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1

MICHAEL HATTAWAY

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

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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

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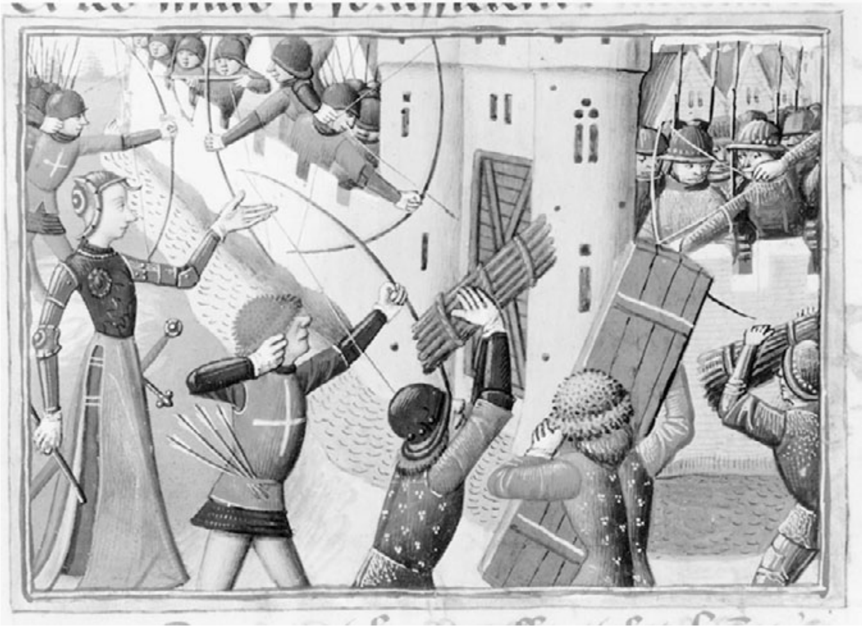

Figure 1 Joan of Arc (see *1 Henry VI*) leading the assault against Paris, from Martial d'Auvergne, *Vigiles du roi Charles VII*, 1484.

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*

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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

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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. (2*H6*, 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

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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,

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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.

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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.

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