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The Really Real, Authentic, Original Shakespeare

Abstract: This essay considers the question of how original/new interpretations help redefine (or reify) the original/old perception of Shakespeare and the work its cultural capital performs, demonstrating the inherent impossibility of reconciling an “original” Shakespeare with contemporary performances of his plays through a reading of *Twelfth Night*, and address some of the ideological implications of trying to conflate the two. It then takes a detour into contemporary marketing and consumer-psychology literature to explore the crucial roles which the concepts of “authenticity” and “originality” have come to play in contemporary consumer culture, circling back to Shakespeare, to ruminate on the implications of the use of his cultural capital as an ultimate positional good in the 21st century.

Keywords: authenticity, consumer capitalism, consumerism, identity, individuality, originality, Shakespeare, *Twelfth Night*

I would like to begin by showing how the concept of originality has a twofold opposing denotation. One, following Baldwin’s cited observation, travels backwards in time to a (perhaps mythologized) point of an “authentic origin” that roots and undergirds later existence. The second refers to “original” interpretation of Shakespeare, one that—by definition of its newness—disrupts the continuity of tradition, and provides a transversal glimpse of a differential perspective. As such, while intrinsically linked to it, the second conception of originality (which I will here call original/new) negates the first conception (here, original/old) by, minimally, erasing the continuity of previous interpretation to derive back at an origin (e.g. previous interpretations of Shakespeare’s *Taming of the Shrew* reified the subjection of women to men, but here I demonstrate that Shakespeare really meant to deliver a blow to male chauvinism), and, in the opposite extreme, juxtaposing a ‘new’ interpretation of the Shakespearean canon against the canon itself, perhaps undermining a particular aspect of the Shakespearean cultural capital and cultural industry (e.g. Shakespeare did mean us to delight in anti-Semitism in the *Merchant*; how do we reconcile the idea of

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a disgustingly racist Shakespeare with the general perception of the uber-humane Bard?).

I propose to interrogate this tension in considering the question of “authentically original” Shakespeare overall: what do we mean when we say “original” or “authentic” Shakespeare? Why and how do we seek it? What are the ongoing implications of defining and reifying it through academic, theatrical, and educational practice? And, how do original/new interpretations help redefine (or reify) the original/old perception of Shakespeare and the work its cultural capital performs?

In *The Authentic Shakespeare*, Stephen Orgel destabilized the very source to which we’re claiming authenticity.¹ In a series of thematic articles, he undermines, one by one, the traditional touchstones that have anchored our interpretation of Shakespearean work. Since the plays were written for performance rather than publication, we can hardly recognize their published textual iterations—no matter how carefully preserved—as anything stable or purposeful; the texts attributed to him do not in any way represent “the true, or final, or accurate, or authentic text of the work they presented” (Orgel 7). Furthermore, our obsession with the published work seems to be dissonant with the Renaissance nonchalance about text, cutting and rewriting at will, not to mention the 2 hour expected maximum duration for all “traffic” of the stage requiring dramatic textual cuts that leave the plays open to radical reinterpretation. Focusing on the author works poorly as well, considering how little we know of Shakespeare and how collaborative the writing process was; we know for (almost) certain that other Renaissance playwrights have written some parts of some of the plays at some time (the witches in *Macbeth* seem to have been radically altered after the death of the playwright for instance, Orgel delights in telling us). But the extent and specific textual locations of such collaborations will never be fully transparent to us beyond the fact that we want to find “the perfect plays that Shakespeare did not write” (Orgel 176), since

¹ Stephen Orgel is but one—albeit representative—scholarly voice that points out the disconnect between contemporary perceptions of an authentic Shakespeare and the reality of the production and consumption of Renaissance theater. Other salient examples of what had become a subfield of Shakespeare study bent on particularizing—rather than generalizing—the process of Shakespearean interpretation in order to intervene in the effortless universalizing conflation between the Renaissance and the present moment include Jean Howard’s and Marion O’Connor’s *Shakespeare Reproduced* or David Scott Kastan’s and Peter Stallybrass’ *Staging the Renaissance*. Another, cultural-materialist trajectory of Shakespeare scholarship which came to the fore in the late 1980s, harnessed such careful historical research to argue that, regardless of the past, our understanding of historical texts will always remain firmly anchored in our own ideological concerns and considerations. Examples of such scholarship include (but are not limited to), Jonathan Dollimore and Alan Sinfield’s *Political Shakespeare*.

perfection is determined via our own structures of plausibility, referentiality, and theatrical practice. We tend to struggle with our “myth of a stable, accurate, authentic, legitimate text, a text that we can think of as Shakespeare’s legitimate heir” (176, emphasis Orgel’s). In sum, we’re reminded that the actual thing that we’re measuring authenticity against is an unstable, transient, and indefinite artifact presented to us through a medium foreign to its mode of origin. Since most of what we have to go on is this anachronistic medium, authenticity becomes a tricky, if not untenable proposition.

I first extend the argument of the impossibility of originality into the domain of historicity. Even if the source texts of Shakespeare’s plays available to us were definitive and stable, their interpretation isn’t. Contrary to the belief in the transcendental signification of Shakespeare’s plays, meaning is ideologically produced at the point of consumption frequently virtually erasing the meaning-making mechanism of the source-culture. By necessity, post-Shakespearean interpretations of the Shakespearean canon are original/new, if not to its contemporaries (in terms of interpretive and performance history), then certainly to whatever original/old Shakespeare may have existed. As I will illustrate through a brief comparison of the affective connections between characters in *Twelfth Night* first within what we (think we) know of the ideological context in which the play was produced and, second, our within own Western normative construct, there is little that “authentic theatrical techniques” can do to approximate the completely foreign “original” message of the play for contemporary audiences. And yet, though—or perhaps because—“authenticity” and “originality” remain perpetually elusive in Shakespeare and elsewhere, these two concepts have become the single most important attributes of goods exchanged in 21st century global economy (a short stroll through any grocery market aisle will demonstrate this point). As numerous marketers emphatically attest, highly-individualized discerning consumers increasingly purchase goods and experiences they recognize as authentically expressing their own distinctive facets of identity, particularly those that are oriented at transformative processes that would promise the attainment of aspirational unique identities authentically superior to others. The hottest commodities are “positional goods” that offer markers of superior status to their consumers. These markers are defined in terms of “alternatives” to the normative mainstream, whether those be in terms of artistic tastes, expression of particular values (such as environmentalism), or limited-edition personalized products. As such, the construction of authenticity always inevitably seems rooted in elitism—collected data persistently shows that “New Consumers” (also known as members of post-Baby boomer generations dubbed variously as Generation-X and/or Y, Millenials, or Generation Me; in other words, anyone born after 1970) rapidly abandon products, services, and experiences that are perceived as too popular and/or catering to a broad, undistinguished mass of people in favor of authenticated “original” products,

services, and experiences that speak to their perception of (aspirationally defined) selves.

As a global business franchise whose survival depends on continuous, consistent, and broad commitment to the Shakespeare brand, translated into consumption of a broad range of products on offer from a variety of providers on an indefinite spectrum of institutionalized authenticity, Shakespeare has struggled to retain customer loyalty, despite unprecedented subsidies offered by enforced educational study in many national curricula and investment in developing new themed experience hubs in flagship locations such as London's Globe and Stratford's Heritage site. The number of performances of Shakespeare globally seems to be declining, his theater audiences graying and dwindling, and some educational systems have dropped the Shakespeare requirement altogether. In this context, the commitment to authenticity is absolutely central to the rejuvenation of Shakespeare both in global and intimately local contexts (and, as we've seen with the relatively recent "discovery" of a new, more definitive—and infinitely more attractive, at least as far as contemporary aesthetic sensibilities go—portrait, endorsed in press by none other than Stanley Wells, the establishment is responding).

My main intention is to move from the ontology of authentic and original Shakespeare to an epistemological consideration of our search for Shakespearean authenticity, contextualized in the current neoliberal moment within which all facets of personal identity have been commodified and we understand our own prospective lives through a selective consumption of material and cultural goods ranked along varied hierarchies of "authenticity," this most coveted dimension of consumable goods, experiences, and cultural products. Ultimately, I grapple (unsuccessfully and earnestly, despite the obvious attempts at levity) with the uneasy proposition that original/new inventions of original/old Shakespeare, in the survivalist mode of appearing as a positional good attractive to contemporary consumers, might not only endorse traditional conservative elitism in stratifying the general populace, but also potentially negate the possibility of Shakespeare to serve as a site of ongoing transideological debate.

On the Impossibility of Authentic Originality: Speed-rumination on *Twelfth Night*

The likely impossibility of grasping Shakespearean originality comes from a comparative reading of *Twelfth Night* in (faux)² 16th century setting against the

² Faux = as we understand 16th understanding today, a concept that perpetually changes in reflection of our own ideological preoccupations and interests.

backdrop of the current (North American, specifically Midwestern U.S.) cultural context. For the sake of brevity and clarity, I will focus on the one dimension of the play that we usually link with transcendental universal humanism: the concept of love, so central to this particular play (if love, the transcendental universal human emotion is not experienced similarly across time, what is?). While the original context may have delighted in an affective flux, where characters sort through a multiplicity of simultaneous attractions to form what seems to be a number of ad-hoc and unforeseen attachments, the current cultural context seems to privilege an understanding of well-defined exclusive couplings. My contention here is that, without a significant cultural change that would bring the two lived normative ideological frameworks closer together (or without a brick of explanatory cliff-notes mailed to audiences for study prior to their theatrical experience of *Twelfth Night*), there is little to no chance that 21st century viewers will grasp the original Shakespeare (as approximated by careful historian and literary scholars) no matter how the play is performed in terms of theatrical practices.

The play revels in the confusion of a multiplicity of affective relationships as they evolve among a group of people who place variously on a gendered continuum of agency. The multiple-marriage ending functions more as a closure to the confusion of the play than as a resolution to several unsolved questions: to what, exactly, was Olivia attracted if her intended can be easily replaced by another? Is Orsino satisfied with his spontaneous face-saving marriage to his own page? What of his professed affection for Olivia? Is Aguecheek mortally wounded in his pride? Will Malvolio come around? What of Maria—is her new marital alliance to her liking? And, finally oh finally, what of Antonio, the most honorable and masculine lover in the play? Will he be able to negotiate his Friend's new marital situation?

While contemporary audiences might appreciate these questions, their answers would stray significantly from the Renaissance interpretive context. As scholars of the Renaissance have emphatically argued, this play charmed original audiences thanks to more than its interminable play with gender indeterminacy, its fantasy of sameness between twins, and its cheeky promotion of drunken revelry over sober protestant work ethic. The play's undeniable draw also lies in the depicted variegated attempts at the embodiment of (gendered) agency, some—but not all—of which might be intelligible to contemporary audiences. 21st century Westerners might, for instance, readily understand the female characters' ingenuous attempts to exercise affective agency against the challenge of patriarchal norms that would hinder their choice of potential partner. They might have a more difficult time with the men, most of whom the play exposes as severely lacking in masculine traits so central to effective exercise of social agency. In fact, 21st century perceptions of the signifiers of male agency might be flipped, depending on the theatrical practices employed by a

production to communicate the multi-dimensional character traits of each male. Orsino, for instance, whom we might see as the disarmingly eligible bachelor (after all, Olivia concedes that he's qualified in all ways, 1:5:227-31³, and Viola, the sweetheart of audiences in the 20th and 21st centuries, chooses him—she couldn't be wrong, could she?), would have been recognized by Renaissance audiences as weak, wrong-headed, and hopelessly—perhaps even disgustingly—effeminate. In contrast, the “bewitched” Antonio (5:1:64)⁴, whose professions of uncontrollable affection for Sebastian might land him in the “effeminate” category for contemporary audiences used to stereotyping queer men as lacking in masculinity, would have been read by Renaissance audiences as the pinnacle of masculine agency. As Stephen Orgel points out in *Impersonations*, keeping company with this “fighter/pirate—and lover of boys” would have been recognized as highly desirable for someone so young as Sebastian, in hopes that some of Antonio's exemplary masculinity, buttressed by his complete independence of female company, might rub off (81). The key to the distinction is a changed perception in gendered agency: whereas the Renaissance valued masculine Friendship⁵ above other affective bonds and warned men against excessive, effeminizing pursuit of female company, contemporary heteronormative cultural bias tends in the opposite direction, preferring to cast men who prefer to keep company with other men as inevitably feminine.

³ Olivia here extensively outlines Orsino's many good qualities: “I suppose him virtuous, know him noble,/Of great estate, of fresh and stainless youth,/In voices well divulged, free, learned, and valiant,/And in dimension and the shape of nature/A gracious person; but yet I cannot love him.”

⁴ Antonio reveals that for three months “no interim, not a minute's vacancy,/Both day and night did we [himself and Sebastian] keep company” (5.1.83-85). Once Sebastian decides to move on, Antonio does not hesitate to risk his life following to Orsino's hostile territory, since Sebastian's absence would “murder” him (2.1.35). He gives Sebastian his “love, without retention or restraint, all his in dedication” (5.1.69-70). Sebastian corroborates this account, proclaiming that, even after he has married Olivia, any time apart from Antonio “rack[s] and torture[s]” him (5.1.203). It is further worth noting that, in terms of affective expression, Antonio's exclamations of love for Sebastian parallel, and therefore in the world of the play equal, Cesario's professions of love for his/her master as s/he marches to seemingly certain death at her beloved Orsino's command (5.1.115). Similarly careless of preserving his/her life, Cesario proclaims that s/he “most...willingly...a thousand deaths would die” for him whom s/he loves “More than I love these eyes, more than my life,/ More by all mores than e'er I shall love wife” (5.1.122-26).

⁵ For detailed consideration of “effeminacy” resulting from excessive female company in comparison to the masculinizing effects of male Friendship, see, for instance, Alan Bray's *The Friend*. For an illustrative Renaissance consideration of the comparative benefits of marriage (and heterosexual love) and of homoerotic Friendship, see Michel de Montaigne's “On Friendship” in his legendary *Essays* (1:28).

Furthermore, contemporary audiences are generally blissfully ignorant of an ingrained Renaissance cultural and religious perception, with which 16th century audiences would have been primed, of Antonio and Sebastian as a couple. As Cynthia Lewis in *Particular Saints* has unearthed,

By the late 16th century, the names Antonio and Sebastian alone must have provided a literary-theatrical shorthand to an audience that, upon hearing them, would recall a host of possibilities for and expectations of these characters. Most significantly, the audience would have instinctively associated Antonios with extravagant love and with the difficulty of expressing such love as human beings in the human sphere, which is bound by constraints. (Lewis 15-16).

And while Sebastian's unexpected and seemingly experimental marriage to Olivia does change the landscape of his lived experience, it does not a priori put an end to his Friendship with Antonio. As much Renaissance literature suggests, homoerotic friendships between men were read as institutions separate from heterosexual marriage, and men could (and by all accounts did) indulge in both simultaneously. It's worth noting that, unlike *The Merchant of Venice* where Portia explicitly lays out her expectations for her new husband's relations with his Friend (also) Antonio⁶, Olivia seems troubled not at all with her new husband's existing relations and exerts no effort in trying to curb or control them.

In performance, all of this poses insurmountable difficulties if one is interested in rendering authenticity to the source "Shakespeare experience." In today's binary-based normative cultural framework that strongly endorses clearly delineated boundaries of sexual identity, a director faces a series of choices that result in performances that might be innovative, intellectually provocative, artistically breathtaking, and original/new relative to recent stage history or ingrained popular interpretive practice, but they do not in any way approximate an 'authenticity' or 'originality' of the source material. Where the Renaissance the audience might delight in Olivia's attraction to the androgyny inherent in the youth of Cesario/Sebastian (which, far as research on Renaissance sexual attractiveness tells us, could indeed make them interchangeable as far as sexual partnership is concerned), contemporary directors will have to solve the performative question of Olivia's potential lesbianism (if she is one, is a marriage to Sebastian a patriarchal punishment?). Antonio will have to either be a homosexual or ("only") a good friend, in which case his lines better be cut a bit. In either case, it's best if he exits the stage in act

⁶ Subsequent to the climax at the trial, Portia orchestrates the ring coup against her husband which effectively forces Antonio to act as a surety in a new contract between the married parties, wherein Portia claims primacy over her husband's affections, making Antonio's friendship secondary.

five as the others begin to couple off. Sebastian better be ignorant of Antonio's affection in either case to make a convincing potential partner for Olivia, unless, of course, the director would like to push the boundaries of the comedic structure and make this into a "problem." In case the director decides to pursue an enduring love triangle, the production enters an uncharted category of pansexual non-monogamy which undeniably challenges the comfort-zone of most contemporary audiences but comes no closer to capturing the "authenticity" of Renaissance affective structures.

A similar argument can be made about any aspect of performance of Shakespeare's—or any historically or culturally "foreign"—text. A performance delivered by a company of exquisitely trained male performers might be a transformative experience that feels authentic to us, but it will hardly capture the experience of a law student watching the play, amid general revelry, in 1602. All we can learn is, ontologically, that Renaissance theatrical practice was different from ours or, more broadly, to take our own normative ideological boundaries less...definitively. In other words, an authentic originality is an impossibility; what authenticity seems to be available resides in the eye of the beholder, rather than in any intrinsic, attributable (or performable) tangible characteristic of any practice or understanding.

Authenticity: The Inherent Core of the Aspirational Self (a brief detour into—or shortcut through?—the world of contemporary marketing practices)

In *Authenticity: What Consumers Really Want* (original emphasis), a sequel to the bestselling *The Experience Economy: Work is Theater and Every Business a Stage* (predictably, Shakespeare allusions abound), James H. Gilmore and B. Joseph Pine II suggest that successful brands in developed global economies thrive not on the exchange of commodities or manufactured goods, but rather on the successful commodification of authentic transformative experiences. To illustrate the point, I will use one of their elementary examples. We might think that any given shoe company, let's randomly pick Nike, thrives on selling shoes. The better the shoes—or the better the shoes are marketed—the better the customer satisfaction and resulting profits. In *The Experience Economy*, Gilmore and Pine correct this perception to argue that it is not the actual shoe that makes Nike its astronomical profits, but rather the desired experience of running (or strolling by Avon, if that's what you do in your Nike shoes) that Nike cleverly markets to its potential customers. In *Authenticity*, Gilmore and Pine revise their thesis again, this time to assert that it's not even the running itself, but rather the authenticity of the transformative promise the purchase of Nike running shoes affords, linking the ownership of a pair of Nikes with the ability to attain one's aspirational self and to transform, based on individualized preferences, one's

visage, weight, muscle-tone, or pheromone-make up. Said simply, people do not buy Nikes to own shoes, or to run; Gilmore and Pine claim that people buy Nikes as part of an aspirational process to get healthy, thin, strong, attractive, or any other number of individually-determined goals that may or may not coincide with larger culturally-set normative boundaries of preferred individuality. And, it is the perceived authenticity of this offering (which has little to do with whether or not the purchase of the product will lead to the actual transformation) that is the single most important characteristic; it is this authenticity that persuades consumers to buy one—rather than another—kind of shoe (or another material implement) that will provide the simulacrum of agency in the desired aspirational transformation.

This message is reinforced in a number of similar publications, suggesting that, beyond the commodification of individualized subjectivity, selective consumption of authenticity will increasingly drive the public cultural, social, and political spheres. In *The Soul of the New Consumer*, David Lewis and Darren Bridger comb through reams of data to conclude that “at the heart of the soul of the New Consumer [a term they’ve coined] lies a desire for authenticity” (10), which serves as the major tool of “closing the gap between their real and ideal selves. The quest for authenticity stems from this relentless striving for self-actualization” (Lewis and Bridger 29). The intensity of this relentlessness, Lewis and Bridger observe in echo of Gilmore and Pine and other researchers, is rooted in the gradual unraveling of functioning political, economic, social, and cultural structures (Pine and Gilmore 23-30; Lewis and Bridger, 198). This dysfunction is responsible for the shift to consumption as the growing (and ultimately, they argue, sole) tool for delineating individual subjectivity. What’s more, Lewis and Bridger suggest that the process of getting involved in public affairs is being reversed; the same individualized distinctions that drive *and derive from* the selective consumption of authentically-perceived goods, experiences, and cultural products will drive individual decisions in the socio-political sphere, such as decisions “whether to accept social changes, government policies, spiritual beliefs and political ideologies” (4). Pine and Gilmore similarly see this dysfunction of public institutions as a vastly profitable opportunity which provides “wide room for business to offer alternatives that provide real value” (10). In other words, post-boomer generations in the ‘developed’ world do not consume based on their intrinsic values; instead, they create and reify their values and their sense of selves through consumption of carefully curated goods and brands.

In the absence of larger structures of meaning-making which have overdetermined individual choice and behavior in the past, personal authenticity has become the paramount compass of individual development, morality, and action. Instead of looking to society to affirm their choices, members of the latest generation(s), as Jean Twenge demonstrates in *Generation Me*, turn to

their individually conceived sense of self as a touchstone of their morality. Far from seeking approval from others, they want to do “everything the right way, *their way*” (98). To bystanders bewildered by this apparent lack of consideration for the value-structures of their surroundings, such self-centeredness has very much seemed as narcissism. While the label in many instances sticks, it also masks the desperate attempt of the current generation, highly mistrustful of mainstream politics and culture as it is, to discover some true modicum of morality and universal rightness—whether based in spirituality, renewed religiosity, regressive conservatism, passionate environmentalism or any number of divergent personal or subculture pursuits. In the absence of trusted and reliable external structures, all that members of “Generation Me” have left is reliance on the self as the ultimate authority, conscience, self-consistency, and authenticity: as one interviewed member of “Generation Me” pointed out, when the society in general is uncertain “you’ve got to be able to count on yourself first” (Twenge 77).

In this search for meaningful, internally-consistent alternatives, distinction from the distrusted mainstream is key. As Joseph Heath and Andrew Potter outline in *Nation of Rebels*, alternative subjectivity is firmly grounded in the consumption of “original” positional goods that confer on the consumer the distinction of not belonging to the suspicious, supposedly “fake” mainstream. Because alternative subjectivities are highly desirable, the consumption cycle becomes a relentless pursuit for ‘authentic’ products that express consumers’ unique personal identities.⁷ These goods, generally of intangible material value, are valued in reverse proportion to their availability and accessibility. As soon as a critical mass of consumers catches on to a new ‘alternative’ trend and a particular product/experience becomes more accessible, it loses its elitist value and becomes ‘inauthentic’ by the virtue of not conferring a specific, unique identity on its consumer. The once sought-after consumable, whether it be a product, a taste, or a fashion fad, is recognized as a cheapened sell-out, and those who were in hot pursuit move on into a different sphere of competitive consumption.⁸ It is a cycle in which authenticity and originality always remain moving targets, obsolete as soon as they are popularized, and thus in need of constant re-articulation to serve the needs of modern-day consumers, earnest in their pursuit of transcendental truth. The perpetually moving markers of

⁷ Lewis and Bridger refer to the same phenomenon with the help of Freud’s concept of “narcissism of small differences” via which humans seek to find the precise authentic distinctions that “demonstrate our individuality and a membership of some small but select group” (15).

⁸ Lewis and Bridger address this phenomenon in terms of customer loyalty, which they note has decreased dramatically for ‘New Consumers,’ who are disturbingly ‘promiscuous’ when it comes to popular brands; the only way that a brand can seek to recapture their flitting interest is, yes, through authenticity (204).

authenticity create a flux in identity signification where the only constant remains thinly veiled elitism, masked as a dogged alternative to a nominally insufficient and corrupt mainstream. And, as politically charged as this selective consumption seems to be, frequently purporting to support specific social, even anti-consumerist, causes, it has little overall effect on the distribution of power in society. As Heath and Potter point out, “counter-cultural rebellion is a pseudo rebellion: a set of dramatic gestures that are devoid of any progressive political or economic consequences and that detract from the urgent task of building a more just society” (65).

Circling back to Shakespeare. The Ultimate Positional Good

Although a 21st century performance of Shakespeare would be hard-pressed to communicate accurately an experience authentic to “original” Renaissance theatrical practices, the demand on authenticity for contemporary audiences has been growing. In terms of the health of his long-term cultural capital, Shakespeare is straddling a precarious abyss. His cultural ubiquity and material accessibility (one can download the plays for free to a variety of electronic devices) threaten to make him a sell-out fad. Then again, his long-established history riddled with attractive mystery provides enough fodder for cultural nostalgia so crucial to powerful renditions of authenticity (Pine and Gilmore 71), and the multiplicity of original/new Shakespeare iterations, paraphernalia, and themed experiences satisfies at least some of the consumer demand. In this context, it seems absolutely crucial to update regularly Shakespeare’s cultural brand and keep the original/new adaptations and interpretations flowing, ever repositioning the “authentic Shakespeare” as a positional good accessible only to the academic and cultural elite. If we’re to take seriously the perilous predictions of the researchers visited above, Shakespeare as a cultural phenomenon has no chance of survival *unless* it offer recognizable transformative experience authentic to prospective audiences’ perceptions of the role of history and its cultural production in today’s cultural moment.

Considering Shakespeare’s ubiquity, the proposition of a Shakespeare that would speak to each and every consumer’s authentic sense of self, even with the prop of professed transcendentalism of human experience that the plays nominally possess, is insurmountable. The very premise of ‘new consumerism’ as stratified positional consumption seems to preclude a singular mass experience of aspirational self, unless that ideal self transcends growing consumer differences. Furthermore, since this “new” conception of authenticity is not intrinsically anchored in the actual Shakespeare play but is affirmed by the consumer (based on a particular packaging of a particular provider), it seems that consumers will be in charge of determining the degrees of this authenticity,

demanding that it endorse their sense of the cultural capital of Shakespeare and of the appropriate affiliated ideological framework, so as to deliver the desired transformative experience toward the aspirational self (we can readily see examples of such struggles in the numerous localized public debates over “appropriate,” or “real” Shakespeare). As such, this ‘authentic Shakespeare’ gathers overt political overtones, both thanks to the nominal politicization of consumption and to Shakespeare’s already extensive track record of butting into political discourses over the last several centuries. Contemporary audiences thus might become even more demanding that ‘their’ Shakespeare endorse their ideological views, whether in terms of religion, sexuality, gender, race, environmental issues, or any other hot-button issue relevant to subjectivity-building.

In a world where positional goods sell best, rather than explicitly handing over the reins of Shakespeare interpretation to the general populace, it might seem prudent to capitalize on the inherent inaccessibility of the Shakespeare texts (and contexts) to manage always developing and changes levels of authenticity for selective consumption by consumers eager to capitalize on the positional good that Shakespeare seems to render as a transformational tool toward their aspirational unique identity. This direction underscores a long-existing oxymoron in Shakespeare studies: how can one deliver a positional good of something that is transcendental, relevant to all humans everywhere at all times? How can something be simultaneously ubiquitous and elite, accessible and inaccessible at the same time? But, perhaps this oxymoron is an oxymoron in name only, for it seems that it is the very ubiquity that serves as the prime exemplum of the Shakespeare’s inaccessibility, fuelling the desire for authenticity and positional cultural capital. The very impossibility to gain an authentic experience of Shakespeare without extensive historical study reifies the elitist stratification of the general public that does consume—but does not *really* understand—Shakespeare.

Yet, a move toward accentuated elitism and positional status would undermine the potential of Shakespeare to function as a global public common. Even if Shakespeare’s original dissemination across the globe saw some less than savory chapters,⁹ his overabundance in disparate regions of the globe offer an unprecedented opportunity for conversation about shared humanist goals across vast ideological differences. In the absence of functioning public institutions, it might ironically be Shakespeare that provides the framework for tentative conversations about shared humanity, its rights and interests. In such a

⁹ I here refer to the use Shakespeare (and his capital) as a tool of colonial project at the hands of British Empire, for instance, in strategic reification of racial and cultural hierarchies that privileged the Shakespeare-savvy colonizers. See the likes of Martin Orkin, Ania Loomba, or Natasha Distiller (to name only three) for extensive discussion.

framework, the search for authenticity might perhaps become a conversation about authenticities, origins and originalities, where epistemology complements ongoing discussions of ontology and history.

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