

*Shakespeare
on the
American
Stage*

FROM THE HALLAMS
TO EDWIN BOOTH

Charles H. Shattuck



How long has Shakespeare been performed in America? What was the American theatre like in the early nineteenth century when performers such as Edmund Kean and Fanny Kemble brought Shylock and Portia, Hamlet and Ophelia to life in New World environments?

Now at last we have an authoritative survey of Shakespeare's place in the formative years of the American theatre. Extensively illustrated—with over 100 photographs (four in full color) of actors and actresses, scene designs, playhouses, and playbills—*Shakespeare on the American Stage* features a vibrant narrative by the distinguished theatre historian, Charles H. Shattuck of the University of Illinois. One emerges from this book with a renewed sense, not only of the enduring vitality of Shakespearean drama, but also of the form and pressure of each period and setting in which Shakespeare has been performed in the United States.

Like *The Hamlet of Edwin Booth* (1969), *The John Philip Kemble Promptbooks* (11 volumes, 1975), and Professor Shattuck's other publications, *Shakespeare on the American Stage* will be welcomed by theatregoers as one of the essential histories of Shakespeare in performance.

Planned so that its publication date coincides with the April 1976 opening of the Folger Library's "Shakespeare in America" exhibition as well as with the opening of the inaugural world congress of the International Shakespeare Association, *Shakespeare on the American Stage* serves a double purpose, both as a record and symbol of a notable occasion in American's Bicentennial year and as a timely evocation of some of the most fascinating chapters in the cultural history of the United States.

FOLGER
BOOKS Published by the
FOLGER SHAKESPEARE LIBRARY
Washington, D. C. 20003

Shakespeare on the American Stage

From the Hallams to Edwin Booth

Charles H. Shattuck

The Folger Shakespeare Library

Copyright © 1976 by The Folger Shakespeare Library

First Published 1976

The Folger Shakespeare Library is Administered by
the Trustees of Amherst College.

Nancy Hallam in Cave Scene from *Cymbeline*. Painted in Annapolis by Charles Willson Peale in the summer of 1771 during a return engagement of Miss Hallam, it represents a scene before a cave from Shakespeare's *Cymbeline*, Act III, scene 6. Miss Hallam plays the part of Imogen, who is here disguised as the boy Fidele. Her use of oriental costuming was common in eighteenth-century theatre, although often historically inappropriate to the role. Courtesy of Colonial Williamsburg Foundation.

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data

Shattuck, Charles Harlen, 1910-
Shakespeare on the American stage.

Includes index.

1. Shakespeare, William, 1546-1616—Stage history—
United States. 2. Actors—United States.

I. Folger Shakespeare Library, Washington, D. C.

II. Title.

PR3105.S5 792'.0973 75-43999

ISBN 0-8139-0651-2

Printed in the United States of America

For Susan

Preface

THE NOTION that this book should be written grew out of a conversation with Dr. O. B. Hardison, Director of the Folger Shakespeare Library, who thought that during the Bicentennial Year the American history of Shakespeare should be celebrated as part of the nation's history. We first intended that this book, like the Folger's Bicentennial Exhibition of "Shakespeare in America," should cover the full scope of Shakespearean production down to the present. It soon became apparent, however, that the subject was too vast to be covered in a single volume—hence I have attempted to discuss only the first century of it and a little more, from the first *Merchant of Venice* of the Hallam company down to the major Shakespearean realizations of Edwin Booth.

Grateful acknowledgment is hereby made to the Copernicus Society of America, which helped subsidize this work. Particular thanks are due to Mr. Edward J. Piszek, President of the Society, and Mr. Ernest Cuneo, representative of the Society in Washington.

I am indebted to Dr. Hardison not only for his initial suggestion but for his subsequent encouragement. I am grateful to Dr. John F. Andrews, Director of Research Activities at the Folger, for helpful criticism; to Miss Martha Gibbons of the Folger staff for gathering the illustrations; to Professor Richard Benson of Eastern Kentucky University for providing the scene design for Booth's *Julius Caesar* (Illustration 103); to Mrs. Daryle Carras, who has translated my draft into cleanly typed pages. I am particularly grateful to Miss Megan Lloyd, the Folger Editor, for labors with the text far beyond the call of duty. My greatest debt is to the patience and counsel of the person whose name appears on the page following the title page.

CHARLES H. SHATTUCK

Urbana, Illinois
September 1, 1975

Introduction

IN ITS BEGINNING the art of theatre in America, including Shakespearean theatre, was entirely an importation from the mother country. From 1752 when Lewis Hallam led his London Company of Comedians to Virginia until well into the 1820s, very few native-born Americans took to the stage and none rose to eminence. It should be noted that for most Americans who attended the theatre in the eighteenth century Shakespeare in performance was their first experience with Shakespeare's plays in any form. They knew odds and ends of quotations which had drifted into common lore, like the "To be or not to be" soliloquy, but few had read any of the ten or fifteen Shakespeare plays which, over the years, they might see acted in one of the larger cities. Books of the plays were not readily accessible, and only the most highly educated would have developed the play-reading habit. In this respect, as has often been noted, those Americans who did attend the theatre resembled Shakespeare's first audiences: they were seeing the plays without having read them.

Much of what they saw was not true Shakespeare, of course, but "Shakespeare improved." *Hamlet*, *Othello*, *The Merchant of Venice*, and *Cymbeline* came through fairly straight (though much cut); but *Richard III* was Colley Cibber's melodramatic reworking of the original, *Romeo and Juliet* was David Garrick's version with a surprise ending, *The Tempest* was the Dryden-Davenant refashioning of it to bring it in line with Restoration-period notions of comedy, *Macbeth* was tricked out with choruses of dancing and singing witches, *The Taming of the Shrew* had been reduced by Garrick to a three-act farce called *Catharine and Petruchio*, and *King Lear* had been thoroughly rewritten by Nahum Tate, who gave it a happy ending. All the same it was "Shakespeare" that the American audiences saw—Shakespeare adorned in the current London fashion. Such of Shakespeare's proper qualities as filtered through made their impact; and if audiences credited Shakespeare with the tears they shed

over Colley Cibber's lurid additions to the murder of the little princes, with their delight in the comicalities of Dryden's Hippolito and Dorinda in *The Tempest*, and with their excitement during Tate's last-minute rescue of Cordelia from rape during the Storm Scene on the heath, these effects served to keep Shakespeare on the boards until later generations with purer taste would gradually welcome restoration of the "true texts."

The principal actors who arrived from England during the generation after the Peace of 1783 seem mostly to have been either gifted eccentrics like John Hodgkinson and James Fennell or uninspired practitioners of the neo-classic school of acting, given to bold posing and ponderous declamation. Few of them, with the exception of Ann Brunton Merry, could likely have stood up to the competition of the great John Philip Kemble or his sister Sarah Siddons in London; and on the whole, the best level of Shakespearean acting in America down to 1810 seems to have been competent but unremarkable.

But then, between 1810 and 1821, thrown off as it were by the volcanic eruption in England which is palely described as the Romantic Movement, there came to America three actors—George Frederick Cooke, Edmund Kean, and Junius Brutus Booth—whose astonishing personalities and revolutionary methods; whose rigorous attack upon roles; whose vivid pantomime, impetuosity, and bold contrasts of speed, volume, and intensity in their speaking startled American spectators, as they had startled the English, into a new awareness of the living reality of Shakespeare's characters. For the time being, America was too preoccupied with practical affairs—settling its government, expanding into the wilderness, waging its last armed conflict with England—to create a romantic theatre of its own, or even, indeed, to know quite what to make of these romantically rebellious visitors. When the wildest of them, Edmund Kean, had the bad manners once to refuse to perform for too small an audience, America responded in a paroxysm of hurt pride, declared that

he had insulted the nation, and sent him packing home.

At last, in the middle 1820s, America produced a great actor of its own. This was Edwin Forrest, a brawny, massive, passionate man, endowed with every strength of body, voice, and mind which he would need to achieve the highest level of histrionic excellence. In the long run, however, he narrowed himself into a symbol of American nationalism—self-consciously parochial, belligerent, and at worst downright bullying. Forrest took his inspiration in part from the blazing emotionalism of Edmund Kean, with whom in his early years he once acted, in part from the Noble Red Man, whose physical culture he emulated. In the Red Man's cause, that of an oppressed race defying the oppressor, he found a symbol of his own favorite cause: the democrats in American society defying the aristocrats, or the New World defying the Old. His patriotism, fervid from the beginning, soured with the turn of events in his life into a relentless hatred of all things English—hatred of the Englishwoman whom he had married and of one particular English rival in the profession. His antipathy to William Charles Macready climaxed in 1849 in the horrible Astor Place Riot, when more than thirty persons were shot dead in the streets. In Forrest, the romantic spirit spent itself not so much in realizing the characters of Shakespeare as in using Shakespeare to fight causes and to do down supposed enemies of himself and the state.

The comedian James Hackett, who was of Forrest's generation, was also deeply rooted in the American (especially the Yankee American) scene; but having nothing of the jingo in his makeup, he actually allied himself with American "aristocrats" and with Englishmen in high intellectual and social circles. The great Charlotte Cushman, approximately contemporary with Forrest, resembled him in physical strength, emotional power, and strong-mindedness, but not in political attitudes or personal vindictiveness. Those early-middle decades of the nineteenth century were frontier days, Paul Bunyan days, and inevitably a shoal of imitators of Forrest—outsized, loud, and muscular—followed in his wake, but they need not individually concern us here.

Yet even as these native-born Shakespearians were rising in their primitive vigor, they were rivaled on their own stages by an unceasing procession of visiting stars from England, who made the crossing for no grander purpose than to glean fortunes from American box offices. During the 1820s and 1830s these visitors clung mostly to the eastern seaboard—from New York north to Boston

and south through Philadelphia, Baltimore, Washington, and as far as Charleston. By the 1840s they would cut across the southern states for a long stand in New Orleans, then complete the grand circle up the Mississippi to Saint Louis and through the Ohio River towns to Pittsburgh and on to New York again. By their foreignness and their glamorous reputation as well as by their polished style, they continued to anglicize and sophisticate American taste in Shakespearean acting.

Thus when William Charles Macready first came to America in 1826, he found an audience weary of the secondhand classical acting of established Americans like Thomas Cooper, and at the same time distrustful of the spectacular but erratic acting of Edmund Kean. They were ready to take lessons from Macready's more thoughtful approach to his art. It was good to see a Hamlet conceived intellectually and played reliably, consistent from end to end. When he came again in the 1840s he had won (or at least he wore) the label of "The Eminent Tragedian." By then he had passed through his celebrated if futile struggles to rescue the great patent theatres of London from animal shows, melodrama, and opera and rededicate them to Shakespeare and the classics. Glorious in defeat, he was welcomed by leaders of the intellectual and artistic community. In the 1830s, the last representatives of the famous Kemble family—Charles and his daughter Fanny—and after them Ellen Tree, drew the world of fashion to the theatre, as much perhaps because of their social reputation and gentility as for their genuine acting skills. In the 1840s Charles Kean initiated patrons of the Park Theatre to the delights of modern scenography, re-creating for them the recent London stagings of *Richard III* and *King John*. He failed to establish a fashion for historically accurate scenery, for the American audience was not yet sufficiently interested in that sort of "educational theatre," but at least he set a standard for scenic investiture of Shakespeare which would be remembered in years to come.

Just after the mid-century a new generation of American actors and managers began to grow up to their Shakespearean responsibilities. They did not altogether reject the refining influence of English models, and probably, too, both performers and audience were becoming serious *readers* of the plays. By mid-century American editions were plentiful (including family and fireside editions), and the lyceum lectures on Shakespeare, such as H. N. Hudson's and Ralph Waldo Emerson's (his enthronization of Shakespeare as "The Poet"), were becoming al-

most as popular as Shakespeare in performance. The new generation of actors certainly turned their backs on the screaming-eagleism which had inflamed the mobs in Astor Place, and with a new thoughtfulness and sensitivity they fashioned a Shakespeare for the coming age.

William Burton must surely be counted as a catalyst in this process. Born in England and trained as a comic actor there, he spent the second and more important half of his life as an actor-manager in Philadelphia and New York. He not only played a superb Toby Belch, Bottom the Weaver, and Autolycus but mounted several Shakespeare comedies in stagings which would yield nothing to the best theatres of London. Moreover, as an expert bookman he accumulated a vast library of Shakespeareana and other literary rarities. Several leading Shakespeare scholars of the day found source and stimulus for their work in Burton's library. In Edward Loomis Davenport we come at last upon an American-born actor who, though somehow lacking in ambition or sense of career, was so well molded a man, a voice, and an intelligence that even among the hypercritical English he passed as a fine Shakespearean. One of the most gratifying accomplishments during the 1870s and early 1880s was that of John McCullough, a handsome, tall, and stalwart man, who succeeded in bringing the gigantic Lear and Othello of his master Edwin Forrest down to the level of human beings, investing them with something of his own geniality, warmth, and kindliness.

American Shakespeare of the nineteenth century climaxed in the long career of Edwin Booth. Although as an actor Booth lacked humor, sentiment, and physical grandeur, he united beauty of face and voice, brisk wit, gentleness, companionability, an impression of intellectuality, a mysterious power of compelling all eyes and ears and wishes to attend upon him, and a total dedication to theatrical art. For about a decade he strove to emulate the English in the arts of *mise-en-scène*, and he achieved some triumphs in this kind. Fortunately, however, financial disaster put a stop to his indulgence in what was after all a diversion from the true Shakespearean essence. His strength lay in acting. As an actor he won and held the admiration of a nation, revealing to his nineteenth-century audiences such truths about Shakespeare's characters as he and his age could comprehend.

We have no history of Shakespeare in the American theatre. I offer this set of essays as the beginning of one.

At the time of the Shakespeare quatercentenary, there appeared two fine articles which touch upon American performances of Shakespeare, but only cursorily, along with other matters. James G. McManaway's "Shakespeare in the United States" (*PMLA*, 79 [1964], pp. 513-18) discusses most interestingly those American editors and critics whose work has been made possible by the establishment in this country of great libraries of Shakespeareana and Renaissance books. Robert Falk's "Shakespeare in the United States" (*PMLA*, 79 [1964], pp. 513-*Survey*, 18 [1965], pp. 102-18) takes note, in turn, of "the actors of Shakespeare, his editors, and aesthetic critics, and . . . the imaginative use of his themes and language in new forms of literature." Especially rewarding are the two final sections of Falk's essay, in which he traces the influence of Shakespeare upon American intellectual life in the nineteenth century (Emerson, Lowell, Whitman) and the transmutation of Shakespearean art and idea in the fiction of Herman Melville.

Behind these essays stand two important books, both published in 1939. Alfred Westfall's *American Shakespearean Criticism, 1607-1865* is a systematic analysis of American editions of Shakespeare and American critical utterances down to the Civil War. It climaxes with the work of Richard Grant White and stops just short of H. H. Furness and the beginning of the *New Variorum*. Except for one brief chapter, largely statistical, on staged Shakespeare in the eighteenth century, Westfall did not concern himself with the theatre at all. Esther Cloudman Dunn's ambitious and wide-ranging *Shakespeare in America* devotes half of its chapters to Shakespeare in the theatre during the eighteenth century and the first half of the nineteenth. Of especial value are two chapters in which Miss Dunn brings together curious information about Shakespeare on the frontier—first in the Ohio and Mississippi valleys, then beyond the Rockies in the wake of the Gold Rush. Miss Dunn's basic concern, however, is to observe Shakespeare as a "barometer of social and cultural history" (these are the last six words of her text), and thus she tends to generalize from the theatrical experience rather than to examine in detail the work of actors and managers, their acting styles and modes of stage production. She is indeed more interesting, and perhaps on surer footing, in her discussions of Shakespeare in the magazines, the rise of Shakespeare studies in school curricula, the early editions of Shakespeare, and Shakespearean influence on the thinking of certain founders of the nation (Adams, Jefferson) and on certain nine-

teenth-century thinkers (Emerson, Thoreau, Whitman, Lincoln).

My objective in the essays that follow is narrower than Miss Dunn's, although I hope also to contribute something to modern awareness of our cultural history. My objective is to bring the glass down quite close upon certain long-past performers and performances of Shakespeare, to brighten our vision of those persons and events, to improve our understanding of their cultural significance, and to restore something of their forgotten luster in the annals of theatrical art.

We must bear in mind Miss Dunn's cautionary observation that "the business of conjuring the past, making it deliver itself up, 'in its habit as it lived,' is as everybody knows, mostly a failing business." Insofar as is possible, I have endeavored to conjure up this theatrical past through the language and opinions of the actors themselves and of the professional critics of their day. This language and these opinions must be taken with grains of salt, of course. We do not know what such words as *beautiful* or *natural* or *gentlemanly* or *indecent* meant a century ago, or two centuries ago, to the writers who used them or to the readers who then read them. We can pretty well rely on two laws of history which, to be sure, almost contradict each other. The first and more important of these is that in a mere two hundred years human nature has not changed much in its intelligence, its passions, and its fundamental values. But the second law, caught up in the phrase *autres temps, autres mœurs*, reminds us that the surface manifestations of human nature—*manners*—fluctuate wildly from one generation to another. And theatre is intimately tied to manners. A hundred years ago an exposed female "limb" gave scandal; and actors in those days dared not utter the name of God upon the stage, but always substituted a mild "Heaven." In the theatre of our own time, total nudity is the vogue, and profane or blasphemous language is almost as common in film and drama as it is in everyday life. Manners, not morals, is the issue. Thus when we find a critic of the past condemning on moral grounds some theatrical effect—an entire play, a costume, a word, a gesture—which was in fact no worse than a violation of some popularly held code of manners, it is usually not difficult to detect the confusion and to allow for it. We must be extremely wary, though, in detecting shifts in *aesthetic* standards, which are subtle and unspectacular. We must scrupulously adjust aesthetic pronouncements of theatrical ef-

fects in the light of what we know about shifts of taste in literature, music, painting, and all the other arts. In using past language to re-create past events, I have made every effort to find statements which I take to be not only reliable but relatively factual, forthright, unambiguous—which exchange at face value in the marketplace of ideas.

I have referred to what follows as "essays" rather than as a "history," for it has been my method to select those few figures in each generation whose work seems to me to typify or to set the tone for the Shakespearean theatre of their time, and to treat those figures in sufficient detail that their significance comes clear. The whole history would do justice (as I have not attempted to do) to the Wallacks (Henry and James William and James William the Younger and Lester), whose careers, taken together, spanned seven decades of the nineteenth century; Thomas Hamblin, actor and longtime manager of the Bowery Theatre; James Murdoch, actor and teacher of actors; to such comedians as Henry and Thomas Placide, William Davidge, W. R. Blake, and Charles Bass; to a number of visitors from abroad—James Anderson, George Vandenhoff, G. V. Brooke, and Barry Sullivan; and to such actresses, famous in their day, as Caroline Chapman, Laura Keene, Julia Dean, Anna Cora Mowatt, Josephine Clifton, Emma Waller, and Mrs. D. P. Bowlers. These and dozens more served the cause admirably, but to rehearse their careers would, I think, add little more than bulk to the "idea" of Shakespeare in America.

I have refrained, too, from any attempt to report the spread of Shakespeare across the nation. Shakespeare in New Orleans, Boston, San Francisco, Chicago, Philadelphia, Cincinnati, Baltimore, Saint Louis—and in dozens of lesser towns that built theatres and sustained resident companies—is indeed important. But I have limited my scope mainly to cities of the East and, after the turn into the nineteenth century, mainly to what happened in New York City. For ultimately whatever set the style of Shakespearean playing and production in America came into or came out of the theatrical capital of the country and was well reported there.