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Shakespeare's Newest Stage: The Reshaping of Cultural Capital Through Youtube

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SHAKESPEARE'S NEWEST STAGE: THE RESHAPING OF CULTURAL CAPITAL
THROUGH YOUTUBE

by

Ben Griffin Long

A thesis submitted to the faculty of the University of Mississippi in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the Sally McDonnell Barksdale Honors College.

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Abstract

Since its launch in 2005, YouTube has quickly situated itself as a major facet of popular culture. The prevalence of Shakespeare on YouTube is fascinating considering the diversity of the videos found, and the tremendous audience response to these clips. Is YouTube helping or hurting Shakespeare's reputation? This thesis explores this question through the lens of Pierre Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital.

The argument is that amidst the process of reinvention, a redefining of what is Shakespeare is occurring. The support provided is framed through numerous video analyses, that cover a wide range of topics including: Shakespeare in education, Shakespeare in advertising, the question of authorship and the perception of art, Shakespeare for youth culture and the postmodernist movement, and questions of finality in Shakespeare's plays and the destruction of cultural capital. Like any other type of capital, cultural capital can be created or destroyed. The examples of Shakespeare on YouTube not only illustrate separate instances of this phenomenon, but the overall effect that it is having on the perception of Shakespeare.

The term popular culture has been made unclear by its frequent use, relation with the media, and negative lowbrow stereotypes. Shakespeare was written for all audiences, and the idea that Shakespeare exists strictly for high culture is a result of the treatment it has received in the past. The Shakespeare that pervades the popular mind is a market-driven product, and YouTube is providing an avenue for the further democratization and demystification of Shakespeare today, while contributing the perception of universality.

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List of Abbreviations

SGF Sassy Gay Friend

Introduction

The Internet has hundreds of millions of websites and counting. Using Google to search for video sharing sites returns a list of about 55 million results in 0.25 seconds; upon clicking the “Videos” search tool the results are incontestably outnumbered by the video-sharing site YouTube. Narrowing that search to “Shakespeare videos,” however, returns similar results dominated by YouTube. With the prevalence of so many video-sharing sites online, isn’t it fascinating that one stands so far above the others? Since 2005, the website YouTube has been operating with an aim to “Discover and shape the world through video.” In this thesis I am exploring the idea that YouTube is reshaping not only the world, but also how the world perceives Shakespeare and his cultural capital. YouTube has made an impact on the world by radically affecting how we share ideas and information, create art, and relate to it. YouTube is accessible to anyone at anytime, and those who incorporate Shakespeare into the videos they are creating, or the videos that they simply watch, are tapping into a fascination the world has maintained for more than four hundred years.

Continuing the search for “Shakespeare” on YouTube returns about 80,700 results as of March 2012; that number continues to grow by the day. During the first year of its launch, YouTube began seeing feedback of over 100 million views per day. The website has been an incredible sensation because the world has never before been so connected by such a widely accessible form of free publication.

Advertising, entertainment, arts, and music have been revolutionized by the introduction of YouTube, and Shakespeare has certainly not “shuffled off” the world’s stage in wake of this new media platform. The prevalence of Shakespeare on YouTube seems unlikely, the slogan does not read “shape the literary or academic world,” simply the world. However, the treatment of Shakespeare on YouTube is so rampant, with such a large and growing audience, that there must be some effect on the perception of Shakespeare in people’s minds. What we know to be “Shakespeare” is an accumulation of every type of treatment that he and his works have received throughout the centuries. In this way, YouTube is a part of shaping Shakespeare today. With views exceeding 2 billion views a day, YouTube is a virtual playground for artists and has come to be a major facet of popular culture (Facts and Figures). Nearly every noteworthy occurrence that is caught on tape can be found on YouTube where the video can be viewed, reviewed, reenacted, recreated, discussed, and especially made light of. YouTube has quickly situated itself as a media touchstone, lacing the world together in a way that has snowballed different cultural influences into a single condensed space.

One of the first results listed following a search of “Shakespeare” on YouTube is a video entitled *A Small Rewrite*. The video is a skit where two actors portray William Shakespeare and his editor, who happen to be discussing Shakespeare’s latest play, Hamlet. *A Small Rewrite* remains one of the most popular Shakespeare videos online, boasting 1,224,913 views as of March 2012. The discussion between author and editor quickly descends into a comical negotiation where the men argue over which scenes to keep and which scenes to cut. This may be seem to be a normal

conversation for writers of today to have, but doesn't it seem strange that the rules of our world should apply to Shakespeare too? Shakespeare and his supposed editor fire witty lines back and forth throughout the skit drawing laughter from such remarks as telling Shakespeare that certain scenes in his play are just plain boring. At first glance the scene seems to be very surface-level humor, but outside of the one-line jokes and comical gestures what is it that really makes this performance so funny to everyone? Why do people of today choose to publish or watch Shakespeare on YouTube as opposed to a modern political icon or living celebrity? What is it about *Shakespeare* after hundreds of years that still holds interest for people? Why create something so far off base from Shakespeare's original words, meaning, or context? Further, how has Shakespeare managed to thrive so well on the Internet's newest stage, and how is this revolutionary technology affecting our perception of Shakespeare? I believe *A Small Rewrite* to be an ideal example of achieving the appeal of the audience by humanizing Shakespeare, an icon that has come to be perceived as an idealized facet of literature and production.

Today, Shakespeare is everywhere. The question is: how did such an image attach itself to Shakespeare? It is often said that Shakespeare is universal; my aim is not to prove or debunk the issue of universality itself, but to explore the perception of universality and what contributes to maintaining, creating, or destroying that image. There is undoubtedly a distinction that people recognize regarding the treatment of the fine arts. Is Shakespeare intended for study or entertainment? Traditionally, literature, theatre, cinema, or any other form of art becomes categorized as either highbrow or lowbrow status; one being worthy of study and

analysis, and the other reserved for simple enjoyment. We even have designated persons, whom we call *critics*, whose job is to make the distinction for us. In the words of Douglas Lanier, regarding the distinction made about popular culture, which is generally associated with a lowbrow status: “Popular culture, so the story goes, is aesthetically unsophisticated, disposable, immediately accessible and therefore shallow, concerned with immediate pleasures and effects... mass produced by corporations primarily for financial gain” (3). By contrast, high culture is something that is intellectually complex, challenging generation after generation. My definition of high culture is informed by that written by Douglas Lanier in *Shakespeare and Modern Popular Culture*, where high culture is described as being mature. It deals with hallmark issues that form the seams of humanity; it’s reserved for those who dedicate themselves to its study, it is an ever-expanding frontier of new ideas and complex insights that wait to be uncovered. Something easily within intellectual reach is usually is regarded as being too common for refined society (6). With the entire premise of YouTube being ease of accessibility in order to “connect the world through video,” we can begin to see how the critical eye has easily passed over this groundbreaking new theatre. YouTube has earned itself a distinctive spot in the pop culture world, but can a literary icon like Shakespeare mesh with such a common sector of society? Popular culture is the ever-changing region of our culture that will ultimately prove inconsequential to history when compared to the longevity of high or refined culture. To use the term pop culture is to compartmentalize our changing tastes and fickle moods as a society, that are meant to exist outside of refined culture.

Shakespeare itself in a way represents the divide between educated and uneducated. The general regard people have for Shakespeare today is the result of the perceptions held by people centuries ago. In recent years past, Shakespeare has been predominantly a subject taught by few. Because of this treatment, it is less common for the individual to seek Shakespeare, and it has earned the dismissive reputation from the masses as too complex to be enjoyed. Equivocally, common “treatment” of Shakespeare (appropriation, adaptation, or improvisation) has largely been barred from highbrow culture due to what is seen as misuse of such highly regarded subject matter. Those who reject any forms of appropriation as worthy of analytical consideration, see such treatment as abuse, a dilution and therefore a wasted endeavor on what has been traditionally treated as “popular” culture, or “of the people (from Latin *popularis*)” (Lanier, *Modern Popular Culture* 5).

Gary Taylor proposes that a major shift has occurred in the Shakespeare of “then” and the Shakespeare, of now. It is suggested that from “the Restoration to the Romantics, the movement of Shakesperotics had been essentially vertical; assessments of the value of his work rose and rose. In the late eighteenth century his supremacy was consolidated; potential challenges were defeated or defused” (167). In short, Shakespeare’s word became God. Therefore, starting in the eighteenth century, any deviation from what was considered actual Shakespeare became irreverence. Once Shakespeare’s dominance ceased to be debated in the eighteenth century, his “main movement” through the “cultural environment” shifted from “vertical” to “lateral” (Taylor 168). In other words, his reputation began to spread,

and along with it the understood definitiveness that supports the perception of universality.

For something to truly be “of the people” it must manifest and change with the people rather than be a rigid presentation to the masses. “A number of critics have objected to the notion that popular culture is ‘popular’... Rather, pop culture is produced by what some have called “the culture industry” (Lanier, *Modern Popular Culture* 6). This culture industry is an unceasing process that seeks financial gains from representing what is popular, or well received, in slight variations. The film industry is a prime example, representing the hooks that sell the most tickets, fast car chases, large explosions or stunning beauties playing lead roles, illustrating the alternate definition of popular. However, if we work from the definition that popular is of the people then we find that YouTube is truly popular culture in the sense that it is not a limited menu on which everyone is forced to order from, so to speak, but more of an open kitchen. What is created is freestanding, not forced but independently evaluated and assigned worth by the people. The appearance of Shakespeare being universal is strengthened by widespread recognition. Since we have concluded that the Shakespeare we perceive is a result of the treatment it has received in the past, we must concede that Shakespeare today is a market-driven product. My suggestion is simply that YouTube is having a radical effect on the market itself, despite the fact that the perception of universality still persists.

Before I get to the question of *Why Shakespeare?* It is important that I address the question *How Shakespeare?* How has Shakespeare managed to survive

this long? How has Shakespeare adapted to the modern so affluently? How has Shakespeare become so paramount in literature, education, and in a sense, our world-culture? Without jumping to an analysis of each time period between Shakespeare's and now, the question of *how* is best answered through defining how value, an objectified idea, can be placed on something as abstract as the idea of Shakespeare. Referring to Shakespeare without clarification might prove to be confusing because simply invoking the name allocates such a broad implied list of meanings. For example, people use the name Shakespeare to refer to all or any one of his plays that might be performed, regardless of any adaptations or liberties that might be taken. Shakespeare is the long list of major motion pictures that have been made carefully, or loosely, adhering to what one might know as the original script. Shakespeare is an author, an idea, and a subject to be studied. What is Shakespeare and what is not Shakespeare is a topic heavily debated, because he most certainly did not write everything that carries his name, but for the purposes of my analysis, Shakespeare is an all-encompassing term used in reference to any part of a video that puts to use what might be recognized as borrowed or influenced from Shakespeare's work.¹

Returning to the question *How Shakespeare*, I ask how can something be discussed in terms of lending and borrowing if it is not tangible? The effects that I will be exploring from the video analyses will deal primarily with what is referred to as Shakespeare's cultural capital.

¹ I am indebted to Douglas Lanier for my definition of Shakespeare.

Cultural capital is a concept and theory first developed by Pierre Bourdieu, who defined the concept as “a social relation within a system of exchange that includes accumulated cultural knowledge that confers power and status” (Barker 37). Bourdieu introduced his theory in an attempt to objectify abstract cultural goods, such as literature and knowledge, which leave no evidence of their value other than their continuation. Cultural capital, “a metaphr for literary and artistic value,” is representative of the social world, in which some aspects have gained such recognition. Here, Bourdieu presents an explanation of value recognized by the social world through the lens of economic capital, which offers more concrete and easily explained illustrations. For example, the economy gives us direct evidence of materials and the value they maintain throughout time. Gold is one of these tangible goods. There is nothing inherent in the makeup of gold that grants its value. Instead, it is the universal recognition that gold is a suitable form of exchange for our time and efforts. As stated, by Bourdieu, economic capital “enables them [people] to appropriate social energy in the form of reified or living labor,” or make real the results of our work (Bourdieu 241). We can see the value that gold commands based on the price that it represents in the market. Gold is the “currency” by which we appropriate our efforts, and in turn, trade with one another. Cultural capital can be explained in this same context, however, not entirely. The “social relation,” or social world’s form of exchange, is not dependent on some of the necessary goods that can be gained through a transaction of gold. Bourdieu refers to these transactions, as “a discontinuous series of instantaneous mechanical equilibria between agents who are treated as interchangeable particles,” in other words, *you give me that, I’ll give*

you this, and we're even. Therefore, in order to understand the theory of cultural capital through the lens of economic capital, we must redefine, as Bourdieu attests, notion of capital.

Bourdieu defines capital as “accumulated labor in its materialized form” (241). However, cultural capital is not a materialized form of capital. Cultural capital can be “inscribed in the objectivity of things,” and in turn converted to means of economic gain, but in itself is immaterial (Bourdieu 241). The mode of exchange varies from that of its economic counterpart in that it is the sharing of knowledge is the exchange, and the “social rate of return,” a phrase borrowed by Bourdieu from Gary Becker, is simply the endurance of that knowledge and not monetary (Bourdieu 244).

Shakespeare’s cultural capital does not assume an objectified state. Shakespeare’s cultural capital, simply put, is a result of the overall “accumulated history” that associates what we recognize as Shakespeare and what that means to us. Cultural capital is furthered by the exchange of knowledge that the social world employs, and by extension, Shakespeare’s cultural capital is fit for the same recognition, transmission, or even manipulation that might befit any other type of theoretical capital (Bourdieu 245). This “accumulation” which “cannot occur instantaneously,” as monetary exchanges do, can be equivocally compared to the economic value that gold represents. The difference is, Shakespeare’s cultural capital is measured by the extent and transmission of itself, which I interpret as the “social relation” mentioned by Bourdieu (Barker 37).

Because the social conditions of its [cultural capitals] transmission and acquisition are more disguised than those of economic capital, it is predisposed to function as symbolic capital, i.e., to be unrecognized as capital and recognized as legitimate competence, as authority exerting an effect of (mis)recognition...Furthermore, the specifically symbolic logic of distinction additionally secures material and symbolic profits for the possessors of a large cultural capital (Bourdieu 245).

While Shakespeare's work has spurred significant economic profits for some, the major accumulation of capital, *cultural capital*, is in regard to how the popular mind regards "Shakespeare" with power and status.

In this thesis, I will be exploring the effect that publication and appropriation on the video-sharing site YouTube are having on Shakespeare's cultural capital. I will be analyzing various Shakespeare appropriations and discussing their effects on Shakespeare's cultural capital. Through the examples analyzed, I hope to illustrate YouTube Shakespeare as deserving of proper consideration, capable of sparking new ideas or deepening the understanding of Shakespeare that people already know.

The Internet has lowered the barrier of learning so to speak. No longer confined to a classroom or expensive campus, knowledge has been made readily available and presented without bias to the world at home, not from a book but on our mobile phones, and our laptop computers. There are no prerequisites, degrees, or even a clear understanding required for one to borrow Shakespeare on YouTube

and subject him to be handled at will by the world at large. The sheer number of videos on YouTube that invoke the name Shakespeare alone is reason enough to warrant an analysis of YouTube Shakespeare. When coupled with the millions of people who contribute to the videos by discussing, creating their own, or simply being exposed, the need is apparent. The broad spectrum of treatment that Shakespeare receives from its “adaptors,” as Douglas Lanier calls them, are having an effect (“Recent Shakespeare”). The contributing body of people dealing with Shakespeare is “ingenious and tenacious in finding means for reconceiving and thereby preserving” that “authority” which we call Shakespeare’s cultural capital (Lanier, “Recent Shakespeare”).

Chapter 1

***Soliloquy on B:* Shakespeare and Education**

A person encountering “Shakespeare” for the first time might not have any context in which to place the new information, yet at some point, everyone must have encountered “Shakespeare” prior to knowing what the name signifies within our culture. The educational television series *Sesame Street*, posted a video monologue entitled “Sesame Street: Soliloquy On B.” The video itself is an appropriation of Hamlet’s famous “To Be or Not to Be” speech, with the “Be,” originally intended to mean “exist,” substituted with the letter “B” from the alphabet. Visually, what we have is renowned actor Patrick Stewart garbed in what most would consider clothes from Shakespearean times, sitting on a lone stool with the letter in hand. The man speaks in an accent, which makes him sound distinguished amongst the group of strictly American accents. What would all this production mean to a child who, in all likelihood, would never watch this video and understand any of the layered references and play on “Shakespeare?” To a child, the man and his different accent are probably funny. To the other 549,000 people that have watched the skit for its artistic value, this appropriation means something else entirely.

Hamlet is a character notorious for not adhering to the terms of society. His willingness to abandon these societal conditions and pursue what he believes to be truth personifies a very humanistic quality - one that leads us to question what

otherwise might be accepted as an unchangeable reality. In Hamlet's case, that unchangeable reality that he refused to accept was that Claudius was the rightful king, and that he was to accept the terms of his father's demise without confrontation. For Patrick Stewart, the reality in question is whether or not "B" is what he supposes. The soliloquy under appropriation comes at one of the most intimate points in the play for Hamlet, a time when he is contemplating the very meaning of his existence. These lines have been stripped for parts many times over due to their reputation of stirring feeling as they so intimately describe the human condition. It is because of this effectiveness that they have taken on an air of universality. In other words, we all die and we all ponder the meaning of life; therefore it makes sense that we are able to connect to a character that is outwardly experiencing the same struggle. Shakespeare seemed to put this plight in a way that speaks to people; therefore his words have been reused many times over. How does Patrick Stewart playing Hamlet capture or convey any of the originally inspired *Hamlet* through this video? Rather, what is Mr. Stewart conveying to his audience by questioning the validity of the letter "B," and how does that reflect Shakespeare's cultural capital? It looks and sounds like a "B," but should we accept or trust that without putting it to fair scrutiny? Are we mere subjects to the monarchy of society or will we, like Hamlet be willing to stand on our own and question what we are expected to accept? Though we are not all subjects under an unlawful king like Hamlet was, in reality we still run the risk of being told how and what to think if we fall into the malleable herd mindset. By analyzing Patrick Stewart's rendition of Hamlet's speech from this standpoint, we begin to see through the crosshairs of

Sesame Street's aim at children, and how this skit begins to mold an early perception of Shakespeare.

Education is intended to train young people in the ways of society. It teaches people how to act, how to behave, how to think, and teaches us the meaning behind being civilized (Lanier, *Modern Popular Culture* 7). Shakespeare regularly challenged class boundaries in his writing. I believe that the very nature of this video is informed by that same challenging of classes – only this time in the context of a classroom. Education encourages independent thinking. It does not necessarily teach us what to think but how to think, and how to question within certain parameters. Achieving independence is gaining a sense that you're free are within of the boundaries imposed by society. Hamlet removed himself from those boundaries when he went from mourning his father's death to investigating what he believed to be his father's murder, it was that unconventional behavior of not accepting what *is* that earned Hamlet the suspicion of lunacy (albeit an intended effect). Though the young audience targeted by *Sesame Street* probably has no interest in the existential questions that Hamlet poses, the spirit in which he posed them is an invaluable lesson for children, whom we want to become reflective adults. It is in this way that challenging the simple validity of the letter "B" takes on a deeper Shakespearean meaning.

The television network PBS originally aired this episode on television; it was not created for YouTube. Someone took the time to take this video and put it online. The difference between airing a television show and a YouTube video is in the

nature or mode of presentation. Anything on television is presented without question. The choices about the show are made beforehand; the show is neatly packaged and presented to the viewers. A YouTube video is intended more for the people. Every video is available for discussion and review by the audience. Critiques are offered, feedback is evident, and changes are made. Questions lead to a deeper understanding of the world around us, which, in turn, provokes curiosity, and curiosity and the subsequent satisfaction thereof leads to identifying knowledge with value. A simple Shakespeare skit tailored for a children's show has extrapolated a mature principle that would most likely hold no interest for a child and refit the message to suit the target audience.

What effect does having Patrick Stewart dressed like Shakespeare have on the meaning? If we return to the mission of education, to train and assimilate effective adults into society, then it can be inferred that recognition of historical figures is central to that training. Patterns promote obscurity or camouflage. A break from a pattern allows for easy recall. On a television show where puppets and cartoon characters are the focus, a real person might seem out of place – or perhaps carefully planned so that the patterns (puppets and cartoons) blend, and people become the point of simple recall. Patrick Stewart, portraying Shakespeare, is the point of heavy emphasis in this video. There is nothing else happening around him outside of his reasoning with “B.” Though a child may not know who Shakespeare is at the time they watch this video, what they are being trained to see is that this man is important. The producers of this video are successfully assimilating Shakespeare's value, his cultural capital, in a context that it was never written for, yet amazingly,

the shoe seems to fit. It is in this way that We see a video complete a two-fold teaching objective, recognition of an important historical figure and application of an invaluable cognitive concept, yielding an impressive and successful children's program.

Sesame Street is arguably a part of what Lanier referred to as the "culture industry" (*Modern Popular Culture* 6). Originally, the video was aired as a part of an episode, shown on regular television with the creative input of few. Though *Sesame Street* is a successful television show on its own, it cannot be said that it is truly of the people. It is not *popular* in this sense. Once transplanted to YouTube, however, the video stands in a totally different context. Why is the distinction between successful and popular important in the context of cultural capital and value? Simply being successful is not a thorough litmus test on the strength of culture due to the chance of limited options; the treatment of Shakespeare in *Sesame Street* might have been pure coincidence. YouTube is a decidedly different avenue when it comes to production on account of its openness to analytical discussion. In commercial production, the goal is to maximize profits, the only feedback is having a high number of viewers digesting what the producers feed them without offering input. In this way something can be successful if it can be mass-produced and consumed, but not popular if there simply isn't any other choice for people to turn to. On YouTube the number of times a video has been viewed is posted, comments are welcomed and encouraged, and people readily offer individual insights and opinions. Through these innovations the true embrace, or rejection, by the people is exposed. Are the people watching Patrick Stewart or are they looking for the

Shakespeare between the lines? The answer: probably both. Patrick Stewart is lending some of his popularity to the reception of the performance, just as the performance is lending some of its value to Patrick Stewart. This idea of parodical strain will be discussed citing another example. Why else would adults take interest in a short skit on a children's show? The duality of such issues lie at the heart of themes such as an analysis of cultural capital, appropriations of Shakespeare, and the validity of popular culture as a means of deciphering how much value the world places on such folds of culture.

The video presents a phonetically similar form of Shakespeare's language using different words, and a completely different meaning from the original version of Hamlet's speech. To a person who is trying to decipher some meaning of Shakespeare from this video, *Sesame Street's* version is useless. To the person with some familiarity, this video is granted some legitimacy on the grounds that they are using Shakespeare, an integral part of proper education, as a platform to teach simple concepts. What is actually happening to Shakespeare's cultural capital in this video is "not a 'making sense' of this literary artifact," nor is it destroying anything that is Shakespeare (Hedrick Reynolds, eds 7). Instead, what may be seen as a misuse of Shakespeare in an irrelevant context is more of a testament to the "real value accrued over time... and that one who takes this value, even if a kind of thief of value, can be transformed by the taking itself" (Hedrick Reynolds, eds 7). By using the word "transformed" we suggest a change, but what is meant here is that by stealing Shakespeare's value (or cultural capital), we are buying into what is accepted as important, and therefore extending its relevance in the world. The video

borrowed educational power from Shakespeare, and recasts it to achieve what is hailed as valuable education for children. In this way, the benefits of cashing in on Shakespeare's cultural capital are apparent.

Incorporating Shakespeare into the *Sesame Street* skit is a clever way to "invoke high culture concepts" (Lanier, *Modern Popular Culture* 53). Drawn upon again is the distinct emphasis of "high" and "low" culture. Exploring "high culture" and "low culture" we have traced the connection to authentic "popular culture" and seen how it warrants analysis due to the unavoidable interaction with the cultural capital of the Shakespeare that we are familiar with. Now with the introduction of "high culture concepts" we must consider the existence of "low culture concepts" and assume cultural capital an equal opportunity employer. If one can draw upon the "high culture concepts" such as the value of an independent mind and education, then it is safe to assume that one can rely on Shakespeare's cultural capital to promote and give reason for unpopular, negative, cultural concepts.

Chapter 2

Bikini Shakespeare: Shakespeare in Advertising

The invocation of the “forms of capital” as theorized by Bourdieu warrants a discussion of capitalism itself. Capitalism is known as a competition driven system within a free market. What is being competed for is what is known as *capital*, most frequently in its monetary form, which grants one buying power. The ultimate goal of capitalism is to compete for control of the most capital, which grants power through fiscal assets. Therefore, capital is empowering. The ability or potential for something to catalyze personal gain is the underlying motivation for how we apply value to something. As we have equated cultural capital with economic capital we have leveled the two on what Bourdieu calls a “single axis” by which we can understand the different forms of capital by use of a “single standard” (Forms 125). Since the different forms of capital are subjected to the same principles, then isn’t it reasonable to assume that one form has the potential to accrue more value in an alternate form? If capital is empowering, and if the gain of monetary capital grants more buying power, then by the same merit, couldn’t cultural capital grant the same buying power, and allow for gains resulting in an overall increase, regardless of the form? Shakespeare’s cultural capital in this context is his buying power. With a large sum of financial buying power one has the opportunity to grow their money, whether through investments, interest, or an alternate method that results in gains. Since we are applying the same standard to cultural capital, we can assume that

Shakespeare's cultural buying power can be used to produce more of the same or, in its alternate form, financial gains. Bourdieu discusses this point by stating that the "abstract operation," defining the forms of capital by a single standard, has its roots in the idea that one form must be "available" to the possibility of "converting one type of capital into another" (Bourdieu, *Forms* 125). This notion of conversion is put to use in the YouTube video *Bikini Shakespeare*.

Advertising is a way by which companies appeal to people in mass. By doing so, the goal is that a business will see better sales of its product. *Bikini Shakespeare* is an advertisement for a particular brand of popcorn. The video shows beautiful women dressed in bikinis horribly misreading various plays by Shakespeare, while stuffing their faces with the popcorn. I believe that the reason these advertisers thought to use Shakespeare in this ad can be analyzed through the lens of Bourdieu's theory on the conversion of capital. Shakespeare, as we have said, is a form of high art. High art has found its place within our culture as being something that quantifies itself with meaning and value. So how does that value translate to society, and what is its place within our culture? High art, and by extension high culture, is certainly regarded as important by some, but is generally recognized to be important by all. Those who have been educated and perhaps learned to appreciate it for the timeless concepts and lofty doctrines might have direct or personal interest in the objects of high art, but interest is not always dictated by familiarity. However, we see the treatment, or mistreatment, of some art forms as largely a differing of opinion among different groups harboring differing perspectives. For example, popularizing Shakespeare in the context of on-screen de-

textualization has been a fiercely controversial topic for years. Many scholars view lending Shakespeare to kitsch, popular media, or styles and genres outside of the academic realm as an infraction on Shakespeare's proper place in literary culture. The stratification of art, the separation between high and low, generally dictates the distinction between proper and improper treatment. Those who cherish Shakespeare as high art and believe it should only be treated as such, regard the mistreatment of Shakespeare with "fear [of] mass culture crowding out knowledge of artistic traditions of the past" (Lanier, *Modern Popular Culture* 48). So the negative connotation of Shakespeare within lowbrow culture is largely the opinion held by those who would have Shakespeare frozen on his throne as a literary icon, unapproachable by the "homogenized, mediatized, politically quiescent, profit-driven culture-for-dummies" (Lanier, *Modern Popular Culture* 48). The improper, or mistreatment, does not necessarily describe an abusive intent, but as Donald Hendrick and Bryan Reynolds describe as "misappropriation," more of a "creative change," by one who "takes [Shakespeare's] value" and puts it to another use (7). The versatility that Shakespeare commands here is the pinnacle of Bourdieu's theory of exchange. Cultural capital is representative of all the buying power that Shakespeare has accrued, and by taking it and putting it to another use, we are carrying out a transaction via cultural capital.

The mistreatment of high art in many different forms has earned the corollary title of kitsch. Kitsch is, "a tacky or lowbrow quality or condition" (Webster). A mere replica of true art, kitsch is lacking in the creativity or value that true, high art inspires. Such art, or handling of art, is usually regarded as being

worthless due to its deliberate misuse of artists' or artistic conventions. Returning to the question of art's function in society, I think that kitsch is the simple use of art as amusement. So kitsch art, or "what appears to be aesthetic appreciation or the purely disinterested enjoyment is nothing but an attempt to be "distinguished" in society" (Ferraroti 2). If art allows for such distinction in society then the use of beautiful women *misreading* Shakespeare in a sarcastic, irreverent fashion has a two-fold application in terms of capital, making it twice as valuable. On one hand, there is the potential for Shakespeare's cultural capital to be exploited on the grounds that it can somehow translate into financial gain (economic capital) for the people selling the popcorn. On the other hand, using Shakespeare in an advertisement somehow has a way of lending "distinction" or validity to a popcorn brand based on people recognizing the Shakespeare used. Lanier frames this phenomenon quite well saying "popular audiences are not particularly respectful of Shakespeare's intended meaning; they fasten on (and even embellish) some elements and ignore others" (*Modern Popular Culture* 52). The point made calls attention to the fact that the particular bit of Shakespeare used is irrelevant. What is being gained from the use of Shakespeare does not come from the text itself or some value inherent to the Shakespeare being read. In fact, the "fidelity and decorum that govern proper Shakespearian interpretation" is completely absent. Instead, what we have is a use of Shakespeare from the stance that it will benefit the advertisement as an "instance(s) of Shakespeare's cultural authority," providing the extra "literary heft and depth" to the simple video advertisement (Lanier, *Modern Popular Culture*

53). The end result is a theoretically more valuable product for society all because Shakespeare was used in an advertisement.

The tension between high and lowbrow Shakespeare has existed since it was first appropriated. Schools impart the reverence and instill the importance of proper Shakespeare while pop culture provided the appropriations. In fact, “the process of reinvention that has given us our Shakespeare is complex, and by no means inevitable” (Lanier, *Modern Popular Culture* 21). This reinvention has cut the path leading us to ask the questions of how and why Shakespeare is appropriated in different ways. What this means is that what Shakespeare is today is a direct result of the treatment it has received throughout the years. What has garnered attention from people has shaped what we know and inspired what has been created or changed, illustrating “Shakespeare’s extraordinary cultural [capital] as a social construction, not some natural state” (Lanier, *Modern Popular Culture* 21). Therefore, it is contributions such as ones like *Bikini Shakespeare* on YouTube that allow the “social construction,” or the “reshaping,” to persist. Such divisions in the classification of art and culture like kitsch become “principles” or models, which have been translated from our social lives, or the way by which we constructed “the image of the social world” (Bourdieu, *Forms* 471). In other words, the same distinctions that we apply to ourselves as being an individual as well as part of “the group,” allows for the orientation of one within the society, or as Bourdieu puts it “a sense of one’s place” (Bourdieu 471). What I see here is an explanation for why “improper” Shakespeare, or Shakespeare kitsch, is used in this advertisement as opposed to Shakespeare in its appropriate form. The aim is not to be of any use to

Shakespeare's cultural capital, but rather to employ it as mere amusement to the people that this company is advertising to. We would undoubtedly see a completely different treatment of Shakespeare were this advertisement to be aired only to a group of Shakespearean scholars, or a host of people at a literary convention. Instead, what we have is the advertisers attempt at appealing to the largest audience possible, which explains the use of Shakespeare as merely a device to elicit recognition and enjoyment, rather than to spark some sort of raving review from the lean number of people who dedicate themselves to Shakespearean study.

The emphasis of advertising is solidified in what Donald Hedrick refers to as the "foundation of capitalism itself," where a major shift in society from more production oriented views to a "means of consumption" became widespread (39). *Bikini Shakespeare* was made for the sole purpose of targeting and appealing to potential consumers. This is achieved by convincing the audience of their need for this product, when the only real potential for gain lies with the company that stands to benefit from the exchange of capital. The point of Hedrick's argument concerning the shift from production to consumption is that along with the manifestation of a consumer culture a "corresponding 'subject of value'" was also created (39). In other words, we must be consuming for a reason, and that reason is to achieve more of the said object of value. Generally speaking, when a "want" is effectively disguised as a "need," then the potential for the appearance of universality is formed. A "want" is not nearly as marketable to the world as a "need" might be; therefore the potential for gain is significantly increased when the appearance of a "need" is created. The "subject of value" that Hedrick refers to is what he calls, an "opulence" or luxury,

which has been disguised as a need and serves as the “paradoxical” foundation for capitalism (39).

A luxury cannot be a necessity in the true sense of the word. Nor can a luxury truly be universal if it exists as nonessential. However, if it is possible to create a seemingly universal need, for luxury itself, then the possibility for an immortal market that plays on people’s wants and needs emerges. This is why Hedrick references another unnamed writer and says he “paradoxically termed ‘UNIVERSAL luxury,’” or, “what is experienced [as] the making widely popular of what was designatedly nonpopular” (39). Isn’t this exactly how Shakespeare came to have the perception of universality? He is a market-driven product, and if the market convinces us that we need something, then someone stands to gain significant capital. As long as everyone is convinced that they are the beneficiaries then the system persists.

We know that capital is empowering, but can a consumer culture that is convinced they need luxury serve as the foundation of capitalism itself? I think yes. Because if capitalism provides power through gain, then we’ve created a self-sustaining market so long as people buy and buy-into what they’re told is essential. People are certainly not all convinced that they need popcorn, much in the same way that not everyone is convinced that they need Shakespeare. However, as a consumer culture we are convinced that we need things that are not essential to our survival. This must be true for Shakespeare and the perceived need for luxury to have survived so long as a market driven products. Because we associate these ideas

with value, we sustain capitalism, and the idea of universality. Finally, by aligning a simple advertisement for popcorn alongside popularly valued ideas such as beauty, and Shakespeare, the potential market for a want can blend more easily within the camouflage of needs.

Chapter 3

Shakespeare Impressions:

The Question of Authorship and the Perception of Art

Rowan Atkinson threw the punch heard around the world when he socked Shakespeare in the face in “the name of every school boy and school girl for the next four hundred years.”² *Punch Shakespeare* shows the playwright, at long last, receiving what Atkinson believes has been coming to him “for all the suffering” students have endured “sitting at desks looking for one joke in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*.” The laws of physics dictate that for every action there must be an equal and opposite reaction; therefore, the proverbial action of “teaching Shakespeare” demands a reaction – or in the instance of *Punch Shakespeare*, retaliation. The tension between “proper” and “improper” Shakespeare alludes to an unceasing struggle between the designated high and low brow forms of Shakespeare over what could be becoming a new common ground of effective transmission through YouTube (Bourdieu, *Distinction* 2). Pierre Bourdieu points out that this struggle often begins with education in the classroom (Bourdieu, *Distinction* 2). Formal education’s goal is to create a knowledgeable society by teaching decidedly important material, known as core curricula. For years Shakespeare has been a large part of core curriculum in school. Shakespeare is maintained so well in institutions of higher education because his work is integrated into education at all levels. There

² All quotes from *Punch Shakespeare* can be found at the address:
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wE5jB2tl70M>

is nothing inherent about Shakespeare that demands we teach it; the fact that he remains is one of the major contributing factors to his perceived universality. High culture is viewed as a qualification or necessity by high society, and is verified by “length of schooling” which, in turn, provides a way to measure “education level” (Bourdieu, *Distinction* 1). However, Shakespeare must be set apart from subjects such as history or mathematics because the subject of Shakespeare is intended to be less of a formula to be learned, and more of an art. For instance, if one never learned to add or subtract, or understood the different values of currency, he or she would not be suited to function within society. However, if one were to never “learn” Shakespeare, that person could arguably be no worse off than his or her Shakespeare-educated peer. So why do we even bother learning such material as opposed to just experiencing Shakespeare for entertainment? If Shakespeare had never made his way into education, and not been the object of such close scrutiny by scholars, the entertainment factor alone would not be enough to have sustained him for so long. The logic works in reverse, if people didn’t genuinely enjoy Shakespeare, then he could have easily been written out of the text books he currently occupies. It takes two legs to stand. Shakespeare continues to be taught because of the high regard we have for the art of literature and the art of theatre, but also because he is a market driven product. The world has a great sense of appreciation for Shakespeare’s plays and YouTube is easing the relational strain between education and appreciation.

Immediately the tension existing between education and appreciation becomes relevant when applied to the concept of understanding art. Education

seeks to convey what Bourdieu calls the “stratum of secondary meanings” which exists beyond the mere sensory perception of a work of art and more to the “stylistic properties of the work,” or the implications the art has (Bourdieu, *Distinction* 3). While it is feasible to teach such secondary meanings, how can an artist’s intention, presumably for the audience to grasp a deep understanding through appreciation, be attained by groups “differing in their ideas of culture” and thereby differing in their ideas of “legitimate relation” to what Shakespeare means versus what Shakespeare means to them individually? (Bourdieu, *Distinction* 2). The relevance of appreciation is apparent as Atkinson mocks, “Oh look, here comes Othello talking total crap as usual.” The difference in someone who appreciates Shakespeare’s use of prose and verse, and someone who shares Atkinson’s opinion, obviously does not always lie in the lack of education or understanding of the “crap” Shakespeare wrote, but with how people associate their own personal experience with Shakespeare. Reception to Shakespeare presented in its formal context could be dictated by exposure in “a cultural household” because within the educational system, proper culture is often “devalued” due to its classification and juxtaposition against “direct experience and simple delight” (Bourdieu, *Distinction* 2). Therefore, education provides us with what we are expected to know, while what we can learn to love is left for the individual, or chance, to decide. The conclusion that Bourdieu reaches sets up an interesting paradox for the relationship between what I am separating as education and appreciation, “A work of art has meaning and interest only for someone who possesses the cultural competence, that is, the code, into which it is encoded” (Bourdieu, *Distinction* 2). So, while we are made to understand

the art, we cannot be made to appreciate the art, but in order for us to have a deep appreciation for the art, we must first understand “the code,” or meaning, that Bourdieu mentions.

Exposure to Shakespeare is a step in the process of understanding it and ultimately the prospect of appreciating the art beyond a superficial experience. YouTube is an effective, accessible mode of exposure that can lay the foundations for interest. Perhaps immediate interest cannot be taught, but once that knowledge is owned, the digestion of the art allows it to take on a deeper meaning and appreciation can begin to expose itself. Therefore, the “tension” between education and appreciation becomes unnecessary once the two begin to feed off one another and coexist rather than oppose one another in a proverbial tug of war, where an increase on one end demands a lessening on the other. Atkinson may not have liked the “years wearing stupid tights in school plays,” and saying things like “What ho, my Lord?” But he did appreciate what he was learning. Otherwise, what use is the autograph he took the time to get?

Bourdieu’s theory that cultural competence is essential for interest and understanding is heavily dated by class stratification and educational standards from the time it was written. How do artistic appreciation and understanding operate today? How has education, which teaches the value of cultural capital, adapted in its ability to transmit cultural knowledge? What Bourdieu does effectively, and the reason parts of his discussion on the perception of art are necessary to include in my argument, is his accurate depiction of how the

perception of cultural capital is integrated into the learning process and handled by people. The classifications made by Bourdieu between high and low culture “demonstrate” how the web of “cultural preferences that are themselves generative of ideas defining patterns of legitimization in culture at large” that is; popular mediums such as YouTube have the capability of creating new patterns relevant to what we consider to be high culture and possessive of significant cultural capital (Prior 4). Things are changing in regard to the accessibility to reliable information, that much is certain. Education, politics, social hierarchy, economics, the web that connects the world is woven in a tighter knit pattern than ever before. Cultural capital is more easily accessible as well. People are not so disconnected from each other as we once were, as from a time when appreciation and recognition of cultural capital was reserved for the “privileged social class” (Prior 4).

The use of Shakespeare and his cultural capital is becoming more and more rampant on YouTube. Comedian impressionist Jim Meskimen delivers Clarence’s speech from *Richard III* in different voices of celebrities. The video is made available by a “channel” on YouTube called “Open Culture” that operates under the slogan, “The best free cultural & educational media on the web.” People possessing high levels of understanding and appreciation of and for cultural capital, are illustrated by Bourdieu as “a social aristocracy” undoubtedly because of the value that they associate with it (Prior 6). However, it is not the effect of defaming cultural capital or those who possess high levels of cultural capital that I am targeting. It is the notion that YouTube is effectively “dislodging” some of the tension that has previously surrounded something of vast cultural capital accrued by Shakespeare,

and the “disinterestedness that pervade[s] popular and elite definitions of the aesthetic” (Prior 7). In Meskimen’s impressions of such contemporary popular celebrities, he uses a speech from *Richard III* tying in numerous personas with various amounts of cultural capital themselves to a Shakespeare themed skit that regards itself as “the best free cultural media” online. YouTube is all-inclusive in the way that Meskimen is with the range of celebrities that he imitates. In this way, YouTube is using Shakespeare’s cultural capital with the “objective” being to separate from the old system where “class alone is the predictor of consumption patterns” (Prior 9). Who’s to say that scholars, students, Internet surfers, children, adults, and everyone in between aren’t all represented in the 769,277 viewers of this video? It is not safe to say that YouTube Shakespeare’s audience is completely homogenized, but the possibility that it could be is profound in itself.

“These allusions are *doing something*” (Lanier, *Modern Popular Culture* 16). That is what Douglas Lanier writes about the increasingly complex relationship between Shakespeare and popular culture. YouTube Shakespeare is not meaningless. It would be shortsighted to observe the treatment of Shakespeare in this new way as benign to his existence. As I have been discussing, Shakespeare is present in different “cultural systems” of highbrow and lowbrow, and that dual existence demands a degree of “interplay” between the two. In terms of YouTube, “interplay” is quickly becoming full involvement with one another. Is Meskimen’s use of Shakespeare simply a distraction, or filler, propping the comedy in the bit? Or, is the real intent not to simply impress us with the impressions themselves, but with the use of Shakespeare as well? It is important in the discussion of the ambiguous

divide between high and low culture to note that though the appropriations on YouTube effectively allow more exchange between the two, the division is not destroyed. YouTube Shakespeare belongs to both the highbrow and lowbrow audiences. Part of Shakespeare's remarkable existence within the cultural context of things is his ability to relate to both groups in a way that "sustains his cultural life and power" (Lanier, *Modern Popular Culture* 19). As noted by one of the comments in Meskimen's video by one of the 769,277 viewers in only 6 months of being posted, "This is absolutely the first time I've *ever* enjoyed Shakespeare,"³ we still see that lowbrow use that does not have complete access to Shakespeare while he is regarded as strictly highbrow material (Lanier, *Modern Popular Culture* 18). This user clearly makes the distinction that it is not the Shakespeare that was un-enjoyable, but the way in which it has been presented. It is impossible to know how much or how little an individual is experiencing the Shakespeare used in this video versus the simple enjoyment of how it is being delivered. What we can infer is that if one were to go from never experiencing any Shakespeare to enjoying Shakespeare, whether at his expense or for what is regarded as "original Shakespeare," then a middle ground takes shape. In effect, people who never before "enjoyed" Shakespeare, are getting to know him. It is improbable for someone to find "jokes" made at Shakespeare's expense without understanding the context from which it is drawn, and by experiencing Shakespeare in whatever way, we are familiarizing ourselves more without even intending to.

³ All user comments on Jim Meskimen's video, *Impressionist Jim Meskimen Does Shakespeare in Celebrity Voices*, can be located at: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j8PGBnNmPgk>

Bridging the gap between the artist and the audience has a definite effect on the “guessing game” of Bourdieu’s perception theory. Another user comments directly to Meskinsen, saying, “you [Meskinsen] actually deliver Shakespeare with a great amount of intelligence and understanding.” What told this user that Meskinsen has a deep understanding of Shakespeare? Does the old adage, *It takes one to know one*, become applicable here? Jim responds to this users comment with gratitude, and asserting that he does not consider himself “a Shakespeare scholar,”⁴ but he has “really enjoyed the work” that he has “read and seen.... It’s a miracle.” Admittedly, Meskinsen does not hold the appreciation of Shakespeare as an inheritance to his station as an actor. Instead, he relays a humble expression regarding his lack of in depth Shakespeare understanding in exchange for a sense of awe and admiration.

In an email exchange with Jim, he commented about the “levels” of intent that he had for using Shakespeare. His primary reason for using Shakespeare as the canvas for his video was to “draw attention to his own talents.” Does reading Shakespeare amplify an actor by nature of association? Or, is it a sense of admiration for the work itself, such as the ability to enunciate the complex wording? According to Jim, it’s because “Shakespeare knew how to REACH people, and hang on to them.” Jim credits “Shakespeare the man” with the genius that he focuses on in his videos. He says that the fascination we have is with “his characters, his turns of phrase, his poetry, his observations, his thoughts.” Romanticizing the author in this way is an attempt draw on their cultural authority to bring further credibility on one’s own

⁴ All direct quotes from Jim Meskimen are from the e-mail messages I exchanged directly with him.

creation (Lanier, *Modern Popular Culture* 112). What bearing does it have then on Shakespeare's cultural capital to credit "the man" with the value that has accumulated through use of his name over the centuries?

Shakespeare the man is only a part of the "figure of myth" that we associate with the name Shakespeare (Lanier, *Modern Popular Culture* 112). The association we have with Shakespeare is in part the author himself, but it is mostly a result of people's recognition of the name because of the cultural capital it has accrued. It is not a failure to recognize that the Shakespeare we know today is a product of our own creation; instead it is a failure to comprehend exactly how far reaching the reinvention goes. Every time we encounter Shakespeare we add to our overall experience and perception, it is constantly moving, "no matter how historically faithful they choose to be, popular portrayals of Shakespeare (and scholarly ones as well) inevitably serve ideological ends" (Lanier, *Modern Popular Culture* 112). We have made Shakespeare into what we want him to represent, which does not necessarily concede that he owned all of the genius we credit him with while living. So the ideological ends that these popular portrayals are serving, mean that we have idealized Shakespeare to make him "stand for" the things that we think he should, like literature and art (Lanier, *Modern Popular Culture* 113). The question remains though: are those ideas and attitudes effective in crediting Shakespeare the author in ways that help people draw meaning from his works, and if so, how does that meaning reflect which audience Shakespeare belongs to on cultural outlets such as YouTube? For those like Meskimen, Shakespeare is an author that "mankind has been in love with for centuries."

“Pop depictions typically locate the meaning of Shakespeare’s works firmly with the man himself, in his personal life or his individual genius” (Lanier, *Modern Popular Culture* 114). When compared with Meskimen’s explanation of his video, the man himself still has incredible genius in the popular mind. Because people are so aware of Shakespeare’s work, whatever comes out as Shakespeare’s newest piece sparks significant interest. When a new “film” (or video) comes out, regardless of whether or not “as an homage” to Shakespeare, like the *Jimpressions* are, or “a derivative” of one of Shakespeare’s works, the public gets interested again. If popular depictions of Shakespeare are rooted with the man himself, then “contemporary criticism” draws from “posthumous reinvention by posterity,” or the collective conclusions and meaning written by scholars and experts *after* Shakespeare died (Lanier, *Modern Popular Culture* 114).

How we associate the credit given to something of significant cultural power has a profound effect on our perception of the art, and how that meaning reflects the accessibility of art specifically. Does crediting the author with meaning that doesn’t necessarily belong to him restrict a person’s ability to experience the art in a deeply personal way, or does it enable us to feel more connected to the art itself? Romanticizing Shakespeare as the sole proprietor of his value is something that enables the popular audience to feel like beneficiaries to the meaning that they enjoy most (Lanier, *Modern Popular Culture* 115). The “principle of literary authorship” is a common recurrence, especially when it pertains to Shakespeare, and the “relation between the author’s ‘original’ conception and latter-day adaptations or reinventions” (Lanier, *Modern Popular Culture* 114-115). It is difficult

to conceive a connection to something that was created for profit rather than from inspiration. To tie in education, art, and how we derive meaning from these things is a difficult task wrapped in a simple concept. People connect to other people. We are relational beings; this is why we live in community with one another. A person can be taught any subject, but it is not common for people to say they find meaning and connection in something uninspired by our experience as human beings, something that art does best. This concept is a way of understanding how people connect to Shakespeare and shape their perception of the idea of Shakespeare. It is why Meskimen says that Shakespeare “knew how to REACH people.” Shakespeare, not what we’ve decided that Shakespeare meant through his words, but Shakespeare himself knew how to reach people. It is fascinating to consider how different people perceive these ideas, and precisely the reason that Meskimen thinks that Shakespeare will forever “be a great jumping off point for artists, whether musicians, painters, or even other playwrights.” We can be taught the “stratum of secondary meanings” (Distinction 3), but people connect to art best when it presents an “alternative to the dehumanizing effects of mass production... and profit driven imperatives of advanced capitalism” (Lanier, *Modern Popular Culture* 115). If people can effectively connect their experience of art with the artist, bridging the gap between education and appreciation comes much more easily.

Returning to *A Small Rewrite*, we see the question of authorship dealt with very directly. As Shakespeare and his editor are discussing *Hamlet*, their conversation (not surprisingly) centers on the “To be, or not to be” soliloquy. Shakespeare is too wordy? It is absolutely necessary to “cut the dead wood” from his

lines? Humanizing Shakespeare in the sense of showing that he struggled with the writing process at times is one thing, but to assert that Shakespeare alone didn't write those lines is outright blasphemy to the idea of universality. The final cut of the speech, as portrayed by the skit, which will be forever preserved for its ability to relate to the human condition, wasn't even written by Shakespeare; in fact, it didn't even make sense to him. The implications of such an idea do not mesh well with romanticizing the author. What we have is a Shakespeare who is bartering for which scenes he gets to keep. This is a heavy contrast from the immortal playwright who has God-like power over the world of theatre. Perhaps we laugh because we like seeing Shakespeare put in his place by someone else, perhaps we laugh because it is humorous to suggest that Shakespeare didn't really write his plays, but regardless of the reason, I think the end is the same. This skit, and the idea of romanticizing the author as a whole, demystifies Shakespeare to people. By achieving a sense of closeness made impossible by the gap in our lifetimes, we gain a sense of ownership of the material. If the individual gains a sense of ownership of Shakespeare, or the knowledge thereof, then the means by which Shakespeare continues to thrive, cultural capital, has been successfully fertilized and is enabled to further grow through retransmission. In other words, if Shakespeare is more accessible, if he has been successfully given back to the people through this demystification, then it is more likely that the individual will, in turn, somehow retransmit that knowledge and familiarity again.

Finally, "popular representations of Shakespeare often implicitly resist how contemporary criticism situates his works in a realm of textuality and specialized

knowledge over which professional Shakespearians and not popular audiences hold sway” (Lanier, *Modern Popular Culture* 115). All roads lead back to the great cultural class divide. Romanticizing and demystifying Shakespeare release him from highbrow sequestering like educational institutions. The point is that if Shakespeare truly belongs to both highbrow and lowbrow cultural classes, then there must be a blending of the two occurring somewhere. Meskimen says that Shakespeare especially, is capable of hitting people “at different levels.” To very “studious” people, or “professional Shakespearians,” it [experiencing Shakespeare] can be a “very rich experience.” However, “to those who get lost in the vocabulary or language,” Shakespeare can be reduced to a “pretentious blur.” Meskimen is not a scholar, he does “get lost in some of the more complex phrases,” but he knows “a LOT of material” word for word, and keeps finding things “to appreciate, over and over again.” Meskimen’s video, and personal testament to his own experience of Shakespeare shows strong evidence for a lessening of the cultural stratification that Bourdieu describes.

Chapter 4

Epic Rap Battles of History:

Shakespeare within Youth Culture and the Postmodern Movement

Another movement that has been associated with the retreat of highbrow Shakespeare in the face of redefined cultural association is postmodernism. Postmodernism is a term with a broad application that is difficult to define. Most commonly it is described as a “period after modernism” when “the corresponding view among scholars, cultural critics, and philosophers” collapsed, resulting in the abandonment of “established rules and categories” (Postmodernism). For the purposes of my argument, I am relying on Douglas Lanier’s definition, where it is “not a body of specific themes, ideas or stylistic features,” but more an “attitude towards cultural traditions” (*Modern Popular Culture* 17). Most notably, the postmodernist forms “push against the privileged status,” especially in contention with art, in order to challenge institutions that maintain the specific distinctions between high and low class stratification (Lanier, *Modern Popular Culture* 17). Pastiche is a term specific to postmodernism, being a major device of the movement. In a paper critique of Richard Dyer’s Pastiche, Peter Matthews cites the origins of the word pastiche from the Italian word pasticcio, “literally, a pie of mixed ingredients” (Matthews). Pastiche remains rooted in the idea of postmodernism, described in part as “mixing otherwise incompatible elements” (Lanier, *Modern Popular Culture* 17). Parodies, satires, and other forms of adaptation, like those on

YouTube, are often pastiche heavy, bringing together many different “ingredients” that rely on wide recognition of the elements that they draw from for their comedy.

The downside to this view is the assumption that when dealing with any modern adaptation, like Shakespeare parodies on YouTube, it becomes all too easy to categorize as an “example of this postmodern mode... and dismiss it as a passing fad” (Lanier, *Modern Popular Culture* 17). Pastiche proves to be of use when applied to the cultural reshaping of Shakespeare attributable to YouTube; it should not be declared “a symptom of cultural decadence” (Matthews). For example, pastiche has a way of accessing broader audiences than literature does. If the recipe for this “intertextual soup” contains even “far flung artefacts” from canonized literature, then pastiche cannot be shrugged off (Matthews). Shakespeare has been undergoing changes long before the time of postmodernism (Lanier, *Modern Popular Culture* 17). An ever-changing world demands ever-changing techniques to provoke new ways of thinking. In conjunction with the “advent of mass media” (Lanier, *Modern Popular Culture* 17), and the emergence of the YouTube video subculture, Shakespeare been recycled to “resituate in the regime of the (moving) image, not that of the word” (Lanier, “Recent Shakespeare”). If Shakespeare, the object of much highbrow study and debate, can reposition itself into stride with modern media, then the scope of study must expand as well. Matthews writes how Dyer “reminds us that knowing imitation is a perennial mode” and Lanier’s argument that pastiche “often coexists with the conviction that Shakespeare is a valuable aesthetic touchstone” (*Modern Popular Culture* 17) makes a compelling argument for the unrecognized value present in these videos.

For the most part, pastiche gets a bad rap; so, for some, watching Shakespeare recite some bad rap would be an insult to everything that Shakespeare represents. A video entitled *Epic Rap Battles of History* features Shakespeare rapping insults to another well-known author they have pitted against him, Dr. Seuss. *Epic Rap Battles of History* have over a dozen different “battles” of celebrity characters, both fictional and real. The rap battles are a prime example of some of the parody and pastiche made specifically for YouTube. The production of these videos is top notch. They even have “behind the scenes” videos posted showing how they make their rap battle videos, which stands as a testament to their success. The rap battle videos are a prime example of clips that have a dedicated following on YouTube. The videos are made by popular demand, meaning that the audience interacts with the producers of the video to tell them who they want to see battle. The two writers make witty jests about one another’s work saying things like, [Shakespeare to Seuss] “I’ll put a slug between your shoulder blades, then ask, what light through yonder poser breaks?” The line is borrowed from Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet* but recast to be a stab at Dr. Seuss, the words themselves serve as an ingredient in the pastiche mixture. Shakespeare continues to berate his opponent with the lines, “And to top it off you’re not a doctor, I’ve never seen a softer author, you crook you, I bet you wrote the Twilight books too!” Only 40 seconds into the video and we’re already getting some considerable accusations from “Bill,” as Seuss calls him. It is the phrasing and the context of lines like this one, where Dr. Seuss calls Shakespeare “Bill,” that deconstruct the thick atmosphere of ceremonial treatment that high culture imposes on Shakespeare. By deconstruction I mean not the kind that

undermines Shakespeare's authority in the context of his cultural importance, but deconstruction in terms of its approachability. Dr. Seuss is battling Shakespeare. His use of the name "Bill" is in every way aimed at stripping Shakespeare of the respect he is given, but for the unbiased viewer, the name provides a term of endearment. How often is it used? Shakespeare professionals certainly wouldn't be expected to call him "Bill" in front of an audience. Something that common clearly stands outside of highbrow culture. The rappers were not the first ones to bring Shakespeare down to such common ground. We see Shakespeare referred to as "Bill" and "Shakie" by his editor in *A Small Rewrite*. It is more befitting in that context to see how he responds to being "Shakespeare the man." Surprisingly, he does not conjure up his booming authorial voice and berate his editor for addressing him disrespectfully; instead the nicknames seem quite normal. Thus, to the YouTube viewer, hearing Shakespeare called "Bill," or "Shakie," is a form of democratization, springing forth from the assumption that people will hear it and realize that Shakespeare adheres to the same rules as we do. If he is "Bill" and not William Shakespeare, then suddenly he is not totally dictated by the rules of high culture, educational institutions, and critical analysis. Shakespeare is meant to be of the people, and the realization of that is essential to the continuation of his growing cultural capital.

The entire idea that Shakespeare could ever have any relation to hip-hop, or rap, music is absurd; but that's exactly what pastiche does. It makes the absurd seem normal. What we get is an unexpected yet "effortless segueing between high and low [that] creates its own principle of suspense" (Matthews). It's exciting to see Shakespeare in this new context. That is one of the advantages of using the pastiche

device– it associates and “lends Shakespeare street credibility, broad intelligibility, and celebrity” (Lanier, “Recent Shakespeare”). It is apparent in videos such as *Epic Rap Battle of History* that they were created with a younger target audience in mind. I find it incorrect to assume that videos colored by a shade of the postmodern pastiche influence nullifies Shakespeare’s cultural capital to viewers when they were created with a specific audience in mind. So while Bourdieu makes it clear that “cultural competence,” in the context of at-home exposure, is necessary to proper perception of art, and that competence is hallmark of the social elite, we are confronting an unrestricted use of Shakespeare with a specific audience in mind; Shakespeare for “youth culture” (Lanier, “Recent Shakespeare”).

Modern criticisms of Bourdieu’s theory of perception contest that “distinction has been replaced by distraction,” and the visual world of fast paced videos, especially those with production quality, has caused “wholesale transformations” in perception (Prior 11). The argument here is that “visual culture,” like YouTube videos, “has accelerated to such a degree” that people can no longer focus on what they’re seeing, rendering us thoughtless captives of the moving images on screen (Prior 11). The world of fast paced media has produced consumers who are accustomed to having high volumes of information presented at a relatively quick pace. Therefore, the Shakespeare market is being adjusted to match the times. I find it presumptive for critics to limit how people process and associate information. In order for Shakespeare’s cultural capital to keep manifesting itself in new ways, then it demands the opportunity for a new perspective. If people are bored from being told how to perceive properly, then

perhaps the visual perspective can be of practical use in exposing people to art. If we limit the means by which we can extract meaning and value from art, as well as dismiss the “parodic strain” (caused by the assumption that Shakespeare as a whole is the object of parody) in YouTube Shakespeare, then we leave ourselves in a postmodern vacuum where value is not allowed to procreate, and all culture and class stratification is maintained (Lanier, *Modern Popular Culture* 17).

Rap music has traditionally operated as a voice against some of the restraints society imposes and the struggles of those who exist outside of the social elite. Part of its rebellious appeal is in the tendency of rap music to overtly associate with taboo topics that captivate us. “Rap resonates because it talks about our lives, and tells stories of love, violence, sex—the things that get our blood racing,” says the English teacher who is trying to mesh Shakespeare with today’s youth (Markham). His ability to relate to the human condition is one of the main reasons that Shakespeare has survived for so long. Shakespeare’s ability to reach people, an integral part of his perceived ubiquity, was the main motivation for Meskimen’s impressions video. Educational programming exposes children to Shakespeare in programs such as *Sesame Street*, and advertisers use Shakespeare as the backdrop for their commercials because familiarity with Shakespeare to some degree is thought to be universal. In part, perhaps, people are familiar with Shakespeare because at some point they were made to be, but I think that the argument that Shakespeare knew how to reach still resonates with youth. Shakespeare is a market driven creation. Production of cultural capital creates the appearance of universality, and Shakespeare rap is one example of how well he manages to stay up

to date in a new market (Hulbert, Wetmore, and York 2). Kathryn Markham, the English teacher, refers him to her students as “the ultimate rapper.” Common questions from young people regarding the relevance of Shakespeare include things like, “What does Shakespeare have to do with me?” And, “Why did he write in this snooty poetry that no one can understand?” That’s precisely Markham’s point: “His poetry was the best street rhyming of his time” (Markham).

Using Shakespeare’s language has been a weapon of critics, both highbrow and lowbrow, for a long time. “Inaccessibility,” or not understanding Shakespeare, paves the way for language itself to also become a divide (Hulbert, Wetmore, and York 2). Highbrow criticism studies the language and lowbrow criticism dismisses it. In fact, Shakespeare’s language is probably the single most polarizing point lying with contemporary interest. Since language manipulation is a major device of rap music, then we must explore what this video is doing by exploiting Shakespeare’s language. For instance, one might assume that if the language dates the work in a way that demands we be taught the meaning behind it, then it is easier to assume that it has no relevant application today. Or there’s the opposing argument, which contests that the language of Shakespeare is the focus of his genius. Therefore, the value that we place on Shakespeare is lost when adaptations or appropriations fail to include the original wording. These type arguments fail to accept the possibility that they are involved in a cyclical process that keeps rolling Shakespeare through the ages. Donald Hendrick and Bryan Reynolds also make the point in their introduction, where Shakespeare is both a “socially and historically determined playground” where class divides slip, and reimagination and “alternative

opportunities” are encouraged (9). Adaptations often involve much translation and reduction with the sole purpose of appealing to youth culture. There is a group called the Reduced Shakespeare Company that performs Shakespeare’s *Othello* as a rap on YouTube. Preserving the original language keeps Shakespeare as the object of study and importance in higher educational institutions, and modern adaptations revive widespread modern interest. Bringing Shakespeare into this fantasy rap battle where we can call him “Bill” and watch him rhyme insults to Dr. Seuss fascinates people because it is fresh. When Shakespeare is rapping against Dr. Seuss’ characters Things 1&2, they attack his language saying, “you can take your fancy words and take them back home to your mama.” The same issue is raised in *A Small Rewrite* when Shakespeare’s editor is convincing him to reword everything to make it more “snappy,” or when young English students demand to know why it is important to study something that is hard to understand. Dr. Seuss’ language is snappy. It’s quick and simple, although unconventional in terms of how people converse. Arguably, Shakespeare and Seuss are on the opposite ends of the spectrum when it comes to simplicity of language, but they share the same affinity for the mastery of language. There is undoubtedly a degree of fascination with Shakespeare’s language. But that fascination could not persist if there was not significant value found in what he was saying as well – does Shakespeare rap create new levels of meaning, or destroy the culture that it strips its material from? (Wetmore 150). The relationship between Shakespeare properly worded and Shakespeare reduced mirrors that of the battle for where Shakespeare belongs –

high or low – when the essential conclusion is that he belongs to both. Shakespeare belongs to his audience, and that term is non-discriminatory.

Youth culture is a major market, especially for film producers. Equally so, it is a major market for makers of YouTube films (Lanier, “Recent Shakespeare”). Recalibrating Shakespeare to that market means making adjustments on the things that youth might not find as interesting, and shaping into something that they do, with the debating being over what might or might not be lost. Rap music may seem subversive, but in this case it is not necessarily subversive to Shakespeare as it is to some of the tradition surrounding Shakespeare. An audience during Shakespeare’s time shouted obscenities, threw things, got rowdy, and displayed behavior totally separate from what we would consider theatre proper (Ultimate Rapper). “Sounds like a rap concert, doesn’t it?” Asks Markham, The Globe truly was the Apollo Theater of the day” (Ultimate Rapper). Shakespeare rap brings that same element of unruly treatment to modern times. There are thousands of videos that include “Shakespeare” and “rap” in the titles on YouTube. It is certainly getting a response and it has certainly become quite a theme with a wide range of application. The Reduced Shakespeare Company’s *Othello Rap*, William Shatner’s *No Tears for Caesar*, and *Epic Rap Battles of History* are all examples of a central theme in wide application. When using Shakespeare, the single most-referenced symbol of highly cultured oration, is set “within the outlaw of rap” the result is a jab at one of culture’s icons done in jest (Lanier, *Modern Popular Culture* 15). A critic of Shakespeare used in rap might be appalled at how the language is tossed out the window in *Othello Rap*, but as seen in *Epic Rap Battles of History* and *No Tears for*

Caesar, rap can serve other purposes, preserving and extending the language of Shakespeare's reach into youth culture.

Returning to Bourdieu's theory of perception, we see how it hinges on the observer considering a static piece of art, but Shakespeare always intended his plays to be in action, whereby the meaning cannot exist in a strict frame like a painting might. Lanier argues, "the shift of gravity from text to image paves the way for Shakespeare to go fully global" (Lanier, "Recent Shakespeare"). Lanier's idea of pastiche Shakespeare for youth culture sits flush with what Prior argues is becoming of Bourdieu's theory, where the idea is that the change "sets up parallels" between the highbrow and lowbrow systems at odds (Prior 10). In what is referred to as a "new middle-class fraction," people are becoming "less dichotomized – that is, *either* cultivated or popular" (Prior 10) meaning that audiences are no longer confined with the rigidity of Bourdieu's theory, nor is it as dismissive as the postmodernist, excusing Shakespeare parody as simple "irony" (Lanier, *Modern Popular Culture* 17).

The idea of Shakespeare, youth culture, and globalization is essential to the concept of cultural capital. Doesn't something take on more value when its value is widely recognized as opposed to being confined to a small niche of the world? That is exactly what is happening when we see Shakespeare relocated to a place like YouTube and rap music, the opportunity for new folds of meaning is created because the "young viewer/reader/listener is not... the passive member of a one-way transaction, but has agency to engage, reimagine, and re-create the plays on his

or her own terms” (Hulbert, Wetmore, and York 4). The rap battle has been viewed over 24 million times, in less than a year being on YouTube. I’d say an author releasing a new critique on Shakespeare, or even an acting group performing Shakespeare would find it impossible to find 24 million people, from all over the world, to perform for or have as readers. “Once Shakespearean narrative could be disembedded from Shakespeare’s words, it became far more readily available for translation into all manner of languages and cultural contexts” (Lanier, “Recent Shakespeare”). That point holds water in particular with the Shakespeare rap. One comment, posted while I was watching the video myself reads, “I love [these] Rap Battles so much that I learned the text of all Rap Battles by heart... and my English isn’t good cause I am a 11 years old German boy.” Another comment says that in English class at school, the teacher has the students writing their own “Shakespeare Rap Battles.” Youth culture certainly has an impact on the legacy of Shakespeare’s cultural capital.

“In any case, rap music can (and has been used to) serve as a means of reducing, translating, and referencing Shakespeare” (Wetmore 152). Is that not the entire premise of appropriation and adaptation as a whole? Ideally, the audience will see Shakespeare’s rap appropriations from different perspectives to see how rich the quality can be. As often as the idea of thoughtless adaptation is associated with YouTube Shakespeare, one would think that the reverse might well be equally recognized. For someone without command of a working knowledge of Shakespeare, it seems intuitive that they might access something easier to digest than Shakespeare’s original works. The ease of understanding Othello in a three-

minute rap certainly carries appeal to youth, and consequently when Shakespeare is accessed in this way (building understanding from adaptation to the original) then the appropriations that employ his cultural capital become closely associated with his identity.

For the past few decades, rap music has been so popular it is inevitable that something like Shakespeare would be brought into the mix. The references to Shakespeare in rap can serve many ends, we see the “Shakespearean original” in *No Tears for Caesar*, we see it rewritten to the “codes and language of hip-hop” in *Othello Rap*, and we see it reference the man himself in *Epic Rap Battle* (Wetmore 156). The lyrics of rap music are written with a purpose. The words do not exist to go unnoticed. Every reference is tailored to draw meaning from its source. Shakespeare rap may be the ultimate use of Shakespeare’s cultural capital because it is singularly dependent on what Shakespeare means in the minds of listeners for its support. Youth culture is the forefront for the continuation of Shakespeare’s cultural capital, as well as a major market for industry. If Shakespeare is not marketable to new generations, then it cannot hope to be sustained. However, “like so much else of youth culture, Shakespeare’s presence in it remains paradoxical” (Hulbert, Wetmore, York 222).

Chapter 5

Shakespeare's Sassy Gay Friend:

Questions of Finality in Shakespeare's Plays and the Destruction of Cultural Capital

The finality of the plays themselves remains at the center of such questions as Shakespeare's cultural authority. For every argument made that Shakespeare has an increasing amount of cultural capital, there is another to refute it, but the plays themselves have always remained a touchstone for adaptation and appropriation. Whereas Rowan Atkinson plays on the parodic strain in *Punch Shakespeare*, some appropriations have a detrimental effect on Shakespeare's cultural capital. Shakespeare's plays have an alleged universality to them, but can such authority even exist without exception? Or, is there a line where adaptation ceases to simply apply Shakespeare's themes while leaving significance intact, and destroying what cultural capital it may be borrowing? I have dealt with the common adaptations and appropriations that relocate Shakespeare into new settings and contexts, but in order to capture the full scope of Shakespeare's treatment on YouTube, I must consider those videos that radically affect the plays and their meaning. One series of YouTube videos by TheSecondCityNetwork achieves this by intervening on the paths of some of Shakespeare's female characters just before their death. These videos, entitled *Sassy Gay Friend*, star a flamboyantly homosexual man who saves women such as Ophelia, Juliet, and Desdemona from the grim fate written for them by Shakespeare. Shakespeare's cultural capital may be destroyed in one form, but it always retains the potential to be converted again back to another state. In this

same way, videos like *Sassy Gay Friend* destroy parts of Shakespeare's cultural capital, but do not leave Shakespeare so crippled as to render it obsolete.

The three videos that feature women from Shakespeare's plays have amassed a staggering 14 million views among them. Each video begins with a *what-got-us-here* explanation from a narrator, followed by the disclaimer, "This fate could have been avoided, *if* she had a sassy gay friend."⁵ At this point, Sassy Gay Friend (SGF) bursts onto the scene just before their death shouting, "What are you doing? What, what, what are you doing?!" Shakespeare's authority over his creation is challenged by putting a stop to the action that is at the crux of these plays. In regard to the discussion of authorship, romanticizing the author typically implies a strict reverence for the material itself, resulting in leaving the appropriated material intact. If a Sassy Gay Friend can intervene and change the entire course of action of a play, then Shakespeare's word suddenly is not final, and he is stripped of the power and credit granted by his cultural capital. Shakespeare becomes truly displaced by SGF as the threshold for adaptation and appropriation are exceeded, giving way to a total reworking. Is Shakespeare inseparable from the original conclusions of his plays, or have the tendrils of adaptation reached the point where they can change Shakespeare at will and do no harm?

The first Sassy Gay Friend intervention comes just before Juliet is going to take her life. A scene that is generally regarded as one of the most authentic acts of love ever written is quickly dismantled when SGF tells Juliet that what she's doing is

⁵ Unless otherwise noted, all un-cited quotations are taken directly from video dialogue from the website <http://www.youtube.com>

irrational. "I love him," says Juliet. "You love him? You met him Sunday; it's barely Thursday morning. Slow down, crazy, slow down," responds SGF. Whatever allowances are made in terms of believability are immediately called into question when SGF breaks the continuity of events and forces both Juliet and the audience to question what is going on. Suddenly she is not a woman so committed to love that life cannot continue in absence of her Romeo and becomes a confused teenager who needs to be talked from a ledge. When the audience is made to confront the world of the play presented by the author, any meaning that has been packed alongside it is destroyed in the process. If Juliet is just crazy, and her actions are unreasonable then the play can no longer rally fame under the theme of ubiquitous love. SGF draws his humor from taking Shakespeare's words, and offering his own interpretations (Garcia). SGF mocks Juliet, saying, "Romeo, Romeo, where for art thou, Romeo?" Translation, "Desperate, desperate, I am really desperate! Are there any stalkers on my grounds?" At this point, the focus shifts from love's lost battle for the star-crossed lovers to the ridiculous nature of the scene. SGF's rationale is really "pragmatic and realistic" (Garcia). Without realizing it, we have dismissed Shakespeare's lead, and in its place sided with SGF and the "shifting societal attitudes toward the young" (Buhler 243).

The impact of these videos is largely attributable to the prevalence of popular adaptation within youth culture. The youth of today have come to represent a "subculture" that behaves independently from the greater cultural group, they are associated with different "patterns, tastes, and purchasing power" (Buhler 243). If the youth culture today is seen to exist as a separate market, then the culture that

they bring into the association must exist independently from its greater whole to some extent. In this sense, Shakespeare is taken by youth culture and manipulated to a form that fits best with what they represent. "Youth-culture Shakespeare, like all youth culture, is about identity and cliques" (Hulbert, Wetmore, York 8). How is Shakespeare being identified when Juliet is given a voice outside of the text? (Garcia). Since these women are made to exist independently from Shakespeare, we force the author to take a back seat and focus on the characters as the point of criticism. In other words, the "Shakespeare" implemented in these videos needs Shakespeare the author to some extent in order to exist. The meaning we bestow upon such characters as Juliet stems from what "Shakespeare" as a whole means to us. To assert that Shakespeare was wrong is to presume that now, after hundreds of years of adaptation, appropriation, and reflection, we have gleaned enough meaning from it all to say that we know these characters better than Shakespeare himself. "This all could have been avoided, if she had a Sassy Gay Friend," suggests that it is by some fault that these women are in their situations. An author depends on his reader to glean meaning from his character. However, being that a character follows a path meant to convey meaning designed by the author, the extent with which we associate a character's meaning with the author must be, if only slightly, valid. In the same way that an author writes meaning into his characters, those characters come to define the author himself because, to an extent, we associate one with the other. The logic of SGF suggests that we are better equipped to handle situations that these female characters find themselves in, and in doing so it introduces cynicism to into the play that destroys parts of Shakespeare's cultural capital.

“Romeo killed your cousin Tybalt,” rebukes SGF. “Tybalt killed his friend Mercutio,” Juliet retorts. “Save it Patty Hearst! I’m not buying any Stockholm Syndrome today, thank you!” By freeing these women in the way that saves them from imminent death, one can’t help but breathe a sigh of relief because at one point or another in reading the text or seeing the play performed, consideration had to be given to how the tragedy could have been avoided. Seeing the “happy” resolution unfold is comforting. However, that victory is short lived because Shakespeare no longer remains “universal” to us, but sequestered alongside youth culture, where the allowances for Shakespeare’s cultural capital are not made. Instead, it is left to desiccation by abandonment and the new version is content with letting Shakespeareans have Shakespeare, and they’ll make their own more popular version. Paul Miller writes that cynicism is the “dominant spirit of our age” (77). Cynicism is distant. It says, “behind every silver lining is a cloud” and behind every written death is a mistake (Miller 77). If romanticizing the author is a means of relating to the text, then de-romanticizing the author like SGF creates the possibility of “numbness” where we used to find meaning (Miller 77). The *Sassy Gay Friend* video is indicative of the size of the shift from the beliefs of the eighteenth century until now in regard to Shakespeare’s authority as the author. Now, the focus held is that “the responses of readers matter more than the intentions of authors” (Taylor 322). In terms of *Sassy Gay Friend*, this phrase would more accurately read “the responses in number of views matters more than the accuracy of the material itself.” The ideas held during the eighteenth century and today are not totally at odds with

one another, but like a dog discovering its tail, only appear to be moving against one another.

In each of these videos, SGF makes different arguments as to why the girls should be reconsidering their actions. The dialogue suggests that what is happening then would not be happening today. It is upon this realization that he convinces them to change their minds. Juliet contests, "I'm a grown woman." "I think you're 14 and you're an idiot," says SGF. It is this perspective on things that shakes the confidence in what is written. The Sassy Gay Friend is a device set in place to make the viewer question Shakespeare's character development by putting us close to the women themselves. It takes a gay man to bring these ladies to the realization of their own inner strength that is left unrecognized by Shakespeare. Shakespeare had it all wrong, right? I believe that freeing these women from their written fates, their character becomes less concrete. Juliet is the epitome of young strength. One female user comments, "These women are all but sad, irrational and impulsive." Jennifer Hulbert describes Juliet as "one half of Western drama's most glorious couple," if we separate her from her Romeo then that which is Romeo & Juliet, and by extension Shakespeare, is destroyed (Hulbert 202). They cannot exist independently from one another, even if what is supposedly happening is a realization that she is independent in her choices. Juliet already epitomizes feminine strength; her male counterparts and her male author do not drag her down. "Juliet is too strong a force in her play and too well adjusted to be an apt depiction of a contemporary teenage girl in the manner that those who would construct such girls as suffering from being too much put upon" (Hulbert 202). Is Juliet simply a stupid 14-year-old girl? Or is

she made strong in her defiance of her father's will, even stronger still in her accepting not a "roofy from a priest," as SGF defines it, but a fierce act of love in which she fools every masculine presence in the play? (Hulbert 202). The association between author and character must be considered when we see the Friar caution Romeo against his actions. These few lines provide supporting evidence that Shakespeare wants us to see Juliet in a certain way. Further, this revelation debunks the idea that "Shakespeare was wrong" expressed by SGF. Shakespeare considered the possibility that his characters knew they might be making the wrong decision, but chose to have the reader focus on the fact that they acted in spite of that knowledge. In light of this, Juliet suddenly becomes informed by the opportunity that she and Romeo had to prevent disaster by considering the risks. They knew what they were doing, yet they acted anyways. Shakespeare knew what he was writing, but he wrote with intent. If SGF prevents these actions from occurring, he destroys all that Juliet represents, as well as Shakespeare's authority as the author.

A stereotype of contemporary gay men associates them with having the blinders of masculinity removed, therefore granting them level insight into the behavior of both sexes. I believe the use of SGF would not work as well with a heterosexual man because of the assumption that he could not understand the female mind. Presenting SGF as a way to "demarginalize" the teenage girl actually has the opposite effect when it takes down Shakespeare with it (Hulbert 203). So, the "false intimacy of being in-the-know" that SGF operates from, is really just making Shakespeare "feel phony" (Miller 77).

It is critical and directorial efforts to turn Shakespeare into some kind of non-popular, non-sentimental, non-sensational, anti-heroical, anti-romantic moralist or ideologue that have tampered with, to the point of destroying, the essential chemistry of the Shakesperian properties they are dealing with... Arguably anyway, aesthetic and emotional impacts have more to do with artistic survival than ideological messages. (Lanier, *Modern Popular Culture* 95-96)

Does *Sassy Gay Friend* turn Shakespeare into a non-sentimental, anti-heroical, anti-romantic? I think yes, especially if you destroy the “essential chemistry” of the plays as a whole. Paradoxically, if we give Juliet, Desdemona, and Ophelia voices that speak outside of their existence in the text, then their actions, the part of them that speaks the loudest, is silenced, making SGF, not Shakespeare, the anti-heroical villain. Aesthetic and emotional impacts become impossible when cynicism numbs us to their effects.

The cynical onslaught employed by this video is detrimental to the sense of esteem associated with a high regard for cultural capital, but not the democratization of Shakespeare as a whole. Referencing Shakespeare, or “dumbing down the language” or even taking liberties with the material is not at all uncommon in popular adaptation and appropriation (Garcia). However, the agenda of an adaptation is usually clear, to the point that such a convoluted relationship can be called clear, based on whether or not it calls attention to some dimension of Shakespeare or if it is tugging at the thread to unravel the entire thing. Ophelia and

Desdemona get a more feminist perspective from SGF as he addresses their situations as more a result of the wrongly subservient female as opposed to the naivety of youth. Comments from people on Sassy Gay Friend vary greatly, but the attack geared towards Shakespeare's need for upgrade doesn't ease by undetected with viewers. "These solutions to the main character's problems might be humorous but clearly they sound more rational to most people of today, wherein women empowerment is always voiced out"⁶. SGF makes a point with both Desdemona and Ophelia to show them how the men in their lives are what is holding them back. This comment confirms this video has at saying we are somehow better equipped than Shakespeare was to deal with these issues. Ophelia is about to drown herself when SGF tells her to back away from the water. Ophelia pleads that Hamlet no longer loves her, and it is this realization that is driving her to suicide. SGF responds, "So we kill ourselves? KILL OURSELVES? This Hamlet we're talking about, OK? HAMLET. There is something rotten in Denmark and it's his piss poor attitude." No doubt that the way SGF talks down to Ophelia is hilarious, yet the fact that he is immediately dismissive of any other issues besides Ophelia's death undermines the meaning within the play. His reasoning behind Ophelia choosing life over death is that Hamlet is not worth it, but the events surrounding Ophelia's death in the play itself remain unclear. Did she kill herself, or was she mad, implying that her actions were outside of her control? SGF prevents consideration of this question that Shakespeare clearly leaves unanswered for the audience to consider. Further, SGF deconstructs the

⁶ <http://transmedialshakespeare.wordpress.com/2011/03/20/sassy-gay-friend-saves-the-day-how-ophelia-desdemona-and-juliet-escaped-their-plays/>

moral obligation that Hamlet presumably operates from, and condenses him to a simple “piss poor attitude.”

Desdemona receives similar treatment when she is caught “waiting in her bed to be murdered by her husband.” Although people are intrigued with the idea of “what if?” that these videos present, the potential for a double perspective is equally shared. Posted to Garcia’s essay, one user raises the question, “A gay friend to the rescue could be ever so useful, but, what tragedy then would transpire?” I believe that TheSecondCityNetwork displays a heavy reliance on the audience. They are aware of how they are manipulating and destroying some of the meaning within these plays, but they also chose to utilize Shakespeare for a reason. Perhaps because they knew that his celebrity could handle any type of treatment, or perhaps because they knew that his name would attract more viewers. Regardless, the point is that the audience as a whole is not convinced of these videos to the point of allowing it to disrupt everything they know to be Shakespeare. Instead, they take the videos for what they are, funny, clever, and resourceful with the abundant supply of cultural capital that Shakespeare has to offer. Garcia notes the duality of these videos in her essay as an attempt to play down Shakespeare while “reinforcing his importance at the same time.” Others post things that commend the actors themselves as opposed to raising a mob against Shakespeare: “Okay I LOVE Sassy Gay Friend, he’s a comedian who obviously knows his Shakespeare” (Garcia), “This is sooo funny, especially if you’ve read the book and understand all the references,” “I swear these vids are helping me study for my English literature class.”

Sassy Gay Friend is representative of the paradoxical strain that exists when dealing with such videos on YouTube. These videos clearly “stand well outside ‘proper’ Shakespeare” and although they clearly destroy parts of Shakespeare’s cultural capital, the overriding theme of resituating Shakespeare from the untouchable realm of highbrow still prevails (Lanier, *Modern Popular Culture* 19). Videos like *Sassy Gay Friend*, *Epic Rap Battles of History*, and *A Small Rewrite* have polarizing effects because they push creativity within something that people are passionate about, and people are quick to defend what they love. Within the group that cherishes “proper” treatment of Shakespeare over things like SGF, it is easy to focus on the particular “misuse” or “misinterpretation” rather than the power at play. “Transgression is not the whole story, and we shouldn’t fail to note that the act of transgression paradoxically depends upon preserving – at least initially – some conception of an authentic, original, or proper Shakespeare so that it can then be symbolically defaced” (Lanier, *Modern Popular Culture* 19). We see this recurring theme from Shakespeare rap. If the objective was to deface for the sake of defacing then Shakespeare would have long since been destroyed through the handlings of culture. People recognize the reference that serves to spark their interest. Shakespeare’s greatest weapon for survival is that he is the point of debate. Videos that mock and defile are popular, regardless of their immediate implications. Overall, the fact that Shakespeare has been used and reused by the makers of Sassy Gay Friend to the point that millions of people have seen it confirms the attraction Shakespeare still holds for viewers.

Conclusion

Shakespeare exists as both highbrow and lowbrow art within the larger cultural system of relation in society. Within those systems of highbrow and lowbrow classification, Shakespeare is subject to a wide spectrum of treatment resulting in the continual resituating of how people perceive him and his works. Pierre Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital helps us quantify what is generally recognized as Shakespeare's value, and through this lens I have applied that abstract concept to adaptation and appropriation of Shakespeare on YouTube. Cultural capital, like any type of currency, can be created and destroyed. The same concept applies to what I have defined as Shakespeare's cultural capital. When borrowed and reapplied in another context, that cultural capital can be further propagated, resulting in the continuation and sustaining of Shakespeare's value within society, or it can be destroyed, further distancing and clouding Shakespeare within the popular mind. As a result of four centuries of continuation, Shakespeare has accrued a significant amount of cultural capital through differing modes of transmission such as the highbrow institution of education, and lowbrow affiliations with popular culture.

Popular culture is a term that has been made unclear by its frequent use, relation with the media, and negative lowbrow stereotypes. The most literal definition of the word popular stems from its Latin root, meaning "of the people." In recent years, YouTube has become one of the most widely recognized cultural

markets that the world has ever seen. Shakespeare's treatment on YouTube has provided an effective model for the unrestricted access to cultural capital available to people. Examples in advertising, theatre, television, music, and parody illustrate the length to which adaptation and appropriation can sustain or destroy the cultural capital surrounding Shakespeare, giving Shakespeare the appearance of being universal.

The Shakespeare that pervades the popular mind is a market-driven product. The idea that an "authentic Shakespeare" exists, whether in the context of the author himself or the works themselves, is ultimately a result of an ever-evolving cultural capital (Lanier, *Modern Popular Culture* 19). Shakespeare is unique in that he has been able to coexist under the claims and affiliations with both highbrow and lowbrow stratification. I believe that the prevalence of Shakespeare within educational institutions and educational programming has reinforced the illusion that Shakespeare exists for higher education, for high culture, and for highbrow prejudices, thereby distancing some from a creation intended for all. Pop-culture's version of Shakespeare, which has traditionally earned negative lowbrow connotations is not so clearly defined in the wake of what I consider a reshaping within the cultural system of relation. A very rigid and stratified class system based on education and accessibility of knowledge is fading within society on account of revolutionary changes in information transmission like the Internet. That is not to say that the economic generalizations of the rich, the middle-class, and the poor no longer exist, but the accessibility to subjects of cultural importance, like Shakespeare, are becoming more and more demystified and democratized. YouTube

is one of the causes and means by which we can see this phenomenon occurring. A primary source used for sizing audiences, obtaining feedback, and understanding all of the knowledge and efforts that go into creating a video accessing Shakespeare's cultural capital makes YouTube a truly unique tool for tracing the evolution of Shakespeare.

Once again Shakespeare has shifted along with the passing of time. Taylor states that readers of today engage literature from the standpoint of an intense personal experience rather than buying into an assumed meaning. This view is supported by the rise of what I have defined as postmodernism, youth culture, and parody. My point is that these approaches do not exist as separate entities in regard to their approach to understanding and sustaining Shakespeare's cultural capital; they too raise important questions that lead to further understanding of Shakespeare and ultimately contribute to his supposed value (Lanier, *Modern Popular Culture* 20). Taylor tracks Shakespeare's movement from the eighteenth century to now and treats the two extremes as not separate instances, but two parts of the greater whole of Shakespeare's evolution. Shakespeare's universality, a residual effect from how people value his work and how closely they relate that value to him, is ultimately a self-fulfilling prophecy once it has been established that you cannot define work without the author, and author without the work. Taylor illustrates this strain by saying, "we must see marks on paper in order to interpret them properly... but we must interpret the marks on the paper in order to see them properly" (322). The bottom line to this discussion is that however the people in a particular time period regard Shakespeare has an effect on the perceptions of

generations to come. The common denominator when it comes to the perception of art is that, “perception depends on interpretation,” and “there are as many interpretations as there are readers” (Taylor 323). The unifying theme is that the “reader is an essential ingredient, the work itself has no fixed meaning” (Taylor 323). Without an audience, a show cannot continue, and with no performance, the perception of universality cannot endure. Although reader-response criticism of today “presupposes that literature is characterized by anonymity, absence, isolation, and silence” it also “depends” on certain understanding about the work, and how meaning is delivered through that work (Taylor 323). People in the eighteenth century tied the meaning they read closely with the author himself; today, this practice isn’t as central to the audience’s experience. The intermediate of these extremes is one where we partly include the association of author with works, but not to the point relying solely on the author for meaning. The range of different approaches, or taking different degrees of liberties, to Shakespeare on YouTube supports this idea. With this in mind, it is easier to keep the idea of universality in perspective because when we become part, or close, to of the process of production, as the contributors to YouTube are, we become aware that Shakespeare is a product we reproduce in order to keep drawing meaning from it.

By resituating Shakespeare from the confines of high culture, we are expanding our definition of Shakespeare and are able to “turn our attention towards broad questions about Shakespeare’s place, past, present, and future, in the politics of culture” (Lanier, *Modern Popular Culture* 20). YouTube is bringing Shakespeare, once again, closer to being truly of popular culture. One truth remains: the day that

we stop seeing Shakespeare on media such as YouTube, is the day that we finally mourn the death of the world's greatest bard.

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