

The birth of Shakespearean cultural capital: Early configurations and appropriations of Shakespeare

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After the World Shakespeare Festival (a part of the 2012 Cultural Olympiad), the 450th birthday celebrations of 2014 and the 400th anniversary of Shakespeare's death in 2016, which led to the organisation of a wealth of events worldwide, it may be a good moment to reflect on why Shakespeare has taken so much space in postmodern culture.

This chapter will first discuss Shakespeare's presence in part of the culture around us and then turn to the past in order to understand the journey that has led the Stratford-born dramatist and poet to become the quintessential figure of the author that he is now. After looking briefly at the current circulation and merchandising of Shakespeare's representations on the Internet and in mainstream culture, the chapter will demonstrate how such trends find their roots partly in the early configuration of his works in print (especially in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries) and in their appropriation by early readers. Some of the paratexts of Shakespeare's quartos and folios will be examined, as well as the traces and inscriptions left by readers in those books. Further argument will focus on the interconnections between the configuration of the first editions and their reception by actual or 'empirical' readers, to get a sense of how Shakespeare's image was shaped. His paradoxical position in modern culture as an author both revered and parodied can be explained by the analysis of the complex early modern construction of Shakespeare as a literary figure and the material configuration of his early works.

The postmodern circulation of Shakespeare

One of the ways of investigating Shakespeare's impact on postmodern culture is to look at his Internet presence by using the postmodern research tool *par excellence*, the Google search engine. Typing in the author's name yields a spectacular 129 million results. A similar search for Shakespeare's contemporary and rival, Ben Jonson, produces only some 653,000 entries.¹

Clearly, Shakespeare is everywhere on the worldwide web and the pages connected to his name through Google's algorithms are arranged in seemingly endless rows of numbered record sets. The inescapable Wikipedia page devoted to him comes up first of course. Thus, it is clear from the very top of the page that one version of the postmodern Shakespeare is constructed collaboratively by people who remain anonymous and are themselves referred to as 'users' rather than 'authors': Wikipedia defines itself as 'a free encyclopaedia, written collaboratively by the people who use it' (Wikipedia 2016).

Academically reliable sources such as the MIT Shakespeare project (The Complete Works of William Shakespeare 1993) have to compete with the 'noise' that Google's search tool generates automatically every time it is activated. Indeed, the same search informs us that 'Since 1897, Shakespeare has been the leader in quality, affordable fishing tackle' and points to a website selling 'Fishing Rods, Fishing Combos, Fishing Reels' – a site, moreover, that is using the dramatist's name as a registered trademark: 'Shakespeare®' (Pure Fishing 2018). Shakespeare of course has also his own Facebook page, which personalises the author, and yet depersonalises him as soon as we access the page that displays a string of generally disconnected posts (Facebook 2018). Moreover, his works are disseminated not only through a baffling number of editions available online, but also further fragmented and dissected by sites offering on-the-spot recyclable quotations, such as brainyquote.com, or 'Shakespeare Quotes' at Absolute Shakespeare.com (BrainyQuote 2001-2021; AbsoluteShakespeare 2000-2005).

This ‘user’ and machine-generated Shakespeare is not devoid of interest of course for teaching and learning, but far from short-circuiting the work and purpose of teaching, Shakespeare’s internet presence can be as baffling as traditional textbooks and does require much cultural mediation from educators to be adequately comprehended. Indeed, as Christie Carson and Peter Kirwan write in their essay collection on *Shakespeare and the Digital World*: ‘The authority that these digital Shakespeares gain from the use of Shakespeare’s name is dissipated further with each new iteration’ (2014, 249).

The birth of iconic Shakespeare: The visual impact of the Droeshout portrait

Google was also quick to cast its nets wide to capture an infinite number of images. Again, if ‘Shakespeare’ is typed into this search engine and an option ‘Images’ is chosen, one contemplates a vast computer-generated gallery of portraits and objects. Shakespeare’s name is used to sell merchandise remotely connected to the Elizabethan playwright or to his works themselves. Shakespeare mints, mobile phone covers, ties, or uncanny tissue box covers and costumed dolls appear perhaps less related to the Shakespeare studied at school or university than the Shakespeare of wedding cakes or Valentine’s cards. These speak of tradition and make use of an old trope – Shakespeare the love poet.

However, beyond what could be seen as vulgar merchandising, or as Internet ‘noise’, there is a cultural phenomenon at work which requires more in-depth attention. Looking closely at these pictures, one can observe that no other image recurs more, is produced and reproduced than the Droeshout portrait of Shakespeare. The portrait – or engraving, to be precise – originally appeared in the first collected edition of Shakespeare’s plays published in London in 1623, the First Folio. The book (which was followed by three other folio editions in 1632, 1664 and 1685)² contains thirty-six plays of which eighteen had never been published before. Part of the aura surrounding the volume is that, if these works had not been assembled, we may not have heard of plays such as *The Tempest*, *As You Like It*, *Macbeth*, *Julius Caesar* or *Anthony and Cleopatra*. This was the first folio volume devoted only to plays and this made quite an impact at the time in the sense that it turned plays performed in the public theatre into literature and arguably turned Shakespeare the poet and dramatist into a literary author.

The title page of the book has much to tell us about how this posthumous volume of Shakespeare’s plays constructed its author on the printed page. It was innovative in the sense that it reversed the usual printing conventions. Instead of having the text in the middle of the page, with a decorative frame around it, the now famous and much circulated portrait of Shakespeare is at the centre of the title page.

The author looks out from the imposing rectangular image engraved by Martin Droeshout. The text, with its title and author information, is placed on the perimeter of the image. The other material elements of this portrait are revealing too. The compilers of the First Folio did not choose to commission a woodcut portrait, which would have resulted in a rougher picture and would immediately have branded the publication as of lower status. Instead, the editors went with the more refined (and much more expensive) option of an engraved portrait.

The history of the portrait explains why it has exerted a measure of fascination because of its eerie and somewhat unreal aspects. Martin Droeshout was only sixteen when Shakespeare died, so he probably used someone else’s model. Shakespeare did not sit for him. Furthermore, it is possible that only the head and neck area appeared in the initial design. This would not have been an uncommon type of composition at the time.³ It could explain the proportional discrepancy between the head and the smaller body, which Droeshout could have borrowed from another composition. Close study of the various printed versions of the

engraving has revealed that the engraver retouched the plate and altered the image during the course of the First Folio's printing (Blayney 1991, 18–19; Blake and Lynch 2011, 27). All versions of the portrait look a little awkward, but the first state of the portrait is more peculiar because the head seems to be slightly detached from the large white collar (Blayney 1991, 19; Blake and Lynch 2011, 26).

So Droeshout reworked the plate, giving weight to the head by adding a triangle of hatched lines to the collar, below the ear and hair, as its shadow. When he touched it up again he added an extra line on the pupil of each eye and another strand of hair. The plate continued to be used for each of the subsequent folio editions and was not reworked again until 1685, when it was necessary to strengthen worn-out lines on the forehead, cheeks, and clothing for the printing of the Fourth Folio.

The portrait clearly emphasized the head of the author, especially because of its imbalance. There is a reason to believe that the engraving may not have been a true likeness of Shakespeare either. The prominent forehead, the receding hairline, the facial hair and the bags under the eyes - all these traits seem to be distinctive and yet individuals in other Droeshout portraits share them. For instance, the features of 'Shakespeare' can also be recognized in a later portrait of the Spanish priest and writer Francisco de la Peña, as Blake and Lynch have argued (2011, 29).

Thus, it could be that the famous face is more generic, less personal than we previously thought. One can also remark in passing that it does not directly bear Shakespeare's name. This may explain its iconic status, the fact that it now represents more than Shakespeare the historical author. It is synonymous with literature, culture, sometimes Britishness and because of its generic aspect it is able to transmute itself and continue to accumulate meanings. It is what one might call an *open signifier*. Indeed, as Douglas Lanier explains, 'the portrait serves as a widely shared memory device, a visual anchor for a body of connotations historically accrued by the name "Shakespeare"' (2007, 94).

To sum up, the material features of the portrait explain partly why Shakespeare the historical author could be appropriated and transformed through the centuries and by so many cultures. In this way, the First Folio is a crucial starting point for the transformation of the poet and dramatist into a literary and cultural figure. Yet there were other elements in this remarkable book, as well as in some of the single play editions that preceded it, which contributed to this transformation too.

The print birth of Shakespeare: The author and his paratexts

The paratext of the First Folio and of some of the single quarto play editions that preceded it was designed to play powerfully on the mind of its readers. Prefaces in general create what Roger Chartier has helpfully called an 'order': 'The book always aims at installing an order, whether it is the order in which it is deciphered, the order in which it is to be understood, or the order intended by the authority who commanded or permitted the work' (Chartier 1994, vii). Yet such prefaces work also as testing grounds for the relationships between book producers – eager to construct an engaging image of the author – and their consumers.

As Jerome J. McGann explained in his influential book, *The Textual Condition*:

Authorship is a special form of human communicative exchange, and it cannot be carried on without interactions, cooperative and otherwise, with various persons and audiences. In these events editors and publishers function as the means by which a text's interaction with its audience(s) is first objectively hypothesized and tested.

(1991, 64)

It is precisely this material and symbolic testing ground that will now be explored. The set of relations mentioned by McGann creates the charisma surrounding Shakespeare, but as Pierre Bourdieu and others have observed, the essentialist belief in the charisma of a work is an illusion: a creation of what Bourdieu calls the ‘charismatic economy’, which suppresses ‘the question of what authorizes the author, what creates the authority with which authors authorize’ (1993, 76). This is why recent critics, such as Jérôme Meizoz, not only see authorship as plural, but also resituate the work of art within the contexts, cultural territories and textual rites that make that work possible in the first place (2007, 14).⁴

The order of books fosters *experimental* text-reader interactions which rely on imaginary elements and constructs. In some early quartos of Shakespeare, the paratexts and the way the author’s work should be authorized either by the stage or by the world of literature appears still tentative. Thus, the 1609 quarto of *Troilus and Cressida* exists in two settings, as if the publishers Richard Bonian and Henry Walley could not decide how to commercialize the quarto. In its first setting, the title page states that the play was printed ‘[a]s it was acted by the Kings Maiesties seruants at the Globe’. This statement is omitted in the second setting and a preface to the reader (‘A neuer writer, to an euer reader. Newes.’) even claims that ‘you have here a new play, never staled with the stage, never clapper-clawed with the palms of the vulgar’ (Shakespeare 1609, sig. ¶2r).

Bonian and Walley sought to target another potential market, that of book collectors. The epistle points out humorously that investing in the work of an aged artist is a sound venture: ‘And beleeeue this, that when hee is gone, and his Commedies out of sale, you will scramble for them, and set vp a new English Inquisition’ (Shakespeare 1609, sig. ¶2v).

The 1622 quarto edition of *Othello* appears to confirm their claim. Six years after Shakespeare’s death and just a year before the publication of the First Folio, the deceased dramatist’s name is deemed sufficient by the publisher Thomas Walkley to add prestige to the playbook and to guarantee its literary worthiness to any potential reader: ‘I am the bolder, because the Authors name is sufficient to vent his worke’ (Shakespeare 1622, sig. A2r). Nonetheless, it is with the First and Second Folios of Shakespeare’s plays that the ‘author function’ dear to Michel Foucault begins to operate fully and that what was previously a body of separate works begins to be ordered so as to form an *œuvre*. As Michel Foucault points out famously ‘[t]he author’s name serves to characterize a certain mode of being of discourse’ (1998, 211).

Furthermore, this sense of an *œuvre* is conveyed by the fact that playbook readers are given prominent attention. As they open the First Folio, readers are greeted by Ben Jonson’s epistle ‘To the Reader’ with the Droeshout engraved portrait of Shakespeare on the facing page. Yet Ben Jonson’s poem also directs the reader’s gaze away from the portrait: ‘Reader, looke / Not on his Picture, but his Booke’ (Shakespeare 1623, sig. A1v). The portrait is there to reassure readers that the book is authentic, as the image purports to be a representation of the historical author.

However imperfect the portrait, what Roger Chartier calls ‘the assignation of the text to a single “I” immediately visible’ is there to ‘reinforce the notion that the writing is the expression of an individuality that gives authenticity to the work’ (1994, 52). The metaphor of embodiment (the writer embodied in his works, or rather the works embodying the writer) relies on realistic images of an individual author, even though the First Folio is in truth a product of a collective enterprise which is dependent upon communities of readers. Moreover, the press and the materialized book produced by it acquire a central role in the process: a role that Shakespeare’s readers cannot ignore.

Thus, Shakespeare’s First Folio is ordered so that access to the historical individual who partly produced the text is only possible through the mediation of the material book. John Heminges’s and Henry Condell’s ensuing dedication to the Earls of Pembroke and

Montgomery reminds readers that Shakespeare's company was part of powerful social and political networks. But these lines also have an incantatory and performative value: 'we most humbly consecrate to your H.H. these remaines of your seruant *Shakespeare*' (Shakespeare 1623, sig. A2v). The material book establishes a link between the past and the present, between the world of the dead and that of the living. Therefore, the First Folio is given a dual role: the author's death is consecrated in the book in order to allow the author figure to be reborn in and through the book: 'to keepe the memory of so worthy a Friend, & Fellow aliue' (Shakespeare 1623, sig. A2v). Some seven years after the author's physical death, the 1623 folio completes the mourning process: the physical void left by the departed person is filled by a symbolic figure materialized by the book.

This process cannot be fully realized without the assistance of readers. Heminges's and Condell's lines addressed 'To the great Variety of Readers', referring to the book's succession of prefaces and commendatory epistles, seek to expand the network of readers (and interpreters) of this text: 'And so we leaue you to other of his Friends, whom if you need, can bee your guides: if you neede them not, you can leade your selues, and others. And such Readers we wish him' (Shakespeare 1623, sig. A3r). The First Folio readers will encounter other readers in the book's paratext and they will in turn encourage new people to join this prestigious and yet open community.

The ensuing commendatory poems continue to construct Shakespeare as a literary author, but they can be seen also as potent celebrations of the book and of reading. In his second poem of praise, titled 'To the memory of my beloued, The avthor mr. vwilliam shakespeare: and what he hath left vs', Ben Jonson suggests that Shakespeare the author is now both kept alive and monumentalized by the book: 'Thou art a Moniment, without a tombe, / And art aliue still, while thy Booke doth liue, / And we haue wits to read, and praise to giue' (Shakespeare 1623, sig. A3r). In other words, readers will now ensure the lasting value of the author's writings.

The Second Folio of Shakespeare's works (1632) reprints the paratextual material of the first edition and adds three new poems that further expand the circle of those acting as guides to the volume's readers. 'Upon the Effigies of my worthy Friend, the Author Master William Shakespeare, and his Workes' is an anonymous poem which encourages spectators to turn away from the stage and look to books for a more genuine experience: 'Spectator, this Lifes Shaddow is; To see / The truer image and a livelier he / Turne Reader' (Shakespeare 1632, sig. A5r). The third poem, 'On Worthy Master Shakespeare and his Poems', contains a striking description of Shakespeare's rebirth through (and into) the book. The man and his works merge on the page, as if, having shed his mortal coil, Shakespeare has slipped into paper clothes:

[...] death may destroy
They say his body, but his verse shall live
And more then nature takes, our hands shall give.
In a lesse volumne, but more strongly bound
Shakespeare shall breath and speake, with Laurell crown'd
Which never fades. Fed with Ambrosian meate
In a well-lyned vesture rich and neate.
So with this robe they cloath him, bid him weare it
For time shall never staine, nor envy teare it.
(Shakespeare 1623, sig.*1v)

The success of the first editions of Shakespeare's collected plays resides partly in the fact that they are a celebration of the book. But it is explained as well because, even if the

order installed by those who produced the First Folio of Shakespeare's works is everywhere apparent, the fate of the volume relied on its readers, whose freedom was perhaps greater because no authorial voice was seeking to establish its authority over the text. That is, readers' freedom of interpretation would have been more limited, had Shakespeare been alive or had he been, as some authors were, possessive about his own writings and nervous about their reception as printed literature.

The origins of Shakespearean appropriation: Gaining cultural capital

Last section of this chapter focuses on the work of actual readers of Shakespeare. It attempts to show not only what the book brought to them, but also what they brought to the book, as they took it on numerous personal journeys. The marks they left inside their copies can be construed as forms of consumption of the book and as traces of material, intellectual and emotional involvement. In many cases, these types of engagement could lead to the construction of yet another author figure. Indeed, as much as readers ventriloquized Shakespeare's writings, they themselves could be ventriloquized by them.

Traditionally looked upon as marks of desecration, graffiti, in most instances, intriguingly celebrate the work, and, at the same time, their own authors. It is common to find parts of the preliminary epistles in honour of Shakespeare copied out by readers in the opening pages of the folios (as, for instance, in Folger Library Fo. 1 no. 28).

What can be regarded as penmanship exercises or pen trials, may be seen either as attempts at self-expression sparked by Shakespeare's work, or as confident assertions by extremely literate individuals of their mastery of the written medium in a rare book (Scott-Warren 2010, 368). In Folger Library Fo. 1 no. 32, on the page bearing Hugh Holland's epitaph 'Vpon the Lines and Life of the Famous Scenicke Poet, Master William Shakespeare', one late seventeenth-century reader has made an incomplete (and possibly half-humorous) attempt at self-expression:

margarit by is my name and
with my peen I wright this same
and if my peen hade ben better
i sholld

In Folger Fo.1 no.54, a late seventeenth-century reader by the name of Olivea Cotton signed her name above Leonard Digges's epitaph to Shakespeare: 'To the Memorie of the Deceased Author Maister W. Shakespeare'. John Lister – another reader of the same period – signed his name in a large italic hand just above Ben Jonson's homage to Shakespeare ('To the memory of my beloved, The Author') in Folger Fo.1 no.70. Lister also inscribed his signature in elegantly calligraphed letters no fewer than five times near the Hugh Holland epitaph ('Upon the lines and life of the famous scenicke Poet, Master William Shakespeare').⁵

No less obsessive and no less determined to leave an imprint in his own edition, Joseph Batailhey, another late seventeenth-century reader, signed his name on almost every play of Folger Fo.1 no.76.

Many of these inscriptions can be seen as traces of the way in which culture operates as a cycle. As I have suggested, the Shakespeare folios in particular create their own sense of prestige through their format and the manner in which their paratextual material has been configured. To write in such a book is for many early modern individuals a source of prestige and is in some regards empowering ('what one is depends on what one owns' De Grazia 1996, 34). But such writing – often self-consciously ostentatious – inevitably adds further

prestige to the book, is a conscious or subconscious message to other potential readers and is a way to authorize Shakespeare's works.

In a number of folios, individuals celebrate Shakespeare and simultaneously make a show of their own intellectual confidence gained by their ownership of the book. Some of the graffiti in early Shakespeare editions could in fact be considered to be forms of life-writing. In the case of the Shakespeare folios, the books' physical size combined with their prestige as cultural objects and as expensive commercial items can lead at times to extravagant expressions of the self. For instance, in a later Folio (Shakespeare 1664; Folger Fo.3 no.8), the blank page after *Twelfth Night* and facing the opening page of *The Winter's Tale* is entirely covered with the inscription 'John Barnes His Book 1762' drawn in ink and with decorative dots (Shakespeare 1664, sig. Z6r).

On the third flyleaf of Fo.1 no.45, 'The incomparable Shakespear' and the dramatist's last name are elegantly calligraphed across the page in an eighteenth-century hand. Just under these inscriptions, the words 'Knowledge & wisdom' appear.

A reader again celebrates what she or he regards as the intellectually empowering value of Shakespeare's works in Folger Fo. 3 No. 8. On a page of *Romeo and Juliet* (Shakespeare 1664, sig. Kkk5v) the word 'Knowing' has been calligraphed, and the almost Cartesian and partly existential phrase 'Knowing so I am' appears on a page of *Macbeth* (Shakespeare 1664, sig. Ooo4v).

Inspired by the book's paratext, readers are tempted to construct a plurality of interpretations, which they attribute to the author. Meaning is hence ascribed to the author in the act of engagement with the text – it is not so much a direct outcome of the text. Nevertheless, the name of the author has also a not-so-negligible effect on readers. It gives some unity to a body of otherwise disparate texts and tends to personalize the works. In this sense, '[t]he work presents itself as a metonymic fetish of the person, as a relic endowed with sacredness and treated as such' (Meizoz 2007, 42). Meizoz's definition of the fetishization of the work of art may of course be applied to Shakespeare and to the way his readers construct him as an author and, as we have observed, authorize his works.

Be that as it may, all sacred territory can be challenged by those who themselves established the boundaries. Readers never form unified communities and have various agendas. Thus, one finds early examples of negation and parody of Shakespeare – and of course you only negate or parody what has already high value or is sacred. In a First Folio that was sold in 2006 at Sotheby's in London for 2.8 million pounds (now some 3.1 million euro) is a mischievous note written in an eighteenth-century hand, possibly directed at other readers, left on the last page of *Hamlet* (Shakespeare 1623, sig. qq1v): 'But I desier the readerers moughth [mouth] to kis the wrighteres [writer's] arse.'⁶ One can imagine that such a phrase was even more transgressive because it was left in the volume of an already revered and fetishized author.⁷ In fact, the way postmodern cultural productions (films, series, theatre, etc.) relate to Shakespeare is equally ambivalent, although the way today's culture toys with Shakespeare's works and with Shakespeare as an author is tied to different historical agendas. As Douglas Lanier explains,

Like the Bible, Shakespeare is widely regarded as a repository of fundamental truths, and like the Bible, Shakespeare has the power to sanctify the 'profane' media, languages, and speakers it comes in contact with, to make them vehicles for truth or art. Of course, this analogy between Shakespeare and the Bible is not exact. Unlike the Bible, Shakespeare is secular scripture and as such can be transposed into 'vulgar' or 'improper' forms with far less controversy. And yet even with Shakespeare, a sort of secular blasphemy is possible, and it is also a resource for doing certain kinds of cultural work.

Conclusion

‘There is nothing outside of the text’, wrote Jacques Derrida famously in *Of Grammatology* (1997, 158). Often misconstrued, the phrase has been frequently associated with the almost complete lack of interest in the figure of the author during the second half of the twentieth century, especially in the field of literary studies. Derrida never meant that the text should be totally paramount and completely severed from the author. His idea was rather to give readers an almost limitless freedom of interpretation of the text, even if the figure of the author remained what he called – with a degree of regret – ‘this indispensable guardrail’ (Derrida 1997, 158) that stopped interpretation from straying into nonsense. No one today would contest the importance of the historical or empirical author (even if, in Shakespeare’s case, his *identity* is regularly but unconvincingly disputed). Dramatists counted for little in Elizabethan theatre, yet Shakespeare did have a special status – he was, to some extent, a member of the Establishment, as the Chamberlain’s Men and the King’s Men were hardly obscure companies. Nonetheless, all of this historical fame could not have been perpetuated without his successful entrance into the cultural realm of literary authorship. The transmutation of the historical author into a cultural and fetishized figure has been the subject of this chapter. What I have tried to highlight is the type of cultural work that was done and continues to be carried out to construct Shakespeare as an author. With the paratexts of his early editions, including the First Folio’s fascinating Droeshout portrait (which continues to circulate in our cultures) and the visible and invisible work of several generations of readers, Shakespeare was ‘pushed by many hands’, to gloss Crites in Dryden’s *Essay of Dramatic Poesie* (1668, 9). This great variety of agents and agencies – together with subsequent dramatists, adaptors, writers and interpreters – created and disseminated the Shakespeare we are familiar with: the omnipresent, endlessly fascinating and ever fleeting figure who is malleable and transferable to a multiplicity of contexts. Thus, Shakespeare the man and writer became a cultural phenomenon and a powerful means to make sense of who we are and how we live together as human beings.

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¹ These figures are of course approximations: they are proportionally correct but vary depending on the location of the computer performing the search.

² The Third Folio was first published in 1663, but its 1664 issue added *Pericles* and six other 'apocryphal' plays: *The London Prodigal*, *Thomas Lord Cromwell*, *Sir John Oldcastle*, *The Puritan*, *A Yorkshire Tragedy*, and *Lochrine*. The Fourth Folio appeared in 1685 and 70 pages of this edition were reprinted around 1700 to make up a shortage. Some scholars consider the latter as a Fifth Folio (Rasmussen 2001, 147).

³ The following material description of the engraving is much indebted to Blake and Lynch (2011, 21–29).

⁴ The quotations from Meizoz are translated by the author.

⁵ Lister also inscribed some eight female names (possibly family members?) on the same page.

⁶ Once the property of Dr Williams's Library in London, the Folio is now in private hands in the U.S.

⁷ On the First Folio as fetish and on his place within the postmodern capitalist economy see Hooks (2016, 186, 193).
