


1-1-2015

# Shakespeare in the Nineteenth Century; Shakespeare, Time and the Victorians: A Pictorial Exploration

Daniel Pollack-Pelzner  
*Linfield College*

Follow this and additional works at: [https://digitalcommons.linfield.edu/englfac\\_pubs](https://digitalcommons.linfield.edu/englfac_pubs)

 Part of the [Dramatic Literature, Criticism and Theory Commons](#), and the [Theatre History Commons](#)

---

## DigitalCommons@Linfield Citation

Pollack-Pelzner, Daniel, "Shakespeare in the Nineteenth Century; Shakespeare, Time and the Victorians: A Pictorial Exploration" (2015). *Faculty Publications*. Published Version. Submission 53.  
[https://digitalcommons.linfield.edu/englfac\\_pubs/53](https://digitalcommons.linfield.edu/englfac_pubs/53)

This Published Version is brought to you for free via open access, courtesy of DigitalCommons@Linfield. For more information, please contact [digitalcommons@linfield.edu](mailto:digitalcommons@linfield.edu).

**Shakespeare in the Nineteenth Century**, edited by Gail Marshall; pp. xv + 464. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012, £64.99, £19.99 paper, \$104.99, \$32.99 paper.

**Shakespeare, Time and the Victorians: A Pictorial Exploration**, by Stuart Sillars; pp. xxiii + 360. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012, £64.00, \$104.99.

That William Shakespeare played a central role for Victorians has long been known; these two books confirm that Shakespeare plays a central role for Victorianists as well. Gail Marshall's edited volume, *Shakespeare in the Nineteenth Century*, arrives in the wake of her two-volume edited collection with Adrian Poole, *Victorian Shakespeare* (2003); Poole's nimble introduction, *Shakespeare and the Victorians* (2004); and Marshall's monograph, *Shakespeare and Victorian Women* (2009). Stuart Sillars's *Shakespeare, Time and the Victorians: A Pictorial Exploration*, the third entry in his sumptuously illustrated triptych on Shakespeare and the visual arts, anticipates his recent contribution to the Oxford *Shakespeare Topics* series, *Shakespeare & the Victorians* (2013). If the Victorians are now on the Shakespeareans' map, Victorianists have repaid the attention, and the two books under consideration offer contrasting avenues into the field.

Since many of the arguments in Marshall's volume were developed elsewhere in recent monographs, often by the authors of their respective chapters, the significance of the collection lies in the varied approaches it opens for a scholar new to the territory. As befits a title that replaces the expected conjunction ("Shakespeare and . . .") with an inviting preposition ("Shakespeare in . . ."), Marshall's volume searches for Shakespeare across boundaries: its seventeen chapters track his afterlives not only in London, but also in the provinces; not only in England, but also in Germany, across Europe, and America; not only in drama, but also in fiction, poetry, visual arts, and music; not only in criticism, but also in new editions, periodicals, commerce, and politics. "Variety" may be the most repeated word in the book; as if proving John Keats's famous characterization of Shakespeare as "the camelion Poet," the contributors find Shakespeare enlisted to support Chartists as well as monarchists, to define femininity and debunk gender roles, to bolster nationalism and fuel international exchange, and to provide popular entertainment and secure elite culture (qtd. in Marshall 119). During the nineteenth century, Shakespeare is variously "Frenchified" (299), "contemporized" (138), and "memorialized" (1), even as he undergoes "Germanizing" (314), "domestication" (155), "novelization" (110), and, of course, "canonization" (124). Methodologies vary as well, though most chapters showcase rich archival material rather than theoretical investments. Kathryn Prince nuances theater history through contemporary periodical debates as an alternative to Russell Jackson's more conventional run through leading actor-managers; Mark Hollingsworth shrewdly detects literary criticism in biographies, sermons, fiction, and children's tales as well as monographs and articles; and the volume concludes with reference guides to play performance and publication by year, as if to spur readers to similar research feats.

However archive-driven, appropriation studies risk transforming the foreground while reifying the background; Victorianizing the Bard remakes Shakespeare by holding the concept of "the Victorian" constant. Marshall's authors animate familiar narratives with lively details: here comes the railroad, speeding pilgrims to see the

birthplace of “St. William of Stratford” (253); there go moral crusaders, wielding Frederick Sherlock’s anthology of quotations, *Shakespeare upon Temperance* (1884); off marches the British Empire Shakespeare Society under the motto “Using no other weapon but his name” (qtd. in Marshall 244); up comes scientific study, with the Reverend F. G. Fleay urging Shakespeare critics to train “in Mineralogy, classificatory Botany, and above all, in Chemical Analysis” (qtd. in Marshall 39). But the volume is at its best in resisting received wisdom about “Victorian Values,” the title of the nineteenth-century chapter in Gary Taylor’s landmark cultural history, *Reinventing Shakespeare* (1989). Even if one idealizing impulse in Victorian culture led Lewis Carroll to dream of “Bowdlerising Bowdler” (qtd. in Marshall 209), for instance, Christopher Decker points out that Henrietta Bowdler’s notorious *Family Shakespeare* (1807) was not representative of nineteenth-century editions, since unexpurgated editions far outnumbered expurgated ones. But it was representative of different trends, such as providing an opening for female Shakespeare editors (though Henrietta’s brother’s name replaced hers on the title page) and appealing to girls to read Shakespeare on their own.

An attractive anecdote about female mill operatives in the 1840s who gathered at five o’clock in the morning to read Shakespeare for an hour before work (so attractive, in fact, that two successive chapters cite it) illustrates this volume’s alignment with recent criticism that highlights responses by women and the working classes. Charles Dickens and Anthony Trollope hardly appear in Marshall’s chapter on Shakespeare in fiction, with Walter Scott, William Makepeace Thackeray, and Henry James absent entirely, but we do get astute readings of lesser-known works such as Harriett Jay’s *Through the Stage Door* (1883) and Mary Ward’s *Miss Bretherton* (1884), in which Shakespeare legitimates the fraught display of actress’s bodies; and deft attention to George Eliot, who mocks facile Shakespeare allusions made by other novelists and by her own characters. For an era when biographical criticism increasingly conflated the writer and his creations, Prince helpfully distinguishes between radical periodicals like the *Northern Star*, which ran a “Chartism from Shakespeare” series in 1840, and more conservative publications like *Chambers’ Edinburgh Journal*, which emphasized the upwardly mobile trajectory of Shakespeare’s biography but tried to separate the incendiary rhetoric of some of his characters from his own presumed middle-class values.

These competing claims reflect a shared understanding of Shakespeare’s authority as the national poet, a sense shared by the collection as well, which focuses primarily on England, aside from the chapters explicitly devoted to other regions. The American scene is treated in one incisive chapter by Virginia Mason Vaughan on the Gilded Age quest for cultural capital and gentility, but is largely excluded from the other sections: no Ralph Waldo Emerson in criticism, no Herman Melville or Mark Twain in fiction, no Abraham Lincoln in politics. But we do see the mediating role of other European cultures: John Stokes points out that a 1769 French version of *Hamlet* furnished the standard text for Dutch theaters and an 1866 Italian production made *Hamlet* a sensation in Spain, while Frederick Burwick traces the process by which Shakespeare joined Johann Wolfgang von Goethe and Friedrich Schiller “in the triumvirate of national poets” in Germany, in part as a rebellion against the influence of French neo-classicism (317). And although many of the topic chapters emphasize the Victorian portion of the nineteenth century, we are given some challenges to easy periodicity:

Jackson reminds us that the Shakespearean criticism of Keats and Samuel Taylor Coleridge wasn't published until the late 1840s, while also noting the 1820s antecedents to mid-Victorian antiquarian stage designs.

For antiquarian design, we must turn to Sillars, whose packed chapter on Shakespeare and the visual arts in Marshall's collection only skims the riches he probes in *Shakespeare, Time and the Victorians*. After the rapid pace and quick shifts of focus in the edited volume, it comes as a relief to luxuriate with Sillars over a single idea: that the Victorians were obsessed with their temporal place in history, and that they represented Shakespeare through aesthetic forms that make their anxious sense of temporality visible. Sillars develops these "dual axes of Victorian Shakespeare activity" through brilliantly layered readings of visual culture—easel paintings, engravings, costume designs, stage designs, illustrated editions, photographs, production souvenirs—aided by seventy gorgeous color plates and 120 additional reproductions (51).

The stated intervention of Sillars's analysis is to redeem mid-Victorian visual culture, particularly the elaborate historical pageantry of Charles Kean's 1850s Shakespeare productions for the Princess's Theatre, from charges of mere spectacular extravagance by showing how it enacted a deeper understanding of historical consciousness. He proves this point abundantly, but since it overlaps with the argument of Richard W. Schoch's *Shakespeare's Victorian Stage: Performing History in the Theatre of Charles Kean* (1998), Sillars's impact will likely come more from his attention to "transmediation" as a defining force in Victorian Shakespeare representation (123). It's hard to imagine a scholar better informed about technical innovations that drive new representational strategies or more attuned to the philosophical effects of those strategies as they relate to the Victorian sense of time. Sillars can detect time anywhere, even in the "immaculate creases of Isabella's freshly ironed habit" (in William Holman Hunt's 1853 painting of *Measure for Measure*), "subtly opposing a fragment of domestic temporality against the timeless devotion of which the habit is a symbol," and he constantly registers the effects on temporal perception as images cycle from paintings to the stage to memorial reproductions (80).

It's a measure of Sillars's success that you cannot look at another Victorian Shakespeare image without wondering about its representation of time and the effects of its material form on the viewer. It's a measure of the success of Marshall's collection that so many other questions will occur to you as well. Did Kean's historical representations shape visual culture outside London, since Richard Foulkes shows that the provinces couldn't sustain the long runs required to recoup the cost of expensive antiquarian sets? How did the production of souvenirs, whose aesthetic effects Sillars analyzes so well for Kean's *Richard II* and Henry Irving's *Macbeth*, interact with the rise of commercialism that Julia Thomas finds in the branding of Stratford as a tourist Mecca? How do the imaginary female and lower middle-class readers that Sillars conjectures in his final chapter compare to the historical readers that Georgianna Ziegler and William Greenslade uncover? If Sillars shows the rewards of a veteran pursuing one question to journey's end, Marshall's volume trains new scholars of Victorian Shakespeare to cast a wider net.

DANIEL POLLACK-PELZNER  
*Linfield College*