Branding Bill
The Shakespearean Commons

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A year ago, the world celebrated William Shakespeare’s 450th birthday. But this essay has little to do with Shakespeare’s plays, or Shakespeare scholarship. It situates Shakespeare within what may be broadly characterised as “brand studies.” Adapting the work of semioticians of brands and retail, Celia Lury, John Frow, and others, the article examines the process and results of “branding Bill,” or Shakespeare-as-brand. Shakespeare-as-brand mediates the supply and demand of Shakespearean products through the organisation, coordination, and integration of the use of information — whether about his life, his loves, his texts, his editors, and his readers/consumers. Shakespeare as a commons continues to gather cultural capital because of the iterability of the brand in mass/popular forms and media that now possess the maximum cultural legibility (like the graphic novel or Hollywood romance). This is possible even more in the digital age because the Shakespearean page, stage, and image are all available simultaneously on a screen, making Shakespeare an interactive, global archive.

In culture generally, but certainly in popular culture, the name and image of ‘Shakespeare’ has become a byword for a set of qualities that have been attached to an astonishing variety of texts and products — bank cards, £20 notes (from 1970–93), beer, crockery, fishing tackle, book publishing, cigars, pubs, and breath mints, to name a few. ‘Shakespeare’ has come to serve as an adjective, a tool potentially for reshaping the associations of objects that become linked with his name (2007: 93).

Lanier treats Shakespeare as a brand, and goes on to term him the “Coca-Cola of canonical culture” (p 93). This also means that there is Shakespeare as information running wild.

An immediate objection that could be raised here — and one voiced by Rumbold in her essay on “Brand Shakespeare” in 2011 — is that the brand image is a corporate effort, the signature of a company (as opposed to the signature of an individual, as Frow argued in 2002). Rumbold argues that while Shakespeare might “enact some of the legitimating functions of the brand, it is not quite the same as being a trademark” (2011: 26), and we need to see the branding of Shakespeare as “retrospectively constructed.” But Rumbold concedes that this brand effect is more about the symbolic function of Shakespeare in the marketplace. My contention is that the temporality — when does Shakespeare become a brand — is less significant than the reach of the symbolic and cultural value of the commodity we have come to identify as Shakespeare. This “reach” also means that brand Shakespeare is co-produced rather than corporate controlled, by users, readers, and non-specialists, in multiple domains and genres.

We thus need to move beyond thinking of brands as only corporate produced. Shakespeare the brand does not pre-exist his “commercial deployment,” says Rumbold (2011: 27) — but surely it would be severely restrictive to say that it is only in the marketplace that Shakespeare-as-brand is produced. I suggest towards the end of the essay that it is vernacular creativity and everydayness that enables Bill to be branded, for reinforcing the brand magic and building what I shall irreverently call the “Shakespearean commons.”

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Further, the argument — made endlessly to require repetition here — that Shakespeare’s popularity was linked to the rise of the British Empire does not, in my mind, quite explain the continued, even extended popularity he enjoys after the British Empire. By that argument, he should be a relic, which he clearly is not. This is precisely because Shakespeare does not require special status, like a Rolex watch or a Lamborghini. He is common, on coffee mugs and in everyday speech (okay, among coffee mug and T-shirt icons, Shakespeare is the Lamborghini). I outline a few propositions about Shakespeare-as-brand.

1 An Organising Principle
Brand might be defined as a set of relations between products and services. It is intangible and non-corporeal but is never immaterial. Shakespeare organises relations between products, or texts (English literature, films) and services (criticism, academicism, viewing, reviewing, film-making). Shakespeare emerges within the interstices of a variety of projects, products and processes, where services (including academic services provided by teachers of English, editors, and publishing houses) produce products too. Shakespeare therefore might be seen as organising an entire system of social relations across many industries. There are two parts to this organisational ability of Shakespeare-as-brand.

(a) At All Levels: Shakespeare organises these social relations differentially — authentic Shakespeare, inauthentic Shakespeare, political Shakespeare, radical Shakespeare, revisionary Shakespeare, and so on. Shakespeare enables the organisation of academics, book reviewers, editors, and film-makers along specific lines — ideological, linguistic, pedagogic — and even enables them, on occasion, to rank themselves vis-à-vis others. Shakespeare can be, and is, a specialised product available for mass circulation. The signifier functions as a luxury product, once exclusive to white academia and playhouses but increasingly a mass product of considerable cultural value.

(b) In Quality Testing: Shakespeare-as-brand functions as a device for quality testing. In product testing, “standards” are tests in which the quality of a product’s consistency across variant models is produced. “Tests of differentiation” mean the processes in which quality is subject to experimentation. These are process in which some of the variables (price, place, packaging, and product, but also design, style, and service at the point of sale) of distributed production are kept constant while others are manipulated. In these processes of differentiation, quality (understood as the meeting of a fixed standard) is broken down and reconstituted as qualities, which may then of course be consolidated in the implementation of new or “improved” standards. The test of literary syllabi, pedagogy, film-making theory remains Shakespeare studies. Shakespeare becomes the medium through which stylisation, pedagogic success (or failure), and adaptation is achieved. Shakespeare-as-brand thus functions as a device for the qualitative testing of innovation in product design or experimentation in production processes.

That is, Shakespeare is used as a device for reconfiguring the production of multiple products, whether plays or films or comics or musical shows. Further, I am speaking here of “brand extension” where all plays, playwrights, film adaptations, theories of tragedy or heroism, even as they innovate Shakespeare, are pursued or rejected based on their compatibility with the core values and attributes of the Shakespeare brand, which itself is produced through debates about whether Shakespeare has a core value at all. That is, debates about, say, authenticity or relevance or true-to-the-original implicitly produce a hierarchy of products even as they function within a nebulous notion of the brand’s core value. My proposition is that these debates themselves produce the notion of “core values” around Shakespeare. “Branding Shakespeare” is the articulation of debates about his authenticity, creativity, relevance, genius, adaptability — criteria often used to evaluate subsequent Shakespeare products — that in turn produce the brand as a set of arguable values.

When a “Shakespeare product” enters a new market — manga, film, comics — the market gains by the use of Shakespeare-as-brand. Whether Shakespeare possesses a set of core values or not might perhaps be indirectly answered through the continuous process of appropriations across the world into multimodal formats and cultural productions. (The 2012 World Shakespeare Festival had productions of various plays in 50 languages.) Even if we deny any such core values to a set of texts that we have come to call Shakespeare’s (with an emphasis on the possessive), what remains unuestionable is the cultural capital to be accrued from Shakespeare. Whether in academia or in mass cultural form, as Lanier puts it, “Shakespearean cultural capital now moves freely from investment to investment, from one cultural arena or medium to another” (2010: 104).

Product Differentiation and Brand Integration
Let me turn to two key aspects of branding cultures — product differentiation and brand integration. Product differentiation is the number of different product lines established by a company. The many product lines, product items, and product assortment are organised in relation to brands through brand-name decisions and brand repositioning — or what is called brand integration. Thus we have numerous product lines and items within Shakespeare films, adaptations, and editions (variorum, annotated, critical, casebook, and now the graphic novel). Shakespeare as a product is differentiated along various lines to suit multiple markets. Think of the Norton Shakespeare from W W Norton and the No Fear Shakespeare from SparkNotes. Both are commercially successful companies offering a variety of Shakespeare products. These position themselves differently in the marketplace for and of Shakespeare products.

Norton writes,

Upon publication in 1997, The Norton Shakespeare set a new standard for teaching editions of Shakespeare’s complete works. Instructors and students worldwide welcomed the fresh scholarship, lively and accessible introductions, helpful marginal glosses and notes, readable single-column format, all
designed in support of the goal of the Oxford text: to bring the modern reader closer than before possible to Shakespeare’s plays as they were first acted. Now, under Stephen Greenblatt’s direction, the editors have considered afresh each introduction and all of the apparatus to make the Second Edition an even better teaching tool (Norton Shakespeare 2014).

And this is No Fear Shakespeare:

No Fear Shakespeare puts Shakespeare’s language side-by-side with a facing-page translation into modern English — the kind of English people actually speak today (2015).

Both companies have deep and wide product lines, offering all kinds of tools and apps to read Shakespeare. But these are organised, or integrated, into “Brand Shakespeare.”

This is brand integration of multiple product lines but also the integration of the brand into lives and plots (teaching, classroom works, everyday language, and scholarship). It results in the integration of multiple products into/under one name, Shakespeare, and drives the name’s recognisability higher — which is the purpose of branding. Shakespeare-as-brand means that related images are internalised into a conceptual whole, called, simply, “Shakespeare.”

All this means we can consider Shakespeare as a multidimensional object.

2 Properties and Brand Management

A brand is the outcome of objectives, commonly called “design.” This brings back intentionality, whether of making the First Folio, bowdlerising, or what might be thought of as contemporisation. We can think of this as brand management. A brand is a sign with considerable symbolic value (and hence copyright and trade laws that protect logos), and brand management is the attempt to determine and channelise this value. Before examining brand management, a few properties of the brand as interface may be listed.

(a) Multimodal: The interface is a communicative frame that unifies and separates disparate spaces, wherein interaction or exchange can occur independent of the surrounding context. The interface itself is scattered across several surfaces and media (print, digital, film). Shakespeare might “belong” to the artificial system of literature today, or more specifically, English literature. But as a brand Shakespeare functions as an interface, or a frame, of mediation. The category “literature” was not current in early modern England, so Shakespeare at that point was not considered “literature.”

During his time, there was an increase in printing and literacy (although the concept of literacy itself is a 19th century one). Plays were published in quarto form and also staged, which meant that the stories were circulating in more than one format, and as critics have noted, one cannot rank “high” and “low” readership (Newcomb, cited in Henderson 2007: 19). Thus Venus and Adonis (printed in 1594) had 10 reprints by 1617, according to E K Chambers (Henderson 2007: 20). What I am arguing here is that Shakespeare, even during his age, mediated multiple genres, formats, and readership, from page to stage, as he does today. Like a brand, he is multimodal, protean.

(b) Multiple Meanings: The interface is a frame, and it connects and separates the producer and consumer in particular ways. Thus brands are believed by marketers and producers to generate particular meanings for consumers. Producers seek to determine the identities and meanings that the consumers find when they interact with a brand-as-interface. While brand management is the deliberate organisation of this interface, it assumes a certain performativity of the brand itself. That is, as the brand emerges as a set of relations between products, it begins to acquire a self-organising, recursive logic that cannot be reduced to the strategies of social actors or the objectives of the producer/s.

This simply means Shakespeare as a brand or interface can generate his own dynamic. Consumers find meaning within Shakespeare independent of what the producer (whether Norton or Vishal Bharadwaj) might intend as an objective. Thus the brand as interface may promote or inhibit exchanges between producers and consumers.

(c) Reformulation: Design activity, or brand management, is not directed at some final goal, but entails a frequent reformulation of goals. This means a brand feeds on itself, continuously recasting itself. Brand Shakespeare, from First Folio to the manga, had different goals at different points in space and time. Bowdlerisation (after Thomas Bowdler, who produced in 1754 a “family Shakespeare,” having expurgated much of the playwright’s offensive material) was intended to produce a certain kind of Shakespeare, just as manga Shakespeare does. Initial conditions and procedures — protocols of reading and consumption — are no longer valid, even though within specific domains (such as literature classrooms) references are made to older forms of reading Shakespeare.

This last means that the brand’s history and protocols of reading are invoked within specific domains to show present-day departures from them. The goal is no longer, in these cases, to discern an Elizabethan world picture, but rather to gesture at the Elizabethan world picture to show how it excluded gender and race issues. This reformulation of protocols is crucial to keeping the brand relevant.

(d) Transnational: Turning to the environment of the brand (by which I mean the factors of production made visible), in some cases, the origins of a brand are made very visible (Swiss watches are an example). Actor David Garrick built a temple to Shakespeare at Hampton, on the Thames, in 1756. It is the only known shrine to the playwright. The shrine is a memorial but also a protocol of reading Shakespeare as a local (English) cultural icon beside another icon, the Thames. The village of Stratford-upon-Avon became a site of literary pilgrimage from the end of the 18th century, despite that except for a passing reference to the neighbouring village of Wincot in The Taming of the Shrew, Shakespeare’s texts have nothing of this locality in them (Watson 2007: 199). These were attempts to give Shakespeare a local habitation and a name, even as the tourism industry sought to brand the village after Bill.
But in most cases now, with distributed processes of production, the origins of Shakespeare-as-brand are rendered invisible and irrelevant. The Shakespeare interface/brand that was once tied to specific locales and locations (England) is now global. It is interesting to see that a chapter in a book on Shakespeare and national culture (by John J Joughin) is devoted to transnational Shakespeare. This spatial flexibility of Shakespeare-as-brand is akin to Nike, for instance, where the specific relations of production in specific locations are not inscribed on the interface, thereby implicitly gesturing at its globality. What we are looking at here is the perceptual similarity of Shakespeare-as-brand across origins and spaces.

But what is also interesting in the study of Shakespeare-as-brand is the increased emphasis on seeing the origins of his own work in transnational and trans-historic frames. Texts like Carole Levine's and John Watkins' Shakespeare's Foreign Worlds (2009) or John Giles' Shakespeare and the Geography of Difference (1994) demonstrate how Shakespeare's internal environment (of his plays, creativity, or sources) was itself multilocal. Thus, if the outside-in story of the brand suggests a shift from local to global, the inside-out story of the brand also suggests the same thing now.

3 Declarative Sign

Brands thrive as a result of not only objectives, but also objections. Shakespeare is also the effect of objections — the resistance to Shakespeare studies, and the tracking of racist, misogynist, and other tendencies in his work. (Emma French in her 2006 study of the film marketing of Shakespeare argues that a mix of irreverence and awe arises out of the anxiety around the marketing of Shakespeare, and proposes that “faithful” adaptations often fail whereas irreverent productions are commercial successes. Thus a greater amount of irreverence seems to make Shakespeare more appealing in the 20th century.) Here the brand may be fruitfully read as a symbol, a sign of the third variety as identified by semiotician C S Peirce (the first two being iconic and indexical). This kind of sign is a declarative. It is not a single thing, but a general type which, it is agreed through convention, shall be significant. The sign here is an argument, a set of typifications.

Brand management involves the conscious mediation of the iconicity (suggesting the quality of what it denotes) and indexicality (suggesting a more existen
tial connection with that object it denotes) of the sign so that an argument emerges around the logo. Logos are ubiquitous, iterable. This last is at once a semiotic and a cultural iterability. Through numerous repetitions, Shakespeare-as-brand acquires a certain semantic autonomy. I propose that the brand or logo “Shakespeare” can be represented or reproduced with absolutely no external referent, whether to his plays, life, loves, or texts. The repetition of the logo — Shakespeare's famous portrait (the Droysheott engraving that appeared as the frontispiece of the First Folio, and is perhaps the most recognisable Shakespeare face), in this instance but the very name too — secures the familiarity of the brand through endless permutations and combinations. I refer to this as cultural legibility because as a brand or logo “Shakespeare” signals not just a set of texts but also an entire set of products, services, ideologies, and institutions across the world. Texts, plays, sonnets, love poetry, quotable quotes, and emblematic figures (Hamlet, Lear, Macbeth — themselves symbols) across multiple cultural contexts. The name might be invoked to make derisive comments (“He thinks he is Shakespeare!”), to show off, or to make a self-evident point (“Hamlet-like”).

In modern contexts, there is a certain indexicality to brands and logos (Armani, Microsoft, Apple, Martha Stewart), where there is an existential connection between the logo and the founder-person. It is assumed the founder-person will die and the logo will have to live on after. Therefore the attempt is to convert these signs into icons, to which I now turn.

4 Secular Icon

Shakespeare as a cultural icon is founded on both cultural iterability and cultural legibility. Shakespeare, I propose, constitutes what Vicky Goldberg calls “secular icons.” I take secular icons to be representations that inspire some degree of awe — perhaps mixed with dread, compassion, or aspiration — and that stand for an epoch or a system of beliefs. Although photographs easily acquire symbolic significance, they are not merely symbolic, they do not merely allude to something outside themselves … for photographs intensely and specifically represent their subjects. But the images I think of as icons almost instantly acquired symbolic overtones and larger frames of reference that endowed them with national or even world-wide significance. They concentrate the hopes and fears of millions and provide an instant and effortless connection to some deeply meaningful moment in history. They seem to summarise such complex phenomena as the powers of the human spirit or of universal destruction (quoted in Brink 2000: 136–37).

Shakespeare's status as cultural icon is evidenced in his continued constructed relevance to the cultural formations, some corporatised, some amateur, that give meaning to protests and critiques in entirely new domains, whether in politics or literary studies, media productions, or protest writing. (In the 1960s and 1970s, Boris Pasternak's translations of Macbeth and King Lear were used by Grigory Kozintsev for film versions that critiqued the government, censorship, and the corruption of Russian society.) This of course brings back the whole debate about Shakespeare's universal relevance and dominance (as late as 2007, people were speaking of his “malleable qualities, combined with the timelessness of his plot structures and characters” [Giles 2007: 14]), but secular signs do function, as semioticians tell us as “summaries” of “complex phenomena.”

As an icon, “Shakespeare” enables making what Lury calls “abductive inferences about the possibilities of objects” (2004: 69). The icon when deployed, say, in connection with another playwright, a film adaptation, or even a joke, enables us to conjecture possibilities on qualities such as genius, creativity, the use of the English language, and the institution of literature itself. Through iterability and legibility — no doubt the result of mediation and manipulation — Shakespeare as an icon serves the purpose of becoming a part of the social and cultural
imaginari. Shakespeare as an icon is now shared through narratives, myths, symbols, rituals (including fans), and collective memory so that all around the world people see themselves, with all their diversity, as those who recognise the name of Shakespeare.

5 Endurance
The brand is a set of relations between products in time where information about competitors and the consumer is fed back into production so as to make the brand itself dynamic. The Shakespeare effect is at once the set of relations between the First Folio and later texts, such as prefaces to Shakespeare (by John Dryden, Johnson, Arnold, Coleridge, T S Eliot, and so on). The making of authoritative and definitive texts — Norton, Arden, Signet — are part of this process. But also, the emendations and referencing are relations across texts in time. Information about predecessor texts, later editions, and details of the consumption of adaptations feed back into how later works/editions are produced. There is a discernible Shakespeare info-loop. If continuity is the very nature of brands, Shakespeare’s endurance as a brand suggests a polychronicity, across time and space. This is precisely because the brand maintains some kind of homeostatic stability across multiple genres, media, and narratives, even when this stability or core values are being called into question.

The questioning is now an integral part of the production process. Postcolonial or transnational Shakespeare implicitly or even explicitly gesture at the multiple, entangled, and messy histories of Shakespeare. This means that the intervals between different productions function as a continuum, or flow. Just as in production, including cultural production, we speak after Arjun Appadurai of disjunctures and difference, we cannot see the intervals of Shakespeare products as discrete units. Rather, we see these disjunctures and variants as part of the operationality of the brand. The operationality is the associations we bring to the brand, no matter where or in what form he is produced. When we speak of Brand Shakespeare, I suggest, we are witnessing, ironically, an “intensification” of the values with which the brand is associated through practices of targeting, criticism, and positioning of latter day editions (politically correct Shakespeare, feminist Shakespeare, postcolonial Shakespeare, and so on). Shakespeare-as-brand comes to function as a specular or even speculative device for magnifying one set of associations and then another.

Brands are “markers of the edge between the aesthetic space of an image or text and the institutional space of a regime of value which frames and organises aesthetic space” (Frow 2002). This could be postcolonial, feminist, national, regional, or linguistic values and critiques mounted on Shakespeare-as-brand. His “association” with English identity, and then morphing into a transnational icon means there is a contest, or conjunction, between aesthetic space and particular social, political, commercial, and moral regimes of value. Shakespeare is therefore the brand that effects and is effected by hyperlinkages.

This occurs even in strange fields. When Jane Goodall, perhaps the world’s most famous primatologist and Dale Peterson were working on their book on chimpanzees, titled appropriately, Visions of Caliban: On Chimpanzees and People (1993), their overriding motif was Caliban (from The Tempest) to make the comparisons between humans and chimpanzees while making larger arguments about the social construction of animality and the discourses of species and racial difference. The book itself constantly uses quotes from The Tempest as chapter titles and epigraphs. It is this capacity of the brand for hyperlinkages that leads Lanier to speak of Shakespeare as an “open signifier.” This leads me to another point.

6 Iconic Signification
Latter day texts in their appropriations drive up the interest not only in the brand’s supposed mutability, but also in its availability and appeal to different segments of the consumer-reader, whether Marxist, feminist, conservative, or postcolonial. That is, in the process of producing different adaptations of Shakespeare, we can see market segmentation and product differentiation of the product even as these are then integrated into the brand. This is the iconic signification of the brand. This means that the “personality that sustains the iconic logo need not necessarily be embodied in an individual, fictional or real, alive or dead, but is instead an abstract amalgam of qualities” (Lury 2004: 75).

When product differentiation and market segmentation produce brand integration around the icon, it suggests that as a brand Shakespeare has many forms of being. In marketing jargon, they speak of the multilayered character of the brand’s ontological existence. Shakespeare-as-brand comprises a mode of production, a technical or physical support, and a set of conventions that articulate or work on that support. He is a dynamic platform or support for practice. He exists across platforms, and the platforms are produced by Shakespeare-as-brand. To return to Lanier (2010: 104) once again,

Shakespeare’s association with a mass-cultural product, medium, or genre lends that item a moiety of highbrow depth, ‘universality,’ authority, continuity with established tradition, or seriousness of purpose, while at the same time the association with mass culture lends Shakespeare street credibility, broad intelligibility, and celebrity.

While the commodity has its value amplified through the introduction of the Shakespeare motif, it also means, or ensures, that Shakespeare as a brand is preserved, if nothing else, for its very everyday usability, even as an irreverent symbol, as a joke.

7 Avenue of Aspiration
Another proposition I would like to forward here, in line with Olsson’s argument (2013), is that as a brand Shakespeare is positioned between the different needs of local populations and production companies. These different needs are relevant and accessible local productions, and the simultaneous “connection” to an iconic Shakespeare tradition. That is, as a brand, Shakespeare has represented, in every age, the tensions between local traditions and cosmopolitan aspirations, of local populations who
aspire to a global cultural frame through the only iconic sign they can imagine — Shakespeare.

What I am proposing is that Shakespeare-as-brand survives as a route to cosmopolitan aspirations of societies and cultures, with or without knowledge of the plays themselves. The World Shakespeare Festival is comparable to the only other global festivity that showcases the world’s cosmopolitan aspirations, and the only one, perhaps that predates the World Shakespeare Festival — the Olympic Games. It comes as no surprise, therefore, that the 2012 World Shakespeare Festival with 69 productions, seven exhibitions, six film screenings, nine short plays, 263 amateur shows, and 28 digital commissions and films was a part of the London Olympics. It reached eight million people worldwide. It is in this cosmopolitan imaginary of a global civil society that Shakespeare finds his greatest support.

The UK’s Arts and Humanities Research Council-funded project at the University of Birmingham, “Interrogating Cultural Value in Twenty-first-Century England: The Case of Shakespeare,” therefore seeks to develop a “sophisticated and historically informed understanding of the value of Shakespeare in 21st century culture.” This could very well be the foundation for understanding similar cultural values associated with Shakespeare across the world. The global knowledge society is now constituted not by experts and professors but by ordinary people — and they keep Shakespeare going. At the World Shakespeare Festival, embodying this cross-cultural brand image, Shakespeare’s Richard III and King John were performed alongside the work of Mexican dramatist Luis Mario Moncada, who wrote a play about his country’s 15th century dynastic conflicts referencing Shakespeare’s histories. And in April 2012, in a six-week event, “Globe to Globe,” companies from across the world performed all 37 of Shakespeare’s plays in 37 different languages. Thus, when Shakespeare scholar Marjorie Garber spoke at Memphis College on Shakespeare, she titled the lecture, “Occupy Shakespeare: Shakespeare and/in the Humanities,” appropriating “Occupy” for her purposes. Comparisons have also been made between King Lear and the Occupy campaigns.

**In Conclusion**

We now gather together the above points in the form of a tentative thesis. Shakespeare-as-brand represents the making of an image or icon “commons.” Shakespeare is no longer a proper name but a common name, with an everyday stylisation. I here use Hardt and Negri’s work on commons in *Empire.*

Constructing concepts and what they call ‘common names’ is really an activity that combines the intelligence and the action of the multitude, making them work together. Constructing concepts means making exist in reality a project that is a community. There is no other way to construct concepts but to work in a common way. This commonality is, from the standpoint of the phenomenology of production, from the standpoint of the epistemology of the concept, and from the standpoint of practice, a project in which the multitude is completely invested (2000: 302–03).

The investment we make in Shakespeare, as consumers, film-goers, readers, students, and fans, entails seeing the brand as playing some role, however minimal, in our lives — even if it is in the form of “to be or not to be” (one of the most quoted lines in English). I am proposing here that despite Shakespeare representing — and this is undeniable — an instance of “soft capitalism” (Nigel Thrift’s 1997 term for the cultural turn in capitalism and its reliance on the knowledge economy), he cannot be restricted to it. The knowledge relations Shakespeare partakes in is not confined to academia or Hollywood but is a matter of everyday interactivity. Thus, in an age when screen and its adjunct, visual culture, dominate the cultural field, it is no surprise that there is such a huge Shakespeare comic book industry that reterritualises Shakespeare for the masses.

It is in this everydayness of Shakespeare, requiring both cultural legibility and iterability (qualities of a consistent brand), that we may find the source of his popularity. When Neil Gaiman, arguably one of the most popular writers in mass culture as well as “high culture” today, appropriates A Midsummer Night’s Dream in *The Sandman,* he continues, for instance, to retain the sense of poetic creation as magical. This, according to Brown, flies in the face of literary criticism and theory (which seeks to demystify literature), where the “responses to his (Shakespeare’s) plays within popular culture expressed and appealed to a more fully human faculty for wonder which is capacious enough to embrace a counterbalancing scepticism” (2009: 174). Thus Shakespeare’s magic is now part of mass cultural magic today, making him our contemporary, to borrow the title of Jan Kott’s classic work from 1964.

Shakespeare is a brand of massive cultural authority that delivers information to the consumer reader, bestows cultural capital, but is also built up as a brand through the information coming in — reception — from the consumer, or what I am calling interactivity. Shakespeare as commons continues to gather — and this is a prominent thesis — considerable cultural capital because of the iterability of the brand in mass/popular forms and media that now possess the maximum cultural legibility (the graphic novel or the Hollywood romance). Without this core value of cultural capital, Shakespeare would not be a brand sought after by all and sundry, in multiple forms and formats. This is possible even more in the digital age because the Shakespearean page, stage, and image are all available simultaneously on a screen today. Shakespeare is an interactive, global archive.

In another essay, Rumbold (who is associated with the Birmingham project on cultural value and Shakespeare) has argued persuasively that institutions such as the Royal Shakespeare Company, the Shakespeare Birthplace Trust or the Globe, “connect value to their work by co-opting the kinds of digital activities that the public perform independently of them” (2010: 329). I see this as an instance of the interactivity and vernacular creativity that contributes to Shakespeare-as-brand and the cultural value of traditional institutions. It is in user-generated or even just plain amateur adaptations of Shakespeare, functioning as information or entertainment, that we need to seek (and find) the continuity of his brand image. Users, one could hazard a guess, “spread the word”
about Shakespeare, and therefore become alternative forms of authorship, and constitute new sources of “authority” over Shakespeare-the-text.

As early as 1997, Knorr-Cetina spoke of the new knowledge society. A knowledge society is not simply a society of more experts, of technological infra- and information structures, and of specialist rather than participant interpretations. It means that knowledge cultures have spilled and woven their tissue into society, the whole set of processes, experiences and relationships that wait on knowledge and unfold with its articulation ... We need to trace the ways in which knowledge has become constitutive of social relations (pp 9–10).

This argument might work for Shakespeare-as-brand. Vernacular creativity, user-generated buzz, and alternative forms of authorship — mostly amateurish, non-specialist — constitute the knowledge about Shakespeare. The presumption that Shakespeare-as-brand has been produced by specialist, professional, and “high cultural” corporate organisations needs to be rethought now. Knowledge practices about Shakespeare are not circumscribed within academia, serious publishing houses, or the Royal Shakespeare Company. Shakespeare as everyday is, one could even say, a constitutive of social relations — in the quotes we use so often, for example. The brand exists and is reinforced in its symbolic value due to its inscription in the everyday social. Shakespeare is not the object of knowledge, but is mainly information. If the brand, as Lury argues, is an “object that is both constituted in and constitutive of information” (2004: 125–26), then Shakespeare-as-brand circulates endlessly in information about him, even as he makes the information — both being the work of non-specialist everyday life.

To put it differently, it is in the interactivity of the audience (possessing cultural capital and authority) with the brand that Shakespeare becomes common. In the world’s civil society, we can now postulate the existence of a Shakespearean commons akin to the creative commons, beyond copyright, beyond patents, beyond adherence or fidelity to a tradition or origins.

NOTES

1 There is an academic branding as well, which leads on to other kinds of branding. And this branding is also, like consumer branding, hierarchical. Thus we do not see Charles Dickens cigarettes or Jane Austen T-shirts, but we do see Shakespeare products.

2 Pendulum Illustrated, Graphic Shakespeare, Picture Thist!, Comic Book Livewire Shakespeare, No Fear Graphic Shakespeare, and Wonderland Illustrated Classics are a few of the better-known comic book Shakespeare.

REFERENCES


