

“A Darker Story”:
Two Shakespeares, Art, and History in Emmerich’s *Anonymous*
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ABSTRACT

Emmerich’s *Anonymous* (2011) infamously splits the character of Shakespeare into two disparate figures. In its alternative Tudor past, the “real” Shakespeare—the Earl of Oxford—and Elizabeth I embark on a lifelong relationship that has shocking consequences for history and literature. The film’s other Shakespeare is the actor Will, who acts as the front for Oxford. Over the course of the film, Will is revealed to be a dangerous buffoon; he is boorish, near-illiterate, fame-hungry, and homicidal. While the film packages itself as a fresh take on Shakespeare’s biography, for all its revolutionary fervor it borrows much from *Shakespeare in Love*, and draws on the conspiracy thriller, period drama, blockbuster, and biopic. The film presents itself as conscious not only of its cinematic ancestry, but of dramatic and theatrical history. In this article, I demonstrate that *Anonymous* projects a coherent trajectory for Elizabeth’s reign that is mapped onto Shakespeare’s creative process and his plays—from the youthful magic of *Dream* to the decayed tragedy of *Hamlet*—and in doing so adapts and appropriates the Tudor past to serve a range of sociopolitical aims. Finally, I will connect the film’s author-hero to the film’s director through an examination of the film trailer and poster, and especially Emmerich’s propagandist video “Ten Reasons Why William Shakespeare is a Fraud.” Like the film, these paratexts aim to unseat Shakespeare as literary god, but they also reveal how *Anonymous* is deeply invested in appropriating Shakespeare’s authority, as well as his economic and cultural capital. Ultimately, I argue that *Anonymous* and its paratexts seek to deconstruct Shakespeare as icon in order to reshape our present and stimulate debate over the value and meaning of art in the twenty-first century.

INTRODUCTION¹

Roland Emmerich’s *Anonymous* (2011) infamously splits the character of Shakespeare into two disparate figures. In its alternative Tudor past, the “real” Shakespeare is the Earl of Oxford, while Will Shakespeare is a buffoonish second-rate actor who agrees to be the front for Oxford’s literary output. In this reimagining of Shakespeare’s biography, the film draws together two conspiracy theories: the so-called Oxfordian theory — Edward De Vere, the 17th Earl of Oxford, is the true author of Shakespeare’s works, and the Prince Tudor II theory — Oxford was Elizabeth I’s son, the pair became lovers and conceived a child, Henry Wriothesley, 3rd Earl of Southampton.² *Anonymous* charts Oxford and Elizabeth’s lifelong relationship and its lasting impact on history and literature. The film packages itself as a fresh take on Shakespeare’s biography, but for all its vaunted originality and revolutionary fervor, it borrows much from *Shakespeare in Love* (1998), and exploits the conventions of the conspiracy thriller, murder mystery, period drama, blockbuster, and biopic. The film signals its cinematic ancestry to accrue authority and help its audience grasp the convoluted and controversial tale, but it also reworks theatrical and political history to suit its goals.

As I will demonstrate, *Anonymous* reimagines the Tudor past in order to foreground the power of art and to engage and entertain its audience with a shocking “truth.” This truth, the revelation that “the man we call William Shakespeare” is a “cypher, a ghost,” is couched in the language of religion and indeed Oxford is presented as the god of the new faith. This is not uncommon; as Hampton-Reeves has shown, the anti-Stratfordian stance often involves a “declaration of faith” as well as a “declaration of loss of faith — faith in Shakespeare” (2013, 202). While this article focuses primarily on *Anonymous*, it will close by exploring the film’s trailer, poster, and Emmerich’s propagandist video on the authorship question (available on YouTube). Ultimately, I argue that the film and its paratexts aim to unseat Shakespeare as literary god and undermine the ideologies he supposedly represents. In doing so, I propose, they reveal how *Anonymous* is simultaneously deeply invested in appropriating Shakespeare’s authority and cultural capital, and in valorizing art as a propagandist tool.

As Peter Kirwan observes, Emmerich’s film has a triple-layered framing device and is bookended by a framing device: *Anonymous* is a Broadway play and Derek Jacobi is its Chorus (2014). This casting and the camerawork in the opening scenes aims to gain legitimacy via nods to Branagh’s *Henry V* (1989), where Jacobi played the Chorus, and to Olivier’s *Henry V* (1944), which similarly begins in a theater but quickly moves metacinematically into the “real” world of the staged play. Here and elsewhere in *Anonymous*, this “cinematic pastiche” suggests the audience is “getting at unvarnished historical ‘truth’” (Lanier 2013, 216). Moreover, the impression that the narrative is “a flat, linear, and immutable recitation of the historical record” (Sherman 2013, 134) is enhanced by the silence and indistinctness of Jacobi’s theater audience. Pennacchia’s remarks on Kapur’s *Eliza-*

1 My thanks to audiences in Montpellier, France; England; and Ireland for their comments on earlier drafts of this paper, and especially to all involved in the seminar “Shakespeare as Character on Screen in the Digital Era” at the Shakespeare on Screen in the Digital Era conference 2019. My thanks also to B&L’s reviewers and editors for their suggestions on this article.

2 Over 80 different figures have been put forward as the “real” author of the works of Shakespeare (full list available on Wikipedia [here](#).) Emmerich and several actors in *Anonymous*, including Ifans, Jacobi and Rylance, are self-proclaimed anti-Stratfordians.

beth are applicable to *Anonymous*' scenes in early modern England: it is “the visually-detailed reconstruction of the historical period, that ensure the audiences' perception of authenticity” (2016 n.p.). Addressing the theater and cinematic audiences, the Chorus reminds us of Shakespeare's iconic status and lasting influence, but he soon poses rhetorical questions challenging the received accounts of his genius, and: “offer[s] you a different story, a darker story, of quills and swords, of power and betrayal, of a stage conquered and a throne lost.” On the one hand, this prologue presents the film as an innocuous and entertaining “story.” On the other hand, however, Jacobi's prologue suggests that the film is a powerful alternative history. Art and history, “quills and swords,” are inextricably entwined and by reimagining our past and an iconic figure that is foundational in Western thought, the Chorus tantalizingly implies, a different present and future are possible.

ELIZABETH I AS MUSE

Central to this “different story” of Shakespeare is an Elizabeth who is alluring but rash, weak, and promiscuous. This portrayal of the Virgin Queen is in service of the deification of Oxford. *Anonymous* diminishes Elizabeth's character from early on to ensure that her fame will add to, but not eclipse, Oxford's glamour. Moreover, this reduction of Elizabeth means she can be easily used to demonstrate Oxford's lasting historical and artistic import.

Elizabeth's inadequacies as a leader are apparent in her first scene. Old and frail, the queen enters leaning on Essex's arm for support. Here she is literally dependent on and led by men, who speak for and about her, while she remains largely silent and bewildered by the crowd of nobles (Figure 1). In the next scene, Elizabeth watches a performance of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, covertly arranged by Oxford. She delights in the play but remains ignorant of the apparent political motives behind the production. Her advisor William Cecil, however, realizes it is a bid for power by Oxford who “wishes to choose the next king” (though we are never told *how* the play will achieve this goal). The power of Oxford's literary gift is then emphasized in a flashback to forty years earlier to Elizabeth's first encounter with Oxford. Although a boy, Oxford has written and stars in *Dream* as Puck. The young queen is dazzled by the wunderkind's prodigious talents, and it is heavily implied that we should be similarly impressed.



Figure 1: Robert Cecil, Essex, Elizabeth I, and Puck offering the gift of a play, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.

From early in their relationship, Elizabeth is Oxford's passive muse; she inspires but does not actively participate in literary greatness. In a flashback to her affair with Oxford, Elizabeth is again presented as a mere object of art rather than a subject in history. Following the consummation of their relationship (Figure 2), the young queen detects an ulterior motive to her lover's attentions: he seeks a commission. Elizabeth flies into a rage only to be abruptly seduced by Oxford extemporaneously composing "O Mistress Mine." Elizabeth is the occasion for brilliant verse then, but it is Oxford's creativity that is exalted. Moreover, in repeatedly showing Elizabeth being swayed by Oxford's words, *Anonymous* suggests that nations and history can be shaped by literature. By diminishing its queen and statesmen (the Cecils), *Anonymous* contends that it is the writer who holds the true power. The film compounds this idea by portraying Oxford as a self-made genius and so creating "a picture of history as a narrative of powerful individuals, who, by dint of remarkable gifts [. . .] can literally write—or rewrite—history" (Custen 1992, 151). Only Oxford can spontaneously create great art and, in doing so, enthrall the queen and control the kingdom.



Figure 2: Young Oxford and Elizabeth in a post-coital embrace

WILL, THE UPSTART CROW

Anonymous operates on the principle that it is right and proper to worship a genius, but it tells us we have been worshipping a false idol: Oxford is the one true god. Against this hero, as is typical for anti-Shakespearean fiction, from both the Baconian and Oxfordian factions, is his foil: Will (Franssen 2013, 200). *Anonymous* is light on subtext and its class prejudice becomes glaringly patent as Oxford is exalted, while Will appears as a fame-hungry buffoon and ruthless opportunist. Jacobi’s Chorus tells us he “was born the son of a glovemaker,” he was surrounded by family who were “irrefutably illiterate,” and he had only “a grammar school education.” In the epilogue the Chorus announces, with a sniff, that Will spent his later years “as a businessman and grain merchant.” Will’s modest origins in an insignificant rural town, the inference that he was barely educated, and that he retired from the theater and settled into trade, are submitted as proof that this “upstart crow” could not have written the greatest literary works of all time. In the world of *Anonymous*, prosperity or even basic business sense is antithetical to the artist. The film’s class bias is apparent as it presents financial acumen and genius as mutually exclusive, as is evinced by Oxford’s dying penniless and Will’s involvement in trade in retirement. Crucially though, the film suggests that Will’s greatest crime is not his commonness or even murder (though he does stab Marlowe and so literally kills off some of the competing talent), but his failure to appreciate genius.

Whereas Oxford is concerned with worthy things—love, the state, the fate of his son Southampton, his artistic legacy—Will cares only for short-term gain and pleasure.³ He nonchalantly blackmails Oxford, wallows

³ This strand of the plot is used to neutralize and deflect from the homoerotic desire often detected in the sonnets and seen in other screen Shakespeares. For more on depictions of Shakespeare as heteronormative, see Starks, 2019. In Emmerich’s film, Oxford’s interest in Southampton derives from paternal concern, not queer desire. Oxford’s status as a virile heterosexual hero is reinforced in other ways: a flashback shows the young Edward copulating with a court lady, who is pregnant with his child, before cutting to him energetically writing at his desk,

in his newfound fame, and sleeps with prostitutes before stiffing them on the bill. Most notably, however, he misses the momentousness of the publication of *Venus and Adonis*:

Oxford: Oh and congratulations, you . . . you’ve had a poem published today.

Will: Pub, pub, published? What, oh what, do you mean like, in a book?

The characters’ varied responses to *Venus and Adonis*, which Oxford writes to gain access to the queen, are revealing. While the elderly Elizabeth sees the poem as a veiled eulogy of her affair with Oxford, and her courtiers see it as elite erotica, to Will, it is pure titillation (Figure 3). Reading the poem aloud, he sleazily reacts with *Carry On* style comments: “Oooh, I like this” and “Phwoar.” When other screen Shakespeares are demythologized, their flaws make them endearingly human, but Will’s crassness and desire for immediate personal gratification make him bestial. As with the characterization of Elizabeth as a stereotype of feminine frailty, Will’s function in the film is to bolster the deification of Oxford. Whereas Will’s shortcomings make him an object for derision, the failings of a genius are the stuff of great tragedy, as I discuss below.



Figure 3: Will is titillated as he reads *Venus and Adonis*.

Will, however, is only the clueless face of the greatest conspiracy in history. The Cecils emerge as the brains behind the operation and are effectively the film’s “Big Bad” (*TV Tropes*). Together Will and the Cecils represent all that’s wrong in the world: Will is witless and base, incapable of appreciating art, while the Cecils are the self-proclaimed enemies of “beauty and art in life.” As the puritanical William Cecil informs a young Oxford: “my lord, we believe such activities [composition and poetry] to be the worship of false idols and therefore a sin before the eyes of God.” Art, however, is Oxford’s religion and he even petulantly informs Cecil that “My

and his marriage to Anne yields a daughter. However, although it is downplayed, Oxford is a neglectful father; he only cares about his son with Elizabeth, not the child with the unnamed courtier, nor his child with Anne. Oxford can feed his sexual appetites and express himself artistically, but he is callous and self-absorbed—and so, more like Will than the film would have us believe.

poems *are* my soul!” Although there are elements of comedy to the character of Robert Cecil—his appearance is redolent of a cartoonish Richard III and Count Rugen, the six-fingered villain of *The Princess Bride*—he adopts his father’s views. When he tries to prevent the elderly Elizabeth from seeing *Dream*, he pronounces that “Plays are the work of the devil.” The Cecils are all too aware that literature can influence Elizabeth, and they wish to be the sole powerbrokers in the kingdom. Representing order, duty, and pragmatism, the Cecils work against Oxford’s key values—beauty, art, passion—and they play a crucial role in his tragedy.

By bifurcating Shakespeare into two distinct characters, *Anonymous* endeavors to co-opt the Shakespeare brand and give it a new face: Oxford. The film’s producers seek to maintain and appropriate some effects of “Shakespeare™” through Oxford (namely “cultural authority, quality, legitimacy”), but denounce and jettison other elements (Shakespeare as a man of humble beginnings from Stratford, as tradition, as “‘proper’ art promoted by official educational and cultural institutions”) (Lanier 2007, 99). Paradoxically then, despite its iconoclastic zeal, the film ends up “preserving Shakespeare’s privileged status” (99). *Anonymous* thus dethrones Shakespeare via the negative portrayal of Will, but it engages wholeheartedly in Bardolotry, particularly in depicting Oxford as a visionary.

OXFORD AS VISIONARY

Anonymous initially suggests that Oxford’s inspiration comes from the experiences afforded by his aristocratic status; he is highly educated, well-travelled, a privileged courtier, and a connoisseur of culture. In portraying the “real Shakespeare” as a “lone transcendent poet,” Byronic in suffering for his art, *Anonymous* seems to double down on “the classist assumptions underlying the anti-Stratfordian cause (Lanier 2013, 217–18, 222). During a conversation with his estranged wife Anne, Oxford reveals that his real inspiration is voices which come to him at all hours. He confesses that he is besieged, hearing:

- Oxford: the sweet longings of a maiden, the surging ambitions of a courtier, the foul designs of a murderer, the wretched pleas of his victim. [. . .] I would go mad if I didn’t write down the voices.
- Anne: Are you possessed?
- Oxford: Maybe I am.

These phantom voices, as Sherman remarks, are “‘Shakespeare’ as commonly conceived of today—a sublime field of universality with unparalleled potential for the creation of literary meaning” (2013, 132). To his puritan wife, Oxford is diabolic but to the audience he appears as a conduit for the gods, a seer with privileged access to a higher plane. Notably though, the audience is kept at a distance from Oxford. As the “tormented artist” type, he and his mystical experiences are inaccessible (Kirwan 2014, 24), and so the film veers away from the subject of inspiration to focus on Oxford’s influence on the earthly sphere.

Throughout *Anonymous*, Oxford is presented as a peerless visionary precisely because he alone recognizes and can harness the political potential of drama and theater. This appears to be a conscious concern of the film’s artists and producers. In interview at the Toronto International Film Festival, Rhys Ifans declared that “the beauty of any great piece of art is that it creates a debate, a necessary debate, and that’s what this film does” (TIFF Originals). He goes on to advocate reading Shakespeare’s works “in a historical and political context” as this illuminates that “they have power, real power, for change, which is what they had at the time” (TIFF Originals). Critics have taken issue with *Anonymous*’ reduction of “the author of the great plays . . . to a political propagandist” (Shapiro, 2011), but the film actively promotes the artist as manipulative puppeteer (Lanier 2013, 222). At Oxford and Jonson’s first encounter, the audience are explicitly schooled on the proposition that the value and significance of art lies in its political efficacy. Jonson initially makes the mistake of separating literature and current affairs:

Jonson: Politics? My play has nothing to do with politics, it, it, it’s just a simple comedy!

Oxford: [. . .] All art is political, Jonson, otherwise it would just be decoration. And all artists have something to say, otherwise they’d make shoes. And you are not a cobbler, are you Jonson?

Oxford’s line seems to point to the Latin expression “Sutor, ne ultra crepidam,” meaning “Shoemaker, not beyond the shoe,” used to warn people to avoid passing judgment beyond their expertise. The point is underscored when, immediately after this scene, Robert Cecil repeats Jonson’s error. Robert sees *Dream* as merely “some nonsense about faeries and cherubs [. . .] just a play,” until his savvy father clarifies it is actually Oxford’s bid for influence. *Anonymous* thus idealises Oxford because only he has the power to both see the opportunity presented by literature and to act on it. His mystical creativity enthralled and influences Elizabeth at every stage of life, *Henry V* brings the public audience to patriotic fervour, *Hamlet* turns them against William Cecil (through the figure of Polonius), and *Richard III* stirs them to open revolt. Such power comes at a price however, as the film’s final scenes show.

THE PRICE OF GENIUS

All the way through *Anonymous*, the color palette helps to prepare us for and create a tragic narrative arc. Scenes of Oxford’s happier, ascendant youth are saturated in warm hues (costumes in gold, cream, and orange; yellow fire and candlelight; umber tapestries in the scenery). Indeed, Oxford’s radiant vitality is embodied in the lighting scheme. For instance, the film’s cinematographer Anna J. Foerster remarks that the Cecil manor “is generally very dark and somber,” but in the scene where Oxford moves in, “we had sunbeams shining through because Oxford was penetrating the house with emotional light” (Stasukevich 2011, 38). The setting sun repeatedly illuminates Oxford’s face when he first meets Jonson, but the other characters in the scene remain in shadow. When Oxford composes in his study—the locus of his genius—it is bathed in a golden glow (Figure 4). Once the focus shifts to Oxford’s present and the film’s climax (the Essex rebellion), cool tones dominate

(monochrome costumes, the muted blue greys of Oxford’s estate, rain, fog, and snow—see Figure 6 below for example). The film’s color scheme suggests, then, that Oxford’s light is dimmed by a series of catastrophes: the revolt fails, Essex is executed, Southampton is imprisoned, but most fatefully, Oxford learns that he is Elizabeth’s son, he has committed incest, and he could have been king (this is the “throne lost” mentioned by Jacobi).



Figure 4: Oxford writes *Richard III* in his study.

Robert’s “big reveal” of Oxford’s true parentage is significant for two reasons. Firstly, as subsequent imagery makes evident, the revelation is what ultimately kills Oxford. Secondly, the foster brothers’ exchange lays bare the toxic effects of denying freedom of expression. Under the repressive regime of the Cecils, art has been stifled, corrupted, and it turns on its master. When Robert outlines Oxford’s failings, he identifies their roots in his artistic desires. Apparently despite his wisdom and years of planning, even William Cecil:

Robert: could not *possibly* predict what kind of *failure* you would become. How you would *fail* in politics, ignore your estates to the point of bankruptcy, all to write—poetry.—Nor could he have predicted that you would commit incest.—Delicious, isn’t it? Right out of a Greek tragedy. (Figure 5)

Horrified, Oxford walks into the rain-soaked courtyard, where a soldier shoots a dying rebel and the gunshot echoes. He staggers before sinking to his knees amid the corpses. It is clear to the audience that he is as doomed as the rebels, his end is nigh. With the life of the artist polluted, both he and his country suffer: to protect his poems, the young Oxford murders Cecil’s servant and, in the cover-up, is manipulated into a loveless marriage; the performance of *Richard III* should have led to Robert’s overthrow, but it leads instead to Essex’s death; art brings Oxford and Elizabeth together but the Cecils’ scheming corrupts the relationship, it turns out to be taboo, and Oxford becomes Oedipus, the archetypal tragic hero of Aristotle’s *Poetics*. After the failed rebellion,

life again imitates art. Anne waspishly informs her husband that Essex and Southampton “are to be beheaded. Your son is going to be killed, Edward, by his own mother. Put *that* in one of your plays” (Figure 6). Here as elsewhere, as Lanier asserts, *Anonymous* adheres to the “notion that the art is fundamentally expressive of [. . .] the author’s life” (2013, 219), but this idea paints the film into a corner. With the author’s life corrupted and ultimately in ruins, art is both dangerous and endangered. The film presents this idea quite literally in its final scenes.



Figure 5: Robert Cecil informs Oxford he has committed incest with his mother, Elizabeth.



Figure 6: Anne tells Oxford that Essex and Southampton are to be executed.

OXFORD’S DEATH AND JACOBI’S EPILOGUE

Perhaps unsurprisingly as it seeks to dethrone a giant of literature, *Anonymous* is preoccupied with legacy. It is, for example, what appeals to Elizabeth when she reads *Venus and Adonis*: “And so, in spite of death, I shall survive, in that my likeness still lives.” Oxford’s legacy grants meaning and value not only to the queen, but also to lesser mortals. As Jonson informs Anne: “you, your family, even I, even Queen Elizabeth herself, will be remembered solely because we had the honor to live whilst your husband put ink to paper.” Soon after the Essex rebellion, Oxford lies on his deathbed. Heavy-handedly, the film implies that he is a martyr for his art and, indeed, his “words,” his “sole legacy,” are in jeopardy. With the enemies of art—Anne and Robert Cecil—nearby, Oxford bestows responsibility for his legacy on Jonson, who vows to safeguard the papers and to maintain the conspiracy.

Anonymous presents Oxford’s death as a cause for mourning—even linking it to Elizabeth’s death to emphasize its momentousness—but it quickly and triumphantly presents his *oeuvre* as an inspiring monument. In this *Anonymous* follows its biopic ancestors which emphasize the importance of the protagonist’s exit and present it as ultimately uplifting. In his exploration of studio-era biopics, George Custen observes that “a monument or commemorative icon, the token of life after death—at least in terms of fame—often concluded the biopic. [It] is a reminder of the veneration the hero has earned in the living narrative just seen” (1992, 153). At the end of *Anonymous*, we are reminded that the protection of Oxford’s legacy—Shakespeare’s works—is the driving force of the film. At various points in the narrative, we saw Jonson pursued, captured, and tortured to reveal the location of Oxford’s papers. In this strand of the film’s plot, Shakespeare’s works appear like a MacGuffin (*TV Tropes*). To his captors Jonson confesses that the papers are burnt, but later finds that the precious bundle has miraculously survived the fire in the Rose theater. As Jonson unearths the papers, nondiegetic choir music soars signaling that a holy relic was lost and now is found. Having been primed by the cinematography as well as Jonson’s earlier comments, this scene completes the deification of Oxford. As the guardian of the hallowed legacy, Jonson is distinguished as Oxford’s first disciple, but the epilogue delivered by Jacobi’s Chorus induces the cinema audience to convert to the new religion.

Pointedly, the film’s return to the modern-day forges a connection and suggests a continuity between the early modern audiences, the Broadway theater audience, and the film’s audience. Jacobi suggests that like Oxford’s audiences, we filmgoers enjoy great works of art but have been hoodwinked by a grand charade. Like Jacobi’s audience though, we can supposedly now challenge received history as we see how “Our Shakespeare is a cypher,” a front man masking a genius, just as the prologue announced. Here *Anonymous* is similar to other recent biographical depictions of Shakespeare that, while they “feed [the modern] craving for speculation and information; they also paradoxically ensure that the questions will continue to be asked and the debate will go on” (Wardle 2018, n.p.). Having aroused our curiosity and stirred debate, at the end of his epilogue Jacobi directly addresses the camera, appealing once again to the cinemagoers: “And so, though our story is finished, our poet’s is not. For his monument is ever living, made not of stone, but of verse, and it shall be

remembered as long as words are made of breath, and breath of life.” (Figure 7) Jacobi’s lines have an air of authority and truth as they draw on both Jonson’s panegyric “To the Memory of My Beloved, The Author, Mr William Shakespeare” in the Folio, and on Gertrude’s lines in *Hamlet*’s closet scene: “Be thou assured, if words be made of breath / And breath of life, I have no life to breathe / What thou hast said to me” (3.4.195–97). Having converted the film’s audience with a darker but supposedly truer story, Jacobi strives to enlist us in the preservation of the memory and legacy of the “real Shakespeare.” Just as Jonson was, we the audience are entrusted with Oxford’s sacred legacy—we must spread the truth, keeping his verse, his soul, alive: we are now the keepers of the faith.



Figure 7: The Chorus delivers his epilogue.

For all its trumpeted concern with truth and a new (literary) religion, its propagandizing of the Oxfordian and Prince Tudor II theories, like any modern movie, *Anonymous* primarily sets out to engage and entertain—that is essentially, to sell itself. In its attractive visuals and at the level of plot, it is a high-brow Hollywood blockbuster that works hard to and succeeds in intriguing its audience. To do so, it jettisons much of Shakespeare as we know him and, in place of the familiar icon and his texts, heaps conspiracy upon conspiracy, veers between thriller, melodrama, and tragedy, throws in some universal taboos (incest, murder, treason), and promises a compelling biopic of the world’s greatest writer. Like *Shakespeare in Love* then, *Anonymous* “demonstrates what most of us would suspect [. . .] that the dramatist’s economic capital is first and foremost not in the plays and poetry, but in the name ‘Shakespeare’” (Cartmell 2016, 73). Whether *Anonymous* is actually successful in converting any nonbelievers to the Oxfordian position is debatable, but it is certainly effective in accruing some of the economic and cultural cache of Shakespeare’s name.

ANONYMOUS’ TRAILER, POSTER, AND DVD

Thanks to its arresting trailer, *Anonymous*’ audience may have been primed to expect the revelation of a grand conspiracy. Interspersed between images from the film, the trailer includes ink-splattered captions which dramatically inform us that: “WITHIN HIS WORDS / BETWEEN THE LINES / LIES THE TRUTH / WE’VE ALL BEEN PLAYED” (Figure 8). As Christopher Haigh observes: “A major difficulty in making a history film is that much of the audience knows, or thinks it knows, the story already—so the producers need a ‘spin’, a ‘twist’, to make it different” (2009, 129). *Anonymous*’ spin is to present a new take on old history via the genres of the mystery and conspiracy thriller, and strikingly, it depicts its audience as participants in its tale. Like the popular meme showing *The Matrix*’s Morpheus asking, “what if I told you,” Jacobi’s voiceover invites the viewer to speculate: “but what if I told you, Shakespeare never wrote a single word.” By the close of the trailer, as in the fiction of Dan Brown, the audience are simultaneously the greatest suckers in history (we’ve been had, as *Anonymous*’ trailer says) and the iconoclastic investigators charged with uncovering the truth. In its presentation of a grand historical conspiracy, *Anonymous* is strongly influenced by Brown’s *The Da Vinci Code*, the worldwide bestseller novel of 2003 which was followed by a star-studded film adaptation in 2006.

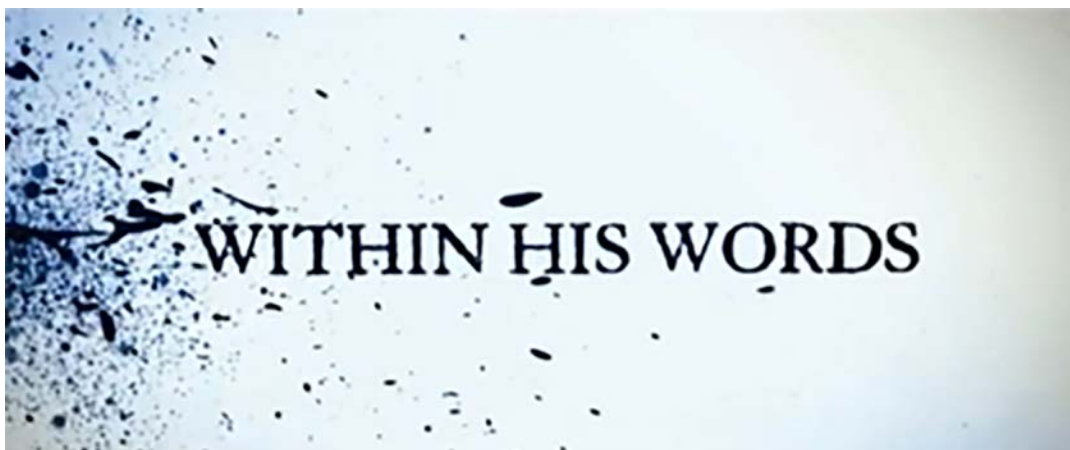


Figure 8: Captions from the trailer for *Anonymous*

The film’s DVD cover replicates the film’s main promotional poster, and like the trailer, de/constructs Shakespeare as a literary icon and toys with the audience’s role in the conspiracy. Its imagery both lends the film an air of mystique—mythologizing Shakespeare—and promises answers—*Anonymous* alone can demythologize Shakespeare. The poster and DVD show Oxford, with his back to the viewer, holding a poised quill. The picture is ink-splattered, implying writing is in progress, and at the bottom, a tagline simultaneously hints at a shocking secret and makes a grand promise: “THE TRUTH IS THE GREATEST TRAGEDY OF ALL.” Of Oxford’s image, Deborah Cartmell observes that the “quill functions to reveal that this is the figure of the writer, the ‘real Shakespeare’” (2013, 156). Shakespeare is shown but also concealed, his true identity is fetishized; his face and the “TRUTH” are objects of desire for the viewer, as much as for the anti-Stratfordian.

EMMERICH’S “TEN REASONS WHY WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE IS A FRAUD”

While the trailer, poster, and DVD packaging aim to sell the film upfront, the propagandist video “Ten Reasons Why William Shakespeare is a Fraud by Roland Emmerich” obscures its promotion of *Anonymous* until its last minute. Like *Anonymous*’ other paratexts, this eight-minute short is designed to promote the film, engage an audience, and potentially move them to join the authorship debate:

in today’s mediatised culture, the representation of celebrated lives is not limited anymore to the relation between literature and film, biography and biopic, telling and showing, but it assumes the form of a whole series of media tie-ins in a system of closely interrelated digital media, where users can interact more creatively and incisively than ever before. (Minier and Pennacchia 2016, np)

A slick media tie-in, “Ten Reasons” seeks to reinforce *Anonymous*’ “sacrilegious thesis” (Lefait 2015, 242), but in deposing Shakespeare, it simultaneously strives to appropriate his authority, legitimacy, and cultural capital. The short film opens by playing with the incongruity of a blockbuster director doing high culture, toying with our (assumed) surprise at the involvement of Emmerich, the so-called “Master of Disaster.” (A variety of articles and interviews over the past decade have labelled Emmerich as such; see for instance Deininger’s article. Indeed, some critics have seen *Anonymous*’ “polemical stance as Emmerich’s attempt to gain his credentials as a filmmaker by proving” his range and skill (Lefait 2015, 242).) The voiceover reminds us that Emmerich’s past films include *Independence Day*, *The Day After Tomorrow*, *Godzilla*, and *2012* before announcing that he now brings us “Shakespeare!” However jokingly, this introduction suggests that *Anonymous* will be as impressive and big-budget as these films, and having tackled monsters, aliens, and mind-blowing events, Emmerich is the right man to take on a cultural behemoth.

Following this introduction, the screen cuts to a cartoon depicting a bird falling in love with a statue of Shakespeare, which stands literally atop a pedestal. Landing on the effigy, the bird rapturously gazes up at the genius’s visage, it coos and strokes the statue’s belly, and emits cartoon love hearts. Spray-paint appears on the plinth below, reading “10 REASONS WHY SHAKESPEARE IS A FRAUD,” before a cartoon Emmerich appears to tack on a sign, after the “WHY,” reading “Roland Emmerich believes” (Figure 9). This caveat thus deploys the language of faith found in other anti-Stratfordian works (Hampton-Reeves 2013, 202), but the title of the video on YouTube presents its content as fact and Emmerich as its purveyor. The film then cuts to the real-life Emmerich who proceeds to lay out his reasons, and the film cuts back and forth between the real Emmerich in a studio and the cartoon. At the end of each of his reasons, Emmerich throws a quill off screen, the film cuts to the cartoon where the feather hits the Shakespeare statue with the sound effect of a bomb dropping. Each salvo weakens the sculpture until it is destroyed by Emmerich after “Reason #10.”



Figure 9: Opening of “Ten Reasons”

The cartoon bird’s appearance is significant. Sporting a mortarboard cap, bowtie, and spectacles, the bird unsubtly represents academia or more broadly “the Shakespeare establishment.” As Paul Edmondson has remarked: “the anti-Shakespearians, whose cause is parasitic, need always to oppose something, so ‘the Shakespeare establishment’ is construed as an edifice for them to contradict and challenge. When anti-Shakespearians are labelled as conspiracy theorists, they see their accusers as part of that conspiracy” (2013, 227). Emmerich sets himself in opposition to the Shakespeare establishment which, in the form of the bird, is shown to maintain the myth of Shakespeare as a Stratfordian of modest origins. The establishment is presented to be, at best, in denial about the true author of Shakespeare’s works, and at worst, in on the conspiracy and propping it up out of self-interest.

Under the barrage of the director’s reasons/quill projectiles, the scholar bird grows increasingly irate and disheveled, and more desperate. For instance, he faints in Reason #2 and sobs in Reason #5 and #7, and in Reason #6, when Shakespeare’s statue falls over, he performs CPR on it: this is the Shakespeare establishment providing life support for a stale and dying myth. Just as the cartoon’s statue of Shakespeare is a false god which Emmerich’s reasons can easily topple, then, the bird is shown to be an idolatrous fool enamored with and deeply invested in maintaining a fantasy. For these sins, the bird is punished—by the end of the cartoon he has been harassed, shamed, blown up, encased in molten gold, burnt to a cinder by lightning, and has taken up smoking due to the stress. After Reason #10, cartoon Emmerich saunters up and the bird surrenders as a sore loser; he blows a raspberry, gibbers angrily, and flounces off. (Figure 10) Emmerich thus heroically ousts the conservative academic, an obsolete minister of the old religion, and frees his audience from myth and delusion.



Figure 10: The scholar bird confronts Emmerich in the final scene of “Ten Reasons”

OXFORD AS EMMERICH AND EMMERICH AS SHAKESPEARE

In their persuasive analyses of *Anonymous*, both Lanier and Kirwan have proposed that Jonson is a “stand in for the modern Oxfordian,” an “avatar for the anti-Stratfordian sense of self” (Lanier 2013, 223; Kirwan 2014, 23). Building on my arguments on the film and using “Ten Reasons,” I wish to extend this notion of stand-ins to suggest that Oxford can be viewed as an avatar for Emmerich, and this is another way that *Anonymous* works to accrue Shakespeare’s cultural authority, value, and legitimacy. In the film, Oxford stands for the film director; he is a creator of art but stays in the background, an unseen but brilliant presence. The spectators of the art (Oxford’s audiences and modern cinemagoers) favor the faces they see, heaping acclaim upon the

performers (like Will), but overlook the true mastermind who struggles against outside forces to share his brilliance (Oxford, the modern film director). The idea of Oxford as an avatar for the film director can be inferred from *Anonymous*, but in “Ten Reasons,” both Emmerich’s words and the visuals aim to associate him with the genius of Shakespeare.

As a whole and in individual scenes, “Ten Reasons” repeatedly strives to connect Oxford and Emmerich. *Anonymous*’ actors participate in interviews and other promotional activities, but Emmerich is the only live human in this video, only he exists in both its real and cartoon worlds, and he addresses the viewer directly. In Reason #7, for instance, Emmerich declares: “I would never compare myself to Shakespeare but, for *me*, the idea of retiring from directing and moving back to my hometown, and never to be associated with movies again, it’s just *completely* unthinkable. So what happened? Did William Shakespeare run out of ideas? Hmmm.” Despite his assurance, Emmerich obviously does compare himself to, and attempt to establish a link with, Shakespeare. It is worth noting that Emmerich is not alone in this tendency; the scriptwriters of *Shakespeare in Love* saw their hero as “just like us when we were young writers—he had our problems” (as quoted in Franssen 2016), while Neil Gaiman, author of the *Sandman* comics, which feature Shakespeare, implicitly connects himself and Shakespeare through their shared experience of writing (Saidel 2012, 110–11). This Reason is built upon the idea that whether in the early modern or modern era, geniuses, or at the very least, artists, are alike: Emmerich could never retire and thus the man who did, Will Shakespeare, could not be the true author of the great works. In Reason #9, we see a kind of diptych of Emmerich and the Stratford funerary monument of Shakespeare; this image encourages the viewer to compare and connect the men. (Figure 11). Both Emmerich and Shakespeare are shown from the waist up, both sport beards, Emmerich holds his quill in the same hand as Shakespeare does, and even Emmerich’s tie draws a line similar to the buttons of Shakespeare’s doublet. (For a fascinating analysis of the iconography and history of the funerary monument, see Orlin Cowen (2021)). Whether they wear a shirt and tie or doublet and hose, or work in a playhouse or on film, the men are bonded by their shared genius.



Figure 11: Reason #9 of “Ten Reasons”

As in *Anonymous* then, even as Emmerich tries to unseat Shakespeare, he seeks to co-opt elements of the Shakespeare brand: perpetual fame, quality, cultural value. Following Reason #10, the cartoon Emmerich topples the battered Bard from his pedestal with one puff of breath, exposing an *Anonymous* poster beneath. (Figure 12) Emmerich then stands beside the poster, and in front of the upended Shakespeare, spinning a quill like a Western gunslinger with a pistol. The director has dueled with the world’s greatest writer and won. In literally toppling the old god, Emmerich thus reveals the “real” Shakespeare (Oxford), advertises his film and presents himself as the cool new kid on the block, chases off the fuddy-duddy Shakespeare establishment, and ultimately frees his audience. It is no wonder then that Emmerich stands proud at the end of “Ten Reasons,” cracking a cheeky grin at the viewer. He is art’s new messiah and awaits our applause.



Figure 12: the near-final image of “Ten Reasons” shows Emmerich posing beside the poster for *Anonymous* and the toppled Shakespeare monument

CONCLUSION

Combining the traits of the blockbuster and the biopic, *Anonymous* capitalizes on the popular interest in conspiracies and the enduring fascination with authors’ lives. It plays too on the near religious zeal seen in “truthers” to engage its audience with an alternative Tudor past that purports to reveal a “darker” —and thus more authentic, more believable— history of Shakespeare. (*Anonymous* has even been linked with the rise of conspiracy theories; Robert Sawyer suggests that “it is only in a post-9/11 climate that such a film could have been so widely circulated” (2013, 28).) The bifurcated Shakespeare is split along grounds of morality, intellect, status, and values so that the audience cannot but help favor the “right” side (once they ignore the film’s blatant conservatism and classism, that is.) Will is constructed to be a despicable oaf, while Oxford is the martyred genius doomed by villains. We have thus a substitution game: even as the film and its paratexts strive to unseat Shakespeare as literary god, they simultaneously mythologize him, just with a new visage. This rebranding of Shakespeare™ with Oxford as figurehead requires a shift in brand values. Most notably, *Anonymous* prizes great literature only as propaganda and the artist only as a sociopolitical puppeteer. If this is the “truth” that the film offers its viewers, it is indeed the greatest of tragedies.

In his prologue, Jacobi’s Chorus reminds the audience that there is much at stake in the authorship conspiracy. Shakespeare is after all the “most performed playwright of all time,” and his works are universally celebrated “as the ultimate expressions of humanity in the English language.” The producers of *Anonymous* want some of

that cultural cachet, the association with quality, legitimacy, durability, not to mention the attendant economic capital. Shakespeare’s verse is everlasting and so too is his marketability. This is the very thing that drives “Ten Reasons.” It seeks to promote *Anonymous* with a supplemental deconstruction of Shakespeare as iconic genius and to oust, or at least rankle, the so-called Shakespeare establishment (more furor, more money). The short film is no public service announcement, however; its vested interests are concealed until its final seconds, but they are nonetheless apparent. Standing in Shakespeare’s place, literally in the final cartoon, is Oxford and Emmerich—two geniuses, both alike in dignity, or so we are encouraged to believe.

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