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978-0-521-03152-3 - Not Shakespeare: Bardolatry and Burlesque in the Nineteenth Century

Richard W. Schoch

Excerpt

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## INTRODUCTION

*'New Readings for Unconventional Tragedians'*

Sometime toward the close of the eighteenth century, the comic actor Thomas Blanchard received an offer from an English strolling company to play one of the gravediggers in *Hamlet*. He was also asked to double in the role of Guildenstern. The offer was unusual. While low comedians were typically cast as the gravediggers, they would not expect to play any of the serious parts. Nonetheless, Blanchard accepted the offer; and he performed the role of Guildenstern the only way he knew how: as a clown. In the scene where Hamlet repeatedly urges Guildenstern to play a recorder, Blanchard preposterously procured a bassoon from the theatre's orchestra. The actor playing Hamlet fell about laughing, and it was 'some time before he could arrange his muscles with sufficient gravity'.<sup>1</sup> Recovering his composure, the tragedian carried on with the scene, anticipating that Blanchard's Guildenstern would protest his inability to play the instrument. Yet after Hamlet's third entreaty, Guildenstern unexpectedly responded, 'Well, my lord, since you are so very pressing, I'll do my best.' Whereupon he took up the bassoon and played 'Lady Coventry's Minuet'. The response, as shown in illustration 1, was uproarious. A shocked Hamlet, his hand covering his speechless mouth, shrinks from Guildenstern who tries to hand over the bassoon once he has finished playing. Judging from their laughter, the audience and the orchestra equally enjoyed the antic disruption of Shakespeare's tragedy. The only person excluded from the merriment was Hamlet, who 'had not another word to say for himself'. Needless to say, Blanchard never played Guildenstern again.

Blanchard's 'gag' ruefully confirms the prescience of Hamlet's injunction to the players that 'clowns speak no more than is set down for them' lest they 'set on some quantity of barren spectators to laugh' and thereby obscure 'some necessary question of the play' (*Hamlet* 3.2.40, 41–2, 43–4).

<sup>1</sup> Unidentified clipping, Theatrical Miscellany Scrapbook 11, Folger Shakespeare Library, Washington, DC.

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1. Thomas Blanchard as Guildenstern in a provincial production of *Hamlet*, c. 1790. Note the smiling face set into the front of the proscenium arch.

Enacting the very comic transgression which Hamlet was so anxious to avoid, this production marks the late eighteenth-century theatre's incipient burlesque disposition toward Shakespeare: that comic deformations of his classic texts might claim a place upon the stage. In the

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decades following, the Shakespeare burlesque emerged as a distinctive theatre genre which allowed clowns to speak more than Shakespeare had 'set down for them'. This book tells their story.

Throughout the nineteenth century, nearly all the leading actor-managers in Great Britain – J. P. Kemble, W. C. Macready, Charles Kean, Samuel Phelps and Henry Irving – staged lavish revivals of Shakespeare. They did so partly to play great roles, partly to educate their audiences in history and morality through Shakespeare's plays, and partly to win respectability for themselves as gentlemanly proprietors of reputable places of amusement. These eminent tragedians were nothing if not earnest. And they were simply begging to be ridiculed. The burlesque backlash – the comic attack upon the pious pretensions of 'legitimate' Shakespearean culture – was not long in coming. From John Poole's *Hamlet Travestie* (1810) to W. S. Gilbert's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern* (1891), Shakespeare burlesques were an especially vibrant, yet controversial, form of nineteenth-century popular theatre. Vibrant because of their exuberant humour, controversial because they seemed to imperil the sanctity of Shakespeare as a national icon.<sup>2</sup> Wildly popular in their own day, these plays are now little read, scarcely studied, and never performed.<sup>3</sup>

While this work restores an unjustly neglected series of comic plays and performances, restoration is the least of its goals. Bringing together archival research on burlesque performances, close readings of playtexts, and an awareness of theatrical, literary, and cultural contexts, I seek to disclose the centrality of burlesques in critiquing what the *Westminster Review*, in 1833, called the 'respectable humbug' of Bardolatry.<sup>4</sup> This

<sup>2</sup> Shakespeare burlesques are by no means limited to the nineteenth century. This enduring theatrical tradition ranges from Thomas Duffet's *The Mock-Tempest* (1674) to Anton Dudley's *Romeo & Juliatic* (2000). As staged by Cherry Red Productions at the Metro Cafe in Washington, DC, *Romeo & Juliatic* satirized America's attitudes towards seniors and the theatre community's lame recent rush to reinterpret all of Shakespeare's plays'. The production's catchy slogan was 'you're never too old to die young' (Cherry Red Productions, [www.cherryredproductions.com](http://www.cherryredproductions.com)).

<sup>3</sup> This study makes only passing reference to Shakespeare burlesques staged in America since the cultural politics surrounding those productions were not at all similar to those of British productions. On Shakespeare burlesques in nineteenth-century America, see Susan Kattwinkel, ed., *Tony Pastor Presents: Afterpieces from the Vaudeville Stage* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1998); Lawrence Levine, *Highbrow/Lowbrow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988); David L. Rinear, *The Temple of Momus: Mitchell's Olympic Theatre* (Metuchen, NJ: The Scarecrow Press, Inc., 1987); and volume v of Stanley Wells' anthology *Nineteenth-Century Shakespeare Burlesques* (London: Diploma Press, 1977). On American burlesque generally, see Robert C. Allen's *Horrible Prettiness: Burlesque and American Culture* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1991).

<sup>4</sup> *Westminster Review* 18 (1833), p. 35.

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book, in short, explores the paradoxical ways in which plays that are manifestly ‘not Shakespeare’ – plays like *Macbeth Somewhat Removed from the Text of Shakespeare* (1853) and *A Thin Slice of Ham let!* (1863) – purported to be the most genuinely Shakespearean of all. For all its doggerel, painful punning, and licentiousness, the burlesque styled itself as the norm to which transgressive theatrical practices should revert. As the comic playwright Sir F. C. Burnand enjoined, burlesque was the ‘candid friend of the Drama’ and the ‘natural’ extension of Shakespeare.<sup>5</sup> Drawing a distinction between Shakespearean texts and Shakespearean performances, the editor of *Punch* explained that burlesques were themselves a response to the occasions when Shakespeare was ‘injured by the misinterpretation of self-complacent mediocre actors’ or ‘rendered ridiculous by extravagant realism in production’ (p. 175). By its own admission, then, the burlesque actively intervened to protect Shakespeare from his true detractors. Accusations that burlesques detracted from the poet’s genius were false, or so we are asked to accept. With Shakespeare thus besieged, the ‘legitimate employment’ of the burlesque was to ‘hold the mirror up, not to Nature, but to such distortion of Nature’ in order that those very distortions be rectified; that Shakespeare be returned to himself, whole and unblemished. For much of the nineteenth century, to burlesque *was to* be Shakespearean.

As the most spiritedly topical form of nineteenth-century stage comedy, the burlesque fixed its satiric gaze not only upon Shakespeare, but also upon opera, melodrama, poetic drama, classical mythology, Arthurian legend, Arabian tales, English history, the novels of Edward Bulwer-Lytton, and the plays of Oscar Wilde and Henrik Ibsen. From J. R. Planché’s *Orpheus in the Haymarket* (1865) to Burnand’s *Tra-la la Tosca* (1890), and from Robert Brough’s *Frankenstein; or, the Model Man* (1849) to H. J. Byron’s *The Corsican ‘Brothers’; or, The Troublesome Twins* (1869), the burlesque exempted no area of culture from its parodic assault. Indiscriminate in taste, the burlesque never regarded Shakespeare as a uniquely deserving recipient of its mockery. Nor did individual burlesque theatres, playwrights or performers specialize in Shakespearean parody. In 1854, for example, the Strand burlesqued Kean’s productions of *Faust and Marguerite* and *The Corsican Brothers* as well as his revivals of *Macbeth* and *Othello*. Robert Brough, in addition to co-authoring a burlesque of *The Tempest*, also wrote burlesques of Bellini’s *Norma*, Sir Walter Scott’s *Ivanhoe*, and Euripides’ *Medea*. Frederick Robson, the greatest burlesque artist of

<sup>5</sup> F. C. Burnand, ‘The Spirit of Burlesque’, *Universal Review* 2 (September–December 1888), p. 171.

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the nineteenth century, starred in two Shakespearean burlesques – Francis Talfourd's *Macbeth Somewhat Removed from the Text of Shakespeare* and *Shylock; or, the Merchant of Venice Preserved* (1853). Yet he was equally famous for his performance *en travestie* in the title role of Robert Brough's *Medea; or, the Best of Mothers, with a Brute of a Husband* (1855). And while Marie Wilton made her London debut in the title role of William Brough's *Perdita; or, the Royal Milkmaid* (1856), she appeared in only one further Shakespeare burlesque – Andrew Halliday's *Romeo and Juliet Travestie* (1859).

In light of such diversity, we might well question why Shakespeare burlesques should be singled out for investigation. After all, no one has yet written a monograph on nineteenth-century burlesques generally.<sup>6</sup> But of the many kinds of burlesques written in the nineteenth century, Shakespeare burlesques offer the most compelling material for critical and historical study. Because burlesques bring into popular consciousness the very contradictions of popular culture, they must aim at the summit of that culture to be most effective. If Shakespeare matters more than other cultural forms, then Shakespeare burlesques will matter more than other kinds of burlesques. Simply put, there is more at stake in burlesquing *Hamlet* than in burlesquing Colin Hazelwood's melodrama *Lady Audley's Secret*.

The mid-Victorian era witnessed Shakespeare burlesques at the height of their frenzy and favour. Within a decade of the passage of the Theatres Regulation Act of 1843, which left Shakespeare, as Planché quipped a year later in *The Drama at Home*, free to be performed 'where'er you please / No longer pinioned by the patentees',<sup>7</sup> Phelps at Sadler's Wells and Kean at the Princess's Theatre embarked upon lengthy managerial careers distinguished above all by Shakespearean revivals. As Stanley Wells has calculated, 'roughly twice as many Shakespearian burlesques' were written between 1840 and 1870 as in the preceding thirty years (*Nineteenth-Century Shakespeare Burlesques*, III, p. 52). 'We have been done

<sup>6</sup> W. Davenport Adams' *A Book of Burlesque: Sketches of English Stage Travestie and Parody* (London: Henry & Co., 1891) and V. C. Clinton-Baddeley's *The Burlesque Tradition in the English Theatre after 1660* (London: Methuen & Co., Ltd, 1952) are more surveys than monographs. Some of the more extended research on Shakespeare burlesques has been undertaken by non-Anglophone scholars. See, for example, Gerhard Müller-Schwefe's *Corpus Hamleticum* (Tübingen: Francke, 1987) and the same author's anthology *Shakespeare im Narrenhaus* (Tübingen: Francke, 1990). That burlesques have been so lightly researched is itself symptomatic of the longstanding critical neglect of nineteenth-century popular drama.

<sup>7</sup> J. R. Planché, *The Drama at Home*, in *Plays by James Robinson Planché*, ed. Donald Roy (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), p. 17. Under the 1843 Act, the patent theatres (Covent Garden, Drury Lane and, in the summer, the Haymarket) lost their monopoly in the production of legitimate – i.e., scripted – drama.

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to death with burlesques', the *Spectator* entreated in the spring of 1853, the year in which a record-setting six Shakespearean parodies were performed in London theatres.<sup>8</sup> A few weeks later, a bemused *Lloyd's Weekly London Newspaper* reported that a 'Charles Kean mania [was] breaking out like a rash upon all [burlesque] actors' and so it was impossible to 'go to a theatre without hearing the continual imitation' of Kean's Macbeth.<sup>9</sup> No new Shakespeare burlesque was performed for almost the entire 1860s, a period marked by a pronounced decline in the frequency of memorable London productions of Shakespeare. Burlesques revived in the 1870s and 1880s, however, as a new generation of tragedians – Tommaso Salvini, Wilson Barrett and Irving – produced Shakespeare with greater frequency, thus making themselves vulnerable to burlesque ridicule.

While Shakespeare burlesques certainly parodied specific actors, productions, and methods of *mise-en-scène*, they also parodied the pomposities of official Shakespearean culture. To that extent, these plays bore witness to the nineteenth century's profoundly equivocal commitment to Bardolatry. In the wake of David Garrick's 1769 Stratford Jubilee – the founding moment of institutionalized Bardolatry – Shakespeare's iconicity seemed unassailable. The evolving forms of Shakespeare worship, both magisterial and humble, were varied indeed: not just theatrical performances, but also public readings, critical editions, biographies, essays and articles, trips to Stratford-upon-Avon, anniversary celebrations, Shakespeare societies, and a vast range of iconographic material from Charles Knight's eight-volume *Pictorial Edition of the Works of Shakespeare* (1839–42) to enamel Tercentenary buttons decorated with a 'rosy-cheeked miniature of the Bard'.<sup>10</sup> What Elin Diamond has observed of Tom Stoppard's *Dogg's Hamlet* (1979) and *Cahoot's Macbeth* (1979) seems equally appropriate when assessing the broad cultural interventions made by nineteenth-century Shakespeare burlesques: that such

<sup>8</sup> *Spectator* 30 April 1853. The six Shakespeare burlesques produced in 1853 were Barton's *Hamlet According to an Act of Parliament* (Strand 7 November 1853); Francis Talfourd's *Macbeth Somewhat Removed from the Text of Shakespeare* (Olympic 25 April 1853); Malone's *Macbeth Travestie* (Strand 18 April 1853); Talfourd's *Shylock; or, The Merchant of Venice Preserved* (Olympic 4 July 1853); a revival of Maurice Dowling's *Othello According to an Act of Parliament* (Strand September and October 1853); and a revival of Charles Selby's *Kynge Richard ye Third* (Strand October 1853).

<sup>9</sup> *Lloyd's Weekly London Newspaper* 8 May 1853. For example, *Bell's Weekly Messenger* noted that Hodson, in the Strand burlesque, carried a 'shelleagh' as the Irish Macbeth, a prop which seems likely to have been inspired by the stick Kean himself used when playing Macbeth (24 April 1853). Similarly, the manuscript for John E. Chalmers' *King Lear and His Darters* (Bower Saloon 1848) indicates that during the storm scene burlesque Lear should declaim in an 'imitation of Macready' (Chalmers, *King Lear and His Darters* 1848 BL Add MSS 43,001, f. 405b).

<sup>10</sup> 'Shakespeare-Mad', *All the Year Round* 11 (21 May 1864), p. 345.

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comic plays do not simply parody the original tragedies in order to ‘criticise the institutional appropriation of Shakespeare’ but actively use parody to *situate* ‘Shakespeare, or rather the canon . . . both as a cultural force and as a cultural menace’.<sup>11</sup> Shakespeare burlesques are testaments to both the vitality *and* the vulnerability of nineteenth-century Bardolatry.

In thinking about how burlesques expose the fragility of official Bardolatrous culture, we must remember that the theatre was but one site of Shakespearean parody in the nineteenth century. In the 1850s, the comic singer Sam Cowell, for example, performed one-man parodies of *Hamlet*, *Macbeth*, *The Merchant of Venice*, and *Richard III* in Evans’s Supper Rooms in Covent Garden. James and Horatio Smith’s *Rejected Addresses* (1812), a satire on the scripts submitted for production at the newly rebuilt Drury Lane, included a musical version of Macbeth’s dagger soliloquy. George Cruikshank’s 1835 caricature of Charles Kemble as Hamlet confronting the ghost demonstrates the satiric potential of Shakespearean iconography. And since many prominent burlesque playwrights earned their living as journalists, we need not be surprised that Shakespearean parodies regularly appeared in the nineteenth-century periodical press. Indeed, *Punch* parodied Shakespeare more than any other author, whether through caricatures, burlesque sketches, or fictive theatrical anecdotes. In the fanciful ‘Ballet of Lady Macbeth’, for example, the Scottish thane’s hallucinatory soliloquy becomes a *pas de deux* as Lady Macbeth ‘coquettishly’ draws the dagger away from her husband ‘whenever he attempts to grasp it’.<sup>12</sup> Similarly, the *Comic Almanack* predicted that the next Shakespeare Jubilee Festival would feature both the new pantomime *Harlequin Macbeth; or, the Magic Cauldron and the Walking Wood* and a grotesque ‘Pas de Caliban’ inserted in *The Tempest*.<sup>13</sup> These parodic imaginings are no mere pleasantries, for they allude to the legitimate theatre’s developing obsession with producing Shakespeare as song-and-dance extravaganzas which dispensed with ever-increasing amounts of text.

More sober periodicals also featured satiric versions of Shakespeare. Published in *Bentley’s Miscellany*, Thomas Ingoldsby’s poem ‘The Merchant of Venice’ (1842) shared many of the formal features of theatrical burlesques, including sarcastic references to Shakespearean editors; colloquial depiction of characters (Portia is ‘Mrs. Bassanio’,

<sup>11</sup> Elin Diamond, ‘Stoppard’s Dogg’s *Hamlet*, Cahoot’s *Macbeth*: The Uses of Shakespeare’, *Modern Drama* 29 (1986), p. 594.

<sup>12</sup> ‘Ballet of Lady Macbeth’, *Punch* 5 (July–December 1843), p. 240.

<sup>13</sup> *The Comic Almanack* 1844–1853 2nd ser. (London: Chatto and Windus, n.d.), p. 134.

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p. 431); localizations (the Doge lives in London's Hanover Square); and the repeated use of Jewish Cockney dialect ('vat, pray', Shylock asks Antonio, '[m]ight your vorship be pleased for to vant in my vay', p. 431).<sup>14</sup> Indeed, Ingoldsby's poem reads as a workable script for a miniature burlesque of *The Merchant of Venice*. Similarly, the six cartoons 'New Readings for Unconventional Tragedians' (c. 1850s), as shown in illustration 2, display Shakespearean vignettes whose impish humour would have been equally at home on the burlesque stage: Macbeth, attended by a pair of frogs, implores the Witches to 'show, show, show' while peering through a pair of binoculars at shadow puppets; Shylock literalizes his line '[m]y deeds upon my head!' (his riposte to Portia's plea for 'deeds of mercy') by carrying a stack of actual deeds and bonds on top of his head; Hamlet and Ophelia, discovering a topical meaning in 'jig maker', dance the can-can before Claudius and Gertrude; Romeo hurls himself over the wall outside Juliet's balcony, careful to avoid the embedded glass shards designed to deter thieves; Othello makes the customary pun on 'spirits'; and, in a parody of *Richard III*, the Duke ('Jockey') of Norfolk appears as an actual jockey who presents Richard (distinguished by a grotesque white rose of the House of York) with a copy of the contemporary sporting journal *Bell's Life*.<sup>15</sup> By no means, however, did all Shakespearean parodies evoke a sense of theatricality. F. W. Fairholt's *The Grimaldi Shakspere* (1853) is a case in point. In 1852, the Shakespeare editor J. P. Collier announced in the *Athenaeum* his discovery of an annotated 1632 Folio. As Collier conjectured, the so-called 'Perkins Folio' superseded the authority of all other Folios by virtue of its contemporaneous annotations.<sup>16</sup> Among the most ingenious attacks on Collier's audacious claim was *The Grimaldi Shakspere*. As its title suggests, the comic pamphlet purported to be the compilation of alterations and emendations found in the newly discovered 'Grimaldi Folio of 1816' in which the great pantomime clown had corrected the texts of Shakespeare's plays with 'true sympathetic genius'.<sup>17</sup> Any 'violation of sense' in Shakespeare's texts, Fairholt attested, 'was painful to the

<sup>14</sup> Thomas Ingoldsby (pseud. Revd Richard Harris Barham), 'The Merchant of Venice', *Bentley's Miscellany* 11 (1842), pp. 429–38. Shylock's speech mimics the stereotyped accent and cadence of East End Jews.

<sup>15</sup> The cartoon of Romeo is only too accurate. In *Romeo and Juliet Travestie*, a wounded Romeo complains that '[h]e jests at scars, who never . . . / mounted garden wall and got a scratch / From a row of broken bottles' (Andrew Halliday, *Romeo and Juliet Travestie; or, the Cup of Cold Poison*, London: Thomas Hailes Lacy, n.d., p. 17).

<sup>16</sup> *Athenaeum* 17 January 1852.

<sup>17</sup> F. W. Fairholt, *The Grimaldi Shakspere* (London: J. Russell Smith, 1853), p. 6.

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2. 'New Readings for Unconventional Tragedians', c. 1850s. Hamlet appears to be played by a burlesque 'boy'. Note the long hair and ankle boots which match the pair Ophelia wears.

distinguished pantomimist who gave meaning to "Tippety Witchet" (p. 11). As these varied examples attest, Shakespeare burlesques were but one aspect of a parodic disposition to Shakespeare which ran throughout Victorian popular culture.

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While this study does not pretend to survey the stage history of nineteenth-century Shakespeare burlesques – or even to reconstruct selected productions – it does undertake to explain the principal features of burlesque dramaturgy, acting, and *mise-en-scène*. That explanation begins by specifying which plays were burlesqued.<sup>18</sup> To be a viable candidate for burlesque treatment, a play would have to be both well known *and* responsive to comic rewriting. As might be deduced from these criteria, *Hamlet* was the most frequently burlesqued Shakespearean play in the nineteenth century, with over a dozen versions either performed or published. Given that many burlesques parodied specific productions, frequently performed plays such as *Hamlet* and *Macbeth* generated a disproportionately high number of burlesques. As an emblem of the entire Shakespearean canon, *Hamlet* offered burlesque artists an unparalleled opportunity to mock the cult of Bardolatry. By contrast, plays rarely performed during the nineteenth century – e.g., *All's Well that Ends Well* and *Measure for Measure* – were never burlesqued.

Timeliness also played an essential part in the burlesque critique of legitimate Shakespeare. Less than six weeks after Kean played Richard III at Covent Garden in 1844, two mock versions were written, rehearsed, and performed: J. Stirling Coyne's *New Grand, Historical, Bombastical, Musical and Completely Illegitimate Tragedy to be called Richard III* (Adelphi) and Charles Selby's *Kynge Richard ye Third; or, ye Battel of Bosworth Field* (Strand). The anonymous *Salthello Ovini* (1875), as its title's transposed syllables would suggest, burlesqued Salvini's performance as Othello. Irving's 1874 performance in *Hamlet* (Lyceum) not only led to a revival of Poole's *Hamlet Travestie* (Globe) but also inspired two new burlesques: W. R. Snow's *Hamlet the Hysterical, a Delirium in Five Spasms* (Princess's 1874) and Gilbert's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern*.<sup>19</sup> Similarly, Wilson Barrett's 1884

<sup>18</sup> For lists of Shakespeare burlesques performed and/or published in nineteenth-century Britain, see William Jaggard, *Shakespeare Bibliography* (Stratford-upon-Avon: The Shakespeare Press, 1911); Henry E. Jacobs and Claudia D. Johnson, *An Annotated Bibliography of Shakespearean Burlesques, Parodies, and Travesties* (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1976); Allardyce Nicoll, *A History of Early Nineteenth-Century Drama 1800–1850* 2 vols. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1930) and *A History of Late Nineteenth-Century Drama 1850–1900* 2 vols. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1946); Senga Wallace Roche, 'Travesties and Burlesques of Shakespeare's Plays on the British Stage during the Nineteenth Century', unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, University of London, 1987; Jacob Bonnist Salomon, 'Dramatic Burlesques of Shakespeare in Great Britain Before 1900: A Stage History and Analysis', unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, University of Pennsylvania, 1975; and R. Farquharson Sharp, 'Travesties of Shakespeare's Plays', *Library* 1 (June 1920), pp. 1–20.

<sup>19</sup> Gilbert's play, not produced until 1891, was initially serialized in *Fun* (December 1874).