Introduction

This book is not about Shakespeare. That is to say, it is not concerned with the playwright, born in 1564, who made a career in London and died in his native Stratford-upon-Avon in 1616; nor does it deal with his works. At best, Shakespeare, thus understood, plays a marginal role in this study. What I am concerned with, in other words, is not essential Shakespeare, but his fictional afterlives: how subsequent generations of creative writers have tried to make sense of his life, his works and the interrelationship between them. Shakespeare, thus understood, is truly 'myriad-minded', and has led an infinity of lives. He has been a Protestant, a Catholic, a Jew and an agnostic; a philanderer and a faithful husband; gay, bisexual and straight; revolutionary and conservative; black and white; male and female. As one of the icons of Western literature, multiple, often diametrically opposite fictions have been devised around his name. Some of these have been disguised as facts, but most fictional representations are easy to distinguish from serious biographical studies. Samuel Schoenbaum has discussed the two genres in tandem; however, this led to biography getting the lion's share of attention.[1] I have chosen to study Shakespearean fictions in their own right, as one way in which later ages have come to terms with his memory. I have not studied these stories, novels and plays for their intrinsic value as literary narratives: instead, I have sought to extricate the underlying motivations that drove them, the discourses that Shakespeare has come to embody for these later authors.

My project is based on the conviction that we can learn more about what Shakespeare meant for a certain author, a certain culture, a certain age, a certain nation, through their fictions about his life than through almost any other means. More than serious biographies, portraits, statues or the reception, editions and rewrites of his plays and poems, works of fictional biography reveal the ideological substratum that underlies them, the cultural constructions of Shakespeare that inform them.[2] In different ways, Shakespeare has been turned into the mirror of a period, an outlook

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on life or an individual author; but nowhere is this more clearly visible than in fictional works featuring him as a character.

The reason for this may become clear in the light of Michael Dobson's *Making of the National Poet*. Unlike earlier critics such as Terence Hawkes and Alan Sinfield, who stress the ease with which Shakespeare's plays lend themselves to appropriations, so that their meaning is culturally produced rather than given, Dobson acknowledges that there are limits to their versatility.[3] The works lend themselves to some readings, but not to others. Indeed, Dobson argues, there is a good deal of common ground in the assumptions that underlie all appropriations.[4] In emphasising that Shakespeare's texts may resist certain readings, Dobson leaves the door ajar for some attenuated essentialism. Some meanings can only be imposed on the works by extensive rewriting. For instance, when the Nazis appropriated *The Merchant of Venice* as anti-semitic propaganda, they cut or rewrote the marriage between Jewish Jessica and Christian Lorenzo, as it conflicted with their doctrines of racial purity.[5] Directors who appropriate Shakespeare for their special ideological aims often cut scenes or add dialogue or stage business. The very need for these changes is an index to a vestigial essential meaning, which needs to be obscured; a resistance to particular interpretations, which can only be overcome by excising the obstreperous signifiers from the text.

This is where the deployment of Shakespeare as a literary character comes into focus, because, unlike the Shakespearean corpus, his life offers so little resistance. After all, we know very little of Shakespeare the man, in particular as a private person. With reference to A. C. Bradley's analysis of *Hamlet*, Terence Hawkes has argued that any text is opaque, and will inevitably be read in the reader's own image; but it is not just the words that lend themselves to an infinity of readings, but mainly the silences, the gaps and indeterminacies between these words.[6] If we transfer this notion of silences to Shakespeare's life, it becomes clear that this is a text full of gaps, and therefore one that particularly lends itself to appropriation.

This freedom, of course, the fiction writer shares with the serious biographer, as Schoenbaum has reminded us; yet there is a difference in degree. Faced with a dearth of material, the serious biographer will attempt to stick to the known facts where possible and clearly present his ways of filling in the silences as just speculation, and even there offer possible variants; in this way, the reader is at least confronted with the opacity of the material. Less serious biographers, by contrast, often give their speculations the status of facts: for instance, Schoenbaum gives many examples of wholly unwarranted inferences from the works being transplanted into

the biography. However, this speculative approach has become less common in scholarly biographies. This does not mean that it has died out altogether; rather, it has been transplanted to the mode of acknowledged fiction. Unlike biographers, the authors of novels and plays can ignore historical plausibility and documented facts when they like. Usually they do not disregard them altogether but weave their fictional plots on a loom of authenticated facts and factoids. Still, from this body of given material they are fully entitled to select only what suits their conception of Shakespeare.

Writing fiction, even on a factual basis, offers far broader interpretative possibilities than staging or rewriting Shakespeare's texts. This is particularly so where the latter are invested with an aura of sacredness that makes any ill-conceived addition or cut into an act of sacrilege in the eyes of critics. As the example of Alexandre Duval's international hit, *Shakespeare amoureux* (Chapter 2) suggests, a popular and influential play about Shakespeare may be constructed out of almost nothing by way of biographical information and even in defiance of the most elementary facts about Shakespeare's life and the theatrical practice of his era: Duval has an unmarried Shakespeare woo his star actress.

Although fictions of Shakespeare's life take many liberties with the known facts, this is not to say that they are to be treated as mere light-hearted fantasies, without any deeper cultural relevance. For one thing, many of these frankly fictional Shakespeares are presented as somehow essentially accurate portraits of the man, in spite of occasional lapses in detail. No matter how speculative or even absurd a certain representation of Shakespeare's life may be, in paratexts and interviews, the author frequently goes out of his way to provide circumstantial evidence showing that it is correct in essence, if not in details. George Bernard Shaw and Edward Bond wrote lengthy prefaces to defend their visions of Shakespeare in their plays; Anthony Burgess, in addition to two novels and some short stories, contributed a biography of Shakespeare in which many of the fantasies of the novels turn up as serious, be it speculative, theories.[7] Among the authors covered in this study, Isaac Asimov, Frank Harris and Nathan Drake wrote non-fictional works about Shakespeare, too, in which they made some of the same points as in their fictions.[8] Even minor details may sometimes be a matter of great pride to authors. Following the publication of his novel *Mrs. Shakespeare*, Robert Nye engaged in a heated debate with Eric Sams, who had reviewed the book in *TLS*, about such factual issues as the correct spelling of the name of Shakespeare's son, John Shakespeare's recusancy, and the precise meaning of the term 'pox' in the early seventeenth century.[9]

Admittedly, in some works discussed in this study, there has been a counter-trend to question the very possibility of representing a man of the Renaissance accurately. The implicit claim of having recovered the 'real' Shakespeare is often accompanied by framing devices, which make it obvious that what we are reading is *not* a serious biography but a fictional recreation. As we shall see in Chapter 4, it was Oscar Wilde who pioneered this framing device, which calls attention to the discrepancy between artistic and historical truth, in 'The Picture of Mr. W. H.', and he was followed in this by James Joyce and, to some extent by Joyce adept Anthony Burgess, among others. The latter elaborated parts of Joyce's/ Stephen's theories about Shakespeare in his main contribution to the genre, *Nothing Like the Sun*, which he presented as a lecture by a certain Mr Burgess, who gets more and more drunk as the book proceeds, so that his narrative sinks into incoherence by the time he comes to Shakespeare's death. Paradoxically, Burgess, too, claims some degree of authenticity for his work when, in his 1982 preface, he says that, though 'only a novel', the book's 'interior, or invented, biography does not conflict with ... the exterior biography [which] is probably correct.' Indeed, '[t]he book is intended to be a presentation of life and real people, who remain much the same whether in the proto- or the deutero-Elizabethan age'.[10] In all these cases, the dangers of representing historical subjects are implicitly acknowledged in the framing devices. Such concerns might be termed typically postmodern but for the fact that they are already present in the works of Wilde and Joyce. Not surprisingly, it is around the figure reputed to be the world's chief universal genius, William Shakespeare, that questions about the true knowability of another person, another time, therefore, about true universality, first crystallised.

Works like those by Wilde, Joyce and Burgess foreground and problematise a tendency that is present in many texts in the genre: the desire on the part of the modern author to fashion a Shakespeare in his own image. This phenomenon is not, of course, limited to fictional works; Schoenbaum has pointed out that, insofar as there is one single motive force in the countless scholarly biographies of Shakespeare's life that he has studied, it is their tendency to 'oblique self-portraiture'.[11] What is true for scholarly works, where such human weaknesses are counterbalanced by considerations of historical accuracy and the need for documentary evidence, is obviously true a fortiori for frankly fictional Shakespeares. It is of the nature of all appropriations to fashion the source text in accordance with one's own needs and concerns, and appropriations of Shakespeare's life are no exceptions. As Douglas Lanier has pointed out, however, this is

not necessarily a matter of idiosyncratic desires, but may also speak to the needs of a culture at large:

> [T]o stress the element of oblique self-expression at work in Shakespearian biography is perhaps to commit a form of the biographical fallacy, that is, to locate the final meaning and significance of a given portrait of Shakespeare in the personal experiences, preoccupations, and ideas of the individual biographer. Equally important for understanding portraits of Shakespeare, particularly those in popular culture, are those collective ideals, desires, and anxieties to which Shakespeare's life and his formidable poetic power have been made to give voice. For a portrait of Shakespeare to be compelling and relevant to a mass audience – in a word, popular – it must above all address those shared fantasies.[12]

It is precisely in its mass appeal that some of the importance of the genre of Shakespeare's fictional lives lies. Whereas scholarly biographies typically attract a small, elite readership, fictions, whether they are in the form of prose narrative, drama, television series or film, often reach bigger audiences. If we wish to know what Shakespeare meant to the man in the street in the early nineteenth century in much of Europe, we might begin with an analysis of Alexandre Duval's romantic yet wholly unhistorical play *Shakespeare amoureux*. In the twentieth century, even those who would never dream of going to a theatre or of reading a book were offered an insight into Shakespeare's supposed life by John Mortimer's script for a television series, entitled *Will Shakespeare*. With the accompanying book, marketed as a 'Lighthearted Amusement for Every Humour', it must have had a far greater impact on popular conceptions of Shakespeare than ten serious biographies put together.[13] More recently, John Madden's romantic comedy *Shakespeare in Love* appealed once again to a broad spectrum of viewers: some Shakespeare scholars were delighted by its self-deconstructing anachronistic jokes, others worried that their students would take its tongue-in-cheek representation of Shakespeare seriously, while anti-Stratfordians, realising the power of the medium, produced their film *Anonymous* to plug the Earl of Oxford as the real author. Meanwhile, the Bard had also been embraced by the comic strip. Three of the issues of Neil Gaiman's celebrated *Sandman* series offer a remarkably imaginative version of Shakespeare's life, giving many young readers their first introduction to Shakespeare. It is true that scholarly biographies will probably outlive comic books and TV series; but precisely in those more ephemeral cultural products can the forces that made Shakespeare into a national and international myth, and the uses to which that myth is put in any particular era, be seen most clearly.

The popularity of the genre is only part of the story, however. If some biofictions are more notable for their commercial success than for their artistic quality, others were authored by canonical writers. The fictions discussed in this volume include works by Ludwig Tieck, Oscar Wilde, Henry James, George Bernard Shaw, William Dean Howells, James Joyce, Anthony Burgess and Jorge Luis Borges. One might extend this list by adding Mark Twain and Virginia Woolf. Clearly, it is not just second-rate minds that feel attracted to the genre.

In view of its broad appeal, both in terms of audiences and of authors, it is somewhat surprising that Shakespearean biofiction has so far attracted only a handful of dedicated studies. Until some thirty years ago, this was mainly in the form of articles. Marion H. Spielmann did some pioneering work, resulting in a series of brief articles in the *Times Literary Supplement*, and his son Percy completed his manuscript bibliography, titled 'Shakespeare: A Character in the Play', now in Birmingham University Library.[14] James W. Nichols published a summary of his 1951 MA thesis on the topic in 1963.[15] However, in most cases the analysis focused on the sheer variety of plot devices, without asking what these fictionalisations of Shakespeare might signify in broader cultural terms. Maurice O'Sullivan anthologised some of these fictional works in *Shakespeare's Other Lives*, categorising the various plot forms and approaches in his introduction.[16] David Ellis traced various myths in *That Man Shakespeare*, which is particularly useful for its lavish quotations from primary materials.[17] In recent years, some useful work has also been done on Shakespeare's role in political or artistic discourse in such fictions. Andreas Höfele wrote an article about Shakespeare as an elusive character in Wilde, Joyce and Burgess, while his appropriation by female writers for their own empowerment, also in the form of biofiction, was traced in a volume entitled *Women's Re-Visions of Shakespeare*.[18] Susan Baker investigated the symbolic significance of Shakespeare in detective fiction, in some cases featuring the Bard himself as the sleuth.[19] *Shakespeare Survey* dedicated one issue to 'Writing about Shakespeare', including articles by Peter Holland and Jill Levenson about Shakespeare as a character; this was emulated by *Critical Survey*'s two issues on Shakespearean biography, with ample space for fictional biography.[20] Berit Schubert dedicated her PhD thesis to Shakespeare as a stage character in British and American drama of the later twentieth century.[21] Michael Dobson included some early British Shakespearean fictions in his seminal work *The Making of the National Poet*, as well as in his study of Elizabeth I co-written with Nicola Watson.[22] In a paper delivered at a 2013 conference at Montpellier, he addressed fictional constructions of Shakespeare's youth.[23] Helen Hackett devoted an entire

book to myths connecting Shakespeare and Elizabeth, mainly in fiction.[24] The turn of the millennium was marked by a revival of interest in the topic, following the box-office success of *Shakespeare in Love*, which gave rise to many analyses of Shakespeare's role in modern culture, those by Richard Burt and by Douglas Lanier being most noteworthy.[25] Even closer to my concerns is Graham Holderness's *Nine Lives of William Shakespeare*, which mixes biography, analysis of fiction and original fiction in a rare blend.[26] In most of these studies, however, fictions about Shakespeare are not the main or exclusive concern, and their focus is usually limited to the Anglophone world. On the other hand, there are some articles by in particular German and Spanish scholars analysing the role of Shakespearean biofiction in their national discourse.[27] What has been lacking so far, however, is a synthesis which studies fictions of Shakespeare's lives in an international context, looking for their ideological undercurrents.

In this book, I intend to fill some, though not all, of these gaps. I will take as my starting point the assumption that many biofictions, even those that have least claim to historical accuracy, deploy their vision of Shakespeare in support of an implicit ideology. With the help of a number of case studies, I will try to lay bare these ideological elements. The discourses involved range from nationalism, colonialism and class divisions, to issues of gender and sexual identity; from church politics and theatrical wars to questions of race and cultural stratification.

One problem with analysing the ideological implications of full-length narratives is that they are often too long, too shapeless and multifarious, and therefore hard to compare. My unit of study, therefore, is considerably smaller than a complete novel, film or play: as my point of departure for each chapter, I take a fact or factoid that recurs in several biofictions, lends itself to comparisons across several works, and may thus reveal its ideological substratum. The factoids or motifs studied in this book include traditional myths about Shakespeare, such as the idea that, as an actor, he played the ghost of Hamlet Senior, that he died a papist or that he poached deer; but also more recent ideas, such as his involvement in the translation of the King James Bible, his travels abroad, his acquisitiveness; and inferences from his works, such as his involvement with a young man and a Dark Lady. In addition, there are a few motifs that are independent of any conceivable occurrences in his real life, such as his apparition as a ghost and the use of a time machine to establish direct contact with him.

Although this book is not intended to be a complete history of Shakespeare as a literary character, the opening chapters (1–2) sketch the

origins of Shakespearean biofiction from the late seventeenth to the early
nineteenth century. These chapters are international in focus. All too
often, the tacit assumption is that, as Shakespeare lived and worked in
England, fictions of his life, too, must have spread from Britain to the rest
of the world, or from English to other languages. As my findings demon-
strate, however, up to the middle of the nineteenth century, the influence
in this particular genre could also go the other way around: in particular,
continental European authors often established models of their own, for
Shakespeare as a lover or as the friend of aristocrats, which influenced the
reception of Shakespeare in Europe, in America and ultimately even in
England itself. In some countries, Duval's *Shakespeare amoureux*, in parti-
cular, even led the way for the reception of Shakespeare before his works
had been translated or staged. The opening chapter focuses on the motif of
Shakespeare's apparition as a ghost and the way it reflects changes in his
cultural authority over the centuries, differentiating between Britain and
the European Continent in particular. The second chapter is concerned
with the impact of Duval's play on the reception of Shakespeare on the
Continent, where it spawned translations and imitations, while its original
context of the French Revolution was either forgotten or only dimly
reflected. I also show how Duval's comedy reached Britain, where it was
turned into a reflection of conflicts within the theatre world and a plea for
royal patronage.

The third chapter looks at fictions about Shakespeare's origin in the
countryside and the dynamism between Stratford and London. The first
section discusses stories of young Shakespeare being forced to flee to
London after having poached a deer. Modifications in this motif from its
origins to recent times reflect changing views of the rights of the aristoc-
racy. The second section looks at stories and plays set in Stratford that bear
on the conflict between the city and the country, in particular as it was
epitomised in the struggle over the guardianship of Shakespeare's heritage.

Chapter 4 is concerned with the ways in which Shakespeare's image lost
its lustre from the late nineteenth century onwards. Its three sections focus
on constructions of Shakespeare's sexual orientation, his class conscious-
ness and his relations with the Dark Lady, as indicative of his attitude to
racial difference.

Chapter 5 deals with Shakespeare's supposed religious affiliation, which is
inextricably mixed up with issues of British politics towards Ireland and other
(former) colonies. Chapter 6 is about fictions of Shakespeare as a traveller and
analyses the different ways in which his putative overseas journeys have been
used to figure British relations with the United States, Italy and Spain.

Chapter 7, finally, picks up where Chapter 1 left off, and shows how the modern equivalent of the ghostly apparition – establishing direct contact with the Bard through the device of time travel – has been used to negotiate the gap between high culture and low culture.

Collectively, these chapters create a picture not just of the variety of approaches that fictions of Shakespeare have taken, but also of the manifold ways his authority has been appropriated for a certain discourse or undermined in the service of another. Michael Dobson, in *The Making of the National Poet*, stresses the underlying agreement between incompatible strands of Shakespeare reception in the eighteenth century[28]; indeed, from a modern perspective these do look rather monolithic for the simple reason that these contemporaries, for all their disagreements, shared so many ideas about the function of art and about Shakespeare's role in it. Taking a longer time span of four centuries, however, we can see that there are few fields if any that the average modern reader would necessarily agree on with his seventeenth-century counterpart: revolutions have taken place in the religious, social, sexual, racial and artistic spheres, which we cannot disregard even if we do not like them. These enormous changes in outlook from pious to agnostic, paternalistic to emancipatory, feudal to democratic have left their traces in fictions about Shakespeare, too. Shakespeare has become an international icon on which we project our views of man: our greatest aspirations and our worst fears about ourselves. Studying representations of Shakespeare, therefore, may help us to chart the ways in which individual writers have seen Western man in general, the role of the artist in particular, and the ways such images of the Bard have been shaped by and themselves have helped to shape the societies they originated in.

Notes

1. In his original *Shakespeare's Lives* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1970), Schoenbaum dedicated 365–80 and 765–8 to acknowledged fiction. The 1991 revised edition omitted most of the material on fictional biography. All subsequent references are to the 1993 Oxford University Press paperback of the revised edition.
2. On fictional representations of authors in general, see Franssen and Hoenselaars, *Author as Character*.
3. Hawkes, *Shakespeherian Rag* and *Meaning by Shakespeare*; Sinfield, 'Making Space'; Dobson, *National Poet*. Cf. Bate, *Shakespearean Constitutions*, 209–10.
4. Dobson, *National Poet*, 12–13.
5. See Márkus, '*Merchant von Velence*', 148–9.
6. Hawkes, *Shakespeherian Rag,* Chapter 2.

7. Burgess, *Shakespeare*, e.g. 146, 233–4.
8. Asimov, *Guide to Shakespeare*, xii; Harris, *The Man Shakespeare*; Drake, *Shakspeare and His Times*.
9. See *TLS* of 29 January, 12 February, 19 February, 26 February and 5 March 1993.
10. Burgess, *Nothing Like the Sun*, 2.
11. Schoenbaum, *Shakespeare's Lives*, VIII.
12. Lanier, *Popular Culture*, 141–2.
13. Mortimer, *Will Shakespeare,* jacket blurb. For the TV-series based on Mortimer's script, see *Will Shakespeare*.
14. Marion Spielmann, 'Shakespeare's Ghost', and the three articles entitled 'Shakespeare Treads the Boards'.
15. Nichols, 'Shakespeare as a Character'; Nichols 'William Shakespeare on the Stage'.
16. O'Sullivan, introduction to *Shakespeare's Other Lives*, 1–24. Cf. his article 'Shakespeare's Other Lives'.
17. Ellis, *That Man Shakespeare*. Cf. Sandra Clarke's survey of 'Shakespeare on Stage'.
18. Höfele, 'Portraits of W. S.'; Novy, *Women's Re-Visions*.
19. Baker, 'Shakespearean Authority'.
20. Holland, 'Dramatizing the Dramatist'; Levenson, 'Shakespeare in Drama'; *Critical Survey* 21.3 (2009) and 25.1 (2013).
21. Schubert, *[Enter Shakespeare.]*.
22. Dobson, *National Poet*; Dobson and Watson, *England's Elizabeth*.
23. Dobson, 'A Boy from Stratford, 1769–1916', ESRA Shakespeare Conference on 'Shakespeare and Myth', Montpellier, France, 26–29 June 2013. A printed version is forthcoming in Zachary Leader (ed.), *Literary Life-Writing* (Oxford University Press, 2015).
24. Hackett, *Shakespeare and Elizabeth*.
25. Burt, 'End of Shakespearean'; Lanier, *Popular Culture*, and 'William Shakespeare, Filmmaker'.
26. Holderness, *Nine Lives*.
27. See Habicht, 'Making of the Poet'; Gregor, 'Shakespeare on Spanish Stage'; Gregor and Vidal, 'The "Other" William'; Tronch, 'Breaking Shakespeare's Image'; Pujante and Vera, 'Shakespeare as Character'.
28. Dobson, *National Poet*, 13.