

# Waves and Wills: Van Thiessen's *Shakespeare's Will*

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## Abstract

Canadian playwright Vern Thiessen's *Shakespeare's Will*, a one-woman play, presents William Shakespeare through reminiscences of Anne Hathaway, his wife. Thiessen explores the union between the two as a complex, and not entirely fulfilling, relationship in which Shakespeare reneges on vows that he and Anne made privately to each other to accommodate desires that could not be contained within the terms of conventional marriage. The play makes a case for broadening the terms of marriage to accommodate a greater range of diverse desires or "wills." This broadening of perspective is consistent with the ethos of contemporary Canada, where, as the result of new human rights legislation, legal definitions of marriage have become more inclusive in the past twenty-five years. The essay thus argues for understanding the play within the larger context of a major shift in Canada's social and legal dynamics.

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## Acoustic Chiaroscuro

*Shakespeare's Will*, by Edmonton-based playwright Vern Thiessen, is a solo-show for a female actor who portrays Anne Hathaway, the wife of William Shakespeare. The play opens with Anne<sup>1</sup> returning from her husband's funeral, in receipt of his will, from which the play gains one meaning of its title. The death of Shakespeare is the occasion for Hathaway to remember her relationship with her husband, and so the play becomes an adaptation of Shakespeare, not in the conventional sense of referring to his plays in the making of new ones, but of constructing a portrait of the playwright through the imagined memories and musings of his wife. Given that relatively little is known of Shakespeare's family life, save for the details recorded in parish registers and the infamous will, Thiessen's depiction of the relationship between the playwright and his wife of necessity is speculative, signaled through Hathaway's reminiscences, which are offered through a poetic monologue that is fragmentary, and richly allusive, with the transitions punctuated by movement accompanied by sound. Because the portrait of Shakespeare emerges through Hathaway's reminiscences, two subjects are in play: Hathaway, and through her, Shakespeare. Writing these two subjects involves techniques akin to those of a painter employing *chiaroscuro*,

in which the interplay of light and dark make visible some aspects of the subject while others are consigned to shadows, barely visible. Despite the title of the play, which implies that Shakespeare is central, he is the figure in the shadows. The play addresses the long-standing historical impulse to forge a complete, authentic "portrait" of Shakespeare, whether through conventional biography or through painting — but it does so by consigning Shakespeare to a space of absence.

The impulse to create a biography for Shakespeare, in spite of the scant documentation upon which such a project might credibly be built, is long-standing. Undergirding projects associated with reconstructing Shakespeare is an investment in Shakespeare as the putative zenith of writing in English. As such, the project of forging an image of Shakespeare the man, whether in words or through painting, is one of bringing him into the "light" so that the human figure who penned the plays and poetry can be "seen." Underlying such projects is the desire — if you like, the "will" — to forge a stable image of Shakespeare that begs the question: Why the need to bring Shakespeare from the shadows into the light?

Terrence Hawkes, in his essay, "Swisser Swatter," offers some clues to the investment in creating a stable portrait of Shakespeare. In his discussion of the writing of Shakespeare's biography in the influential series *English Men of Letters*, Hawkes notes that by the time the biography was commissioned in 1903, the task was daunting because Shakespeare "for over a hundred years, had been growing to the stature of a cultural superman" (1985, 32). Hawkes argues that Shakespeare's status was the effect of pressures generated on English society, particularly those of the second Reform Bill of 1867, which had extended the franchise (30). In the face of the extension of the right to vote to all male householders, the increasingly dominant upper echelons of the middle class wanted a population worthy of enfranchisement and so, their newly acquired formal participation in the governance of England. Key to this project was education, and particularly, reading; commensurately, literature attained cultural currency as a tool in the education of citizens who exemplified Englishness (30).

The biography of Shakespeare in the *English Men of Letters* represents, as Hawkes avers, the consolidation of a number of ideological forces. Shakespeare's biography was written by Walter Raleigh, who during the period in which he was writing the volume, was appointed as Oxford's first chair of English literature (Hawkes 1985, 32). Raleigh, in less than five years after the biography appeared in 1907, was knighted for his achievements, including his account of the life of Shakespeare, which rehearsed the dominant cultural sense of Shakespeare as a writer whose work was best appreciated when read rather than performed, as if theatrical performance were a supplement that denigrated the written word (33). Raleigh's Shakespeare was robustly English, as Hawkes notes, citing a passage from the biography in which the Bard's mental processes are

described as involving "the thick-coming thoughts and fancies shaping themselves, under the stress of the central will, into a thing of life" (quoted in Hawkes 1985, 35). Hawkes ably demonstrates that Raleigh's biography of Shakespeare is shaped by an ideology manifested as the cultural desire for an iconic figure — "a superman" — who consolidates the values of Edwardian Englishness that were losing currency in the face of the decline of England as an imperial force.

Projects such as Raleigh's purport to present the "true" Shakespeare, as if he can be really known. Their terms of reference largely involve treating the medium purporting to represent Shakespeare — whether words or painting — as if it were a transparent conduit for the "real" Shakespeare. Following the logic of contemporary theory, no medium is ever transparent, and the exact correspondence between a subject and its representation is fraught and full of ambiguity. Rather, media circulate around the inevitable displacements associated with representation, which, in the case of language and textuality, hinge on metaphor and metonymy, tropological systems of exchange and substitution.

Thiessen consciously exploits the mediation of his theatrical medium — the "languages" of the stages that include not only spoken words, but also the body of the actor producing those words as it moves through the space of performance. *Shakespeare's Will* is written in poetry. The connotative qualities of poetry serve to emphasize a fundamental property of language: the unstable relation between the sign and what it represents. For example, "will" takes on multiple meanings in the play, including the literal notion of a "will" as a legal document, "Will" as a contraction of the playwright's first name, and "will" as Shakespeare's "will" to have a life spent in London, largely away from his wife and their three children — Susanna and the twins, Hamnet and Judith. The will of Shakespeare to live independently from his wife and children and to forge a theatrical career in London suggests another meaning of "will" that is related to independence. Thiessen represents Shakespeare and his wife as sharing a bond in which each respects the other's need for sexual independence — that is, for the expression of erotic "will" — outside the terms of a monogamous marriage. This mutual "will" frees Shakespeare to self-fashion "Will" in London, at his will.

The mutability of "will," as represented by Thiessen, occurs within the context of water tropes, and the necessity of water to different forms of life. Water takes on multiple, interrelated forms in the play: as rain, as water used domestically, and as the sea, all tropes associated with the symbolic logic of the play. The play opens with following stage directions:

*Rain.*

*She moves slowly through it.*

*She enters her house.*

*She stares at her room.*

*She lights a lamp.*

*She removes her mourning attire.*

*She sits.*

*She washes off her makeup.*

*She opens the will.*

*She stares at it without reading.*

*She is drowning in words.* (Thiessen 2002, 3)

Notable in the stage directions, as cues for the practitioners to translate — or adapt — for the audience, is Hathaway moving "through" the rain. The use of rain creates an ambience, that of an overcast day that cues the designers around light and sound, presuming an affective response in the audience. Against the visual and design cues offered initially are cues to the actor who moves "slowly through it" and lights a lamp, her practical gesture of addressing the darkness brought by a rainy day (3). Following this simple act, the actor removes the character's makeup, presumably by using water, and so removes not only the "public" face that the character offers, but also her makeup, the tool of performing actors. Hence, both actor and character are laid "bare."

For an audience, that much — though subtly offered by Thiessen — is readable within the opening moments of the play, before a word has been uttered. Thiessen sets up tensions between the natural and the social, and between the social and the private, that open a space for reception by the audience of the first line of the play: "I long for the sea" (Thiessen 2002, 3). In the published text, the ascription of these words is to the character named "Anne" who, in the stage directions that precede them, has been identified only as "she," establishing for the practitioners staging the play a tension between the anonymity of the pronoun "she" and the naming of the character by her first name, her intimate name, "Anne." For practitioners, this shift should be read as significant, as it should for students reading the published text: Thiessen's use of "she" signals that an anonymous female character, unnamed, arrives on the stage, moves through the natural element of rain and its accompanying dreariness. "She" executes a set of actions that culminate in her speaking. It is only with the act of speaking that she is named as "Anne." In denoting the character who speaks as "Anne," and not "Anne Hathaway," or "Shakespeare's Wife," Thiessen depicts her as though she were a woman with whom he is familiar rather than a re-creation of a historical person. Given that little is known about Anne Hathaway, the historical figure, Thiessen's re-creation of her is in fact a staging of his familiarity with her as a construct of his imagination.

### Doubleness and Sexuality

The constructed terms of theatrical representation, though obvious, warrant mention. Theatrical performance hinges on "doubleness": The actor plays a character; the space in which performance occurs is an actual theatrical space and is transformed through elements of design into the world in which the performance is set. Theatrical performance has duration within actual time, which frequently has no correspondence to the time frame of the piece: for example, Thiessen's prefatory notes to *Shakespeare's Will* indicate that it "runs approximately one hour and thirty five minutes without intermission" but is set in "Anne's room, her imagination, her memory, her dreams, and the sea," which conflates an imagined setting with actual temporality (Thiessen 2002, 2).

The terms of theatrical performance are significant because the script indicates Thiessen's awareness of them in relation to his dramaturgical project. Specifically, the "doubleness" that is a defining characteristic of theater is embodied in the "she" who becomes "Anne." The actor enters the space as an actor, executes liminal actions in a performance space that is merely a stage and not, initially, a specific setting, as the actor who, through action, is "becoming" the character. Only through speaking does she fully become the character who warrants being named. This transition from the liminality of actor and character, as offered by the stage directions, is a cue for the practitioners, as is Thiessen's conflation of time with space through his placement of the action in an actual space — Anne's room. But that "space" also exists in memory and so carries resonances of temporality: Memory involves the remembering and, crucially, misremembering of the past. In a sequence that moves from an actual space — "Anne's room" — to imagination, then to memory with its implications of temporality, then to dreams, and back to the actual, "the sea," Thiessen not only conflates time and space, but through "imagination" and "dreams," also suggests that these categories labile and fluid. Fact and fiction are not discrete, antithetical categories, but flow into one another. Thiessen's dramatic strategy has implications beyond his own project because it implies that all portraits of historical figures, including those of Shakespeare, circulate within an economy of representation that is informed by imagination, dreams, and fact.

Thiessen, having cued the practitioners to the terms of his project through his prefatory notes and initial stage directions, lets the audience into the terms of his project through Anne's opening words: "I long for the sea . . ." (Thiessen 2002, 3). She longs — desires, as if expressing a modality of "will" — for the sea with its waves, its movement, and fluidity. Thiessen's "Anne" is a vibrant woman who enjoys her own eroticism and so refuses to be contained by the social codes of "appropriate" femininity. In Shakespeare, whom she meets at the fair as they watch a troupe of actors from the "city," she finds a partner who understands and accepts her personal need to live outside terms of social propriety because he shares that need. After they have sex, Anne presumes that the encounter was Bill's first with a woman:

Your hands, shaking  
 never having been  
 had  
 not by a woman at least  
 not by an older woman  
 at least. (8)

Her comments open the possibility that Bill has had other sexual encounters with men, which she accepts with the ease of knowing that in Bill, she has found a partner whose sexual inclinations are fluid, as are hers. She, the older and more sexually experienced of the two, recalls asking Bill if he is attracted to men: "Do you . . . I say / . . . do you . . . / What. / I don't know . . . like boys?" (10). After a long pause, Anne remembers that Bill tells her that he doesn't know (10). Her response is to laugh, which she recalls hurts her lover (10). She laughs at his discomfort with the fluidity of his erotic inclination, which lies outside social norms, and not at its more specific objects of desire, men. As she assures him, Anne is also attracted to men and has no interest in monogamy because her erotic constitution is outside the terms of the socially acceptable.

Anne has told Bill, in the initial aftermath of having had sex with him, "You know, I say / I don't want to marry. / Not you, not anyone" (Thiessen 2002, 9). Through this, and the subsequent post-coital exchange between Anne and Bill, Thiessen represents each of them as eschewing convention as a private, pleasure-driven choice, rather than as a mode of social dissent. Anne finds herself missing menses, and so, pregnant, tells her lover, whose response is delight at the impending birth of a child. Bill suggests that they marry; but Anne's father is displeased with the prospect of his daughter marrying a younger man, a Catholic whose family is not held in high regard (12).

The couple then marries, taking their vows publicly in a service officiated by a priest. Thiessen represents the service as a shambles: Anne, suffering from morning sickness, retches twice on her way to the wedding; the service, slated for 11:00 am, does not happen until 2:00 pm, when Bill arrives; he is too poor to give her a ring; and the sobriety of the officiating priest is dubious (Thiessen 2002, 13-14). While the terms of the official ceremony do not auger well for the success of the union, the public taking of vows has been preceded, on the day that Anne and Bill decide to marry, by the couple making vows to each other in private:

We make a vow:  
 to wed yes  
 but to live  
 our own lives.

To treat each other well  
but to allow for our separate desires.  
To have our secrets  
but to protect  
what we each  
hold most dear.  
It will be  
our own kind of marriage. (12)

These vows, made with one another as witnesses, are ones that the couple seems to uphold, although by the end of *Shakespeare's Will*, Thiessen suggests that Bill only seemingly keeps his private vows to Anne. In the early stages of the play, Thiessen nevertheless signals that from its beginning, the public terms of the marriage are not its actual terms, which are private between Anne and Bill. Marriage presents each with a veneer of nominal conformity to codes of social respectability. In a relationship that has little in terms of public record, Thiessen imagines that the dynamic between husband and wife is consigned to deep shadow, coming to the imagining of the playwright through the memories he ascribes to Hathaway. Thus, the marriage and its terms are not represented by Thiessen as a historical reconstruction, but as conjecture, his imaginative rendering.

Thiessen, as if to emphasize that history always entails imagination, continually employs the motif of the sea as symbolic of flux. For Anne, the sea is a site of solace, particularly against death brought by the plague because, when she was eight, her mother had contracted the disease and died. Against the terminal illness of the mother, Anne's father consoles his children with tales of the sea: "And he settles us in / by the fire, and tells us stories / of the sea" (Thiessen 2002, 46). In his stories, the father — facing the death of his wife and the mother of his children — renders the sea as a character, "proud and boastful," "angry and loud" (47). The sea is a force, dynamic and changing, and in its transformations the sea affirms life.

Anne confirms her commitment to the vows that she and Bill made by accepting his need to have the freedom to go to London, pursue his career, and take on lovers. She accepts his increasingly intermittent returns home, and commensurately, the increasingly longer lapses in their written communication, or so Thiessen imagines. But the silence gnaws: "I become a beggar for news / asking anyone who comes from the city: / Do you have any word from my husband?" (Thiessen 2002, 39). She takes care of the three children in a house on the edge of town, bought with the profits from Shakespeare's plays. With the two servants, Nelly and Brundage, they forge a loving, if socially unconventional, family: Nelly and Brundage live as if they are married,

but are not; nor Anne speculates, are they sexually involved, though they love each other. She muses,

Never slept in the same bed  
 . . . I don't think?  
 Perhaps  
 like us  
 they have made their own vows. (34)

After a pause, indicated in the stage directions as if to punctuate her realization, "We have become a kind of family: / I and the children and Nelly and Brundage" (34). The location of the house, at the edge of town and so presumably largely without the prying surveillance of the townspeople, allows Anne to act on her need for sexual freedom by taking many men as lovers (35-38). Though the terms of Anne's life are ones that Thiessen presents as largely suiting her and are in keeping with the reciprocal vows made by her and Bill, they are not entirely equitable, given that she bears sole responsibility for raising the children.

When the twins are eleven, the plague again rages. Hamnet — "Harry" — finds a rat that has been killed by one of the family's cats. He takes a pocket knife, one left by his father, and dissects the rat (Thiessen 2002, 50). The moment is innocuous and horrifying, not just because Harry, a child, acts impulsively to sate his curiosity without awareness of the deadly risk that his actions entail, but because he is using the knife of his father, who is too removed from his son and his curiosity to recognize the hazards such tools pose when in the hands of a child. The mother, seeing the child at risk, responds quickly, chastising her son and rinsing his hands in lye "to let him know" that she "is serious" about the risks of his actions (50).

Anne, her life marked by her mother's death, is seized by the terror that one of her children has contracted the plague. Feeling alone because Bill is in London, which has also been ravaged by the plague, and with no news of her husband's fate, she prepares her family — including Brundage and Nelly — to make a trip to the sea. The children are frightened by the intensity of their mother's response to the plague. They have heard rumors of its spread through London and fearfully ask their mother if their father is dead. She assures them that he is not, but in reality she has no such knowledge, until they are leaving and a brief letter arrives:

Dearest Anne:  
 Don't worry.  
 I am fine.  
 Do what you must.



## Much Love

Bill. (Thiessen 2002, 53)

While Anne is relieved, the terms of the letter are shocking given her desperation to ensure her children's safety.

When they arrive at the sea, Judith turns to her mother and asks, "What does Father look like?" (Thiessen 2002, 57). Susanna responds, "Like his portrait!" (57). But of the various portraits, which one? There are several prominent images of Shakespeare — the Chandos, the Droeshout, the Sanders — as well as various sculptural renderings. The accuracy of any of these portraits is moot, since that question perhaps diverts attention from another: Why is there the need to have a stable image of Shakespeare? The desire of the children to have an image of their absent father is understandable, and through it, Thiessen frames the cultural significance of Shakespeare as the "father" of English literature whose "shadow" casts, borrowing from Harold Bloom, an "anxiety of influence" (Bloom 1974). Moreover, Thiessen also points to the commensurate need to respond to the legacy of the father through the dual gesture of adaptation, which sets homage against a bid for independence through the writing of a work that is an "off-spring," like but unlike the works of the literary forefather.

Anne, with her children, creates a portrait of Bill using materials that the family finds by the sea:

His face is as shiny as the moss there on the hill.  
And they all grab moss to create an outline of your face.

His eyes are like two shiny stones on the beach.  
Harry carefully chooses two from the beach  
and Susanna places them down.

His hair — what's left of it —  
(they laugh again)

Is like the straggly seaweed there. (Thiessen 2002, 57)

Once the portrait is finished, mother and children sit on their haunches, admiring their creation until the tide washes the father's "smile out to sea" (58). The moment poignantly rehearses the ephemeral, fleeting presence of Shakespeare in the lives of his wife and children. These fleeting presences are the terms by which Shakespeare, the man, is known to any of us — an image we fashion through the materials available to meet our need to know him. While the existing images

of Shakespeare may have greater material permanence than did the imagined portrait created by his wife and children in *Shakespeare's Will*, those portraits are no less the effect of desire to know an unknowable than is the one created on the imaginary beach in Thiessen's play.

By not trying to forge a rendering that corresponds to assumptions about the historic figure, Thiessen envisions a "Shakespeare" who is mediated by the theatrical conceit embedded in the performance of Hathaway's recollections — hence, a Shakespeare presented, meta-ironically, within the terms of theatrical performance, which is always ephemeral, dissolving at the play's end as surely as the portrait by mother and children is effaced by the sea. Perhaps most obviously, by having Hathaway give voice to her memory of Shakespeare, Thiessen gives this woman, consigned to the margins of history as Shakespeare's wife, a dignified presence that has some relation to Virginia Woolf's conjecture about Shakespeare's sister in *A Room of One's Own*. Woolf, in that essay, champions women who want to work as writers and considers the material conditions that prevent them from realizing their creativity; or, if against all odds, they do, the conditions of production and reception that prevent recognition of their "genius." Historically, culture has been understood to have been created by men. And Thiessen, ironically in his position of male playwright re-imagining another male playwright as imagined through the voice of a female character he has also created, problematizes this ideological configuration.

Woolf muses that if Shakespeare had a sister, "Judith," equally as talented as her brother and as keen to realize his gifts as a practitioner, what might her fate have been? Woolf imagines that "Judith" might have made her way to London and found her entry to realize her talent by appealing to an actor-manager named "Nick Greene," who

took pity on her; she found herself with a child by that gentleman and so — who shall measure the heat and violence of the poet's heart when caught and tangled in a woman's body? — killed herself one's winter's night and lies buried at some cross-roads where the omnibuses now stop outside the Elephant and Castle. (Woolf 2001, 58)

While Thiessen shares Woolf's concern with the conditions that have prevented women from being recognized for their achievements, he is arguing the case of a woman who was extraordinary, as a *person* and not as an artist — although Thiessen's depiction of Anne forging a portrait of her husband through "found" materials suggests that she does have latent artistic abilities. The point that Thiessen and Woolf each makes is that historically, the social construction of femininity is such that women's bodies, circumscribed by their sexuality and reproductive capacity, have determined their fates. Woolf is willing to speculate on the inauspicious terms of the grave of Judith — unmarked, with the technology and so, purported social "advancement" that technology

popularly is seen to represent, rumbling over this "lost" woman. She is less willing to offer cues about the meaning of the pregnancy for the fictive sister of Shakespeare. Does she kill herself because she cannot imagine bearing a child conceived outside wedlock, and perhaps without the possibility of her child being legitimized socially through marriage? Does she imagine that her family will ostracize her for being sexually active before marriage, even though her brother's wife, in Woolf's words, "bore him a child rather quicker than was right"? (47). Or, does the responsibility of motherhood generate for "Judith" an impossible choice between her raising a child and her creative aspirations, as if the two roles were without the possibility of reconciliation?

Thiessen's Anne faces no anxiety about motherhood nor, initially, about the terms of her relationship with her children's father, and how the differing needs of the parents will affect their offspring. By the end of *Shakespeare's Will*, the shambles of the wedding ceremony — Anne retching with morning sickness, Bill, late as if casual about the wedding, the drunken priest — become an eerie harbinger of the terms of the relationship. Despite the vows, Shakespeare, in the play, capitulates to the dominant terms of masculinity that license him to do as he "will." Anne, in contrast, never waivers from her vows, despite what they cost her. Thiessen imagines that the trip to the seashore and Anne's attempt to protect her children, particularly "Harry," who has handled an infected rat, goes horrifically wrong. "Harry," while playing by the sea with the same abandon and lack of awareness of risk that allowed him to pick up the rat, is carried out to sea by a wave. Watching her son swept out to sea, Anne tears at her own clothing, while looking for Brundage, the servant consigned in the hybrid family to the role of "father" in the absence of Bill. Her daughters plead with their mother not to try and save Harry because in so doing she will surely die and leave them (Thiessen 2002, 68-69). Anne's marriage has come to the impossible moment where there are no real choices, but only the horizon of loss— almost certainly of Harry and probably of her own life should she try to save him, which would in turn leave her daughters bereft. This horizon of loss has an actual symbolic geography, occurring at the limits of the sea and stretching to the perceived infinity of sea and sky. The sea-water, which Anne equates with life, with transformation and possibility, offers no solace in the death of her son by drowning.

Against the loss that now marks Anne's life, there is a flicker of hope when Bill finally comes home, at some point after the death of their son. He and Anne embrace and kiss, momentarily rekindling their initial attraction at the fair (Thiessen 2002, 61). The moment is fleeting. Recalls Anne, "You are / sad / awkward / out of place" (61-62). Having left his life in London and the theater, Bill is adrift. Unlike the characters of some of his plays, Bill's metaphoric drifting never results in his landing on the "shore" of family life, transforming himself from the independent man of the theater into a man living with his family. He eventually becomes ill, feverish. Thiessen's

Anne cares for her ailing husband, lying beside him one night to give him comfort. She drifts off to sleep and awakes to find, as she recalls, that "the night has swept you away," as if the night has rhythms akin to those of the sea that took the life of their son (64).

Bill is buried. Anne receives his will, which she reluctantly reads. Much of the estate goes to Susanna and, upon her death, "to the first sone of her body lawfully issuing, and to the heirs . . . / male . . . / of her body"; rings are left to Shakespeare's friends; the house is bequeathed by Shakespeare to his sister, Joan; to Anne, Shakespeare leaves his "second best bed" (Thiessen 2002, 67). These are the actual terms of Shakespeare's will, the significance of which remains opaque to historians, who, as Thiessen notes in a postscript, debate whether or not the will slights Anne (73-74). Certainly, Thiessen is clear about his interpretation of the will through his adaptation of the prose of the will into a prose poem. The line break and ellipsis, between "heirs" and "male," with "male" as the sole word of a single line gives particular emphasis to the terms of Shakespeare's bequest to his elder daughter, suggesting that the force of the bequest is intended to punish Anne for Harry's death, as if that death were the consequence of Anne's negligence. Given the terms under which Thiessen presents Harry's death, his dramaturgical perspective is clear; the death was an accident, and if one parent should be held culpable, it is not Anne, but William, who abrogated his responsibilities as a husband and father to pursue his will to live independently, to realize his aspirations — both personal and professional — and so, to have the freedom to self-fashion his "Will."

Thiessen is not interested in whether Shakespeare's chosen life of independence led to surpassing artistic achievement as a playwright and poet. The terms of the play suggest that this achievement is a given. What interests Thiessen more are the terms of the private vows that Anne and Bill made to each other and how these vows represent the possibility of forging new terms for configuring a family. Thiessen, through *Shakespeare's Will*, then, offers a discreetly poignant feminist work that, without being dogmatic, is nevertheless insistent in its championing of women. Through dramaturgical *chiaroscuro*, he sheds "light" on Anne Hathaway as a woman whose strength stems from self-knowledge. While her commitment to the private vows she and Bill made allows him the freedom to realize his will, and so to go to London and work in the theater, they also allow Anne to realize her own will and live life on her own terms. But the social construction of masculinity and femininity does not allow easily for equality between the two genders, whatever the private will of individuals, because understandings of femininity circulate around the female body and its reproductive capacity. Having given birth to children, Anne is defined by her role and responsibilities as mother, whereas Bill is estranged from his fatherhood, unwittingly working toward his canonization as the "father" of English literature.

Thiessen presents this estrangement as a fundamental slippage by Bill from the terms of his private vows. This slippage is facilitated by the dominant understandings of masculinity and femininity that complacently accept a man's prerogative to enjoy such freedoms because siring a child does not define him. Initially, Thiessen suggests that the private vows represent the possibility for two individuals to live as they "will," but Bill increasingly fails to honor the vows by assuming the privilege of freedom from his family without the commensurate responsibilities. The transforming possibility of the vows dissipates, and the cost is borne by Anne who, in the end, in Shakespeare's actual will, is left his "second best bed." It is Thiessen's focus on Anne and her wish for a marriage in which the desires of each partner, whether or not they conform to the conventional understanding of the roles for husbands and wives, are honored that marks the "Canadian-ness" of *Shakespeare's Will*.

### Conclusion: Canadian-ness

Both Anne and Bill have sexual desires that are at odds with the dominant cultural norms. Their desires — wills — cannot be met by adhering to the conventional terms of marriage and family and so, their recourse is to forge private vows. Thiessen alludes to Shakespeare having had homoerotic inclinations that were not served by the conventional terms of marriage. But perhaps more crucially, neither Anne nor Bill, in the play, is served by a conventionally monogamous union, as indeed were neither Brundbage nor Nelly, who wanted to marry, to be monogamous but apparently without engaging sexually with each other (Thiessen 2002, 34). Thiessen's representation of the bonds of affect that bind each of these couples, albeit problematically, speaks to contemporary Canada and the shifts in understanding around marriage. In fact, the play's politics and key adaptive gestures coincide with transformations in Canada around orthodoxies associated with gender roles and families.

Through the Canadian Charter of Rights and the challenges to it, as of June 2005 gay people were able to marry in Canada. Most Canadians accept this right; indeed, the acceptance of same-sex marriage, particularly among younger Canadians, has become a key element of Canada's national identity. Thiessen is not a polemical playwright, and while his plays have a politics, their politics are nuanced. In *Shakespeare's Will*, Thiessen begins and ends his play with the issue of the legal will of Shakespeare. In so doing, Thiessen reminds his audience that marriage is a legal, and therefore social, contract. The private vows between Anne and Bill have no legal force because there were no witnesses. The marriage, and its terms, in the end, amount to the will, and Anne being left her husband's "second best bed." The terms of the will, presented within the context of *Shakespeare's Will*, imply that societies need to change their understanding of marriage, as has

occurred in Canada, in a preliminary way, through the legal challenges facilitated by the Charter of Rights. Such challenges have not created full equality, but in the recognition of the rights of same-sex partners and reconfiguration of the understanding of "family," have begun a crucial process of broadly based social acceptance of the kind that Thiessen persuasively argues for in *Shakespeare's Will*.

Another indication of *Shakespeare's Will's* Canadianness is Thiessen's refusal to create a portrait of the Bard and so, his refusal to give Shakespeare "center stage." Canadian theater has long been dominated by the two festivals which are dedicated, at least nominally, to the works of two British playwrights: the Shaw Festival, which features the work of George Bernard Shaw and his contemporaries; and the Stratford Festival of Canada, which was founded to reproduce the work of Shakespeare. These two large festivals (with their numerous stages, on which plays are simultaneously mounted during seasons that run from the late spring into the fall) speak to the history of theater in English Canada and the degree to which it has struggled with its place in a culture that has been dominated by an attitude of obsequiousness to its British forebears. In consigning Shakespeare to the shadows in *Shakespeare's Will* and focusing on Hathaway, Thiessen suggests that there is no need for Canadian theater practitioners — or anyone else — to attend slavishly to the cultural forefathers: there are other voices that deserve to be heard, such as those of contemporary Canadians writing for the theater. Ironically, Stratford's 2007 season featured a production of *Shakespeare's Will*, which was produced in the smallest of the Festival's four theater spaces, the Studio — suggesting that the struggle between canonical orthodoxy and the kinds of new "Canadian" imaginings that are given voice in Thiessen's work is far from over.

### Notes

1. In keeping with Thiessen's naming of characters in *Shakespeare's Will*, Anne Hathaway is referred to as "Anne" and William Shakespeare, as "Bill" in discussions of the play.

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