Introduction

As early as 1831 Shakespeare was part of everyday life in America, to judge from Alexis de Tocqueville's remark that

> There is hardly a pioneer's hut which does not contain a few odd volumes of Shakespeare. I remember that I read the feudal drama of Henry V. for the first time in a log house.[1]

Nor did it take long for Americans to claim Shakespeare as one of their own: by 1849, in *Representative Men* Emerson could call Shakespeare "the father of the man in America."[2] American writers have felt comfortable using, indeed taking liberties with, Shakespeare. From the Duke and Dauphin in *Huckleberry Finn* to Broadway musicals like *Kiss Me, Kate* or *Play On!* Americans have amused themselves by appropriating, and misappropriating, Shakespearean material. His figure fills American needs. It seemed entirely suitable that in 1976, the year of the American Bicentennial, the International Shakespeare Association held its inaugural World Congress in Washington, D.C., focusing on the topic of "Shakespeare in America."[3] The American experience of Shakespeare was thus institutionalized as worthy of the world's attention (or at least the attention of the academic world).

As critics have increasingly moved away from asking what Shakespeare means to asking what uses we make of Shakespeare, I have become curious about the ways that Americans use Shakespeare idiosyncratically: how he has served American popular entertainment during the founding of the nation, during the nineteenth century, and within America's quintessential theatrical form, the musical comedy.

This book has a long genesis that owes much to the patience and knowledge of others. I might say it began in the 1960s with my family's patience as I played albums of Broadway shows over and over or with my stint as stage manager for the first production of *Hello Hamlet!* in 1967. (A burlesque by George Greanias, today a prominent Houstonian, *Hello Hamlet!* has become a Rice University tradition.) In the 1970s, working with John

Velz to edit the Crosby letters gave me a taste of Shakespeare's importance in nineteenth-century America. But these experiences simply whetted my interest about what happens to Shakespeare in the American book musical.

One evening in the 1980s, I was at a party with a colleague in music, Tom Riis. When I said I thought a book might be written about Shakespeare musicals, Tom was enthusiastic. But as a music historian who was just completing his groundbreaking book on African-American musicals, Tom recognized problems that I hadn't seen. What did "Shakespeare musical" mean? Would I include Verdi and minstrel-show burlesques? When did musicals begin and where did they come from? I had no answers, so went away to read and re-think my project.

The questions Tom had raised took me to nineteenth-century America and some ideas about how Americans had used Shakespeare to explain themselves. For a Shakespeare Association of America seminar, I drafted an essay about the topic, and then ran it by some of my colleagues in American literature. One, Douglas Anderson, who was finishing what would become a major study of reading in early American culture, responded with a long set of marginal comments that made his skepticism clear because he had recognized more problems that I hadn't seen. Why was I assuming that most Americans knew little about Shakespeare? Wouldn't attitudes toward Shakespeare have been as various as Americans were? What of American reading or popular performances? Again, I read further in the material he suggested and re-thought the project.

And so I continued, learning about one area only to discover that I was still poorly read in another. Thanks are due to many, but especially to Richard Burt for a good reading list on popular culture, to historian Allen Kulikoff for guidance through American colonial-history sources, and especially to Irene Dash whose resistance to my interpretations is matched by her generosity of spirit. These conversations have pushed me back in America's cultural history and forced me to reconsider the project. Yet each has also confirmed for me the importance of working across specialist boundaries, despite the discomfort one feels in doing so. This study does not easily fit the fields of performance history, Shakespeare study, or American studies. In fact, those who work in those fields may well wonder why I am bothering with material that seems to them peripheral or digressive. My answer is that I think one can understand what Americans do with Shakespeare only when one works *among* the fields.

To put the matter another way, I do not believe that one can understand what is happening in *Play On!* unless one understands the sources of *The Boys from Syracuse* or *Swingin' the Dream*. Those productions grow out

of a performance tradition epitomized by the now-forgotten show, Eddie Foy's *Mr. Hamlet of Broadway*. Foy's work exists in the context of his early experience as a supernumerary for Edwin Booth. To understand Edwin Booth, one must consider the performances both of his predecessor Edwin Forrest, and his brother John Wilkes Booth. Making sense of the way that John Wilkes Booth employs Shakespeare demands close attention both to Shakespeare's text and to the American political tradition that cites Shakespeare as an authority sanctioning violence, a tradition that begins with the years before the Revolution and proceeds through Adams and Jefferson and (tragically) Booth. My original interest in Shakespearean musicals has proven digressive and the musicals themselves transgressive.

Like earlier studies, this one concentrates on various manifestations of Shakespeare – that is, the historical Shakespeare, his works, and the cultural institution that clusters around his name – principally in the United States, all of which elements I will call Shakespeare's American figure. Unlike other scholars, I am relatively uninterested in the role that Shakespeare's figure plays in America's intellectual or aesthetic life, although I do not doubt his importance in these spheres. Nor do I wish to duplicate the examination of American "legitimate" theatre, a project that Charles Shattuck undertook and that other theatre historians have ably continued. Because I am concerned with the origins of twentieth-century Broadway musicals, I will consider only those aspects of both elite and popular culture that lead to shows like *The Boys from Syracuse*, *Kiss Me, Kate*, or *West Side Story*.

Instead, I want to explore the way that Americans have used Shakespeare's figure in idiosyncratic popular ways to screen out certain values and attitudes. But a screen has other functions: it can, for example, cover up an area that one does not wish to acknowledge, without denying its existence; one can also reflect small images on a screen. (That is not to suggest that I shall investigate American film treatments. At one point I had planned to do so, but as I did the preliminary research, I came to believe that Shakespearean films have been international from their outset.) In the first part of my study, I want to use the screen metaphor to show how Americans employ Shakespeare's figure to sift out their values, to conceal what they would prefer to ignore, and to reflect what they consider of most value; in the second part, I shall use a different metaphor.

Although Shakespeare's figure matters to America in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, America's history begins much earlier. Neither read nor staged in America until the eighteenth century, Shakespeare's plays had little influence on American society during much of the colonial period. The importance that Shakespeare eventually assumed in American life, as

well as the speed with which his figure became important after the Revolutionary War, seem to me disproportionate and fascinating, an instance of an idiosyncratically American phenomenon, the ability to make a radical shift in the culture's values with very little fuss or acknowledgment that any change has occurred. (One might think of the sudden change in American foreign policy toward China during the Nixon administration, for instance, or the abrupt popular recognition among whites of the cost of racism when Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird* was published.) During the decades when colonial America broke away from England, Shakespeare swiftly prospered, and in hindsight the importance of his figure in colonial times serves as a harbinger of that period's end. During the decades when America was most dependent on England, however, Shakespeare was ignored. While earlier studies have both documented and interrogated Shakespeare's importance in American life,[4] none has yet explored why Shakespeare was absent for so long in the early years of America, nor what his figure offered that nineteenth- and twentieth-century Americans found so appealing. Thus, I begin with Shakespeare's absence in colonial America.

I shall try to suggest why Shakespeare was left off stage for so long and why his plays did not appear on an American reader's shelves. After trying to account for the speed with which Shakespeare's plays entered American life, I examine the role that Shakespeare's figure played during the Revolutionary period, as well as in the early years of argument about what sort of culture the new nation would have. I argue that the role Shakespeare takes in this public debate is crucial to his later reputation in America, for from this debate comes the impetus to re-fashion Shakespeare as an American author, or at least as an authority who sanctions American desires.

An important figure who used that re-fashioned Shakespeare is Emerson, as others have suggested; writers like Melville and Whitman also play roles in transforming Shakespeare's figure into a screen that both sifted out American culture from English and concealed other projects behind the shelter of unquestioned or unquestionable value.[5] Such writers are *not* representative men in this discussion, however, because I am less concerned with the role that Shakespeare and his writing played in the development of American culture than in the way that American culture has shaped Shakespeare. The way in which nineteenth-century Americans employed Shakespeare and his work to mark their national, class, or regional identity interests me, especially when such appropriations lead to action that is unethical, even violent or treasonous. Throughout this section, I try to keep an eye on the way that popular entertainment developed in this country, especially in ways

that are idiosyncratically American, and to trace Shakespeare's presence in that development.

The final section of this study focuses on the way that American popular theatre has employed Shakespeare as an unacknowledged agent to allow the commercial theatre to make changes that might frighten or upset audiences if they were perceived too plainly. In it I am principally concerned with musicals. When a production was innovative in a threatening way, when it broke the boundaries of taste or social preconceptions, its creators were apt to use the screen of Shakespeare's figure to mask their project. The results have been especially interesting for what they suggest about shifts in American taste and anxiety about that taste.

PART I

Pilgrims, pioneers, and parlors

CHAPTER 1

Shakespeare and the spirit of '76

When one turns to a reference book for information, the ideal entry offers a neat array of dates and data and quickly sums up a vast subject in a paragraph. An encyclopedia entry on theatre in the United States of America, for example, divided into discussions of particular periods and regions, might suggest a smooth flow of development, extension, and improvement. While it would begin with the insistence that the subject is complex, the *telos* of the entry is to simplify that complexity into a narrative of progress and promise.

At the root of American theatre, its fundamental source, is the English tradition, and according to *The Oxford Companion to the Theatre* (*OCT*), ". . . it was from a secular, British source that a distinctively American theatre emerged" (s.v. United States of America, 846). The third edition of *OCT* explicitly claimed that Shakespeare is the playwright most influential to American theatre, and Shakespeare's centrality recurs in other reference works. *The Reader's Encyclopedia of World Drama* says that American drama's "first models were the lofty tragedies and extravagant comedies popular in England in the latter half of the eighteenth century" (s.v. United States, 882). *The Oxford Companion to American Theatre* says "Shakespeare came to American stages relatively early" (s.v. Shakespeare, 611); and *The Everyman Companion to the Theatre* remarks that "It was not until quite late in the eighteenth century that serious attempts began to be made to establish for American theatre an identity separate from England's" (57). In all of these works, the principal emphasis is on English and other influences are scanted. Fuller treatments of the subject do acknowledge other traditions than that of the English, although these too move quickly to focus on the Anglo-American stage tradition.[1] Their recitation often sounds mechanically correct, and the various repetitions lend an air of credibility.

Yet one could easily write an encapsulated history of theatre in America that differs widely from these. This received account ignores the variety of cultures that make up America's past, the powerful orature of colonial

churches, and the commercial difficulties and rewards of beginning a theatrical tradition.[2] It also ignores one thing that made the earliest English settlements quite different from those of other European nations, an unusual emphasis on education and literacy. Moreover, because the sort of account found in such a reference book must be compact, it smoothes out the interesting complexities of the relationship that people living in America during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries had with Europe. Nor does it account for the way in which Shakespeare's figure after its introduction to American culture becomes linked to particular political positions or class identities.

Rather than smooth out the narrative of Shakespeare's figure in America, I shall begin with such a variant account, one that initially leaves Shakespeare off the American stage, on the grounds that his absence is more telling of the American character than his presence. European settlements in the Americas took root during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. One of Europe's greatest dramatists turned his attention away from his home nation to write a play about the potential richness and present mysteries of America. Yet despite his fascination with its promise, he would never leave Europe. While he never crossed the ocean, his work did. At the end of the sixteenth century, homesick settlers performed his plays; and only twenty years after the first permanent playhouse was built in the city where he wrote, settlers established a playhouse of their own so that they could lose themselves in dreams of their motherland. Indeed, the settlers loved his work so much that his plays were translated into an indigenous language so that the settlers could share the riches of their European background with the native people among whom they lived.

The dramatist in this sentimentalized history was, of course, Lope de Vega, who wrote a heroic drama about Columbus. As the *OCT* notes, "Long before any English plays were presented in the New World, what is now Latin America and the west coast had witnessed performances" (965). Spanish settlers in Mexico first viewed theatrical performances in 1538, less than fifty years after Columbus' first voyage. Seventy years after Columbus landed, Lope de Vega was born in 1562. A playhouse was built in Mexico City by 1597, "only twenty years after the first permanent theatre was established in Madrid itself. Priests used miracle plays to teach converted Indians about Roman Catholicism; and work by Lope de Vega was translated into native languages such as Nahuatl or Quechua.[3] In Peru the earliest touring company arrived in 1599" (*OCT* 895). The theatrical tradition in Hispanic America is a particularly rich one: not only were plays by Golden Age dramatists performed, but native American playwrights soon developed in

part because missionaries in Mexico City offered an annual prize for the best *auto sacramentale*.[4]

The dramatic traditions of Spain stand in marked contrast to those of another great nation. It, too, had a great playwright, but his plays went unperformed in the Americas until more than a century later than the Mexican performances, although these Europeans had mounted an American production of an open-air pageant in 1604. Still he was not altogether neglected: a mere ten years after his greatest play was first performed, it received an amateur production across the ocean. Drama was produced as a diversion for the troops guarding the settlements. Unfortunately, some of the settlers objected to plays on moral grounds, blocking their performance, so the theatrical history of the French in America is not so rich as that of Hispanic drama. Nevertheless, the French garrison at Port Royal did stage *Le Théâtre de Neptune* on the beach to amuse and divert the soldiers in 1604.[5] A 1646 production of Corneille's *Le Cid* in Québec is notable. Finally, however, the Bishop of Québec's objection to Molière's *Tartuffe* led him to block the production that Governor Frontenac proposed in 1694, for many of the same reasons that led to protests against the play's anti-clericalism in Paris.[6]

Finally, there is Shakespeare, considered to be England's (indeed, the world's) greatest dramatist. His plays went unperformed in the Americas until more than a century and a half after the first English settlements. Scholars have largely ignored or glossed over this disjunction of timing among the theatrical traditions of European settlers (see table, p. 12). David Hackett Fischer remarks of the English settlers,

> Many colonists felt desperately homesick, and regretted what Isaac Johnson called their "voluntary banishment" from the "mother country." Something of this colonial mood persisted for many years.
>
> This aching sense of physical separation from the European homeland became a cultural factor of high importance in colonial settlements. The effect of distance created feelings of nostalgia, anxiety, and loss.[7]

That yearning undoubtedly helps to account for the Spanish and French efforts to produce the plays of their home nations. The English felt it as well, although their sense of nostalgia did not move them to re-create London's drama. The word "nostalgia," which today often denotes a sentimental yearning for an earlier, better time, originally described a disease. As Susan Bennett points out, a Swiss doctor coined "nostalgia" in 1780, meaning home-sickness. When David Hackett Fischer speaks of an "aching sense of physical separation," he does not exaggerate: settlers became physically

Summary of American events before 1750

	Spanish	French	English
First explorers	1492–1540	1524–1635	1497–1630
Although the Spanish were the first, their explorations were concentrated in the early years of contact and fell off as they established settlements. The French did the least significant exploration, although exploitation of the Newfoundland fisheries began in 1507; their activity was concentrated in Canada. After a lengthy period of neglect, following Cabot's initial voyages, the English continued their exploration far longer than either of the other groups.			
Early settlements	1521 Mexico City 1565 St. Augustine	1608 Québec 1642 Montréal	1585 Roanoke 1607 Jamestown
It is worth noting that the Spanish did not settle Mexico City; they sacked and seized it. Initially the English were less successful than either the Spanish or French in establishing major urban centers; New York (1624) was settled by the Dutch, while Boston (1630), Charleston (1670), and Philadelphia (1682) were all settled relatively late. Their first settlement, Roanoke, failed.			
First performances	1538 Mexico City	1604 Québec	1703 Charleston
The Spanish and French moved quickly to introduce drama, the Spanish staging plays within 17 years of taking control of the city and the French actually staging a pageant before the establishment of Québec. Charleston's first performance occurred 33 years after the city's founding and 118 years after Roanoke's settlement.			
First playhouse	1597 Mexico City	1790 Montréal	1716 Williamsburg
The construction of a building specifically for theatre required a period of peace. Thus the French, plagued by unsuccessful wars with England for control over Canadian territory, built a playhouse quite late.			
Major dramatist	1590s Lope de Vega	1646 Corneille	1750 Shakespeare
Lope de Vega was not even born when the Spanish began producing plays in the Americas. Corneille was alive when *Le Cid* was performed in Montréal. Shakespeare had been dead for over a century before one of his plays was performed in the Americas, and that production was of Cibber's revision of his work.			

ill with desire for England. The point is important because a settler's self-identification as English and the conservatism that nostalgia evoked would produce adherence to the past, to "preserve the cultural dynamics that existed in the hour of their birth" (Fischer 57). This loyalty to a vanished world operated to exclude Shakespeare from the first English settlements. French and Spanish settlements coincided chronologically with the greatest period of their dramatic literature. While the first significant wave of immigrants from England was Puritan, the second major wave was Royalist and Anglican, traditionally groups that valued theatre highly.[8] That second wave lasted three times as long as the first and brought to America over