Introduction: the nobility and genealogy

It is a commonly held and textually substantiated belief that Falstaff, the corpulent, cowardly, and occasionally criminal friend of Prince Hal in Shakespeare's *Henry IV* plays, was originally named "Oldcastle." Sir John Oldcastle was indeed a companion of the historic Henry of Monmouth, and Shakespeare's characterization of him has been consistently popular with audiences since its conception. However, the portrayal was not at all popular with Oldcastle's descendant, William Brooke, Lord Cobham – member of the Queen's Privy Council, Knight of the Garter, Lord Warden of the Cinque Ports, Lord Chamberlain of the Queen's Household, Lord Lieutenant of Kent, Constable of the Tower and, not least, close friend to Lord Burghley. In fact, Lord Cobham was so offended by the characterization of his ancestor that Shakespeare was reportedly forced to change the name of Oldcastle to Falstaff. Subsequently, in November of 1599, the Admiral's Men, the rival playing company of Shakespeare's Lord Chamberlain's Men, produced a play entitled *The First Part of the True and Honourable History of the Life of Sir John Oldcastle, the Good Lord Cobham*. This play portrayed John Oldcastle as a Protestant martyr – virtuous, brave, and undoubtedly trim – while making frequent disparaging allusions to Shakespeare's treatment of history. Neither the name change nor the new play helped Lord Cobham; his fellow aristocrats continued to mock him, following Shakespeare's lead and changing his nickname to "Falstaff" in their letters to each other.[1] Critics are divided as to whether Shakespeare intentionally insulted William Brooke or whether Brooke literally forced him to change the character's name.[2] But in the long run the incident did prove beneficial, or at least edifying, for the playwright. When he wrote his tragedy of *Macbeth* five years later, he enhanced and vastly improved the character of Banquo from the representation that is found in the chronicles. This was no doubt greatly appreciated by Banquo's self-proclaimed descendant, the newly crowned King James I of England.

Although this study deals with Shakespeare's earliest history plays, in which Falstaff is not a character, I begin with the Cobham incident because it provides clear evidence that Shakespeare and his contemporaries were cognizant of the importance of family lineage and reputation within the aristocracy. The incident also exemplifies what Louis Montrose terms the "power personation" inherent in the history plays of the sixteenth century. [3] In portraying monarchs and aristocrats, Elizabethan players were in effect granted a two-hour traffic to appropriate, control, and propagate the image of the ruling class. Each time a history was performed on stage, the carefully crafted self-presentation of the monarchy and aristocracy was confiscated and placed into the hands of actors, who might, even under the duress of censorship, manipulate, taint, or completely destroy the rigidly delineated roles and boundaries that formed English society and preserved the power of the hegemony. Once an image is appropriated, even temporarily, the power of that image is eroded. Historical figures become characters, characters become interpretations, and interpretations become evidence of fact. For two hours, the dynamics of power shift; the "ruling class" is at the bar, judiciously following the rules of decorum and rank, while the lower classes sit in judgment upon them, in a decidedly indecorous and democratic forum. As David Kastan explains it, "[c]haracters and speeches are literally scrutinized from above and from below . . . while on the stage aristocratic action is mimicked and criticized by commoner and clown."[4] Montrose and Kastan make sensible points regarding the appropriation of representation that is inherent, and thus inherently threatening, in the history plays. However, the Cobham/Falstaff incident is indicative of another phenomenon of appropriation. In examining the history plays, historicists and historians alike have neglected the critical fact that virtually every English character in the plays is the ancestor of descendants living in Shakespeare's time, descendants who wielded considerable power and who existed in an atmosphere of genealogical anxiety and blood consciousness. The materiality of family lineage and reputation in the sixteenth century makes the history plays more than theoretical examinations of monarchy or politics, more than exercises in patriotic nostalgia, and even more than endorsements or subversions of the dominant class and gender. Chauvinism and politics can be found in every genre of the Elizabethan play. The history plays are unique in the fact that they are also personal family histories of the aristocracy. They do not depict personas from the mythical past or the legendary past or the foreign past – they depict the progenitors and the consanguinity of the nobility of England. When the history plays appropriate identity, therefore, they are not only appropriating on the level

of rank or status; they are also appropriating on the most deeply personal, evocative, and intrusive level of the family.

The centrality of family to the early modern societal structure has long been understood by anthropologists but was only studied seriously by historians in the later part of the twentieth century. The most influential historical work on the early modern family is Lawrence Stone's *The Family, Sex, and Marriage in England, 1500–1800*, which argues that the early modern family was distinguished by distance and deference, lacking even the most basic attachment of maternal devotion.[5] Stone's assertions have been roundly disputed and fundamentally disproved by more recent historians such as Alan MacFarlane, Judith Hurwich, David Cressy, Ralph Houlbrooke, and Diana O'Hara, each of whom provides substantial evidence of close bonds within the early modern extended family unit.[6] The historians' interest in the early modern family, however, has not entirely breached the citadels of Shakespearean scholarship. Although some critics, such as Catherine Belsey, Valerie Traub, Lynda Boose, and Stephen Orgel, have written extensively about the family in Shakespeare, they and most other scholars concentrate on issues of gender or relationships within the nuclear family, rather than kinship networks.[7] Nevertheless, when addressing Shakespeare's history plays, it is important that we understand precisely the imbroglio he was embarking upon when he decided to realistically depict the ancestors of the English aristocracy, to whom he was obliged to pay at least a minimal and ostensible deference. Shakespeare and his audience, however that audience is defined, lived in a society founded and embedded in the notion of family. The system of kinship that dominated and drove English society was a living network of favor and reciprocity that was more secure, more private, and more exclusionary than the patronage offered by either church or court. It persevered as a still vital remnant of tribal and clannish mentality, whereby blood alone could admit one into a charmed circle of interdependence and mutual obligation that could be activated merely by the appropriate appellation. A letter or petition addressed to a "cousin" was rarely ignored; it implied an intimacy and inferred an obligation. Often, favors were granted, money disbursed, and patronage given between strangers based on nothing more than the most distant claim of mutual kinship.[8] The importance and reliability of family was a notion that was instilled in childhood. Every schoolboy was required to read Cicero's *De Officiis*, which placed family as the first of the four degrees of social groups, "as the foundation of civil government, the nursery as it were, of the state." Every literate Englishman was familiar with Thomas Elyot's intonement that:

Where vertue joined with great possessions or dignitie, hath longe continued in the bloode or house of a gentilman, as it were an inheritaunce, there nobilitie is most shewed, and these noble men be most to be honoured.[9]

If, as David Cressy points out, a living family network provided a "basis for sympathy, linkage, and collaboration,"[10] then a family history or genealogy provided a basis for self-definition and societal recognition. In early modern England, the past legitimized the present and guaranteed the future, and both the legitimization and the guarantee were bound up in the notion of family pedigree. Consequently, the creation of family genealogies, the composition of family histories, and the reliance on family connections permeated, and in many cases warranted, Elizabethan life.

On the most fundamental level, England's national and religious identities were founded upon genealogical arguments. Biblical precedence provided the justification for using family lineage as the determinate of personal worthiness and public status. The Old Testament is rife with genealogies that define the character and piety of the Hebrew prophets and patriarchs. Christ's messianic nature was in large part authenticated by his descent from David, outlined in Matthew 1 and Luke 3, which fulfills Old Testament prophecy and testifies of a savior with not simply deific but royal origins. However, even more significantly, the biblical genealogies were considered essential to understand and profit from the word of God. The draper Roger Cotton, in *Direction to the Waters of Lyfe*, describes the importance of the genealogies of the Bible:

And I pray you, what part of the Bible is there, that doth not thereof consist? be not men the grounde and cause of all the matter there? And how can we knowe the matter as we ought, vnlesse we know the men of whom the matter speaketh? Without the knowledge of these things, you are neyther able to heare or reade the worde of God with understanding . . . for you so think [they are unprofitable or superfluous] the curse of God wyll come vpon you, even to your utter damnation.[11]

This sentiment was shared by the biblical scholars of the day[12] and gave rise to the belief that, as Elyot stated, "nobilitie may in no wyse be but onely where men can auaunte them of auncient lineage." Although there were humanist polemics (Elyot's among them) that argued for a man's personal reputation and responsibility, popular opinion continued to support the biblical notion that a man's familial connections were the overriding factors in determining personal merit. As a result of this belief, genealogical research and the composition of family histories became an obligation, and in many cases, a preoccupation, for the *respublica litteratum* of Early Modern England.[13] Lord Burghley, for example, was one of the many who

passed his leisure time studying the family histories of himself and others.[14] Although pedigrees were required reading for the assessment and distribution of titles, more often than not Burghley would "request" a family tree simply to satisfy his own curiosity.[15] This was not merely the idiosyncratic pastime of an elderly aristocrat. It was a common practice among all classes of London society to annotate personal chronicles and histories with anecdotes from proud if sometimes meager family trees.[16]

Among the aristocracy, family lineage was far more than a pastime, however. Pedigree was the overriding consideration in granting titles, arranging marriages, and determining the fate of extant and potential peers. It was genealogy that decided the monarchical destiny of particular families and, consequently, it was genealogy that ultimately defined the character and fortune of the entire country. An extensive family tree not only spoke to the continuity of the family, but of English society. This was significant at every point in English history, but it was particularly critical in the early 1590s, when speculation regarding the succession to the English throne had reached a fevered, if secretive, pitch. By then, it was painfully clear that Elizabeth I was going to die sooner rather than later, and that she was going to die childless. To raise the stakes even higher, Elizabeth quite simply and quite obstinately refused to name an heir, and furthermore forbade any discussion of the issue. As a result, of course, discussion became rampant. As Leonard Tennenhouse points out, the invention of various succession scenarios was the most popular pastime among intellectuals in England and abroad.[17] A few brave souls published pamphlets setting forth their opinions of the legitimate and best heir – one of these speculators, Peter Wentworth, was often imprisoned for it.[18] The field of candidates for the throne was large, prompting Thomas Wilson to remark, "this crown is not like to fall to the ground for want of heads that claim to wear it, but upon whose head it will fall is by many doubted."[19] In 1600, Wilson narrowed the field to twelve contenders: James VI of Scotland; Lady Arabella Stuart; Edward Seymour, Lord Beauchamp; Henry Seymour; the Earl of Derby; the Earl of Huntingdon; the Earl of Westmorland; the Earl of Northumberland; the son of the King of Portugal; the Duke of Parma; the King of Spain; and the Infanta of Spain.[20] As is clearly seen, half of these claimants were members of the English aristocracy. Although James was the leading contender in 1590, he was not by any means the favorite. He was "foreign," and his mother had recently been executed for treason – both of these factors made him unpopular and subject to debarment.[21] Furthermore, as C. G. Thayer suggests, an endorsement of James' right to the throne could have been seen as an indirect endorsement of Mary's same right.[22] It was perhaps

safer, and undoubtedly preferable, for many Englishmen to privately favor one of their own nobles over the problematic James. James himself had to court the English nobility to gain support for his bid, but his position remained uneasy, practically until the moment of Elizabeth's death.[23]

The most notorious succession pamphlet was written by Father Robert Parsons, under the pseudonym of R. Doleman, in 1593. *A Conference Aboʋt the Next Sʋccession to the Crowne of Ingland* asserts the right of the Infanta Isabella of Spain to succeed Elizabeth to the throne of England over the other claimants. It would be logical to assume that the Jesuit Parsons was claiming the superiority of Isabella because of her Catholicism. However, this is not the case. The tract is in fact a genealogical argument that asserts the right of one particular branch of the Lancaster family to the throne of England. Parsons' argument runs as follows: the Lancastrian patriarch, John of Gaunt, was the oldest surviving son of Edward III at the time of Edward's death. Gaunt's first wife, Blanche of Lancaster, was a direct descendant of King Henry III. Individually, Gaunt and Blanche were strong claimants to the throne; their issue consequently became even stronger claimants. When their eldest son, Henry Bolingbroke, seized the crown from Richard II, he was not a usurper, according to Parsons' argument, but merely an overeager and completely legitimate heir.[24] Since Henry Bolingbroke's direct line was eliminated by the Yorks, the Lancaster claim would necessarily carry over to the other descendants of John of Gaunt and Blanche of Lancaster. In the sixteenth century, their only living descendant was the Infanta of Spain. Therefore, as Parsons argues with painstaking detail, the Infanta was indeed the rightful heir to the English throne after Elizabeth.[25] The Infanta's claim, like the York claim, descended through the female line – the Infanta was descended from Philippa, the daughter of Gaunt and Blanche. Parsons' reasoning may be faulty – if the female line of John of Gaunt could produce an heir, so could the female line of Lionel, Duke of Clarence, the York ancestor. Nonetheless, it is interesting to note that late in the sixteenth century, Parsons revisits the same genealogical argument that incited the Wars of the Roses and inspired Shakespeare's first tetralogy of history plays.

Of course, only a few families could claim a genuine genealogical right to the throne of England. Nevertheless, in the latter half of the sixteenth century, nearly all the families of the Elizabethan aristocracy became consumed with what Lawrence Stone calls an "excessive adulation of ancient lineage" and what William Rockett has more colloquially dubbed "the great pedigree craze."[26] The aristocratic pride of ancestry and the construction of family genealogies reached unparalleled heights during Elizabeth's reign, almost to the point of becoming an obsession for the titled classes. The

"older" nobility cultivated and flaunted their genuine genealogies in order to reassert their innate superiority over the "new" nobility; the "new" nobility created counterfeit genealogies in order to compete and gain respectability. The College of Arms granted 2,000 grants for pedigrees and arms in the years between 1560 and 1589 and another 1,760 within the next fifty years.[27] External proofs of pedigree, such as family trees and coats of arms, were prominently displayed in every noble household.[28] Antiquarian tracts circulated among the nobility, not only recounting family descent but also describing the lives, status, and accomplishments of ancestors, particularly those from a family's halcyon days of oligarchical splendor.[29] As the sixteenth century wore on, the genealogies, both real and counterfeit, grew in size and number until the Tudor heralds were constructing family trees that traced aristocratic ancestors back to the Trojans or even the Old Testament. It was the Tudors themselves who may have started this vogue. Henry VII came to the throne with a victory at Bosworth but with a paltry and slightly tainted pedigree. Patrilineally, he was descended from Owen Tudor and Henry V's widow Catherine de Valois, who were most probably not married. Matrilineally, he was descended from the Beauforts, the bastard line of John of Gaunt. Henry's solution was simple enough. His chroniclers constructed a counterfeit genealogy for him that included King Arthur and Brutus, thus providing the Tudor family tree with the twin requisites of longevity and legend. Not to be outdone, the Popham family tree reached impressively back to Noah who, according to Genesis, was a direct descendant of Adam and Eve.[30] This genealogical fervor was generally motivated by practical and egocentric aspirations. There were multiple benefits, both tangible and intangible, that could be derived from an impressive lineage. Societal position and personal respectability were directly related to the length and quality of the genealogical scroll and so too was a family's case for nobility. Without a genealogy, or with an inferior genealogy, an aristocrat, however moneyed, was as Phyllis Rackin notes "nothing more than a commoner."[31] The queen herself tacitly endorsed the importance of a venerable and extensive ancestry. Elizabeth's reluctance to grant new peerages is legendary, but it may have been based more on elitism than parsimony: of the eighteen peerages that the queen did create, only two of them, Lord Burghley and Lord Compton, belonged to "new" families without ancient ancestral claims.[32] The flaunting of a genealogy was simply a more effective method of attaining favor than the flaunting of a purse or a sword. Although their family histories were often used for less than altruistic purposes, the aristocrats' passion for genealogy should not be discounted as a mere ostentation. Belonging to a well-established and famous family was a

source of genuine and demonstrable pride for them. Quite naturally, this pride of family led to a congruous preoccupation with family reputation. Stone refers to it, in fact, as a "cult of reputation." Nothing could be more damaging than to cast aspersions on someone's ancestry or ancestors, and the consequence of such aspersions often led to duels and/or generational feuding.[33]

The peculiarities of aristocratic history necessitate a slight digression in our discussion to address the topic of titular versus familial ancestry. During the Tudor regimes, many Tudor loyalists were granted titles which had previously belonged to other families; these other families either died out from natural causes and the lack of male heirs or were attainted of their titles and honors by the Tudors or their predecessors. The titles of Suffolk, Somerset, and Warwick are some cases in point: the titles were, before the Tudors, held by the de la Poles, the Beauforts, and the Beauchamp/Nevilles respectively. These families were attainted for loyalty to the wrong monarch during the Wars of the Roses, and the Tudors subsequently awarded the title of Suffolk to the Brandons, the title of Somerset to the Seymours, and the title of Warwick to the Dudleys. In a few cases, such as the Dudleys, there was some indirect relationship to the earlier family, but for the most part the new families had absolutely no connection to the old. The question of whether the new family would assume the identity of the old or, more precisely, be affected by the reputation of the old, is one that has not been extensively studied by historians, but it is an important question in the study of genealogical history. The answer is rather simple, if not obvious. The title is larger than the man. When a man is granted a title, his identity is subsumed into that title; he is known, henceforth, not by his surname but by his title. So, for example, Edward Seymour, the Duke of Somerset, is called "Somerset" by himself and his peers; he is never called "Seymour." "Somerset" is how he is addressed, it is how he signs his letters, it is his legal and personal identity.

The appropriation of this new identity goes beyond the title. When a new family was given an old title, it was also given the properties and tenants that belonged to former holders of that title. The only exception to this rule occurred when the property had already been granted to another family. The property, however, never remained in the possession of the previous title holders once they had been attainted. For example, in 1449, when Richard Neville was created Earl of Warwick in place of his father-in-law, he received the title and estate of the Earl of Warwick, which included the familial lands of Warwick, Worcester, Elmley, Cardiff, Neath, Abergavenny, and the Lordship of Glamorgan.[34] He was attainted, and in 1492 Henry VII

bestowed the title on Edward Plantagenet, the son of the Duke of Clarence, and Richard Neville's daughter Isabel. Edward Plantagenet was granted the moiety of the Warwick and Salisbury lands, which Henry VII kept in custody until Edward reached his majority.[35] But there was a legal debate as to whether Edward Plantagenet was actually entitled to the Salisbury lands, and although two juries and the crown recognized his title to those lands, he never had physical possession of them. Without the lands, Edward Plantagenet could never be considered the Earl of Salisbury,[36] and when he was later attainted, his forfeited lands went to the crown. In 1547, John Dudley, a distant descendant of the last Beauchamp to hold the title of Earl of Warwick, was granted the lordship, manor, township, and castle of Warwick.[37] John Dudley's lands were withdrawn when he was attainted and executed, but when his son, Ambrose Dudley, was created Earl of Warwick in 1561, he was given the place, precedence, and lands of the former Earls of Warwick.[38] Ambrose's brother, Robert Dudley, was created the first Earl of Leicester and given the duchy of Lancaster; this was the first time the Lancaster lands had been out of the monarch's possession since Henry IV. Henry IV, being the Duke of Lancaster, had kept the title and lands of Lancaster when he became king. The title and lands were passed on to all subsequent monarchs, Lancastrian or Yorkist, until Elizabeth I, who gave the lands to Leicester as a sign of her good favor.[39] In doing so, she alienated the title from the lands for the first time in three hundred years.

The Dudleys had some familial connection to the former Earls of Warwick. When Charles Brandon was created Duke of Suffolk by Henry VIII, however, he had no familial relationship to the de la Poles or the Uffords, the two previous holders of the titles. Nonetheless, when Brandon was ennobled, he was given "all the possessions forfeited by Edmund [de la Pole], Earl of Suffolk, and his brother John, Earl of Lincoln, with the revision of those held by Queen Catherine and Margaret, Countess of Suffolk."[40] Happily for the new Duke of Suffolk, he also received huge grants of monastic lands after the monasteries were dissolved. These monastic lands were in the County of Suffolk.[41] When Thomas Howard, the hero of the Armada, was given the Earldom of Suffolk in 1603, he also received the Suffolk estates, and although he spent some time in the Tower for embezzlement, he was never attainted and managed to die in his bed in Suffolk House in 1626.[42]

There were, by necessity, some exceptions to this rule of land. The Duke of Somerset was one. The Somerset lands had belonged to the Beauforts, who held the title until 1461, when the last Earl of Somerset, Henry Beaufort, turned against Edward IV to join the Lancastrian forces. Somerset was beheaded, his title forfeited, and his lands were given to Richard, Duke

of Gloucester, later Richard III.[43] Henry VII, who restored many of the Lancastrians' rights posthumously, created Henry Beaufort's illegitimate son, Charles Somerset, the Earl of Worcester and granted him the Somerset lands.[44] Thus, when Edward Seymour was created Duke of Somerset by Edward VI, the Somerset lands were already in Worcester's possession. The Earl of Somerset was subsequently given monastic lands in an area slightly southeast of the old Somerset lands. However, these cases were exceptions. In the great majority of circumstances, the lands were bestowed with the titles. Therefore, all the external conditions that contribute to a man's identity – name, occupation, possessions – were transferred from one man to another at the granting of a title.[45] The resultant conditions – ancestral pride and reputation – were transferred as well. Consequently, titular lineage was studied and esteemed with the same scrupulous fervency as a blood family line.

The obsession with genealogy has been acknowledged but not significantly studied by historians or literary critics, who tend, like Phyllis Rackin, to attribute it to self-indulgence, vanity, male domination, or the threatening specter of a female fertility.[46] While genealogies certainly do function as springboards for patriarchal pride and familial precedence, no one has studied genealogy as an alternative history that acts in the same way as any alternative discourse.[47] In the sixteenth century, the aristocratic genealogy provided a site for the negotiation, interrogation, and subversion of the state-sanctioned "Tudor" histories that were required reading for the literate masses. The Tudor regime had various and sundry methods of retaining its precarious hold on the crown, but one of the most effective of strategies was to keep an inordinately tight grasp on any written representations of history. All publicly disseminated histories were subject to censorship, but the chronicles, which were designed for public consumption rather than governmental record keeping, were the most closely scrutinized of *all* publications, and the only texts to be directly licensed by the Privy Council.[48] The reason for this was, quite simply, that the chronicles were the best and most efficient vehicles for government propaganda. They were deliberately didactic in nature, instructing the population, particularly the aristocratic population, on the evils of rebellion and the divine sanction of Tudor rule. Perhaps not surprisingly, the chronicles taught these lessons by exemplifying the rise, triumph, fall, and extinction of once powerful English households that were destroyed, often quite literally, because of the actions of one or two wayward members. In fact, with the exception of Foxe's *Monuments*, which focuses on the lives of saintly commoners, the chronicles are themselves little more than elaborate family histories of