In recent years, the study of the past and present relationships between Shakespeare and popular culture has been transformed: from an occasional, ephemeral, and anecdotal field of research, which, if it registered at all, was generally considered peripheral to the core concerns of scholarship and pedagogy, to one which is making an increasingly significant contribution to our understanding of how Shakespeare’s works came into being, and of how and why they continue to exercise the imaginations of readers, theatergoers, viewers, and scholars worldwide. A range of factors have prompted this shift, among them the increased priority afforded to theatrical performance; the growth of interest in Shakespeare on film and television; the theoretical debates and methodological innovations of the 1980s and 1990s, which have encouraged new kinds of interdisciplinarity in the field of Shakespeare studies, as well as turning attention to the larger forces that have shaped Shakespearean production and reproduction in material culture; the condition of postmodernity itself, in which traditional distinctions between high and low culture have been eroded; and, not least, the changing patterns of educational participation and provision that have characterized the end of the twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty-first. Contemporary research and pedagogy in the field of Shakespeare and popular culture is concerned with the Shakespearean theatre and drama’s immersion within the festivities and folk customs, entertainment industries, and traditions of playing of its own time; it is also interested in the reinvention, adaptation, citation, and appropriation of the plays (and, to a lesser extent, the poems), and the myths and histories that circulate around them, across a wide range of media in subsequent periods and cultures. Throughout history, Shakespeare’s enduring high-cultural status has coexisted with a multiplicity of other Shakespeares, recycled in stage performance and cinematic adaptation, political discourse, literary and theatrical burlesque, parody, musical quotation, visual iconography, popular romance, tourist itineraries, national myth, and everyday speech. Shakespeare can be quoted in support of an individual declaration of love or an act of war; his
works have acted as sources of inspiration for everything from high opera to the porn movie; his image turns up in the unlikeliest of locations. Versions of, or borrowings from, Shakespeare may be respectful or irreverent, they may be witty, acute, or scurrilous, delinquent, or just plain silly, and whether everything and anything that operates under the banner of Shakespeare can or should be afforded any value or significance, or is of more than passing academic interest, is a matter of debate; as is the desire of generations of educationalists, theatre practitioners, and film-makers for a truly popular “authentic” or mainstream Shakespeare, whether this is to be found in the classroom, on stage, or on the screen. The “popular” is itself hardly a singular or uncontested term or frame of reference: seen from some angles, it denotes community, shared values, democratic participation, accessibility, and fun; from others, the mass-produced commodity, the lowest common denominator, the reductive or the simplified, or the shoddy, the coarse, and the meretricious. When the transmission and appropriation of Shakespeare are at stake, considerations of taste and aesthetic value are also bound up with inevitably vexed questions of cultural ownership, educational attainment and class, and with issues of who the desired and actual consumers of “popular” Shakespeares may be, who these hope to include, and who they don’t.

Whereas many recent studies of popular Shakespeare have tended to focus upon its contemporary manifestations, this volume aims at broader historical coverage. It addresses the ways in which Shakespeare has been consumed and reinvented, allowing for interface between cultural, literary, performance, and cinema studies, by means of focused and localized case studies as well as through the mapping of larger cultural logics of Shakespeare-making. In the first chapter (“From popular entertainment to literature”), Diana Henderson traces Shakespeare’s journey from the early modern theatrical marketplace to the beginnings of literary lionization, outlining a career as a working dramatist within an emergent entertainment industry which belies his subsequent repositioning as an icon of elite culture. This chapter addresses the relation between the cultures of entertainment and performance (both learned and popular, aristocratic and plebeian) in which the plays of Shakespeare and his contemporaries originated and the fashioning of Shakespeare’s dramaturgy into a literary oeuvre, a process definitively marked by the publication of the First Folio in 1623. Peter Holland (“Shakespeare abbreviated”) offers a brief history of Shakespearean theatrical production, cultural dissemination and transmission, in terms of its logics of reduction, selection, and abbreviation; in the popular theatre, Shakespeare seen whole is anomalous and exceptional. Beginning with the shortened and streamlined performance texts of the seventeenth centuries, the chapter considers the durability of the burlesque, skit, spoof, sketch, and parody in the theatre and other media. Holland’s
performance history, which considers the factors which adjust Shakespeare’s
texts to the material contingencies of theatre-making and popular taste, is
followed by Barbara Hodgdon’s account (‘‘Shakespearean stars’’) of the phe-
omenon of the ‘‘star’’ Shakespearean performer in both the theatre and
cinema, from Richard Burbage to Ian McKellen, looking in particular at the
ways in which the popular understanding of stardom is differently inflected on
stage and screen, and, in relation to this, at the changing levels and types of
cultural prestige afforded to the Shakespearean performer before and after the
advent of mass media.

From Henry Peachum’s extempore illustration of a sixteenth-century text of
Titus Andronicus onwards, Shakespeare’s works have provided ample mat-
erial for artists of every description, serving as source material and inspiration
for portraiture, genre painting, representations of scenes and characters, car-
toons, caricatures, and prints. Tracing the ways in which Shakespearean visual
iconographies both shape expectations of reading and performance and
assume a life of their own, Stephen Orgel’s chapter, ‘‘Shakespeare illustrated,’’
examines how the changing relationship between the arts of performance and
of illustration disseminates images of the drama beyond the limits of both page
and stage. There are, as Orgel points out, only a handful of pictorial represen-
tations contemporary to Shakespeare which allude to performance; much
more generally associated with the likeness of Shakespeare in popular con-
sciousness is the portrait of the author, attributed to Martin Droeshout, that
acts as the frontispiece for the 1623 Folio. This iconic, much-reproduced image
is the point of departure for Douglas Lanier’s essay, ‘‘ShakespeareTM,’’ which
moves from a consideration of its status as a universally recognized trademark
to an examination of Shakespeare’s personal appearances, in various guises, in
popular fiction. Addressing a range of media and cultural formats (theatre,
film, the novel, comic books), this chapter investigates how biographical
fictions trade with and transform the popular mythologies that circulate
around the writer and the work. Like Shakespeare himself, Shakespeare’s
plays and characters have also provided material for narrative adaptation
from an early stage, and in the following chapter, Laurie Osborne focuses
upon recent novelistic appropriations of Hamlet to explore the ways in which
popular fiction reworks dramaturgy as narration. Questions of genre, and of
the effects of adjusting Shakespeare’s works to a medium for which they were
not conceived (in this case, television), are also the concern of Emma Smith’s
chapter, ‘‘Shakespeare Serialized.’’ Looking at a pioneering instance of
Shakespearean transposition to the broadcast medium, the BBC’s serial adapt-
ation of the First and Second History play cycles, An Age of Kings (1960),
Smith identifies its generic affinities with the soap opera and historical epic, as
well as comparing the forms and conventions of modern serialization with the
original circumstances of composition and theatrical production of the multi-
part play.

As Stephen Buhler observes in his survey of “Musical Shakespeares,” the story
of Shakespeare in music begins with the presence of music in Shakespeare; since
then, across a range of musical genres, the language, narratives, dramatis
personae, and mythology of Shakespeare’s works have served as resources of
musical inspiration, citation, allusion, and recycling, frequently in ways which
blur the divisions between the serious and the popular, highbrow and lowbrow,
minority and mass culture. Acknowledging the vast terrain of musical appro-
priations of Shakespeare, this chapter examines modern popular musical
culture’s enduring capacity to borrow or steal Shakespearean archetypes as
a means of engaging concerns of race, generational conflict, and sexuality.
Shakespeare’s auditory presence is also the concern of “Shakespeare Overheard,”
in which Susanne Greenhalgh surveys Shakespeare’s fortunes within one mass
entertainment medium in which he has seemed remarkably at home: radio.
Greenhalgh details a history of productions of the works, and their associated
authorial fictions, that has remained largely invisible to performance critics.
Following an itinerary which runs from Shakespeare’s Stratford to “Juliet’s
balcony” in Verona, Nicola Watson’s chapter, “Shakespeare on the tourist
trail,” examines the dissemination of Shakespearean mythologies and cultural
memories across a range of key tourist sites, assessing both the official narratives
that are available to the Shakespearean tourist, and the variety of ways in which
these can be negotiated by the serious, agnostic, or casual visitor. If the tourist
sites associated with Shakespeare can be regarded as specific, highly charged
geographical locations in which popular myths and alternative narratives
around Shakespeare flourish independent of scholarly concerns, the placeless,
global space of the world wide web is another arena in which information – and
misinformation – about Shakespeare can circulate regardless of academic
boundaries and regulations. A number of recent accounts of Shakespeare on
the internet have begun to focus upon the pedagogic and scholarly possibilities
and responsibilities of the digital media with regard to the dissemination of
archival, teaching, and research materials, to the exchange of information and
to the management of critical debate. Once academic discourse is placed in the
wider context of internet culture, however, it finds itself situated within a
medium which does not necessarily differentiate between the responsible and
the irresponsible use and circulation of information, between high and low
cultures, and between what can be verified and what can be fabricated.
Shakespeare on the internet is as much the provenance of the cultist, the
 crank, the conspiracy theorist, the parodist, and the pornographer as it is the
domain of the professional researcher and pedagogue, in that it allows, even
encourages, the proliferation of resources and viewpoints once confined to
marginal groups of self-styled sectarians, heretics, and dissidents. In the penulti-
mate chapter, “Performing Shakespeare in digital culture,” W. B. Worthen takes
up the challenge of Shakespeare in the newest media, suggesting that the extent
of the impact of digitalization, the DVD, and the potential for interconnectivity,
upon our understanding of how performance works, and what it is, has only
begun to be realized. Finally, in “Shakespeare’s popular face,” Carol Chillington
Rutter reflects upon both the beginnings and endings of performance by turning
to an aspect of Shakespeare’s visual presence within the cultural environment
that has been strangely neglected as a source of evidence of how the theatre
engages its audiences: the playbill and the theatre poster.

This Companion invites the reader to consider the singular case of
Shakespeare in order to address wide-ranging questions of cultural transmis-
sion, appropriation, authority, and pleasure. It asks what happens when
Shakespeare is popularized, and when the popular is Shakespeareanized; it
queries the factors that determine the definitions of and boundaries between
the legitimate and illegitimate, the canonical and the authorized, and the
subversive, the oppositional, the scandalous, and the inane; it investigates the
consequences of what happens when cultural practices and vocabularies
located within one zone migrate to another, as when popular performance
becomes legitimized, or when aspects of elite or minority culture are ren-
dered mainstream. Acknowledging the immense diversity of forms and
activities adopted by, on behalf of, or under the name of, Shakespeare, it
hopes to extend and enrich our continuing conversations with the works, and
with the cultural legacies they have sustained and generated.

Quotations from Shakespeare are from the Oxford Complete Works