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COMPANION TO

SHAKESPEARE'S HISTORY PLAYS

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CONTENTS

FIGURES

1

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The Shakespearean history play

Genre

In 1623 when, seven years after Shakespeare's death, John Heminges and Henry Condell, the editors of First Folio (the first collected edition of Shakespeare's works), grouped roughly a third of Shakespeare's plays under the heading of 'histories', they confirmed a dramatic genre that Shakespeare himself seems to have endorsed: Polonius announced that 'the best actors in the world, either for tragedy, comedy, history . . .' had arrived in Elsinore (*Ham.*, 2.2.416). But Heminges and Condell also unloosed a host of critical problems – they seem to have recognised difficulties themselves. *Troilus and Cressida*, which they placed after *Henry VIII*, they entitled *The Tragedy of Troilus and Cressida*. Yet this play is not included in the Folio's 'catalogue' or index of the tragedies, which are printed after the histories. In fact many have regarded *Troilus* as a 'history', which is how it had been categorised by the publisher of its Quarto version (1609)[1] where it was entitled *The Famous History of Troilus and Cresseid* [*sic*]. In recent years critics have located *Troilus* among the 'problem plays' (plays that defy easy generic classification and which may be best approached by way of the ethical problems they explore).

Generic classification was bound to be difficult given that most of the English histories centre their action on the reign of a monarch, the narrative ending with his death. It was therefore inevitable that 'history' plays were going to be closely affiliated with tragedy. Some were initially labelled as such. The long title headings to Folio 'Histories' include *The Life and Death of King John*, *The Life and Death of King Richard the Second*, and *The Tragedy of Richard the Third: with the Landing of Earl Richmond, and the Battle at Bosworth Field*. (Forms of these titles in the volume's catalogue often vary from the above.) The Quarto title of the second of these is *The Tragedy of King Richard the Second* (1597 etc.), while the third has a running title 'The Life and Death of Richard the Third'. Only the Henry VI plays offer

a 'life' from the king's childhood to his death: the others, like tragedies, take up the story of the king's reign when his career is tilting towards crisis. As the case of *Troilus and Cressida* suggests, the very titles Heminges and Condell gave these plays may not be those by which Shakespeare knew them: the play they called *The Second Part of Henry the Sixth* had been entitled in its Quarto version *The First Part of the Contention betwixt the Two Famous Houses of York and Lancaster* (1594), and the title of the Octavo version of *The Third Part of Henry the Sixth* is *The True Tragedy of Richard Duke of York and the Death of Good King Henry Sixth* (1595).

Despite this evidence, for generations it was common to regard the union of 'history' and 'tragedy' as an uneasy one: Aristotle, after all, had contrasted 'history' with 'poetry' on the grounds that the latter was more philosophic and universal, an observation endorsed by Sir Philip Sidney. A.C. Bradley's distinction between 'historical' and 'pure' tragedy led him to exclude *Antony and Cleopatra* from his influential *Shakespearean Tragedy* (1904).[2] All too often commentators concentrated on the personalities of the protagonist, marginalising 'history' and offering a moralisation of the action that occluded the politics. More recently, however, the *convergence* of history and tragedy in Shakespearean texts has been a starting point for critical analysis. Tragedy has been characterised not just by conflict between a man of high degree and his destiny or read as a tale of a 'flawed' protagonist, but has been seen to evolve from political situation. Attention has been paid not only to larger patterns of action but to values, ideologies, and institutions, and to the accidental or contingent. Rather than seeing politics emerge from history it may even be more profitable to think of history emerging from politics: historical narratives are shaped by the politics of the writers of those narratives. In theatrical productions the outcome of the action has been signalled from the beginning, perhaps so that the audience might attend to constitutional degradation or the particular chains of causation that generate the play's ending. In 2000 Steven Pimlott's *Richard II* for the Royal Shakespeare Company opened with a striking stage image: the royal throne was perched on top of a chest that became, at the end, the coffin for the king. In Adrian Noble's 1988 RSC production of '*Henry VI*' and '*The Rise of Edward IV*' (conflations of *1*, *2*, and *3 Henry VI*) the throne stood above a prison cage in which both Mortimer and King Henry were to die. In Julie Taymor's film *Titus* (2000) an induction showed a boy playing with robotic warrior toys, an index for the techno-muscular masculinity the film explores, his game presently interrupted by a massive explosion as if from a bomb outside.

Henry V is the play that is the most obvious exception to this rule. It ends, not like tragedy with a death, but like comedy with a marriage. If we read the two parts of *Henry IV* as one play, we note an ending in death, but

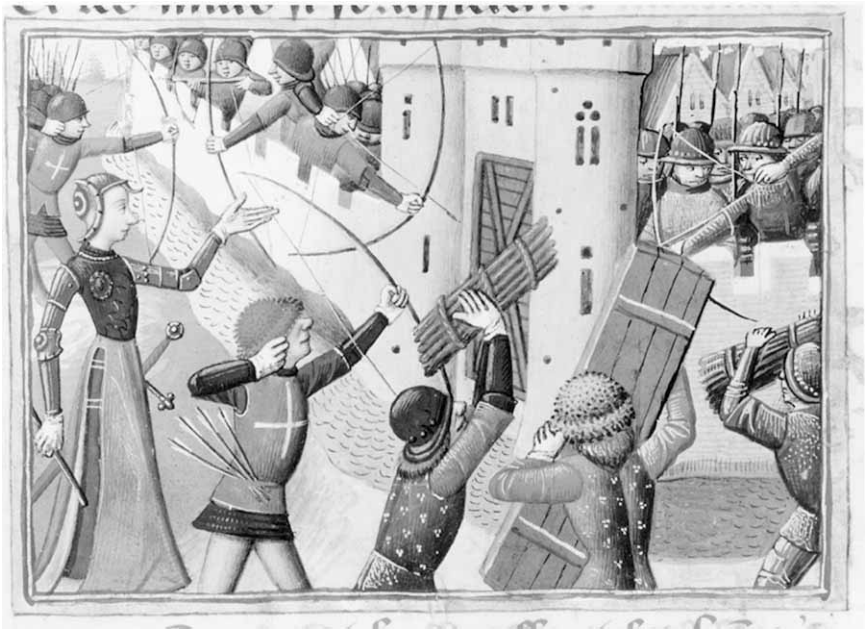

Figure 1 Joan of Arc (see *1 Henry VI*) leading the assault against Paris, from Martial d'Auvergne, *Vigiles du roi Charles VII*, 1484.

Part 1, dominated as it is by the misrule of Falstaff, is also closely related to comedy.[3]

Folio titles may be yet more deceptive: *The Famous History of the Life of King Henry the Eighth* (1613) was, possibly, originally called *'All is True'*. Moreover, although this play seems to be appropriately placed in order of reign at the end of the 'histories' section of the Folio, the play was written much later than the others and is, in its structure, more like Shakespeare's late romances than, say, the plays about the reigns of Henry IV or Henry V. (Romance was not a genre recognised by the Folio editors.) Sometimes tragedies and even comedies were labelled 'histories': in 1600 a Quarto appeared entitled *The Most Excellent History of the Merchant of Venice*, and in 1607–8, another Quarto: *Mr William Shakespeare his True Chronicle History of the Life and Death of King Lear and his Three Daughters*. Certain of the tragedies (*Macbeth*, *King Lear*) have among their principal sources the chronicles by Edward Hall (1548 etc.) and Raphael Holinshed (1577 etc.) that Shakespeare had used for his 'histories'.[4]

What have come to be called the 'Roman plays' appear in the Folio among the tragedies – a tendentious placing given that, famously, Julius Caesar is murdered less than half-way through the play (called in Folio *The Tragedy of*

Julius Caesar) that bears his name. Likewise *Cymbeline*, arguably a romance although categorised as a 'tragedy', has only a couple of scenes in which King Cymbeline appears. *Coriolanus* appears first among the tragedies with the title *The Tragedy of Coriolanus*. The Stationers' Register entry of 6 February 1594 for what is probably *Titus Andronicus* refers to 'a noble Roman history of Titus Andronicus' although the play is described in both Folio and Quarto as a 'tragedy'. Like these three texts, the English history plays all bear the names of individuals, but it is apparent that they too are as much about reigns as personalities – an observation that is supported by the title page of a play now ascribed at least in part to Shakespeare, *Edward III* (1595) which, interestingly, reads 'The Reign of King Edward the Third: as it hath been sundry times played about the City of London'. Moreover, it is arguable that all of the plays have at their centres political and social concerns: *Julius Caesar*, for example, exposes the fragility of republics, *Cymbeline* celebrates Empire (the word 'Britain' occurring frequently in the text, testifying to James VI and I's attempts to unify the crowns of Scotland and England),[5] and *Titus Andronicus* addresses the grotesque excesses of honour cultures and the way tyranny both generates and is generated by violence.

So, from a consideration of their titles alone, the genre of the Shakespearean history play was very undetermined. Who else had written 'history plays'? Drama in England before the first decades of the sixteenth century was almost entirely ceremonial and produced under the auspices of religious institutions. Dramatisations of biblical history and of saints' lives we know as 'mysteries' and 'miracles' respectively – few of the latter have survived. Those that were written to instil Christian doctrines of ethics, 'moralities', were allegorical, generally dramatising a battle between personified virtues and vices for the soul of mankind. (The conflict between the Chief Justice and Falstaff for the allegiance of Prince Hal is a residue of this pattern.) Both mystery and morality plays mingle the grandiose and the comic, pain and laughter – like Shakespeare's histories. But in the reign of Henry VIII new kinds of offering appeared: John Skelton's *Magnificence* (*c*.1515–1523), described on its title-page as a 'a goodly interlude', sets out the relationship between 'magnificence' and 'measure' within a court world that is defined by characters with names like 'Cloaked Collusion' and 'Courtly Abusion'. The play satirises a contemporary, the most powerful man in England after the monarch, Cardinal Wolsey. About the same time appeared political moralities with titles like *Friendship, Prudence, and Might* (offered by boy players at court in 1522) and *Lord Governance and Lady Public Weal*, a play that was obviously a political morality. Its text is lost but it was performed at Christmas in Gray's Inn 1526, by and for law students.[6] Its title suggests a perennial theme. Conflicts between, on the one hand, the material

desires of the aristocracy and monarchs who required money for rule and government (or demanded it to maintain wanton magnificence), and, on the other, the necessary thrift of commoners and handicraftsmen led to charges of prodigality and waste that are represented in morals throughout the sixteenth century and given a local habitation in Shakespeare's histories. An anonymous morality, *Liberality and Prodigality*, was performed by boys of the Chapel as late as 1601. Shakespeare's 'prodigal' Richard II improvises a way of defraying the costs of putting down rebellion in Ireland and of his 'fierce blaze of riot' (2.1.33) by seizing the wealth of his uncle John of Gaunt upon the latter's death. Moral outrage could harden into a kind of class conflict: in 2 *Henry VI* we hear two of Cade's followers compare the lot of the common people with that of 'magistrates', i.e. high-ranking members of the executive:

> HOLLAND ... Well, I say, it was never merry world in England since gentlemen came up.
> BEVIS O miserable age! Virtue is not regarded in handicraftsmen.
> HOLLAND The nobility think scorn to go in leather aprons.
> BEVIS Nay more, the King's council are no good workmen.
> HOLLAND True: and yet it is said, 'Labour in thy vocation': which is as much to say, as let the magistrates be labouring men; and therefore should we be magistrates. (*2H6*, 4.2.7–16)

Although the mechanicals' chop-logic vitiates their conclusion, the passage reminds us of how the myth of 'merry England' was both informed by the imperative of social equality and grounded in scriptural values.

What are the characteristics of Shakespeare's histories? Shakespeare could probably count on a minimal knowledge of historical events in his audience[7] and he represented these in various ways, inevitably concentrating as much on form and genre as on story. Structurally the plays are indeed various: the earliest, the plays about the reign of Henry VI (1588–90), are chronicles of civil war, what Edmund Hall called 'intestine division'.[8] Dramatising the events of this reign involved not only making sense of, and giving a dramatic shape to, the chroniclers' accounts of the Wars of the Roses between Yorkists and Lancastrians, but relating the surges of national politics to the persistent conflict between England and France during the Hundred Years War. Out of this wilderness of wars between barons and nations personalities emerge: England's doughty champion Lord Talbot, 'the terror of the French',[9] who fights a racy Joan of Arc who spouts Marlovian heroical verse; Good Duke Humphrey, brother to England's lamented hero, Henry V; the womanising Edward IV; the high-aspiring Duke of York who dies at the hands of a tigress, Queen Margaret of Anjou; and her husband, the pious

Henry VI, who achieves some tragic quality as he is slaughtered by the villainous Richard of Gloucester. In production, the parts of Joan of Arc and Margaret can be doubled, an economical way of exposing the destabilising role of powerful women. The plays invoke the populist myth of the court being infiltrated by diabolic 'politicians' – the word was newly imported from France.[10] When Richard of Gloucester in the Folio version of *3 Henry VI* boasts that he will 'set the murderous Machiavel to school' (3.2.193) we recognise a popular figure who was also conjured up by Kyd and Marlowe, the totally unscrupulous bogyman. 'Machiavel' derives from Protestant writings against Italianate vice rather than from any real comprehension of the writings of Niccolò Machiavelli who lived well after the death of Henry VI. It is significant that, in the Octavo, 'aspiring Catiline' appears in place of 'murderous Machiavel', probably a player's recollection of a lost play by Stephen Gosson, *Catiline's Conspiracies*, performed at the Theatre about 1578. Both readings testify to the way political myths infiltrated chronicled history.

In *Coriolanus* one of Aufidius' serving men proclaims: ' Let me have war, say I. It exceeds peace as far as day does night: it's sprightly walking, audible and full of vent' (4.5.228–9). This matches the tone of these first histories, but they are also remarkable for their quizzical interrogation of sovereignty and the way they portray the horror and savagery as well as the glories of war, suggesting throughout, in a manner akin to the 'true' Machiavelli, that the course of human history is evidently ordained by the might of armies and the actions of particular men.

King John (1595–6) is a theatrical essay that anatomises different claims to authority and portrays a Romish intervention in English politics. One of its most prominent characters, Philip Faulconbridge, often referred to as 'the Bastard', derives from another traditional figure, the Vice of the morality plays. *Richard III* (*c.*1591) and *Richard II* (*c.*1595) concentrate more on central figures whose lives are fitted into tragic moulds. The earlier play owes as much to Seneca as to the chroniclers of English history, and its hero is constructed differently from the figure he cut in *3 Henry VI*. In the play that bears his name he is a figure in whom dissimulation has distorted personality, a man whose shadow has displaced his substance. 'Shadow' was an Elizabethan designation for an actor – there is extended play with the word in 4.1 of *Richard II*.[11] This doubleness is associated with the fiction that a king was 'twin-born with greatness' (*H5*, 3.1.231), inhabiting his own body, the 'body natural', but incarnating the mystical 'body politic' which legitimated his rule and ensured succession. Play between these two 'bodies' might generate splits in personality, conflict between them, tragedy.[12] The Henry IV plays (*c.*1597) return to civil war, to discrepancies between public and private personalities,

and lay bare conflict between monarchy and aristocracy, fathers and sons, authority figures and the unaccommodated. *Henry V* (*c.*1599) is an epic pageant that places in perspective both the glories and the moral expenditure of war. Henry's heroical venture into France may be driven by a desire for glory, but for Pistol, one of his officers, war was an occasion for plunder.

Characters recur in different plays,[13] and there can be a degree of narrative continuity, but it is probably misleading to assume that Shakespeare planned these works as a 'cycle'. The order of the plays' composition does not match the sequence of the reigns they portray, and grouping them into 'tetralogies' elides their structural differences. (The 'second tetralogy' covers the reigns of the *earlier* Plantagenets Richard II, Henry IV, and Henry V, while the so-called 'first tetralogy' yokes together, as we have seen, plays as formally different as *1–3 Henry VI* and *Richard III*.) They certainly do not possess a pattern that is directed to endings that are morally or theologically linked to their beginnings in a manner analogous to the way that the 'cycles' of medieval mystery plays progressed from creation to resurrection. But although, since 1864, there have been a number of ambitious and important linked productions of the histories as 'tetralogies' or 'cycles',[14] there is no evidence from Shakespeare's time that they were ever performed in this manner, and no evidence that he was aware of the 'cycles' of ancient Greek tragedy. Nor does it seem that he wrote them programmatically to exhibit a providential scheme that culminated in the foundation of the Tudor dynasty that is acclaimed at the end of *Richard III*. Presenting the plays as cycles emphasises elements of ritual which may dampen the political charge they delivered, and also invites audiences to consider attendance at linked performances as a celebration of a myth of Englishness, akin to a pilgrimage to Bayreuth to hear Wagner's *Ring* cycle. In fact, while Shakespeare created many touchstones for national sentiment, he also showed that, even as the state was developing, the unified nation which might validate that state was a myth. Shakespeare chronicles an age of feuding warlords and, in what may seem to be his most patriotic play, *Henry V*, reminds his audience that the motley horde of English, Irish, Welsh, and Scots that make up the king's army scarcely constitutes 'one nation'. National unity was a tactical instrument developed to sustain an expeditionary force, the creation of which was supposed to concentrate the 'giddy minds' (*2H4*, 4.3.342) of the leaders of political factions. The English monarchy was legitimated by heredity: Shakespeare shows not only alternative political systems, republics and elective monarchies, but lays out, in all their complexity and tenuousness, the devious paths by which the crown descended to Elizabeth.

For many modern theatregoers, however, Shakespeare's histories, especially when experienced as linked productions, seem to make a statement about a destiny for England. In other words, although Homer and Virgil are never primary sources, magnitude of action, grandiloquence of style, the invocation of deity, and what are taken as signs of divine intervention have suggested to critics since Coleridge relationships not only to tragedy but to epic. Coleridge considered both genres were 'founded on the relation of providence to the human will', and while

> in the epic poem fate is represented as overruling the will . . . in the drama, the will is exhibited as struggling with fate . . . The events themselves are immaterial, otherwise as the clothing and manifestation of the spirit that is working within. In this mode, the unity resulting from succession is destroyed, but is supplied by a unity of a higher order, which connects the events by reference to the workers, gives a reason for them in the motives, and *presents men in their causative character* (emphasis added).[15]

Coleridge's concentration on the way men struggle to make their own history suggests a model for interpretation that does not stress a grand design but which anatomises the English body politic and refuses the mystification of the secular and causative that occurs when claims for master narratives made by characters within the plays are taken literally. This part of Coleridge's account is not so very different from the ideal for political drama created by Bertolt Brecht with his model for epic theatre. There is so much questioning of glory in Shakespeare that we might even claim that the histories are rejoinder to Elizabethan projects for a revival of heroic poetry. In the October eclogue in *The Shepheardes Calender* Piers had sounded a clarion call for poets:

> Abandon then the base and viler clowne,
> Lyft up thyselfe out of the lowly dust:
> And sing of bloody Mars, of wars, of giusts [jousts];
> Turne thee to those that weld the awful crowne,
> To doubted [dubbed] knights, whose woundless armour rusts,
> And helmes unbruzed wexen dayly browne. (36–42)

Shakespeare implicitly asserts that if a poet is to address the ancient topics of heroism and return to the depiction of knights fighting for fame and honour, it is necessary to eschew the pieties of romance epic that emerge in *The Faerie Queene*. He delineated the duties as well as the glories of England's honour caste, and subjected monarchs, their courts, and the ideology of monarchy to a scrutiny as searching as that to which they had been exposed in the morality plays.

Truth and realism

Henry VIII may have been called 'All is true', possibly a quiet irony that disputes the content of the play in that it shows the king rewriting the history of his marriage to Katherine of Aragon.[16] We rapidly realise what a riddle that alternative title is. Although writers of history in our own age are aware that the past they map out is coloured by ideological positioning and fashioned by the kinds of narrative they are creating, all modern historians critique their sources and write discourses that are evidence-based. We assume that behind modern histories are 'facts', deduced from written or material documents, witnesses to events, or from statistical analysis. Any divagation from this kind of 'truth' would, in our own period, be unacceptable. Yet although Renaissance historians in their search for veracity went to what they took to be primary sources, particularly the historians of the ancient world, they made few distinctions between historical figures and fictive characters, and made ample use of the rhetorical device of *prosopopeia*,[17] writing speeches they deemed such figures on particular occasions might have made – or ought to have made. Such fictional histories were the stuff of popular literature as well. When Prince John denigrates Falstaff's capture of Coleville of the Dale, Falstaff retorts 'let it be booked with the rest of this day's deeds; or, by the Lord, I will have it in a particular ballad else, with mine own picture on the top on't, Coleville kissing my foot' (*2H4*, 4.1.395–8).

As Shakespeare did in the comedies, where he inserted frequent intimations of the conventions of comedy (creating 'meta-theatre'), in his political plays he addressed not only history but historiography. *Readers* of history may be encouraged to reflect upon recurrent patterns in the past, but theatre audiences watch history being made: the immediacy of the experience concentrates the mind upon the contingent, the secular, and on psychological deliberation. Moreover, given that each production is going to create particular emphases and therefore differing explanations for dramatised events, historicism may be impossible in the theatre. While St Paul may have written 'there is no power but of God: the powers that be are ordained of God' (Rom.13.1), the winning and losing of theatre battles obviously rests upon charismatic leadership and upon the right forces being in the right place at the right time. The authority of office might be subverted by the impotence of the office holder, the outcome of a staged battle may be shown to depend upon the particular sword-strokes and spear-thrusts in a fight to the death.

Although this suggests a kind of demystification or historical 'realism', Shakespeare, like his contemporaries, made no attempt to create a sense of

geographical exactitude or historical authenticity by 'accurate' theatrical settings. Elizabethan playhouses were not designed for *illusion*: there was no question of constructing scenic likenesses of palace rooms or tavern 'ordinaries', formal gardens or fields for battle. When such places were evoked in dialogue, they served as what Mikhail Bakhtin called 'chronotopes',[18] 'time-places', representations of *social spaces* and not imitations of *particular places*. We are not certain how actors were dressed: it seems most likely that basic costumes were Elizabethan with some token costumes – long medieval shoes, for example – to mark historical difference. Other details obliterated that difference: clocks are referred to long before they were historically invented, Cleopatra plays billiards. Anachronism was not a failing: it may indeed have served to forge links between past and present situations. What is certain is that no play stands or falls by its historical 'accuracy'. Not all characters are historical, some were composites as with Mortimer in *1 Henry VI*,[19] others were shunted from one generation to another: Hotspur and Hal, contemporaries in *1 Henry IV*, historically were born in 1364 and 1387 respectively. 'There is figures in all things' (*H5*, 4.7.30): stage-Plantagenets could signify individuals contemporary with Shakespeare. In the Chorus to Act 5 of *Henry V* Shakespeare explicitly compares Henry's triumphant return from Agincourt to a wished-for return for Robert Devereux, Earl of Essex who, at the time of the play's composition, was in Ireland dealing with the Tyrone Rebellion. 'All is true' turns out to have other meanings that are not related to accuracy: the phrase might suggest scepticism, or it might mean that the action presented is of universal validity, a demonstration of political paradigms and not necessarily an accurate account of the deeds of one set of great women and men. (Alternatively, the title may be a rejoinder to a censor.)

Courts are represented not with painted scenery but by appropriate varieties of theatrical ritual: processions, music, formal speech. The ceremonies that sustain the state are often interrupted – that is the pattern of the arrested funeral of Henry V at the beginning of *1 Henry VI*, of Saturninus' obstruction of the investiture of Titus Andronicus, and of the moment when Richard II refuses to allow the challenge to Mowbray by Bullingbrook in 1.3 to proceed to a duel – a trial by combat that would have delivered the outcome into God's hands. Richard, for once a good strategist, intervenes to banish both men, Mowbray because he may *know* too much about the murder of Woodstock in which Richard himself had had a hand, Bullingbrook because he may *want* too much, even the crown of England.

Shakespeare, therefore, was concerned not just with chronicle and personality but with institutions: in particular with the fissures of court politics. St Augustine had famously pointed out the precariousness of what we would

now call the 'state':

> Remove justice, and what are kingdoms but gangs of criminals on a large scale? What are criminal gangs but petty kingdoms? A gang is a group of men under the command of a leader, bound by a compact of association, in which the plunder is divided according to an agreed convention.[20]

From some points of view the Wars of the Roses and the earlier insurrections of Bullingbrook's erstwhile allies can be seen as chronicles of plunder, Augustinian gang-wars, and the solemn oaths that, it is claimed, seal allegiance seem more like what Augustine had in mind when he wrote of 'compacts of association'. If Shakespeare celebrates monarchical magnificence, as in the set-piece description of the Field of the Cloth of Gold in *Henry VIII*, or acclaims his audible and sprightly walking heroes, he equally offers a populist perspective on political action: he decrowns power, makes majesty his 'subject', unmasks politicians, exposes feebleness.[21] This he sometimes does by introducing scenes in different modes, in subplots and counterplots. Once Bullingbrook is firmly established on the English throne, after a long ritualistic sequence in which Richard II strips himself of the regalia that sustained his power, the newly crowned Henry IV finds himself 'monarchising' in a strange little farce written in comic couplets (5.3). Here he seeks news of his 'unruly son', Prince Hal, and has to decide between, on the one hand, the claims of the Duke of York who wants the even more unruly Aumerle, his own son, put to death for plotting against the crown and, on the other, the pleas of the boy's mother for mercy on her son's life.[22] The irony is that Henry IV as Bullingbrook himself had come to the throne by 'by-paths and indirect crooked ways' (*2H4*, 4.2.312). Fathers cannot control sons, and the Eastcheap scenes in the Henry IV plays implicitly question whether the royal writ can (or ought to) extend into the tavern. As Francis Bacon observed in his essay 'Of Empire' , 'Kings have to deal with their neighbours . . . their children, their prelates . . . their nobles, their second-nobles . . . their commons, and their men of war.'[23]

The Pistol sequences in *Henry V* register not only the decease of the qualities of wit and ease incarnate in that 'second-noble' and unwilling man of war, Falstaff, but the contrast between heroic rhetoric and the actualities of politics and the battlefield, hinting the while at a causative relationship between male sexuality and military aggression. Henry V's jingoism as he departs for France is replayed in a fustian mode as Pistol takes leave of the Hostess:

> Look to my chattels and my movables.
> Let senses rule. The word is 'Pitch and pay'.

> Trust none, for oaths are straws, men's faiths are wafer-cakes,
> And Holdfast is the only dog, my duck.
> Therefore *caveto* be thy counsellor.
> Go, clear thy crystals. – Yoke-fellows in arms,
> Let us to France, like horse-leeches, my boys,
> To suck, to suck, the very blood to suck! (2.3.43–50)

Pistol's rhetoric exposes the tactical considerations that may animate Henry's claim to the throne of France, made, he asserts, 'with right and conscience' (*H5*, 1.2.96). The real end of war was at best the wealth that could come from ransoms, at worst the rape of cities and wanton pillage:[24] the Battle of Bosworth in *Richard III* may be the only example of a just war in the canon. Indeed Shakespeare's protracted analysis of the nature, origins, and uses of power makes us realise that it may well be more profitable to think of these texts as political rather than 'historical' plays.

Politics

Shakespeare's 'histories' therefore are neither generically similar one to another nor bound to historical fact. They are related to history mainly by offering representations of historical figures and the creation of theatre out of historical events. Yet in another sense they are profoundly historical, addressing themselves to historical *process*, ways in which change comes about. Raphael Holinshed's *Chronicles of England, Scotland, and Ireland*, Shakespeare's principal source, offer not only stories, but colour the narrative of events with set speeches and reflections upon the course of action. Sometimes Holinshed mingles providential accounts of history with secular materialist ones of the kind associated with Livy or Machiavelli. Sometimes marginal notes offer a sardonic and populist perspective upon a grand narrative: 'an ominous marriage' beside the account of the marriage of the young Henry VI to Margaret of Anjou, or, concerning the death of the Duke of York in *3 Henry VI* which the text likens to the Crucifixion, 'a purchase of God's curse with the pope's blessing'.[25] Hall had offered introductory essays that reflect upon the course of his chronicle and the moral nature of his protagonists, and the title of his work, *The Union of the Two Noble and Illustre Families of Lancaster and York*, proclaims the 'end' of at least one phase of history, marked by Henry Tudor's victory over Richard III at Bosworth Field.

Were the plays, like the pattern of Hall's chronicle, patriotic? A hard answer would be that there was no one 'nation' to which contemporaries might owe allegiance. Although both Shakespeare's contemporaries Thomas Nashe

and Thomas Heywood bear witness to the way history plays stiffened the sinews and summoned up the blood of Englishmen,[26] there are grounds for conjecturing that Shakespeare may have provoked rather than pleased those who would control the political culture of England. At the beginning of his career, at the time of the Henry VI plays, his endeavour may even have appeared 'oppositional': on 12 November 1589 the Privy Council wrote to the Archbishop of Canterbury, the Lord Mayor of London, and Edmund Tilney, Master of the Revels, asking them each to appoint someone to scrutinise all plays performed in and about the City of London because the players had taken 'upon them, without judgement or decorum, to handle matters of divinity and state'.[27] Parts of the Henry VI plays reveal evidence of censorship by Tilney[28] – or of self-censorship by the players. History was indeed dangerous matter: it was not until 1608 that the deposition scene (4.1.154–317) was included in Quarto versions of *Richard II*.[29] Following the publication in 1599 of his *Life and Reign of King Henry IV*, the historian Sir John Hayward was almost indicted for treason, although much of his material was drawn from the writings of the Roman historian Tacitus.[30] Also in 1599 certain publications provoked a famous order by the Archbishop of Canterbury, John Whitgift, who prohibited further printing of certain named satires in verse and prose (those that had been printed were to be burnt), and commanded in particular that no history plays be printed unless they had been allowed by the Privy Council and that other plays be permitted only 'by such as have authority'.[31] All of this testifies to a widespread habit of scrutinising the past for analogues of the present, a habit of mind that derives from typological reading of the Bible. Yet the fact that the gist of that 1589 order from the Privy Council (which repeats a formula that had been used in a proclamation of 1559), was often repeated is yet another example of the way the reach of the Tudor state exceeded its grasp.[32]

What this and other encounters with the various authorities who had powers of censorship confirm – Jonson was forced to write a prefatory epistle to *Sejanus* which does not really accord with the contents of his play – is that the age did not draw a firm distinction between history and politics. This was inevitable: Cicero had celebrated history as the 'light of truth ... the mistress of life', a contradictory description that could be sharpened into a claim as threatening as the observation by a contemporary of Shakespeare that history taught 'the precepts either of politic laws or of the art of war'.[33] It was equally impossible to separate politics from religion: Richard Bancroft, canon of Westminster, seems to have promoted theatrical satires by Lyly, Nashe, and Greene against 'Martin Marprelate', the fictitious author of scurrilous pamphlets attacking the English bishops.

Historiography

Like the 'chroniclers' Shakespeare does not offer an unadorned account of act and event, nor does he separate dramatisation from commentary – Rumour as chorus in *2 Henry IV* and the prologues in *Henry V* are the exceptions that prove the rule. His language, in verse and in prose, tells as it shows, offering not reflections *of* the past but reflections *on* the past. As the Russian director Grigori Kosintsev exclaimed, 'Who said [Shakespeare] was reflecting history? He was interfering with the present'.[34] Shakespeare, in fact, may well be the greatest political thinker of his age, addressing himself to matters such as the enigmas of empire, statehood, and nationality, to clashes between ethical and political imperatives, the possibilities for individual liberty within a society conceived of as a 'body politic' (see Menenius' parable of the belly in *Coriolanus* 1.1). He examines roles for women in political life, lays out relationships between honour, valour and policy – sometimes suggesting that women's concept of what constituted honour in men was too narrowly equated with valour, an equation that, as in *Henry VI*, *Macbeth*, and *Coriolanus*, could have disastrous consequences.[35] More generally he questioned whether nobility derived from birth or behaviour, addressed difficulties of governance in a society where information was scanty, rumour was rife, and national armies were put together out of what were essentially private militias. He drew attention to the way the level of funds in the exchequer affected the monarch's power to act, and explored what constituted the 'common weal', suggesting throughout that although monarchical power might have been acquired by 'divine right', monarchs had no absolute right to rule in a lawless manner.[36] Shakespeare may well have appreciated Alexander Pope's quipping reference to 'The RIGHT DIVINE of Kings to govern wrong' (*The Dunciad*, 1742, IV, 188).

Above all, like most 'politic historians' of the Renaissance, Shakespeare was interested in causation.[37] Earlier writers chronicled the course of human events on the assumption that they unfolded under divine control: events from the death of a king to the fall of a sparrow were demonstrations of God's providence. Accounts of prodigies and what we would take to be 'natural' catastrophes are construed by Hall and Holinshed as divinely ordained. Although Shakespeare probably believed that there was a divinity that shaped our ends, like most of his contemporaries his interest was in secondary causes, in the way men could be seen making their own history, even if the conditions were not of their choosing: 'Wisdom cries out in the streets, and no man regards it' (*1H4*, 1.2.89) proclaims Hal – he was quoting from Proverbs 1.23–4. It may well be that Shakespeare would have agreed with Francis Bacon who held that any attempt to deduce metaphysical causes

from the material world served just to create '*remoraes* and hindrances to stay and slug [hinder] the ship from sailing'.[38] As in the case of Hall and Holinshed, we should not look for consistency – in any one play providential explanations of historical change may coexist with secular ones. This is not surprising, given that the author is often depicting the explanations men offer themselves of historical change. The texts are polyphonic: 'the powers that be', voices of authority, attempt to legitimate their authority by avowing that they and their offices are ordained by God. These voices contend with popular voices which invoke the commonweal, demystify power, desacralise the monarchy, or expose the cost of heroic adventurism: 'there are few die well that die in a battle' (*H5*, 3.1.141). Despite the rhetoric of military leaders, many a battle in the histories does not in performance resemble a duel, a form of trial under the eye of God, but appears as a 'brawl ridiculous' (*H5*, 4 Prol. 51) or as a skirmish whose outcome has little meaning. Fights are won or lost for secular or material reasons, for 'want of men and money' as a Messenger puts it tersely at the opening of Shakespeare's first history, *1 Henry VI*. The terse words of the Messenger criticise not only the conduct of the nobility, but their self-deluding fustian style. 'Politics', a demystificatory analysis of the forces that shape events, has interrupted 'history' – at least that kind of history that derives from theology and reads human chronicles as chapters in a book of God. When, in *Henry V*, the English win a great victory over the French at Agincourt the result is presented as a miracle as disconcerting as it is glorious – the ethics of the Almighty himself seem to be questioned. In his film version, made during the Second World War, Olivier changed the number of the English dead from 'five-and-twenty' (4.8.107) to 'five-and-twenty score', presumably to make the outcome of Agincourt less embarrassing.

Although, as in *Julius Caesar* and *Richard III*, ghosts may appear and supernatural prodigies may be described, these tend to function as portents, theatrical devices to signal the course of the action. Margot Heinemann wrote, 'Prophecies, dreams, and ghosts may influence the audience's moral attitude to the action ... but do not determine its course. Comments on political events are usually those of various human characters, not of the author, and the audience retains the right to judge between them.'[39] As in the tragedies, there are many moments like that when Cassius uses a familiar trope to urge Brutus to political action:

> Men at some time were masters of their fates.
> The fault, dear Brutus, is not in our stars,
> But in ourselves, that we are underlings.
> (*JC*, 1.2.140–2)

History is made by the decisions and actions of men and women taken at particular times and in particular circumstances.

As well as following Hall and Holinshed, Shakespeare had absorbed the influence of the Italian politic historians of the Renaissance, epitomised by the writings of Machiavelli, a contemporary of Sir Thomas More at the beginning of the sixteenth century. In the introduction to his *Discourses* Machiavelli writes of history as having to do with action and not mere knowledge.The majority of people, he says, read history passively, in order to 'take pleasure only in the variety of events' it relates, 'without ever thinking of imitating the noble actions'.[40] There is a cue for subversion there – 'if you want to learn how to become a "magistrate", read this'. Shakespearean texts, plays like *Richard III*, may demonstrate the fragility of civil society rather than a confidence in a divinely appointed order. Richard of Gloucester can destroy a state in the way a clever and malicious child can destroy a family – in fact he and Buckingham play a theatrical and childlike game of defending an imaginary Castle of England in order to dupe the Mayor of London (*R3*, 3.1). In another mode Henry V accepts the challenge of the Dauphin who sends him tennis balls as tribute and goes to France to play at war. The sport of kings becomes the scourge of peace.

All Shakespeare's history plays, with the exception of *Henry VIII*, were written during the reign of Elizabeth. Although their material derives from the English chroniclers Hall and Holinshed they may have been generated in part by a surge of interest in historiography that centred on critical rereadings of Tacitus. It is a moment of politic history that can be located about the time of the composition of Marlowe's translation of Lucan's *Pharsalia* and the publication of Sir Henry Savile's translation of Tacitus' *Histories* in 1591, printed with an epistle that, according to Jonson, was written by the Earl of Essex himself.[41] Marlowe's translation is significant because Lucan took a very sceptical view of Julius Caesar's imperial ambitions.[42] Tacitus' view of history was likewise quizzical and secular: his emperors were, unlike Shakespeare's monarchs, scarcely possessed of a mystic as well as a natural body, and his great themes were ancient liberty, and what his translator, almost certainly invoking *Tamburlaine*, called 'higher aspiring minds',[43] corruption, and modern servitude. In the epistle we read

> In these four books … thou shalt see all the miseries of a torn and declining state: the empire usurped, the princes murdered, the people wavering, the soldiers tumultuous, nothing unlawful to him that hath power, and nothing so unsafe as to be securely innocent … If thou dost detest their anarchy, acknowledge our own happy government, and thank God for her, under whom England enjoys as many benefits as ever Rome did suffer miseries under the greatest tyrant.[44]

'Ambition' is a key word in *Julius Caesar* and Jonson was to get into trouble by writing Tacitean history plays in the next century and during the next reign. But Tacitean matter – it is not just a question of style – can be discerned earlier. Tacitus delighted in exposing the hypocrisy of courtiers: his target was absolutism and her handmaid, theatricality. His tone was sardonic and his characters could be fantastical, like actors in a play. *Richard II*, unlike many tragedies, centres not just on one outsize character but on the conflict between two men with very different styles as actors on the political stage, King Richard and his cousin Henry Bullingbrook. As the former declines in power, figured in the moment when he cannot resist the great histrionic gesture and comes down 'like glistering Phaethon' from the walls of Flint Castle to parley with his adversary (3.3.178–83), the latter rises, designing strategic alliances with the Percy family. Bullingbrook's motives are ambiguous: is he merely ambitious, or is he concerned to prune the garden of the commonwealth (3.4) and take out the prodigal gardener? Shakespeare was always alert to a variety of historical processes and his political characters often behave theatrically – at worst being guilty of dissimulation, at best as though they are conscious of taking part in a play. Even Coriolanus says, 'I play / The man I am' (3.2.14–15). Richard III had pronounced, 'I am I' (5.3.186), in his case a blasphemous echo of God's words to Moses from the burning bush, 'I AM THAT I AM' (Exod. 3.14). With these observations in mind, we might even surmise that a classic definition of postmodernist novels as 'historiographical metafictions' well describes Shakespearean history plays.[45]

The translator of Tacitus, Sir Henry Savile, was prepared to argue that it was right to resist a tyrant, a thesis that was also propounded in political documents like the anonymous *Vindiciae Contra Tyrannos* that had emerged during the French Wars of Religion. Richard's profligacy weighed so heavily on his people as to constitute a kind of tyranny. Of Vindex, who led a rebellion against Nero, Savile wrote:

> Not upon private despair to set in combustion the state, not to revenge disgrace or dishonour, not to establish his own sovereignty, things which have moved most men to attempt; but to redeem his country from tyranny and bondage, which only respect he regarded so much that in respect he regarded nothing his own life or security.[46]

Savile then discusses Nero who stands for exotic monstrous viciousness in *3 Henry VI* (3.1.40); in *King John* the Bastard likes the English lords to 'bloody Neros, ripping up the womb / Of your dear mother England' (5.2.152–3). Another Tacitean theme is that the populace are merely 'the instruments of the ambition of others',[47] a view that might invalidate our sympathies for the followers of Cade in *2 Henry VI* or of the plebeians in the Roman

plays. Theatrical representation of such sequences, however, can invalidate this scepticism.

Yet the plays have not always been read in this fashion. Earlier generations of commentators read the plays as a prolonged apologia for the Tudor dynasty. E.M.W. Tillyard, writing during the Second World War, held that Shakespeare and his contemporaries endorsed what Tillyard had earlier termed '*the* Elizabethan world picture', and in particular, that Shakespeare's history plays endorsed 'the Tudor myth [which] presented a scheme fundamentally religious, by which events evolve under a law of justice and under the ruling of God's providence, and of which Elizabeth's England was the acknowledged outcome'.[48] There are various difficulties with such a reading. First, there would have been no instructions from a variety of censors if there had not been radical disagreements in the period over the best ordering of a civil society. The execution of Roman Catholic priests during the reign of Elizabeth was an instrument of political as well as religious repression. Tillyard's reading concentrates on prophesies and on references within the text to a divinely ordained pattern for history. Yet prophesying was as much a political as a religious act, and those characters who proclaimed a divine order may have been created by Shakespeare as examples of those who used the topics of religious discourse for particular secular purposes or as figures of self-deception or even credulousness. They are not necessarily choric figures – it is notable that there are no references to a providential pattern to English history in those (comparatively few) choruses that he wrote. When the Bishop of Carlisle prophesies in 4.1 of *Richard II* he is giving an account of history that is his own – not necessarily one endorsed by Shakespeare – and he is promptly arrested for capital treason.

In Tillyard's reading the murder of Richard II becomes a kind of original sin, the consequences of which were visited upon Bullingbrook (Henry IV) and his descendants. However, as we have seen, *Richard II* and *1–2 Henry IV* were written *after* the chronicles of the Wars of the Roses in *1–3 Henry VI* and *Richard III*, and in *1 Henry VI* Shakespeare gives us an emblematic scene in which plucking of white and red roses marks the division of England's élite into factions. The iconography of the scene contains analogies with the narrative of the Fall in Genesis and may encourage a reading that stresses systemic rather than historical origins for dissent.

'Edification'

As we have seen, Machiavelli seemed to the Elizabethans to have brought into being the dystopias that Shakespeare created in the Henry VI plays and *Richard III*. It was to Sir Thomas More that men looked for the

opposite vision, to More's model of a designer state in the *Utopia*. Although Shakespeare was no Utopian, never willing to share the view of those who saw things as other than they are, he did imply that men could, by thinking strategically, construct a new kind of society. Here is the canny Lord Bardolph, one of the leaders of the rebels against Bullingbrook in *2 Henry IV*:

> When we mean to build,
> We first survey the plot, then draw the model;
> And when we see the figure of the house,
> Then must we rate the cost of the erection,
> Which if we find outweighs ability,
> What do we then but draw anew the model
> In fewer offices, or at least desist
> To build at all? Much more in this great work
> (Which is almost to pluck a kingdom down
> And set another up) should we survey
> The plot of situation and the model,
> Consent upon a sure foundation,
> Question surveyors, know our own estate,
> How able such a work to undergo,
> To weigh against his opposite.
> (*2H4*, 1.3.41–55)

The analogy is a time-honoured one, deriving ultimately from the linked Parables of the Tower Builder and the King going to War in Luke 14.28–32. Bardolph is offering a lesson in 'edification': etymologically the word means 'building' and is a recurrent metaphor in the Pauline epistles. It is around this topic, attached to the building of Solomon's Temple, that the reforming theologians who prepared the Geneva Bible in 1560 wrote their Epistle Dedicatory to the monarch.[49] Shakespeare's debt to Plutarch, Tacitus, and the Italian historians places him in the mainstream of Renaissance culture, but he owes equal allegiance to movements for reformation. Reformation, a project at the centre of the history plays,[50] whether of the individual as with Prince Hal or of the country, depends upon planning and the setting of realistic goals. As Richard Hooker wrote about 1593, 'men are edified, when either their understanding is taught somewhat whereof in such actions it behoveth all men to consider, or when their hearts are moved with any affection suitable thereunto'. Hooker goes on to praise words and 'sensible means', i.e. religious and public ceremonies, as instruments of edification.[51]

'Edification' has also to do with the craft of the playwright or maker of theatrical ceremonies. Playwrights deploy what Sir Philip Sidney, following

Aristotle, called the 'architectonic' arts, those that combined particular skills.[52] A playwright is a kind of 'architect', called upon to furnish narrative, language, and directions for the theatrical imagery that adorned his play. Out of these materials a maker of history plays builds ethical and political structures. And, as Aristotle said,

> Since politics makes use of the other practical sciences, and lays down what we must do and what we must not do, its end must include theirs. And that end, in politics as well as in ethics, can only be the good for man. For even if the good of the community coincides with that of the individual, the good of the community is clearly a greater and more perfect good both to get and to keep. This is not to deny that the good of the individual is worth while. But what is good for a nation or a city has a higher, a diviner, quality.[53]

If Shakespeare was setting out to educate his audience he offered not just moral exhortation, lessons in providential history or repetitions of Tudor propaganda, but sketched out situations and motivations in all their complexity, writing theatrical essays on political 'edification', on the possibilities of and impediments to wisdom and reformist visions.

In *King John* (1596) and the *Henry IV* plays that were written over the next couple of years Shakespeare addresses not just character conflict but the role of the monarchy in a newly emergent state. For the authors of that Geneva Epistle, the enemies of the state were papists, ambitious prelates, and 'worldlings'.[54] Shakespeare's plays ask their audience whether in fact England is governable, as they watch the monarch resisting the machinations of the papal legate Pandulph in *King John* or the destabilising prophecies of the Bishop of Carlisle in *Richard II*. In *1* and *2 Henry IV* we witness Bullingbrook's difficulties with the worldlings of his reign, notably with the Percies who had supported him. His own son is so driven by a desire to seize the crown that we may be tempted to look for a psycho-social explanation, possibly Freud's Œdipal complex, to explain it. Falstaff and his crew demonstrate that while kings might propose it is clowns who dispose. The king had two bodies: the material body of Falstaff, standing for commodity (expediency and self-interest), revelry, lasciviousness, and makes him a political figure – scarcely a focus for mere 'comic relief'. His rotundity makes him truly a 'worldling', a figure of everything that could not be accommodated within the state of England. Yet he is also, as we see from the play-scene in *1 Henry IV* (2.4), an actor, able to play the king just as well as his companion the prince. Handy-dandy, what is substantial, what is mere 'shadow'? This is the question that Shakespeare in his great historiographical metafictions wickedly but wisely refused to answer.

NOTES

I should like to thank Sarah Carter for preparing the index to this volume.

1 Some of Shakespeare's plays were individually published during Shakespeare's lifetime as smaller books, 'quartos' or, occasionally, 'octavos'. The texts these contain often differ considerably from those of the Folio. Some of them are obviously corrupt, but even the so-called 'bad quartos' contain stage directions that are useful to modern editors, because many reveal traces of early performance.

2 Aristotle 1920, ch. 9, p. 43; Sidney 1965, p. 109; Bradley 1957, p. 62; for the essay Bradley wrote about *Ant*., see Bradley 1909, pp. 277–308.

3 See Bulman's essay in this volume, pp. 158–76.

4 See Foakes' essay in this volume. pp. 214–28.

5 For a reading of *The Tempest* as an English 'history play', see Wymer 1999.

6 See Harbage 1989, pp. 22–3.

7 See Fox 1999.

8 Hall 1809, p. 1.

9 Nashe 1958, I, 212.

10 Puttenham 1589, p. 122.

11 See Bolam in this volume, pp. 141–57.

12 See Kantorowicz 1957.

13 See in this volume, pp. 247–60.

14 See p. 230 of Hampton-Reeves in this volume; Hodgdon 1991.

15 Coleridge 1836, II, 159–60.

16 See Kreps 1999.

17 For *prosopopeia* see Puttenham 1589, p. 200.

18 See Bakhtin 1981.

19 See *1H6*, ed. Hattaway 1990, p. 64.

20 Augustine, *The City of God*, 4.4, quoted in Cox 1989, pp. 12–13.

21 See Kastan 1986.

22 See in this volume, Bolam, pp. 147–8.

23 Bacon 1865, p. 77.

24 See *1H4*, 1.3; *H5*, 3.6.100–12; *Cor.*, 1.6.

25 *3H6*, ed. Hattaway 1993, p. 213; see also Goy-Blanquet, p. 63 in this volume.

26 Nashe 1958, I, 212; Gilbert 1962, p. 558.

27 Wickham *et al.* 2000, p. 95; this order may, however, refer to anti-Martinist plays (see below) or to seditious matter in Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus*: see Clare 1990, pp. 24–59.

28 Clare *ibid*., pp. 39–43, Clegg 1997.

29 See Bolam p. 144 in this volume; for the censorship of 'Oldcastle' (Falstaff), see Bulman pp. 160–2 in this volume.

30 See Collinson 2000a.

31 See McCabe 1981.

32 No officers were to permit interludes 'wherein either matters of religion or of the governance of the estate of the Commonwealth shall be handled or treated: being no meet matters to be written or treated upon but by men of authority, learning, and wisdom, not to be handled before any audience, but of grave and discreet persons' (Wickham *et al.* 2000, p. 51); see also minutes of 15 August 1597 (p. 102) and 10 May 1601 (p. 414).

33 Cicero, *De Oratore*, 2.9; Coignet 1586, p. 71.
34 Quoted in Hodgdon 1983.
35 See Harding 1969.
36 These matters are best explored in the working drafts made in the 1590s by Richard Hooker and published as Book VIII of his *Laws*: see Hooker 1989, pp. 139–58.
37 For a general survey of Renaissance historiography, see Woolf 1999; also Rackin 1990, pp. 6ff.
38 Bacon 1900, II.vii.7, p. 119.
39 Heinemann 1990, p. 179.
40 Machiavelli 1950, p. 104.
41 See Womersley 1991, pp. 313–42; Tuck 1993, p. 105; the epistle may have been written by Anthony Bacon.
42 See *JC*, ed. Humphreys 1984, p. 28 for evidence that Shakespeare knew Lucan.
43 Tacitus 1598, I.4, p. 7.
44 *Ibid.*, 1591, Sig. ¶3^{r-v}.
45 Hutcheon 1988, p. 5.
46 Tacitus 1591, Sig. ¶6^{v}; see Skinner 1978, pp. 187–358.
47 See Womersley 1991.
48 Tillyard 1943; *ibid.*, 1944, p. 321.
49 Key scriptural texts are Rom.14.19; 1 Cor.10.23 and 14.3–5; 2 Cor.13.10; 1 Thess.5.11; the metaphor is found in a treatise to King James written by Francis Bacon at the time of the Hampton Court Conference (1604), *The Pacification and Edification of the Church of England* and in Jonson's *Catiline* (1.392–5) and Jonson's *Bartholomew Fair* (5.6.115–16) where it derives from Horace and Sallust.
50 See Collinson 1986.
51 Hooker 1907, I, 361.
52 Sidney 1965, p. 104.
53 Aristotle 1955, I, i–ii, p. 27.
54 Bible, (Geneva, 1560), Sig. ***ii^{r}.