EARLY MODERN LITERARY STUDIES

***The Talented Mr Shakespeare*, written and directed by Wilf Scolding.**

Starring Mark Gatiss as Sir Robert Cecil, Arthur Hughes as Christopher Marlowe, Harry Kershaw as Will Kemp, Renee Lamb as Lady Audrey Walsingham, Tom Mothersdale as Will Shakespeare, Alana Ramsey as Elizabeth I and Martha, Lady Audrey's servant and Travis Ross as John the Messenger. Music by Ed Scolding. Produced by David Morley. A Perfectly Normal production for BBC Radio 4. Broadcast on May 7, 2025, 1415-1500.

Kevin De Ornellas
Ulster University
k.deornellas@ulster.ac.uk

and

Kelly McCloy
Ulster University
k.mccloy1@ulster.ac.uk

This radio play, a sort of adventure fantasy involving the usual suspects of early 1590s England, was refreshing not just in its utter lack of Bardolatry but because of its self-conscious silliness: essentially, William Shakespeare, after a convoluted struggle with Christopher Marlowe, celebrates the beginning of a quite ludicrous plot to overthrow Elizabeth I. Shakespeare himself tells the tale retrospectively, stressing his gentlemanliness and his popularity with lower and upper sorts. In an audio version of the cinematic flashback method, his narrative is punctuated with supposed recordings of the events – to an extent they undermine his memories: he is revealed to be boorish, drink-sodden, unpopular and vain. Selfish, vainglorious and bereft of compassion, he is as egregious as the title character of the film that Scolding's title alludes to – 1999's *The Talented Mr Ripley*. Bardoclastic indeed.

The radio play's lack of seriousness is made clear in its very early stages. Shakespeare refers to himself as a gentle, loved, universally acclaimed figure. But the dramatised events present him as a drunken boor graffitiing a tavern table. Not the loved figure that he retrospectively presents himself as, Shakespeare is ejected from the tavern for being an 'arrogant toerag who can't handle his ale'. Despite his lack of personal charm, Shakespeare is successful as a writer. He boasts, on New Year's Eve, about his momentous year of 1591 – when having three hit plays at the Globe made him the world's leading writer. The Globe, of course, did not open until 1599 – that is the key to understanding the play's deliberate silliness. Facts do not matter – this is a purposefully preposterous alternative history of Elizabethan London. It is not just pub landlords who hate Shakespeare: rival writers hate him too. Christopher Marlowe in particular despises the Warwickshire man: 'I want Shakespeare dead', he asserts. His hatred is motivated not just by jealousy but because Shakespeare allegedly told Elizabeth I that the three *Henry VI* plays were all his work – Marlowe is angry at Shakespeare who has claimed all the credit. So fixated is he with hatred for Shakespeare, that Marlowe concocts a plot to stir up the interest of Sir Robert Cecil who will, Marlowe thinks, have Shakespeare executed for disloyalty to Elizabeth I. He will use another ubiquitous Elizabethan figure to help him: Will Kemp. But Kemp has been ejected from Marlowe's bed – virtually everybody in this Elizabethan London is gay or bisexual. Marlowe, oddly, doesn't see that Kemp will resent this rejection. So, Kemp goes to visit Shakespeare and tells him about Marlowe's nefarious plan. Despite Will's contempt for 'Kempy Wempy Woo', he takes the information seriously and realises that he must pursue a counterplot against Marlowe. He gets lucky when he realises that an influential noblewoman wants Marlowe dead too.

Lady Audrey Walsingham, arguably, steals the show. Played as a dynamic, contemptuous and hyper-confident, socially-climbing northerner by Renee Lamb, she hates Marlowe because he has been sleeping with her husband, Thomas – the brother of the late spymaster, Francis Walsingham. Lady Audrey's anger at her husband is not based on some sort of thwarted love, but because his weakness for sex with men might undermine her role as Lady of the Bedchamber for Elizabeth I. Her fondness for that role is, inevitably, Sapphic. Elizabeth I, played as a sort of psychological bully by Alana Ramsey – she treats Sir Robert Cecil like a thick minion, making crude jokes at his expense – stresses her fondness for the way Lady Audrey is 'awfully good' at 'tucking me in' at night. This Elizabeth is reminiscent both of Miranda Richardson's giggly but changeable Queenie in *Blackadder II* (1986) and the needy, Olivia Coleman-portrayed Queen Anne in the 2018 film, *The Favourite*. After insidiously telling her Queen that the hitherto favoured Marlowe undermines her divine right to rule through his atheism, Lady Audrey bullies Kemp into helping her to destroy Marlowe. So, everything falls into place for Shakespeare: a crude alliance of hate-motived men and women plot to provoke Sir Robert

to have Marlowe either legally executed or covertly assassinated for atheism and disloyalty.

Sir Robert, though, is strangely aloof. He despises both Marlowe and Shakespeare. Both are lobbying him to have the other killed. He doesn't care about either. Basically, he says that he will have Shakespeare or Marlowe killed – the one who dies will be the one convincingly implicated as a traitor by the other. So, a farcical race ensues: will the alliance of Kemp, Lady Audrey and Shakespeare get Marlowe killed? Or will the increasingly isolated Marlowe get Shakespeare eliminated? Lady Audrey sets a honey-trap for Marlowe. Pretending to be interested in his work, she invites him over for an evening of conversation and a grudgingly allowed 'cuddle'. Using a resourceful, armed servant, Martha, she has organised for Marlowe to be murdered when he leaves her house. The assassins are to be Shakespeare and Kemp – they are to be used by Lady Audrey even though, in Martha's words, they are 'cowardly, misogynistic and irritating'. The anachronistic language is typical of the play. Appropriations of songs from later centuries – 'What shall we do with the drunken Shakespeare?' – and jokes about gay or bisexual characters being in closets further remind us that there is no suspension of disbelief aimed at here. We are constantly reminded that this is a daft fantasy, not any sort of accurate representation of late-Tudor England.

The intoxicated but sexually frustrated Marlowe is indeed assaulted by the disguised Shakespeare and Kemp. This, though, leads us to the play's main, defining twist. They have stabbed the vulnerable Marlowe – but with stage prop knives. Shakespeare and Kemp are good at one thing only: creating illusion, make-believe. Their murder of Marlowe is a sham, as illusory as any stage death. Aggrieved and sore, but glad to be alive, Marlowe is recruited into a new alliance: a triumvirate of stage men – Kemp, Shakespeare and Marlowe himself. They will all work together in secret defiance of Sir Robert and Lady Audrey. Their goal is to plot the death of Elizabeth I and to replace her with a Catholic monarch. Their purpose is utterly selfish: as Shakespeare puts it to Marlowe, 'getting a Catholic on the throne will make us all rich, Love'. Who this new Counter-Reformation monarch might be is not clear. It is also totally unclear how Catholic rule will somehow lead to increased profits for actors and playwrights. But facts and reality are not important here. This play is deliberately silly. The story is silly; the characters are silly; and the conspiracies make no real sense. Ultimately, though, the largely ahistorical Shakespeare constructed in this radio play is no more or less credible than the bad-breathed, philandering Shakespeare we see in the *Doctor Who* story, 'The Shakespeare Code', the intellectually confident but prickly Shakespeare in the sitcom, *Upstart Crow*, the measured, wise, retired Shakespeare in Branagh's film, *All is True* or the grieving celebrity Shakespeare seen at the climax of Maggie O'Farrell's novel,

Hamnet. In other words, Scolding's twenty-first century Shakespeare is no more or less fantastical than any other twenty-first century fictional depiction of Shakespeare as a character. We don't know the real Shakespeare but we'll perennially have fun imagining sober or outlandish fantasies about him.