



Received: 03 June 2016  
Accepted: 04 August 2016  
Published: 24 October 2016

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#### Humanities Research: Shakespeare and the Public

This article forms part of a collection on “Shakespeare and the Public”, commissioned and supported by the Humanities Research Centre at the Australian National University. This is the first such issue to be published in *Cogent Arts & Humanities*: previous thematic issues of contemporary work in interdisciplinary humanities scholarship have been published in the journal *Humanities Research*, and this connection is preserved in the title of the collection. The Humanities Research Centre brings together scholars from all over the world, housing Visiting Fellows and hosting conferences and symposia to stimulate and publicise new knowledge in all areas of the humanities, creative arts, and social sciences. Each individual issue draws on scholarly activities and events enabled by the Centre.

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## LITERATURE, LINGUISTICS & CRITICISM | RESEARCH ARTICLE

# “Damn him and the spikes”: *Richard III*, riot, and the formation of an Australian colonial theatre public

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**Abstract:** On 26 December 1833, the first licensed theatre in New South Wales offered its first Shakespeare play—Colley Cibber’s adaptation of *Richard III*. The event entailed a riot and the lead actor being charged with assault for hurling an audience member from the stage. Using insights drawn from scholarship on the Covent Garden “Old Price Riots” in 1809, this essay investigates the Sydney Theatre Royal’s 1833 disturbance as an indicative phase in the development of a colonial theatre public. Thirty years after this troubled beginning, majestic theatre venues hosted international stars throughout Australia’s major cities. What constituted this rapid transformation? The press, satire, and travesty were instrumental through their vividly performative negotiation of the contradictions of this British penal colony’s love for Shakespeare. Of this phenomenon, *Richard III*, a drama of disrupted authority and (with *Othello*) the most popular play on the colonial Australian stage, proffers the ideal case study.

**Subjects:** Shakespeare; Theatre; Colonialism; Cultural Studies; Social and Cultural History

**Keywords:** Shakespeare; colonial Australia; theatre; riot; John Meredith; Barry Sullivan; Charles Kean

On 26 December 1833, the first licensed theatre in Sydney offered its first Shakespeare play—Colley Cibber’s adaptation of *Richard III*. Despite some recent successes in staging the popular farces and sensationalist dramas of the Georgian repertoire, this ambitious undertaking prompted a theatrical calamity. For the press, the climax of the entertainment came when John Meredith, the actor playing

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### PUBLIC INTEREST STATEMENT

Has theatre always been a stately entertainment for the rich? How important could Shakespeare possibly be to a penal colony of hard-pressed, homesick settlers and convicts? This essay confronts the contemporary assumption that theatre in Australia is peripheral to the real business of nation. By examining the first riotous performance of a Shakespeare play in a licensed theatre in NSW (1833), it reveals the centrality of the stage and Shakespeare to how settler Australia articulated and debated civic rights in the penal context. It also reveals the colonies’ fractious relationship with the cultural and political authority of Britain. It does this using *Richard III* to tell a story of usurpation, public violence, and comic subversion.

Richard, pushed an intruding audience member off the stage injuring him on the “spikes” that separated the stage from the pit. Meredith was later charged with assault, tried, and ordered to pay damages. If this occasion was the first test of whether a decorous theatrical public could be assembled, the penal colony of New South Wales failed. Public theatre, with its obvious potential for disruption to public order—a potential recognised by its very first opponents in sixteenth-century London—had been banned in Australia until Levey received his license from Governor Bourke in April of 1832 (Irvin, 1971, p. 71). The debacle of its first anniversary celebrations must have realised the public authorities’ worst fears. This essay charts the journey from the Royal’s night of disaster to the thriving industry that theatre became over the following three decades. Press commentary, satire, and travesty took major parts in shaping this trajectory through their negotiation of the cultural and political problematics of a British penal colony’s relationship with Shakespeare. *Richard III*, in the sense that it dramatises disruption to royal authority and in that it was almost unrivalled in popularity in the era, provides the perfect case study of the birth of public theatre in Australia and the new scope it provided for defining and debating the boundaries of British cultural sovereignty.

Before an investigation of the specific kinds of disorder and disruption that characterised Australian colonial theatre, it is fitting to note that riotous behaviour was common to all theatre in the Georgian and Victorian periods. Existing analysis of sociocultural and economic forces at play in theatre riots is very informative for the Australian context. In particular, Marc Baer’s work on the “Old Price” Riots (O.P. Riots) which took place at Covent Garden for 67 nights in 1809 contributes two surprising and relevant insights to the present study. The first is that the riots themselves were extravagantly theatrical; the second is that a symbiotic relationship can be observed between the theatre riot, stability and maintaining of the status quo (Baer, 1992, on theatricality: p. 11, 12; on theatre riot and stability: p. 13). In the case of the O.P. Riots, rioters expressed conservative and nationalistic ideology rather than radical impulses. They advocated not change, but a return to the “old prices” of theatre tickets driven by a sense of popular proprietorship of the theatre. Similar thematic patterns can be seen in the Australian theatrical riot and rivalry which are the subject of this chapter: first, opportunistic theatricality and impromptu use of the theatre for purposes other than plays and, second, a sense of popular ownership of Shakespeare driving revolts against (variously) entrepreneurial innovation and imperial cultural authority.

For the purposes of this argument it is also important to distinguish *public* theatre from other kinds of dramatic entertainment. The Meredith incident took place in the Australian colonies’ first licensed, and therefore public, theatre. Theatrical licensing brings with it a historical freight which informs the relationship between public theatre and public protest. In Shakespeare’s era the metropolitan public playhouse attracted regulatory legislation that differed from anything applied to its provincial forerunners. In 1594 Henry Carey, the lord chamberlain, authorised only two companies to play in London: the Lord Admiral’s Men and the Lord Chamberlain’s Men (White, 2004). As their names suggest, both were sustained by aristocratic patronage and both played command performances at court and at the public theatres. Arguably, it is this arrangement and its legacies into the nineteenth century that informs the spirit of the riots and rivalry here under discussion. A company granted license by the authorities for public performance bears with it an implicit mandate to serve the public. In cases where, as in the O.P. Riots the manager threatened to raise the price of tickets and to create private boxes, the rioters were in fact asserting traditional privileges granted by their ruler (See Baer, 1992, p. 25, 26).<sup>1</sup> It is, therefore, unsurprising that the loud singing of “God Save the King” attended many of their protest activities. The Meredith incident both deviates from and echoes this pattern. On the surface it seems much more like a private business dispute than a public one. However, the press granted this dispute extended play in ways that revealed public investment in its treatment of Shakespeare—an investment as deep and conservative as it was playful in expression. And as succeeding decades reflect, Shakespeare is invoked as a kind of licensing authority in the cultural realm whose mandate, like the early modern monarch’s, sometimes reinforced conservative regulation and, at other times, permitted contained disruptions to cultural authority. *Richard III* as charismatic usurping monarch serves as the perfect emblem for this complex phenomenon.

The imaginative pairing of licensing with a pronounced sense of public ownership attended the opening of Australia's first licensed theatre. The ideological ambitions of the project far exceeded what we would see today as the purpose of "entertainment". Public theatre was seen as an expression of cultural and hence political continuity with Britain; nationalism was bound up with imperialism in what was at this time a popular understanding of what it was to be Australian. Evidence for this is found in the reopening of Sydney's refurbished Theatre Royal on 5 October 1833. The English-born actor Conrad Knowles wrote and performed a 75-line prologue that included these lines:

Advance Australia! And advance, the Stage.  
Let every hand, let every heart engage,  
Let every voice be raised in one loud strain,  
And bid the Drama prosperously reign—  
Let it be told in History's bright page,  
The Drama flourished here in this our age ... (*Theatre Comes to Australia*, 1971, p. 109).

Preceded by enthusiastic singing of "God Save the King", this prologue acts as a halting metrical tribute to early modern verse drama but urges a new era of solidarity where a nation's vision of advancement is best articulated and reflected through theatre. It looks forwards by looking back. Notice how the deictic "here" reveals a consciousness of not being "there" where "The Drama" first flourished. Working in concert with the performance itself, the newspaper *The Australian* reinforced the sense of the public reach of "the Stage", by printing this entire manifesto for its readers (Miscellaneous news—theatricals, 1833, p. 2). Successive months proved that the grand ambitions for unity and public good were not to be realised by the Theatre Royal in any simple sense. What did eventuate was a constitutive forum for a new kind of colonial public. This forum was animated by peculiar forms of class division and competing views of Australian nationhood, was fuelled by and fuelled the public press, and was characterised by rivalry and comic subversion of cultural and political authority. In fact, the particular kind of public consciousness enabled by the relationship between the theatre and the press was instrumental in how Australia came to view itself as an evolving political and cultural entity in the nineteenth century.

To return to the pivotal scene of conflict at the Theatre Royal—the Meredith incident—is to begin with its prologue. Disputes over appropriate pay for actors beleaguered colonial theatre managers such as Barnett Levey who, Eric Irvin, argues paid his actors far more than their English counterparts, despite their lack of professional experience (*Theatre comes to Australia*, 1971, p. 93). On 18 February 1833 one such dispute led to a deadlock between Levey and one of his actors: Buckingham refused to go on without increased pay and Levey dismissed and replaced him (and his disgraced colleague, Mr Mackie) with inexperienced amateurs. After the play, the disaffected actors, Mackie and Buckingham, attempted to plead their case from the stage before being "floored" by the stage manager, one John Meredith. According to the *Sydney Monitor*, "some of the junior portion of the audience laughed heartily at Meredith's prowess, considering this fisticuff scene as *the commencement of the afterpiece*" (Domestic Intelligence, 1833, p. 3). Worth noting in this instance is the actors' willingness to be theatrical—to use the stage to advocate their own position and the encouragement received by the audience for the actors to perform their private conflict in a public manner.

Perhaps the most significant aspect of the dispute for the purposes of this essay, however, is the extent to which it catalysed articulation of beliefs about public ownership of the theatre. This entailed both a belief that it should be accessible to all and a concern that the hybrid class composition of the audience necessitated diligent police regulation. The writer for *The Sydney Monitor* opens his piece by comparing the good manners of two "Ticket men", or emancipated convicts, to those of the actor Mackie who had received his dismissal from the theatre for insulting them. The journalist argues that the manager, Levey, acted with "respect for the public" in dismissing Mackie for "he is bound to protect the public" (Domestic Intelligence, 1833, p. 3). He then goes on to advocate a

stronger police presence at the theatre in general to counter the antics of a particular component of the pit audience called the “flushmen”. These young men, who gained admittance at half-price, “though dressed in decent apparel, flock from Kent Street and other low parts of town to avail themselves of any disturbance in the Theatre to pick pockets and hustle” (*Domestic Intelligence*, 1833, p. 3). Further, the journalist expresses his dissatisfaction at learning that there were four police constables who seemed “to go to the Theatre as listeners, not as servants of the public to keep order” and who, therefore, did not intervene when “two persons were struck down in the pit during the afterpiece by the swell mob”. “The Theatre”, he insists, “is now a public institution, and demands protection at the public expense” (*Domestic Intelligence*, 1833; p. 3). Expressing both the specific hopes and anxieties attendant on the formation of a new theatrical public in a penal New South Wales, this piece is characterised by both conservative and radically egalitarian impulses. In the wake of the dispute a rumour was circulated that Levey had plans to exclude from his stage all but those actors who came as free settlers to the colony. This ignited a new conflagration in the public press in which *The Monitor* switched sides, backing the claim of emancipists to participate in the new public institution. Couched as a warning to Levey, *The Monitor* proclaimed that “a free man is a free man”, and that it would “join the public to the utmost of its power to raise a new [alternative] theatre” if it confirmed that he was excluding actors from the Royal on the basis that they were once convicts (*The Theatre*, 1833, p. 2). Here we see the public theatre offering physical dimensionality and performative play to ideological conundrums particular to early colonial New South Wales.

On the night of John Meredith’s gravest misdemeanours two months later we observe a developing pattern of the theatre operating as live negotiation space for competing views of public decorum and particularly cultural value. To this, Shakespeare was integral. On 26 December 1833 Levey programmed the theatre’s first full Shakespeare play to celebrate its first anniversary. The undertaking was doomed from the outset. Colley Cibber’s *Richard III* was an artefact of Restoration theatre built to accommodate the increasing stature of the actor-manager. Seemingly there was no actor of sufficient talent or celebrity to measure up. Added to this, the Royal was troubled at the time by another internal dispute, this time over casting. An actor, Mr Palmer, left theatre on the morning of the 26th. Irvin speculates that Palmer believed he should have been cast as Gloucester on the strength of his successful performance of the “tent scene” in a benefit performance in June that year. In any case, the lead role went to Meredith instead. The night’s scheduled entertainments included, along with Shakespeare, a pantomime and a “fire balloon” to ascend at the front of the theatre (Irvin, 1971, p. 138). Undoubtedly it was the promise of such a mixed-genre spectacle that drew a large crowd, many of whom had to be turned away at the door. The *Sydney Herald* reports that on the rising of the curtain “there were deafening cries from the gods for Mr Palmer” and that, despite an explanation from lead actor John Meredith that he would not be appearing, an “incessant roaring” persisted throughout the performance (*Domestic Intelligence—Theatricals*, 1833, p. 2). The consequent inaudibility of the performance notwithstanding, reviewers fix a tenacious focus on the quality of the production. The *Sydney Herald* is scathing of Meredith’s effort:

His voice and action are anything but faithful indices to the workings of the soul of “Richard”; but the ghost scene was one of the most unpardonable absurdities ever witnessed. These sepulchral gentlemen had arrived before their time, and on the rising of the scene decamped leaving their cerements behind them. (*The Sydney Herald*, 1833, p. 2)

The same report describes how “between the Acts” some frightened women scrambled out of the pit onto the stage and were escorted out of the building. It was in this melee that, according to court witnesses for the plaintiff called “Nathan”, Meredith pushed him off the stage: Meredith “came out of one of the stage doors, and seizing him [Nathan] by the collar, precipitated him from the front of the stage into the orchestra, his leg catching the iron spikes at the border, and lacerating the part, which bled profusely”. When cautioned by an onlooker to “mind the spikes” and not hurt the man, Meredith reportedly replied “Damn him and the spikes” (*Nathan v. Meredith*, 1834).

The characteristics of this riot offer insight into the formation process of a colonial theatre public and, particularly, its imaginative investment in Shakespeare. Usurpation becomes a leading emblem for what took place on this night on both the theatrical and the metatheatrical planes. Meredith usurped Palmer in the role and then proceeded to extend his royal prerogative beyond the performance of the play through aggressive and histrionic, policing of the stage space. Arguably, Meredith exercised what he felt was an authority granted by Shakespeare and the British theatrical tradition to take back the stage from the audience. It is worth noting the prominence of the architectural feature of the stage “spikes” in the reports of this incident. Spikes were not a feature of the early modern theatre’s theatre-in-the-round arrangement. They are documented as being introduced along the front of boxes during the O P riots in 1809 to limit the mobility of rioting audience members (Baer, 1992). The Cruikshank etchings of these riots also make them a prominent feature of the front of the stage (For example Cruikshank, 1809). Were the spikes a purely pragmatic response to an increased frequency of rioting in the theatre from the restoration onward? Or did this aggressive delineation partake of a longer term pattern of spatially distancing the audience from the action? As such, might the spikes have had a function in concentrating and exacerbating rather than diffusing mutinous sentiments? These questions are yet to be answered in a wider study of the politics of theatre architecture. What is evident here is that by 1833, at Sydney’s new Theatre Royal the “spikes” are an unremarked commonplace except when an audience member is injured by them—not in trying to get onto the stage, but being hurled from it. Meredith’s apparent disregard for the spikes—“Damn him and the spikes”—constitutes a disorderly enforcement of order. It also constitutes a rough antipodean inversion of the O.P. power play; here the real threat to public safety comes from the stage, not from the pit. What did Meredith understand as the source of his authority? Did the role of violent and articulate villain which he had just played license him to behave in such an extravagantly autocratic fashion? We have already scene Meredith in the role of defacto police officer—forcefully removing fellow actors from the stage. In this incident he activates the spikes as a conscious prop in what was to be a fleeting performance of newly-won territorial sovereignty.

Meredith’s reign, whether licensed by Shakespeare or not, was short-lived. His defeat came not from the pit, nor even the law, but from the Tasmanian press. According to Hobart’s *Colonial Times*, Meredith’s chief breach of order was not the one for which he was tried in court but for that perpetrated against *Richard III*. In this we witness another kind of boundary policing catalysed by the public stage and by Shakespeare. A fortnight after the incident in a section headed “New South Wales Intelligence”, the *Colonial Times* printed a piece with the subheading “Court of Taste”:

It having been represented to this Tribunal that one John Meredith did, on Thursday night last on the stage of the Theatre Royal, Sydney, wilfully, wantonly, and with malice aforethought, maltreat and assassinate one Richard, Duke of Gloster. (*Colonial Times*, 1834, p. 7)

In this playful conceit the task of judging the crime committed by Meredith (with the aid of Barnett Levey) required a “spectral” jury. The selection speaks volumes for the imagined location of cultural authority; it includes Hamlet, David Garrick, Edmund Kean and John Philip Kemble—with William Shakespeare subpoenaed to identify of the body or Richard. However, Shakespeare when called upon cannot at first identify the body because it has been too severely mutilated. This is a humorous tilt at Meredith’s mangling of the role. The defence offered by “Counsellor Spare em” is no less damning of Meredith’s skill and experience. He suggests that Meredith and his fellow actors “could hardly be charged with malice inasmuch as their manner of treating the sufferers when they first met, proved that they were after strangers”. Drawing inspiration from legal proceedings brought against Meredith for his actual act of assault this comedic commentary condemns his assault of Richard and by implication, Shakespeare. His chief crime (and artistic failure) is summed up as a failure in the death scene, which in Cibber’s version is vastly longer and more sensational than in Shakespeare’s: “Mr Meredith had appeared so little moved in the death scene, that he looked on the ground as indifferently as though he were humming over the end of an old song” (*Colonial Times*, 1834, p. 7).

This elaborate satire takes part in a subversion of the play's historically embedded politics. If Shakespeare in any sense vilified Plantagenet Richard to align himself with the succeeding Tudor dynasty, then this incident returns him through a theatrical and meta-theatrical process, to a pathetic victim. The first step of this return was already inherent in the Georgian penchant for tragic downfall personated by star performers, with their capacity to "move" audiences by revealing the "workings of the soul" of the character. Cibber's *Richard III* (c.1700) which retains fewer than 800 of Shakespeare's lines from the play, adds over 1000 and interpolates lines from other of Shakespeare's histories, is the perfect vehicle for this operation.<sup>2</sup>

The second step of this subversion was entailed in a tenacious colonial attachment to a cultural authority beyond the local context of performance. This is expressed in a confidence in the superiority and immutability of a "Shakespeare" that is not really "here" (to invoke the implicit binary of Knowles' prologue) but there. The criticism of the Royal's *Richard III* is underwritten by a belief in the culturally stable, "real" Shakespeare and an English stage tradition (Garrick, Kean and Kemble) which make Meredith's performance preposterous. The function of this satirical commentary, then, is to police the boundaries of the stage in a different sense, to reassert an English Richard in the face of Meredith's attempted coup. While succeeding decades reflect changes in the relationship between Australia and imperial cultural authority, the trope of disrupted authority inspired by *Richard III*'s tactics of usurpation sustains its utility in succeeding decades for investigating the formation of a theatre public.

The piece for the *Colonial Times* exemplifies one response to the colonial theatre's apparent failure to present Shakespeare's plays; it pits sophisticated satirical commentary against what it deems unworthy execution. Another related response which gained ascendancy in this era was travesty. Notably, both rely upon and showcase a detailed knowledge of and attachment to Shakespeare's plays. As a consequence, *Richard III* became affectionately associated with two seemingly opposite genres of entertainment. Despite its bad start in Australia, presentation of the Cibber adaptation received critical acclaim before 1840 in Hobart, Launceston and Adelaide. Each of these cities had experienced more auspicious beginnings to theatre than Sydney, and each was helped by the glamour of actors with some claim to recent experience in provincial English theatre (Webby, 2001). Not long after this, however, the character of *Richard III* also began to make an appearance in travesties, both imported and local in origin. That serious and subversive treatments of the play were seen as complimentary rather than contradictory is suggested by the fact that in November of 1846, the Royal Olympic Theatre in Launceston programmed the popular English travesty by Charles Selby—"Merrie Myserie in I Act—*Richard Ye Third: or, Ye Battel of Bosworth Field*" as a benefit night for the comic actor J.S.H. Lee in the same month as he played Richmond in *Richard III* (Webby, 2001). Only six months later, the same theatre programmed *Shakspericonglomorofunnidogammoniae* (hereafter "Shaksperi"), a home-grown travesty published by Charles Nagel in Sydney in 1843 and performed at the Royal Victoria—Sydney's second theatre—on 1 July 1844.

*Shaksperi* figured Richard as a lead character described on the playbill as "King *Richard III* (recently arrived from Gloster, quite the Cheshire, and the real Stilton, in love with Ophelia)" (Webby, 2001). In a complex transnational etymology these nineteenth-century "cheese" puns prompted by "Gloster" carry the implication that Richard is the most important figure in the piece and the genuine artefact or "real thing". This is humorously ironic in a travesty which is necessarily a derivative of the "real" thing, and doubly so in a culture preoccupied with its distance from the putative "real" thing. In the same playbill, Ophelia is given as "(a dairy maid, whose hand is sought by many, a young lady rather low and looking very high, scorning the Moor and rather struck after Dick)". This description, no less than that of Richard, reveals a concern with cultural categories and particularly class. In this era, and in pronounced ways in the Australian colonies, Shakespeare was distinguished from "low-comedy" and actors, ran the risk of compromising their careers by combing the two (*The Australian, 1844*).<sup>3</sup> A performer's class background often determined the genre for which she or he was seen as most suitable. But the rules were not as fixed as they were at "home". In the volatile climate of colonial Australia, particularly during the mid-century gold rushes, "being rather low" but "looking very

high” was equally likely to be rewarded with prosperity as censure. In the process of establishing itself as a public institution, theatre walked a narrow pass between reputational risk and opportunity. *Shaksperi* reflects a kind of playful self-consciousness about this predicament by daring to mix what is high with what is low. On 14 November 1843 the newspaper, *The Australian*, in a review of the November issue of the *New South Wales Magazine* asks sharply “what shall be thought of the ‘Review of New Works’ confining its labours to an ephemeral trifle like Captain Nagel’s Shaksperi Conglomerofunnidogammoniae?” (*The Australian*, 1843, p. 3). This rhetorical question ironically reinforces a sense of cultural indeterminacy while seeking to reinforce cultural stratification: What, indeed, “will be thought”? The audacious familiarity with Shakespeare reflected in the note that Ophelia is “rather struck after *Dick*” also participates through comic familiarisation in a subversive championing of the character.

From the mid-nineteenth century the Australian theatre scene was transformed by gold-rush prosperity. Opulent venues rivalling those in London were erected in most major cities. Shakespeare’s plays held their place on the repertoire as the yardstick by which theatrical talent was measured and actors of the London stage were lured to tour the colonies by the promise of profit. Competition for Australian audiences was fierce. In this climate, a theatrical controversy unfolded which brings the present account of disruption to cultural authority full circle. It sees *Richard III* leading the charge in a complex public narrative which supplants English Shakespeare with a defiant Irish-inflected Australian brand. This “Melbourne Shakespeare War”, while not played out over the edge of the physical stage replicates the terms of self-appointed cultural policing and popular revolt for which Meredith’s act offers such a vivid emblem. Like the occasions discussed above, it also showcases the evolving sensibilities of the colonial theatre public. The Meredith case above indicates the propensity of the press to take sides in theatrical disputes and to relish and amplify conflict. In the incident discussed below, the press, operating as an extension of public playing space, articulated the terms of engagement, drew the battle lines, and set the spikes.

In August of 1862, Irish actor, Barry Sullivan performed as *Richard III* (again in Cibber’s adaptation) at Melbourne’s Theatre Royal and was crowned as a local favourite. For reviewers, Sullivan exemplified the exact qualities that Meredith’s Richard had lacked: Sullivan was the real Richard. In *The Age* this feeling belief is reflected in the syntactical collapse of distinction between character and actor: “Stung with rage and bursting with passion, the workings of the fiery soul were expressed in every movement. He was eager with the wild impetuosity of revenge and his hurried action, his quivering visage, and violent transitions showed that he felt and knew of the coming crisis of his fate” (*The Age*, 1862, p. 5). Reception of Sullivan’s performance reinforces the wider narrative of popular revolt in that the affective power of the actor makes the reviewer lament the morally deserved demise of the character; or is it the other way around?: “so well does the unscrupulous monarch play his regal part in his closing moments that we are tempted to regret the fatal pass of Richmond’s sword which rids the earth of the royal villain” (*The Age*, 1862, p. 5). Notice how Richard himself is praised for his histrionic talent: the “monarch ... play[s] his regal part”. In this complex formulation the fact of Richard’s usurpation is secondary to its force and Sullivan is a vector for something *felt* to be true about the character. The more culturally and politically conservative paper, *The Argus*, concurs with *The Age* regarding the emotional force of Sullivan’s portrayal but also attempts to anatomise it by policing the boundaries of the real, in this case textual, Shakespeare. *The Argus* points out that Cibber’s adaptation is designed to amplify the kind of emotional excess which made for a popular theatrical spectacle: “much...has been imported into the tragedy for the sake of dramatic or melodramatic effect”. The sensational force of the drama is framed as owing to its corruption through adaptation. Following suit, the popularity of Sullivan’s performance is attributed to a cultural pedigree that lacks intellectual refinement: “Mr Sullivan has hit the taste of his audience with his Richard the Third, though it is a character which depends for its success less upon the mental than the physical qualities of the actor” (*The Argus*, 1862a, p. 5).

This bias was given fuller expression the following year when Barry Sullivan's *Richard III* came up against that of an actor with royal associations. Charles Kean, son of the more charismatic Edmund Kean, identified himself as English (although born in Ireland) and had held the prestigious post of Master of the Revels to Queen Victoria. He arrived in Australia in October of 1863 with his famous wife Ellen (Tree) Kean to perform at George Coppin's Haymarket theatre. On Saturday 14 November, Kean played *Richard III* at the upmarket Haymarket and Barry Sullivan, in a deliberate effort to sabotage Kean's premiere, played *Richard III* at the Royal. The opposing stances taken by the *Argus* and *The Age* on what developed as a pitched battle between the two actors revealed the centrality of theatre to the formation of public cultural politics. *The Argus* took the part of the Keans, urging audiences to emulate reception they had received in America and England and modelling a form of dutiful praise for the fairly obviously mediocre Kean (*The Argus*, 1862b, p. 4, 5). *The Age* by contrast took the opportunity to assert an independent stance: "The Richard of Mr Kean is highly esteemed by the English admirers [...] and has been regarded as in the first rank of his Shakesperian performances. We cannot concur" (*The Age*, 1863, p. 5). The bias expressed by *The Argus* has at heart sectarian and class distinctions. In letters home, Charles and Ellen Kean both pinpoint Sullivan's support by the "Low Irish" party as the source of their troubles and, as I mentioned above, *The Argus* had already implied that Sullivan's popular support was grounded in physical facility to evoke what it deemed vulgar emotional excess (See Hardwick, 1954, p. 94, 95).<sup>4</sup> This controversy mobilised the figure of *Richard III*—the canny upstart usurper—as a mascot for a kind of cultural revolution. As I have argued at greater length elsewhere, Sullivan's Richard offered a new icon of resistance to hegemonic imperial cultural politics (Flaherty & Lamb, 2012).

That this canny cultural usurpation was in some sense successful is attested over a century later in an obscure journalistic coda. A 1983 feature for the Australia publication, *The Daily Mirror*, valorises Sullivan and Richard together as champions of the popular Irish cause with a distinctly Australian inflection. Entitled *Richard III died in Melbourne like and Irish Gentleman*, the piece describes Sullivan's 1862 performance: "the climax came in the final act when the fury maddened Richard fought the earl of Richmond not only for his own life but for the crown of England itself ... every Irishman in the audience cheered for Barry Sullivan as the swords flashed. But then when a lethal thrust sent him crumpling to the ground a great groan of anguished filled the theatre" (*The Daily Mirror*, 1986, p. 11). Note how character and actor are folded into a single significance—one which on this occasion represents both Irish resistance to English domination (at the height of "The Troubles") and the vitality of the local Australian theatrical moment against the distant English ideal. In the constitution of a new theatrical public in colonial Australia, the "real" has finally found new local coordinates. Specifically, Gloucester's compelling and affective performance of usurpation finds new traction in the terrain of local cultural politics. In this case study it becomes clear that the particular kind of public consciousness generated by the performance of Shakespeare at public theatres and amplified by the public press was integral to how Australia came to view itself as a political and cultural entity in the lead up to Federation.

#### Funding

The author received no direct funding for this research.

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#### Citation information

Cite this article as: "Damn him and the spikes": *Richard III*, riot, and the formation of an Australian colonial theatre public, Kate Flaherty, *Cogent Arts & Humanities* (2016), 3: 1237141.

#### Notes

1. The politically powerful were also paternalistic: patri-cians played an important role in legitimizing some

disturbances by at least tacit approval.

2. William Hogarth's iconic 1745 painting of Garrick in the role offers a sensational visual representation of this fascination with the actor's expression of "the workings of [Richard's] soul".

3. In *The Australian* on 3 July 1844 a reviewer opined of actor Francis Nesbitt's appearance in popular farce: "Nesbitt's attempted assumption of low comedy parts ... if persevered in ... will prove a serious drawback to his value as an attractive card, for the treasury. His forte is tragedy, and we are sorry to find him leaving the sock and buskin, for the brogues and high-lows of broad farce. We would recommend to the Management, Shakespeare's tragedy of Coriolanus, which includes a cast that might admirably filled by his company, and present Nesbitt to the Sydney public in a character which would prove the touchstone of his talent", p. 3.

4. In a letter to his daughter Mary Kean (dated 17 November 1863), Charles Kean claims that the support Sullivan received emanated from the “Low Irish party”.

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