Civil War Treasures: The Civil War And Reconstruction In A Shakespearean Idiom

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Feature Essay

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The works and words of William Shakespeare were a common cultural presence in both Great Britain and the United States throughout the nineteenth century, providing a means for both nations to comprehend a variety of national issues. His influence crossed all social classes through theater performances both refined and burlesque, more readily available editions of his works, art and music inspired by his plays, myriad literary allusions, the required reading of formal schooling, political discourse, and other common cultural references. English political caricatures and cartoons began employing Shakespearean themes in the eighteenth century as the Bard became firmly established as an unassailable national institution in Britain, and he would persist as a familiar subject in periodicals both highbrow and lower-class during the subsequent century. As Kathryn Prince has observed, “The periodicals of the nineteenth century initiated and propagated the habit of using Shakespeare to frame current events and thus to shape understanding.”¹

This installment of Civil War Treasures considers a sampling of political cartoons from both sides of the Atlantic that looked to William Shakespeare’s plays to explain issues in the American Civil War and Reconstruction. *Punch, or the London Charivari*, the famous British weekly satirical magazine established in 1841, had become a truly national institution by the time the American Civil War began and sometimes published cartoons on the war to join the many Shakespeare-themed contributions in its pages.² *Harper’s Weekly: A Journal of Civilization* is undoubtedly familiar and endearing to Civil War and Reconstruction historians both for its extensive coverage of the war and the ingenious cartooning of Thomas Nast, who drew for the periodical between 1862 and 1886. The LSU Libraries Special Collections holds original issues of both *Punch* and *Harper’s Weekly* for the years of the Civil War and Reconstruction.

A cartoon published early in the war on April 5, 1862, illustrated the general North-South dispute over slavery through the quarrel of Oberon and Titania from *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. In act 2, scene 1, Titania rebuffs Oberon's demand for possession of her Indian changeling boy, the son of her deceased votaress. Here Abraham Lincoln (portrayed as Oberon) and Titania (representing the state of Virginia), both with wings colored in their national flags, deliver slightly modified lines. The American Oberon asks, "I do but beg a little **nigger** boy, to be my henchman," only to be sternly refused by the Confederate Titania firmly clutching the hand of her child slave, "Set your heart at rest, the **northern** land buys not the child of me."³

Punch had included images of slaves in cartoons inspired by *Othello* and *The Tempest*, but the dilemma of determining the role of freedmen in the United States was the subject of an August 15, 1863, cartoon based on the famous scene of the apparition of Caesar's ghost in act 4, scene 3 of *Julius Caesar*. Set in Brutus' tent the night before the Battle of Philippi, Brutus reads a book while his attendant Lucius plays music for him. All are drowsy, so Lucius, Varro, and Claudius fall asleep, leaving only Brutus awake to see Caesar's ghost tell him he will see Brutus again when he perishes at Philippi. In the cartoon, Lucius is portrayed as a young, naïve black minstrel fast asleep with his banjo beside him, while the ghost of a stern-faced freedman reminds President Lincoln in exaggerated negro dialect, "I am dy ebil genus, massa LINKING. Dis child am awful Inimpressional." Lincoln is pictured reading a copy of *Joe Miller's Jests*, a popular joke book first published in 1739 and reprinted in numerous editions—a jab at Lincoln's famous sense of humor that will do him no good when deciding how to deal with this new class of Americans whom he has created by proclamation.⁴ Incidentally, Lincoln's humor was subjected to ridicule again in another Shakespearean cartoon published during the 1864 election that portrayed George McClellan as Hamlet holding the president's head in the place of Yorick's skull, reciting from act 4, scene 1: "I knew him, Horatio; a fellow of infinite jest . . . where be your gibes now?"

The postwar *Alabama* claims inspired a pair of dueling political cartoons between *Punch* and *Harper's Weekly* in the late spring of 1869. The English took the first shot on May 29 with a cartoon drawing on an exchange between Jack Falstaff and Prince Hal in the Boar's Head Tavern in act 3, scene 3 of *Henry IV Part 1*, where Falstaff bemoans his impecunious state and finds his rash words come back to haunt him:

PRINCE HENRY: Thou sayest true, hostess; and he slanders thee most grossly.

MISTRESS QUICKLY: So he doth you, my lord; and said this other day you ought him a thousand pound.

PRINCE HENRY: Sirrah, do I owe you a thousand pound?

FALSTAFF: A thousand pound, Ha! a million: thy love is worth a million: thou owest me thy love. Here the American “Sir Jonathan Falstaff” raises the sum to four hundred million, an outrageous amount demanded of the English for their role in abetting Confederate depredations on the high seas. Thomas Nast struck back a month later with a parodying cartoon published alongside the reprinted *Punch* creation. He quoted directly another tavern exchange between the two from act 2, scene 4: “Here comes lean Jack, here comes bare-bone. How now, my sweet creature of bombast! How long is’t ago, Jack, since thou sawest thine own knee?” Now a huge-bellied “Sir John Bull Falstaff” is featured with “fair play” and “honest neutrality” written on his knees, concepts he seems unable to see with his eyes or observe in his actions. A copy of “Sumner speech” is mashed angrily in his hand, an allusion to the April 13, 1869, speech by Senator Charles Sumner of Massachusetts, chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, demanding \$2 billion in damages, or alternatively, the ceding of Canada to the United States.⁵

Nast loved to use Shakespearean allusions in his political cartoons, including those supporting Republican aims on Reconstruction. One amusing example borrowed from *Othello* to imagine the humiliation of Jefferson Davis. Nast’s April 9, 1870, cartoon for *Harper’s Weekly* portrays Davis as a seething Iago casting a bitter backwards glance at Hiram Revels, who in 1870 became the first African American to serve in Congress, ironically by taking the same Senate seat for Mississippi that Davis had resigned in 1861. The caption is borrowed from act 2, scene 1: “For that I do suspect the lusty Moor / Hath leap’d into my seat; the thought whereof / Doth, like a poisonous mineral, gnaw my inwards.”⁶

If you can’t come to Hill Memorial Library or your local library to see these cartoons on their original printed pages, the HarpWeek website has collected all 119 of Thomas Nast’s Shakespearean-themed creations in a finely edited “Nast and Shakespeare” webpage.

¹ Jonathan Bate, *Shakespearean Constitutions: Politics, Theatre, Criticism, 1730-1830* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989); Kathryn Prince, "Shakespeare in the periodicals," in *Shakespeare in the Nineteenth Century*, ed. Gail Marshall (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 63.

² Alan R. Young, *Punch and Shakespeare in the Victorian Era* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2007).

³ *Punch*, April 5, 1862, p. 137.

⁴ *Punch*, November 9, 1861, p. 187, January 24, 1863, p. 35, August 15, 1863, p. 69.

⁵ *Punch*, May 29, 1869, p. 223; *Harper's Weekly*, June 26, 1869, p. 413.

⁶ *Harper's Weekly*, April 9, 1870, p. 232.