

# Burgess and *Will!*: Anthony Burgess's Cinematic Presentation of Shakespearean Biography

By [Kay Smith](#)

In early 1968, Anthony Burgess flew to Hollywood to discuss what he hoped would be a film script for his first major motion picture. He was known in Hollywood for his fictional biography of Shakespeare, *Nothing Like the Sun*, and this project was to be an offshoot of that, a life of Shakespeare that would also be a musical. From its inception, the project had two titles, *Will!*, the title Burgess preferred, and *The Bawdy Bard*, the title preferred by everyone in Hollywood connected with the project. Because of his success with *Nothing Like the Sun*, Burgess says, "...it was considered that I could produce something sensual and violent enough to be called *The Bawdy Bard*."  
[Note 1](#)

The idea of a musical version of Shakespeare's life seemed more than acceptable in a 1960's Hollywood which was riding a wave of very successful British musicals, like *My Fair Lady* and *C*

*amelot,*

and historical blockbusters like

*A Lion in Winter*

and

*A Man for All Seasons*.

Warner Brothers Seven Arts was eager to create a similar success with Burgess's Shakespeare.

William Conrad, a successful actor turned producer, had conceived the project and was instrumental in involving Burgess. In

*You've Had Your Time*,

Burgess describes how he warmed to Conrad, who, he noted, was "a true actor, in that he knew Shakespeare" (143), and they became friends. Burgess was amused but put off by Conrad's improvisation of a song for the movie that began "To be or not to be in love with you,/ To spend my life hand in glove with you" (143). Besides bad lyrics, Conrad's plan for the film included, Burgess noted, "outmoded Shakespeare lore" like the legend that Shakespeare left Stratford because he had been caught poaching deer on the land of Sir Thomas Lucy, or the legend that he had held horses outside the Curtain playhouse before becoming a playwright (144). But Burgess could not completely condemn such material since he had not hesitated to use legendary material himself in

*Nothing Like the Sun*

. About the film project, Burgess says, "If I was a scholar, I'd have been outraged.

But I'm only a novelist, as much a show-biz man, I suppose, as any juggler, soft shoe-shuffler, or film-deity, and I was intrigued."

[Note 2](#)

But Burgess the novelist had a serious prior restraint in deciding how to handle a screenplay narrative of Shakespeare's life: He had sold a theatrical option of

*Nothing Like the Sun*

to a New York producer and "...even to lift one of my own lines from novel to script would be rank plagiarism..."(

YHYT

142). Thus he had to come up with an entirely new treatment of Shakespeare's life, and legendary material he may have eschewed for

*Nothing Like the Sun*

became necessary for

*Will!*

Burgess, of course, had many problems to solve in finding the proper alternative material; of equal difficulty were the structural problems that Hollywood imposed on the story. The most successful British musicals, like *My Fair Lady*, were long, some over three hours, and typically had an intermission that divided the story in the middle. Burgess saw Shakespeare's story as dividing into three parts: his life up to leaving Stratford; his early success in Elizabethan London including his involvement with the Dark Lady and the noble patron; finally, his great 'tragic period' under James I, culminating in his retirement to Stratford, a prosperous gentleman

(YHYT

145). Burgess had concentrated on the first two parts in

*Nothing Like the Sun*

, implying, in that work, that there was a link between disease and genius that impelled Shakespeare into his tragic period, but skipping over this period to conclude with Shakespeare's dying monologue.

Indeed he had admitted in an article on the composition of

*Nothing Like the Sun*

that there was little of dramatic potential in the Jacobean part of Shakespeare's life, where the work ---the production of the great tragedies---dominates.

[Note 3](#)

This time, for the film, he would have to find a way to divide the life in two and include the potentially less dramatic period of Shakespeare's life.

The other problem presented by Hollywood was motivation. Burgess has an amusing story in *You've Had Your Time*

about his encounter with the studio "motivation man." To Burgess, the story was "just about a Stratford lad making it in the big time and getting laid by a black bitch," (145) but the motivation man wanted a "...single theme you could write on the back of a four-cent postage stamp...He was very fierce about motivation: a movie was like a locomotive, running on predestinate rails to a depot on whose platform all the luggage of past action was deposited: everything had to tie up with everything else, even if historical truth was violated" (145). This was, Burgess says, "probably sound, even Shakespearean" (145). Burgess and the "motivation man" decided on guilt as the motivating factor, guilt about Will's adultery, guilt about the death of his son, Hamnet, guilt over abandoning his wife for success in London.

"Guilt, guilt, guilt" as Burgess reiterates in the short article he wrote about the screenplay.

[Note 4](#)

Of course the problem was that guilt and the musical did not necessarily go together well, but Burgess had the recent example of

*Camelot*,

the successful late sixties Learner and Lowe musical that had emphasized and medievalized guilt, adultery, and betrayal in a musical format and made a fortune for Warner Brothers.

From the beginning of the project, Burgess's approach to the material was both eager and ironic. After all, this was a major studio project. The headline on the *Times (London)* article about the project read "Millions on a Musical about Shakespeare."

[Note 5](#)

A successful film would make Burgess's name as a marketable Hollywood script writer, a valuable credential since he was also working on a script for a film production of his novel, *Enderby*,

in 1968, and hoped to see other of his books become film projects. (

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) But the musical nature of the film both fascinated and repelled Burgess, a man who was more

often fascinated than repelled by music. He wrote about twenty songs (both music and lyrics) that were recorded with full orchestration by Warner Brothers, but he was nevertheless concerned that the story was damaged by the songs, that Shakespeare's genius was diminished by the imposition of the standard lyrics of the 60's musical, no matter how good the lyrics and music might be. "Ghastly" is the word he used later to describe this mix (

YHYT

147). Yet a close examination of the lyrics in the screenplay manuscript reveals a combination of story and song that is not nearly as bad as Burgess feared. The great risk, of course, involved having Shakespeare or Anne or the Dark Lady or Southampton, the main characters, sing. Undoubtedly, Burgess must have wondered how one could put bad lyrics like Conrad's "to be or not to be in love with you" in the mouth of Shakespeare, or show him listening and responding emotionally to Anne or the Dark Lady if they sing something that might sound frightfully inane? Would the Earl of Essex sing at his own execution? These are only a few of the potentially laughable problems.

The manuscript of *Will!* shows that Burgess tried to solve these problems by limiting them. [Note 6](#)

The main characters, particularly Anne and Will, sing more at the beginning of the screenplay, but then much of the music becomes environmental, as in the montage Burgess creates to celebrate Will's arrival in London, which he, taking historical license, makes coincide with the defeat of the Spanish Armada in 1588 (64-69). In this sequence, Burgess combines a patriotic ditty with an aural montage based on London church bells. In the tradition of musicals or, more to the point here, opera, everyone sings, people on the street, people in shops, whores hanging out of windows, Will himself. The sequence is quite successful on its own terms and would have worked cinematically. In many cases, Burgess taps into the great riches of the Elizabethan period, setting Nashe's verses from "A Litanie in Time of Plague" to music, for the plague and closing of the theaters sequence in the screenplay. Cleverly, he sets to music a number of Shakespeare's own lyric compositions, from

*Loves Labour's Lost, As You Like It,*

and

*, Much Ado about Nothing,*

for instance, and he sets several of Shakespeare's sonnets to music. Thus by the end of the screenplay, the music sung by main characters has almost disappeared but the film still contains ample music: a good solution to a difficult problem. Nevertheless, as we shall see, in later years Burgess would turn his uneasiness about the appropriateness of music in this project into wonderful material for parody and satire, both in his autobiography and in his last

*Enderby*

novel.

The project, still called by both names, *Will! Or the Bawdy Bard*, went forward during a very difficult time in Burgess's life in 1968-70, with the death of his first wife and his remarriage to Liliana Macellari, but it went forward rather quickly. The film was to be directed by Joseph L.

Mankiewicz, who had directed

*All about Eve*

, a film Burgess "considered a masterpiece" (

YHYT

186). Mankiewicz had directed the acclaimed

*Julius Caesar*

with Marlon Brando as well as a film version of

*Guys and Dolls*

, so he had experience with both Shakespeare and musicals, but in the sixties he was probably best known for the huge and expensive flop,

*Cleopatra*,

with Elizabeth Taylor and Richard Burton. He needed a big successful movie and was hoping that

*Will!*

would be it (

YHYT

185

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Mankiewicz had already made some casting decisions -- Maggie Smith as Anne, her husband Robert Stephens as Will, James Mason as Philip Henslowe, Peter Ustinov as Ben Jonson, Jessica Tandy as Queen Elizabeth. No decision was made about the Dark Lady, although Burgess somewhat facetiously suggested Diana Ross (

YHYT

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. The plot began to take shape as a somewhat collaborative effort among Burgess, Mankiewicz and William Conrad. Conrad suggested that they have Will and the Lord Chamberlain's Men perform

*Richard II*

at Court on the eve of the Earl of Essex' execution. The Queen would force Will to go to the Tower with her to witness Essex' death. It was melodramatic of course, but, in fact, the Lord Chamberlain's men did perform at Court on the night before Essex was killed. This combination of historical fact and speculation appealed to Burgess and he included this incident in the screenplay (

YHYT

157).

The only existing manuscript of Burgess's screenplay of *Will or the Bawdy Bard*, the one found in Burgess's papers at the Harry H. Ransom Research Center at the University of Texas, represents most likely his first attempt at a full length screenplay, after having gained approval from Mankiewicz of his initial treatment of the material. He probably wrote several versions after this one, but this is the one he chose to keep among his papers and it is the only record of Burgess's work on this project . The manuscript is long, 219 pages, and includes all the lyrics that were later cut when Mankiewicz decided, somewhat to Burgess's relief, that the film was

not to be a musical (

YHYT

185). The plot that Burgess created does indeed rely on legendary material about Shakespeare but nevertheless augments that material in unique ways. It is very important in considering the plot that Burgess developed for

*Will!*

to remember that, in researching and writing

*Nothing Like the Sun*

, Burgess had already familiarized himself with the known facts about Shakespearean biography and a wide range of theory.

Scholars have commented on Burgess's use of Stephen Dedalus's theory about Anne Hathaway's adultery with Shakespeare's brothers, found in Joyce's

*Ulysses*

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[&nbsp;](#)

Note 7

In an article on the writing of

*Nothing Like the Sun*

, Burgess says, "I had been reading pretty widely, ever since my student days, in books about Shakespeare, in Elizabethan documents, in close scholarly background history.

I had taken a lot of notes feverishly, making a chronological table which related the known facts of Shakespearean biography to the wider events of the time."

[Note 8](#)

Burgess found G.B. Harrison's

*The Elizabethan Journals*

and

*The Jacobean Journals*

, day by day compilations of primary source materials, to be particularly useful in creating atmosphere for

*Nothing Like the Sun*

. He was also indebted to Harrison's biography

, *Shakespeare under Elizabeth*

for the idea that the Dark Lady was indeed a black woman. From Thomas Mann's

*Dr. Faustus*,

Burgess found confirmation for his theory that great art was related to illness, in Shakespeare's case, Burgess speculated, syphilis. (

YHYT 79)

. George Bernard Shaw, Frank Harris, Georg Brandes, John Dover Wilson and others who have written on Shakespearean biography also influenced Burgess's view of Shakespeare's life in

*Nothing Like the Sun*

. Yet

*Nothing Like the Sun*

is clearly fiction, not biography. It is not surprising that this concatenation of fact and imagination provoked the great scholar of Shakespearean biography, Sam Schoenbaum to describe

*Nothing Like the Sun*

as an "...absurd gallimaufry of invention and (to put it mildly) dubious biographical theorizing,"

but it is important to remember that Schoenbaum also praises

*Nothing Like the Sun*

as "the only novel about Shakespeare acceptable on its own terms as a novel."

[Note 9](#)

It is with this understanding of Burgess's intimate knowledge of both Shakespearean fact and Shakespearean legend that we must examine the plot he created for

*Will!*

There are three aspects of the plot of *Will!* that I want to describe: First, the way in which Burgess employs the necessary legendary material that he had left out of

*Nothing Like the Sun*

; second, the way in which Burgess puts Will into actions that have high cinematic as well as dramatic potential; third, the way in which he creates an entirely different relationship between Will and Anne Hathaway than the one found in

*Nothing Like the Sun*

, and thus an entirely different ending for the screenplay. First, the legendary material. Since he could not use much of the actual story from

*Nothing Like the Sun*

, Burgess is much more reliant on Shakespearean legend in

*Will!*

He makes extensive use of the old story that Will had been poaching from the lands of the local gentry, particularly Sir Thomas Lucy. Early in the screenplay, Sir Thomas Lucy threatens Will and warns him off his property (

7)

. Later we see Will, Dick Field, and Dick Quinney (historically authentic residents of Stratford) killing a deer on Sir Thomas' property and then giving it to a poor family. In fact, the poaching is linked to both an egalitarian theme ---at one point Will says "How can one man steal wild rabbits from another? God owns the wild rabbits" (9)--- and to the major theme of frustrated gentility that runs through the screenplay: Will complains that "Shakespeare is a better name than Lucy.... He keeps his land: the Shakespeares lost theirs" (10). Later in the screenplay, when the Queen's Men come to Stratford, Dick Tarleton, the comic actor with whom Will has become acquainted, complains about the tavern fare and Will impetuously offers to get him venison (54). This time he is caught and jailed, to the disgrace of his family, particularly his wife, Anne. He escapes and flees to London, but on his infrequent visits back to Stratford, Sir Thomas Lucy is still after him. Eventually he must ask Southampton and Essex to use their influence to mitigate Sir Thomas's wrath (125).

Surprisingly, Burgess stretches this dubious poaching material through the full length of his plot. At the end of the story, Will, back in Stratford but depressed and unhappy, gets drunk with Ben Jonson and, ranting, wanders off in a snowstorm for one last shot at the Lucy deer. Lost in the woods, Will sees visions of his plays mingle with visions of his experiences, and we begin to understand why Burgess has hung on to the Lucy story for so long, as Will hallucinates images



of the Dark Lady, named Lucy Negro --- ironically a name that echos Will's old enemy and promises both light (luce) and darkness (negro). But this Lucy whom he sees in the snowmist "tears off her face to disclose a leprous horror" (217) as Will stumbles on to his death. It is clear from this summary of the poaching legend, that Burgess is trying to reinvigorate this legendary material not by minimizing it as one might expect, but by seeing imaginative links that can expand and become meaningful in terms of both plot and themes.

Burgess's Dark Lady in *Will!* is not the Dark Lady of *Nothing Like the Sun*, who is a Malay woman whom he calls FATIMAH. While Burgess got the idea of a truly dark-skinned woman from G. B. Harrison, for

*Nothing Like the Sun*

he used his own experience of living in Malaysia to create a "dark woman who came from the East --- a woman like one of the Malays I had been hotly attracted to during my time as a colonial civil servant.

I knew nothing about black women but plenty about brown."

[Note 10](#)

A black woman playing the love interest of a white man in a 1968 movie was likely to be highly controversial, and this may explain why the part of the Dark Lady remained uncast for the duration of the project, even though Burgess says that he wanted Diana Ross for the part (

*YHYT*

144). In

*Will!*

Burgess links this potentially controversial idea of the black mistress with one of the oldest pieces of legendary material about Shakespeare---the first Shakespeare Joke!

In his diary, John Manningham of the Middle Temple has the following entry for March 13, 1601:

Upon a time when Burbage played Richard III, there was a citizen grew so far in liking with him, that before she went from the play she appointed him to come that night unto her by the name Richard the Third. Shakespeare, overhearing their conclusion, went before, was entertained and at his game ere Burbage came. Then, message being brought that Richard III was at the door, Shakespeare caused return to be made that William the Conqueror was before Richard the Third.

[Note 11](#)

While there are traces of this story in *Nothing Like the Sun*, in *Will!* Burgess uses the joke quite literally to create the circumstances of the meeting between Will and Lucy Negro, the Dark Lady of the screenplay . It is true that "meeting cute" between men and women is part of the tradition of motion pictures and we accept circumstance and coincidence on screen that we would consider trite in a novel. Still, this is Burgess's most blatant use of legendary material and he takes a real risk in the screenplay of making the central love relation of the film faintly ridiculous



by associating it with this old joke. Though he may have believed that it would work on screen, nevertheless, it is likely

that, later when Burgess came to ridicule the work he had done on

*Will!*,

it was this kind of travesty of legendary material that he had in mind.

[Note 12](#)

On the other hand, Burgess was quite capable of discarding old legends that were suggested for the screenplay and substituting something more dynamic. Burgess doesn't show Will holding horses at the playhouse door when he comes to London, as William Conrad had suggested. Instead, Burgess gives us several scenes of Will trying to break into authorship by selling his plays to that theatrical entrepreneur and brothel-keeper, Phillip Henslowe. In the most effective of these sequences, Will accosts Henslowe and the player, Edward Alleyn, in one of Henslowe's brothels. Will begins to recount the plot of *Titus Andronicus*, which is, of course, filled with rape, mutilation, murder, and cannibalism. As he does so, the whores and their clients begin to listen in rapt attention, putting aside their business with each other, and leaning over the balcony to see better. Then there is a sound edit and a visual overlap so that the actor, Alleyn's voice takes over the lines from

*Titus*

and we find ourselves watching the actual production in the Swan Theater (82-85). In small moments like this, Burgess demonstrated a necessary command of the visual medium in quite clever ways while avoiding piling on the legendary material.

In fact, for his first attempt at a full-length screenplay, Burgess shows an understanding of how movie scenes must be staged differently from *Nothing Like the Sun*, in order to put Will literally into the picture in a visual sense as often as possible. In this screenplay, Will is the primary focus, and, just as in a first-person narrative, he must always be present in the action, or in this case, on screen. As I have noted, Burgess uses a historical contrivance to put Will at the scene of the execution of the Earl of Essex, where the Queen calls him "little man" and warns him to stay clear of politics. Earlier in the screenplay, Burgess arranges for Will to witness the murder of Christopher Marlowe and to be, of course, horrified by it, particularly since Marlowe had earlier given Will an introductory note to Henslowe which said, facetiously, "When I am dead, this man will be the greatest poet of England" (79). Wracked by fear and ironic guilt at the truth of Marlowe's prophecy, Will relives Marlowe's death vividly several times in surreal hallucinations and dream sequences, including the one that ends the film.

In another visual sequence, Burgess faces the problem, more of a problem in the late sixties than today, of showing too much violence. In this scene, Will, new to London, is attending his first execution ---a hanging, drawing and quartering of Jesuit priests. Burgess shows the crowd

lusting for blood and in the crowd Will spots a coach with a Negroid lady whom we shall come to know as Lucy, his Dark Lady, "excited as by the prospect of sex," to quote the script directions (79). Rather than show detail after detail in this gruesome execution scene, Burgess resorts to an old trick, a blind man who stand next to Will and asks excited questions. Members of the crowd cheer "at what makes Will flinch" (80) and describe the scene to the blind man. Building up the morbid curiosity of the viewer, the camera finally cuts to the hangman who has just eviscerated one of the priests. Here are Burgess's directions from the script:

The hangman grins, holding up the blood clotted pluck. The CAMERA pans down to the fire. The hangman throws the entrails on to it. There is a fine sputtering. Renewed cheers. (81)

To end the scene, the camera returns to Will as he pushes out of the crowd, "dashes to the camera and starts to vomit in it" (81). Burgess uses this "blackout" of the camera as a cut to the next scene. Scenes like this clearly indicate that Burgess had a keen visual, as well as a verbal, imagination and a visual vocabulary of editing techniques to go with the violence and squalor he was committed to putting on the screen. Often screenplays written primarily by novelists fail to take into account the needs of visual narration and tend to read like somewhat flat stage plays, but Burgess's screenplay is usually quite aware of and notes appropriate camera placement and movement, as well as other aspect of filmic vocabulary like editing, overlapping sound, and montage. Burgess knows how to put Will into a variety of actions that literally show him affected by the people and circumstances around him.

The final aspect of the plot of Burgess's screenplay that I want to discuss is the treatment of Anne Hathaway in *Will!*. In both *Nothing Like the Sun* and *Will*, Burgess embraces the theory expounded by James Joyce in

*Ulysses*,

that Shakespeare's wife, Anne, was unfaithful to him with his brother, Richard. Both

*Nothing Like the Sun*

and

*Will!*

revolve around the two poles of fair wife and dark mistress, both of whom ultimately betray the poet. Yet one of the key differences between these two works is in the handling of the fair wife, Anne. In

*Nothing Like the Sun*

, Anne is presented as lusty and sexually demanding. Will meets her on May Day, a traditional time for the sexual revels of the young, after being rejected by a dark girl who chooses to go off with a young miller's son instead of him. Getting blind drunk with rejected disappointment, Will simply wakes up, horribly hung over, in the arms of this unknown but experienced and somewhat older woman. There is no exposition, no acquaintanceship beforehand: This Anne Hathaway is like a lusty goddess of the woods, a Venus who simply overtakes Will unawares.

In *Will!* more exposition accompanies the introduction of Anne Hathaway, who is presented much more demurely. Will meets her at his father's shop where she comes to bring a pair of gloves to be repaired. She is attractive and modest. While Will's father talks with her about her family, Will says to his brother Gilbert "that, Gilbert, is known as a woman handsome but past her first youth." His father concedes that Anne is a "sweet and pretty girl [who]... badly needs wedding," and warns his son to "Keep away. Such women are dangerous" (12-15). Later, as in *Nothing Like the Sun*

, when Will is rejected by his dark girl, he gets drunk and awakens in the arms of Anne Hathaway, but this is a very different Anne. The film script presents Anne in much more romantic cinematic terms, intercutting between the couple's lovemaking and the bringing in of the Maypole, in a phallic montage that would have made Sir James Frazer proud. A postcoital Will and Anne are shown in long shot walking through the fields of rye, talking, laughing, holding hands (21-23).

There is much more going on in this alteration than simply meeting the visual and narrative needs of the cinema. True, Burgess has added exposition appropriate to a more simplified and visual plot, and true, he has taken advantage of what film can do through visual juxtaposition. But in making Anne a modest though aging virgin, Burgess abandons *Nothing Like the Sun's* theme of the overlustful wife, a Venus who drives the young poet to disturbing bouts of sexual frenzy. In

*Nothing Like the Sun*

, Shakespeare is finally driven to leave Anne and Stratford because of his disgust at his wife's arousal in seeing an old woman beaten through the night streets below their bedroom window. In contrast, in the screenplay, Anne is much more straightlaced: Will meets Anne for a second time just as she is leaving the Shottery church where she has gone to pray, for instance. Again, Burgess may have been impelled by issues of screen censorship to make these changes. It is hard to imagine a sixties blockbuster musical of the

*My Fair Lady*

ilk, which is what

*Will or the Bawdy Bard*

was to be, pursuing a theme of sadomasochistic sex (one would have to wait for the seventies and

*Cabaret*

for that). It would seem, however, that Burgess was less interested in the censors and more interested in a completely different conception of Anne Hathaway. In

*Will!*,

Anne Hathaway is a budding Puritan or Brownist, whose cooling religiosity finally pushes her husband away. This conception of Anne is going to have long-term plot consequences in the screenplay. Unlike

*Nothing Like the Sun*,

in the screenplay Will never actually discovers his wife making love to his brother, but he has numerous ominous dreams --- presented in flash cuts that show what Will imagines is happening. His imagination indeed proves accurate, when near the end of the movie, his wife confesses her adultery before Will and her co-religionists. But Will understands that it is

loneliness, not lust, that has pushed her towards adultery. Guilt, Will's guilt at what he has done to his family, is the dominant factor in the musical, just as the "Motivation Man" had suggested. From the beginning of the musical until its end, Will can never be what Anne wants him to be, and Burgess writes a sequence of songs for Will and Anne that captures the conflict between his desire to seek his destiny and hers for quiet happiness at home: Will's song revolves around his self identification with the constellation that forms Cassiopeia's Chair, which he sees as a huge W in the sky:

My name in the sky  
Burning forever,  
Fame fixed by fate  
Never to die. (25)

Anne sees a different natural symbolism at work, when she sings:

Will o'the wisp,  
Do not desire  
To follow fame,  
That foolish fire.

Her song is loaded with homey imagery of baking bread, and crisp dawns:

Better by far  
The fire at home -  
Smoke in the rafter  
Lamb's wool and laughter. (31)

These two songs are among the more successful lyrical pieces in the musical, and they point to a conflict quite different in form from the conflict of Will and Anne in *Nothing Like the Sun*. In fact, Burgess employs a frame story in

*Will*

that emphasizes the poet's guilt and frustration at his incompatibility with his wife.

*Will!*

starts with a scene of Shakespeare dying in his bed, the camera taking his point of view as he scans those around him. He sees Anne "wrinkled as an applejohn, sour as a crab" (2) and hears her rattle the pennies in her pocket, waiting to put them on his eyes when he dies. Then his mind drifts away to that springtime when he had hoped to meet his dark-haired girl and met gingery Anne instead, and his story begins by going back to that time. At the end of the screenplay, after he has caught his last illness wandering and hallucinating in Sir Thomas Lucy's woods, the scene returns to his deathbed where Will's last words are "...my dear dear lord." Anne says: "I hope he was calling on God. I hope he has made his peace," and Ben Jonson replies: "Ah, woman, he has made more than you will ever understand." The final words of the film are Anne's. She says, "It could have been so different. He could have made

something with his life" (218). This frustrating and ironic ending is very different from the ending of

*Nothing Like the Sun*

with its emphasis on the muse, the dark lady whose final gift was disease, and the goddess whose final gift is death. Because of the emphasis in the screenplay on guilt, rather than on inspiration as in

*Nothing Like the Sun*

, Anne Hathaway plays a much larger role in Will's life and in his psyche, and the Dark Lady, his lover and ultimately his muse in

*Nothing Like the Sun*

, a much smaller one.

In examining *Will!* in detail, as we have done, it is difficult not to speculate on Burgess's feeling about his material. Not being able to use *Nothing Like the Sun* because of rights restrictions must have been galling to Burgess, who nevertheless sneaked a good bit of useful dialogue from

*Nothing Like the Sun*

into the screenplay. Just as the characters are named differently in the two works, "WS" being the interior man of

*Nothing Like the Sun*

and "Will" being the exterior man of the screenplay, Burgess's approach to language is quite different in the two works. Burgess had serious doubts and concerns about how to bring the language necessary for film up to the higher literary standard of

*Nothing Like the Sun*

because he tended to scorn the language of the typical Hollywood film script. In an interview he says:

Film people are very conservative about dialogue: they honestly believe that the immediate grasp of lexical meaning is more important than the impact of rhythm and emotionally charged sound. It's regarded as cleverer to pretend that the people of the past would have spoken like us if they had been lucky enough to know how to do so, delighted with the opportunity to view themselves and their times from our angle. [Note 13](#)

In the screenplay, as in *Nothing Like the Sun*, Burgess avoided anachronistic language, using only words and phrases that would have been available to speakers in Shakespeare's day, but the language of *Will!* has little relation to the much more evocative language of *Nothing Like the Sun* N

*Nothing Like the Sun*

. Of course, key differences between screenplays and novels have to do with the nature of screenplays, which are all show, concentrating on what can be seen and what can be said, or in the case of a musical, sung. While we all know that films can be enormously evocative, we know that they can not do what

*Nothing Like the Sun*

can do, which is to show the inner life of a great poet.

*Nothing Like the Sun*

is a novel of enormous, almost Joycean, interiority. Even though Burgess only occasionally makes use of Joyce's stream of consciousness, the narrator is almost always inside Will Shakespeare's head. The narration takes many forms in

*Nothing Like the Sun*

. It begins and ends as a frame story, with Burgess delivering a drunken farewell lecture to his Malay students. Sometimes the story is told as though Will were writing in a diary; other times it is a sermon delivered by a puritan preacher; other times first person narration in one paragraph moves into third person in the next paragraph. On the penultimate page of the novel, the narrator teases the audience by asking "You wish to know how ventriloquial all this is, who is really speaking?" (233). By that point, ravished by words, the audience becomes aware of a merging and strong identification between the narrator, the fictional Burgess, and WS. Yet, if there is inconsistency in narration in

*Nothing Like the Sun*

, there is great consistency in language and tone. Burgess has worked hard to make the language acceptably Elizabethan while still intelligible, and he has wonderful ability with the catalogue, a piling on of words and images, some faintly archaic, that create a palpable Renaissance reality in the novel. Here, for instance is the old actor, Dick Tarleton. Burgess has made it deliberately unclear whether he is speaking aloud or thinking these lines as he examines the crowd before him:

Ho there, all, give ear to your betters. There is one blats like a flayed pudding and, by Godspod, I shall be after him with my little whip. Hark, all, your doubtful worships are royally bidden to a feast of wrongdoing and thereto will be added for good measure a good measure, nay a treasure of good measures, viddy or skiddy lissit a jug, aye, a jig. Here is your only jigmaker. And it will be tomorrow, you whoreson skirvyrumps, you cheeseheads, you heavenhigh stinkards and cackards.

[Note 14](#)

Burgess never reached that playful yet precise level of language in the screenplay and doubted that he could. In an article that appeared in the *Times (London)* in 1968, while Burgess was working on the screenplay, he comments on problems in handling the speech in

*Will!:*

While I was in Hollywood I recorded some Elizabethan dialogue to show how like American it is, but the response I got was that it sounded like Irish. It would certainly be a mistake to have Shakespeare spouting today's English.

[Note 15](#)

Of course, in one form or another, 'today's English' is an inevitable necessity in any

contemporary film, whether it is historically based or not. Another doubt that Burgess had about the possible film that was developing --- one with quite a different plot from *Nothing Like the Sun* and quite

different use of language--- was that the director Mankiewicz, would make a film that was full of pseudo-Renaissance settings just as

*Camelot*

was full of pseudo-Medieval settings (

*YHYT*

186

)

. Burgess wanted squalor, the kind of squalor that would have characterized the London of Shakespeare's day. At one point in the screenplay, Burgess instructs the camera to follow an open sewer on a London street, tracking "dead cats and fish heads" (68). In

*Will!*

there are plenty of heads on pikes, and chained criminals floating in the Thames' changing tides.

Burgess's doubts about the screenplay and the project in general were reenforced by a growing sense he had that the film would never be made. In fact, in 1969, he contracted to write "a brief biography of Shakespeare which should be sumptuously illustrated" so that he would not waste the research he had done for the film (*YHYT* 109). This is his "coffee table" book, called simply *Shakespeare*

, which was published in 1970. Yet, even full of doubts, he was still working on the screenplay.

As he says, "Desperately trying to finish the script, I yet knew that it was not going to reach the screen" (

*YHYT*

190). His premonition proved correct:

Warner Brothers was being sold and even though studio executives supported the project, "all existing enterprises were scrapped when the new regime started," as Burgess explained in an interview.

[Note 16](#)

Burgess had bad luck with this project, just as he had bad luck with the

*Enderby*

film script that he was writing simultaneously with the

*Will!*

film script: In that case, the producer, John Bryant, who was committed to the project, dropped dead at the Cannes Film Festival (

*YHYT*

185). Thus neither

*Will!*

nor

*Enderby*

were ever to make it to the screen.



One cannot help but be curious whether either one (but *Will!* in particular) would have been a success if it had been made. After all, we have recently seen overwhelming interest in the life of Shakespeare in the 1998 success of the pseudo-biographical film,

*Shakespeare in Love*

. Would

*Will!*

have been as successful as

*Shakespeare in Love*

? To compare the screenplay of

*Will!*

to the film of

*Shakespeare in Love*

is to compare the modern with the postmodern in imaginative biography and film making.

*Will!*

is modernist in its approach to the whole life of its subject, while the postmodernist

*Shakespeare in Love*

privileges the part to the whole, emphasizing an episode rather than thematizing a life. This makes

*Shakespeare in Love*

more tightly organized and more seemingly complex within more narrow bounds than

*Will!*.

In contrast,

*Will!*

consists of lots of small "lies"--- a complex compilation of fact and fiction often derived from reading the life into the work or accepting legendary material.

*Shakespeare in Love*,

on the other hand depends upon one big "lie" ---that Shakespeare wrote

*Romeo and Juliet*

based on a love affair of his own with a prominent noblewoman. Both history and source study refute the premise of

*Shakespeare in Love*

as impossible with ridiculous ease. Yet the untruth of its premise shrinks to insignificance; it is the magnificently intertwined life and art that keeps us interested in the film, despite its blatant inaccuracy. Burgess is himself no slacker when it comes to intertwining life and art, and

*Will!*

shows us, in many clever ways, Shakespeare at work on and performing in his own work and others (

*Will!*

has a wonderful

*Dr. Faustus*

scene, for instance, with a drunken Marlowe yelling abuse from the audience.) But Burgess's more expansive technique of citing fragments from many of the plays and other works of the period might be thought of, finally, as allusive, more like the modernist work of Eliot in

*The*

*Wasteland*

than the highly intertextual post-modernism of

*Shakespeare in Love*.

Overall, we must remember that films are highly collaborative and note that

*Will!*,

like

*Shakespeare in Love*,

would have had an excellent cast, an experienced director, and, of course, a talented scriptwriter. While we can admire Geoffrey Rush's portrayal of Henslowe in

*Shakespeare in Love*

, we can still yearn for the opportunity to have seen a quite different interpretation by James Mason, the Henslowe of

*Will!*

Overall, however, it is likely that *Will!* would not have done well at the box office, through no real fault of its own, but rather through a seismic shift in tastes that was occurring while Burgess was working on

*Will!* The late sixties saw the advent of the counterculture not only as a social phenomenon but also in films.

*Easy Rider*

and

*Midnight*

*Cowboy*

both appeared in 1969. While on a lecture tour of Australia and New Zealand, Burgess saw both films. He said they "...showed me the way the contemporary cinema was going and how old-hat and prissy

*Will!*

would have been" (

YHYT

217). Ironically, it was on this same trip that Burgess found out that his novel

, *A*

*Clockwork Orange*,

was definitely going to be filmed and that "Stanley Kubrick was sending urgent cables about the need to see me in London on some matter of the script" (

YHYT

217). The now old-fashioned

*Will!*

was being dropped, but Burgess was soon to find himself working on a film,

*A Clockwork Orange*,

that would define one element of the counterculture of the early seventies.

However, if one examines carefully what Burgess created in *Will!*, one notices aspects of the film that would have made it far less old-fashioned than the hopelessly outdated

*Camelot*

for instance. Burgess's insistence on the violent and the squalid is one of the more contemporary aspects of the screenplay, as is the idea, in the racially charged atmosphere of 1968, the year that Martin Luther King was killed, of a love affair between England's greatest poet and a black woman. The Dark Lady problem could have made the film more interesting and controversial, particularly if the Dark Lady had been played by Burgess's choice, Diana Ross.

When Warner Brothers abandoned the notion of making a film of *Will!* in 1969, Burgess may have been relieved. Over time, as I have noted, he began to see the many drawbacks of the project, particularly the "ghastly" (as he described it) idea of a musical. Yet Burgess never really abandoned his screenplay, though he readily abandoned the idea of actually seeing it on screen. In fact, it was characteristic of Burgess as an author never to abandon anything that might be usefully linked with some future work. In a recent article in the

*Anthony Burgess Newsletter*

, based on a 1969 lecture called "The Dependent Mind," Tom Stumpf reminds us of the complex interconnection of all of Burgess's work, from the mundane linking of characters and circumstances to the more exalted level of theme. Stumpf pays particular attention to the links he sees between

*Enderby*

and

*Nothing Like the Sun*

,  
"two novels in which the grossness and uncleanness of the flesh are almost disproportionately emphasized, perhaps as a direct result of the fact that both novels deal with the exalted calling of the poet, the artist."

[Note 17](#)

Not only are both novels about poets, as Stumpf notes, but both poets suffer from mental or physical diseases that are directly linked to their muses: Enderby's 'goddess' who only comes to him when he is in a state of arrested adolescence, and WS's Dark Lady, who gives him the case of syphilis which prods his diseased imagination into the suffering of his great tragic period. It is thus not surprising that, in 1983, after killing off Enderby in

*A Clockwork Testament*,

Burgess revives his poet and links him with Shakespeare in

*Enderby's Dark Lady*.

Harold Bloom, who calls himself "a devoted Enderbyan" and who writes perceptively about the relationship of Burgess's Shakespeare and Enderby characters to Joyce's Leopold Bloom, notes that "Burgess gave us

*Enderby's Dark Lady...*,

a super amalgam of

*Inside Mr. Enderby*

and

*Nothing Like the Sun*."

[Note 18](#)

Though Harold Bloom is an eminent critic who is right to see connections between these two books, he is wrong in linking these two works together as an amalgam. In fact,

*Enderby's Dark Lady*

is an amalgam of

*Enderby*

and Burgess's screenplay,

*Will!*

Though abandoned as a film project, much of the material of

*Will!*

, from the songs to the plot to the Diana Ross-like Dark Lady, makes a final appearance in

*Enderby's Dark Lady*.

In *Enderby's Dark Lady*, Burgess is essentially bringing together and recycling a number of Shakespeare pieces he had written over the years, as well as using the experience and circumstances of writing them for the plot of the novel. Burgess wrote the short story, "Will and Testament" which begins *Enderby's Dark Lady*, in 1976, and read it for the first time at the Folger Shakespeare Library for a celebration of Shakespeare and the American Bicentennial, the very occasion that Enderby is called upon to commemorate in at the satirically named Peter Brook Theater in Indiana in

*Enderby's Dark Lady*

(

YHYT

336). The short story that ends the novel, fittingly called "Muse," was first published in

*The Hudson Review*

in 1968, the same year Burgess was working on

*Will!*

. The material in between the two short stories, in which Enderby is called to Indiana to write a musical of Shakespeare's life, is an imaginative reworking of Burgess's experiences in writing the abortive screenplay,

*Will!*

In

*Enderby's Dark Lady*

, Burgess is both recycling the faintly ridiculous experiences he had in Hollywood and reconciling himself to the failure of his

*Will!*

screenplay ever to see light. In

*Enderby's Dark Lady*

, Enderby meets and falls in love with the wonderful April Elgar, a black singer of the Diana Ross variety who is to play the Dark Lady in this stage production. The lyrics and the plot of the musical that Enderby creates in Indiana are all straight from

*Will!*

Enderby shares with Burgess his ambivalent feeling toward his creation, perverted as it is by American accents and American attitudes. Burgess certainly uses

*Enderby's Dark Lady*

as a vehicle of satire, projecting the disasters that might have happened if

*Will!*

had been produced. But, because of the love affair that develops between Enderby and April, Burgess also redeems the material that he had worked so hard on for the production of

*Will!*

In light of the relationship between

*Enderby's Dark Lady*

and

*Will!*

it is important to remember the ending of

*Enderby's Dark Lady*

, in which Enderby himself plays Will, and, inappropriately but in some deeper psychological way highly appropriately, consummates his affair with April Elgar, the ultimate Dark Lady. It is on a public stage and in a production that greatly resembles

*Will!*

that Burgess finally allows his much put-upon poet Enderby to have a satisfactory sexual encounter for the first and only time in the entire

*Enderby*

saga. This is "Will in overplus" as Shakespeare says in Sonnet 135. Perhaps with

*Enderby's Dark Lady*

, Burgess was finally satisfied that

*Will!*

had not been a complete waste of effort, that he had redeemed what he could from the screenplay that was destined never to appear on the screen. In

*Enderby's Dark Lady*

he finally brought his efforts together and finally gave them 'a local habitation and a name,' or, as Enderby says in a discussion of what to call his musical, "I now think that

*Will*

might be better. Will the name and the drive, sexual and social, you know, and even the final testament with the second best bed.

With an exclamation point, possibly.

*Will!*

Or two if you'd like —

*Will!!!"*

[Note 19](#)

Given the long journey that Anthony Burgess went on with the Bard of Avon, two seem hardly enough.

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## Notes

1. Anthony Burgess, *You've Had Your Time* ( New York: Grove Press, 1990) 142. All subsequent citations of this work will be included in the body of the text. If the context does not make the source of the citation sufficiently clear, this work will be abbreviated

*YHYT*

in the parenthetical documentation.

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2. Anthony Burgess, "To Be or Not to Be in Love with You," *Show; The Magazine of Film and the Arts* , 1.1 (January, 1970): 76.

[Return to article](#)

3. Anthony Burgess, "Genesis and Headache." In *Afterwords; Novelists on Their Novels*. Ed. by Thomas McCormack. (New York: Harper, 1968) 31.

[Return to article](#)

4. "To Be or Not to Be in Love with You" 77. [Return to article](#)

5. Ernest Betts, "Millions on a Musical About Shakespeare." *Times* (London) 24 August 1968, 18. [Return to article](#)

6. Anthony Burgess, *Will! Or the Bawdy Bard*. ts.. Anthony Burgess Papers. Harry H. Ransom Research Center, University of Texas. All subsequent citations of this work will be included in the body of the text. If the context does not make the source of the citation significantly clear, this work will be abbreviated *Will!* in the parenthetical documentation.

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7. See, for example, [Allen Roughley](#) , "Nothing Like the Sun: A. Burgess's Factification of Shakespeare's Life." *Anthony Burgess Newsletter* 3 (December, 2000) .

[Return to article](#)

8. "Genesis and Headache," 31. In this essay, Burgess mentions many of the books he used and also includes one of the charts that he made. [Return to article](#)

9. Samuel Schoenbaum, "Burgess and Gibson," *Shakespeare's Lives* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1970) 766.

[Return to article](#)

[Return](#)

10. "Genesis and Headache" 30. [Return to article](#)

11. John Manningham, *Diary*. Quoted in: Anthony Burgess, *Shakespeare* ( New York: Knopf, 1970) 184-5.

[Return to article](#)

[Return](#)

12. See *Enderby's Dark Lady*. (New York: McGraw Hill, 1984). [Return to article](#)

13. Quoted in John Cullinan, "The Art of Fiction XLVIII: Anthony Burgess," *Paris Review* 14. 56 (Spring, 1973): 119-63.



[Return to article](#)

14. Anthony Burgess, *Nothing Like the Sun* (London: Heinemann, 1964) 72. [Return to article](#)

15. Quoted in Betts, 18. [Return to article](#)

16. Quoted in Cullinan, 133. [Return to article](#)

17. [Tom Stumpf](#), "The Dependent Mind" *Anthony Burgess Newsletter* 3 (2000) [Return to article](#)

18. Harold Bloom, "Introduction" *Anthony Burgess*. Ed. by Harold Bloom ( New York: Chelsea House, 1987) 5. [Return to article](#)

19. *Enderby's Dark Lady*, 72. [Return to article](#)