and his context that Halliwell left behind.¹⁰ Pickleherring's text is all-inclusive and paints a kaleidoscopic picture of the playwright in which many different and contradictory Shakespeares are possible. His encyclopaedic narrative is in true postmodern fashion a palimpsest of all kinds of documents, folk traditions and speculations about Shakespeare's life and its connection with his works. It does not strive for smoothness in the narrative but allows for fragmentation in a biography that brings to mind the definition of the genre by the narrator in Julian Barnes's *Flaubert's Parrot* (1984) as "a collection of holes tied together with a string" (38). Throughout his biography Pickleherring grants credibility to supposedly verifiable evidence, facts backed by documents and direct witnesses, but also to fantastic stories that clearly belong in the realm of illusion. In the final chapter, when the biographer puts down his pen as fire is raging through 1666 London, he claims that he will fly over the city as the Ariel that he really is, and this comes not as a shock, because Pickleherring has presented throughout his biography episodes

¹⁰ Like Pickleherring's piles of documents, Halliwell's boxes of MSS and 120 scrapbooks at the Folger and its numerous MSS at Edinburgh University Library contain "notes on Shakespeare's career, the actors, about thirty-two towns visited by the troupes, play-performances, other shows (including funerals), as well as on plague, harvests, food stocks, prices, and even the weather in the 1590s" (Honan 1998: 418).

that belong in the magic world of Prospero's island or the midsummer's wood of the fairies, such as the story of "Shakespeare Breeches" in chapter sixteen, in which we hear about the night when tailor Martin Jimp sewed them upon the consecrated ground of Holy Trinity Church in the midst of dreadful apparitions, or the chain of metamorphoses of the adolescent Shakespeare as he confronts his mother Mary the witch. Pickleherring's absolute devotion for the playwright whom he thought "more a god than a mortal man" (2001: 9) is no obstacle, however, for his bawdy recollections of an all-too human Shakespeare who liked fondling his favourite boy actor or spent long hours in the seven coloured chambers of Lucy Negro's brothel in St John Street, Clerkenwell, where he got himself infected with the pox (2001: 354). While the first real outline of Shakespeare's life in Thomas Fuller's book was a brief and deficient sketch, Nye envisions an impossible encyclopaedic first biography of the Bard that shares the Rabelesian excessiveness of Falstaff's autobiography as Nye created it in his award-winning novel *Falstaff*. Pickleherring's biography shares significant features with Falstaff's autobiography in this novel, and in both works the Shandian accumulation of information, titles, figures and names parodies the biographer's struggle to support narrative with documentary evidence and questions the reliability of representation that lies at the basis of biography and history.

The biographer in *The Late Mr Shakesperare* organises his text into one hundred chapters with playful titles, the very same structure of Falstaff's memoirs. Both narrators are raunchy old men who begin at eighty-one a narrative about the past. Pickleherring is in his excessiveness and vulgarity a sort of Falstaff, but some connections are also established between Falstaff and Shakespeare himself, beginning with the very uncertainty of their names: Falstaff provides sixty-nine variants for his name and Pickleherring forty-eight variants for the spelling of Shakespeare. There is a temptation to read this uncertainty of names as an apt metaphor for instability in the identity of the subjects, but it was indeed a fact in Elizabethan English with its unfixed spelling that the name of the Bard "assumed fantastic variations: Shakespey, Schacosper, Scakespeire, Saxper, Chacsper, Schaftspere, Shakstaf, and over seventy others" (Schoenbaum 1991: 5). Both Falstaff and Shakespeare are presented in these novels as larger-than-life characters who make a spectacular entrance onto the fictional stage: Falstaff's Rabelesian conception happens under a fig tree planted

on the phallus of a legendary giant carved into a chalk hillside in Dorset. Shakespeare's conception is similarly outrageous as it is presented in chapter six, "About the begetting of William Shakespeare." He is conceived one night when the fluttering of thousands of birds miraculously saves his mother when her jealous husband repeatedly tries to hang her from a tree in the forest of Arden. The fictional biographer speculates about other possible family origins for "the hero," a term that serious biographers such as Schoenbaum have used to refer to their protagonists,¹¹ and thus about the possibility of multiple beginnings for the story of the protagonist's life (just as for Robert Merivel's in Rose Tremain's *Restoration* [1990]). The most bizarre of speculations about origins is the story that Queen Elizabeth herself was the Bard's mother, which includes the recollection of the bawdy episode of her encounter with John Shakespeare in the forest of Arden. Nye is giving outrageous articulation to the long-lived idea that Shakespeare's genius and creation deserved a higher origin than the common Stratford family he was born into. In the novel the biographer's reasoning is that no other woman is higher, and also that she fits the Shakespearean spirit that holds contraries in harmony, her life thus showing a similarity with Shakespeare's genius. The parallel division into a hundred chapters and the similar voice of a narrator that continuously addresses the readers, shifting between plural and singular, male and female addressee create another link between Nye's novels *Falstaff* and *The Late Mr Shakespeare*. Robert Nye reinserts Shakespeare's Falstaff into a fiction of his own that is a dialogue with the original character and similarly re-inscribes William Shakespeare into a fiction of his own, in which the fictional biographer is a Restoration man with a significantly postmodern attitude to his task. Just as Mrs Shakespeare acknowledges that she presents the truth only as it is perceived by her ("I am telling you the truth *as it happens to me*" [2000: 30; emphasis in the original]), Pickleherring admits that he is only presenting what he has seen and heard. He has no problems accepting contradictions and multiple truths, and he uses the conjunction "or" so many times to give alternative possibilities of

¹¹ In one of the early chapters of *William Shakespeare: A Compact Documentary Life* (1977), for example, Schoenbaum states: "[W]hen was the poet born? Not a momentous question, perhaps, but a necessary one; for the biographer will wish to have, as his starting point, the precise date of his hero's nativity" (24).

reality that he views this very word as a fitting summary of his biography: “[S]ometimes I think that OR should be this book’s subtitle” (2001: 187).

Schoenbaum remarks in the opening of *Shakespeare’s Lives* that “biography tends towards oblique self-portraiture” (1991: viii-ix), and Pickleherring is well aware that biographies tell as much about their authors as about their subjects. He admits that the different stories he will present about the playwright might cancel each other out, since the answer to the opening question “What is Shakespeare?” is a difficult one: “That is the question my book is trying to answer. *What is Shakespeare?* Where is he to be found? How can we tell the man from the work and both from the stories about him?” (2001: 38; emphasis in the original). The biographer in Robert Nye’s novel participates in the *biographical fallacy* that has traditionally interpreted Shakespeare’s texts as records of what happened in his life, but he takes this tendency to new heights in some of his farfetched connections which certainly go beyond most daring scholarly speculations. He is particularly attentive to passages that somehow in his opinion do not fit the works where they occur so that an extra-subtle connection with the playwright’s life can be established. Unlike scholarly biographers, however, Pickleherring does not strive for plausibility (just as he is willing to accept discontinuity) and when it comes to the biographical underpinning of passages, Pickleherring revels in ambivalence, so that sometimes he strongly supports the biographical interpretation of texts while at other times he insists that there is absolutely no biographical basis for the works. This biographer has no qualms about defending particular biographical readings of the sonnets while at other times he insists that there was not one friend but several and no Dark Lady: “These are not persons. They are patterns ... these figures have no existence save as the words they are, black marks on a white page ... [the Dark Lady] could be a perfect fiction. Like Cleopatra. Like Shakespeare’s mother. Or *like me*” (2001: 285-88; emphasis added). And he curiously does behave like a true scholar in acknowledging the literary origins for the plots and incidents of Shakespeare’s plays, so that against the grounding of *Romeo and Juliet*, for instance, in the playwright’s experience, a view that has found its most popular expression in the 1998 film *Shakespeare in Love*, Pickleherring insists that much of the play comes straight from Arthur Brooke’s translation of Bandello’s *Novelle*, and he even includes a passage from the original

with the following comment: "That's from Broke's *Romeus and Juliet*. Pyramus and Thisbe, eat your hearts out. If alchemy is what they say it is – the art of transmuting base matter into gold – then Mr William Shakespeare was an alchemist" (2001: 64).

Nye's choice of biographer in his novel is not casual. Robert Reynolds was the name of someone Shakespeare knew in Stratford and the name also brings to mind Robert Reynolds, a seventeenth-century actor with no direct connection with Shakespeare. His nickname, Pickleherring, is significant for a number of reasons, not only because of its meaning of 'fool' and its reference to a quintessentially English delicacy (a surfeit of which supposedly killed Shakespeare's rival Robert Greene). Pickleherring was the name of the fool in many continental productions of Shakespeare in the seventeenth century ("it was mainly the tradition of the Fool, and its specific offshoot, Pickleherring, that was responsible for the dissemination of Shakespeare's plays on the continent" [Procházka 2000]), and thus in the novel the playwright's life is narrated by the fool, who is "like Mr Shakespeare, motley-minded" (2001: 69). Pickleherring was also the colourful name of one of the five sons of a madman in a popular Christmas mummers' play that Shakespeare probably knew (his brothers being Blue Breeches, Pepper Breeches, Ginger Breeches and Mr All Spice). In this play Pickleherring brings his father back to life (Greenblatt 2004: 34-35), which is really what the biographer in Nye's novel is doing, as he resurrects at the beginning of the Restoration period the spirit of a father figure (the biographer himself says "Shakespère was my father" [2001: 39]). Furthermore, like the narrator-historian in Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* (1981), Pickleherring connects his task of capturing the past with pickling: "I have a jar of pickled mulberries besides me as I write. I do not write quickly. I suck on a mulberry and think, and I chew and I scribble" (2001: 346). This particular association of biography with pickled mulberries is deeply meaningful in the case of Shakespearean history, given the key role played by a famous mulberry tree at New Place in the early stages of Bardolatry and the Shakespeare tourist industry in eighteenth-century Stratford. According to a long-enduring tradition the Bard himself had planted it in the garden of New Place and endless wood souvenirs were manufactured and sold as proceeding from that very tree, catering to the increasing fervour to

possess anything that might have been close to the Bard¹². The image of Pickleherring sucking on the pickled mulberries is therefore an appropriate emblem for the kind of biography he is writing: the fictional biographer in this novel is a man surrounded with boxes containing scholarly documents and factual evidence for his encyclopaedic task, but at the same time he is purposely feeding into his story the very legends and popular beliefs that serious biographers will work so hard to separate from the so-called *facts*.

Shakespeare's life, Robert Nye is telling us, can hardly be represented in history books and biographies, not only because of the difficulties inherent to the task of writing the past, but also because he has become, like the characters he created, part of the popular imagination of the English mind. The biographer shows that "Shakespeare has become a figure of myth, far more the product of elaborate legends, conjectures and fiction than of history" (Lanier 2002: 112). Pickleherring's biography belongs to what he calls "country history" in opposition to "town history." While town history relies on facts and figures, is believable and reliable, offers proofs and never strains credulity, country history always strains belief since it is open-ended and it always exaggerates what it talks about. Town history starts from the premise that facts tell the truth, while country history knows that facts can obscure the truth. In Pickleherring's opinion, town history "probably falls short of the mark when it comes up against Mr Shakespeare" (2001: 68); the only possible way of accounting for Mr Shakespeare is in country history, which sometimes "catches the ghostly coat-tails of what is otherwise ungraspable" (2001: 68). The fictional biographer's insistence at points that he has boxes of documents and notes that back all his statements is a wink at the scholarly obsession with proof and documentary evidence. The novel is after all a celebration of the idea that no hard fact can bring us closer to the author than the works themselves, and thus articulates in fiction Stephen Orgel's view of biography when referring to Schoenbaum's monumental *Shakespeare: A Documentary Life* (1975): "Documents produce for us the irreducible minimum of fact ... But what is it that we want out of a likeness, or a biography? Do we really believe that getting back to the hard evidence, the

¹² On the Shakespeare tourist industry see Holderness (1988) and Muñoz Valdivieso (2004).

documents, the facts, the undoubted portrait, is getting back to the real person?" (83). Schoenbaum himself closes his *Shakespeare's Lives* with the recognition that a fully satisfactory biography of the Bard has not yet been produced. He acknowledges that the three greatest contributions to Shakespearean biography (Malone's posthumous biography, Halliwell-Phillipps's *Outlines* and Chambers's study of facts and problems) are unable to sustain continuous narrative, and he even hints at the impossibility of ever overcoming the enormous distance between what he calls "the sublimity of the subject" and "the mundane inconsequence of the documentary record" (1991: 568).

Robert Nye's novels are to be seen in the context of the postmodern delight "in resurrecting historical authors as characters" (Franssen and Hoenselaars 1999: 11) even as the possibility of historical knowledge and the legitimacy of representation are called into question. These novels articulate the postmodern crisis of representation and in them we find the recognition of the subjectivity of accounts of the past. This is particularly the case, Nye seems to suggest in *The Late Mr Shakespeare*, when attempting to reconstruct the identity of a man who is present to us only in his own literary texts, through which he appears, as Pickleherring says in an echo of Jorge Luis Borges, "[I]ike the Egyptian Proteus ... exhaust[ing] all the guises of reality" (2001: 38). Robert Nye's novels hold a middle ground between Bardolatry and the tendency towards demystification of contemporary visions of the writer that present him as "an anti-heroic, coarse, or ordinary man of foibles and failings" (Lanier 2002: 116) in a reaction to the extravagant idealisation of nineteenth-century fictional biographies. There is no Marxist critique of Shakespeare the landowner as in Edward Bond's *Bingo*, nor a major focus on the intimate details of Shakespeare's sexual preferences as in Anthony Burgess's *Nothing Like the Sun*. As a matter of fact, *The Late Mr Shakespeare* could be seen as an immense tapestry that interweaves the proven facts of Schoenbaum's documentary life with many of the legends, speculations and stories that the scholar discards in his *Shakespeare's Lives*, laced with Rabelesian episodes in the line of Nye's own novel *Falstaff*, with numerous tales and fantastic stories, as well as with the echoes of many writers, from Edgar Allan Poe to Dylan Thomas, from Ludwig Wittgenstein to John Dover Wilson—the postscript mentions sixty-six. Robert Nye's fictional vision of Shakespeare and his times is shaped by the texts

of the present as much as by those of the past, not only the so-called Shakespeare documents but everything else ever written about him, and everything the novelist's imagination incorporates into the portrayal, from a mock test on the author to a recipe for pudding, from medical nostrums and remedies to a manuscript page of the play *More*.

Pickleherring's work attests to the impossibility of ever writing a definite biography of William Shakespeare, but the novel articulates this impossibility not as a reason for regret but for celebration, and Shakespeare emerges in the novel as much more than the sum of the stories about him. What has been said about Julian Barnes's *Flaubert's Parrot* is indeed true of *The Late Mr Shakespeare*, a fiction about "attempting to write about a writer one admires ... in different ways, serious and nonsensical, without ever getting any closer to this subject than one can by reading his novels or letters" (Fokkema 1999: 45). The crucial difference is that in the case of Shakespeare there are no texts beyond his literary works. Our interest in Shakespeare the man is a consequence of our fascination with the words he left behind, and thus the irreverent episodes in which Shakespeare the man is presented as coarse, mean and full of failings cannot in Pickleherring's view tarnish the power of what he considers the English language itself speaking through his works. He explicitly says at the beginning of his biography that he only tells the tales and stories about Shakespeare that he has heard and insists: "You are not required to believe any one of them. Nor is it necessary to salvation that you should" (2001: 38). Pickleherring is not concerned with plausibility and his narrative is opposed to the spirit of conventional biographies of the Bard. If we compare the presentation of Pickleherring's biography with the introduction to Park Honan's well-received biography of the same year, for instance, we see that a major concern of the serious biographer, not stretching plausibility, is of no relevance for the fictional biographer, who feels free to play with the facts and uses his imagination to create, or as he claims, record outrageous incidents and stories that do not belong in the realm of history writing. Honan makes his position very clear from the beginning: "Imaginative reconstructions and elaborate psychological theories about him can be amusing; but, for me, they strain credulity" (ix). It is evident that the language of archaeological precision that Honan uses to describe the task of former biographers runs counter to the explosion of fantasy and carnivalesque excess that guides

Pickleherring. For Honan the major effort of previous biographers has been “in a sense to clean the bones of the ‘Shakespeare documents’ or to separate facts from myths and errors” (ix), but even his biography cannot help but include passages of imaginative speculation, as for instance his reconstruction of Shakespeare’s routine at school or his envisioning of his time as a country teacher. While the serious biographer has to choose what seems more plausible, Pickleherring absorbs and regurgitates every story that has ever been propounded about Shakespeare’s life. While a professional biographer strives to create a portrait of the Bard that readers may accept as the true one, or as close to the true man as possible, Robert Nye is creating his own portrait of the man and arguing a case for the right to possess him just as we possess his words: in one sense, through our direct contact with the text, but in a wider sense mediated by the cultural construct that has been erected through the generations around him. No other fictional biography of Shakespeare written to date is as inclusive as *The Late Mr Shakespeare*, a parody of conventional biographies that flaunts an exuberant knowledge of what has been written and speculated about William Shakespeare’s life since the seventeenth century in the voice of its Falstaff-like narrator. The novel argues, like Samuel Schoenbaum’s or Gary Taylor’s scholarly works, that each age has constructed an image of Shakespeare to suit its needs. The vision of Shakespeare at the turn of the millennium, Pickleherring’s implausibly postmodern biography suggests, is still kaleidoscopic and multiple. He introduces his biography with an epigraph from Edmund Spenser’s *The Tears of the Muses* (1591), “Our pleasant Willy, ah! Is dead of late,” a passage that until the twentieth century was associated with Shakespeare after Dryden wrongly made the attribution. Pickleherring’s biography and Mrs Shakespeare’s memoirs in these two novels show that, just as well as in academic circles, in contemporary fiction *our* Willy is indeed very much alive.

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