

The Man in the Box

Nigel Cliff

Edwin Forrest, big and beaming as always, arrived in Liverpool on January 12, 1845, with his wife Kate at his side. Two days later, while she was reunited with her family, he had already travelled on to Paris, and that was where the real trouble began.

William and Catherine Macready were already there. With Covent Garden barely alive and Alfred Bunn back in charge at Drury Lane, London's doors were shut to the Eminent. Paris, though, welcomed him with open arms. On his first visit to the French capital, in 1828, Macready had made such a deep impression that audiences wept and fainted and carried him on their shoulders, and the city had not forgotten him. He was enthusiastically welcomed by the literati, and though his audiences were better prepared for his once revolutionary fusion of nature and artistry – it was Macready, more than anyone, who had ignited the spark of French Romanticism from the classical ashes of the Comédie Française¹ – he still awoke a flurry of excitement, and when he played Hamlet at the king's theatre in the Tuileries Palace he was presented by Louis Philippe with a jewelled poniard.²

There is no record of the two stars meeting in Paris, but Macready certainly knew of the other man's presence. For several days, Forrest tried to make an appointment to see John Mitchell, the impresario of the English theatre in the city. Mitchell, Macready noted without comment, avoided the American, and Forrest retreated to London, half suspecting that someone was trying to sabotage his tour.

Instead, on February 17, 1845, Forrest opened at the Princess's Theatre in Oxford Street, one of the shabby minor theatres where the legitimate drama had taken refuge, as half of a novel double act with Charlotte Cushman, an American who had just made her London debut. Yet within seconds of striding on stage as Othello he realised something was amiss. The unwonted sound of hissing assailed him from three distinct areas of the auditorium: clearly, he thought, there was an organised opposition afoot. Or so he later claimed: the newspapers reported no hisses, only sustained applause. When he played Macbeth four days later, though, the dissent was unmistakable. 'Forrest has failed most dreadfully,' his co-star wrote home. 'In Macbeth they shouted with laughter and hissed him to death.'³

Even more unexpected was the reaction of the press. The *Spectator* called his Othello a burlesque of Kean 'varied by the Yankee nasal twang [...]. His passion is a

violent effort of physical vehemence [...] his tenderness is affected, and his smile is like the grin of a wolf showing his fangs.⁴ His *Lear*, the newspaper followed up, was even more of a caricature: ‘a roaring pantaloon, with a vigorous totter, a head waving as indefatigably as a china image, and lungs of prodigious power. There only wanted the candlewick mustaches to complete the stage idea of a choleric despot in pantomime.’⁵ The *News*’s critic simply said he found himself yawning.⁶

The reaction was not all bad. In the theatre, Forrest’s *Lear* was cheered at the end of every act: *The Times* called it masterly, intelligent, and powerful, the *Sun* a triumph.⁷ But it was clear that a large portion of the press had turned against the American Tragedian. The satirical magazine *Punch* captured the flavour in an open letter to Forrest. ‘Dear Sir,’ it addressed him,

Allow me, as an old critic, to very sincerely thank you for the handsome palsy which you have put upon King Lear. Had Shakespeare really known any thing of his art, he would – by two or three lines – have strongly marked the necessity of King Lear’s shaking his head to show the age of the man. The poet, however, only half knew his business. You have been his best, his most practical annotator; and in your hands there can be no doubt of the senility of King Lear, seeing that he continually niddle-noddles his head like a toy mandarin. Considering the mere poetry of the part, the fact of Lear’s great age might otherwise have escaped us.

Do you not think, sir, that a touch of lumbago, with – in the later scenes – a violent attack of gout, as indicated by flannel swathings, would also considerably assist the moral majesty of Lear, elevated as it unquestionably is by your capital ploy?⁸

Enough of the public went along with the mood that Forrest’s run was a flop. After just a few weeks he was playing for virtually nothing, and the engagement came to a swift end. It was the first comprehensive defeat of his life.

Macready heard of Forrest’s reception in Newcastle, where he was trudging through another provincial tour, and he read confirmation in the papers of the American’s ‘disastrous and total failure in *Macbeth*.’ When he had seen Forrest perform, he noted, the experience was very dull but not otherwise offensive; ‘but in *Macbeth* he seems to have provoked the patience of the audience. I am truly sorry for him (without wishing him *great* success) and deeply sorry for his wife.’⁹

At the beginning of March, Macready travelled down to London to spend his fifty-third birthday with his family, and he called on the Forrests at their Regent Street lodgings to invite them to the party. There is no record of whether they accepted, but later

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Macready remembered that over the next few months Forrest ‘returned mine and my wife’s several visits, and met me on friendly terms *outwardly*,’ as if nothing had changed.¹⁰ What is certain is that Forrest told Macready he had finally engaged to appear in Paris, where he was sure he would be better appreciated. ‘I fancy *not*,’ Macready thought.¹¹ Forrest had been trying to put together his own production at the Théâtre Odéon in Paris: as the actor he asked to be his stage manager later recalled, the negotiations were broken off as a result of the insolvency of the theatre’s owner, and Forrest never did act in France. It was an embarrassing comedown: he had told his friends that he had set his heart on performing in the country that had aided America’s glorious struggle for independence, and to herald his appearance flattering pieces had been placed in the French press.

However civil he was in public, in private Forrest was becoming increasingly furious. He was not an envious man, but he was rock solid in his conviction that he was the greatest actor in the world. Unlike Macready, he rarely found fault with his own performances. ‘I never acted better in my life – I never before achieved such a performance of “Lear,”’ he once wrote to a friend. ‘What a pity, it could not have been photographed! I mean the entire representation of the character, with all its power – with all its changeful passions – with all its unspeakable subtleties.’¹² He had never submitted to being snubbed, even before the years of playing heroes to adoring fans had rubbed off on him, and he resented, with mounting self-righteousness, what he saw as a gross injustice. No matter that the majority of the American press had favoured him over Macready; no matter that Macready himself had been attacked for years by the partisan English papers. Forrest’s pride needed a grand enemy, and there was only one candidate.

He brooded over the pieces of the supposed plot. Macready, he knew, was the intimate friend of John Forster, the man who had written him down so spitefully on his last visit; besides, he also recalled, they were both cronies of Charles Dickens, the great America-baiter. On this visit, Forster’s *Examiner* barely noticed the American’s performances: its two squibs were based on second-hand information, and though the first passed on the news – arch enough, admittedly – that Forrest’s style had apparently undergone a ‘clear improvement,’ the second was both brief and contemptuous. ‘Our old friend, Mr Forrest, afforded great amusement to the public, by his performance of *Macbeth*,’ it sneered. ‘Indeed our best comic actors do not often excite so great a quantity of mirth. The change from an inaudible murmur to a thunder of sound, was enormous; but

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the grand feature was the combat, in which he stood scraping his sword against that of Macduff. We were at a loss to know what this gesture meant, till an enlightened critic in the gallery shouted out, “that’s right, sharpen it!”¹³ This was enough to persuade Forrest that Forster had poisoned the press against him at his friend Macready’s behest. Or so he said later.¹⁴

Then there was the suspicious fact that Macready had been in Paris when he was so rudely snubbed. Forrest only needed one more piece of circumstantial evidence, and it came via another close associate of Macready’s, Edward Bulwer Lytton. Forrest wrote to Bulwer Lytton for permission to perform, for a nightly fee, two of his plays. The writer refused, but offered terms of fifty guineas for twenty nights. Forrest smelled a rat: since Bulwer Lytton had replied on March 4 and Forrest’s engagement was for three nights a week and due to end on April 7, it was impossible for him to get his money’s worth out of the deal.¹⁵

The names lined up: the Eminent, he concluded, had clearly stabbed him in the back. Or again, so he later claimed.

Was he right? Almost certainly not. There was clearly something uncivil about John Mitchell’s refusal to meet with him, and it was easy to conjecture that the manager might have consulted Macready about Forrest’s likely prospects in Paris. But Mitchell later categorically swore that at no point did Macready, ‘in any manner direct or indirect, with me personally, or to my knowledge with any other person, attempt to interfere with, or prevent, any arrangement, that Mr. Forrest might have desired to make with me for his appearance at Paris.’¹⁶ The truth is that Mitchell’s enterprise was billed as the English Theatre in Paris: it would have been self-defeating to give the stage to an American, particularly one who wanted to prove that American tragedians were at least as good as English and then go home. Why Mitchell avoided Forrest, he kept to himself: most likely, he did not want to get into his reasons for excluding him.

As for Bulwer Lytton and Forster, it seems highly likely that after Macready came back from America he had complained to his friends about his head-to-head bouts with Forrest. He certainly told Catherine: in stark contrast to her earlier letters, she happily reported to her husband that Forrest had been spotted on stage foaming at the mouth to a disgusting extent.¹⁷ Yet Forster had already shown himself perfectly happy to condemn Forrest without the slightest hint from Macready, or rather, despite all Macready’s

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representations to the contrary; in any case, Forster was laid up with rheumatic fever during the American's engagement and missed the entire thing, and though it is certainly possible that he suborned deputies or spoon-fed a friendly editor, he had too many enemies in the press to marshal a full-scale campaign against anyone. Bulwer Lytton, meanwhile, was merely sticking to his usual policy and his standard fee: as a leading writer, he felt obliged to set an example by insisting on licensing his plays only for long runs. The principle was especially important just then because he was piloting a bill through Parliament to shore up writers' royalties. It must also have crossed his mind that Forrest had turned a vast profit from performing his plays across America free of copyright.

The most outlandish charge that Forrest later levelled at Macready was that he had personally orchestrated the whole opposition to him at the theatre and in the press. That must be untrue. Aside from the fact that he was away nearly the whole time, Macready had never attracted a fan club like Kean's Wolves, and he had never cosied up to journalists. In any case, he was far too proud to play the hypocrite and call on Forrest if he had been manoeuvring against him.

Who, then, was behind the dissent? There are two answers. The first is that Macready's school of acting had become the only show in town. Largely thanks to the Eminent's example, tastes had changed since Forrest's last trip: Victorians increasingly wanted Shakespeare played with reasoned artistry, and the American looked like a throwback to a more florid age.

The second answer lay in the world outside the theatre, a place where most actors seldom looked. In November, James Polk had been elected president on his slogan 'Fifty-four Forty or Fight,' and the English press was thick with battle cries: within months *The Times* reported that the Foreign Office had informed the American envoy 'that the English Government is perfectly prepared to make war immediately upon the United States, and to strike great blows at the first outbreak of hostilities.'¹⁸ Meanwhile the repudiation scandal was still rumbling on. *Punch* was busy caricaturing Americans as insolent 'Yankee-Noodles' who shook their fists and pistols across the Atlantic and taught Grandmother Britannia to suck eggs, and in one number it managed to snare the twin demons of repudiation and expansionism with a single barb: America, it revealed, wanted to toss England for Oregon, and it was only prevented from making a proposition to that effect by

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the fear of having to borrow a dollar for the purpose.¹⁹ When Forrest tried out *Metamora*, his Indian tragedy, the entire press derided it as an orgy of senseless butchery and the *Observer* saw its chance. ‘What a pity,’ it crowed, ‘he could not be let loose upon the drab-colored swindlers of Pennsylvania.’²⁰

There was one problem with the hypothesis that Forrest was the victim of anti-Americanism: his co-star and compatriot Charlotte Cushman had made an instant and spectacular hit. From her first night, she was hailed as the finest actress in the English-speaking world: the papers leapt over themselves to panegyriser her as the possessor of a godlike gift, a dizzying admixture of earnestness, intensity, sensitivity and passion that put her beyond the reach of England’s most accomplished actresses. Critics likened her to the great Sarah Siddons and the *Sun*, forgetting it had used the same line about Forrest, declared that she had made the most impressive debut since Kean.²¹ Forrest was outraged that a minor American actor had stolen his crown: he sat thunder-faced backstage while the audience roared her name, and he refused to lead her out. ‘Damn Miss Cushman, she can go to hell!’ he exploded.²² In a week, Charlotte went from eating chops in a bedsit to entertaining in splendour in Bond Street, and she was still starring at the Princess’s long after Forrest had left to lick his wounds.

For a while, Forrest was convinced that Macready had manoeuvred against him to elevate Cushman. The Englishman, after all, was her idol: she had been mesmerised by him as a child, she had thrown away a career as a manager to act with him during his last American trip, and she dated her discovery of true acting to their first night together on stage. Charlotte had sent Macready flowers and poems, published sonnets to him in the papers, and reverently kissed his hand, a liberty that sent him into his usual frenzy of propriety, though for once he worried unnecessarily, because Cushman, a large, angular woman who, some said, looked peculiarly like her mentor, turned out to have well-developed Sapphic tendencies. It was on Macready’s advice that she had come to England to practice her craft, and the Englishman had furnished her with letters of introduction to the London literati: it was, Forrest told one actor, ‘by *them* he was crushed, as the means to exalt *her*.’²³

There was undoubtedly no love lost between the two Americans. Forrest charged Cushman with Macreadyism, which to him meant mannered, mechanical acting; once he labelled her ‘Macready in petticoats.’²⁴ Charlotte called Forrest a butcher and refused to

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meet him at dinner; she was also far from convinced that he had been as universally admired on his first trip to London as he claimed. It appeared, she wrote home, that last time around Alfred Bunn had manipulated the press in his favour: ‘Now he has no such support. The papers cut him all to pieces.’²⁵ But Cushman had no need to put Forrest down in her own cause, and Macready, even if he had had a taste for such intrigues, certainly had no interest in so doing: on her arrival in England, Cushman was canny enough to refuse to play second fiddle to her mentor, which infuriated him enough to leave her to make her own way. In any case, Forrest quickly realised that talking up his compatriot’s success was only a recipe for humiliation.

Yet Cushman’s triumph does not refute the charge of anti-Americanism among Forrest’s detractors. London cheered her because it had discovered an exceptional new talent in its own image and, perhaps, because she was a woman and a debutante. It booed Forrest because he was billed as the *American Tragedian*, the representative of his nation, and because he was famous for his nationalistic politics. Forrest had set himself up as the Great American, and London was only too happy to pull him down.

For the next year, Forrest avoided the capital and toured Britain and Ireland, where he was far better received. In Cork the papers lauded him as the foremost living actor, a man lit by the divine fire of genius, and the audiences cheered the roof off, especially when he acted the rebel against English tyranny: indeed, he identified so passionately with his characters’ struggles that it hardly seemed like acting at all. On his last night, he came out for his call, boomed out the hope that ‘the dark cloud that overhangs this fair country will soon pass away; that a happier and brighter day will beam on her,’ and bowed himself out to an ear shattering roar.²⁶ On March 1 he moved on to Edinburgh, and the next day he took advantage of a night off to see his old friend, now his arch rival, in *Hamlet*.

It was Macready’s first night and the theatre was packed. He entered to a tempest of applause, though the figure he cut was hardly heroic. He wore a dress waisted under his armpits and a hat with a huge sable plume. His gloves were too big; his undershirt, of amber-coloured satin, looked simply dirty. John Coleman, who was on stage with him, declared that ‘with his gaunt, angular figure; his grizzled hair; his blue-black beard, close-

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shaven to his square jaws, unsoftened by a trace of pigment; his irregular features; his extraordinary nose, unlike anything else in the shape of a nose I have ever seen; and his long, lean neck, he appeared positively grotesque.’ But, he added, ‘when he spoke, he made music – brightened, illumined, irradiated the atmosphere, and became transformed into the very beau ideal of the most poetic, subtle, intellectual, dramatic, and truly human Prince of Denmark I have ever seen.’²⁷ Macready, too, felt he was acting at his best, and he began to relax, sensing he was carrying the audience with him.

Then he reached the players’ scene. He gave Hamlet’s famous directions to the actors, he told Horatio that he had set *The Mousetrap* to catch the conscience of the King, and as the court entered he muttered to him the simple line:

‘They are coming to the play. I must be idle. Get you a place.’²⁸

Modern editions of *Hamlet* still disagree about the meaning of the phrase ‘be idle.’ One camp glosses Hamlet’s meaning as ‘seem to have nothing on my mind;’ another as ‘act foolish, pretend to be crazy.’ The two senses are similar to those of the word ‘distracted’ – having one’s attention diverted, or being affected with madness.

Both are dramatically possible, but the second gloss is a better fit. Hamlet has already put on an antic disposition before the court; Polonius has reported him as mad; the King and Queen have charged Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to find out what afflicts him. Now, as the march plays and the trumpet and drums sound in the court, the King turns to Hamlet.

‘How fares our cousin Hamlet?’ he asks.

‘Excellent, i’faith,’ Hamlet replies: ‘of the chameleon’s dish. I eat the air, promise-crammed. You cannot feed capons so.’

Hamlet is playing on the meaning of the word ‘fares’, and he responds as if Claudius has inquired what he had for dinner. Chameleons, as well as being able, like Hamlet, to change their hue, were commonly believed to feed on air. That offers him another pun, on the homonym ‘heir.’ Hamlet implies that he is being fed an equally thin diet: Claudius is filling him with empty promises that he will succeed to the throne. Perhaps there is a suggestion, too, that he is eating himself up in his horror at his situation. To Hamlet there is sense behind the line, but he does not expect Claudius to catch on to the innuendo, and its aim is clearly to make him appear crazed. Claudius’s response suggests it has worked: ‘I have nothing with this answer, Hamlet,’ he replies; ‘these words

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are not mine.’ In other words, he does not understand what Hamlet is saying, because the Prince’s answer seems to have no connection with his question.

During the rest of the scene, moreover, Hamlet hardly makes an effort to be unobtrusive. He jeers at Polonius, makes obscene puns to Ophelia, pointedly remarks that his mother looks cheerful considering her husband has just died, and interrupts the play with barbed comments. ‘You are as good as a chorus, my lord,’ says Ophelia. The reading that Hamlet’s line – ‘I must be idle’ – marks his resumption of his feigned madness is, then, at least highly plausible and most likely correct. Macready certainly thought so. As the court entered he walked rapidly back and forth across the stage, bobbed his head from side to side, pulled out his handkerchief, took it by the corner and twirled it in the air while dancing a little hopping jig.

At that point, before the next speech had started, an almighty hiss came from a box to the right of the stage – a hiss, said Coleman, like the exhaust from a steam engine. Macready bowed derisively and waved his handkerchief even harder. The audience booed back at the hisser, the play came to a standstill, and Macready, livid with rage, struggling to stay in character, staggered back and sank into a chair.

‘Turn him out!’ came a cry from the students’ gallery above the box; eventually a large figure stood up and slowly turned away. Macready took hold of himself and launched back into action.

The next day the whole of Edinburgh was abuzz with rumours that the hisser was none other than the American Tragedian. Macready, standing in the footlights, had not made him out, but John Coleman had seen him distinctly:

The square brow, the majestic head, the dark eyes flashing forth defiance, the pallor of the white face enhanced by his black beard, which contrasted strongly with his turned-down white collar, he looked exactly as he used to look in *The Gladiator* when he said, ‘Let them come, we are prepared!’²⁹

At first Macready refused to believe it: Forrest, he told the manager Murray, was too much of a gentleman to betray himself so publicly.³⁰ But the next day it was beyond doubt. Three men who had been sitting in the American’s box told an actor that the hisser was Forrest. Another audience member told the manager that the hisser was Forrest. A police officer came in during the rehearsal and said the hisser was Forrest, and the police record for the night confirmed it. That day the *Scotsman* alluded to the incident. ‘We should not have thought it worthwhile to mention such a circumstance,’ it mentioned, ‘had

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it not been reported, though we scarcely think it credible, that the offender was a brother actor, and one, too, who probably considers himself a rival.’³¹ Lest any doubt remained, the High Sheriff of Edinburgh later summed up the evidence: ‘There was but *one* hiss – and one hisser. Forrest was the hisser – Forrest’s was the hiss.’³²

All of Macready’s long-nursed animus against his profession burst out against the American actor.

‘I feel glad that it is not an Englishman,’ he piously declared, suddenly patriotic – ‘but no Englishman would have done a thing so base [...]. I do not think that such an action has its parallel in all theatrical history! The low-minded ruffian! That man would commit a murder, *if he dare*.’³³

That evening Forrest coolly walked into the theatre again. He had dressed carefully for his part in his best dress suit and a pair of kid gloves, he had sprinkled himself with cologne, and he went in search of the editor of the *Scotsman*. He found him in his usual seat in the upper boxes, fixed his eyes on him, gritted his teeth, and asked if he was the writer of the article in his paper.

The newspaperman shrank a little.

‘I am not,’ he replied.

‘It is fortunate for you that you are not,’ Forrest said, glaring, ‘for had you been, by the living God I would have flung you over the balcony into the pit.’³⁴

By March 12 the scandal had filtered down to London. *The Times* reprinted the *Scotsman*’s report under the headline ‘Professional Jealousy’ and added, belittlingly, ‘We believe that Mr. Forrest, an American actor, is the party supposed.’³⁵ The *Edinburgh Weekly Chronicle*, which was firmly in Forrest’s camp, published an enormously long piece two days later in which it attempted to justify the hiss and called *The Times*’s comment an ‘unjustifiable and inexcusable’ slur motivated by favouritism and malice. Macready’s hand, it added, was clearly behind it.

Perhaps the matter might have rested there. Forrest could have gone on performing to admiring regional crowds; the whole thing might have dispersed in a cloud of doubt. But it was not in Forrest’s nature to let anything lie. He bridled at the accusation of underhanded behaviour, and he took on the challenge like the man of action he was. The *Scotsman* refused to insert his letter answering its charges, but since the article had now surfaced in the London press – ‘doubtless,’ thought Forrest, ‘sent thither for insertion,

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from the same malignant motives which governed its writer' – he felt called upon to reply in the most public manner possible: a long letter to the editor of *The Times*, which he sent via a friend, along with strict instructions to ensure it was printed verbatim and a request that twenty copies of the paper be forwarded to him.³⁶

It was not a conciliatory piece of correspondence. 'There are two legitimate modes of evincing approbation and disapprobation in the Theatre,' Forrest launched off:

one, expressive of approval, by the clapping of hands, and the other by hisses, to mark dissent. And, as well-timed and hearty applause is the first meed of the actor who deserves well, so also is hissing a salutary and wholesome corrective of the abuses of the stage; and it was against one of those abuses that my dissent was given [...]. The truth is, that Mr Macready thought fit to introduce a fancy dance into his performance of Hamlet, which I thought and still think, a desecration of the scene [...].

That a man may manifest his opinion, after the recognized mode, according to the best of his judgment, when actuated by proper motives and for justifiable ends, is a right which, until now, I never heard questioned, and I contend that that right extends equally to an actor as to any other man, in his capacity as a spectator. For, from the nature of his studies, he is much better qualified to judge of a theatrical performance, than any soi-disant critic, who has never himself been an actor [...].

As to the pitiful charge of 'professional jealousy,' preferred against me, I dismiss it with the contempt it merits, confidently relying upon all those of the profession with whom I have been associated, for a refutation of the slander.³⁷

Behind Forrest's bombast and pique lay the differences between two styles of acting, styles now inseparable from their nations: to the American, Macready's flamboyant handkerchief action – Forrest later labelled it his '*pas de mouchoir*' – was an effeminate travesty of the manly dignity of a star. But sibilations, like vegetables, were dying out as vehicles of dramatic criticism, and though Forrest was hardly the first actor to be hissed in London, and Macready was not the last to be hissed in Edinburgh, Forrest's self-defence was built on shaky ground. In any case, when all was said and done the peculiar history of hissing and the different readings of *Hamlet* were beside the point. The plain fact was that never before had one actor stood up and hissed another in full view of the stage. Macready had never hissed Kean, Kean had never hissed Kemble, and the star of one nation had certainly never hissed the star of another. The act was probably unplanned; once done, it had to be defended, for Forrest was not about to admit he was in the wrong.

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Macready read Forrest's letter – Forster showed him the paper – the day it was printed. 'This seems to me,' he wrote,

to be the seal of his character. Many have been indisposed to believe such malignity and such folly, and many have refused to believe it. But here stands self-confessed this citizen of the United States, to whom the greatest harm that I can do, I will: which is to give him the full benefit of his noble, tasteful, and critical qualities, and 'leave him alone with his glory.'³⁸

It was a doleful end to a once cheerful friendship.

The controversy spread across the Atlantic and rumbled on long after Forrest went home in August. The reaction of the American newspapers was divided, largely along class lines: one half commended Forrest's independent spirit, while the rest strongly censured his lapse of manners. At the inevitable homecoming banquet in New York, the honour of proposing Forrest's health was given to William Cullen Bryant, the poet and editor of the *Evening Post*. But Bryant was also a friend of Macready's, and he slipped Forrest a piece of advice masquerading as praise. The American tragedian, he declared, had never fallen prey to the follies that tempted other men of his profession: 'In the intense competitions of the stage, Mr. Forrest has obeyed a native instinct in treating his rivals with generosity, and, when beset by calumny and intrigue, has known how to preserve the magnanimous silence of conscious greatness.'

Perhaps he might have once; not now. Forrest stood up and pointedly replied that he was sure his audience would pardon him if he broke that silence. England's theatrical cliques, he boomed, had machinated against him, and their hireling scribblers had treated him with malice:

Even before I had appeared I was threatened with critical castigation, and some of the very journals which, upon my former appearance in London, applauded me to the echo, now assailed me with bitterest denunciations. Criticism was degraded from its high office, – degraded into mere caviling, accompanied by very pertinent allusions to Pennsylvania bonds, repudiation, and democracy.

At the mention of repudiation nervous laughter and defiant cheers broke out in the hall.³⁹

Forrest did not mention Macready by name, but he did not need to. He had brought home a burning grudge: he shared it with anyone who would listen, and it seeped out into the press, where it assumed the ridiculous dignity of a minor international incident. It would be wrong to suggest that Forrest demonised Macready to cover up his failure and explain his actions in Edinburgh: wrong because he had persuaded himself it was the

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truth. His friends took up his cause with a vengeance, and they were still nursing their anger two years later when Macready returned to the United States.

The battle lines were drawn, but still no one suspected that a petty feud that became public knowledge over a single line from Shakespeare would soon leave dozens dying on New York's streets.

This excerpt is chapter 8 of Nigel Cliff's, *The Shakespeare Riots: Revenge, Drama, and Death in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Random House, 2007).

¹ The English actors who visited Paris in 1827–28 sent the young Parisian radicals – among them Alexandre Dumas, Victor Hugo and Hector Berlioz – into transports over the wild passions of Shakespeare, and it was Macready, more than Kean or his other colleagues, who enthralled the city. Suddenly Shakespeare's barbaric blend of tragedy and comedy seemed right for the age. 'After God,' said the thoroughly converted Dumas, 'Shakespeare created most,' and Hugo wrote a typically hefty book in which he proposed that the Bard be appointed Poet Laureate of Europe. 'Shakespeare,' recalled Berlioz, 'coming upon me unawares, struck me like a thunderbolt. The lightning flash of that discovery revealed to me at a stroke the whole heaven of art [...]. I recognized the meaning of grandeur, beauty, dramatic truth, and I could measure the utter absurdity of the French view of Shakespeare which derives from Voltaire – "That ape of genius, sent / By Satan among men to do his work" – and the pitiful narrowness of our own worn-out academic, cloistered traditions of poetry. I saw, I understood, I felt [...] that I was alive and that I must arise and walk.' (Jonathan Bate, *The Genius of Shakespeare* (London: Picador, 1997), pp. 34, 232–33). Berlioz fell so deeply in love that he pursued and married the actress who played Juliet and Ophelia. It is impossible to overestimate the extent to which Shakespeare trampled over eighteenth- and nineteenth-century creeds.

² He should have been suspicious when one of the emeralds dropped off: back home he had the knife examined and found the metal was silver-gilt and the jewels paste, which just about summed up his view of royalty. 'That *shabby dog*,' he called the Citizen King. William Charles Macready, *The Diaries of William Charles Macready 1833–1851*, ed. by William Toynbee, 2 vols. (London: Chapman and Hall, 1912), II, p. 291.

³ Joseph Leach, *Bright Particular Star: The Life and Times of Charlotte Cushman* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1970), p. 150.

⁴ *Spectator*, 22 February 1845.

⁵ *Spectator*, 8 March 1845. Forrest's friends later claimed that the *Spectator*'s review of *Lear* was written by Forster, though their only evidence was a perceived congruity of style with his earlier reviews. See A Rejoinder to 'The Replies from England, etc. to Certain Statements Circulated in This Country, Respecting Mr. Macready' (New York: Stringer & Townsend, 1849), p. 66.

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- ⁶ Quoted in Richard Moody, *Edwin Forrest: First Star of the American Stage* (New York: Knopf, 1960), p. 217.
- ⁷ *The Times* and *Sun* reviews were published on 9 March 1845.
- ⁸ *Punch*, 8 (1845), p. 138.
- ⁹ *Diaries*, II, p. 289.
- ¹⁰ *Diaries*, II, p. 412.
- ¹¹ *Diaries*, II, p. 290.
- ¹² Forrest to James Oakes, 22 December 1867, C0721, Manuscripts Division, Department of Rare Books and Special Collections, Princeton University Library.
- ¹³ *Examiner*, 22 February and 1 March 1845.
- ¹⁴ Forrest was likely helped to his conclusion by Macready's enemies: one candidate is Henry Wikoff, Forrest's grand tour companion, who told his friend that everything Forster wrote was at Macready's charge (see *New York Herald*, 26 April 1849).
- ¹⁵ Letter from Bulwer Lytton to Forrest, 4 March 1845, in extra-illustrated Gabriel Harrison, *Edwin Forrest: The Actor and the Man* (Brooklyn, N.Y.: [n. pub.], 1889), THX 35702.354.43.11q, Princeton University Library.
- ¹⁶ *The Replies from England, etc., to Certain Statements Circulated in This Country Respecting Mr. Macready* (New York: Stringer & Townsend, 1849), p. 12.
- ¹⁷ Quoted in Alan S. Downer, *The Eminent Tragedian: William Charles Macready* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1966), p. 275.
- ¹⁸ *The Times*, 12 March 1846.
- ¹⁹ *Punch*, 8 (1845), p. 223.
- ²⁰ Quoted in Montrose J. Moses, *The Fabulous Forrest* (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1929), p. 210.
- ²¹ See *Charlotte Cushman: Her Letters and Memories of Her Life*, ed. by Emma Stebbins (Boston: Houghton, Osgood & Co., 1878), pp. 51–60. Stebbins was Cushman's long-term partner.
- ²² Leach, p. 150.
- ²³ *The Replies from England*, p. 19. Cushman was not the only American actress who professed herself deeply indebted to Macready for his advice. Another was the wonderful Anna Cora Mowatt, a runaway child bride who turned to the stage when her elderly husband lost his fortune; a New York blue blood by birth, she became the first notable female American playwright as well as a successful comic actress. Macready threw a dinner to introduce her to his influential friends and, she gratefully acknowledged, promoted her interest with alacrity.
- ²⁴ John Coleman, *Fifty Years of an Actor's Life*, 2 vols. (London: Hutchinson, 1904), I, p. 336.
- ²⁵ Leach, p. 150.
- ²⁶ Moody, pp. 232–33.
- ²⁷ Coleman, *Fifty Years*, II, p. 344.
- ²⁸ The lines are at III. ii.
- ²⁹ Coleman, *Fifty Years*, II, p. 345.

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³⁰ *The Replies from England*, pp. 14, 15.

³¹ *Scotsman*, 4 March 1846, quoted in *A Rejoinder*, p. 56.

³² *The Replies from England*, p. 14.

³³ *Diaries*, II, p. 327.

³⁴ William Rounseville Alger, *Life of Edwin Forrest, the American Tragedian* (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott & Co., 1877), p. 412.

³⁵ *The Times*, 12 March 1846.

³⁶ *The Times*, 4 April 1846.

³⁷ *The Times*, 4 April 1846.

³⁸ *Diaries*, II, p. 334.

³⁹ Alger, pp. 419–21.