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## William Shakespeare and the American People: A Study in Cultural Transformation

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LAWRENCE W. LEVINE

THE HUMOR OF A PEOPLE AFFORDS IMPORTANT INSIGHTS into the nature of their culture. Thus Mark Twain's treatment of Shakespeare in his novel *Huckleberry Finn* helps us place the Elizabethan playwright in nineteenth-century American culture. Shortly after the two rogues, who pass themselves off as a duke and a king, invade the raft of Huck and Jim, they decide to raise funds by performing scenes from Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* and *Richard III*. That the presentation of Shakespeare in small Mississippi River towns could be conceived of as potentially lucrative tells us much about the position of Shakespeare in the nineteenth century. The specific nature of Twain's humor tells us even more. Realizing that they would need material for encores, the "duke" starts to teach the "king" Hamlet's soliloquy, which he recites from memory:

To be, or not to be; that is the bare bodkin  
That makes calamity of so long life;  
For who would fardels bear, till Birnam Wood do come to Dunsinane,  
But that the fear of something after death Murders the innocent sleep,  
Great nature's second course,  
And makes us rather sling arrows of outrageous fortune  
Than fly to others that we know not of.<sup>1</sup>

Twain's humor relies on his audience's familiarity with *Hamlet* and its ability to recognize the duke's improbable coupling of lines from a variety of Shakespeare's plays. Twain was employing one of the most popular forms of humor in nineteenth-century America. Everywhere in the nation burlesques and parodies of Shakespeare constituted a prominent form of entertainment.

This essay was begun while I was a Regents Fellow at the Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of American History and was completed in its present form during my fellowship at the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars. The splendid facilities and atmosphere provided by both of these institutions greatly enhanced my work on this and related projects. An early version of this essay was presented to a meeting of American and Hungarian historians sponsored by the American Council of Learned Societies and the Hungarian Academy of Sciences, held in Budapest, August 1982. I am grateful to the scholars at that conference for their encouragement and criticisms as I am to those many colleagues who commented on later versions I presented in seminars and lectures at Johns Hopkins University, Yale University, the University of Minnesota, the State University of New York at Stony Brook, the Wilson Center, and the University of Maryland.

<sup>1</sup> Twain, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (New York, 1884), 190.

*Hamlet* was a favorite target in numerous travesties imported from England or crafted at home. Audiences roared at the sight of Hamlet dressed in fur cap and collar, snowshoes and mittens; they listened with amused surprise to his profanity when ordered by his father's ghost to "swear" and to his commanding Ophelia, "Get thee to a brewery"; they heard him recite his lines in black dialect or Irish brogue and sing his most famous soliloquy, "To be, or not to be," to the tune of "Three Blind Mice." In the 1820s the British comedian Charles Mathews visited what he called the "Nigger's (or Negroe's) theatre" in New York, where he heard "a black tragedian in the character of Hamlet" recite "To be, or not to be? That is the question; whether it is nobler in *de* mind to suffer, or tak' up arms against a sea of trouble, and by *opossum* end 'em." "No sooner was the word *opossum* out of his mouth," Mathews reported, "than the audience burst forth, in one general cry, '*Opossum! opossum! opossum!*'"—prompting the actor to come forward and sing the popular dialect song "Opossum up a Gum Tree." On the nineteenth-century American stage, audiences often heard Hamlet's lines intricately combined with those of a popular song:

Oh! 'tis consummation  
Devoutly to be wished  
To end your heart-ache by a sleep,  
When likely to be dish'd.  
Shuffle off your mortal coil,  
Do just so,  
Wheel about, and turn about,  
And jump Jim Crow.<sup>2</sup>

No Shakespearean play was immune to this sort of mutilation. *Richard III*, the most popular Shakespearean play in the nineteenth century, was lampooned frequently in such versions as *Bad Dicky*. In one New York production starring first-rank Shakespearean actors, a stuttering, lisping Othello danced while Desdemona played the banjo and Iago, complete with Irish brogue, ended their revelries with a fire hose. Parodies could also embody a serious message. In Kenneth Bangs's version of *The Taming of the Shrew*, for example, Kate ended up in control, observing that, although "Shakespeare or Bacon, or whoever wrote the play . . . studied deeply the shrews of his day . . . , the modern shrew isn't built that way," while a chastened Petruchio concluded, "Sweet Katharine, of your remarks I recognize the force: / Don't strive to tame a woman as you would a horse." Serious or slapstick, the punning was endless. In one parody of the famous dagger scene, Macbeth

<sup>2</sup> Laurence Hutton, *Curiosities of the American Stage* (New York, 1891), 157, 181–86; Stanley Wells, ed., *Nineteenth-Century Shakespeare Burlesques*, 5 (London, 1978): xi–xii; Charles Mathews, *Trip to America* (Baltimore, 1824), 9, 25; Charles Haywood, "Negro Minstrelsy and Shakespearean Burlesque," in Bruce Jackson, ed., *Folklore and Society: Essays in Honor of Benj. A. Botkin* (Norwood, Pa., 1976), 88; and Ray B. Browne, "Shakespeare in America: Vaudeville and Negro Minstrelsy," *American Quarterly*, 12 (1960): 381–82. For examples of parodies of *Hamlet*, see *An Old Play in a New Garb: Hamlet, Prince of Denmark*, in Wells, *Nineteenth-Century Shakespeare Burlesques*; and *Hamlet the Dainty*, in Gary D. Engle, ed., *This Grotesque Essence: Plays from the Minstrel Stage* (Baton Rouge, 1978). For the popularity of parodies of *Hamlet* in the United States, see Ralph Leslie Rusk, *The Literature of the Middle Western Frontier*, 2 vols. (New York, 1925), 2: 4n; Louis Marder, *His Exits and His Entrances: The Story of Shakespeare's Reputation* (Philadelphia, 1963), 295–96, 316–17; and Esther Cloudman Dunn, *Shakespeare in America* (New York, 1939), 108–12, 215–16.

continues to put off his insistent wife by asking, "Or is that dagger but a false Daguerreotype?" Luckily, Desdemona had no brother, or Othello "might look both black and blue," a character in *Othello* remarked, while one in *The Merchant of Venice* observed of Shylock, "This crafty Jew is full of *Jeux d'esprit*!" Throughout the century, the number of parodies with such titles as *Julius Sneezer*, *Roamy-E-Owe* and *Julie-Ate*, and *Desdemonum* was impressive.<sup>3</sup>

These full-fledged travesties reveal only part of the story. Nineteenth-century Shakespearean parody most frequently took the form of short skits, brief references, and satirical songs inserted into other modes of entertainment. In one of their routines, for example, the Bryants' Minstrels playfully referred to the famous observation in Act II of *Romeo and Juliet*:

Adolphus Pompey is my name,  
But that don't make no difference,  
For as Massa Wm. Shakespeare says,  
A name's of no signifrance.

The minstrels loved to invoke Shakespeare as an authority: "you know what de Bird of Avon says 'bout 'De black scandal an' de foul faced reproach!" And they constantly quoted him in appropriately garbled form: "Fust to dine own self be true, an' it must follow night an' day, dou den can be false to any man." The significance of this national penchant for parodying Shakespeare is clear: Shakespeare and his drama had become by the nineteenth century an integral part of American culture. It is difficult to take familiarities with that which is not already familiar; one cannot parody that which is not well known. The minstrels' characteristic conundrums would not have been funny to an audience lacking knowledge of Shakespeare's works:

When was Desdemona like a ship?  
When she was Moored.<sup>4</sup>

IT IS NOT SURPRISING THAT EDUCATED AMERICANS in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries knew their Shakespeare. What is more interesting is how widely Shakespeare was known to the public in general. In the last half of the eighteenth century, when the reading of Shakespeare's plays was still confined to a relatively small, educated elite, substantial numbers of Americans had the chance to see his plays performed. From the first documented American performance of a Shakespearean play in 1750 until the closing of the theaters in 1778 because of the American Revolution, Shakespeare emerged as the most popular playwright in the

<sup>3</sup> For examples, see Wells, *Nineteenth-Century Shakespeare Burlesques*; and Engle, *This Grottesque Essence*. For a contemporary view of nineteenth-century parodies, see Hutton, *Curiosities of the American Stage*, 145–204. Also see Marder, *His Exits and His Entrances*, 316–17; Alice I. Perry Wood, *The Stage History of Shakespeare's King Richard the Third* (New York, 1909), 158; Browne, "Shakespeare in America," 380, 385–90; David Grimsted, *Melodrama Unveiled: American Theater and Culture, 1800–1850* (Chicago, 1968), 240; and Constance Rourke, *Troupers of the Gold Coast* (New York, 1928), 221.

<sup>4</sup> Haywood, "Negro Minstrelsy and Shakespearean Burlesque," 80, 86–87; and Browne, "Shakespeare in America," 376–79.

colonies. Fourteen or fifteen of his plays were presented at least one hundred and eighty—and one scholar has estimated perhaps as many as five hundred—times. Following the Revolution, Shakespeare retained his position as the most widely performed dramatist, with five more of his plays regularly performed in an increasing number of cities and towns.<sup>5</sup>

Not until the nineteenth century, however, did Shakespeare come into his own—presented and recognized almost everywhere in the country. In the cities of the Northeast and Southeast, Shakespeare's plays dominated the theater. During the 1810–11 season in Philadelphia, for example, Shakespearean plays accounted for twenty-two of eighty-eight performances. The following season lasted 108 nights, of which again one-quarter—27—were devoted to Shakespeare. From 1800 to 1835, Philadelphians had the opportunity to see twenty-one of Shakespeare's thirty-seven plays. The Philadelphia theater was not exceptional; one student of the American stage concluded that in cities on the Eastern Seaboard at least one-fifth of all plays offered in a season were likely to be by Shakespeare.<sup>6</sup> George Makepeace Towle, an American consul in England, returned to his own country just after the Civil War and remarked with some surprise, "Shakespearian dramas are more frequently played and more popular in America than in England." Shakespeare's dominance can be attested to by what Charles Shattuck has called "the westward flow of Shakespearean actors" from England to America. In the nineteenth century, one prominent English Shakespearean actor after another—George Frederick Cooke, Edmund Kean, Junius Brutus Booth, Charles and Fanny Kemble, Ellen Tree, William Charles Macready—sought the fame and financial rewards that awaited them in their tours of the United States.<sup>7</sup>

It is important to understand that their journey did not end with big cities or the Eastern Seaboard. According to John Bernard, the English actor and comedian who worked in the United States from 1797 to 1819, "If an actor were unemployed, want and shame were not before him: he had merely to visit some town in the interior where no theatre existed, but 'readings' were permitted; and giving a few

<sup>5</sup> John Quincy Adams, who was born in 1767, wrote of Shakespeare, "at ten years of age I was as familiarly acquainted with his lovers and his clowns, as with Robinson Crusoe, the Pilgrim's Progress, and the Bible. In later years I have left Robinson and the Pilgrim to the perusal of the children; but have continued to read the Bible and Shakespeare." Adams to James H. Hackett, printed in Hackett, *Notes and Comments upon Certain Plays and Actors of Shakespeare, with Criticisms and Correspondence* (New York, 1864), 229. See Alfred Van Rensselaer Westfall, *American Shakespearean Criticism, 1607–1865* (New York, 1939), 45–46, 50–55; Wood, *The Stage History of Shakespeare's King Richard the Third*, 134–35; Charles H. Shattuck, *Shakespeare on the American Stage: From the Hallams to Edwin Booth* (Washington, 1976), 3, 15–16; and Hugh Rankin, *The Theater in Colonial America* (Chapel Hill, 1960), 191–92.

<sup>6</sup> Arthur Hobson Quinn, *A History of the American Drama* (New York, 1943), 162; Dunn, *Shakespeare in America*, 133, 171–72; and Carl Bode, *The Anatomy of American Popular Culture, 1840–1861* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1960), 16–17. For the reception of Shakespeare in specific Eastern and Southern cities, the following are useful: T. Allston Brown, *A History of the New York Stage from the First Performance in 1732 to 1901*, 3 vols. (New York, 1903); James H. Dorman, Jr., *Theater in the Ante-Bellum South, 1815–1861* (Chapel Hill, 1967); W. Stanley Hoole, *The Ante-Bellum Charleston Theatre* (Tuscaloosa, Ala., 1946); Reese Davis James, *Cradle of Culture, 1800–1810: The Philadelphia Stage* (Philadelphia, 1957); Martin Staples Shockley, *The Richmond Stage, 1784–1812* (Charlottesville, Va., 1977); Eola Willis, *The Charleston Stage in the XVIII Century* (Columbia, S.C., 1924); and Joseph Patrick Roppolo, "Hamlet in New Orleans," *Tulane Studies in English*, 6 (1956): 71–86. For tables showing the popularity of plays in the first half of the nineteenth century, see Grimsted, *Melodrama Unveiled*, apps. 1–2.

<sup>7</sup> Towle, *American Society*, 2 (London, 1870): 22. The migration of English stars to America is demonstrated throughout Shattuck's *Shakespeare on the American Stage*.

recitations from Shakespeare and Sterne, his pockets in a night or two were amply replenished." During his travels through the United States in the 1830s, Tocqueville found Shakespeare in "the recesses of the forests of the New World. There is hardly a pioneer's hut that 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 cabin."<sup>8</sup> Five decades later, the German visitor Karl Knortz made a similar observation:

There is, assuredly, no other country on the face of this earth in which Shakespeare and the Bible are held in such general high esteem as in America, the very country so much decried for its lust for money. If you were to enter an isolated log cabin in the Far West and even if its inhabitant were to exhibit many of the traces of backwoods living, he will most likely have one small room nicely furnished in which to spend his few leisure hours and in which you will certainly find the Bible and in most cases also some cheap edition of the works of the poet Shakespeare.<sup>9</sup>

Even if we discount the hyperbole evident in such accounts, they were far from inventions. The ability of the illiterate Rocky Mountain scout Jim Bridger to recite long passages from Shakespeare, which he had learned by hiring someone to read the plays to him, and the formative influence that the plays had upon young Abe Lincoln growing up in Salem, Illinois, became part of the nation's folklore.<sup>10</sup> But if books had become a more important vehicle for disseminating Shakespeare by the nineteenth century, the stage remained the primary instrument. The theater, like the church, was one of the earliest and most important cultural institutions established in frontier cities. And almost everywhere the theater blossomed Shakespeare was a paramount force. In his investigation of the theater in Louisville, Cincinnati, St. Louis, Detroit, and Lexington, Kentucky, from 1800 to 1840, Ralph Leslie Rusk concluded that Shakespeare's plays were performed more frequently than those of any other author. In Mississippi between 1814 and the outbreak of the Civil War, the towns of Natchez and Vicksburg, with only a few thousand inhabitants each, put on at least one hundred and fifty performances of Shakespeare featuring such British and American stars as Ellen Tree, Edwin Forrest, Junius Brutus Booth, J. W. Walleck, Charles Kean, J. H. Hackett, Josephine Clifton, and T. A. Cooper. Stars of this and lesser caliber made their way into the interior by boat, along the Ohio and Mississippi rivers, stopping at towns and cities on their way to New Orleans. Beginning in the early 1830s, the rivers themselves became the site of Shakespearean productions, with floating theaters in the form first of flatboats and then steamboats bringing drama to small river towns.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>8</sup> Bernard, *Retrospections of America, 1797–1811* (New York, 1887), 263; and Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, pt. 2 (Vintage edn., New York, 1961), 58.

<sup>9</sup> Knortz, *Shakespeare in Amerika: Eine Literaturhistorische Studie* (Berlin, 1882), 47.

<sup>10</sup> James G. McManaway, "Shakespeare in the United States," *Publications of the Modern Language Association of America*, 79 (1964): 514; and Bernard DeVoto, *Mark Twain's America* (Boston, 1932), 142–43.

<sup>11</sup> Rusk, *The Literature of the Middle Western Frontier*, 1: 398–400, 411–14; William Bryan Gates, "Performances of Shakespeare in Ante-Bellum Mississippi," *Journal of Mississippi History*, 5 (1943): 28–37; Ashley Thorndike, "Shakespeare in America," in L. Abercrombie et al., eds., *Aspects of Shakespeare* (Oxford, 1933), 116–17; Westfall, *American Shakespearean Criticism*, 59; William G. B. Carson, *The Theatre on the Frontier: The Early Years of the St. Louis Stage* (1932; reprint edn., New York, 1965); West T. Hill, Jr., *The Theatre in Early Kentucky, 1790–1820* (Lexington, Ky., 1971); Sol Smith, *Theatrical Management in the West and South for Thirty Years* (New York, 1868); and Noah Ludlow, *Dramatic Life as I Found It* (St. Louis, 1880).

By mid-century, Shakespeare was taken across the Great Plains and over the Rocky Mountains and soon became a staple of theaters in the Far West. During the decade following the arrival of the Forty-niners, at least twenty-two of Shakespeare's plays were performed on California stages, with *Richard III* retaining the predominance it had gained in the East and South. In 1850 the Jenny Lind Theatre, seating two thousand, opened over a saloon in San Francisco and was continuously crowded: "Miners . . . swarmed from the gambling saloons and cheap fandango houses to see *Hamlet* and *Lear*." In 1852 the British star Junius Brutus Booth and two of his sons played *Hamlet*, *Macbeth*, *Othello*, and *Richard III* from the stage of the Jenny Lind and packed the house for the two weeks of their stay. In 1856 Laura Keen brought San Franciscans not only old favorites but such relatively uncommon productions as *Coriolanus* and *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Along with such eminent stars from abroad, American actors like McKean Buchanan and James Stark kept the hunger for Shakespeare satisfied.<sup>12</sup>

But Shakespeare could not be confined to the major population centers in the Far West any more than he had been in the East. If miners could not always come to San Francisco to see theater, the theater came to them. Stark, Buchanan, Edwin Booth, and their peers performed on makeshift stages in mining camps around Sacramento and crossed the border into Nevada, where they brought characterizations of Hamlet, Iago, Macbeth, Kate, Lear, and Othello to miners in Virginia City, Silver City, Dayton, and Carson City. Walter M. Leman recalled the dearth of theaters in such California towns as Tod's Valley, Chip's Flat, Cherokee Flat, Rattlesnake, Mud Springs, Red Dog, Hangtown, Drytown, and Fiddletown, which he toured in the 1850s. In the Sierra town of Downieville, Leman performed *Richard III* on the second story of a cloth and paper house in a hall without a stage: "we had to improvise one out of the two billiard tables it contained, covering them with boards for that purpose." Such conditions were by no means confined to the West Coast. In earlier years, Leman had toured the Maine towns of Bangor, Belfast, Orono, and Oldtown, not one of which had a proper theater, necessitating the use of church vestries and other improvisations. In 1816 in Lexington, Kentucky, Noah Ludlow performed *The Taming of the Shrew*, *Othello*, and *The Merchant of Venice* in a room on the second floor of an old brewery, next door to a saloon, before an audience seated on backless, cushionless chairs. In the summer of 1833, Sol Smith's company performed in the dining room of a hotel in Tazewell, Alabama, "on a sort of landing-place or gallery about six feet long, and two and a half feet wide." His "heavy tragedian" Mr. Lyne attempted to recite the "Seven Ages of Man" from *As You Like It* while "Persons were passing from one room to the other continually and the performer was obliged to *move* whenever any one passed."<sup>13</sup>

Thus Shakespeare was by no means automatically treated with reverence. Nor was he accorded universal acclaim. In Davenport and neighboring areas of Eastern

<sup>12</sup> Rourke, *Troupers of the Gold Coast* 33, 44, 101-02; George R. MacMinn, *The Theater of the Golden Era in California* (Caldwell, Idaho, 1941), 23-24, 84, 87-88; and Margaret G. Watson, *Silver Theatre: Amusements of the Mining Frontier in Early Nevada, 1850-1864* (Glendale, Calif., 1964), 73.

<sup>13</sup> Leman, *Memories of an Old Actor* (San Francisco, 1886), 212-13, 260-62, 276-77; Ludlow, *Dramatic Life as I Found It*, 89-90, 113, 116, 242-43, 256, 258, 303; and Smith, *Theatrical Management in the West and South for Thirty Years*, 90-91.

Iowa, where the theater flourished in both English and German, Shakespeare was seldom performed and then usually in the form of short scenes and soliloquies rather than entire plays. As more than one theater manager learned, producing Shakespeare did not necessarily result in profits. Theatrical lore often repeated the vow attributed to Robert L. Place that he would never again produce a play by Shakespeare "no matter how many more he wrote." But these and similar incidents were exceptions to the general rule: from the large and often opulent theaters of major cities to the makeshift stages in halls, saloons, and churches of small towns and mining camps, wherever there was an audience for the theater, there Shakespeare's plays were performed prominently and frequently. Shakespeare's popularity in frontier communities in all sections of the country may not fit Frederick Jackson Turner's image of the frontier as a crucible, melting civilization down into a new amalgam, but it does fit our knowledge of human beings and their need for the comfort of familiar things under the pressure of new circumstances and surroundings. James Fenimore Cooper had this familiarity in mind when he called Shakespeare "the great author of America" and insisted that Americans had "just as good a right" as Englishmen to claim Shakespeare as their countryman.<sup>14</sup>

Shakespeare's popularity can be determined not only by the frequency of Shakespearean productions and the size of the audiences for them but also by the nature of the productions and the manner in which they were presented. Shakespeare was performed not merely alongside popular entertainment as an elite supplement to it; Shakespeare was performed as an integral part of it. Shakespeare *was* popular entertainment in nineteenth-century America. The theater in the first half of the nineteenth century played the role that movies played in the first half of the twentieth: it was a kaleidoscopic, democratic institution presenting a widely varying bill of fare to all classes and socioeconomic groups.

During the first two-thirds of the nineteenth century, the play may have been the thing, but it was not the only thing. It was the centerpiece, the main attraction, but an entire evening generally consisted of a long play, an afterpiece (usually a farce), and a variety of between-act specialities. In the spring of 1839, a playbill advertising the appearance of William Evans Burton in *As You Like It* at Philadelphia's American Theatre announced, "Il Diavolo Antonio And His Sons, Antonio, Lorenzo, Augustus And Alphonzo will present a most magnificent display of position in the Science of Gymnastics, portraying some of the most grand and imposing groups from the ancient masters . . . to conclude with a grand Horizontal Pyramid." It was a characteristically full evening. In addition to gymnastics and Shakespeare, "Mr. Quayle (by Desire)" sang "The Swiss Drover Boy," La Petite Celeste danced "a New Grand Pas Seul," Miss Lee danced "La Cachuca," Quayle returned to sing "The Haunted Spring," Mr. Bowman told a "Yankee Story," and "the Whole" concluded "with *Ella Rosenberg* starring Mrs. Hield."<sup>15</sup>

Thus Shakespeare was presented amid a full range of contemporary entertain-

<sup>14</sup> Place, as quoted in Dormon, *Theater in the Ante-Bellum South*, 257n; Cooper, *Notions of the Americans*, 2 (London, 1828): 100, 113. For the theater in Iowa, see Joseph S. Schick, *The Early Theater in Eastern Iowa: Cultural Beginnings and the Rise of the Theater in Davenport and Eastern Iowa, 1836-1863* (Chicago, 1939). Schick's appendixes contain a list of all plays performed in either English or German in Iowa during these years.

<sup>15</sup> Playbill, American Theatre, Philadelphia, May 13, 1839, Folger Shakespeare Library, Washington [hereafter, FSL]. For the prevalence of this format in the eighteenth century, see Rankin, *The Theater in Colonial*



ment. During the Mexican War, a New Orleans performance of *Richard III* was accompanied by "A NEW and ORIGINAL Patriotic Drama in 3 Acts, . . . (founded in part on events which have occurred during the Mexican War,) & called: Palo Alto! Or, Our Army on the Rio Grande! . . . TRIUMPH OF AMERICAN ARMS! Surrender of Gen. Vega to Capt. May! Grand Military Tableau!" It would be a mistake to conclude that Shakespeare was presented as the dry, staid ingredient in this exciting menu. On the contrary, Shakespearean plays were often announced as spectacles in their own right. In 1799 the citizens of Alexandria, Virginia, were promised the following in a production of *Macbeth*: "In Act 3d—A Regal Banquet in which the Ghost of Banquo appears. In Act 4th—A Solemn incantation & dance of Witches. In Act 5th—A grand Battle, with the defeat & death of Macbeth." At mid-century, a presentation of *Henry IV* in Philadelphia featured the "Army of Falstaff on the March! . . . Battlefield, Near Shrewsbury, Occupying the entire extent of the Stage, Alarms! Grand Battle! Single Combat! DEATH OF HOT-SPUR! FINALE—Grand Tableau."<sup>16</sup>

Shakespeare's position as part and parcel of popular culture was reinforced by the willingness of Shakespearean actors to take part in the concluding farce. Thus Mr. Parsons followed such roles as Coriolanus, Othello, Macbeth, and Lear by playing Ralph Stackpole, "A Ring-Tailed Squealer & Rip-Staver from Salt River," in *Nick of the Woods*. Even Junius Brutus Booth followed his celebrated portrayal of Richard III with the role of Jerry Sneak in *The Mayor of Garrat*.<sup>17</sup> In the postbellum years Edward L. Davenport referred to this very ability and willingness to mix genres when he lamented the decline of his profession: "Why, I've played an act from *Hamlet*, one from *Black-Eyed Susan*, and sung 'A Yankee Ship and a Yankee Crew' and danced a hornpipe, and wound up with a 'nigger' part, all in one night. Is there any one you know of today who can do that?"<sup>18</sup> It is clear that, as much as Shakespearean roles were prized by actors, they were not exalted; they did not unfit one for other roles and other tasks; they were not elevated to a position above the culture in which they appeared. Most frequently, the final word of the evening was not Shakespeare's. *Hamlet* might be followed by *Fortune's Frolic*, *The Merchant of Venice* by *The Lottery Ticket*, *Richard III* by *The Green Mountain Boy*, *King Lear* by *Chaos Is Come Again* on one occasion and by *Love's Laughs at Locksmiths: or, The Guardian Outwitted* on another, and, in California, *Romeo and Juliet* by *Did You Ever Send Your Wife to San Jose?*<sup>19</sup>

*America*, 150, 193–94; Kenneth Silverman, *A Cultural History of the American Revolution* (New York, 1976), 62; and Garff B. Wilson, *Three Hundred Years of American Drama and Theatre* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J., 1973), 19–27.

<sup>16</sup> Playbills, St. Charles Theatre, New Orleans, November 30, 1846, Alexandria, Virginia, July 12, 1799, and Arch Street Theatre, Philadelphia, March 2, 1857, FSL.

<sup>17</sup> Playbills, American Theatre, Philadelphia, August 30, 31, September 1, 11, 1838, June 24, 1839, FSL.

<sup>18</sup> Davenport, as quoted in Lloyd Morris, *Curtain Time: The Story of the American Theater* (New York, 1953), 205.

<sup>19</sup> Playbills, Walnut Street Theater, Philadelphia, November 30, 1821, Military Hall, Newark, N.J., August 15, 1852, Montgomery Theatre, Montgomery, Alabama, March 21, 1835, and American Theatre, Philadelphia, June 25, 1839, December 14, 1837, FSL; and MacMinn, *The Theatre of the Golden Era in California*, 90. Nevertheless, it was not uncommon for *Catharine and Petruchio*, an abridged version of *The Taming of the Shrew*, to serve as an afterpiece; see playbills, American Theatre, New Orleans, April 20, 1827, American Theatre, Philadelphia, September 26, 1838, and St. Charles Theatre, New Orleans, March 25, 1864, FSL. *Catharine and Petruchio* also served as an afterpiece when plays other than Shakespeare's were presented; see playbills, American Theatre, New Orleans, April 20, 1827, and American Theatre, Philadelphia, September 26, December 8, 1838, FSL.

These afterpieces and *divertissements* most often are seen as having diluted or denigrated Shakespeare. I suggest that they may be understood more meaningfully as having *integrated* him into American culture. Shakespeare was presented as part of the same milieu inhabited by magicians, dancers, singers, acrobats, minstrels, and comics. He appeared on the same playbills and was advertised in the same spirit. This does not mean that theatergoers were unable to make distinctions between Shakespearean productions and the accompanying entertainment. Of course they were. Shakespeare, after all, was what most of them came to see. But it was a Shakespeare presented as part of the culture they enjoyed, a Shakespeare rendered familiar and intimate by virtue of his context.

IN 1843 THE CURTAIN OF THE REBUILT ST. CHARLES THEATRE featured an arresting bit of symbolism: it depicted Shakespeare in a halo of light being borne aloft on the wings of the American eagle.<sup>20</sup> Shakespeare was not only domesticated; he was humanized. Henry Norman Hudson, the period's most popular Shakespearean lecturer, hailed Shakespeare as "the prodigy of our race" but also stressed his decency, his humility, his "true gentleness and lowliness of heart" and concluded that "he who looks the highest will always bow the lowest."<sup>21</sup> In his melodrama *Shakespeare in Love*, Richard Penn Smith pictured the poet not as an awesome symbol of culture but as a poor, worried, stumbling young man in love with a woman of whose feelings he is not yet certain. In the end, of course, he triumphs and proclaims his joy in words that identify him as a well-rounded human being to whom one can relate: "I am indeed happy. A poet, a lover, the husband of the woman I adore. What is there more for me to desire?"<sup>22</sup> Nineteenth-century America swallowed Shakespeare, digested him and his plays, and made them part of the cultural body. If Shakespeare originally came to America as *Culture* in the libraries of the educated, he existed in pre-Civil War America as *culture*. The nature of his reception by nineteenth-century audiences confirms this conclusion.

While he was performing in Natchez, Mississippi, in 1835, the Irish actor Tyrone Power observed people on the road hurrying to the theater. Their fine horses, ornate and often antique saddles, and picturesque clothing transported him back to Elizabethan England and "the palmy days of the Globe and Bear-garden." Power's insight was sound; there *were* significant similarities between the audiences of Shakespeare's own day and those he drew in America. One of Shakespeare's contemporaries commented that the theater was "frequented by all sorts of people old and younge, rich and poore, masters and servants, papists and puritans, wise men etc., churchmen and statesmen." The nineteenth-century American audience was equally heterogeneous. In both eras the various classes saw the same plays in the same theaters—though not necessarily from the same vantage point. Until mid-century, at least, American theaters generally had a tripartite seating arrangement:

<sup>20</sup> John S. Kendall, *The Golden Age of the New Orleans Theater* (Baton Rouge, 1952), 210.

<sup>21</sup> Hudson, *Lectures on Shakespeare*, 1 (New York, 1848): 1–41.

<sup>22</sup> Smith, *The Sentinel and Other Plays*, ed. Ralph H. Ware and H. W. Schoenberger (Bloomington, Ind., n.d.), 101–14.

the pit (orchestra), the boxes, and the gallery (balcony). Although theater prices fell substantially from 1800 to 1850, seating arrangements continued to dovetail with class and economic divisions. In the boxes sat, as one spectator put it, "the dandies, and people of the first respectability and fashion." The gallery was inhabited largely by those—apprentices, servants, poor workingmen—who could not afford better seats or by those—Negroes and often prostitutes—who were not allowed to sit elsewhere. The pit was dominated by what were rather vaguely called the "middling classes"—a "mixed multitude" that some contemporaries praised as the "honest folks" or "the sterling part of the audience."<sup>23</sup>

All observers agreed that the nineteenth-century theater housed under one roof a microcosm of American society. This, the actor Joseph Jefferson maintained, was what made drama a more difficult art than painting, music, or writing, which "have a direct following, generally from a class whose taste and understanding are pretty evenly balanced,—whereas a theater is divided into three and sometimes four classes." Walt Whitman warmly recalled the Bowery Theatre around the year 1840, where he could look up to the first tier of boxes and see "the faces of the leading authors, poets, editors, of those times," while he sat in the pit surrounded by the "slang, wit, occasional shirt sleeves, and a picturesque freedom of looks and manners, with a rude good-nature and restless movement" of cartmen, butchers, firemen, and mechanics. Others spoke of the mixed audience with less enthusiasm. Washington Irving wrote a series of letters to the New York *Morning Chronicle* in 1802 and 1803 describing his theater experiences. The noise in the gallery he found "is somewhat similar to that which prevailed in Noah's Ark; for we have an imitation of the whistles and yells of every kind of animal." When the "gallery gods" were roused for one reason or another, "they commenced a discharge of apples, nuts & ginger-bread, on the heads of the honest folks in the pit."<sup>24</sup>

Little had changed by 1832 when the English visitor Frances Trollope attended the theater in several American cities. In Cincinnati she observed coatless men with their sleeves rolled up, incessantly spitting, reeking "of onions and whiskey." She enjoyed the Shakespeare but abhorred the "perpetual" noises: "the applause is expressed by cries and thumping with the feet, instead of clapping; and when a patriotic fit seized them, and 'Yankee Doodle' was called for, every man seemed to think his reputation as a citizen depended on the noise he made." Things were no better in Philadelphia and, if anything, worse in New York theaters, where she witnessed "a lady performing the most maternal office possible . . . and a general air of contempt for the decencies of life."<sup>25</sup> When he published his reminiscences in

<sup>23</sup> Power, *Impressions of America*, 2 vols. (London, 1836), 2: 189–92. Shakespeare's contemporary is quoted in Alfred Harbage, *Shakespeare's Audience* (New York, 1941), 84–85. For an excellent discussion of theater audiences in the first half of the nineteenth century, see Grimsted's indispensable *Melodrama Unveiled*, chap. 3. For a comparison with audiences in eighteenth-century England, see James T. Lynch, *Box, Pit, and Gallery: Stage and Society in Johnson's London* (New York, 1971). Claudia Johnson deals with a neglected part of the American audience in "That Guilty Third Tier: Prostitution in Nineteenth-Century Theaters," *American Quarterly*, 27 (1975): 575–84.

<sup>24</sup> Alan S. Downer, ed., *The Autobiography of Joseph Jefferson* (Cambridge, Mass., 1964), 286; Whitman, "The Old Bowery," in Justin Kaplan, ed., *Walt Whitman: Poetry and Prose* (New York, 1982), 1189–90; and Irving, *Letters of Jonathan Oldstyle*, ed. Bruce I. Granger and Martha Hartzog (Boston, 1977), 12–25.

<sup>25</sup> Trollope, *Domestic Manners of the Americans*, 2 vols. (London, 1832), 1: 179–84, and 2: 87–88, 194–95.

1836, Tyrone Power tried to counter such accounts by praising the attentiveness and intelligence of his American audiences, but it appears that what differed was less the audience than Power's tolerance for it. For instance, in hailing the "degree of repose and gentility of demeanour" of the audience he performed for in New Orleans in 1835, he wrote:

The least prolonged tumult of approbation even is stilled by a word to order: and when it is considered that here are assembled the wildest and rudest specimens of the Western population, men owning no control except the laws, and not viewing these over submissively, and who admit of no *arbitræ elegantiarum* or standard of fine breeding, it confers infinite credit on their innate good feeling, and that sense of propriety which here forms the sole check on their naturally somewhat uproarious jollity.<sup>26</sup>

Evidence of this sort makes it clear that an understanding of the American theater in our own time is not adequate grounding for a comprehension of American theater in the nineteenth century. To envision nineteenth-century theater audiences correctly, one might do well to visit a contemporary sporting event in which the spectators not only are similarly heterogeneous but are also—in the manner of both the nineteenth century and the Elizabethan era—more than an audience; they are participants who can enter into the action on the field, who feel a sense of immediacy and at times even of control, who articulate their opinions and feelings vocally and unmistakably. Washington Irving wryly observed, "The good folks of the gallery have all the trouble of ordering the music." When the orchestra's selection displeased them, they stamped, hissed, roared, whistled, and groaned in cadence until the musicians played "*Moll in the wad, Tally ho the grindlers*, and several other *airs* more suited to their tastes." The audience's vociferousness continued during the play itself, which was punctuated by expressions of disapproval in the form of hisses or groans and of approval in the form of applause, whistles, and stamping to the point that a Virginia editor felt called upon to remind his readers in 1829 that it was not "a duty to applaud at the conclusion of every sentence." A French reporter, attending a production of Shakespeare in California in 1851, was fascinated by the audience's enthusiasm: "the more they like a play, the louder they whistle, and when a San Francisco audience bursts into shrill whistles and savage yells, you may be sure they are in raptures of joy." Audiences frequently demanded—and got—instant encores from performers who particularly pleased them. "Perhaps," a New York editor wrote sarcastically in 1846, "we'll flatter Mr. Kean by making him take poison twice."<sup>27</sup>

Like the Elizabethans, a substantial portion of nineteenth-century American audiences knew their Shakespeare well. Sol Smith reported that in 1839, when he wanted to put on an evening of acts from various Shakespearean plays in St. Louis, he had "no difficulty in finding Hamlets, Shylocks and Richards in abundance, very glad of the opportunity to exhibit their hidden powers." Constance Rourke has

<sup>26</sup> Power, *Impressions of America*, 2: 171–74. Also see *ibid.*, 1: 62–66, 87–89, 123–26, 210–11.

<sup>27</sup> Irving, *Letters of Jonathan Oldstyle*, 14; the Virginia and New York editors are quoted in Grimsted, *Melodrama Unveiled*, 63–64; and the French reporter's account is reprinted in Barnard Hewitt, *Theatre U.S.A., 1665 to 1957* (New York, 1959), 164–66.

shown that as far west as California, from miners' camps to the galleries of urban theaters, there were many who knew large parts of the plays by heart.<sup>28</sup> This knowledge easily became an instrument of control, as more than one hapless actor found out. In the winter of 1856 Hugh F. McDermott's depiction of Richard III did not meet the critical expectations of his Sacramento audience. During the early scenes of Act I "a few carrots timely thrown, had made their appearance," but the full ardor of the audience was roused only when Richard's killing of Henry included a "thrust *a posteriori*, after Henry had fallen." Then, the *Sacramento Union* reported, "cabbages, carrots, pumpkins, potatoes, a wreath of vegetables, a sack of flour and one of soot, a dead goose, with other articles, simultaneously made their appearance upon the stage." The barrage woke the dead Henry, who fled followed by Richard, "his head enveloped in a halo of vegetable glory." Pleas from the manager induced the audience to allow the play to go on—but not for long. Early in Act II, McDermott's ineptness brought forth first a storm of shouts and then a renewal of the vegetable shower accompanied this time by Chinese firecrackers. As poor Richard fled for the second time, "a well directed pumpkin caused him to stagger; and with still truer aim, a potato relieved him of his cap, which was left upon the field of glory, among the cabbages."<sup>29</sup>

Scenes like this account for the frequent assurance on playbills that "proper officers are appointed who will rigidly enforce decorum."<sup>30</sup> Proper officers or not, such incidents were common enough to prompt a nineteenth-century gentleman to note in his diary, "The egg as a vehicle of dramatic criticism came into early use in this Continent."<sup>31</sup> Nevertheless, the same California audiences capable of driving King Richard from the stage could pay homage to a performance they recognized as superior. Irish-born Matilda Heron's portrayal of Juliet on New Year's night 1854 "so fascinated and entranced" the "walnut-cracking holiday audience," according to the *San Francisco Chronicle*, that "they sat motionless and silent for some moments after the scene was done; and then suddenly recovering themselves from the thralldom under which they had been placed, they came down in a shower of applause that shook the house."<sup>32</sup>

These frenetic displays of approval and disapproval were signs of engagement in what was happening on the stage—an engagement that on occasion could blur the line between audience and actors. At a performance of *Richard III* with Junius Brutus Booth at New York's Bowery Theatre in Decemer 1832, the holiday audience was so large that some three hundred people overflowed onto the stage and entered into the spirit of things, the *New York Mirror* reported. They examined Richard's royal regalia with interest, hefted his sword, and tried on his crown; they moved up to get a close look at the ghosts of King Henry, Lady Anne, and the children when these characters appeared on stage; they mingled with the

<sup>28</sup> Smith, *Theatrical Management*, 137–38; and Rourke, *Troupers of the Gold Coast*, 149–50, 209–10.

<sup>29</sup> *Sacramento Union*, as quoted in MacMinn, *The Theatre of the Golden Era in California*, 90–91.

<sup>30</sup> Playbill, Walnut Street Theatre, Philadelphia, November 30, 1821, FSL.

<sup>31</sup> As quoted in Nancy Webb and Jean Francis Webb, *Will Shakespeare and His America* (New York, 1964), 84.

<sup>32</sup> *San Francisco Chronicle*, January 1854, as quoted in MacMinn, *The Theater of the Golden Era in California*, 100.

soldiers during the battle of Bosworth Field and responded to the roll of drums and blast of trumpets by racing across the stage. When Richard and Richmond began their fight, the audience “made a ring around the combatants to see fair play, and kept them at it for nearly a quarter of an hour by ‘Shrewsbury’s clock.’ This was all done in perfect good humor, and with no intention to make a row.” When Dan Rice came on to dance his famous Jim Crow, the on-stage audience made him repeat it some twenty times, “and in the afterpiece, where a supper-table [was] spread, some among the most hungry very leisurely helped themselves to the viands.”<sup>33</sup> Frequently, members of the audience became so involved in the action on stage that they interfered in order to dispense charity to the sick and destitute, advice to the indecisive, and, as one man did during a Baltimore production of *Coriolanus* and another during a New York production of *Othello*, protection to someone involved in an unfair fight.<sup>34</sup>

THESE DESCRIPTIONS SHOULD MAKE IT CLEAR how difficult it is to draw arbitrary lines between popular and folk culture. Here was professional entertainment containing numerous folkish elements, including a knowledgeable, participatory audience exerting important degrees of control. The integration of Shakespeare into the culture as a whole should bring into serious question our tendency to see culture on a vertical plane, neatly divided into a hierarchy of inclusive adjectival categories such as “high,” “low,” “pop,” “mass,” “folk,” and the like. If the phenomenon of Shakespeare was not an aberration—and the diverse audiences for such art forms as Italian opera, such performers as singer Jenny Lind, and such writers as Longfellow, Dickens, and Mark Twain indicate it was not—then the study of Shakespeare’s relationship to the American people helps reveal the existence of a shared public culture to which we have not paid enough attention. It has been obscured by the practice of employing such categories as “popular” aesthetically rather than literally. That is, the adjective “popular” has been utilized to describe not only those creations of expressive culture that actually had a large audience (which is the way I have tried to use it in this essay), but also, and often primarily, those that had questionable artistic merit. Thus, a banal play or a poorly written romantic novel has been categorized as popular culture, even if it had a tiny audience, while the recognized artistic attributes of a Shakespearean play have prevented it from being included in popular culture, regardless of its high degree of popularity. The use of such arbitrary and imprecise cultural categories has helped obscure the dynamic complexity of American culture in the nineteenth century.

Our difficulty also proceeds from the historical fallacy of reading the present into the past. By the middle of the twentieth century, Shakespearean drama did not occupy the place it had in the nineteenth century. As a Shakespearean scholar wrote in 1963, “the days when a Davenport and a Barry could open rival productions of *Hamlet* on the same night, as in 1875; when *Macbeth* could be seen at

<sup>33</sup> New York *Mirror*, December 29, 1832, reprinted in Hewitt, *Theatre U.S.A.*, 122.

<sup>34</sup> Grimsted, *Melodrama Unveiled*, 60; and *Harper’s New Monthly Magazine*, December 1863, p. 133.

three different theatres in New York in 1849; when ten *Hamlets* could be produced in a single season, as in New York in 1857–58; . . . these days are unfortunately gone.”<sup>35</sup> Although in the mid-twentieth century there was no more widely known, respected, or quoted dramatist in our culture than Shakespeare, the nature of his relationship to the American people had changed: he was no longer their familiar, no longer part of their culture, no longer at home in their theaters or on the movie and television screens that had become the twentieth-century equivalents of the stage. If Shakespeare had been an integral part of mainstream culture in the nineteenth century, in the twentieth he had become part of “polite” culture—an essential ingredient in a complex we call, significantly, “legitimate” theater. He had become the possession of the educated portions of society who disseminated his plays for the enlightenment of the average folk who were to swallow him not for their entertainment but for their education, as a respite from—not as a normal part of—their usual cultural diet. Recalling his youthful experiences with Shakespeare, the columnist Gerald Nachman wrote in 1979 that in the schools of America “Shakespeare becomes theatrical spinach: He’s good for you. If you digest enough of his plays, you’ll grow up big and strong intellectually like teacher.” The efforts of such young producers and directors as Joseph Papp in the late 1950s and the 1960s to liberate Shakespeare from the genteel prison in which he had been confined, to restore his plays to their original vitality, and to disseminate them among what Papp called “a great dispossessed audience” is a testament to what had happened to Shakespearean drama since the mid-nineteenth century.<sup>36</sup>

Signs of this transformation appear throughout the twentieth century. In his 1957 treatise on how to organize community theaters, John Wray Young warned, “Most organizations will find it difficult to please with the classics. . . . Shakespeare, Ibsen, Chekhov, the Greeks, and the other masters are hard to sell in the average community situation.” Shakespeare had become not only a hard-to-sell classic to average members of the community but even an alienating force. In a 1929 episode of the popular comic strip “Bringing Up Father,” the neighborhood bartender, Dinty Moore, suddenly goes “high hat” when he meets and courts a wealthy woman. The symbols of his attempt to enter “society,” which alienate him from his friends, are his fancy clothing, his poodle dog, his horseback riding and golf, his pretentious language, and his reading of Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet*, which so infuriates his friend Jiggs that he seizes the volume and throws it at Moore.<sup>37</sup> In one of his wonderful monologues on politics, published in 1905, George Washington Plunkitt, ward boss of the fifteenth assembly district in New York City and one of the powers of Tammany Hall, admonished aspiring politicians:

If you’re makin’ speeches in a campaign, talk the language the people talk. Don’t try to show how the situation is by quoting Shakespeare. Shakespeare was all right in his way, but he didn’t know anything about Fifteenth District politics. . . . go out and talk the language of the

<sup>35</sup> Marder, *His Exits and His Entrances*, 317–18.

<sup>36</sup> Nachman, “Break a Leg, Willy,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, November 30, 1982; and Papp, as quoted in Gerald M. Berkowitz, *New Broadways: Theatre across America, 1950–1980* (Totowa, N.J., 1982), 37.

<sup>37</sup> Young, *The Community Theatre and How It Works* (New York, 1957), 126; and George McManus, *Bringing Up Father*, ed. Herb Galewitz (New York, 1973), 37.

Fifteenth to the people. I know it's an awful temptation, the hankerin' to show off your learnin'. I've felt it myself, but I always resist it. I know the awful consequences.<sup>38</sup>

For Plunkitt, and obviously for his constituents, Shakespeare symbolized "learning," irrelevant, impractical, pretentious—fit only for what Plunkitt called "the name-parted-in-the-middle aristocrats." Similarly, in her account of her life as a worker, Dorothy Richardson deplored the maudlin yellowback novels that dominated the reading habits of working women at the turn of the century and pleaded for the wide dissemination of better literature:

Only, please, Mr. or Mrs. Philanthropist, don't let it be Shakespere, or Ruskin, or Walter Pater. Philanthropists have tried before to reform degraded literary tastes with heroic treatment, and they have failed every time. That is sometimes the trouble with the college settlement folk. They forget that Shakespere, and Ruskin, and all the rest of the really true and great literary crew, are infinite bores to every-day people.<sup>39</sup>

Culture is a process, not a fixed condition; it is the product of unremitting interaction between the past and the present. Thus, Shakespeare's relationship to the American people was always in flux, always changing. Still, it is possible to isolate a period during which the increasing separation of Shakespeare from "every-day people" becomes more evident. The American Theatre in San Francisco advised those attending its May 29, 1855, production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* that "owing to the length of the play there will be NO FARCE." Similarly, in 1869 the Varieties Theatre in New Orleans announced in its playbill advertising Mrs. Scott Siddons in *As You Like It*, "In consequence of the length of this comedy, it will constitute the Evening's Entertainment." In following decades it became less and less necessary for theaters to issue such explanations. In 1873 the California Theatre in San Francisco advertised *Coriolanus* with no promise of a farce or between-act entertainment—and no apologies. This became true in city after city. There is no precise date, but everywhere in the United States during the final decades of the nineteenth century the same transformation was evidently taking place; Shakespeare was being divorced from the broader world of everyday culture. Gone were the entre-act diversions: the singers, jugglers, dancers, acrobats, orators. Gone, too, was the purple prose trumpeting the sensational events and pageantry that were part of the Shakespearean plays themselves. Those who wanted their Shakespeare had to take him alone, lured to his plays by stark playbills promising no frills or enhancements. In December 1890 Pittsburgh's Duquesne Theatre advertised productions of *The Merchant of Venice*, *Othello*, *Romeo and Juliet*, and *Julius Caesar* by announcing simply, "Engagement of Mr. Lawrence Barrett, supported by Miss Gale And a Competent Company of Players." Significantly, the frequent admonitions relating to audience behavior were now missing as well. By the early twentieth century, playbills of this type became the norm everywhere.<sup>40</sup> Once again, William Shakespeare had become *Culture*.

<sup>38</sup> Plunkitt, *Plunkitt of Tammany Hall: A Series of Very Plain Talks on Very Practical Politics*, recorded by William L. Riordon (1905; reprint edn., New York, 1963), 52, 71.

<sup>39</sup> Richardson, *The Long Day: The Story of a New York Working Girl* (1905), reprinted in its entirety in William L. O'Neill, ed., *Women at Work* (Chicago, 1972), 300, chap. 6.

<sup>40</sup> Playbills, American Theatre, San Francisco, May 29, 1855, Varieties Theatre, New Orleans, December 30, 1869, California Theatre, San Francisco, April 4, 1873, Mechanics Hall, Salem, Mass., February 12, 1868, San



It is easier to describe this transformation than to explain it, since the transformation itself has clouded our vision of the past. So completely have twentieth-century Americans learned to accept as natural and timeless Shakespeare's status as an elite, classic dramatist, to whose plays the bulk of the populace do not or cannot relate, that we have found it difficult to comprehend nineteenth-century conceptions of Shakespeare. Too frequently, modern historians of the theater have spent less time and energy understanding Shakespeare's nineteenth-century popularity than in explaining it away. The formula is simple: how to account for the indisputable popularity of a great master in a frontier society with an "overwhelmingly uneducated" public. The consensus seems to be that Shakespeare was popular for all the wrong reasons: because of the afterpieces and *divertissements* that surrounded his plays; because the people wanted to see great actors who in turn insisted on performing Shakespeare to demonstrate their abilities; because his plays were presented in altered, simplified versions; because of his bombast, crudities, and sexual allusions rather than his poetry or sophistication; because of almost anything but his dramatic genius. "Shakespeare," we are told in a conclusion that would not be important if it were not so typical, "could communicate with the unsophisticated at the level of action and oratory while appealing to the small refined element at the level of dramatic and poetic artistry."<sup>41</sup>

Again and again, historians and critics have arbitrarily separated the "action and oratory" of Shakespeare's plays from the "dramatic and poetic artistry" with which they were, in reality, so intricately connected. We are asked to believe that the average member of the audience saw only violence, lewdness, and sensationalism in such plays as *Richard III*, *Hamlet*, *King Lear*, *Othello*, and *Macbeth* and was incapable of understanding the moral and ethical dilemmas, the generational strains between parents and children, the crude ambition of Richard III or Lady Macbeth, the haunting guilt of Macbeth, the paralyzing introspection and doubts of Hamlet, the envy of Iago, the insecurities of Othello. We have been asked to believe that such human conditions and situations were beyond the powers of most of the audience and touched only a "refined element" who understood the "subtleties of Shakespeare's art."

CERTAINLY, THE RELATIONSHIP OF AN AUDIENCE to the object of its focus—be it a sermon, political speech, newspaper, musical composition, or play—is a complex one and constitutes a problem for the historian who would reconstruct it. But the problem cannot be resolved through the use of such ahistorical devices as dividing

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Jose Opera House, August 22, 1870, Roberts Opera House, Hartford, Conn., November 1869, Academy of Music, Providence, R.I., November 24, 1869, Leland Opera House, Albany, N.Y., September 27, 1880, April 15, 1882, Opera House, Albany, N.Y., January 21, 22, 1874, Piper's Opera House, Virginia City, Nevada, July 29, 1878, Walnut Street Theatre, Philadelphia, November 5, 1875, Duquesne Theatre, Pittsburgh, December 23, 24, 25, 1890, Murray Hill Theatre, New York, May 4, 1903, Garden Theatre, New York City, December 24, 1900, Forty-fourth Street Theatre, New York City, February 22, 1915, Schubert Memorial Theatre, St. Louis, November 9, 1914, Olympic Theatre, St. Louis, January 6, 1902, May 6, 1907, and National Theatre, Washington, D.C., October 2, 1939. FSL.

<sup>41</sup> Dornon, *Theatre in the Ante-Bellum South*, 256–59. Esther Dunn studied the "indifferent and vulgar stuff" accompanying Shakespeare in the theater and concluded that, "if the public could stand for this sort of entertainment, night in and night out, they could not have derived the fullest pleasure from the Shakespearean

both the audience and the object into crude categories and then coming to conclusions that have more to do with the culture of the writer than that of the subject. In fact, the way to understand the popularity of Shakespeare is to enter into the spirit of the nineteenth century. Shakespeare was popular, first and foremost, because he was integrated into the culture and presented within its context. Nineteenth-century Americans were able to fit Shakespeare into their culture so easily because he *seemed* to fit—because so many of his values and tastes were, or at least appeared to be, close to their own, and were presented through figures that seemed real and came to matter to the audience. Shakespeare's characters, Henry Norman Hudson insisted, were so vivid, so alive, that they assumed the shape "of actual persons, so that we know them as well and remember them as distinctly as we do our most intimate friends." For the teenaged William Dean Howells, who memorized great chunks of Shakespeare while working as an apprentice printer in his father's newspaper office in the 1850s, the world of Shakespeare was one in which he felt as much "at home," as much like "a citizen," as he did in his small Ohio town.<sup>42</sup>

Both worlds enshrined the art of oratory. The same Americans who found diversion and pleasure in lengthy political debates, who sought joy and God in the sermons of church and camp meeting, who had, in short, a seemingly inexhaustible appetite for the spoken word, thrilled to Shakespeare's eloquence, memorized his soliloquies, delighted in his dialogues. Although nineteenth-century Americans stressed the importance of literacy and built an impressive system of public education, theirs remained an oral world in which the spoken word was central. In such a world, Shakespeare had no difficulty finding a place. Nor was Shakespearean oratory confined to the professional stage; it often was a part of life. Walt Whitman recalled that as a young man he rode in the Broadway omnibuses "declaiming some stormy passage from Julius Caesar or Richard" to passersby. In the 1850s Mark Twain worked as an apprentice to the pilot-master George Ealer on the steamboat *Pennsylvania*: "He would read Shakespeare to me; not just casually, but by the hour, when it was his watch, and I was steering. . . . He did not use the book, and did not need to; he knew his Shakespeare as well as Euclid ever knew his multiplication table." In Corpus Christi, Texas, in 1845, soldiers of the Fourth Infantry Regiment broke the monotony of waiting for the Mexican War to begin by staging plays, including a performance of *Othello* starring young Lieutenant Ulysses S. Grant as Desdemona. Many of Lincoln's aides and associates remembered his tendency to recite long, relevant passages from Shakespeare during the troubling days of the Civil War. Shakespeare was taught in nineteenth-century schools and colleges as declamation or rhetoric, not literature. For many youngsters

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portion of the programme"; *Shakespeare in America*, 133–35, 142–45, 175. In 1926 Poet Laureate Robert Bridges spoke for many on both sides of the Atlantic when he attributed the "bad jokes and obscenities," "the mere foolish verbal trifling," and such sensationalism in Shakespeare's plays as the murder of Macduff's child or the blinding of Gloucester to Shakespeare's need to make concessions "to the most vulgar stratum of his audience, . . . those wretched beings who can never be forgiven their share in preventing the greatest poet and dramatist of the world from being the best artist"; Bridges, *The Influence of the Audience* (New York, 1926), 3, 23.

<sup>42</sup> Hudson, *Lectures on Shakespeare*, 1: 54; and Kenneth S. Lynn, *William Dean Howells: An American Life* (New York, 1971), 67–68.

Shakespeare was first encountered in schoolbooks as texts to be recited aloud and memorized. Through such means, Shakespearean phrases, aphorisms, ideas, and language helped shape American speech and became so integral a part of the nineteenth-century imagination that it is a futile exercise to separate Americans' love of Shakespeare's oratory from their appreciation for his subtle use of language.<sup>43</sup>

It was not merely Shakespeare's language but his style that recommended itself to nineteenth-century audiences. In a period when melodrama became one of the mainstays of the American stage, Shakespearean plays easily lent themselves to the melodramatic style. Shakespearean drama featured heroes and villains who communicated directly with the audience and left little doubt about the nature of their character or their intentions. In a series of asides during the opening scenes of the first act, Macbeth shares his "horrible imaginings" and "vaulting ambition" with the audience (I.iii-vii). Similarly, Iago confides to the audience "I hate the Moor," rehearses his schemes of "double knavery" to betray both Cassio and Othello, and confesses that his jealousy of Othello "Doth, like a poisonous mineral, gnaw my inwards; / And nothing can or shall content my soul / Till I am evened with him" (I.iii). As in melodrama, Shakespearean villains are aware not only of their own evil but also of the goodness of their adversaries. Thus Iago, even as he plots against Othello, admits that "The Moor—howbeit that I endure him not— / Is of a constant, loving, noble nature" (II.i).

Lines like these, which so easily fit the melodramatic mode, were delivered in appropriately melodramatic style. The actors who dominated the stage during the first half of the nineteenth century were vigorous, tempestuous, emotional. To describe these men, contemporaries reached for words like "hurricane," "maelstrom," "avalanche," "earthquake," "monsoon," and "whirlwind." Edmund Kean's acting, one of them noted, was "just on the edge, sometimes quite over the edge of madness." It "blinded and stunned the beholders, appalled the imagination, and chilled their blood." Walt Whitman, who saw Junius Brutus Booth perform in the late 1830s, wrote of him, "He illustrated Plato's rule that to the forming an artist of the very highest rank a dash of insanity or what the world calls insanity is indispensable."<sup>44</sup> The first great American-born Shakespearean actor, Edwin Forrest, carried this romantic tradition to its logical culmination. William Rounseville Alger, who saw Forrest perform, described his portrayal of Lear after Goneril rebuffs him:

His eyes flashed and faded and reflashd. He beat his breast as if not knowing what he did. His hands clutched wildly at the air as though struggling with something invisible. Then, sinking on his knees, with upturned look and hands straight outstretched towards his

<sup>43</sup> Whitman, *Specimen Days*, in Kaplan, *Whitman: Poetry and Prose*, 702-03; Twain, *Is Shakespeare Dead?* (New York, 1909), 4-7; William S. McFeely, *Grant: A Biography* (New York, 1982), 29; Robert N. Reeves, "Abraham Lincoln's Knowledge of Shakespeare," *Overland Monthly*, 43 (1904): 336-42; Westfall, *American Shakespearean Criticism*, 227-29; and Henry W. Simon, *The Reading of Shakespeare in American Schools and Colleges: An Historical Survey* (New York, 1932).

<sup>44</sup> Ludlow, *Dramatic Life as I Found It*, 234, 690-91, 694-95; Richard Moody, *America Takes the Stage: Romanticism in American Drama and Theatre, 1750-1900* (Bloomington, Ind., 1955), 195-96; and Whitman, "The Old Bowery," in Kaplan, *Whitman: Poetry and Prose*, 1187-88.

unnatural daughter, he poured out, in frenzied tones of mingled shriek and sob, his withering curse, half adjuration, half malediction.<sup>45</sup>

As in melodrama itself, language and style in American productions of Shakespeare were not utilized randomly; they were used to inculcate values, to express ideas and attitudes. For all of the complaints of such as Whitman that the feudal plays of Shakespeare were not altogether fitting for a democratic age, Shakespeare's attraction for nineteenth-century audiences was due in no small part to the fact that he was—or at least was taken to be—in tune with much of nineteenth-century American consciousness. From the beginning, Shakespeare's American admirers and promoters maintained that he was pre-eminently a *moral* playwright. To overcome the general prejudice against the theater in the eighteenth-century, Shakespeare's plays were frequently presented as "moral dialogues" or "moral lectures." For Thomas Jefferson, "A lively and lasting sense of filial duty is more effectually impressed on the mind of a son or daughter by reading *King Lear*, than by all the dry volumes of ethics and divinity that ever were written." For Abraham Lincoln, *Macbeth* stood as "the perfect illustration of the problems of tyranny and murder." And John Quincy Adams concluded, even as he was waging his heroic fight against the power of the slave South in the House of Representatives in 1836, that the moral of *Othello* was "that the intermarriage of black and white blood is a violation of the law of nature. *That* is the lesson to be learned from the play."<sup>46</sup>

Regardless of specific interpretations, writers of nineteenth-century schoolbooks and readers seemed to have agreed with Henry Norman Hudson that Shakespeare's works provided "a far better school of virtuous discipline than half the moral and religious books which are now put into the hands of youth" and reprinted lines from Shakespeare not only to illustrate the art of declamation but also to disseminate moral values and patriotic principles. As late as 1870 the playbill of a New Orleans theater spelled out the meaning of *Twelfth Night*: "MORAL: In this play Shakespeare has finely penciled the portraits of Folly and Vanity in the persons of Aguecheek and Malvolio; and with a not less masterly hand, he has exhibited the weakness of the human mind when Love has usurped the place of Reason." The affinity between Shakespeare and the American people went beyond moral homilies; it extended to the basic ideological underpinnings of nineteenth-century America. When Cassius proclaimed that "The fault, dear Brutus, is not in our stars, / But in ourselves, that we are underlings" (*Julius Caesar*, I.ii), and when Helena asserted that "Our remedies oft in ourselves do lie, / Which we ascribe to heaven: the fated sky / Gives us free scope" (*All's Well That Ends Well*, I.i), they

<sup>45</sup> Alger, *Life of Edwin Forrest: The American Tragedian*, 2 (Philadelphia, 1877; reprint edn., New York, 1972): 786.

<sup>46</sup> For Whitman's musings about the effects of Shakespeare's "aristocratic perfume," see his "A Thought on Shakespeare" and "A Backward Glance o'er Travel'd Roads," in Kaplan, *Whitman: Poetry and Prose*, 1150–52, 663–64. Eighteenth-century depictions of Shakespeare as a moral playwright are described in Bernard, *Retrospections of America*, 270–71; Westfall, *American Shakespearean Criticism*, 30–31; and Shattuck, *Shakespeare on the American Stage*, 16. And see Jefferson, as quoted in Lawrence A. Cremin, *American Education: The Colonial Experience, 1607–1783* (New York, 1970), 438; Lincoln, as quoted in Alan Bloom, *Shakespeare's Politics* (New York, 1964), 5; and Adams, "The Character of Desdemona," *American Monthly Magazine*, 1 (1836): 209–17, reprinted in Hackett, *Notes and Comments*, 234–49, and "Misconceptions of Shakespeare upon the Stage," reprinted in Hackett, *Notes and Comments*, 217–28.

articulated a belief that was central to the pervasive success ethos of the nineteenth century and that confirmed the developing American worldview.<sup>47</sup>

Whatever Shakespeare's own designs, philosophy, and concept of humanity were, his plays had meaning to a nation that placed the individual at the center of the universe and personalized the large questions of the day. The actor Joseph Jefferson held Shakespeare responsible for the star system that prevailed for so much of the nineteenth century since "his tragedies almost without exception contain one great character on whom the interest of the play turns, and upon whom the attention of the audience is centered." Shakespeare's characters—like the Davy Crocketts and Mike Finks that dominated American folklore and the Jacksons, Websters, Clays, and Calhouns who dominated American politics—were larger than life: their passions, appetites, and dilemmas were of epic proportions. Here were forceful, meaningful people who faced, on a larger scale, the same questions as those that filled the pages of schoolbooks: the duties of children and parents, husbands and wives, governed and governors to one another. In their lives the problems of jealousy, morality, and ambition were all writ large. However flawed some of Shakespeare's central figures were, they at least acted—even the indecisive Hamlet—and bore responsibility for their own fate. If they failed, they did so because ultimately they lacked sufficient inner control. Thus Othello was undone by his jealousy and gullibility, Coriolanus by his pride, Macbeth and Richard III by their ambition. All of them could be seen as the architects of their own fortunes, masters of their own fate. All of them, Hudson taught his audiences, "contain within themselves the reason why they are there and not elsewhere, why they are so and not otherwise."<sup>48</sup>

How important this quality of individual will was can be seen in the fate of Sophocles' *Oedipus* in nineteenth-century America. The play was introduced twice in the century to New York audiences and failed both times, largely because of its subject matter. The New York *Tribune's* reaction, after *Oedipus* opened in January 1882, was typical: "King Oedipus certainly carries more woe to the square inch than anybody else that ever walked upon the stage. And it is woe of the very worst kind—without solace, and without hope." Sophocles seemed guilty of determinism—an ideological stance nineteenth-century Americans rejected out of hand. "The overmastering fates that broke men and women upon the wheel of torture that destiny might be fulfilled are far away from us, the gods that lived and cast deep shadows over men's lives are turned to stone," the New York *Herald's* reviewer wrote. "The helpful human being—who pays his way through the world finds it hard to imagine the creature kicking helpless in the traps of the gods." Similarly, critics attacked the bloodshed and immorality in *Oedipus*. The New York *Mirror* denounced "a plot like this, crammed full of murder, suicide, self-mutilation, incest, and dark deeds of a similar character."<sup>49</sup> Shakespearean drama, of course, was no

<sup>47</sup> Hudson, *Lectures on Shakespeare*, 1: 79; and playbill, Varieties Theatre, New Orleans, January 3, 4, 1870, FSL. Also see Ruth Miller Elson, *Guardians of Tradition: American Schoolbooks of the Nineteenth Century* (Lincoln, Neb., 1964), 242, 283; and Simon, *The Reading of Shakespeare in American Schools and Colleges*, 19, 26, 44.

<sup>48</sup> Downer, *The Autobiography of Joseph Jefferson*, 166–67; and Hudson, *Lectures on Shakespeare*, 1: 69.

<sup>49</sup> For the New York reaction to Sophocles, see Doris M. Alexander, "Oedipus in Victorian New York," *American Quarterly*, 12 (1960): 417–21.

less laced through with gore. But, while this quality in Sophocles seemed to Americans to be an end in itself, Shakespeare's thought patterns were either close enough or were made to seem close enough so that the violence had a point, and that point appeared to buttress American values and confirm American expectations.

This ideological equation, this ability of Shakespeare to connect with Americans' underlying beliefs, is crucial to an understanding of his role in nineteenth-century America. Much has been made of the adaptations of Shakespeare as instruments that made him somehow more understandable to American audiences. Certainly, the adaptations did work this way—but not primarily, as has been so widely claimed, by vulgarizing or simplifying him to the point of utter distortion but rather by heightening those qualities in Shakespeare that American audiences were particularly drawn to. The liberties taken with Shakespeare in nineteenth-century America were often similar to liberties taken with folklore: Shakespeare was frequently seen as common property to be treated as the user saw fit. Thus many small changes were made for practical and moral reasons without much fanfare or fuss: minor roles were consolidated to create richer acting parts; speeches and scenes, considered overly long or extraneous, were shortened or omitted; sexual references were rendered more palatable by shifting such words as “whores” to “wenches” or “maidenheads” to “virtue”; contemporary sensibilities were catered to by making Juliet eighteen rather than thirteen or by softening some of Hamlet's angriest diatribes against Ophelia and his mother. Some of the alterations bordered on the spectacular, such as the flying, singing witches in *Macbeth* and the elaborate funeral procession that accompanied Juliet's body to the tomb of the Capulets in *Romeo and Juliet*. On the whole, such limited changes were made with respect for—and sensitivity to—Shakespeare's purposes.<sup>50</sup>

It is important to realize that, while some of the alterations were imported from England and others were made in America, none were adopted indiscriminately. Of the many drastically revised editions of Shakespeare that originated in England, only three held sway in the United States during the nineteenth century: David Garrick's *Catharine and Petruchio* (1756), Nahum Tate's revision of *King Lear* (1681), and Colley Cibber's revision of *Richard III* (1700). For our purposes, the first is the least significant, since it was largely a three-act condensation of *The Taming of the Shrew*, which retained the basic thrust of Shakespeare's original and won considerable popularity as an afterpiece. If brevity was the chief virtue of Garrick's *Catharine and Petruchio*, the attractions of Cibber's *Richard* and Tate's *Lear* were more complex and suggest that those alterations of Shakespeare that became most prevalent in the United States were those that best fit the values and ideology of the period and the people.

For most of the nineteenth century Colley Cibber's *Richard III* held sway everywhere.<sup>51</sup> Cibber's revision, by cutting one-third of the lines, eliminating half of

<sup>50</sup> Grimsted, *Melodrama Unveiled*, chap. 6; George C. Branam, *Eighteenth-Century Adaptations of Shakespearean Tragedy* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1956), chap. 1; and Rankin, *The Theater in Colonial America*, 83–84, 191–92.

<sup>51</sup> In 1909 Alice Wood reported that Cibber's version of *Richard III* “is still holding the stage and is still preferred by a large part of the community,” and thus “the struggle for the ‘Richard the Third’ of Shakespeare

the characters, adding scenes from other Shakespearean plays and from Cibber's own pen, succeeded in muting the ambiguities of the original and focusing all of the evil in the person of Richard. Thus, although Cibber retained Shakespeare's essential plot and much of his poetry, he refashioned the play in such a way that, while his work was done in the England of 1700, it could have been written a hundred years later in the United States, so closely did it agree with American sensibilities concerning the centrality of the individual, the dichotomy between good and evil, and the importance of personal responsibility. Richmond's speech over the body of the vanquished Richard mirrored perfectly America's moral sense and melodramatic taste:

Farewel, Richard, and from thy dreadful end  
 May future Kings from Tyranny be warn'd;  
 Had thy aspiring Soul but stir'd in Vertue  
 With half the Spirit it has dar'd in Evil,  
 How might thy Fame have grac'd our English Annals:  
 But as thou art, how fair a Page thou'st blotted.

If Cibber added lines making clear the fate of villains, he was no less explicit concerning the destiny of heroes. After defeating Richard, Richmond is informed that "the Queen and fair Elizabeth, / Her beauteous Daughter, some few miles off, are / On their way to Gratulate your Victory." His reply must have warmed America's melodramatic heart as much as it confirmed its ideological underpinnings: "Ay, there indeed my toil's rewarded."<sup>52</sup>

Tate's altered *King Lear*, like Cibber's *Richard III*, virtually displaced Shakespeare's own version for almost two centuries. Tate, who distorted Shakespeare far more than Cibber did, devised a happy ending for what was one of the most tragic of all of Shakespeare's plays: he created a love affair between Edgar and Cordelia and allowed Cordelia and Lear to live. Although there were certainly critics of this fundamental alteration, it proved popular with theatergoers. When in 1826 James H. Hackett chided his fellow actor Edmund Kean about his choice of Tate's ending rather than Shakespeare's, Kean replied that he had attempted to restore the original, "but when I had ascertained that a large majority of the public—whom we live to please, and must please to be popular—liked Tate better than Shakespeare, I fell back upon his corruption; though in my soul I was ashamed of the prevailing taste, and of my professional condition that required me to minister unto it."<sup>53</sup> Still, many Americans defended the Tate version on ideological grounds. "The moral's now more complete," wrote a contemporary, "for although Goneril, Regan, and Edmond were deservedly punished for their crimes, yet Lear and

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is still 'on'; *The Stage History of Shakespeare's King Richard the Third*, 133, 165. As late as 1930, Arthur Colby Sprague attended a performance of *Richard III* in Boston and was treated to "the Cibber text, practically in its entirety" although Cibber's name was nowhere mentioned; Sprague, *Shakespearian Players and Performances* (1953; reprint edn., New York, 1969), 151, 212 n. 3.

<sup>52</sup> Cibber, *The Tragical History of King Richard III*, in Christopher Spencer, ed., *Five Restoration Adaptations of Shakespeare* (Urbana, Ill., 1965), 275–344. For an excellent discussion of Cibber's adaptation, see Wood, *The Stage History of Shakespeare's King Richard the Third*, chaps. 4, 6; also see Frederick W. Kilbourne, *Alterations and Adaptations of Shakespeare* (Boston, 1906), 107–12.

<sup>53</sup> Hackett, *Notes and Comments*, 227n. For John Quincy Adams's critique of Tate, see *ibid.*, 226–28.

Cordelia were killed without reason and without fault. But now they survive their enemies and virtue is crowned with happiness.”<sup>54</sup> That virtue be “crowned with happiness” was essential to the beliefs of nineteenth-century Americans. Thus audiences had the pleasure of having their expectations confirmed when Edgar concludes the play by declaiming to “Divine Cordelia”:

Thy bright Example shall convince the World  
(Whatever Storms of Fortune are decreed)  
That Truth and Vertue shall at last succeed.<sup>55</sup>

The profound and longstanding nineteenth-century American experience with Shakespeare, then, was neither accidental nor aberrant. It was based upon the language and eloquence, the artistry and humor, the excitement and action, the moral sense and worldview that Americans found in Shakespearean drama. The more firmly based Shakespeare was in nineteenth-century culture, of course, the more difficult it is to understand why he lost so much of his audience so quickly.

A COMPLETE EXPLANATION would require a separate research project of its own, but it is appropriate here to probe tentatively into the factors underlying Shakespeare’s transformation. Some of these were intricately connected to the internal history of the theater. So long as the theater was under attack on moral grounds, as it was in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, Shakespeare, because of his immense reputation, could be presented more easily and could be used to help make the theater itself legitimate. Shakespearean drama also lent itself to the prevalent star system. Only the existence of a small repertory of well-known plays, in which Shakespeare’s were central, made it feasible for the towering stars of England and America to travel throughout the United States acting with resident stock companies wherever they went. The relative dearth of native dramatists and the relative scarcity of competing forms of theatrical entertainment also figured in Shakespeare’s popularity. As these conditions were altered, Shakespeare’s popularity and centrality were affected. As important as factors peculiar to the theater were, the theater did not exist in a vacuum; it was an integral part of American culture—of interest to the historian precisely because it so frequently and so accurately indicated the conditions surrounding it. A fuller explanation must therefore be sought in the larger culture itself.<sup>56</sup>

Among the salient cultural changes at the turn of the century were those in language and rhetorical style. The oratorical mode, which so dominated the nineteenth century and which helped make Shakespeare popular, hardly survived into the twentieth century. No longer did Americans tolerate speeches of several hours’ duration. No longer was their attention riveted upon such political debates as

<sup>54</sup> As quoted in Grimsted, *Melodrama Unveiled*, 119–20.

<sup>55</sup> Tate, *The History of King Lear*, in Spencer, *Five Restoration Adaptations of Shakespeare*, 201–74. Also see Kilbourne, *Alterations and Adaptations of Shakespeare*, 157–72.

<sup>56</sup> For a first-hand account of the changes the theater underwent, see Otis Skinner, *Footlights and Spotlights: Recollections of My Life on the Stage* (Indianapolis, 1924), esp. chap. 23.



that between Webster and Hayne in 1830, which consumed several days. It is true that in the closing years of the century William Jennings Bryan could still rise to national political leadership through his superb oratorical skills, but it is equally true that he lived to see himself become an anachronism, the bearer of a style redolent of an earlier culture. The surprisingly rapid decline of oratory as a force in national life has not received the study it deserves, but certainly it was affected by the influx of millions of non-English-speaking people. The more than one thousand foreign-language newspapers and magazines published in the United States by 1910 testify graphically to the existence of a substantial group for whom Shakespeare, at least in his original language, was less familiar and less accessible.<sup>57</sup> These immigrant folk helped constitute a ready audience for the rise of the more visual entertainments such as baseball, boxing, vaudeville, burlesque, and especially the new silent movies, which could be enjoyed by a larger and often more marginal audience less steeped in the language and the culture.

If what Reuel Denney called the “deverbalization of the forum” weakened Shakespeare among some segments of the population, the parallel growth of literacy among other groups also undermined some of the props that had sustained Shakespeare’s popularity. Literacy encroached upon the pervasive oral culture that had created in nineteenth-century America an audience more comfortable with listening than with reading. Thus the generations of people accustomed to hearing and reciting things out loud—the generations for whom oral recitation of the King James version of the Bible could well have formed a bridge to the English of Shakespeare—were being depleted as America entered a new century.<sup>58</sup>

These language-related changes were accompanied by changes in taste and style. John Higham has argued that from the 1860s through the 1880s romantic idealism declined in the United States.<sup>59</sup> The melodramatic mode, to which Shakespeare lent himself so well and in which he was performed so frequently, went into a related decline. Edwin Booth, the most influential Shakespearean actor in America during the closing decades of the nineteenth century, played his roles in a less ferocious, more subtle and intellectualized fashion than his father and most of the other leading actors of the first half of the century had. When asked how his acting compared to his father’s, Booth replied simply, “I think I must be somewhat quieter.” The younger Booth’s quietness became the paradigm.<sup>60</sup> The visceral, thunderous style fell into such disfavor that by 1920 the critic Francis Hackett not

<sup>57</sup> Joshua A. Fishman, *Language Loyalty in the United States* (1966; reprint edn., New York, 1978), 59.

<sup>58</sup> For Denney’s phrase, see his essay, “The Discovery of Popular Culture,” in Robert E. Spiller and Eric Larrabee, eds., *American Perspectives: The National Self-Image in the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge, Mass., 1961), 164–65. The relationships between recitation of the King James Bible and performances of Shakespeare and between the transformation of nineteenth-century religious style and the transformation of Shakespeare need further thought and research.

<sup>59</sup> Higham, “The Reorientation of American Culture in the 1890’s,” in John Weiss, ed., *The Origins of Modern Consciousness* (Detroit, 1965), 25–48.

<sup>60</sup> The questioner was the young actor Otis Skinner; see his autobiography, *Footlights and Spotlights*, 93. As he was preparing for his first portrayal of Shylock in 1893—the year of Booth’s death—Skinner discovered the extent of Booth’s influence: “I found myself reading speeches with the Booth cadence, using the Booth gestures, attitudes and facial expressions, in short, giving a rank imitation. The ghost of the dead actor rose between me and the part.” *Ibid.*, 213. For other evidence of Booth’s influence, see Hutton, *Curiosities of the American Stage*, 293–94; Henry Austin Clapp, *Reminiscences of a Dramatic Critic* (1902; reprint edn., Freeport, N.Y., 1972), chap. 15; and Charles H. Shattuck, *The Hamlet of Edwin Booth* (Urbana, Ill., 1969).

only berated John Barrymore for his emotional portrayal of Richard III but also took Shakespeare himself to task for the “unsophisticated” manner in which he had crafted the play—the play that nineteenth-century audiences had enjoyed above all others: “the plot, the psychology, the history, seem to me infantile. . . . Are we led to understand Richard? No, only to moralize over him. Thus platitude makes cowards of us all.”<sup>61</sup>

These gradual and decisive changes in language, style, and taste are important but by themselves do not constitute a totally satisfying explanation for the diminished popularity of Shakespeare. As important as changes in language were, they did not prevent the development of radio as a central entertainment medium at the beginning of the 1920s or the emergence of talking movies at the end of that decade. Nor was there anything inherent in the new popular media that necessarily relegated Shakespeare to a smaller, elite audience; on the contrary, he was quite well suited to the new forms of presentation that came to dominance. His comedies had an abundance of slapstick and contrived happy endings, his tragedies and historical plays had more than their share of action. Most importantly, having written for a stage devoid of scenery, Shakespeare could and did incorporate as much spatial mobility as he desired into his plays—twenty-five scene changes in *Macbeth*, one of his shortest plays, and forty-two in *Antony and Cleopatra*, where the action gravitated from Alexandria to such locales as Rome, Messina, Athens, and Syria. This fluidity—which caused innumerable problems for the stagecraft of the nineteenth century—was particularly appropriate to the movies, which could visually reproduce whatever Shakespeare had in mind, and to radio, which, like the Elizabethan stage itself, could rely upon the imagination of its audience. That these new media did not take full advantage of so recently a popular source of entertainment as Shakespearean drama demands further explanation.<sup>62</sup>

SHAKESPEARE DID NOT, OF COURSE, DISAPPEAR from American culture after the turn of the century; he was transformed from a playwright for the general public into one for a specific audience. This metamorphosis from popular culture to polite culture, from entertainment to erudition, from the property of “Everyman” to the possession of a more elite circle needs to be seen with the perspective of other transformations that took place in nineteenth-century America.

At the beginning of the century, as we have seen, the theater was a microcosm; it housed both the entire spectrum of the population and the complete range of entertainment from tragedy to farce, juggling to ballet, opera to minstrelsy. The theater drew all ranks of people to one place where they constituted what Erving Goffman has called a “focused gathering”—a set of people who relate to one another through the medium of a common activity. The term is useful in reminding us that, in the theater, people not only sat under one roof, they

<sup>61</sup> Hackett, “After the Play,” *New Republic*, March 24, 1920, p. 122.

<sup>62</sup> For the suitability of Shakespeare to modern media, see Roger Manvell, *Shakespeare and the Film* (New York, 1971), 9–10; Jan Kott, *Shakespeare, Our Contemporary*, trans. Boleslaw Taborski (Garden City, N.Y., 1964), 231–35; and John Wain, *The Living World of Shakespeare* (London, 1978), 2–7.

interacted. In this sense, the theater in the first half of the nineteenth century constituted a microcosm of still another sort: a microcosm of the relations between the various socioeconomic groups in America. The descriptions of such observers as Washington Irving and Mrs. Trollope make it clear that those relations were beset by tensions and conflicts. Even so convinced a democrat as Whitman complained by 1847 that the New York theaters were becoming “‘low’ places where vulgarity (not only on the stage, but in front of it) is in the ascendant, and bad-taste carries the day with hardly a pleasant point to mitigate its coarseness.” Whitman excepted only the Park Theatre “because the audiences there are always intelligent, and there is a dash of superiority thrown over the Performances.” Earlier in the century the Park Theater had received the patronage of the entire public; by the 1830s it had become more exclusive, while the Bowery, Chatham, and other theaters became the preserves of gallery gods and groundlings. This development was not exclusive to New York. “I have discovered that the *people* are with us,” Tyrone Power reported from Baltimore in 1833, since the Front Theatre, at which he was performing, drew “the sturdy democracy of the good city,” while its rival, the Holiday Theatre, was “considered the aristocratic house.”<sup>63</sup>

Not only was there an increasing segregation of audiences but ultimately of actors and styles as well. On a winter evening in 1863, George William Curtis, the editor of *Harper's*, took a “rustic friend” to two New York theaters. First they went to see Edwin Forrest at Niblo's Gardens. “It was crammed with people. All the seats were full, and the aisles, and the steps. And the people sat upon the stairs that ascend to the second tier, and they hung upon the balustrade, and they peeped over shoulders and between heads.” Forrest's acting, Curtis wrote, was “a boundless exaggeration of all the traditional conventions of the stage.” Still he conceded that Forrest “move[d] his world nightly. . . . There were a great many young women around us crying. . . . They were not refined nor intellectual women. They were, perhaps, rather coarse. But they cried good hearty tears.” After one act his friend whispered, “I have had as much as I can hold,” and they went up the street to the Winter Garden, where Edwin Booth was portraying Iago. “The difference of the spectacle was striking. The house was comfortably full, not crowded. The air of the audience was that of refined attention rather than of eager interest. Plainly it was a more cultivated and intellectual audience.” And just as plainly they were seeing a very different type of acting. “Pale, thin, intellectual, with long black hair and dark eyes, Shakespeare's Iago was perhaps never more articulately represented. . . . ; all that we saw of Booth was admirable.”<sup>64</sup>

In 1810 John Howard Payne complained, “The judicious few are very few indeed. They are always to be found in a Theatre, like flowers in a desert, but they are nowhere sufficiently numerous to *fill* one.” By the second half of the century this was evidently no longer the case. Separate theaters, often called *legitimate*

<sup>63</sup> Goffman, *Encounters: Two Studies in the Sociology of Interaction* (Indianapolis, 1961); Whitman, “Miserable State of the Stage,” *Brooklyn Eagle*, February 8, 1847, reprinted in Montrose J. Moses and John Mason Brown, eds., *American Theatre as Seen by Its Critics* (New York, 1934), 70–72; and Power, *Impressions of America*, 1: 141.

<sup>64</sup> Curtis, “Editor's Easy Chair,” *Harper's New Monthly Magazine*, December 1863, pp. 131–33. For the contrast between the two actors portraying Hamlet, see Hutton, *Curiosities of the American Stage*, 281.

theaters, catering to the “judicious,” appeared in city after city, leaving the other theaters to those whom Payne called “the idle, profligate, and vulgar.”<sup>65</sup> The psychologist Robert Somer has shown the connections between space and status and has argued that “society compensates for blurred social distinctions by clear spatial ones.” Such scholars as Burton J. Bledstein and William R. Taylor have noted the Victorian urge to structure or rationalize space.<sup>66</sup> As the traditional spatial distinctions among pit, gallery, and boxes within the theater were undermined by the aggressive behavior of audiences caught up in the egalitarian exuberance of the period and freed in the atmosphere of the theater from many of the demands of normative behavior, this urge gradually led to the creation of separate theaters catering to distinct audiences and shattered for good the phenomenon of theater as a social microcosm of the entire society.

This dramatic split in the American theater was part of more important bifurcations that were taking place in American culture and society. How closely the theater registered societal dissonance can be seen in the audiences’ volatile reaction to anything they considered condescending behavior, out of keeping with a democratic society. The tension created by hierarchical seating arrangements helps explain the periodic rain of objects that the gallery unleashed upon those in more privileged parts of the theater. When Washington Irving was “saluted aside [his] head with a rotten pippen” and rose to shake his cane at the gallery gods, he was restrained by a man behind him who warned that this would bring down upon him the full wrath of the people; the only course of action, he was advised, was to “sit down quietly and bend your back to it.”<sup>67</sup>

English actors, who were *ipso facto* suspected of aristocratic leanings, had to tread with particular caution. Edmund Kean failed to do so in 1821 when he cancelled his performance of *Richard III* in Boston because only twenty people were in the audience. The next day’s papers denounced him for insulting and dishonoring the American people and suggested that he be taken “by the nose, and dragged . . . before the curtain to make his excuses for his conduct.” Four years later, when Kean returned to Boston, he attempted to make those excuses, but it was too late. The all-male audience that packed the theater and overflowed onto the streets allowed him neither to perform *Richard III* nor to “apologize for [his] indiscretions.” A barrage of nuts, foodstuffs, and bottles of odorous drugs drove him weeping from the stage and the theater, after which the anti-Keanites in the pit and gallery turned on his supporters in the boxes and did grievous damage to the theater. Kean performed in Philadelphia, New York, and Charleston but precipitated another riot in Baltimore and finally left the country for good.<sup>68</sup>

In 1834 the Irishman Tyrone Power committed exactly the same error—he

<sup>65</sup> Payne, as quoted in Grimsted, *Melodrama Unveiled*, 56–57.

<sup>66</sup> Somer, *Personal Space: The Behavioral Basis of Design* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J., 1969), chap. 2; Bledstein, *The Culture of Professionalism: The Middle Class and the Development of Higher Education in America* (New York, 1976), 58–64, 80; and Taylor, “Public Space, Public Opinion, and the Origins of Mass Culture,” paper presented to a joint meeting of the American Council of Learned Societies and the Hungarian Academy of Sciences, held in Budapest, August 1982.

<sup>67</sup> Irving, *Letters of Jonathan Oldstyle*, 12.

<sup>68</sup> Francis Courtney Wemyss, *Twenty-Six Years of the Life of an Actor and Manager* (New York, 1847), 97–99, 113–15; and Shattuck, *Shakespeare on the American Stage*, 2–43.

cancelled a performance in Albany, New York, when the audience numbered less than ten—and found that even his outspoken democratic sympathies could not save him from a similar fate. When he next performed two days later, he reported, “the house was filled with men, and everything foreboded a violent outbreak. . . . On my appearance the din was mighty deafening; . . . every invention for making the voice of humanity bestial was present and in full use. The boxes I observed to be occupied by well-dressed men, who generally either remained neutral, or by signs sought that I should be heard.” Upon the intervention of the manager, Power was allowed to explain himself, after which “the row was resumed with added fierceness: not a word of either play or farce was heard.”<sup>69</sup>

The full extent of class feeling and divisions existing in egalitarian America was revealed on a bloody Thursday in May 1849 at and around the Astor Place Opera House in New York City. The immediate catalyst was a longstanding feud between two leading actors, the Englishman William Charles Macready and the American Edwin Forrest, who had become symbols of antithetical values. Forrest’s vigorous acting style, his militant love of his country, his outspoken belief in its citizenry, and his frequent articulation of the possibilities of self-improvement and social mobility endeared him to the American people, while Macready’s cerebral acting style, his aristocratic demeanor, and his identification with the wealthy gentry made him appear Forrest’s diametric opposite. On May 7, Macready and Forrest appeared against one another in separate productions of *Macbeth*. Forrest’s performance was a triumph; Macready’s was never heard—he was silenced by a storm of boos and cries of “Down with the codfish aristocracy,” which drowned out appeals for order from those in the boxes, and by an avalanche of eggs, apples, potatoes, lemons, and, ultimately, chairs hurled from the gallery, which forced him to leave the stage in the third act.

Macready was now prepared to leave the country as well, but he was dissuaded by persons of “highest respectability,” including Washington Irving and Herman Melville, who urged him not to encourage the mob by giving in to it and assured him “that the good sense and respect for order prevailing in this community will sustain you.” Eighteen hundred people filled the Astor Place Opera House on the evening of May 10, with some ten thousand more on the streets outside. Assisted by the quick arrest of the most voluble opponents inside the theater, Macready completed his performance of *Macbeth*, but only under great duress. Those outside—stirred by orators’ shouts of “Burn the damned den of the aristocracy!” and “You can’t go in there without . . . kid gloves and a white vest, damn ’em!”—bombarded the theater with paving stones, attempted to storm the entrances, and were stopped only after detachments of militia fired point blank into the crowd. In the end at least twenty-two people were killed, and over one hundred and fifty were wounded or injured.<sup>70</sup>

<sup>69</sup> Power, *Impressions of America*, 1: 351–55.

<sup>70</sup> My account of the Astor Place Riot is based on Richard Moody, *The Astor Place Riot* (Bloomington, Ind., 1958), 12, 172; William Toynbee, ed., *The Diaries of William Charles Macready*, 2 (London, 1912), 404–29; and Peter G. Buckley, “The Astor Place Riot and Jenny Lind,” paper presented at the Ninety-Sixth Annual Meeting of the American Historical Association, held in Los Angeles, December 28–30, 1981, and “‘A Privileged Place’: New York Theatre Riots, 1817–1849,” paper presented at the annual meeting of the Organization of American

If the eighty-six men arrested were at all typical, the crowd had been composed of workingmen—coopers, printers, butchers, carpenters, servants, sailmakers, machinists, clerks, masons, bakers, plumbers, laborers—whose feelings were probably reflected in a speech given at a rally the next day: “Fellow citizens, for what—for whom was this murder committed? . . . To please the aristocracy of the city, at the expense of the lives of unoffending citizens . . . , to revenge the aristocrats of this city against the working classes.” Although such observers as the *New York Tribune* saw the riot as the “absurd and incredible” result of a petty quarrel, the role of class was not ignored. The *Home Journal* viewed the riot as a protest against “aristocratizing the pit” in such new and exclusive theaters as the Astor Place Opera House and warned that in the future the republic’s rich would have to “be mindful where its luxuries offend.” The *New York Herald* asserted that the riot had introduced a “new aspect in the minds of many, . . . nothing short of a controversy and collision between those who have been styled the ‘exclusives,’ or ‘upper ten,’ and the great popular masses.” The *New York* correspondent for the Philadelphia *Public Ledger* lamented a few days after the riot, “It leaves behind a feeling to which this community has hitherto been a stranger—an opposition of classes—the rich and poor . . . , a feeling that there is now in our country, in New York City, what every good patriot hitherto has considered it his duty to deny—a high and a low class.”<sup>71</sup>

THE PURPOSE OF ACTING, Shakespeare had Hamlet say in his charge to the players, “was and is, to hold, as ‘twere, the mirror up to nature; to show virtue her own feature, scorn her own image, and the very age and body of time his form and pressure” (III.ii). The functions of the nineteenth-century American stage were even broader. As a central institution, the theater not only mirrored the sweep of events in the larger society but presented an arena in which those events could unfold. The Astor Place Riot was both an indication of and a catalyst for the cultural changes that came to characterize the United States at the end of the century. Theater no longer functioned as a cultural form that embodied all classes within a shared public space, nor did Shakespeare much longer remain the common property of all Americans. The changes were not cataclysmic; they were gradual and took place in rough stages: physical or spatial bifurcation, with different socioeconomic groups becoming associated with different theaters in large urban centers, was followed inevitably by the stylistic bifurcation described by George William Curtis and ultimately culminated in a content bifurcation, which saw a growing chasm between “serious” and “popular” culture.

Increasingly in the second half of the nineteenth century, as public life became everywhere more fragmented, the concept of culture took on hierarchical connota-

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Historians, held in St. Louis, April 8–11, 1982. I am extremely grateful to Buckley for sharing with me not only his unpublished papers but also a chapter from his draft dissertation. Moody sets the number of dead at thirty-one—twenty-two during the riot itself and nine more as a result of wounds received during the riot; in his more recent research Buckley has only been able to account for a total of twenty-two dead—eighteen during the riot and four more as a result of wounds received.

<sup>71</sup> *New York Tribune*, May 12, 1849; *New York Herald*, May 12, 1849; *Home Journal*, May 12, 1849, as quoted in Montrose J. Moses, *The Fabulous Forrest: The Record of an American Actor* (Boston, 1929), 262; and Philadelphia *Public Ledger*, May 16, 1849.

tions along the lines of Matthew Arnold's definition—"the best that has been thought and known in the world . . . , the study and pursuit of perfection." Looking back on "the disgraceful scenes of the Astor Place Riot" some thirty years later, Henry James pronounced it a manifestation of the "instinctive hostility of barbarism to culture."<sup>72</sup> This practice of distinguishing "culture" from lesser forms of expression became so common that by 1915 Van Wyck Brooks found it necessary to incorporate the terms "highbrow" and "lowbrow" to express the chasm between which "there is no community, no genial middle ground." "What side of American life is not touched by this antithesis?" Brooks asked. "What explanation of American life is more central or more illuminating?"<sup>73</sup> Walt Whitman understood the drift of events as early as 1871. "We find ourselves abruptly in close quarters with the enemy," he charged in *Democratic Vistas*, with "this word Culture, or what it has come to represent." "Refinement and delicatessen," he warned, "threaten to eat us up, like a cancer." Whitman insisted that culture should not be "restricted by conditions ineligible to the masses," should not be created "for a single class alone, or for the parlors or lecture-rooms," and placed his hopes for the creation of a classless, democratic culture in the leadership of the new "middling" groups—"men and women with occupations, well-off owners of houses and acres, and with cash in the bank."<sup>74</sup>

The groups to which Whitman turned were neither willing nor able to fulfill his expectations. The emergence of new middle and upper-middle classes, created by rapid industrialization in the nineteenth century, seems to have accelerated rather than inhibited the growing distinctions between elite and mass culture. When, in the waning years of the century, Thorstein Veblen constructed his concept of conspicuous consumption, he included not only the obvious material possessions but also "immaterial" goods—"the knowledge of dead languages and the occult sciences; of correct spelling; of syntax and prosody; of the various forms of domestic music . . . ; of the latest proprieties of dress, furniture, and equipage"; of the ancient "classics"—all of which constituted a conspicuous culture that helped confer legitimacy on the newly emergent groups.<sup>75</sup> "Culture" became something refined, ideal, removed from and elevated above the mundane events of everyday life. This helps explain the vogue during this period of manuals of etiquette, of private libraries and rare books, of European art and music displayed and performed in ornate—often neoclassical—museums and concert halls.<sup>76</sup>

<sup>72</sup> Arnold, *Culture and Anarchy* (New York, 1875), 44, 47; and James, as quoted in Moses, *The Fabulous Forrest*, 246.

<sup>73</sup> Brooks, *America's Coming-of-Age* (New York, 1915), 6–7. Brooks popularized rather than coined the terms. According to the *Supplement to the Oxford English Dictionary*, "highbrow" was first used in the 1880s to describe intellectual or aesthetic superiority, while "lowbrow" came to mean someone or something neither "highly intellectual" nor "aesthetically refined" shortly after 1900. The term "middlebrow" seems to have come into use in the 1920s.

<sup>74</sup> Whitman, *Democratic Vistas*, in Kaplan, *Whitman: Poetry and Prose*, 950–51, 961–62. For an excellent discussion of Whitman and culture after the Civil War, see Alan Trachtenberg, *The Incorporation of America: Culture and Society in the Gilded Age* (New York, 1982), 158–60.

<sup>75</sup> Veblen, *The Theory of the Leisure Class* (1899; Penguin edn., New York, 1979), 45, 397–98.

<sup>76</sup> My sense of late nineteenth-century American culture was enhanced by the following: Trachtenberg, *The Incorporation of America*; Lewis A. Erenberg, *Steppin' Out: New York Nightlife and the Transformation of American Culture, 1890–1930* (Westport, Conn., 1981); Daniel Walker Howe, "American Victorianism as a Culture," *American Quarterly*, 27 (1975): 507–32; John F. Kasson, *Amusing the Million: Coney Island at the Turn of the Century* (New York, 1978); John G. Sproat, *"The Best Men": Liberal Reformers in the Gilded Age* (New York, 1968); Arthur

It also helps explain the transformation of Shakespeare, who fit the new cultural equation so well. His plays had survived the test of time and were therefore immortal; his language was archaic and therefore too complex for ordinary people; his poetry was sublime and therefore elevating—especially if his plays could be seen in a theater and a style of one's own choice, devoid of constant reminders that they contained earthier elements and more universal appeals as well. The point is not that there was a conspiracy to remove Shakespeare from the American people but that a cultural development occurred which produced the same result—a result that was compounded by the fact that during these years American entertainment was shaped by many of the same forces of consolidation and centralization that molded other businesses.<sup>77</sup>

If the managers of the new theater chains and huge booking agencies approached their tasks with a hierarchical concept of culture, with the conviction that an unbridgeable gulf separated the tastes and predilections of the various socioeconomic groups, and with the belief that Shakespeare was “highbrow” culture, then we have isolated another decisive factor in his transformation.

The transformation of Shakespeare is important precisely because it was not unique. It was part of a larger transformation that Richard Sennett has argued characterized Western European culture after the eighteenth century, in which public culture fractured into a series of discrete private cultures that had less and less to do with one another. The audience that had been heterogenous, interactive, and participatory became homogeneous, atomized, and passive—in Sennett's phrase, “a spectator rather than a witness.”<sup>78</sup> When George Makepeace Towle was rediscovering his native land shortly after the Civil War, opera was still part of the public domain. “*Lucretia Borgia* and *Faust*, *The Barber of Seville* and *Don Giovanni*, are everywhere popular,” he wrote in 1870; “you may hear their airs in the drawing rooms and concert halls, as well as whistled by the street boys and ground out on the hand organs.” In the twentieth century, such scenes became increasingly rare as grand opera joined Shakespeare in the elevated circles of elite culture.<sup>79</sup>

The journey could lead in the opposite direction as well. From 1840 to 1900, chromolithography—the process by which original paintings were reproduced lithographically in color and sold in the millions to all segments of the population—

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M. Schlesinger, *Learning How to Behave: A Historical Study of American Etiquette Books* (New York, 1946); John Tomisch, *A Genteel Endeavor: American Culture and Politics in the Gilded Age* (Stanford, 1971); T. J. Jackson Lears, *No Place of Grace: Antimodernism and the Transformation of American Culture, 1880–1920* (New York, 1981); Stow Persons, *The Decline of American Gentility* (New York, 1973); Robert R. Roberts, “Gilt, Gingerbread, and Realism: The Public and Its Taste,” in H. Wayne Morgan, ed., *The Gilded Age: A Reappraisal* (Syracuse, N.Y., 1963), 169–95; Robert Wiebe, *The Search for Order* (New York, 1967); and George Frederickson, *The Inner Civil War: Northern Intellectuals and the Crisis of the Union* (New York, 1965).

<sup>77</sup> See Albert F. McLean, Jr., *American Vaudeville as Ritual* (Lexington, Ky., 1965), 16–17; Foster Rhea Dulles, *A History of Recreation: America Learns to Play* (New York, 1965), 219; Russel Nye, *The Unembarrassed Muse: The Popular Arts in America* (New York, 1970), 170; and Wilson, *Three Hundred Years of American Drama and Theatre*, 301.

<sup>78</sup> Sennett, *The Fall of Public Man* (New York, 1978), esp. 261. For the argument that by the 1880s Americans became preoccupied with the private rather than the public taste, also see Russell Lynes, *The Tastemakers: The Shaping of American Popular Taste* (1955; reprint edn., New York, 1980), 117.

<sup>79</sup> Towle, *American Society*, 4. For a discussion of opera as popular music in nineteenth-century America, see Charles Hamm, *Yesterdays: Popular Song in America* (New York, 1983), chap. 4.



was one of the most familiar art forms in the nation. It was hailed as a vehicle for bringing art “within the reach of all classes of society” and praised as “art republicanized and naturalized in America.” These very characteristics made chromolithography anathema to E. L. Godkin of *The Nation* and the genteel group for whom he spoke. To Godkin, chromolithography symbolized the packaged “pseudo-culture” that “diffused through the community a kind of smattering of all sorts of knowledge” and gave people the false confidence of being “cultured.” “A society of ignoramuses who know they are ignoramuses, might lead to a tolerably happy and useful existence,” he wrote, “but a society of ignoramuses each of whom thinks he is a Solon, would be an approach to Bedlam let loose. . . . The result is a kind of mental and moral chaos.” Godkin’s view prevailed. By the 1890s the term “chromo” had come to mean “ugly” or “offensive.” Thus, while at the Philadelphia Centennial Exposition in 1876 chromolithographs were exhibited as “Fine Arts” along with sculpture, painting, and engravings, seventeen years later at Chicago’s Columbian Exposition of 1893 they were classified as, and exhibited with, “Industrial” or “Commercial” arts. Indeed, the Columbian Exposition itself, with its sharp physical division between the Midway, containing common entertainments, and the Court of Honor or White City, containing monumental classic architecture, stood as a fitting symbol of the bifurcated culture that had come to characterize the United States.<sup>80</sup>

This is not to suggest the existence of an idyllic era when the American people experienced a cultural unity devoid of tensions. In the nineteenth-century folk paintings of Edward Hicks, the wolf and the lamb, the lion and the fatling, the leopard and the kid might occupy the same territory in harmony, but reality was more complex—as Hicks and his countrymen well knew. Still, America in the first half of the nineteenth century did experience greater cultural sharing in the sense that cultural lines were more fluid, cultural spaces less rigidly subdivided than they were to become. Certainly, what I have called a shared public culture did not disappear with the nineteenth century. Twentieth-century Americans, especially in the palaces they built to the movies and in their sporting arenas, continued to share public space and public culture. But with a difference. Cultural space became more sharply defined, more circumscribed, and less fluid than it had been. Americans might sit together to watch the same films and athletic contests, but those who also desired to experience “legitimate” theater or hear “serious” music went to segregated temples devoted to “high” or “classical” art. Cultural lines are generally porous, and there were important exceptions—Toscanini was featured on commercial radio and television, and Shakespeare’s works were offered on the movie screen. But these were conscious exceptions to what normally prevailed. The cultural fare that was actively and regularly shared by all segments of the population belonged to the lower rungs of the cultural hierarchy.

<sup>80</sup> This account of chromolithography is based upon Peter C. Marzio, *The Democratic Art: Pictures for a Nineteenth-Century America* (Boston, 1979). For the Columbian Exposition of 1893, see Reid Badger, *The Great American Fair: The World’s Columbian Exposition and American Culture* (Chicago, 1979); David F. Burg, *Chicago’s White City of 1893* (Lexington, Ky., 1976); and John C. Cawelti, “America on Display: The World’s Fairs of 1876, 1893, 1933,” in Frederick Cople Jaher, ed., *The Age of Industrialism in America* (New York, 1968), 317–63.

As we gradually come to the realization that Fred Astaire was one of this century's fine dancers, Louis Armstrong one of its important musicians, Charlie Chaplin one of its acute social commentators, we must remember that they could be shared by all of the people only when they were devalued as "popular" art, only when they were rendered nonthreatening by being relegated to the nether regions of the cultural complex. By the twentieth century, art could not have it both ways: no longer could it simultaneously enjoy high cultural status and mass popularity. Shakespeare is a prime example. He retained his lofty position only by being limited and confined to audiences whose space was no longer shared with, and whose sensibilities no longer violated by, the bulk of the populace.