

SHAKESPEAREANA: SOME CURIOSA

By Eddi Jolly

Some time ago Judith Branz gave Christopher and Marjorie Dams an early twentieth-century sales catalogue for a collection of books, manuscripts, and pictures, all associated with Shakespeare. The account below picks up some of the gossipy titbits in the manuscript section, which covers documents mainly from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The collection came up for sale at the very moment that Americans, particularly Henry Folger, were buying up anything to do with ‘our’ bard, William Shakespeare. It demonstrates the hold Shakespeare had in the UK, on the continent, and in the US.

Shakespeareana: the manuscripts¹ (page numbers below refer to *Shakespeareana*)

Snippets here relate to authorship. Richard Farmer, who wrote the *Essay on the Learning of Shakespeare*,² wrote to Edmund Malone in 1788. Farmer referred to Ben Jonson’s paean to Shakespeare at the beginning of the first folio, commenting, ‘I have often thought, that the *outshining as Ben* (Jonson) calls it, of Marlow’s mighty Line, alluded to the Additions to Henry 6th’. He also speculated, ‘Qu^o whether Kyd might not be the author of the old Taming of the Shrew?’ (p.74). This was the same century as Ireland’s Shakespeare Forgeries, and Horace Walpole wrote that he was ‘not surprised at any new lie that Ireland tacks to his legend; were He to coin himself into a Grandson of Shakespear [sic], with his ignorance of all probabilities, it would be but an addition to his bedroll of Incredibilities’ (p.95).

There seem to be more comments on aspects of *Hamlet* than any other play, even *Lear*, which I had understood was the most popular play at least in the 1800s. Colley Cibber, a writer much scorned by Alexander Pope, paid ‘Half a Crown’ (£0-2s-6d) for a ‘head of haire’ (a wig) for Ophelia, probably for a Drury Lane theatre performance (p.71). This was in May 1714.

There is clear evidence here of the popularity of Shakespeare not just at home but also on the continent. Actor and actor–manager Friedrich Ludwig Schroeder, on 20th September 1766, introduced Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* to the German stage with a high-quality performance, and from then on toured through many towns in Germany (p.88–9). In 1917, H. B. Irving, actor and dramatist, wrote that he would

be 'honoured to join the central committee for the presenting to Italy of a monument to Shakespeare ...' (p.81). The same year actress Madge Kendal wrote that she and her husband would 'gladly add our names to yr. list for a monument of Shakespeare in Rouen' (p.85).

Americans are also showing a growing interest in Shakespeare by the mid-nineteenth century, presumably why Henry Folger set about collecting so many folios in the early twentieth century. For example, in 1851, Abbott Lawrence, US Minister to Great Britain, writes, 'My countrymen begin to arrive in considerable numbers ... large numbers of them will not return home without visiting the birthplace of Shakespeare' (p.78). By 1877 Edwards Pierrepont, now holding the same role, comments, 'Shakespeare is, I believe, read quite as much in America as in England and we enjoy his undying fame and feel almost as much pride in his increasing renown as tho' he had been born in the United States.' He continues with a comment on authorship:

So marvellous are his revelations of human nature that some have been led to believe that he was inspired while others have insisted that one of his meager learning could never have written the Plays; and books have been written to prove that Lord Bacon, and not Shakespeare, was the author of these surpassing productions. But anyone familiar with Lord Bacon's life & writings, might know that Bacon could no more have written the plays, than Shakespeare could have written the *Novum Organum* (p.79).

Orthography pops up too. Gabriel Rosetti wrote a sonnet c.1882 – unpublished at the date of this catalogue – in which he plays upon 'thou cannibalic Caliban' (p.68). Two years later, one Davos Platz writes to Swinburne, praising his 'Study of Shakespeare', but saying, 'Do not think me guilty of spelling Shakspeare's [sic] name in deference to the New Sh. Socy. I have done so for the last twenty years on the understanding that it was upon the whole the most authentic mode of writing the name, i.e. the one wh. has the most authority' (p.92–3).

A.C. Swinburne, poet, by the way, has a forceful turn of phrase about some French novelists – the date is unknown, the letter unpublished according to the catalogue – 'What are the worst offences of the Shakespearean stage if we compare the putrescent poeticules of contemporary Paris – for example, to use the phrase

of an absurd and brutal Englishman, with the hog Zola & the hog-louse Maupassant?' (p.90). I leave readers to consider which of Swinburne, Zola and Maupassant they think is best remembered today.

The fashionistas needed to see Shakespeare on the stage. In 1855 Charles Kean revived *Henry VIII* at the climax of his career, performing as Cardinal Wolsey, and an artist Alfred Crowquill asked for two tickets in the November, 'so that I may be received into civilized society' (p.73).

Shakespeare plays epitomizing 'civilized society'? Not a bad place to end this sampling of those documents. By the way, they were for sale at £1,000. But perhaps we shall end with a tongue-in-cheek (?) comment from Oscar Wilde, from 1889. He wrote an article for Blackwood's magazine, entitled 'Mr. W.H.' 'W. H.', claimed Wilde, was a lad named 'Willie Hughes' who 'took a female part in the acting of the Plays of Shakespeare, there being no actresses in those days' (p.96).

Endnotes:

1. *Shakespeareana* catalogue, offered by G. Michelmores & Co., 5 Royal Opera Arcade, Pall Mall, London SW1. The date is post-1917, since there is an internal reference to that date (opposite p.48), but otherwise unknown. Online references to what appears to be this catalogue suggest a date of 1926. Modern reprints are available from online booksellers. The 'open' library offers a pdf text to download for consultation at:
<https://nymykotuhaqaxov.greggdev.com/shakespeareana-illustrated-book-33853xv.php>
2. Richard Farmer, *An Essay on the Learning of Shakespeare*. British Library reference: 641.e.27, 1767.

