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978-0-521-56155-6 - Historiography and Ideology in Stuart Drama

Ivo Kamps

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This study explores the Stuart history play, a genre often viewed as an inferior or degenerate version of the exemplary Elizabethan dramatic form. Writing in the shadow of Marlowe and Shakespeare, Stuart playwrights have traditionally been evaluated through the aesthetic assumptions and political concerns of the sixteenth century. Ivo Kamps's study traces the development of Jacobean drama in the radically changed literary and political environment of the seventeenth century. He shows how historiographical developments in this period materially affected the structure of the history play. As audiences became increasingly skeptical of the comparatively simple teleological narratives of the Tudor era, a demand for new ways of staging history emerged. Kamps demonstrates how Stuart drama capitalized on this new awareness of historical narrative to undermine inherited forms of literary and political authority. *Historiography and ideology in Stuart drama* is the first sustained attempt to account for a neglected genre, and a sophisticated reading of the relationship between literature, history, and political power.

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Published by the Press Syndicate of the University of Cambridge
 The Pitt Building, Trumpington Street, Cambridge CB2 1RP
 40 West 20th Street, New York, NY 10011-4211, USA
 10 Stamford Road, Oakleigh, Melbourne 3166, Australia

© Cambridge University Press 1996

First published 1996

Printed in Great Britain at the University Press, Cambridge

A catalog record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress cataloging in publication data

Kamps, Ivo.

Historiography and ideology in Stuart drama / Ivo Kamps.
 p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0 521 56155 8

1. English drama – 17th century – History and criticism.
 2. Literature and history – Great Britain – History – 17th century.
 3. Politics and literature – Great Britain – History – 17th century.
 4. Historiography – Great Britain – History – 17th century.
 5. Historical drama, English – History and criticism. 6. Political plays, English – History and criticism. 7. Great Britain – Politics and government – 1603–1714. 8. Great Britain – Historiography.
- I. Title.

PR678.H5K36 1996

822'.309358–dc20 96-14728 CIP

ISBN 0 521 56155 8 hardback

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For Deborah

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They flutter behind you your possible pasts. Roger Waters, *The Final Cut*

Good my lord, will you see the players well bestow'd? Do you hear, let
them be well us'd, for they are the abstract and brief chronicles of the
time. After your death you were better have a bad epitaph than their ill
report while you live. Shakespeare, *Hamlet*

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Preface

This book is not the first to study the connection between history-writing and the renaissance history play. Not surprisingly, I am therefore indebted to those who surveyed the field before. Three claims in particular that emerge from earlier studies help to frame the present inquiry. First, members of all social classes in the Elizabethan and Stuart epochs turned to history to locate and legitimate personal and family identities that had become unsettled in a climate of unprecedented social and economic mobility and religious and political turmoil. But at the same time that people turned to history for much needed stability and continuity, it became increasingly clear that “Historiographic writing no longer had a direct, unequivocal relation with historical truth. Alternative accounts of historical events and opposed interpretations of their causes and significance now threatened each other’s credibility.”¹ These two opposing tendencies which are admirably elaborated upon by Phyllis Rackin in *Stages of History*, and which seek for certainty where there is much ambiguity, are exploited magnificently and provocatively by a small number of Stuart playwrights. The third contextual marker of this study – the one that firmly links historiography to the drama – derives from Irving Ribner who, taking his cue from Lily B. Campbell’s *Shakespeare’s Histories: Mirrors of Elizabethan Policy*, characterized the history play as a type of drama that based itself on one or more of the English chronicles and sought to achieve the *authentic purposes of renaissance historiography*.² The crux of Ribner and Campbell’s claim is that the drama appropriated not only the substance of history-writing but also its methods and aims – an act of appropriation that, this study seeks to demonstrate, helps to explain the generic shift from the Elizabethan to the Stuart history plays.

Taken together, these three factors drew the historical drama and historiography very closely together, and set the drama in competition with the narratives. In Ben Jonson’s *The Devil is an Ass*, Meercraft says to Fitzdottrel: “By my faith, you are cunning in the chronicles, sir,” to which Fitzdottrel replies, “No, I confess I have it from the play-books, / And think they are more authentic.” No matter how witty and provocative

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Fitzdottrel's remark is, the point of this book is not to argue that one genre is more historical than the other, but rather that the close proximity in which the two genres found themselves in the renaissance theater resulted in a dramatic formulation of an acute skepticism about the reliability of historical discourse in general. The status of historical discourse in the theater is the subject of this book.

This book began as a dissertation at Princeton University, under the direction of Lawrence Danson and Victoria Kahn. A dissertation fellowship from the Mrs. Giles Whiting Foundation allowed for its completion in 1990. The idea to write about renaissance conceptions of history and the drama first occurred to me in one of the last seminars Alvin Kernan taught at Princeton. Along the way many friends and colleagues have been kind enough to discuss with me or read various incarnations of my argument. I would like to thank Sharon Achinstein, Hunter Cadzow, Chris Fitter, Ellen Gardiner, Richard Kroll, Robert Mack, Sheila Newbury, Karen Raber, and Jyotsna Singh. I am deeply indebted to Michael Sprinker, who has, over the years, supported my work in every conceivable way, and who took the time to read the manuscript in its entirety, and parts of it twice. At the University of Mississippi, I learned much from the group of students that participated in the Studies in English Drama seminar. For a whole semester I got to try my arguments about Stuart drama on a "captive" audience. Summer grants from the Graduate School and Department of English helped me to bring the book to a conclusion.

At the Folger Shakespeare Library, I benefited greatly from Linda Levy Peck's seventeenth-century history seminar. I am grateful for the Folger's support of my participation in the seminar and my research with a grant-in-aid.

At Cambridge University Press, Ray Ryan was surpassingly helpful and diplomatic in negotiating this study into print. David Sanders has my gratitude for being a very careful yet flexible copy-editor.

My father, Carel F. Kamps, Jr., provided the illustration of a gang of conspiratorial-looking Dutch politicians for the dust jacket. Given avid genealogical interests that usually led him to hard-to-decipher records in Dutch libraries, church registers, and town halls, I suspect he quite enjoyed hunting for pictures.

My greatest debt is to Deborah, to whom this book is dedicated, not least because the good ideas in it are hers. She is both its co-author and most astute critic.

Parts of chapter 4 appeared as "Possible Pasts: Historiography and Legitimation in *Henry VIII*" in *College English* 58 (1996), pp. 56–79, and are here reprinted with permission of the editor of the journal.