

# THE REAL PLAYS NEVER SEEN FOR 200 YEARS



Fanny Kemble (1810-1893)  
From T. Sully's painting, 1835

Edwin Booth (1833-1893) as Shylock  
From a drawing by W. J. Hennessy - Collection of William Winter

## Not Till the Nineteenth Century Did Audiences Ever See Anything But Perversions of Them

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ONLY within comparatively recent years has the theatre manifested anything like complete fidelity to the letter and the spirit of Shakespeare. Shortly after the reopening of the playhouses at the Restoration, the process began of altering his works to suit the taste of the public, and the mutilation wrought in the time of Charles II. persisted even through the age of John Philip Kemble, who retired in 1817. The period 1690-1700 saw all the important changes in Shakespeare that continued on the stage for a century and a half. It is the object of the present discussion to trace some of this theatrical history for our generation, which has come to exact in such affairs the last degree of textual accuracy.

One of the earliest adaptations was Davenant's "Law Against Lovers," produced at Lincoln's Inn Fields, in 1662. This is "Measure for Measure," with modifications of the story; the Mariana episode is omitted, and Claudio does not beg Isabella to buy his life with her honor. The character of Julietta is much expanded, and the love of Angelo for Isabella is somewhat purged of its Shakespearean offensiveness. In the end, Isabella marries him, not the Duke. But the really astonishing thing is that Beatrice and Benedick are introduced from "Much Ado About Nothing," indulging for a few scenes in the original badinage from Shakespeare, and toward the end of the play becoming chief conspirators in a plot to effect the escape of Claudio and Julietta from prison.

In order to make plausible their connection with this situation, Benedick is made the brother of Angelo, and Beatrice Angelo's ward. Beatrice is also generously provided with a very young sister, Viola, who stops the action occasionally, in order to indulge in a song. If one could forget Shakespeare and Judge Davenant's work on its merits, it would not seem much beneath the average of tragic-comedy before 1640. It was acted, so far as I know, only in 1662. Pepys saw it, an employed Viola's singing immensely. I mention it here only as a curiosity. Gildon's "Measure for Measure; or, Beauty the Best Advocate," came in 1700.

Davenant, who, like most violators of Shakespeare's text, professed the greatest veneration for the poet, has been held responsible for a Restoration "Macbeth," that kept the stage till 1744, sending the original into desuetude for all that time. This version, printed in 1674 and again in 1687 and 1710, does not have Davenant's name on the title page, though to him it is expressly attributed by Downes. It was acted at Dorset Garden in 1672, but it may have been the "Macbeth" that Pepys saw in 1664 and 1667, delighting especially in what he calls the *divertissement*. His meaning is cleared up by Downes (*Roscius Anglicanus*): "The tragedy of Macbeth, altered by Mr. D'Avenant, being dressed in all its finery, as new cloaths, new scenes, machines, as flying of the witches, with all the singing and dancing . . . it being all excellently performed, being in the nature of an opera, it recompensed double the expense; it proves still [in 1700] a lasting play."

In addition to the music and spectacles the adaptor added some dramatic touches of his own. Lady Macduff, for instance, is at the beginning of the play the guest of Lady Macbeth; she is worried about her husband at the wars; and no amount of glory he wins will console her. She platitudinizes about moral worth, while Lady Macbeth, anxious to read her precious letter, is eager to get rid of her. The episode of the drunken porter is omitted, as violating the unities, I suppose, but, after

vogue. Genest records performances as late as 1717, but not one of "Romeo and Juliet" until Sept. 11, 1744, when Theophilus Cibber made a version for the Haymarket Theatre. Cibber's play harks back in some degree to "Caius Marius." There is no reference to Romeo's love for Rosaline; rather, like young Marius with Lavinia, he is in love with Juliet at the start, his father insisting that he shall give up his love. Hence the ballroom scene at the end of Act I. is omitted; Romeo and Juliet have met before. Lines from Otway are found in the bedroom scene. At the end, Juliet wakes before Romeo dies, and we have a passionate love duo between the two, as in Otway's "Marius." Garrick (in his original tomb scene) also follows Otway in having Juliet awake before Romeo's death, and he gives up the Rosaline theme. In 1750 Covent Garden and Drury Lane ran rival productions for twelve nights, beginning Sept. 23.

The Kemble version of the play differed but slightly from Garrick's; even French's acting version today retains the awakening of Juliet before the death of her lover. This would indicate a continuance of the custom far into the nineteenth century; Gounod's opera follows the same practice.

In 1681 Nahum Tate's "King Lear" was shown at Dorset Garden. Tate's dedication to his "set-tem'd friend, Thomas Boteler, Esq.," says that in Shakespeare's "Lear" he had found "a heap of jewels unstrung and unpolish'd; yet so dazzling in their disorder that I soon perceiv'd I had seiz'd a treasure." The three most striking alterations were (1) an "expedient to rectify what was wanting in the regularity and probability of the tale," by



Mr. Quin in the Character of Sir JOHN FALSTAFF.  
Sold at the Golden Head in Covent Garden  
From the Collection of Evert Jansen Wendell

making Edgar and Cordelia (who never meet in the original play) lovers from the start; (2) the omission of the Fool; and (3) "making the tale conclude in a success to the innocent distressed persons," in other words, with a "happy" ending—Lear restored to his throne, the wicked sisters dying of poison, and Edgar and Cordelia married. "Yet," says Tate, "was I wrack'd with no small fear for so bold a change, till I found it was well receiv'd by my audience."

The first change involved the doing away with Cordelia's suitors, the King of France, and an implication that her cold answer to Lear was due to hatred of Burgundy and love for Edgar; it necessitated keeping her in England and compelling her to wander about on the heath in the fearful storm, accompanied by an interpolated confidant, Arante, useful for sending on errands. Heaven knows where they slept! The omission of the Fool removed from the play one of the most fascinating, un-earthy characters in Shakespeare; he was not restored to the English stage till 1838. The third alteration took from the sufferings of Lear all their bleak, elemental tragedy, and reduced the play to melodramatic limits. Finally, the Edmund-Goneril-Regan episode was unpleasantly amplified.

Tate's mangling was castigated for a century and a half, but never once acted in all that time. Yet efforts were made to break the "Tatefication," as it was called. Colman, in 1768, removed the exorcism of the love of Edgar and Cordelia, but retained the "happy" Tate ending, still eliminating the Fool. He also gave up the "absurdity" of Gloucester's fall from the cliffs of Dover. The attempt failed at Covent Garden, actors and public preferring the non-Shakespearean love affair. Garrick, in 1756, produced a version at Drury Lane with much of Tate replaced by the original Shakespeare; nevertheless, Cordelia and Edgar still love, and the catastrophe is Tate's. This version was used throughout the rest of the century; Kemble's, printed in 1814, hardly differed from it.

Not until 1823 was the tragic ending of Shakespeare restored by Edmund Kean; his version otherwise was Tate's, Edgar and Cordelia still lovers. In 1838, when

manager at Covent Garden, Macready restored to the stage Shakespeare's entire play, Fool and all.

The second Shakespearean play to live on in a mangled form was Colley Cibber's "Richard III.," played first by the author at Drury Lane, in 1700. This version has really never been driven from the stage; it is probably a more effective acting vehicle than Shakespeare's. It simply strings together bits of "Henry VI.," part 3; "Richard II.," and "Richard III.," interpolating even a speech from "Henry IV.," part 2. It omits many passages of Shakespeare's "Richard III.," Clarence's dream and Margaret's curse, for instance, and it interpolates one by Cibber himself, that in which Richard informs his wife—Lady Anne—that he is weary of her, and means to marry her successor. The aim is to make the leading character, as Hazlitt says, more villainous and disgusting; hence, the play opens with several scenes from the end of "Henry VI.," part 3, showing the murder of the King by Gloucester. It has always been a thriller, and, as Shakespeare's play is not highly regarded, perhaps no great harm is done. "Lear" and Cibber's "Richard" for upward of two centuries kept Shakespeare's greater creations from the stage. Another mangling is Garrick's farce, "Katharine and Petruchio," acted at Drury Lane in 1756, and persisting as a permanently successful after-piece till 1887, when Augustin Daly was the first to revive "The Taming of the Shrew" in its entirety.

In 1756, also, Garrick produced an operatic "Tempest" and a "Winter's Tale," shorn of its first three acts, and giving only the Florizel-Perdita story, with Paulina's trick of the statue, at the end. Garrick had at this time a passion for hewing away great blocks from the Shakespearean comedies. In 1775 he produced an opera, the "Fairies," with splendid scenery and songs and dancing. This was "A Midsummer Night's Dream," with the hard-handed men left out; conversely, in 1763, after a one-night trial of the "Dream," with thirty-three songs, Colman, in Garrick's absence from town, reduced the offering to a musical farce with only the hard-handed men and the fairies; the four lovers and Hippolyta are gone. Yet Garrick was constantly prating of his veneration for the poet.

Perhaps his most high-handed proceeding was with "Hamlet," which, with "Othello," had hitherto escaped serious alteration. Voltaire had animadverted on the "barbarous" character of "Hamlet," and Garrick, in 1772, to obviate these strictures, decided to leave out much that was concerned with the madness and death of Ophelia, and entirely eliminate the grave-diggers and Osric! The version held the stage till 1780, but was never printed.

It will be seen, then, from the Restora-

tion until 1830, or, roughly speaking, until the retirement of Kemble and Edmund Kean, the stage cared but little for what we today should call textual or even dramatic accuracy in the presentation of Shakespeare. The tragedies suffered much, but they were still treated as serious plays; the comedies were mostly regarded—in that century of comedies of manners, from Wycherley to Sheridan—as fantastic conceptions eminently fitted for conversion into operatic spectacles, with dance and song. "The Tempest," the "Winter's Tale," and "A Midsummer Night's Dream" were particularly open to such attempts. They were put on frankly as fantastic, pretty entertainment.

At the very end of the period, from 1815 to 1830, Frederick Reynolds, sometimes with the aid of Bishop, musical director at Covent Garden, made such shows of the "Midsummer Night's Dream," "Twelfth Night," "Taming of the Shrew," "Merry Wives of Windsor," "Comedy of Errors," and "Two Gentlemen of Verona." Genest breaks out wrathfully against Reynolds for his violation of "Twelfth Night": "In the Devil's name, why does not Reynolds turn his own plays into operas?—does he think them so bad that even with such music as he put into 'Twelfth Night' they would not prove successful?—or has he such a fatherly affection for his own offspring, that he cannot find it in his heart to mangle them?"

In Reynolds's time these operatic perversions made their way across the Atlantic, and the Park Theatre in New York, on Nov. 8, 1826, offered the first performance in America of the "operatic comedy," "A Midsummer Night's Dream," with the scenery, dancing and songs, "incidental to the piece." In the same season the "Comedy of Errors" and the "Merry Wives of Windsor" were staged in the same way.



Mrs. Siddons, the most famous of Shakespearean actresses (1755-1831) Painted by Thomas Gainsborough

All this was changed with the final passing of the great actors whose line extended from Betterton to Kemble and Kean. When Macready assumed the management of Covent Garden in 1837 the reign of the scholarly actor-manager began. Public taste also probably had begun to demand Shakespeare, not the century-old perversions of him. At any rate, Macready restored much of Shakespeare to the stage. His term of management was brief, but Samuel Phelps at Sadler's Wells (1844-62) and Charles Kean at the Princess's (1850-59) brought out most of Shakespeare's plays on a scale of liberality with historical correctness and perfect taste hitherto unknown; they aimed at producing them as written, curtailing, perhaps, or even running together scenes, but never adding. Charles Kean's published editions of his acting versions are scholarly works. Charles Calvert, in Manchester in the '60s, and Henry Irving at the Lyceum, in the '70s and '80s, were legitimate successors of Macready, Phelps, and Charles Kean. All five were "scholarly" players and careful producers; they restored Shakespeare to the stage, and inaugurated the habit of correct detail in scenery, dress, accessories, &c.

In this country, actors lagged far behind. J. E. Booth and Forrest used modifications of the Tate "Lear," the Colley Cibber "Richard III.," &c. Managers of the mid-century like J. W. Wallack and W. E. Burton, in New York, and Thomas Barry, at the Boston Theatre, made really conscientious and beautiful attempts—probably inspired by Phelps and Charles Kean in London—to put on the comedies with reverence for the text and with completeness and correctness of investiture. They met with generous public response. But traveling stars wandered about with haphazard prompt-books and performed in provincial theatres with resident stock-actors and stock-scenery. Forrest and Charlotte Cushman were giants and could "get away" with pigmy support. Edwin Booth, in his few years of management at Booth's Theatre, (1839-73.) improved all this and met lasting renown and financial bankruptcy. It was not, however, till 1877 that he finally discarded the Cibber "Richard" and the Tate "Lear"; about this time he new-studied Shakespeare and produced him in the versions still published under the name of "Edwin Booth's Prompt-Books, edited by William Winter."

The foregoing facts I have put forward without comment. Davenant, Dryden, Tate, Cibber, and Garrick have been anathematized from their own day to ours; my condemnation is unnecessary. In their defense I would say that they, like Shakespeare, worked to please the taste of their public; a man who so liberally helped himself as did Shakespeare to the work of others could with but bad grace revile those who helped themselves to his.