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Shakespeare in Love and the End of the Shakespearean: Academic and Mass Culture Constructions of Literary Authorship

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In Shakespeare in Love, a Harvard professor is said to have played a tiny, but critical part. Marc Norman, one of the screenwriters, said he consulted Stephen Greenblatt, a Shakespeare scholar, to make sure that at least the framework of his story followed what was known about Shakespeare’s life. ‘I needed some sort of firm ground, some sort of confidence,’ Mr Norman said. ‘The great thing about writing about Shakespeare is that everyone in the world knows him and there are about five facts.’

James Sterngold, New York Times reporter

The point about Shakespeare’s life is that nobody knows anything. All we know is that [Shakespeare] paid 50 pounds to join the Chamberlain’s Men and that in his will he left his second best bed to his wife – that’s about the sum of it.

John Madden, director of Shakespeare in Love

Some readers might take these epigraphs to be yet more instances of a screenwriter’s and journalist’s typically low regard for academic knowledge: in the first epigraph, the college professor plays a ‘tiny’ role, ‘critical’ only in the sense that he frees the screenwriter to disregard academic authority over a film about Shakespeare’s early life as a lover and writer in the theatre. Like Norman, the director John Madden wanted to make a film about this part of Shakespeare’s life, the so-called ‘lost years’ and, according to him, as the second epigraph makes clear, there are only two, not five, things we know about the dramatist. Moreover, the film was marketed so that knowledge of Shakespeare among moviegoers was irrelevant: ‘Mr Madden is at pains to make it clear that knowing about Shakespeare and his time are not
necessary for enjoying the film. The academic may be the one who knows about Shakespeare, and thus, according to the screenwriter, has to be consulted, but the academic is also the one whose knowledge does not matter much at all.

Some academic readers who like the film, telling the story of how Shakespeare came to turn an idea for a play called Romeo and Ethel, the Pirate’s Daughter into Romeo and Juliet after he fell in love with a fictional character named Viola de Lesseps, might nevertheless want to dismiss it as so much fluff on the grounds that it has next to nothing to do with Shakespeare or Elizabethan England. Alternatively, some academic readers might want to laud the screenwriters and director for disregarding academic knowledge about Shakespeare on the grounds that this disregard has a politically progressive potential, especially for feminism. At the present historical moment (I write as President Clinton’s impeachment trial is ending), I am less and less clear about what a progressive feminist position regarding mass culture might be. But an academic fantasy about the progressive is perhaps clearer, and might run as follows: feminist mass culture versions of Shakespeare’s life would open new kinds of female authority over high culture writing and performance. Correspondingly, canonical male writers and performers would have their authority reduced, their masculinity revised, some might say feminized, a process signalled by gender trouble, ambiguity about sexual orientation, sexual/literary impotence, and so on. One could argue that Shakespeare in Love feminizes Shakespeare along these very lines, particularly his love life and his writing process. Indeed, in order to put the brakes on a perceived feminization (which, of course, is by no means inevitable or inherent in the process of turning Shakespeare into a character), historical accuracy may sometimes be sacrificed to mainstream notions of what now counts as masculine for some film producers. As Sandy Powell, the costume designer for Shakespeare in Love, says: ‘On Shakespeare in Love, the studio was very worried about the pants. It’s a difficult period for men not to look stupid, so the exec types kept asking, “Will there be tights?” So we made the jackets a little longer, the pants a little longer. You want to have believable clothes for the period, but you don’t want your actors to look silly.’ The screenwriters and director of Shakespeare in Love might be thought to be working against the ‘exec types’ in writing a love story about a man whose clothes make him look all too feminine (read ‘silly’).

In this essay, I focus on Shakespeare’s appearance as a fictional character in a single genre of mass culture, namely, the romance,