Everyone likes a comeback story. When the Boston Red Sox rallied from a three-game deficit to win the American League pennant in 2004, even people who weren’t baseball fans perked up. Sometimes the same thing happens with words, though admittedly a lexical comeback arouses somewhat less excitement among the hoi polloi, in part because the time frame is decades or centuries rather than a couple of weeks of doubleheaders. The word “wireless” is the most recent example of a significant lexical comeback. “Wireless” originally appeared near the beginning of the twentieth century to denote a newfangled alternative to the traditional telegraph, one that used radio waves rather than miles of wire to send messages across the continent. Later on, the word “wireless” was extended to devices that transmitted not just dots and dashes but voices and music. Families would gather around their “wireless” to hear news about the sinking of the Titanic, the burning of the Hindenburg, or the latest song by the Andrews Sisters. But by the middle of the twentieth century, especially in North America, the word “wireless” was in decline, fast becoming a quaint relic of bygone eras, a word your grandfather used, replaced in common parlance by “radio.” That would have been it for “wireless” had it not been for yet another revolution in communications that took off in the late 1990s, one that used radio waves rather than miles of wire to send digital media from your laptop or Blackberry to the Internet. Now, having been coaxed out of retirement, “wireless” is again the darling of telecommunication, the “new” hip word of the twenty-first century.

The comeback that “wireless” experienced due to changes in technology also happened to “brand,” albeit thanks to changes in commerce. Nowadays, that word is commonly used to refer to a family of products that is produced, or at least sold, by a particular corporation. Even children know that Nike is a brand, that Coke is a brand, that McDonald’s is a brand. What they and their parents might not know, though, is that the original meaning of “brand” was quite different: in the tenth century, it referred to a piece of wood burning in a hearth, especially one that was going to be pulled from the fire and used as a torch. A brand, in other words, was neither lumber nor ember, but something in between. It was useful because it gave off light but also because it could sear things, including human flesh. Thus, in the mid-sixteenth century “brand” came to denote a mark burned onto the arm, shoulder, or forehead of a criminal, imprinted both as a painful punishment and as a warning to others not to trust this disfigured miscreant. Not surprisingly, this sense of “brand” more or less fell out of currency by the eighteenth century, as the practice of scarring criminals with burning sticks and red-hot pokers fell into disuse. A parallel sense of “brand” survived, however, one that first emerged in the mid-seventeenth century. This “brand” denoted a mark that was seared not onto the flesh of humans but onto that of cattle or horses. From a semantic point of view, moreover, this new kind of branding was crucially different: if branding a person signified “Beware,” then branding an animal signified “This is mine.” The former conveyed the notion of outcast, and the latter, of belonging. This shift
in application rescued “brand” from oblivion and inaugurated its comeback as a familiar noun. This usage was assured in the early nineteenth century, when “brand” extended its application still further as it came to denote marks or symbols seared or painted onto mass-produced merchandise such as wine barrels or timber.

By the early twentieth century, this sense of “brand” had moved into the figurative or notional realm: a manufacturer branded a product not with fire or paint but simply by affirming it, usually through the medium of advertising. Not surprisingly, it was at this time—the early 1920s—that the term “brand name” arose. Later still, in 1958, the term “brand image” emerged, thanks to the ever-increasing sophistication of advertising agencies when it came to creating brands. A brand was no longer a proprietary family of products but an image or an attitude. And whereas a brand had once indicated that a product belonged to a certain manufacturer, it now implied that consumers belonged to certain brands. Consider, for example, the term “brand loyalty,” which first appeared in 1961: the loyalty is that of the consumer to the product, like a soldier to a flag, not the other way around.

It was at the tail end of all this—in 1955, just a few years before the invention of the terms “brand image” and “brand loyalty”—that Ray Kroc convinced Dick and Mac McDonald to let him open a franchise of their McDonald’s restaurants. This venture, which eventually led to Kroc purchasing the chain of nine restaurants from the two brothers, inaugurated what is surely among the most successful and sustained branding campaigns in history. Over the past fifty years, that campaign has covered a lot of semiological territory as the fast-food chain has word-smithed and tweaked names of entrées, slogans, and corporate logos, all in a quest to invent, reinvent, and propagate the McDonald’s brand. In terms of trademarked food names, most of them—like “Big Mac” and “Quarter Pounder”—have been highly successful. A few have flopped, like the 1963 “Hulaburger,” in which a slice of pineapple replaced the beef patty in the hope of marketing it to Roman Catholics who avoided eating meat on Fridays. In terms of slogans, McDonald’s has usually aimed to inculcate a sense of belonging, as with the 1967 “McDonald’s is Your Kind of Place” or the 1988 “Good Time, Great Taste, That’s Why This is My Place.” It’s interesting, too, to observe that the main difference between
these two slogans is the shift in pronoun: by changing “Your…Place” to “My Place,” the later slogan further conflates corporate identity and consumer identity. That conflation of identity is implied, too, in a slogan that McDonald’s used in 2001, but only in Canada: “There’s a little McDonald’s in Everyone.”

In terms of logos, the M that forms the “golden arches” found outside and inside every McDonald’s is, of course, a constant in the chain’s tireless branding machine. The M obviously references the initial letter of McDonald’s, but it also fortuitously gestures toward, at least in the English-speaking world, both “me” and “my.” By happy coincidence the M also implies the Roman numeral for 1,000, a perfect cube (103) that has traditionally been associated with fulfillment: for example, in the New Testament Peter says that “one day is with the Lord as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day” (2 Peter 3:8), and in St. John’s vision of the end of time, it’s prophesied that Christ will bind Satan and reign over the world for a thousand years (Revelation 20:4). Moreover, the phrase “golden arches” is itself imbued with heavenly associations, rather like “pearly gates.” The phrase was certainly used that way in a poem written by William Stark in 1856 to commemorate the founding of Manchester, New Hampshire. In the passage quoted below, Stark laments that even though innumerable Native Americans have lived in the region for generations, none of them have made it into heaven, presumably because they weren’t Methodists:

A thousand years have trod their weary marches,  
A million souls have lived along this shore:  
But who can say, that Heaven’s golden arches,  
For all this host, support one soul the more.

(Strange, too, how the poem’s reference to “a million souls” echoes the familiar “Billions and billions served.”)

Of course, not everything is divine in the world of corporate branding. The downside of a highly successful and sustained branding campaign like McDonald’s is that the brand can become such an integral part of the culture that the culture begins to cannibalize it, snipping pieces off the brand for purposes unrelated to, or even antithetical to, the brand. For example, in 1986 The Economist bestowed the name “Big Mac Index” on a method of comparing purchasing power between two currencies: how many Big Macs five dollars in Canadian currency will buy in Canada versus how many Big Macs five dollars in American currency will buy in the United States. More pejorative is the term “McDonaldization,” coined by sociologist George Ritzer in 1993 to describe the process by which a society takes on the characteristics of a fast-food restaurant.

McDonald’s is probably also displeased with the folk adoption of “quarter pounder” as a slang name for the male member. And the corporation is clearly annoyed by the phenomenon of prefixing “Mc” to a noun in order to convey a sense of generic and mindless mediocrity, as with “McPainting,” “McChurch,” “McTheater,” and “McMansion.” The most notable example is “McJob,” which appeared in 1986 in the Washington Post and was popularized a few years later in Douglas Copeland’s novel, Generation X. “McJob” subsequently achieved such currency that in 2003 it appeared in the Merriam-Webster dictionary, prompting McDonald’s CEO, Jim Cantalupo, to write an open letter to the dictionary’s publisher in Nation’s Restaurant News complaining about the word’s inclusion. The dictionary did not budge, and that small chunk of the McDonald’s brand is now burned onto the pages of English-language history. Of course, none of this would have come to pass if Ray Kroc, when he bought the chain from the McDonald brothers in 1961, had changed its name to “Kroc’s.”