

‘Leaves from the Life! and Lays from the Lyre! of William Shakespeare!:
An historical, musical and illustrative Lecture’

Introduction

‘Leaves from the Life!’ is an unusual item in the British Library’s Lord Chamberlain Plays Collection (ADD MSS 52938 R), not least because it is one of the few items which is not a formal play. Rather, it is, as the title suggests, an ‘illustrat[ed] Lecture’. Despite this, the manuscript is labelled, ‘Theatre Royal Sadlers Wells’. This is odd on at least two counts: firstly, why should a London theatre be featuring a lecture? Secondly, why should the text for that lecture have been sent to the Lord Chamberlain for approval? Several intriguing answers may be suggested in response to either question: the manuscript itself reveals little, allowing (or, perhaps forcing) the scholar to pursue various paths of speculation. In what follows some of these paths are sign-posted and, to an extent, mapped. Such paths, however, are offered in the spirit of suggestion rather than prescription. It is hoped that those who come across them will be inspired to continue this work of clearance, and so create a map of the Victorian theatrical landscape that reserves space for the idiosyncratic theatrical events and performances that took place at the margins of recognised dramatic culture: after all, as Virginia Blain rightly suggests, ‘it is only by exploring the edges of a territory, where definition falls under challenge, that one begins to perceive some of the truly ambiguous effects of that territory in the first place’.¹

So what kind of territory are we confronted with in ‘Leaves from the Life!’? As a theatrical lecture it works both as a performance and as an exposition on that great figure of Victorian, as much as Renaissance, English theatre: Shakespeare. It exists, therefore, at one of those exciting cross-roads where territorial boundaries are debated and valiantly fought for: where passions run high and investments run deep. In this sense, it typifies both ‘Victorian Shakespeare culture’ and the theatre at which it was performed: the Theatre Royal, Sadler’s Wells in Islington. Indeed, Shakespeare’s reputation in the middle decades of the nineteenth century was closely associated with Sadler’s Wells because the theatre had in 1844 been taken over by Samuel Phelps, an actor-manager with a startling dedication firstly to establishing Shakespeare in the suburban theatre and secondly to raising the status of such theatres by using Shakespeare as remedy.² Under his management Sadler’s Wells became ‘The Home of Shakespeare’³ and in 1853, following a decade during which Phelps-with-Shakespeare had steered the theatre through a period of transition, we might see ‘Leaves from the Life!’ as an intriguing seal on that fruitful and collaborative relationship.

Manuscript to performance.

The manuscript in the British Library collection consists of around 48 double-sided sheets of handwritten text, forming the script for a lecture. Although the text is complete and appears in the correct order, the pages are made up of more than one notebook fused together and there are times when a sheaf of blank pages is fixed between two pages of script. It is written in at least 3, possibly 4, different hands; the main text is written in ink, but it features several pencilled annotations – usually indicating a word to be cut, a substitute word or a question mark, presumably indicating a potential cut or change. At times larger parts of the text are crossed through in ink, and in the case of sections which run to more than 3 lines the word ‘CUT’ is written across the text in ink.⁴ At times the script is written so smoothly that it seems possible it was dictated; certainly it was written in sufficient advance of performance to allow for alteration either on the grounds of tone, as where ‘this gentleman was however most probably a lunatic’ receives a suggested alteration to ‘this gentleman was mistaken’ in pencil, or apparently for timing and cogency, as where a large section on the English ballad tradition is excised. This combination of several hands and several alterations suggests firstly that this may have been a collaborative effort (see below) and secondly that the lecture could have been performed in full, probably in private, before the public performance and that the text was prepared, or even taken down by copyists, on that occasion and subsequently altered in the light of this run-through. In terms of dating, the lecture is marked ‘5 March 1853’; it was received at the Lord Chamberlain’s office on 8 March

¹ Virginia Blain, ‘Queer Empathy: or, Reading/Writing the Queer in Victorian Poetry’, *Compass Literature* <http://www.literature-compass.com/victorian/view_LICO_059.asp> [accessed 20 May 2004] (22 paragraphs).

² At first Phelps managed the theatre jointly with Mrs. Warner, a well-known actress, but she left in 1847 to take over the management of the Theatre Royal, Marylebone.

³ So named by Edward Joseph Dent in chapter 3 of his *A Theatre for Everybody: the Story of the Old Vic and Sadler’s Wells* (London: Boardman, 1945).

⁴ These removed sections are indicated in the text and given either in footnotes or appendices.

and the licence sent on 9 March. Yet, as discussed below, it does not seem to have been performed publicly until 24 March.

The lecture opens with a discussion of Shakespeare's life and reputation; it continues by musing on the English musical tradition, including discussion of practice in Elizabethan England. It touches on anecdotal and folk knowledge of England's past, including some idiosyncratic diversions such as a section on the history of naming meat in English culture, before moving on to speculate on the background and character of various figures who feature only by report, never on stage, in Shakespeare's plays. The entire piece is punctuated by various songs, duets, and glees taken mainly from Shakespeare's comedies. Its tone is at once commemorative and light-heartedly comedic: Shakespeare emerges both as English hero and rogue, delighting in parodying the rich, tantalising with glimpses of the saucy life of the under-stairs poor, yet maintaining noble-minded admiration of the pious and the just. Generically it is intriguingly hybrid: despite gesturing at the formal lecturing style of those such as Schlegel it also almost names itself as *vaudeville*. Certainly it segues between the quasi-scholarly and the uproariously entertaining, and features as much singing and music as it does speech.

Although the mss is labelled 'Theatre Royal Sadler's Wells' it features no names, either of performer or author. However, the dates given on the text help us to situate this piece of theatre: it was submitted to the Lord Chamberlain's office during the Lenten period of 1853. Clearly it caused little or no concern to the censors as the licence was processed within a day. It had been known for theatres to change their schedules according to the Easter calendar: in Phelps' first season at Sadler's Wells the theatre had closed during Holy Week and he also chose not to follow the example of other managements by holding an Easter spectacular.⁵ However in 1853 plays continued to run during Lent and Holy Week at Sadler's Wells, including *Henry IV Part 2* in which Phelps played both the King and Justice Shallow, earning the approval of the *Morning Advertiser's* reviewer, who went so far as to claim that this virtuosity, 'raises the office of the actor into the highest department of literature and the arts'.⁶ It is precisely this shift from the acting sphere of the theatre to the culturally accented sphere of art and literature that 'Leaves from the Life!' straddles, leading one to speculate that it was indeed a collaborative effort between those with expertise in both. We know a good deal about Phelps at Sadler's Wells, but a notice in *The Times* for March 24 1853, featured not in the formal adverts for performances at the Theatres Royal which *The Times* ran daily, but rather in amongst the classified listings, can lead us to identify the comedic talent that undoubtedly characterised the tone of 'Leaves from the Life!':

Theatre Royal Sadler's Wells: Mr. Hoskins will deliver this evening (Thursday), and on Saturday next, a new historical, musical, and illustrated entertainment, entitled 'Leaves from the Life and Lays from the Lyre of William Shakespeare'. In the second part Mr. Hoskins will attempt to develop and illustrate a few unseen characters incident to the Plays of Shakespeare.⁷

A second notice, featuring the exact same wording, appears in *The Times* for Saturday March 26 1853. Perhaps surprisingly, given twenty-first century habits, the theatre at this time ran several entertainments in one evening. Thus even performances of major plays such as *Othello* or *Henry IV Part 2* were followed by musical entertainment or one-act farces,⁸ and although Phelps was dedicated to associating Sadler's Wells with Shakespeare, his plays ran in the same week as plays by other dramatists both new and old. 'Afterpieces' were often performed by those who had played minor parts in the main comedy or tragedy of the evening; in the case of some performers, and Shirley S. Allen includes Mr. Hoskins in this number, players would prove important to both forms of entertainment.⁹ Indeed, on these two evenings (Maundy Thursday and the Saturday of Easter weekend), Mr. Hoskins appears to have brought all forms of entertainment together into one occasion. Although Allen suggests that the audiences at Sadler's Wells 'did not like the kind of broad farce which was popular at many of London's minor theatres' (p. 126), it seems

⁵ For example *The Times*, 22 March 1853 includes an advertisement for 'a new grand equestrian spectacle' for Easter Monday at Astley's Royal Amphitheatre.

⁶ Review by F. G. Tomlinson printed in W. May Phelps and John Forbes Robertson, *The Life and Life-Work of Samuel Phelps* (London: Sampson Low & Co., 1886), pp. 127-8.

⁷ *The Times*, 24 March 1853, p. 4. The mss features no split; but editorial speculation as to the division between the two parts is indicated in the text.

⁸ As in the advertisement for the bill at Sadler's Wells featured in *The Times*, 8 March 1853: 'For the benefit of the widow of the late John Moody, this evening will be presented Othello. After which a concert, in which Miss Poole, Miss Rosa Graham, Messrs. H. Drayton and R. and C. Blagrove, Husk, Baldwin, Fielding, Seymour, &c, will appear. And My Neighbour's Wife.'

⁹ Shirley S. Allen, *Samuel Phelps and Sadler's Wells Theatre* (Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 1971), p. 126.

they were not averse to varied entertainment, some of it sounding particularly populist, such as ‘Jacobs the Wizard of Wizards’, whose act had included ‘ventriloquist magic[], experimental philosophy, improvisation’ staged at Sadler’s Wells on the previous Friday and Saturday nights.¹⁰ ‘Leaves from the Life!’ then apparently continues this vein of weekend entertainment, a light-hearted respite from the week’s performances of serious drama. Perhaps most vitally, however, it was slated directly against attractions such as ‘Adam’s Orrery’ at the Adelphi Theatre, in which Mr. Adams, playing for the twenty-third year in London, would ‘deliver his Annual lecture on Astronomy. Begin at 8, end about 10. Children half-price’.¹¹ The decision to play ‘Leaves from the Life!’ at the theatre, therefore, engages with the broader project of Shakespeare and Sadler’s Wells, but also indicates a desire to compete more immediately with the range of Easter entertainment on offer in London. Unlike the Adelphi’s management, however, Phelps rather cannily emulated the central-London vogue for Easter lectures whilst prudently utilising the talents of his own acting company, in the form of Mr. Hoskins (about which more below), rather than bringing in stars from afar.

So, ‘Leaves from the Life!’ could deliver for Phelps as both Shakespeare-event and Easter entertainment. But why need it be sent to the Lord Chamberlain’s office? The lecture is billed as essentially Mr. Hoskins’ occasion, yet the fact that his lecture featured several duets and glees (a song written for at least 3 parts, originally for male voices) indicates that he would have been joined on stage by other performers. However, Phelps’ general disinclination for spectacular theatre (although his early career was spent with the celebrated Macready at Drury Lane and Covent Garden, he did not wish to compete with West End extravagances) suggests that his influence shaped the entertainment as a simple fare of traditional ballads, probably all unaccompanied, rather than grand-scale musical concert. Despite this, the presence of more than one performer, and a script that it is tempting to imagine could produce a *tour de force* of comic entertainment as well as enlightenment, indicates that the lecture was more than either an exposition or a gimmicky stage-show. This, together with the fact that it was based on the ‘national’ poet (see below), would then explain why the script was sent to the Lord Chamberlain: this was, effectively, a performance of Shakespeare and was treated with the scrupulosity necessary when showing licensed drama.

A note on the Music.

As described by Charles Cudworth, the tradition of setting songs and excerpts from Shakespeare’s plays to music had developed together with the vagaries of theatrical tradition itself: music in the playhouse was affected by issues of space and architecture as well as taste and content.¹² Music, therefore, appeared to greater or lesser degrees in performances of Shakespeare according to fashion, and whether the songs were based on extracts from the text or were merely pieces of whimsy concocted in generalised response to the plays was a matter of chance and preference on the parts of management and composer. Even a paucity of lyrical material from the texts themselves was no barrier to introducing musical accompaniment: in 1736 Henry Carey composed incidental music for *Hamlet*, notably for the protagonist’s lying-in-state, now ‘with new music proper to the occasion’ (Cudworth, p. 59). In the case of the lecture, most musical excerpts derive from Shakespeare’s comedies, but it does not indicate which settings were to be used, and includes no lyrics. Given that settings were numerous (Thomas Arne is mentioned, whose famous settings of Shakespeare’s songs are still sung today) we cannot be sure which versions would have been featured or, indeed, whether or not they included words from Shakespeare’s text. To aid the reader, however, the relevant textual extracts for each of the songs mentioned are given chronologically in Appendix 3. Sadler’s Wells was not noted for its musical performances, although concerts were held there, but Allen does observe that audiences expected pieces to be ‘well sung’ (p. 126). The lecture itself embeds the Shakespearean songs within larger traditions of English balladeering (especially in the excised section featuring in Appendix 1), suggesting that the performance was more concerned with simplicity and tradition than spectacle and musical distinction.

Victorian Shakespeare Culture at Sadler’s Wells.

Sadler’s Wells theatre had originally been established in the late seventeenth century, affording it one of the longest histories in London. Situated in Islington it opened to serve boisterous visitors to a medieval well ‘to which miraculous healing powers were attributed’ (Allen, p. 77). The theatre continued such populist tradition for many decades: in the eighteenth century it was especially celebrated for a dramatisation of

¹⁰ *The Times*, 18 March 1853.

¹¹ Listing from classified section of *The Times*, 24 March 1853.

¹² Charles Cudworth, ‘Song and Part-Song Settings of Shakespeare’s Lyrics, 1660-1960’, in *Shakespeare in Music: Essays by John Stevens, Charles Cudworth, Winton Dean, Roger Fiske*, ed. by Phyllis Hartnoll (London: Macmillan, 1964), pp. 51-88.

Hogarth's *The Harlot's Progress* and the crowd's enjoyment of the shows was lubricated by generous supplies of wine, kept on specially built ledges in the backs of seats (ibid.). The theatre's reputation for populist entertainment, often featuring performing animals and celebrated pantomime, continued into the early decades of the nineteenth-century, when a notorious feature was installed: an enormous water tank under the stage, exposed for glory in the "nautical dramas" for which Sadler's Wells became famous. Despite (or more probably because of) these technical achievements, the theatre continued to be associated with chaotic and heckling audiences, affording Sadler's Wells the reputation as a home of lower-class, often bawdy entertainment. For example, Dent cites Prince Pückler-Muskau, a German nobleman who visited Sadler's Wells in 1827 and found that 'the most striking thing to a foreigner in English theatres is the unheard-of coarseness and brutality of the audiences' (p. 17). However, by the 1840s things were beginning to change and the *Theatrical Journal* noted that admired pantomime was now beginning to attract a changing class of audience: 'the crowds of respectable persons who take their families to witness the performance of the pantomime is surprising' (Allen, p. 78-9). It is in this spirit of development that Phelps took over, and in which Shakespeare may be seen as a civilising tool.

Phelps arrived at Sadler's Wells in 1844, the year following the Theatres Regulation Act. This act lifted the monopoly which the patent theatres (Theatres Royal at Covent Garden and Drury Lane) had established over playing Shakespeare.¹³ Phelps responded to the opportunities that the Act afforded with impressive energy, seeking to bring 'legitimate' Shakespeare (i.e. using Shakespearean texts without recourse to burlesque, musical, or pantomime adaptation) to suburban theatres: as Dent suggests, 'the passing of the Theatre Regulation Act in 1843 made it possible for a new experiment to be tried in [Islington]' (p. 49). As has been well documented,¹⁴ the pre-1843 legislation may have attempted to protect Shakespeare from a rowdy theatre culture beyond the West End, but its efforts were thwarted by the growth of the adaptation industry, which had seen versions of Shakespeare appear across theatrical culture in various populist disguises. The success of such innovative performances had, ironically, overtaken that of the 'official' Shakespeare at the patent theatres, forcing the latter gradually to appropriate some of the characteristics of popular theatre in order to raise receipts. It was precisely this period of cultural transition that forms the context for Phelps' and Warner's experiment:

Mrs. Warner and Mr. Phelps have embarked in the management and performance of Sadler's Wells Theatre in the hope of eventually rendering it what a theatre ought to be—a place for justly representing the works of our great dramatic poets. This undertaking is commenced at a time when the stages which have been exclusively called 'National' are closed, or devoted to very different objects from that of presenting the real drama of England, and when the law has placed all theatres upon an equal footing of security and respectability ... These circumstances justify the notion that each separate division of our immense metropolis, with its two million of inhabitants, may have its own well-conducted theatre, within a reasonable distance of the patrons.

(Dent, p. 49)

As we can infer from this advertisement certain parts of the theatrical industry sensed a gradual squeezing-out of the unadulterated Shakespeare from London theatre spaces.¹⁵ Phelps, therefore, sought to remedy the two situations (lower-classed suburban audience's exclusion – by strictures economic and geographic – from 'legitimate' Shakespeare and Shakespeare's texts' weakened position within London theatre culture) with one solution: establishing a suburban theatre dedicated to the production of 'national drama'.¹⁶ This audacious land-grab of the contested ground and its relocation to the suburban hinterland was to become a triumph for both Phelps and Sadler's Wells, most memorably described in R. C. Hudson and Dickens' report for *Household Words* in 1851.¹⁷

¹³ As a result of their being the only theatres licensed to perform 'spoken drama' since the restoration of Charles II in 1660.

¹⁴ See Jane Moody *Illegitimate Theatre in London 1770-1840* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000) and Richard Schoch, *Not Shakespeare: Bardolatry and Burlesque in the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2002).

¹⁵ A wry report in the *Athenaeum*, written as a review of Phelps' opening production, *Macbeth*, in 1844 notes, 'It had been frequently suspected that the neighbourhood of Islington and Pentonville contained many such old-fashioned people, from the fact of the theatre there being always profitably conducted [...] But the locale was despised by high actors, as well as high caste admirers. Destiny has at length found there the only theatre in which the persecuted drama could find refuge; and Mrs. Warner and Mr. Phelps—two among the best tragic performers now in London—have been glad to make it their asylum' (Dennis Arundell, *The Story of Sadler's Wells: 1683-1964* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1965), p. 138).

¹⁶ Indeed, Dent titles this section of his book, 'Phelps to the Rescue'.

¹⁷ 'Shakspeare and Newgate', *Household Words* 4 (No. 80) (4 October 1851), pp. 25-27.

The state of the theatre's typical audience before Phelps' intervention is described with Dickensian relish – 'within, it was a bear-garden, resounding with foul languages, oaths, catcalls, shrieks, yells, blasphemy, obscenity—a truly diabolical clamour' (p. 25) – only for these horrors to be relegated to a grim and distant past. Under the management of Phelps and the influence of Shakespeare, transformation occurred, such that *Household Words* 'question[ed] whether a more sensible audience for a good play could be found anywhere than is to be found at Sadler's Wells'; indeed, the gallery was 'now as orderly as a lecture-room' (p. 27). Jim Davis and Victor Emeljanow warn that this narrative of redemption has as much to do with a Dickensian desire to endorse the curative effect of theatre's appeal to the emotions (so the rowdy audiences of the past define by contrast the enlightened, softened crowds of the present)¹⁸ as it has to do with the facts of the transition: as has been noted, things were beginning to change at Sadler's Wells before Phelps' arrival.¹⁹ Nevertheless, it is true that Sadler's Wells, having received scant regard from theatre critics before, was newly discovered by the chattering classes, causing the periodical *John Bull* to apologise for the fact that 'the excellent company now established at this theatre have not received from us, or indeed from the press generally, the degree of attention to which they are justly entitled' (Allen, p. 92). Even if the change was gradual rather than revolutionary, the theatre had become associated in commentators' minds with a remarkable turnaround.

It is necessary, therefore, that we see 'Leaves from the Life!' against the backdrop of this broader Shakespearean project. The theatre had continued to develop its Shakespearean reputation even since the publication of the *Household Words* piece, bringing ever more Shakespearean texts back to London's theatre culture, from which they had been absent for so long. The lecture, however, is more of an adjunct to than a staple of that trajectory. As will be discussed below, it appears to bear the influence of Phelps' Shakespearean drive, but it is also importantly cheerful, comedic, and populist. What then is 'Leaves from the Life!' doing for 'Phelpsian' Shakespeare? On the one hand, one may say that it continues the process of bringing Shakespeare into the culture of the aspirational suburban middle-classes – this time under the cover of popular entertainment, rather than serious-minded drama. And yet, the lecture does not draw on especially vital passages from original texts, or even bid for a coherent, sustained exposition on the importance of Shakespeare to English intellectual life (although this is everywhere implied, providing the pulse that sustains the froth of its comedy). Rather it is a magpie-picked selection of highlights, an anthology rather than a 'complete works'.²⁰ It feels wrong to read this over-earnestly as a bid for acceptance on the part of suburban theatre; it feels more accurate to read it as a light-hearted, even in parts parodic, engagement with Victorian Shakespeare culture. Written from the perspective of those immersed in the endeavour to take Shakespeare newly seriously, it nevertheless both partakes of Shakespeare culture and gently mocks it (as when the character and personality of servant 'Potpan' receives a similar level of fevered speculation as did Shakespeare's own in the early decades of Victoria's reign).

What the lecture certainly does do, however, is absorb Shakespeare in to a particular English culture: one that is proud of its heritage, yet carries that weight lightly. It draws on a mixture of folklore and learning, quoting both great scholars and rowdy drinking songs. It therefore charts a liminal space, somewhere between family knowledge and learned knowledge: resolutely suburban, one might say, indicating the territory of the low- to middle-classes themselves. Allen claims that 'Phelps had destroyed the boundary line which had traditionally separated lower-class suburban audiences from classic English drama in much the same way as Dickensian novels had removed barriers to the widespread enjoyment in literature' (p. 109-10). It would seem that his methods accorded with Dickens' too: just as Dickens appealed to the heart as much as the head, so too did 'the occasional pathos of [Phelps'] delivery thrill[] the heart within many a rude bosom with unwonted emotion'.²¹ By 1853, it would seem, the suburban classes had taken Shakespeare to those hearts with sufficient confidence to dismantle some of the serious-minded apparatus that had brought him to them, and allow him to emerge as neither aristocratic or actorly, simply as 'one of us', an Englishman looking for a holiday song to sing.

¹⁸ In its opening remarks the article notes, 'such of our readers as have accompanied Mr. Whelks to the Theatre through the medium of these pages, know what the Drama, with its noble lessons of tenderness and virtue usually does for *him*' (p. 25).

¹⁹ Jim Davis and Victor Emeljanow, 'Victorian and Edwardian Audiences', in *The Cambridge Companion to Victorian and Edwardian Theatre*, ed. by Kerry Powell (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), pp. 93-108 (p. 99).

²⁰ See Robert Douglas-Fairhurst, 'Shakespeare's Weeds: Tennyson, Elegy and Allusion', in *Victorian Shakespeare*, ed. by Gail Marshall and Adrian Poole, 2 vols (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), ii, 114-130, and Leah Price, *The Anthology and the Rise of the Novel: From Richardson to George Eliot* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000) on the culture of Shakespearean anthology in Victorian England.

²¹ See *Athenaeum* review cited by Arundell, p. 138.

What do we know of Mr. Hoskins, the deliverer of this lecture? He was a member of Phelps' acting company, first joining it in 1846, having previously appeared at Covent Garden (Allen, p. 102). In the 1851 census he is listed as 'comedian',²² a title that is endorsed on the very odd occasions that he does appear in theatrical commentary (May Phelps, p. 8). Hoskins was known for excellent handling of Shakespearean supporting roles and it was actors such as he who contributed greatly to the reputation of Phelps' company as one commended for the 'general quality of the performance', in which no one star dominated over a 'heap of rubbish' but rather the whole company performed with 'intelligence and verisimilitude' (Allen, p. 92). Indeed, Hoskins' expertise may explain the lecture's fascination with minor characters from Shakespeare – part two is given over to discussion of those who do not even feature on stage (Leah wife of Shylock, Yorick the Jester, the Thane of Cawdor, for example). This is either the resolution of the workaday actor calling for recognition of the theatrical architecture than underpins such great roles as Hamlet or Macbeth; or perhaps this is a demonstration of Hoskins' wry humour that alludes to his own reputation for minor roles by pursuing those of vanishing significance? Yet, though his roles were small, they were nevertheless noticed: Allen observes that a production of *Measure for Measure* was commended for the minor parts, 'particularly Lucio, which Hoskins lifted into prominence with delightful humor' (p. 103). Indeed, this performance was recorded for posterity in an engraved print, 'Miss Glyn as Isabella and Mr Hoskins as Lucio', now in the archives at the Royal Shakespeare Company and available to view online.²³ However, this is not the whole story, for while the lecture is humorous it is also learned, and this is where the influence of Phelps is felt.

Although courted by the likes of Dickens and Macready, Phelps was 'studious and even scholarly in his interests and not inclined to conviviality' (Allen, p. 110). Rather than accepting invitations to dinner, Phelps concentrated what efforts remained after his acting exertions on an ambitious project to edit Shakespeare. During 1852-4 (so contemporaneous with the 1853 lecture) he published the two-volume *Complete Works*.²⁴ Although the volumes are undoubtedly characterised by the needs of the actor-manager (the plays are shortened such that they may be performed within three hours)²⁵ they are nevertheless attended by scholarly apparatus: each play is prefaced with an introduction, speculation as to the date of composition, and a summary of debates regarding authorship and performance history. Further, Phelps was an advocate for using Shakespeare's texts in performance, rather than acting versions (Allen, p. 214), and this allegiance to textual forms that had scholarly rather than theatrical authority characterised a career dedicated to redrawing the relationship between Victorian theatre culture, Shakespeare, and forms of Shakespeare-hagiography. It is clear that 'Leaves from the Life!' at least in part also contributes to this larger undertaking: it features an overview of Shakespeare's life and genius that echoes the tones of contemporary commentators such as the Reverend Gilfillan,²⁶ it creates a picture of post-Shakespearean English culture peopled with composers, writers, and scholars dedicated to commemorating a writer who had, particularly since the eighteenth-century, been adopted as an English match for the great writers of Classical civilisation.²⁷ Further, it enlivens the age from which Shakespeare's work issues by constructing an image of 'Merrie England' that reflects Victorian investment in the past as prompt to nostalgia and as reassurance, in an age of alarming change, that English civilisation had a stable and ingenious foundation.²⁸ Such features suggest that despite its billing as

²² Amusingly, Sarah Phelps, wife of Samuel, is listed as 'wife of a comedian' in that census. However, Samuel was not present at home in Islington on the night of the census; rather he was visiting at Devonport (Phelps was from Devonshire). Away from home and listed as 'visitor', Phelps gives his occupation rather more grandly as 'Tragedian at Sadler's Wells'.

²³ <http://www.rsc.org.uk/searcharchives/search/data?type_id=1&field,RESOURCE_IDENTIFIER,substring,string=A_72_20_1850SAD> [accessed 22 July 2007].

²⁴ Samuel Phelps, *The Complete Works of Shakespeare; Revised from the Original Text with Introductory Remarks and Copious Notes, Critical, General and Explanatory* 2 vols. (London: Willoughby & Col, 1852-4).

²⁵ Phelps' well-considered editorial decisions on texts are discussed in his general introduction, *The Complete Works*, i: 214-225.

²⁶ Compare the lecture's, 'The soundest philosophy – the purest morality – the deepest judgement – the brightest imagination – the profoundest knowledge of human nature shine out from his almost inspired pages – equal lord was he of the realms of terror and of beauty – nothing in earth – air – or sky was without the magic circle of his mighty mind [...] his was the learning of nature – fresh – bright and strong – his high soul, the clear fountain from whence flowed the mightiest truths clothed in a mantle of everlasting poetry' with 'The[] principal faculties may be classed as universality, impersonality, imagination, wit, humour, and a knowledge of the springs of human action absolutely boundless. How are these displayed in Shakespeare's poetry? As the ocean is displayed in a little creek, and as the sun in a wave of water, they are there' (George Gilfillan, *The Poetical Works of William Shakspeare and the Earl of Surrey* (Edinburgh: James Nichol, 1856), p. xxxiii).

²⁷ See Simon Jarvis, *Scholars and Gentlemen: Shakespearean Textual Criticism and Representations of Scholarly Labour, 1725-1765* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995) for full discussion of this process.

²⁸ The lecture describes how English church music was supported by Elizabeth I but benefited from the influence of Italian composers. This bears comparison with Arthur Henry Hallam's views of Shakespeare's *Sonnets*, the power of which he attributes to their being a hybrid of the English and the continental: 'I cannot help considering the Sonnets of Shakspeare as a sort of homage to

Easter entertainment, it may have been conceived by one whose interests extended beyond those of the ‘light comedian’ or actor.

This leads to the intriguing speculation that Phelps was involved – to a lesser or even to a greater extent – in the preparation of this lecture and that such involvement forms a part of Phelps’ theatrical work that has, as yet, received no attention or commentary. Indeed, Phelps’ known hand, seen in letters, bears comparison at least with the hand that has annotated the front page of the manuscript (where is written, ‘N.B. The quotations are all from Shakespeare and the Songs & Glees duets &c have been sung in public for many years!’) and may even be compared with some of the script in the main text. This would suggest that, in contrast to many theatrical managers who outsourced production procedures such as script-writing, Phelps had at least looked over this lecture prior to its being sent to the Lord Chamberlain, and may have amended or written parts: certainly the opening section, which considers Shakespeare’s biographical background, resembles parts of the introduction to Phelps’ *Complete Works*. That Phelps may at least have proofed this script – and that his hand alerts the reader to the fact that the quotations and songs were of longstanding use in the theatre – suggests another reason why it was sent for licensing: this demonstrates the rigour of one who had utmost respect for Shakespeare as national drama and therefore welcomed ‘legitimation’.

The possibility that this piece was a collaborative work then goes some way towards understanding this little-known, absorbing piece of Victorian theatre. On the one hand, it demonstrates an impressive range of reference – indicating the ambition of one who may even wish to become assimilated with the traditions of scholarship that his, albeit breezy and sometimes inaccurate, lecture sketches out. This might be what one expects from a lecture prepared concurrently with an edition of the *Complete Works*: it acts as a companion piece, less earnest perhaps but retaining the richness of reference that sketches longstanding traditions of English creative endeavour. And yet this is brought together with music and comic performance – the discussion of ‘Potpan’ for example is Dickensian in its scope for hectic rendition. We can see then that ‘Leaves from the Life!’ is an exciting hybrid: something between scholarship for the chattering classes and entertainment for the holiday weekend. We might imagine crowds familiar with Hoskins’ celebrated supporting roles assembling to see him as he commands the stage for himself, but we can also imagine the sage actor-manager approving its content. Further, when we consider that the 1851 census lists Hoskins as being married to Julia Hoskins, ‘actress and singer’,²⁹ it seems possible that this was an opportunity to see an exotic couple segueing between comic sketch and cooing love duet.

In the final reckoning, ‘Leaves from the Life!’ forces us to reconsider boundaries we may have thought set: between performance and scholarship, theatre and school-room, and ‘legitimate’ Shakespeare and light entertainment. It tells us that Sadler’s Wells was a space for experimentation *and* entertainment, and it tells us that Shakespeare, far from representing a culture of aristocracy or even theatrical snobbery, was enthusiastically embraced by the aspirational, avowedly suburban middle classes: he was made into a typical Victorian.

the Genius of Christian Europe, [...] I would observe, too, that the structure of these sonnets is perfectly Tuscan, except in the particular of the rhymes’. Further, the lecture delivers a more circumspect version of Hallam’s view that ‘the intense thoughts set in circulation by those “orbs of song” and their noble satellites “in great Eliza’s golden time,” did not fail to awaken a proportionable intensity [...] The knowledge and power thus imbibed became a part of national existence; it was ours as Englishmen; and amid the flux of generations and customs we retain unimpaired this privilege of intercourse with greatness’. *The Writings of Arthur Hallam*, Ed. by T. H. Vail Motter (London: Oxford University Press, 1943), p. 229; 189.

²⁹ Julia Hoskins, née Wallack, was a member of a theatrical family that enjoyed success on both sides of the Atlantic. Indeed, her father, Henry John Wallack (1790–1870), stage-managed the theatre at Covent Garden for a short time in the late 1830s, just when Mr. Hoskins himself was appearing there. See *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* entry on James William Wallack (1795–1864).