

VOLUME XIV, NUMBER 2, SPRING 2014

CLAREMONT

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A Journal of Political Thought and Statesmanship

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PRICE: \$6.95
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"TIME WORKS WONDERS."

IAGO. (JEFF DAVIS.) "FOR THAT I DO SUSPECT THE LUSTY MOOR
HATH LEAP'D INTO MY SEAT: THE THOUGHT WHEREOF
DOETH LIKE A POISONOUS MINERAL GNAW MY INWARDS." — OTHELLO.

Wood engraving by Thomas Nast, published April 9, 1870, in *Harper's Weekly*

POET OF THE NEW WORLD

Shakespeare in America: An Anthology from the Revolution to Now, edited by James Shapiro.
The Library of America, 755 pages, \$29.95

“**P**OETS,” PERCY BYSSHE SHELLEY BOASTED and lamented on behalf of his guild, “are the unacknowledged legislators of the world.” If this is true—and it’s close enough to have stirred Plato’s competitive juices—Shakespeare is the American Moses. From the brightest heaven of invention, he brought down tablets that Americans have revered since we assumed our separate and equal station among the powers of the earth.

No other poet has so deeply penetrated and thoroughly inhabited the souls of the American people, awakening and informing our sense and sensibilities about practically every interesting dimension of the human things—love, tyranny, revenge, virtue, vice, justice, free will, providence, chance, fate, friendship, loyalty, betrayal, passions and reason, men and women, nature and convention, ruling and being ruled, high ambition and low scheming, war and peace, and the variety of human characters and regimes. Drawing upon the likes of Aristotle, Cicero, Locke, and Sidney, Thomas Jefferson aimed, with the Declaration of Independence, to give noble expression to the American Mind. In Shakespeare we discover the furthest reaches of the American Soul.

James Shapiro, the Larry Miller Professor of English at Columbia University, does not quite make such ambitious pronouncements in his new book, *Shakespeare in America: An Anthology from the Revolution to Now*, published by the Library of America. He does allow himself to suggest that “the history of Shakespeare in America” is, in a certain sense, “a history of America itself.” It is a parallel history found in “two-and-a-half centuries of essays, parodies, burlesques, poems, speeches, short stories, letters, musicals, novels, reviews, films, and staged performances.” Shapiro can’t collect the stage performances, novels, musicals, or films in his book, so he confines himself to the essays, short stories, poems, letters, and speeches, and offers the best reviews he can find of some of the historic performances on stage and screen. Leaving aside “academic essays” (thank you), and eschewing excerpts almost entirely, he assembles “a one-volume collection of American writing on Shakespeare from 1776 to the present day,” trying above all “to bring together memorable works that speak to each other, works that taken together tell an overlooked story, one that I hope [quoting Hippolyta from *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* here] ‘grows to something of great constancy.’”

OF THE 71 ENTRIES, THE LONGEST IS Henry James’s story “The Birthplace” (58 pages), the shortest Langston Hughes’s 8-line poem “Shakespeare in Harlem.” An early selection is a letter in 1805 from John Adams to his son John Quincy reflecting on the lessons for America that John Sr. found in serious reading, and re-reading, of Shakespeare’s English history plays. Later comes the famous letter from Abraham Lincoln to the American actor James Hackett, offering a “small attempt at [Shakespearean] criticism.” On the essay front, we get Ralph Waldo Emerson’s memorable “Shakespeare; or the Poet”; Herman Melville’s “Hawthorne and his Mosses,” comparing Nathaniel Hawthorne to Shakespeare; Walt Whitman’s “What Lurks behind Shakspere’s Historical Plays?” discovering in these plays’ unloving disposition toward feudal England a kind of anticipation of America; and essays by William Dean Howells, Jane Addams, T.S. Eliot, and George Santayana, among others. There are humorous reflections by Mark Twain; a handful of poems, including ones by Emily Dickinson, Robert Frost, and William Carlos Williams; Cole Porter’s amusing popular song “Brush Up Your Shakespeare,” from his smash-hit musical *Kiss Me, Kate* (1948), set around a production of *The Taming of the Shrew*; and a review by Pauline Kael of Orson Welles’s controversial film *Falstaff*, later renamed *Chimes at Midnight* (1965). Shapiro introduces each entry, usually using the better part of a page in small print to provide background and context.

Several pretty good books over the past century have told the story of Shakespeare in America—of how active, varied, deep, widespread, and continuous has been his presence in the country. Each of these takes a slightly different slant, and each adds something to its predecessors: *Shakespeare in America*, by Esther Cloudman Dunn (1939); the first chapter of *Highbrow/Lowbrow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America*, by Lawrence W. Levine (1990); *Shakespeare and the American Nation*, by Kim Sturgess (2004); *Shakespeare in America*, by Alden T. Vaughan and Virginia Mason Vaughan (2012). It is not in the nature of an anthology to weave together all the threads of such a great narrative. Still, there is “something of great constancy” behind the dozens of sparkling mementos assembled by Shapiro.

MOVING FROM 1776 TO NOW, WE SEE how rebels and loyalists both invoked Shakespeare in their cause in the Revolutionary period; founders and other great Americans turned to Shakespeare in search of moral and political truths; Americans early made it a national pastime to visit his birthplace in Stratford-upon-Avon (P.T. Barnum tried to buy it and remove it to New York!); performances of Shakespeare, far more than any other dramatic poet, filled the American stage—from big eastern cities to wild frontier towns. In the notorious Astor Place riot in 1849, over 20 people were killed and many more injured when thousands of partisans of one (American) Shakespearean actor besieged a performance of *Macbeth* by another (British). Generations of American literary men and women have found inspiration, example, and competition in Shakespeare; the Folger Shakespeare Library in Washington, D.C., became the finest collection of Shakespeare’s works in the world, and is deliberately situated so that “a line drawn from the site of the [library] through the capital building and extended onward will all but touch the monument to Washington and the memorial to Lincoln—the two Americans whose light also spreads across the world”; Shakespeare clubs, societies, and festivals spread across the country; American actor Sam Wanamaker became the driving force, against Britons’ resistance, behind the building of the modern Globe Theatre in London.

The foreword to *Shakespeare in America* is by “President Bill Clinton,” not William J. Clinton, President of the United States, 1993–2001. On the back cover is a blurb by Meryl Streep in which an ill-chosen metaphor comes dressed in bad grammar (she writes, “how vivid the legacy of one Englishman’s imagination still sits within the consciousness of our country”). So, one enters the book with small misgivings, and then disappointing oversights in copyediting here and there make one fear greater oversights (I didn’t notice any). But like other volumes in the Library of America series, this one is a pleasure to hold and to behold, and its contents, easy to dip into and out of and useful to have collected together between two nicely constructed covers, help confirm James Fenimore Cooper’s sentiment, that Shakespeare was “the great author of America.”

Christopher Flannery is a senior editor of the Claremont Review of Books.

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