# How Shakespeare Lost the American West

Merlyn Q. Sell
Independent Scholar

Shakespeare was among the first European settlers in the American West. He first hitched rides in the packs of fur traders in the 1830's and then stuck around, hanging out through the cattle drives of the 1890s. Considering Shakespeare's large role in the Wild West of history, his absence from the Wild West of popular culture is glaring. While fictions of the Wild West are not beholden to the facts, the reasons a particular fictitious narrative has dominated the genre deserves interrogation—particularly when that narrative forms a cornerstone of national identity. A key reason for Shakespeare's disappearance, or erasure, from the myth of the Wild West is his association with upper-class women and their civic reforms. As the "wildness" of the west became idealized, Shakespeare was remembered as a sign of refinement and his wilder and woollier past forgotten.

In the mining camps of the West the same pattern emerged time and again. Shakespeare was an integrated part of these rough and rowdy communities from the start. His works were performed alongside variety acts, circuses, and boxing matches for a mostly working class, mostly male audience.[1]

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As railroads linked these once isolated communities to the trends of the East, Shakespeare's place within the community transformed. Older versions of Shakespeare performance were not suitable for the changing demographics as cities once dominated by single males saw an influx of women and families.[2] While women did not introduce Shakespeare to Western communities, they did employ him in different ways. They attended his works only when they were staged in a respectable theatre; they performed his works as benefits for charitable causes; they taught Shakespeare to their children; and they studied him as members of literary clubs.[3] Along with Shakespeare, many of these clubs were interested in political movements, such as temperance and women's suffrage, and through these organizations women had the influence to effect actual changes in their communities.[4] As such, Shakespeare became associated with, not the wildness, but the reformation of the West.

This association made Shakespeare incompatible with the myth of the Wild West, which took hold even before the settlement of the West was complete. As early as 1833, *Western Monthly Magazine* published a plea for a national literature that reflected American struggle and triumph in the West.[5] In 1860, publishing house Beadle and Adams was established and would go on to specialize in Western dime novels;[6] by 1864 the company posted aggregate sales of five million books.[7] Wild West shows brought the West to the East, and the wild west portrayed by Buffalo Bill Cody and his colleagues would go on to influence novels and, later, films.[8]

Shakespeare posed a threat to a key figure in this Wild West myth, in part because his growing association with intellectual pursuits put him at odds with the Western hero, who was typified, not by his eloquence or education, but by his primitive and decisive actions.[9] Shakespeare posed an even greater threat to the myth through his association with the other great civilizing force in the mythological west: women.

As Richard White points out, "The West of Remington, Roosevelt, and Wister was an unabashedly masculine and nasty place,"[10] and if the frontier was masculine, femininity was then its antithesis. The perception of Shakespeare and his female accomplices as the vanguards of the advance of Eastern civilization was popularized in literature and film. In Owen Wister's novel *The Virginian*, a schoolteacher ultimately pacifies the titular hero, with Shakespeare being her most effective tool.[11] In the *Bonanza* episode "Spotlight," the women of Virginia City suggest a Shakespeare play as an addition to the town's founder's day celebration, only to be admonished by a town official that "you'll ruin the whole shebang with your high falutin' ideas."[12] Keep in mind that in its early days as a mining camp, Virginia City was able to support five theatre companies producing Shakespeare at the same time.[13] In the 1993 film, *Tombstone,* the Shakespearean performer, Mr. Fabian, is heckled by the outlaws, cowboys, and gunslingers in his audience, while the one viewer moved by his performance is the effeminate Billy Breckinridge.[14] Arguably, by the time these mythological versions of Shakespeare and femininity have put an end to violence and brought artistic endeavors to a community, the community ceases to be a part of the mythological and masculinized west. Shakespeare, then, became a means of civilizing and effeminizing the frontier instead of a part of it.

Deadwood, South Dakota, one of the most infamous cities of the Wild West, and, as it happens, my home town, provides an ideal case study for this phenomenon. In 1877, newspapers across the country promoted Deadwood as "the wickedest spot this side of the infernal regions."[15] First in the Deadwood Dick dime novels of the 1870s and later in films such as *Calamity Jane* and the 2004-2006 HBO series *Deadwood*, Deadwood has persisted as an idealized embodiment of the Wild West mythos. As early settler John S. McClintock mused, it would be difficult to imagine another Western

town that "would so vividly open to the mind a panorama of revelry, wild ruffianism and tragedy."[16]

Shakespeare was a part of everyday life in early Deadwood. The local paper quoted him constantly. Local merchants used him to shill their wares. "He who steals my purse steals trash," began one ad in the *Black Hills Daily Times* before continuing, "but he who gets away with that fine bottle of beer or demijohn of whiskey purchased of Herrmann & Treber commits an offense against the lover of 'ould rye' that will long be remembered."[17] *The Black Hills Daily Times* reported that a local lawyer named John had been spotted "perusing a copy of Shakespeare" in a barbershop.[18] In 1877, James Leary filed a claim for the Coriolanus lode, tying Shakespeare to Deadwood's most prominent industry: gold.[19]

In addition, Shakespeare productions frequently graced Deadwood's stages. *The Daily Hornet* of Cheyenne reported in April of 1878 that a local actor known as "Mac" or "McDaniels" had given six performances of *Hamlet* in Deadwood.[20] An amateur production of *Hamlet* was attempted in August of 1878.[21] Deadwood's resident legitimate theatre troupe under the supervision of Jack Langrishe produced *Othello* in June of 1879.[22] Alice Cochran lists an 1879 performance of *Richard III* in her timeline of Deadwood theatre productions as well.[23] And a later benefit for actors Emma Whittle and J.P. Clark at the Metropolitan Theatre included scenes from both *Richard III* and *Hamlet*.[24]

Besides the few legitimate theatres, certainly Shakespeare's works had plenty to contribute to what the *Black Hills Daily Times* called the "numerous scenes, sketches, refrains, droll doings, and diversions that go to make up a first class variety performance."[25] When Tom Miller opened the Bella Union in 1876, the variety company included "Chas. Stacey,"[26] most likely the same Stacey referred to later in local papers as Deadwood's "erstwhile Hamlet."[27] It seems likely then that Stacey's variety act was a burlesque of *Hamlet*. The Opera

House hosted one potentially Shakespeare-related variety performance in 1888, with the appearance of the "Edwin Booth Dramatic Club," a traveling troupe of pre-teen little people.[28]

But as the population of Deadwood changed, so did its Shakespeare. In 1880, the ladies of the Episcopal Church hosted a benefit production of *The Merchant of Venice*.[29] A review of the entertainments emphasized the femininity of the event, saying "When the ladies of Deadwood undertake anything it is sure to be a success."[30] In 1890, a benefit for the fire department included performances from several young ladies of Deadwood's finest families. Miss Hamill appeared in a scene from *Hamlet*, and Miss Jean Cowgill and Mrs. Williams performed as Juliet and the Nurse respectively.[31] Less formal performances also occurred. An afternoon of ice cream among Deadwood's finest young people in 1890 was followed by spontaneous recitations, including "Pyramus and Thisbe."[32]

A select number of Deadwood's ladies used Shakespeare as a means to self-improvement via the academically minded Round Table Club established in 1887.[33] Membership in this club was limited to upper class ladies with the necessary free time and education to participate in its course of study, and Shakespeare occupied a great deal of the club's time and interest.[34] Members provided inspirational quotes for the club's edification at each roll call, and quotes from Shakespeare were a popular choice.[35] The club's first anniversary banquet featured escalloped oysters labeled, "Why then the world's my oyster (Shakespeare)."[36] In September of 1887, Mrs. Gaston even went so far as to provide a character sketch of Lady Macbeth, while in April of 1888 Mrs. Coe asked the group questions regarding Stratford–on–Avon.[37] That year the club chose to focus all their studies on the works of William Shakespeare and Nathaniel Hawthorne.[38] In her diary, Irene Cushman noted a pending meeting in January of 1891, when she was to present on *As You Like It* and referred

to the topic as a "lesson," which she was dreading.[39] In 1904, a marketing publication for the Black Hills area mentioned the club in conjunction with "the study of Shakespeare and the histories of the countries in which his plays are located."[40] The club founded the Deadwood Public Library and chose the books for its collection for many years;[41] it can be assumed Shakespeare's works figured prominently in the library's initial inventory. As recently as 2004, the club remained active, with nine members still promoting education and providing books and donations to various local libraries and literacy programs.[42]

Even this limited review of Deadwood's Shakespearean activity illustrates a community actively engaging with his works from the very beginning, yet he seems to have no place in the lucrative myth of Deadwood recreated today. Starting with the Deadwood Dick dime novels of the 1870s, Deadwood has been represented as a haven for criminals, violence, and corruption. The City of Deadwood website claims that today's visitor to Deadwood will experience "a careful, accurate restoration of a historically significant city," emphasizing the town's "colorful, violent, and lawless beginnings."[43] Six nights a week during the summer, historical re-enactors stage the murder of Wild Bill Hickok and the subsequent trial of Jack McCall (a show which has been in constant seasonal production in Deadwood since the mid-1920s).[44] The focus of this production is an incident that by its very nature occurred only once—far less than the purported six performances of *Hamlet* by McDaniels or even the more modest, yet better substantiated, performances of Langrishe's *Othello*. Deadwood's 1876 Theatre provides dinner theatre featuring melodramas written by local playwrights, but does not recreate Deadwood's historical theatre of Shakespeare and variety.[45] None of Deadwood's historical marketing makes mention of The Round Table Club, despite its one hundred and seventeen-year history and the long-lasting contributions by its members. This trend has

continued through David Milch's television series *Deadwood*, which combined Deadwood's lawless reputation with heightened language that drew comparisons to Shakespeare. Addressing his use of early modern cadence in an interview, Milch himself claimed that his characters were speaking in "someone else's language."[46] Here again the juxtaposition of these supposedly conflicting elements was noted, even though historical newspapers indicate Deadwood's citizens were quite comfortable with Shakespeare's words. While Al Swearengen and the Gem figure largely in the series, Milch's fictional Gem is a saloon and brothel only, not the variety theatre it was historically. Milch even included Jack Langrishe in the third season, but Langrishe is portrayed as an agent of civilization, a harbinger of changing times. He and his company are set apart from the rest of the camp by nature of their language, extravagant wardrobe, and overall cleanliness. In "Amateur Night," Langrishe opens his theatre by inviting Deadwood locals to perform for each other, saying, "All the world's a stage, and all the men and women merely players."[47] The acts performed by the Deadwood amateurs include singing, dancing, and balancing acts, but no Shakespeare.[48] In reality, Deadwood amateur readings and performances of Shakespeare were more common than Langrishe's professional Shakespeare productions. While the complexity of the series' language may be compared to early modern texts, *Deadwood* does nothing to reclaim Shakespeare's place in historical Deadwood. These popularized images of Deadwood's past only contribute to long held beliefs about the crudity of its first settlers, subjecting them to a blunt binary of wildness *or* civilization, and not providing for the ambiguous reality.

The reinstatement of Shakespeare in the West not only changes perceptions of the time and place, but also perceptions of American culture. Understanding why Shakespeare has been erased from the popular concept of the Wild West reveals what values have been privileged in the

creation of American history. Re-evaluating Shakespeare's place in our past may reshape his place in our future, opening new avenues for scholarship, new performance possibilities for his works, and new audiences to experience them.

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