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## THE READING OF SHAKESPEARE IN COLONIAL AMERICA\*

By EDWIN ELLIOTT WILLOUGHBY

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THE first permanent English settlement in America was made at Jamestown in 1607 at the time of Shakespeare's greatest dramatic activity. Reports from this colony were perhaps woven into *The tempest*. The second settlement was founded at Plymouth in 1620, the year before the printing of Shakespeare's collected plays was begun. At the time that the colonists for these two settlements sailed, about one-half of Shakespeare's plays had been issued in small quarto pamphlets. Cheap and portable, they would have made excellent companions with which to while away the tedium of a long voyage. But if they formed part of the baggage of these first settlers, all trace of them has long been lost. This is not to be wondered at, for in a land where waste paper was both scarce and in demand for tinder and other uses small unbound pamphlets of trivial subject matter had but small chance of surviving.

There was, to be sure, a volume of nine quartos, printed by William Jaggard in 1619, but provided for the most part with false imprints and fictitious dates, containing ten plays, some by Shakespeare, some falsely ascribed to him, which Colonel Thomas M. Randolph, the son-in-law of Thomas Jefferson, gave to the University of Virginia. Lost during the burning of the library in 1895 and probably—but not certainly—destroyed, its

\*Read, June 23, 1937, at a meeting of the Society held in New York City.

history forms one of the great enigmas of American bibliography,<sup>1</sup> but there is no reason to suppose that this volume was an early importation into the colonies.

Again, the founder of one of the later colonies had in the library of his boyhood home at least two of these Shakespearean quartos. In copies of the First Quarto of *2 Henry IV* (1600) and of the Fourth Quarto of *Richard III* (1605) appear the autographs of Sir William Penn, the admiral and father of the founder of Pennsylvania.<sup>2</sup> But there is no evidence that Penn brought any of these pamphlets with him to his Quaker colony.

In 1623 was published the collected *Comedies, histories & tragedies* of Shakespeare, a folio volume likely to be bound and preserved. The demand for Shakespeare was of such strength during the seventeenth century that to satisfy it three more collected folio editions were issued—in 1632, in 1664, and in 1685. These were, to be sure, expensive works and probably were not printed in large editions. Besides these, from the time of Shakespeare's death until the end of the seventeenth century, there were also issued a number of his plays in pamphlet form, chiefly in acting versions.

These editions, then, were available for purchase in England and for importation into America. But several influences operated to keep Shakespeare from being widely read in the seventeenth century. During the first third of the century, the King's Players, by their influence with the lord chamberlain, effectively discouraged the publication of Shakespeare's plays in quarto—the most popular form—because they believed that the reading of them would reduce attendance at the theater.<sup>3</sup> By restricting the reading of Shakespeare when his plays were new,

<sup>1</sup> Dudley Hutcherson, "The forged quartos," *Times literary supplement*, January 3, 1935, p. 9.

<sup>2</sup> H. C. Bartlett and A. W. Pollard, *A census of Shakespeare's plays in quarto* (New Haven, 1916), pp. 25 and 92.

<sup>3</sup> E. E. Willoughby, *The printing of the first folio of Shakespeare* (London, 1932), pp. 39-40.

they reduced his appeal to the reader later in the century. Again, soon after Shakespeare's death his plays were to a considerable extent crowded from the boards by those of younger dramatists, Ben Jonson, Beaumont, Fletcher, Massinger, Ford and Webster, with a host of lesser playwrights, such as Sir William Berkeley, author of *The lost lady* (1636) and afterward governor of Virginia.<sup>4</sup> The play-reader, following the playgoer, read these and neglected Shakespeare. The closing of the theaters during the civil war and Commonwealth deprived readers of plays of the stimulus of the theater, and with the opening of the theaters after the Restoration new tastes in the drama left Shakespeare well respected but neither frequently performed nor widely read.

This condition prevailing in England during the seventeenth century was magnified in the colonies. The pioneer had but little time for light reading. Isolated on a farm, he was often forced to be his own doctor, lawyer, and preacher; so his books were largely serious works of agriculture, medicine, law, and religion. The New Englander, too, during the greater part of the seventeenth century took both life and letters seriously. The library of the "learned and reverend" Samuel Lee which was sold in Boston in 1693, for example, contained, according to its catalogue, the contemporary theological writers, the early Church Fathers in Latin and Greek, the Schoolmen, such as Thomas Aquinas, the Babylonian Talmud, the Greek and Latin classics, a very respectable collection of mathematics and science, but only one example of popular literature, a life of Merlin, included perhaps because of the contemporary interest in witchcraft. Deprived of the stimulus of the stage and discouraged in many sections by Puritan antagonism to light literature, readers in the American colonies in the seventeenth century did not often turn to Shakespeare.

<sup>4</sup> R. C. Bald, "Sir William Berkeley and *The lost lady*," *The library*, XVII (4th ser., 1937), 395-426.

In fact, the only copy of a Shakespearean play apparently recorded in America in the seventeenth century is found in Virginia. In the inventory of the library of Arthur Spicer of Richmond County, Virginia, whose will was proved on April 3, 1700, is listed a copy of *Macbeth*.<sup>5</sup> As *Macbeth* was not published separately until 1673, we can fix the approximate date of the importation of this item. Perhaps, however, this is not Shakespeare's original play but Sir William Davenant's adaptation, which was first published in 1674.

Although the copies of Shakespeare which can be assigned with certainty to the seventeenth century resolve themselves into one of a play that may be an adaptation, there are, nevertheless, other copies which may have come to the American colonies before the close of the century.

"Colonel" William Byrd of Westover, Virginia, at his death in 1744 left a magnificent library. On one shelf, for example, stood the works in folio of Shakespeare, Ben Jonson, Spenser, Beaumont and Fletcher, Chaucer, and Dryden.<sup>6</sup> When William Byrd acquired these books we do not know, but, as he was in England as a student from 1684 to 1692, it is not unlikely he purchased this folio of Shakespeare (quite probably a Fourth Folio of 1685) at that time.

Edmund Berkeley, a member of the council of the governor of Virginia, whose will was proved on March 3, 1718, had in his well-rounded library a copy of Shakespeare which he may have added before the close of the century.<sup>7</sup>

Another copy of Shakespeare's works which perhaps found

<sup>5</sup> E. C. Delano, "Arthur Spicer's inventory," *Tyler's quarterly*, X (1929), 165.

Dr. E. G. Swem, from whose *Virginia historical index* I have obtained the references to early Virginia copies of Shakespeare, tells me that an early folio of Shakespeare, probably the fourth, came to Virginia before the end of the seventeenth century. I have not been able, however, to discover the present whereabouts of the owner of this copy; so have not been able to obtain permission to refer to it.

<sup>6</sup> Wm. Byrd, *Writings*, ed. J. S. Barrett (New York, 1901), p. 422.

<sup>7</sup> *Virginia magazine of history*, XXXV (1927), 37.

its way into the American colonies before the close of the seventeenth century was the copy of the First Folio owned by none other than Cotton Mather.<sup>8</sup> That this staunch Puritan should own a book of plays need not astound us. Shakespeare was gradually being regarded primarily as a poet, and a distinction—which still obtains among certain evangelical sects today—was being made between the morality of witnessing the stage presentation of his plays and of reading them. The English Puritan, Dr. Daniel Williams, for example, bought a copy of the First Folio for the library for Nonconformist divines which he founded in London in 1711.<sup>9</sup> Cotton Mather, too, especially in the later years of his life, was much more liberal in thought than is popularly supposed. On the other hand, Mather's concern with Shakespeare may have been merely controversial, as it was with the works of the Catholic theologians and Roman service books which he had in his library.<sup>10</sup> Certainly he had there, to fortify himself against the influence of the greatest English dramatist, Prynne's *Histrio-mastix* and Stubbes's *Anatomy of abuses*.

The paucity of surviving copies indicates that Shakespeare was little read in the American colonies in the seventeenth century. But this evidence is probably somewhat deceiving. Like modern magazines, pamphlet plays were probably read and discarded and were seldom considered important enough to include in inventories of estates. The last decades of the seventeenth century saw even staid New England succumbing to the charms of worldly frivolity. By 1681 a dancing master had set himself up in Boston,<sup>11</sup> and invoices of books imported from

<sup>8</sup> Sir Sidney Lee, *Shakespeare's comedies, histories & tragedies; a census of extant copies* (Oxford, 1902), p. 14, No. CXXXVII.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, No. VII.

<sup>10</sup> J. H. Tuttle, "The libraries of the Mathers," reprinted from the *Proceedings of the American Antiquarian Society* (N.S.), XX (1910), 14-26, 35-90.

<sup>11</sup> T. G. Wright, *Literary culture in early New England, 1620-1730* (New Haven, 1920), p. 120.

1682 to 1684 include not only Dekker's *The gentle craft* and Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus*, such picaresque novels as Kirkman's *The English rogue*, but even such ribald works as the Earl of Rochester's *Poems* and Duprat's *Venus in a cloister*. At the end of one of the book lists is even the ominous entry—"4 packs cards."<sup>12</sup> Indeed among the books of New England a number seem singularly unpuritanical, and no doubt some of the readers might be described by the same adjective. John Dunton, writing from Boston on March 25, 1686, to Mr. George Larkin, a London printer, thus describes one of his customers, a Mrs. H—:

She looks high and speaks in a Majestic Tone, like one acting the Queen's Part in a Play. . . . She paints and to hide her painting dares hardly laugh. . . . She was a good customer to me. . . . The chief Books she bought were Plays and Romances; which to set off the better she would ask for *Books of Gallantry*.<sup>13</sup>

Although Dunton was writing in the conventional style of a character book, there is no reason to assume that he was not describing one type of customer. And a few seventeenth-century New England readers, such as Mrs. H—, may have perused Shakespeare's plays in pamphlet form; but, if so, they have left no trace of their reading. Elnathan Chauncy, son of the president of Harvard, to be sure, copied a quotation from *Venus and Adonis* into a commonplace book not long after 1661, but this line was derived not directly from Shakespeare but from Robert Allott's anthology, *Englands Parnassus* (1600).<sup>14</sup>

The dawn of the eighteenth century saw a change in Shakespeare's vogue both in England and in America. In 1709 was published Rowe's edition of the dramatist. This work freed the text of Shakespeare from some of its obscurities, modernized the spelling and to some extent the language, supplied a life

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 224-37.

<sup>13</sup> *Letters written from New England A.D. 1686* (Boston, 1867), p. 116.

<sup>14</sup> G. L. Kittredge, "A Harvard salutatory oration of 1662," *Publications of the Colonial Society of Massachusetts*, XXVIII (1935), 7-8.

of the author, added act and scene headings, and in general made the plays easier for the average reader.<sup>15</sup> Published by Jacob Tonson, one of the most enterprising publishers England has ever known, in a convenient octavo format in six volumes at the moderate price of thirty shillings, the edition had an immediate success. Other editions were soon called for, and the great eighteenth-century editors, Theobald and Johnson, made the text increasingly easier to read.

The improved text and format wrought under the guidance of shrewd publishers an increase in the reading of Shakespeare. This vogue was further increased by the rapidly growing popularity of Shakespeare on the stage under the influence of able actors, of whom the greatest was Garrick.

The eighteenth century saw the American colonies with growing cities on their coasts, sufficiently removed from the hardships of the frontier to enjoy culture and able to receive from England the increasing popularity of Shakespeare. In 1722 that irrepressible young journalist, James Franklin, in the issue of July 2, 1722, of his *New England courant* stated that there was in his printing office for the use of writers for his paper, a library of English authors, of whom he named, among others, Shakespeare (who headed the list), Milton, Addison, Steele, and Cowley. In the following year Harvard College<sup>16</sup> printed its first catalogue. In it is listed Rowe's 1709 edition. Harvard's library, then, compared in its Shakespearean holdings favorably with the Bodleian Library, which in 1738 had only a Third Folio and one quarto, an edition of the *Poems*, and three adapted plays. In 1773 Harvard listed, in a catalogue of books most frequently read, another set dated 1728, no doubt Pope's second<sup>17</sup> edition. Yale was less ready in its welcome to Shake-

<sup>15</sup> R. B. McKerrow, *The treatment of Shakespeare's text by his earlier editors* (London, 1933), p. 16.

<sup>16</sup> Wright, *op. cit.*, p. 187.

<sup>17</sup> Cf. entries of the 1790 Harvard Library catalogue.



spare, but Bishop Berkeley presented the library with an edition which was classified, in the catalogue of 1743, with books of diversion.<sup>18</sup> Soon Shakespeare's works with the text emended by the latest editor became a standard item in a list of books offered for sale.

The stage, too, came to America in the eighteenth century. As early as June 23, 1730, an amateur performance of *Romeo and Juliet* was given in New York,<sup>19</sup> and by 1750 professional performances of Shakespeare were being given. This had a decided effect upon readers. In 1761 we find Hugh Gaine of New York advertising for sale a number of pamphlet plays, suitable for taking to the theater. Most of these were contemporary eighteenth-century comedies, but the list included *King Lear*, *The tempest*, and Garrick's adaptation of *The taming of the shrew*, *Catharine and Petruchio*.<sup>20</sup>

Shakespeare soon began to appear with greater frequency in private libraries. James Logan, secretary of the province of Pennsylvania, had in his library a 1714 edition of Rowe probably purchased soon after publication.<sup>21</sup> John Herbert of Chesterfield County and "Councilor" Robert Carter, Virginia, had amazingly well-rounded libraries, each of which included a good edition<sup>22</sup> of Shakespeare. Lord Botetourt, the popular governor of Virginia, at his death in 1770 left in his library not only Hanmer's edition of the dramatist but an *Ode to Shakespeare*—no doubt Garrick's ode to music of 1769.<sup>23</sup>

A number of leaders of the American Revolution were also readers of Shakespeare. In George Washington's boyhood home

<sup>18</sup> Wright, *op. cit.*, p. 187.

<sup>19</sup> New York Public Library, *Bulletin*, XL (1936), 494.

<sup>20</sup> Hugh Gaine, *Journals*, ed. P. L. Ford (New York, 1902), *passim*.

<sup>21</sup> H. N. Paul, "Shakespeare in Philadelphia," *Proceedings of the American Philological Society*, LXXVI (1936), 721.

<sup>22</sup> *William and Mary quarterly*, 1st ser., VIII (1900), 145; XI (1902), 23.

<sup>23</sup> *Tyler's quarterly*, II (1921), 123-24.

there was "in the Library . . . 6 Vols of Shakespeare's plays."<sup>24</sup> Later he bought a copy of the very popular Bell's edition of 1773, now a prized treasure of the Folger Shakespeare Library. His wife, too, had opportunity to become familiar with the dramatist; her first husband, Daniel Parke Custis, who died in 1757, had in his large, well-selected library a set of Shakespeare.<sup>25</sup> Some of the signers of the Declaration of Independence who owned copies of Shakespeare were John Adams, Francis Hopkinson, and John Penn.<sup>26</sup>

It is evident that, by 1776, copies of Shakespeare were fairly common in the American colonies. One question, of course, arises: Were they read? Shakespeare, it should be remembered, was not introduced into a college curriculum until the late 1850's,<sup>27</sup> and there was no compulsory reading of him. Ambitious students, to be sure, occasionally read him to improve their literary style. James Otis, for example, thus exhorted James Perkins: "If you want to read poetry read Shakespeare, Milton, Dryden, and Pope and throw all the rest in the fire, these are all that are worth reading."<sup>28</sup> But, on the other hand, Benjamin Franklin did not include the dramatist in the large list of recommended authors in his *Sketch of an English school*. In those happy days, when a college student, such as J. Eggleston, a student at William and Mary, who in 1774 owned a set of the dramatist's works, read Shakespeare,<sup>29</sup> he read him for diversion. Yet there existed, thus unforced, a demand even for scholarly critical works about the poet. The Library Company of Philadelphia in 1770 contained not only the plays in the edi-

<sup>24</sup> C. A. Hoppin, "The house in which Washington was born," *Tyler's quarterly*, VIII (1926), 92.

<sup>25</sup> *Virginia magazine of history*, XVII (1909), 412.      <sup>26</sup> Paul, *op. cit.*, p. 721.

<sup>27</sup> H. W. Simon, *The reading Shakespeare in American schools and colleges: an historical survey* (New York, 1932), pp. 45-96.

<sup>28</sup> William Tudor, *Life of James Otis* (Boston, 1823), p. 17.

<sup>29</sup> *Virginia magazine of history*, XXIX (1921), 160 n.

tion of Hanmer (purchased in 1746) and of Johnson but also Upcott's *Critical observations on Shakespeare*.<sup>30</sup> Dixon and Hunter of Williamsburg, too, advertised for sale in the *Virginia gazette* for November 25, 1775, Benjamin Heath's "Revisal of Shakespeare's text wherein the Alterations introduced into it by the more modern editors and critics are particularly considered."<sup>31</sup>

Nor was Shakespeare the peculiar pet of a scholarly group. As early as 1756, a writer using the pseudonym, "The Virginia Centinel," wrote a series of patriotic articles in the *Virginia gazette* designed to arouse the colonies against the French, replete with Shakespearean allusions.<sup>32</sup> By the time of the opening of the American Revolution, Shakespeare was so well known that a striking quotation from his plays could form an effective addition to the title-page of a political tract, and a parody of Hamlet's soliloquy could be used to ridicule one's political enemies.<sup>33</sup>

Shakespeare, to be sure, did not appear in print in the American colonies. The first American edition, or rather adaptation, of a play of Shakespeare, *The twins or which is which, a farce altered from Shakespeare's Comedy of errors* by William Woods was published in Philadelphia in 1787. The first critical work on the dramatist, the fourth edition of *A philosophical analysis of some of Shakespeare's remarkable characters* by William Richardson of the University of Glasgow was published in the following year. And, finally, the *Plays and poems of Shakespeare corrected from the best London editions with notes by Samuel Johnson* made its appearance in Philadelphia in 1795 and 1796, accompanied by a preface and a life of Shakespeare,

<sup>30</sup> 2d ed.; London, 1748.

<sup>31</sup> *William and Mary quarterly*, XV (1st ser., 1906), 106.

<sup>32</sup> E. C. Cook, "Colonial newspapers and magazines," *Cambridge history of American literature* (4 vols.; New York, 1917-21), I, 118.

<sup>33</sup> M. C. Tyler, *Literary history of American revolution, 1763-1783* (2 vols.; New York, 1897), II, 54-55.

almost certainly written by a young Philadelphia lawyer, Joseph Hopkinson, best known to his contemporaries and to us as the author of "Hail Columbia, happy land."<sup>34</sup>

Shakespeare, then, did not appear in print in the New World until ninety-nine years after his great contemporary, Bacon, whose *Essays* comprised the third part of Daniel Leeds's *Temple of wisdom* printed in Philadelphia by William Bradford in 1688. But this delay was largely the result of the ease of importation of books from England. To cite an analogous example: although the English Bible was the most read book in the American colonies, and although as early as 1688 William Bradford had proposed the printing of an edition, the New Testament in English was not printed in this country until 1777, nor the whole Bible until 1782.

To return, however, to Colonial days: two readers have left us accounts of their reading of Shakespeare in prerevolutionary America. The relation by Dr. Alexander Hamilton, a good-natured Scotch physician who had settled in Annapolis, of how on a journey north in September, 1744, he read in Philadelphia amid much visiting "one of Shakespeare's plays," and a few days later, "Shakespeare's *Timon of Athens or Manhater*" (probably Shadwell's adaptation), need not detain us here.<sup>35</sup> The second account, however, describes a situation which is unlikely to be duplicated, an incident in which the reading of Shakespeare saved the reader's life. Captain Thomas Morris "of his Majesty's XVII regiment of Infantry" wrote the story in his journal, which he completed at Detroit on September 25, 1764.<sup>36</sup>

General Bradstreet, unmindful of the influence that Pontiac

<sup>34</sup> He also claimed to have been the designer of the American flag (G. E. Hastings, *Life and works of Francis Hopkinson* [Chicago, 1926], pp. 240-58).

<sup>35</sup> *Itinerarium*, ed. A. B. Hart (St. Louis, 1907), pp. 232 and 235.

<sup>36</sup> Printed in R. G. Thwaites, *Early western travels* (32 vols.; Cleveland, 1904-7), I, 296-328.

still exerted on the western tribes, sent Morris, accompanied by a released French-Canadian prisoner and some friendly Indians, to take possession of the Illinois country in His Britannic Majesty's name, and to induce the Indian tribes to ally themselves with the British. He proceeded to Pontiac's own village near Naumee Rapids, where he stayed for several days negotiating and miraculously escaping several attempts which were made to assassinate him. On the thirtieth of July he writes in his journal: "An Indian called the little chief . . . made me a present of a volume of Shakespeare's plays: a singular gift from a savage. He however begged a little gunpowder in return." This volume of Shakespeare no doubt was taken from the body or baggage of some British officer who had been killed in Braddock's defeat, nine years before, for this occurred but a few miles from the scene of that disaster, and a few days later, on the fifth of August, Morris met "an Indian on a handsome white horse that had been General Braddock's and had been taken . . . when that General was killed." Continuing his journey, as Morris relates it in his journal,

on the seventh of September in the morning we got into easy water and arrived at the meadow near the Miamis fort, pretty early in the day. We were met at the bottom of the meadow by almost the whole village, who brought spears and tomahawks in order to despatch me; even the little children had bows and arrows to shoot at the Englishman who had come among them; but I had the good fortune to stay in the canoe, reading the tragedy of Anthony and Cleopatra, in the volume of Shakespear, which the little chief had given me, when the rest went on shore, though perfectly ignorant of their intention, I pushed the canoe over to the other side of the river [p. 312].

Escaping this mob attempt on his life and several later dangers, Captain Morris finally made his way to Detroit and lived to write an essay on dramatic art in which he said: "If the world ever afforded me a pleasure equal to that of reading Shakespear at the foot of a water-fall in an American desert, it was Du Menil's performance of tragedy."<sup>37</sup>

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 299.