

William Shakespeare and Elizabeth I: The Special Relationship?

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One of the most famous scenes from *Shakespeare in Love* (1998) is the dramatic reveal near the end of the film that Queen Elizabeth I had secretly been in the audience at the Globe watching the premiere of Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*. This event is of course entirely fictitious, but it is not an unusual part of cinematic and televisual depictions of the life and work of Shakespeare. At the core of this paper is the question: why do modern adaptations of Shakespeare depict him as having a close, personal friendship with Elizabeth I? Certainly, Elizabeth saw some of Shakespeare's plays when they were performed at Court—notably *The Merry Wives of Windsor* and *Love's Labour's Lost*—but it was under her successor, James VI & I, that Shakespeare achieved his greatest successes. Likewise, Elizabeth and Shakespeare would have known of each other, but only in a traditional sense (one knows who the monarch is) and in a professional sense (Elizabeth would have been aware—even vaguely—of who the actors performing at court were). This paper analyses the depiction of the fictitious relationship between Elizabeth and Shakespeare in *Upstart Crow* (2016-present) to argue that this fictional friendship is used to 'soften' Elizabeth—that is, to make England's (in)famous Virgin Queen more 'human' and less bizarre, especially in her old age—and because Shakespeare is intrinsically associated with the Elizabethan period, audiences believe he 'must' have enjoyed Elizabeth's patronage. In analysing an adaptation that was produced in the context of the celebrations of the 400th anniversary of Shakespeare's death, this paper seeks to understand why audiences are so eager to see these two important figures of the English past as friends.