

Founding Fathers: Patriotic Ceramics and Shakespeare in the United States

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Abstract

This essay examines an early nineteenth-century bowl from the Shakespeare Birthplace Trust's US collection to explore the ramifications of seeking and finding connections to Shakespeare in such an item. With no direct link to Shakespeare or his works, the bowl illustrates Christy Desmet's concept of accidental appropriation and reveals the ambivalent relationship between US independence and a reliance on the Old World as a source of refined cultural identity that endured for most of the nineteenth century. As this reflects on US annexation of Shakespeare as a symbol of refinement, Shakespeare's cultural capital is also recognised in its manner of arrival in the collection, and indeed, in the desire by SBT curators and researchers to 'find' Shakespeare within it.

The Shakespeare Birthplace Trust's (SBT) vast but hitherto unaddressed international collection contains a multitude of items that constitute compelling international responses to William Shakespeare. It also showcases objects that are accidentally Shakespearean through context rather than content. Accidental appropriation, Christy Desmet explains, can be understood as a fortuitous network "of signs and contexts [that] make possible a mutual, if not perfectly homologous, recognition of Shakespeare's cultural capital" (Desmet 2014, 54). The SBT's US collection traces personal and political engagements with that capital from the eighteenth century to the twenty-first. The majority of the US collection items demonstrate a national interest in Shakespeare that is founded on the cultural bond Shakespeare represents to the "Old World." Items such as the first US-published collection of Shakespeare's works demonstrate the ways in which this relationship is underpinned by shared language and the desire to re-establish hierarchies of gentility and knowledge in the "New World." This note suggests that a more nuanced indication of the desire to retain Shakespeare as part of the US's national identity is discernible in a ceramic bowl adorned with symbols of US independence (fig. 1), which, by existing in the Birthplace collection

as an example of Shakespearean ephemera, invites us to build unexpected connections between this American artifact and Shakespearean history.

The bowl has no obvious relation to Shakespeare. Externally, it is adorned with medallion portraits of Benjamin Franklin, George Washington, the Marquis de Lafayette, and the Great Seal of the United States. The SBT gained possession of the bowl through its custodianship of Harvard House, Stratford-upon-Avon, the former home of the mother of John Harvard (founder of Harvard University). The property was established in 1909 as a museum of US-Americana which linked a new age of education in the US to the legacy of Shakespeare, localized in Stratford-upon-Avon as "the chief shrine of our common literature" (Anon. 1909). Harvard House museum was rebranded as the Museum of British Pewter in 1996 and closed to the public in 2010, but its US-related artifacts remain deposited at the Shakespeare Centre.

On the inside base, the bowl features the guild insignia "The Shipwright's Arms," which indicates that despite the patriotic images the item was manufactured in England as part of a vast output of Anglo-American transferware produced in the wake of US victory in the Revolutionary War (fig. 2). In a display of dispassionate marketing prowess, the British manufacturing industry swiftly capitalised on both the fragility of the burgeoning US manufacturing industry as well as lingering associations of British goods as symbols of refinement, flooding the US market with highly desirable patriotic items like this bowl. Kariann Akemi Yokota explains:

American elites continued to look to the old world not only for refined goods but also for direction on how to use them. And so while cultural and economic autonomy from the British was an ideal to which Americans aspired in the years following the Revolution, old templates of dependence remained in place long after the war ended. (Yokota 2011, 65)

The US was profoundly conscious of European mutterings about its "embarrassing provincial rusticity," and the insecurity this prompted about US identity meant that desire for British ceramics halted burgeoning US manufacturing and meant that the new nation was trapped ideologically as well as economically (Yokota 2011, 63).

The sense that security and quality could be assured only in what was already established, and specifically in the European tradition, was also true in US culture. Shakespeare was, and remains, a pillar of refined cultural identity long after the establishment of US independence. Frances Teague explains that in the early nineteenth century, US culture was developing as "a synthesis of all that is excellent in the past" (Teague 2011, 725). Thus, what was valued—the refinement of British imports like ceramics, Shakespeare, and, of course, republican independence—came to represent US identity. The bowl, then, as an incidental (if not random) item in the SBT's

collections, happens to illuminate the correspondence between the ways in which US identity was established as specifically Anglo-American by the annexation of Shakespeare and consumption of British goods in the early nineteenth century, as well as the motivations for it.

The bowl indicates the complex ambivalence of an identity that simultaneously rejoices in and rejects Britishness. Around the Great Seal on the side of the bowl is the motto "Republicans are not always ungrateful," which suggests that this item is one of many produced around the time of Lafayette's tour of the States in 1824, when he was welcomed as the last surviving general of the War of Independence (fig. 3.). The motto is derived from the welcome speech given by the Mayor of New York, in which the "unjust imputation" that republics are "ungrateful to their benefactors" was publicly refuted (Knapp 1825, 445). This need to value independence without devaluing the "benefactor" directly corresponds to the desire to keep Shakespeare as the cornerstone of US cultural identity while maintaining the principles of the separation from the mother-country. Shakespeare was ingrained in US culture through citations found not only on the stage and in required reading lists at school, but also "on almanacs, patent medicines, saloon signs and the deeds to gold mines" (Sturgess 2004, 4). Such citations indicate a "deferential relationship; it is frequently self-authenticating, even reverential, in its reference to the canon of 'authoritative', culturally validated, texts" (Sanders 2006, 4). The motto's presence on this bowl, then, indicates the ways in which citation became a crucial means of embedding within US culture the principles of both independence from and gratitude to the former oppressor, which in turn mitigated the elevation of the values of refinement associated with British culture and goods.

As an item that belongs to the collection of a cultural institution, the bowl functions as a citation of a particular conception of nineteenth-century US identity, and in consequence also highlights the role of museums like the Shakespeare Birthplace or Harvard House in establishing and maintaining notions of national identity through the curation of material history. The bowl's original purpose would have been for display in the home—as personal museum—to establish the family identity as proud patriots with refined taste. It may even have been joined on the shelf by an early edition of Shakespeare's works to augment the display of cultural discernment even further. As such, the combination of deference to perceived authority and self-authentication that is in evidence in this bowl encapsulates the transatlantic cultural oscillations of the early nineteenth century and provides a material frame of reference for the role of Shakespeare in the development of US cultural identity.

A semiotic approach to such an obliquely Shakespeare-related item reveals the range of significations that can be attributed to it, in turn demonstrating how its serendipitous provenance as part of the SBT's collection can be profitably mined for intriguing layers of meaning. Such an

approach reveals Shakespeare as a key constituent within a broader network of appropriations of Britishness, while also signifying the very process of *recognizing* the connection points within that network. In this instance, Shakespeare's cultural capital is recognizable through the early nineteenth-century US backdrop of the bowl's manufacture: a context in which British goods were being fetishized and literary culture was being appropriated. This cultural capital is also recognizable in the bowl's status as part of the Harvard House collection, as that property was established to join the legacies of Harvard and Shakespeare. Finally, this capital is recognizable in the SBT's very desire—and indeed my own—to find Shakespeare within the object through a series of extant connections. Determining the ethics of this process of recognition requires a new framework that unites museum and object theory with Desmet's theorization of accidental appropriation and recognition, so that the museum comes to represent one of Desmet's "different temporal and spatial process[es] through which recognition [of Shakespeare] occurs" (Desmet 2014, 55). Above all, therefore, the bowl indicates the need for a deeper consideration of the operation of the museum within Shakespeare studies, in which the imperative to tell stories about Shakespeare in the world drives the desire to "recognize" Shakespeare in every object.

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