

Introduction: Shakespeare and the Victorian Stage

RICHARD FOULKES

There is a certain isle beyond the sea
 Where dwell a cultured race . . .
 'Tis known as Engle-land. Oh, send him there!
 If but the half of them be true
 They will enshrine him on their great good hearts,
 And men will rise or sink in good esteem
 According as they worship, or slight him!

These lines, spoken by Ophelia in W. S. Gilbert's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern* (1891), refer to the exiled Hamlet's likely reception in England, but they can be applied with remarkable aptness to the esteem in which Shakespeare himself was held by the Victorians. For during the reign of Queen Victoria Shakespeare was indeed enshrined not only in individual hearts, but also in the institutions of national life; and men worshipped him not only as an act of veneration, but also as a means of imbuing themselves and their enterprises with the status that was increasingly ascribed to the realm's immortal laureate.

It might be assumed that the Victorians venerated Shakespeare pre-eminently as a dramatist, but such was the uncertain status of the theatre at the beginning of the reign that actors sought respectability for their profession by invoking the respect in which Shakespeare was held outside the theatre, as author and poet. The point was well made, as late as 1892, by Henry Irving in *The Henry Irving Shakespeare*:

SHAKESPEARE AS A PLAYWRIGHT

I daresay that it will appear to some readers a profanation of the name of Shakespeare to couple with it the title of playwright. But I have chosen this title for my introduction because I am anxious to show that with the mighty genius of the poet was united, in a remarkable degree, the capacity for writing plays intended to be acted as well as read. One often finds that the very persons who claim most to reverence Shakespeare, not only as a poet but also as a dramatist, carry that reverence to such an extent that they would almost forbid the representation of his plays upon the stage, except under conditions which are, if not impossible, certainly impracticable. (1892, vol. 1, p. lxxxii)

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Irving's insistence upon Shakespeare's genius as a practical dramatist is coupled with a certain defensiveness about the current style of staging his plays. It was the theatre's determination to claim Shakespeare as its own, and to accord his plays productions whose lavishness persistently exceeded their appropriateness, that characterised Shakespeare's fortunes upon the Victorian stage.

During this period the theatre was led by a series of remarkable actors and actresses. The career of William Charles Macready (1793–1873) began as early as 1810 with *Romeo* in Birmingham, and his final appearance, after a prolonged sequence of farewell performances, was as *Macbeth* in 1851. Known as the 'Eminent Tragedian' (taken by Alan Downer as the title for his 1966 biography of the actor), his most influential achievements in terms of Shakespearean production were his managements of the two patent theatres, Covent Garden (1837–9) and Drury Lane (1841–3), during which he established high standards of rehearsal and preparation. The actress with whom Macready is most closely associated is Helen Faucit (1817–98), who married Theodore Martin, the biographer of Prince Albert.

The actor who was widely regarded as Macready's heir, Samuel Phelps (1804–78), benefited from the abolition of the Patent Theatres Monopoly in 1843, whereby the restrictions on performing legitimate drama in the capital were removed. Phelps, initially with Mrs Warner, set up in management at the outlying Sadler's Wells Theatre in 1844 and by 1862 had staged all of Shakespeare's plays except *Henry VI*, *Troilus and Cressida*, *Richard II* and *Titus Andronicus* (Allen, 1971, pp. 314–15).

Coinciding with the middle years of Phelps's management was that of Charles Kean (1811–68), the Eton-educated son of Edmund, at the Princess's Theatre in Oxford Street between 1851 and 1859. Kean had previously taken charge of the royal theatricals at Windsor for eleven seasons from 1848 (Rowell, 1978, pp. 47–65), establishing important contacts between the theatre and the court. Formidable support in all Kean's endeavours came from his wife, Ellen Tree (1806–80). Phelps and Kean both continued to act after retiring from management, and Phelps was still performing Shakespeare in 1878, the year in which Henry Irving took over the management of the Lyceum Theatre. In the last decades of the century Irving's extraordinary personality dominated the profession as a whole and achieved for it unprecedented social and artistic status. He became the first actor-knight in 1895. For much of his reign at the Lyceum Irving was partnered by Ellen Terry (1847–1928), offspring of an old theatrical family.

Irving's tenure of the Lyceum ended in 1902, but already lavish

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Shakespearean productions by Herbert Beerbohm Tree (1853–1917) at Her Majesty's Theatre, which he built and occupied from 1897, were a powerful counter-attraction. The Lyceum itself proved to be a training ground for actor-managers, notably Johnston Forbes-Robertson (1853–1937), whose *Hamlet* was so highly regarded by Shaw, Frank Benson (1858–1939), the tireless purveyor of Shakespeare to the provinces, and John Martin-Harvey (1863–1944), all of whom were knighted.

Although Macready, Phelps, Kean, Irving and Tree were the pre-eminent Shakespearean actor-managers of the period, there were, of course, many others: Madame Vestris (1797?–1856) with a notable *Midsummer Night's Dream* at Covent Garden in 1840; Ben Webster (1797–1882) with an Elizabethan-style *Taming of the Shrew* at the Haymarket in 1844 and 1847; the French actor Charles Fechter's (1824–79) revolutionary *Hamlet* in the 1860s; the Bancrofts' (Sir Squire, 1841–1926; Marie, 1839–1921) *Merchant of Venice* with sets by E. W. Godwin (1833–86) at the Prince of Wales's Theatre in 1875, to mention but a few, all of them in London. But of course London has no monopoly of Shakespeare, whose plays were performed all over his own country and overseas in languages not his own.

By the turn of the nineteenth–twentieth century new and original talents were directing their attention to Shakespeare, as J. L. Styan (1977) has shown. Foremost amongst these were William Poel (1852–1934), exponent of the Elizabethan style; Edward Gordon Craig (1872–1966), combining the inherited gifts of his parents, Ellen Terry and E. W. Godwin, with his own piercing vision of stagecraft; and Harley Granville-Barker (1877–1946), actor, dramatist and scholar, whose productions of *The Winter's Tale* and *Twelfth Night* in 1912 and *A Midsummer Night's Dream* in 1914 remain amongst the most significant in the history of the Shakespearean stage.

The recurring debate about Shakespearean production during the Victorian period centred on the conflicting demands for spectacular scenery and for the restoration of Shakespeare's texts. The plays had been written for a non-scenic theatre which allowed rapid changes from location to location. The taste for localised and elaborate sets necessitated extensive rearrangement and cutting. For instance, in *The Merchant of Venice* the casket scenes (or those that survived) were often run together to reduce the number of scene-changes. Scene-changes were nevertheless numerous (ten to twelve on average) and very time-consuming, requiring extensive cuts to the plays to keep performances within a reasonable timespan. The Victorians also inherited other accommodations of the text, prompted by public distaste for certain aspects of Shakespeare

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unaltered. Nahum Tate's *Lear* (1681) was the most notorious example, and his exclusion of the Fool was perpetuated until Macready's restoration in 1838, when he cast an actress, Priscilla Horton, in the role.

The theatre's awareness of the importance of textual probity was heightened by the increasing scholarly attention devoted to Shakespeare's plays. Victorian Shakespearean scholarship was not without its own controversies, notably that surrounding John Payne Collier and the so-called 'Perkins First Folio' (Ganzel, 1982); but Collier, J. O. Halliwell-Phillipps, Alexander Dyce, Edward Dowden, F. J. Furnivall (Benzie, 1983) and H. H. Furness, with the Variorum editions from 1871, constituted a corpus of editorial industry and expertise which, even allowing for the individual distinction of earlier editors, was unprecedented. A school of literary criticism was also developing, with A. C. Bradley making the most enduring contribution (Stavisky, 1969). In its pursuit of respectability the theatre recognised the kudos that could be derived from association with this scholarly endeavour. Edward Dowden, Furnivall and Furness all contributed to Irving's Shakespeare edition.

Hitherto only the classics of ancient literature had been thought worthy of such treatment, but now English literature was deemed to be a fit subject for university study. Henry Morley, an enthusiastic chronicler of the stage, was Professor of English Literature at University College, London, the prolific editor of popular classics and a supporter of a School of Dramatic Art. At Oxford University, Arthur Bouchier took a lead in establishing OUDS (the Oxford University Dramatic Society) in 1885, together with the future Archbishop of Canterbury, Cosmo Gordon Lang, cousin of actor Matheson Lang. Frank Benson and Irving's son Harry (H.B.) were amongst the first university-educated actors, and Benson always cultivated schools' patronage for his touring companies. Shakespeare's potential as an educator was widely recognised amongst the Mechanics' Institutes across the land and in the university extension work emanating from Cambridge, Oxford and London.

Actors, at least nominally, produced editions of the plays. E. L. Blanchard prepared a complete works, which bore Samuel Phelps's name. *The Henry Irving Shakespeare*, in eight volumes (L. Irving, 1951, pp. 522–4), was undertaken for him by Frank A. Marshall 'with notes and introductions to each play by F. A. Marshall and other Shakespearean scholars and a life of Shakespeare by Edward Dowden, LL.D.'. Irving also produced acting editions of his productions, printed by the Chiswick Press, as did Charles Calvert for his Manchester revivals. H. B. Irving's edition of *Hamlet*, as arranged for performance at the Shaftesbury Theatre in February 1909, is prefaced by a note concerning 'the adoption in the

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Second Act of the sequence of scenes as given in the earlier Quarto of 1603'. On the other hand editions of the plays (including examples by Halliwell-Phillips and Charles Knight) contained illustrations of stage performances.

However, whilst actors might lend their names to complete works in print, in the theatre (with the creditable exception of Phelps and later of Benson) the canon was very much smaller, with the same plays – the major tragedies, the romantic comedies and the popular histories – recurring to the almost complete exclusion of the remainder. Furthermore, the individual acting editions revealed the extent to which the theatre still cut and rearranged the plays. Cuts of up to and over a thousand lines were not unusual, particularly for Charles Kean. But a complete *Hamlet* is rarely feasible, and the acting text is best prepared with a knowledge of the possibilities available, as demonstrated by H. B. Irving.

The editions of Shakespeare's plays as 'arranged for representation at the Princess's Theatre with historical and explanatory notes by Charles Kean' (printed by John Chapman) emphasise the conflict between textual purity and spectacular scenery. Kean's editions abound in scholarly paraphernalia, but it is directed not at the plays themselves, but at the historical period in which they are set. The depth and range of this scholarship is undeniably impressive, and it demonstrates again the theatre's zeal for accruing respectability by association with other non-theatrical pursuits. Kean became a FSA in 1857, the most important public accolade thereto accorded to an actor.

Macready, Phelps to a lesser extent, Irving more selectively, and Tree more extravagantly, all subscribed to the fashion for lavish historical scenery and costumes. This was reinforced by the Victorians' appetite for exhibitions of all kinds. The British Museum accumulated antiquities from all over the world – from the Elgin Marbles to A. H. Layard's discoveries at Nineveh, which were a direct source for Kean's revival of Byron's *Sardanapalus* and, more improbably, for Phelps's *Pericles*.¹ Richard Altick, in *The Shows of London* (1978), reveals the public enthusiasm for historical and geographical panoramas and dioramas, the latter being a favourite scenic device in the theatre.

The Great Exhibition of 1851 crowned all. Kean's biographer, J.W. Cole, acclaimed it: 'The six months which followed were pregnant with instruction' (1859, vol. 2, p. 6). Its historical displays were every bit as popular as those of contemporary industry and were permanently installed in the Crystal Palace on its new site at Sydenham in 1854. The profits from the Great Exhibition were used to establish the South Kensington museums.

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The predilection for spectacular scenery inevitably influenced the style of acting to be found in Victorian productions of Shakespeare. G. H. Lewes recognised genius in Edmund Kean, but only talent, albeit 'so marked and individual that it approaches very near to genius' (1875; repr. 1952, p. 39), in Macready. The quality of Macready's that Lewes singled out was his voice, 'capable of delicate modulation in quiet passages . . . and having tones that thrilled and tones that stirred tears'. His declamation may have been 'mannered and unmusical', but it was accompanied by an intelligence which followed 'the winding meanings through the involutions of the verse'. This vocal power, attuned to the meaning and measure of the verse, characterised Macready's Shakespearean performances and those of Samuel Phelps. Both actors perpetuated traditional stage conventions in their classical roles.

By the 1860s this style was becoming outmoded, and, as Shirley Allen (1971, p. 192) observes, Charles Fechter's Hamlet 'was the greatest single event in this evolution from the traditional to the modern school of acting'. Fechter eschewed the declamatory style and ignored established conventions; he was more conversational in speech, plucking from the lines fresh meanings which cast a new light upon character.

Undoubtedly Charles Kean had been moving in the same direction the previous decade, but without the benefits of grace and charisma possessed by Fechter. Furthermore, so preoccupied was Kean with scenic detail that the actors were often regarded as little more than accessories to the stage picture. Such a subsidiary role could not be ascribed to Ellen Terry, whose remarkable beauty and warmth of character presented such a glowing physical presence on the stage, with so strong an appeal to the eye, that the ears and mind were stilled in their expectations.

If Macready's and Phelps's acting was characterised by vocal power and Ellen Terry's by pictorial effect, Henry Irving was not naturally well endowed either vocally or physically. Edward Gordon Craig (1930, pp. 70–1) undertook to defend Irving against William Archer's criticisms that he 'murdered our mother tongue . . . could not speak English . . . And . . . that his locomotion is the result of an involuntary spasm.' It is a measure of Henry Irving's extraordinary quality as an actor that he offset his lack of natural gifts of voice and form with compelling performances which transfixed his audiences with his distinctive insights into the inner reaches of his characters, often extending to the darker sides which had rarely been explored before.

Acting styles – declamatory, pictorial, psychological – developed through the long years of Victoria's reign, and interpretation of character varied also. But by and large the prevailing taste inclined towards the

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domestic and sentimental, and this is reflected in realisations of Shakespeare's characters in other art forms, notably the graphic arts of portraiture and book illustration. The established status of the fine arts – the Royal Academy, with its president and academicians and summer exhibitions – lent a further respectability to the theatre by its association with them.

As Victoria's reign progressed Shakespeare's name and reputation were upheld in an increasing variety of ways. John Payne Collier established, in 1840, the first Shakespeare Society, which spearheaded the advance of Shakespeare scholarship with an extensive range of publications. It survived only until 1853, but in 1874 the New Shakespeare Society was founded by F. J. Furnivall at a meeting at University College, London. Shakespeare's birthplace was purchased by public subscription in 1847 with the help of actors, writers and politicians. In the succeeding years J. O. Halliwell-Phillipps, under the aegis of his National Shakespeare Fund, set about the acquisition of the other Shakespeare properties in Stratford-upon-Avon.

The Shakespeare tercentenary of 1864 (Foulkes, 1984) provided the occasion for national – indeed international – celebrations of the Bard, with Stratford and London vying with each other for the prior claim. Edward Fordham Flower masterminded the celebrations in Stratford, which involved, with not a little controversy, leading actors, public figures and all levels of society. The London celebrants, invoking the status of the capital, dubbed themselves the National Shakespeare Committee and were led by W. Hepworth Dixon, editor of the *Athenaeum*. They were dogged by misfortune and mismanagement and never achieved their goal of a statue of Shakespeare in the nation's capital.

Nevertheless, as London, like the other capitals of Europe, vested itself with the institutions of national government – Parliament, ministries, museums and galleries – the literary heritage was pressed into the service of national pride. Characteristically for Britain, the initiative was left largely to private enterprise, with the Lyceum Theatre becoming a national theatre in all but name. Similarly, it fell to a private individual (albeit a MP), Albert Grant, to acquire the dilapidated Leicester Fields in 1873 and to commission Signor Fontana to reproduce Peter Scheemakers' statue of Shakespeare as the centre-piece of Leicester Square, as it remains today. In an age in which religious belief came less easily, the Victorians created their own immortals, in whose hall of fame Shakespeare's place was assured.

In Birmingham George Dawson founded the Birmingham Shakespeare Library, and when Charles Flower realised his ambition of a Shakespeare

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Memorial Theatre in Stratford in 1879 it contained, as well as a stage, a library and art gallery. In 1887 a commemoration monument in the form of an ingenious architectural marriage of a clock and fountain in the Gothic style was erected in Rother Market, and in the following year Lord Ronald Gower presented to Stratford his group of bronze statues representing Shakespeare surrounded by Hamlet, Hal, Falstaff and Lady Macbeth. The poet's home town was progressively translated from an unexceptional market town to a mecca, which attracted visitors from all over the world.

The distinctive quality of the theatre was that it could give living expression to Shakespeare's plays and, being the most popular form of entertainment of its day, could reach the mass of the population. This it succeeded triumphantly in doing. Shakespeare's plays figured in the Windsor theatricals, encouraging a widespread transference of Queen Victoria's enthusiasm for the theatre to Shakespeare's own sovereign Queen Elizabeth, who, it was happily supposed, was on close and friendly terms with the author. The audiences at Windsor included the British royal family, courtiers, clergy and visiting royalty from overseas. The Queen, until Prince Albert's death, also patronised London theatres, a tradition maintained by her son, the future Edward VII. Whereas in the early nineteenth century the theatre was largely ignored by the upper classes, Irving's Lyceum first nights were a high point of the London season, as were Tree's at Her Majesty's.

The theatre was certainly not the exclusive preserve of the upper classes. The Lyceum and Her Majesty's incorporated extensive gallery seating. The pit at Sadler's Wells in Phelps's day was exceptionally large, and he prided himself on attracting the local Islington populace to attend Shakespeare's plays, which they did with an enthusiasm and intelligence which impressed Charles Dickens and Bishop Tait of London alike.

For the provinces, with admitted exceptions and fluctuations, a similar tale is told. Douglas Reid asserts, of the Birmingham Theatre Royal, 'that Shakespearian productions drew consistently good popular audiences' (Bratby, 1980, p. 82), and for the week of so-called 'Popular Entertainments', following the main tercentenary celebrations, in Stratford audiences flocked in from all over the West Midlands, facilitated by the new network of railways.

Shakespeare was indeed the poet of all the people, from the court at Windsor to the Leicester Shakespearean Chartist Association, and it was to his interpreters in the theatre that the population turned on an unprecedented scale. If the theatre is the most collaborative of the arts, it is also the most ephemeral. Whereas the Victorian buildings, books, statues and paintings inspired by Shakespeare still, for the most part,

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survive, the stage productions have like insubstantial pageants faded, leaving behind the occasional costume, set-design, photograph, prompt-book, memoir and review. These are the materials from which theatre historians assay their task of reconstruction and reassessment. Those Victorian Shakespeareans were well served by their contemporary chroniclers² – Morley, G. H. Lewes, Clement Scott, William Archer, Shaw and Max Beerbohm; we, the contributors to this volume, must hope that we have served them in like measure.

NOTES

- 1 Richard Foulkes, 'Samuel Phelps's *Pericles* and Layard's Discoveries at Nineveh', *Nineteenth Century Theatre Research*, 5.2 (1977), 85–92.
- 2 Rowell, 1971. For a summary of scholarly work on Victorian productions of Shakespeare's plays, see Russell Jackson, 'Before the Shakespeare Revolution: Development in the Study of Nineteenth-Century Shakespearian Production', *Shakespeare Survey*, 35 (1982), 1–12.

PART I

Shakespeare in the Picture Frame

PREFACE

ALTHOUGH it was not until 1880 that Squire Bancroft encased all four sides of the Haymarket Theatre's proscenium arch in a picture frame,¹ the tendency to regard Shakespeare's plays as pictorial subjects, both on canvas and on stage, was long-standing. The enterprise of John Boydell's Shakespeare Gallery of 1789, which exhibited paintings on Shakespearean subjects by virtually all the leading artists of the day, was unmatched in the theatre. It was not just the scale of eighteenth-century Shakespearean paintings and their freedom from current theatre practice that placed them in advance of contemporary stage interpretations, but also the nature of their insight into the plays. Whilst Sir Joshua Reynolds adhered to the classical precepts of composition, William Blake – not represented in the Boydell Collection – revealed the romantic potential of his subjects in a manner which the theatre was not to witness until the advent of Edmund Kean.

The degree of convergence between the artist's studio and the stage designer's paint-frame fluctuated throughout the nineteenth century, with Clarkson Stanfield, W. R. Beverley, Ford Madox Brown and Sir Lawrence Alma-Tadema producing important work in both spheres of activity.² A key figure is James Robinson Planché, whose long life (1796–1880) and career spanned much of the period under consideration here. The author of burlesques, his more substantial contribution was in the field of historically accurate costume. His designs for Charles Kemble's *King John* in 1824 are generally regarded as a turning-point in stage practice, and, as Dr Fowler asserts (below, p. 31), his *History of British Costume* – first published in 1834 and extended into *A Cyclopaedia of Costume or Dictionary of Dress* (1876–9) – was the source book for many a Victorian costume designer. Planché's importance as a link between the theatre and the art world is indicated by his responsibility for the armour display at the Art Treasures of the United Kingdom Exhibition at Manchester in 1857, referred to by Richard Foulkes.