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

Korovsky Moura, F.

Conclusion

When a theatre performance is over, the curtains are drawn and the spectators go home, the scenes that were so vividly represented on stage remain as a shadow, a ghost in the viewer's mind. It is this ephemeral quality of theatre that renders the moments shared by audience, actors and playwright, so precious. The theatre, in fact, exists only in the moment of performance, only in the present time. Although each performance is indeed unique, the idea of the ephemeral nature of theatre is in a sense an illusion. That is because a key element of the theatrical activity is repetition – every night, for a specific number of nights, the same action is re-enacted on stage. The performance becomes the *here* and *now* every time the ensemble is put together, creating an illusion of *presentness* in a loop. For example, every time Shakespeare's *Richard II* is brought to the stage, King Richard's presentness comes into relation with the audience's presentness, while the stage functions as an illusionistic bridge that connects past and present. In fact, the stage works as a sort of time machine, absorbing the audience and trapping them momentarily in an illusion of time travel.

Artistic engagements with the past become more prominent as the nineteenth century unfolds, a consequence of the increasing awareness and understanding of the past as different from the present, and, therefore, as exotic and intriguing; this is also a consequence of the development of new technologies, such as the daguerreotype and the photograph in the 1830s, which initially promised an impartial and objective depiction of reality. However, the objectivity of photograph is also an illusion. The camera catches a possible impression of reality, inevitably filtered by the artist.

In this dissertation, I have taken Shakespeare's *Richard II* as the starting point for my analysis of the interactions between past and present in textual, theatrical

and visual adaptations of the play. In c. 1595, Shakespeare returns to Richard II's reign, recreating fourteenth-century England for the Renaissance stage. In 1793, the painter James Northcote paints a canvas for the Boydell Shakespeare Gallery, materialising Richard and Bolingbroke's entrance in London, an event that is not directly shown but only described in Shakespeare's play. In 1815, Richard Wroughton adapts Shakespeare's text, rescuing the play from its relative obscurity; the play is in turn performed by Edmund Kean at Drury Lane in the same year; and later re-created in 1850 and 1857, when William Charles Macready and Charles Kean revive *Richard II* at the Haymarket and the Princess's Theatre, respectively. The examples discussed in detail in this thesis illustrate the interconnections between stage, page and picture in different moments of time, adding new interpretative layers to the reconstruction of Richard II's medieval past. I have shown how these productions elucidate the complexities of negotiating the past in art. Edmund and Charles Kean and Macready engage with the medieval past *through* Shakespeare, inevitably modifying and historicising the Shakespearean text for their time and audience. The result is a constant flow of rupture and continuities.

At the beginning of this study, I set out to explore the theatre as a place for political awareness, discussion and interaction in the first half of the nineteenth century. As the Chorus in Shakespeare's *Henry V* emphasises, the audience plays a significant role in recreating the past on stage and drawing associations with their contemporary time. This process is interpretative and creative at its core, and therefore dynamic, since the topicalities triggered by the play reflect the concerns of the age.

The theatrical audience is composed of a group of private individuals who, together, form a public circle of influence. Within the theatrical public sphere, they can feel free to "kindly judge" the play, along with the historical people and events it recreates. This freedom is allowed by the assumed fictionality of the stage. The theatre's potential for existing as a space for political discussion led it to be considered "dangerous" by Early Modern anti-theatricals and the government. In the case of *Richard II*, the threat is even more forceful, since the play stages a precedent for deposing a monarch if they fail to perform their duties to the kingdom and its subjects. However, despite the anti-theatricals' efforts to refrain the popularity of the theatre, it remained as one of London's main entertainment options in the first half of the nineteenth century, adapting its political capacities according to the demands of the age.

The increasing political freedom in Parliament after the Great Reform Act of 1832 was reflected on stage. There was an increasing gap between "high" and "low" art, and between "legitimate" and "popular" theatre, still reminiscent of the 1737 Theatre Licensing Act, which conferred the monopoly of spoken drama to the two patent theatres, Drury Lane and Covent Garden. As a result, there was an emerging counterculture in the minor playhouses in London in response to the monopolisation of drama. These theatres were not allowed to stage tragedy or comedy, and were thus forced to incorporate sub-genres such as melodrama, burlettas or pantomimes, or to include musical or dance interludes, in order to avoid censorship.

Shakespeare's plays were intrinsically connected with the canon of legitimate drama. His name conferred authority and the status of a tradition of learning. However, his works were not exclusively shown at Drury Lane and Covent Garden. Minor theatres reinterpreted and adapted Shakespeare for their own purposes. They even used Shakespeare ironically to satirise the pretensions of the legitimate Shakespearean culture of the patent theatres. The marginal and local counter-culture of London's Southside theatres provided a space for oppositional political debate and public meetings, even a locus for selling radical newspapers and pamphlets. It became a "counter-public sphere" (Newey, 'Shakespeare and the Wars of the Playbills' 15).

I have demonstrated how theatre in nineteenth-century London was essentially commercial and central to popular culture, following the growth of the middle class and the urbanisation of the city. The revival of Shakespeare's history plays at the time made use of the techniques of sensation drama, such as exciting plots and special stage effects, to recreate the historical past on stage, offering an illusion of bringing the past back to life. In this context, this thesis has argued that nineteenth-century historical theatre – aided by the development of new technologies unavailable in Shakespeare's lifetime – functions, as it were, as a magic spell, evoking the past and embodying it temporarily on the wooden stage.

The play *Richard II* reconstructs the reign of the fourteenth-century monarch for dramatic purposes, and it demonstrates how Shakespeare engages with and imagines the medieval past in Renaissance England. With this thesis, I have explained how the Shakespearean history play reconstructs history and embodies the English monarchy on stage, interacting with questions of politics and ideology. Furthermore, stage adaptors inevitably add new layers of political and ideological discourses every time a play is performed. Within this context, Shakespeare should not be seen as a historian, nor his plays understood as history texts. Nevertheless,

Shakespeare has contributed significantly to the circulation of ideas about England's history, encouraging reflection on the process of historical reconstruction through art.

Given the recurrent and interchained nature of history, looking at the past can also function as a way to understand the present. Theatre was the medium through which Shakespeare compared his present to the past, and expressed his conceptions of the period we now call the Middle Ages. The playwright's engagement with the Middle Ages is illustrated by the plays he wrote that are set in the medieval past, based on medieval sources, linked to medieval philosophical concerns, consonant with medieval stagecraft or dramatic devices, or associated with a medieval aesthetic. I have argued that especially the manner with which Shakespeare has *selected* and *adapted* instances of English medieval history for dramatic purposes sheds light on his particular understanding of the medieval past. As we have seen, Early Modern theatre did not show a concern with historical accuracy – that only became the case in the second half of the eighteenth century. By contrast, Elizabethan theatre was more directed towards language and gesture. Shakespeare's Middle Ages are mainly *told* rather than *shown*, therefore the medieval past is recreated verbally rather than visually. The nineteenth century would shift the priorities, giving greater emphasis on the visual than the verbal.

Shakespeare's conception of the medieval past is not as straightforward as Petrarch's Dark Ages. On the one hand, the playwright emphasises the grotesque violence of political plotting, murder and tyranny. On the other, he accentuates the familiarity of human feelings, such as love and mourning. Especially in the case of the history plays, they also activate in the audience a sense of tradition and belonging. Therefore, at the same time that Shakespeare points at the differences between his own time and Richard II's reign, he also underscores the continuity of history.

In my analysis of Shakespeare's engagement with the medieval past in *Richard II*, I have looked specifically at three elements: ritual and pageantry; the arbitrary power of kings; and nostalgia. Courtly pageantry creates an illusion of royal legitimacy. It also reinforces the significance of symbolic fictions within society, which in turn is illustrative of society's needs and longings. It emphasises both rupture *and* continuity, as exemplified by Queen Victoria's Golden Jubilee. Ritual is in essence a connection with "pasts", either factual or fabricated for specific purposes, which are successively formalised by repetition. In the theatre, rituals receive a new layer of symbolism and repetition with each new production. They

become a double performance: a performance of a performance, which exposes the artificiality and arbitrariness of rituals.

Shakespeare's *Richard II* also establishes a dialogue with the medieval belief in the divine right of kings, in the monarch being an indisputable representative of God on Earth, and in the king's two bodies: body natural and body politic. Richard's tyranny results from such belief. However, Shakespeare does not depict the arbitrary power of kings neutrally, but as the source of evil and weakness in the play. In addition, the portrayal of Richard as a mortal body embodying the immortal body politic emphasises the performative nature of kingship. A king plays a part just like an actor on stage. During the scene of his de-coronation, Richard paradoxically uses his own authority to strip himself of such authority.

Finally, I have explored how *Richard II* looks back at an earlier past with nostalgia. The past can function as an alternative for the realities of the present – either as a form of escape from the harshness of contemporary life, or as a vantage point from which to admire the achievements of the present. Shakespeare's *Richard II* combines both approaches in an example of a double-voiced medievalism. On the one end, Shakespeare depicts the idealised past of Richard I and the Crusades, embodied by John of Gaunt and epitomised by his speech in 2.1. On the other hand, Richard II represents the grotesque and tyrannical Middle Ages.

This study has explored the cultural movement that Alice Chandler names the Medieval Revival, which refers to moments of renewed attention to Britain's roots and its Middle Ages. The medieval past was established as the origin of English identity in contrast to the Classical principles of Ancient Greece and Rome. As we have seen, in the nineteenth century the revival reached its peak, affecting different areas, such as literature, visual arts, architecture, philosophy, etc. The idea of England's medieval past and of medieval romance was significantly affected by Edmund Spencer's epic poem *The Faerie Queene* (1590-96). It led to a summoning of the Middle Ages as a time and space that offered opportunities for adventure and fantasy, inspiring the Romantic imagination. Chivalry became a prevalent element, as exemplified by Walter Scott's *Ivanhoe* (1820) and its several adaptations to the theatre, and the 1839 Eglinton Tournament that aimed at creating an (albeit failed) illusion of living the past to both role-players and spectators.

Based on my study of nineteenth-century medievalism in England, I have identified eight main reasons for which artists, architects, politicians, readers, and others, would feel the desire to return to a medieval past:

- As a response to rapid urbanisation and industrialisation. There was a nostalgic longing to a simpler way of life in opposition to the increasingly alienating and materialistic culture of modern life.
- A connection with the past through architecture. Pugin's Gothic Revival fostered an illusion of the possibility of erecting medieval buildings in nineteenth-century England, forging a link with an idealised Catholic past. Other architectural projects created an imagined vision of the medieval past, such as Horace Walpole's Strawberry Hill and Walter Scott's Abbotsford mansion.
- A fascination for material vestiges of the past, hence the interest in nature and ruins.
- A return to ideals of medieval heroism. Thomas Carlyle referred to the moral and unselfish man concerned with the welfare of society as a whole as the medieval ideal of heroism.
- A return to faith and belief, not necessarily linked to a specific religion. It promoted good deeds and charity, not a bondage to rituals and doctrines.
- An appreciation of loyalty and generosity in opposition to the egotism of modern society.
- A devotion to tradition, conservatism and feudalism in contrast to modern liberalism and progress.
- A longing for imagination and emotion, challenging the rationalism of modern thought.

These elements recur in nineteenth-century reimaginations of the medieval past, although not necessarily simultaneously. In each particular case, it is fundamental to investigate the connections between the historical, cultural and political contexts of the time, in order to assess the relevance of each one of these elements. Furthermore, the investigation of these aspects allows for a better understanding of the connections between art and society, and the tension between *contrast* and *continuity* that underscores the medievalist approach.

In his famous essay "Dreaming of the Middle Ages", the Italian medievalist Umberto Eco enumerates "ten little Middle Ages", referring to ten "types" of Middle Ages that permeated the late-20th-century imagination: The Middle Ages as pretext, the Middle Ages as the site of an ironical revisitation, the Middle Ages as a barbaric age, the Middle Ages of Romanticism, the Middle Ages of the *philosophia perennis* or of neo-Thomism, the Middle Ages of national identities, the Middle Ages of Decadentism, the Middle Ages of philosophical reconstruction, the Middle Ages

of occult philosophy, and the expectation of the new millennium regarding the Middle Ages (Eco 68–72). Different from Eco's listing of types of reconstructions of the medieval past, I have listed the reasons why there was a revival of interest in the Middle Ages in the first half of the nineteenth century, answering the overarching research question that guided this thesis.

This dissertation has also explored how illustrated editions of *Richard II* (since Rowe's in 1709 until Halliwell's daguerreotype actor portraits in 1850) (re-)interpreted and depicted the medieval past visually. The following timeline indicates the dates of these illustrated publications:

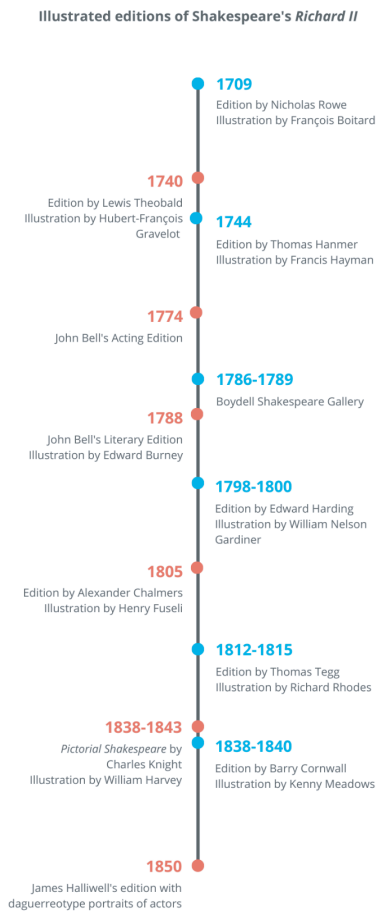

Figure 58 - Timeline of Illustrated Editions of Shakespeare's *Richard II*

The study of the prints has pointed out three main aspects of the illustrated Shakespeare tradition: an awareness of historical authenticity, an interest for depicting character's interiority, and a record of the change in theatrical conventions. Firstly, while early-eighteenth-century editions depict characters in contemporary eighteenth-century clothing, which created what we perceive as an anachronistic incongruence, Hanmer shows concern for historical accuracy in 1744, providing scholarly sources for Hayman's illustrations. Knight's Pictorial Shakespeare (1838-1843), aimed at offering art as a means of instruction, includes extensive extra material and historical explanation. Secondly, Boitard emphasises the violent side of the medieval past in Rowe's edition, while Gravelot offers a more ambiguous representation in 1740, opposing light and darkness to contrast the fluidity and sensual texture of the Rococo style with a foreboding darkness. Cornwall's 1838-1840 edition takes another step in favouring imaginative reinterpretations through minimal expression, exploring emblematic images and symbols; and Harding in 1798-1800 and Chalmers in 1805 display a keener interest in depicting the interiority of Richard's character. Finally, the acting editions provide valuable insight into the changes in theatrical practices. Bell's Acting edition of 1774 includes portraits of actors in costume, based on the promptbooks from Drury Lane and Covent Garden. As the image of the actor Francis Aickin as Henry IV demonstrates, the actor embodying a medieval king wears contemporary eighteenth-century clothes. Halliwell's 1850 edition, the nineteenth-century counterpart, shows daguerreotype images of actors. In this edition, the use of historically plausible clothes and settings indicates that the past was understood as different from the actors' present.

As David Lowenthal describes in *The Past is a Foreign Country*, the past began to be regarded as different from the present only in the late eighteenth century (Lowenthal 4). The trajectory of illustrations of Shakespeare's *Richard II* confirms this statement. In addition, the study of the illustrations indicates a split of two concomitant paths at the turn of the nineteenth century: on the one hand, they became more concerned with the historical plausibility of the characters' and settings' representation; on the other, they embraced more emblematic depictions that relied on symbolic meaning. In either case, the past was depicted as a foreign country.

The theatrical study cases in this dissertation explore the expressions of medievalist thoughts through adaptations of Shakespeare's *Richard II* in London in the first half of the nineteenth century. Edmund Kean's, Macready's and Charles Kean's productions illustrate three major pillars of nineteenth-century theatre:

the performance of emotions to foster parallels between the past represented on stage and contemporary political concerns; the authority of Shakespeare's name in conferring respectability and legitimacy to the theatrical business; and the combination of antiquarian knowledge with popular entertainment.

The first decades of the nineteenth century still felt the consequences of the failed radicalism of the French Revolution, suffocating the ideals of change and freedom. In this context, the critic William Hazlitt felt that society at the time was too concerned with national issues, neglecting human individual emotions, which are the core of tragedy and comedy. Hazlitt disdained the rise of the "public man", shaped by the generalising nature of the commercial press. Hence, he concluded that his time was not *dramatic*. In Hazlitt's view, the theatre should function as a medium to explore human feelings, offering the playgoer the possibility to return to the local and individual, instead of the national and general. However, it is not possible to extricate the personal from the general. Moreover, the examination of human feelings, such as ambition or weakness, can contribute significantly to the understanding of broader political concerns. In this context, the theatre operates as a public space for the discussion of historical and contemporary events, raising the spectator's awareness of participating in the public sphere.

In Hazlitt's appreciation of *Richard II*, he emphasises the complexity of Shakespeare's protagonist in its personification of *pathos*, of feeling combined with weakness. However, Edmund Kean acted the role differently in 1815 at Drury Lane, giving a performance full of energy and confidence. Instead of a character of *pathos*, Kean offered a character of *passion*, which greatly disappointed Hazlitt. The clash between a heroic and a weak king is what prompts the different political parallels between the Drury Lane stage and the post-Revolution political scenario. Kean used Wroughton's textual adaptation of the play, which puts emphasis on the king's display of authority and omits instances of Richard's fickleness. In combination with Kean's heroic portrayal of the king, his *Richard II* evokes the figure of Napoléon Bonaparte – seen as a tyrant by some, but as a hero by others, including Lord Byron. Richard's deposition on stage would recall Napoléon's recent deposition before his exile in 1814, a topic that regained attention in February 1815, when Bonaparte escaped from his confinement on the island of Elba, just weeks before Kean's production. Napoléon's deposition is thus mirrored on the Drury Lane stage, and the embodiment of Napoléon by Kean (advanced by earlier comparisons between the actor and the French military leader in contemporary print) raises at least two possible interpretations: One, that Richard's deposition is a disappoint-

ment, representing the yielding of Napoleonic radicalism and a retrograde return to monarchy. The other possibility, the very opposite, reads Richard's deposition as a victory, a celebration of monarchy over revolution, since Bolingbroke carries on the immortal body politic. However, Bolingbroke's awareness of wrongdoing and repentance at the end of Wroughton's adaptation undermines the triumph of the crown.

Edmund Kean reconstructs the Middle Ages in *Richard II*, reimagining the medieval past as a locus for feeling and emotion, an association already explored by Gothic writers in the 1790s. Kean uses costume and royal regalia to emphasise Richard's authority and his belief in the divine right of kings, which is challenged by Bolingbroke. However, the reconstruction of the past does not take centre stage in this production, since the Middle Ages are recreated rather as a mythical than as a historical site. The medieval past is conceived as a background to explore the inherent *gusto* of the Shakespearean play. Nevertheless, my analysis has demonstrated that the study of emotions can also contribute to the understanding of political parallels between the stage and the world.

Thirty-five years afterwards, Macready staged *Richard II* at the Haymarket as part of his farewell season to the stage in December 1850. This production offered a different approach to Shakespeare's *Richard II* and its depiction of medieval royal power. Contrary to the Romantic appreciation of the character's *pathos*, Victorians reassessed Richard as a morally flawed character. His punishment is thus justified by his disloyalty both to God, who anointed him king, and to his subjects. This dissertation has shown how Macready dedicated his career to establishing a National Theatre, repositioning the actor as a gentleman in Victorian society. In the London theatrical scene post-1843 Theatre Regulation Act, Macready used Shakespeare's name to legitimise his project, reinstating Shakespeare's original text and rejecting previously popular textual adaptations of the play. Furthermore, he omitted religious allusions and references to sex, infidelity, violence or any morally inappropriate content, as a way to reinforce the integrity and morality of the theatrical business. In this manner, the theatre could be regarded as a safe and moral public space, where entertainment is combined with instruction.

The case study of Macready's *Richard II* has demonstrated how the actor-manager used history to represent Shakespeare, his focus being on the Shakespearean text. The historically authentic sets and costume worked as mere decorations, accessory to Shakespeare's poetics. In addition, the visual representation of the Middle Ages on stage benefited from the new possibilities and technologies from

early-Victorian stagecraft, but without sacrificing the dramatic text at the expense of pictorial extravagance. Lastly, Macready went beyond the static pictorial tradition of dioramas and *tableaux vivants*, exploring voice and action to enhance the illusionistic capability of the stage, heightening the experience of lived history.

Cassius and Titinius are described as being "the last of the Romans" in Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*, for standing as the last noblemen true to the principles of the Roman Republic. Similarly, contemporary periodicals referred to Macready as "the last of the Romans", the last tragedian of a generation to remain true to Shakespeare's principles. However, that is not necessarily the case, as Charles Kean's management at the Princess's Theatre from 1850 to 1859 exemplifies. Similar to Macready, Kean also strove to confer respectability and seriousness to the theatrical trade. However, unlike Macready, Kean used Shakespeare to represent history. His focus was thus on the materialisation of the past on stage, which could be brought to life with every production.

According to *The Era* of 12 April 1857, Charles Kean earned the merit of rendering "the stage a faithful mirror of the past". His project encompassed a combination of Victorian antiquarianism and popular extravagant entertainment. However, instead of completely rejecting the latter, Kean explored the strategies, techniques and potentialities of popular theatre to convey historical knowledge to a broader audience and elevate the prestige of the theatrical business, especially outside the patent theatres. Kean's *Richard II* creates sets, costume, props and *mise-en-scène* based on historical research and on previous illustrations of the play, building a connection between stage, page and picture, with minute attention to detail in order to convey realism. Kean's realism is not dry, but aided by imagination. It is, in fact, imagination that helps to make sense and create a cohesive narrative out of historical facts.

Finally, Charles Kean's *Richard II* showcases the Mid-Victorian fascination with the visual image, also expressed in illustrated editions of Shakespeare, illustrated periodicals, illustrated novels, and exemplified by the increasing adornment of the stage and the rise of the photograph. These aspects point to a deeper engagement with material culture and material vestiges of the past, grounded on the desire to *see* and *experience* the past. In this sense, the theatre becomes a powerful tool, since it *creates* a material past. The physicality of the past is decisive for offering an illusion of seeing the past alive and moving on stage. It is, also, an escapist illusion, which allows the spectator to forget temporarily their own reality and find

another – and, perhaps, better – home in the past. Especially in moments of intense change and uncertainty, a nostalgic longing for the past becomes more urgent.

The deposition scene in Shakespeare's play poetically translates the paradoxical simultaneity of transience and permanence in performances of history plays. Embodied by an actor on stage, the king is endlessly deposed, murdered and revived at another production. As we bid farewell to Richard at Drury Lane in 1815, the king returns to the Haymarket in 1850, and is revived again on the Princess's stage in 1857, each time with a new conception, linked to the concerns and aspirations of the age. It is thus but a temporary parting. Shakespeare's text connects the present with different layers of pasts, offering the spectator a portal to different versions of the Middle Ages. As I have argued in this dissertation, the paradoxical simultaneity of rupture and continuity, and of realism and idealism, is the core of mid-nineteenth-century engagements with Shakespeare's pasts on stage, page or picture.