

'That's One of Mine': Upstart cannibalism in the BBC's Shakespearean biofiction

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Abstract

In televisual representations of William Shakespeare's life which blend biographical fact with fictionalised fantasy, contemporary writers often utilise the trope of the playwright colliding with characters and scenes recognisable from plays which he has yet to create and, consequently, finding inspiration. Others construct a reciprocal loop of influence, whereby Shakespeare is shown to have written or been informed by works that did not exist during his lifetime and which his plays themselves instigated. It has become fashionable in the metamodern era to depict these forms of metaphorical cannibalism in a parodic manner which oscillates between sarcastic rejection of Bardolatry and sincere appreciation for Shakespeare's 'genius'. Gareth Roberts satirised the notion of Shakespeare's originality in Doctor Who episode The Shakespeare Code (2007), through the depiction of the playwright being fed and consuming his own works and specific references. In 2016, the 400th anniversary year of Shakespeare's death, a number of commemorative BBC programmes also exhibited cannibalistic features, including the reverent (The Hollow Crown), the irreverent (Cunk on Shakespeare), and those which combined both registers (Upstart Crow). I will explore how these writers construct their portrayals of Shakespeare and, by interlacing fact and fiction, what portrait of the playwright these cannibalistic representations produce.

Keywords: Shakespeare; biofiction; metamodernism; popular culture; Upstart Cow; Doctor Who; All is True; Will; The Hollow Crown; Cunk on Shakespeare; Game of Thrones

Introduction: Metamodern Shakespeare

SHAKESPEARE: *Good luck, Doctor.*

DOCTOR: *Good luck, Shakespeare. Once more unto the breach.*

SHAKESPEARE: *I like that. Wait a minute, that's one of mine (Roberts, 2007).*

This metatextual exchange takes place between a fictionalised version of William Shakespeare (Dean Lennox Kelly) and the Tenth Doctor (David Tennant) during the climax of *The Shakespeare Code*, a 2007 episode of the long-running BBC science fiction television series *Doctor Who*. The central characters are gathered for a final rally against the evil, witch-like Carrionites, who are intent on entering Elizabethan England to destroy the world, when Tennant's Doctor delivers King Henry V's famous line. It is possible to interpret writer Gareth Roberts framing Shakespeare as a literary cannibal who fed on his own words and ideas, created by others, to produce what is widely considered the most significant body of dramatic work in theatrical history. The playwright's realisation that the Doctor's quotation from *Henry V* is 'one of mine' represents the culmination of a running gag throughout the episode, which this article will explore in greater detail, and one which suggests that the playwright has become aware he is embroiled in an ontological paradox created by a time-travelling alien supplying him his own lines.

In this article, I will explore how BBC programmes have, during the last thirteen years, explored Shakespeare's process of literary creation, his sources of inspiration and the various mysteries which surround his life, work and authorship. Televisual representations of Shakespeare's life which blend biographical fact with fictionalised fantasy, such as *The Shakespeare Code*, often utilise the trope of the playwright colliding with characters, scenes and phrases recognisable from plays which he has yet to create and, consequently, finding creative stimulation. Others, such as Charlie Brooker's satirical mockumentary, *Cunk on Shakespeare* (2016) construct a reciprocal loop of influence, whereby Shakespeare is shown to have created work that did not exist during his own lifetime such as HBO fantasy drama series *Game of Thrones* (2011-19).

Although Shakespeare does not directly meet any of his creations in *The Shakespeare Code*, Roberts offers a variation on what Douglas Lanier explains is an extension of 'the biographical assumptions surrounding Shakespeare's life by imagining his engagement with his own characters, who are presented as if they have lives of their own' (Lanier, 2007: 101). Shakespeare's encounters with the Carrionites, who operate as a trio and thus resemble *Macbeth's* three Wyrd Sisters, is not as explicit an example of what Lanier describes as Ben Elton's construction of an imagined encounter between Shakespeare and one of his characters in his situation

comedy *Upstart Crow* (2016-18). In Series 3 Episode 1: *Lord, What Fools These Mortals Be!* (2018), which takes *A Midsummer Night's Dream* as its source material, 'Will' Shakespeare (David Mitchell) meets a confidence trickster named Puck (Ken Nwosu) in a forest who proceeds to sell him a love potion.

In each instance, the origin story for *Macbeth* and *Dream*, both of which contain prominent examples of Shakespeare's use of the supernatural, are represented by depicting the playwright encountering real magic, which constructs the idea in the viewer's mind that Shakespeare's 'greatness' sprang from a connection to otherworldly forces unavailable to an 'ordinary' writer. It has become fashionable in the 'metamodern' era to depict these forms of metaphorical cannibalism in a parodic manner which swings between sarcastic rejection of Bardolatry and sincere appreciation for Shakespeare's 'genius'. Although the term appeared as early as 1975, metamodernism was first proposed as an alternative term to post-postmodernism by Dutch cultural theorists, Timotheus Vermeulen and Robin van den Akker, in their 2010 essay *Notes on metamodernism*, where they argue that:

metamodernism oscillates between the modern and the postmodern. It oscillates between a modern enthusiasm and a postmodern irony...Each time the metamodern enthusiasm swings toward fanaticism, gravity pulls it back toward irony; the moment its irony sways toward apathy, gravity pulls it back toward enthusiasm (Vermeulen and van den Akker, 2010: 5-6).

Luke Turner, a British metamodernist artist who collaborates with the American actor Shia LaBeouf and Finnish artist Nastja Säde Rönkkö as the performance art collective LaBeouf, Rönkkö & Turner – all of whom were born in the 1980s – suggests that:

*[o]urs is a generation raised in the '80s and '90s, on a diet of *The Simpsons* and *South Park*, for whom postmodern irony and cynicism is a default setting, something ingrained in us. However, despite, or rather because of this, a yearning for meaning – for sincere and constructive progression and expression – has come to shape today's dominant cultural mode (Turner, 2015).*

Turner is describing Millennials and the increasing tendency for contemporary artists to produce work that rejects outright sarcasm in favour of art which metatextually acknowledges the irony inherent in its own plot, setting or process of adaptation, whilst attempting to reach a level of sincerity with which its audience can identify, and thereby gain a greater understanding of their personal identity and issues within the wider world.ⁱ In the two primary instances of biographical fiction which

this article discusses, *Upstart Crow* and *The Shakespeare Code*, the writers' responses to Shakespeare as a literary icon veer from a parodic register – which attempts to render the playwright relatable and human through the reveal and explanation of his artistic process as banal, coincidental or lucky – to a more reverential attitude that reaffirms his status as an unparalleled literary force.

Upstart Crow

Lanier discusses how '[s]ome pop presentations, particularly contemporary works of an iconoclastic or parodic bent, emphasize the mundane or sordid nature of Shakespeare's life in order to cut the mythic author down to size' (Lanier, 2007: 100-1), which accurately describes the satirical approach taken by Elton towards Shakespeare's creative process and the domestic and workplace obstacles which stand between him and success. Lanier further explains, however, that 'far more typical for pop culture is to construct scenarios that locate the genesis of Shakespeare's writing in fabricated details of his personal experience, while never seriously challenging the extraordinary cultural authority accorded to his work' (Lanier, 2007: 101). *The Shakespeare Code* fulfils these criteria by plugging one instance of Shakespeare's 'tantalizing lacunae' (Lanier, 2007, 102), the existence of his supposedly lost play *Love's Labour's Won*, with a fantasy adventure which not only explains this specific mystery but also reveals the genesis of other plays, including *Hamlet*, *Macbeth* and *The Tempest*.

Roberts and Elton do not subject Shakespeare to the level of critique, with the playwright portrayed as a dashing genius in *The Shakespeare Code* and a bumbling family man in *Upstart Crow*, who often requires the women in his life to alert him to the flaws in his writing. For instance, in *Lord, What Fools These Mortals Be!*, Elton utilises the metatheatrical conceit of Shakespeare's appearance in the plot of *Dream* to enable a critique of his love juice plot device by Kate (Gemma Whelan), the daughter of Shakespeare's London landlord. This is ahistorically contextualised within modern, progressive attitudes towards sexual consent:

KATE: *Mr Shakespeare, is your play suggesting that a drugged person is capable of giving consent?*

WILL: *What? Blimey, I didn't see that coming! But, you know, if the drug is administered by well-intentioned fairies that's all right, isn't it?*

KATE: *No, it isn't! Goodness gracious, Mr Shakespeare. This appalling Puck figure goes about drugging people so they can then be forced into intimate relations with those whom they had previously despised. That is sexual assault, Mr Shakespeare.*

WILL: *God's boobikins, Kate. If a mischievous sprite can't administer a simple love potion to a sleeping innocent without being accused of assault, then I give up! Really! You must curb your tendency to apply a joyless socio-political agenda to every situation. (Elton, 2016)*

The transportation of contemporary politics and social principles into Shakespeare's period is a common feature of *Upstart Crow* and one which allows Elton simultaneously to critique uncomfortable aspects of Shakespeare's work – such as Oberon and Puck manipulating the four lovers against their will and leaving one, Demetrius, under the spell at the end of *Dream* – and to satirise modern archetypes, such as the elder, mansplaining male and the younger, woke female, who are here ably symbolised by Shakespeare and Kate.

Despite his rejection of Kate's warranted objections, Shakespeare is frequently shown elsewhere by Elton to be stimulated by specific experiences and encounters with people in his everyday life. Each episode follows the structure of a one or more Shakespeare text, with the episode's title usually referencing which particular plot is being followed. In the episode 'What Bloody Man Is That?', Shakespeare and his companions encounter three women on a heath during their journey back from London, who prophesies that he will be 'Owner of New Place hereafter' (Elton, 2016), alluding to the second largest house in Stratford-upon-Avon. He and his wife then become involved in a plot to murder Duncan MacBuff, the Scottish owner of New Place, representing the roles of Macbeth and Lady Macbeth. Although the episode performs a number of comic deviations away from *Macbeth*, the basic structure of Shakespeare's play remains intact. Lanier delineates how '[t]he author's relationship with his own creations is the focus of an entire sub-genre, tales in which Shakespeare meets his own characters' (Lanier, 2002: 129) and the way in which Elton relocates Shakespeare's encounters onto specific plays, which he would later write, undoubtedly shares in this creative impulse towards the satirical demystification of Shakespeare's authorship. These collisions between Shakespeare's life and his plays represent a form of self-cannibalisation, where the playwright is shown to be influenced by plots of whose existence the audience are already aware, which, paradoxically, advances the biographical myth that Shakespeare's personal experiences actively inspired his plays.

When these programmes swing back from irreverence towards reverence, this position is frequently signposted through the direct usage of words such as 'genius', however ironic or sincere, and references to future work which he directly or indirectly influenced. In her discussion of *The Shakespeare Code*, Janice Wardle argues that such texts 'explicitly, and conterminously, in their reading of Shakespeare, see the author as both

‘of his time’ and also ‘out of time.’ Often the presence of this double time enables films to assert the playwright’s genius as an author for all time’ (Wardle, 2018: 2). Elton metaphorically imports ideas from the present into the past via the prominent female characters, Kate and Shakespeare’s wife and daughter, who are frequently given the opportunity to critique or deliver advice but subsequently, with a touch of irony by Elton, receive little credit for this by the male playwright. Roberts, by contrast, transports The Doctor and his companion, Martha Jones (Freema Agyeman) to 1599 London and, consequently, creates a more explicit form of duality through this physical manifestation of Martha, a twenty-first century, black, female Londoner, occupying an older, less diverse and politically correct version of her hometown.ⁱⁱ

The blend of Shakespearean parody and social awareness demonstrates that, as Turner expresses, ‘[t]he metamodern generation understands that we can be both ironic and sincere in the same moment; that one does not necessarily diminish the other’ (Turner, 2015). Although Elton (b. 1959) and Roberts (b. 1968) belong to an older generation, their writing nevertheless adheres to many of the principles outlined by Turner in his ‘Metamodernist Manifesto’, such as the need to ‘recognise oscillation to be the natural order of the world’ (Turner, 2011) and his definition of metamodernism ‘as the mercurial condition between and beyond irony and sincerity, naivety and knowingness, relativism and truth, optimism and doubt, in pursuit of a plurality of disparate and elusive horizons’ (Ibid). Moreover, the work often exhibits signs of the writer’s own act of literary cannibalisation and an attempt, to some extent, to explore their own artistic identity through a consideration and fantastical speculation of Shakespeare’s creative and domestic persona.

Upstart Crow has frequently been compared to Elton’s previous success as a co-writer for the sitcom *Blackadder* (1983-99). Indeed, a character from *Blackadder II* makes a guest appearance in the *Upstart Crow* episode *The Quality of Mercy*, while the death of Shakespeare’s son, Hamnet, which occurs during the final episode of the third series, echoes the unexpectedly tragic mood at the conclusion of *Blackadder Goes Forth*, when the main characters finally venture into No Man’s Land. In *The Shakespeare Code*, Roberts reuses the idea of The Doctor visiting Shakespeare which he had explored two years earlier in the *Doctor Who Magazine* comic book story *A Groatworth of Wit* (2005), in which the Ninth Doctor (Christopher Eccleston) time-travels to England 1592 with his companion to combat the Shadeys, a race who harness negative emotions as a power source and attempt to manipulate Shakespeare’s contemporary, Robert Greene, into killing his rival, thus drawing on his jealousy in order to destroy Earth.ⁱⁱⁱ

The Shakespeare Code

A frequent convention of *Doctor Who* is an opening scene which takes place prior to the episode's title sequence and recognisable theme music, thereby establishing its setting, themes and tonal palate. These scenes often exclude the eponymous Doctor, an alien Time Lord with the appearance of a man or woman, and his/her time-travelling human companion, instead foregrounding the time and period into which they are about to venture. This is particularly prevalent in episodes which take their cue from historical fact and blend it with science-fiction. *The Shakespeare Code* begins by introducing a Wiggins (Sam Marks), a handsome young man, singing to Lilith (Christina Cole), a beautiful young woman, who leans out of an open window, thus creating an image which is instantly redolent of *Romeo and Juliet's* balcony scene. However, instead of following the pattern of Shakespeare's play, in which Juliet warns Romeo that she has 'no joy of this contract tonight; / It is too rash, too unadvised, too sudden' (*Romeo and Juliet*, 2.1.159-60), Lilith remarks that 'such sweet music shows your blood to be afire. Why wait we on stale custom for consummation?' (Roberts, 2007). Roberts consequently undermines the viewers' expectations – particularly those with prior knowledge of the play – and satirises Juliet's wish for Romeo to be sexually patient by recasting her as a temptress who willingly and immediately welcomes her suitor's advances.^{iv}

Encouraged by this invitation, Wiggins incongruously exclaims 'oh yes. Tonight's the night' (Ibid), which creates tension between his contemporary vernacular and Lilith's approximation of Shakespearean language. This foregrounds the relationship between the past and present that functions throughout *The Shakespeare Code* and which, as Janice Wardle suggests, creates 'deliberate dramatical capital out of the co-existence of different time periods' (Wardle, 2018: 2). Once inside Lilith's home, a second contrast develops, when, instead of the unfolding of an anticipated love scene, she transforms into a fanged, hook-nosed hag after being kissed by Wiggins. Quipping that 'a suitor should meet his beloved's parents' (Roberts, 2007), Lilith welcomes two other witch-like creatures, Mother Doomfinger (Amanda Lawrence) and Mother Bloodtide (Linda Clark), who proceed to swoop down on the screaming Wiggins and rip him to shreds. Meanwhile, she turns to camera and addresses the viewer directly, proclaiming: 'soon at the hour of woven words we shall rise again, and this fleeting Earth will perish' (Ibid), before her evil cackle gives way to the titles.

Lilith's transformation into witch and the shift from romance to horror – specifically, *Romeo and Juliet* into *Macbeth*, signposted by the appearance of three witches and a prophetic announcement – informs viewers that

the episode will blend tonal registers from across Shakespeare's plays and, despite the absence of any direct textual references in this scene, prepares them to expect an intertextual approach to the canon. The use of *Macbeth's* Witches as a malignant force and the notion of magic as a fictional explanation for both Shakespeare's genius and the mystery of *Love's Labour's Won* drive the narrative focus of *The Shakespeare Code*, the title of which, Emily Sidel explains 'intertextually cites Dan Brown's blockbuster novel *The Da Vinci Code* suggesting that Shakespeare is going to be recontextualised within a "popular" discourse' (Sidel, 2003: 119).^v

Significantly, in the scene which follows the opening credits, the Doctor initiates the episode's series of embedded Shakespearean quotations by telling Martha that 'I promised you one trip, and one trip only. Outside this door, brave new world' (Roberts, 2007). Indeed, as Martha steps out of the TARDIS (the Doctor's time machine) into Elizabethan England, her expression of wonder evokes Miranda's reaction in *The Tempest's* final scene upon meeting shipwrecked men, during which she exclaims 'O brave new world / That has such people in't' (*The Tempest*, 5.1.184-5). The quotation is emblematic of Roberts's process of Shakespearean appropriation; 'brave new world' is a phrase with potential recognisability to audience members beyond those with detailed Shakespearean knowledge due to it also being the name of Aldous Huxley's 1932 novel, whilst it draws attention to both the Doctor's intellectual prowess and the parallels between the experiences of Shakespeare and *Doctor Who's* characters. Consequently, at its very outset, the episode invites viewers to unstitch the layers of its intertextual fabric, while providing references which are less likely to alienate audience members unfamiliar with the playwright.

The Doctor and Martha first glimpse Shakespeare at a performance of *Love's Labour's Lost*. During the curtain call, Lilith is pictured in disguise as a noblewoman in an upper balcony, holding a voodoo doll which resembles the playwright, which is later referred to by the Doctor as a 'DNA replication module' (Roberts, 2007), thus combining references to science and magic. Unnoticed by all, Lilith kisses the doll and manipulates Shakespeare into announcing 'the premiere of my brand new play. A sequel, no less, and I call it *Loves Labour's Won*' (Ibid). This immediately piques the duo's curiosity; Martha confesses that she has never heard of the play and the Doctor responds by telling her that it is 'the lost play. It doesn't exist. Only in rumours. It's mentioned in lists of his plays but never, ever turns up and no one knows why' (Ibid). In the contemporary manner of fans taking a backstage tour to meet a famous personality or performer, they proceed to Shakespeare's tavern to meet him, whereupon he greets them in the weary mode of a modern celebrity:

DOCTOR: *Hello! Excuse me, not interrupting, am I? Mister Shakespeare, isn't it?*

SHAKESPEARE: *Oh no. No, no, no. Who let you in? No autographs. No, you can't have yourself sketched with me. And please don't ask where I get my ideas from. Thanks for the interest. Now be a good boy and shove off [...]* (Roberts, 2007).

This constructs the fictional relationship between the time-traveller and Shakespeare as one between fan and star, with the question of how Shakespeare became 'Shakespeare' being a common point of exploration for biofictional portrayals of the playwright's life.^{vi} This fascination extends to the marketing campaigns for films and television series inspired by Shakespeare's life and works, such the BBC comedy film *Bill* (2015) and TNT drama television series *Will* (2017), each of which proclaimed in their respective promotional posters that '[b]efore he was Shakespeare he was... Bill' and '[b]efore he was Shakespeare he was... Will'. In the 'origin story' tradition popularised by superhero movies, *Bill* and *Will* both explore how the Man from Stratford journeyed to London in order to seek fame and fortune whereas, in *The Shakespeare Code*, the audience is presented with a mid-career writer who despite already having found success, seeks new ideas and inspiration to take his 'genius' to the next level. Although the balance of power in the Doctor-Shakespeare relationship shifts throughout the episode, the Time Lord begins the episode as a fanboy seeking to know more about, as Martha describes Shakespeare, one of his 'heroes' (Roberts, 2007). The tenor of their exchange, between a devout fan and world-weary writer, was echoed in Kenneth Branagh's recent Shakespeare biopic *All Is True* (2018), in one of the few scenes which does not feature Shakespeare accompanied by a family member:

HENRY: *Mr. Shakespeare? I don't want to pester you.*

WILL: *Good. Excellent news. Cheerio then.*

HENRY: *It's just that I wanted to ask...*

WILL: *The best way to get started as a writer is to start writing. Cheerio.*

HENRY: *No really could I...*

WILL: *I don't have a favourite play. I admire all my fellow dramatists equally. And yes I do think women should be allowed to perform the female roles as is the practice on the continent. Now please. If you'll excuse me* (Elton, 2018).

All Is True was also written by Elton, and, in this fictional conversation, he orchestrates a dialogue between a young, aspiring author and the playwright, with a self-aware Shakespeare anticipating the questions which will plague future generations of academics, writers and directors. It is plausible to imagine Branagh, one of the foremost popularisers of Shakespeare in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, asking these questions of the playwright and consequently there is a metatextual element to this conversation whereby Henry (standing in for Branagh the Shakespeare fan) interrogates Will (Shakespeare portrayed by Branagh). A further thread of the intertextual web which connects *All Is True* to *Upstart Crow* is Branagh's guest appearance as a Dickensian ghost in the 2018 Christmas Special, *A Crow Christmas Carol*, who visits Mitchell's Shakespeare, still grieving for his dead son, during a commute from London to Stratford-upon-Avon. Credited only as 'The Stranger', Branagh's brief but significant appearance, during which he recounts the tale of a miser, prompts Shakespeare into spreading Yuletide joy by 'haunting' his adversary Greene and, in doing so, attempting him to set him on a Scroogean path to redemption. Elton and Branagh also meditate on the spectre of Hamnet's death in *All Is True* by representing the lost boy in visions which plague Shakespeare throughout the film.

Kelly's Shakespeare shares a similar preoccupation in *The Shakespeare Code*. His opening lines are delivered directly to the groundlings who, after a performance of the comic *Love's Labour's Lost*, he tells to 'shut your big fat mouths' (Roberts, 2007), with the crestfallen Doctor is consequently warned by Martha that '[y]ou should never meet your heroes' (Ibid). However, by the final scene, thanks to the Doctor's creative input, Martha's status as Shakespeare's 'new muse' (Ibid) and the adventure they share together, Shakespeare tells the duo, as they are about to depart, that he has 'new ideas. Perhaps it's time I wrote about fathers and sons, in memory of my boy, my precious Hamnet' (Ibid). Indeed, the Doctor feeds Shakespeare a line from *Hamlet* and suggests he document another spoken unconsciously during the episode which, as Wardle observes, indicates that 'Shakespeare is being edged by the Doctor towards writing *Hamlet*' (Wardle, 2018: 13). Andrew James Hartley also explains that this 'end roots the episode in Shakespeare's repudiation of the frivolity of comedy for something of more weight. That 'something' was to be his father's response to the death of his son Hamnet, the grief of which, we are told, had somehow facilitated the rise of the Carrionites in the first place' (Hartley, 2009: 11). Consequently, as the Carrionites attempted to harness the power of Shakespeare's words and exploit his grief, so he is ultimately able, with the Doctor and Martha's assistance, to banish them and reclaim this traumatic event as the impetus for dramatic inspiration, cannibalising the words spoken to him by the Doctor.

In setting and contextualising his life and artistic process in a fictional world where literal magic exists, Roberts likens Shakespeare's abilities to a form of sorcery. Lilith, Doomfinger and Bloodtide are Carrionites, three witch-like aliens from another realm, who, having been banished by The Eternals in ancient times, harness the combined power of Shakespeare's words and the Globe Theatre's fourteen sides in order to open a portal from their own world which will allow the rest of their race to enter Elizabethan England and wreak havoc on humankind. During their first confrontation, the Doctor defeats Bloodtide by naming her, a process which he describes to Martha as 'old magic' (Roberts, 2007). In response to her protestations that 'there's no such thing as magic', the Doctor explains that 'it's a different sort of science...The right numbers, the right equation, can split the atom. Carrionites use words' (Ibid). At the episode's conclusion, Shakespeare confesses that he does not remember writing the final words of *Love's Labour's Won*, whereupon the Doctor realises that the Carrionites have been manipulating the playwright as a linguistic puppet:

DOCTOR: *That's it. They used you. They gave you the final words like a spell, like a code. Love's Labours Won. It's a weapon! The right combination of words, spoken at the right place, with the shape of the Globe as an energy converter. The play's the thing! And yes, you can have that (Roberts, 2007).*

The Doctor's use of the word 'code' reinforces the episode's central plotline, since the code in question is the lost play, *Love's Labour's Won*, which is here revealed as the key to the villains' potential success. The premise of a missing work by Shakespeare grounds this episode in the creative impulse to fill in the blanks our understanding of who Shakespeare was, and what the plays convey about their author. Lanier suggests that '[f]ictionalized biography of Shakespeare supplies what the historical record does not or cannot offer (or even actively contradicts), the inner workings of Shakespeare's emotional psychology or intellect' (Lanier, 2002: 116). *The Shakespeare Code* can therefore be defined as an example of biofiction which exploits absent information about Shakespeare as a creative opportunity to discuss the playwright's identity as well as his cultural legacy.

The notion of Shakespeare's originality and the parodic idea of him being cannibalistically fed his own works and specific references is satirised throughout the episode: a running joke features the Doctor feeding Shakespeare well-known lines from plays which he has not yet written, including 'all the world's a stage' (*As You Like It*, 2.7.138) and 'the play's the thing' (*Hamlet*, 2.2.581). Shakespeare signals his approval of the phrases in these metatheatrical moments, culminating in his response to

the name 'Sycorax' (*The Tempest*), which the Doctor uses to describe a previously defeated foe, that 'I'll have that off you as well' (Roberts, 2007). The Doctor remarks that he 'should be on ten percent' (Ibid), referring to the idea that he ought to receive commission for his contribution to Shakespeare's work. This simultaneously parodies and supports academic theories that Shakespeare and his contemporaries were more collaborative than first believed, which has resulted in the widespread attribution in recent years of some Shakespeare plays as co-authored works. This was demonstrated by the publication in 2016 of *The New Oxford Shakespeare: The Complete Works: Modern Critical Edition*, a major volume which illustrates Shakespeare's collaboration with contemporaneous playwrights such as John Fletcher and Thomas Middleton and which, its editors suggest, 'offers readers the most up-to-date scholarship about which plays, and which parts of plays, were written by Shakespeare, and which were written with, or adapted by, someone else' (Taylor and Bourus 2016: 58).

Hartley observes here that '[t]ime, which seems linear (Shakespeare hears the word and writes it into a later play) becomes a mobius strip, circling back on itself' (Hartley 2009: 12). His metaphor, which refers to a surface with one continuous side, reflects the way in which the episode distorts Shakespeare's process of creation by introducing the paradox of reverse adaptation. The Doctor and Shakespeare's unconscious process of collaboration establishes an ontological paradox, which strongly evokes the concept of cannibalisation, explained through the creative collision of adapted materials and their source. The episode explores the paradox in three specific ways. Firstly, when Shakespeare mumbles the line 'to be or not to be' (*Hamlet*, 3.1.58) from the-yet-to-be written *Hamlet*, although the Doctor recommends that he write it down, Shakespeare rejects on the grounds that it is 'too pretentious' (Roberts, 2007). This both undercuts the reverence accorded to one of Shakespeare's most famous phrases and subtly interacts with the different version of the now iconic line in Shakespeare's First Quarto or so-called 'bad quarto': 'To be or not be, ay, there's the point'.

Secondly, the Doctor's appropriation of *Henry V* during the episode's climax, and Shakespeare immediate recognition of it as 'one of mine', makes historical sense, given that the play is thought to have been written in early 1599, the year in which *The Shakespeare Code* is set. It also suggests that, as the episode draws to a close, Shakespeare has realised the metatextual game that the Doctor has been playing with him. He hints at this in the episode's final scene, when he tells the Doctor 'you're travelling through time and space...it's not hard to work out' (Ibid) which, provoked by the inclusion of a line from *Henry V*, can be theorised as proof of him finally recognising the truth of the ontological paradox being

created by the Doctor's use of his own words. Kelly V. Jones discusses this moment in terms of the 'ambiguity...that arises as a result of the temporal paradox as to whether it is the Doctor's genius that feeds Shakespeare the lines that will feature in his plays or whether the Doctor here operates as a cultural magpie, playfully citing Shakespeare's own lines from his later plays to inspire their writing' (Jones, 2015: 243). The frisson which this produces for *Doctor Who* viewers is the observation that a historical figure receives the opportunity to glimpse their cultural immortality – a theme in other episodes which feature Charles Dickens, Agatha Christie and Vincent van Gogh – explained in this moment by Shakespeare directly acknowledging the existence of time travel. Consequently, it is possible to draw the conclusion that, if Shakespeare realised that voyagers from the future exist, they would only visit and praise him if his work had lasted long beyond his own lifetime.

Finally, the Doctor quotes Dylan Thomas's 'rage, rage against the dying of the light' from his 1951 poem *Do not go gentle into that good night* but, after Shakespeare signals his approval, warns him against its use due to it being 'someone else's' (Roberts 2007). Jones suggests that 'Shakespeare is here portrayed as a potential plagiarist, scavenging for inspiration at all times' (Jones, 2015) and, moreover, with this quip, *Doctor Who* returns to the point that Shakespeare was 'not actually the "original", but rather a culturally big link in a chain of narratives' (Hansen and Wetmore, Jr., 2015: 20) and destabilises ideas of cultural hierarchy and precedence in order to emphasise the role of the playwright as both borrower and lender.

Conclusion: Cunk, Crowns and Thrones

The 'double time' (Wardle, 2018: 2) of Shakespeare inhabiting both past and present becomes more prevalent once the celebratory context in which *Upstart Crow* and *Cunk on Shakespeare* were conceived and broadcast is taken into consideration: the quatercentenary of Shakespeare's death. In 2016, the BBC broadcast a number of Shakespeare-themed dramas, comedies, documentaries and live performances to commemorate this anniversary. Some commentators decried this festival of programming as overly reverent and sycophantic towards Shakespeare's work and cultural legacy. For example, Michael Hogan described it as 'the luvvie-ish BBC festival' (Hogan, 2016) in his review of *Cunk on Shakespeare* which, by comparison, he went on to celebrate as 'a bracing antidote' and 'gloriously funny, bored schoolkid's view of the Bard'. This offers a rather narrow reading of the festival, drawing the same either/or comparisons between highbrow and lowbrow interpretations of Shakespearean adaptation as Michael Billington's criticism of the birthday broadcast *Shakespeare Live! From the RSC*, in which he suggested that '[b]y including ballet, opera, jazz, hip-hop,

Broadway musicals and solo songs, the evening stressed Shakespeare's legacy at the expense of his plays and, at times, resembled an upmarket version of the Royal Variety Show' (Billington, 2016). Aside from the implicit cultural snobbery, Billington suggests that, by depicting Shakespeare in various popular guises, the celebration failed to define his essence as a writer. Billington's opinion that the event lacked 'cohesion' because of 'trying to satisfy everyone' (Ibid) also fails to acknowledge the inherent difficulties embedded in any attempt simultaneously to celebrate the work of Shakespeare *and* his cultural afterlife, and adversely oversimplifies the relationship that Shakespearean adaptations have with their source texts. It also ignores the possibility that, by presenting a variety of different interpretations of Shakespeare, the result was more consistent with the multi-faceted nature of the playwright's influence on popular culture.

In reality, the BBC were far more adept at switching between cultural registers and drawing from a wide range of Shakespearean authorities and viewpoints in single broadcasts than these reviews suggest. One need only acknowledge that *Cunk on Shakespeare*, a satirical Shakespearean spoof, was broadcast on 11th May 2016, just four days after the first episode of the second series of *The Hollow Crown* (bearing the subtitle *The War of the Roses*). A brief glance at this series, which condensed Shakespeare's first historical tetralogy of four plays into three episodes, would suggest that it was more traditional and reverent than *Cunk on Shakespeare*, particularly when taking into account the respective personnel responsible. Each episode was directed by Royal Shakespeare Company and Royal Court director Dominic Cooke, adapted by Deputy Artistic Director of the National Theatre and playwright Ben Power and featured a number of prominent British actors who are well-known for their theatre work, particularly in Shakespeare productions, including Benedict Cumberbatch, Judi Dench and Michael Gambon. It was, therefore, the product of established and celebrated figures in the British theatrical establishment. In contrast, *Cunk on Shakespeare* was written by Charlie Brooker, a satirist known for *Charlie Brooker's Weekly Wipe* (2013-15), which offers acerbic and honest commentary on pop culture and current affairs, and his dystopian science-fiction anthology series *Black Mirror* (2011-present).

Despite these apparent differences, the two programmes share a common point of connection through the construction of a relationship between the respective cultural dominance of Shakespeare and the HBO fantasy drama series *Game of Thrones* (2011-19). *Thrones* is based on *A Song of Fire and Ice*, a series of novels by the fantasy author George R.R. Martin, which are themselves strongly influenced by the events of The War of the Roses. Martin, for instance, expresses his sense of kinship with Shakespeare's adaptational practice towards English history: '[y]ou look at

Shakespeare, who borrowed all of his plots [from *Holinshed's Chronicles*]. In *A Song of Ice and Fire*, I take stuff from the Wars of the Roses and other fantasy things, and all these things work around in my head and somehow they jell into what I hope is uniquely my own (Gilmore, 2014).

Amy Rogers explains that the basic outline and uniting narrative arc in *Thrones* 'displays an unmistakably Shakespearean footprint. 'Lannisters' and 'Starks' (patronyms that echo the War of the Roses' major familial players, the Lancasters and the Yorks) vie for the throne' (Rogers, 2015: 145). She discusses a number of similarities between the ways in which Shakespeare and *Thrones* both use historical narratives to highlight similarities between the past and the present moment, also providing their audiences with an escape route from their own world into something even more nihilistic and unstable and further suggests that '*Thrones* and other historical series demonstrate their debt to earlier forms of entertainment historiography via *how* they portray the past – what they bring into deep focus, what they omit from the frame, and how they bring the past and present into proximity' (Ibid: 144). Martin is thereby cast as a historical revisionist magpie, selectively borrowing from fact and fiction and mixing these to create a new narrative which is both familiar and unsettlingly alien; Shakespeare's *Holinshed* consequently becomes Martin's Shakespeare.

Some reviewers of *The Hollow Crown* wrote with apparent ignorance of this connection whilst approving of its re-appropriation of a pop culture phenomenon which itself contains strong evidence of Shakespearean influence. For instance, Billington wrote that the first episode 'will have also kept viewers riveted to their screens, astonished that Shakespeare could outdo Game of Thrones' (Billington, 2016), while Tim Auld noted that 'the audience-grabbing spirit of Westeros [the fictional setting of *Thrones*] was everywhere to be seen. To borrow tricks from Game of Thrones should not be seen as dumbing down Shakespeare; rather, as wising up' (Auld, 2016). Despite reducing the plot of Shakespeare's three *Henry VI* plays into two episodes, following Peter Hall and John Barton's *The Wars of the Roses* adaptation in 1963, *The Hollow Crown's* narrative makes time to focus on explicit violence and add sex scenes between Margaret of Anjou and the Duke of Somerset, capitalising on the reputation for frequent gore and nudity in *Thrones*, which lends some credibility to the links drawn in these reviews. In another review which referenced the series' resemblance to *Thrones*, Sam Wollaston described *The Hollow Crown* as 'Shakespeare that hasn't just been trimmed down, it's been sexed up for a television audience' (Wollaston, 2016). This suggests a direct link between the act of reduction and popularisation; by 'trimming' Shakespeare's first tetralogy and drawing visual and thematic inspiration from a series which is itself derived from the same source

material, Cooke and Power were aiming to transform a group of texts that are sometimes viewed by audiences as inaccessible, overlong and inferior to Shakespeare's later work into visceral, violent and provocative episodes of sensationalised historical fiction.

In popular culture, *Thrones* has become a shorthand for satirically presenting an ahistorical reading of Shakespeare's influences. Impromptu Shakespeare, a British improvisation group, suggested in their 2016 Edinburgh Fringe performances that Shakespeare had constructed his history plays by 'binge watching Game of Thrones in a weekend' and in the 2017 Edinburgh run of their stage parody *William Shakespeare's Long Lost First Play (abridged)*, the Reduced Shakespeare Company updated their 'list of titles Shakespeare was considering' (Martin and Tichenor, 2018: 5) for their fictionalised version of his debut work to include '*Game of Thrones*' (Ibid). In the final section of *Cunk on Shakespeare*, Brooker takes this satirical conceit to its logical conclusion by claiming that *Thrones*, rather than being a paradoxical influence on Shakespeare, was created by the playwright himself:

Throughout this programme, we've seen how Shakespeare's genius spans 'seven different genres of play.' But all of these pale into insignificance against Shakespeare's most greatest work: Game of Thrones. Game of Thrones is a proper bloodthirsty, action-packed epic, which skilfully combines all the genres Shakespeare invented into one coherent work. It's got everything. It's got history, comedy, Shakespearean, tragedy, horror, fantasy and romance. (Brooker et al, 2016).

I suggest that this presents a parodic alternative to Rogers's suggestion that, in our fast-paced, rapidly disseminated and instantly analysed twenty-first century world, '[q]uickly ingested and discarded, history moves closer and closer to experience itself, as, in the digital era, the present is always-already on the verge of the past' (Rogers, 2015: 142). Despite the satirical intent behind the joke, Brooker's implication is that, for modern audiences, *Thrones* and Shakespeare's history plays are so mutually synonymous that distinguishing between them becomes a subliminal process and defies the ways in which we perceive and consume our culture and history. The contemporary audience member is inherently metamodern; not only able to oscillate between reverence and irreverence but trained to view cultural artefacts as existing within the same temporal space rather than part of a chronological series of events. The constant production of prequels, sequels and reboots in film and television and the remounting and reinterpretation of classical texts on stage has resulted in a generation of artists and audience members alike who read their history as intrinsically bound in the present and, as a result,

are subjected to cannibalistic art on a regular occurrence. It is natural, therefore, that the Shakespeare which is produced by and for those consumers, should be one which devours his own material in order to ensure its continued survival.

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Endnotes

ⁱ The online movie magazine *Screen Junkies*, which focuses on contemporary film and television, published a 2019 video essay 'How Lord & Miller Make Bad Movies Good: Spider-Verse Analysis' in which it was suggested that the films of writer-directors Phil Lord and Christopher Miller, especially their Oscar-winning animation *Spider-Man: Into the Spider-Verse* (2018), were examples of metamodernism. This is due to the film-makers' ability to recycle intellectual property which has been reinterpreted on an exhaustive number of occasions, such as with comic book superheroes like Spider-Man, to create a critically and economically successful film that both acknowledges this process of reiteration and attempts to harness the ideals which drew audiences to those characters and storylines in the first place.

ⁱⁱ In their first meeting, Shakespeare uses a number of archaic and offensive racial slurs to describe Martha, to whom he is evidently attracted, including 'blackamoor lady', 'Ethiop girl' 'swarth' and 'Queen of Afric' (Roberts, 2007). By the end of the episode, despite having stopped using terms such as these and dedicated Sonnet 18 to her, Shakespeare continues to exoticise Martha by referring to her as 'my dark lady' (2007). Although the episode largely dismisses the issue of Shakespeare's potential racism, with the Doctor referring to it as 'political correctness gone mad' (2007), *Doctor Who* has tackled the issue of present day companions encountering prejudice in past eras elsewhere. This is more forcefully explored in *Rosa* (2018), written the author Malorie Blackman, who depicts the Thirteenth Doctor (Jodie

Whittaker) and her three companions – one of whom is Black British and one who is British Indian – travelling to 1955 Alabama where they meet another historically significant figure: the civil rights activist Rosa Parks.

ⁱⁱⁱ The comic's title and focus take inspiration from the factual tract *Greene's Groats-Worth of Wit*, published by Greene in 1592, which is best known for a passage in which the playwright dismisses Shakespeare, who was near the beginning of his career, as 'an upstart crow, beautified with our feathers'. This has been hypothesised by some critics and creatives as a derogatory comment which references Shakespeare's status as an actor and Greene's consequent belief that a mere player should have the audacity to write plays; an interpretation which has recently been embraced by both *Upstart Crow* and the TNT drama television series *Will* (2017), in which Greene is cast as one of Shakespeare's primary antagonists.

^{iv} Juliet is similarly reimaged as a sexually aware character, rather than an innocent figure, in the comic book series *Kill Shakespeare* (2010-17) and the Reduced Shakespeare Company's 2016 play *William Shakespeare's Long Lost First Play (abridged)*, both of which engineer a number of character 'mash-ups' from different plays. In the latter case, this includes a scene in which Juliet pursues Dromio from *The Comedy of Errors* and is later schooled in love by *Much Ado About Nothing's* Beatrice and *The Taming of the Shrew's* Katherina.

^v Wardle reveals that '[t]he original title was, in fact, "Love's Labour's Won" [...] However, Russell T. Davies, the series producer, reveals on the BBC *Dr Who* website that this original title was rejected because the original was "too academic" (Wardle, 2018: 11). Tennant further remarks in a video diary recorded for the Series 3 DVD Extras that another working title was 'Theatre of Doom', which was presumably rejected for its considerably darker tone and lack of Shakespearean specificity. Wardle argues further that, although the titular 'code in this episode has a genuine narrative function [...] the reference to code could also allude to the modern audience's concerns that [Shakespeare's] plays are written in a kind of incomprehensible linguistic code, which has to be cracked' (Wardle 12). Although this is a secondary function of the episode's title, beneath its primary purpose as a pop culture allusion to Brown's contemporaneous novel (2003) and film adaptation (2006), Wardle's suggestion that the titular code implicitly encourages the viewer to perceive Shakespeare's work as a riddle or puzzle which can be solved connects it furthermore to Shakespeare and the Doctor's mutual attempts to crack the reasons for each other's genius throughout the episode.

^{vi} Graham Holderness delineates the difference between 'a study of "Shakespeare"', rather than of Shakespeare...a name which...is merely metonymic of an entire cultural-political formation, and thus more akin to "Disney" or "Rockefeller"' (Holderness, 2001: x).