



THE RENAISSANCE HISTORY PLAYS

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History plays, sometimes known as chronicle plays (after the “chronicles” from which the plots were taken), were a highly popular form of drama in Shakespeare's time. By 1623, every English monarch from William the Conqueror to Elizabeth I had been represented in a play, as the English past served as an important repository of plots for the dramatists of the burgeoning theater industry of Elizabethan England. The plays not only offered entertainment but also served many people as an important source of information about the nation's past. In 1612 English dramatist Thomas Heywood claimed that such plays “instructed such as cannot read in the discovery of all our English Chronicles.”

The Elizabethans considered history instructive but did not always agree on the particular lessons it taught. Sometimes history was thought to be a branch of theology, the record of God's providential guidance of events, and sometimes it was seen solely as the record of human motives and actions. Sometimes history was valued because it was an accurate record of the past, and sometimes because it provided examples of behavior to be imitated or avoided. History plays became increasingly popular after 1588 and the defeat of the Spanish Armada, so clearly the interest in English history reflected a growing patriotic consciousness.

Shakespeare wrote ten plays listed in the 1623 Folio as histories and differentiated from the other categories, comedies and tragedies, by their common origin in English history. Eight of Shakespeare's history plays re-create the period in English history from 1399, when King Henry IV took the throne after deposing King Richard II, to the defeat of Richard III in battle in 1485. Henry IV was the first English king from the house of Lancaster. The history plays cover the conflict between the houses of Lancaster and York, known as the Wars of the Roses, from 1455 to 1485. The final event is the victory of Henry VII over Richard III in 1485, ending the rule of the York dynasty and beginning the Tudor dynasty. The eight plays devoted to this period, listed in the chronological order of the kings with the dates of their composition in parentheses, are Richard II (1597); Henry IV, Parts I and II (1597); Henry V (1598); Henry VI, Parts I, II, and III (1590-1592); and Richard III (1592-1593). As their dates indicate, Shakespeare did not write the plays in chronological order. He wrote the second half of the story first, and only later returned to the events that initiated the political problems.

The two remaining Shakespeare history plays are King John (1596) and Henry VIII (1613). King John, beginning soon after John's coronation in 1199, was seemingly reworked from an anonymous, older play on the same subject. It treats the English king's failed effort to resist the power of the pope, a theme of obvious relevance in England after the Protestant Reformation. Henry VIII, probably co-written with English dramatist John Fletcher, is a loosely connected pageant of events in Henry's reign, ending with the prophecy of the birth of Elizabeth and her succession by King James.

Shakespeare's main sources for the events of the history plays were the Chronicles of England, Scotland, and Ireland (1577; 2nd ed. 1586, which Shakespeare used) by Raphael Holinshed and Edward Hall's Chronicle (1542). Although Shakespeare took situations from these and a few other historical sources, he selected only such facts as suited his dramatic purposes. Sometimes he ignored chronology and telescoped the events of years to fit his own dramatic time scheme. Above all, he used the power of his imagination and language to mold vivid and memorable characters out of the historical figures he found in his sources.

The overall theme of the history plays is the importance of a stable political order, but also the heavy moral and emotional price that often must be paid for it. Shakespeare dramatized the great social upheaval that followed Henry IV's usurpation of the throne until the first Tudor king, Queen Elizabeth's grandfather, restored peace and stability. In addition to chronicling the often violent careers of England's great kings, Shakespeare's history plays explore the extreme pressures of public life, the moral conflicts that kings and queens uniquely face, and the potential tragedy of monarchy.

EARLY HISTORIES

The four plays that dramatize the Wars of the Roses, the turbulent period from 1422 to 1485, are possibly Shakespeare's earliest dramatic works. These plays, Henry VI, Parts I, II, and III and Richard III, deal with disorder resulting from weak leadership and from national disunity fostered for selfish ends. Richard III, however, closes triumphantly with the death of Richard and the ascent to the throne of Henry VII, the founder of the Tudor dynasty and grandfather of Queen Elizabeth.

HENRY VI

Henry VI, Parts I, II, and III, chronicle the troubled reign of Henry VI, during which time England is reduced from a position of influence and status within Western Europe, earned by his father, Henry V, to a state that is all but torn apart by civil war. A pious man but not a gifted ruler, Henry VI was beset by opposition from the House of York, culminating in the Wars of the Roses, which disturbed English soil for 30 years. In Part III, Act 2, Scene V, Shakespeare poignantly illustrates the personal torment that inevitably arises from the public conflict of civil war: the upsetting of the order of the state has upset the natural order of kinship, so that father is set against son, and son against father, in a war that “profits nobody”. The despairing Henry is powerless to do anything but sit by and lament as he observes the tragic grief of men whom, as king, he should have had the authority and ability to lead and protect, as a shepherd does his flock.

The three parts of Henry VI chronicle the troubled reign of that king, from the death of his father in 1422 to his own death in 1471. During that time England was all but torn apart by civil strife following the death of Henry V. Part I deals with wars in France, including combat with Joan of Arc, and had early success on stage, performed 15 times in 1592 alone. Parts II and III, revealing Henry VI as a weak and ineffectual king, treat England after it has lost its possessions in France and factionalism at home erupts into full-fledged civil war. Today, the Henry VI plays, if staged at all, are likely to be seen in condensed adaptations or conflations (combination of parts) as in English director John Barton's Wars of the Roses in 1963 at Stratford-upon-Avon.

RICHARD III

Richard III begins where Henry VI, Part III leaves off and completes the sequence begun with the Henry VI plays. It presents a fictionalized account of Richard III's rise and fall, from the time he gains the crown through murder and treachery to his death at the Battle of Bosworth Field, which ends the Wars of the Roses and brings the Tudor dynasty to power. The story of Richard's rise and fall derives from an account by English statesman Thomas More, written about 1513. As presented by Shakespeare, Richard is an eloquent, intelligent man, who is morally and physically deformed. Richard dominates the stage with a combination of wit and wickedness that has fascinated audiences and made the part a popular one among actors.

LATER HISTORIES

Shakespeare wrote his most important history plays in the period from 1596 to 1598, plays that reveal both his dramatic mastery and his deep understanding of politics and history. The so-called second tetralogy (four related works), consisting of Richard II, Henry I V, Parts I and II, and Henry V, encompass the 23 years immediately prior to those portrayed in the Henry VI plays. The last three plays of the second tetralogy constitute Shakespeare's supreme achievement in writing histories, focusing on the development of Prince Hal (in the two parts of Henry IV) into England's greatest medieval hero-King Henry V.

RICHARD II

In 1601, on the day before beginning his unsuccessful revolt against Queen Elizabeth I, the earl of Essex commissioned a group of actors to perform a play about Richard II at the Globe Theatre, believed by many critics to have been Shakespeare's Richard II. The performance was controversial, since Elizabeth disliked any connection made between herself and the earlier monarch, who had come to a tragic end. In 1599 the archbishop of Canterbury, acting on her behalf, had ordered the destruction of a book concerning King Richard and Henry Bolingbroke, who had taken over Richard's throne to become Henry IV: the book had borne a dedication to Essex and the potential for comparison was deemed too dangerous. It is thought unlikely, however, that Shakespeare had any such direct political purpose in mind, and the actors who undertook the 1601 performance were not punished along with the conspirators. In one of the contentious episodes, Act 4, Scene I, Richard, resigned to his fate, sends news of his abdication of the throne to his stronger opponent, Bolingbroke, and those assembled with him. The bishop of Carlisle, who voices opposition, is silenced and arrested for treason, just before Richard arrives to hand over the crown. Although self-indulgent, Richard's melancholy is poignantly expressed, and while the forceful, plain-speaking Bolingbroke seems a more natural leader, the contrasting presentation of the pair is not entirely unsympathetic to Richard's plight.

Richard II is a study of a sensitive, self-dramatizing, ineffective but sympathetic monarch who loses his kingdom to his forceful successor, Henry I V. As a model for this play Shakespeare relied heavily on Marlowe's chronicle play Edward II (1592) with its focus on a personality ill-suited for the demands of rule. The play was a success on stage and in the

bookstalls, but until 1608 the scene of Richard relinquishing his crown to Henry Bolingbroke, in Act 4, was omitted from the printed versions because it portrayed the overthrow of a monarch.

HENRY IV

Henry IV, Parts I and II, continue the quartet of history plays begun with Richard II and ending with Henry V. In the Henry IV plays, however, Shakespeare makes much use of comedy, particularly in the portrayal of Sir John Falstaff, to provide light relief and to offer parallels to, and a level of commentary on, the main plot. In Richard II, King Henry IV had usurped the throne from Richard; in Henry IV, Part I, he finds himself facing rebellion from both his subjects and his own son and heir, Prince Hal. Hal is the real focus of the plays: together they trace his development from a seemingly wayward youth, enjoying the company and influence of an ignoble father-figure, Falstaff, to the loyal son and future king who will prove triumphant in Henry V. The first scene presented here, taken from Part I, shows Hal idling with Falstaff and his friends; yet even though he agrees to join in their plan to commit a robbery, his final speech begins to set the stage for the transformation that is to come. The second scene, the deathbed scene from Part II, movingly portrays the moment at which Hal is reconciled to his true father, and takes up his destiny: the crown of England.

In the two parts of Henry IV, Henry recognizes his own guilt for usurping the throne from Richard and finds himself facing rebellion from the very families that had helped him to the throne. His son, Prince Hal, is, however, in many ways the focus of the plays, which trace the prince's development from a seemingly wayward youth, enjoying the company and influence of the fat knight Falstaff and other drinking cronies, to the future king who proves triumphant in the play Henry V. Many critics consider Henry IV, Part I to be the most entertaining and dramatic of the Henry plays with its struggle between King Henry and his rebellious nobles, led by the volatile Hotspur. The king's fears for his son prove unfounded when Prince Hal leaves the tavern to take his place on the battlefield, where his defeat of Hotspur in combat proves his readiness to assume the burdens of rule.

Shakespeare makes much use of comedy in the plays, particularly in the portrayal of the fat knight Falstaff, whose irrepressible wit has long been the major source of the plays' remarkable popularity. The comedy, however, neither dominates nor is subordinated to the historical plot, but is brilliantly intermingled with it, commenting often witheringly on its actions and values. At the same time the comedy insists that history is something more spacious than a mere record of aristocratic men and motives.

HENRY V

Henry V was the last history play that Shakespeare wrote, until he returned to the genre with his collaboration on Henry VIII late in his career. Henry V celebrates the great military and political achievements of the king in his victories over France, but also allows other angles of vision upon his accomplishments that may well raise doubts about their moral cost. While the Chorus speaks the lofty rhetoric of heroic idealization, the comic plot reveals a world of baser motive, which parallels and comments on the historical action. Henry V may well have been the first play performed at the Globe Theatre in the summer of 1599.

In the history play Henry V, Shakespeare's rhetoric successfully creates a heroic vision of the English king and his people in their fight against the French. The use of a formal chorus, as here at the beginning of Act 3, further emphasizes the epic thrust of the play. Patriotic-almost jingoistic-in sentiment, the play has become a symbol of popular nationalism, and was famously presented in this manner in the classic 1944 film by Laurence Olivier, during World War II. In Act 3, Scene I, Henry delivers a rousing speech to rally his troops in readiness for the battle at Agincourt; the time has come for bravery: "The game's afoot!" British actors Kenneth Branagh and Emma Thompson share a scene in the 1989 film Henry V, which Branagh also directed. After defeating French forces at the battle of Agincourt, Henry, who speaks no French, courts French princess Katherine, who speaks no English.

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