

# Medieval and Early Modern England on the Contemporary Stage



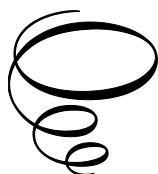
# Medieval and Early Modern England on the Contemporary Stage:

*The Past is Back on Stage*

Edited by

Marianne Dugeon

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The Past is Back on Stage

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*His Biographical Afterlives* (edited by Paul Franssen and Paul Edmondson, Berghahn 2020). His recent *Borrowers and Lenders* article "'I Know My Clay": Some Musical Afterlives of Hamlet's Gravedigger' considered Shakespearean echoes in songs by Georges Brassens and Jake Thackray, and featured the first English-language recording of 'Croque' by Thomas Fersen in the author's own translation. He is also the author of multiple poetry pamphlets (including *The Dolphin House*, published by Broken Sleep Books in 2021), and in 2017 won an Eric Gregory Award from the Society of Authors.

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# INTRODUCTION

MARIANNE DRUGEON

“History needs your story” (Brenton 2005, 80)

“histories are stories” (Friel [1989] 1999, 335)

*Medieval and Early Modern England on the Contemporary Stage* explores the way contemporary playwrights and directors look back on the past, specifically on the medieval and early modern periods, both as a source of texts to be adapted anew and of stories to be told again, and as a formal and aesthetic model to go back to and follow again in new work. Indeed, as Michael Bennet comments in his own introduction to *Narrating the Past through Theatre* (Bennet 2013, 3-4), the tension between the two adverbs “back” and “anew” may epitomise the way those plays and productions are at the same time narrating a new story and translating an old one. Bennet illustrates this tension through a geometric and temporal analysis: the plays are synchronically limited to the past in which they are set or which they tell again, but they are also diachronically timeless because they are relevant to our present condition.

*Medieval and Early Modern England on the Contemporary Stage* explores that tension through the analysis of adaptations of Shakespeare for modern audiences, but also through that of contemporary history plays set in that distant past, from the perspective of their political impact: why choose to once more adapt the embodiment of classical theatre, William Shakespeare, when there are so many new voices to listen to? Why set a play in the Tudor period when the present political and social situation should be an endless source of material for contemporary playwrights, all the more so when they are politically-committed?

As a matter of fact, the sheer number of contemporary productions that relate to the medieval and early modern periods, either because the adapted material dates back to that time or because the play is set at that time, is in itself relevant: along with films and TV series, video-games and novels, many plays created in the past two decades were set in the Middle Ages, during the Tudor era or in the Renaissance period, so much so that Marina

Gerzic and Aida Norrie coined a new term, “early-modernism,” on the model of “medievalism” (Gerzic and Norrie 2019, 3) so as to account for and analyse this recent tendency and sub-genre.

One explanation for that trend is certainly a nostalgia for a mythical past, all the more glorified because it is so distant that it seems to be cut from our contemporary preoccupations. But contrary to that view Anthony Pennino argues that Elizabethan England in particular is close to contemporary England on many counts and the productions explored in the following chapters most certainly echo that opinion, drawing clear parallels between that particular past and the present. James Shapiro comes to the same conclusion: “[T]he amount of information that historians have uncovered about life in Shakespeare’s England is daunting. They’ve shown that Elizabethan culture ought to matter a great deal to us, for we’ve inherited its conflicting views of everything from the nature of self and sexuality to nationhood and empire” (Shapiro 2005, xiii). Both in the private and in the public spheres, therefore, the parallels are numerous. Elizabethan culture, its society and its political organisation are not only a reference but also a model. It is no surprise therefore that contemporary writers centre on the Reformation so as to obliquely comment on contemporary religious extremism, or use the plots and conspiracies at the court of Henry VIII, in ways which clearly bring to mind Shakespeare’s own history plays, the better to analyse post-Brexit politics. But the parallels are not only to be found in the stories which are told (again) but also in the form that those stories share. Medieval and Elizabethan drama have clearly influenced contemporary playwrights in their use of metatheatricity and their wish to return to a more direct relationship between the stage and the auditorium, notably when following the Brechtian model. Jen Harvie also notes the fact that Brechtian playwrights will favour history plays as a form that is fitted to their vision of drama: “‘History plays’ – which commonly narrate events in national histories – have been prevalent in Britain and Ireland throughout the twentieth century, perhaps especially following the influence of Brecht’s plays and theories” (Harvie 2005, 42).

The medieval and early modern periods certainly present us with not only aesthetic models but also stories, heroes and tragedies which are well-known and beloved. For theatres and companies, the choice of adapting a play by Shakespeare or setting one in Tudor England is also financially safe, as evidenced by the popular success of the Globe Theatre since its opening in London in 1997. In that regard, might we go as far as infer that a history play set in the Tudor period is safer than one set in a more recent past, for instance during the Iraq war, or even World War II? It might be safer because a more distant historical material is better known by historians, but

also because, in a manner of speaking, it has entered into the public domain and can therefore be adapted freely. Thus, a Black Hamlet or a White Othello are widely accepted, which may be explained by the fact that Shakespeare has been subjected to so many adaptations and appropriations over the centuries that nothing seems impossible. But, as Richard O'Brien explores in this collection, colour-blind casting has also recently been used for history plays whose subject is not fictional: is the history of Nell Gwynn, for instance, rendered more fictional for that ethical and political choice of casting? Is not that choice telling more about contemporary England than about the England of the Restoration?

Whether they are adaptations or history plays, the contemporary productions are always influenced by political commitments, which it is the purpose of this volume to investigate. Both types of plays are indeed particularly apt recipients of political ideologies, and the productions analysed in the following chapters show it in a variety of ways, as they all actively engage in reinterpreting the past, rather than merely repeating it or conserving it nostalgically.

This idea of a repetition (a term which in French means also rehearsal) remains nevertheless at the heart of theatre, as Marvin Carlson states: "The simultaneous attraction to and fear of the dead, the need continually to rehearse and renegotiate the relationship with memory and the past, is nowhere more specifically expressed in human culture than in theatrical performance" (Carlson 2001, 167). To go one step further, that need is nowhere more specifically expressed in theatrical performance than in adaptations of past work and in history plays.

### **The case for adapting Shakespeare on the contemporary stage**

The adaptation of "old material," in Carlson's words "this complex recycling" (Carlson 2001, 4) sets in motion an intertextual attitude on the part of the audience. Gérard Genette favours the term "transtextuality," which we could adapt to drama as "transtheatricality," and argues that a web of references and echoes is thus built, not only inside the same text, but between the hypotext and all its hypertextual variations. This chamber of echoes resonates in the present and enables the ghosts of the past to haunt us. Genette also uses the image of the palimpsest, through which the contemporary reader may decipher several layers of meaning, while Howard Barker sees the writer as an archaeologist who builds a three-

dimensional architectural structure (Barker [1989] 2016, 168).<sup>1</sup> Whether one prefers an aural or a visual metaphor, the theatre is particularly effective in creating this complicated resonance for the spectators to experience *en masse* in an auditorium and not individually in their private living rooms.<sup>2</sup> While Roland Barthes's "Death of the Author" is accompanied by the death of the single reader, the palimpsestic authorial voice starts talking to a community of spectators whose every single perception of the creation nourishes a complex global reception. One may also come up with botanical images and see an adaptation as an offshoot and the act of adapting akin to that of grafting. So as to avoid any sense of a qualitative hierarchy which would consider the adapted source as the main tree, I prefer to use those terms only in relation to time: the first seed came before, it grew and strengthened with every new fertiliser that was added to its breeding-ground, and each new leaf ensures that the tree lives on. Without it the tree, and the original seed with it, would die. Some of the new leaves, closer to the trunk, have grown and made the tree more majestic, others have appropriated the biological characteristics of the first plant and colonised new ground, adapting (in the Darwinian sense) to new environments, and others still have changed the soil on which they are growing.<sup>3</sup> It is furthermore important to remember that the first seed, Shakespeare's theatre, is itself the result of a composition of several voices. I am not here questioning the authorship of the work, but pointing to the fact that the play-texts as we know them have been, for the most part, adapted by actors and editors, as Shakespeare scholars have proved time and time again. Thus Jean-Christophe Mayer, William H. Sherman and Stuart Sillars take up the work of John Jowitt, Gabriel Egan, Lukas Erne and Margaret Kidnie, pointing that "Apart from the eighteen plays which survive only in Shakespeare's First Folio, the rest have various versions, with anything up to six Quarto versions vying with the Folio, and all subject to the efforts of

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<sup>1</sup> See his conference "Murders and conversations: the classic text and a contemporary writer" given at the University of Portsmouth on 7<sup>th</sup> December 1994, in which he analyses his own play, *Seven Lears*, a rewriting of Shakespeare's *King Lear*.

<sup>2</sup> One might here remember Carlson's words: "Drama, more than any other literary form, seems to be associated in all cultures with the retelling again and again of stories that bear a particular religious, social, or political significance for their public" (Carlson 2001, 8); or wonder with Freddie Rokem about the meaning of an event which is staged again and again every evening (Rokem 2000, xi).

<sup>3</sup> Graham Saunders thus defines appropriations as freer from the source text in comparison with adaptations: "appropriation challenges and subverts, whereas adaptation mostly confirms and confers an already assumed authority held by the source text" (Saunders 2017, 17).

later editors to establish a true, original text that might take us behind the mediation of Shakespeare's actors, scribes, and composers" (Mayer, Sherman and Sillars 2013). They add: "And the debate does not, of course, end there: how can a performative entity be given a single finite identity, depending as most critics now believe on circumstances of individual performance that are as various as individual actors and as unreliable as the weather besieging the Globe?" (Mayer, Sherman, Sillars 2013). Careful to avoid crediting a single, genuine and original genius that the Romantic ideal sees as the unique source of a masterpiece, this volume wishes to explore how literature in general and theatre in particular thrive on collaboration, between authors, actors, editors and readers/spectators.

What is more, it is a pleasurable collaborative creation which gains from the enjoyment of the playwright who nods at, or talks back to, communicates and engages with a well-known work, and the satisfaction of the spectators who recognise the source and compare various versions which have emanated from it. Linda Hutcheon and Julie Sanders have commented on that pleasure which, for me, is also in finding a common ground with the author(s) of the work, in recognising that we share the same references and knowledge of past works of art. It is therefore the pleasure of a community much more than an individual pleasure. On the one hand, one may argue that it is an elitist pleasure, as the spectators are meant to have that knowledge beforehand, and indeed there are references which will be felt as in-jokes to be enjoyed in private, that will be missed by those who will not understand them in the moment. On the other hand, as Hutcheon contends, adapting is in itself a way to democratise culture and to counter elitist hierarchies which posit that Shakespeare cannot be surpassed (Hutcheon 2013, xiv). In both cases adaptation is ideologically and politically connoted and this is what this volume aims to explore. In both cases also, it is not a hostile takeover, nor is it necessarily a reverential homage that adaptors wish to pay. Rather, Shakespeare's work is being challenged through the process of being updated, all the more so as we now share a post-modern attitude to art, and are used to seeing it being parodied, cut in pieces and rearranged as a collage.

I have been using a variety of terms that are trying to make sense of different types of adaptations and what they do to the source text. They may be organised according to the political intent of the adapter. In her study of adaptation, Julie Sanders suggests a list of nouns: "variation, version, interpretation, imitation, proximation [...] palimpsest, graft, rewriting, reworking, refashioning, revision, re-evaluation" (Sanders 2016, 5). These are all neutral terms, in that the message of the resulting adaptation is not assessed in comparison with that of the adapted material. On the contrary,

nouns like sclerosis, nostalgia, petrification, fetishism, ritualisation or heritage all qualify negatively the adapter's creative process, implying that the adaptation has not produced any new work but is merely a sterile repetition of the same. That kind of (re)production is often deprecatingly deemed to result in escapism for the spectators: the adaptation does not shed any new light on the past work, but merely invites the audience to travel back in time and stand at the exact same place as their ancestors, enjoying the same performance, at least in theory. Aleks Sierz thus talks of "costume drama with little relevance to today" (Sierz 2011, 64). But the question of relevance goes both ways: imagining today a Shakespeare production with a white actor with black makeup or a cast of men only could be seen as nostalgic and petrified. Interestingly though, such a production today would also reveal strikingly how we have evolved, and would be read anew as underlining how much we still have to evolve to reach gender and race equality. In that light, even a fossilised adaptation of *Othello* or *The Taming of the Shrew* could be politically effective. Nevertheless, much more positive verbs are also used to assess the effect of an adaptation: reinterpret, offer an alternative, renew, reinvent, reread or witness, among others, all mean that the spectators could, as a consequence of the performance, re-evaluate the world around them. What those terms stress, whether they are negative or positive, is the fact that an adaptation can and should be assessed for its ideological and political impact, because it is never neutral. It may be highly conservative, when it enshrines or celebrates an elitist view of culture or an established literary reference, or it may be progressive, allowing new audiences to have access to the classics, even if it is then sometimes accused of a dumbing-down of culture. It can also be progressive in being oppositional and subversive, allowing for feminist, post-colonial or LGBTQ+ readings. In both cases it opens up to new audiences, and those new spectators will partake of the conversation and fertilise new ground. Indeed, because the material is adapted from a well-known prior text, the creators, when they choose not to go as far as alter the ending, produce a teleological narrative, with a foregone conclusion: as we all know how *Othello* ends, what is of interest is the perspective offered on that play when it is adapted again, so the playwrights and the spectators will concentrate on the manner at least as much as on the subject matter, and assess the creation not as an independent work but as one element in the chamber of echoes, in relation with the source text and with all other adaptations of it.

But if this chamber of echoes, this haunted production (in the words of Carlson and also those of Jacques Derrida who speaks of a haunted text) is created whenever a play by Shakespeare is being adapted, this is also the case with history plays which constantly revise history. Richard H. Palmer,



in his seminal analysis of history plays, thus explains that “revision is a natural part of the process of writing history” (Palmer 1998, 73).

### **The past is back on the contemporary stage**

If Shakespeare’s plays have become iconic works to be adapted by and to every generation, the Middle Ages and the Tudor era as a whole also contribute to haunting our contemporary stage, not only through re-visions of their history but also because they gave rise to dramatic forms which are seen again as effective and relevant today.

Once more, the focus of this volume will be on the political motivations for such a choice of reference and source of inspiration. If history plays, as Anthony Pennino notes, have been “part of the theatrical tradition since 472 BCE when Aeschylus dramatized his experiences at the Battle of Salamis in *The Persians*” (Pennino 2018, 232), it is nevertheless quite striking that politically-committed playwrights in particular should choose to use this material. Why concentrate on a distant past rather than set their new plays in the present that they want to comment on, and possibly, to change? Certainly, their motivation resides at least in part in the idea that knowing the past will help us understand the present. So why choose the 16<sup>th</sup> century? Robert Bolt, in his introduction to *A Man for All Seasons*, justifies his choice in these terms: “I took a historical setting in the hope that the distance of years would give me Dutch courage, and enable me to treat my characters in a properly heroic, properly theatrical manner” (Bolt [1960] 1996, xix). Those words seem to imply that a temporally distant material allows more licence as regards historical truth; but then why choose a historical subject if one wants to create a timeless mythical hero? The Brechtian playwright is here in contradiction with his model, which he acknowledges readily, and Palmer recognizes a general tendency: “setting a play in a historical period distances the material from the demands of modern realism” (Palmer 1998, 4). But if mythical and idealised, Bolt’s hero is nevertheless not living in a fictional England. Going one step further, other playwrights choose to produce an image of ‘Olde England’ which is nostalgically idealised into a protean tale, history mingling with myth, in the manner of the genealogy of Henry VIII whose lineage was tied to King Arthur by his father Henry VII. Similarly, contemporary plays often refer to that mythical England, that of the Middle Ages for instance, which is seen as fixed once and for all, as part of a heritage which helps define a nation and a sense of belonging. On the contrary, many other contemporary playwrights may choose to write a history play in order to correct a pre-existing vision of the past and offer a different perspective on it. Again, for all three purposes the theatre is a

particularly fit medium: as Aleks Sierz explains, it “is part of a widespread conversation about who we are as a nation, and where we might be going” (Sierz 2011, 1), and as a collective experience, it effectively creates a sense of community as the individual is part of an audience.

One actually finds a similar typology of history, which may concentrate on mythical heroes, or celebrate an idealised past, or again try to reassess the past so as to suggest a different definition of who we are. Indeed, according to Friedrich Nietzsche, history comes in three shapes: monumental history which provides us with mythical heroes to be held as examples, antiquarian history which is commemorative and critical history which comments on and judges the past (Nietzsche [1873] 1957, 12-22). Those three kinds of history can once more be defined politically: commemorating and celebrating a heroic past (that of an individual or that of a nation) may well be conservative, or even regressive, when it implies to nostalgically glorify it and infer that the present fails short; while judging the past from the point of view of the present could be deemed more progressive, or (paradoxically) forward-looking, as it leads to reassessing the past in order to prepare the future. For Peter Ackroyd, history (and as a consequence history plays) is “about longing and belonging. It is about the need for permanence and the perception of continuity. It concerns the atavistic desire to find deep sources of identity” (Ackroyd 2013, 446). It is also about redefining the constantly changing identity of the community to which the spectators belong. The plays are indeed part of an ongoing dialogue, trying to define the spectators as citizens and the country whose past is being told as a nation. In so doing, their aim is also at times to give voice to marginalised or oppressed sections of society. As Julie Sanders argues about adaptations, but her analysis applies to history plays as well, they can “indicate those communities whose histories have not been told before, the marginalised and the disenfranchised” (Sanders 2016, 179). By spotlighting subaltern stories, history plays reflect the more fully inclusive community of the nation and, in the process, “History, literary or otherwise, is redeployed” (179).

Many other similarities can be found between adaptations and history plays: both are often assessed according to their respect of the source-text or the accuracy of the history they tell again, but the contributors to this volume presume it more relevant to analyse the perspective chosen for the new or re-creations, rather than the degree to which they reproduce an unfiltered past, which is always and already imaginary and unreachable. Echoing those debates, Brian Friel wrote a history play entitled *Making History* which reads more like a reflection on the motivations behind making history, than as an actual account of facts and of history being made.

In that regard it is also a very political play, with characters debating the difference between reality and myth, history and story. The historian of the play, Lombard, concludes: “If you’re asking me will my story be as accurate as possible — of course it will. But are truth and falsity the proper criteria? I don’t know. Maybe when the time comes my first responsibility will be to tell the best possible narrative. Isn’t that what history is, a kind of story-telling?” (Friel [1989] 1999, 257). One might question the motivations of the writer of history plays in similar ways as one would question those of the historian: should the play teach or entertain, be accurate or passionate?

Whatever the kind of history, theatre allows the ghosts of the past to live again and talk to us in the present in a way that no other medium is able to and the playwright’s role is to excavate what lies beneath our feet. This vertical perspective of history conjugates with the horizontality of adaptation (Hutcheon 2013, xv), creating a rhizomatic structure (Lanier 2014, 28-29). The consecutive architectural structure, in three dimensions, again resonates with the echoes of the past.

## A Historical Perspective

Since the Second World War, British theatre has gone through alternative periods of innovation and retreat: after the catastrophic trauma of the Holocaust, history plays were written with a presentist perspective.<sup>4</sup> The disillusionment of the 1950s and the revolutionary atmosphere of the 1970s gave rise to a first and then a second wave of political theatre that was strongly embedded in the present. But Thatcher’s consecutive conservative governments and the cut in theatre subsidies that they implemented led to a retreat of culture and the 1980s saw more revivals and adaptations than new plays. The end of the 1990s and the 2000s, in reaction, saw an explosion of new writers, notably with in-yer-face theatre, which seems again counteracted in the 2010s. The present sanitary crisis and its terrible impact on culture does not bear good tidings for the decade to come. On the whole, adaptations of the classics and history plays, especially set in the distant past, tend to multiply in more conservative periods, when audiences and playwrights prefer commemorating and celebrating their history than trying to come to terms with more topical crises. When Anthony Pennino describes the

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<sup>4</sup> On presentism, see in the bibliography James O’Rourke, *Rethinking Shakespeare through Presentist Theory* and Hugh Grady’s *Presentist Shakespeare*, as well as Wai Chee Dimock’s article, “Editor’s Column: Historicism, Presentism, Futurism,” which offers an overview of the debates surrounding the doctrine (Dimock 2018, 257).

atmosphere of Thatcher's Britain, there are many parallels with Cameron's, then May's and currently Johnson's Britain, which still has not overcome the crisis of Brexit, or indeed with Trump's America, supposedly made great *again* (my emphasis): "there was no clear programmatic strategy, no clear roadmap to the future, no desire greater than to reverse the engine of progress for some romanticized past that did not exist for the vast majority of the citizenry, Thatcherism does not promote an ideal of active and engaged citizenship but rather a sense of the voter-as-consumer" (Pennino 2018, 20). The political sclerosis of the governments seems in a way to pervade the theatre, or maybe politically-committed playwrights avoid the petrified present to come to grips with a past where they will find a way to revitalize art and citizenship. Again, Pennino describes it for the 1980s: "in the production of oppositional history plays, the theatre has the ability to move past the petrified zone and engage with history in such a way that imagines new paths of national development" (Pennino 2018, 41). This historical perspective allows me to point to the synergy between the political climate of a country and the drama it produces.

On a more optimistic note, the theatre is also in synergy with its audience. A team of scientists at University College London recently proved that spectators' hearts beat at the same rate when they are part of an audience. Dr Joe Devlin, the scientist who conducted the experiments at UCL, explains: "Experiencing the live theatre performance was extraordinary enough to overcome group differences and produce a common physiological experience in the audience members" (Anonymous 2017). The synchrony of the beating hearts of all the spectators when they become members of a unified audience, engaging with each other thanks to the shared experience of spectatorship, is a hopeful image of what the playwrights wish to achieve. The adaptations of plays by Shakespeare and the history plays which are explored in the following chapters all partake of the same wish to share a communal feeling and, if possible, to build the sense of a common cultural, political and national identity which finds its roots, its cement, in a distant past.

## **Structure and content of the volume**

The volume is divided in three parts. The first one is devoted to present-day adaptations of plays by Shakespeare, the second to contemporary plays set in the medieval and early modern period, and in the third we listen to the playwrights themselves, who share their experience as writers of history plays.

Part one partakes of a conversation which has been going on for centuries around the restaging and adaptation of Shakespeare's plays. Focusing as it does on the political motivations behind such choices, it questions the relevance of 16<sup>th</sup>-century plays in the contemporary political and social contexts, focusing on two of the most burning issues in our times: the rise of nationalism in post-Brexit Britain and the violence against women. Those two chapters thus explore the way contemporary adaptations of Elizabethan plays may emphasise the lessons of the past in order to guide and inform the present, in the same way that those Elizabethan plays did when they were created.

In chapter one Pascale Sardin investigates the impact of intermediality on our experience of the theatre, and specifically of Shakespeare's history play *Richard III* and its relation with the definition of a British national identity. What was already true in 2016 when Rupert Goold adapted that play at the Almeida has become even more central to our apprehension of theatre in the context of the pandemic, as creations went online during lockdown. How can the theatre build a sense of collective identity as a community when individualism is promoted by Capitalism as well as by the sanitary crisis? Is Shakespeare, now an international reference, really the incarnation of Britishness? Goold's production reverberates not only the 2016 referendum which led to Brexit but also the discovery of Richard III's remains in a parking lot and his reinterment in Leicester Cathedral in 2015. Commemorative ceremonies and rituals are at the heart of the construction of stories, icons and myths, mixing story and history or, in the words of Pascale Sardin, demonstrating the effectiveness of the "interaction of historiography and mythmaking." *Richard III*, one of Shakespeare's most political history plays, works as a chamber of echoes between past and present, reworking the metaphor of an archaeological dig, the unearthing and burial of a mythical figure of the past. Its dialogues also repeat the debates among the leave campaigners, demonstrating how adapting Shakespeare may be as effective in commenting on the contemporary situation as writing a new play.

In chapter 2, Sara Reimers analyses several productions of Shakespeare's divisive *The Taming of the Shrew* for young audiences in the context of the MeToo movement and the Women's March of January 2017. Whereas the original context could not but endorse male supremacy which was not to be questioned for another 400 years, the theatres and companies deciding to adapt that particular play today, all the more so when they have a didactic purpose as the production is meant for young audiences, have an ethical responsibility in updating and changing the original message of the play. Consequently, the productions explored gender-swapping and played with

the confrontation of different historical periods through costumes, some of them Elizabethan and some of them modern, creating a “moderbeathan” context (a coinage of stage director Michael Fentiman). One might note how “modern costumes” are actually, in both productions, inspired by the 1950s, possibly participating in a nostalgic vision of a not-so-distant past but also stressing how history plays set in the more distant past sometimes need updating to a more recent, more relatable past, that of the grandparents of the spectators in that case.

But Shakespeare is not only the author of plays which are being adapted and updated. He is also a mythical character himself, and the subject of several productions, some of which explored by Richard O’Brien in chapter 3, which opens the second part of our volume. This part is devoted to contemporary history plays which, either because they revise the history of the past or because they are influenced stylistically by the past, create another echo chamber through the centuries. The plays analysed once more explore contentious contemporary issues of race, gender and religion, and while exploring the roots of British identity, they mirror at least equally our world in the present.

In chapter 3, Richard O’Brien analyses plays that set out to pay homage to mythical figures who represent the tradition of the English stage and, in the process, engages with contemporary social issues such as the slow inclusion of women and people of colour, as actors and as playwrights. Being celebratory, the plays analysed are prone to historical nostalgia, but they also pander to the tastes of a liberal audience who would like to believe Shakespeare to be a good man with values akin to theirs. As a consequence, the white supremacist roots that the same liberal-minded spectators fight today and which took shape in the Elizabethan period are ignored and glossed over. Colour-blind casting, favoured as a way to cast more Black and Asian actors, including to embody people who were white in reality,<sup>5</sup> needs to be inquired into, taking in consideration the way the audience,

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<sup>5</sup> Colour-blind casting is being explored and discussed in the media and increasingly among scholars, as Richard O’Brien discusses. See for instance in the bibliography Micha Frazer-Carroll’s article “‘It’s dangerous not to see race’: is colour-blind casting all it’s cracked up to be?” in *The Guardian*, Christine Geraghty’s article “Casting for the Public Good: BAME Casting in British Film and Television in the 2010s” in *Adaptation*, James Shapiro’s article “Shakespeare and the Culture Wars: On the Movement for Color-Blind Casting” in *Literary Hub* and his volume *Shakespeare in a Divided America*, or Layla Saad’s *Me and White Supremacy, Combat Racism, Change the World, and Become a Good Ancestor*, discussed in the blog *Diversity in Action* by Annah Hackett in “Color Blind Casting and Recognizing Race,” all published in 2020.

consciously or unconsciously, reacts to what can easily be deemed revisionist. Conversely, scholars have recently demonstrated the presence of many more dark-skinned people in England in the Middle Ages and Renaissance, and the expansive roles of women behind the popular and courtly stages of Shakespeare's London,<sup>6</sup> so the question of historical accuracy also needs to be reassessed in that regard. As a consequence, new creations must fight on two fronts, against the popular cultural representation of early modern England as white – in Richard O'Brien's terms: "white Western masculinity as a universalist default setting" – but also against the naïve assumption that their audience is unified on issues of racial and gender equality. All those interrogations partake of the definition of the contemporary audience as part of a community, a society, and as citizens of the world. That debate needs to be initiated if we are to effectively progress today against racism and misogyny.

Chapter 4 by Julien Alliot adds to the conversation by concentrating on the formal influence of the theatre of the Middle Ages on contemporary playwriting. The nostalgic vision of a Merry England of old is served by what is seen as a festive and inclusive stage which shares many features with contemporary experiments since the 1970s: the promenade theatre takes after the mysteries with their pageant wagons stopping at different stations in the town and celebrating Christianity on special days of the liturgical calendar, which organised the life of the citizen both spatially and temporally. The symbolism of the moralities, which were not itinerant but performed in spaces organised in the round, also notably influenced the didactic experiments of agit-prop which was favoured by the second generation of politically-committed playwrights in the 1970s. Lastly, the pagan theatre was no less ritualised, and its influence can be likewise traced in contemporary experiments: mummers' plays are thus added as interludes or opening scenes because of their subversive dimension and their questioning of settled hierarchies through carnivalesque celebrations. Those formal characteristics allow contemporary playwrights to reorganise the relations between the actors and the spectators, and therefore redefine social groups, centre and periphery, public and private spheres in a festive way. In Julien Alliot's words: "instead of revering a sclerotic vision of the past in

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<sup>6</sup> See in the bibliography Ayanna Thompson's *The Cambridge Companion to Shakespeare and Race*, published in 2021; and on the presence of women: Sara Mendelson and Patricia Crawford's *Women in Early Modern England 1550-1720*, published in 2000 and Phyllis Mack's article "Women and Gender in Early Modern England" published in 2001.

an elegiac awe, looking back at ‘Merry England’ can also result in retrieving deeply subversive strategies.”

In chapter 5, Marianne Drugeon concentrates on two history plays written by two politically-committed playwrights, David Edgar and Howard Brenton, on the translation of the Bible in English and its political implications, for the England of Henry VIII, Elizabeth I and James I as well as for contemporary Britain. Both authors having started their career around the same time and sharing more or less the same vision of what theatre can do, it is enlightening to analyse the way they picture the distant past in history plays written in the 2010s. While both plays literally haunt the present with the ghosts of the past, the perspective they offer shifts both vertically as they look at power from below, and horizontally as they do not follow a chronological order but instead create a chamber of echoes where the inhabitants of the past and present if not future cohabit. Beyond debates on authenticity and historical accuracy, the choice of venue which induces a different type of audience, and the way actors and spectators interact are also shown to have an impact on the lessons that the past can teach us in the present, when entertainment and didacticism share the stage.

In the third part of the book, the playwrights themselves share their experience of writing today about the distant past. The titles of the two chapters evince the same idea of a constant movement back and forth between past and present (“Re-forming the Reformation”), and the same lexical and dramaturgical interplay between the living and the dead (“Walking with Ghosts”). The wide and varied experience of the two authors, not only with professionals but also with amateur companies, illustrates the manifold aspects of the interaction between contemporary Britain and its medieval and early modern past.

David Edgar started his career as a playwright in the wake of the protests of 1968. As a politically-committed writer, he not only wrote and continues writing new plays, but also adapted many classical works, from William Shakespeare’s *Richard III* to Robert Louis Stevenson’s *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* and from Charles Dickens’ *Nicholas Nickleby* to Julian Barnes’ *Arthur and George*. He also wrote history plays set variously in the Middle Ages, early modern England or the Victorian era, and was inspired by medieval theatrical forms which he took up again like the mummers’ play opening the second version of the Dorchester community play *Entertaining Strangers* which he wrote for the National Theatre, or the parody of a mummers’ play in *O Fair Jerusalem*, analysed by Julien Alliot in chapter 4. In chapter 6, David Edgar draws enlightening parallels between his own work and that of other politically-committed playwrights who also wrote history plays, and offers a typology organised according to the alleged



intention of authors when they set their plays in the distant past. Honestly assessing the capacity of history plays, and their writers, to actually change and challenge the way spectators look at the present, David Edgar also concentrates on his latest incursion in this field: *Written on the Heart*. As part of a series of new works set in the Tudor period, the play occasioned an exploration of the roots of contemporary Britain's relation to religion, as a private individual practice and above all as a powerful political tool in the organisation of society. Studying very precisely the choice of words and demonstrating the political agenda at stake behind the translation of the word of God, David Edgar also points to the resonance of past debates in today's world.

In chapter 7, Stephanie Dale writes about her experience as a writer of two community plays for Dorchester, *A Time to Keep* in 2007, co-written with David Edgar, and *Spinning the Moon* to be created in 2022, and of a mystery play for Chester in 2013. The two forms are of remarkable interest for us as the first, conceptualised by Ann Jellicoe, is a particular kind of history play, written for the city of Dorchester about its past and performed by its citizens, while the other is a contemporary adaptation of the medieval mystery, also performed by amateurs, whose avowed aim, according to the Chester mystery plays website, is to "Keep History Alive and Well" (ChesterMysteryPlays, n.d.). Describing the feeling of writing for a community of actors and spectators who come to share the experience, Stephanie Dale points to the democratic process which is at stake in the creation of those two types of plays, and which is itself a political act. Site-specific, community-specific, they are of a particular space, of a particular relation to history, and for a particular community. They also become a communal creation, which belongs to the hundreds of participants who, like the medieval guilds, took part in the creation, and to the thousands of spectators who are engaged actively in the experience of the performance.

The last two chapters of this volume thus epitomise not only a theatrical choice but also a political one: Howard Barker, whom I referred to at the beginning of this introduction, defines the task he envisions for theatre as "not to produce cohesion or the myth of solidarity but to return the individual to himself. Not 'We must act!' but 'Are we thus?'" (Barker [1989] 2016, 11). Interestingly, at Ann Jellicoe's request he also wrote a community play for the city of Bridport in 1981, entitled *The Poor Man's Friend*. In the documentary broadcast on the BBC in 1982, "A play for Bridport," Barker explains that his aim was to "fill the stage with those ghosts who come back to justify themselves" (Wheatley 1982). In the guise of that community play, all the plays explored in this volume aim at creating a sense of community in celebrating and/or questioning a common identity

which links the citizens of today, the spectators, to their ancestors who have come back to haunt the stage. The message is thus political, but so, often, is the process of creation, which is democratic. Linda Hutcheon comments on adaptation as a democratic creation which is owned by the community, as “an act of communal ownership of a story deeply embedded in the consciousnesses of multiple generations across the globe” (Hutcheon 2013, 191). Aleks Sierz, when he analyses the rewriting of the nation by contemporary British theatre, also recognises the power of history plays to heal a community, here to be understood not as a political construct but, following Benedict Anderson’s definition, as a cultural construct: “Imagining a nation can be a comforting act of participation, flattering the lonely self with the idea of what Benedict Anderson dubbed ‘an imagined community’, in this case of fellow audience members” (Sierz 2011, 8). Those creations and re-creations ensure that an actual physical bond is enlivened and energised, between the actors and the spectators, and between the citizens of today and their ancestors, all participating in the creative process, and all taking pleasure in it. What is more, the community which is generated is inclusive and extends with each new live performance, just like each adaptation, or reformulation, or recreation of a play becomes part of what Chantal Zabus calls an incremental literature (Zabus 2002, 4). Adaptations and history plays, which are as many rereading of the past, are thus all contributing to a reconfiguration of our society and its culture today, creating a constellation nourished by its past and its variations.

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## **PART I:**

# **RESTAGING AND REWRITING SHAKESPEARE**

## CHAPTER ONE

# IRONIC INTERMEDIALITIES IN RUPERT GOOLD'S RICHARD III (ALMEIDA THEATRE, JUNE-AUGUST 2016)

PASCALE SARDIN

As Philip Auslander has demonstrated, living in a mediatized culture dominated by the televisual and the digital has changed our ways of perceiving liveness. For the critic our screen culture is now embedded within our experience of theatre as a live art form. Concurrently, video, screens and other technological devices have invaded theatrical stages enhancing and displacing our conception of theatre, even if recorded media has been used for over a century in theatre (Giesekam 2007, 2-3).<sup>1</sup> The influence of screen culture and mediatization on the art of performing is also referred to as “intermediality,” a term that can be defined as “the co-relation of media in the sense of mutual influences between media” (Kattenbelt 2008, 20-21) that derives from “the incorporation of digital technology into theatre practice, and the presence of other media within theatre productions” (Chapple and Kattenbelt 2006, 11). Such intermediality can be traced in at least three recent adaptations of Shakespeare’s *Richard III* – Thomas Ostermeier’s sleek German abridged version produced at Berlin’s Schaubühne (later performed at the Festival d’Avignon in July 2015), Thomas Jolly’s 4-hour-long Gothic rock-’n’-roll version produced at the Théâtre de l’Odéon in early 2016, and finally Rupert Goold’s more subdued version presented at the London Almeida Theatre from June to August 2016.

There is at least one major difference between Goold’s, Ostermeier’s and Jolly’s productions besides their respective contexts of production, which is the way they incorporate modern visual technology into their respective stagings. Both the German and the French directors use

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<sup>1</sup> The incorporation of film into theatre has indeed occurred since the invention of cinema (Georgi 2014, 2).