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THE KING IS DEAD, LONG LIVE THE KING:
SHAKESPEARE'S *RICHARD II* AND ITS EARLY STAGE HISTORY

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ABSTRACT: William Shakespeare's plays have been staged in various sociopolitical contexts over the past four hundred years. *Richard II* was first performed c. 1595, but was not one of the most popular dramatic texts of the Bard. During the nineteenth century in London, however, when English artistic production in general developed a great interest in representations of the past, especially the Middle Ages, Shakespeare's King Richard returned to the stage in spectacular productions, such as the early-century staging starring Edmund Kean at the Royal Drury Lane Theater in 1815, and Charles Kean's "archaeological" production in 1857 at the Princess Theater. This article aims at presenting and discussing such stagings of *Richard II* in nineteenth-century London from the perspective of "medievalism."

Keywords: William Shakespeare. *Richard II*. Medievalism. Stage history. Nineteenth century. London.

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O REI ESTÁ MORTO, LONGA VIDA AO REI:
RICARDO II DE SHAKESPEARE E SUA HISTÓRIA DE PALCO

RESUMO: As peças de William Shakespeare foram encenadas em diversos palcos e contextos ao longo dos últimos mais de quatrocentos anos. *Ricardo II* foi levada ao palco pela primeira vez em c. 1595, mas não se tornou uma das peças mais populares do Bardo. Durante o século XIX em Londres, no entanto, período em que a produção artística inglesa desenvolveu grande interesse por representações do passado, principalmente da Idade Média, o Rei Ricardo de Shakespeare voltou à cena em espetaculares produções, como a de Edmund Kean, no Teatro Real Drury Lane, em 1815, e a produção “arqueológica” de Charles Kean, em 1857, no Princess Theatre. Este artigo busca apresentar e discutir tais encenações de *Ricardo II* sob o viés do “medievalismo”.

Palavras-chave: William Shakespeare. *Ricardo II*. Medievalismo. História de palco. Século XIX. Londres.

*O for a Muse of fire, that would ascend
The brightest heaven of invention,
A kingdom for a stage, princes to act
And monarchs to behold the swelling scene!*
Henry V (Prologue, 1-4)

INTRODUCTION – THEATRICALITY AND THE KING’S TWO BODIES

A play that features open opposition to the ruling monarch, his forced deposition and subsequent murder was bound to cause stir on stage, as the performance history of William Shakespeare’s *Richard II* illustrates. The present article aims at delving into the meaningful early stage history of the play, with focus on productions until the end of the nineteenth century and their associations with political contemporary matters. Before diving into that

stream, however, I would like to bring forth some themes in the play that have shaped its performance history.

The historical Richard of Bordeaux (1367-1400) and his twelve-year reign as Richard II were as theatrical as the character Shakespeare created for him at the very end of the sixteenth century. A king, after all, plays a role as much as an actor on stage. The theme of theatricality and role-playing is recurrent in *Richard II* and has been interestingly tackled by different productions throughout the centuries. Medieval political theology regarded the king as having two bodies: the body natural, his own breathing human body, and the body politic, a personification of the state. According to Jonathan Bate and Eric Rasmussen in the RSC edition of *Richard II*, “as body politic, the king was incarnation of the nation; as body natural, he was a mortal like anyone else. This was what made possible the paradoxical words ‘The king is dead, long live the king’” (2010, p. 10), a traditional dictum at the ascension of a new monarch, meaning that the body natural of the previous king is gone, but the body politic lingers on in the body natural of the new king or queen. In this sense, monarchy – the body politic – is immortal.

The idea of a king’s two bodies springs from the medieval belief in the divine right of kings – a belief that the monarch was an indisputable representative of God on earth. The acceptance of the king’s supernatural ability is what Rebecca Lemon considers the source of Richard II’s tyranny, in her political analysis of the play. According to Lemon, in depicting Richard’s “errancy, Shakespeare not only stages the spectre of tyrannical leadership before his audience, but he also locates the origin of this tyranny: it emerges from the king’s faith in his own divine right” (LEMON, 2012, p. 247). Richard’s abuse of power, his different penalties for Bolingbroke and Mowbray, and his indulgence of favourites are all rooted in his own certainty of his unquestionable place as king.

However, what Lemon states in her article and I firmly agree with, is that Shakespeare does *not* represent a tyrannical Richard on stage as a direct reference to Elizabeth I’s government and lack of military expertise in the final years of her rule, but as an established criticism against tyranny and against a possible tyrannical successor for the queen. The author affirms that “the play does not represent this political model of the divine right of kings neutrally. Shakespeare stages this doctrine as a prop for corrupt kingship, displaying a limit-case for divine right theory as subjects consent to rule by a murderous sovereign” (LEMON, 2012, p. 256). The play stages the threat of a tyrannical rule at the very end of the sixteenth century, when the old and unmarried Queen Elizabeth had no heirs to whom pass on the English crown, which was susceptible to fall in the hands of the Catholic Philip II of Spain

(1527-1598), who had a claim to the throne by means of his marriage to Mary I (1516-1558), the first daughter of King Henry VIII (1491-1547), or in the hands of the Infanta Isabella Clara Eugenia, Phillip's daughter with his third wife Elisabeth of Valois (1545-1568). The play's spectators at the time were certainly concerned with the fate of their kingdom.

The protagonist Richard, in Paul Yachnin's view, is not the centre of the play, nor his associations with other monarchs such as Elizabeth, but what matters the most in Shakespeare's play is its power to infuse historical awareness in the audience, who would see themselves as descendants and part of history itself. Yachnin suggests what an Elizabethan audience may have felt when facing Shakespeare's drama on stage, how

[...] it might have affected a crowd of people in 1595, some of them Londoners, many from villages and towns of the English countryside, many of them learning English history for the first time, many acquiring their first powerful sense of what it might mean to be English. Did they perhaps feel the blood of their ancestors and their ancestors' rulers under their feet in the very soil of the yard of the Theater? (YACHNIN, 2008, p. 133)

Whether the enraptured members of the audience managed to feel such historical awareness and belonging is impossible to tell, but Shakespeare's play definitely provides an opportunity for historical reflection. As Yachnin points out, Shakespeare's central purpose

[...] is not to create rational character, but rather to put character to use in order to cultivate in his audience members a sceptical spirit of historical inquiry that is inseparable from an unfolding awareness of themselves as a sacramental political community bound together by both their collective historical and political discernment and their common, guilty imbibing of their ancestors' and their ancestors' kings' blood. (YACHNIN, 2008, p. 134)

Such capacity to move the audience towards critical historical thinking illustrates the Shakespearean text's power as *theatre*: it reaches full potentiality not when read from a script, but when performed in front of an audience.

Directly related to the king's two bodies and the theatricality of kingship is the monarch's public self, body politic, in opposition to his private self, body natural. The public persona of a ruler is invariably a role-play, as King James I once said: "a King is as one set on a stage, whose smallest actions and gestures, all the people gazingly doe behold" (DOTY, 2010, p. 201). Jeffrey

Doty explains the comparison between kings and actors in terms of popularity, a term in development in the sixteenth century: “Kings and actors are subject to the same conditions of popularity: they must please demanding audiences, and vulnerability is a fundamental condition of both performances” (DOTY, 2010, p. 201). As the author explains, near the end of Elizabeth I’s reign, the term *popularity* had two main different but overlapping meanings: the first, a term to ridicule the public circulation of political arguments; and second, in relation to an individual’s use of public favour for political purposes. The second and most common meaning of the term at the time was closely related to the figure of Robert Devereux, the second Earl of Essex (1565-1601), one of Queen Elizabeth’s favourites (DOTY, 2010, p. 188-189).

The Earl of Essex is a central piece to understanding Shakespeare’s *Richard II* at the time of its production and early stagings. Essex “was the queen’s former favorite, the realm’s most important military commander, and England’s leading nobleman” (HAMMER, 2008, p. 4), one of the most important members of Elizabeth’s court. He is usually linked to *Richard II*’s Henry Bolingbroke, the future Henry IV. Charles Forker points out that “analogies between Richard and Elizabeth or between Bolingbroke and Essex are clearly available in *Richard II*, but how they are received resides largely in the eye of the beholder” (FORKER, 2002, p. 15). For late sixteenth-century spectators, some actions of Shakespeare’s Bolingbroke would no doubt remind them of the popular earl. Bate and Rasmussen relate Essex’s “embodiment of the martial code of chivalry and honour” (BATE; RASMUSSEN, 2010, p. 4), military skills and popularity to Shakespeare’s Bolingbroke. Indeed, “there is no precedent in Shakespeare’s historical sources for this striking image of Bullingbrook’s (sic) *popularity*” (BATE; RASMUSSEN, 2010, p. 6, my emphasis). Bate and Rasmussen regard this addition by Shakespeare as a way to establish contrast with Richard, who by the end of the play becomes more and more unpopular with his subjects. “Shakespeare thus illustrates the process of the two cousins being like two buckets, one descending down a well as the other rises up” (BATE; RASMUSSEN, 2010, p. 6). However, could creating dramatic opposition be the only reason for Shakespeare’s depiction of Bolingbroke’s popularity? Or was Bolingbroke depicted thus as a parallel to contemporary Essex?

The real Henry of Bolingbroke (1367-1413) as well as the Shakespearean character forced Richard II’s deposition to become the new ruler, Henry IV. The Essex’s 1601 Rising, as will be discussed later, prompted the idea that Essex’s followers wanted him as the successor for the heirless Elizabeth I. “What is more, he [Essex] claimed descent from Bullingbrook [sic], which made some people worry that he had aspirations to the throne himself”

(BATE; RASMUSSEN, 2010, p. 5). Whether Essex wished to depose his queen and whether Shakespeare depicted his Bolingbroke as a reference to the Earl, these questions will never be satisfactorily answered, although they prompt interesting reflections and productions.

The critic John Peter in a review of *Richard II's* production at the Gainsborough Film Studios in London in 2000 by the Almeida Theatre Company, directed by Jonathan Kent and with Ralph Fiennes in the role of Richard and Linus Roache as Bolingbroke, wrote about the *power of performance* in Shakespeare's play and how the two central characters' actions are based on role-playing: "In fact, Bolingbroke is acting; and one difference between him and Richard... is that he [Bolingbroke] acts when he needs to, like a professional, whereas Richard, who has an actor's temperament but not his skill, acts only out of emotional need, for an imaginary audience but mostly for himself" (qtd. in SHEWRING, 2012, p. 147). Both Richard and Bolingbroke act a persona in public: Bolingbroke, when he returns from banishment, acts the wronged nobleman who seeks revenge but in truth wants to seize the crown, and Richard acts the poor ruler betrayed by those who should revere and love him. Although I agree with Peter in his statement of Richard's acting as out of emotional need, I do not concur with his affirmation of Richard being an inefficient actor, quite the contrary, as the iconic scene of his own "de-crowning" illustrates. Richard is brought forth to Bolingbroke by officers in Act 4, Scene 1, and when asked by Henry if he is contented to resign the crown, he says, performing his own de-coronation:

Ay, no; no, ay; for I must nothing be;
Therefore no no, for I resign to thee.
Now mark me, how I will undo myself;
I give this heavy weight from off my head
[Gives crown to Bolingbroke.]
[...]
Make me, that nothing have, with nothing grieved,
And thou with all pleased, that hast all achieved!
Long mayst thou live in Richard's seat to sit,
And soon lie Richard in an earthly pit!
God save King Harry, unking'd Richard says,
And send him many years of sunshine days!
What more remains? (SHAKESPEARE, 4.1.201-222)

Richard's spectacle, which does not have himself alone as audience, but Bolingbroke, York, Northumberland, the Bishop of Carlisle and others, is

based on his power as body politic. As king he still has the authority to de-crown his body natural, which becomes a mortal body once again. An actor playing Richard in this scene on stage offers thus a dual level of role-playing: an actor playing a man who plays a king. Hence the complexity of performing the Shakespearean Richard. As the critic Michael Wright once said, “if stage roles are like mountains to be climbed, then Richard is the K2 to the Prince of Denmark’s Everest” (qtd. in SHEWRING, 2012, p. 136).

“A KINGDOM FOR A STAGE” – *RICHARD II* ON AND OFFSTAGE

All these aspects that make Shakespeare’s *Richard II* the complex play that it is offer a bucketful to producers who bring it to the stage, adding new layers of meaning according to their own purposes and backgrounds across the centuries. In Paul Hammer’s article on *Richard II*, he refers to it as “the most conspicuous and famous example of a Shakespearean play transcending the confines of theatrical production to enter into real-life political drama during the playwright’s own lifetime” (HAMMER, 2008, p. 1). As mentioned earlier, Shakespeare’s play illustrates the potentiality that theatre has as a place for historical and political awareness.

Jeffrey Doty uses the term “public sphere” to understand “the political consequences of the informal networks of interaction and exchange that people formed in connection with varieties of print culture or playgoing” (DOTY, 2010, 185-196). And the theatre was a place for such interactions, where ordinary people had access to political ideas and opinions. Doty explains the rise of an early-modern public sphere dating from 1575, when political matters became more public and the topic of conversations outside the court, such as the issue of Elizabeth I’s succession, an enigma that caused popular preoccupation regarding the future of the kingdom.

The fact is that the theatre was an open space for political debate which, free from constraints of social status, led many people to despise it. Stephen Gosson, a sixteenth-century writer, attacked the theatre “precisely because it invited critical judgment that exceeded the merely aesthetic realm: ‘an assemblie of Tailers, Tinkers, Cordwayners, Saylers, olde Men, yong men, women, Boyes, Girles, and such like’ are transformed in the theatre into the judges of faultes [of kings and queens] there painted out” (qtd. in DOTY, 2010, p. 192). Everyone was allowed to participate in the debate within the theatrical space – even to judge the behaviour of important historical figures depicted on stage – as long as they had the money to pay for the entrance.

Such powerful political and relatively democratic discussion atmosphere did not pass unnoticed to the followers of the popular Earl of Essex, ex-favourite of the queen and regarded by some as a suitable heir to the throne. After the first performance of the play around 1595,¹ *Richard II* was revived on 7 February 1601 by the Lord Chamberlain's Men after a request by supporters of Essex. This performance happened one day before the so-called Essex Rising: "one of the most famous, even notorious, events in the long reign of Queen Elizabeth I. On the morning of Sunday, 8 February, Essex and about one hundred gentleman followers marched out of Essex House and tried to rally the people of London to protect the earl from his private enemies" (HAMMER, 2008, p. 3). The general belief was that Essex had the purpose to march to the castle and force the queen to change some of the court leaders, with whom Essex and his supporters were not satisfied. However, given the special performance of *Richard II* the day before, which includes the forced deposition of the king and the rise of a nobleman as the next ruler, the fear in the court was that Essex hoped to follow the lead of Bolingbroke and seize the crown from Elizabeth. On this occasion, Essex and his followers were proclaimed traitors. Essex was executed in the Tower of London only seventeen days after.

The connections between the dangerous political matters in *Richard II* and the Essex Rising have been substantially dealt with by numerous critics. Nevertheless, "as Leeds Barroll warned, some of these claims have been wildly exaggerated and reflect a severely distorted understanding of the events of 7 and 8 February 1601" (qtd. in HAMMER, 2008, p. 3). Hammer states that Essex's supposedly *coup d'état* was imagined by the Earl's enemies in court, who were precisely afraid of that outcome. In addition, a traitor sentence would ensure the earl's death (HAMMER, 2008, p. 4). In fact, Walter Raleigh (1552-1618), a court gentleman, explorer and one of Essex's enemies wrote about him in a letter to Robert Cecil (1563-1612), the Earl of Salisbury: "He [Essex] will ever be the canker of her estate & saufty" (qtd. in HAMMER, 2008, p. 7). Linking Essex to an act of treason and to an attempt to seize the crown would fulfil the gentlemen's wishes.

¹ There is no consensus in criticism as to when exactly the play was first performed. Chris Fitter (2005) argues that it was staged between October 1594 (when Samuel Daniel's *The First Foure Bookes of the Civile Warres*, a book that the author considers to be one of Shakespeare's sources for the play, was registered) and August 1597 (when the First Quarto of the play was catalogued). One possibility is some time after the Accession Day tournaments from November 1595, since the spectacular chivalric appearance of the Earl of Essex on this occasion has parallels with the appearance of Bolingbroke in the first scene of Act I in Shakespeare's *Richard II*.

The Essex Rising definitely adds new topicality to the play, creating a resonance that did not yet exist at the moment of the play's creation some years earlier. Year by year, generation after generation, new events add distinctive topicalities to the play in performances ranging in time and place. After the production requested by the Essex's Men in 1601, the play was staged at the Globe by the Lord Chamberlain's Men on June 12, 1631, and then only again in 1680 with the adaptation by Nahum Tate (1652-1715),² according to the compilation in James G. McManaway's article.

Tate's adaptation, as Yachnin puts it, started a trend that would go on to the eighteenth century: "a tendency to want to fill in what they [the adaptors] see as explanatory gaps in Shakespeare" (YACHNIN, 2008, p. 124). For instance, York's abrupt change of sides, from Richard to Bolingbroke, and his condemnation of his own son for staying true to Richard is explained in Tate's adaptation: "Tate re-conceives York as a plain-talker, an opponent of [sic] Bullingbrook (sic), who, upon reflection, decides to support the new king because he has risen to the throne by due process of law" (YACHNIN, 2008, p. 132). Yachnin calls this process "rational characterization", an attempt "to make transparent and graspable what Shakespeare seems to prefer to leave obscure or indeterminate" (YACHNIN, 2008, p. 123). What ensues is a simplification of the interpretative layers in the Shakespearean text. Tate made crucial changes not only in Shakespeare's *Richard II*, but also in other Shakespearean adaptations. He famously rewrote the tragedy *King Lear*, for instance, with a happy ending.

Writing in the years following the Restoration of the monarchy in 1660, Tate was aware of the dangers of performing a play that staged a king's deposition and subsequent murder. Indeed, as Anthony Dawson and Paul Yachnin point out in the introduction to the Oxford edition of the play, his production was soon banned. For this reason, he changed the title to *The Sicilian Usurper* and changed the plot to Sicily. However, it was only a matter of time before the staging was banned once again. According to the editors, Tate "complained in a Preface to the published version (1681) that his innocent attempt to portray a 'dissolute' and 'ignorant' age was unjustifiably suppressed as a 'libel' upon the present" (DAWSON, YACHNIN, 2011, p. 80). Shakespeare's dramatic text found new topicality in the late-sixteenth century English society, who had witnessed the execution of Charles I in 1649 and the restoration of the monarchy with Charles II in 1660, who would reign until his death in 1685.

² These are the productions of which there are records. There might have been others that got lost.

As the eighteenth century unfolded, a period of Neo-classicist influence, the play was attacked by critics for lacking in unity. As Forker puts it, “generally speaking, Restoration and eighteenth-century critics objected to the play’s quibbling and rhyming style, to its unclassical structure and violations of decorum (such as onstage murder), to its paucity of stage action and to the unheroic weakness of its protagonist” (FORKER, 2002, p. 92). That is why adaptors of the play attempted to render it more suitable to eighteenth-century tastes. Lewis Theobald produced *Richard II* at Lincoln’s Inn Fields in 1719. As Dawson and Yachnin point out, Theobald cut the first two acts entirely, erasing much of Richard’s reproachable behaviour, and included a tragic love story between Lady Piercy, an invented daughter for Lord Northumberland, and Aumerle. When Aumerle is executed for treason, the broken-hearted young girl commits suicide (DAWSON, YACHNIN, 2011, p. 81). In the preface to the play, Theobald “excuses the many changes he made by declaring that what Shakespeare’s play needed was a way to incorporate its ‘many scatter’d Beauties’ into a ‘regular Fable’ – i.e. one ordered according to the eighteenth-century principle of dramatic unity” (qtd. in DAWSON, YACHNIN, 2011, p. 81). As the editors affirm, the production was extremely popular and ran for seven times in that year and three more in the following two (DAWSON; YACHNIN, 2011, p. 81). However, the political potency of the play was still latent and there were new topicalities that could be added to the interpretative spectrum of the play text. In order to avoid censorship, Theobald made it clear in the added prologue to the play: “The Muse presumes no Parallels to Draw” (qtd. in DAWSON; YACHNIN, 2011, p. 81), neutralizing any political associations with his present time.

The other known production of the play in the eighteenth century was that by John Rich at Covent Garden in 1738, requested by the Shakespeare Ladies Club, a group of unknown upper-class women who attempted to revive Shakespeare’s play. According to Emmet Avery, the club was “organized in the late months of 1736 and which set about promptly to persuade London’s theatrical managers to give Shakespeare a greater share in their repertoire” (AVERY, 1956, p. 153). And the ladies were quite successful; they “restored many of Shakespeare’s neglected plays to the boards, increased the frequency with which many of the familiar ones were presented, brought his works a great deal of publicity in an exceedingly short time, and became a model to later groups which similarly wished to improve the stage” (AVERY, 1956, p. 153). *Richard II* was one of the plays elected by these ladies. McManaway states that this was the first time the original text was performed in over a hundred years (MCMANAWAY, 1964, p. 163). It is important to emphasise that 1738 was one year after the imposition of the Theatre Licensing Act, which

gave the monopoly of legitimate spoken drama to two playhouses only: Drury Lane and Covent Garden. Censorship was also heavy. McManaway refers to a letter written by C. C. P. L. published in *The Craftsman* in July 1737 that enforced the Licensing Bill. The unidentified writer of the letter gave extracts of Shakespeare's *King John* and *Richard II* as examples of what should be banned from stage. This letter caused a stir and prompted responses from different sides for the freedom of the press and stage. Interestingly, all the lines quoted in the letter appeared in Rich's production, which leads McManaway (1964, p. 167-169) to infer that the manager's choice for *Richard II* was not accidental, but wished to attract the public to the theatre to see for themselves what C. C. P. L. considered so dangerous. The publication of the letter in *The Craftsman* and the effort of the Shakespeare's Ladies Club revived interest in *Richard II*. However, after this popular production, the play went to rest until the first decades of the following century.

The person responsible for bringing *Richard II* back to the spotlight was Edmund Kean (1787-1833), the famous Shakespearean. As Forker points out, Romanticism "brought sympathetic revaluation, not only of Richard's character as a subtle combination of feebleness and dignity but also of the play's secondary characters, its poetic splendours, its chiasmic structure, its blend of epic and tragic elements and its sense of dynastic politics as cyclical" (FORKER, 2002, p. 92). Indeed, the text is a majestic poetic endeavour, being one of the only Shakespearean plays written entirely in verse. Even minor characters, such as the gardeners, speak in a noble tone.

The text used by Kean for his production was adapted by Richard Wroughton and performed at the Drury Lane in 1815. The text suffered major changes: more than a third of the lines were cut, others were inserted, including extracts from other Shakespearean plays (the Queen in *Richard II*, for instance, speaks King Lear's words over the body of his daughter Cordelia when she finds her husband Richard dead on stage), and offers a more heroic view of the king (FORKER, 2002, p. 93). However, these changes did not bother the audience. According to Dawson and Yachnin, "Kean's 'passion' was contagious and audiences responded enthusiastically, despite (or perhaps because of) the depredations made to the final act of the play by its adapter" (DAWSON; YACHNIN, 2011, p. 83). As Bate and Rasmussen assert, Wroughton's text was a "natural successor" of Theobald's, who had "foregrounded spectacle" (BATE, RASMUSSEN, 2010, p. 129). Spectacle, however, was taken to another level by Edmund's son, Charles Kean (1811-1868), in his famous season of *Richard II* at the Princess's Theatre in 1857.

Kean was one of the most important names of what would later be called *Victorian extravagance*. Kean's pictorial and spectacular style moved the

play away from its political potency. As Forker puts it, “Kean emphasized the King’s pathos at the expense of the play’s political context” (FORKER, 2002, p. 93). The focus of the production was on the tragedy of Richard, played by Kean himself. The production was a huge success, it “had 112 performances – a first run of 86 consecutive performances, beginning on March 12, 1857, and a revival of 26 performances in the fall of the same year” (WILSON, 1967, p. 42), and it depended heavily on Kean’s extensive research of the fourteenth-century period. His aim was to combine entertainment with education, seeing in the theatre a means to offer historical knowledge for the audience. His production was accompanied by “an annotated and documented edition of his text [...] sold at performances along with an elaborate souvenir program which showed 15 of the 16 settings with characters grouped on them” (WILSON, 1967, p. 42). His effort to recreate the fourteenth-century atmosphere included historically researched costumes, settings and even historically accurate music. Dawson and Yachnin write that “the combat scene featured lifelike, though inanimate, horses, and Kean invented a triumphal entry for Bolingbroke into London [...] complete with five hundred extras” (DAWSON, YACHNIN, 2011, p. 84). This historical interpolation was created by Kean, as in the Shakespearean original Bolingbroke’s entrance in London is only told by York and not seen by the audience. His exaggerated care with historical authenticity “led to jokes that even the playbills were printed on ‘fly-leaves from old folio editions of the History of England’” (BATE, RASMUSSEN, 2010, p. 130). Kean’s effort to bring the fourteenth century back to life on stage marked the way theatre was made and influenced generations of Shakespearean productions afterwards.

Kean’s was indeed the most famous and successful production of *Richard II* in the nineteenth century. After him, two minor productions followed, which I will briefly comment. The first one was a revival by Frank Benson for the Stratford-upon-Avon festival. Benson, as Dawson and Yachnin reported, “as actor-manager, was still caught up in the pictorial tradition of Victorian performance, though without the archaeological fervour of Kean” (DAWSON; YACHNIN, 2011, p. 86). Benson performed the role of Richard himself, “skilfully contriving to endow the character with mingled strength, sensitivity and weakness in a way that commanded great sympathy, even in contrast to the manliness and pragmatism of Bolingbroke” (FORKER, 2002, p. 96). Indeed, Benson’s performance of Richard endorsed one of the two main perspectives on the character by the end of the Victorian era: the aesthetic school, which celebrated Richard’s refinement of sensibility, in opposition to the moralistic school, which emphasised Richard’s weakness and want of virility (FORKER, 2002, p. 95-96). Benson’s Richard was praised by important

names with aesthetic tendencies, such as William Butler Yeats and Charles Edward Montague.

The other late-nineteenth century production, indeed the last known performance of *Richard II* in the century, was staged by William Poel, founder of the Elizabethan Stage Society. The society had as aim to stage Shakespearean plays as they were supposedly originally performed in Shakespeare's lifetime. According to Forker, the production was staged without scenery in a lecture hall at the University of London in 1899 (FORKER, 2002, p. 96). In contrast to the massive historical stagings of Kean and the sensitive performance of Benson, Poel's project freed "the language and the actors, bringing them closer to the audience and enabling easy transitions from one scene to another. [...] these changes put the actors at the centre, highlighting what they had to say, and giving richer scope to the characters they portrayed" (DAWSON; YACHNIN, 2011, p. 87). Poel's production left behind the extravaganza of the nineteenth century and started a new trend that would go on to the following century: that of focus on character.

"INTO AN HOURGLASS" – FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

After taking a brief journey through the first three centuries of stage history of Shakespeare's *Richard II*, understanding the theme of theatricality in the play, and investigating its political potency and how it has reverberated in different moments in history, it is possible to understand the power of *theatre* in Shakespeare's *Richard II*. The play has found and explored different topicalities throughout the centuries, enriching the interpretative spectrum of the play text, inspiring new productions and awaking the audience to historical thinking.

Famously, the Chorus in the prologue to Shakespeare's *Henry V* evokes the presence of the muse of fire that could conjure "a kingdom for a stage, princes to act, / And monarchs to behold the swelling scene" (SHAKESPEARE, Prologue 3-4). As that powerful entity cannot be summoned, the Chorus invites the audience to use their own imagination and see "within the girdle" of the theatre walls "two mighty monarchies", real horses "printing their proud hoofs n'th' receiving earth" where there are none, and to turn "the accomplishments of many years / Into an hour-glass" (SHAKESPEARE, Prologue 19-31). Shakespeare incited the audience to *imagine* history on stage in *Henry V*, as well as in *Richard II* and other history plays. Later adaptors in possession of new technologies and different theatrical perspectives invited the

audience to *see*, such as Theobald, Edmund Kean, his son Charles, and Benson. Others, as Poel, found a way to “go forwards back to Shakespeare” – in Peter Brook’s words quoted by Margaret Shewring (2012, p. 144) – “re-establishing Elizabethan conditions of staging”.

The political potentiality in *Richard II* has aroused new interpretations due to newfound topicalities, such as the fear of Essex’s taking Queen Elizabeth I’s crown and the Essex Rising in the early-seventeenth century, the *The Craftsman* letter and theatre censorship in the eighteenth century, and a move away from politics in favour of spectacle in the nineteenth century.

As Shewring points out in the article where she analyses the topicality of the play in late-twentieth and early-twenty-first centuries productions, “*Richard II* sits, historically and politically, at the turning point of four centuries: the late medieval world of the fourteenth into the fifteenth centuries and the Elizabethan world of the sixteenth into the seventeenth centuries” (SHEWRING, 2012, p. 135). Yet its power is not confined to these four cornerstones on which it is rooted, but resonates in later decades and centuries, and possibly millennia ahead, inviting contemporary events to add new meanings to the play. And here I return to the words that title this article and to the possibility of stating “The king is dead, long live the king”. Although Shakespeare’s Richard is dead, as well as Kean’s, Benson’s, and of so many other actors who brought the character to life, it lives on when another actor picks up the gauntlet and accepts the challenge of breathing new life into Shakespeare’s creation. Indeed, the king is long dead, but long may he live!

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