

OXFORD SHAKESPEARE TOPICS

Shakespeare
& the
Victorians



STUART SILLARS

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GENERAL EDITORS: PETER HOLLAND AND STANLEY WELLS

*Shakespeare and
the Victorians*

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| Oxford Shakespeare Topics

Shakespeare and the Victorians

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The Shakespearian edifice that the Victorians constructed for themselves was extensive, and had many mansions. Any attempt to do it justice in a small introductory volume will inevitably be selective, and for the areas that this one does not cover I would point readers to the Further Reading section with which it concludes, which gives advice on some of the more specialized areas of the subject that space has excluded here. After long and careful thought and discussion with the series editors, I have decided to return to the original policy of the series and not include footnotes, but instead to make sources clear in the text and then give full details with the other volumes suggested for further study. The illustrations have been selected to present a representative range of visual treatments of Shakespeare from the period, and also as far as possible for their relative absence from published sources. Most of the paintings referred to in Chapter 4 can be easily seen on the websites of the relevant galleries; consequently, images of contemporary engravings or of less familiar works have been included here.

A particular problem when writing about the Victorians lies in the choice of words that both reflect the usages of the time and remain clear to readers of the present day. For names of the plays and the characters I have retained earlier usages, with *2 Henry VI* rather than *The First Part of the Contention*, Falstaff not Oldcastle, and Imogen not Innogen. To reflect today's thinking I have used the word 'actor' for performers of both gender and, although the Victorians were quite happy about 'femininity', I have opted for the perhaps less contentious 'femaleness'. That said, I have retained stage names such as 'Mrs Patrick Campbell'. Since Henry Irving, Beerbohm Tree, and William Poel all devised their own stage names, it seemed ungracious to deny that right to their female partners—most particularly since a declaration of marriage was presumably an important statement of respectability of a kind as yet not always conferred on someone using the deeply ambivalent term 'actress' to describe her occupation.

Any work of this kind inevitably depends on the help of others, and it is a pleasure here to thank those who have contributed generously of their time and expertise. I am especially grateful to Stanley Wells and Peter Holland, initially for inviting me to write this book and subsequently for their guidance and kindness during its gestation. The poet and critic Clive Wilmer showed great kindness in helping the discussion of Ruskin and Shakespeare. As always, the librarians of the Rare Books Room, Cambridge University Library, were of very great assistance. In Oxford, Jacqueline Baker gave enthusiastic support from the outset, and Rosie Chambers oversaw the production process with great efficiency. Susan Frampton copy-edited the text with precision, tact, and patience. To them all, I offer my sincere thanks, grateful for the pleasure and privilege of working with skilled professionals. For all errors, inaccuracies, and infelicities that remain, however, I take sole responsibility.

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Shakespeare the Victorian

Many months before April 1864, local worthies and the great and good began planning how to celebrate with due decorum the tercentenary of Shakespeare's birth. Preparations were as extensive and methodical as every other Victorian venture, typifying the age's concern for propriety and order. When the eventful date arrived, the festivities themselves were equally revealing: to the later onlooker, they are a formidable, inclusive lens through which the period's construction of Shakespeare is refracted. That the plays themselves occupied only a small part of the celebrations, enfolded as they were within banquets, excursions, sermons, dances and concerts, the organisation and physical location of which reflected civic pride and due observance of social rank, makes them an immediate representative sample of the Victorian creation of what *Punch*, the comic magazine founded in the early years of the period, called 'Shakespeareanity'. That scholarly activities—lectures, publications, editions—were conspicuously absent from the celebrations evidences a division between critical endeavours and those of the stage and wider society, a separation remaining largely unbridged throughout the period.

On 23 April, the Stratford festivities began, not with a performance of a play but with a celebratory banquet and firework display; it was clear from this that, while Shakespeare was being celebrated, the celebrations themselves would be wholly Victorian in nature. The original scheme had been that the second evening would be the climax of the celebrations, but what transpired was not quite what had been planned. The Stratford committee, headed by the local

brewing magnate and Shakespearian amateur Edward Flower, and composed of other civic dignitaries, had wanted a performance of *Hamlet*. But who should play the prince? Charles Kean, having completed his tenure at the Princess's Theatre, had departed for a tour of Australia, and had in any case been far from successful in the role. Samuel Phelps, famed for his *Hamlet* and innovative in his productions when managing Sadler's Wells in the 1840s and 50s, was now widely considered old-fashioned in his declamatory style. To many, his successor was Charles Albert Fechter, of whose début in the role the *Athenaeum* (23 March 1861) simply asserted 'Mr Fechter does not act; he is Hamlet'. In a tradition not uncommon among committees, both actors were invited. Phelps, already furious with Fechter, withdrew; Fechter, after promising faithfully to perform, pulled out much later.

What might seem an outbreak of offstage histrionics was a reflection of a larger uncertainty in the theatre at the time. Phelps's time had passed; Kean's tenure at the Princess's, where elaborate scenery was as important as personal performance, had ended in 1859. In the mid-1860s the theatre lacked a single dominant power. Fechter came close, but his popularity was limited for many by his nationality: of Anglo-German descent, he was brought up in France, where he established his reputation before coming to England. There were many other figures, but no outstanding leader: it was not until the 1880s that Henry Irving would emerge as the eminent tragedian, in the process making the profession respectable and becoming the first theatrical knight.

In an atmosphere of mingled relief and smug satisfaction that the Frenchman would be both unsuitable and untrustworthy, a double bill of *The Comedy of Errors* and *Romeo and Juliet* was given on the 27th. Such yoking together of tragedy and comedy, or even the inclusion of two or three quite different plays, was by no means unusual. The idea of a single play being the focus of an evening's theatre-going was as yet rare, developing a little later in the era of much larger theatres with associated bars and restaurants, and the longer intervals demanded by changes of ever more complex scenery. The evening also typified earlier production styles in using the same scenery for both plays—the sets and props for *Romeo* that had been used a few days before at the Princess's Theatre. In the comedy, the

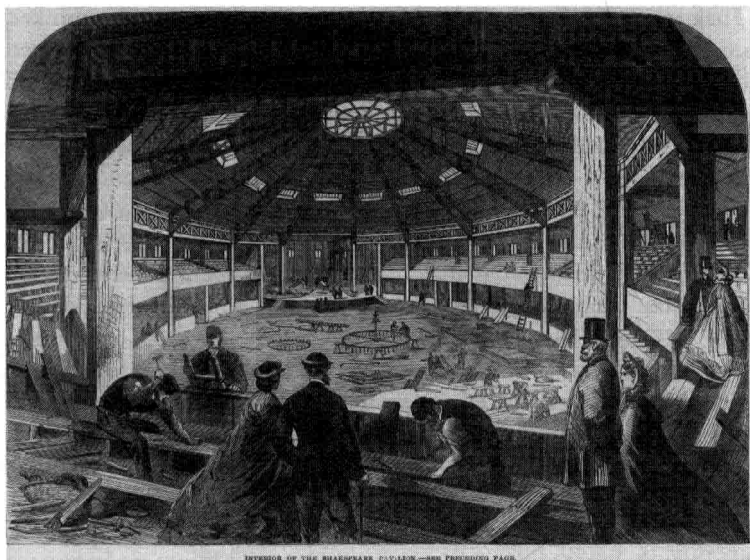
two Dromios were played by actors celebrated for the roles, the Brothers Webb, identical twins who gave the performance something of the quality of a Victorian circus. In the tragedy, as Juliet the French actress Stella Colas was generally thought beautiful in appearance but incomprehensible in diction; as Romeo, J. Nelson provided matching home-grown inadequacy, and it was left to George Vining as Mercutio and Mrs Henry Marston as the Nurse to carry the performance, to the general approval of the capacity audience of 3,000. Unusually for the period, it used the revision of the text by David Garrick in which Juliet recovers briefly to exchange final vows with Romeo. A century earlier this had been a great success, and Benjamin Wilson had painted the recovery scene being played by Garrick and George Anne Bellamy. Now, though, it was seen by many as unfashionable and by some as an inappropriate tampering with Shakespeare's text, the pursuit of the elusive authoritative original forms of the plays being a constant concern for scholars, editors, and some, though by no means all, performers.

Textual choices apart, both productions reflected the state of the theatre, its performers and its audiences, at the centre of Victoria's reign. The inclusion of foreign actors, either using their own language or speaking the parts with heavy accents, was frequent in London, balanced by visits of English actors to Europe, America or, in the case of the Keans, Australia. That a major female performer appeared under the name of 'Mrs Henry Marston' suggests the status of the actress at a time before individual identity was established by later women actors, notably Ellen Terry. A similar uncertainty of station was shown by Helen Faucit who, celebrated as Juliet and other major Shakespearian roles in the 1840s, and prized for her tenderness and womanly grace as Imogen, had in 1851 married the literary scholar Theodore Martin, and had increasingly moved away from the stage in consequence. She took no part in the tercentenary celebrations, only performing once at Stratford when, in 1879, she played Beatrice in *Much Ado About Nothing* in the recently completed Shakespeare Memorial Theatre.

The evening before the climactic double bill, *Twelfth Night* had been performed, followed by a more recent comic piece, *My Aunt's Advice*. Both were given by the company of the Theatre Royal, Haymarket, under the direction of its manager John Baldwin

Buckstone, one of a small but significant body of actor-managers whose companies balanced Shakespeare against more popular contemporary pieces in the somewhat precarious business of theatrical management. Buckstone took the role in which he was celebrated, Sir Andrew Aguecheek, with other members of his company in a reprise of their Haymarket roles. The Haymarket was one of many smaller theatres competing for audiences in the century's middle years. The theatre itself, built to a design by John Nash in 1821, had been remodelled in the succeeding decades, most notably in the shortening of the forestage, widening of the proscenium and the removal of proscenium doors to reflect changes in performance style. What was performed was also significant: the Haymarket had been one of the earliest theatres to challenge the restrictions on serious drama in theatres other than Drury Lane and Covent Garden, and was given a special licence for such productions before the 1843 Act allowed them in all theatres. Despite this, it was outside the narrow area of fashionable London, described in the 1850s as 'uncompromisingly in the foreign quarter' yet still 'generally acknowledged to be one of the best playhouses in London'. In design, repertoire, location and reputation, it was representative of the state of theatrical presentation in the middle years of Victoria's reign.

The setting of all these productions was a wooden Pavilion, specially constructed on the meadows beside the River Avon. In its design and the uses to which it was put it presented a forceful emblem of the place of Shakespeare in Victorian society (see Illustration 1.1). The building was a twelve-sided structure with two stages facing each other, one used for theatrical performances, the other as a space for aristocratic dining or, with part of its dais removed to form an orchestra pit, for choral-orchestral concerts. The auditorium, at floor level and in a gallery, offered seating of various kinds at different prices, from the silk-and-velvet chairs before the stage to the wooden benches of the higher galleries. This sharp demarcation of rank through differences in price reflected practice in London and in regional theatres housing touring companies, and the repertory companies of theatres built as part of the emerging civic identities of the industrial north. The building was essentially a physical embodiment of Victorian society, its structures of rank and its cultural forms, with Shakespeare's plays in a firm, but not dominant, position within them.



1.1 The interior of the Stratford Pavilion under construction for the tercentenary celebrations. The stage is in the distance, seen from the gallery where visitors could pay to see the opening banquet in progress; that the figures shown represent three clear layers of Victorian society is suggestive of the event's inclusiveness, but also its strict social divisions.

That it was a temporary rather than a permanent structure, like the rotunda built by Garrick for his celebrations nearly a century before, was further suggestive of the place of Shakespeare and the theatre in the national psyche: the Bard was a figure of national importance, but not one whose works were deserving of a permanent, still less a nationally supported, place of performance.

This reflects an ambivalence seen throughout the tercentenary celebrations, and the larger society they represent. Many were passionate in their support of the theatre and Shakespeare's place in performance. John Ruskin, the 'sage of Denmark Hill', who wrote and lectured profusely about art, society, and the need to return to a proper estimation of the working man, found it an essential means of combining entertainment with education, both aesthetic and moral. Others were less enthusiastic. The novelist and poet Thomas Hardy declined to contribute to the fund to build the Shakespeare Memorial

Theatre, saying that he valued Shakespeare as a man and a thinker, not a dramatist. Throughout the period, indeed, writers discussed Shakespeare as a moral guide rather than a practising poet and playwright. Thus the celebrations in Stratford and London were largely intended to mark the centenary of a great thinker, a great Englishman whose gifts were divinely inspired, so that performances of the plays, though important, were only one part of the celebrations.

To reflect this, the pavilion was the site of several other events during the celebrations. In the afternoon of 25 April Handel's *Messiah* was performed, with an amateur chorus of 500. Above all others, this was the work which enshrined the musical taste and practice of establishment England, its composer, forgiven for being of German origin by his long residence in London, the musician whose place in the public imagination was rivalled only by Mendelssohn. *Messiah*, held without question as his greatest work, had been performed annually by many of the music festivals that proliferated in the nineteenth century throughout the country. There is an important parallel with Shakespeare here. Just as Handel represented an ideal Englishness in music, so the plays were seen as something available for all, and the performance of the oratorio on the platform at the opposite end of the pavilion to its acting stage nicely presents this balance of cultural identities. In the evening of the same day there was a concert of music associated with Shakespeare's works, with items by the eighteenth-century composer Thomas Arne, and a specially composed overture, albeit not related to Shakespeare, by the conductor Alfred Mellon. Alongside them were important European compositions: Beethoven's *Coriolan* overture, pieces by Verdi, and Schubert's 'To Silvia', the song from *The Two Gentlemen*—a reminder of the international nature of much Victorian music-making, and the appreciation given to operatic and vocal settings by major European composers. This did not mean that native composers were unimportant; rather, they were regarded in a different light. Alfred Mellon was representative of a little-known and today almost totally forgotten group of musicians who composed, arranged, conducted, and played in the theatres of the period, their music aimed to reflect the mood of performances and, in consequence, as ephemeral as it was fitting.

Although standing at its centre, the pavilion was only one of the focal points of the Stratford celebrations. They began on the 23rd with a procession to the site proposed for a national monument to Shakespeare, headed by the Tercentenary Committee, an embodiment of the Victorian love of committees, rituals, and monuments that both made the tercentenary celebration possible and dominated its events. There followed a formal banquet, with speeches, at which the committee and honoured guests sat on the stage, while others who had paid 21 shillings were served in the auditorium. The less well off could pay five shillings for a seat in the gallery to watch the proceedings. A firework display ended the day's entertainments. On the following day, Sunday, there were two services in Holy Trinity Church, with sermons appropriate to the occasion. At Matins, the Reverend Chenevix Trench spoke on the text 'every perfect gift is from above', reflecting the common idea that, while Shakespeare was the embodiment of all things English, he was also a gift sent from God to 'mould a nation's life' to ensure that it would be 'animated and quickened to heroic enterprise and worthiest endeavour', as well as offering 'ideals of perfect womanhood'. He did not, however, find it necessary actually to quote anything from the works of Shakespeare in support of these noble thoughts. In the evening Charles Wordsworth spoke on Shakespeare's knowledge and use of the Bible, bringing together the two volumes that, with the possible addition of *The Pilgrim's Progress*, stood on every Victorian bookshelf, with bindings appropriate to the station of their owners.

Stratford town offered further enticements, most prominently Shakespeare's Birthplace in Henley Street, still retaining much of its external form within a row of houses, part of which was an alehouse. A further attraction within it was a portrait recently discovered by a W. H. Hunt, the town clerk of Stratford, encased in a fire-proof iron case with a frame of wood, a painted announcement claimed, from 'the old structure of Shakespeare's house'. Adherents claimed it was the original life portrait on which the bust in Holy Trinity was modelled; the *Athenaeum* dismissed it as 'a modern daub, possibly a tavern sign, a "Shakspear's head," probably made up for some purpose connected with the jubilee'. Controversy about the authenticity of portraits of Shakespeare was to remain prominent throughout the period, and far beyond. Adjoining the ruins of New