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Nicholas Grene

Excerpt

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## Introduction

In 1965, when I was still at school in Belfast, I watched the BBC Television broadcast of *The Wars of the Roses*, John Barton and Peter Hall's Royal Shakespeare Company adaptation of the three parts of *Henry VI* and *Richard III*. I was amazed. It was partly the acting: Peggy Ashcroft playing Queen Margaret from handsome battlefield trophy to vengeful harridan; the gentle, gaunt, shambling David Warner as King Henry; and Ian Holm's brilliant, baby-faced Richard of Gloucester. But it was also the sheer grip of the narrative as it built from episode to episode, battle to battle, from one tense council-table confrontation to another. I had never heard of the *Henry VI* plays, much less read them. I had no idea how heavily they had been condensed and adapted by Barton and Hall, nor yet how celebrated this production had been. The one Shakespeare history play that I did know, and know well, was *1 Henry IV*, because it was a prescribed text for A-level, and we had spent months of class time reading and re-reading it. We were well taught. We were shown the unity of the play, focused on the theme of honour. The central figure was Prince Hal, flanked by Hotspur who overvalued honour – 'By heavens, methinks it were an easy leap / To pluck bright honour from the pale-faced moon' – and Falstaff who thought it a mere scutcheon. Between these polar opposites Hal had to get the balance right. The play's dramatic structure was equally shapely, rising through the mid-point of Hal's interview with his father, to the climactic culmination of his duel with Hotspur at Shrewsbury. Because it was called the *First Part of Henry IV*, we must have been aware that there was a *Second Part*, but no one suggested we read it. Come June, there would be no questions on *2 Henry IV*, no marks for knowing it; *1 Henry IV* was our set text, end of story.

Critical times have changed since 1965, and my awareness of Shakespeare's history plays has changed with them. Still, those two early experiences of the histories must have stirred in me some curiosity that has resulted, however belatedly, in this book. Were Shakespeare's

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histories designed to have anything like the effect on their original audience that the television *Wars of the Roses* had had on me? What was the relationship of an individual play such as *1 Henry IV*, with all its formal autonomy, to the plays that preceded and followed it in sequence? When I started to think about these issues, I was concerned primarily with intentions. Had Shakespeare pre-planned a series of four plays on the reigns of Henry VI and Richard III, another series devoted to the time of Richard II, Henry IV and Henry V, or did he just keep adding on sequels as he went along? I have tentative answers to offer to these questions in my first chapter. But with so much undecidable in the matter of Shakespearean intentions, I became preoccupied with broader issues. I wanted to explore what was involved in the enterprise of serialising the chronicles in the 1590s, how the sequences of plays were shaped up out of their narrative sources, and how that enterprise may have been related to theatre practices of the time. I was equally interested in the much later theatrical opportunities afforded by the plays as they have been given serial productions or adaptations in the modern period, that phenomenon of which *Wars of the Roses* was only the best-known example. My object has been to bring together these two sorts of evidence, and use that as the basis for a reconsideration of the two history play series.

The initial section of my book seeks to tell the story of these serial histories, in Chapter 1 attempting to reconstruct the theatrical market-place conditions out of which they arose, the indications of sequential design or otherwise in their treatment of the chronicle sources, the formal inter-relationship of the plays themselves. The second chapter moves on to an overview of modern serial productions, beginning in the mid nineteenth century and flourishing in the twentieth, with their intellectual and cultural contexts. The frame of reference in both these chapters is limited. In looking at sources, for instance, I have concentrated more or less exclusively on Hall and Holinshed, the two main chronicles on which Shakespeare drew, ignoring many other materials he may have used. My focus is on how the plays were quarried out of their source texts, the ways their serial continuum resembles or differs from the ongoing historical rhythms of the chronicles. Equally my account of the plays in performance does not claim comprehensiveness. I have looked only at productions or adaptations of more than two of the plays as a series, and not with even emphasis at all of these. Although I have tried to reconstruct the effect of earlier stagings from reviews, prompt-books, eye-witness accounts, with performance there can be no substitute for being able to watch for oneself. Accordingly the bias of detailed illustrations

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throughout this book is tilted towards the modern productions that I have been able to see, or those where a full visual record on film or video can be recovered.

Among readers of the book, there may be those who might have preferred a more thoroughgoing study of the source material, or those who believe the book would have been better based exclusively in performance analysis. I have decided to combine the two in order to explore the phenomenon of the plays' seriality both in its origins and in its changing theatrical manifestations. This is a text-centered book, often concerned with close reading. The object of such an approach, however, is not to revert to an old-fashioned principle of the autonomy of the text, the canonical integrity of the Shakespearean plays in and for themselves. Rather the opposite: I hope to show how the plays, themselves constructions from the chronicles, are open to continuous reconstruction on the stage.

The aim of the two main sections of the book, devoted to the two history play series, is to re-read them in the light both of my reconstruction of their Elizabethan origins and of their latter-day theatrical redactions. Given this perspective, it would have made no sense to work my way forward a play at a time. Instead I have followed a number of themes and interpretative issues thrown up by attending to the plays as series. So with the *Henry VI – Richard III* sequence, concerned as it is with wars, foreign and domestic, I have looked in Chapter 3 at how those wars are imagined, how and if that imagination changes from play to play according to a developing pattern of theatrical representation. With the through-casting of characters in the series, there is also the question of the ways these individual figures may be progressively characterised, the acting opportunities they provide for 'building a character': this is the subject of Chapter 4. Prophecies and curses are tropes frequently used in the earlier set of histories to shape up the dramatic narrative to come: Chapter 5 is centred on how they function, and what sort of causalities they imply.

The second group of plays, *Richard II – Henry V*, is formally more independent, more loosely connected, in my view. Yet, as they succeed one another in a continuing chronological sequence, they grow into a series if only retrospectively. It is the retrospective mode that I consider in Chapter 6 – the uses made of looking back, both at an imagined past in *Richard II* and, in the later plays, at the previously represented theatrical action. The mode of the history play notably shifts in the *Henry IV* plays, with the introduction of a hybrid history form capable of including comedy. Chapter 7 is concerned with the effects of this multi-strand,

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multi-mode genre upon the linear historical narrative represented by the series. The last chapter is devoted to the transformation of Prince Hal into Henry V, and the questions of change and identity entailed by that transformation enacted over a sequence of three plays.

There is a problem for anyone writing on Shakespeare of how to deal with the huge and ever-increasing body of scholarship and interpretation. In this book I have tried faithfully to acknowledge my critical debts, to credit the sources for any specific ideas or information borrowed. In other cases, however, I have given references only to material that comes directly in the line of my argument. I have nowhere cited a book or article just to demonstrate that I have read it. I have adopted this policy the more readily because the book is intended not only for Shakespearean specialists but for students who may prefer a text less laden with scholarly citation. I hope that such a light armour of annotation will not appear either ignorant or arrogant.

The approach in this study is intended to be open-ended and exploratory, rather than thesis-led. With such a book, even more than with other works of interpretation, the proof of the pudding must be in the eating. But, in the context of modern critical analysis of Shakespeare's history plays, it may have something to recommend it by way of new departure. Writing on the histories over the last fifty years has been dominated to an extraordinary extent by reaction to just one book: E. M. W. Tillyard's *Shakespeare's History Plays*. It is not just that Tillyard's conception of all eight plays as a single integrated vision of English history reflecting the 'Tudor myth', the 'Elizabethan world order', was for a time very influential on scholars and theatre directors. In fact the argument of the book was quite soon challenged, then repeatedly contested, and has come to be all but discredited. More significantly, Tillyard set the terms of a debate that has continued to run and run. Ways of looking at the histories may have changed with the impact of new historicism, cultural materialism, and feminism, but the political and social configurations underpinning the histories remain the compelling critical consideration. Interpretation of the history plays has been preoccupied, not to say obsessed, with ideology. This book makes no claim to be an ideology-free zone: a good deal of attention is necessarily given to the political implications of the plays and their several serial representations. But starting from the fact of their seriality as a changing theatrical manifestation across time may provide a different sort of entry to the issues, may allow us to see the histories from another angle. That, at least, is what I hope the book can achieve.

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PART I

*The story of the histories*

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## CHAPTER ONE

*Serialising the chronicles*

How to tell the story of the histories in their own time? Shakespeare's ten history plays, a whole section of the First Folio, getting on for a third of the complete corpus, were all but one of them written and produced in the 1590s; after 1600 there is only the much later collaborative *Henry VIII*. In this Shakespeare's practice reflects/dominates that of his theatrical contemporaries. There hardly was any such thing as an English history play in the professional theatre before 1590; there was a marked falling off in the genre after the turn of the century. Of an estimated 150 plays dealing with the history of England in the period 1562 to 1642, nearly 80 are dated in the one decade of the 1590s.<sup>1</sup> Felix Schelling who supplied these figures, writing in his 1902 book on *The English Chronicle Play*, supplied also a traditional explanation for the phenomenon, one way of telling the story of the histories:

It was in the very nature of things that the popularity of the Chronicle Play should find its origin in the burst of patriotism and the sense of national unity which reached its climax in the year 1588 and stirred England to meet and to repulse the Spanish Armada.<sup>2</sup>

By the opposite end of the twentieth century critics had grown more sceptical of a historically inevitable 'nature of things', and the ideological sky over interpretations of the period had darkened. The post-Armada period was no longer read as one of euphoric patriotism, and Shakespeare's history plays were often construed rather as a contribution to a radical historiography reflecting the political unease of the time.<sup>3</sup> Times change and change the way we tell the story.

However it is told, the story of the emergence of the Elizabethan history play is necessarily bound up with the story of Shakespeare's emergence as a dramatist. The first two known allusions in print to Shakespeare's presence in the London theatre (Nashe's *Pierce Pennilesse* and Greene's *Groatsworth of Wit*) are both from 1592, and both refer to

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what were already evidently the very successful *Henry VI* plays. Greene's envious attack on the 'upstart Crow, beautified with our feathers' was originally interpreted as evidence of Shakespeare's beginnings in the theatre as an adapter of other men's plays. For Edmond Malone, the Greene attack clinched his view that the anonymously published texts known as the *First Part of the Contention* and *The True Tragedy of Richard Duke of York* were the early unadapted versions of the plays by other dramatists which, when re-written by Shakespeare, became *2 Henry VI* and *3 Henry VI*.<sup>4</sup> However, the bibliographical work in the 1920s which established *1 Contention* and *Richard Duke of York* as merely reported texts of the equivalent *Henry VI* plays allowed for a different view of Shakespeare's beginnings in the theatre.<sup>5</sup> When Shakespeare was no longer to be seen as a hack 'fixer' who advanced to writing his own solo plays, the *Henry VI–Richard III* series could be read instead as being all his own, a tetralogy of premeditated design.<sup>6</sup> This chimed well with the influential Tillyard conception of the grand narrative of the two tetralogies as a whole.<sup>7</sup> For a time, from the 1940s on, textual scholarship and critical interpretation together sustained a unified idea of the histories as a single massively planned enterprise with which Shakespeare began his career.<sup>8</sup>

By the 1980s, however, grand narratives were decidedly unfashionable, and the editors of the Oxford Shakespeare comprehensively dismantled the monolithic version of the histories. In their 1986 edition the plays were once again held to be collaboratively written, not composed in chronological sequence, and were re-named to correspond to the titles by which they were (allegedly) first known in the theatre. So in the Wells and Taylor *Complete Works*, the reader no longer finds the sequence of *1 Henry VI*, *2 Henry VI*, *3 Henry VI*, familiar from the Folio on, but *The First Part of the Contention*, *Richard Duke of York*, and only then *1 Henry VI*.<sup>9</sup> Underlying this revised version of the early history plays were the editorial principles giving new authority to theatrical evidence, even if it was from reported texts or so-called 'bad' quartos. They were the same principles which produced, most controversially, the editorial decision to have a character called Oldcastle in *1 Henry IV* who then in *2 Henry IV* turns into Falstaff, to reflect the name-change which appears to have been forced on Shakespeare between the two plays.<sup>10</sup> Where previous editors and critics had constructed an early Shakespeare in control of a planned series of history plays, reflected in the sequential march of reign after reign of the Folio text, the Oxford edition posited happenstance histories derived from unstable texts created by the arbitrary contingencies of theatre.

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The object of this chapter is to concentrate on the two series of Shakespeare's history plays, leaving out the non-serial *King John* and the later *Henry VIII*, and to frame the story of the histories in the 1590s somewhat differently. I want to begin by relating the emergence of Shakespeare's multi-play history series to the vogue for two-part plays following on from the spectacular success of *Tamburlaine*, to show how the fashion for history plays may have arisen as much in response to the market dynamics of the theatre as to the political atmosphere of England in the aftermath of the Armada. It is in such a context that I situate the *Henry VI – Richard III* plays. Starting with a recapitulation of the facts and problems associated with the *Henry VI* plays, I want to come at what was involved in this first extended effort of serialising the chronicles for the stage. I shall be attending less to the issue of whether Shakespeare planned and wrote them all in chronological order as one ideologically integrated creation, but rather to the issue of how the narrative continuum of his major source, Hall's *Union of the two noble and illustre famelies of Lancastre & York*, was shaped into the set of four plays. I want to examine particularly how far that shaping was designed with serial production of the plays in mind, and what evidence there may be, internal or external, that they were produced as a series in the theatre of the time. The evidence on this appears to me to be different for each sequence. It might seem logical to suppose that if Shakespeare had succeeded in creating one series of four plays on English history, then the second set of such plays would certainly have been pre-planned, and that has been the common assumption. Yet in my view the *Richard II – Henry V* plays are much less clearly written for serial production; in their formal distinctness and the weakness of the links between them, they suggest a set of individual compositions only incrementally accumulating into a series. This, at least, will be my story of the histories in the 1590s.

#### TAMBURLAINE AND THE TWO-PART PLAY

The principle of sequels and series, the marketing strategy of selling people more of what they liked the first time, is fundamental to any number of different entertainment industries: the Barseshire chronicles, the Forsyte saga, soap operas, television mini-series, the latest Hollywood success number 2, 3 or 4 coming soon to a cinema near you. It seems so fundamental that it is hard to imagine anyone having first invented it. But as far as the English Renaissance stage goes, the credit has to go to Christopher Marlowe with *Tamburlaine*. There does not seem to be a



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single example of a two-part play certainly performed in the London professional theatre before *Tamburlaine* in 1587–8. There has been a great deal of argument as to whether Marlowe planned both parts of *Tamburlaine* in advance; the Prologue to 2 *Tamburlaine*, if we take it literally, suggests rather a cash-in sequel:

*The generall welcomes Tamburlain receiv'd  
When he arrivèd last upon our stage,  
Hath made our Poet pen his second part<sup>1</sup>*

But in the wake of *Tamburlaine* two-part plays, sequels and series, planned and unplanned, are everywhere. There are records of well over forty titles which have more than one part in the period up to 1616.<sup>12</sup>

Many of these plays survive in title only. Some of those that are extant involve companion plays rather than sequels, such as *A Knack to Know an Honest Man*, a quite unrelated work that served as follow-up to *A Knack to Know a Knave*.<sup>13</sup> This was in all probability the relationship also of Shakespeare's *Love's Labour's Won*, which we only know from Francis Meres' *Palladis Tamia*, to his *Love's Labour's Lost*. But whether the plays were actual narrative continuations of one another or merely designed to hook on to a previous title, the underlying market principles were the same: to build quickly on any theatrical success. Philip Henslowe's *Diary* supplies detailed evidence of how such two-part plays were commissioned, and brings out the speed with which sequels were delivered. So, for example, a play called *Black Bateman of the North* was ordered by Henslowe from four of his regular authors, Henry Chettle, Robert Wilson, Michael Drayton and Thomas Dekker, in May 1598. It was in production by mid-June; within weeks Chettle and Wilson were getting advances on a second part which was finished by 14 July (Henslowe, 89–93). This sort of pattern is replicated numerous times in the *Diary*: a first part is bargained for, delivered and produced, and if it goes down well, or even in some cases if it looks promising, a second part is demanded almost immediately. Not all two-part plays were unpremeditated, however; in some cases two parts were ordered in advance. To take just one instance, in October 1599 Henslowe bought from Wilson, Drayton, Anthony Munday and Thomas Hathway the script of the 'first pte of the lyfe of Sr Jhon Ouldcastell' and paid them an advance on a second part, which was duly delivered in December (Henslowe, 125, 129).

Two cases of two-part titles are especially interesting as they suggest developments leading from the two parts of *Tamburlaine* to the three parts of *Henry VI*. The first is the anonymous *Troublesome Raigne of John, King*

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of *England*, published in 1591, either the source play for Shakespeare's *King John* or some sort of pirated version of Shakespeare's play itself.<sup>14</sup> Two things are significant about it from my point of view here. One is the fact that it was published in two separate parts, even though it seems very unlikely that it was ever performed as two plays. Here was a canny publisher exploiting the vogue for the two-part play and selling one play as two. The other is the sales pitch of the prologue to the play addressed to the 'Gentlemen Readers':

*You that with friendly grace of smoothed brow  
Have entertained the Scythian Tamburlaine,  
And given applause unto an Infidel:  
Vouchsafe to welcome (with like curtesie)  
A warlike Christian and your Countreyman.*

(Bullough, iv, 84)

Here we see a bid for the *Tamburlaine* market made on behalf of a play drawn from the English chronicles. It may well have been the need for readily available and continuing narrative materials as well as patriotic fervour that sent playwrights to English history to find subjects of *Tamburlaine*-like audience appeal.

The other play that is significant for my argument is the *First part of the Tragicall raigne of Selimus* published anonymously in 1594, but sometimes attributed to Greene. There does not seem ever to have been a second part to *Selimus*, but Greene, or whoever, clearly planned that there should be one. The events which the play dramatises concern the murderous take-over of the Turkish Empire by Selimus in the year 1512, and the playwright left himself the eight remaining years of Selimus's reign to make the substance of a second part – a Part II which, the conclusion to Part I promises the audience invitingly, 'shall greater murthers tell'.<sup>15</sup> One of the pieces of evidence often used by scholars as an indicator that the second part of *Tamburlaine* was an unpremeditated sequel is the fact that Marlowe had run through most of his source material in Part I, and had to pad out his 'Return of Tamburlaine' with whatever dubiously relevant matter he found to hand.<sup>16</sup> The author of *1 Selimus* had learned that lesson: if you want to have a sequel, plan ahead and economise on your narrative accordingly.

Let me then put a hypothesis. Shakespeare in the early 1590s saw the market possibilities that had opened out from the enormous success of the two-part *Tamburlaine*. In theatrical conditions that demanded readiness with a quick sequel to follow up on a popular play, it was important to have