

Dossiê Shakespeare

**Charles Macready's *King John*: Victorian Theatre and
Double-voiced Medievalism**

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Abstract: During the nineteenth century, there was a revival of interest in the Middle Ages, which was considered the birth of English culture and identity in opposition to Classical Antiquity. This movement was called the Medieval Revival. It was expressed in several areas of knowledge and artistic manifestations, including in the theatre. Charles Macready's reconstruction of Shakespeare's *King John* in 1842 at Theatre Royal Drury Lane in London is inserted in this context. Macready's production brings together two perspectives of the Middle Ages on stage: the more negative Renaissance view along with the Victorian idealised outlook, characterising a phenomenon I call double-voiced medievalism, based on Richard Schoch's concept of double-voiced historicism.

Keywords: Charles Macready; William Shakespeare; Victorian theatre; Double-voiced medievalism.

Resumo: Durante o século XIX, houve um renascimento de interesse na Idade Média, considerada o nascimento da cultura e da identidade inglesas em oposição a Antiguidade Clássica. Esse movimento foi chamado de *Medieval Revival*. Ele foi expresso em várias áreas do conhecimento e manifestações artísticas, incluindo o teatro. A reconstrução de *King John*, de Shakespeare, por Charles Macready no Theatre Royal Drury Lane, em Londres, em 1842 está inserida neste contexto. A produção de Macready reúne duas perspectivas sobre a Idade Média em cena: a visão renascentista mais negativa junto com a perspectiva idealizada da Era Vitoriana, caracterizando um fenômeno que chamo de *double-voiced medievalism*, com base no conceito de *double-voiced historicism* Richard Schoch.

Palavras-chave: Charles Macready; William Shakespeare; Teatro vitoriano; Medievalismo.

Time is a wonderful and mysterious concept. No wonder it has fascinated artists throughout the centuries. The English bard was no exception. In his sonnet 65, Shake-

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speare writes about the unstoppable force of time, this “wreckful siege of battering days” (l. 6). Nothing can stop time’s wrath, not even impregnable rocks or “gates of steel so strong” (l. 8). Not even “time’s best jewel” (l. 10) can resist time, unfortunately. As what this jewel may refer to, the interpretations abound. I sustain that “time’s best jewel” is art—theatrical art. As lamentable as it may be, a theatrical event fades as soon as the curtains close on the stage. Countless times curtains have been closed on stages around the world throughout the centuries, each performance with an enchantment of its own. However, albeit these spectacles are over, their magic has not been extinguished. As Shakespeare puts it, “unless this miracle have might, / That in black ink my love may still shine bright” (l. 13-14); as long as our pens continue to write about these spectacles, they remain alive. The theatrical event itself is, *de facto*, irretrievable. Nonetheless, based on research and imagination, it is possible to reconstruct those theatrical events, bringing them back to life. That is the fascinating task of the theatre historian.

Several past theatrical events are worth being rescued and brought “back to life” by theatre historians. My choice for this paper has been to revive William Charles Macready’s work, the Eminent Victorian tragedian. More specifically, I aim at analysing Macready’s reconstruction of Shakespeare’s *King John* in 1842, which premiered at Theatre Royal Drury Lane on 24 October 24, as an illustration of the concept *double-voiced medievalism*. This was a play that gained unprecedented popularity in the nineteenth century, possibly due to the Victorian attraction to the Middle Ages, as I will go on to argue.

Reconstructing history

When it comes to history, Raymond Aron affirms that “no such thing as a historical *reality* exists ready made, so that science merely has to reproduce it faithfully. The historical reality, because it is human, is *ambiguous* and *inexhaustible*” (ARON 1961: 118). From this perspective, there is not one single historical reality that can be retrieved by historians and therefore reproduced faithfully. As Aron explains, history is human and, consequently, “ambiguous and inexhaustible”, open to interpretations and continuous debates. Linda Hutcheon in *The Politics of Postmodernism* (1989) points out that Fredric Jameson’s idea of History—with capital letter—as “uninterrupted narratives” has been contested by a postmodern perspective on histories—in the plural—that are “plural, interrupted, unrepressed” (HUTCHEON 1989: 65). The approach to History as a unique, unalterable and unquestionable report of past events no longer stands. Phyllis Racking adds to this discussion by affirming that “in the light of the contemporary revolution in historiography, the old positivist claims about an objectively ‘true’ history beyond the reach of ideology seem impossible to sustain” (RACKING 1990: x). Today—and I strongly agree with this view—, history is seen as multifaceted and fragmented. It is the result of an everlasting discussion and overlapping of different interpretations—congruent or incongruent—of past events.

The writing of history—historiography—must take into consideration the fragmented nature of history. Racking explains that the change of perspectives on historiographical understanding began during the Renaissance, the period in which Shakespeare lived and wrote. According to Racking, historiography ceased to be regarded as the written expression of one undisputable truth; it was now beginning to be seen as the result of multiple interpretations and, for that matter, susceptible to incredibility and contestation. Additionally, the advent of the moving type and the increase of popular literacy allowed history writing to become more accessible to a wider public (RACKING 1990: 13). Racking also submits that the figure of the historian was slowly being demystified during the Renaissance: he was “no longer an authority simply by virtue of his authorship, he came to be seen as a fallible human being, located in a particular time and place, limited by ignorance, subject to bias and blindness, struggling to recover a past in which he had not lived” (RACKING 1990: 13). These new ideas surrounding historiography most certainly influenced the artistic production of the time, including Shakespeare’s. Since the historian had fallen from his pedestal of supreme historical authority and was regarded as susceptible to errors, historiography was no longer unreachable. If historians were “fallible human beings”, other fallible human beings could express their own reconstructions of history, such as artists, poets and playwrights.

Reconstructing history on stage has been a fascinating expression of art and history. First of all, it is crucial to remember that any attempt to represent any historical moment on stage is not a reproduction, but a *reconstruction*. Even an analyst watching the theatrical event first-hand will construct his/her interpretation based on his/her individual background, which will be different from another analyst’s who may be watching the very same performance. Therefore, every analysis of any performance, live or not, is a reconstruction. José Roberto O’Shea adds to this discussion by stating that “the analysis of performance is not an experimental science in search of empirical demonstration, but an interpretative intellectual exercise, in search of construction of meaning” (O’SHEA 2015: 7-8). The word *construction*, and its derivation *reconstruction*, is key in Hutcheon’s, O’Shea’s, and my own perspective of performance analysis. Every performance after the close of the curtains, as put by O’Shea, “vanishes” (O’SHEA 2015: 8). Therefore, any attempt to retrieve it will forcefully be a reconstruction, based on interpretation and meaning construction.

Theatre—unlike drama, which is the written dramatic text and, therefore, has a long life—“having *vita brevis*, [...] is not fixed, hardly recordable, unrepeatable, and difficult to measure” (O’SHEA 2004: 146). Theatre encompasses a lot more than the written text: it has performance at its core. As O’Shea puts it: “theatre is spoken language signifying side by side visual, aural, and sensorial language, by means of actors, space, movement, props, light, music, and the complex interrelations among these, all coming to fruition in reception” (O’SHEA 2004: 147). All these elements, which are so fluid and likely to change in every performance, will inevitably influence the spectator’s experience in the theatre. Even spectators watching the same performance in the same playhouse but sitting at dif-

ferent distances and angles from the stage will forcefully have distinguished perceptions. Therefore, each spectator constructs the performance as well as a theatre historian does.

Victorian historical theatre

Victorians were also mesmerised by the concept of time. During the nineteenth century, there emerged a desire to know the past. The English wished to understand their heritage, even more at a time of significant change, such as the moment in which Victorians lived. In contrast to the chaotic Victorian Era, they searched their past for a moment in history on which they could look back in a nostalgic manner, in which they could feel “at home”. And they chose the Middle Ages, the birth of English culture. The medieval past with its huge castles, brave knights, free people, and courtly love, was revived in the English imagination, being expressed in several areas of thought and artistic expression.

As a result, artists from the past regained prominence, such as William Shakespeare—especially his historical plays, which reconstructed significant moments and historical figures. Added to the Victorian taste for spectacle, productions of Shakespeare’s historical plays became a visual feast: extravagant costume, grand sets, admirable performances; all underlined by careful historical research. William Charles Macready (1793-1873) was one of the main Victorian theatre managers who ventured into the realm of historical theatre. His productions were abundant, but my focus here will be on his 1842 production of *King John* at Drury Lane.

In reconstructing past events in the theatre, several “possible worlds” converge on stage. Thomas Postlewait describes these possible worlds as the contexts to which the theatrical event is related. According to Postlewait,

theatre events are capable of representing and being influenced by any aspect of the world, in a multitude of modes, means, and manners. They also engage with alternative and possible worlds, the “as if” versions of existence. The theatrical arts have always been an important arena for representing the full imaginative realms of possibility (and even impossibility), as we fill the stage or the film with gods, demons, aliens, creatures, and a wild range of human beings. (POSTLEWAIT 2009: 12)

In the case of Macready’s production of *King John*, it encompasses three worlds: the world in which the staging was situated, the city of London during the Victorian Era; the world the staging represented, thirteenth-century England ruled by King John; as well as the world around its teller, Shakespeare’s late-sixteenth. These three worlds converge and give meaning to Macready’s production.

Schoch discusses this fascinating issue of different historical worlds converging on stage in terms of *double-voiced historicism*. Theatrical representations of Shakespeare’s medieval plays, *King John* included, “necessarily encoded Renaissance values about the

Middle Ages” (SCHOCH 2006: 145). In this way, Victorian theatre managers had to imagine three historical moments at once: the Middle Ages, Shakespeare’s Renaissance England and their Victorian era. As Schoch points out, it was eventually perceived “that the Middle Ages could not be authentically restored because it was always already mediated through an Elizabethan perspective” (SCHOCH 2006: 146). In any case, the medieval past could never be retrieved regardless of the historical moment in which this attempt was made, either during the Renaissance, in the Victorian era, or nowadays. As we have seen, any effort to recover the past would inevitably go through the interpretative filter of the historian, which in turn is inescapably influenced by his/her ideological positions and cultural repertoire. What Schoch brings to the discussion, however, is that Shakespeare’s reconstruction of King John’s reign, for instance, is influenced by his time’s and his own conceptions of the monarch, and Renaissance views on the nature of historiography and medievalism. Moreover, Macready’s production of Shakespeare’s reconstruction of King John’s reign adds a new voice to this historical process: Macready unavoidably brings to the nineteenth-century stage Victorian—and his own—conceptions of thirteenth-century England along with Victorian—and his own—ideas on historiography and medievalism.

Based on Schoch’s definition of double-voiced historicism, I propose a new concept: *double-voiced medievalism*. Schoch’s concept defines the convergence of two different historical perspectives of the same historical event, such as Shakespeare’s and Macready’s reconstructions of King John’s reign in dialogue on the Victorian stage. Double-voiced medievalism, in this sense, refers to two different perspectives of the medieval past in confluence. Given this standpoint, neither perspective of the Middle Ages eventually undermines the other. Contrarily, traces of both views are perceptible and intertwine. Macready’s 1842 production of *King John*, for instance, was a place where Renaissance and Victorian perspectives of the Middle Ages converged.

During the Renaissance, the Middle Ages were regarded as the Dark Ages, a moment of barbarous brutality and rarely any intellectual improvement—contrary to the “enlightened” sixteenth century, in their own view. In the nineteenth century, however, as the aforementioned *Medieval Revival* movement illustrate as the Middle Ages began to be seen through an idealised lens as the Golden Age in English history.

Schoch points out that the incongruities between Shakespeare’s medieval and the Victorian idealised Middle Ages occurred even at the level of narrative: “For with the possible exception of *Henry V*, the chronicle plays dramatize an unflattering period in the English past: John was a murderer, Richard II weak and derelict, Henry IV a usurper, and Henry VIII a tyrant and adulterer” (SCHOCH 2006: 150). In this way, Renaissance and Victorian perspectives on the Middle Ages were at odds. The Elizabethans sought in the medieval past examples to be contrasted. They believed that Elizabethan England was ahead of the prosaic Middle Ages, and going back to a medieval past was to retrocede. According to Chandler, “the Elizabethan differed from their successors in their approaches to the past, since they used the Middle Ages to support change rather than challenge it”

(SCHOCH 2006: 2), hence Shakespeare's choice of imperfect monarchs, which would allow the Elizabethans to reflect upon their current political affairs.

On the other hand, nineteenth-century England, as we have seen, was in the midst of modern chaos and desolate about the uncertainties of the future. As Chandler points out, Victorian medievalists lamented the situation of the impoverished industrial proletariat, "working an eighty-four-hour week in lint-choked factories and living in sickness-breeding, filthy hovels. They believed that by comparison to the modern wage slave, even a thirteenth-century serf was fortunate" (CHANDLER 1970: 3). In this way, differently from Renaissance thinkers, the Victorians believed the Middle Ages were a lost paradise. The medieval man was considered "a dynamic and generous creature, capable of loyal feeling and heroic action" (CHANDLER 1970: 7), very different from the modern nineteenth-century "wage slave". The medieval movement in Victorian England was "a social and political ideal and its symbolic value [was] a metaphor of belief" (CHANDLER 1970: 10); a belief in order, chivalry and, as we have seen, a desire to feel at home. As Chandler puts it, "in contrast to the certainties of the Middle Ages, modern life seemed to offer only broken lines and meaningless energies" (CHANDLER 1970: 11).

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Macready's *King John* and *double-voiced medievalism* on the Victorian stage

On 24 October 1842, Macready's *King John* premiered with pomp at Royal Theatre Drury Lane. The production was very well received and acclaimed by theatre-goers and critics alike. The reviewer in *The Examiner*, five days after the opening, compared Macready's piece with previous productions of the play, and affirmed "it is six years since we saw *King John*, with some seven ragged supernumeraries for the power of England, while that of France, headed by a king in boots à la Louis Quatorze, crawled about the stage with three" (qtd. in SHATTUCK 1962:1). The critic condemned that earlier production of *King John* which, unlike Macready's, had only a few performers on stage to represent the English and French armies, and offered an actor wearing late-seventeenth century boots in order to represent an early-thirteenth century king. Those discrepancies could no longer entertain the Victorian audience at the theatre.

Macready was certainly up to the challenge of entertaining the Victorians, and, in *The Examiner* reviewer's words, performed the work of an alchemist, "converting to richest use the meagre resources of the stage" (qtd. in SHATTUCK 1962:1). Unlike the other performance which the critic disapproved, Macready's *King John* was praised for the care with which every detail in costume and scenery was developed: "The accoutrements are complete, from the helmet to the spur of each mailed warrior. Not a distinction is missed in the appointments. From citizen to baron, gentleman to knight, herald to man-at-arms, soldier to servant, priest to king, gradations are marked with picturesque exactness, to the eye and to the mind" (qtd. in SHATTUCK 1962:1). It is interesting that the critic uses the expression

“to the eye and to the *mind*”, because, although the costumes and set were reconstructed based on historical research, they still left a margin for the audience’s imagination, which is a characteristic of the theatre. Moreover, the set created by William Telbin (1813-1873) added to the spectacle of Macready’s *King John*. The same reviewer in *The Examiner* wrote:

The council room, the field before and after the battle, the fortifications of Angiers, the moated and embattled fortress of Northampton, the glitter of the Royal tent, the gloom of Swinstead Abbey; they have all the air of truth, the character of simple and strong fidelity. And above all, in every moment of the tragedy, there is Mind at work, without which wealth of material is nothing. (qtd. in SHATTUCK 1962:1)

Again, the critic uses the word *Mind*—with a capital letter—alluding to the importance of room for imagination in the theatre. As he puts it—and I strongly agree—there is little use for spectacular scenery and majestic costumes if there are not smart minds behind it to bring it all to life. These minds belong to all the agents involved in Macready’s production—Macready himself, Telbin, the costume designer Charles Hamilton Smith (1776-1859), the cast, and others, who often enough do not even figure in historical archives—agents who collectively incited the audience’s imagination, inviting them to reconstruct the Middle Ages on the Victorian stage.

In *The Examiner* critic’s words, it is also possible to identify traces of double-voiced medievalism. In his review of Macready’s *King John*, the critic brings together two views of the Middle Ages: the negative view of a prosaic medieval past, as thought by the Elizabethans, as well as a romanticised perspective of the Middle Ages, typical of the Victorian Era. According to this Victorian critic, “the rude heroic forms of the English past; the gothic and chivalric grandeur of the Middle Age; the woes and wars of a barbarous but an earnest time, with its reckless splendour, its selfish cruelty, and its gloomy suffering; are in this revival realized” (qtd. in SHATTUCK 1962:1). Therefore, he sees in Macready’s production a romanticised medieval past, which he describes as “heroic”, with “chivalric grandeur” and “reckless splendour”. At the same time, however, the critic is able to spot in Macready’s *King John* “the woes and wars of a barbarous” Middle Ages, its “selfish cruelty” and “gloomy suffering”, illustrating the Elizabethan perspective on the medieval past. This more negative outlook on the Middle Ages can, of course, also be found in Shakespeare’s *King John*, created in the midst of Renaissance ideas about the medieval past. This extract of *The Examiner*, therefore, is an example of the double-voiced medievalism surrounding historical and artistic productions in Victorian theatre.

Final considerations

The curtains were closed at Drury Lane in 1842. However, as I argued in this paper, it is possible to reconstruct it based on historical research. This study is grounded

on postmodern perspectives on history, historiography, and theatre historiography. As Hutcheon points out, history can no longer be seen as a unique continuum, stable and incontestable. History is now regarded as plural, fragmented, and liable to diverse interpretations. This manner, historical accounts inevitably go through the interpretative filter of their teller, who brings his/her own political, social, and cultural background to the discussion. Therefore, no historical writing is impartial. From a postmodern perspective, theatre historiography has also come to regard theatrical performances as *reconstructions* of the past. As Postlewait and O’Shea explain, the past itself is irretrievable; any attempt to go back to what happened inside a playhouse yesterday, last week, or two hundred years ago will forcefully be a *reconstruction*, which is never ideologically neutral.

Another concept which has guided this study is Schoch’s idea of *double-voiced historicism*. As we have seen, Schoch explains his concept as the overlapping of distinct historical perspectives in one artistic manifestation. For instance, in Macready’s *King John*, the reconstruction of the past is pervaded by two different historical approaches: thirteenth-century England is reconstructed by a Renaissance writer, whose play in turn is reconstructed by a Victorian theatre director. Therefore, two historical voices overlap. This is a fascinating perception, which has led me to think of a new concept that I have called *double-voiced medievalism*. In my view, Macready’s 1842 *King John* also encompasses two different approaches to the *medieval past*, which intertwine. Renaissance writers had a quite negative view of the Middle Ages, which they believed were a prosaic and barbaric time, in their view “superseded” by the sixteenth century. Victorians, on the other hand, regained interest in the Middle Ages due to the overwhelming social, economic, political, and scientific transformations of the nineteenth century. In a turbulent present, the idyllic medieval past was revived as the Golden Age in English history. Thus, the Middle Ages were more a mythical than a real place for the Victorians, who idealised the medieval past. As a consequence, Macready’s production of *King John* intertwined two different approaches towards the Middle Ages: the Renaissance perspective—illustrated by Shakespeare’s original text—and the Victorian romanticised view—illustrated by Macready’s reconstruction of the play.

As I wrote in the beginning of this final section, the curtains were closed in 1842. However, it is always possible to take a glimpse behind them. Based on historical research, it is possible to imaginatively reconstruct what happened on stage over a hundred and seventy years ago. Unfortunately, we cannot go back in time, and watch Macready’s premiere of *King John* at Drury Lane. Nevertheless, we can always watch it “in our mind’s eye” (*Hamlet* 1.2.186).

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