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978-0-521-86177-9 - Shakespeare for the People: Working-Class Readers, 1800-1900

Andrew Murphy

Excerpt

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Introduction

‘SHAKSPEARE, THE POET OF THE PEOPLE.’ So proclaimed the headlines of a poster distributed in Stratford-on-Avon in April 1864, in advance of the festival organised to celebrate the tercentenary of the playwright’s birth.¹ The poster was addressed to the common people of Stratford and it asked them: ‘Where are the seats reserved for YOU at the coming Festival? What part or lot have YOU, *who originated it*, in the coming Celebration?’ The answer, the poster declared, was a resounding ‘NONE!’ The people were to be offered nothing more than ‘cold “wittles”’ ‘*after the swells have dined*’ (Fig. 1). For this reason, the ordinary Stratfordians were enjoined to make their own festival and to let their watchword be ‘SHAKSPEARE, the POET of the PEOPLE’.

In London, too, the tercentenary celebrations proved to be contentious. The official committee in charge of the affair had comprehensively failed in its mission, and its efforts were roundly attacked on all sides. *The Bookseller* observed that the committee had ‘made a mess of their business’ and that the whole affair had ‘turned out to be a miserable failure’.² *Reynolds’s Newspaper* offered an analysis of ‘The Shaksperian Commemoration – Its Blunders and Its Failures’, and it concluded that ‘Had it not been for the once despised working man there would have been no London commemoration at all!’³ The paper was referring here to the efforts of the Working Men’s Committee, which organised a procession to Primrose Hill, where an oak sapling was planted in Shakespeare’s honour (Fig. 2). The Committee called on ‘the workmen and operatives of the United Kingdom’ to attend the ceremony, and a crowd somewhere in the region of 100,000 strong assembled.⁴ *The Times* was sarcastically dismissive of the affair, observing of the procession that ‘Altogether it formed an assemblage which might be fairly classed as among those with which Falstaff would have avoided Coventry.’⁵ Other papers were, however, more positive in their coverage of the event. *The Observer* commented that the demonstration

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Figure 1. The tercentenary celebrations at Stratford-on-Avon, from *Illustrated London News* (reproduced by kind permission of Birmingham Library and Information Services).

bore ample testimony to the rapid strides which education and intelligence have made, when certainly, at least one hundred thousand people could assemble, not for any political or party purpose, but to pay a debt of gratitude and admiration to that man who has done more to humanise the feelings of our race, and for the pure literature of his country than any poet who had gone before or who has ever succeeded him.⁶

The Daily News mirrored *The Observer's* comments on education by noting that, while the two hundredth anniversary of Shakespeare's birth 'shone on the chill reflection of restricted education', the Tercentenary 'beams in the light of a people growing to know their strength, and with their strength their duties and their destinies'. The same article in *The Daily News* celebrated also the ready availability of Shakespeare's plays in a great multiplicity of editions:

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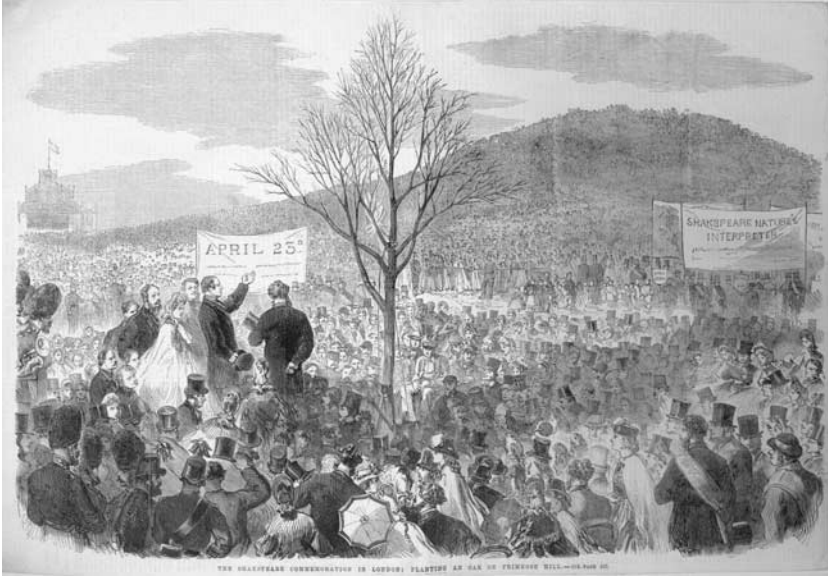


Figure 2. The tercentenary tree-planting ceremony on Primrose Hill, from *Illustrated London News* (reproduced by kind permission of Birmingham Library and Information Services).

every year sees now three or four fresh impressions of his works. They are of all sorts and sizes and prices, with notes and without notes, with illustrations and without illustrations, reproductions of old and scarce copies for the luxurious student, penny a week issues for the apprentice or artisan. And they all sell. No book that ever was printed – save one – has had a circulation so enormous, so increasing, so real.⁷

The same theme is picked up by *The Morning Star*, in an article which asserts that

We should be afraid to hazard a guess with regard to the number of editions of his works which have issued from the press since the commencement of the present century. But their name is legion, and they are adapted to every purse – ranging from the luxuriously got up and richly illustrated octavo to the single plays at a penny, and even at a halfpenny, the market for which cannot be a very aristocratic one.⁸

The events in Stratford and London serve to indicate the extent to which Shakespeare had become intertwined with issues of class by the middle decades of the nineteenth century and also, more specifically, the extent to which the working class really had taken possession of Shakespeare.⁹ The

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coverage in *The Observer*, *The Daily News* and *The Morning Star* helps to provide some indication of how, exactly, Shakespeare's following among the working class had been established. Education had expanded considerably over the course of the nineteenth century, with increasing numbers of the poorest members of society being granted access to basic schooling for the first time ever from the earliest decades of the century. In his autobiography, published in 1898, the union leader Joseph Arch (1826–1919) registers the importance of the struggle for education in the period: 'Over and over again I used to say, "If you want your dear children to have a fair chance of rising, of bettering themselves and enabling them to better their surroundings in time, you must see that they are educated"'. He provides a strikingly vivid picture of his own efforts to ensure that working-class children gained access to education:

Sometimes I used to feel as if I was on a bank I had climbed up, and was pulling other labourers and their wives and children out of a Slough of Despond, till my arms ached fit to drop off, and my head was swimming, and my legs were shaking under me. But I, and my mates standing by me, kept pulling and tugging with might and main; we did not stop longer than to fetch our breath, and then we set to work pulling and tugging again.¹⁰

As the century progressed, the struggle gradually became easier, as the school network expanded and, in time, the government came to accept direct responsibility for education. By the end of the century, the illiteracy rate had been reduced almost to zero.

The journalist Thomas Frost noted in *Forty Years' Recollections* (1880) that the expansion of the educational franchise prompted publishers to think in terms of serving an expanding market for cheap literature: 'Enterprising publishers began to dream of standard works issued at prices within the means of every one, and therefore to be sold by tens of thousands.'¹¹ By the mid-point of the century, books had become cheap enough and the reading habit had become sufficiently well established among the working class that F. Mayne, writing in the *Englishwoman's Magazine*, felt moved to declare that it would be

found on inquiry, that in most cases the minds of the working classes are by no means allowed to lie fallow after the period of quitting school. Nay, I know for certain, that the working-classes of the country, both in agricultural and manufacturing districts, are, to a great extent, a *reading people*; a *reading* and a *thinking people*.¹²

By 1868, Thomas Wright observed approvingly that 'the books necessary for a complete course of self-education can be obtained for a few shillings.

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“Shakespeare’s Complete Works” are advertised for sale for one shilling; and a really handsome, useful, and well-edited copy of these matchless works may be had for three shillings and sixpence.¹³ Even four years prior to this, as we have seen *The Morning Star* note, individual Shakespeare plays could be had for as little as ½d. each.

The purpose of this book is to map out the history of these developments in detail. It offers an account of working-class education over the course of the nineteenth century, and it traces developments in publishing to indicate the manner in which, by the middle decades of the century, editions of Shakespeare became affordable to those of even the most modest means. Having outlined this contextual background, the study then goes on to examine the actual experience of working-class readers as they came to encounter Shakespeare, and it also details the ways in which the playwright gained a political value for a particular subset of these readers, namely, those who were involved in the various radical, reform and labour movements during the course of the century. I conclude the book by looking forward to the twentieth century, to suggest some reasons why, having gained a working-class readership in the 1800s, Shakespeare began to lose that popular readership over the course of the new century.

The central resource for this study is a set of autobiographies written (at least for the most part) over the course of the nineteenth century. In using this material, I am following in the footsteps of Jonathan Rose, whose extraordinarily rich and engaging *The Intellectual Life of the British Working Classes* draws on the same resource to map out a large-scale history of working-class culture in the nineteenth century.¹⁴ It is a striking feature of working-class life in this period that so many people felt motivated to record the details of their lives. Pioneering work in the field of working-class autobiography has been carried out by the historians John Burnett, David Vincent and David Mayall. In their impressively extensive annotated critical bibliography of such texts, they note that the ‘trickle of works which began to appear in the 1790s was to develop into a remarkably diverse and fertile genre whose existence reflected a major transformation in the way in which the labouring poor regarded themselves.’¹⁵ Burnett and his colleagues see the nineteenth-century texts as being a secular extension of the Puritan tradition of the confessional autobiography: ‘In their different ways all the working class autobiographers were building upon puritan assumptions about the significance of the inner lives of ordinary men and women, and about the necessity of understanding human identity in the dimension of time.’ They note, however, that most of the nineteenth-century writers

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depart from the spiritual autobiographers' ultimate disregard for the affairs of this world, and base their accounts on an essentially secular view of the times they have witnessed. For them, the social, economic and political events which they seek to describe have an importance in themselves, irrespective of the ultimate destination of the writer's soul.¹⁶

The autobiographers themselves frequently address the question of why they feel the need to tell their life stories. Robert Lowery (1809–63), the Chartist activist, was motivated largely by political considerations, noting that he had often been urged to write his autobiography by 'many of my friends who are labouring to elevate the working classes' and 'who think that my life would be interesting and instructive in incidents and events connected with those movements which have engaged the attention of these classes for these last twenty years'.¹⁷ George Elson (b. 1833), by contrast, had a much simpler aim: he wanted to tell the story of a chimney-sweep's life at first hand for the first time. He writes: 'I should never have attempted so presumptuous a task as to write my own biography, only that I believe there never was a book written and published by a genuine sweep-lad before me'.¹⁸ Hannah Mitchell (1872–1956) also had endearingly modest ambitions for her work, as she observed of her autobiography: 'My readers may not find it a very thrilling story, but I hope it will reveal to them the early dreams, secret hopes and half-realized ambitions of one very ordinary woman.'¹⁹

There was some resistance in establishment circles to the idea of members of the working class setting out their life stories. In 1827, the *Quarterly Review* complained that the expansion of literacy had the 'disgusting effect' of emboldening 'beings who, at any period, would have been mean and base in all their objects and desires, to demand with hardihood the attention and the sympathy of mankind, for thoughts and deeds that, in any period but the present, must have been as obscure as dirty'.²⁰ Eight years later, Francis Place testified before a Select Committee on Education. He discussed the particulars of his own life in some detail and his observations on his life were subsequently included in the Committee's report. *The Times*, commenting on this development under the heading 'Autobiography of Francis Place', dismissed Place's recollections as 'miserable and vulgar twaddle' and 'mere trash'.²¹ By the middle of the century, however, Charles Manby Smith was able to observe in his autobiography, *The Working Man's Way in the World*, that

The time has been when an apology would have been thought necessary for obtruding on the notice of the public these passages in the life of a Working Man: that time is however past, and there are now an abundance of precedents to

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keep any man in countenance who, for reasons good, bad or indifferent, may choose to draw aside the veil from his personal history, and publish it to the world.²²

A central set of about one hundred of these autobiographical texts provides much of the evidence presented in this study.²³ For the most part, they are printed texts, published in a variety of different ways – some serialised in newspapers, others produced by the authors themselves, some published by provincial presses, others brought to print by mainstream London publishers. About 10% of the sample is made up of unpublished manuscript and typescript autobiographies, mostly drawn from an archival collection established by John Burnett at Brunel University Library.²⁴ This latter set of texts is particularly valuable in giving an insight into the lives of those who had very little in the way of a public profile and who recorded the details of their lives, oftentimes, simply to pass them on to members of their own immediate families.

There are certain limitations to the autobiographies as a source of evidence, and I will come on to discuss these presently. First, however, I attend to a fundamental issue of definition of central importance to my study. The meaning and utility of the term ‘working class’ has been much discussed and disputed in recent years. In part, the reaction against the term has been prompted by a desire to interrogate and re-evaluate E. P. Thompson’s classic study, *The Making of the English Working Class*, now seen by some historians as offering an unhelpfully totalising narrative in its efforts to track the emergence of class consciousness over the course of the nineteenth century. Patrick Joyce, for example, has argued of this period that ‘British political development was about a good deal more than the growth of a class-conscious proletariat’ and he observes that ‘however broadly class is defined it is still only one among many understandings of the social order held by people’.²⁵ The desire to investigate a wider range of possible fields of identity has had the effect of undermining class as an analytical category. Thus, Peter Bailey has observed that

Sapped by gender and race, class now seems about to collapse into mere difference, a master (*sic*) category on its last legs. Social identity, we are now told, starts with the self, a multiple subject constructed by language, culture and the symbolic system, a self for whom class may be one narrative thread among many, for whom work and material existence may be less significant than consumption and life style. Class is an imagined community competing with other collective identities for the allegiance of an overdetermined subject.

Bailey himself has offered some resistance to the tendency to see class as just one element of identity for the fractured self called to subjecthood through

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language and the symbolic order. He observes, for example, that ‘the mark of class sticks like a burr in nineteenth-century society and remains among the more potent vectors of difference, however indeterminate or relativised’.²⁶ David Cannadine has also tried to reclaim class as a useful analytical concept, defending it on what amount to positivistic empirical grounds:

Whatever the devotees of the ‘linguistic turn’ may claim, class is not *just* about language. There is reality as well as representation. Go to Toxteth, go to Wandsworth, go to Tynecastle, go to Balsall Heath, and tell the people who live in the slums and the council estates and the high-rise ghettos that their sense of social structure and social identity is no more than a subjective rhetorical construction, that it is nothing beyond a collection of individual self-categorisations. It seems unlikely that they will agree.²⁷

Most theoretically informed critics and historians are, of course, unlikely to find Cannadine’s argument satisfactory, since it represents an essentialist appeal to a reality that is presented as uncomplicatedly sitting outside any kind of analytical framework: it just *is*. This is a fair point but, at the same time, it is hard not to feel that there is, nevertheless, a certain force to what Cannadine has to say here. There *are* divisions of wealth within society, and those with the least resources surely have a different experience of the world from those who enjoy real prosperity. And postmodern concepts of subjecthood provide scant consolation to those who must struggle on a day-to-day basis through a life of poverty and deprivation.

Cannadine usefully invokes a division, which he takes from Marx, between class ‘in itself’ and class ‘for itself’, the former being ‘no more (and no less) than an objective social category, which grouped individuals together on the basis of their shared economic characteristics: the source of their income, the extent of their wealth, and the nature of their occupation’. Class ‘for itself’, by contrast, is connected with the emergence of a sense of class consciousness – ‘a shared process of self-discovery and self-realisation’, which must lead ultimately, for Marx, to conflict between the classes.²⁸ The emergence of a sense of class ‘for itself’ might be said to be the organising principle of Thompson’s *Making of the English Working Class* – and it is the construction of that kind of grand narrative that historians such as Joyce find problematic. For the purpose of this study, however, I wish to deploy the term ‘working class’ primarily as a form of social description rather than necessarily thinking of it as a form of highly self-conscious social identity (though the question of class identity is of some importance to one element of the argument I put forward in Chapter 5 of this book). In this sense, my concern can be said to be largely with class ‘in itself’ rather than ‘for itself’.

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Debates over the meaning of the term ‘working class’ are not new. This was as much a live issue in the nineteenth century as it is in our own time. Thomas Wright offered a crude but effective definition in his *Habits and Customs of the Working Classes* (1867), where he observes that the working class ‘comprises all, who, in the literal sense, earn their bread by the sweat of their brow, and, to use their own phrase, “have black hands to earn white money.”’²⁹ In the same year, in their *Progress of the Working Class, 1832–1867*, J. M. Ludlow and Lloyd Jones offered a rather more nuanced view, noting that, in their work, the terms ‘working class’ and ‘working man’ would be taken

in their every-day acceptance, as meaning those who work, chiefly with their muscles, for wages, and maintain themselves thereby. The phrase, ‘we are all working men,’ as used by the brain-worker, has a truth to it, but becomes a cant when carried too far. It is not, indeed, intended to deal with ‘the poor,’ – *i.e.* those who may work, but cannot thereby habitually maintain themselves, otherwise than by an occasional glimpse at some of their efforts to raise themselves into the true working class.³⁰

Taken together, Wright and Ludlow and Jones provide the rough outlines of a definition of the term ‘working class’ which fits reasonably well with my own use of the phrase in this study. ‘Working class’, for my purposes, serves to describe those who grew up in a certain set of circumstances, and whose lives conformed to the same broad, general trajectory. To be a little more precise: the vast majority of the autobiographers considered here are the sons and daughters of tradesmen or unskilled workers (where their mothers have worked they have generally been servants); virtually all of them have received, during their childhood, no more than the very basic education that was generally available to the children of the poor (largely in dame schools and church schools); with a small number of exceptions, the typical autobiographer considered here worked in a trade of some sort and, while some achieved significant success in their trade (the tailor Francis Place being a notable example), most lived modest lives, often struggling to get by, especially if they were heavily burdened with family responsibilities. The range of occupations of the autobiographers considered includes baker, basketmaker, blacksmith, bricklayer, cabinetmaker, chimneysweep, dressmaker, housepainter, maid, miner, navy, printer, ropemaker, servant, shoemaker, soldier, stonemason, tailor, waterman, weaver, whitesmith. Some autobiographers combined a number of different occupations over the course of their lives. Betsy Cadwaladyr was a servant, a ship’s steward and a nurse; George Elson was a hawker, then a chimneysweep, ultimately becoming a

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swimming instructor, shampooer and masseur at a Turkish baths; John Bedford Leno notes that he specialised in ‘p’ occupations, having been a ‘Pieman, Pastrycook, Printer, Publisher, Politician and Poetaster’.³¹ A few of the autobiographers did achieve some degree of eminence in life, principally in the fields of education and politics. Henry Jones became a professor at the University of St Andrews, where he taught (among other things) English literature. A fairly modest degree of eminence this, to be sure, but, nonetheless, it meant that he moved in a rather different world from that of his original trade of shoemaker. Similarly, a number of autobiographers born later in the century entered parliament as Labour MPs and achieved cabinet positions when the Labour party finally came to power. J. R. Clynes falls into this category; he served, at various times, as Lord Privy Seal, Deputy Leader of the House of Commons and Home Secretary. Taking my sample as a whole, however, Jones and Clynes are the exceptions rather than the rule. Most of the autobiographers drawn on here worked steadily at their trades and lived fairly modest lives.³²

As already noted, there are various important limitations to the evidence provided by the autobiographies, most notably in terms of the nature of the sample of working-class opinion which they provide. The first thing to register is that the size of the sample relative to the general working-class population should not be overestimated, nor should these writers’ views necessarily be taken as fully representative of their community as a whole. Thomas Wright noted, in *Our New Masters* (1873), that ‘Individual instances of well-educated working men are tolerably numerous, but compared with the vastness of the general body they are exceptional, are by others regarded as exceptional, and not always as favourably exceptional’.³³ John Burnett and his colleagues have also observed that

it will never be possible to approach the autobiographies as a statistically accurate cross-section of all, or any part of the population. They remain pieces of literature, their content shaped not only by the intentions of the writers and the traditions within which they were working, but also by the mode in which they were recorded.³⁴

From the specific perspective of the current project, it should also be noted that it is an inevitable effect of the particular focus of this study that Shakespeare will seem to be a significant centre of interest for the writers quoted throughout. In some cases, this is an entirely accurate reflection of the autobiographers’ preoccupations. Thus, for example, Thomas Cooper refers extensively to Shakespeare throughout his work, as he tells us of his