

## Book Review

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***Fictional Shakespeares and Portraits of Genius*. Annalisa Castaldo. Recreational Shakespeare. Leeds, UK: Arc Humanities Press, 2022. 141 pp. \$85 (cloth and eBook). ISBN 978-1-6418-9244-5; ISBN 978-1-6418-9245-2.**

The third volume in Arc Humanities Press’s Recreational Shakespeare series, Annalisa Castaldo’s *Fictional Shakespeares and Portraits of Genius* offers an intelligent and engaging exploration of Shakespeare as a genius in a range of twentieth- and twenty-first-century media. Castaldo attends carefully to what is emphasized, augmented, omitted, or ignored when writers imagine Shakespeare’s authorial brilliance, inspiration, and development, proposing that he “has become a kind of synecdoche of and test case for creative genius” (3). She identifies four ways that Shakespeare’s genius has been appropriated in fiction. In novels, YA fiction, short stories, drama, film, TV, and comic books, Shakespeare’s genius arises from his being: acutely empathetic to and aware of humanity; different and distanced from humanity; inspired by an external force such as a supernatural entity; and lastly, a mere “beard” that is undeserving of fame but who usefully conceals the identity of the true genius, who may be Marlowe, Bacon, or the Earl of Oxford. These varieties of Shakespeare are the subject of the four chapters of Castaldo’s compact volume.

Using a wide range of texts, such as the illustrated children’s book *Will’s Quill, Or, How a Goose Saved Shakespeare* (1975), the 1978 miniseries *Will Shakespeare*, the star-studded film *Shakespeare in Love* (1998), the series *Will* (TNT, 2017), and YA novels from the 1980s-2010s, chapter 1 considers depictions of Shakespeare as acutely aware of and engaged with the world. Castaldo argues that this empathic Shakespeare is both democratic—because the genius must connect with humanity in all its infinite variety—and aspirational—because the genius’s curiosity, compassion, and alertness can be imitated by the average person. In these stories, Shakespeare is a naturally convivial figure deeply interested and invested in humanity, or else he experiences a painful incident that heightens his emotional connections. This Shakespeare’s interest in humanity also makes him a keen observer with a prodigious memory; hence, in historical fiction and murder mysteries, he often appears as a kind of early modern Sherlock Holmes. Either way, Shakespeare’s receptivity is used to explain how his works capture the essence of humanity and include characters that are (supposedly) eternally and universally appealing.

Drawing on Romantic ideas of the artist and the writings of Virginia Woolf and John Keats, chapter 2 turns to portrayals of Shakespeare as an aloof “great man.” Castaldo demonstrates how the writers of mystery novels, plays, short stories, and the recent *Kill Shakespeare* (2010–2014) comic book all suggest that genius only comes at a price. This version of Shakespeare is isolated because his greatness separates him from ordinary people and he cannot, or refuses to, be part of normal life. He may also be unappreciated or suffer because he is ahead of his time. Audiences, Castaldo remarks, may feel pity or revulsion as tragedy befalls Shakespeare, or those around him, because of his brilliance. When Shakespeare’s genius leads to madness or a superiority complex, he is shown to callously neglect, hurt, or betray family and friends. Castaldo finds one such Shakespeare in Bernard Cornwell’s *Fools and Mortals*, a novel “published in 2018,” a moment when there seemed to be a global “increase in violence, hate crimes, and indifference to the suffering of others by those in power. Perhaps Cornwell is, unconsciously, giving us a Shakespeare for our times” (40).

Chapter 3 examines how Shakespeare’s genius has been imagined as so inexplicable that it must be “a gift from a superhuman force rather than an inborn or cultivated ability” (60). In a range of media, Shakespeare is inspired to write by time travel, the mystical, or faery magic. Castaldo begins by examining some early examples of this trend, such as Méliès’s 1907 film *Shakespeare Writing Julius Caesar*, but largely this chapter analyses Shakespeare’s appearances in Gaiman’s comic *Sandman*. As it enters its third decade, *Sandman* is by now well-trodden ground for literary criticism. On the one hand, then, more discussion of other texts that imagine Shakespeare as a vessel of the otherworldly would be welcome, but on the other hand, Gaiman’s comic is probably the best-known example of this trend and thus accessible and of interest to readers. Castaldo concludes her thoughtful consideration of the comic by asserting that “Gaiman seeks to have it both ways”: Shakespeare’s talent is so extraordinary that it is shown to be both his own and a gift from a powerful eternal being (70).

Since “the authorship controversy is intimately connected with understanding genius,” it is the focus of the book’s final chapter (73). As Castaldo persuasively demonstrates, at the heart of the anti-Stratfordian conspiracies espoused in a range of novels, plays, and Roland Emmerich’s 2011 film *Anonymous*, is the belief that “[real] artistic geniuses are not motivated by money, are never practical and responsible, and are unable to happily retire and give up creating” (73). Exploring “double portraits” of the true genius and the actor who is imagined to be his cover (75), Castaldo reveals the importance of authorial originality, personal experience, and antagonistic foils for contemporary conceptions of genius. Chapter 4 also builds profitably on previous chapters with a perceptive discussion of *Anonymous*, a film that “bundles elements of all three explanations for artistic genius into one incoherent portrait” (92). As well as identifying *Anonymous*’s many gaps and inconsistencies, Castaldo makes astute arguments on its casting, camerawork, and its depictions of writing and theatrical performance. The volume ends with an afterword that fruitfully explores the collapse and overlap of Castaldo’s four categories of fictional Shakespeares through an analysis of the *Doctor Who* episode “The Shakespeare Code” (2007) and the biopic *All Is True* (2018).

In keeping with the spirit of the Recreational Shakespeare series, throughout the book Castaldo's style is lucid and accessible. She is especially adept at summarizing and condensing complex issues into a clear salient point. Given the limited space available, critical support is minimal but well-chosen and effective. I had only one minor gripe on this excellent book: it has no index. While this omission is likely a requirement of the series, an index would have been useful, especially as Castaldo examines such a wide range of texts and media, some of which are mentioned only once while others recur. Overall, *Fictional Shakespeares and Portraits of Genius* makes a valuable contribution to appropriation, biofiction, and pop culture studies, all the while being enjoyable and immensely readable.