

All is True – Film directed by Kenneth Branagh

All is True, written by Ben Elton and featuring a stellar cast including Kenneth Branagh, Judy Dench and Ian McKellen, is about the final few years of William Shakespeare's life in Stratford. The film creates a beautiful web of fantasy pinned to a few historical facts about WS: that his son Hamnet died in 1596 leaving a twin sister Judith and an older sister Susanna (married to a Puritan doctor), that Judith's husband and Susanna herself were reputed to have had extra-marital sex, that WS left his 'second-best bed' to his wife, that a 'sweet swan of Avon' came into it somehow (beautiful view of a swan on a river), that he bought a nice big house with a nice big garden, that the 'fair youth' of the sonnets might have been the Earl of Southampton, and that WS died in 1616. That's quite a lot — and the film manages to be action-packed as well as remarkably slow moving and ponderous. The title of the film is based on the contemporary title for Henry VIII, which was playing at the Globe when it burnt down in 1613 — said in the film to be the reason for WS leaving London that year and giving up writing plays. As WS (Kenneth Branagh) says in the film, "Never let the truth get in the way of a good story" and "Nothing is true". Indeed, but it's not a good story and monkeys too much with the truth. As Deborah Ross wrote in *The Spectator*, "If this portrait of the greatest writer of any age were to be believed, Shakespeare was a walking cliché — as well as a bit of a moron". Hers was one of the 27% unfavorable reviews quoted in Rotten Tomatoes; most of them swallowed it, if not always whole.

All is True is a carefully crafted story. Why that title, which is the little-known title of a little-known play? Rather than the absurd storyline in *The Upstart Crow*, which makes it hard to believe WS had written the plays, this film clearly aims at making a serious point in favour of the orthodox case. Ben Elton, in Q&As screened after the film, said he had the support of the Reverend Dr Paul Edmondson (Head of Learning and Research for the Shakespeare Birthplace Trust) who has commented on the true and less true points to which this web of fantasy is pinned. <https://www.shakespeare.org.uk/explore-shakespeare/blogs/is-all-of-this-true/> Elton also said that Branagh, the film's director, wanted him to avoid being funny, which he found difficult: this shows — he's a much better writer when he's allowed to be funny. The text is slow, banal, separated by long silences, and completely unlike Elton (or Shakespeare for that matter). Unlike *The Upstart Crow*, the story avoids any reference to reasons for doubting the orthodox story by simply assuming that everyone in Stratford knew that WS was the great author. (Not true, see Ramon Jiménez' article in *Great Oxford*). Elton admits to using his imagination to flesh out the story — but if it were true that WS thought women were made for one thing only (as his daughter Judith and wife seem to think) how could he have written Portia, Imogen, Maria, Emilia *etc.*? In the film WS ends up teaching his wife to write — Anne belatedly signs her marriage certificate (she seems to have been able to read and had got hold of a copy of the Sonnets). The story centres on WS' absence from Stratford for most of the previous 20 years, particularly when Hamnet died (he bought New Place the following year so he must have been around some of the time), his belated mourning, his wish that Judith had died instead, and his belief that Hamnet had written poetry — which turns out to be have been by Judith, suggesting the twins had both been able to write (sorry, plot spoiler — and also not true). Thus this sentimental film brings in a fashionable feminist subplot to appeal to modern tastes. But Shakespeare invented subplots to suit his purposes (Richard II was probably a

good king, and was it really Richard III who killed the princes in the tower?) so who's to complain? Perhaps none of us, because the true story, or at least the serious academic debate about it, is bound to be acknowledged in the end. It is interesting that this film coincides with mainstream publicity for Sir Mark Rylance's views on the authorship question (<https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/did-shakespeare-write-his-own-plays-that-is-the-question-spds5gp5h>) — although some of us are more interested in the brilliant mind behind the works than the roles of others who may have contributed to them, and in a much more interesting story than this one.

The casting of this film is strange. (I missed David Mitchell as WS.) Judy Dench plays Anne Hathaway who would have been 60 rather than 80+ when WS died. The Earl of Southampton (played by Ian McKellen) was nearly 10 years younger than WS and needn't have been so old and wrinkled. Mind you, the vignette of McKellen and Branagh both speaking sonnet 29 with different emphasis is the highlight of the film. But why did they choose that one, which is one the least likely to have being written by the man from Stratford? Perhaps this is a cunning subplot? Perhaps younger luvvies had all signed the Declaration of Reasonable Doubt and didn't want to be associated with this outdated fairy story.

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