"Chopkins, Late Shakespeare": The Bard and His Burlesques, 1810-66
Author(s): Richard W. Schoch
Published by: The Johns Hopkins University Press
Stable URL: http://www.jstor.org/stable/30031947
Accessed: 03/12/2013 17:01

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.
“CHOPKINS, LATE SHAKESPEARE”: THE BARD AND HIS BURLESQUES, 1810-66

BY RICHARD W. SCHOCH

R. F. Sharp’s 1920 bibliography of Shakespeare burlesques, the first of its kind in English literary scholarship, is most notable for what it excludes: Thomas Duffet’s *The Mock-Tempest* (1674) and his farcical version of Elkanah Settle’s *The Empress of Morocco* (1673). Duffet’s burlesque of *The Empress of Morocco* features an epilogue which parodies the elaborate production of the witches’ scenes in Sir William Davenant’s adaptation of *Macbeth* then being performed at the rival Dorset Garden Theatre.1 Mocking scenic effects of “Painted Tiffany” which “blind and amuse the senses,” Duffet’s epilogue flatters itself as more theatrically honest than Davenant’s tragedy because its own “thunder and lightning” were discovered “openly, by the most excellent way of Mustard-bowl and Salt-Peter.”2 In other words, reliance on traditional stagecraft made the Drury Lane travesty a more legitimate version of Shakespeare than the Dorset Garden *Macbeth*, which owed much of its success to intricate behind-the-scenes technology.

While more than thirty years have passed since Stanley Wells acknowledged Duffet’s “Epilogue Spoken by Hecate and the Witches” as the first recorded Shakespearean travesty, the implications of that acknowledgment are, for students of Shakespeare in performance, still largely unexamined.3 It seems clear enough, however, that Duffet’s epilogue anticipates the two principal features of nineteenth-century Shakespeare travesties and burlesques: first, that the object of their satire is not Shakespeare’s text, but a specific *performance* of a text; and second, that the travesty authorizes itself to speak on Shakespeare’s behalf when he comes under attack (at least in the opinion of burlesque playwrights) from latter-day theatrical iconoclasts. From its inception, then, the burlesque sought not only to criticize contemporary Shakespearean performances but to correct them. The burlesque was as much prescriptive as it was diagnostic. An act of theatrical reform that aggressively compensated for the deficiencies of other people’s productions, the burlesque became part of the very performance history upon which it first had cast its reproachful eye. And in honoring Shakespeare,
the travesty really honored itself as the poet’s rightful heir and only legitimate descendant, effectively displacing—indeed, bastardizing—all other competing versions and performances of the Bard. To burlesque was to be Shakespearean.

In John Poole’s *Hamlet Travestie* (1810), the first performed parody of Shakespeare since the Restoration, these issues of legitimacy and fidelity to the playwright emerge with renewed vigor. The most successful aspect of Poole’s travesty, as its original critics affirmed, was not the text itself (a bland, full-length Shakespearean paraphrase) but rather its satiric versions of critical notes, glosses, and emendations. *Hamlet Travestie* thus mocked the conventions not of the stage, but of scholarship. Poole asserted that his parody of Shakespeare criticism required neither “apology” nor “extenuation” because all admirers of the Bard (and who, he presumed, would read the burlesque *but* an admirer) must feel “indignant at finding his sense perverted and his meaning obscured, by the false lights, and the fanciful and arbitrary illustrations of Black-letter Critics and Honey-Catching Commentators.” On behalf of those whose devotion to Shakespeare remained undiminished, Poole undertook to out-Herod Herod, declaring that “it had been well if some able satirist had exposed and punished their folly, their affectation, and their arrogance.” Jealous, then, of its own privileged relationship with the simple and plain-speaking national poet, the burlesque disavowed the haughty exhortations of “every pedant in Black-Letter lore.” Even in a text as manifestly atheatrical as *Hamlet Travestie* (for there is no mention, let alone criticism of a specific performance) we can nonetheless detect the continuing desire, inherited from Duffet, to safeguard Shakespeare from his “pollutor[s].”

Of course the burlesque was not merely destructive, but also actively restorative. For even as the burlesque obliterated traditions of textual criticism or theatrical staging, it also postulated—and upheld—an exacting standard of Shakespearean purity which it alone could attain. “The business of burlesquing Shakespeare,” W. Davenport Adams argued at the close of the nineteenth century, had never been conducted in a “wholesale or intentionally irreverent spirit.” At the mid-century height of Victorian burlesques, the *Morning Advertiser*, in its review of Francis Talfourd’s *Shylock; or, the Merchant of Venice Preserved* (Olympic, 1853), rebuked those who dismissed burlesques as “impertinent degradations” of the original with the rejoinder that the “mighty original . . . only rises to the memory with greater force, as it is recollected through the mummery and nonsense of its merry parody.”

John Poole, more than forty years prior, had argued in the preface to

“Chopkins, Late Shakespeare”
*Hamlet Travestie* that “instead of derogating from the value or reputation of its subject,” a travesty may be considered “no inadequate test of its merit.” Of that same text, the *Monthly Review* enthused that “Shakespeare himself” would have “delighted in this very comic travestie.” The nineteenth-century burlesque thus came full circle almost instantaneously: far from being an insult to Shakespeare’s poetic genius, it was an expression of such undoubted loyalty to the playwright that he himself could not have withheld his mirthful assent. As V. C. Clinton-Baddeley has similarly asserted in the twentieth century, “burlesque discovers laughter not in the objects of its hatred but rather in the objects of its affection.”

This wild inversion of canonicity—that burlesque is the most truly Shakespearean form of theater—was enacted most forcefully on the mid-Victorian stage. Within a decade of the passage of the Theatres Regulation Act of 1843—which left Shakespeare, as J. R. Planché quipped a year later in *The Drama at Home*, free to be performed “where’er you please / No longer pinioned by the patentees,” Samuel Phelps at Sadler’s Wells and Charles Kean at the Princess’s Theatre embarked upon managerial careers distinguished above all by Shakespearean revivals. The burlesque backlash, as we might call it, was not long in coming. Between 1840 and 1870, in Stanley Wells’s tabulation, there are “roughly twice as many Shakespearian burlesques as in the preceding thirty years.” In these same decades, the forms and conventions of Shakespeare burlesques had fallen into a highly consistent pattern: rhymed couplets in either a paraphrase or parody of Shakespeare’s text (usually a tragedy; rarely a comedy); an explicit theatrical bias, with an emphasis on stage business, sight gags, and special effects; relentless puns and topical references, ranging from the Prime Minister to the price of beer; and soliloquies and set pieces rewritten as lyrics to familiar songs, whether popular, operatic, or even minstrel. “We have been done to death with burlesques,” the *Spectator* entreated in the spring of 1853, the year in which a record-setting six Shakespeare travesties were performed in London theatres. A few weeks later, a bemused *Lloyd’s Weekly London Newspaper* reported that a “Charles Kean mania [was] breaking out like a rash upon all [burlesque] actors” and that it was impossible to “go to a theatre without hearing the continual imitation” of Kean’s performance as Macbeth.

To be sure, there were attacks on Shakespeare burlesques in the nineteenth century, and they disclose a mounting anxiety over declining moral and literary standards. In one especially virulent denunciation, George Eliot objected to Shakespeare travesties as a form of theatrical

Richard W. Schoch

975
spoliation which “debas[ed] the moral currency” and “lower[ed] the value of every inspiring fact and tradition.” She feared that future generations of Englishmen would come to know Shakespeare only through burlesques, while the original master-texts would themselves “be reduced to a mere memoria technica of the improver’s puns.” While Eliot’s embittered prophecy betrays a widely-felt alarm at Shakespeare’s dissipating cultural status, for some contemporary observers she was nonetheless misdirecting her critical energies. The popularity of Shakespeare burlesques throughout the Victorian era undoubtedly tells us that the sanctity of Shakespeare as cultural and national icon was under siege—but not from where we would expect. For the threat to Shakespeare was posed not by the burlesque, so its proponents claimed, but rather, pace Eliot, by pedantic literary critics, mediocre performers, and sensationalizing actor-managers.

Consider the judgment rendered in the Leader by G. H. Lewes that Charles Kean, in his spectacular and antiquarian revivals of Shakespeare, “has touched nothing that he has not burlesqued. . . . [H]e has suggested the ludicrous side of all that is grand in art, and dignified in history . . . [and] leaves the field for those literary contortionists, the burlesque writers, so narrow and difficult.” At least for Lewes, writing pseudonymously as “Vivian,” legitimate Shakespeare was, if only involuntarily, the true burlesque. Yet sometimes the legitimate theatre actively sanctioned its own burlesques. Kean’s 1855 Christmas panto The Maid and the Magpie, to cite one example, was remarkable for its “juvenile version” of Wolsey’s Banquet in York-Palace, one of the most spectacular moments from the actor-manager’s own celebrated production of Henry VIII. The “troop of children,” as described by a delighted E. S. Dallas in Blackwood’s Magazine, consisted principally of the “little bluff King Hal making love to a diminutive Anne Bulleyn [and] a miniature Queen Kate scratching the face and tearing the eyes of her maid of honour.” That Kean himself succumbed to the temptation of consciously burlesquing his own acclaimed Shakespearean revivals failed to surprise Dallas, who asserted that the Princess’s would naturally produce the “best pantomime” precisely because, amongst all London theatres, it routinely paid the “most attention to stage effects.” Since Kean’s company excelled in the “illustration of Shakespearean drama,” it would be strange indeed if that same theatre were also “behind-hand in the representation of its pantomime.” In an ironic telescoping of high and low theatrical genres, performing legitimate Shakespeare was the express prerequisite for performing an effective travesty of Shakespeare.
Yet the argument also worked the other way around. If burlesque playwrights were eclipsed by Kean’s own ludicrous Shakespearian revivals, then the work of these same “literary contortionists” became more contorted still. That is, if the legitimate becomes burlesque, then the burlesque itself must become legitimate. To argue for the piety and reverence of the Shakespeare burlesque was, on the face of it, simply irrational. What kind of veneration could there be in *Hamlet, According to an Act of Parliament* (1853), whose title-character, as described by the *Morning Chronicle*, “meet[s] his father drunk” and “fights Laertes in a ring with gloves”?219 And yet such a claim did indeed have a nagging validity, for the mid-Victorian burlesque directly responded to contemporary concerns that Shakespeare had been all but replaced by spectacular and decorous *mise-en-scène*. By sharp contrast, the travesty appeared a model of deference and circumspection.

Kean’s *Macbeth* (1853), for example, was roundly criticized for burying Shakespeare under the weight of scenic splendor and antiquarian pedantry, while its two burlesque imitations (which opened within a week of each other) were upheld as more truly tragic versions of the play. When produced at the Olympic Theatre in April 1853, six years after its debut as a student production at the Henley Regatta, Francis Talfourd’s *Macbeth, Somewhat Removed from the Text of Shakespeare* explicitly satirized the historical accessories and supernatural effects of Kean’s concurrent production through its own comic stage business: for example, armor made of “pot lids” and the appearance of Banquo’s ghost not from within the “hollow of one of the pillars,” as in Kean’s staging of the banquet scene, but from within an anachronistic “clock case.”20 The Strand production, *Macbeth According to an Act of Parliament*, was a “new Irish operatic extravaganza” starring the low comedian Hodson as Phelim O’Macbeth (Celtic to the power of two, as it were).21 This “un-Shakespearean revival,” as the Strand’s manager, F. W. Allcroft, described the production in his playbill essay, traded on the convention of the wild, red-bearded and shillelagh-carrying stage Irishman. “Macbeth is a great hero—great in travestie as given here,” proclaimed *Bell’s Weekly Messenger*, “and great at the Princess’s . . . We prefer, however, the New Strand *Macbeth* of the two.”22 And Lewes, surely writing with the knowledge of these dual travesties, declared that the absurd solemnity of Kean’s antiquarian dramaturgy made the actor-manager’s own staging of *Macbeth* the “more genuine burlesque.” Indeed, Lewes went so far in his acrimony to declare that it would be “impossible to realize a *Macbeth more* comic” than Kean’s high-minded archaeological spectacle.23

*Richard W. Schoch*
The burlesque thus repudiates the stature of the ostensibly legitimate production which it parodies even as it revalorizes Shakespeare's canonical authority—that is, it enables the playwright and his tragic heroes to be "great in travestie." In so doing, the burlesque empowers itself to define and to enforce standards of Shakespearean correctness. We can glimpse, in such a disciplinary regime, the underlying sobriety of the burlesque which leaves its audience in a state of interpretive perplexity. The most successful performances, as V. C. Clinton-Baddeley has remarked, "support an elaborate pretence of not being funny at all."24 Here, then, is the unmasked critical manoeuvre of nineteenth-century Shakespeare burlesques: the inversion of Shakespearean normativities. By its own admission, the burlesque actively intervenes to protect Shakespeare from his real detractors (burlesque playwrights being falsely perceived as detractors).

Duffet's claim in The Empress of Morocco that "bad Travestie" earns its legitimacy through constructive ridicule found eloquent elaboration in the Victorian age.25 As the nineteenth-century comic playwright (and editor of Punch) Sir Francis Burnand enjoined, burlesque was the "candid friend of the Drama" and the "natural" extension of Shakespeare. For all its doggerel, painful punning, and licentiousness, the burlesque styled itself as the norm to which transgressive theatrical practices should revert. Drawing a distinction between Shakespeare's texts (always objects of reverence) and Shakespearean performances (potential objects of disrepute), Burnand explains that burlesques are themselves a response to the occasions when Shakespeare was "injured by the misinterpretation of self-complacent mediocre actors" or "rendered ridiculous by extravagant realism in production." With Shakespeare thus besieged, the "legitimate employment" of the burlesque was to "hold the mirror up, not to Nature, but to such distortion of Nature" in order that those very distortions might be rectified.26 In order that Shakespeare be returned to himself, whole and unblemished.

This "natural" essence of the travesty was not simply a matter of authorial boasting but extended equally to contemporary critical response. In Frederick Robson's portrayal of Samuel Macbeth in Talfourd's 1853 travesty at the Olympic, theatrical reviewers judged a burlesque performer to be more authentically Shakespearean than the tragedians who were his supposed superiors. Nearly all London critics agreed that the comedian's impersonation of Macbeth was strikingly original, for Robson neither belittled the dignity of the role (that is, he didn't mock Shakespeare) nor lowered himself to perform a mere slavish caricature of contemporary actors (that is, he didn't mock Kean or Phelps).27

“This Chopkins, Late Shakespeare”
Rather, he accomplished something which had eluded those theatrical eminences: he captured the ideal state of the Shakespearean tragic hero. Because Robson was “aware of the tragic foundation which lies at the bottom of the grotesque superstructure,” claimed the Observer, his extravagant “gestures and articulations” expressed an “intrinsically serious feeling.” The Spectator announced that only for the sake of Frederick Robson’s “original conception” of Macbeth would it “endure Lady Macbeth singing ‘tooral looral’ in her sleep.” And the critic E. S. Dallas, once having regarded burlesque acting as the “most unnatural thing in the world,” was now astonished to discover “perfect nature” in Robson’s every look as burlesque Macbeth and Shylock.

Robson’s ability to reach both emotional depths and comic heights—and to move between them with lightning speed—brought about an unanticipated reversal of standards in Shakespearean acting which elevated the low comedian to the dignified and respectable status of a tragedian. For a good number of London theatre-goers in the 1850s, the best Shakespeare on offer was not at the Princess’s or Sadler’s Wells, but at the burlesque houses along the Strand. After witnessing Robson in Olympic travesties of Macbeth and The Merchant of Venice, the Illustrated London News declared that “many of his bursts are truly tragic, and might have done credit to Edmund Kean in his best days. The coincidence is so striking as almost to tempt us to a disquisition on the affinity between burlesque and tragedy.” For some critics, the only hope of witnessing an entirely satisfying performance of either Macbeth or Shylock was that Robson might turn legitimate and thus develop the full range of his talents in a more creditable venue and, presumably, before a more creditable audience. Even Henry Morley confirmed the unparalleled potential of Robson’s histrionic genius when he remarked, in the Examiner’s review of Shylock; or, the Merchant of Venice Preserved, that “at a time when all serious acting is tending to the burlesque and unreal, a burlesque actor should start up with a real and very serious power in him. The only regret in observing [Robson’s] execution of Mr. Talfourd’s Shylock is that he had not made trial of Shakespeare’s in preference.” Morley’s desire that Robson come face-to-face with the Bard himself—and thereby abolish the travesty as a distinct theatrical form—betrays only too well the shocking realization that Shakespeare can indeed be “great in travestie.” So great, in fact, that the comic genius of travesties ought no longer to perform in them. The travesty, as a theatrical rival, must be naturalized as an iteration of the legitimate; as the ever-flattering reflection of an unchanging and unchangeable Shakespeare.

Richard W. Schoch
Yet as evidenced by the success of Robson's half-serious and half-ludicrous portrayals of Shylock and Macbeth, the strategy for cultural resistance and, indeed, dominance pursued by nineteenth-century Shakespeare burlesques was to naturalize themselves and to denaturalize the presumably legitimate productions which they satirized: to assert that the burlesque was not a burlesque at all; that it neither departed from nor diminished the playwright's genius. No longer accepting a dependent or parasitic position toward the rival productions of West End actor-managers, the Victorian burlesque declared itself to be the most authentically Shakespearean performance of all. In the dagger scene from a Macbeth travesty of 1866, Lady Macbeth ordered her trembling husband to "shake off this ill-timed shake." In reply, he protested, "I'm shaking all I can." This is of course the oldest pun on Shakespeare's name. Yet it is also one which reminds us that the burlesque strove to "shake off" Shakespeare in order to be true to Shakespeare; in order to be "shaking all it could." In effecting this theatrical displacement, the burlesque, like the Old Price Riots of 1809, did not so much reform as restore traditional culture. The travesties that found favor with Victorian audiences styled themselves as the vehicle, however seemingly ludicrous, for a triumphal reinstatement of Shakespearean loyalties at the precise moment when the poet was under assault by the spectacular excesses of antiquarian mise-en-scène.

Let us look more closely, then, at how the burlesque staged its own strangely conservative and cozy relationship to Shakespeare. Sterling Coyne's This House to be Sold; (The Property of the Late William Shakespeare) Inquire Within (Adelphi, 1847) took its cue from the recent "sale of Shakespeare's [father's] house," as the Literary Gazette noted in its review of the comedy. The play thus begins with Shakespeare commodified: his birthplace, far from being a central and protected part of English heritage, is actually downgraded to the status of a marketable product—yet another establishment to be rented out, though with an undeniable cachet due to its former occupant. Shakespeare belongs, then, not to the entire nation but to the single speculator who can afford him (and who will most likely sell him off to yet another speculator at a higher price). Yet who should actually acquire the "dilapidated, but heart-stirring premises," as the play's real estate agent describes the house in Henley Street? Not the Shakespeare Club of Stratford-upon-Avon, eager though it was to "preserve everything connected with [the playwright's] mortal remains from further

"Chopkins, Late Shakespeare"
disrespect,” but Chatterton Chopkins, an entrepreneurial Cockney who promptly paints “Chopkins, Late Shakespeare” above the entrance to his newly-purchased place of business.\(^*\)

The seeming profanity of having the son of an East End fishmonger become, in his own boast, “the legitimate successor of the Bard of Avon” \((T, 1.23)\) is forestalled by the parvenu’s own dream of a “grand tableau” in honor of the “immortal” playwright \((T, 2.8)\). Chopkins, upon waking, decides to abandon his lawyer’s scheme of charging five shillings per person to view the house (more than twice the price of admission to the pit of a West End theater) and resolves instead to “make a present of it to the nation” \((T, 2.16)\). Coyne’s topical divertissement thus begins with the rejection of Shakespearean heritage (but not the Shakespearean marketplace) by the culture at large and ends with the revalorization of Shakespeare by a working-class character in a play drawing a sizeable working-class audience. Chopkins goes to his bed a speculator but rises from it a Bardolator. The burlesque thus not only declares its willing Shakespearean subjection—or infantalization, we might say, since the diminutive “Chopkins” has a childish ring to it—but also implies that it alone has kept the faith. The burlesque alone has the power to restore Shakespeare to the nation, even if only through the intercession of a Cockney “small substitute for the great Bard” \((T, 1.82)\).

And yet even this affectionate homage comique scarcely encompasses the full critical powers exercised by nineteenth-century Shakespeare travesties. Consider, as well, how Talfourd’s Macbeth travesty does not merely ratify the superiority of the original play over its wanton restaging by Kean but enacts its own privileged kinship ties to that original text. The punning title of Macbeth, Somewhat Removed from the Text of Shakespeare foregrounds—in the word “removed”—both the distance separating the burlesque from the original tragedy and the familial ties which nonetheless bind them together. Meditating upon its disputed Shakespearean legitimacy, the burlesque discloses its own ambivalent and unstable position of being “somewhat removed” within the playwright’s extended theatrical family. What Macbeth, fearful of murdering his sovereign, says of his relationship to Duncan—that the king is his “kinsman in a sort of way; / (How many times removed I cannot say;)”—is comparable to the imprecise relationship between the travesty and the tragedy enacted through the performance itself: an affinity that is at once undeniable and undefinable.\(^*\)

Yet how much further can Talfourd’s parallel take us? If the burlesque is removed from Shakespeare in the same way that Macbeth is removed from Duncan, are we then invited to believe that the burlesque’s

Richard W. Schoch

981
designs are similarly murderous? Is Macbeth, Somewhat Removed the instrument of Bardicide? Surely this cannot be, since the explicit target of the burlesque’s jocular invective is not Shakespeare, but Charles Kean—the very man who does usurp Shakespeare’s authority (or so we are apprised) by sacrificing the text to antiquarian splendor. The burlesque’s duty is to restore the rightful order of succession in the House of Shakespeare by overthrowing Kean’s unfounded claims of legitimacy. In consequence, then, Kean himself now becomes Macbeth, the expropriator of authority, while the burlesque takes on the avenging role of Malcolm. Indeed, the burlesque ranges so far in its quest to recognize Shakespeare’s authority that it must conclude with a most un-Shakespearean moment in order to preserve that authority. As Macduff is about to bestow the crown upon Malcolm, the unexpectedly alive Duncan enters the scene nodding and winking. In a Napoleonic gesture, he replaces the crown on his own head. Malcolm, Macduff and the other noblemen “fall back in astonishment” as Duncan declares that he shall once again wear the crown “if it’s all the same to you.” Macbeth, dead all the while on the stage floor, now suddenly sits up, looks around, and abdicates his throne (posthumously, as it were): “at [Duncan’s] feet I lay my regal diadem / Without regret, nor wish again that I had ’em.”

Duncan’s peaceful return to power, hailed even by the usurping “ex-Monarch” (as Macduff topically terms the penitent Macbeth) who at first wished him dead, not only signals that the burlesque itself harbors no selfish designs on the stature or authority of Shakespeare, but also warns that actor-managers such as Kean should behave with a similar regard for established theatrical authority.

In contrast to the playful puns of Macbeth Somewhat Removed, other Victorian burlesques defended Shakespeare with more naked aggression. La! Tempest! Ah!, an adaptation of The Enchanted Isle (Robert and William Brough’s 1848 travesty of The Tempest), opened at the Haymarket in the summer of 1850 as a satire of the opera La Tempesta then enjoying a triumphant run at the nearby Her Majesty’s Theatre. The Morning Chronicle heralded the Brough brothers’ revised comedy as the “great event of the season,” especially since London theatre-goers had already “heard and read much controversy upon the impropriety of founding an opera” based upon The Tempest. In a parody of the ghost scene from Hamlet—with the ghost now being that of Shakespeare himself—the prologue denounces La Tempesta as a form of “murder most foul.” The specter of Shakespeare haunts the boards of the Haymarket to decry his own murder at the hands of operatic meddlers who have brought down to “Tom Thumb’s level / The plot of [his] most
seeming perfect play.” Hamlet, upon hearing this woeful tale, resolves to avenge the death of father Shakespeare by performing yet another travesty, thereby outsmarting the authors of La Tempesta “on their own ground.” 41 La! Tempest! Ah! this ingeniously uses a deliberate travesty to malign an unwitting one. Of course it would be wrong to presume that the self-laureation of this and other Shakespeare burlesques went unchallenged. As some critics pointed out, La! Tempest! Ah! was doubly guilty of the very offense which it charged the opera La Tempesta of having committed, since it was itself an adaptation of an adaptation. The jokes directed against the opera’s librettist Eugène Scribe were absurd, judged the Morning Advertiser, because the “authors of The Enchanted Isle [that is, the Brough brothers] . . . not only vulgarise[d] Shakespeare, but render[ed] that which is itself ‘beautiful exceedingly,’ ridiculous and contemptible.” 42 Even so, the critical observation remains that the burlesque defense of Shakespeare was at once conservative in intent and radical in execution: to uphold the playwright through mockery. 43

The critical powers of the nineteenth-century burlesque ranged further still. On occasion, the burlesque had to defend Shakespeare from himself, as in Charles Selby’s Kinge Richard ye Third; or, ye Battle of Bosworth Field. This historical travesty, performed at the Strand in both 1844 and 1853 (years in which, not coincidentally, Charles Kean played Richard III before London audiences), claimed to have “improved” Shakespeare’s original text through “copious alterations, additions, and omissions.” As Selby further argued in the playbill, since the “original passages by the Gentleman from Stratford” were “beyond comprehension,” the public would more readily appreciate his own sensational “Drama of Effect” over any legitimate—that is, tedious and inscrutable—“Drama of Literature.” 44 Andrew Halliday’s 1859 Romeo and Juliet Travestie; or, the Cup of Cold Poison enacts even more broadly this same textual manipulation. Near the end of the play, after Queen Mab has restored Mercutio, Romeo, and Juliet to life as minstrel show “serenaders,” a figure of Shakespeare—dressed in white and striking a menacing pose—rises through a trap in the stage floor. 45 Alarmed by the sudden appearance of the angered playwright, the three serenaders immediately fall silent. As Romeo quickly perceives, Shakespeare’s “noble tragedy [has] turned to fun, and he don’t like it” (R, 6.107-8). To soften Shakespeare’s heart and reconcile him to the travesty’s supposedly justified distortions of the original play, Romeo concedes that he and his fellow actors “have not been behavin’ / With that respect” deserved by the “illustrious Swan of Avon” (R, 6.112-13). Yet he further advises that

Richard W. Schoch
... [I]f we essayed your play
As you did write it—the boxes and the pit
Would say we could not act the play a bit.
And so that with us, not at us they may laugh
We’ve winnowed your fine corn into chaff.

(R, 6.115-19)

As Romeo freely confesses, the travesty amends the original, yet defective, Shakespearean text by rendering it more theatrically effective for a contemporary audience. In one sense, Romeo’s decision to update the tragedy is the decision inevitably faced whenever classic plays are restaged. Actors and directors in the nineteenth century no less than today are always trying to make Shakespeare speak across time. Yet there is a particular tension within the nineteenth-century burlesque amendments to Shakespeare. For the only means of making *Romeo and Juliet* acceptable to a mid-Victorian audience, as the burlesque itself confirmed, was to coarsen the playwright’s refined sensibilities: to winnow the poet’s corn into the clown’s chaff. Reinforcing the apparent incongruity that the travesty is the form which Shakespeare must take if “Shakespeare” is to survive at all, the Nurse astutely notes that the burlesque which has angered the playwright is itself of Shakespearean provenance, and so his anger is utterly uncalled for. “You wrote burlesques yourself, and well you know it,” she remonstrates with some justification (R, 6.121). Caught, then, in a literary imposture, the figure of Shakespeare literally descends from his elevated stage position and so enacts the decline of standards which was the price to be paid by an 1859 audience for making Shakespeare its own contemporary. The Nurse then gloats that she “had him there” (R, 6.122) and so acts out her own superiority for having explained to Shakespeare just what being Shakespearean means.

A final and even more strident example of the burlesque rehabilitation of Shakespeare is William Brough’s *Perdita* (1856), first performed at the Lyceum Theatre as a parody of Charles Kean’s revival of *The Winter’s Tale*. Kean’s classicized production opened at the Princess’s Theatre on 28 April 1856 and ran for 101 consecutive performances, closing just a month before the premiere of Brough’s burlesque. In his playbill essay, Kean noted with some consternation the play’s much-debated and (for the Victorians) lamentable historical errors: the Delphic Oracle, Christian burial, and references to the Emperor of Russia and the painter Giulio Romano. Each unfortunate anachronism was alluded to by the historically conscious burlesque Chorus, who

“Chopkins, Late Shakespeare”
deftly argued in a micro-manifesto on theatrical historicism that *The Winter's Tale*

[A]s written by Shakespeare, won't do in our day.
There’s so strange an admixture of periods historical,    
An emp’ror of Russia, a pedlar, an oracle,    
That now in this critical age each man wonders
The bard should have made such chronological blunders.48

In the Chorus’s frank admission, the play “as written by Shakespeare”
cannot meet the rigorous and precise standards of historical research
demanded in the “critical age” of the mid-nineteenth century. Yet since
Shakespeare wrote “not for one age, but for all sorts of times” (as the
Chorus neatly colloquializes Jonson’s founding expression of Bardolatry),
he must be continually revised to satisfy the expectations of subsequent
ages (*P*, prologue, 14). For the Victorians, those changing expectations
had everything to do with historical correctness; and Shakespeare in
performance increasingly became the occasion for the display of ar-
chaeological finery.49

We might be tempted, then, to conclude that Charles Kean, whose
antiquarian dramaturgy could transform even Shakespeare’s fantastic
romances into animated pictures of Periclean Athens, would be the
ideal person to correct the embarrassing “chronological blunders.” But
as the Chorus further advises, the purportedly authentic “Greek Robes,”
“Phrygian bonnet[s],” and music of “antiquity” (*P*, prologue, 30, 45)
which figured in Kean’s classicizing *mise-en-scène* did not so much
purge *The Winter’s Tale* of its errors as compounded the play’s incoher-
ence because those artifacts, despite their presumed classical authentic-
ity, could never find sanction within the text’s own historicist imprec-
isions.50 “[T]he bard says nothing” (*P*, prologue, 32), the Chorus reveals,
about whether the actors should wear Greek costumes. Although
intended to liberate Shakespeare, Kean’s antiquarian reforms succeeded
only in bringing about the “worthy old dramatist’s slaughter” (*P*, pro-
logue, 49) by forcing his play into an arbitrary historical framework.
Kean’s archaeologized version of *The Winter’s Tale* failed, at least for its
burlesque appraisers, to be either genuinely classical or genuinely
Shakespearean. Equally false as both history and theatre, the revival at
the Princess’s amounted to nothing more than a deadly retrospection of
the picturesque.

So where does all this criticism of Kean’s *The Winter’s Tale* leave a
mid-Victorian audience? With the astonishing implication that the
travesty *Perdita* took full honors for both historical truth and

Richard W. Schoch 985
Shakespearean fidelity. Safe and secure in the loving hands of burlesque artists, “the poor old dramatist” was no longer condemned to “slaughter” but rather was successfully rehabilitated for performance in “our day.” And yet the way in which Shakespeare was rehabilitated in September 1856 for the audience at the Lyceum was altogether unforeseen. The textual corrections of Selby’s 1844 *Kinge Richard ye Third* made that comic play something like a performance edition of Shakespeare’s *Richard III*: a rectified version of an original, yet corrupt playtext. Halliday’s *Romeo and Juliet* burlesque was indisputably Shakespearean because, as the Nurse sharply retorted, Shakespeare himself had written burlesques. Each of these travesties defined its correctness against the standard of an established Shakespearean canon. The canon needed rethinking, to be sure; but the primacy of “Shakespeare” within the canon was never questioned. The claim of *Perdita*, however, was something shockingly new: not that the travesty must be faithful to Shakespeare, but that Shakespeare must be faithful to the travesty.

The subtitle of Brough’s comedy, *Being the Legend upon which Shakespeare is supposed to have founded his Winter’s Tale*, is startlingly instructive. To allege that *Perdita*, rather than Greene’s *Pandosto*, was Shakespeare’s source text is obviously preposterous—and thus a source of delectation.  But the allegation is no less serious for being amusing. The self-bestowed authority of the burlesque demands that Shakespeare’s blundering play be corrected not by reference to some idealized authorial intent (that is, what the Victorians imagined Shakespeare would have written had he himself been a Victorian) but rather by alignment with its presumed—and newly-recovered—source text. *Perdita* does not (indeed, cannot) rewrite Shakespeare precisely because Shakespeare himself had previously rewritten that very burlesque, itself now being revived for performance centuries later. *The Winter’s Tale*, if we follow Brough’s logic to its illogical conclusion, was thus always already an adaptation of a burlesque original. What is required in a contemporary performance, then, is a kind of unwriting—a reformation—which enables the burlesque to reassert its own normative a priori status over Shakespeare’s play. Only with this ultimate reinstatement of the originary burlesque can the process of amendment and alteration which Shakespeare himself began come to an end. With the performance of *Perdita*, Shakespeare and his “supposed” source are finally and conclusively reconciled. Reconciled, that is, to the burlesque’s advantage.

Here, at last, is the way around the vexing impasse created by Shakespeare’s “chronological blunders.” By returning to the text which, in the burlesque’s elaborate conceit, the poet first consulted, the mid-

“Chopkins, Late Shakespeare”
Victorian stage purged *The Winter's Tale* of its historical errors and thus, as the burlesque Chorus confirms, “righted what Shakespeare left wrong” (*P*, prologue, 17). As historically conscious Victorians knew only too well, “Time’s contradictions” (*P*, prologue, 16) could be reconciled only by relying upon authoritative and confirmed primary sources. This was precisely what Charles Kean, despite his antiquarian ardor, failed to do. He certainly relied upon classical stage accessories to clarify *The Winter’s Tale’s* confused historical referents. But, as we have seen, Kean’s antiquarian sets, costumes, and properties only intensified the problem of historicization because the use of such accessories was not stipulated by Shakespeare himself. In fact, the playwright was bafflingly silent on the matter. If, however, Kean had turned in the opposite direction—if he had gone back to the burlesque for guidance—then his revival would not, we are invited to believe, have resulted in the “poor old dramatist’s slaughter.” The travesty, precisely because it was uniquely capable of negotiating temporal interstices, thus became the standard for both historical and theatrical correctness while Kean’s spectacle of classical antiquity was mocked for its own dramaturgical deviance.

* * *

What has emerged by the end of the 1850s, and most clearly in *Perdita*, is a two-faced Shakespeare: the “Swan of Avon” who, however “illustrious,” is estranged from nineteenth-century popular culture; and his burlesque alter ego, pedestrian to be sure, but who for that very reason can command appreciative audiences. The burlesque thus served the notable, yet ironic, function of repatriating Shakespeare—of “shaking off the ill-timed Shake” only to remain “shaking” still.52 The double feint of the travesty was to proclaim its own historicity by mocking the “peculiarities of the day” and yet also to align itself with the ahistorical purity—“for all sorts of times”—attributed to Shakespeare once his plays were freed from the deformations wrought by intrusive actor-managers.53 Like the sempiternal national dramatist himself—“radiant aloft . . . a thousand years hence,” as Thomas Carlyle prophesied in 1840—the Shakespeare travesty equally purported to be outside of time precisely because it did not indulge in such passing fashions as antiquarian spectacle.54 Not held hostage to any historical moment, and least of all to its own, the burlesque descended to the level of contemporary *mise-en-scène* only to rescue the playwright from just those topical “peculiarities.” Behind the undeniably pronounced localism of nineteenth-century Shakespeare travesties, behind the bracing freshness of

*Richard W. Schoch*
their slang and up-to-the-minute puns, there also lurked an equally pronounced universalism which secured the travesty's contorted authority and perverse canonicity—reminding us just how obligingly the Victorians had acceded to Thomas Duffet's prescient injunction of 1673: "to get good Plays be kind to bad Travesty."

University of London

NOTES

4 All quotations in this paragraph are from John Poole, "Preface" to Hamlet Travestie in Three Acts with Burlesque Annotations (London: J. M. Richardson, 1811), viii.
6 Review of Shylock; or, the Merchant of Venice Preserved, by Francis Talfourd, as performed at the Olympic, Morning Advertiser, 5 July 1853; my emphasis.
7 Poole, ix.
8 Review of Hamlet Travestie, by Poole, Monthly Review, November 1810, 325.
11 Charles Kean’s own retirement from the Princess’s Theatre in 1859 marked the beginning of a twenty-year “interregnum” in memorable London productions of Shakespeare, a tedious interval relieved only by Charles Fechter’s Hamlet in 1861 and 1864 and the Bancrofts’ 1874 archaeologized staging of The Merchant of Venice (G. C. D. Odell, Shakespeare from Betterton to Irving, 2 vols. [New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1920], 2:358). Similarly, no new Shakespeare travesties were produced on the London stage between 1860 and 1868, when F. C. Burnand’s Richard the Third premiered at the Royalty Theatre. Senga Wallace Roche, “Travesties and Burlesques of Shakespeare’s Plays on the British Stage during the Nineteenth Century” (Ph.D. diss., University of London, 1987), 265.
13 Review of Macbeth Somewhat Removed from the Text of Shakespeare, by Talfourd, as performed at the Olympic, Spectator, 30 April 1853, 414. The Spectator registered its complaint only halfway through the theatrical season. The six Shakespeare burlesques produced in 1853 were Barton’s Hamlet According to an Act of Parliament (Strand, 7 November 1853; the first travesty of the play since Poole’s 1810 version); Francis Talfourd’s Macbeth, Somewhat Removed from the Text of Shakespeare (Olympic, 25 April 1853); the anonymous Macbeth According to an Act of Parliament (Strand, 18 April 1853); Talfourd’s Shylock; or, The Merchant of Venice Preserved (Olympic, 4 July 1853); Othello According to an Act of Parliament, a revival of Maurice Dowling’s “Chopkins, Late Shakespeare”

988
travesty (Strand, September and October 1853); and Kinge Richard ye Third, a revival of Charles Selby’s travesty (Strand, October 1853).

14 Lloyd’s Weekly London Newspaper, 8 May 1853, 8. For example, Bell’s Weekly Messenger noted that Hodson, in the Strand burlesque, carried a “shellelagh” as the Irish Macbeth, a prop which seems likely to have been inspired by the stick Kean himself used when playing Macbeth which, in turn, reminded the critic of a similar one “carried by Rambo Sambo the Indian juggler”—in a concatenation of colonial stereotypes (24 April 1853, 5).


16 G. H. Lewes [Vivian, pseud.], Leader, 30 July 1853.

17 Illustrated London News, 29 December 1855, 755.


19 Review of Hamlet According to an Act of Parliament, by Barton, as performed at the Strand, Morning Chronicle, 7 November 1853, 5.

20 Reviews of Macbeth, Somewhat Removed, by Talfourd, as performed at the Olympic, Observer, 1 May 1853, 7 (“pot lids”); Court Journal, 19 February 1853, (“hollow of”); Bell’s Life in London, 1 May 1853, 5 (“clock cases”)


22 Review of Macbeth According to an Act of Parliament, anon., as performed at the Strand, Bell’s Weekly Messenger, 24 April 1853, 5.

23 Lewes, 30 July 1853; my emphasis.

24 Clinton-Baddeley, 10.

25 Duffet, epilogue, line 143.

26 Francis Burnand, “The Spirit of Burlesque,” The Universal Review 2 (September-December 1888), 171 (“candid friend” and “natural”), 175 (“injured by” and “rendered ridiculous”).

27 Reviews of Macbeth, Somewhat Removed, by Talfourd, as performed at the Olympic, Illustrated London News, 30 April 1853, 327; Lloyd’s Weekly Newspaper, 8 May 1853, 8.

28 Review of Macbeth, Somewhat Removed, by Talfourd, as performed at the Olympic, Observer, 1 May 1853, 7.

29 Review of Macbeth, Somewhat Removed, by Talfourd, as performed at the Olympic, Spectator, 30 April 1853, 414.

30 Dallas, 214.

31 Review of Macbeth, Somewhat Removed and Shylock; or, The Merchant of Venice Preserved, by Talfourd, as performed at the Olympic, Illustrated London News, 9 July 1853, 15; my emphasis.

32 Henry Morley, review of Shylock; or, The Merchant of Venice Preserved, by Talfourd, as performed at the Olympic, Examiner, 9 July 1853.

33 Bell’s Weekly, 24 April 1853.


35 Review of This House to be Sold; (The Property of the Late William Shakespeare) Inquire Within, by Sterling Coyne, as performed at the Adelphi, Literary Gazette, 11 September 1847. Shakespeare’s birthplace was purchased in 1847 through funds raised by subscription, with donors including William Charles Macready and Charles Dickens.

Richard W. Schoch

36 Coyne, This House to be Sold (London: National Acting Drama Office, 1847), scene 1, line 8. Hereafter cited parenthetically in the text by scene and line numbers and abbreviated T.


39 Talfourd, Macbeth, Somewhat Removed, scene 7, lines 54-55.

40 Review of La! Tempest! Ah!, by Robert and William Brough, as performed at the Haymarket, Morning Chronicle, 10 June 1850, 5. The controversy betrays a stunning lack of historical perspective as The Tempest received its first operatic adaptation as early as 1674 at the Dorset Garden Theatre, in Thomas Shadwell’s version of Dryden and Davenant’s The Enchanted Isle. See Jocelyn Powell, Restoration Theatre Production (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1984), 62-86.

41 Robert and William Brough, La! Tempest! Ah!, prologue, line 23 (“murder most”), 44-45 (“Tom Thumb”), 66 (“on their”). No manuscript of this Haymarket production has survived except for the prologue, now held in the Lord Chamberlain’s collection in the British Library (Add. MSS. 43028).

42 Review of La! Tempest! Ah!, by Robert and William Brough, as performed at the Haymarket, Morning Advertiser, 21 October 1850.

43 Indeed, the burlesque’s claim to respectability rested in good measure on the fact that Shakespeare himself wrote burlesques, of which the most notable were the play of Pyramus and Thisbe in A Midsummer Night’s Dream and the pageant of the Nine Worthies in Love’s Labour’s Lost. In Planché’s extravaganza Love and Fortune (1859), written to inaugurate Augustus Harris’s management of the Princess’s Theatre, Love dissuades Fortune from being “horribly afraid” of Shakespeare with the emboldening reminder that “pleasant Will” himself had “shed a glory round things most grotesque / [And] wrote for Grecian clowns the best burlesque” (The Extravaganzas of J. R. Planché, 1825-1871, 5 vols. [London: Samuel French, 1879], 5:203).


45 Andrew Halliday, Romeo and Juliet Travestie; or The Cup of Cold Poison (1859); rpt. in vol. 3 of Nineteenth-Century, scene 7, line 99 (stage direction). Hereafter cited parenthetically in the text by scene and line numbers and abbreviated R.

46 Marie Wilton, more than forty years before she became Lady Bancroft, made her London debut in the title role. She carried a “wreath of blush roses,” the actress-manager recalled in her memoirs, and wore a “charming little dress of white cashmere” made by her mother and adorned at the waist with roses (Mr. and Mrs. Bancroft On and Off the Stage, 2 vols. [London: Richard Bentley and Son, 1888], 1:45).

47 Playbill, 28 April 1856, Princess’s Theatre production file, Theatre Museum, London.

48 William Brough, Perdita; or, the Royal Milkmaid: Being the legend upon which Shakespeare is supposed to have founded his Winter’s Tale (1856); rpt. in vol. 3 of Nineteenth-Century, prologue, lines 8-12. Hereafter cited parenthetically in the text by scene and line numbers and abbreviated P.


990

“Chopkins, Late Shakespeare”
Kean, having set *The Winter’s Tale* partly in Magna Graecia, was able to indulge a taste for classical costume. Obtaining historically correct music was more difficult, he elaborated in the playbill, as only “meagre information” was available. He nonetheless chose to have the *Hymn to Apollo*, “which many consider genuine Greek,” performed during the play (Playbill for *The Winter’s Tale*, 28 April 1856, Princess’s Theatre production file, Theatre Museum, London).

Brough’s *Perdita* was surprisingly faithful to the metatheatricality of the statue scene, for it staged that climactic moment as a performance for royalty—a gesture no doubt equally inspired by the presence of Victoria and Albert at the opening performance of Kean’s *The Winter’s Tale*. In the burlesque’s play-within-a-play, there is thus a kind of telescoping of histrionic moments. For when Paulina stage-managed a performance for Leontes, who himself sat within a make-shift “Royal box” guarded by ersatz “beef-eaters” and, moreover, when she expressed her gratitude for the honor which the court had bestowed on the company assembled by its “state visit” on the “opening night,” the audience at the Lyceum could not have failed to recognize the reenactment of Kean’s welcome to the Queen and her consort at the Princess’s Theatre four months earlier.

The irony was further underscored by the convention of performing burlesque Macbeths as stereotypical “stage Irishmen”—a case of using colonial imaginary to revalorize England’s national poet.

Review of *Macbeth, Somewhat Removed*, by Talfourd, as performed at the Olympic, *Bell’s Life in London*, 5 (“peculiarities of the day”).


Richard W. Schoch 991