CHAPTER 14

SHAKESPEARE IN TRANSIT: BLOOM, SHAKESPEARE, AND CONTEMPORARY WOMEN’S WRITING

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During the four hundred years since his death, Shakespeare has become both an icon and an industry. In the proliferation of films and books that have been inspired by, or based on, his life and his plays, Shakespeare has remained a steady presence in popular culture. Considering the enthusiastic reception that films such as Shakespeare in Love (1998) and Baz Luhrmann’s Romeo + Juliet (1996) have enjoyed, one can easily conclude that Shakespeare is still a brand that sells (at least in the English-speaking world). Even for me, a Shakespeare scholar who has left academe for a job in the financial sector, there is no escaping from the Bard. Lately, I have been riding to work with him on the subway—sort of. The Toronto Transit Commission, in an effort to enlighten commuters in the Greater Toronto Area, has put together a series of poster ads called “Poetry on the Way.” The series features poems by Canadian writers and, needless to say, I was very pleased, if somewhat puzzled, by Shakespeare’s presence amidst the Canadians. I might also add that Shakespeare was the only writer whose picture is featured in the series. Not only is he a man with multiple national identities—in this case, an honorary Canadian—but, in the twenty-first century, his face is still a recognizable image, a brand with worldwide recognition, a marketer’s dream.

American scholar Harold Bloom and, more recently, British academic Sir Frank Kermode have both produced books that advertise their
longevity and reputation as scholars in order to reach a mass audience of readers and fans of Shakespeare. Kermode does not mince words in the title of his book, *Shakespeare’s Language* (2000). Bloom is wordier, boldly calling his book *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human* (1998). In a recent discussion at the 92nd Street Y in New York City, the two authors were put together in a public arena to discuss Shakespeare (and to plug their books). Given the large number of New Yorkers who flooded to the Y to hear these men talk about their books on Shakespeare, Kermode’s attack on the “disease of bardolatry” that plagues contemporary scholarship might strike one as somewhat ungrateful. Retaliating, Bloom asserted (to the great pleasure of the audience) that “if bardolatry is a disease, it is a benign malady” (Bloom and Kermode 2000). Considering the congenial, entertaining atmosphere at the Y in New York and Shakespeare’s pervasive presence on subways around Toronto, I would have to agree with Bloom’s statement. As both a scholar and a city dweller, I have seen much more troubling sights than Shakespeare and his work in the public spaces of Toronto and New York.

This brings us to some of Bloom’s more sweeping assertions in the section of his book entitled “Shakespeare’s Universalism.” He places Shakespeare firmly at the center of the Western literary canon, describing him as a “mortal god” who asserts his presence in subway systems, theaters, and bookstores around the globe (Bloom 1998, 3). Drawing a connection between the Bible and Shakespeare’s plays in order to illustrate Shakespeare’s “pervasive presence” in a multiplicity of contexts and cultures, Bloom writes:

What the Bible and Shakespeare have in common actually is rather less than most people suppose, and I myself suspect that the common element is only a certain universalism, global and multicultural. Universalism is now not much in fashion, except in religious institutions and those they strongly influence. Yet I hardly see how one can begin to consider Shakespeare without finding some way to account for his pervasive presence in the most unlikely contexts: here, there, and everywhere at once. He is a system of northern lights, an aurora borealis visible where most of us will never go. (3)

Bloom modestly acknowledges the datedness of his statement about Shakespeare’s universalism, admitting to the fact that he is not interested in questioning Shakespeare’s centrality. As he writes, “I am not concerned, in this book, with how this happened, but with why it continues. If any author has become a mortal god, it must be Shakespeare” (3). My own edition of *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human* serves to under-