DIGITISING THE BARD:
Old Culture, Shakespeare and New Economies

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Abstract

This paper addresses emerging methodologies and technologies for the distribution of canonical cultural studies content in new economy structures. Recent developments in Creative Industries frameworks and attendant languages have drawn attention to the issues raised in linking creative content with wider industrial applications. The example of this process, to be outlined in this paper, is the merging of the myriad cultural associations and entrenched applications inherent in Shakespearean studies in Australia with creative business clusters, such as Bell Shakespeare, in order to develop new creative enterprises and add to the use-value of the primary content. In this context, this paper will demonstrate the digital platform being developed currently via QUT to deliver such established content into new cultural formations.

This is an interdisciplinary and cross-institutional project that will focus on contemporary Australian outcomes. Questions that arise from the teaching of cultural studies approaches in relation to Shakespearean texts and the complexities added when those approaches are delivered in the context of the new Creative Industries focus will also be addressed. Recent discussions have revealed the problematic status of teaching Shakespearean studies in contemporary environments. Product 'Shakespeare,' always a problematic consumable deployed by, and for, varying political and social aims, is moving in new directions, such as corporate business training.

New technologies offer much to such divergent interests but also raise important political and social questions, particularly in relation to non-Eurocentric cultures. This paper is an attempt to consider some of the methodologies, and the technologies, involved in the latest round of appropriations of Shakespearean studies.

Introduction

On watching the seemingly exponential and increasingly star-studded trajectory of the 413-year-old canonical corpus called 'Shakespeare,' two questions emerge. One: given the colonial associations and the constant deployment of Shakespeare as a political and cultural propaganda apparatus, why should we teach Shakespeare at all? Two: if so, how do we go about doing so within the framework of the 'new economy' to which universities are now wedded?

In answer, we begin by stating that Australians have a long-standing and rich association with Shakespeare's works. It is a relationship that began with convict

associations, as Robert Jordan's (2002) recent book makes clear, and it has continued to develop in prolific and unusual profusion. Often insisting on its 'difference' from European productions, Australian Shakespeare appeared to become the 'bastard' child of English parentage, transgressing and re-forming the Bard's material in new and challenging ways. Today, the relationship has reached a critical point: Shakespeare is more popular than ever, and the works are being appropriated for seemingly unrelated purposes such as management education, while the business of Shakespeare is exceptionally bankable, as Michael Bristol's book *Big-time Shakespeare (1996)* indicates.

One important aspect of this critical juncture is the mobility of Shakespeare across the cultural and creative industries. The core content of the works has been appropriated and transformed endlessly in the past, but today Shakespeare is entering the digital economy and a new range of products and processes is being developed to take advantage of the phenomenon. We argue that Australian producers of Shakespearean work are well positioned in this enterprise because of the history of the Shakespearean corpus in this country, a history that permits and encourages the crossing of boundaries.

This paper addresses two aspects of our engagement with Shakespeare in Australia. First, briefly, the literary birth of the 'bastard', that is Australian writing and theatre, and the consequent ambivalences. Here we concentrate on Shakespearean plays and performance, as this is where the current debate is located, and we acknowledge the effect this debate has on teaching practices. The second area of discussion focuses on the way in which new media can connect such canonical cultural products with a wider range of commercial and non-commercial interests. Here we describe the digitising framework in which we have positioned the latest 'bastard,' the web site called Bard.*wire*, developed by the Creative Writing and Cultural Studies and Communication Design disciplines at the Queensland University of Technology (QUT).

In addressing the literary birth identified above, it is possible to argue that the very term 'bastard' denotes the ambivalence that underscores Shakespeare in Australia. In their discussion of national identity, Bob Hodge and Vijay Mishra state that Australians use the word 'bastard' both as a term of abuse and as an expression of solidarity that affirms illegitimacy in order to evade an anxiety about origins" (p.23). Certainly, Australian productions of Shakespeare often consciously affirm their illegitimacy but it is a moot point as to whether the response is driven by a need to celebrate or a desire to evade. However, whether or not the impetus behind the bastardisation is celebratory or evasive, there is no doubt that the performance and reading of Shakespearean work was located in popular culture from the first performances in Australia (and still is), and that it revelled in appropriation and transgression of convention. This location both spoke back to the environments in which the plays were first performed in Renaissance England and facilitated the appeal of the work to new environments, especially those with a strong convict profile. In a sense, the contemporary desire to connect Shakespeare's work with the burgeoning information technologies is a continuation of this process, which will, inevitably, spawn further, and increasingly interesting, bastards.

(i) Australian Shakespeare?

Harold Bloom (1998) says that we keep "returning" to Shakespeare "because we need him; no one else gives us so much of the world most of us take to be fact"(Bloom, p.17). In Australia, our "returning to" Shakespearean works has generally been in the form of a continual rehearsal or "speaking back" to both our imperial roots and our colonial past. In recent work on Shakespeare in Australian theatre, John Golder and Richard Madelaine (2001) explain that "Shakespeare has been an important feature of the Australian theatrical and cultural landscape since at least 8 April 1800"(p.1). While his work may have been reproduced in Australian schools and theatres because it was valued for its literary excellence, the performance, production and appropriation of Shakespearean works was also a perfect site for articulating an emergent Australian identity. The relationship between national identity and literature has always been an anxious one. An implicit comparison between a (inferior) fledgling Australian culture and a (superior) established British culture with its grand literary history certainly influenced Australian writers and critics.[1]

Against this backdrop of cultural self-loathing, envy, and growing national pride, Shakespearean works were appropriated and transformed for Australian public consumption. As Golder and Madelaine (2001) explain, "even when Australians saw themselves as colonial or provincial British people, they expected their localised cultural needs to be met by the style of the Shakespearean production they were offered" (p.1). Though the cultural context undoubtedly influenced Australian productions, so too did Shakespeare's iconic status in literature. These two, at times competing aspects of Shakespearean works, that is, the cultural context versus literary icon, have resulted in two quite different approaches to the performance of Shakespearean plays in Australia. This is exemplified in the different, and self-consciously so, approaches of the Bell Shakespeare Company and the Australian Shakespeare Company.

The company mission statements indicates this difference. John Bell, as Artistic Director of Bell Shakespeare, states the following:

> *"I think the main difference between ourselves and other theatre practitioners*
> *is that we are here for the long haul, devoted to specialisation, training,*
> *education, and ongoing exploration in our attempts to reconcile great classic*
> *texts with contemporary Australian life, to find ways of integrating*
> *Shakespeare into the Australian theatre of the twenty-first century; not as*
> *some sort of cultural appendage, or nostalgic token of British heritage*
> *but as a true reflection of our own lives and experiences, a vital expression*
> *of our desires and apprehensions."* (Bell, 2003)

The Australian Shakespeare Company web site, however, says in a section sub-titled "A Tradition of Excellence" that:

> *"The Australian Shakespeare Company has presented more than ten vibrant*
> *stagings of Shakespeare's plays since 1982. It has kept Shakespeare's work*

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[1] It is, perhaps, no surprise that critics often conceived of Australian culture as limited when prominent Australian writers made statements to this effect. For example, Patrick White, Australia's only recipient of the Nobel Prize for Literature, described the culture as "the Great Australian Emptiness, in which the mind is the least of possessions".
http:www.abc.net.au/arts/white/titles/other/whitespeaks.html#prodigal). Similarly, A.D. Hope's derisive poem, "Australia", describes the culture as a desert from which prophets will hopefully come (*My Country: Australian Poetry and Short Stories Two Hundred Years Vol .II 1930s-1980s*. Sydney: Ure Smith, 1985: 222).

> *alive for over a decade with its productions being enjoyed by capacity*
> *audiences throughout Victoria, South Australia, and New South Wales.*
> *Unlike the Bell Shakespeare Company, the ASC illuminates Shakespeare's*
> *text within a traditional style of production."* (Australian Shakespeare
> Company)

This site also says that the company is at a 'critical' stage for future development.

Yet both exemplify a rich response to Shakespeare, especially when there is such a strong sense of ownership of the corpus, across a range of cultural expressions. Given such extraordinary cultural currency, an applied Shakespeare was a logical progression for his postmodern corpus. Dramatic changes in the way that literature and the Arts generally are funded, (some might say valued), within the academy (education sector) certainly accelerated pragmatic approaches to this cultural production. Put simply, the Arts had to not only find applications for its disciplines, it had to ensure those applications were economically viable.

(ii) The Creative Industries:
Stuart Cunningham (2002) states that the Creative Industries is "a quite recent category in academic, policy and industry discourse" (p. 54). The term is drawn from the Creative Industries Task Force Mapping Document of 1998 (and 2001) in the United Kingdom. This document isolated a number of creative industries sectors in analogue and digital economy sectors, such as fashion, advertising, arts, publishing and software. Following this research, there has been institutional backing for, and academic theorising of, the establishment of 'creative industry' hubs in select locations in Britain. Queensland has largely taken up the British model, describing Creative Industries as a specific market segment, focussed on the arts, cultural and digital economy industries, whereas the US descriptions often include patent industries.

This inter-disciplinary focus provided an instrumental and institutional framework in which the postmodern corpus could be further disseminated. The 'applied' focus shifts then to what Stephi Hemelryk Donald (2002) has called an articulation of engagement in economies that are:
> ". . . *increasingly characterised by visible mobility, the bundling and flow of*
> *knowledge, and the need to produce outcomes that move across platforms of*
> *social activity, creative production, and the generation of revenue.*"
> (p.33)
In such circumstances, the teaching of Shakespeare that has always straddled three or four discipline areas, could be broadened and mobilised. It was no longer a 'humanities' subject, nor even an applied humanities subject: it was, in fact, a 'bastard' child.

That a market exists for such explorations and disseminations is not in doubt. John Howkins (2001) states that in 2001, the United States "creative economy" (Howkins term for the interaction of creativity and economic structures using new technologies) accounted for "more than 40 percent of the global total, and also accounts for more than 40 percent of all R&D spending worldwide" (p.xiii).

Yet how does this changing economic profile affect everyday teaching practice? Put simply, Australia wants to 'grow' a larger slice of what is a multi-billion revenue.

Shakespeare then becomes not just the plays and performance and reading, but an industry, a cultural product that is being consciously moved away from high culture associations of more recent times to the popular culture flavour reminiscent of its birthright. Bell Shakespeare's statement, noted above, acknowledges this process. This move, of course, favours some types of campuses. Smaller universities that have retained a conventional Arts framework are having difficulty justifying teaching Shakespeare, and report that courses in Shakespearean studies have been dropped from the curriculum. Large sandstone institutions, however, have a critical mass that supports the teaching of courses in Shakespeare at graduate and postgraduate level.

But the movement from a conventional culture and positioning, stimulated by a history of 'bastard' appropriations and re-formations, may offer wider opportunities. For example, the Australian Graduate School of Management (AGSM), located in Sydney, has a new venture based on Shakespeare's plays. The AGSM, already developing training courses with Bell Shakespeare to provide a theatrical basis for management training, recently signed an agreement with the Melbourne Business School for the "Melbourne Business School Bell Shakespeare Programme" to provide workshops in leadership and corporate culture, emotional intelligence and structures of power based on plays such as *The Merchant of Venice*, *Henry V*, and *Julius Caesar*.

The rationale for this project offers some interesting insights into the potential for the appropriation of canonical works. The Programme is aimed at meeting international trends that use major cultural works as a 'window' for quite different enterprises. Paul Rizzo, Dean of the Melbourne Business School, said that the programme represented a "marriage of creativity" with the world of business. The formation of this programme tells us that there is a commercial demand for material that makes use of "great cultural works" and that increasing opportunities exist for the crossing of boundaries between the subsidised and non-subsidised sectors.

(iii) Methodologies:
The experience of the AGSM is instructive in the context of both the increasingly mapped domain of Creative Industries and the history of Shakespeare in Australia. Initially, the Bell program replicated a British workshop that was staffed by actor/managers with long standing connections to Shakespearean theatre. This was a spectacular flop in Australia because chief executive officers refused to revere all things Shakespearean. A new model had to be developed and this has been successful because it has moved management out of their offices and into the theatre environment. Coupled with pre-workshop psychometric testing, attendees and actors take part in a series of performances and discussions. Workshop leaders say that individuals are encouraged to question the actors, not on their understanding of the play or performance, but in relation to them as 'characters.' This has been, reportedly, the key liberating experience for attendees.

Obviously, such engagements with the business world are good money-spinners for the theatre companies.   Yet tension still exists even with such an apparently win-win arrangement. John Bell, mentioned above, recently professed admiration for the skills demonstrated by workshop leaders but equivocated about the deployment of Shakespeare for such commercial interests. His comments follow a statement by Bell (2002) that interest in Shakespeare is "burgeoning" and much of this is to do with the

"rough potency" of Elizabethan theatre (p.198) that is "subversive, sceptical, agnostic" (p.199). Although we cannot recover the Elizabethan theatre, we can, Bell argues, recover the "sense of roughness, intimacy and community" so that, he says, "I'd prefer to do all my work in rough, flexible, unglamorous spaces, maximising actor/audience interplay and exploiting the sense of community" (p.201).

Bell's stress on the sense of 'community' is important.   It can be argued that interactions with the corpus will move away from conventional educational approaches to a community network that is inclusive and moves across the "platforms of social activity" Donald mentioned, as noted above. In this context, the Bard.*wire* site is a response to such changing relationships between canonical and commercial and educational 'Shakespeare'. The web site provides an opportunity to map the interaction between the Shakespearean corpus and the wider community and to collect and analyse information on this process. The corpus now encompasses a number of industry sectors identified as part of 'Creative Industries': film, music, performing arts, publishing, software, television and radio. The site is able, therefore, to chart that movement from Shakespeare as 'cultural industry' to Shakespeare as 'creative industry.' Shakespeare's works offers a core content that has a historical profile and a textual richness that can be adapted and deployed into a myriad of locations in a range of mediums, as the AGSM example noted above indicates. Taking into account the history of Shakespeare in Australia, also noted above, there seems to be a valuable opportunity to develop mediums through which the tertiary sector can liaise with the wider community—a strategy recently identified as important in government research into the tertiary sector. Bard.*wire* will operate as an exchange of information and views within, and without, the academic environment.

(iv) Design Implementation : Bard.*wire*
Bard.*wire* materialised as a web site between December 2002 and February 2003. This short three-month process represented, however, a three-year period of informal debate and trial-and-error teaching strategies surrounding a central question: "What relevance does the work of Shakespeare hold for 21st century students, and, if that relationship is proven, how best does one teach this material in the digital age?" After initial discussions regarding a possible web page with Communication Design staff, it became apparent that Carson's initial concept could be developed further as a research and teaching project. Dr Deb Polson, Dr Susan Carson, and Mr Gavin Theisfield spent several months working on the framework for a site, completing Stage 1 of the process only recently. The rationale for a web site was derived from a perception that disciplines need to further facilitate industry interaction, and there was no 'space' in which to collaboratively develop and share emerging issues and practices. Dr Polson was interested, as well, in the pedagogical cross-disciplinary opportunities offered by the design and implementation process. Bard.*wire*, when fully implemented, could offer students experience in work as editors, as marketers, and as designers.

The original interest in the site as a vehicle to support existing interests changed substantially during the initial design process. It became apparent that there should be a stronger 'community' and pedagogical focus to the site. It was decided to address academic curricula and research interests, as well as a broad range of community activities, ranging from businesses that are involved in various Shakespearean enterprises to non-aligned local groups. The web site was designed, therefore, to address the following categories of Community/Pedagogies/Publications, which were

the split into: Pedagogies b) Publications c) Communities d) Links e) Credits. An important incentive for the work was the International Shakespeare Symposium, to be held in Brisbane in 2006. This is an event that will attract significant national and international attention and funding, and university involvement. The monitoring of activity in the lead-up to, and during, this festival will provide substantial data for further research in the cultural and creative industries.

Bearing in mind the range of issues canvassed in the initial planning of the site and the shift of focus from 'dissemination' to that of 'exchange,' the word 'exchange' is taken as a load-stone for the web profile. 'Exchange' offers both a community and business resonance that blends well with the pedagogical demands of the site. Once this was established, the 'name search' narrowed to two concepts:

- one : the Bard, a well recognized eponym for Shakespeare, and
- two: the notion of 'wire' denoted communication, invoking, as well, Australian 'barbwire' connotations.

This site is still being developed. It is hoped that the very issues facing the developers will provide researchers, from a number of different disciplinary backgrounds, with the opportunity to monitor, and engage with, the changing profile of a cultural product that is subject to a surprising sense of ownership on the part of consumers. By investigating the cultural changes incurred by the production of a 413- year-old body of work within the structures of the new economy, we hope that we will continue the development of a transgressive Australian Shakespeare--by retaining our characteristic Australian ambivalence to the latest digitised bastard offspring.

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