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Edwin Forrest's July 4th Oration and the Specters of Provocative Eloquence

A September 25, 1831, *New-York Mirror* review of a soon-to-be-staged tragedy, *The Gladiator* by Robert Montgomery Bird, declares the opening scene of the fourth act as "bear[ing] comparison with nearly the best of the modern dramatists, if not the best." The play, winner of Edwin Forrest's third US playwriting contest¹, treats the 73-71 B.C. gladiator rebellion led by Spartacus, a Thracian captive who, in the speech the reviewer found so admirable, challenges Roman rule by embracing his purported barbarousness. "I thank the gods I am barbarian," declares Spartacus,

For I can better teach the grace-begot
And heaven-supported masters of the earth,
How a mere dweller of a desert rock
Can bow their crown'd heads to his chariot wheels.
Man is heaven's work, and beggar's brats may 'herit
A soul to mount them up the steeps of fortune,
With regal necks to be their ste[p]ping-blocks. (Bird [1831] 1997: 220)

In this celebrated speech and throughout the play, Spartacus's egalitarian vision fuels his soaring eloquence and his thirst for vengeance; comrades and enemies alike find the hero's powerful speech and capacity for violence to be inextricable. Bird, with whom Forrest collaborated to revise the drama

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for the stage, knew the yoking of articulacy to brawn through the figure of the heroic noble savage was key to the star power of Forrest, whose commanding voice, sculpted body, and explosive displays of emotion thrilled rowdy urban audiences primed for stagings of equality wrested from tyrants.

Spartacus's speech in the fourth act points to the key concern of *The Gladiator* and, more broadly I argue, of Forrest's oeuvre in the period: the vexed relationship between speech and physical power. Significantly, Spartacus's eloquence, which unifies the rebel forces at the start of the conflict, fails him as the tragedy unfolds, his soldiers deserting him for other leaders and his Roman enemies dismissing the once feared enemy as a lunatic (Bird [1831] 1997: 239). In Forrest's other lead roles in such tragedies as *Metamora* and *Virginius*, as well as Shakespeare's *Othello*, *King Lear*, *Richard III*, *Macbeth*, and *Hamlet*, he repeatedly illustrated the capacity of eloquence to marshal force but also the degradation of public speech in the context of violent struggles for power. In this sense, he participated in a broader theatrical response to the centrality of oratory in antebellum public life and attendant anxieties concerning the inordinate power of the eloquent. During what Edward G. Parker (1857) deemed the Golden Age of American Oratory, the U.S. theatre insistently staged instances of public speaking gone astray, either because the speaker sought to manipulate audiences to his own selfish ends or because ill-equipped, even base, auditors quickly formed a destructive horde.²

Today most associate Forrest more with mob violence than eloquence because of his connection to the Astor Place Riots of May 1849, when in response to the appearance of British actor Charles Macready's *Macbeth* at the Astor Place Opera House and days of inflammatory editorials and broadsides, a mob of New Yorkers loyal to Forrest (who was performing in *Gladiator* at the Broadway Theatre) attempted to storm the venue, with deadly results (Moody 1958; Levine 1988: 63-69; Cliff 2007). And before Astor Place, Forrest found himself caught up in the Farren Riot of July 9, 1834, when

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in the midst of anti-abolitionist rioting in the city, a mob responded to a rumor that the Bowery Theatre's English stage manager George Farren had blasphemed the United States by descending upon the theatre (where the evening performance of *Metamora* was a benefit for Farren) and forced Forrest and his fellow cast members from the stage (Burrows and Wallace 1999: 557; Cliff 2007: 127-28). Forrest's association with two major theatre riots of the era cannot, however, obscure his engagement with an oratorical culture seeking to distance public speech from collective violence. Four years after the Farren Riot, in the aftermath of city rioting associated with the Panic of 1837, Forrest took to the podium, delivering the New York Democratic-Republican Party's July 4th oration to at least 4,000 gathered at the Broadway Tabernacle. Though many feared that the star's performance would incite disorder among the boisterous audience, it did no such thing. Forrest's 1838 oration, delivered in an explicitly restrained style, was standard patriotic fare, laced not with radical invective but with the markers of Democratic rhetoric: praise for Thomas Jefferson, criticism of governmental intervention in the market, specifically through a national Bank, and prophesy of westward expansion. A number of periodicals, Whig as well as Democratic-Republican (referred to as Democratic from here forward), reviewed and excerpted the speech. According to the *Morning Herald* (NY), W. R. Blake read it as part of the evening's entertainments at New York's Franklin Theatre on July 19, and party officials published it in pamphlet form the following August, which prompted additional reviews and excerpting. In the wake of Forrest's oratorical success, the party asked him to serve as a candidate for Congress from New York, but the thespian eventually rejected the opportunity, citing his theatrical earning potential (Moody 1960: 175-77).

The subject of Forrest's partisan commitments, and more specifically the intended political work of his theatrical performances, has dominated scholarly treatment of his career, especially in recent

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decades. Bruce McConachie (1992) influentially describes Forrest and his oeuvre as essentially Democratic and haltingly populist. Through the roles of heroes who nobly resist tyrannous government on behalf of an oppressed people unworthy of such sacrifice, he argues, Forrest captured the Jacksonian "contradiction between egalitarianism and charismatic authority" (McConachie 1992: 92). Given this emphasis, Forrest's July 4th oration has most often been noted by theatre historians and drama critics to emphasize Forrest's relationship to the Democratic party and its working-class constituency, though disagreement persists over the extent to which Forrest exploited political affiliation for personal gain or supported specific Jacksonian causes, such as Indian removal or the dissolution of the Bank of the United States (see Mallett 1993; Martin 1999; Sayre 2005: 117-25). Multiple readings of Forrest's performance in *Gladiator* in particular refer to his turn as Democratic orator and particular love of Andrew Jackson in order to explain how a tragedy about slave revolt that premiered the same year as Nat Turner's rebellion could have been received by many on both sides of the Mason Dixon line as not having an abolitionist tenor (McConachie 1992: 117; Richards 1997: 168; Jones 1992: 199, 206; Miller 2007: 71-72).

But a re-reading, or re-staging, of Forrest's July 4th oration in the immediate circumstances of the occasion complicates any simple vision of the political work of Forrest's performances by revealing the star's complex engagement with the potentially incendiary nature of free expression in a democracy necessarily marked by economic and racial inequality. On the surface, Forrest's July 4th oration demonizes those who would suppress popular speech in the name of public safety and declares that the guarantee of free expression circumvents popular violence. By doing this, Forrest most immediately defends one particular wing of the New York Democratic Party, the Equal Rights Democrats or "Locofocos," who had been blamed with instigating the 1837 New York Flour Riot. But insofar as his

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defense of free expression is, to use the terminology of Marvin Carlson (2001), *haunted* by his theatrical portrayal of the eloquent and bloody rebel and delivered in a venue *haunted* by attacks on abolitionists, Forrest's oratorical assertion of peaceable democratic expression contains an implicit threat of violence. Such a realization brings us full circle to *Gladiator's* ambiguous relationship to the slavery question and the larger consideration of the political work of Forrest performances. A critical re-staging of Forrest's July 4th oration as a performative defense of the Locofocos raises the possibility that Forrest's success in this period had less to do with a consistent or consistently legible Jacksonianism—abolitionist, pro-slavery, populist, demagogic, or otherwise—than with his function as an uncanny register of the era's investment in and fear of provocative eloquence.

"Mr. Forrest the orator, was not Mr. Forrest the actor"

On June 20, 1838, the New York *Morning Herald* commented concerning Forrest's upcoming oration, "The only difficulty to get over will be to find a room large enough for the accommodation of the multitude." Around 2pm on July 4, over four thousand people, party enthusiasts and curious interlopers alike, crowded into a sweltering Broadway Tabernacle to hear and cheer the 77-minute performance. Anticipation was high. Though Forrest had proclaimed his love of President Jackson during curtain speeches, an actor's delivery of an official party oration was novel—its propriety had been debated in the press in the preceding weeks—and Forrest was at the height of professional and personal success, having received a hero's welcome after returning from a successful tour of England in 1836-1837 with a British bride on his arm. More to the point, Forrest would bring to the podium the malleable voice (said to move from a guttural bellow to a high-pitched whine), barrel chest, large calves, burnished skin, Byronic shock of hair, and wild eyes with which he regularly challenged theatrical decorum—much to

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the delight of working-class fans. Particularly through roles like Spartacus, Forrest had developed a "theatre of yeoman independence," portraying physically and vocally forceful leaders fit to lead the masses against corrupt and tyrannical government (McConachie 1992: 65-118). The audience gathered at the Broadway Tabernacle sought the latest incarnation of the Forrest hero, a new eloquent rebel poised to spearhead a Democratic offensive in the name of the People.

Instead, as the purportedly unrevised published version of the oration and most newspaper accounts of its delivery show, the audience was treated to a calm exposition of party principles as echoing the values of an American Revolution marked less by violence than by reasonable thought. Thus Forrest refuses to recount the scenes of battle by which the colonies wrested liberty but instead celebrates "the glorious charter of liberty" whose articulation of foundational Enlightenment ideals justified revolution and provided the basis for the nation (Forrest 1838: 6). "How simple, how sublime, is the occasion of our meeting!" he concludes his exordium, for this group has gathered "to solemnize the anniversary of an event which appeals, not to their senses nor to their passions, but to their reason; to triumph at a victory, not of might, but of right; to rejoice in the establishment, not of physical dominion, but of an abstract proposition," namely "the political equality of mankind" (ibid.: 6). He proceeds to identify the nation's foundational propositions—so "grand in their simplicity"—as equality, majority rule, "the protection of life, property, and social order," and free speech, or "leaving opinion free as the wind which bloweth where it listeth" (ibid.: 7). "[T]hese," he concludes, "are the plain, eternal principles on which our fathers reared that temple of true liberty" (ibid.: 7), and their simplicity "gives signal assurance of that inherent durability, which can withstand unhurt the stormy conflicts of opinion, and the tempest breath of the time. Simplicity is the invariable characteristic of truth" (ibid.: 8).

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Simplicity is Forrest's key term in a discourse that assumes societal progression toward an originary state of nature through the application reason. "Simplicity is the end, as it is the origin, of social effort," he declaims: "it is the goal, as well as the starting post, on the course of nations" (ibid.: 9). Forrest celebrates Jefferson for "reducing the theory of freedom to its simplest elements," and situating the author of the Declaration alongside Cadmus, Bacon, Newton, and Franklin, he characterizes the American Revolution in terms of rational "experiment" (ibid.: 11) rather than martial contest. Such an account of human progress underpins the party's *laissez faire* ethos. "Here at last is discovered the grand political truth," Forrest concludes,

that in the simplicity of government consists the strength and majesty of the people. . . .

When the institutions of society shall conform to the beautiful simplicity of nature, which does nothing in vain, then will man have attained the utmost limit of human felicity. . . . Let us keep constantly in mind, that the sole end of government, consistent with the unalienable equality of human rights, and the greatest diffusion of happiness, is the mere protection of men from mutual aggression, leaving them otherwise in unlimited freedom, to follow their own pursuits, express their own opinions, and practise [sic] their own faith. (ibid.: 17)

Fittingly, then, the oration culminates not in a call for partisan struggle or renewed revolution but a vision (ironically common just months prior to the Trail of Tears) of the natural, inexorable, peaceable extension of a nation characterized as "the grandest, the most important experiment, ever undertaken in the history of man" (ibid.: 11). Forrest prophesies the western lands populated by "a hundred millions of co-sovereigns, recognizing no law, but the recorded will of a majority; no end of law, but mutual and equal good; no superior, but God alone!" (ibid.: 24).

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Despite this rousing conclusion, multiple accounts of the event and reviews of the published speech suggest the star's performance did not meet expectations. Visiting from Boston, Whig newspaper editor Dr. Joseph Palmer, whose observations appeared in the *Daily Commercial Bulletin* (NY) of July 21, 1838, was surprised to hear an oration that was "a fair, calm disquisition on political government generally, free from loco-focoism and party bias." He continued,

His oration . . . was listened to with the most marked attention, interrupted by repeated bursts of applause, and at the conclusion the cheers were long and loud, and yet it appeared to me that a large number of the audience were disappointed in it. It did not seem to be radical enough for them, and therein I thought was its great merit. I hope they were satisfied; I certainly was not only satisfied with its general tone, a few things only excepted, but felt gratified to find that the author was not disposed to act the character of the political brawler and leveller [sic], which I feared he would feel himself obliged to assume.

An otherwise irreverent piece in the *Morning Herald* of July 6, 1838, "The Celebration," concluded with serious praise: "Mr. Forrest the orator, was not Mr. Forrest the actor." The reviewer, and indeed the rowdy audience that gathered in the sweltering heat, likely anticipated the Forrest whose voice was said to roar like a cataract and whose eyes were compared to flashes of lightening. Instead they found a speaker who read from a prepared text and who "remind[ed] one very forcibly of Daniel Webster, though by no means an imitation. His style is his own—it is manly—it is classic—it is chaste, and the very beau ideal of simplicity." A Whig senator and the era's most prominent orator, Webster resisted the emergent "middling rhetoric" of the Jacksonians and employed the updated classicism dominant since the Revolution (Cmiel 1990: 61; C. Smith 2005: 2-3), an elocutionary practice that "subordinated argument to the tonal register of feelings" but also served as "a ritualized forum for demonstrating self-

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control" (Fliegelman 1993: 32, 104). In contrast, as Matthew Rebhorn argues, Forrest's sublimely volatile theatrical performances "purposely outstripped the elocution revolution's efforts at control" and constituted "a new language . . . that went beyond the grammar of passions" (Rebhorn 2012: 34). The adjectives in the *Morning Herald* description indicate that Forrest's speech appeared stripped of unnecessary or distasteful rhetorical ornamentation and marked by the regulated expression and elicitation of emotion. Given the party's anxieties about the behavior of the assembled crowd, Forrest's decision to chasten his performance style was no doubt wise. And surely it led to such comments as found in the July 7, 1838, *Daily National Intelligencer* (Washington DC): "Mr. Forrest's oration is well spoken of by all who heard it, mingling the manner of the actor, however, with much real eloquence of language. It was not sprinkled with Locofocoism, I am told."

Forrest's oratorical decorum, I propose, had everything to do with his strong association with the Equal Rights Party or "Locofocos," a prominent wing of the city's Democratic party—and indeed, indicate the extent to which he sought to advance the group's agenda. The Locofoco platform, as captured in the party's July 1837 *Declaration of Rights*, was explicitly Jeffersonian, echoing the Declaration of Independence's emphasis on natural rights; asserting "unqualified hostility to bank notes and paper money," "to any and all monopolies by legislation," "to the dangerous and unconstitutional creation of vested rights," and to legislative curtailment of trial by jury; and finally, affirming the legislature's ability to alter or repeal previous legislative acts (Equal Rights Party 1837). The Locofocos coalesced as an anti-bank Democratic faction in October 1835 when they directly challenged the authority of the New York Democratic Party establishment, Tammany Hall. At the meeting for selecting candidates, Tammany officials had unceremoniously cut off the group's protests and the meeting by turning out the lights. Those who stayed behind to assemble their own slate lit matches, or *locofocos*,

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and thereby gained a nickname associating them with incendiary politics (Byrdsall 1842: 23-28; Burrows and Wallace 1999: 609). This association was driven home with the Flour Riot on February 13, 1837, when a Locofoco rally at which orators blamed monopolies for the surge in flour prices in the city culminated in the departure of auditors to ransack and burn multiple warehouses (Weinbaum 1977: 85-89; Wilentz 2004: 295). Thus a movement that started with an act of peaceable resistance to Tammany authority was viewed as emblematic of working-class volatility unleashed by irresponsible speech.

When Forrest took the stage on July 4, 1838, audiences sympathetic and hostile alike anticipated his explosive theatrical style would serve to further rouse an unruly Locofoco constituency. When as orator he conformed to the controlled display of emotion common to elocutionary practice of the day and, as Alan Ackerman has it, explicitly "appeal[ed] not to the passions of his spectators but to their reason" (2003: 47), Forrest undermined the expectations of his theatrical fans in order to defend the Equal Rights platform as socially constructive rather than disruptive. More specifically, he carefully and rationally presented that platform as inherently opposed to what he regularly performed on stage: the use of collective violence in pursuit of political reform. Perhaps Forrest drew inspiration from Shakespeare's *King Henry IV, Part 1*, in which Prince Hal anticipates the advantageous effect of his having slummed in East Cheap before ascending to the court, declaring, "My reformation, glittering o'er my fault, / Shall show more goodly and attract more eyes / Than that which hath no foil to set it off" (I.ii.166-68). Most likely, as the newspapers speculated, Forrest developed his strategy in consultation with his dear friend, and fondest theatre critic, the outspoken Democrat William Leggett (Mallett 1993: 36-37; Moses 1929: 172-73), whose political editorials had inspired the Locofoco movement (Hofstadter 1943). Certainly Leggett had a reputation for vituperative writing—what mentor William Cullen Bryant later celebrated as "words of fire" (1839: 430)—and was readily attacked as an agitator in an era of

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popular disturbances. Yet, as Jeffrey Sklansky explains, Leggett "defined his own vision of popular politics against the wave of urban riots that formed the underside of Jacksonian politics," and while his writings "owed [their] expressive force to the theatrical conventions of melodrama," they did not promote violent confrontation with malevolence so much as harness such spectacle to political ends (2012: 214, 203). Whether Leggett authored, co-authored, or simply inspired Forrest's oration, it explicitly emphasized the individual's rational, peaceful participation in democratic processes, in contrast to revolutionary upheaval.

Forrest directly addresses the skeptic's fear of an unruly mob responsive to the silver-tongued speaker not only by characterizing his own speech as simple but also by describing such skepticism as fundamentally un-American. During troubled times, notes Forrest via imagery from *Macbeth*, "there are a sort of boding political soothsayers, who, with malignant alacrity of evil augury, magnify each transient speck into a fearful harbinger of desolating tempests" (Forrest 1838: 13). "But how pitiful," he continues, "how worse than pitiful, the wretched aim of those, who gloat over these rare and transient ebullitions of tumultuous rage as supplying an argument against the adequacy and benign effects of democratic government!" (ibid.: 14). Those who find in the Flour Riot evidence that public speech must be curtailed in the name of public safety actually seek to undermine the nation's democracy and, he continues, find a governmental model in Britain (ibid.: 14). Having thus questioned the patriotism of those fearful of popular unrest, Forrest spends the remainder of the refutation linking the nation's security and happiness to the fact that nothing apart from the "gentle weapon of suffrage" is needed to secure the People's rights (ibid.: 22). His words in defense of the absolute equality of individuals' "moral rights" (the philosophical foundation for the Equal Rights Party's anti-monopolism and anti-Bank positions) are worth quoting at length:

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There is no room to fear that persuasion to this effect, though urged with all the power of logic, and all the captivating arts of rhetoric, by lips more eloquent than those that address you now, will lead too suddenly to change. Great change in social institutions, even of acknowledged errors, cannot be instantly accomplished, without endangering those boundaries of private right which ought to be held inviolate and sacred. Hence it happily arises, that the human mind entertains a strong reluctance to violent transitions, not only where the end is doubtful, but where it is clear as the light of day, and beautiful as the face of truth; and it is only when the ills of society amount to tyrannous impositions, that this aversion yields to a more powerful incentive of conduct. Then leaps the sword of revolution from its scabbard, and a passage to reformation is hewn out through blood. But how blest is our condition, that such a resort can never be needed. (ibid.: 22)

The Locofoco spokesperson confirms that change would be gradual, violence unnecessary, and the orator a reasonable participant in the deliberative process at the heart of democracy. As the *Democratic Review* concluded in its enthusiastic response to Forrest's address, the star had with these words, "developed the majestic strength of the popular cause in gigantic vastness and repose"—rather than in active revolt—"and proved the unshaken sway of the cardinal principles of democracy over the minds and wills of which the simple exertion can place our cause in triumph" ("Mr. Forrest's Oration" 1838: 56).

But surely audiences did not overlook the fact that while Forrest the orator emphasized humanity's "strong resistance to violent transitions" and would not claim the power to stir the throngs to revolt in the name of equal rights, Forrest the actor claimed such power on a nightly basis—and Forrest's identity was inextricable from his most famous dramatic roles (Carlson 2001: 68; McConachie

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1992: 77). In his seminal work, *The Haunted Stage*, Marvin Carlson details how theatrical performances are surrounded and infused by the ghosts of previous performances, theatrical and otherwise. As he has it, every element of performance, from the actor's body to the dramatic text to the venue itself, is *haunted*, and thus reception and creation take place in a tangle of performance genealogies themselves composed of haunted performances. Of the "recycled body of an actor" in particular, Carlson writes, "already a complex bearer of semiotic messages, [it] will almost inevitably in a new role evoke the ghost or ghosts of previous roles if they have made any impression whatever on the audience, a phenomenon that often colors and indeed may dominate the reception process" (2001: 8). The press surrounding Forrest's performances confirms that the star was inseparable from his noble heroes whose violent ends he portrayed with such gusto, and certainly Forrest's popularity with Democrats depended on the nature of his heroic roles. A short 1837 biography "Written by an Individual Who Had Known Him from His Boyhood" declares, "The feeling [of Spartacus] so consonant to his warm heart gives it the full force of nature, which to imitate, constitutes perfection in the performer" (*History of Edwin Forrest* 1837: 13). One imagines, then, the audience for Forrest's oration seeing not simply the well-groomed, statuesque declaimer before them, but a matrix of individuals akin to the rendering of Forrest's most popular roles (Spartacus, Macbeth, Jack Cade) in figure 1 (<hdl.loc.gov/loc.pnp/pga.04004>). The text anticipates Forrest's haunted body as it pairs the eschewal of popular violence with a thrilling reference to tyranny, swords, and blood. In the words of the address and in its delivery, Forrest associates Locofocos not with riot—not with the scenes of bloody revolution he enacts elsewhere—but with gradual reform attained through the exercise of suffrage and possible only in the context of free speech. To do so he depends on his own haunted body, establishing his representative control over his considerable emotions and

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remarkable physique through the contrast between Forrest the orator and Forrest the actor, between Edwin the Democrat and Spartacus the Rebel.

Responses to Forrest's political dalliance in 1838 affirm his haunting but also gesture toward a range of potential responses to the contrast between Forrest's theatrical and oratorical performances. As the New York Democrats continued to press Forrest to run for Congress, the *Morning Herald* of October 17, 1838, commented, "If Forrest should 'stand the hazard of the die,'" quoting *Richard III*, in which Forrest had starred, "it will bring up an entire new question both in theatricals and politics." Emphasizing that no "mere player" in the history of the world had ever succeeded in becoming a political leader, the Whig writer quotes *Macbeth* as he issues a challenge to the star of *Gladiator*: "Spartacus is the first and last attempt of the kind—and he died 'with the harness on his back.' Stand, Forrest, for the novelty of it." The partisan's sarcastic dismissal of Forrest's candidacy through a mash-up of his most famous roles indicates that he either failed to see or willfully dismissed the star's defense of the Locofocos, as that defense depends on the distinction between his theatrical and oratorical styles. At the same time it captures another strain in Forrest's oration and broader political discourse of the era: the use of military metaphors for partisan debate. This suggests the possibility that Forrest's rhetorical use of his theatrical ghosts might have done more than re-characterize Locofocos as peaceable.

Forrest's strategic conjuring and eschewal of bloody revolution draws upon a well-established anti-Jacobinism in US political discourse and in the popular genre of the July 4th oration more specifically (Cleves 2009: 53-55). Since the bloody aftermath of the French Revolution, rhetors from both political parties had come to frame the American Revolution as a political event marked more by the rational development of principles than physical resistance to British rule—much as Forrest does in his

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oration. But as Rachel Hope Cleves documents, whereas conservatives (Federalists then Whigs) conjured the specter of Jacobinism to justify prior restraint, Jeffersonians began to describe governmental suppression of speech in the name of public safety as itself violent—another “reign of terror.” With the rise of anti-Jacobin discourse and the related distrust of violent passions, revolutionary struggle shifted from the actual battlefield to a discursive one (*ibid.*: 12).³

William Cullen Bryant, who at the time of Forrest's oration was the beleaguered editor of New York's Democratic *Evening Post*, captured this in an 1837 poem, “The Battle-field,” which Forrest quotes in his July 4th oration. When Bryant wrote the poem, he was coping with the choices Leggett had made while serving as editor of the *Evening Post* during Bryant's 1834-1836 sojourn in Europe. In those years, Leggett had defended the rights of workers to unionize and declared himself an abolitionist, thereby alienating many readers and bringing the periodical perilously close to death (Muller 2008: 133-55). Bryant defended Leggett upon return, embraced the same causes, and “resolved to make the *Evening Post* the conscience of the country” (*ibid.*: 137). “The Battle-Field” appeared in the inaugural issue of the *Democratic Review*, a bastion of cultural nationalism and Democratic politics. Ostensibly a celebration of Revolutionary soldiers and a reassertion of violent rebellion's superfluity in the present day, Bryant's poem midway turns to the “harder strife” of those who, like himself, are locked in a rhetorical battle against market and partisan forces threatening to silence the Truth of the forefathers once and for all. Forrest (1838: 23) quotes the most hopeful stanza, the first included below, of a poem that end with a vision of never-ending struggle:

Truth, crushed to earth, shall rise again;

The eternal years of God are her's;

But Error, wounded, writhes with pain,

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And dies among his worshippers.

Yea, though thou lie upon the dust,

When those who helped thee flee in fear,

Die full of hope and manly trust,

Like those who fell in battle here.

Another hand thy sword shall wield,

Another hand the standard wave,

Till from the trumpet's mouth is pealed

The blast of triumph o'er thy grave. (Bryant 1837)

Forrest, then, acknowledges the nation's leading poet and his friend Leggett's outspoken champion as a fellow soldier in a battle to protect and sustain the freedom to voice political opinion.⁴ It would appear Forrest finds in Bryant's poem inspiration for the metaphorical sword that indicates the translation of physical struggle into discursive battle.

And yet the persistence of battle imagery in Bryant's poem and Forrest's oration indicates the extent to which Forrest's defense of the Locofocos and of free speech more broadly depends on an implied threat of force. Haunted by bloody roles—rebel leader, power-hungry traitor, noble savage—Forrest's reference in the long passage quoted above to "reformation [] hewn out through blood" indicates not only the distance between the battles of the Revolution and contemporary political deliberations but also warns opponents that the suppression of speech or the curtailment of suffrage would no doubt produce a violent response. Put another way, even as Forrest appears to sheath the

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actual sword of revolution, he pointedly characterizes it as ever-present, ever-ready. Indeed, Forrest reaffirms individual rights not through the acts of violence he publicly disowns but through dire prophecy: no one, not even the virile hero, will be able to halt collective violence *if* the rights and demands of the People are not respected.

Fittingly for the holiday, Forrest reinforces this with a subsequent reflection on the nation from which he had recently returned, an "aristocratic" England incapable of "restrain[ing] the outbreaks of popular phrenzy," including acts by "the riotous and incendiary sons of agriculture," "the pale operatives of manufactories," and a press-gang, all of whom "contend[] for the inestimable right of personal freedom" but are subdued "at the bayonet's point" (Forrest 1838: 15). In this way, Forrest recalls the bloody events surrounding reform in Britain, including the notorious Peterloo Massacre of 1819. Once again, then, Forrest's description of peaceable democracy stands in contrast with unwarranted governmental force that creates rather than restrains a passionate response. "The dams and embankments of arbitrary power may, for a while, compel the stream of society to flow in a direction contrary to that of nature," he acknowledges,

but wider is the havoc of the deluge, when the flood sweeps away its bounds, and gushes in wild torrents over the land. Happy, then, that country, whose simple polity places no restraint on opinion, which, feely expressing itself in the constituted modes, continually conforms the institutions to the public will, and thus prevents all occasion and excuse for violent disruption and change. (ibid.: 16)

Forrest's performance simultaneously distances the Locofocos from the Flour Riot and indicates that rioting is bound to happen if the government colludes with business interests against the will of the worker. *Take heed*, the ghosts around him whisper; *the People will not be restrained*. Haunted by a

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theatrical style and roles that do not disassociate eloquence and physical violence but find them natural allies in the confrontation with tyranny, Forrest at once performs the self-control of the Locofocos and indicates the limits of such restraint, the conditions under which rioting would recur—and justifiably.

"as full of 'Abolitionism' as an egg is of meat"

Forrest's strategic emphasis on irrepressible rebellion in the presence of unnatural tyranny is appropriate in a work celebrating Jefferson, who (in)famously asserted, "The tree of liberty must be refreshed from time to time with the blood of patriots & tyrants" (Jefferson [1787] 1904-5). Forrest's prophetic tone reminds one even more of Jefferson's most candid reflections on the future of slavery in America. "Indeed I tremble for my country," Jefferson writes in *Notes on the State of Virginia*,

when I reflect that God is just: that his justice cannot sleep for ever: that considering numbers, nature and natural means only, a revolution of the wheel of fortune, an exchange of situation, is among possible events: that it may become probable by supernatural interference! The Almighty has no attribute which can take side with us in such a contest. (Jefferson [1787] 1982: 163)

A slave-owning son of liberty, Jefferson knew only too well the increasing irony and difficulty of maintaining slave power in the new nation, and he paired his advocacy for gradual, comprehensive emancipation with a foretelling of divine wrath picked up in the subsequent literature of abolition. Though Forrest praises Jefferson and his fellow revolutionaries without ever mentioning the peculiar institution, he does not exorcise the threat of domestic slave revolt as articulated by the architect of the Declaration. Indeed, his emphasis on intractable violence in the context of repressed speech resonates with contemporaneous turmoil over the censorship of abolitionist views (Gilmore 2010: 15-42).

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In 1838 the issue of free speech was inherently wedded to slavery, and no one was more certain of this than Forrest's possible collaborator, Leggett (Wilentz 1997; Earle 2004: 19-27). In the first half of the decade, Leggett criticized calls for immediate emancipation as "fanaticism" and voiced support for colonization efforts. However, writing in the *Evening Post* in response to the July 1834 anti-abolitionist violence in New York, which included the Farren Riot and an attack on abolitionist minister Charles Grandison Finney's Chatham Street Chapel, Leggett lambasted such attacks as "neither just nor politic" and blamed the editors who spurred them (Leggett 1984: 191). As Sean Wilentz has it, Leggett was sensitive to a harsh irony: "While they condoned violation of other men's rights to free speech, the editors (who like to pose as gentlemen) spoke dangerously, in ways calculated to excite the basest emotions of the mob" (1997: 88). A year later, Leggett linked anti-abolitionist violence directly to censorship in his criticism of the postmaster of Charleston SC for refusing to deliver abolitionist tracts; he concluded, "It is the bounden duty of the Government to protect the abolitionists in their constitutional right of free discussion; and opposed, sincerely and zealously as we are, to their doctrines and practise, we should be still more opposed to any infringement of their political or civil rights" (Leggett 1984: 198). For his blunt editorials, Leggett was kicked out of the Democratic Party by Tammany officials in October 1835. It was in response to the treatment of their hero that soon-to-be-named Locofocos came prepared to light matches at the Tammany meeting.

During the mid-1830s, his increasingly embattled position as editor, the incessant violence directed at abolitionists, and legal efforts to suppress abolitionist speech, especially Congress's Gag Rule (1836-1842), brought about Leggett's full "conversion" to abolitionism. Writing in the pages of his new paper, *The Plaindealer*, on January 14, 1837, Leggett declared, "Every succeeding effort of intolerance, every outbreak of violence, every tumultuous attempt to invade the sacred right of speech and of the

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press, has swelled the number of those who, in the true spirit of the Constitution, assert the equal claim of all mankind to the blessings of liberty." "We cannot give up Freedom for the sake of Union," he concluded; "We cannot give up the principle of vitality, the very soul of political existence, to secure the perishing body from dismemberment. No! rather let it be hewed to pieces, limb by limb, than, by dishonourable compromise, obtain a short renewal of the lease of life, to be dragged out in servitude and chains" (Leggett 1984: 215, 218). The slavery question had become inextricably bound to the fate of free speech for Leggett, such that the curtailment of free expression prompted him to become an abolitionist and compelled him to employ brutal figures resonant with revolutionary violence.

The emphasis placed in Forrest's address on democratic free speech as a guarantor of peace that is worth defending in war points toward Leggett's editorials, and as mentioned above, many voiced suspicions that Leggett had authored the oration. Such suspicions indicate how an address that studiously avoided mention of slavery was nonetheless infused with it. Consider as well that Forrest delivered his praise for free expression in a venue haunted by radical abolitionism and its attempted suppression. Charles Grandison Finney and his congregants relocated from the Chatham Street Theatre to the Broadway Tabernacle in 1836, and soon found themselves once again threatened by critics of anti-slavery preaching and racial integration. On the haunting of a performative site, Carlson observes, "the 'something else' that this space was before, like the body of the actor that exists before it is interpellated into a character, has the potential, often realized, of 'bleeding through' the process of reception, the process I have called ghosting" (Carlson 2001: 133). Though Finney had left New York in 1837 for Ohio and the Broadway Tabernacle was no longer the scene of such controversy, the venue no doubt retained Finney's ghost and reminders that it had been maliciously burned during construction but finally completed as site for the espousal of an egalitarian evangelicalism (Chesebrough 2002: 47-48;

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T. Smith 2007: 168). Remembering that Leggett's journey toward abolitionism began with his disgust over the attacks on Chatham Street Theatre, Forrest's Leggettian emphasis on free speech could not be extricated from the abolitionist history enveloping the stage on which he spoke.

Nor could Forrest's body be entirely dissociated from that of the African American slave due to his early performances in blackface and the popularity of his Othello and Spartacus portrayals. Peter Reed concludes that *The Gladiator's* remarkable "unwilling[ness] to divulge its relationship to African American slavery" arose in part from its inscription of "subtle racial associations on working-class American bodies"—as made palpable in the subtle racial associations inscribed on the body of the laboring Forrest (2009: 152). Despite the play's debut the same year as Nat Turner's Rebellion, reviews of *The Gladiator* in performance are largely free of references to contemporary slavery, and theatre historians, with the recent exceptions of Reed and Heather Nathans (2009: 176), have long concluded that audiences found in Forrest's Spartacus a hero of exclusively *white* liberty, a classical model for the nation's founding and on-going process of democratization rather than for African Americans' clash with slaveholding power (McConachie 1992: 117; Richards 1997: 168; Jones 1992: 199, 206; Miller 2007: 71–72). In this understanding, the tragic arc of *The Gladiator*, in which Spartacus loses his eloquence along with his authority as the vengeful passions of his fellow rebels overwhelm rational military strategy, resonates with Forrest's oratorical promotion of unfettered political expression in the interest of defending white Locofocos as non-violent but not with a defense of physically defiant African American slaves.

And yet playwright Robert Montgomery Bird, who was no abolitionist, privately expressed concerns about Southern audiences' reception of the play (Reed 2009: 172-73), and in 1846 Walt Whitman famously went so far as to declare in a review of Forrest's performance, "This play is as full of

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'Abolitionism' as an egg is of meat." He elaborated, "Running o'er with sentiments of liberty—with eloquent disclaimers of the right of the Romans to hold human beings in bondage—it is a play, this *Gladiator*, calculated to make the hearts of the masses swell responsively to all those nobler manlier aspirations in behalf of mortal freedom!" (Whitman [1846] 2010: 44-45). With a hero who initially wins respect by refusing to kill for sport but whose dying words declare, "Romans are straws.—No prisoners.—Naught but blood" (Bird [1831] 1997: 241), *The Gladiator* prompted spectators to imagine their response to a situation in which "sentiments of liberty," though exquisitely and urgently articulated, can be realized *only* through ferocious insurrection of the kind prophesied by Jefferson and feared by Southerners. One's theatrical response to slave rebellion could potentially clarify one's response to rebellion off stage. For his part, Leggett in July 1837 cast himself and his readership as a passive audience to slave revolt: "Should the oppressed bondmen, impatient of the tardy progress of truth urged only in discussion, attempt to burst their chains by a more violent and shorter process, . . . we should stand a sad spectator of the conflict; and whatever commiseration we might feel for the discomfiture of the oppressors, we should pray that the battle might end in giving freedom to the oppressed" (Leggett 1984: 230). When Forrest declared within the Broadway Temple that no bloody action would be needed to effect change in America because of the guarantee of free expression, then immediately conjured the irrepressible "sword of revolution," he primed an audience for the extra-theatrical spectacle of rebellion in the context of failed speech.

In the months after Forrest's oration, in the lead-up and aftermath to his refusal of candidacy, commentators both friendly and hostile to Forrest's candidacy raised the issue of his murky stance *vis-à-vis* abolitionism. Forrest officially declined to run because he could make more money acting. The popular press buzzed with speculations as to unofficial reasons, including that he was insufficiently

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abolitionist for Leggett-inspired Locofocos. The *Morning Herald* of October 17, 1838, reported that Forrest would "decline in favor of Leggett" despite the former's superior "talent and discretion" and pointedly predicted in an piece on "The Elections" that the success of the Whigs in the 1840 presidential election would depend on the outcome of New York's congressional race in 1838. New York editorialists were not the only newspapermen who found national importance in the race, especially once Leggett's candidacy was challenged by Isaac Varian, a Tammany leader and future New York mayor. The *Daily National Intelligencer* paid close attention to the debates over the Democratic nominee, emphasizing Leggett's support for and Varian's opposition to the outlawing of slavery within the nation's capital (a highly contested issue in that election cycle). Ultimately, a correspondent to the *Daily National Intelligencer* reported on October 22, 1838, that Leggett had failed to gain the nomination not because of his abolitionism; to the contrary, his serious consideration was proof, the writer believed, that the majority of "the Slam Bang Locofocos" had embraced his views on "equality in all things, races, colors, and so-forths." Leggett failed because "the Locofocos have all *body* and no *head*. The Conservatives in disguise here are the *head*, and the Locofoco multitude is the *body*, with the legs and arms." Persistently characterized as physical, unintelligent, and subject to cooptation, Locofocos remained excluded from party power. Still, according to a piece reprinted in the *Colored American* (NY) on October 27, 1838, the struggle between Tammany and the Locofocos had confirmed anti-abolitionists' fears that rather than debates over federal involvement in banking, "It is the question of *abolition*—and *abolition alone* that now agitates the country, and preys on its vitals."

Forrest's contemporaries were no more certain of the star's stance on the issue of slavery than twenty-first century scholars, but the specters of provocative abolitionist eloquence that suffused his 1838 oration (text, body, audience, and venue) meant the slave question could not be disentangled

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from it.⁵ The *Emancipator* indicated this on August 16, 1838, in a piece dismissively titled "Rhetorical Flourishes," when it noted that Forrest had referred to "fifteen millions of fellow-men" celebrating the national holiday, a figure including African Americans, free and enslaved. Whether or not Forrest had intended to extend equality to African Americans (the paper implies he did not), his words brought African Americans into fellowship with the heroes of the Revolution and those gathering to memorialize them in 1838. The ambiguity of Forrest's stance *vis-à-vis* slavery was undeniably heightened by his oration's emphasis on the suppression of free speech and corresponding mass violence. That concern had led Forrest's strongest advocate and dearest friend to Abolitionism and would no doubt work the same transformation in others.

"All poetry is, indeed, essentially democratic"

In "Forrest, the Tragedian" of August 1, 1838, *The Hesperian* reprinted a blunt assessment of Forrest's oration: "while most of it is well enough and very like Fourth-of-July Orations in general, there is very little that one would be likely to remember a week here afterward, unless it be some of the quotations." Indeed, Forrest drew upon striking lines of verse not only by William Cullen Bryant but also by John Milton, Alexander Pope, and Walter Scott, among others.⁶ Responding to a report that the oration included "frequent quotations from Shakspeare [sic]," a writer for the *Baltimore Patriot* imagined Forrest repurposing the bard's work to denounce the national bank and Van Buren's presidency. "In reference to the many promises made in the earlier years of Jacksonianism," the satirist concludes, "the orator might have described the people of the United States in the predicament of Hamlet, 'Eating air[,] promise-crammed.'" ⁷ As much fun as the *Baltimore Patriot* had with a politicization of Shakespeare, the basis for his criticism appears as insubstantial as the false promises described, for the print version of

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Forrest's oration, while overflowing with others' words, contains only three phrases (ten words total) from Shakespeare's works.

The oration does contain ample quotations from a longstanding British tradition promoting rational progress through the free expression of ideas. Consider the passage offered from Milton's famous refutation of censorship, *Areopagitica* (1644): "Though all the winds of doctrine were let loose to play upon the earth, so truth be in the field, we do injuriously, by licensing and prohibiting, to misdoubt her strength. Let her and falsehood grapple! for who ever knew truth put to the worse in a free and open encounter? Her confuting is the best and surest suppressing" (quoted in Forrest 1838: 18). As we saw with Forrest's recitation of lines by Bryant, the intertextual accumulation of military metaphors for the open contest of ideas rather than armed bodies reinforces the orator's performance of self-control ghosted by the willingness to back words with force. But the misattribution of Forrest's quotations to Shakespeare brings into relief the diffuse nature of his rhetorical agency, the way in which theatrical overtones seemingly harnessed to political ends could send interpreters far afield. Marilyn M. Cooper reminds us that "agency is an emergent property of embodied individuals," such that in the oratorical context, "coming to an agreement or success in persuasion is a joint enterprise" of orator and listener (2011: 421, 438). If some of Forrest's audience members assumed the actor-turned-orator inevitably channeled the Bard of Avon, those more knowledgeable of the Anglo-American archive on which he drew might not even share conclusions he and Leggett had drawn. Forrest's recitation of passages by Percy Bysshe Shelley in particular raised additional specters of armed rebellion, tyrannous suppression of speech, and the political portability of romantic performance.

Forrest, who owned Shelley's collected works in his expansive library (Sabin 1863), included in his 1838 oration two stanzas from Shelley's verse dramas *Queen Mab* (1813) and *Revolt of Islam* (1817,

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originally *Laon and Cythna*). The latter of these represents Shelley's explicit attempt to aestheticize democratic commitments—an artistic act likely endearing to Forrest and his friend Leggett. Critic Michael Henry Scrivener argues that Shelley wrote it as “a practical attempt to counter [William] Hazlitt,” who had lamented in an 1816 review of a *Coriolanus* production, “although democracy is ethically correct, aristocracy and absolutist power are most susceptible to aesthetic representation. . . . The natural tendency of poetry is to foster authoritarianism, a love for tyrannical power, and a contempt for the people” (Scrivener 1982: 120). *Coriolanus*, it is worth noting, begins with the titular hero's suppression of a grain riot, and in January 1838, between the Flour Riot and his July 4th oratory, Forrest debuted the role unsuccessfully in New York and Philadelphia (Meyers 1989-90: 32-33). Countering assertions like Hazlitt's was, of course, the driving force behind Forrest's body of work, and the cultural organ of his political party, the *Democratic Review*, praised Forrest on the occasion of his July 4th oration for making clear that “All poetry, indeed, is essentially democratic.” “Poetry can never be made the instrument of oppression,” the *Review* continued, “and the poetry of England, in particular, has gloriously contributed to swell the mighty current of democratic feeling which is now spreading over the world, and which promises results so vast for the future destiny of the human race” (“Mr. Forrest's Oration” 1838: 54-55). The *Democratic Review*, like Forrest, revered Shelley for setting out explicitly to versify democratic speech.

Shelley's democratic commitments were decidedly non-violent in the tradition of William Godwin; in an era of Revolution marked by collective brutality and suppression of opposition, Shelley was “an uncompromising republican and anti-militarist” who envisioned the poet as diviner of an ideal intended to reclaim and purify the People's pursuit of institutional reform (Foot 1980: 60). His verse, then, communicated a vision of gradual but irresistible social progress rather than violent revolution

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(Dawson 1980: 6-7; Scrivener 1982: xii)—despite the terror wielded by corrupt leaders. The poet served as prophet or visionary in this cause as Shelley made clear in "The Defence of Poetry" (1821):

Poets are the hierophants of an unapprehended inspiration; the mirrors of the gigantic shadows which futurity casts upon the present; the words which express what they understand not; the trumpets which sing to battle, and feel not what they inspire; the influence which is moved not, but moves. *Poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world*. (Shelley 1954: 297, emphasis mine)

Poets, that is, do not decree action but "guide the general will by expressing it" (Dawson 1980: 222). That will, as expressed in *Queen Mab* and *Revolt of Islam*, longs for a peaceful and enduring realm of liberty. Through selected quotations, Forrest echoes the pacifism of Shelley and takes up the role of democratic poet whose political work is less institutional than inspirational.

In *Queen Mab*, the Fairy Queen comes upon the sleeping lanthe, transports her soul to the Queen's palace in order to view all human history, including instances of despotic oppression, bloody war, false religion, selfish commerce, and deceptive eloquence. From this work Forrest extracts a description of the utopic eclipse of Religion by Nature, reframing it to emphasize how the United States—"the temple of true liberty"—persists unscathed by the bloody unrest of the centuries (the verse is Shelley's, the prose Forrest's):

'When the sweeping storm of time
Has sung its death dirge o'er the ruined fanes
And broken altars of the mighty fiend
Whose name usurps her honors, and the blood,
Through centuries clotted there, has floated down

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The tainted flood of ages,'—

that shrine shall stand, unshaken by the beating surge of change, and only washed to purer
whiteness by the deluge that overwhelms all other political fabrics. (Forrest 1838: 8)⁸

Likewise Forrest draws upon the *Revolt of Islam*, which imagines revolutionary leaders resistant to the surfeit of violence that marked the French Revolution but destined to be defeated, to celebrate the wedding of liberty to peace in the young nation. From a section in which the hero, Laon, describes the promise held by America, Forrest takes a passage to elucidate the United States' rapid development:

Whence is derived the strange activity which has wrought this change—so vast, so sudden, it almost makes the wildest tales of magic credible? Whence?—but from the inspiring influence of equal democratic liberty.

'Yes, in the desert there is built a home
For freedom. Genius is made strong to rear
The monuments of man beneath the dome
Of a new Heaven. Myriads assemble there
Whom the proud lords of man, in rage or fear,
Drive from their wasted homes.'⁹

No need of standing armies here . . . Here at last is discovered the grand political truth,
that in the simplicity of government consists the strength and majesty of the people. (Forrest
1838: 16-17)

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Forrest's citation of Shelley's verse is judicious; the poet's critique of organized religion is jettisoned in the interest of figuring an ideal US democracy in persistent, peaceful defiance of all who seek to suppress political movements of the People.

A close reading of these passages is not sufficient to an understanding of the range of political meanings generated by Forrest's performative inclusion of Shelley's verse, however. As Forest the orator was ghosted by his theatrical roles, and thus his defense of Equal Rights Democrats depended on contrasting images of violent rebellion, so Shelley's were ghosted by British popular reform and its violent suppression. As Paul Foot argues, "The three periods of Shelley's most prolific political writing" correspond roughly to the 1811-12 Luddite uprising, the 1817 Pentrich Rebellion, and the 1819 Peterloo Massacre when, at St. Peter's Field in Manchester, a cavalry rode upon an assembled crowd demanding Parliamentary reform, killing eleven and wounding hundreds (Foot 1980: 222). Shelley's righteous indignation over such events fueled poetry and prose in which he defended democratic movements while emphasizing "the power that accrues to the powerless through organized mass resistance" (Tetreault 1990: 283). In the context of widespread censorship and Shelley's decision to publish selectively his most radical writings, reformers pirated Shelley's works from 1819 until long after his death in 1822. Forrest himself owned a pirated 1821 London edition of *Queen Mab* (Sabin 1863). When he recited passages from *Queen Mab* and *The Revolt of Islam* in July 1838, Forrest the bibliophile and English sojourner not only drew upon Shelley's formulation of the poet and peaceful social progress in the face of tyranny but also summoned the unruliness of democratic radicalism across the Atlantic.

More specifically, audience members and readers familiar with Shelley and democratic politics in Britain would have understood Forrest's choice of verse as sympathetic with the nascent Chartist Movement, which took its name from People's Charter of May 1838. Resonant with the New York Equal

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Rights Party's *Declaration of Rights* of the previous year, the People's Charter upheld universal male suffrage, along with reforms aimed to secure working-class representation in Parliament: secret balloting, no property qualification for members of Parliament, pay for members of Parliament, consistently-sized constituencies, and annual Parliamentary elections (Roberts 2003: 1-2). And like the Locofocos, the Chartists took inspiration from a literature of democracy. "Among the framers of 'The People's Charter' in 1838," notes Ronald Tetreault, "were admirers of Shelley like Henry Hetherington and James Watson, who had risked prosecution to publish his works," especially *Queen Mab* (Tetreault 1990: 280). Chartist newspapers praised and reprinted Shelley's work through the 1850s such that looking back at the end of the century, George Bernard Shaw declared *Queen Mab* "the Chartist Bible," and Frederick Engels recalled for his daughter, "Oh, we all knew Shelley by heart then" (quoted in *ibid.*: 280, 284). Just as the Equal Rights Party anointed the unaffiliated Leggett architect of their movement, adopting and adapting his works to their own rhetorical ends, so the Chartists named the long-deceased Shelley their prophet and guide (Shaaban 1996).

Insofar as the work of Leggett and Shelley declaimed resistance to tyranny with rhetorical vehemence, devotees could overlook their eschewal of violent rebellion. In the decade following the People's Charter, as Chartists split over the issue of whether forceful resistance was warranted, the group's militant wing nonetheless continued to claim Shelley as vital inspiration (Tetreault 1990: 286). By the time Forrest quoted Shelley to the crowd at the Broadway Tabernacle, *Queen Mab* and *Revolt of Islam* epitomized self-consciously democratic poetry and linked the American actor to the British movement. In turn, the Glasgow *Chartist Circular* reprinted the first half of Forrest's oration on November 23 and 30, 1839. So while specters of provocative eloquence abound in Forrest's oration and summon such flashpoints in New York political life as the advent of Locofocoism, the Four Riot, and the

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Farren Riot, Forrest's citation of the Unacknowledged Legislator links a local defense of free speech to transatlantic pursuits of broad democratic reform and individual liberty. But it also underscores the limits of the speaker's rhetorical agency. For the romantic aesthetic of prophetic, peaceable idealism was poised for adoption and circulation by political activists not beholden to the fine points of the Poet's philosophy—or the Actor's for that matter.

* * *

In his examination of "It"—that "certain quality, easy to perceive but hard to define, possessed by abnormally interesting people"—Joseph Roach attributes celebrity to "the power of apparently effortless embodiment of contradictory qualities" (Roach 2007: 1, 8). Surely the allure of Edwin Forrest resided in productive tension between his beautiful voice and muscle-bound form; working-class affinity and economic success; racial crossings and Jacksonian affiliations; nationalism and cosmopolitanism; turns as bloody rebel and rational statesman. And yet analysis of such "play of sudden reversible polarities" cannot establish the political meaning (intended or otherwise) of Forrest's performances. For if "the outcome of the struggle between implacable opposites must be deferred to maintain suspense," as Roach explains, "at the end, a dark secret remains untold, and even in the afterglow of the most illuminating disclosure, there is an uncanny translucence without transparency, a silhouette" (ibid.: 9). Forrest remains perpetually fascinating to scholars of nineteenth-century America because he and his performative work are richly evocative and stubbornly elusive.

The resonance of Forrest's July 4th oration with contemporaneous elocutionary practice and with the writings of Leggett and Shelley could inspire a radically new account of the actor as linking the Locofocos, Chartists, and enslaved African Americans in a transatlantic performance of peaceable democratic revolution. Yet the polarities that enable such an interpretation—theatrical excess and

Mielke, Laura L. "Edwin Forrest's July 4th Oration and the Specters of Provocative Eloquence." *American Literature* (2014) 86(1): 1-30. Publisher's official version: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1215/00029831-2395429>. Open Access version: <http://kuscholarworks.ku.edu/dspace/>.

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oratorical decorum, physical rebellion and discursive resistance—destabilize it as well. Forrest's oration, in contrast with the haunting emotional excesses of his theatrical performances, underscored a vision of non-violent social transformation, but remained available to fans finding in spectacular servile rebellion a model for, among other things, renewed anti-monopolistic rioting or radical abolitionist speech. Forrest's oration, like his larger performative oeuvre, illuminates a broad cultural faith in the power of public speech to provoke action and shadows forth the conflicted feelings of speakers and auditors who understood that action might very well be more destructive than transformative.

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Endnotes

I am grateful to the many readers and auditors who provided invaluable responses as this essay evolved, especially members of Midwest Nineteenth-Century Americanists and my department's Literature, Rhetoric, and Social Action Writing Group.

¹ Forrest solicited heroic dramas tailored to his strengths by sponsoring nine US playwriting competitions between 1828 and 1847 (Moody 1960: 88-91).

² Thomas Gustafson (1992) examines the period's often tragic sense of the indexical relationship between moral and linguistic clarity.

³ Recent works on public debate in the early republic and antebellum periods link rhetorical failure to violence and civil war: Sandra M. Gustafson (2011) argues that the emergence and ascendance of Jacksonian democracy highlighted the limits of deliberative politics and the institutions charged with fostering it, and Michael T. Gilmore (2010) examines how crises concerning slavery and race diminished faith in expressive power of free speech over the course of the nineteenth century.

⁴ Forrest supported Bryant's efforts in the early 1830s, loaning him money to increase his share in the *Post* (he would go on to bankroll Leggett's endeavors) and writing letters for the *Post* during an 1835 European sojourn (Muller 2008: 107, 129).

⁵ Consider as well that Forrest owned such prominent abolitionist texts as William Ellery Channing's *Slavery* (1836), *History of the Rise, Progress, and Accomplishment of the Abolition of the African Slave Trade by the British Parliament* (1808 and 1816 editions), the slave narrative of Charles Ball (1837), and John Greenleaf Whittier's *Poems Written during the Progress of the Abolition* (1837)—alongside publications of the American Colonization Society and the pro-slavery writings of John C. Calhoun and J.K. Paulding (Sabin 1863).

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⁶ The speech quotes the following sources: Milton's *Paradise Lost* and *Areopagitica*; Pope's *Essay on Man*; Scott's *Harold the Dauntless*; Bryant's "The Ages," "Thanatopsis," and "The Battle-field"; Percy Bysshe Shelley's *Queen Mab* and *Revolt of Islam*; Sir Thomas Noon Talfourd's *Ion; A Tragedy*; Henry Taylor's *Philip van Artevelde*; Edwards Young's "The Complaint"; the Gospel of Luke; the Declaration of Independence; and Shakespeare's *Hamlet* and *Othello*.

⁷ Reprinted as "Shakspeare [*sic*]—Forrest—Loco Focoism" in the *Indiana Journal* (Indianapolis) of August 18, 1838.

⁸ Verse by Shelley appears as quoted in Forrest's text.

⁹ Forrest also transcribed these lines from *Revolt of Islam* into his 1835 diary (Jones "Original Characters," 18, 307-8 n. 72).