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Romance, Revolution & Reform

Playing the King on Stage: Shakespeare's *Richard II* in the Shadow of Napoleon

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THE NINETEENTH CENTURY, often characterised by its industrial rationality and imperial ambitions, was also a deeply playful age. Recent scholarship has demonstrated how play as imaginative engagement, performative practice, and cultural mode remained central to how nineteenth-century societies understood themselves and their pasts. Russell Jackson explains how spectacle and entertainment were an essential part of culture, with the theatre at its centre. Ingrained in all ideas of 'progress' in the nineteenth century, 'there is a strong sense of the modification of the free market to acknowledge the change in the nature of society and the importance entertainment had in it.'[1] Moreover, new technology allowed theatre managers to materialise on stage what before was unthinkable, producing 'a complete convincing illusory world, in which any modern, fantastic or historical event or scene could be rendered with accuracy and conviction.'[2] In fact, theatrical performance emerged as a key site where history could not only be reconstructed but played with: audiences were invited to revisit, reframe, and emotionally reanimate the past in ways that were both structured and speculative, educational and affective. This ludic engagement with history was especially visible in the spectacular revivals of Shakespeare's history plays, where theatrical recreations of national events became opportunities to participate (consciously or not) in the playful remaking of historical memory. It is important to note that the term 'play' here involves more than just the literal performance of the text; it involves a broader sense of play as negotiation, contestation, and disruption. In this context, this article examines Edmund Kean's 1815 production of Shakespeare's *Richard II* at Drury Lane as an example of the playful nature of theatrical historicism, combining the trappings of documentary realism with the emotional and interpretive freedoms of dramatic performance. Focusing on Richard Wroughton's textual adaptation of the Shakespearean play, the text used by

[1] Russell Jackson, *Victorian Theatre: The Theatre in its Time* (New Amsterdam, 1994), pp. 4-5.

[2] Ibid., p. 2.

Kean, I argue that this production offered nineteenth-century audiences a form of cultural play that allowed them to emotionally engage with the uncertainties of monarchy, identity, and political legitimacy at a moment when those very concepts were unsettled by the shadow of Napoleon Bonaparte.[3] Kean's Richard II invites dual political readings: Bolingbroke's seizure of the crown can be seen either as an act of tyrannical usurpation, aligning him with Napoleon as despot, or as a liberation from divine-right monarchy, casting him as a Napoleonic hero.

This article situates Kean's performance within a wider theatrical and political culture that was itself saturated with performative notions of power. In the wake of the Napoleonic Wars, Britain's fascination with the stage mirrored its struggle to articulate national identity and imperial destiny through historical narratives. Napoleon, a consummate theatrical strategist himself, loomed large in the cultural imagination as both a figure of immense historical relevance and a master of self-staging. When Kean's Richard II becomes associated with the Napoleonic figure, the monarchy as staged at Drury Lane is not only enacted but contested, rehearsed, and emotionally reexperienced on stage. By reframing the medieval past of Richard II to his contemporary audience, Kean's production is an example of how performances of history plays act as a mode of historical interpretation, enabling the theatre-goer to play with the past: to inhabit it, reshape it, and find meaning within its theatrical repetition.

Theatre and the Napoleonic Wars

The English stage during the early nineteenth century was a space charged with political resonance, where historical drama intersected with contemporary anxieties, national identity, and questions of legitimacy. In the aftermath of the French Revolution and amid the long shadow cast by Napoleon, British audiences turned to Shakespeare's histories not only for entertainment but also for moral instruction, political allegory, and reflection. As Romanticism reshaped the cultural imagination, the performance of Shakespeare's kings – especially the deposed Richard II – took on new significance. The

[3] Although Wroughton's adaptation is mentioned in several accounts of the stage history of *Richard II,* including Margaret Shewring's *Shakespeare in Performance: King Richard II and Charles Forker's Richard II: 1780-1920*, there has, to my knowledge, been no in-depth, full-length scholarly article devoted specifically to this adaptation.

stage became a forum where the past was not merely reconstructed but reinterpreted: history-making as imaginative and ideological play.

The Napoleonic Wars (1803–1815) profoundly shaped Britain's political landscape and cultural production. They reinforced both a sense of national vulnerability and triumphant superiority, as Britain stood against revolutionary France and later claimed victory after Waterloo. In this climate, theatre played an important role in the forging of national identity. As Linda Colley has argued, Britain's image of itself was consolidated in part through cultural rituals that emphasised difference from France and celebrated monarchy, Protestantism, and military might. British royal ceremony 'was hallowed by tradition, as distinct from the upstart and synthetic contrivances of the French.'[4] By the end of George III's reign (1760-1820), the monarchy was perceived differently by the people, a consequence of a sort of 'new kind of royal magic and mystique.'[5] The defeat in America, the consequences of the French Revolution, the threat of Napoleon and his armies, and the king's weakness and illnesses (which rendered him more human) combined to foster a sense of patriotism: 'Herein lay the essence of a newly invented royal magic. At one and the same time, Britons were being invited to see their monarch as unique and as typical, as ritually splendid and remorselessly prosaic, as glorious and *gemütlich* both.'[6]

Like George III, Napoleon also became a paradoxical figure in the British cultural imagination. While frequently cast as the embodiment of tyranny, he also emerged in Romantic literature and popular discourse as a tragic, charismatic figure – one whose downfall mirrored classical narratives of hubris and fall. As Simon Bainbridge explains in *Napoleon and English Romanticism*, British artistic and literary production has interpreted and reframed Napoleon to foster specific ideological, cultural or economic arguments. For instance, for the Tories, Napoleon's figure was used as a political threat 'to ensure loyalty to their administration and payment of taxes'; whereas for the Whigs, he was seen as a hero 'whose cause and character embody their advocacy for liberty and their opposition to the encroachments of monarchical power.'[7] He was both the 'greatest' and the 'meanest': 'on the one hand, Napoleon is described as

[4] Linda Colley, *Britons: Forging the Nation 1707-1837* (Yale University Press, 2017), p. 221.

[5] Ibid., p. 237.

[6] Ibid.

[7] Simon Bainbridge, *Napoleon and English Romanticism* (Cambridge University Press, 1995), p. 6.

"extraordinary", "gigantic", "great", "wonderful", "marvellous", "prodigious" and "tremendous". On the other, as "cruel", "mean", "merciless", "perfidious", "imperious", "cowardly" and even "insane"'.[8] When Napoleon was forced to abdicate in 1814, Lord Burghersh wrote to the Duke of Wellington: 'Glory to God and to yourself, the great man has fallen.'[9] However, the same event led the poet Lord Byron, a fervent admirer of Napoleon, to write an Ode to lament his hero's base submission:

> Is this the man of thousand thrones,
> Who strew'd our earth with hostile bones,
> And can he thus survive?
> Since he, miscall'd the Morning Star,
> Nor man nor fiend hath fallen so far.[10]

This dual image of Napoleon in the British imagination could resonate with the figure of Richard II in early 1815, especially given Kean's revival of the Shakespearean play 77 years after it had last been seen on a London stage.[11] What had prompted Kean to perform a rather obscure Shakespearean play? It is likely that the political climate of the age and the repercussions of Napoleon's first abdication in April 1814 raised the theatre manager's interest in *Richard II*, the only Shakespearean play in which a monarch is forced to abdicate on stage. Kean's production thus emerges as a site of political reflection, where the audience is invited to think about the consequences of absolutism and the thin line between heroism and tyranny. By drawing a parallel between Richard II and Napoleon, Kean simultaneously feeds from and challenges the ambiguous portrayals of these historical characters.

Napoleon was a constant presence in plays of the 1810s on the London stage. Responding to the public's appetite for martial spectacle, they dramatised recent battles, celebrated military heroism, and, crucially, caricatured or vilified Bonaparte. But

[8] Ibid., p. 8.

[9] Elizabeth Longford, *Wellington: The Years of the Sword* (Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1969), p. 422, quoted in Bainbridge, p. 9.

[10] Lord Byron, 'Ode to Napoleon', ll. 5-9.

[11] Prior to Kean's revival of the play, the last time *Richard II* had been performed on the London stage was in 1738, when John Rich brought it to Covent Garden by request of the Shakespeare's Ladies Club.

even as Napoleon became the embodiment of foreign threat and tyrannical ambition, the complexity of his image in the theatrical imagination goes beyond simple propagandistic binaries. As Gillian Russell explains, theatre held political power in Georgian society, where performance and spectatorship were central to social life. Coronations, processions, funerals and other rituals were turned into ceremonial spectacles, and institutions such as the army and the navy gained a new layer of theatricality. According to Russell,

> In a country which had not been invaded by an enemy since 1745, the majority of the population experienced war as theatre—the performance of manoeuvres and sham fights, the display, colour, and music of a parade, the elaborate choreography of large scale reviews presided over by the King in much the same way as he commanded Covent Garden or Drury Lane.[12]

Such displays inevitably affected the way the Napoleonic Wars were interpreted by the population.

Susan Valladares explores how war dramas offered audiences immediate, emotional engagement with current events, transforming newspapers and dispatches into visual and affective experiences. These productions capitalised on public enthusiasm for military figures such as the Duke of Wellington, while often representing the French – and Napoleon most of all – as both theatrical villains and symbols of dangerous charisma. For example, Fairburn's *Comic Constellation* (1814), a collection of songs from theatrical productions from the early nineteenth century, including songs from 'Vittoria', or 'Wellington's Laurels' (a musical and military melange by Charles Dibdin the Younger celebrating Wellington's victory in 1813), and the song 'Vittoria; or King Joseph's Last Gun,' performed at Astley's Amphitheatre. Valladares describes that in the latter,

> Napoleon is caricatured as "little Boneyparte", "With his swagg'ring frown, | And iron crown", while the Spaniards (represented by a "master Don") respond

[12] Gillian Russell, The Theatres of War: Performance, Politics, and Society 1793-1815 (Clarendon Press, 1995), p. 17.

> indignantly to Bonaparte's gift of the Spanish throne to his "brother Joey": […] For while we're back'd by England, | Lads, a fig for Mr. Boneyparte.[13]

In songs like 'Vittoria,' the emphasis is on British courage, Spanish alliance, and French cowardice, with Napoleon often figured indirectly or through his defeated generals. Such dramas helped audiences process the war through theatrical means, blurring the boundaries between history and entertainment.

A few weeks before Kean's *Richard III* premiered on the Drury Lane stage, Napoleon escaped the island of Elba, where he was sent in exile in May 1814 after his first deposition. Napoleon, who rose to power through a complex mix of military prowess and symbolic manipulation, was a political figure deeply attuned to the theatrical dimensions of authority. His career was marked by a constant self-staging: his carefully crafted public image, grand historical references, and dramatic entrances and exits all reveal a man who understood that power must be performed. As Sudhir Hazareesingh explains, the cult of Napoleon under the Bourbon Restoration (1815-1830) was celebrated by liberals, Napoleonists, and republicans. This idolisation sprang from 'a romantic and sentimental view of the Emperor, based on an idealization of the past (especially the Empire's military past), rather than any practical or programmatic vision of the future'.[14] His political power was deeply performative, built not only through war but through visual culture, staged ceremonies, and symbolic gestures.

The eighteenth-century French historian Gabriel Bonnot de Mably argued for 'the need to establish a republican system of government' modelled on 'the huge federal republican system that […] had once existed in Europe under Charlemagne,' the King of Franks from 768 until his death in 1814.[15] Mably's ideal system would be led by 'a prince who was simultaneously a philosopher, a legislator, a patriot, and a conqueror', an image that appealed to Napoleon.[16] The connection with Charlemagne would be explicitly established in Napoleon's coronation on December 2 1804, when the French

[13] Susan Valladares, *Staging the Peninsular War: English Theatres 1807-1815* (Routledge, 2019), p. 143.

[14] Sudhir Hazareesingh, 'Memory and Political Imagination: The Legend of Napoleon Revisited', *French history*, 18 (2004), p. 464.

[15] Michael Sonenscher, *Before the Deluge: Public Debt, Inequality, and the Intellectual Origins of the French Revolution* (Princeton University Press, 2007), p. 224.

[16] Ibid., p. 250.

leader 'received Charlemagne's sword and crown at the famously stage-managed coronation ceremony inaugurating the new reign'.[17] This act was not simply propaganda; it was a performance grounded in a self-aware manipulation of historical forms, which demonstrates that Napoleon did not just use the past but played with it. His imperial pageantry enacted his own medievalism, remaking tradition into theatre, and theatre into power.

Napoleon's own interest in theatre was not incidental. He was a frequent attendee of plays, especially tragedies.[18] According to Louis-Henry Lecomte, Napoleon affirmed that 'high tragedy is the school of great men; it must be that of kings and peoples; it is the duty of sovereigns to encourage and spread it. Tragedy warms the soul, lifts the heart, it can and must create heroes!'[19] Napoleon understood the political utility of theatricality. In his reign, as in his legend, history was dramatised for effect, constructed and consumed as a form of spectacle. After his defeat and exile, this performative legacy lingered. British theatre in the post-Napoleonic era remained haunted by the tension between spectacle and seriousness, and between grandeur and collapse; these were tensions that were especially vivid in performances of historical kingship.

This context is especially relevant when considering the staging of Shakespeare's *Richard II*, and Kean's interpretation of the deposed monarch. In contrast to the war spectacles of the early 1810s, which tended to flatten political complexity into a patriotic narrative, *Richard II* offered a more introspective, melancholic meditation on the fragility of kingship under the threat of tyranny. *Richard II*, performed in the long shadow of war, could thus evoke not only the ghost of England's own medieval past, but also the figure of the French emperor who threatened its future.

[17] Ibid., p. 349.

[18] Louis-Henry Lecomte lists sixty-three plays which Napoleon attended during the Consulate (1799-1804). Among them, he was a frequent attendant of productions of Pierre Corneille's tragedy *Cinna or the clemency of Caesar Augustus* (Daragon, 1912), pp. 74-96.

[19] 'La haute tragédie est l'école des grands hommes ; elle doit être celle des rois et des peuples ; c'est le devoir des souverains de l'encourager et de la répandre. La tragédie échauffe l'âme, élève le cœur, peut et doit créer des héros!', Louis-Henry Lecomte, *Napoléon et le monde dramatique* (Daragon, 1912), pp. 72-73.

History-Making as Play on the English Stage: Richard Wroughton's Richard II

Historical reconstruction found vivid expression on the nineteenth-century stage, combining a desire to bring the past back to life with apparent fidelity to historical detail (think, for example, of Charles Kean's sumptuous Shakespearean revivals at the Princess's Theatre during his management from 1850 to 1859), while simultaneously exploring emotional, aesthetic, and ideological reinterpretation. This dual investment in authenticity and affect represents a distinctively theatrical way of knowing history not as fixed knowledge, but as a kind of imaginative play.

Looking at the gap between history and performance studies, Katherine Johnson describes the liminal landscape occupied by the past and the present as 'a fertile ground rich with possibilities.'[20] Her research focus is on historical re-enactments, 'the (re)performance of a historical event, person, culture, or activity,' which are creative reconstructions of the past, where different conventions are 'played with, and at times, desecrated.' [21] Johnson understands historical re-enactments as an example of what Diana Taylor calls repertoire, or 'embodied memory: performances, gestures, orality, movement, dance, singing—in short, all those acts usually thought of as ephemeral, nonreproducible knowledge'.[22] Different from the archive, which exists physically ('documents, maps, literary texts, letters, archaeological remains, bones, videos, films, cds, all those items supposedly resistant to change'), the repertoire is fluid; it requires creative and imaginative engagement in order to be reconstructed.[23]

Johnson makes a distinction between 'theatrical re-enactment' and 'historical re-enactment,' or 'living history.' She understands the latter as an effort to recreate the experience of living in a different era, whereas the former 'pertains to the restaging of plays and other forms of theatre, with a focus on recreating a portrayal as close as possible to the so-called original.'[24] In this way, the author limits the notion of playfulness to historical re-enactments, overlooking the fact that theatrical re-

[20] Katherine Johnson, 'Performing Pasts for Present Purposes: Reenactment as Embodied, Performative History', *History, Memory, Performance*, edited by D. Dean, Y. Meerzon, and K. Prince (Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), p. 36.

[21] Ibid., pp. 36, 37.

[22] Diana Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory In the Americas* (Duke University Press, 2003), p. 20.

[23] Ibid.

[24] Johnson, p. 38.

enactments are, by their very nature, equally playful. Consider, for instance, the aforementioned recreations of the Napoleonic Wars on the early-nineteenth-century English stage and the different dramatic depictions of the character of Napoleon.

In S*hakespeare's Victorian Stage: Performing History in the Theatre of Charles Kean*, Richard Schoch investigates why the theatre was a place for such historicism in action. He reflects that 'one possible answer is that the theatre was an especially provocative site for the recovery of Britain's medieval heritage because it was already a self-consciously nationalistic form of social practice and cultural production.'[25] The stage was a place where patriotism could gain vigour through the public demonstration of English grandeur. That is why choosing Shakespeare's history plays was meaningful: having become a national cultural icon by the end of the eighteenth century, Shakespeare added authority and legitimacy to theatrical reconstructions of English history. On the other hand, the summoning of the past could also be used as a method to criticise the present and subvert the status quo without referring directly to current affairs. As Jonathan Dollimore puts it, literature and theatre do not passively reflect history, but 'intervene in contemporary history in the very act of representing it.'[26] By reconstructing history, literature and theatre remake history.

Theatre thus became a site of historical negotiation: a space where audiences could encounter the past not as fixed knowledge but as dynamic performance. This form of performance was inherently ludic. In this sense, theatrical re-enactments can also be seen as a 'playful, public mode of historical inquiry' similar to recreational re-enactments of historical moments. [27] For instance, Johnson describes her experience watching the demonstrations at Winterfest, a medieval festival in Sydney, Australia:

> Dressed in reconstructed medieval armor, these men were fighting with full-size and weighted replicas of medieval weapons. They had learnt the same bodily techniques as medieval warriors and were now moving with their bodies in much the same way as their medieval counterparts, a skilled mode of moving created

[25] Richard Schoch, *Shakespeare's Victorian Stage: Performing History in the Theatre of Charles Kean* (Cambridge University Press, 2006), p. 15.

[26] Jonathan Dollimore; Alan Sinfield, *Political Shakespeare: Essays in Cultural Materialism* (Manchester University Press, 1994), p. 10.

[27] Johnson, p. 38.

> for and with these recreated tools. I never felt that these men (or their audience) were in any way in the Middle Ages. Rather, I began to consider the possibility that they were bringing something of the Middle Ages forward, bringing a touch of 'then' into the now.[28]

A spectator watching Kean's Richard II in 1815 may have felt a similar awareness of the bridge between past and present. For example, referencing the production, a theatre critic from the Public Cause claimed that:

> The opening scene of the play is a fine one for stage effect. The appearance of the Monarch on his Throne, supported by all the high and noble of his realm, assembled on either side, while the two powerful rivals, Mowbray and Bolingbroke, reciprocate their accusations, and interchange their pledges of hostility, presented altogether a display of Royal and Knightly pageantry.[29]

Over forty years later, a critic watching Charles Kean's production of *Richard II* at the Princess's Theatre would more explicitly describe the feeling of being transported to the past:

> From the moment we take our seat in the Princess's Theatre, to the period when reluctantly quitting it dazed and dazzled with the stage-wrought wonders that have been conjured before us, we relapse into the stern bustling reality of the modern gas-lit Oxford street, we are under the spell of a potent magician. A vale [sic] is dropped before our eyes, and the glamour of theatrical witchcraft enthrals every sense. We are thrown back to the time of the fourteenth century.[30]

These two critical excerpts demonstrate how theatrical re-enactments make use of props, costumes, carefully designed sets, and stage effects to create a visual and material illusion of lived history. They also involve tone, gesture, and emotion in the

[28] Johnson, p. 45.

[29] 'Theatricals,' *Public Cause*, Wednesday, 15 March, 1815, p. 194.

[30] 'Princess's Theatre Representation of "Richard II," *The Era*, Sunday, 15 March, 1857, p. 11.

ways actors embody historical figures as affective subjects with modern resonances. As Freddie Rokem emphasises,

> The actors serve as a connecting link between the historical past and the "fictional" performed here and now of the theatrical event; they become a kind of historian, what I call a "hyper-historian," who makes it possible for us—even in cases where the reenacted events are not fully acceptable for the academic historian as a "scientific" representation of that past—to recognize that the actor is "redoing" or "reappearing" as something/somebody that has actually existed in the past.[31]

Much in the same way that the historical re-enactors in medieval armour prompted a historical reflection on Johnson, Edmund Kean functioned as the bridge between the past historical Richard (and Shakespeare's Richard) and the audience's present, playfully inviting the spectators to imagine themselves looking at the past.

When Kean assumed the role in 1815, his performance was thus situated within a broader theatrical and political fascination with the past, allowing the play to engage powerfully with both historical imagination and current anxieties. The playbill announced the play's premiere on Thursday 9 March:

> Their Majesties' Servants will perform, for the first time, with appropriate Splendour, SHAKESPEARE'S Tragedy of King Richard the Second, (With Considerable Alterations and Additions, from the Writings of the Same Author,) With New Scenes, Dresses, & Decorations. And a New Overture, Act Symphonies and Marches, Incidental to the Tragedy. [32]

[31] Freddie Rokem, *Performing History: Theatrical Representations of the Past in Contemporary Theatre* (University of Iowa Press, 2002), p. 13.

[32] The play was originally scheduled to premiere on Monday, 6 March, but it was postponed due to Mr. Ellistone's indisposition, the actor playing 'the long and arduous Character of Bolingbroke.' As the playbill from that day announces, 'The Manager, in order to prevent that Play from being represented in an Imperfect State, is under the very unpleasant Necessity of postponing it until Thursday next; and (in Hopes of the Indulgence of the Publick, on so unforeseen an Occasion,) to substitute for this Evening, the Tragedy of Macbeth.'

Although Wroughton's textual adaptation, the one used by Kean for his production at Drury Lane, lists it as 'a[n] historical play,' the playbill refers to it as a 'Tragedy,' and not as a History play, following the classification of the first Quarto (*The Tragedie of King Richard the Second*), and not the First Folio categorisation.

The bill makes no reference to any attention given to historical authenticity apart from the 'appropriate Splendour' – different from Charles Kemble's 1823 King John at Covent Garden, which was famously announced as:

> Produced with an attention to Costume which has never been equalled on the English Stage. Every Character will appear in the precise habit of the Period—the whole of the Dresses and Decorations being executed from copies of indisputable authority, such as Monuments, Seals, illuminated Manuscripts, painted Glass, &c.[33]

The review in the *Morning Post* from Friday, 10 March 1815, only states that 'the splendour of the dresses and scenery does credit to the liberality of the managers.'[34] This distinction suggests that Kean's relationship with the historical Richard II was more playful and malleable than Kemble's rigour.

In the advertisement for Wroughton's textual adaptation of *Richard II*, the author laments that the play had been neglected by the London theatre managers for the past

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Theatre Royal, Drury Lane, 'A collection of playbills from Drury Lane Theatre, 1814–1816', *Nineteenth Century Collections Online*, link.gale.com/apps/doc/AKSOGO512787134/NCCO?u=leiden&sid=bookmark-NCCO&xid=478c3f1a&pg=166 (accessed 4 Aug 2025).

[33] Kemble's King John was also categorised as a Tragedy in the playbill, and not as 'The Troublesome raigne of John, King of England,' as in the Quarto publication.
Royal Opera House, Covent Garden, 'A collection of playbills from Covent Garden Theatre, 1823–1824', *Nineteenth Century Collections Online*, link.gale.com/apps/doc/AKTQXL409779735/NCCO?u=leiden&sid=bookmark-NCCO&xid=951a703f&pg=184 (accessed 4 Aug 2025).

[34] 'Drury Lane Theatre,' *Morning Post*, Friday, 10 March 1815.

years.[35] He allows that the text was 'too heavy for representation' as it was originally conceived, although it is not clear what Wroughton means by 'heavy.' It could mean that the content of the play was too politically charged, since it deals with the forced deposition of a monarch. Or, that the poetic language was burdensome or lengthy, 'bordering too much on the Mono-drama.'[36] Indeed, the reviewer in the *Public Cause* of 15 March 1815, writes that

> Few, we apprehend, would, from the very perusal of it [*Richard II*], have considered it likely to prove particularly interesting in the performance. The declamatory speeches run to such length, and the interest of the action appears to move forward so heavily, that it has been for a long time suffered to repose quietly on the Manager's shelf, and left to the silent enjoyment of those who could relish the rich poetry of its sentiment and diction.[37]

The critic adds that whether it was due to the manager's taste or Kean's sagacity, they are grateful for the final result seen on the Drury Lane stage.

Wroughton believes that disregarding so 'exquisite a production' as *Richard II* could be considered 'Theatrical Treason.'[38] For this reason, he proposes a new adaptation to rescue the play from its state of disregard. He admits having borrowed lines from *Henry VI*, *Titus Andronicus* and *King Lear*, although he has also borrowed from *Antony and Cleopatra* and *Richard III*. Wroughton justifies his decision to combine extracts of different plays by referring to Colley Cibber's famous adaptation of *Richard III*, which had also altered Shakespeare's original text significantly. Although Cibber's adaptation was partly censored at the time of its creation in 1699, it became very popular at the beginning of the nineteenth century. It was, as Wroughton points out, 'now acted at both Theatres,' that is, Covent Garden and Drury Lane.

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[35] Prior to Kean's revival of the play, the last time *Richard II* had been performed on the London stage was in 1738, when John Rich brought it to Convent Garden by request of the Shakespeare's Ladies Club.

[36] Richard Wroughton, *King Richard the Second; an Historical Play. Adapted to the Stage, with Alterations and Additions by Richard Wroughton, Esq. And Published as It Is Performed at the Theatre-Royal, Drury Lane* (John Miller, 1815), p. 1.

[37] 'Theatricals,' *Public Cause*, Wednesday, 15 March 1815, p. 194.

[38] Wroughton, p. 1.

Wroughton's use of the phrase 'theatrical treason' can be interpreted in at least two distinct ways, both of which carry significant weight in the context of the play's historical moment. First, in a straightforward sense, Wroughton could be lamenting the neglect of *Richard II* in the theatre, calling it a 'crime' against both Shakespeare's legacy and the cultural enrichment that the play might provide. This interpretation frames the absence of the play from the stage as a missed opportunity to engage with a canonical work of drama, which is consistent with Wroughton's desire to revive and re-contextualise the play for contemporary audiences. From this angle, theatrical treason becomes a critique of theatrical conservatism or stagnation. However, a more politically charged interpretation is suggested when we consider the historical backdrop of Wroughton's adaptation. After the promises of freedom and change prompted by the French Revolution in 1789, a period of political unrest followed. The disillusionment derived from the failed revolution, the violence of the Reign of Terror and the eventual establishment of Napoleon as Emperor of France affected the perception of the country. As we have seen, his rule created a new oligarchy. William Wordsworth's (1770-1850) autobiographical epic poem *The Prelude* (1805), for instance, illustrates the author's change of heart from a radical pro-revolutionary youth into a conservative older man after disappointment with the outcomes of the French Revolution. Wordsworth describes his residence in France in Book 9. After encountering a starving girl on the streets of Paris, he is still hopeful of changes that would end poverty, recompense labour, and abolish 'empty pomp' and the cruel power of the state.[39] However, years later, he reconsiders his naïve confidence. Wordsworth abhors those who changed 'a war of self-defence' for 'one of conquest,' becoming oppressors in their turn.[40] The examples from Wordsworth's *The Prelude* contrast the idealised radicalism of Romantic poets at the turn of the century with the pragmatic realism of the failure of the First French Republic.

Kean's production of *Richard II* must be understood within this interplay of historical reconstruction and Napoleonic memory. His interpretation of the fallen king emerged in a cultural landscape still saturated with the spectacle of Napoleon's decline, especially after his first abdication and exile. Like Napoleon, Richard is a ruler undone by theatricality: a king who can no longer sustain the image of sovereignty that his role

[39] William Wordsworth, *The Prelude*, l. 526.

[40] Ibid., ll. 207-208.

requires. The poignant de-coronation scene in Act IV of Shakespeare's play is a vivid example of the theatricality of kingship. When Richard hands over the crown to Bolingbroke (future Henry IV), Richard turns the act into a performance, full of poetic excess and self-conscious spectacle. He declares, 'You may my glories and my state depose, | But not my griefs; still am I king of those.'[41] Instead of resisting with dignity or authority, Richard indulges in a prolonged lamentation, emphasising his suffering and casting himself as a tragic figure. His line, 'With mine own hands I give away my crown,' foregrounds his agency in a gesture that is more performative than political.[42] The mirror scene that follows, in which he smashes a looking glass after studying his reflection, underscores his obsession with image and identity, turning his abdication into a kind of theatre. In this sense, Shakespeare's play, especially in this scene, invites audiences to witness not only a historical narrative but a meditation on the pageantry of power, as well as on the fragility of identity when shaped by ritual, public gaze, and symbolic power. Hazlitt disliked the way Kean performed this specific instance in the play. He writes that Kean made Richard 'a character of passion, that is, of feeling combined with energy, whereas it is a character of pathos, that is to say, of feeling combined with weakness.'[43] In the mirror scene, Kean 'dash[es] the glass down with all his might, […] instead of letting it fall out of his hands, as from an infant's.'[44] What Kean fails to convey in this scene is 'how feeling is connected with the sense of weakness as well as of strength, or the power of imbecility, and the force of passiveness.'[45] Hazlitt's observation highlights the paradox at the centre of Shakespeare's play: kingship is not only an exercise of authority but also a performance that reveals the human vulnerability beneath royal power.

This moment of Shakespeare's play is part of the de-coronation or deposition scene, undoubtedly the most politically charged in the text. Famously omitted from the first quarto publications, it was only printed in Q4 (1608), not coincidentally five years after Queen Elizabeth I's death. With the ageing of the childless queen and the absence

[41] William Shakespeare, *Richard II* in *The RSC Shakespeare Complete Works*, ed. by Jonathan Bate and Eric Rasmussen (Macmillan, 2008), 4.1., pp. 186-187.

[42] Ibid., p. 202.

[43] William Hazlitt, 'Mr. Kean's Richard II,' *The complete works of William Hazlitt; vol. V, Lectures on the English poets and A view of the English stage* (J. M. Dent and Sons, Ltd.), p. 223.

[44] Ibid., p. 224.

[45] Ibid.

of an undisputable heir to the English throne, any mention – let alone a public performance – of a monarch's deposition was extremely dangerous. In fact, Shakespeare's play draws attention to the issue regarding who is more suitable to govern: the anointed monarch who has divine sanction to rule but abuses their power and therefore fails to care for their subjects, or a usurper who claims to be a better and more effective ruler but who has challenged the divine hereditary nature of the crown?

The early stage history of Shakespeare's *Richard II* connects the play to Robert Devereux (1565-1601), the 2nd Earl of Essex, and one of the Queen's favourites; he had a prominent position at court and led some to believe he coveted the English crown. Essex's popularity, especially his extravagant exhibitionism during the Accession Day tilts in 1595, had been compared to Bolingbroke's, creating a connection between Essex and the Shakespearean character. In 1601, the play *Richard II* was arguably commissioned by Essex's supporters and staged at the Globe on 7 February. Paul Hammer explains that 'on the morning of Sunday, 8 February, Essex and about one hundred gentleman followers marched out of Essex House and tried to rally the people of London to protect the earl from his private enemies.'[46] However, the public conviction was that Essex had gathered supporters to seize the castle and force the queen's deposition. Given the special production of *Richard II* the day before, such an assumption gained credibility, leading the queen to proclaim Essex and his followers traitors to the crown. Essex was executed in the Tower of London on 25 February of the same year.

The deposition scene gains further topicality in Kean's production in 1815. Napoleon's first deposition in April of the previous year would still be latent in the audience's mind, especially after his escape from Elba in February 1815. In this context, it is relevant to investigate whether Shakespeare's deposition scene was included in Wroughton's adaptation, and how Kean brought it to life. Wroughton's text cuts more than a third of the lines of the original play and inserts around two hundred. It alters the balance of the Shakespearean original, omitting instances of Richard's fickleness, borrowing extracts from other Shakespearean plays that would evoke an emotional reaction from the audience, and making Bolingbroke's plan to usurp the crown explicit. It ends with a repentant Bolingbroke and the death of Richard's queen on stage.

[46] Paul Hammer, 'Shakespeare's *Richard II*, the Play of 7 February 1601, and the Essex Rising', *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 59 (Spring 2008), p. 3.

Wroughton also introduced a pastiche Elizabethan song sung by Blanche (one of the queen's ladies, a character created by Wroughton) in the Garden Scene, allowed more space to the role of the queen, focused the plot more exclusively on the conflict between Bolingbroke and the king, and rendered Richard's character more heroic than in the Shakespearean original text. Richard Forker sees the latter as a reason for Kean's energetic acting, criticised by Hazlitt as lacking pathos.[47] These alterations can be associated with the broader cultural landscape of dramatic writing in the Romantic period. Jeffrey Cox writes about the pattern in Romantic playwrights' responses to the past. He identifies a double impetus in the turn to earlier dramatic forms: 'First, there is little doubt that the romantic playwrights were unhappy both with those plays that remained committed to a neoclassical ethic and with the popular drama with its reliance upon spectacle, music, and pantomime' and, second, despite the need to revolt against the contemporary drama, they feared losing touch with this tradition.[48] As an actor himself and in tune with the dramatic production of his time, Wroughton inevitably manifests the same double impetus: by the same time that he evokes tradition by choosing a Shakespearean text and by adding extracts from other Shakespearean plays to his adaptation, he challenges it by incorporating melodramatic elements that would appeal to his contemporary audience.

In Wroughton's version, the deposition scene begins with Bolingbroke's words: 'My countrymen, my loving followers, | Friends that have been thus forward in my right, | I thank you all; | And to the love and favour of my country, | Commit myself, my person, and my cause.'[49] Wroughton borrowed these lines from Saturninus in *Titus Andronicus*, which is, not coincidentally, a play steeped in violence, usurpation, and the theatricality of power. This addition implicitly aligns Bolingbroke's ascent with the rhetoric of Roman imperial authority. Bolingbroke performs gratitude and humility while consolidating control; the act of addressing 'his countrymen' and 'loving followers' becomes a public ritual designed to secure legitimacy through performance rather than divine right. Here, Bolingbroke also makes his cause – that of usurping the crown – which he believes to be 'his right,' known to the lords.

[47] Richard Forker, 'Introduction', *Richard II, 1780-1920* (The Athlone Press, 1998), p. 106.

[48] Jeffrey Cox, *In the Shadows of Romance* (Ohio University Press, 1987), p. 32.

[49] Wroughton, p. 53.

The Duke of York speaks next, referring to Richard's willingness to resign and yield the royal sceptre to Bolingbroke, as in Shakespeare's original. However, the Bishop of Carlisle's speech condemning Bolingbroke's challenge to the hereditary right of kings and prophesying a bloody future for England has been removed. Instead, Bolingbroke immediately requests Richard's presence, so 'that in common view, | He may surrender, so we shall proceed | Without suspicion.'[50] As soon as Bolingbroke tells Richard what he must do, Richard asks for the crown and tells Bolingbroke to hold its other end. The comparison of the crown to a deep well with two buckets, the discussion on grief, and the play with the word 'care' were all cut by Wroughton, who, instead, offers a more succinct version of Richard's performative act of a reversed coronation ritual:

> I give this heavy weight from off my head,
> And this unwieldy scepter from my hand,
> The pride of kingly sway from out my heart;
> With mine own tears, I wash away my balm,
> With mine own hands I give away my crown;
> All pomp and majesty I do forswear;
> My manors, rents, revenues, I forego:
> My acts, decrees, and statutes I deny;
> Heav'n pardon all oaths, that are broke to me,
> And keep all vows unbroke, are made to thee.
> What more remains? —[51]

A reviewer for Johnson's Sunday Monitor on 12 March 1815, affirms that Kean's Richard's

> Address to Bolingbroke, on his abdication, drew down immense applause. The struggle with which he kept down his indignation, the tone and look of sarcasm in which he accepted the successful rebel's homage, the burst of ungovernable scorn and aversion which he ported on the Minister who offered him the articles of condemnation, were received with shouts and applause, which, from that

[50] Ibid., p. 54.

[51] Ibid., p. 55.

> scene until his death, were only suspended by the deeper excitement of the play.[52]

This reviewer's words reinforce the idea that Kean played a heroic rather than a pitiful Richard, keeping a look of sarcasm and scorn.

Richard's request for a mirror and his exploration of his unaltered face on the glass remain intact in Wroughton's adaptation, but the scene concludes in quite a distinct way. Shakespeare's original version ends it with the short conversation between Carlisle, Aumerle and the Abbot of Westminster, hinting at a plot to assassinate Bolingbroke, the failed Epiphany Rising. Wroughton, however, borrows extracts from Parts 2 and 3 of *Henry VI*, and ends the scene with Bolingbroke's rejoicing at his victory:

> Thus far my fortune keeps an upward course,
> And I am grac'd with wreaths of majesty—
> How sweet a thing it is to wear a crown,
> Within whose circuit is Elysium,
> And all that poets feign of bliss and joy.
> Ah! Majesty! Who would not buy thee dear? —
> Let them obey, who knows not how to rule.
> Now am I seated as my soul delights,
> And all my labours have as perfect end
> As I could wish—the crown, the crown is mine.
> Fortune, I acquit thee—let come what may,
> I'll ever thank thee for this glorious day![53]

This final monologue exposes Bolingbroke as a cruel and ambitious strategist, perhaps inviting the audience to connect him with the power-thirsty Napoleon.[54]

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[52] *Johnson's Sunday Monitor*, Sunday 12 March 1815.

[53] Wroughton, p. 58.

[54] The audience's parallel between *Richard II* and the Napoleonic Wars would be reinforced by the performance of Beethoven's 'The Grand Battle Sinfonia,' also part of the Drury Lane repertoire that season. Beethoven wrote the song to celebrate the decisive victory of Arthur Wellesley (later duke of Wellington) over Joseph Bonaparte at Vitoria in 1813.

The most significant change Wroughton made to Shakespeare's original version is at the very end of the play. Shakespeare's Richard dies after being attacked by Sir Exton, and the play concludes with Bolingbroke's empty promise to visit the Holy Land to atone for his sins after seeing Richard's coffin. Wroughton creates a more melodramatic ending, bringing the Queen back for the final act. After Richard's attack by Sir Exton, the Queen is heard offstage: 'Where is my Richard? Quick unbar | your gates— | Conduct me to his sight. | I will not be restrain'd!'[55] She then enters the stage and sees Richard's body: 'My king! My husband! | O horror!—my fears were true, and I am lost!'[56] Kean, however, renders the scene even more sentimental. The handwritten notes on the prompter's copy of Wroughton's *Richard II* mark that Richard does not die immediately after the attack. He hears the Queen's voice and says: 'Ah! My queen! My love!' He, then, 'makes a feeble effort to rise & meet her, but sinks and dies.'[57] This last exchange of words between Richard and his queen enflames the tragedy of Richard's misfortune, making him more human.

The stage directions in Wroughton's adaptation indicate that the Queen faints after seeing Richard's dead body. Bolingbroke re-enters the stage, followed by Exton and the lords. He notices the queen and says: 'She revives—remove her from the body.' But the queen refuses to part from her beloved: 'O, you are men of stone. | Had I tongue and eyes, I'd use them so, | That heaven's vault should crack! O, he is gone for ever. | A plague upon you! —Murderers! —Traitors all!'[58] Bolingbroke asks the queen to be comforted and leave that fatal place. Yet, the queen cannot be consoled. She cries in agony: 'Do you see this, look on him, look on his lips, | Look there, look there!'[59] And, according to the stage directions, she falls. Kean's prompter's handwritten notes reveal extra information regarding the production in 1815. Instead of falling, the 'Queen dies and the Lords let her gently to the ground.'[60] Kean's version of the play, therefore, ends with two bodies – of Richard and his queen – on stage. The reviewer for *Public Cause* of 15 March 1815, commends this affecting scene, writing that 'nothing could be more

[55] Ibid., p. 70.

[56] Ibid.

[57] Handwritten notes on Wroughton, p. 70. Promptbook held at the Folger Library, PROMPT *Rich. II* 3.

[58] Wroughton, p. 70.

[59] Ibid, p. 71.

[60] Handwritten notes on Wroughton, p. 71.

natural or effecting than his last feeble, ineffectual, struggle to reach out his hand towards the beloved partner of his sorrows, whom in his dying moments he had seen approaching.'[61] Wroughton's ending transforms Shakespeare's original into a work of heightened sentiment and spectacle. This melodramatic conclusion departs from the historical record, yet it exemplifies how theatrical adaptations engage in playful historical reconstruction, using imagination and emotion to reanimate the past for the present. In this way, Wroughton makes history felt rather than merely narrated, turning the history of the fall of a monarch into a deeply human drama.

Wroughton's original text includes a final monologue for Bolingbroke, which is crossed out in Kean's promptbook:

> Lords, I protest, my soul is full of grief,
> Read not my blemishes in this foul report,
> But mourn with me for what I do lament.
> I'll make a voyage to the Holy Land,
> To wash this blood from off my guilty hand,
> And shed obsequious tears upon their bier.
> O, were the sum of those that I should pay,
> Countless and infinite, yet would I pay them;
> But let determin'd things to destiny
> Hold unbewail'd their way. Thus instructed,
> By this example, let princes henceforth learn,
> Though kingdoms by just titles prove our own,
> The subjects' hearts do best secure a crown.[62]

Wroughton's remorseful Bolingbroke and didactic tone did not align with Kean's vision of the play. Kean's focus, it seems, is not on absolving Bolingbroke but on placing the unfairness of Richard's fate in the foreground. If we extend the connection between Bolingbroke and Napoleon, then Kean's production exposes both as ambitious tyrants who usurped a crown.

[61] *Public Cause*, Wednesday 15 March 1815, p. 194.

[62] Wroughton, p. 71.

The reviewer for *Public Cause* of 15 March 1815, wrote that this play, 'so seldom acted,' was,

> On the present occasion, so considerably altered, that it might, by the majority of the audience, have been considered a new play; [...] but this we may safely venture to say, that whatever liberties may have been taken with Shakespeare's text, the alterer, whoever he be, has produced a fine Drama for the Stage, and one which, with Mr. Kean's attraction, is likely long to keep possession of the boards.[63]

Despite all the changes made by Wroughton, the production at Drury Lane was a commercial success: it was staged 13 times in the first season in 1815 and continued to be part of the theatre repertory until 1828. It was also staged in America in 1820 and 1826 with Kean again in the leading role.

Kean's *Richard II* and *Richard III* in the Shadow of Napoleon

When *Richard II* premiered, Kean's reputation was already established as the most promising actor of the age. He had made his debut in London only a year before with the role of Shylock in a revival of *The Merchant of Venice* on 26 January at Drury Lane. In February, Kean played the role of another Shakespearean king, Richard III. He received a lot of attention for his performance, mainly positive reviews for bringing innovation to the role. Hazlitt describes it as 'entirely his own, without any traces of imitation of any other actor.' [64] The critic pinpoints what it is about Shakespeare's character that the actor should be able to perform. Shakespeare's Richard is:

> Towering and lofty, as well as aspiring; equally impetuous and commanding; haughty, violent, and subtle; bold and treacherous; confident in his strength, as well as in his cunning; raised high by his birth, and higher by his genius and his

[63] *Public Cause*, Wednesday, 15 March 1815.

[64] William Hazlitt, 'Mr. Kean's Richard,' *The complete works of William Hazlitt; vol. V, Lectures on the English poets and A view of the English stage* (J. M. Dent & Sons, 1930), p. 180.

> crimes; a royal usurper, a princely hypocrite, a tyrant, and a murderer of the House of Plantagenet.[65]

This is a role that the actors John Philip Kemble (1757-1823) and Thomas Cooke (1786-1864) had played before, but neither had managed to convey Richard's passionately conflicted character. Although Hazlitt acknowledges that Kean did not succeed completely, he affirms that the actor managed to surpass his predecessors.

Peter Manning stresses that Kean acted Colley Cibber's adaptation of the Shakespearean text, which 'replace[d] subtleties with crude effects, and reduce[d] Shakespeare's Machiavellian figure to a boisterous monster.'[66] The lawyer and diarist Crabb Robinson, for instance, described Kean's portrayal of the king as 'unkingly' for accentuating the evils of abusing power and 'royal misdemeanour, incompatible with an idealised perception of the monarch.'[67]

Lord Byron was one of the spectators of Kean's *Richard III*. Byron was an early admirer of Kean, and Kean's performance fascinated the poet to such a degree that he attended the theatre every night during the first season; he sent Kean an elegant snuffbox from Italy, and wrote the following verse:

> Thou art the sun's bright child!
> The genius that irradiates thy mind
> Caught all its purity and light from heaven
> Thine is the task, with mastery most perfect,
> To bind the passions captive in thy train
> [...] I herald thee to Immortality![68]

The poet was enthralled by one of the 'added points' that Kean introduced to the part, especially the one on the eve of the Battle of Bosworth. Both the critics Hazlitt and Leigh

[65] Ibid., p. 181.

[66] Peter Manning, 'Edmund Kean and Byron's Plays', *Keats-Shelley Journal*, 21/22 (1973), p. 193.

[67] Peter Thomson, 'Edmund Kean', in *Great Shakespeareans: Garrick, Kemble, Siddons, Kean,* edited by Peter Holland (Bloomsbury, 2010), p. 156.

[68] James Henry Hackett, *Notes and Comments Upon Certain Plays and Actors of Shakespeare: With Criticisms and Correspondence* (Carleton, 1863), p. 128.

Hunt wrote about this specific moment. Hunt was disappointed overall with Kean's acting, deeming his style 'too artificial to be a mere falling off from nature.'[69] However, despite Kean's artificiality, Hunt praises the particular moments of naturalness and authenticity that Kean brings to the character, 'passages of truth and originality.'[70] One such moment is on the night before the battle. According to Hunt,

> It would be impossible to express in a deeper manner the intentness of Richard's mind upon the battle that was about to take place, or to quit the scene with an abruptness and self-recollecting, pithy and familiar, than by the reveries in which he [Kean] stands drawing lines upon the ground with the point of his sword, and his sudden recovery of himself with a 'Good night'.[71]

It is one of Kean's special moments because he manages to convey feeling with naturalness, awakening the spectator's sympathy. Kean's creation of the king drawing on sand with the point of his sword became iconic, and Byron incorporated it into his 'Ode to Napoleon Bonaparte':

> Then haste thee to thy sullen Isle,
> And gaze upon the sea;
> That element may meet thy smile—
> It ne'er was ruled by thee!
> Or trace with thine all idle hand
> In loitering mood upon the sand
> That Earth is now as free!
> That Corinth's pedagogue hath now
> Transferred his by-word to thy brow.[72]

Byron connects Kean's performance of a meditative moment that precedes the tragic battle at Bosworth with Napoleon's isolation on the island. Byron's biased poetic

[69] George Rowell, *The Victorian Theatre, 1792-1914: A Survey* (Cambridge University Press, 1978), p. 52.
[70] Ibid.
[71] Ibid., p. 53.
[72] Lord Byron, 'Ode to Napoleon Bonaparte,' ll. 118-126.

expression manifests his disillusionment with the former hero-figure in forsaking his ambitious projects. Byron is embittered at the failed attempt to retain a French Republic and its consequential drawbacks in initiating a republican state in England, more than he is concerned with the fall of the individual man. Byron's poem expresses resentment for what Napoleon had represented for him, which was an illusion, a 'fabricated' image of Napoleon that Byron constructed for himself. The moment when Kean's Richard draws meditatively on the sand with his sword incites sympathy from the beholder, who – even if temporarily – identifies with the calculating Richard. It is a complex and contradictory emotion to feel sympathy for the villain of the play, hence its powerfulness. By transferring this impassioned moment to Napoleon, Byron awakens the same paradoxical reaction from his readers.

Byron also identified with the pre-exile heroic figure of Bonaparte. As Manning puts it, 'it is not fortuitous that an echo of Kean should be found in the Ode on Napoleon, for Byron's self-identification with Napoleon was recognised by their contemporaries in a commonplace linking of the two that often expanded to include Edmund Kean.'[73] Byron's poem thus connects himself, Napoleon, Kean and Richard III. The playgoer Leveson Gower writes after watching Kean as Richard III in a letter to Lady Bessborough: 'Kean gives me the idea of Buonaparte in a furor. I was frightened, alarmed.'[74] The Irish poet and diarist Melesina Trench writes about her experience seeing the same production: '[Kean] reminded me constantly of Buonaparte that restless quickness, that Catiline inquietude, that fearful somewhat resembling the impatience of a lion in his cage. Though I am not a lover of the drama […], I could willingly have heard him repeat his part that same evening.'[75] The poet John Keats also sees the connection; he categorises Byron and Napoleon, as well as Charmian from *Antony and Cleopatra*, as belonging to 'the worldly, theatrical and pantomimical' in opposition to 'the unearthly, spiritual and ethereal.'[76] Finally, Thomson compares Kean's impulse to exceed audience expectations with the characters of Byron and Napoleon,

[73] Manning, p. 196.

[74] Arthur Colby Sprague, *Shakespearian Players and Performances* (Harvard University Press, 1953), p. 79.

[75] Melesina Chenevix St. George Trech, *The Remains of the Late Mrs. Richard Trench, Being Selections from Her Journals, Letters, & Other Papers* (Parker, Son, and Bourn, 1862), p. 283.

[76] John Keats, *Selected Letters, edited by Robert Gittings* (Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 395.

'the heroes of 1814.'[77] For Byron, 1814 was the year of *The Corsair*, which sealed his reputation as the archetypal Romantic hero: restless, transgressive, and self-mythologising. For Napoleon, it was the year of his dramatic fall and exile to Elba, a moment that transformed him from emperor to legend, turning his political failure into a form of mythic grandeur.

These examples demonstrate that the images of Kean and Napoleon shared a common ground in the early-nineteenth-century cultural scene in London. Kean's biographer, Frederick William Hawkins, writes about Kean's acceptance of the audience's applause after his second time as Shylock during his debut season at Drury Lane. He writes: 'The fact that, after he had made a graceful acknowledgement of the welcoming applause, he took about as much notice of those in front as Napoleon is said to have done of his Parisian audiences, at once impressed the spectators in his favour.'[78] Hawkins' comparison between Kean's theatrical audience at Drury Lane and Napoleon's Parisian audiences adds topicality to the connection. It is interesting to note that Hawkins writes over thirty-five years after Kean's death, but the association of the actor with Bonaparte remained.

Kean's memorable performance as Richard III in 1814 also affected how his performance of Richard II was received in the following year. A reviewer for *Public Cause* of 15 March 1815, affirms that 'we cannot hesitate to declare, that, in our opinion, his representation of the 2nd Richard deserves to be ranked among his happiest performances, and is not excelled even by its most popular rival, Richard III.' According to the reviewer, these two Shakespearean characters are complete opposites: 'Ambition, indeed, they both possess, but in the Usurper it is "bloody, bold, and resolute;" while, in the legitimate Sovereign, it appears the restless vanity of an idle debauchee.'[79] The reviewer for the *Public Cause*, thus, explicitly connects *Richard III* with the unlawful seizing of the crown, and *Richard II* with legitimate monarchy. Although Kean was the actor portraying both characters, the role of the Usurper is placed on Bolingbroke in *Richard II*. Therefore, in an analysis of Kean's *Richard II* in the shadow of Napoleon, Kean could potentially be interpreted as embodying the death of lawful sovereignty, threatened by Napoleon, represented by Bolingbroke.

[77] Thompson, p. 163.

[78] Frederick William Hawkins, *The Life of Edmund Kean* (Tinsley Brothers, 1869), p. 140.

[79] *Public Cause*, p. 194.

The role of Richard II evokes a different type of emotion from the audience than that of Richard III. As Hazlitt explains: 'we feel neither respect nor love for the deposed monarch; for he is as wanting in energy as in principle: but we pity him, for he pities himself.'[80] The pity incited by the Shakespearean character creates a bond with the audience, who sympathises with Richard not as a body politic but as a body natural: 'The sufferings of the man make us forget that he ever was a king.'[81] In this sense, we can link Richard II's human vulnerability, which invites the audience to sympathise with him, with George III's popularity at the end of his reign: the 'royal magic and mystique,' as explained by Colley. Whereas the focus of interest in *Richard III* is the ascension to power, in *Richard II* it is the fall from power that takes centre stage.

The connection between Kean's acting career and the figure of Napoleon extends into the realm of mythmaking. Both Kean and Napoleon were not merely individuals; they were public icons, constructed through performance, media, and public perception. As the audience responded to Kean's portrayal of monarchy on stage, they were engaging with a larger cultural narrative about power and its discontents. Just as Napoleon was mythologised both as a hero and a tyrant, so too were Kean's Richard figures, who transcended the boundaries of the plays themselves, becoming symbols of the emotional and political contradictions of the era.

Adaptation and the Politics of Play

Seeing Bolingbroke's usurpation of Richard's rightful crown as evocative of Napoleon's proclamation of himself as Emperor is tempting, but it is not the only interpretative possibility. As we have seen, Napoleon was a complex figure, viewed as a tyrant by some, but as a hero by others. When Kean gives the audience a commanding and passionate performance of Richard II, it is possible to read Kean's tyrannical king as a personification of absolutist monarchy. In this sense, Bolingbroke's intervention can be linked to Napoleon's rupture of the old chain of hereditary monarchy and the creation of a Republic, an achievement that Byron admired. Writing in his diary on 23 November 1813, Byron expresses his discontent with Napoleon's eminent fall after his failed

[80] William Hazlitt, *The complete works of William Hazlitt; vol. IV, The Round Table and Characters of Shakespeare's Plays* (J. M. Dent & Sons, 1930), p. 272.

[81] Ibid., p. 273.

conquest in Russia: 'Give me a republic, or a despotism of one, rather than the mixed government of one, two, three. A republic!'[82]

Hazlitt writes that it was a common assumption that Richard II was Kean's finest role until that point in his career in 1815, despite his success as Richard III the previous season. Nevertheless, Hazlitt found it 'a total misrepresentation.'[83] In Kean's Richard II, Hazlitt perceived 'only one or two electrical shocks,' whereas in other roles the actor had offered many more. Bryan Procter manifests a similar opinion. Although an admirer of the actor's career, Procter thought Kean's 'was not a true portrait of the weak and melancholy Richard.'[84] Procter also identified the lack of what Hazlitt describes as pathos in Kean's role: 'The grandson of Edward the Third was not fierce nor impetuous, but weak and irritable, and in his downfall utterly prostrate in spirit. We did not recognise these qualities in the acting of Mr. Kean, who was almost as fiery and energetic as he used to be in Richard the Third.'[85] Both Procter's and Hazlitt's reviews indicate that Kean could not offer a combination of emotion and frailty to the spectator. Instead, Kean gave energy and passion, emphasising Richard's belief in his divine right to be king.

Kean's performance as Richard II recalls how the actor had played the tyrant Richard III a year previously. The critic in the *New Monthly Magazine* noted the similarity between the two: 'Mr. Kean indulged rather too freely in what constitutes a predominant feature of his acting—a certain, sarcastic, epigrammatic turn, which gives peculiar force and meaning to particular passages', which he had employed with Richard III, and which did not agree with the character of Richard II.[86]

Kean's Richard is more decisive and authoritative. Manning agrees that Wroughton's text offers 'a worthier figure out of Richard,' and that this transformation was reinforced by Kean's 'acting Richard heroically.'[87] For example, when Bolingbroke and Mowbray refuse to return the gages thrown in defiance in Act I, Richard exclaims: 'Rage must be withstood,' and, according to the prompter's handwritten stage

[82] Lord Byron, *The Works of Lord Byron with His Letters and Journals, and His Life*, edited by Thomas Moore, vol. 2 (John Murray, 1832), pp. 272-3.

[83] Hazlitt, Vol. V, p. 223.

[84] Bryan Waller Procter, *The Life of Edmund Kean* (Hard Press, 2019), p. 126.

[85] Ibid.

[86] *New Monthly Magazine*, 1 May 1815, pp. 360-61.

[87] Manning, p. 199.

directions, he 'comes down from the throne and advances to the front – all the Lords rise.'[88] The figure of the king incites respect from the court members, who stand when he stands. Although Wroughton's text kept Richard's plea to Bolingbroke: 'Cousin, do you begin to throw up your gage,' Kean crosses out this extract of the text. On the Drury Lane stage, the king directly states his command after standing from the throne: 'We were not born to sue, but to command; | Which since we cannot do to make you friends, | Draw near, and list what, with our council, we have done,' and banishes Bolingbroke from England for 'twice five summers' and Mowbray forever, 'never to return.'[89]

As we have seen, the de-coronation scene in Richard II is a politically charged theatrical moment, rich with contemporary resonance. On the one hand, Bolingbroke's seizure of the crown might evoke the image of Napoleon as a tyrant driven by ambition, echoing fears of revolutionary leaders who usurp lawful authority. In this reading, Bolingbroke becomes a mirror of Napoleon's imperial overreach – a figure who overthrows a legitimate monarch and destabilises the natural political order. The stage thus becomes a site for mourning the loss of divine right and legitimate sovereignty, aligning with conservative anxieties about the consequences of revolution and regime change. Yet, the same scene also lends itself to a radically different interpretation. Bolingbroke's rejection of Richard's divine entitlement and assumption of power can be seen as an act of liberation from tyranny, a move away from the inefficacy and absolutism embodied by Richard's mystical view of kingship. Viewed this way, Bolingbroke resembles the heroic Napoleon of Byron's imagination, the man of action who deposes corrupt tradition and embodies meritocratic strength.

The theatre, as a space of interpretative play and adaptation, accommodates both readings simultaneously. Kean's energetic performance of Richard, and the layered reception of Shakespeare's histories in a post-revolutionary context, reveal the extent to which political meaning on stage is never fixed, but performed, contested, and reshaped in dialogue with the moment. In 1815, *Richard II* was not just the tragedy of a medieval king; it was a living allegory of sovereignty, revolution, and the precarious balance between legitimacy and ambition. Staging Richard's de-coronation at a time

[88] Wroughton, p. 10.

Handwritten notes in Wroughton, p. 10.

[89] Wroughton, p. 10.

of such political unrest in France and in England, and during a period when drama in London was controlled and heavily censored by the Lord Chamberlain under the Licensing Act, could be regarded as subversive. In this light, the play on the stage becomes a kind of play with political power itself: the way theatre, through its manipulation of texts and performance, could challenge or reflect on the state of the nation. The divergent responses to *Richard III*, *Richard II* and Napoleon reflect the tensions inherent in theatrical historicism: the past, once opened up to performance, becomes contested and unstable. The stage becomes a space where history is not only remembered but negotiated – and played with.

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BIOGRAPHY: Dr. Fernanda Korovsky Moura completed her PhD at Leiden University, the Netherlands, in 2023. Her thesis, entitled *Farewell King! Staging the Middle Ages in Nineteenth-Century London Performances of Shakespeare's Richard II*, explores how three productions of the play (by Edmund Kean, William Charles Macready, and Charles Kean) recreate the Middle Ages, elucidating the complexities of negotiating several layers of past in art. Moura is working on a book proposal to share her research findings. She is currently a postdoctoral researcher at Leiden University.

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