

Dickens and Shakespeare

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For Dickens Shakespeare was “the great master who knew everything,” whose plays were “an unspeakable source of delight.”¹ It has been well said that “No one is better qualified to recognise literary genius than a literary genius,”² and no other author has had so profound an effect on Dickens. From the outset of his career his achievement has been compared to that of Shakespeare, and it is a mark of his stature that to this day the comparison commands assent.

His interest in Shakespeare began from a very early age. As a youngster he went with his cousin James Lamert to the Theatre Royal, Rochester, where he was terrified as Richard III “backed up against the stage-box in which I was posted.” There he learned “many wondrous secrets of nature . . . of which not the least terrific were, that the witches of Macbeth bore an awful resemblance to the Thanes and other proper inhabitants of Scotland; and that the good King Duncan couldn’t rest in his grave, but was constantly coming out of it and calling himself somebody else.”³ The excitement of the theatre was to be a life-long passion and, as recounted in this passage, one principal source of delight was the endlessly fascinating relationship between pretence and reality.

When he was “a queer small boy. . .not more than half as old as nine” his father took him on walks to look at the house at Gad’s Hill, “where Falstaff went out to rob those travellers, and ran away.”

And ever since I can recollect, my father, seeing me so fond of it, has often said to me, ‘If you were to be very persevering and were to work hard, you might some day come to live in it.’⁴

It was thus a dream come true when, many years later, that very house came up for sale, and Dickens purchased it. It was to be his home for the last decade of his life, and he took enormous pleasure in its Shakespearean associations. He had a commemorative stained glass window made and placed

prominently in the house to greet visitors. Now on display in the Charles Dickens Museum in London, its inscription reads:

This house, Gadshill Place, stands on the summit of Shakespeare's Gadshill, ever memorable for its association with Sir John Falstaff and his noble fancy. *But, my lads, to-morrow morning, by four o'clock, early at Gadshill! there are pilgrims going to Canterbury with rich offerings, and traders riding to London with fat purses: I have vizards for you all; you have horses for yourselves.*⁵

Dickens's engagement with Shakespeare was lifelong. On the day after his eighteenth birthday, the earliest date he could gain admission to the library of the British Museum, among the books he checked out were two multi-volume editions of Shakespeare—one edited by a scholar suggestively named Samuel Weller Singer.⁶ On the occasion of the first anniversary of the appearance of the first number of *The Pickwick Papers* his publishers Chapman and Hall presented him with a set of Shakespeare.⁷ In 1841 he purchased the “third variorum” edition of *Shakespeare's Plays and Poems* in twenty-one volumes, edited by James Boswell the younger from materials left by the foremost early Shakespeare scholar, Edmund Malone.⁸ And on the eve of his departure for his first trip to America in 1842, his friend and biographer John Forster gave him a one-volume edition which, Dickens reported, “I constantly carry in my great-coat pocket.”⁹

From early adulthood he numbered among his friends and acquaintance leading Shakespeare scholars, critics and actors. The foremost tragic actor of the day, William Charles Macready, became one of his very closest friends, looking after the Dickens children when Dickens and his wife were in America. During the actor's management of Covent Garden Theatre Royal in 1837-38, when Macready attempted to restore English drama to its former grandeur, Dickens served as an intimate artistic adviser, and he dedicated *Nicholas Nickleby*, with its depiction of Vincent Crummles and his acting company, to Macready. Another close friend was the artist Daniel Maclise, whose paintings of Shakespearean subjects were among his most popular and respected works. Later Dickens enthusiastically helped to promote the career of the actor Charles Fechter, whose renditions of Hamlet and Iago were among his most important roles. It was Fechter who gave Dickens the miniature Swiss chalet on stilts which the novelist used as a study in the garden at Gad's Hill.

Dickens was an active member of the Shakespeare Club, an association of some 70 leading writers, actors, painters and musicians who met weekly during 1838-39 for readings, papers and discussion. The Club broke up at

the annual dinner in December 1839, with Dickens in the chair, when Forster provoked an altercation. The following year former Club members founded the Shakespeare Society, a subscription publishing venture which flourished until 1853. Dickens served as a member of the Society's Council in 1843-44, and 49 of its publications were in his library at the time of his death in 1870.

In 1848 Dickens busied himself with the London Shakespeare Committee, which had purchased Shakespeare's birthplace in Stratford-upon-Avon. More than a decade earlier Dickens had left his autograph in the room where Shakespeare was born.¹⁰ Learning of the bankruptcy that year of the playwright and actor James Sheridan Knowles, Dickens organised amateur theatrical productions to raise money on his behalf. The plays chosen were *The Merry Wives of Windsor* and Ben Jonson's *Every Man in His Humour*. Dickens undertook the roles of Justice Shallow in the one and Bobadil in the other, and a series of performances in the provinces followed. Plans to use some of the proceeds to establish a curatorship for Shakespeare's house, with Knowles as the first incumbent, proved unnecessary when Knowles was granted a government pension.

From his close and repeated reading of Shakespeare, from friendships and from his participation in organisations devoted to Shakespeare, Dickens maintained close familiarity with the bard's life and works. But it was in the theatre that Dickens knew Shakespeare best. He told Forster that as a young man he went to the theatre "every night, with a very few exceptions, for at least three years."¹¹ In those days his chief ambition was the stage, and the description of private theatres in *Sketches by Boz*, in which aspiring young actors paid money in order to assume roles such as that of Richard III, is likely to derive from personal experience.

As a child he produced a toy theatre production of Isaac Pocock's popular melodrama *The Miller and His Men*. By the time he was sixteen he had written two plays (the text of neither has survived), and in 1833 he wrote and, with his family and friends, produced a Shakespearean travesty, *O'Thello, or The Irish Moor of Venice*. It survives only in seven pages of doggerel verse and songs, written to be sung to popular tunes, from his father's manuscript prompt copy.¹² The play has only faint connection with Shakespeare's play and is of no literary merit (Dickens later did his best to destroy all evidence of his early playwriting). The comic misadventures depicted in his 1834 Sketch "Mrs Joseph Porter—Over the Way" (later collected in *Sketches by Boz*) suggest that such a production of private theatricals was more than likely to end with ludicrous results.

He wrote or collaborated on several more plays in the course of his

career; he was the driving force behind and leading actor in a number of amateur theatrical productions, and the final twelve years of his life were dominated by public readings from his works, inspired in part by the success of Shakespearean recitations by the retired actress Fanny Kemble.¹³ In all of his theatrical activities he was meticulous in preparation, energetic in his involvement, and ubiquitous in his attention to detail. Macready, generally contemptuous of amateur acting, considered Dickens one of only two amateurs “with any pretension to theatrical talent” and judged Dickens’s electrifying reading of the murder of Nancy, adapted from *Oliver Twist*, to be as powerful as “two Macbeths!”¹⁴

Of the many theatrical productions Dickens was involved in, only a single play, *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, was by Shakespeare. Originally planned for performance at Covent Garden Theatre Royal in London in spring of 1847 for the benefit of Leigh Hunt (the perpetually indigent radical journalist later satirised by Dickens as Skimpole in *Bleak House*), production was abandoned when Hunt was granted a Civil List pension. A year later Dickens organised his amateur players once more, this time for the benefit of Sheridan Knowles. After considering and rejecting Jonson’s *The Alchemist*, Bulwer’s *Money* and Douglas Jerrold’s *The Rent Day*, the company settled on Shakespeare’s *Merry Wives*, alternating with Jonson’s *Every Man in His Humour*, with Dickens firmly in charge.

Forster describes how Dickens threw himself into theatrical production:

He was the life and soul of the whole affair. . . He took everything on himself, and did the whole of it without an effort. He was stage-director, very often stage carpenter, scene-arranger, property-man, prompter, and bandmaster. Without offending any one he kept every one in order. For all he had useful suggestions, and the dullest of clays under his potter’s hand were transformed into little bits of porcelain. He adjusted scenes, assisted carpenters, invented costumes, devised playbills, wrote out calls, and enforced as well as exhibited in his proper person everything of which he urged the necessity on others.¹⁵

Merry Wives was first performed at the Haymarket Theatre, London, on 15 May 1848 and subsequently in Manchester, Liverpool, Birmingham, Edinburgh and Glasgow. Dickens arranged and conducted the rehearsals with rigour, negotiated the venues, dispatched the advertisements, ordered the props, arranged for period costumes, selected the music, designed the tickets, numbered the seats—in short, orchestrated every detail, as well as acting the rôle of Justice Shallow. Mark Lemon, editor of *Punch*, played Falstaff; Mary Cowden Clarke, author of *The Complete Concordance to Shakespeare* (1844-45), was Mistress Quickly. She described Dickens as

stage-manager, “superintending, directing, suggesting, with sleepless activity and vigilance,” and of his performance as Shallow she wrote,

His impersonation was perfect; the old, stiff limbs, the senile stoop of the shoulders, the head bent with age, the feeble step, with a certain attempted smartness of carriage, characteristic of the conceited Justice of the Peace, were all assumed and maintained with wonderful accuracy; while the articulation, part lisp, part thickness of utterance, part a kind of impeded sibilation like that of a voice that “pipes and whistles in the sound” through loss of teeth, gave consummate effect to his mode of speech.¹⁶

In addition to his own theatrical performances, Dickens took keen interest in productions which he saw. Kate Field described him as “that best of dramatic critics.”¹⁷ He wrote a number of theatrical reviews, three of which deal with productions of Shakespearean drama: “Macready as Benedick” (*Examiner* 4 March 1843), “Macready as King Lear,” (*Examiner* 27 October 1849), and “On Mr Fechter’s Acting” (*Atlantic Monthly* August 1869). He collaborated with R. H. Horne on another, “Shakespeare and Newgate,” (*Household Words* 4 October 1851). A fifth, on Macready’s 1838 production of *Lear* (*Examiner* 28 January 1838) was written by Forster who, being indisposed on the night, quoted at length from “a friend, on whose judgment we have thorough reliance” – almost certainly Dickens. A sixth, “The Restoration of Shakespeare’s *Lear* to the Stage,” (*Examiner* 4 February 1838) mistakenly included by B. W. Matz in his collection of *Miscellaneous Papers* for the National edition of Dickens’s works in 1908, and routinely attributed to Dickens ever since, was actually written by Forster, although Dickens is certain to have sympathised with its content.¹⁸

In these reviews Dickens singles out intelligent attention to Shakespeare’s text and scrupulous attention to detail as prime elements for praise. His belief in the powerful educative force of the drama underlies everything he says, as does his conviction that an audience unprejudiced by preconceptions will enjoy and learn from “rational entertainment”. His is in complete accord with his friend Macready’s concern – unusual at the time – with the coherence of production, achieved through a determined striving for artistic excellence, truthfulness and passion, through careful planning and good casting, and through hard work in rehearsal.

Of the *Lear* production, Dickens (and Forster) single out for particular praise Macready’s return to Shakespeare’s text (after a century and a half during which the English stage witnessed only Nahum Tate’s “disgusting”

adaptation), in particular the re-introduction of the Fool to the cast. Dickens describes the presence of the Fool as “singular and masterly relief” to the character of Lear, which he proclaims to be Macready’s “finest role”. Rejecting Lamb’s belief that the play is too intellectual to be adequately realised on stage, Dickens calls Macready’s production “magnificent”:

The heart, soul and brain of the ruined piece of nature, in all the stages of its ruining, were laid bare before us. . . The tenderness, the rage, the madness, the remorse, and sorrow, all come of one another, and are linked together in one chain.¹⁹

Of Macready’s impersonation of Benedick in *Much Ado about Nothing* Dickens praises the actor’s “masterly discrimination,” and addresses the “risk” involved for a tragic actor undertaking a comic rôle. Describing as prejudice the assumption that an actor’s range is narrowly confined, and rejecting the expectation that an actor must slavishly follow traditional conventions in the portrayal of a part, Dickens declares Macready’s performance as “fresh, distinct, vigorous and enjoyable.”²⁰

Charles Fechter was an actor Dickens had admired for many years before writing a eulogistic review in 1869, on the eve of the actor’s departure for America. Having first come to fame in France, Fechter was manager of the Lyceum Theatre in London (1863-67) and distinguished himself in 1867 as the villain Obenreiser in Dickens’s and Collins’s play based on their Christmas story *No Thoroughfare*. Dickens described Fechter as a great romantic actor, of “delicate and subtle knowledge both of nature and of art.”²¹ In his Shakespearean roles, Dickens admired Fechter’s musical and intelligent enunciation of blank verse. His Iago, Dickens declared, was no cardboard villain but a schemer whose deceptions were entirely believable, and his Hamlet, animated “by one pervading purpose,” achieved a consistency greater than portrayed by other actors, through the merit of “a distinctly conceived and executed idea.”²²

Undoubtedly the most interesting journalistic essay Dickens wrote on Shakespeare was the one on which he collaborated with his *Household Words* colleague Richard Henry Horne, celebrating Samuel Phelps’s productions at Sadler’s Wells. After playing for several seasons in the shadow of Macready, Phelps assumed the management of Sadler’s Wells, situated far from the West End in a neighbourhood notorious for profligacy, where he boldly produced thirty-four of Shakespeare’s plays between 1844 and 1862. Dickens describes with admiration the ways in which Phelps systematically rooted out “truly diabolical” behaviour and attracted attentive audiences to productions mounted “with the utmost care, with great intelligence, with an

evidently sincere desire to understand and illustrate the beauties of the poem.” Dickens gives voice to some of his most heartfelt convictions when he praises Phelps’s achievement in inspiring audiences to appreciate productions for their artistic excellence, their attention to detail and the coherence of the whole.

There are not many things of which the English as a people stand in greater need than sound rational amusement. As a necessary element in any popular education worthy of the name; as a wholesome incentive to the fancy, depressed by the business of life; as a rest and relief from realities that are not and never can be all-sufficient for the mind – sound rational public amusement is very much to be desired.²³

In addition to the articles which he himself wrote, as editor he oversaw the publication of a further number of essays dealing with Shakespeare. Under his editorship in *Bentley’s Miscellany* he published a series of six studies of Shakespeare’s characters by William Maginn, the prominent Regency journalist. *Household Words* included “Something that Shakespeare Lost” (17 January 1857), by his staff writer Henry Morley, on contemporary reviewing of *Hamlet*; “Touching the Lord Hamlet,” a source study of *Hamlet* by John Oxenford (17 October 1857); and “Re-Touching the Lord Hamlet” by J. A. Heraud (5 December 1857).

In *Nicholas Nickleby* Dickens ridicules wrong-headed scholarship in the person of Mr Curdle, who

had written a pamphlet of sixty-four pages, post octavo, on the character of the Nurse’s deceased husband in *Romeo and Juliet*, with an inquiry whether he really had been a ‘merry man’ in his lifetime, or whether it was merely his widow’s affectionate partiality that induced her so to report him. He had likewise proved, that by altering the received mode of punctuation, any one of Shakespeare’s plays could be made quite different, and the sense completely changed; it is needless to say, therefore, that he was a great critic, and a very profound and most original thinker (*NN* chp 24).

And in the same novel Dickens satirises mindless gushing over the bard as seen in silliness of Mrs Witterly:

“I’m always ill after Shakespeare,” said Mrs Witterly. “I scarcely exist the next day; I find the reaction so very great after a tragedy, my lord, and Shakespeare is such a delicious creature” (*NN* chp. 27).

To understand Dickens’s attitudes to Shakespeare it is essential to recognise that he knew the plays not simply in scholarly texts and in serious

productions. In the tradition of Shakespearean adaptation in minor theatres, fairground booths, public houses and other unprepossessing venues, Dickens had at hand an example of great art that was vigorously popularised. Despite legal regulations in force throughout the eighteenth century and well into the nineteenth, Shakespeare has never been the exclusive property of an elitist culture. His works regularly percolated down to the lowliest stages in the land, and Shakespearean adaptation was a burgeoning phenomenon in the decade when Dickens produced his own first popular works.²⁴

In the Restoration period of the late seventeenth century, principal actors and actresses from Covent Garden and Drury Lane found that a quick way to cash in on their fame and make money during the off-season was to perform in fairground booths. After the duration of Bartholomew Fair was reduced in 1735 from a fortnight to three days, the actors found it more profitable to turn to the provinces when the London theatres were closed, but even after the actors from the patent houses had deserted the fairs, the plays remained: versions of *The Merchant of Venice*, *Henry IV*, *The Tempest* and *A Comedy of Errors* are on record. Emphatically, these were not full versions of Shakespearean drama, but adaptations carved out of Shakespeare to make his works suitable for the fair booths. They were shortened to reduce complexity and to heighten comedy, spectacle and action. New titles indicate the elements of appeal, as in a 1733 adaptation, *The Comic Humours of Sir John Falstaff, Justice Shallow, Ancient Pistol, and Others*.²⁵

But if the booth theatres were not faithful to the Shakespearean text, neither were the most prestigious playhouses in the land. It was an age of wholesale tampering with Shakespeare, as Nahum Tate, Colley Cibber and their ilk rewrote plays to suit the taste of their time. And a long time it was: not until 1838 did a production of *King Lear* based on Shakespeare's text appear on an English stage in place of Tate's version with its love interest between Edgar and Cordelia and its happy-ever-after ending. There remained a great distance between a full-length production in an elegant playhouse and a booth theatre performance competing for patrons with freak shows, rope dances, gingerbread stalls and puppet plays. But the point stands that the legacy of eighteenth-century Shakespearean production at all levels was one of adaptation. In this context one can see why Dickens, with his passionate devotion to the theatre, so highly valued Macready's endeavours to mount productions which took Shakespeare's dramatic and literary quality seriously. But one can also see that Dickens would find nothing extraordinary in the notion that excellence and popularity could be bedfellows. In the theatrical tradition which he inherited the difference was one of degree rather than of rigid compartmentalization.

Compartmentalization, however, was precisely what the theatrical licensing laws were designed to enforce. Enacted in 1737 and not revoked until 1843, the law decreed that spoken drama could be performed only in the two patent theatres. The act met with ineffective resistance in the eighteenth century, but by the early nineteenth century, as theatres proliferated in response to the rapid increase in urban population, the monopoly restrictions began to be circumvented. The law forced the unpatented theatre to become innovative to create attractive entertainment without breaking the law.²⁶ Since straight drama could not be legally presented outside the patent theatres, two courses were open to managements wishing to produce Shakespeare: illegal production, or adaptation away from spoken text into mime, music and spectacle. In either case, Shakespearean drama was what it had been in the eighteenth-century fairground: a vigorously popularised form.

In the unlicensed penny gaffs, which flourished in poor neighbourhoods throughout the nineteenth century and were by many accounts the nadir of theatrical activity, Shakespeare's plays took their place alongside the most scabrous melodrama. As in the fair booths, and entire programme, including two or three separate entertainments, took less than an hour to perform and was repeated several times each night. Heavy emphasis on murder, madness, ghosts, fights and deaths make it easy to imagine how *Macbeth* and *Hamlet* could fit so easily into the repertoire of the gaffs.²⁷

More respectably, in the minor theatres, which saw much of the creative innovation in nineteenth-century production, Shakespeare was squeezed to fit within the letter of the patent laws. In 1809 Robert Elliston produced at the Surrey Theatre a "ballet of music and action" entitled *The History, Murders, Life, and Death of Macbeth* which skirted the law by virtually eliminating dialogue and concentrating on action and spectacle, heightened by music. Twenty years later, with the monopoly rapidly eroding, Elliston acted the roles of Hamlet, Othello, Mercutio and Falstaff, in shortened musical versions of Shakespearean drama.²⁸

In 1834 and 1835 Astley's Circus presented plays based on Shakespeare under the titles *the Life and Death of King Richard II; or Wat Tyler and Jack Straw* and *The White and Red Rose; or The Battle of Bosworth Field*. At Astley's, drama was enacted on horseback according to the dictum of the manager and star of the arena, Andrew Ducrow, "Cut the dialect and come to the 'osses," and in the 1835 production, John Cartlitch, the tragedian from John Richardson's fair booth, took the rôle of Richmond.²⁹

Meanwhile an increasing number of burlesques of Shakespeare began to appear. The weakening of the patent regulations meant that theatres could place greater reliance on spoken dialogue without facing prosecution, and

(as noted above) Dickens contributed his mite to the vogue with a travesty of his own, *O'Thello*. Stanley Wells, who has selected a sufficient quantity of nineteenth-century Shakespearean burlesques to fill five volumes, observes that the emergence of Shakespearean burlesque coincided with the rise of a new seriousness about textual matters and about historical accuracy in major productions.³⁰ Popularization and attention to excellence once again converge.

Dickens clearly recognized in Shakespeare one of the great creative writers and dramatists in the language. He was alert to the gulf between ambitious, faithful dramatization and vulgar trivializing; as he said in a letter to Macready in 1839 (glancing at the packed houses which the lion-tamer Isaac Van Amburgh attracted to Drury Lane that winter), "I hold any society to be valuable which recognizes something of slight interest in the Drama shorn of Lions and Tigers."³¹ At the same time, Dickens was far from solemn in his veneration for the bard: the early *O'Thello* and the late hilarious portrayal of Mr Wopsle as Hamlet are evidence in point. He was fully capable of distinguishing between the great tragedies of Shakespeare on the one hand and the brisk melodramas of Richardson, the wretched depravity of the penny gaffs and the derisory incompetence in private theatres. Without question, he knew the difference.

Rather, Dickens saw that Shakespeare was freely appropriated by the most unpretentious theatres, catering to poorly educated audiences for whom, according to one of Henry Mayhew's informants, a faithful production of Shakespeare was incomprehensible. In this coster's opinion, *Hamlet* was better when confined to the ghost scenes, the funeral and the final killings, and *Macbeth* to the witches and the fighting.³² Dickens knew from close and extensive observation how the lower classes chose to amuse themselves, and he expressed confidence in his anti-Sabbatarian pamphlet *Sunday Under Three Heads*, written when *Pickwick* was just underway, that most people prefer good entertainment to bad. He was later, in his important *Household Words* essay "The Amusements of the People" to articulate his conviction that people were susceptible of improvement through entertainment, because love of dramatic representation was "inherent in human nature."³³ This is not the crude condescension of a "moral uplift" theory of art, but a belief that, properly presented, artistic excellence would appeal to a broad audience. From this perspective, one facet of Shakespeare's genius was to have a core of artistry which appealed to the sophisticated and unsophisticated alike. The presence on Shakespearean adaptations outside the patent theatres offered Dickens a supreme example that popularity need not mean hackneyed frivolousness, and that achievement of lasting worth could

exist in popular forms.

Dickens's novels, journalism and letters are saturated with quotations, creative misquotations, and allusions to Shakespeare. The extent of his references to Shakespeare is suggested by a catalogue compiled by Valerie Gager in her book *Shakespeare and Dickens: The Dynamics of Influence*, which, admittedly incomplete, nevertheless extends to some 120 pages. In his early essay "The Pantomime of Life," Dickens refers to himself as a follower of Shakespeare, "tracking out his footsteps at the scarcely-worth-mentioning little distance of a few millions of leagues behind,"³⁴ and in a speech honouring his fellow-novelist William Makepeace Thackeray in 1858 he declared, "Every writer of fiction, though he may not adopt the dramatic form, writes in effect for the stage."³⁵

His fiction contains memorable comic descriptions of Shakespearean tragedies: *Othello* is the play chosen for amateur theatricals by Mrs Joseph Porter in *Sketches by Boz*; Romeo is the character in which Nicholas Nickleby achieves his finest hour with Vincent Crummies and his strolling players; and the most extended account of a Shakespearean performance appears in *Great Expectations*, when Pip and Herbert go to see Mr Wopsle undertake the rôle of Hamlet.

There are references by Dickens to the majority of Shakespeare's works, but the overwhelming preponderance come from two plays, *Hamlet* and *Macbeth*. These seem to indicate that Dickens uses Shakespeare's lines as vehicles for his own thought, both from the frequency of allusion and from the active way in which Dickens adapts quotations to suit his own purposes. But he also uses at least one play as a structural model for his novels; a number of critics, most notably Alexander Welsh, have explored parallels between *King Lear* and *The Old Curiosity Shop*, *Dombey and Son*, and *Hard Times* in particular. In Welsh's words, "whenever Dickens required an exalted test of love and truth in his fiction, he tended to favour the Cordelia model of loyalty to a difficult father. . . Dickens, in fact, cannot be said ever to have completed the study of *King Lear* inspired by Macready's production of 1838."³⁶

Dickens invariably thought of *Macbeth* when he thought of murder, an act which fired his imagination throughout his career.³⁷ His most powerful evocation of *Macbeth* appears in *Oliver Twist*, when he describes Sikes's psychological anguish after the murder of Nancy. "So much blood!" Sikes cries, echoing Lady Macbeth (*Macbeth* 5.1.44). Just as Banquo's ghost terrifies Macbeth, so Nancy's eyes haunt Sikes, and in his tormented flight he, like Macbeth, has indeed "murder[ed] sleep" (*Macbeth* 2.1.36).

Hamlet, on the other hand, is a character whom Dickens was unable to

take seriously, and he repeatedly invokes the Prince for comic purposes. As Juliet John cogently argues, Dickens was deeply suspicious of excessive introspection when socially constructive action is more appropriate, and he considered Hamlet the very type of the Romantic intellectual.³⁸ As Dickens remarked in a cancelled passage from *A Christmas Carol*,

Perhaps you think that Hamlet's intellects were strong. I doubt it. If you could have such a son tomorrow, depend upon it, you would find him a poser. He would be a most impracticable fellow to deal with, and however creditable he might be to his family after his decease, he would prove a special incumbrance in his lifetime, trust me.³⁹

King Lear provided Dickens with a model for one of the relationships which interested him most, namely that of father and daughter. Like Macready, Dickens conceived the play as sentimental tragedy, in which pathos was the primary emotion evoked.⁴⁰ *The Old Curiosity Shop* contains a number of explicit references to Shakespeare's play, in which Nell guides her grandfather after he loses his sanity, until both she and the old man die. In *Dombey and Son* the proud and errant father-figure is redeemed by the unswerving love of a daughter, and in *Hard Times* Sissy Jupe exemplifies "a wise and loving passivity" which enables Gradgrind to learn wisdom and love.⁴¹

Angus Wilson has well observed that literary influence is not the lifting of identifiable snippets, but a response which "affects your whole outlook, the whole fictional world you live in, and that isn't a matter of taking little pieces and incorporating them, however transformed."⁴² Dickens's art is like Shakespeare's in three major ways: it is entertaining, it is theatrical, and it is verbally inventive.

Like Shakespeare, Dickens was an entertainer who saw no conflict between popular appeal and artistic excellence. His fiction is essentially histrionic: he visualises the appearance of his characters; he depicts them dramatically interacting with one another; and when they talk, they invariably declaim. His daughter Mamie recounted how she watched one day as he wrote--grimacing in a mirror in order himself to enact the scene he would then retreat to his desk to transcribe.⁴³ One of his richest and most typical comic veins is the pretence that people behave the same in private as in public; that is, his characters are invariably seen performing their own distinctive rôles. The law-clerk Mr Guppy proposes marriage to Esther by asking to be allowed to 'file a declaration' (*Bleak House* chp 9); Mr Lillyvick talks in the argot of a water-rates collector in the Kenwigses drawing room (*Nicholas Nickleby* chp 15). Often an audience gathers to witness

set pieces: a crowd “to the number of some five-and-twenty” follows Bounderby to his self-exposure as a fraud (*Hard Times* 3.5); the village urchins watch Trabb’s boy mimicking Pip (*Great Expectations* chp 30). Dickens has an eye for group scenes, in which characters are carefully placed in relation to one another, and action regularly ends in tableau, such as the finale of *Martin Chuzzlewit*, when Old Martin thrashes Pecksniff (chp 52). This is one reason why Dickens’s fiction lends itself so well to illustration, and it is notable that some dramatizations of Dickens’s works consisted of little more than tableaux in which actors arranged themselves in living representations of Phiz’s drawings. Dickens was an inferior playwright, but his novels are Shakespearean in their vital theatricality.

Finally, Dickens is like Shakespeare in his verbal inventiveness. Both writers extended and enriched the language; both delight in the novel turn of phrase, the vivid yoking of words not usually heard together. This produces the animism so characteristic of their language: inert things take on a life of their own, whereas living creatures are grotesquely reified. It produces the dynamic interrelation between the mundane and the imaginary, constantly testing the boundaries between the real and the fanciful. And it produces extraordinary richness of texture, in which the local life of a phrase encapsulates the wider themes of a work, functioning as an “expanded metaphor” (Wilson Knight’s description of Shakespearean language, which Steven Marcus tellingly applies to Dickens).⁴⁴ In this sense Dickens, like Shakespeare, is a supreme poet of the English language. As F. R. Leavis observed, “Dickens’s command of word, phrase, rhythm and image: in ease and range there is surely no greater master of English except Shakespeare.”⁴⁵

Notes

- ¹ “Night Walks,” *The Uncommercial Traveller* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1958), p. 132; *The Letters of Charles Dickens*, The British Academy/Pilgrim Edition, ed. Madeline House, Kathleen Tillotson, Graham Storey, et al. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1965-2002), 3.165 (to Forster 22-23 March 1842).
- ² Alfred Harbage, *A Kind of Power: The Shakespeare-Dickens Analogy* (Philadelphia: American Philosophical Society, 1975), p. 114.
- ³ “Dullborough Town,” *Uncommercial Traveller*, p.120.
- ⁴ “Travelling Abroad,” *Uncommercial Traveller*, p. 62.
- ⁵ Forster, *The Life of Charles Dickens*, ed. J. W. T. Ley (London: Cecil Palmer, 1928), Bk 8, ch. 3, p. 652.
- ⁶ *Pilgrim Letters* 1.9 n.
- ⁷ *Pilgrim Letters* 1.244 n.
- ⁸ *Pilgrim Letters* 2.229 n & 2.433 n.

- ⁹ Pilgrim *Letters* 3.165
- ¹⁰ Pilgrim *Letters* 1.447.
- ¹¹ Forster, *Life*, Bk. 5 chp. 1, p. 380.
- ¹² Charles Haywood, "Charles Dickens and Shakespeare; or The Irish Moor of Venice, *O'Thello*, with Music," *Dickensian* 73 (1977), 67-88.
- ¹³ Philip Collins, "Introduction," *Charles Dickens: The Public Readings* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), pp. xlix-l.
- ¹⁴ William Charles Macready, *Macready's Reminiscences and Selections from his Diaries and Letters*, ed. Sir Frederick Pollock (London: Macmillan, 1875), 1.112; Pilgrim *Letters* 12.291.
- ¹⁵ Forster, *Life*, Bk. 5, ch. 1, p. 383.
- ¹⁶ Charles and Mary Cowden Clarke, "Splendid Strolling," in their *Recollections of Writers* [1878], as quoted, respectively, in Pilgrim *Letters* 5.278 n. and in Valerie Gager, *Shakespeare and Dickens: The Dynamics of Influence* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 111.
- ¹⁷ *Atlantic Monthly* (1870) as cited in *Dickens' Journalism*, ed. Michael Slater and John Drew, 4 vols. (London: Dent, 1994-2000) 4.404.
- ¹⁸ Leslie C. Staples, "Dickens and Macready's *Lear*," *Dickensian* 44 (1948), 78-80, established Dickens's authorship of the review "Macready as King Lear," when he found the manuscript of the review in Dickens's hand in the Forster Collection at the Victoria and Albert Museum. William J. Carlton, "Dickens or Forster? Some *King Lear* Criticisms Re-examined," *Dickensian* 61 (1965), 133-40, conclusively shows that it was Forster and not Dickens who wrote the review "The Restoration of Shakespeare's *Lear* to the Stage". The manuscript of the review "Macready as Benedick" is in the Forster Collection; that of "On Mr Fechter's Acting" is in the Houghton Library, Harvard University. The Contributors' Book for *Household Words* attributes "Shakespeare and Newgate" to Dickens and Horne (*Household Words: A Weekly Journal 1850-1859, Conducted by Charles Dickens*, ed. Anne Lohrli [Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1973], p. 84).
- ¹⁹ "The Theatrical Examiner. Haymarket Theatre," *Examiner* (27 October 1849).
- ²⁰ "Macready as Benedick," (*Examiner* 4 March 1843).
- ²¹ Pilgrim *Letters* 10.52.
- ²² "Of Mr Fechter's Acting," *Atlantic Monthly* (August 1869).
- ²³ "Shakespeare and Newgate," *Household Words* (4 October 1851).
- ²⁴ See Paul Schlicke, "The Showman of *The Pickwick Papers*," *Dickens Studies Annual* 20 (1991), 1-15.
- ²⁵ Sybil Rosenfeld, *The Theatre of the London Fairs in the Eighteenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1960), pp. 9, 42, 147.
- ²⁶ See Michael Booth, "The Social and Literary Context" in *The Revels History of Drama in English*, eds. Clifford Leech and T. W. Craik (London: Methuen, 1975), 6, 1-57.
- ²⁷ See Paul Sheridan, *Penny Theatres of Victorian London* (London: Dobson, 1981).
- ²⁸ Christopher Murray, *Robert William Elliston Manager* (London: Society for Theatre Research, 1975), pp. 22-25; Arthur Colby Sprague, "Shakespeare and Melodrama," *Essays and Studies* n.s. 18 (1965), pp. 1-12, and "A *Macbeth* of Few Words," *All These to Teach: Essays in Honor of C. A. Robertson*, eds. Robert Bryan, et. al. (Gainesville, FL: Florida University Press, 1965), pp. 80-101.
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- English Circus* (Hamden, CT: Archon, 1978), pp. 179, 286.
- ³⁰ Stanley Wells, ed, *Nineteenth-Century Shakespeare Burlesques*, 5 vols. (London: Diploma, 1977), 1.xiii and 2.x.
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- ³³ Dickens, "The Amusements of the People," *Household Words* I (1850), 13-15 and 57-60.
- ³⁴ *Bentley's Miscellany* (March 1837).
- ³⁵ *The Speeches of Charles Dickens*, ed. Kenneth J. Fielding (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1960), p. 262.
- ³⁶ Alexander Welsh, *From Copyright to Copperfield: The Identity of Dickens* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1987), pp. 88, 104.
- ³⁷ Michael Slater, "Some Remarks on Dickens's Use of Shakespearean Allusions," *Studies in English and American Literature in Honour of Witold Ostrowski* (Warsaw: Polish Scientific Publishers, 1984), p. 142; Gager, *Shakespeare and Dickens*, pp. 76-77.
- ³⁸ Juliet John, "Dickens and Shakespeare," *Victorian Shakespeare*, eds. Gail Marshall and Adrian Poole (London: Palgrave, 2003); see also John, *Dickens's Villains* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), and Adrian Poole, *Shakespeare and the Victorians* (London: Arden, 2004).
- ³⁹ Quoted by Michael Slater in his notes to *A Christmas Carol* in *The Christmas Books*, 2 vols. (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1984), 1.257.
- ⁴⁰ Paul Schlicke, "A 'Discipline of Feeling': Macready's *Lear* and *The Old Curiosity Shop*," *Dickensian* 76 (1980), 79-89
- ⁴¹ Grahame Smith, "'O reason not the need': *King Lear*, *Hard Times* and Utilitarian Values," *Dickensian* 86 (1990), 164-70.
- ⁴² Angus Wilson, "Dickens and Dostoevsky," *Dickens Memorial Lectures* (supplement to the 1970 *Dickensian*), p. 42.
- ⁴³ Mamie Dickens, *My Father As I Recall Him* (London: Roxburgh Press, 1897), pp. 47-9.
- ⁴⁴ Steven Marcus, *Dickens from Pickwick to Dombey* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1965), p. 40.
- ⁴⁵ F. R. Leavis, *Dickens the Novelist* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1970), p.207.