

Fran Teague

Shakespeare before America

When one turns to a reference book for information, the ideal entry offers a neat array of dates and data and quickly sums up a vast subject in a paragraph. An encyclopedia entry on theater in the United States of America, for example, divided into discussions of particular periods and regions, might suggest a smooth flow of development, extension, and improvement. While it would begin with the insistence that the subject is complex, the *telos* of the entry is to simplify that complexity into a narrative of progress and promise.

At the root of American theater, its fundamental source, is the English tradition, and according to *The Oxford Companion to the Theatre* (OCT), “. . . it was from a secular, British source that a distinctively American theatre emerged” (s.v. United States of America, 846). The third edition of OCT explicitly claimed that Shakespeare is the playwright most influential to American theater, and Shakespeare’s centrality recurs in other reference works. *The Reader’s Encyclopedia of World Drama* says that American drama’s “first models were the lofty tragedies and extravagant comedies popular in England in the latter half of the eighteenth century” (s.v. United States, 882). *The Oxford Companion to American Theatre* says “Shakespeare came to American stages relatively early” (s.v. Shakespeare, 611); and *The Everyman Companion to the Theatre* remarks that “It was not until quite late in the eighteenth century that serious attempts

began to be made to establish for American theatre an identity separate from England's" (57). In all of these works, the principal emphasis is on English and other influences are scant. Fuller treatments of the subject do acknowledge other traditions than that of the English, although these too move quickly to focus on the Anglo-American stage tradition.<sup>1</sup> Their recitation often sounds mechanically correct, and the various repetitions lend an air of credibility. Yet one could easily write an encapsulated history of theater in America that differs widely from these. This received account ignores not only the variety of cultures that make up America's past, but also the powerful orature of colonial churches.<sup>2</sup> I shall begin with such a variant account, one that leaves Shakespeare off the American stage, on the grounds that his absence is more telling of the American character than his presence.

**Shakespeare off the American Stage**

European settlements in the Americas took root during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The country's greatest dramatist turned his attention away from his home nation to write a play about the potential richness and present mysteries of America. Yet despite his fascination with its promise, he would never leave Europe. While he never crossed the ocean, his work did. At the end of the sixteenth century, homesick settlers performed his plays; and only twenty years after the first permanent playhouse was built in the city where he wrote, settlers established a playhouse of their own so that they could lose themselves in dreams of their motherland. Indeed, the settlers loved his work so much that his plays were translated into an indigenous language so that the settlers could share the riches of their European background with the native people among whom they lived.

The dramatist in this sentimentalized history was, of course, Lope de Vega, who wrote a heroic drama about Columbus. As the *OCT* notes, "Long before any English plays were presented in the New World, what is now Latin America and the west coast had witnessed performances" (965). Spanish settlers in Mexico first viewed theatrical performances in 1538, less than fifty years after Columbus's first voyage. Seventy years after Columbus landed, Lope de Vega was born in 1562. A playhouse was built in Mexico City by 1597, "only twenty years after the first permanent theatre was established in Madrid itself. In Peru the earliest touring

company arrived in 1599” (OCT 895). Priests used miracle plays to teach converted Indians about Roman Catholicism; and work by Lope de Vega was translated into native languages such as Nahuatl or Quechua.<sup>3</sup> The theatrical tradition in Hispanic America is a particularly rich one: not only were plays by Golden Age dramatists performed, but native American playwrights soon developed.<sup>4</sup>

The dramatic traditions of Spain stand in marked contrast to those of another great nation. It too had a great playwright, but his plays went unperformed in the Americas until more than a century later than the Mexican performances, although these Europeans had mounted an American production of an open-air pageant in 1604. Still he was not altogether neglected: a mere ten years after his greatest play was first performed, it received an amateur production across the ocean. Unfortunately, some of the settlers objected to plays on moral grounds, blocking their performance, so the theatrical history of the French in America is not so rich as that of Hispanic drama. Nevertheless, the French garrison at Port Royal did stage *Le Théâtre de Neptune* on the beach to amuse and divert the soldiers in 1604.<sup>5</sup> A 1646 production of Corneille’s *Le Cid* in Québec is notable. Finally, however, the Bishop of Québec’s objection to Molière’s *Tartuffe* led him to block the production that Governor Frontenac proposed in 1694, for many of the same reasons that led to protests against the play’s anti-clericalism in Paris.<sup>6</sup>

Finally, there is Shakespeare, considered to be England’s (indeed, the world’s) greatest dramatist. His plays went unperformed in the Americas until more than a century and a half after the first English settlements. Scholars have largely ignored or glossed over this disjunction of timing among the theatrical traditions of Europeans. Since the implications of this problem affect the Anglo-American appropriation of Shakespeare’s figure, however, I want to consider

Shakespeare's absence before turning to his entrance on the American stage. Briefly (perhaps reductively), Spanish exploration and settlement of the Americas began in 1492, preceding that of either France or England. Early explorers were Columbus, Pizarro, Nuñez de Vaca, and Cabrillo. In the early sixteenth century, the Spanish government sent priests and soldiers, who conquered and settled American territory. Mexico City fell in 1521; St. Augustine was founded in 1565. The Spanish theatrical tradition in America began within three decades of the Europeans' arrival and flourished. Plays were performed principally to provide religious edification; the Church took over native dramatic traditions, retaining the indigenous form, but infusing it with Catholic content. Furthermore, developments in Spain affected theater in the Americas. Thus theater was attractive to the settlers both in itself, for these decades coincided with Spanish Golden Age drama, and as a means of fostering religion. That is not to say that Hispanic theater in the Americas depended on Europe exclusively. American-born Hispanic playwrights came along quickly and did significant work; Usigli points out that missionaries in Mexico offered an annual prize for the best original *auto sacramentale*, which they then produced.

The French came to America soon after the Spaniards. Verrazano sailed in the 1520s, Cartier began his voyages in 1534, and the fishermen of La Rochelle operated off the Newfoundland Banks during the sixteenth century.<sup>7</sup> By 1608 Québec City was settled, and its chief founder, Samuel de Champlain, extended the French claims into what is now Wisconsin before his death in 1635. Montréal was founded by 1642. While the Spanish government offered the chief impetus for expeditions to the Americas, France, like England, was negligent in its attention to the possibilities of settlement. French explorers and settlers were largely motivated

by the hope of commercial gain. Nonetheless, Jesuit missionaries were active in French territories, as in the Spanish, and French troops were stationed in eastern Canada at such sites as Port Royal. The fact that the French came later to the Americas and took longer to settle there than did the Spanish may actually have strengthened their interest in theater, for the greatest age of French drama happens to coincide with the years when the French were beginning to establish a presence in America: Corneille, Racine, and Molière all wrote during the seventeenth century, when French settlements were being founded. Drama was viewed largely as a diversion, particularly for the troops stationed there.

The English history of settlement is quite different. Although John Cabot explored for England in 1497, merely five years after Columbus, and in 1578 Drake landed on the California coast, which he promptly claimed for Elizabeth, the first English settlement did not occur until the 1580s, and the first successful settlement is considered to be Jamestown in 1607.<sup>8</sup> Religious or political dissenters established the early settlements, which did not prosper. A significant exodus to North America, beginning about fifty years after the first settlements and lasting from 1629-40, was that of the English Puritans; a second exodus occurred from 1642-1675 and comprised English immigrants who were strongly Anglican and Royalist and so wanted to leave England when Parliamentary forces had taken control and forced Charles I out.<sup>9</sup> The first group of settlers did not permit theater; it took sixty years before the second group, which settled along the Southeastern coast, saw any plays and another fifty years before Shakespeare's work was performed. While drama in London had just passed its peak during the first wave, many dissenters disapproved of plays. By the time the Anglican and Royalist immigrants arrived in the second wave, Shakespeare's plays had fallen out of fashion.

The time between the first explorers, the first settlers, and the first performances varies for each of these three European groups (see Table A for a summary).

**Table A: Summary of American Events**<sup>10</sup>

	<b>Spanish</b>	<b>French</b>	<b>English</b>
<b>First Explorers</b>	1492-1540	1524-1635	1497-1630

Although the Spanish were the first, their explorations were concentrated in the early years of contact and fell off as they established settlements. The French did the least significant exploration, although exploitation of the Newfoundland fisheries began in 1507; their activity was concentrated in Canada. After a lengthy period of neglect, following Cabot's initial voyages, the English continued their exploration far longer than either of the other groups.

<b>Early Settlements</b>	1521 Mexico City	1608 Québec	1585 Roanoke (failed)
	1565 St. Augustine	1642 Montréal	1607 Jamestown

It is worth noting that the Spanish did not settle Mexico City; they sacked and seized it. Initially the English were less successful than either the Spanish or French in establishing major urban centers; New York (1624) was settled by the Dutch, while Boston (1630), Charleston (1670), and Philadelphia (1682) were all settled relatively late.

<b>First Performances</b>	1538 Mexico City	1604 Québec	1703 Charleston
---------------------------	------------------	-------------	-----------------

The Spanish and French moved quickly to introduce drama, the Spanish staging plays within 17 years of taking control of the city and the French actually staging a pageant before the establishment of Québec. Charleston's first performance occurred 33 years after the city's founding and 118 years after Roanoke's settlement.

<b>First Playhouse</b>	1597 Mexico City	1790 Montréal	1716 Williamsburg
------------------------	------------------	---------------	-------------------

The construction of a building specifically for theater required a period of peace. Thus the French, plagued by unsuccessful wars with England for control over Canadian territory, built a playhouse quite late.

<b>Production of Play by a Major European Dramatist</b>	1590s Lope de Vega	1646 Corneille	1750 Shakespeare
---	--------------------	----------------	------------------

Lope de Vega was not even born when the Spanish began producing plays in the Americas. Corneille was alive when *Le Cid* was performed in Montréal. Shakespeare had been dead for over a century before one of his plays was performed in the Americas, and that production was of Cibber's revision of his work.

---

To generalize, settlers followed soon after Spanish explorers; French and English settlements occurred more slowly. The Spanish and French settlers soon began to watch plays and produced work by major European dramatists. The English were slow to produce any plays; works by their leading dramatist, Shakespeare, were ignored while the Spanish produced plays by Lope de Vega and the French produced plays by Corneille. This is not to say that English settlers rejected their European tradition and the French and Spanish did not. David Hackett Fischer remarks of the English,

Many colonists felt desperately homesick, and regretted what Isaac Johnson called their “voluntary banishment” from the “mother country.” Something of this colonial mood persisted for many years.

This aching sense of physical separation from the European homeland became a cultural factor of high importance in colonial settlements. The effect of distance created feelings of nostalgia, anxiety, and loss. (Fischer 55)

That yearning undoubtedly helps to account for the Spanish and French efforts to produce the plays of their home nations, and the English felt it as well, although their sense of nostalgia did not move them to recreate London’s drama. The word “nostalgia,” which today often denotes a sentimental yearning for an earlier, better time, originally described a disease. As Susan Bennett points out, a Swiss doctor coined “nostalgia” in 1780, meaning home-sickness. When David Hackett Fischer speaks of an “aching sense of physical separation,” he does not exaggerate: settlers became physically ill with desire for England. The point is important because a settler’s self-identification as English and the conservatism that nostalgia evoked would produce adherence to the past, to “preserve the cultural dynamics that existed in the hour of their birth”

(Fischer 57). That loyalty to a vanished world operated to exclude Shakespeare from the first English settlements. French and Spanish settlements coincided chronologically with the greatest period of their dramatic literature; the first surge of English emigration came in the 1630s, just after the height of Elizabethan and Jacobean drama. The second surge came while theater was forbidden in England. For those English who settled America, in other words, staged theater had no place in their sense of the lost mother country, though theater's place in their rhetoric is powerful.

It is tempting to claim that the English performed no plays in their American settlements simply because Puritans thought theaters wicked. Such a generalization is simplistic: Puritans, a remarkably diverse lot, were selectively anti-theatrical. In England, a tradition of Puritan drama is discernible among the plays of Jacobean and Caroline England:

To see all Puritans as automatically hostile in principle to the theatre and the arts generally is . . . to misunderstand the depth and complexity of the intellectual and social movements that led to the upheavals of the 1640s.<sup>11</sup>

John Milton enjoyed plays, after all, and Oliver Cromwell had sanctioned masques and opera performances. Furthermore, sales of play texts flourished during the Commonwealth years.<sup>12</sup> The simplistic explanation obscures the culture's complexity.

The New England settlements exhibit a curiously double attitude toward theater of condemnation and contemplation. Plays and performers were associated with hypocrisy and roundly condemned by early American writers such as Thomas Hooker:

Look as it is among stage-players. The stage-player puts on brave apparel and comes on to the stage, and resembles the person of a king and acts the part of a monarch; but if you

pull him off the stage and pluck his robes from his back, he appears in his own likeness. So it is here. A carnal hypocrite, a cursed dissembler, is like a stage-player. He takes upon him the person and profession of a godly, humble, lowly man, and he acts the part marvelous curiously, and he speaks big words against his corruptions and he humbles himself before God, and he hears and prays and reads; but when God plucks him off the stage of the world and his body drops into the grave, and his soul goes to hell, then it appears that he had not the power of godliness; he was only a stage-player, a stage professor. (Quoted in Richards, 113)

One notes that this attack is ostensibly on stage-players, although implicitly it calls attention to the fallibility and mortality of the monarch, a topic of considerable interest to a dissenter in the first wave of immigrants. Thus it combines the political with the theological by summoning up an image of that which is not permitted, a staged performance. Even though many sermons and essays condemned plays, those same sermons and essays repeatedly draw on the trope of *theatrum mundi* to express Puritan doctrine. Richards remarks,

. . . theater metaphor replaces the playhouse in Puritan culture—at least for ministers; after all, as Cotton Mather announces confidently in his diary, “the *All-Seeing Eye* of God shall be *Theatre* enough.” (126)

Despite the almost obsessive presentation of their world as a performance acted out for the eyes of God, New England communities consistently prohibited plays on the grounds of public morality (and few citizens would have welcomed performances).<sup>13</sup> The New England settlements were those closest in time to the heyday of Elizabethan and Jacobean drama, but while those settlers were aware of theaters, they preferring them in preaching, not in practice.

Beyond New England, seventeenth-century attempts by the English settlers to perform plays—by Shakespeare or anyone else—were quashed.<sup>14</sup> As a consequence, a performance in 1665 of an entertainment (which may or may not have been a play) named *Ye Bare and Ye Cubbe* at Cowle's Tavern in Virginia was blocked by the arrest of the participants, although the Virginia settlers were no Puritans. In Elizabethtown, New Jersey, the 1683 Fundamental Constitution forbade stage plays, masques, and revels—along with murder, atheism, and whoring—and while no evidence suggests that the much-feared stage plays were ever actually performed, there is equally no evidence that plays were stopped by the injunction against them (Solberg 246). The year before, William Penn had issued a similar decree forbidding performances for the Quaker colony (Solberg 251-52). Certainly some wanted to see staged entertainment, even in the New England settlements. In 1687 there was a flurry of activity: one Captain Wing wanted to put on staged displays of sword fights, a Maypole was mounted, and actual plays were proposed. Samuel Sewall persuaded Wing that his plan was “offensive” and protested against the possibility of plays (Richards 119-120); Increase Mather complained about the sword playing and the Maypole in his diary and noted sadly “there is much discourse of beginning Stage-Plays in New England” (Meserve 20). Mather and those who would restrain performance were fighting the inevitable, however, for Harvard College students acted *Gustavus Vasa*, a work by their classmate Benjamin Coleman, in 1690. Outside New England, even more theatrical activity occurred. A play was performed in 1703 in Charleston; and Williamsburg had a playhouse by 1716. As for Shakespeare's plays, 1750 is generally given as the first date for an American production, when Colley Cibber's version of *Richard III* was performed in New York; two years later Lewis Hallam and his company began giving performances in Charleston.<sup>15</sup>

To argue that plays were unwelcome only because the Pilgrim fathers frowned upon them assumes that the English in America offered a homogeneous response to European culture. That is simply not true. While the first significant wave of immigrants from England was Puritan, the second major wave was Royalist and Anglican, traditionally groups that valued theater highly.<sup>16</sup> That second wave lasted three times as long as the first and brought to America over twice as many people. Yet this second wave of immigrants took little note of drama. Although the first professional performance in 1703 did take place outside New England, one might wonder why that Charleston performance was not several decades earlier.

Arguably for American theater history, the more important effect of Puritan opposition to drama is not the forbidding of plays in the America, but rather the closing of playhouses in London from the 1640s until the 1660s. For two decades, the theatrical tradition of England was *non-performance*; thus settlers who might have welcomed theatrical performance in America did not always have a habit of viewing performances formed in their European lives. Their nostalgic attempts, in Hackett Fischer's phrase, to "preserve cultural dynamics" of England meant that the suppression of the playhouses in the Commonwealth period was reflected in America as an absence of theatrical practice. Yet the powerful language of the English attacks on the theater survived, as Jeffrey Richards has shown, in the *theatrum mundi* metaphor that operates so strongly in religious and civic discourse. In the French or Spanish traditions, plays in the Americas were quickly performed after arrival, although the popular taste seems to lag about one or two decades behind those in Europe. In the English tradition, plays are absent and attitudes are at odds with those of the homeland. The settlers who arrived within one or two decades of a

healthy London theater were opposed to performance; those who were potentially friendly arrived during the decades when no English model for performance existed.

A factor just as important as Puritanism is the lack of institutional backing for performances. The earliest Spanish and French performances were staged by the army (*The Oxford Companion to Canadian Literature* even includes an entry for “garrison theatre”) or by Catholic missionaries. Neither institution was a significant force in the English settlements. The English army was caught up at home in the problems of the Civil War and its aftermath; Catholic missionaries reserved their efforts for the heretic island of England, not the English settlements. Furthermore, the Spanish and French settlers moved quickly to establish communities that maintained close relations with their home nations. Despite the English settlers’ feelings of “nostalgia, anxiety, and loss,” most had come to the New World as dissidents. While they might yearn for English homes, they did not, as a rule, yearn for English establishments. Instead they had come to America in reaction against Stuart kings or Oliver Cromwell, the Established Church or the Puritan meetings. Thus they were less interested than the Spanish or French in replicating the public life of a nation they had left in dissent, however deeply they yearned for the private life they had once known in England.

Although the power elites in French and Spanish settlements were more apt to be drawn from men who had some familiarity with Paris and Madrid, those in the English settlements were not necessarily from London. Indeed the source of the first wave of English immigrants, that is, the Puritan wave, was from East Anglia and Suffolk, outside of London (Hackett Fischer 31-42). Less than 10% of the population came from London. The second wave came from the South of England and a much larger percentage of it had lived in London, perhaps as much as one-third.

When English theater began in America, it began with in the settlements of this second wave, taking place in Charleston, Williamsburg, and New York. The first two venues were in the midst of areas settled by the second wave of immigrants, while New York had been settled by the Dutch.

Theatrical performances in the Americas, then, depended on a group of settlers who had become familiar with drama in an urban European setting. It grew out of a nostalgia for the home nation and an appreciation of that nation's culture. Once settlements began in the Americas, the power elites of those settlements controlled the advent of performance; staging plays served practical purposes: to re-affirm Roman Catholic values, to amuse bored soldiers, to make an implicit claim of relationship to the home nation.

England was slow in establishing settlements; its earliest settlers were unfamiliar with urban life and with drama. The power elite of the earliest settlers was hostile toward drama; the power elite in the second wave of settlers was not necessarily familiar with drama, which was proscribed in London for two decades. The English did not need to reaffirm Catholicism or to amuse an army, nor were settlers anxious to make an implicit claim of relationship to a home nation that they had rejected. Yet when theater finally did come to Anglo-Americans, it neglected Shakespeare for another half century. The first English plays produced in the New World were by dramatists rarely produced today: Addison and Farquhar preceded Shakespeare because they had become fashionable in London in the early eighteenth century, and nostalgic Americans wanted what they had once known in England. Nor were Shakespeare's plays read since no copies of them were available in America until the eighteenth century. The first English play published in America was Lillo's *George Barnwell*, produced at London's Drury Lane in

1731 and already appearing serially in an American weekly magazine in 1732.<sup>17</sup> One cannot account for the absence of Shakespeare's figure simply by pointing to the absence of theatrical performance, although that lack of a theatrical venue is certainly important. To understand why Shakespeare is absent in the American colonies, one must first consider his status in England.

**Shakespeare on the High Street and High Seas**

Given the perceived importance of Shakespeare's figure today, the lateness of his arrival in America may seem puzzling, if one acknowledges it at all. (Most accounts of American theater history, as I've suggested, either ignore it or imply that Shakespeare's figure was central from the beginning.) To understand the absence of Shakespeare, one must try to re-create a world in which his figure was not regarded as preeminent. Contemporary Shakespeareans can try to set aside the idea that Shakespeare is the world's greatest dramatist who epitomizes all that is finest in Anglo-American culture and whose plays provide transforming inspiration to those who experience them. Yet such an idea is deeply ingrained in our intellectual tradition; the habit of association is difficult to break (especially if one has an identity as a "Shakespearean," a proper noun that claims special knowledge and power for its holder). Given that difficulty, I want to employ a digression into a bit of town history in hopes that it will make explicit how misleading the assumption of Shakespeare's centrality can be.

In the High Street of Stratford-upon-Avon, some citizens built new houses that signaled their prosperity. One such citizen was Shakespeare, who bought New Place for his family in 1597, not long after he had acquired a coat of arms, another sign of his rise in the world. Among his neighbors was the well-to-do Stratford alderman Thomas Rogers. One of Rogers' daughters, Katherine, married a Robert Harvard on April 8, 1605. Two years later Rogers' grandson John

was born. (Evidently the in-laws got on well, for another of Rogers' daughters married Robert's brother William in 1611.) Grandson John grew up to attend Emanuel College, Cambridge, a hotbed of Puritanism, and then moved back to Southwark in London where he had grown up. As an English Puritan, John decided he had no future in London and chose to leave England for America.

Not long after arriving in New England, John accepted a position as a schoolmaster; he began his work in the early summer of 1638. But his career as a schoolmaster was short-lived, as was he. On September 14, 1638, he died, leaving his books and half his property to the school. In appreciation for this gift, the community named the school after him. A book called *New England's First Fruits* gives this account of how the community established the school:

After God had carried us safe to *New-England*, and wee had builded our houses, provided necessaries for our liveli-hood, rear'd convenient places for Gods worship, and settled the Civill Government: One of the next things we longed for and looked after was to advance *Learning* and perpetuate it to Posterity; dreading to leave an illiterate Ministry to the Churches, when our present Ministers shall lie in the Dust. And as wee were thinking and consulting how to effect this great Work, it pleased God to stir up the heart of one Mr. *Harvard* (a godly Gentleman and a lover of Learning, there living amongst us) to give the one halfe of his Estate (it being in all about 1700 l[bs].) towards the erecting of a Colledge, and all his Library: after him another gave 300 l[bs]. others after them cast in more, and the publique hand of the State added the rest: the Colledge was by common consent, appointed to be at *Cambridge* (a place very pleasant and accomodate) and is called (according to the name of the first founder) *Harvard Colledge*.<sup>18</sup>

This 1641 account shows how seriously the community valued education. Having provided for survival by building houses, for God's worship by rearing churches, and for order by establishing a settled government, the English immigrants next turned to education. By building a college, they hoped to attain continuity by training the next generation of ministers who would lead them. Thus, Harvard's legacy is considered pleasing to God because it gives the community what is needed to preserve past values and pass them on to posterity. This "great Work" of establishing the college required the community's money, but it also required John Harvard's library of about four hundred books, since these contained the knowledge that would be preserved and taught. As Louis Wright remarks, "Harvard College was established by a people determined to reproduce the best of traditional learning and make it accessible to their sons";<sup>19</sup> John Harvard's precious library held "the best of traditional learning."

Today a reader might expect to find a copy of Shakespeare's *Works* among that legacy of books since John Harvard enjoyed a personal connection to the dramatist. His grandfather and Shakespeare were neighbors; their families could well have attended each other's celebrations. As one biographer remarks, "If Shakespeare was in Stratford as early as April [1605] he would certainly attend the wedding of Robert Harvard of Southwark and Katherine Rogers, the daughter of his neighbour Thomas Rogers, and even if he were not there would soon meet them at their home on Bankside, where their famous son, John Harvard, was born two years later."<sup>20</sup> Quite possibly Shakespeare's family were wedding guests when John Harvard's parents were married at Holy Trinity Church in 1605, or perhaps the Shakespeares gave a gift when John was christened in 1607, just as Thomas Rogers and his family could have been guests when Susanna Shakespeare married John Hall in June, 1607, or when Shakespeare's granddaughter was

christened in February, 1608. What could be more natural than that the two patresfamilias, Thomas Rogers and William Shakespeare, would be friends? Both were successful men in their fields, their daughters were married and grandchildren born at about the same time, and they had known one another since they were boys.

But John Harvard took no copy of Shakespeare's plays to America, it seems. Although most of the Harvard collection was destroyed by fire in 1764, scholars have been able to reconstruct an inventory of the books from records (T.G. Wright 265-72); Shakespeare does not appear. Possibly the two families were at odds: in 1604 Shakespeare had sued a Stratford apothecary named Philip Rogers for a small sum. If Philip was a relative of Thomas Rogers, a feud might have begun between the neighbors, less drastic than that between the Montagues and Capulets to be sure, consisting of snubs, not sword fights. Or perhaps the families did not get along because of religion, Shakespeare's family tending toward Catholicism (perhaps) and Rogers' toward Puritanism (maybe).

Speculation multiplies: one can hypothesize about the relations within the Rogers family. If Thomas Rogers, like Lear, quarreled with his daughter Katherine Rogers Harvard, or if he came to regret the unions that his daughters had formed with the two Harvard brothers, then that estrangement within the family might have made his grandson indifferent, even hostile, to anyone from Stratford. Or perhaps the quarrel was between John Harvard and his parents. When John decided to leave England for America, he may have cut himself off from his family and all things associated with them in order to make a new start. Family friction—within the Harvard household, between Rogers and the Harvards, or between Rogers and Shakespeare—might

explain why John Harvard's books, that legacy embodying "the best of traditional learning," included no Shakespearean texts, an extraordinary omission.

Only the omission is not extraordinary. Shakespeare's works were not included among "the best of traditional learning" until about a century and a half after Harvard's death. In England, it would take the efforts of such eighteenth-century editors as Nicholas Rowe or Edmond Malone and such actors as Colley Cibber or David Garrick to recreate Shakespeare as a figure of importance, a figure that would eventually become the central cultural institution of today.<sup>21</sup> Even though Shakespeare was regarded less highly in the 1600s than he is now, one might still hope to find a copy of his works imported by some settler who, unlike John Harvard, brought books to America for amusement rather than for the preservation of "the best of traditional learning." As it happens, however, the first definite record that one of Shakespeare's plays reached America occurs in 1699 when a Captain Spicer recorded possession of a copy of *Macbeth* in an inventory of his books. In all likelihood, this work was not Shakespeare's text, but rather William Davenant's operatic revision, which includes singing and dancing witches as well as plenty of spectacle (Dunn 29). Yet without a script from which to work, an acting company could not give a production. Before his plays could reach the American stage in 1750, his play texts had to be available in American bookcases.

In America, then, the process of introducing Shakespeare reverses that of recuperating his reputation in eighteenth-century England. There, as Gary Taylor has shown, "Shakespeare had not yet become part of the mental equipment of every educated Englishman" (34), for "In the restoration of Shakespeare's reputation, publishers followed; actors led" (33). In America, by contrast the books came well before the actors—by at least fifty years. Some scholars would

argue that copies of Shakespeare's work had reached American shores well before the first record of such importation in 1699 because Anglo-American settlers hungered for books.

As *New England's First Fruits* suggests, learning was highly valued among New England's settlers. Like Prospero, John Harvard loved his books and had brought four hundred of them to Massachusetts, a place where others also valued books highly, for "nearly all the Pilgrims owned some books as the years brought them greater wealth and more leisure" (Hart 6). Many, but not all, of these books concerned religion. Hart categorizes the books found in the inventory of a Boston bookseller, who had imported over 3,000 books between 1682 and 1685: in addition to nearly 1,500 books on religion and Bibles, the inventories include over 1,000 school texts; other categories include romances and light fiction (162 books), navigation (150), books of practical morality or essays (94), poetry (81), medicine (65), law (61), classics (43), history (32), and jest books (28). One of the Mayflower Pilgrims, William Brewster, owned nearly four hundred books when he died; another early settler, William Blackstone, owned 186 volumes. Furthermore, each of the Puritan ministers in America was given £10 to buy religious books, another indication of the high value New England culture set on books.<sup>22</sup> While the supply of books was limited in America, the English settlers regarded the books that they owned as important and necessary; their books did not include Shakespeare's plays.

One might argue that Shakespeare was, in fact, part of American culture in the early settlements, but that evidence of his presence has simply been erased by time. After all, plays in books were regarded less negatively than plays on stage.<sup>23</sup> Early New Englanders like John Harvard did own play books; his library included copies of Plautus and Terence as well as a play that had been produced at his alma mater Cambridge University. The students at Harvard

College read plays by classical authors. Dunn thinks that some seventeenth-century New Englanders might even have read Shakespeare. She points that John Cotton's son Seaborn included Shakespeare's lyric "Take, O take those lips away," in his commonplace book; he was not the only Puritan to have a passage from Shakespeare in his papers.<sup>24</sup> One even finds a persistent tradition that Cotton Mather owned a Shakespeare First Folio.<sup>25</sup> Thus Dunn concludes

In this relatively "Shakespeareless" century, then, actual evidences of the presence and reading of Shakespeare's plays are scarce. But the evidences are there. . . . What the evidence shows, so far as it goes, is a rugged, busy world in which libraries were not common. Yet in those recorded, vaguely or specifically, Shakespeare has a fair chance of being present. The chance is not as good as it was in England, but Puritan restrictions and the austerities of pioneer life have not excluded him. (32-33)

The evidence she cites, however, seems weak: two Shakespeare passages, both quoted in student commonplace books, and the traditional story of Cotton Mather's First Folio (first heard of in 1874). Despite her remark that "libraries were not common," Dunn also presents much evidence that Americans owned and valued books, including play texts, the titles of which are unrecorded. Among these, she thinks, one might have found a copy of Shakespeare, a more convincing speculation although it too is founded on no concrete evidence.

Dunn's entire analysis of seventeenth-century American reading habits begins with the assumption that "Shakespeare, so substantial an expression of his own Elizabethan England, so popular and successful a purveyor of entertainment to all classes of people in the London of 1600, has possessed the imagination of English-speaking people, both in England and America, from that day to this" (8). Hart too assumes the importance of Shakespeare, although he is

sharply aware that literary taste shows no uniformity over time. As he remarks, “Books flourish when they answer a need and die when they do not” (Hart 285). Thus he remarks

What makes America select as its all-time most popular books (**of course excluding the Bible and Shakespeare’s plays**) works as diverse as *How to Win Friends and Influence People*, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, *In His Steps*, *Ben-Hur*, and *Gone with the Wind* is a question not lightly answered. (287, my emphasis)

The importance of Shakespeare in America now is so great that neither Dunn nor Hart (nor most scholars) would seriously question his significance for the Anglo-American community throughout its history. Dunn acknowledges no solid evidence exists for Shakespeare’s presence in the early settlements and Hart acknowledges changes in taste, yet both assume Shakespeare’s figure was a constant, albeit an undocumented constant, in America. If one allows questions about Shakespeare’s significance, instead of excluding such questions as a matter of course, it soon becomes obvious that Shakespeare has not always enjoyed the status of a classic in America. Indeed many of the standard studies about colonial reading fail to mention Shakespeare at all in the seventeenth century, although they do note his presence in the eighteenth. See for example, George E. Littlefield’s *Early Boston Booksellers*, Worthington Chauncey Ford’s *The Boston Book Market 1679-1700*, or Lawrence C. Wroth’s *The Colonial Printer*, none of which mentions Shakespeare. Wright’s *Literary Culture in Early New England* mentions Shakespeare only to comment on his general absence until the eighteenth century. A change did occur then.

The way the Shakespearean materials spread in the eighteenth century is notable. One cause was the publication of Nicholas Rowe’s edition of Shakespeare in 1709. As Gary Taylor remarks, the “1709 edition of Shakespeare was to previous editions what an operatic Restoration

adaptation [like Davenant's] was to the original performances, a spectacular new rendition seasoned to contemporary tastes" (74). After 1709 Shakespeare's plays became more readable thanks to the editions by Rowe and his successors. Any colonist who wanted to import a Shakespeare collection could do so easily and read it with enjoyment. In *A Colonial Southern Bookshelf* (Athens: U Georgia P, 1979), Richard Beale Davis comments on the eighteenth century and points out that Southern readers owned Shakespeare's plays; furthermore,

Original essays on the quality and nature of his genius appear in the southern gazettes, and in the same newspapers were reprinted British commentary on his plays, such as Steele's *Tatler* No. 53 or Addison's *Spectator* Nos. 40 and 592. (Davis 96)

Nevertheless, Davis later remarks apropos of the *Spectator* essays that "There are more than three times as many collected editions of the work of Addison and Steele in South Carolina inventories, for example, as of Shakespeare, the most popular purely belle lettristic item" (114). Today Shakespeare's figure seems integral to American literary culture, but it was not until the eighteenth century that he made the voyage to America.

As Wright remarks, "these pioneers were more concerned about self-improvement than poetry. Shakespeare had not yet been made 'improving' by legions of schoolteachers" (Wright, *Cultural Life* 127-28). The folios and quartos presented plays, which were suspect to some seventeenth-century Americans for their playhouse associations, but more importantly, which were old-fashioned in their style. The works that are today regarded as supremely valuable were not so regarded in the first century of Anglo-American settlement. They were first frivolous, even immoral, and then unattractive and out of fashion. Had John Harvard carried a copy of

Shakespeare from the High Street of Stratford to Southwark and across the high seas to America, that importation, with its hint of importance, might indeed have been startling.

**Shakespeare and the Spirit of '76**

What is startling is the way that Shakespeare spread in the decades between 1750 and 1776 as the practices of reading and of book production changed: from a figure leaving no significant trace in the culture of colonial America, Shakespeare moves to become a powerful presence authorizing revolt and empowering colonists to claim cultural superiority over their mother land. I do not think that it is a coincidence that Shakespeare's language, whether read or performed, was highly valued during the Great Awakening (1730s to 1770s), when emotionally-charged eloquence swept across the land. For those who had discovered a sudden hunger for rich language, Shakespeare's plays stood ready as secular sermons, and they were less morally suspect than more frivolous, if more fashionable, plays such as Farquhar's *Beaux's Strategem*. Thus, in the first part of the eighteenth century, American colonists began, for the first time, to read Shakespeare. Nor do I think it is an accident that interest in Shakespeare heightened in the same years that tensions grew between England and its American colonies. Increasingly Shakespeare appears in a political context, supporting one position over another, used as a voice for authoritative social values. In the twenty-five year period between 1750 and 1775, his plays are suddenly performed, read, and cited, while his image appears in household furnishings and his authority crops up in political discourse. Moreover, when colonial America invokes Shakespeare in the decades just before the Revolution, he serves both sides of the political

conflict. Shakespeare functions simultaneously as an index of all that is best about England and as England's sharpest critic, whether on stage, at home, or in the public arena.

To begin with the performances, the popularity of his plays speedily increases after the first Shakespeare production in 1750, *Richard III* by the Murray-Kean Company in New York. (A production of *Romeo and Juliet* was announced in 1730, but no trace of its actual performance exists. Shattuck 1:3) In the latter half of the eighteenth century, as Shakespeare's reputation was rapidly rising in England, his plays were increasingly being produced in America. Rankin considers Shakespeare the most popular colonial playwright, estimating that "In the twenty-four years before the Revolution [i.e., 1750 on], fourteen of his plays were performed at least 180 times, and, in the light of the paucity of information, it would be reasonable to guess the total to be at least 500" (191). Those figures are remarkable. From 1600 until 1750, no performances of Shakespeare occurred, but from 1750 until 1776, there were 500 by conservative estimate. Rankin's estimate raises the question of why Shakespeare's plays—so late in coming to the Americas—immediately prospered.

One reason that English plays, including Shakespeare's, were finally performed in the Americas is the same reason that they continued to be performed: a desire for liberty, or rather a desire to be free from restrictive laws. Actors wished to evade English laws against performance and earn a living by acting. In 1737, the Theatre Licensing Act limited the number of theatrical venues in England. A number of actors attempted to get around the law, one of them being a man named William Hallam who ran the New Wells Theatre. In 1747, Hallam abruptly stopped his efforts to put on plays "probably [because] the law was closing in" (Shattuck 1:4); in a recent analysis of the Hallam family, Robert Myers and Joyce Brodowski show that "Throughout their

careers, William and the other Hallams were at odds with the patent theatres and the law.”<sup>26</sup> A few years later he began investigating the possibility of putting together a company to perform in America. Another London manager, John Moody, was enjoying some success in Jamaica (R. Wright 26-8); Robert Upton, sent to New York at William Hallam’s behest to investigate conditions, found them sufficiently promising that he set up in business for himself (Shattuck 1:4). Following the lead of Moody and Upton in 1752, Hallam’s brother Lewis and nine other actors sailed to Williamsburg and began performances there, soon performing in New York, Philadelphia, and Charleston as well.

These actors’ attempts to find theatrical venues in America, since such venues were limited in London, enjoyed success. Whenever the Hallam company ran into difficulties because of opposition from local authorities, they simply moved on to the next city; when the opposition was particularly intense in 1755-58 and 1764-66, the company went to Jamaica, returning when the climate for performances was friendlier on the mainland. (During the first trip to Jamaica, Lewis Hallam, Sr., died in 1758, and the company was thereafter run first by David Douglass and later by Lewis Hallam, Jr.) America, then, allowed actors what Europe could not: room to move about and evade anti-theatrical prejudice. America offered freedom.

That freedom was not political or artistic, but rather freedom from regulation, important to actors on commercial grounds. The prosperity that the Douglass-Hallam company enjoyed allowed it to recruit new performers from England; over the years some of these actors broke away to form their own companies. By the middle of the eighteenth century, much of the anti-theatrical opposition had died down. The new acting troupes showed no interest in the controversial, and here Shakespeare’s plays played an important part because they had become

relatively old-fashioned. Thus, in 1759 when Quakers and Presbyterians in Philadelphia pressured the General Assembly to suppress productions in a newly built playhouse, the actor-manager, David Douglass,

rearranged his repertoire to feature the plays of Shakespeare and the less offensive efforts of contemporary playwrights. Shakespeare, of course, was presented in the altered or expurgated versions then current on the London stage. (Rankin 83)

In 1761, when Douglass and his company gave the first performances in Rhode Island, they continued to use Shakespeare as a stalking horse to defend against moral objections. Douglass presented Shakespeare in the form of “MORAL DIALOGUES in five parts,” beginning with *Othello* and its depiction of “the Evil Effects of Jealousy and other Bad Passions, and Proving that Happiness can only Spring from the Pursuit of Virtue” (Rankin 94). (Once again, we may see the influence of the Great Awakening in his ploy.) And when the company returned to Philadelphia in 1770, Douglass toned down the company’s performances. “Some concessions were made to the simpler and spiritual tastes of Philadelphia,” including a production of Dryden-Davenant’s revision of *The Tempest* because, as a newspaper said, Philadelphians could “reflect Honour on our Taste, by patronizing one of the *Chef d’Oeuvres* of the Immortal Genius” Shakespeare (Rankin 137). Having been excluded from sixteenth- and seventeenth-century American life because he did not fit a nostalgia for England, Shakespeare now benefitted from a nostalgia for a later England that had designated him as a national representative. Though initially unwelcome, Shakespeare now represented good taste.

By the 1770s, Shakespeare’s plays served as a mainstay in the repertory for the touring companies that performed in all the major southern and some of the northern cities, with the

most popular being *Richard III* and *Romeo and Juliet*. In the years before the Revolution, those who would become loyalists and rebels all attended the theater. One could relish English plays while dissenting from the policies of the English government: for those who lived in the colonies, after all, those of English descent regarded themselves as English and laid claim to all that was attractive in that identity, including its theatrical interests. Shakespeare's popularity was somewhat restricted by the coming of rebellion, as the American leaders in the Continental Congress felt that playgoing (like cockfighting and horse racing) had to be discouraged:

We will, in our several stations, encourage frugality, economy, and industry . . . and will discountenance and discourage every species of extravagance and dissipation, especially all horse-racing, and all kinds of gaming, cock-fighting, exhibition of shews, plays, and other expensive diversions and entertainments. (Rankin 187)

The British had no such scruples about going to plays. While the start of the Revolution meant ceding the pleasures of playgoing to British identity, that surrender was not uncontested. Despite the American prohibition on performance, Douglass and his company continued to produce plays in Baltimore. He even tried to realign his acting troupe's identity by changing its name to the American Company in 1776 (Dunn 62), and at least one member of the company, Francis Mentges, became an American officer (Rankin 173). George Washington was an avid playgoer even during the war, evidently ignoring the laws against such activity despite his position as commander-in-chief. Ultimately, both armies would produce Shakespeare's plays.

During the Revolution (1775-1783), Shakespearean productions were military entertainments, paralleling the sixteenth-century Spanish productions in Mexico and the seventeenth-century French productions in Canada. Theater served to raise morale, providing a

pastime for the performers and entertainment both for the troops and the community that housed them.

From 1777 until 1782, British officers gave six seasons of drama at the “Theatre Royal” in John Street, New York, for the benefit of “charity” and “the widows and orphans of soldiers.” Of Shakespeare they produced *Othello*, *King Richard III*, *King Lear*, *Macbeth*, *King Henry IV, Part I*, and *Catherine And Petruchio*, a list which shows that the officers preferred the martial and heroic. (Gale 43)

Gale also reports Shakespearean performances by British troops in Philadelphia, while Dunn speculates that the British in Boston may also have performed Shakespeare. Dunn suggests that the British soldier-actors were principally interested in supplementing their pay despite the publicized claim of concern for “widows and orphans” of fallen comrades. During the Revolution, then, Shakespeare was principally performed by the British, not by the American rebels, and presumably his plays embody values of importance to the British forces. Gale thinks those values were the martial and heroic, while Dunn thinks they were economic.

It also seems fair to argue that the choice of plays to be performed was, to some extent, affected by the performers’ political sympathy for Britain, especially in one instance of a Shakespeare play performed by American troops. Dunn describes the circumstances:

A Shakespearean play, *Coriolanus*, buttressed the low spirits of the American Army in New Hampshire at Portsmouth in 1778. One Jonathan Sewall wrote an epilogue for this occasion, showing the figure of Coriolanus as a man suffering from ‘his country’s base ingratitude’. This epilogue, later printed, carried a footnote indicating that Shakespeare’s

Coriolanus spoke for the American soldiers and officers who felt that their efforts for their new country were not appreciated. (120)

Gale and Pollack also record theatrical performances both at Valley Forge and in Philadelphia, but it is not clear that these plays were Shakespearean (Gale 46; Pollack 36-9, 131-32). In the case of the New Hampshire *Coriolanus*, those who put the play on are aggrieved with their American commanders. Clearly there is self-identification with a hero who is thrust out from his own nation and unable to come to terms with another nation. The choice of a Shakespearean play may underscore the soldiers' dissatisfaction with the American command, given that Shakespeare on stage was largely associated with British practice during these years.

During wartime, then, Shakespeare's plays served to raise British morale by reinforcing the cultural values that their audiences held. British officers wanted plays that were linked to the motherland, and they enjoyed watching plays like *Richard III*, *Macbeth*, *1 Henry IV*, and *Lear*, in which those who attempt to displace a rightful king are defeated. American officers seem to have preferred non-Shakespearean farces or plays like *Cato* (all by British authors, of course), yet turned to Shakespeare when they sought a way of critiquing their command. But what is one to make of the sudden introduction of Shakespeare in 1750 or the surge in popularity that his plays had in the years leading up to the Revolution? Drama is intensely political in early America, as David Shields has demonstrated,<sup>27</sup> and the sudden performance of Shakespeare's plays coincides nicely with the rising concern that Americans felt about the colonial relationship with Britain.

The experience of the Maryland Company precludes the idea that Shakespeare's theatrical popularity is simply political. Despite the Congressional injunction forbidding plays (as well as cockfights and horse racing), the Maryland Company produced a season in 1782-83,

which included seven of Shakespeare's plays (J. Brown 146, 155). American rebels, including some officers and soldiers, attended the plays, suggesting that the law against theater was enforced intermittently. The company's use of Shakespeare may owe something to one of the players, billed as a Mr. Shakespeare, "who later continued his professional career with another company" (J. Brown 150). But certainly the principal reason the company (indeed any eighteenth-century company) did Shakespeare's plays was that they wanted to make money. Presumably the company enjoyed enough success that the following year they raised their sights higher. Having succeeded in Baltimore, Maryland, they wished to try a larger city with a more sophisticated playgoing public, namely, New York. New York was, of course, under British control. The chameleon nature of theater become apparent:

When his company performed in Baltimore, Ryan produced plays and prologues that had appealed to American patriotic sentiment. Now that he was in British-occupied New York, however, Ryan abruptly became a Tory. (J. Brown 164)

Shakespeare could, in short, be used by either side theatrically, but the American rules against playgoing limited performance of his plays in the Revolutionary years.

It was not only on the stage that Shakespeare suddenly became popular, but in the home as well. Busts of Shakespeare and other memorabilia become part of colonial domestic furnishings in the period between 1750 and 1776. Carson notes that the earliest such item was "A beautiful Statuary Marble carved Chimney-Piece and Picture; two fine China Chandeliers, fitted with Flowers and Branches; with three Plaister Figures of Shakespear, Milton, and Pope," which was offered for sale in 1754. In subsequent years, figures of Shakespeare adorned American mantelpieces and mahogany cases, and he was the subject of a number of small plaster

busts and medallions.<sup>28</sup> In 1769, for example, Samuel Chase, who would sign the Declaration of Independence, began construction of a house that featured a mantelpiece with a marble bas-relief of Shakespeare being visited by the Muse. A Wedgwood chess set sold in the colonies is notable: the chessmen represented characters from the Charles Kemble/Sarah Siddons *Macbeth*. Thus Americans began to use images of Shakespeare and his plays in their home to indicate their education and taste. Owners of such objects implicitly claim a privileged status in society. In at least one case, the owner of Shakespearean items was an American who was unsympathetic to the Revolutionary ideas. Elizabeth Graeme Fergusson complained that “twelve small medal Plaister of Paris heads of the Poets” among her domestic goods were seized by the “rebels,” a reminder if one is needed that not all American colonists wanted their independence from Britain, and that Shakespeareana might be used to indicate both allegiance to Britain and social status. In the colonial period, then, domestic furnishings offered Americans a way to emulate British taste. As Shakespeare moved into position as “England’s poet” for Londoners in the early eighteenth-century, adoption of his figure into domestic furnishings allowed Americans to demonstrate that they were current with the fashions of their motherland. Unlike the stage productions before the war, which could appeal to those on both sides of the growing political divide, domestic use of Shakespeare’s image seems more often to show sympathy to British interests.

More complex are the rising number of references to Shakespeare. Privately in letters and commonplace books, American colonial writers began to invoke Shakespeare as an authority who lent prestige and weight to their complaints about the political situation, while publicly

newspapers appropriated his texts to criticize England. Initially, citation of Shakespeare served aesthetic ends. Hennig Cohen gives one such example:

Another indication of how well Shakespeare was known is the extent to which local writers used quotations from his plays as epigraphs to their own poems and essays. For example, “Humourist,” a regular contributor to the [Charleston] *Gazette* in 1753-54, sprinkled his essays with Shakespearian quotations and used several examples of Shakespeare’s nature descriptions (along with others by Dryden, Spenser, and Otway) to demonstrate the superiority of the “Moderns” over the “Antients.” (Cohen 328)

Such citation soon shifted to politics. Esther Dunn records a number of such references in Massachusetts and New York newspapers between 1770 and 1776, showing that in the popular press, Shakespeare becomes a standard referent for complaints about England’s colonial policy. One of the best examples is a parody of *Hamlet* that asks

Be taxt or not be taxt--that is the question.  
Whether ‘tis nobler in our minds to suffer  
The sleights and cunning of deceitful statesmen  
Or to petition’ gainst illegal taxes  
And by opposing, end them? (Dunn, 108)

Other journalists produced similar parodies, and in one case the parodist was a loyalist, an American Whig who referenced Shakespeare as he expressed his reluctance to sign an article of “association” favoring the rebels: “To sign, or not to sign?” he asks a few years later (1774-76):

. . . that is the question.

Whether ‘tis better for an honest man

To sign--and so be safe; or to resolve,

Betide what will, against 'associations,'

And, by retreating, shun them. (Dunn 111-12; Rawlings 29-31).

Another broadside from 1778 refers to "Old Shakespeare, a poet who should not be spit on, / Although he was born in an island called Britain" (Dunn 112). Does this doggerel suggest that rebels showed particular contempt for Shakespeare? Probably not, since rebels as well as loyalists invoked him, but it does suggest how closely Shakespeare was linked in the popular imagination of the day to British-ness. For the rebellious colonists, references to Shakespeare's works provided a way for them to reproach what they regarded as a falling away from the traditional British love of liberty, while loyalist colonists could invoke him as a symbol of British greatness. What strikes me as interesting is the way that both sides cite Shakespeare to lend power to their position: Shakespeare makes it possible for them to declare themselves.

Abigail and John Adams, for example, use Shakespeare in their private discussions of George III's government. Thus Abigail Adams writes a letter comparing George III to Richard III, or John Adams compares his revulsion at a political choice to the revulsion that Mistress Ford feels at Falstaff's attempted seduction (Dunn 86, 92). These casual references suggest the couple's familiarity and comfort with Shakespeare's works, to be sure, but they may also suggest that he was particularly congenial in discussions of politics. Michael Bristol suggests that John Adams' later appropriation of Ulysses' speech on degree in *Troilus And Cressida* is especially significant:

Adams invokes Shakespeare to authorize his own refusal of myth as the basis for his constitutional project, the arduous task of making social institutions as opposed to simply

affirming either what has been received or what has been newly instituted. Shakespeare clearly functions as part of praxis, that is, political action informed by theoretical as well as by strategic deliberation. (58)<sup>29</sup>

(I would underscore Bristol's point that the way Shakespeare gets used is pragmatic rather than aesthetic.) Such references work in a way somewhat different from performances of Shakespeare's plays then: while the American rebels stopped performing Shakespeare's plays for the most part during the war, appropriations of his language were commonplace. And those appropriations were intended to mark American ideas as truer readings of Shakespeare's meaning than conventional British attitudes could be. But not only Americans made such a claim. In 1777 Maurice Morgann, a British official who had actually worked in North America on government service, wrote that when Voltaire and his criticism of Shakespeare should be no more, "the *Apalachian* mountains, the banks of the *Ohio*, and the plains of *Sciota* shall resound with the accents of this Barbarian [Shakespeare]" (170). It is not England that shall outlast the French Voltaire, but the Americas that shall be Shakespeare's future home. Shakespeare, in this way, becomes more American than British, a suggestion that would continue in American culture.

Political pragmatism also occurs with Thomas Jefferson, who kept a commonplace book that uses Shakespearean passages frequently. These citations are generally passages "of defiance and rebellion" that are "characterized by emphatic outbursts" and entered in an "energetic and flamboyant hand, the most exuberant in the manuscript," "that is called the 'Shakespeare' hand" (D. Wilson 18-19). In his private reading, Jefferson found Shakespeare's works intensely political, concentrating on those plays in which characters struggle with issues of authority: *I*

*Henry IV*, *2 Henry VI*, *Henry V*, *Julius Caesar*, and *Coriolanus*. In one case, Jefferson makes use of a revision of *Julius Caesar* by John Sheffield, Duke of Buckingham, and Douglas Wilson comments that Jefferson “seems to have been attracted by the same things in Buckingham as in Shakespeare—the strident note of defiance and the insistence that death is preferable to infringements of one’s honor or liberty” (158). Wilson also notes the way that Jefferson often linked Shakespeare to Milton, who attracted him because of “strong expressions of rebellion and defiance of authority” (174). Like Adams, Jefferson seems to have found Shakespeare both useful (as a way of authoritatively supporting his own positions) and attractive (perhaps because appropriating Shakespeare to American values diminishes British culture). What seems most striking, however, is that the Shakespearean works Jefferson was most drawn to were those that authorize political violence.

Not everyone in eighteenth-century America found Shakespeare interesting or apropos, of course. Benjamin Franklin, for example, never cites Shakespeare (although his print shop owned a copy of Shakespeare’s *Works*), nor are there any Shakespearean allusions in *The Federalist Papers*. I have looked through the indexed papers of such “founding fathers” as John Jay, Henry Laurens, Richard Henry Lee, William Livingston, Alexander Hamilton, James Madison in vain: they never mention Shakespeare. Others such as George Mason, George Washington, and Fisher Ames may quote a tag in passing, but say nothing of substance. Nor is it only notable American political figures who appropriate Shakespeare as an index of America’s cultural superiority to England. In 1770, for instance, a review of a production of *Cymbeline* in Maryland declared belligerently that, “The Merit of Mr. Douglass’s Company is, notoriously in the opinion of every Man of Sense in America, whose Opportunities give him a Title to Judge--

take them for all in all--superior to that of any Company in England, except those of the Metropolis” (Rankin 157). It would not be long before the qualifier was gone and Americans told themselves that their version of Shakespeare was altogether superior to everyone else’s version. Thus in 1811, *The American Review* says, “The sterling poets of England, such as Milton, Shakespeare, Pope and Cowper, are read and admired here by that class of society, which, in Europe, scarcely aspires to the rudiments of letters” (Dunn 130). The idea that Americans might have a superior understanding of Shakespeare would reappear powerfully in the next century, as does the invocation of his figure as a justification for violence.

\* \* \* \* \*

How is one to account for the surge in Shakespeare’s popularity between 1750 and the 1776? A widespread art form in eighteenth-century America was the silhouette. The subject sat between a light source, such as a candle or lamp, and a screen. The artist would hold a sheet of paper up to the screen and trace the sitter’s shadow, or silhouette. The screen served as a place onto which one projected light. Yet when the screen was a piece of glass, as often happened, rather than opaque material, it was also a medium through which one could see the object. In a sense, Shakespeare served Americans, whether they were pre-Revolutionary colonists or post-Revolutionary citizens, as a silhouette artists’s screen, serving both to display England and to project American feelings about England, sometimes transparent and sometimes opaque..

In the eighteenth-century Shakespeare was increasingly identified as “England’s poet,” and that identification had a powerful and complex effect on the way that England’s colonial subjects in America regarded Shakespeare. As symbol of British values, Shakespeare becomes embraced by colonists who want to be *au fait* with what is happening in the motherland,

especially in the fashionable world of London. References to Shakespeare occur in chess sets, newspaper columns, and biographies of George Washington.

Yet Shakespeare also becomes a means of voicing discontent with the British for perceived hypocrisy and a turning away from liberty. He becomes a figure to be ignored (e.g., Franklin), as well as one to be appropriated (e.g., John and Abigail Adams). Those rebels who employ Shakespeare find in such plays as *Julius Caesar* and *Coriolanus* an authorization of political violence (e.g., Jefferson). The British forces, as the war breaks out, employ Shakespeare as a national representative to entertain the troops. This version of Shakespeare is cited by Americans who are sympathetic to Britain and opposed to rebellion. The crucial point, however, is that Shakespeare's figure **is** powerful. As the American colonists began to examine critically their relationship with Britain, he suddenly appears in American culture. His presence becomes more and more common, and after the American Revolution, Americans would claim him as their own. Colonial and Federalist Americans seem to have recognized that Shakespeare was as available to them as to anyone in England: Shakespeare could be claimed as an American figure just as well as a London one. Appropriating his works, whether in parody or in defense of liberty, was an especially gratifying act of rebellion, precisely because he was so closely associated with England.

Information about Shakespeare provides an index to American attitudes toward Britain: hence the timing of the sudden introduction of Shakespeare in 1750 or the surge in popularity that his plays had in the years leading up to the Revolution. Drama is intensely political in early America, as David Shields and others have demonstrated, and the sudden performance of Shakespeare's plays coincides nicely with the rising concern that Americans felt about the

colonial relationship with Britain. Moreover, evidence about Shakespeare's image in expensive domestic ware suggests that pro-British sentiment was often linked to a class marker; Shakespeareana becomes an index of social rank.

Finally, the history of Shakespeare in eighteenth-century America matters because of what would come from it. The impulse that led to Shakespeare's sudden presence is, as I have tried to show, pragmatic, not aesthetic, whether one thinks of actors trying to evade licensing laws, colonists trying to signal their social status, or men like Adams and Jefferson trying to find a solid precedent for violently breaking with a monarch. The outcome of such pragmatic projects is that Shakespeare's figure has power and his power is linked to such concepts as the British, social rank, or political violence. In the next century, his power would grow, as would the violence. In 1847, P. T. Barnum unsuccessfully attempts to purchase Shakespeare's birthplace and bring it to America. In 1849, more than thirty New Yorkers are killed in the Astor Place riots about a production of *Macbeth*. And in 1865, John Wilkes Booth claims a horrifying self-identification with Brutus in *Julius Caesar* as he kills Lincoln. Shakespeare's presence shapes American culture in ways hitherto unexplored.

## Notes

- 
1. Cf. Felicia Londre in vol. 2 of *The History of World Theater* (New York: Continuum/Frederick Ungar, 1991); Walter J Meserve, *An Emerging Entertainment: The Drama of the American People to 1828* (Bloomington: Indiana U P, 1977), esp. ch. 1-2; Garff Wilson, *Three Hundred Years of American Drama and Theatre*, 2nd ed. (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1982), "Prologue."
  2. The term "orature" is from Joseph Roach, *Cities of the Dead: Circum-Atlantic Performance* (New York: Columbia, 1996).
  3. Elizabeth Wright, Louise Burkhart, and Barry D. Sell are in the process of preparing four Nahuatl texts from 1640 in a scholarly edition, which will be the second volume in the Nahuatl Theater Series for the University of Oklahoma Press; the texts include Nahuatl versions of Pedro Calderon de la Barca's *El gran teatro del mundo*, Lope de Vega's *La madre de la mejor*, Antonio Mira de Amescua's *El animal profeta y dichosa parricida San Julian*, and "an *entremes* of uncertain authorship" (Wright, 1). OCT claims translations to the Incan language Quechua, as well, but does not give a source for that information.
  4. Among the earliest important Spanish language playwrights from the Americas, for example, are Ruiz de Alarcon, Eusebio Vela, and Sor Juana. I have sought information about the early Spanish language theater in America from a number of sources. Among these is one particularly rich item: a special issue of *Theatre Arts Monthly* on Mexican theater, edited by Miguel Covarrubio, 22 (1938). Other sources include Marilyn Ravicz, *Early Colonial Religious Drama in Mexico: from Tzompantli to Golgotha* (Washington, Catholic University of America Press, 1970); Rudolfo Usigli, *Mexico in the Theater*, trans. Wilder P. Scott (University, Miss.: Romance Monographs #18, 1976); Guillermo Lohmann Villena, *El Arte Dramático En Lima Durante El Virreinato* (Madrid: [Estades, artes gráficas] 1945). I must confess, however, that I have been unable to date the first production of a play by Lope de Vega in the Americas, although his work was known in Mexico by the 1590s and was produced by the end of the sixteenth century after the playhouse was established.
  5. The masque was the work of Marc Lescarbot, and a translation was published in 1927. As Georgianna Ziegler pointed out to me, in Lescarbot's *History of New France* he contrasts native

---

performance traditions to those of the French.

6. For information on Canadian drama, see Eugene Benson and L. W. Conolly, eds., *Oxford Companion to Canadian Theater* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1989) and William Toye, ed., *The Oxford Companion to Canadian Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983); according to Toye's entry, "Drama in French," the conflict between Monsignor de Saint Vallier and Governor Frontenac was resolved when the Bishop offered the impecunious Governor £100 to cancel his production.

7. Samuel Eliot Morison, *The European Discovery of America: The Northern Voyages A.D. 500-1600* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1971), I: 265-67, says the earliest records for the La Rochelle fishermen date from 1523; when Cartier discovered "(as he thought) the Gulf of St. Lawrence in June, 1534, [he] found a fishing vessel from La Rochelle there ahead of him" (265-66). Later Morison mentions a Norman fishing voyage between Newfoundland and Rouen, which occurred as early as in 1507. He also discusses the reasons that France and England neglected the Americas in *Northern Voyages* I: 314-16, 470-71.

8. In 1578, Sir Humphrey Gilbert received a patent from the Queen to establish a colony in America; his efforts to settle colonists in Newfoundland came to nothing and he died en route from Canada to England in 1583. The first colonial settlement was presumably Roanoke in 1585, although it vanished. See David Hackett Fischer, *Albion's Seed*, 804; George Louis Beer, *The Origins of the British Colonial System 1578-1660* (New York: Macmillan, 1908) chapter 1, 1-31; and Morison, *The Northern Voyages*, chapter 17, I: 555-582.

9. David Hackett Fischer's *Albion's Seed* examines the waves of immigration from England to the Americas in considerable detail.

10. The major anomaly in this table is the slowness of the English to introduce drama in their settlements. Another anomaly that deserves consideration is the lateness of the first French playhouse: that late entry may be traced to the beginning of wars with England for control over the Canadian territories, a conflict that began at about the time when the French might have been expected to build a playhouse.

11. Margot Heinemann, *Puritanism and Theatre* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), 22.

12. Louis B. Wright, "The Reading of Plays during the Puritan Revolution," *Huntington Library Bulletin* # 6 (Nov. 1934): 73-108. Jeffrey H. Richards, *Theatre Enough* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1991) and Jean-Christophe Agnew, *Worlds Apart* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), both discuss the prevalence of classical play texts in early Puritan libraries.

13. For information on proposals to give New England performances, see Hugh Rankin, *Theater*

---

in *Colonial America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1960), 3-5. For the Puritan's use of theatrical metaphor, see Jean Christophe Agnew and Jeffrey H. Richards.

14. Meserve, 1977: 15-23; Rankin, 5-8. Vernon Jones found the reference to *Ye Bare and Ye Cubbe* (1665), "The Theatre in Colonial Virginia," *The Reviewer*, 7 (1925), 81-88. Most histories continue to use the date of 1703 when Tony Aston (or Ashton) gave performances, probably solo dramatic readings, in Charleston and New York, as the beginning of America's professional theater.

15. Cedric Gale, "Shakespeare on the American Stage in the Eighteenth Century" (Diss. New York University, 1945) and Charles Shattuck, *Shakespeare on the American Stage* (Washington: Folger Press, 1976, 1987) both mention other possibilities for the first performance of Shakespeare. In 1729/30 a production of *Romeo and Juliet* was announced in New York, although there is no evidence this production took place; Gale also records a 1737 performance of "The Song of Mad Tom" in Charleston.

The usual credit for the first professional American productions of Shakespeare goes to Lewis Hallam's company, an attribution that Shattuck would "simply accept," although Gale prefers the Murray-Kean 1750 productions in New York or the Robert Upton 1751 productions, also in New York. My own preference is for the Murray-Kean company, which performed in New York, Maryland, and Virginia, and built the first American playhouse in Williamsburg. Neither Shattuck nor Gale pays much attention to productions of English stage plays in Jamaica, which clearly preceded those on the mainland.

When all is said and done, the question of which company deserves credit for the first Shakespeare productions in America is far less important or interesting than the questions of why Shakespeare productions came so late to the New World or why they suddenly became so popular.

16. Richards argues that American ambivalence toward the actual theater and fascination with the *theatrum mundi* trope similarly affects both the Anglican South and the Congregational New England (179). I would modify that argument somewhat, although I suspect he is correct in his analysis of the theatrical aspects of the Great Awakening. See also Patricia Bonomi's *Under the Cope of Heaven* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986) on the Great Awakening.

17. James D. Hart, *The Popular Book: A History of America's Literary Taste* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1950), 28.

18. Quoted in Morison *The Founding of Harvard College* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1935), 432.

19. Louis B. Wright, *The Cultural Life of the American Colonies: 1607-1763* (New York: Harper, 1962 rpt. of 1957 edn.), 116.

20. F. E. Halliday, *Shakespeare, a Pictorial Biography* (New York: Crowell, 1956): 97.

- 
21. Gary Taylor, *Reinventing Shakespeare* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989); Margreta de Grazia, *Shakespeare Verbatim* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991); Grace Ioppolo, *Revising Shakespeare* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991).
22. David D. Hall would qualify Hart's estimates that most ministers owned books, although he too regards books in early America as objects regarded as being of particular value and necessity; Hall, "The Uses of Literacy in New England: 1600-1850," in William L. Joyce, et al., eds., *Printing and Society in Early America* (Worcester: American Antiquarian Society, 1983).
23. See Richards, *Theater Enough*, "Puritans thought plays to be appropriate reading" (118-19). Richards gives many instances; Wright's article on "The Reading of Plays" is also useful.
24. Dunn, 20-24. She mentions only one other Shakespeare quotation in a commonplace book. Willoughby, "The Reading of Shakespeare in Colonial America," *PBSA* 30 (1936), 48, is also relevant.
25. Dunn 24. William Schiede, "The Earliest First Folio in America?" *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 27 (1976), 332-33, suggests that the tradition of Cotton Mather's first folio stems from the fact that his granddaughter, Hannah Mather Crocker, married Samuel Parker in 1802. Parker owned the earliest first folio in America; its presence can be dated to 1791.
26. Robert Myers and Joyce Brodowski, "Rewriting the Hallams: Research in 18th Century British and American Theatre," *Theatre Survey* 44 (2000)1-22.
27. See David Shields, *Oracles of Empire: Poetry, Politics, and Commerce in British America, 1690-1750* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990).
28. Henderson and Carson detail these items. Henderson discusses a particular mantlepiece; Carson surveys catalogues and advertisements. Although it does not fit into the years before the Revolution, Carson does include an example that is tantalizing: a sampler prepared by a young American named Anne Hathaway in 1797 includes two lines from *Titus Andronicus*:
- Fair Philomel, she but lost her tongue  
And in a tedious sampler sewed her mind.
29. Bristol's discussion of how Shakespeare serves Adams' political ends is fascinating, 51-9.