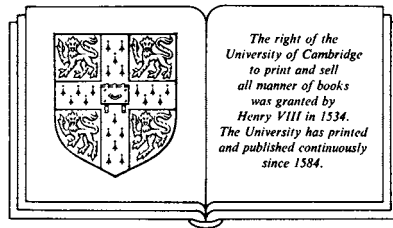


SHAKESPEARE SURVEY  
AN ANNUAL SURVEY OF  
SHAKESPEARIAN STUDY AND PRODUCTION

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38

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# SHAKESPEARE'S HISTORY PLAYS: 1952-1983

DENNIS H. BURDEN

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When Harold Jenkins wrote his survey of criticism of the English history plays from 1900 to 1951 for *Shakespeare Survey* 6 (Cambridge, 1953) two critical approaches were dominant: firstly the reading of them in the light of the historical thesis which they were seen to present and which was particularly associated with E. M. W. Tillyard's *Shakespeare's English History Plays* (1944), and secondly close analysis of their style and imagery. It might be useful first to consider how these two modes of interpretation have developed in the period presently under review.

## THE OVERALL PATTERN

The influence of Tillyard's thesis can be seen in the amount of reference to it in later work. Its attraction was that it provided the English histories with an intellectual dimension that they had previously lacked. Instead of being seen as immature and formless, perhaps the result of collaboration and revision by different hands, they were given the weight of a philosophical and political thesis. The interpretation of them in the light of the 'Tudor myth', reading English history from Richard II to Henry VIII as the working-out of a process of punishment and expiation for the deposition and murder of Richard II, God's judgement falling particularly on the house of Lancaster and more generally on the nation, provided the plays with coherence and dignity. An extract from a contemporary review of Tillyard's book illustrates in a small way how the thesis brought new significance to the plays: 'that dull old stick, Alexander Iden, becomes a steadying symbol of degree and of duty done in the allotted state of life'.<sup>1</sup>

The importance of the book made it perhaps more vulnerable since it was brought under such close scrutiny. It came under increasing challenge. Whereas A. S. Cairncross, editor of the new Arden 1, 2 and 3 *Henry VI* (1962, 1957, 1964), accepted it, A. R. Humphreys, editor of the same series' 1 and 2 *Henry IV* (1960, 1966), did not. To some perhaps it came to seem the product of the view from a Cambridge college window looking out on a world at war and nostalgic for a more stable and comprehensible historical process. Later times came to need different theses and a very different appeal was made to the 1960s by Jan Kott's very popular *Shakespeare our Contemporary* (1964). To Kott all Shakespeare's English kings faced a violent and indiscriminating historical process which exposed the hollowness of political life where the outlines of the individual face could not be discerned in the dark corridors of power. Kott's thesis is as deterministic as Tillyard's but it reflects a very different experience and ideology. To each its own, but Philip Edwards has stressed what risks of misinterpretation we run when we impose modern attitudes, for instance that social and political attitudes are necessarily alienating, upon our readings of the plays.<sup>2</sup>

Tillyard himself, in a later essay<sup>3</sup> written in answer to R. A. Law who had argued that the series showed Shakespeare moving tentatively from play

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<sup>1</sup> *Times Literary Supplement*, 6 January 1945.

<sup>2</sup> *Person and Office in Shakespeare's Plays*, Annual Shakespeare Lecture of the British Academy (1970).

<sup>3</sup> 'Shakespeare's Historical Cycle: Organism or Compilation', *Studies in Philology*, 51 (1954), 34-9.

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to play,<sup>4</sup> admitted that his larger plan did not exclude local opportunism in the individual play or scene. A. L. French has set his sights very effectively on particular points of rebuttal – that the political process in *Richard II* is not at all clear, that Joan's role in *1 Henry VI* is not to be a scourge of God, that there is a pervasive uncertainty about *Richard III*, that *Richard II* does not cast a long shadow on to *Richard III*, that the plays do not present a continuous picture of a moral retributive process<sup>5</sup> – but the objections were more often to the general outline of the thesis. Leonard F. Dean stressed the way in which Shakespeare thought his way progressively into his material, making new discoveries about it, exploiting contrasting modes, and going beyond what were coming to seem the naiveties of popular chronicle and history.<sup>6</sup> Michael Quinn also argued that the concept of a divine providence acting in history was much more relevant to the first than to the second tetralogy.<sup>7</sup> Certainly later studies in Tudor political thought established that Tillyard overestimated its orthodoxy and in particular made it too absolutist. The doctrine of obedience to the king could be based upon consent and natural law. Christopher Morris's *Political Thought in England: Tyndale to Hooker* (1953) presents a more complex picture and Morris's discussion of what the homilies actually did and did not say is very helpful. E. M. Talbert in *The Problem of Order* (Chapel Hill, 1962), by looking in particular at the thought of Sir Thomas Smith and Hooker and by going on to analyse *Richard II* in a way which emphasizes a genuine clash of political theory in the play, shows that the Elizabethan world-picture was not just a few simple ideas about order. A most important contribution is made by Henry A. Kelly's *Divine Providence and the England of Shakespeare's Histories* (Cambridge, Mass., 1970), studying the attitude of Tudor chronicles and histories to the role of divine power in history, an important part of Tillyard's thesis. Kelly establishes that there was more than one 'Tudor myth': besides the Yorkist one stressing the punishment of the house of Lancaster which Tillyard reflects, there is also the Lancastrian one which justified the overthrow of Richard II because his corrupt government did not serve the welfare of the kingdom. Furthermore Kelly shows that there was

hesitancy, inconsistency of interpretation, more off-the-cuff judgement in the sources so that the variety which literary criticism was beginning to stress in the plays could also be found in the ways in which sixteenth-century historians interpreted the same material. Kelly argues for the presence of a burlesque anti-providential myth in More's *Richard III*, a point also made by Alison Hanham in '*Richard III*' and the *Early Historians* (Oxford, 1975). S. Schoenbaum<sup>8</sup> and Gordon Ross Smith<sup>9</sup> have also shown that there was a variety of opinion about Richard II and Henry V in Shakespeare's time.

Of course when we look to this wider field of political and historical thought we cannot suppose that Shakespeare was necessarily familiar with it nor that he would consciously entertain some of its more radical postures if he were. He certainly reflects the age's fear of rebellion which was what helped most to keep order. The government's hand was also strengthened by its censorship of the press and stage and its exploitation of pageant and symbol (see Alice S. Venezky, *Pageantry on the Shakespearian Stage* (New York, 1951)). The most theoretical challenge to the establishment probably came from Puritan thinking but most of the Tudor rebellions were based upon specific local grievances often fanned by suspicion. In choosing Rumour to open *2 Henry IV* Shakespeare was putting his finger on one of the greatest threats to security but also at the same time unwittingly showing the threat the drama posed. Rumour, unfolding acts with his many tongues,

<sup>4</sup> 'Links between Shakespeare's History Plays', *Studies in Philology*, 50 (1953), 168–87.

<sup>5</sup> 'Who Deposed Richard II?', *Essays in Criticism*, 17 (1967), 411–33; 'Joan of Arc and *Henry VI*', *English Studies*, 49 (1968), 425–9; 'The World of Richard III', *Shakespeare Studies*, 4 (1968), 23–39; '*Henry VI* and The Ghost of Richard II', *English Studies*, 50 (1969), 27–43; 'The Mills of God and Shakespeare's Early History Plays', *English Studies*, 55 (1974), 313–24.

<sup>6</sup> '*Richard II* to *Henry V*: a Closer View', in *Studies in Honour of Dewitt T. Starnes*, ed. Thomas P. Harrison (Austin, Texas, 1967), pp. 37–52.

<sup>7</sup> 'Providence in Shakespeare's Yorkist Plays', *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 10 (1959), 45–52.

<sup>8</sup> '*Richard II* and the Realities of Power', *Shakespeare Survey*, 28 (Cambridge, 1975), 1–13.

<sup>9</sup> 'Shakespeare's *Henry V*: Another Part of the Critical Forest', *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 37 (1976), 3–26.

### SHAKESPEARE'S HISTORY PLAYS: 1952-1983

speaking of many different things, is doing what the dramatist himself had to do and it was here that the plays encountered both opportunity and risk. For in presenting, and for dramatic reasons justifying, specific cases of rebellion against established authority, exploiting traditions of oration, dispute and persuasion, the dramatist necessarily involved his drama in theory while in no way intending consciously to adumbrate it. While it might be dangerous to proffer a thesis in favour of deposition in a play, Shakespeare had to give Bolingbroke or somebody else reasons for going through with it, though in so risky a case they might get fewer and fewer and more hedged about with reservation as the crisis approached. And such a procedure might, as L. C. Knights argues, be determined by Shakespeare's own experience and imagination, his 'negative capability', not by any predetermined pattern.<sup>10</sup>

The majority of the critical studies during this period have been concerned with the variety of the plays, their reflection of Shakespeare's many-sided imagination, their resistance to simple interpretation, and have tended to prise the two tetralogies apart from each other and the individual plays from each other, seeing a process of growth and maturity at work. A. P. Rossiter in a set of pugnacious essays written in the early 1950s (collected in *Angel with Horns* (1961)) sees the plays as subtly undermining the 'Tudor myth' (by way of paradox, interactions of comedy and tragedy, irony and what he calls 'ambivalence'), recalcitrant to the restraints of an imposed thesis and swayed beneath their surface by a sense of obscure tragedy. Virgil Whitaker in *Shakespeare's Use of Learning* (San Marino, California, 1953) argues a progressive view of Shakespeare's intellectual development in which Shakespeare, driven by his sense of what dramatic possibilities history offered, moved from the limited intellectual range of the first tetralogy into a greater maturity of thought about the material partly deriving from a careful, more systematic use of a greater variety of sources but mostly generated from within. Robert Hapgood argues that the production of a risky flux and reflux in sympathy was a characteristic feature of Shakespeare's dramatic method. Episodes such as the deposition of Richard

II and the rejection of Falstaff deliberately engineer in us a delayed reaction leading us to reconsider them so that although we are brought to see that a certain course of action is wrong we nevertheless still keep our sympathy for a character who thought that it was right. Like Rossiter, Hapgood sees the plays as deliberately cultivating unresolved political and moral oppositions.<sup>11</sup> Norman Rabkin in *Shakespeare and the Common Understanding* (New York, 1967) sees the plays as consciously projecting problems and setting up 'areas of turbulence' rather than offering certain solutions. Wilbur Sanders, using Marlowe as a whipping-boy, puts forward in *The Dramatist and the Received Idea* (Cambridge, 1968), with particular reference to *Richard III* and *Richard II*, a similar view: the ability of the really great writer is to lower the threshold of orthodoxy and to let the mind play over a wide band of possibility. All these viewpoints take it as characteristic of the plays to be more interesting than any thesis that they might seem to offer and see the chafing against any particular set response or evaluation as what makes them such an impressive artistic achievement.

A most stimulating book, both from the point of view of the disintegration of the Tillyard thesis and of an intelligent assessment of the plays, is Robert Ornstein's *A Kingdom for a Stage* (Cambridge, Mass., 1972). Considered simply, the plays are, he demonstrates, about rebellion and reconciliation not legality or long-term retributions. Political orthodoxy, which Tillyard saw as such a strength, Ornstein sees very much as a limiting factor on Shakespeare's openness of mind and breadth of humanity. The discipline which the dramatist imposed is developed by the needs of art not dogma. Adjustment is the art of drama as well as of politics; and Shakespeare, like his characters, calculates, improvises, experiments, achieves dazzling success and also (and this is a very engaging part of Ornstein's book) makes mistakes. Ornstein is not afraid to be critical, seeing the plotting of *3 Henry VI* as

<sup>10</sup> *Shakespeare's Politics*, Annual Shakespeare Lecture of the British Academy (1957).

<sup>11</sup> 'Shakespeare's Delayed Reactions', *Essays in Criticism*, 13 (1963), 9-16.

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perfunctory, *King John* as an artistic failure, the last act of *Richard II* as something of an anti-climax. His method is necessarily somewhat subjective – he values Shakespeare because he is different from and better than his contemporaries – but the measure of Ornstein's success lies in the great extent to which we concur with his readings and find them sound and persuasive.

Another approach to the plays has been to see them as presenting some pattern though not Tillyard's and to concentrate on some particular aspect or theme. Nicholas Brooke in his essay 'Marlowe as Provocative Agent in Shakespeare's Early Plays' provides a very searching account of Marlowe's influence.<sup>12</sup> M. M. Reese in *The Cease of Majesty* (1962), accepting the Tillyard thesis in so far as he allows that Shakespeare's approach to history was to see it as presenting events within the scheme of God's providence and so answering to the problems of the 1590s, nevertheless goes beyond that to see the plays as concerned with the wider problems of social order and partnership. From the point of view of a society's political health, if concord is to be established, then what matters is how adequately the king's nature responds to political crisis, and true kingship emerges as based upon justice, charity, kindness and a sense of community between ruler and ruled. S. C. Sen Gupta in *Shakespeare's Historical Plays* (1964) reads the series very sensibly as studies essentially of characters rather than ideas, Shakespeare's involvement being human and not political or homiletic. H. M. Richmond in *Shakespeare's Political Plays* (New York, 1967) sees the plays as providing an intelligent and evolving study of man as a political animal. Three books which are also concerned with the theme of kingship in the histories are John Bromley's *The Shakespearean Kings* (Boulder, Colorado, 1970) which attempts to show by a commentary on the plays that the kings are destroyed by the burden of their royalty and the coarseness of power, Moody E. Prior's *The Dream of Power* (Evanston, Illinois, 1973) a sensible study which sees each play as defining a different problem about kingship (the *Henry VI* plays about legitimacy for example, *Richard III* about tyranny) which can be related to contemporary thinking about politics,

and Michael Manheim's *The Weak King Dilemma in the Shakespearean Henriad* (Syracuse, 1977) which, with some twentieth-century pointing, see the plays as a series in which traditional monarchy, increasingly inadequate because of its weakness, is superseded by a more efficient but ruthless Machiavellism. Robert B. Pierce in *Shakespeare's History Plays: the Family and the State* (Columbus, 1971) also studies one aspect of the plays, in this case their presentation of the dramatic motif of the family, emblematic and personal, something which enables the audience to get close to what might else be unfamiliar experience. David Riggs in *Shakespeare's Heroical Histories* (Cambridge, Mass., 1971), attempting to break the conventional linking of the English histories with the morality plays, posits a popular tradition of heroic history – *Tamburlaine* being the key play – behind the first tetralogy which presents a deterioration of the heroic ideal, an ideal partly recovered in the second tetralogy. Two recent books are Kristian Smidt's *Unconformities in Shakespeare's History Plays* (1982) using the plays' many inconsistencies and anomalies to counter the view that they are built to a pre-arranged plan (a far cry from Tillyard), and H. R. Coursen's *The Leasing Out of England: Shakespeare's Second Henriad* (Washington, DC, 1982) which uses economic pointers (war as commerce, dislocations of the economy) as keys to the growth of the series.

Separate studies of the two tetralogies have also tended to shift the focus of the plays away from the Tillyard thesis. J. P. Brockbank's 'The Frame of Disorder' gives a cogent account of the *Henry VI* plays as the education of a tragic dramatist contemplating man's plight in a nihilistic historical and political process where virtue connives its own destruction and where retribution is ironically imposed by evil men and deeds.<sup>13</sup> Edward I. Berry in *Patterns of Decay: Shakespeare's Early English Histories* (Charlottesville, Virginia, 1975) studies the collapse of the values established by Henry V into the narrowing concern of the family (1, 2 and 3 *Henry VI*) and the self (*Richard III*). A. C. Hamilton (*The*

<sup>12</sup> *Shakespeare Survey* 14 (Cambridge, 1961), 33–44.

<sup>13</sup> In *Early Shakespeare*, ed. John Russell Brown and Bernard Harris, Stratford-upon-Avon Studies, 3 (1961), 72–99.

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*Early Shakespeare* (San Marino, California, 1967)), D. M. Ricks (*Emergent Form*, (Logan, Utah, 1968)), and Nicholas Brooke (*Shakespeare's Early Tragedies* (1968)) all argue for a higher evaluation of the *Henry VI* plays and their individual achievement. Emrys Jones in *The Origins of Shakespeare* (Oxford, 1977) stresses the emergence of the plays from mid-Tudor culture and humanism and from the dramatic tradition of the mysteries and insists on the conscious planning of the *Henry VI* group as a trilogy. In Jones's commentary the plays form a densely woven web of traditions and conventions and appear very convincingly not so much a start as a culmination of a tradition, topical plays embedded in older wisdoms and experience. David Frey's *The First Tetralogy: Shakespeare's Scrutiny of the Tudor Myth* (The Hague, 1976) considers the inadequacy of Tillyard's thesis. F. W. Brownlow in *Two Shakespearean Sequences* (1977) argues that the sequence *Henry VI* to *Richard II* shows the representation of motive and character as more important than historical or even moral issues.

An important book on the second tetralogy is Derek Traversi's *Shakespeare from 'Richard II' to 'Henry V'* (1957), an evolutionary account of the plays allowing for changes in direction, seeing them as a developing critique of political behaviour and tracing the various complex thematic mutations by way of close and detailed analysis. James Winny in *The Player King* (1968) concentrates on the way in which the idea of the king is developed from *Richard II* to *Henry V*, Shakespeare presenting a sequence of royal figures seeking to establish an identity which is not basically a political concept but an imaginative one that develops from play to play. Eric La Guardia,<sup>14</sup> Alvin Kernan<sup>15</sup> and Virginia Carr<sup>16</sup> in their different ways see the second tetralogy as concerned with lost ritual and ceremony. C. G. Thayer also argues against the plays as tracts, seeing the way in which Shakespeare presents Bolingbroke as evidence of his interest in character rather than ideology.<sup>17</sup>

As stated earlier it seemed convenient to base this part of this survey fairly closely upon Tillyard's book and upon the thesis which it put forward. It was in its time a most important book on the English

histories which could not be ignored. Looking back one can see how it has silted up, its timbers warped and broken, but one does not want to be ungenerous to its commitment or to its belief in Shakespeare's intellectual calibre. Certainly no book since has attempted so comprehensive a reevaluation of the English histories, and most of us have cause to be grateful to it.

### STYLE

The other very influential mode of criticism at the beginning of this period – one applied across the whole of Shakespeare's work – was the interpretation of the plays from within, as it were, by way of a close analysis of poetry, imagery, symbolism and theme, the plays being seen essentially as dramatic poems. Early in the period under survey R. A. Foakes argued for the adoption of a greater rigour in this approach, pointing to some logical flaws in it and to its operating on what was too narrow a definition of imagery that took the plays too far into the page and away from the theatre.<sup>18</sup>

Kenneth Muir in a study of the imagery noted a gradual progression in Shakespeare's use of iterative imagery, finding little in the early histories but a much more striking use later, especially in *Richard II* and *2 Henry IV*.<sup>19</sup> Two books devoted to a study of style are Robert Y. Turner's *Shakespeare's Apprenticeship* (Chicago, 1974) seeing, by means of a study of different types of scene and speech, the histories moving from a didactic, oratorical mode to one which more fully realized the distinctive

<sup>14</sup> 'Ceremony and History: the Problem of Symbol from *Richard II* to *Henry V*' in *Pacific Coast Studies in Shakespeare*, ed. W. F. McNeir and T. N. Greenfield (Eugene, Oregon, 1966), pp. 68–88.

<sup>15</sup> 'The Henriad: Shakespeare's Major History Plays', *Yale Review*, 59 (1969), 3–32.

<sup>16</sup> 'Once more into the Henriad: a Two-Eyed View', *Journal of English and Germanic Philology*, 77 (1978), 530–45.

<sup>17</sup> 'Shakespeare's Second Tetralogy: an Underground Report', *Ohio University Review*, 9 (1967), 5–15.

<sup>18</sup> 'Suggestions for a New Approach to Shakespeare's Imagery', *Shakespeare Survey* 5 (Cambridge, 1952), 81–92.

<sup>19</sup> *Image and Symbol in Shakespeare's Histories* (Manchester, 1967).

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properties of the medium, and G. R. Hibbard's *The Making of Shakespeare's Dramatic Poetry* (Toronto, 1981) positing an increasing self-consciousness on Shakespeare's part about the extravagant style of the early plays and seeing the histories as eventually developing a comprehensive and varied style which was to serve as a complete dramatic instrument for the maturer tragedies. Richard Lanhan in his chapter on the second tetralogy in *The Motives of Eloquence* (New Haven, 1976), again pressing hard on the style, saw the whole sequence as a complex structure of style and attitudes. Setting the plays within the co-ordinates of what he defines as the serious and the rhetorical he reads them as demonstrating the impossibility of imposing a rigid scheme on the material, *Richard II* dissolving a theme, Falstaff proving resistant to concepts, *Henry V* dissolving an event.

The style and manner of *Richard II* have been of especial concern. J. A. Bryant, Jr, argued that the play represented a new departure for Shakespeare: we should, as in Bushy's perspective, look at the play awry in order to see its true meaning and form, the Chronicle material being shaped into new poetic symbols and analogues.<sup>20</sup> Looking to the play's fascination with ceremony, T. McAlindon in his *Shakespeare and Decorum* (1973) saw it as deliberately exploiting indecorousness in order to highlight misjudgement and error, Richard's failure to adopt one consistent style marking his perverse and destructive failure to behave ceremoniously enough. Ernest B. Gilman in his chapter on *Richard II* in *The Curious Perspective: Literary and Pictorial Wit in the Seventeenth Century* (New Haven, 1978) discussed the play's shifts of perspective in relation to sixteenth-century art which often required the viewer to balance contradictory but equally valid impressions. Faced with disaster, artifice is Richard's only resource. John Baxter's *Shakespeare's Poetic Styles* (1980) is concerned mostly with *Richard II* and applies Yvor Winters's differentiation between Petrarchan and plain styles in its analysis of the play.

Two very subtle essays concerned with style are M. M. Mahood's chapter on *Richard II* in *Shakespeare's Wordplay* (1967) seeing the development within the play as being a testing of the efficacy of

the word and of the relationship between names and their bearers and at Richard's fall between words and things so that it is words that ultimately become meaningless; and Anne Barton's essay 'Shakespeare and the Limits of Language', studying the way in which *Richard II* and the following plays explore and exhaust the achievement of language setting imagination against fact, Richard II failing ultimately to dominate facts, Falstaff similarly attempting and failing to transcend reality, Henry V receding almost to colourlessness.<sup>21</sup>

Close to the concerns of these studies has been the development during the period under review of a study of the plays which sees concern about style as the key to the play's intention and meaning. A seminal book is Sigurd Burckhardt's *Shakespeare's Meanings* (Princeton, 1968) which in its turn owes a lot to William Empson. As a critic Burckhardt is both exciting and difficult, suggestive and baffling. His starting point can be what seems to be a minor episode or point of style which is then shown to function importantly as a clue to the play's meaning. Meaning is very much what Burckhardt thinks that the plays have, and he follows no merely aesthetic track. An important element in his criticism is his reading of the plays as self-referential, self-conscious speculations about themselves and their own nature so that the dramatist himself is involved in the action, the plays posing his own artistic problems. The treatment of Falstaff in *2 Henry IV* typifies the way in which that play retreats from solutions, consciously muffling its dramatic opportunities as *Part 1* did not. The characteristic style of *1 Henry VI* is the 'vaunt', a hyperbolic mode of writing indicative not of Shakespeare's immaturity but of his very intelligent appraisal of his material, the hyperboles being deliberately refuted in the Countess of Auvergne episode when in three lines (2.3.25-7) Talbot defines for us a new world, a different 'Tudor myth' of courtesy and understatement.

Burckhardt's book was influential, and this interest in the way in which a play can explore its own

<sup>20</sup> 'Linked Analogies of *Richard II*', *Sewanee Review*, 65 (1957), 420-33.

<sup>21</sup> *Shakespeare Survey* 24 (Cambridge, 1971), 19-30.

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nature, potentialities and limitations is marked in some later criticism, finding its fullest expression with James Calderwood. Calderwood works from a conception of 'metatheatre', plays that go beyond the confines of traditional drama and become a kind of anti-art form in which the boundaries between the play as a self-contained work of art and life are taken down. Calderwood's first book, *Shakespeare's Metadrama* (Minneapolis, 1971), devoted its final chapter to *Richard II* but his next, *Metadrama in Shakespeare's Henriad* (Berkeley, 1979), applied the analysis to the whole of the second tetralogy, seeing it as a self-contained metadrama in which Shakespeare was subjecting his own art to close scrutiny, the main plot being about the cyclic fortunes of drama and speech: a fall of speech with *Richard II*; a holding moment in the *Henry IV* plays; and the restoration of some sort of limited order in *Henry V*, Canterbury's speech being about order in drama as well as society, Agincourt redeeming Shakespeare as well as England, the Epilogue celebrating Shakespeare's own fugitive dramatic art. The main thesis runs the risk of drastically limiting the relevance of the plays. Language becomes a sort of substitute for religion, something in which one has faith or loses faith. Joseph A. Porter in *The Drama of Speech Acts* (Berkeley, 1979) also saw the second tetralogy as marking a shift in the way of conceiving and using language. There are familiar points in Porter's analysis - Richard II's self-consciousness, the clash between Falstaff and Hal - but they are set in a linguistic context. With *Henry V* language is seen as mastered and manageable, Hal's triumph sanctioning drama. Another study in this tradition is John W. Blanpied's *Time and the Artist in Shakespeare's English Histories* (Newark, Delaware, 1983). Here the plays are seen as an evolving process, partly one of self-education and self-realization incorporating the dramatist himself. Although Blanpied works close to some actual productions his stress falls mainly on language: the murder of Clarence becomes the destruction of the language he uses, the rebellion in 1 and 2 *Henry IV* a rebellion of style. This branch of criticism offers some cogent and close readings but, as is not the case with Burckhardt, they are harnessed to what seems a very narrow aesthetic

and stylistic purpose, the critical method closing down a lot of moral and other interesting options in order to make Shakespeare's concern with the purposes and limitations of his art the central concern of the plays.

Brian Vickers in *The Artistry of Shakespeare's Prose* (1968) provides an extensive study of the prose in 1 and 2 *Henry IV*, charting how it creates changes in our sympathies.

### GENRE

There are obvious difficulties in defining the history play as a genre since its nature has to do with content rather than outcome or mood. F. P. Wilson in his essay 'The English History Play', working to a simple formula, saw Shakespeare as the possible inventor of the history play and certainly the first dramatist to give it any sort of coherence or dignity.<sup>22</sup> Studies of specific conventions that find their way into the genre are provided by Wolfgang Clemen on the set speech in tragic and historical drama<sup>23</sup> and by Bernard Spivack on the growth of the evil character from late medieval drama through the moralities to Shakespeare (Richard III and Falstaff), noting the increasing secularization and moral tolerance which the sixteenth century brought to the material.<sup>24</sup> But the most thorough-going study of the genre is Irving Ribner's *The English History Play* (Princeton, 1957, rev. edn. 1965) defining it as an essentially patriotic and political study of the past, establishing the relevance of the past to the present and demonstrating a rational and Christian plan in history. Ribner also allows for the presence of a certain romantic element in the genre. He covers the evolution of the history play from the late Middle Ages to 1653 and discusses the two Shakespeare tetralogies (which he sees as separate cycles) in some detail. It is clear that Shakespeare himself could not be wholly aware of some of the elements in the tradition that these various studies identify and Anne Barton in her essay 'The King

<sup>22</sup> In *Shakespearian and Other Studies*, ed. Helen Gardner (Oxford, 1969), pp. 1-53.

<sup>23</sup> *English Tragedy before Shakespeare* (1955).

<sup>24</sup> *Shakespeare and the Allegory of Evil* (New York, 1958).

## SHAKESPEARE SURVEY

Disguised: Shakespeare's *Henry V* and the Comical History' argues that what distinguishes the history play is its lack of dramatic theory, the genre essentially developing out of the contemporary theatre through a sort of dialogue among specific plays.<sup>25</sup> This seems a profitable way to approach them and various essays have thrown light on them from this point of view. Harold E. Toliver sees Shakespeare as facing up to some tricky problems of genre in the second tetralogy and giving the history play a new stature. The plays integrate pragmatic political concerns and timeless human impulses, Henry V learning how to counter and transcend destructive impulses and ultimately integrating them in the adjustment to history.<sup>26</sup>

The connection between history and tragedy and the development of Shakespeare as a tragic dramatist within the cycle have aroused much interest. R. J. Dorius argues that the role of the heroes in the histories limits their tragic potential since in history their best role is to reconcile and maintain, their virtues those of prudence and economy, whereas the truly tragic heroic role is to risk and to dare.<sup>27</sup> Harold F. Brooks studies the role of women and Senecan features and techniques in *Richard III*<sup>28</sup> and Nicholas Brooke argues that that play is ambivalent between tragedy and history, Richard by extravagantly asserting his own will being able to free himself from the mechanism of history.<sup>29</sup> *Richard II* is again an important play. Travis Bogard<sup>30</sup> and Peter Phialas<sup>31</sup> have both seen it as making an important step forward in Shakespeare's development towards tragedy, though, on R. F. Hill's view, it marks the limit of what one sort of tragedy – rhetorical tragedy – can achieve.<sup>32</sup> John R. Elliott, Jr, sees the historical concerns of the play as putting a limit to its tragic power since history demands that the play be structured as much around Bolingbroke's progress towards the crown as around the figure of Richard himself: dramatizing a political issue it contains the wider rhythms of history.<sup>33</sup> On the other hand Michael Quinn sees the play as a perfect blend of history and tragedy, an ethical judgement being passed upon political failings.<sup>34</sup>

The comic genre is also important and S. L. Bethell provides a good analysis of the different

sorts of comedy found in the histories.<sup>35</sup> It is clearly possible to see some of the plays as accommodating happily to the comic genre. *1 Henry IV* is interpreted by Maggie Tomlinson as a unique comic success, Falstaff representing the comic spirit which brings extremes together,<sup>36</sup> and *Henry V* by Rose Zimbardo as a perfectly formal and balanced celebratory play.<sup>37</sup> The importance of pastoral in the histories has been studied by Charles R. Forker.<sup>38</sup>

The presence of different genres has been seen to cause some disturbing notes in the plays. C. L. Barber in *Shakespeare's Festive Comedy* (Princeton, 1959) notes the involvement of *1* and *2 Henry IV* with the comic traditions of the saturnalia (clowning and folly) and carnival, *Part 2* on his view failing since it excludes at the end the holiday sense of life. Jonas A. Barish also holds that the problems raised by the rejection of Falstaff are ultimately problems of genre, Hal's killjoy note associating him too closely with other comic killjoys (Shylock, Mal-

<sup>25</sup> In *The Triple Bond*, ed. Joseph G. Price (University Park, Pennsylvania, 1975), pp. 92–117.

<sup>26</sup> 'Falstaff, the Prince and the History Play', *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 16 (1965), 63–80.

<sup>27</sup> 'Prudence and Excess in *Richard II* and the Histories', *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 11 (1960), 13–26.

<sup>28</sup> '*Richard III*, Unhistorical Amplifications: the Women's Scenes and Seneca', *Modern Language Review*, 75 (1980), 721–37.

<sup>29</sup> Brooke, *Shakespeare's Early Tragedies*, pp. 48–79.

<sup>30</sup> 'Shakespeare's Second Richard', *PMLA*, 70 (1955), 192–209.

<sup>31</sup> '*Richard II* and Shakespeare's Tragic Mode', *Texas Studies in Literature and Language*, 3 (1961), 344–55.

<sup>32</sup> 'Shakespeare's Early Tragic Mode', *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 9 (1958), 455–69; 'Dramatic Techniques and Interpretation in *Richard II*', in *Early Shakespeare*, ed. John Russell Brown and Bernard Harris, Stratford-upon-Avon Studies, 3 (1961), pp. 100–21.

<sup>33</sup> 'History and Tragedy in *Richard II*', *Studies in English Literature, 1500–1900*, 8 (1968), 253–71.

<sup>34</sup> "'The King is not himself': the Personal Tragedy of *Richard II*", *Studies in Philology*, 56 (1959), 169–86.

<sup>35</sup> 'The Comic Element in Shakespeare's Histories', *Anglia*, 71 (1952–3), 82–101.

<sup>36</sup> '*Henry IV*', *The Melbourne Critical Review*, 6 (1963), 3–15.

<sup>37</sup> 'The Formalism of *Henry V*', in *Shakespeare: 'Henry V': a Casebook*, ed. Michael Quinn (1969), pp. 163–70.

<sup>38</sup> 'Shakespeare's Chronicle Plays as Historical-Pastoral', *Shakespeare Studies*, 1 (1965), 84–104.

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volio) and denying him that enrichment of personality which characters traditionally enjoy at the end of comedy.<sup>39</sup>

*Henry V* has also been seen as modified comedy. Placed within a religious framework for example, the play becomes to Roy W. Battenhouse a heroic comedy of irony mocking reprobate heroism and glory;<sup>40</sup> to Robert Egan the comedy of a king confronting the role of conqueror, an outward prince and an inward Christian, a potentially tragic choice but one ultimately resolved, as comedy must be, by the king's discovery of his true identity.<sup>41</sup>

The romance is also a constituent of the histories. Thomas H. McNeal sees the Margaret of Anjou episode in *1 Henry VI* as romance material deriving from *The True Chronicle History of King Leir* and added to *Part 1* to create a link with *Part 2* which had been written earlier.<sup>42</sup> Paul Dean presents the *Henry VI* trilogy as creating a new genre out of Elizabethan romance dramas<sup>43</sup> and *Henry V* as making a sometimes disturbing mix of history and romance material,<sup>44</sup> a point also developed by Joanne Altieri.<sup>45</sup> Anne Barton in the essay mentioned earlier sees *Henry V* as providing Shakespeare with the occasion for the deliberate rejection of an outworn romantic mode.<sup>46</sup>

A very interesting book taking an extensive view of the genre is Herbert Lindenberger's *Historical Drama: the Relation of Literature and Reality* (Chicago, 1975). This has the excitement of the wider view, seeing the English histories in a broad context of historical fictions both English (e.g. Scott) and European (e.g. Brecht). Lindenberger takes up most of the problems that have been posed by Shakespeare's plays. On the question of sustaining the heroic illusion, for example, Lindenberger sees Talbot as Shakespeare's only uncompromised hero: the plays thereafter record a natural but progressive diminution of values, but also gain some strength from the scepticism about itself found in *Henry V*.

### STRUCTURE

There have been in the period developments in the analysis of the dramatic structure of the plays. Hereward T. Price worked the plays free from

classical ideas of structure and plot, the plays in his view being governed by a controlling idea best established by a careful study of individual scenes and their relationship, making his point by a detailed analysis of *1 Henry VI*.<sup>47</sup> Madeleine Doran in *Endeavors of Art* (Madison, 1954) has extensively discussed those elements – the literary tradition, training in rhetoric, etc. – which help to determine the structure of the plays. Richard Levin, working from Empson's discussion of double plots in *Some Versions of Pastoral* (1935), examines the various types of plot structure in *The Multiple Plot in Renaissance Drama* (Chicago, 1971). Under hierarchical and clown sub-plot categories he discusses the sub-plots of *1* and *2 Henry IV* and *Henry V* and argues that their effect is to point up the adaptability of Hal and to add dignity to the main action (not always the way they are read); he convincingly differentiates Falstaff and Hal as creatures of time. Emrys Jones's *Scenic Form in Shakespeare* (Oxford, 1971) also emphasizes the crucial nature of the scene, offering careful analysis of how individual scenes are structured. In so far as Jones is also concerned with the recurrence in the plays of certain types of scene, situation and character, the early histories are especially important since they provide some of the die-castings as it were. *Richard III* and *1* and *2 Henry IV* for example are shown to contribute to the dense

<sup>39</sup> 'The Turning Away of Prince Hal', *Shakespeare Studies*, 1 (1965), 9-17.

<sup>40</sup> 'Henry V as Heroic Comedy', in *Essays on Shakespeare and Elizabethan Drama in Honor of Hardin Craig*, ed. Richard Hosley (1963), pp. 163-82.

<sup>41</sup> 'A Muse of Fire: Henry V in the Light of Tamburlaine', *Modern Language Quarterly*, 29 (1968), 15-28.

<sup>42</sup> 'Margaret of Anjou: Romantic Princess and Troubled Queen', *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 9 (1958), 1-10.

<sup>43</sup> 'Shakespeare's Henry VI Trilogy and Elizabethan "Romance" Histories: the Origins of a Genre', *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 33 (1982), 34-48.

<sup>44</sup> 'Chronicle and Romance Mode in Henry V', *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 32 (1981), 18-27.

<sup>45</sup> 'Romance in Henry V', *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900*, 21, (1981), 223-40.

<sup>46</sup> Barton, 'The King Disguised: Shakespeare's Henry V and the Comical History' (see note 25).

<sup>47</sup> 'Construction in Shakespeare', *University of Michigan Contributions in Modern Philology*, 17 (Ann Arbor, 1951).