Between Two Worlds: Shakespeare the Ordinary Man and Artist

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Abstract

Jude Morgan's novel, The Secret Life of William Shakespeare*, is a work of biofiction that deals with the playwright's life from shortly before he met Anne Hathaway up to the year 1603, highlighting private aspects such as the relationships with his family and friends – and even his rivals. At the same time, the novel offers an insight into the Elizabethan world in which William Shakespeare lived and rose to fame, actually a pretext to bring to the foreground timeless issues which characterise today's world as well. The portrayal offered by Morgan is, therefore, one that aims to reconcile the two personas of the Bard – the family man and the poet and playwright. The present paper aims to analyse how those aspects are put forward by the novel, relying on features of postmodernism and the biographical novel, as the author attempts to fill in the gaps in Shakespeare's life narrative. What is more, emphasis is laid on the relative concept of 'truth' and how it is deconstructed in the shaping of this particular version of Shakespeare's story.*

Keywords: *biography, biofiction, Shakespeare, truth, life narrative*

A postmodernist biographical novel

In order to discuss some of the features of Jude Morgan's *The Secret Life of William Shakespeare,* it seems necessary to briefly take into account the characteristics of postmodernism, which may be traced in this novel.

Postmodernism is mainly defined as a reaction against modernism, bringing to the forefront concepts of "fracturing, fragmentation, indeterminacy and plurality" (Malpas 2005: 5), but it is more than that, as it presupposes "multifarious aspects" (Praisler 2005: 59), as well as an "erosion of the older distinction between high culture and so-called mass or popular culture" (Jameson 1983: 112). For instance, postmodernism favours "the return to history" and to narrative. It also "blurs" the boundary between history and fiction, emphasising that history is not to be taken as fact, as it only represents "another version of his-story"; at the same time, postmodernism plays on the "fiction/fact paradox" which allows the "'consumer' to understand that the only reality it observes is that of the very textuality of the text, of the materiality of the pages." What is more, postmodernism is "governed by intertextuality" as the writer is aware that

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little has been left "unsaid" or "unwritten," therefore he or she turns to texts that precede him/her (Praisler 2005: 60-61).

According to John Hawkes, "the true enemies of the novel were plot, character, setting and theme" (qtd. in Lewis 2001: 126), which many authors have tried to shatter and change. Postmodernist writers prefer to structure narratives in more original and personal ways. Reference should be made in this respect to the use of multiple endings, going against closure by offering the reader a multitude of outcomes for the plot. Openness and ambiguity can also be achieved "by breaking up the text into short fragments or sections, separated by space, titles, numbers or symbols" (Lewis 2001: 127).

The concept of "truth" is questionable in the case of biography, especially in biographical novels, in which fact and fiction are interwoven. As Malpas suggests, truth is "based on conventions and beliefs rather than absolute principles" (2005: 135). The notions of "truth" and "reality" are continually challenged and deconstructed in Jude Morgan's novel; therefore, in order to examine how this deconstruction works in *The Secret Life of William Shakespeare*, one should first and foremost highlight the importance of the paratext which accompanies it. For instance, the front cover of the novel announces its subject, as the first thing that draws the attention of the reader is the title, written in a large cursive font that is perhaps reminiscent of Shakespeare's own times, thus lending a sense of "authenticity" to the story. The use of the word "secret" might suggest that the novel offers a hidden story of Shakespeare's life, one that has never been heard of or written about before, and that only the writer is privy to.

Perhaps the most revealing piece of paratext, however, is Jude Morgan's own commentary at the end of the novel, in which he offers an explanation for his choice of biographical subject, declaring that he "wanted above all to reinstate Shakespeare as a real person" (2012: 441) and write a novel "about a human being of flesh and blood" (443), given that people nowadays have a rather equivocal attitude towards the playwright: the larger public perceives him as a distant god-like figure, his works being more often than not dismissed or considered too difficult to understand and digest. On the other hand, the elite put him up on a pedestal, while "silly names" are attributed to him, such as the Bard or the Swan of Avon, which only turns him into a product, all "resemblance to a human being" stripped from his persona (441).

Therefore, Jude Morgan decided to offer his readers a different perspective on Shakespeare, in an attempt to change his reception and to bring him closer to the mass audiences. In his endeavour, he was helped by the fact that there is little biographical data on the playwright which,

according to him, poses a great, exciting challenge to novelists like himself (441). However, Morgan does not claim to offer a definitive version of Shakespeare's life, as such a thing would be impossible: there will always be another novelist who will take up the task of writing a novel on Shakespeare, offering yet another interpretation of the little information that survived (442).

Through the issues that Morgan approaches in constructing Shakespeare's life, the literary figure becomes a universal cultural icon, any reader being able to associate the struggles and the pleasures that Shakespeare's character is experiencing on page with events of their own lives and times. Thus, Jude Morgan weaves fact into fiction in order to construct what seems to be a "genuine" version of William Shakespeare, in such a manner that one might forget that one is reading a *version* of the life of a literary figure, an (inter)national cultural icon whose name alone evokes quality and sophistication to, perhaps, anyone's mind. The reader of the novel can sympathise with him and, at the same time, he or she is enabled to reflect on – and better understand – their own life.

As a postmodernist biographical novel, it can be said that *The Secret Life of William Shakespeare* has a disrupted structure: despite its chronological linearity, which is made obvious by the years marked in the title of each chapter, significant episodes from Shakespeare's life are interspersed with episodes from other characters' lives, such as Anne Shakespeare, or Ben Jonson – Shakespeare's contemporary and aspiring scholar, in what Julia Novak called the "portmanteau narrative" (2017: 16). At a first glance, there does not seem to be a connection between all these episodes; however, they do help construct the character of Will Shakespeare and his life, since they provide insight into his relations with the people around him and draw parallels between similar events in different characters' lives. Furthermore, part of the novel is actually written from Ben Jonson's perspective, Morgan explaining that he did so in order to

> make it clear that Shakespeare was not a solitary genius, single-handedly inventing Elizabethan drama. He was one of many: perhaps the most consistently successful, but still working in a crowded marketplace. (Morgan 2012: 444)

Intertextuality also plays a major role in the construction of Shakespeare's life story. For instance, there are mentions in the text of other highly popular and successful plays, such as Thomas Kyd's *The Spanish Tragedy* or Christopher Marlowe's *Tamburlaine*, *Doctor Faustus* or *The Jew of Malta*. Moreover, the titles of the fourteen chapters that make up the novel are, in

fact, the names of plays written by Shakespeare's fellow Renaissance playwrights. Therefore, by subtly incorporating references to other Renaissance playwrights, both in the titles of the chapters and in the story itself, Jude Morgan's aim does not seem to be that of contesting Shakespeare's genius – which he puts in opposition to Ben Jonson's "scholarly and painstaking" (Morgan 2012: 444) writing – but to raise awareness of the other notable dramatists that helped shape, together with him, the Elizabethan drama and then the Jacobean and Caroline stage, which tend to be forgotten as the already-formed image of Shakespeare puts him forward as the sole great playwright of the Renaissance. Morgan's decision might also work as an oblique criticism of the scholars and academics who are inclined to dismiss the importance of other writings in favour of Shakespeare's. The only exception in the list of plays selected by Jude Morgan is *A Larum to London*, which Maltby comments upon in his *The Black Legend in England*, saying that it "should serve to remind us that not all Elizabethan playwrights were touched with genius" (1971: 52). Thus, this might assert Shakespeare's position as a playwright, albeit brilliant, among other (more or less) successful playwrights.

"Oh, he was real enough, (…) but certainly elusive."

Unlike other texts dealing with Shakespeare's biography, in Jude Morgan's version, Will's career is closely linked to the relationship with his family, the latter playing an important role in shaping his progress towards fame. However, although he eventually becomes quite a popular man, Will has always been a complete mystery.

Morgan depicts him as always waiting eagerly for the players to arrive in Stratford, so he can watch their performances and talk to them. For instance, to young Will, whose passion for the theatre seems to surpass everything else in his life, summer is associated with the coming of the players and, in turn, with the renewal of life itself:

> Now summer, and the players would soon be here. Mud from the storm splashed up to his calves but the sky was all high blue contrition, temper-fit gone; the meadows brimmed with light and the trees were heavy, nodding drunken with leaf, and everything he saw and smelt said the players, time for the players to rattle their tinker's cart of seduction over Stratford Bridge. Time to wake. (Morgan 2012: 14)

However, his father's disapproval makes things difficult for him. In this way, a recurrent issue that is tackled in Jude Morgan's novel is that of family and parenthood.

Right from the beginning of the first chapter, it is clear that Will has a tumultuous relationship with his father, who does not seem to approve of his son's inclinations towards the theatre. Instead, John Shakespeare would like his son to follow in his footsteps and become a famous glove maker. Will is constantly chastised for sneaking off to see the players, in spite of his father's requests, who claims that:

> [p]layers are well in their way. But still theirs is a loose, low, scrambling sort of life, even with some great noble's name clapped to them. And they sow idleness and fruitless dreaming. Now consider, is that fitting for John Shakespeare's son? (2012: 2)

This might be an oblique comment on a recurrent belief that is even nowadays attached to the job of an artist: its "fruitless" nature, as the general opinion is often that it only leads to "dreaming" and "idleness" on the part of both the creator and the consumer, given that the product is not one that can be used to directly improve the quality of life. Joan, Will's sister, remarks on the subject of play-going that it is "[a] pity the play brings out the low sort, for it's a pleasant, pretty diversion after all" (2012: 49). Therefore, the idea that plays, and implicitly Shakespeare's own works, were addressed to the masses is reinforced in the novel, challenging today's notion of their status as high-culture, intended for the elite.

What is more, it can be said that the reaction against the players that John Shakespeare displays is a rather hypocritical one:

> Oh, it's wrong to be a player, they declare. But what do they do when they wake up in the morning? Straight be themselves? No: they remind themselves who they are. […] They have to because otherwise they're walking on ice and it's cracking. (2012: 39-40)

Jack Towne cleverly explains that everyone is a "player" of some sort, as every person has to play a given role in society; at the same time, he claims that a player's business is lying (2012: 41), hence sending across the idea that everybody alters the truth. Anne herself fears that Will might lose himself altogether (2012: 63) when he plunges into the world of acting, as assuming too many different identities might eventually lead to forgetting which the "real" one is. Therefore, the notion of "reality" is questioned once again in Morgan's novel: which of the many facets of a person is actually the real one,

given that everyone plays various roles throughout their life, depending on the situation at hand?

John Shakespeare's remark "is that fitting for John Shakespeare's son?" may also be a thinly veiled critique on another issue of our times, that of parents expecting – even persuading – their children to take their example career-wise or, at least, to work in a domain that can bring them high material satisfaction. Shame is also something that perhaps drives John Shakespeare in his attempts at coaxing Will into stopping seeing the players. Jude Morgan may draw on the unfortunate events of John's life as the motivation behind his wishes and desires regarding Will's path in life: financial struggles and falling "on hard times" which made John stop attending council meetings and lay low (Schoenbaum 1991: 9), perhaps even troubles of the illegal sort, such as wool dealing, according to Rowe (qtd. in 1991: 67). For instance, Anne's brother Bartholomew comments on John's situation:

> No, they say he's [John Shakespeare] a queer, awkward fellow to deal with nowadays. There was all that ticklish matter of him trading in wool, and going before the court for it. And now I hear he never stirs abroad. Half mad, or popish. (Morgan 2012: 10)

Consequently, it is no surprise that Morgan's version of John Shakespeare is keen on leading his son to the "right" path, that of becoming a respectable glover, like himself, instead of dealing with obscure matters, such as acting. As a result, Will is constantly forced to choose between his duty and his calling, but, although he is quite good at his trade, "the handiwork of stitching his two selves together was getting beyond his dexterity. He could feel tugging and tearing" (14).

After marriage, Will assumes – among others, on his journey towards fame – the new roles of husband and father "[a]nd he seems to belong to each of them, like a portrait that suits any frame" (95). It is clear that Will's inclination towards playing and drama writing also affects his private life, as he is putting on different "masks" in different circumstances, so good at playing roles that he might have everyone around him fooled, himself included. The boundary between Will the man, the father and husband, and Will the actor is so thin that, at times, the latter seems to completely take over the former, leaving no room for distinction. This can be seen especially in the relationship between Will and his children: he is a stranger to them, more like an uncle who occasionally comes bearing gifts (232). What is more, Hamnet seems to be the most affected by Will's being away from home as

he often has unpleasant reactions upon seeing him: "Hamnet burst into tears, ran away, crying, 'Who's that man, I don't know that man…'" (232). Similarly, when Will puts on his actor mask and performs in front of his family, in an attempt at entertaining them, things quickly go wrong:

> And the laughter disguises it at first, until it will not be hid: the thin hard cry of Hamnet. He doesn't like it. It's not real. It's stupid. Father's pretending. It's frightening. Looking stricken, Will throws off the actor, bends and stretches arms to his son. Yet still perhaps there is something in his gesture that is a little stylised, that shows he is accustomed to assuming a feeling: even perhaps real ones have to be tried on first. (236)

Hamnet turns to his grandfather – with whom he seems to have a better relationship than with his own father – for comfort, his accusatory looks directed at everyone for "indulging the lie" (236).

Despite the bad feelings between the two of them, Will travels to Stratford to be by his father's side as he lies on his deathbed. In a dramatic scene, John makes it clear that he never really knew Will, his son: "'I don't know you.' Very softly. 'Why don't you let people know you? Why?'" (345). John Shakespeare's words to his son might be an oblique comment reflecting on the elusive nature of William Shakespeare's life, which makes it difficult for biographers to offer a clear perspective and distinguish fact from fiction.

Will does eventually succeed in his career, spending more and more time with the players until he starts writing his own plays and sonnets. Consequently, it is only natural that speculations on Shakespeare's life start to circulate following his gradual rise to fame, given that even Ben Jonson finds it difficult to learn more about "Master Shakespeare": some thought he was a butcher's son, others that he was a lawyer's clerk; the most striking theory is that of a drunkard that Ben came across, claiming that Shakespeare "was not really a play-maker at all, and the plays he put his name to were brought to the theatre by night in a silk-tied bundle, with a peer's coronet on the seal," before passing out (193). Therefore, Jude Morgan challenges the theories of identity and authorship that surround William Shakespeare, trying to perhaps dispel the rumours and provide a semblance of truth about him.

Nevertheless, how can one understand Shakespeare when he did not know himself? Always reluctant to expose details about his life or the innermost workings of his brilliant mind, he ponders – via a passage employing the free-indirect discourse – the idea that "in himself he had dusky vacancies and gaps on which he wanted no searching light to fall" (327).

"You made Will Shakespeare, Anne."

In her book, *Shakespeare's Wife*, Germaine Greer comments on how the wives of almost all great writers are completely obliterated from history (2007: 1), their role being marginalised in favour of telling *his*-story, and suggests that Anne Shakespeare, "[b]y doing the right thing, by remaining silent and invisible" as generally expected of women, left a void in Shakespeare's biography, which would be filled with various speculations (2007: 4). Consequently, besides telling the "lost" story of Shakespeare's life, as well as touching upon Ben Jonson's own life narrative, Jude Morgan manages to "recover" a version of Anne Shakespeare's story, by giving her a voice and a greater part in his novel than just that of Shakespeare's estranged wife, while attempting to cast new light upon her.

Anne is the quiet wife, loyal to her husband, but also "Mistress of New Place" in Will's absence, and "a woman of the world" (Morgan 2012: 382), fighting for what is left of their marriage, as suggested by the proleptic passage in the third chapter of the novel. Through free-indirect discourse, Anne's feelings and thoughts are revealed:

> Anne accepts a gift of gloves. But beyond that lies another acceptance, and there she still shrinks. Because now she knows something terrifying about herself: that her yes is not a word but a shout; that you can set the world before her and she, for the right thing, for the right love, will tip it all over like a drunkard with an inn-table, devoted to that dreaming fire in the head. (54)

Will and Anne's relationship is far from being an ideal one, but it does start with love, although it soon goes cold and they distance themselves due to Will's relentless pursuit of his career, only to be offered a glimmer of hope for reconciliation at the end of the story. Their "stormy" marriage is announced by the cyclical structure of the novel: the first chapter opens with a proleptic passage, namely in the middle of a storm which causes a cow at Hewlands Farm, the Hathaway home, to miscarry its calf. Trying to find a way to dispose of it, Anne suggests to her brother that they should sell it to Master Shakespeare, the glover, who might find use for the calf's hide, which Will comes to collect. Thus, to make up for the lack of records on how Anne and Will came to know each other, Morgan employs fate in the guise of a terrible storm to bring the two of them together – he weaves a piece of fiction into what is expected to be the "true" story of William Shakespeare, in order to account for the missing details on their courtship, while also lending a sense of verisimilitude to it: their story starts through mere coincidence,

leading to something beautiful, but at the same time marred by issues that any family might have to face due to social and economic, as well as personal, struggles.

The novel ends with the violent wind easing down into peaceful stillness in order to reveal the storm as a "fraud" (438). Therefore, by including the word "fraud" into the narrative, Morgan might actually attempt to deconstruct the myths revolving around Shakespeare's so-called "failed" marriage, aiming an oblique attack at such theories as that claiming he hated his wife (Greer 2007: 3). The "wife-shaped void" (2007: 4) in Shakespeare's life is thus filled with a different, perhaps more sympathetic version of Anne than the ones provided by *his*-story.

The second time they meet is at one of the players' performances where, for the first time ever, Will – who is described as being "insane" about the plays (Morgan 2012: 49) – has to split his attention between the performance and Anne, whose beauty seems to capture his eye: "That smile. It didn't last as long as it should. It seemed to Will that to coax and tend that smile, to bring it into the world, would be something worth" (48). As expected, infatuation follows soon enough. Free-indirect speech is again resorted to in order to hint at Will's obvious attraction towards Anne. Morgan seems to suggest that it was actually love that brought the two of them together:

> When she had laid her hand on his shoulder everything else, thought, emotion, gave way to sensation. The breathing weight and warmth of her astonished him. It was as if he had never touched a human being before. Eighteen years old: eighteen years' worth of living, and now it seemed a long, fusty drowse before a proper waking. (49)

It may also be a desire to make up for his lack of experience as Park Honan puts it: "One may have good reasons for loving, or none, but William, it seems, was partly moved by an urge to purchase experience" (1999: 73). Nevertheless, it is further mentioned that the two of them keep "a kind of double courtship" (Morgan 2012: 62) leading to the consummation of their relationship, as they meet in the middle of nature – their private space:

> Outside is different. […] Outside he is not diminished but multiplied. Along the bare field path he conjures a company; he peoples the wood. Daphne runs from Apollo towards the Evesham road. (62)

Thus, there is a reversal of meanings, as the outside becomes the private, while the inside (i.e., the Shakespeares' house on Henley Street, the

Hathaways' farm) represents the public sphere. In this particular context, the outside might as well suggest being away from family, especially from John Shakespeare, under whose disapproval Will's genius cannot thrive. Moreover, this play on the private and the public may suggest the multifaceted nature of Will, who is always adapting to his surroundings, much like a chameleon: outside he is Anne's lover, and a creator; inside he is John Shakespeare's son, "a different version, armoured for pleasantries" (70). The wood, however, turns out to be a mere illusion towards the end of the novel: in London, Anne seeks a cow-keeper who would occasionally bring her milk, only to find that she lives in a filthy place, with a man who seems to be treating her with violence. Her illusion of London shattered, she runs back home, bumping into Will on the way, to whom she explains her going away: "I thought […] that it would be like the wood" (307). But the wood "is no place" (308), her husband replies. This contrast between the misery and violence of London and the beauty and peace of Stratford might be associated with Anne's displaced expectations of her marriage to Will. The wood, their private place, was also an illusion; things have changed.

Morgan also plays on the theories suggesting that William Shakespeare's marriage to Anne Hathaway was simply prompted by the unexpected pregnancy that ensued following their time spent together, leaving William with no other choice but to accept the responsibility (Honan 1999: 82): "She holds him, and doesn't need to say, no one needs to say, that something also has been lost: choice" (Morgan 2012: 71). This particular event reflects issues of present-day society as well, given that unplanned pregnancies, out of wedlock, are frequent and often stripping the involved parties of the luxury of choice. Moreover, their relationship now seems to be based on something else, Susannah acting as the link between them instead of love: "Will and Anne created her, but just as surely she created Will and Anne – what they are together, and must be, for always" (96).

Instead of depicting an idealised romance between Anne and Will, Morgan attempts to shape their relationship quite realistically, drawing on Shakespeare's constant travelling between Stratford and London which is obviously bound to push them further and further apart. The estrangement between Anne and Will is foreshadowed in Chapter 4, appropriately titled *Love's Metamorphoses*, in which the players mock Knell's marriage and take pity on the poor girl who married him: "'Fifteen,' Towne says. 'And now left behind in a fine house in London to sew and sing psalms'" (92). Thus, the fate that awaits a player's wife is hereby brought into the spotlight in another proleptic passage, announcing that Anne herself would have to lead such a life, as theirs is a trade that requires constant travelling and does not allow

them to settle down. Moreover, the building sexual tension between Knell and Towne, driven by the latter's jealousy, is paralleled by sequences of Anne and Will's life, following the progress from what seemed to be love to distancing and coldness: "They move about the kitchen without touching, but there is something not quite empty about the spaces between them" (95). As the heated argument between the two players reaches its climax, it is already clear that just as it is too late to save the injured, dying Knell, it is also too late to save Anne and Will's relationship from its state of declining:

> He sees his love for Anne and it is there, so clearly shaped, like a bird's nest in a tree revealed by winter bareness; and it was there all the time, but you only see it when it is empty, and nothing more can come of it. (102)

There is no helping Will: he has his mind set on his career, which is perhaps the only thing that will ever bring him satisfaction, despite his family's discontent with his constant travelling and toiling away. His love for acting, and even reading and writing, seems to triumph over his family's needs, the two sides of Will in a perpetual conflict:

> He read, and reads, alone. Oh, he presents an ill picture, this other Will who dwells apart and, in between the summer visits of the players, strings his soul along posts of dream and fantasy and invention and imitation. He looks guilty in it: everything screams that his innocence is a lie, the murdered ghost walks abroad. (98)

Thus, for all of his family's attempts at "pinning him down" and John Shakespeare's pushing his daughter-in-law to stop him from spending time with the players, Will "was a man at his own government; and if he chose to walk up to the Swan to talk to the players after his work was done, there was nothing to stop him" (104). Anne, however, remains faithful and loyal to him.

It appears that troubles are far from being over in Will and Anne's marriage: despite a blood promise made to Anne before leaving for London, Will gradually starts to give in to temptation: first, he seems to be attracted to Madame Vautrollier, a French woman and Richard Field's wife-to-be, mostly due to the aura of exoticism that surrounds her – perhaps a hint at the Dark Lady of the sonnets. However, it is later proven that the muse is actually Isabelle Berger, another French woman who came to seek refuge in London and with whom Will cheats on Anne. Indeed, it seems that Shakespeare did live among French Huguenots (Honan 1999: 99), but there is no record of any Isabelle Berger – therefore, the character might be the

product of Morgan's imagination, introduced in the story in order to question the identity of one of Shakespeare's muses, namely the Dark Lady.

Will is constantly torn between Stratford and London, between his family and his career:

> Over there, the husband, loving but absent and therefore failing: over there, the father who thought his children looked huge and alien; over here, the man of the theatre lusting for new lines and loud, quick-witted citizen-crowds, and over here, too, someone grim and purposeful, thinking: Put money in your purse, aim, make right, win – win over your father else nothing won will ever count. (Morgan 2012: 164)

He does eventually win his father over, indeed, by managing to acquire the coat of arms that he so much desired. With Anne, however, it is a different story: he tries to bring her and the children to London, but, as Hamnet catches an illness, Anne feels that she has to return home, where the children were safe and healthy – London is no place for them and they feel foreign there. In Stratford, Hamnet passes away, causing a rift between Anne and Will that might never be fixed. Although there are no records of the cause of death, just suppositions (Potter 2012: 204), in the novel it is said to have been the plague. Anne, however, blames Will for taking them to London where Hamnet supposedly contracted the infection. Their estrangement is also worsened by the fact that Will was away when his son died, therefore not by his family's side in such difficult moments.

As the visits home become less and less frequent, Anne starts to suspect foul play on Will's part. Thus, she asks Edmund, Will's little adoring brother, to help her in her quest: as Edmund is in London struggling to become an actor like his brother, Anne sends him on a "mission" to find out who Will's mistress is. Edmund, ever faithful to Will, tries to assure Anne of his loyalty to her. However, Anne senses that Edmund is covering up the truth, so she travels all alone to London, to find it out herself. In emphasising Anne's jealousy, Morgan employs intertextuality, specifically drawing on two major elements in *Macbeth*: the vision of the dagger and Lady Macbeth's obsession with her bloody hands:

> Queen of jealousy, she lay drowning in wonderment in the bug-rid inn bed, imagining Will in someone's arms, and the someone almost took shape when she dreamed, and woke with a start putting out her hand, purposefully. Doing what? She seemed to feel or see, with the melded senses of sleep, a dagger. Was she putting it away, or taking it to her? Was this – she lurched up – blood? (Morgan 2012: 414)

After a conversation with Isabelle Berger, who misleads Anne into believing that Will was surely spending time with Matthew, the boy actor (421) – thus touching upon issues of Shakespeare's sexuality – then barging into what she thought to have been Will with a man in his bed (i.e., a very sick Jack Towne whom he was actually taking care of), Will and Anne eventually settle down and talk:

> At the window the wind stops its violence and gives way to a clear stillness, and the threatened storm reveals itself a fraud. Just as with passion, the truest thing about it is the peace that follows it. (2012: 438)

The open ending of the novel, thus, leaves room for hope in their relationship, hope that things can still be mended as the story comes full circle.

Conclusions

Through Jude Morgan's *The Secret Life of William Shakespeare*, a new version of Will's story emerges, depicting him as a man with an incredible lust for writing and acting, perhaps even for fame, who makes great sacrifices for his career, going against his family's wishes and leaving them behind in Stratford in his relentless pursuit. Nonetheless, he is a man that still has hope for reconciliation with his wife and children, the open ending leaving room for the reader's imagination to further fill in the gaps in order to complete Shakespeare's story.

Moreover, Morgan does not stop at *his*-story in his portrayals of Will's, Ben Jonson's and even, in part, the players' lives, as Anne Shakespeare's story is also restored. And he does so skilfully, through the fragmentation and intermingling of their life narratives, drawing parallels (i.e., between Shakespeare's family and Jonson's), incorporating references to other texts in order to enlarge the perspective, while constantly challenging notions such as "truth, fact, reality," and frequently employing the free-indirect discourse to allow his characters their own voices.

Consequently, William Shakespeare is (re)presented as a literary genius worthy of praise and admiration even from scholars like Jonson, as well as a human being, capable of making errors and flawed in every way, but who was and still is perhaps the greatest poet and playwright of the Renaissance – among many other successful writers. Although Shakespeare's talent brought him immortality and transformed him, in time, into a high-culture icon, a "darling" of the elites, Jude Morgan, like other writers nowadays, strives to bring Shakespeare back to the masses or, at

least, to put forth a more "balanced" representation in which the private and the public, the highbrow and the lowbrow, Shakespeare the man and Shakespeare the artist could not be so easily separated.

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