The background of the slide features a collection of white, three-dimensional block letters scattered on a grey surface. The letters are in various orientations and positions, creating a sense of depth and movement. Some letters are in sharp focus, while others are blurred in the background. The overall aesthetic is clean and modern.

Shakespeare in Popular Culture

The Growth of a Shakespeare Vulgate

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Motto:

“The play we watched last night,” Danby said. “*Romeo and Juliet*—why didn’t you like it?”

“It was rather horrible, sir. It was a burlesque, really—tawdry, cheap, the beauty of the lines corrupted and obscured.”

“Do you know the lines?”

“Some of them.”

“Say them. Please.”

“Yes, sir. At the close of the balcony scene, when the two lovers are parting, Juliet says, *Good night, good night! Parting is such sweet sorrow, that I shall say good night till it be morrow.* And Romeo answers: *Sleep dwell upon thine eyes, peace in thy breast! Would I were sleep and peace, so sweet to rest!* Why did they leave that out, sir? Why?”

“Because we’re living in a cheap world,” Danby said, surprised at his sudden insight, “and in a cheap world, precious things are worthless. Shay—say the lines again, please, Miss Jones.”

“*Good night, good night! Parting is such sweet sorrow, that I shall say good night till it be morrow—*”

(Robert F. Young, *Thirty Days Had September*)

No escape from Shakespeare there.¹

“The answer to the question ‘Why Shakespeare?’ must be ‘Who else is there?’”²

Shakespeare’s major³ works have made a profound and lasting impression on later theatre, literature and even language, an inkling which is felt even today as an authoritative energy that feeds linguistic and literary fields within the realm of cultural constructs worldwide. This is to a certain extent due to the fact that, as Ben Johnson put it, Shakespeare ‘was not of an age, but for all time’. Our education as readers of English Literature has been mainly Shakespearean, under the shadow of the Bard. His name has become synonymous with the two words ‘great literature’. He seems to be everywhere: he is quoted and adapted daily in newspaper headlines and in commercials for a wide range of products. In British and American schools, he is the only compulsory author in the National Curriculum and in Advanced Level English Literature. He even has a theatre company named after him. When you enter Warwickshire the sign says ‘Warwickshire: Shakespeare’s County’. Even now, after so many years, we are still speaking in Shakespearean terms, first of all because,

¹ Maynard Mack, *Everybody’s Shakespeare. Reflections Chiefly on the Tragedies*, University of Nebraska Press (June 28, 1994), p. 4.

² Harold Bloom, *Shakespeare. The Invention of the Human*, New York: Riverhead Books, 1998, p.1.

³ In the article entitled “Give an Account of Shakespeare and Education, Showing Why You Think They Are Effective and What You Have Appreciated About Them. Support Your Comments with Precise References,” included in Russ McDonald’s *An Anthology of Criticism and Theory 1945-2000*, Alan Sinfield discusses about which of Shakespeare’s works should be considered as a part of the canon and, consequently, important for English Literature studies in schools and universities. Sinfield is, in a way sceptical when speaking about Shakespeare and the educational system insisting on the fact that ‘Shakespeare remains as the great witness to the universality of literature experience, but his position is absurd, for he is a representative of a category, of a theory, of which he is the only undoubted instance. [...] Yet it is unlikely that Shakespeare’s significance as a cultural token will diminish – it is too firmly established outside education as well as inside. [...] The plays may be taught so as to foreground their historical construction in Renaissance England and in the institutions of criticism, dismantling the metaphysical concepts in which they seem at present to be entangled, and especially the construction of gender and sexuality. Teaching Shakespeare’s plays and writing books about them is unlikely to bring down capitalism, but it is a point for intervention.’ pp. 561-562.

as Maynard Mack put it, ‘Shakespeare is the only writer in world literature who actually comes close to belonging to the world’⁴. Shakespeare still has a sort of pervasive influence on the English language and on Western and global culture. Many creative artists have been inspired by his plays to compose works of their own. Familiarity with his works does indeed allow an enhanced understanding of the music of great composers such as Mendelssohn and Berlioz, Prokofiev and Britten, of paintings by Reynolds and Blake, of modern novels such as John Updike’s *Claudius and Gertrude* and Jane Smiley’s *A Thousand Acres*, of the thousands of films and television sitcoms that make allusions to Shakespeare, and of references to him by politicians and journalists, preachers and comedians. He is a permanent presence in our daily speech: almost all and sundry uses words like ‘flaming youth’, ‘to the manner born’, ‘rich but not gaudy’, ‘more honoured in the breach than the observance’, ‘it smells to heaven’, ‘hoist with his own petard’, ‘the dog will have his day’, not to mention ‘life’s but a walking shadow’ or ‘more matter with less art’, ‘lack-lustre eye’, ‘star-crossed lovers’ and many more. But hidden under the cloak of social and, consequently, cultural changes that wear the garments of a crisis in English literary studies, Shakespeare’s brilliance of thought, meaning and language, his cognitive acuity, linguistic energy and power of invention were oddly strained to put on a series of masks that are not suitable for such a persona. He is no longer the ‘National Poet’ or the greatest author of verse that ever existed, no longer an icon which represents the alleged High Culture. The Bard of Avon is nowadays a fruitful spring of entertainment and wit that can be used in everything, be it advertising, commercials, Sunday evening shows or low budget films. Using Hamlet’s famous line ‘to be or not to be’ in a commercial that props up cell phone services might not have the effects a producer or the telephone company wants.

⁴ Mack, *Everybody’s Shakespeare. Reflections Chiefly on the Tragedies*, p.1.

After being the object of 'bardolatry' (as George Bernard Shaw calls it), Shakespeare gradually became a figure associated with matters of sexuality, racism, Marxism feudal propaganda and chocolate commercials. Starting with the 50s, Shakespeare and his works have experienced a prominent propagation of 'new accents' and methods (most of them radical approaches) in the sense of a re-making of his writings from the viewpoint of transnationalism and social, economical and political changes, but the significance and usefulness of this remaking has not always been noticeable.

At a textual level, this distorted image of Shakespeare and his works has been shifting, focusing on such issues as sexism (the feminist and psychoanalytical readings), Marxism, political correctness, post-colonialism (New Historicism and Materialist Criticism), and many more. But the questions that come to one's mind are the following: what kind of Shakespeare do we read? Was Shakespeare really sexist? Did he think of disrupting sexual difference, of meaning and gender and how the two merge together? Did he think of being politically correct? Was Shakespeare an ardent devotee of colonialism? Was he a mere product of his age, a mingling of social forces? If so, why did not Marlowe, or other rival playwrights of the age, create such masterpieces as 'Hamlet' or 'Macbeth'? Why were social energies more productive in the son of Stratford than in Ben Jonson? After all, they shared the same social and cultural milieu, the same disjunctions between ideas of affection and order. Instead, they gave us fluent caricatures rather than men and women. Did he just try to pass on something that would remain imprinted forever in the heart and thought of his readers and viewers? Are we brilliant or was he brilliant before us?

(Post-)modernism brings to the fore a new Shakespeare, a no-fear Shakespeare, a Shakespeare that speaks not only the language of his age but also the language of our age. He can be western movie Shakespeare, emo Shakespeare, tomato sauce Shakespeare and chocolate Shakespeare. The Bard of Avon can also be used instead of the Coca-Cola banners that are placed at the entrance of a fast-food corner stand. Shakespeare is as famous as the Coca-Cola Company is. Psychoanalytical Shakespeare is the perfect patient who speaks in verse, feminist Shakespeare talks about the role of women in a patriarchal world, new historicist Shakespeare informs us about his age and its customs, commercial Shakespeare wrote Othello for chocolate advertisements, emo Shakespeare wrote tragedies for youngsters to read on the tube, hyper Shakespeare wrote interesting quotes so that one may use them on blogs and internet journals. He wrote so that one may say 'to be or not to be, that is the question' without even knowing the title of the play; he wrote Hamlet so that one may use his name for garage rock bands or cigar names. There is a pocket Shakespeare for everyone. 'Shakespeare is the writer you need! Always fresh, at all times for your taste! Always re-fashionable! Buy your Shakespeare Today! Buy your Shakespeare here! Limited edition!' What we now name 'Shakespeare' is not only the author of Hamlet but also an unalleviated and almost incommensurable string of modifications operated on the written text and the text into performance over the centuries. After all, one must admit that the richness of Shakespeare's plays is a cause of great diversity of interpretation and perspectives. Nevertheless, the observer still knows this author as being Shakespeare himself despite these amendments (re-editing, interpretations, productions, adaptations and re-writings of all kinds). This proves that the Shakespeare text is responsive to action upon it, that it cooperates with adaptation, and offering numerous possibilities for transformation and usage. Accordingly, Shakespeare is both one and many, formed but still forming.

To out-Shakespeare Shakespeare

After taking into consideration such enquiries and brooding over the possible answers that can be given, another major issue comes to the fore. After all these years, critics still cannot decide whether Shakespeare was a drastic republican or a diehard royalist, a neo-Platonist or a materialist, a Christian or an atheist. How is it that Shakespeare, who is made accessible through endless performances worldwide, is so impossible to pin down? Surely this mystery at the heart of our culture is worth our full reverence. One possible answer to these questions could reside in the originality of Shakespeare's works manifested as individual endeavour and self-sufficiency. In *The Western Canon* (1994), Harold Bloom sees originality as 'the great scandal that resentment cannot accommodate' especially when talking about Shakespeare. Actually, Bloom goes further by saying that 'Shakespeare remains the most original writer we will ever know' despite the fact that many critics considered him a writer that takes into consideration the myths of the past and re-writes them from another perspective (Greene's 'upstart crow'). Bloom's vision of Shakespeare is rather epistemological: he begins with the remark that Shakespeare's utmost accomplishment is the creation of uniquely undeniable figures that not only change in the course of the plays but also have the capacity to alter themselves through the power of their innermost reflexive consciousness. Such characters, which are 'free artists of themselves' – as Hegel called Shakespeare's personages – do not appear as the leading energies of a narrative, or as rhetorical figurations, or as reflexes of Shakespeare, but more as autonomous self-regulating beings. Thus, these characters become not images of a certain social or cultural background, but mirrors to our own conscience:

Shakespeare... suggested more contexts for explaining us than we are capable of supplying for explaining his characters... (He) so opens his characters to multiple perspectives that they become analytical instruments for judging you. If you are a moralist, Falstaff outrages you; if you are rancid, Rosalind exposes you; if you are dogmatic, Hamlet evades you forever.
(Bloom, 1994: 64)

In addition to this, a common reader would agree that the school of the ages has taught us that it is originality which kept Shakespeare on the buoyant line and this is why he is still the centre of the western canon. Originality is Shakespeare's aesthetic supremacy (Bloom, 1994: 64). He is at the heart of the canon and so many thousands of books have been devoted to him that even specialists find it difficult to keep up with the literature relating to just one aspect of his work.

In the end, we can all consent that originality makes an author universal, which offers possibilities of being interpreted in many ways over the centuries: the same process can be connected to such names as Homer, Dostoevsky, Tolstoy, Dante and other major authors of world literature. Shakespeare's unique strength lies in the capability of his works to be ahead of any conceptual and imagistic approach, ahead of any of us, enclosing us in his thought. Whatever viewpoint we choose in order to assess Shakespearean characters, we find that, through their capacity for self-exploration, they have got there before us. In this sense, Bloom states the following:

You cannot illuminate him with a new doctrine, be it Marxist or Freudianism or Demanian linguistic scepticism. Instead, he will illuminate the doctrine,

not by prefiguration but by postfiguration as it were: all of Freud that matters most is there in Shakespeare already, with a persuasive critique besides. (Bloom, 1994:25)

In other words, Shakespeare's masterpieces not only allow the application of certain theories but contain at the same time their deconstruction. 'Or, to vary my point', Bloom continues, 'a Shakespearean reading of Freud illuminates and overwhelms the text of Freud; a Freudian reading of Shakespeare reduces Shakespeare, or would if we could bear a reduction that crosses the line into absurdities of loss'. (Bloom, 1994: 26)

Bloom also insists on the fact that during the ages there have been certain changes at the level of aesthetics, namely, each age has brought a new perspective of literature. However, these new perspectives are not necessarily positive:

Shakespeare, whose aesthetic supremacy has been confirmed by the universal judgement of four centuries, is now "historicized" into pragmatic diminishment, precisely because his uncanny aesthetic power is a scandal to any ideologue. (Bloom, 1994: 23)

The argument against these hardly noticeable aesthetic changes is that these changes do not come from the community, but rather from class struggle. It is the community which is awarded 'leisure for meditation'. The aesthetic authority or, in other words, the aesthetic power is a result of the 'energies that are essentially solitary rather than social' (Bloom, 1994: 37). As an example of forces that try to undermine Shakespeare's aesthetic value, Bloom recalls new-critics, Foucault-inspired new-historicists, neo-Marxists, feminists,

structuralists, psychoanalysts, deconstructionists, Afro-centrists, and other trends, each claiming sole possession of the truth (they actually believe in no truth at all, or in relative truths & values) when speaking about Shakespeare's works, although their contribution is scarcely noticeable. The author of *The Western Canon* groups all these under the generic name of the School of Resentment.

Shakespeare and the toothless terror of fashion

In the Victorian age, Shakespeare was the beneficiary of a type of widespread popularity based on the fact that performances of his plays were attended by all levels of society and more and more people started to have Shakespeare's plays on their shelves beside the Bible and other authors of world literature. One could say that there was a wide consumption of Shakespeare, and there is a good explanation for the use of the word 'consumption'. In such terms consumption refers to the fact that people did not necessarily think very carefully about what they consumed. They did not filter out individual meanings implied in the succession of words they heard, but rather appreciated the wholeness of the play. This was probably due to the amalgamation of his plays with other forms of popular culture. Rather than being performed on their own, as an icon of elite culture (high culture) unavailable somewhere else, his plays were performed with dancers, mimes, jigs, interludes and other similar things. Despite the fact that the plays might be performed as they are, they were usually accompanied by lighter fare specifically designed for amusement and leisure. In those times people saw the Shakespearean text as entertainment. They actually identified themselves with certain characters from the plays, they were aware of the human aspects

that were displayed, they could absorb the tragedy, they could perceive the pain and the pathos. Accordingly, they took from Shakespeare what they needed, namely entertainment, and perceived the Shakespearean text as the mechanism of amusement. Nevertheless, this popularity automatically implied a process of cannibalization which chewed and swallowed the original text into other texts which deviated from it in a barbaric manner. However, as the nineteenth century hastened to its end, such practices started to disappear and the plays were performed alone, as a sort of dry dose of high culture to be taken as drug, healthy but never agreeable. Consequently, in the twentieth century, Shakespeare becomes separated from popular culture, as opposed to the widespread popularity he enjoyed in the nineteenth. Yet, he continued to be popular, theatres were still full. However, he becomes the image of the unfamiliar, no longer part of a culture that is accessible to every member of the society. The Bard of Avon becomes the sole possession of the educated portions of society, too complicated for the low segments of the public. In a sort of turnaround of the nineteenth century mode of presenting Shakespeare, the twentieth century has sliced the plays as well as the legend of the bard, and introduced them into a wide variety of popular culture forms. From ads to films, pieces of Shakespeare hang within other works, sometimes motivated, sometimes as pure ornaments triggering a sort of recognition. In such situations, the question that comes to one's mind is what sort of purpose Shakespeare serves in these forms.

The unconscious levelling and the NFS (a.k.a. No Fear Shakespeare)

The death of Shakespeare – or at least the death of integral Shakespeare – in popular culture meant the entrapment of his figure and works in the alleged high culture and the narrowing of interest when it comes to studying Shakespeare. Nevertheless, he remained the symbol of the genius and this is why he started to be more and more widely used in movies, commercials and other types of industries. The results are fairly predictable. The assimilation of the Shakespearean text gave birth to extreme deviations from the original. For instance, in the economic climate of the mid-1970s and 1980s a sort of deviant Shakespeare film emerged. These types of films did not have the intention of being firmly connected to the original text but they were rather experimental and independent works by directors from an Art School tradition and not from a theatrical one. As an example, Derek Jarman's *Tempest* released in 1979, and *The Angelic Conversation* (1985) created surprising and even upsetting images on videotape and on low-grade film. In addition to this, they also appropriate Shakespeare for gay susceptibility and the spirit of idiosyncrasy. Thus, Jarman's Prospero is a morose figure in a gloomy and sinister house scrawled with astrological scribble. His *Tempest* finally ends in dissolution. Another example is the film directed by Michael Almereyda released in 2000, in which the ghost of Hamlet's father is seen first by the use of surveillance cameras. The movie continues using all sorts of modern props in contrast with Shakespeare's out fashioned and extreme metaphorical language. Thus, at a certain moment in the movie the king's ghost disappears in a Pepsi machine.

If we are to think on a more theoretical echelon, nowadays we witness a process of unconscious levelling. Namely, the Shakespearean text is translated into a contemporary discourse which

appeals to the modern reader viewer by shocking the eye with excessive disruptions and remakings. The sole goal of these remakings is that of bringing a lost simplicity back, and to recreate a meaning which is apparently lost for the modern reader. This process of levelling derives from the need of manufacturing a Shakespeare for everyone, accessible to everyone, always fresh and available. The unconscious levelling also refers to a type of contemporizing old texts and situations, namely it levels the difference between the old and the new by cutting scenes and lines in order to make the Shakespearean text appropriate for the modern taste. Thus, instead of the well known lines from *Hamlet*

*To be or not to be? That is the question –
Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer
The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune,
Or to take arms against a sea of troubles,
And, by opposing, end them?*⁵

the modern reader gets the following:

*The question is: is it better to be alive or dead?
Is it nobler to put up with all the nasty things that luck throws your way?
Or to fight against all those troubles
By simply putting an end to them, once and for all?*⁶

Barnes & Noble's website entitled Sparknotes offers this so-called 'no fear Shakespeare' for free, demonstrating to young learners of English literature that Shakespeare poses

⁵ William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, III.i.

⁶ Sparknotes, *No Fear Shakespeare*, and URL: <http://nfs.sparknotes.com/> (visited on 2009/03/27).

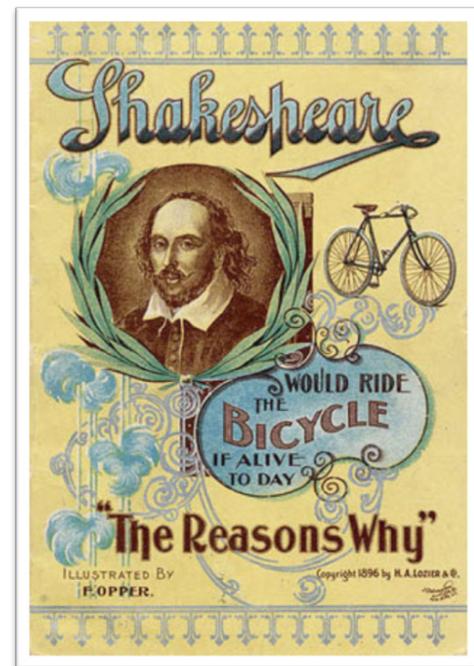
no threat to their understanding. Consequently, one could no longer speak of a kind of Shakespeare which is accessible only to the high culture, but rather one could speak about a Shakespeare which is available even for uneducated persons. The unconscious levelling is visible when the distinction between high culture and low culture becomes ludicrous and is no longer a distinction. By virtue of his familiarity (both through his prominence in academic environments and in the kind of fragmented representation I have spoken of in the previous chapter), he allows a link to be created between high and low/ popular culture. Due to this familiarity, the alleged myth of Shakespeare can be easily understood by a large portion of the public, therefore creating the illusion that the text and the public can be familiar with high culture. In other words, Shakespeare is used to bond the entertainment-oriented members of low/ popular culture with the representatives of high culture. The quest of providing a Shakespeare for the masses is of course a notable quest and deserves our full reverence, but it also implies a risk if the original text is absent in the process of reading/ understanding. These types of rewriting involve a transaction between an ancient text and a modern agenda. The risk is that very often it is the contemporary issue that seems more important, as the plays are refocused towards modern issues. Through this sort of 'translation' of meaning an important part of Shakespeare is lost, namely the immortal part. Shakespeare is first of all famous for his vocabulary and his peculiar way of combining words with powerful imagery in a constellation of remarkable metaphors. One may easily notice that the translated piece is a barbaric reduction of the very beauty of language Shakespeare uses in his works. Because of this reduction the figure of the bard loses its peculiar aspects and becomes a part of the ordinary. The idea is that whatever we consume it is no longer The Shakespeare but a series of alterations put together in a melting pot of resentment.

Shakespeare loved ice-cream but hated the mob

Nowadays, Shakespeare becomes a mass-market item and he is often absorbed as a gesture towards or claim of affiliation with high culture. In this sense he becomes a sort of celebrity even though he is – as a person – dead. In other words, he becomes useful as a brand. Because he and his plays are extensively known to almost any type of public the commercial industry uses him in order to get the message across the borderline of culture. Thus, if one uses the language of Shakespeare, or the imagery of Shakespeare, he or she will get more recognition from the target market. Consequently, people started using Shakespearean lines and situations in almost everything: chocolate and ice-cream ads, patent medicines, ketchup

ads, they even made calendars and almanacs filled with quotations. In Nevada for instance, several gold mines were named after Desdemona and Ophelia. Writers started to use ideas and write sequels to Shakespearean texts or even rewrite some of his plays. Everybody is familiar with such texts of literature as Tom Stoppard's play *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* (1966), W.S. Gilbert of Gilbert and Sullivan's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern* (1974), John Osborne's *A Place Calling Itself Rome* (1973) or Edward Bond's *Lear* (1972) and many others. One could also find Shakespeare used in dime novels which aim at a young audience. He appears as a character, as a muse, as a means of advertising the product. One could also find William Shakespeare's profile on hi5 and write comments on it.

The commercials in which Shakespearean lines, metaphors and situations appear are numerous. Many of them make usage of Yorick's skull, but there is a clear misuse in each of those commercials. One of them is a commercial for Doritos (a triangular shaped type of flavoured tortilla chips) in which two ferrets – one of them being Horatio and the other Hamlet – have the famous discussion about Yorick's skull. Their discussion follows the Shakespearean pattern until one of the ferrets realizes that what they have found is actually a Dorito and not Yorick's skull. The misuse is clear in this case because, after all, how could anyone mistake a chip for a skull (despite the fact that we could suspend this counterargument by thinking that the ferrets were actually incapable of making the difference). Another example is the commercial for a sports channel (rugby league) in which Yorick's skull is used as a rugby ball. Again, as in the case of Doritos, Hamlet's soliloquy with the skull in his hand goes as in the original text, but at a certain moment Hamlet is interrupted by one of the actors (probably Horatio) who suddenly thinks that he is actually playing rugby and uses the skull as a ball with which he scores. Similar to this, there is another commercial which advertises the famous Heinz Ketchup. The viewer sees a young boy performing Hamlet's part and uttering the well known soliloquy 'to be or not to be' in a sort of r&b/ hip-hop manner. The audience is extremely bored



and at a certain moment somebody throws a Heinz ketchup bottle at the young actor. The voice of the *raisonneur* comes at the end of the clip and says that Heinz uses real tomatoes thus triggering the fact that there was a reason why the audience mistook the bottles of ketchup for real tomatoes. Another Heinz commercial displays a man who is sitting at a table with a hamburger in front of him on a plate. The question which bothers his mind is if he should wait for the thick ketchup to come out of the bottle or use a butter knife for that. The solution comes from another personage who says that a squeeze bottle would be more efficient in such cases.



Other types of commercials use not his characters and lines but the Bard himself. This is the case of one commercial which advertises Klondike ice-cream. In this clip Shakespeare himself is asked to write a TV sitcom in exchange of a Klondike bar. At first, the answer is clear: “Methinks not!”, but after having tasted the delicious ice-cream bar (“no room for a stick”) Shakespeare finally accepts and writes the requested sitcom.

Another example is represented by an ad for SIM Global Education Company, in which a god-like voice speaks about the options one has when building his/ her future. Thus, the voice talks about two ways of fabricating a future:

How to make everyone love your work? Option one: the William Shakespeare way. First, find yourself a good pair of tights. Then, show off your bald head. Write comedies with men in tights. Write tragedies with men in tights. And write histories with men in tights. Then, become a pigeon target. Or, try option two: the SIM way.



A third example of commercial is that which advertises a type of writing instruments called The BIC Banana (“which comes in ten expressive colours”). In this case the viewer comes across the never-ending quest of finding a meaning in what Shakespeare was trying to say. The explanation which is found regards the fact that Shakespeare did not have a BIC Banana in order to make himself clear by writing in a simpler way:

For years, Shakespeare struggled to express himself, and today there are still people trying to figure out what he was talking about. ‘To be or not to be?’ what does it mean? If he had a BIC Banana he would have written ‘I am, take it or leave it!’ You could express yourself with a BIC Banana. You could write, sign, draw, mark and go crazy. You don’t find that kind of expressiveness in a ballpoint. In a ballpoint you would get ‘wherefore art thou Romeo?’ in a BIC Banana you’re going to get ‘Romeo, you keep yourself nice, let’s get married!’



The image that this type of commercial creates is in a way a distorted image of Shakespeare. For instance, somebody who has not heard of Shakespeare could think that this ‘individual’

did not have the proper means to express himself and thus has written something which is incoherent and incomprehensible to the modern reader. Secondly, because Shakespeare chose to write 'to be or not to be' instead of 'I am, take it or leave it', that does not mean that he had difficulties in expressing what he wanted to render in his text. In addition to this, the aesthetic value of the original text would be lost and Shakespeare would not be Shakespeare. Moreover, one must admit that, no matter how brilliant he was, Shakespeare wrote in the language of his times and we as readers must take into consideration the fact that maybe, in those times, it was easier for the public to understand the meaning of 'to be or not to be' instead of 'I am, take it or leave it'. Again, as I have mentioned before, the rewritings that we produce today are always seen through the filter of contemporary problems and we have the tendency to insert our problems in the original text. The risk which is implied here is predictable, namely such rewritings offer the possibility of seeing what we want/ need to see.

Another example is represented by an advertisement for cigars. Each of these adverts presents the viewer with a situation in which something bad or unpleasant happens. In one of these commercials, Queen Elizabeth wants to step into the street but cannot do that



because of a puddle. Thus, what is probably Sir Walter Raleigh sacrifices his coat to save the queen from getting her feet wet. The problem is that when she steps on her newly 'paved' way the puddle seems to be deeper than it first appeared and the queen disappears into the waters of the puddle. Sir Walter Raleigh is arrested and imprisoned for conspiring against the queen. While he is in prison he lights a cigar and enjoys the beneficial smoke. The conclusion is that 'Happiness is a cigar called Hamlet, the mild cigar.'

The strange case of Hamlet, Lear, and the insane asylum

Shakespeare's plays have been a continuous source of ideas not only for commercials or for the mass consumption society, but also for psychiatrists who found in his texts all sorts of tests and treatments for the people that were considered insane. For instance, in the 1820s, the English Physician Sir Henry Hallford turned to a well-known scene from *Hamlet* in which Hamlet visits his mother's chamber and confronts her. And in the middle of the scene Hamlet kills Polonius who is hiding behind the screen. This was considered by Hallford a sign that there is something wrong with Hamlet. After he has killed Polonius, Hamlet is visited by the ghost of his father and he begins to talk with the ghost. Consequently, his mother asks him who he is talking to and he replies that he is speaking to his father. He is on the point of leaving when his mother says to him:

*This is the very coinage of your brain.
This bodiless creation, ecstasy
Is very cunning in.⁷*

What Gertrude is trying to say is that she thinks Hamlet has gone mad and started having hallucinations (mad people often talk to ghosts and imaginary creatures). Hamlet's answer is as follows:

*Ecstasy?
My pulse as yours doth temperately keep time
And makes as healthful music. It is not madness
That I have uttered. Bring me to the test,*

⁷ William Shakespeare, *The Tragedie of Hamlet, Prince of Denmarke*, act 3, scene IV.

*And I the matter will reword which madness
Would gambol from.*⁸

Actually, what Hamlet is trying to say is that in order to demonstrate that he is not mad, he is going to rephrase what he has just said, an impossible thing for those touched by madness. In other words, he wants to demonstrate that he is in possession of his faculties. Halford thought that this was an excellent device and consequently established a procedure by which, if somebody had written a will which was contested, one could simply ask the person who wrote it to rephrase the will, and if he could do it in an accurate way the will would be legally binding. The procedure had a tremendous success especially in the United States, until asylum superintendents realised that something was wrong with the procedure. They reached the conclusion that correct rephrasing did not mean that a person was sane, and that it is only an indication that he is able to function competently at that particular instance. Thus, the procedure was scrapped and no longer used.

Another example is represented by the usage of Shakespeare's *King Lear* in trials. For instance, if somebody was trying to demonstrate that a person had gone mad – usually an elderly person who had never shown manifestations of mental illness until the past year, at which point this person wrote a will or another important document which was contested by somebody – the psychiatrists used the example of Lear, who himself did not show signs of madness until very late in life.

⁸ William Shakespeare, *The Tragedie of Hamlet, Prince of Denmarke*, act 3, scene IV.

Hamlet 2 and Rock Me Sexy Jesus

Coming back to the idea of deviational or ‘contemporizing’ Shakespeare, Andrew Fleming directed a film which was released in the U.K. at the end of February 2009. The movie is entitled *Hamlet 2* and tells the story of Dana Marschz (played by Steve Coogan), a recovering alcoholic and failed actor, who has become a high school drama teacher in Tucson, Arizona. After a series of failures in the theatrical world, Dana has an idea which will later be seen as his most brilliant idea. With the help of his students he performs what he calls a sequel to Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, under the name of *Hamlet 2*. The play itself faces a double reception because people are equally horrified (considering it disrespectful for Christians, as Jesus appears in the play as a surfer who has a sexy body) and fascinated (observing the philosophy which stands behind what is happening on the stage). The play revolves around the usage of a time machine which offers Hamlet (and Jesus) the possibility to save his mother from being poisoned and Ophelia from drowning. Beside these matters Hamlet and Jesus have the possibility to go back in time and mend their troubled relationships with their fathers. Thus, the play ends with an emotional scene in which both Hamlet and Jesus forgive their fathers for the wrongs that they have done. Moreover, Dana’s play emphasizes the process of contemporizing and at a certain moment in the movie – when several parents come to stop their children from performing on the stage – one of the personages says that if Jesus would come on earth again, He should adopt a different style in order to be of interest to the modern world. This is also the case with Shakespeare: in order to appeal to modern tastes, his plays should adopt a new style. Consequently, *Hamlet 2* takes shots at gays (the personage that plays the part of Laertes is homosexual), Christians (Jesus is a sexy surfer who rocks and kicks the devil’s ass), Latinos, Jews, and the American Civil Liberties Union.

Dana Marschz’s play is essentially psychoanalytical, as the movie illustrates how aspects of the

author's life (Dana Marschz) are reflected in the text. In addition to this, Dana finds a sort of explanation for Hamlet's insanity by rendering the fact that he had an uneasy relationship with his father, the king, and that is why he continues to see his ghost. Another aspect refers to the fact that Dana, by rewriting Shakespeare's play, has taken the tragedy out of the tragedy. By the use of the time machine Ophelia is saved from her tragic death and finally marries Hamlet. The play ends with the line 'I forgive you, father!' uttered by both Hamlet and Jesus. The movie in itself is not a great achievement but the irony with which the matter is treated saves it from kitsch and absolute nonsense.

Everybody's Shakespeare

"Some authors indeed are dead, but not William Shakespeare."⁹

In *Shakespeare, the Invention of the Human*, Harold Bloom insists on the fact that Shakespeare created not only characters, but also 'real people'. Thus, characters like Ophelia, Hamlet, Macbeth, Rosalind, Cleopatra or Falstaff live not in the text – as opposed to Foucault, who says that the text is the limit of all human action – but outside the text. Hamlet, for instance, is one of the few characters that live outside the text, outside the theatre. Hamlet means something even for those who never read Shakespeare's play, or as Jan Kott said, *Hamlet* 'is rather like Leonardo's Mona Lisa.' We somehow know that she is smiling even though we have never seen the picture in the original. When we say 'Hamlet', we refer not only to Shakespeare's play, but also to all the critics, writers, poets that wrote about Hamlet, even though there are hundreds

⁹ Harold Bloom, *Shakespeare. The Invention of the Human*, New York: Riverhead Books, 1998, p. 14.

of them. Being real people, they live among us: we, as his readers, have something in common with his characters. We like Shakespeare not because he had an outstanding vocabulary and a great talent for metaphors and other figures of speech, but because his works are like a mirror which reflects not how his characters are and how they act but what we are. 'If your Falstaff is a roistering coward' Bloom writes, 'a wastrel confidence man, an uncourted jester to Prince Hall, well, then, we know something of you, but we know no more about Falstaff. If your Cleopatra is an aging whore, and her Antony a would-be Alexander in his dotage, then we know a touch more about you and rather less about them than we should.' If your Shakespeare is a feminist who wanted to emphasize the feebleness of the female body in a dominant patriarchal society, or a result of his age, the spokesman of Elizabethan society, or a keen supporter of colonial England, or a writer that wrote about the nothingness of this world, then we know more about you and rather less about Shakespeare. It is not fair criticism anymore, but rather oblique criticism or writing about you instead of Shakespeare.

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