The Chartist Movement of Great Britain (taking its name from the People’s Charter of 1838) stands as arguably the first organized mass working class movement and one of the most ambitious. In order to encourage large-scale change within British society, the Chartists developed a rather complex set of cultural practices with the intent of inculcating members of the urban working classes with the foundational principles of the movement. These practices included the appropriation of Britain’s literary heritage. The Chartists reevaluated a number of British authors through their critical lens, but no one received greater attention than William Shakespeare whose biography and works were positioned within the new social construct. Here, Shakespeare stands as a hero of the working class, as a man with republican sympathies, and for some, anachronistically, as a Leveller. In Marxist terms, this program was pursued to frame British history and culture in terms of an ongoing class conflict and to locate within that conflict certain exemplars who lent their voice and support to working class causes.

The Chartists lasted only a decade as a viable political force, but the architecture of their programs would ably serve those who followed in working class political and cultural movements. Since this movement in its mission crossed so many disciplinary boundaries, cultural history serves as a valuable means of investigation of the Chartist project, particularly with regard to its cultural practices. Cultural history lends itself to an examination of the public expression of those who are outside of the ruling classes, provides context on how social movements affect society at large, and charts the growth and evolution of human thought (which includes but is not limited to political ideology). The notion of ideology here is a complicated one given the relative newness of the concept in the nineteenth century and given that many in Britain’s elites eschewed the very notion of ideology at the time. In reclaiming the past for themselves, the Chartists hoped to influence contemporary political debate and place their ideology before the people using whatever media – newspapers, parades, speeches, theatrical events -- at their disposal.

How then may the Chartist mission be termed ideological? As Thomas Carlyle asks in Chartism, “Or does the Brit-
ish reader, safe in the assurance that ‘England is not France’, call all this unpleasant doctrine of ours ideology, perfectibility, and a vacant dream?” (47). To many in Britain, ideology – and the theories which underlay an ideology -- had a distinct continental or French flavor and stood outside of a Newtonian and rational worldview. Chartist Ernest Jones, in a speech on universal suffrage, articulates the dangers inherent in abstract political formulations, “To-day the Constitution recognizes universal suffrage in theory that it may, perhaps, deny it in practice on the morrow” (Marx). To promulgate an ideological agenda, complete with acultural program in support, was a seemingly insurmountable task, for the laissez-faire status quo was not understood as the dominant ideology but rather as the natural state of the human polis. The utilization of Shakespeare (and other literary figures) and the recasting of history serves the larger purpose of the Chartists. Though chronologically pre-revolutionary, at least in regards to the major works of Marx and Engels, the Chartists were attempting, as their successors would, to render ideology as a product of rationality by embracing all of human knowledge. Raymond Williams’ analysis of ideology in *Marxism and Literature* (with regard to a brief examination of Lenin) has applicability here, “More significantly, perhaps, ‘ideology’ in its now neutral or approving sense is seen as ‘introduced’ on the foundation of ‘all…human knowledge…science…etc.’, of course brought to bear from a class point of view” (69). From this perspective, Chartists engaged in conversations about literature and history, in part, to embrace all of human knowledge and render their ideology “neutral”.

Thus, history for them is no longer a static knowledge of dates and facts, but a conversation – what Williams terms *geschichte* – between past and present based upon a particular political agenda. Roger G. Hall states: “Although Chartist activists and leaders not infrequently referred to statutes, documents, and printed authorities, they turned to history primarily out of the pursuit of democratic political power, not out of an impartial search for ‘objective’ historical truth” (233). That the Chartists would take an interest in creating such a narrative is not that surprising considering they are advocating for their cause scant decades after Gibbon completed his magnum opus, which, despite its flaws, developed a coherent account of the fall of the Roman Empire based on a highly contentious and inflammatory argument.

At this juncture, an overview of the Chartist Movement is in order. Chartism flourished in the 1830’s and 40’s in Great Britain reaching its height in 1848 before tensions among the leadership and efforts by the ruling classes (coinciding with the reactionary response on the Continent to the Springtime of the Peoples) led to its gradual demise. Chartism arose during the first wave of the Industrial Revolution and correspondingly during very difficult economic times in Britain. Not coincidentally, Charles Dickens in his fiction chronicles many of
the same societal ills that the Chartists were attempting to alter. Ian Haywood explains those societal ills: “For the majority of the population, the 1830’s and 1840’s must have felt like a downward spiral into poverty, disease, misery, and alienation. Much of the suffering was attributed to the laissez-faire and repressive policies of a government which preached individual freedoms while imposing or supporting vicious new social and economic controls on the mass of the population” (1). The more politically engaged of the working class felt as if they were caught between two equally corrupt and vile forces: the old of the aristocracy represented by the Tory Party and the new of the bourgeoisie represented by the Whig Party.

Chartists published many of their own newspapers and also took to the streets to protest the social status quo in processions, parades, marches, and assemblies (some of which were decried in the establishment press as “riots”). Chartist action should capture our attention not in the least because it served as the prototype for future industrial action, or as John Plotz notes: “In the development of the mechanisms of public meeting, open petition, and paraparliamentary action, Chartism laid down a pattern that virtually all later North American and Western European crowd activism was to follow” (89). These actions were taken to bring democratic reform of the political process. In the wake of both the American and French Revolutions, such an agenda would have been deemed radical if not revolutionary by the Government and its supporters. Indeed, in 1848, acts of Parliament banned public meetings and declared those who agitated for the Charter to be guilty of sedition and treason.

The Charter enunciated the six main points of the movement: 1.) universal suffrage for men above the age of 21, 2.) secret ballot, 3.) no property qualification for MPs, 4.) salaries for MPs, 5.) elimination of “rotten boroughs”, and 6.) annual Parliaments. While Carlyle believed that less democracy and more government was needed (45), Karl Marx himself approved of the Charter, noting that it could be nothing but Socialistic given specific conditions in England: “But universal suffrage is the equivalent for political power for the working class of England, where the proletariat form the large majority of the population, where, in a long, though underground civil war, it has gained a clear consciousness of its position as a class, and where even the rural districts know no longer any peasants, but landlords, industrial capitalists (farmers) and hired labourers. The carrying of universal suffrage in England would, therefore, be a far more socialistic measure than anything which has been honoured with that name on the Continent” (Marx).

An evaluation of Chartist ideology is necessarily complex for two crucial reasons. First, as the sort of ur-working class movement, Chartism was exploring this new public space of emergent voices
and hence the lines are blurred between, to use Williams’ terminology, “the development of a pre-revolutionary or potentially revolutionary or briefly revolutionary” (67) aspects of the movement. Second, even though the Chartist Movement itself never saw this political platform enacted into law, the genetic fabric of its ideology entered into the continuing mainstream of the public discourse and five of its six demands would be successfully passed as legislation over the course of the nineteenth century.

Chartism was the rare movement that attempted to create a mass appeal across a broad spectrum of political, social, and cultural contexts. With the emergence of a large and influential popular press (which was made possible by further mechanization of the printing process which in turn led to cheaper printing costs), Sally Ledger reports that those in the Chartist leadership needed to compete with this early form of mass media. The historical significance of this cannot be understated as she explains: “Chartism’s own efforts to wield mass influence, through a negotiation of the popular, ultimately failed. The result was that British radicalism after Chartism became a culturally and politically distinct enterprise, no longer bolstered by popular culture in the way that had been possible in the first decades of the nineteenth century” (“Chartist Aesthetics” 32). It is with this pivot to the popular that Chartists crafted many of their cultural practices, including their appropriation of Shakespeare.

In order to comprehend this appropriation of Shakespeare, it is necessary to place it within its historical context by examining the publications of Thomas Spence, whose work served as precursor to that of the Chartists. Spence is perhaps best known for his publishing and selling of Thomas Paine’s Rights of Man as well as his own publication of the same title in the 1790’s. He was jailed for this publication and would often find himself in prison for charges of treason. The publisher was one of the leading satirists during the Regency period, and he was often criticized for his radical ideals: an end to land enclosures, universal suffrage for all, and national engagement to prevent children from growing up in an impoverished and cruel environment. Starting in 1793, Spence published the journal Pig’s Meat, which directly challenges the hegemonic order. The publication includes, among other features, the first English translation of the French revolutionary anthem “La Marseillaise”, a comparison of the living conditions of a West Indies slave and an Irish laborer, and reprints of documents from Britain’s own Interregnum. He makes common cause with Paine, and compares him with the historic Brutus, “who spoke to a people” as opposed to Burke and by extension Cicero “who spoke to a Parliament”. Additionally, Spence examines Shakespeare’s Julius Caesar and, not surprisingly, finds Brutus to be the hero. The assassination of Caesar is a necessary if unfortunate act to ensure the liberty of the people, “[F]or my part/I know no personal cause to spurn at him/But for the general” (II.i.10-2). If Brutus has a fault, it
is one of virtue in the sparing of the even more monstrous Antony, “Let us be sacrificers, but not butchers” (II.i.173). Spence has a very specific purpose as Anne Janowitz explains: “In Pig’s Meat, Spence advances a concept of tradition which, though not posed in the language of class, will define a ‘people’s’ literary heritage, even while claiming figures from the hegemonic culture. Using the form of Knox’s Elegant Extracts, in Pig’s Meat, Spence pries loose Shakespeare and Goldsmith from one position in culture and shapes them into another, situated along more contemporary works” (76). In so doing, Spence thus invites a political reading of the works of these authors. Spence is also clever in his choice of literary icons, belonging to the “hegemonic culture” as they may. The biographies of Shakespeare and Goldsmith (as well as of Milton who figures quite prominently in the periodical) can easily be cast as having resonance with the working class readership. Shakespeare is of humbler origins, while both Goldsmith and Milton had to contend with economic deprivation and/or political oppression. Their personal histories are of as great value as their works, and hence the university-educated Christopher Marlowe or the court apparatchik Ben Jonson do not grace the pages of Pig’s Meat. Janowitz further notes that the periodical “sets a precedent for organizing and inventing a cultural tradition, laying claim to texts from the past, and juxtaposing them in such a way as to generate new meanings which fasten these texts to the social and political claims being made by the unenfranchised and the labouring poor” (76). Spence laid the groundwork for Chartist cultural argumentation.

That Shakespeare should become a critical figure in the establishment of a Chartist cultural project is not as surprising as may at first seem. Antony Taylor discusses the accessibility of the playwright’s works: “The role of Shakespeare within popular politics reflects his importance within plebeian culture more generally. Many working-people learnt to read from his plays, others saw them or experienced them at second hand in popular almanacs, bowdlerized versions, or in Friendly Society tableaux” (359). Shakespeare thus became an important touchstone within the Chartist cultural construct. The Chartist poet Thomas Cooper established an adult school in Leicester in 1841. According to Timothy Randall, he had the students “compose hymns for the Sunday meetings, which he collected and published as The Shakespearean Chartist Hymnbook” (184). While they were in prison, Jones and George Julian Harney, another Chartist leader, requested the tragedies of William Shakespeare, among other works, as reading material. They were denied these requests. Janowitz also reports that in the Spring of 1840 the leading Chartist newspaper The Northern Star published an ongoing series entitled “Chartism from Shakespeare”, “culling passages from the plays with which to exemplify Chartist principles and issues” (146). Indeed, the Shakespeare Tercentenary celebration in London in 1864 would quickly dissolve
into demonstrations protesting the deportation of Italian nationalist hero Giuseppe Garibaldi from the country; these demonstrations were an inciting incident in the eventual creation of the Reform League a year later (Anthony Taylor 358). It should be noted that the Reform League would advocate for many of the same principles that the Chartists had two decades prior.

In the pursuit of literature as a political enterprise, Chartists were both critics and creators. What the Chartist authors sought to convey in their own works they believed they perceived reflected in Shakespeare’s canon. Aesthetically, the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries saw literary realism at its height. Realism, however, was a mode of expression that many Chartists found unavailable to them. Haywood argues that realism was firmly entrenched in the concerns and culture of the bourgeoisie. He continues, “By the time the Chartist authors turned their hands to fiction, the British novel was deeply biased against reflecting a working-class perspective on society” (3). In challenging middle-class attitudes Chartist fiction by necessity challenges a rigorous realism. This fiction is often set away from the metropolitan center of London and in the “wilderness” of far-flung regions of the British Isles. For instance, Chartist poet Robert Peddie, who wrote a good deal of verse while in prison, penned much of his work in his native Scottish dialect; his “Spirit of Freedom” references the mythic Scottish heroes Robert Bruce and William Wallace. Some Chartist fiction, such as that of Cooper, resists traditional narrative closure wherein the ordered world of the middle-class family is restored and strengthened. Further, Chartist fiction tends to eschew domestic settings while focusing on a number of a characters rather than a single individual hero, hence celebrating the spirit of class unity and achievement over a single person’s endeavors. Thomas Martin Wheeler’s Sunshine and Shadow (serialized March 1849 – January 1850) serves as an excellent example of this genre in that it equates the marriage of middle-class women with the exploitation of the working class and equally condemns chattel and wage slavery. Though George W. M. Reynolds was both a Chartist and a novelist, his fiction stands outside of consideration here because his work, such as The Mysteries of London, in the penny dreadfuls was more concerned with the needs of melodrama than the promulgation of his ideology. Reynolds aside, most Chartist literature was quite radical or, as Haywood states, “[N]ot all working class texts are as clearly oppositional in form and content as those of Chartists” (3).

This spirit of creation informs their criticism as well, which, not surprisingly, is often quite materialist in its evaluative process. Chartists honored the Romantic poets, but more for their political aspirations than the innovation of their poetry. They brought a similar assessment to Shakespeare. By the nineteenth century, Shakespeare had gained the stature in English letters that he enjoys today. In Gary Taylor’s estimation, Shake-
Shakespeare’s predominance could only expand across the spectrum. He writes: “Consequently, the main movement of Shakespeare now became lateral, his influence broadened geographically and socially. What had been the river of his reputation was now the ocean of Shakespeare” (168). The Chartists were without a doubt a leading force in transforming that river into an ocean.

It is easy to see the appeal Shakespeare would have to the early radicals, especially since the doors of realism were closed to them. In works such as *As You Like It*, the Bard exposes and dramatizes the tensions between the metropolitan center as represented by the court and the periphery as represented by Arden Forest. Indeed, time spent in this idealized bucolic setting has a positive moral effect. Orlando learns to be a more mature lover, Oliver loses his antipathy to his brother, and, indeed, Duke Frederick ends his illegitimate reign and “was converted/Both from his enterprise and from the world” (V.iv.53-4). Or consider *Henry V*. Here we have a “band of brothers” from all socio-economic levels of society who work in common cause in overcoming a seemingly insurmountable obstacle. Shakespeare honors the regional distinctiveness of the various members of Harry’s army – the captains are variously Welsh, Cornish, Irish, Scottish – and seeks to represent that this diverse community is a notable strength of the realm. Indeed, at a crucial moment during the Battle of Agincourt, the King and Captain Fluellen share a moment of camaraderie over their shared Welsh – not English – heritage:

“I wear it for a memorable honor/For I am Welsh, you know, good countryman” (IV.vii.100-1). Characters in other history plays speak positively of rebellion[Bolingbroke, from *Richard II* states, “The caterpillars of the commonwealth/Which I have sworn to weed and pluck away” (II.iii.166-7)]; many of the casts are ensemble in nature; and the works -- such as *A Winter’s Tale* and *The Tempest* -- are certainly not restrained by realism.

*The Tempest* in particular would have great appeal for early radicals and reformers on both sides of the Atlantic. In the United States, Margaret Fuller, who as a journalist supported revolution in Italy, describes herself as an American Miranda because “Miranda seems to represent a feminist ideal” (Showalter 25-6). The Chartists too would surely find much that is vital and malleable. Caliban’s rage against Prospero – “A plague upon the tyrant that I serve!” (II.ii.74) – provided much fodder. Perhaps most salient would be Gonzalo’s vision (which borrows from Thomas More’s *Utopia*) of a classless society:

I’ the commonwealth I would by contraries
Execute all things; for no kind of traffic
Would I admit; no name of magistrate;
Letters should not be known; riches, poverty,
And use of service, none; contract, succession,
Bourn, bound of land, tillth, vineyard, none;
No use of metal, corn, or wine, or oil;
No occupation; all men idle, all;
And women too, but innocent and pure;
No sovereignty;-- (II.i.123-32)

Such sentiment places Gonzalo, and seemingly Shakespeare, within the same conceptual space as the Romantics and, coupled with the character’s later rejection of a “need of any engine”, in opposition to the political and economic elites of the new Industrial Era.

Chartists, of course, were manipulating Shakespearean text to their own ends. In the aforementioned series “Chartism and Shakespeare” in *The Northern Star*, quotations from the playwright’s works were employed that might best echo then contemporary radical views of the political situation. For instance, the following appeared from *Antony and Cleopatra*, “What poor an instrument/May do a noble deed! he brings me liberty” (V.ii.236-7). Out of context, of course, these lines would seem almost a call to arms in the battle for liberty against an implacable foe. In context, however, these are the words Cleopatra utters when she receives the asp in order to commit suicide. Similarly, the paper quoted from *Henry IV*, Part I, “The better part of valour is discretion” (V.iv.120-1). Again, on the face of it, this is a noble sentiment. However, the sentiment is spoken by Falstaff after he “plays dead” in order to avoid engaging Hotspur in battle.

The Chartist constructed a Shakespeare who was “one of the people”, someone the historical Shakespeare would not have recognized. He may have engaged (as much as we can determine from the scanty evidence of surviving documents) in the enclosing of land around his native Stratford-upon-Avon; Edward Bond in his 1971 play *Bingo* explored this possibility. If true, this fact places Shakespeare as the diametric opposite of the Levellers. To further belie the Shakespeare-as-Leveller argument, other than historical anachronism, comes the question of Shakespeare’s personal political beliefs. Did Shakespeare share with the Levellers a belief in popular sovereignty and republican form of government? Andrew Hadfield, in his study *Shakespeare and Republicanism*, posits that late sixteenth-century republicanism was significantly different from nineteenth-century republicanism. In Shakespeare’s era, republicanism was a movement meant simply to curb some of the greater excesses of the monarchy by surrounding the person of the sovereign with wise and judicious advisors, a position more in accord with that of nineteenth-century Whigs than Chartists. It did not call for the abolition of the monarchical institutions such as would later occur during the reign of Charles I. We can perhaps observe some sympathy on the part of Shakespeare for republicanism in his positive portrayal of the Venetian polis. But, again according to Hadfield, if Shakespeare truly inculcated republican inclinations, it was probably as a result of the crisis of succession brought on by the unmarried and childless Queen Elizabeth I as she neared the end of her life. Republicanism quickly lost attraction as a viable political alternative during the seeming stability of James I’s first years on the throne (205).
The Chartists, as other critics have, often viewed Shakespeare’s plays, which are populated with characters from across the social spectrum, through the prism of class conflict. For the Chartists, that conflict can be viewed as both a political as well as a cultural opposition both on the stage and in the audience. In his discussion of *The Merchant of Venice*, however, Walter Cohen finds a cultural cohesion in that audience, “Even more, we may recall that Shakespeare’s plays, despite their elaborateness, appealed to a broadly heterogeneous primary audience: an achievement that depended on a comparative social and cultural unity, long since lost, in the nation as well as the theatre. This underlying coherence emerges in the logical, and, it would seem, inherently meaningful unfolding of the dramatic plot” (72). The Chartist critique of Shakespeare is perhaps understandable given how the very ontological nature of theatre evolved from the Elizabethan Era to Industrial Era. “The playwright in this world,” explains William Demaster, “was not an eye/god who saw the mysteries of the cosmos: he was an eye/god whose clear insights into objective realities of existence directed him to preach how an imperfect social world could be improved if only it would follow the prescriptions of this eye/playwright” (79). To utilize Demaster’s terminology, the Chartists conceived of Shakespeare as an “eye/god” from the perspective of their own time, not his; logically, then, Shakespeare would be preaching against an “imperfect social world”.

To be clear, this re-appropriation of Shakespeare was done for then current political practices and not historical pedagogy. Shakespeare himself was often guilty, of course, of this practice in the creation of his history plays. The portrayal of Richard III, for instance, was constructed for its value to the Tudor Dynasty’s mythic conception of its own genesis. We need to remind ourselves of Williams’s distinct definition of history as *geschichte* from *Keywords*: that of a conversation between past, present, and future. This definition is particularly apt given that it relies on Enlightenment notions of progress, an intellectual construct in ascendency in the first half of the nineteenth century (147). For Shakespeare, there is no clear line dividing history from art just as for the Chartists there is no clear line dividing culture from politics; here though culture is not a universal historic force, as considered in the Enlightenment Era, but as something that the working class can develop as separate and distinct from that of the ruling classes.

McDouall’s *Chartist and Republican Journal* provides insight into the matter. This newspaper published – across several issues – a play entitled *Electioneering* by “a Bristol radical”. In this work, Jonathan Holdfast, a shoemaker, turns his back on both the Whig and Tory candidates for Parliament and proclaims himself for the Charter and asks the audience to do the same. Here we see how a work of art – in this case a play – is crafted for specific political ends. The work of established au-
thors was similarly utilized in the furtherance of the cause. Robert G. Hall reports that the poet Thomas Cooper used to perform dramatic readings for Chartist audiences; the readings included scenes and monologues from Shakespeare. Here is Hall on the subject: “[Cooper’s] reading of Shakespeare and Sir Walter Scott, especially the Waverley novels, as well as the ‘rational’ writings of Volney and Elihu Palmer, also clearly informed and sharpened his approach to, and understanding of, the past. Drawing on these varied sources of historical knowledge, he entertained audiences in the Shakespearean Room of the Leicester Chartists with recitations and dramatic readings from Shakespeare, Milton, and Burns” (238-9). The key here I believe is this notion of “understanding” the past. That Shakespeare is a titan of literature matters not so much but that he is a “source of historical knowledge” does. In order to change the society of the now, the Chartists were reimagining the British past utilizing as their tools works of literature. Antony Taylor also notes the use of the canon for historical context, “This body of work provided a radical literary canon that dignified and elevated the struggle for reform, and provided a historical and constitutional pedigree for the popular politics of the nineteenth century” (358). Why depend on the works of Shakespeare or Milton? Because they provide “pedigree” or give strength and lend credence to the Chartist argument. Again, Taylor provides insight: “Moreover there was an alternative history of England here mirrored in the careers of writers from a plebeian background who came to express the sentiments radicals most admired” (359). This idea of an “alternative history” is extraordinarily important. In rethinking the past, the Chartists are attempting to recast the present and influence the future. In McDouall’s, one article opines that England existed as an almost “constitutional” idyll prior to the Norman conquest of 1066. It further emphasizes that the England of the 1840’s is still an occupied nation, and if the people want to return to the true English way of government – i.e. constitutionality – then it must return conceptually to the time pre-1066.

This notion of “occupation” here is particularly poignant. Obviously, it is crucial to examine Chartist cultural practices through the lens of New Historicism. The idea of “occupation” allows us to approach this material from this perspective of post-colonialism as well. For a writer such as Peddie, a post-colonial approach is particularly apt because of his Scottish heritage. This new lens can be utilized to evaluate and re-evaluate the Chartist movement as a whole. Though writing about American imperialism, Amy Kaplan in her argument on the relation between foreign and domestic policies offers a valuable perspective, “Not only about foreign diplomacy or international relations, imperialism is also about consolidating domestic cultures and negotiating intranational relations. To foreground cultures is not only to understand how they abet the subjugation of others or foster their resistance, but also to ask how interna-
tional relations reciprocally shape a dominant imperial culture at home, and how imperial relations are enacted and contested within the nation” (14). Kaplan notes that while “current critical trajectories ...separate British Studies from American Studies” new directions in British Studies allow for an examination of empire closer to home, not only in Ireland but also in the “urban immigrant communities” (18). Clearly, we can take this critical approach and apply it to the Chartists and potentially other working class movements. Hence, the conflict is between classes but also between distinct cultural identities. The efforts of the ruling classes to create a uniform society can be observed in numerous instances in the early nineteenth century. For example, the Act of Union of 1801 created a politically uniform state by incorporating Ireland into the rest of the United Kingdom. The enclosing of land, the industrialization of northern England, the growth of coal mining, and the expansion of the railroad (such as the Liverpool and Manchester Line) along with the Land Ordnance Survey of 1824 in Ireland gain new meaning from this perspective. Texts that challenge the metropolitan center or are perceived to do so – such as As You Like It – gain new currency. Edward Said states: “[C]olonial space must be transformed sufficiently so as no longer to appear foreign to the imperial eye” (226). The Chartist support of Romantics and other artists who champion the idea of a bucolic England while always done out of defiance grows in intensity according to this argument because the Chartists are protesting against the transformation of their space in order to make it more pleasing to “the imperial eye” in London.

The Chartists found themselves in an extraordinarily complicated place within British society. They had to appeal to a segment of the population that did not have a strong education or exposure to the arts or, even in a number of cases, the ability to read. The Chartists had to combine a radical political message with popular cultural signifiers. Hence, Chartist artistic efforts tend toward poetry, songs, and theatrical pieces because these works could all be performed in a public setting without requiring the audience to read text (poetry and songs were particularly valuable because they could be easily memorized without reading). The fifty plus Chartist newspapers and journals attempted to bridge the gap between politics and popular culture with various degrees of success (The Northern Star was the most successful). Only one writer seems truly to have navigated the dangerous shoals between a radical avant-garde and the people: Charles Dickens. Ledger explains Dickens’ success, which is also a fair barometer of what the Chartists ultimately failed to achieve: “Dickens acted as a cultural bridge between, on the one hand, an older, eighteenth-century political conception of ‘the People’ and, on the other hand, a distinctly mid-nineteenth-century modern conception of a mass-market ‘populace’” (Ledger 2-3: 2007). What Ledger credits as Dickens’ achievement – and
she dismisses the later evaluation of him as a writer for the bourgeoisie – is exactly the same discreet space the Chartists hoped to occupy and failed ultimately to do so during their brief time on Britain’s political stage. It is worth remembering that though their organization may have come to an untimely end, their ideological agenda did not; here we return to the notion that for the Chartists ideology encompassed all human knowledge as so that agenda includes both political and cultural aspects.

Shakespeare occupies a critical place in the promulgation of that agenda. First, his works served as a means by which the Chartist leadership could more easily communicate with the masses and in so doing a common radical lexicon evolved. Second, the Chartist persistence in bringing the works of Shakespeare (whose works could be found on bookshelves in both Birmingham and Belgravia) and other canonical authors to the people allowed these works to be seen as “belonging” to the people and not received as from on high. What is key here is not that Shakespeare was made available – that had already happened – but that radicals, reformers, and those outside of the establishment were given the means to examine and interpret these texts through the lens of their own experiences and values and not those of the elite culture. To borrow Said’s terminology again, the “space” of the literary texts was not “transformed” in accordance with the “imperial eye” but rather to conform to the eye of the working class. This would lead to highly contentious questions as to whom in British society had “ownership” of Shakespeare and hence of the nation’s literary landscape. In fact, the Chartists and their successors were so successful at co-opting Shakespeare as their own, that there was, as Antony Taylor details, an intense conservative reaction, “Much Chartist and early socialist writing on this subject was fiercely protective of Shakespeare from suggestions that he was not the true author of the plays, and that the laurels belonged to titled noblemen like Francis Bacon or Edward de Vere (the Earl of Oxford). This debate ignited particularly in the 1880’s following the foundation of the Bacon Society in 1885 dedicated to proving that Francis Bacon was the true author of Shakespeare’s works” (368). In this regard, Shakespeare escaped the hegemonic influence and had to be remade or transformed into someone entirely other.

Much has already been written by such distinguished scholars as Janowitz and Haywood on Chartists and their aesthetics, at least in terms of poetry, journalism, and, to a lesser degree, the novel. A great deal less has been written on Chartist theatre and theatrical practices. The utilization of Shakespeare by the Chartists offers an excellent opportunity to examine this early political theatre and to investigate how it might have served as a prototype for later politically active theater both in the United Kingdom and abroad. We should note in particular that what we do know of Chartist theatrics is that they conform closely to what Bertolt Brecht would later define as necessary
for an Epic Theatre. We can also locate within the Chartist aesthetic, both on and off the stage, a possible thread that would later be sewn into the whole cloth that would be Modernism. Whatever the case, the cultural history of Chartists is something that should have multidisciplinary appeal to those in the fields of political and intellectual history as well as those in literature, performance studies, and area studies. Shakespeare in this regard is the thin end of the wedge to help us better understand the complexities of the Chartists’ relationship to art.

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Siyasi ve Edebi İktidara Tanıklık Edebiyatı ile Direnmek:

O Hep Aklımda

Hülya Göğercin Toker*

“İnsanlık dışı olandan yola çıkarak edebiyat yapma fikri ne tuhaf bir fikirdir”
Marc Nichanian

Edebiyat Nerede? İçerde mi Dışarda mı?


“Politik roman”ın 12 Mart sonrasında bir başka aşamaya geçtiği kabul edilmekte; bu dönem bir dönüş noktası olarak görül-

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