Where Would you Fit the Coconuts? The Reinstatement of Sexual Stereotypes in a Mock-Biopic

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Abstract
On 9 May 2016 BBC proposed the first instalment of *Upstart Crow*, a mock-biopic of William Shakespeare written by Ben Elton and starring some of the best comic actors of British television. The timing was impeccable: the series appeared as the planet was united in celebrating Shakespeare, riding on the back of a high number of academic and semi-fictional biographies, which had re-opened controversies on Shakespeare's life and on the authorship of the plays, and called into question the nature of biography as a genre. *Upstart Crow* could meet the audience at different levels and work on the assumption that the composition of the individual plays was closely interlaced to different biographical phases. Here I explore the treatment of sexual stereotypes in the series. The mixture of academic and populist makes such allusions especially difficult to deal with, since they are not located within a firm ideological agenda, but feed on the ambiguity that pervades the whole series.

Key-words: William Shakespeare, mock biography, *Upstart Crow*, gender stereotyping.

Almost ten years after the extremely successful *Blackadder* TV series presented its last instalment on BBC, Paul Weiland directed a short feature film, *Blackadder: Back & Forth* (1999), in which the redoubtable Lord Edmund Blackadder, now a twenty-first-century entrepreneur, and his servant Baldrick embark on a time travel adventure. Among the various historical characters they meet, Blackadder runs (very literally) into a rather apologetic William Shakespeare, played by Colin Firth. After asking him for his autograph, Blackadder punches the playwright, declaring that he is doing so on behalf of "every schoolboy and schoolgirl for the next four hundred years", proceeding then to enumerate some of Shakespeare's iniquities, from the impenetrability of his jokes to

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the obscurity of his language. He then kicks the by now prostrate dramatist, as a vengeance for "Ken Branagh's endless uncut four-hour version of *Hamlet*". As a bemused Shakespeare asks, reasonably enough, "Who is Ken Branagh?", Blackadder answers, "I'll tell him you said that, and I think he'll be very hurt".

A liberating vindication of schooldays' suffering, a wink at actors' delusions of grandeur, and a touch of academic smugness: this short sketch contains *in nuce* many of the elements of the television sitcom, *Upstart Crow*, authored by Ben Elton, who was also one of the authors of *Blackadder*. *Upstart Crow* made its first appearance on 9 May 2016, at the height of the "Shakespeare 400" celebrations: the BBC proposed it as part of its programme of Shakespearean commemorations. It was the first instalment of what was destined to become an extremely fortunate series, a mock-biopic of William Shakespeare that ran for three years and starred some of the best comic actors of British television. The series included a sum total of 20 episodes, occasionally introducing star guests such as Emma Thompson, Ben Miller, and inevitably Kenneth Branagh; at the same time, Elton wrote the script for another Shakespeare biopic, if a more elegiac one – *All Is True* (2018), directed by Kenneth Branagh, who also played the lead.

Put in these terms, *Upstart Crow* sounds like a sophisticated in-joke, but it was also a successful show. Its timing was impeccable: not only did the series appear at a moment in which the planet was united in celebrating one of the world's literary geniuses; it was also riding on the back of a surprisingly high number of academic and semi-fictional biographies, partly motivated by the two anniversaries (2014 and 2016) which had increased the always high interest in the playwright. These biographies had not only re-opened ancient controversies on Shakespeare's life and on the authorship of the plays, but also called into question the very nature of biography as a genre. With its very title alluding to the famous attack against the young playwright attributed to an envious Robert Greene, the sitcom worked on the basis of very good historical and literary research to build a reconstruction of Shakespeare's life that also would take into account his most famous works; at the same time, much of the comedy was based on constant allusions to contemporary England, the most successful running joke being the playwright's reiterated moaning about the unpleasantness of the commute between

London and Stratford, and about the poor standards of English public transport, in itself, a muted reference to the vogue of literary tourism that has developed around the Shakespeare cult (Wardle 2018). In spite of the relatively scant information on Shakespeare's life, therefore, *Upstart Crow* could meet the audience at many different levels and work on the assumption that the composition of the individual plays was closely interlaced to different biographical phases; at the same time, it could rely on the audience being familiar, at least at a superficial level, with Shakespeare and his works for the theatre (some of the most popular sonnets were also alluded to).

A few years before this double anniversary, Helen Hackett had published a monograph, *Shakespeare and Elizabeth*, which shows some prescience, and might be read as a salutary warning. Hackett studied the modern reception of these two historical characters, noting the tendency of later readers, scholars and audiences to imagine a contact, an intellectual exchange, between the Queen and the Poet:

> The pairing of Shakespeare and Elizabeth is in fact one of England's, and Britain's, most entrenched and persistent cultural myths. This imagined golden moment from the nation's history was replayed again and again as England increased in power and confidence and came to preside over the United Kingdom of Great Britain. It became even more prominent in national myth as the British Empire extended its power over vast territories. The double myth of Shakespeare and Elizabeth brought together a man claimed as the greatest writer of all time with a woman claimed as one of the greatest rulers of all time to create a potent and irresistible image of the preeminence of the British nation. (Hackett 2009: 3-4)

Inevitably, while the two anniversaries constituted an academic opportunity for the re-exploration of the themes of biography and authorship, at a more popular level they were the perfect occasion for the reinstatement of the national myth. Like other films based on Shakespeare's life, such as *Shakespeare in Love*, this series could send different messages: for the academic audience, or the lovers of Shakespeareana, it would resurrect and play with a well-established repository of anecdotes and a series of half-forgotten characters, and tread the thin line between historical characters and theatrical personae; for the television-loving audience, it could mock staples of British TV sitcom and evoke facile comparisons with contemporary

issues, from the looming risks of Brexit to the arrogance of Eton-and-Oxford boys.

Its deliberately low-key tone offset and justified its limits: deliberately filmed as a televised sitcom, almost without camera movement, *Upstart Crow* used a very limited number of locations – generally marked by very short cartoons with minimal animation, drawn in the style of an early modern woodcut, indicating the passage from the city to the countryside, or from day to night – and reduced visual effects to the minimum (with a partial exception for S01E05, "What Bloody Man is that?", a parody of *Macbeth*, and the second Christmas special, *A Crow Christmas Carol*, which used some Victorian gothic, nodding to Dickens's story of Scrooge and its numerous cinema adaptations). Canned laughter accompanied the verbal gags, and the very few scenes which included a crowd (as in the case of the première of *Romeo and Juliet* which concluded S02E06) did not present more than a couple of dozen people. Critical reactions tended to see this as a fitting choice, since the everyday, domestic tone of the series was especially praised: James Alsop, writing in *Shakespeare Bulletin*, noted that the great merit of the sitcom was the humanising of the playwright: "this is Shakespeare as we so rarely see him depicted in popular culture: Shakespeare the family man; Shakespeare the working man; Shakespeare, one of us" (Alsop 2018: 351).

At some temporal distance, however, the critical reaction might be reappraised. The humanisation of the genius seems to be following a rather more tortuous agenda than Alsop's words appear to warrant. In claiming Shakespeare as "one of us" Alsop was making a particularly ambiguous statement: does *us* refer to all that part of humanity who is not a genius, or to English people, or to contemporary viewers of sitcoms, or to readers of *Shakespeare Bulletin*? It is arguable that many of the jokes were actually aimed at the latter, playing as they were on academic debates about Shakespeare's persona that can be located well outside his literary works; this was made even more evident by the publication, in 2018, of *Upstart Crow. The Scripts*, a rewriting of the screenplays which bore the rather annoying subtitle *First and Second Folios. Introduced and Fulsomely Annotated by the Author* (Elton 2018)[1]. As has been

[1] I am using this edition also for all quotes from the sitcom dialogues.

noted in the case of *Shakespeare in Love*, which shares with *Upstart Crow* a faux-populist approach, the sitcom "wants to have it both ways, bringing Shakespeare down and setting him up on a pedestal" (Klett 2001: 27). The book rather emphasised this dichotomy: while the sitcom rhythm, and the debonair approach of David Mitchell, the actor playing Shakespeare, had made even the less clear puns and allusions funny, the printed version inevitably slowed the rhythm down, and adopted a top-heavy approach which underlined the fundamentally elitist nature of the whole enterprise.

At the same time, the tongue-in-cheek tone of the series allowed its writer to circumvent a number of thorny obstacles, the foremost of which is our relations with issues of biography, in particular with Shakespearean biography, and of attribution. One very simple instance is the title: as mentioned above, it derives from a famous passage from *A Groatsworth of Wit*, which contains a parody of Shakespeare's line in *3 Henry VI* ("O tiger's heart wrapp'd in a woman's hide!")[2], disparagingly describing the young playwright as "an vpstart Crow, beautified with our feathers, that with his *Tygers hart wrapt in a Players hyde*, supposes he is as well able to bombast out a blanke verse as the best of you" (Cairncross [1957] 1962: xv). The line, and indeed the whole pamphlet *A Groatsworth of Wit*, have been traditionally attributed to Robert Greene; however, in more recent years scholarship has cast serious doubts on the attribution, and as early as 1993 John Jowett was refuting it on the basis of extremely sound research (Jowett 1993). It is not of course the duty of a sitcom to enter into delicate issues of attribution of minor Elizabethan texts; but by having Robert Greene play a prominent role, as the pompous, self-serving villain whose envy of Shakespeare's genius betrays his own woeful shortcomings as a writer, the sitcom alludes to the controversy and elegantly acknowledges its awareness to the academic viewer, while offering an enjoyable portrait of an Elizabethan baddie. As concerns the thornier issue of the attribution of some of Shakespeare's plays to Christopher Marlowe, *Upstart Crow* executes its masterstroke, by portraying Marlowe as a likeable rascal, with no literary talent whatsoever, merrily stealing some of Shakespeare's plays as a cover-up for his activities as a spy.

[2] *Henry VI, Part 3*, I.iv.137. For all quotations from Shakespeare, the edition used is Evans 1974.

In short, the biopic here moves from the life to the afterlife: the subject of this sitcom is not so much the portrait of Shakespeare the man, his life and times. Rather, what we are presented with is Shakespeare the monument, the fighting ground of academics and the despair of schoolchildren. Viewers with an academic background in Shakespearean studies see this as a pleasurable challenge: recognising as many allusions as possible adds to the enjoyment of the experience, as it provides for an escalation of anagnorisis. Even features of Shakespearean stagecraft that have become obsolete with time and the introduction of new media are made elements of an amusing metadiscourse: hence the innumerable occasions on which a character delivers an aside, "which by strict convention nobody can hear" (Elton 2018: 138, 194, 203, 253, *et al.*). The very fact that we have precious few details to cover the bare bones of Shakespeare's life (he was born, he studied, he got married, he migrated to London, he built for himself a successful career) allows the scriptwriter to effect a clever reversal of a critical approach that was typical of nineteenth-century readings of Shakespeare: rather than using biography to explain the writer's treatment of certain themes in his works – love, loss, revenge – Elton uses his works to explain what cannot be known of his biography. The biopic is thus transformed into a collage of well-known episodes from the most famous plays: Macbeth becomes an embarrassingly rumbustious but warm-hearted Scottish neighbour in Stratford; Romeo an annoying and eternally love-sick nephew of Robert Greene's; Caterina Minola is Shakespeare's own daughter, desperate to assert herself in a male-dominated household.

The instance of Caterina Minola, and the treatment of *The Taming of the Shrew* in the series, brings me to a delicate issue which is at the core of this biopic and, although often touched upon, remains (sometimes painfully) unexplored. In the printed version of the script, this episode (S02E05) is preceded by this apologetic introduction:

> The following episode tells the story of Shakespeare writing *The Taming of the Shrew*. In the modern age, when the issue of male entitlement and sexual harassment is finally and properly at the forefront of the national conversation, it seems unlikely that Shakespeare's appalling "comedy" of sexism and sexual abuse will ever be staged again. Unless, of course, someone chooses to play the "irony" card. (Elton 2018: 301)

Playing the irony card is exactly what the episode will do, and the script proposes this introduction as a clever self-absolution. Throughout, the feminist viewpoint is embodied by Kate, Shakespeare's landlady's daughter who is also extremely learned and, one suspects, slightly more intelligent than her tenant. Kate's obsession is the ban against women acting, and this theme appears right at the beginning of the episode:

> BOTTOM: [...] a girl onstage would be nothing but a proslington and a whoreslap.
>
> KATE: Oh, another brilliant argument, Bottom, because delivering blank verse in the character of a dead queen is obviously just code for "Hello, ducks, I'll fondle your fandangles for a farthing".
>
> BOTTOM: Dirty talk won't win your argument.
>
> KATE: Finish your great teen romance, Mr Shakespeare. Let me be your Juliet. (Elton 2018: 303)

Though it does echo wearisome debates on the stereotyping of women actors, the dialogue is also interesting for another stereotype that is silently allowed in: the moral uprightness of women acting appears to be established by the assigned role (a dead queen speaking in blank verse, which inevitably prompts the question of whether an actor is less morally upright if she plays a prostitute), while immediately afterwards Kate switches to the character she is really interested in acting, that is, a love-sick adolescent.

Kate is one of the few completely unhistorical characters of the series, and as such could be used for the exploration of gender-related stereotypes, especially in the comparison with the other three female characters, who are bound both by their historical background and their role *vis-à-vis* the playwright: his wife, Anne, their daughter Susanna, and the innkeeper Lucy, loosely based on Black Luce or Lucy Negro, a Clerkenwell brothel owner whose somewhat tenuous connection with Shakespeare has been exploited in the search for the real identity of the Dark Lady of the Sonnets[3]. The very historicity of these three characters makes them irredeemably flat:

[3] In a provocative piece, Harold Bloom pushes this connection to its very limits while showing its tenuousness (Bloom 2015).

Anne is the wise rustic, patient and strong, to whom the playwright turns for peaceful meditation after the hectic events of each episode; Susanna is the rebellious but ultimately loving adolescent; Lucy is the exotic other, the woman whose foreignness justifies sexual licence and linguistic liberty. Lucy is even reflected in two pallid copies, the two Italian female characters: the *contessa* in S02E03, who re-enacts platitudes on the sexual freedom and awareness of Italian women, and Emilia in S01E04, the dedicatee of Sonnet 130. Family ties on the one hand, and exoticism on the other, appear to deny these female characters any possibility of development, confining them to gender and/or race stereotypes. Kate would seem to offer more possibilities: however, her completely fictive character and the erudition and intelligence with which she is endowed are constantly hemmed in by a rather obvious femininity, exemplified in her presentation in *Upstart Crow. The Script*, where she is presented as "sweet, fragrant and a raging femmo" (Elton 2018: x), and shown in this excerpt of a dialogue with Lucy:

> KATE: I have come to see you, Mistress Lucy, because you are a strong woman. You have independence, your own business. How did you do it?
>
> LUCY: I cut off the penis of the cur who enslaved me, stole his gold, jumped ship at Tilbury and bought a pub.
>
> KATE: I am not sure that will help me get on to the stage.
>
> LUCY: Pah! Lady acting is against the law, Kate, because the law hates women. Your only hope is to do as I did: use a man to get what you need. Oh ho! Will Shakespeare is your friend.
>
> KATE: You think I should cut off Mr Shakespeare's penis?
>
> LUCY: No, no, no, just get him to help you. Persuade him to write a sublime female lead and convince him that only you can play it.
>
> KATE: Oh yes, but how?
>
> LUCY: Ah, ah, eh, eh. Kate, you are a woman. A woman has special skills to move a man
>
> KATE: Wait, you think I should embroider him a cushion cover? I suppose it might work. (Elton 2018: 308)

The scene shows the two women thinking and projecting themselves according to rigidly conventional lines – Lucy as the man-eating dragon, Kate as the headstrong but ultimately sweet bluestocking. This attitude marks the series' lack of courage. The mixture of the academic and the populist mentioned above makes such allusions

especially difficult to deal with, since they are not located within a firm ideological agenda, but rather feed on the ambiguity that pervades the whole series, which tends to rely on the audience's complaisance – given its overall tone of mockery of one of England's great national myths. Such an ideological compromise may be imposed by the very genre of mock-biopic, which founds its fundamental premise on the unstinting veneration the audience feels for the protagonist.

The term *mock-biopic*, it should be noted, still awaits a full definition. Ashley D. Polasek proposes a first description, writing that the term "exists to denote a certain category of fictional film that appropriates the attributes and mechanics of the biopic genre, but that is self-consciously fictional" (Polasek 2020: 319). Thus the self-consciousness implicit in the act of fiction *ipso facto* proposes the mock-biopic as a form of alternative truth. It might be argued, however, that this conscious fictionalisation is part of the film biopic as a genre: Deborah Cartmell and I.Q. Hunter remind us that "films, to the despair of historians, have always taken a 'postmodern' approach to the past, viewing it not as a dull chronicle but as a dynamic resource for exciting stories and poetic, morally uplifting untruths" (Cartmell and Hunter 2001: 2). I believe that the mock-biopic goes one step further than simple self-conscious fictionalisation, since it invites us to reflect on the process of fictionalisation through the tool of irony. Whether this irony is used simply as a form of transcendental synthesis of imagination or whether it is proposed as an open mockery (of the genre or of its chosen protagonist), it is, I believe, a fundamental component of the mock-biopic. The choice of William Shakespeare as the subject of a biopic almost inevitably invites self-reflexive irony, not only because of the weight of the biographical research that has accumulated around the playwright, but also because he determinedly uses the performative word in order to explore the inner self[4].

Shakespearean reception obviously goes beyond academic tittering, and some of the themes, once we lay aside the obscure language or tortuous images, are still resonant in audiences' hearts and minds. We can still sympathise with King Lear as he strips himself of his honours and is reduced to bare humanity: such

[4] I would like to thank Maddalena Pennacchia for discussing this point with me.

bareness is painfully indecent, and it is interesting to see that this particular play is unmentioned in the series. In other cases, the most touching passages are used for an abrupt (and, one may feel, unfair) switch from irony to pathos: thus "Grief fills the room up of my absent child", the devastating monologue in *King John* (III.iv.93-8) in which Constance expresses her grief, and which does not lend itself to any kind of academic parody because of its subject matter rather than its form, becomes the accompaniment to the most tragic fact we know of Shakespeare's biography, that is, the death of his son Hamnet. In this particular instance the script almost takes advantage of the audience: by using an undeniably moving passage, it offers a superimposition of poetic production over biography that is proposed as an indisputable fact. We have, of course, no way of knowing whether William Shakespeare actually did suffer for the death of his child, but we are culturally conditioned to believe that any father mourns for the death of his child – thus Shakespeare, this superior human being, certainly did mourn. It is equally inevitable that this episode should mark the end of the series, since the irruption of authentic tragedy into the domestic life of Shakespeare makes irony unbearable.

The mock-biopic then shows its limitations in its use of irony as an alibi. A comparison with other recent TV series which, without fully belonging to the genre, allude to and play with the mock-biopic, may be instructive: I refer to the immensely successful *House of Cards*, a political thriller following the ascent to power of a future American President (spectators may read him as a blueprint for a number of recent US politicians), and to the critically acclaimed *Penny Dreadful*, an extreme instance of Victorian Gothic. In the latter case, the cultural reference is used as prestige currency: having on screen, on the flimsiest possible narrative pretext, characters such as Victor Frankenstein or Dorian Gray, or alluding to historical characters such as the explorer Sir Richard Burton, lends the show an aura of cultural respectability even for (in fact, especially for) the segment of the audience which is not familiar with the corresponding literary or historical works. Conversely, *House of Cards* may propose in the opening shots of the first episode a theatrical device (the villain directly addressing the audience in soliloquy) which evokes a similar instance in *Richard III*, but it is just an added bonus: the plot works perfectly well even for the spectator who is unaware of

such a Shakespearean allusion. In both cases the relative freedom with which the series plays with its related structure of cultural *topoi* allows for a more articulate exploration of contemporary issues. In particular, gender issues are freely explored, and if this seems less controversial in the case of *House of Cards*, which is set in the world of contemporary US politics, there is a degree of courage in the way in which *Penny Dreadful* explores the male and female body and their fears and desires, while maintaining the story (within the premises established by the nightmarish quality of the setting) firmly embedded in its Victorian background. It may be argued that, having been realised for web television, these two series can count on a dedicated following that interacts and responds through social media and YouTube, while the BBC-produced *Upstart Crow* catered to a more generalised and potentially conservative audience, less open to the potentially subversive use of irony. Besides, if we agree that "life writing cannot be separated [from] nation writing" (Brown and Vidal 2013: 23), national issues are even more at stake when the life being narrated is that of the national poet and playwright: thus, a degree of caution is mandatory. On the other hand, the literary allusions and in-jokes show us that the intended audience appears to be the liberal, cultured minority of England. Yet what could have become an arena for the challenging of cultural stereotypes remains safely ensconced in the realm of reassuringly snobbish, conventional comedy.

If it is true that a great literary text will give us a glimpse of an ideological opposition to the very ideology it is peddling, the literary biopic often pushes to the limit a trait that belongs to the biopic *tout court*: its being "an earnest genre" (Lupo and Anderson 2008: 102), an uncontroversially acceptable manifestation of social homage. In their study of film biopics of unconventional characters, Jonathan Lupo and Carolyn Anderson find that "though in the 1990s and early 2000s we have seen an increase in biopics of irreverent or inconsequential subjects, the use of irony in depicting those lives usually begins and ends with the choice of subjects. A conservative structure or laudatory tone is used to convince viewers of the subject's worthiness, for biopics must make a case for their subjects" (p. 105). On the other hand, *Upstart Crow* uses the unconventionality of its approach to justify a fundamental conservatism that rests solidly on an unshakable faith in Shakespeare's tenets, no matter

how unacceptable or dated their ideology. This might reflect the complacency and conventionalism of the liberal, cultured minority for which the series was conceived.

At the height of its success, at the end of the second series, triumphantly concluded by the successful première of a *Romeo and Juliet* in which Kate's dream of theatrical stardom found temporary fulfilment, *Upstart Crow* presented its first Christmas Special, *A Christmas Crow*, with Emma Thompson as a guest star. While the plot included an obvious allusion to a famous scene in the 2003 film *Love Actually*, in which the character played by Emma Thompson discovered proof of her husband's infidelity, in the Christmas Special Thompson played an aged, scowling, decapitation-happy Queen Elizabeth, moved to unexpected graciousness by Shakespeare's sublime celebration of love (presented as a short anthology, mainly from the sonnets). Shakespearean scholarship, starting from the 1960s, had started denying the double myth, "preferring to keep the playwright as far apart from the Queen as possible in order to assert his populist and protosocialist credentials" (Hackett 2009: 4). Critical movements such as postmodernism and poststructuralism further contributed to deconstruct these myths. And yet,

> in 1998 audiences flocked to see *Shakespeare in Love*, a film widely acclaimed for its irreverent, ironic, and self-conscious treatment of the Bard. This, critics said, was postmodern costume drama. History, and cultural icons, looked different now, it seemed; we viewed them skeptically, askance, playfully. And yet – at the climax of the film, Elizabeth emerged from the shadowy gallery of the playhouse to express her enjoyment of *Romeo and Juliet* and to invite the playwright to come to her palace at Greenwich, where "we will speak some more." This zeitgeist-conscious 1990s film culminated in a scene that would have been comfortably at home in a work from the 1890s or 1790s. (Hackett 2009: 4)

The reappearance of the old myth-pairing twenty years later, in a sitcom set between the intoxicating years of the Shakespeare anniversaries and the onset of the Brexit nightmare, apparently did not correspond to Hackett's suggested reading of the two myths as a reaffirmation of British greatness; however, it evoked a powerful nostalgia, a longing for the re-establishment of a convention unthreatened by the challenge against stereotypes. The myth of

the Virgin Queen, proposed in a number of Elizabeth-centred biopics (Pigeon 2001), was neither simply re-stated nor discussed: it was gently made fun of, as if the audience were expected to see such trivial conventions from a height. The attitude the audience was invited to share was of a slightly patronising condescension, an attitude that does not require any taking up of sides.

The case of *Upstart Crow* asks us to consider the scope and purpose of the mock-biopic *vis-à-vis* its intended audience: the failure of this sitcom to realize fully its subversive potential may have to do with the remit of the BBC, not only as a TV organisation meant for the general public, but also as a public service broadcaster, empowered to represent, as it were, the spirit of the nation. Any fictionalising of Shakespeare can challenge his stature as a man, a husband and father, even a playwright: but the laughter this excites must remain fundamentally conservative and reassuring.

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