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History plays in the twenty-first century: new tools for interpreting the contemporary performance of the past

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ABSTRACT

New plays set in the past continue to make up a significant proportion of theatre productions in England. This article argues that there is much to gain by recognising such works as 'history plays', deploying a broad understanding of this grouping as constituting plays that make a claim to be set in the past. We draw on a range of plays, including as case studies Moira Buffini's *Handbagged*, Peter Morgan's *The Audience*, and Lucy Kirkwood's *The Welkin*, locating them in the landscape of contemporary theatre whilst identifying tropes and conventions of representing the past that have a history of their own. Thinking inclusively about the history play also highlights the connections between how stage, screen, and England's wider heritage society portray the past. Rather than using another set of categories for measuring plays, this article proposes the activation of modes as a way of understanding how history is invoked in new playwriting and performance. In this theorisation, the different modes – which we name as heritage, the historical record, and creative licence – become the tools through which we can consider what cultural authority is being drawn on in specific moments within a history play, addressing both playwriting and performance practice.

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Introduction

'The history play' is a term that academics know and use, but that theatre-makers avoid. This may be because the term's implications of a dry, worthy, or didactic entertainment – the 'history lesson' tradition of historical drama – are seen as unhelpful to perceptions of contemporary playwriting.¹ If theatres are investing in 'new writing', the last thing they want it to be perceived as is old. And yet in practice 'the history play', as a strand of new writing, has become widespread in British theatre, at flagship cultural venues and in national and regional producing houses. The history play itself, as Paola Botham notes in analysing this trend in 2016, has a long history (Botham 2016b, 81), and this article sets out to identify some of the ways in which history plays operate differently in the twenty-first century compared to previous eras. Beginning with a literature review that places scholarship on the history play in conversation with work on the heritage industry, this

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essay argues for a broad conception of what constitutes a history play, negotiating between often contradictory claims and definitions. In doing so, the article makes a distinction between what new writing does when it invokes the past, and what revival and intermedial adaptation do when they identify historical settings. Using plays staged in London as case studies, we will consider Moira Buffini's *Handbagged* (2010, revised Buffini 2013), Peter Morgan's *The Audience* (2013, revised Morgan 2015), and Lucy Kirkwood's *The Welkin* (Kirkwood 2020) in the light of this theory, but draw on a range of twenty-first-century history plays, produced in theatres in England, to develop our argument.² We contend that three distinctive but intertwined modes are in play when contemporary playwriting represents history: heritage, the historical record, and creative licence. By identifying how these modes invoke different sources of cultural authority and showing how they work in combination with published playscripts and performance, we aim to offer new tools for analysing the complexities of staging the past in the twenty-first century.

The history play: potential and politics

Powerful claims are made of the use of history in theatre. To take just one example, for Freddie Rokem in his influential *Performing History*, 'theatrical performances of and about history reflect complex ideological issues concerning deeply rooted national identities and subjectivities and power structures' (Rokem 2000, 8). Such performances have at least two particular dimensions, Rokem asserts: firstly, they possess a 'reality or a veracity which does not exclusively confine them to the functionality of the stage', yet this outside reference point of factuality can also take on a mythological and otherworldly quality (Rokem 2000, 11). Secondly, Rokem charges that plays that use historical analogies 'seem to be rhetorically much stronger than the forms of analogy created by purely fictional genres of theatre' (Rokem 2000, 23). Rokem confines his study to performances concerning two unarguably world-historical events, the French Revolution and the Shoah. His choice of terminology is 'performing history' rather than 'the history play', reflecting his particular interest in the theatrical experience of specific productions as re-enactment (Rokem 2000, 13), or a conjuring of the historical event's energies (Rokem 2000, 194), rather than in the history play as a textual entity. Nevertheless, his remarks are a useful starting point for a consideration of the contemporary English history play, since they allude not only to the affective potential of work set in the past or concerning history, but to the ways in which such work rhetorically invokes extrinsic forms of knowledge and understanding in order to do so. It is these citational aspects of the history play that form the basis of this essay's argument regarding the three key legitimising modes that contemporary playwriting makes use of when it mobilises history.

The contemporary history play has been identified as a form of political theatre, and it derives some of its cultural cachet from that association. Herbert Lindenberger and Michael Y. Bennett, both drawing on Bertolt Brecht's epic theatre, argue for the political, didactic qualities of history plays from different eras, before and after Brecht. Bennett suggests that with history plays 'the audience [...] must say to themselves: Here are the mistakes of the past that look a lot like the present; so what will we, and what will I, do in the future?' (2013, 16). Similarly, Lindenberger takes from *Danton's Death* a feeling that

'We can rechannel history, throw off Büchner's fatalism' (Lindenberger 1975, 165), which seems in keeping with his global comment that 'the education or redirection of the audience's consciousness is often overtly part of the play's intent' (146). For Botham, focusing on the present day, 'twenty-first century history plays can be seen as one of the most effective forms of contemporary political theatre' (2016, 81), while Ian Brown's starting point for this exploration of the Scottish history play is 'that history is regularly presented and reinterpreted for "political" purposes, however broadly defined' (Brown 2016, viii). Janelle Reinelt (1994, 5–16) and Keith Peacock, writing in the 1990s, both historicised this turn, with Peacock stating that in plays from the late 1960s on, 'all history was to become contemporary history [...] a means of discussing the present and as a vehicle for confronting public rather than personal issues' (Peacock 1991, 30). And although the power of political theatre to instigate or effect tangible change has also been subjected to critical scrutiny since the 1960s (Shalson 2017, 21–27),³ recent work on political theatre has continued to hold out the tentative hope that plays in theatres can make political interventions.⁴

However, the history play also benefits from, and often responds to, the cultural and political significance that is attached to history itself in contemporary society. As numerous historians and historiographers attest, the study of history is key to helping us to understand the modern world (MacMillan 2010, 165–169; Evans 2018, 13); and fulfil our civic and democratic duties (Spalding and Parker 2007, 71;151). As Cannadine, Keating and Sheldon observe, since the 1990s England has become a history-saturated society: 'history is instantly, everywhere available, all day, all night, 24/7, and learning about it in school is only part of the process of encountering and, increasingly, "experiencing" the past' (Cannadine, Keating, and Sheldon 2011, 210). Nevertheless, the question of what periods and events are taught in schools has been a point of ongoing media controversy (Cannadine, Keating, and Sheldon 2011, 201–2, 217; Spalding and Parker 2007, 121–2; Andress 2018, ll.1723). In this social and cultural context, then, it is hardly surprising that history plays appear to carry a double significance, as commentary on the past to inform the present; as both 'history lesson' and intervention in contemporary politics. However, while there is broad agreement on the significance of history to contemporary culture and thus on the powerful ways that it can be used in the theatre, defining what we mean by a 'history play' is no easy matter. The next section sets out to unpick some of these complexities and contradictions.

Taxonomies of the history play

This essay is grounded in a survey of books, chapters and articles on the history play, which broadly fall into two categories. The first consists of those which discuss 'the history play' in general terms, often placing it in a European theatre tradition, from William Shakespeare to work by post-war dramatists such as Peter Weiss's *Marat/Sade* (Weiss 1969) and Robert Bolt's *A Man For All Seasons* (Bolt 1960). This category includes Lindenberger (1975), Harben (1988), Rokem (2000) and Bennett (2013). The second category is made up of studies of post-1960s playwriting in the UK and its use of history, including Peacock (1991), Palmer (1998), Feldman (2013) and Anthony P. Pennino (2018). Critical attention in the second category has tended to cluster around a select group of white male English playwrights who came to prominence since the 1960s and

who drew, more or less consciously, on Brechtian historicization: Edgar, Brenton, Hare, Bond and Barker, with Churchill the notable exception (Reinelt 1994). A small proportion of these studies consider playwrights' uses of history in UK theatre in the 1990s and beyond: Berninger (2002), Brown (2016), and Botham (2016a, 2016b).⁵

This critical literature offers a wealth of potential taxonomies for the history play. Palmer proposes a classification based on a play's 'uses of history' (Palmer 1998, 9), whether psychohistory, oppositional history, Marxist history, social history, local history, feminist history, deconstructionist history, or postmodern history (14–16). Meanwhile, Berninger argues for five types of history play evident in the 1990s, based on their relationship to the historical record: the documentary history play, the realistic history play, the revisionist history play, the metahistorical play, and the posthistorical play (2002, 39–40). In contrast, Rokem suggests that performing history involves a navigation between two poles: 'at times it moves closer to the fictional or even allegorical pole [...] and at other times closer to the pole of historical accuracy and documentation' (2000, 7). Brown, drawing on earlier work with Barbara Bell, offers a 'matrix of purposes' for the history play, a set of nine observable 'functions', from the celebratory to the socio-political, where 'engagement with only one or two functions may be a sign of oversimplification resulting in pageant or agitprop rather than drama, while the more matricial functions a play fulfils may mark its greater dramaturgical and ideological complexity' (2016, 26), a pattern that Brown identifies in Scottish history plays since the 1970s (220). These are broad categorisations that seek to make order out of the history play's many manifestations.

Nevertheless, the proliferation of descriptions of how history plays work serves to mask a general reluctance to argue for what a history play is. Rokem refers to 'this subgenre loosely called "the history play" or "history performance"' (2000, 3); Palmer to it being 'an ill-defined genre' (1998, 9). Peacock, having referred to the history play as a genre, adds that 'its form and emphases alter with the social and political changes that are themselves the constituents of history itself' (1991, 4). Berninger, too, refers to the history play as a 'time-honoured genre' but also 'a play defined by its topic', meaning that it can be combined with other genres that are *not* defined by topic, such as tragedy (2002, 37). Both Peacock and Berninger, then, assert the history play's status as a genre that has no consistent formal qualities. Lindenberger concedes from the outset that defining the history play as a genre would be impractical, and later suggests that 'by a strict definition one cannot categorise historical drama as a genre at all' (Lindenberger 1975, ix). Berninger suggests a way out of this impasse by identifying 'a dominant type of history play that has been considered the genre-model for a long time', including an interest in 'great men', a focus on political and military events, Eurocentrism, stage realism, the presentation of events in chronological order, and the use of documentary sources combined with fictional elements (2002, 39). Berninger also identifies features, tropes and tendencies such as 'tushery', archaic speech, period costume, hero worship, and a tragic plot as contributing to this dominant type of history play. This composite 'genre-model' has the benefit of functioning as a shorthand, a point of reference against which the dramaturgy of contemporary history plays can be evaluated.

A similar strategy for preserving the notion of the history play as a genre is to define it by what it is not. Lindenberger (1975, 21) and Rokem (2000, 7) both discount documentary drama as a type of history play; they are 'dead on the printed page' and 'more like

newspapers'. In Palmer's view, no specific length of time must pass to qualify an event as historical (1998, 10), but for Brown a qualifying factor of his study of Scottish history plays is that they concern events no later than the end of the Second World War' (Brown 2016, viii). For some, the history play is defined in opposition to the chronicle play, which simply presents a sequence of successive events, rather than shaping a narrative as the history play does (Palmer 1998, 6). Other attempts at definition rely on perceptions of authorial intention and credibility; for Harben, a history play 'evinces serious concern for historical truth or historical issues' (Harben 1988, 18) while Peacock expects 'that the dramatist will approach the facts of the recreated period or figure in a spirit of "serious scholarship"' (Peacock 1991, 4). Pennino rejects Peter Whelan's *The Accrington Pals* for his study because he finds it too personal and nostalgic (Pennino 2018, 43).

These essentialist definitions of the history play exclude certain stage works from consideration for a range of mutually incompatible reasons. Moreover, restricting what counts as a history play, based on scholars' preferences, cultural assumptions, and methods of organising their material, has an impact on the selection of works that are understood to be operating in that tradition: those which belong to the 'canon' of history plays and are made easily available to students, academics and theatre-makers. By the same token, commercially or critically successful history plays are often reclassified as, for example, political theatre or documentary drama, erasing the play's continuities and congruences with patterns of historical playwriting, as if they have 'broken out' of generic constraints and have achieved a higher status, becoming what Sarah Grochala calls 'serious drama': drama which is legitimised through associations with 'responsibility, utility and value' (Grochala 2017, 28).⁶ If we fail to look across at the tropes and gestures of other playwriting that makes use of history, then we miss a key element of a play's theatrical and cultural context.

In what follows, we will propose an inclusive definition of a history play that is not reliant on particular formal features, a generic model, or subjective critical preferences. However, in order to do so, it is first necessary to consider the impact of the heritage industry on conceptions of history, and therefore also of the history play, for theatre-makers and audiences.

The history play and the heritage industry

The representation of the past in new playwriting sits in an ecology of cultural uses of history across media, national identity, and ideology; prominent within these structures is the heritage industry. There appears to be a mutual inattention in scholarship whereby literature on the history play does not extensively position it in conversation with the heritage debate across media, while paradoxically the heritage debate does not substantially consider playwriting.

The reimagining of history on the contemporary stage does not exist in a vacuum but rather echoes or challenges the English cultural obsession with evoking the past. Patrick Wright foregrounds a cultural focus in his exploration of the uses of British history, aiming to examine 'how ideas of the national past were sustained and articulated in the present' (Wright 2009: x). Originally published in 1985, his book *On Living in an Old Country* (Wright 2009) was instrumental in shifting a theoretical perspective beyond a material focus; he instead 'approached "heritage" as a cultural theme of wider reach

than was necessarily the concern of archaeologists and museum curators' (Wright 2009, x). Wright is speaking to the politics of heritage under Thatcher and interrogates how history operates across British culture from attention to everyday life, and personal narrative, to a national understanding through political policy and organisations such as the National Trust (Wright 2009). Building on Wright's cultural approach, Owen Hatherley draws attention to twenty-first century culture in England, arguing that the contemporary 'obsession with the past [is] multivalent, never obvious, never just reproduction' (2016, 7). With a focus on the repeated slogan 'Keep Calm and Carry On', Hatherley argues that the Conservative Party has weaponised the past, creating a mode of nostalgia whereby 'austerity in 2015 dreams of austerity in 1945' (Hatherley 2016, 12).

Wright and Hatherley's interrogations of the politics of the uses of history across English culture resonate with scholarship concerned with heritage studies. The notion of heritage came under critique in the development of the field in the twentieth century with scholars placing it in direct opposition to history; this is captured by David Lowenthal's argument that, 'heritage mandates *misreadings* of the past' (Lowenthal 1998, 129). Similarly, Robert Hewison argues that a rise in heritage practice has led to 'a distortion of the past' (Hewison 1987, 10). Building on this scholarship, Raphael Samuel appears to defend the heritage industry, calling for a more nuanced approach, as he charts its critique during the twentieth century, initially outlining critics' interpretations of heritage as fraudulent in relation to history (Samuel 1996, 259–266). In response to this charge, Samuel links heritage to postmodernism, observing that it is under attack, 'not because heritage is too reverent about the past that it provokes outrage, but on the contrary, the fact that, in the eyes of the critics at least, it seems quite untroubled when it is dealing with replicas and pastiche' (Samuel 1996, 266). However, as the heritage debate has developed, perspectives within the field have shifted from an archaeologically influenced material focus that sits in tension with history and towards recognition of heritage as a cultural process. Resonating with Wright's approach, Laurajane Smith recognises that while being about the past and material objects, heritage is also, 'a process of engagement, an act of communication and an act of making meaning in and for the present' (Smith 2006, 1).

Where heritage is considered beyond direct opposition to history and material authenticity, an interrogation of English culture's obsession with the past can emerge. Jerome de Groot explores a range of examples across media, such as film and television, in his focus on historical fiction in *Remaking History* (de Groot 2016), and earlier with a broader transmedia coverage including historical re-enactments, computer games, and graphic novels, in *Consuming History* (de Groot 2009). With a focus on popular culture, de Groot advocates to 'follow "history" as a thread through contemporary culture and that it might show anew and in greater depth the consumptive practices of society: The *range* of the historical is the point' (de Groot 2009, 13). Theatre features briefly within this range, as de Groot considers Shakespeare's Globe theatre primarily with attention to the site as a 'tourist attraction, heritage centre, cultural venue and educational establishment simultaneously' (de Groot 2009, 125). Unlike de Groot's identification of the Globe as a heritage site, Vera Cantoni (2018) focuses on the particular dramatic conventions and practices, past and present, that shape new playwriting at this theatre.

In contrast to the breadth of media engaged with by de Groot, Andrew Higson focuses his interrogation of the heritage industry through an exploration of costume drama in

English cinema of the 1980s and 90s (Higson 2003). Higson goes on to examine notions of nostalgia in his engagement with websites and ‘heritage films’; cultivating a methodology which weaves together both ‘formal analysis and the analysis of reception or consumption’ (Higson 2014, 121–122). Thus, similarly to de Groot, he prioritises a focus on the audience or consumer in his engagement with heritage. D. M. Copelman (2019) develops this debate on consumerism and questions of heritage and nostalgia in reference to the UK TV series *Downton Abbey* (2010–2015). With a focus on American culture, Copelman interrogates the commodification of *Downton Abbey* in reference to ‘the myriad opportunities for merchandising, tourism, exhibits, TV projects and journalism at every level and in every medium,’ identifying that although such products ‘sold the fantasy of aristocratic life, [they] were not aimed at wealthy consumers’ (2019, 65). Copelman uses the programme to conduct socio-cultural analysis arguing that ‘*Downton Abbey*’s commodification can also illuminate our specific context of neoliberal austerity’ (2019, 70–71). Hence, the international reception of *Downton Abbey* offers a means through which to explore cultural questions of heritage and nostalgia. This literature indicates the development of scholarship concerned with the phenomenon of history, manifesting through the heritage industry, operating across media and popular culture.

Honing this focus on heritage from transmedia to live performance, Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett demonstrates an emphasis on performance through her engagement with the cultural production of heritage in relation to the performativity of museum displays, arguing that ‘objects are the actors and knowledge animates them’ (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1998, 3). With a similar focus on museums, Anthony Jackson and Jenny Kidd adopt an interdisciplinary approach in *Performing Heritage* (Jackson and Kidd 2011) to explore the development of the heritage industry through museum performance, once again positioning heritage as a cultural process. Susan Bennett brings this coupling into sharp focus in *Theatre & Museums*, identifying the paradox of ‘material designated as representing the past, while theatrical performance takes place resolutely in the present’ (Bennett 2013, 5).⁷ Moving more explicitly into a theatrical context, Pennino explores 1980s plays which provided ‘a clear voice and alternative to that of the government’s’ and goes on to argue that the ‘dramatization of history’ was ‘a central part of that alternative programme’ (Pennino 2018, 2). Pennino positions the works explored (including plays by Brenton, Churchill, Daniels, and Edgar) in opposition to Thatcher’s ‘vigorous promotion of all things heritage from theme parks to private museums’ (Pennino 2018, 27). He interrogates the influence of heritage culture with a focus on funding structures, whereby a decrease in Arts Council funding in the 1980s prioritised the commercialisation of the theatre and encouraged projects which ‘contributed to tourism’ and ‘national heritage’ (Pennino 2018, 26–27). Similar to the literature discussed above, Pennino broadens his focus beyond the theatre to acknowledge the rise of a heritage focus across ‘all artistic genres’ (Pennino 2018, 28). Hence, this study models the positioning of the history play as politically oppositional, considering the influence of heritage from an economic perspective. This approach resonates with Copelman’s examination of neoliberalism, and Hatherley’s critique of austerity nostalgia, and provides a fruitful lens to interrogate the material structures that shape the contemporary history play.

Addressing the above scholarship, the contrast between de Groot and Cantoni, in reference to the Globe theatre, best illustrates the gap in the literature in which we

aim to intervene. Cantoni notes, ‘the Globe’s complex nature as a monument referring to the past but also a theatre operating in the present’ (Cantoni 2018, 2), thus acknowledging the role of history in contemporary theatre beyond questions of repertoire. However, while Cantoni’s study recognises the multiple time periods and traditional performance practices framing new playwriting at this institution, notions of heritage are overlooked. Meanwhile, de Groot gestures towards theatre in reference to heritage, but direct exploration of play content and dramatic form is not offered. Therefore, Cantoni demonstrates engagement with dramaturgy and narrative in reference to the contemporary history play while de Groot offers consideration of theatre in reference to the wider history-obsessed cultural moment. By combining these theoretical perspectives, we are able to consider dramatic content and form in conversation with the wider, heritage-driven moment. Taking this into account, we propose an understanding of the history play as a cultural artefact shaped by, and responding to, the heritage industry, historical research, and playwriting’s own history. This leads to the availability of the heritage, historical record, and creative licence modes that we will apply in the second half of this paper.

Defining the history play

In this article, we argue for a broad definition of a ‘history play’. Following Brown, we include as history plays those that ‘use specific details of historical events’, those which ‘create imaginary characters whose actions are set in historic times’ and also those which ‘engage historical figures with their own created characters’ (Brown 2016, xii). Further, we extend our definition to include action which takes place at any point in historical time; to include both domestic and public events and settings; and to include plays where time travel occurs, where there are multiple timelines, or where the dramaturgy is that of the ‘time hop’ (Poore 2018). We discount the ‘requirement of historical factuality in either or both character and event’ that defines the history play for Peacock; nor do we require that a history play ‘deals with history’ as Berninger proposes (2002, 37). It does not require any specific form of stage realisation. Instead, the fundamental requirement of a history play is a claim that something we are witnessing takes place in the past. This claim was the general rule in playbills and programmes for plays of all kinds up until the 1960s: ‘The action of the play takes place at the Marchs’ home in Highgate London, 1923’; ‘A September evening in the year 1908’.⁸ It is, of course, also a conventional feature in published playscripts up to the present day: ‘The play is set in March of 1759 on the border of Norfolk and Suffolk, in England’; ‘The Davies Household, Brighton, 1862’.⁹ It may also be conveyed through documentary or prefatory material, as in, for example, Caryl Churchill’s *Light Shining in Buckinghamshire* (Churchill 1978). This past may be indicated in performance by costume, scenography, or action, and may be stated in Brechtian, presentational style through placards, direct address, screens or projections. What is key to this claim to historicity is that it is announced in the play script, requiring some form of interpretation in production. It represents a direction by the play that the character or event be interpreted, at least in part, by knowledge and understanding from outside the purely fictional and imaginary (see Rokem 2000, 11; Palmer 1998, 7). This definition removes *a priori* questions of authorial intention or aesthetic merit from inclusion in the category, and focuses on the gesture of an

appeal to a historical reality, whether that gesture is fictionally ‘reliable’, consistent and convincing, or contradictory and anachronistic; whether it is dramatic, epic or postdramatic. Therefore, the first fundamental criterion that we use to define history plays is that they ‘announce’ their relationship to the past. To borrow from Linda Hutcheon’s definition of adaptation, history plays usually openly announce this relationship to the past, in a similar way to how adaptations usually openly announce their relationship to a source text (Hutcheon 2012, 3).

History plays and adaptations

Does this mean, therefore, that adaptations can also be history plays? The relationship between the history play and adaptation to the stage from other media requires that our definition be given additional nuance. Many of the theoretical principles that apply to adaptation are also relevant to the creation of history plays. Given that history ‘is only tangible – if at all – through documents, among other sources’ (Minier and Pennacchia 2014, 8), the act of staging history is in effect a transmediation of various sources. The difference is that the outside reference-point in adaptation is almost always a singular, fictional source (which may in turn be a work set or written in the past, or historical fiction), whereas the outside reference-points for the history play are usually multiple and either present themselves as factual or documentary sources. Nevertheless, there are several examples of history plays that are substantively based, by their authors’ own admission, on individual works of narrative history: John Osborne’s *Luther* was inspired by Erik H. Erikson’s *Young Man Luther* (Harben 1988, 191); Caryl Churchill’s *Light Shining in Buckinghamshire* by Christopher Hill’s *The World Turned Upside Down* (Palmer 1998, 14–15); and Peter Shaffer’s *The Royal Hunt of the Sun* by W.H. Prescott’s *The Conquest of Peru* (Peacock 1991, 13). Timberlake Wertenbaker’s *Our Country’s Good* is based on Thomas Keneally’s 1987 historical novel *The Playmaker*, although the 2020 Methuen Student edition of the play, edited by Sophie Bush, is the first to announce its status as an adaptation on the cover (Wertenbaker 2020). Adding to the impression of a crossover between what adaptations and history plays are and do, Frances Babbage argues that the practice of adaptation makes ‘immediate and graspable’ the sense in which the source is ‘not fixed, final and authoritative but malleable, contingent and contestable’ (Babbage 2017, 214). Indeed, history plays, like adaptations, have also in recent decades tended towards metatheatricity, exposing the means of their own construction (Babbage 2017, 215; Feldman 2013).

However, as Thomas Leitch has proposed, ‘all adaptations are obviously intertexts, but it is much less obvious that all intertexts are adaptations’ (Leitch 2012, 89). We argue that history plays and adaptations are two discrete kinds of intertextuality. To classify history plays as adaptations risks collapsing the distinction between adaptations and other types of cultural production, in unhelpful ways which would ultimately render the label of adaptation meaningless. We maintain, however, that both history plays and adaptations are modes of intertextual production that can be usefully separated for analysis. Leitch’s chapter ‘What isn’t an Adaptation, and What Does it Matter?’ proposes a series of ways of theorising adaptation. While Leitch remains ambivalent about its utility, his fourth suggested theory of adaptation works well as a working definition of a history play: ‘[history plays] are texts whose status depends on the audience’s acceptance of

a deliberate invitation to read them as [historical representation]’ (Leitch 2012, 94). If the play gives a deliberate invitation to be read as a historical representation – however conventional, or oppositional, that representation of history may be, and even if it also functions as docudrama or biodrama – then that makes it a history play. Where a stage revival takes a previously produced play as its core source, and an adaptation for the stage takes a work of fiction as its core source, a history play is usually constructed from multiple factual sources and also *invites us to read it as historical representation*. This means it may be a history play and also a documentary play (*The Stirrings in Sheffield on a Saturday Night* (Cullen 1974); *The Knotty* (Cheeseman 1970)) or a history play and also a biographical play (*Anne Boleyn* (Brenton 2012); *Nell Gwynne* (Swale 2016); *Queen Anne* (Edmundson 2017); *Swive* (Hickson 2019)). The repackaging of *Our Country’s Good* mentioned earlier represents a move in the opposite direction, inviting readers and audiences to see the play as primarily an adaptation. So, to qualify the criterion noted above – that a history play asserts a claim that something we are witnessing takes place in the past – we need to add that this claim cannot be to a fictional source text that has already made this same gesture; the claim needs to refer to an idea of the past that is *not* mediated through a secondary source that announces itself as fiction. If it follows this pattern, the play is a deliberate invitation to be read as a historical representation rather than as an adaptation, with all the contradictions, tensions and trade-offs between historiography and dramaturgy that this entails.¹⁰

History plays in the twenty-first century

Having addressed this larger question of what we understand a history play to be, rather than sidestepping the question as monographs on history plays have tended to do, this article can begin to focus on the three main modes that history plays in theatres in England employ in order to shape and nuance their invitation to be read as history. By way of clearing the ground for this enquiry, it should be understood that when we analyse the workings of history plays in the twenty-first century, we do not mean to suggest or imply dramaturgical ‘advances’ in the history play of the last twenty years. As noted earlier, the literature on history plays offers many models for classifying the functions of history plays in relation to the historical record and to historiographic trends and practices. These models, too, mostly caution against a ‘Whiggish’ idea of playwriting ‘progress’. So, for instance, history plays focusing on domestic life and ordinary people date back at least as far as the ‘populist historical drama’ of the postwar period (Peacock 1991, 17). The time-hop play traces its roots back at least as far as Churchill’s *Cloud Nine* (Churchill 1979), if not J.B. Priestley’s ‘time plays’ and, before that, Bernard Shaw’s *Back to Methuselah* (Poore 2018). The ‘epic’ British history play, with its discontinuous action in different times and places (Grace and Bayley 2015, 95–96) similarly goes back at least as far as the post-1968 generation of playwrights. Feldman focuses on his idea of a ‘historiographic metatheatre’ on the London stage from the 1960s on (Feldman 2013, 3); even Berninger’s ‘posthistorical play’, his category representing ‘the extreme form of the revisionist history play’ (2002, 41), has early examples like Bond’s *Early Morning*, and Arden and D’Arcy’s *The Hero Rises Up* (2002, 42). As this article argues, what has changed in recent years is not so much the dramaturgy of the history play, as the popularity and prevalence of particular dramaturgies, and that what is also different is the

history play's subject matter and perspective as gender, sexuality and race become more prominent focal points. To take some examples, Alexi Kaye Campbell's *The Pride* (Kaye Campbell 2013), Samuel Adamson's *Wife* (Adamson 2019) and *The Inheritance* by Mathew Lopez (2018) assess changing attitudes to sexuality in recent decades, while Jessica Swale's *Blue Stockings* (Swale 2013), Rona Munro's *Scuttlers* (Munro 2015) and June Wilkinson's *The Sweet Science of Bruising* (Wilkinson 2018) take single historical settings and focus on a group of women navigating hostile and misogynistic environments. History plays exploring the legacies of colonialism and slavery, such as Winsome Pinnock's *Rockets and Blue Lights* (Pinnock 2020), Juliet Gilkes Romero's *The Whip* (Romero 2020) and Janice Okoh's *The Gift*, (Okoh 2020), were notable for their presence in theatres in the months running up to the first 2020 lockdown.

While this article remains indebted to these earlier classifications of history plays, as noted above, what they have tended to prioritise is a bilateral relationship between playwrights and historians, disregarding the ways in which our present-day society, preoccupied with the past, authorises 'history' in ways beyond historical documents, archives and published work by historians. This essay proposes, therefore, three ways in which history plays rhetorically invoke what Siân Adiseshiah calls 'the authority of history' (Adiseshiah 2009, 93), acknowledging that the 'heritage society' of the present century functions differently from that of, for instance, the 1970s or the 1990s.

The activation of modes

As indicated by our exploration of literature concerned with the history play, and in scholarship addressing the transmedial uses of history across culture, firm classifications of the history play can lead to restrictive boundaries with a prioritisation of the historical record as a measuring stick. We noted previously that the valorisation of objectivity and historical scholarship has been a consistent trend in studies of the history play (Harben 1988, 18; Peacock 1991, 4; Pennino 2018, 43). It is also a common feature of critical responses to new writing set in the past, where reviewers often note when they perceive playwrights to be playing 'fast and loose with the facts', whether the event is sufficiently 'factually informative', 'what's been left out' of the representation of history, and whether a performance 'captures' some aspect of a historical figure.¹¹ What, then, is the implication if we privilege playwriting and performance practice, above historical content, in order to move towards multiplicity in the understanding of this genre?

Rather than using another set of categories by which to measure a play, we propose the activation of modes as a way of understanding how history is invoked in playwriting and performance. In this theorisation, the different modes become the tools through which to consider what cultural authority is being drawn on in specific moments within a history play, addressing both playwriting and performance practice, in order to distil the complexity of this classification. This perspective foregrounds a play's relationships to historical research, tropes and methods of playwriting, and the wider socio-cultural uses of history in which this genre of new work is framed.

In new playwriting with a historical focus, the author holds two dimensions in tension: the historical account and their own creative process of research, interpretation and representation. Exploration of the heritage debate indicates that historical research does not exist in a vacuum but rather is shaped by a cultural 'obsession with the past'

(Hatherley 2016, 7), thus identifying heritage as a third tension held in this playwriting process. We argue that the historical record, creative licence, and the heritage mode may be activated at different moments within a play and used as ground from which to legitimise a playwright's representation of the past. This claim to legitimacy comes from the cultural authority with which each mode is considered. Creative licence, for example, sits in the legacy of history plays which have come before, while the historical record holds claim to the research process and the heritage mode speaks to the wider socio-cultural relationship with familiar uses of the past. Each mode offers a way for evoking history in contemporary performance, drawing on previous cultural knowledge, and provides the tools through which to explore the history play not through strict categorization but with a focus on the complexity of the notion of 'history' in a particular moment. As we have noted, the historical record is the dominant mode through which historical plays have tended to be praised or criticised in scholarship and culture more widely, while the creative licence mode seeks to challenge such expectations or use them as a springboard for the historical imagination. The heritage mode is the element that has not been fully accounted for in readings of the history play thus far. Furthermore, it is the interaction between these three modes – the ways that they can be played off against each other in text and performance – that is the key intervention we propose here.

History in the paratext

Through introductions, authors' notes and prefaces in published playtexts, playwrights frequently position their work in relation to historical research. As identified above, in reference to Harben, Peacock and Pennino, scholars similarly put pressure on the process of historical research as a way to legitimise a history play. This process from playwrights, is visible in authors' notes such as Joy Wilkinson's statement that, 'I researched in depth about boxing and nineteenth-century women,' for her play *The Sweet Science of Bruising* concerning this topic (Wilkinson 2018, n.p.). However, Wilkinson goes on to clarify, 'despite the historical research, I'm not interested in museum pieces, and (to paraphrase Ken Loach) whether it's a true story matters less to me than if there is truth in the story' (Wilkinson 2018, n.p.). This indicates a leaning on the historical record to legitimise the process before a swift dismissal of it, while simultaneously implying a tension with the wider heritage industry in not wanting to be read as a mode of performance associated with the 'old', or perhaps the educational.

In contrast, Tanika Gupta prefaces her playtext *Lions and Tigers* with a timeline of 'key events in Indian politics leading to Independence' (Gupta 2017, 7), alongside outlining that the letters included in the plays were by the playwright's Great Uncle and are, 'accurate copies of original correspondence by Dinesh Gupta who wrote 92 letters from prison over a six-month period' (Gupta 2017, 16). In this case Gupta calls on both the personal and public historical records to frame the piece, making the historical research and verbatim text central to the play rather than a backdrop from which to create, as implied by Wilkinson. Similarly, Winsome Pinnock indicates the role of historical material in her creation of *Rockets and Blue Lights*, highlighting that 'the main inspirations for this play are J.M.W. Turner's paintings: *The Slave Ship (Slavers Throwing Overboard the Dead and the Dying – Typhoon Coming On)* and *Rockets and Blue Lights*' (2020, 9). Pinnock continues, 'the painting suggests the ongoing legacy of the

slave trade. The play explores this legacy and attempts to reconstruct the lives of black Londoners after abolition' (2020, 9). Here, Pinnock is foregrounding the play's focus of inquiry stimulated by the paintings; both the historical record and a clear investigation in response are held within this creative process.

Conversely, Howard Brenton's preface to *Anne Boleyn* explores what he refers to as the 'Anne Boleyn cult', acknowledging varying approaches from historians as well as representations of the historical figure in fiction and television (2012, 5–8). Brenton concludes that he 'wrote the play to celebrate her life and her legacy as a great English woman who helped change the course of our history' (2012, 8). In this case, Brenton indirectly calls on the historical record in his preface by noting the perspectives of historians, for example 'Antonia Fraser [...] sees Anne as a schemer and a poseur', but his concluding remark indicates the heritage mode, whereby the play calls on the cultural authority of celebration as the means through which to read the historical reimagining (2012: 6–8). Here, notions of heritage resonate with Smith's distinction of heritage as 'multi-layered performance [...] that embodies acts of remembrance and commemoration while negotiating and constructing a sense of [...] belonging and understanding in the present' (2006: 3). The notion of commemoration speaks to Brenton's emphasis on celebration, while his claim to be prioritising legacy echoes Smith's recognition of heritage as a negotiation between the past and present. This overview of authors' notes indicates the activation of modes in how the playwright frames the text for fellow creatives and readers. Rather than a clearly defined genre, the playwrights appear to emphasise what the play is aiming to 'do' or how it is operating which subsequently shapes the reader's approach to the text.

Activating modes in performance: *Handbagged* and *The Audience*

The preface or author's note appears to be one method through which modes are activated prior to reading a play text; developing this enquiry further, tracking the activation of modes in text and performance facilitates exploration of these nuances in practice. *Handbagged* by Moira Buffini and *The Audience* by Peter Morgan provide a fruitful case study through which to consider how cultural authority is drawn on in specific moments within a history play. Both plays focus on Queen Elizabeth II's private weekly meetings, or 'audiences', held with the serving Prime Minister (PM) as is the convention in UK politics.

The Audience spans the Queen's sixty-year reign interspersing timelines with dream-like scenes of Elizabeth as a child alongside scenes with the character of the Queen at varying ages in conversation with her PM of the moment in question. The premiering production had Helen Mirren playing the Queen and focused on transforming the performer across time periods predominantly through appearance and characterisation to delineate aging. Reviewer Peter Brown noted that there were, 'some fairly quick costume changes, some of which take place rather magically on-stage. Ms Mirren makes the transitions seem effortless, and is hugely convincing and authoritative both as the younger monarch and her older counterpart' (Brown 2013, n.p.). Brown's suggestion of a perceived 'magic' to the theatrical devices used to visually indicate the historical period resonates with an enchantment conjured by discourses of heritage, echoing

David Lowenthal's critique that 'heritage reshapes a past made easy to embrace' (Lowenthal 2007, 115). Lowenthal indicates here the repackaging of history; in the case of *The Audience* the theatrical devices not only enable this reshaping, but their highlighting of the spectacle makes that embrace all the more 'magical'. Similarly, Smith acknowledges the role of 'identity formation' within heritage practice and describes heritage as 'about the promotion of a consensus version of history' (2006, 4). Smith goes on to assert a 'dominant Western discourse', which she terms 'authorized heritage discourse', that 'naturalizes certain narratives [...] often linked to ideas of nation and nationhood' (Smith 2006, 4). With regard to *The Audience*, narrative content and dramatic form foreground the 'consensus' version of history and further contribute to the naturalization of dominant cultural narratives identified by Smith. This resonates with Brown's interpretation of *The Audience*, whereby Mirren embodies the monarch which appears to imply a performance of 'Britishness' and tradition sitting in conjunction with enchanting theatrical representation. Hence, the historical record is not the focus here but rather the experiential device – the 'magic' – through which history is conjured and served. By using the lens of heritage to interpret the onstage action in *The Audience*, we can see how this moment offers identity-making linked to contemporary 'Britishness' while simultaneously commemorating the past.

It is worth noting that *The Audience* was written following Morgan's film *The Queen* in which Mirren also played the title role. After the play, Morgan went on to write the internationally acclaimed Netflix drama series *The Crown* which includes scenes of Queen Elizabeth II at varying ages in a private audience with the serving PM, as well as exploration of her private life, most notably her relationship with the Duke of Edinburgh. This legacy in which the play is now framed echoes de Groot's notion of 'consumptive practices' across media relating to history, whereby an appetite for a reimagining of the Queen's private life has gathered momentum in the twenty-first century, with Morgan working across media both driving and responding to this phenomenon (de Groot 2009, 13).¹²

Like *The Audience*, *Handbagged* draws on the Queen's weekly audiences as the play's focus, but in contrast Buffini homes in on one relationship, that of the Queen and PM Margaret Thatcher. *Handbagged* is structured around two characters to represent each of the historical women, with a younger character contemporary to the 1980s and an older character looking back. The play employs direct address and, in contrast to *The Audience*, moves away from evoking historical period through use of set; rather, the dialogue predominantly delineates to the audience the historical moment. In addition to the four characters representing the two historical women, the play includes Actor 1 and Actor 2 who offer narration, reflective comments, and multirole other historical characters, such as Denis Thatcher, who come and go from the play's plotline. Exploration of these two characters indicates the emphasis on the playwright's creative licence, which draws on devices from epic theatre whereby the mechanics of theatre are made visible.¹³ The activation of this mode, which draws on the cultural authority of the artform, operates alongside indications to the historical record. For example, the two actors acknowledge metatheatrically the process of playwriting:

Actor 1 Why don't you tell them who you are playing in this half?

Actor 2 Murdoch – got a line of Prince Philip; look out for that one folks – Heseltine – Did you see his left-left-left speech?

Actor 1 No

Actor 2 It's virtuoso and she's cut it

(Buffini 2013, 74)

The characters go on to defy the absent playwright, who through metatheatricality has become a character by default, and argue over who should play Neil Kinnock (the Leader of the Opposition at the time), with Actor 2 proclaiming 'I wanted to be Kinnock [...] I can do a good Kinnock' as Actor 1 retorts, 'Yes but he's in my contract' (Buffini 2013, 75). The argument culminates in what Actor 1 proclaims is a 'Kinnock-off' passing the speech, and the character impression, back and forth, including:

Actor 2 If Margaret Thatcher wins on Thursday, I warn you not to be ordinary –

Actor 1 I warn you not to be young –

Actor 2 I warn you not to fall ill –

Actor 1 I warn you not to grow old –

(Buffini 2013, 77)

This sequence clearly cites the historical record of the verbatim text of the speech. However, this playful approach suggests that the role of these characters, used to represent different historical figures through the play, is to draw on stereotypes and provide impressions. This blurring of the line between play content and form actively rejects notions of heritage; in splitting up the speech, the audience is discouraged from measuring the accuracy of the portrayal of Kinnock even though paradoxically that is what the Actor characters are asking them to do. Here, the creative mode explicitly acknowledges the reimagining of history as a theatrical process in which the playwright steers the representation. Lowenthal's critique of heritage is turned on its head here as the 'reshaping' of history is made visible; thus, in this case the creative licence mode discourages notions of nostalgia, frequently evoked by connotations of heritage, in favour of highlighting the act as performance (Lowenthal 2007, 115). This sequence ends abruptly as the character of T appears proclaiming 'Denis' and stage directions dictate that 'Actor 2 puts Denis's glasses on' to return to the world of the play, with the use of the prop still suggesting a stereotype (Buffini 2013, 77). In this moment, all three modes serve the analysis; the historical record is directly drawn upon, but when we additionally identify the rejection of the heritage mode, and the foregrounding of the creative process, it sheds further light on the cultural authority being called on in this sequence. Consequently, the piece is not measured as a 'type' of history play but rather how history is evoked and used within the process of playwriting is brought into sharp focus.

Authorising creative licence

The semi-fictional, metatheatrical spotlighting of the playwright's choices returns us to the third of the modes we have discussed in this article, creative licence. Here, we want to name three salient tropes that belong to this mode and that serve its function as an

authenticating device, even as, in the example of *Handbagged* above, it de-authenticates the ‘historical record’ mode by flaunting the constructedness of its narration of the past. Firstly, as noted earlier, the playwright’s prefatory notes, in a programme or published text for a history play, frequently assert the writer’s use of the historical record and then identify the point at which they began to invent and imagine. Resonating with Wilkinson’s comments on *The Sweet Science of Bruising* is Lucy Kirkwood’s note on *Chimerica*: ‘It is a fact that there was a Tank Man. It is a fact that photographs were taken of him. Beyond that, everything that transpires in the play is an imaginative leap’ (Kirkwood 2013, 7). Or we might add Helen Edmundson’s note on *The Heresy of Love*: ‘I went away and I read everything I could find about [Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz], and to my relief discovered that, whilst certain facts are known about her and there are several extant documents relating to her life, there remain many unanswered questions about her motivations, beliefs and the state of her heart. Here, then, was room for invention’ (Edmundson 2012, 3). The creative ‘turn’ in these sentences, from facts and research to imagining and inventing, picturing and making, rhetorically clears the ground for what follows in the printed play, licensing its exploration of historical gaps and absences.

The second example of a trope that emphasises creative licence is what we call *elective anachronism*: the deliberate placement of moments that do not ‘belong’ in conventional representations of history.¹⁴ Such moments challenge normative expectations that historical drama will be ‘accurate’ or ‘impeccably researched’, expectations fed by film and television costume drama, with its abundance of period detail, as celebrated in ‘behind the scenes’ featurettes (Poore 2015, 71–72). An excellent example of this subtle undermining of historical illusionism is Kirkwood’s *The Welkin*. At the beginning of the second act, a stage direction tells us that we are seeing the events of the ‘hours before the murder’ of which the central character, Sally Poppy, is accused. It is 1759, and Sally and the murder victim, Alice Wax, are ‘play[ing] aeroplanes’ (2020, 77). When Sally recounts the day of the murder in the next scene, she too mentions that they ‘played aeroplanes’ (2020, 97), and when Sally has been questioned on the murder and her part in it, there is ‘A long and wretched pause’ before another character asks, ‘What is aeroplanes?’, to which Sally replies, ‘I don’t know’ (2020, 99). Later, after an angry and violent exchange, the jurors begin to sing a song ‘arranged like an old folk song’ but which turns out to be “‘Running Up That Hill” by Kate Bush’ (2020, 106). In these moments, the play draws our attention to its own unreliability as history, while forcing us to reassess the internal logic of this fiction and to consider what the playwright’s purpose might be in ‘breaking the spell’ in this way. At two moments of highly dramatic tension, then, the play asserts the creative presence of the playwright.

Our third example of creative licence is when a history play evokes or references precursor texts from playwriting history. To pursue this thinking with *The Welkin*, we need to reflect on the comparisons that critics made between the play and other drama. For example, almost all the reviews of the production, on the National Theatre’s Lyttelton stage, made the comparison with Reginald Rose’s teleplay, film and stage play *Twelve Angry Men*, given the ‘jury of matrons’ who are asked to pronounce on Sally’s guilt or innocence, and the enclosed space of the courthouse (e.g. Akbar 2020, 93; Crompton 2020, 101; Wong Davies 2020, 98). Inevitably, too, critics allude to Arthur Miller’s *The Crucible* (‘a community, bound by restrictions, at war with itself and ideas of truth’ (Benedict 2020, 102)). However, a more consistent reference-point is Caryl Churchill,

whose *Light Shining in Buckinghamshire*, *Fen*, and *Top Girls* are all named as indicators of ‘the impact of Caryl Churchill on Kirkwood’ which is ‘undeniable’ (Benedict 2020, 103). While some of these allusions may be superficial, the *Top Girls* connection merits further consideration. *Top Girls* had been revived on the same stage at the National seven months earlier, in a production by Lyndsey Turner that dispensed with the play’s traditional multi-rolling and featuring a company of eighteen women. The ready availability of the *Top Girls* comparison may spring partly, therefore, from a large cast of women performing at the same venue. However, we propose that the way these plays are linked helps to illuminate something about Kirkwood’s use of creative licence.

Top Girls falls outside our definition of a history play, in that while it features historical characters in its first act, its setting is (or was, at the time it was written) the present day (Churchill 1982). In *Cloud Nine* too, and with the ghosts in *Fen*, Churchill writes characters from the past, and – deploying different dramaturgies in each – puts them in modern settings. If we return to the examples of elective anachronism identified above, it is evident that Kirkwood is doing the opposite in *The Welkin*. The setting is historical, but the characters are, in these moments with the aeroplane and ‘Running Up That Hill’, pushing up against that setting, pointing to something beyond the play-world. Churchill’s characters out of their time, and Kirkwood’s events glimpsed out of their setting, are matching gestures, one coming from outside the history play as we understand it, Kirkwood’s coming from within. Or, put another way, Kirkwood turns Churchill’s dramaturgies in those plays inside-out. Even without the critical chorus in support of the connection, Kirkwood’s choice is hard to read as accidental; she has spoken about Churchill’s influence on her work and has drawn attention to the detail contained in particular lines as well as the impressiveness of Churchill’s play construction: ‘I often feel in our eagerness to admire her cathedrals we overlook the exquisite craft of the individual bricks’ (Kirkwood 2018. n.p.). We suggest that Kirkwood is here using the ‘crafted bricks’ of elective anachronisms to push back against a reading that privileges historical accuracy, and instead, is consciously expressing originality in relation to a playwriting tradition.

An objection to this last example might be that, in destabilising the past in a way that is familiar from landmarks of playwriting, Kirkwood’s elective anachronisms are really an example of the heritage mode. However, we would suggest there is a useful distinction to be made here. The heritage mode, in representing the history that ‘everybody knows’, may seek to commemorate, celebrate or provoke a sense of cosy familiarity. Referencing prior works of theatre, on the other hand, may imply a sense of belonging to a ‘heritage’ of history plays, but these are often complex and disturbing works that seek to subvert what we think we know and understand about the past. We would therefore consider this history of previous history plays as a legacy of (oppositional) cultural authority in playwriting that can be drawn on, rather than as heritage. However, as the example of *Handbagged* demonstrates, these modes are not mutually exclusive; a play or performance may move between different modes, or their activation of these modes may overlap in fluid and nuanced ways.

Conclusion

Using the examples of contemporary history plays centred on monarchs and leaders (*The Audience*, *Handbagged*) and also imagined, unknown figures (Sally Poppy in *The*

Welkin), this article has sought to offer tools for further use in analysing history plays in the twenty-first century. It has been argued that in the present age our relationship to historical material, whether as theatre-makers or theatre audiences, is always mediated by the heritage industry on the one hand, and the playwriting legacy on the other, both of which offer ways for us to ‘tune in’ to shared ideas of what is familiar, predictable, plausible or possible in these imagined worlds of the past. The essay’s proposal that we release ourselves from a limiting singular understanding of what constitutes a history play, and its proposal that we think in terms of the activation of modes, are in fact intertwined. Once we are no longer beholden to an essentialist definition of a history play that privileges subject, setting, dramaturgy, intent or function – and instead accept the play’s own claim that these events take place in the past – then we are more empowered to analyse what happens moment by moment in the play, and how different conceptions of ‘history’ are operating in different combinations at different points. These modes can, of course, also be deployed as a means of analysing the present-day revival of history plays written in earlier periods, where a consciousness of the play’s ‘present’ – from which it evokes the past – now being, itself, historic, may complicate the interaction of the three modes still further. This is surely not a comprehensive set of tools for analysing any play that makes a claim to be set in the past, and further work will no doubt refine or expand our thinking. These interactions will certainly be different in the other nations of the UK and in other countries, where new writing practices, industry conditions, and influences from period film and television will impact distinctively on history plays. Nevertheless, we suggest that the ways in which the modes of heritage, the historical record, and creative licence intersect, overlap, and even compete, in play texts and performances are particularly useful as lenses of analysis in the context we describe. They help us to characterise some of the ways in which history plays in theatres in England work differently in the twenty-first century, in their shifting, unsettled relationships to the cultural validation offered by these three modes.

Notes

1. D. Keith Peacock observes that the ‘history lesson’ play was ‘contrived to ensure that an audience, while adding a little to its knowledge of history, would also experience an entertaining evening’s theatre’ (Peacock 1991, 25).
2. The nature and prevalence of history plays in regional theatres in England is a neglected area of research, and one that we plan to address fully in future publications.
3. See also Tomlin 2019.
4. See Grochala (2017, 220–221) and Fragkou (2019, 183, 186).
5. This survey is particularly indebted to the accounts of theories of the history play given by Botham in articles that focus on the work of David Greig (Botham 2016a) and Howard Brenton and James Graham (Botham 2016b).
6. For an example of a critical tradition that has overlooked the historical dimension, see the discussion of Churchill’s *Cloud Nine* in Poore’s *Heritage, Nostalgia and Modern British Theatre*, where the initial critical reception placed the play in the context of other theatre of the 1970s satirising the Victorians, a set of associations that go unmentioned when the play is seen as part of the Churchill or ‘modern drama’ canon only (Poore 2012, 189–90).
7. Benjamin Poore also addresses this focus on museum performance, through an exploration of moments of performance at heritage sites, stating, ‘for every museum, gallery, stately home or site of historical interest, there will be a slightly different variety of “live

- interpretation” (2012, 123). Poore positions this enquiry in conversation with an exploration of twentieth-century bio-dramas, with a focus on the Victorians, thus directly bringing questions of heritage and representations of history into the arena of new playwriting.
8. These are the opening stage directions of, respectively, John Galsworthy’s *Windows* (Galsworthy 1922) and J.B. Priestley’s *When We Are Married* (Priestley 1938).
 9. These are the opening stage directions of Lucy Kirkwood’s *The Welkin* (Kirkwood 2020) and Janice Okoh’s *The Gift* (Okoh 2020), which both premiered in 2020.
 10. See, for example, Lindenberger (1975, 3–4); Brown (2016, 40); Rokem (2000, 3); Botham (2016b, 87).
 11. These quotations are all taken from reviews of the *Women, Power and Politics* play cycle at the Tricycle Theatre in 2010, as part of which *Handbagged* was first staged. The critics are Sarah Hemming (2010, 655), Tim Auld (2010, 656), and Susannah Clapp (2010, 656–657) respectively.
 12. The ‘magic’ of representations of history and the British royal family became the subject of national news at the end of 2020 when the Culture Secretary, Oliver Dowden, called for the fourth series of *The Crown* to carry a warning that it was a drama. In calling *The Crown* ‘a beautifully produced work of fiction’, Dowden invoked a similar idea of enchantment, his ‘fear [that] a generation of viewers’ due to the magic of high production values, ‘may mistake fiction for fact’ (Bakare 2020).
 13. For example, in ‘The Street Scene: A Basic Model for Epic Theatre’ Brecht insists that epic theatre must not ‘cast a spell’ and must avoid ‘the engendering of illusion’; ‘the theatre will stop pretending not to be theatre’ (Brecht 2015, 204–205).
 14. Here we might have used the term ‘strategic anachronism’ to describe the playful or jarring ways on which anachronism is deployed, but the phrase has already been coined to refer to language choices (Traub 2002, 16) and to a form of dramatic irony in historical TV drama (Baglia and Foster 2015, 52). It is perhaps more helpful in this context to consider anachronism as a Brechtian technique (Silberman 2006).

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