

Nicoletta Caputo

*Richard III as a Romantic Icon:  
Textual, Cultural and Theatrical  
Appropriations*

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## Introduction

# Richard III as a “Romantic” Icon

This book is an investigation into a particular aspect of the Romantic era’s so-called bardolatry, namely the nature and significance of Richard III during this period as both a historical figure and a subject for literary and theatrical representation. While many important critical studies on the appropriation of Shakespeare and on Romantic theater and performance have been written,<sup>1</sup> monographs on the appropriation of a specific play in a specific historical period are virtually nonexistent. The starting point of this research was the use and the reuse that each generation has made of William Shakespeare who, in the second half of the eighteenth century, was enshrined as the unrivalled national poet and the embodiment of “Englishness.”<sup>2</sup> However, the focus of this book is not only the reception of *King Richard III* in Romantic times but also Richard III as a cultural object. Theater obviously occupies a crucial place, but literature, history, criticism, politics and society in general are equally significant. Richard III exerted an almost inexhaustible fascination over the Romantics, and he is found to a surprising degree at the center of literary, theatrical, ideological, and ethical

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<sup>1</sup> The first full-length study of Shakespeare adaptations was Frederick W. Kilbourne, *Alterations and Adaptations of Shakespeare* (Boston: The Poet Lore Company, 1906). Twenty-first century works on this subject include Daniel Fischlin and Mark Fortier, eds., *Adaptations of Shakespeare: A Critical Anthology of Plays from the Seventeenth Century to the Present* (London: Routledge, 2000); Graham Holderness, *Cultural Shakespeare: Essays in the Shakespeare Myth* (Hatfield: University of Hertfordshire Press, 2001); Ton Hoenselaars, ed., *Shakespeare’s History Plays. Performance, Translation and Adaptation in Britain and Abroad* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004); Don-John Dugas, *Marketing the Bard: Shakespeare in Performance and Print, 1660–1740* (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 2006), and Margaret Jane Kidnie, *Shakespeare and the Problem of Adaptation* (New York: Routledge, 2009). On the “re-invention” of Shakespeare over time see Gary Taylor, *Reinventing Shakespeare: A Cultural History from the Restoration to the Present* (New York: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1989); Jonathan Bate, *Shakespearean Constitutions: Politics, Theatre, Criticism 1730–1830* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989) and, more recently, Fiona Ritchie and Peter Sabor, eds., *Shakespeare in the Eighteenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012). For Romantic theater and performance see, for instance, Joseph Donohue’s *Dramatic Character in the English Romantic Age* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1970) and his *Theatre in the Age of Kean* (Totowa, NJ: Rowman & Littlefield, 1975), and Jane Moody, *Illegitimate Theatre in London, 1770–1840* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

<sup>2</sup> As Jonathan Bate claims, “‘Shakespeare’ is not a man who lived from 1564 to 1616 but a body of work that is refashioned by each subsequent age in the image of itself” (Bate, *Shakespearean Constitutions*, 3). Bardolatry is “the worship of Shakespeare,” Graham Holderness, ed., *The Shakespeare Myth* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1988), 3, the quasi-religious reverence for Shakespeare and all things pertaining to him. On this subject, see Michael Dobson, *The Making of the National Poet: Shakespeare, Adaptation and Authorship, 1660–1769* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992) and, more recently, Enrico Scaravelli, *The Rise of Bardolatry in the Restoration* (Bern, Peter Lang, 2016). For a study on Bardolatry as “the formal cult of Shakespeare worship that required shrines where acolytes could pay homage,” see Richard Schoch, “The Birth of Shakespeare’s Birthplace,” *Theatre Survey* 53, no. 2 (2012): 181–201. In Bate’s words, Shakespeare assumed “the status of England’s patron Poet, even its patron Saint” (Bate, *Shakespearean Constitutions*, 6); it is also true, however, that “in the latter part of the eighteenth century Shakespeare became commercialized and was made into a commodity” (45). Shakespeare assumed the dual role at the time of both a quasi-religious figure and a commercial venture.

debates over a period of several decades. That could be, in part, because of the conflicting ethical response he aroused, in an age when morally dubious figures (such as George Gordon, Lord Byron) were highly fashionable. The present study intends to highlight the coalescence of discourses related to the figure of Richard III that emerged in the last decades of the eighteenth century, investigate the Romantics' morbid fascination with this character in its various manifestations, and explore what can be considered a true Romantic-period myth from a variety of points of view.<sup>3</sup>

In the "Romantic" years, Richard III, like Shakespeare himself, became "a controversial piece of cultural property."<sup>4</sup> As will become evident in this study, Richard's multifariousness as a dramatic and cultural figure mirrored the age, and the multiplicity of Romantic-period Richards were strictly connected with the cultural and ideological multiplicity of the Romantic era itself. In addition, the ductile image of Richard often played a part in the process of self-definition of writers and intellectuals. Exemplary from this point of view is the affinity that Byron—who was identified as the head of the "Satanic school" of poetry by the poet laureate Robert Southey<sup>5</sup>—felt with Shakespeare's arch-villain on a personal level, and the impact it had on his works. Or, in the last decades of the eighteenth century, the various attempts on the part of the so-called sentimental critics to humanize (and domesticate) a disturbingly vicious character like Richard III. Recurrently, Richard became a site for debating crucial issues of the times. For instance, siding with him gave his admirers—namely William Hazlitt and Lord Byron—the opportunity to develop and express their ideas of heroism. On all such occasions, the politics of the competing Richards—i.e. the different approaches to the historical, dramatic and theatrical figure—really seem to enact different notions of individual and national identity.

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<sup>3</sup> A study of this kind is very different in scope from the volumes that have already been written on the stage history of the play, namely: Alice I. Perry Wood, *The Stage History of Shakespeare's King Richard III* (New York: The Columbia University Press, 1909); Scott Colley, *Richard's Himself Again. A Stage History of Richard III* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1992) and the "Plays in Performance" edition of *Richard III*, edited by Julie Hankey (London: Junction Books, 1981).

<sup>4</sup> Jane Moody, "Romantic Shakespeare" in *The Cambridge Companion to Shakespeare on Stage*, ed. Stanley Wells and Sarah Stanton (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 40.

<sup>5</sup> In the "Preface" to the poem *A Vision of Judgement* (1821), where Southey described the members of the School in terms that strangely seem to characterize Richard III himself: "Men of diseased hearts and depraved imaginations, who, forming a system of opinions to suit their own unhappy course of conduct, have rebelled against the holiest ordinances of human society, and hating that revealed religion which, with all their efforts and bravadoes, they are unable entirely to disbelieve, labour to make others as miserable as themselves, by infecting them with a moral virus that eats into the soul! [. . .] they are more especially characterized by a Satanic spirit of pride and audacious impiety, which still betrays the wretched feeling of hopelessness wherewith it is allied," Robert Southey, *A Vision of Judgement* (London: Longman, Hurst, Rees, Orme, & Brown, 1821), xix–xxi.

Recent scholarship has emphasized how the cultural was political in the Romantic period, and how, repeatedly, heated debates surrounding key cultural figures uncovered arenas of socio-political conflict.<sup>6</sup> Aesthetic divides could mirror political divides. However, while the ideological import of the Romantic-period dispute over Milton's Satan and Napoleon has been widely explored and discussed,<sup>7</sup> the controversy surrounding Richard III and his theatrical interpreters, which was equally ideologically pregnant, has been totally ignored. The politics of the "rival Richards" are extremely interesting, and the divide between pro-Richard and anti-Richard intellectuals mirrors the responses to Satan and Napoleon. The three figures were linked in literary works and in the major thinkers' comments on the political and cultural situation of the time, sometimes explicitly and sometimes only implicitly. Greatness split from morality was what critics—chiefly hostile ones—generally recognized in Satan, Napoleon, and Richard III alike.

In dramatic criticism, William Richardson was the first who, in seeing admiration rather than pity (as other "sentimental" critics did) as a response to the character, made a possible connection with Satan evident. Occasionally, such a connection merged with a (quite problematic) engagement with another powerful "Romantic" myth: Prometheus. The contest over Satan and Napoleon parallels the contest over Richard III and Edmund Kean, his most acclaimed performer on the stage in the period. Like Satan and Napoleon, Richard III too became a site of dispute over what people deemed important in the field of morality and heroism at a time of great political turmoil. Romantic-period writers and critics constructed and appropriated different Richards to engage more effectively in the complex reality surrounding them, and these competing cultural creations mirrored different ideological positions.

They similarly constructed and appropriated Edmund Kean, an actor who, as Barbara Hodgdon rightly argues, "[. . .] was *their* creation, their

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<sup>6</sup> See, for instance, Jeffrey N. Cox, *Poetry and Politics in the Cockney School. Keats, Shelley, Hunt and their Circle* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998). According to John Hayden, "politics pervaded the age, its literature, and its criticism," John O. Hayden, *The Romantic Reviewers 1802–1824* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1969), 38. Jerome McGann notes how "the period is notable for its many ideological struggles," and defines the "sharp ideological conflict" through which "a romantic ethos achieved dominance" as "the civil wars of the romantic movement itself," Jerome McGann, "Rethinking Romanticism," *ELH* 59, no. 3 (Autumn 1992): 735–36.

<sup>7</sup> For example, in Simon Bainbridge, *Napoleon and English Romanticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995) and in Peter A. Schock, *Romantic Satanism: Myth and the Historical Moment in Blake, Shelley, and Byron* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003). On the impact of the Napoleonic Wars on Romantic literary culture, see Jeffrey N. Cox, *Romanticism in the Shadow of War: Literary Culture in the Napoleonic War Years* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

commodity.”<sup>8</sup> The discussions about Richard III and Kean betray the same political context that characterizes the competing assessments of Satan and Napoleon, with admiring liberal and radical writers and critics,<sup>9</sup> and skeptical or disapproving conservatives. Like Richard III, Kean too became, for liberal and radical writers, a vehicle to express their views on culture, society, and politics. Jonathan Mulrooney, while commenting on the desire John Keats emphatically expressed of being in the “low company” of Kean, instead of dining with respectable “members of the merchant class who aspired to cultural legitimacy through literary pursuits,” rightly notes that the poet’s “explicit alliance” with the actor was a veritable

... identification with the new modes of cultural experience Kean embodied on the early nineteenth-century London stage. [. . .] Kean played a crucial role in shaping both Keats's attitudes towards his own social rank and his ideas about the changing nature of cultural experience. Educated to an understanding of Kean by Hazlitt's theatrical criticism, Keats's attention to the actor in letters and theatrical reviews in late 1817 and early 1818 coincided with and [. . .] occasioned his thoroughgoing revision of the poet's role as a cultural intermediary for readers.<sup>10</sup>

Actually, Kean’s “revolutionary” acting and his rendering of Richard III were appropriated by writers from different party affiliations to serve both their aesthetic and their political ideologies, and the actor himself, with his transgressive social behavior, was made into a highly disputed—and highly contradictory—symbol.

Although this study purports to be focused on the Romantic period, it includes two chapters that deal with mid-eighteenth-century phenomena. This contradiction is only apparent if we just look at how criticism has recently realized that there are “much

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<sup>8</sup> Barbara Hodgdon, “Shakespearean Stars: Stagings of Desire” in *The Cambridge Companion to Shakespeare and Popular Culture*, ed. Robert Shaughnessy (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 53.

<sup>9</sup> Although, as Nicholas Roe argues, “in the period 1817–1822 [. . .] ‘liberal’ and ‘radical’ were virtually synonymous terms in political discourse,” I prefer to use two distinct terms; see Nicholas Roe, *John Keats and the Culture of Dissent* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 10.

<sup>10</sup> Jonathan Mulrooney, “Keats in the Company of Kean,” *Studies in Romanticism* 42, no. 2 (Summer 2003): 228 and 229. Keats expressed this desire in a letter to his brothers that he wrote just before Christmas 1817: “They talked of Kean and his low company—Would I were with that company instead of yours said I to myself! I know such like acquaintances will never do for me . . .” (227). Mulrooney also draws an interesting parallel between Wordsworth and Kemble on the one hand, and Keats and Kean on the other: “If Wordsworth’s egotism represented, in both his life and work, a literary parallel to the masterful authority displayed on the Covent Garden stage by John Philip Kemble, Edmund Kean embodied for Keats a refusal to seek cultural distinction by emulating that authority” (Mulrooney, “Keats in the Company of Kean,” 232). For a politically informed criticism of Keats, see Roe, *John Keats and the Culture of Dissent*.



closer ties than we used to accept between trends we now call ‘Romantic’ and much of the ‘Enlightenment’ that led to them’;<sup>11</sup> as a consequence, less restricted time frames are used more and more frequently in assessments of “Romantic” culture and literature.<sup>12</sup> As far as Richard III is concerned, it seemed necessary to trace the roots of the Romantic period’s heightened and often revisionist attention to this character to Horace Walpole’s *Historic Doubts on the Life and Reign of King Richard the Third* (which was published in 1768), to David Garrick’s stage embodiment of the villainous monarch (who first saw the light of day on October 19, 1741), and to eighteenth-century character criticism.

In a review of Lord Byron’s *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage, Canto III*, Sir Walter Scott defines politics as “that extensive gulph whose eddies draw everything that is British into their vortex,”<sup>13</sup> and, in a 1821 letter, John Clare asserts that “to escape the hell of party political criticism is impossible.”<sup>14</sup> Indeed, at the time it was usual for reviewers to obtrude their political opinions into their writings and, often, literary and theatrical considerations were subordinated to political ones.<sup>15</sup> This is precisely what happened with the controversy surrounding Richard III (surveyed in Chapters 1 and 2): since its very inception with Walpole’s revisionist *Historic Doubts*, it marked both aesthetic and political fissures. The first attack on Walpole, who at the time had just resigned as MP for the Whig Party, arrived from the *Critical Review*,<sup>16</sup> a journal that had been founded by Tobias Smollett in 1756 as the Tory competitor to Ralph

<sup>11</sup> Jerrold E. Hogle, “Romanticism and the ‘Schools’ of Criticism and Theory,” in Stuart Curran, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to British Romanticism*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 25.

<sup>12</sup> As Thomas Keymer and Jon Mee argue, the less restricted time frame “enables an understanding of longer processes now increasingly seen as central to the formation of Romantic culture” and “acknowledges the survival into the early nineteenth century of characteristically eighteenth-century modes and discourses,” Thomas Keymer and Jon Mee, eds., *The Cambridge Companion to English Literature 1740–1830* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), xi.

<sup>13</sup> *Quarterly Review* XVI, n. 31 (October 1816), 197. In this *Canto*, Byron defined Napoleon as “the greatest [. . .] of men” (stanza 36). Scott, on the other hand, was a Tory, and in 1827 he was to publish what today is considered a hostile biography of Napoleon, in nine volumes: *The Life of Napoleon Buonaparte, Emperor of the French. With a Preliminary View of the French Revolution*. However, he agreed on the fact that Napoleon was “the greatest man of his time,” *The Letters of Sir Walter Scott 1787–1832*, ed. H. J. C. Grierson, 12 vols. (London: Constable, 1932–1937), 10: 261. This was in contrast with the opinion of other Romantic conservative writers who, aware of Napoleon’s dangerous charismatic appeal, thought that “all public claims for Napoleon’s greatness were morally and politically reprehensible” (Bainbridge, *Napoleon and English Romanticism*, 10).

<sup>14</sup> *The Letters of John Clare*, ed. Mark Storey (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985), 190.

<sup>15</sup> As Jane Moody put it: “Performing Shakespeare in the Romantic age became an intensely political business. The leading theatre critics—William Hazlitt, Charles Lamb, and Leigh Hunt—pepper their dramatic interpretations with deft, savvy and mischievous political shots. Reviews make frequent and pointed references to controversial topical events [. . .]; political concepts and institutions—anarchy, monarchy and aristocracy—pervade the discussion of Shakespearean performance. [. . .] At the heart of this period is a battle for the political and moral possession of Shakespeare” (Moody, “Romantic Shakespeare,” 37).

<sup>16</sup> Another early rejoinder arrived from the *London Chronicle*, but the review consisted of a short paragraph (as was usual with this journal) and Walpole never mentioned it in his letters.

Griffiths's Whig *Monthly Review* (established in 1749). The author was William Guthrie, the chief reviewer of "polite literature" of the journal. Guthrie—whom Thomas Gray called "rascal" in the answer to Walpole's letter resenting the "abusive" attack on "[his] Richard"<sup>17</sup>—was a Scot of Jacobite connections with a reputation as a political writer for having written fictionalized reports of Parliamentary debates for *The Gentleman's Magazine* at a time when parliamentary reporting was forbidden.<sup>18</sup> However, Guthrie was also the author of *A General History of England from the Invasion of Julius Caesar to the Revolution of 1688* and, as appears evident from the review itself, he was enraged that Walpole had not mentioned him among the "modern historians" who had treated his subject.<sup>19</sup> Thus, it seems reasonable to surmise that personal resentment and political bias mixed in Guthrie's harsh critique of Walpole's vindication of King Richard III.

In the first decades of the nineteenth century, as in the second half of the eighteenth, the "personal" and the theatrical success of King Richard went together, and several, sometimes clashing, kinds of discourse centered around this denigrated monarch. Walpole was not left alone in advocating for the rehabilitation of this sovereign's reputation. Chapter 2 shows how redeeming Richard III's wronged memory could appeal to progressive minds, like Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley's, who took a deep interest in the subject and, in *The Fortunes of Perkin Warbeck. A Romance*, offered a highly revisionist and counterhistorical version of the story from which Richard III emerged in a completely different light. Her father, the radical philosopher William Godwin, was also unusually encouraging, helpful, and appreciative. However, the benevolent attitude towards the historical Richard that started to catch on after Walpole's defense did not sort with Richard's portrayal on the stage, because, as

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<sup>17</sup> "Letter 338 To Mr. Gray. Arlington Street, Friday night, Feb. 26, 1768," *The Letters of Horace Walpole, Earl of Orford: Including Numerous Letters Now First Published from the Original Manuscripts. In Four Volumes*, vol. 3, 1759–1769 (Philadelphia: Lea & Blanchard, 1842), 512.

<sup>18</sup> These satirical reports, in which the names of politicians were derisively scrambled (Sir Robert Walpole became Walelop), appeared from June 1738 with the title of *Debates of the Senate of Magna Lilliputia*; they were revised by Samuel Johnson, who from 1740 began to write them himself. See Samuel Johnson, *Debates in Parliament. In Two Volumes* (London: John Stockdale, 1787).

<sup>19</sup> Guthrie's *General History from the Invasion of Julius Caesar to the Revolution of 1688* had been published in four volumes in the years 1744–51. In his *Historic Doubts*, Walpole had asserted that Rapin and Carte were the "only two who seem[ed] not to have swallowed implicitly all the vulgar tales propagated by the Lancastrians to blacken the house of York," Horace Walpole, *Historic Doubts on the Life and Reign of King Richard III* in *Richard III. The Great Debate*, ed. Paul Murray Kendall (New York: W. W. Norton, 1965), 161. In his (anonymous) review, Guthrie retorted: "had [Walpole] given himself very little trouble, he might have seen that Mr. Carte borrowed from Mr. Guthrie all the doubts and scruples which he affected as to Richard's history," William Guthrie, "Walpole's Historic Doubts on the Life of Richard III," *The Critical Review: or, Annals of Literature* 25 (February 1768), 117.

Chapter 3 argues, the leading actors of the period strove to emphasize his villainy and offered a Richard that was very different from Garrick's splenetic creation. As Charles Lamb complained, George Frederick Cooke presented "the *monster Richard*," while Kean's Richard appeared almost superhuman (or demonic) with his unfaltering and defiant energy. Such devilish and sinisterly attractive stage portrayals of Richard paradoxically provoked in the spectators a desire to rehabilitate the historical Richard, as the exculpations that accompanied the reviews of theatrical performances show.

Walpole was only the first of those for whom "Richard" was a topic of deep interest in the long Romantic period. The "sentimental" critics followed. Their views on Richard are discussed in Chapter 4, where we see how their attempts to play down Richard's boisterous malignity and make him an object of pity—like Garrick had done on the stage just a few years before—were superseded by dramatic criticism that revealed in Richard's unruly and transgressive individuality. Eighteenth-century Shakespearean criticism peculiarly tended to moralize the study of character—that is, to use Shakespeare's characters as illustrations of moral principles that the reader should follow. Of course, such an operation was not easy when a champion of villainy like Richard III was concerned, and this was often a cause of frustration to critics and could give rise to inconsistencies. In time, the attempt to find some sparks of goodness in the character was abandoned altogether, and, as we see in Chapter 5, the ground for Richard's appreciation (or detestation) became his unbridled energy alone. It was precisely in this period—the dawn of the nineteenth century—that the theatrical association between Richard III and actors who were thought to be similarly transgressive and morally reprobate was formed. Actually, the Regency era—an epoch of extraordinary political turmoil and social transition—was the period in which "scandalous celebrity" took center stage.<sup>20</sup> Not surprisingly, the Romantic period's major interpreters of Richard III—George Frederick Cooke, Edmund Kean, and Junius Brutus Booth—were very different from the gentlemanly Garrick, his chief eighteenth-century interpreter. The fact that the elegant and aristocratic-looking John Philip Kemble was deemed unfit for the role is revealing with regard to the conception of the character that was prevalent at the time.

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<sup>20</sup> Clara Tuite has defined "scandalous celebrity" as "a new form of ambivalent fame that mediates between notoriety and traditional forms of heroic renown," *Lord Byron and Scandalous Celebrity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), iv.

Part II, which focuses on the “textual” *Richard III*, concludes with a chapter (Chapter 6) that examines two adaptations of the play that were produced in 1820 (Thomas Bridgman’s) and in 1821 (Macready/Swift’s text) and that were born of a growing dissatisfaction with Colley Cibber’s version of the play, which had been composed at the end of 1699 and held the stage quite undisturbed for almost two hundred years. Both adaptations, however, in their spurious form and in their failure to gain or hold the stage, fell short of the ambitious goals their authors declared in the prefaces. Indeed, the two plays do not appear to have offered a viable alternative to Cibber, whether in terms of fidelity to the Shakespearean “original” or of the need that was always felt to make the Bard “our contemporary.” The early nineteenth century was an age of virtuoso performance, and the star actor was the unquestioned sovereign of the theater. The persistence of Cibber’s revision in the period can be related to the fact that, at a time when the actor was acknowledged as a creator in his own right,<sup>21</sup> the actual script was, to some degree, marginalized, and the player, with his so-called points and “new readings,”<sup>22</sup> created his own performance text and, quite autonomously, managed to make it fit to his age. If the theatrical adaptations produced in the Romantic period were little more than abortive attempts, it was the actors themselves who succeeded in adapting the play to the “spirit of the age.” The fact that they acted in Cibber’s version did not seem to represent an obstacle, and they made the play resonate regardless of its fidelity to an “original.”

Central to the present study is also the peculiar and varied hybridity of the Romantic period *King Richard III*, which was a counterpart to the composite nature of theater at the time. In this study, the term “hybrid” is intended, in a general, figurative sense, as “anything derived from heterogeneous sources, or composed of different or incongruous elements.”<sup>23</sup> As Homi Bhabha has written, “the hybrid” is a concept “that has established its salience in a wide range of discourses relevant to the aesthetics of cultural difference and the politics of minorities.”<sup>24</sup> The importance of the notion of

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<sup>21</sup> See Timothy Webb, “The Romantic Poet and the Stage: A Short, Sad History” in *The Romantic Theatre: An International Symposium*, ed. Richard Allen Cave (Totowa, NJ: Barnes & Noble, 1986), 37.

<sup>22</sup> The phrase “new readings” was coined in those years to refer to an actor’s innovative stage rendition of a particular moment in a play.

<sup>23</sup> “Hybrid,” A.2.a *The Oxford English Dictionary (OED)*, 2nd ed., ed. John Simpson and Edmund Weiner (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989).

<sup>24</sup> Homi K. Bhabha, “Foreword” in *Debating Cultural Hybridity: Multi-Cultural Identities and the Politics of Anti-Racism*, 2nd ed., ed. Pnina Werbner and Tariq Modood (London: Zed Books, 2015), ix. Bhabha is the author of *The Location of Culture* and is often considered “the father” of hybrid theory.

hybridity when studying the dynamics between elite and popular culture in the early modern period and in the Romantic era is self-evident and can scarcely be overestimated.<sup>25</sup> Jeffrey Cox and Michael Gamer note that the Romantic stage was a “meeting place—of high and low, legitimate and illegitimate, past and present, elite and popular.”<sup>26</sup> Such a hybridity wonderfully mirrors the multifarious mongrelness of the object of this study, i.e. the hybridity that is the common denominator of Shakespeare’s Richard, of *King Richard III* as it was performed at the time, and of the major actors who played the role: George Frederick Cooke and Edmund Kean. All this is examined in Part III. Hybridity, too, appears to be far from being ideologically neutral, since the transgressive merging of highbrow and lowbrow forms in the contemporary cultural, literary and, above all, theatrical landscape was considered socially destabilizing and politically dangerous by conservative observers. Critics and reviewers, for instance, were much concerned about the “jumbling” of traditional genres, as the assessment the pro-Tory *True Briton* published of *Every One Has His Fault* reveals: “We are at a loss what to term this new species of composition; ‘tis neither Comedy, nor Tragy-Comedy, but something anomalous in which the two are jumbled together.”<sup>27</sup> In the attacks on generic jumbles—one of the many forms theatrical hybridity could assume at the time—aesthetic and political reservations combined, as Cox and Gamer again point out: “acts of innovative ‘jumbling,’ whether of social or generic categories, always carry with them political, and often radical, significance.”<sup>28</sup> As we have already noticed, British literary culture was highly politicized in the early nineteenth century, and political and literary (or, even more, theatrical) concerns were inescapably intertwined: dramatic or theatrical jumbling was evocative of social jumbling for Tory reviewers.

Although hybridity only becomes the center of interest in Part III, it nonetheless runs like a leitmotif throughout the entire study. In fact, as far as *generic* hybridity is concerned, the last decades of the eighteenth century witnessed a contamination

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<sup>25</sup> The concept of “cultural hybridity” has been widely used in critical and theoretical discourses about race, (post)colonialism, multicultural identity, cultural imperialism and globalization, which emerged in the early 1990s (with the works of Homi Bhabha, Néstor García Canclini, Stuart Hall, Gayatri Spivak and Paul Gilroy) and were afterwards criticized (by Amar Acheraiou in *Questioning Hybridity, Postcolonialism and Globalization*, for instance). However, insofar as these discourses are primarily concerned with contemporaneity and deal with different sets of problems, they are only partly relevant to this study.

<sup>26</sup> Jeffrey N. Cox and Michael Gamer, eds., *The Broadview Anthology of Romantic Drama* (Peterborough, ON: Broadview Press, 2003), xxiv.

<sup>27</sup> *True Briton*, January 30, 1793, 2. *Every One Has His Fault* is a 1793 play by the Jacobin sympathizer Elizabeth Inchbald.

<sup>28</sup> Cox and Gamer, *Broadview Anthology of Romantic Drama*, xxiii.

between history and fiction, a phenomenon that is discussed in Chapter 1 and that was to give rise to what has been defined as the “most important generic innovation of Romantic-era fiction”:<sup>29</sup> the historical novel. One of the precursor writers of this new genre, Horace Walpole, in the “Preface” to the second edition of *The Castle of Otranto* (1765), in defending his creation from the accusations of having mixed styles and modes, made recourse, again, to the concept of hybridity with reference to Shakespeare’s plays. Of such a hybridity *King Richard III*, as we see in Chapter 7, is a perfect example. On generic contamination, Walpole asserted:

The great master of nature, Shakespeare, was the model I copied. Let me ask if his tragedies of Hamlet and Julius Caesar would not lose a considerable share of their spirit and wonderful beauties, if the humour of the gravediggers, the fooleries of Polonius, and the clumsy jests of the Roman citizens were omitted, or vested in heroics? Is not the eloquence of Antony, the nobler and affectedly-unaffected oration of Brutus, artificially exalted by the rude bursts of nature from the mouths of their auditors? These touches remind one of the Grecian sculptor, who to convey the idea of a Colossus within the dimensions of a seal, inserted a little boy measuring his thumb.<sup>30</sup>

Walpole’s celebration and defense of Shakespeare’s hybridity—and, even more, the attack on Voltaire that the author gratuitously coupled with it—was precisely what caused the French philosopher’s resentment and prompted him to find a pretext to get in touch with Walpole and enter into a controversy with him. By some strange coincidence, this pretext was the apparently deferential and appreciative request for a copy of the *Historic Doubts on the Life and Reign of King Richard the Third* (see Chapter 1).

As mentioned previously, the Shakespearean Richard III is a hybrid character, because he synthesizes elements pertaining to different domains and different traditions. Such a hybridity is explored in Chapter 7, where it is connected to Richard’s popular traits and allegorical ancestry. Evidence of the character’s liminality can be found in his “monstrously grotesque” figure and in his self-avowed affinity with the Tudor Vice.

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<sup>29</sup> Anne H. Stevens, “Tales of Other Times: A Survey of British Historical Fiction, 1770–1812,” *Cardiff Corvey: Reading the Romantic Text* 7 (December 2001): 1, [https://digitalscholarship.unlv.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1022&context=english\\_fac\\_articles](https://digitalscholarship.unlv.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1022&context=english_fac_articles).

<sup>30</sup> Horace Walpole, “Preface to the Second Edition,” *The Castle of Otranto. A Gothic Story*, 3rd ed. (London: John Murray, 1769), xvi–xvii.

Furthermore, it is argued that the play, as it was performed in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, was equally a hybrid creation, since Cibber had heavily revised Shakespeare's text and had filled the vacuum created by the illegibility of the Vice figure for contemporary audiences with sensationalism. In its altered form, *King Richard III* was highly successful from a theatrical point of view. That was because Cibber's version, which was designed to feed its compiler's vanity, was perfect for a star-actor. Obviously enough, the extraordinary expansion of the central role that is found in the adapter's text made it a favorite with actors and decreed its unparalleled success not only at Garrick's time, but also in a period like that of "Romanticism," one in which the theater *was* the actor and authorship was subordinated to acting.<sup>31</sup>

Hybrid theatrical portrayals of Richard are examined, then, in Chapters 8 and 9, which focus on the illegitimate elements that characterized the performances of George Frederick Cooke and Edmund Kean, the two most acclaimed Richards of those years. The two actors, at a personal and professional level, perfectly reflected the hybrid nature of the Romantic stage and the latent illegitimacy of the theatrical Shakespeare at the time. Chapter 8 explores the association of Cooke with melodrama, a mode that already featured in Shakespeare's play and, still more, in Cibber's adaptation; whereas, in Chapter 9, Kean is not only connected to melodrama, but also to pantomime. In both cases, the political implications of illegitimacy, which conservative observers perceived as a threat to social stability, are highlighted. Kean's extreme acting style was read as *political* extremism by admirers and detractors alike. Contemporaries were well aware that Kean was translating Shakespeare into the illegitimate language of melodrama and pantomime and, if audiences were electrified by Kean's heightened emotionalism and frantic action, conservatives were frightened by the irruption of illegitimate conventions into the theatrical shrine of legitimacy: Drury Lane.<sup>32</sup> Kean's performances revealed a plebeian Shakespeare that thrilled radical critics like William Hazlitt and Thomas Barnes, but greatly disturbed Tory reviewers. Nor could Kean's public accept his defiantly scandalous conduct, and the ostracism that he was made to suffer plunged him more and more into pantomime.

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<sup>31</sup> See Webb, "The Romantic Poet and the Stage," 37–38.

<sup>32</sup> The Theatre Royal Drury Lane was defined as "a shrine for Shakespeare" in the "Prologue" that was written by Lord Byron and read by the actor Robert Elliston on October 10, 1812, on the occasion of the re-opening of the theater after it had been destroyed by fire in 1809.

To conclude this brief survey, hybridity, especially in its ideological guise, can indeed be considered as the common denominator of the various issues that will be discussed in the following chapters.