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Shakespeare, *the* Man: The Bard in Historical Fiction for Young Readers

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Abstract

This article examines the representation of William Shakespeare as a character in children's and young adult (YA) historical fiction. While scholarship on children's and YA Shakespeare has largely focused on adaptations of his plays, Shakespeare's fiction presence as a historical character has received only sporadic attention. It is argued that, by shifting the focus from the plays to the man, Shakespearean historical fiction allows for Shakespeare to be promoted as cultural capital to young readers by making Shakespeare's authority intimate and narratively accessible through the protagonists' perspectives. The article defines Shakespearean historical fiction, understood to include so-called time-slip stories, and examines the main features of Shakespearean historical fiction, especially its use of point of view to make him more attractive to a young readership, and it discusses what version of Shakespeare is portrayed in the novels. The article particularly highlights how gender shapes the heroes' and heroines' relationships with the playwright, within and without the fictional world.

Keywords: William Shakespeare; children's literature; young adult fiction; historical fiction; Shakespeare as a character

1. Introduction

Children's and young adult (YA) literature entertains in order to instruct. As many have remarked (e.g., Hateley 2009; Scutter 1999; Bottoms 2004; Beckton 2015; Lanier 2008), Shakespearean literature for young readers is meant as an introduction to Shakespeare as desirable cultural capital in adult life: knowledge of the playwright and his works signals education, refinement, and access to authorised culture. Such literature acquaints readers with "Shakespeare's mythic stature as playwright" (Lanier 2008, p. 104), making him the "source of specific ideas and norms [...] deemed valuable by dominant middle-class culture" (Hateley 2016, p. 1720). As Tosi observes (Tosi 2014), in children's and young adult literature, "Shakespeare" predominantly coincides with his plays,[1] and, more specifically, with the stories told in his plays, so much so that narrativisation is the primary form of Shakespearean adaptation for young readers. Such adaptations are intended as an early, mediated encounter with his works, which are meant to be followed, in adult life, by "the real thing" (Bottoms 2004; Hateley 2016), as is the case with adaptations of the classics more in general (Müller 2013). But what about the man William Shakespeare? How are young readers introduced to the playwright as a real person?

William Shakespeare appears in many genres for young readers, including biography (a non-fiction genre), biographical fiction, and historical fiction. Yet, unlike the extensive and detailed scholarship on Shakespearean adaptations for young readers across media, scholarship on Shakespeare as a character in children's and YA literature is sporadic and

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general. The playwright's representation in children's and YA fiction has received limited attention, mainly in brief and general overviews (Lanier 2008; Hateley 2016; Franssen 2016a), or within broader studies by the same scholars with other primary foci, such as Shakespearean adaptations for young readers (Hateley 2009), Shakespeare as a character in various media and genres (Franssen 2016b) or Shakespeare in popular culture (Lanier 2002). Although such studies (see also Pinsent 2004; Munkelt 2013; Rokison 2013; Sasser 2015) offer compelling analyses of the fictional portrayals of Shakespeare, they necessarily generalise, overlooking differences and focusing on few popular works. For instance, they consider biographical fiction all that is not adaptation, or they do not distinguish between different age or gender groups.

This article focuses on the representation of the playwright in contemporary YA historical fiction, conventionally understood to also comprise time-slip stories. Pinsent has claimed that "By definition, any novels featuring the character of Shakespeare are historical" (Pinsent 2004, p. 116), but such stance is complicated by key differences between Shakespearean biographical fiction and historical fiction aimed at young readers.

My first aim is thus to define historical fiction for young readers featuring Shakespeare as a character, to which I will refer as "Shakespearean historical fiction". I will distinguish it from Shakespearean biographical fiction for the same readership and show how the conventions of this genre of historical fiction are essential to its distinctive didactic approach: the man William Shakespeare is presented through the protagonists' eyes as a life mentor and guide, and the use of internal focalisation invites young readers to develop similar opinions of the playwright.

Secondly, I will highlight how Shakespeare's fictional representation in Shakespearean historical fiction reflects bardolatric notions of the playwright, and how such portrayal is so consistent across novels that we may conceive Shakespeare as a bardolatric transtextual character.

Finally, I will show how the genre perpetuates nineteenth-century gendered assumptions about young readers and their relationship with Shakespeare as cultural capital. To do so, I will focus on the ways in which gender shapes the protagonists'—and by extension, the readers'—relationship with the playwright, but also the approximate age at which such encounter with cultural authority is expected and encouraged to take place.

These three aspects are all interrelated, and I will strive to develop my argument accordingly. When one aspect takes precedence over the other, I invite the reader to bear such interconnection in mind.

The analysis discusses all the English-language instances of Shakespearean historical fiction I could access and identify. Some of these novels have already been considered in criticism, but primarily as biographical fiction or a version thereof; for readability, when citing such studies, I will not repeat such distinctions unless necessary. For clarity, I have included a list of the novels considered part of a certain subgenre at the beginning of the relevant subsections in Section 5.

2. Shakespearean Historical Fiction

YA historical fiction has received scarce critical attention among genres featuring Shakespeare as a character. The only previous study on the subject is a graduate research paper (Grout 2002), testing whether historical novels, vaguely defined, represent Shakespeare's biography "accurately" in light of surviving historical records—a slippery pursuit, considering the longstanding debate on the thin line separating fiction and history as narrative (see, e.g., White 2005; Fisher 2002) as well as the limited documentary evidence of Shakespeare's life.

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Even when Shakespearean historical novels have been previously discussed, they have been most often referred to as biographical fiction, or "biofiction". Yet, the two genres present fundamental differences. Biofiction may be understood as "literature that names its protagonist after an actual historical figure" (Lackey 2017, p. 3). Many follow Lukács ([1937–1938] 1962) in treating it as a subgenre of the historical novel that offers an intentionally subjective, "personalised" version of history rather than attempting an objective reconstruction of the past (de Haan 2016). It is in this sense that Hateley (2009), following Pinsent (2004), discusses some of the novels here considered as "historical fiction", while still treating them as "fictional accounts of Shakespeare's life" (Hateley 2009, pp. 50–51). However, Shakespearean biofiction presents features that set it apart from historical novels proper.

In Shakespearean biofiction, Shakespeare is the main protagonist and focaliser—if not narrator—of the books,[2] and he is roughly the same age of their intended readers. Young readers are encouraged to see the playwright of mythic proportions as a relatable peer, who shares their emotional turmoils or desire for adventure. Furthermore, although set in the Elizabethan past, biofiction makes Shakespeare's life an adaptation of his plays: characters and events in the books are inspired by plots, situations, and characters in the plays rather than by documented facts, but they are also shown or implied to have inspired the plays in turn. We could say that, in biofiction, Shakespeare *is* his plays. The genre operates similarly to Stephen Greenblatt's *Will in the World* (Greenblatt 2004), connecting biography and art to explain *How Shakespeare Became Shakespeare*, but it does so to the point of heavily blurring, if not erasing, the distinction between Shakespeare's life and the plots and characters of his plays, even though readers may not yet recognise the references.

Unlike biofiction, Shakespearean historical fiction usually portrays Shakespeare as an adult and seeks to represent his professional success as a key period in English literary history. Even though the theatre plays a prominent role in all novels, it is Shakespeare as a "great man and author" who takes centre stage. Plots may resort to typically Shakespearean situations—most frequently, female characters cross-dressing as boys—but they do not make his life an adaptation of his plays, nor do they provide extensive overviews of the playwright's life. Rather, Shakespearean historical fiction introduces young readers both to the context of the plays and to their author. It lies at a crossroads between, on the one hand, adaptations of the classics and, on the other, historical fiction for young readers more in general.

The former are meant as an initiation "to a literary canon [...] deemed essential for sharing a common cultural heritage" (Müller 2013, p. 1) and as an invitation to "approach both text and context, both original and adaptation" in due course (Lawrence and Montz 2020, p. 1). Children's and YA historical fiction, on the other hand, is a didactic genre by definition, which aims to bridge the distance between readers and past ways of life, their governing principles, constrictions and limitations (Lynch-Brown and Tomlinson 1993), while also seeking to "reveal History and the true character of historical figures" (Reed 1993, p. 159). Many have recommended historical fiction as a valuable aid in the classroom (see, e.g., Van Sledright and Kelly 1998; Filardo Llamas and Guitiérrez Rodríguez 2006; Wilson 2011), since it may evoke "a fresh and more vivid view of the past" (Filardo Llamas and Guitiérrez Rodríguez 2006, p. 40): these novels include many descriptions of material culture—clothing, food and eating practices, daily occupations—that bring the history book alive.[3] Shakespearean historical fiction teaches young readers about Shakespeare as a consistently positive influence to encourage readers to discover more about him, his time and his works.

The protagonists of Shakespearean historical novels are usually fictional boys or girls, who live in or travel to Shakespeare's past, encounter the playwright in his professional

context, and usually join him and his acting company. Shakespearean historical novels belong to two of the three main kinds of children's historical fiction outlined by Filardo Llamas and Guitiérrez Rodríguez (2006, p. 49): (1) "stories in which the main characters are imaginary and only some secondary characters may be actual historical figures"; (3) what Hall (2001) has called "time-slip" stories. Time-slip stories are characterised by a fantasy element: characters travel from their primary world to another time, usually through some form of portal (Tosi and Paruolo 2012, pp. 207–8). In time-slip novels and in novels set entirely in the Elizabethan past (henceforth also "classic historical novels"), Shakespeare is a secondary character in the protagonists' own coming-of-age journey, but it is thanks to Shakespeare's guidance and model that the characters may mature and enter adult society. Pinsent (2004), followed by Lanier (2008) and Hateley (2009), noticed that Shakespeare represents a surrogate (or literal) father figure to the novels' protagonists, a notion that is complicated by the protagonists' gender, as we will see.

Stories are told from the young protagonists' perspective, and the use of point of view is one of the distinctive features of Shakespearean historical fiction (see next section). In this sense, these novels are consistent with Valerie Krips' observations on English historical fiction for young readers published after World War II. Krips argues that English postwar culture became concerned with preserving and sustaining what it had inherited, and that children's historical fiction responded to this concern by helping shape what would later be understood in "heritage" terms. Consequently, modern engagements with the past increasingly depend not on passive information but on "active participation", and require "imagination and empathy" (Krips 2000, p. 10). Rather than asking young readers simply to accept Shakespeare's cultural authority as an imposed truth, Shakespearean historical fiction invites the reader to experience such authority through the protagonist, making cultural inheritance feel like personal discovery rather than instruction.

Nonetheless, there are very few Shakespearean historical novels compared to adaptations or other Shakespearean genres for young readers, which attests to the general trend in children's and YA literature and non-fiction to identify Shakespeare with his works. Like biofiction, Shakespearean historical fiction is a contemporary genre, but novels that belong to the category are comparatively few and they first appeared in a rather scattered pattern in the second half of the twentieth century, with *At the Sign of the Globe* (Bowers 1966) being the earliest instance I could find. The main bulk of Shakespearean historical novels was published between 1999 and 2006, in a context in which Shakespeare was being popularised to teen audiences, mainly thanks to groundbreaking film adaptations such as Luhrmann's *Romeo and Juliet* (1996) and productions such as *Shakespeare in Love* (1998), which, in turn, prompted a series of film adaptations aimed at teenagers and set in contemporary times.

There are, of course, precursors, such as Bennett's *Master Skylark: A Story of Shakspere's Time* (Bennett 1897),[4] or Trease's *Cue for Treason* (Trease 1940). Both novels anticipate most features of novels targeting boys specifically (see next sections). Shakespeare is always a point of reference for the protagonists, and he will eventually be crucial in the boys' return home. Yet, as Hateley noted about *Cue for Treason* (Hateley 2009, p. 53), these novels bridge between the nineteenth and the twentieth century. In both novels, unlike contemporary fiction, the status quo is eventually restored with the boy protagonist's return home. *Master Skylark* is focalised through the protagonist, yet its third-person omniscient narrator is similar to the ones of Victorian and Edwardian adaptation collections: a conspicuous but also benevolent voice, it strives to make the protagonist's experiences relevant to its readers, but at the same time it is clear that "all the knowledge is on the side of the adult" (Tosi 2020, p. 4). *Cue for Treason*, on the other hand, is closer to contemporary novels—it is told in the first person by the protagonist; the plot revolves around a theatre apprenticeship and a conspiracy—but it does not depict the protagonist's emotional development. Rather, his

passage from boyhood into adulthood is summarised with "What else is there to tell?" and a reference to the fact that, in the time between the events narrated and his narration, he married and had children (Trease 1940, p. 281).

Shakespearean historical fiction as I am outlining it, on the other hand, is consistent with Krips' analysis. Rather than using the past as a backdrop for Dumas-inspired adventures, framed as an exciting parenthesis in an otherwise orderly and static life, it presents the past as a space which young readers can enter and evaluate through a personalised perspective.

3. A Matter of Perspective: The Use of Narrative Point of View

Sir Walter Scott's famous protagonist, Edward Waverley, "st[ood] metonymically for the audience's engagement with the historical past: as something consciously understood only with the benefit of hindsight" (de Groot 2009, p. 22). Similarly, the young protagonists in Shakespearean historical novels function as mediators between the present-day perspective of young readers and the past (Filardo Llamas and Guitiérrez Rodríguez 2006)—that is, between the modern reader and the defining historical moment in which Shakespeare, the individual, earned his status of cultural myth. By adopting the young protagonists' perspective, Shakespearean historical fiction may present Shakespeare's authority as willingly embraced rather than imposed, and it invites readers to do the same.

In these novels, it is middling, relatively undistinguished characters—fictitious or real characters of secondary importance—who serve as the main focal point of the narrative. Almost all of the novels here considered are narrated in the first person by their protagonists, and the focalisation in the other novels is primarily internal, anchored on the protagonists. Since these protagonists are usually close in age and gender to the target audience, this mechanism encourages readers to identify with the offered perspective: their "impulse [...] to surrender themselves to the shaping [narrative] discourse renders them susceptible to the power in point of view to impose a subject position from which readers will read" (Stephens 1992, p. 27; cf. Fisher 2002; Unzue 2015). This facilitates the mediating process, since the characters' experience of the Elizabethan context acquaints present-day readers with the past, and the narrators' (or focalisers') personal knowledge of Shakespeare gives readers a privileged access to the playwright.

Such personalised perspective is particularly significant in light of the novels' classification as YA fiction. Overall, the primary intended readership of Shakespearean historical fiction ranges between middle-grade and end-of-high-school age groups, both in terms of expected reading level and of subject (cf. Nilsen and Donelson 2001; Eaton 2010, 2013; Hintz and Tribunella 2024).[5] It has been repeatedly underlined how YA literature is often read by older people as well, to the point that, as of 2017, at least 70% of YA buyers were estimated to be adults (Cadden et al. 2020; Hintz and Tribunella 2024). Nonetheless, most of the novels here considered predate, or are at most early contemporary to, key phenomena such as *Harry Potter* (1997–2007), *Twilight* (2005–2008), and *The Hunger Games* (2008–2010), three watershed series that expanded the readership of YA literature to explicitly encompass adults (see, e.g., Tucker 1999; Beckton 2015; O'Sullivan 2023). Especially if we consider the didactic nature of historical fiction for young readers, we may assume authors, marketers, and sellers of Shakespearean historical novels to target young audiences primarily. Of course, adults may still have read or continue to read Shakespearean historical fiction aimed at younger readers, but I am focusing on the novels' primary intended readership because it allows me to highlight broader didactic patterns and cultural concerns surrounding the relationship between young people and Shakespeare. As we will see, the novels' distribution along (intended) age categories of YA readership depends primarily on the gender of their protagonists.

As Trites has shown (Trites 2000), a characterising feature of YA fiction is the fact that it eventually incorporates characters and readers into the institutions it appears to challenge. In the case of Shakespearean historical fiction, the readers' potential resistance against Shakespearean cultural authority—unappealing because linked to the school curriculum and adult expectations and requirements—may be reabsorbed through the use of internal focalisation. In the next section, we will see how this relates to a mediated and gendered access to Shakespeare as cultural capital. Here, it is worth considering how Shakespearean historical fiction circumvents explicit didacticism and rather encourages readers to share their views on Shakespeare—and, by extension, his works—as a positive guide in their process of personal and professional growth. Such an ostensible recognition to agency "works to produce identification strategies whereby the implied reader [...] have [*sic*] few positions from which they can contest [Shakespearean] value or their own complicity in it" (Hateley 2009, p. 51).

At the same time, the point of view of an early modern or time-travelling peer serves both to facilitate and to mediate the reader's experience of the past as "a foreign country", to borrow L.P. Hartley's famous phrase (Hartley [1953] 1987, p. 7). Detailed descriptions of past ways of life produce a "temporal and epistemological tension" between the characters' immediate experience of the past and the implied reader's later historical perspective (Hatavara 2014, p. 243). Such descriptions foster comparisons between past and contemporary ways of life, but not necessarily to "reveal that, although social mores may change, human values do not", as Adamson argued (Adamson 1994, pp. xi–xii). Also for didactic purposes, novels often highlight the differences between the present, assumed to be Western and privileged, and an early modern past marked by death, religious persecution, disease, and social injustice (cf. McEvoy 2023; Hansen 2023; Turchi 2023). For instance, in *Loving Will Shakespeare*, eight-year-old Agnes Hathaway must care for her mother, ill with the plague, and the novel does not censor the physical horror of the illness, describing the "reeking pus" coming out of the swollen sores that make the woman "writh[e] and rav[e]" in pain (Meyer 2006, p. 9).

In this sense, time slip stories allow for an additional layer of mediation. Wilson (2011, pp. 6–7) has described "living history fiction" as time-travel fiction that creates a meeting point between modern characters and history, either physically or psychologically: the past is filtered through a "strong and consistent modern character focalization" rather than presented from a fully historical point of view. This makes the gap between the reader's present and Shakespeare's past explicit and immediate: as the protagonists explore and interact with the past, they also interpret it for the reader, bridging the gap between historical distance and the present through a shared experience of discovery, and often filtering some of the more disturbing aspects of the past for the contemporary reader. In *King of Shadows*, Nat Field, an American who travels back from modern-day to early modern London, acknowledges that he is experiencing "culture shock": "Living in 1599 was like being on a permanent camping trip in a third world country" (Cooper 1999, p. 68).

The use of a mediating point of view also allows readers to learn more about Elizabethan theatre life as the protagonists learn about and experience it themselves. Novels thus grant the present-day readers with an exceptional insight into a theatre world of which there is relatively little documentary evidence. In the novels, the protagonists are or become members of a theatre company, which gives them the necessary skills to help the reader appreciate the Elizabethan theatrical craft, such as early modern staging solutions and machinery. For instance, in *Saving Hamlet*, the time-travelling protagonist, Emma, must even learn how to bang together pewter mugs to produce the sound of clashing swords, or how to load a cannon with rudimentary blank shots without causing a fire. Shakespearean historical fiction still revolves around the playwright's professional life, but it does so by

depicting the Elizabethan theatre world through the eyes of characters who want to be part of it or experience it with wonder.

4. Shakespeare, the Bard

If the narrator in Victorian and Edwardian adaptations of Shakespeare "occasionally coerce[d the reader] into reading and understanding the plays *in the right way*" (Tosi 2020, p. 2, original emphasis), Shakespearean historical fiction uses internal focalisation to paint Shakespeare as a genius through the protagonists'—and thus the readers'—eyes. In this sense, it is in continuity with nineteenth-century history for young readers, which "offer[ed] accounts of great events and important men" (de Groot 2009, p. 92), and it undoubtedly conveys what Erica Hateley has called

> a somewhat desperate nostalgia for a return to a post-Elizabethan but pre-postmodern time, when children could be told that Shakespeare was a genius [in the Romantic sense] without a threat of a lapse into poststructuralist relativism (Hateley 2009, p. 50).

Ever since the Lambs' *Tales from Shakespeare* (Lamb and Lamb [1807] 1986), Shakespeare's plays have been retold, appropriated, and expanded to suit different times, contexts, and cultural agendas. Adapters have strived to make Shakespeare relevant by allowing young readers to make personal connections with his plays (cf. Lawrence and Montz 2020). Young readers, and especially teenagers, "value the ways that reading reflects aspects of themselves" (Coldwell 2014),[6] and Shakespeare has been shown to be an ever-adaptable, "open" signifier (Lanier 2008, p. 94; Hateley 2009) capable of accommodating their experiences, struggles and desires. It is precisely this adaptive process that makes Shakespearean universality across time and cultures possible.

In Shakespearean historical fiction, instead, Shakespeare is presented as the Bard idolised in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century bardolatry, and the novels are quite conservative in portraying his "matchless image", as the Lambs called it (Lamb and Lamb [1807] 1986, p. vi). Like many other nineteenth-century authors and intellectuals, the Lambs hoped that Shakespeare's works would make readers—and specifically the young readers of the *Tales*—more virtuous by teaching them "courtesy, benignity, generosity, humanity;—for of examples, teaching these virtues, his pages are full" (p. vii). Shakespearean historical fiction makes William Shakespeare the embodiment of such qualities, implying that the plays must share these virtues. The fact that the protagonists' own positive growth usually pivots on their experiences at and with Shakespeare's theatre further corroborates the connection between moral rectitude and Shakespeare's plays.

The playwright's character is thus described as a combination of reverend figure and occasionally short-tempered erratic genius, who is nonetheless always benevolently authoritative in relation to other characters. Similarities across portrayals of Shakespeare in Shakespeare historical fiction persist even beyond age and gender divisions in intended readership. Such fictional representation is so consistent that Shakespeare may even be considered a transtextual character. Richardson (2011) argues that "Transtextual exemplifications of the same character must be consistent with essential aspects of the original presentation", and that

> Other figures derived from an original character can be considered variants; one still needs knowledge of the original version to fully comprehend the later one, though the later one cannot provide new information about the original. (p. 139)

Shakespearean historical fiction does not, of course, extend "the Bard" as a fictional character created by a single author; rather, it repeatedly draws on the culturally authorised figure of "the Bard William Shakespeare" as the genius, father, mentor, professional model

and life guide of bardolatry. Each novel offers a "variant" of the same cultural construct: a Shakespeare whose occasional human flaws only make him exceptionally more accessible and attractive to both protagonist and reader, confirming him as a figure of authority and cultural value through an intimate perspective.

Hateley (2009) has argued that classic historical novels and time-slip stories move from different premises, namely that time-travelling protagonists have preconceived notions about the playwright. However, as Pinsent (2004) has underlined, readers "are more aware of [Shakespeare's] status than are the fictional characters" because "they recognise his greatness": "The aura Shakespeare possesses means that [...] he can never be simply an ordinary character" (p. 18). Shakespearean historical fiction even assumes that descriptions of Shakespeare's appearance are superfluous: such novels only mention details, such as his receding hairline, which Lanier associates with the intellectuality attached to Shakespeare's works as elite culture (Lanier 2008, p. 94).

Significantly, even historical novels for young readers that appear to challenge the Shakespearean myth are consistent with his transtextual portrayal as the Bard. Kositsky's *A Question of Will* (Kositsky 2000) follows Willow, a girl who travels back in time to discover that Edmund de Vere is the real author of the plays and Shakespeare a horrible conman. Instead of a challenge, however, this is rather an Oxford-theory variant. Kositsky's representation of the "real" Bard follows the same pattern as novels promoting Shakespeare (see Section 5.3), so that the Bard William Shakespeare is replaced by the Bard Edmund de Vere, but the transtextual quality of the bardolatric representation is preserved.

Pinsent might be considered correct in claiming that all novels for young readers featuring Shakespeare are "historical" (Pinsent 2004, p. 116), but only insofar as one considers "historical" to mean "set in the past": whereas adult fiction often challenges Shakespearean cultural authority by having the playwright travel to the present, Shakespearean historical fiction never risks displacing Shakespeare to a context that might put such authority to the test. As Krips has argued, the past must be idealised in order to become heritage, and this process necessarily "stop[s] time" (Krips 2000, p. 11). The Bard William Shakespeare undergoes a similar crystallisation: he is always associated with "normative gender, subjectivity, and behaviour" (Hateley 2009, p. 19), whereas adaptations of his plays or adult fiction challenge such fixity.

5. Gendered Encounters with Shakespeare

Hateley (2009) has stressed how Shakespearean cultural capital operates through a patriarchal model, and how children's Shakespeare does not simply teach literature, but also gendered relations to cultural authority. In her study, Hateley observes how, particularly in novels featuring Shakespeare as a character, the playwright is "made a resolutely patriarchal discourse which is, in part, made possible because of its difference and distance from femininity" (Hateley 2009, p. 50). However, Shakespearean historical fiction proves conservative also in its perpetuating nineteenth-century gendered notions about the relationship between Shakespeare and young readers, particularly when it comes to the girls' delayed access to Shakespeare and to the layers of mediation separating them from the playwright—as a person and as cultural capital. Conservative gender notions shape not only the narratives, but also the novels' implied readerships and the age at which young readers are invited to approach Shakespeare.

In the nineteenth century, it was assumed that young readers' access to Shakespeare should be mediated. The adapter and the narrator of Shakespearean adaptation collections, but also figures outside the books per se, such as parents or siblings, should protect very young or female readers from the obscurity of Shakespeare's language and from inappropriate content, but also teach them the correct approach to Shakespeare so that they could

appreciate it in later life—something which is still true today (on the subject, see Tosi 2020). Yet, the collections assume that boys will have direct access to Shakespeare's "manly book" (Lamb and Lamb [1807] 1986, p. vi) earlier than girls. Contrary to Hateley's claims, even collections addressing girls call for an additional figure to direct female readers' experience. The Lambs encouraged boys to read selected passages of the plays to their sisters (Lamb and Lamb [1807] 1986, pp. vi–vii), while Mary Cowden Clarke assigned this mediating role to mothers (cf., e.g., Barber 2013). Crucially, these female readers are not children but "young ladies" (Lamb and Lamb [1807] 1986, p. vi). As Cowden Clarke recommended in *The Girl's Own Paper*, only girls "emerging from childhood" to enter "woman-life" should access Shakespeare directly, and even in those cases, primarily to learn from Shakespearean female models; in all other cases, a mediator should intervene (Cowden Clarke 1887, pp. 562, 564). Shakespearean historical fiction perpetuates such notions.

Novels with male protagonists are marketed to readers between 9 and 14 years of age, whereas those with female protagonists are targeted at older teenagers, aged 14 and above. Whereas the former novels are usually structured around the "quest-narrative", a typically male-engendered narrative form (Stephens 1996, p. 19), the latter foreground romance, sexuality and bodily experiences, emotional conflict, and rebellion against social or familial expectations (cf. Beckton 2015). Genres in children's and YA literature are "endemically gendered in their character functions, events and outcomes" (Stephens 1996, p. 17), so that novels may be considered to address male or female readers based on such elements only. Yet gendered divisions extend beyond textual representations to the publishing market itself. Books are usually categorised and promoted according to presumed differences between male and female readers, and paratexts such as book covers communicate expectations about gender and genre, which are sustained by consumers' purchases (cf. Munson-Warnken 2017; Roper and Santiago 2021; Adukia et al. 2023).

In other words, in the case of Shakespearean historical fiction, the characters and events depicted in the novels, combined with the marketing strategies employed to promote them, reinforce the gender and age divide between younger boy readers and older girl readers. Similarly to what Hateley remarks about crime fiction rewritings of Shakespeare (Hateley 2017), boys are given earlier direct access to Shakespearean cultural capital, within and without the fictional world, and such access usually corresponds to different narrative patterns: boys act; girls feel. In Shakespearean historical fiction, boys approach the playwright through work, theatrical practice, but also danger and mystery; girls, instead, approach him through grief, love, filial sentiment or marital devotion. Such gendered structural pattern of action as opposed to emotion emphasises how "girls' identity decisions centre on their relationships with others, specifically romantic interests and familial connections" well beyond the YA fantasy novels studied by Weissman and Swanstrom (2016, p. 6). Furthermore, male protagonists are on average much younger than female protagonists: even to his own daughters, Shakespeare is an invariably distant figure, to whom they can grow closer only when they approach adulthood.

For boys, Shakespeare thus becomes a model of conduct, and acting (in both senses) with and for Shakespeare allows boys to mature; for girls, the playwright becomes a patriarchal centre of emotion around which their identity is negotiated. Readers are encouraged to accept the narrative point of view and its recognition of Shakespearean cultural capital also in these gendered terms, instead of questioning its authority and the values associated with it (cf. Hateley 2009, 2017).

5.1. Classical Historical Novels: Shakespeare and Boys

Novels: *At the Sign of the Globe* (Bowers 1966); *The Player's Boy* (Forest 1970) and *The Players and the Rebels* (Forest 1971); *Plots and Players: The Lopez Conspiracy* (Melnikoff 1988);

Gary Blackwood's trilogy comprising *The Shakespeare Stealer* (Blackwood 1998), *Shakespeare's Scribe* (Blackwood 2000), and *Shakespeare's Spy* (Blackwood 2002); J.B. Cheaney's duology, *The Playmaker* (Cheaney 2000) and *The True Prince* (Cheaney 2004).

In classic Shakespearean historical fiction revolving around boys, Shakespeare's emergence as a substitute father figure is facilitated by the fact that the protagonists' parents are often absent, dangerous, or dead. The boys' relationship with Shakespeare is thus unmediated. Their *Bildung* is structured around action and through the sacrifice of their childhood, as they usually reject their past and embrace the chosen family of the theatre. If "the willingness to make sacrifices is critical to the formation of the disciplined and mature citizen" (Tribunella 2009, p. xiv), the boys' ability to leave their traumatic past behind and move—and act—forward marks their entry into adult life. This is even more striking if we consider that boy protagonists are approximately of the same age as the intended reader.

The protagonists usually get to know Shakespeare as they train as boy actors with his company. Through this professional relationship, Shakespeare earns their respect, trust, and admiration, which soon develop into genuine affection and into a selective, privileged bond. Yet, although Shakespeare is often the only adult in whom they can confide, it is not primarily through words that he gains the boys' loyalty, but through action, for instance by offering them opportunities to prove themselves and their skills. The protagonists learn to look up to him, personally and professionally, and he becomes a model of manhood for them. For instance, Blackwood's Widge first admires Shakespeare as "a poet of quality, perhaps of genius" (Blackwood 1998, p. 33), but then learns from him the meaning of "words such as honesty and trust, loyalty and friendship. And family. And home" (pp. 215–216). The trilogy concludes with Widge even following in his mentor's footsteps as a playwright, ratifying Shakespeare as a role model.

Although male protagonists eventually mature psychologically, they do so through concrete action. Classic Shakespearean historical novels usually revolve around one or more quests undertaken by the protagonists, usually active tasks which have an impact in the greater world of Elizabethan England. In these novels, theatre performance is almost invariably paired with mystery, danger and action outside the playhouse. For instance, over the course of the *Shakespeare Stealer* series, Widge faces a sinister character who wants him to transcribe *Hamlet* during the performance and later to steal a copy of the play; he infiltrates the Lord Admiral's Men to identify a spy; he helps a Jesuit recusant flee from England and even discovers that his friend, Julia, is the Earl of Essex's illegitimate daughter. Most often, protagonists help thwart conspiracies or participate in them, but they are also threatened by various antagonists and they must contend with impostors, bullies, and criminals.

For instance, in Antonia Forest's *The Player's Boy* (Forest 1970) and *The Players and the Rebels* (Forest 1971), originally conceived as one book, Nicholas is personally touched by religious persecution against Catholics, but he also contributes to foiling Essex's rebellion against Elizabeth I. In J.B. Cheaney's *The Playmaker* (Cheaney 2000) and its sequel, *The True Prince* (Cheaney 2004), Richard Malory first gets involved with the Catholic Holy Restoration Society, discovering that his own father had feigned his death to act as an undercover agent among the recusant Catholics and helping him escape to France, and he later lets himself be drawn into a conspiracy to solve a mystery surrounding a series of crimes that put the Lord Chamberlain's Men at great risk. The boys' actions in the world of the theatre are thus shown to have a positive impact on society as a whole, often in political terms.

The boys' experiences with Shakespeare are framed as a new life, an opportunity "to start over and cast themselves anew in any mood they chose", in Richard Malory's words (Cheaney 2000, p. 8). This new life is marked by the protagonist' journey across space to London, with which the novels generally begin, and by new names or identities.

Shakespeare even participates in this symbolic renaming. For instance, in *The Player's Boy*, Shakespeare recommends Nicholas Marlow to assume the pseudonym of Nicholas Arden, so as to protect him from the murderers of Christopher Marlowe, with whom the boy travelled to London. In the *Shakespeare Stealer* trilogy, Widge's real name is never revealed. Widge, short for "pigwidgeon", is the nickname given to him at the orphanage, but when he begins acting with the Lord Chamberlain's Men he briefly chooses the stage name Pedringano. Yet, Widge fully enters adult society as his own independent individual at the end of the final book in the trilogy, when he decides to be a playwright following in Shakespeare's footsteps, and is helped by his mentor to choose his new *nom de plume*, James Pope. Such new names symbolise the boys' incorporation into social adulthood through the theatre community.

5.2. Classical Historical Novels: Shakespeare and Girls

Novels: *My Father Had a Daughter: Judith Shakespeare's Tale* (Tiffany 2003); *Shakespeare's Daughter* (Hassinger 2004);[7] *Loving Will Shakespeare* (Meyer 2006).

Whereas boys mature through action and by inheriting Shakespeare's moral and cultural legacy, girls encounter Shakespeare as a patriarchal problem, which is ultimately resolved in eminently emotional and domestic terms. In novels with female protagonists, the attention paid to women's perspectives and embodied experiences does not lead to a feminist or sustained critical engagement with Shakespeare, as Hateley has noticed (Hateley 2009): admiring, loving or reconciling with Shakespeare means going back to the patriarchy, for the protagonists and for the reader (cf. particularly pp. 49–51).

In classic historical novels, the protagonist is either one of Shakespeare's daughters (Susanna and Judith), or his wife. The Shakespeare women are, however, in a consistently subordinate position to the playwright compared to Shakespeare's surrogate sons. Furthermore, in these novels, female characters may travel, defy conventions and even pursue a career, but their plots repeatedly return them to love and domestic care—for and through Shakespeare. As Brown stresses, girlhood narratives can both "liberate and limit", offering choice and constraint at the same time (Brown 2011, p. 117; cf. Harlan 2018). First-person narration or close focalisation arguably contribute to delimiting such female perspective within the domestic and familial sphere.[8] Compared to boys' adventures, girls' escapades are self-contained transgressions: even when they encounter the broader world, their impact does not reach beyond their immediate social circle, and they eventually return to domesticity.

The relationship between Shakespeare and his daughters is marked by grief and it is initially strained by his emotional absence from the girls' lives. In the novels, the heroine leaves Stratford as an emotional reaction to Hamnet's death. In *My Father Had a Daughter,* Judith travels to London to ruin *Twelfth Night* in retaliation, as her father has clearly written the play about her and her twin brother but was not present at the boy's deathbed. In *Shakespeare's Daughter*, Susanna feels responsible for Hamnet's death and hopes that her father and London society will allow her to find some closure and perhaps pursue a music career. The emotional distance is bridged when each girl eventually witnesses her father at work. Theatre is a way to maturity, but only because it allows Judith and Susanna to realise that their father grieves like they do, to witness his genius and to acknowledge his stature—only then are they reconciled with him can they justify his absence from their lives.

Yet, even after reconciliation, they do not build a more intimate relationship with him. Rather, they are more willingly subjected to his patriarchal authority. For instance, in *My Father Had a Daughter*, Judith not only returns to Stratford to marry the man her father chose for her, but she also discovers at her father's deathbed that he intentionally prevented her from pursuing a life in the theatre despite her talent. Even the girls' acting and singing flare

is derivative: each is "her father's daughter", as many characters remark in both novels, but they are always denied independent assessment.

The relationship between Shakespeare and his daughters is never as direct as the ones which the boys build with him in other novels. Rather, it is mediated through the protagonist's love interest, family relations, and additional mentors. Family is the primary emotionally charged entity that shapes the girls' relationship with Shakespeare. In these novels, Anne Hathaway and the Shakespeare relations are against the theatre and life in London, which prompts in the girls a fascination with the city as a place of possibility, but also connotes such life in emotional terms, attaching gratitude for a comfortable life as well as emotional unavailability to Shakespeare's theatre. Such attitudes also delay the girls' access to their father until late girlhood. Only when they are old enough to make their own decisions can they run away from home and approach Shakespeare.

Even then, the relationship between the girls and their father is never as intense as the one they have with their exclusively male romantic partners. Such relationships, however, always return the girls to a place of embraced subordination. For instance, in *Shakespeare's Daughter*, Susanna's love interest, Thomas, involves her in a network of Catholic conspiracies. Her father and Emilia Lanier (1569–1645, among the earliest women poets to have a collection of verse published commercially in English) urge her to leave England with Thomas because her attachment to him has put her in danger—the fact that she might have a singing career abroad is but a happy coincidence. Her future is thus dictated by her emotional attachments rather than by her own, independent choice.

Finally, even Shakespeare's mentoring role is displaced onto other characters. He remains the heroine's main model and most influential point of reference, but other characters serve as immediate mentors, who establish closer affective ties with the girls and further explain Shakespeare's eminence—namely, Emilia Lanier in *Shakespeare's Daughter* and Richard Burbage in *My Father Had a Daughter*. Emilia assumes an almost maternal role in Susanna's life, teaching her not only music, but also social graces. Such relationship further reinforces the patriarchal constraints that shape the protagonist's worldview and are justified through her emotional attachment to Emilia and Shakespeare: Susanna even comes to accept and respect her father's affair with Emilia as an expression of genuine love. In these novels, Shakespeare is thus a mediated guide in the girls' emotional and professional growth. The heroines admire him from afar, through a web of relationships and degrees of separation that do not constrain male protagonists.

Loving Will Shakespeare takes this kind of patriarchal subordination associated with Shakespeare to its extreme. In the novel, Shakespeare is the centre of his wife's identity and the purpose of her existence. Agnes Hathaway has lost most of her family and has been left under the authority of a fairy-tale-like tyrannical stepmother—she is a "sad girl", a recurring trope of YA fiction, defined by loss, vulnerability, and emotional deprivation (Brown 2011). Arguably, her only active choice and transgression in the novel is yielding sexually to young Will: romance is presented as her only escape, although she originally did not intend to marry. Agnes' identity is shaped by Shakespeare to the point it is Will who renames her "Anne". In this novel, Shakespeare is the primary catalyst of Agnes' transition into womanhood, but only through sex and marriage: she never visits her husband in London or reads his plays; her notion of his greatness derives only from her love for him, from his letters and Stratford gossip. Her devotion is marked by geographical distance and lack of affinity. She does not share his ambitions or understand his world, nor does she attempt to. Yet, the girl's—and in the last few pages, woman's—awe is unwavering, even despite Shakespeare's absence. The novel is framed as a memoir-like account of her love story with the playwright, and Stratford domesticity is presented as the only memorable achievement in Agnes' life.

Shakespearean historical novels belong to Filardo Llamas and Guitiérrez Rodríguez' first category even when the protagonist is one of Shakespeare's daughters or his wife. There is documentary evidence about all three Shakespeare women, and these novels might be argued to sit at the boundary with biographical fiction. Yet, in popular narrative, the three women are confined to Stratford and domesticity and, in Shakespearean historical fiction in particular, they are relegated to bearing witness to the playwright's genius. In other words, they function like historically minor figures or entirely fictional characters, to the point their documented existence is often disregarded: they provide but a point of access into Shakespeare's rise to literary prominence and his impact on theatrical and literary history.

5.3. Time-Slip Stories

Novels: *King of Shadows* (Cooper 1999); *Kissing Shakespeare* (Mingle 2013); *Saving Hamlet* (Booth 2016).

Time-slip stories sit on the verge between novels with male protagonists and those with female protagonists. They all revolve around a task that is shown to have a cultural, rather than political, impact on the greater world—namely, preserving Shakespeare's cultural significance. Compared to classic historical fiction, time-slip stories strike a greater balance between action and emotion. In *King of Shadows*, Nat travels to the past to prevent Shakespeare from contracting the plague, but his presence in Elizabethan times also enables him to process his grief after his mother's death and his father's consequent suicide. Rehearsing with Shakespeare for the première of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* provides the structure of repetitive action that contains and supports Nat's grieving process. In *Saving Hamlet*, Emma's task is to ensure the success of the first performance of *Hamlet* and of her school production of the same play, but, in both cases, success depends on her resolution of emotional conflict—her own grief, but also her friends' emotional struggles. In *Kissing Shakespeare*, Miranda is brought back in time to seduce Shakespeare and prevent him from becoming a Jesuit and renouncing the theatre—in this case, the task is immediately reframed as a heteronormative romance plot.

Despite such balance, the novels are eventually consistent with classic historical fiction for boys and for girls. Nat's parents are both dead and he immediately develops an intense, direct personal relationship with Shakespeare as a surrogate father figure. While in Elizabethan London, he does not assume the name as much as the identity of another boy, the historical boy actor Nathan Field (1587–1620). Emma and Miranda, on the other hand, have to deal with their families—and particularly their mothers—as sources of pressure and identity conflict. All three protagonists share a pre-existing love for Shakespeare but, unlike Nat, Emma and Miranda admire Shakespeare from a reverential distance, regarding him as their idol from the outset without ever developing a close relationship with him, even in Miranda's case. Rather, as in classic Shakespearean historical fiction, they develop closer bonds with other mediating figures: in Emma's case, the book-keeper of the Globe, Master Wick, who becomes her professional mentor, and in Miranda's case, Stephen the time traveller, who becomes her love interest in Shakespeare's place. While Shakespeare does set an example for them, they must work on their issues without his constant, direct involvement.

Time-slip stories share the distinctive feature of explicitly foregrounding how Shakespearean legacy is passed on to the protagonists and, through them to the reader. Shakespeare's authority and his poetry are shown to outlast the personal relationship: Shakespeare's words follow the protagonists into the future, continuing to serve as emotional and cultural guides. For instance, in *King of Shadows*, Shakespeare copies Sonnet 116 for Nat to remind him that love endures beyond the loss of our loved ones. Nat loses the manuscript in this journey in time, but he rediscovers the sonnet in his own present, in a modern edition.

In *Kissing Shakespeare*, Miranda's farewell gift from Stephen is a pendant engraved with a line from Sonnet 87—she inherits Shakespearean legacy, though through a male mediator. The message to the reader is thus explicit: if YA literature is marked by "continued, rather than achieved, growth", producing "a certain lack of closure, or openness to possibility" (Gruner 2019, p. 6), Shakespearean historical fiction signals that Shakespeare's value is carried across time by his works, which may offer readers the same guidance that the protagonists have experienced in person.

6. Conclusions

This article has sought to define Shakespearean historical fiction for young readers as a distinct genre, which introduces these readers to Shakespeare through the personal experiences of fictional or historically marginal characters. Narrative perspective is central to this process. Through first-person narration or internal focalisation, Shakespeare's stature becomes something the protagonists experience first-hand and willingly acknowledge. The intimacy of such encounters does not challenge Shakespeare's mythic stature. On the contrary, the playwright is portrayed as a consistently positive figure across the novels, whose essential qualities remain unchanged despite variations in plot and setting. Shakespearean historical fiction thus offers young readers privileged access to the culturally constructed figure of the Bard William Shakespeare and to the cultural capital attached to it. Although the genre replaces overt didacticism with personal discovery, it reproduces the values and expectations traditionally associated with Shakespeare's authority, particularly in nineteenth-century bardolatry.

Shakespearean historical fiction even preserves the cultural and gendered hierarchies that have historically governed access to Shakespeare. More specifically, his cultural authority is experienced and inherited differently according to gender. The novels perpetuate nineteenth-century gendered assumptions about young readers' access to Shakespearean cultural capital: boys are invited to approach Shakespeare at an earlier age, through action and an unmediated relationship with the playwright as a surrogate father. By contrast, girls are encouraged to approach Shakespeare in their later teens; nonetheless, their relationship with the playwright—as a person and as cultural capital—is mediated through emotional relationships with family members and love interests as well as professional ones with surrogate mentors. Even when female protagonists challenge conventions, the narratives return them to forms of patriarchal subordination.

In Shakespearean historical fiction, the protagonists' encounters with Shakespeare have lasting consequences for their futures. All novels conclude with the protagonists' entering a new phase of life, whether through love, marriage, or the first steps towards professional independence. Shakespeare thus plays a decisive role in their transition towards adulthood, even when his influence is mediated through other characters. Just as the protagonists' journeys of self-discovery reach their turning point through the theatre, readers are encouraged to regard Shakespeare and his works as guides in their own personal growth and transition into adulthood.

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Notes

[1] Shakespeare's poems are, at best, briefly mentioned. Such absence is likely due to two main factors: the poems lack easily adaptable storylines (cf. Tosi 2014; Bottoms 2011) and their themes—such as mortality, sensuality, and rape—are deemed unsuitable for child and young adult readers, although YA Shakespearean adaptations are increasingly challenging such taboos. Furthermore, the poems' meaning is arguably inseparable from their form. Children's and YA Shakespeare often preserves plot while reducing or adapting Shakespeare's language, but this strategy is ineffective for pure poetry: poetic form is meaning, so that abandoning the language of the poems risks eliminating what makes them "Shakespearean".

[2] If he is not the sole protagonist, the other one is usually a heterosexual love interest (sometimes a fictional character based on the female ones in the plays) with whose point of view Shakespeare's alternates in the novel, as, for instance, in *Love Disguised* (Klein 2013).

[3] The novels in Doré Ripley's *Needle and Quill* series (*The Playhouse Mysteries*, Ripley 2023, and *The Crimson Bodice*, Ripley 2026), set in the Elizabethan era, even include extradiegetic historical notes at the end of each chapter, which explain galenic medicine and bathing habits, inform the reader of Philip Henslowe's documented existence or of the Earl of Essex's attempted coup.

[4] First serialized in *St. Nicholas Magazine* between 1896 and 1897 and later published as a book in 1897.

[5] On the ambiguous definitions of "Young Adult" literature; see, e.g., (Allen 2025).

[6] The article has no pagination.

[7] For the classification of Tiffany's and Hassinger's novels as literature for young readers; see (Hateley 2009; Munkelt 2013; Rokison 2013).

[8] This is not exclusive to Shakespearean historical fiction: adult novels such as *Hamnet* (O'Farrell 2020) operate similarly. Like Meyer's novel, *Hamnet* is told entirely from Agnes' domestic perspective, and presents her life in very similar terms. Yet, adult fiction is still more willing to challenge Shakespearean authority, even when it focuses on women: in *Hamnet*, Shakespeare is never explicitly named ad his words are rarely reported in direct speech, as if to deprive him of his most powerful weapon. There is no need to specify his name for the reader to recognise him, but this form of erasure is relatively original in a panorama that associates the name Shakespeare and the playwright's words with a monumental cultural construct.

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