

All Is True: Kenneth Branagh's vision of William Shakespeare's final days

By David Walsh
5 June 2019

Directed by Kenneth Branagh; written by Ben Elton

Actor and director Kenneth Branagh has made a film, scripted by Ben Elton, devoted to the last years—1613-1616—of English poet and playwright William Shakespeare's life.

All Is True derives its name from an alternative title for *Henry VIII*, one of Shakespeare's later works, generally believed to be the product of a collaboration with John Fletcher.

The subject matter is fascinating and rich with promise, but the treatment, unfortunately, is largely leaden and relies on contemporary upper-middle class preoccupations to make sense of—or fail to make sense of—the life of an early 17th century artist.

The premise of Branagh's film is that following the fire which broke out at the Globe theater in London (in fact, during a performance of *Henry VIII*) in June 1613 and which burned the theater to the ground, Shakespeare retires to Stratford-upon-Avon. He has spent much of the previous quarter century or more in London acting and writing. His wife, the former Anne Hathaway, and his two daughters, one of them married with a child, still live in Stratford, some 90 miles north of the capital.

Shakespeare (Branagh) doesn't merely return to his birthplace in *All Is True*, but to a host of vexing private dramas—wholly invented or assigned to him, one might add, by the filmmakers.

Anne Shakespeare is a neglected and resentful wife. "Twenty years, Will. We've seen you less and less," she says, and invites him to sleep apart from her. Later, Anne complains jealously about Shakespeare's sonnets, some of which famously describe a "dark lady": "But you wrote them, Will, and people read them. And after they'd read them, they kept asking, 'Who are they? Who is this dark lady he's so in love with?'"

The film operates at a generally clichéd and, when it chooses, peculiarly literal level. Shakespeare's elder daughter Susanna (Lydia Wilson) is married to Dr. John Hall (Hadley Fraser), a prominent local physician. Because Hall is *ideologically* a Puritan, this means for the filmmakers that Hall has to be cold and "puritanical," and hypocritical, in his relations with his wife. *All Is True* therefore implies that the claim by one John Lane (Sean Foley) that Susanna is "fornicating" with a local tradesman may well or ought to be true. (The real Lane did make the accusation, but he had previously been "sued for riot; and libelling the vicar and aldermen; the churchwarden charged him with drunkenness." *William Shakespeare: A Compact Documentary Life*, S. Schoenbaum)

Absurdly, the film has Shakespeare threaten Lane with a visit from an "African" actor, "magnificent and terrifying," to discourage the disreputable man from pursuing his charges against Susanna.

Susanna's younger sister is in an even worse fix. Unmarried at 28, Judith Shakespeare (Kathryn Wilder) is embittered and openly hostile toward her long-absent father in *All Is True*, the very model of a modern angry feminist.

Judith inveighs against a woman's position in society, bemoaning the fact, for example, that "by law" her sister's property is Hall's, "as is her body." Toward the conclusion, she explains that "I was jealous, because

Hamnet went to school, and I had to work in the kitchens because I was a girl."

She is a surviving twin. Judith's brother Hamnet has died almost 20 years previously, in 1596. The filmmakers dream up a body of poems, apparently written by the dead boy, which had made Shakespeare "the proudest father in the kingdom."

This of course only makes Judith more irate and aggrieved. Speaking of her father, she bursts out at one point, "Every single time he reads one of them bloody poems, which aren't even that good, he thinks, 'Why did she survive and not him?' You know, 'The golden boy's gone, and you know what? I'm just left with a girl. A useless, pointless girl. ... Why did the wrong twin die?'" Naturally, there are revelations (further inventions) that will place these comments in a different light.

Harvard professor and Shakespeare scholar Stephen Greenblatt observes that the central theme of *All Is True* seems to be "the tragic cost of not having full access to literacy if you were a woman." (Is this all that's to be made of Shakespeare's life and work? Does it not have any objective significance apart from the light it sheds on gender inequalities? Is that why his works are performed more often than those of any other playwright who ever lived?)

The banalities here—in the playwright's own phrase (*As You Like It*)—"flow as hugely as the sea." Susanna asks her father, "So why are you come home, hmm? No more stories left to write?" He replies, "Susanna, I've lived so long in imaginary worlds, I think I've lost sight of what is real, what is true." (The dramatist's plays, these mere "imaginary worlds," have endured for 400 years precisely because they contain so much of "what is real, what is true.")

An admirer accosts Shakespeare while he is gardening in *All Is True* and inquires, wonderingly, "how you knew ... everything." This is the subsequent exchange:

Shakespeare: I ... have imagined.

Man: But they say that you left school at 14. You've never traveled. Imagined from what?

Shakespeare: From myself.

Man: Yourself?

Shakespeare: Yes. Everything I've ever done, everything I've ever seen, every book I've ever read, every conversation I've ever had, including—God help me—this one. If you want to be a writer, then speak to others and for others. Speak first for yourself. Search within. Consider the contents of your own soul, your humanity. And if you're honest with yourself, then whatever you write, all is true.

We have no idea what Shakespeare thought about the sources of his art, but this is trivial and misses the point. Enormous historical processes and transformations lay behind Shakespeare's work and the work of his gifted contemporaries. Bourgeois society, as Leon Trotsky noted, "during the period of its rise, had a great aim for itself. Personal emancipation was its name. Out of it grew the dramas of Shakespeare and Goethe's *Faust*. Man placed himself in the center of the universe, and therefore in the center of

art also.”

All Is True reduces Shakespeare to a contemporary best-selling novelist offering “self-help” advice.

Branagh’s Shakespeare has the opportunity for his own outraged tirade, addressed to Anne, which might not be out of place in an Arthur Miller drama: “I’ve worked ceaselessly on behalf of this family. On your own behalf. Yeah, and I’m head of this family! And I’ve given you a fine house and servants, sent you money all your life. Is not that comfort? You have two beautiful daughters, you’ve got a brilliant son and a husband who, though absent, kept you always in his thoughts. Is that not that companionship in abundance? I’ve risen this family up! Through my genius, I’ve brought fame and fortune to this house. Yes, yes, my genius. Would you have me ignore that, as well? Ignore a gift from God Almighty so that I could stay here in Stratford and be a bloody glove maker, and you might feel a bit more appreciated?”

There are a few pleasures in *All Is True*. Branagh is a fine actor, and hearing both him and Ian McKellen (as the Earl of Southampton), another remarkable performer, recite in turn Shakespeare’s Sonnet 29, “When, in disgrace with fortune and men’s eyes,” is a brief joy. A famous snatch of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* (“I know a bank where the wild thyme blows, Where oxlips and the nodding violet grows, Quite over-canopied with luscious woodbine, With sweet musk-roses and with eglantine ...”) is a delight too.

And the final sequence, in which Anne and Judith, more or less reconciled to husband and father, respectively, along with Susanna, declaim the words of the song from *Cymbeline* that begins ...

“Fear no more the heat o’ the sun,
Nor the furious winter’s rages;
Thou thy worldly task hast done,
Home art gone, and ta’en thy wages:
Golden lads and girls all must,
As chimney-sweepers, come to dust. ...”
... is genuinely moving.

Shakespeare possessed unique artistic, poetic genius. Not all those attracted—even genuinely and deeply attracted!—to his work are thereby guaranteed genius as well.

Branagh (born 1960), as noted, is a gifted performer. From a humble background in Belfast, his father a plumber and joiner who ran a small firm, he determined at a young age, among other things, that Shakespeare ought to be made accessible to wide audiences. His early film adaptations of Shakespeare (*Henry V*, *Much Ado About Nothing* and *Hamlet*), while not inspired, had a certain “democratic” freshness and openness to them, especially as they appeared in the bleak cultural landscape of the late 1980s to the mid-1990s.

Without Shakespeare on hand, however, his *Dead Again*, *Peter’s Friends* and *In the Bleak Midwinter* were extremely weak, awkwardly and gracelessly done. By 2011, Branagh was reduced to directing one of the Marvel Comics series, *Thor*. He followed that up with *Jack Ryan: Shadow Recruit*, about the fictional CIA agent, and the turgid, tedious *Murder on the Orient Express*. Branagh has not exhibited to date any particular film sense.

Even leaving aside the “playful” and empty postmodernist ambiguities (“And if you’re honest with yourself ... all is true” versus “Judith says, Nothing is true”), Branagh’s *All Is True* falls down in its approach to Shakespeare’s life and to historical development.

James Shapiro, in *Contested Will* (2010), cautioned against the assumption “that what makes people who they are now made people who they were back in Shakespeare’s day. Social historians have shown how risky such an assumption can be. There’s little evidence that the lives of early modern men and women resembled our own ... Despite all this, it’s not easy to break that preconception central to psychobiography that the modern nuclear family and the developmental struggles intrinsic to it

were the norm *All back then to true’s* (Shakespeare-Branagh proclaim, at Judith’s wedding, apparently in all seriousness, that “family is everything.”)

Shapiro observed it was “odd” that many biographers “focus so exclusively on his [Shakespeare’s] relationships with his father, son, wife, and daughters—all of whom he lived apart from most of his adult life.” He pointed out as well that the “lives of women within Elizabethan households” had been “especially misunderstood.” Anne Hathaway, he argued, supervised Shakespeare’s economic activities as “part of the complicated business of overseeing a household for close to thirty years while her husband was mostly off in London.” Biographers “unable to imagine Anne Hathaway as anything but a spurned, passive, and possibly adulterous wife ... have got it wrong.”

Furthermore, “Extraordinary claims have been made about Shakespeare’s grief over his young son, Hamnet’s, death. But there’s a good chance that he saw his son only a handful of times after leaving Stratford-upon-Avon for London not long after Hamnet was born.” Shapiro adds, and he might have been writing about *All Is True*, “As much as we might want Shakespeare to have been like us, he wasn’t—and biographers lead us astray when they invite us to imagine that he was.”

In the end, such views are not merely misguided, nor are they “innocent,” they serve social interests. In *The Historical Novel* (1937), Georg Lukács noted that one of the features of the increasing inability of bourgeois novelists—from the mid-19th century and the emergence of the working class onward—to honestly confront “general social-historical problems” was their tendency to reduce history to “no more than a pictorial frame within which a purely modern story is unfolded.” Lukács further referred to “the outward, soulless facts of history ... which are injected with an entirely modern sensibility.” He described an approach that “does not make the feelings, ideas and thoughts of past human beings intelligible to us, but attributes our feelings, etc. to them.” Bound up with that was the transformation of social life into “picturesque atmosphere or immobile background, etc., against which supposedly purely private histories are unfolded.”

Obviously, this process has reached an advanced stage by the time it makes an extremely threadbare appearance in a work such as *All Is True* and nearly every other film treatment of history at present.

Concretely, the overwhelming inclination of contemporary artists to “always find the same motive forces in history, their own” (in Bertolt Brecht’s expression), to repeat to themselves and others, “People don’t change much,” “Love is timeless” or “I’m exactly like everybody, everybody is exactly like me,” has roots in the current political and cultural stagnation, including a sharply deteriorated historical sense.

But such conceptions, which present the past as indistinguishable from the present, have definite consequences and implications. They encourage the idea that life and society are unalterable and unchanging, that things have always been the same and always will be. They reinforce the status quo.

The situation is only made worse when contemporary gender politics is transported back in time. History and historical figures are reorganized and “sanitized” (or condemned) so as not to offend contemporary petty bourgeois tastes and views. This is not a fruitful or productive path.

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