

Shakespeare's Other Eden

Richard II by Ouroboros Theatre Company (2013)

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Abstract Among Shakespeare's history plays, *Richard II* is the least known and performed in Ireland. For a long time, the overthrow and murder of the anointed king was shown to English audiences with the interesting omission of the deposition scene (also known as the 'Parliament scene', IV, 1, 151-318), while in Ireland the play was taken for a long time to be a tragic reminder of the Island's colonial past. It is possibly for this reason that there has been a significant lack of professional productions of *Richard II* in Ireland, and equally there has been a significant lack of critical attention to its fate on the Irish stage. In recent years, however, some attempts have been made to re-appropriate a canonical text whose plot lends itself to reflections on history and the past. One such instance is a production of Shakespeare's play presented in 2013 by the Dublin-based Ouroboros, a theatre company that is no longer in operation. This study looks at the way in which Ouroboros creatively use the source text to travel across a century of Irish history, relocating the story of King Richard II in Ireland to reflect up-on the making of the country that it is today.

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Keywords Richard II. Shakespeare our contemporary. Irish theatre. Ouroboros. History.

1 Introduction

Shakespeare's *Richard II* (c. 1595) is one of four history plays dramatising a century of profound religio-political changes, during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, and it centres upon an unprecedented episode in English history, namely the deposition of an anointed king.¹ At the time when *Richard II* was written and staged, England was facing yet another political crisis, which posed a threat to the stability of Queen Elisabeth I's reign. The Nine Years War, between 1594 and 1603 confronted the monarch with the prospect of losing control over Ireland, and since the Irish were

¹ The play was entered in the Stationer's Register on 29th August 1597 with the title of *The Tragedie of King Richard the Second*. It is part of Shakespeare's so-called second tetralogy, which includes *Henry IV* (Parts I and II) and *Henry V*. Shakespeare had dedicated another tetralogy to the history of England during the War of the Roses, up to Richard III's reign.

fighting with the help of the Spaniards, there was also a possibility that the Island would become an access point for a Spanish attack to Britain (Murphy 1966, 38-9). The analogy between the plot of Shakespeare's play and the historical context that inspired it was undeniably (and worryingly) real (Alexander 2004; Forker 2002; Dollimore, Sinfield 1994) to the point that Elizabeth I admitted to it herself.² As regards Ireland, the 'Irish war' engaged in by Richard in the play (II, 1, 154-8) seemed to bear a striking resemblance to the turmoil and the ongoing conflict between England and her neighbouring Island³ at a time when Edmund Spenser's hugely influential treatise - *A View of the Present State of Ireland* (1598) - asserted "the right of English planters to remain in Ireland", and gave an account of "how they *should be defended* by the English crown" (Hadfield 2012, 159; emphasis added).⁴ For Spenser, himself a planter, the Irish were a savage people from whom the English needed protection, and who had better been "cleansed or scraped" (Spenser 1840, 507). In his view, military intervention was inevitable, if not desirable, if the safety and stability of the English were to be guaranteed. It is little surprise, therefore, that for modern literary critics and historians a dramatisation of Richard's story at the end of the sixteenth century represented a cautionary tale for the English. For the Irish, *Richard II* was, and remained for a long time, a tragic reminder of England's colonial power and of the inextricable link between the two countries and their histories (Collins 2015).

The legacy of Ireland's colonial past has certainly impacted upon the play's reception in Ireland, and this should not be overlooked when assess-

2 During a visit to the archives in the Tower of London, Elisabeth I saw some papers relating to King Richard's reign and famously commented: "I am Richard II. Know ye not that?" (Albright 1927, 692).

3 Richard II visited Ireland twice in the course of his life. The first time, in 1394-95, resulted in the submission of the Irish chiefs 'by their own will' to the King, who received the title of Lord of Ireland by the princes of Ulster, Thomond, Connacht, Leinster, among others. This was a relatively brief but peaceful visit. Curtis (1927, 54), unlike his second expedition, occurred in June-July 1399 and in less favourable circumstances. The sovereign was cut short by news of Bolingbroke's armed return to England, and it is this venture that inspired Shakespeare's *The Tragedie of King Richard the Second*.

4 The impact of Spenser's tract cannot be overestimated; in fact it contributed to a general understanding that "the establishment and maintenance of colonies was a central element of a responsible government's concern" (Hadfield 2012, 170). Spenser's crucial place in England's colonial propaganda and the views which he contributed to disseminate reflect how, in the words of Renaissance scholar Kevin Sharpe, "the business of government was the act of securing compliance". In Tudor England, this was achieved through "the theatricalisation of regality" whereby monarchs embraced disciplines as diverse as literature, history, material culture and art history in order to enhance their authority and power. Cf. Sharpe (2009). Theatre - Sharpe argues - "was the principal site of meditation on power and the critical interrogation of politics. [...] The vogue for history plays, in particular, evidenced both the success of the Tudors in establishing their dynasty and [...] the nation's anxieties about [Elizabeth's] succession!" (2009, 461).

ing the fortunes and misfortunes of Shakespeare's *Richard II* in the country. A closer look at its performance history shows that little research work has been carried out on the theme, so far,⁵ also confirming the unpopularity of the play and an evident lack of professional productions in Ireland. This is due partly to the thematic and narrative complexity of *Richard II*,⁶ and partly to its portrayal of a past that is at best contested, if not a traumatic one. Between 1951 and 2015, as little as five productions of Shakespeare's tragedy appear to have reached the Irish stage. These include Michael MacLiammoir's *Richard II* at the Gate theatre, Dublin (1951); Mary and Pearse O'Malley's staging for the Lyric Theatre in Belfast (1957), David O'Brien's production for the Dublin Shakespeare Society (1996), Ouroboros' *Richard II* in Dublin and Cork (2013), and Mark O'Rowe's *DruidShakespeare* in Galway (2015).⁷ What follows is dedicated to the experimental version of *Richard II* by the then Dublin-based Ouroboros Theatre Company, produced for the Abbey and for Cork's Everyman theatres.

5 Forker (1998, 1-55) provides a comprehensive account of Shakespeare's critical tradition in England and America but gives no details concerning the Irish context. Elsewhere, the information remains scarce and it is sparsely accessible.

6 This may explain the fact that *Richard II* has lent itself to adaptations and free versions rather than faithful stagings, as Forker suggests. The complexity of the play, it is worth noting, has to do with it being defined as "a tragedie", and that it may well be taken as an experiment at tragedy, along with other Shakespearean tragedies.

7 The script of MacLiammoir's *Richard II* is currently held in the Rare Book & Manuscript Library of the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign; a bill for the show is kept at the Lyen Hall Library in Belfast and it is available online at <http://www.digitaltheatrearchive.com/archives/686> (2017-11-23). Material for Mary and Pearse O'Malley's Belfast production is housed at NUI (National University of Ireland), Galway (URL <http://archives.library.nuigalway.ie/cgi-bin/FramedList.cgi?T4>, 2017-11-23) and it was kindly provided by the archivist, Mr Barry Houhinhan. Details of David O'Brien's production are available from the Dublin Shakespeare Society website; as to Mark O'Rowe's *DruidShakespeare*, information can be found at <http://druid.ie/druidshakespeare/about> (2017-11-23). All relevant materials concerning *Richard II* by Ouroboros Theatre Company (unpublished script, video recording of the performance in Cork, production notes, reviews) were kindly provided by the company's artistic director, Denis Conway. URL <https://vimeo.com/100098427> (2017-09-18) (filmed on 10th May 2013 while on tour). On the performance of Shakespeare's history plays in Ireland, Conway has noted how they "are never done: *Henry IV*, Parts I and II are on the Junior Cert, so they tend to be done the odd time. But *Richard II* is never done [...] *Henry V* is never done, and for obvious reasons, because it's all about the glorification of England, if you read it on only one level. *Henry VI*, Parts I, II, and III, is more of that, and then there's *Richard III*. When Ouroboros did *Richard III*, with me playing Richard, 13 years ago, it was the first time the play had been done professionally in Ireland since 1935. And that's one of Shakespeare's most popular plays. [...] The history plays are - on one reading - about England. But I think, now, that after the peace process, after the Queen's visit, and all of that business, we need to grow up. Shakespeare was an artist. He wasn't an historian" (Killeen 2013).

2 *Richard II* by Ouroboros

The play formed part of the company's investigation of Shakespeare's history plays from *Henry V* to *Richard III*, an attempt at making a claim to Shakespeare in Ireland and "bring [the Bard] to Irish audiences" on the basis that he is 'our' contemporary.⁸ Accordingly, pre- and post-show discussions on both these aspects took place in Dublin and Cork⁹ in an attempt to investigate further Shakespeare's interest for Ireland and the relevance of Shakespearean drama in the Irish cultural context. This approach is aligned with post-colonial reassessments of the Bard's work, and it owes mainly to recent academic research work carried out by eminent Renaissance scholars such as Andrew Hadfield, Richard English, Andrew Murphy, Michael Cronin, and Lisa Hopkins, to name a few,¹⁰ who have argued, rather persuasively, that "since the seventeenth century, Shakespeare has proved an abiding presence in Irish history, politics and culture. [... His] works have served not only as a source of inspiration but also as an agent of frustration for succeeding generations of Irish novelists, poets, playwrights" (Burnett, Wray 1997, 1). A thorough survey of "the vexed but integral place of Shakespeare in the Irish imagination" (1) is beyond our scope here, but it ought to be said how such a notion has been endorsed also beyond academic circles; it certainly has by theatre practitioners at Ouroboros. For Denis Conway, the company's artistic director, and for Michael Barker-Caven, the director of Cork's Everyman until 2014, Shakespeare is definitely 'our contemporary' in the sense that he is *Ireland's* contemporary as well as being the author of timeless and universal tales, whose themes and tropes speak *to* the present and *of* the present. A brief look at the contents of Shakespeare's *Richard II* may be useful before looking further into these aspects and into Ouroboros' new version.

8 The concept owes largely to Jan Kott's groundbreaking study of that title (1967).

9 A pre-discussion show entitled *Do We Need to Make Shakespeare Relevant?* took place at the Abbey Theatre on 25th April 2013; at Cork's Everyman Theatre a similar event entitled *Shakespeare in Ireland* took place on 8th May 2013, followed by a workshop by professional actors with director Barker-Caven (2013, 8).

10 Cf. Burnett, Wray (1997), especially the introductory chapter, chapter 3, chapter 6 by Richard English "Shakespeare and the Definition of the Irish Nation" (136-51) and chapter 11 by Michael Cronin "Rug-headed Kerns Speaking Tongues: Shakespeare, Translation and the Irish Language" (193-212). See also individual studies by Hadfield (2003, 2012), Murphy (1999), Murphy (1996, 38-59).

3 *Richard II* by W. Shakespeare¹¹

Richard II recounts the story of the eponymous sovereign who is dethroned by his cousin Bolingbroke, the Duke of Lancaster, sent to prison, and killed in cold blood. A king by divine right, Richard II was betrayed by many courtiers and, more crucially, he proved to be unfit for his role.¹² This contributed to “the shame of England” poignantly denounced in the play by Richard’s uncle, John of Gaunt, before he dies (II, 1, 40-68). A fitting metaphor for the fading medieval value system, the old man’s death marks the collapse of that ancient order with its catastrophic consequences, also echoing the then current belief that bad government and the usurpation of Richard’s throne were a denial of God’s will. Richard’s inability to rule and Bolingbroke’s usurpation are considered to be a heresy, an original sin that needs purging before a new king can sit on England’s throne (V, 6, 49-52).

In dramatising those historical events and that phase of transition in English history Shakespeare focused on such aspects, placing significant attention to the questions of power and of the monarch’s entitlement to the crown.¹³ In his play, the view that a sovereign’s (moral) state impacts on the health of the State is reiterated throughout to the point that the *tragedie* of Richard II, as the original title has it, becomes also England’s *tragedie*. The country is depicted as a place in need of healing and redemption whose head seeks a cure for a land that is corrupted (I, 1, 154-7) while he actually contributes to its malaise. The pursuit of redemptive freedom serves the double purpose of restoring peace to England as well as enabling the transition from the still dominating archaic order to modernity, namely to Tudor England. These questions, and the conviction that man can be the maker of his own destiny are articulated by way of a Biblical reference, where a gardener instructs his aid to “bind [... the] dangling apricots, | which like unruly children make their sire | stoop with oppres-

11 All quotations from the play are taken from the Arden edition of Shakespeare’s *Richard II* (Forker 2002) and are cited into brackets within the text.

12 Richard became King of England at the age of ten, following the death of his father. It was decided that he would rule the country in spite of his age, and his inexperience inevitably led to a number of mistakes. His uncle Gloucester, the eldest brother to Richard’s dead father, was the chief of the Lord Appellants, a group that wanted to rid Richard’s court of perilous and corrupt men. They launched accusations against the sovereign, somehow humiliating him, so that years later, having gained power, Richard exacted revenge on those men, causing Gloucester’s death.

13 Shakespeare drew upon a number of narrative and dramatic sources including Edward Hall’s *The Union of the Two Noble and Illustre Families of Lancastre and York* (1548), Raphael Holinshed’s *Chronicles of England, Scotland and Ireland* (1587), Samuel Daniel’s poem *The First Fowre Books of the Civile Wars* (1594), as well as dramas which Shakespeare saw in performance, most notably the anonymous *Woodstock* (c. 1592) and Marlowe’s *Edward II* (c. 1592). Cf. Bullough (1960, 356-8), Payne (2014, 14-15).

sion of their prodigal weight” so that the “bearing boughs may live” (III, 4, 29-66). What the gardener refers (and alerts the audience) to is the need to re-gain control and restore harmony for the State (represented metaphorically by the Garden), claiming that this should be done promptly since “the whole land | is [*already*] full of weeds” (III, 4, 43-4). As the gardener knows, however, it is too late; in fact *had* the king taken care of his Garden (England) with equal care, he *would* “himself [*have*] born the crown” (III, 4, 61-5, emphases added). The scene is a powerful allegory of the “already depressed and deposed” Richard, an anticipation of events that are yet to unfold and which are thus made public. Hidden “into the shadow”, the Queen overhears those words, and in dismay she reacts to the “unpleasing news”:

Thou, old Adam’s likeness set to dress this garden,
 How dares thy harsh rude tongue sound this unpleasing news?
 What Eve, what serpent, hath suggested thee
 To make a second fall of cursed man? (III, 4, 72-6)

References to Adam and Eve and to the “second fall of cursed man” are consonant with the play’s distinctive semantics of the garden,¹⁴ also echoing the notion of Richard’s lapsarian state as a repetition of Adam’s fate, thereby suggesting that every man’s destiny is to be cursed and fall out of grace. In the King’s case, the curse and fall are necessary to his self-realisation, in fact they mark the beginning of Richard’s story as a new man, who discovers that he is a human (and not a divine) being.

4 Historical Drama and the Ritual of Theatre

The centrality of Richard’s individual tragedy, and the ensuing cycle of death and rebirth in Shakespeare’s play lie at the heart of Ouroboros’ reading and staging of the text. Their relocation of *Richard II* in the Irish context also revolves around the idea that Richard needs dying as a king before he can be born again as a man, and equally that the old order – the repository of sacred traditions and values – needs dying before a new (secular) order can begin. The past, however, never fully dies, and it never becomes totally past; in fact it keeps returning and forms part of what we are in the present and what we aspire to be in the future. This is crucial to

¹⁴ Shakespeare relies on the biblical imagery which is referred to also in Hall’s *Chronicles*, cit. in Shakespeare (Melchiori 1996, 4). The gardener’s words echo Gaunt’s speech (II, 1, 40-66), and also Bolingbroke’s (II, 3, 166).

historical drama as a genre *tout court*,¹⁵ and it represents a fundamental aspect of theatre as a ritual practice. It is worth noting that the year when Ouroboros staged their *Richard II*, 2013, marked the 100th anniversary of the Dublin Lockout, a massive strike of Dublin's transport workers which paralysed the Irish capital and effectively paved the way towards the events of the Easter week of 1916, namely the Easter Rising and the Proclamation of Irish Independence (*An Poblach*), and later on the birth of the Irish Free State (Foster 1989, 2015). In that context, a retelling of Shakespeare's tale became an opportunity to recount another cautionary tale, that of the Irish nation, from its birth in 1916 up to the present (2013). Holding a mirror up to the (Irish) nation, the Ouroboros version of *Richard II* focused on the connection between that past and the present, and the extent to which one reflects has shaped and still shapes the other. This notion is well established from the start of the play, in the confrontation scene between Mowbray and Bolingbroke. The two convene at Richard's castle "to appeal each other of high treason" (I, 1, 27); in the end the former is sentenced to permanent exile for the murder of Gloucester, whom he has actually killed upon Richard's demand, while the latter receives six years' banishment (I, 3, 247-8). The chain of the ensuing events is presented in such a way as to suggest that Bolingbroke is not a complete "villain miscreant and traitor" after all, while the King may have deserved his fate - following Gaunt's death, Richard plans "his Irish wars" (II, 1, 154), determined to "supplant those rough rug-headed kerns, | which live like venom where no venom else" (II, 1, 154-6). The Irish campaign is costly and unnecessary, and as it turns out it has been (unduly) financed with "the royalties and rights" of Gaunt's heir, the banished Bolingbroke. Richard's mistakes prove to be fatal to him since in his absence Bolingbroke (returned from exile) usurps his throne, and when the legitimate king goes back to England he is deposed. The cause-effect dynamics of the plot in the first act suggest how the fate of one man affects the fate of another one, to the point that the opposing cousins are made to represent "the split halves of a once whole". Richard thus becomes to Bolingbroke what Bolingbroke is to Richard, and vice versa; their *agon* serves to articulate the "duality within man" and to achieve "the compression of opposites into the same compact space [that allows] a third vision to appear, born of the cleansing fire" (Barker-Caven 2013, 7). The Mowbray/Bolingbroke confrontation in Ouroboros' *Richard II* goes a bit further into exposing the sometimes irreparable bearing the past can have upon the present: significantly, in their opening scene the opponents are made to "wear mohair suits" so as to resemble two *Táoiseach Dáil* (Ministers of the Irish Parliament) fighting over financial reports, statistics and incriminating data, a domesticated

15 Lukács [1938] (1969), especially in chapter 2, the section dedicated to historical drama.

modern version of the “gage” thrown down by Shakespeare’s offended Duke of Norfolk (I, 1, 146). This particular scene is exemplary of how, in Conway’s words, “when so few of our writers dare to deal with the slow suffocation of the body politic, a return to Shakespeare [... helps us] make sense of the here and now (2013, 5). And indeed, audiences of Ouroboros’ *Richard II* would easily relate fiction to fact, at times amused, at times perhaps disturbed by the force and resonance of a revealingly familiar tale.

5 The Politics of Translation

Ouroboros’ politics of translation, and the way in which their performance of *Richard II* is set, from page to stage, is aligned throughout with Conway’s ideas above. As regards the script, the artistic director feels no need to modernise the language in the source text, in keeping with the company’s mission of going back, re-connecting and re-discovering the beauty of Shakespeare’s diction, and also because he is confident that Irish audiences are “both familiar and estranged” from the power of this sixteenth-century language “in ways that other audiences are not” (Conway 2013, 5). In fact, people attending the performance could appreciate the original lines from Shakespeare’s verse play while also engaging in a contemporary relocation of *Richard II* in Ireland, among Irish people (this is suggested by the characters’ accents).

Conway relies largely on the first Quarto edition of 1597, to which he adds the deposition scene of the 1623 Folio.¹⁶ Shortening the source text by 465 lines, the Ouroboros director makes a number of alterations which are worthy of note:

1. 11 of the original 37 *dramatis personae* are omitted, including servants, marshals, heralds and other minor characters. Introductory passages such as “Here comes...” (eg. II, 2, 73; II, 3, 82) are also deleted. This is due partly to the use of role double-ups in performance, and partly to the need to simplify and shorten a play that is evidently long.¹⁷
2. Lengthy/dense speeches are often compressed primarily in the interest of the play’s rhythm and tempo.

¹⁶ This is a crucial scene (IV, 1, 154-318), which was censored in England until 1608 (Forker 1998, 69; Payne 2014, 43). The Arden Shakespeare edition of *Richard II* includes the deposition scene (also known as the ‘Parliament scene’).

¹⁷ References to the play in performance relate to the above cited video recording of the show in Cork, available at vimeo.com/67800873. Actors in the Ouroboros’ production play two or three roles, with the only exception of Patrick Moy (Richard II), Frank Mc Cusker (Bolingbroke), Michael Power (Northumberland) and Jane McGrath (the Queen).

3. Allusions to England are deleted in most cases along with other geographical references (especially France, V, 1, 22; V, 3, 110-11) as are the most patriotic, colonial/imperialist dialogues (eg: Mowbray's "My native English" speech in I,3,159-66, Bolingbroke's exile speech in III, 1, 306-9; Gaunt's lines in II, 1, 53-7 in which he mentions the "royal kings [...] renowned for their deeds [...] for Christian service and true chivalry").
4. More references to England are deleted, such as, for instance, Bolingbroke's words "Or here, or elsewhere to the furthest verge | that was ever survey'd by English eye" (I, 1, 93-4); there is no mention of the patron saint, "St George" (I, 3, 84); and no allusion to Richard as "Landlord of England" (II, 1, 113). These omissions serve the purpose of facilitating a rethinking of the story as disengaged from site and time specific referents - England in 1399 - while arguing that *this* Richard belongs to Ireland because his story is the story of a wronged man, who suffers a sacrilegious act that violates his human and civil rights. The contemporary stage rendition of the prison cell monologue (V, 5, 12-66) is a fine example of poetic license of a political adaptation that recasts Richard as a hunger striker during the so-called "dirty protest" in the Belfast Maze Prison/Long Kesh in 1978.¹⁸

Ouroboros' appropriation of Shakespeare's text thus lays a claim to the inextricable link between Irish and English history, but it also seeks to deepen our reflection on the significance and value of freedom, and of what Barker-Caven terms the "cosmic consequences" of human words and actions, to suggest that the past may not always be contingent (2013, 7). In II, 3 (set in Bolingbroke's camp), the now Duke of Lancaster appears on stage wearing unequivocal attire which conflates his classical role of the usurper to the image of Michael Collins, a 'rebel' in the Easter Rising of 1916, a protagonist of Irish politics at that turbulent time, who was involved in negotiations for the partition of Ireland and was killed in an ambush because considered to be a traitor (fig. 1). Bolingbroke is recast as an unscrupulous man, a true savage against whom Richard's vulnerability is easily exposed - and so the dethroned king becomes both a victim and a rebel in turn, like the hunger strikers in Belfast would, in their turn, have become years later in their protest against British Rule. For Ouroboros, this Richard "has never been freer", in spite of him being locked in a jail, "whilst the ideals of Pearce and Collins have been hijacked and imprisoned into a 'power of state' mentality and become as bad as those they sought to replace" (Barker-Caven 2015).

¹⁸ Significantly, during the performance this moment is introduced by the 1983 U2 song *Bloody Sunday*. On the stage, Richard, who is seen in his prison cell, holds a bucket and dirties the walls, before he sits and pronounces the monologue at V, 5, 12-66.



Figure 1. Bolingbroke recast as Michael Collins, usurper of Richard II's crown. (©Monika Chmielarz, URL https://www.abbeytheatre.ie/whats_on/event/richard-ii/)

5.1 Ritual and History

A re-thinking of (Irish) history in these terms reflects a vision of time that is not linear but rather cyclical, a concept inscribed in the name of the company itself and symbolised by the image of the mythological serpent eating or biting its tail (*the Ouroboros*). History requires a constant re-telling if new meanings of it are to be disclosed in the present. One way in which this can be attained is by dislocating historical figures from their context and relocating them into a time that is different and eternal. Tellingly, in the *Ouroboros* script most allusions to divination, to the future and the past are avoided, and most references to lineage and parentage are omitted.¹⁹ Thus, for instance, Gaunt does not mention his “brother Edward’s son”, or his “brother Gloucester” (II, 1, 125-31); York does not say that he is “the last of | noble Edward’s sons, of whom thy father [...] was first” (II, 1, 171-83), Northumberland’s speech (II, 1, 279-85) is de-

¹⁹ This is the case, for instance, with Bishop Carlisle’s prophesy that “the blood of English shall manure the ground | and future ages groan for this foul act | [...] and, in this seat of peace, tumultuous wars | shall kin with kin, and kind with kind confound” (IV, 1, 136-41).

leted, and there is no mention to his offspring, Percy, nor to Bolingbroke's "unthrifty son" (V, 3, 1-23). By breaking lines of descent and questioning the validity of the father-son succession, the play's attention is effectively made to focus on the present moment and on the immediate fate of its protagonists. Disengaged from both blood and history ties, characters in Ouroboros' *Richard II* become the bearers of universal messages and of a superior wisdom in a way that recalls the place of heroes in classical tragedy and also the place that Shakespeare notably gives to 'marginal' yet crucial characters in his plays.²⁰

It is not accidental that the Ouroboros performance begins and ends with propitiatory rites. Like a *parodos* from a Greek play, the opening rituals involve a small tree, which is set on a table, at the centre of the stage. A woman (who will turn out to be Queen Isabella) enters on the almost empty stage and performs a ritual in front of a flowering tree of life. A second (cleansing) rite follows, performed by a small crowd standing around a covered corpse (the body of dead Gloucester), on the left of the stage. Finally, Richard enters in full regal attire, and symbolically washes his face and hands – like a Pontius Pilate he washes his guilt off over his uncle's death. The lights are lit up at this point, and the play begins (the Mowbray/Bolingbroke confrontation occurs). The same rituals are re-evoked at the end of the play when the same characters gather on stage and Bolingbroke, now King Henry IV, announces that he "will make a voyage to the Holy Land | to wash *this* blood [Richard's blood] off my guilty hand" (IV, 6, 49-50). His "guilty hands" put an end to the play: these are in fact the last words in the Ouroboros script (from which II, 51-2 are omitted), and while the new sovereign mourns Richard's death, the body of the murdered king lies on the floor, just like Gloucester's had at the start of the performance. The tree of life is now a withered tree of death, rooted in a land that has been poisoned with treason and treachery. And under the new regime, Isabella is no longer a free woman. The Queen sees the lifeless body of her husband and lies beside him; like a Virgin Mary by the body of her dead son she mourns by Richard's grave, and clutches to her breast the sole remnant of a once blossoming tree – a flower that symbolises the life she carries within, a king to be born.²¹ The closing of the Ouroboros'

20 To cite some examples, the Fool in *King Lear*, Enobarbus in *Anthony and Cleopatra*, Falstaff in *Henry IV*.

21 The Queen is pivotal in Ouroboros' reworking of the play: she is "the embodiment of lost, traumatised, ancient goddess of wisdom", in Barker-Caven's words. This vision of Isabella owes to "the single fundamental idea" or the "great theme" of Shakespeare's dramaturgy, developed by Ted Hughes in *Shakespeare and the Goddess of Complete Being* (1992). Years earlier, Hughes had described it as "the symbolic fable which nearly all his greatest passages combine to tell, and which each of his plays in some form or other tells over again. This was the way his imagination presented the mystery of himself to himself [...]. This symbolic

performance is an added scene accompanied by the religious tune of the *Alleluia*, a musical choice that further echoes the company's re-thinking of Richard as a martyr. Local tradition and religion merge and conflate with musical emblems of secularism to evoke a haunting sense of inevitable change (and replicate the transition towards modernity in Shakespeare's text).²² The adoption of a rich repertoire of traditional ballads, rock music, film soundtracks and church songs²³ to mark pivotal moments in the play further contributes to its communicative force, possibly making the performance "relentless" in the words of a reviewer, a relentlessness that is all but negative.²⁴

Another significant trait of Ouroboros' cosmic re-envisioning of history is the use of feminine agency. Notably, there are 'only' three women in Shakespeare's *Richard II*, a small number that reflects patriarchal superiority in Elizabethan society without hindering, but rather acknowledging, the power of female interventions in processes of change and renewal. Women act as the guardians of the domestic sphere, protecting it from the menace of corruption; like the gardener in III, 4, 41, they also aim to "keep law and form and due proportion". Shakespeare himself took liberties in shaping the female roles for *Richard II*:²⁵ his widowed Duchess of Gloucester, for instance, manages to influence Gaunt's attitude towards the King (I, 2); the Duchess of York saves her son's life, in spite of her husband's opposition and thus she saves the life of England's only legitimate successor to the throne, after Bolingbroke (V, 3). The third woman in the play, Queen Isabella, obtains Ouroboros' greatest attention and, as noted, she finds a truly central place in their reading of *Richard II*. Recast as a quasi-divine presence, Isabella embodies a magical ancestral organic whole summoning earthly energy to give life at the start of the play and striving to save it at the end. She is the bearer of life and hope; by way of her, and of the

form of his nature [...] appeared to him as a problem, the posing of a chronic sexual dilemma, a highly dramatic and interesting collision of forces". Hughes (1971, 106).

22 "Religious traditions and practices - writes Denis Conway - no longer hold the authority they once did, in Ireland [...]. Today, Shakespeare's plays are our secular Gospels". Conway (2013, 4).

23 Details of the music used in performance are further discussed in Barker-Caven (2015).

24 This brief review refers to the use of music as "fingerwaggingly obtrusive", and considers Barker-Caven's attempt to transmit a number of messages as "an overwhelming mishmash where the audience isn't left any room to breathe or think [...]. As a result, the whole production felt relentless". Cf. "Look Back at Broken Dreams" [online]. *Irish Independent*. URL www.independent.it/lifestyle/look-back-at-broken-dreams-29226593.html (2017-12-01).

25 Isabella was actually aged 11 when Richard was deposed; the Duchess of York, Aumerle's mother, died before Richard's fall, and in the play she is too old to bear more children. Cf. Melchiori (1996, 8).

rituals she performs, this un-silenced feminine voice allows for history to be re-told, and for the past to be performed and renewed in the eyes of its beholders. And, we, the beholders, end up seeing things differently.

Tellingly, the mirror scene in IV, 1, 276-91 is the culmination of the play's quest for self-discovery and self-understanding,²⁶ a metaphor for the ritualistic re-enactment of the past that occurs in history plays. Like Shakespeare, and also like W.B. Yeats, who saw in *Richard II* a model for the kind of theatre that he aspired to,²⁷ Ouborobos conceive of the theatrical medium as a site of transformation. When Richard "dashes the glass against the ground", the cracked looking glass returns an image that is not distorted – the Ireland we see is not a hell "where no venom else" or Spenser's "foul moss [to be] cleansed or scraped away before the tree can bring any good fruit" (1840, 507), but it is an Eden, it is Shakespeare's other Eden.

6 Conclusions

The last statement brings us to another important scene in the play, the moment when Old Gaunt pronounces his eulogy to

This scept'red isle | this earth of majesty, this seat of Mars
 This other Eden [...] This fortress built by Nature for herself
 [...] This happy breed of men, this little world
 (II, 1, 41-9)

England is mentioned only at the end of the monologue, at line 50, and until then the "precious stone in the silver sea" could be any place, any isle. To audiences in Dublin and Cork in 2013, 'this' heavenly island could only have been their Ireland. On the stage, Gaunt and York are recast as Yeats and Joyce (fig. 2), Ireland's bards, whose encounter signifies the encounter of two different yet mutually completing notions of history – a nightmarish vision of the past that repeats itself, endlessly and in cycles, and which needs to be remembered, reassessed, accepted and ultimately forgiven if peace and freedom are to be attained in the present.

²⁶ This is typical of tragedy more than of chronicles or histories, and indeed *Richard II* was conceived to have the textual and narrative features of tragedy. Tellingly, the play was entered in the Royal Stationer as "The Tragedie of King Richard the second". Bullough (1960, 353).

²⁷ Yeats ([1901] 2007, 79-81). Written in 1901, this essay is a precious insight into Shakespeare's characterization of *Richard II* in relation to both *Henry V* and *Hamlet*. The value of Yeats's original and influential interpretation of the play cannot be overstated, and where Ireland is concerned there are strong possibilities that he may have contributed to shaping perceptions of Shakespeare in Ireland. For a reading of Yeats's essay, see Salis (2015, 108-6).

Figure 2. The Duke of York (D. Conway) & John of Gaunt (Des Nealon) recast as Ireland's Bards, Yeats & Joyce. (©Monika Chmielarz, URL https://www.abbeytheatre.ie/whats_on/event/richard-ii/)



Thus set, the epilogue of Shakespeare's tragedy acquires a new significance on the contemporary (Irish) stage, and messages of hope and inclusion are disclosed. On the one hand, Ouroboros' *Richard II* is a time-bound, socially and culturally-situated version of a complex canonical English text that is revisited creatively to travel across a century of Irish history and to reflect upon the making of Ireland as it is today. On the other, this contemporary version of Shakespeare's play is a testimony of the universal appeal of a classic, a communicative event that uses ritual and the ritual of theatre to return to the past and advocate shifts in perspective in the present. When we return to the past, we pose questions that are inevitably "prompted by our present concerns"; we read "documents [that] are open to our values because they offer [...] *textual mediations of experience* which we are to read [...] if we are to *make sense of it*" (Sharpe 2000, 342, emphasis added). To "make sense of the here and now", as noted, is central to Ouroboros' agenda, a process that stems from their conviction that there is no looking at Irish history without also looking at English history. And equally, there is no looking at the present (and at the future) without looking at the past, and vice versa. The coming full circle of the Ouroboros, the symbol and the theatre company bearing that name, is precisely that: it is our understanding that this is so.

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Figure 3.
Mowbray
and Bolingbroke
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Figure 4.
Carlyle and
Bolingbroke
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