American Shakespeare
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Introduction. American Shakespeare

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The American Shakespeare profiled in this volume may at times appear but is not, be assured, some jingoistic chimera conjured by cultural nationalists eager to appropriate him as their country's *genius loci*[1]. Shakespeare occupies a real and commanding place in America's national life, serving for over two centuries as a cultural touchstone in the curriculum of both public and private schools and on the boards of theaters from Broadway to Tombstone[2], and as a

[1] In his inaugural lecture as the first director of the Folger Shakespeare Library, Joseph Quincy Adams was eager to claim Shakespeare as "the common possession of both branches of the Anglo-Saxon race". The British colonists may have "shifted the place of their residence", he argued, "but not to a foreign country". They had, rather, "established a newer England beyond the sea", taking with them, as "their birthright", Shakespeare "as the finest flower of [their] language and culture". "Nothing could rob them of him", Adams writes; "And being theirs, he is ours, is of us, their descendants" (Adams 2014, 419-21).

[2] In John Ford's *My Darling Clementine*, Wyatt Earp proves his mettle and worth as a sheriff for the feral frontier town of Tombstone by volunteering to rescue a harried Shakespearean actor who has been kidnapped by the notorious Clanton gang. He finds the terrified actor being taunted into performing Hamlet's "To be or not to be", which he manages to do until, terrified, he stops short after declaiming, "Who would fardels bear / To grunt and sweat under a weary life". The tubercular Doc Holliday, who grunts and sweats for physical as well as spiritual reasons, takes up the dopped line at the charged word "life", and

wisdom figure almost reflexively invoked in public debates about the exceptional nature and (possibly imperiled) future of the Republic[3]. Yet American Shakespeare cannot simply be regarded as a cultural icon like any other, since veneration of Shakespeare, while it entails, can also transcend conventional notions of influence. At its most profound and generative, American enthrallment with Shakespeare and his characters – above all Falstaff and Hamlet, but also and obsessively, with Lear, Macbeth, Prospero, Shylock, Coriolanus, Iago and, for those with particularly supple natures, Rosalind and that queen of the bodily sublime, Cleopatra – can lead to the discovery, or unleashing, of the 'true self', Whitman's "Me myself", which otherwise might remain dormant or incompletely realized. To cite some of the most eminent examples featured and expounded in this volume: Emily Dickinson, the recluse of Amherst, saw her own declamatory inwardness mirrored in a Danish prince with too much, rather than too little, commerce with the world; Orson Welles, whose life might easily be moralized in Falstaff's self-lament, "Company, villainous company, hath been the spoil of me" (Shakespeare 2005, III.iii.9-10), cutting and splicing revered Shakespearean texts to 'liberate' the

proceeds to recite words that possess an achingly special meaning for him – "But that the dread of something after death…". Although Doc does not quite finish the soliloquy, his contemplation of impending death resonates with a personal pathos that otherwise seems to be missing in a frontier town whose fame is connected to its affinity for dead bodies. The Englishman, once freed, concludes, miserably for everyone, that "Shakespeare was not meant for taverns nor for tavern louts".

[3] Even as I write, Shakespeare is a trusted guide through the thickets of political dissension and disorder. In a column lamenting how "Wokeness Derails the Democrats", Maureen Dowd appeals to Shakespeare for guidance: "In Shakespeare, when characters want to fulfill their desires, they escape to what's been called the Green World. And that's what Democrats promised voters: that they could leave behind the vitriol and aggravation of Donald Trump's America and escape to an Arden that was cool, calm and reassuring". Noting that the Democrats "violated that pledge" and lost their way to that "verdant forest", Dowd laments that the Democrats only managed to lead the country "into a circular firing squad", so that, as one top Democrat she quoted dispiritedly remarked, instead of "rancor and division" Democrats "offered something else: division and rancor" (Dowd 2021). Rosalind might be amused to hear that the Forest of Arden is characterized as a cool, calm and reassuring place of refuge.

great-spirited entertainer Falstaff he felt himself to be; Philip Roth, from *Operation Shylock* through *Sabbath's Theater* and the terse bitter outbursts of *Exit Ghost* and *The Humbling* impersonating and Americanizing one Shakespearean role after another as if determined to establish, as Stephen Dedalus is challenged to do in *Ulysses*, that Shakespeare was a Jew[4].

Such imaginative transpositions of Shakespearean into American originals are among the sturdier offspring of what Walt Whitman deemed the "*mythus*" of Shakespeare's incomparable, but also inexplicable genius (Whitman 2014, 221). The most fantastical yet tenacious belief emanating from that *mythus* is that Shakespeare found his natural heirs and true home in America. Willa Cather abandoned her customary reserve to advance just such a view. In reviewing a production of *As You Like It* staged at a newly dedicated Stratford theater in which the American Mary Anderson played Rosalind, Cather insisted that "[i]t was more fitting […] that an American woman play there that night than an English woman because Shakespeare belongs to two nations now" (Cather 2014, 247). Cather follows up this upstart claim to joint ownership of Britain's most cherished national treasure with a disarming admission: "Then one always fancies if he had been born just a few centuries later he would have been an American" (247). Once you grant – a major concession! – Cather's initial premise that there is a something intrinsically American in Shakespeare's unbounded genius, it "then" inevitably ("always") follows that it was only an historical accident, one easily rectified by American fancy, that he wasn't born in America.

Cather was not alone in conjuring an American Shakespeare as the great might-have-been and perhaps yet-to-be. A half century earlier Melville refused to be deterred by the *mythus* of

[4] In compiling evidence to support his claim that "[a]ll events brought grist to his mill", Stephen argues that "Shylock chimes with the jewbaiting that followed the hanging and quartering of the queens' leech Lopez, his jew's heart being plucked forth while the sheeny was yet alive". He is just congratulating himself on "getting on very nicely" with his "theolologicophilolological" demonstrations when he is challenged by John Eglinton: "Prove he was a jew […]. Your dean of studies holds he was a holy Roman" (Joyce 2000, 262-63). The point is not an idle one in a novel that posits that the modern Ulysses is a Jew.

"Shakespeare's unapproachability", a tenet of the "absolute and unconditional adoration of Shakespeare" as an unsurpassable, decidedly Anglo-Saxon genius (Melville 2014, 131). Carrying the banner of "republican progressiveness into Literature", Melville, in a sudden surge of evangelical zeal, rallies his comrades in American letters: "Believe me, my friends, that Shakespeares are this day being born on the banks of the Ohio. And the day will come, when you shall say who reads a book by an Englishman that is a modern?" (131).

No one would argue that that day has come (and gone) and Melville justified in his belief that "if Shakespeare has not been equalled [sic], he is sure to be surpassed, and surpassed by an American born now or yet to be born" (132). This volume does not concern itself with assessing the chances or alleged instances of such miraculous surpassings. Rather it addresses Shakespeare's uncanny modernity through the supreme fiction of his naturalization and subsequent instatement as the tutelary spirit of the New World fostering its fables of a diverse, resourceful and self-creative humanity. Collected here are essays that survey and analyze telltale works of literary, cinematic and popular culture that invoke Shakespeare as the progenitor and custodian of its artistic and spiritual achievements, its advances upon unclaimed reaches of human experience. It examines Shakespeare's presence in its various, multiform avatars and iterations – prose fiction, staged performances, essays and journal entries, poetry and film – any and all works that allude to, re-imagine or internalize Shakespeare in pursuit of their own aesthetic aims, whether those aims be to satisfy or to disappoint modern and democratic American purposes, such as they may be and however they are defined, defended or derided (satirized).

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Emerson was the first to proclaim Shakespeare, whose very name "suggests joy and emancipation to the heart of men", as a poet-prophet "announcing new eras and ameliorations" (Emerson 2014, 119-20). In his "omnipresent humanity" (118) Shakespeare was prototype of the American Bard proclaiming the liberal and

liberating ideals espoused (if never adequately realized) by the world's newest democracy. Trusting, like all true genius, to his demotic instincts, he grounded his art in popular tradition, which "in furnishing so much work done to his hand, [left] him at leisure, and in full strength for the audacities of his imagination" (108). Such audacities in "transferring the inmost truth of things into music and verse" left not just human, but "natural history" forever changed and so "added a new problem to metaphysics" (118-19). Whitman, more troubled by the political than metaphysical problem posed by Shakespeare's imaginative fecundity, confessed to a "baffled and mix'd" feeling in confronting the audacities of Shakespeare's creative power (Whitman 2014, 223). He hazarded that there was something "offensive to the modern spirit" in an imagination so engrossed by "the dragon-rancors and stormy feudal splendor of mediæval caste" (Whitman 1892, 391). He insisted that Shakespeare's style, supremely grand as it was, stopped "short of the grandest sort, at any rate for fulfilling and satisfying modern and scientific and democratic American purposes" (392). Nonetheless he prophesized that in less than two generations Shakespeare was destined to live in America "less as the cunning draughtsman of the passions, and more as putting on record the first full exposé – and by far the most vivid one, immeasurably ahead of doctrinaires and economists – of the political theory and results, or the reason-why and necessity for them which America has come on earth to abnegate and replace?" (Whitman 2014, 222).

The recent spate of works on Shakespeare's enduring relevance to American political culture would seem to ally themselves with Whitman over Emerson in defining the nature and impact of Shakespeare's words (what his personal views might be is forever in dispute) on American public life. Among the most notable and influential scholars/popularizers of Shakespeare's unfailing contemporaneity is James Shapiro, whose Library of America anthology, *Shakespeare in America*, a collection spanning from Revolutionary times to the present day, and his *Shakespeare in a Divided America: What His Plays Tell Us about Our Past and Future*, advance the view that Shakespeare is unrivalled in giving voice to the American political unconscious. "For well over two centuries",

Shapiro writes, surveying the wide rolls of democratic citizenry, "Americans of all stripes – presidents and activists, writers and soldiers – have turned to Shakespeare's works to give voice to what could not readily or otherwise be said" (Shapiro 2020, ix). In Shapiro's account, Shakespeare emerges as an articulate medium for a diverse and increasingly cacophonous *vox populi*, ventriloquizing the political hopes and grievances of dissenting, at times rabid faction that would otherwise remain ill-formulated or altogether mute.

Sometimes the messaging is implicit rather than overt, as in the anecdote Shapiro relates to introduce *Shakespeare in America*. He singles out an 1846 production of *Othello* staged largely for the entertainment of U.S. troops stationed in Corpus Christi, Texas, a slave state that bordered on Mexico, with whom the country was soon to be at war. The oddity that seemed prescient yet hardly remarked at the time involved casting: soon-to-be Confederate general James Longstreet was initially cast as Desdemona, and when he proved too tall, Ulysses S. Grant, the future commander of the Union army, was assigned the role. (He was later replaced by a professional actress, his performance apparently lacking in the sentiment, not to mention the desired "look", for the role [Shapiro 2014, xix]). Shapiro regards this episode, which exposes the sordid tangle of the country's foreign and internal race relations, the latter of which would soon plunge the country into civil war, as symptomatic of how "the history of Shakespeare in America is also a history of America itself" (xxii). The equation is elegant, but perhaps a little too tidy in aligning the two histories in such a seamless synchrony. One might as readily venture that Shakespeare becomes the man of the times precisely when the times themselves seem unsure of what his value, the value of the arts generally, might be in light of the pressing, agonizingly obdurate political, social and economic problems besetting and sometimes dividing the nation. As Robert L. Caserio suggests in an essay in this volume: "If Shakespeare (or any poet, dramatist, or novelist) can target and illuminate the news of the day, then, it would seem to follow, his cultural value, as well as that of literature generally, is assured".

Caserio questions the grounds and, more radically, the benefits of such assurance and the avid, increasingly urgent pursuit of demonstrable relevance it fuels. The urgency is exemplified by Stephen Greenblatt's *Tyrant*. Greenblatt portrays Shakespeare as a popular entertainer and shrewd businessman who, knowing "that for a playwright, any critical reflections on powerful contemporary figures or on contested issues were at once alluring and risky" (Greenblatt 2018, 184), resorts to canny indirection to make himself heard without jeopardizing his livelihood, not to mention his life. He became master of the art of "the oblique angle" by which he "prudently projected his imagination away from his immediate circumstances". Nonetheless, Greenblatt avers,

> Shakespeare found a way to say what he needed to say. He managed to have someone stand up onstage and tell the two thousand listeners – some of whom were government agents – that "a dog's obeyed in office". The rich get away with what is brutally punished in the poor. "Plate sins with gold", his character continued,
> And the strong lance of justice hurtless breaks:
> Arm it in rags, a pigmy's straw does pierce it.
> If you said words like these at the tavern, you stood a good chance of having your ears cut off. But day after day they were spoken in public, and the police were never called. Why not? Because the person who spoke them was Lear in his madness. (186)

It is through such oblique yet readily discernible references that Shakespeare, Greenblatt concludes, "never looked away from the horrible consequences visited upon societies that fall into the hands of tyrants". In his focused attention on the "tyrants" who populate Shakespeare history plays and tragedies – Richard II, Macbeth, Lear and Coriolanus – Greenblatt himself looks obliquely at the character and regime of Donald Trump, whose election in 2016 convinced him of "Shakespeare's uncanny relevance to the political world in which we now find ourselves" (191).

Kenneth Burke, writing at an earlier but equally if not in fact more troubled, disconcerting time[5], had a somewhat different sense of Shakespeare's uncanny relation to the social and political world and a decidedly different theory of how such uncanniness worked on a mind – or audience – distressed at the state of things. Although he is briefly tempted to succumb to the biographical allure of the Shakespeare *mythus*[6], Burke does not linger over his 'feelings' about how the plays may betray Shakespeare's personal traits or inclinations, but prefers to foreground "another kind of knowledge about Shakespeare that we *do* have, and *should* use", namely that Shakespeare "lived at a time when feudal thinking was being transformed into nationalism": "Otherwise put, the kind of quarrels among families that had come to a head in the Wars of the Roses were giving place to the growth of centralized, though limited monarchy, and the emergence of Britain as an *empire*" (Burke 2007, 7-8). Feeling securely grounded in the historic 'knowns' of Shakespeare's time, he then takes a theoretical leap into the aesthetic unknown where, presumably, Shakespeare's genius was germinating, and discovers something like the traces of spontaneous generation:

> I think he spontaneously saw both how complex a motive is and how to translate it into, if not a simplicity, at least a unified set of interrelationships. And whereas others might have added an adjective to a noun, or to a verb an adverb, he added to our lore a cluster of

[5] Burke's intense engagement with Shakespeare began in the 1920s and extended over half a century through the Great Depression and the Second World War and into the postwar era. His landmark reading of *Othello* appeared in 1951, but it was in the 1960s, a period of inordinate social and political unrest, that his method illustrated, in three of his most trenchant and influential readings, the fatalities of power in Shakespeare's political tragedies: "Shakespearean Persuasion: *Antony and Cleopatra*" (1964); "*Coriolanus* – and the Delights of Faction" (1966); "*King Lear*: Its Form and Psychosis" (1969). These essays are collected in Burke 2007.

[6] Thus, for example, with a characteristic and, to me at least, an endearing willingness to indulge second thoughts, he allows that the plays "do reveal a kind of imagination ultimately impinging upon modes of self-involvement that, as you prefer, could be called either suicidal or narcissistic. Such traits come to fruition, I feel, in plays as different as *Othello*, *Antony and Cleopatra*, and *Timon of Athens*" (Burke 2007, 4).

> persons. He knew, even more thoroughly than Plato, how any given idea would behave, when translated into terms of personality. (8)

Burke, an imaginative but loyal disciple of Aristotelian poetics and rhetoric, turns his attention to Shakespeare's plots, which reliably and entertainingly translated ideas into personalities. Infusing and complicating his Aristotelianism with Freudian insights into individual and social pathologies, Burke contends that Shakespeare's plays recognize and project whatever underlying socio-political anxieties – he calls them "psychoses" – might have motivated them. This is a theory he advances and develops, with a surprising amiability, in his "*King Lear*: Its Form and Psychosis". Recognizing that the coupling of form and psychosis seems too radical, even demented a notion to entertain, Burke suggests we "now try: '*King Lear*: What Is It About?'". The rephrasing, he hopes, will encourage us not to think about the play as being simply "'about' a foolish old king whose bad judgment got him into fatal difficulties" and to begin thinking about its plot "in ways whereby it can be shown to involve an underlying extra-literary 'psychosis', if there is such a thing as an underlying psychosis" (155). There is indeed such a thing, as Burke will take pains to demonstrate, not only in *King Lear* but in all the great Shakespearean dramas, including the comedies. (The absurd entanglements and ludicrous interlacing of human and faery worlds of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, for example, are motivated by a "Court psychosis" that Puckishly splits the form – and our sympathies – between "the courtly characters and the respectfully subservient 'mechanicals'" [180], between human and faery kingdoms)[7].

[7] In this late work, Burke is keen to establish that though the tenor of comedy, especially a comedy like *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, is designed to induce a "state of *total relaxation*", "the motive underlying its comic appeal (what I would call the 'psychosis' of the situation) was in dead earnest". To illustrate just how deadly, he compares the comedy to *Coriolanus*, whose psychosis reflects and tragically intensifies the "equally wide social gap between the courtly characters and the 'handicraft men' who are so seriously concerned with their plans to perform a play in the Duke's honor" (Burke 2007, 178-79). Both the tragic class oppositions at the heart of *Coriolanus* and the comic entanglements in which both the Court and merry mechanicals are embroiled in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*

In Burke's account *King Lear* is a play whose psychosis derives from "anxieties and disturbances" consequent upon the very idea of abdication, whose appeal, Burke speculates, overlaps "upon such motivational quandaries as are implicit in thoughts of retreat or surrender, with no reference whatever to parents and their offspring":

> For instance, any threat to one's self-esteem might find sympathetic response in the tragedy of a man whose mistakes had strongly forced upon him the fear of impotence, with a corresponding sense that many of his utterances might prove as powerless as the rage of senility or infancy. Might not the appeal of *King Lear*, so far as an extra-literary "psychosis" is concerned, begin in such feelings as many people have at the thought, far afield, that our nation must not give, like a weak old man, but should go on expending its treasure until, still young and vigorously assertive, we shall have torn apart any enemy, even if it be but a distant victim of our own choosing? (157)

As Burke almost sheepishly confesses, "it is but a step from drama to Dramatism" (156-57), his omnibus theory of the multiple, multivalent rhetorics of human culture that was indebted to Shakespeare's modeling and representation of the world as *theatrum mundi*, a stage on which is enacted, over and over and yet never exactly the same, the "play" – understood both as a construct and a series of expressive acts – of human life. "[O]nce you hit that center", Burke writes, "and know how to be thorough in developing outwards from it, or in tracking down its implications, you have *in principle* anticipated just about everything – and that's the recipe for Shakespeare" (8). Emerson was adamant that "[n]o recipe can be given for the making of a Shakespeare" (Emerson 2014, 119). Apparently a recipe can be given, and not just an approximate one either. According to Burke, it is precisely what the critic can and should feel compelled to provide if we are to identify "everything" that goes into the making of a Shakespeare play. Burke, having stumbled on that word, never abandons or regrets it; "recipe" recommends itself as a word suggesting that the materials

illustrate Shakespeare's "Humanistic" treatment of a "hierarchal psychosis" (184).

of drama are readily at hand, a matter of combining the formulas and motives of human action in their rightful, that is dramatically combustible (mentally or emotionally comestible?) proportions. In exemplary democratic fashion he selects a homely word to signify a method, at once palatable and purgative, of serving up to our hungry minds the *prima materia* of the human pageant[8].

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That Shakespeare is routinely invoked as the national dramaturg providing the scripts and *dramatis personae* for America's political and cultural stage would seem to confirm Whitman prediction that Shakespeare, "the cunning draughtsman of the passions", would be superseded by Shakespeare the prescient delineator of the 'reasons why' a constitutional republic is destined to abnegate and replace the *ancien régimes* of caste-bound societies. But Shakespeare's looming presence in the national psyche may also portend a somewhat different outcome, one in which Whitman's prophecy itself appears superannuated, given that politics and the passions now seem to have merged, one hopes not irreversibly, in the furors and paroxysms of class-inflected faction. The times arguably call for, if they do not exactly promote, another urgency, the need to attend to the "philosopher's Shakespeare"[9] who enthralled and instructed Melville. Melville extolled an altogether different American Shakespeare from the popular idol adored by "those mistaken souls, who dream of Shakespeare as a mere man of Richard-the-Third humps, and Macbeth daggers" (Melville 2014, 129). It was not such self-disfiguring disguises and lurid props, Melville reminds us, but "those deep far-away things in him; those

[8] Newstok notes that "in Shakespeare's period, 'recipe' meant a prescription-like formula for a medical concoction, a sense appropriately returning us to the medico-physiological basis of Aristotle's *catharsis* what was of enduring interest to Burke". He then goes on remark that recipe "might even hearken back to the disdain Socrates displays toward rhetoric as mere 'cookery' in the Gorgias [462b-466a], a kind of shadow of true medicine – a charge that Burke would have been eager to rebut" (Burke 2007, xxix).

[9] Stanley Cavell has been the most eloquent and influential exponent of the skeptical "philosopher's Shakespeare". See especially Cavell 1987. See also McGinn 2006.

occasional flashings-forth of the intuitive Truth in him; those short, quick probings at the very axis of reality; – these are the things that make Shakespeare, Shakespeare" (129).

These deep far-away things clustered around the very axis of reality are rarely, if ever apprehended, much less probed by the collective mind, which is generally satisfied by things close-by that are found on the surface, rather than hidden within the depths of reality. For Melville, the sublimity of Truth is gleaned through individual intuitions and the mind's "quick probings" that have the capacity to transfigure the realities they penetrate. Emerson had insisted that "[f]or executive faculty, for creation, Shakespeare [was] unique", "the subtilest of authors, and only just within the possibility of authorship" (Emerson 2014, 118). Imagining worlds and lives at "the farthest reach of subtlety compatible with an individual self" (118), the (American) Shakespeare Emerson salutes no longer insistently appears or even interests us as "a canary in the coal mine" (Shapiro 2020, 203), a harbinger as well as indicator of potentially explosive, incipiently transformative cultural change. He attracts our attention and ultimately compels our moral and spiritual allegiance as the creator, Harold Bloom insists the inventor, of the human. Bloom helpfully if tendentiously summarizes the two main, utterly divergent ways of reading Shakespeare – or as Bloom would and did say, the ways Shakespeare reads us. The first concentrates on Shakespeare primarily as "a cultural phenomenon, produced by sociopolitical urgencies". "In this view", Bloom alleges, "Shakespeare did not write Shakespeare – his plays were written by the social, political, and economic energies of his age". This is arrantly reductive but not that far off the mark. "The other way of exploring Shakespeare's continued supremacy", as Bloom describes it, "is rather more empirical: he has been universally judged to be a more adequate representer of the universe of fact than anyone else, before him or since" (Bloom 1998, 16).

Whether one accedes to Bloom's vision of Shakespeare's supremacy depends in large part on whether one agrees with, or even fully comprehends, his sense of fact. The universe of fact he invokes is constituted, along with strictly empirical data favored by historicist critics – dates, events and the broad social and political

movements they instantiate, statistical and circumstantial information about the lived reality of any particular time or person – out of less tangible moral and ontological facts, especially the fatal vagrancies of the will and heart and the blunt fact that we must die. In rebuffing the claims of historizing materialists with his own generous sense of fact, Bloom disarms resistance to the notion that Shakespeare "gives us more of the world most of us take to be fact" and thus makes more plausible his even more extravagant claim that to an extent we have still to acknowledge, Shakespeare "pragmatically reinvented us". Reinvention is a particularly American trope, especially when it comes to questions of identity, as in "Americans are always reinventing themselves", a formula for the opportunity America offers its citizenry that every schoolchild learns and, often to their cost, takes to heart. Shakespearean humanity anticipates and is perpetuated by this typically American desire and will to change, to become other or more than oneself. Or as asserted by Bloom: "What Shakespeare invents are ways of representing human changes, alterations not only caused by flaws and by decay but effected by the will as well, and by the will's temporal vulnerabilities" (2). Shakespeare envisioned and endowed his characters with a moral freedom never before experienced, foremost a freedom of self-determination previous literary characters, however original, hardly ever possessed, much less were allowed to exercise.

Following Dr Johnson, Bloom locates the grandeur and astonishing fecundity of Shakespeare's all-too-human/superhuman art in the number of these transformations, in his "diversity of persons": "No one, before or since Shakespeare, made so many separate selves" (1). Although this claim is made in exploring Shakespeare's universalism, it reflects an American preoccupation with the allure, but also the challenge of diversity, connecting as it does the notion of a changeable and changing selfhood with the social advantages and cultural splendors of difference, of *separate* selves each with their individualizing language, each intent on exercising their inalienable right to pursue their own sweet (or foul, as the case may be) will. Bloom, for whom separateness is the hallmark and guarantor of a genuine diversity, is most astonished by Shakespeare's prodigies, "heroic vitalists", as

he characterizes them, like Rosalind, Shylock, Iago, Lear, Macbeth, Cleopatra, characters who, in his most Emersonian evocation of new eras and ameliorations, Bloom credits with "the inauguration of personality as we have come to recognize it" (4).

Bloom spent the last decades of his extraordinary life as an antinomian critic expounding the audacities of Shakespearean characters, who are no longer featured players or protagonists in the classical or traditional sense of the term, but aboriginal beings who abound in "[c]harisma", with "an aura of the preternatural" (384). Citing "Hegel's fine observation that Shakespeare made his best characters 'free artists of themselves'", Bloom then pronounces that "[t]he freest of the free are Hamlet and Falstaff, because they are the most intelligent of Shakespeare's persons (or roles, if you prefer that word)" (271) and, as such, are "the fullest representations of human possibility in Shakespeare" (745). Bloom thus proposes – vehemently –

> that we know better what it is we mean when we speak of the personality of Hamlet as opposed to the personality of our best friend, or the personality of some favorite celebrity Shakespeare persuades us that we know something in Hamlet that is […] his principle of individuation, a recognizable identity whose evidence is his singularity of language, and yet not so much language as diction, a cognitive choice between words, a choice whose drive is always toward freedom […]. Like Falstaff, Hamlet implicitly defines personality as a mode of freedom, more of a matrix of freedom than a product of freedom. (427)

Such freedom is not, we are advised, particularly emancipatory. A dark ambivalence shadows Bloom's portraits of Shakespeare's heroic vitalists. The ambivalence is "both cognitive and affective" and is incarnated in Hamlet, but prepared for in Shylock, the first of Shakespeare's characters to warn us of the "abyss of inwardness": "the tenacious and justice-seeking Shylock essentially is a would-be slaughterer, and Shakespeare painfully persuades us that Portia, another delightful hypocrite, prevents an atrocity through her shrewdness" (11). We are thus persuaded of Hamlet's superior reality because Shakespeare has given Hamlet, "the least archaic role in all of Shakespeare" (385), both the intelligence and

freedom to confront "the truth, truth too intolerable for us to endure" (7). It is this confrontation with such an intolerable truth that ages Hamlet; he is older, Bloom hazards, than Falstaff, afflicted as he is with a "catastrophic consciousness of the spiritual disease of his world, which he has internalized, and which he does not wish to be called upon to remedy, if only because the true cause of his changeability is his drive toward freedom" (430).

Falstaff, fattened on pleasure, enamored of play and thus paradoxically, cognitively, the younger personality, enjoys and pursues another mode of freedom. It is a freedom coursing through "his torrent of language and laughter" and that is necessary for his "assaults the frontiers of what is possible" (Bloom 2017, 6). What is possible is always, to Sir Jack, more life. And what is required to satisfy life's hunger to extend the frontiers of the possible is less the freedom from – "from malice", from "the superego" and its moralisms (Bloom 1998, 313) – as much as the freedom to – primarily the freedom to play. "The idea of *play* is as central to Falstaff as the idea of *the play* is to Hamlet", Bloom writes, then quickly adds, as if to eliminate any confusion about the kinds of vitality, consciousness and freedom each player embodies and, in his own way, perfects: "These are not the same idea: Falstaff is infinitely more playful than Hamlet, and the prince is far more theatrical than the fat knight" (401). But for both, as for Bloom, as for Burke, the play is the thing:

> "Play out the play!" Falstaff cries to Hal; "I have much to say in the behalf of that Falstaff". "Suit the action to the word, the word to the action", Hamlet admonishes the Player King. "I charge you, O men, for the love you bear to women", Rosalind adroitly pleads, "that between you and the women the play may please". The voice in all three, at just that moment, is as close as Shakespeare ever will come to letting us hear the voice of William Shakespeare himself. (225)

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If there is something patently "hyperbolical" in Bloom's claims (his own word for those who would read him only in terms of his extravagances [726]) and something palpably, at times worryingly

overwrought in the American idolatry of Shakespeare as the "man of men, […] who […] planted the standard of humanity some furlongs forward into Chaos" (Emerson 2014, 121), it did not go unnoticed by Americans themselves. T. S. Eliot, whose Prufrock knows he is not Hamlet nor is meant to be, declared, with a sense of exasperation he can barely conceal, that *Hamlet* was a failure that did not so much advance on Chaos as succumb to it. Here again it would seem that it is facts themselves that are in dispute. Eliot wonders that no one has sufficiently remarked that "Hamlet (the man) is dominated by an emotion which is inexpressible, because it is in *excess* of the facts as they appear" (Eliot 2014, 382). The facts, such as they are, at least to Eliot, are these: Hamlet is overwhelmed by a "disgust" with his mother, a disgust that "envelops and exceeds her" (383). Eliot's Hamlet is not Bloom's intellectual adventurer into the abyss of inwardness, that ontological vortex in which seeing and being, playing and acting are so perilously interfused. He is the febrile brainchild of a Shakespeare writing "under compulsion of" some "inexpressibly horrible" experience (383-84), a Shakespeare who struggles and fails to find an objective correlative for a horrendous experience, the actual nature of which we can only surmise.

I revisit this dispute not to resolve it but to draw attention to what Eliot claims *Hamlet* offers in the place of an objective corrective – a "buffoonery of an emotion which can find no outlet in action" (383) or in the dramatist's verbal art. Yet Eliot himself knew and unleashed the power of buffoonery to express and not simply lampoon unfathomable emotion, as many of the poems collected in *Inventions of a March Hare* and the characteristically hangdog verses of "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" and its companion poems attest. In such moments of high clowning, as well as in the verbal hijinks of *Old Possum's Book of Practical Cats*, Eliot secured his popular appeal as an American humorist, a dimension of his artistic personality that faded virtually to extinction in his later paeans to high culture and its churches. The innate humor lurking in excessive or outsized emotion is familiar to American popular audiences in the form of the tall tale and its larger than life folk heroes like Paul Bunyan and Pecos Bill, forms and figures that come naturally to a people who, as Melville

manfully boasts, "in most […] things out-do as well as out-brag the world" (Melville 2014, 132). In the free and easy, sometimes outlandish fantasies circulating through and enlivening popular culture, Shakespearean excesses in word, deed or emotion are not regarded as signs of artistic failure; on the contrary they provide an outlet for the crude vitalism and rude invention encouraged and rewarded, indeed demanded by the rough and ready culture of a society for whom the memory of the wilderness is quite recent and painfully sharp. What Eliot dismissed as a mere "buffoonery of emotion" could even be sublimated and spiritualized into what Melville, peering into the dark recesses of Hawthorne's twice-told tales, called a "religion of mirth" (126), a peculiarly American creed, touched as it is with "Puritanic gloom" and suffused with that "great power of blackness" that "derives its force from its appeals to that Calvinistic sense of Innate Depravity and Original Sin, from whose visitations, in some shape or other, no deeply thinking mind is always and wholly free" (128).

Two seemingly antithetical but deeply allied minds, both mordant American humorists steeped in the doctrine of "Original Sin", exemplify American ingenuity in accommodating these visitations through Shakespearean "buffooneries of emotion", buffooneries enacted, witnessed or denounced. The first "deeply thinking", but superficially ingenuous mind belongs to Mark Twain, who relished parodying Shakespearean plots, characters and language, never to greater, more hilarious effect than the Shakespearean revival (mis)conceived and staged by the conning duke and king in *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. For an encore to this night of dazzling entertainment the duke gamely pieces together fragments of Hamlet's famous soliloquy, musings on the afterlife that are interspersed with Macbeth's equally lugubrious musings on life's calamities. The opening alerts us to the grim fun ahead:

> To be, or not to be; that is the bare bodkin
> That makes calamity of so long life;
> For who would fardels bear, till Birnam Wood do come to Dunsinane,
> But that the fear of something after death
> Murders the innocent sleep,

> Great nature's second course,
> And makes us rather sling the arrows of outrageous fortune
> Than fly to others that we know not of. (Twain 1958, 115)[10]

These scrambled lines never attract the audience they seek, and may in fact deserve; the show is a flop, but the duke, a quick study, decides on a very different entertainment the following evening, replacing Shakespearean set pieces with the spectacle of the king appearing before a now full house "a-prancing out on all fours, naked" (127). No matter, since the best audience for the duke's Shakespearean pastiche is surely Huck himself, who seems to have committed the bowdlerized soliloquy to memory. He may not recognize the lines as a nonsensical mishmash, but that does not mean that they do not have their intended effect, especially if we connect them to what we might call Huck's "psychosis", a child's (but hardly childish) dread of isolation intensified by an even greater dread of finding oneself in the company of "sivilized" saints (23). This split consciousness, born of Huck's dawning awareness of himself as inviolably separate and other, manifests itself at the very beginning of the novel when, after being "pecked at" by the pious Miss Watson about the "bad place" where misbehaving miscreants like himself are destined to go unless he behaves (4),

[10] For your enjoyment, here is that delirious pastiche in its entirety: "To be, or not to be; that is the bare bodkin / That makes calamity of so long life; / For who would fardels bear, till Birnam Wood do come to Dunsinane, / But that the fear of something after death / Murders the innocent sleep, / Great nature's second course, / And makes us rather sling the arrows of outrageous fortune / Than fly to others that we know not of. / There's the respect must give us pause: / Wake Duncan with thy knocking! I would thou couldst; / For who would bear the whips and scorns of time, / The oppressor's wrong, the proud man's contumely, / The law's delay, and the quietus which his pangs might take, / In the dead waste and middle of the night, when churchyards yawn / In customary suits of solemn black, / But that the undiscovered country from whose bourne no traveler returns, / Breathes forth contagion on the world, / And thus the native hue of resolution, like the poor cat i' the adage, / Is sicklied o'er with care, / And all the clouds that lowered o'er our housetops, / With this regard their currents turn awry, / And lose the name of action. / 'Tis a consummation devoutly to be wished. But soft you, the fair Ophelia: / Ope not thy ponderous and marble jaws, / But get thee to a nunnery – go!" (Twain 1958, 115-16).

Huck gives his mind over to the night's darkness to which he feels his feelings and behavior have condemned him:

> I felt so lonesome I most wished I was dead. The stars were shining, and the leaves rustled in the woods ever so mournful; and I heard an owl, away off, who-whooing about somebody that was dead, and a whippowill and a dog crying about somebody that was going to die; and the wind was trying to whisper something to me and I couldn't make out what it was, and so it made the cold shivers run over me. Then away out in the woods I heard that kind of a sound that a ghost makes when it wants to tell about something that's on its mind and can't make itself understood, and so can't rest easy in its grave and has to go about that way every night grieving. I got so down-hearted and scared, I did wish I had some company. (5)

Huck is never more himself, since he is never more alone, than as a pint-sized American Hamlet, haunted by a ghost eager to make itself understood. The ghost, we might say, is a specter of his own nascent moral consciousness burdened, as the ghost is, by incommunicable but lacerating grief. Grief for what? The loss of innocence perhaps, or the loss of faith in "sivilization", which ultimately are the same loss. The unquiet rustlings of the night echo his disquieting apprehension of such losses and the death they portend. These fardels become easier to bear, however, when lightened by Huck's own guileless religion of mirth, his best and perhaps only defense upon the darkness within as well as outside him, including and especially the black infamy of slavery. But Huck is a child and his defenses are unavailing against the brute social and political facts of antebellum America, facts so obdurate and unconquerable as to make his planned escape to the Territory beyond the reach of all "sivilizing" people and forces seem what it actually is – a childish fantasy.

A more adult, contemporary and decidedly militant Shakespearean burlesque is Mary McCarthy's assault on "General Macbeth" as "[a] commonplace man who talks in commonplaces, a golfer, one might guess, on the Scottish fairways" (McCarthy 2014, 531). In McCarthy's moral dissection of the ambitious Thane of Glamis, Macbeth is shown up as the Shakespearean hero who most corresponds to an American "bourgeois type", "a murderous

Babbitt" (531). She begins by protesting that Macbeth has been credited, falsely and to the detriment of genuine visionaries, with imagination, while on the contrary his actions betray the baleful literal-mindedness and pettiness of a middle-class opportunist. McCarthy allows that Macbeth is "impressionable" (531); he is, after all, particularly susceptible to the equivocating prophecies of the three witches, predictions that amuse Banquo but which Macbeth credulously accepts. But a truly "reflective" mind, McCarthy insists, "might wonder how fate would spin her plot", whereas "Macbeth does not trust to fate; that is, to the unknown, the mystery of things; he trusts only to a known quantity – himself – to put the prophecy into action. In short, he has no faith, which requires imagination. He is literal-minded; that, in a word, is his tragedy" (531).

McCarthy parses that word and the tragedy that ensues from it in all its variations, remarking how literal-minded Macbeth cannot contain his excitement at the promised 'promotion' to king and sends on a letter to his wife "like a businessman briefing an associate on a piece of good news for the firm" (532). McCarthy ridicules him even here as a trepidant executive, a "buck-passer", "ready to fix responsibility on a subordinate" (537), as he does in incriminating the drunken chamberlains for Duncan's death. He is expert at providing himself public cover, justifying his actions in bombastic utterances, subtly and horribly converting poetry into declamations that pitch the entire play "to the demons' shriek of hyperbole" (540). In all these ways, McCarthy concludes, *Macbeth* shows us "life in the cave" (540). For McCarthy, Macbeth's reversion to a primeval conception of nature and human society found its contemporary counterpart in "the return of the irrational in the Fascist nightmare and its fear of new specters in the form of Communism, Socialism, etc." (540). It is thus not brooding Hamlet, but "bloodstained Macbeth" who seems to her "the most 'modern'" of Shakespeare's characters, "the only one you could transpose into contemporary battle dress or sport shirt and slacks" (540). So attired, Macbeth's last and most morally depraved contemporary avatar is the "churchgoer", "indifferent to religion, to the categorical imperative of any group of principles that be held to stand above and govern human behavior" (540-41).

Bloodstained or less murderously ambitious Babbitts may be indifferent or outright hostile to any categorical imperative at odds with their craving for social success or supremacy, but America is also the land of the non-conforming, the dissident, the *free*. For such American originals, the nation's founding principles – life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness – possess tangible moral weight and reference and impose certain deeply felt obligations, including the obligation to oneself. These democratic ideals were never more exuberantly defined and defended, but also more ardently scrutinized, than in classical Hollywood cinema, especially in the comedies of its golden age. Two anxieties in particular shadowed and thus potentially jeopardized the human and historical viability of these ideals. One we might call the "love psychosis", the fear, endemic to hard times, that love is an economic liability and happiness is best pursued and more likely to be realized apart or in spite of marriage. The other we might deem the "class psychosis", a disturbance or fracturing of class identity symbolized in the runaway heiress and dizzy dame, defectors from the upper class who risked their personal and even mental safety in venturing beyond the prescribed bounds, the safety and sanctimony, of conformity. These "psychoses" threatened to undermine faith in, and moral allegiance to, the life, liberty and authorized pursuits of happiness that constitute America's foundational principles and categorical imperatives.

Here, too, Shakespeare provided the characters and the dramatic templates, the "recipe", as Burke might say, for acknowledging and dramatically purging the psychoses spawned by a world-wide Depression and the rise of totalitarian regimes that were undermining trust in the viability of democratic institutions. Stanley Cavell puzzled "why it was only in 1934, and in America of all places, that the Shakespearean structure surfaced again, if not quite on the stage" (Cavell 1981, 19), to give birth to a socially and philosophically questioning, self-revising and indisputably native genre – the comedy of remarriage. Cavell points to the historical confluence of transformative social forces: "the technology and the achievement of sound movies, the existence of certain women of a certain age, a problematic of marriage established in certain segments of the history of theater" (28). Remarriage thus became a

trope for reaffirming but also reimagining social bonds between the sexes and the classes from which they came and hoped either to reform or escape. The genre of remarriage reached its apogee in films like Frank Capra's *It Happened One Night*, a Depression era fairy tale that tallied, in a uniquely American accounting, what love, among other necessary commodities, actually cost; Howard Hawks' *Bringing Up Baby*, a zany burlesque of renegade instincts (and loose leopards) in the "green world" of Connecticut; and in the dazzlingly ingenious farces of Preston Sturges. Sturges, as demonstrated in an essay in this volume, was brilliantly inventive in transposing Shakespearean comic situations and predicaments, especially the perplexities of being twinned or its psychological equivalent – divided yet joined in feeling, motives or objectives – into an American context, a transposition that meant not just a change in terrain, but a transvaluation of social, moral and emotional outlook. In Sturges's canny Americanization of Shakespearean plots and plotters, the pursuit and achievement of happiness rather than social harmony and comity became the end terms of comedy's contrivances and mystifications, its frantic deceptions and social maneuverings.

America also proved hospitable to more malign but equally entertaining master manipulators schooled in Shakespearean schemes and connivances, like the fiendish, manipulative and hyper-theatrical Frank Underwood of *House of Cards*, a Shakespearean prodigy of evil concocted out of a grotesque coupling of Macbeth and southern ribs (a recipe Burke might have savored). In the pantheon of charismatic demons incubated and nourished in American popular entertainments we might add Don Corleone, an actual, if lovable monster who actually dies pretending to be one to amuse (although he only succeeds in terrifying) his grandson, and Tony Soprano, the one the more dangerous the quieter he becomes, the other volatile and clamorous, both ruthless in conducting family business. Both are outsized Shakespearean personalities playing signature roles in America's dark romance with the twisted codes and criminality of the Italian mob. Then there are the merchants of vice like Walter White, the black genius of *Breaking Bad* (whose Shakespearean DNA, along with Frank Underwood's, is anatomized within this

volume), or *Deadwood*'s Al Swearengen, the real life architect and kingpin of a thriving gambling and prostitution emporium in historic Deadwood whose thriving trade in drink, cards and flesh proved instrumental in the annexation of the Dakota territory. The casting of Ian McShane, an English actor with RADA training, to play the American-born Swearengen continues the tradition of English actors impersonating the accent and speech patterns as well as the tawdry morals of American builders of family and commercial empires, suggesting the brisk and fertile transatlantic translation of Old World Shakespearean characters (and character actors) into New World villains with the wilderness in their blood.

The first native American actor who seemed the rightful inheritor, but also transformer of the Shakespearean legacy was Edwin Booth, to whom we owe our "modern" Hamlet, dressed in black and melancholic. His fame and stature are forever shadowed by the infamy of his brother, John Wilkes, the assassin of President Lincoln. Both are the central figures of David Stacton's *The Judges of the Secret Court*, the title itself evoking American paranoia towards its own juridical institutions, whether constituted as legal or moral courts of conscience. The brothers are creatures of the theater for whom Shakespeare not only represents but comprises "the universe of fact". The world for them is but a stage and the stage a world on which they have been born – doomed? – to perform, albeit with different levels of skill. The least skillful actor is the assassin; he is also, as Mary McCarthy might say, the literalist. In a near-faultless illustration of Burkean dramatism, John Wilkes, in preparing for his murderous assault, assembles all the necessary ingredients of the dramatic recipe suitable for his chosen role as "the booted avenger":

> It seemed altogether natural, therefore, to pack a false beard, a dark moustache, a wig, a plaid muffler and a make-up pencil, for wrinkles and lines of anxiety, should those be called for. […]
> There remained only the choice of some phrase appropriate to the action. This was a serious matter, and Shakespeare was the source there. Unfortunately he could not think of anything from *Julius Caesar*, *Richard II*, *Richard III*, or *King Lear*, the only Shakespeare he really knew. The immortal assassination line in *Caesar* unfortunately belongs to Caesar. (Stacton 2011, 43)

An actor who knows he is only as good as his lines, John Wilkes combs his memory for a striking Shakespearean phrase to make his assassin's bullet fatally eloquent. He finally decides that "if words were to have any dignity, they must be in Latin. They must have a certain imprimatur, if that was the word" (43). Not exactly the right word, but no matter, since the audience in attendance at the Ford's Theater never hear his vaunted lines of justification, "*Sic semper tyrannis*", and in fact initially believe this intruder on the stage to be "a character from some other play" who "blundered into this one" (55). The last impression made by the actor who envisioned himself as a Great Hero is that of a "maimed and crazy" supporting player, dressed as a slave driver and limping like a toad, making a clumsy, ignominious exit. In his flight to the (presumed) safety of the South, Booth, incorrigibly theatrical and now delirious from the sepsis emanating from the injury he sustained in leaping onto the stage, conceives a new part for himself. No longer the Great Hero, he will shine as the Great Sinner impressing the world with the enormity of his sins. Booth ransacks his memory for Shakespearean speeches that capture the pathos of defeat, finally settling on the lines possessing the desired Shakespearean imprimatur:

> All I want, he would say, is *a grave*.
> *A little little grave, an obscure grave*.
> He had always been adept at pathos. (134)

But as John Wilkes realizes when he awakens from his delirium, the "lines" are "from the wrong play": "They are spoken by Richard II, before he is betrayed by the pretended clemency of Bolingbroke into giving himself up, not by Richard III" (134). Buffoonery of emotion has found its objective correlative.

But Stacton does not end his account, nor should we our survey, with such tragic blunders, grotesque miscasting, scrambled lines and roles. The figure brought and arraigned before the Judges of the Secret Court, a uniquely American institution of moral inquisition, at the beginning and conclusion of Stacton's historically based fiction is Edwin Booth. His personal and family life coalesce into an affecting "gaslit parable" in which he is, perennially, the

Hamlet doomed to set things right. He accepts the burden of that role, resolving that "having lost spontaneous laughter, like Hamlet himself, he could at least be jesting gay" (238). His capacity for such doleful humor helps exalts Edwin to "the palladium of the American arts, those arts they [Americans] had no time for, and regarded with suspicion" (240). That American audiences nonetheless found time for Edwin and for the Shakespearean art he incarnated was due, Stacton advises, to there being

> something gentle in Edwin, and at the same time something enormously strong, which made him acceptable. Perhaps it was dignity. Or perhaps it was that he was a sort of talisman, that he had to live with something that they knew they should remember, and yet, being human and every day, quite sensibly forgot. (241)

National poet, seer, and dramaturg, American Shakespeare's last but not final role, we might hazard, was to act as a sort of national talisman, a reminder of something to be remembered, but also what Americans tend, perhaps sensibly, perhaps not, to forget. That something is encompassed, positively but ineffably, by the democratic ideals in danger of being lost or forgotten among the expediencies and temporizing moralities of a citizenry at once jealous and heedless of its freedoms. That something is encompassed, negatively but palpably, in Edwin's recognition that, with Hamlet dead, "[t]he world belongs to Fortinbras" (240). His recognition carries with it a judgment against the universe of facts, of things as they are. But things as they are susceptible to change, a possibility that the American Shakespeare, in his various avatars, but especially as the Bard of new eras and ameliorations, represents.

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