Farewell, king! staging the Middle Ages in nineteenth-century London performances of Shakespeare's "Richard II"

Korovsky Moura, F.

Citation

Chapter 2

Remembrance of Things Past: Historical Drama and the Medieval Revival

To reverence the King, as if he were
Their conscience, and their conscience as their King,
To break the heathen and uphold the Christ,
To ride abroad redressing human wrongs.
To speak no slander, no, nor listen to it,
To honour his own word as if his God's,
To lead sweet lives in purest chastity,
To love one maiden only, cleave to her,
And worship her by years of noble deeds,
Until they won her; for indeed I knew
Of no more subtle master under heaven
Than is the maiden passion for a maid,
Not only to keep down the base in man,
But teach high thought, and amiable words
And courtliness, and the desire of fame,
And love of truth, and all that makes a man.

(Alfred Tenysson, *Idylls of the King*, ll. 68-83)

Periodisation is a question that plays a significant role in medievalist scholarship: when did the Middle Ages end and when can post-medieval recreations of the

Middle Ages be considered an example of medievalism? Mike Rodman Jones submits that not only is it important to distinguish the end of the Middle Ages, but also the beginning of modernity in order to understand medievalisms. For him, four aspects mark this transition in Western culture: first, politically, Henry VII's victory at Bosworth Field in 1485 and the beginning of the Tudor dynasty; second, textually, the development of print in William Caxton's print shop in Westminster in the 1470s, which prompted a shift from a scribal culture to mass production print; third, linguistically, the gradual standardisation of written English; and, finally, religiously, the Reformation, which is often considered as signalling the divide of religious culture between traditional Latin Christianity and the expanding modern fragmented churches (Jones 89). The turn from the fifteenth to the sixteenth century is, therefore, the cusp from medieval to Early Modern culture in England. Not surprisingly, it is also the moment when medievalist thinking began to establish. Nevertheless, the word *medieval* was only used at the beginning of the nineteenth century. Its first recorded use dates back to 1817 in a text on British monasticism. Until then, the word generally used to describe the pre-Renaissance period in history was *Gothic*, although it carried a negative connotation associated with the German barbaric tribes. It was from the 1830s onwards that the word *medieval* began to replace *Gothic*, which in turn became increasingly used to refer to the architecture style (Alexander xxiv).

Medievalism in sixteenth-century England arose as a reaction to changes in politics and religion, supporting the Protestant Church and legitimising the Tudor claim to the throne. Although England's medieval past was Catholic, it was revived selectively and reconstructed for specific purposes. Dominique Goy-Blanquet refers to the different historiographical tendencies in sixteenth-century Reformist or Anti-Reformist history writing, each searching historical precedence to endorse their own claims. While Anti-Reformists appointed their past and validity in the history of the solid Catholic Church, the Church of England legitimated their authority in God, whose existence predated Rome or any canon law (Goy-Blanquet 58). Henry VIII's English Church was in this perspective a return to immemorial customs prior even to Rome. These opposing movements aimed at either effacing the medieval past or rescuing it from destruction. It is an example of conflicting but paradoxically supplementing visions of the Middle Ages.

According to David Matthews, parallel to a nostalgic longing for the past, which he calls the "romantic Middle Ages" (15), the Middle Ages have also been regarded as dark, barbarous, and superseded – the "gothic or grotesque Middle Ages"

(Matthews 15). These two outlooks developed from a late-seventeenth-century dual perspective on the medieval past since the 1688 Glorious Revolution, which arguably sprang from the opposing Whig and Tory re-connections with the Middle Ages. The first, "a Whiggish celebration of the antiquity of British freedom," opposed to the "ultimately more influential, a Tory regret for the rejected feudal past" (Chandler 2). The Whigs looked to Anglo-Saxons' ideas about parliamentary kingship while the Tories leaned on Norman models of absolute monarchy introduced by William the Conqueror (c. 1028-1087). These two ensuing different approaches to the Middle Ages are not clear-cut divisions. On the contrary, they coexist and overlap in cultural reconstructions of the medieval past in what I call double-voiced medievalism.

By double-voiced medievalism I refer to the phenomenon of coexistent contrasting conceptions of the Middle Ages expressed in representations of the medieval past based on the tension between the grotesque and the romantic. These two categories are the extreme poles of this cultural phenomenon, and the artistic productions that reconstruct the medieval fluctuate in-between, inevitably pending to one side or the other. This fluctuating movement is constant, and hardly any artistic representation of the Middle Ages offers a completely grotesque or completely romanticised perspective of the medieval past.

Matthews explains that a gothicised conception of the Middle Ages is based on a simplistic idea that connects anything medieval to "threat, violence and warped sexuality" (15). The word *grotesque* derives from the word *grotto*, which means a cave, and from the Greek adjective *kryptos*, signifying *hidden* or *concealed*. Hence, the word *grotesque* refers to "darkness, obscurity, the hidden and repressed" (Matthews 20). Moreover, the "middle" of the Middle Ages refers to it as an in-between period, allocated after Antiquity and before Modernity, which conveys an idea of incompleteness or transition. According to Matthews, this tripartite division of history was devised by the Italian scholar Petrarch (1304-1374), who believed Modernity should favour a return to the Antiquity ideals, condemning the intermediate Middle Ages (Matthews 20). This idea was solidified during the Renaissance, when scholars were conceived to have overcome the 'dark ignorance' of the past.

Matthews mentions the antiquarian William Camden (1551-1623), who edited the medieval poetry anthology *Certain Poems, or Poesies, Epigrams, Rhythms, and Epitaphs of the English Nation in Former Times* in 1605. He wrote the following in the introduction to the piece: "I will only give you a taste of some of middle age, which was so overcast with dark clouds, or rather thick fogs of ignorance, that every

little spark of liberal learning seemed wonderful" (Matthews 21). Camden uses the words 'dark clouds' and 'fogs of ignorance' to refer to the medieval past, which significantly summarises the period's general prejudiced view on the Middle Ages.

Peter Raedts explains that Europe's perception of its medieval past changed from negative to positive from 1750 onwards. Raedts exemplifies his point with an episode from Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's (1749-1832) life in 1770, when the young man moved to Strasbourg to finish his law degree and met the philosopher Johann Gottfried Herder (1744-1804). Herder was by then already famous for praising German cultural roots in opposition to the classical ideals, and for encouraging the rescue and collection of traditional German tales and ballads. Persuaded by Herder, Goethe visited Strasbourg's countryside and became enchanted by Strasbourg cathedral, an immense Gothic building completed in the fifteenth century. Facing the Gothic architecture, Goethe realised he had fallen prey to "the prejudice of his day that the Gothic age was tantamount to disorder, unnaturalness, ornateness; [and that,] indeed, it was everything a person of good taste was supposed to dislike" (Raedts 1–2). In a moment of epiphany, Goethe acknowledged his previous biased opinion, and recognised the majesty of medieval German masters, such as Erwin von Steinbach (1244-1318), the main architect connected to the Strasbourg cathedral. As Raedts emphasises, although Goethe praised rather the artist responsible for the cathedral than the time and place he lived in, Goethe's essay "Von Deutscher Baukunst" (*On German Architecture*) (1773) contributed to the change of perspective regarding the Middle Ages at the end of the eighteenth century. As Raedts puts it, "never before had anyone who belonged to the band of leading intellectuals of his day praised a medieval monument so unconditionally and shown that medieval artists had been capable of an originality which was in no way second to that of the Greeks and Romans" (3). As part of the *Sturm und Drang* movement, Goethe saw in the Middle Ages an alternative to the rationalism and lack of creativity of classicism.

Raedts identifies two reasons for this perceptive shift in relation to the Middle Ages: first, the knowledge of other cultures beyond Europe as a result of the colonising overseas exploration, which offered contact with different ways of living and different beliefs, mostly incompatible with their own Christian history, expanding their understanding of the world and its history. Cultures were then understood to be following a sequence of three or four developmental stages: "the most primitive stage was that of the savages, the hunters and gatherers, still to be seen in America, subsequently the nomadic, cattle raising stage, then the sedentary, farming stage,

both usually labelled together as the barbaric age. That in turn resulted in the commercial civilisation phase, which eighteenth-century philosophers considered the highest stage of society". When history was understood as a process of *progress*, the Early Modern period was consequently regarded as a step forward from the Middle Ages, and Classical Antiquity could no longer be considered superior to what came after. It also meant that the medieval past was a necessary step for the establishment of eighteenth-century Europe as it existed then for Goethe and his contemporaries. Secondly, German scholars in the mid-eighteenth century such as Herder developed the idea that all cultures were equal and unique, and should thus be considered according to their own merits, not in comparison with contemporary European cultures. Likewise, medieval cultures should be regarded in their own right, and not in juxtaposition with Ancient Greece or Rome.

2.1 The Middle Ages in the Nineteenth-Century Imagination

As the centuries unfolded, the purposes of looking back at the Middle Ages varied. During the eighteenth and beginning of the nineteenth centuries in Britain, the idea of the medieval past and medieval romance was greatly affected by Edmund Spenser's epic poem *The Faerie Queene* (1590-1596), in which the poet allegorically refers to different knights and their virtues. As Clare Simmons explains, these artists evoked the Middle Ages as a time and space that offered opportunities for adventure and fantasy, inspiring the Romantic imagination (103). Walter Scott's (1771-1832) *Ivanhoe* (1820) offered the foundation for perceptions of the medieval past, depicting medieval tournaments, battles, sieges and trial by combat. Scott's medievalism inspired the 1839 Eglinton Tournament, organised and dedicated to Archibald Montgomerie, the 13th Earl of Eglinton (Simmons 112–13). Its purpose was to re-enact a medieval joust tournament, and its popularity is demonstrated by the attendance of thousands of spectators, including Prince Louis Napoleon Bonaparte (1808-1873).

In *An Account of the Tournament at Eglinton* (1839), James Aikman describes the tournament where "the Earl of Eglinton had resolved to revive the manly sports of those days in which his ancestors were so distinguished" as "a galaxy of beauty and brilliancy not to be surpassed in the fables of eastern romance", an "assemblage of fair women and brave men – themselves a spectacle of animating interest – that had come to shed lustre by their presence on the deeds of modern chivalry", de-

spite the overcast and rainy weather (Aikman 5; 7; 9). Aikman describes the ball on Thursday night:

> [It] was one of the most splendid sights we have ever seen. In the vast assemblage there were not above a dozen of plain dresses, and many of the costumes, both male and female, were truly magnificent. The principal dancing room, just previous to the opening of the ball, presented one moving mass of shining silks, waving feathers, and glittering jewels. Lord Eglinton and the Marchioness of Londonderry were remarked for the peculiar richness of their attire; but it was impossible to particularize others, for when you thought you had picked out the finest dress, your attention was immediately attracted by one that you imagined finer. (Aikman 14)

Figure 3 - The Tournament at Eglinton - August 1839 (March to the Tilting Ground) – Aikman, J. *An Account of the Tournament at Eglinton* (1839)

Interestingly, a review printed in the *The Pilot* from 4 September 1839 offers a rather different view of the whole pageant. Because of the intense rain in the first two days of the festival, the correspondent affirms that

> Never was there such a deplorable exhibition as the grand procession. The Marquess of Londonderry was completely drenched; he had a most grotesque appearance as he struggled to keep his royal robes around him; and exposed, unconsciously, a large umbrella, in the vain endeavour. The mail-clad knights looked grim, indeed not with valour, but vexation as the rain descended in pertinacious torrents upon the fine caparisons and nodding plumes of their steeds. The heralds and the poursuivants, and the esquires and the pages, and all the motley multitude, were sore dispirited; and Lord Eglinton himself, it was evident, although he strove to make the best of it, and put on a smiling countenance, was vexed and disheartened. (*The Pilot*, Wednesday 4 September 1839)

At the end of his contribution, the writer stated that "the Eglinton tournament is among the things that were, and will be long remembered as the most magnificent abortion that has been witnessed for two centuries", and adds a short mocking stanza: "Ill would it suit the dullard ear / Of distant listeners, to hear / All the vexatious I have borne / Since Tuesday night to Thursday morn" (*The Pilot*, Wednesday 4 September 1839). Clearly, the reconstruction of the medieval past and attempted revival of the idealised grandeur of jousting tournaments were perceived differently by these two chroniclers. The event aimed at creating the illusion of living in the past, to be experienced by both the role-players and the spectators. However, the illusion failed. Terrible weather conditions damaged the idealisation of the past and betrayed the artificiality of the plan. The two contradictory reports of the same event are an interesting example of the double-voicing surrounding medievalism: the opposition between and overlapping of a romantic and a grotesque Middle Ages. It is also a contrast between the ideal and the realistic, a disparity also explored in the literary production of the time.

The Tournament at Eglinton resonates with the nineteenth-century romantic quest for English roots in their medieval past. English identity was to be found in its own Middle Ages rather than in Ancient Greece or Rome, as done by the classicists in the sixteenth century. Chivalry became a powerful theme, especially during the Victorian era. Matthews affirms that the renewal of interest in

chivalry and the romanticised Middle Ages began mainly in poetry and literary studies in the beginning of the eighteenth century, particularly under the influence of the French historian Jean-Baptiste de La Curne de Sainte-Palaye (1697-1781) and the German poet and literary critic Friedrich von Schlegel (1772-1829) (Matthews 24–25). Thomas Percy (1729-1811), for instance, published *Reliques of Ancient English Poetry* in 1765, a collection of British ballads and popular songs; Thomas Warton (1728-1790) wrote a three-volume work on English poetry from the eleventh until the sixteenth centuries entitled *History of English Poetry* (1774-1781); and Richard Hurd (1720-1808) wrote *Letters on Chivalry and Romance*, published in 1762. The Romantic poets from the turn of the century, such as Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1772-1834) and John Keats (1795-1821), also found in the English Middle Ages a usable heritage for British culture in contrast with Classical antiquity. According to Simmons, by the end of the eighteenth century, England and northern Europe were overcoming the "cultural inferiority complex that privileged the literature and style of ancient Greece and Rome over indigenous history, arts, and culture" (103). Britain thus turned to its medieval past as a means to express nationalist sentiments and to construct its own national identity.

With the uncertain consequences of the industrialisation and urbanisation of the big cities, artists turned to old British folk traditions from the British Isles and Britain's Celtic roots, searching for a way of life more connected with 'nature' (Simmons 105). Examples of these Romantic efforts include the Ballad Revival movement of the late-eighteenth century. Walter Scott famously collected popular ballads and oral folk songs from the Scottish borders in his *The Minstrelsy of the Scottish Border*, first published in 1802 but expanded in later editions. This is an important moment in British medievalism, since, as Simmons puts it, it illustrates "the power of poetry to preserve national memory" (105). Literature was a way to rescue the roots of the British people.

The early-nineteenth-century historical novels feed on this recovery of the medieval past as the birth of British identity. Scott's *Waverley* novels (1814-1832), the unfinished *Queenhoo-Hall* by Joseph Strutt (finished by Scott and published in 1808), Jane Porter's *The Scottish Chiefs* (1810), and Thomas Love Peacock's *Maid Marian* (1822) are key examples of this trend. Moreover, medieval texts regained attention from scholars and antiquarians, and were re-printed, such as Geoffrey Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* (1476), Thomas Malory's *Le Morte D'Arthur* (1485) and William Langland's *Piers Plowman* (c. 1370-90). An interest in the medieval past prompted the desire to know more about it, replacing general ideas about the

Middle Ages based on both history chronicles and fiction with structured academic and archival research. As illustration, Simmons names Henry Hallam's *View of the State of Europe during the Middle Ages* (1818), Sharon Turner's *History of the Anglo-Saxons* (1799-1805), Robert Henry's *History of Great Britain from the first invasion of it by the Romans, Written on a New Plan* (1771), and the aforementioned antiquarian and engraver Joseph Strutt, who reproduced rare medieval illustrations, displaying the Middle Ages and the medieval ways of life to the modern reader. For instance, he published *A Complete View of the Dresses and Habits of the People of England* in two volumes in 1786 and 1799 respectively, and *The Sports and Pastimes of the People of England* in 1801 (Simmons 108–09). These historiographical works were not only valuable to aid readers to visualise the past and its people, but they were of immeasurable worth as a resource for theatre managers and set and costume designers, who relied heavily on works such as Strutt's to recreate the Middle Ages on stage.

The popular historical novels also found their way to the theatre. Scott's *Waverley* novels were a constant presence on the British stage from the first publication of the books. The first title of the series, *Waverley; or, 'Tis Sixty Years Since* (1814), set on the brink of the Jacobite uprising of 1745, reached Australia in 1822 at Perth Theatre Royal, and was later staged at Adelphi Theatre in March 1824, and at Edinburgh Theatre Royal in 1824, 1831, 1852 and 1871. *Ivanhoe* was staged for the first time one month after its publication at Surrey Theatre. Five other productions followed in the same year: at Coburg Theatre on 24 January, at the Adelphi on 27 January, simultaneously at Covent Garden and Drury Lane on 2 March, and at Birmingham Theatre Royal on 1 September. As the years followed, thirty more productions reached the stage until 1913, from operas to burlesques, pantomimes and even a production in German at Drury Lane in 1840 (Ford 20–27; 47–49).

In addition to tracing continuities and traditions, political reasons also account for establishing the Middle Ages as the set for a fictional narrative. In order to avoid censorship, turning to the past could be a veiled way to criticise the present state of affairs. As an example, Simmons mentions Robert Southey's dramatic poem *Wat Tyler* (1817) about the Peasants' Revolt in 1381 under Richard II's reign,[14] as well as his *Sir Thomas More; Or, Colloquies on the Progress and Prospects of Society*

---

[14] Southey wrote *Wat Tyler* as a young man, although it was not published then. The 1817 edition was an unauthorised publication by his enemies to expose Southey's early republicanism. Similarly to the poet William Wordsworth, Southey left his youth radicalism behind and became increasingly more conservative throughout his life.

(1829), where Southey suggests that "the English people had been happiest at the end of the Middle Ages" (Simmons 110). Apart from Sir Thomas More, Southey incorporated other medieval figures in his poetic works, including the paradoxical Joan of Arc in the eponymous poem from 1796, who had previously become a dramatic character in Shakespeare's *Henry VI*.

Shakespeare's history plays reviving the Middle Ages were constant in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century playbills. However, they were not the only such plays to be staged. New medievalist creations were continually produced, adding more layers to the reconstructions of the medieval past. According to Simmons, "while medieval drama began to be studied during the Romantic era, it does not seem to have been performed. On the other hand, dramas that referred very loosely to the medieval period and that involved medieval settings and costuming were extremely popular" (115). As examples, Simmons cites the Scottish poet and dramatist Joanna Baillie and her *Plays of the Passions* (1798-1812), Anne Yearsley's *Earl Godwin*, performed in 1789 and printed in 1791, and George Colman's *The Battle of Hexham* (1789), set during the War of the Roses, and *The Surrender of Calais* (1791), set during Edward III's reign (Simmons 115). The theatre was a dynamic medium to recreate the Middle Ages, since it deals not only with the printed word, but also with acting, setting and costuming, providing a three-dimensional reconstruction of the medieval past. Moreover, it was a means to familiarise the public with the medieval past, as well as a manner to criticise or elevate the present by comparison, and to raise the audience's awareness about the act of historical reconstruction.

2.2 Historical Reconstruction and the Illusion of "Living History"

As the Eglinton Tournament and the several medievalist plays that hit the London stages in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries illustrate, the past was gradually understood as "a foreign country", as L. P. Hartley once put it, a different way of living than today. However, David Lowenthal explains that "the past is a foreign country reshaped by today, its strangeness domesticated by our own modes of caring for its vestiges" (Lowenthal 4). Accordingly, the academic and artistic productions mentioned above have reshaped the past given their own yearnings and purposes. Lowenthal argues that the past began to be regarded as different from the present only in the late eighteenth century. Until then, "human nature supposedly remained constant, events actuated by unchanging passions

and prejudices. Even when ennobled by nostalgia or deprecated by partisans of progress, the past seemed not a foreign country but part of their own" (4). When this distance in time and place was established and "yesterday became less and less like today" (Lowenthal 4), people became increasingly fascinated about eras that were long gone. One of the consequences was the emergence of a desire to preserve and reconstruct the past as an alternative to one's own time; hence the antiquarian projects to save monuments and antiquities, and to start museums in Europe in the nineteenth century.

Stephen Bann identifies a "historical poetics" that was distinctive to the emergence in this period of a new way to acknowledge the past (*The Clothing of Clio: A Study of the Representation of History in Nineteenth-Century Britain and France* 6). Using a metaphor in *The Inventions of History*, Bann analyses the advertising poster of an exhibition at the British Museum in 1987-88 entitled "Views of the Past". On the poster, we find a reproduction of a 1782 watercolour by James Lambert of Bramber Castle, in Sussex. There, two figures look at the remains of the Norman castle, one of whom is sketching. Based on the exhibition's title and on the watercolour, Bann poses the following question:

> In what sense, if any, are these two figures – the artist and his companion – 'viewing the past'? Is there any sense at all in claiming that these attentive observers (and the late eighteenth-century people for whom they serve as surrogates) were not simply considering a piece of architecture in its natural setting, but 'viewing' history in one of its contemporary and concrete manifestations? (Bann, *The Inventions of History: Essays on the Representation of the Past* 122)

Whether the two men were indeed reflecting on the material vestiges of the past while looking at those ruins or not, it is impossible to say. However, Bann's speculative example illustrates the potential wish to look beyond stones to imagine the past.

Figure 4 – Lambert, James. *Drawings of Castles and Churches in Sussex*. 1779-1782. British Library, Add. MS 5676-5677

In addition to ruins and nature that have withstood the action of time, another way to look at the past is through architecture. In Romantic England, the movement devoted to preserve and reconstruct medieval architecture was known as the Gothic Revival. John M. Ganim emphasises that the idea behind medievalism and the Revival lies in conjuring up "an image of the built environment" (29). Whether authentically old or newly built with an old style, these buildings played a meaningful role in materialising the past in the present. When the two figures at Bramber Castle touch the ruins of the fortification, they are in fact touching the very same stones that sheltered the Braose family at the end of the eleventh century. The stones are a material connection bridging (many layers of) past and present.

It is no wonder that ruins captivated those interested in seeing and touching the material past. They were regarded as embodiments of history for having (partially) stood the test of time throughout centuries, bearing witness to the change of hundreds of seasons, and going far beyond the span of a human life. Britain's material past was furthermore the inspiration for modern medievalists, who sought

in medieval architecture a medium to return to former times. Horace Walpole (1717-1797), the author of *The Castle of Otranto* (1764), considered the first Gothic novel in English language, was famously responsible for rebuilding a small seventeenth-century house and turning it into Strawberry Hill, a majestic Gothic-style villa (See figure 5). In a chronological summary of the principal rooms at Strawberry Hill, W. S. Lewis lists over thirty rooms completed between 1748 and 1776, including a Great Parlour, Armory, Library, Round Drawing Room, Walpole's Bedchamber and Towers (Lewis 91). Strawberry Hill is a striking example of how the Middle Ages were re-created for eighteenth- and later nineteenth-century purposes. The medievalist movement of the period was significant for its political ideas, but also "its symbolic value as a metaphor of belief" (Chandler 10). Strawberry Hill was Walpole's "metaphor of belief", by means of which he expressed his idealised perspective of the medieval past, as well as a nostalgic longing for what these idealised Middle Ages could offer: romance, adventure and valour.

Of course, Strawberry Hill was an illusion, a way to "erase" the present and find refuge in an imaginary age. As Ganim points out, Walpole's villa "embodied an imagined vision of the Gothic, rather than a conscious imitation of existing medieval structures. Strawberry Hill would soon be dismissed by medieval revivalists in the early nineteenth century as an inconsistent confection built with techniques alien to medieval crafts" (30). This stage of the Gothic Revival is what Alexander calls "the playful, picturesque and theatrical phase of 'the Gothick architecture,' a phase beginning early in the [eighteenth] century with garden follies" (62).[15] Alexander also refers to Walpole's Strawberry Hill, calling it "the self-amusing papier-mâché tracery of Horace Walpole",[16] and adds more examples of contemporaneous architectural medievalist projects, such as William Beckford's "terror-Gothic 'Abbey'" at Fonthill, designed by James Wyatt in 1796. Walter Scott's "Scottish-Baronial" home Abbotsford House in the Scottish Borders is another remarkable example of early-nineteenth-century medievalism, where Scott sheltered his collection of curiosities and antiquities (Alexander 62–63). Chandler adds that Abbotsford House also illustrates the dynastic element of the Gothic Revival, since it could be regarded as Scott's claim to security and land establishment to

---

[15] The author refers to the spelling used by Walter Scott in his personal journal and widely used to refer to the eighteenth-century exaggerated Gothic.

[16] The ornamented ceiling in Strawberry Hill's Gallery is made of papier-mâché disguised as stone or wooden decorative details.

be bestowed to his descendants, replicating the notion of the ordered feudal ideal in the Middle Ages (Chandler 186).

Figure 5 – Strawberry Hill. Creative Commons License

As we have seen, the purpose of re-living the Middle Ages in Romantic England was not simply consequent of a historical interest in English cultural heritage. It was, rather, a nostalgic desire to go back to a simpler unindustrialised way of life. It is therefore no wonder that the medieval past began to be greatly idealised by the end of the eighteenth century, when the rise of industrialism and major economic and social changes impacted particularly England and Europe as a whole: urban development, agricultural machinery and the effects of the Revolution and dissolution of the monarchy in France could be felt on the continent and beyond.

A nostalgia for the past was consolidated with criticism on the poor working conditions of regular laborers at time. Augustus Pugin's book *Contrasts*, first published in 1836 and revised and republished in 1841, illustrates the divergence between present and past, comparing "the noble edifices of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries" with "similar buildings of the present day; showing the present decay of Taste", as he states in the book's subtitle. The word "noble" referring to late-medieval architecture reveals the idealised perspective with which Pugin looked at the past. According to Pugin, "on comparing the Architectural Works of

the last three Centuries with those of the Middle Ages, the wonderful superiority of the latter must strike every attentive observer; and the mind is naturally led to reflect on the causes which have wrought this mighty change, and to endeavour to trace the fall of Architectural taste" (1). For Pugin, the decline of architectural majesty in England is intrinsically connected to the decline of Catholicism and the rise of Protestantism. The nineteenth-century architect claims that "the triumph of these new and degenerate ideas [since the reigns of Henry VIII and Francis I] over the ancient Catholic feelings, is a melancholy evidence of the decay of faith and morals at the period of their introduction, and to which indeed they owe their origin" (Pugin 13). Pugin's impression of the Middle Ages is by no means impartial, since it is imbued with his religious beliefs and his faith regarding the superiority of Catholicism. His architectural medievalism, including the interior design of the Palace of Westminster in London, has become an intrinsic part of the Gothic Revival. However, neither the term Gothic Revival nor Victorian Gothic were used by Pugin himself: "It was only a generation later, in 1872, that C. L. Eastlake in publishing the earliest *History of the Gothic Revival* established the former in English usage" (Hitchcock 7).

The Gothic Revival in England began in the early eighteenth century, "when clients and designers, in contrast to the almost unconscious post-medieval 'survivalism' characteristic of the work of many craftsmen-builders in the seventeenth and even the eighteenth centuries, began to aim at imitating, however superficially, however frivolously, the decorative aspects and the picturesque massing of medieval structures" (Hitchcock 9). For Pugin, these Neo-Gothic buildings, although constructed in the nineteenth century, could not be considered nineteenth-century buildings. In fact, he manufactures the illusion that it was possible to erect a medieval building in the present by using medieval techniques. He makes the following distinction in the preface to the second edition of *Contrasts*: "revivals of ancient architecture, although erected in, are not buildings of, the nineteenth century, – their merit must be referred back to the period from whence they were copied" (Pugin v). Pugin's conviction reveals the nineteenth-century beliefs that the past could be, literally, re-constructed.

Pugin's definition of "pure Gothic" or "pointed architecture" is based on the construction style and "decorative complexity" from the late-fourteenth and early-fifteenth-centuries, which "recall the moment of the last complete hegemony of Catholicism, on the eve of the Reformation" (Ganim 31). Pugin's architectural style consequently manifests his support of Catholicism, congruent with the An-

glo-Catholicism of some members of the Oxford Movement. Conversely, it avoids the late-Gothic perpendicular style, which can be seen in King's College Chapel in Cambridge, for instance, for its connection with "Henry VIII's projects, and therefore with both apostasy and persecution of Catholics, though Pugin never makes this rationale explicit" (Ganim 31). Ganim goes on to explain that "as the nineteenth century developed, Pugin's identification of the Gothic as a quintessentially Catholic style would be challenged by the adaptation of the style for other purposes, including civic institutions, especially in the north of England, and evangelical Protestant churches around the Empire" (31). In fact, it was his Catholicism that hindered Pugin from being properly recognised for his work and from receiving public commissions. As Alexander puts it, "the silence about Pugin on the part of the leading advocates of a return to medieval ideals was not professional jealousy but anti-Catholic prejudice" (66), even after the Catholic Relief Act of 1829, which allowed Catholic members to sit in Parliament.

Pugin's medievalist project to re-build Catholic England is a biased and idealised re-imagination of the past. Alexander explains that "Pugin's vision of English life during the Wars of the Roses is amusingly serene, and should be taken not literally but symbolically" (69). It is the role of the medieval past as a Catholic symbol that fuelled Pugin's medievalism. Additionally, Pugin also regarded industrialism as a cause for the contemporary state of decay; he felt that "the increase of industrial production ha[d] come at a dire human and spiritual cost, visible in greed, cruelty, social division and harshness of urban life" (Alexander 69). In *Contrasts*, for example, Pugin compares a Catholic town in 1440, which landscape is enriched with Gothic-towered chapels, abbey and guild hall, with the same place in the mid-nineteenth century. A stone wall circles the medieval town, and outside the gates it is possible to see some people interacting in a field behind the church and a single person rowing a boat. The feeling produced is of idyllic peace and community. In contrast, the description of the same town in 1840 emphasises the change in the landscape: the tall Gothic towers and churches have been replaced by square plain buildings, such as the new jail. Of the imposing Abbey there are only ruins, and the New Parsonage House and Pleasure Grounds feature a Neoclassical architectural style. Walking on the path in front of the parsonage house, it is possible to distinguish a woman holding a boy's hand, pushing a cart with two children, followed by yet another child. The picture implies suffering, since the woman walks with her back bent and head down, suggesting exhaustion. Finally, the landscape is complete with over fifteen chimneys releasing pollution in the

once clean air of the 1440s. As a result of comparing the harshness of the present with the picturesqueness of the past, the medieval feudal system was thus revisited with nostalgia. As Chandler explains, "in contrast to the alienated and divisive atmosphere of an increasingly urbanized and industrialized society, the Middle Ages were seen as familial and patriarchal" (3). Moreover, the lost bond between master and employees was regretted, along with grief for the loss of connection with nature, which can also be identified in Pugin's illustrations.
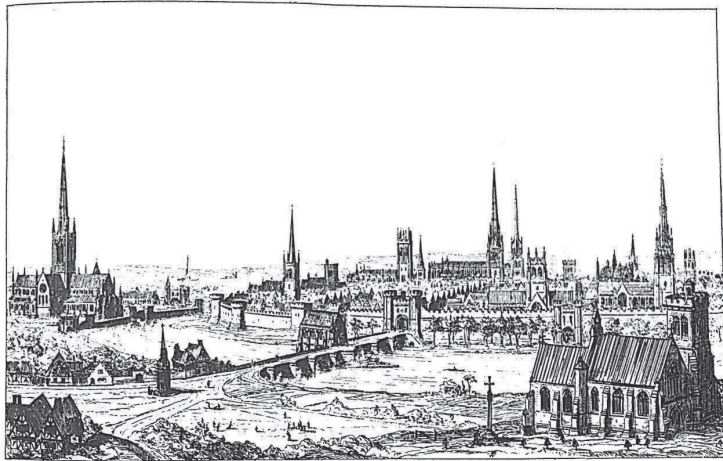
Figure 6 - Catholic town in 1440. Pugin, A. *Contrasts.*
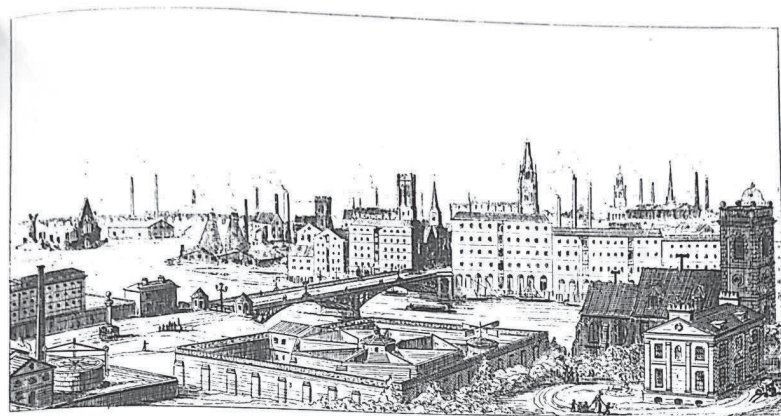
Figure 7 - The same town in 1840. Pugin, A. *Contrasts.*

The re-evaluation of the medieval past which started in the mid-1700s carried on to the nineteenth century, when the relationship with the Middle Ages changed from interest to idolatry by a great number of people. Surely, the medievalist "dream of order", as Chandler calls it, was an idealised agenda. It was mainly a desire to get lost in an illusion of a romantic past, "a period of heroic action and belief" (Chandler 125). Simmons mentions Kenelm Henry Digby's (c. 1797-1880) *Broad Stone of Honour, or Rules for the Gentlemen of England*, first published in 1822. For Digby, the Middle Ages symbolised what the future of England could be, especially in relation to chivalric and Christian values, as illustrated by stories of King Arthur and Charlemagne (Simmons 112–13). Digby advocated a return to "the custom of our ancestors", that youth should be instructed and trained "to piety, heroism, loyalty, generosity, and honour; that men might learn to emulate the virtues of their famous ancestors, and as Christian gentlemen, to whom Christendom was a common country, to follow the example of those ancient worthies who were the defenders of the church, the patrons of the poor, and the glory of their times" (Digby 4). Digby's words demonstrate how the idea of the medieval ideal was intrinsically connected with honour, piety and gender ideals.

Medieval heroism and the idea of the hero were also studied by the medievalist Thomas Carlyle (1795-1881). Carlyle's *Past and Present* (1842) was published during a period of hardship when rural England had suffered with bad harvests in 1837, bank failures in 1838 and the closing of cotton factories in 1839. By that time, paupers made almost one tenth of the English population (Chandler 137). In such a trying period, looking back at an idealised medieval past where lords, vassals and serfs could rely on reciprocal allegiance was appealing. Chandler points out that Carlyle had turned to German Idealism and Romantic writers in a search for meaning and purpose, and their ideas prompted him to develop a biased perspective in favour of the Middle Ages (124).

When referring to "heroes", Carlyle meant moral and unselfish men who would be concerned with the welfare of society as a whole. In other words, the hero was a modern-day knight following the chivalric code. To exemplify his medieval hero, Carlyle presents Lord Edmund, a landlord who possessed a large amount of land in Eastern England. He was a man with an ordinary life, who "did go about in leather shoes, with *femoralia* and bodycoat of some sort on him; and daily had his breakfast to procure; and daily had contradictory speeches, and most contradictory facts not a few, to reconcile with himself" (Carlyle 56). Although a simple and normal man, his existence benefitted others, providing him with admiration and rendering him

a hero. He managed to lead such a life "by doing justly and loving mercy"; he had walked "humbly and valiantly with God, struggling to make the Earth heavenly, as he could: instead of walking sumptuously and pridefully with Mammon, leaving the Earth to grow hellish as it liked" (Carlyle 57). The counterpart of Lord Edmund was Carlyle's contemporary man. In the modern world, the medieval hero is transformed into the ordinary working man, the one who "stood bravely in defense of his own", and "needed no yeomanry-cavalry to keep his tenants in order" (Chandler 141). The nineteenth-century knight was in danger of extinction.

The striking contrast between past and present became tangible to Carlyle when in September 1842 he visited the workhouse of St. Ives and the ruins of St. Edmund's Abbey. Just as for Pugin, to whom the contrast between a medieval and a modern poor house in 1836 had symbolised the decline of England, the differences between the workhouse and the abbey ruins represented for Carlyle the British decay since the Middle Ages. Carlyle noticed that "in the workhouse healthy inmates sat enchanted in their 'Bastille,' victims of a do-nothing government and a laissez faire economy; [while] in the abbey they had once received wise government in their prosperity and ample charity in their need" (Chandler 138). From this first comparison, Carlyle developed others in *Past and Present*, where he opposes the chaotic present with a harmonious medieval past, using the same contrasting narrative technique as Pugin in *Contrasts*.

When looking at the ruins of the Abbey of St. Edmundsbury, Carlyle reflects on how history loses materiality when tucked away inside history books:

> Alas, what mountains of dead ashes, wreck and burnt bones, does assiduous Pedantry dig up from the Past Time, and name it History, and Philosophy of History; till, as we say, the human soul sinks wearied and bewildered; till the Past Time seems all one infinite incredible grey void, without sun, stars, hearth-fires, or candle-light; dim offensive dust-whirlwinds filling universal Nature; and over your Historical Library, it is as if all the Titans had written for themselves: DRY RUBBISH SHOT HERE! (Carlyle 53)

How different the historical experience is when, rather than looking at pages from a book, one has the opportunity to look at material vestiges of the past, conjuring the souls of men and women long gone and imagining how life must have been like in those days. It is as if Carlyle, just like so many other "Romantic myth-makers,

[...] [were] ultimately vindicating a notion of resurrection from the dead – 'let these bones live!'" (Bann, *The Inventions of History: Essays on the Representation of the Past* 143). When looking at the walls of St. Edmund's Abbey, originally founded in the eleventh century, Carlyle reflects: "it was a most real and serious purpose they [the walls of the abbey] were built for! Yes, another world it was, when these black ruins, white in their new mortar and fresh chiselling, first saw the sun as walls, long ago" (53). Indeed, the sense of historical awareness is distinct when one is in material contact with the past, albeit divided by a barrier of time.

In Ralph Waldo Emerson's review of *Past and Present*,[17] Emerson refers to Carlyle as "a powerful and accomplished thinker, who has looked with naked eyes at the dreadful political signs in England for the last few years" (7). Such "dreadful political signs" are vividly described by Carlyle in the beginning of his book:

> England is full of wealth, of multifarious produce, supply for human want in every kind; yet England is dying of inanition. With unbated bounty the land of England blooms and grows; waving with yellow harvests; thick-studded with workshops, industrial implements, with fifteen millions of workers, understood to be the strongest, the cunningest and the willingest our Earth ever had; these men are here; the work they have done, the fruit they have realised is here, abundant, exuberant on every hand of us: and behold, some baleful fiat as of Enchantment has gone forth, saying, "Touch it not, ye workers, ye master-workers, ye master-idlers; none of you can touch it, no man of you shall be the better for it; this is the enchanted fruit!" On the poor workers such fiat falls first, in its rudest shape; but on the rich masterworkers too it falls; neither can the rich master-idlers, nor any richest or highest man escape, but all are like to be brought low with it, and made 'poor' enough, in the money-sense or a far fataller one. (Carlyle 17)

Carlyle's discourse resembles the speech given by Gaunt in *Richard II*. Carlyle refers to England's wealth and diverse produce, the bountiful land, thriving harvests, and the industry of the "strongest", "cunningest" and "willingest" workers in the world. Despite the natural richness, "England is dying of inanition", because they are stuck in a "fatal paralysis", and cannot profit from their own land. Gaunt's speech in 2.1 praises England, "this other Eden, demi-paradise, / This fortress built

---

[17] Published in *The Dial* in July 1843.

by Nature for herself" (2.1.47-48), and its "happy breed of men" (2.1.50). However, this "blessed plot" is "now leased out", "like a tenement or pelting farm" (2.1.55, 65-66). Both Carlyle and Shakespeare's Gaunt grieve the present situation of their England, looking back at the past as a more suitable alternative.

As Emerson puts it, Carlyle's *Past and Present* "firmly holds up to daylight the absurdities still tolerated in the English and European system. It is such an appeal to the conscience and honour of England as cannot be forgotten, or be feigned to be forgotten" (Emerson 7). Emerson's words, as well as Carlyle's and Gaunt's, reflect a romanticised view of the Middle Ages and of the natural world. Nature is, after all, another materialisation of the past: it is antiquity. When man loses connection with nature, he becomes miserable: "had he faithfully followed Nature and her Laws, Nature, ever true to her Laws, would have yielded fruit and increase and felicity to him: but he has followed other than Nature's Laws; and now Nature, her patience with him being ended, leaves him desolate" (Carlyle 36). In contrast to the medieval man who had a harmonious connection with nature, the nineteenth-century man has forfeited it for industrialisation and profit exploration, and now suffers the consequences of his actions.

The influential social critic and medievalist John Ruskin (1819-1900) also reflected on material vestiges of the past left in architecture and art. He regrets how modernity intervenes with historic buildings and artefacts. John Ganim affirms that Ruskin disapproved of the approach of French architects such as Eugène-Emmanuel Viollet-le-Duc (1814-1879) and Jean-Baptiste Antoine Lassus (1807-1857), and their attempt to rebuild or renovate medieval constructions in ruins. Ruskin advocated that maintaining the ruins would offer the viewer a point of contact with the people who had built and used the buildings. This experience is more authentic than reconstructed sites based on modern ideas of Gothic art and architecture (Ganim 33). Ruskin's approach is connected with late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth-century interest in ruins, as exemplified by Lambert's illustration of Bramber Castle mentioned above. The fascination with ruins was also expressed in poetry, especially in poems from the Graveyard school, whose pre-Romantic members turned to stones, skulls, tombs and ruins to ponder over mortality, fragments and their sense of sublime. According to Chandler, "the ruins were meant to give a park or garden a pleasurably romantic gloom. They show in their landscape setting the same attempt to couple nature and the past that was characterizing the poetry of the time and the same attempt to use the faraway in time and place as a

stimulus to emotion" (185). Nature was therefore a means of connection between past and present, while the ruins were the material vestiges of this connection.

As Carlyle and Pugin had done, Ruskin returned to the Middle Ages as a contrast to both the alienating and materialistic culture of modern life and Ancient Rome. Ruskin's medievalism is based on an establishment of relationships between the natural order and the medieval state, on a belief in nature and nature's God (Chandler 196). In his famous three-volume *The Stones of Venice* (1851-1853), Ruskin depicts the history of the Italian city from medieval to modern days, going from the Byzantine period, through its Gothic phase up until its Renaissance. According to Ruskin, the city's architectural decline is symbolic of the decline of society after the Middle Ages. Despite his later scepticism in religion, Ruskin viewed the Middle Ages as a period of belief. In this sense, medieval architecture was strictly interwoven with faith, and Gothic was the quintessential style for worship, since it depended on no trivial embellishment and allowed for freedom and self-expression. Although in the appendix to *The Stones of Venice* Ruskin belittled Pugin's skills as an architect along with his Catholic approach, both medievalists identified in medieval architecture its connection to faith and a superior way of life. Regardless of their religious backgrounds, Pugin, Ruskin and Carlyle identified in the return to the Middle Ages a reconnection with a more creative, spontaneous and democratic way of life, which had been lost by their nineteenth-century contemporaries.

Finally, medievalism in the nineteenth century also found extensive representation in paintings. As Chandler explains, "although medievalist painting is usually thought to have begun in England with the founding of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood in 1848 and thus to have started almost one hundred years after the Gothic Revival, medievalism in the arts actually had a very long genealogy" (191). An example of early art medievalism is the Nazarene Brotherhood, a group of German and Austrian painters based in Rome who had a great effect on the later Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood in England, although the latter tended to negate the connection with the former because of the Catholicism of the Nazarenes. The members of the German brotherhood attempted to revive in contemporary painting the spirit of the medieval artist, especially the early Italian painters. For the Nazarenes, the nobility of the medieval artists rested on their sacrificing their individuality for the community (Chandler 191–92). Prominent members were Peter von Cornelius (1783-1867) and Johann Friedrich Overbeck (1789-1869). In Great Britain, there were also painters who preceded the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood in depicting the Middle Ages on canvas, including the Scottish William Dyce

(1806-1864), the English John Frederick Lewis (1804-1876), and the Irish Daniel Maclise (1806-1870). However, the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood were indeed the most significant exponents of the medievalist thought and what they imagined to be medievalist practice in nineteenth-century art. The Brotherhood started in 1848 when seven young members from the Royal Academy Schools with similar artistic principles got together to propose a return to a style of art previous to Raphael's Renaissance techniques. The artistic creations produced by the members[18] carried the letters PRB, and included a variety of genres – poems, paintings, sculptures, amongst others. By placing medieval art in a superior stance to Renaissance Classicism, the Brotherhood subverted the academic canonical order. As Alexander puts it, "the avant-garde overturns the immediate past in the hope that the future may resemble a remoter past" (126). And this remoter past, the Middle Ages, was the source of the artists' idealised inspiration. They exchanged the conventions of classicism for a less rational look at nature.

The examples mentioned above in diverse areas of expression illustrate how important the contrasts and connections between past and present are for the medievalist thought, especially in the long nineteenth century. Chandler explains that such opposition was also founded on a longing for imagination and emotion, challenging modern rationalism. In this perspective, medieval society united men through bonds of loyalty and generosity, while the egotism of modern society led men apart (Chandler 153). In politics, the return to feudalist thinking inspired the creation of a new political grouping following a split within the Tory party in the 1840s. The Tories had been associated with tradition, conservatism and medievalism, while the Whiggish party advocated liberalism and material progress. As Chandlers puts it, "the 'New Toryism' of the 1840s, like the contemporaneously developing Oxford movement, was quite deliberately retrogressive, seeing in a return to ancient principles a bulwark against corrosive liberalism" (157–58). The split within the Tory party began in the 1830s, when Sir Robert Peel (1788-1850) led some of the members to think about reconciling with the prospering industrial class, moving to a more liberal and mercantile approach (Chandler 158). The opposing group within the party led by Benjamin Disraeli (1804-1881) and the Young

---

[18] The three founders were Dante Gabriel Rossetti (1828-1882), William Holman Hunt (1827-1910) and John Everett Millais (1829-1896), who were later joined by the poet William Michael Rossetti (1829-1919), the painter James Collinson (1825-1881), the art critic Frederic George Stephens (1827-1907) and the poet and sculptor Thomas Woolner (1825-1892).

England party rejected Peel's ideas, and "posited instead a new political philosophy – one might well say, a new feudalism – that attempted to forge a bond between the landed aristocracy and the laboring masses" (Chandler 158). The main objectives of this new party were to restore the reputation and prominence of the monarchy and England's traditional institutions, to reconcile all classes, and to improve the life conditions of the poor (Chandler 159). It was undoubtedly an ambitious and idealising project. As Chandler emphasises, the party was characterised by its influences from romanticism, a touch of dandyism – "the white-waistcoats of Lord John Manners and his friends were almost as much discussed in society as Disraeli's rings and ruffles" (Chandler 159) –, preference for ceremony and ritualism, an interest in the Anglo-Catholic revival, and a wish to unite Church, the State and the people. As an illustration, an extract of Lord Manners' poem *England's Trust* (1841) provides an interesting representative of Young England's longing for the medieval past:

> Gone are the days and gone the ties that then
> Bound peers and gentry to their fellow men
> Now in their place behold the modern slave,
> Doomed from the very cradle to the grave,
> To tread his lonely path of care and toil
> Bound, in sad truth, and bowed down to the soil;
> He dies, and leaves his sons their heritage—
> Work for their prime, the workhouse for their age. (qtd. in Chandler 162)

Manners' poem is also reminiscent of the contrasts in Pugin's book, depicting an idyllic medieval community in opposition to the suffering and exhaustion of the "modern slave". Although Lord Manners and several of his Young England fellow members came to realise that an idealised rural program could not be the only approach to fighting the hardships of nineteenth-century England, its creation is representative of the young medievalists' early beliefs and their relationship with the medieval past.

Conclusion

This chapter has investigated the reception and reconstruction of the Middle Ages at the end of the eighteenth and beginning of nineteenth century in order to provide context for the analysis of the *Richard II* productions that compose the main corpus of this research. I began this discussion by problematising the demarcation of the end of the Middle Ages. As Rodman Jones explains, the shift between the medieval past and the beginning of modernity can be traced to Henry VII's victory at Bosworth Field in 1485, the development of William Caxton's print shop in the 1470s, the progressive establishment of a standard form of written English, and the Reformation. Therefore, there is not one specific event that marks the end of the Middle Ages, but a combination of factors that contributed significantly to a change in the ways of living. All the representations of the medieval past subsequent to this shift are objects of study in the field of medievalism. This chapter has briefly discussed examples of medievalism in Early Modern Britain, such as the work of history chroniclers and the rise of the history play. This was followed by a more comprehensive overview of medievalisms in the nineteenth-century British imagination, covering the Tournament of Eglinton and its failed attempt to recreate a medieval tournament; Walter Scott and the rise of the historical novel; the Gothic Revival in architecture, and a renewed interest in feudalism, as well as in Christian and chivalric values.

Moreover, in this chapter I have explained the concept of double-voiced medievalism, which analyses the circumstances affecting reinterpretations of the medieval past that fluctuate between an idealised/romantic perception, on the one side, and a grotesque/barbaric perspective, on the other. This dualism is a consequence of opposing Whig and Tory reconnections with the medieval past since the Glorious Revolution of 1688: the first advocated individual freedom, liberalism, and progress, while the second praised tradition and conservatism, nostalgically lamenting the end of a feudal 'harmonious' hierarchy. This polarisation inevitably affects all representations of the Middle Ages, which are intrinsically associated to the historical, cultural and political contexts of the time. Hence the importance of evaluating these conditions prior to analysing Edmund Kean's, Macready's and Charles Kean's reinterpretations of Shakespeare's *Richard II*.