CHAPTER 3

Shakespeare Goes to School

In the previous chapter, I used Looking for Richard to demonstrate that these days it’s hard indeed to escape the pedagogical imperative, a contradictory formation in which the demand that the public find pleasure in Shakespeare is countermanded by a quasi-evangelical practice, emerging from a range of sites, in which Shakespeare is inalienable from pedagogical agendas. The classroom thus occupies a contradictory position: it is the presumable source of disaffection in the first place, yet at the same time it often affords the tacit structuration within which that disaffection is meant to be overcome. So it is only fitting that I dedicate a chapter to Shakespeare in the schools. My purpose, however, is not to show how disaffection arises, nor to advocate for other or better approaches to teaching the plays. Disaffection, where it exists, is overdetermined and is ineluctably, even dialectically, related to the widespread demand in American culture that Shakespeare constitute a universally lovable object. As such, it far exceeds the capacity of noncollegiate instruction for countering (although I do not concede that it needs to be countered): the school is its scapegoat as vehicle of transmission, not its source.

Rather, I want to show how things came to be as they are, how Shakespeare is above all the locus of pedagogical experience for Americans. Thus the aim of this chapter is to show how Shakespeare went to the schools—that is, how a select handful of his plays became a nearly inescapable aspect of secondary education during the twentieth century, a state of affairs that persists into the present. The history of Shakespeare in American education is only beginning to be written, and it is far beyond the scope of this project to contribute to it in anything but a fragmentary manner. It follows that many mechanisms doubtless contributed to Shakespeare’s pedagogical centrality;
that being so, however, understanding how Shakespeare, elite culture, and education first came into a productive relation will go a long way toward explaining the source of the continuing misrecognition I am arguing against in this study. Hence my focus on the reading lists prescribed or otherwise influenced by the College Entrance Examination Board (CEEB) around the turn of the twentieth century and that, in a more diffuse way, rendered the ability to demonstrate knowledge of Shakespeare inseparable from collegiate-level literacy—that is, from a level of education then an inalienable privilege of a demographically pressured Anglo-Saxon elite.2 As the fact of that pressure might suggest, literacy was not the sole issue leading to Shakespeare’s being enshrined in the schools: given that mass immigration from non-Anglophone countries was held to imperil the social reproduction of the nation-state, Shakespeare and what he represented were enlisted, sometimes overtly, to serve the cause of a eugenicist “race knowledge” then widespread in educational discourse.

The recognition that Shakespeare was in some sense overtly politicized long before the advent of cultural materialism, or for that matter of interpretive strategies attentive to ideologies of race, gender, and sexuality, reminds us that historical research is the ally of more topical work. At the same time, however, it also nudges us to remember how readily decisions made for one reason harden into self-evident facts requiring institutional support but no further explanation. Witness Shakespeare’s career in formal education. Once the plays found their way into the secondary school curriculum for the purposes of college preparation for a few, it seems to have been determined they would stay, despite the fact that admission to college has (in public discourse at least) long since hinged on the scientistic testing of aptitude rather than on the acquisition of specifically textualized cultural capital. This unhinging, which is perhaps better called a disarticulation, represents all the more reason to consider Shakespeare a public cultural entity rather than an elite one. Having outlasted his real utility to the work of a once-restrictive higher education in the service of industrial capital and of the racial imaginary of the nation for which his texts were enlisted approximately a century ago, Shakespeare lives on in the schools, a compulsory good and residual formation from that earlier moment.

Demonstrating this two-pronged claim concerning emergence and residuum, even in the necessarily partial ways to follow, is fundamental to the argument of this book. It is not possible to argue against the claim that Shakespeare is elite until and unless one can demonstrate the systematic manner in which his texts are widely (if not deeply) impressed into the U.S. imaginary, the better to serve as a reservoir for fantasy, resistance, investment, and counterinvestment. The secondary school, the completion of which has taken on