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## The Melbourne Shakespeare Society: Bardolatry, Resistance and Fellowship

“The growth of such societies is a feature of our time”  
(Edward E. Morris, 1887)

### Origins, Constitution, Motto and Aims

The Melbourne Shakespeare Society, originally “Shakspeare” Society, came into existence in June 1884, following a meeting of about a hundred people in the Town Hall. The initiative came from Professor Edward E. Morris, recently appointed to the Chair of Modern Languages and Literature at Melbourne University. He became the first President. The first committee brought together David Blair, James Edward Neild and James Smith, all, for 30 years, leading men of letters in the city.<sup>1</sup> Among their various occupations, all had been at times journalists, Blair and Smith editors, and theatre and music critics of Melbourne’s best newspapers, *The Age*, the more conservative *Argus*, and its associated weekly *The Australasian*.

The aims and ethos of the Society were indeed intellectual, studious, and inspired by a belief that the works of Shakespeare deserved the most careful study, at times in a fashion close to that of the Bible, as is evident in the following quotation where a President of the Society compares the Shakespeare text with the Ark of the Covenant. In 1905 in a paper on recent Shakespeare performances in the city P.D. Phillips complained of the practice of cutting the plays for the stage:

Here in a Society which only exists to promote the study of Shakespeare, the text should be held sacred, and woe should be denounced to those impious Uzzahs<sup>2</sup> who put forth an innovating-hand to what should remain the permanent, unchanging, unalterable heritage of mankind.<sup>3</sup>

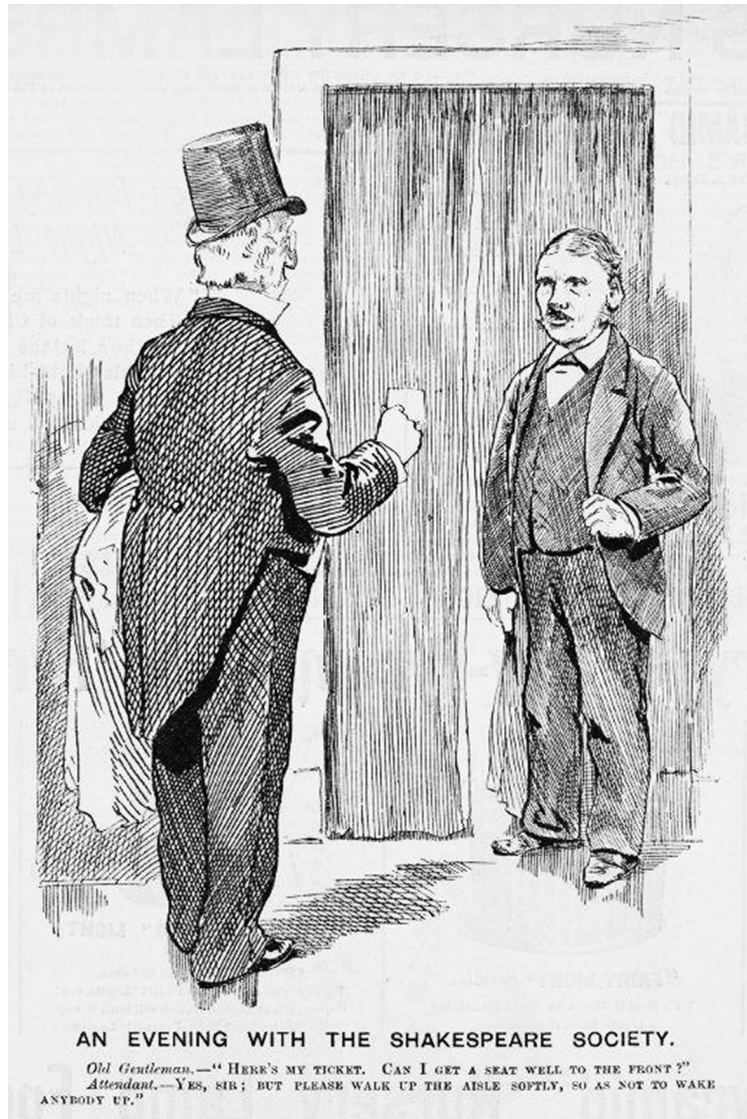
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<sup>1</sup> In addition to these, early members included “Vagabond” (John Stanley James, a journalist and playwright); (Sir) George Frederic Verdon, FRS, a politician who was interested in astronomy and was appointed honorary assistant at the Melbourne Observatory in 1858; Reverend John Reid; Councillor Ievers; P. D. Phillips (1836-1909), a leading insolvency lawyer, free trader, Shakespeare scholar and President of the Society; his son, M. M. Phillips, a solicitor, and also President.

<sup>2</sup> & <sup>3</sup> Over the page.

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*Figure 1: Melbourne Punch, 8 May 1890.*

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<sup>2</sup> A son of Abinadab who, with his brother, drove the cart which carried the Ark to Jerusalem. Reaching out to steady the Ark, he touched it, in violation of divine law, and died instantly. (2 Samuel 3-7)

<sup>3</sup> Papers of the Melbourne Shakespeare Society, La Trobe Library, Melbourne, MS 12491. Subsequent references to these papers will be identified by accession numbers. The Phillips family maintained a connection with the Society until the 1950s.

The choice of the motto, "Would that I knew his Mind", a quotation of course, but a rather obscure one (*The Two Gentlemen of Verona*, I.ii. 33: Julia is speaking about Proteus), points again to the intellectual and at times even spiritual view of Shakespeare's work which was the Society's focus.<sup>4</sup> In Harold Love's view, the Society was creating "a secular religion, based on the semi-deified Shakespeare and the sacred volume of his works" (299). The conservative Neild held the work of Shakespeare in the highest reverence. Other members, less given to bardolatry, reflected a variety of political views, and spoke on such topics as Shakespeare the republican,<sup>5</sup> the limitations of Shakespeare as benefactor of humanity (compared with others' more tangible achievements), and the defects of Shakespeare as



PAPERS PROPOSED TO BE READ BEFORE THE SHAKSPEARE SOCIETY.

1. "SHAKSPEARE A PROTESTANT," BY THE BISHOP OF MELBOURNE. 2. "SHAKSPEARE A LARRIKIN," BY MR. GARDINER. 3. "SHAKSPEARE A POLITICIAN," BY MR. MIRAMS. 4. "SHAKSPEARE A CATHOLIC," BY DR. GOULD. 5. "SHAKSPEARE A CONSERVATIVE," BY SIR WILLIAM MITCHELL. 6. "SHAKSPEARE A SOLDIER," BY THE "LIEUTENANT COLONEL." 7. "SHAKSPEARE A REVOLUTIONIST," BY MR. WOODS. 8. "SHAKSPEARE A WOMEN'S RIGHTS," BY MRS. DUGDALE. 9. "SHAKSPEARE A MASHER," BY MR. SHIELDS.

Figure 2: *Melbourne Punch*, 10 June 1884.

(Reproduced with Permission of the Library of Monash University, Melbourne.)

<sup>4</sup> In the significant year 1964 the Society adopted instead a more predictable motto: "Not of an age but for all time".

<sup>5</sup> See the cartoon below.



philosopher.<sup>6</sup> In the early years, the Society enjoyed the challenging presence of Mr Hanbury Geoghegan, a Baconian. Unable to convert members, he left to begin his own Bacon-Shakespeare Society in West Melbourne.

A more head-on challenge came in 1885 from young Valentine “Mad” Browne, “a fly in the honey which members gathered from each flower of Shakespeare’s work”. He denounced the “stale stuff” offered by the committee and interrupted the “lecturettes”. His own provocative paper asserted that Juliet was “a girl destitute of all maidenly modesty ... nurtured by an abominably immoral old nurse”. Juliet was furthermore a “vulgar, forward, coarse-looking girl” who could have no character at all since she was only 14 years old. Browne’s Romeo was “a cowardly larrikin” who (had death not interfered) “would have been suing for a divorce within a week”. “This frankness so incensed a member of the committee that he kicked off the platform the essayist’s papers into a lady’s face. The young critic took his revenge by interjecting during the reading of papers, and thus delivered himself into his enemies’ power”.<sup>7</sup> At length the fly was thrown out. Another Shakespeare skeptic, Mr Dillon, provoked more lively scenes with a “clever audacious paper ... subversive of the objects of the Society”. In spite of the “old Shakespeare trumpet” being “blown vehemently”, Dillon remained unconvinced, “and would not assent to unhorsing St George from his saddle and putting Shakespeare there as England’s patron saint in his place” (*Table Talk*, 11 September 1885).

### Membership

As well as those ejected there were those who chose not to join. In 1884 John Gardiner MLA wrote scathingly:

I was going to join the Shakespeare Society but the members were too mixed for me, as it were. When I read the immortal bard aloud it must be in the best of company. I can’t stand these Professors at any price. We’ve got one in the House, and he is enough for me. He calls ‘Romans’ ‘Womans’ and ‘Speaker’ ‘Speekah’. Blooming fine mess he’d make of the immortal Williams. [sic] (*Table Talk*, 10 July 1884)

Members came predominantly from the professions, including lawyers, doctors, clergy, school teachers, or were businessmen with literary interests like Mr Mullen the bookseller. A number were indeed professors; others were

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<sup>6</sup> Neild clipped newspaper bardolators for his scrap book. For instance, one, after referring to the transcendent genius of the master, observes of his birthday: “A greater than St George first saw the light on a certain 23<sup>rd</sup> of April ... he did more in an intellectual sense to raise and maintain the prestige of his country than any of his fellows” (23 April 1890) MS 12380.

<sup>7</sup> *Table Talk*, 26 June 1885; “The Melbourne Shakespeare Society: The Story of Its beginnings” by A. H., 1934, reprinted in *The Melbourne Shakespearean* 1.2 (December 2000).

journalists, with some few theatre people like Miss Kate Bishop of the “Theatre Royal”, and other artists and musicians. They were mostly men, and for a time men held all the offices. Elizabeth Anne Fraser, of whom more later, notes dryly that “[i]t was not till 1909 that the Society committee found it advisable to have women in its membership”. Some of the women members had husbands, brothers or fathers in the Society. With the initial subscription set at 10/- a year, when a skilled adult tradesman earned between £130-200 a year and a head clerk between £200-300, the cost of membership might be off-putting, and in addition the Society assumed a quite high level of education among its members, for readings (with their own copies of plays) and for general participation.

Nevertheless, in spite of its elevated profile, the Society appeared to some at least open and welcoming: an unidentified newspaper cutting of 3 April 1888 urges people to join: “all lovers of the bard ought to join, and come out of their nooks and corners. It is a mistake to imagine the Society is too high-toned” (MS 9635, 29). At the 1890 AGM (which about 200 people attended, some of whom had been members from the start) Neild as President thanked the *Argus* for support in maintaining community awareness and interest by publishing transcripts of papers read before the Society, and noted “[t]he quarterly literary and musical evenings had been a pronounced success and have led to many additions in membership”. Nonetheless at the Anniversary meeting on 23 April at the Athenaeum in the same year, Neild complained that out of “half a million people in Melbourne” and with the Society six years old, “only two hundred members” was a dismally low figure. Several members reportedly had “la grippe” and had stayed away. Despite Neild’s reproaches, evidence suggests that 200 was a constant and indeed impressive number for membership until the late 1920s.

The Society remained a white middle-class organization of professional Christian and Jewish men and women, with a fringe around it of European musicians and artists. It was not until 1919 that a non-European name appeared in the Society when a Miss Rose Quong is noted in the programme playing Rosaline in *Love’s Labour’s Lost*. There is, as far as we can see, no trace of the settler Society’s feeling a need to acknowledge indigenous people, apart from Neild’s suggestion, when a new theatre was being built, that it have a Shakespearean name, or an Aboriginal one, such as Monomeeth (pleasant) or Narbethong (cheerful). Alternatively, he suggested, it might commemorate an actor, and certainly not make another allusion to royalty, in a name like “the Prince of Wales”, since Melbourne already had a Royal and a Princess’s (Love, *Neild* 246).<sup>8</sup>

## Context

It is striking that in the papers we have examined there seems to be no evidence at the time of the formation of the Society of any sense of cultural

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<sup>8</sup> Cf. the Poet Henry Kendall naming his daughter “Araluen” (place of the water lilies).

inferiority, no urge to bring civilization to the outposts of empire, no colonial anxiety.<sup>9</sup> This is best explained, we think, by the context of the Society's creation.

The Victorian gold rush, beginning in Ballarat in 1851, had made Melbourne rich, and attracted immigrants of all kinds, including the medically qualified J.E. Neild, who left England in 1853. Though founded in 1835, forty-seven years after the arrival of the first fleet in Sydney, the population of Melbourne in 1870 was 191,449, when Sydney's was 134,736.<sup>10</sup> The city's development had also outstripped Sydney in terms of the establishment of cultural institutions. Galleries, libraries, newspapers, weeklies, bookshops and literary societies all flourished. A small local publishing industry was beginning too. Melbourne University was founded in 1854, and the Working Men's College (now RMIT) opened in 1887. In 1880 Ned Kelly was hanged and the Royal Exhibition Building opened for Melbourne's first international exhibition. In his study of the colonial literati, Ken Stewart observes that the emigré journalists wrote with "an élan and self-confidence that promoted publicly an impression that, in literary matters, the Colonial City had confidently 'arrived'".<sup>11</sup> *Melbourne Punch* began in 1855, followed soon by the Garrick Club, an amateur dramatic club and rendezvous for "men of cultivated minds and refined tastes in this city and Colony" (*Age* 22 October, Stuart 35, qtd. in Love, *Neild* 33) and a stage for their fierce rivalries and arguments. The Club was short lived but, as Love remarks, later the lively meetings of the MSS realized something like it. The value of colonial writing was a controversial issue, but there was a growing sense of its acceptability and viability. Neild was one who defended the locally written drama against the "coloniphobists" (his word) (Love 40, 201).

Theatre-going gradually became more respectable, and audiences better behaved, and though pantomime and the melodramas of the day prevailed, the classics were played, including seven plays of Shakespeare in the years 1843-54. From 1854 on Melbourne had at least two theatres functioning and saw fine performances by stars from abroad, Gustavus Brooke (in Melbourne 1855-61), Barry Sullivan (in Melbourne 1862-6), the Keans (1863) and Walter Montgomery whose 1867 performance of *Hamlet* led to a heated argument in the press, "Was *Hamlet* Mad?". In the Brooke years more of Shakespeare's plays were performed (22) than at any equivalent period in the twentieth century.<sup>12</sup> Then came a decline in the number of visits by touring stars, together with the rising popularity of spectacle, musicals and melodrama: by 1880 the first heyday of

<sup>9</sup> Ken Stewart (65-6) suggests that twenty years earlier the feeling was different, quoting verses by Richard Horne expressing a colonially-conscious reverence of Shakespeare, who provides a link with home and Englishness. Horne was, however, unlike other English settlers, hostile to colonial literary efforts, asserting: "We do not want a colonial literature. We are English" (27 February 1869). He returned to England shortly after.

<sup>10</sup> In 1880 it was 268,000, boosted to 473,000 by 1890, by the new households of gold rush children and new immigrants. "Between 1892 and 1895 [when the boom broke] Melbourne lost some 56,000 people" mostly from the older working-class suburbs (Davison, 152, 172).

<sup>11</sup> Ken Stewart, "A Careworn writer for the Press", 166.

<sup>12</sup> See the table of performances in D. Bartholomeusz, "Shakespeare on the Melbourne Stage, 1843-61".

Shakespeare on the Melbourne stage was over. Moreover, in the minds of some, by the 1890s “a huge wave of anti-intellectualism was about to break” (Love 307); a generation of native born Australians was emerging, to the horror of immigrant intellectuals.<sup>13</sup> In a context where, according to Stewart, colonially inflected reverence to Shakespeare coexisted with indifference, there must have seemed to be good reasons for establishing a Society which would honour Shakespeare by reading his plays.

### **Activities: Readings, Papers and Discussion**

Readings were from the beginning a major part of the activities undertaken by the Society. (They still are.) In addition there were short papers, an annual lecture, and the yearly Musical and Dramatic Entertainment, of which more in the next section. In its earnest attempt to keep abreast of Shakespeare scholarship, the Society had a library maintained by Dr. Neild. It ambitiously opened a fund for a Shakespeare Memorial Theatre in Melbourne, “abandoned temporarily owing to the war” in 1915, and maintained contact with other Shakespeare Societies, local and overseas. After the rowdy and no doubt entertaining skirmishes at the early meetings, a small booklet was produced in 1885, referred to as *The Book of the Society or The Rules*, setting down how the Society was to run. Rule 2 for example stated: “The Object of the Society is the Study of Shakespeare through the reading of his dramas, accompanied with oral criticism, and also through the composition and delivery of original papers” and Rule 13: “On the occasion of a reading, members shall be permitted to offer critical remarks on the Play, such remarks to be offered at the close of the reading, and no speaker to occupy more than five minutes, except at the discretion of the Chairman”. Papers were to take 15 minutes with a bell to be rung to warn speakers to finish. Long papers were a constant problem, and so was the lack of any permanent place for meetings: it is perhaps a sign of the Society’s health that it survived frequently moving around the city. As one member, Elizabeth Anne Fraser, noted, “we have ‘a name’, but no ‘local habitation’”.

Fraser’s paper “Early Days in the Shakespeare Society” brings belonging to the Society to life. Written in 1939 when she was aged 83, it reveals her as enthusiastic and independent-minded. A school teacher who had joined in 1889, she pays particular attention to women’s participation on the committee:

In 1900 both Miss Farrell and I had been nominated for the committee but we declined the favour. I do not know who nominated us or why we declined. Mr Phillips nominated me in 1903 and I was elected, the first and only woman on the Shakespeare Society committee, and I enjoyed the distinction for one year. (MS 9504, 14)

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<sup>13</sup> Neild himself had complained about Melbourne’s rowdy audiences since the late 1860s, as did Boucicault after his visit in late 1885.

Her record of their final acceptance, quoted already, has a wry tone: “It was not until 1909 that the Society committee found it advisable to have women in its membership”. Three women rose to this rank together, Charlotte Hemming, Miss Wallace, and herself. All had previously read papers at meetings, as indeed women members had from the first.<sup>14</sup> But achieving committee membership took 25 years. Some remarks of the founding president, Professor Morris, suggest a conventional domestic view of women’s place in such an organization. At the end of his prefatory paragraphs in the 1887 Book of the Society, distributed to all members, he had a suggestion to make to facilitate the Society’s central concern with reading the plays:

I could wish that the systematic reading of the plays in smaller parties were generally practised. The difficulties in the way are apparent, but they are not insuperable. Our lady members might render good service in the organization of reading parties, and thus help the Society.

This sounds like providing refreshments. On the other hand, when in 1925 Charlotte Hemming, a regular performer in the entertainment programmes, fell and broke her hip, the Society’s intention to rally round this popular “self-supporting woman” was reported in the press. Their “practical appreciation” of her work took the form of a benefit concert, with patrons galore and participation by the Melbourne Symphony Orchestra, who played Elgar, and the Dickens Dramatic Club, who performed “Betsy Trotwood Receives Visitors”. At times Fraser suggests an awareness of the delicacy of a single woman’s participation in a mixed group in a secular gathering. She speaks of her friendship with some of the male members, and of how this feeling survived her “sticking to her guns” in discussion: “which attitude, I think, rather surprized him, [P. D. Phillips] but he did not like me any the less for daring to hold my own opinion”. In the early days, papers were read and then discussed in what she calls “a conversational style of criticism”, that was both interesting and amusing. And this meant at times the conversation could become flirtatious, as when she recalls taking questions on her paper on *As You Like it*:

Mr Deegan would like to know how Rosalind and Orlando got on together twenty years after.  
Miss Fraser cannot answer that question until she has been twenty years married herself.  
Miss Sophie Osmond . . . would like to know whether Miss Fraser has ever met a ‘new woman’ having so far failed to meet one herself.  
Miss Fraser is happy to say she has not met a specimen of the

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<sup>14</sup> S. R. Hooper’s “Shakespeare’s Arthur and the real Arthur” was listed in August 1887.



‘new woman’, but she regards her, not as a personality, merely as a *tendency*.

Miss Osmond cannot help expressing her admiration of Miss Fraser’s very happy definition. (General applause.)

For Fraser, looking back revived memories of such gratifying moments in the Society, and of other “pleasant little gatherings” after meetings, such as going with the Baconian Geoghegan and other members to Gunsler’s café.

The variety of papers reflected the members’ varied interests and attitudes. Mr A. S. Way (headmaster of Wesley College) read his paper “The Ethical Tendency of Shakespeare’s plays” in 1888, to defend Shakespeare against the charge, made in an 1885 paper “Shakespeare the Hero” (later published in the *Argus*), that Shakespeare “lacked earnest purpose [...] and ethical influence”. Way addressed two popular theories “which appear to find favour with the robust type of mind which is apt to take a tinge of cynicism from experiences of the world”. The first was that Shakespeare was ruled in his selection and treatment [...] solely by considerations of “what would take with the public, draw an audience, and pay”; the second that Shakespeare wrote without caring about a moral aim. Was Shakespeare’s object ethical or merely artistic? Despite ‘Proteus’ in the *Argus* (26 May 1888) commenting on Way’s “unnecessary” defence of Shakespeare, this is a discussion that continues in the Society and elsewhere.

Among many other interesting papers, there was the Reverend John Reid’s “On Literary Mare’s Nests”, 1894, which disposed of the Bacon claim. A valuable paper on Shakespeare in performance was given by P.D. Phillips in 1905, amusingly condemning inappropriate actors’ business and interpolations. His paper, “On Some Recent Shakespeare Performances” focussed on a contemporary *Romeo and Juliet*. The actress Mrs Hill as the Nurse, Phillips argued, who was “not content with the aches in her head and back which Shakespeare has given her, but flies to others that he knew not of, ... complains of her leg which Juliet (Miss Brune) proceeds to rub much to the amusement of the unthinking”. This leads Phillips to draw attention to the poetic structure of Shakespeare’s language through the “supplementary leg” of Mrs Hill: “actors will find that it is best to leave the poet’s lines with just the number of feet supplied by the author and an extra leg, unless it be a wooden one, may obviously cause a redundant foot”.

The scholar E. H. C. Oliphant’s Annual Lecture in 1914 on “The Place of Shakespeare in Elizabethan Drama—Primus inter Pares”, introduced to the Society the importance of paying attention to Shakespeare’s contemporaries. In 1919 he spoke again, this time on that persistently controversial topic, “The Shakespeare Canon”. “Shakespeare and Nationality” was the Annual Lecture topic of the Venerable Archdeacon Aickin, in 1922; and Elizabeth Fraser spoke on “Four Wooings” in *As You Like It*. The article she “concocted” on “Shakespeare and cycling” and thought not “high-class enough for the Society” and therefore published elsewhere, was spotted by Mr Reid with the result that she was invited to present it, and did so to “much laughter”. Another lighter paper which leaps out from the records is Reverend George Walters’s on “Titania in Society”:

Titania was giddy and foolish, was fond of dancing, was given to revelry, and would probably have gone to Flemington on Cup Day [the horse racing carnival] had she been living here recently .... Walters imagined Titania was healthy and vigorous by reason of her free and happy nature: so the Titanias of the present day were quite right in taking healthy exercise, in studying how to be beautiful as well as useful, and in cultivating the aesthetic part of human nature ... Titania had strange visions and became enamoured of an ass. This too frequently was Titania in society ... the reunion of Titania and Oberon [Mr Walters thought] was a mental forecast of the reunion of the ideal manhood and the true ideal womanhood in society. (*Argus* 5 December 1887)

Alongside the arguments of Way (author of a long poem in couplets, "Our debt to Shakespeare", reportedly well received in England in 1888) and of Phillips and Oliphant, comes Walters, or perhaps the *Argus*, making Shakespeare a peg on which to hang more reflections on the contemporary Melbourne Woman.

Contrary to a contemporary view that characterized Society members as "nervous, timorous people, with a dread of anything that approaches the stage" (*Herald* 2 September 1887), play readings were a core activity. Reports of two early attempts at *Julius Caesar* reveal the Society in the process of establishing this important part of its programme in Melbourne's cultural life. In 1884 a reading of the first four acts was savagely ridiculed in *The Daily Telegraph*, as if it were a public performance: "seriously, I would ask the gentlemen who took part in Friday evening's burlesque, if they expect to popularize the study of Shakespeare by such ludicrous exhibitions of senility", and so on for more than 1500 words. The stiff reply, by Blair (Brutus), accuses the writer (if a member) of disloyally attacking fellow members, or (if not) of being an interloper and spy. He points out that the reading was preceded by "a brief essay on the more salient points of the drama, as exhibited in the most recent criticism" and followed by discussion of the play's "political lessons": "the republican and anti-republican views respectively were most effectively upheld by their several advocates". He defends both reading and discussion and asks for no more spies when "we meet together to read and study our Shakespeare" (*The Daily Telegraph* 16 June 1884). The *Herald* critic who had further claimed that the Society forgot "that Shakespeare was the actor and manager, not a dry-as-dust philosopher" is effectively answered by Blair's defence. The current archivist, Barbara Sharpe, has tracked down an unidentified article dated 1934 about the 1884 *Julius Caesar* which makes interesting reading: the Rev. John Reid played Cassius "whilst the versatile and accomplished Alfred Deakin, though a busy member of the Crown (and later Prime Minister), was content to read such varied small parts as those of Casca, the conspirator, Young Cato, the republican, and the Third Citizen". There was a talented cast.

Three years later at the Athenaeum the Society again read *Julius Caesar*, drawing a crowd of about 150, though some had not paid dues so could not be counted as members, and this time the *Herald* reported enthusiastically (6 June 1887):

[Julius Caesar] “rose before us as a mighty whole” ... an “Opera di Camera”, studies of the minds of Brutus, Cassius, Antony and Caesar, by Professor Morris, Mr Corr, Potts, Way, Ievers, Carrington et al. Brutus “stepped forth, as freshly and vigorously impersonated by a G.V. Brooke”. Brooke as mentioned above had performed impressively in Melbourne twenty years before. Further on, the report alludes to the Society motto “Would that I knew his mind”, commenting: “Their discussion on Julius Caesar helped us towards attempting to fathom that infinite mind”.

### **Activities: Musical and Dramatic Entertainments**

While lectures, readings, papers and discussions were the fare at regular monthly meetings from the outset, members also enjoyed several social “Entertainments” each year, where they could hear and perform musical items and recite favourite bits from Shakespeare. To celebrate the Society’s first anniversary and Shakespeare’s birthday on April 23rd, 1885, the Metropolitan *Liedertafel* sang a number of popular pieces by Arne, Bishop, Stevens, Locke and Pelham Humfrey, all billed as “madrigals”. Also on the programme were the “Nocturne” and “Grand March” from Mendelssohn’s incidental music to *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* played on violin, organ and piano—a somewhat challenging combination for instrumentalists. The souvenir programme thoughtfully included the words of the songs, together with extensive notes on the composers and arrangers.

Following committee discussions on the subject in 1887, the Secretary duly called members’ attention to “the proposed Musical Section of the Society” which they were urged to support. And they did. In December of that same year the programme for “A Literary and Musical Evening” at the Athenaeum set the pattern for decades to come. Between short lectures, speeches and recitations, musical items included Locke’s “When shall we three meet again?” (which got an encore) and the very popular glee “O happy, happy fair”. A second bracket of songs by Miss Nellie Neild included old favourites “Where the bee sucks”, “Sigh no more, ladies” and an encore of “Blow, blow, thou winter wind”.

Certainly by 1888 Neild thought that meetings should be gingered up with music. The *Argus* (5 May 1888) noted that “Dr Neild has said some prominent members of the *Liedertafel* had promised to enliven the proceedings of the Society’s meetings occasionally with musical selections”. In July, the *Argus* noted that about 200 ladies and gentlemen attended a Society evening that was “Music and Literary”, with recitations, songs, and Chopin and Weber on the piano. A year later, the Society formed its own Choir with sixteen members. This seems to have flourished, under the guidance of Mr. Furlong (whose Music Studio was in Royal Arcade). Fraser records that he and the choir rendered Lock’s [sic] *Macbeth* music to complement two scenes from the play “admirably presented” by the Reverend John Reid and Mrs G. B. W. Lewis, in December 1896.

Not all was plain sailing, however: we can only speculate on the effect of the music offered at the sixth anniversary meeting in 1890, where violinist Mr Max Klein was billed to play an evocatively titled solo, “Ophelia’s Death Wail” by Dobryzynski. At the same entertainment, a Signor de Beaupuis who had

been engaged to play some piano pieces declined because the Steinway grand provided was not up to his expectations.

A glance at the 1888 Birthday programme illustrates how dramatic as well as musical performances were integral to the evening's entertainment of seventeen items. No wonder it was announced that "as a consequence of the length of the programme, encores will not be allowed". Scenes performed were from *The Merchant of Venice*, (Portia and Nerissa), *Henry V*, with Katherine performed by Miss Irma Dreyfus, Alice by Nellie Neild and Henry by J. F. Bradly, then *Much Ado*, the Church scene, and finally *Hamlet*, the Player King and Queen. An unknown journalist in an unassigned clipping dated 3 April 1888 described the event as "a mild and appropriate intellectual carnival".

Although it is tempting to speculate about non-Anglo membership of the Society from listed participants in these entertainments, there is no sure way of discerning whether they were Shakespeare Society folk or invited *Liedertafel* members, or indeed professional artistes invited by Dr Neild. Perhaps, as European and Jewish surnames like Dreyfus, Klein, Samuell and Herz suggest, these were cultivated *Liedertafel* members helping out: whether they had come to Australia as refugees or settlers is not known. More research needs to be undertaken in this whole area.

Looking at printed programmes from the early 1900s, we notice that the Society's original aims (as specified in the 1887 Book mentioned above, "the study of Shakspeare through the reading of his dramas, accompanied with oral criticism and also through the composition and delivery of original papers") have been modified to incorporate and emphasise the significance of popular musical and dramatic entertainments. A December 1915 programme for example specifies, as the Society's aims "in the thirty-first year of its existence", that it "*was established for the promotion of the study of Shakspeare's works by means of dramatic and musical renderings of portions of them*, the celebration of the anniversary of his birthday, prize examinations, and monthly meetings for the reading of papers and discussions" (our emphasis).

Understandably during the period of the First World War, each December meeting became a cultivated Christmas party fortified by patriotic sentiment. In 1914, it was a "Patriotic Concert in aid of the Belgian Relief Fund", including an address by M.M. Phillips, the Society's Treasurer, on "Shakespeare's Patriotism" and a recitation by Mr Claude Hall of "Henry V at Harfleur". The following year Mr Arthur Coppin gave an equally stirring and appropriate "Richmond before Bosworth" recitation. And in December 1917 the Society pulled out all the stops to mount a Patriotic Performance of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, in aid of the Victorian Red Cross. Significantly making a virtue of necessity in this production, the programme specifically noted that "the Scenes are played in Curtains and no scenery is used at all, thus approximating as far as possible under modern conditions to the stage of Shakspeare's own day".



### Attitudes to the Professional Stage

While the Society deplored the professional stage's practice of cutting Shakespeare ("The pruning knife", exclaims the Author, 'Zounds, the Axe'", as P. D. Phillips has it in his 1905 paper) they were no enemies of performance itself, nor of good professional actors. Willingness to participate in events like *Julius Caesar* (noted above) is evidence that members were at ease with their own partially staged events as well as with the Dramatic Entertainments open to the public.

As for the professional stage, Phillips' 1905 paper again raises an important question. He admits to a "divided duty". On the one hand, he's thankful to managers for taking the risk to put Shakespeare on the public stage and wants to support actors, particularly those, as in the *Romeo and Juliet*, "who come so far to interpret him". He is well aware of the financial risks, something the manager Coppin had explained to Neild:

I am not a Shakspeare scholar altho a great admirer of his works and have lost thousands of pounds in my endeavours to create a public taste for them—I never felt at home in a Shaksperian character and as a Manager—with very few exceptions—I always lost money by Shakspeare without a first-class Star—and then I am positive it was the Actor and not the Author that brought the money.' [1885] (qtd. in Love, ed. *The Australian Stage*, 64)<sup>15</sup>

At the same time, Phillips decries common contemporary faults such as excessive stage business, giving Othello a portrait of Desdemona to gaze at, or Malvolio entering in his night-gown—something the character as Shakespeare has written him would never do, that is, sacrifice his dignity by appearing undressed. He also comments on the modern habit of making big stage pictures, as in Romeo and Juliet's marriage in Friar Laurence's cell, complete with fully dressed altar and choir. "What then is to be done with these criminals?" he asks. In the Society he is arguing: "here's our Shakspeare, as we know and love him and we cannot avoid viewing with disfavour, departures and excressences [sic] and innovations ... undertaken with desire for novelty ... and meretricious effect".

We get some feeling for the respect for professional actors in the Society at large when in May 1914 they send out printed invitations for an At Home to meet Ellen Terry. Unfortunately, she was unable to attend due to illness. Earlier, Fraser reports, the Society in 1896 went "*en masse*" to see Rignold's famous *Henry V*: "During an interval Dr Neild and members of the committee presented a complementary address to Mr Rignold, who, seated on his horse, received the gentleman on stage". The next year Rignold's *Tempest* was under the official patronage of the Society, but few members went to see it. The Society's attitude

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<sup>15</sup> Coppin arrived in Sydney in 1843.

to actors, in one popular view, was hypocritical, both superior and deferential: “Although the Shakespeare Society is largely composed of those persons who never go to a theatre, they never can get on without referring to the elucidation by actors ...” complained Demos in the *Argus* (1 August 1888). For all that, as mentioned earlier, the Society aspired to raise money to build a Shakespeare theatre in Melbourne, “a long sought ambition” Fraser calls it, and, abandoning that, later raised money to support the new Memorial Theatre at Stratford (*Argus* 24 June 1926). And on occasions they organized theatre visits explicitly to support a manager they approved of, as in this item about Wilkie:

In view of Allen Wilkie’s laudable enterprise and his signal success in the production of Shakespeare’s plays so excellently and effectively, it is to be hoped that, as a mark of appreciation of his achievements, all members of the Society will endeavour to be present on the occasion.

In 1928 Sir John Monash felt it appropriate to urge the Society to call on the Government to subsidize performances of Shakespeare.

### **Shakespeare Prize Examinations**

A highlight of each December’s Musical and Dramatic Entertainment was the distribution of prizes to successful candidates in the annual Shakespeare Prize Examination, held in March (or August in 1900s). The value the Society put on knowing Shakespeare, in the sense of being very familiar with the plays, lies behind the effort expended year after year from 1887 to set, distribute and judge papers. The annual Examination was still going strong in the 1970s. Entry, for a small fee, was open to anyone under 20.

Early papers tested detailed knowledge of one play (in 1889 *Henry V*, 1890 *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, 1891 *The Merchant of Venice*), plus Dowden’s *Shakspeare* (sic) *Primer*. Candidates prepared by committing significant speeches to memory and knowing the meaning of every word. A collection of papers from the 1900s shows that the examination became even more demanding. The general prescription for 1925, set by Mr A. H. Williams MA, ran as follows:

A detailed knowledge of one of Shakespeare’s tragedies; a general acquaintance with *As You Like It* and *The Merchant of Venice*, and one historical play; a knowledge of the Elizabethan theatre and of the life and time of Shakespeare; the ability to quote certain specific passages in *Richard II*, *Julius Caesar*, *Henry V*, *Twelfth Night*, *The Merchant of Venice*, Sonnet XXX [“When to the sessions of sweet silent thought”]

The attached bibliography directed candidates to A. C. Bradley, Sir Walter Raleigh and F. S. Boas’s *Shakespeare and His Predecessors*.

After perusing a few question papers from the 1900s, we consider this to have been a tough exam on a wide range of knowledge. There were some curly questions, too, that might baffle a scholar today (let alone a student), like the following: “In what respects does the historical play you have studied differ from fact?” or “Where are Ely House, Plashy, Langley and Berkeley?”, or the devastatingly simple “Is Shakespeare typically English?” And two questions from 1917: “State *four* uses that Shakespeare makes of prose in his plays”. “Tell the story of one of the following characters: Lady Macbeth, Ophelia, and Cordelia”. The examiners’ reports list the number of candidates, the marks attained, and note that they value “accurate knowledge combined with good powers of expression”.

A fund for Prizes was begun in 1887 with a £25 donation from actor-manager J. C. Williamson, and maintained by fundraising efforts thereafter.<sup>16</sup> The results were published in the press and the presentation of six prizes (later more) by the wife of the Governor, Lady Mayoress (or some other dignitary; in 1928 it was Sir John Monash) took place during the annual Dramatic and Musical Entertainment evening. Winning the first prize was for many years a valued distinction. It features in the biography of Mary Grant Bruce, the famous writer of children’s books, the Billabong series. She was in a private school run by Miss Beausire who, through a fellow teacher, Miss Fraser again, heard of the examination of the Melbourne Shakespeare Society, and encouraged her to enter: she won first prize in 1895, 1897 and 1898. After her successes a rule was introduced preventing winners from re-entering. In the early years, the Society also administered a quite separate prize awarded on the result of another set of examinations at Melbourne University. Papers preserved by Neild reveal that these candidates sat four separate papers, and were required to submit also an essay or poem. There was only one candidate in 1892. The Prize here was a Shakespeare Scholarship. Elizabeth Fraser noted that Miss Wallace, “winner of the Shakespeare Scholarship 1902” was “the first female student to gain that distinction. She has given great assistance in our annual examinations as well as contributing papers on various subjects” (including one on Enobarbus in 1903).<sup>17</sup> Yet further participation in teaching Shakespeare by the Society was, in the late 1920s, the providing of lectures at the University on the Shakespeare plays set for the Intermediate exam. It was promised that songs and scenes from the Plays “will also be provided” (*Age*, 6 July 1927). As always, the Society was ready to perform Shakespeare.

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<sup>16</sup> Prizes in 1887-8: 1<sup>st</sup> Junior £5, 2<sup>nd</sup> £1; 1<sup>st</sup> Senior £10, 2<sup>nd</sup> £5, 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> £1 each.

<sup>17</sup> Won in 1889 by Charles R. Long, of the Central School, Richmond. A.H. wrote in 1934 that Mr Long “is now the Senior Member, with a record of 46 years continuous service. He has been committeeman, secretary and president, and this month gave us a paper on King Lear. Of such stuff are good Shakespearians made”.

**Coda**

What of the Society in Melbourne in the early twenty-first century? It continues to flourish, nowadays with a far more diverse international membership than its original. Everyone is still intensely committed to uphold the prime aim “to foster an appreciation of the works of William Shakespeare in the community” and support many educational and dramatic ventures Shakespearean. The Society continues to hold monthly discussion meetings in the city with guest speakers, musical items, book reports, sonnet readings and reports of other Shakespeare-related events. We, the researchers, are both members and regular speakers. In assembling the material for this paper we (and the Society’s archivist, Barbara Sharpe, whom we thank) are fulfilling another aim of the Society in its present manifestation, to record and preserve its ongoing history.

The most significant development in the Society’s activity in recent years has been the formation of a Reading Group in 1998, convened by Paul Roebuck: the group completed its third cycle of reading the complete Canon in 2011. Associated readings of other plays (classical, Renaissance and modern) which illuminate Shakespeare’s works are also undertaken by the group. In the spirit of E.H.C. Oliphant’s plea for “an open mind”, these readings provide “plenty to discuss, plenty to admire” (“The Place of Shakespeare in Elizabethan Drama” MS 9508, 24).

These rehearsed readings give members a chance to try their hand at directing, to speak their favourite roles and hear others, in an entertaining workshop performance open to the public. Society members are as “eager to act” as ever they were in the 1880s, combining a passionate commitment to knowing Shakespeare’s language with a love of the plays as theatre.

Sadly, there are still no indigenous members of the Melbourne Society, even though papers on Shakespeare in relation to topics of contemporary political significance, like Shakespeare’s *Boat People* (about refugees) and *Caliban* as a colonial victim, are well received by an open-minded group of listeners. Perhaps it will happen with the next generation of the Melbourne Shakespeare Society.



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