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Shakespeare and Porky's

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I saw Shakespeare on television the other night, twice. He showed up first in an ad for a Klondike-brand ice-cream bar. Against a backdrop of two actors reciting something in impossibly stagy British accents, a narratorial voice asks him if he'd be willing to write a sitcom in exchange for a Klondike bar. He retorts haughtily "Methinks not," until he actually "tastes" a Klondike bar, at which point we see the whole troop of actors in a Three-Stooges-like farce, breaking chairs over each other's heads. The bard is happily munching away. I guess a Klondike bar is pretty powerful stuff if it can get even Shakespeare to stoop so low.

Flipping channels, I run into a second Shakespearean exchange, even more impossible than the first. It is a scene that I learn later is from a movie called *Porky's II* (meaning, I imagine, that it was inspired by a *Porky's I* that must have grabbed movie-goers' hearts and minds and wallets). Here an even more impossibly stagy character, a sweaty preacher in a white suit, with a suitably exaggerated southern accent, rails against pornography. His example? Shakespeare. He quotes from *The Taming of the Shrew*, the scene where Petruchio and the shrewish Kate are having a knock-down, drag-out war of words, which is really a test of their cleverness at coming up with insults. The puns fly fast and furious until Petruchio gets off a zinger about having his tongue in her tail (trust me, it's well set up and a real surprise, and a real show-stopper too). The reference to tail, bellows the white-suited preacher, is clearly pornography.

Now I'm puzzled. Shakespeare, in the context of televised popular culture, is on one channel an icon of the out-of-touch high-brow, on another channel a Larry-Flint-wannabe. How does he manage to be both, and who is right on this, \textit{Porky's} or Klondike bar?
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Porky's or Klondike bars? I investigate the history a little bit, of Shakespeare's reception in the popular mind.

In the 19th Century, Shakespeare bridged the gap between high and popular culture, in both Britain and America, through the identification of his name with high culture, to which the working class aspired. In Britain, as Thomas Hardy relates, workingmen and clerks who wished to rise read Shakespeare on their lunch breaks, from cheap, pocket-sized editions published for that purpose, and like E. M. Forster's Leonard Bast, they attended public lectures in the arts in an attempt to acquire a marker of the middle class. In America, where Britain dominated the culture business, the tours of Charles Dickens, Lillie Langtree, and Oscar Wilde raked in great sums of cash in cities large and small. Dickens read, Langtry sang, but Wilde lectured, on interior decoration, with a liberal sprinkling of Shakespearean quotations, to miners in Denver and shopkeepers in Toronto. Mark Twain famously satirized this hunger for culture in the Duke-and-Dauphin scene in Huckleberry Finn. While some Americans, such as Walt Whitman, wished to create a specifically American literature, encompassing popular culture, most writers who wanted to make their literary mark went to London, even as late as the early twentieth century—Henry James, Robert Frost, Henry Adams, Ezra Pound, Hilda Doolittle, T. S. Eliot were all expatriates there for a while.

As American political and economic hegemony grew, so did its appropriation of British culture, and especially Shakespeare. The growth of the Shakespeare tourist industry was initially a homegrown phenomenon—witness pilgrimages to Stratford-on-Avon in the 18th Century to buy a trinket made from Shakespeare's mulberry tree—but from the start, there was always a large foreign element that held the Globe and the Bard in awe and wonder. The real growth in bardolatry has been in the New World, with its transplanted Stratfords, Shakespeare Festivals, Shakespeare gardens, and replica Globe theaters.
The Texas State Fair of 1936 even sent to England for a vial of Avon water and some earth from New Place to consecrate a reconstruction of an English village. In the post-World-War-II era, American power projected itself from Texas to Stratford itself, with tourist dollars creating a second city of brick hotels and restaurants ringing the original village.

In British eyes, those American tourists had working-class tastes with middle-class money. In American eyes, the working class had disappeared in the long economic boom, and everyone was happily middle class. The long-standing middle-class ritual of theater-going that marked bourgeois culture in Britain was thoroughly adopted by the new American middle class, in token respect if not in practice (that is, play-going was so virtuous an activity that it was one’s duty to make one’s children go, much like buying a set of encyclopedias—“think of the children”). In Britain, however, under poorer economic conditions, there was a growing political and social divide between the prosperous, middle-class, rural, Conservative-voting South and the poorer, working-class, urban, Labour-voting North. The ability to rise in class was championed by the Conservative party of Margaret Thatcher, a grocer’s daughter, and John Major, who never attended university, but the Labour voters from the high-unemployment urban North rejected this route as no longer possible. To this large segment of the country solidly identified as working-class, Shakespeare was no longer a bridge. Images of Shakespeare began to be used to subvert middle-class power, as in the Carling Black Label beer ads and several British soaps. Shakespeare as a champion of the middle class is made fun of, reduced (for example, to a footballer in the beer ad), or simply made irrelevant (“Shakespeare said that? Why did he name himself after a pub on Dock Street?”).

The same move again happened in American. Shakespeare is still overvalued in the 19th Century, was made to reflect middle-class aspirations. Since the country identifies itself as middle-class, also this majority that cannot rise Shakespeare does serve as a bridge between culture and popular culture, re-cast in acceptable irrelevance. Shakespearean. This is what the popular Willy Russell play and then film Educating Rita, starring two actors with working-class backgrounds, Michael Caine and Julie Walters, gave a slightly more complex vision of the meaning of Shakespeare to a working-class teenager: the values of the middle class are seen the middle-class (the value of a literary education) to be the standard “received” by the new mates at the university, which she earlier has left.

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36 even sent to England and some earth from the reconstruction of a pre-World-War-II era, and some earth from Texas to tourist dollars creating a middle-class pull ring-
American tourists had middle-class money. In the working class had disappeared, and everyone was middle-class. The long-standing theater-going that marked Britain was thoroughly American middle class, in practice (that is, play-going) that it was one's duty to go, much like buying the papers—"think of the theatre!"—however, under poorer circumstances, there was a growing po-
enting the prosperous, conservative-voting South as gentility to rise in class was through no longer the white-collar, urban, Labour-
class, Shakespeare did not serve as a bridge between high culture and popular culture, but only by being re-cast in acceptable images that are quite un-Shakespearean. This is what makes the Klondike bar commercial so ironically perverse: Shakespeare unwilling to write a television sitcom? He practically invented the form. This un-Shakespearean Shakespeare is most acutely seen in issues of pornography and obscenity, anathema to middle-class definitions of high culture, or indeed any cultural pursuit. Thus bawdy in Shakespeare has comfortably been ascribed to the need to satisfy the tastes of the peanut-crunching "pit" audience, when even a cursory examination of the plays would show that often the vilest speakers turn out to be noble heroes, such as Hamlet and Othello. Productions in high schools, colleges, and on television still bowdlerize Shakespeare's language, although they sometimes allow for a nudity that would make no sense on an Elizabethan stage with boy-play-
ning of Shakespeare to a working-class hairdresser, but ultimately the values which Shakespeare represents to Rita are shed by her in her life. She has seen the middle-class (through her new command of a literary education) and now has a choice of which class to live her life in. The choices she contemplates are weighted toward the working-class values she began with—maybe she'll work as a hairdresser, maybe she'll have a baby—and she finally chooses to express those possible choices in a working-class northern accent, not the standard "received pronunciation" of her new mates at the university, a pronunciation which she earlier has learned to imitate.

The same move against Shakespeare has not happened in American popular culture. Here, Shakespeare is still overwhelmingly identified, as in the 19th Century, with high culture, but re-made to reflect middle-class values and aspirations. Since the great majority of the country identifies itself as middle-class, and yet it is also this majority that consumes popular culture, Shakespeare does serve as a bridge between high culture and popular culture, but only by being re-cast in acceptable images that are quite un-Shakespearean. This is what makes the Klondike bar commercial so ironically perverse: Shakespeare unwilling to write a television sitcom? He practically invented the form. This un-Shakespearean Shakespeare is most acutely seen in issues of pornography and obscenity, anathema to middle-class definitions of high culture, or indeed any cultural pursuit. Thus bawdy in Shakespeare has comfortably been ascribed to the need to satisfy the tastes of the peanut-crunching "pit" audience, when even a cursory examination of the plays would show that often the vilest speakers turn out to be noble heroes, such as Hamlet and Othello. Productions in high schools, colleges, and on television still bowdlerize Shakespeare's language, although they sometimes allow for a nudity that would make no sense on an Elizabethan stage with boy-play-

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If we are today a post-feminist audience, then *Taming of the Shrew* has become our new problem play. Petruchio’s violence to Kate, and her final pledge of obedience, have become for us as an audience the new obscenity. The 1980s television series *Moonlighting’s* famous version of the play did not tone down the violence nor most of the sexual punning, but did feel it necessary to change the ending, so that rather than pledge obedience to Petruchio in her last speech, Kate declares instead that marriage is “50-50.” What the show also changed, however, was a bawdy pun that climaxes the war-of-words scene central to the play. “My tongue in your tail?” was judged too indecent for a prime-time television audience. Perhaps the preacher of *Porky’s* is more in tune with Hollywood than he realized. It is precisely the pun in this line, however (on “tail” and “tale”), which brings together sexuality and women’s roles. Kate is adjudged a shrew by reputation, by “tales” with a sting to them. This line can be played so as to give a far more feminist reading than the mocked-up ending that Cybil Shepherd speaks to Bruce Willis. Jonathon Miller’s BBC version of the play turns on precisely such a reading: a distracted Kate, not really looking at Petruchio but looking instead inward to her memory of pain, bids him adieu if he “talk of tails [tales].” Her pain at being defined by the strict roles of the culture, which demand Bianca-seeming sweetness and obedience, becomes the motivation for the action. And it is Petruchio who must be transformed, from his rude and boorish wit and insensitive sexual punning to a lover who asks for a kiss rather than forces it.

If my analysis is true, then the Shakespeare that popular culture is left with remains the icon of a middle-class vision of high culture. It is a vision of propriety that opposes Shakespeare to the popular. Even the well-received Oscar-winner *Shakespeare in Love* bows to this proper Shakespeare. The film indulges in the usual muddy streets filled with bustle and pick-pockets, followed by tavern scenes with feats of prodigious eating, drinking, fighting, and whoring. This may seem to pay homage to Shakespeare, but these elements are thrown in with a wink at the jolly version of life in the renaissance past (it hardly seems historical here, despite the ahistorical historians’ version). Actually a handsome middle-class preacher covered with mud, like Petruchio, feels a high passion for Kate (the name depending on context or out). The film itself is a case of those two narratives: Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet*, in which Romeo loved because he could not sleep, is replaced by Juliet who, beyond measure on Tuesday night. Arguably, is about the difference. *Shakespeare in Love* sees romantic love as the best good. And creature comforts? I love this film, and I mean that literally. Another example of this occurred when Madonna’s role in *Evita* was that of the historical Evita Peron, with his eyebrows in short order. The message is clear. She feels a high passion for middle-class. He has not the propriety of sex, nudity, or the more disreputable culture, where Madonna stands. Where does Shakespeare stand in the popular culture? He stands for the middle-class culture. As long as this culture remains its power, that even his film remains so in advertisements and theater. His work is the life of the under-class and the most recent film, *Shakespeare in Love*, with Leonardo DiCaprio, is the play to street-fight.
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true, then the Shakespeare left with remains the ico of high culture. It is that opposes Shakespeare to the well-received Oscar-winner bows to this proper film indulges in the usual scenes with feats of stunt and pick-pocketing, fighting, and whor ing. This may seem to promise a rather low sitcom, but these elements are done “tastefully,” with a wink at the jolly fun. They are a stylized version of life in the rollicking medieval or renaissance past (it hardly ever matters which in these ahistorical histories). Our hero, however, is actually a handsome swain who is not smelly or covered with mud, like his surroundings, and he feels a high passion for his Juliet or Rosalind (the name depending on whether she is in character or out). The film does not play with the ironies of those two names as they appear in Shakespeare’s Romeo and Juliet, where Rosalind, whom Romeo loved beyond measure on Monday, is replaced by Juliet, whom Romeo loves beyond measure on Tuesday. Shakespeare’s play, arguably, is about the delusions of romantic love. Shakespeare in Love sees romantic love as the highest good. And creature of popular culture that I am, I love this film, and buy it whole-heartedly—and I mean that literally as well as emotionally.

Another example of this proper Shakespeare occurred when Madonna’s book Sex was published. The accompanying illustration in The Detroit Free Press was that of the high-foreheaded Bard lifting his eyebrows in shock at the pictures inside. The message is clear. Shakespeare belongs to the middle-class. He has nothing to do with the vitality of sex, nudity, or profanity, which belong to the more disreputable productions of popular culture, where Madonna firmly stands.

Where does Shakespeare stand within popular culture? He stands for the values opposed to that culture. As long as the American myth retains its power, that everyone in America either is middle-class or has access to the middle-class through dint of education and effort, Shakespeare as the popularized icon of high culture will remain unchallenged. He certainly remains so in advertisements, film, television, and theater. His work is deemed relevant even to the life of the under-class, as in West Side Story and the most recent film version of Romeo and Juliet, with Leonardo DiCaprio, which updates the play to street-fights with firearms named
“Sword” rather than Smith and Wesson. The numerous Shakespeare-in-the-streets and Shakespeare-in-the-parks programs attempt to dissociate the bard from money and high status, but the parks and streets are usually in good neighborhoods or on college campuses, or in pay-to-be-admitted theme parks such as Epcot Center where a Commedia-del-Arte troupe performs snippets of the bard. That is, the streets, parks, and theme parks in which these performances appear resemble less the mean streets of the big cities than the sanitized ones that reach their apotheosis in that mid-westerner Walt Disney’s vision of America, where Shakespeare has an enshrined place, as he did in the Denver and Toronto of Oscar Wilde, but purged of his vulgarities just as the miners and factory workers and shopkeepers of those towns hoped to purge theirs. Only the most outlandish and un-American of preachers could rail at Shakespeare, for he is as tasty and appropriate for our consumption as a Klondike bar.

Shakespeare Speaks to Ally McBeal
for Ben Lockerd

All right, so I’m male, and dead,
you needn’t rub it in so. There
weren’t then ways for girls to earn their bread,
right? So I’m male! And, dead
successful. So shoot me! My big brainy head
makes quite a target square,
all right so. I’m male, and dead.
You needn’t rub it in. So there!