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Shakespeare Birthplace Trust Blogs
1 August 2017

Blog Post 1: *King John* in Print and Performance

As one of this year's recipients of the Sir Stanley Wells Shakespeare Studentship, I have been exploring the archives of the Shakespeare Birthplace Trust in support of my ongoing research for a PhD thesis chapter on the political aspects of William Shakespeare's *King John*.

This play does not appear in print before its inclusion in the Shakespeare First Folio of 1623 (where it begins the category of "Histories"), but it went on to have a robust afterlife both in print and on the stage, particularly during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Shortly after its first documented performance at Drury Lane in 1737, Colley Cibber adapted the play as *Papal Tyranny* in 1745, which took the occasion of the recent Jacobite Rebellion as an opportunity to draw out the more explicitly nationalist dimensions of the figure of John as a righteous English king rebelling against encroaching international enemies.

Beginning in the early nineteenth century, by contrast, productions of the play tended to strive for a more historically accurate representation of John's medieval world. A collection of 44 playbills from the Trust's archive, dating from 1795 to 1859, illuminate this broader shift in interpretations of the play. Over the course of Philip Kemble and William Charles Macready's long runs in the starring role of King John, the play was increasingly paired with other texts on epic or historical subjects, including John Dryden's *King Arthur; or, the British Worthy* and a pantomime titled *Alexander the Great; or, the Conquest of Persia* (accompanied by a note that "*the Scenes, Machinery, Dresses, and Decorations are entirely new*"). Moreover, the extant playbills for *King John* contain named cast lists even for what modern readers might consider minor characters, such as the "citizens of Angiers," suggesting a growing focus on staging large groups in an attempt to portray these historical scenes in an ostensibly authentic manner.

In addition to these later adaptations of Shakespeare's own text, the seventeenth century witnessed a number of other engagements with *King John* and the legends surrounding him, such as his supposed association with the quasi-historical figure of Robin Hood. Among the Trust's holdings is an annotated copy of the 1662 second edition of Robert Davenport's play *King John and Matilda*, which itself borrows from an earlier set of plays published during Shakespeare's lifetime: Anthony Munday and Henry Chettle's *The Downfall of Robert Earl of Huntington* and *The Death of Robert Earl of Huntington* (both 1601).

Davenport's play likely dates from the late 1620s, but it was first printed in 1655 with a list of *dramatis personae* which names the actors who had performed the play before Parliament's closure of the theatres in 1642: a valuable resource both for seventeenth-century playbook buyers and for modern scholars interested in the history of the English stage. In contrast, the 1662 edition, printed after the Restoration and the reopening of the theatres, attributes the play to the significantly better-known playwright William Davenant, perhaps (aside from the similar surnames) because he had become a major figure of dramatic production during the theatres' official closure, and continued to enjoy favor with the new king. The frontispiece of the Trust's 1662 copy has also exchanged the list of actors from the 1655 edition for a list of characters divided neatly into "the King's party" and "the Barons party"—a paradigm that would

have had particular relevance for a country still attempting to mend the rifts between King and Parliament.

In his preface to the 1655 first edition, Davenport had announced that “The *Author* of this, had no mind to be a man in Print,” though “he hopes the knowing Reader will rather Crown it by his Candor, then kill it in the Cradle” (A4r). Far from being neglected by readers, however, adaptations like this one help to demonstrate the longstanding (and still ongoing) fascination with the figure of King John through the centuries.

Sources Cited:

Davenant, William [i.e., Robert Davenport], *King John and Matilda* (London: Richard Gammon, 1662).

Davenport, Robert, *King John and Matilda* (London: Andrew Pennycook, 1655).

Munday, Anthony, and Henry Chettle, *The Downfall of Robert Earl of Huntington* (London: William Leake, 1601).

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Blog Post 2: *Coriolanus* at the Royal Shakespeare Company

The 2017 season of the Royal Shakespeare Company has been collectively titled “ROME MMXVII,” with promotional materials posted across Stratford-upon-Avon boldly proclaiming that “all roads lead to Rome”. Indeed, even productions of non-Shakespearean works like Phil Porter’s *Vice Versa*, Robert Harris’ “Cicero trilogy,” and Oscar Wilde’s *Salome* explicitly call attention to their connections to the Roman world. In this environment, lines such as Herod’s repeated references to the power of Caesar in *Salome* draw heightened force from audience members’ awareness of concurrent performances of *Titus Andronicus*, *Julius Caesar*, and *Antony and Cleopatra* taking place in the adjacent Royal Shakespeare Theatre.

One area of my current research focuses on Shakespeare’s *Coriolanus*, and while my Studentship will unfortunately have come to an end before that play debuts on 15 September, the Trust’s archives offer ample opportunities to consider the RSC’s prior engagements both with this play and with the complex significance of Rome and *Romanitas* more generally. Since the late nineteenth century, the RSC has staged *Coriolanus* with some regularity (though with a notable lacuna during the 1980s). But one of the most interesting recent productions is that directed by John Barton in 1967, for which the Trust holds a wide range of archival documents.

Arriving on the heels of the influential 1965 London production of Bertolt Brecht’s version of *Coriolanus* by the Berliner Ensemble, Barton’s revival borrowed significant elements of that performance’s stripped-down aesthetic while also minimizing or evading some of the political emphasis on class conflict and military authoritarianism that Brecht characteristically sought to underscore. The Shakespeare scholar John Ripley, in his *Coriolanus on Stage in England and America, 1609-1994*, argues that Barton’s production relied not on “textual manipulation” but rather on “stagecraft and actorial ingenuity” (314-15) in order to achieve its

aims, but a closer look at the altered playtext used as the basis for the script reveals how even subtle textual changes can support a markedly different interpretation of the work.

In the play's first scene, a group of famished Roman citizens confronts the patrician Menenius, who attempts to talk them out of their stated goal of demanding corn "at [their] own price" (1.1.9-10)—and of killing the soldier Martius (later known as Coriolanus), who they claim is their inveterate enemy. The RSC script displays a number of minor cuts in Menenius' speeches in this scene, including his insult of one citizen as a "rascal" and his comment that the plebeians should "make you ready your stiff bats and clubs" (1.1.160) as Martius enters to oppose them. The cumulative effect of such changes is to depict the citizens not as a fearsome mob or ragtag army, but rather as a group of genuinely starving petitioners; this interpretation is reinforced by production notes for the scene's props and staging, which observe that most of them should carry not the weapons mentioned by Menenius but rather shallow "panniers" with bread crusts and scattered ears of corn.

Another annotated staging photograph wryly describes this scene's general atmosphere as "Covent Garden at dawn," emblemized by "broken boxes" and "cabbage leaves" strewn across the stage. And this attempt to connect the play to audiences' modern-day experiences (in a production that otherwise conformed to period dress conventions) may suggest the pervasive influence of Brecht's effort to highlight the play's relevance to contemporary political and economic tensions. At a moment when the RSC's 2017 production of the Roman plays (particularly *Titus Andronicus*) are engaging with issues of state violence, austerity, and celebrity, returning to the company's archives provides a unique perspective on this longer history of politicized Shakespeare.

Sources:

Ripley, John. *Coriolanus on Stage in England and America, 1609-1994* (London: Associated University Presses, 1998).

Shakespeare, William. *Coriolanus*, ed. Peter Holland (London: Arden Shakespeare, 2013).