About twenty-five years ago Walt Whitman told his Boswell, Horace Traubel, that Shakespeare would be laid on the upper shelf, but I have a suspicion that the "Good Gray Poet" unintentionally deceived his literary executor, for there is no evidence that the dramatist is passé, though he may have become more classic.

The fact is, the city fathers tried to lay the bard on the shelf the first time he showed his head, and they did succeed in driving him out of town. Fortunately, Philadelphia in numerous ways has made amends for its hasty conduct in 1749. In driving away the company of actors who strove to enlighten the Quaker City, the Council very nearly prevented this city from enjoying the distinction of being the first on this continent to witness a Shakespearean play.

The theatrical histories give the credit to New York, but the evidence, or rather the inference, is that it was in Philadelphia, and not in New York, that Richard III received its initial presentation in America.

We know from the journals of the Common Council, that in the early winter of 1749, William Allen, the Recorder of the City—he of the splendid turn-out—four black horses and an imported English coachman—acquainted the Council that certain persons had taken it upon themselves to act plays, and as he was informed, to have made a practice thereof.

He feared that this practice would be attended with mischievous effects, whereupon the Council requested
the magistrates to take the most effectual measures to suppress the disorder.

The company did not advertise in Philadelphia, so we do not know with certainty what were the plays they acted, but, like many others who have attempted to introduce something novel and were attacked for their pains, these players went to New York. There they advertised, and from these notices we learn that one of their plays was Richard III.

Their list of plays was not a long one and we may be pardoned for inferring that Richard had been performed by them in Philadelphia.

Primitive Philadelphians seem to have been too seriously occupied with the hard work that attends pioneering, such as building, selling choice lots under water, and clearing the forest, to heed the call, if indeed they heard the siren voices of the muses.

Shakespeare was not one of the best sellers in those days. He does not appear to have been either bought or read.

When Franklin and his friends of The Junto, founded the Philadelphia Library, they neglected to provide anything of Shakespeare’s. The first catalogue, issued in 1741, shows the library had Steele’s Dramatic Works, a History of Japan, a description of Greenland, to say nothing of a set of the works of Francis Bacon, whom some well-meaning people believe really wrote the masterly plays and ingenious poems signed with Shakespeare’s name, in addition to his own rather voluminous writings, but Shakespeare’s name is absent from it. The Library Company must have realized their shame, for when the second catalogue appeared in 1746, it mentioned a six-volume edition of Shakespeare, printed in 1745, which had been added to the library.

Whatever doubt may be thrown upon the first presentation of Richard III, there can be none to deprive
us of the distinction of having had Hamlet and Macbeth played here for the first time in the New World. These were probably not any too well acted, for Hallam, the younger, was seen in the title roles, and he was a very young man of limited experience. At that time he never had witnessed any acting but in the company managed by his father and later by his stepfather, David Douglass. His mother, then Mrs. Douglass, was the leading lady, and she demanded her parts so imperiously that she insisted upon playing Lady Macbeth to her son's Macbeth, and subsequently Juliet to his Romeo. The unpleasantness of such casts evidently did not cause her any embarrassment. They were her parts and it was in her husband's company, so like managers' wives from the time women first played on the stage, Mrs. Douglass demanded her rights to her parts—and she got them.

It might be of historical interest to mention that Hamlet was first performed in America in 1759, at the old Southwark Theatre, where, in the same season Macbeth was first witnessed in this country.

It is not unlikely that Hallam, although he had had no European experience on the stage, had been coached in the traditions of the parts. He was not a great actor, but he was the first one of importance to begin his career on the stage in this country.

In those days Philadelphia, whose southern boundary, fortunately was Cedar, or South street, would tolerate no playhouses, and one was erected outside the city limits. So the drama went along at a jog trot for two generations. After the Revolution, the old-fashioned ideas of the church-loving Philadelphians, underwent a change. The Assembly, in response to a sensible appeal made the theatre free.

This was in 1789. Immediately Philadelphia became a city of fashion. Pleasure no longer was forbidden; the theatre now could be erected within the sacred pre-
The Shakespeare Tradition in Philadelphia.

cincts of the city itself; and the drama began a new epoch in this country.

Wignell, who had been an associate of Hallam, was given assistance of the foremost citizens of Philadelphia, and began the erection of a splendid new theatre, the first real playhouse of generous dimensions and facilities to be erected in this part of the world.

He collected an admirable company in England, and when these arrived Shakespeare for the first time in America came into his own.

From time to time Wignell induced other good performers to cross the Atlantic. He brought out Fennell, the best Othello on the English stage and the first good Hamlet seen in this city.

But, the brightest of the lights brought over was Mrs. Merry.

She was the Ellen Terry of her day, and Philadelphia, like London, fell victim to her charm. She was undersized, however, but she had grace, and played her parts with an effective womanly tenderness. She was an impressive Ophelia, but was unsuited to Desdemona. She might be said to have excelled in the lighter Shakespearean characters, and was particularly admirable in Hermione. She was happy in those parts that demanded a smile, and her voice was beautifully feminine.

She once saw Mrs. Siddons act Lady Macbeth, and then resolved that nothing would induce her to attempt the character because she despaired of successful competition with the great Sarah.

Cooper was another good tragedian, who in the early years of the Nineteenth century, gave Philadelphians a glimpse of Shakespearean characters. But he was not a genius. He might be called the Lawrence Barrett of his age, and that means he was a genuinely good actor of the first rank, but lacked the spark that flames efficiency into genius. Cooper, however, had a talent for
management. He knew the value of a name, and he went to England, when times were bad in the theatres here, and brought George Frederick Cooke to this country.

There were ungenerous persons who declared that Cooper had kidnapped the Tragedian, after plying him with his favorite liquor. However, laying aside the morality of this act, he did an important service to the American stage. For Cooke was a revelation and an inspiration. He was the first really great actor who had been seen in this country, and his eccentricities, which seem to have been unknown to no one, added to the immense popular interest he excited.

In Cooke the traditions of Shakespearean acting, were handed from Garrick to another generation. He had seen Little Davy play Lear, Hamlet and Benedict. He had witnessed the performance of Barry as Lear and Jacques. He had been amazed with Macklin’s Shylock and Iago; had seen Reddish as Edgar, Henry and Macduff; and knew the limitations of Henderson as Macbeth, Hamlet, Shylock and Falstaff. These were among the studies that Cooke had made, and on which he naturally formed his style.

As these actors had received hints from older players, one might say with truth that, in a measure, Cooke was in possession of traditions that dated from the days of the Globe Theatre.

So Philadelphia, in witnessing his performances, saw Shakespeare acted with something of the same stage business, something of the same arrangement that had been taught to the original players by the dramatist himself.

There were no press agents in 1811, but the city had been made aware of the arrival of Cooke.

Such intense interest in his performances was displayed that when the tickets were placed on sale, the Old Chestnut Street Theatre was actually mobbed.
For the first time in the history of amusements here, premiums were willingly paid for a place in any part of the house. Porters, draymen, and boys, fought their way in the crowd. Coats were torn, eyes were blackened and noses bled in the wild rush of their owners to obtain places.

One widely known physician, a certain Dr. R., is said to have thrown Scotch snuff into the faces of the crowd, taking advantage of the confusion he caused to get nearer the ticket office. He succeeded the first time he tried this experiment, but the next time he was caught by the mob and dealt with roughly.

The demand for choice seats was so great that the best places were sold by auction, the first time in this country that this was done.

Curiosity to see Cooke, however, did not limit itself to witnessing his acting, but included a desire to see the man himself. So dense was the crowd gathered around the stage entrance to the theatre that when Cooke arrived with his friend and manager, Dunlap, he had to make himself known in order to get into the house.

In the crowd that was burning with desire to see Cooke act, was a small boy and it is fortunate for art that he was able to achieve his ambition. He knew the son of the scene-painter Reinagle, and the two lads went up into the flies, from which high perch they watched the great George Frederick play his greatest part, Richard III. The ambitious boy watched the actor on and off the stage; he had an introduction to him, and as a result of his studies he drew a portrait of the player in the part of the last of the Plantagenets.

Bradford & Inskeep, the publishers of the "Mirror of Taste," a fine example of the literary magazine of the period in this country, in whose office the boy worked as an apprentice, saw the drawing, had Edwin engrave it, and issued it with their periodical.
Interest in the wonderful young artist was shown by men of prominence to whom his employers exhibited his work, and together they made up a purse to send him to England to study. That is how Charles R. Leslie received his start. He lived in England through the greater part of his life, and in that time he painted several pictures that illustrate Shakespeare, with a beauty of drawing, and a charm of composition that probably has not been surpassed.

Cooke’s Richard was said by those who saw it to have been a wonderful performance. “You felt everything he did,” remarks Durang. “The face fixed your attention at once. The words that followed rivetted your attention and absorbed all objects else. You did not see Cooke; you only saw the character.”

Some of us are proud of the things that Philadelphia was first in. The list is a rather long one, but it is enough for us here to say that the first American edition of Shakespeare is to be found in it.

In 1795 and 1796 Bioren & Madan issued the plays and poems in eight volumes small octavo. This work which was a very creditable performance, was edited, according to repute, by Joseph Hopkinson, who has been chiefly remembered because he wrote “Hail Columbia.” It is interesting to note that this edition is not only the first of the plays to be issued in America, but likewise is the first edition of the poems. Further, it contains the first glossary, and the first estimate of the poet, in the form of introduction, to achieve print in this country. For this edition the first portrait of Shakespeare was executed by Robert Field.

Sidney Lee tells us that there have been traced 140 copies of the first folio, but the first American edition is far more rare than that, because there probably are not a dozen good copies in existence, and not 25 sets in any condition. Yet this edition was printed only 120 years ago.
I may be pardoned for quoting a few words from the preface.

"An attentive perusal of this author," remarks the American editor, "must indeed afford the utmost pleasure and justify the utmost praise."
The Shakespeare Tradition in Philadelphia.

We have neither inclination, nor time to insert the ponderous dissertations on his merit, that some preceding editors have discharged upon the world.

"In place of notes, a glossary of obsolete words will be given in the first volume of the work, and will be found sufficient for every substantial purpose of elucidation. An American reader is seldom disposed to wander through the wilderness of verbal criticism."

He excuses the addition of the poems in this manner:

"That no part of this author may be lost, we have added to the present edition his poems. Though not destitute of merit, they are confessedly inferior to his dramas."

One of the greatest American tragedians, Edwin Forrest, was the gift of Philadelphia to the stage. He did what no other actor before his time had done, he sought to create an American drama. But we have to do now only with Shakespearean tradition, and that leads to the thought that while Forrest probably was the most tremendous Lear that ever walked the boards, he was, as Fanny Kemble described him, "A mountain of a Man," and consequently was a sorry sight as Hamlet, or as Romeo. Even as Shylock his powerful physique did not agree with the traditions of the part.

"He was tall and muscular," wrote one who saw him, "such calves as his I have seldom seen. It was with admirable instinct that Dr. Bird wrote for this large person the play of 'The Gladiator.' He was born for single combat.

"His mastodonian muscularity was a disadvantage in characters of predominating intellect, like Hamlet, with which our actor never meddled without reminding us of a bull in a china shop."

This reference to Hamlet reminds us of the long line of lady Hamlets that have been seen on our stage. Charlotte Cushman, who was of the number, was more of an innovater when she donned the sword and cloak of Romeo and played the part like a man.

This trial was made at the Walnut Street Theatre in 1843, when she was the nominal manager. Vandenhoff, who played Mercutio to her, and who lent her the hat and sword she wore on that occasion, and who said he might take credit for giving her a few fencing hints,
tells us that she killed Tybalt like a man, which he added, was the only good point in this hybrid performance.

"She looks neither man or woman," he remarked "or both, and her passion was equally epicene in form. I never yet heard any human being that had seen her Romeo who did not speak of it with a painful expression of countenance, more in sorrow than in anger." I may be permitted to mention here that this year is the centennial of her birth.

There have been other spectacles seen on our stage, quite as disquieting as Miss Cushman's Romeo. I have alluded to the performance of Hallam in the part to his mother's Juliet, but Charles Kemble played the part to his daughter Fanny's Juliet. You do not find much in commendation of Miss Kemble's Juliet, but her father's Romeo was a classic. Yet it was distasteful to find these parental relations set aside for the purposes of the stage.

No reference to Shakespearean tradition in Philadelphia would be complete without mention of the elder Booth, who was more eccentric than Cooke, and in his way an equally powerful actor. Like Cooke, he passed along many Shakespearean traditions of the stage to his successors, and principally to his better-recalled son, Edwin Booth.

He put intensity and enthusiasm into his thespian passions; he felt the part he was playing so seriously that it has been said, that the player who acted Richmond when he was the Richard had to be an expert fencer to prevent himself from being the victim instead of the conqueror of Bosworth Field.

But I never have been able to trace to its source the tradition, that once Booth fought his Richmond from the stage of the Walnut Street Theatre out into Ninth Street, before he realized that the contest was only a mimic one.
Philadelphia has made some notable contributions to the literature on Shakespeare, in addition to publishing his works. In 1834 Dr. James Rush wrote a most remarkable play which you may find in the University Library. This was entitled, "Hamlet, a Dramatic Prelude," and the novelty of the play lies in the fact that its action takes place before the elder Hamlet's death, and consequently before Shakespeare's tragedy begins. It is a curiosity, and, of course, never was presented.

The first Concordance to the Poems of Shakespeare was the work of a Philadelphia lady, Mrs. H. H. Furness, and the first Shakespeare Society in America was organized here, in a lawyer's office in the Mercantile Building, Fifth and Sansom Streets, in 1851. In its work you may find the influence that finally led the late Dr. Horace Howard Furness to edit the new Varorium edition of the dramatist's works, of which we justly are proud, for it has carried the name of Philadelphia to all parts of the world where there are Shakespearean scholars, and they are to be found wherever English is spoken or read.