Kenneth Branagh's Ultimate Shakespeare: *All Is True*

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Abstract
Despite the financial potential of all things Shakespearean and the degree of freedom granted by gaps in Shakespeare's biography, only a few biopics have been produced. *All Is True* (2018), directed by Kenneth Branagh, is the latest re-telling of Shakespeare's life, the huge cultural capital of which mostly lies in its starring Branagh himself as Shakespeare alongside an all-star cast of long-Shakespearean iconic actors. *All Is True* is a family drama addressing a semi-neglected period of the playwright's life, and it is imbued with a gloomy and melancholic atmosphere that clashes with more usual representations of Shakespeare's mythicised glory. However, what I argue in this paper is that the bleakness inhering *All Is True* is made in fact functional to a consecration of both Shakespeare as *the* greatest writer of all time and of Kenneth Branagh as *the* greatest interpreter of his words. The film's bittersweet celebration of Shakespeare's genius through the reiterated emphasis on the uniqueness of his language is all the more compelling because it takes place far from London, and yet defeats the yoke of stagnating country family life. When Branagh takes Shakespeare back home to Stratford, he exploits the scientific endorsement of the Shakespeare Birthplace Trust as a way to state his film's historical accuracy. *All Is True*, nonetheless, mingles fact and fiction, but Branagh prevents any charges of speculation by indirectly comparing himself to Shakespeare: just like the Bard, he is filling in the biographical gaps with sparks of his own genius to write his own Shakespearean play.
Key-words: Kenneth Branagh, Shakespeare, cultural capital, fact vs fiction.

1. Shakespeare returns home

As an emblematic instance of the allure exerted by the biographies of writers who have made it into the Western literary canon, the life of William Shakespeare has long been at the centre of scholarly and popular interest, a cultural phenomenon that has been increasingly

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boosted by twentieth- and twenty-first-century celebrity culture. The scarce body of biographical information we possess about Shakespeare has strongly appealed both to the scientific community and to fictional writers, thus inspiring a remarkable amount of scientific and literary biographies over the past thirty years[1]. Shakespeare's life is "a text full of gaps" that "particularly lends itself to appropriation" (Franssen 2016: 2): confronted with little documentation and with the fact that Shakespeare wrote essentially nothing about himself (Bevington 2010: 3), the serious biographer usually "attempt[s] to stick to the known facts where possible and clearly present [their] ways of filling in the silences as just speculation", whereas fictional writers often "weave their […] plots on a loom of authentical facts and factoids" (Franssen 2016: 2-3).

If compared to written biographies, however, the number of biopics that have been produced for cinema and television so far strikes as curiously limited: *Shakespeare In Love* (1998, dir. John Madden), *A Waste of Shame* (2005, dir. John McKey), *Miguel Y William* (2007, dir. Inés París), *Anonymous* (2011, dir. Roland Emmerich), *Upstart Crow* (2016-2018, dir. Matt Lipsey and Richard Boden) and *All Is True* (2018, dir. Kenneth Branagh), which will be analysed in this paper as part of Branagh's lifelong Shakespearean 'politics'. Such a patent shortage of screen biographies is even more surprising if we consider the enduring success of Shakespearean adaptations throughout the history of cinema and television[2], the long cinematic engagement with the lives of literary authors (Buchanan 2013: 4) and, above all, the huge cultural cachet and financial potential inhering all things Shakespearean (French 2006: 16ff; Blackwell 2018: 40ff).

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[1] Recent scientific biographies written by Shakespearean scholars include: Duncan-Jones (2000), Greenblatt (2004), Bevington (2010), Holderness (2011), and Potter (2012). Shakespeare's countless fictional biographies span across literary genres – novels, short stories, graphic novels, comics, etc.; for further details, see Franssen (2014, 2016).

[2] The Shakespeare on Screen field of research has become increasingly rich and varied since the last decade of the 20th century; critical contributions on this topic provide accounts on intermedial adaptations of Shakespeare's plays from different theoretical and methodological perspectives. See Rothwell (1999), Cartmell (2000), Rosenthal (2000), and Jackson (2007).

The biopic is a genre deeply relying on the combination of fact and fiction (Minier and Pennacchia 2014: 1-31; Cartmell and Polasek 2020: 1-10), an adaptation of sources belonging to different media and having a different scientific prestige (Minier and Pennacchia 2014: 7-11): being "more fictional than fact, a critical construct, not a 'real thing'" (Cartmell and Polasek 2020: 3), the biopic as such requires that liberties should be taken by the adaptor(s) to fill the hermeneutic gaps with their own imagination. The degree of freedom granted by the dearth of biographical material – though challenging and appealing (Potter 2005: 1) – becomes however more problematic in the case of Shakespeare, who is a 'canonical', popular and yet very enigmatic figure about whom the opposition fact-versus-fiction has to be negotiated alongside the controversial issues of authorship and 'bardolatry'.

The question of historical authenticity and fidelity that is intrinsic in the biopic genre is at the core of *All Is True*, as the film's title (a reference to the original title of *Henry VIII*)[3] aptly – though provocatively – foregrounds. This latest re-telling of Shakespeare's life was directed by Kenneth Branagh in 2018 and features a screenplay by comedian Ben Elton as well as an all-star cast including iconic and longstanding Shakespearean actors such as Judi Dench (as Anne Shakespeare) and Ian McKellen (as Henry Wriothesley, Earl of Southampton). Twelve years after *As You Like It* (2006), his last screen adaptation of a Shakespearean play, Branagh comes full circle and seems to put an end to the long series of films that has turned him into an extremely popular Shakespearean actor and director and into the mediator of Shakespeare for Hollywood and the American public (French 2006)[4]. The "outstanding Branagh marketing phenomenon" (French 2006: 75) is arguably mostly responsible for the exportation of Shakespeare overseas for contemporary audiences, and it has certainly made it possible for

[3] *Henry VIII*, a collaborative effort of Shakespeare and John Fletcher, was probably written in 1613 and was initially called *All Is True*. However, *The Famous History of the Life of King Henry the Eight* became the official title of the history play-tragicomic romance no later than the 1623 First Folio edition (Greenblatt et al. 2016: 3269). All references to Shakespeare's texts are to this edition.

[4] *Henry V* (1989), *Much Ado About Nothing* (1993), *Hamlet* (1995), *Love's Labour's Lost* (2000), *As You Like It* (2006). For detailed accounts of Kenneth Branagh's films, refer to Hatchuel (2000) and Crowl (2006).

Branagh himself to become a figure so intimately associated with the Bard to be able to access and fully exploit the huge cultural cachet that comes with him and his works (Blackwell 2018: 42).

With *All Is True* Branagh brings Shakespeare back home, to the British film industry (TKBC Limited)[5] and to Stratford-upon-Avon, the very and only place where 'Shakespeariness' comes to stand for Britishness; the decision to re-import Shakespeare to the UK, at such a critical moment in national history and at this particular time in Branagh's career as a director, seems to be part of an on-going process of self-fashioning whereby Branagh has been promoting himself as *the* Shakespearean interpreter of the new millennium for Anglophone audiences. This complex cultural and ideological operation started at the end of the 1980s, with *Henry V*, what has been defined as the "The Kenneth Branagh Era" (Crowl 2003)[6] and was rounded off with Branagh's highly symbolical Shakespearean performance during the Opening Ceremony of the 2012 London Olympic Games[7].

The relevance of *All Is True* as a somehow conclusive manifesto of Branagh's appropriation of Shakespeare, of course, lies in having Branagh, who has played many of the Bard's most acclaimed

[5] *All Is True* was interestingly produced not by a major company but by Branagh's own TKBC Limited, a minor production company which had at the time only produced television films (all starring Branagh) and which had previously been called "The Shakespeare Film Company Limited" (1998-2018). The shift to the acronym supposedly standing for The Kenneth Branagh's Company is highly telling in light of the main argument of this paper.

[6] Samuel Crowl labels the long decade from 1989 to 2001 "The Kenneth Branagh Era", following Kenneth S. Rothwell's condensation of the history of Shakespearean films into five acts: Act I, the silent era (1899-1929); Act II, the 1930s with Hollywood's first attempts to merge Shakespeare with popular films; Act III, the great decades following World War II with Laurence Olivier, Orson Welles, Akira Kurosawa, Grigori Kozintsev, and Franco Zeffirelli; Act IV from Roman Polanski's *Macbeth* to Branagh's *Henry V* (1971-1989), as a time when Shakespeare almost disappeared from films; Act V, "The Age of Branagh" (1989-2000) as a revival of the Shakespeare on film genre (Crowl 2003: 1; Rothwell 1999).

[7] On this extremely mediatic occasion, Branagh performed Caliban's most famous lines (III.ii.128-36) while impersonating the great civil engineer Isambard Kingdom Brunel (1806-1859) in front of a group of ecstatic nineteenth-century gentlemen and, behind them, a group of common people; he was holding Shakespeare's *The Tempest* as a preacher would hold the Bible and spoke from above a hill-pulpit to the epic tunes of Edward Elgar's "Enigma Variations-Nimrod".

roles, now starring as Shakespeare himself, as if this film were a final chapter in a larger biopic discourse in which all of Branagh's previous Shakespearean roles figure. Furthermore, *All Is True* is not meant or advertised as a romanticised re-telling of Shakespeare's life (as in the case, for example, of Madden's *Shakespeare In Love*) but as a biopic aiming to be as authentic and truthful as possible, insofar as the openly fictional events that inform the plot are strongly counterbalanced by references to the biographical facts we do know about him from historical records. As a way to state and certify his film's historical accuracy and fidelity, Branagh resorts to the corpus of academic research on Shakespeare's life and especially exploits the highly prestigious scientific seal of the Shakespeare Birthplace Trust, which not only opened Shakespeare's birthplace houses to the camera as a setting but is also present in a long commentary section ("Visiting Stratford: The Story Behind") included in the DVD bonus material whose aim is to "take claims behind *All Is True* and test them alongside archives, library books and museum objects", as Paul Edmondson explains[8].

Yet, as we shall see, in spite of the huge cultural capital of a biopic on Shakespeare starring Branagh and boasting celebrities of the Shakespearean theatrical pantheon, *All Is True* strikes as an unexpected – and somehow disappointing – product that does not meet the degree of grandeur one might expect from a film with such marketing potential. As the Italian translation of the title (*Casa Shakespeare*) aptly suggests, *All Is True* is a family drama about what happens to Shakespeare in his last three years (1613-1616), when he retires to Stratford after the Globe's fire; it therefore deals with a semi-ignored period of the Bard's life that does not share the allure of his glorious London career. Shakespeare is portrayed as a middle-

[8] The Shakespeare Birthplace Trust (SBT) is an educational charity based in Stratford-upon-Avon which was founded in 1847 with the aim of preserving Shakespeare's birthplace properties as national memorials, as well as historical records, books and objects of antiquity related to his life and works. The DVD section "Visiting Stratford: The Story Behind" includes interviews with Paul Edmondson (Head of Research at the SBT and Branagh's Shakespeare consultant for the film together with Russell Jackson, Shakespeare Institute, University of Birmingham), Amy Hurst (Archivist at the SBT), Rosalyn Sklar (Museum Collections Officer at the SBT), Phil Watson (Period Interpreter at the SBT), and Stanley Wells (Honorary President of the SBT).

aged writer who comes home and has to face the family he has neglected for decades, has to fight to fix the relationship with his wife Anne and daughters Susanna (Lydia Wilson) and Judith (Kathryn Wilder), and has to deal with sexual scandals, financial difficulties and local quarrels: as Branagh makes clear, his Shakespeare is a man "in that moment of life when you have to face your own mortality, your family and your sense of who you are and what your life means or meant" (*All Is True*, "The Bard's Reckoning"). Due to the chosen biographical period, the process of writing, which is often at the core of literary biopics mostly engaging with authorial creativity (Buchanan 2013: 4-5), is completely missing from the film, and the London figures that do appear in it (the Earl of Southampton and Ben Jonson, played by Gerard Horan) seem to be mostly functional to enable Shakespeare to take stock of his life coming to a close.

Moreover, *All Is True* is imbued with an omnipresent and persistent gloomy atmosphere largely obtained through the use of dark colours and dull lights, which conveys a strong sense of melancholic decline and further fosters the issues of loss, mourning, approaching death and guilt that inform the film. This feeling of bleakness is certainly due to the fact that Shakespeare himself is at the twilight of his days and has to eventually come to terms with the death of his son Hamnet (who died at 11 in 1596); however, it also springs from the representation of Stratford as a claustrophobic, dreary and narrow-minded country village whose inhabitants are mostly stereotyped in ways that often verge on the grotesque. The murky and sombre colours permeating the general atmosphere in Stratford are exacerbated in all indoor shots, which are mostly plunged into almost complete darkness and in which characters are only illuminated by extremely dim candlelight, as if to create a neat contrast with the bright, glorious days Shakespeare must have experienced in London – which came to an end when the last and greatest light (the Globe fire) was lit. In these domestic sequences, Shakespeare often has to struggle with sad gazes and deep, long silences from his family, let old grief come back to the surface, and face his own failures (as husband and father) and those of his children (as daughters and wives). As the Earl of Southampton remarks when he visits Shakespeare in his hometown, this is in fact a very small life for a man whom he saw as the greatest poet that ever existed.

The several outdoor natural scenes, mainly set in the flower garden Shakespeare is growing as a homage to his lost son, are, by contrast, sometimes brighter and airier. Here one may indeed perceive a sense of peace and redemption offered by the close contact with nature; and yet, it is always a bittersweet feeling in which rebirth cannot be separated from unredeemable loss, in which digging metaphorically stands for growing a new life but, at the same time, for burying an old one. While resorting to the topical dichotomy between Stratford and London, between country and city (Franssen 2016: 77), the whole film in fact endorses a depiction of life in the countryside that is very distant from the imagery of rural England traditionally advertised as an ideal, Edenic place of self-identification in contrast with the cosmopolitan degeneration associated with cities (namely with London), distant from the mythic representation steeped in the Elizabethan Age and later revived as a way to oppose the widespread urbanisation and depopulation of rural areas from the last decade of the nineteenth century (Marzola 1999: 57-58).

The demythologised return to Shakespeare's autochthonous origins, a feature that is in line with recent trends in the biopic genre (Cartmell and Polasek 2020: 2-3), and the global sense of dreariness inhering *All Is True* seems to resonate with – and even be reinforced by – the fierce debate over the future relationships between the UK and the European Union and by the domestic political crises of the past few years. At such a momentous time in British history as the post-Brexit referendum period, issues of separation, abandonment and geographical (and national) belonging have indeed acquired a different, more negatively nuanced connotation. As an icon of the British culture worldwide and epitome of Britain's intelligentsia, Branagh might thus be voicing the rampant discontent and resentment felt by most of the "Remain" voters in the UK, when he counterpoises in *All Is True* the metropolitan and cosmopolitan mentality that characterises London (as much in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries as it does today) to the provincialism and chauvinistic nationalism more commonly associated with the country. Furthermore, the nostalgic feeling deriving from Shakespeare's being staged as an aged and mournful man approaching his death might also echo the latent disenchantment and sense of decline arising from the fact that nowadays Britishness is being associated with old age

to an unprecedented extent: the Royal Family has always been the harbinger of what it means to be British all over the world, but now those identity values are not only embodied by the oldest monarch and heir to the throne in the country's history, but also often reflect conservative and traditional cultural paradigms with which younger and more dynamic generations hardly identify.

However, although it clearly clashes with more iconic representations of Shakespeare's mythicised glory, in this paper I would like to argue that all the sense of desolation pervading *All Is True* may not be utterly detrimental but, on the contrary, may even be made functional to the (self-)consecration of both Shakespeare as *the* greatest writer of all times and of Branagh as *the* greatest interpreter of his words, which this film seems to underscore.

2. "You can enchant the multitude with a scratch of your quill"

In spite of the unfashionable period in the life of its protagonist in which the film is set and of the dreariness with which it is infused, *All Is True* shines forth as an open celebration of Shakespeare's poetry: not only is it scattered with references to poetic writing in general – namely in the subplot involving Hamnet's poems – but it is also characterised by a remarkably reiterated emphasis on the uniqueness of Shakespeare as a poet (more than a playwright). The deep reverence for both the author and his texts, a prerequisite for Shakespeare to be marketed to cinema (Cartmell 1999: 37), paves the way for an absolute consecration of Shakespeare's language as the quintessence of his greatness. This mirrors and takes to extremes one of the distinguishing features pertaining to Branagh's Shakespearean adaptions, that is, his programmatic utter devotion to the 'authentic' words of the Bard as well as his faith in their invigorating effect on audiences (Pennacchia 2008: 79).

Although Shakespeare is represented in *All Is True* in that time of his life when he is probably no longer writing, he is thoroughly praised as a matchless writer who, as Ben Jonson meaningfully acknowledges in one of the final shots, "[has] written the greatest body of plays that ever were or will be" (Elton 2018: 90). The film's homage to what seems to be singled out as the core of Shakespeare's genius mainly comes in the shape of a long sequence involving a visit the Earl of Southampton pays to him in Stratford, which seems

to have been included in the script with the precise purpose of eulogising Shakespeare's verses:

> EARL: "You […] are the son of Apollo, Will. God of poetry, god of truth. The finest, the most complete and most beautiful mind, I warrant, that ever existed in this world. […] You can enchant the multitude with a scratch of your quill […]. Your talent has a greater scope than all the other poets combined. […] You must write again, Will. London needs you, I need you. We have only Jonson now".
>
> SHAKESPEARE: "Who laughs at me because I speak no Greek and don't know whether Bohemia has a coast".
>
> EARL: "Oh, Christ, Will, why do you care what he thinks? You wrote *King Lear*".
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> SHAKESPEARE: "I care because it matters, Your Grace. Well, in England, it matters. I have what I have upon my own merit, and for that I'm suspect. Perhaps I'll always be suspect. But I have my money and I have my houses, and I have my coat of arms".
>
> EARL: "And you have your verses. Great Christ, man, you have your poetry. Such poetry. Such beautiful, beautiful poetry. And some of it was writ for me". (Elton 2018: 42-5)

The prestige and supremacy bestowed upon Shakespeare's language by Henry Wriothesley culminates when Sonnet 29 is twice performed at the end of the scene, first by Shakespeare and then by the Earl (pp. 45-7), as a way to commemorate their past and unquenched platonic love bond. Here, the lines of the sonnet are presented as doubly prophetic: they foretold that Shakespeare would find comfort to his miseries in the memory of his own love for the Fair Youth, and they witness – by being quoted in a twenty-first century film – the immortality Shakespeare's words have gained (as is well known, one of the core issues of the whole sonnet sequence): "I've grown old […], but the beauty I inspired in you will be forever young. And in a thousand years from now, when people read those lines, I will be young. Alive still in the heart of lovers yet unborn" (p. 45). Such celebration is echoed throughout the film by references to some of Shakespeare's lines, which are mostly incorporated in the dialogues as explicit quotations[9] to pay homage to his fame. They

[9] *Titus Andronicus*, V.i.128-44 (Elton 2018: 31); *The Tempest*, IV.i.156-58 (p. 79); *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, II.i.249-56 (pp. 85-6); *Cymbeline*, IV.ii.257-74 (p. 86).

are also provided with inspirational, pseudo-thaumaturgic powers, inasmuch as when Shakespeare comes home he infuses his devotion to written words into his illiterate wife and daughter: by the end of the film, both Anne and Judith are able to read – and not simply perform by heart – the lines from *Cymbeline*'s "Fear no more" song as a funeral oration for their late husband and father (*Cymbeline*, IV.ii.257-74; Elton 2018: 86).

Moreover, what is being praised and solemnised in Branagh's biopic is Shakespeare's talent not as the result of scholarly learning (even though he did attend the Grammar School in Stratford) or theatrical practice, but as pure genius, as an innate faculty the Bard has been endowed with, a transcendental gift urging him to write. Being a sacred talent one could not simply choose to ignore and dismiss, Shakespeare's creative genius is thus refashioned as a divine call, a moral duty that justifies all of his personal and family faults and failures, as clearly implied in a conversation with Anne: "Through my genius, I've brought fame and fortune to this house! […] Would you have me ignore […] a gift from God Almighty so that I could stay here in Stratford and be a bloody glove maker […]?" (p. 50).

As if in an attempt to provide an answer to the endless doubts about the origin of Shakespeare's knowledge of the world and erudition that have thrived within both the scholarly and the popular debate in the last decades, in *All Is True* Shakespeare's inborn ingenuity is appointed as the only source of his sheer artistic genius; such a further focus on Shakespeare's works as the outcomes of a prodigious visionary mind mainly emerges in a highly emblematic dialogue between the Bard and a young student named Henry, who approaches him in Hamnet's garden to question him about the genesis of his work:

> HENRY: "Mr Shakespeare, […] I just wanted to ask how you knew."
> SHAKESPEARE: "Knew what?"
> HENRY: "Everything. […] There is no corner of this world you have not explored, no geography of the soul which you cannot navigate. How? How do you know?"
> SHAKESPEARE: "What I know, if I know, I don't say that I do, I have imagined."
> HENRY: "But they say you left school at fourteen. You've never travelled. Imagined from what?"

SHAKESPEARE: "From myself. […] Everything I've ever done, everything I've ever seen, every book I've ever read, conversation I've ever had […]. If you want to be a writer and speak to others and for others, speak first for yourself. Search within. Consider the contents of your own soul, your humanity. And if you're honest with yourself, then whatever you write, *all is true*". (Elton 2018: 22-24)

Such consecration of Shakespeare throughout *All Is True* might seem to be in contrast with the general melancholic atmosphere conveyed by the film and with the startlingly ordinary life that Shakespeare is living, according to the Earl of Southampton, after his retirement to Stratford. However, this exaltation seems to me to be an even more powerful statement exactly *because* it takes place far from London, far from theatres, far from the spotlight; it appears to be amplified by the fact that Shakespeare's artistic genius is eulogised even though he himself is represented as a restless, aging man, and even though he is now living in a provincial village, pestered by Puritan morals and ruled by the close-minded country gentry that Sir Thomas Lucy (the local Lord) epitomises: as Branagh's *All Is True* seems to be declaring, Shakespeare's words are so exceptional and everlasting as to survive the Globe's fire, defeat the yokes of stagnating country family life and even outlive the man who has engendered them.

3. The problem of truth: fiction as artistic genius

As previously remarked, *All Is True* is a biopic which – despite its apparently programmatic title – mingles fact and fiction to a great extent: as is often the case with this genre, the extremely accurate historical reconstruction of early seventeenth-century Stratford and of those events we do know from records and archives of the last three years of Shakespeare the man are counterpoised by several completely fictional episodes giving shape to a plot which is in fact heavily speculative, especially as regards the story of Hamnet's suicide and the discovery that his youthful poems were instead written by his talented twin sister.

However, unlike many literary biographers who often "give their speculations the status of facts" (Franssen 2016: 2), Branagh openly states that his biographical account is strongly fictional and that it was informed both by what we know about Shakespeare's retirement

in Stratford and by what we know he was particularly interested in at the time. He does so in the Q&A session included in the DVD, which stands out as a telling "example of the contemporary auteur's construction and promotion of a self" (Corrigan 1998: 51)[10]. By doing so, I would suggest, Branagh prevents any charges of disrespectful and irreverent treatment of the life of Britain's literary milestone through an insightful redefinition (and, therefore, legitimisation) of speculation in his film as artistic genius. Shakespeare "knew no more about the details in between the facts of the life of Henry VIII than we know about [him]", Branagh aptly points out in the included interview, and by doing so he indirectly compares himself to Shakespeare: *All Is True* is not mere fiction but a play of his own. Just like the Bard, Branagh has collapsed timeframes and depicted unreal events, thus filling in the biographical gaps with sparks of his own gifted visionary imagination that can as well go beyond what history has handed down.

As a way to further entitle himself to re-tell Shakespeare's life through a series of incidents and encounters as the core of a film in which the issue of truth is centre-stage, Branagh also exploits a privileged connection he has established between himself and Shakespeare the man: as he confesses to his interviewer, Branagh has always felt both inspired and comforted by the humble origins and lack of classical education he shares with Shakespeare, as well as by the fact that they were both fascinated by theatre at a very young age even though they lived in a social context in which theatre was perceived as something unfamiliar. In light of this, that Branagh should select this period in the life of Shakespeare for *All Is True* comes as no surprise, for no other period would have enabled him to create an exclusive individual and artistic bond between himself and the Bard and, at the same time, to merge absolute fidelity and reverence with unrestrained creative ingenuity. Such choice might therefore be interpreted as a way to claim an equal cultural status for himself: this film is, in fact, not about Shakespeare, but about Branagh interpreting Shakespeare.

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[10] In his volume dedicated to filmic paratexts as "acts of meaning construction", Jonathan Gray refers to interviews included in a DVD's bonus material and advocates for their role "in attempting to resurrect the figure of the author that literary and cultural studies theory has long thought dead" (Gray 2010: 52, 19).

If we read *All Is True* as Branagh's own Shakespearean play and reverse the common critical claim according to which Shakespeare could have been a filmmaker had he been born in the twentieth century (Lanier 2007, Brode 2000: 6), then also some directorial choices acquire different nuances. The use of gloomy candlelight in indoor scenes, for instance, could be a hint at the early modern indoor playhouse lack of artificial lights; the decision to cast Ian McKellen (who is now 80) as the Earl of Southampton (who was 40 in 1613) and Judi Dench (85) as Anne (57-58 in 1613), might be perceived not only a way of "celebrating Shakespeareanism" (Blackwell 2018: 3-7), but also as an example of what commonly happened on the Shakespearean stage (though in the reverse): no matter how old the actor is, the audience is forced into suspending their disbelief and trusting dramatic fiction.

As for the plot itself, *All Is True* does not merely include imaginary events but is in fact crafted as an early modern play relying on manifold *topoi* and dynamics of Shakespeare's canon: it is a family drama revolving around the loss of a child, the father-daughter relationship, marriage, male heirs, and the division of one's estate; it is inhabited by slandered women, mistaken twins, outspoken daughters and ghosts; it deals with love in all its forms, including the homoerotic one; and, finally, it opens with a man who has lost his powers, develops around a mystery to be solved and ends with a final reconciliation. This connection between Branagh's and Shakespeare's 'plays' also emerges at the intermedial level by means of an iconographical reference to John Everett Millais's *Ophelia* (1851-52), arguably the most iconic representation of the death of Ophelia (*Hamlet*, IV.iv), in the flashback showing Hamnet's drowned body.

Even though many of the narrative lines unfolding during the film belong to the realm of fiction, the issue of truth is absolutely pivotal as in many Shakespearean plays: the question of 'what is true' haunts the characters of the film and keeps being posed in relation to Shakespeare's hallucinated visions, to the slanders against his daughters and to the mysteries surrounding the memory of Hamnet. However, the conclusion we are led to draw by the end of *All Is True* seems to be, paradoxically, that "*nothing* is ever true" (Elton 2018: 2), as Judith nihilistically declares: that is why, when Shakespeare has finally solved the mystery, Hamnet's

ghost appears one last time to thank him for having finished his story – so that he can rest in peace – and, just before disappearing, reminds his father that "we are such stuff as dreams are made on, and our little life is rounded with a sleep" (*The Tempest*, IV.i.156-58; Elton 2018: 79).

Just like Prospero's illusionistic spectacles on the island of *The Tempest*, the biopic that Branagh provocatively entitles *All Is True* in fact emerges as fictional, in spite of being an extremely accurate historical reconstruction informed by scholarly certified facts. What seems to be implied is, then, that this film is not (or not only) the "human story behind a dark and little known period in the life of William Shakespeare", as the DVD back cover reads, but the imaginative product of the visionary mind Branagh shares with both Prospero and Shakespeare. Taglines on the film's paratexts, always displaying a "constitutive role in creating textuality" (Gray 2010: 7)[11], advertise *All Is True* as the "one last story [Shakespeare had] to tell – his own" (on the DVD front cover) and "the final act of the world's greatest playwright" (on the film's poster). However, it is not Shakespeare – either as a voice-over narrator or through flashbacks – who tells his own story but Branagh, who re-invents it and, by doing so, turns this final act into his own ultimate act, into a celebration of himself as *the* Shakespearean interpreter whose genius might be compared to his master's.

Branagh's self-consecration already emerges from the image printed on the DVD cover, which differs from the one on the cinema poster as concerns the figure of Shakespeare himself. In both cases, Shakespeare is shown as standing between Anne looking backwards and the Earl of Southampton looking to the right with quills on his hat – and so between his past life and the future endless glory of his works. On the poster Shakespeare is wearing an unbuttoned

[11] Starting from Gérard Genette's theory of paratexts as thresholds between the inside and outside of a literary text, Gray's book investigates the ways in which "hype, synergy, promos, narrative extensions, and various forms of related textuality position, define, and create meaning for film and television" (3). He defines filmic paratexts as "gateways into the text, establishing meanings and frames for decoding" (18), and divides them into "entryway paratexts" determining our entrance to a text (trailers, hype, promos, posters, etc.) and "in medias res paratexts" inflecting our interpretation of a text (DVDs, interviews, commentary tracks, making-of documentaries, etc.).

shirt and is looking ahead, like a pirate who is scanning the horizon and looking forward to a new (last) adventure: a clever appeal to the audience and a successful film promo, even though in *All Is True* Shakespeare's life is anything but adventurous. What we see on the DVD front cover is, instead, a picture of Branagh-Shakespeare strikingly resembling the famous *Chandos Portrait*[12] (c. 1600s) – the same clothes, hair, moustache, beard, earring, gaze, body posture –, the one that is commonly regarded as the best version of Shakespeare as the ingenious creative artist in contrast with more realistic depictions portraying him as a middle-class intellectual (Pennacchia 2008: 108).

This very picture condenses most of the ideological claims that *All Is True* seems to be underscoring: it fully exploits the marketing potential of the most famous living Shakespearean actors in our cultural imagination. Through such an accurate living reproduction of the *Chandos Portrait*, it also suggests that the film seeks to be as truthful as possible; at the same time, however, it is the striking resemblance between Branagh and *this* romanticised version of Shakespeare that consecrates Branagh himself as Shakespeare's ultimate interpreter: the one who possesses an equal artistic gift, the one who is "uncannily like him"[13].

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[12] Attributed to the English painter John Taylor (c. 1585-1651) and now displayed at the National Portrait Gallery, London.

[13] Judi Dench declared that "Ken[neth Branagh]'s more like Shakespeare than anyone I've ever seen playing Shakespeare…uncannily like him" (*All Is True*, "Behind-the-Scenes Dame Judi Dench").

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