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Brian McClinton on the Bard as buffoon

## Shakespeare in Love

**S**EEING IS BELIEVING. Perhaps; but sometimes it is a confirmation of disbelief. *Shakespeare in Love* adds weight to the contention of heretics that William of Stratford didn't write a word of the works ascribed to him.

William is the most famous nonentity in history. He left no manuscripts, no books, no letters, no prose works on contemporary events, and no poems in praise of friends or fellow writers. In terms of the life of the mind, he was truly William the Silent. His known life was preoccupied with the mundane externals of acting, tax evasion, property ownership, money lending and selling corn and malt. It is often said that, alas, we know so little about him, but more likely there is really little to know.

Henry James was 'haunted by the conviction that the divine William is the biggest and most successful fraud ever practised on a patient world'. And I am sure he is right. Shakespeare's early plays were indeed, as the film suggests, performed in Henslowe's theatres, yet his name is strangely absent from Henslowe's Diary, unlike that of other playwrights, though many of the plays are entered; the name Shakespeare was frequently appropriated by others without any apparent protest; William's death in 1616 went totally unnoticed outside his own close circle; the plays were apparently revised between 1616 and 1623, the year of the First Folio; the Folio itself includes a deliberate dummy mask full of anatomical and dress inaccuracies; and there were contemporary allusions to doubts about his ability to pen the works.

It is, as Emerson lamented, impossible to marry this man to the verse, and *Shakespeare in Love* doesn't even try. Instead the author is portrayed as a chancer and buffoon who didn't really know what he was writing but who worked by sudden flashes of inspiration, greatly assisted by those around him. Thus a street preacher attacks the two nearby theatres by saying



'a plague on both your houses', and Will (Joseph Fiennes) snaps up the trifle for his play.

That play is initially *Romeo and Ethel, the Pirate's Daughter*. Somehow, out of total chaos, it becomes *Romeo and Juliet*. The inspiration for this transformation comes from Shakespeare's love affair with Viola de Lesseps (Gwyneth Paltrow) who, disguised as a male to further her acting ambition, has been given the part of Romeo. To suggest that great art is directly inspired by emotional 'highs' - for example, the line from the play "stay but a little, I will come again" is composed after an orgasm! - surely distorts and trivialises the act of (artistic!) creation.

The film also subscribes to the *Casablanca* school of great works: the writers of that film made it up as they went along, yet it became a masterpiece. All this is, of course, a travesty of the self-conscious genius who was the real author, and we have to ask why popular entertainment insists on denigrating the efforts of great artists in this way. The real master mind is probably whirling in his grave. On second thoughts, since Ben Jonson affirms that Francis Bacon could rarely spare, or pass by, a jest, perhaps he is having a good laugh.

True, it's only an entertainment and not meant to be taken seriously. But nothing is ever that simple.

Westerns were only entertainments, yet for decades they demonised native American Indians and thus contributed to a culture of discrimination. The assumptions sink in and help to formulate our outlook on the world. *Shakespeare in Love* may literally claim poetic licence to treat the personality of the millennium in whatever way it likes, but it cannot escape responsibility for perpetuating the myth of the 'unconscious' genius misconception of literature's colossus.

To be fair, the film's irreverent, *Monty Python* tone suddenly vanishes when the troupe perform the play itself before a real audience. Then it becomes pious, some might even say mawkish. I liked this switch and felt that perhaps the approach somehow worked by drawing us in to an affecting appreciation of the great tragedy. After all, as Ben Jonson advised in his poem 'To the Reader' in the First Folio, if we want to know the real Shakespeare we must look, not on his picture, but his book.

*Shakespeare in Love*, is very much a packaged commodity, mindful of the American box office. It throws in bits and pieces to please everybody: scholarly allusions to flatter the learned; a beautiful couple in love to appeal to the youth audience; a whiff of satire to amuse fans of alternative comedy; a dose of authentic setting to interest the heritage industry; and a watery ending to cash in on *Titanic* mania.

There isn't much in the way of enlightenment here. It tells us nothing about the author of Shakespeare except to confirm that William, through the compounded errors of four centuries, has had greatness thrust upon him. This Will would be more at home with plates and bowls and second-best beds than with the real Shakespeare enterprise of 'shaking a lance, as brandish'd at the eyes of ignorance' and of promoting the advancement of learning through the medium of dramatic entertainment.