"To build or not to build": LEGO® Shakespeare™ and the Question of Creativity

Sarah Hatchuel, University of Le Havre

Nathalie Vienne-Guerrin, University Paul-Valéry Montpellier 3

Abstract

This essay aims to explore the cultural stakes underlying the fleeting and almost incongruous Shakespearean presence in *The LEGO Movie* (2014), analyze the meeting of "LEGO" and "Shakespeare" in the cinematic and digital worlds, and suggest that at the heart of the connection between Shakespeare and LEGO lies the question of originality and creativity. "LEGO Shakespeare" evinces interesting modes of articulation between art and industry, production and consumption, high-brow culture and low-brow culture and invites us to study how Shakespeare is digested into and interacts with multi-layered cultural artifacts. It will be this essay's contention that Shakespeare's unexpected manifestation in *The LEGO Movie* is a symptom of LEGO's official re-appropriation of more playful and grass-roots productions. These creations stem from users who become "prosumers" in the participatory culture of Web 2.0 and who interact with both the LEGO world and Shakespeare's canon in a cross-over that turns the playwright into a figure that oscillates between spectrality and materiality.

In the 3D computer-animated film *The LEGO Movie* (2014), Shakespeare unexpectedly appears as one of the "master builders" featured in the background story.[1] His name is never uttered in the film, masking the fact that LEGO Shakespeare constitutes a world in itself, to which a few scholars have paid some attention. Christy Desmet (2009, 65) already notes that YouTube "lists nearly 50 entries for videos of *Macbeth* using Lego!" Peter Holland (2009, 256) mentions "My Name is Macbeth," the rap version acted out by Lego figures, as well as Logan Stromberg's "Lego MacBeth" (262). LEGO Shakespeare is part of what has come to be identified as "YouTube Shakespeare" (O'Neill 2014). However, when one searches the World Shakespeare Bibliography online, no study focusing exclusively on LEGO Shakespeare comes up; similarly, in the indexes of Stephen O' Neill's volume *Shakespeare and YouTube* (2014), or Alexa Alice Joubin and Charles Ross's *Shakespeare in Hollywood, Asia, and Cyberspace* (2009), the term LEGO is not listed;

nor is it mentioned in the recent *Shakespeare and the Digital World: Redefining Scholarship and Practice* (2014), edited by Christie Carson and Peter Kirwan. LEGO Shakespeare is, therefore, not (or not yet) identified as an object of extensive or legitimate study.

The purpose of this article is to show how and why Shakespeare and LEGO meet in the cinematic and digital worlds and to suggest that LEGO Shakespeare is a complex example of the popular culture that Douglas Lanier has termed "Shakespop" (Lanier 2002). It evinces interesting modes of articulation between art and industry, production and consumption, high-brow culture and low-brow culture, and invites us to study how Shakespeare is digested into and interacts with multi-layered cultural artifacts. This article aims to explore the cultural stakes underlying the fleeting and almost incongruous Shakespearean presence in *The LEGO Movie*, isolate "LEGO Shakespeare" as an object of study by giving a brief panorama of the "LEGO Shakespeare" world, and suggest that at the heart of the connection between Shakespeare and LEGO lies the question of originality and creativity.

It will be this essay's contention that Shakespeare's unexpected manifestation in *The LEGO Movie* is a symptom of LEGO's official re-appropriation of more playful and grass-roots productions. These creations stem from users who become "prosumers" in the participatory culture of Web 2.0 and who interact with both the LEGO world and Shakespeare's canon in a cross-over that turns the playwright into a figure that oscillates between spectrality and materiality.

Shakespeare in *the LEGO Movie*

The LEGO Movie is the first full-length theatrical LEGO adventure from Warner Bros. Pictures and Village Roadshow Pictures, directed by Phil Lord and Christopher Miller. In 2000 the LEGO Studios were created, as is narrated by Daniel Lipkowitz in *The LEGO Book*:

> In 2000, the LEGO Group teamed up with the world-famous director Steven Spielberg to create a new kind of LEGO theme. Lego Studios wouldn't just be about construction and play, but making video stories using the principle of stop-motion animation. In this process, a camera takes a single picture of a model or scene, which is then moved slightly and photographed again. By repeating this over and over and then playing back the shots in sequence, the many still pictures blend together to make an animated LEGO movie. (2009, 176)

Before *The LEGO Movie*, other animated movies with LEGOs had been released, but only in DVD format. The first LEGO movie on DVD was *LEGO: The Adventures of Clutch Powers* (dir. Howard E. Baker, 2010), followed by *Lego Batman: The Movie — DC Superheroes Unite*

(dir. Jon Burton, 2013), and the LEGO *Star Wars* trilogy — *The Padawan Menace* (dir. David Scott, 2011), *The Empire Strikes Out* (dir. Guy Vasilovich, 2012), and *The Yoda Chronicles* (dir. Michael Hegner, 2013).

On IMDB, the story of the 2014 film is presented as a fight against immobility and rigidity, in very literal ways: "An ordinary LEGO construction worker, thought to be the prophesied 'Special,' is recruited to join a quest to stop an evil tyrant from gluing the LEGO universe into eternal stasis." The hero of the story, Emmet, is a "rules-following perfectly average LEGO minifigure" who is "mistakenly identified as the most extraordinary person and the key to saving the world."[2] Wyldstyle, the heroine in the film, says about him: "I don't think he's ever had an original thought." The villain in the film is President Business who, because he is obsessed with order, decides to "hunt down all the master builders" who are creative enough to invent new objects and story worlds with LEGO bricks without respecting the precise rules of construction. As Business wants to glue things eternally, Emmet has found a "piece of resistance" that should restore creativity and originality. The "master builders" are inset doubles for the real-life "master builders" in the LEGO industry, who are "rigorously tested and selected for their creative construction skills." They "work at the LEGO model shops where they assemble an incredible variety of models for in-store use, parks, special projects, and events all around the world" (Lipkowitz 2009, 188). These real-life "master builders" are thus transposed in the film and turned into children's popular Superhero figures such as Superman, Batman, or Wonder Woman.

Among the "master builders" that appear in the film, the spectators can recognize Shakespeare; but because he is never formerly introduced or even named, viewers need to be attentive and aware of the usual representations of Shakespeare, such as the portraits. The playwright is first presented next to a panda, a Yeti, and a pirate, among many other LEGO minifigures (see figure 1), as one of the "people of the universe" who used to be "free to travel and mingle and do whatever they wanted" and are now chased by President Business, who fears the chaos that free creation implies.

In the second moment featuring Shakespeare, Emmet delivers an "eloquent speech" before the assembly of master builders (see figure 2). He is invited to do so by Vitruvius, the wise bearded old wizard (voiced by Morgan Freeman) in charge of organizing the resistance. The name "Vitruvius" immediately conjures up the figure of a great "builder": Marcus Vitruvius Pollio, the Roman architect who was a civil and military engineer as well as an urban planner in the First Century BC, and who famously wrote the multi-volume treatise *De architectura* as a guide for building projects. The Vitruvius minifigure thus embodies the tension found in the film between the precise "instructions" defended by President Business and a free creative spirit with a thirst for

invention. The word "architect" actually derives from the Greek *archi* and *tekton* — "Master" and "builder/carpenter." To make the reference to the Roman Vitruvius even more explicit, the scene takes place in an ancient amphitheater.

When Vitruvius calls out several of the master builders, they are introduced to the viewers: Robin Hood, the Mermaid Lady, Gandalf, the 2002 NBA All-Star players, Wonder Woman, 1980-Something Space Guy, Green Ninja, Milhouse (from the Simpsons), Michelangelo (the artist) and Michelangelo (the Ninja Turtle), Cleopatra (with a serpent around her neck), and Dumbledore (from the Harry Potter saga). Among the master builders one also recognizes Abraham Lincoln, who is not named but who, seeing the quarrels and fights in the assembly, utters: "A house divided against itself would be better than this," in reference to the House Divided Speech (1858). We then briefly see the Shakespeare minifigure again (see figure 3), who, upon discovering that Emmet is "not a master builder . . . yet," shouts "Rubbish!" rolling the "r"s and angrily sending an object at Emmet's face — an object that looks like a pizza. Shakespeare appears but is never named, as though he should be recognized easily by the spectators. Like other Disney, Dreamworks, or Pixar animated films, *The LEGO Movie* is clearly aimed at families, audiences made of both adults and children who receive the film differently, thanks to the use of multiple layers of meaning and cultural references. Therefore, even if a child may not recognize Shakespeare, the father or mother sitting next to him or her in the cinema probably will share their knowledge and help the child decipher or decode the allusion.

In another brief sequence, one sees Shakespeare being arrested by President Business, together with Wonder Woman, Superman, and a few others (see figure 4). When President Business calls out the two Super Heroes, the name "Shakespeare" is still not voiced. As the playwright can be seen on screen, it is the name "Shaquille O'Neal" (another of the master builders) that can be heard, thus creating confusion between Shakespeare and the basketball legend. In yet another sequence, which shows the rebellion of the free LEGO builders, Shakespeare appears on a rocket with Lincoln and Michelangelo, saying "And don't forget us, master builders" (see figure 5). At the end of the film, which sees the victory of the creative builders over President Business, as a celebratory move the Shakespeare minifigure is seen executing a hip hop wave on the floor (see figure 6).

This unacknowledged, brief, and transitory Shakespearean presence throughout the film must be interrogated. Why does Shakespeare appear at all in this LEGO movie? What does his occurrence mean if one considers the issue of creativity vs immobility that permeates the story?

If Shakespeare is in this movie, it may be because he is everywhere anyway, as any story world seems to be able to absorb him and his works; but there is more to it. As Alan Sinfield has argued, "Shakespeare is a powerful cultural token, such that what you want to say has more authority if it

seems to come through him" (1992, 11). Shakespeare's cultural capital may be exploited to give cultural credence and aura to a LEGO-based production. Shakespeare's presence first invites us to identify some elements of the film as Shakespearean motifs. Vitruvius, the father-figure, dies before coming back as a *Hamlet*ian Ghost to haunt the "Special" minifigure. The prophecy that a "Special" one would save the LEGO world is revealed as false but leads to victory anyway, revealing its self-fulfilling, *Macbeth*-like nature. Moreover, the film plays with the frames of the story: in a reflexive *mise-en-abyme*, the minifigures are ultimately revealed to be *played with* by real-life people, a father and his son, who disagree on the way one should interact with the LEGO bricks (see figures 7, 8, and 9).

The father defends a vision in which LEGO models are built to be fixed, glued, and admired as art works — in this, he is disclosed as the real-life President Business, while the son wants to play, mix things, and imagine action-filled adventures for the minifigures — thus standing for the inset "master builders." The "real-life" frame sometimes invades the story-world: the "Special" Emmet has had visions of a huge hand in the sky (see figure 10); the top of President Business' tower is removed as if by an outside force; and the Ghost of Vitruvius is moved like a puppet, with the help of a thread that is never hidden from the viewer (see figure 11). The father and son appear as doubles for the directors and scriptwriters, acting literally as "hands of God" in the story world. At the end of the film, shots alternate between the very material LEGO world (see figure 12) seen by the father and the son, who "direct" the story, and the imaginary, digitally-enhanced LEGO world as experienced by the minifigures themselves, who "live" the story (see figure 13).

In its multiple levels of fiction that collapse onto each other in constant metalepses, *The LEGO Movi*e makes us aware of its construction and interrogates the very boundaries of the story world, as it invades the "real" in a re-enactment and updating of the motto "all the world is a (LEGO) stage."

If the film features Shakespeare and if Shakespeare has now been made a LEGO minifigure (released in the wake of the film in 2013-2014),[3] which even appears in *The LEGO Movie* video game,[4] it is not only to encourage the viewers to notice the Shakespearean themes or aesthetics in *The LEGO Movie*, but also to reflect on and acknowledge a media phenomenon. Shakespeare's manifestation in this blockbuster aimed at a large, family audience may be read as the sign of a corporate re-appropriation of what started as very creative amateur videos that crossed the LEGO world and Shakespeare's, while interrogating the boundaries between production and consumption.

Shakespeare Bricks on Film: From YouTube Bits to Full-length Movie

The Internet and new technologies have offered readers and spectators a space of heightened imagination, blurring the frontiers between producers and consumers. For Matt Hills (2002), it

is no longer possible to claim, as Michel de Certeau did in the 1980s, that boundaries are clear between the creators-producers with their powerful strategies of market anticipation on the one hand and the consumers with their small-scale tactics of appropriation on the other. This model now seems too rigid to define the present system of fan production, in which consumers have partly become producers or "pro-sumers." In these fast-developing structures of niche marketing, fans-producers now create their works alongside official productions and become creators-performers of a cultural capital that can be appropriated, copied, and parodied, sometimes influencing the official fictions. Christie Carson (2014, 227) notes that "the line which formerly split viewer and viewed, but also producer and consumer, has broken down in the digital world" and that "there has been an implosion of authority, with all the hierarchies of the twentieth-century world shifting or breaking down," while "new meaning-making structures are developing" (227). The LEGO Shakespeare phenomenon may be considered as emblematic of these new ever-shifting, fluid forms. This is all the more paradoxical, since LEGO bricks should epitomize fixity by their very materiality.

Before *The LEGO Movie* was released, many LEGO fans had already adapted scenes from Shakespeare, filming them in LEGO stop-motion and posting the videos on platforms such as YouTube — so much so that the LEGO Shakespeare videos now constitute a large corpus on YouTube and have become an educational tool and product. LEGO designers admittedly find their inspiration on the Internet. When the toy manufacturer had to adapt to the computer age, they had the idea of using the LEGO fans to feed their imagination, which implied working interactively with their Internet fan base.

According to John Fiske (1992), texts that are elected, among popular fictions, as "cult texts" (or "fan texts") are characterized by insufficiencies that call for re-appropriation; they need to be open enough and to include contradictions, ambiguities, and/or unresolved cultural issues that invite rewriting, re-activation, and circulation. "Shakespeare" (both the "author figure" with its mysterious and incomplete biography and his plays, full of ambiguities and ambivalences) as well as the LEGO brick-world that calls for ceaseless re-construction and re-ordering, fit Fiske's definition of "fan texts," constantly feeding the users-performers' imagination. Shakespeare's plays have been adapted to the world of "Bricks on film," which Lipkowitz describes as follows in *The Lego Book*:

> From official LEGO movies to themed sets that enable builders to create animations of their own, and on to an entire industry of amazing fan-made films, LEGO building and the world of movie-making have forged a beautiful friendship destined to last for years to come. (2009, 176)

An old-time material toy like LEGO, therefore, has been saved and revived by the new digital technologies. When the words "Shakespeare LEGO" are searched for on YouTube, Shakespeare is clearly revealed as part of the LEGO movie world. On 15 May 2016, 52,800 results came out. This number can only be approximate: when you skim through these results, you find that many results are, in fact, irrelevant, as is usual with Internet searches. Yet it gives an idea of the phenomenon, all the more so if you combine these results with others, such as LEGO *Romeo and Juliet* (31,600), LEGO *Macbeth* (20,500), LEGO *Hamlet* (25,500), LEGO *The Tempest* (32,400), LEGO *Coriolanus* (1040), or LEGO *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (6,600). Even if very approximate, these results are sufficient to allow us to identify a large corpus of LEGO Shakespeare videos. Now entered on Google, the search for "LEGO Shakespeare" produces 595,000 results. Shakespeare is not the only author to be "LEGOized" (LEGO Jane Austen provides 415,000 results on Google, LEGO Chaucer 367,000, while the LEGO Bible reveals more than 2 million results). Shakespeare is part of a large phenomenon of appropriation of literary classics by the LEGO world and industry that makes classic authors accessible, a trend that was emphasized when in 2014, the Waterstones bookstore chain decided to recreate "setpieces from great literature in toy bricks to coincide with the release of The LEGO Movie."[5]

It is possible here to delineate some specific features of this LEGO Shakespeare material. In her article "*Othello*/YouTube" (2015), Ayanna Thompson identifies three main trends that she considers as characteristic of YouTube *Othello* videos: "The Archival Impulse," "The Pedagogical Impulse," and "The Parodic Impulse."

The existence of "LEGO Shakespeare" videos first demonstrates that LEGO is used as a pedagogical tool to make the playwright accessible to pupils. Many videos explicitly claim to be part of school projects and assignments. LEGO obviously is used by teachers to attract the pupils' interest in Shakespeare and his language. Christy Desmet analyzed in 2009 the educational potential of YouTube Shakespeare, suggesting how LEGO could provide pupils with a first access to Shakespeare. For example, "William Shakespeare's Romeo and Juliet in LEGO," a ten-minute video posted in July 2012, introduces itself as a school project in English and the first "stop animation" experience of the "girlwiththeblueeyess."[6] "It was created by Me and a couple of my mates please put what your views are but don't be too harsh . . . please :)," says the comment that accompanies the video, revealing the Shakespearean motif of the amateur "rude mechanicals" who are afraid to hurt and to be hurt in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. These Shakespeare LEGO videos have much to do with the performances that Michael Dobson studies in his *Shakespeare and Amateur Performance. A Cultural History* (2011). These videos deriving from school projects are

amateur performances of Shakespeare's plays, thanks to which Shakespeare becomes fun. Many other examples can be found on YouTube, such as "Shakespeare's Romeo and Juliet: Act 2: Scene 2 IN LEGO!," a five-minute video described as "A literature project my brother and I worked on for a few weeks. It's pretty good lol. Voice acting by Kendal Miller and Kenneth Nicolas, and everything else by us."[7] Another one, "Shakespeare Much Ado About Nothing in Lego," stages act 5, scene 3, a video again described as "My first stop motion video as a project for my Shakespeare class."[8] These pedagogical videos all combine Shakespeare's words with LEGO designs, contrary to the "Shakespeare Lego Films" that are dumb shows accompanied by music but that let us hear no Shakespearean words. These silent films were probably created in the wake of *The LEGO Movie*, as they include the Shakespeare minifigure.[9]

Whether the videos are designed for schoolwork or just for fun, LEGO Shakespeare means mini-Shakespeare. The LEGO Shakespeare videos are short and provide "reduced Shakespeare" films.[10] They either condense the plays, like the aforementioned Shakespeare LEGO films, or focus on just one scene, as is the case with "LEGO Shakespeare, As You Like It, Act 1, Sc. 1," an eight-minute version of the play's first scene, including the text and subtitles in English.[11] Posted in February 2010, this textually-oriented LEGO sequence triggered only one visible comment: "High culture," a commentary that seems to be both ironic and sincere, so that it interrogates rather than establishes the film's cultural value. The LEGO Shakespeare world privileges a scale of adaptation that puts Shakespeare into "tatters," if one is to follow an expression coined by Mariangela Tempera.[12] Yet these "LEGO Shakespeare" tatters are packed with meaning and re-creative impulses.

These few-minute fanvids posted on YouTube testify to the users' desire to interact creatively and parasocially (Booth 2010) with both the Shakespeare fiction and the LEGO brick world, generating renewed sites of cultural negotiations (Hills 2002) in which personal interpretation and amateur performance can thrive (Kustritz 2014, 373). As a cross-over between the world of Shakespeare and the world of LEGO, "LEGO Shakespeare" mixes and entangles what are traditionally seen as "high-brow" and "low-brow" cultures; they call cultural hierarchies into question and redefine the boundaries between the "official" field (either governed by corporate copyright in the case of LEGO or canonicity in the case of Shakespeare) and the "non-authorized," fan-made creations.

Putting Shakespeare into LEGO amounts to playing and toying with Shakespeare. Integrated into the LEGO universe, Shakespeare and his plays are the objects of all kinds of manipulation and can be associated with such worlds as *Star Wars* in a move encouraged by *The LEGO Movie* itself,

since Batman or Superman can meet the LEGO world effortlessly. The video entitled "Lego Star Wars Julius Ceasar" [sic], posted in March 2013, is accompanied by the following text: "This is a tragic play written by William Shakespeare. Except this time it is reenacted in LEGO and has a *Star Wars* theme. This was an assignment that I had to do for my English Class. Note that this may not make much sense if you have not read the story."[13] In this video, the worlds of *Julius Caesar* and *Star Wars* overlap, Chancellor Palpatine being cast as 'Cassious' [sic], Anakin as Brutus, Obi-Wan Kenobi as Julius Ceasar [sic], and "Santa Clause as The Old Man." In a frenzied video that mentions a Caesar salad, Obi-Wan Kenobi's dying words are "And you too Anakin!" re-inventing the famous "Et tu Brute." Using the *Star Wars* LEGO minifigures to perform a Shakespearean story is a recurrent feature in these films. This combination suggests that the two worlds have much in common or are at least culturally compatible, as seems to be shown by the recent publication of *Shakespeare's Star Wars* by Ian Doescher (2013), a mash-up trilogy that retells the plot of George Lucas's saga in Shakespearean style. Cultural exchanges between the two diegetic worlds seem to be easy, confirming Amy Scott-Douglass's analyses of *Star Wars*' Shakespearean features or, should we say, of Shakespeare's Star-Warrish features.[14]

As Shakespeare's characters have not (yet) been turned into LEGO minifigures, LEGO/ Shakespeare fans have to adapt existing figures to build Shakespeare's characters, so that they can best express their most conspicuous characteristics. "MACBETH stop motion lego" is a six-minute video presented as "A lego star wars stop motion parody video of Shakespeare Macbeth act 1 scene three."[15] Posted in 2010, it represents the "Weird Sisters" as three Jar Jar Binks minifigures, thus emphasizing their strange appearance. "Star Wars Lego Romeo and Juliet," posted in 2008 and viewed more than 120,000 times so far, provides the complete Shakespeare *Star Wars* dramatis personae at the end of the video, with Romeo as Luke Skywalker, Juliet as "Random Lego girl," Friar Lawrence as Lego Yoda, and "bickering servants" as "Lego R2-D2 and C-3PO."[16] The video thus offers a *Star Wars* reading of the play in which the wars become a feud and vice versa. Playing at/with Shakespeare LEGO or LEGO Shakespeare offers other forms of recreation and "reconfiguration" (Mayer et al., 2013). "Lego man talks Shakespeare," posted in January 2012, shows a LEGO medieval minifigure delivering the "To be or not to be soliloquy" in Kenneth Branagh's voice (*Hamlet*, 1996).[17] This multi-layered appropriation in a Shakespeare-Branagh-LEGO example shows how fanvids can feed on previous film adaptations, boasting original creativity through transfer and hybridity. The Shakespearean films are "poached" (Henry Jenkins's expression [1992], borrowed from Michel de Certeau's notion of "braconnage" [1980]) as if they had become as canonical as Shakespeare's plays, as if they *were* Shakespeare's plays (Hatchuel

2015). In the same way, several layers of reduction-adaptation appear in a LEGO video of the Reduced Shakespeare Company Rap of *Othello*,[18] which seems to be part of the very process of canonization of this ironical "RSC" rap.[19] Combining the Reduced Shakespeare Company, Rap, and LEGO, this video integrates Shakespeare into a tangled digital object that calls for disentanglement.

The recent creation of a LEGO Shakespeare minifigure suggests that Shakespeare already means something to many LEGO fans who are both adults and children. This recent release is bound to lead to even more Shakespearean LEGO movies in which Shakespeare himself becomes the hero. The fan-produced amateur videos that we have studied have been joined by a new wave of fanvids since the release of the much-publicized *LEGO Movie* and that of the Shakespeare minifigure. "LEGO Shakespeare, Where are my Pants? (Stop-Motion)"[20] is based on an allusion to a recurrent satirical gag in *The LEGO Movie* ("Honey, where are my pants?"). "Action Bill — A LEGO Stop Motion Short Film" is a five-minute video in which "William Shatner's time traveling robot attempts to destroy William Shakespeare but underestimates the fighting prowess of Action Bill."[21] In this much more elaborate video, Shakespeare is led to interact with LEGO, Action Man, and the world of *Star Trek*, a television and film series that is already known for its appropriation of Shakespearean motifs and quotes (Lanier 2002, 14-16). *The LEGO Movie* video game integrates Shakespeare, whose weapon is a skull (Yorick's) borrowed from the formerly-released minifigure of the Actor (minifigures series 8), so that he looks like an Elizabethan thespian performing Hamlet.

The LEGO Shakespeare craze finds its expression in the two "Brick Shakespeare" books: one, published in 2013 by Skyhorse, focusing on the tragedies and the other, published in 2014, focusing on the comedies (see figures 14 and 15).

If these books are not entitled "LEGO Shakespeare," it is because "LEGO® is a trademark of the LEGO Group of companies which does not sponsor, authorize, or endorse this book" (McCann et al. 2013, copyright page). *Brick Shakespeare* has recently been commercialized as a complete set of hardback books (2014), which seems to testify to its success. It was not the first book of its kind. *The Brick Bible* was also published in several editions and has been sold as a complete set since 2013; *Brick Fairy Tales* and *Brick Greek Myths* are now sold in one set (2015), while *Brick Dracula and Frankenstein* is the latest in the series (2014).

The introduction to the latest Shakespeare volume states that:

> *Brick Shakespeare: The Comedies* presents four of the Bard's most famous and clever comic works in LEGO form, each of which has been carefully abridged. The fun brick scenes depict Shakespeare's plays just as they were originally written (perhaps with more plastic

than he had imagined), with helpful narrative in between to explain what we did not include. Whether you are just being introduced to Shakespeare or are a seasoned devotee, we hope you enjoy this creative and constructive new take on Shakespeare's comedies! (McCann et al., 2014)[22]

"Creative," "constructive," "new": here lies the heart of the LEGO marketing strategy, which is based on the promotion of originality, although it paradoxically encourages the re-enactment of world-famous, four-century-old plays.

When the LEGO Ideology and Marketing Strategy Meet Shakespeare

The LEGO Movie translates the ideology that is conveyed by the LEGO industry, which is very simple. There are basic, ordinary, common construction guys, such as Emmet; there are "master builders," such as Shakespeare. Any basic construction guy may become a master builder; any Emmet may become a Shakespeare, an Abraham Lincoln, or a Wonder Woman. "You are the Special, and so am I and so is everyone": such is the message of the film, uttered by Emmet, addressing President Business. The key is to "believe" in oneself, as the ending of the film makes clear. The LEGO world values both regular, generic construction workers who are keen on following the instructions precisely and the master builders who are inspired, inspiring, and cultivate freedom.

The whole plot of *The LEGO Movie* rests on a conflict between and finally the reconciliation of generations, as we learn in the final sequence when we discover that President Business is the father and Emmet the son. The father wants his son, who has been playing with his LEGO "stuff," to "put everything back the way [he] found it." With his glue (termed the "Kragle" in the LEGO world imagined by the son), the father wants to "make things the way they are supposed to be, permanently." What the son sees as a battleship, the father perceives as a "hodgepodge." While Emmet/the child wants to appropriate what his father made, "making something new out of it," Business/the adult wishes to freeze things, considering the LEGO world as a "highly sophisticated interlocking brick system, an adult thing." Here the LEGO theory of adaptation can be used as a metaphor for a theory of Shakespearean adaptation: originality is when things are not "glued"; freedom is the key. At odds with the LEGOLAND theme parks in which all the large models are glued,[23] the film favors instead the idea that the minifigures should not be placed in a scale model in one single position forever. Instead, they must be used to play and make up stories imaginatively, in a direct reflection of Shakespeare's words and characters needing to be performed and moved out of the fixity of the page.[24] The film puts to the fore the *impermanence* of any LEGO playing

field in its constant reconfiguration: any LEGO show put on by a child is, indeed, a performance.[25] However, at the same time, the film asserts the power of cinema to fix and preserve (therefore, "glue" together) this show permanently.

What can be found at the core of *The LEGO Movie* and the marketing strategy it implies is that the plastic toys feed and facilitate a dialogue between generations. The idea is that both adults and children enjoy LEGO, in the same way as both adults and children love — or are supposed to love — Shakespeare. The community of LEGO fans is made of children but also of adults who buy very costly LEGO special edition sets, collect very costly LEGO items, and even create "LEGO Brick Art." *The LEGO Book* notes that:

> Some artists paint on canvas. Others carve stone or weld metal. But a special few create art using the unique medium of LEGO bricks and imagery. The work of these talented "brick artists" and others like them is a remarkable visual testament to the creative nature of LEGO building and the unlimited ways that it allows people to express themselves. (Lipowitz 2009, 190-91)

Like Shakespeare, LEGO seems to provide endless opportunities for adaptation, invention, and creation. However, the LEGO creation may be limited to some users only since *The LEGO Movie* expresses an all-male vision of who should constitute the LEGO players: LEGO matters seem to concern fathers and sons in a very biased, gendered stance. The end of the film heavily paves the way for a sequel by announcing the arrival of the very young daughter as a *threat* to the game, which precisely points to the gender stereotypes. This ending actually reflects LEGO's choice of designing "LEGO Friends" sets specifically aimed at young girls, a choice that was undoubtedly dictated by economic and marketing requirements.[26] This targeting reveals that LEGO, contrary to the vision it defends in the film, certainly defines and "glues" the boy world and the girl world into stereotypical representations.

One layer of irony appears in *The LEGO Movie*'s villain being called "President Business" or "Lord Business." The film thus seems to denounce the alienation of the working-class consumers and an economic system based on conformity, military-like management and wild profit-making, while being undoubtedly part of a marketing strategy to sell even more LEGO boxes. The film — in itself a two-hour-long advertisement, albeit a very smart and witty one — encourages people to invent and create new story worlds . . . but only with LEGO material. This invitation to be creative under strict constraints reproduces the attempts by corporations to control the circulation of transformative fan fictions that use characters or stories protected by copyright law. Even when they are not produced for profit (Rose 2012, 101-102), fan fictions have generally been seen as a

threat by companies owning the copyrights, since fan works may be seen as modifying or tarnishing the image of the diegetic world carefully constructed by the corporations. Lucasfilm has sought to contain fan fictions based on *Star Wars* by offering fan-authors to host their productions on an official site free of charge, so long as the fictions became the company's property; Warner Pictures violently targeted all the websites hosting fan rewritings of *Harry Potter*, and Fox attacked unauthorized sites devoted to shows such as *The Simpsons* or *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (Burke 2000). However, the more producers attempt to control the fans' freedom of expression, the more they may alienate a great part of their audience, all the more so since the authors of fan fictions remain enthusiastic readers/spectators of the "original" works.

The fact that Shakespeare appears in the LEGO film for the first time shows that the figure may have become marketable and bankable — probably not, or not yet, as bankable as Harry Potter™, Indiana Jones™, or Star Wars™, cleverly licensed by LEGO to attract young buyers, but bankable anyway. The *Star Wars* minifigures were the first ever licensed LEGO characters in 1999. Since then many more have followed: Spider-man™ minifigures are "some of the most popular characters to feature in fans' stop animation videos, which are known as brickfilms" (Martell 2009, 72); the LEGO Harry Potter™ theme was released in 2001, the LEGO NBA™ in 2003, the LEGO Spongebob Squarepants™ in 2006, LEGO Batman™ in 2006, and LEGO Indiana Jones™ in 2008-2009. And then, in 2013-2014, LEGO Shakespeare™. Shakespeare is used as a brand name, with no specific content but reduced to two accessories: the quill and the parchment displaying the mock-quote "To build or not to build."

In the LEGO world, there are other minifigures known as "Fan-figures," among which one finds Abraham Lincoln (dated 2008), but also Benjamin Franklin (dated 2008, as well). The Shakespeare minifigure, similarly, was created in the first place by fans. They were the ones who customized existing LEGO parts to *build* Shakespeare, before it was commercially released by LEGO. Such a customized figure appears in a 2011 ABC LEGO history on the LEGO MOCs ("My Own Creations"), which shows Shakespeare under the letter S (see figure 16).[27] Different versions of "Shakespeare," fan-made and officially released, thus compete with and complement one another. By officially releasing the Shakespeare minifigure in 2013 as a mainstream trademark, LEGO at once acknowledges the works of fans and manages to channel these creative endeavors. "Shakespeare" becomes a paradoxical character who is revised and who "trembles" through transfictionality (which postulates that characters may leave their preliminary fictive work to live their own lives in other stories and other media, suggesting that they do not belong to a single author or to one particular source). As "Shakespeare" moves freely from one customized version to

another, and from customization to officialization, his identity is reshuffled and, if one is to follow Richard Saint-Gelais's general claim on transfictional characters, "contaminated by some part of alterity," although it is not possible to "talk of distinct characters" (2011, 59).

"From famous historical figures to futuristic steampunk warriors, many talented customizers have truly allowed their imagination to run wild," Nevin Martell writes in *Standing Small* (2009, 92). The customized — i.e., the creative "original" — becomes a commonplace figure once it is commercially released or "glued," so to speak, in the LEGO world. In a similar way, the fanvids reproducing Shakespearean plays with existing LEGO bricks and figures have been reappropriated in an official way by the LEGO company: to mark the 400th anniversary of Shakespeare's death in April 2016, scenes from *Romeo and Juliet*, *Macbeth*, and *A Midsummer Night's Dream* were recreated in very professional, stop-motion-style CGI animation. The videos were then posted on YouTube and advertised in the press (Moran 2016).[28] If LEGO celebrated Shakespeare, Shakespeare certainly served to promote LEGO.

If, as analyzed by Maurizio Calbi (2013), "Shakespeare" has been more and more fragmented, spectrally mediated and experimentally disseminated in multi-layered, multi-mediatized afterlives on film, TV, and the Web (Calbi 2013), LEGO has first re-materialized "Shakespeare" — by creating, in 2013, a very tangible figure that can be manipulated, played with, used as a character and filmed by young (and less young) fans of his plays and of LEGO bricks — before turning the playwright back into a flimsy presence/absence throughout *The LEGO Movie* a year later and recreating the plays in stop-motion to promote both Shakespeare and the bricks. *The LEGO Movie* builds up yet another ironical effect by reducing such a master builder as Shakespeare to the status of a reactionary, old-fashioned figure who shouts "Rubbish!" when he is confronted with the novelty and originality that Emmet, the not-yet-master builder, represents. All the master builders, compared with Emmet the common construction worker are, in fact, presented as old-fashioned and ordinary. Paradoxically, when the ordinary is erected into an emblem of originality, then the original and the exceptional become ordinary. *The LEGO Movie*, which praises creativity and originality, ironically leads to a vision of the world in which everyone is a creator, ergo no one is a creator, not even Shakespeare; and yet, the fact that Shakespeare should call Emmet's speech "Rrrrubbish" suggests that among all the master builders, the one who is presented as beyond any other future builder is Shakespeare. Shakespeare's exclamation could mean "You will not build beyond me."[29] The Shakespeare figure itself thus states and feeds its own mythical stature as a builder "for all time," never to be equalled.

Shakespearean congresses and conferences around the world frequently include seminars and panels on adaptation and re-creation, while also addressing topics rooted in Elizabethan England, displaying the tensions between the two diverging meanings of the word "original" — on the one hand, "That is the origin or source of something; from which something springs, proceeds, or is derived; primary," and on the other, "Created, composed, or done by a person directly; produced first-hand; not imitated or copied from another; novel or fresh in character or style" (*OED*). A case in point was the call for submissions issued by the World Shakespeare Congress devoted to "Creating and Re-creating Shakespeare," in 2016 in Stratford and London:

> The year 2016 marks four hundred years of popular, artistic, and scholarly enthusiasm for Shakespeare's life and works. We justly celebrate Shakespeare as a creator of plays and poems, characters and ideas, words and worlds. But so too, in the centuries since the playwright's death in 1616, have scholars and thinkers, writers, artists, and performers — of all kinds and from around the globe — re-created him. In such perpetual reinventions of Shakespeare we seem to have confirmation of Ben Jonson's words: Shakespeare was "not of an age, but for all time."

> The tenth World Shakespeare Congress of the International Shakespeare Association will honor Shakespeare's 400-year legacy and celebrate the continuing global resonance of his work. The Congress's rich programme of plenary lectures, seminars, panels, workshops, events, and performances will take place across two successive locations: first in Stratford-upon-Avon, among the key sites of Shakespeare's personal life; and subsequently in London, close to the site of his most famous workplace, the Globe Theatre. WSC 2016 will offer unparalleled opportunities to engage with current Shakespeare performance, criticism, and pedagogy, and to connect with fellow Shakespeareans from around the world. (World Shakespeare Congress 2016)

This call for submissions sounds oddly "LEGOesque." The invitation sent to the "globe" to create and recreate, to freely build and rebuild Shakespeare is definitely there, but the fact that the Congress, for this special anniversary, takes place in Stratford and London suggests that there is no way of escaping the brand name "Shakespeare" and its first location in England. Just as one is free to build and rebuild imaginary worlds as long as it is with LEGO bricks, one is free to build and rebuild Shakespeare — as long as one remembers and acknowledges the authority of its primary roots. One may be free to be "original," so long as one pays tribute to the "origin." This is fair

enough, but what is surprising is that LEGO — an enterprise that one would have thought very far from the Shakespeare heritage and industry — seems to encapsulate the very tension at the core of Shakespeare studies. The presence of the Shakespeare minifigure in *The LEGO Movie* may be less fleeting than profoundly eloquent and revelatory.

Notes

1. Special thanks to François Guerrin for sharing his LEGO scholarship with us.

2. See https://www.imdb.com/title/tt1490017/?ref_=nv_sr_2 [accessed 28 April 2018].

3. A presentation of the Shakespeare minifigure by a LEGO fan is available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LCP7VHC1Yc0.

4. A presentation of the game by a LEGO fan is available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4ErkpBuz50w.

5. *The Guardian*, 19 February 2014. Available online at: http://www.theguardian.com/books/gallery/2014/feb/19/classic-literature-lego-in-pictures-dracula-romeo-and-juliet [accessed 6 September 2015].

6. Available online at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UkBCBluq5Js [accessed 16 May 2016], 442 views.

7. Available online at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=q6Zz4dXY6_U [accessed 16 May 2016], 8,316 views.

8. Available online at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yfdcL8CBRbY [accessed 16 May 2016], 154 views.

9. Available online at: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P-2OTPwT22k [accessed 16 May 2016], 9 films (*Cor*, *TC*, *Tit*, *JC*, *Oth*, *KL*, *Ham*, *Rom*, and *Mac*), between 1061 views (*Romeo and Juliet*) and 100 views (*Coriolanus*)

10. Several layers of reduction-adaptation appear in a LEGO video of the Reduced Shakespeare Company Rap of *Othello* at the following address: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P-2OTPwT22k [accessed 1 April 2018].

11. Available online at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=18F8MNsx3Uc [accessed 16 May 2015], 786 views.

12. In May 2013, Mariangela Tempera organized an international conference in Ferrara entitled "Shakespeare in Tatters."

13. Available online at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Uksiib-HLrk [accessed 16 May 2016], 1,248 views.

14. Amy Scott-Douglass shared her work on Shakespeare (especially *Othello*) and *Star Wars* at the International Shakespeare Conference, during a seminar convened by Brian Walsh (Stratford-upon-Avon, August 2014).

15. Available online at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aksAMwDeJEc [accessed 16 May 2016], 372 views.

16. Available online at: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jUDyd8KQcbk [accessed 16 May 2016], 129,838 views.

17. Available online at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hAUK0Fgb6_s [accessed 16 May 2016], 145 views.

18. Available online at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P-2OTPwT22k, accessed 16 May 2016], 267 views.

19. Available online at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UC-f0drvdmM, accessed 16 May 2016], 614,342 views.

20. Available online at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=I1U0STyAnDI [accessed 6 September 2015], 202 views.

21. Available online at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jQjzWbGKp5w [accessed 16 May 2016], 24,678 views.

22. For a thorough analysis of these *Brick Shakespeare* books, see Sarah Guizal's M. Phil thesis (IRCL, Montpellier, 2015).

23. LEGOLAND Model Maker Nev Smith has admitted: "We have to glue all of our LEGO models. We use a solvent-based plastic weld. It heats the bricks up so the edges bind together. Obviously it has to be very strong to withstand weather conditions." See https://www.facebook.com/notes/official-legoland-windsor/your-questions-answered-by-legoland-model-maker-nev-smith-part-2/497439006912 [accessed 3 April 2018].

24. "LEGO" comes from the Danish *Leg godt*, which means "play well."

25. Many thanks to Amy Scott-Douglass for this idea. This article stems from the seminar convened by Brian Walsh on "Adaptation and originality in Shakespeare films" (International Shakespeare Conference, Stratford-upon-Avon, August 2014). Many thanks to the seminar's contributors for their useful feedback on the first version of this article.

26. Many defenders of "gender neutral" toys have denounced the release of these "LEGO Friends," sets designed for girls.

27. Available online at: http://www.mocpages.com/moc.php/258002 [accessed 16 May 2016].

28. Available online at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6k7g8IBHiYE [accessed 25 April 2016].

29. Many thanks to Douglas Lanier for this reflection.

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