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# Shakespeare and Incomplete Modernity<sup>1</sup>

Ewan Fernie

This essay explores the association between Shakespeare and political liberalism, opening up some of the ways in which appeals to Shakespeare have fomented real-world change. The vivid, ever-changing pluralism of Shakespeare's characterisation, across his dramatic canon, has helped to inspire a politics of freedom. And yet, that project remains crucially incomplete. We are now living in a climate where freedom is tainted by its association not just with an ethically cynical (and unfortunately named) "neoliberalism," but also by regressive nationalism. But perhaps the struggle for freedom in Shakespeare can help us to recognise and reclaim that more progressive passion for freedom which has been a major driver of western modernity and might make us modern yet.

Key words: Shakespeare, freedom, Birmingham, Louis Kossuth, George Dawson.

The Shakespeare Centre Library and Archive holds a note in the Hungarian revolutionary hero Lajos Kossuth's hand. It reads, in a flourishing script, "received from Revd. George Dawson as the proceeds of my lectures at Birmingham, London May 14, 1856." It is archived together with a small photographic portrait of himself which Dawson had evidently presented to the Hungarian, in which he looks at once gravely

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<sup>1</sup> This essay draws together a highly compressed version of my argument in *Shakespeare for Freedom: Why the Plays Matter* with new material on Kossuth, Dawson, Shakespeare and Birmingham, in order to make a more consolidated and specific case for Shakespeare's part in the making of liberal modernity.

committed and rather like a white lion.<sup>2</sup> The librarians at the Shakespeare Centre have no idea what it is it doing in a Shakespeare collection. This essay proposes to shed light on the mystery. Indeed, the Kosuth note will allow me to reflect on the topic of change, particularly on how Shakespeare has functioned – and continues to function – as a vital agent for cultural and political change.

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The most promising and inspiring thing ever said about Shakespeare and change is the nineteenth-century German philosopher Georg Friedrich Hegel's thrilling dictum that Shakespeare's characters are "free artists of their own selves" (Hegel 70). According to Harold Bloom, this is simply the best thing on "Shakespearean representation *yet written*" (Bloom 70; my emphasis). It is "the insight into Shakespearean representation of character that still needs to be developed by us." Bloom elaborates as follows:

Iago and Edmund and Hamlet contemplate themselves objectively in images wrought by their own intelligences and are enabled to see themselves as dramatic characters, aesthetic artifices. They thus become free artists of themselves, which means they are free to . . . will changes in the self. (Bloom 70)

Shakespearean character discloses to us nothing less than a species-distinguishing power of self-renovation. This is what Bloom means when he attributes to Shakespeare nothing less than "the invention of the human."

Hegel did not quite claim that for the Bard, but he did see him – along with his more German and religious counterpart, Martin Luther – as the great architect of that free-spiritedness which, for Hegel, defines the breakthrough into modern life. Shakespearean character is the great testimony of the arts to the new "right of personality," the new "principle of subjectivity" (Hegel 59, 68, 73-74). Shakespearean character exemplifies modern freedom in its double aspect. On the one hand, it is *the freedom to be oneself*. As the famed creator of some of the world's most vital and substantial characters, Shakespeare affords excellent examples of this. Take Falstaff, for instance. The very fatness of the fat knight

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<sup>2</sup> DR1136/3/2/89: Kosuth note: Garside collection; other letters, 14 May 1856, Shakespeare Centre Library and Archive.

expresses his condition of superabundant liberty. But freedom can also take an almost opposite form, that of *the freedom to be different*. This is the freedom not of being (what you are) but *becoming* (what you might be), the freedom to change – casting off all that you have been till now in a sudden, insurgent desire to be otherwise. Falstaff exemplifies this too, in that he becomes something totally different from a fat old man in all the luxuriantly creative quickness of his own imagination.

But a character who more clearly exemplifies such self-subverting freedom to change is Rosalind. At the beginning of *As You Like It*, she is clearly an obedient daughter; but this limits her freedom, which is why, when she's forced to leave home, she goes with such "swashing," emancipated glee "to liberty, and not to banishment" (1.3.114, 132).<sup>3</sup> By assuming a male alter ego, she lays claim to a whole new self, one which sets her free not just from familial and social duty but even from her identity as a woman. For her, freedom is not so much a charter to be and enjoy your self as the liberty to destroy your established identity, stepping into a whole new existence. And of course this is exactly what any actor must do each time he (or she) throws himself (or herself) into a new part; such freedom to be otherwise is hard-wired into the very technology of the form that Shakespeare works in. Ganymede, the sexually ambiguous name of the alter ego which Rosalind assumes – it is also the name of Zeus's cup-bearer and male lover in antiquity – is Shakespeare's name for the other life of freedom to which we all potentially are called.

The self-subverting freedom I have been describing reflects the challenge of change, since it can be disturbing to contemplate and hard to attain. It is, after all, the forsaking of everything we are and own in favour of sheer uncreated difference – easy, perhaps, in postmodern theory, but not so much in real-life practice, though that does not stop people doing it; think of the well-attested phenomenon of the "mid-life crisis." But the challenge of this kind of modern freedom remains such that it is often stalled, only half achieved, and Shakespeare understood this. Hegel argued that Shakespearean drama accomplished its fundamental historical breakthrough by moving beyond the essentially allegorical mode of classical theatre – where characters like Antigone stand for a particular ethical value or "pathos" – into a freer, specifically modern individuality. I propose that in *Antony and Cleopatra*, in progressing from his once imperturbable Roman heroism into the more fungible state he recognises in the changing clouds, Antony undertakes exactly

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<sup>3</sup> Shakespeare references are to *The Norton Shakespeare*, ed. Stephen Greenblatt.



that journey beyond allegory for himself, as we see in the following beautiful passage of dialogue.

ANTONY Eros, thou yet behold'st me?  
 EROS Ay, noble lord.  
 ANTONY Sometime we see a cloud that's dragonish,  
     A vapour sometime like a bear or lion,  
     A towered citadel, a pendent rock,  
     A forked mountain, or blue promontory  
     With trees upon't that nod unto the world  
     And mock our eyes with air. Thou hast seen these signs;  
     They are black vesper's pageants.  
 EROS Ay, my lord.  
 ANTONY That which is now a horse even with a thought  
     The rack distains, and makes it indistinct  
     As water is in water.  
 EROS It does, my lord.  
 ANTONY My good knave Eros, now thy captain is  
     Even such a body. Here I am Antony,  
     Yet cannot hold this visible shape, my knave.  
 (*Antony and Cleopatra* 4.15.1-14)

Antony assumes he is describing a revelation in the heavens of his own peculiar tragic state, but in fact he is unveiling something much more important – he is expressing a fundamental truth of being in Shakespeare in general. But if it is a truth of being, it is one where being is shifting into becoming, with the freedom to be yourself transitioning into the freedom to become something different. In this great speech, Antony reads the shiftingness written in the changing sky back into his own selfhood. And he reads this cloudy mutability in terms of melancholy self-loss, even death: “black vesper’s pageants.” Though his persistently lovely imagery and phrasing intimates that his painful loss of secure identity potentially inaugurates a new kind of freedom, he is here unable to recognise and make this new freedom the foundation for a new self and life. Antony has gone beyond any sustainable antique conception of personality, but he has done so without quite attaining to the new, more “liquid” Shakespearean concept of modern selfhood that Hegel describes as characteristic of Shakespeare and modernity. In subjective terms, at least at this point in the play, Antony gives us the image of a woefully incomplete modernity.

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I have thus far been sharing only examples of *individual* freedom. And given that they evoke character as a splendidly interpersonal achievement, Shakespeare's plays cannot but project, and be haunted by, at least the idea of a free society of mutually fulfilled individuals. Certainly, that has been the view of the many significant people who have upheld in our culture an important but now rather neglected tradition of associating Shakespeare with freedom and positive political change.

I begin at the beginning, with the first ever Shakespeare celebration: David Garrick's Shakespeare Jubilee, which took place in Stratford-upon-Avon in 1769. On that occasion, the Corporation of Stratford invited the leading Shakespeare actor of the day, David Garrick, to celebrate Shakespeare and open the new Town Hall. They made him the first ever "Freeman" of Stratford. And it was an honour Garrick truly deserved given the captivating freedom of his revolutionary new, more naturalistic style of acting.

As Steward to the Jubilee, Garrick took Shakespeare out of the scholar's study, and even the theatre, and quite literally to the streets. His coat was trimmed in the colours of the rainbow and Garrick encouraged all festival-goers to wear a rainbow ribbon. This ribbon was, explicitly, "The Shakespeare Ribband," which expressed the great variety of Shakespeare's genius in explicitly political terms of his openness and availability to all (Deelman 184).

Garrick served up turtle at the festive banquet: a hell of a turtle in fact, it weighed when living no less than 327 pounds. Why turtle? As his correspondent the celebrated philosopher of the sublime, Edmund Burke explained, because it was neither fish nor flesh, and thus was, like the plays, a suitably inclusive repast for all (England 58).

In this context of liberation, it's not surprising that the songs which were sung for Shakespeare at Stratford were subsequently refitted for later jubilees in favour of the great political cause of the day: "Wilkes and liberty" and the extension of the franchise. John Wilkes was the great contemporary figurehead for liberty in eighteenth-century England. He had repeatedly been returned as MP for Middlesex, but each time he was removed by the government. The people's protest against this injustice was serious and sustained, with seven protestors dying as they chanted, "No liberty, no King" at the St George's Field Massacre in 1768: the year before Garrick's Jubilee. Wilkes was thrown in prison for the anti-royalist tenor of number 45 of his radical paper, *The North Briton*. Though, as the published text has it, "Mr. Garrick may brag /

Of his Warwickshire wag,” it was Wilkes’s 45th birthday that was celebrated in King’s Bench Prison, with a jubilee featuring songs specifically adapted from the Jubilee song book, and another three-hundred-pound turtle. The hit song of the Jubilee was “The lad of all lads was a Warwickshire lad.” In honour of Wilkes, this mutated into: “Middlesex friend, freedom defend / For the friend of all friends is a Middlesex friend” (*The Patriot’s Jubilee* iii).

A striking and intriguing fact of the original Shakespeare celebrations is that they did not actually include any Shakespeare plays or poems. There were new songs, a new oratorio (called Judith but probably not in homage to Shakespeare’s daughter), a planned procession of Shakespearean characters, a dance and a horse race (the Shakespeare Cup). Garrick offered his own brand-new Ode to Shakespeare in the presence not just of an audience but also of a Shakespeare statue as the artistic centrepiece of the Jubilee. He presented Shakespeare not as literary heritage to be preserved but as *the direct inspiration for change, for new life and art*.

I suggest Garrick performed on the banks of the Avon not so much an exclusive cult of personality as what we might call a *culture of personality derived from Shakespeare’s genius for characterisation*, one which encourages others to find themselves in Shakespeare as he simultaneously and definitively demonstrated he himself had done. If the Shakespeare discovered at the Jubilee was, on the one hand, the transcendent genius with whom we are now perhaps excessively familiar, at the same time Garrick’s Shakespeare was a figure unprecedentedly thrown open to identification, participation, and creative reinvention. Garrick offered Shakespeare to the people as the prospect of their own transcendence. And this, we shall now see, unleashed a great political force.<sup>4</sup>

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It is in Chartism – the mass, nineteenth-century English movement to give the working-class the vote – that we really see how an appreciation of Shakespeare’s genius for characterization could combine with the development of a more democratic politics (albeit one that stopped short of women’s suffrage) to produce a lively idea of fulfilment for all. And where Garrick derived his politics of freedom from the expressive

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<sup>4</sup> For more on Garrick and the Jubilee, see Fernie (113-26).

individualism he found in Shakespeare, Chartism brought together the politics of freedom with the remarkably Shakespearean vision and charisma of Thomas Cooper.

Born in Leicester in 1805, he was the illegitimate son of a dyer, who had died when Thomas was just a child (Murphy 144). Cooper found in Shakespeare a man who had been “humbly born . . . (yet who had) climb(ed) up into the realms of truest grandeur” (quoted from *Reasoner* II, 277, in Roberts 31). And from this he drew a general lesson: clearly “that region is open to all humanity” (quoted from *Reasoner* II, 277, in Roberts 31). But Shakespeare is not only an example of a boy made good for Cooper. In his autobiography, he writes:

The wondrous knowledge of the heart unfolded by Shakespeare, made me shrink into insignificance; while the sweetness, the marvellous power of expression and grandeur of his poetry seemed to transport me, at times, out of the vulgar world of circumstances in which I lived bodily. (Cooper *Life* 64)

In what Cooper says, Shakespeare’s politics opens up like a flower, becoming something much more intimate and revealed. Cooper’s testimony to Shakespeare’s power combines a cognitive insight into human being (“wondrous knowledge of the heart”) with a creative prospect of sheer and heightened possibility (“out of the vulgar world of circumstances”). It recalls the inventive as well as expressive power of Garrick’s acting, which in turn is reflective of that double truth whereby Shakespearean character both is splendidly itself and at the same time the inventive power to become something other than oneself: somebody else. “Wondrous knowledge” calls for worshipful humility; but Shakespeare’s knowledge, according to Cooper, is not knowledge of what will be out of reach for all but the rarest and most brilliant spirits, it is instead knowledge of what is most deeply held in common: knowledge of the *heart*. Reading Shakespeare is not in the end just an abasing experience. It ravishes Cooper, at least on occasion, into a new reality of sweetness, power of expression, grandeur; and Cooper is a *Chartist*, so he experiences this Shakespearean vision as more than just a sublime enhancement of his own ego – it opens into his vision of social freedom as such.

Shakespeare puts flesh on the bones of the Chartists’ crucial demands for a fairer politics: the vote for all men, a secret ballot, no property qualification for MPs, and so on. By invoking Shakespeare, Cooper was able to look beyond this shopping list of conditions into the more realised, fulfilled, and developed common life they were intended to

facilitate. What this will mean in terms of actual political life is imagined in Cooper's fellow Leicester Chartist, William Whitmore's lines which Cooper published in *Cooper's Journal* (1850):

The young spring morn breaks brightly on a scene  
Of festival outstretching far and wide:  
Toil is respited, mute the town's huge din,  
And throngs of freemen, consciously allied  
To England's Shakspeare, hail with soul-felt pride  
This glorious natal day! (quoted in Bate 215)<sup>5</sup>

Thus did Chartism make of Garrick's original Shakespeare celebration a much more explicitly radical thing. "Throngs of freemen consciously allied to England's Shakspeare": this presents a vision of freedom in Shakespeare made actual. The heart of Shakespeare's work does not finally belong to just one person. "The great recommendation of this knowledge," Cooper felt sure was, "its immense utility" (*Reasoner* V 308 in Roberts 32). In learning *Hamlet* "entirely and perfectly *by heart*," by committing to memory "thousands of lines" of other poetry, he did not consider himself to be turning away from politics (Cooper *Life* 66, 68; my emphasis); on the contrary, he felt he was going deeper into it. Making Shakespeare's language his own in this way seemed to him perfectly consistent with storming around Nottingham with Chartist comrades, singing, "The Lion of freedom is come from his den" (Cooper *Life* 160).<sup>6</sup> Whitmore's poem about the united throng of Shakespearean freemen was called "Shakspeare's Birthday – in the Future." There was a job to be done, a new world to be wrestled into being.

It was fundamentally because Cooper construed Shakespeare to be part of this revolution that, in 1841, the year following the appearance of the "Chartism from Shakespeare" series in the *Northern Star*, he broke away from the main Leicester Chartist association, setting up a rival branch which he styled "The Shakspearean Association of Leicester Chartists" (Cooper, *Life* 163). They held their meetings in the

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<sup>5</sup> See also *Cooper's Journal* (1.21, 25 May 1850: 328).

<sup>6</sup> This was a familiar vein for Cooper. His own "Chartist Chaunt" includes these lines:

TRUTH is growing – hearts are glowing  
With the flame of Liberty:  
Light is breaking – thrones are quaking –  
Hark! – the trumpet of the Free! (Cooper, *Poetical Works* 283).

“Shaksperean Room” (Roberts 32).<sup>7</sup> They also compiled and sang from their “Shaksperean Chartist Hymn Book” (Cooper, *Life* 166). Here is a representative inclusion:

Britannia’s sons, though slaves ye be,  
 God, your Creator, made you free;  
 He life and thought and being gave,  
 But never, never made a slave!  
 . . .  
 All men are equal in His sight,  
 The bond, the free, the black, the white:  
 He made them all, them freedom gave;  
 God made the man – Man made the slave! (Cooper, *Life* 166)

Now it has to be said that, like Whitmore’s “Shakespeare’s Birthday,” this does not attempt to imitate the quality and sophistication of Shakespeare’s verse. There is more of the Chapel than the Bard to such texts; and never mind Shakespeare, they are vastly inferior to, say, the hymns of Charles Wesley. And yet, I would contend that they are still significant. The association with Shakespeare pushes the conventional spirituality of the hymnal into a more secular, political sphere, mobilising it and as its background all the individuated complexity of Shakespearean drama, to which, as we have seen, Cooper’s commitment was not at all casual. “Britannia’s sons,” Cooper tells us, was composed by one John Bramwich: a stocking weaver. “He was a grave, serious man,” we’re additionally informed, “the very heart of truth and sincerity.” And then Cooper plainly states that “He died of sheer exhaustion, from hard labour and want, in the year 1846” (Cooper, *Life* 165).

This cruelly premature death is a reminder that the stakes were high in Chartism. It is a reminder that Cooper and Bramwich were right to fight as they did. Not enough has been made of the fact that they did so expressly in Shakespeare’s name, in obedience to what Cooper regarded as his “wondrous knowledge of the heart,” in the hope of bringing into being a sweeter, grander, more expressive world of freemen consciously allied to England’s Shakespeare. In such a world Bramwich would flourish and not die. But the campaign for now needed something other than sophisticated poetry; it needed marching songs, militant anthems, cruder and more serviceable than Shakespeare but testifying to the politically

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<sup>7</sup> This splinter group of Leicester Chartists called themselves Shakespeareans not only because the room in which they met in Humberstone Gate was so called, but also because Cooper “liked the name of Shakespeare” (see the letter written by Cooper to R. G. Gammage, dated 26 February 1855, and printed in Gammage [405]).



relevant transcendent truth that Cooper and his Shakespearean Association of Leicester Chartists nevertheless found in the Bard.

Cooper called himself the “Shaksperean General” (Murphy 147).<sup>8</sup> It is a suggestive moniker firstly because it associates Shakespeare with an expressly militant politics. Beyond that, “general” suggests the Chartist-stand Cooper was making for Shakespearean character as exemplifying the sort of splendid self-realisation he wanted for all. Cooper demonstrated his commitment to a specifically Shakespeare-inflected freedom in the fresh campaign for the extension of the franchise which he launched in 1849. Instead of another mass Chartist petition, Cooper argued in favour of individual petitions, to be sent to Parliament in batches of a hundred. The day he fixed upon for dispatching these of course was Shakespeare’s birthday. “You could not, unenfranchised, honour the birthday of our greatest Englishman more worthily,” he declared, “than by joining to claim your rights as freemen that day” (quoted in Taylor 366).<sup>9</sup> In 1849, Cooper wanted to make what Whitmore foresaw of “Shakspere’s birthday in the future” come true today. He argued that Shakespeare’s anniversary should be declared a national holiday, like Burns night, and that “[o]ur order ought to see to this; for the unequalled woolstapler’s son belongs to us” (*Cooper’s Journal* 15.1, 28 April 1849: 118). Two years later still, in 1851, Cooper fulfilled one of the great desires of his life, making a pilgrimage to Stratford and kneeling on Shakespeare’s grave.

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Cooper demonstrates more explicitly and forcefully than Garrick does that Shakespearean singularity – the sheer, irreducible life of his characters – can facilitate a politics of freedom. But I have spoken thus far only about English traditions, and I now want to open this up to equally important European traditions of associating Shakespeare with emancipation and political change. The international potential of freedom in Shakespeare was in fact already evident at the 1769 Jubilee. “It was not confined to the English only,” reported *The Public Advertiser*, “for the Scotch and the Irish were as eager in paying their devotion” (3). And the part played there by the Scot, James Boswell, sufficiently demonstrates

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<sup>8</sup> See also Thomas Cooper’s letter, dated 29 August 1842 to the *Northern Star* (3 September 1842: 6).

<sup>9</sup> See also *Cooper’s Journal* (1.21, 9 June 1849: 170). It should be admitted Cooper is fired up by Milton as much as Shakespeare in this passage.



that the first Shakespeare jubilee really was not just English for the English. Boswell came to Stratford resplendent in the costume of a Corsican chief.

Boswell's commitment to Corsica was not at all casual. He visited Corsica, went native with the rebels there, and launched himself when he returned into an elaborate newspaper campaign intended ultimately to persuade the British government to intervene and support them. He personally raised money to send arms to Corsica, and he edited a volume of essays "in favour of the brave Corsicans." But his "little monument to liberty" was his own book: *An Account of Corsica; The Journal of a Tour to That Island, and Memoirs of Pascal Paoli* (the Corsican rebel leader) (Boswell xvii). It was a great success in Britain and in Europe, and it had a real impact on European politics. The French government commissioned a translation, and the British sent secret supplies to the rebels. But, in spite of Boswell's efforts, Britain was not about to declare war on France on behalf of a small island of apparently little strategic interest, and the rebellion had been decisively routed by the time of the Stratford Jubilee. But that did not stop Boswell from hitching his one-man international liberation movement to Garrick's Shakespeare festival. His diary entry for 2 September 1769 tells how, in preparation for Stratford, he sought out "an embroiderer in Bow Street, Covent Garden; gave him, cut out in paper as well as I could, the form of a Corsican cap, and ordered *Viva la Libertà* to be embroidered on the front of it in letters of gold" (Boswell 288). Two days later he was tramping all over London searching for other Corsican necessities, then happily observing that he could get it all in his "travelling-bag, except my musket and staff." The staff he describes as "a very handsome vine with the root uppermost, and upon it a bird, very well carved." "I paid six shillings for it," he records. "I told the master of the shop, 'Why, Sir, this vine is worth any money. It is a Jubilee staff. That bird is the bird of Avon'" (Boswell 291-92). Only a deep and natural association of Shakespeare and freedom will make of Boswell's Corsican kit and a staff that might have been carved in Arden such a miraculously coherent ensemble. It is, I think, a wonderful icon of the internationally significant association of Shakespeare and freedom as it was forged in the definitively English celebration of Shakespeare in 1769.

Cooper, too, looked abroad as much as he looked to Shakespeare. He welcomed the "wonders" and "political earthquake" of 1848, which he called "the most remarkable year of the nineteenth century" (Cooper, *Life* 301, 310). And his career confirms Boswell's dramatic statement that an enthusiasm for Shakespeare really is not incompatible with a

passion for international freedom. In the pages of *Cooper's Journal*, the same William Whitmore who had conjured visions of "Shakespeare's Birthday – in the Future" also offered encouraging verses to the Hungarian revolutionary Kossuth: "Kossuth, droop not, the Magyar's strength matures: / The phoenix, Freedom, aye will spring replete / With fresh life-vigour from the ashes of defeat!" (Whitmore 56). And, for his part, John Alfred Langford, wrote from Birmingham for *Cooper's Journal*, these lines "To Kossuth": "The annals of the world contain no name, / At which we freely with more reverence bow, / Than thine, immortal Kossuth!" (Langford 198).

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I began with reference to Kossuth's note to George Dawson, found in the Shakespeare Centre Library in Archive. Who was this "immortal" man? Alas, outside Hungary, his memory has proved all-too-mortal, and he tends therefore to need some introduction today. An ardent liberal nationalist, Kossuth sought freedom for Hungary from Austria. He was imprisoned for a year in 1837, and immediately sentenced to a further four years; though he was liberated in 1840, the strict confinement had damaged his health. He demanded a parliament for Hungary and constitutional government for the rest of Austria in 1848, briefly becoming President-Regent of the Hungarian Republic in 1849, before the Russians interfered and Kossuth was forced to leave his beloved country. He travelled widely, before settling in Italy, becoming something of a cause célèbre throughout Europe and in the United States, which found his political stand congenial to its own founding ethos. A bust of him in the US Capitol is decorated with the inscription, "*Father of Hungarian Democracy, Hungarian Statesman, Freedom Fighter.*" Abraham Lincoln, no less, called Kossuth the "most worthy and distinguished representative of the cause of civil and religious liberty on the continent of Europe" (Lincoln 376).

And, like Cooper, who read Shakespeare behind bars when imprisoned for rioting in the Potteries, Kossuth, too, read Shakespeare in prison. He repeatedly identified freedom with Shakespeare, and in the London Tavern in 1853 he claimed to have derived his own politics of freedom from the English dramatist. What was presented to him there was "a neatly-constructed model of Shakespeare's house at Stratford-upon-Avon, in which was placed a splendidly-bound copy of 'Knight's Shakespeare,' ornamented with the arms of the Kossuth family, and

elaborately decorated in crimson, silk and gold.” On the front of this was a silver plate, which was inscribed as follows: “Purchased with 9215 pence, subscribed by Englishmen and women, as a tribute to Louis Kossuth, who achieved his noble mastery of the English language, to be exercised in the noblest cause, from the page of Shakespeare.”<sup>10</sup>

In his acceptance speech, Kossuth explained that Shakespeare had taught him not only to speak (English) but also “something besides”: politics. Kossuth knows that to claim to have learned his politics of freedom from a dramatic poet might be a surprising thing.

*What, politics from Shakespeare?*

But he is undeterred.

*Yes, gentlemen.*

He further said that “the best thanks he could give for this testimonial, and similar honours, was the assurance that he and his country would endure anything, and wait any time, but would never give up the resolve of retrieving independence.” And with that a large crowd of ordinary English men and women mixed with radical big-hitters of the day – including Richard Cobden, Douglas Jerrold and Sir Joshua Walmsley – went berserk in a rapture in which the love of English Shakespeare was perfectly continuous with selfless enthusiasm for a Hungarian freedom fighter.

Let us return for a moment to contemplate the rich gift that the meeting had given to Kossuth. He kept the model on his desk while in exile in Turin, and I tracked it down to the Hungarian National Library. The edition of Shakespeare’s complete works which Kossuth received was “superbly bound in mulberry-coloured morroco.” The case containing the books was “a model of Shakespeare’s house, very delicately rendered by Messrs. Howitt of High Holborn.” The account in the *Illustrated London News* gives further detail:

The interior and exterior are of white holly, to represent lime-wash; the outside transverse timbers of black oak. The roof is made of birch, to represent

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<sup>10</sup> Quotations are from “Presentation of the Shakespeare Testimonial to Kossuth.” The source appears to be the *Illustrated London News* (15 May 1853: page number unknown). See Lemuel Matthews Griffiths (88) at the Library of Birmingham; see also Andrew Murphy (149).

thatch. The doors are of brown oak, with black oak graininess. On a silver plate above the centre window is the inscription.

I suggest that lovingly encasing the books in this way eloquently expresses the conviction that a life can be made out of Shakespeare. And I suggest that dedicating not only Shakespeare's books, but also Shakespeare's house, to a Hungarian freedom fighter makes the surprising assertion that Shakespeare and Stratford model the new moral and political world for which Kossuth was fighting.

I am attempting to recover – and, indeed, to *recreate* – a lost tradition of Shakespearean freedom that extends from Garrick, through Cooper, to Kossuth. As I hope is clear by now, the Shakespearean careers of these charismatic men are very evidently related, and we can point to, as it were, genetic links between them. The line between Garrick and Cooper's Shakespearean efforts to extend the franchise can be traced via the association between Garrick and Wilkes, as well as in the evident indebtedness of Whitmore and Cooper's ambitions for Shakespeare's birthday to the original Garrick Jubilee. And there are subsequent connections between Cooper and Kossuth as well. Douglas Jerrold – who chaired the Shakespeare tribute to Kossuth in the London Tavern – was also instrumental in publishing Thomas Cooper. And while Kossuth was fighting the Emperor in his Hungarian homeland, Ernest Jones, a Chartist leader somewhat to the left of Cooper, was unwittingly following Kossuth in asking to read Shakespeare in prison – though, unlike Kossuth's, Jones's request was refused. Jones was another radical in whom literary and theatrical pretensions and emancipatory politics came together. A friend of the actors Charles Kean (son of Edmund) and Charles Kemble, he had written several plays and dreamed of becoming a playwright, before turning to poetry (Taylor 361).<sup>11</sup> And in case we are still inclined to think the beautiful Shakespeare tribute to Kossuth a winsome one-off, I should add that Jones's comrade on the left of Chartism, George Julian Harney, a friend of Marx and Engels – who was imprisoned around the same time as Cooper for his part in the Lancashire Plug Plot riots in 1843 – was also presented with a complete Shakespeare in “an artistically carved oaken box.” “Old Chartists,” the *National Reformer's* correspondent avers,

can remember the *Red Republican*, and new strugglers for freedom ought to recognise that the political liberty we use was by the persistent efforts of

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<sup>11</sup> See also the memoir of Ernest Jones's life in the *Manchester City News* (18 January 1919: 4).

those who, like George Julian Harney, had to answer in the felon's dock for the cause. ("George Julian Harney" 278)

Garrick did not answer for the cause in the felon's dock, but Cooper, Jones, Harney and Kossuth did, and all of them were associated with Shakespeare: ample confirmation that, for some at least, the expressive freedom of Shakespeare's characters opens naturally into activism in favour of political change. All of these men tap into Shakespeare's characterisation as both a lively inspiration and an existential mandate for a pluralist politics even as they exemplify the promise of such a politics in their own vividly Shakespearean self-realization. The flamboyance of Shakespearean personality is not, in this lost tradition, opposed to politics, as it so often was in the culture wars of the 1990s, where it was aligned with a sort of privileged aesthetic attitude. No, in this important alternative tradition the flamboyance of Shakespearean personality is the source of a joyous, affirmative politics of its own, one which finds in Shakespeare's central achievement of creating characters who are more spirited and alive than any we have seen before or since a political as well as a personal *promesse de bonheur*. That tradition has faded, if it has not been utterly eclipsed; but it was hardly a flash in the pan.

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Evidently, then, there was at least a Shakespearean tincture to Kossuth's fight for freedom. But that alone will not, I think, explain what his handwritten note to George Dawson is doing in the Shakespeare Centre; I do not, for instance, believe that Kossuth actually lectured *on Shakespeare* in Birmingham. But Kossuth's Shakespearean associations were bolstered by Dawson's. And I want to suggest that Dawson was disposed to see Kossuth's advent as a Shakespearean phenomenon, whether the Hungarian hero expressly linked his fortunes to Shakespeare or not.

Dawson very much fits into the progressive political story I have been telling here. In March 1859 he presided at a lecture given by Cooper at the Oddfellows' Hall, Birmingham, and he was well-known to and shared radical platforms with Jerrold (Wilson 122). It was Dawson who called the first meeting on English soil in favour of Kossuth's Hungarian insurrection against Austria (Wilson 110). And though all but forgotten today, Dawson was the most creative and influential figure in the history of England's second city in the period of its greatest and most



significant flourishing. His statue stood in what is now Chamberlain Square alongside the much more abstract tribute to Birmingham's most celebrated politician, the reforming mayor Joseph Chamberlain, which is still standing; and what is more, the Chamberlain monument was clearly and fundamentally linked to the much more animated and personal monument to Dawson, which was not dismantled till 1951.

Chamberlain himself said, "It is a great thing to say of a man that he has influenced the life of a great town, and it is true, and we know it, that if this great town . . . has its special characteristics . . . these . . . are chiefly due to the teachings of George Dawson" (George Dawson Collection 21: 1-4). It was Dawson's vision which Chamberlain put into practice and, as a result, by the 1890s American observers were calling Birmingham the best governed city in the world (Briggs 184).

If Dawson is remembered at all today, it is for his so-called Civic Gospel. To Dawson, according to the academic-turned-MP-turned-Director-of-the-Victoria-and-Albert-Museum, Tristram Hunt, the city was "the new corpus" (Hunt 327). Dawson promoted one great common, energetically progressive life, one which included everything – politics and culture, science and the arts and religion. His vision brought together all the different aspects of human life, but also the people in general. This double convergence, for Dawson, was religious in its significance: he spoke of "the great genius of the Christian religion . . . all things for all men: the highest to kiss the lowest: the manifestation of God in the world in order that the meanest of mankind might be brought to a knowledge of Him" (Dawson 160). In the same landmark speech, he suggested that the opening of Birmingham's Corporation Library announced to the world "that one of the highest offices of civilization is to determine how to give access to the masterpieces of art and of literature to the whole people." Such "freedom" he claimed was the "glory" of the Corporation Library (Dawson 160). One of the greatest glories of his civic gospel, as well as the most important surviving monument to him, is the Birmingham Shakespeare Memorial Library: a world-class research library that is still unique in the world in that it belongs to *all the people of Birmingham*. "Having watered the streets, seen to the drainage, lighted the lamps, and laid down stones," Dawson suggested, the Town Council had thereby shown "that the range of its love and interest is the *range of humanity*" (Dawson 96; my emphasis).

Dawson welcomed as a salient characteristic of the modern age "an increasing intention to give everything to everybody," and he wanted specifically to give Shakespeare away (George Dawson Collection 11: 36). Shakespeare for him absolutely opened out into political change

and a new age of freedom. In a lecture in Sheffield in December 1846, he insisted poets were “seers, because they were believed to see further than other men.” He further insisted that “Shakespeare’s characters were creations, and men disputed not whether Hamlet was represented as mad, but whether or not he *was* mad.” And yet, Shakespeare had created not life as it is, but life as it shall be. “Realism must be checked by poetry,” he said, and “the students of the possible, admitting that things were bad, had [to have] full faith in the future” (George Dawson Collection 11: 108).

The plays, for Dawson, represented an expressly radical force:

There are things in Shakespeare that he would have been burned for, if he had not been a player. There is heresy enough to have carried him to endless stakes, political liberty enough to have made him a glorious Jacobin in evil days, and carried him to destruction and doom. If he had appeared as a divine, they would have burned him; as a politician, they would have beheaded him. What would the Tudors have made of him if they had been wise enough to understand him? But God made him a player. (Dawson 105)

Shakespeare, for Dawson, set out what he called “in deference to my clerical friends, the lay duty of mankind” (Dawson 83); he was the proponent of something like an alternative, a more secular and progressive religion. Ultimately, Dawson concluded that “[h]e who holds the cup to Shakespeare’s fount comes home full to the brim with the water of life – I say it very solemnly – the very water of life” (Dawson 100).

Such a vision of Shakespeare’s significance meant that Shakespeare could not be segregated from life as such, which meant he could not be kept out of politics. Dawson always insisted that “life should be a manifestation of one spirit, and that should be the result of the highest style of thinking” (George Dawson Collection 11:101).

The Kossuth note to Dawson *is* held at the Shakespeare Centre because there is a Shakespearean tincture to Kossuth’s fight for freedom, and because Dawson was a committed Shakespearean, but it is also held there, I suggest, because Dawson was for a time successful in persuading people that Shakespeare was not just part of the ever-changing process of life and politics in the way that everything else is, but instead was a vital agency for change, the repository of a futuristic vision of personal and social fulfilment.

Kossuth first landed on British shores in 1851. Dawson was there to greet him. At Southampton, he presented the Hungarian hero with an address from the men of Birmingham, and he was prominent in secur-



ing Kossuth's subsequent, extraordinary visit to the city ("Our Representatives" 92). When the Hungarian freedom fighter arrived at Small Heath outside the city centre, between sixty and seventy thousand men were there to escort him to a city centre festooned with the Hungarian tricolour (Langford, *Modern Birmingham* 401-04). As it were in token of lively Shakespearean associations, Kossuth's wife was presented with a gorgeously bound and illuminated volume of *Sentiments and Similes of W. Shakespeare, Selected from His Plays and Poems*, which is now held along with the tribute presented to him in the London Tavern in honour of "the great statesman" by the National Széchényi Library in Budapest. "Meanwhile," the Birmingham archive informs us, "the town was in a flutter of expectation and preparation":

Banners and flags of all colours and devices floated from every house between Small Heath and Five Ways. Groups of men wearing the insignia of different Orders, marched with music and banners through the streets. Then came the processions of the various trades, bearing emblems of their respective crafts. Foremost among them were the glassmakers, many of whom wore glass helmets, and bore in their hands rods of spiral crystal, surmounted with coloured streamers. Then came the venerable banner of the Old Political Union. Presently came a procession of gentlemen bearing aloft the Hungarian bannerette, surmounted by a Turkish crescent. Then came the Odd Fellows, of both Orders, wearing their regalia; and these were followed by the processions of gun makers, brassfounders, jewelers, brush makers, saddlers, tailors, shoemakers, bricklayers, stonemasons, and japanners; and finally came the men of Coventry, Leicester, Wolverhampton, Walsall, and other towns, all making their way to the rendezvous at Small Heath. (George Dawson Collection 1:55)

The same source suggests: "Certainly not fewer than three hundred thousand persons must have taken part in the day's proceedings" (George Dawson Collection 1:56). To put that figure in perspective, it is not far short of the then total population of Birmingham. "Kossuth," we are told, "was dressed in a tight fitting, braided, blue military surtout closely buttoned to the throat, and wore a low crowned dark green felt hat with a drooping ostrich feather. In response to the shouting he uncovered and bowed gracefully" (56). Evidence of the broad appeal of the occasion is provided by a printed song sheet of "Kossuth's Welcome to Birmingham." I do not know the tune, but it reads as follows:

You merry men of England,  
     Come let us all rejoice,  
 And loudly cheer the brave Kossuth,  
     With a free and willing voice;  
 He is the great Hungarian Chief,  
     For liberty he stood out,  
 So welcome him to Birmingham  
     With a loud and glorious shout.

## CHORUS

So welcome the Hungarian bold,  
     And cheer him through the van,  
 He nobly fought for Liberty,  
     To claim the rights of Man.  
 The day that he came in the town  
     It was a glorious sight,  
 To see the trades of Birmingham  
     All meet him with delight,  
 The banners from the different towns  
     Were quickly seen unfurl'd.  
 And nobly borne before the Chief,  
     An example to the world.

...

The people shouted heartily,  
     The music loud did play,  
 And thousands by the railroads  
     Were wending of their way;  
 Towards the Bull-ring in the town,  
     To see this man of might,  
 They would not stop to have a drop,  
     For fear they'd lose the sight.

...

At the great Town Hall, in Birmingham  
     A banquet will be held,  
 In honour of this warrior bold,  
     For his valour in the field;  
 And let us hope that one and all  
     Who wishes Kossuth well,  
 Will post the pony in a trice,  
     And be among the swells.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Printed broadside by W. PRATT, Printer, No. 82, Digbeth, Birmingham; George Dawson Collection (1: 61 [1st leaf]).

At that banquet in the Town Hall, a handwritten account suggests,

Kossuth was visibly affected at the enthusiastic greeting he received and after the dinner was over and he rose to acknowledge the toast referring to himself he was so deeply affected as to be unable for a time to proceed – he wept for a time like a child – his speech lasted two and a ¼ hours. (George Dawson Collection 1: 61 [2nd leaf])

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Thus, Kossuth's note to Dawson acknowledging the funds which they'd raised together for, let's face it, a further Hungarian revolution is held in the Shakespeare Centre Library and Archive because Dawson, the visionary behind the founding of Birmingham's civic Shakespeare library, held Kossuth to be a Shakespearean phenomenon *whether or not he was bigging up the Bard*. The account I have shared from the Birmingham archives can help us understand why. The procession of so many different men, from different places and guilds, from Small Heath to an English City Centre that was so comprehensively decorated in Hungarian colours remembers Garrick's Jubilee of 1769 but on a much greater scale, and in a much more ardently political key; and yet it is much more forgotten. Dawson would see it as perfectly continuous with Whitmore's evocation of "Shakspeare's birthday, in the future." The glass-makers in their glass helmets, twirling their rods of spiral crystal surmounted with Hungarian streamers, are an epitome of movingly large-minded internationalist industrial creativity. Kossuth's tears at Birmingham, and his great speech, suggest some great Shakespearean actor, or hero. The ballad written for, and presumably sung on, the occasion enlarges its scope to that of the general franchise which Dawson's Shakespeare library invited in, into the world of Shakespeare scholarship and, more importantly, the vision of vivid inclusivity that Dawson and Kossuth alike found in the plays.

These nineteenth-century men saw perhaps more clearly than we do that Shakespeare's is an art which encourages us to remain always, indefatigably open to the mobile, indeterminable possibilities that are engendered by the ongoing interaction of human selves now. As such, Shakespeare remains a vital agent for cultural and political change. We are living in a time where freedom has been tainted by its association not just with an ethically cynical (and, to my mind, unfortunately named) "neoliberalism," that favoured critical term for the free-market fundamentalism which demonstrably works in the interests of the few at the

expense of the many, and which was unleashed in a particularly virulent form on the world by the governments of Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher. Neo-liberalism has, in short, given freedom a bad name. We are also living in a time when the Right have commandeered the politics of freedom for a dangerously regressive nationalism. One way of reclaiming that more progressive passion for freedom which has been such a major driver of western modernity might be to return to Shakespeare's politics of freedom, and the largely forgotten struggle for freedom which it has inspired, a struggle for freedom that is epitomised by Garrick, Wilkes, Boswell, Cooper, Kossuth and Dawson.

It might make us modern yet.

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