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STUART SILLARS

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Contents

List of Illustrations vii
Author's Note ix

1. Shakespeare the Victorian 1
2. Scholarship, Editing, and Criticism 19
3. Performance 51
4. Music and Visual Art 79
5. Shakespeare, the Novel, and Poetry 105
6. Searching for Shakespeare: Poems, Lives, and Portraits 133
7. Shakespeare beyond Shakespeare 157
8. Last Years 173

Chronology 187
Further Reading 195
Index 205

List of Illustrations

Except where otherwise noted, all images are from the author's collection.

1.1 The interior of the Stratford Pavilion, tercentenary celebrations, *Illustrated London News*, 1864. 5

1.2 'Exhibition of Shakspeare Pictures and Relics in the Townhall', *Illustrated London News*, 1864. 8

1.3 Lead-glazed earthenware figure of Shakespeare, made in Staffordshire at about the start of the Victorian period. © Victoria and Albert Museum, London 9

2.1 Title page to *Julius Caesar* from Charles Knight's *Pictorial Shakspere*, 1838–43. 30

2.2 Page from *King John*, edited by Howard Staunton and illustrated by John Gilbert, 1856–60. 35

2.3 Title page to *All's Well That Ends Well* from John Dicks' *Complete Works of Shakspere*, 1864. 37

2.4 Questions from the Oxford and Cambridge edition of *As You Like It*, 1884. 42

3.1 Architects' drawings of the Shakespeare Memorial Theatre, Stratford-upon-Avon, from *The Building News*, 22 September 1876. 57

3.2 Louis Haghe: *Mr Macready as Hotspur*, mid-1840s. © Trustees of the British Museum 59

3.3 'In Fairyland', by R. Caton Woodville, a lithograph dating from 1885. 64

3.4 *The Theatrical Times*, 8 January 1849, with an anonymous wood-engraving of Mrs W. Daly as the Nurse from *Romeo and Juliet*. © Trustees of the British Museum 68

3.5 Review of Wilson Barrett as Hamlet, *The Illustrated Sporting and Dramatic News*, 25 October 1884. 70

4.1 William Quiller Orchardson, engraved by J. C. Armytage: *Falstaff, Hal and Poins*, in Knight's 'Imperial Shakespeare', 1873–6. 96

4.2 Marcus Stone, engraved by W. Ridgway: *Lear and Cordelia*, in Knight's 'Imperial Shakespeare', 1873–6. 97

4.3 Frank Dicksee, engraved by J. M. Johnstone: *Othello and Desdemona*, 1890–1.
© Trustees of the British Museum 98

4.4 C. R. Leslie: *Olivia*, from Charles Heath's *Shakespeare's Heroines*, 1848. 100

4.5 Martin Laroche: Photograph of Ellen Tree and Drinkwater Meadows in the garden scene from *Richard II*, c. 1857.
© Victoria and Albert Museum, London 102

6.1 W. E. Frost, engraved by P. Lightfoot: *Disarming of Cupid* (Sonnet CLIV) 140

6.2 William Russell Sedgefield: Stereoscopic photograph of Shakespeare's Birthplace.
© Victoria and Albert Museum, London 150

8.1 Page-opening from Collins' *Shakespeare* of 1900, with a photograph of Ellen Terry as Imogen and the opening of *Cymbeline*. 172

Author's Note

The Shakespearian edifice that the Victorians constructed for themselves was extensive, and had many mansions. Any attempt to do it justice in a small introductory volume will inevitably be selective, and for the areas that this one does not cover I would point readers to the Further Reading section with which it concludes, which gives advice on some of the more specialized areas of the subject that space has excluded here. After long and careful thought and discussion with the series editors, I have decided to return to the original policy of the series and not include footnotes, but instead to make sources clear in the text and then give full details with the other volumes suggested for further study. The illustrations have been selected to present a representative range of visual treatments of Shakespeare from the period, and also as far as possible for their relative absence from published sources. Most of the paintings referred to in Chapter 4 can be easily seen on the websites of the relevant galleries; consequently, images of contemporary engravings or of less familiar works have been included here.

A particular problem when writing about the Victorians lies in the choice of words that both reflect the usages of the time and remain clear to readers of the present day. For names of the plays and the characters I have retained earlier usages, with *2 Henry VI* rather than *The First Part of the Contention*, Falstaff not Oldcastle, and Imogen not Innogen. To reflect today's thinking I have used the word 'actor' for performers of both gender and, although the Victorians were quite happy about 'femininity', I have opted for the perhaps less contentious 'femaleness'. That said, I have retained stage names such as 'Mrs Patrick Campbell'. Since Henry Irving, Beerbohm Tree, and William Poel all devised their own stage names, it seemed ungracious to deny that right to their female partners—most particularly since a declaration of marriage was presumably an important statement of respectability of a kind as yet not always conferred on someone using the deeply ambivalent term 'actress' to describe her occupation.

Any work of this kind inevitably depends on the help of others, and it is a pleasure here to thank those who have contributed generously of their time and expertise. I am especially grateful to Stanley Wells and Peter Holland, initially for inviting me to write this book and subsequently for their guidance and kindness during its gestation. The poet and critic Clive Wilmer showed great kindness in helping the discussion of Ruskin and Shakespeare. As always, the librarians of the Rare Books Room, Cambridge University Library, were of very great assistance. In Oxford, Jacqueline Baker gave enthusiastic support from the outset, and Rosie Chambers oversaw the production process with great efficiency. Susan Frampton copy-edited the text with precision, tact, and patience. To them all, I offer my sincere thanks, grateful for the pleasure and privilege of working with skilled professionals. For all errors, inaccuracies, and infelicities that remain, however, I take sole responsibility.

1

Shakespeare the Victorian

Many months before April 1864, local worthies and the great and good began planning how to celebrate with due decorum the tercentenary of Shakespeare's birth. Preparations were as extensive and methodical as every other Victorian venture, typifying the age's concern for propriety and order. When the eventful date arrived, the festivities themselves were equally revealing: to the later onlooker, they are a formidable, inclusive lens through which the period's construction of Shakespeare is refracted. That the plays themselves occupied only a small part of the celebrations, enfolded as they were within banquets, excursions, sermons, dances and concerts, the organisation and physical location of which reflected civic pride and due observance of social rank, makes them an immediate representative sample of the Victorian creation of what *Punch*, the comic magazine founded in the early years of the period, called 'Shakespeareanity'. That scholarly activities—lectures, publications, editions—were conspicuously absent from the celebrations evidences a division between critical endeavours and those of the stage and wider society, a separation remaining largely unbridged throughout the period.

On 23 April, the Stratford festivities began, not with a performance of a play but with a celebratory banquet and firework display; it was clear from this that, while Shakespeare was being celebrated, the celebrations themselves would be wholly Victorian in nature. The original scheme had been that the second evening would be the climax of the celebrations, but what transpired was not quite what had been planned. The Stratford committee, headed by the local

brewing magnate and Shakespearian amateur Edward Flower, and composed of other civic dignitaries, had wanted a performance of *Hamlet*. But who should play the prince? Charles Kean, having completed his tenure at the Princess's Theatre, had departed for a tour of Australia, and had in any case been far from successful in the role. Samuel Phelps, famed for his Hamlet and innovative in his productions when managing Sadler's Wells in the 1840s and 50s, was now widely considered old-fashioned in his declamatory style. To many, his successor was Charles Albert Fechter, of whose début in the role the *Athenaeum* (23 March 1861) simply asserted 'Mr Fechter does not act; he is Hamlet'. In a tradition not uncommon among committees, both actors were invited. Phelps, already furious with Fechter, withdrew; Fechter, after promising faithfully to perform, pulled out much later.

What might seem an outbreak of offstage histrionics was a reflection of a larger uncertainty in the theatre at the time. Phelps's time had passed; Kean's tenure at the Princess's, where elaborate scenery was as important as personal performance, had ended in 1859. In the mid-1860s the theatre lacked a single dominant power. Fechter came close, but his popularity was limited for many by his nationality: of Anglo-German descent, he was brought up in France, where he established his reputation before coming to England. There were many other figures, but no outstanding leader: it was not until the 1880s that Henry Irving would emerge as the eminent tragedian, in the process making the profession respectable and becoming the first theatrical knight.

In an atmosphere of mingled relief and smug satisfaction that the Frenchman would be both unsuitable and untrustworthy, a double bill of *The Comedy of Errors* and *Romeo and Juliet* was given on the 27th. Such yoking together of tragedy and comedy, or even the inclusion of two or three quite different plays, was by no means unusual. The idea of a single play being the focus of an evening's theatre-going was as yet rare, developing a little later in the era of much larger theatres with associated bars and restaurants, and the longer intervals demanded by changes of ever more complex scenery. The evening also typified earlier production styles in using the same scenery for both plays—the sets and props for *Romeo* that had been used a few days before at the Princess's Theatre. In the comedy, the

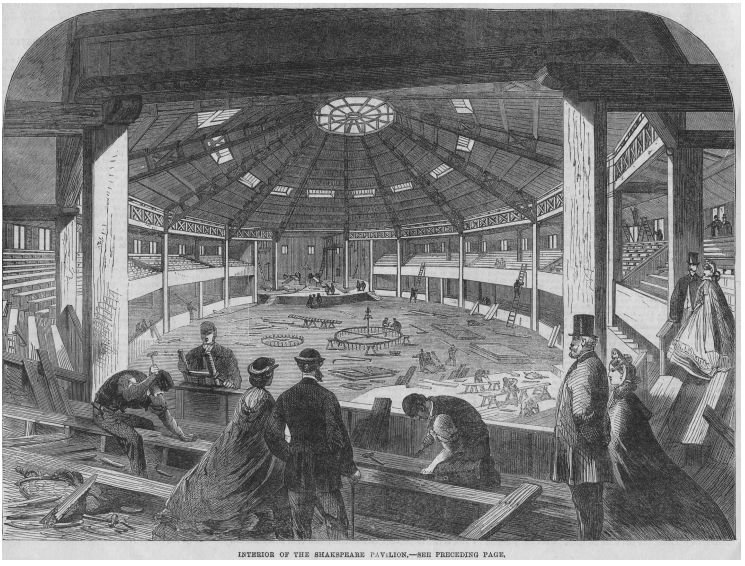
two Dromios were played by actors celebrated for the roles, the Brothers Webb, identical twins who gave the performance something of the quality of a Victorian circus. In the tragedy, as Juliet the French actress Stella Colas was generally thought beautiful in appearance but incomprehensible in diction; as Romeo, J. Nelson provided matching home-grown inadequacy, and it was left to George Vining as Mercutio and Mrs Henry Marston as the Nurse to carry the performance, to the general approval of the capacity audience of 3,000. Unusually for the period, it used the revision of the text by David Garrick in which Juliet recovers briefly to exchange final vows with Romeo. A century earlier this had been a great success, and Benjamin Wilson had painted the recovery scene being played by Garrick and George Anne Bellamy. Now, though, it was seen by many as unfashionable and by some as an inappropriate tampering with Shakespeare's text, the pursuit of the elusive authoritative original forms of the plays being a constant concern for scholars, editors, and some, though by no means all, performers.

Textual choices apart, both productions reflected the state of the theatre, its performers and its audiences, at the centre of Victoria's reign. The inclusion of foreign actors, either using their own language or speaking the parts with heavy accents, was frequent in London, balanced by visits of English actors to Europe, America or, in the case of the Keans, Australia. That a major female performer appeared under the name of 'Mrs Henry Marston' suggests the status of the actress at a time before individual identity was established by later women actors, notably Ellen Terry. A similar uncertainty of station was shown by Helen Faucit who, celebrated as Juliet and other major Shakespearian roles in the 1840s, and prized for her tenderness and womanly grace as Imogen, had in 1851 married the literary scholar Theodore Martin, and had increasingly moved away from the stage in consequence. She took no part in the tercentenary celebrations, only performing once at Stratford when, in 1879, she played Beatrice in *Much Ado About Nothing* in the recently completed Shakespeare Memorial Theatre.

The evening before the climactic double bill, *Twelfth Night* had been performed, followed by a more recent comic piece, *My Aunt's Advice*. Both were given by the company of the Theatre Royal, Haymarket, under the direction of its manager John Baldwin

Buckstone, one of a small but significant body of actor-managers whose companies balanced Shakespeare against more popular contemporary pieces in the somewhat precarious business of theatrical management. Buckstone took the role in which he was celebrated, Sir Andrew Aguecheek, with other members of his company in a reprise of their Haymarket roles. The Haymarket was one of many smaller theatres competing for audiences in the century's middle years. The theatre itself, built to a design by John Nash in 1821, had been remodelled in the succeeding decades, most notably in the shortening of the forestage, widening of the proscenium and the removal of proscenium doors to reflect changes in performance style. What was performed was also significant: the Haymarket had been one of the earliest theatres to challenge the restrictions on serious drama in theatres other than Drury Lane and Covent Garden, and was given a special licence for such productions before the 1843 Act allowed them in all theatres. Despite this, it was outside the narrow area of fashionable London, described in the 1850s as 'uncompromisingly in the foreign quarter' yet still 'generally acknowledged to be one of the best playhouses in London'. In design, repertoire, location and reputation, it was representative of the state of theatrical presentation in the middle years of Victoria's reign.

The setting of all these productions was a wooden Pavilion, specially constructed on the meadows beside the River Avon. In its design and the uses to which it was put it presented a forceful emblem of the place of Shakespeare in Victorian society (see Illustration 1.1). The building was a twelve-sided structure with two stages facing each other, one used for theatrical performances, the other as a space for aristocratic dining or, with part of its dais removed to form an orchestra pit, for choral-orchestral concerts. The auditorium, at floor level and in a gallery, offered seating of various kinds at different prices, from the silk-and-velvet chairs before the stage to the wooden benches of the higher galleries. This sharp demarcation of rank through differences in price reflected practice in London and in regional theatres housing touring companies, and the repertory companies of theatres built as part of the emerging civic identities of the industrial north. The building was essentially a physical embodiment of Victorian society, its structures of rank and its cultural forms, with Shakespeare's plays in a firm, but not dominant, position within them.



1.1 The interior of the Stratford Pavilion under construction for the tercentenary celebrations. The stage is in the distance, seen from the gallery where visitors could pay to see the opening banquet in progress; that the figures shown represent three clear layers of Victorian society is suggestive of the event's inclusiveness, but also its strict social divisions.

That it was a temporary rather than a permanent structure, like the rotunda built by Garrick for his celebrations nearly a century before, was further suggestive of the place of Shakespeare and the theatre in the national psyche: the Bard was a figure of national importance, but not one whose works were deserving of a permanent, still less a nationally supported, place of performance.

This reflects an ambivalence seen throughout the tercentenary celebrations, and the larger society they represent. Many were passionate in their support of the theatre and Shakespeare's place in performance. John Ruskin, the 'sage of Denmark Hill', who wrote and lectured profusely about art, society, and the need to return to a proper estimation of the working man, found it an essential means of combining entertainment with education, both aesthetic and moral. Others were less enthusiastic. The novelist and poet Thomas Hardy declined to contribute to the fund to build the Shakespeare Memorial

Theatre, saying that he valued Shakespeare as a man and a thinker, not a dramatist. Throughout the period, indeed, writers discussed Shakespeare as a moral guide rather than a practising poet and playwright. Thus the celebrations in Stratford and London were largely intended to mark the centenary of a great thinker, a great Englishman whose gifts were divinely inspired, so that performances of the plays, though important, were only one part of the celebrations.

To reflect this, the pavilion was the site of several other events during the celebrations. In the afternoon of 25 April Handel's *Messiah* was performed, with an amateur chorus of 500. Above all others, this was the work which enshrined the musical taste and practice of establishment England, its composer, forgiven for being of German origin by his long residence in London, the musician whose place in the public imagination was rivalled only by Mendelssohn. *Messiah*, held without question as his greatest work, had been performed annually by many of the music festivals that proliferated in the nineteenth century throughout the country. There is an important parallel with Shakespeare here. Just as Handel represented an ideal Englishness in music, so the plays were seen as something available for all, and the performance of the oratorio on the platform at the opposite end of the pavilion to its acting stage nicely presents this balance of cultural identities. In the evening of the same day there was a concert of music associated with Shakespeare's works, with items by the eighteenth-century composer Thomas Arne, and a specially composed overture, albeit not related to Shakespeare, by the conductor Alfred Mellon. Alongside them were important European compositions: Beethoven's *Coriolan* overture, pieces by Verdi, and Schubert's 'To Silvia', the song from *The Two Gentlemen*—a reminder of the international nature of much Victorian music-making, and the appreciation given to operatic and vocal settings by major European composers. This did not mean that native composers were unimportant; rather, they were regarded in a different light. Alfred Mellon was representative of a little-known and today almost totally forgotten group of musicians who composed, arranged, conducted, and played in the theatres of the period, their music aimed to reflect the mood of performances and, in consequence, as ephemeral as it was fitting.

Although standing at its centre, the pavilion was only one of the focal points of the Stratford celebrations. They began on the 23rd with a procession to the site proposed for a national monument to Shakespeare, headed by the Tercentenary Committee, an embodiment of the Victorian love of committees, rituals, and monuments that both made the tercentenary celebration possible and dominated its events. There followed a formal banquet, with speeches, at which the committee and honoured guests sat on the stage, while others who had paid 21 shillings were served in the auditorium. The less well off could pay five shillings for a seat in the gallery to watch the proceedings. A firework display ended the day's entertainments. On the following day, Sunday, there were two services in Holy Trinity Church, with sermons appropriate to the occasion. At Matins, the Reverend Chenevix Trench spoke on the text 'every perfect gift is from above', reflecting the common idea that, while Shakespeare was the embodiment of all things English, he was also a gift sent from God to 'mould a nation's life' to ensure that it would be 'animated and quickened to heroic enterprise and worthiest endeavour', as well as offering 'ideals of perfect womanhood'. He did not, however, find it necessary actually to quote anything from the works of Shakespeare in support of these noble thoughts. In the evening Charles Wordsworth spoke on Shakespeare's knowledge and use of the Bible, bringing together the two volumes that, with the possible addition of *The Pilgrim's Progress*, stood on every Victorian bookshelf, with bindings appropriate to the station of their owners.

Stratford town offered further enticements, most prominently Shakespeare's Birthplace in Henley Street, still retaining much of its external form within a row of houses, part of which was an alehouse. A further attraction within it was a portrait recently discovered by a W. H. Hunt, the town clerk of Stratford, encased in a fire-proof iron case with a frame of wood, a painted announcement claimed, from 'the old structure of Shakespeare's house'. Adherents claimed it was the original life portrait on which the bust in Holy Trinity was modelled; the *Athenaeum* dismissed it as 'a modern daub, possibly a tavern sign, a "Shakspear's head," probably made up for some purpose connected with the jubilee'. Controversy about the authenticity of portraits of Shakespeare was to remain prominent throughout the period, and far beyond. Adjoining the ruins of New

1.2 'Exhibition of Shakspeare Pictures and Relics in the Townhall', *Illustrated London News*, 1864. That the case of 'relics' is attracting more attention than the paintings perhaps suggests that the cult of 'Shakespeare the Man' was already well developed.

Place, Shakespeare's last home in Stratford, was the Shakespeare Museum, housing a collection of local documents and other elements purporting to come from Shakespeare's time or, much more rarely, from his own home or possessions. The Town Hall was the setting for an exhibition of paintings and other materials associated with the dramatist (see Illustration 1.2). Queen Victoria lent Thomas Lawrence's portrait of Kemble as Hamlet, and other exhibits included trinkets made from the mulberry tree in the garden of New Place, and the chair in which Shakespeare had reputedly sat. The range of these elements testified to the central importance of physical memorabilia to the mythic identity of the young Shakespeare—an importance that continued throughout the celebrations, and throughout the reign, by the sale of objects avowedly made from the mulberry tree, commemorative ribbons, Staffordshire ceramic figurines of actors in Shakespearian character and Shakespeare himself, and other impedimenta without which no serious Victorian parlour was complete (see Illustration 1.3).

1.3 Lead-glazed earthenware figure of Shakespeare, made in Staffordshire at about the start of the Victorian period. About 12 inches high, and based loosely on Scheemakers' life-size sculpture in Westminster Abbey, it offered Victorians an object of veneration for their own home.

Other attractions were a short distance away. A procession of carriages took the affluent to see Charlecote, in celebration of Shakespeare's allegedly having poached deer from the estate, a story so longstanding as to have become an essential element of the Shakespeare myth. The building traditionally known as 'Anne Hathaway's Cottage' was a popular destination, with Mrs Mary Baker, purportedly the last survivor of the Hathaway family, in loving attendance. In fact a fairly substantial farmhouse, the building was traditionally known as a 'cottage', a shift that suggests a liking for the picturesque rural ideal, far removed from the damp, rat-infested actuality, that was celebrated by painters like William Allington and Randolph Caldecott. Together, these attractions remained powerful elements of Victorian Shakespeare, holding sway over the public imagination and making Stratford increasingly a place of attraction, and in many cases pilgrimage, for anyone in search of cultural fulfilment, almost a cut-price version of the European grand tour followed by young aristocrats.

After a performance of *As You Like It*, with James Bennett, a local actor, as the exiled Duke Senior, the pavilion was the setting for a fancy dress ball, the final event of the celebrations. Again, spectators were allowed in the gallery for five shillings; they would have seen dancing to music composed by Alfred Mellon by the Flower family and other guests, including the Lord Lieutenant of Warwickshire and the Mayor of Stratford who went, with remarkable imagination, in costumes as the Lord Lieutenant and the Mayor. But the celebrations did not quite end there. The following week was given over to popular entertainment, with events including a pageant with horses, knights in armour, and a procession of characters from the plays, at last enacting the one planned by Garrick a century earlier that was abandoned in heavy rain. Special trains were run from all over the country, in a nice example of the latest technology facilitating a mythic invention of the past, something far from uncommon in the Victorian frame of mind. *Othello* and *Much Ado* were performed, and the trial scene from *The Merchant of Venice*, testimony to the frequent use of Portia's 'Quality of Mercy' speech as an elocution-piece and moral homily in schools and academies throughout the age.

Those who could not attend the Stratford celebrations were offered rather more limited events in London. There were concerts

and dramatic readings, performances of the plays, and separate scenes from them. A 'Colossal Tercentenary Bust' made by Charles Bacon was unveiled; the Chandos portrait of Shakespeare, a much worthier contender as life portrait than Mr Hunt's offering, was exhibited in the temporary home of the new National Portrait Gallery; Samuel Phelps, recovered a little from his rebuff at Stratford, recited the first act of *The Tempest*. At the Crystal Palace, William Paxton's masterpiece of glass and iron, a ceremony was held around the great statue of Shakespeare that had been made, like the Palace itself, for the Great Exhibition of 1851.

All these were similar in manner and kind to the events at Stratford, revealing again the ways in which the idea of Shakespeare the man and the works of Shakespeare the dramatist were embedded in Victorian culture and society. But one event presented a rather different set of relationships, albeit largely by chance. On 23 April the Working Men's Shakespeare Committee organized a 'Grand Miscellaneous Entertainment and Monster Demonstration of the Working Classes'. This merged with a large-scale political demonstration, with a crowd estimated at 4,000 protesting against the departure of the Italian statesman Garibaldi who, it was felt, had been urged to leave England for political reasons that ran counter to democracy. Later, some would see it as a preparation for the great Hyde Park demonstration of the following year, when thousands of working men assembled to demand reform of the electoral system. That the protests occurred simultaneously with Samuel Phelps planting a commemorative oak tree on Primrose Hill was a chance coincidence, but a revealing one. Shakespeare was part of the national consciousness, it seemed, in ways that went far beyond ideals of identity and moral guidance. There was, in the coming together, just a hint that his plays might contain ideas counter to those of established rank and order, and that those who had read speeches from the plays in the National Schools, or bought cheap editions of them as a means of self-improvement, would reject the social structures of which the plays had, in the minds of the Stratford and London tercentenary committees, been an inseparable, God-given part.

* * * * *

While the events, structures, and sites of the tercentenary celebrations should not be regarded as encyclopaedic in revealing Victorian

approaches to Shakespeare, they offer enough that is representative to make them a secure starting point for larger discussions. The events make clear that in Victorian society 'Shakespeare' meant both far more and far less than a collection of literary and dramatic texts. One of the earliest poems by Matthew Arnold, a foremost intellectual and social critic of the age, is a sonnet entitled 'Shakespeare' (1844):

> Others abide our question. Thou art free.
> We ask and ask—thou smilest and art still,
> Out-topping knowledge

The opening lines suggest the status of the dramatist at the time, as something beyond human measure. The poem's conclusion, a tercet which places 'all pains', 'all weakness' and 'all griefs' within Shakespeare's understanding, is a summation of the period's veneration of the dramatist as a latter-day philosopher king. That the poem is itself a sonnet is a form of homage, a reflection of the influence of Shakespeare on literary production of the time. Sonnets of all kinds were written and published, some popular and about love, many less so, and engaging with political issues. The novel, especially in its more serious forms, examined the problems of the day through modifications of Shakespearian plot trajectories. Even the most popular, and least avowedly intellectual, made use of quotations and allusions as a way of establishing a bond between text and reader. In *The Manchester Man*, by Mrs G. Linnaeus Banks (1876), a whole chapter is devoted to 'How the Rev. Joshua Brookes and Simon Clegg interpreted a Shakespearian text' with no mention of the text itself. The episode relates to the confusion over naming a child at baptism, the title assuming that readers will immediately associate this with the 'What's in a name?' speech from *Romeo and Juliet*. A more specifically theatrical novel, Howard Merrick's *The Actor Manager* (1898), repeatedly puts quotations from the plays into the speech and thought of the central male character, and contains a scene in which the main female figure goes through proof prints of photographs of herself in Shakespearian roles to select the most appealing—both elements depending on the reader's knowledge of the plays and their production.

Such writings were one way in which a Victorian man or woman would probably have encountered the aesthetic construction known