



FICTIONAL SHAKESPEARES AND PORTRAITS OF GENIUS

by
ANNALISA CASTALDO

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INTRODUCTION

THE FIRST FOLIO opens with a portrait of Shakespeare, somewhat aristocratically dressed, staring at the reader with a slightly sideways glance. Across from this portrait is a poem, “To the Reader” which is worth quoting in full:

This Figure, that thou here seest put,
It was for gentle Shakespeare cut
Wherein the Graver had a strife
With Nature, to out-doo the life:
O could he but have drawne his wit
As well in brasse, as he hath hit
His face, the print would then surpasse
All that was ever writ in brasse.
But, since he cannot, Reader, looke
Not on his Picture, but his Booke.

This poem accomplishes several things. It off-handedly assures the reader that the likeness is very like and at the same time declares that what matters is not the portrait, but the words—readers are directed to look on the “book,” not the picture, if they wish to understand who Shakespeare really was. If the engraver could have “drawne his wit” as well as his “face” then the print would be a true representation (beyond what any other print has managed) of Shakespeare; since that is impossible, the reader should look to Shakespeare’s words to find the truth of “his wit.” While the movement of the poem may seem to be away from the person and character of Shakespeare the man, and towards the words of Shakespeare the writer, the poem’s very existence, and the full-page portrait of the man, undermines the apparent message. We are, in fact, directed to look at *both* the portrait and the book. The slippage between portrait and words appears more strongly when the poem claims that if the engraver could draw wit, the portrait would “surpasse / all that was ever *writ* in brasse” (emphasis added), conflating writing and engraving, words and pictures, work and author. The suggestion, therefore, is that the wit is contained in both the plays Shakespeare authored and in his physical body. This conflation of Shakespeare with his works continues in the dedication, where Heminge and Condell state, “But it is not our province, who only gather his works, and give them you, to praise him. It is you that reade *him*” (emphasis added). While the first sentence draws a distinction between the works and the man, the second sentence collapses it, offering the audience not just the works, but Shakespeare himself to read.

Admittedly, this type of dedicatory material is not unique. Ben Jonson’s collected works also open with a portrait of the man and there are several poems that applaud Jonson as writer and man. But whereas Shakespeare’s portrait is presented as a life drawing (the dedication poem assures us it is very life-like), Jonson’s is clearly meant to evoke classic poets—he is crowned with a laurel wreath and contained within a frame that is itself mounted on a pedestal. One of the accompanying poems claims

For Lyrick sweetness in Ode, or Sonnet
 To *Ben* the best of Wits might vail their Bonnet.
 His *Genius* justly in an Entheat Rage,
 Oft lasht the dull-sworn Factors for the Stage;...

The man is here described, but there is not the same sort of overlap between man and work evident in the material about Shakespeare. Jonson is described as *having* wit and skill, and using them for specific purposes (lashing the dull) rather than actually *being* wit; instead of collapsing the distance between work and man, the introductory materials widen it. Jonson is perhaps more humanized in that he is very much grounded in his time, whereas Shakespeare is described as living beyond his age, but again a comparison with another folio makes the difference clear. The collected works of Beaumont and Fletcher also have a portrait as a frontispiece, but in this case the picture makes no attempt to be of the living man—instead Fletcher is presented as a bust with toga-like draping over the shoulders and a wreath. Here the author (despite the title page, only Fletcher is pictured) is presented as a type rather than an actual person. Shakespeare, as early as the First Folio, is presented as occupying an unusual middle ground, neither idealized as an artist nor completely fleshed out as a person. Readers are told to ignore the picture and find the man in his works, but by conflating man and work, Shakespeare the man thus becomes available for future generations to imagine as a flesh and blood person. This in turn allows readers to see their version of Shakespeare as capturing some essential truth about the man that explains the power and longevity of the works. A mere seven years after his death, Shakespeare has already become merged with his writing, so that one reflects and embodies the other.

To be sure, Shakespeare is not the only literary figure to have an afterlife as a fictional character. Dickens, especially, shows up in his own person in multiple venues, and female writers (Austen, Dickinson, Woolf) are often the subjects of fictionalized biographies. Nonetheless, Shakespeare is materially different, both in the range and number of times his person appears and in the flexibility of his meaning. Whereas other writers are fictionalized in approximately the same way each time, the facts of Shakespeare's actual life are obscure enough that he can be used to explore many different topics and embody many different metaphors. He can represent men pulled away from family duties by the longing for adventure, or the poor fit between creative brilliance and small-town life. He can embody the American dream of upward mobility, before there was an America, or the glories of England's past. He can be a saint or a sinner, or both.

Consider again Shakespeare's portrait. As Erin Blake notes, "Portraiture is supposedly about verisimilitude, but a successful portrait is less about replicating someone or something in another medium than about meeting expectations. Portraits depict what we want to see."¹ The portrait from the First Folio is not the only portrait of Shakespeare, although it is the most iconic. Since 1640, artists and scholars have been modifying Shakespeare's portrait to ensure he continues to reflect the sensibilities of the current age. Sometimes this is merely a matter of updating details—Marshall's 1640 portrait

¹ Blake, "Shakespeare, Portraiture, Painting and Prints," 409. The full citation is in the Bibliography at the end; I follow this practice throughout.

gives Shakespeare a laurel branch to hold, for example, while the Chandos portrait provides more relaxed, informal clothes. Others literally redraw Shakespeare to fit different norms. The 1770 portrait included in Charles Jennen's edition of *King Lear*, for example, presents a very different man than the one pictured in the First Folio. Here Shakespeare acquires his iconic gold earring, as well as more hair. He wears an elaborate lace ruff and his face is more angular; in total, he looks much more like an aristocrat. Then, in 2002, the "discovery" of the Sanders Portrait gave the world a young, sexy Shakespeare, with a widow's peak just beginning to hint at later baldness and a devilish Mona Lisa-type smile. Despite controversy over the attribution of the portrait, the Sanders portrait has been embraced because it gives the modern world a modern Shakespeare. In each case, the physical representation of Shakespeare shifts just enough to make the man recognizably "like us" without being overt enough of a change to suggest there is no reality behind the portrait. As Blake notes, "Objectively, buck teeth and a heavy unibrow would not change the beauty of the words that Shakespeare left behind, but the contrast between that face and the words opens up an uncomfortable gap."² This urge to close an apparent or assumed gap between artist and art is especially powerful in the case of Shakespeare, who has, since the eighteenth century, been widely (almost universally) considered a vital cultural touchstone.

Portraits are limited, both by being single and static images, and by having to maintain some connection to historical reality. Someone presenting a portrait of Shakespeare with pointed elf ears, or wearing modern dress could not pretend the portrait represented anything like the historically accurate appearance of the man William Shakespeare. Fictionalized characterizations, on the other hand, whether visual or textual, have much greater license; they need only present their audience with something that seems to get at the essence of the man, playing with the details as they wish. Play they do. Shakespeare has appeared in ads, TV shows, movies, art, and literature from Sir Walter Scott to Salman Rushdie. In addition to many, many nonfiction biographies, there are fictionalized biographies, not only of Shakespeare, but about and from the point of view of Shakespeare's wife, his daughters, and his dog. Why do so many people want to adapt not the works of Shakespeare but the person, to reimagine his life and personality? This is hardly the first work to note that Shakespeare the character has had a rich and varied afterlife. Other authors who have tackled the fictional Shakespeare have focused on categorizing these appearances (Maurice O'Sullivan's *Shakespeare's Other Lives*, 1997) or the ways in which Shakespeare works as a mirror for different historical periods (Paul Franssen's *Shakespeare's Literary Lives*, 2016). These works are invaluable, particularly Franssen's study of fictional biographies, which powerfully demonstrate how the presentation of myths about Shakespeare's life (such as the claim that he poached deer or played the Ghost of King Hamlet) tell us more about the particular adaptor and time period than about Shakespeare himself. Even so, I wish to consider a different reason Shakespeare manifests so often: He has become a kind of synecdoche of and test case for creative genius. While biographies strive to understand the historical Shakespeare and what influenced him, fictional versions of Shakespeare allow writers and readers

2 Blake, "Shakespeare, Portraiture, Painting and Prints," 423.

to reflect on how genius comes about, what motivates or drives someone to create art that endures, and most importantly, what genius actually is. As Douglas Lanier notes, “Shakespeare is popular culture’s favourite symbol for the principle of literary authorship, and his appearance brings into play related issues, among them the origins and nature of genius.”³

The definition of genius has changed over the millennia. At first, in ancient Rome, the word was used to designate a guiding spirit or deity of a specific person, family (*gens*), or place. Genius meant protection and inspiration as well as a sense of personal connection between a single person or family and a being of the supernatural world. Yet right from the start there was also a sense of creativity; *genius* is linked to the Latin verb *genui*, which means to bring into being or create. It is also related to the Greek word for birth. Thus genius, from its origins, was linked to creativity and the metaphorical birthing of new ideas. Because the “genius,” the protective deity, of powerful or extraordinary men was considered to be motivating or at the very least intimately connected with their accomplishments, the word quickly came to have a secondary meaning of exceptional talent and inspiration. The dual history of the word echoes today as different societies or segments of society struggle to pin down where genius comes from—is it an inherent quality unique to the individual who displays it, or is it wholly or in part due to outside factors? Is it genetic or environmental? What role, if any, do family life, education, exposure, and life experiences play in the shaping of a genius?

In addition to the question of what creates or causes genius, the definition of what exactly genius *is* has always been and continues to remain fluid and contradictory. In Volume Two of *Encyclopédie* (1757), Jean-François de Saint-Lambert claims

Genius is the expansiveness of the intellect, the force of imagination and the activity of the soul. The way in which one receives his ideas is dependent on the way in which one remembers them. Man is thrown into the universe with more or less vivid feelings which belong to all mankind. Most people only experience strong feelings when the impression of those objects has an immediate effect on their needs or their tastes. Everything that is foreign to their passion, all that is without a connection to their way of living or is not apparent to them, or is only seen for a moment without being felt and to be forgotten forever. The man of *genius* is he whose soul is more expansive and struck by the feelings of all others; interested by all that is in nature never to receive an idea unless it evokes a feeling; everything excites him and on which nothing is lost.⁴

Here genius is described as simply *more* of what is innate to all people—the man of genius is “more expansive” in both feeling and remembering experiences; “everything” touches him, unlike ordinary men who forget in “a moment” anything that is “foreign to their passion.” Yet by the end of the entry, genius is no longer a human trait, but is instead described more like the original definition of a supernatural force: “Within the Arts as in the sciences or in business, *genius* seems to alter the nature of things, its char-

3 Lanier, *Shakespeare and Modern Popular Culture*, 114.

4 Ascribed to Jean-François de Saint-Lambert (ascribed), “Genius” in *The Encyclopedia of Diderot & d’Alembert Collaborative Translation Project*, translated by Glaus. Originally published as “Génie,” *Encyclopédie ou Dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts et des métiers*, 37 vols. (Paris, 1751–80), 7:582–84.

acter expands over all it touches, it bursts over the past and the present and lights the future.”⁵ Here genius seems to act independently of its human vessel, interacting with the world directly and possessing its own character.

In his description of genius in literature, Saint-Lambert mentions Shakespeare along with Racine, Homer, and Virgil. Shakespeare’s genius shines like “lightening throughout a long night.”⁶ This interesting metaphor is followed by “Racine is always beautiful,” suggesting, perhaps, that Shakespeare has mere flashes of genius compared to the French Racine who is continuous in the level of his creation. During this time, Shakespeare was admired almost grudgingly, especially by the French, who faulted his work for neglecting the unities, but could not help but admire some of his verse. Saint-Lambert, unlike many later authors, is not interested in Shakespeare as a human being. Instead, he describes Shakespeare’s genius as a natural phenomenon: lightening, which can be destructive, but can also show ordinary people glimpses of the world that they (trapped in “a long night”) cannot see on their own.

The idea Saint-Lambert puts forth, that “rules and laws of taste will only be obstacles to genius,” shows up in other views of genius. Kant, for example (in *Kritik der Urteilskraft* / The Critique of Judgment, §46–§49, e.g., §46), defined genius as that which is so fully original it need not be taught. However, not all views of genius are so positive. In the twentieth century, psychology has suggested that genius is linked to various mental illnesses, ranging from depression to schizophrenia, and earlier philosophers, such as Schopenhauer, believed the very traits that made someone a genius made that person unable to live comfortably in the mundane world. Some strains of the Romantic view of genius suggested a similar inability to function successfully in day-to-day life and this view of genius, especially creative genius, has become increasingly popular in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Rock stars like Kurt Cobain, painters like Edvard Munch (who claimed his art only existed because of his mental illnesses), and writers like Sylvia Plath, among many other examples, have fed a popular belief that great genius grows out of mental instability. Perhaps this idea is so strong because there is something comforting in the belief that genius means giving up the ordinary but rewarding joys of normal life.

Even though Shakespeare has been recognized as a genius (whatever that means) for centuries, we will never know exactly how he was viewed during his lifetime. What scraps of information we have do not seem to suggest universal awe. Greene famously describes him as a plagiarist, decking himself out in others’ words. His retirement to Stratford rather than staying in London and in the world of the theatre may indicate that he saw himself as a craftsman, working to order for pay, rather than an artist, and perhaps others agreed. However, as James Shapiro points out in *Contested Will*, there is a great deal of evidence that from at least the midpoint of his career, Shakespeare was praised as one of the best writers of the times. Aside from written praise by various writers, there is the simple fact that the most well-respected and highly praised act-

5 Saint-Lambert (ascribed), “Genius.”

6 Saint-Lambert (ascribed), “Genius.”

ing company—The Lord Chamberlain’s Men, who, when James ascended to the throne, became The King’s Men—trusted Shakespeare to be their house playwright. Moreover, Shakespeare’s name generally appeared on the title page of his published plays after about 1598, indicating that part of what booksellers thought would attract a buyer was his name. Whatever may have been true during his life, shortly upon his death, his works were recognized as worthy of special treatment; his was only the second set of plays to be published in expensive folio form, and they were the first to have a folio devoted entirely to drama. After his death, Jonson, Milton, and others paid poetic tribute to his works, and Charles I is said to have read Shakespeare while awaiting his execution. His reputation only increased after the Restoration, and Bardolotry was full blown by the time David Garrick staged the Shakespeare Jubilee in 1769. Shakespeare’s genius—or Shakespeare as genius—thus has a long history.

When Shakespeare became recognized as the national poet of England, he also became the example of poetic excellence for much of the world. Due to the historical accidents of the British Empire and the United States’ rise as a twentieth century superpower, English is an important language for a great deal of the world. Regardless of what the native language might be, British texts are taught and studied the world over, not just by academic specialists but by generations of school children. In addition, the continuing presence of the plays on stage (and in movies, books, and occasionally television shows) adds to the universal awareness of Shakespeare, not just the works, but the man. He has come to function as a shorthand for genius and therefore a way to explore what a particular age or culture means by the term “genius.” Indeed, “by recognizing that Shakespeare’s significance springs from a continuing contest of values and interests, we better understand how we in the present actively perpetuate and intervene in the cultural afterlife of Shakespeare.”⁷

In this book I have sorted the variety of ways the idea of genius is defined, explored, and explained into three major schools of thought. I argue that these approaches inform four distinct ways Shakespeare is portrayed as a fictional character. These are not necessarily scholarly approaches, because my interest is in how Shakespeare functions culturally as an explanation for or example of genius, rather than any scientific study of the sociological or biological origins of genius. Similarly, I have not tried to firmly nail down the slippery idea of genius itself; part of what makes Shakespeare such an excellent test case is that almost no one questions his credentials. This makes it possible to work backwards—given that Shakespeare is unquestionably “a genius” there is automatic justification for pointing to some aspect of his work or life to explain what genius is.

In Chapter One I explore the idea presented by Saint-Lambert in the *Encyclopedie*—genius is the expression of greater awareness of and engagement with the world at large. Shakespeare becomes the exemplar of that mind which is excited by everything and which forgets nothing. Although this is not the language used until the twentieth century, this is a view of genius that is, at heart, utterly open to difference, embracing and accepting all manner of humanity. When Saint-Lambert defines genius as finding nothing foreign, we might think of Shakespeare’s sympathetic, three-dimensional por-

⁷ Lanier, *Shakespeare and Modern Popular Culture*, 21.

traits of Shylock, Othello, and Cleopatra. Works which present a fictional Shakespeare interested in and empathetic towards all the people he meets appeal to this idea of a genius as one who deeply understands and thus is sympathetic to all kinds of people and experiences. These versions of Shakespeare are universally positive.

In Chapter Two I consider an interpretation that is almost opposite to Saint-Lambert's. Here, genius is some sort of intrinsic aspect of an individual mind, but a mind that is so different from the norm that it creates a barrier to successful interaction with the real world. This is allied to the view of genius as connected to or a manifestation of mental illness or, in modern terms, a non-neurotypical brain. These portraits of Shakespeare stress his separation from the rest of the world; instead of being more fully engaged than the average person, Shakespeare is shown as distanced or removed from everyday concerns. Sometimes this is presented as a positive thing—Shakespeare has access to a purer understanding than everyone else because he is not distracted by mundane concerns. Yet more often those who create the removed Shakespeare stress what genius costs—failed relationships, loneliness, alienation. Within these portraits there is a definite range—sometimes Shakespeare is aloof but surrounded by admiring, even loving, friends. Other times he is entirely isolated, unable to engage with normal life. At the most extreme end Shakespeare is a madman, the plays more real to him than the actual world, his works created out of a kind of artistic schizophrenia or delusion.

Chapter Three returns in some ways to the original Roman definition and views of genius as bestowed on Shakespeare by some external force—divine, supernatural, or magical. In these portraits, genius often rides Shakespeare the man, using and controlling him to create poetry and characters that, for some reason, need to exist in the world. This is a favourite approach of late twentieth-century writers, who use Shakespeare to explore everything from mythopoeic ideas of humanity to the Jungian collective unconscious. Further, with the rise of fantasy and science fiction as important genres, Shakespeare works as a symbol for what is special about humanity itself. For example, while Shakespeare never showed up as a fictional character in any of the various *Star Trek* series, the repeated conceit that watching or acting in his plays, specifically, is a way to understand humanity illuminates the same belief. “The Defector” a third season episode of *Star Trek: The Next Generation*, opens with Data performing part of 4.1 from *Henry V*. Picard has suggested Data will learn how to be human by playing Henry V. The writers of the episode chose Shakespeare in part because viewers will have some familiarity with the works, if not the individual play, but more because those viewers have already learned that Shakespeare's works are the most perfect representation of humanity available, so perfect they can teach humanity to an android. From the belief in Shakespeare's perfect understanding of humanity it is a short step to imagine that Shakespeare was gifted with his genius by some outside force, in order to serve as a guide, model, or inspiration for the rest of humanity, throughout the ages.

The portraits of Chapter Four, in some ways, are the antithesis of the first three. For as long as there has been an authorship controversy, there have been fictionalized portraits of “the actor Will Shaxspere,” the beard or stand-in for the real genius. Although I find the authorship debate largely pointless, this debate and the fictional portraits it spawns demonstrate the importance of a match between one's understanding of genius

and the life of the person gifted with that genius. Shakespeare the middle-class businessman with a grammar school education is so unappealing as a vessel for genius that some people simply cannot accept it. Since the genius of the plays is unquestionable, all that is left to question is the man who supposedly authored them. In this last chapter I look at a range of portraits that present both the actor from Stratford as cover story and the “real” genius hiding behind the name Shakespeare, noting how these works repeat certain tropes and characteristics over and over, for both the fake and the real author of the plays. Indeed, in many ways, this chapter most clearly indicates what genius means to the post-Romantic Western world and how intrinsic concepts such as originality and passion have become to our understanding of genius. In the end, these portraits reinforce the beliefs laid out in Chapter One, by insisting that only personal experience can account for the level of genius people find in Shakespeare’s plays.

Shakespeare’s range of work enables different portraits of the artist and his genius. Those who create a Shakespeare whose genius is based in his intense connection to everyday events or personal emotional experiences tend to focus on earlier plays, and especially *Romeo and Juliet*. Since love is a universal experience—and since Shakespeare’s sonnets suggest a tortured, adulterous affair—the comedies and *Romeo and Juliet* can be treated as outgrowths of his personal romances. Plays such as *Macbeth*, *King Lear*, or *Antony and Cleopatra*, while recognized as master works, do not serve this purpose. In addition, creators of these portraits concentrate on Shakespeare’s early years as a way to show how genius arises out of mere talent and events or relationships as he begins to write. In contrast, those writers who want to see Shakespeare as aloof, cut off, or insane focus mainly on the later plays, especially *King Lear* and sometimes *Hamlet*; the tortured protagonists of those plays represent Shakespeare’s own tortured mind. Unsurprisingly, the texts that present Shakespeare’s genius as having a divine or supernatural origin tend to focus on *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, *Macbeth*, and *The Tempest*. Meanwhile, those who support the authorship controversy engage with a sort of “greatest hits” of Shakespeare’s plays, usually reading the plays as containing coded messages about the real identity of the author; a code that only works if many of the less popular plays are ignored.

In each case, creators of fictional Shakespeares ignore large chunks of the canon and often revise chronology, sometimes drastically. They also, almost universally, ignore the source material that Shakespeare relied on, preferring to locate the source for the plays in Shakespeare’s life or purely in his mind. This reflects the post-Romantic obsession with originality, something that the early modern period did not value in nearly the same way. Since sources are rarely introduced to students or casual readers today, it is easy to present the plays as arising solely from Shakespeare’s own experiences or imaginings. It also explains why different versions of genius focus on different plays—each writer uses the plays that best match the portrait of genius they wish to create and ignores all other works.

This book focuses on popular culture artifacts—mass-market novels, Hollywood movies, comic books, and television. While it might seem that a work interested in unpacking the concept of genius might look to high culture and academia for answers, part of what makes Shakespeare such a perfect figure for this exploration is the way

his work and his character straddle worlds. The plays continue to show up in everything from TV commercials to game show questions and when Shakespeare himself appears, it is almost never as a stuffy academic aware of his own greatness. Fictional Shakespeares can be absent-minded and dreamy, overly emotional, cut off, or practical and compassionate, but they are rarely great “artistes” keenly aware of their own brilliance (and when they are, it is almost always in service of the belief that someone else wrote the plays). Genius, in this case, is best understood as a popular conception, one that informs and is used by everyone in a particular culture, rather than the purview of philosophers and psychologists.

I want to stress that not all fictional portraits of Shakespeare are automatically an exploration of genius. Because he is so well known, so instantly recognizable, Shakespeare is a convenient mythic figure who can be used for a variety of purposes, not all about artistic genius. The various retellings of young Will the deer poacher, for example, are almost never interested in Shakespeare the genius, instead presenting him as a Robin Hood figure, morally and politically on the side of the poor worker rather than the wealthy landowner.⁸ Stories told from the perspective of Anne, such as Robert Nye’s *Mrs. Shakespeare: The Complete Works* and Rosemary Anne Sisson’s *Will in Love*, or one of the children, such as Peter Hassinger’s *Shakespeare’s Daughter* and Grace Tiffany’s *My Father Had a Daughter* assume his genius but focus instead on his absences from Stratford to order to explore what others suffer when a husband or father cares more for his work than his family. For example, although *Will in Love* covers Shakespeare’s life from the day he meets Anne Hathaway until 1607 (the death of his brother Edmund), it is not until fifty pages from the end that anyone names one of his plays, and then it is a passing reference to the popularity of “Oldcastle,” which leads directly to his mother complaining that making fun of a famous man might get William in trouble. There is no sense of what Shakespeare’s inner life is like and it is not his genius but his absences that divide him from his family—he could as easily be a soldier, always off fighting, or a merchant, gone overseas for months or years at a time, as a playwright living in London. The most recent entry in this category, Maggie O’Farrell’s *Hamnet: A Novel of the Plague* suggests (at the very end) that Shakespeare’s creation of *Hamlet* is motivated by the loss of his son. Apart from that connection, Shakespeare is not only mostly absent from the novel, he is never named; instead, he is described as John’s son, Agnes’ (O’Farrell’s name for Anne) husband, the twins’ father. The story may build to the writing and performance of *Hamlet*, but like other books in this category, it is really about the people Shakespeare left behind—the wife and children who had to live (and die) without him.

Sometimes, Shakespeare’s appearance is so brief that exploration is impossible—Shakespeare is presented as a recognizable representative of creative genius, but he is symbolic and static: a statement rather than a discussion. Sir Walter Scott’s injection of Shakespeare into *Kenilworth* (appearing as an adult and an already respected writer when the historical Shakespeare would have been, at most, twelve) is the most extreme example of this. Shakespeare is greeted by Leicester as “wild Will!,” whose *Venus and Adonis* has so charmed Philip Sydney and others that “we will have thee hanged as the

8 Franssen, “The Adventures of William Hood.”

veriest wizard in Europe!”⁹ The narrator then comments, “The Player bowed, and the Earl nodded and passed on—so that age would have told the tale—in ours, perhaps we might say the immortal had done homage to the mortal.”¹⁰ This ahistorical view of Shakespeare—the narrator pulling out of the story to reflect on the irony that the relative importance of these two men would shortly and for the rest of history be entirely reversed—certainly presents Shakespeare as not just a genius but The Genius. That is all that is offered—there is no exploration, discussion, or explanation of that genius. Shakespeare appears in the novel because Scott cannot resist bringing him in, but he is not the focus and thus his portrait is flattened so much that he has no character at all—he does not even speak. Similarly, many examples that feature Shakespeare for a brief period often assume but do not explore his genius. As Paul Franssen notes in *Shakespeare’s Literary Lives*, before 1800 Shakespeare appeared almost exclusively as a ghost and “a regal ghost, whose authority is not to be doubted.”¹¹ His appearance as a ghost immediately underscores his authority as a genius “poet of Nature” (which was never in doubt anyway) and delivers warnings to, mourning for, or approval about the state of the theatre’s divine legitimacy. In none of these early, ghostly portraits is there any focus on how Shakespeare became a genius or how his genius functions. It exists as a simple fact, a fact which can therefore provide blessing or condemnation of a current theatrical, political, or personal agenda.

Finally, some portraits offer a Shakespeare who is actually not a genius. Some writers resurrect Shakespeare specifically to go against the grain, to dethrone him. However, in many cases the clear desire of the writer to present a Shakespeare who is not a genius often gets derailed by the power of the cultural belief that he is the very embodiment of genius. An excellent example is Isaac Asimov’s short story “The Immortal Bard.” A physicist tells an English professor that he has developed time travel and can bring people from the past to the present. After bringing forward scientists such as Archimedes and Newton, and having to send them home when they could not adjust, the physicist brings forward Shakespeare because “I needed someone with a universal mind, someone who knew people well enough to be able to live with them centuries away from his own time.”¹² The joke is when confronted with the reverence and the extent of the analysis his works receive, Shakespeare is dumbfounded and insists that the artist is just a craftsman: “He wrote his plays as quickly as he could. He said he had to on account of the deadlines. He wrote *Hamlet* in less than six months. The plot was an old one. He just polished it up.”¹³ The physics professor delivers the punch line to the joke after Shakespeare enrolls in the English professor’s course, “Why, you poor simpleton. You *flunked* him!”¹⁴ Underneath the joke is the fact that Shakespeare, it turns out, is the only one

9 Scott, *Kenilworth*, 168.

10 Scott, *Kenilworth*, 168.

11 Franssen, *Shakespeare’s Literary Lives*, 12.

12 Asimov, “The Immortal Bard.”

13 Asimov, “The Immortal Bard.”

14 Asimov, “The Immortal Bard.”

who is smart enough to know that Shakespeare's plays are not great works of art, but instead rush jobs intended to entertain the masses. He is the only person the physicist has brought forward who seems able to adjust to living in a completely different century. Rather than any inability to live in the modern world, he asked to be sent home because of the humiliation of being failed for his opinions of his own work. This is a very different response than that of Archimedes and Newton, the other two geniuses brought into the present, who did not have the "universal mind" necessary to adapt to a radically different world.

A second example of sparks of genius creeping into a work that resolutely sets out to prove Shakespeare was not at all a genius is George Bernard Shaw's short play "The Dark Lady of the Sonnets." Shaw was famously critical of Shakespeare, whom he considered a personal and professional rival. Shaw imagines a Shakespeare whose main focus is on seducing women (he arrives at Whitehall for a tryst with Mary Fitton and ends up trying to seduce the disguised Elizabeth I), and who continually writes down other people's words to use in plays. The guard at Whitehall accidentally offers him "Frailty thy name is woman" and "a snapper up of trifles," to which Shakespeare responds "Immortal phrase! This man is greater than I."¹⁵ When Elizabeth says, "Season your admiration for a while," Shakespeare starts to write it down but misremembers it as "Suspend your admiration for a space," which Elizabeth calls "A very vile jingle of esses" and corrects him.¹⁶ Thus far Shakespeare seems next-door to a plagiarist and rude to boot. Shakespeare defends the title of poet to the still disguised Elizabeth, cleverly using Christianity to bolster his claim. "I tell you there is no word yet coined and no melody yet sung that is extravagant and majestic enough for the glory that lovely words can reveal. It is heresy to deny it: have you not been taught that in the beginning was the Word?"¹⁷ When Elizabeth reveals herself, Shakespeare is not the least bit unnerved to find out he has been flirting with the Queen of England. He tells her that she is no true Tudor and that she holds her throne not because of her wit or wisdom, but because "Nature hath made you the most wondrous piece of beauty the age hath seen," a backhanded compliment that nonetheless cools Elizabeth's wrath.¹⁸ Further, when Elizabeth accuses him of being cruel to Mary he responds, "I am not cruel, madam: but you know the fable of Jupiter and Semele. I could not help my lightnings scorching her."¹⁹ Perhaps Shaw means Shakespeare to seem ridiculously conceited with this comparison, but since we have just seen him win over the Virgin Queen with his words, the claim actually rings true, more so when Shakespeare then turns to the question of establishing a national theatre (the real point of Shaw's play). Elizabeth says that such a theatre will not be possible for more than three hundred years and adds, "Now it may be that by then your works will be dust

¹⁵ Shaw, "The Dark Lady of the Sonnets," 94.

¹⁶ Shaw, "The Dark Lady of the Sonnets," 96.

¹⁷ Shaw, "The Dark Lady of the Sonnets," 97.

¹⁸ Shaw, "The Dark Lady of the Sonnets," 99.

¹⁹ Shaw, "The Dark Lady of the Sonnets," 100.

also,” and Shakespeare responds “They will stand, madam: fear not for that.”²⁰ Despite Shaw’s attempts to parody Shakespeare, he ends up being as forward-thinking (wishing for a theatre supported by the government so it could support experimental works) and as brilliant at word play as any portrait that sets out to seriously explore Shakespeare’s genius.

Thus, some aspect of genius often shows up in most fictional Shakespeares, regardless of the author’s desire, but I am not therefore claiming that each and every fictional portrait of Shakespeare represents a creator’s attempt to explore or explain how that genius came to be, and what the effects of being such a genius are. Nonetheless, many of the short stories, novels, comics, and movies that present Shakespeare in the flesh do explicitly exist in order to explore this question—if we take as given that Shakespeare is a genius, what can we learn about genius itself by bringing him to life?

20 Shaw, “The Dark Lady of the Sonnets,” 102.