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“My Noble Spartacus”

Edwin Forrest and Masculinity on the Nineteenth-Century Stage

Ginger Strand

Edwin Forrest (1806–72) owes his reputation to his status as American theater history’s first native-born, native-trained star. Famous for his emotional interpretations of Shakespeare—especially the roles of Othello, Macbeth, and Lear—Forrest is also remembered as an early benefactor of American drama, which he fostered through a series of competitions for American playwrights. The prizewinning plays, including John Augustus Stone’s Metamora, which played in repertory with his Shakespearean roles, allowed Forrest to dominate the American stage from 1835 to 1855, making more money than any American actor before him and helping to institutionalize the star system on American stages.

But Forrest’s legacy lingers more compellingly, if more intangibly, in the enduring image of him as representative man: a brawny, melodramatic tragedian turned hero for the working classes; a self-made man who created for himself, from a repertoire of Shakespearean monarchs and historical populists, an on- and offstage persona that embodied the mid-nineteenth century’s interdependent virtues of entrepreneurial self-reliance and masculine vigor. He was, according to Walter Meserve, “essentially melodramatic: strong, direct, and representative of masculine America.” Bruce McConachie refines the equation, describing Forrest as representative of the mid-nineteenth century’s “yeoman ideology of manly honor, republican independence, and hero worship,” a construct that can also be seen in popular representations of Andrew Jackson. From his own time to ours, Forrest has been constructed as a paragon of nineteenth-century masculinity.

But the particularities of this construction—what it has included and what it has suppressed—have much to tell us about the last century’s changing conceptions of sexuality and masculinity. And much of it comes as a surprise. Forrest may have been “representative of masculine...
America,” but his sexuality is by no means straightforward. And his hypermasculine persona, on further investigation, can be seen as based not on the suppression of feminine characteristics, but rather on their incorporation. This reading is not one that needed a century to be possible. Even while creating Forrest’s “manly” image, contemporary commentators acknowledged the radical sexual inclusiveness that underlay the actor’s public and private lives.

Born and raised in Philadelphia, the young Forrest was apprenticed as a clerk to an importing house but nursed an unquenchable ambition for the stage. As a child, his official biographer, William R. Alger, informs us, Forrest “was thin, pale, and had a slight forward stoop of the chest and shoulders,” with “a quick pulse, a nervous habit, a sensitive brain and skin,” and a tendency to cry easily. Aware of these limitations, the boy created for himself a strict regimen of gymnastics and wrestling, based on that of circus performers, which ensured that by the time he was seventeen, he was “as fine a specimen of a manly youth as one might wish to see.”

It seems, then, that he was drawn to the stage as a means of creating the vigorous masculine identity that eluded him as a child. Having done so, his “Herculean” physique, along with his resounding, emotional voice, was one of his greatest assets as an actor. Working his way through the stage ranks, first with sporadic parts in his hometown, then grueling stock actor work, he made his New York debut at the newly built Bowery Theatre in 1826—a theater whose trajectory was similar to his own. After his first night, his managers promptly voided his contract for twenty-eight dollars a week and wrote a new one giving him forty. From that point on, he was acknowledged to be one of the leading actors of his age.

Forrest’s rise to stardom was concurrent with sweeping changes in urban life being wrought by skyrocketing immigration and the shift in the theater business that followed. If Forrest’s stage personality embodied the ascendant Jacksonian values of strength, freedom, common sense, and self-creation, his tremendous success had as much to do with the creation of an audience desirous of a hero with those traits. This audience, increasingly working class although still predominantly male, instigated a transition in both the way the theater business was conducted and the kinds of plays that were popular. McConachie describes this transition as a shift from “elite paternalism”—a paternally administered theater business that favored fairy-tale melodramas starring benevolent father-figures—to the period of “yeoman independence,” in which stars and
stock companies offered a more heterogeneous audience heroic melodramas featuring heroes for the people.5

The "people" were increasingly aware of themselves as such, and growing more and more self-conscious about their desires and requirements for heroes, as evidenced by the segregation of theater audiences along the lines of class. Beginning in the 1820s, and continuing into the 1830s, working-class audiences abandoned the "fashionable" theaters in favor of houses like the Bowery and the Chatham that catered to an audience of "mechanics."6 Regularly denounced in the press for their tumultuous and uncouth behavior, these audiences increasingly became the show itself, as their move onto the stage in later "local color" dramas proves.7 And they loved Forrest as one of themselves.

Forrest's New York debut was undertaken at a theater that Moody explains was intended to be fashionable, although "[i]n later years it became known as the democratic playhouse."8 Walt Whitman's reminiscences of the Bowery Theatre demonstrate the specifically masculine, working-class appeal that Forrest and his audience confirmed for each other.

Recalling from that period the occasion of either Forrest or Booth, any good night at the old Bowery, pack'd from ceiling to pit with its audience mainly of alert, well-dress'd, full-blooded young and middle-aged men, the best average of American-born mechanics—the emotional nature of the whole mass arouses'd by the power and magnetism of as mighty mimes as ever trod the stage—the whole crowded auditorium, and what seeth'd from it, and flush'd from its faces and eyes, to me as much a part of the show as any—bursting forth in one of those long-kept-up tempests of hand-clapping peculiar to the Bowery—no dainty kid-glove business, but electric force and muscle from perhaps 2,000 full-sinew'd men...9

Forrest chose his roles carefully to appeal to this audience, even selecting from among Shakespeare's heroes. The non-Shakespearean plays in his repertoire all cast him as patriot and populist. John Banim's Damon and Pythias was perhaps the most popular of Forrest's non-Shakespearean roles outside the prize plays. In it, Forrest portrayed Damon, the ancient Greek democrat whose refusal to acknowledge the tyrant Dionysus leads to his imprisonment and death sentence and gives his beloved friend Pythias the chance to offer to die for him. The play focuses on the passionately loyal relationship between the two men. Banim's play was one of the most widely disseminated versions of a narrative that had
broad popular appeal: in mid-nineteenth-century America, the phrase *Damon and Pythias* was often used to refer to an intensely loyal friendship between two men.

But Forrest found his best roles in the prize plays written specifically for him. The successful star began his play contests in 1828, requesting an American play in which “the hero or principal character shall be an aboriginal of this country.”¹⁰ The first winning play was John Augustus Stone’s *Metamora; or, the Last of the Wampanoags*, a heavily sentimental depiction of the doomed noble savage who refuses to submit to the white man’s tyranny. The play included a romantic subplot and plenty of thrilling action, and it was an immediate hit, as was Forrest’s idea for the play contests, which constructed him as both charitable and patriotic. His motives were hardly lacking in self-interest, however. The actor bought the prizewinning plays outright and performed them, allowing the authors no further rights while creating a tremendous popular reputation for himself. Several plays subsequently became nineteenth-century American stage classics. Besides Stone’s *Metamora*, Robert Montgomery Bird’s *The Gladiator*, and Robert T. Conrad’s *Jack Cade* were the most successful prize plays.

The contests provided a means by which Forrest could acquire exactly the kinds of roles he wanted to shape his public persona as patriotic democrat and opponent of oppression. In fact, all of the plays gave him the same role: that of the natural man, honest, unquestionably loyal, courageous, and self-reliant. In *The Gladiator*, he played Spartacus, leader of the Roman slave uprising that begins when he refuses to combat his own brother. As Jack Cade in Conrad’s play of that name, he reversed the common idea of the fourteenth-century English insurrectionary leader as an odious leveler, remaking him as what Alger calls “an avenging patriot, who felt the wrongs of the downtrodden masses and animated them to assert their rights.”¹¹

McConachie shows that each of these plays follows a four-part formula, in which a hero in search of a utopia for himself and his people is thwarted, first by the oppression of aristocratic rulers, then by the betrayal of his own people, until he must become a martyr to his cause.¹² Even the less stagreworthy prize plays provided this role for Forrest. Robert Penn Smith’s *Caius Marius* cast its title figure, a Roman general found in Plutarch, as a fervent democrat battling aristocratic tyranny. Bird’s *Oralloossa, Son of the Incas*, invented a son for Itahualpa the Inca, executed by Pizarro, in order to tell a tale of individual freedom struggling against tyrannical oppression. Only in Bird’s *The Broker of Bogota* did
Edwin Forrest as Spartacus

(Courtesy Billy Rose Theatre Collection, The New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, Astor, Lenox and Tilden Foundations.)
Forrest diverge from the role, playing a father whose happiness is ruined by his own rigid authoritarianism. While Forrest, for once, played the conservative role, the play’s overall antiauthoritarian message is clear.

These plays gave Forrest a chance to display his physical and emotional prowess in a variety of idealized masculine character-types: soldier, gladiator, statesman, chieftain. They involved elaborate costuming, whose historicizing provided an excuse to foreground Forrest’s physical features. And they foregrounded a populist politics that was seen as part of his specifically masculine ethos. Alger declares that the manly ideal permeates all of his roles.

This imperial self-reliance and instinctive honesty, this unperverted and unterrified personality poised in the grandest natural virtues of humanity is the key note and common chord to the whole range of his conceptions. Fearless faithful manhood penetrates them all as the great elevating principle that makes the harmonies of one essential ideal.13

Forrest’s ideal excludes one audience as efficiently as it addresses its particular fans. In the reminiscence quoted above, Whitman notes that while both Booth and Forrest thrilled the masculine, working-class audience, “both these great actors and their performances were taboo’d by ‘polite society’ in New York and Boston at the time—probably as being too robustuous.”14 Certainly “polite” critics did object to what Whitman calls the “robustuous” style of these actors. For Forrest, though, the taboo became much more rigorous after his two public scandals: the 1849 Astor Place riot, and his divorce from Catherine Sinclair.

In the Astor Place riot, at least twenty-two men died when the militia were called out to quell crowds disrupting a performance of Macbeth by English actor William Macready.15 Although the ostensible reason for the riot was the performance’s competition with Forrest’s simultaneous enactment of the role, the rivalry between the two stars was long-standing. Like the split from his English wife, the rivalry with Macready demonstrated Forrest’s equation of Englishness, aristocratic oppression, and femininity. Bad feeling heated up when Forrest hissed Macready publicly during a performance of Hamlet in Edinburgh. In a letter to the editor of the London Times, Forrest explained that he had used this “salutary and wholesome corrective of the abuses of the stage” because he objected to a “fancy dance” Macready had inserted after Hamlet’s line “I must be idle.”16 Throughout the rivalry, Forrest labeled Macready as outdated, aristocratic, and effete, and his battle cry was
gladly taken up by nativists and members of the Know-Nothing Party, who demanded “America for Americans” and sparked the riot by posting flyers proclaiming, “

WORKING MEN: SHALL AMERICANS OR ENGLISH RULE IN THIS CITY?”

For Forrest the issue of anti-English sentiment was mingled with his own domestic unhappiness. Henry Wikoff, Forrest’s traveling companion during his 1835–36 trip abroad, relates that Forrest’s fears about marrying Sinclair centered on her status as an Englishwoman. Although he took advantage of his bachelorhood—his diary of this trip is well stocked with accounts of his trips to brothels and prostitutes, often reporting on two or three sexual encounters in an evening—the actor was, according to Wikoff, deeply committed to the establishment of domesticity. Immediately upon completing his grand tour, Forrest played a brief engagement in New York and Philadelphia, then returned to Great Britain for a professional engagement. He returned in the autumn of 1837 with Catherine Sinclair as his wife.

By all accounts, the marriage was a disaster. Although there seem to have been a few happy years, Forrest carried on an extramarital sex life, and Catherine was depressed and exhausted from bearing four children, all of whom died at birth or within a few days afterward. Acquaintances reported on a vast difference in temperaments: Catherine sociable, Forrest private, with some claiming that Forrest felt self-conscious about the literary, urbane circle that Catherine drew around herself. Forrest’s friend James Rees attributes much of their difference of temperament to nationality, asserting, “If Mr. Forrest had established in his household certain rules, and taught his wife the difference between English and American habits, much of the evil, arising out of their misunderstanding, might have been obviated.” But there also is some truth to assertions by Catherine’s supporters that Forrest resented her superior social position. Writing to her from Baltimore, for instance, he recounts that a “grand democratic procession” had passed in front of the theater, “with cheers for your humble servant. You will I am sure be gratified to hear this in spite of your pretended aristocracy.”

When the split came, it was bitter and public. Each accused the other of infidelities, and the intimate details revealed in court were printed in newspaper columns. Catherine was granted a divorce; Forrest was found guilty of having committed adultery with actress Josephine Clifton, a brawny, athletic woman with, in one reporter’s account, “a bust finely developed, a physiognomy indicative of great firmness of character and a mind rather of a masculine turn.” Biographer Richard Moody, speculating on how such
a woman could possibly have interested the actor, concludes, “Perhaps Forrest was weary of femininity.”

If he wasn’t weary before his divorce, he certainly became so afterward. Outraged at the verdict, Forrest immediately embroiled himself in a lifelong series of appeals, refusing to pay the substantial alimony legislated by the court. His letters from this point on become virulently misogynist, insisting that all women are “swindlers,” referring to Sinclair as a “whore,” and asserting that marriage is the “invention of the devil.”

All these comments appear in letters to James Oakes, Forrest’s constant companion and closest intimate from his divorce until his death.

James Oakes, proprietor of Boston’s Old Salt Store, met Forrest backstage after a performance of Damon and Pythias in 1827. It was the young actor’s Boston debut. The two became fast friends, and after Forrest’s divorce, they spent nearly all of their free time together. They traveled together, spent summers and holidays at one another’s home, and corresponded frequently when apart. Their letters are filled with passionate assertions of affection and devotion. Oakes often began his letters “My noble Spartacus”; Forrest continually thanks Oakes for his endless tokens of love and devotion. Forrest reports to Oakes on every detail of his life: his engagements, his financial successes and fears, his erratic health, and his intermittent depression. Oakes seemed concerned with all of it and always willing to offer assistance: “Command my services to the fullest extent, in anything and in everything,” he signs once, “For I am, from top to bottom, inside and out, and all through, forever yours.”

The two often exchanged portraits of themselves; Alger relates that Forrest’s Philadelphia mansion displayed portraits of Oakes in the entry, the dining room, the picture gallery, and the library. As they grew older and each suffered from a variety of health complaints, the few weeks they spent together each summer seemed insufficient. After an illness, Forrest assures Oakes that he is healthy: “No, I think we both of us have vitality enough to enjoy many years yet of happiness, even in this vale of tears,” he writes sentimentally. “But then, we must inhabit it together, for

“When true hearts lie withered,
And false ones are gone,
Oh, who would inhabit
This blank world alone?”

Upon leaving for his California tour, Forrest pleaded with Oakes to join him, promising to pay all his friend’s expenses and assuring him that “it
would make me the happiest man in the world." The two of them frequently referred to a fantasy they shared of moving together to Cuba, which Forrest expected would join the Union before long. "I think with you, we ought not to live so much asunder," Forrest writes to Oakes in 1868, "our time is now dwindled to a span, and why should we not see together the declining sun go brightly down upon the evening of our days. What a blessed thing to realize that dream of Cuba—I named it to you when last I saw you." Two years later, Oakes retired from his business, closing the Old Salt Store, and sending his wife to live with one of their daughters while he himself stayed with his sister for a while. Forrest congratulates him on the move, declaring, "I look forward with a loving impatience to the end of my professional engagements this season that I may repair to Philadelphia there to make a settlement of such comforting means as shall make the residue of your life glide on in ceaseless ease." Forrest did leave Oakes an annuity of twenty-five hundred dollars a year in his will, and certainly his friend deserved it. In Forrest's final days, Oakes was with him for all of his professional engagements, helping him onto the stage and taking care of him after his performances. Writing to one of Forrest's earliest biographers, Oakes gives a touching account of Forrest's final performance and his own role in it.

The last time Forrest acted was Tuesday evening, April 3rd, 1872, at the Globe Theatre, this city; the play was Richelieu, on which night he was very ill, and I was with him behind the scenes during the entire performance; and I very much feared he would not be able to get through the play. I led him from his dressing room, with the assistance of his dresser, to the wing, where I had a chair placed for him to sit in, waiting for his cue, during the three last acts, and he was so weak that he was unable to raise himself from the chair, and he would say to me: "Oakes, lift me up, and let me go on!" I would put my arms around his body, and raise him to his feet, when he would in a quick and nervous tone say: "Steady me, steady me; get me before the audience, my friend, and I will finish the play, but it may be the last!" Alas! it was the last time he acted. From the theatre, after the play, I accompanied him to his hotel, where a physician had been summoned, and remained with him day and night without taking my clothes off, until the 24th of April, 1872, twenty-one days and nights, as the physician said his life depended more upon nursing than the skill of his physician, and advised that two trained hospital nurses be procured to take charge of him. Forrest looked earnestly into the face of the physician and said: "I want my friend Oakes to take care of me. If careful nursing will save
my life, he will save it.” For nearly the whole of this time his life seemed to hang upon a thread.\textsuperscript{30}

Forrest had pneumonia. He recovered and returned to Philadelphia, where Oakes spent the summer with him. In the fall of 1872 he embarked upon a reading tour but again became worn down. When he returned home to recuperate, he died. Daniel Dougherty, a friend of Forrest’s, immediately sent a telegram to Oakes in Boston saying simply, “Forrest died this morning; nothing will be done until you arrive.”\textsuperscript{31} The primacy of Oakes’s intimacy was never disputed; this acknowledgment of it seems especially significant in our own time.

In another letter to Harrison, Oakes writes of Forrest,

\begin{quote}
After he had recovered [from the pneumonia in Boston], he said to me: “Oakes, you have saved my life this time, and I hope that God, in His Great mercy and goodness, may grant that you may be with me at my last hour, and with your own friendly hands close my eyes!” But, alas! it was not so ordained. Dear, dear, old friend, he died alone!! But, my dear Harrison, why, what is death but life in other forms of being? . . . There is no such thing as death. What’s called so is but the beginning of new existence,—a fresh segment in the eternal round of change. It is in God’s \textit{Justice}, that those who sincerely love each other here shall meet in a brighter, happier sphere on the “other side!”\textsuperscript{32}
\end{quote}

When Oakes arrived to bury Forrest, their mutual friend James Rees relates, “His emotion, his tears, were those of a man true to one with whom, for years, he had been so intimately associated.”\textsuperscript{33}

What are we to make of this relationship? In the life of a man so immovably centered on masculine ideals of courage, independence, and physical daring, the touching devotion and care stand out. Forrest, Oakes, and the earliest biographers are not at all self-conscious about using words like \textit{love}, \textit{passion}, and \textit{romance} to describe the two men’s feelings for one another. In the introduction to his biography, Alger declares that Oakes was “the sworn bosom friend of Edwin Forrest. He regarded him with an admiration and love romantic if not idolatrous.”\textsuperscript{34} The biographer relates that “whenever they met, after a long separation, as soon as they were alone together they threw their arms around each other in fond embrace with mutual kisses, after the manner of lovers in our land or of friends in more tropical and demonstrative climes.”\textsuperscript{35} For his own part, Oakes declares to sculptor Thomas Ball, whom he had commissioned to make a statue of Forrest: “For more than forty years I
have known this man with an intimacy not common among men. Indeed, our friendship has been more like the devotion of a man to the woman he loves than the relations usually subsisting between men.”

In another letter, Forrest relates to Oakes an interesting conversation he has had with Lillie Swindlehurst, his leading lady on all of his later tours. “I am glad you are pleased with Lillie,” he writes to Oakes, “who in a letter which I got from her yesterday asks if we are married as you told her—which is the Woman.”

Moody mentions this letter in his biography, but mistakenly assumed the “we” refers to Swindlehurst and Forrest, claiming that “Miss Lillie had written asking if she and Forrest were to be married. Oakes straightened her out on this matter, and Forrest forgave her womanly indiscretion.”

Even without the question “which is the Woman,” it’s grammatically clear that the “we” referred to here is Forrest and Oakes. Oakes, presumably, had told Swindlehurst that he and Forrest were married, and she (in innocence? in spite? in play?) had written to ask which of them was the woman. Apparently Oakes suggested a response, because in his next letter, Forrest writes: “Thanks dear friend. I shall tell Lillie not Lottie, as you have it, that either of us is quite likely to turn to a Woman, when it is desirable. Married or Single—Eh!”

As many astute critics have warned us, we must be on guard against reading too much into texts that play by different rules, or placing historical subjects into categories—such as gay or bisexual—that did not even exist at the time those subjects lived. And it is now a truism that before the invention of the category of “homosexual,” passionate relationships between members of the same sex were not subject to the rigorous external and internal censorship that forces friends to demonstrate that they are not lovers, once the possibility they might be becomes thinkable. As Robert K. Martin argues,

> [I]t is obvious that the boundaries between permissible and impermissible forms of expression of male friendship were drawn very differently in mid-nineteenth-century America than they are now. It is possible that a strict interdiction against full genital sexuality... at the same time allowed for a much fuller expression of male friendship, since that in no way threatened to spill over into genitality.

At the same time, the critic finds herself in a bind, for there is an equally distressing danger in refusing to see gay desire. As James Creech has expressed it: “One must be very prudent in attributing homosexual content to what are only stock effusions in nineteenth-century writing; but just as obviously, one must be careful not to mistake for mere rhetoric
the intensely sexual longings which can be smuggled into expression using the very same language as a cover."43

The unembarrassed ease with which contemporary commentators remarked on the relationship between Oakes and Forrest certainly suggests that their love for one another in no way violated social or sexual norms of the period. In fact, Forrest’s relationship with Oakes was seen to be a sign of his masculinity. Early biographer Lawrence Barrett refers to the relationship as one of “manly affection,”44 while Alger appendes an entire chapter on friendship to his biography, arguing that love between men is the highest form of relationship possible.

[W]hen two men, two of these intellectual and sentient microcosms, meet, so adjusted as mutually to reflect each other with all their contents and possibilities in sympathetic communion, their life is perfected, their destiny is fulfilled, since the infinite Unity of Being is revealed in each made piquant with the bewitching relish of foreign individuality.45

Alger seems to have been planning a book on male friendship before he began Forrest’s biography. In an 1869 letter to Oakes, Forrest suggests Alger consult Herman Grimm’s recent biography of the artist Michelangelo for a look at “the beautiful friendship” between the aging artist and his “young votary Cavalieri.”46 On the pages Forrest references, Alger would have found a short description of what looks more like an older man’s obsession for a young boy, including a description of drawings Michelangelo made for Cavalieri of the rape of Ganymede and a “children’s bacchanal,” as well as two sonnets written by the artist for his student.47

The relationship between Forrest and Oakes drew upon a lively nineteenth-century culture of male friendship that provided not only sanction, but affirmation. This cultural phenomenon has been less well documented than the complementary culture of love “surpassing the love of men” between nineteenth-century women.48 But even from the evidence of contemporary responses to Forrest and Oakes’s relationship, it seems clear that love between men was readily understood within a ready-made context of male devotion. The frequent reference to literary-historical models—Damon and Pythias, Jonathan and David—suggest the extent to which such relationships were understood to be part of a tradition.

Furthermore, this culture of male friendship seems to have sanctioned physical expressions of intimacy. In a brief analysis of a late-nineteenth-century diary describing a passionate friendship between two
heterosexual men, Martin Duberman hazards the assertion that “some nineteenth-century men were (contrary to the traditional view) remarkable full and unself-conscious in physically expressing affection for each other.” At the same time, however, he points out the unusual nature of the diary, comparing it to the plethora of texts pertaining to women’s relationships, and citing it as the “only evidence that has yet come to light (so far as I know) of comparable passion between heterosexual men of the period.” Questions surely remain about how much the private correspondence between Oakes and Forrest was a continuation of their public relationship, and how much it used that public relationship as a cover.

Alger openly acknowledges the physical intimacy of the two men, but, typically, relates it to a cultural form of otherness—the habits of “more tropical and demonstrative climes.” Later biographers can only see physical intimacy and deep love for a man as a sign of effeminacy, and they downplay the relationship accordingly. The only biographer to address the question of whether the men were lovers, Richard Moody, dismisses the idea because in his eyes it is disallowed by Forrest’s virility. “Except for the extravagant expressions of their affection,” he declares, “there are no grounds for believing that their relationship was unnatural [sic]. Their letters are filled with virile observations on the sexual proficiency of various females. Forrest simply needed the genuine and enduring friendship that he found with a man like Oakes.”

For the early biographers, Forrest’s relationship with Oakes was a sign of masculinity; for Moody it can only be a sign of femininity. Moody simply points to the fact that the men exchanged information about women as though it thoroughly undermines any attempt to ascribe homosexual content to the relationship. Forrest himself is perhaps the slyest commentator on this tendency: in his quip about being likely to “turn to a Woman,” he conflates an assumed femininity with a bragging assertion of his virility. What is surprising in the comment is the playfulness with which Forrest treats the suggestion that the relationship did include genitality, and the unconcerned way in which he connects that possibility with heterosexual exploits.

Moody ignores this revealing comment. In both of the twentieth-century biographies of Forrest, many stories that set the tone of the relationship are dropped, ostensibly because they are only “hearsay,” or “reminiscence”; Alger and Barrett, for instance, both mention an occasion on which Oakes was made to dress up in a silk bathrobe and wig and perform lawn chores for Forrest before breakfast. Neither Moses nor Moody repeats this story. And while Alger devotes nearly an entire
chapter to delineating the “happy league of unselfish love and faithful service”\textsuperscript{52} between the two men, Moses mentions the friendship only in passing, and Moody discusses it for two pages only to eliminate the possibility that it might have been sexual. “Certainly in the mid-twentieth century,” he declares, “two men would shy from expressing their affection so openly.”\textsuperscript{53}

Interestingly, Moody’s anxiety about Forrest’s sexuality adheres to more than Forrest’s relationship with Oakes. While performing in his early stock-actor capacity in New Orleans, Forrest became friends with Push-ma-ta-ha, a Choctaw chief who fostered the actor’s interest in Native Americans. In July 1825, entangled in an unfortunate quarrel (over a woman) with his manager, and threatened with the possibility of a duel, Forrest decided it would be politic to leave New Orleans for the summer. He spent two months with Chief Push-ma-ta-ha and his tribe. Alger relates a story that happened one night, as Push-ma-ta-ha and Forrest were lying on the ground before a fire outside the village.

Like an artist, or like an antique Greek, Forrest had a keen delight in the naked form of man. . . . Push-ma-ta-ha, then twenty-four years old, brought up from his birth in the open air and in almost incessant action of sport and command, was from head to foot a faultless model of a human being. Forrest asked him to strip himself and walk to and fro before him between the moonlight and the firelight, that he might feast his eyes and his soul on so complete a physical type of what man should be. The young chief, without a word, cast aside his Choctaw garb and stepped forth with dainty tread, a living statue of Apollo in glowing bronze.\textsuperscript{54}

Moody repeats Alger’s account, but adds that this is a story Forrest “might have hesitated to repeat today.”\textsuperscript{55} Again, the most recent biographer expresses a deep-felt concern that Forrest’s sexuality will be “misunderstood” in a more gay-affirmative era.

In spite of his clear discomfort with homosexuality, Moody’s comments unintentionally point to an interesting fact in their suggestion that today, in our own more tolerant era, many emotionally compelling aspects of Forrest’s life are more likely than ever to be suppressed. It is in our own time, in fact, and not his own, that Forrest’s love for Oakes dare not speak its name. This is true in more than the conservative sense that Moody’s comments imply. The biographer’s point, presumably, is that in our own, “oversexualized” era, Forrest’s simple, friendly love for his
companion would inevitably be misinterpreted as sexual. But in the wake of the construction of gay and lesbian studies as an academic category, and that category’s need to conform to clear standards of historical and interpretive rigor, something quite different has occurred. The historical evidence being as vague and ambiguous as it is, Forrest is just as likely to be excluded as an object of interest for gay and lesbian history by definitions that proclaim sex—and a circumscribed notion of how to define sex—as the standard by which gay identity is measured. If sexual identities were defined as much by the practices of respect, devotion, love, and lifelong care as by the practices of genital contact, Edwin Forrest would be clearly and incontrovertibly defined as gay. Were he a woman, in fact, this identification might be easier to make: Lillian Faderman has made an influential argument for the inclusion of nongenital love relationships between women in the category “lesbian,” which she defines as “a relationship in which two women’s strongest emotions and affections are directed towards each other.”

Why, then, limit the definition of male homosexuality to a practice more specific? The ongoing perpetuation of gender stereotypes surely contributes to the fact that Forrest must be described as a bundle of “contradictions”: sexually involved with many different women, “married”—as he himself admits—to a man.

Discussing the wide range of possibilities for male relationships in the nineteenth-century, Robert Martin has commented, “The very range of these possibilities may suggest the extent to which the categories that we now take for granted, such as an absolute split between homo- and heterosexual based on genital behavior, were nascent and fluid. Their emergence provided a greater sense of identity for some, but simultaneously meant a loss of possibility for others.” Forrest’s sexuality with respect to his relationship with Oakes clearly fits into one of these myriad categories, a category not very easy to delineate after the late-nineteenth-century codifications of sexuality in which, as Foucault put it, “the homosexual was now a species.”

Given how readily Forrest’s intense relationship with Oakes was acknowledged by his contemporaries, it seems likely that Forrest’s contemporaries had no concerns or anxieties about it, and it seems logical to attribute this to the wider parameters for expressions of male friendship in the nineteenth century. But there is still the question of whether Forrest’s sexual ambiguity was noticed at all by his contemporaries. The answer is at best elusive. If the early biographers were not anxious about Forrest’s relationship with Oakes, they were often driven to make assertions about
his masculinity that can only be described as hyperbolic, even—it is tempting to say—defensive. In particular, the fact that at least one of Forrest’s early performances was in a female role—as a replacement for an absent ingenue—apparently required much rationalization. Writing some reminiscences in 1857, while Forrest still lived, James Rees mentions two female roles and gives an account of the actor’s appearance.

Once more let us turn to the Apollo. It was here Forrest played Lady Anne, in the tragedy of “Douglass,” to Charles S. Porter’s Young Norval; he also played Rosolia, the beautiful and romantic heroine of the drama entitled “The Robbers of Calabria,” to Mr. Porter’s Rudolph. Forrest’s dress on that occasion was not marked by that artistic taste which has since been such a prominent feature in his impersonation of character. It was one we shall never forget. He wore thick, heavy shoes, coarse woolen stockings, and a short, white dress, reaching with some difficulty to his knees; on his head he wore a bright red scarf, intended to represent a sort of fashionable, or rather unfashionable, head-dress. Every time allusions were made to the beauty and the symmetry of her form, and the matchless excellence which is only to be found in the object of our affections, and which Rudolph delights to utter, the audience—and it was numerous—laughed most heartily; and well they might, for it was the most comical thing we ever witnessed in the theatrical way. This, we think, was in 1817.

On one occasion Forrest disputed their right to criticize his dress, averring that if silence was not observed he would march off the stage. This had the desired effect—silence was most strictly observed. 59

Seventeen years later, in his biography, Rees alters the story, dropping the reference to Forrest as Lady Anne, and replacing Forrest’s threat to stop performing with an account of a “pugnacious boy” in the pit who comments aloud on Forrest’s appearance and is rewarded by having the actor step forward and threaten, “I’ll whip you when the play is over.” “This silenced the boy,” Rees assures us, “and the play went on.” 60 Told in this way, the story works much harder to subvert the feminine implications of Forrest’s cross-dressing with assertions of his masculine efficacy.

Barrett also feels compelled in the telling of this story to frustrate any tendencies to see Forrest as feminized by his costume.

In the habiliments of the weaker sex, adorned for the play by unskillful hands, in such garments as could be collected hastily and secretly from several sources, which covered a figure always the reverse of feminine, and were worn in a manner far removed from the dainty grace belonging to such robes, our hero came from behind the scenes.
for his débùt; no doubt with a palpitation of heart suitable to his disguise, but in no other way belonging to his rôle. ⁶⁵

While not suggesting any real defensiveness on the part of the contemporary commentators, these remarks show a level of conscious design going into the representation of Forrest as a paragon of masculinity. Understanding this image as a consciously created one on the part of Forrest and his contemporaries makes it possible to look at masculine ideals themselves in a new light. And one of the most important sources for those ideals will surely be the plays themselves. The dramatic vehicles created for the actor might well be reread for what they tell us about how Forrest was perceived by those around him.

To suggest how things might look different, then, I want to close with a brief discussion of Forrest's phenomenally successful vehicle The Gladiator, by Robert Montgomery Bird. This play was one of the biggest moneymakers in Forrest's repertoire, holding the stage for forty years, and being the first play in English to reach a thousand performances during the lifetime of its author. ⁶² The second of Bird's plays to win Forrest's prize and the first subsequently to be produced (Pelopidas won in 1830 but was never performed), The Gladiator was written expressly for Forrest's contest—and for Forrest to perform. In writing it, Bird shows not only a thorough knowledge of the ideals Forrest's public persona embodied, but an interest in exploring those ideals in relation to Forrest's status as theatrical spectacle—a position that can be used to stand for a sexual ambiguity Bird may or may not have perceived in the man himself.

Not only designed for Forrest, The Gladiator is, in a sense, about him as well. Bird's play tells the story of Spartacus, a Thracian gladiator and leader of the Roman slave uprising. Using source material from Plutarch and Appian, Bird shaped a play that proclaims itself a populist manifesto and can be read, in its excoriation of slavery, as abolitionist. ⁶³ The appeal for the playwright lay in the character of Spartacus, a man who could be remade for Forrest as a heroic man-of-the-people. But he is also, when the play opens, a slave, and this threat to his masculine potency and self-determination is figured by Bird through his spectacularity.

Since Laura Mulvey's influential "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" laid the groundwork, feminist film theory has associated the position of spectacle with femininity, and the position of spectator with masculinity. ⁶⁴ Since then, a plethora of critics has sought to elaborate what happens when the position of spectator is occupied by a female subject. ⁶⁵
and a smaller, but still significant, number have addressed the idea of the male as spectacle.\textsuperscript{66} While argument rages over whether the spectating woman is necessarily male-identified, the spectacular male is almost universally understood to be feminized.

Even if this formulation strikes one as somewhat simplistic, it is clearly operative in Bird’s text. In the play’s opening scenes, Spartacus loses his masculine privilege not only by virtue of being a slave, but also by the spectacularity forced upon him. His first appearance on stage is prefaced by a conversation between two slaveowners, Bracchius, who unknowingly owns the wife and son of Spartacus, and Lentulus, who owns Spartacus himself. As Spartacus is brought on, Bracchius mistakes him for his own “troop of women and children”.\textsuperscript{67} all slaves, male or female, look alike to the master class. Once arrived, Spartacus is widely admired for his muscular physique, called “A Hercules, a Mars” (244),” metaphorical titles recalling those applied to Forrest. But Spartacus refuses to play along, instead taunting his captors. Describing the scene where he was captured, he tells how he believes his wife and child to be dead, since he looked back and saw his home on fire with no one outside it. At that, he tells his audience, “I was a man no more” (245).

It’s difficult not to see in this depiction an image of Forrest himself. Like Forrest, Spartacus combines a spectacular physique with a moody, unbending personality, presenting both to a largely admiring crowd. “Well I am here, among these beasts of Rome, a spectacle,” he says (251). But his unmanning lies not only in his loss of freedom, but also in the sentimental attachments that keep him from regaining it. Eventually, Spartacus agrees to fight in the gladiator contests in exchange for the enfranchisement of his wife and son. Although this leads to the slave rebellion, his sentimental attachments ultimately prove his downfall. He quarrels with his brother, Phasarius, over a captive woman whom he pities, causing Phasarius to defect with most of the army. Senona, Spartacus’s wife, reassures the captive Julia by telling her that the heart of Spartacus “beneath his bloody mail / Can melt to pity quickly as thine own” (261). Indeed, Spartacus’s pity proves fatal. Outnumbered after most of his army defects, he is unable to give up on his traitorous brother and escape while he has the chance. Instead, he stays to help Phasarius, bringing on his own death as well as those of his wife and son.

Bird thus constructs an extremely masculine character whose feminine capacity for sympathy is both his downfall and his exemplary quality. Was there a subtle comment about Forrest worked into this text? Was Bird using the sexual ambiguity of Forrest to reconfigure his era’s ideals
of masculine action and self-reliance? And if so, how does this shed light on our inherited notions of what those ideals were about? Lesbian and gay history cannot simply dispense with these questions. Simply enrolling Forrest as one of its subjects does not even begin to answer them. But it allows the questions to be asked, which moves us toward a broader, more complex understanding of the nineteenth-century’s constructions of sexuality, gender, and democracy. And it gives us a more multidimensional look at a personality whose forceful self-creation embodied many contradictions inherent in those ideals and, in doing so, made its mark on the history of the American stage.

NOTES

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1. For an excellent account of Forrest’s role in transforming audience responses to stars, see chapter 3 of Bruce McConachie, Melodramatic Formations: American Theatre and Society, 1820–1870 (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1992), 69–90.


3. McConachie, Melodramatic Formations, 68.


6. See Mary C. Henderson, The City and the Theatre (Clifton, NJ: James T. White, 1973), 62. In Theater Culture in America, 1825–1860 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), Rosemarie Bank points out that the evidence for class segregation in the theaters is by no means conclusive. However, it is clear from contemporary accounts that a perception of the theaters as divided by class operated in the 1830s and 1840s.

7. For an invigorating account of these dramas, see Luc Sante, Low Life: Lures and Snares of Old New York (New York: Vintage Books, 1991), 71–90. Bank also discusses the historical contexts and meanings of these plays in Theater Culture in America, 75–119.


10. Critic, November 22, 1828.


12. McConachie, Melodramatic Formations, 104.
13. Quoted in ibid., 88.
19. Ibid., 215–16.
22. Quoted in ibid., 201.
23. Ibid.
24. Edwin Forrest, letters to James Oakes, CO721, Manuscripts Division, Department of Rare Books and Special Collections, Princeton University Libraries; folder 1, June 20, 1857; folder 5, February 24, 1867; folder 3, November 24, 1865. Published with permission of Princeton University Libraries. I would like to thank the archivists, especially Margaret Sherry, at Princeton.
26. Forrest, letters to Oakes, folder 3, August 24, 1865.
27. Forrest, letters to Oakes, folder 4, February 27, 1866.
28. Forrest, letters to Oakes, folder 6, April 14, 1868.
29. Forrest, letters to Oakes, folder 8, November 29, 1870.
30. May 11, 1873; quoted in Gabriel Harrison, Edwin Forrest (Brooklyn, 1889), 181. This rare early biography is available in the Harvard Theatre Collection; I would like to thank the librarians there, in particular Michael Dumas, for their help.
32. May 12, 1873; quoted in Harrison, Edwin Forrest, 182.
35. Ibid. vol. 1.
37. Forrest, letters to Oakes, folder 4, March 29, 1866.
39. Forrest, letters to Oakes, folder 4, April 3, 1866.
42. Lawrence Barrett, Edwin Forrest (Boston: J. R. Osgood, 1881), 76.
44. Forrest, letters to Oakes, folder 7, May 24, 1869.


48. Ibid., 67.


56. Faderman asserts “that women’s love relationships have seldom been limited to one area of expression, that love between women has been primarily a sexual phenomenon only in male fantasy literature” (*Surpassing Love of Men*, 17–18). Although more recent feminists might find Faderman’s claim somewhat essentialist in its ascription of well-rounded, loving relationships primarily to women and, by implication, genital sexuality primarily to men, acknowledging love between men that is not primarily sexual might help circumvent the unhappy gender politics of consigning lesbians to the closet once more in the arena of overtly sexual expression.

57. Martin, “Knights-Errant,” 182.


63. Although early on Bird claimed that if the play “were produced in a slave state, the managers, players, and perhaps myself in the bargain would be rewarded with the Penitentiary,” he was wrong. McConauchie points out that “like other Jacksonians, southerners understood the rhetoric of slavery and freedom as referring to the traditional rights of white people” (*Melodramatic Formations*, 117).

64. First published in *Screen* 16 (autumn 1975), “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” has been widely anthologized and is republished in Mulvey’s *Visual and Other Pleasures* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989).

65. A short list would begin with Mulvey’s own “Afterthoughts on ‘Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema’ Inspired by King Vidor’s *Duel in the Sun*,” in *Visual and Other Pleasures*; E. Ann Kaplan’s “Is the Gaze Male?” in *Women and
