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**Marianne Dugeon**

**Reconstruction on the British Contemporary Stage – the What Ifs of History**

I finished my thesis on the committed playwright David Edgar in 2004, and by then I had a rather clear definition of the ideas shared by the second generation of angry young men, playwrights who started writing in the wake of 1968, and who thought that theatre was an effective pulpit from which to engage the audience on topical issues such as the Viet Nam War, the rise of Feminism, the politics of Thatcher, and later the fall of the Berlin wall or the workings of the British legal system, or of an American election...The list could go on forever, what struck me was the topicality of those plays. The idea was that setting plays in the past was a sort of evasion, and that if you wanted to write plays about contemporary politics you should set them in the present day.

Even when they used history, it was the better to talk about the present situation. The then and there served as a clear metaphor for the here and now. Thus Brenton wrote *Romans in Britain* in 1980 to talk about the English imperialism in Catholic Ireland, and David Edgar wrote *Dick Deterred* in 1974, a parody of *Richard III* which was really talking of Nixon and the Watergate.

The year 2011, which was the occasion of the celebration of the four-hundredth anniversary of the King James Bible, nevertheless saw both authors choose to write plays about four hundred years ago: Brenton's *Anne Boleyn* opened at the Globe (John Greenfield mentioned it at the opening conference on Thursday, and I agree with him, it was brilliant) in 2010; and David Edgar's *Written on the Heart*, about the translation of God's Word into English, was first performed by the RSC in the Swan Theatre in 2011.

I would like to explore the way both plays reconstruct history, but even more importantly I would like to understand why committed playwrights thought it interesting to try their hand at costume drama.

In the keynote lecture David Edgar gave 10 days ago in Montpellier for the conference 'The Past is Back on Stage', the playwright listed five reasons why authors write history plays:

1. The historical and mythical past provides great and grand stories in which eternal human dilemmas are confronted and setting plays there demonstrates their universal character
2. To challenge received views of past events or people (for instance from a feminist perspective in recent years)
3. To illuminate the present by exposing its roots in past events
4. To show how live current issues were confronted in the past
5. Finally playwrights choose historical settings to write about the present by way of analogy

-> my purpose today is to analyse *Anne Boleyn* and *Written on the Heart* along those five lines and try to assess in what way they are related to our here and now.

(I think that among the five reasons listed above there is one, the first one, which really does not correspond with the work of politically committed playwrights, but the other four feel relevant.)

- I. Drawing from the past to understand our roots?
  1. Importance of History

Both plays are in fact set in different periods in the past, and do not develop chronologically.

WH begins in 1610 and then jumps through a series of analepses on various moments over 70 years previous to 1610.

In the programme of the play you have a summary: scene one 1610; scene two 1536, scene three 1586, scene four 1610.

But the spectators who have not bought the programme are left to their own devices to guess when the scenes take place. They are helped in that by a series of repetitions of important sentences, turned into leitmotifs representative of such and such a character, who has aged, or is younger, and may be not directly recognisable.

Thus the young priest who talks with Tyndale in his cell in 1535 in scene two “changes from the twenty-year-old Catholic YOUNG PRIEST to a seventy-year-old Anglican Archdeacon at the beg. Of scene three, but the transformation operates before the eyes of the spectators.

In a contrary movement, the chaplain whom we meet when he is 33 in scene 3 is in fact the same person as the 55-year-old Bishop of Ely, Andrewes, whom we have already encountered in the first scene.

But this is not very clear, and many critics have complained they felt lost in the plot: **I would have liked clearer indications of the scene's dates** (Michael Billington (!), WH review)

**This is a play in which you need to do your prep. I spent more than an hour before it started reading Edgar's “afterword” to the published text and the programme notes describing the religious and historical background to King James I's decision to form a committee to produce an authorised English Bible. Yet I still found the piece hard work.** (Charles Spencer, WH review)

As for *Anne Boleyn*, the play opens with a kind of prologue with Anne Boleyn talking directly to the public, then the scenes alternate between 1603-1604 under the rule of James I and 1527-1536 under the rule of Henry VIII.

Though the play is once more not linear nor chronological, it is nevertheless easier to follow: for one thing the period from 1527 to 1536 is meant to show us, through a series of representative episodes, the story of the relationship between Henry VIII and Anne Boleyn, from the encounter through to her execution, and these episodes are organised chronologically.

What is more, the characters themselves help the spectators in very Shakespearean asides, like Anne stating “five years later” at the beginning of scene 7.

Brenton's play much more openly centers on important historical figures than Edgar's one, and he indeed states in an interview: "It is my view that personalities do make history, alas." But both plays do show us History through the story of individuals.

History is thus made personal through the itineraries of significant figures or representative types. Tyndale, Anne Boleyn, Henry VIII, Cromwell, More or James I are significant figures, while the young priest who meets Tyndale and changes his whole view of the world as a consequence, or the many servants with whom the historical figures have conversations, are representative types, with whom the spectators may identify.

These are also plays that intertwine individual stories with History.

This is also visible when you look at the programmes: WH -> 4 double pages devoted to a chronology of events (you have that in the book too), then articles by former canon chancellor of St Paul's Cathedral and a professor of English from Oxford. Finally there is a double page giving short biographies of the real persons -> some of them have their portraits, but some are represented only by a photograph of the actor who plays the role!

As for AB, you have a long article by Brenton on Anne Boleyn, the reproduction of letters or extracts from Tyndale's translation, and an article on James I by a historian.

I think those two programmes are emblematic of this combination of History and Theatre. It also illustrates what those two playwrights have recognised: the ability of Theatre to tell not only stories but also History, in a very convincing way.

## 2. The power of History plays over History books

Indeed the two playwrights have really taken advantage of theatricality and metatheatricality in various ways.

In WH, a long scene is set in Tyndale's prison cell, just before his execution. This was situated on the protruding area at the Swan in Stratford-upon-Avon, much further into the audience, allowing more dramatic effect and a possible identification with Tyndale, all the more so as the scene is played by candlelight, the candle also serving a metaphor to illustrate the courage and faith of Tyndale.

On the other hand *Anne Boleyn* opened at the Globe, and the designer added to the existing protruding stage a series of catwalks crossing the yard so that the actors were really among the spectators (see photograph p. 15 programme). In the same season at the Globe, a play by Shakespeare, *Henry VIII*, was also performed, with the same actress, Miranda Raison, playing Anne Boleyn in the two plays.

Both plays also use extensively metatheatre, with a ward in WH who played "Dame Goodly Thinking" in a mystery (p. 23), or Tyndale accusing the priest who visits him in his cell of being "a lazy actor who [has] not learnt [his] script." (p. 30) when he sees him visibly unconvinced by the part he has to play.

The characters in *Anne Boleyn* also recurrently resort to asides, which provide necessary information to the spectators, for instance Cromwell's double dealing, lies and secrets.

Metatheatre thus allows the spectators to get basic facts, but more generally, it also illustrates the notion that differences between the Roman Catholic Church and the

Lutheran creed are more a matter of plays on words, so that the execution of so many people because of them is shown as arbitrary and uncivilised.

### 3. Showing how it happened

Indeed the main power of theatre is that it allows the playwright to show us History in the making, and this, once more, is exemplified in the two plays. But when Brenton merely illustrates, I would contend that Edgar constructs, and reconstructs, through analogies and metaphors.

This begins in scene two, in Tyndale's cell, where the keeper only speaks Flemish. His words are not translated (though the translation appears in the play text). Similarly the young priest who visits Tyndale speaks in Latin: very concretely thus, words have a hidden meaning for the spectators. Tyndale sometimes translates for the two to understand each other. Then the process of translation is shown in the making. But the scene is also the occasion for Tyndale to smuggle his translation out with the help of the priest. This time, Tyndale voluntarily omits translating parts of the dialogue, or sometimes mistranslates to hide the real meaning from the keeper. This of course illustrates the power of the translator in twisting, slanting, reconstructing the meaning of words, and as the play is about the translation of the Bible, we are here talking of the twisting, slanting and reconstructing of the Word of God!

Another very powerful metaphor used by Edgar, and not for the first time for he had already experimented on that with *Pentecost*) is the façade of a church as a palimpsest, showing the marks of history. History is thus made visible, even tangible. Here are the stage directions at the beginning of scene 3:

"The church is dominated by a rood screen with a complicated history: originally, there were painted Saints, but their faces, hands and feet have been scratched out. A couple of the faces have been crudely repainted. Then, clearly, the whole screen has been whitewashed, but, last of all, the whitewash over the Saints themselves has been rubbed off. So currently we see a white screen with the Saints appearing like ghosts within it." (p. 40)

The metaphor is further explained by a character, the churchwarden, who sums up the changes of his recent history and the effect they had on the construction, deconstruction and reconstruction of his church:

"In King Henry's time, of blessed memory, we are enjoined to strip the statues of their clothing, and to remove the lights before them. To take down the altars and to level out the steps. Then, in the rule of his son Edward, we must smash the rood loft and pull down the images that stand below it. Rend all the primers and the legendaries, save for the English Bible. Remove all vestments, plate, and bells, and uproot the crosses from the graves. Then in the reign of his sister Mary we must put the altars up again, repaint the Saints, repurchase plate and bells and books and vestments, set back up the Latin Bible and destroy the English. Then, when our present Queen...

1549: 'For removal of altar and rood loft, taking down of bells and scraping off of Saints' names: ten pounds and three shillings.' 1551: 'Two shillings and threepence for taking down an image of St George.' 1555: 'Five shillings and sixpence for putting up an image of St George.' 1559: 'For the purchase of a Book of Common Prayer, three shillings and eightpence. For removing the corpus from the rood: nine shillings and five pence..."

The series of dates at the end of this long quotation shows to what extent the theatre is able to tell us of History, to illustrate how the roots of the people can explain their present situation. Nevertheless, to take up again Edgar's classification, do these plays really tell us about the present? Do they illuminate the present by exposing the past? At first sight it seems rather that they represent a regression rather than a progression.

- II. Perhaps a regression?
  1. Entertainment (coming with a price)

Most obviously, Howard Brenton's play, which is highly entertaining, seems a little too light to be tackling such complicated issues as the English Reformation. Writing for the Globe certainly comes at a price, and this price is most visible when we compare the two plays.

As the critic Philip Fisher states: "History lessons are not supposed to be such fun. Howard Brenton's envisioning of the life and afterlife of Queen Anne Boleyn is a bawdy, raucous romp packed with ripe, modern language that still manages to address some serious issues in considerable depth."

While I do agree with the first few adjectives used in this quote, I am not quite persuaded that we may consider the result as a deep and serious reflection on the issue. This is not to say that Anne Boleyn opening the play by teasing the audience into believing that she will show them her severed head ("Do you want to see it? Who wants to see it? Do you? You? I'll show then." +photo) is wrong. The depiction of Anne as a facetious and clever woman (she first draws a bible from the bag, before indeed taking out her head and playing with it) is indeed quite thought provoking and certainly more interesting than depicting her as a sensuous whore as is too often the case in TV series for instance.

But depicting James I as a clown, who farts, plays with women's attires, is lewd, superstitious and puerile, does simplify the picture.

On the whole the dialogue is certainly not only more modern than in WH, but also less complicated, relying on comic insults rather than wit.

James I is thus constantly sprinkling his rather simple speeches with onomatopoeias such as 'tum tum tum', 'oop oop oops, pis h posh' or 'thwack thwack'

Even Anne, though she was reputed for her wit and sharp repartee, is reduced to braying when angry: "Wolly wolly Wolsey, woolly sheep...butcher's son, let him butcher a sheep" the nursery rhyme then loses all articulation: "bah bah bah" while we see her pull faces and finally burst out laughing. She does win the audience, but more with low comic than cleverness.

At the beginning of act 2 James I is seen kissing his courtier. For one thing his homosexuality is subject to debate, as it probably was a slander circulated 25 years after his death by Anthony Weldon who had been rejected from court. But even if this were true, who cares? Moreover his homosexuality is depicted by Brenton as a ridiculous femininity equated with weakness which, though of course it raises laughter, is also disturbing to watch.

Last, but not least, when we compare the way the debates around the choice of words for the KJB are presented in both plays, we are struck by how simplified Brenton's discussion is.

The first debate is thus literally cut:

“Enter JOHN REYNOLDS, HENRY BARROW just behind him, and other PURITANS. They kneel. JAMES gestures for them to get up.  
JAMES. Doctor Reynolds. I am not ready to hear, at large, what you can object or say to the Church of England.  
REYNOLDS. The sacraments of the Church must be reformed.  
ANDREWES. There has been reform enough to the Church of England.  
REYNOLDS. Not so.  
ANDREWES. Very much so.  
CECIL. (aside) Five hours later.  
All rearrange into exhausted disarray. JAMES appears to be asleep.”

When, later in the play, James wakes up and discusses the choice between two translations for the Latin “Ecclesia”, his explanation once more turns into not even a play on words but a mere play on sonorities: “A world of difference. ‘Church’ meaning an institution of the State. ‘Congregation’ meaning a meeting, higgledy-d-piggledy group. Nub gentlemen. Nub? And another, nubblly knobblly nub.”

And when Cromwell, who is busy finding the right phrasing for the act of parliament announcing the separation from the Roman Church, wants to get rid of Henry VIII, he merely mentions food and there flees the King to the kitchen.

The play as a whole is thus successful for the very reason which limits its interest for a historian: it satisfies the needs of the body, but not those of the mind.

Even Anne Boleyn’s very last words on stage, which work as a Shakespearian epilogue, offer a rather simplistic moral for the story: “Be careful of love. No, don’t be careful. Why not live for love? Why not live for a better world?”

## 2. Playing with Truth, what if...

But the plays are not only guilty of simplification, or lies by omission, they are also taking liberties with historical truth, reconstructing it thanks to the magic of theatre.

Once more though Edgar seems less offhand: if he images that Andrewes and Tyndale meet, it is only because Tyndale returns as a ghost.

But he nevertheless chooses to present as facts elements which are only inferred but have never been proved. After the death of Tyndale, John Rodgers published a translation of the New Testament, which much resembles in style the translation of the old Testament which we know is by Tyndale. But there is no proof of that. David Edgar chose to show a young priest successfully smuggling this translation from Tyndale’s cell. (The plot is of course reminiscent of Brecht’s *Galileo*)

(Similarly historians have no proof that Tyndale did know that, quite ironically, by the time he was condemned to death in 1536, Henry VIII was already convinced that the Bible would have to be translated in English. But Edgar decides to have the ghost of Tyndale discover it in his play.)

Of course the play does not pretend to be an accurate documentary on the period (and even if it were we have seen yesterday how theatre couldn’t possibly be expected to show an accurate image of reality. But by intentionally mixing checked facts with fake news David Edgar reconstructs history without acknowledging it.

Howard Brenton is guilty of the same freedom with facts, and even has a name for it, as he explains in his foreword to the play: “Anne Boleyn and Tyndale never met but in my

play they do (it's what playwrights call "the Schiller manoeuvre", after the great scene in *Maria Stuart* where Elizabeth I meets Mary Queen of Scots).

So:

"what if one of Catherine of Aragon's sons had survived – would England have stayed Catholic? What if Henry had not caught Anne's orange – would the Protestants at court have lost out? (...) what if when James ascends the English throne in 1603 he is looking through Queen Elizabeth's effects and, hidden in an old chest, he finds her mother's copies of Tyndale's books and becomes obsessed with her?"

This last 'what if' is at the centre of the plot of Brenton's play. But like Edgar's ghostly Tyndale, Brenton's Anne is a ghost when she meets James I.

On the other hand, the meeting between Anne and Tyndale, for sure, never happened. History plays are necessarily interpretations of history. Why not, thus, imagine that it is Cromwell who pushed Jane Seymour in the arms of the King the better to get rid of Anne Boleyn who had discovered he was stealing money from the monasteries.

But on the whole, those two plays seem to embody a sort of retrenchment, a sort of withdrawal from more pressing subjects, to concentrate on the distant past because it might seem safer...

### 3. Withdrawal

I will not have time to talk about it today but in 1999 David Edgar published a collection of articles entitled *The State of Play*. In one of them written by him he begins by saying: "Alone among the arts, the live theatre is in the present tense or it is nowhere."

If we take a broader look at the career of Brenton, we will also be struck by the fact that all but one of the plays he wrote in the 70s were set in the present, while all but one of his 21<sup>st</sup> century plays are set in the past.

I still do find it surprising for those two authors thus to relish in what can be categorized as costume drama, relishing also in the use of an antiquated language. In that light, it seems ironical to read Edgar commenting on the voluntarily exaggerated traditionalism of the language used in the KJB, with its use of thou, hath, doeth, or "thereof" instead of you, has, does and its. Is deciding to write a play in 2011 set in 1611 not also showing the same kind of nostalgia for the past, the same will to find the roots of today, even if they are artificially devised? (same questioning around his work with his wife Stephanie Dale on community plays)

What is more, Edgar seems now to prefer discussion to action, to a point that it becomes almost caricatural: the whole of act one of WH, if it is indeed very interesting and challenging intellectually, also feels like an endless discussion about the choice between « confessing or acknowledging », « delectable or very pleasant » p. 8 ; « thy faith hath healed thee or thy faith hath saved thee » p. 9

During one of those discussions a character exclaims:

p.11 « And yet, lords, we are gathered, or you might say, rather – dragged here, while our greater duties fall into neglect. The King's treasury is bare, the Spanish match is in contention, and both superstition – seemingly – and separatism – manifestly – stalk the land. While we adjudicate between 'acknowledge » and « confess », weigh « heal » and « save », and distinguish – if distinction may be drawn – between « very pleasant » and « delectable ». » -> this might describe DE's position !!

### III. A possible mirror for the present?

#### 1. Demystifying the word of God

But now that we have seen how those two plays reconstruct the past, we still may try to see in what ways they also try to mirror the present, or try to link the past with the present.

In his afterword, DE states as the main goal of his play his wish to demystify the Word of God, explaining how it is not unique, nor universal, but instead made for a particular time, and for a particular purpose.

In that regard, working with the RSC, who aims at demystifying Shakespeare, seems logical.

Interestingly, Brenton also explains in an article that what triggered his decision to accept to write a play about that period was a conversation between his father and a butcher about the KJB. When Brenton's father argued that the teaching of the Bible should not be taken literally, and that anyway they were a translation from the Hebrew and Greek and Latin,

"The butcher exploded. Translation? No! He believed Jesus and the disciples actually spoke the words of the King James Bible. The language of biblical Palestine was Jacobean English.

This literalism seems absurd. The title page of the King James version reads "newly translated out of the original tongues, and with former translations diligently compared and revised, by His Majesty's special command". But I suspect that, since its publication in 1611, millions in the English speaking world have shared the butcher's certainty. Nowadays James's "authorised version" is seen as merely a monument of beautiful but antiquated English. But for the faithful it was – and for many still is – the word of God made ink on paper.

So the butcher was expressing a fundamental Protestant belief: the word of God must be absolute, certain, unquestionable, because it is the only thing we have to live by. By attacking my father's "rationalism" he was also expressing a deep, Protestant fear: call the literal interpretation of the Bible into doubt and God's word becomes incoherent. God begins to mumble, then falls silent and dies. The word is all."

Interestingly here David Edgar, and up to a point Howard Brenton, seem to do the exact opposite of what DE suggested as the first reason for setting plays in the past: instead of trying to tell a great and grand story with a universal dimension, they tell of a particular time, of particular persons, so that we may wonder at this point if there is any lesson to draw from those particular situations that would be applicable to the present.

#### 2. Offering another version of History and building a hall of mirrors

I would like here to look at the way both plays instead offer one version of History, and more particularly one version of those very famous historical figures.

In WH, Thomas More is described by the heroic figure Tyndale as “the hell-bound Thomas More”. In that regard it is quite entertaining to compare all the different version offered by playwrights, novelists or scriptwriters in recent years: for Robert Bolt in *A Man for all Seasons*, More was a humanist who died because he would not disclaim his beliefs, while Hilary Mantel chose Cromwell as a hero and consequently shed a much more negative light on More.

In Brenton’s play, *Wolsey*, More and Cromwell are all shown as bullies and manipulators, and the image of More, enjoying torturing Protestants in his basement reminds us more of a serial killer in an American movie than the noted Renaissance humanist!

This might be because Brenton’s focus is on a woman, Anne Boleyn. Thus his play does seem to fit Edgar’s second reason, challenging the received views of the past.

Indeed Anne Boleyn is today the object of a cult. But most of the time she is seen as either the puppet of her father who uses her sex appeal to serve his ambitions, or as a schemer and calculating manipulator herself.

But Brenton adds another dimension, her faith as a Protestant:

“I wrote the play to celebrate her life and her legacy as a great English woman who helped change the course of our history.”

In an interview of Brenton, Susan Bordo, a professor of the humanities, also explains that Anne Boleyn is taken as a figurehead of third-wave feminism:

I think that she appeals to contemporary girls because of her complexity, and they “get” her in a way that many of the official historians don’t. She says to them: You can be smart. You can be dedicated. You can fight for a cause. But you also can like beautiful clothes and jewelry and don’t think for a minute that just because I flirt with you that you can’t take me seriously. And don’t think I’m anyone’s victim! They want heroines who stand up for themselves, who fight for what they believe, but who also have a sexual, playful, ironic side. And I think Anne works that way for them. In a sense, she’s a “third-wave” heroine.

This description of her as the heroine of today’s teenagers, does fit the Anne Boelyn imagined by Brenton, and is thus an effective reconstruction of the past, one which does not simply imitate faithfully but offers a new historical figure to which new generations wish to identify.

3. Explaining the links between Religion and Politics, drawing parallels with our present situation (religious integristism)

What is more, both plays do not content themselves with the history of important figures, they also deal with the history of a nation as a whole.

In WH: “we do not deal with one archbishop’s work but the fates of kings and nations, in this matter” p. 14

(example of the political reasons behind choices of translations: The KJB prefers “submission” where Tyndale had “obeying” (to masters, husbands, kings): submission is an acknowledgement of a prior hierarchy, obeying is something the individual chooses to do.)

In AB, the queen's ambition is not personal, it is ambition for her country: "I will be a new Queen. For a new England (...) God's will. This may be his purpose for me on earth. A protestant Queen for England."

WH is not really about God's words but rather about questions of diplomacy and politics, while AB is not really about the love story between Henry VIII and one of his wives but about the English Reformation and its long-term consequences on the definition of a national identity for the British.

Finally, both playwrights have also talked about the possibility that their plays might illuminate the present through analogy:

DE: "the fundamentalist protestantisms of the sixteenth and seventeenth century were eerily resonant of other religious fundamentalisms today: with their veneration of the book, their hostility to the image and suspicion of music, their sexual puritanism, their desire to unify Church and State, and their obsession with martyrdom. Even the beards."

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Brenton is less self-assured, as if any analogy was fortuitous:

"Perhaps because it's about the instability of regimes. (...) In my view, you can't ever have a message-stricken play that tries to disrupt accepted ideas, and so on. You just follow an instinct, something that you're obsessed with at the moment, and then only later do you realize why. It's very dangerous for writers to suddenly begin to think about their "whys". You can go bonkers; you turn into the label that you've created. We can't be moralists or ideologues."

In the words of the playwrights, the link that the two plays underlines between religious and political questionings, and between the past and the present is easily summed up: "no bishops no king" p.79 / "No Tyndale, no Kindle"p. 112