

## Simms, Shakespeare, and Civil War

*Benjamin B. Alexander*

William Shakespeare was a vital author for William Gilmore Simms. Simms found himself strategically positioned as the historical interpreter of two secessionist movements in American history: the first, successful, in the American War of Independence and the second, a dismal historical tragedy, in the failed campaign for southern independence. Simms discovered in Shakespeare's plays a running commentary on the complex issues he faced as secession and Civil War loomed. Shakespeare showed Simms, as he would later William Faulkner and Shelby Foote, how to deal dramatically with imperial invasion and sectional loyalties, as well as political leaders involved with such issues. In terms of character, the *dramatis personae* of the American Revolution and the Civil War were better than what a novelist could come up with anyway. Foote makes this clear—no novelist could improve on Nathan Bedford Forrest, Robert E. Lee, or Abraham Lincoln.

Shakespeare perfected the chronicle or history play, showing in the process how scenes and characters from English history could effectively work on the stage. The English history plays show the British are adroit in their cruelties, engaging in poisonings, drownings, blindings, stabbings, hangings, beheadings, ambushes, and starvation to advance their political disagreements, often with their own blood kin and friends. Huck Finn, in educating the runaway slave, Jim, about royalty, states, "taken all around kings is a mighty ornery lot." Shakespeare's Henry V insists that English monarchs should not be mistaken for the "Turkish court," but even the famous Islamic general, Saladin, looks good in comparison to cruel English tyrants like Richard III.

Shakespeare's skills echo in the English language. Winston Churchill drew on the xenophobic rhetoric of Henry V to instill hope during the darkest days of World War II, and even the Republican congressional managers at the impeachment trial of President Bill Clinton called themselves a "happy band of brothers." They were in good company. In colonial times Abigail Adams often signed her letters to John, "Portia," and likened herself to Brutus's loyal wife in *Julius Caesar*. Jefferson considered himself a student of Shakespeare, and most of the signers of the Declaration of Independence he penned were familiar with Shakespeare's plays. In 1828, James Fenimore Cooper proclaimed Shakespeare the "great author of America" whose memorable lines were on the lips and in the hearts of Americans (Levine 40). Tocqueville in the 1830s observed "there is hardly a pioneer's hut that does not contain a few odd volumes of Shakespeare." (Levine 38). Popular legend cast Abraham Lincoln reading scripture and Shakespeare by firelight, where he memorized soliloquies from *Julius Caesar* and *Henry V*. The

Shakespearian grandeur of imperial rhetoric would find its way into Lincoln's oratory. Like Henry V, Lincoln became the implacable invader, steely and enduring, only to fall victim to assassins, as did Caesar.

Like Lincoln, Simms was similarly attuned to the cadences of Shakespearean language and the drama of history. When Simms wrote about Shakespeare, he had seen his plays performed many times throughout the South and beyond. Shakespeare was much admired in the South, and there was ample opportunity to attend plays. Simms and his countrymen delighted in these dramatic events. Even frontier settings like Arkansas had Shakespeare performances, portrayed hilariously by Mark Twain in *Huckleberry Finn*.

Writers from the southern tradition like Twain and Simms loved the stage's raucous humor. Theatrical spectacle, on the other hand, won little admiration from their New England counterpart, Ralph Waldo Emerson. The excesses of the stage upset Emerson's puritanic calmness. He preferred Shakespeare as a mystical transcendental poet of wisdom. Shakespeare, the working playwright who portrayed some unseemly scenes with characters using bawdy humor and rakish puns, led Emerson to suspect the theatre and playwrights. He sometimes sounds like Malvolio and even used puritanic language to label Shakespeare the "master of revels to mankind" (Falk 532). Emerson also lamented that Shakespeare, "the best poet, led an obscure and profane life, using his genius for the public amusement" (Falk 542).

Given Emerson's conflicts about Shakespeare, Simms commentary about the bard is refreshing. As many writers before, in 1843, Simms penned a poem of homage to "the Mighty master" noting "how the mind follows, how vibrates the heart" when Shakespeare "bends him to his art." (Guilds, *Reader* 388) During a prolific period of editing literary magazines Simms published serially a year later, in 1844, in the *Orion* an essay, "The Moral Character of Hamlet." A decade later he plunged into the perennial field of existential quandary that persists to this day concerning Shakespearean authorship. In 1855 Simms edited a volume, *A Supplement to the Plays of William Shakespeare* (New York: Alden and Beardsley) with his own Introduction. Like Poe, he engaged in such literary ventures, at least in part, to enhance his credentials in the Anglo-American international community of men of letters. Simms took his place seamlessly as an aggressively American critic. He entered into discussions about Shakespeare with his English counterparts, among them Dr. Johnson, Hazlitt, Coleridge, and Lamb. In doing so, Simms took exception to one of the most celebrated utterances of Shakespeare commentary from the opinionated Dr. Johnson, who remarked in his celebrated Preface to his edition of Shakespeare plays that "Shakespeare sacrificed virtue to convenience and seemed to write without moral purpose" (Eliot 217). Simms said of this judgment: Johnson's "incidental remarks" "deserve little notice, as it is surprising how little genuine thought seems to be accorded."<sup>1</sup>

This is an interesting comment in light of the fact that Johnson's celebrated Preface and careful editing of the plays became a kind of textual gold standard for most Americans reading Shakespeare from 1795 to 1831. Dr. Johnson was *the* authority until an edition of Shakespeare plays, edited by the American, S.W. Singer, was published in

1831. Simms may have possibly read *Hamlet* in an edition edited by Dr. Johnson, but he still disagreed with the great critic's criticism of the lack of morality in Shakespeare. He was glad that the merriment and innocence of what Orson Welles calls "old England" exempted from Johnson's censure its greatest embodiment, Sir John Falstaff of the *Henry IV* plays. Simms saw in both characters an unexpected, resourceful way to advance his own advocacy of southern aristocracy that had proved itself in the War for Independence. A chronicler of the Revolution in his magisterial novels and biographies of the American patriots, Simms found in these two characters from Shakespeare remarkable universality for unfolding American history. Yet Simms, unlike Emerson, the relentless utopian optimist, gravitated as William R. Taylor observes, to Shakespeare's tragic characters: Simms "grew to accept the ideal of a separate Southern destiny and came to feel that an impending doom was settling over the world" (Taylor 292).

Seeking to develop "Americanism" in literature, Simms did as other Americans (such as Mark Twain) and used Shakespeare's characters as a useful resource. In Simms's case, this was as he sought to deal with the growing castigation of southern planters by abolitionists, radical Republicans, and inflexible Unionists. Falstaff and Hamlet were vital in Simms's shaping an inclusive aristocratic social vision rooted in his regional loyalties. As John Guilds notes, by 1840, Simms was "fully allied" with the "Southern planter aristocracy," yet he, like Poe, in literary matters "retained a national outlook" and was an "advocate of a distinctively American literature and was an "equally determined opponent of British dominance of American literary thought" (*Literary Life*, 131).

Shakespeare's dealing with civil wars and invasion was helpful to Simms, especially the *Henry IV* plays. There, Falstaff is the witty Socratic critic of civil wars in general, noting their brutality and folly. He praises survival at the bloody battle of Shrewsbury in the much-quoted, "discretion is the better part of valor in which I have saved my life." Falstaff undercuts chivalric values by insisting they lead to ugly deaths that he surveys on the Shrewsbury battlefield. He points at Sir Walter Blunt, dead on the ground, noting, "there's honor for you."

Falstaff's wisdom found its way into the comic quips of Captain Porgy in *Woodcraft*. Simms skillfully distinguishes between aristocratic South Carolina slave-owners, such as Captain Porgy and the Widow Everleigh, and merciless slave traders, such as Colonel Moncrief and McKewn. Notwithstanding the stark contrasts in *Woodcraft*, Frederick Douglass insisted, in his *Narrative of an Ex-Slave*, that southern aristocrats were the cruelest of hypocrites in professing "slaveholding religion."

As the sectional divisions hardened, the rhetoric became more heated and the fateful prospect of secession more likely. It was against this backdrop that Simms used certain characters from Shakespeare to explore and promote the character and value of planter hierarchy in the face of alien forces. The defeat of the French by Shakespeare's Henry V was a testament to the bravery exalted in Henry's St. Crispin's Day's speech before the Agincourt battle. Yet that campaign came at enormous personal cost to Henry V's humanity: at his earlier coronation the young monarch castigates his old friend, the jovial Sir John Falstaff, as a "fool" and "jester," thereby destroying a deep bond of affection through cruel public humiliation and rejection of the old man.

While Henry V rejected Falstaff, Simms breathes new life into the comparable character of Captain Porgy of *Woodcraft*, a rotund character as dedicated to “gormandizing” as his counterpart. Captain Porgy, with his ungainly appearance and his tattered clothes, would not be mistaken for Mel Gibson’s Benjamin Martin in the movie *The Patriot*. Simms brilliantly locates in the Carolina low country a disheveled Falstaffian planter. In a scene of adroit historical precision Porgy mentions Othello as he faces his transition from patriot soldier to debt-ridden planter in the immediate years after the British were expelled from Charleston. Captain Porgy in *Woodcraft* tells his compatriot, Lance, “Othello’s occupation’s gone.” Porgy recalls he was “a Moorish soldier” and a “famous fighter in his day; but there came a day when his wars ended like ours” (53). Porgy’s emotional state is not nearly as agitated as Othello’s at the end of the play, but he shares in Othello’s brooding and, as for the Moor, suicide looms in Captain Porgy’s deliberations about the future. He notes that “throat cutting” was Othello’s “business” and that if Captain Porgy had to forego “throat cutting” altogether in his new civilian life, he would ask Lance, his friend in arms,” to pass the edge of your sabre across my jugular” (53).

Captain Porgy’s suicidal thought is fleeting as the restoration of the planter hierarchy proceeds, culminating in his reunion with his devoted slaves at the end of *Woodcraft*. For Simms, the contrast is great between the Carolina low country, where the bonds of affection unite all the members of the plantation community, and the racially stratified Venice of *Othello*. The Venetian community (excepting Desdemona) does not accept Othello socially but is happy to have him serve as a mercenary commander to repel the infidel Ottoman Turks. Othello heads a professional military with its rootless class of soldiers that spawns alienated villains like Iago, who deceives Othello at every turn. The Moorish general, despite his military accomplishments in exotic places, lacks what Simms calls “woodcraft” and also the trust that inspires the loyalties of Captain Porgy’s devoted followers. Such characters as Millhouse and Lance endure much with Captain Porgy to win hard won victories against the military equivalent of Othello’s mercenary army: the British. The imperial forces are the professionals who lose to the irregular partisans and local militia, who who do not even have consistent uniforms.

In probing the reasons for such an unlikely outcome, Simms turns to another Shakespearean character. It is not surprising that he finds his way to the most resourceful of Shakespeare’s characters, Hamlet. In repelling the war scavengers McKewn, Bostwick, and their band of desperados, Simms editorializes on the recklessness of Arthur, the widow Eveleigh’s son: had he known the truth he might have congratulated himself in the language of Hamlet, “praised be the rashness for it” (95). By the time Simms identified Arthur in *Woodcraft* with the Danish prince, he had been looking to Hamlet for guidance at least since he first discussed the prince’s moral character in that 1844 article.

The domestic and foreign perils faced by Hamlet were similar to forces soon to be arrayed against the South. In the 1844 article on Hamlet Simms found in the Danish prince, in some respects, an ideal aristocrat and a paragon of breeding and sensibility. Simms, however, did not deal with Hamlet’s problematic education, but instead praised his formation at “the finest German universities.” At Wittenberg Hamlet begins to lose

his religious patrimony and adopted a debilitating introspection that would lead to his later undoing. At that fine “German university” Hamlet imbibed deeply of philosophic skepticism that underlies his suspicions about the spiritual origins of his father’s ghost: is it a valid purgatorial being or is it a demonic presence to be repelled?

Simms faults Hamlet’s delay, resulting from spiritual doubt, in fulfilling the Ghost’s demands to avenge his murder. Unlike the empirical Hamlet, Simms implies that the Ghost is a valid being. He resembles a shade from what in Dante’s *Divine Comedy* is known as ante-Purgatory, specifically those souls who lost their lives through battle, murder, or sudden death. The Ghost’s misery is compounded in that Claudius’ crime is not just murder, but a theologically heinous one. In the context of the pre-Reformation older religiousness of Denmark (which Simms does not consider), Claudius murders his brother, who dies without the benefit of last rites and confession. The Ghost’s agony is spiritual. He tells Hamlet, he was “cut off even in the blossoms of my sin” with “no reck’ing made but sent to my account/ With all my imperfections on my head/ O horrible, O horrible, most horrible”(Shakespeare 1135). Simms laments Hamlet’s deficiency in responding to these dastardly crimes without recognizing their source. Hamlet’s skepticism is rooted in his Wittenberg education that undercuts instinctive, immediate bravery. For Simms the ability to act courageously without ruminating is the foundation of aristocratic character.

Hamlet’s other gifts, in oratory, theatricality, and sword-fighting, make him for Simms a resourceful paradigm for evolving southern identity. Simms assessed Hamlet through the lens of the American Revolution. Hamlet embodies much that Simms found replicated, with some significant differences, in the Revolutionary patriots. His criticism of the Dane’s character is rooted in the heroic feats of Marion, Greene, and others. Simms also saw that the successful “woodcraft” of the Revolutionary patriots may have to be revisited in the coming years by the heirs of their bravery. Little more than a decade after Simms analysis of Hamlet, southerners would find themselves on distant battlefields fighting a second war for independence.

Hamlet’s introspection, however, differentiates him from the bold American patriots. William R. Taylor, in his seminal *Cavalier and Yankee*, cites Thomas Nelson Page’s observation about the antebellum period. Page believed the gentleman of the American Revolution had been the “most active and enterprising,” while their grandsons “had been left too brood over the declining fortunes of the South.” (157). Simms faulted Hamlet for a similar inwardness yet observed that Hamlet’s indecision showed him to be a cultured Prince. This meant that his “tastes were trained and refined at the expense of his energies...There are certain roughing processes in very proper system of training, which are requisite to the proper development of manhood. Smooth seas make no seaman...The boy must have his trials, as a boy, preparatory to those of manhood.” As a result, Simms, concluded, Hamlet suffers “a misfortune to which the children of an aristocracy are commonly subject” (“Moral Character”).

As southern planters in the nineteenth century increasingly came under attack by what Simms considered lesser men from the outside, ill-formed socially and lacking in courtliness, Hamlet’s inaction was not helpful. Abolitionist vituperation and the

cerebral utopianism of the Transcendentalist “wise men” required instinctive courage that Simms faulted Hamlet for not possessing: “A little more blood, and of the proper kind in his [Hamlet’s] veins, would have dethroned and beheaded the usurper, placed his mother in a convent and himself upon the throne, without difficulty and with little risk” (Moral Character). In Simms’s view, delay in expunging “something rotten in Denmark” should not be emulated by aristocratic southern soldiers and public men facing their own growing political threats. The patriots had realized as much in the Revolution and acted decisively. They managed to expel the British whose attempted conquest of the Americans was inspired, in part, by the mythical soldier-king, Henry V.

The French submission to the indignities of English invasion was a cautionary tale for Simms. The political and social forces arrayed against Hamlet were also germane to the perils and complexity of the southern political situation in the mid 1800s. Looking to the past of the Revolution and looking forward to what might become a new independent southern nation made Hamlet, for Simms, a cogent historical parallel. Indeed, Hamlet faces domestic conspiracies at every turn in the Danish court. The Norwegian army led by Fortinbras only adds to the threats facing the Danish prince, who is driven as a result, in the “to-be-or-not-to-be” soliloquy, to contemplate suicide.

Simms criticized Hamlet for isolation, distrustfulness, and an “antic disposition” to appear mad. While Simms states in *Woodcraft* that the strategy entails “art improving brute force,” Hamlet has too much artifice and too much untested courage. He lacks “woodcraft” and he lacks companions in “woodcraft.” Instead of building on the trust of Horatio and Ophelia, Hamlet dwells on the treachery of Claudius and his sycophants, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. Moreover the dramatic stabbing of Polonius is brazen, and the subsequent erotic imaginings uttered to his mother are unspeakable. Immoderate and vulgar, Hamlet speaks of “the bloat king” “in the rank sweat of an enseamed bed / Stewed in corruption, honeying and making love / Over the nasty sty” (Shakespeare 1152).

Simms, nevertheless, admired Hamlet for resisting plots and a nefarious kinsman. Simms believed only older places could produce a character such as this: Denmark, and in America, Charleston and Boston. Simms decried, in the border novels, the crude characters “of the West, in Texas” or “any regions where the rude primary wants of life throw the moral man into the shade.” (It is likely Emerson would have concurred). Hamlet by contrast, Simms observed “we encounter in all *old communities*.” In these places, “individual manhood” “is restrained by the high tone of social refinements.” In America only Charleston and Boston possessed the social chemistry to produce such individuals. Simms notes that, in Charleston, “we know of several Hamlets”, “individuals who, placed in the same circumstances with the youthful Dane would have been like him the victim to the circumstances which they should have mastered” (“Moral Character”).

Simms through Hamlet skillfully appealed to the aristocracy of both North and South in identifying the two iconic American cities. Emerson agreed in noting that Hamlet was an “inborn gentleman” (Falk 539). During the American Revolution Charleston and Boston had produced American Hamlets. In the future, Simms hoped, new Hamlets, embracing aristocratic moderation, would appear. Simms’s hopes would not have been

lost on New England men of letters and public figures such as Nathaniel Hawthorne, U.S. President Franklin Pierce, the unjustly obscure Orestes Brownson, and Henry Adams. They were *all* critical of what struck them as the extremism of abolitionists and Lincoln's nationalist political agenda. Hawthorne observed that no one deserved hanging more than the insurrectionist of Harper's Ferry, John Brown. Hawthorne's college roommate at Bowdoin, Franklin Pierce, having served as a Democratic U. S. President, opposed Lincoln's Republican agenda. (He was one of a handful of Americans who thought the poetry of the Gettysburg address did not mitigate the grievous loss of 50,000 dead in the great battle). The Lincoln government's imprisonment and threat of treason trial of Jefferson Davis particularly outraged Pierce. The prospect of a show trial of the forlorn Confederate President, former U.S. Senator and Secretary of War in Pierce's administration, promised to cast Davis as an American Lear. Pierce courageously objected. Similarly, Orestes Brownson was no "Lincoln man." A mild Unionist he criticized what he thought were the excesses of Lincoln's war policies. He predicted that the Civil War might promise to free slaves at a terrible price: the destruction of the southern aristocracy and its vital link to the American Revolution.

Simms had similar fears. He appealed to aristocratic leadership of both North and South in his analysis of *Hamlet*. By the 1840s when Simms wrote his commentary, the high body count at the end was terrifying and foreboding: king and queen dead; the prince of Denmark also dead; court counselor, Polonius, stabbed unceremoniously by Hamlet; Laertes, his son, poisoned; and Ophelia drowned. The ending of the play was cautionary as the storm clouds of war gathered and the shrill voices of sectional ideology overwhelmed counsels of political moderation.

In advocating restraint borne of a balanced aristocratic temperament, Simms paralleled another Shakespeare play setting forth an essential kinship of aristocratic classes badly divided by war. In *Troilus and Cressida*, a play set in the Trojan War, voices of division seek to continue a mindless fratricidal conflict. After nine years of protracted bloodshed, Hector, the Trojan general, however, offers peace to his Greek adversaries based on their kinship. He proposes avoiding more bloodshed, proclaiming to Ajax, his stolid, surprised enemy:

Thou art, great lord my father's sister' son,  
A cousin-german to great Priam's seed;  
The obligation of our blood forbids  
A gory emulation twixt us twain... (Shakespeare 780)

Shakespeare in scene after scene in his plays evoked the power of feudalism and its rituals. Hector appeals to the common kinship among the Trojans and Greeks. He casts an unlikely Trojan general to voice alternatives to blood-letting. Against Hector's counsel are the increasingly dehumanized Greeks, who the mocking Thersites observes, threaten "barbarism."

Similarly Simms identified the dense aristocratic cultures of the "older communities" of Charleston and Boston as a basis for social mutuality rather than difference. This to Simms was borne out in the compromises of the American Revolution and the subsequent honing of hard sectional edges in the establishment of the new

American republic. John Adams, an ardent son of New England, restrained Jefferson's fondness for French political innovations; Jefferson through his stalwart anti-Federalism rooted in Virginia soil countered the ideas of centralization of Hamilton. Thus the political chemistry of sectional compromise worked its magic.

In terms of what Simms understood to be the great drama of the American Revolution, its form was tragic-comic. As the storm clouds of sectional discord gathered while Simms wrote about *Hamlet* in 1844, he hoped and worked for a similar dramatic outcome. He, however, sounded a note of foreboding when he observed that Hamlet was the most Greek of Shakespeare's plays. An inexorable cosmic fatalism overtook all the players. Simms ended his analysis where many critics do, with the beautiful, poignant words of Horatio to Hamlet: "good night, sweet Prince/ And flights of angels sing thee to thy rest."

That is not the end of the story, however. Hamlet's adversary, the Norwegian Prince, Fortinbras, heard the moving last words of the two friends. Fortinbras, as Kenneth Branagh so precisely understands in his rich film version of the play, orders military funeral rites for the Prince of Denmark. Horatio says he will report: of "carnal, bloody, and unnatural acts," of "casual slaughters." Fortinbras, however, commands a military funeral for Hamlet befitting a prince of Denmark:

Let four captains

Bear Hamlet like a soldier to the stage

For he was likely to prove most royal; and for his passage

The soldiers music and the rite of war

Speak loudly for him. (Shakespeare 1170)

If Simms believed that Hamlet was the most Greek of Shakespeare's plays, he witnessed and endured a similar fate personally in the destruction of his home, the burning of Columbia, and the vindictive ruin of his beloved state in the Civil War. Simms reported like Horatio of "carnal, bloody and unnatural acts" in the *Sack and Destruction of the City of Columbia*. General Sherman would not be mistaken for Fortinbras. In Hamlet's last words to Horatio, the prince whispers: "in this harsh world, draw thy breath in pain/ to tell my story." Hamlet knew, as did Simms, the victors write the history. Fortinbras, however, proved more noble than those who loathed southern independence. Simms's social vision for an inclusive American aristocracy endures against the version of history written by the American nationalist victors dedicated to statist uniformity. A generation after the carnage of Shiloh, Gettysburg, and Antietam, Theodore Roosevelt praised, in "The Strenuous Life," the rejection of the "ignoble counsels of peace" voiced by "Peace" Democrats and others. Roosevelt found inspiration in "the suffering and loss, the blackness of sorrow and despair, that were unflinchingly faced, and the years of strife endured" through the "wisdom of Lincoln" and the "sword or rifle in the armies of Grant!" (Roosevelt, np).<sup>2</sup> Roosevelt's praise of the Civil War's protracted carnage starkly contrasts with Simms's pleas for restraint in his commentary on Hamlet. Simms wrote it to try to avert the violence Roosevelt found to be heroic. What Fortinbras said of Hamlet is no less true of Simms: "For he was likely to prove most royal."

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Simms, "The Moral Character of Hamlet," Parts I, II, III, IV, *Orion*, 1844. The original text is among the writings of William Gilmore Simms at the South Caroliniana Library, University of South Carolina, Columbia. All references come from a transcribed copy of the original I made in 2007 under the auspices of a *Fides et Ratio* faculty grant, Franciscan University of Steubenville (Ohio). The transcribed copy is part of a larger collection I am editing of antebellum essays on Shakespeare by Simms, Poe, Emerson, J. Q. Adams, and others.

<sup>2</sup> Roosevelt changed his mind about war when his own son was killed in World War I)

## Works Cited

- Eliot, Charles W., ed. *Prefaces and Prologues to Famous Books*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1938.
- Falk, Robert P. "Emerson and Shakespeare." *PMLA* 56 (June 1941): 532-543.
- Guilds, John C., ed. *The Simms Reader*. Charlottesville: UP of Virginia, 2001.
- . *Simms, A Literary Life*. Fayetteville: U of Arkansas P, 1992.
- Levine, Lawrence W., "William Shakespeare and the American People: A Study in Cultural Transformation." *American Historical Review* 89 (Feb. 1984): 34-66.
- Roosevelt, Theodore, "The Strenuous Life." <http://www.bartleby.com/58/1.htm> (April, 1899). Web.
- Shakespeare, William, *The Complete Works*. New York: Walter J. Black, 1925.
- Simms, William Gilmore. *Woodcraft*. Spartanburg, SC: The Reprint Company, 1976.
- Taylor, William R., *Cavalier and Yankee: The South and American National Character*. New York: Harper, 1957.