

DOI: 10.32782/2225-479X-2023-36-37-8

УДК: 791.221.27

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3973-0620>

Livingstone David
(*Olomouc, Czech Republic*)

Festive Comedy Galore in Ben Elton's Shakespearean BBC Sitcom *Upstart Crow*

Лівінгстон Девід. Розмаїття святкових комедій у шекспірівському ситкомі Бена Елтона «Ворон-вискочень» на BBC.

Ця стаття присвячена темі святкової комедії, якою вона постає в сучасному телесеріалі BBC «Ворон-вискочень». Автор також згадує театральну п'єсу «Ворон-вискочень» 2020 року. Пори не дуже шанобливе ставлення до вихідного матеріалу (життя та творчість Шекспіра), серіал відтворює дух шекспірівських п'єс та його часу.

Ключові слова: телесеріал «Ворон-вискочень», Бен Елтон, Девід Мітчел, Шекспір, шекспірівська комедія, святкова комедія.

This paper will focus on the recent television series *Upstart Crow* written by Ben Elton and starring David Mitchell. There have been 21 episodes thus far spanning three series and including three Christmas specials. There has also been a recent theatrical play, *The Upstart Crow*, with an added definite article, which had a limited run unfortunately due to the Covid crisis. Each of the episodes takes its title and draws inspiration from either one or more of the plays or the sonnets. The festive comedies are referenced repeatedly, in particular *Twelfth Night* and *As You Like It* and in one episode even *Love's Labour's Lost*. The current paper will focus on certain episodes and the recent play which draw inspiration from the festive comedies and often parody them.

The episodes of *Upstart Crow* are actually structured along the lines of romantic comedies. Robert Greene,¹ where of course

¹ Robert Greene (1558–1592) was a playwright and one of the so-called University Wits. He is mostly remembered at present for his petty attack on Shakespeare in the tract *Greenes, Groatsworth of Witte, Bought with a Million of Repentance* from 1592 which includes his resentful

III. Шекспірівський дискурс

the title comes from, is Master of the Revels and almost always plays the role of the butt, the kill-joy, scheming to bring Shakespeare to his knees. Christopher Marlowe² acts the fool much of the time, being a man about town who Shakespeare generously allows to take credit for some of his plays, specifically *The Jew of Malta* in episode three. Both John Shakespeare and Ned Bottom (Shakespeare's London servant) function as rustic clowns of sorts. The series mostly takes place in two locales, Shakespeare's two homes in London and Stratford, with the trips back and forth providing an ongoing gag involving a critique of the inefficient British transport system. This movement from the city to the country and back again several times is reminiscent of what Northrop Frye calls "the drama of the green world",³ with the juxtaposition between the rural and urban settings. *Upstart Crow*, like the festive comedies, almost always concludes with a celebration of marriage and in contrast to most potboiler treatments of Shakespeare's love life, the Bard does have a wandering eye, but inevitably fails and in the end seems most at ease with Anne back at home. The episodes almost always conclude with husband and wife sitting at the fireside puffing on pipes, often with Anne providing common sense and country wisdom to her genius, head-in-the-clouds, husband. There is usually a happy ending with resolution or what C. L. Barber famously calls "through release to clarification".⁴ There is also a great deal of celebration of festivity of various kinds, particularly in the Christmas specials, with the writer Ben Elton often parodying the popular image of English Renaissance 'roistering'.⁵ Finally, another one of the ongoing themes in the television series is the desire on the part of Kate, the daughter of Shakespeare's landlord in London, to act in the theatre. Her

statement about his younger, more successful colleague: "... an upstart crow, beautified with our feathers." The characterization of him in the tv series is, of course, entirely fictional.

² Christopher Marlowe (1564–193) was a highly successful playwright whose life was tragically cut short at the age of thirty-nine. Marlowe is occasionally put forward as being the true author of Shakespeare's plays, given his higher social standing and university education. This makes the depiction of him in *Upstart Crow* all the more delightful, as he is the dunce for a change.

³ Frye N. *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays*, Princeton : Princeton University Press, 1957. P. 196.

⁴ Barber C. L. *Shakespeare's Festive Comedy: A Study of Dramatic Forms and their Relation to Social Custom*, Princeton : Princeton University Press, 1959. P. 17.

⁵ In episode 13, the Christmas special, *A Christmas Crow*, Shakespeare invites Marlowe, Kate, Bottom and Greene back to Stratford where they play various games such as Snuffle the Truffle, Snaffle the Apple, Make Merry with the Berry, all of which seem to boil down to the same thing.

ambitions are, not surprisingly, repeatedly discouraged and mocked by not only Shakespeare, but by the trio of actors at the Red Lion Theatre, in particular Henry Condell who specialises in cross-dressed female roles and whose livelihood would be threatened by actual women taking the female roles.

There are obvious parallels between the television series and earlier literary treatments of Shakespeare as a literary character. G. B. Shaw, for example, in his play *The Dark Lady of the Sonnets* brings up many of the same objections to the misogynist and downright offensive language of sonnet 130, which is lampooned with great gusto in episode four. Caryl Brahms and S. J. Simon's delightful novel *No Bed For Bacon* manifests much of the same cross-dressing mishaps as well as the overall tone.⁶ Refreshingly, in contrast to most other treatments in the past,⁷ Shakespeare regularly visits his family in Stratford and has a healthy marriage with Anne. This is in stark contrast to *Shakespeare in Love*, for example, where Anne is only mentioned as having been a fateful mistake of his youth when Shakespeare tries to reconcile with his love interest Viola.

Episode one, *Star Crossed Lovers*, establishes the blueprint for Kate's role in the series when she expresses admiration for Shakespeare's new play and argues she would be ideal for the part of Juliet. "It just seems so unfair that the theatre employs men to perform female roles when I, a real woman, am ready and eager." Shakespeare dismisses the idea out of hand, this having obviously been a bone of contention for a while now. "Oh, Kate, don't go there. Lady-acting is illegal. Beside which, girls can't act. Just as they cannot practise law, cure the sick, handle financial matters or stand for any office." Without being heavy-handed or preachy in its feminist message, the series hammers the point home with much humour.

The Apparel Proclaims the Man, episode three, includes Robert Greene tricking Shakespeare into wearing the Malvolio outfit from *Twelfth Night* to Southampton's 'saucy prancings'

⁶ For more on this topic, see David Livingstone *In Our Own Image Fictional Representations of William Shakespeare*, (Olomouc: Palacký University, 2019).

⁷ Germaine Greer in *Shakespeare's Wife*, (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2007) has pointed out, amongst other things, the constant sexism and misogyny directed at Anne in depictions of Shakespeare's love life.

III. Шекспірівський дискурс

fashionable party. Shakespeare, always eager to ingratiate himself in the series with the ruling class, enlists Anne to make him suitable attire for the bash: “It seems, to fit the fashion, I come all attired in purple puffing pants, yellow tights and really stupid cross-garters”. This ends up being a trap laid by Greene to publicly humiliate his rival and thwart his success. Shakespeare is saved from infamy at the last minute by Marlowe, who dresses up in the same manner and therefore makes it ‘cool’. He is rewarded out of gratefulness with the manuscript of *The Jew of Malta* to pass off as Marlowe’s own, with this actually being appreciated by Kate, who is concerned about the racism and antisemitism of the play and the negative light it might throw on Shakespeare.

In the *Merchant of Venice* inspired episode six, *The Quality of Mercy*, Kate has a brief cross-dressing adventure where she manages to successfully pass herself off as a male until her own female concerns become evident when the men are designing a new theatre, the Globe. She cannot resist objecting to the limited number of toilets provided for the women in the audience, “And er numerous closeted stalls for the ladies. 20 or 30 I’d say, otherwise there’ll be a queue.” Burbage is taken aback, “The ladies? You think we should cover for them?”. Kate is on thin ice but continues, “Well of course yeah. While there be no ladies on stage, many do attend the play”. Burbage ends up, high-handedly, adding a bucket in a shed for the ladies, to Kate’s helpless horror. Her disguise completely falls apart when she pulls out a salad for lunch in contrast to the meaty, fattening dishes of all of the men. “Oh I’ve made a lovely little salad, which you’re all welcome to pick at. Just some fresh leaves and carrot goujons. Also some rose petals just for sense and colour, but you can eat them.” Although her male disguise fails to fool the theatre men, she does end up saving Shakespeare (Antonio) in Portia-like fashion (cross-dressed of course) from the clutches of the Shylockian Greene, who has had Shakespeare arrested, when she sees through the male disguise of the judge (who also brings a salad to work with her).

Although Episode ten, *Food of Love*, obviously takes its name from *Twelfth Night*, it only briefly makes reference to the plot of the comedy. Shakespeare has just completed *Titus*

Andronicus which has failed to impress. He is encouraged by Kate to take his work in a new direction:

You need to come up with a new art form which allows for such exuberant absurdity. Some extra element which takes us to a heightened world, where we can accept such joyful nonsense. A new style which defies dramatic logic and appeals directly to the senses, the emotions, the soul.

This is obviously a reference to the genre of the much reviled musical, but could also be applied loosely to the festive comedy.

Of greatest interest for the purposes of this essay is the first of the Christmas specials, episode 13 "*A Christmas Crow*", which focuses on the preparation of a new play *Eighth Night* for a private performance for the Queen. The episode opens in Stratford with the playwright's arrival during preparations for Christmas. Shakespeare disappoints his family by informing them that he has to return to London immediately, but for good reason. "I've had such success this year that the Queen has commissioned me to produce a play for her Christmas feasting. And I have just the thing – I'm going to use that new cross-dressing comedy I was telling you all about." Susanna, always ready to take her father down a peg, is suspicious, "Another cross-dressing comedy. I think you've gotta ask yourself why?!". Although young in age, she is wise in years, being very much aware of the sexual ambiguity generated by this gender-bender aspect. Shakespeare has also returned to pick up some money in order to buy an expensive present for the Queen. Anne assumes, however, that she will be the recipient. In typical kill-joy fashion, Greene steals the necklace hoping to humiliate Shakespeare in front of the Queen. Upon realising her husband will be caught empty-handed, however, Anne saves his neck by handing over the sonnet he had written for her earlier; she has overcome her initial disappointment, having expected something more garish and valuable. The Queen, played movingly and with great verve by Emma Thompson, is impressed.

The love contained within your verse is of a different order. It speaks not of duty, nor yet of fear. It is the love felt by one person for just one other, given freely and unselfishly. Such a love is not for me, for I am married to England. And though all the nation be my spouse. I

III. Шекспірівський дискурс

am ever the loneliest person in the realm. I thank you, sir for this little window into love.

This comic scene is quite moving and profound. Thompson manages to convey the distinct loneliness and isolation which the Queen might have experienced, without, however, overstepping the boundaries of the comedy television series. She is also impressed by Shakespeare's generosity of spirit when he makes use of his good graces with the Queen to have Marlowe released from the Tower, having been tricked by their nemesis Greene earlier. Back in Stratford, husband and wife discuss the turn of events and end with a blessing directed at the LGBT community.

Not sure the world's ready for a non-gender specific trans comedy yet.

It will be one day, doll.

You're just a bit ahead of your time, that's all.

Happy Christmas.

Happy Christmas.

Peace on earth and goodwill to all men.

And women.

Of course! And also, those who, like my Viola, aren't exactly sure.

This gentle and tender expression of tolerance is both moving and commendable. Whether or not Shakespeare was actually this progressive does not matter in the end. The fact that he created this ambiguity and presence with his gender-fluid characters is of interest here. Additionally, the scene manages to convey this without it feeling overly forced.

Episode 15, *Wild Laughter in the Throat of Death*, references the play *Love's Labour's Lost*. Marlowe receives a letter which he reads aloud while on a visit at Shakespeare's London digs:

This is interesting. It's from Robert Greene. He is organising an intellectual salon of London's foremost writers. They intend to retreat to the country for – get this – a whole year, forswearing all rumpy-pumpington and, instead, discussing Roman philosophy far from the distracting company of women.

Shakespeare, once again yearning for the acclamation of the establishment, perks up his ears: "A posh boys' literary retreat is just the place I need to come up with an idea for this comedy which eludes me." Kate, always the voice of reason, raises

a valid point: "But, Mr Shakespeare, a whole year forswearing rumpy-pumpington? Won't your wife object?" One of my personal favourite lines follows: "I don't think Anne will mind missing out on one bonk, Kate. She's ... She's not a sex maniac." Unlike many of the oversexed treatments of Shakespeare as a character in adaptations (*Shakespeare in Love*, amongst many others), Mitchell's Bard is refreshingly not particularly virile. Shakespeare, to his great humiliation, is not invited, as Greene is plotting along with Bacon and Oxford to begin to besmirch his reputation by murdering Marlowe and launching doubts concerning the authorship of Shakespeare's plays; authorship question finally solved.

Back in Stratford, Susanna encourages him to stand up for himself, employing the language of twenty-first century psychobabble: "You've got to use your anger, Dad, empower yourself. Write a comedy about a literary salon. Do a play about a bunch of stupid posh boys who are so up themselves they give up sex so they can study Roman philosophy." Shakespeare, always the avid cribber in the series, asks her for more and receives the rest of the plot to *Love's Labour's Lost* delivered to him on a plate. He asks her about the ending, inadvertently revealing his deceit, "How will you end it? I mean, how will I end it?" Susanna brings the play to its conclusion with great vim and verve: "I reckon, when all is revealed and the posh boys have learnt the lesson of their conceited ways, the hot girls bugger off and tell their humble suitors to wait a year before they can cop a bit of a feel-up." Although arguably sexist in toned, this does amusingly get to the heart of the plot of the play and wittily contrasts the earthy teenage lingo of Susanna with her father's literary pretentiousness.

Go On and I Will Follow, episode 19, takes its name from *As You Like It*, but primarily focuses on ridiculing entertainment awards shows such as the Oscars and the Emmys. The only interesting segment related to the theme of this paper is the acceptance speech by Condell, who plays the female roles, concerning unfair treatment of cross-dressed actors:

As an actor who plays female roles, I would like to accept this on behalf of all actors who play female roles. Their courage, their strength, their passion. We need more and better roles for actors who play

III. Шекспірівський дискурс

female roles. We're not just the totty. We are not just eccentric old ladies. We are strong, we are passionate, and we demand an equal voice in this industry. Be angry, be fierce. Dare to dream.

This is obviously parodying the over-the-top emotional speeches given at the Oscars and such by women and minorities. This speech did admittedly make me uncomfortable and Benjamin Broadribb has drawn my attention to how this might actually be a parody of the final speech in *Emilia*, the recent, critically acclaimed, play by Morgan Lloyd Malcolm about the poet Emilia Bassano, who has been one of the many candidates for the identity of Shakespeare's *Dark Lady*. I would personally choose to believe the best and would place the emphasis on how the speech once again underlines the complete absurdity of women not being allowed to play themselves in theatre in Elizabethan times. This is, incidentally, the only episode to end on a tragic note with Shakespeare arriving home only to hear of the death of their son Hamnet. There have been two more Christmas specials, but neither are of particular interest for the present purposes.

The Upstart Crow theatre play which debuted on 7 February 2020 at the Gielgud Theatre in London is of particular interest as it draws from a number of the plays, most notably *King Lear*, *Othello* and *Twelfth Night*. The decision to experiment with this new format is justified logically in a review of the play by the Czech Shakespeare scholar Filip Krajník, "The transition of *Upstart Crow* from the television screen to the theatre stage has proved to be a great idea for several reasons"⁸. The beginning of the play seemed to involve rehashing all the familiar motifs and gags from the series. James I is now on the throne, however, and Shakespeare is suffering from writer's block, this being, according to Kate, a result of unresolved trauma related to Hamnet's death. Burbage is insisting on the writing of a "sexually transgressive" play by Shakespeare. *The Upstart Crow* once again includes disguises with masks and cross-dressing and for good measure a bear, Mr. Whiskers, rescued from bear-baiting. The Malvolio cross-gartered trick is carried out on Dr. John Hall this time (Shakespeare's historical son-in-law), once again played with

⁸ Krajník F. "Zpupný krákal – Shakespeara pro naši dobu." (*Upstart Crow* – a Shakespeare for Our Time). *Theatralia*, Vol 23, 2/2020, 198–202.

much villainous glee by Mark Heap as the stick-in-the-mud. In the play, Kate finally gets the opportunity to act on stage, in the role of Desdemona after dressing up as a boy first.

There is a variation on Viola and Sebastian with two newcomers, the Egyptian twins, Desiree and Arragon who both end up dressing up as the opposite sex, resulting in much confusion and sexual ambiguity. Everything is smoothly resolved, however, at the end just as in the last act of *Twelfth Night*: “The big deal is Prince Dez, a genuine African prince. A black man pretending to be a white man pretending to be a black woman in order to be the first black man to play a leading role on the English stage.” This aptly reminds us how progressive Shakespeare was in anticipating highly topical issues concerning gender identity and sexuality. David Mitchell's Shakespeare brings the stage play to an end, summarising the continued relevance of both the plays and the genre of festive comedy: “Female writer, female actors, diverse actors, gender fluidity, and no animals were harmed in the making. Theatre has finally come of age and it's only 1605. Let us dance.”

Despite receiving mostly positive reviews, the use of blackface and problematic sexual politics has met with some criticism. Gemma Allred in her review points out the supposed sexism and racism and concludes that “Elton's jokes feel out of place, outdated and cheap”⁹. Gemma Whelan, seemingly aware of this possible criticism, whose character Kate is described aptly as “a feminist stooge” in another review by Nick Curtis¹⁰, defends the play in an interview.

The pure unadulterated silliness of it mixed with a lot of really clear current affairs or current issues like race and gender, fluidity and acceptance and diversity... And it's a very, may I say, 'woke' show. And Just when everything is going down a dodgy avenue, it swerves and surprises you. And who doesn't need a dancing animal in a show?¹¹

⁹ Allred G. “The Upstart Crow: Exit Pursued by Outdated Humour,” *medium.com*, March 6, 2020. URL: <https://medium.com/action-is-eloquence-re-thinking-shakespeare/the-upstart-crow-exit-pursued-by-outdated-humour-3fd83dede83d>.

¹⁰ Curtis N. “Upstart Crow Review: Panto Meets Pentameters in Funny but Exhausting Shakespearean Play,” *Evening Standard*, February 18, 2020. URL: <https://www.standard.co.uk/culture/theatre/upstart-crow-review-panto-meets-pentameters-in-funny-but-exhausting-shakespearean-play-a4364626.html>.

¹¹ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vwUe6Md9_E.

III. Шекспірівський дискурс

The play, in line with the tenets of festive comedy, flirts with 'the dark side' but ends happily with a jig, reaffirming lightness and the good.

Although Shakespeare the man, in both the series and play, is very much humanized and brought down to size with all his insecurities, including fear of failure, concerns about balding and cribbing from the women around him, the series nevertheless celebrates the genius of the creative, final product. It has also, arguably more than any other treatment of Shakespeare as a fictional character, highlighted not only the period sexism which denied women the opportunity of representing themselves in theatre, but also how the cross-dressing in the festive comedies generated sexual ambiguity and excitement. Although the majority of the viewers and audience members are in all probability not all that familiar with the tenets and philosophy of festive comedy, *Upstart Crow* has done much to reintroduce and popularize the genre once again.

References:

Allred G. "The Upstart Crow: Exit Pursued by Outdated Humour," *medium.com*, March 6, 2020. URL: <https://medium.com/action-is-eloquence-re-thinking-shakespeare/the-upstart-crow-exit-pursued-by-outdated-humour-3fd83dede83d>.

Barber C. L. *Shakespeare's Festive Comedy: A Study of Dramatic Forms and its Relation to Social Custom*, Princeton : Princeton University Press, 1959.

Boden R., dir. *Upstart Crow*, London : BBC, 2017.

Boden R., dir. *Upstart Crow*, London : BBC, 2018.

Curtis N. "Upstart Crow Review: Panto Meets Pentameters in Funny but Exhausting Shakespearean Play," *Evening Standard*, February 18, 2020. URL: <https://www.standard.co.uk/culture/theatre/upstart-crow-review-panto-meets-pentameters-in-funny-but-exhausting-shakespearean-play-a4364626.html>.

Elton B. *The Upstart Crow*, directed by Sean Foley, 7 Feb. 2020, Gielgud Theatre, London.

Frye N. *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays*, Princeton : Princeton University Press, 1957.

Greer G. *Shakespeare's Wife*, London : Bloomsbury Publishing, 2007.

Krajník F. "Zpupný krákal – Shakespeara pro naši dobu." (*Upstart Crow – a Shakespeare for Our Time*). *Theatralia*, Vol 23, 2/2020, 198–202.

Lipsey M., dir. *Upstart Crow*, London : BBC, 2016.

Livingstone D. *In Our Own Image: Fictional Representations of William Shakespeare*, Olomouc : Palacký University, 2019.