

## Reclaiming Shakespearean Freedom



What *good* is Shakespeare? The proliferation and specialisation of Shakespeare studies tend to have the unfortunate effect that we neglect the big question of why we bother with him at all. One of the great merits of Jonathan Bate's elegant and important book *The Genius of Shakespeare* was that it faced up to this question, but Bate's book is about twenty years old now, and we need to renew its effort.<sup>1</sup> After the World Shakespeare Festival that was central to the Cultural Olympiad of 2012, and the four-hundred-and-fiftieth birthday celebrations of 2014, as well as 2016's four-hundredth anniversary of the playwright's death, there is a real and frankly reasonable danger of everybody without a vested interest in the playwright simply getting sick of him. And there's no logical reason why that sickness shouldn't prove terminal, why Shakespeare shouldn't finally begin to die off in human culture. *If* Shakespeare matters – and I mean *still* matters – then in this context especially, we need a less academic reason than the 'aspectuality' and 'performativity' which Bate defines as salient qualities of Shakespeare's genius.<sup>2</sup> Bate is pointing to important truths – about Shakespeare's ambivalence, about his philosophical as well as aesthetic commitment to the realisation of character in action. But we now need a more direct and powerful way of expressing the poetry and reality of what Shakespeare has, in the past, given human life; in the wake of the 2012, 2014 and 2016 celebrations of Shakespeare, we need a better reason why we should continue to lavish such disproportionate attention on this long-dead Warwickshire poet-playwright. This book argues that Shakespeare means freedom. That is why the plays matter, and not just aesthetically but also in terms of the impact they historically have had and can continue to have on personal and political life in the world.

Of course Shakespeare's achievement – the beauty of his language and dramatic embodiment of life, the breadth of his insight – cannot be reduced to freedom, or to anything else for that matter; but in these pages, I will argue that in and through that breadth and beauty freedom nevertheless emerges as a supreme Shakespearean value, one which has played an important part in the history of culture and which we need to reclaim now. But what is freedom, and what does it mean to invoke it as a surpassing value in Shakespeare? It's impossible to formulate a satisfactory answer quickly. For in the plays as in life, freedom is richly various; if that's one reason for its complex appeal and poetry, it also makes it hard to get hold of. We might instinctively *know* what it means, but it's difficult to conceptualise and *say* what it means. Shakespeare's plays crystallise a number of different kinds of freedom dramatically, and that can give us a first steer on what it is and why it matters in general.

One central kind of freedom, in the Western tradition, is *the freedom to be yourself*. Such existential freedom is more comprehensive and profound than the freedom to *do what you like*, though that certainly contributes to it. As the famed creator of some of the world's most vital and substantial characters, Shakespeare affords excellent examples of this existential freedom. Take Falstaff, for instance. The very fatness of the fat knight expresses his condition of superabundant liberty, as becomes apparent the moment we meet him. Falstaff's first words in Shakespeare frame a question you'd think was innocent enough, 'Now, Hal, what time of day is it, lad?' But instead of saying five past three, for example, Hal lays bare Falstaff's freedom from such distractions. 'Unless hours were cups of sack, and minutes capons, and clocks the tongues of bawds, and dials the signs of leaping-houses, and the blessed sun himself a fair hot wench in flame-coloured taffeta,' he says, 'I see no reason why thou shouldst be so superfluous to demand the time of day' (*1 Henry IV*, 1.2.1–10).<sup>3</sup> Time, in this utterance, stands for duty, industry, self-control. Hal's Salvador-Dalí-like metamorphosis of its elements and appurtenances into the pleasures of drinking, eating and sex announces Falstaff's emancipation from such constraint. And yet, this speech does more than afford memorable images of Falstaff's freedom; it *participates* in that freedom in a crescendo of imagined indulgences – from drink, to food, to sex; from the tongues of bawds (a foretaste of tongues of whores), to 'leaping-houses' (whose name anticipates energetic release), to that 'fair hot wench in flame-coloured

taffeta' (a phrase leaning towards luxurious climax). That such an irresistible creature has morphed out of 'the blessed sun himself' has a blasphemous implication; in the theatre, 'blessed sun' could be heard as 'blessed *son*'. This is a speech which doesn't just transgress against conventional religion but begins to remake it in the image of Falstaff's subversive and sensuous freedom, with the crucified messiah transmuting into a red-hot prostitute.

Falstaff is of course delighted by this. 'Indeed you come near me now, Hal,' he murmurs (1.2.11), before continuing the game with his own, differently alluring fantasy: 'when thou art king,' he says, 'let not us that are squires of the night's body be called thieves of the day's beauty. Let us be "Diana's foresters", "gentlemen of the shade", "minions of the moon"' (1.2.20–3). Such wistful phrasing has a cool and elegant dignity clearly meant to counterpoint Hal's hot whore. And it's an excellent joke of course – one where the fat knight reveals by cold juxtaposition Hal's warm imaginative involvement in his own supposed excesses, and even as he does so stakes hilarious claim to a stately composure that is patently quite beyond him. But it's not just a joke. It also intimates, however teasingly, a transvaluation of values, whereby Falstaff recasts unbridled freedom in such a way as asserts its potential for beauty and dignity.

In this conversation between Falstaff and Hal, we see how fertile freedom is, how Falstaff's unbridled life stimulates Hal's wit, which in turn provokes Falstaff's epiphany. Harry calls Falstaff 'fat-witted' (1.2.2). He means hung over, half-asleep; but he also, surely, means to acknowledge, stimulate and point out to the audience the expansive largeness of Falstaff's mind. When, in both parts of *Henry IV*, Falstaff takes up his own 'great belly' as a theme for comic celebration, he further encourages us to see his fatness as but the outward and visible sign of an uncontainable spirit of freedom (2 *Henry IV*, 1.2.133–4). 'Well, the truth is, Sir John,' says the Lord Chief Justice, 'you live in great infamy'; with his hands on his vast girth, Falstaff answers, 'He that buckles himself in my belt cannot live in less' (2 *Henry IV*, 1.2.125–7). Falstaff cannot be contained by ordinary decorums, nor can he even be confined by the play's end. More than any of Shakespeare's characters, he steps from play to play. And he steps through history too; that is why it's so easy to imagine him, even now, spilling out of his trousers while delightfully destabilising any given civic occasion, office

function, family wedding. In Falstaff, we touch something essential: the unrestrained subversive freedom of Shakespeare's own imagination.

Falstaff not only nails the freedom to be yourself; he magnificently exemplifies its value. But freedom can also take an almost opposite form, that of *the freedom to be different*. The fat knight gives us the scandalous freedom of a mature person who lives his (or her) own life entirely beyond respectability, but Shakespeare equally speaks to the kind of freedom most associated in our time with adolescence or mid-life crisis. This is the freedom not of being (what you are) but *becoming* (what you might be), the freedom to cast off all that you have been till now in a sudden, insurgent desire to be otherwise. One Shakespearean character who exemplifies this self-subverting freedom is Rosalind. At the beginning of *As You Like It*, she clearly is a good girl, 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). 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 isn't so much a charter to be and enjoy your self as the liberty to destroy your established identity in the act of stepping into a whole new existence. And this, too, is a very Shakespearean thing, 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.

A further, still more venturesome kind of freedom is *the freedom to enter evil*. Rosalind's and Falstaff's freedom is subversive in an enjoyable, relatively safe fashion. We experience Rosalind's new life as Ganymede as marvellous self-expansion; Falstaff, too, remains essentially delightful, because we are not encouraged to think too long or hard about those he is letting down or exploiting. And yet, Falstaff's freedom does have its cruelties – his indifference to his soldiers, the extra wound he dishes out to Hotspur's corpse. But if in Falstaff Shakespeare starts to open up the morally dubious side of freedom, elsewhere he goes much further. When at the beginning of *King Lear*, for instance, Edmund repudiates traditional constraints and beliefs – not least about his illegitimacy – he may remind us of Rosalind or Falstaff, but his is a wilfully illegitimate kind of freedom, one which spins a positively immoral vocation out of his illegitimate birth. It initiates a career of deliberate and murderous treachery, and it can't be

excused as high spirits or recuperated into any kind of decency. If this darkens Edmund's dramatic life, at the same time it lends it an extra, glamorous power. Edmund puts it in tumescent terms: 'I grow; I prosper. / Now gods, stand up for bastards!' (1.2.21–2). Wicked freedom stands revealed as erotic intensification.

In Edmund, self-assertive freedom takes a turn for the worse, but freedom is equally found in Shakespeare in forms of life which are opposite to self-aggrandisement. Rosalind's 'swashing' liberation may be one of the glories of *As You Like It*, but Oliver's attempts at self-assertion in the same play are not at all successful. It is only when he is saved by the younger brother he has been jealously trying to put down that he is liberated – liberated *from self* into a life of love. Looking back on his earlier, unregenerate life, he ventures, beautifully:

'Twas I, but 'tis not I. I do not shame  
To tell you what I was, since my conversion  
So sweetly tastes, being the thing I am.

(4.3.134–6)

Falstaff finds freedom in being what he is, whereas Rosalind finds it in becoming what she's not. Edmund forges a glamorous kind of freedom in wicked self-assertion, but Oliver tastes sweet freedom only when he's shocked out of self-interest. Freedom in Shakespeare is unpredictable, and the fact that we don't ever quite know where or when it might transpire makes an important contribution to the interest and appeal of the plays, both for the characters and the audiences.

I propose that Shakespeare can help us see freedom less as a substantial thing or concept and more as a specific and welcoming disposition towards life. For the plays suggest that the forms of freedom are as various as life is; they suggest freedom can be found wherever life is affirmed. As often as not in Shakespeare, freedom is a thrilling surprise, a kind of secular blessing or grace. You might expect to discover or secure it in triumph, but Antony and Cleopatra find it instead in death, 'which shackles accidents and bolts up change', and failure, which enables their splendid exit from the cramping conditions of culture and mortality (*Antony and Cleopatra*, 5.2.6). As we shall see in the course of this book, the same might be said for Hamlet.

Freedom in Shakespeare is an open question. We have only just begun to respond to its presence in the plays, but I hope I have done enough to demonstrate that it requires a wide-angled approach. I want this book to do justice to the difficult and differentiated breadth of Shakespearean freedom, not to narrow the lens *a priori* and make it sharper or neater. It is the complexity of freedom, including its moral complexity, that makes it interesting, alluring, sometimes tragic. In what follows, I will try to incorporate as much as I can of what freedom is in the plays, as well as something of what Shakespearean freedom becomes through the modern epoch, and what it might do for contemporary life and culture.

But I am leaving an important thing out. I have suggested that freedom of the most intense and existential kind is the freedom of being or becoming yourself. I have also suggested that freedom is self-sovereignty, self-possession and sheer enjoyment of life, that it is a welcoming and affirmative disposition towards life, wherever that is found. But so far I have been dealing only with examples of individual freedom, and freedom has an important collective aspect. Self-sovereignty and enjoyment of life work, I think, for national and larger political as well as subjective freedoms; they help explain something of the excitement and warmth of feeling which nationalism or broader identifications such as Zionism, Christendom or Pan-Slavism can involve. At the end of this chapter and elsewhere in the book, we will see that nationalism has often derived a powerful impetus from Shakespearean freedom. But there are tensions between subjective, familial, national and larger political identifications as alternative spheres of freedom, and these are tensions which sometimes tear apart the lives of individuals, families and nations. We don't have to look far for Shakespearean evidence. It is clear that Juliet transgresses against and compromises the Capulets' sense of themselves by falling for their enemy's son, and it's clear that this entails agonising consequences for her as well as them. *Coriolanus* presents a more complex case. The hero here becomes convinced that Rome is falling short of its own proper *Romanitas*, leaving him alone as the embodiment of its properly 'free contempt' for the mere needs and dispositions of the plebs (2.3.189). That is why when the city banishes him, Coriolanus feels able to say back to Rome, 'I banish you' (3.3.127). But what complicates this further is that Rome has banished Coriolanus at the behest of the people, who are agitating for a new, more democratic kind of freedom in a new kind of

Rome. The way they see it, Coriolanus doesn't stand for the freedom of the city at all but rather for the exclusive, unjust and outrageous freedom of his class.

All of Shakespeare's characters have to fight for their freedom through and sometimes against the larger freedoms of family, class, nation and so on; but beyond or perhaps below this, the basic sociality of Shakespeare's art – the fact that even his most splendid characters can only secure their freedom by interacting with others – lends Shakespearean drama an inherent political suggestiveness. How might such freedom be extended – even shared out equally – among the *dramatis personae*? What sorts of interaction, on and off stage, tend to promote the freedoms which Shakespeare dramatises? Some kinds of freedom (Oliver's) are clearly compatible with the free flourishing of others, but others (Edmund's) are actually forged by deliberately violating them. An *excessively* generalised freedom – which we might think of in contemporary terms of 'political correctness' – is likely to diminish the quality of freedom as a feeling for and identification with life. And if that's the case, as a society we need to know what scope, moral or otherwise, there is for the singular, amoral and even immoral freedom of the individual in relation to the politics of freedom in general.

This book will argue that freedom in Shakespeare is always a struggle for freedom. Freedom in Shakespeare is also a struggle between characters and from play to play over what freedom *means*. And it is a struggle that is played out time and again in the life and lives, and progressive political movements, which Shakespeare has stimulated or inspired. This struggle will never be over. Unlike Wagner, Shakespeare makes no attempt to give us an overarching myth. He offers only a series of plays. One comes to an end; another begins. There is no final, definitive synthesis. And in spite of the links and resonances between them, each play retains its own separate integrity. *The Tempest* cannot wholly absorb *King Lear*, or for that matter *Troilus and Cressida*, or *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Shakespeare expresses the unavoidable and unending power of contingency. Even after Shakespeare – even after the four-hundredth anniversary of his death – life goes on. My hope in this book is that reclaiming Shakespearean freedom might at the same time encourage a creative and hopeful orientation to its ever-new possibilities, without evading the moral complexities and pitfalls that entails.

The time is ripe, I believe, for a bold new argument in favour of Shakespearean freedom. In recent years, there have been striking intimations of a new recognition of it in mainstream literary and popular culture, but these hopeful signs have been snuffed out by a crippling diffidence about the good of the arts in general, and of Shakespeare in particular – as we shall now see.

## 1 What Good Are the Arts?

John Carey raised that big question in his book of the same title in 2005, and the book's popular success suggests a new appetite for it.<sup>4</sup> If, on the one hand, this conveys a hunger in contemporary culture for aesthetic meaning and value, on the other, it probably confesses a creeping suspicion that the arts aren't really any good at all. Carey offers some uncomfortable and, I will suggest, ultimately unsatisfactory conclusions. But, at the same time, he leads us towards the case for Shakespeare I want to make in these pages, as well as demonstrating the difficulties which in our time we appear to have in making it.

What, asks Carey, is a work of art? 'My answer,' he writes, is 'A work of art is anything that anyone has ever considered a work of art, though it may be a work of art only for that one person.'<sup>5</sup> The trouble is that this gives no grounds on which to build the case for aesthetic value or appreciation. Is art morally improving then? Carey doubts it, citing the French dandy anarchist poet Laurent Tailhade (a friend of Wilfred Owen) who, when a bomb was thrown into the French parliament in 1893, said that the victims didn't matter so long as the gesture was beautiful. Carey points to Hans and Shulamith Kreidler's scientific assessment of the *Psychology of the Arts*, which concluded that 'the widely shared belief that art can instruct the public, and help to attain a better state of affairs, lacks any factual backing.'<sup>6</sup> And he gives short shrift to the mystical account whereby art facilitates in the beholder states of transcendent oneness with the Universe. This, he scoffs, is simply a fanciful invention of the mid-eighteenth century.<sup>7</sup> Moreover, where people do report being ravished by art into states of ecstasy, it tends to make them selfish and disengaged rather than better people, he suggests, pointing to a 1960s survey by Marghanita Laski.<sup>8</sup> To nail the point that art appreciation doesn't necessarily make you a better person, Carey then turns to Frederic Spotts's book



*Hitler and the Power of Aesthetics*, which puts paid to the comforting fiction that Hitler had no taste by showing how the worst moral monster of the twentieth century was simultaneously the greatest art collector of all time.<sup>9</sup>

But if he gives up on the arts in general, Carey still wants to make a case for the importance of literature, and of Shakespeare especially. He claims that 'literature gives you ideas to think with', but painting can also do that – think of cubism, and of the fact that much contemporary art is deliberately 'conceptual'.<sup>10</sup> Carey lauds Shakespeare's 'superior indistinctness', for being 'vivid and nebulous'.<sup>11</sup> But Beethoven is no less superior and vivid and, given the non-linguistic nature of his medium, he is more indistinct and nebulous (or, if we want to put it more positively, more suggestive, less tied to denotative meaning). As the last sally of his book, Carey writes, 'If I had to choose one single Shakespearean thought to cling to when all else fails, it would not be from any of the great plays or major characters but from Parolles in *All's Well that Ends Well*.' The Shakespearean thought that Carey has in mind is the one Parolles utters after being utterly humiliated and ruined: 'simply the thing I am / Shall make me live' (4.4.310–11). The very last sentence of *What Good Are the Arts?* reads as follows: 'That thought may be useful for all of us in the end, and it is a different thought for each of us, because each of us must read "the thing I am" in a different way.'<sup>12</sup> It's hardly a knock-down endorsement of Shakespeare's value, or of the good of the arts in general.

But what is interesting about it is the sheer tentativeness with which it intimates an argument about Shakespearean freedom which it somehow isn't ready or able to own. Carey appreciates Shakespeare's almost musical combination of vividness and openness to interpretation. 'Simply the thing I am / Shall make me live': the fact that he adopts this as his own last word on the question of aesthetic value suggests an irreducible freedom to be oneself is not just the hallmark of Shakespeare's achievement but the good of the arts in general. And Carey's gloss on the phrase – 'each of us must read "the thing I am" in a different way' – imputes a comparable freedom to Shakespeare's readers. All told, he implicitly evokes a Shakespeare who portrays free individuals and submits them to the free judgement of individuals whose freedom their freedom reflects and affirms, but he can't quite bring himself to say this. And we find this same powerful but

disabblingly abashed desire to affirm Shakespearean freedom in mainstream popular culture as well.

## 2 London 2012

Perhaps the most weirdly compelling and certainly the most public invocation of Shakespeare in our time occurred when Kenneth Branagh opened the Cultural Olympiad of 2012 watched by an estimated global TV audience of some 900 million.<sup>13</sup> Costumed in top hat and fake whiskers as the pioneering Victorian engineer Isambard Kingdom Brunel, Branagh nonetheless spoke these words: ‘Be not afeard. This isle is full of noises, / Sounds, and sweet airs, that give delight and hurt not.’ Since you’re reading this book, you probably know that they originate from Caliban in *The Tempest* (3.2.135–6), and that they’re nothing to do with the famous engineer. But one wonders what the watching millions who *didn’t* know their Shakespearean provenance made of them.

*The isle is full of noises?!*

And even if you were one of the relative few, in the stadium or tuning in at home, who got the reference, you were likely to be bemused. As the first and most imposingly spoken words in the whole Olympic Opening Ceremony, they were meant to function as a kind of headline or even moral for the games, which moreover had a ‘Caliban’s Dream’ theme song. And the enormous ‘Olympic Bell’ – struck by Team GB cyclist Bradley Wiggins to announce the stage was set for Branagh – was inscribed: ‘LONDON 2012 / BE NOT AFEARD; / THE ISLE IS FULL OF NOISES’. In *The Tempest*, Caliban is the solitary indigenous inhabitant of an obscure island seemingly not much bigger than an indoor theatre, as well as, in Erin Sullivan’s phrase, ‘one of the most politically disenfranchised and dispossessed characters in all of Shakespeare’s plays’.<sup>14</sup> Why was he speaking, through Brunel, for this unprecedentedly public presentation of Britishness? How was his poignant moment of aboriginal inwardness meant to relate to Brunel’s achievements in engineering? And when Branagh positively hollered the climactic words of what was originally intended to be a quietly soothing as well as passionately inspired speech from the midst of Elgar’s swelling ‘Nimrod’ variation ‘in a manner’, as

Sullivan rightly observes, ‘more reminiscent of Henry V before his armies’, what kind of triumph was being proclaimed and celebrated?<sup>15</sup> And how was Caliban’s epiphany connected to the energetic dramatisation of the industrial revolution which succeeded it, seemingly to Branagh / Brunel’s great pride and satisfaction?<sup>16</sup> What was going on in this strange appropriation of Shakespeare?

I should say at this point that it’s not unusual, in modern times, for Caliban to stand for something beyond the purview of the play, and what he typically stands for is freedom. Aimé Césaire, the Martinique politician and poet of *negritude*, made him an icon of anti-colonialist resistance in his celebrated Shakespeare adaptation *Une tempête* (1969).<sup>17</sup> In Césaire’s play, Caliban’s ‘first word is “Uhuru!” which, as Bate observes, is Swahili for “freedom” and ‘his last utterance is a triumphant repetition of that word in French, “La liberté, ohe la liberté”’.<sup>18</sup> Of course in Shakespeare, this ecstatic freedom in fact boils down to Caliban’s self-subjugation to a drunken sailor; but Laurence M. Porter comments on the way in which Césaire rescues it from this ‘powerfully ironic context’, turning it instead ‘into the lucid affirmation of a new-found dignity’.<sup>19</sup> In a vein not untypical of *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human* (1998), Harold Bloom fulminates that ‘a poignant but cowardly (and murderous) half-human creature’ has ‘become an African-Caribbean heroic Freedom Fighter.’ ‘This,’ he goes on, ‘is not even a weak misreading; anyone who arrives at that view is simply not interested in reading the play at all.’<sup>20</sup> But Caliban’s potential to speak to the struggle for freedom is unarguably present in the play itself when he says, ‘This island’s mine by Sycorax, my mother’ (1.2.334–5). The most enthusiastically inspired critical response comes from Leslie Fiedler. ‘Even drunk,’ says Fiedler, ‘Caliban remains a poet and a visionary, singing [a] new freedom in a new kind of song’:

No more dams I’ll make for fish  
 Nor fetch in firing  
 At requiring  
 Nor scrape trenchering, nor wash dish.  
 ’Ban, ’ban, Cacaliban  
 Has a new master. – Get a new man!  
 Freedom, high-day! High-day, freedom! Freedom high-day, freedom!  
 (2.2.171–7)

Noting 'its Whitmanian long last lines,' Fiedler concludes rhapsodically: '[Caliban] has created something new under the sun, the first American poem.'<sup>21</sup>

Fiedler, writing in 1973, sees Caliban as not just 'the American Indian', but one who augurs a new epoch of sensual, aesthetic, cultural, racial and political freedom for all. What has happened in the critical tradition more broadly is that the historical struggle against imperialism has definitively let Caliban's potential for freedom out of the bottle and neither Bloom nor anyone else can get it back in.

Still, even in these liberal readings dating from the last half of the last century, Caliban remains a remote, marginal, oppositional figure, labouring far away from the centre of power to reclaim what is, aboriginally, his own. No-one, surely, expected him to turn up at the most public presentation of Britishness for decades, wearing a top hat, coolly passing himself off as Brunel, and as it were tapping his cane on British soil and saying, '*This island's mine.*' Certainly, in 1984, after race riots in Brixton, the St Lucian Nobel Laureate Derek Walcott imagined something very different:

With the stampeding hiss and scurry of green lemmings,  
 midsummer leaves race to extinction like the roar  
 of a Brixton riot tunnelled by water hoses;  
 they seethe towards autumn's fire – it is in their nature,  
 being men as well as leaves, to die for the sun.  
 The leaf stems tug at their chains, the branches bending  
 like Boer cattle under Tory whips that drag every wagon  
 nearer to apartheid. And, for me, that closes  
 the child's fairy tale of an antic England – fairy rings,  
 thatched cottages fenced with dog roses,  
 a green gale lifting the hair of Warwickshire.  
 'I was there to add some colour to British theatre.  
 'But the blacks can't do Shakespeare, they have no experience.'  
 This was true. Their thick heads bled with rancour  
 when the riot police and the skinheads exchanged quips  
 you could trace to the Sonnets, or the Moor's eclipse.  
 Praise had bled my lines white of any more anger,  
 and snow had inducted me into white fellowships,  
 while Calibans howled down the barred streets of an empire

that began with Caedmon's raceless dew, and is ending  
in the alleys of Brixton, burning like Turner's ships.<sup>22</sup>

Walcott's is a complex poem which struggles to reject Shakespearean Englishness. Its imagery is fractious, discontinuous, hard to get a fix on. We begin somewhere not in England, with lemmings: in the Arctic? 'Midsummer leaves' make a brief appearance only to be rushed unnaturally fast to a contradictory 'extinction': by water hoses towards autumn's fire. But if 'leaves' is a verb as well as a noun, and 'race' is a noun as well as a verb, there is a chilling pun in 'midsummer leaves race to extinction', which prepares us for the suggestion that the leaves are men 'as well as leaves', and that they 'die for the sun': men from the tropics, black men? At the same time, they remain leaves, their stems enchained, and so equally slaves? The tree of race is somewhere behind all this. Its branches are said to be 'bending like Boer cattle under Tory whips that drag every wagon nearer apartheid'; and with that the poem's angry line of thought seems itself to 'branch' out more clearly and simply, yet only for the branch of pastoral poetry to snap off for good. In this poem, a recognition of the riots gradually but inevitably overwhelms what remains of a Shakespearean impulse to delight in a green and pleasant England. That fantasy, now that it has been exposed as such, can be indulged and in terms that delightfully suggest Anne Hathaway's cottage in Shroton: fenced with dog roses, a fairy ring in the garden, a green gale lifting the hair of Warwickshire. But it can be indulged only in valediction, as a lost thing in a children's book which has to be shut forever. The Olympic Opening Ceremony dramatised how green and pleasant England gave way to the industrial revolution; for Walcott, its innocence is fatally compromised by political failure. Walcott, also a playwright, was in the UK, his poem tells us, in order 'to add some colour to British theatre'. At which point an anonymous voice immediately objects – 'But the blacks can't do Shakespeare, they have no experience' – and, surprisingly, the poem concurs (because Shakespeare has to be forsworn for political reasons?). It then shockingly proceeds to align Shakespeare's sonnets and plays with 'quips' (racist jokes?) traded between 'the riot police' and 'skinheads' acting in favour of 'the Moor's eclipse'. In the context of what was then happening in Brixton, this 'quip', a reference to *Othello*, is an especially horrible one, a casually poetical euphemising of brutal race hatred. Behind it are black

men and women from Brixton, their thick heads, as the poem tells us, bleeding with rancour.

And Walcott evidently wants to stand with *them*, not with Shakespeare, the coppers and the skins; but he finds that his own verse has been blanched by praise, snow, 'white fellowships'. He wants to stand with the Calibans whom he so vividly pictures at the end of his poem urgently howling down the barred streets of an empire. And he wants to stand with them in solidarity not just with their suffering but also with their rage. Moot here is the ambiguity of the preposition 'down'; Walcott's Calibans are howling 'down' in the sense of *along* barred streets of empire, but they also are howling so violently as to bring those streets and that empire down, to an end. And with the empire, the poem insists, must come its literature, even if it is a tradition so venerable as to stretch as far back as Caedmon: the first Anglo-Saxon poet. The dewiness of this origin has its wistful beauty but only till we remember that pastoral has been exposed as a lie in this poem, and while it contemplates Brixton and its resonances with apartheid, it can no more accept that English literature is 'raceless'. And yet – Walcott cannot find or forge a place entirely outside English literature and culture. Caliban is his last figure of resistance, and the final, apocalyptic conflagration it imagines remains, at the same time, a spectacular Turner sunset. Walcott's poem demonstrates the cultural-historical reasons why Shakespeare should in fact to be associated with unfreedom, but at the same time it confesses that it can't find a way of imagining freedom which is not itself Shakespearean.<sup>23</sup>

For Césaire, Caliban is a Caribbean freedom fighter; for Fiedler, he is a liberated Native American, fighting for and exemplifying a condition of personal and political freedom which should be of interest to us all. The Caliban who comes home to London in Walcott's impressive poem does so as one of many, howling down the barred streets of an empire and setting it ablaze. It's true, then, that Caliban has had a further, politically significant life beyond the limits of *The Tempest*, but the nature of that life makes it more rather than less extraordinary that he should have turned up in a top hat to speak for the whole history and reality of British culture.

And yet, and as if to insist that the inclusion of Caliban's speech wasn't just a casual or thoughtless gesture, it was spoken again on the Olympic stage, at the Closing Ceremony, two weeks later. This time Caliban's words were voiced not by Branagh, but by Timothy Spall, another very

established British actor, and Spall wasn't straightforwardly playing Caliban anymore than Branagh had. In fact, he outdid Branagh-as-Brunel in the guise of that acme of all British heroes, including Shakespeare: Winston Churchill. Spall-as-Churchill emerged from the top of a model of Big Ben to puff on a cigar and muse that the isle is full of noises; and it *was* full of noises, what with the excited crowd, the emphatically English music and the strange pageant of circling lorries, at least one of which was papered with a story headlined with the first line of a Shakespeare sonnet: 'My Mistress's Eyes Are Nothing Like the Sun.' Spall-Churchill-Caliban's delivery turned out to lack the clarity and authority of the otherwise equally bemusing Branagh-Brunel version, and the actor ultimately presented a rather pathetic prospect, subsiding into silence, marooned up Big Ben on an enormous roundabout, around which traffic continued to orbit senselessly . . .

But the Games still didn't give up on Shakespeare. They had another stab at incorporating Shakespearean significance into a third set-piece ceremony, though in terms of aesthetic confidence and impact this was the worst of the three. Its occasion, this time, was the Paralympic Opening Ceremony. Where Branagh and Spall had played Caliban at one remove, Ian McKellen now played Prospero more directly, but the words he spoke to a wheelchair-bound Miranda, played by disabled actress Nicola Miles-Wildin, weren't Shakespeare's:

Miranda! Miranda! Go out into the world! Will you be, for all of us gathering here, our eyes, our ears and our hearts? Shine your light on the beautiful diversity of humanity . . . Look up, stretch your wings and fly. Will you take this journey for all of us and will you set us free?<sup>24</sup>

These sentiments are admirable, but the vaguely iambic and heightened language is strained and repetitious: 'Miranda! Miranda!' 'our eyes, our ears and our hearts'. The last sentence is a bit coercive. I hope that reading Walcott's poem has suggested language sometimes has to come under strain in order to express experiential and political complexity, but McKellen's speech is strained by less than persuasive looseness. The worst phrase bears the most weight: 'beautiful diversity of humanity' is clichéd, excessively polysyllabic and awkward ('diversity', 'humanity'). But then this whole episode was perilously close to bathos throughout, and all the more so given the sentimentally overblown music and the fact that

Miranda and her wheelchair ultimately drifted off towards their brave new world in a sail boat that was simultaneously an upturned brick-red umbrella like something out of a children's TV show.

Branagh's was the best, but in truth none of these Shakespearean interludes really worked; certainly none of them had anything like the fierce power and resonance of the Walcott poem. It would be easy just to mock it all and have done with it, but I think it would be wrong to do so. Prospero, in *The Tempest*, talks of setting Ariel as 'free as mountain winds', and there is provocative potential in the idea of making Shakespeare's Miranda both a wheelchair user and an avatar of a different kind of freedom – a freedom which, presumably, doesn't so much transcend limitation as it is found within and transfigures limitation (*The Tempest*, 1.2.502–3). We have seen, earlier, that Caliban has inspired dissident critics and artists, 'howling down the barred streets of an empire', and in that context there's something exciting about him suddenly storming the centre and repossessing and even speaking for the history that has oppressed and excluded him. Indeed, it's a rather wildly exciting idea to imagine him seizing not the Bastille but Big Ben and assuming the authority of Churchill! My point is that Caliban's interventions at the Olympics nearly suggested a transformation of history and politics from within. Given his aboriginal credentials, making him politically exemplary does perhaps run the ideological risk of playing into a sinister ideology of blood and soil; but this danger is considerably minimised by the fact that the speech chosen as a central motif for the Olympics was one of soothing and tender susceptibility: '*Be not afeared . . .*'. Making it – rather than 'we shall fight them on the beaches' – Churchill's representative speech suggests a more peaceable kind of solidarity. As does making this same tender speech the stimulus to a revolution in industry. For all of the criticism I have offered, I also want to honour the fact that the use of Shakespeare within the ceremonies of the 2012 London Olympics got close to dramatising an extraordinarily comprehensive liberation, bringing the formerly excluded and despised to the centre of power and placing freedom at the heart of a gentler, more sensitive politics.

But if Caliban and the wheelchair-bound Miranda might have become Olympics icons of Shakespearean freedom, London 2012 muffled if it didn't altogether muff this; and it foundered on a crucial lack of confidence. Paul Prescott reports that Danny Boyle, the director of the Opening



Ceremony, told Culture Secretary Jeremy Hunt, ‘the whole thing is based on *The Tempest*.’<sup>25</sup> When Frank Cottrell Boyce, the screenwriter who scripted the event, articulated the dearest, most serious message of the Opening Ceremony in the Olympic Programme, he called it:

A single golden thread of purpose – the idea of Jerusalem – of the better world, the world of real freedom and real equality, a world that can be built through the prosperity of industry, through the caring nation that built the welfare state, through the joyous energy of popular culture, through the dream of universal communication. A belief that we can build Jerusalem. And that it will be for everyone.<sup>26</sup>

Amen to that: however hard it would be actually to bring it to pass, it surely is a worthy aspiration. But you will notice that Shakespeare has entirely dropped out of it. Questioned specifically about Caliban’s role, Boyce was evidently embarrassed: ‘If you analyse why, I’d say I don’t really know why – it’s a madly inappropriate speech in a way. Why the hell would Brunel be quoting Caliban?’<sup>27</sup> Like Carey, the London Olympics wanted to commit powerfully and unequivocally to Shakespearean freedom but somehow it just couldn’t.

### 3 The Robben Island Bible

Still, Shakespeare and freedom came together elsewhere in 2012, in ‘Shakespeare: Staging the World’: the impressive Olympic exhibition at the British Museum that ran from the 19th of July to the 25th of November, curated by Dora Thornton and Jonathan Bate. The prize and culminating exhibit there was the so-called Robben Island Bible, Sonny Venkatrathnam’s copy of the Alexander Shakespeare, disguised as a Hindi religious text and signed by Venkatrathnam and thirty-three other South African political prisoners. It was opened at the page where the name ‘N. R. Mandela’ and the date 16.12.77 appear against this passage:

Cowards die many times before their deaths,  
The valiant never taste of death but once.  
Of all the wonders that I yet have heard,  
It seems to me most strange that men should fear,  
Seeing that death, a necessary end,  
Will come when it will come.

(2.2.32–7)<sup>28</sup>

If the Olympic Ceremonies flirted with but in the end failed definitively to commit to Shakespearean freedom, you'd think the Olympic exhibition would now make the most of the remarkable fact that the greatest and most celebrated freedom fighter of our time had signed his name to a passage of Shakespeare while in prison. But even though this was clearly the reason for exhibiting the Robben Island Bible in the first place, 'Shakespeare: Staging the World' did not do this.

In the last words of the exhibition catalogue, Bate and Thornton write about the Robben Island Bible, 'Shakespeare's life did not cease with the "necessary end" of his death in 1616: his plays continue to live, and to give life, four centuries on, all the way across the great theatre of the world.'<sup>29</sup> The trouble with this pleasingly emphatic confirmation of Shakespeare's universality and transcendence is that it pulls in exactly the opposite direction to Mandela's identification with Shakespeare's words. What Mandela recognises in the passage from Shakespeare he signs is the necessity of dying, and dying moreover what could very well be a violent death; what he *gets* from recognising this is presumably encouragement and the comfort of knowing that something like his experience has been imaginatively shared by the world's greatest writer. It is ironic that this heroic acknowledgement of death accomplished via reading Shakespeare becomes, for Bate and Thornton, a proof of the Bard's deathless universality. They prefer aesthetic transcendence to mortal risk – and who wouldn't? Well, the answer to that is Mandela wouldn't or, rather, didn't.<sup>30</sup> His reading of Shakespeare embraces mortal risk. Bate's and Thornton's immediate restatement of the myth that Shakespeare is deathless and universal to that extent betrays Mandela's reason for putting his name to the lines he chose. Neil MacGregor, the then director of the British Museum, in an overlapping book titled *Shakespeare's Restless World*, which presents a related exhibition of 'an unexpected history in twenty objects', also ends with the Robben Island Bible. And his conclusion? 'The Robben Island Bible resoundingly vindicates the great truth that everyone can see in Shakespeare the mirror of their own predicament.'<sup>31</sup> Maybe, but what about the great and much more urgently specific truth that you've got to find the courage to die, even if that means to die violently, a truth which Mandela apparently found in Shakespeare, and one which may very well have stiffened his resolve? What about the very particular meaning that Shakespeare had in a bleak South African prison in

the 1970s where Mandela was still a political prisoner with no hope of release?

If Bate, Thornton and MacGregor pull too quickly away from Mandela's literally death-defying heroism into a more generalised celebration of Shakespeare's deathless universality, David Schalkwyk's sensitively rigorous treatment in *Hamlet's Dreams: The Robben Island Shakespeare* (2012) sells somewhat short the conjunction between Shakespeare and freedom which the Robben Island Bible suggests for opposite reasons. Himself a white South African as well as a Shakespeare professor, Schalkwyk's aversion 'to the exaggeration of Shakespeare's influence or importance' is redoubled by his sense of his own share of responsibility, despite an impressively liberal record, for South Africa's violent history.<sup>32</sup> This is a humbling quality of Schalkwyk's work, and I say so because you only have to think of the massive inequalities all across the globe to see that any of us in a position to write or read a book like this are ourselves guiltily complicit. To date, politically progressive cultural history has tended to be written in unproblematic solidarity with the victims – almost everyone will agree they were wronged and shouldn't have been. And of course such recognition matters; but if we are to change history in the future, what perhaps is needed more is recognition of our own guilt and a change of heart. What's needed in literary terms is a more repentant kind of cultural history, one written by the former oppressors, or at least by those who are associated with and have benefited from oppression. For Schalkwyk, the Robben Island Bible is a *temptation* – a temptation to a self-exculpating association of Shakespeare and freedom that will justify the way he has spent his life. Instead, and without in any way denying Shakespeare's aesthetic and moral interest – he in fact is a fine reader of the plays in the humanist tradition – Schalkwyk leaves us with a question, one which is as urgent as it is awkward: in the face of real, present-day oppression and suffering, what reason have we to continue praising the author who has already been praised above all others, and who, in South Africa, was moreover part of the assumed supremacy of white over black that fuelled and sustained oppression and suffering?<sup>33</sup>

And yet, Schalkwyk's sensitive anxiety about claiming too much for Shakespeare, and by extension for his own vocation as a white South African Shakespearean, perhaps prevents him from formulating the powerful connection between Shakespeare and freedom which the

Robben Island Shakespeare really does seem to suggest. Venkatrathnam has said: 'About six months before my due release date, I circulated *The Complete Works of Shakespeare* and asked my comrades there to select a line or passage that appealed to them and sign it. All of them chose lines of passages that inspired them and strengthened the resolve for the struggle.'<sup>34</sup> And as Schalkwyk notes, the first signature in the Robben Island is 'S. K. Venkatrathnam': 'His name appears in confident italics that expand across the space on the title page below the names of Shakespeare and the book's editor, Peter Alexander.'<sup>35</sup> Venkatrathnam's signature is thus, as Schalkwyk suggests, not just a simple assertion of ownership of the physical book but also a claim to moral parity with the two names it follows. I would add that, taken together with the other signatures which Venkatrathnam collected, it is an assertion on behalf of the political prisoners on Robben Island of equal ownership of and identification with the whole human world that Shakespeare depicted, which has since been recognised as one of the central achievements of Western art. Shakespeare, Venkatrathnam says, 'has a very peculiar place in the hearts and minds of people'; he 'uniquely represents the universal man'; he 'captures that essence.'<sup>36</sup> This may remind us of what Bate and Thornton, and MacGregor, say; but where their generalisations leave Robben Island behind, it is clear that this idea of a universal suffrage in the name of Shakespeare would have had real anti-apartheid edge actually on Robben Island. By finding themselves represented in this 'Bible' of Western secular culture, Venkatrathnam and the other prisoners who signed it were laying claim to the cultural and political representation which they were denied. By finding *themselves* in Shakespeare, those who did so were also implicitly signing up to Shakespeare's individualism, and in such a way as reveals the political implications of such a commitment more vividly than it might emerge in, say, an undergraduate tutorial in Oxford. Venkatrathnam is only secondarily making a claim about Shakespeare; his Robben Island Bible primarily lays claim to the human dignity which Shakespeare is taken to have expressed on behalf of the prisoners and the victims of apartheid more generally.

Schalkwyk is right to stress that many prisoners on Robben Island didn't sign up to Shakespeare; some signed for other reasons, because they had learned a speech in school, 'as witness to a sense of solidarity unconnected with the meaning of this speech or that sonnet', and so on;<sup>37</sup> many could

not even read. He is also right to point out that even those who did sign often did not remember or continue to identify with what they had signed afterwards. And he's right that Mandela's own chosen passage is and is not well adapted to Mandela's heroic struggle for freedom inasmuch as Caesar is not, in Shakespeare, a heroic figure, and actually seems to be the enemy of freedom. Schalkwyk also comments on the uneasy fit between the Shakespearean tag which Mandela reached for at his trial 'when', Schalkwyk writes, 'the death penalty was a possible, even a likely, outcome'.<sup>38</sup> This is Mandela himself:

I was prepared for the death penalty. To be truly prepared for something, one must actually expect it. One cannot be prepared for something while secretly believing that it will not happen. We were all prepared, not because we were brave but because we were realistic. I thought of the line from Shakespeare: 'Be absolute for death; for either death or life shall be the sweeter.'<sup>39</sup>

Schalkwyk points out that the Shakespearean words that Mandela reaches for here belong in the original text, *Measure for Measure*, to 'a manipulative, Machiavellian politician', Duke Vincentio.<sup>40</sup> It prevents or at least disturbs any straightforward, optimistic alignment of the plays with Mandela's heroism.

Or does it? Of course none of the Robben Island signatories corresponds precisely to the character whose words he signs; and, in fact, this confirms both Shakespeare's individualism and their own. Mandela at his trial in Rivonia or on Robben Island is clearly not signing his personality away in favour of Caesar's or Duke Vincentio's; he is endorsing particular sentiments or ideas expressed by those characters which seem meaningful in relation to his own necessarily very different predicament. Coincident difference allows for identification.

One of the most moving moments in Schalkwyk's book is the following:

On 14 December 1977, two days before the book was signed by Mandela, Billy Nair marked a passage from the first play in the First Folio, an order that Alexander followed for Venkatrathnam's edition, *The Tempest*: 'This island's mine, by Sycorax my mother, / Which thou tak'st from me.' (1.2.331–2)<sup>41</sup>

Schalkwyk glosses this as follows:

At a time when almost all South African students, at university and school (and indeed students in the English-speaking world as a whole) would have been taught

Shakespeare's last singly authorized play as a representation of the conflict between the 'vile' and the 'non-vile', the 'noble' and the 'savage', a prisoner on Robben Island registered Caliban's claim as simply his own, and that of all the dispossessed inhabitants of South Africa.<sup>42</sup>

After all the morally troubled scrupulosity of his argument, there is a palpable sense of relief here. 'It is', as he writes, 'as direct and uncompromising a claim as one might find in Shakespeare', and it is one which offers a direct and uncompromising correspondence between Shakespeare and the struggle.<sup>43</sup> Otherwise, Schalkwyk deems that 'at most' his book has 'conjured a few shadows from the historical conjunction of Shakespeare's extraordinary text and the unique marks of the proper names inscribed in its pages'.<sup>44</sup> Certainly in no other case that he analyses is the correspondence between Shakespeare and the struggle as simple and satisfying as it is with Nair. Given the difficulty of these other cases, Schalkwyk is not even looking for simple correspondences. Instead, he sees himself as attempting to discern the individual and collective 'unconscious' of the Robben Island Bible.<sup>45</sup> The last sentence of *Hamlet's Dreams* expresses his fear that this unconscious has 'largely been my own'.<sup>46</sup>

In the end, I am not so sure as Schalkwyk that we need the concept of the unconscious to explain the Robben Island Bible. Instead I'd submit that the remarkable fact that those men signed their names on the collected works of a white sixteenth-century Englishman at that world-historical juncture constitutes a deliberate collective assertion, as Venkatrathnam's words intimate, of the human dignity which Shakespeare expressed and with which he is associated; it also quite plainly asserts that, in spite of their incarceration, they are as free to be themselves as Shakespeare's characters are. The beauty of the fact that the Robben Island Shakespeare asserts freedom by means of identification is that it implies freedom is more than a personal thing *all the way down*; it implies that freedom is always political, always a matter of asserting and protecting as well as identifying with the freedom of others and the possibility of freedom as such. The prisoners on Robben Island identify with Shakespeare's characters in the same way that Shakespeare's characters identify with one another in the erotic, ethical and political scenarios he dramatises. This, I think, can accommodate the fact that some of them identify with the speaker and the speech to which they put their names more fleetingly and even superficially

than others. It also presents a larger and more durable claim for Shakespeare's political significance than the admittedly striking fact that he created a Caliban as well as a Prospero or a Caesar. The Robben Island Bible helps us see that Caliban's explicit struggle for freedom is related to the freedom of being expressed, enjoyed and fought for by Shakespeare's characters and readers.

It was an extraordinary, an almost unbelievable thing for Schalkwyk to hold in his hands the very copy of the Alexander Shakespeare, familiar from so many reading lists and classrooms, which thirty-four political prisoners on Robben Island, including Mandela, had signed. Encountering the book by chance at an exhibition mounted by the Shakespeare Birthplace Trust in Stratford in 2006, he arranged, through the good offices of Stanley Wells (honorary chairman of the Trust), to examine it after the exhibition closed. 'There was', he affirms, 'indeed something special about having touched and read the book that had passed through the hands of the people who had saved my country.' And yet, more 'especially striking' for Schalkwyk on that special occasion even than, say, the conjunction of Shakespeare and Nelson Mandela were 'the dessicated Eucalyptus leaves' and 'wild flowers' which he found still 'pressed between the pages' of the book and even 'still bearing the traces of their scent'. These, he writes, 'had presumably been picked on the way to the quarries where the prisoners had been subjected to hard labour' and 'preserved as a tiny form of sensory richness – a reminder of the outside to be savoured and recalled'. 'Shakespeare is important,' he reminds himself and us, 'but he's not everything.'<sup>47</sup>

Schalkwyk's reluctance to bring it all back to Shakespeare makes sense, and it is comparable to Walcott's similarly conflicted feelings about the Bard. Just as Mandela can't finally or completely be identified with Caesar or Vincentio, and just as Shakespeare is irreducible to the end of apartheid, so the end of apartheid exceeds Shakespeare.<sup>48</sup> Still, if it makes sense to observe and be moved by the trace and scent of eucalyptus which the leaves gathered by the political prisoners on Robben Island had left on the pages of Shakespeare's book, then it makes sense to observe and be moved by the trace of Shakespeare that the Robben Island Bible brought into the struggle against apartheid. It remains an extraordinary conjunction of Shakespeare and freedom.

#### 4 Lajos Kossuth

If this book argues that Shakespeare's plays manifest and model the struggle for freedom, it further suggests that this struggle for freedom has been central to the Shakespearean tradition until recent times. And it suggests reconnecting with that lost tradition to affirm and renew Shakespearean freedom now. As a first indication of what we're missing, I want to take you more than a hundred and fifty years further back than the 2012 Olympics to an evening in the London Tavern on May the 13th, 1853, when ordinary English men and women made an extraordinary presentation to honour the Hungarian revolutionary Lajos (Louis) Kossuth (1802–94). My main source for this is a newspaper cutting, apparently from the *Illustrated London News*, titled 'Presentation of the Shakespeare Testimonial to Kossuth', in volume 11 of *Newspaper Cuttings Relating to Shakespeare*, which Lemuel Matthews Griffiths gifted to the Shakespeare Memorial Library at the Library of Birmingham.<sup>49</sup> The fact that Griffiths thought it worth collecting twenty-nine volumes of Shakespearean cuttings for a public library is itself eloquent of a higher estimation of what Shakespeare has to offer public life than we are used to. But the story he cut out and preserved of Kossuth and Shakespeare is especially remarkable, and I suggest that it reveals the potential of Shakespeare and freedom like nothing else.

What the people of England gave Kossuth in 1853 was far more physically impressive than the Robben Island Shakespeare. And insofar as it represents a more wholehearted, thought through and sustained commitment to Shakespeare's revolutionary potential, it is more metaphysically impressive as well. And yet, it's not nearly as well known. An article by the Hungarian historian Tibor Frank led me to suppose that it was held in the Kossuth Museum in Cegléd, and I made appropriate enquiries.<sup>50</sup> In fact, since 2004, it too has been held in the National Széchényi Library in Budapest, reunited with the handsome volumes, each emblazoned with the freedom fighter's coat of arms, that it housed when it was first given to Kossuth (Figures 1.1–1.3).

Apart from anything else, such a superb neglected work of craftsmanship deserves our attention. It presents an edition of Shakespeare's complete works, in the words of the *Illustrated London News*, 'superbly bound in mulberry-coloured morroco' and decorated with Kossuth's coat of arms





FIGURE 1.1 The Shakespeare Tribute to Louis Kossuth, courtesy of the National Széchényi Library, Budapest; photo by Adam Ackermann



FIGURE 1.2 Refer caption from figure 1.1



FIGURE 1.3 Refer caption from figure 1.1

‘elaborately decorated in crimson, silk and gold’. The case containing the books is ‘a model of Shakespeare’s house, very delicately rendered by Messrs. Howitt of High Holborn’. The account in the paper 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 thatch. The doors are of brown oak, with black oak graininess.’ If examining the model suggests that the roof is actually made of the same wood as the walls, I would venture that the journalist can be forgiven an embellishment presumably intended to convey just how splendid a thing Kossuth had been given by the people of England. On a silver plate above the centre window is the following inscription: ‘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’ (Figure 1.4).

These days Kossuth, perhaps, needs some introduction. A glamorous and romantic figure, he had wanted to become a writer, penning an account of the French Revolution in his youth, and even attempting



FIGURE 1.4 Refer caption from figure 1.1

a universal history. Drawn to both poetry and the stage, he translated a number of Western-language plays, at least one of which was staged in the provinces, then in Pest. Shakespeare interested and impressed him when he translated the first lines of *Macbeth*; and he made a good fist of them, according to a present-day Hungarian scholar: ‘Though obviously dated and laden with antiquated elements of vocabulary, style and expression, Kossuth’s *Macbeth* is written in strong, sophisticated and passionate terms.’<sup>51</sup>

But Kossuth’s real genius was for politics. An ardent liberal, he longed for freedom for Hungary from Habsburg Austria. He was imprisoned for a year in 1837 and immediately sentenced to a further four years. Though he was freed in 1840, the confinement had damaged his health. And yet, the great epoch of Kossuth’s life was about to begin. His literary and political talents came together as the editor of the increasingly radical paper *Pesti Hírlap*, which called for the freedom of the serfs, the cessation of systematic punishment beatings in law and in the family, the amelioration of poor conditions in prisons, an institute for the blind, orphanages and

a children's hospital.<sup>52</sup> Subscriptions, by the standards of the time, went through the roof. Meanwhile Kossuth had married Terézia Meszlényi, who had visited him in prison; this represented 'another political and social breakthrough' since Kossuth was a Lutheran and Meszlényi a Catholic in a country where mixed marriage was forbidden by church and state.<sup>53</sup> Kossuth ultimately demanded a parliament for Hungary and a constitutional government for the rest of Austria, fighting a revolutionary war against the Habsburgs that was 'the largest, best organized and most determined insurrection of 1848 anywhere in Europe'.<sup>54</sup> In 1849, he became president-regent of the new Hungarian Republic, and the 'great reforms' he initiated included the emancipation of the serfs, the establishment of responsible government and the freedom of the press.<sup>55</sup> They also extended to a Jewish emancipation law, which 'was most enlightened by any measurement of the day'; 'it took the Habsburg administration almost twenty years before it would consent to, let alone initiate, a similar bill'.<sup>56</sup> But the Russians came to the aid of Austria, Kossuth's revolutionary project was defeated, and he was forced to flee his beloved country.

Some of Kossuth's generals, the so-called thirteen martyrs of Arad, died for the cause; that he himself did not is one of the things that tarnishes his reputation for some Hungarians to this day. Kossuth threw himself on the mercy of the Turks, who refused to give him up to the emperor. Finding his stand for liberty congenial to their own founding ethos, members of the U.S. Congress invited him to visit America, and Kossuth set sail for the land of the free, though not before first landing in England, in October 1851. Among those who met him when his ship docked at Southampton was the Birmingham activist, nonconformist preacher and Shakespeare lecturer George Dawson – also the moving spirit behind the establishment of the Birmingham Shakespeare Memorial Library, from where I derive this story. At Southampton, Dawson presented Kossuth with an address from the men of Birmingham, and he was prominent in securing Kossuth's subsequent visit to the city.<sup>57</sup> When the Hungarian freedom fighter arrived at Small Heath, between sixty and seventy thousand men were there to escort him to a city centre that was festooned with the Hungarian tricolour.<sup>58</sup> In Edgbaston, Kossuth's wife was presented with the following gorgeously bound and illuminated volume of *Sentiments and Similes of W. Shakespeare, selected from His Plays and Poems*, now also held in



FIGURE 1.5 *Sentiments and Similes of W. Shakespeare, selected from His Plays and Poems*, courtesy of the National Széchényi Library, Budapest; photo by Adam Ackermann

honour of 'the great statesman' by the National Széchényi Library (Figures 1.5 and 1.6).

Having arrived in the United States, Kossuth apologised, in a speech at Faneuil Hall, on April the 29th, 1852, for 'profaning Shakespeare's language'

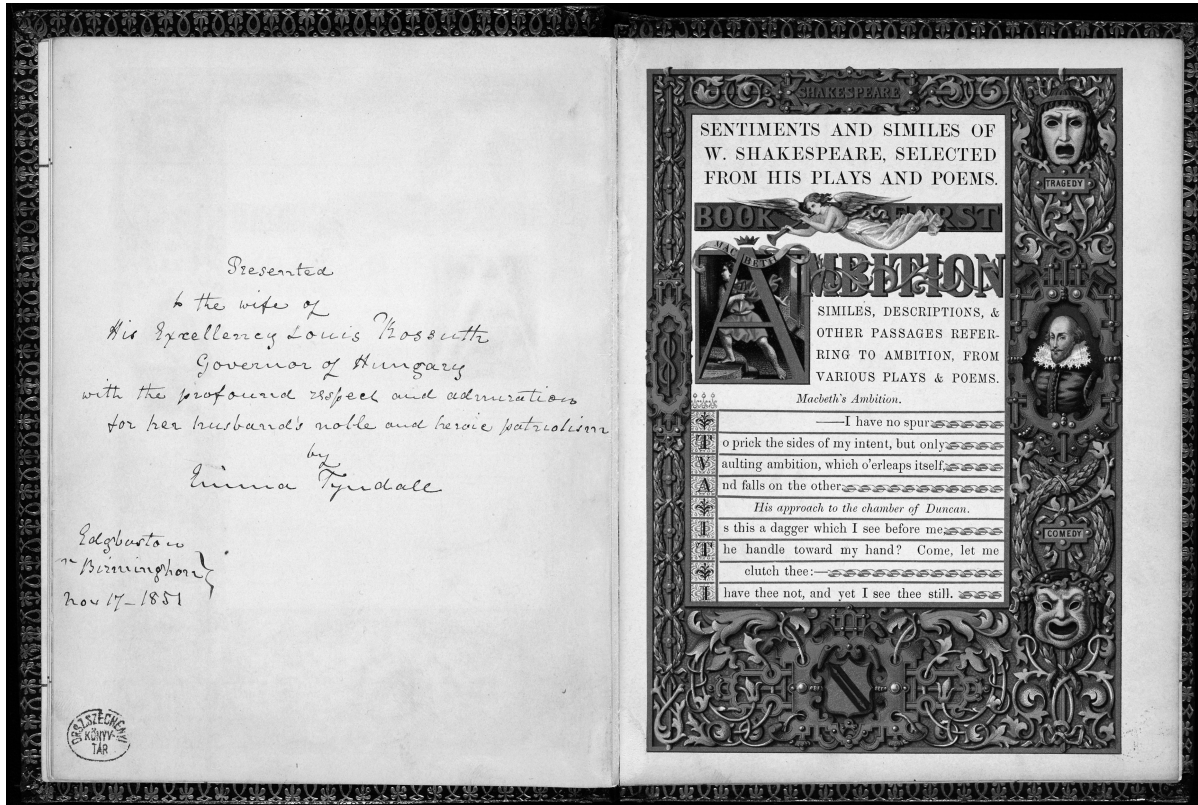


FIGURE 1.6 Refer caption from figure 1.5

in 'the cradle of American liberty'.<sup>59</sup> Abraham Lincoln recognised him as the 'most worthy and distinguished representative of the cause of civil and religious liberty on the continent of Europe'.<sup>60</sup>

There were limits to Kossuth's liberal credentials, however; as governor-regent of Hungary, he had been aggressively unsympathetic about extending the full political and cultural freedoms he had gained for ethnic Hungarians to the significantly numerous non-Magyar minorities of his country.<sup>61</sup> But that said, it is only fair to mention the nationality bill Kossuth passed intended to secure the position and safety of all ethnic groups in the new nation.<sup>62</sup> And then in exile, he devised more enlightened schemes for the self-government of the nationalities in Hungary, and for a Hungarian-Serbian-Romanian Danube Federation in Central Europe, which, had it been realised, might conceivably have prevented World War I.<sup>63</sup> A more straightforward moral failure was Kossuth's refusal openly to condemn American slavery because he wanted the support of the Southern (as well as the Northern) United States for the cause of Hungarian freedom, which the abolitionist leader William Lloyd Garrison denounced as criminally evasive.<sup>64</sup> But (as we shall see) Frederick Douglass nevertheless regarded Kossuth's Shakespeare-inspired struggle in Hungary as inspirational in the fight for black emancipation in America.

If there are real blemishes on Kossuth's record, Ralph Waldo Emerson afforded perhaps the most instructive as well as the most charitable response when he said to the Hungarian patriot at Concord: 'We know the austere condition of liberty – that it must be reconquered over and over again; yea, day by day; that it is a state of war . . . always slipping.'<sup>65</sup> Emerson recognised that, in spite of his limitations, Kossuth remains a great hero of freedom, as well as a great voice, on the world stage, for the principles of freedom which his actions impressively if imperfectly illustrated. When he employed Shakespeare's language in Faneuil Hall, Kossuth did so to remind Americans that the 'nature of a privilege is exclusiveness, that of a principle is communicative. Liberty is a principle: its community is its security; exclusiveness is its doom.' In the same speech, he deplored the 'exclusive liberty' of the aristocracy, concluding as follows: 'As aristocracy should vanish within each nation, so should no nation be an aristocrat among nations. Until that ceases, liberty will nowhere be lasting on earth.' He was grateful, he said, for the warm reception he had received in America but, in accordance with his larger views, he did not wish to see this in merely personal terms. Instead, he approvingly quoted

the man in a crowd in Worcester, Massachusetts, who had shouted out to him: ‘*We worship not the man, but we worship the principle.*’ If he at times fell short himself of this principle, we may safely assume that he knew it. And as Emerson concluded at Concord, ‘you, the foremost soldier of freedom in this age, – it is for us to crave your judgment; who are we that we should dictate to you?’<sup>66</sup> For Emerson, Kossuth still was ‘the angel of freedom, crossing sea and land; crossing parties, nationalities, private interests and self-esteem; dividing populations where you go, and drawing to your part only the good’.<sup>67</sup>

Later in 1852 Kossuth returned to London. The Folger Shakespeare Library in Washington, DC, holds three letters which help recreate the excitement of the Shakespearean invitation to him in the London Tavern the year after. The prime mover in this enterprise was Douglas Jerrold, a playwright (his first great dramatic success had been *Black-Eyed Susan* in 1829) and radical journalist. A friend of Charles Dickens, Jerrold was, according to Peter Ackroyd, ‘a small man with a massive head and sharp features’, who was ‘noticeable also for his intense nervous energy, tossing his long hair “like a lion does with its mane” at moments of excitement, and afflicted by a “peculiar restlessness of eye, speech and demeanour”’.<sup>68</sup> He was inspired by the report that Kossuth had learned English from reading Shakespeare in an Austrian prison. This convergence between Shakespearean eloquence and the Hungarian fight for freedom revealed to Jerrold an excitingly militant potential in the Bard: ‘arrowy words that kindle as they fly – words that are weapons, as Austria will know’. Jerrold thought Kossuth was waking England up to its own Shakespearean vocation to liberty, by means of ‘glorious words he has uttered among us, words that have been as pulses to the nation’. He was convinced that ‘hundreds of thousands of Englishmen’ would ‘rejoice’ to ‘manifest their gratitude’ for this new-found Shakespearean lease of life, and therefore he established a penny subscription so that England might bestow a suitably Shakespearean honour on Kossuth.<sup>69</sup> Frederick Douglass supported this in spite of Kossuth’s pragmatic failure to condemn American slavery, and on the 8th of January, 1852 the *Frederick Douglass’ Paper* duly declared, ‘We hope to see [Jerrold’s] excellent suggestion . . . at once acted upon’, noting in addition that ‘Mr. Jerrold has received numerous letters expressive of high approval of the proposition, and also several subscriptions.’ ‘He suggests,’ Frederick Douglass concluded, ‘that boxes be affixed to the offices of the



liberal press throughout England.<sup>70</sup> The real political passion which this conjunction of Shakespeare and Kossuth roused on both sides of the Atlantic helps measure how far we have come from such a militant view of the Bard.

Jerrold's penny subscription was so successful that he was able to commission a finely crafted casket to house the complete Shakespeare he intended to present to his hero, and when he received it, his grandson tells us, he 'took almost a boyish delight in showing the treasure to his friends'.<sup>71</sup> The first pertinent letter in the Folger's possession is from Jerrold to Thornton Hunt, editor of the radical periodical *The Leader*, which was also supported by George Dawson, the Shakespearean Birmingham progressive and Kossuth sympathiser we have met already. 'My dear Hunt,' Jerrold writes on the 21st of November, 1852, 'Will you not give a few lines on "Shakespeare and Kossuth," and will not the Leader open a box for pennies?' He notes, 'I am in the continual receipt of letters in the matter', and also that 'they are stirring at Manchester', suggesting that an actual political revolt might emerge from enthusiasm for the Shakespearean event he was plotting.<sup>72</sup>

Jerrold's next letter in the Folger's collection is addressed, on the 5th of December to Charles Gilpin, another confirmed supporter of Kossuth. A thoroughgoing Quaker and liberal, Gilpin was involved in movements to repeal the Corn Laws, abolish the death penalty, end slavery and establish world peace. Jerrold, Hunt, Dawson, Gilpin: the archival trail shows some of the big political players converging in the effort to yoke Shakespeare together with the international liberation movement. And the *Illustrated London News* reveals that further radical big hitters including Richard Cobden (co-founder of the Anti-Corn Law League), Sir Joshua Walmsley (president of the National Reform Association) and Alderman Wire (later lord mayor of London) were involved in the occasion itself. It is impossible to imagine as many public figures of comparable authority and stature getting involved in any bringing together of Shakespeare and radical politics today. Jerrold confided to Gilpin that the venue he had intended to host the presentation, the Whittingham Club, 'repudiate all and every matter bearing on Kossuth as political': a reminder that the attempt to link Shakespearean Englishness to Kossuth was seriously controversial, even dangerous.<sup>73</sup>

The third Folger letter is also addressed to Gilpin but comes this time from the great Hungarian himself. 'My dear Sir!' Kossuth writes from 21 Alpha Road, Regents Park on May the 3rd, 'It is Tuesday already, and I have yet no communication about the Shakespeare presentation meeting at which you desired my presence for Friday next.' Kossuth wants to know whether or not it's happening. And if it is, at what time? How political it is intended to be, and how public? Is he expected to speak? And will there be an address for him to answer? 'You know,' he reminds Gilpin gravely – if perhaps a tad disingenuously, given the eye-watering number of public engagements he had already undertaken on both sides of the Atlantic – 'that I but very hesitantly yield to any necessity of appearing in public; but if I must do it I would like to be acquainted with the particulars in time.' And he asks Gilpin kindly to 'make me informed about the matter' by the end of the day.<sup>74</sup> Presumably Gilpin (or someone else) did, because ten days later Kossuth knew his part sufficiently well to help make the presentation of the Shakespeare testimonial to him in the London Tavern on the 13th of May, 1853 a magnificent success.

Jerrold was always shy of public speaking, but on this occasion he took the chair in an exceptionally nervous and distracted mood; his son recalled 'his hair flowing wildly about him, his eyes starting, and his arms moving spasmodically'.<sup>75</sup> And yet, he managed to pull himself together enough to present Kossuth with the work he had commissioned and already taken much pleasure in.

It was clearly a very exciting occasion, and not only for the distracted Jerrold: one where literature and politics came together in the lives of ordinary people. When Kossuth rose to say thanks for his gift, the assembled company roared their approval. He had to stand on a chair, 'the better to be seen and heard'. Before he embarked on his speech, he admitted that he felt 'after an abstinence of some months from public speaking, almost the embarrassment of a debutant'.

But he needn't have worried. Unlike the poor chairman, he was always a brilliant speaker, and he certainly pulled the rabbit out of the hat on this occasion. He began by addressing Jerrold in the chair. 'My Lord,' said Kossuth,

I have received this evening a precious addition to the numerous tokens of friendship and sympathy to my country, with which people of different climates,

different in origin, in language, religious worship, habits and political organisation, have honoured me; tokens worthy to adorn the national hall of a new-born Hungary, once the trials of national misfortune shall pass . . . And may I sink or swim, may I live or die, I trust to God they will be placed there, to stand as memorials of the brotherly tie which unites the national members of mankind to one common family, which has one common father there above.

The value of Hungarian freedom Kossuth evokes is not a singularly private one – a matter for Hungary alone – but communicative and sympathetic: an instantiation of the irreducible particularity of freedom such as may appeal to all peoples. Liberty may be a principle, as the Hungarian had insisted in Faneuil Hall, and here he invokes it with religious hope and intensity, but it is a principle which comes to life in authentic and unimpeded self-realisation. That is how on the thirteenth of May in the London Tavern, Kossuth's own exotic flamboyance could convincingly combine with the freedom that Shakespeare had won for himself and his characters in such a way as to come to stand for nothing less than the value of freedom itself.

Warming now to his theme, Kossuth added,

To those memorials the old Magyar will lead the children of his children; to inspire them with the same just feeling of brotherly affection to their fellow-men; and tell them how we have merited those tokens of world-wide sympathy, by having fought bravely, and suffered ungrudgingly for freedom and fatherland; and admonish them to remain worthy of that sympathy by using wisely, and by maintaining resolutely, that freedom which we will have conquered for them.

In the speech he had made presenting the gift to Kossuth, Jerrold had said,

And, sir, hoping, believing, knowing that the day will come when you shall sit again at your own fireside in your own liberated Hungary, we further hope that sometimes turning the leaves of these word-wealthy volumes, you will think of Englishmen as of a people who had for you and for your cause the warmest admiration and deepest sympathy.<sup>76</sup>

Alluding to this, Kossuth now politely remarks that his plan to showcase his Shakespearean testimonial at the civic heart of a liberated Hungary 'will be a more adequate use of your valuable gift, than should I with selfish egotism of innocent joy only keep it to delight me and my children with at my own humble fireside'. The 'national hall of a new-born Hungary' he contrasts with Jerrold's picture of a contented and deserved domesticity is

a kind of Valhalla of freedom: a synecdoche and quintessence for the free fraternity of humankind to which he had already appealed. But we need to keep the material occasion and spur for Kossuth's speech very much in mind – for his audience in the London Tavern, this brave new institution of Hungarian freedom which Kossuth was conjuring for them was conjured only in relation to and in a sense *out of* the splendid model of Shakespeare's birthplace that had both elicited his words and was presumably sitting before him on a table as he spoke.

Kossuth now went on to explain to the meeting that he literally did derive his knowledge of English from 'the page of Shakespeare'.<sup>77</sup> But he also insisted that Shakespeare had taught him not just English but politics. He had been forced to endure solitary confinement 'in a damp lonely chamber', 'seeing neither the sky nor the earth' and 'without a book to read, without a pen to write'. He was alone 'with God', 'my tranquil conscience, and with meditation'. 'But,' he goes on, 'it is fearful to be thus alone, with nothing to arrest the musing eye.' What he then says reveals his own, rather Shakespearean powers of fancy: 'Imagination raises his dreadful wings, and carries the mind in a magnetic flight to portentous regions, of which no philosopher has ever dreamt.' It was all Kossuth could do to get a grip: 'I gathered up all the strength of my mind, and bade him stop all that dangerous soaring.' 'It was done,' he confirms, but he admits he had grown 'afraid of myself'. That is why he petitioned his gaolers for something to read. 'Yes', they say, 'but nothing political'. 'Well, give me Shakespeare, with an English grammar and a dictionary', answered Kossuth; 'that you will take, I trust, not to be political. Of course not, answered they, and gave it to me.'

Kossuth now goes on to recall his days as an imprisoned student of Shakespeare's text. 'For months', he says, 'it was a sealed book to me, as the hieroglyphs were to Champolion, and as Layard's Assyrian monuments still are.' But then, he recalls, that at last: 'the light spread over me; and I drank, with never-quenched thirst, from that limpid source of delightful instruction.' He continues as follows:

Thus I learnt the little English I know. But I learnt something more besides. I learnt politics. What, politics from Shakespeare? Yes, gentlemen. What else are politics than philosophy applied to the social condition of men? and what is philosophy

but knowledge of nature and of the human heart? and who ever penetrated deeper into the recesses of those mysteries than Shakespeare did?

I admit that I find this very moving. The inscription on Kossuth's presentation Shakespeare suggests that the Bard has given him a great political resource – 'his noble mastery of the English language, to be exercised in the noblest cause' – its phrasing implying a certain continuity between Shakespearean English and the cause of liberty, although it is worth noting that a Shakespearean mastery of language (noble) defers to the cause of liberty here (noblest). But Kossuth goes further than the English subscribers in extolling the merits of their national poet in his acceptance speech. Where Caliban snarls that Prospero taught him to speak and his profit on't is to know how to curse (cf. *The Tempest*, 1.2.366–7), Kossuth says that Shakespeare 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; it is the very claim, I have suggested, that London 2012 and its commentators so much wanted and yet, crucially, hesitated to make.

*What, politics from Shakespeare?*

But Kossuth is undeterred.

*Yes, gentlemen.*

Kossuth wasn't Nelson Mandela, but in his liberal nationalism, his (admittedly brief) leadership of a liberated nation and his international political celebrity he wasn't completely different from Mandela either – and both of them read Shakespeare in prison. In his preface to the third edition of *Radical Tragedy*, Jonathan Dollimore has suggested that the political criticism of our time has paid insufficient attention to liberal humanists such as Herman Hesse who opposed a defiantly non-political spirituality to the political barbarity of fascism, 'preferring instead easier targets in academic literary criticism'.<sup>78</sup> This is true, and important. But a hundred years before Hesse, Kossuth, and others like him, risked their lives, and the lives of others, for a vision of freedom that was more passionately political than it was personal and spiritual. In the London Tavern, Kossuth concurred with Jerrold and his audience that Shakespeare had made a real contribution to Kossuth's Hungarian revolution. Upon presenting his Shakespearean tribute to Kossuth, Jerrold said the Hungarian leader enjoyed 'not the

acquaintance, but the lifelong friendship, of the men and women of our immortal Shakespeare'. He insisted that Shakespeare's characters were behind Kossuth and Hungary, and that they lent it more than just a personal authority as they were equally 'great proportions, solemn truths'.<sup>79</sup> In this remarkable conjunction of Shakespeare and politics, Jerrold is drawing on something like the apprehension of Falstaff, Rosalind and Edmund's vitality as sketched at the beginning of this chapter. Taken together, the vivid range of Shakespeare's characters stand for the variegated but unitary truth of freedom. That was why, in the London Tavern, Kossuth could claim to have derived from Shakespeare a revolutionary politics that was deeply responsive to the 'mysteries' of 'nature' and the 'human heart'. It was, Jerrold said, a 'glorious use' to make of 'a glorious weapon'.<sup>80</sup>

The night on which he received this splendid gift in the London Tavern Kossuth recalled that he had made six hundred speeches, and that he had been listened to and acclaimed by literally millions of people. This was because, he said, he had 'spoken for liberty' and 'held up the bleeding image of his country'. He implored the assembled company 'but to read the declaration of the independence of Hungary'; it is a mark of the political seriousness of the occasion that when he said he would get this document reprinted, it 'excited immense cheering'. After that, 'Alderman Wire, Sir Joshua Walmsley, and Mr. Cobden then addressed the meeting – the last named at some length – *in severe reprobation of the government*': one gets the impression of things building towards a political fever pitch. There is a vote of thanks to the Chairman Jerrold, who announces several further meetings to sympathise with Mr Kossuth: 'The meeting broke up with hearty cheering for Kossuth and his family.' Again the ripples reached America, with the *Frederick Douglass' Paper* more than doubling the number of 'English workmen' who had subscribed to the fund for purchasing Kossuth's Shakespearean tribute in its enthusiasm for the event.<sup>81</sup>

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To my mind, this story about Shakespeare and Kossuth is one of the most extraordinary Shakespeare stories there is. And it is also one of the most significant, since it exemplifies the scope for and power of associating Shakespeare with freedom. So why has Kossuth disappeared so completely from the international political scene where once he loomed so large? Why

has his intense and importunate association with Shakespeare been almost entirely forgotten?

One reason for Kossuth's eclipse is the current diffidence about freedom which I have pointed to throughout this chapter. Freedom is a potent political idea, as even the most casual consideration of history from the Greeks to the French Revolution and back to Mandela will suggest. And yet, for many years now, it has been pretty much off the agenda in the academy. This comes partly down to an unfortunate effect of nomenclature: the fact that 'neo-liberalism' has become the favoured critical term for that 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. But of course recent intellectual distaste for freedom isn't *just* a matter of name calling. It was important in the 1980s to oppose Thatcher's position that 'there is no such thing as society', and the self-serving creed of 'greed is good' which was the other side of that, as Dollimore's affirmation of 'collectively defined goals' showed in the last sentence of *Radical Tragedy*.<sup>82</sup> But we have seen already that freedom in the sense of emancipation from externally imposed limits into a fully experienced and expressed life can be collective as well as individual, as it is in national liberation; and it arguably imposes the political obligation upon society in general to prioritise and enable as much freedom as possible for all. Certainly, I believe it is now time to remember and revive an important tradition of cultural critique that begins and ends with freedom. Freedom was the first aim of the French Revolution – which, according to Eric Hobsbawm, is the pattern of modern revolution as such;<sup>83</sup> it was freedom above all that inspired the American Revolution, and from 1829 to 1834 the idea of freedom drove a second wave of revolution in Europe, before igniting the 'spontaneous and general conflagration' of 1848 for which Kossuth was the major figurehead, and which Hobsbawm says was as near as we have ever come to 'the world-revolution of which the insurrectionaries of the period dreamed'.<sup>84</sup> Of course, enthusiasm for freedom can lead to suffering and evil. The French Revolution eventuated in chaos leading to mass innocent bloodshed (the Terror) and a new tyranny (Robespierre). Thomas Mann memorably recalls his experience during the Nazi period

of listening to ‘hysterical declamations of the German radio announcer about the “holy struggle for freedom against the soulless hordes”’.<sup>85</sup> Yet for Hannah Arendt, freedom still ‘animates and inspires all human activities and is the hidden source of production of all great and beautiful things’.<sup>86</sup> And in this context, I would suggest, large-minded English enthusiasm for the Shakespeare-inspired insurgency of a progressive Hungarian freedom fighter is very much worth retrieving.

A more particular reason for the eclipse of the Shakespearean Kossuth is the understandable ethical suspicion in which Romantic nationalism is held, particularly after the catastrophe of Nazism. This connects with a salient issue in Shakespeare studies more broadly. Some years ago now, in one of his earliest books, Jonathan Bate ventured a bold comparison in order to describe and bring out the political value of Shakespeare’s pluralism and openness: ‘His “truth” cannot be defined or pinned down. He is always being appealed to, but he does not exist in an Authorized Version. He is open to perpetual reinterpretation and reappropriation. Shakespeare is like the English constitution.’<sup>87</sup>

Now that ‘Global Shakespeare’ is the watchword in international Shakespeare studies, it would be harder to get away with that. Given the crises of nationalism, empire and Anglo-Saxon cultural imperialism, the proponents of Global Shakespeare align themselves with Ania Loomba and Martin Orkin’s pioneering assertion in *Post-Colonial Shakespeares*: ‘The Shakespearean text, which for so long helped anchor a disciplinary formation called “English Studies”, can become a means for discussing the nature of our diverse post-colonialities.’<sup>88</sup> In her defining article ‘Global Shakespeares as Methodology’, Alexa Huang confirms ‘a degree of textual transparency that allows audiences to tell their own stories and thereby shape our knowledge base of world cultures’.<sup>89</sup> It is impossible not to notice how abstracted such professional statements seem after Kossuth’s appeal from the heart, to the heart. It is also impossible not to notice that the accent is not so much on what Shakespeare is in himself than on what other cultures can do with him. Huang speaks for a utopian, post-national kind of liberalism, for which Shakespeare’s Englishness is definitely off limits, and the heat and controversy of inter-national politics are politically regressive. To the extent that we may take such an approach as indicative, Shakespeare’s association with an out-and-out nationalist such as Kossuth was bound to be passed over.



Now, clearly no sane and responsible person today would simply endorse Romantic nationalism. As Simon Winder writes,

There is no doubt that by many measures 1848 was a great watershed in European history – I am not sure anyone today would particularly fancy going back to a world where most of us would be tied labourers. But it is impossible not to feel a sense of dread about the gap between the excitement of 1848 and the degree to which we now know that it was firing a starting gun that would initiate some of Europe's most terrible events.<sup>90</sup>

Indeed, but I would maintain that we shouldn't rush to dismiss Kossuth. As we saw earlier, by the time he was in a position to, as he put it, 'profane Shakespeare's language' in Faneuil Hall, Kossuth had decided, 'Liberty is a principle: its community its security; exclusiveness is its doom.' As governor-regent of Hungary, he had emancipated the Jews; in exile, he had brought his formerly debased position on Hungarian minorities up towards the level of the principle he enunciated in America. Furthermore, Christopher Clark has shown that nationalism was more idealistic and sympathetic in Kossuth's period: 'Europeans could derive vicarious excitement from each other's national causes; liberals in Germany, France and Britain became enthusiasts of Polish, Greek and Italian liberty.' And:

Nationalism was a potentially radical force for two reasons. Firstly, nationalists, like liberals and radicals, claimed to speak for 'the people' rather than the crown . . . Indeed, nationalism was in some respects more inclusive than liberalism, whose horizons were confined to a wealthy, educated and largely urban elite . . . Secondly, nationalism was subversive because in many parts of Europe, the realization of the national vision implied fundamental transformations of the political map.<sup>91</sup>

That of course was absolutely the case for Kossuth, who sought to liberate his country from the Holy Roman Empire. And lest we should think that this is all very well but that progressive nationalism became a spent force in human culture after 1945, we should recall the post-colonial struggle for freedom, the liberation of various nationalities after the collapse of the Soviet Union and, most recently, the success of the Scottish National Party (SNP) in bringing Scotland to the brink of independence after the Scottish referendum of 2014.

Relevant here is a reticently fierce exchange in the *London Review of Books* about the late Scottish poet Edwin Morgan's poem, 'Louis Kossuth'. Morgan's lines imagine Kossuth in exile in Turin: 'The Danube can only flow through my dreams.' For all the excitement of his revolutionary life, all the hospitality he had enjoyed from liberal-minded foreigners, his 'longings / Are inextinguishable, exact, and sad'. He recalls a speech he had once made in Glasgow. In the melee after, he was 'buttonholed by a skelf of a man': the unprepossessing alcoholic Macfarlan, who attacked Kossuth for prioritising freedom over the material needs and welfare of the people.<sup>92</sup> In a subsequent letter to the LRB, Hugo Stolkin essentially chided Morgan for doing the same thing. The poet responded angrily, insisting he hadn't introduced Macfarlan to mock him and concluding as follows:

The Scottish context is significant in the poem. Scotland has unfinished political business, with a devolved Parliament that pleases some and not others. Neither socialist nor nationalist aspirations can be ruled out. Stolkin says he is sad that 'Macfarlans [socialists] are in short supply these days.' I agree. But they are not in quite such short supply in Glasgow, where they may be nationalists as well.<sup>93</sup>

Now I am fundamentally arguing that Kossuth's brand of progressive nationalism opens into the broader cause of progressive politics as such, and for that reason should not be forgotten or neglected – and I should say, for the record, that I do not find Huang's hopes for a post-national politics unappealing, or even ultimately impossible. Nevertheless, what Morgan says stands as an intense little demonstration of the power that remains, even today, in Kossuth's specifically nationalist progressive challenge.

And yet, the English men and women who presented Kossuth with his Shakespeare testimonial in 1853 went decidedly beyond any restrictively nationalist view of Shakespeare. In making Kossuth a present of Shakespeare's house as well as his books, they symbolically gave away his birthplace and English origin in favour of claiming his relevance to the present-day political struggle abroad. This was not the England of Brexit isolationism. Nor was it Shakespeare as a mere pretext, for 'anchoring a disciplinary formation called "English Studies"'; for 'discussing the nature of our diverse post-colonialities'; for enabling 'audiences to tell their own stories'; for 'shaping our knowledge base of world cultures'. What

happened on May the 13th, 1853 suggests instead that Shakespeare might actually and concretely exemplify freedom to the world. It can't completely purify Shakespeare of the sort of tainting historical associations that worry Walcott and Schalkwyk, nor will it disguise the fact that there is a successful, self-interested Shakespeare industry, but it might encourage us to renew the case that Shakespeare has an objective intellectual, existential and political contribution to make to global culture.

A further and perhaps most decisive reason for Kossuth's eclipse in contemporary culture is his theatrical individualism. Though Morgan is Scotsman enough to leave Shakespeare out of it, his Kossuth admits, 'Some say I am a showman.'<sup>94</sup> You'd think being a theatrical character would be no slur to Shakespearians, but in fact there is a long-established prejudice against character in Shakespeare studies. This derives from the preference of modernist critics such as G. Wilson Knight for seeing the plays as comprehensive dramatic poems.<sup>95</sup> It has been re-stimulated in our time by the deconstruction of the self in postmodern approaches. And I suggest that it has been reinforced further by a certain distrustful puritanism involved in the professionalisation of English Studies as a respectably rationalist discipline. But what perhaps sealed the posthumous fate of Kossuth was Marxist scorn for a rival form of revolutionary politics. Karl Marx called Kossuth 'a swindler', 'a big-mouthed charlatan' and 'a tight-rope walker who does no dance on a rope but on his tongue'; but this is borrowing the scorn of the upper orders for 'low' commercial theatre, and Jonathan Sperber, Marx's biographer, points out that Marx was flattered and bribed into his hostility to Kossuth by undercover agents of the Austrian empire.<sup>96</sup> Though Marxists tend to reject 'bourgeois individualism', Terry Eagleton has recently insisted that 'the free flourishing of individuals is the whole aim of [Marxist] politics.'<sup>97</sup> And Sperber observes that the 'sole description of a communist society in the *Manifesto* was the assertion that it would be "an association in which the free development of each is the condition for the free development of all"<sup>98</sup>.

Marx was a keen Shakespeare fan; his daughter called the works of Shakespeare 'our house Bible'.<sup>99</sup> Like Hegel, what he prized as Shakespeare's signal achievement was his really individuated characters. He recommended in a letter to an aspiring playwright that the man should 'Shakespearise' his *dramatis personae*, explaining 'I miss what is

characteristic in the characters.<sup>100</sup> In ordinary language, when we say someone's 'a character', we mean that they live more distinctively and fully, and perhaps even that they exemplify character as such. The Shakespearean celebrity which Kossuth enjoyed in his own time demonstrates the potential political value of this. It shows that Brecht was wrong, that the magnetic richness of Shakespearean character is not always a distraction from history and politics.<sup>101</sup> To contemporaries such as Jerrold, the political promise of Shakespeare's powers of self-realisation and expression came to life vividly in Kossuth. Some leading Marxist thinkers, including Brecht, Marcuse and Dollimore, have worried that since Shakespearean character is most richly realised in tragic catastrophe and death, Shakespeare is a political pessimist.<sup>102</sup> And it is true that the failure of Kossuth's hopes and efforts to secure independence for Hungary suffuses his character with a historical pathos that seems truly Shakespearean; but Kossuth remained dauntlessly political unto death. His story therefore resonates more with Kiernan Ryan's argument that the Shakespearean hero who dies like a comet actually augurs a better future, where his (or her – I am thinking of Cleopatra) splendid self-realisation will be more possible and more shared.<sup>103</sup> For those who honoured him in the London Tavern, Kossuth's Shakespearean charisma revealed to the world something of the liberated condition he was fighting for. And as we have seen, Kossuth's was a character which stands for the larger, independent character of his nation, free from the Habsburgs. That was how he became Emerson's 'angel of freedom': the avatar of freedom as such.

What did Kossuth think when the meeting in the London Tavern dispersed and he was left to reflect on this extraordinary gift he'd been given? As an exile, he was presumably moved to have been given a model of a home, a birthplace. In fact, he would never again lay eyes on the home country for whose freedom he had given so much. Lovingly encasing Shakespeare's books in a model of the house of his birth in Stratford, as Jerrold and company had done in this tribute to him, eloquently testifies to a specifically English freedom to be oneself. But, as I've said, Jerrold and company also symbolically gave this away to Kossuth, thereby acknowledging that he was fighting for comparable freedoms in Hungary. And when they made a present of Shakespeare's books and house, they were also giving him the gift of an alternative

birthplace, homeland and identity, and thereby decentring Shakespeare's Englishness. To that extent, the ceremony on May the 13th, 1853 dramatises a double conception of freedom, one which derives from nationality but also completely exceeds it, making Shakespeare and Kossuth unlikely brothers. Jerrold and the contributors to his Kossuth fund rejoiced that England had rediscovered itself in Kossuth, who had rediscovered himself in Shakespeare.

An extraordinarily comprehensive English unity had been achieved in favour of Hungarian freedom via a common link to Shakespeare. Jerrold insisted, in his presentation address, that to fund this tribute to Hungarian freedom, English 'pennies came in from men and women of all classes, from all parts of the country.'<sup>104</sup> 'Very curious would it be,' he opined, 'to consider the social history, the household history, of many of these pennies.'<sup>105</sup> In other words, Kossuth's Shakespeare house had been built from the very different pockets of a nation it had united with a foreign cause. What happened in the London Tavern affords a complex, reciprocal example of the way in which Shakespearean freedom renews itself beyond Shakespeare's nation. Neither Kossuth nor Shakespeare, neither England nor Hungary, had priority in this complex transaction, which may help us see that it's not necessary to throw the baby out with the bathwater when investigating Shakespeare's relevance to global culture. Shakespeare was a source of freedom, which Kossuth had brought to life now. And no-one present thought that the cause of liberty could or should just end there. Jerrold expressly looked forward to the day 'when the darkness that now benights the greater part of Continental Europe will be rolled away, dispersed by the light of liberty, like some suffocating fog', bringing freedom to France, to Austria and to Italy.<sup>106</sup> Here was a form of Shakespearean patriotism of an enthusiastically European and outward-looking kind.

Kossuth ultimately took his Shakespeare tribute with him into the last phase of his exile in Turin. He kept it in his study. And if, on one hand, this signified that he had kept faith with the struggle, it was also a sign that he remained every inch himself: a character. In what I have written in this chapter, I have tried to show that this was in no way at odds with his Shakespearean politics of freedom. Kossuth loved nature, climbing the high Alps when he was well into his eighties. His herbarium and collection of snail shells are in Budapest museums. Almost blind, he remained, Istvan

Deak tells us, 'upright, strong, dignified and argumentative'. Deak also tells us that he 'fell in love with a young Transylvanian-Hungarian girl, to whom he addressed pathetically beautiful letters'. Such irreducible, inimitable, no doubt sometimes infuriating life Kossuth found in the plays and fought to win for others. Shakespeare matters, this story suggests, because of his power to inspire others, including this Hungarian freedom fighter, to be or become themselves. In this my first attempt to do justice to Shakespearean freedom, it therefore seems perfectly appropriate to end not with Shakespeare but with Kossuth, who died on the 20th of March, 1894. His body was buried in Budapest. Millions showed up to welcome him home.<sup>107</sup>