HiStories Re-told
ISSN 2283-8759
pp. VII-XVII (2022)

"This England". Shakespeare's Histories in the Twenty-First Century: Text, Genre, Performance

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> *H.* The plaies that they plaie in England, are nor right comedies.
> *T.* Yet they doo nothing else but plaie euery daye.
> *H.* Yea but they are neither right comedies, nor right tragedies.
> *G.* How would you name them then?
> *H.* Representations of histories, without any decorum.
> (Florio 1591, 23)

The Queen Is Dead, Long Live the King

The topic of *Memoria di Shakespeare* 9/2022 on Shakespeare's *Histories* could not be more timely. Political upheavel, a war in the heart of Europe, the death of a queen and forthcoming ceremonies of succession feature as a staple of our morning papers and evening news. In saying this, I am certainly not invoking the old adage "Nothing new under the sun", let alone implying that nothing has changed since Shakespeare's time, still less, as in fact we very often see happening, looking to Shakespeare's verses and stories for the explanation of, and even the solution to, all the world's ills.

What can be observed, however, is that such is Shakespeare's cultural authority in anglophone countries and cultures that his representation of British history continues to attract attention and stimulate intellectual reflection. In a very recent contribution, Paul Stevens once again reminds us that Shakespare's drama is "woven into the fabric of our culture: when its lines are quoted by Colonel Collins of the Royal Irish on the eve of the Iraq War or more recently by the eulogist at Senator McCain's funeral, no one has to explain

where phrases like 'band of brothers' come from" (Stevens 2021, 221). Well into the twenty-first century, even the most dramatically contemporary history of Great Britain is represented through the echoes of William Shakespeare's language: *This England*, a very recent BBC production, starring a mimetic Kenneth Branagh as a Boris Johnson disastrously managing the COVID-19 pandemic, once again borrows the notorious lines uttered by John of Gaunt in *Richard II*:

> This royal throne of kings, this sceptred isle,
> This earth of majesty, this seat of Mars,
> This other Eden, demi-paradise,
> This fortress built by nature for herself
> Against infection and the hand of war,
> This happy breed of men, this little world,
> This precious stone set in the silver sea,
> Which serves it in the office of a wall,
> Or as a moat defensive to a house
> Against the envy of less happier lands,
> This blessèd plot, this earth, this realm, this England.
> (Shakespeare 2005, II.i.40-50)

"This England", a hymn to the homeland, in which the anaphoric presence of "this", a small deictic, here both temporal and textual – an empty sign, in Jakobson's terms – makes it valid at any time and in any context, at the same time allowing comparison with another time and another context, in this case with an obviously critical and sadly ironic description of today. Did Shakespeare imagine and guess or even plan that his "this" could be used by others, in other times, for their "this"?

Why and how Shakespeare's views on (English) history and politics continue to matter nowadays is both obvious and mysterious at the same time. In recent years, the study of past and present relations between Shakespeare and popular culture has been transformed: a number of factors which include the very condition of postmodernity, in which traditional distinctions between high and low culture have been eroded, have led to an appropriation of 'the Shakespeare brand' in many forms: "Throughout history, Shakespeare's enduring high-cultural status has coexisted with a multiplicity of other Shakespeares, recycled in

stage performance and cinematic adaptation, political discourse, literary and theatrical burlesque, parody, musical quotation, visual iconography, popular romance, tourist itineraries, national myth, and everyday speech. Shakespeare can be quoted in support of an individual declaration of love or an act of war; his works have acted as sources of inspiration for everything from high opera to the porn movie; his image turns up in the unlikeliest of locations" (Shaughnessy 2007, 1-2; see also Maley and Tudeau-Clayton 2010). In this context, the long tradition of the Bard's myth (Taylor 1989) and the gradual and constant appropriation and dissemination of a Global Shakespeare that never seems to lose its appeal encounter a culture of convergence (Jenkins 2006) that feeds on itself, chews up the products it appropriates and returns them, the same but different. This leads us to take stock of the phenomenon from time to time and revisit the presumably original source of influence, the text and performance of Shakespeare's plays. The terms "history" and "story" could be used almost interchangeably in Shakespeare's time and "one of the dominant meanings of 'story' during the period was a narrative of events that were believed to have taken place in the past" (Lidster 2022, 8), and this allows us to present our "HiStories Re-told" without fear of straying from a rootedness in history. Certainly, this issue does not offer, nor could it do it, an exhaustive overview of the fields of inquiry related to the histories. Rather, by selecting a few areas of interest that continue to evolve, the aim is to provide an example of the range and vitality of Shakespearean criticism on these plays.

Genre, text and language are the topics on which we offer a fresh look, examined through different fields involving textual editing, literary criticism, theatre and reception studies. Criticism in the twenty-first century tends to emphasize the shift in Shakespearean studies away from both traditional liberal humanism and the approaches of the late twentieth century, such as new historicism or cultural materialism, feminism or psychoanalysis – which indeed played a particularly prominent role in the analysis of Shakespeare's history plays – in favour of approaches like disability and ecofeminist studies, or posthumanist and cognitive ethology studies, which surreptitiously repropose a decontextualization of the Shakespearean text, now called upon to flexibly respond to

questions of the present times (Gajowski 2020). The articles in this issue of *Memoria di Shakespeare*, however, while ranging in different fields, and in constant dialogue and confrontation with the culture of the present, strongly argue the need to root Shakespeare's texts in their historical and cultural context as the only possible approach for a rigourous investigation.

Genre, Text, Language

The longstanding question of the genre of Shakespeare's plays about English kings opens the issue: John Florio's dialogue (1591), which frames this introduction, highlights the core of the matter by pointing out the uncertain nature of plays performed in Elizabethan England which were "neither right comedies, nor right tragedies", but "[r]epresentations of histories, without any decorum". As is well known, about thirty years later, it was the Folio of John Heminges and Henry Condell that clarified the point, for the first time distinguishing the genre of dramas about history. Moreover, and with a further specific act of selection, the Folio only included in the genre those dramas dedicated to English kings (and allocated *Macbeth*, for instance, and *King Lear* to the tragedies). Also due to the Folio's editorial design was the arrangement of the works according to the order of the English kings and not the order in which the works were composed. However, "order matters", as Emma Smith writes in her essay ("Shakespeare's Serial Histories?"), where she argues that "the Folio reordering of the history plays is a specific intervention that does not necessarily reflect reader expectation or authorial intention". Smith puts forward various kinds of evidence to support her hypothesis: she points out that other contemporaneous collections of Shakespeare's works, such as the Jaggard Quartos, or the Quarto history plays were presented as autonomous works, and as such were titled as tragedies. By challenging the natural status of that chronological order of the kings' lives, the ideological and artificial project made by Heminges and Condell emerges as "a deeply embedded fiction" and proves that "the editorial arrangement of plays in the First Folio prioritises and, in so doing, constructs genre".

It is interesting to note how the issue of order continues to be relevant in present times and touches on aspects of communication

and contact with the recipient of the message through the media in the twenty-first century. When this is television, by definition the most popular medium for the international success of series, the preference for a chronological order of the stories of the kings seems to be confirmed. On more than one occasion, British television has appropriated a product ready-made, one might say, and Shakespeare's histories have been framed within a possible serial structure[1]. Certainly, this responds to the need to offer an audience unfamiliar with the subject matter the sequence that apparently explains the reasons for the events – from the usurped reign of the legitimate King Richard II to the battle that ends the civil war and establishes the new order – but there are certainly deeper motivations that have to do with mass communication, with the very pleasure of narration that prevails over representation, a 'plottification' of the theatrical text that aligns it with the potential of the medium: Emma Smith herself, among others, has observed that "[t]he Folio encourages the experience of reading serially, an experience in which the endings of individual plays are subordinated to the onward movement of the sequential narrative" (Smith 2007, 147). Ultimately, the parallels between television programming and early modern theatre programming, and the consumption of Shakespeare's plays in the theatre and on television, highlight again some reciprocal relations between Shakespeare, serialization and popular culture in our time.

On the subject of the order of the histories, a special contribution may also come from the work of textual editing, which is undergoing a very rich expansion today. It is well known that scores of scholars – mostly white and male, we have to say – have worked over time to propose new philological evaluations and new amendments to the text, a long chain of names which have begun to flank the author's name as 'grand possessors', rightly or wrongly claiming a sort of new creation of the text, both written and performed, but necessarily in print. As Amy Lidster, in fact, reminds us, "[t]he vast majority of early modern history plays that

[1] Series such as *An Age of Kings* (1960) or *The Hollow Crown* (2012-16) have popularized the stories of kings for the general public by associating them with occasions of national significance, such as the 2012 Olympics and the Queen's Diamond Jubilee.

have survived have done so because they were printed. Our access to history plays is substantially determined by the publication process and the strategies of selection that have motivated stationers' investment in them" (Lidster 2022, 18).

Along this line, Rory Loughnane's essay "Shakespeare, Marlowe, and Traces of Authorship"[2] offers a chronological summary of the publications and stagings of Shakespeare's *2* and *3 Henry VI*, *The First Part of the Contention* and *The True Tragedy of Richard Duke of York*, evaluating the works before the printing of the First Folio in 1623. The essay addresses the difficulties of determining co-authorship and establishing the canons of both Marlowe and Shakespeare. Although Loughnane focuses primarily on finding traces of Shakespeare's authorship in these works, he also notes that "[t]here are no known allusions in either Marlowe's own work or that of others that connect him to the *Henry VI* plays". Moreover, despite Marlowe's notoriety and the publication of three of his works in 1594 with Marlowe's name "prominently displayed on each title-page", the earliest printed versions of Thomas Millington's *Henry VI* contain no reference to Marlowe, nor does Shakespeare's name appear on the title page. According to Loughnane, the reasons why the names were omitted may be that the plays were not yet associated with a particular playwright, shedding light on the complex procedures that early modern dramatic texts went through in order to be staged and published.

What is very often not highlighted about the theories and editorial practices that have accompanied the revision of Shakespeare's text over time, however, is the cultural and social context in which this revision has taken place. As Sonia Massai sharply puts it in her 2007 book *Shakespeare and the Rise of the Editor*: "Like any other textual practice, editing is embedded within wider cultural and literary contexts, which affect the way in which editors feel they should re-present early modern printed playbooks to their readers" (Massai 2007, 204). Certainly, the task of the Shakespearean editor risks turning into a Sisyphean effort, in which

[2] We gladly reprint here online, for the courtesy of Routledge, Rory Loughnane's essay published in *The Birth and Death of the Author: A Multi-Authored History of Authorship in Print*, ed. Andrew J. Power (New York: Routledge, 2020), 54-78. For this piece Loughnane was awarded the 2019 Calvin and Rose G. Hoffman Prize for distinguished scholarly work on Christopher Marlowe.

one aspires to reconstruct a text understood as original and 'authentic', erroneously in search of the perfect text, especially if we remember the very fluidity of the concept of text in Elizabethan theatre. Quite different is the role of the editor seen as a bridge between two (or more) worlds and between cultures, in search of a product that is not meant as an antiquarian relic, but in synergy with the changes that language itself undergoes, taking into account not only production, but also reception. Sonia Massai, currently in the process of preparing a new edition of *Richard III* for the fourth Arden Shakespeare series and as one of the general editors of the forthcoming Cambridge Shakespeare Editions series – the first female editor whose mother tongue is not English – addresses these critical points in conversation with Andrea Peghinelli. In her textual editing of *Richard III*, calling in diversity studies, from disability to BIPOC, Massai vigorously reminds us how doing this work on the text means interpreting it, and how many different meanings a work like *Richard III* can have for new generations of readers, scholars and spectators, if only a proper attention is paid to history, gender or skin colour.

Margaret Tudeau-Clayton's essay shifts to the discussion of another crucial issue running through the text and performance of Shakespeare's historical plays, namely the king's word and language. In particular, her article analyses the unique Shakespearean case of "the King's English" trope in the Folio version of *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, and the ironical allusions to the language of the new Scottish king, virtually excluded as an official language. The play explicitly postulates "the King's English" as a language that members of the community share even as they are continually embroiled in miscommunication (Magnusson 2012; Tudeau-Clayton 2018). It is an issue that reverberates in the words of the first and second tetralogy and ostensibly calls into question the relationship between language and nation, and between language and Englishness, in dialogue and confrontation with other languages and linguistic variations which move across the historical scene as key markers of social and cultural identity, as well as ideological representation of difference. Drama, as an oral and aural medium, is well-suited to this type of investigation because it functions as a place in which the audience

is exposed to different modes of speech in dialogue with each other, and this contributes to highlighting ideological associations between the concepts of standard English and linguistic authority (Reynolds 2008). It would appear that, in *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, "the King's English" is compared with Latin and French, as rival languages in terms of cultural prestige and linguistic richness, and is even allowed to be "hacked" by "other" languages without this being seen as a threat to a still rising linguistic authority (Montini 2021).

The Histories in Italy

In an act of deliberate defamiliarization from a 'natural' connection between the histories and the English nation and culture, an essay and a specific bibliographical review focus on reception studies at the theatre and on academic criticism and refer to the Italian context of the pre-COVID19 twenty-first century, aiming at insights into performances and critical productions as received and perceived by non-English eyes and ears. In so doing, innovative perspectives are presented on both the collection and analysis of data, and a new methodological light is also shed on that chapter that in Italian criticism on famous authors or works used to go under the title "La fortuna di…".

In the context of the current emerging interest in the sonic and aural environment of the British stage and academic research, Emiliana Russo's "Italian Soundscape in Performance: Voices, Accents and Local Sonorities of Shakespeare's History Plays in Italy (2000-2020)" describes the reception of the histories in Italy as a privileged case study for investigating possible experimental innovations in a non-English speaking country. The article expands that strand of research that goes by the name of "theatrical phonetics" and concludes that "the phonetics of the stagings of the Shakespearean histories in the period 2000-2020 mostly assumes the guise of uniformity: the reviews depict a rather homogenous universe" in which dialects are in the minority, Italian accents are not contemplated, and Shakespeare's language is expected to be "elegant and non-scurrilous".

Remo Appolloni opens the section devoted to reviews of Shakespearean publications and provides a specific web-based

investigation into Shakespeare's history plays in the twenty-first century academic studies in Italian language, so as to measure the interest and popularity of this genre. Especially in view of the new trends of web-based research, statistical analysis and pattern recognition, a systematic digital and quantitative approach to a bibliographical review is combined with a qualitative approach, used to organize data and the reference categories for the analysis.

Coda

Franco Marenco's thought-provoking essay, "Craftsman Meets Historian: Shakespeare and Material Culture", closes (but it could also have opened) the monographic part of the issue by recalling Shakespeare the historian essentially as "a *playwrighter* and *stagewrighter*" and reminding us of "the coexistence of two tracks of development, the artisanal and the artistic – the artisan or craftsman drawing his material from the 'shifting assemblage of humans, tools, and raw materials inhabiting a specific environment' – and, on the other hand, the original, the personal, innovative breakthrough – shirking the conventional and the repetitive – in other words, *art*". We are among those who believe that maintaining a firm and conscious grasp with both of these tracks of development, without loosing contact with the written and performed text, nor forgetting the contexts and even the strictures of the era in which that text was conceived, is the only way forward for good Shakespearean criticism.

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