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Mrs Shakespeare's New Face(t)s

Paola Spinozzi, University of Ferrara

What do we know about Shakespeare's wife? How do we know about her? Why do we want to know? Delving into the life of Mrs Shakespeare involves identifying the sources which have been chosen to reconstruct, or rather construct, her biography, and understanding why she arouses the interest of scholars, creative writers, and readers. She has been studied from various perspectives of literary criticism and represented in a variety of literary genres. Different modes of approaching and appropriating Shakespeare's wife call attention to the ways in which what is known has been used and what is less or not known can be conjured up. Historical sources and fictional material generate an intricate biographical discourse and raise aesthetic and ideological issues about life, art, and life writing.

Rewritings and remediations by poets, playwrights, novelists and scholars reveal biases and idiosyncrasies, highlight new face(t)s, historical and fabricated. The title *Imagining Shakespeare's Wife: The Afterlife of Anne Hathaway*, chosen by Katherine West Scheil for her 2018 book, suggests that imagination is essential to her approach as a cultural historian: "No one Anne emerges [...], but instead, we will encounter a multitude of Annes, in conjunction with their equally fictive Shakespeares" (West Sheil, 2018: 15).

Starting from the assumption that creative writing and criticism intertwine, sources of knowledge about Shakespeare's wife can be classified as: legal documents; poems; plays; novels; scholarly criticism. Firstly, intergeneric and intertextual dynamics will be identified in documents, poems and plays. Secondly, three biographies, one by a literary scholar and two by creative writers, will be examined to understand new forms of remediation.

LEGAL DOCUMENTS, POEMS, AND PLAYS

It is widely acknowledged that in November 1582 William Shakespeare married Anne Hathaway: he was eighteen, she was twenty-six and pregnant with their first child, born six months later. Age difference and pregnancy have been mentioned as evidence that the wedding was planned by her family and forced on him, yet evidence is missing. An entry dated 27 November 1582 in the bishop of Worcester's register records that a license was granted to William Shakespeare for his marriage to Anne Whateley of Temple Grafton. The key entry, on folio 43v, reads: "Item eodem die *similis emanauit licentia inter Willelmum Shaxpere et Annam Whateley de Temple grafton*" ("Also on the same day a similar licence was issued between William Shakespeare of Stratford and Anne Whateley of Temple Grafton") (Bearman, 2018a). A marriage bond dated 28 November 1582 states that there was nothing to prevent William Shakespeare and Anne Hathaway's marriage from taking place, and the bishop of Worcester, who issued the marriage license, would be safeguarded from any future possible objections. The marriage bond is an original document and thus likely to be more accurate than the register entry, which is a later copy. Fulk Sandells and John Richardson, relatives of Hathaway from Stratford, signed a financial guarantee of £40 for the wedding (Bearman, 2018b).

In *The Man Shakespeare and His Tragic Life Story* (1909) the Irish writer, journalist and publisher Frank Harris declared that these documents testify to Shakespeare's involvement with two women. He intended to marry Anne Whatley, but when his preference for her became known, he was compelled to marry Anne Hathaway by her family. In the entry on "Whatley, Anne" in *The Oxford Companion to Shakespeare* (2005) Stanley Wells observes that the name Whatley is regarded as "almost certainly the result of clerical error" (Wells, 2005: 185) by most scholars. The popular assumption that Shakespeare came to dislike his wife should also be considered as widely conjectural.

It is well known that Anne Hathaway may be the subject of Sonnet 145. The couplet “‘I hate’ from hate away she threw, / And saved my life, saying ‘not you’” seems to contain strong allusions to her: the pronunciation of the words ‘hate away’ in the Elizabethan age may point to a pun on ‘Hathaway’. Likewise, the final line “And saved my life” would sound indistinguishable from “Anne saved my life”.

Those lips that Love’s own hand did make
Breathed forth the sound that said ‘I hate’
To me that languish’d for her sake;
But when she saw my woeful state
Straight in her heart did mercy come,
Chiding that tongue that ever sweet
Was used in giving gentle doom,
And taught it thus anew to greet:
‘I hate’ she alter’d with an end,
That follow’d it as gentle day
Doth follow night, who like a fiend
From heaven to hell is flown away;
‘I hate’ from hate away she threw,
And saved my life, saying ‘not you.’

(Shakespeare, 2007: 355)

Whether the sonnet was composed by Shakespeare in 1582, when he was eighteen years old, and whether the pun is plausible, as Andrew Gurr has claimed (Gurr, 1971: 221-226), have been largely debated. His interpretation is significant from a metacritical perspective, being an attempt at regarding Anne Hathaway as a woman who was doted on by Shakespeare. Whether Mrs and Mrs Shakespeare experienced romantic love for each other has been a

captivating topic. In the collection *The World's Wife: Poems* (1999) Carol Ann Duffy gives poetic voice to the wives of celebrated men. She evokes Mrs Shakespeare, Mrs Midas, Mrs Aesop, Mrs Darwin, Mrs Sisyphus, Queen Kong, Mrs Quasimodo, the Devil's Wife, Frau Freud, drawing on myth and history. In the sonnet "Anne Hathaway" the passage from Shakespeare's will regarding his "second-best bed" triggers a lyrical narrative in which that bed is conjured up as a memento of their love and cherished as an enchanted place of delight.

'Item I gyve unto my wief my second best bed...'

(from Shakespeare's will)

The bed we loved in was a spinning world
of forests, castles, torchlight, cliff-tops, seas
where he would dive for pearls. My lover's words
were shooting stars which fell to earth as kisses
on these lips; my body now a softer rhyme
to his, now echo, assonance; his touch
a verb dancing in the centre of a noun.

Some nights I dreamed he'd written me, the bed
a page beneath his writer's hands. Romance
and drama played by touch, by scent, by taste.

In the other bed, the best, our guests dozed on,
dribbling their prose. My living laughing love –

I hold him in the casket of my widow's head
as he held me upon that next best bed.

(Duffy, 2015: 256)

The bed is a synecdoche for passionate lovemaking, in which "romance and drama" are ignited by verbal ingenuity and nurtured by the senses, in contrast with the other bed, where

guests can entertain themselves with prose, the best one objectively, but not subjectively. The couplet is a hymn to romantic love, where possession circulates between a material and an immaterial object, a tangible piece of furniture, signifying their bond, and her mind, guarding fond memories: “I hold him in the casket of my widow’s head / as he held me upon that next best bed”.

The newly widowed Anne Hathaway meets her old rival, Mistress Anne Whatley, in Hubert Osborne’s *The Shakespeare Play: A Drama in Rhythmic Prose* (c. 1911) and its sequel *The Good Men Do: An Indecorous Epilogue* (1917). Osborne focuses on the lives of the women in Shakespeare’s life, his wife Anne Hathaway, their daughters Judith and Susanna, and Mistress Anne Whatley, portrayed as the one he truly loved. The confrontation between Anne Hathaway and Mistress Whatley, two women significantly older than Shakespeare, intersects age and gender issues. In a climactic scene of *The Good Men Do* Osborne imagines a dialogue in which Whatley vents her frustration by openly accusing Hathaway:

You tricked him into marrying you knowing that he did not love you. You made no home for him who loved the little niceties of life, but made him live in squalor. You drove him from you by your nagging tongue to taverns and low company. Your jealous tantrums made banishment a happy liberty (Osborne, 1917, 52).

Emotional details boost the story and serve artistic purposes: Shakespeare’s love life captures the attention of wide audiences and reinforces the idea that his genius shines through personal events which can be faithfully rendered by the adaptor. As Daniel Fischlin observes, “in so doing, the adaptor links his or her own production to the very ‘genius’ being promulgated in the adaptation, a way of building on the artistic capital guaranteed by association with the Shakespearean legacy” (Fischlin, 2004).

Edward Bond's *Bingo: Scenes of Money and Death* (1973), influenced by Bertolt Brecht and Epic theatre, explores politics and interpersonal relationships as it portrays Shakespeare, ageing, melancholic, worried about money in his Warwickshire home in 1615 and 1616. Expanding on the idea of a problematic relationship between Shakespeare and Anne Hathaway, Bond represents Shakespeare's last days, suggesting that he and his wife had become estranged and showing that their daughter Judith resents his treatment of her mother. *Mrs Shakespeare. Will's First and Last Love* (1989) is a long solo show performed by American actress-writer Yvonne Hudson: separated by dramatic events, Anne and Will have become good friends and she is sympathetic towards his infatuations and possible adulteries. Like Duffy in her sonnet, Hudson attaches a positive symbolic meaning to the bed bequest, the only place where Anne felt she possessed William. *Mrs Shakespeare. Will's First and Last Love* explores what it means for a woman to look after a house without a husband and delves into the emotional sphere, expressing sympathy for her husband's world as she quotes sonnets and soliloquies. New narrative material in the twenty-first century explores Shakespeare and Hathaway in the very last stages of their existence: *Shakespeare's Will* (2005) by Canadian playwright Vern Thiessen is a one-woman piece about Anne Hathaway on the day of her husband's funeral. While combining details of her personal life with dramatic twists, the poetic monologue also claims a place as a historical document about women's lives in Elizabethan England.

LITERARY CRITICISM

Germaine Greer, *Shakespeare's Wife*, 2007

Stereotypes about Anne Hathaway are the core concern of the lengthy *Shakespeare's Wife*, published by Germaine Greer in 2007. In deconstructing prejudices and received opinions, she constructs her own ideological discourse, one that targets canonical scholars of Shakespeare

and exposes their gender bias. She rejects the uncritical plainness of the assumption that Mrs Shakespeare was not able to read, let alone appreciate her husband's work, based on the fact that illiteracy was shared by most women at the time:

Scholars desirous of separating Shakespeare from his pesky wife have taken for granted that all her life she could neither read nor write. They want her, need her to have had no inkling of the magnitude of her husband's achievement.

Of course most of the women in his world had little or no literacy, but the commonness of the condition does not change the fact: it is entirely possible that Shakespeare's wife never read a word that he wrote, that anything he sent her from London had to be read by a neighbour and that anything she wished to tell him – the local gossip, the health of his parents, the mortal illness of their only son – had to be consigned to a messenger.

Greenblatt can see no one to help Ann keep in touch with her husband beyond an Elizabethan version of a courier service. He imagines that any letter of Shakespeare's would have to have been read by a 'neighbour'.

If Shakespeare wrote at all, he would have written as Richard Quiney did, to a kinsman or a close friend, who had the duty of reading the letter to his wife and of penning her response. Abraham Sturley used to sign himself off to Quiney as writing 'at your own table in your own house', with Elizabeth Quiney beside him, virtually dictating what he was to write.

At least one of Shakespeare's brothers was fully literate and should have kept Shakespeare informed of the health of his parents. Ann's brother could read and write, as could her elder daughter Susanna.

Ann did not have to depend on the kindness of strangers or on professional messengers, who did not exist. Early modern letters were not private, but designed to be read aloud, in company. Truly intimate matters were deemed unsuitable for a letter.

Certainly it is possible, even entirely possible, that Ann could not read. It is also possible, given the absolute absence of evidence to the contrary, that she was blind. She may have been illiterate when

Shakespeare met her, and he may have spent the long hours with her as she watched her cows grazing on the common, teaching her to read. (pp. 51-52)

Greer cannot accept that women's illiteracy should be taken for granted, disparaged, and exposed as a form of social disability. She detects a methodological flaw in Greenblatt's value judgement on the epistolary correspondence between Mr and Mrs Shakespeare. Greenblatt wrongly assumes that they would be obliged to adopt a plain and neutral register, as she almost certainly could not read and should always require the intervention of someone specially summoned to fulfil that specific task. As a matter of fact, it was perfectly normal to write plain letters that would circulate among family and friends. Relatives would easily read and write for each other, and the social stigma would not be an issue.

Greer's discourse on Mrs Shakespeare thrives on the deconstruction of what she defines as the biased view of other famous Shakespearean scholars. However, her critique of other critiques is so vehement that it comes across as her major goal, partly overshadowing her biographical study. The forcefulness which fuels her interrogation of other scholars' methods and intentions backfires, instilling the doubt that Mrs Shakespeare may be a pretext. In this sense Stanley Wells' polemical review of *Mrs Shakespeare*, published on *The New York Review of Books* in 2008, is hardly unexpected and his reasons for retaliating sound convincing:

When I heard that Germaine Greer was embarking on a biography I was skeptical of what seemed likely to be a tenuous enterprise. There are serious gaps in our knowledge of Shakespeare himself, and facts about the woman he married are even harder to come by. Though Greer makes no use in *Shakespeare's Wife* of the fictions I have mentioned, she is nevertheless much concerned with what she sees as fictions masquerading as truth in what claim to be biographical writings about Shakespeare (or the Bard, as she is all too apt to call him). Ann, she considers, has had an unjustifiably bad press at the hands of (mainly male) biographers such as Anthony Burgess, Anthony Holden, and Stephen Greenblatt, and her book

offers characteristically pugnacious challenges to what she sees as received opinion. Drawing on her own research in the archives of the Shakespeare Birthplace Trust on the place of women in Elizabethan society, she makes use of the techniques and skills of a social historian and, to a lesser extent, a genealogist. (Wells, 2008)

As Greer targets and accuses male biographers, Wells targets and accuses her of criticising and even disparaging their biographical work by default, rather than on the basis of solid arguments. The patronising attitude she believes they display when tackling the topic of Shakespeare's wife becomes a fixation:

Shakespeare's Wife is an example of an emerging subspecies of Shakespearean biography. Other examples are James Shapiro's *A Year in the Life of William Shakespeare, 1599* (2005) and Charles Nicholl's *The Lodger* (2008). They approach Shakespeare's life story partially or obliquely, and they may be all the more illuminating than cradle-to-grave accounts for doing so. Greer's book opens up new perspectives in offering alternative hypotheses to many of the all-too-easy assumptions about Shakespeare's wife and his relationship to her. Greer is often unnecessarily, stridently, and self-defensively combative. She ends with a gratuitous insult to those whom she derides as "the Shakespeare wallahs" who "have succeeded in creating a Bard in their own likeness, that is to say, incapable of relating to women," as if she herself were not a Shakespeare wallah. But this is an important book in the challenges that it poses to received opinion. It will have a permanent and beneficial effect on attempts to tell the story of Shakespeare's life. (ibidem)

Wells appreciates Greer's determination to interrogate common knowledge and truisms about Shakespeare and his wife, recognising that there is critical work to do. This battle of the critics reveals that Shakespeare's life and relationships incorporate methodological and ideological negotiations. In the twenty-first century the biography of Mrs Shakespeare becomes the catalyst of metacritical questions about canonical and feminist scholarship.

NOVELS

Mrs Shakespeare attracts creative writers, especially those who draw upon sentimentality and sensationalism to fabricate fictional biographies in which historical facts are peripheral. Karen Harper's *Mistress Shakespeare*, published in 2009, and Arliss Ryan's *The Secret Confessions of Anne Shakespeare*, published in 2010, deserve attention as contemporary expressions of popular literature investing in Shakespeare's love interests.

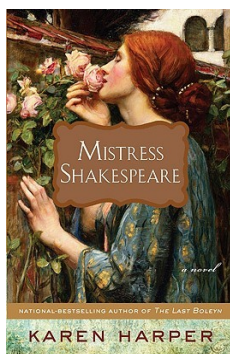
Both titles play with mystery and expectations. *Mistress Shakespeare* alludes to a woman who may or may not be his wife, *The Secret Confessions of Anne Shakespeare* points to unknown events that have been unveiled. Cover images and reviews offer clues to understanding the genesis and intended audience of both.

Karen Harper, *Mistress Shakespeare*, 2009

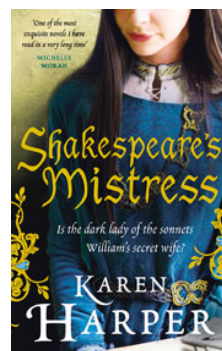
For thirty-five years Karen Harper has lived in Columbus, Ohio, and periodically in Naples, Florida; after teaching English at the Ohio State University, in 1984 she started writing novels. Harper is a *New York Times* and *USA Today* bestselling writer of books published in foreign languages and the recipient of the Mary Higgins Clark Award for 2005. She has gained popularity as the author of historical and contemporary fiction blending suspense, mystery and romance. The Maplecreek series, the Home Valley series, the Cold Creek series are formed by 10 suspense novels published between 1996 and 2014, the Queen Elizabeth I series comprises 9 historical mystery novels published between 1999 and 2007, and many other novels are standalone.

Her favourite settings are the Amish community in the contemporary age and England in the Tudor period. One of the main reasons for Harper's success as a writer of popular

literature is her focus on historical British women, which indicates her ability to satisfy an appetite for stories that are left untold in scholarly books.



Cover image of the US edition



Cover image of the UK edition

The sentimental and sensational component of *Mistress Shakespeare* is announced in the cover images of both the US and UK edition, the former showing *The Soul of the Rose* (1910), a famously lavish painting by John William Waterhouse, the latter presenting a young lady in a Tudor costume and introducing the tantalizing question: “Is the dark lady of the sonnets William’s secret wife?”. Her face is only visible from the nose down; eyes and forehead are cut off from the picture, alluding to the mysterious identity of Shakespeare’s beloved mistress.

Karen Harper’s rich website offers an enticing presentation of the plot, which revolves around the idea that Anne Whateley is real, and Shakespeare truly loved her. Harper indicates two main reasons why this lady must have existed. First, the discrepancy between Anne Whateley of Temple Grafton and Anne Hathaway from Stratford is too strong, which points to the existence of both. Second, the presence of Fulk Sandells and John Richardson is ambiguous: the role of sureties who should take responsibility for the outcome of the wedding sounds weak, instead they may have well exerted a function of control and enforcement:

MISTRESS SHAKESPEARE is the real story of Shakespeare in love.

All fiction—and real life—is about ‘what if?’

What if the record of the marriage bond previous to and in the same 1582 registry (still in existence) between Anne Whateley of Temple Grafton and William Shakespeare indicates that Will loved and wed another woman before he married Anne Hathaway? A later entry links him to “Anne Hathway [sic] of Stratford in the Dioces [sic] of Worchester maiden.” The earlier Whateley entry can hardly be a mere slip of the pen, for not only the last names but the women’s villages are different. As Germaine Greer says in her recent nonfiction book, *SHAKESPEARE’S WIFE* (about Anne H.), if the Whateley/Shaxpere marriage bond is a scribal error, it’s really an odd one.

Will’s marriage to Anne H. was what we would call a “shotgun” wedding, not unusual for the time, but it may well not have been voluntary on his part, for it was enforced by two friends of the bride’s family, who put up a goodly sum to produce Will for the ceremony. What if the famous “second best bed” in Shakespeare’s will was given to Anne H. because he and Anne W. had the first best bed at their Blackfriars Gatehouse in London – a property he made certain did not go to his wife or daughters in his will.

So – what if Anne Whateley was really the love of his life, the dark lady of his sonnets, his inspiration and muse? What if you read their story, then decide for yourself?

(For a look at the Shakespeare/Whateley marriage license (in Latin, with the usual loose Elizabethan spellings) go to <http://home.att.net/~mleary/positive.htm>.

If you would like to hear the music to a song with the words by Will Shakespeare, one that fits the era and theme of *MISTRESS SHAKESPEARE*, try artist Emilie Autumn – O Mistress Mine – Listen free at www.last.fm/music/Emilie+Autumn/_/O+Mistress+Mine (Harper, 2006-2011)

Harper skilfully arouses the readers’ desire for empowerment. She invites them to enjoy the novel and develop their own conjectures. In order to do so, she suggests they become acquainted with authentic documents, providing links which must have worked initially, but have not been updated and are thus no longer available. She also publicizes contemporary fairy

pop singer Emilie Autumn, whose genres encompass classical, dark cabaret, electronica, industrial, new age, and folk.

All the reviews point to a bestselling book by a bestselling author whose strength lies in the ability to re/produce the Elizabethan and Jacobean culture, blending truth-likeness, intensity, and sentiment.

Mistress Shakespeare was selected by *Womans [sic] Day Magazine* in June 2009 as one of the Best 10 Summer Beach Reads

“This intoxicating, fictionalized memoir of Shakespeare in love is a romantic roller coaster rich with vivid details reminiscent of *Romeo and Juliet*.”

-- *Womans [sic] Day magazine*

“Karen Harper has written a riveting tale of intrigue and passion that plunges the reader straight into the complex heart of Elizabethan England. Rich with details and drama, *Mistress Shakespeare* is a story Shakespearean fans will love.”

-- Deanna Raybourn, author of *SILENT ON THE MOOR*

“Told in first-person by Anne Whateley, this fictional memoir is a touching perspective of the life of William Shakespeare told by his soul mate and life-long love. Expertly researched and woven with the pageantry of Elizabeth and Jacobean history, this author has given us a rare glimpse of real persons from history, turning their lives into narratives that will entertain and delight the most discriminating readers.”

--*Fresh Fiction*, on-line review

“[Harper] has a great knowledge of the way that people acted and spoke back then, and her characters never feel overly modern. Maybe Harper was an Elizabethan in a previous life?”

--*Historical Fiction*, on-line review

“Everyone knows William Shakespeare – or thinks they do – yet few know the woman who inspired so many of his greatest works. A richly satisfying novel that recreates Elizabethan London at its riotous, unruly best.”

--Susan Holloway, author of *The King's Favourite* (ibidem)

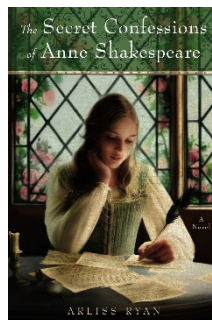
The fact that the book appears on the list of the Best 10 Summer Beach Reads selected by *Woman's Day Magazine*, spelled twice without the Saxon genitive, invites two considerations: it is on a list produced by a magazine discussing food and recipes, health and fitness, life, sex and relationships, and it suited for summer holidays. Entertainment is the major feature, highlighted in all reviews, which praise the coexistence of (much) imagination and (some) objectivity: “fictionalized memoir of Shakespeare”, “the complex heart of Elizabethan England”, “lives into narratives that will entertain and delight”, “great knowledge of the way that people acted and spoke back then”. All these appreciations share the assumption that, because Harper thoroughly studied the Elizabethan and Jacobean age, she has developed a unique ability to reproduce the atmosphere of London, the language, the cultural habits and emotional turmoil of the people. Hyperbole permeates the last endorsement, in which the author of another historical fiction suggests that Harper has been endowed with the gift of authenticity and with other supernatural powers that allow her to penetrate the life of the woman who was the muse of Shakespeare.

Arliss Ryan, *The Secret Confessions of Anne Shakespeare*, 2010

Arliss Ryan holds a Phi Beta Kappa B.A. degree in English from the University of Michigan and lives in St. Augustine, Florida. In January 2017 she and her husband moved aboard their

35' sailboat Corroboree and began a circumnavigation of the globe, which she has documented in her blog "The Old Woman and the Sea".

The Secret Confessions of Anne Shakespeare is her third novel, published by New American Library and Penguin Books in 2010. The choice of historical fiction allows her to tackle the question of Shakespeare authorship from the perspective of romance. Compared to the US edition of *Mistress Shakespeare*, the cover image of *The Secret Confessions of Anne Shakespeare* is even more allusive and tantalizing: the virginal beauty of a young lady in a generic Renaissance garb is captured while she is engrossed in writing, oblivious to the outside world. Sheltering and imprisoning her, the window grid also symbolizes her impossibility to come out as an author, while the roses make sure that the aesthetic titillation is felt by the reader.



Living as a widow in Stratford-upon-Avon in 1623, Anne Hathaway is lying in bed, quickly deteriorating. While her granddaughter Lizbeth reads aloud from Shakespeare's plays, Anne reveals that he is not the only author. Ryan recounts how Anne Hathaway follows Will to London to support his decision to become an actor. His career as a professional writer develops mainly thanks to the support and active contribution offered by Anne, an author in her own right, whose talent must remain in the shadow. Far from being a country girl who beguils him, she is portrayed as a resourceful woman with extraordinary artistic creativity, sharp intellect, and acute practical sense. It is their secret collaboration that makes Will the most

celebrated playwright in Elizabethan England. The relationship between Mrs and Mrs Shakespeare is thus presented in a highly compensatory way: owing to the lack of equal opportunities, she did not become famous, but at least she was able to make the most of her talent by building up a highly successful partnership.

While *Mistress Shakespeare* thrives on romantic speculations about Shakespeare's love life, *The Confessions of Anne Shakespeare* tests the limits of historical fiction as a genre by combining romance and the question of authorship. Its distinctive feature is the way in which Ryan uses the first-person narrative to envision how Anne Hathaway would deal with gender issues. The result is a post-modern stream of consciousness in which the predicaments of the protagonist sound all too similar to the problems with which contemporary women find themselves constantly confronted:

From *The Secret Confessions of Anne Shakespeare*

I admit the thought of a lover, or rather a husband, was on my mind. I would soon be twenty-six, a prime age to wed, and Duck's push had a hint of impatience to it... Yet when my brain played over the likely candidates, my heart remained strangely empty. I did not fancy any of the local bachelors, though one or two had come calling. Even less did I incline toward the widowers and the taking on of their children as my stepmother had done. I knew I did not possess her gifts of patience or nurture. It frightened me to admit I might not make a good mother at all. But whomever I wed, he would expect me to bear him a brood, and the idea of childbirth sent a cold shudder along my spine. My mother had died of it and a dozen more wives I could name. You may call me lily-livered, but I would not have been unhappy to have proven barren.

I had reached the secluded place where the brook pools into a large pond, surrounded by reeds and overhung by willows, dragonflies buzzing above the lily pads. Catching my reflection in the dappled water, I pictured beside it the faces of various eligible men and heaved a glum sigh. Too bad that our late fornicating monarch Henry VIII, in breaking with the church of Rome, had dissolved the monasteries and religious houses; if we were still Catholic, I would at least have had the option of

becoming a nun. It might have well suited me, for in a company of sisters I could have had a brisk and purposeful life, tending gardens or supervising the kitchen or managing the daily affairs. I could have muttered whatever prayers were required. The more I envisioned it, the greater pity it seemed to have missed out.

I tossed my hand over the water in a commanding arc. “Get thee to a nunnery!” I cried.

“What?”

I whirled around, and there stood Will Shakespeare, chuckling.

“What nunnery?” he demanded, coming closer, pleased at my discomfort.

“No nunnery. It’s not important. I—”

“Is there a fish?”

“Where? In the nunnery?”

“No, in the water. You were staring at it as I approached.”

“No, there’s no fish in the water,” I replied.

“But you were fishing, wishing, for something.”

“I was only imagining faces.” I shrugged, perturbed and hoping to end the conversation. Will’s outfit, a blue satin doublet and breeches, seemed a little dandified for a country stroll.

“A strange river that has not fish but faces floating in it,” he observed.

“That’s not what I meant. There probably are fish in the brook, but I was imagining faces because, well, you can see how the play of sunlight and water and the lily pads might suggest...Here, you can see my reflection.”

He stepped up beside me, and we both gazed into the pond. While he took the opportunity to study my visage in the water, I found myself contemplating his. Not bad. His hair was close to mine in color but gingery where I was amber brown. His face was well shaped and the forehead prominent. His upper lip was somewhat thin, his mouth and chin fringed with the first appearance of down. Not bad, but far too young for me. Still, I kept looking. (Ryan 2019)

Ryan’s skill in combining macro and micro stories is evident in the fictionalization of the first encounter: Anne ponders on the first manifestations of erotic tension, elaborates on the

socio-economic advantages and dangers of marriage, mentions the religious controversies following Henri VIII's Act of Supremacy and explores the prospect, less feasible after the schism, of becoming a nun. Then she exclaims the very famous line from *Hamlet*, "Get thee to a nunnery!", which many readers will be pleased to recognise. Finally, they see each other and immediately start flirting. These self-reflexive moments of erotic arousal, religious critique and flirtatious banter are historically implausible, each of them sounding fictionally construed and narratively superimposed. Yet their tone is pleasant, and the effect is entertaining.

Codified notions of femininity and individual eccentricity generate a mismatch that resonates through the whole narrative. In spite of the great confession, which has the potential to change history, nothing changes, not only because times were not ripe for the genius of Anne Shakespeare, but because her attitude is traditional and conservative, expressing self-denial, support and subservience. Ryan's perspective is only apparently and superficially feminist.

Reviewers stress the boldness of Ryan's imagination, which allows her to access Hathaway's private thoughts and public aspirations, desires and predicaments.

"This story is a fantastic view of life in the theatre, and one woman's struggle to maintain her family; her attempt to keep the love for her selfish husband; and, understand the remarkable stories that are piling up inside her own head.... After reading this, you'll not only applaud Anne Shakespeare, but you'll also give Arliss Ryan a standing ovation for a job well done."

– Feathered Quill Book Reviews

"An entertaining and admirable novel that offers a surprising reinterpretation of Will Shakespeare's wife, Anne Hathaway, who shares, and helps shape, his dream."

– Sandra Worth, author of *The King's Daughter: A Novel of the First Tudor Queen*

“This is a book to savor! The cover screams ‘young adult’ but looks are deceiving in this case, as it is a very mature, well-written story and absolutely plausible...”

– Historical-fiction.com (Arliss, 2019)

Hathaway’s “struggle to maintain her family; her attempt to keep the love for her selfish husband”, the ways in which she “shares, and helps shape, his dream”, the “absolutely plausible” story show that ultimately the novel works as a form of normalization and neutralization of femininity and female autonomy. However, within the normative parameters of the genre, Ryan’s focus on confessions of authorship may be seen as bold, especially if compared to Harper’s preference for pure romance. Indeed, Harper’s endorsement of Ryan’s novel highlights “controversial”, “daring”, and even shocking features:

Controversial and clever, daring and detailed, *The Secret Confessions of Anne Shakespeare* out shocks any modern day tell-all. Anne, the feisty and dynamic narrator, gives us an in-depth view of her own life and of Queen Elizabeth’s England. The novel is as sweeping and insightful, tragic and comic as some of the bard’s own plays.

-Karen Harper, national bestselling author of *Mistress Shakespeare* and *The Queen’s Governess*
(Ryan, 2010)

Five couples of adjectives – “controversial and clever, daring and detailed”, “feisty and dynamic”, “sweeping and insightful, tragic and comic” – form a paratactic sequence exhibiting Harper’s perception of Ryan’s inclination for extremity, mitigated by acceptance and praise. Fictional biographies of Shakespeare’s wife must count on their authors’ mutual endorsements to enhance public recognition.

It might be tempting to classify diverse renditions of Mrs Shakespeare according to the reliability of the sources: historical documentation would be placed on top of the list, scholarly biographies and literary criticism in the middle, fictional representations at the bottom. However, such hierarchical classification would be fragile, because different approaches to life writing, especially if the subject is a woman whose husband happens to be one of the most famous persons in the world, are adopted to pursue different aims. Filling gaps may be a shared aim, but other objectives are pursued, which may vary significantly. Historical truth, accuracy, objectivity, authenticity, conjecture, ambiguity, bias, preconception, projection, fictionalisation are components of a wide spectrum of methods and practices through which a predominantly unknown life comes to be known. How a biographer – scholar or creative writer – would like a life to be known is entwined with how s/he would like that life to be.

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