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052182902X - Shakespeare's History Plays: Performance, Translation and Adaptation in Britain and Abroad

Edited by Ton Hoenselaars

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Foreword: histories and nations**Dennis Kennedy*

In the beginning there were four nations. That was what they called themselves, though at the time none of them was a sovereign state. They raised indigenous attack forces for a series of clashes, insisting on an absolute victor: the heroic, conquering, nation of nations. They did this every year, year after year, encouraged by national desires for glory, overwhelming public support, and a tradition of aggressiveness that reaches back to descriptions of war in the *Iliad* as a magnificent occupation for men, a thing of great beauty, triumph and overthrow in direct and undisguised antagonism. Despite their long-standing enmity and cultural and linguistic differences, they shared a lingua franca in combat, geographical proximity and a tattered political history. The rules of engagement, altered over time to suit changing circumstances, ultimately derived from a single source, a remote ascetic sanctuary located in the largest of the four, dedicated to the training of young men.

But then a fifth was admitted to the fray, a barbarian country with a history of enmity with the founding nation, equivalent in population, larger in area, contrary in custom, dissimilar in language and insufficiently aware, some therefore thought, of the true meaning of battle. If the addition struck those observers as bizarre, they would have been flabbergasted when nearly a century later a sixth challenger gained the right of combat despite its shadowy national history and uncertain martial qualifications. Perhaps more will join the struggle in future: there are no certainties in warfare. For now it remains six. In alphabetical order, England, France, Ireland, Italy, Scotland, Wales. The Six Nations Rugby Tournament.¹

If these are all nations, they are so in different meanings of the word. Two British political entities now partially devolved from Westminster are matched with a fully independent one (yet whose northern six counties are not at this moment devolved from Britain at all). An ancient state whose borders shifted with regularity until 1945, often in the past trading

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soil with England. A nation formed only in the late nineteenth century out of highly disparate principalities and republics that continues to show severe regional stress. And the land of St George itself: nobody seems sure any longer what England means. Despite occasional confusion in common speech, England is hardly equivalent with the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. While its borders are clear and its flag distinct, politically it is a little confused, since there cannot be complete devolution in the UK until England has its own parliament.

The six rugby nations are the countries that are most regularly referred to in Shakespeare, usually with some attention to governance; even Italy, which does not feature in the history plays (unless we count the Roman tragedies), is usually rendered on a political ground, as in *Romeo and Juliet*, *The Merchant of Venice* and *Othello*. The English sagas offer local versions of medieval polity on the way to becoming something more recognizable to the late sixteenth century. *Richard II* and the two parts of *Henry IV*, displaying rebellion in Ireland, Wales and the north of England, present arguments about the nature of an early modern nation, how it should be governed and who should govern it. Five of the rugby nations are represented in a single match in *Henry V*, the play which most probes the idea of nation, relying occasionally on sporting metaphors to do so, by getting four to gang up on one, so that Harry le Roy can become king of them all. Of course the France he conquered was hardly coterminous with the large hexagon that defines the borders of the country today. All his victories took place in Normandy and Picardy and his triumph was short-lived, as the *Henry VI* plays show; the Treaty of Troyes in 1420, which concludes *Henry V*, was in tatters at its hero's death two years later, a historical fact that makes the elevation of the play into a paean of English nationalism a strangely short-sighted move. (Henry would not have dreamed of war in Gasgoyne and Languedoc in the south-west, now the centre of French rugby. The residual nationalism of those regions is notorious, and there have even been moves to redesignate the fifth rugby nation as Occitania.)

What is a nation? What is a national history? In Shakespeare's chronicles these questions are intensely localized to England and England's provinces. With the major exceptions of grandiose or luxurious characters like Richard III and Falstaff, the history plays and their historical material have held relatively little interest for readers and audiences further afield. This is perfectly understandable. British colonial dominance encouraged a special connection in Anglophone theatre and criticism, but the endless genealogical patterns, the confusion of names and geography and the complicated dramatic actions have tended to diffuse their impact anywhere

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outside the originating nation. Why should France take to *Henry V* or rugby, two cultural products of its traditional enemy? Tom Lanoye and Luk Perceval, the recent adapter and director of the history cycles in Flanders, put it bluntly: the cycle plays are 'a baffling series of conspiracies, marriages, murder, and battles; a pandemonium of forty acts, two hundred scenes and three hundred characters'.² For Belgian and Dutch audiences, Lanoye said, Richmond and Kent are not historical figures or geographical place names, they are cigarette brands.

Correspondingly, the English have long taken a proprietary interest in the histories. It has often been noted that these plays constitute a national epic in dramatic form, and without doubt they have been significant in the project of nation building and nation maintaining. From the time of Elizabeth I to the time of Elizabeth II, from Burbage to Branagh, Shakespeare's nine dramas on the political development of England in the fifteenth century, through some nine kings, and occasionally with the addition of *King John*, have been drawn upon to define or redefine or query national identity. They cover almost half the list of monarchs in the breathless schoolchild mnemonic:

Willy–Willy–Harry–Steve
 Harry–Dick–John–Harry 3
 1–2–3 Neds–Richard 2
 Harry 4–5–6, then who?
 Edward 4 and Richard 3
 Thought I didn't know, tee-hee.

But the relative familiarity some English spectators have with their own history does not mean that the plays are easy, for in Stratford as well as Milan they are not routinely congenial in the way that most of the comedies and many of the tragedies are. Calling attention to this in an introductory manual, Russ McDonald writes that 'the chronicle play or history was also less familiar to Shakespeare and his audiences than comedy or tragedy because it was being invented at the very moment that Shakespeare began working in the form'.³ We might add that the genre more or less died out in London immediately afterwards. There are predecessors and descendants but few examples of plays so directly conscious of public ideologies and private prerogatives, of dynastic and internecine angst or of the relationship of personality to power. Shakespeare's chronicles are complicated works that reach their conclusions through plots labyrinthine in bearing. If they can be thought of as a saga of the English nation, it is a tale of precarious preservation shot through with torture and distress.

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Taken singly, the history plays can be impressive on a number of levels and individual scenes often reveal the inherent contradictions in the histories they relate. But it is the perception that they constitute a dramatic series with an internal logic and a grand overplot that gives them their special distinction in the world repertoire. Thinking of them as a cycle, or as two related cycles, makes possible large-scale showings that have substantially raised critical opinion of the plays, especially of the three parts of *Henry VI*, and liberated them from individual status through marathon experiences over a number of nights or in gruelling weekends. (For me, the most gruelling was Stuart Seide's production in French at the Avignon Festival in July 1994, outdoors in the Court of Honour of the Papal Palace, which began with the funeral of Henry V on a warm evening at 10 o'clock and ended with the crowning of Edward IV in a cool dawn at 6.30 the next morning.) Whether we accept Nicholas Grene's contention that the histories were written as 'serial' dramas, their exposition in serial fashion has indelibly affected how they are now viewed critically.⁴

But in the theatre this seriality is a recent idea. The notion of the Shakespeare cycle was the invention of a nineteenth-century theatre manager, Franz von Dingelstedt, who staged both cycles in Weimar for the tercentenary in 1864 and revived them in Vienna in 1875.⁵ Also the translator-adaptor of Shakespeare's works (Berlin, 1877), Dingelstedt was probably more interested in the amalgamation of the plays into a critical Shakespearian mass than he was in an extensive review of English history. Nonetheless his antiquarian productions, similar in nature to the historicism of Charles Kean in London in the 1850s, emphasized the particularity of period, attempting the display of a medieval authentic, an approach to the chronicles that continued with a number of directors well into the twentieth century. The theatrical methods differed over time, of course, as did the look of things, but the impulse to create a *mise-en-scène* in tune with current notions of the past has often been at the root of attention to these plays.

Wagner's *Ring* cycle, first seen entire in Bayreuth in 1876, was part of the trend to marathon performance of Shakespeare. Certainly the construction of the Bayreuth Festspielhaus, the first theatre in history dedicated to a single artist, greatly influenced the drive to build the Shakespeare Memorial Theatre in Stratford, which opened three years later, the first theatre in history dedicated to a single dramatist. Yet no history cycle was produced there, or anywhere else in Britain, until Frank Benson's production of the double tetralogy in 1906 (oddly, minus *1 Henry IV* because he could not find a sufficiently heroic part for himself). While his scenography was not

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lavish, the scent of English empire past and present was heavily in the air. It was so again at Stratford at the end of the empire when Anthony Quayle mounted the complete second tetralogy of histories in 1951, played on a unit set by Tanya Moiseiwitsch, the directing shared with Michael Redgrave and John Kidd. With almost a half century between them, serial performance had obviously not taken root in Shakespeare's nation. In fact the only other major cyclic presentation in the first half of the century was again in Germany, Saladin Schmidt directing all ten of the English chronicles in Bochum in 1927.

Nonetheless it was in Stratford that the Royal Shakespeare Company changed common notions of the histories. When in 1963 Peter Hall chose to use the first cycle to define the style of the newly created company, and to celebrate the writer's quatercentenary by adding the second cycle the following year, he deliberately sought hard-edged acting and visuals that had little to do with the historicist tradition. Yet he too was following foreign leads, particularly those of a German marxist and a Polish dissident. As James Loehlin shows here, by mid-century Bertolt Brecht had provided 'a model for historical theatre' in his own plays, in his analytical commentary and in his directing practice. Brecht's company visited London a few weeks after his death in 1956 with two history plays of a different type, *Mother Courage* and *The Caucasian Chalk Circle*; Hall was so impressed that when he founded the RSC in 1960 he based his organizational, social and aesthetic standards on the Berliner Ensemble. With his designer John Bury, Hall extracted from the Ensemble a Brechtian realism for the histories: the Middle Ages concocted from heavy clanging broadswords, grunting actors, sweaty leather and a rough-hewn approach that revealed glimpses of the social and class circumstances underneath Shakespeare's dramas.

But when unravelled a bit, many of the Brechtian motifs were stylistic rather than interpretive, for at the heart of the cycle was Jan Kott's decisive essay on the histories, 'The Kings', published in *Shakespeare Our Contemporary* in Polish in 1961, in French in 1962 and in English in 1964. Kott's essay comparing *King Lear* to Beckett's *Endgame* – the quintessential Cold War play – had already substantially affected Peter Brook's version of *Lear* for the RSC in 1962; theatrically speaking, Brook's dark vision was Hall's greatest influence. Kott was writing as a former marxist, disenchanted by the Soviet invasion of Hungary in 1956 and Stalinist authoritarianism in Poland. He saw in Shakespeare's chronicles a cycle of unending repression, political opportunism and murderous brutality that paralleled his view of life, a generalized application of the Eastern European condition. Using

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the central image of the 'grand staircase', Kott imagined Shakespeare's kings and would-be kings perpetually shuffling up and down the steps, knocking each other over on their way to the top. No reason to think that the accession of Henry VII would change matters, since the 1960s inclined to the same inhuman, brutal, absurdist politics: *It Was Ever Thus*. As Brook in *Lear* (and in his production of Peter Weiss's *Marat/Sade* of 1964), Hall found Kott's *It Was Ever Thus* philosophy more intellectually apposite than Brecht's marxist conviction that *We Can Change the World*. Needless to say, in a Western capitalist environment IWETers are more congenial than WeCaners. Even the overall title, *The Wars of the Roses*, emphasized the continuing nature of unhappy history.

So one of the major outcomes of Hall's cycle was a foregrounding of the histories as contemporary Cold War plays.⁶ Serial performance of the histories then became a major way to honour Shakespeare's 400th birthday, usually under the same influences. Various signs of those two rationales for revivals were apparent in a politically and textually conservative serial production by Leopold Lindtberg in Vienna (which actually began before Hall, in 1961), a more radical one by Giorgio Strehler in Milan (*Il gioco dei potenti*, 'The game of the mighty', 1965) and in *Der Krieg der Rosen* by Peter Palitzsch in Stuttgart (1967). A wide European re-evaluation of Shakespeare followed in Kott's wake, and he and Brecht continued to affect Shakespeare production in general well into the 1980s. They could even be seen to lurk under the surface in Michael Bogdanov's *The Wars of the Roses* for the touring English Shakespeare Company in 1986, though that cycle was definitely more WeCaner than IWETer.

When I put *Foreign Shakespeare* together in 1991 and 1992, the book as a whole was greatly affected by the political changes in Europe and the Soviet Union that had just occurred. The violence which followed in the former Soviet empire highlighted the ways Shakespeare had been employed for nationalist causes during the Cold War on both sides of the Iron Curtain. The end of that period also clarified the movements away from the political uses of the plays that started to appear in the late 1970s. While the histories always remain political at some level, a postmodern turn appeared in production, most notably in Ariane Mnouchkine's *Richard II* and *1 Henry IV* in Paris (1981, 1984), part of an aborted six-play Shakespeare cycle that was to include the full *Richard II* tetralogy. Mnouchkine consciously denied Kott's approach – 'Shakespeare is not our contemporary,' she said, 'and must not be treated as such'⁷ – and drew instead on Asian performance methods, *nô* and kabuki in particular, a thorough-going aestheticizing of the historical material.

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Seen at the Olympic Arts Festival in Los Angeles in 1984, Mnouchkine's orientalist work also prefigured another change, the globalized or festivalized performance of marathon productions for an international audience. The RSC in Stratford has always relied on tourist spectators, and the histories appear with some regularity there, most recently in quasi-serial form in 2000. Even the heavily touristic new Globe in London offered *Henry V* as its official opening production in 1997, which local audiences insistently made into a chauvinist statement by hissing the French at their every entrance. In England, at least, a nationalist interpretation of the chronicle plays appears to be part of the game. But the number of intercultural and non-anglophone productions of the histories seen at international festivals, and a growing attention to these plays in Asia (including a politically aggravating *Richard III* in Beijing in 2001, directed in an international style by Lin Zhaohua), suggest that there is large room for future studies of global Shakespeare performance.

The great paradox of our time is the intense exercise of a residual form of nationalism amid a globalized economy and transnational politics. The low cost of air travel, the ease of touring, the universal acceptance of credit cards, the introduction of the euro as currency, the rise of the Internet, the prevalence of English as the language of trade, the opening of the bazaars of the second-world and third-world economies to the powerful forces of Western capital – all of these suggest a 'one-world' planet where cultural difference is tolerated for its marketability, or where the 'glocal' operates as a simulated but efficient substitute for the indigenous. Yet at the same time we witness daily examples of fervent nationalism or of cultural and religious tribalism that seek to close borders, both physical and psychological ones, often through violent means that deny humanity to the other.

At the level of surrogation, the ritualized combat of sport may provide the best example of the national in the midst of the global, as so many games on the world stage rely upon the creation of national squads or permit nationalist identification with the participants. We can see on television, that prime agent of the global, regular international competitions in rugby, soccer, cricket, lawn tennis, prize fighting, horse racing (on the flat and over fences), show jumping, polo, squash, even snooker and billiards. Other sports can be added, of course, but I choose that list because all of those games are English in foundation. Some of them have maintained overtones of the colonial, especially cricket and polo, but most of them long ago lost any connection to the land of their birth. Soccer, the world's most popular spectator sport, played almost everywhere, may have originally spread through informal colonialist patterns, but few people today identify

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it principally with England and even fewer know the origin of its name (Association Football is its formal title in English, soccer a nickname derived from the abbreviation 'Assoc.').

And with the necessary changes for its different cultural field, a similar pattern can be applied to Shakespeare's history plays. They came from England, they are about England and they can be made to speak for England, but they have been discharged from their uniquely nationalist obligations. Their reception and performance in the other Six Nations, and in wider nations as well, the topic of this book, show that when the history plays are spoken in foreign climes and foreign tongues they often speak of matters foreign to England. In international rugby matches England frequently wins these days, but has long been thoroughly used to being beaten in soccer, cricket and tennis. When the Empire (and the nations of rest of the world) write back about sport, it's often to say we play differently from you but are just as good if not better. Why shouldn't that be true of Shakespeare as well, England's most famous export?

NOTES

- 1 The first Four Nations Tournament took place in 1882. France joined in 1910 and Italy only in 1998, though rugby has been played there competitively since 1909. My thanks to Edward Braun for help on the history of English sports.
- 2 Quoted from the cover of the original box set of Tom Lanoye and Luk Perceval, *Ten Oorlog*, 3 vols. (Amsterdam: Prometheus, 1997).
- 3 Russ McDonald, *The Bedford Companion to Shakespeare: An Introduction with Documents*, 2nd edn (Boston: Bedford/St Martin's, 2001), 90.
- 4 Nicholas Grene, *Shakespeare's Serial History Plays* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).
- 5 See Simon Williams, *Shakespeare on the German Stage, 1586–1914* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 153–4.
- 6 I take up this argument in another context in 'Shakespeare and the Cold War', in *Four Hundred Years of Shakespeare in Europe*, edited by A. Luis Pujante and Ton Hoenselaars, with a Foreword by Stanley Wells (Newark, NJ: University of Delaware Press, 2003), 163–79.
- 7 Quoted in David Bradley and David Williams, *Director's Theatre* (New York: Macmillan, 1988), 100, 98.

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Introduction: Shakespeare's history plays in Britain and abroad

Ton Hoenselaars

The essays collected in this volume address the different attitudes to Shakespeare's English history plays in Britain and abroad, from the early modern period to the present day. One of the aims is to study the various national responses to the plays with an eye to the process whereby different political and cultural contexts have tended to accommodate the plays' implicit 'Englishness', that is, the notion which led Heminges and Condell in 1623 to present these ten plays as 'Histories', plays which subsequently became known also as the 'history plays', but also, in more specifically national terms, as the 'English chronicles', and as the 'English history plays'.¹

This volume explores the histories within the context of several major recent developments in Shakespeare Studies. One of these developments is the increasing attention devoted to the 'nation', be it as this is represented or defined in Shakespeare's plays, or as various nations, including England, have over the centuries interpreted and appropriated these plays to meet certain ideological ends.² Another major development of recent decades acknowledged here is the unprecedented expansion of the field of Shakespeare Studies, as the traditionally Anglo-centred Shakespeare industry has come to recognize the cultural validity of manifestations and appropriations of the playwright beyond the British Isles, in different national contexts, and, nearly as a matter of course, in languages other than Shakespeare's own. An approach like this, it is hoped, will simultaneously enhance our appreciation of the British, more or less self-reflexive preoccupation with the histories, and at the same time our insight into the processes of international appropriation.

Recognizing the predominant concern with notions like 'nationhood' and 'the nation' in either tradition, this volume signals a curious phenomenon: whereas the 'native' tradition in the theatre as well as academe (with ample support from their counterparts in North America, Australia, and New Zealand) has in recent years only broadened its interest in the histories, the academic representatives of the second Shakespeare tradition

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have largely ignored them. However, this current discrepancy of academic attention to the genre stands in no relation to the fact that these plays have had a formidable stage history, across the world as in Britain, from the earliest times to the present day. It is, therefore, high time to redress the balance.

This introduction provides a broad historical survey of the reception of the histories, devoting special attention to the less familiar foreign traditions. Thus it provides a framework for the essays in this volume which address the various manifestations, British and foreign, in detail, and likewise concentrate on the relatively less accessible non-English-speaking traditions in particular.³ By presenting the British and foreign traditions side by side, it becomes possible to identify not only traditions of 'foreign' histories beyond the English Channel, but also within the 'native' preoccupation with the genre, in post-devolution Britain.

The introduction concludes with a brief exploration of the apparent divide between the two academic traditions central to this volume. Although there is a significant measure of overlap, interaction and exchange between the native and the foreign Shakespeare industries, geographical as well as linguistic and cultural barriers between them remain. Given the obviously shared concerns and interests on either side, thematic enterprises like the present one might be the most creative way of investigating the cross-cultural and cross-national reception and appropriation of the plays, and promote a more finely integrated world Shakespeare.

The final decades of the twentieth century witnessed a radical reorientation of the traditionally Anglo-centred Shakespeare industry.⁴ As the once firm belief in an essentialist Shakespeare embodying universal truths was effectively discarded, and the playwright's status came to be recognized as a complex political construct, it was not long before the process was also exposed, notably by Michael Dobson and Jonathan Bate, by which English Shakespeare had in the course of history been promoted as the 'symbol and exemplar of British national identity'.⁵ The assumed cultural identity of 'Britain' that Shakespeare, among others, was made to uphold had tended to obscure internal power relations, as it glossed over differences of race, religion and also region.

As new ways were developed during the late twentieth century to recount the 'English', 'Irish', 'Scottish' and 'Welsh' histories, homogenous British Shakespeare devolved into multiple regional Shakespeares. Following the independent pioneering work of Philip Edwards in the 1970s, the research field of Ireland was effectively opened up by Andrew Hadfield, Brendan