

SHAKESPEARE’S REAL AND FICTIONAL HISTORY

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Abstract

This article aims to reflect upon Shakespeare’s real and poetical history as found in his history plays. Shakespeare proved England’s past to be a subject worthy of great theatre. His Britain was mapped and re-mapped, and his history plays bring a wealth of information which literary critics, even historians, could not possibly overlook. But, just as Shakespeare’s geography is more than once fictional, or even poetical, so is his history. Shakespeare traces the history of Britain in such a way that it suits the needs and expectations of his royal audience and the public at large.

Acest articol își propune să reflecteze asupra istoriei reale și poetice a lui Shakespeare așa cum se regăsește în piesele sale istorice. Shakespeare a dovedit trecutul Angliei a fi un subiect extraordinar de dramaturgie. Marea Britanie a lui Shakespeare a fost definită și re-definiă, iar piesele lui istorice aduc un volum de informații peste care criticii literari, chiar și istoricii, nu au putut trece cu vederea. Dar, la fel cum geografia lui Shakespeare este mai mult decât o dată fictivă, sau chiar poetică, așa este și istoria lui. Shakespeare urmărește istoria Marii Britanii în așa fel încât să se potrivească nevoilor și așteptărilor atât publicului regal cât și publicului larg.

Keywords: Shakespeare, history plays, fiction, history, English.

In 1588, Sir Francis Drake had defeated the Spanish Armada against all odds. By then, too, England had established a presence in the New World and on maritime trade routes. Elizabethans began to view themselves as subjects not merely of a monarch but also of a historical process whose precarious shape could be changed by their actions. Nowhere is this more evident than in Shakespeare’s history plays. All but *Henry VIII* were written during the most optimistic years of Queen Elizabeth’s reign. Yet even in these plays, Shakespeare is less interested in historical accuracy than in compelling drama. And it is a testament to the playwright’s priorities that the history plays include many of his most enduring and universally engaging dramas.

“THE PENNYLES PILGRIMAGE, OR The Money-lesse perambulation, of Iohn Taylor, *Alias* the Kings Majesties *Water-Poet*,” printed in 1618, starts:

READER, these Travels of mine into Scotland, were not undertaken, neither in imitation, or emulation of any man, but only devised by myself, on purpose to make trial of my friends both in this Kingdom of England, and that of Scotland, and because I would be an eye-witness of divers things

which I had heard of that Country; and whereas many shallow-brained Critics, do lay an aspersion on me, that I was set on by others, or that I did undergo this project, either in malice, or mockage of Master Benjamin Jonson, vow by the faith of a Christian, that their imaginations are all wide, for he is a gentleman, to whom I am so much obliged for many undeserved courtesies that I have received from him, and from others by his favour, that I never to be so impudent or ungrateful, as either to sufferer any man's persuasions, or mine own instigation to incite me, to make so bad a requital, for so much goodness formerly received.[1]

John Taylor's "penniless pilgrimage" took him to the border between England and Scotland where he was startled by what he discovered:

Eight miles from *Carlisle* runs a little river,
Which *England's* bounds, from *Scotland's* grounds doth sever.
Without horse, bridge, or boat, I o'er did get
On foot, I went, yet scarce my shoes did wet.
I being come to this long-looked-for land,
Did mark, remark, note, renote, view'd, and scann'd;
And I saw nothing that could change my will,
But that I thought myself in *England* still.
The kingdoms are so nearly join'd and fix'd,
There scarcely went a pair of shears betwixt;
There I saw sky above, and earth below,
And as in *England*, there the sun did show;
The hills with sheep replete, with corn the dale,
And many a cottage yielded good Scottish ale...

The author tells us about England which borders Scotland on a 'little river' that he crossed without even wetting his shoes, and – however hard he tried – he could not make any difference between the two countries. Taylor's surprise at Scotland's resemblance to England confirms the early modern expectation that borders are markers of significant difference: the sun was rising in the morning, 'as in England', sheep were grazing on the hills, while the farmers were happily brewing 'good Scottish ale', just as the English farmers would do. Taylor vaguely anticipates some kind of transformative event, but to no avail: "I saw nothing that could change my will." Not only is the landscape the same, but so is Taylor. Of course, the "water poet" makes fun of his own expectation of transformation. Still, Taylor's joke requires that his early modern reader recognize the symbolic potency of border crossing. What precisely might such a reader have been anticipating and why? What exactly do borders and border crossing mean in the period? Borders would be fought for, and they could be crossed and even erased from the map in expansion wars. Borders would then be traced anew, using thicker lines, to define the new geography. Thus Shakespeare's Britain was mapped and re-mapped, and his history plays bring a wealth of information which literary critics, even historians, could not possibly overlook. But, just as Shakespeare's geography is more than once fictional, or even poetical, so is his history. Shakespeare traces the history of Britain in such a way that it suits the needs and expectations of his royal audience, and the public at large.

Ten of the eleven history plays – *Edward III* was only recently admitted into the Shakespearean corpus – are listed as ‘Histories’ in the *First Folio*. They are not difficult to distinguish from other kinds of Shakespearean plays: comedies, tragedies and romances. Each play is set principally in England and addresses the political challenges confronted by a specific English king, whose name figures as the play’s title. Each king’s troubles are usually covered in a single play, although two Lancastrian monarchs receive more than one play each: three early plays treat the reign of Henry VI and two somewhat later plays the reign of Henry IV. *Macbeth* and *King Lear* are not counted among the history plays, for while King Macbeth in Scotland and King Lear in England were historically attested rulers, these plays, like *Julius Caesar* and the other Roman tragedies, focus instead on the tragic fall of a heroic person who only happened to be a historical ruler.

For all but three history plays, Shakespeare set action during reigns associated with the rise and fall of the house of Lancaster. In 1399, Richard II was deposed by Henry IV (Lancastrian). Through to the usurpation of the throne by Henry VII in 1485, sons of the House of Lancaster struggled to gain and then hold onto the English crown. In using reigns associated with Lancastrians and their Yorkist rivals as dramatic settings, Shakespeare was taking a political and ideological statement. For it was Queen Elizabeth’s Tudor grandfather, Henry VII, who brought an end to the bloody Wars of the Roses by uniting the dynastic lines of Lancaster and York. The legacy of Henry VII left its mark on the Elizabethans, who believed not only that English rulers were vice-regents of God, but also that history itself unfolded according to divine design. God may have intended for England to suffer through foreign and civil wars but, with Henry VII, Elizabethans believed God had interceded to end an era of devastating strife and bloodshed.

King Henry VII shrewdly called for chroniclers to recount England’s history from the new, Tudor viewpoint. He commissioned the Italian humanist Polydore Virgil to write *Historia Anglica*, which in turn served as the basis for the two chief sources for Shakespeare’s history plays. The first was Edward Hall’s 1548 *The Union of the Two Noble and Illustre Families of Lancaster and York*, whose very title refers to Henry VII and the Tudor line that brought peace to England by unifying opposed claimants to the crown. The second and most important was Raphael Holinshed’s *The Chronicles of England, Ireland, and Scotland*, published first in 1578, and again in 1587, when the work served as a major source for London playwrights responding to the post-Armada thirst for plays about English history. Equipped with these and other chronicles, and drawing on such diverse materials as classical Senecan tragedies and more recent political morality plays, Shakespeare addressed in some of his earliest plays the reigns of the Wars of the Roses.

Known collectively as the ‘first tetralogy’ because they were written early and around the same time (1589-93) are: *Henry VI Part I*, *Henry VI Part II*, *Henry VI Part III* and *Richard III*. Richard III ruled during three decades of civil wars pitting the House of Lancaster (symbolized by a red rose) against that of York (symbolized by a white rose). The reign of Lancastrian Henry VI is handled in linear episodic fashion, the work of a playwright trying his hand at a new form. *Richard III* portrays a villain of the House of York, who murders and marries his way to the throne held by his Yorkist brother Edward IV as the play begins. In this play, certain rigid and repetitive elements drawn from Senecan tragedy are overwhelmed by the dazzling fiendishness

of Richard's persona. In dialogues of intense dramatic irony and in riveting soliloquies, *Richard III* distinctly shows Shakespeare making the history play his own kind of drama.

From 1595 to 1599, Shakespeare wrote another grouping of four history plays, known as the 'second tetralogy', or the 'Henriad': *Richard II*, *Henry IV Part I*, *Henry IV Part II*, and *Henry V*. While written after the first tetralogy, these plays are set in the earlier era of the Hundred Years' War between England and France. *Richard II*, notable for its lyrical language, treats the reign of the deposed and murder Yorkist king as a man who failed to rule effectively. Turning to the reigns of Lancastrians Henry IV (1399-1413) and Henry V (1413-22), Shakespeare moved from high lyricism to a remarkable mixture of prose and poetic language, and tragic and comic modes. The playwright's most grandiose creation, Sir John Falstaff, enters in *Henry IV Part I* with his feisty associates and remains in *Henry IV Part II*, with his death mourned in *Henry V*. For Falstaff and his entourage, Shakespeare found an English of entirely new energies, which he balanced against the more formal language of other speakers to render both parts of *Henry IV* among his most extraordinarily innovative plays. *Henry V* changes stylistic tempos yet again, following in a highly patriotic register the rise to the throne of the rebellious young Hal, who as Henry V is represented as the most successful of Shakespeare's English kings, achieving an ideal balance between man and king, soldier and lover.

During the interval between the composition of the two tetralogies, Shakespeare wrote two other history plays: *King John*, set in the early 13th century, portrays the English monarch as an incompetent usurper who loses most English territories in France, murders the rightful heir to the throne and is then poisoned to death; and *Edward III*, set in the mid-14th century, is principally a vehicle for exhibiting the heroism of the king's son, Edward the Black Prince, in defeating the French in the battles of Crécy and Poitiers. Fourteen years after writing his last Elizabethan history play, *Henry V*, Shakespeare returned to the genre with *Henry VIII*, based on the reign of Queen Elizabeth's Tudor father. Written with John Fletcher while King James held the throne, *Henry VIII* treats Henry's break with Rome after the Pope's refusal to sanction his divorce from Katherine of Aragon and his marriage to Anne Boleyn, Queen Elizabeth's mother. The play is among the very last written by Shakespeare.

The history plays examine not a single person or thread of action but rather a sequence of historical events related to the theme of the unification of England. However, while these plays form a distinct category of Shakespearean drama, they contain elements of other kinds of drama. Most history plays present a character similar to the central figure of a tragedy: the heroic figure who falls, and, with the final scenes of many history plays offering cause for celebration, their conclusions resemble those of the comedies. Indeed, few of Shakespeare's characters are more comical than Falstaff and his associates, who nevertheless make their first and most enduring appearances not in a comedy but in a history play. Yet Shakespeare's history plays do not merely combine aspects of comedy and tragedy. They form an independent genre characterized by specific themes, dramatic structures and political implications.

In Elizabethan times, these plays were also enormously topical: audiences were assured by the history plays that, thanks to their ruler's Tudor bloodline, they dwelled in a country providentially united. But at the same time, they were cautioned not to be complacent, for the calamitous civil wars of pre-Tudor England could one day return.

Thus, the ideological stance of the history plays is consistent: were England divided internally, it could face defeat both at home and overseas.

The history play was not the first dramatic genre in England to resemble political propaganda. Even before Shakespeare flourished, morality plays treated political themes, often in a didactic manner. In John Bale's *King John* (c. 1530) and Thomas Sackville and Thomas Norton's *Gorboduc* (c. 1562), tyranny and rebellion unravel the national unity inevitably restored in England by the end of each play. But after the defeat of the Spanish Armada in 1588, the morality play, with its simplified worlds of good and evil, no longer satisfied Elizabethans eager to celebrate England's grand successes and ambitions. Cardboard cut-out figures of Virtue and Vice needed to be given flesh and bones.

George Peele, Robert Greene, Thomas Lodge and Christopher Marlowe first turned to English history for dramatic material appealing to new audiences. As in Elizabeth's England, where the vulnerable succession of her crown was coveted by rulers overseas and upstarts at home, the England of past monarchs was also plagued by foreign and domestic threats to stability and continuity. Thus, the past offered ample material mirroring the present. Further, English history was well documented by the 1590s, when the fad for plays about historic defeats and conquests was peaking.

Shakespeare's earliest works in this genre were not radically different from the linear chronicle plays popular in London. But as his plays begin to explore historical figures as individuals with inner worlds and dimensional passions, they came to form their own kind of English drama. Shakespeare created his own world, not only in geographical but also, historical terms. The stage was set for a talented new playwright to satisfy spectators of a changed London theatre scene and of a new English political reality.

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