

PERFORMING SHAKESPEARE  
IN THE AGE OF EMPIRE

RICHARD FOULKES



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## *Contents*

<i>List of illustrations</i>	<i>page</i> viii
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	ix
Introduction	i
1 The hero as actor: William Charles Macready	6
2 Equerries and equestrians: Phelps, Kean and Astley's	32
3 A babel of bardolaters: the 1864 tercentenary	58
4 Made in Manchester: Charles Calvert and George Rignold	82
5 The fashionable tragedian: Henry Irving	105
6 The imperial stage: Beerbohm Tree and Benson	130
7 The national arena: Granville Barker, Louis Calvert and Annie Horniman	157
8 The theatre of war: the 1916 tercentenary	180
In conclusion	205
<i>Notes</i>	207
<i>References</i>	213
<i>Index</i>	228

## *Illustrations*

1	English theatricals at Paris – The Salle Ventador ( <i>Illustrated London News</i> 28 December 1844)	page 28
2	HRH Princess Victoria, ‘The Tournament of Richard II’, pencil on paper, signed, inscribed and dated Osborne, May 1857 for Mr Corbould (By courtesy of the Forbes Collection)	48
3	<i>Richard III</i> at Astley’s Amphitheatre ( <i>Illustrated London News</i> 6 September 1856)	56
4	Shakespeare and the Pygmies ( <i>Punch</i> 30 January 1864)	80
5	Interior of the Prince’s Theatre, Manchester during a performance of <i>The Winter’s Tale</i> ( <i>Illustrated London News</i> 27 November 1869)	93
6	Sketches from <i>Othello</i> at the Lyceum Theatre ( <i>Illustrated London News</i> 4 June 1881)	114
7	Mrs Langtry as Rosalind (from <i>The Days I Knew</i> by Lillie Langtry)	117
8	Souvenir programme for the visit of H. Beerbohm Tree and His Majesty’s Theatre Company to Berlin (By courtesy of the University of Bristol Theatre Collection)	137
9	Conrad Tritschler’s design for The Forest of Arden from the programme for <i>As You Like It</i> at the Prince’s Theatre, Manchester (By courtesy of Manchester Public Libraries)	172
10	Byam Shaw, ‘It is the Prince of Wales’ (from <i>Shakespeare Tercentenary Commemorative Performance The Memorial Volume</i> ) (By courtesy of the Shakespeare Centre Library, Stratford-upon-Avon)	201

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*The hero as actor: William Charles Macready*

THOMAS CARLYLE

On 12 May 1840 Thomas Carlyle delivered his lecture ‘The Hero As Poet: Dante; Shakespeare’, the third of six in his series ‘On Heroes, Hero-Worship and the Heroic in History’. In his lecture Carlyle identified what he considered to be Shakespeare’s prospects not only in the land of his birth, but also around a world which during the remainder of the century was to become increasingly dominated by the English language. In a key passage Carlyle identified Shakespeare’s role at home and abroad:

In spite of the sad state Hero-worship now lies in, consider what this Shakspeare has actually become among us. Which Englishman we ever made, in this land of ours, which million of Englishmen, would we not give-up rather than the Stratford Peasant? There is no regiment of highest Dignitaries that we would sell him for. He is the grandest thing we have yet done. For our honour among foreign nations, as an ornament to our English household, what item is there that we would not rather surrender than him? Consider now, if they asked us, Will you give-up your Indian Empire or your Shakspeare, you English . . . ? (1946, p. 148)

Carlyle’s pride in Shakespeare as the greatest ‘Englishman we ever made’ is proprietorial in an almost timeless way. He identifies Shakespeare as the product of a particular period (‘This Elizabethan Era’) in the nation’s history, but the credit is shared by all his countrymen in perpetuity. The scale of the importance with which Carlyle imbued such a hero is evident from his valuation of ‘the Stratford Peasant’ above a ‘million of Englishmen’ or a ‘regiment of highest Dignitaries’ or ‘your Indian Empire’. During the next three-quarters of a century ‘the sad state of Hero-worship’ was to improve – beyond even Carlyle’s aspiration – reaching such heights that a ‘million of Englishmen’ and more were indeed sacrificed not directly for Shakespeare, but for a patriotic ideal with which he had become indissolubly identified. This was certainly not Carlyle’s intention. He perceived that in the case of Shakespeare hero-worship would be a force for peace:

England, before long, this Island of ours, will hold but a small fraction of the English: in America, in New Holland, east and west to the very Antipodes, there will be a Saxondom covering great spaces of the Globe. And now, what is it that can keep all of these together virtually one Nation, so that they do not fall-out and fight, but live at peace, in brotherlike intercourse, helping one another . . . We can fancy him [Shakespeare] as radiant aloft over all the Nations of Englishmen, a thousand years hence. (p. 149)

By the time he delivered his hero-worship lectures, Carlyle had developed strong personal links with the contemporary author whom he would not have been alone in considering to be a candidate for such status: Goethe. In 1824 Carlyle sent a copy of his translation of *Wilhelm Meister*, with its influential critique of *Hamlet*, to the German author, with an accompanying letter and a correspondence ensued over the rest of the decade. Carlyle paid fulsome tribute to Goethe for the help which he had gained from the German author's works in overcoming his own spiritual crisis, but the scope of the letters extended from the benefits which great literature could impart to individuals to those which it could exert between nations. Thus on 20 July 1827 Goethe wrote to Carlyle:

It is obvious that the efforts of the best poets and aesthetic writers of all nations have now for some time been directed towards what is universal in humanity . . . striving to diffuse everywhere some gentleness, we cannot indeed hope that universal peace is being ushered in thereby, but only that inevitable strife will be gradually more restrained, war will become less cruel, and victory less insolent. (Norton ed., 1887, p. 24)

Carlyle reciprocated these sentiments, drawing attention to the 'rapidly progressive . . . study and love of German Literature' in Britain, where 'within the last six years, I should say that the readers of your language have increased tenfold' (p. 85).

In practice the implicit notions of national superiority and cultural hegemony were all too liable to surface in the form of rivalry, sometimes personal but also national, in which the achievements of artists and writers became part of the chauvinist arsenal rather than the instruments of peace.

#### MONOPOLY

Amongst those present at Carlyle's lecture on Shakespeare was William Charles Macready, the 'Eminent Tragedian', seen to be manager of

Drury Lane Theatre. Ever sensitive about the status of the profession which he had reluctantly joined, when the decline in the fortunes of his actor–manager father placed the law and the church beyond his reach, Macready expressed himself ‘disappointed in his [Carlyle’s] treatment of the subject’, an opinion no doubt conditioned by what the actor took as Carlyle’s view ‘of managers of playhouses being the most insignificant of human beings’ (Toynbee ed., 1912, vol. 2, p. 60). In fact Carlyle had expressed his admiration for Macready’s attempts to elevate the contemporary stage in a letter of 12 January 1838, in which, though describing himself as ‘an entirely *untheatrical* man’, he had expressed his wonder ‘at your Herculean task. Proceed in it, prosper in it’ (Archer, 1890, pp. 117–18). Carlyle’s sentiments were apt, for if Shakespeare was to become the ornament of the English stage, it was upon Macready that the responsibility principally rested.

The status of the two principal London theatres, Covent Garden and Drury Lane, had come under parliamentary scrutiny in 1832 when a Select Committee had been appointed ‘to inquire into the LAWS affecting DRAMATIC LITERATURE’ (*British Parliamentary Papers, Stage and Theatre I*, 1968). Though the committee’s remit extended to authors’ copyright and other issues, it was the monopoly of the performance of ‘legitimate drama’ – principally Shakespeare – enjoyed by Covent Garden and Drury Lane that was most fiercely debated. These two theatres based their claim on the warrants granted by King Charles II to Thomas Killigrew (the King’s Company) and Sir William Davenant (the Duke’s Company) on 21 August 1660. In due course these companies had taken up residence at Drury Lane and Covent Garden respectively, and, though these theatres had been successively rebuilt, being enlarged each time to accommodate the capital’s expanding population, their nineteenth-century managers regarded themselves as the heirs to Killigrew and Davenant and the privileges accorded to them by Charles II.

Charles Kemble, the youngest brother of Sarah Siddons and John Philip Kemble, whose precarious management of Covent Garden had only been salvaged by his daughter Fanny’s debut as Juliet in 1829, nevertheless staunchly defended the monopoly, claiming that: ‘certain plays . . . cannot be adequately represented without space to do them in; for instance such plays as *Coriolanus* or *Julius Caesar*’ (p. 45). When asked whether audiences would prefer to see the plays ‘as near their own doors as possible’, Kemble replied ‘I do not believe that there is any demand for it.’

In 1832 Macready had no experience of managing a patent theatre, but he was insistent upon the retention of their privileged status, though when asked how many times he had played Shakespeare during his current engagement of two years at Drury Lane, he was obliged to reply that he had played Macbeth six times, Richard III ‘five times, and Hamlet once and the Winter’s Tale once’ (p. 135). When it was pointed out to him that ‘by limiting the performance of Shakespeare to the two great theatres, you leave it to the caprice of the proprietors of those theatres’, he replied ‘Yes; but they pay for that caprice, and the losses have been very heavy indeed in consequence.’ Both Kemble and Macready were invited to make comparison with the Théâtre-Français (Comédie-Française) in Paris, but of course that received a state subvention, something never enjoyed by the English patent companies/theatres. The supporters of the monopoly found themselves in the unenviable position of asserting a privilege without having the means of carrying it out effectively.

Not only were the economic and demographic odds stacked against the patents, but also the very monopoly they were defending had long been more honoured in the breach than the observance. For years minor theatres had resorted to various ruses in order to perform Shakespeare. The most common was some form of music, an extreme case being the performance of *Othello* as a burletta, ‘which was accomplished by having a low pianoforte accompaniment, the musician striking a chord once in five minutes – but always so as to be totally inaudible. This was the extent of the musical element distinguishing *Othello* from the dialogue of the regular drama’ (Nicholson, 1906, p. 330). Another subterfuge was to perform Shakespeare’s plays with different titles: ‘*Othello* under the title *Is He Jealous?*; *Romeo and Juliet* under the guise of *How to Die for Love*; *Macbeth* as *Murder Will Out*; *The Merchant of Venice* billed as *Diamond cut Diamond*; and *Hamlet* as *Methinks I See My Father*’ (Broadbent, 1901, p. 107). Absurd though these instances now seem, they do make the crucial point that Shakespeare was still a dramatist with huge appeal to a ‘popular’ audience. He could be ‘box-office’; otherwise managers would not go to such lengths and risk falling foul of the law to stage his plays. Jane Moody has argued persuasively ‘that this process of adaptation began primarily as a legal safeguard but also provided an opportunity to translate Shakespeare for popular consumption’ (1994, p. 62 and 2000).

Although the Select Committee’s second recommendation was that all London theatres ‘should be allowed to exhibit, at their option, the

Legitimate Drama', it was not until 1843 that the necessary legislation was passed. In the interim intrepid managers assumed the responsibility of the patent houses, accepting to varying degrees that the performance of Shakespeare's plays was part of their remit. Alfred Bunn, who did 'not think it compatible with the disposition of this country, that its places of public entertainment should be up held by any grant from Government' (1840, vol. 1, p. 34) nevertheless drew attention to the financial penalties of producing Shakespeare at Drury Lane in the 1835–6 season. The twenty-four Shakespearian appearances by Macready – with 'every possible advantage to back him' – in the lead brought in £4,542, 'a nightly average of £189' compared with Madame Malibran whose sixteen performances in the *Maid of Artois* 'yielded a nightly average of more than £355 . . . Difference per night! – £166' (vol. 2, p. 72). The uneasy partnership between Macready and Bunn was terminated on 29 April 1836, not by the inadequacy of the financial rewards attached to staging Shakespeare, but by the former physically assaulting the latter at the end of Act 3 of *Richard III*.

#### MACREADY AS MANAGER

Macready set up, in opposition to Bunn, as manager of the other patent house, Covent Garden, issuing on 23 September 1837 his prospectus, which Bunn dismissed as 'this pretty document' (p. 268). In it Macready proclaimed 'his strenuous endeavours to advance the drama as a branch of national literature and art' (p. 267), drawing from his rival Bunn his resolve 'to sustain the character [which] Drury Lane has long enjoyed of being the FIRST THEATRE OF THE EMPIRE' (p. 273). Combative as ever, Bunn referred to the acting companies as 'the respective forces' (p. 277) and, the air thick with claims to 'national' and 'empire', battle was duly joined.

One of the causes of the decline of the drama, which the 1832 Select Committee had identified, was 'the absence of Royal encouragement'. Clearly if either (or both) of the patent houses was to achieve the status of a national theatre, the 'encouragement' of the sovereign was very much to be desired. By an apparently propitious synchronism on 20 June 1837, just months before Macready inaugurated his Covent Garden regime, the eighteen-year-old Queen Victoria had succeeded William IV. Furthermore in her prime minister, Lord Melbourne, the young sovereign had a fellow devotee of the theatre with whom, as George Rowell has observed (1978, p. 21), she discussed Shakespeare's plays and contemporary performances of them. Macready did not permit his professed republicanism

to stand in the way of his swift application for the royal patronage, recording in his diary for 19 August: 'Wrote my memorial to the Queen, requesting her to let me call the Covent Garden players, "Her Majesty's Company of Performers." Inclosed it in a note to the Lord Chamberlain and sent it' (Toynbee ed., 1912, vol. 1, p. 407). His diary entry for 23 August shows that Macready had received an equivocal reply from the Lord Chamberlain, expressing the queen's interest, respect and admiration, and intimating that, though it might be deemed impractical to accede to his precise request, 'other means might be found of rendering assistance to his undertaking'. The monarch's response fell short of Macready's hopes (if not his expectations), but he had succeeded in introducing at the very outset of the new reign a theme – royal patronage – which was to be not only crucial for the theatre, but also significant for the nation in the ensuing decades.

In the event Macready's management made what William Archer described as 'but a languid start' (1890, p. 112) with a worthy, but uninspired revival of *The Winter's Tale* (30 September 1837) and during the first year of her reign the queen's patronage was weighted towards Drury Lane, where she relished the performances of Charles Kean. As Hamlet, which she saw on 26 January 1838, the queen found 'his delivery of all the fine long speeches quite beautiful' (Esher ed., 1912, vol. 1, p. 265), but she was even more impressed by his Richard III, which she attended twice (5 February and 1 March), and pronounced 'a *triumph*': 'He [Charles Kean] was dressed exactly like his father [Edmund]' (pp. 271–2). As the queen's comments imply Charles Kean was then very much under the shadow of his famous father, but in time he was to make his mark as a producer of Shakespeare's plays and render his sovereign signal service.

Whatever the immediate attractions of Shakespeare at Drury Lane may have been, at Covent Garden Macready was developing the principles of Shakespearian production, which were to establish his reputation and influence his successors for the rest of the century and beyond. The turning point was his revival of *King Lear* on 25 January 1838. Though the dominance of Nahum Tate's *The History of King Lear* (1681) had of late been somewhat eroded, the Fool was still a notable absentee from the English stage. Macready had originally cast Drinkwater Meadows in the role, but was so apprehensive about the result that he thought 'we should be obliged to omit the part' until George Bartley suggested Priscilla Horton, whom Macready agreed was 'the very person' to perform 'the sort of fragile, hectic, beautiful-faced, half-idiot-looking boy' that he had in mind (Toynbee ed., 1912, vol. 1, p. 438). Though by no

means disinterested, being a member of Macready's coterie, John Forster clearly reflected the approbation of 'the three crowded audiences', which had so far attended *King Lear*, when he wrote his review (*Examiner*, 4 February 1838) in which he discoursed on the importance of the Fool and the beneficial effect on Macready's *Lear*: 'Mr Macready's *Lear*, remarkable before for a masterly completeness of conception, is heightened by this introduction of the Fool to a surprising degree. It accords exactly with the view he seeks to present of *Lear*'s character.'

Lord Melbourne was aware of Macready's improvements (though he confused Tate with Cibber) when on 4 February he asked the queen if she had seen *King Lear*: 'It is *King Lear* as Shakespear wrote it; and has not been performed so, since the time of Queen Anne' (pp. 269–70). It was a reflection of the queen's tastes that she did not see *King Lear* until 18 February 1839, by which time Macready was highly indignant about her attendance at rival theatres, especially five visits to Drury Lane at the beginning of 1839 where Van Ambrugh's *Lions* occupied the historic stage. By then Macready had added another major Shakespearian revival to his credits: *Coriolanus* (12 March 1838). In Forster's view it surpassed all Macready's previous Shakespearian achievements and 'may be esteemed the worthiest tribute to the genius and fame of Shakespeare that has been yet attempted on the English stage' (*Examiner*, 18 March 1838). James Anderson, who played Aufidius to Macready's Caius Marcius, attested to 'the immense success' of Macready's Shakespearian revivals, which the manager refused to exploit by long runs. Instead Macready staged *The Tempest* (13 October 1838), in which – together with Dryden's and Davenant's alterations/additions – he dispensed with the dialogue of the first scene in favour of a spectacular shipwreck, and *Henry V* (10 June 1839), the centrepiece of which was Clarkson Stanfield's scenery, especially his illustrations of Chorus's speeches. Archer considered that with *Coriolanus* 'Macready seems to have anticipated all the Meiningen methods' (1890, p. 115). The hallmarks of this style, which was to dominate the nineteenth-century Shakespearian stage, were large casts, thorough rehearsals and pictorial, historically accurate sets; all of them were conducive to high costs. Without a subsidy, long runs were the only answer, but these Macready eschewed. At a dinner to mark the end of his Covent Garden enterprise, with the Duke of Sussex heading the distinguished assembly, Macready spoke of his hope and intention 'to have left in our theatre the complete series of Shakespeare's acting plays . . . But "my poverty, and not my will," has compelled me to desist from the attempt' (Toynbee ed., 1912, vol. 2, p. 17).

Macready's rather improbable successors, as what Clifford John Williams has called the 'custodians of the National Drama' (1973, p. 155) at Covent Garden, were gentleman-comedian Charles James Mathews and his wife Madame Vestris, whose early career had been based on her skills as a dancer and singer. Their inheritance was awesome, not only in terms of Macready's achievements, but also in the sheer scale of the undertaking. Mathews compiled 'A Return of all Persons engaged in this Establishment during the Week ending 26<sup>th</sup> December 1840': the total was 684 (pp. 151–2). Madame Vestris, determined to improve the conduct of the auditorium, closed the upper gallery, thereby making the cheapest seat in the house one shilling and sixpence. This action, hardly designed to promote the patent house as a theatre for all levels of society, provoked the anger of the galleryites, who were finally admitted to a less elevated part of the theatre for their usual price of one shilling. Their presence (and protest) at least showed that there was a demand from the denizens of the cheaper seats for Shakespeare at a patent theatre, but whether Madame Vestris's choice of what she described as 'a long-neglected play of England's immortal bard' (in Appleton, 1974, p. 124) would have been theirs was another matter. *Love's Labour's Lost* (30 September 1839) ran for only nine performances. Its most successful feature had been the sets designed by J. R. Planché, the distinguished antiquarian, and executed by Thomas Grieve, who were reunited for *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (16 November 1840) with Mendelssohn's music (for the first time – Wyndham, 1906, vol. 2, p. 154) and a corps of over seventy dancers. Planché suggested a striking effect based on Oberon's 'Through this house give glimmering light' (Planché, 1901, p. 274), which brought the production to a spellbinding finale:

the entire place seems sparkling with countless hues of light, and the delighted eye passing its thrill of pleasure to the tongue, one exclamation of delight springs from the beholders as down falls the curtain. Take it all together, I do not believe a happier revival ever took place on the stage, than in *The Midsummer Night's Dream*. (E.R.W. in *Theatrical Journal*, 1 May 1841)

Werner Habicht has pointed out that Ludwig Tieck's 1843 Berlin revival of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* 'coincided with the comparable effort of Elizabeth Vestris and Charles Mathews in London' (1996, p. 99). Theodore Martin considered that 'probably no Englishman... was more conversant with the history of the English stage than Tieck' (*Nineteenth Century*, February 1880), a claim substantiated by the German actor's 1817 visit to London during which he attended thirty

performances in two months. For *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (Williams, 1990, pp. 183–5) Tieck combined features of the Elizabethan stage and characteristics (lavish choreography, painted scenery and Mendelssohn's music) in common with Madame Vestris's revival. The success and distinction of their *A Midsummer Night's Dream* notwithstanding, the Mathews/Vestris Covent Garden management ended in 1842 – even more ignominiously than Macready's – in bankruptcy with Mathews being imprisoned, albeit briefly, for debt.

Though the days of the patent theatres' monopoly were clearly almost over, Macready, encouraged by his coterie (including Dickens, Forster, Bulwer Lytton) took Drury Lane, opening with *The Merchant of Venice* on 27 December 1841, swiftly followed by *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* on 29 December. *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*, like Madame Vestris's revival of *Love's Labour's Lost*, reflected the patent theatre manager's resolve to range beyond the familiar canon and met with little more (twelve performances) success. Indeed given his response to the King of Prussia's selection of *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* – 'I could have wished he had stayed at Windsor or gone to any other theatre, rather than have fixed on such a play' (Toynbee, 1912, vol. 2, p. 155) – it is somewhat surprising that Macready staged the play at all. Sir William Martin had reported from Windsor the king's preference for *Macbeth*, which, though it would have been a much better showcase for Macready personally and Shakespeare on the London stage, could not be prepared in time. So the King of Prussia saw England's eminent tragedian as Valentine at an only moderately well-attended house, which greeted him warmly and in marked contrast to the protocol to which he was accustomed at home: "one cheer more" was shouted by a person in the pit, and "one cheer more" was accordingly given'. Once ensconced in the royal box:

The king . . . paid the most intense attention, making quite a study of the performance. He had a book with him, with which he followed the actors line by line, and we do not think he could have missed a word of the piece. At the end of the serenade to Sylvia he applauded, as well as at the situation where Valentine rescues Sylvia from Proteus. (*The Times*, 1 February 1842)

On his visit to what *The Times* (29 January 1842) described as one of the 'two national theatres', the King of Prussia had been accompanied by the Chevalier Bunsen, a versatile scholar, who had just become ambassador to Britain. Though hardly a model monarch (indecisive, mystic and eventually insane), King Frederick William IV did set an example to the British crown of royal patronage of the theatre. Like most of

his countrymen (and indeed Macready) the king preferred the major tragedies to a minor comedy. The earnestness which Frederick William displayed towards such a slight piece as *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* typified the German approach to Shakespeare, which continued during the reigns of his brother Wilhelm I and Wilhelm's grandson Kaiser Wilhelm II.

Macready's production of *As You Like It* with which he opened his second season on 1 October 1842 was one of his finest achievements. True to his principles, Macready restored the true text, cutting only a modest 387 lines from the total of 2,845 (Shattuck ed., 1962a, Introduction); Charles Marshall as scenic designer provided ten complete settings, seven of them in the Forest of Arden replete with musical birds, sheepfold and babbling stream; and Macready, a suitably melancholy Jaques, led a company of overall talent.

Possibly encouraged by King Frederick William's example and certainly by her husband, Queen Victoria responded positively to Macready's proposal, submitted to George Anson, equerry to Prince Albert, that she should make a state visit to *As You Like It*. On 7 June 1843 Macready 'Received a note from W. Anson, informing me that the Queen would command on Monday, an act of kindness which I felt very much. Sir William Martin called to give me the official intimation' (Toynbee ed., 1912, vol. 2, p. 211). Since Victoria's marriage to Prince Albert, the royal family had been augmented by another theatre-enthusiast, one whose tastes were rather more serious and purposeful than his pleasure-seeking wife's. Thus Macready recorded that when he was introduced to the royal couple after the performance the queen simply 'said she was much pleased and thanked me', but 'Prince Albert asked me if this was not the original play. I told him: "Yes, that we had restored the original text"' (p. 212).

Such was the significance of the queen's command that the *Theatrical Journal* of 17 June 1843 was almost entirely devoted to an account of it. It described Macready's efforts, as Carlyle had done, as 'Herculean' and bemoaned the 'shameful neglect of public patronage and supineness of popular feeling'. The royal presence had attracted an overflowing audience (£606; Downer, 1966, p. 223), Macready having decided against increasing the prices, but 'respectable and well-behaved' they bore 'the almost suffocating heat' and crowding 'cheerfully and patiently'. The more fortunate of them could see: 'The Royal box, an elegant and tasteful fixture, supported by gilded pillars attached to the stage . . . gorgeously fitted up in the form of a tent with hangings of rich crimson falling from

the top.’ The appearance of the royal party (the queen in black velvet with diamonds and the Garter ribbon and Prince Albert in full military uniform with the Garter ribbon, badge and star) was greeted with ‘a tremendous burst of spontaneous applause’, which the queen graciously acknowledged. Then the curtain rose on ‘no less than three hundred professionals’ who gave an enthusiastic rendition of the national anthem, which was greeted ‘with cheering and waving hats and handkerchiefs’ after which ‘the performance of the drama commenced’. For Macready, who had been quick to register the importance of royal patronage, it was too late to rescue his management and the patent theatres as an institution. In July the *Theatrical Journal* reported that ‘The two patent national houses are now without tenants’ (1 July 1843).

The issue of the *Theatrical Journal* for 24 June 1843 reviewed Macready’s Drury Lane season, listing his Shakespearian performances which totalled ninety-eight of ten plays, with twenty-two for *As You Like It* and twenty-six for the other major revival *King John* (Shattuck ed., 1962b). On 24 July Macready went to the Home Office ‘and had a conference with Manners Sutton, to whom I complained of the injustice done to myself and the dramatic art by the Bill of Sir J. Graham as it stands. I urged the right of acting Shakespeare being given to the licensed theatres if the patent theatres were unable to act his works’ (Toynbee ed., 1912, vol. 2, p. 216). His experience at the two patent houses had led Macready to concede the point of the question posed to him in the 1832 Select Committee. Later that month the *Theatrical Journal* published:

the truthful petition of Mr Macready, the most able, experienced, and influential dramatic artist of our time – in which he boldly remonstrates against the monopoly of the patents attracted to our national theatres, and the absurdity of ‘the vested rights’ that preclude the performance of Shakespeare within five miles of their locality. Monopoly is the bug-bear of our present government . . . If Shakespeare be, as he is, the most exalted of all our native poets, surely his pure teachings ought to be given in all our dramatic temples throughout the land for the benefit and instruction of all classes; not by confining his intellectual splendour within the limited circle of the few to the utter exclusion of the many. (19 August 1843)<sup>1</sup>

With the passing of the 1843 Theatre Regulation Act, Shakespeare was free.

Three years later in September 1846 Macready himself took an engagement at the Surrey Theatre, formerly a minor, which blazoned its coup: ‘First Appearance of the Eminent Tragedian Mr Macready

Mrs Davidge having concluded an Engagement with him for a limited number of nights, at an enormous outlay, is resolved in order to present a series of SHAKSPERIAN TRAGEDIES in the most perfect form, to her Patrons the Public, to spare neither expense, or labour.<sup>2</sup> Mrs Davidge engaged a strong supporting cast for a repertoire dominated by Shakespeare (*King Lear*, *Macbeth*, *Othello*, *Hamlet*). At the first night (7 September) and the last (7 November) the press described ‘the house filled to suffocation’ (Knight, 1997, p. 220). Dramatic critics made a direct connection between what they saw at the Surrey (and Sadler’s Wells and the Queen’s) and recent legislation: ‘A remarkable change has taken place of late in the bent of the public taste, as regards the support of legitimate drama in different theatrical localities.’ The writer proclaimed it ‘a great thing to draw large numbers of the frequenters of a minor theatre together, and show them that there is an entertainment of a far higher class than they have been accustomed to run after, more capable of moving the real feelings, and furnishing them with far more to think about, to their improvement and gratification than the miserable ranting melodramas of the old school’. Undoubtedly this had been the intention behind the 1832 report and the 1843 legislation, but, having noted the enthusiasm and attentiveness of the Surrey audience, the same observer could not help wondering whether he had witnessed Surrey regulars, ‘usually [amongst] the noisiest’, ‘awe[d] into silence and reflection’ or ‘a totally different class of persons’, attracted to the Surrey by prospect of seeing Macready at lower admission prices than in the West End in which legitimate fare was then scarce. He concluded, with more optimism than confidence: ‘We are willing to believe it is the first theory.’<sup>3</sup> Whichever was the case, a question had been posed which would recur for years to come: did supposedly ‘popular’ Shakespeare draw the audiences it intended to, or simply attract the regular, Shakespeare audience to a different venue?

#### AMERICA

Immediately following Macready’s season, the Surrey Theatre hosted the Misses Cushman, Charlotte and her sister Susan, who, opening with their celebrated performances as (respectively) *Romeo and Juliet*, produced on the audience an ‘effect . . . not one whit inferior to that they had made upon those in the more legitimate spheres’.<sup>4</sup> It was appropriate that Macready should be followed by the American actress whom, according to Helena Modjeska, Edwin Forrest called ‘Macready in petticoats’ (Modjeska, 1910, p. 501). Trained as an opera singer, Charlotte Cushman

decided to become an actress on the advice of James Caldwell, manager of the St Charles Theatre in New Orleans where she made her debut as Lady Macbeth in 1836, propitiously on 23 April (Smither, 1944, p. 128). Cushman did not possess a costume for Lady Macbeth, but was able to borrow one from the 'other important house in New Orleans, the French Theatre, [which] often gave *Macbeth* in translation' (Leach, 1970, p. 43). That a young American actress should choose Shakespeare for her debut in a predominantly French city and furthermore be able to borrow the costume for Lady Macbeth from the French Theatre there is eloquent testimony that Shakespeare was occupying an expanding world stage.

Macready and Cushman first appeared together in *Macbeth* at Philadelphia's Chestnut Theatre on 23 October 1843. By his own sparing standards, Macready was almost fulsome in his praise: 'The Miss Cushman who acted Lady Macbeth interested me much. She has to learn her art, but she showed mind and sympathy with me, a novelty so refreshing to me on stage' (Toynbee ed., 1912, vol. 2, p. 230). In the eyes of some there was such a physical similarity (depressed nose, broad brow) between Macready and the mannish Cushman that they might have been brother and sister, but more importantly Cushman consciously set out to adopt Macready's style of acting. Alan S. Downer (1946) identified five schools of acting in the nineteenth century: Kemble, Edmund Kean, Macready, the Prince of Wales's Theatre (Wigan) and Irving, characterising Macready's as an amalgam of Kean and Kemble, combining the intensity of the former with the scholarly approach and declamatory beauty of the latter. Fellow actor Lawrence Barrett wrote that for Cushman 'the revelation of his [Macready's] art fell like a message of revelation' (1889, p. 17) and thereafter she 'followed his example' in seeking 'finer shades of meaning', giving to her Lady Macbeth in particular a 'new intensity'. The cross-influence between English and American actors was a vital feature of the Shakespearian stage in both countries during the nineteenth century.

Macready arranged for Charlotte Cushman to partner him in subsequent engagements during which he gave her his customarily guarded encouragement: 'Note from Miss Cushman . . . I think it is only my duty to myself to be strictly circumspect' (Toynbee ed., 1912, vol. 2, p. 234), but even after their first meeting the American actress had announced: 'I mean to go to England as soon as I can. Macready says I ought to act on an English stage and I will' (Leach, 1970, p. 117).

Macready, who had previously visited America in 1826, was intent upon meeting the republic's most prominent citizens, as his diary entries

recording engagements with Longfellow, Charles Sumner and Ralph Waldo Emerson testify. In this he was promoting Carlyle's ideal of an extended 'Saxondom' and indeed doing so with the sage's assistance. On 27 August 1843 Carlyle dispatched letters from Annandale to John Greig of New York and to Emerson in Boston. To the former he wrote: 'No public character in this island has, to my mind, so distinguished himself for honourable demeanour in late years',<sup>5</sup> and to the latter: 'He loves Heroes as few do . . . This Man, presiding over the unstablest, most chaotic province of English things, is the one public man among us who has dared to take his stand on what he understood to be *the truth*, and expect victory from that: he puts to shame our Bishops and Archbishops' (Norton ed., 1883, vol. 2, pp. 33–6).

In Emerson Carlyle had a kindred spirit, not merely an Anglophile but one who in his *Representative Men* (1850) treated 'Shakespeare: Or, The Poet' in very much the Carlylean vein with his emphasis on 'great men', his exploration of the national and religious circumstances surrounding his life, his role as 'the father of German literature' and as the 'poet-priest' which 'the world still wants . . . [as] a reconciler' (Jones ed., 1956, p. 477). In the opinion of Walt Whitman, Carlyle – together with Tennyson and Hugo – was not 'personally friendly or admirant toward America; indeed quite the reverse', because 'they . . . cannot span the vast revolutionary arch thrown by the United States over the centuries, fix'd in the present, launch'd to the endless future' (Stovall ed., 1964, p. 478). Whitman, whose enthusiasm for the Shakespearian performances of Charles Kean, Edwin Forrest, Charlotte Cushman and Edwin Booth in New York in the 1840s is abundantly evident in his 'The Old Bowery A Reminiscence of New York Plays and Acting Fifty Years Ago', reflected elsewhere ('Poetry To-day in America – Shakespeare – The Future') on the necessity for a nation to create its own culture: 'The stamp of entire and finish'd greatness to any nation, to the American Republic among the rest, must be sternly withheld till it has put what it stands for in the blossom of original, first-class poems' (p. 474). Whitman recognised that the United States (then thirty-eight of them) stood 'heirs of a very old estate' (p. 475), but though he looked 'mainly for a great poetry native to us . . . these importations till then will have to be accepted, such as they are, and thankful they are no worse' (p. 478). Emerson and Whitman might be identified with the literary elite, but, as Larry Levine has shown, Shakespeare's plays far from being a highbrow preserve were in performance 'an integral part of . . . popular entertainment in nineteenth-century America' (1988, p. 21). The consequence of Shakespeare's appeal to all classes was that

he became the focus of tensions between them, from the deference of the Anglophiles to the counter claims of the nationalists.

This Macready was to discover to his personal cost during his 1848–9 tour in which he became the target of elements in American society which were inflamed by what they perceived as an air of cultural superiority in certain English visitors. Charles Dickens's *American Notes* (1842) and *Martin Chuzzlewit* (1843–4) and Mrs Trollope's earlier *Domestic Manners of the Americans* (1832) had been seized upon to fuel resentment far beyond their actual readership. The tragic Astor Place riots on Thursday 10 April 1849 have been thoroughly chronicled by Alan S. Downer (1966, pp. 299–310), J. C. Trewin (1955, pp. 221–5) and Richard Moody (1958) and form the subject of Richard Nelson's play *Two Shakespearean Actors* (1990). The hostility fomented by Edwin Forrest against Macready resulted in a death toll of seventeen with many others injured. Behind the personal rivalry lay a clash of two cultures. Edwin Forrest, the first American-born actor to achieve star-status, belonged in Lawrence Barrett's opinion to a 'method' (powerful voice and physique) which dated back 'through the Kembles to Betterton and Barton Booth' (1881, p. 4). As an actor Forrest appreciated this tradition and the fact that Shakespeare's plays offered the finest roles in the repertoire, but as a patriotic American he could not regard the theatre of another nation as superior to that of his own. Barrett illustrates the point colourfully. For a performance of *Hamlet* in a small American town towards the end of Forrest's career, the manager, in the absence of more conventional scenery, 'hung two American flags at the stage openings, and these represented drop curtains as well as palace, platform, chamber, and castle'. Forrest determined to show the audience that "'Hamlet" could be played in that foreign frame with none of its powers shorn or weakened, while his own patriotism would stimulate his energies, as his eyes rested on the banners of his native land' (p. 6).

Edwin Forrest was the first major American actor to seek the imprimatur of the London stage for his Shakespearian performances, making his debut at Drury Lane in 1836. Of the reviews which he received, those by John Forster, Macready's associate and friend, laced with what James A. Davies has called 'an edgy mockery' (1983, p. 68), caused most offence. As Davies points out much of Forster's criticism was based on aesthetic principles (upheld by Macready) of unified effect. Thus he wrote of Forrest's *Othello* 'The performance was made up of an infinite variety of parts, through which there was no unity . . . Mr Forrest had no intellectual comprehension of what he was about' (Archer and Lowe

eds., 1896, p. 21). Instead of unity of conception and execution Forrest strung together a series of effects. The murder of Desdemona was ‘a down-right Old Bailey affair . . . It was full of the falsest seekings for effect’ (p. 24). In Lear’s great speeches Forrest alternated fierce and tender tones with complete disregard for sense; as Macbeth he indulged in ‘violent contortions’ aimed to impress the gallery (p. 33) and as Richard III he displayed ‘hideous looks and furious gestures, ear-splitting shouts and stage devouring strides’, culminating in ‘one of the most wretched and melodramatic tricks of the profession’:

While Richard fought with Richmond he had provided himself with long and heavy strips of black hair, which were fixed in such a way that they came tumbling over his forehead, eyes, and face, with every barbarous turn and gesture. The princely Plantagenet – he

‘Who was born so high  
His airy buildeth in the cedar’s top,  
And dallies with the wind and scorns the sun’ –

was thus accomplished by Mr Forrest in all points of a savage newly caught from out the American backwoods. (p. 41)

Even though Forster’s reviews might be construed by his countrymen as critiques of the contrasting acting styles of sophisticated English actors and their American counterparts, that in itself would have been offensive to Forrest, but the disdainful allusions to America, of which the ‘backwoods’ reference was the most extreme, were bound to incur his personal wrath and patriotic indignation.

When Forrest made his second British tour in 1845–6, Forster’s pen was again tainted with vitriol, mocking Forrest’s business of scraping his sword against that of Macduff in the final combat until ‘an enlightened critic in the gallery shouted out, “That’s right! sharpen it!”’ (Downer, 1966, p. 276). Forster received no encouragement from Macready in writing so derisively about Forrest, but the American, convinced that the English actor was implicated, followed Macready to Edinburgh. There on 2 March 1846 during a performance of *Hamlet* he hissed Macready’s favourite piece of business with a handkerchief just before the ‘The Mousetrap’. Probably mindful that Forster’s criticisms had been directed at his performances, rather than at him personally, Forrest claimed that he was showing disapproval at one aspect of Macready’s performance by hissing, just as he would show approval by applauding. John Coleman described the consequences of the incident in characteristically dramatic

terms: 'There can, however be no doubt that that one stupid hiss in Edinburgh wrecked a great reputation and caused a deplorable calamity' (1904, vol. 2, p. 350). He went on to say that though Forrest 'retained his hold on the *oi polloi*', he was 'utterly alienated from the refined and cultured moiety of his fellow citizens'. Undoubtedly there were social, as well as personal and national, antagonisms behind this incident and these were associated with different styles of acting Shakespeare. There was the thoughtful, refined, restrained style which appealed to the discerning (usually well-to-do) playgoer, and there was the broader, bolder, even barnstorming style, which appealed to what Coleman dubbed the *oi polloi*.

These tensions were certainly evident in New York when Macready began his final American tour with *Macbeth* at the Astor Place on 4 October 1848. As on his previous visit when he had sought out the republic's 'prominent citizens', Macready was taken up by the 'aristocracy', but amongst the less well-off, who felt threatened by foreign labour of any kind, there was increasing support for Nativism (Downer, 1966, p. 297). This was Forrest's natural (and nationalistic) constituency, which he marshalled effectively to harass the English actor. From the outset there were rumours of hostility towards Macready, but his first performance was warmly received. Unwisely the English actor made a curtain speech thanking his audience for having refuted his detractors. The speech was seized upon as a challenge by a friend of Edwin Forrest, James Oakes, who produced a lengthy piece in the *Boston Mail* (30 October) alleging that Macready was responsible for the hostile reception accorded to Forrest in 1845. The two actors published rival accounts and Macready began an action against Forrest, who followed him from city to city acting the same roles at rival theatres, as he did in New York. There on 10 May, with mayhem and slaughter surrounding the Astor Place Opera House, Macready, the true professional, acted on to the bitter end: 'The death of Macbeth was loudly cheered, and on being lifted up and told I was called, I went on, and . . . quitted the New York stage amid the acclamations of those before me' (Toynbee ed., 1912, vol. 2, p. 426).

#### PARIS

Apart from America, where his early achievements were eclipsed by this calamitous denouement, the country which Macready visited most often was France. In 1822, as part of a continental tour, which included Verona and Venice in both of which he experienced the power of the

city's Shakespearian associations, Macready attended performances at the Paris theatres. The great French tragedian Talma was ill then, but when Macready saw him act he was immensely impressed, admiring his unconsciously dignified and graceful attitudes, his flexible and powerful voice, but most significantly (and influentially): 'His object was not to dazzle or surprise by isolated effects: the character was his aim; he put on the man, and was attentive to every minutest trait that might distinguish him' (Pollock ed., 1873, p. 180). In 1822 a troupe of English actors also visited Paris to play Shakespeare in English at the Porte-Saint-Martin, but, as J. J. Jusserand judged, 'the attempt was a premature one' (1899, p. 451). Anti-English feeling following the Napoleonic wars had not subsided. At the opening performance of *Othello* on 31 July the audience threw fruit at the actors and shouted 'Parlez Français' and eventually the military intervened. Following an even worse reception of *The School for Scandal* on 3 August, the company decamped to the Théâtre de la Rue Chantierine where they gave private performances by subscription. There they remained until the beginning of October affording the discerning, though small, audiences the opportunity to see scenes, such as the death of Desdemona, which were excised on the rare occasions when French theatres essayed Shakespeare.

The resistance of the French to Shakespeare was not based only on recent history. The tone had been set by Voltaire, who had been exposed to the native stage during his visit to England. In his *Preface to Brutus: Discourse on Tragedy*, addressed to Lord Bolingbroke (1731), he wrote of his experience seeing *Julius Caesar*: 'I surely do not claim to approve the barbaric irregularities with which it is filled; it is only astonishing that there are not more of them in a work composed in a century of ignorance by a man who did not even know Latin, and who had no teacher but his own genius' (in Le Winter ed., 1976, p. 33). In his own plays and his critical writing Voltaire upheld the rigid interpretation of the classical unities, which had long dominated the French theatre. However the hostility with which the English players had been received in 1822 notwithstanding, Voltaire's critique of Shakespeare (Lounsbury, 1902) was being challenged.

Madame de Staël and Charles Nodier had shown the way. Nodier, the first disciple of Romanticism to be admitted to the Académie Française, had written his *Pensées de Shakespeare extraites de ses Ouvrages* at the age of twenty-one in 1801 when hostilities between Britain and France were – temporarily – halted by treaty on 1 October. Monsieur Guizot, author of the essay 'On the Life and Works of Shakespeare', which appeared in

1821 as an introduction to a French edition of the plays, was successively professor of history, ambassador to London (1840), foreign minister and prime minister (1847). Guizot posed the question ‘whether Shakespeare’s dramatic system is not superior to that of Voltaire’ (1852, p. 1). He pointed out that in England in Shakespeare’s day ‘a theatrical performance’ was ‘a popular festival’ (p. 2) and ‘dramatic poetry, therefore, could originate only among the people’ (p. 3). Guizot recognised the popular origins of Shakespeare’s plays and their innately broad appeal. He analysed *Macbeth* to show what would have been lost had it been written on classical principles: the comic porter, the murder of Lady Macduff and her children and much more besides. These comic and action scenes, which no French dramatist would have included, accounted in large measure for Shakespeare’s continuing appeal to mass audiences across the globe during the nineteenth century. As Guizot presciently remarked: ‘England will not be the only country indebted to Shakespeare’ (p. 141).

In *Racine et Shakespeare* (1823), Stendhal referred to the English players’ performances of Shakespeare in 1822. He contrasted the court audiences, for which Racine had written, with the ‘new class which had a growing thirst for strong emotions’, proposing three reforms: writing in prose, abandoning the unities and making French history the subject matter (1962, p. 7). Stendhal provoked an intense controversy, debating at the Académie Française with its permanent secretary, Monsieur Augier, a staunch classicist and producing further pamphlets including ‘What is Romanticism?’ Thus when another troupe of English actors arrived in Paris in September 1827, the climate had changed significantly for the better since 1822. The circumstances and significance of this visit have been extensively chronicled from the handsomely illustrated *Souvenirs du Théâtre Anglais à Paris* (see Eddison, 1955) and J.-L. Bergerhoff’s *Le Théâtre Anglais à Paris sous la Restauration* (1913) to biographies of those who participated and those who were influenced by them.

The first Shakespearian offering was *Hamlet* on 11 September with Charles Kemble in the lead as he was for *Romeo and Juliet* (with Harriet Smithson) and *Othello*, which followed. The press was generally laudatory (Williamson, 1970, p. 181) and in his daughter Fanny’s opinion: ‘My father has obtained a most unequivocal success in Paris’ (1878, vol. 1, p. 191). Fanny Kemble described the Irish actress Harriet Smithson, her father’s Juliet, Desdemona and Ophelia, as ‘a young lady with a figure and face of Hibernian beauty, whose superfluous native accent was no drawback to her merits in the esteem of her French audience’ (p. 188). If performing to a non-English-speaking audience was a positive

benefit for Harriet Smithson, it was evidently no disadvantage to Kemble, who told his daughter that ‘in spite of the difficulty of the foreign language . . . his Parisian audience never appeared to him to miss the finer touches or more delicate and refined shades of his acting’ (p. 189). Charles Kemble had evidently mastered a style of acting in which pictorial techniques of gesture and expression compensated for the spoken word, which was to be an important accomplishment for Shakespearian actors – with various native tongues – during the coming decades.

Fanny Kemble attributed Harriet Smithson’s success to the sympathy aroused by playing heroines who were victims of incidents ‘infinitely more startling’ (p. 188) than French audiences were used to. In fact the English company had substantially adapted the plays partly in the interests of simplicity, but also in deference to French taste. In *Hamlet*, references to Fortinbras, Ophelia’s songs, Hamlet’s bawdy and anything at all digressive were cut, but Ophelia’s madness and the graveyard scene survived to excite French susceptibilities (Heylen, 1993, pp. 46–7). The effect of Smithson, ‘Fair Ophelia’ (Raby, 1982), his inspiration and eventually his unhappy wife, on Hector Berlioz was the most extreme outcome of these Shakespearian performances on the Parisian artistic community. Victor Leathers (1959, pp. 86–91) has enumerated the writers, artists and musicians for whom the experience of seeing the English players in Shakespeare was a turning point: Hugo, Alexandre Dumas, Vigny, Musset, Delacroix and of course Berlioz. The English players in Shakespeare had played an important part in blowing away ‘the stagnant vapours of neoclassicism’ (Hemmings, 1994, p. 185).

Macready, though he had been in Paris in early September 1827, did not act with the company until 7 April 1828 when he played Macbeth, supported by Miss Smithson (less happily cast than previously) and the witches who excited laughter. Greatly admired in Sheridan Knowles’s *Virginius*, Macready made way for Edmund Kean, but returned in June and added Hamlet and Othello (tactfully obscuring the murder of Desdemona) to his laurels. Whereas during the opening months of the season the impact of the English actors had been on the artistic community at large, Macready particularly impressed his fellow actors. Alan S. Downer quotes a French critic, who voiced his countrymen’s preference for Macready over Charles Kemble and Edmund Kean because of ‘his gift of creating emotion . . . being natural without vulgarity, and elegant without affectation’ (1966, p. 116). Downer describes the effects of this Paris season on English acting as ‘far-reaching’, as French actors