Historic British Royal Memes

Revealing the Popular Memory of Past Monarchs

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Feature

Introduction

A successful Internet meme entwines comedy with social commentary to make its point. This potent combination provides an accessible way for individuals to participate in public discourse. A sub-category of Internet meme are historic royal memes. These memes leverage shared historical knowledge to communicate ideas. This article examines memes that use imagery of past English and British monarchs from William the Conqueror (1066) to George VI (1952). It will provide illustrative analyses of memes that use Lady Jane Grey (1537-1554) and Richard III (1452-1485) as their inspiration to demonstrate how historic events are leveraged for both humour and social commentary. In doing so, it asks: what do historic royal memes reveal about how English and British monarchs are remembered in the popular imagination today? Findings reveal that on aggregate, monarchs are remembered more for their failings rather than their achievements, and that the politics of the past often mirror those of today. In this way, historic royal memes have much to tell us about our society today.

Memes

The focus of this study is on memes from the category 'Internet memes'. Just what constitutes an Internet meme is not completely settled. For example, di Legge, Mantovani, and Meloni provide the broad definition "the term 'Internet meme' concerns a user generated content, i.e. a union of different semantic units (typically still images and text, or animated GIF, or a video), that spreads online and changes along the way" (Di Legge, Mantovani, and Meloni 409). Limor Shifman provides a definition based on memes as a corpus rather that a singular unit: "(a) a group of digital items sharing common characteristics of content, form, and/or stance; (b) that were created with awareness of each other; and (c) were circulated, imitated, and/or transformed via the Internet by many users" (Shifman "Humor"; Shifman *Memes*). Bradley E Wiggins provides a more nuanced description, stating that "the internet meme is … defined as a remixed, iterated message that can be rapidly diffused by members of participatory digital culture for the purpose of satire, parody, critique, or other discursive activity" (Wiggins 453). In particular, he notes that Internet memes "are heavily dependent, one might even say obsessed with parody and intertextuality and even intermemetic-referentiality (memes that refer to other memes)" (Wiggins 480).

Memes in this context can enjoy either a short life-span or can be recycled for years. They can be static images, GIFs, or videos. They are often recycled or put into new contexts. Memes work especially well if they are a complete text within themselves; that is, as Nadia Agatha Pramesthi argues, "they do not have to occur in a conversation. They also do not depend on a special context for their interpretation" (Pramesthi 215). In her study of memes shared in the Reddit group *r/HistoryMemes*, Pramesthi found that many of the memes were easily understood outside the community by those who did not have specialised knowledge in history (Pramesthi 228). As anthropologist Daniel Miller puts it: "an internet meme must be easily understandable and reproducible. For a meme to exist successfully, it must catch on and be shared as often as possible" (Göke).

The rising popularity of memes at the turn of the millennium can be connected to five principal facts, according to di Legge, Mantovani, and Meloni:

> the leverage for creating memes provided by graphics editing programs and the Internet; the adaptability to a wide range of uses, communicating jokes, emotions, advertisements; their ease of mastery, since most of them are made by using cut-copy, paste and text tool functions; the accessibility of memes, which depends on the accessibility of their habitat,

> the Internet; lastly, their transferability, relating to their most important quality, namely replicability in different cultures. (Di Legge, Mantovani, and Meloni 409).

The comedic value of memes provides a safe way for individuals to engage in public debates, as Daniel Miller euphemistically puts it: "somebody who is quite shy and [doesn't] want to express political views or opinions, [doesn't] want to give religious opinions, they will send memes" (Borgerson and Miller 525). As a communication device, creating a meme is relatively easy, allowing for even the most casual Internet users to be able to participate in their creation and dissemination. There are even Websites such as *Make A Meme.org*, *iloveIMG.com*, and even Adobe which allow users to create memes with little knowledge of either graphic software or computer coding. Free and easy to use, you can create your own meme and publish it in just a few minutes. Maybe it will even go viral.

As a cultural artefact, memes have several functions beyond humour. Daniel Miller argues that one of the primary functions of a meme is that they "basically denigrate what they don't agree with or laud behavior they do agree with; so memes are what we call the moral police of the internet" (Borgerson and Miller 525). Knobel and Lankshear (218), in developing a typology of memes, provide several motivations for their creation, grouped under the umbrellas of social commentary, humour, expressing fandom, and creating hoaxes. For Valeriya Kalkina, "one particular function that memes fulfil in contemporary culture is mocking all subjects, for instance, our daily life, current political issues, historical events or famous personalities" (Kalkina 133). Di Legge, Mantovani, and Meloni argue that "memes, as part of popular culture, are first and foremost an accurate mirror of society, as they reflect the changes in our perception of a world in which humour seems to be [what Limor Shifman calls] the 'unique key for the understanding of social and cultural processes'" (Di Legge, Mantovani, and Meloni 417). Thus, rather than being the aim, humour is the medium through which memes make social statements.

Limor Shifman found that most popular topics in Internet humour were global in their understanding: "sex, gender and animals" were the most prevalent, with more local topics such as "politics, sports and ethnicity" being less so (Shifman "Humor" 200). Shifman notes that "the Internet is a suitable medium for sexual jokes, as the anonymity and isolated reading process may encourage people who find it embarrassing to tell or hear sexual jokes in the 'offline world' to send or read them online. In addition – sex, maybe more than any other topic – is global in its nature" (Shifman "Humor" 201). While the assertion that sex is more "global in its nature" is arguable, Shifman's conclusions posit the question: is the Internet an ideal forum for a range of jokes that would be socially embarrassing to participate in otherwise, for example racist or sexist humour?

Internet memes have shifted the way we participate in social communication. Shifman argues that "three fundamental characteristics of the Internet come into play: Interactivity, multimedia, and global reach" (Shifman "Humor" 204). The hierarchy between joke-teller and audience found in legacy media such as television or on stage collapses here. Instead, the roles are fluid. Additionally, the original author is often anonymous, and may have only fleeting control over both the content and the dissemination of the meme. Audience members are free to take a meme and redistribute it, and transform it howsoever they wish. The meme becomes the creation of a loose coalition of individuals who may have only ever had fleeting contact through the meme. This leads to the phenomenon of transformation, where memes seem to take on a life of their own as they travel through culture. Their success, however, remains within their level of saliency: do the results remain instantly recognisable to the other members of the group?

Shifman argues that there are three defining characteristics of online humour. The first is a feature she calls "highlighted incongruity", using collage techniques to juxtapose elements into a single form. The second, the fusion of real and fiction within a meme, is what Shifman calls the 'postmodern spirit' of the genre (Shifman "Humor" 205). The third can be found in the "the comic commodification of celebrities. Many of the new texts focus on famous people, from various spheres such as sports, politics and entertainment. In this process, iconic images of celebrities are chopped into visual and audible pieces, which are then manipulated in order to generate scornful laughter" (Shifman "Humor" 205). Memes seemingly cover a diverse range of elements; however, Shifman found in a study of Youtube memes that there were "six such features common to a majority of the sampled texts: A focus on ordinary people, flawed masculinity, humor, simplicity, repetitiveness and whimsical content" (Shifman "Anatomy" 192).

History Memes

Royal history memes are a sub-category of history memes. The cultural significance of memes has resulted in calls for history memes to be taken seriously as a unit of study. Di Legge, Mantovani, and Meloni say that history memes' "popularity should be taken seriously as objects of curation and collection" and can reveal how "non-academic audiences play an important role in the representation of the past" (Di Legge, Mantovani, and Meloni 407-08). Prominent historical imagery is imbued with shared cultural knowledge that allows them to be exploited by meme-makers. From Soviet propaganda posters to art to sepia-tone photographs and black and white film, historic artefacts can be repurposed for the present. For example, Valeriya Kalkina found that "Soviet-related memes may provide a grass-roots re-conceptualisation of the Soviet past" (Kalkina), free from the original intended propaganda meanings. Di Legge, Mantovani, and Meloni note that "some memes can summarize – though in a simplified manner – even complex historical issues (Di Legge, Mantovani, and Meloni 412)".

Further, Makhortykh argues that "in the case of historical memes, it is not possible to ignore the large body of their offline precursors" (Makhortykh 70). In this vein, he states that historical memes can broadly be sorted into three categories: replications, transformations, and inventions. Replications reproduce pre-Internet era memes. Transformations are also based upon pre-Internet memes; however, they repackage the original: "such memes often acquire humorous features and serve as parodies that make fun of the meme's original meaning" (Makhortykh 70). The third and final category is inventions, which do not have any off-line predecessors. In his study of Russian Second World War memes, Makhortykh found that while the boundaries of each category were not always clear, the majority of memes, approximately three quarters of them, fell into the first two categories, with replications being the largest category, accounting for about 55% of the memes. This suggests that shared cultural memory is an important factor in the success of a meme.

AV Ramos argues that history memes are an understudied, yet important source of information about politics and culture today. His study of the memes designed by the US Republican party during Donald Trump's election campaign attempted to position Trump as a defender of the American political traditions of freedom and liberty. By appropriating the imagery of the past, the past is made present to the viewer (Ramos 649). While history memes may seem inseparable from political memes, Mykola Makhortykh argues that historical memes should be seen as a distinct category as "historical memes are explicitly related to a particular historical event or personality and often refer to existing memory practices by satirising, strengthening or

propagating them online" (Makhortykh 64). As a subcategory of historical memes, royal historical memes have not previously been studied in detail, which this project aims to address.

British Royals in Memes

There are two overarching visual categories of royal memes. The first features imagery of past queens and kings to make their point (e.g. historic paintings); the second uses contemporary images, often recycling other memes, in reference to these monarchs. For example, a meme based upon the c. 1592 'The Ditchley Portrait' of Elizabeth I included the wording "because I'm all 'bout that bass, no treble" from the 2014 body-positive pop song by Meghan Trainor, "All about That Bass". The meaning is easily discernible here, even for those with scant knowledge of sixteenth-century fashion. We see instantly the wide skirt, held aloft by a farthingale (a hooped petticoat), and the flattened elongated trunk created by the bodice. The humour here also brings to the fore the changing social relationships with royalty. The Ditchley Portrait is an artefact of Elizabethan propaganda, one of its primary functions being to venerate the queen. The contemporary irreverence of the meme reveals both society's changed relationship with royalty and our more tolerant political discourse. While respect for the monarchy remains for a portion of society, the relative anonymity of the Internet allows for more light-hearted critique of monarchy, often among those of a similar political persuasion.

Memes often require knowledge of previous memes. For example, the cousin Throckmorton memes which proliferated after a tweet by @ChibsArts, who posted an image responding to a question posed in his physics textbook featuring "your cousin Throckmorton", who is skateboarding "down a curved frictionless ramp", and asking the students to ascertain his speed and "the force that acts upon him", prompting the tweet asking "sorry, my cousin who?" The seemingly improbable name led to a number of memes celebrating the skater Throckmorton. According to knowyourmeme.com (Adam), one of the authors of the textbook, Roger Freeman, texted that the name Throckmorton itself was used in homage to a character on the classic American sitcom radio show *The Great Gildersleeve*, which ran between 1941 and 1958. So, imagine one history student's delight when he found out that there was a Throckmorton involved in a 1583 Catholic plot to overthrow Elizabeth I and replace her with Mary Queen of Scots. The humour of this development works as it relies upon the element of surprise; readers can imagine that it is the same Throckmorton across each source.

These memes are reductive in nature; they highlight what is remembered from each of these monarchs' reigns. While it is outside the scope of this article, the wider research that this is part of finds that much of this knowledge is shaped by our cultural exposure to past monarchs, gleaned through a mix of popular culture and history lessons at school. Further, royalty itself has long been adept at propaganda, curating and reducing its own image into easily digestible pieces for consumption. These memes posit how the general public receive and understand these ideas. Some of the memes discussed here have a wide reach, whereas others have circulated among a smaller audience who participate in fora focussed on particular historic events. For these memes, audiences are assumed to have a high-level knowledge that is required to make the meme salient. The following two case studies illustrate how propaganda, humour, and political discourse come together in memes.

Lady Jane Grey

The Lady Jane Grey memes demonstrate how layers of meaning can combine in memes. This first set of memes leveraged the shockingly quick rise and fall of the young Lady Jane Grey (c. 1537-1554), known as the 'nine day queen'. Grey, a great-niece of Henry VIII, was the figure-head of a plot to seize power after the death of the young Edward VI. Despite Henry having two daughters of his own, there was no precedence for a female monarch. Further, there was the complication of Henry's many wives and the shadowy legitimacy of his daughters Mary and Elizabeth. Mary was arguably illegitimate, as her parents' marriage was annulled. Elizabeth was the daughter of a traitor. Add in Mary's Catholic status, and the conditions were ripe for a power play. This came in the form of teenage Lady Jane Grey, Henry's niece, and was led by Jane's father-in-law, the Duke of Northumberland, who was both protestant and legitimate. She also had the privilege of being name by Edward VI as his successor and had the support of the Privy Council. Jane went to the Tower of London to await her coronation. However, in a matter of days, support quickly switched to Mary. Jane's reign lasted just 9 days and she would be executed the following year; she was aged just 16 or 17.

Memes played upon the perception of the young queen being a puppet to political events. One meme uses a sixteenth-century Francois Colet portrait, embellished with the words "TFW [that feeling when] it wasn't even your idea to be queen in the first place, but they behead you anyway". Another meme recycles the William Dafoe Spiderman meme, with the words "when Edward VI dies and names you Queen but you only rule for 9 days before everyone betrays you in favour of Mary and you're executed: You know, I'm something of a monarch myself".

The story of Lady Jane Grey has then been used in relation to events in modern politics. As an example, two of memes which illustrate the transformation of Delaroche's masterpiece *The Execution of Lady Jane Grey* (1833) to political and social commentary are presented here. Created three hundred years after the event, the painting dramatically depicts the execution of Lady Jane Grey, based upon Delaroche's study of historic documents. The following two memes use this picture to comment on contemporary events. In the portrait Lady Jane Grey is blindfolded, a feature that inspired one memer to compare it to the 'Birdbox Challenge'. In this meme, Delaroche's painting is overlaid with the words "after being Queen of England for nine days, Lady Jane Grey takes the Birdbox Challenge". The challenge, which involved participants filming themselves undertaking everyday tasks whilst blindfolded and uploading it to social media, was inspire by the Netflix film *Birdbox*, in which Sandra Bullock's character must elude entities that kill through getting people to look at them. Hence, she makes her escape in a blindfold. The challenge went viral; however, safety concerns were raised when social media stars filmed themselves driving and walking through traffic whilst blindfolded (Andriani), risking a fate as tragic as Jane's.

A second meme is much more political in its tone. Here the painting is serving to highlight the parallels between the short tenures of Lady Jane and the British Prime Minister Liz Truss, but also to make commentary on the political machinations behind them. Truss had the ignominy of being the shortest-serving British Prime Minister. Her tenure lasted for just fifty days between September and October 2022, a consequence of her disastrous interim budget. In this scene, entitled erroneously "44 days a PM", the faces of the key characters in the painting have been replaced by key political figures. Truss is Lady Jane Grey, the executioner is her successor Rishi Sunak. The recently deceased Elizabeth II and King Charles III watch on; if not active participants in the political execution, then at least unwilling to intervene. The parallel with the brutality of historic political events provides a lens through which those of the present can be interpreted.

Rehabilitating Richard III

The case of Richard III, who ruled for just a short period between 1483 and 1485, is an interesting example of how changes in knowledge can shift shared cultural understandings and depictions of historic events. Richard III has long lingered in cultural memory as the deformed, hunchbacked, and villainous king who killed his two young nephews, Edward V and his brother Richard, in order to claim the throne. They would become known as the Princes in the Tower, before they mysteriously vanishing in 1483. Richard III memes play on this perceived villainy, and he is one of the most 'memed' monarchs.

Much of what is popularly known about Richard III is mediated through William Shakespeare's titular play. Here, three memes demonstrate how knowledge of Richard is directly linked Shakespeare's depiction of the King. Some memes humorously make a play on the malapropisms, or the misuse or mishearing of similar sounding words. Here the famous line from Shakespeare's play about the king, "now is the winter of our discontent", is variously reimagined as a 'disco tent' or a 'discount tent'. Other memes make use of the political machinations attributed by Shakespeare to Richard. For example, one meme belongs to the 'Gru's plan' category of memes. Gru is a character from the film series *Despicable Me*, featuring the hapless Gru explaining over four panels his plan before realising the fatal flaw in it. In the play, Richard III's fatal flaw is his lack of horse at the Battle of Bosworth. The meme uses Gru as Richard III outlining the steps in his plan as 1) "murder people to get the crown", 2) "murder more people to get the crown", 3) "no horse available", before Gru/Richard realises in the final panel that "no horse available" is the flaw. Shakespeare's depiction of Richard III, however, has been critiqued as little more than Tudor propaganda. Written as an historical play by the playwright just over a hundred years after Richard's death, Shakespeare was influenced by the politics of the day and arguably wrote the play to suit a Tudor audience, with the resulting depiction of the Richard III a caricature. The ability of the Gru meme to distil this essence of Shakespeare's political choices is instant and arguably relies on little actual knowledge of Tudor politics, relying instead on a broader knowledge of absolute monarchies of the mid-millennium.

The negative image of Richard III has continually been culturally influenced by Shakespeare, as well as other forms of Tudor propaganda, a fact that is critiqued in a meme which depicts the playwright's choice between writing plays which depict "historical accuracy" or "pleasing the current monarch". The meme utilises images of the Sesame Street character Elmo, facing the choice between healthy fruit ("historical accuracy") and white powder ("pleasing the current monarch"), which could be sugar, but could also be intended as a drug reference by the memer. Elmo buries his face in the white powder. The implication here is that aligning himself with royal propaganda is a prudent move for the playwright.

Richard also has his memer defenders. For example, a meme created by Facebook user Roisoleil (whose name means "sun king' in French) utilises a still from the BBC's *Horrible Histories* (2009-) to depict a softer portrait of Richard III, adorned with white roses and a feathered hat. The accompanying text reads "when you are Richard III, but also a good chap". While memes such as this suggest that Richard III has been rehabilitated in the eyes of some members of the public, historians would be more careful when exonerating Richard as the politics of the 1400s was very different, and much knowledge has also been lost.

Richard may have been an inhabitant of the fifteenth century; he was brought into the twenty-first by the seemingly incongruous finding of his remains under a carpark in Leicester.

Highlighted incongruence is what Shifman claims to be one of the factors that can make memes work well. One example here is a meme that repurposes the James William Edmund Doyle's painting *Richard Orders the Arrest of Hastings* (1864). Here, a courtier is depicted asking "your majesty, may we build a parking lot" to which Richard replies "over my dead body!" Another example reworks key lyrics from Joni Mitchell's *Big Yellow Taxi* (1970), stating "Richard III: Pave Plantagenet and put up a parking lot". The use of a distinctive lyric here invites the reader to read the meme 'songlike' in their mind, leveraging mnemonic powers of music (Jakubowski). A third example takes a still from the first season of the BBC historical comedy *Blackadder* (1983), featuring the hapless Baldric with the (presumably) offscreen Blackadder chastising him "Really, Baldric. Under a carpark? That was your cunning plan?" This meme draws upon a reoccurring narrative device in *Blackadder* where Baldric introduces his solution to Blackadder's current problem, prefaced with the line "I have a cunning plan…", which the audience understood to be the precursor for an illogical absurdity. In the context of the meme, the illogical idea that anyone in the fifteenth century would conceive of hiding a body beneath a carpark, a structure not yet invented in its modern form, is drawn. While all three of these memes use different artefacts from popular culture to highlight the juxtaposition of a carpark with a royal tomb, they reveal how the social narrative of monarchy has been interrupted. Intertwining stories from popular culture help audiences to both understand and resolve this deviation from the norm.

Conclusion

Kings and Queens within memes are depicted more for their failings than their successes. As this history shows us, the crown was a ground of contestation for most of the past millennium, with monarchs from King Harold to Charles I, James II, and Edward VIII all having to relinquish their crowns. What this study reveals is that what is remembered in the popular consciousness is less aligned with the concept of the divine right of kings, and rather a history of poor behaviour, sexual proclivities, political disgrace, and the occasional support. David Mitchell, who recently published his own humorous history of British monarchs, *Unruly* (2023), commented in the Guardian:

> the medieval monarchy is a succession of brutes and fools, with the occasional foolish brute and one or two ruthlessly efficient tyrants. They fought, they fornicated, they murdered and they usually failed. Fundamentally that is the royal tradition. (Mitchell)

The memes reviewed here reflect this. Rather than seeing our royal past as a dignified tradition, royalty have been remembered for their capriciousness, ruthlessness, and failings.

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