

Introduction

Admit me chorus to this history. Shakespeare, *Henry V*

I

It is time to fill a void in renaissance drama studies by reconsidering the Stuart historical drama in the context of recent research on the history of renaissance historiography. To be sure, over the last few decades several critics have scrutinized the renaissance history play in conjunction with renaissance historiography, but only Irving Ribner's now inevitably dated investigation extends beyond the works of Shakespeare *and* into the Stuart period.¹ Many critics have slandered the Stuart historical drama by insisting on its inferior status compared to Elizabethan history plays. But such defamations are based less on a thorough appreciation of the Stuart history play on its own terms and in its historical context, than on the unfounded assumption that historical drama ought to be heroic, nationalistic, and more or less ideologically coherent – that it ought to be Elizabethan in character. With the accession of James I, a new set of political ideologies fused with typically Elizabethan modes of representation (including the drama) to foster a decidedly different cultural and literary landscape in England. In appearance and rhetoric, King James presented himself as more autocratic, more convinced of his absolutist powers, than Elizabeth ever had. To sanction this image of himself, James frequently turned to historical modes of argumentation. In part as a response to these changes, the Stuart playwrights begin to rethink and redefine the role of the monarch in their history plays. This process of redefinition, we shall see, is aided greatly by their understanding of renaissance innovations in historiographical theory and discourse. My chief aim will be to unfold the intricate negotiations between the genres of historiography and historical drama in the early years of the seventeenth century, and to relate those negotiations, whenever possible, to the representation of monarchs (or rulers) in the plays. And I will have achieved my goal if this inquiry were to lead to a new appreciation of the Stuart historical drama's conceptual, historiographical, and aesthetic strengths.

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The basic argument of this book is that the *forms* of historiography developed in the sixteenth century become part of the *content* of pre-Civil War Stuart historical drama. The playwrights do not embrace these forms uncritically; indeed, they often set these forms against each other for the purpose of causing calculated disruptions in the wildly popular and socially conventional plots common to sixteenth-century historical narratives and dramas, and, in the process, help to make visible the ideological operations which produce these plots. To be sure, a handful of Elizabethan history plays, Shakespeare's *Henry V* in particular, reveal similarly disruptive moments in historiographical discourse, but on the whole their broad actions and sweeping gestures foreground unity and cultural orthodoxy, as depicted through a coherent literary representation of the figure of the monarch, and a utilization of providence.² The opposite is true for the early Stuart historical drama, which dramatizes precisely the inadequacy of orthodox socio-historical and providential patterns imposed routinely by the shaping powers of Tudor culture on history's rag-and-bone shop.

This study explores points of friction between the playwrights who write history plays and a state that seeks to control historical discourse. The relationship between the state and the theater, however, is not a binary one. The state did not actually *write* the histories (although it did commission some of them and submitted virtually all of them to censorship) to which the playwrights took exception. The renaissance state's most effective mode of control over historiographical discourse was often less direct, less focused, and less concrete, and had to do more with a shaping of life in general than with any particular aspect of it. Through its religious policies, system of law, social customs, and educational system, the state tried to create obedient subjects that would be accepting of a society with enormous economic and social inequities. That the state was very successful in making its subjects embrace the social hierarchy as an image of God's plan and natural law is evident from the fact that ordinary men and women – educators, artists, poets, dramatists, members of the clergy, lawyers, clerics, historians, and artisans – none of whom benefited from the system the way their social superiors did, actively participated in the perpetuation (or reproduction) of that system (which included, of course, literary production). Whether their stake in the system was sufficient to justify their participation is a different matter, but it is certain that without their participation the Elizabethan–Jacobean state could not have lasted as long as it did.

But even if the state's means of exerting control (law, church, patronage, royal iconography, etc.) generally produced compliant subjects, we also know that in a hierarchical system no amount of social engineering can render absolutely invisible or completely rationalize gross disparities between its subjects. The reason is that although a social system produces

subjects of various classes that share a common interest in the reproduction of that system, no two subjects will have all interests in common. This inevitably causes friction, which can be expressed across a wide spectrum of possibilities (depending, in part, on how deeply the state's principles of obedience have been internalized), ranging from silent discontent or personal depression to innocuous social satire to armed rebellion and revolution. Because it understood that its more "benevolent" modes of subject production were not perfect, the state called into being very specific institutions – the censor, for instance, to deal with unruly playwrights and historians – to curb the concrete transgressions of its subjects. We must keep in mind, however, that, despite this outrageously lopsided division of power, the forces that drove the social reproductive process were disseminated throughout the culture, and were not located solely in the hands of the elite.

The bulk of this study's argument flows from a reading of a small number of Stuart history plays in their historical context. By historical context I certainly mean here the political, religious, legal, and cultural milieu of the moment, but especially the pivotal developments that occurred in the field of *historiography* just prior to and concurrent with the period during which the plays were written. The reason for making historiography a centerpiece of this study of the drama is that the playwrights recognized the inherent ideological dimension of history-writing, a recognition which they exploited to marvelous effect in their stage plays. Although most categorical distinctions between the Tudor and Stuart periods ultimately demand qualification, we can be certain that Stuart dramatists conceived of the monarch and his relationship to history in a manner conspicuously different from their Tudor predecessors. In the Stuart drama the monarch is viewed less and less as the primary (earthly) mover of history, and becomes instead a figure who is himself subject to historical necessity.

Following the widely accepted "great men" theory of history, most sixteenth-century playwrights and historians portrayed the monarch as the master and the maker of history. Narrative historians organized their matter according to the reigns of monarchs, allowing the political lives and deeds of the rulers to give shape, order, and meaning to events. Given a universally held belief in the absolute power of divine providence, no one could reasonably deem the monarch all-powerful in all matters, but the ruler's obvious sway over most earthly matters is reflected in Tudor historiography's blatant preoccupation with the actions and motives of "great men," or, on rare occasions, of great women. This preoccupation with "mostly kings, generals, statesmen . . . [and] princes of the church"³ betrays a certain Tudor perception of the dynamics of history and the basis of power. Power is thought to be held by "princes," and history is the consequence of their wielding it: history is literally "made" by princes (Ferguson, *Clio Unbound*

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4); indeed, in a sense, princes *are* the stuff of history, or history itself. On occasion this rather extreme yet commonplace fixation on “great men” takes on an unfeeling, almost callous quality, as when Shakespeare’s Henry V names for posterity the English fallen at Agincourt: “Edward the Duke of York, the Earl of Suffolk, / Sir Richard Kettle, Davy Gam, esquire; / *None else of name.*”⁴ We are not merely talking of Bardolph and Nym here, but of ordinary soldiers (like Court and Bates and Williams) who could have lost their lives in their king’s service. Their names matter not. But even men of name may be quickly forgotten, for it is King Henry, or *England* – as some of the speech prefixes in the First Folio identify him – whose fate is synonymous with England’s historical fate. When the Chorus, who embraces the role of the historian (see Prologue 32), in the epilogue tells of Henry’s death it is clear that the *king* achieved “the world’s best garden” (Epilogue 7), and that his premature death changed the course of history and made “England bleed” (12). “Historians in the sixteenth century,” David Scott Kastan points out, “were willing to isolate the victorious acts of Henry V from the temporal context in which they occur. From such a vantage point, they saw only the peerless warrior-king, and it is their uncritically heroic conception of Henry that informs the voice of the Chorus.”⁵

Needless to say, this “great men” theory of history, which we encounter in Edward Hall, Raphael Holinshed, George Puttenham, and, in less developed form, in Polydore Vergil, was hardly adequate to describe the complex relationship of actual monarchs to power and history. In the early Jacobean period, Sir Walter Raleigh’s “immensely popular” *History of the World* stands as a spirited corrective to any idea of princely control over the forces of history (Woolf, “Erudition” 54). However, far from deconstructing or disseminating the power of princes into impersonal historical forces, Raleigh unswervingly emphasizes the “storme-like, suddaine, and violent” powers of inscrutable divine providence and its agent fortune which obliterate the efforts and achievements of even the world’s greatest princes (53). Yet despite Raleigh’s fervor his views do not constitute a conceptual breakthrough in historical thought. Rather, the difference between Raleigh’s and his Tudor predecessors’ representation of the prince in history is one of accent: the former fatalistically valorizes providence as an incalculable force which wrecks monarchical accomplishments, whereas the latter more optimistically holds out for greater historical stability and at least a temporary triumph of the prince over history. The key terms in the debate – providence, prince, and history – remain constant.

Perhaps it is incongruous that the *dramatists* found both historiographical models wanting; it is downright ironic that they were the ones whose texts reveal a conceptual breakthrough in historical thinking. The late-Elizabethan Shakespeare and the early Stuart dramatists, I will show,

astutely abandon a view of the prince as the repository of power and maker of history in favor of a prince who is an opportunistic manipulator not merely of historical events themselves (many of which turn out to be largely beyond his control) but also, crucially, of their *representation*.

The difference here is not simply one of degree. The point is easily illustrated by again turning briefly to Shakespeare's Henry V. In *King Henry IV, Part 1*, Hal soliloquizes his intent to "redeem time." Such a redemption – if we take the term literally, and I think that Hal wants us to – would require a Christ-like intervention in the course of history. It turns out, however, that all Hal is capable of is fighting wars and praying to God: "O not to-day, [to] think upon the fault / My father made in compassing the crown" (*Henry V* 4.1.299–300). If any time is to be redeemed, if any sins are to be forgiven, God must be the redeemer and the forgiver, not Henry. And, as Henry privately admits, not even his "contrite tears" and liberal charity payments can exact God's redemption ("all that I can do is nothing worth" [309]), because his "penitence comes after all" (310). But despite some highly unflattering self-pity, Henry V is able to shed successfully whatever idealistic historical pretensions he may have embraced as young Prince Hal. In their stead Henry, the son of the usurper, comes to understand that "authority goes to that contender who can seize hold of the *symbols* and *signs* legitimating authority."⁶ One of those signs is, of course, historical representation, especially here the attempt to impose on the chaos of civil strife (which characterized the reigns of Richard II and Henry IV) Edward Hall's "restorative" conception of history:⁷ "O God, thy arm was here; / And not to us, but to thy arm alone, / Ascribe we all!" (*Henry V* 4.8.108–10). The king's professed piety writes him into history, into providence, as God's agent, as the *embodiment* of history, as the *de facto* (but really the *ex post facto*) redeemer of "England." Of course, as we shall see in chapter 4, Shakespeare's play as a whole precisely challenges Henry's (and the Chorus's) efforts to use historical representation to transform the "fantasy of . . . ideological [and historical] unity in the sole figure of the monarch."⁸ My central point here is that we see Shakespeare represent the king as one acutely concerned with the power of historical representation, not with history itself.

In order to trace this conceptual shift embodied in the renaissance drama, I have limited myself to a relatively small number of plays. From the period between 1519 and 1642 there are some seventy extant plays that have some claim to belonging to the history play genre (Ribner, *English History Play* 319–27). But I have confined my investigation to Stuart history plays and left undiscussed the plethora of acclaimed Elizabethan history plays, which have received, and continue to receive, ample attention, while the Stuart dramas are generally slighted or disparaged. This study closely examines

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only four Stuart history plays, even though there are at least twenty-four extant history plays written and published between 1603 and 1642 (Ribner, *English History Play* 325–7). Obviously, I do not offer my study as a survey of the field. I have narrowed my inquiry by selecting those plays which treat of the English monarchy directly. The reason for this is plain. If the Elizabethan history play exalted the “great men” view of history, and if the Stuart playwrights come to challenge that mode of representation, then it should be particularly useful to scrutinize the representation of monarchs in the Stuart historical drama. Strictly speaking, *The Tragedy of Sir John Van Olden Barnavelt* may appear to be an exception to this rule (for it does not introduce a monarch), but I will argue that the political and religious ties between England and the Dutch Republic (where the play is set) are so close that the play can be read in terms of James I’s foreign and domestic policies, and thus has direct bearing on the monarchy. Also, I have opted to write only about those dramas that deal with “recent” history (as opposed to ancient or legendary history or romance history) of the English monarchy because they exude a more perspicacious and genealogically more urgent connection to the reigning Stuart dynasty than do the plays about ancient English history. The practical consequence of this connection is a more acute ability of these plays to intervene (subversively or otherwise) in contemporary political thought and practice. With the exception of John Bale’s *King Johan* and Shakespeare’s *Henry V* (both of which are treated as test cases of my basic premises about the negotiations between drama and historiography), none of the plays harkens back further than Henry Richmond’s victory over Richard III in 1485. Therefore, each play examined here has keen bearing on the Tudor and Stuart dynasties. I have therefore opted for the following plays: Thomas Heywood’s *If You Know Not Me You Know No Bodie* (part 1), Shakespeare and Fletcher’s *Henry VIII*, Philip Massinger and John Fletcher’s *The Tragedy of Sir John Van Olden Barnavelt*, and John Ford’s *Chronicle History of Perkin Warbeck*.

II

Although this study is primarily historical in character, it also engages the vexed theoretical problem of literature’s relationship to history. Therefore a word or two should be said about the theoretical underpinnings sustaining my enterprise. As I began to suggest at the outset, my study attempts to show that the Stuart history play differs significantly from its Elizabethan predecessor because it appropriates not only the substance or content of sixteenth- and early-seventeenth-century historiography but also its various conceptual and methodological innovations. Hence, my study is about the relationship between form and content, and I proceed on the

assumption that literary form and content stand in a fundamentally dialectical relationship to one another. Form, in the words of Terry Eagleton, is a product of content, “but reacts back upon it in a double edged relationship.”⁹ What is more, “Forms are historically determined by the kind of ‘content’ they have to embody; they are changed, transformed, broken down, and revolutionized as that content itself changes” (Eagleton, *Marxism* 22).

We can set aside here the difficult problem of introducing a hierarchy within the dialectic (problematic because form and content are never encountered independently of one other), and instead focus on the dialectic itself. The form–content dialectic is so important to the present study because it offers an antidote to the still common tendency among literary critics to assume too readily that when playwrights, novelists, and poets incorporate materials from other sources, they transform those materials into something essentially literary, effacing their formal characteristics in the process. Many critics would admit that materials taken from, say, myths, folktales, historical narratives, or romances retain some of their original qualities; but such qualities are always down-played, and in those instances where they are too visible in the literary work they are invariably judged detrimental to the literary work, and discussed in terms of a conflict between genres or the author’s failure to master his or her sources. Nothing could be more damaging to a consideration of the history play, a genre that, as I will show, self-consciously appropriates formal features from historiography. Several Stuart historical dramas simulate historiographical practices and offer them up for the audience’s inspection. To erase or minimize those simulations by describing them as primarily “literary” is to miss the point of some of these plays completely.

The straightforward form–content dialectic is useful in helping us see what is at stake in the Stuart history play, but to comprehend fully what dramatists like Shakespeare, Fletcher, Massinger, Heywood, and Ford are up to, we need to make a further distinction within the dialectic. Before “content” borrowed from a historical narrative enters a history play, it already possesses a dual “form.” First, it is part of a narrative structure – say, John Foxe’s Protestant interpretation of English history – and its form and meaning are inevitably shaped by that narrative. The gruesome deaths by Marian fire of Protestants Latimer, Cranmer, and Ridley are necessarily acts of heroism and martyrdom, not, as they might be in some other narrative, acts of sheer stupidity. We are dealing with a historical account here, but we can call its form “literary” because its narrative is an expression of a specific ideological interpretation of history. However, before the “content” entered into Foxe’s narrative, it already possessed a “form” – a

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pre-literary “form.” It is less the product of a calculated effort by a single author, or small group, trying to impose a pattern on life than it is produced “under pressure of an inner need, of a collective psychological demand which, like everything else . . . has its social roots.”¹⁰ What this means is that the “raw” materials (words, jokes, folk stories, history, romance plots) out of which historical and, by extension, literary texts are fashioned do not exist in a vacuum; they are “the very components of our concrete social life itself” and possess what Fredric Jameson calls an “inner logic” – the “inner logic of content” (Jameson, *Marxism and Form* 402, 401–3).¹¹ Inner logic is not to be understood as a fixed essence, but rather as one of content’s elastic features whose particular manifestation depends on the ideological milieu within which it occurs. Or, to put it differently, “content” becomes available to a writer (or anyone else) only when ideology endows it with a form or pattern that makes it recognizable. As Hayden White has aptly observed, the contents of “verbal fictions,” be they literary or historical, “are as much *invented* as *found*.”¹² The historical “facts” or “contents” of literary works are already culturally produced, that is, prior to their incorporation in the literary text.

Significant for this investigation of the drama is that there often existed a tension between content’s inner logic and the literary form into which it was cast by historians. From the perspective of someone like Foxe it was crucial (as we will see below) that readers believed that inner logic and Protestant historiographical form were absolutely identical. Foxe’s need to stress the equation stemmed of course directly from the existence of alternate readings that propounded different inner logics and different narratives, suggesting that histories are indeed invented, not found. The Stuart dramatists seize on these tensions and foreground them in their plays, pointing out discrepancies between historiographical practices and various “components of . . . concrete social life itself.”

For the dramatists, the process of textual production, then, “is the process whereby ideology produces the forms which produce it, thus determining in general both the instruments and devices which work it, and the nature of the work-process itself” (Eagleton, *Criticism* 84). And it is this understanding of the literary work as “an ideological production to the second power” which grants it its peculiar status with regard to ideology. “For in producing ideological representations, the text reveals in peculiarly intense, compacted and coherent form the categories from which those representations are produced” (Eagleton, *Criticism* 85). Reading a literary text, therefore, is not an ordinary encounter with ideology (even though the text *is* an ideological product); the text draws attention to its own artificial and constructed nature (or to the fact that “naturalness is the effect of a particular production”) and thus counteracts ideology’s basic drive to

conceal the productive modes that “naturalize” ideological categories, dissolving them into the spontaneity of the “lived.” The Stuart historical dramas considered here capitalize on this fact by enacting the ideological work – here, specifically, the work of historical representation – required to produce a king.

Eagleton rightly points out that this “double-production” of ideology may, in fact, “cancel itself out” and “invert itself back into an analogue of knowledge.” Such “knowledge,” to be sure, is still ideological in character (it does not transcend the context which produces it), but it *can* make visible, to the attentive reader, precisely those operations which ideology conceals. It can help shift ideological horizons. Such revelations are of concern to the student of past cultures, and they are extremely significant at a given historical moment insofar as they can constitute a rational basis for an oppositional stance to a cultural hegemony. Whether or not such opposition is actually subversive or whether it is eventually smothered in the all-encompassing embrace of power (as some new historicists would have it) of course depends on larger and entirely extra-literary conditions of political struggle. No type of “knowledge” is inherently subversive.¹³

The *potential* for seditious historiographical activity, however, was greatly enhanced by innovations in English approaches to the past. Beginning in the early decades of the sixteenth century, under the pressures of internal ideological shifts and continental influences, English historiography metamorphosed from a chiefly unified medieval practice into a methodologically eclectic endeavor: different historians came to embrace different philosophies of history and different historiographical practices. Obviously, the actual events of English history had not changed but the Reformation especially brought about changes in the “inner logic” of the content of history. These changes in turn transformed the literary form(s) of the historical narratives and promoted borrowings from continental historiographical practices. Somewhat surprisingly, this methodologically mixed bag, which produced variant and often contradictory historical accounts, did not initially create the epistemological ambiguity one might look for. On the contrary, it was not until the playwrights seized on historiography’s eclecticism by borrowing its *forms* for the stage that historiographical instability was foregrounded to the (playhouse) public at large and linked to contemporary political discourses. In order to explore these matters, however, the history play had to abandon the typical Elizabethan historical narrative with its fondness for strict hierarchies and divine overplots. One way to expose the mechanics of history-writing was to disrupt or displace the ways in which the Tudor conception of history concealed its own production. This was possible not merely because the playwrights carefully studied the historians, but because the “inner logic” of the content

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of Elizabethan history changed in a Jacobean world with new ideological trends, including ostensibly greater religious tolerance, a policy of peace vis-à-vis Spain, and an intensification of the rhetorics of divine right theory and royal absolutism. By appropriating the content and the form of the narrative histories and incorporating *both* of them into the content of the drama, the playwrights alter the *form* of the history play in two crucial ways: they transform the Elizabethan ideological model (and the literary form which flows from it), and they change the *genre* of the history play.

These changes also spelled the demise of the history play, but not, as has been argued, because of an aesthetic decline; on the contrary, the history play wrote itself out of existence by probing into the nature of historical presentation, which did not go over well with an audience which had grown accustomed to heroic plots that by and large affirmed Tudor orthodoxy. The dramatists, it seems, were responding to a set of cultural and ideological developments (a foreign monarch on the English throne, peace with Spain, and so forth), while the audience was locked into a nostalgic longing for the days of the Virgin Queen during which all could unite with her against a common foe. In other words, the playwrights on the whole reflected the cultural disjointedness of the new Jacobean nation, whereas the public, in the theater at least, apparently harkened back to former times. The growing appetite for the romance plays of Shakespeare, Fletcher, and others may be, as critics have suggested, a reflection of this.

III

Part of what made history plays effective as inquiries into the very process of historical representation is a continuity that existed in the renaissance between the fields of “literature” and “history.” The sharp distinction we commonly draw between history and literature (or poetry) is essentially a modern invention. The renaissance did not always insist on this discrimination, or even care to make it. At any time during the renaissance, “history,” the *OED* tells us, could mean “A relation of incidents (in early use, either true or imaginary; later only those professedly true). . .” Early usage continued into the early seventeenth century. Measured against a modern yardstick, renaissance usage seems primitive because it falls far short of a conception of history as ostensibly fact-based. It would be grossly misleading, however, to assume that renaissance men and women were troubled per se by the “story” component of history. On the contrary, there are numerous renaissance instances where history and poetry intersect quite naturally. *Hamlet* serves as an excellent example. The Prince Hamlet hails a troupe of traveling players to Elsinore with the recommendation that they be “well us’d for they are the abstract and brief chronicles of the time”