CHAPTE R  I

BARDGUIDES OF THE NEW UNIVERSE

Niche Marketing and the Cultural Logic of Late Shakespeareanism

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Market Segmentation for Dummies

A recent New Yorker cover cartoon by the amazing Roz Chast (November 22, 1999) shows an urban newspaper kiosk whose vendor is surrounded by a display of current magazines for sale. Reading the titles posted in this dauntingly large spread, however, one encounters a succession of geometrically expanding specializations: Reader’s Digest Digest, Celebrity Surgery, Staten Island Poetry Journal, Home Dentist, Tinfoil Crafts, Plastic Wrap Crafts, Wanna-bes, Has-beens, Vegan Surfer, to the magazine with the ultimate contemporary identification, Loser. The joke about increasingly narrow and esoteric magazines is at the same time an insightful play on my subject here—niche marketing. Here I want to consider the state of Shakespeare, at the present historical moment in an explosion of film adaptations and other interest, with respect to the phenomenon (or fiction) of the “mass market” in what is something like a “postmodern consumerism” of niche marketing, where the “old hierarchies are becoming obsolete,” where there is “no fashion, only fashions” (Featherstone 1991, 110–11), style is manufactured with planned or “progressive” obsolescence (Ewen 1988, 244, 249–51), and where we are in the era of “demassification” and “the end of mass culture” (Toffler, Denning, cited in Agnew 1993, 38). I want to begin to describe how this market phenomenon helps account for central features of what I will term “late Shakespeareanism”—a cultural phenomenon I make analogous to the “late capitalism” of left economic analysis (Mandel...
1975) but one without, for most Shakespeareans at least, that term’s implicit hope of decay and implosion. That is, we watch anxiously rather than hopefully as a gigantic phenomenon disappears, the supernova becoming a black hole, the ultimate niche.

Shakespeare’s own awareness of this contemporary logic, I wish to show, is useful in understanding what happens to him after the introduction of the mass market proper. What happens in its contemporary evolution, however, is distinctive and consequential, as niche marketing reaches a radical completion as a “mode of consumption” turning back on itself, as the commercial itself becomes just another niche within the field. I want to explore, later in the essay, this new market context as it appears in an exemplary appropriation of Shakespeare—recent guides to corporate management that adopt the words, characters, and lessons of corporate wisdom supposedly found in several Shakespearean plays. Overall, I trace the final resting place of a de-massified imaginary in a new version of the “universalism” usually discredited by contemporary theory, and describe in some detail the way that envisioning Shakespeare as master CEO symptomatically reveals the ethical and political fault lines of a corporate-driven culture.

Chast’s comic version of market targeting and segmentation has found a darker resonance in the recent hearings of the Federal Trade Commission regarding the discovery of documents from the advertising side of the film industry. These documents reveal the explicit strategies of marketing campaigns and devices specifically aimed at young people who are, in fact, too young to be allowed to see the movies or games being promoted. Federal Trade Commission Chair Robert Pitofsky, finding some 80 percent of violent movies thus covertly marketed, points out that this is at the very least a deceptive practice, given that the industry by its own self-regulation regards these films as inappropriate for the young. ¹

Presumably, marketing Shakespeare as entertainment does not have such nefarious circumstances attached to it, at least not so directly, though Shakespeare is perhaps ever protected by the equivalent of the Elizabethan “benefit of clergy,” by which quoting scripture could save a felon’s neck. Nevertheless, the history of this marketing may reflect something of the ways in which marketing itself has historically tended to shift. Applying the broad categories of sociologist Richard Tedlow (1996), one might perceive that the development of marketing tends to fall in something like his three developmental stages, from Fragmentation to Unification to Segmentation. While I would not press the model too confidently into an overview of the history of marketing Shakespeare, a rough trajectory of this sort may nevertheless be seen from the early modern period to the present: the identification of the reading portion of the public by Shakespeare’s actor friends Heminges and Condell, who urge us to buy the Folio they have posthu-