Chapter 1

The uses of history

Renaissance ideas of history

Shakespeare and his contemporaries did not share the belief, widely held by historians and literary critics today, that there are essential differences between past and present more significant than any possible continuities. To the Shakespeare of *Julius Caesar* and *Henry V*, the past was by no means a foreign country, ruled by different ideological assumptions. The reading of history, according to the preface to Sir Thomas North's *Plutarch's Lives* (the source of Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar, Antony and Cleopatra*, and *Coriolanus*), makes the past present, in the way it 'setteth before our eyes things worthy of remembrance', preserving them from 'the death of forgetfulnes':

> For it is a certaine rule and instruction, which by examples past, teacheth us to judge of things present, and to foresee things to come: so as we may know what to like of, and what to follow, what to mislike, and what to eschue.[1]

History, in this view, teaches by examples, enabling us to understand the present by reflecting on past triumphs, disasters, and missed opportunities. The practical lessons history teaches are applicable to everyday life, by 'comparison and application' to our own circumstances.[2]

The Shakespearean history play is notoriously unconcerned with anachronisms: his ancient Romans and medieval noblemen are Elizabethans, thinly disguised. Cleopatra plays billiards, the conspirators in *Julius Caesar* wear hats and listen to the clock striking, medieval warriors shoot pistols and fire cannons long before they were in use. Samuel Johnson in the eighteenth century complains of Shakespeare:

> He had no regard to distinction of time and place, but gives to one age or nation, without scruple, the customs, institutions, and opinions of another, at the expense not only of likelihood, but of possibility.[3]

According to his fellow dramatist Thomas Heywood in *An Apology for Actors* (1612):

> If wee present a forreigne History, the subject is so intended, that in the lives of *Romans, Grecians*, or others, either the vertues of our Country-men are extolled, or their vices reproved . . . either animating men to noble attempts, or attacking the consciences of the spectators, finding themselves toucht in presenting the vices of others.[4]

Shakespeare's history plays are not naïvely didactic in the way Heywood suggests, nor, aside from the *Murder of Gonzago* in *Hamlet*, is the link between what is represented on stage and the world of the spectator ever this literal. But drama works, as Heywood recognized, by 'attacking the consciences of the spectators' in awakening their feelings – including, at times, patriotic sentiments and feelings of guilt.

> What English blood seeing the person of any bold English man presented and doth not hugge his fame . . . as if the Personator were the man Personated, so bewitching a thing is lively and well spirited action, that it hath power to new mold the harts of the spectators and fashion them to the shape of any noble and notable attempt. What coward to see his countryman valiant would not be ashamed of his own cowardice?
>
> (*Apology for Actors*, Sig. B4)

Dramatic representation has a magical quality, 'bewitching' the spectators and encouraging what Coleridge later called the willing suspension of disbelief: we watch the events unfold before our eyes, and experience them as happening at this moment.

In *Henry V*, cited by Heywood as an instance of the power of historical drama to 'new mold' and 'fashion' character, the warrior king by implication enrols generations to come in the 'band of brothers' fighting side by side. Memory, reinforced by the retelling of the story in dramatic performance, keeps alive what 'all-oblivious enmity' would destroy:

> This story shall the good man teach his son,
> And Crispin Crispian shall ne'er go by
> From this day to the ending of the world
> But we in it shall be remembered,
> We few, we happy few, we band of brothers.[5]

'Old men forget' (4.3.49), and it is the responsibility of historian and dramatist to counteract the natural tendency to forget or ignore anything beyond the immediate moment. As Ralegh writes:

> For as wee are content to forget our owne experience, and to counterfeit the ignorance of our owne knowledge, in all things that concerne our selves . . . so wee neither looke behind us what hath beene, nor before us what shall bee . . . Wee are compounded of earth, and wee inhabit it.
>
> (*History of the World*, p. 61)

The events of historical narrative and historical drama differ from those in other narratives and plays in that they are assumed to be true, with a separate existence outside the imagination of the author. Shakespeare's English and Roman history plays occupy a hinterland between fact and fiction, challenging the sharp distinction Aristotle in the *Poetics* and Sir Philip Sidney in *The Defence of Poesy* draw between the imaginative artist or poet and the historian who, as they see it, is limited to relating what 'has happened', the realm of verifiable fact. Sidney contrasts the 'golden' world of the poet, who can roam freely 'within the zodiac of his own wit', inventing entire universes, with the 'brazen world' ordinary people and historians are forced to live with.[6] But plays like *Henry V* and *Julius Caesar*, though based closely on historical sources and thus 'tied . . . to the particular truth of things', show that there is plenty of room for invention, interpretation, dramatic heightening within the parameters of given facts or events. The historian writing a narrative and the dramatist writing a play about Henry V needs to make certain formal decisions in shaping his material. Such a writer, as Hayden White has argued, 'confronts a veritable chaos of events *already constituted*, out of which he must choose the elements of the story he would tell'.[7]

The extent to which sixteenth-century historians felt a need to shape and select their material varied greatly, and it has been argued that attitudes towards the writing of history changed markedly during the course of the century. The chronicles of Holinshed and Hall, the main sources for Shakespeare's history plays, are organized 'on the principle of including as much as possible'. Yet this inclusiveness of apparently 'random information' can be seen as a strength rather than a weakness, in allowing for differing voices to be heard. Holinshed's *Chronicles* often juxtapose several accounts of the same events, refusing to select and edit, 'to give everie author leave to tell his owne tale':

> For my part, I have in things doubtful rather chosen to shew the diversitie of their writings, than by over-ruling them, and using a peremptorie censure, to frame them to agree to my liking: leaving it nevertheless to each mans judgement, to controll them as he seeth cause.[8]

The 'politic historians' of the later sixteenth century, strongly influenced by Tacitus and Machiavelli, placed a far greater emphasis on causation, on

examining the motivations underlying action, often treated with a bracing scepticism. This scepticism, in writers like Ralegh, extended to the reliability and authenticity of the primary sources on which historians depended. As Ralegh wrote in 'a digression' on 'using conjecture in Histories':

> Informations are often false, records not alwaies true, and notorious actions commonly insufficient to discover the passions, which did set them first on foote . . . For the heart of man is unsearchable: and Princes . . . by their own close temper, or by some subtill miste . . . conceale the trueth from all reports.

Ralegh's remarks suggest that the historian's responsibility is to 'search into' the hidden springs of behaviour, hoping to discover 'the most likely motives' of any action, while remaining aware of the endless obstacles which may render his or her task impossible.[9]

In *2 Henry IV*, the King, sick and weary, cries out: 'O God, that one might read the book of fate!' The only lesson one learns from history is that nothing lasts, that 'the revolution of the times' will eventually 'Make mountains level, and the continent, / Weary of solid firmness, melt itself / Into the sea': we are powerless to avert the buffetings of 'chance's mocks / And changes' (3.1.45–9, 51–2). The book of fate is closed to us, and if we could read it, what it reveals would be unbearably painful to contemplate, extinguishing all hope:

> O, if this were seen,
> The happiest youth, viewing his progress through,
> What perils past, what crosses to ensue,
> Would shut his book and sit him down and die.
>
> (3.1.53–6)

The Earl of Warwick, seeking to counter the King's despair, in contrast finds a pattern in history, discernible both in the individual life and in the collective history of 'all men'. Time is not simply a destroyer, but a preserver, planting the seeds of new life in 'the times deceas'd'.

> There is a history in all men's lives
> Figuring the nature of the times deceas'd;
> The which observ'd, a man may prophesy,
> With a near aim, of the main chance of things
> As yet not come to life, who in their seeds
> And weak beginnings lie intreasured.
> Such things become the hatch and brood of time.
>
> (3.1.80–86)

Warwick's organic metaphor suggests that it is possible to learn from experience (the King ends the scene saying 'I will take your counsel'), recognizing recurrent patterns and, wherever possible, taking advantage of them: 'Let us meet them like necessities' (3.1.93, 106). History, Warwick maintains, is not a closed book, and it is not a mass of unconnected details, dead facts. A recognition of the shaping forces of history enables us to understand the past and to anticipate the future.

Two views of history widely held in later periods were far less common among Shakespeare and his contemporaries. Though antiquarian research, the investigation and collection of material remains from past civilizations – inscriptions, coins, place names, records 'hidden in old books hoarded up in corners' – became more and more popular during the sixteenth century, history tended to be identified with narrative. Even distinguished antiquarians like William Camden saw their own researches into 'small things' as falling below 'the Dignity of History', concerned 'to handle Businesses of great weight and Importance'.[10] The positivist conception of history, associated with Leopold von Ranke in the nineteenth century, that the historian, aiming at a scientist's objectivity, should limit himself to 'strict presentation of the facts', 'to let the things speake' and thus 'transmit what happened', avoiding any contamination by values or personality, was virtually unknown in Shakespeare's day.[11] The poststructuralist conception of history, which questions the very existence of objective 'fact', is equally at variance with Renaissance notions of history. In poststructuralist theory, historical facts are 'constituted' by the historian, who imposes a 'fraudulent outline' on his or her materials, making them fit a pre-existing template.[12] Renaissance historians looked for an overall coherence in the events they described, but considered this pattern to be implicit in the events themselves, rather than imposed by the historian. In the Renaissance, history was seen as exemplary, providing practical lessons for its readers. Holinshed, at the end of his first volume, urges his readers to 'imagine the matters which are so manie yeares past to be present, and applie the profit and commoditie of the same unto our selves'.[13]

If it was generally agreed in the Renaissance that a didactic element was prominent in historical narratives and history plays, there was considerable disagreement at the time as to what kind of lessons these works taught. One view, particularly emphasizing the appeal of dramatic performance to a wide popular audience (including the 'unlearned'), is expressed in Heywood's *Apology for Actors*. As we will see, such a view of the history play as fundamentally conservative and serving the interest of the English monarchy in preaching obedience has had considerable currency among twentieth-century Shakespeare critics:

> Plays have made the ignorant more apprehensive, taught the unlearned the knowledge of many famous histories, instructed such as can not read in the discovery of all our *English* Chronicles . . . Playes are writ with this ayme . . . to teach the subjects obedience to their King, to shew the people the untimely ends of such as have moved tumults, commotions, and insurrections, to present them with the flourishing estate of such as live in obedience, exhorting them to allegeance, dehorting them from all felonious stratagems. *(Apology for Actors*, Sig. F3, F3v)

According to E. M. W. Tillyard's enormously influential *Shakespeare's History Plays* (published in 1944 and still in print), this is precisely the intention of Shakespeare's histories: plays not only keep the past alive, but, by means of vivid, memorable examples, they teach the audience the virtues of order and degree, the evils of disorder and disobedience. As Tillyard points out, Edward Hall's chronicle (1548), one of Shakespeare's principal sources, states as its 'general theme':

> What mischiefe hath insurged in realmes by intestine division, what depopulacion hath ensued in countries by civill discencion, what detestable murder hath been committed in citees by seperate faccions, and what calamitee hath ensued in famous regions by domestical discord & unnatural controversy: Rome hath felt, Italy can testifie, France can bear witnes . . . and especially this noble realme of Englande can apparantly declare and make demonstracion.[14]

Yet if we look at the Preface to Ralegh's *History of the World*, which includes a brief survey of English history in the same period treated in Hall's chronicle, the moral he draws and the 'patterne' he finds are very different:

> Oh by what plots, by what forswearings, betrayings, oppressions, imprisonments, tortures, poysonings, and under what reasons of State, and politique subteltie, have these forenamed Kings, both strangers, and of our owne Nation, pulled the vengeance of GOD upon them-selves, upon theirs, and upon their prudent ministers! and in the end have brought those things to passe for their enemies, and seene an effect so directly contrarie to all their owne counsaile and cruelties; as the one could never have hoped for. (*History of the World*, p. 61)

The pattern Ralegh describes is fundamentally ironic, or even tragic: as in *Hamlet*, 'purposes mistook / Fall'n on the inventor's heads' (*Hamlet*, 5.2.389–90). Historical example does not demonstrate the benevolence of those in power and the prudential wisdom of obedience, but presents a litany of oppressions and disasters, perpetrated by those priding themselves on their 'politique subteltie'. Though divine providence, as in Hall, is invoked ('But the judgements

of GOD are for ever unchangeable' (p.50)), Ralegh's perspective, like Machiavelli's, is profoundly secular and without comforting illusions. His advice is being offered to princes rather than subjects, in full awareness that they are probably not going to listen.

Shakespeare's history plays

The *First Folio* (1623) bears the title *Mr William Shakespeares Comedies, Histories, & Tragedies*, dividing the plays into three generic categories, fourteen comedies, eleven tragedies, and ten histories. The arrangement of the plays in the *First Folio* reflects the chronology of the events treated in each play, beginning with *King John* (early thirteenth century) and ending with *Henry VIII*, rather than the order of composition.

Conventionally, the three *Henry VI* plays and *Richard III* are known as 'the first tetralogy', written and performed between 1589 and 1593, and the four plays *Richard II, 1* and *2 Henry IV*, and *Henry V*, written and performed between 1595 and 1599, 'the second tetralogy'. These eight plays treat a continuous slice of English history, beginning late in the reign of Richard II (1398) and ending with the death of Richard III in 1485. In each group of four plays the action is closely linked, with characters appearing in successive plays and explicit references in one play to events depicted in another. *3 Henry VI* begins 'I wonder how the King escaped our hands', a direct reference to the final scene of *2 Henry VI*, and both *Richard III* and *1 Henry IV* begin with tributes to peace succeeding the 'grim-visaged War' or 'civil butchery' presented in an earlier play.[15] A more complex instance of links between plays occurs in the confrontation between father and son in *1 Henry IV*, where the angry king likens his scapegrace son to the deposed Richard II:

> The skipping King, he ambled up and down
> . . .
> Mingled his royalty with cap'ring fools,
> Had his great name profaned with their scorns
> . . .
> And in that very line, Harry, standest thou;
> For thou has lost thy princely privilege
> With vile participation
> . . .
> For all the world,
> As thou art to this hour was Richard then,
> When I from France set foot at Ravenspurgh.
> (*1 Henry IV*, 3.2.60–4, 85–7, 93–5)

This scene serves several functions: it links the present action with antecedent action, reminding the audience of a play they may recently have seen, acted by the same company with a number of the same actors; it suggests the recurrence of certain patterns in history, the burden or legacy of the past; and it provides motivation for the action to follow, as Prince Hal strives to disprove his father's accusations and wash away his 'shame' on the battlefield (3.2.137).

Generic categories are not absolute. The term 'history' was used promiscuously in titles of plays during this period: quarto editions of Shakespeare's plays include *The True Chronicle History of King Lear, The Tragical History of Hamlet*, and *The Most Excellent History of the Merchant of Venice*, and titles and subtitles of plays by other authors include 'The Famous Chronicle historie', 'The Comicall Historie', and 'An English Tragical History'.[16] Quarto editions of *Richard II* and *Richard III* describe these plays as tragedies. As Paulina Kewes points out, plays by Elizabethan and Jacobean dramatists set in ancient Rome and contemporary or near-contemporary France, the Netherlands, Scotland, or Turkey share thematic concerns and formal characteristics with Shakespeare's English histories, and 'blur the boundaries between the native and the foreign'.[17]

Shakespeare's 'Roman plays', *Julius Caesar* (1599), *Antony and Cleopatra* (1606–7), and *Coriolanus* (1607–8), are classified as tragedies in the Folio, and generally accepted as such. These plays, based on events from Roman history, resemble Shakespeare's English histories in many respects. A play like *Julius Caesar*, first performed in the same year as *Henry V*, not only includes battle scenes staged in a similar manner, but performs a similar balancing act between fact and fiction, between fidelity to a historical source and the requirements of dramatic form. As David Daniell, its recent Arden editor, has said, the subject of *Julius Caesar* is 'the morality of rebellion', which, as in *Richard II* and nearly all of Shakespeare's English histories, is treated as deeply problematical, beset with uncertainties.[18] Bathing their hands in blood, the conspirators prophesy correctly that the present scene will in future years be staged over and over again in theatres like the Globe:

> CASSIUS
> Stoop, then, and wash. How many ages hence
> Shall this our lofty scene be acted over
> In states unknown and accents yet unknown?
>
> BRUTUS
> How many times shall Caesar bleed in sport
> That now on Pompey's basis lies along,
> No worthier than the dust?

CASSIUS
So oft as that shall be,
So often shall the knot of us be called
The men who gave their country liberty.
(*Julius Caesar*, 3.1.111–18)

What they fail to prophesy is that history may judge them differently – not as patriots and heroes of liberty, but as the bloodstained perpetrators of a 'foul deed', the unleashers of 'domestic fury and fierce civil strife' (3.1.263, 274). This kind of dramatic irony is equally characteristic of the English histories, where words are shown to be subject to violently opposed interpretations, and where characters, immersed in a struggle for power and the illusion of autonomy, bring about by their actions 'an effect . . . directly contrarie to all their own counsailes' and intention.[19] In all these plays, individuals are subject to historical forces beyond their understanding and control.

In this study, the primary emphasis will be on the ten plays categorized as histories in the First Folio, with comparisons, where relevant, to the Roman plays and to plays by Shakespeare's contemporaries and predecessors closely related to particular Shakespearean texts. Though *King Lear, Macbeth*, and *Cymbeline* concern themselves with 'the matter of Britain', they are plays of a very different kind. *Edward III* and *Sir Thomas More*, plays of multiple authorship with Shakespeare as a possible co-author, are generically similar to Shakespeare's history plays, but reasons of space do not permit any detailed treatment of these plays here.

The history play is a characteristically Elizabethan genre, prominent during the 1580s and 1590s and markedly declining as a popular dramatic genre after 1603, in the reign of James I. As a genre, the English history play was not invented by Shakespeare: according to Scott McMillin and Sally-Beth MacLean, the Queen's Men, the most prominent and successful theatrical company of the 1580s, specialized in plays based on recent English history. *The Famous Victories of Henry the Fifth* (1586?), probably 'the earliest of extant English history plays among the professional companies', and *The Troublesome Reign of King John* (1588?), both in the repertory of the Queen's Men, may have served as partial sources for Shakespeare.[20] Several other plays belonging to the genre are roughly contemporaneous with Shakespeare's English histories. Marlowe's *Edward II* (1592) and the anonymous *Woodstock* (1592?) are the best known of these, and two other plays, *Edward III* (1590?) and *Edmund Ironside* (1588–90), have, with varying degrees of plausibility, been attributed to Shakespeare, either as sole author or as collaborator.[21] History plays continued to appear on stage, in decreasing numbers, after the death of Elizabeth I. The prologue

to John Ford's *Chronicle History of Perkin Warbeck* (1634), described by Levy as the only history play 'of any importance' after 1616, characterizes the genre as 'out of fashion'.[22] Though Shakespeare did not create the history play as a viable dramatic genre, he was more responsible than any other dramatist for establishing its contours and conventions, and his plays are the ones which have endured.[23]

Extremely popular in Shakespeare's lifetime, his English history plays continued to be performed frequently after his death, with a long stage history in the eighteenth, nineteenth, and twentieth centuries. *Richard III*, which provides a star part actors still love to play, is one of the three or four Shakespeare plays most frequently performed today: there are two famous films, with Laurence Olivier (1955) and Ian McKellen (1995) as Richard, as well as Al Pacino's tribute, *Looking for Richard* (1996). Early testimony to the popular success of *1 Henry VI* (a play much less familiar to modern audiences) is provided in Thomas Nashe's *Pierce Pennilesse His Supplication to the Divell* (1592), in praise of the history play as a genre by means of which 'our forefathers' can be 'raised from the Grave of Oblivion'. Like Heywood in *An Apology for Actors*, Nashe locates the moral efficacy of plays in their 'open presence' in live performance, the way they make historical figures immediately present, involving the spectators as participants, where otherwise these 'valiant acts' would lie 'buried' and inaccessible.[24] The example he gives is Talbot, the warrior hero who dominates the first four acts of *1 Henry VI*, dying nobly at the end of Act 4, to rise triumphantly from the grave in each performance, greeted by the tears of spectators.

> How would it have joyed brave *Talbot* (the terror of the French) to thinke that after he had lyne two hundred yeares in his Tombe, hee should triumphe againe on the Stage, and have his bones newe embalmed with the teares of ten thousand spectators at least (at severall times) who, in the Tragedian that represents his person, imagine they behold him fresh bleeding? . . . There is no immortalitie can be given a man on earth like unto Playes. (2.212)

Nashe's figure of 'ten thousand' may not be an exaggeration in indicating the large audiences the play drew in the 1590s. Henslowe's Diary records seventeen performances in 1592–3, and the Rose Theatre, where it was acted, could have held a thousand spectators at each performance.[25] Nashe singles out the death of Talbot as the scene that is most effective in stirring the emotions of the audience; paradoxically, it is presented as a moment of triumph, giving joy to the spectator and to Talbot himself, beyond the grave. As we will see, the patriotic element in Nashe's account of 'brave *Talbot* (the terror of the *French*)'