The name of an author, Michel Foucault famously observed, does not simply refer to a specific historical person who lived and wrote; “more than an indication, a gesture, a finger pointed at someone,” he writes, “it is the equivalent of a description.”¹ That is, attaching an author’s name (and image) to a text (or product) predisposes us to interpret it in a certain manner, to classify it with certain texts (or products) and not with others, to expect it to have certain qualities, themes, ideas, or formal traits. For an example, one need look no further than Shakespeare. 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. The phenomenon to which Foucault points bears interesting affiliations with the phenomenon of branding, in many ways the popular counterpart of the critical operation he describes. Like an author’s name, a brand is a sign that is instantly recognizable, distinctive, transferable (that is, capable of being attached to an array of products), and powerful and productive in its connotations. The significance of a brand (or author’s) name is not controlled by a single marketer or critic, but rather emerges from myriad interactions between producers, consumers, and various cultural intermediaries and contexts. Brands have become ubiquitous elements of contemporary popular culture, functioning like authors’ names as principles for classifying texts and products.²

If, then, Shakespeare is the Coca-Cola of canonical culture, its most long-lived and widespread brand name, the face of Shakespeare, familiar from the Droeshout portrait that graces the First Folio, has become its trademark. Like all trademarks, that single image telegraphs what have been widely taken as...
certain key qualities of the franchise. The engraving’s now antique style has come to communicate Shakespeare’s status as a figure for aesthetic traditionality (and by extension, time-tested trustworthiness), that is, for art before (and to an extent opposed to) the advent of mass media and identified with traditional British rural life or “merrie old England.” Shakespeare’s high-domed forehead, the face’s most recognizable feature, bespeaks his work’s association with intellectuality and by extension with elite culture. The comparatively unadorned quality of the portrait (no crown of bays or allegorical accoutrements) and the somewhat naive quality of the rendering accord with Shakespeare’s reputation as a natural genius whose work has its roots not in study but in God-given talent or as a poet writing for and about “the people,” about a shared human nature and not the experience of the privileged few. Yet like all brand icons, the Shakespeare trademark is an open signifier. The correspondences I’ve just described are not necessarily inherent in the details of the Droeshout portrait and are certainly in no simple way intended. Rather, the portrait serves as a widely shared memory device, a visual anchor for a body of connotations historically accrued by the name “Shakespeare,” some of which are contradictory. That field of established associations is a powerful cultural resource precisely because it is so well established, but the particular associations within that field are open to appropriation, rearticulation, extension, even negation and parody, its meanings transferable to other arenas of cultural production depending upon the needs and purposes of the user and always open to re-branding should the need arise. To put this another way, adding Shakespeare’s face to a product has become a means for adding value, both of certain connotations and, consequently, of commodity value, but in the process of adding value to other products, the value (and values) of the Shakespeare brand have been preserved, extended, and transformed.

The appropriation of Shakespeare’s face in marketing has a long history stretching back to the late nineteenth century, when his face adorned some of the earliest advertisements featuring graphics. To take one example, Horlick’s Malted Milk, a baby formula created in late nineteenth-century Wisconsin and aggressively marketed throughout the early twentieth century, featured Shakespeare’s face in its turn-of-the-century advertisements, a campaign which ran from 1905 to 1908. Part of the attraction was its sheer recognition value, but another was that face’s rich set of associations. On the one hand, Shakespeare’s face signified that which is well established, wholesome, and trustworthy, connotations particularly important for a product that aspired to replace a mother’s natural milk. Shakespeare’s face also promised a product whose usefulness, like his plays, might be appreciated by and available to those in all walks of life. In the Horlick’s campaign (as in many other turn-of-the-century advertisements), that association was reinforced by inclusion of a
version of the “seven ages” speech, rewritten so that the product became linked to every stage of life, an attempt—a successful one, it would turn out—to extend Horlick’s market beyond infants. On the other hand, the Shakespeare trademark also exemplified “quality,” not only the product’s well-crafted and healthy nature (a major concern for mothers replacing their milk with a commercial product), but also its deluxe associations. The product’s Shakespearean trademark thus promises a vicarious experience of elitism, a taste of the cultural good life and intimation of upward social mobility.

The advent of modern mass media in the early twentieth century (particularly film and radio) led to the displacement of the stage as the dominant popular performance medium. The theatre was the medium closely identified with Shakespeare and served in many ways as the basis for his claim to popularity, and its move from a dominant to a residual form within the panoply of pop cultural offerings precipitated a decisive shift in the meaning of the Shakespeare trademark in popular culture, a meaning which accentuated nascent tensions and contradictions in the field “Shakespeare.” This shift in significance was played out against the backdrop of the disciplinary institutionalization of English in the academy (with Shakespeare at its symbolic center), the cult of the modern with its narratives of technological progress and fears about dehumanization and urbanization, and concerns about newly dominant forms of popular culture which, so critics feared, presaged the fall of traditional artistic canons and the rise of working-class, immigrant, and (particularly in Europe) American cultural clout. Within mid-twentieth century popular culture the Shakespeare trademark takes on an increasingly ambivalent cast. Though Shakespeare’s face continues to evoke traditionalism, learnedness, hand-crafted quality, and high art, those associations signify in the context of popular culture’s self-advertised qualities of instantaneous accessibility, newness, “democratic” inclusiveness, and anti-elitism. Shakespeare comes to signify what modern popular culture defines itself against, becoming in effect popular culture’s symbolic “Other.” And, as is often the case with the cultural “Other,” in many cases Shakespeare also becomes an object of ambivalent desire for popular culture—a source of still potent cultural capital and thus of legitimation, a mark of social mobility, or even a vehicle for self-critique. Nevertheless, we should be quick to notice that in these invocations popular culture was, for all its putative hostility to the elite tradition for which Shakespeare came to stand, invested in affirming, even enhancing Shakespeare’s “high” cultural status, for that association was a powerful resource which mass producers could invoke and manipulate in order to articulate the “popular” nature of their products. That is, one especially long-lived paradox of the Shakespeare trademark is that it is popular culture’s favorite sign of high culture.
Something of this mid-century ambivalence can be seen in his cameo appearance in *Time Flies*, a routine if oddball B-picture produced by Gainsborough Pictures in 1944, the same year as Laurence Olivier’s *Henry V*. This bizarre time-travel comedy features popular British radio comedian Tommy Handley as a flim-flam man who, with a dotty professor and American show-biz duo Susie and Bill Barton, accidentally travels back to Elizabethan England, where the group encounters Sir Walter Raleigh, John Smith and Pocahontas, Elizabeth and her court, and (briefly) Shakespeare. After ducking into the Globe Theatre to hide and donning the period attire she finds there, Susie climbs into a balcony where she spies Shakespeare writing. As he struggles with a speech, she supplies the crucial line: “He jests at scars that never felt a wound.” When he asks her her name, she replies “What’s in a name?,” and in the exchange that follows, she, knowing Shakespeare’s famous lines from the future, ends up dictating to him much of the balcony scene while Bill interrupts with quips. This sequence affirms, indeed depends upon, the monumental quality of Shakespeare’s writing, lines so powerful that Susie would have committed them to memory. But at the same time, the scene plays out a persistent pop cultural fantasy of appropriation, maintaining the cultural authority of Shakespeare’s work while comically transposing the source of that work from Shakespeare (now rendered inarticulate by writer’s block) to the mouth of a modern popular entertainer. The scene’s second half develops the juxtaposition of popular and Shakespearean, this time shifting to the realm of music. At the end of Susie and Shakespeare’s exchange, a group of musicians gather on the Globe stage and rehearse a short Renaissance ditty about ringing bells; in response, Bill plays a jazz riff on a recorder, launching Susie into a song-and-dance number, “Ring Along Bells,” a performance that quickly gathers a crowd who sway with the syncopated rhythms and appreciatively toss pennies Susie’s way. In one shot we see Shakespeare in merriment, pictured somewhere between directing the musicians (now suddenly playing swing music) and simply enjoying the show and realizing its commercial potential. Again, the opposition of “classical” and “popular” dominates – the period recorder tune functions as the equivalent of Shakespeare’s text and is set against big band swing, in the forties the epitome of modern popular culture. Susie’s impromptu swing update of the Globe musicians’ song points the way to “classic” culture’s popular survival – it demands being jazzed up, brought in line with the protocols of modern pop. One part of that process includes Shakespeare and “Shakespearean” music becoming Americanized, a quality made all the more striking given the British provenance of this film and strongly shaped by the wartime context; another, more subtle element is the sweeping away of a signature feature of Shakespearean theatrical
practice, the stricture against women performing onstage and the consequent cross-dressed performance of female parts, a stricture which, in this context, marks the Elizabethan theatre as quaint, artificial, and sexually restrained. Even so, it is striking that the sequence “popularizes” only “Shakespearean” music and not Shakespeare’s words. For all its emphasis upon the need for updating the glories of England’s cultural past, a culture revealed elsewhere in the film to be comically superstitious, classist, and credulous, the film retains a respect, albeit an ambivalent one, for the Shakespearean text.

The postwar triumph of mass media precipitated a crisis in long-standing schemes of cultural stratification and thus in the significance of the Shakespearean trademark. The mediatization of culture accelerated the absorption of icons of traditional high culture into the pop mediastream, a process already begun with film and radio but hastened by television and ever more ubiquitous forms of visual culture. Many have argued that by the third quarter of the twentieth century traditional distinctions between “high” and “pop” culture had collapsed into a postmodern array of decontextualized signs and styles, all equally available for producers to mix and match for their own purposes. In such a scheme, the Shakespearean trademark is emptied of any foundational claim to special authority and threatens to represent little more than the face of yet another celebrity, akin to Marilyn Monroe or Mao Tse-Tung, albeit with a more “retro” feel than most. Such a view underestimates, however, the recuperative capacity of stratificational schemes and the residual usefulness of connotations of exclusivity, learnedness, and quality long attached to the Shakespeare trademark. In postmodern culture yet another significance of Shakespeare’s image emerges: it comes to function as a marker of a self-ironized mode of cultural connoisseurship. Shakespeare is attached to products capable of being appreciated by a special class of consumer capable of appreciating both the subtleties of pop allusion and consumption and reference to a different cultural register, though that register has been largely emptied of (and is sometimes actively mocked for) its traditional claims to moral authority or aesthetic superiority. The result is a form of reciprocal irony: by attaching the Shakespeare trademark to an inappropriately pop object, the act of engaging in pop consumerism by buying or collecting it becomes self-consciously ironic; by attaching kitsch to Shakespeare, any residual hint of bardolatry or snobbery involved in the invocation of Shakespeare becomes self-protectively parodic. In this context, the Shakespeare trademark marks a distinction between the run-of-the-mill consumer simply immersed in pop mediastream and the connoisseur conversant with two cultural registers at once and thus capable of a knowing distance from each. This dual cultural literacy, what Josef Gripsrud has dubbed “double access,” implies a privileged access to education and leisure
time and thus serves as one marker of a newly emergent “high” cultural strata, the college-educated intelligentsia that came of age in America and Europe after World War II.

Consider, for example, the Shakespeare beanie baby, the Shakespeare bobble-head, the Shakespeare action figure, or the Shakespeare celebriduck (a rubber bath duck adorned with the face of Shakespeare). Though all are toys, none are intended for the “educational” children’s market. Rather, they are intended as upmarket fetish commodities for educated adults. The suggestion of cultural superiority communicated by Shakespeare is ironically infantilized, the heart of each item’s appeal its ironic distance from mainstream pop capitalism. The Shakespeare celebriduck mocks celebrity culture even as it trumpets its owner’s sophisticated taste in culture heroes (the other “celebrities” in this product line tend to be “classics” – the Mona Lisa, the Marx Brothers, the Lone Ranger – rather than current mainstream celebrities); the Shakespeare action figure and bobble-head attach an intellectual icon to a genre of objects more typically associated with male bodily pastimes, sports and combat; the Shakespeare beanie baby, a parodic riff on the ultimate in pop collectibles, is one of several campy items produced by the Unemployed Philosophers Guild to, their website proclaims, “fulfill the materialistic desires of the funny and sophisticated everywhere,” the company name sardonically celebrating the marginal place of the disaffected intellectual in the pop marketplace. What these Shakespeare-trademarked objects provide for their consumers is a differentiated relationship to the pop marketplace and an opportunity to display that “sophisticated” differentiation; what one buys is a set of air quotes one can place around consumerism even as one participates in it. Such mutual lampooning of highbrow and lowbrow has its roots in nineteenth-century Shakespearean burlesque, in which Shakespearean theatre and popular melodrama were melded in order to mock the conventions and clichés of both. Of course, Victorian Shakespearean burlesque, often sharing the bill with straight performances of the bard, was directed not to a market niche but to a wide audience, and it served as a carnivalesque reassertion of Shakespeare’s popularity. By contrast, these contemporary Shakespop objects acknowledge the hegemony of the pop marketplace and recuperate Shakespeare’s status as a mark of high culture only by camping up his commodification.

Though the three modes of Shakespearean branding I have detailed here – what we might call appropriative, juxtapositional, and ironic uses of Shakespearean cultural capital – emerge from particular historical moments in the relationship between pop culture and Shakespeare, nevertheless, they are not mutually exclusive nor do they fully displace each other. Earlier uses of the Shakespeare brand co-exist in contemporary pop culture with later ones,
all still potent resources for reshaping the connotations of products for various audiences and purposes. Their continued potency depends upon the tenacious (albeit ambivalent) opposition between Shakespeare and mass-produced culture inherited from late nineteenth-century cultural theory, an opposition that has been periodically reinflected in response to pop culture’s erosion and recontouring of cultural strata in the last century. Behind the various re-brandings of Shakespeare in the last century lies a fundamental continuity – Shakespeare as pop’s Other. Within pop culture Shakespeare’s face remains the sign of that culture which pop proclaims it isn’t, old-fashioned, elitist, artisanal, intellectual, moralistic “proper” art promoted by official educational and cultural institutions, but it also remains the sign of pop’s desire, its desire for the kind of cultural authority, quality, legitimacy, and upward mobility that Shakespeare continues to symbolize. For that reason, despite a concerted attempt within recent scholarship to rethink Shakespeare’s cultural standing, pop has been a countervailing force for preserving Shakespeare’s privileged status even as, paradoxically, pop has ever more aggressively assimilated his work and image.

A case in point might be found in Shakespeare’s cameos in Looking for Richard, Al Pacino’s 1996 cinematic paean to Richard III. As part of the film’s introduction, Pacino strides onto the stage to perform as Richard III only to encounter Shakespeare as the only member of his audience, to which Pacino responds with an anxious expletive. Here Shakespeare serves as a standard-bearer of cultural propriety and authority before which Pacino, working as a film actor and popularizer, is doomed to fall short. At film’s end, immediately after Pacino’s staging of Richard’s death dissolves into horseplay with his co-director Frederic Kimball, the opening scenario in the theatre returns, this time with Shakespeare shaking his head with disappointment, as if completing the actor’s nightmare with which the film began. By this time, however, Shakespeare has become a figure for the theatre, a mode of production which Pacino’s film, with its increasingly cinematic approach (the death of Richard is nearly wordless), has left behind. Indeed, Shakespeare is cited as both a symbol of academic and historical correctness that Pacino’s “popular” approach consciously pushes against and a source of legitimation that Pacino only half-mockingly appropriates. The film’s final conversation, between Pacino and John Gielgud, turns on Hamlet’s final line. During the interview, Pacino, milking a momentary silence, asks, “After silence, what else is there? What’s the, what’s the line?” With delicious sang-froid Gielgud, ever the keeper of the “proper” Shakespearean text, supplies “the rest is silence.” Pacino’s reply, “Silence is... Whatever I’m saying, I know Shakespeare said it,” underlines how he, an American film actor and spokesperson for the popular, in many ways
Gielgud’s and Shakespeare’s antithesis, nevertheless lays wry claim to a genuinely Shakespearean spirit, even though he hasn’t gotten the lines quite right. Partaking of elements of bardolatry, iconoclasm, and postmodern irony all at once, the bard’s cameos in Looking for Richard aptly illustrate the signature doubleness with which contemporary popular culture invokes its Shakespearean other.

**Shakespeare™’s mythic biographies**

Like the Shakespeare trademark, fuller pop treatments of Shakespeare the man – in fictional biography, in children’s literature, in genre fiction, period costumers, musicals, comic books, TV and film biographies – dwell in the long shadow of nineteenth-century conceptions of Shakespeare, in particular the outsize mythos surrounding Shakespearean authorship which had its roots in the cult of Romantic genius. As Shakespeare was elevated to a literary master of all aspects of human nature and experience, Shakespeare the Author simply outstripped the known facts of his mundane bourgeois life. Given the predominantly biographical orientation of nineteenth-century literary criticism, with its assumption that writing springs from and expresses the personal experience of its author, the yawning gap between Shakespeare the Author and Shakespeare the man presented (and continues to present) a considerable problem. Throughout the twentieth century pop representations of Shakespeare the man persisted in this post-Romantic vein, even in the face of evidence that Shakespeare’s writing was shaped by the commercial needs and collaborative atmosphere of the playhouse, most of his sources to be found in other works, his presentation of erotic passion poorly fitted to conventional heterosexuality, his writing attuned to the hurly-burly of early modern cosmopolitan London rather than bucolic Stratford. One explanation of this persistence is that, as Richard Burt observes, “mass culture narratives rely on dated scholarship.” Another is that what Pierre Bourdieu calls the “popular aesthetic” is founded on “the affirmation of the continuity between art and life” rather than treatment of art as an autonomous realm, with its own history, conventions, and modes of connoisseurship. Thus, one issue linking pop’s myriad treatments of Shakespeare the man is how to bring that biography in line with all that the Shakespeare trademark has come to represent, and nowhere is that challenge more vexed than in pop culture’s treatment of Shakespearean authorship. For that reason pop versions of Shakespeare’s life are typically concerned less with historical fidelity and more with adjusting (or fabricating) details of Shakespearean biography and reinflecting the mythic stature of Shakespeare the Author so that man and myth are in congruence. Some pop representations, particularly in
contemporary works of an iconoclastic or parodic bent, emphasize the mundane or sordid nature of Shakespeare’s life in order to cut the mythic author down to size, but far more typical for pop culture is to construct scenarios that locate the genesis of Shakespeare’s writing in fabricated details of his personal experience, while never seriously challenging the extraordinary cultural authority accorded his work. Whatever the approach, pop representations of Shakespeare are not merely one more instance of the postmodern availability of biographical figures for fictional citation. Rather, they are instances of ideological negotiation and recuperation, in which the Shakespeare brand is fleshed out and adjusted. Through this process, the mythic Shakespeare can address changing social conditions that potentially challenge it, including, paradoxically, mass media culture itself.

Two venerable popular traditions involving Shakespeare the man have especially deep roots in nineteenth-century bardolatry. One is the “Shakespeare country” motif, stressing the ways in which Shakespeare the Author was definitively shaped by and thus symbolizes traditional British village life. This nostalgic association, an assertion of Shakespeare’s affiliation with populist origins and folk culture, is a pronounced feature of tours of Stratford landmarks (and their various replicas around the world), as well as a mini-industry of Shakespeare-themed household goods (such as crockery, tea towels, and the like). The second tradition extends the biographical assumptions surrounding Shakespeare’s writing by imagining his engagement with his own characters, who are presented as if they have lives of their own. In those versions clustered around the tercentenaries of Shakespeare’s birth and death, the characters gather to praise their creator, allowing an often amazed Shakespeare to see the scope of his literary legacy. (Of course, this motif also admits of parody, in which Shakespeare’s characters demand revisions or berate their author.) A variation on this theme can be found in the first talkie featuring Shakespeare as a character, *The Immortal Gentleman* (1935), in which he, Ben Jonson, and Michael Drayton gather to share a pint in a Southwark tavern. Passers-by prompt Shakespeare to think of his own characters and crucial passages from his plays, suggesting that Shakespeare drew his most famous creations from observation of contemporary Londoners. A third tradition, that of fictions of Shakespeare the lover, owes its fascination with Shakespeare’s erotic life to his reputation as the preeminent poet of love in English, a reputation tied particularly closely to two works, his sonnets and *Romeo and Juliet*, the biographical catalyst for both serving as fodder for popular speculation.

Several strains of fictional Shakespearean biography bear a family resemblance to these long-lived traditions. Since popular culture so firmly locates the origins of Shakespeare’s writing in his childhood in bucolic Stratford, popular
novelists and playwrights have imaginatively filled in the particulars of Shakespeare’s early life, especially those tantalizing lacunae in his early biography, his romance with and early marriage to Anne Hathaway and the so-called “lost years” between his Stratford adolescence and his debut as a London player. These works tend to fall into two groups. The first, exemplified by Emma Severn’s *Anne Hathaway* (1845), Sarah Sterling’s *Shakespeare’s Sweetheart* (1905), and more recently Pamela Berkman’s *Her Infinite Variety* (2001), paints an idyllic picture of Shakespeare’s romantic and domestic life in Stratford, typically with his passionate relationship with Anne as its centerpiece. Targeting a female audience, these pieces recast Shakespeare in the mold of a romantic hero, with Anne serving as a surrogate for the reader. The second group, rather more common as the twentieth century progressed and exemplified by Anthony Burgess’s *Nothing Like the Sun* (1964), William Gibson’s *A Cry of Players* (1968), and more recently in Grace Tiffany’s *Will* (2004), evoke a Shakespeare dissatisfied by the limits of village life and dreaming of theatrical adventure or poetic fame elsewhere.\(^6\) In these works, Anne often hardens into a shrew, Shakespeare’s parents and siblings come to personify rural provinciality, and only the young poet’s children give him pleasure. Of interest in these latter group, however, is the prominent element of nostalgia and regret which haunts the Shakespeare of so many of these pieces, particularly so as he looks back in his retirement, as he does in *The Best House in Stratford* (1965), the final volume of Edward Fisher’s biographical trilogy on Shakespeare, and in Neil Gaiman’s evocative comic book treatment “The Tempest” (1996). In addition to locating the power of Shakespeare’s work in personal loss, a frequent motif in Shakespearean pop biography, this strain recasts Shakespeare as a figure of modernity, drawn away from traditions of the past into an exhilarating but alienated existence in the city. Both groups of biographies situate Shakespeare’s early life in Stratford at the center of his authorial power, either as the wellspring of his inspiration or the stultifying strictures of tradition against which he pushed.

Shakespeare’s stature as a love poet, a long-standing centerpiece of his authorial mythos, provides ample material for pop fictionalization, and nowhere more fruitful than in speculation about another biographical lacuna, the identity of the Dark Lady of the sonnets and her various romantic avatars. A favorite plotline, stretching back at least as far as Alexandre Duval’s influential, much translated play *Shakespeare Amoreaux* (1804), involves Shakespeare’s passion for a clandestine lover who ignites his romantic eloquence and thus becomes the catalyst for the sonnets, *Romeo and Juliet*, or one of his heroines. This beloved becomes Shakespeare’s erotic muse, a participant in the writing of his works, their inspiration, the secret hermeneutic key that unlocks their true meaning (which the reader comes to share), and their first,
most privileged audience. The roster of Shakespeare’s imagined beloveds is remarkable for its variety. Besides several candidates for the Dark Lady (in, for example, Karen Sunde’s 1988 and Michael Baldwin’s 1998 novels, both entitled Dark Lady; Leonard Tourney even builds a mystery novel around their affair in Time’s Fool [2004]), it includes Rebecca Lopez, a Spanish Jew, in Faye Kellerman’s The Quality of Mercy (1989); Lady Viola Compton, an orphaned aristocrat and ward of Queen Elizabeth, in Caryl Brahms and S. J. Simon’s No Bed for Bacon (1941); and, through the magic of time travel, Jessica Pruitt, an aging actress filming The Merchant of Venice in Erica Jong’s Serenissima (aka Shylock’s Daughter, 1987). A recurrent romantic fantasy pairs Shakespeare with Queen Elizabeth, imagining a potential union of political and cultural power, two icons of British national culture. This fantasy too has its roots in nineteenth-century narratives (Ambroise Thomas’s 1850 opera Le Songe d’une nuit d’été, a melding of biographical fantasy and the Bottom–Titania plotline from A Midsummer Night’s Dream, is the most memorable example), but vestiges of it persist well into the twentieth century.

Given the homoerotic content of the sonnets and the gender-bending romances of Shakespeare’s cross-dressed heroines, it is striking how little pop culture is willing to entertain the possibility of a male erotic muse for Shakespeare. There are isolated, largely post-Stonewall examples – Casimir Dukahz’s pornographic novel Shakespeare’s Boy (1991) features pedophilic trysts involving Ruy, a boy player, and Stephanie Cowell’s The Players (1997) imagines a love triangle between Shakespeare, the Earl of Southampton, and Emilia, an Italian servant girl. But most of those pop presentations that acknowledge the possibility of Shakespeare’s homoeroticism do so in order eventually to efface it. The blockbuster Shakespeare in Love (1999), a fine example of the erotic muse narrative, flirts with the homoerotic possibilities of its heroine’s cross-dressing – Will kisses his beloved Viola de Lessups, for example, when she is in male disguise – only forcefully to reassert the heterosexual nature of his passion (his Sonnet 29 is addressed in the film to a woman, not a man); in Serenissima, it is the heroine’s affair with Shakespeare that rescues him from the sterile love of Southampton (and gives the couple a child). These examples suggest how powerfully Shakespeare is identified with and functions as a mainstream icon for heteronormative sexuality, at least until relatively recently. Another indication of that ideological function can be seen in the recurrent opposition of Shakespeare and Marlowe in biographical fictions. Marlowe is often portrayed as homoerotic, promiscuous, hedonistic, recklessly drawn to political and religious intrigue, doomed by his passions – everything the mythic Shakespeare is not. The first episode of the 1978 TV mini-series The Life of Shakespeare (1978) uses this opposition to establish
Shakespeare’s apolitical, bourgeois character, and the subsequent episodes featuring his relationship with Southampton confirm that his interests in his patron are less in sexuality than in material comforts. In *Young Will* (2004), Bruce Cook iconoclastically presents a Shakespeare who falls for Marlowe and is progressively drawn into a life of libertinism (young will, indeed), eventually becoming Marlowe’s murderer. Tellingly, Cook’s Shakespeare is no love poet but rather a literary hack cravenly pursuing aristocratic privilege and stealing his fellows’ work. Even though Shakespeare is an object of erotic fantasy in popular culture, his authorial myth, it would seem, still remains incompatible with unconventional sexuality.

Of greater generic range are those fictionalizations which imagine Shakespeare’s life in the theatre – the vicissitudes of stage performance, the playwright’s rivalries and friendships with fellow-players and writers, the stage’s participation in contemporary political machinations. Typically these works do not primarily focus on Shakespeare, in part because the minutiae of playwriting and stage production offer limited opportunities to sustain a narrative. Instead, Shakespeare and his plays serve as a historical backdrop for a genre narrative that becomes woven into the playwright’s works. Historical mysteries, for example, with their evocation of period detail and their concern with hidden hermeneutic keys and the exercise of intellectual acumen, make a potentially fruitful match with Shakespeare’s reputation for literary complexity, though, interestingly enough, he is rarely cast as a detective, perhaps because Shakespearean citation in mysteries is most often associated with villainy. Each installment of Philip Gooden’s Elizabethan detective series – *Sleep of Death* (2000), *Death of Kings* (2001), *The Pale Companion* (2002), *Alms for Oblivion* (2003), *Mask of Night* (2004), *An Honourable Murderer* (2005) – is structured around a single Shakespearean play (with murders linked to their performances) and features a member of the Lord Chamberlain’s Men, Nick Revill, as its narrator and sleuth; Shakespeare appears only as a recurring minor character, even serving as a murder suspect in *Mask of Night*. Simon Hawke’s Shakespeare and Smythe series – *A Mystery of Errors* (2001), *Much Ado About Murder* (2002), *The Slaying of the Shrew* (2002), *The Merchant of Vengeance* (2003) – pairs the aspiring playwright with an erudite ostler and actor, Symington Smythe, in effect casting Shakespeare as Watson to Smythe’s Holmes, though the novels are peppered with lines that eventually end up in Shakespeare’s work; the final novel of the series even offers an ingenious rationale for the writing of *The Merchant of Venice*.

One body of popular material where fictionalizations of Shakespeare’s playhouse activities thrive is children’s literature. Portrayals of Shakespeare for children are designed to introduce them to Shakespeare’s mythic stature
as playwright, and they focus on his theatrical life because the pleasures of play and fantasy are among his key appeals for children. Typically children’s narratives present Shakespeare as a substitute father or mentor for the young protagonist, who is often orphaned or alone and taken in by the bard and his stage compatriots. Shakespeare is by turns intimidating and nurturing, and being in his company helps initiate the child into the wider social world of adults represented by stage performance of his plays, acting a means for the child to overcome the traumas and developmental crises of youth. Gary Blackwood’s *The Shakespeare Stealer* (1998) chronicles the maturation of Widge, an orphaned boy with special skills in reading and writing, from professional plagiarist to resourceful apprentice in Shakespeare’s company. At first under the thumb of his authoritarian owner Simon Bass, who forces the boy into using his skill at writing to transcribe performances for piracy, Widge soon gives up his life of crime and becomes an apprentice in Shakespeare’s troupe, his new surrogate (and far more benevolent) family. Interestingly, it is Robert Armin who serves as Widge’s father-figure; Shakespeare is portrayed as an aloof, intimidating figure, rendered quick-tempered by the loss of his own son. (That Widge will eventually serve as that lost son’s replacement is strongly suggested by the fact that the boy first sees Shakespeare in a mirror.) Although children’s narratives typically paternalize Shakespeare’s authority, they also take pains to de-monumentalize the man and his productions, emphasizing how the child protagonist (and vicariously the reader) becomes an active participant in the making of his plays – a co-creator, with a distant affinity to the erotic muse. In *The Shakespeare Stealer* Widge uses his talents for charactery to create a fake script that pirates pilfer, a ruse that saves the day. In subsequent installments in the series – *Shakespeare’s Scribe* (2000) and *Shakespeare’s Spy* (2003) – Widge’s reading and writing talents allow him to move from an apprentice to a scribe and a sleuth who uncovers playhouse piracy, in effect becoming the guardian of the textual integrity of Shakespeare’s work. In Don Freeman’s *Will’s Quill* (1975), a fatherly Shakespeare offers encouragement, artistic recognition, and comfort to orphaned Willoughby the goose, who is alone and frightened by London crowds; in exchange, the playwright receives a boon from his new friend, the quill-feather he needs to complete *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, thereby enabling Shakespeare’s first literary triumph. The Shakespeare-themed contribution to Mary Pope Osborne’s popular Magic Tree House series, *Stage Fright on a Summer Night* (2002), also imagines an exchange of boons: Jack and Annie help Shakespeare by playing parts when two boy actors don’t appear, and Shakespeare returns the favor by adopting a maltreated bear on which Annie took pity and supplying Jack with pithy lines for his journal.
Though these narrative templates and motifs form the basis for most popular fictionalizations of Shakespeare, they are often freely varied and recombined, particularly in contemporary examples. Such is the case for Sarah A. Hoyt’s *Ill Met by Moonlight* (2001), the first volume in her fantasy trilogy starring Shakespeare. Combining the Stratford and erotic muse narratives, Hoyt makes Shakespeare’s awakening as a writer and lover the result of his encounter with Quicksilver, a shape-changing fairy prince whose brother Sylvanus has usurped his rightful title and exiled him from the supernatural world. The resemblances between *Hamlet* and the fairy court intrigue are deepened by Quicksilver’s discovery that Sylvanus arranged the death of their parents, Titania and Oberon, and by Quicksilver’s unwitting part in the death of Pyrite, his friend and brother of his Ophelia-like beloved, Ariel (also echoed are *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* and *Romeo and Juliet*).

Will, a milquetoast schoolmaster and dreamer, becomes drawn into the plot when Sylvanus kidnaps Anne Hathaway (‘‘Nan’’) to be his bride and nursemaid for his child. Seeing an opportunity for revenge, Quicksilver engages Will to kill Sylvanus in order to save Nan from assimilation into Faerie. One of Hoyt’s more provocative conceits is that Quicksilver, in his female guise as the Dark Lady, uses his erotic power to seduce Shakespeare and cement their relationship. Quicksilver, we learn, has had previous sexual dalliances in both female and male form, the latter with Christopher Marlowe, with the result that his homoerotic passions and fantastical imagination were inflamed beyond his control. That is, in this fiction the two beloveds of the sonnets, the young man and the dark lady, are the same person (actually, fairy), though Hoyt is careful to insist that Will’s tryst with Quicksilver is, at least from his perspective, strictly heterosexual. In the end, Will’s brief affair only serves to revitalize his love for Nan and his domestic life, and with Quicksilver’s help he heroically rescues her during a fairy dance, thereby quieting the storms raised by Sylvanus’s violation of the natural order. But, as the narrator notes in a coda, Will’s contact with Quicksilver has tacitly awakened the poet’s fancy, a fancy that will inevitably lead to the loss of his hard-won tranquillity and prompt the writing of “fantastical tragedies and mad farces” that draw upon his supernatural adventures: “Quicksilver’s love had its price, after all . . . And is Will – who will leave wife and daughter and mother and father behind and trade his small domestic happiness for a spotlight in a world made stage – better or worse off than if he had never come across the unexplained marvels of elvenkind?” In the sequels, *All Night Awake* (2002) and *Any Man So Daring* (2003), Will is haunted by his recognition that his artistic genius springs from a potentially self-destructive bargain, a self-destructiveness borne out by Marlowe’s premature death, and he struggles twice, as an aspiring playwright in London and again in his
Stratford retirement, to defend his fidelity to family and bourgeois comfort against the dangerously seductive and politically volatile world of faerie. Hoyt engages the gap between man and authorial myth by emphasizing it, recasting the wellspring of Shakespeare’s imaginative potency as a threat to his otherwise quotidian life and reinventing the bard as a hero rising to meet that threat.

A very different body of popular works eschew entirely concern with fictional biography, instead using time travel or magic to bring Shakespeare in contact with modernity. There are instances in which Shakespeare makes an un-ironic cameo appearance as an authority on human nature or literary craft to offer advice at a moment of crisis, as in “The Power of the Pen” (1990), an episode of A Different World in which Shakespeare appears in a dream to defend the value of poetry, or the Norwegian film Sofies verden (1999), where Shakespeare offers the heroine Sophie a crucial clue to her mysterious identity. Far more often, however, the encounter between Shakespeare and the present is an instrument of critique. Parting company with Victorian presentations of Shakespeare worshiped by his own living creations, one group of works stages a comic confrontation between Shakespeare and the contemporary myth he has become. When Blackadder, that popular antithesis of British heritage, time-travels from the present to the Elizabethan past in Blackadder Back & Forth (1999), he bumps into Shakespeare (literally) as the bard rushes with his latest creation, Macbeth. Blackadder promptly decks him, offering this explanation:

That is for every schoolboy and schoolgirl for the next four hundred years. Have you any idea how much suffering you’re going to cause? Hours spent at school desks trying to find one joke in A Midsummer’s Night Dream, wearing stupid tights in school plays and saying things like, “What ho, my Lord,” and, “Oh, look, here comes Othello, talking total crap as usual.”

Of course, the suffering is not caused so much by the man himself as by those official institutions that promulgate “proper” Shakespeare, in this case one of popular culture’s favorite targets, academia. As Blackadder leaves, he strikes a blow against another highbrow institution, the heritage cinema, kicking Shakespeare for “Ken Branagh’s endless, four-hour version of Hamlet” and in the process resisting the importation of high cultural notions of quality and reverence into the cinematic popularization of Shakespeare in the 1990s. Nonetheless, ever the craven materialist, Blackadder recognizes the commercial value of the Shakespeare myth, and so he makes sure to get Shakespeare’s autograph before thrashing him.

Another group uses Shakespeare as an indisputable standard of cultural achievement against which to criticize (or to celebrate, with tongue in
cheek) the failings of contemporary pop culture. One episode of the American radio show *Favorite Story*, “Mister Shakespeare” (1947), imagines how a resurrected Shakespeare might fare in modern Hollywood. Finding his poetic talents universally rejected by the studios as hopelessly uncommercial, he is forced to work on a genre picture, *The Capulets*, and becomes discouraged by pop’s reliance on mass-produced formulae. In effect endorsing radio’s emphasis on the spoken word, Shakespeare ruminates that “after three centuries, I thought maybe people would learn to appreciate beautiful words by themselves without having them strung on stale plots. I was wrong.” Though he is delighted to find a romancing couple who appreciate the erotic power of his language (“the old stuff still works!,” he observes), in the end the vacuity of popular culture overwhelms Shakespeare, and he chooses simply to fade away. More recently, “Death Trek 100, Part Two,” an episode of the comic book *Lobo* (number 36, 1997), offers a more ambivalent, postmodern mode of critique. It intercuts an adventure of the ultra-violent hero Lobo with a lecture by Shakespeare, analyzing a story where the writer runs out of plot. Though the tale includes skewed allusions to *Romeo and Juliet* (in this version, the star-cross’d lovers treacherously kill their parents and betray Lobo in order to be together and enjoy the movie rights to their story), Shakespeare repeatedly observes that the comic’s scant narrative is padded out with visual spectacle and gratuitous violence, echoing long-standing highbrow complaints about the empty sensationalism of superhero comics. What Shakespeare and his highbrow students discover is that they are merely plot devices to fill up space until the final pages where Juliet has constructed a secret narrative fail-safe device: if all else fails, blow everyone up. In the end, it is bad-boy Lobo who gets his revenge upon high culture by actively embracing pop culture’s commercialized, sensationalistic values. After killing the lovers, he sells their story of “murder, sabotage, forbidden love – everything” to the highest bidder, and he is the only one to survive the final fireball, exiting with the pun “write on, dudes.”

Yet another means of negotiating the gap between man and authorial myth is entirely to reassign the identity of the man, a strategy which has the added frisson of resisting conventional scholarly wisdom about the playwright’s identity in which official Shakespeare-dom is so invested. A number of fictional works playfully reimagine the true author of Shakespeare’s plays as a gay black slave (as in Farrukh Dhondy’s novel *Black Swan* [1993]) or a woman (as in Snoo Wilson’s play *More Light* [1987] or Malia Martin’s romance novel *Much Ado About Love* [2000]) as a way of suggesting that Shakespeare’s penetrating portrayals of female or black psychology spring not from the author’s imagination or his sources but from personal experience.
(This approach also lends itself to parody, where the “real” Shakespeare is imagined as a fool.) Such reassignments of Shakespeare’s identity marshal the considerable cultural authority associated with his works to lend legitimacy and dignity to groups historically denigrated. It is for that reason, for example, that the gay popular press has been concerned to claim Shakespeare as one of its own, even though Shakespeare’s depictions of sexuality, unconventional though they may be, do not line up well with modern notions of homosexuality.

In the same family of appropriations, though far less progressive in its implications, is the phenomenon of anti-Stratfordianism. This popular conspiracy theory, which first surfaced in late nineteenth-century America, rejects the possibility that Shakespeare, with his provincial background and lack of formal education, could have written the sophisticated, politically informed works that bear his name. Instead, anti-Stratfordians have proposed a series of alternative figures with biographies that better match the dimensions of the authorial myth. Nearly all the candidates, not coincidentally, are aristocratic or university-educated and thus, so the logic runs, were personally acquainted with the privileged milieu – the trials and tribulations of kings, cosmopolitan European locations – depicted in the plays. This hypothesis casts the man from Stratford as a front to protect the real aristocratic author from the taint of the playhouse and requires elaborate conspiracies among members of the court and theatrical companies. Anti-Stratfordianism has emerged as official Shakespeare’s Doppelgänger, the basis of a considerable counter-industry of amateur scholars and a periodic favorite of popular journalism. Not surprisingly, then, it has also spawned works in pop genres that advance (or occasionally parody) its cause, including Amy Freed’s The Beard of Avon (2001), a comedy that dovetails the erotic muse narrative with the hypothesis that Edward de Vere, Earl of Oxford, penned Shakespeare’s plays; Lynne Kositsky’s young adult novel A Question of Will (2000), an Oxfordian variation on the time-travel tale in which Shakespeare is revealed to be a drunken boor; and Sarah Smith’s Chasing Shakespeares (2004), which grafts Oxfordianism and a critique of literary academia onto a Da Vinci Code-style suspense narrative. Anti-Stratfordianism reveals the lengths some have been willing to go to preserve the axiom of biographical expressivity, but it also provides evidence of a popular hostility towards Shakespearean professionals who have sought to become exclusive hermeneutic gatekeepers for (and drawn their own cultural authority from) “official” Shakespeare.

Though this survey of Shakespearean sub-genres might suggest that much of pop culture’s representation of Shakespeare the man is self-serving and predominantly conservative in its orientation, a handful of examples suggest
more progressive potential. Pamela Melnikoff’s *Plots and Players* (1988), a young adult novel modeled on the familiar child-meets-the-bard narrative, engages the question of Shakespeare’s liberal humanist sensibilities, a key ideological component of the authorial myth. Early in the book, Robin Fernandez, a Jewish Portuguese boy actor living in London, auditions for Shakespeare and gains a part in *Romeo and Juliet*. At that point, the narrative makes a break with generic convention – Robin becomes aware of a conspiracy to frame the Queen’s Jewish physician and Fernandez family acquaintance, Doctor Lopez, for treason. In an early discussion with Robin about bear-baiting, Shakespeare displays a historically uncharacteristic sensitivity to the oppressed when he observes that “a poor beetle suffers as much when you tread on him as a giant suffers when he does.” But as Robin recognizes the extent of Renaissance anti-Semitism, he also comes to recognize the limitations of Shakespeare’s sympathies and his art. When Marlowe’s *The Jew of Malta* whips Londoners into an anti-Semitic frenzy, Robin confronts Shakespeare about his unwillingness to depict Jews as heroes. When the playwright replies that “no audience would accept such a thing,” Robin replies, “Then if we can’t be heroes, why can’t we at least be human beings? … You won’t let us be giants, but why do we have to be horned beasts?” Only later does he learn that, chastened by their conversation, Shakespeare destroyed an earlier, more virulent draft of *The Merchant of Venice* and wrote another:

You taught me that Jews are human beings, to be presented as such on the stage. And so, after leaving you, I went home and burnt my play. I have rewritten it, and more to your taste, I think. No, there is no need to look so happy. I would not make the Jew a hero … such a thing would not be allowed … no audience would accept it. He is still the villain of the piece, but a human villain, I think. He may not be a giant, but at least he is less of a horned beast.11

This portrayal of the genesis of *The Merchant of Venice* is remarkable for its frank acknowledgment of Shakespeare’s ideological blindspots, the extent to which his plays were profoundly shaped (though not entirely determined) by popular prejudices to which the commercial theatre played. Shakespeare’s sketch of Shylock underlines the limits of liberal humanism in the play that has come down to us – Shylock is a villain but a human one, less of a horned beast, but a beast nevertheless.

Harry Turtledove’s *Ruled Britannia* (2002) is an equally remarkable revisionary work, but for different reasons. Turtledove, a writer renowned for well-researched alternate histories, imagines an Elizabethan England in which the Spanish Armada succeeded in forcing it back into the Catholic fold, an England under Spanish occupation where Elizabeth is imprisoned in
the Tower, spying, suspicion, and brutal oppression are rife, and the theatre is subject to censorship. Shakespeare, the novel’s protagonist, is presented as a respected playwright-for-hire, engaged by the Spanish to write a play in honor of the dying monarch Philip II at the same time that he is hired by Burghley and his allies to write a history play about Boudicca, the ancient Briton queen who resisted Roman occupation, a play designed to rouse Britain to rebellion. Shakespeare’s two foils are Marlowe, portrayed as an impish, nihilistic provocateur who regards politics as a game, and Lope de Vega, depicted as a hedonistic connoisseur of women and words, a fellow man of the theatre who appreciates Shakespeare’s verbal craft but who because of his egotism fails to nose out the bard’s true political affiliation. Besides the sheer daring of Turtledove’s premise and his detailed (and hardly idealized) portrait of London life, the novel is unusual for how it depicts the nature of Shakespeare’s authorship. First, Turtledove uncouples the link between Shakespeare’s personal experience and the content of his plays by emphasizing Shakespeare’s process as a wordsmith crafting speeches, not as an imaginer of original plots and characters from his personal experience. Shakespeare’s London experiences, all pointedly mundane, have nothing to do with his plays. For both of those he is contracted to write, he is given the sources from which to work, and the playhouse scenes stress how much Shakespeare’s writing reflects give-and-take with his fractious company. As is often the case with Shakespearean fictional biographies, the novel is peppered with familiar Shakespearean bons mots, but since so many are spoken out of earshot of Shakespeare, the effect is to suggest that these phrases were simply in the Elizabethan air, not the bard’s original creations. Second, Turtledove presents Shakespeare’s playwriting as a fundamentally political and potentially subversive activity. Sensitivity about the application of plays to the immediate political situation Turtledove treats as a cultural given, even though Shakespeare himself is not portrayed as a political insider; his Boudicca prompts an immediate response, the bloody rebellion against the Spanish and restoration of the British crown that forms the book’s climax. If popular culture often portrays Shakespeare’s works as repositories of timeless if abstract truths, Turtledove’s portrayal restores their political effectivity and historical specificity. The novel’s premise also cleverly shifts the political orientation of Shakespeare’s identification with British nationalism. Where recent scholarship has tended to see that identification as a mark of Shakespeare’s alliance with conservative politics and outmoded notions of British identity, Shakespeare’s British propagandizing takes on a revolutionary color in Turtledove’s alternate history – not to recuperate conservative notions of British nationhood but to demonstrate the strategic, potentially politically transformative uses of Shakespeare’s art.
Conclusion

In his study of branding, Douglas B. Holt observes that brands achieve iconic status by maintaining a sense of continuity of brand identity while reinventing themselves to speak to current collective fears and aspirations that spring from acute cultural tensions. “Icons,” he writes, “come to represent a particular kind of story – an identity myth – that their consumers use to address identity desires and anxieties.”

Holt’s paradigm goes a long way towards explaining Shakespeare’s continued iconic status in modern popular culture. Once Shakespeare’s face had been established as a widely recognized sign of cultural power by the nineteenth century, it was available for popular culture to rearticulate its central qualities – its association with “culture,” quality, Britishness, tradition – to serve its own often contradictory needs and to respond to social changes, not least of which was pop’s emergent cultural hegemony and the erosion of inherited high–low cultural oppositions. The fleshing out of the Shakespeare trademark with fictions of Shakespeare’s life has been one of pop’s mechanisms for accomplishing that rearticulation, in the process (and with relatively few exceptions) reaffirming Shakespeare’s mythic status and one of the foundational axioms of the popular aesthetic, the continuity of biography and art. It is beside the point, then, to chastize popular representations of Shakespeare the man for their myriad and often willful factual inaccuracies, for they are less concerned with historical fidelity than with the ideological work of servicing, extending, reorienting, and at the same time drawing upon Shakespeare’s inherited cultural authority, one of pop culture’s most valuable resources. One difference lies, however, between corporate brands and the Shakespeare trademark, a difference that is perhaps one key to its continued strength. The Shakespeare trademark is never under the control of a single institution or cultural (re)producer. It thus remains ever a contested object of value, a body that, despite Shakespeare’s warning about moving his bones, remains always in motion.

NOTES

3. www.philosophersguild.com

6. A contemporary feminist corollary of this group are those works which, using Virginia Woolf’s portrait of Judith Shakespeare in *A Room of One’s Own* as inspiration, imagine a female relative or acquaintance of Shakespeare as an aspiring poet or player frustrated by patriarchal restrictions and seeking relief in London, sometimes through Rosalind-like male disguise. Examples include Laura Shamas’s *The Other Shakespeare* (1981), Doris Gwaltney’s *Shakespeare’s Sister* (1995), Judith Beard’s *Romance of the Rose* (1998), and Grace Tiffany’s *My Father Had a Daughter: Judith Shakespeare’s Tale* (2003). Mollie Hardwick’s *The Shakespeare Girl* (1983) and Peter W. Hassinger’s *Shakespeare’s Daughter* (2004) provide examples written for young adults.


8. Hoyt’s trilogy, particularly its final novel, merits close comparison with Neil Gaiman’s “The Tempest,” the final installment of his *Sandman* comic book series, with which it shares many motifs and thematic concerns.


