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978-0-521-03436-4 - Shakespeare's Victorian Stage: Performing History in the Theatre of Charles Kean

Richard W. Schoch

Excerpt

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Introduction

The century spanned by the writings of Ranke, Macaulay, Marx and Nietzsche was the golden age of history. It was a time when the desire to know and possess the past rivaled science as the dominant system of cognition and history as a practice seemed to overtake the whole scope of representational activities: literature, architecture, handicrafts, painting, photography, sculpture, spectacle, and theatre. As Hayden White has remarked, nineteenth-century artists 'went to history for their themes and appealed to "historical consciousness" as a justification for their attempts at cultural palingenesis'.¹

The popular culture of mid-Victorian London, a prosperous, multi-racial and multi-ethnic city, was governed by a taste for spectacles and displays devoted to 'popular education in the young and in the adult'.² Among the 'amusements for mind and senses [that] woo the world of London at every turn', the *National Review*, in 1856, counted 'lecture-rooms, dioramas, panoramas, cheap concerts, oratorios, public gardens, and innumerable other diversions, suited to every scale of purse and every variety of taste and cultivation'.³ As Allardyce Nicoll observed, points of destination ranged from the 'Egyptian hall [of] moving panoramas and conjuring displays' to the Myriographic hall 'where W. S. Woodin gave his *Soirées Comiques*', or even to the Royal Living Marionette Theatre in Leicester Square, the site of performances by the Young Garrick and other 'infant geniuses'.⁴

But for Londoners '[h]igh or low, rich or poor', enthused *Blackwood's Magazine*, theatre was their 'supreme delight' (51 (1842), p. 426). The 'upper, middle and lower classes' of the nation's capital could take their

¹ *Tropics of Discourse* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978), p. 41.

² 'The world of London', *Blackwood's Magazine* 51 (1842), p. 278.

³ 'The English stage', *National Review* (January–April 1856), p. 412.

⁴ 'Drama', in *Early Victorian England: 1830–1865*, ed. G. M. Young (London: Oxford University Press, 1934), p. 278.

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pick of 'theatres for the east, and theatres for the west; theatres for this side of the river, and theatres for that; theatres for performances equestrian and aquatic; theatres legitimate and illegitimate' (p. 427). As a central part of a vibrant and spectacular popular culture whose audience was equipped to recognize and read historical iconography, the mid-Victorian theatre was uniquely poised to ensure the material continuity of the past. In the theatre, above all, the past was not dead. It was not even sleeping. It was alive and well and appearing nightly. Performance was a powerful agent of historical consciousness in the nineteenth century precisely because it realized the past with a 'bold and master hand' greater than that of literature, painting, or even photography.⁵ Archaeological eclecticism flourished in the Victorian theatre and a lively range of historical places, personages, and events was recreated for eager and ever-expanding audiences.

In *The Clothing of Clío*, a book otherwise distinguished by a bravura synthesis of art, literature and history, Stephen Bann stops short of including theatrical performance in his study of nineteenth-century historical representation.⁶ His hesitation is surely not for lack of sources. Had Bann chosen to include stage design in his formidable arsenal of artistic exempla, he might have remarked upon Philippe De Louthembourg's designs of the Gothic picturesque for David Garrick in the 1770s, William Capon's scenes of 'ancient English streets' created for John Philip Kemble in 1794, Clarkson Stanfield's dioramas used in William Charles Macready's 1839 production of *Henry V*, and the hundreds of antiquarian scene designs created expressly for Charles Kean's Shakespearean revivals at the Princess's Theatre in the 1850s. Despite, however, the ample evidence for a strong tradition of historicized stage design, and even while acknowledging that journeymen scene painters of the Georgian theatre became artist-antiquaries through the study of illustrated histories, Bann does not explore theatrical manifestations of the nineteenth century's obsession with recreating the past. He justifies his disavowal, moreover, on the procedural grounds that it is 'hard to talk with confidence about the integrated effect of theatrical productions' (*Clothing of Clío*, p. 59).

This work begins where Bann leaves off, for it does attempt to talk about the 'integrated effect of theatrical productions'. It seeks to demonstrate the centrality of performance and, more broadly, performative

⁵ 'A few words in defence of the stage addressed to its religious objectors', *Tallis's Dramatic Magazine* April (1851).

⁶ S. Bann, *The Clothing of Clío* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), p. 59.

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acts in nineteenth-century historical thought. More specifically, this work examines the relationship between theatricality, historical consciousness, and nationalism in mid-Victorian Britain, with principal reference to Kean's antiquarian revivals of Shakespeare at the Princess's Theatre between 1852 and 1859. Through a combination of discourse theory, new historiography, and archival research, I seek to produce a work of integrative performance criticism.

While it would be possible to examine the phenomenon of nineteenth-century theatrical historicism with reference to the productions of Macready and Irving, it strikes me as more sensible to focus principally on Charles Kean since his productions were most fully undertaken in the spirit of historical realization. Unlike his predecessors, contemporaries, or successors, Charles Kean was an actor-*historian*. In his brief managerial career at Covent Garden (1837–9) and Drury Lane (1841–3), Macready was renowned not only for expelling prostitutes from the theatre, but also for restoring the integrity of Shakespeare's texts and staging his plays with increased attention to historical accuracy in sets and costumes. If Charles Kean's goal was to use Shakespeare to represent history, then Macready's was to use history to represent Shakespeare. The eminent tragedian took as axiomatic that a performance should be 'one of the best illustrated editions of the poet's works'.⁷ To accomplish such a literary goal, the theatre must preserve the sanctity of Shakespeare's texts and perfect its own methods of scenic illustration. Macready made the expected overtures toward historical representation but he did not regard the theatre principally as a means of historical instruction. And thus his playbills, for example, do not feature the scholarly apparatus more commonly associated with Charles Kean's antiquarian dramaturgy.

Charles Kean's own retirement from the Princess's Theatre in 1859 marked the beginning of a twenty-year 'interregnum' in memorable London productions of Shakespeare, a tedious interval relieved only by Charles Fechter's *Hamlet* in 1861 and 1864 and the Bancrofts' 1874 archaeologized *The Merchant of Venice*.⁸ Shakespeare was eventually restored to the London stage under Henry Irving's management of the Lyceum Theatre from 1878 to 1902. From Charles Kean, Irving inherited not simply a repertoire of gentlemanly melodrama and Shakespeare,

⁷ E. B. Watson, *Sheridan to Robertson: A Study of the Nineteenth-Century London Stage* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1926), p. 184.

⁸ G. C. D. Odell, *Shakespeare from Betterton to Irving*, 2 vols. (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1920), II, p. 282.

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but also a taste for historical spectacle. (He even inherited his own leading lady from Kean, for a nine-year-old Ellen Terry had made her debut in 1856 as Mamilius to Kean's Leontes.) Aided by the use of three-dimensional scenery, Irving could display an enviable accumulation of historical accessories. But even this daunting archaeological overload was more a case of aestheticism than historicism since Irving's overriding concern was to achieve a fully pictorial display through the manipulation of theatrical space, even at the expense of historical correctness. The past was thus refigured more as an object for contemplation at a distance – across a darkened auditorium and through a picture-frame proscenium arch – and less as a tangible physical presence. Under Henry Irving, history was not so much restored as beheld. For all its massiveness, late-Victorian theatrical archaeology was strangely dainty, like 'household bric-a-brac', as Stephen Orgel notes, or 'souvenirs of a colorful past'.⁹

In only nine seasons, Kean recreated not merely the medieval and Tudor England of Shakespeare's history plays, but also Assyria (Byron's *Sardanapalus*); Peru (Sheridan's *Pizarro*); Renaissance Italy (*The Merchant of Venice*); medieval France (*Louis XI*); Magna Graecia and Bithynia (*The Winter's Tale*); and Periclean Athens (*A Midsummer Night's Dream*).¹⁰ The 'present age demands that all dramatic representations must of necessity be accompanied by a certain selection of scenery, dresses, and music', wrote Kean in the playbill for *Pizarro*, and 'truth in these matters is preferable to *inaccuracy*'. Endorsing that preference for historical truth, the *Builder* admitted to having happily

⁹ 'Staging Clio', Clark Lectures, Cambridge University, February 1996.

¹⁰ Throughout this work, I will refer to the following plays produced by Kean at the Princess's Theatre between 1852 and 1859: *The Corsican Brothers*, 24 February 1852; *Faust and Marguerite*, 19 April 1854; *Henry V*, 28 March 1859; *Henry VIII*, 9 May 1855; *King John*, 9 February 1852; *Louis XI*, 13 January 1855; *Macbeth*, 14 February 1853; *Pizarro*, 1 September 1856; *Richard II*, 12 March 1857; *Sardanapalus*, 13 June 1853; *The Tempest*, 1 July 1857; and *The Winter's Tale*, 28 April 1856. Unless otherwise indicated, all quotations from playbills are for the dates indicated above (i.e. the production's first performance). All the playbills I have consulted are held in the Princess's Theatre production file, Theatre Museum, London.

These productions are among the most fully documented in the Victorian theatre. The Folger Shakespeare Library possesses numerous promptbooks as well as hundreds of letters written to and by Charles and Ellen Kean, many of which refer to his Shakespearean and non-Shakespearean productions. In the Victoria and Albert Museum, the Charles Kean Collection, which comprises over four hundred original watercolors, offers the most detailed visual record of nineteenth-century set and property designs. The collection documents all of Kean's Shakespearean revivals at the Princess's as well as his productions of *The Corsican Brothers*, *The Courier of Lyons*, *Faust and Marguerite*, *The First Printer*, *Louis XI*, *Pauline*, *Pizarro*, and *Sardanapalus*.

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followed Mr. Kean to the capital of the Assyrian Ninus; trod with Macbeth the wilds of Scotland and visited its pre-Norman fortresses; seen the eighth Henry in his voluptuous court . . . [and] contemplated a portraiture of the architecture, costume, and domestic manners of the Greeks never before attempted upon any stage . . .¹¹

So enamored of Kean's complete 'view of Universal History' was Britain's leading journal of architectural criticism that it later reproached the actor-manager for staging *Henry V* as his farewell production at the Princess's in 1859. From the *Builder's* 'scenic point of view', either *Coriolanus* or *Antony and Cleopatra* would have been more desirable, as a Roman play would have made Kean's 'series complete in an architectural and ethnological point of view'.¹²

To assume, then, that Charles Kean's theatrical historicism extended only to the Middle Ages would be flatly wrong. The broadest possible examination of historical consciousness in the mid-Victorian theatre would need to include, at the very least, Kean's classicizing and Italianate stagings of *The Merchant of Venice*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, and *The Winter's Tale*. Particular emphasis could be given to his 1857 revival of *The Tempest*, a production set in the thirteenth century but whose masque nonetheless evoked Periclean Athens. We would also need to ask why Kean neglected Shakespeare's Roman plays despite his manifest interest in classical archaeology. Did Kean never play *Coriolanus* because he lacked the patrician grandeur and noble stature of John Philip Kemble, with whom the part was so closely identified? Or did the decline of the Roman plays in the mid-nineteenth-century theatrical repertoire result from a pervasive interest in the Middle Ages? Moving from the antique to the exotic, it would be profitable to examine Kean's archaeologically correct productions of *Sardanapalus* and *Pizarro* in light of late-twentieth-century debates on colonialism and cultural patrimony, especially as Kean's revivals of those plays were inspired by imperialist narratives. The 1853 publication of Austen Henry Layard's *Discoveries in the Ruins of Nineveh and Babylon* preceded Kean's spectacular staging of Byron's verse tragedy by only six months. And in 1856, when the actor's imagination was captured by Prescott's *History of the Conquest of Peru*, the result was his revival of Sheridan's melodrama. '[S]omething very striking and new

¹¹ *The Builder* 21 March 1857. *The Builder's* editor, George Godwin, served as Kean's archaeological advisor on *Macbeth*, *Henry V*, and *The Winter's Tale*.

¹² *The Builder* 2 April 1859.

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might be effected in that quarter', he exclaimed to George Godwin; '*I am bitten with it.*'¹³

While Kean's historical interests were impressively global – and thus consistent with the nineteenth century's rapacious designs on the past – his chief legacy undoubtedly resides in his grand revivals of Shakespeare's English (and, in one instance, Scottish) chronicle plays: *King John* (1852), *Macbeth* (1853), *Henry VIII* (1855), *Richard II* (1857), and *Henry V* (1859). In demonstrating the active historical consciousness of the mid-Victorian stage, I will focus most closely on these five antiquarian productions, which themselves re-enacted historical events from eleventh-century Scotland to the christening of Princess Elizabeth half a millennium later. This work, accordingly, is not a theatrical biography, an apology for Charles Kean, or even a comprehensive reconstruction of his Shakespearean revivals – assuming, which I do not, that reconstruction is at all possible.¹⁴ Rather, I use Kean's restagings of Shakespeare as an expansive case study to address broader issues in the dense interlacings of performance, history, and politics in mid-Victorian Britain.

Such a cultural analysis is accomplished, nonetheless, by a close reading of the traditional primary and secondary sources of theatre history: promptbooks, scenic designs, costume sketches, photographs, engravings, programs, letters, and newspaper and periodical reviews. Because performance reconstruction is *not* a goal of this work, I make heavier use of journalistic notices than some theatre historians would deem prudent. Indeed, my sustained use of periodical sources will seem lacking in rigor to theatre historians who undertake intensive promptbook analysis on the assumption that promptbooks are more or less authentic documentary sources. Unlike such objectivist historians, I regard periodical and newspaper accounts of theatrical performances as discursive formations in their own right and not as confirmations of primary sources. Because theatrical reviews are readings – and not iterations – of a performance, they do not express anterior assumptions about theatrical and popular culture so much as they constitute those

¹³ Charles Kean, letter to George Godwin, 15 July 1856, one of six letters bound in a presentation copy of Kean's 1856 edition of *The Winter's Tale*, in the Shakespeare Collection, Folger Shakespeare Library, Washington, DC.

¹⁴ While no monograph has appeared on Charles Kean since Cole's obsequious *Life and Theatrical Times of Charles Kean, F.S.A.* (London: Bentley, 1859), a handful of doctoral dissertations have reconstructed, through promptbook analysis, Kean's major productions at the Princess's Theatre. Chief among these unpublished works is M. Glen Wilson, Jr, 'Charles Kean: A Study in Nineteenth-Century Production of Shakespearean Tragedy', unpublished dissertation, Ohio State University, 1957.

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very assumptions. The theatrical review is, consequently, no less real and no less significant than the event which it might be presumed only to recount.¹⁵

By studying Kean's productions as enactments of nineteenth-century theories of history and historical representation, I hope to disclose the centrality of a neglected tradition of theatrical performance in Victorian cultural mythology. Consider, for example, how Walter Pater, as an eighteen-year-old, was enraptured by the luxuriant sensuality of Charles Kean's *Richard II*. In middle age, he recalled that 'those who were very young thirty years ago' might have witnessed at the Princess's Theatre

much more than Shakespeare's play could ever have been before – the very person of the king based on the stately old portrait in Westminster Abbey . . . the grace, the winning pathos, the sympathetic voice of the player, the tasteful archaeology confronting vulgar modern London with a scenic reproduction, for once really agreeable, of the London of Chaucer. In the hands of Kean, the play became like an exquisite performance on the violin.¹⁶

Pater's anecdote gracefully brings together several of the principal strategies and features of Charles Kean's historicist *mise-en-scène*: the use of primary visual sources (the 'stately old portrait'); the theatrically effective recreation of historical sites ('tasteful archaeology'); the embodiment or realization of historical personages ('the very person of the king'); the continued importance of acting even in the midst of spectacle ('the winning pathos, the sympathetic voice of the player'); the recognition that performance is the event when an ideal past meets a degraded present ('confronting vulgar modern London'); and the Victorian theatre's attempt to surpass the limitations of Shakespeare's own theatre ('much more than Shakespeare's play could ever have been before').

Most critically significant of all is that Pater's fond recollection of his adolescent theatre-going reiterates, at a personal level, the general phenomenon of Victorian medievalism. That is, Pater recalling having seen *Richard II* as a teenager is analogous to Victorian England affectionately gazing upon the 'Young England' of its medieval (but not middle-aged) past. The spectacular abundance of Kean's *mise-en-scène* gains a critical complexity, I believe, when examined as constitutive of a

¹⁵ On such post-structural readings of periodical literature, see Lyn Pykett, 'Reading the periodical press: text and context', in *Investigating Victorian Journalism*, ed. Laurel Brake, Aled Jones, and Lionel Madden (Basingstoke: Macmillan Press Ltd, 1990), pp. 3–18, and *The Victorian Press: Samplings and Soundings*, ed. Joanne Shattock and Michael Wolff (Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1982).

¹⁶ 'Shakespeare's English Kings', in *Appreciations* (London: Macmillan and Co., 1924), p. 195.

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broader historiographical discourse.¹⁷ The poetic narration of English history, the astonishing accuracy of scenery and costume, and the presence of live actors recreating legendary events collectively established the theatre of Charles Kean as a place where the traditional parts of history were reclaimed and restored.

In contrast, then, to the views advanced in recent accounts of the nineteenth-century theatre, I propose that Kean's antiquarian dramaturgy was not a naïve fascination with historical accuracy – not interior decoration with a vengeance – but historicism in action. This work does not share, for example, Moelwyn Merchant's assessment that Kean's managerial career was a 'blinker achievement'¹⁸ or Sybil Rosenfeld's curt dismissal of antiquarian *mise-en-scène* as a mass of 'misdirected detail[s]' and 'unnecessary pictorial adjuncts';¹⁹ still less does it ratify Dennis Bartholomeusz's portrayal of Kean as a 'heroic victim to the pedantic heresy of fact'.²⁰ And it explicitly rejects both J. L. Styan's ahistorical view that the Victorian theatre's devotion to antiquarianism was a 'misplaced belief'²¹ and Dennis Kennedy's surprisingly simplistic assertion that Kean's audiences were 'distracted from the play by manipulated historical pictures'.²²

Although we tend to associate Victorian medievalism with architecture, painting, literature, and the arts and crafts – with Pugin, Rossetti, Ruskin, Disraeli, and Morris – theatrical performance was also an active partner in the nineteenth-century effort to recover the medieval past. Reviving Shakespeare's history plays was certainly not the only imaginable way to perform the medieval past in the Victorian era; it was just the only effective way. Certainly the existence of the corpus of medieval drama was well-known in the nineteenth century and some literary critics even acknowledged its pious intentions, conceding that the orig-

¹⁷ Such a project is certainly not without precedent. In *Historical Consciousness in Nineteenth-Century Shakespearean Staging* (Ann Arbor, MI: UMI Research Press, 1987), a chronological survey of historicism in the British theatre from John Philip Kemble to Charles Kean, Nancy Doran Hazelton suggests that theatrical representations of medieval architecture can be aligned with the 'Merrie England' ethos of the Gothic Revival. Though severely handicapped by its descriptive emphasis, Hazelton's monograph begins to sketch out a historiographical issue which students of the Victorian theatre have largely ignored. See also Michael Booth's 'Shakespeare as spectacle and history: the Victorian period', *Theatre Studies International* 1.2 (1976), 99–113, and the same author's *Victorian Spectacular Theatre 1850–1910* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1981).

¹⁸ 'Artists and stage designers', in *Shakespeare and the Victorian Stage*, ed. Richard Foulkes (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), p. 20.

¹⁹ *A Short History of Scene Design in Great Britain* (Totowa, NJ: Rowman and Littlefield, 1973), p. 127.

²⁰ *The Winter's Tale' in Performance in England and America 1611–1976* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), p. 98.

²¹ *The Shakespeare Revolution* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), p. 21.

²² *Looking at Shakespeare* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), p. 40.

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inal 'actors believ[ed] themselves to be carrying out a work pleasing to God'.²³ Yet while liturgical tropes, morality plays, and Corpus Christi cycles could be the objects of genuine historical interest and even of sympathetic appreciation, they could not join the repertoire of the Victorian theatre because they remained morally bankrupt instruments of a Catholic social order. 'The mysteries and moral[ity] plays of the clergy', in the dismissive words of one essayist, 'were a mix of frivolity, buffoonery, and blasphemy'.²⁴

Unable to revive medieval drama without committing heresy, the nineteenth-century theatre attempted to produce its own versions of history. The results were indifferent. In 1832, to cite one early example, J. F. Pennie published *Britain's Historical Drama*, a self-professed antiquarian record of the 'manners, customs, and religious institutions of our early ancestors'.²⁵ While affirming that historical drama is 'essentially English, and we would promote it by all means in our power', *Fraser's Magazine* nonetheless complained that Pennie's national tragedies were of the 'stilted kind... [T]hey are all ludicrously grandiloquent. This results from an anxiety about *how* [the characters] should speak rather than *what* they should speak' (p. 675). Pennie's epic history-cycle failed because it was an antiquarian tract masquerading as a play – historically correct, but theatrically inept. And if a history play could not succeed as a play, then it could not succeed as history.

Charles Kean did indeed produce non-Shakespearean plays set in the Middle Ages, and he evinced a marked preference for melodrama when doing so: Charles Reade and Tom Taylor's *The First Printer* (1856) – a play about Gutenberg; and Dion Boucicault's adaptations from the French of *Faust and Marguerite* (1854) and *Louis XI* (1855). Though often immensely popular, these casually historicized plays lacked a strong narrative of national history. The complete opposite of Pennie's antiquarian epics, these vivacious melodramas were theatrically effective but were not historically instructive. Indeed, not one of them was set in Britain. In consequence, their educational value was largely discounted, since the primary goal of theatrical historicism was to apply antiquarian *mise-en-scène* not to quasi-historical melodramas, but to the national drama – i.e. to Shakespeare's authoritative account of English political

²³ *Contemporary Review* 25 (1875), p. 605.

²⁴ 'The past, present, and possible future of the English stage', *Tallis's Dramatic Magazine*, June (1851), p. 225.

²⁵ Review of *Britain's Historical Drama: a series of National Tragedies, intended to illustrate the Manners, Customs, and Religious Institutions of different early eras in Britain*, by J. F. Pennie, in *Fraser's Magazine* 5 (1832), p. 675.

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history. That is, an historically accurate theatrical performance could succeed as history only if the dramatic action recovered an authentic moment of nation-building. A noteworthy historical event still had to be recreated within the performance no matter the accumulation of pleasing picturesque detail. Kean himself nicely makes this point in the playbill for *Henry VIII*, a play which merited its 1855 revival because it dramatized the Reformation, an event 'intimately associated with our strongest national feelings'.

Faced with no viable alternative, actor-managers from John Philip Kemble to Henry Irving placed their trust in Shakespeare when they set about to perform the Middle Ages. On the face of it, relying on Shakespeare was the obvious thing to do since his English chronicle plays were regarded by many Victorians as history books written in dramatic verse. 'It is the Henry V or Richard III of Shakespeare that occur to every mind when these English monarchs are thought of', insisted *Blackwood's Magazine* in 1845, and not 'the picture of them presented, able as it is, by Hume or Turner'.²⁶ Similarly, the *Era* declared, although with some exaggeration, that 'so generally truthful is Shakespeare in his dramatic transformations' that he has 'seldom led those who have trusted to his guidance into a chronological or personal error of any importance'.²⁷

Yet approbation of Shakespeare's historical worthiness was by no means universal. Indeed, one of the dilemmas posed by historicist thought was that Shakespeare could *not* instruct the Victorians in history precisely because he was a product of Elizabethan culture and therefore betrayed opinions and attitudes which were alien to the nineteenth century. Surely one of the inherent complications of Victorian theatrical medievalism was its unavoidable reliance on Renaissance dramatic texts. The significance of that problem cannot be overestimated for it cuts to the heart of the contradiction in the very notion of 'performing' the Middle Ages: i.e. that there can be no pure or unsullied recovery of the past because all historical representations are mediated by yet other representations. A Shakespearean past thus inevitably ghosts or haunts theatrical representations of the medieval past. Such historical doubling is, admittedly, unique neither to Shakespeare, nor to the Victorians, nor to the stage. That these tensions appear in a more pronounced or

²⁶ 'Historical Romance', *Blackwood's Magazine* 58 (1845), p. 347.

²⁷ *The Era* 24 October 1858. 'Many students [of] history, and amongst them the great Duke of Marlborough, have admitted that their knowledge of our own annals was derived principally from a study of these celebrated plays.'