Blaming the Bard: Shaw's Fifty Years of Refinishing *Cymbeline*

Richard G. Scharine
University of Utah

> Pray understand that I do not defend Cymbeline. It is for the most part stagy trash of the lowest melodramatic order, in parts abominably written, throughout intellectually vulgar, and, judged in point of thought by modern intellectual standards, vulgar, foolish, offensive, indecent, and exasperating beyond all tolerance. There are moments when one asks despairingly why our stage should ever have been cursed with this "immortal" pilferer of other men's stories and ideas, with his monstrous rhetorical fustian, his unbearable platitudes, his pretentious reduction of the subtlest problems of life to commonplaces against which a Polytechnic debating club would revolt, his incredible unsuggestiveness, his sententious combination of ready reflection with complete intellectual sterility, and his consequent incapacity for getting out of the depth of even the most ignorant audience, except when he solemnly says something so transcendently platitudinous that his more humble-minded hearers cannot bring themselves to believe that so great a man really meant to talk like their grandmothers. With the single exception of Homer, there is no eminent writer, not even Sir Walter Scott, whom I can despise so entirely as I despise Shakespear when I measure my mind against his.[1]

Early in Shakespeare's career Robert Greene criticized his lack of originality, calling him an "upstart crow beautified with our feathers."[2] Succeeding generations have erred on the other end of the continuum, finding such universality in Shakespeare that they have not hesitated to presume that—given the opportunity—he would have written just as they did. Thus, for two hundred years after his death the adaptations of Davenant (who tried to pass himself off as Shakespeare's bastard son), Killigrew, Dryden, Tate, Garrick, and a multitude of lesser names held the stage, while the originals of the Bard gathered dust on the library shelves. In the nineteenth century, the right to cut Shakespeare's cloth to fit

one's own style passed from the playwright to the theatre manager. Therefore, in the words of George Rowell, Henry Irving "had reason to be grateful to Shakespeare (though [it is to be] doubted whether Shakespeare had reason to be grateful to him),"[3] and in our century the three and a half hours of the aptly titled "Trevor Nunn's *The Merchant of Venice*" ends with Jessica's heartrending rendition of Shylock's kaddish. Nor—until the happy uniting of the heirs of Shakespeare with the lawyers of Samuel Beckett and Arthur Miller—does this situation seem likely to change.

Probably no one in the modern era challenged Shakespeare's dramatic efficacy with better credentials than George Bernard Shaw. From his days as *The Saturday Review* theatre critic in the nineties to his penultimate play, *Shakes Versus Shav* in 1949, "Bardolotry" was a piñata for Shavian scorn, and the canon representative most frequently targeted by Shaw's verbal assaults was the late Romance, *Cymbeline*. The September 26, 1896, review (quoted above) came in the midst of a long and passionate exchange of letters about the play with Ellen Terry, the Imogen of Henry Irving's current production at the Lyceum. That production was still on his mind forty years later when he was asked about a proposed revival of the play at the Shakespeare Memorial Theatre at Stratford-upon-Avon:

> I mooted the point myself by thoughtlessly saying that the revival would be all right if I wrote a last act for it. To my surprise this blasphemy was received with acclamation; and as the applause, like the proposal, was not wholly jocular, the fancy began to haunt me, and persisted until I had exorcised it. [4]

Cymbeline Refinished was written in December 1936 and produced the following November at the Embassy Theatre, Swiss Cottage, London. As was Shaw's habit, he then set the play aside and did not write a preface for it until December 1945.

Examined closely, Shaw's presumed antipathy for Shakespeare depends as much on paradox as do his plays. What initially appears to be egotistical self-aggrandizement is revealed to be an astute analysis of an underrated classic and a fascinating picture of a theatre in the midst of a highly significant transition. What were perceived to be attacks on Shakespeare and his most successful interpreter, the Lyceum Theatre of Henry Irving, are actually calls for the kind of theatre Peter Hall would establish with The Royal Shakespeare Company a decade after Shaw's death: a classical theatre embracing a modern, social viewpoint and utilizing the

staging methods employed by the Elizabethans three hundred years earlier. To understand Shaw's relationship to Shakespeare in the nineties requires an understanding of the English theatre of the time and how new Shaw was to it. Seen in our day as the man who used Ibsen as a club to destroy Victorian society, Shaw claimed to be totally ignorant of the Norwegian before being recruited to play Krogstadt in a January 1886 reading of *A Doll's House*. Even then he could only recall that he had "chattered and eaten caramels in the back drawing-room whilst Eleanor Marx as Nora brought Helmer to book on the other side of the folding doors."[5]

Over four years later, when Shaw was music critic for *The World*, he volunteered to speak on Ibsen for the Fabian Society's "Socialism in Contemporary Literature" lectures. Out of this lecture (July 18, 1890) came *The Quintessence of Ibsenism*, a book that might have gone unnoticed without the critical uproar that surrounded the opening of the Independent Theatre Society's production of *Ghosts* on March 13, 1891. When J.T. Grein complained of the lack of unconventional English plays submitted to the Independent Theatre, Shaw answered the call by completing an experiment which he and William Archer had begun and abandoned in 1885. Christopher St. John, who later edited the correspondence between Shaw and Ellen Terry, recalled that the production (which had only two performances) occupied the London press for two weeks.

There was no question of *Widowers' Houses* being a good play or a bad one: it was vehemently denied that the thing was a play at all. It was dismissed by the critics as a revolting ineptitude by a pamphleteer without knowledge of the theatre or a natural dramatic faculty. The effect of the experiment on Shaw was to make him quite sure of himself as a writer for the stage.[6]

In 1895 Shaw became the drama critic of *The Saturday Review*. He had written four plays, of which only *Arms and the Man* had received a West End production. His attitude toward Shakespeare, whose most unquestioned exponent was the Lyceum, was already a scandal when he and Ellen Terry began exchanging letters. She wrote to him on July 10, 1896:

> Why do you object to Shakespeare drawing the people to us better than anything else? . . ."Fashionable crazes" don't last for over 20 years, and London, America, and the great English Provinces have responded to our call in greater numbers during the past 2 years than ever before. . . . Why even on the common necessary grounds that it pays H.I. [Henry Irving] to pay so many people in his employment you should discontinue a "goin'" on so against Shakespeare.[7]

Shaw's argument, of course, was that what appeared on stage at the Lyceum was not Shakespeare, but "bardicide," a cut-and-paste Romantic melodrama of the actor-manager's creating (in the words of television drama today) "inspired by Shakespeare." These productions were edited to the disadvantage of the play as a whole, and to the music of Shakespeare's lines in particular. Performances when this capricious editing did not appear were infrequent enough to warrant Shaw's special notice:

> The Forbes Robertson Hamlet at the Lyceum is really not at all unlike Shakespear's play of the same name. I am quite certain I saw Reynaldo in it for a moment; and possibly I may have seen Voltimand and Cornelius; but just as the time for their scene arrived, my eye fell on the word "Fortinbras" in the program, which so amazed me that I hardly know what I saw for the next ten minutes. . . . The story of the play was perfectly intelligible, and quite took the attention of the audience off the principal actor at moments. What is the Lyceum coming to? Is it for this that Sir Henry Irving has invented a whole series of original romantic dramas, and given the credit of them without a murmur to the immortal bard . . . whose works have been no more to him than the word-quarry from which he has hewn and blasted the lines and titles of masterpieces which are really all his own?[8]

Henry Irving did not, of course, invent the concept of "Illustrated Shakespeare," of which the Lyceum was the most successful representative. Philosophically, it owed much to Victor Hugo's 1827 "Preface to *Cromwell*," which quite sensibly points out that "[t]he place where this or that catastrophe took place becomes a terrible and inseparable witness thereof, and the absence of silent characters of this sort would make the greatest scenes of history incomplete in the drama."[9] In England, Illustrated Shakespeare was the descendant of the antiquarian experiments of Charles Kean, who in the 1850s attempted to assure historical accuracy in every production detail. However, Hugo was rebelling against the Neoclassical Unities, not Shakespeare, and Kean was in opposition to a tradition of combining contemporary and conventionalized costuming in Shakespeare. Nevertheless, one effect of Kean's insistence upon pictorial realism for Shakespeare's locales was the mutilation of Shakepeare's texts. He cut many of the finest descriptive passages and replaced them with spectacle and pantomime. In order to allow for the changes in setting which pictorial realism required, Kean replaced Shakespeare's free-flowing scenes with five classical acts and four long intermissions. The

length of the intermissions forced more cutting of the text, which was frequently rearranged to prevent still further scene changes.[10] Shaw believed that Shakespearean scenic effects were best created by Shakespearean poetry and that the interruption of that poetry by literal scenery was a travesty:

> The poetry of *The Tempest* is so magical that it would make the scenery of a modern theatre ridiculous. The methods of the Elizabethan Stage Society leave to the poet the work of conjuring up the isle "full of noises, sounds and sweet airs". . . . Mr. Poel says frankly, "See that singers' gallery up there! Well, let's pretend that it's the ship." We agree; and the thing is done. . . . The reason is, not that a man can always imagine things more vividly than art can present them to him, but that it takes an altogether extraordinary degree of art to compete with the pictures which the imagination makes when it is stimulated by such potent forces as the maternal instinct, superstitious awe, or the poetry of Shakespeare.[11]

In a way William Poel and the Elizabethan Stage Society were also the inheritors of nineteenth-century antiquarianism. However, their call was not for a return to the historical settings for Shakespeare's plays, but to the Elizabethan stages upon which they were performed (discernible in the forms of the Inns of Court and the Halls of the Livery Companies). For ten years, beginning with his December 1895 *Comedy of Errors* at Gray's Inn, the Elizabethan Stage Society provided Poel with an opportunity to experiment with open staging. It was Poel's work with Harley Granville-Barker at the Savoy Theater between 1912 and 1914 that is generally accepted as inaugurating Shakespearean staging as we know it today. As an ex-music critic, Shaw was even more impressed with another part of Poel's Crusade: the speaking of Shakespeare as he wrote and intended.

> To Poel . . . the laboured and idiosyncratic delivery of Shakespeare's verse by Irving or Tree represented music without melody; the tones were even more important than the sense, and much of [Poel's] work took the form of directed readings of poetic drama, including ten years as Instructor of the Shakespeare Reading Society from 1887 to 1897.[12]

In his letters to Ellen Terry, Shaw objects most to "laboured and idiosyncratic delivery" and in his former capacity as a music critic he phrases his objections:

> In playing Shakespear, play to the lines, *through* the lines, on the lines, but never between the lines. There simply isnt time for it. You would not stick five bars rest into a Beethoven symphony to pick up your drumsticks; and similarly you must not stop the Shakespear orchestra for business. Nothing short of a procession or a fight should make anything so extraordinary as a silence during a Shakespearean performance. . . . You ought to get all the business of peeping and hesitating and packed into the duration of the speech, spoken without a single interval except a pause after the call. Otherwise it drags. I don't propose that you should omit or anything, but only that you do it with the utmost economy of time.[13]

Nevertheless, Shaw's grievances against the methodology and repertoire of the Lyceum were as much personal as aesthetic. Irving had taken an option to produce Shaw's *The Man of Destiny* (written with Irving and Ellen Terry in mind), held on to it for a year, and then decided to produce another play about Napoleon, Sardou's *Madame Sans-Gene*, instead. Shaw believed Irving never intended to produce the play, but considered the fifty pounds a year option a sufficient bribe to insure favorable critical responses in *The Saturday Review*.[14] Although this conclusion is more than likely the anger of a rejected artist, not yet confident that his ability would ever be recognized, Shaw had other reasons to derail the Lyceum locomotive. In 1929 the death of Ellen Terry and the proposed publication of their correspondence prompted him to look back on his first sight of Henry Irving on stage as a teenager in Dublin.

> I instinctively felt that a new drama inhered in this man, though I had then no conscious notion that I was destined to write it; and I perceive now that I never forgave him for baffling the plans I made for him (always, be it remembered, unconsciously). . . . He could give importance and a noble melancholy to any sort of drivel that was put into his mouth; and it was this melancholy, bound up with an impish humor, which forced the spectator to single him out as a leading figure with an inevitability that I never saw again in any other actor until it rose from Irving's grave in the person of a nameless cinema actor who afterwards became famous as Charlie Chaplin. Here, I felt, is something that leaves the old stage and its superstitions and staleness completely behind, and inaugurates a new epoch in the theatre. . . . When I saw [Ellen Terry] in *New Men and Old Acres*. . . I was completely conquered and convinced that here was the woman for the new drama which was still in the womb of Time, waiting for Ibsen to impregnate it. If ever there were two artists apparently marked out by Nature to make

> a clean break with an outworn past and create a new stage world they were Ellen Terry and Henry Irving. Nobody can really understand my correspondence with Ellen Terry twenty years later without grasping this situation.[15]

In short, the insistence by Shaw that the methodology of the Lyceum was the wrong way to produce Shakespeare is merely the reverse side of his belief, expressed in 1897, that the Lyceum would be the best place to produce Shaw (or other moderns):

> Maeterlinck's plays, requiring a mystical inscenation in the style of Fernand Knopf, would be nearly as much spoiled by Elizabethan treatment as by Drury Lane treatment. Modern melodrama is so dependent on the most realistic scenery that a representation would suffer far less by the omission of the dialogue than of the scenery... A great deal of the distinction of the Lyceum productions is due to the fact that Sir Henry Irving, when the work in hand is at all within the limits of his sympathies, knows exactly how far to go in the matter of scenery.[16]

Shaw was right in both his arguments with the Lyceum: both the triumph of the modern social drama and the decline of "gentlemanly melodrama" and "illustrated Shakespeare" were as inevitable as the turn of the century. Buttressed by Shaw's arguments, Ellen Terry left Irving's Lyceum, but it was too late to do either of their careers any good. Irving gave up management in 1902, and the Lyceum had been converted into a music hall by his last season as a touring star—the year of his death, 1905. His London season at the Drury Lane that year consisted of Beckett, the *Merchant of Venice*, *A Story of Waterloo*, and *Louis XI*. In the same season across town, Harley Granville-Barker's Court Theatre was producing *Candida*, *You Never Can Tell*, *John Bull's Other Island*, and *Man and Superman*.[17] Nevertheless, although Irving was through with mutilated Shakespeare, Shaw was not. Undoubtedly right about the stagecraft of Shakespeare, he was willfully wrong about the meaning of *Cymbeline*. In his 1896 review and his revision of the fifth act 40 years later, Shaw treats the play as a precursor to *A Doll's House* rather than a preliminary Grimm fairytale, missing what Rudolf Stamm has called the "event of regeneration, the core and center of Shakespeare's ending."[18] In the final scene of Shakespeare's play, Imogen, her two brothers, and Posthumus (all believed to be dead) are restored to life, one another, and to Cymbeline, who is no longer blinded by his Queen, Imogen's wicked stepmother, who planned to replace him with her brutish son, Cloten. The Queen and Cloten being the source of Cymbeline's

emnity against Rome, the war between the two nations is ended, and the life of the Caius Lucius, the Roman General, is spared. Belarius, having restored his sons to Cymbeline, resumes his place in Court, and even Iachimo repents in public without compulsion and is forgiven by Posthumus. All of this, the final battle between the two armies which precedes it, Posthumus' vision in which his deceased kin plead with Jupiter for his good fortune, and a soothsayer's explanation of the prophecy he received at that time takes Shakespeare 845 lines to unfold. Shaw's fifth act is about a third as long, with 89 lines taken from the original (33 from Posthumus' speech which opens Shakespeare's Act V). The vision, the prophecy, and all references to the Queen are gone. Happy though he may be that Imogen is still alive, Posthumus seems overly concerned that Iachimo return his diamond ring and pay him the ten thousand ducats from the bet over Imogen's chastity. His lines would play very nicely as outtakes from Charles Lomax in *Major Barbara*, while in her response to Iachimo's apology, Imogen shows herself as disillusioned about marriage as Nora Helmer.

> *Imogen.* You at least
> Have grace to know yourself for what you are.
> My husband thinks that all is settled now
> And this a happy ending!
> *Posthumus.* Well, my dearest,
> What could I think? The fellow did describe
> The mole upon your breast.
> *Imogen.* And thereupon
> You bade your servant kill me?
> *Posthumus.* It seemed natural. . . .
> *Imogen.* I must go home and make the best of it
> As other women must.[19]

The most telling view of Shaw's Court of Cymbeline (reminiscent of Calderon's *Life is a Dream*) is the impatience expressed by his two forest-reared sons.

> This kingly business has no charm for me.
> When I lived in a cave me thought a palace
> Must be a glorious place, peopled with men
> Renowed as councillors, mighty as soldiers,
> As saints a pattern of holy living,
> And all at my command were I a prince.
> This was my dream. I am awake today. . . .
> Oh no, sir: give me back the dear old cave
> And my unflattering four footed friends.[20]

In itself, *Cymbeline Refinished* is amusing. As a fifth act for Shakespeare, it is impossible (although perhaps no more jarring

than the Knights' speeches at the end of Eliot's *Murder in the Cathedral*). Shaw's self-evaluation of the piece is half apologetic, half self-promotion, comparing his work not to the corruptions of Garrick and Cibber, but to Mozart's variations on Handel's Messiah or Beethoven's variations on Diabelli's waltz. It is not until the publication of the preface to the play in December 1945 that we get Shaw's final opinion of the play and its last act:

> I had the common impression about it that it was a cobbled-up affair by several hands, including a vision in prison accompanied by scraps of quite ridiculous doggerel. . . . I must have got it from the last revival of the play at the old Lyceum theatre. . . . When I read the act as aforesaid I found that my notion that it is a cobbled-up pasticcio by other hands was an unpardonable stupidity. The act is genuine Shakespeare to the last full stop, and late phase Shakespeare in point of verbal workmanship. The doggerel is not doggerel: it is a versified masque, in Shakespeare's careless woodnotes wild, complete with Jupiter as deus ex machina and all, introduced, like the Ceres scene in The Tempest, to please King Jamie, or else because an irresistible fashion had set in. . . . Performed as such, with suitable music and enough pictorial splendor, it is not only entertaining on the stage, but, with the very Shakespearean feature of a comic jailor which precedes it, just the thing to save the last act. . . . I shall not press my version on managers producing Cymbeline if they have the courage and good sense to present the original word-for-word as Shakespeare left it, and the means to do justice to the masque. But if they are halfhearted about it, and inclined to compromise by leaving out the masque and the comic jailor and mutilating the rest, as their manner is, I unhesitatingly recommend my version. The audience will not know the difference; and the few critics who have read Cymbeline will be too grateful for my shortening of the last act to complain.[21]

More than a hundred years after the first controversy, it is clear that Shaw's anti-Shakespearean diatribes were a call for his drama and that of his generation to be recognized, and in the process to grant Shakespeare access to the type of theatre for which his plays had been written. In the review of the 1896 Lyceum *Cymbeline*, which contains the assault which begins this paper, Shaw grants the pre-eminence of Shakespeare, while the preface to his 1949 play, *Shakes Versus Shav*, ends by debunking the notion that Shakespeare couldn't have written his plays by comparing the Bard's education with his own. "But I am bound to add that I pity the

man who cannot enjoy Shakespeare. He has outlasted thousands of abler thinkers, and will outlast a thousand more. His gift of telling a story (provided someone else told it to him first); his enormous power over language, as conspicuous in his senseless and silly abuse of it as in his miracles of expression; his humor; his sense of idiosyncratic character; and his prodigious fund of that vital energy which is, it seems, the true differentiating property behind the faculties, good, bad, or indifferent, of the man of genius, enable him to entertain us so effectively that the imaginary scenes and people he has created become more real to us than our actual life."[22]

> So much for Bacon-Shakespeare and all the other fables founded on that entirely fictitious figure Shaxper or Shagsper the illiterate bumpkin. Enough too for my feeling that the real Shakespeare might have been myself, and for the shallow mistaking of it for mere professional jealousy.[23]

Notes

1. Bernard Shaw, "Blaming the Bard," *Plays and Players: Essays on the Theatre*, ed. A.C. Ward (London: Oxford University Press, 1952), 115.
2. Quoted by William Allan Nielson, *The Complete Plays and Poems of William Shakespeare*, ed. William Allan Nielson and Charles Jarvis Hill (Cambridge: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1942), 820.
3. George Rowell, *Theatre in the Age of Irving* (Totowa, N.J.: Roman and Littlefield, 1981), 2-3.
4. Bernard Shaw, "Preface," *Cymbeline Refinished*, in *Selected Short Plays* (New York: Viking Penguin, Inc., 1987), 364.
5. Rowell, 152.
6. Christopher St. John, "Introductory Note," *Ellen Terry and Bernard Shaw: A Correspondence*, ed. Christopher St. John (New York: Theatre Arts Books, 1931), 11.
7. *Ellen Terry and Bernard Shaw: A Correspondence* XVI, 32.
8. "Hamlet," *Plays and Players: Essays on the Theatre*, 265.
9. Victor Hugo, "Preface to Cromwell," trans. George Burnham Ives, in *European Theories of the Drama*, ed. Barrett H. Clark (New York; Crown Publishers, 1947), 376.
10. Oscar Brockett, *History of the Theatre*, 6th. ed. (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1995), 396.
11. "Shakespeare and Mr. Barrie," *Plays and Players: Essays on the Theatre*, 276-277.
12. Rowell, 161-162.
13. Ellen Terry and Bernard Shaw: A Correspondence XXXV, 72.
14. St. John, 172.
15. George Bernard Shaw, "Preface," *Ellen Terry and Bernard Shaw: A Correspondence*, ed. Christopher St. John (New York: Theatre Arts Books, 1931), xxiv-xxvi.
16. "Shakespeare and Mr. Barrie," 277-278.
17. Rowell, 7.

18. Rudolf Stamm, "George Bernard Shaw and Shakespeare's *Cymbeline*," in *Studies in Honor of T. W. Baldwin*, ed. Don Cameron Allen (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1958), 265.

19. Bernard Shaw, *Cymbeline Refinished*, in *Selected Short Plays* , ed. Dan H. Laurence (New York: Viking Penguin, Inc., 1987), 374, 378.

20. *Cymbeline Refinished*, 376-377.

21. "Preface," *Cymbeline Refinished*, 364, 367-368.

22. "Blaming the Bard," 116.

23. Bernard Shaw, "Preface," *Shakes Versus Shav: A Puppet Play*, in *The Bodley Head Bernard Shaw Collected Plays with their Prefaces*, VII, ed. Dan H. Laurence (London: The Bodley Head, 1974), 471.