

**SHAKESPEARE AND CONCEPTS OF HISTORY:
THE ENGLISH HISTORY PLAY AND SHAKESPEARE'S FIRST TETRALOGY**

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A thesis submitted in candidature for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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Summary of Thesis

Divided into three large chapters, this thesis explores sixteenth-century concepts of history, considers how those concepts appear in Elizabethan history plays on English history, and finally looks at Shakespeare's first tetralogy of history plays. The aim of the thesis is to consider in some detail the wider context of historical and dramatic traditions in Tudor England to gain a better appreciation of how they influenced possible readings of Shakespeare's early history plays. Chapter One looks at how medieval approaches were modified in the fifteenth century. St. Augustine's allegorical method of biblical exegesis made it possible to interpret history from inside the historical moment by allowing historically specific incidents to stand for trans-historical truths. However, the sixteenth-century chronicle tradition shows an increasing awareness of the difficulties of interpreting history. Chapter Two looks at early English history plays outside of the Shakespearean canon. History plays borrowed the conventions of comedy, tragedy and the morality play to provide frameworks for interpretation. Nevertheless, early histories such as *Kynge Johan*, *Edmund Ironside*, *Famous Victories*, *Edward III*, *The True Tragedy*, and *The Troublesome Reign* did not fit comfortably within established dramatic modes, leading to history's gradual recognition as a separate genre. Chapter Three looks at the contribution Shakespeare's plays made to the developing genre. The un-unified dramatic structure of the *Henry VI* plays denies the audience a stable framework within which to interpret events. In *Richard III*, a clear tragic framework appears, but is undermined by a strong thread of irony that runs through the play. History appears in the tetralogy as a repetitive cycle of violence perpetuated by characters' attempts to memorialise the past while failing to learn from it. The crisis presented by history is the necessity of acting on partial information, while the promise of fuller understanding is projected into an unknowable future.

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Introduction

Shakespeare's 'first tetralogy' of history plays (*1-3 Henry VI* and *Richard III*) have traditionally received less attention than the plays of the second tetralogy (*Richard II*, *1* and *2 Henry IV*, and *Henry V*). Nevertheless, the first tetralogy is in some ways a more interesting set of plays than their better known siblings. For one thing, controversies over the dating and authorship of the first tetralogy have intriguing implications for our understanding of the early development of the history-play genre as a whole. For another, postmodern trends in modern historical theory and the idea of *petits récits* as a way of challenging the overarching metanarrative of traditional 'History' have allowed for a greater appreciation of the effect of the episodic and un-unified artistic structure of the *Henry VI* plays.¹ Furthermore, recent high-profile productions of Shakespeare's history plays from the BBC, the RSC, and Shakespeare's Globe suggest that interest in Shakespeare's histories is growing even outside of academia.² All these things make the plays of the first tetralogy ripe for a fruitful re-evaluation. In particular, this thesis seeks to examine Shakespeare's first tetralogy in relation to earlier forms historical writing, looking at the ideas of influential figures writing on history in order to gain a sense of the wider context of Shakespeare's plays. I will also consider the outlook on history presented in the first tetralogy and its influence on the genre of the history play.

¹ For more on the ways in which *petits récits* challenge traditional metanarratives, see Catherine Belsey, 'Making histories then and now: Shakespeare from *Richard II* to *Henry V*', in *The Uses of History: Marxism, Postmodernism and the Renaissance*, ed. by Francis Barker, Peter Hulme and Margaret Iverson (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1991), pp. 24-46.

² The BBC's *Hollow Crown* series includes *Richard II*, dir. by Rupert Goold, *1* and *2 Henry IV*, dir. by Richard Eyre, and *Henry V*, dir. by Thea Sharrock (BBC, 2012), and the plays of the first tetralogy are set to be released in 2016. Shakespeare's Globe also performed *1-3 Henry VI*, dir. Nick Bagnall (Shakespeare's Globe, 2013) at the Globe, as well as one-off performances at a number of battlefield sites (Towton, St. Albans, Wakefield and Barnet, see <<http://www.shakespearesglobe.com/theatre/whats-on/globe-theatre-on-tour/henry-vi/battlefield-performances>>, [accessed on 05/10/2013]). Finally, the RSC is also in the process of staging Shakespeare's second tetralogy (as separate productions rather than a 'cycle'), beginning with last year's production of *Richard II* starring David Tennant, dir. Gregory Doran (RSC, 2013), and current production of *1 Henry IV*, dir. Gregory Doran (RSC, 2014) in Stratford.

It has been claimed that, in his history plays, Shakespeare engages with the historiographical issues of his day.³ Thus, in Chapter One ('Historiography'), I consider the historiographical context into which Shakespeare's first history plays emerged. The Reformation and the influence of humanist bibliographical practices dramatically changed attitudes towards history over the course of the sixteenth century. While a more secular outlook began to be available, it was still underwritten by a culturally Christian outlook. Chapter Two ('Dramaturgy') looks at how drama took on the subject of history, and considers the question of what distinguishes the 'history play' from other dramatic genres. To do this I look at plays currently outside of the Shakespearean canon in an attempt to get a wider view of the shape of the history-play genre. Such a view is necessary for evaluating the impact of Shakespeare's contribution to the genre.⁴ Finally, in Chapter Three I turn to the plays of Shakespeare's first tetralogy and the various kinds of history they present. In the rest of this introduction, however, I would like to turn to some of the key critical debates concerning historiography and historicism, as well as the relationship between Shakespeare's history plays and the genre as a whole.

Politics and Historicisms Old and New

In a 2004 essay, 'Political Thought and the Theatre, 1580-1630', Annabel Patterson suggests that recent criticism has only just begun to accept the existence of a relationship between plays and politics in early modern drama. She writes:

³ See Robert Ornstein, *A Kingdom for a Stage: The Achievement of Shakespeare's History Plays* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1972), and Paola Pugliatti, *Shakespeare the Historian* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 1996).

⁴ Although the plays I have looked at in Chapter Two are for the most part currently outside of the Shakespearean canon, his involvement has been claimed from time to time in relation to almost all of them. Scott McMillin and Sally-Beth MacLean have speculated about Shakespeare's involvement with the Queen's Men company in the late 1580s, and the possibility that he may therefore have had involvement with the plays *The Famous Victories of Henry V*, *The Troublesome Reign of King John* and *The True Tragedy of Richard III* (see 'Shakespeare a Queen's Man', in *The Queen's Men and their Plays* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), pp. 160-166). Eric Sams has made a case for Shakespeare's authorship of *Edmund Ironside* (see 'Introduction', in *Shakespeare's Lost Play: 'Edmund Ironside'*, ed. by Eric Sams (Aldershot, Hampshire: Wildwood House Ltd, 1986) pp. 1-52). Finally in 1998, the New Cambridge Shakespeare published an edition of *Edward III*, although editor Giorgio Melchiori notes that 'Composition as well as performance were communal activities in the Elizabethan theatre. We should not, therefore, think of *Edward III* in term of sole authorship, whether Shakespeare's or one of a number of other numerous playwrights variously suggested as authors' ('Introduction', in *King Edward III*, ed. by Giorgio Melchiori (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), pp. 1-51 (p. 15)).

Towards the end of the twentieth century there developed in studies of early modern drama an unusual, if not entirely unprecedented, interest in the following questions, though they may not have been posed in exactly the form that follows: what relation did a form of public entertainment, whose popularity and social importance during this period *were* unprecedented, have to public issues? Why were so many plays based on older English history in its more problematic moments, moments when the structure of government was threatened? Why did so many plays seem to allude to controversial events in current English or European affairs? That there was some relation between drama and politics seemed an unavoidable inference (although it had been avoided with considerable determination for the previous three-quarters of a century); and the new historically minded critics began to assemble the evidence, and to argue, about what that relationship was.⁵

Although the questions being asked about the relationship between drama and politics are in many ways very ‘new’, it is simply not true that the existence of a relationship had been ‘avoided with considerable determination for the previous three-quarters of a century’, especially in the case of the history play.

In 1918 the historian J. A. R. Marriott published a book entitled *English History in Shakespeare* in which he states in the preface his intention to approach the plays ‘as a student of History and Politics’.⁶ Even E. M. W. Tillyard’s insistence on Shakespeare’s political orthodoxy depends on the recognition of some kind of relationship between drama and politics.⁷ What Tillyard and Marriott share, which has been rejected by recent criticism, is the idea that Shakespeare wrote with a straightforwardly didactic purpose in mind. For example, Marriott claims:

National unity; an end to dynastic strife; a truce between parties; harmony between classes; this was the supreme need of the hour; this was the lesson which the Chronicle Plays of Shakespeare were intended to pre-eminently enforce.⁸

⁵ Annabel Patterson, ‘Political Thought and the Theatre, 1580-1630’, in *A Companion to Renaissance Drama*, ed. by Arthur F. Kinney (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing Ltd., 2004), pp. 25-39 (p. 26).

⁶ J. A. R. Marriott, ‘Preface’, in *English History in Shakespeare* (London: Chapman and Hall Ltd., 1918).

⁷ See E. M. W. Tillyard, *Shakespeare’s History Plays*, first published 1944 (London: Chatto & Windus, 1961).

⁸ Marriott, *English History in Shakespeare*, p. 8.

Irving Ribner also sees the political purpose of the history play as inseparable from what he calls its 'historical purpose' and, like Tillyard and Marriott, assumes this purpose to be largely instructive.⁹ The difference that the 'new' discovery of politics made, therefore, is in seeing these plays as interrogative rather than didactic.

At the forefront of this 'new' discovery were the 'new historicists'. As James Holstun wrote in 1989:

At the center of new historicism lies a claim that simply could not have been made in the United States twenty years ago with much safety or analytical rigor: that literature does political work. It does not rise above social life to a timeless aesthetic realm, nor does it simply reflect a coherent and hierarchical world view. Rather, it creates models of human identity, gives voice to competing political factions, and works to produce and contain political subversion.¹⁰

Another characteristic of new historicism, according to Howard Felperin, is the 'sudden, often surprising, interpenetration of text and context, [...] indeed, the dissolution of traditional boundaries between them[.]'¹¹ According to Felperin, new historicism and its British counterpart cultural materialism have a 'post-structuralist understanding of literature and history as *constructed textuality* or [...] as *constructed intertextuality*.'¹² The result is a kind of criticism that Stephen Greenblatt proposes will:

[...] look less at the presumed center of the literary domain than at its borders, to try to track what can only be glimpsed, as it were, at the margins of the text. The cost of this shift in attention will be the satisfying illusion of a 'whole reading,' the impression conveyed by powerful critics that had they but world enough and time, they could illuminate every corner of the text and knit together into a unified interpretive vision all of their discrete perceptions.¹³

⁹ See Irving Ribner, 'History and Drama', in *The English History Play in the Age of Shakespeare* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957), pp. 3-32.

¹⁰ James Holstun, 'Ranting at the New Historicism', *English Literary Renaissance*, 19 (1989), 189 – 225 (p. 190).

¹¹ Howard Felperin, "'Cultural poetics" versus "cultural materialism": the two New Historicisms in Renaissance Studies', in *The Uses of History*, pp. 76-100 (p. 80). In contrast, Catherine Belsey comments that, 'A generation ago, because it was understood to be outside literature, history constituted the final court of appeal for readers of Renaissance texts' ('Making histories', pp. 24-5).

¹² Felperin, "'Cultural poetics" versus "cultural materialism"', p. 77 (italics in the original).

¹³ Stephen Greenblatt, *Shakespearean Negotiations: The Circulation of Social Energy in Renaissance England* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), p. 4.

Because of this movement away from a ‘whole reading’ of a text, and the consequent disruption to historical grand narratives it entails, Catherine Belsey calls new historicism ‘characteristically postmodern’.¹⁴

For many, however, new historicism has failed to deliver on its promises. Although, as Belsey claims, new historicism ‘is anything but nostalgic in its account of a world dominated by power, which produces resistance only to justify its own extension’,¹⁵ Felperin argues that Greenblatt only inverted Tillyard’s ‘political valorisation’ of Elizabethan society, and that ‘the terms of its cognition and construction deployed by Tillyard, the early Greenblatt, and many others were not essentially different.’¹⁶ Moreover, despite the promise of moving away from the literary ‘centre’ and unsettling the distinction between text and context, James Holstun objects that new historicists rarely reached outside of the established canon or used non-literary texts in anything other than a conventional manner:

This is not to say that new historicists do not turn to nonliterary texts, but these works typically appear in the traditional role of contexts for the central literary works, or as emblems introducing some interpretive problematic that a literary text captures in a more compelling and self-conscious fashion.¹⁷

It is possible that one reason why Tillyard continues to haunt discussions of Shakespeare’s plays, then, is that criticism has not changed enough to ensure his irrelevance. Indeed, Tillyard’s ‘Elizabethan world picture’ is part of an attempt to assert historical difference and the idea that Elizabethans were not like us.¹⁸

Another reason why Tillyard’s ghost has been so difficult to lay to rest is that he provides a useful description of ‘orthodox’ politics against which to define ‘unorthodox’

¹⁴ Belsey, ‘Making histories’, p. 29.

¹⁵ Belsey, ‘Making histories’, p. 29.

¹⁶ Felperin, “‘Cultural poetics’ versus ‘cultural materialism’”, p. 82. He goes on to write, “Those terms remain ‘empiricist’ or ‘realist’. That is, they all “posit” Elizabethan society as a historical reality not simply present – often oppressively so – and univocal to itself, but one whose historicity exists in its own right – in a sense for all time – and remains independent of our efforts to reconstruct it – despite its survival only in the form of traces’ (p. 82).

¹⁷ Holstun, ‘Ranting at the New Historicism’, p. 192.

¹⁸ See E. M. W. Tillyard, *The Elizabethan World Picture*, first published 1942 (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1974).

ideas. However, new historicism has also made the search for a politically subversive, 'radical' Shakespeare rather difficult. As Francis Barker writes:

In what has become known as the 'subversion and containment model', even as it – often brilliantly – tracks the subversive element(s) in the text or the culture, New Historicism none the less seems to snatch defeat from the jaws of victory and to confirm the effectivity of power *figured as* the containment of that very subversion.¹⁹

Within this model, resistance to power always seems to be successfully contained, either neutralising its threat to the established order or bolstering that order by giving it a triumphant victory. For David Scott Kastan and Catherine Belsey, this failure to find meaningful resistance arises out of new historicists' theoretical sophistication, which, for Kastan, 'forces them to acknowledge the situatedness of the critic as it determines the questions that are asked of the past. Thus, their "presentist" commitments are not only visible from the first but also part of their understanding of how the past is logically conceivable.'²⁰ For Belsey, '[t]he sleek surfaces of New Historicist writing propose no programme; they offer the minimum of evaluations and transformations, except in so far as they transform into its opposite the grand narrative itself; and in consequence they legitimate no political intervention.'²¹ By acknowledging the 'situatedness of the critic', we are forced to concede that the desire for a 'radical Shakespeare' may arise from a modern revulsion from the idea of Shakespeare as a spokesperson for a regime we now consider totalitarian and oppressive. Thus, the illusion of subversion may be created by the critic where none in fact exists.

Tillyard has usefully articulated one particular strand of Elizabethan ideology that might be called 'orthodox' or 'dominant', though not necessarily 'dominant' in the

¹⁹ Francis Barker, 'Which Dead? *Hamlet* and the ends of history', in *The Uses of History*, pp. 47-75 (p. 70, n. 13), italics in the original. He goes on to write: 'At the very least it should be possible to measure what real distance there is (and there is some) between the demonisation of subversion in order to justify and maintain domination, and the ultimate lack – inherent in the incorporation of subversion into power – of a thoroughgoing critique of domination' (p. 70, n. 13).

²⁰ David Scott Kastan, *Shakespeare After Theory* (New York: Routledge, 1999), p. 17.

²¹ Belsey, 'Making histories', pp. 29-30.

democratic sense of being the most common. Nevertheless, an example that illustrates both a site of resistance to orthodox ideology as well as the difficulty of locating and describing that resistance is the idea of a ‘republican’ ideology operating in Elizabethan England. Andrew Hadfield has been keen to construct Shakespeare as an advocate for a ‘republican culture’ he sees at work in Tudor England.²² His account of political resistance under Elizabeth is indeed interesting and nuanced, but in my opinion describing it as ‘republican’ gives a diverse set of outlooks and attitudes a misleading cohesiveness and masks very significant differences between them and modern, or even seventeenth-century ‘republicanism’. As William C. Carroll observes, we must ‘resist the continual temptation to frame a teleological argument, with the events of 1642-9 acting as a magnet, or black hole, toward which each historical moment inevitably moves.’²³ Nevertheless, the execution of Charles I casts a long shadow over the end of the sixteenth century since the origins of the ideas that made his execution seem legitimate must lie somewhere in the theories of monarchy circulating in the period. Ultimately, a ‘teleological’ approach of some description is difficult to avoid, but it is not always invalid to at least take into consideration the shape of subsequent events.

In an attempt to provide a description that does justice to historical difference, Patrick Collinson has coined the term ‘monarchical republic’, stressing that:

[...] *republica* in sixteenth-century parlance did not mean, as it has meant since the late eighteenth century, a type of constitution incompatible with monarchy, it was simply the common term for what we call the state. [Sir Thomas] Smith’s book [*Republica Anglorum*, 1583] was entitled in its English version *Of the Commonwealth of England* and that was a perfectly neutral term, albeit one which the Henrician Thomas Elyot in *The booke named the*

²² See Andrew Hadfield, *Shakespeare and Republicanism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

²³ William C. Carroll, ‘Theories of Kingship in Shakespeare’s England’, in *A Companion to Shakespeare’s Works: The Histories*, ed. by Richard Dutton and Jean E. Howard (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2006), pp. 125-145 (p. 126).

governor (1531) found dangerously plebeian in its implications, preferring 'public weal'.²⁴

Nevertheless, as Hadfield points out, examples like the Roman Republic and contemporary Italian republics such as Venice did offer alternative models of government with which monarchy could be compared,²⁵ and both Hadfield and Collinson agree that Elizabethans considered a so-called 'mixed' mode of government as ideal.²⁶ Collinson considers the idea of a 'monarchical republic' in relation to the possibility that Parliament could act legally in the name of the Queen's politic body (independent of her physical body) by, for example, choosing a successor in the event of Elizabeth I dying without naming an heir. As Collinson explains, in the event of the monarch's death, legally all powers passed immediately to his or her heir, and any parliament in session would be automatically dismissed until recalled by the new monarch.²⁷ This meant that, if there was doubt about the succession, there was no body with the legal power to run the country until such time as a new monarch was crowned. Elizabeth's refusal to marry or name an heir made this a likely possibility, and, according to Collinson, William Cecil appears to have tried to take steps to make legal provision for the running of the country and for a peaceful transfer of power in the event of an interregnum.²⁸ There was, therefore, a growing concept of the authority of Parliament to act on behalf of the crown, and the exact balance of power between the two was an issue to some extent under negotiation.²⁹

²⁴ Patrick Collinson, 'The monarchical republic of Queen Elizabeth I', in *The Tudor Monarchy*, ed. by John Guy (London: Arnold, 1997), pp. 110-134 (p. 114).

²⁵ See Hadfield, 'Forms of republican culture in late sixteenth-century England', in *Shakespeare and Republicanism*, pp. 17-53.

²⁶ Collinson: 'The very fact that 'republic' was an acceptable term for a variety of political systems in itself implies an important historical-etymological assumption about the origins of government, as well as the perseverance of the doctrine, to be found in Plato, that monarchy, aristocracy and democracy in their pure forms are all less desirable than a judicious blend of all three' ('Monarchical Republic', pp. 114-5). Hadfield cites Sir Thomas Smith's *Republica Anglorum*, saying that 'In his first book, which outlines the types of government, Smith makes it clear to the reader that a "mixed" form of constitution is best, being fairest to all citizens, more stable than other types of government, and, most crucially, in harmony with the general principles of politics that he has outlined' (*Shakespeare and Republicanism*, p. 20).

²⁷ See Collinson, 'Monarchical Republic', pp. 126-7.

²⁸ See Collinson, 'Monarchical Republic', pp.123-130.

²⁹ Andrew Hadfield writes: 'The king or queen existed as the monarch in parliament, which allowed for a variety of interpretations of the relationship between the ruler and the highest court in the land. A distinction

Underlying Cecil's project was the idea that the authority enjoyed by the king or queen as a representative of God was not dissimilar to that enjoyed by other magistrates and public officers, and that the ultimate purpose of that authority was the good of the 'common weal'. In some areas this developed into a conviction that, as Collinson puts it:

[...] monarchy is a ministry exercised under God and on his behalf; that it is no more and no less than a public office; that as a public officer the monarch is accountable, certainly to God and perhaps to others exercising, under God, other public offices of magistracy or respecting an overriding and transcendent duty to God himself; and that there is a difference between monarchy and tyranny.³⁰

This theory manifested itself in a number of disparate ways, and can be discerned in the writings of the Protestant reformer William Tyndale in the 1530s. Forced to flee to the continent for fear of persecution in England, Tyndale nevertheless maintains that Christ's teachings do not support civil disobedience:

Even so now (as ever) the most part seek liberty; they be glad when they hear the unsatiableness of the spirituality rebuked; when they hear their falsehood and wiles uttered; when tyranny and oppression is preached against; when they hear how kings and all officers should rule christianly and brotherly, and seek no other thing save the wealth of their subjects; and when they hear that they have no such authority of God to pill and poll as they do, and to raise up taxes and gatherings to maintain their phantasies and to make war they wot not for what cause: and therefore because the heads will not so rule, will they also no longer obey, but resist and rise against their evil heads, and one wickedness destroyeth another. Yet is not God's word the cause of this, neither yet the preachers, for though that Christ taught all obedience, that it is not lawful to resist wrong, (but for the officer that is appointed thereunto:) [...] yet the people, for the most part receive it not: they were ever ready to rise and to fight.³¹

between an "ascending" interpretation of the relationship between crown and parliament, which placed emphasis on the role of the monarch being bound by laws passed in parliament, and a "descending" view of the same relationship, which reduced the powers of the elected chambers to advisory bodies and placed clear emphasis on the monarch's prerogative as the determining political will, had often been made by political theorists. The two views of political culture existed more or less side by side for much of the sixteenth century' (*Shakespeare and Republicanism*, p. 25).

³⁰ Collinson, 'Monarchical Republic', p. 120.

³¹ William Tyndale, *On the Obedience of a Christian Man and How Christian Rulers Ought to Govern*, in *The Works of the English Reformers William Tyndale and John Frith*, 3 vols, ed. by Thomas Russell, (London: 1831), I, pp. 165-379 (pp. 199-200).

For Tyndale, while it is acceptable to preach the ‘truth’ of how those in power ‘should’ rule, rebellion is nevertheless just as much a ‘wickedness’ as the abuses committed by the crown and the spirituality. However, Tyndale writes ‘it is not lawful to resist wrong, (*but for the officer that is appointed thereunto:*)’, suggesting the potential existence of some kind of divinely appointed agent sent to resist the tyrannical ruler. This leaves space for the possibility of ‘lawful’ rebellion, theologically speaking at least. Exactly how such ‘legitimate’ resistance can be separated from ‘wicked’ rebellion is, nevertheless, unclear.

The way in which Tyndale criticises power at the same time as asserting its authority is precisely what makes identifying and describing ‘resistance’ in the era so difficult. Protestant reformers offered Henry VIII a vision of royal power that challenged the power of the Catholic Church, and thus, aspects of the rhetoric of one heretical minority sect were adopted into the centre of power in England. Tyndale’s writings show how the ‘resistance theory’ described by Collinson above grew up, not in reaction to the rhetoric of Royal Supremacy, but as an integral part of it. And if adopting aspects of Protestant rhetoric was in some ways politically convenient for Henry, it also required significant reversals of previous official attitudes which were problematic since they conceded that those attitudes had been held in error. The reaction against the Lollard movement of the late-fourteenth/early-fifteenth centuries had made the English particularly sensitive to anything associated with ‘heresy’. Vernacular scripture was an especially sensitive issue; as Collinson writes, ‘in England (and the situation was not the same in Germany and the Low Countries) the association of translated scripture with heresy held back the publication of a vernacular Bible long after the invention of printing, until the advent of Tyndale.’³² In 1408 Archbishop Thomas Arundel presided over a Convocation in which the, by then, late John Wyclif was officially condemned and his Bible

³² Patrick Collinson, ‘English Reformations’, in *A Companion to English Renaissance Literature and Culture*, ed. by Michael Hattaway (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2003), pp. 27-43 (p. 30).

banned.³³ Subsequently, as Gerald Hammond writes, '[t]hroughout the fifteenth century and into the sixteenth the English people, uniquely in western Europe, were forbidden to own, translate, or even read a vernacular Bible without their Bishop's permission.'³⁴ After the Reformation, however, the first authorised Bible in English, the Great Bible, was made available in parish churches in 1539, three years after Tyndale's execution for heresy near Brussels. The Great Bible was largely compiled from Tyndale's translations, which had been so enthusiastically burned before the Reformation.³⁵

Henry VIII could not simply brush off these reversals as 'errors' of a previous establishment. In 1521 he had been awarded the title *fidei defensor* ('Defender of the Faith') by Pope Leo X for his book *Assertio Septem Sacramentorum* ('Assertion of the Seven Sacraments') in which he not only defended the Catholic sacraments, but also confirmed the supremacy of the Pope. The title was subsequently revoked after the split with Rome, but reinstated by the Church of England in 1544.³⁶ By that time the title had come to mean something significantly different; rather than a defender of the Catholic faith against Protestant heresy, Henry had become the defender of the 'true' religion against the corruption of papist Rome. Nevertheless, Henry's vision of the 'true religion' was not entirely consonant with that of Protestants. In 1536, only two years after the Act of Supremacy that brought the Church of England into existence, Henry published the Ten Articles, which ostensibly confirmed orthodox Catholic practices that had come under fire

³³ Not satisfied with this, Wyclif's body was also exhumed, burned, and thrown into a stream at Lutterworth. See Gordon Leff, 'John Wyclif: The Path to Dissent', in *Heresy, Philosophy and Religion in the Medieval West* (Bury St. Edmunds, SU: St. Edmundsbury Press, 2002), pp. 143-180 (pp. 146-7).

³⁴ Gerald Hammond, 'Translations of the Bible', in *A Companion to English Renaissance Literature and Culture*, pp. 165-175 (p. 168).

³⁵ See Hammond, 'Translations of the Bible', p.169. See also David Daniell, 'Reading the Bible', in *A Companion to Shakespeare*, ed. by David Scott Kastan (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers Ltd., 1999), pp. 158-171 (esp. pp. 162-4).

³⁶ The exact date at which the title was revoked is a little unclear. It seems reasonable to assume that it was part and parcel of Henry's excommunication, the papers for which seem to have been drawn up but never officially issued by Clement VII in 1534. These papers were finally issued under Pope Paul III in 1538. See John Bowle, *Henry VIII: A Biography* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1964), p. 223. For the reinstatement of the title, see 'defender of the faith', *Encyclopaedia Britannica Online*, Encyclopaedia Britannica Inc., 2014. <<http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/155661/defender-of-the-faith>>, [accessed 22/03/2014].

from Protestant reformers.³⁷ Evidently Henry felt the need to reiterate the message, because in 1539 he issued the Six Articles which not only confirmed belief in specific orthodox doctrines, but also introduced sanctions (including burning) against those who refused to accept them. Having adopted Protestant arguments for resisting the power of the Catholic Church, Henry had to exert considerable energy in containing and controlling their influence. Despite Henry's efforts, however, under Edward and Elizabeth, England came to define itself as a 'Protestant nation'.

Royal Supremacy began as a means of resisting the power of the Catholic Church. Both institutions (church and state) represent sites of power and authority within sixteenth-century culture. Simplified to its bare essentials, the new historicist 'subversion and containment' model fails to account for the interplay of competing sites of power within culture. In this sense, it presents a view of culture as monolithic as any found in Tillyard's criticism.³⁸ Catherine Belsey writes of a kind of critical narrative that can:

[...] throw into relief the precariousness of power, of capital, of patriarchy and racism, showing them as beleaguered to the degree that the resistances they produce returns to endanger their seamless mastery.³⁹

However, it seems to me that the challenge for Shakespearean critics is not to create these narratives themselves, but to argue convincingly that this was the kind of narrative Shakespeare created. The difficulty, as Francis Barker, Peter Hulme and Margaret Iverson explain, is that:

The literary or dramatic text may contain moments of subversion, but these moments can then be seen as indeed contained by – and even as charismatically strengthening – the power they apparently

³⁷ Interestingly, although the Ten Articles defended the use of images in Churches as 'kindlers and stirrers of men's minds', kneeling before them or leaving offerings was banned (see 'The Ten Articles', in *The Church History of Britain*, 6 vols, by Thomas Fuller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1845), III, pp. 141-159 (p. 155)). It seems Henry was at least partially convinced of the danger of idolatrous worship in this case.

³⁸ The new historicist 'subversion and containment' model does, nevertheless, usefully describe how power creates subversion seemingly as a function of its existence as well as situations where that subversion is then used to bolster the status quo.

³⁹ Belsey, 'Making histories', p. 31.

contest, permitting such slippery interpretations to appeal to both radical and conservative persuasions simultaneously.⁴⁰

These ‘slippery interpretations’, where radical readings can so easily morph into their opposite, suggest that ‘resistance’ may not lie in the text itself, but in what it potentially inspired in its audience.

The difficulty of identifying political and ideological ‘resistance’ in sixteenth century culture may not only be the result of a newfound awareness of the ‘situatedness of the critic’, but also because of the particular political climate of sixteenth-century England. It may, therefore, be no coincidence that new historicism has been particularly influential in Renaissance studies. However, the ‘containment’ of subversion does not necessarily render it impotent. This is especially true, I believe, of literary texts where containment is, in an artistic sense, artificial. Ultimately the reader or audience is left to judge how satisfying that containment is and how the text signifies in relation to the ‘real’ world. As critics we can look for clues about the possible interpretations available to a contemporary audience in the text itself as well as its historical context, but we have no direct access to the site of these interpretations. Furthermore, we face similar problems attempting to comprehend an Elizabethan understanding of the interplay between different genres and generic conventions as we do in describing the politics of the era. The difficulties of describing this ‘artistic’ context for Shakespeare’s plays are the subject of the next section.

Shakespeare and the Elizabethan History Play

When considering a work as an example of a given genre, Lawrence Danson suggests that:

In order to know what has been subverted and revised, we must have an idea of the general class; to understand what interesting new thing the particular work of art is accomplishing, we must understand it precisely as a variation on the kind of thing it is.⁴¹

⁴⁰ Francis Barker, Peter Hulme and Margaret Iverson, ‘Introduction’, in *The Uses of History*, pp. 1-23 (p. 7).

⁴¹ Lawrence Danson, *Shakespeare’s Dramatic Genres* (New York: Oxford university Press, 2000), p. 5.

Unfortunately, a recurring problem in much of the criticism surrounding ‘Elizabethan history plays’ is the extent to which Shakespeare’s plays are currently used to define the entire genre. In 1944 E. M. W. Tillyard wrote:

In seeking the effect of the Chronicle Play on Shakespeare I had found something much more like the effect of Shakespeare on the Chronicle Play.⁴²

For Tillyard, Shakespeare’s thoughtful and sophisticated treatment of historical material transforms the relatively simple ‘chronicle play’ into the ‘history play’.⁴³ Stephen Longstaffe observes that ‘[t]he compulsion to accompany a rubbishing of the history play as a whole with an insistence that what is good in it is traceable to Shakespeare is surprisingly widespread’, and sentiments similar to those of Tillyard have frequently resurfaced.⁴⁴ Pre-assumptions of Shakespeare’s superiority have long been a flaw in Shakespeare studies generally, where other material is sometimes considered only in order to illuminate Shakespeare’s brilliance. The history play has suffered especially from this particular form of bardolatry, leaving us with a narrow and somewhat warped understanding of the genre.

A good example of Tillyard’s continuing influence in this respect is Robert Ornstein’s book *A Kingdom for a Stage*. Although Ornstein rejects Tillyard’s argument for the political orthodoxy of Shakespeare’s plays, he still echoes Tillyard’s view of other historical drama written in the era:

We are asked to believe that the Shakespeare who blazed the path in tragedy for Chapman, Tourneur, Webster, Beaumont and Fletcher, Middleton, and Ford was content to follow the lead of the plodding didacticists who supposedly created the genre of the History Play, and like them dedicate his art to moralistic and propagandistic purposes.⁴⁵

⁴² Tillyard, *Shakespeare’s History Plays*, p. 120.

⁴³ Tillyard is extremely vague about what exactly a ‘chronicle play’ is. He writes: ‘The chronicling consists in the title. I shall not try to define the English Chronicle Play, but shall confine myself nearly to plays related very obviously by their subject matter to the plays of Shakespeare denominated Histories by the editors of the First Folio’ (*Shakespeare’s History Plays*, p. 98).

⁴⁴ Stephen Longstaffe, ‘What is the English History Play and Why are They Saying Such Terrible Things About It?’, *Renaissance Forum*, 2.2 (1997), <<http://www.hull.ac.uk/renforum/v2no2/longstaf.htm>> [accessed 14/10/2011], (para. 10).

⁴⁵ Robert Ornstein, *A Kingdom for a Stage*, p. 2.

While challenging the notion that Shakespeare is merely propagating the ideology of his era, Ornstein does not question the idea that this is what his contemporaries had done.⁴⁶ Even Lawrence Danson, narrowly focused on ‘Shakespeare’s’ dramatic genres, dismisses other historical plays, saying that ‘[m]ost earlier plays that could in the loosest sense be called “history plays” look very little like Shakespeare’s.’⁴⁷ He goes on to discard John Bale’s *Kynge Johan* (c. 1534) as a ‘mixed-morality’ and to describe *The Famous Victories of Henry V* (c. 1588) as ‘a rollicking good show and, on its own terms, not a bad play; but in reworking the same material Shakespeare was in the process of discovering whole new ways of representing “history”.’⁴⁸ Danson does not go into detail about what these ‘new ways’ of representing history were or how they constituted a ‘variation’ on what had gone before.

This kind of idolisation of Shakespeare’s histories is only one step away from triumphantly discovering Shakespeare to be the inventor of the genre. Tillyard’s seminal study authorises this step by creating a distinction between ‘chronicle’ and ‘history’ plays, with the result that those plays that draw on historical material but do not resemble Shakespeare’s fail to deserve the title of ‘history play’ and are consequently excluded from the genre. Thus, Shakespeare becomes the ‘first’ writer of ‘history plays’ no matter how many plays with historical subject matters had been written before his. And as Paulina Kewes observes, ‘From crediting Shakespeare with the invention of the genre, there is only a short step to treating his “English histories” as normative.’⁴⁹ Not everyone, however, has endorsed Tillyard’s distinction between ‘chronicle’ and ‘history’ plays; as early as 1957 Irving Ribner wrote:

⁴⁶ For a more detailed analysis of the problem of Shakespeare’s dominance of the genre see Longstaffe, ‘What is the English History Play?’

⁴⁷ Danson, *Shakespeare’s Dramatic Genres*, p. 87.

⁴⁸ Danson, *Shakespeare’s Dramatic Genres*, p. 87.

⁴⁹ Paulina Kewes, ‘The Elizabethan History Play: A True Genre?’, in *A Companion to Shakespeare’s Work: The Histories*, pp. 170-93 (p. 186).

Much confusion has resulted, I believe, from the use of the term 'chronicle play' to refer to a large body of extant plays which take as their subject matter the history of England. The term is always used with the unstated implication that a chronicle play somehow differs from a history play, although what a history is and just how a 'chronicle' may differ from it is never made clear. [...] The term 'chronicle' is used, moreover, to refer to a kind of formless, episodic drama, and the implication is usually that this was the only kind of drama in which the history of England was ever treated. The total inadequacy of this notion I shall attempt to demonstrate below. Since a meaningful distinction between 'chronicle' and history is impossible, we had best abandon the term 'chronicle' entirely. Plays which deal with the history of any country are history plays and no other critical term is needed.⁵⁰

Nevertheless, although the term 'chronicle' has fallen out of fashion in recent years, the idea that Shakespeare 'invented' the history play genre has persisted. Lawrence Danson, for example, does not call non-Shakespearean historical plays 'chronicle plays', but he stresses that they can be called 'history plays' only in the 'loosest sense' and writes that 'it would be only a small exaggeration to say that "history play" is the only genre he [Shakespeare] actually invented.'⁵¹

In 1953 F. P. Wilson asserted that 'there is no certain evidence that any popular dramatist before Shakespeare wrote a play based on English history.'⁵² Similarly, Ornstein argues:

If he [Shakespeare] did not originate the form of the History Play when he wrote the *Henry VI* plays, he created its vogue and shaped its tradition. So preeminent was his contribution that, if we omit his History Plays, the tradition very nearly ceases to be artistically significant.⁵³

According to Phyllis Rackin, not only the origin, but also the end of the history-play genre confirm Shakespeare as the inventor. She writes: 'The English history play ceased to be a popular genre soon after Shakespeare abandoned it, and there is good evidence that the

⁵⁰ Irving Ribner, *The English History Play*, pp. 7-8.

⁵¹ Danson, *Shakespeare's Dramatic Genres*, p. 87.

⁵² F. P. Wilson, *Marlowe and the Early Shakespeare* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1953), p. 106.

⁵³ Ornstein, *A Kingdom for a Stage*, p. 6.

genre itself is largely Shakespeare's creation.⁵⁴ Each of these claims is, of course, carefully qualified, allowing critics to make bold claims that mask the ambiguity of the evidence. For Danson it is 'only a small exaggeration', and for Ornstein everything relies on the ubiquitous 'if'. With Wilson one can quibble over the definition of terms like 'popular dramatist' or 'English history',⁵⁵ and the phrase 'there is no certain evidence' presumably refers to the difficulty of establishing an exact chronology for the glut of plays on English history written at the end of the 1580s and early 1590s. Equally, however, there is 'no certain evidence' that Shakespeare's plays *were* the first of these and it seems to me that some justification needs to be given for excluding plays that *are* manifestly earlier in composition such as Legge's *Richardus Tertius* (c. 1579), Preston's(?) *Cambises, King of Persia* (c. 1569), Norton and Sackville's *Gorboduc* (c. 1561), and Bale's *Kynge Johan*. The careful qualifications made by Wilson, Ornstein and Danson avoid confronting the possibility that Shakespeare's claim to inventing the genre of the history play does not *quite* fit all the facts.

One complicating factor is the uncertainty surrounding the dating and authorship of the first tetralogy. The possibility of co-authorship of the *Henry VI* plays and Shakespeare's relative immaturity as an author have provided convenient explanations for the perceived 'inferiority' of the first tetralogy when compared to the second.⁵⁶ As early as 1777, Maurice Morgan, attempting to distance the Falstaff of the second tetralogy from the cowardly knight of the same name who appears in *1 Henry VI*, observed that 'Falstaff' is:

[...] a name for ever dishonoured by a frequent exposure in that Drum-and-trumpet Thing called *The first part of Henry VI*. written doubtless, or rather exhibited, long before *Shakespeare* was born,

⁵⁴ Phyllis Rackin, *Stages of History: Shakespeare's English Chronicles* (Ithaca NY: Cornell University Press, 1990), p. 31.

⁵⁵ For example, John Bale wrote *King Johan* in the 1530s, which qualifies as a 'play based on English history' whether or not it qualifies as a 'history play'. However, Bale may not fit Wilson's criteria for a 'popular dramatist'. Norton and Sackville's *Gorboduc* was performed in the 1560s, but, based on the reign of a pre-conquest monarch this could be considered 'British' rather than 'English' history.

⁵⁶ David Bevington writes: 'Broadly speaking, those critics who admire *1 Henry VI* and find thematic and theatrical integrity in it favor a single authorship and a date preceding Parts 2 and 3, while its critics are eager to lay its presumed defects at the door of other dramatists'. '*1 Henry VI*', in *A Companion to Shakespeare's Works: The Histories*, pp. 308-324 (p. 308).

tho' afterwards repaired, I think, and furbished up by him with here
and there a little sentiment and diction.⁵⁷

Although most modern critics would not date *1 Henry VI* to 'before Shakespeare was born', it has been argued that he may have been only one of a group of collaborators who wrote the play. Other suggested authors include Thomas Nashe, George Peele and Robert Greene.⁵⁸ If the *Henry VI* plays were formative to the history play genre, and if Shakespeare was not their only author, then he cannot be credited with singlehandedly 'inventing' the genre.

There are three main pieces of evidence for dating the *Henry VI* plays. One is a reference to Talbot as a stage character in Thomas Nashe's *Pierce Penniless* (1592).⁵⁹ The second is a reference in Henslowe's diary to a successful 'ne' (either newly performed or, as Michael Hattaway suggests, newly registered by the Master of the Revels) play about 'harey the vi' on March 3rd 1592.⁶⁰ *1 Henry VI* is the only play surviving from the period to feature the character of Talbot, so it is usually assumed that both of these references allude to it and that it was first performed in the spring of 1592. However, complicating matters is the third piece of evidence, the pamphlet *A Groatworth of Wit*, supposedly written by Robert Greene as he lay dying in September 1592:

⁵⁷ Maurice Morgan, *An Essay on the Dramatic Character of Sir John Falstaff* (London: T. Davies, 1777), pp. 49-50 (italics in the original). Many subsequent editors of *1 Henry VI*, including Stanley Wells and Gary Taylor in the Oxford *Complete Works*, have 'emended' the spelling of 'Falstaff' found in the Folio to read 'Fastolfe' (as it sometimes appeared in the chronicles) possibly due to sentiments similar to those here expressed by Morgan.

⁵⁸ See Michael Hattaway, 'Introduction', in *The First Part of Henry VI*, ed. by Michael Hattaway, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), pp. 1-57 (esp. pp. 41-3). See also Gary Taylor, 'Shakespeare and Others: the authorship of *1 Henry VI* in *Medieval and Renaissance Drama in England*, 7 (1995), 145-205, and J. J. M. Tobin, 'A Touch of Greene, Much Nashe, and All Shakespeare', in *Henry VI: Critical Essays*, ed. by Thomas A. Pendleton (London: Routledge, 2001), pp. 39-56. Taylor uses vocabulary, spelling and metrical tests to identify three different possible authors in *1 Henry VI* aside from Shakespeare, one of whom he identifies as Thomas Nashe. Tobin, however, points out the extent to which Shakespeare borrows from Nashe in numerous later works and argues that Shakespeare was enough of a mimic of other people's styles that this need not necessarily mean Shakespeare was not responsible for the majority of the play.

⁵⁹ 'How would it haue joy'd braue Talbot (the terror of the French) to thinke that after he had lyne two hundred yeare in his tomb, he should triumph againe on the stage, and haue his bones new embalmed with the teares of ten thousand spectators at least, (at seuerall times) who, in the tragedian who represents his person, imagine they behold him fresh bleeding?' Thomas Nashe, *Pierce Penniless's His Supplication to the Deuill*, ed. by J. Payne Collier (London: Reprinted for the Shakespeare Society, 1842), p.60.

⁶⁰ See Michael Hattaway, 'Introduction', p. 36. So far as I know no one has suggested the possibility that Henslowe uses 'ne' in the sense of 'the latest'.

Yes, trust them not: for there is an vpstart Crow, beautified with our feathers, that with his *Tygers hart wrapt in a Players hyde*, supposes he is as well able to bombast out a blanke verse as the best of you: and being an absolute *Iohannes fac totum*, is in his owne conceit the onely Shake-scene in a countrey.⁶¹

Greene appears to play on York's description of Margaret having 'a tiger's heart wrapped in a woman's hide' from *3 Henry VI*, suggesting that *Part 3* had at least been written (and that Greene had some knowledge of it) a mere seven months after the first alleged performance of *1 Henry VI*. Assuming that *Part 2* was also written by this time, this is an extraordinarily short period of time in which to have produced two more plays.

If Greene was one of several playwrights to collaborate on the *Henry VI* plays, then he might have had knowledge of the play without it necessarily having been publicly performed. This would lengthen the period of time between the first performance of *1 Henry VI* and *3 Henry VI*, but not by much. Consequently, earlier dates for *1 Henry VI* have been suggested, requiring a reinterpretation of the Nashe and Henslowe references.

Michael Hattaway writes that *1 Henry VI* 'was composed not very long after the Babington Plot of 1586 that led to the execution of Mary Queen of Scots'.⁶² However, Hattaway does not explicitly argue that the play mentioned by Henslowe in 1592 was not *1 Henry VI*.

Indeed, he comments that the remarkably high takings of the play recorded by Henslowe suggests that it was indeed a 'new' play rather than (in modern parlance) a 'prequel' to two previous plays.⁶³ Thus, Hattaway seems to want it both ways, suggesting a much earlier date of composition for *1 Henry VI*, but also maintaining that its first performance was in 1592.

An alternative explanation of the evidence has been that *1 Henry VI* was written later than

⁶¹ Robert Greene, *A Groatsworth of Wit*, transcribed by Risa S. Bear from the Wright edition of 1592, (University of Oregon, 2002), <<http://www.luminarium.org/renascence-editions/greene1.html>>, [accessed 26/03/2014]. What Greene also seems to be accusing Shakespeare of here is plagiarism. Interestingly, the reference to Aesop's crow, beautified with the feathers of other birds, is also an image used by John Stow when accusing Richard Grafton of plagiarising his work (see p. 74 below). However, the 'them' whom Greene is admonishing his fellow playwrights not to trust, are actors, whom Greene has also called 'Anticks garnisht in our colours', so it is possible that Greene considers Shakespeare primarily as an actor, and is piqued by his presumption in attempting to write plays. Evidence is inconclusive, however, although it is intriguing to speculate what exactly might have provoked Greene's tirade.

⁶² Hattaway, 'Introduction', p. 8.

⁶³ See Hattaway 'Introduction', pp. 34-41.

Parts 2 and 3.⁶⁴ A later date for *Part 1* would explain why we have a quarto edition of *Part 2* (1594), and an octavo of *Part 3* (1595), but no version of *Part 1* before its appearance in the Folio (1623). If this was the case, however, it leaves the (for the time being) unanswerable question of when *Parts 2 and 3* might have been written and/or performed.⁶⁵

Richard III is usually also dated to 1592 on the logic that Shakespeare wrote it directly after the *Henry VI* plays. But although 2 and 3 *Henry VI* appeared in print in 1594 and '95, *Richard III* was not printed until 1597.⁶⁶ Sometimes treated as a so-called 'bad quarto', Q1 of *Richard III* is usually regarded as a relatively authoritative 'bad quarto', sometimes thought to have been done by the Lord Chamberlain's Men themselves. Certainly it remained the basis for all subsequent editions until the Folio.⁶⁷ The 'bad quarto' theory, originated by Alfred W. Pollard, has been significantly challenged of late, and other explanations for textual variations have been sought by some more recent critics.⁶⁸ Steven Urkowitz, for example, argues that there may be evidence of authorial revision between the early editions of the *Henry VI* plays and the versions found in the Folio.⁶⁹ If the first tetralogy was written out of order, then it may bolster the theory of authorial revision and provide insight into the way in which Shakespeare's artistic vision developed as he wrote. Dating the plays would also help us to establish whether the plays of the first tetralogy were an influence on, or influenced by, other history plays of the late 1580s and early 1590s. Unless new evidence comes to light, however, it is unlikely these issues will be resolved soon.

⁶⁴ See John Dover Wilson, 'Introduction', in *The First Part of Henry VI*, ed. by John Dover Wilson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1952) pp. ix-1 (pp. ix-xiii), and Taylor, 'Shakespeare and Others'. David Bevington also summarises some of the arguments that have been made for and against this position (see '*1 Henry VI*', pp. 309-311).

⁶⁵ See Thomas A. Pendleton, 'Introduction', in *Henry VI: Critical Essays*, pp. 1-26 for some suggested dates.

⁶⁶ Once in print, *Richard III* appears to have been a remarkably popular play, appearing in no fewer than six editions before the Folio of 1623. See John Drakakis, 'Introduction', in *The Tragedy of King Richard the Third*, ed. by John Drakakis (New York: Prentice Hall/Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1996), pp. 13-37.

⁶⁷ See Drakakis, 'Introduction'.

⁶⁸ See Alfred W. Pollard, 'Shakespeare's Fight with the Pirates; and the Problems of the Transmission of his Text', *Modern Language Notes*, 33.7 (1918), 428-432. See also Paul Werstine, 'Narratives About Printed Shakespeare Texts: "Foul Papers" and "Bad" Quartos', *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 41.1 (1990), 65-86.

⁶⁹ See Steven Urkowitz, 'Texts with Two Faces: Noticing Theatrical Revisions in *Henry VI* in *Henry VI: Critical Essays*, pp. 27-38.

Some critics have suggested a more retrospective recognition of the ‘history play’ which does away with the need to date early Shakespearean and non-Shakespearean plays altogether, yet still gives Shakespeare a key role in the formation of the genre. According to G. K. Hunter, for example:

The great event in the history of the history play is the designation of ten plays (out of thirty-six) in the Shakespeare First Folio as ‘histories’ – for these ten plays are sufficiently like one another to provide a pragmatic definition of the genre.⁷⁰

The folio of *Mr. William Shakespeare’s Comedies, Histories, & Tragedies* of 1623 seems a very concrete demonstration of the existence of ‘history’ understood as a dramatic genre distinct from tragedy and comedy. Furthermore, as Stephen Longstaffe points out:

The first time that the self-sufficient term ‘history’ is used consistently in the modern sense – denoting a play on post-Conquest English history – is thus in the First Folio. It is not wholly facetious to suggest, then, that the first canon of the ‘history’ play, as opposed to that of the ‘true/famous/tragical/chronicle/reign,’ consists solely of those ‘histories’ the First Folio attributes to Shakespeare.⁷¹

This is one of the more persuasive reasons why Shakespeare’s plays on English history have been used to establish the criteria for what constitutes a ‘history play’. Notably, it is an argument that privileges the end result over the process by which the genre was formed – a fact that does not necessarily detract from its validity. For Hunter, too, Shakespeare’s plays indicate that ‘a history play is a play about English dynastic politics of the feudal and immediately post-feudal period,’ and he also notes their role in the ‘patriotic culture of the time.’⁷² This emphasis on ‘post-Conquest English history’ arises because the ‘Roman’ histories, *Julius Caesar* and *Anthony and Cleopatra*, as well as the ‘ancient British’ histories *King Lear* and *Macbeth*, are relegated to the ‘Tragedy’ section of the Folio.⁷³ However, limiting the

⁷⁰ G. K. Hunter, *English Drama 1586-1642: The Age of Shakespeare* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), p. 155.

⁷¹ Longstaffe, ‘What is the English history play?’, 28.

⁷² Hunter, *English Drama*, pp. 155-6. Like many other critics, Hunter also identifies the ‘truth’ of the historical events depicted as another important feature (see pp. 156-7).

⁷³ *Troilus and Cressida* appears to occupy an awkward position in between the two sections, potentially disrupting this ‘neat’, patriotic classification.

title of ‘history play’ to plays on ‘post-Conquest English history’ seems an overly narrow definition of historical drama ‘in the modern sense’, and one which modern criticism regularly ignores by including *Julius Caesar* and *Anthony and Cleopatra* in the canon of Shakespeare’s ‘history plays’.

Plays on English or British history may, nevertheless, have represented a kind of sub-genre within the genre of the history play. In his *Apology for Actors* (1612), Thomas Heywood distinguished plays on English history from those dealing with the classical past, and observes:

[...] what English blood seeing the person of any bold English man presented and doth not hug his fame, and hunny at his valor, pursuing him in his enterprise with his best wishes, and as being rapt in contemplation, offers to him in his heart all prosperous performance, as if the personater were the man Personated.⁷⁴

Heywood’s treatment of ‘our domestic histories’, as he calls them, suggests that inspiring a sense of patriotism was a recognised function of these plays. This aspect of ‘domestic histories’ is, of course, emphasised in order to make theatre seem more acceptable to his contemporaries.⁷⁵ Heywood’s purpose in the *Apology* is to present a (rather elevated) history of acting and the theatre rather than to explain the characteristics of individual genres, with the result that the existence of a concept of history as a dramatic genre is suggested without an explicit explanation of what is understood by that. Nevertheless, the fact that the depiction of historical events is a key part of Heywood’s defence of drama is significant.

My consideration of history plays outside of the current Shakespearean canon in Chapter Two is part of an attempt to break out of this overly Shakespeare-oriented view of the history play. Richard Helgerson makes the case for widening our attention to include other Renaissance plays on historical subject matters:

⁷⁴ Thomas Heywood, *An Apology for Actors*, in *Shakespeare’s Theatre: A Sourcebook*, ed. by Tanya Pollard (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004), pp. 213-54 (p. 221).

⁷⁵ His description of the audience ‘rapt in contemplation’ is perhaps intriguing with regards to the thought-provoking aspects of ‘domestic histories’, but not enough to build a case on.

Shakespeare has so decisively outdistanced his competitors that we find it hard to believe that they ever ran in the same race. Indeed, just admitting that there may once have been viable interests that Shakespeare left out is beyond many of us. [...] But what a careful reading of other Elizabethan dramatists of history can help us to see is that Shakespeare's overwhelming artistic supremacy is not quite the same as universality. His is as much a brilliance of exclusion as of inclusion.⁷⁶

Considering other plays of the era on a more equal footing may help to illuminate precisely what kind of a 'variation' Shakespeare's first tetralogy represents to the genre of the history play as a whole, and help to recover some sense of the 'constructed intertextuality' (to borrow the words of Howard Felperin) that lies behind Shakespeare's works.⁷⁷

Unsurprisingly, widening the field to include non-Shakespearean plays creates a picture that is more fragmented rather than less.⁷⁸

These questions about the genre of the history play are, of course, bound up with the debates about historicism introduced above. On the one hand talking about 'history plays', Roman, British, English or otherwise, provides modern critics with a convenient shorthand for describing plays provided the characteristics of the genre can be agreed upon. On the other hand, many of the characteristics that *are* agreed upon (which I shall examine in more depth in the opening of Chapter Two) were not recognised, or were only in the process of being recognised, by Elizabethan and Jacobean writers and audiences. Even if certain characteristics, or even the genre as a whole, went unrecognised at the time, such categorisation is not necessarily 'false'. But it is important to keep in mind that there are differences between the shape of the genre as it has subsequently been defined, and what it looked like to Elizabethan eyes, and that understanding the *genre* is not the same as understanding Elizabethan attitudes to history, or even how Elizabethan attitudes to

⁷⁶ Richard Helgerson, 'Shakespeare and Contemporary Dramatists of History', in *A Companion to Shakespeare's Works: The Histories*, pp. 26-47 (p. 45).

⁷⁷ Felperin, "'Cultural poetics'" versus "cultural materialism", p. 77. See also p. 4 above.

⁷⁸ In the interests of space, however, I have nevertheless focused my attention on plays dealing with 'post-Conquest English history'.

history manifested themselves in the drama of the time.⁷⁹ My interest in this thesis, therefore, varies between how attitudes towards history in the Elizabethan period were in the process of shaping a new dramatic genre, and what that process can also tell us about those attitudes and how they were changing. The two-way nature of this process can make it difficult to know where to begin. I have begun, therefore, with a consideration of the changing place of history in the sixteenth century before the history play's rise to popularity in the 1590s.

⁷⁹ For more on this idea, see Kewes, 'The Elizabethan History Play: A True Genre?'

Chapter One: Historiography

This chapter aims to elucidate some of the main historiographical assumptions underlying the production of history in Tudor England in order to establish the historiographical context into which Shakespeare's first history plays emerged. Nowadays, 'history' can refer either to the past itself, or to the written record of the past, depending on what level of remove one wishes to adopt. Similarly, 'historiography', which entered the English language in the sixteenth century, can apply either to the written record of the past, or to the process of producing that record.¹ The flexibility of these two words betrays a tendency to collapse the difference between the object of study and the study itself. What is clear is that, in the sixteenth century, ways of 'reading' history were under a process of renegotiation; the religious controversy of the English Reformation destabilised past certainties, both religious and political, and the development of humanist bibliographical practices gave historians new tools with which to analyse historical documents.

The cumulative effect of these changes was to create a space in which a new kind of outlook on the past could begin to develop. The process was a slow one; as F. Smith Fussner contends:

It was not until Camden, Spelman, Stow, Cotton and their contemporaries began to study history – roughly a generation after the Reformation – that we can discern significant qualitative and quantitative changes in the English Historical tradition.²

¹ The earliest recorded use of the word 'historiography' according to the OED is 1565. 'Historiographer' also has its first usage in the 1500s, appearing in 1542. 'History', meanwhile, entered the language much earlier, developing from the Latin *historia*, and even appears in Old English. In the sixteenth century 'history' and 'historiography' seem to have been used interchangeably, as were 'historian' and 'historiographer' (see entries for 'historiography, n.', 'historiographer, n.' and 'history, n.', in OED Online, Oxford University Press, March 2014 <<http://www.oed.com>>, [accessed 22/03/2014]).

² F. Smith Fussner, *The Historical Revolution: English Historical Writing and Thought 1580-1640* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1962), p. 301. D. R. Woolf writes of Fussner that, '[w]hether or not one accepts his general thesis, there is no doubt that the period witnessed substantial and significant changes in historical writing and in public consciousness of the past' ('Erudition and the Idea of History in Renaissance England', *Renaissance Quarterly*, 40.1 (1987), 11-48 (p. 11)).

With the exception of Stow, my story stops a little short of the figures listed by Fussner, since his study reaches into the seventeenth century, and my main focus is the late 1580s and early 1590s. The first history plays appeared at a time when Fussner's 'historical revolution' was not yet 'complete' (if such a word can be used) and indeed, it is often claimed that the history play 'declined' in the early years of the seventeenth century.³ In many ways it is the complex interplay between 'old' and 'new' ideas about history that makes the plays so fascinating, caught as they are in the process of forming a new dramatic genre.

Part One of this chapter concentrates on 'Reading History', and considers how some of the dominant attitudes towards history and the past dictates how history was 'read' in the sixteenth century. 'Older' attitudes are invariably tied up with religion, and so the section 'The Good Book: History and the Bible' begins by looking at how ways of reading the Bible were applied to reading the past. The 'allegorical' mode of exegesis established by St. Augustine was widely adopted in the Catholic Church, and although Protestants later criticised (and satirised) much Catholic exegesis, they did not entirely reject the principles underlying it.⁴ In the preface to his translation of the Bible, William Tyndale writes:

And when some which seem to themselves great clerks, say: they wot not what more profit is in many gests of the Scripture, if they be read without allegory, than in a tale of Robin Hood: say thou

³ For the decline of the history play genre see Irving Ribner, 'The History Play in Decline', in *The English History Play in the Age of Shakespeare* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957), pp. 266-305, and F. J. Levy, 'The Popularization of History', in *Tudor Historical Thought* (San Marino CA: The Huntington Library, 1967), pp. 202-236. As we have already seen in the Introduction, the idea of the decline of the history play genre is also supported by more recent critics (such as Phyllis Rackin, see *Stages of History: Shakespeare's English Chronicles* (Ithaca NY: Cornell University Press, 1990)) for whom it supplies evidence of Shakespeare's dominance of the genre (see 'Shakespeare and the Elizabethan History Play' above). Nevertheless, widening our definition of the 'history play', may mean we need to revise this narrative of the 'decline' of the history play.

⁴ For a Protestant satire of Catholic exegesis see John Bale, *Kynge Johan*, ed. by J. Payne Collier (London: Camden Society, 1838) pp. 17-18. For Bale, the Catholic method of exegesis generated interpretations which were so far removed from the literal level of the text as to be totally false. Furthermore, Bale sought to highlight the historical difference between the practices of biblical believers and those of the Catholic Church in the early sixteenth century.

that they were written for our consolation and comfort, that we despair not if such like happen unto us.⁵

Nevertheless, Tyndale also calls Augustine ‘the best, or one of the best, that ever wrote upon scripture’.⁶ At the same time, investigations of biblical manuscripts carried out by humanist scholars in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries in an effort to ‘restore’ scripture to its supposed original glory and establish an ‘authentic’ text on which to base interpretations had the effect of highlighting the historical contingency of the biblical text and undermine the idea of its ability to provide access to a-historical truth.

In the section ‘Thomas More and William Tyndale: Church or Scripture?’, an argument carried out in print between More and Tyndale illustrates some of the ways in which humanist historiographical methods were assimilated into English scholarly culture in the first part of the sixteenth century. Both men adhere to humanist principles in conjunction with an ‘allegorical’ mode of ‘reading’ history, but occupy very different positions. Thus, humanist historiography provided a new framework for scholarly discourse which did not replace earlier approaches to history, or prescribe a particular political position. In the final section of Part One, ‘Boethius and Machiavelli: Providence and Free Will’, I look at how a providential view of history influenced, not only people’s relationship to the past, but also how they imagined themselves in relation to the world of the present. Boethius’ sixth-century text, *The Consolation of Philosophy*, had laid the foundations of the sixteenth-century view of providence and free will. As humanist historiography raised additional questions about our ability to interpret providence from within the historical moment, a shift in emphasis towards human agency, rather than divine will, as the shaping influence on history began to appear, as evidenced in Machiavelli’s writings.

⁵ William Tyndale, *A Prologue, Showing the Use of Scripture*, in *The English Renaissance: an Anthology of Sources and Documents*, ed. by Kate Aughterson, (London: Routledge, 1998), pp. 17-18 (p. 18).

⁶ William Tyndale, *On the Obedience of a Christian Man and How Christian Rulers Ought to Govern*, in *The Works of the English Reformers William Tyndale and John Frith*, 3 vols, ed. by Thomas Russell, (London: 1831), I, pp. 165-379 (p. 190).

Part Two of this chapter, 'Writing History', examines key histories and chronicles written in the 1500s to see some of the consequences these theoretical debates had for historical writing in the period. While not pretending to a complete account, this section begins with Polydore Vergil's *Anglica Historia* (1534), the first 'humanist' history of England to be published, and ends with Holinshed's *Chronicles* (1577 and 1587). It considers how the dictates of 'style' interacted with a growing antiquarian desire to preserve the existing records of the past and present a 'complete' history that included all the 'facts'. Together, these two parts of the chapter seek to examine some of the outlooks on history that informed the development of the history-play genre in the latter part of the century.

Part One: Reading History

The Good Book: History and the Bible

The Bible offered a complete history of the world that reached not only backwards to Creation but also forwards to Judgement Day. As such it provided a stable overview into which secular history could be slotted and created a concept of history as the totality of events in time (past, present and future), rather than something strictly limited to the past alone. It also presented the possibility of imagining history from the ‘outside’, a viewpoint theoretically enjoyed by God. This perspective may have contributed to the ‘a-historicity’ that characterises medieval approaches to the past, where there is generally little sense of anachronism, or focus on material cause and effect. As E. B. Fryde writes: ‘A thirteenth century author of the “Deeds of the Romans”, a popular history written in French, could innocently describe Caesar as a bishop, because Suetonius mentioned that he was a *pontifex maximus*.’⁷ Peter Burke also observes that in medieval chronicles ‘[t]he favourite connective is not “because” or “as a result” but “meanwhile”.’⁸ This a-historical approach can be explained in part by an ontology that regarded material reality as transient, existing only as a reflection of eternal, spiritual reality. The purpose of historical inquiry was to gain a better understanding of eternal truths, rather than an appreciation of transient historical moments. This link between the Bible and a Christian outlook on history means that understanding how the Bible was read and interpreted sheds light on the way in which history was also ‘read’ and interpreted.

To understand the medieval approach to biblical exegesis it is useful to begin with St. Augustine of Hippo. Writing in the early fifth century, Augustine promoted an allegorical method of biblical exegesis that was heavily influenced by a Christianised reading of Platonic philosophy. The incorporation of Platonism into early Christianity served to

⁷ E. B. Fryde, *The Revival of a ‘Scientific’ and Erudite Historiography in the Earlier Renaissance* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1974), pp. 9-10.

⁸ Peter Burke, *The Renaissance Sense of the Past* (London: Edward Arnold Ltd., 1969), p. 13.

ground the new religion in the rationalist discourses of the time.⁹ The brand of Christian-Platonism developed by Augustine and his contemporaries represented a fusion of Hellenic and Hebraic traditions that had interesting consequences for concepts of time and history. In some ways Plato's concept of a 'Realm of Ideas' corresponds well with Judeo-Christian notions of a higher spiritual reality. In other ways, however, the two systems are less compatible. In the words of Robert Cruso, the central discrepancy is that 'Greek thought is said to be static, Hebrew thought dynamic; Hebrew categories historical, Greek categories metaphysical'.¹⁰ Essentially, Hellenic philosophy saw time as a series of (potentially infinitely) repeating cycles, whereas in Hebraic thought time was linear, progressing from creation towards the end of the world.¹¹ The fusion of these two modes of thought created a concept of time that was in some ways both linear *and* repeating.

Central to Augustine's concept of time was the way in which God was imagined in relation to the world. For Augustine, God was not subject to time in the way that the world and its inhabitants were; God existed outside of time and could experience all moments in time simultaneously.¹² This was what gave God his omniscience and a perspective on history that was fundamentally different from that of human beings. God's power over worldly events also meant that he could act something like an 'author' by, for example, foreshadowing the crucifixion of Christ in Abraham's near sacrifice of Isaac and the lamb

⁹ In *Confessions* Augustine writes about his discovery of Platonic philosophical texts: 'There I read, not of course in these words, but with entirely the same sense and supported by numerous and varied reasons, "In the beginning there was the Word, and the Word was with God and the Word was God."' *Confessions*, trans. by Henry Chadwick (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), VII.ix(13). Furthermore, Anne R. Meyers observes: 'Through his great literary output and extensive readership in western Christendom, Augustine became the primary channel of Platonism to the medieval west; he is also the main figure responsible for securing the acceptance of Christian-Platonism by the medieval Latin Church' (*Medieval Allegory and the Building of the New Jerusalem* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2003), p. 28).

¹⁰ Robert Cruso, 'St. Augustine's Platonism', in *Augustine and his Critics*, ed. by Robert Dodaro and George Lawless (London: Routledge, 2002), pp. 36-49 (p. 38).

¹¹ See also Tom F. Driver, 'Hellenic Historical Consciousness: The Equilibrium of Nature' and 'Judeo-Christian Historical Consciousness: The Vocation of Israel', in *The Sense of History in Greek and Shakespearean Drama* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1960), pp. 19-38 and pp. 39-68 respectively.

¹² Augustine writes: 'It is not in time that you [God] precede times. Otherwise you would not precede all times. In the sublimity of an eternity which is always present, you are before all things past and transcend all things future. [...] You created all times and you exist before all times. Nor was there any time when time did not exist' (*Confessions*, XI.xiii(16)).

sacrificed in Isaac's place. As Peter Burke writes, '[i]t is as if God is writing the history that we live, and Adam is one of his metaphors.'¹³ To interpret the different levels of a text an understanding of signs was required:

All teaching is teaching either of things or signs, but things are learnt through signs. What I now call things in the strict sense are things such as logs, stones, sheep, and so on, which are not employed to signify something; but I do not include the log which we read that Moses threw into the bitter waters to make them lose their bitter taste, or the stone which Jacob placed under his head, or the sheep which Abraham sacrificed in place of his son. These are things, but they are at the same time signs of other things.¹⁴

Thus, historical events could be used by God to indicate a-historical truths.¹⁵

Unfortunately, it was not always easy to identify which 'things' had significance beyond themselves and which did not. Non-biblical history could also signify in meaningful ways, but as the received word of God, the Bible guaranteed the meaningfulness of everything it contained.

The polysemy engendered by Augustine's approach, where 'deeper' meanings coexisted alongside the literal level of the text, was what enabled allegorical exegesis to examine the nature of 'eternal' truths, but it also made it something of a double-edged sword.¹⁶ For example, in the twelfth century Thomas Aquinas addressed the objection that to '[a]llow a variety of readings to one passage, [is to] produce confusion and deception, and sap the foundations of argument [...] Holy Scripture, however, should effectively

¹³ Burke, *The Renaissance Sense of the Past*, p. 4.

¹⁴ Augustine, *De Doctrina Christiana*, trans. by R. P. H. Green (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), I.ii(4).

¹⁵ Transient signs were not always adequate for conveying eternal truths, and the basic disjunction between mutable sign and immutable truth made the relationship between signifier and signified problematic. Augustine identifies this as problematic mainly in relation to finding a way of speaking about God. He writes: 'Have I spoken something, have I uttered something worthy of God? No, I feel that all I have done is wish to speak; if I did say something it was not what I wanted to say. How do I know this? Simply because God is unspeakable. But what I have spoken would not have been spoken if it were unspeakable. For this reason God should not even be called unspeakable, because even when this word is spoken, something is spoken' (*De Doctrina Christiana*, I.vi(13)).

¹⁶ Theoretically allegory could provide access to immutable truths through mutable signs, but when used as a mode of writing rather than a way of reading it also had a tendency to present linguistic (and therefore historically grounded) concepts (as in the case of personifications like 'Nature', 'Fortune' or 'Prudence') as eternal truths.

display the truth without fallacy of any sort. One text, therefore, should not offer various meanings.¹⁷ Aquinas confirms Augustine's stance on the issue:

That God is the author of holy Scripture should be acknowledged, and he has the power, not only of adapting words to convey meanings (which men can do), but also of adapting things themselves. In every branch of knowledge words have meaning, but what is special here is that the things meant by the words also themselves mean something.¹⁸

He goes on to write:

Now because the literal sense is that which the author intends, and the author of holy Scripture is God who comprehends everything all at once in his understanding, it is not amiss, as St Augustine observes, if many meanings are present even in the literal sense of one passage of Scripture.¹⁹

As Aquinas' writings suggest, Augustine's method of biblical exegesis was endorsed by the Catholic Church and remained the dominant approach to the Bible throughout the middle ages.

Allegorical exegesis was never intended to undermine belief in the historical authenticity of the Bible. Crucially, Aquinas points out that the meanings to be found in scripture are many 'not because one term may signify many things, but because the things signified by the terms can themselves be signs of other things. Consequently holy Scripture sets up no confusion, since all meanings are based on one, namely the literal sense.'²⁰ Nevertheless, allegorical exegesis had a tendency to emphasise the 'eternal truths' that could be found beneath the surface of the text rather than the literal 'surface' meaning, with the effect that historical perspective was to some extent 'flattened'. Burke writes that '[t]his kind of interpretation clearly worked against the sense of the past, for it depends on

¹⁷ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, 61 vols, ed. and trans. by Thomas Gilby (Cambridge: Blackfriars, 1964), I, p. 37.

¹⁸ Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, I, p. 37.

¹⁹ Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, I, p. 39.

²⁰ Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, I, p. 39.

taking men and events out of their historical context, and putting them into a spiritual one.²¹ Maureen Quilligan observes that, for literary texts,

[a]llegory has always named a special kind of pleading for texts. If they appear to be immoral, outmoded, insipid, or wrong, allegory licenses the reader to correct them by saying that the meaning he prefers to find there is 'hidden' within.²²

Allegorical exegesis could make scripture relevant to the times without the need to worry too much about the historical context in which it had originated. Continuity rather than change was emphasised because 'eternal' truth was the object of interest. The rise of 'humanist' scholarship, however, and the growing influence of ideas deemed 'heretical' by the Catholic Church in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries meant that things were about to change dramatically.

There is some danger of considering 'humanism' as a more cohesive system than was in fact the case.²³ Nicholas Mann calls humanism an 'activity' rather than a concept, and describes it as:

[...] that concern with the legacy of antiquity – and in particular, but not exclusively, with its literary legacy – which characterises the work of scholars from at least the ninth century onwards. It involves above all the rediscovery and study of ancient Greek and Roman texts, the restoration and interpretation of them and the assimilation of the ideas and values that they contain. It ranges from an archaeological interest in the remains of the past to a highly focused philological attention to the details of all manner of written records – from inscriptions to epic poems – but comes to pervade [...] almost all areas of post-medieval culture, including theology, philosophy, political thought, jurisprudence, medicine, mathematics and the creative arts.²⁴

²¹ Burke, *The Renaissance Sense of the Past*, p. 4.

²² Maureen Quilligan, *The Language of Allegory: Defining a Genre* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1979), p. 30.

²³ The word 'humanism' was not used to refer to 'Literary learning or culture; devotion to or expertise in the humanities, esp. classical scholarship' until the nineteenth century (3rd definition of "humanism, n.", OED Online (Oxford University Press, September 2013), < <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/89272?RedirectedFrom=humanism>>, [accessed 08/11/2013]). However, 'Humanisme' does appear as a personification in Thomas Middleton's *The Owl's Almanac* (1618), which, according to the OED uses it in the sense of 'the pursuit of human or earthly interests to the exclusion of moral or religious considerations' (1st definition of "humanism, n.").

²⁴ Nicholas Mann, 'The origins of humanism', *The Cambridge Companion to Renaissance Humanism*, ed. by Jill Kraye (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), pp. 1-19 (p. 2). As Mann notes, the roots of humanism reach back further than the fourteenth century, and some have posited the liberal education devised by Alcuin for members of Charlemagne's court as essential to the later development of humanism in

According to Jill Kraye, the main difference between humanist and scholastic thinkers was philological:

[H]umanists studied philosophical works in the same manner that they dealt with literary or historical texts, that is, as philologists. As the name itself indicates, philologists were devotees (*philoí*) of the study of words (*logoi*): they drew on their expert knowledge of the language, culture and history of Greece and Rome to determine the precise meaning of an ancient author's words in a specific context. Philosophers, on the other hand, prided themselves on their devotion to the search for fundamental truths and timeless wisdom (*sophia*).²⁵

Determining 'the precise meaning of an ancient author's words in a specific context' required understanding the historical conditions from which a text had originated. Peter Burke identifies a developing sense of anachronism, a new awareness of evidence, and a new interest in historical causation as three changes that resulted from humanist scholarship.²⁶ These changes constituted what Burke calls a 'new historical awareness' and E. B. Fryde calls a 'new historiography'.²⁷

Lorenzo Valla's refutation of the *Donation of Constantine* illustrates the way in which philological inquiry prompted both a new consideration of the evidence and a sense of anachronism.²⁸ The *Donation* was a text supposedly given to Pope Sylvester I by the Emperor Constantine that provided a legal basis for many of the secular powers assumed by the Catholic Church in Italy. But, as Burke writes,

Towards the middle of the fifteenth century, this document was suddenly seen to be a forgery. The point was made independently by Nicholas of Cusa, Reginald Pecock, and Lorenzo Valla, not to mention

the Renaissance (see R. R. Bolger, 'The Educational Reforms of Charlemagne, 775-814', in *The Classical Heritage and its Beneficiaries* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), pp. 106-117).

²⁵ Jill Kraye, 'Philologists and Philosophers', in *The Cambridge Companion to Renaissance Humanism*, pp. 142-160 (p. 142).

²⁶ See Burke, 'Medieval Historical Thought', in *The Renaissance Sense of the Past*, pp. 1-20. E. B. Fryde concurs, considering Petrarch's unfinished biography of Caesar, written near the end of the fourteenth century, as 'the first important achievement of the new historiography. For the first time since Antiquity a serious attempt was being made to write Roman history in part from strictly contemporary sources' (Fryde, *Revival*, p. 5).

²⁷ See Burke, *The Renaissance Sense of the Past*, and Fryde, *Revival*.

²⁸ Valla's refutation of the *Donation* was addressed to his patron, Alfonso of Aragon, who was engaged in a conflict over territory with Pope Eugene IV at the time, perhaps helping to demonstrate some of the very practical, political applications of the new *studia humanitatis*.

less famous scholars. This simultaneity suggests that the new sense of history was spreading.²⁹

Valla provided what Burke calls the most ‘classic exposure’ of the *Donation*. Taking a philological approach, he demonstrated by comparison with documents known to be genuine that some of the official terms used in the *Donation* were (to cite Fryde) ‘absurdly anachronistic’.³⁰ The tone of Valla’s refutation belies the novelty of his approach: ‘Let us talk to this sycophant [the writer of the *Donation*] about barbarisms of speech; for by the stupidity of his language his monstrous impudence is made clear, and his lie.’³¹ Valla writes as though it must be obvious to everyone that the *Donation* is a forgery, but of course it had not been ‘obvious’ to anyone in the preceding centuries.

The new bibliographical techniques developed by humanist scholars were also applicable to the Bible. The goal was not so much to challenge allegorical exegesis as to establish a stable and authentic text on which to base interpretations. The Latin Vulgate Bible, the official Bible of the Catholic Church, had been reputedly translated by St. Jerome in the fourth century from Greek texts for the New Testament and from Hebrew and Aramaic texts for the Old Testament.³² In their quest to make the ‘good book’ better, humanist scholars returned to these early texts in order to make fresh translations. Alistair Hamilton summarises the bibliographical questions they faced:

The first question was one that had troubled biblical scholars even since the Vulgate reached the west: how reliable was the translation? How close was it to the Greek and Hebrew originals? Only at a comparatively late stage, when the text critical tradition of the humanists had been developed, was this followed by the question of the reliability of the available Greek and Hebrew manuscripts. To what extent did *they* reflect an original which had long since disappeared?

²⁹ Burke, *The Renaissance Sense of the Past*, p. 55. Fryde also writes: ‘Valla’s attack on the “Donation” differed from all the previous ones in its exceptional thoroughness.’ *Revival*, p. 17.

³⁰ Fryde, *Revival*, p. 17. Valla pointed out many inaccuracies both cultural and linguistic: he notes that Constantine is called a ‘king’ in the *Donation*, but would not have called himself such, and observes a number of words of Hebrew derivation which did not exist in Constantine’s time.

³¹ Lorenzo Valla, *Donation of Constantine*, trans. by C. B. Coleman, cited by Burke in *The Renaissance Sense of the Past*, p. 55.

³² The translation produced was eventually standardised by Alcuin in the eighth century (see Alistair Hamilton, ‘Humanists and the Bible’, in *The Cambridge Companion to Renaissance Humanism*, pp. 100-117 (p. 102)).

Another question which arose was: how close was the accepted texts of the Vulgate to the translation actually produced in the late fourth and early fifth century? So many different copyists over so many centuries must have introduced errors: how could these be removed? And this in turn was succeeded by another problem: how much of the translation which circulated under Jerome's name was by Jerome himself? In how many cases had he either revised, or simply adopted, existing translations?³³

As Hamilton explains, Valla was also engaged in biblical scholarship:

He seems to have been the first scholar to believe that Jerome had not actually translated the Vulgate New Testament but had issued an already existing translation under his own name, only slightly revising certain parts. More important still, he corrected numerous words and passages in the Vulgate by comparing them to the Greek, aware, as he said, that some had been corrupted by negligent copyists, that others had been mistranslated in the first place and that still others had been deliberately altered to suit the dogmatic purpose of the moment.³⁴

This kind of bibliographical inquiry highlighted the historical conditions of the Bible's composition and raised potential questions about the authenticity not only of scripture itself, but also the teachings derived from it.³⁵

Although they avoided addressing the potential problems of the authenticity of scripture, reformers of the late middle ages and early Renaissance used the 'new historical awareness' developed from these bibliographical practices to attack the historical foundations of the Catholic Church. As James Westfall Thompson and Bernard J. Holm note:

Lutheranism and Calvinism alike were attacks upon the historical foundations and historical claims of the Roman Church. What

³³ Hamilton, 'Humanists and the Bible', p. 102.

³⁴ Hamilton, 'Humanists and the Bible', pp. 104-5.

³⁵ As Fussner puts it, "The authority of tradition, even the authority of the Bible itself, was slowly undermined by historians who insisted that only by going to "the foundations," to original documents, could the truth be known" (*The Historical Revolution*, p. xix). The *comma Johanneum* is a good example of how bibliographical scholarship posed challenges to orthodox doctrine. As Jerry H. Bentley explains, at 1 John 5:7-8, "[m]ost Vulgate manuscripts present here the so called *comma Johanneum* mentioning the "three heavenly witnesses" to Christ's truth: "Et tres sunt qui testimonium dant in caelo, pater, verbum, et spiritus, et hi tres unum sunt" – "And here are three who give testimony in heaven, the Father, the Word and the Spirit, and these three are one." Latin theologians from the early Middle Ages forward had taken this text as providing the clearest scriptural support for the doctrine of the trinity. In all the world, however, only four Greek manuscripts mention the heavenly witnesses. Two of them were copied very late in the Middle Ages; in the other two the passage occurs as a marginal addition by modern hands' (*Humanists and Holy Writ: New Testament Scholarship in the Renaissance* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983), p. 44).

Lorenzo Valla had done with the forged donation of Constantine might be done with other traditions and documents upon which the Church rested its authority.³⁶

Even before Valla's pronouncements on the *Donation*, history had been an important weapon in the hands of late medieval heretics; in the battle between secular and spiritual authority, Lollards in England cited Christ's instruction to his apostles to 'render unto Caesar' (Matthew 22:21) as evidence that the true Church of God was never meant to wield more than spiritual power.³⁷ Focusing on the Bible as a source of historical information, they saw a disjunction between the practices of Jesus and his disciples and those of the late medieval Church. Proving the *Donation* was a forgery strengthened the position of heretics who felt that the Catholic Church had travelled far enough away from the practices outlined in scripture to no longer qualify as the 'true' church of Christ. This attitude was shared by early Protestants who, crucially, did not see their religion as 'new' so much as a return to 'original' Christian practices outlined in the Bible.³⁸

Humanist historiographical practices provided a new standard of scholarship and added to the vocabulary of rationalist discourses of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. These practices were used by Catholics and Protestants alike, although, as we shall see in the dispute between Thomas More and William Tyndale, which aspects of humanist practices were embraced depended to some extent on the ideological goals in question. Bibliographical scholarship highlighted the fragmented nature of the historical record, undermining confidence that the past could be reliably known. Once the likes of

³⁶ James Westfall Thompson and Bernard J. Holm, 'The Age of Erudition', in *History of Historical Writing*, 2 vols, (New York: Macmillan, 1942), II, pp. 3-57, p. 3. Once taken up by the reformers, the 'new historiography' was difficult to dismiss. As Thompson and Holm write: 'The Roman Church was slow to take alarm over the Protestant appeal to history. It vainly endeavored to confine the dispute to questions of theology. But the historical attack finally became so effective that Rome was compelled to fight history with history. Since the Reformation was an appeal to history, the Counter-Reformation was forced to use the same instrument, in incalculable importance for the development of historical scholarship'(p. 3).

³⁷ Gordon Leff describes their outlook: 'Christ had come into the world to exercise spiritual not temporal authority. He had declared before Pilate that his kingdom was not of this world, and throughout his life he had always rendered unto Caesar. As Christ had submitted, so must the church' (*The Dissolution of the Medieval Outlook* (New York: New York University Press, 1976), p. 138).

³⁸ See Gordon Leff, 'The Apostolic Ideal in later medieval ecclesiology', in *The Dissolution of the Medieval Outlook*, pp. 58-82.

Guicciardini and Machiavelli began to focus on the political, rather than the religious or moral, lessons that history might yield, the possibility of deducing moral lessons or identifying a cohesive overarching structure to historical events became increasingly problematic. The next section will consider the reception of humanist practices in England in the early part of the sixteenth century and their relevance to the religious and political upheaval of the Reformation through an examination of a dispute that erupted between Thomas More and William Tyndale initially over a question about the translation of scripture. What their dispute begins to show is the complexity of responses to the new scholarly practices associated with humanism as they slotted themselves into other political, religious, and social biases. This complexity makes it difficult, if not impossible, to identify a particular group of people (for example Protestant or Catholic) as representative of the ‘new’ set of ideas in contrast to the adherents of the ‘old’.

Thomas More and William Tyndale: Church or Scripture?

In 1529, More condemned Tyndale’s English translation of the New Testament (1526) in his *Dialogue Concerning Heresies* (1529). Tyndale responded with *An Answer unto Sir Thomas More’s Dialogue* (1531), thereby provoking More’s *Confutation of Tyndale’s Answer*, published in the same year. What began as a criticism of the way in which Tyndale had translated words such as *ecclesia* (‘church’ according to More, ‘congregation’ according to Tyndale), *presbyteros* (‘priest’ or ‘elder’) and *agape* (‘charity’ or ‘love’) became an argument about the nature of the ‘true’ church and the relative authority of church and scripture.³⁹ Central to this dispute

³⁹ Where I have capitalised the word ‘Church’ I intend it to refer to the institution of the Catholic Church. Where I have not capitalised it I am using ‘church’ in a more general sense in line with how Tyndale seems to have understood the term. Tyndale defends his translation of *ecclesia* as ‘congregation’ by arguing that: ‘It hath yet, or should have, another signification, little known among the common people now-a-days. That is to wit, it signifieth a congregation; a multitude or a company gathered together in one, of all degrees of people. As a man would say “the church of London,” meaning not the spirituality only [...], but the whole body of the city, of all kinds conditions and degrees’ (William Tyndale, *Answer to Sir Thomas More’s ‘Dialogue’*, ed. by Henry Walter (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1850), p. 12). While More does not use the term ‘church’ exclusively to refer to members of the Catholic clergy, he considers the Catholic Church and all those who subscribe to its teachings as the only legitimate church.

were questions of how to authenticate and interpret knowledge about the past, and its relevance to the present.

Written at the request of Bishop Tunstal, Thomas M. C. Lawler suggests that More designed the *Dialogue* not only to refute certain heretical positions, but also to ‘show the orthodox layman or priest how to proceed with a supposedly well-educated youth in the incipient stages of heresy.’⁴⁰ In the *Dialogue* More converses with a messenger sent from a friend to discuss matters of heresy, explaining in the preface that he decided to write their conversation down so that there would more permanent record than memory alone. Interestingly, this (fictional) framing device foregrounds an issue in some ways central to the debate between More and Tyndale: the relationship between spoken testament and the written word. For More, scripture was a potentially fallible and incomplete record of the ‘original’ spoken testaments of Christ and his apostles. In his *Answer*, Tyndale takes a more metaphysical view of writing and argues that the word of God must be in some sense ‘written’ before it can be preached.

In the *Dialogue*, More and the messenger discuss whether the authority of the Church or the Bible should be taken as paramount. According to More, when Christ told Peter that his faith would never fail (Luke 22:31-2) he meant it as a promise to the church as a whole, and not just to Peter individually.⁴¹ This promise meant that the faith practised by the Catholic Church could not ‘fail’ or err in any way. The messenger agrees that Christ’s promise applies more generally, but argues that the Bible is the document through which this promise has been kept.⁴² However, More argues that, because Christ said ‘I am with you till the end of the world’, his words (‘I am’) suggest a continued presence, appropriate because of the nature of God’s existence which is ‘euer beyng and present

⁴⁰ Thomas M. C. Lawler, ‘A General View of the *Dialogue*: An Anatomy of Heresy’, in *The Complete Works of St. Thomas More*, 15 vols (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1981), VI.ii, pp. 439-454 (p. 440).

⁴¹ See Thomas More *Dialogue Concerning Heresies*, in *The Complete Works of St. Thomas More*, 15 vols (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1981), VI.i, pp. 1-435 (I.xviii, pp. 101-10).

⁴² More, *Dialogue*, I.xx, pp. 113-6.

with out dyfference of tyme past or to come.⁴³ His promise, therefore, cannot be fulfilled by scripture because:

In whiche wyse / he was not in his holy scrypture / for that had begynnyng. And at those wordes spoken / was not yet all wrytten. For the chefe parte whiche is the new testament / there was yet at y^t tyme neuer one worde wrytten. And also we be not sure by any promyse made that the scrypture shall endure to y^e worldes ende / albeit I thynke verely the substance shal. But yet I say / promyse haue we none therof. For where our lorde sayth that his wordes shall not passe away / nor one iote therof be lost / he spake of his promyses made in dede / as his fayth and doctryne taught by mouth and inspyracyon. He mente not that of his holy scrypture in wrytyng there sholde neuer a iote be lost / of whiche some partes be all redy lost / more peradventure then we can tell of. And of that we haue the bokes in some parte corrupted with mysse wrytyng. And yet the substauce of those wordes that he mente ben knowen / where some parte of y^e wrytyng is vnknown.⁴⁴

More claims that the written word of scripture cannot fulfil Christ's promise of perpetual presence and that scripture is essentially fallible, with parts lost or corrupted in transmission. More goes on to suggest that scripture may always have been an incomplete record of the doctrines of faith, with further revelations pending in later periods.⁴⁵

According to David Weil Baker, 'More's sense of the variability and corruption of the texts of scripture was itself a humanist one, borne out of the labors of Erasmus on the New Testament'.⁴⁶ More's belief in the priority of Church over scripture, which made the Church the embodiment of the living faith and gave it the authority to interpret, correct and even add to written scripture, allowed him to accept the fallibility of the biblical record implied by humanist bibliographic techniques.⁴⁷ Nevertheless, More's logic is ultimately

⁴³ More, *Dialogue*, I.xx, p. 115.

⁴⁴ More, *Dialogue*, I.xx, p. 115.

⁴⁵ More gives the example of the perpetual virginity of Mary (*Dialogue*, I.xx, p. 115), an article of faith commonly believed and promoted by the Catholic Church but not mentioned in the Bible.

⁴⁶ David Weil Baker, 'The Historical Faith of William Tyndale: Non-Salvic Reading of Scripture at the Outset of the English Reformation', *Renaissance Quarterly*, 62.3 (2009), 661-692 (p. 669).

⁴⁷ More's view of the infallibility of the Catholic Church had particular relevance to Henry VIII's pursuit of a divorce from Catharine of Aragon. Henry sought his divorce on the grounds that Catherine had been briefly married to his older brother, Arthur, and in Leviticus it was written 'If a man shall take his brother's wife, it is an unclean thing [...] they shall be childless' (Lev. 20:21). Henry interpreted Catherine's failure to provide him with a male heir as evidence of God's displeasure. However, a papal dispensation for their marriage had been granted before it began; if the Catholic Church was indeed infallible as Thomas More believed, then it could not have wrongly issued that dispensation. The final logic of Henry's position (that the dispensation had been

circular; the Catholic Church cannot be wrong because it is the true church, and it must be the true church because it cannot be wrong. Tyndale, however, challenges the priority of church over scripture; for him the Bible is ‘older than any church that was’:⁴⁸

Another doubt there is; whether the church or congregation be before the gospel, or the gospel before the Church: which question is as hard to solve, as whether the father be elder than the son, or the son elder than the father. For the whole scripture, and all believing hearts, testify that we are begotten through the word. Wherefore, if the word beget the congregation, and he that begetteth is before he that is begotten, then is the gospel before the church. [...] Christ must first be preached, ere men can believe in him. And then it followeth, that the word of the preacher must be before the faith of the believer. And therefore, inasmuch as the word is before the faith, and faith maketh the congregation, therefore is the word or gospel before the congregation.⁴⁹

Tyndale’s more metaphysical take on the ‘written’ word allows him to construct it as something prior to the spoken word, since it in some sense dictates what it is that will be preached.

Tyndale was aware of the bibliographical issues surrounding scripture, having translated the New Testament from Erasmus’ edition of the Greek manuscripts, and he wrote approvingly of the work done by Erasmus to improve the biblical text.⁵⁰ However, instead of considering the possibility that some things that had been written might have been lost, he tackles the idea that some things may not have been written to begin with, asserting that:

[...] the pith and substance in general of everything necessary unto our souls’ health, both of what we ought to believe, and what we ought to do, was written; and of the miracles done to confirm it, as many as were needful: so that whatsoever we ought to believe or

granted in error) pointed towards the Protestant stance that the Catholic Church was not the representative of the ‘true’ church of Christ.

⁴⁸ Tyndale, *Answer*, p. 55.

⁴⁹ Tyndale, *Answer*, p. 24.

⁵⁰ ‘[T]rue miracles, that confounded the false, gave authority unto the true scripture. And thereby have we ever since judged all other books and doctrine; and by that we know your legends be corrupt with lies: as Erasmus hath improved many false books, which ye have feigned and put forth in the name of St Jerome, Augustine, Cyprian, Dionyse, and of other, partly with authentic stories, and partly by the style and Latin, and like evident tokens.’ Tyndale, *Answer*, p. 135.

do, that same is written expressly, or drawn out of that which is written.⁵¹

Even if scripture is in some sense ‘incomplete’, for Tyndale Christ’s promise guarantees that ‘everything necessary unto our souls’ health’ has survived. As Baker points out, ‘although willing to acknowledge the possibility of a textually corrupt Jerome, and more than willing to regard a document supporting the papacy as “feigned,” Tyndale could not accept that scripture, once at least it had been stripped of false glosses, was less than genuine.’⁵²

In order to explain how one could recognise scripture as holy without relying on the word of the Church, Tyndale turned inwards, distinguishing between what he called ‘historical faith’ and ‘feeling faith’. He explains the difference with an analogy about learning that fire burns:

[I]f my mother had blown on her finger, and told me that fire would burn, I should have believed her with an historical faith, as we believe the stories of the world, because I thought she would not have mocked me. And so I should have done, if she had told me the fire had been cold, and would not have burned; but as soon as I had put my finger in the fire, I should have believed, not by the reason of her, but with a feeling faith, so that she could not have persuaded me afterward the contrary.⁵³

‘Historical faith’ is based on the authority of others and can be deceptive, but ‘feeling faith’ is gained through personal experience; although the Church introduces believers to the teachings of Christ, it is not through the Church that they know those teachings to be true, but through personal experience:

And therefore, when thou art asked why thou believest that thou shalt be saved through Christ, and of such like principles of our faith; answer, Thou wottest and feelest that it is true. And when he asketh, How thou knowest it is true; answer, Because it is written in thine heart. And if he ask who wrote it; answer the Spirit of God. And if he ask how thou camest first by it; tell him whether by

⁵¹ Tyndale, *Answer*, p. 26. For this reason Tyndale rejects the idea that believing in the perpetual virginity of Mary (More’s example of a doctrine known without scripture) is something necessary for salvation, although he does not reject the idea that it is true.

⁵² Baker, ‘Historical Faith’, p. 670.

⁵³ Tyndale, *Answer*, p. 51.

reading in books, or hearing it preached, as by an outward instrument, but that inwardly thou wast taught by the Spirit of God. And if he ask whether thou believest it not because it is written in books, or because the priests to preach; answer, No, not now; but only because it is written in thine heart; and because the Spirit of god so preacheth, and so testifieth unto thy soul: and say, though at the beginning thou wast moved by reading or preaching, [...] yet now thou believest it not therefore any longer; but only because thou hast heard it of the Spirit of God, and read it written in thy heart.⁵⁴

The teachings of the Church provide the ‘outward instruments’ for a more direct kind of communion with God which seems to separate that knowledge from the historical conditions in which it is learned. Moreover:

God wrote his testament to them alway, both what to do and to believe, even in sacraments. For the sacrifices which God gave Adam’s sons were not dumb popetry or superstitious mahometry, but signs of the testament of God. And in them they read the word of God, as we do in books; and as we should do in our sacraments, if the wicked pope had not taken the significations away from us, as he hath robbed us of the true sense of all scripture.⁵⁵

Sermons, the Bible and the sacraments are all outward signs of inner beliefs. Tyndale objects, therefore, to what he sees as the Catholic Church’s inclination to mystify religious practices through obscure symbolism and Latin services because, for Tyndale, true worship cannot be observed without understanding. Unlike More, what troubles Tyndale is the idea of floating signifiers without significance, not the loss of the sign itself.

Eventually More’s messenger allows that it may well be that the ‘true’ church of Christ cannot err in its faith, but asks the question of how we can be certain that the Catholic Church does indeed represent the true church.⁵⁶ This question was obviously central to the dispute between Catholics and Protestants at large, and it hinged on the question of how to interpret history. Protestants saw an obvious disjunction between Christianity as it was practised in the Bible, and as it was practised by the contemporary Catholic Church. The Catholic Church offered a history of continuing miracles and

⁵⁴ Tyndale, *Answer*, p. 55.

⁵⁵ Tyndale, *Answer*, p. 27.

⁵⁶ See More, *Dialogue*, II.i, pp. 187-192.

revelations outside of scripture to justify the development of religious practices. The many miracles supposedly performed at saints' shrines, for example, demonstrated that the practice of venerating saints was indeed divinely sanctioned.⁵⁷ However, many Protestants claimed that the 'age of miracles' had ceased shortly after the time of Christ.⁵⁸ Alexandra Walsham points out that:

[t]he principle that miracles had ceased allowed Protestants to demolish all modern Catholic marvels at a single stroke: it relieved them of the responsibility of proving both that every individual case was either a product of trickery or sorcery and that Roman Catholicism was the Scarlet Whore and Seven Headed Beast identified in the Book of Revelation.⁵⁹

Theoretically, miracles are such fabulous occurrences that the involvement of God cannot be denied. However, because they can be faked, either by evil spirits or more human charlatans, if you had not witnessed a miracle for yourself, then its authenticity depended on the reliability of witnesses and the documents in which their testimony was recorded.

More's messenger ventriloquizes the prevailing Protestant attitude towards miracles; if miracles happen, he says, then they happen 'agaynst the course of nature' and:

[...] god neuer wyll any thyng do agaynst the course / whiche his
hygh wysdome / power / and goodnes hath made so good / y^t it
coulde neuer be broken to y^e better. For yf it myght / than had our
lorde not made his order & course perfyte in y^e begyn[e₃]nyng.⁶⁰

More counters this by arguing that all things made by God are good, but not all things are equally good; 'For els were his worke of as infynite perfeccion as hym self.'⁶¹ It is therefore perfectly reasonable for God to amend some of the faults or limitations of the natural

⁵⁷ See More, *Dialogue*, Liv, pp. 60-1.

⁵⁸ Alexandra Walsham explains that '[c]iting the Fathers Augustine and Chrysostom they insisted that although miracles had been necessary for the "first begetting, breeding and nourcing" of Christianity, once it became established these props and aids [...] had been removed as redundant' (*Providence in Early Modern England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 226).

⁵⁹ Walsham, *Providence in Early Modern England*, p. 228. But, as Walsham also points out, '[...] very few were prepared to declare that God never interrupted or overrode the laws of nature. To do so would be to imply that the Lord had tied Himself exclusively to the use of secondary causes and this would derogate seriously from His supreme majesty. And, *pave* the polemicists, there was nothing in Scripture to confirm unequivocally the claim that miracles had ceased when the primitive Church cast off its swaddling bands' (p. 229.)

⁶⁰ More, *Dialogue*, I.viii, p. 74.

⁶¹ More, *Dialogue*, I.viii, p. 75.

order by working miracles.⁶² After all, miracles are recorded in the Bible, and so they must be possible.⁶³ It is therefore also possible that miracles performed at shrines are real, divine miracles. The question then becomes how to separate real miracles from false ones.

Fraudulent miracles have been discovered, the messenger points out; how, then, can we trust the rest when there could be ‘many such [...] that neuer com to lyght / and are styll taken for very good.’⁶⁴ But, More argues, those false miracles were detected. While the messenger holds that ‘syth I knowe not any whiche I precysely know for trew / I know not whyther any be trew or not’, More takes the opposite view:

For syth god brought to lyght ye false faynyd myracle of ye prestys
of the ydoll Bell in the olde tyme / [...] / it is more lykely that
amonge crysten men he wyll suffer no suche thynges longe lye hyd.
And also how can ye warant that many of those myracles be false.
For whyle there is no doute but many be trew / and ye know not
any whiche ye precisely know for false / ye be not sure whyther
any be suche or not.⁶⁵

Because the messenger cannot say for certain which miracles are false that have not been *proved* false, the messenger must accept miracles to be true unless proven otherwise; the fact that false miracles have been discovered no longer proves that miracles can be false but that false miracles will be detected.⁶⁶

Having rejected miracles, Protestants turned to martyrdoms as evidence that their faith represented the faith of the ‘true’ church. For Tyndale, the lot of the true believer was to be persecuted, as Christ and his apostles had been, and the Catholic Church’s persecution of Protestants only further demonstrated that it was *not* the true church.⁶⁷

⁶² In I.x of the *Dialogue* More also argues that many miraculous things, such as childbirth, are possible even within the natural order (see pp. 77-81).

⁶³ More points out that when Jesus turned water into wine (John 2:6-9) it would have been possible to procure wine through more earthly means: ‘But such was his pleasure in a small matter to do a great myracle / for some shewe of his godhed among them whom he vouchesaufed’ (*Dialogue*, I.xi, pp. 81-2). This was therefore a miracle performed expressly to prove Christ’s divinity.

⁶⁴ More, *Dialogue*, I.xiv, p. 88.

⁶⁵ More, *Dialogue*, I.xiv, p. 89.

⁶⁶ More uses the example of Humphrey, Duke of Gloucester’s detection of a false miracle at St. Albans in the reign of Henry VI (also used by Shakespeare in *2 Henry VI*) as an example of a modern fraudulent miracle come to light.

⁶⁷ Tyndale writes: ‘Let it not make thee despair, neither yet discourage thee, O reader, that it is forbidden thee in pain of life and goods, or that it is made breaking of the king’s peace, or treason unto his highness to read

According to More, however, Protestant ‘heretics’ hid among congregations of faithful believers rather than coming forward to be martyred for their beliefs, as early Christians had done. Furthermore, the diversity of opinion among different Protestant sects showed that they could not be representative of a single ‘true’ church either.⁶⁸ Nevertheless, More’s description of the Catholic Church’s process of weeding out ‘wrong’ beliefs presents ‘orthodox’ Catholic belief as an entirely homogeneous affair and ignores division between different sects within the Catholic Church, presenting the Church as far more unified than was in fact the case.⁶⁹ The ‘evidence’ of martyrdom would not settle their dispute, as both men eventually gave their lives for their respective beliefs. In 1535, Thomas More was sentenced to death for refusing to swear an oath acknowledging the Crown’s authority over the Church.⁷⁰ In 1536, William Tyndale was convicted of heresy in Vilvorde, near Brussels, and strangled to death.⁷¹

Despite their differences, both More and Tyndale were looking for a connection to truth that was not historically contingent, and neither wanted to consider the possibility that, since both the Church and the Bible were subject to historical change, there might be no completely indisputable authority on which to base one’s faith. The mutability that was highlighted by humanist historiographical and bibliographical practices was deeply

the word of thy soul’s health; but much rather be bold in the Lord and comfort thy soul, forasmuch as thou art sure, and hast an evident token through such persecution, that it is the true word of God; which is ever hated of the world, neither was ever without persecution (as thou seest in all the stories of the Bible, both of the New Testament and also of the Old,)[...] And forasmuch as contrarywise thou art sure that the Pope’s doctrine is not of God, which, as thou seest, is so agreeable unto the world, or which rather receiveth of the world and the pleasures of the world, and seeking nothing but the possessions of the world, the authority in the world, and to bear a rule in the world; and persecuteth the word of God, and with all wiliness driveth people from it: yea curseth them and excommunicateth them, and bringeth them in belief that they be damned if they look on it’ (*On the Obedience of a Christian Man*, pp. 165-6).

⁶⁸ See More, *Dialogue*, II.i, pp. 190-1.

⁶⁹ See More, *Dialogue*, II.ii, pp. 192-5

⁷⁰ D. G. Newcombe writes: ‘The basis of his defence against the charges brought against him in the summer of 1535 was his silence when asked to take the oath (the legal interpretation of silence was acceptance, a principle invoked by Warham when he was greeted by the stony silence of Convocation after presenting the king’s terms for the clerical pardon of 1531). [...] In the end the testimony of Sir Richard Rich, often supposed to be false, sealed More’s fate. Rich claimed that More had spoken treason in his hearing, and this was enough to allow the judges to convict’ (*Henry VIII and the English Reformation* (London: Routledge, 1995), p. 56).

⁷¹ See David Daniell, ‘Trail and Execution’, in *William Tyndale: A Biography* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1994) pp. 374-84.

problematic in the way that it undermined the possibility of having certain knowledge of almost anything. As the problems involved with deciphering the pattern of divine will in earthly events became more apparent, the focus began to shift towards more immediate, human causes of history. While this did not mean that ideas of providence were rejected outright, this shift in emphasis would have profound consequences, not just for the interpretation of history, but for the way in which people understood their relationship to the world in which they lived.

Boethius and Machiavelli: Providence and Free Will:

When applied to history, rather than scripture, the ‘allegorical’ mode of interpretation was based on a providentialist view of history that left only an uncertain role for individual free will. Indeed, the theology of providence left it rather unclear whether or not it was possible to act in a way that deviated from God’s plan. Augustine writes in *The City of God*: ‘Faithfully and truly do we confess both [providence and free will]: the former that we may believe well, and the latter that we may live well.’⁷² Augustine’s words suggest a dissonance between ‘believing well’ (believing what Christians are meant to believe) and the practical business of ‘living well’. Written in the sixth century, Boethius’ *Consolation of Philosophy* confronts this dissonance between how the world ‘should’ be, and how it seems to be, and attempts to resolve the apparent conflict between providence and free will.⁷³ In the *Consolation*, the personification of Philosophy appears to Boethius’ narrator, who is imprisoned and awaiting execution. He begins by bewailing the fact that good people, like himself, suffer hardships while evil people seem to prosper. He questions Philosophy about this,

⁷² Augustine, *City of God against the Pagans*, ed. and trans. by R. W. Dyson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), V.x, p. 205.

⁷³ Interestingly, although scholars are relatively certain Boethius was a Christian himself, he makes no reference to any exclusively Christian doctrine in the *Consolation*, leading some to argue that Boethius aimed to create a philosophical treatise, rather than a religious one (see P. G. Walsh, ‘Introduction’, in *The Consolation of Philosophy*, trans. by P. G. Walsh (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), pp. xxi-lii). John Marenbon has proposed the intriguing suggestion that, to a contemporary audience, the narrator takes a recognisably Christian stance while Philosophy is associated with recognisably pagan principles (see John Marenbon, *Boethius* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), pp.156-7). Thus, Marenbon argues that Boethius presents his audience with a view of philosophy which is compatible with Christian doctrines but ultimately limited in its scope.

complaining that ‘it is quite outrageous that a criminal’s plot against an innocent man should prevail while God looks on.’⁷⁴ Philosophy responds by arguing that:

(...) adverse Fortune benefits people more than good, for whereas when Fortune seems to fawn on us, she invariably deceives us with the appearance of happiness, adverse Fortune is always truthful, and shows by her mutability that she is inconstant. (II.8.3.)

By miring them in worldly things, good fortune actually prevents people from apprehending the true good which lies in God.⁷⁵

The discussion moves on to the apparent contradiction between providence and free will. The narrator outlines the problem:

There seems to be a considerable contradiction and inconsistency [...] between God’s foreknowing all things and the existence of any free will. If God foresees all things and cannot be in any way mistaken, then what Providence has foreseen will happen must inevitably come to pass. So if God has prior knowledge from eternity not only of men’s actions but also of their plans and wishes, there will be no freedom of will (V.3.3-5).

The narrator does not accept the solution that some have suggested:

What they suggest is that Providence’s foreknowledge of a future event is not the cause of its happening, but that it is the other way around. [...] Their argument is that things foreseen do not therefore happen by necessity, but that things which will happen are necessarily foreseen (V.3.8-9).

The problem with this is that:

[H]ow topsy-turvy is the suggestion that the outcome of events in time is the cause of eternal foreknowledge! What distinction is there between thinking that God has foresight of future events because they are about to happen, and believing that things which have occurred at some earlier time are the cause of the highest Providence! (V.3.16-17).

If God can be influenced by causes outside of himself, he is not immutable, and that, to medieval and Renaissance eyes, would seriously compromise his divinity. God can

⁷⁴ Boethius, *The Consolation of Philosophy*, trans. by P. G. Walsh (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), I.4.29. All references to this text are to this edition.

⁷⁵ ‘The result is that good Fortune with her enticements diverts men from the path of true good, whereas adverse Fortune often yanks them back with her hooks to embrace true goods’ (Boethius, *Consolation*, II.8.5-6).

influence the things around him, but he cannot be influenced by them. Nevertheless, Boethius cannot concede that we therefore have no free will:

Once this is admitted, the extent of the decline in human fortunes becomes evident. Rewards or punishments offered to good or wicked men are pointless, for they have not been won by any free and voluntary impulse of their minds. What is now considered utterly just – punishments for the wicked and rewards for the good – will be seen to be the greatest injustice imaginable, because they have been compelled to commit good or evil not by their own will, but by the unchanging necessity of what will be (V.3.29-31).

The two premises (that God knows everything and that humans have free will) appear to be completely at odds.

Philosophy assures Boethius that there is a solution. She begins by arguing that our knowledge of things does not come about through the power of things to be known, but through our own powers of understanding.⁷⁶ To understand the workings of providence, therefore, we must consider how God understands the world. Because God is eternal, he ‘grasps and possesses simultaneously the entire fullness of life without end; no part of the future is lacking to it, and no part of the past has escaped it’ (V. 6.8).⁷⁷ To God’s understanding future events appear necessary, but that does not make them necessary in and of themselves. Thus, it is possible for humans to have free will, and for God to have ‘foreknowledge’ (if it can be called ‘foreknowledge’ in the way that God experiences it) of future events. Philosophy is open about the counter-intuitiveness of her arguments, but according to Philosophy, careful philosophical reasoning can help mankind to see past apparent contradictions to discover the logic behind God’s plan. Nevertheless, Philosophy seems to claim that God might understand the world to be other than as it ‘really’ is. It seems that Philosophy’s formulations about knowledge and understanding, where

⁷⁶ [A]ll men believe that the totality of their knowledge is obtained solely from the impact and nature of things known. But the reality is wholly different: all that becomes known is apprehended not by this impact, but rather by the capability of those who grasp it’ (Boethius, *Consolation*, V.4.24-5).

⁷⁷ Philosophy also makes the distinction that the world is ‘enduring’ but not ‘eternal’ because although it will exist for all time it cannot survive the end of time and must experience time linearly. God, on the other hand, exists outside of time and is therefore ‘eternal’ rather than simply ‘enduring’.

understanding is independent of the object of knowledge, is meant to resolve this difficulty, but it is not quite clear how; either God's understanding is correct and events are necessary, or they are not necessary, and God is mistaken, which is not possible. Philosophy assures the narrator that: 'The reason for the cloud that envelops you is that the process of human reasoning cannot attain to the simplicity of divine foreknowledge. If that simplicity could somehow be grasped, it is certain that no ambiguity would remain' (V.4.2). Unfortunately it continues to be beyond humans to fully grasp the so-called 'simplicity' of God's understanding, and so ambiguities remain.

Boethius' *Consolation* remained influential throughout the middle ages and into the Renaissance, and was even translated into English by Queen Elizabeth I herself.⁷⁸ It provided the foundation for the sixteenth-century debate about the relationship between providence and free will. Despite religious controversy, in the early 1500s what could still be generally agreed upon was that 1) God played an active part in worldly affairs and 2) that God had what at least seemed like foresight from a human perspective. Nevertheless, the counter-intuitiveness of providential logic was also recognised. In *The Obedience of a Christian Man* (1528), William Tyndale writes:

If God promiseth riches, the way thereto is poverty. Whom he loveth, him he chasteneth: whom he exalteth, he casteth down: whom he saveth, he damneth first: he bringeth no man to heaven, except he send him to hell first: if he promise life, he slayeth first: when he buildeth he casteth all down first: he is no patcher, he cannot build on another man's foundation: he will not work until all be past remedy, and brought unto such a case, that men may see, how that his hand, his power, his mercy, his goodness, and truth, hath wrought altogether. He will let no man be partaker with him of his praise and glory: his works are wonderful, and contrary unto man's works.⁷⁹

This 'contrariness' could be relied upon to mask the shortcomings of a particular interpretation, allowing history to be construed in a diverse number of ways. As Fussner notes:

⁷⁸ For a consideration of the *Consolation's* influence, see Marenbon, *Boethius*, pp. 172-82.

⁷⁹ Tyndale, *On the Obedience of a Christian Man*, p. 170.

In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries the Augustinian idea of providence was used to sanction the most diverse interpretations of history. [...] Providence served to link together the realm of nature, including history, and the realm of grace, but neither Calvin nor anyone else could prove by historical evidence that a particular interpretation of providence was the right one.⁸⁰

Furthermore, emphasising the idea of a pre-assigned destiny could have the effect of detracting from the importance of human agency.

There were, however, those who preferred to emphasise human agency over predetermined destiny. Niccolò Machiavelli lived between 1469 and 1527, but his most famous work, *Il Principe* (1534), was not printed until after his death. Although Machiavelli's works were on the Catholic Church's list of banned books (1559), they were never officially banned in England. Nevertheless, Felix Raab suggests that getting a license to actually print *The Prince* or the *Discourses on Livy* may have been difficult.⁸¹ Licenses to print many of Machiavelli's other works were obtained, however, and they circulated in print and manuscript in a number of languages, including English.⁸² In response to the charge that familiarity with Machiavelli was available in England principally through Gentillet's *Contre-Machiavel*, Raab points out that:

[...] although Simon Patericke translated the *Contre-Machiavel* in 1577, only a year after it was written, the translation was not printed until 1602, by which time the Machiavellian villain had been a stock figure for some time. To argue that Patericke's translation exerted this tremendous influence in manuscript is clearly ridiculous in view of the proliferation of Machiavelli's works in England, nor is there any evidence that the French edition of Gentillet was being more

⁸⁰ Fussner, *The Historical Revolution*, p. 25. As David Scott Kastan also observes, 'There was general consensus that the past had meaning for the present, but less agreement about what this meaning was' ('Shakespeare and English History', in *The Cambridge Companion to Shakespeare*, ed. by Margreta de Grazia and Stanley Wells (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), pp. 167-182 (p. 166)).

⁸¹ Raab writes: 'The ban on Machiavelli in England in the sixteenth century seems to have taken the form of a refusal to license the printing of *Il Principe* and *I Discorsi*. I have been unable to find any evidence to indicate a positive prohibition on reading him to parallel his inclusion in the Pauline *Index*, confirmed at the Council of Trent' (Felix Raab, *The English Face of Machiavelli* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1964), p. 52). According to Raab, it was the Jesuits who sought to have Machiavelli's works added to the *Index Librorum Prohibitorum*, which was first issued in 1559, well after England's break with Rome (see p. 3).

⁸² *The Prince* and the *Discourses* seem to have circulated in English in manuscript form, although printed translations were not available until 1636 and 1640 (see Raab, *The English Face of Machiavelli*, p. 53).

widely read than Machiavelli in Italian, Latin, French and English before 1602, or, for that matter, afterwards.⁸³

For those not reading Machiavelli, in the latter half of the 1500s there was also the popular stage character of the villainous ‘Machiavel’ to inform people of the ‘correct’ view of his works.

Despite Machiavelli’s radical reputation, however, the terms in which he expresses his ideas are remarkably conventional and rely on some traditional assumptions. A comparison between Boethius’ *Consolation* and Machiavelli’s *Prince* yields some surprising similarities. Both authors are concerned with the workings of ‘fortune’ and both use historical examples to support more general claims. Janet Coleman calls this use of history part of a ‘distinctive medieval tradition of textual study, still very much alive in his [Machiavelli’s] own day, which rendered the past “usable” in the present.’⁸⁴ Coleman argues that by using history in this way Machiavelli ‘shows how an already established way of reading history may be applied to contemporary problems concerning the governance of men and the maintenance of states’.⁸⁵ His use of history in this manner also suggests that Machiavelli assumes an underlying continuity between past and present. Indeed, near the opening of the *Discourses* Machiavelli derides those who ‘take pleasure in hearing of the variety of accidents contained in them [histories] without thinking of imitating them, judging that imitation is not only difficult but impossible – as if heaven, sun, elements, men had varied in motion, order, and power from what they were in antiquity.’⁸⁶ This assumption of continuity renders knowledge about the past useful for making judgements about how to act in the present and the future.

⁸³ Raab, *The English Face of Machiavelli*, p. 56.

⁸⁴ Janet Coleman, ‘Machiavelli’s *via moderna*: medieval and Renaissance attitudes to history’, in *Niccolò Machiavelli’s ‘The Prince’: New interdisciplinary essays*, ed. by Martin Coyle (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1995), pp. 40-64 (p. 41).

⁸⁵ Coleman, ‘Machiavelli’s *via moderna*’, p. 41.

⁸⁶ Machiavelli, *Discourses on Livy*, trans. by Harvey C. Mansfield and Nathan Tarcov (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1996), p. 6.

However, although Machiavelli's methodology suggests an ultimate stability, his focus is on the considerable variability that is evident around him:

I also believe that the one who adapts his policy to the times prospers, and likewise that the one whose policy clashes with the demands of the times does not. [...] Thus it happens that, as I have said, two men, working in different ways, can achieve the same end, and of two men working in the same way one gets what he wants and the other does not. This also explains why prosperity is ephemeral; because if a man behaves with patience and circumspection and the time and circumstances are such that this method is called for, he will prosper; but if time and circumstances change he will be ruined because he does not change his policy. Nor do we find any man shrewd enough to know how to adapt his policy in this way; either because he cannot do otherwise than what is in his character or because, having always prospered by proceeding one way, he cannot persuade himself to change.⁸⁷

Gone is the assumption that behaving 'virtuously', in a traditional sense, will serve no matter the situation. Instead it is an inability to 'change with the times' that prevents individuals from succeeding indefinitely, and Machiavelli leaves it open as to whether this is due to one's essential character, or learned behaviour.⁸⁸ Alison Brown observes that Machiavelli's 'view of the cosmos and man's nature as unchanging seems difficult to reconcile with the flexibility he demanded in the field of politics'.⁸⁹ Machiavelli's 'medieval' assumptions about history are, then, modified by a humanist appreciation of historical specificity and a focus on human rather than divine causes of events, pointing towards a fundamental changeability that unsettles the assumption of an underlying continuity.

Machiavelli's comment about learned behaviour does not quite go so far as to posit the idea that people are the product of historical conditions, but it takes a step in that direction. Another step is taken if we consider his controversial opinions about religion. In the *Discourses*, he writes:

⁸⁷ Machiavelli, *The Prince*, trans. by George Bull (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1995), pp. 78-9.

⁸⁸ Coleman also points out that Machiavelli draws a distinction between 'human nature' in general and individual character: 'Men are agents and their experiences are their willed responses to contingent events so that from these willed responses characteristic habits of behaviour become fixed. [...] Character is the result of habits built upon a foundational shared human nature' (Coleman, 'Machiavelli's *via moderna*', p. 53). This allowed Machiavelli to reconcile a constant human nature with the variability of individual character.

⁸⁹ Alison Brown, 'Philosophy and Religion in Machiavelli', in *A Cambridge Companion to Machiavelli*, ed. by John M. Najemy (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), pp. 157-172 (p. 157).

Thinking then whence it can arise that in those ancient times peoples were more lovers of freedom than in these, I believe it arises from the same cause that makes men less strong now, which I believe is the difference between our education and the ancient, founded on the difference between our religion and the ancient. For our religion, having shown the truth and the true way, makes us esteem less the honor of the world, whereas the Gentiles, esteeming it very much and having placed the highest good in it, were more ferocious in their actions.⁹⁰

According to Raab, '[h]ere the unequivocally secular nature of his approach could not be ignored.'⁹¹ Alison Brown concludes that Machiavelli's writings provide 'a remarkably consistent account of a world in which religion played a supporting but subordinate role in the essential art of politics.'⁹² However, Machiavelli is also considering the influence that different religious and educational systems have on the attitudes and values of people living at different times. His assumption of an underlying stability prevents him from making the final, relativist leap into something resembling modern historicism, but this is, nevertheless, an interesting aspect of Machiavelli's historiography that has been largely eclipsed by interest in his 'secularism'.

Machiavelli's 'secularism' has been advanced as an explanation for why his focus in *The Prince* is almost entirely on 'fortune' rather than 'providence'.⁹³ Peter Burke claims that it is at least partly due to Machiavelli that in the sixteenth century:

⁹⁰ Machiavelli, *Discourses*, 2.2, p. 131.

⁹¹ Raab, 'Machiavelli's Reception in Tudor England', p. 62. Not all critics have agreed with Raab, however; Carey J. Nederman believes that Machiavelli was not as irreligious as some have assumed, arguing that he saw total success as only possible with the additional advantage of divine grace (see 'Fortune, God and Free Will in Machiavelli's Thought', *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 60.4 (1999), 617-638). Nederman cites Machiavelli's approval of Moses, whom he saw as successful in both spiritual and secular social spheres. However, it is worth noting that, in *The Prince*, Machiavelli calls Moses 'merely the executor of God's will', as if this in some way detracts from the impressiveness of what he has achieved, although he does insist that he is nevertheless to be admired (see *The Prince*, Chapter VI, pp. 17-20).

⁹² Brown, 'Philosophy and Religion', p. 167.

⁹³ Objecting to the argument that Machiavelli's treatment of religion results from his desire to write a political rather than philosophical work, Leo Strauss writes: 'This would explain Machiavelli's silence if there was no apparent conflict between his political science and the teaching of the Bible.' Nevertheless, Strauss does concede that what Machiavelli 'seriously means' is 'not [that] the world has been rendered weak by Christianity but [that] Italy has been rendered weak by the Roman Church' (*Thoughts on Machiavelli* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1958), p. 181). Nevertheless, it does not seem as though Machiavelli would have found the Protestant faith, as it was articulated in England in the 1500s, any more appealing considering that, according to Tyndale, 'Christ is never strong in us till we be weak' (Tyndale, *On the Obedience of a Christian Man*, p. 175).

‘Fortune’, that favourite medieval and Renaissance concept, becomes less and less anthropomorphised, less and less the goddess one must grasp by the forelock, and more of a name for the impersonal forces in history, the structures and the trends which are bigger than individuals, but which are susceptible of analysis and calculation all the same.⁹⁴

Fortune was a rather ambiguous figure at the end of the middle ages. Often personified as the goddess Fortuna, her pagan origins obscured precisely what relationship she was supposed to have with the workings of providence; was she God’s agent, or did she operate arbitrarily? Of course, Machiavelli’s purpose in *The Prince* is to teach people how to ‘master fortune’, something which would not be appropriate were ‘fortune’ to be replaced with ‘providence’; fortune was notoriously changeable, providence was not. Machiavelli writes:

I am not unaware that many have held and hold the opinion that events are controlled by fortune and by God in such a way that the prudence of men cannot modify them, indeed, that men have no influence whatsoever. Because of this, they would conclude that there is no point in sweating over things, but that one should submit to the rulings of chance. [...] Sometimes, when thinking of this, I have myself inclined to this same opinion. Nonetheless, because free choice cannot be ruled out, I believe that it is probably true that fortune is the arbiter of half the things we do, leaving the other half or so controlled by ourselves.⁹⁵

Machiavelli does not differentiate between what is controlled by ‘fortune’ or by ‘God’; what is relevant about them both is that they are beyond human control. All Machiavelli has to add is that ‘God does not want to do everything Himself, and take away from us our free will and our share of glory which belongs to us.’⁹⁶

The secular implications were not missed by contemporaries; one anonymous commentator in the 1560s writes:

And that is it, that I call a Machiavellian State and Regiment: where Religion is put behind in the second and last place: where the civil

⁹⁴ Burke, *The Renaissance Sense of the Past*, p. 77.

⁹⁵ Machiavelli, *The Prince*, p. 77-8. The differences between Machiavelli’s *Prince* and Boethius’ *Consolation* are evident here. Machiavelli does not attempt to offer a formal proof for his position or establish it as certain fact; he merely claims it as a personal belief that is ‘probably true’.

⁹⁶ Machiavelli, *The Prince*, p. 82. Compare this to Tyndale: ‘[H]e cannot build on another man’s foundation [...] He will let no man be partaker with him of his praise and glory’ (*On the Obedience of a Christian Man*, p. 170).

Policie, I meane, is preferred before it, and not limited by any rules of Religion, but the Religion framed to serve the time and policy; wher both by word and example of the Rulers, the ruled are taught with every change of Prince to change also the face of their faith and Religion[.]⁹⁷

With Henry VIII's split with Rome in the 1530s and multiple changes to England's official religion on the succession of each of his children, this picture may have seemed worryingly familiar to Elizabethans. In the 1590s, Richard Hooker wrote:

For a politic use of Religion they see there is, and by it they would also gather that Religion itself is a mere politic device, forged purposely to serve for that use. Men fearing God are thereby a great deal more effectually, than by positive Laws, restrained from doing evil; inasmuch as those Laws have no further power than over our outward actions only, whereas unto men's inward cogitations, unto the privy intents and motions of their hearts, Religion serveth for a bridle.⁹⁸

Raab calls this the 'spectre of the Secular State', and, once articulated, either positively or negatively, it was difficult to exorcise.⁹⁹

The mixture of traditional historiographical methods and the oddly new perspectives that Machiavelli draws from them makes his work both continuous with past traditions as well as the starting point for a radical break from previous attitudes towards history. Indeed, it is the underlying question of whether the past can be considered continuous or discontinuous from the present moment that Machiavelli's work unconsciously points towards, unsettling the basis on which the Augustinian method of interpreting the past was founded. Machiavelli appears in Marlowe's *The Jew of Malta* to deliver a prologue that captures the ambivalence of contemporary responses to him:

Admir'd I am of those that hate me most:
Though some speak openly against my books,
Yet will they read me[.]¹⁰⁰

⁹⁷ Anonymous, *Treatise of Treasons against Queen Elizabeth and the Crown of England* (1572), cited by Raab in *The English Face of Machiavelli*, p. 60.

⁹⁸ Richard Hooker, 'Of the Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity', in *Works*, 2 vols, ed. by W. S. Dobson (London: 1825), I, pp. 149-666 (p. 410).

⁹⁹ Raab, *The English Face of Machiavelli*, p. 61.

¹⁰⁰ Christopher Marlowe, *Christopher Marlowe: The Complete Plays*, ed. by J. B. Steane (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1969), p. 347.

If Machiavelli's work had represented something entirely new, it would probably not have been as unsettling as it was. However, it was based on enough familiar, well-established premises that the deeper implications could not be easily dismissed. Similarly, the new humanist historiographical methods did not pose a problem by flatly contradicting previous methods of interpretation, but because they made their application more complicated. Bibliographical practices highlighted the mutability of the historical record, while philology revealed the different meanings that could be attached to the same signifier depending on historical context. These things made it more difficult to confirm that a particular reading had access to the universal truth which was the object of allegorical exegesis and began to suggest that all truth may be historically contingent. Part Two will consider what impact these problems of historiography had on the writing of the history in England over the course of the sixteenth century.

Part Two: Writing History

‘Histories’ and ‘Chronicles’

The ‘literariness’ of history in the sixteenth century is much emphasised in modern scholarship on Renaissance historiography. D. R. Woolf notes that:

For medieval and Renaissance writers, history was a literary record of events deemed worthy of commemoration by historians, not the events themselves or their ‘study’. History was thus a *genre*, not a *thing*, and still less (as it would become in the nineteenth century) a *discipline*.¹⁰¹

Similarly, Patrick Collinson writes: ‘It is significant that the words “story” and “history”, which for us mean rather different things, were for this period interchangeable.’¹⁰² As we have seen, interpreting the past in a way similar to literary texts was legitimised by an ontology that viewed God as a kind of ‘author’ of history. But this Christianised view was not the only thing that linked history to literature; the idea of extracting moral lessons from historical events was also a feature of classical historical writing. As J. H. M. Salmon explains:

[T]he Stoics saw history as a vicarious means of acquiring prudence and applying it to both private and public life. Its catch phrases came from Cicero’s *De Oratore*, in which history was described as, among other things, the ‘guide to life’ (*magistra vitae*) and the ‘light of truth’ (*lux veritatis*) [...] Dionysius of Halicarnassus in his treatise on the art of rhetoric [wrote]: ‘History is philosophy teaching by examples’. [...] and Seneca pronounced the celebrated dictum: ‘The journey is long by way of precepts but short and effective through examples’ (*longum iter est per praecepta, breve et efficax per exempla*).¹⁰³

All of these ‘catch phrases’ are taken from works, not about history, or about philosophy, but about the art of rhetoric.

Rhetorical skill was emphasised in both ancient Greek and Roman education as a means for preparing young men for public life. Cicero wrote in *De Oratore* that a good

¹⁰¹ D. R. Woolf, ‘The Shapes of History’, in *A Companion to Shakespeare*, ed. by David Scott Kastan (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers Ltd., 1999), pp.186-205 (p. 190), italics in the original.

¹⁰² Patrick Collinson, ‘History’, in *A Companion to English Renaissance Literature and Culture*, pp. 58-70 (p. 59).

¹⁰³ J. H. M. Salmon, ‘Precept, Example and Truth’, in *The Historical Imagination in Early Modern Britain: history, rhetoric and fiction, 1500-1800*, ed. by Donald R. Kelly and David Harris Sacks (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), pp. 11-36 (p. 12).

orator ‘must know the whole past with its storehouse of examples and precedents.’¹⁰⁴

History was used as a kind of rhetorical ornament to make one’s argument more persuasive. Studying the rhetoric of classical authors was also a feature of sixteenth-century humanist education; F. Smith Fussner points out that:

History was regarded as a branch of literature by most of the ancients, and by nearly all of the humanists. The rhetorical tradition, which had dominated Greek and Roman historical writing, was exceptionally strong among the humanists. Between 1470 and 1520 humanism made important scholarly contributions to history in the form of textual criticism, Greek studies, and studies in classical archaeology, mainly Roman. At the same time, however, good style and high moral tone were accepted virtues in humanist historiography. It was not until the late sixteenth century, when classical studies became highly specialised, that the literary and scholarly traditions of humanism began to diverge.¹⁰⁵

Peter Burke explains the consequences this emphasis on rhetoric had for Renaissance histories:

Histories usually contained set-pieces which gave the author a chance to show off his rhetorical skill. These set-pieces included the ‘character’ or moral portrait of an outstanding individual; the description of action, particularly battle; and, most important of all, the speech. In all three cases there was a danger that beauty, or the desire to imitate an ancient historian, might conquer truth. Characters, battles and speeches tended to assume stereotypical forms, just as painter tended to imitate classical gestures and poets to follow classical *topoi*.¹⁰⁶

The ‘literariness’ of history was important in both the reading and writing of history, but it made history’s relationship to ‘truth’ a growing concern over the course of the sixteenth century. As Philip Sidney complains of the historian in his *Apology for Poetry*, ‘[m]any times he must tell events whereof he can yield no cause; or if he do it must be poetically.’¹⁰⁷ ‘Style’ was intimately linked to the process of explicating the ‘causes’ of events, and thereby their ‘meaning’ in a given context.

¹⁰⁴ Cicero, *On the Ideal Orator, (De Oratore)*, trans. by James M. May and Jakob Wisse (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), I.18 (p. 61).

¹⁰⁵ Fussner, *The Historical Revolution*, p. 46.

¹⁰⁶ Burke, *The Renaissance Sense of the Past*, p. 106. Later, dramatists including Shakespeare would often include the speeches of historical characters almost line-for-line as they appear in the chronicles.

¹⁰⁷ Sidney, *Apology for Poetry*, ed. by Geoffrey Shepherd, revised and expanded by R. W. Maslen, 2nd edn. (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2006), p. 93.

The emphasis on ‘style’ is more noticeable in the context of formalised ‘histories’, as opposed to other forms of historical writing. A precise distinction between ‘chronicles’ and ‘histories’, however, is not straightforward. D. R. Woolf defines a chronicle as:

[...] an account of events past or present organised according to year and written to preserve those events for the benefit of future readers. As a rule, the chronicler wrote his account year by year, without recourse to a classical *model* even when he was well aware of and deliberately referred to classical *sources*.¹⁰⁸

Chronicles and annals were kept by monasteries and other institutions to record events as they happened. These could be regularly updated to keep abreast of current events, and so there was usually little more than chronological organisation. Formal ‘histories’, on the other hand, such as Bede’s *Historia ecclesiastica gentis Anglorum* (‘Ecclesiastical History of the English People’, c. 731), or Geoffrey of Monmouth’s *Historia Regum Britanniae* (‘History of the Kings of Britain’, c. 1136), were composed by a single author as a treatment of the history of a particular period, institution, or other historical subject matter. Thus, the principal distinction between ‘chronicles’ and ‘histories’ appears to be the extent to which the material has been structured to present an overarching narrative. However, it is not true to say that chronicles *never* developed an overarching narrative, and the advent of print, especially, appears to have muddied the waters in terms of the distinction between these two terms.

For example, Caxton’s *Polychronicon* (1480), one of the first historical works to come from Caxton’s press, was based on an English translation of a Latin history (also called the *Polychronicon*) composed by the monk Ranulph Higden in the early part of the fourteenth century.¹⁰⁹ Higden’s text was designed as a universal history and divided into seven books to mirror the seven days of creation. However, Caxton added another book (the *liber ultimus*) to bring the history up to date, unbalancing Higden’s original organisational

¹⁰⁸ D. R. Woolf, ‘Genre into Artifact: The Decline of the English Chronicle in the Sixteenth Century’, *Sixteenth Century Journal*, 19.3, (1988), 321-354 (p. 323), italics in the original.

¹⁰⁹ The translation was done by one of Higden’s near contemporaries, John Trevisa in 1387.

scheme.¹¹⁰ Higden began with a general description of the world and proceeded to mould his material into a relatively cohesive narrative. Caxton's continuation, on the other hand, adopted a more annalistic style, organised chronologically, which juxtaposed events in ways that resisted a single overarching narrative and disrupted the unity of Higden's original history.¹¹¹ This disjunction of styles was not ideal, but neither would it have been sufficient to publish a history that was over a century old. Caxton's *Polychronicon* represented a kind of merger between Higden's 'history' and Caxton's 'chronicle' continuation, and, indeed, for most of the sixteenth century the terms 'chronicle' and 'history' could be used relatively interchangeably for all of the works considered in the remainder of this chapter.

Marcia Lee Metzger comments that 'few historians have had a more difficult struggle of adhering to "political correctness" than the English chroniclers of the mid-sixteenth century, publishing under Mary and Elizabeth.'¹¹² The Reformation made it necessary to re-imagine the trajectory of England's past and as well as its national character; with each new regime came a new slant on the meaning of history, and texts printed to support the position of the previous establishment were either suppressed or re-written. Importantly, however, Metzger also writes that '[u]nlike overtly religious or polemical works, the chroniclers for the most part escaped the heavy hand of government censorship, presumably because the authors were so willing to censor the works themselves and eventually create a "safe corridor" of agreed upon historical "truths."¹¹³ Nevertheless, Hall's *Chronicle* was (posthumously) banned under Mary, and during Elizabeth's reign John Heyward was imprisoned for suspected treasonous sentiments 'hidden' in his *Life and Reign of King Henry IV* (1599), which was dedicated to the Earl of Essex. History writing in the sixteenth century could be a dangerous business.

¹¹⁰ It is not known for certain whether or not the continuation that appears in Caxton's *Polychronicon* was written by Caxton himself.

¹¹¹ See Kathleen Tonry, 'Reading History in Caxton's *Polychronicon*', *The Journal of English and Germanic Philology*, 3.2 (2012), 169-198.

¹¹² See Marcia Lee Metzger, 'Controversy and "Correctness": English Chronicles and the Chroniclers, 1553-1568', *The Sixteenth Century Journal*, 27.2, (1996), 437-451.

¹¹³ Metzger, 'Controversy and "Correctness"', p. 441.

Polydore Vergil, *Anglica Historia*

Around 1505 Henry VII commissioned a history from the Italian scholar Polydore Vergil, who had recently come to England.¹¹⁴ Vergil's *Anglica Historia*, eventually printed in 1534, was intended to provide an 'up-to-date' history of England.¹¹⁵ The work has been described as the first 'humanist' history of England, and Vergil's personal correspondence shows he was well acquainted with prominent humanists such as Thomas More and Erasmus.¹¹⁶ In the dedication to Henry VIII, written in 1533, Vergil indicates that his reason for writing is to increase the fame of Britain abroad:

And this is the single thing which seems to be lacking from the supreme glory of your realm of English, that, although it is most blessed in all things, its greatness is unknown to a large number of nations since no history exists from which it would be possible to learn the nature of Britain (which is now England)[.]¹¹⁷

Written in Latin and printed in Basel, the *Anglica Historia* was aimed at an educated, European audience with the goal of advertising the educated and enlightened credentials of the monarch who commissioned it, and the country over which he ruled.

For Henry Ellis, who edited a mid-nineteenth century edition of the *Anglica Historia* published for the Camden society, Vergil's humanism is best demonstrated by his

¹¹⁴ See Henry Ellis, 'Preface', in *Polydore Vergil's English History*, ed. by Henry Ellis, trans. by anonymous (London: Camden Society, 1846), pp. v-x (p. vi). The translation of the *Anglica Historia* on which Ellis bases his edition is preserved in MS. Reg. C. VIII. IX, and was made some time in the sixteenth century, but it is not known precisely when or by whom (see Henry Ellis, 'Preface' in *Three Books of Polydore Vergil's English History*, ed. by Sir Henry Ellis, trans. by anonymous (London: Camden Society, 1844), pp. i-xxxii (pp. xxx-xxxii)). Although *Three Books of Polydore Vergil's English History* (which covers the last three books of the *Anglica Historia*) is a different volume from *Polydore Vergil's English History* (which covers the first eight books of the *Anglica Historia*) it is taken from the same translation and was published first. According to Ellis, this volume 'led the Council to believe that an edition of the whole was desirable; not only as affording a faithful version of a work hitherto confined to the Latin tongue, but as preserving a beautiful Translation, made at a period when our language was beginning to assume the character of modern eloquence' ('Preface', *Polydore Vergil's English History*, p. i). It seems that the retrospective intention was to publish the entirety of the *Anglica Historia* in three volumes. Unfortunately the middle volume, covering the reigns of William the Conqueror to Henry V, appears never to have been published.

¹¹⁵ See Ellis, 'Preface' in *Three Books*, p. xiv.

¹¹⁶ See Antonia Gransden, 'The Humanist Historians: Thomas More and Polydore Vergil', in *Historical Writing in England*, 2 vols (Ithaca NY: Cornell University Press, 1982), II, pp. 425-453. See also Ellis, 'Preface', *Three Books*, pp. vi-vii.

¹¹⁷ Vergil, *Anglica Historia*, ed. by Dana F. Sutton, based on the 1555 edition <www.philological.bham.ac.uk/polyverg/>, [accessed 13/06/2012]. Ellis does not include Vergil's dedication (which was included in the 1534 edition of the work) in his volumes of the *Anglica Historia*. Presumably the translation Ellis was working from did not include the dedication.

treatment of source materials. He calls the *Anglica Historia* ‘the first of our histories in which the writer ventured to compare the facts and weigh the statements of his predecessors’.¹¹⁸ Vergil was certainly keen to set his history apart from those that had come before him, but it is the *stylistic* features of his predecessors’ works that he most vocally objects to. Vergil complains that, with a few exceptions, previous histories:

[...] are so bound in shadows that they cannot shine forth. And latterly some men undertook to write almost day-by-day accounts. But they compiled annals in which both the arrangement and the style was so threadbare that they justly strike us, as they say, as food without seasoning.¹¹⁹

Although Vergil did introduce a more analytic treatment of source materials to the chronicle tradition, his stylistic contributions were equally important. For example, rather than structuring his history according to a theological framework or annual chronology, Vergil split it into twenty-four books, the first eight of which dealt with periods of British history (e.g. ‘Roman Britain’, ‘The Norman Conquest’, etc.) and the rest of which were structured essentially as back-to-back biographies of reigning monarchs. Vergil was imitated in this by most subsequent histories written in the sixteenth century, making political changes to the governing body of the country, rather than theological concerns, the overarching organisational principle. Vergil also included many ‘set-speeches’ and concluded each reign with a rhetorical ‘portrait’ of the monarch in question. In the words of D. R. Woolf, Vergil ‘turned what had been disconnected, truncated annals into a smooth-flowing narrative.’¹²⁰

Nevertheless, Vergil’s view of history does suggest the more ‘factual’ attitude towards history that was beginning to develop from humanist practices. For example, he

¹¹⁸ Sir Henry Ellis, ‘Preface’, *Three Books*, p. xxviii. Henry Ellis also edited an edition of Robert Fabyan’s *Chronicle*. Fabyan’s *Chronicle* was first printed in 1516 as *The New Chronicles of England and France*, and was sometimes called *A Concordance of Histories*: Fabyan did cite his sources, but in contrast to Vergil’s treatment of sources, Ellis writes ‘The authorities which are cited in his chronicles are numerous, and some of them but indistinctly named. Indeed he appears more than once to have quoted the same work by a different appellation’ (Ellis, ‘Preface’, in *The New Chronicles of England and France* (London: 1811), pp. i-xxi (pp. xiiv-xiv)).

¹¹⁹ Vergil, ‘Preface’, *Anglica Historia*, ed. by Dana F. Sutton.

¹²⁰ Woolf, ‘Genre into Artifact’, p. 326.

makes an effort to present his history as ‘impartial’; where divine vendetta is suggested, it is usually (although not always) couched in terms of other people’s opinions. This, for instance, is how he describes storms occurring after the murder of the princes in the Tower in the reign of Richard III:

Surely after the murder of king Edwardes soon as oft as any evell storme was presently imynent or lyke to ensew, the people, remembring suddaynly the kings late abhomynable act, layd the blame thereof only upon him, exclaming that God did revenge the kinges wickednes upon the powre Englishe people; whom therefore they accussyd, detestyd, and fynally besowght God to take extreme vengeance upon.¹²¹

It is likely that a moral reading of historical events looks more convincing if it takes the form of a more general consensus rather than ‘merely’ the opinion of the author. In other places, however, Vergil makes a point of his impartiality where he fears he may cause controversy or offence:

What kinde of people were the first inhabitants of Brittain, whether thei that were bredde in the contrie or otherwise straungers, it was never yet sufficiente knowne or determined; wherebie it commethe to passe that of longe season authors have not agreed thereof; as towching which thinge, leste I showlde ether over rashelie plighte mie trouthe in affirminge, or on the other side gette envie bie refutinge or falsificinge, I thought good in this place to repete there sentences in order, and to laye them beefore the ieyes of the reader, to the intent that all things maie stande to the arbitrement of other menn (as it is requisite those thinggs showlde which are incertaine), bie cause an Historie is a full rehersall and declaration of things don, not a gesse or divination.¹²²

Here Vergil anticipates ‘envie’ in the reactions of his readers. The subject of Britain’s origins was a topic English readers were likely to feel strongly about, and this passage suggests that Vergil was aware that some of his claims would not be popular.

Vergil made some controversial challenges to popular British history by dismissing Geoffrey of Monmouth’s *Historia Regum Britanniae*, on which the legends of Brutus, the ‘founder of Britain’, and King Arthur were largely based. Vergil objects that:

¹²¹ Vergil, *Three Books*, p. 191.

¹²² Vergil, *Polydore Vergil’s English History*, p. 26.

[...] yet nether Livie, nether Dionisius Halicarnaseus, who writ diligentlie of the Romane antiquities, nor divers other writers, did ever once make rehersall of this Brutus, neither could that bee notified by the cronicles of the Brittons, sithe that longe agoe thei loste all the bookes of their monuments, as Gildas wittnesseth[.]¹²³

Vergil offers a fairly damning opinion of Geoffrey of Monmouth, but he does so at a curious remove by quoting the twelfth-century historian William Newbury:

[I]here hath appeared a writer in owre time which, [...] hath extolled them [the British] aboove the noblenes of Romaines and Macedoians, enhauncinge them with moste impudent lyeing. This man is cauled Geffray, surnamed Arthure, bie cause that oute of the olde lesinges of Brittons, being somewhat augmented bie him, hee hath recited manie things of this King Arthure, taking unto him bothe the coloure of Latin speeche and the honest pretext of an Historie: more over [...] he hath published the sowthesaiengs of one Merlin, as prophesies of most assured and approved trewth, allways addinge somewhat of his own while he translatehe them into Latine. Thus saithe he, and Gildas before him; but not I, which write nothing but that which hath ben written before, wherefore ther is noe man which justlie can be angrie with me for this sainge[.]¹²⁴

Vergil's attempt to distance himself from criticising Geoffrey directly suggests that he was aware how his claims were likely to be received.

Although Geoffrey's history had been challenged in its own day, it had gained a veneer of credibility by virtue of repetition. Brutus was supposedly a descendant of Aeneas, a survivor from Troy, who founded Britain after the Flood. It was therefore a story that reconciled biblical and classical 'history' while giving Britain a claim to antiquity that it otherwise lacked. King Arthur was especially popular with the Tudors who, because of their Welsh roots, were keen to trace their ancestry back to him.¹²⁵ Henry Tudor's claim of

¹²³ Vergil, *Polydore Vergil's English History*, p. 30. Vergil also gives an explanation for why he thinks such myths may have arisen: 'But in olde time theie did presume on thise fraunchise and libertie that manie nations weare so bowlde as to derive the beginnunge of their stocke form the Goddes (as especiallie the Romaines did), to thentent the originall of there people and citties mighte bee the more princelie and prosperus, which thinges, albeit thei sounded more like fabels than the sincere witnesses of noble acts, yet weare thei received for trewth' (p. 31).

¹²⁴ Vergil, *Polydore Vergil's English History*, p. 29.

¹²⁵ Despite some misconceptions, the section entitled 'The Tudor Myth' in Tillyard's *Shakespeare's History Plays* in fact makes no mention of the idea that the Wars of the Roses were England's providential punishment for the deposition of Richard II. For Tillyard, the 'Tudor Myth' refers only to the Tudors' attempt to claim that Henry Tudor was descended through his Welsh lineage from the ancient kings chronicled in Geoffrey of

descent from this ‘ancient’ line of British kings bolstered the legitimacy of his claim to the English throne, which otherwise relied on a somewhat distant link to the House of Lancaster. Challenging these myths, therefore, was risky since it challenged the Tudor regime’s projected image as well as popular English identity. In addition to this, Vergil was faced with an essential lack of any alternative history. As F. J. Levy observes:

[...] most men disliked blank pages in their histories, and the two most obvious – the period before the Romans and that immediately after their departure – were both filled up quite brilliantly by the British history. If a historian had been able to replace Brutus and Arthur by more convincing figures, there probably would have been no debate.¹²⁶

Despite his reservations, Vergil nevertheless includes both Brutus and Arthur in his account, although he affords barely a paragraph to each.¹²⁷

Vergil’s challenge to ancient British history is not the only reason his history proved unpopular. Even where he strives to flatter, he is not always successful. For example, he attempts to present Britain as having been a particularly devout nation from the beginning:

Brittaine (accordinge to the authoritee of Gildas) even from the first springe and divulgation of the hollie Gospell, did earnestlie embrace the love and woorshippinge of Christe, observing surlie, and holding faste the same, even emonge the tyrannicall persecutions of the Roman Emperours. At that time, albeit they did not openlie professe Christe, bie cause beinge vanquished of the Romaines and Saxons they were compelled to sacrificise to straunge goddess; nevertheless privatlie manie would not forsake there hevenlie dewtie, soe that the Christian religion (as elsewhere wee shall declare) was always extante in som part of the Ilond, untill that at the lengthe bie Saint Gregory it was cleane delivered from confusion, soe that I thincke there is noe people at this present

Monmouth’s history (see Tillyard, ‘The Tudor Myth’, in *Shakespeare’s History Plays*, first published 1944 (London: Chatto & Windus, 1961), pp. 29-31).

¹²⁶ Levy, *Tudor Historical Thought*, p. 65. A notable exception to Levy’s claim that ‘most men dislike blank pages in their histories’ is Bernard André, poet laureate and family tutor to Henry VII, who, in his *Historia Regis Henrici Septimi*, (1502) left an enigmatically blank page for the Battle of Bosworth (see James R. Sieman, ‘Reconstructing the Past: History, Historicism, Histories’, in *A Companion to English Renaissance Literature and Culture*, pp. 662-673 (p. 666)).

¹²⁷ See Vergil, *Polydore Vergil’s English History* p. 34 and pp. 121-2 respectively. Vergil makes his frustration at having to include them clear: ‘The which thinge (albeit not altogether without indignation) yet will wee doe it, bothe havinge regarde to the time and the avoydinge of evel will; mindinge bie the way, as nere as wee cann, to ammede the defaultes therein (which are infinite), to the ende that neither thei maye moleste the readers, neither thei fawle headlonge into them.’ (p. 33.)

which dothe more sincerelie and diligentlie observe all thinges that appartaine to the trew service and glorie of God.¹²⁸

So far so good. It is Vergil's mention of Gildas, a sixth-century writer famously critical of the piety of the British, that muddies the waters.¹²⁹ Far from ignoring Gildas' negative comments about English piety, Vergil uses them to affirm Gildas' honesty, again emphasising his own impartiality by quoting William of Newberry to say that '[i]t is noe smalle argumente of his [Gildas'] synceritee that in uttering the trewth he spareth not his owne nation'.¹³⁰ The way that Vergil tries to reconcile Gildas's position with the tradition of English piety is rather peculiar:

This nation (sai the he [Gildas]), stiffe necked and highe minded
sithe it was first a people, doothe sometimes stubernelie rise againe
Godd, sometime ther owne citizens, and sometimes foraine
princes.¹³¹

Vergil attempts to allay any insult by saying '[h]ere Gildas geeveth us a watchwoorde that the firste inhabitantes of the region had the knowledge of Godd'.¹³² They may have risen against God, but at least they knew about him.

By the time the *Anglica Historia* was published in 1534 Vergil's credentials were spectacularly unsuited to the times. A foreigner, especially an Italian, and a Catholic, Vergil was not someone the English public were willing to accept as an authority on English history after Henry VIII's split from Rome. Unlike his colleague Thomas More, however, Vergil managed to stay on the right side of the Tudor regime, even retaining the income from his English benefices when he retired to Italy under Edward VI.¹³³ Most remarkably, considering its lack of popularity, Vergil's history proved surprisingly influential on subsequent histories written in the 1500s. As Woolf writes: 'Polydore set a pattern for

¹²⁸ Vergil, *Polydore Vergil's English History*, pp. 25-6.

¹²⁹ Gildas appears to have been a particular favourite of Vergil's, who describes him as someone who "exilinge all fables most earnestlie embraceth truth" (Vergil, *Polydore Vergil's English History*, p. 27). Indeed, Vergil himself edited an edition of Gildas for publication, which was printed in 1525 (see Ellis, 'Preface', in *Three Books*, p. xiii).

¹³⁰ Vergil, *Polydore Vergil's English History*, p. 29.

¹³¹ Vergil, *Polydore Vergil's English History*, p. 27.

¹³² Vergil, *Polydore Vergil's English History*, p. 27.

¹³³ See Ellis, 'Preface' in *Three Books*, p. xvi.

subsequent chroniclers and historians, even those who criticised him for his ignorance of the details of English history or for his deflation of cherished national myths.’¹³⁴ Widely vilified and even accused of burning source materials that contradicted his own stance on English history, Vergil’s *Anglica Historia* nevertheless established a new standard for the histories and chronicles of the sixteenth century.¹³⁵ Indeed, perhaps *because* it was so widely criticised, it left a space for someone to write the ‘correct’ version of English history according to the humanist standards of style and research demonstrated by Polydore Vergil.

Hall’s *Chronicle*

According to Antonia Gransden, ‘Sir Thomas More’s *History of King Richard III* and Polydore Vergil’s *Anglica Historia* [...] are the only two humanist histories written in England.’¹³⁶ She acknowledges that the ‘term “humanist” presents a problem’, but resolves this by asserting that ‘[p]erhaps the most distinctive feature of the humanists was that they regarded themselves as humanists, and were so regarded by others.’¹³⁷ Yet, although we may not think of Edward Hall, author of *The Union of the Two Noble and Illustre Families of Lancaster and York* (1542), as a ‘humanist’ in the strictest sense, his borrowings from Vergil’s *Anglica Historia* show that humanism did indeed influence the style, structure and treatment of source material in his work. In terms of popularity, Hall had all the advantages that Polydore Vergil lacked. Where Vergil was a foreigner and a Catholic, Hall was English and a Protestant. Where Vergil challenged Geoffrey of Monmouth’s version of ancient British history, Hall made sure to affirm it, despite writing a history dealing with an entirely different period.¹³⁸ And while Vergil composed his history in Latin for a scholarly audience,

¹³⁴ Woolf, ‘Genre into Artifact’, p. 326.

¹³⁵ For an account of some of the accusations levelled against Vergil, see Ellis, ‘Preface’ in *Three Books*, p. xxiii.

¹³⁶ Antonia Gransden, ‘The Humanist Historians: Thomas More and Polydore Vergil’, p. 425.

¹³⁷ Antonia Gransden, ‘The Humanist Historians: Thomas More and Polydore Vergil’, p. 425.

¹³⁸ Like Vergil, Hall bemoans the lack of written sources for evidence about Britain’s ancient past, but writes: ‘Cesare writeth, that when he was in this realme, the people could not tel their linage, nor their begynnyng. But one Geffrey of Monmothe a thousand yere and more after Iulius Cesare, translated a certayn Britishe or Welshe boke, conceinyng the commyng of Brute with the sequele of his linage, till the tyme of Cadwalader,

Hall wrote in English, making his work accessible to any literate layman. Hall's *Union* is an English history, by an Englishman, in the English language.

In the dedication to Edward VI which prefaces the second edition of the *Union*, printed a year after Hall's death in 1547, Hall gives his reason for writing it:

Sithe the ende of Frossarte whiche endeth at the begynnyng of kyng Henry the fourthe, no man in the Englishe toungue, hath either set furth their [the kings of England] honors accordyng to their desertes, nor yet declared many notable actes worthy of memorie dooen in the tyme of seuen Kynge[s].¹³⁹

This is similar to Vergil's complaint, and, were it not for Hall's emphasis on 'the Englishe tongue', one might wonder why his history had not done the job.¹⁴⁰ Hall distances himself from Vergil's work by trading on his own patriotic credentials.¹⁴¹ Nevertheless, despite emphasising their obvious differences, Hall is not openly critical of him. This may be because he borrows from Vergil in some important ways, listing him among his sources, and incorporating a considerable amount of material from his work. Like the *Anglica Historia*, the *Union* is structured according to the reigning monarch, and Hall also makes an effort to present his history as impartial; he explains in the dedication how he has 'compiled and gathered (and not made)' his history out of 'diuerse writers'.¹⁴²

Hall's dedication provides an interesting insight into his outlook on history. Like Tyndale and More, Hall sees history as something inextricably linked to the written word. Hall calls 'Obliuion' the 'suckyng serpē t of auncient memory', while writing is 'the treasure of memorie'.¹⁴³ According to Hall, historians play a vital role in society:

For what diuersitie is betwene a noble prince & a poore begger, ye a reasonable man and a brute beast, if after their death there be left

whiche Britishe boke if it had slept a litle lenger, Brute with al his posteritie had ben buried in the poke of Obliuion, for lacke of wrytyng' (Edward Hall, *Hall's Chronicle*, ed. by Henry Ellis (London: 1809), p. vi).

¹³⁹ Hall, *Hall's Chronicle*, p. vi.

¹⁴⁰ Hall does cite Fabian and 'one with out name' as exceptions to this lack of historical coverage, but he complains that both are 'farre shotyng wide from the butte of an historie' (Hall, *Hall's Chronicle*, p. vi).

¹⁴¹ Hall ends his dedication by '[b]esechyng your highe Maiestie, to take this my simple and rude woorke, accordyng to your accustomed goodnesse in good part, not regardyng the thyng, but my good will to my natieue cowntree' (Hall, *Hall's Chronicle*, p. vii).

¹⁴² Hall, *Hall's Chronicle*, p. vii.

¹⁴³ Hall, *Hall's Chronicle*, p. v.

of them no remembrance or token. [...] How much therefore are princes, governours, and noble men bounde to them which haue so liuely sette furth the liues and actes of their parentes, that all though they be ded by mortall death, yet they by writyng and Fame liue and be continually present.¹⁴⁴

Historical writing provides a connection to the past by making the dead ‘continually present’ and preserving memory which ‘maketh men dead many a thousande yere still to liue as though they were present’.¹⁴⁵ These words suggest a desire for a tangible connection to the past, the purpose of which is, according to Hall, the pursuit of moral lessons:

If no man had written the goodnesse of noble Augustus, nor the pitie of merciful Traian, how shoulde their successours haue folowed their steppes in vertue and princely qualities: on the contrarie parte, if the crueltie of Nero, the vngracious life of Caligula had not been put in remembrance, young Princes and fraile governours might likewise haue fallen in a like pit, but by redyng their Vices and seying their mischeueous ende, they be compelled to leaue their euill waies, and embrace the good qualities of notable princes and prudent governours: Thus writyng is the keye to enduce vertue and repress vice[.]¹⁴⁶

Writing, history and moral teaching all go hand in hand. Hall, not unusually for his time, mixes an up-to-date approach to historiography with fairly traditional views about the use and purpose of history writing.

History for Hall, as for Vergil, is the story of the ‘deeds of great men’; dependant on a person’s ‘fame’, history is the story of those either born with wealth and power, or those able to distinguish themselves in some way. David Scott Kastan calls this ‘history from above’;¹⁴⁷ rather than social history about the everyday lives of the general populace, Hall writes about the actions, characters and ambitions of those in power. In this sense it is a history understood primarily through the actions of individuals, and the historian’s role in preserving, in Hall’s words, the ‘diuersitie [...] betwene a noble prince & a poore begger’

¹⁴⁴ Hall, *Hall’s Chronicle*, p. v. This also seems like a fairly obvious prompt for patronage.

¹⁴⁵ Hall, *Hall’s Chronicle*, p. vi. This is, of course, precisely the kind of continued presence that, in his *Dialogue*, More rejects that writing can provide (see pp. 39-40 in ‘Thomas More and William Tyndale’, above).

¹⁴⁶ Hall, *Hall’s Chronicle*, pp. v-vi.

¹⁴⁷ Kastan, ‘Shakespeare and English History’, p. 170.

make this an essentially conservative kind of history.¹⁴⁸ This approach would remain fairly dominant throughout the 1500s and, it can be argued, has never entirely disappeared. Nevertheless, as we shall see in the next section, an interest in a more inclusive kind of ‘social’ history did begin to creep in through antiquarian channels in the latter part of the sixteenth century.

Richard Grafton and John Stow

Chronicles could be bulky and expensive, both to produce and to buy, and they were by no means guaranteed to make a profit.¹⁴⁹ Abridged chronicles were cheaper and easier to print, and D. R. Woolf writes that:

[Ben] Jonson was not far from the truth in depicting the chronicler in cahoots with the stationer, but he may have gotten the situation backwards: with the exception of occasional monsters like Holinshed’s and projects that had the assistance of a patron to defray costs, the direction in general was towards smaller, shorter and cheaper, not longer and heavier.¹⁵⁰

In the 1560s a battle took place between the abridged chronicles of Richard Grafton (1511-1572) and John Stow (1525-1605). As well as printing Hall’s *Chronicle* in 1548 and 1560, a revised manuscript for which had been left to Grafton in Hall’s will, Grafton had also been involved with the printing of English language Bibles (the Matthew Bible of 1537 and the Great Bible of 1538). This work earned him the title of Royal Printer under Edward VI, which he lost under Mary.¹⁵¹ Hall’s work had not been Grafton’s first foray into history; in 1543 he had also printed a chronicle by John Hardyng (1378-1465).¹⁵² John Stow, a much younger man, was self-educated and a keen antiquarian. Woolf calls him ‘the most prolific

¹⁴⁸ Hall, *Hall’s Chronicle*, p. v.

¹⁴⁹ See Woolf, ‘Genre into Artifact’.

¹⁵⁰ Woolf, ‘Genre into Artifact’, p. 334.

¹⁵¹ See E. J. Devereux, ‘Empty Tuns and Unfruitful Grafts: Richard Grafton’s Historical Publications’, *The Sixteenth Century Journal*, 1.21 (1990), 33-56 (p. 34). Grafton was hopeful of regaining his patents under Elizabeth, but she retained Mary’s Catholic printer in the interests of magnanimity.

¹⁵² See Devereux, ‘Empty Tuns’, p. 35 for Grafton’s publications of Hardyng’s chronicle; pp. 39-41 for the rather complex print history of Hall’s *Chronicle* under Grafton.

as well as the most able of the late Tudor chroniclers, and the only genuine scholar among them.¹⁵³

The battle was sparked in 1559 by a pirated edition of *An Epitome of Chronicles*, printed by Thomas Marshe, that was full of factual errors. The *Epitome* had first been written by Thomas Lanquet and continued to the reign of Edward VI by Thomas Cooper.¹⁵⁴ Thomas Marshe's version was updated to the reign of Elizabeth by Robert Crowley, and either the book's shortcomings or its commercial success apparently inspired Richard Grafton to compile his own *Abridgement of the English Chronicles*, which he printed in 1563. But Grafton's book also contained numerous mistakes, necessitating a second edition in 1564, which included an apology for inaccuracies which Grafton claimed had occurred 'partlye by miswrytynge, partlye by misentringe & mistaking of yeres, but cheifely by misprenting'.¹⁵⁵ Yet, despite his apology, the second edition still contained many errors. Around the same time Thomas Marshe approached John Stow, who had never previously written an historical work, to compile a new abridgement based on the *Epitome*.¹⁵⁶ Although initially reluctant, Stow was eventually persuaded and set to work. This resulted in Stow's *Summarie of the Chronicles of England* of 1565. E. J. Devereux recounts how:

[Stow] called on Grafton to explain why he had done a rival abridgement, insisting that he had meant no offence. He brought with him his own abridgement and a copy of Grafton's second edition in which he had noted all the errors.¹⁵⁷

Grafton appears not to have taken kindly to Stow's well-intentioned criticisms, and his response was to publish another shorter and even cheaper abridgement, the *Manuell of the*

¹⁵³ Woolf, 'Genre into Artifact', p. 335.

¹⁵⁴ See Devereux, 'Empty Tuns', p. 42. Marcia Lee Metzger writes: 'Thomas Cooper, the Elizabethan bishop who had undertaken the task of continuing Thomas Lanquet's history of England, was not at all amused by Crowley's additions to "his" work. In 1560, Cooper brought out his own *Cooper's Chronicle* in which he warns readers against "the attempts of certain persons utterly unlearned" to alter history' ('Controversy and "Correctness"', pp. 445-9).

¹⁵⁵ Richard Grafton, cited by Devereux in 'Empty Tuns', p. 43.

¹⁵⁶ Stow's initial antiquarian interests had been primarily literary, and he had edited a *Complete Works* of Chaucer that was printed in 1561 (see Devereux, 'Empty Tuns').

¹⁵⁷ Devereux, 'Empty Tuns', p. 44.

Chronicles of Englande (1565), that took advantage of the corrections Stow had given him but which gave no credit to Stow.

A possible explanation for this ‘oversight’ may have been the ‘cut-and-paste’ nature of sixteenth-century chronicles. As Woolf notes:

This sort of mutual borrowing, copying and summarizing continued through the rest of the century. Grafton, Stow, Holinshed and his associates in the 1570s, and John Speed in the early seventeenth century drew equally freely on the works of their immediate predecessors[.]¹⁵⁸

And Devereux acknowledges:

Grafton was indeed one of the historians who habitually took their facts from even older historians, and doubtless saw nothing at all wrong with taking the corrections Stow had offered and Stow’s own book as a source. Furthermore, Stow had admitted in his preface that he had drawn much from Fabian, who was also one of Grafton’s sources, and from Halle and Hardyng, both writers whose chronicles Grafton had edited. Therefore, if Stow claimed to have the exact facts there was no reason not to take them[.]¹⁵⁹

What makes Grafton’s omission more pointed, however, is that he implies in his preface to the *Manuell* that Stow had in fact plagiarised *him* and, dedicating the book to the Guild of Stationers, sought (unsuccessfully) to prevent Stow from ever publishing again.¹⁶⁰

Stow was a different kind of historian from Grafton. For one thing, although he drew upon previous historical works, he was not totally reliant on them for information.

Stow was a keen collector of documents, but also, as Fussner notes:

In his preface Stow acknowledged that he got most of his information from Fabian, Hardyng and Hall. But he wrote that he would not be ‘left naked’ if these men claimed their own: ‘For somewhat I have noted which I my selfe, partly by painful searche, and partly by diligent experience, have found out.’¹⁶¹

¹⁵⁸ Woolf, ‘Genre into Artifact’, p. 328.

¹⁵⁹ Devereux, ‘Empty Tuns’, p. 45.

¹⁶⁰ Grafton writes in the dedication to the *Manuell*: ‘I hope that none wil shewe them selues so vngentle nor so vnfrendly, as to abuse me in this my litle labour and good will, as of late I was abused by one that counterfeated my volume and order of the Abridgement of the Chronicles, and hath my trauaile to passe vnder his name’ (Grafton, cited by Devereux in ‘Empty Tuns’, p. 46.)

¹⁶¹ Fussner, *The Historical Revolution*, p. 215.

Stow's 'painful seache' for material suggests more than simply attempting to reconcile the information contained in several of the most recently printed chronicles, or even checking the sources underlying those chronicles. He also incorporated information gleaned from his antiquarian interests into his writing, creating what Fussner calls 'original work'.¹⁶² He wrote an account of the dispute in which he criticises Grafton for the derivative nature of his works:

[H]e hath but picked fethars from other byrds next in his reache & deked hym selffe ther *with*, but plasyng those same disorderly [...] to those who are able to decerne, he is worsor fauoryd then yf he wer but in his owne, as naked as asups crowe. I deny not, but a man may lawfully to gather out of othar autors, for otherwyse it is vnpossible for any to write, but of theyr owne tyme, neuertheles as it is comendable to *the* autar & profitable to *the* redars, when hyden histories ar browght from dusty darknes to *the* lyght of *the* world, so is it both vncomendable & vnprofitable to gather dyuars bokes all comon in print, & the some of lx presses, into one volume, & then settinge tham of a great pride to beare *the* world in hand to haue delueryd them a mensa rare pies of worke such as had neuer bene sene or hard tell of before.¹⁶³

For Stow the purpose of printed histories was to preserve and disseminate source materials which might otherwise be lost, not simply to regurgitate more of the same. His aim, unlike Grafton's, was not only to make what was already known about history more widely available, but also to make new things known.

If Stow's focus was on establishing the facts, he shows far less interest than Grafton in interpreting them. Devereux comments that Grafton:

[...] obviously saw the main use of history as reinforcing God's plan by presenting examples, as Stow noted scornfully, 'whiche he calleth good lessons (as if hys boke was of deuinite or morall philosophy).' [...] Stow, on the other hand, 'laboured for the truthe,' leaving God's plan to God.¹⁶⁴

Barret L. Beer also writes that Grafton:

¹⁶² Fussner, *The Historical Revolution*, p. 215.

¹⁶³ Stow, cited by Devereux in 'Empty Tuns', p. 55 (italics in the original). Stow never published this account of his dispute with Grafton, probably due to Grafton's death, and so this account exists only in manuscript.

¹⁶⁴ Devereux, 'Empty Tuns', p. 35.

[...] proclaimed how history sets forth ‘the course of God’s doings,’ a view consistent with one who had been official printer to Edward VI and vocal supporter of the Protestant Reformation. Stow’s rationale for the production of chronicles was to provide accurate texts for the public good[.]¹⁶⁵

Histories written under Elizabeth show increasing reservations about making pronouncements about the moral lessons of history, a key part of the purpose of history as it was articulated in the first half of the century.

In his own discussion of Stow, Barret L. Beer describes him as:

[...] a citizen historian, a self-educated man, whose status placed him outside the gentry, and a scholar who was closer to medieval traditions than to the New Learning associated with Renaissance humanism. Stow and his chronicles therefore stand apart from the university educated intellectual elite whose writings shaped the higher culture of Elizabethan England.¹⁶⁶

However, aligning Stow with a ‘medieval’ tradition of historical writing ignores the influence of antiquarianism on his work. Antiquarian interest in the material remains of the past grew gradually out of a humanist conception of historical difference and an analytic treatment of source materials. Although Stow lacked a university education, he shared this interest in antiquarianism with later historians (publishing principally in Latin) such as William Camden and John Speed. ‘Chorographical’ works, like Camden’s *Britannia* (1586) and Stow’s *Survey of London* (1598), combined history with descriptions of the geographical features and monuments of a particular landscape. Nevertheless, near the beginning of the seventeenth century, an increasing number of histories began to appear in Latin, while their more accessible English-language counterparts steadily decreased in number. Thus, history was to some extent ‘reclaimed’ by the ‘university educated intellectual elite’. Nevertheless, D. R. Woolf suggests that ‘it might be argued that Stow and Speed mark the borderline between history and chronicle in Renaissance England, a march which is present but

¹⁶⁵ Barrett L. Beer, ‘English History Abridged: John Stow’s Shorter Chronicles and Popular History’, *Albion*, 36.1 (2004), 12-27 (p. 15).

¹⁶⁶ Beer, ‘English History Abridged’, p. 12.

extremely difficult to define.¹⁶⁷ Thus, Stow was a figure somewhere in the middle of ‘medieval’ and ‘new’ historical methodologies, bringing a new academic rigour to the once popular, but now declining, chronicle form.

Holinshed’s *Chronicles*

While the preferences of printers (and possibly readers) were moving towards shorter and more concise histories, the tendency of those who actually wrote the chronicles seems to have been towards longer and more detailed works. Both Richard Grafton and John Stow went on to write longer chronicles after their abridgements (Grafton’s *Chronicle at Large*, 1568, and Stow’s *Annales*, 1580), and, according to D. R. Woolf, several projects never saw the light of day due to lack of funding.¹⁶⁸ One such project might easily have been Holinshed’s *Chronicles of England, Scotland, and Ireland*. Originally the brain-child of one Reginald or Reyner Wolfe, it was intended as ‘a sort of super-chronicle, a universal history and geography on the order of the *Polychronicon*, complete with maps.’¹⁶⁹ Raphael Holinshed was Wolfe’s assistant, who rose to the position of main editor when Wolfe died. The money never stretched far enough to realise Wolfe’s original vision, so the project was limited to a history of England, Scotland and Ireland. Despite gaining the epithet of ‘Holinshed’s’ *Chronicles*, it was in fact more of a collaborative affair.

The contributors to Holinshed’s *Chronicles* had a diverse range of religious and political views. Edmund Campion, a Jesuit executed for treason in 1581, wrote the ‘History of Ireland’, which was completed by Richard Stanyhurst for the first edition of the *Chronicles* (1577). Stanyhurst, writer of the ‘Description of Ireland’, encountered Campion at university in Oxford, and died a religious refugee in Brussels in 1618, having converted to Catholicism. The other main contributor to the 1577 edition was William Harrison, author of the ‘Description of England’, a clergyman who argued in favour of clerical marriage and

¹⁶⁷ Woolf, ‘Genre into Artifact’, p. 329.

¹⁶⁸ See Woolf, ‘Genre into Artifact’, pp. 336-7.

¹⁶⁹ Woolf, ‘Genre into Artifact’, p. 334.

wanted to see further Protestant reforms in the Church of England.¹⁷⁰ Holinshed died in 1580, and contributors to the second edition included Abraham Fleming (who took over as chief editor) and the antiquarians John Hooker, Francis Thynne and John Stow. Stow was investigated for the possession of works with suspected Catholic sympathies, probably at the prompting of Richard Grafton.¹⁷¹ His possession of these texts was probably the result of scholarly rather than religious interests, although Annabel Patterson claims that the make-up of his collection suggests he may have been ‘particularly interested in political protest and resistance.’¹⁷² The political diversity of the contributors’ backgrounds produced a multivocal text which, Patterson argues, was united by a commitment to a certain amount of neutrality (or in the words of the chroniclers themselves, ‘indifference’) in the treatment of history.¹⁷³ Thus, according to Patterson, the *Chronicles* had something of a ‘liberal’ agenda and ‘were dedicated to the task of showing what it might mean to be “all Englishmen” in full consciousness of the fundamental differences of opinion that drove Englishmen apart.’¹⁷⁴

The influence of antiquarianism on the *Chronicles*, evident in its extensive use of chorography, may have helped to facilitate this so-called ‘liberal’ agenda. ‘Chorography’ was a growing genre of historical writing in the sixteenth century; Vergil also begins his history with a ‘description of Britain’, but what occupied half a chapter in the *Anglica Historia* has grown exponentially in Holinshed’s *Chronicles*. The 1577 edition devoted no fewer than three books to ‘An Historicall Description of the Island of Britayne, with a brief rehearsall of the nature and qualities of the people of Englande, and of all such commodities as are to be found in the same’, as well as a book each to further descriptions of Scotland and

¹⁷⁰ See Annabel Patterson, ‘Authors’, in *Reading Holinshed’s Chronicles* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), pp. 22-31 (esp. pp. 26-8). Patterson’s book is important for the much needed attention it gives to Holinshed’s text for its own sake rather than as a source for Shakespeare. Such consideration is valuable even to Shakespeare studies because it gives us a more comprehensive picture of the context in which Shakespeare was writing.

¹⁷¹ See Devereux, ‘Empty Tuns’, pp. 48-9, and Metzger, ‘Chronicles and “Correctness”’, p. 449.

¹⁷² Patterson, *Reading Holinshed’s Chronicles*, p. 24.

¹⁷³ See Patterson, ‘Intentions’ in *Reading Holinshed’s Chronicles*, pp. 3-21.

¹⁷⁴ Patterson, *Reading Holinshed’s Chronicles*, p. 23.

Ireland. Chapter titles in these sections include ‘Whether it be likely that there were euer any Gyaunts inhabiting in this Ifle or not’, ‘Of the generall Language vfed from time to time in Britaine’, as well as ‘Of Vniuerfities’, ‘Of Armour and Munition’ and (wearing their antiquarian credentials very much on their sleeves) ‘Of the Antiquities, or auncient Coines found in England’.¹⁷⁵ The chorographical mode had several consequences for historiography. One was the technical way in which evidence was dealt with; John H. Arnold writes that ‘it was antiquarians, specializing in a number of different areas, who developed the tools for dealing with the past via its documentary and material remains.’¹⁷⁶ The chorographical mode also made it possible to focus on subjects other than the ‘deeds of great men’, widening the scope of what constituted valid historical inquiry. But chorography approached history from (oddly enough given the reputation of antiquarians) a somewhat ‘presentist’ angle; a chorography described what the landscape looked like in the present, and fleshed out that description with an historical account of how it came to be that way, making the past begin to look like an explanation for shape of the present.

Annabel Patterson points out that there are two commonly held and contradictory ideas about the *Chronicles*: first that it failed to produce an overarching narrative due to its lack of structure and extensive reproduction of source materials, and second that it supports a narrative about the providential rise of the Tudor dynasty. Patterson ascribes the first opinion to F. J. Levy, and the second to E. M. W. Tillyard.¹⁷⁷ Levy does indeed write that the *Chronicles* ‘demonstrated most fully the idea that history could be written by agglomeration’,¹⁷⁸ and calls the second edition of the *Chronicles* (1587), ‘a badly articulated potpourri of diverse historical materials’.¹⁷⁹ But Tillyard also criticises Holinshed for his poor style, calling him ‘a compiler, whose crime is to miss the point of the more

¹⁷⁵ See the list of chapter titles available at ‘The Holinshed Project’, <<http://www.english.ox.ac.uk/holinshed/toc.php?edition=1577>>, [accessed 13/09/12].

¹⁷⁶ John H. Arnold, *History: A Very Short Introduction*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 40.

¹⁷⁷ See Patterson, *Reading Holinshed's Chronicles*, pp. 4-5.

¹⁷⁸ Levy, *Tudor Historical Thought*, p. 184.

¹⁷⁹ Levy, *Tudor Historical Thought*, p. 182.

distinguished of his sources. Much of the motivation of Polydore and Hall was borrowed by Holinshed but only parrotwise and with little understanding.¹⁸⁰ Clearly neither critic has a high opinion of Holinshed's ability to produce an overarching narrative, and although Levy is less committed to the idea of the 'Tudor Myth', he too ascribes at least a moralising purpose to Holinshed, asserting that '[w]here there was any selection at all, it was not based on matters of evidence but on morality. Holinshed shared the view that history should teach men, and especially princes, how to act.'¹⁸¹ Both critics have made assumptions about what Holinshed 'must' be trying to do as an historian, and taken rather negative views of his ability to achieve it.

Patterson challenges these dismissive attitudes by suggesting that 'what has been seen (contradictorily) as incompetence was a deliberate policy, the consequence of holding a different set of historiographical principles.'¹⁸² She argues that:

Holinshed initiated a procedure whereby 'the reader was left to be his own historian,' not because the historian had abrogated his interpretive task, but because he wished to register how extraordinarily complicated, even dangerous, life had become in post-Reformation England, when every change of regime initiated a change in the official religion, and hence in the meaning and value of acts and allegiances. What at one moment was loyalty, obedience, and piety could at the next be redefined as treason or heresy.¹⁸³

Like Stow, Holinshed shows a desire to preserve and disseminate source material, and to establish the facts while holding back somewhat from interpreting them. This desire to preserve and disseminate source materials is also an antiquarian one, but the reluctance to interpret that material was problematic for the 'usefulness' that history was supposed to have. As Ivo Kamps observes: 'The primary objections against antiquarian scholarship was

¹⁸⁰ Tillyard, *Shakespeare's History Plays*, p. 50. Tillyard complains that Holinshed 'blurs the great Tudor Myth', omitting a passage in Hall that recalls an ancient prophesy which supposedly predicts Henry Tudor's accession to the throne' (p. 51).

¹⁸¹ Levy, *Tudor Historical Thought*, p. 184.

¹⁸² Patterson, *Reading Holinshed's Chronicles*, p. 6.

¹⁸³ Patterson, *Reading Holinshed's Chronicles*, p. 6, quoting from an unpublished paper by F. J. Levy delivered at the MLA Convention in 1987.

that it was obscure, had little relevance to the present, and therefore served no pedagogical or utilitarian function.¹⁸⁴

However, antiquarian studies may have been less ‘irrelevant’ than they seemed;

Kamps also writes:

Some of this research had great political potential as it dealt with legal precedents and the ancient constitution, the rights of parliament, and the powers of the crown. There is little evidence that antiquarians did this research for the purpose of intervening politically, but it is clear that others, including James I, recognised the increasing importance of ‘precedent’ in the struggle between king and parliament.¹⁸⁵

Thus, this reluctance to interpret the ‘facts’ of history may not be symptomatic of a belief that they *cannot* be meaningfully interpreted, but that doing so may be dangerous. Patterson claims that ‘all of the chroniclers had, as they frequently testify, good reason to believe that what they were doing teetered constantly on the edge of the illegal.’¹⁸⁶ The antiquarians themselves seem to have tried to minimise this image of themselves, and when the Society of Antiquaries attempted to resume their meetings in 1614, Henry Spelman writes that they had ‘conceived some Rules of Government and Limitation to be observ’d amongst us; whereof this was one, That for the avoiding of Offence, we should neither meddle with Matters of State, nor of Religion’.¹⁸⁷ Nevertheless, works such as John Selden’s *History of Tithes* (1618) could and did provoke considerable controversy.

Annabel Patterson’s re-evaluation Holinshed’s *Chronicles* represents an important contribution to discussions of political ‘resistance’ in Tudor England. In his essay ‘The monarchical republic of Elizabeth I’, Patrick Collinson writes that he has ‘not argued for the incipience in Elizabethan England of a kind of constitutional monarchy, still less of a

¹⁸⁴ Ivo Kamps, ‘The Writing of History in Shakespeare’s England’, in *A Companion to Shakespeare’s Works: The Histories*, ed. by Richard Dutton and Jean E. Howard (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing Ltd., 2006), pp. 4-25 (p. 19). D. R. Woolf also writes that antiquarianism helped to develop ‘a love of the past for its own sake.’ (‘Genre into Artifact’, p. 352.)

¹⁸⁵ Kamps, ‘The Writing of History in Shakespeare’s England’, p. 18.

¹⁸⁶ Patterson, *Reading Holinshed’s Chronicles*, p. 7.

¹⁸⁷ Henry Spelman, ‘The original of the Four Terms of the Year’, cited by Fussner in *The Historical Revolution*, p. 95.

headless republic or even of a continuous, coherent republican movement.¹⁸⁸ These are, indeed, the potential anachronisms into which Patterson's idea of a 'liberal' sensibility threatens to collapse. Certainly the *Chronicles* cannot be called 'republican',¹⁸⁹ and Patterson prefers the term 'liberal', perhaps because their multivocality resists the promotion of a single political position. Nevertheless, I believe that something approaching an 'incipient constitutionalism' does indeed characterise the general attitude of the *Chronicles*. In the 1630s Edward Coke, MP, barrister, and Speaker of the House of Commons under Elizabeth, published the *Institutes of the Lawes of England*, in which he wrote:

It [a legal record] hath a sovereign privilege, that it is proved by no other but by it selfe. *Monumenta (quae nos Recorda vocamus) sunt vetustatis et veritatis vestigea*. And albeit the cause adjudged be particular, yet when it is entered of Record it is of great authority in Law, and serves for perpetuall evidence, and therefore ought to be common to all, yea, though it be against the King[.]¹⁹⁰

Coke's words appear to provide a good description of the rationale underlying the contributors' approach to source materials in Holinshed's *Chronicles*. It was not a stance that rejected the authority of kingship outright, but one that encouraged active participation in politics by informed 'citizens' of the 'commonwealth' on the basis that they had a right to that participation. In a country where the laws of the land were based on custom and tradition, the writing of history played an important role in educating the people in their roles as both 'subject' and 'citizen'.

¹⁸⁸ Patrick Collinson, 'The monarchical republic of Queen Elizabeth I', in *The Tudor Monarchy*, ed. by John Guy (London: Arnold, 1997) pp. 110-134 (p. 129).

¹⁸⁹ Although Andrew Hadfield notes that Francis Thynne incorporated much of George Buchanan's *History of Scotland* into his own 'History of Scotland' for the 1587 edition (see Andrew Hadfield, *Shakespeare and Republicanism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), p. 39). George Buchanan was a staunch opponent of royal supremacy and a tutor to James VI of Scotland (later James I of England), with whom Buchanan's ideas were less than popular. This is, of course, suggestive of the political ideas of only one of the contributors.

¹⁹⁰ Edward Coke, *Institutes of the Lawes of England*, cited by Fussner in *The Historical Revolution*, p. 32. Latin: 'Monuments (which we call Records) are the traces of antiquity and truth' (my own translation).

Conclusion: England Re-formed

After the Reformation England was transformed from what Patrick Collinson describes as '[o]ne of the most Catholic countries in western Europe' to a nation that prided itself on a supposedly long tradition of dissent from Rome.¹⁹¹ What is striking about the historical revisionism of the Reformation is that it presents itself as a discovery of what the 'truth' had *always* been; Henry's marriage had *always* been unlawful, English kings had *always* been entitled to a special authority over the Church. To justify the legality of his divorce and the break with Rome, Henry VIII needed the backing of history in the form of legal precedents. Thus, according to F. J. Levy, '[o]f all the "reformations" of Europe, the English was, in terms of its justification, the most historical.'¹⁹² The 'evidence', scriptural and historical, for the king's authority over the Church was compiled by Thomas Cranmer and Edward Foxe in 1530 in a document entitled *Collectanea satis copiosa* which later formed the backbone of the Act in Restraint of Appeals passed by Parliament in the spring of 1533.¹⁹³ According to D. G. Newcombe, the preamble to this Act was in many ways more important than the articles themselves:

The preamble to the Act in Restraint of Appeals made a number of claims about the nature of kingship in England which, if not entirely new, were argued with a new and different emphasis. The claim that the Crown was imperial was not new, but Cromwell's emphasis on England as 'an empire' was. An empire was different from a kingdom in that it stood as a sovereign state and neither required nor allowed any interference from the outside. No matters, spiritual or temporal, were outside the competence of the state or its courts, and these had their authority from the king, who in turn had his authority from God. The Pope, then, was an irrelevance: his jurisdiction was unnecessary, his interference unwelcome.¹⁹⁴

Borrowing from Protestant arguments against the Church, this reimagining of England's past would eventually lead to a radically new identity for the future.

¹⁹¹ Patrick Collinson, 'English Reformations', in *A Companion to English Renaissance Literature and Culture*, pp. 27-43 (p. 27).

¹⁹² Levy, *Tudor Historical Thought*, p. 79.

¹⁹³ On the *Collectanea satis copiosa*, see Newcombe, *Henry VIII and the English Reformation*, p. 43.

¹⁹⁴ Newcombe, *Henry VIII and the English Reformation*, p. 50.

In 1547, masses for the dead and the observation of saints' days were banned under Edward VI. The connection to the past these religious ceremonies had offered was also gone, and Mary's attempts to resurrect them over the course of her short, five-year reign would prove ultimately unsuccessful. It was the Protestant histories written under Edward and Elizabeth that helped to provide a new kind of connection to the past at the same time as forming a new English identity. For the likes of Edward Hall and Richard Grafton, it was possible to combine these moral and nationalistic needs; learning about the deeds of one's countrymen in the past inspired imitation in patriotic as well as moral matters. It is perhaps due to the Welsh roots of the Tudor dynasty that the national identity created was a curiously 'British' one, albeit a British identity with a keen sense of English superiority over Ireland, Scotland and Wales. Wales in particular came to be recognised as the site of Britain's greatest antiquity. As Polydore Vergil writes:

It is crediblie lefte in writinge that those Britons which wear survivors and safe after the spoyles and destruction of their contreye, in conclusion to have comen into Walles, usinge the opportunitie of the mountaynes, wooddes, and fennes (whereof that countrie is full) for their refuge and saftie, in the which place as yet they continewe.¹⁹⁵

The antiquarian and historian William Camden even learnt the Welsh language so that he could better achieve his goal (stated in his work *Britannia*) to 'restore antiquity to Britaine, and Britaine to his antiquity'.¹⁹⁶

The Galfridian legends offered a particularly popular imagining of this ancient 'British' history, which is perhaps why historians were so reluctant throughout the sixteenth century to dismiss them entirely. Even in Camden's *Britannia*, printed in the reign of James

¹⁹⁵ Vergil, *Polydore Vergil's English History*, p. 12.

¹⁹⁶ William Camden, 'The Author to the Reader', in *Britannia*, a hypertext critical edition, ed. by Dana F. Sutton, trans. by Philemon Holland (1610) (Irvine CA: University of California, 2004), <<http://www.philological.bham.ac.uk/cambrit/>>, [accessed 11/03/2014], (para. 1). Camden writes 'I thereupon in Etymologies and my conjectures have made recourse to the British, or Welsh tongue (so they now call it) as being the same which the primitive and most ancient inhabitants of this land used' (3).

I, after devoting four paragraphs to all of the arguments against Brutus' historicity, he writes:

As for these observations and judgements of other men, which I have recited, I beseech you, let no man commense action against me, a plaine meaning man and an ingenuous student of the truth, as though I impeached that narration of Brutus; forasmuch as it hath been alwaies (I hope) lawfull for every man in such like matters both to thinke what he will, and also to relate what others have thought. For mine owne part, let Brutus be taken for the father and founder of the British nation; I will not be of a contrarie minde.¹⁹⁷

Although Camden's tone suggest that no serious historian believes the myths of Arthur any more, his desire to leave judgement on the matter to his readers suggests a reluctance to destroy them entirely. Although the Tudors were no longer in power, the Galfridian legends still played a part in the 'British' identity constructed by the English.

Despite the longevity of the Galfridian legends, attitudes towards history changed radically in the period. By the end of the sixteenth century, as Fussner notes, history could teach

[...] morals, manners, prudence, patriotism, statecraft, virtue, religion, wisdom, truth; history was equally an antidote to all opposite qualities. History could have tamed the Irish, and history was a salutary remedy for mental sickness. Knowledge of history helped one to rise in the world, and knowledge of God's providence in history solaces those who, like Raleigh, suffered the onslaughts of adversity. The publicity value of history was well understood by projectors and preachers; and history's value as propaganda was firmly grasped by Court, Parliament, and Convocation. The uses of history were almost as various as the understandings of men.¹⁹⁸

¹⁹⁷ William Camden, 'Britaine', in *Britannia*, (para. 15). Nevertheless, Camden also advances his own theory about the origins of the British people: 'This is mine opinion, or conjecture rather, of the Britans originall. For in things of so great Antiquitie a man may more easilly proceed by guesse, than upon grounded reason pronounce sentence either way. And verily this their beginning from Gomer and out of Gaule, seemeth more substantiall, ancient and true, than that from Brutus and Troie. Nay, that this soundeth rather to a truth, and that our Britans are the very of-spring of the Gaulois, me thinks I am able to prove by the name, site, religion, maners and language: by all which the most ancient Gaules and Britaines have beene, as it were, in some mutuall societie linked together. And that I may this doe, let me, I pray you, with favourable good leave range abroad for a while at my pleasure.' (para. 18)

¹⁹⁸ Fussner, *The Historical Revolution*, p. 59.

This diversification of the uses of history, where history – often the same parts of history – could be made to serve the purposes of diverse and even opposing groups, began to undermine the idea that a ‘moral’ lesson, with a claim to universal truth, could easily be sought from history. Thus, Philip Sidney, in his *Apology for Poetry*, is able to level the objection against history that ‘being captived to the truth of a foolish world, is many times a terror from well-doing, and an encouragement to unbridled wickedness.’¹⁹⁹

Although figures such as Stow and Holinshed sought to bring a new academic rigour to the chronicles of the second half of the century, the scholarly credentials of their works would be short lived, and Robert Zaller calls Holinshed’s *Chronicles* ‘the last work in the English Chronicle tradition’.²⁰⁰ Similarly, Annabel Patterson writes that Holinshed’s *Chronicles* ‘began to be devalued within a decade of the second edition.’²⁰¹ According to Woolf, towards the end of the century ‘[i]t became fashionable to point out errors of fact, prejudices of interpretation and ugliness of expression’ in the chronicles.²⁰² Thus, the reason for the chronicles’ decline cannot be wholly ascribed to their failure to participate in the ‘new’ standards of historiography laid down by humanism, but also a failure of ‘style’. In addition, Woolf posits the theory that, with the appearance of printed ephemera that could be produced quickly and cheaply, the various functions of the chronicles were absorbed into new forms of media. He writes:

In short the chronicle did not so much decay as *dissolve* into a variety of genres such as almanacs (information); newsbooks, diurnals, and finally newspapers (communication); antiquarian treatises and classically modelled histories (historical); diaries, biographies and autobiographies (commemorative); and historical drama, verse and prose fiction (entertainment).²⁰³

¹⁹⁹ Sidney, *Apology*, pp. 93-4.

²⁰⁰ Robert Zaller, ‘King, Common, and Commonweal in Holinshed’s *Chronicles*’, *Albion*, 34.3 (2002), 371-390 (p. 371).

²⁰¹ Patterson, ‘Rethinking Tudor Historiography’, p. 186.

²⁰² Woolf, ‘Genre into Artifact’, p. 330.

²⁰³ Woolf, ‘Genre into Artifact’, p. 323.

Woolf's theory adds another dimension to the story of the chronicles' decline by considering the cultural functions served by these texts.

One of the genres of historical writing that came to replace important functions of the chronicles was the 'history play'. Although playwrights did not always have the 'factualness' of the history they presented foremost in their minds, plays about English history could educate a large numbers of the population in their national history. Indeed, Thomas Heywood, in his *Apology for Actors*, makes an argument for why theatre is better than the written word for accomplishing some of the recognised functions of history:

A description is only a shadow received by the ear, but not perceived by the eye; so, lively portraiture is merely a form seen by the eye, but can neither show action, passion, motion, or any other gesture, to move the spirits of the beholder to admiration: but to see a soldier shaped like a soldier, walk, speak, act like a soldier; to see a Hector all besmeared in blood, trampling upon the bulks of Kings [...] oh, these were sights to make an Alexander.²⁰⁴

The actions that Heywood imagines inspiring the audience are not exclusively moral actions, but also 'great deeds' in a more worldly sense. The ability of 'history plays' to mimic the patriotic effects of written histories is also the chief virtue of Talbot's appearance on the stage noted in Thomas Nashe's *Pierce Penniless* (1592).

In his *Apology for Poetry* (c. 1579), Sir Philip Sidney compares the poet to the philosopher and the historian. Which, he asks, is best suited to teaching men how to live?

The philosopher and the historian seek to do this:

[...] the one by precept, the other by example. But both, not having both, do both halt. For the philosopher, [...] his knowledge standeth so upon the abstract and general, that happy is the man who may understand him, and more happy that can apply what he doth understand. On the other side, the historian, wanting the precept, is so tied, not to what should be, but to what is, to the particular truth of things and not to the general reason of things, that his example draweth no necessary consequence, and therefore a less fruitful doctrine.²⁰⁵

²⁰⁴ Thomas Heywood, *An Apology for Actors*, in *Shakespeare's Theatre: A Sourcebook*, ed. by Tanya Pollard (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004), pp. 213-54 (pp. 220-1).

²⁰⁵ Sidney, *Apology*, p. 90.

If the philosopher is too general, the historian is too particular, with no clear-cut general application for the knowledge he possesses. The poet, on the other hand, is able to mould particular examples to illustrate general principles. Sidney exploits the differences between philosophy and history in order to make his case for poetry – a case which in many respects usurps what had been the territory of history. For history, the problem lay in the evident gap between ‘what should be’ (according to philosophy) and ‘what is’. The ‘history play’, however, represented a fusion of poetry and history, and in the next chapter, ‘Dramaturgy’, I shall consider the characteristics of history as a literary and dramatic genre and its development in the sixteenth century.

Chapter Two: Dramaturgy

The purpose of this chapter is to consider the general shape of the ‘history play’ and its development as a genre in the sixteenth century. It begins, therefore, with a look at some characteristics that have been claimed as integral to the genre. In *A Discourse of English Poetrie* (1586) William Webbe describes the differences between poetic genres. His definition of ‘Historicall’ poetry, however, leaves something to be desired:

[...] Poetry is not debarred from any matter, which may be expressed by penne or fpeeche, yet for the better understanding, and breefer method of this discourse, I may comprehend the same in three sortes, which are Comickall, Tragicall, Histori[c]all. Vnder the first, may be contained all such *Epigrammes, Elegies* and delectable ditties, which Poets have deuifed respecting onely the delight thereof: in the second, all dolefull complaynts, lamentable chaunces, and whatsoever is poetically expressed in sorrow and heuines. In the third, we may comprise, the rest of all such matters, which is indifferent betweene the other two, doo commonly occupy the pennes of Poets: such, are the Poeticall compyling of Chronicles, the freendly greeting betweene freendes, and very many sortes besides, which for the better distinction may be referred to one of the three kindes of Poetry.¹

‘History’ becomes a kind of catch-all genre for anything not easily divisible between comedy and tragedy. Webbe’s description demonstrates just how fluid the concept of ‘history’ as a literary or dramatic genre was at the start of the 1590s, and the latter part of this chapter will examine how ‘history’ interacts with the dramatic genres of the morality

¹ William Webbe, *A Discourse of English Poetrie*, ed. by Edward Arber (London: English Reprints, 1871), pp. 39-40. The *Discourse* is, of course, a work about poetry, rather than drama, which may limit how much it can tell us about the concept of history as a *dramatic* genre. However, following Aristotle’s *Poetics*, Webbe appears to view drama as a poetic form, presenting the development of drama as intimately connected to that of poetry: ‘The matters whereof verses were first made, were eyther exhortations to vertue, dehortations from vice, or the prayes of some laudable thing. From thence they beganne to vse them in exercises of immitating some vertuous and wise man at their feastes: where as some one should be appointed to represent another mans person of high estimation, and he sang fine ditties and wittie sentences, tunably to their Musick notes. Of this sort prang the first kinde of Comedyes, when they beganne to bring into the exercises, more persons then one, whose speeches were deuifed by dialogue wise, in answering one another. And of such like exercises, or as some will needes haue it, long before the other, began the first Tragedies’ (pp.38-9). It seem reasonable to assume, therefore, that the genres Webbe applies to poetry would also have been understood to apply to drama.

play, comedy and tragedy. First, however, I will begin with a brief survey of recent critical discussions of the history play genre.

Critical opinion concerning the cohesion and distinctiveness of the 'history play' genre has been varied. Graham Holderness writes that Shakespeare's history plays 'have appeared relatively easy to define and relatively stable in their occupation of a single discrete genre.'² For William A. Armstrong, writing in the 1970s, the cohesion of the history-play genre was a recently solved problem. He notes that eighteenth-century critics 'found the history play hard, if not impossible to classify', citing Nicholas Rowe's rejection of it and Samuel Johnson's opinion of its 'inferiority' to the established genres of comedy and tragedy.³ Yet he confidently asserts that

[...] some of the deepest connections between these [Shakespeare's] histories were not excavated until the twentieth century, and their claim to be a distinctive and coherent dramatic kind has been vindicated only in comparatively recent times.⁴

Since then, however, confidence appears once again to have wavered. Emma Smith writes: '[w]hereas Shakespeare's comedies and tragedies can draw on classical models for their generic validation, the question of genre in relation to the history plays has been rather more up for critical grabs.'⁵ And although G. K. Hunter maintains that '[h]istory plays are clearly different from comedies and tragedies in ways which do not resemble those that separate comedy from tragedy', he also acknowledges that '[i]t can be easily argued that this

² Graham Holderness, *Shakespeare: The Histories* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2000) p. 5. Similarly in his 1992 book *Shakespeare Recycled*, Holderness writes: '[T]hat group of plays based on the English chronicles was clearly designated "histories" in the First Folio of 1623, and as 'history plays' they have generally presented (unlike other forms such as comedy and tragedy) few problems of a generic kind.' (Graham Holderness, *Shakespeare Recycled: the Making of Historical Drama* (London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1992), p. 1).

³ See William A. Armstrong, 'Introduction', in *Shakespeare's Histories: An Anthology of Modern Criticism*, ed. by William A. Armstrong (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1972), pp. 9-22 (p. 9-10).

⁴ Armstrong, 'Introduction', p. 9. Both Armstrong and Holderness deliberately limit their discussion to Shakespeare's history plays.

⁵ Emma Smith, 'Genre', in *Shakespeare's Histories*, ed. by Emma Smith (Maldon MA: Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 2004), pp. 34-42 (p. 34). Smith's preface gives a good overview of the critical debate surrounding the issue of the genre of 'history'.

genre has a tendency to collapse like an unstable isotope into the more stable condition of either comedy or tragedy'.⁶

Seemingly one of the most obvious characteristics of the history play is that it must deal with factual history. Graham Holderness, for example, writes:

Where comedies and tragedies tended to derive their plots from fictional narratives, history plays, written in close relation to historiography were (and are) considered as dealing with matters of 'fact' rather than of 'fiction'. Henry V existed, the battle of Agincourt took place: Orsino and Othello are invented characters, their destinies fabricated from airy nothings to which the drama gave local habitation and a name.⁷

Stephen Longstaffe suggests a possible link with Shakespeare's influence on the genre:

Around the time that Shakespeare's *1 Henry IV* was published as a 'history' there seems to have been a shift away from identifying new historical plays as tragedies [...] and towards designating them as histories with the various qualifiers 'famous', 'chronicle', 'famous chronicle', 'true chronicle' [...] these terms all denote the play's historical veracity.⁸

Clearly some engagement with 'factual' history is necessary, but, perhaps surprisingly, this stipulation is not nearly as straightforward as it sounds.

The problem is threefold. Firstly, as we have seen in Chapter One, many of the stories associated with Britain's ancient past came under scrutiny in the sixteenth century and the historicity of figures such as Brutus, Arthur and other kings from Britain's antiquity was questioned, but often not totally refuted. Thus, plays such as *Gorboduc* (c. 1561) and the anonymous *King Leir* (c. 1594), as well as Shakespeare's *King Lear* (c. 1603) and *Macbeth* (c. 1606), deal with material that may have been viewed as 'factual' history by some, but not by others. Secondly, depicting 'factual' material does not always seem to guarantee the title of 'history play'. In the Induction to *A Warning for Fair Women* (1599), the personifications of

⁶ G. K. Hunter, *English Drama 1586-1642: The Age of Shakespeare* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), p. 155.

⁷ Holderness, *Shakespeare: The Histories*, p. 5. Hunter also talks about the importance of the 'truth' of the events depicted (see Hunter, *English Drama*, p. 157).

⁸ Stephen Longstaffe, 'What is the English History Play and Why are They Saying Such Terrible Things About It?', *Renaissance Forum*, 2.2 (1997), <<http://www.hull.ac.uk/renforum/v2no2/longstaf.htm>> [accessed 14/10/2011] (para. 27).

Tragedy, Comedy and History compete for dominance over the stage.⁹ Although History is banished from the stage, the play does draw its subject matter from chronicle accounts of a murder that took place in 1573.¹⁰ Like *Arden of Faversham* (1592), another dramatization of a murder drawn from chronicle as well as other popular sources, the play is usually classified as a ‘domestic tragedy’ rather than a ‘history’.¹¹ The exclusion of History from the stage in the Induction suggests that, although the action takes place in post-Conquest England and depicts ‘real’ events, contemporary audiences would have agreed with modern critics in not regarding it as a ‘history play’.¹²

The third problem with identifying the ‘history play’ with exclusively factual history is the extent to which playwrights deliberately included either inaccurate or entirely fictional details in otherwise ‘factual’ plays. Such details might range from the relatively minor anachronism of Margaret of Anjou’s presence at the court of Edward IV in *Richard III*, to rather bigger flights of fancy such as Edward IV’s encounter with the Tanner of Tamworth in Heywood’s play *The First Part of King Edward IV* (1599).¹³ At what point does a play become too fictional to be historical? What are we to make, for example, of Anthony

⁹ Comedy and History eventually leave the stage to Tragedy, and History points out: ‘Look, Comedy, I marked it not till now,/ The stage is hung with black, and I perceive/ The auditors prepared for Tragedy.’ *A Warning for Fair Women*, ed. by A. F. Hopkinson (London: M. E. Sims & Co, 1904), Induction, ll. 74-7.

¹⁰ See A. F. Hopkinson, ‘Introduction’, in *A Warning for Fair Women*, pp. i - xxi (p. xx). Other sources for the play include popular ballads and poems.

¹¹ ‘Domestic’ here in the sense of ‘occurring in the home’ rather than, as Thomas Heywood used it, ‘occurring in England’.

¹² In the absence of any direct contemporary explanations we can only speculate as to why. The murder depicted in the play, ‘real’ though it may be, was recent enough that it may not have been considered particularly ‘historical’ to contemporary audiences, and no attempt is made within the play to deliberately ‘historicise’ the subject matter. (Although ‘historicising’ the action is not something that ‘history plays’ necessarily do either.) Furthermore, we are told in the Induction that history enters with a ‘drum and ensign’, and while History still expects to take the stage he exclaims, ‘Oh, we shall have some doughty stuff today!’ (*A Warning for Fair Women*, Induction, opening stage direction and l. 8.) This may suggest an association between history and military action, possibly connected to a concept of history as ‘the deeds of great men’, which fits with Thomas Heywood’s description of ‘domestic’ (English) histories (see *An Apology for Actors*, in *Shakespeare’s Theatre: A Sourcebook*, ed. by Tanya Pollard (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004), pp. 213-54). The low-class characters that appear in *A Warning for Fair Women* may not have fitted with such a ‘glorified’ idea of history.

¹³ This episode was derived from a popular ballad (see Ribner, *The English History Play in the Age of Shakespeare* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957), p. 274). For Ribner, Heywood’s purpose in depicting Edward was wholly patriotic (see pp. 274-278), but Nora L. Corrigan argues that ‘[c]omparing Heywood’s treatment of this material with his popular ballad sources [...] throws his political agenda into sharp relief. In Heywood’s world, politics are not confined to the court and battlefield; rather, they play out in the greenwood, the private home, and the artisan’s shop’ (‘The Merry Tanner, the Mayor’s Feast, and the King’s Mistress: Thomas Heywood’s *1 Edward IV* and the Ballad Tradition’, *Medieval and Renaissance Drama in England*, 22 (2009), 27-41 (p. 27)).

Munday's two plays *The Downfall of Robert Earl of Huntington* and *The Death of Robert Earl of Huntington* (c. 1597)? Munday's plays are set in the reign of Richard I and he makes Prince John and Eleanor of Aquitaine important and active characters, but the events of the plot are entirely fictional and we have no evidence to suggest they were ever considered to be otherwise.¹⁴ Irving Ribner articulates the problem:

The body of plays drawn from such matter is a vast one. To what extent must they be included in any concept of the history play as a distinct dramatic genre? We must attempt to see the limits of history as the Elizabethans saw them; yet we cannot fall in the morass which Tucker Brooke so clearly saw when he warned that any discussion of the subject was in danger of 'losing itself hopelessly in the attempt to follow such quasi-historical will-o'-the-wisps as *George a Greene* and *James IV*.'¹⁵

It is the problem of seeing 'the limits of history as the Elizabethans saw them' which is key.

In his *Apology for Actors*, Heywood describes how 'history plays' inspired the actions of a chain of historical figures:

In the first of the Olimpiads, amongst many other active exercises in which Hercules ever triumphed as victor, there was in his nonage presented unto him by his Tutor in the fashion of a history, acted by the choice of the nobility of Greece, the worthy and memorable acts of his father Jupiter. Which, being personated with lively and well-spirited action, wrought such impression in his noble thoughts that in mere emulation of his father's valor (not at the behest of his stepdame Juno) he performed his twelve labours.¹⁶

He goes on to explain how Theseus was subsequently inspired by a similar performance of Hercules' deeds, Achilles by Theseus, Alexander by Achilles and Julius Caesar by Alexander. Heywood gives no indication that he regards the 'history' of Jupiter or Hercules

¹⁴ *The Downfall* and *The Death of Robert Earl of Huntington* are 'Robin Hood' plays, and Munday is the first to identify Robin Hood as the Earl of Huntington, an outlawed nobleman instead of a poor yeoman. He is also among the first to place the action in the era of King Richard/Prince John, rather than in the reign of Edward I, II or III. Interestingly, Munday leaves it ambiguous whether or not Robert and his lady, Matilda Fitzwater, are meant to be the 'real' Robin Hood and Maid Marion or whether these are identities which they assume (although in the case of Marion/Matilda, she begins the play as 'Marion' and only later assumes the identity of Matilda Fitzwater – the opposite of what one would expect if the characters are meant to be assuming the roles of Robin and Marion). History is certainly used in fascinating ways in these two plays, but they may not necessarily merit the name of 'history plays'.

¹⁵ Ribner, *The English History Play*, p. 13, citing Tucker Brooke, *The Tudor Drama*, p. 297. Ribner eventually finds grounds to exclude such plays on the basis that they have 'no historical purpose and little historical sense' (p. 27).

¹⁶ Heywood, *Apology*, p. 219.

as any more or less factual than that of Julius Caesar. Furthermore, although we think of history as a 'new' genre to the Elizabethan period, Heywood presents it as a classical genre equal to tragedy and comedy and he works hard to present a narrative of continuity. This is in no small part due to his desire to create a dignified, classical pedigree for contemporary theatrical practices. Thus, for the purposes of rhetoric at least, the line between fact and fiction could be extremely elusive.

Irving Ribner blames the decline of the history play in the early seventeenth century on an increasing vogue for what he calls 'romantic' or 'heroic' elements:

As the history play developed, there had developed alongside of it what may be considered an entirely separate dramatic genre, although it is often confused with the history play. This is the romantic drama employing historical figures, of which we have noted *Cymbeline* and *Bonduca* as excellent examples in the field of legendary British history. Such plays draw their subject matter primarily from folk legend and romance rather than from the chronicles, and what chiefly distinguishes them from the history play is that they make no attempt to accomplish the serious purposes of the historian. To the growth and popularity of this separate dramatic type is connected the decline of the legitimate history play.¹⁷

It is difficult to know how an *entirely* separate dramatic genre could be so easily confused with the 'legitimate' history play. Nevertheless, Ribner uses the presence of such 'heroic' elements in *The Famous Victories of Henry V* (1594) to argue that the play lies outside the line of development of 'legitimate' histories:

The Famous Victories is in the tradition of the heroic romance, in which a glamorous popular idol is glorified in a series of loosely connected episodic scenes. It is probably the first such play to draw its titular figure from actual history, but in spite of that it does not, to any degree, approach its subject matter with the serious purposes of the historian, as Marlowe does in *Tambulaine*. [...] the play is not in the line of *Gorboduc*, where, in spite of what, from a modern point of view, is even less historical subject matter, we have serious Elizabethan history in dramatic form. *The Famous Victories* merely uses an actual British hero rather than a legendary one, and it is perhaps most concerned with the legend of Hal's youth which had come down as romantic folklore. It does not, moreover, use this romantic matter to further any serious historical

¹⁷ Ribner, *The English History Play*, p. 267.

aims, as Shakespeare was to use it in his *Henry IV* plays. Not before *Tambulaine* is the romantic hero play given serious historical treatment, and only then does it join the stream which is to culminate in Shakespeare's great tetralogy.¹⁸

What it comes down to, according to Ribner, is whether or not a play has a 'serious historical purpose'.¹⁹

Ribner's stance on *The Famous Victories* seems odd considering his acknowledgment elsewhere that 'a nationalistic glorification of England' is a legitimate 'historical purpose'.²⁰ As I shall argue in the section 'History and Comedy', *The Famous Victories* is a more complex play than Ribner allows for, and certainly it has a serious political purpose, which it approaches through its depiction of history. What Ribner considers to be a 'legitimate historical purpose' frequently looks more mid-twentieth century than Elizabethan; for example, although he acknowledges the emphasis on rhetoric in humanist historiography, he dismisses it, arguing that '[t]he glorification by the humanists of history as a form of rhetoric need not concern us in so far as the historical purposes of Elizabethan dramatists are concerned.'²¹ This seems an odd move when considering history in a literary context, especially given history's role as a kind of 'rhetorical ornament' to support the purposes of other discourses ('political', 'moral', 'theological', 'philosophical', etc.).

Instead of trying to separate 'history plays' from those that merely use historical material, Paulina Kewes suggests an alternative approach:

¹⁸ Ribner, *The English History Play*, pp. 72-3. In contrast Paul Dean writes, 'It could be argued without undue paradox that both *The Famous Victories* and *Sir John Oldcastle* are more entitled to be called historical plays than Shakespeare's, for they both stick quite closely to what were thought to be the historical facts of the personal development and public career of Henry V' ('Shakespeare's Historical Imagination', *Renaissance Studies*, 11.1 (1997), 27-40 (p. 33)).

¹⁹ Ribner writes: 'We may summarize the purposes for which these [historical] matters were treated under two general headings. Those stemming from classical and humanist philosophies of history include (1) a nationalistic glorification of England; (2) an analysis of contemporary affairs, both national and foreign so as to make clear the virtues and the failings of contemporary statesmen; (3) a use of past events as a guide to political behaviour in the present; (4) a use of history as documentation for political theory; and (5) a study of past political disaster as an aid to Stoical fortitude in the present. Those stemming from medieval Christian philosophy of history include: (6) illustration of the providence of God as the ruling force in human – and primarily political – affairs, and (7) exposition of a rational plan in human events which must affirm the wisdom and justice of God' (*The English History Play*, p. 26).

²⁰ See Ribner, *The English History Play*, p. 26.

²¹ Ribner, *The English History Play*, p. 17.

If we want to understand the place and uses of history in early modern drama, we should be willing to consider any play, irrespective of its formal shape or fictional element, which represents, or purports to represent, a historical past, native or foreign, distant or recent (sometimes very recent).²²

Kewes' suggestion has considerable merit, although it is geared towards understanding the 'place and uses of history in early modern drama' rather than defining the 'history play'. As *A Warning for Fair Women* and Munday's *Huntington* plays show, not every play dealing with factual history or purporting to represent an historical past necessarily merits the name of 'history play', but attempting to designate 'legitimate' historical purposes in the way that Ribner does risks approaching the plays with too many pre-assumptions. To begin to understand how Elizabethans saw the relationship between historical 'fact' and 'fiction', we need to be willing to chase some of those 'quasi-historical will-o'-the-wisps' that threaten to make a mockery of attempts to categorise the formal features of the Elizabethan 'history play'.

The majority of Ribner's 'legitimate historical purposes' are political. And indeed, being 'political' has sometimes been claimed as something that separates the history play from other genres. Lily B. Campbell, for example, separates history from tragedy by arguing for a distinction between 'ethics' and 'politics', and writes that:

[...] it is to this distinction between private and public morals that we must look for the distinction between tragedy and history. Tragedy is concerned with the doings of men which in philosophy are discussed under *ethics*; history with the doings of men which in philosophy are discussed under *politics*.²³

As we have seen in Chapter One, the writing of history was very much concerned with morality and ethics, as well as politics. Furthermore, Campbell's distinction between tragedy and history has long been considered problematic. As Ribner writes:

²² Paulina Kewes, 'The Elizabethan History Play: A True Genre?', in *A Companion to Shakespeare's Works: The Histories*, ed. by Richard Dutton and Jean E. Howard (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing Ltd., 2006), pp. 170-93 (p. 188).

²³ Lily B. Campbell, *Shakespeare's Histories: Mirrors of Elizabethan Policy* (London: Methuen, 1964), p. 17.

[...] the public and private virtues are so completely interwoven in general Renaissance concepts of kingship that it is almost impossible for a dramatist to deal with the one to the exclusion of the other.²⁴

It does not make sense to ask whether a play like *Richard III* or *Richard II* is a tragedy *or* a history; quite simply, they are both. As in the case of trying to separate out ‘romantic’ or ‘heroic’ plays, the boundary between the history play and other genres is often flexible, and at times non-existent.

G. K. Hunter suggests a reason why the boundary between the history play and other genres may be so flexible:

Tragedies and Comedies operate inside efficient and well-tested modes for the artful unification of experience, and it has sometimes seemed as if the history play could not achieve such unity unless it fell into the artful method of one or the other of its siblings.²⁵

He goes on to write: ‘History plays are not controlled by the formal closures of death or marriage; they allow the open-endedness of history itself to appear’.²⁶ Indeed, the ‘open-endedness’ of the history has also been claimed as a defining feature of the genre. Paulina Kewes summarises some of the claims made by critics of the history play in this respect:

They argue that contrary to tragedies and comedies which require formal closure, history plays (read: ‘English’ history plays) are ‘open-ended,’ for when the play ends, history continues [...] Not only the endings, but the beginnings of history plays are said to be ‘open,’ for scenes of genealogy which rehearse events preceding the start of action proper direct the audience to locate what they see along a historical continuum.²⁷

Kewes uses this to further her argument that non-English history plays that fit such criteria just as well as English history plays should not be excluded from the genre. What she does not address is the criteria themselves.

²⁴ Ribner, *The English History Play*, p. 11.

²⁵ Hunter, *English Drama*, p. 160.

²⁶ Hunter, *English Drama*, p. 161.

²⁷ Kewes, ‘A True Genre’, pp. 177-8.

First it should be noted that the action of non-historical genres is not always self-contained. Take, for example, *Othello* and *Hamlet*. Othello has already wooed and married Desdemona and promoted Cassio in place of Iago before the action of the play begins, yet these actions are central to the events of the play. At the end, Cassio is appointed in Othello's place, Iago is imprisoned with the prospect of torture, and the remaining characters make plans for a future the audience will never see. In *Hamlet*, Claudius has already murdered his brother, married Gertrude and assumed the throne before the play begins, and the play ends as Fortinbras takes control. Hamlet even directs the audience's attention to a fictional future when he commands Horatio to tell his story, the supposed record of which presumably leads eventually to the very play the audience has witnessed. Both plays deliberately leave the beginning and ending of the action 'open' in order to create the illusion of a kind of 'historical continuum' – and they are by no means unique in doing this. However, history plays are open-ended in a way that implies the relationship of events on stage to the world inhabited by the audience, especially in the case of plays dealing with British or English history. Implicit in the ending of a history play is the question of how the events depicted in the play have shaped the world in which the audience lives. This begins to suggest the special way in which history plays are 'political'.

Although recent critics are less inclined to exclude other genres from being 'political', it is still often claimed as a particular feature of the history play. Indeed, Michael Hattaway writes in his essay 'Drama and Society' in *The Cambridge Companion to English Renaissance Drama*, that '[t]he so-called "history plays" of the period ought, as we have implied in this volume, to be redesignated "political plays".'²⁸ Perhaps influenced by Hattaway's move, there is no essay on the 'history play' in the section 'Genres and Modes' of *A Companion to English Renaissance Literature and Culture*, but history plays feature strongly in Stephen Longstaffe's essay 'Political Plays'. He writes:

²⁸ Michael Hattaway, 'Drama and Society', in *The Cambridge Companion to English Renaissance Drama*, ed. by A. R. Braunmuller and Michael Hattaway (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), pp. 93-130 (p. 96).

Though the evidence is not always conclusive, it suggests that the history play was far more censored than any other dramatic genre, and certainly more so than other political genres such as tragedy; the only element of comparable concern to the Master of the Revels was personal satire.²⁹

What the history play and satire have in common is a direct relevance to the world of the audience. In a country where the law was based on historical precedent, this relationship could potentially have some far-reaching political implications.

Historical drama in the late sixteenth century was a genre that was 'open' in a number of ways. Its status as history implied a connection to the world of its audience, making the action structurally more 'open-ended' than other genres. This made the history play more often than not a history of the present, as much as it was about the events of the past. In addition to this kind of 'openness', historical drama was also 'open' to other genres in the sense that it borrowed from their conventions to structure and organise its narratives about the past. In some ways, history was more of a subject matter, and the terms of its representation were dictated by the artistic conventions of the medium in which it appeared, both on the page and on the stage. The remainder of this chapter, therefore, will look at how the generic conventions of the morality play, comedy and tragedy were translated into key historical plays of the fifteen hundreds.

History and the Morality Play

The influence of the morality play on the history play has been occasionally acknowledged but largely ignored in recent criticism. This is in part a reaction against the 'old historicist' method of tracing back 'a genetic sequence' between plays which is now sometimes considered to force a false sense of stability on a genre rather than come to terms with its instability.³⁰ Like the history play, the morality play lacked a classical pedigree, and it is also easy to think of it as a more coherent genre than it was. As Janette Dillon observes:

²⁹ Stephen Longstaffe, 'Political Plays', in *A Companion to English Renaissance Literature and Culture*, ed. by Michael Hattaway (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2003), pp. 486-498 (p. 488).

³⁰ Hunter, *English Drama*, p. 164.

Critics often group much of the non-cycle drama under the heading of ‘morality play’, another term first coined in the eighteenth century. Early writers occasionally referred to ‘morals’ or ‘moral plays’ but not in a way consistent enough to give these terms very clear currency.³¹

As Dillon notes, *Everyman*, sometimes regarded as the most ‘classic’ morality play, calls itself a ‘treatise’, a term which suggests a formal treatment of a particular subject rather than the kind of sequence of events that makes up a typical ‘story’.³² Since the morality play was largely extinct by the 1590s, recent critics looking at drama of the late sixteenth century have preferred to confine themselves to the genres of tragedy, comedy and history laid out in late sixteenth-century tracts and, of course, in Shakespeare’s Folio.

The influence of the morality play on the history play should not be ignored, however. The link which Elizabethans saw between the subjects of history and morality makes it particularly interesting that, as one form disappeared, the other developed.

According to Ribner:

The morality play structure was a perfect vehicle for executing the true historical function, for the morality was didactic and symbolic, designed to communicate idea rather than fact, built upon a plot formula in which every event was related to the others so as to create a meaningful whole.³³

For Ribner, the conventions of the morality play lent themselves to the moralizing purpose of history. Nevertheless, in other ways the two forms are not obviously complementary.

The morality play is a play of abstract concepts stripped of specificity and presented as trans-historical universals; the history play is a dramatization of events occurring at a particular time. The problem of the relationship between the universal and the particular is, of course, an issue for all literature on some level or another. But if teaching moral lessons was considered to be the primary purpose of history, then the history play had the task of indicating how universal meaning is to be extrapolated from historically specific events.

³¹ Janette Dillon, *The Cambridge Introduction to Early English Theatre* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), p. 145.

³² Dillon, *Early English Theatre*, p. 145.

³³ Ribner, *The English History Play*, p. 31.

Furthermore, the a-historicity of the morality play meant that its conventions were not necessarily useful for depicting providence, which was a working out of God's will over time. To fulfil its 'moral' function, the history play could either explicate the intended interpretation in prologues, epilogues, or speeches attributed to particular characters, or deliberately foreground problems of interpretation by offering several possible meanings at once.³⁴ Critics like Tillyard were right to work under the assumption that we should not underestimate the Elizabethan urge to look for the moral lessons of history, although this need not mean that every history play readily supplied one.

In the early sixteenth century morality plays began to take on a more satiric role by critiquing the structures of power in the state, rather than explaining the power structure of heaven. Irving Ribner calls John Skelton's *Magnyfycence* (1519) 'the first clear application of the morality play form to problems of secular politics' because '[i]t portrays an actual historical situation and uses that situation to teach secular political theory which bears particularly upon immediate political problems.'³⁵ Rather than an 'everyman' figure, the central character in *Magnyfycence* is a king, and the vices who lead him astray are thought to be satiric representations of individuals at court. Robert Potter writes:

In the new social and intellectual world of Tudor England the morality play lost its original function as a repentance drama. A society increasingly preoccupied with the pursuit of wealth and power, and increasingly unable to agree in matters of religion, could scarcely continue to accept the microcosm of the medieval morality play as a true picture of the world. Yet the morality tradition – its structure, stage conventions, characterization and theatrical habit of mind – was assimilated into the new world.³⁶

Although potentially 'political' in the context of religious reform, the political element in plays such as *Mankind* and *Everyman* remained relatively abstract. Applying allegory to a specific situation at court, however, made the political relevance of *Magnyfycence* rather more immediate. This is an aspect the history play shared with these later Tudor moralities.

³⁴ This is an idea which I will explore in greater depth and in relation to specific plays later in the chapter.

³⁵ Ribner, *The English History Play*, p. 36.

³⁶ Robert Potter, *The English Morality Play*, (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul Ltd: 1975) p. 58.

The most important figure adopted into the history play from the morality play is that of the ‘vice’. In morality plays, vices were often comic characters; Margreta de Grazia points out that:

The Antic-Vice remained the dominant stage figure through the middle of the sixteenth century, very much kept alive on the commercial stage by the celebrated clown Richard Tarlton. At his death in 1588 more than the loss of a clown was lamented: ‘Now Tarlton’s dead, the Consort lacks a Vice.’ His dual role as Clown and Vice survived him into Shakespeare’s time through his successor, Will Kempe, known as ‘Jest monger and vice-regent general to the Ghost of Dick Tarlton.’ That the two roles coalesced was quite natural for both were grounded in knavery, the Clown’s concentrated in jest and the Vice’s in scheming.³⁷

Indeed, as W. A. Davenport comments, the extent of the comic contributions of the vices in the morality *Mankind* gave it a reputation throughout much of the twentieth century as a ‘degraded’ and ‘scurrilous’ morality that did not take the delivery of its moral message seriously.³⁸ The possibility of comedy undermining the moral message of a play is an interesting one; in his *Apology for Poetry*, Philip Sidney famously complains that the plays of contemporary dramatists:

[...] be neither right tragedies nor right comedies, mingling kings and clowns, not because the matter so carrieth it, but thrust in the clown by head and by shoulders to play a part in majestic matters, with neither decency nor discretion; so as neither the admiration and commiseration, nor the right sportfulness, is by their mongrel tragi-comedy maintained.³⁹

Sidney goes on to say:

And the great fault, even in that point of laughter, and forbidden plainly by Aristotle, is, that they stir laughter in sinful things, which are rather execrable than ridiculous; or in miserable, which are rather to be pitied than scorned.⁴⁰

³⁷ Margreta de Grazia, *Hamlet without Hamlet* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), p. 180.

³⁸ See W. A. Davenport, *Fifteenth Century English Drama* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1982), pp. 36-7. Davenport principally cites E. K. Chambers (*English Literature at the Close of the Middle Ages*) and A. W. Pollard (*English Miracle Plays, Moralities and Interludes*) in connection to this view of *Mankind*.

³⁹ Philip Sidney, *Apology for Poetry*, ed. by Geoffrey Shepherd, revised and expanded by R. W. Maslen, 2nd edn. (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2006), p. 112.

⁴⁰ Sidney, *Apology*, pp. 112-3.

The danger of mixing these ‘comic’ elements with more serious material, according to Sidney, is that they can encourage the audience either to laugh at sin (presumably thereby dismissing it in some way) or to laugh at people who should be pitied. Nevertheless, in morality plays the role of the vice is often designed to invoke both of these kinds of laughter, but it rarely presents a serious threat to the overall message of the play.

Both of Sidney’s objections about the effects of comic elements could apply to John Bale’s play *Kynge Johan*. Written in the 1530s, the version we have was probably re-written for a performance in front of Queen Elizabeth in 1561.⁴¹ In the scene in which the vices (Sedition, Usurped Power, Private Wealth and Dissimulation) first appear together on stage, Sedition humorously explains (and has each figure act out) how Dissimulation brings in Private Wealth, who in turn brings in Usurped Power. Sedition then makes them all go off-stage again in order to carry him in on their shoulders:

That yt may be sayde that fyrst Dyssymulacion
Browght in Privat Welth to every cristen nacion;
And that Privat Welth browght in Usurpid Power,
And he Sedycyon in cyte, town and tower,
That sum man may know the feche of all owr sorte.⁴²

Whilst carrying Sedition in, Private Wealth complains about Sedition’s weight, and before being put down Sedition warns ‘I wylle be shyte yow all yf ye sett me not downe softe’ (p. 31). This pantomime is certainly designed to draw laughter from the audience – quite literally provoking ‘laughter in sinful things’. However, in this case the humour does not get in the way of the allegorical meaning that the pantomime is meant to convey. Sedition’s treatment of the ‘widow’ England fulfils the criteria for Sidney’s second concern, as Sedition repeatedly pokes fun at her expense.⁴³ However, despite occasionally raising a laugh from the audience, Sedition’s treatment of England may well demonstrate why she is

⁴¹ For the date of the play, see Ribner, *The English History Play*, p. 37. See also Robert Potter, who writes that it was ‘probably written in 1538 and performed at Christmas before the household of Thomas Cranmer, Archbishop of Canterbury’, *The English Morality Play*, p. 95.

⁴² John Bale, *Kynge Johan*, ed. by J. Payne Collier (London: Camden Society, 1838), p. 31. All further references to this text are to this edition.

⁴³ He makes typically antifeminist jokes, calling her ‘whore’ (p. 68) or tries to comically undermine her by accusing her of farting (p. 68).

to be pitied rather than scorned. The subversive potential of these elements is mostly contained within the morality tradition; the actions of the vices are clearly identified as undesirable, immoral and not to be imitated.

I say these elements are ‘mostly’ contained because there is some potential to destabilise the intended moral message. This is most obvious in the case of Sediton, the chief vice of the play, who provides a decentred position from which to view the action of the play. For example:

K.J. Who ys thy husbond, telme, good gentyll Ynglond.
 Y. For soth God hym selfe, the spowse of every sort
 That seke hym in fayth to the sowlys helth and comfort.
 S. He is scant honest that so many wyfes wyll have (p. 5).

By taking the metaphor too literally, Sediton suggests an alternative interpretation (that God is a bigamist) to the one intended by Widow England. And while the play points out these interpretations to be demonstrably wrong, they playfully challenge the ‘correct’ interpretation. More problematically, at the end of the play Sediton offers to confess in return for a pardon, which Imperial Majesty grants him. However, Imperial Majesty and Sediton have different interpretations of what the terms of the ‘confession’ are:

I.M. Aryse; I perdon the, so that thou tell the trewth.
 S. I wyll tell to yow suche treason as enseweth.
 Yet a ghostly father ought not to bewraye confessyon.
 I. M. No confessyon is but ought to discover treason.
 S. I thynke it may kepe all thyng save heresy.
 I.M. It may hold no treason, I tell the verelye (p. 96).

For Sediton confession is a Catholic sacrament that will be kept confidential and have no public consequences; for Imperial Majesty it is a tool of the state for enforcing justice.

Although Sediton does indeed ‘telle the trewth’, Imperial Majesty has him hanged anyway.⁴⁴ Our assessment of Sediton’s role as an abstract type, rather than a particular character, influences whether we interpret Imperial Majesty’s apparently broken promise as justified or not. As Clergy responds to Sediton’s admission of having ‘playde the knave’,

⁴⁴ See *Kynge Johan*, p. 99.

‘Thū canst do none other, except thū change thy wunte’ (p. 94). One might pardon someone guilty of sedition, but Imperial Majesty cannot pardon Seditiō itself. Nevertheless, it is possible that some sympathy might be garnered for the figure of Seditiō; as we have seen, in *The Consolation of Philosophy* Boethius points out that, if we have no free will, there is no justice in being punished for sins we had no choice but to commit.⁴⁵ Similarly, Seditiō, as the embodiment of sedition, has no choice but to act seditiously. Vice is always vice.

Marie-Hélèn Besnault and Michel Bitot describe the characteristics of the vice:

Verbal and physical dexterity, inveterate punning, abrupt changes of tempo and register [...], deceit in the form of physical and moral disguise, tricks in tears and laughter, shifts from controlled rational or even solemn tones to passionate, angry or amorous expostulations, sacreligious use of oaths and Scriptures, satire of courtiers, social climbers and tractable citizens, are all part of their common repertoire, as are misogynistic sneers, self-confidence, and arrogant trust in others’ gullibility. Above all, there is their common ability to step out of the action of the play, comment upon it to the audience, even organise it. Most notable are their superlative acting skills, the high entertainment value of their tricks, and the jubilation they manifest in their triumphant guiles.⁴⁶

Outside of the morality play genre, the vice figure becomes more complex because the interpretive framework that contains the potentially subversive alternative interpretations offered by the vice is not always present.⁴⁷ When ‘vice’ characters are no longer directly identified with vice itself, their decentred view of the action gains legitimacy and can, at times, genuinely rival more orthodox interpretations. So, for example, in *Edmund Ironside* the only character who addresses the audience directly is Edricus, who tries to manipulate

⁴⁵ See p. 49 in ‘Boethius and Machiavelli’, above.

⁴⁶ Marie-Hélèn Besnault and Michel Bitot, ‘Historical legacy and fiction: the poetical reinvention of King Richard III’, in *The Cambridge Companion to Shakespeare’s History Plays*, ed. by Michael Hattaway (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), pp. 106-125 (p. 114).

⁴⁷ The vice figure cannot be claimed exclusively for the history play. Iago, for example, also plays a manifestation of this type in *Othello*.

the conflict between Edmund and Canute to his advantage and thus occupies a position similar to that of Seditio in *Kynge Johan*.⁴⁸ Larry Champion argues that

[Edricus] – by forcing the spectators to view the various conflicts within the play through the filter of his ulterior motivations – infuses a sense of political self-interest that tends to resonate beyond the individual.⁴⁹

In the case of *Edmund Ironside*, Edricus provides the *only* interpretive voice the audience is privy to, with the effect of creating doubt about the purity of the motivations of the other characters.

In Shakespeare's *Henry IV* plays, the effect that Falstaff has on possible interpretations of the action has been a matter of continual debate; should we recognise him as a vice-like character leading Prince Hal into sin, and therefore rejoice at Hal's rejection of him, or does Falstaff somehow represent some important truth which the established order is unable to acknowledge? Falstaff in the *Henry IV* plays and Edricus in *Edmund Ironside* represent very different incarnations of the morality vice. Both are allowed to commentate on events through witty interjections in the dialogue and through soliloquies that offer a decentred view of the action. But while Falstaff has inherited the vice's more jovial characteristics, Edricus represents a far more calculating and manipulative side typical also of 'the Machiavel'. In *Kynge Johan* it is notable that the chief-vice Seditio represents a primarily political 'vice' rather than a religious one, taking him a step closer to the 'Machiavel' of later drama. Falstaff may show considerable self-interest and cynicism, but he fails to be the grand-manipulator, more often falling victim to Hal's pranks than the other way around. While vice-like characters do not always signify in the

⁴⁸ Indeed, Edricus directly compares himself to Ambidexter, the vice character in *Cambises*. See *Edmund Ironside*, in *Six Early Plays Related to the Shakespeare Canon*, ed. by E. B. Everitt and R. L. Armstrong (Copenhagen: Rosenkilde and Bagger, 1965), pp. 104-142 (l. 330). The play is preserved in MS. Egerton 1994, which also contains the unfinished *Thomas of Woodstock*. *Edmund Ironside* is usually dated to the 1580s, and E. B. Everitt notes that 'the brawling scene between two archbishops is un-paralleled in Elizabethan drama for its naive and farcical representation of two church dignitaries, and could not have passed the licensers after November 12, 1589' (*Early Plays*, p. 103).

⁴⁹ Larry S. Champion, *'The Noise of the Threatening Drum': Dramatic Strategy and Political Ideology in Shakespeare and the English Chronicle Plays* (London and Toronto: Associated University Presses, 1990), p. 66.

same way in every play they appear in, they have a general tendency to add an aspect of multivocality to a text, potentially destabilising the interpretive process.

Bale's *Kynge Johan* offers a very interesting case study of the influence of the morality play on the history play because it participates in both genres. The play portrays King John as a proto-Protestant martyr fighting against the Catholic Church. Unlike the *Troublesome Reign of King John* (c. 1589) and Shakespeare's *King John* (c. 1596), Bale's play focuses almost exclusively on John's battle with the Church, making no mention of Arthur of Brittany or John's shaky claim to the throne.⁵⁰ Critics of the early twentieth century sometimes tried to claim the play for either history or morality. William Roy Mackenzie, for example, comments: 'It is evident that a thread of history runs through the play from the beginning to the end, but this historical thread could be removed in a few moments and the play would remain, in texture, exactly as it is now; whereas any attempt to remove the allegorical element would result in the complete dismemberment of the play.'⁵¹ Ribner more sensibly asserts that 'the two [genres] exist side by side',⁵² but feels the need to defend the play's claim to the title of 'history play':

Kynge Johan is our first history play because it deliberately uses chronicle material in order to accomplish several legitimate historical purposes. It is, in the first place, a nationalist work dedicated to the greater glory of England. [...] Secondly, the play attempts, as has been indicated, to reinterpret history in the light of doctrine which holds to be true and to use history, in turn, as support for that doctrine. Thirdly, in typical Renaissance fashion, it uses an historical event of the past to throw light upon a political problem of the present and to offer a guide for its solution.⁵³

It is, however, neither necessary nor desirable to divide history from morality in *Kynge Johan*, since it is the interaction between the two that makes it such a significant play.

⁵⁰ The invasion by Louis of France is mentioned, but it is presented as having been ordered by the Church to put further pressure on John to comply with their wishes (see *Kynge Johan*, pp. 76-7).

⁵¹ William Roy Mackenzie, *The English Moralities from the point of view of Allegory*, (Boston and London: Ginn and Company Publishers, 1914), p. 218.

⁵² Ribner, *The English History Play*, p. 37.

⁵³ Ribner, *The English History Play*, p. 39.

One of the consequences of the interaction between morality genre and historical subject matter in *Kynge Johan*, and the interaction between universal and particular which arises from it, is that identity becomes relatively fluid within the play. Abstractions such as Sedition, Usurped Power and Private Wealth assume the identities of real historical figures (Stephen Langton, the Pope and Cardinal Pandulphus respectively) and King Johan dies and returns as the abstraction Imperial Majesty. In the case of the vices this fluidity associates them with the theme of disguise, foregrounded in one of Sedition's opening speeches:

In euery estate of the clargye I playe a part.
 Sumtyme I can be a monk in a long syd cowle,
 Sumtyme I can be a none and loke lyke an owle:
 Sumtyme a channon in a syrples fayre and whyght,
 A chapterhowse monke sumtyme I apere in syght.
 I am ower syre John sumtyme with a new shaven crowne,
 Sumtyme the person and swepe the stretes with a syd gowne (pp. 8-9).

Thus, it is through the theme of disguise that the play links the idea of 'sedition' to its particular manifestations.⁵⁴ Disguise also allows Sedition to gain power over other characters; when Sedition hears that Nobility will soon be coming on stage he says to the King:

S. Doth he so in dede, by owre lord than wyll I hence.
 K.J. Thow saydest thu woldyst dwell where he kepeth resydence.
 S. Yea, but fyrst of all I must chaunge myn apparell
 Unto a bysshop, to maynetayene with my quarell;
 To a monke or pryst, or to sum holy fryer.
 I shuld never elles accomplych my dysyre (p. 12).

Sedition then leaves the stage despite King Johan's command that he should stay.⁵⁵ The need for the other characters to recognise Sedition and the other vices for what they are becomes increasingly evident as the play goes on, especially in the case of Nobility, who,

⁵⁴ It is difficult to know to what extent the doubling of parts may have contributed to this because it is difficult to know exactly how the parts would have been doubled. For example: near the beginning of the play we have a stage direction saying 'Her go owt Sedwsion and drese for Syvyll Order' (p. 13), yet there are a number of places where both Sedition and Civil Order are on stage at the same time.

⁵⁵ See *Kynge Johan*, p. 13.

when asked by the King whether he knows Seditio, claims not to.⁵⁶ Later on, Seditio passes himself off as ‘Good Perfection’ to Nobility, who still does not recognise him. Seditio, on the other hand, always recognises Nobility immediately.⁵⁷ It is only at the end of the play, after the death of King Johan and the appearance of Veritas, that Nobility is finally able to recognise Seditio.⁵⁸

While this fluidity of identity lends strength to the vices, who, through their duplicity, are able to use it to their advantage, it is more problematic for the other characters. Unlike in the traditional morality tale, Nobility, Clergy, Civil Order, Commonality and England are not ‘virtues’ but aspects of the various ‘estates’ of England. ‘England’ herself, depicted as a wronged widow, represents an especially abstract idea of the country when distinguished from the other four characters. And rather than vices and virtues struggling for control over the central figure, it is these characters who are ‘corrupted’ (with the exception of England) by believing the arguments of the (disguised) vices and who are ultimately responsible for King Johan’s failure to subdue the Church. This corruption poses an especial problem for the identity of Civil Order and Nobility. Rather than the embodiment of civil order, Civil Order identifies himself as an ordinary lawyer, and further describes himself as the Church’s ‘feed man’ (p. 57). His reason for supporting the Church is entirely self-interested:

C.O. For yf the Church thryve than do we lawers thryve,
 And yf they decay ower welth ys not alyve.
 Therefore we musthelpe yowr state masters to uphold,
 Or elles owr profytts wyll cache a wynter colde (p. 49).

⁵⁶ See *Kynge Johan*, p. 13.

⁵⁷ See *Kynge Johan*, p. 45.

⁵⁸ See *Kynge Johan*, p. 94.

Civil Order is more concerned with his own private wealth than with the laws of the land. He is at his furthest from embodying ‘civil order’ when he offers to organise what is essentially a rebellion on behalf of the Church.⁵⁹

Nobility suffers from a division of loyalties between church and state, leading him semi-unwittingly into sedition. Early in the play John asks Nobility’s opinion of Sedition and Nobility responds: ‘Syns I was a chyld both hym and his condycyon/ I ever hated for his iniquite.’ John responds: ‘A clere tokyn that is of trew nobelyte’ (p. 13). The issue of what betokens ‘true’ nobility reappears when Sedition tries to win Nobility to the cause of the Church; Nobility says:

Yt is clene agenst the nature of Nobelyte
To subdew his kyng with owt Godes autoryte;
For his princely estate and power ys of God.
I wold gladly do ytt, but I fere his ryghtfull rode. (p. 46.)

Later in the play, before he is forced to submit to the Church’s authority, King Johan exclaims: ‘Oh, this is no tokyn of Nobelyte/ To flee from yowr kyng in his extremyte.’⁶⁰ Because of the stance that the play takes on the historical events it chooses to depict, the character of Nobility must behave in a way that appears to be less than noble, opening up a space in which to interrogate what it means to be ‘noble’; King Johan claims that:

Sum thynketh Nobelyte in natur to consyst
Or in parentage; ther thought is but amyst:
Wher habundance is of vertu, faith, and grace,
With knowlage of the Lord, Nobelyte is ther in place,
And not wher as in the wylfull contempte of thyngs
Pertaynyng to God in the obedyence of kynges (pp. 58-9).

This borders on a surprisingly egalitarian take on what it means to be ‘noble’. Bale can get away with it because it does not directly conflict with his message of Royal Supremacy, and the play does not closely examine the extent to which the King’s own authority relies on the same system of lineal inheritance that underlies the aristocracy.

⁵⁹ C. O.: ‘For the clargyes sake I wyll in every border/ Provoke the gret men to take the commonys parte’ (p. 49.)

⁶⁰ Nobility rather remarkably replies: ‘I had moch rather do agaynst God veryly,/ Than to Holy Chyrche to do any injurye’ (p. 56).

At the beginning of the play Seditio tells King Johan that the Church's power to depose a monarch 'wyyl appere by yow' (p. 10). According to this interpretation, the fact that the Church succeeds in first subduing, and finally killing the King demonstrates that they have 'power' to do so – although the use of the word 'power' rather than 'authority' carefully sidesteps the issue of the legitimacy of that power. However, after the King's death, Veritas, the only character who could be described as a 'virtue' in the traditional sense, takes the stage in order to explicate the situation. Veritas' speech to the audience marks the point at which the play moves outside of the historical events it purports to depict. In this speech Veritas refutes the interpretation of 'Polydorus' (presumably referring to Polydore Vergil's account of John's reign in the *Anglica Historia*, in which Vergil condemned John's resistance to the authority of the Church) by invoking the authority of no fewer than eight previous chroniclers.⁶¹ Nobility, Clergy and Civil Order enter and dispute Veritas' interpretation, giving Veritas the chance to back up his argument with examples from both secular and scriptural history, and drawing attention to the question of how history is to be interpreted.⁶²

It is only when Veritas identifies himself to the other characters (and, indeed, to the audience) that they stop arguing and beg forgiveness for their actions. There is therefore a small space of time in which the interpretation of events is open to various possibilities before Veritas' interpretation is confirmed to be the position of truth itself. Only then is the stage set for the appearance of Imperial Majesty (or re-appearance, if Imperial Majesty

⁶¹ See *Kynge Johan*, pp. 84-5. Vergil writes: 'The king was unmoved by this terrible severity, but rather decided to overthrow the clergy entirely. Since divine services had been suspended everywhere, he straightway banished a goodly number of priests and prelates, seized their property, and, like a storm falling on his own nation, he likewise plundered the churches. And this bane on religion did much to disfigure the clergy. Just as it was a [sic] wretched to see no services held in churches, so it was far more wretched not just to see, but also to hear that priests were everywhere held in scorn. After this, John, fearing the disloyalty of Man more than the wrath of God, compelled the people to swear another oath of allegiance to himself [...] Amidst these things, at the humble behest of Stephen Archbishop of Canterbury, who greatly grieved that his nation was being so troubled for his own sake, the Pope made the concession that certain priests could preside over divine services on certain days' (*Anglica Historia*, ed. by Dana F. Sutton, based on the 1555 edition <<http://www.philological.bham.ac.uk/polverg>>, [accessed 13/06/2012], book 15).

⁶² See *Kynge Johan*, pp. 85-7.

is played by the same actor as King Johan). Imperial Majesty apparently does not have the authority to impose the ‘correct’ interpretation of events himself, and instead it requires the embodiment of ‘truth’ to do so.⁶³ After all, the audience has just watched an entire play in which King Johan has repeatedly failed to convince anyone of his authority.⁶⁴ As a morality, the play is able to reach outside of the historically specific in order to make the ‘correct’ interpretation of events plain. This is not a strategy so easily available to subsequent history plays, although prologues and epilogues, sometimes spoken by characters such as ‘Truth’ or ‘History’, are used.⁶⁵

The framework of the morality play is an important aspect of early history plays which gradually became less visible as the history play grew in sophistication. In *Cambises, King of Persia* (c. 1569), for example, some of the roles of the minor characters are populated by abstractions such as ‘Preparation’, the servant who prepares a feast, and ‘Murder’, instead of ‘a murderer’, and the name of the ‘vice’ character, Ambidexter, is indicative of his duplicitous nature. The names of these characters have the potential to be merely typographical links to the morality play, but Ambidexter makes certain that the audience is aware of his duplicitous nature in his opening speech:

Ha! my name? My name would you so fain know?
 Yea, iwis, shal ye, and that with al speed:
 I have forgot it, therefore I cannot show.
 Ah, ah! now I have it, I have it, indeed.
 My name is Ambidexter: I signify one
 That with both hands finely can play;
 Now with King Cambises, and by and by gone,
 Thus do I run this and that way.⁶⁶

Ambidexter is linked to the humour and duplicitousness of the morality vice, and also shows a similar fluidity of identity and association with disguise; he enters comically

⁶³ There are also logistical reasons for Veritas’ appearance; without it there would be no gap between King John leaving the stage and Imperial Majesty’s arrival.

⁶⁴ Or perhaps two plays if, as the manuscript suggests, it was meant to be ‘a play in two parts’.

⁶⁵ A good example is *The True Tragedy of Richard III*, which opens with a dialogue between Truth and Poetry, and ends with the various characters onstage explicating the action and subsequent historical events.

⁶⁶ *Cambises*, in *Minor Elizabethan Tragedies*, ed. by T. W. Craik (London: J. M. Dent & Sons, 1974), pp. 59-104 (ll. 146-53). All references to this text are to this edition.

dressed as a soldier, wearing ‘an old capcase on his head, an old pail about his hips for harness, a scummer and a potlid by his side, and a rake on his shoulder’.⁶⁷ Interestingly, Preparation tells Ambidexter ‘thou art not unknown’ (l. 973); it seems that abstractions have the power to recognise each other in this play in a way which the historically specific characters do not. It is as if the world of universals exists just beneath the surface, but recognising it is a challenge for those in more historically fixed roles. It may be significant, therefore, that these abstractions largely occupy the positions of servants and low-class characters.

The use of the morality play framework in *Kynge Johan* foregrounds the process of interpretation whereby universal meaning is extrapolated from historically specific events. In some plays a clearly ‘correct’ interpretation is offered, as in the case of *The True Tragedy of Richard III*, where ‘Truth’ introduces the play and the action is fully explicated in an epilogue voiced by the characters on stage at the end of the play.⁶⁸ But where the morality framework is less visible, it is the process of interpretation, and often the problems of interpretation, which are highlighted. Thus, in *The Troublesome Reign of King John*, the ‘morals’ voiced by both King John himself and Philip the Bastard at the end of the play are undermined by the question of what insight such historically situated figures have into universal truth.⁶⁹ The morality play, however, also lent the history play many of its more humorous and comic elements, adding a certain multivocality which also disrupted the interpretive process once the structural framework of the morality disappeared, as the next section argues.

⁶⁷ *Cambises*, see stage direction, p. 66.

⁶⁸ Janette Dillon observes that ‘[w]here allegorical characters are also named as historical individuals, [...] or where the allegory is otherwise open and explicit, allegory can function as a way of underlining rather than distancing the play’s political message’ (‘The Early Tudor History Play’, in *English Historical Drama, 1500-1660*, ed. by Teresa Grant and Barbara Ravelhofer (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008) pp. 32-57 (p. 34)). Thus, while in the case of *True Tragedy* morality elements are used to enforce the political orthodoxy of the play, the history play, with its emphasis on the difficulty of interpretation, may have represented a politically ‘safer’ mode for those with less orthodox objectives.

⁶⁹ Both *The True Tragedy of Richard III* and *The Troublesome Reign of King John* will be considered in more detail in the section ‘History and Tragedy’ below.

History and Comedy

There are three main elements associated with the genre of ‘comedy’ that are often transferred into history plays. One, which I have already addressed in the introduction to this chapter, is the inclusion of fictional elements, sometimes called ‘heroic’ or ‘romantic’, that have no basis in historical fact.⁷⁰ As I have argued, these elements have been used to justify excluding certain plays from the genre, thus limiting the range of plays which can be considered under the title of ‘history play’. The second aspect that connects history plays to the genre of comedy is the inclusion of humorous scenes. These are the scenes that Sidney complained turned plays into ‘mongrel tragi-comedy’.⁷¹ This element is, of course, also shared with the morality play, and as we have seen, ‘comic elements’ gain subversive potential in the history play by adding multivocality and creating a kind of doubleness of perspective that complicates our ability to interpret a play’s intentions. Equally, however, humorous elements have sometimes led critics into dismissing a play as ‘simplistic’ or nothing more than ‘harmless fun’.

What I would like to examine more closely to begin with, however, is the effect of what I will call the ‘happy ending’. This is often a little more dubiously applied to history plays, but it is ‘happy’ at least in the sense that the body-count is relatively low and it may include a marriage. According to Lawrence Danson:

[...] the one thing we can say of all historical figures is that, like us, they die; their lives, represented on stage, occur in the shadow of the already finished: they cannot escape the plot of their mortality. The characters of Shakespeare’s comedy, on the other hand, are characters of apparently limitless possibility. It is not so much that anything can happen to them as that the one thing necessary in history and tragedy does not happen to them.⁷²

⁷⁰ It should, however, be noted that depicting historical figures in less than historical situations was not entirely confined to the genre of comedy (see my discussion of Munday’s Huntington plays on pp. 91-2 above).

⁷¹ Sidney, *Apology*, p. 112.

⁷² Lawrence Danson, *Shakespeare’s Dramatic Genres* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 60.

It is true that there are usually more deaths in history plays than in conventional comedies. However, there are a number of history plays that seem to resist ‘the one thing necessary in history and tragedy’ happening to the main protagonist. Henry V is one such figure, both in the anonymous play *The Famous Victories of Henry V* and in Shakespeare’s *Henry V*, despite his historically early death at the age of thirty-five. Other history plays with apparently ‘happy’ endings are the anonymous *King Leir*, *Edmund Ironside* and *Edward III*. Of course, the spectre of death always lurks in the background of these plays; in the history play ‘happily ever after’ can only ever be a temporary state, and in Shakespeare’s *Henry V*, Henry’s death is referred to in the Epilogue.⁷³ Thus, history plays lend a darker aspect to apparently ‘happy endings’ and knowledge of subsequent history can often significantly modify or alter the possible range of interpretations for a play.

One play that uses the ‘happy ending’ to extremely disconcerting effect is *Edmund Ironside*. The action of the play seems to develop as a tragedy, and indeed historically Edmund died under questionable circumstances shortly after the truce which features at the end of the play. The truce comes as a complete surprise, and after it the whole play ends in just under sixty lines. What makes this ending disconcerting, as opposed to ineptly abrupt, can be seen by a comparison with episodes in other plays. In *The Troublesome Reign of King John* an exchange between Elinor and Constance establishes the legal basis for John and Arthur’s respective claims before the citizens of Angiers are asked to arbitrate the matter. The citizens of Angiers refuse to do so and a prolonged battle ensues in which the two claimants eventually band together against the townspeople.⁷⁴ In *Edmund Ironside*,

⁷³ However, Q1 of *Henry V* (1600) does not include the Epilogue or chorus speeches, raising the possibility that they may have been added later.

⁷⁴ In the *Troublesome Reign* it is almost impossible to say who would be considered to have the more legitimate claim. John’s claim rests on the fact that Richard apparently barred Arthur from the succession in his will, though, as Arthur argues ‘The law intends such testaments as void/ Where right descent can no way be impeached.’ (*The Troublesome Reign of King John*, in *Six Early Plays Related to the Shakespeare Canon*, ed. by E. B. Everitt and R.L. Armstrong (Copenhagen: Rosenkilde and Bagger, 1965), pp. 144-194 (1.550-1). All further references to this text are to this edition). Shakespeare’s version introduces an element of hypocrisy in John’s character by having him reject a similar will barring Philip’s inheritance of Falconbridge lands in the opening scene.

Edmund and Canute's debate about their respective rights to the throne in the final scene appears to be about to lead to a similar kind of bloodbath. Edmund draws his sword, but when Canute does likewise, Edmund responds by saying: 'That is, of force to put back reason's proof! / Which proves you like your sword, unreasonable' (ll. 1831-2). It seems incredible that, having drawn first, Edmund accuses Canute of resorting to violence because he cannot back his claim through 'reason'. Edricus, the 'vice' or 'Machiavel', then convinces them to fight in single combat ostensibly in the interest of saving lives. As far as the audience knows, Edricus has no further plans that might lead to more bloodshed, creating the rather odd situation in which the villain's schemes appear to have brought the action to the point of resolving the conflict with the minimum of mortalities – presumably a desirable result. Edmund and Canute agree to the single combat and Edmund seems to be winning the fight, when Canute suddenly yields. Edmund accepts and spontaneously, and seemingly unnecessarily, offers to divide the kingdom with him, earning the play its alternative title *War Hath Made All Friends*. Thus, the final truce leaves the audience with the prospect of the division of the kingdom, an act usually presented as a guarantee for further chaos.⁷⁵ Indeed, in the account of these events given in Holinshed it is suggested that God,

[...] being mindfull of his old doctrine, that Euerie kingdome diuided in it selfe can not long stand, shortlie after tooke Edmund out of this life: and by such meanes séemed to take pitie vpon the English kingdome, least if both the kings should haue continued in life together, they should both haue liued in great danger, and the realme in trouble.⁷⁶

Few endings are as brilliantly incongruous as this, but it is an excellent example of how the so-called 'happy' ending can be used to raise more problems than it resolves.

Each of the three elements I have identified has, on occasion, led critics into dismissing some of the more political elements of certain plays under the assumption that

⁷⁵ A theme which runs through *Gorboduc*, the anonymous *King Leir* and, of course, Shakespeare's *King Lear*.

⁷⁶ Raphael Holinshed et. al., *Chronicles of England, Scotland and Ireland*, ed. by Paulina Kewes, Ian Archer, Felicity Heal and Henry Summerson (1587 edition), <<http://www.english.ox.ac.uk/holinshed/texts>>, [accessed 14/11/2013], volume 2, chapter 7, p. 177.

they are not ‘serious’ plays. They have also led to a tendency to view some plays as ‘patriotic’, reflecting a positive image of national unity and identity. The most obvious play to have been interpreted in this way, which contains all of the elements identified above, is *The Famous Victories of Henry V*. I have already cited Danson, who calls the play a ‘rollicking good show’, and Ribner describes it as ‘formless and incoherent and, in general, worthless.’⁷⁷ G. K. Hunter is a little more ambivalent in his reading, saying that, ‘this is a story of strong kingship, but this time it is the strength of comic self assurance that we see, playing the merry games that strength loves to impose on weakness.’⁷⁸ Henry’s power, Hunter writes, is ‘a natural extension of bully-boy dominance’ and he provides ‘a populist role model for genial chauvinism’.⁷⁹ But if Hunter’s description suggests Henry’s ‘bully-boy dominance’ might be problematic in the way that he victimises the lower-class characters who have no scope to resist him, Hunter nevertheless sees that as fully contained politically, concluding that ‘*The Famous Victories* offers the enjoyment of personal and so national power as a flattering mirror for a nationalist audience.’⁸⁰

One critic who could not disagree with this assessment more is Larry Champion:

[A] glance beyond the monarchophilia and patriotic glitter reveals a sordid world of political treachery, a play in which putative honour bows to greed and kingly solicitude is transformed into political exploitation, an aristocratic world of crass legal manipulation, a prince/king satiated with a sense of power to the point of utter disregard for the public welfare, a world foregrounding the horrors and brutalities of a war with, as its special prey, commoners unwittingly victimised by confrontations within the power structure of their society.⁸¹

It is possible, therefore, to view the play as either a bit of fun, or as a damning indictment of aristocratic elitism. As a play written for the Queen’s Men, we might expect a certain amount of political orthodoxy. Yet, according to Scott McMillin and Sally-Beth MacLean,

⁷⁷ Lawrence Danson, *Shakespeare’s Dramatic Genres* (New York: Oxford university Press, 2000) p. 87; Ribner, *The English History Play*, p. 72.

⁷⁸ Hunter, *English Drama*, p. 171.

⁷⁹ Hunter, *English Drama*, p. 171.

⁸⁰ Hunter, *English Drama*, p. 174.

⁸¹ Champion, *The Noise of the Threatening Drum*, p. 18.

the comic elements of the play conflict with the main narrative so that '[i]t shakes loose from the element of Tudor apologia which runs through the Queen's Men repertory, and raises questions about the "famous victories" which its narrative strand wants to set forth.'⁸² McMillin and MacLean seem to imply that the play does this accidentally as an unintended side-effect, while Champion views it as a deliberate strategy. The question is: would an Elizabethan audience see the Prince's criminal actions (robbing tax officials, striking the Lord Chief Justice) as excusable and be entertained by the authorities' inability to bring him to justice, or would they be deeply troubled by it? This is in fact a question foregrounded by the Prince himself in the opening scene; he asks his companions (and perhaps, by inference, the audience) 'But tell me, sirs, think you not that it was a villainous part of me to rob my father's receivers?'⁸³ It is in response to this that Ned, his partner in crime, dismisses it as 'a trick of youth' (1.10). The Prince repeats the question again at the end of the scene (after further harassing the men he has robbed): 'Now sirs, how like you this? Was it not bravely done?' (1.68). Harry invites us to consider his actions as either 'villainous' or 'brave'.

The play sets up an obvious double-standard in how justice is applied to the Prince and how it is applied to his lower-class companions. This double standard is made obvious in the different fates of the Prince and his 'man', Cutbert Cutter. The Prince is not arrested for his part in the robbery at the beginning of the play, despite the fact that the carriers seem to have a good idea of who he is.⁸⁴ However, near the beginning of the opening scene we hear that Cutter is on the run for robbing a 'poor carrier' (1.19). The Prince (ironically?)

⁸² Scott McMillin and Sally-Beth MacLean, 'Dramaturgy' in *The Queen's Men and their Plays* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), pp. 121-154 (p. 135).

⁸³ *The Famous Victories of Henry V*, in *The Oldcastle Controversy*, ed. by Peter Corbin and Douglas Sedge (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1991), pp. 145-199 (1.6-7). All other references to this text are to this edition.

⁸⁴ The two receivers know that their robbers were riding John Oldcastle and the Prince's horses, and that 'there was one about the bigness of you [Harry]' (1.58-9).

condemns Cutter's actions, but nevertheless resolves to save his life.⁸⁵ In the next scene Cutter is arrested by the two clowns Derick (whom Cutter has robbed) and John. Cutter attempts to name-drop his way out of the situation, telling the two that he is 'one of the King's liege people' (2.67). Derick responds by saying he is 'one of the King's filching people' (2.69), suggesting the way in which the Prince's actions associate the King with criminal activities. The Prince is eventually arrested, not for the robbery, but for fighting in the streets.⁸⁶ In scene 3 the King summons the Mayor to explain why his son has been put in prison. Henry IV allows the Mayor to speak because 'otherwise you might think me an unequal judge, having more affection to my son than to any rightful judgement' (3.12-4). In an aside to the audience the King admits that his son has deserved such treatment, but nevertheless orders the mayor to set him free (3.37-40).

While the existence of a double-standard is evident, how it was intended to be interpreted is less obvious. This problem of interpretation comes to a head in scene 4, where the Prince attempts to get Cutter off the charge of robbery and winds up striking the Lord Chief Justice. Possibly we are supposed to include this incident on the list of Harry's hilarious hi-jinx. Possibly we are supposed to admire his loyalty to his 'man' or see this as an attempt on the Prince's part to extend some of the lenity he has enjoyed at the hands of the law to the less fortunate. Possibly we are meant to see this as yet another instance of the Prince obstructing the course of justice. One particularly telling exchange occurs between the Prince and Derick as the Prince attempts to excuse Cutter's actions:

Prince:	[...] On my word, my lord, he did it but in jest.
Derick:	Hear you, sir, is it your man's quality to rob folks in jest? In faith, he shall be hanged in earnest (4.46-9).

⁸⁵ 'Now, base-minded rascal, to rob a poor carrier! Well, it skills not; I'll save the base villain's life' (*Famous Victories*, 1.22-3).

⁸⁶ At the end of scene 2 Cutter asks to be taken 'to the prison where my master is', although it is only in scene 3 that we hear the Prince has been arrested. Cutter and the Prince are not taken to the same prison; instead, Cutter is taken to Newgate while the Prince is (briefly) imprisoned in the Fleet. Nevertheless, in scene 4, possibly before Cutter is actually taken to Newgate, the two do seem to be in the same place.

Derick, supposedly one of the ‘clowns’, does not see the ‘jest’ in being robbed. The inversion which this represents, where the Prince insists it is only a jest, and the clown refuses to allow it, is evident. The Prince’s defence of Cutter is also his own defence, and here it is revealed as wholly inadequate – at least for anyone who is not a prince.

The Prince does not ‘hear’ Derick, and instead addresses the Lord Chief Justice, attempting once again to use his identity as Crown Prince to get his way (‘Why my lord, I pray ye, who am I?’ 4.55). Frustrated when the Chief Justice will not budge, despite acknowledging his royal identity, the Prince strikes him. Ned eagerly responds to this, asking ‘Gog’s wounds, my lord, shall I cut off his head?’ (4.70).⁸⁷ The Prince, perhaps realising the situation is on the verge of being irreparable, cautions Ned and Tom to ‘draw not your swords’ and sends them out to find ‘a noise of musicians’ (4.71-2). Whatever ‘comic inversion’ Ned and Tom represent at this point no longer seems so harmless, and they are banished off-stage. Like Derick, the Chief Justice does not let the full symbolic weight of the incident go unnoticed; asserting his own identity, he asks:

Justice: Why, I pray you, my lord who am I?

Prince: You! Who knows not you? Why, man, you are the Lord Chief Justice of England.

Justice: Your grace hath said truth; therefore in striking me in this place you greatly abuse me; and not me only but also your father, whose lively person here in this place I do represent (4.75-80).

The Chief Justice emphasizes his role as part of the King’s body politic, and it is this authority which he uses to enforce the law against the Crown Prince. What also often goes unmentioned in this scene is that, as well as being sent back to prison himself, the Prince loses the argument over Cutter, who is sent to Newgate to await trial.⁸⁸ Rather than another amusing adventure, I would argue that this scene represents the limits to which the Prince can push his ‘jests’ before they are no longer accepted as mere ‘tricks of youth’.

⁸⁷ Given Ned’s evident eagerness to transgress every boundary in the most violent terms possible, it seems remarkable that so many critics have accepted his assessment of Harry’s actions (in the opening scene) as no more than a ‘trick of youth’.

⁸⁸ See *Famous Victories*, 4.85. Cutter is evidently not hanged, however, as he reappears in scene 9 where he is pressed into the army.

Immediately the Prince and the Lord Chief Justice leave the stage, Derick and John comically re-enact the incident, with some interesting differences. In the exchange between the Chief Justice and the Prince it was the Prince who asked what Cutter had done, but here it is John, playing the role of the Justice, who begins by trying to establish what has been done.⁸⁹ Derick therefore answers, rather self-referentially, ‘Marry, he hath robbed Derick’ (4.102), confusing the issue of identity which was so pointed in the previous exchange. The confusion continues:

Derick:	[...] Shall I not have my man?
John:	No, marry, shall you not!
Derick:	Shall I not, John?
John:	No Derick.
Derick:	Why, then, take you that [<i>Boxes his ear.</i>] till more come! 'Zounds, shall I not have him?
John:	Well, I am content to take this at your hand. But, I pray you, who am I?
Derick:	Who art thou? 'Zounds, dost not know thyself?
John:	No.
Derick:	Now away, simple fellow. Why, man, thou art John the Cobbler.
John:	No, I am my Lord Chief Justice of England.
Derick:	Oh, John, mass, thou sayst true, thou art indeed.
John:	Why then, to teach you what prerogatives mean, I commit you to the Fleet. (4.107-21).

The two clowns begin to forget their assumed roles almost immediately, with the result that John/Justice is very nearly unable to assert his authority over Derick/Prince Henry.

Afterward Derick re-establishes the gap between their own identities and the ones they have assumed: ‘Why, what a clown wert thou to let me hit thee a box on the ear! And now thou seest they will not take me to the Fleet’ (4.123-6). What the two clowns re-enact, therefore, is the difficulty of establishing or maintaining an identity which can assert authority over the crown, in the name of the crown, especially by someone who is a subject of the crown.

Do the antics of the two clowns restore the humorous tone broken by the previous incident, thereby distracting the audience and containing the subversive potential of the

⁸⁹ See *Famous Victories*, 4.101.

scene, or do they heighten the audience's awareness of those problems? This question is to some extent unanswerable, dependant as it is on the audience's response. However, I would argue that the play manipulates these comic elements in a way which is far from trying to convince us that there is any 'simple' solution to the problems raised. The solution that the play realises in the second half, after Henry becomes king, is for the monarch not to transgress such boundaries, thereby avoiding the issue of how subjects might go about policing their monarch. Played before Elizabeth, this might have been considered in the tradition of plays that offered advice to princes on how to rule, but what would a lower-class audience consider the relevance of that message was to them? They might well be less willing to forget the problems that arise when a monarch refuses to abide by the law, and might even conclude that there was a need to limit royal power. Janette Dillon writes:

When Elizabeth came to the throne in 1558, she lost no time in issuing a proclamation 'Prohibiting Unlicensed Interludes and Plays, Especially on Religion or Policy' which outlawed any play 'wherein either matters of religion or of the governance of the estate of the commonweal shall be handled or treated, being no meet matters to be written or treated upon but by men of authority, learning, and wisdom, nor to be handled before any audience but of grave and discreet persons'; and by 1581 full powers to censor the performance of plays were invested in the Master of the Revels.⁹⁰

Thus, the place of performance becomes important in establishing the meanings which a play might produce. Perhaps oddly, performance in front of a lower-class audience yields a potentially *more* subversive interpretation than performance before the Queen, since it invites 'subjects' to pass judgment on royalty.⁹¹

The problems of the first half of the play are perhaps mitigated by the second half. Once king, Henry repents, banishes his friends, and begins a war in France. But if this play

⁹⁰ Janette Dillon, 'The Early Tudor History Play', pp. 47-8.

⁹¹ Indeed, David Scott Kastan argues that this aspect makes history plays inherently subversive: 'Whatever their overt ideological content, history plays inevitably, if unconsciously, weakened the structure of authority: on stage the king became a subject – the subject of the author's imaginings and the subject of the attention and judgement of an audience of subjects. If, then, English history plays recollected and rehearsed the past, they also prophesied the future, as they place the king on a scaffold before a judging public.' (*Shakespeare after Theory* (New York: Routledge, 1999), p. 111).

is supposed to inspire 'patriotism', it once again seems aimed towards the higher end of society; John and Derick are the only common soldiers that we see in battle, having been pressed into the army against their will. We do not see them valiantly fighting off Frenchmen, but rather devising ways of getting out of the battle and sneaking their stolen plunder back to England.⁹² While comically diverting, they are not exactly the type of characters to inspire a great sense of patriotism, especially in the lower-class audience members whom they supposedly represent. The play also appears to suggest that Henry's early exploits *were* good preparation for the role of king. Larry Champion seems surprised when Oxford and Exeter 'incredibly' claim that the Prince's 'former life' supports Henry IV's hope that his son will be 'as warlike and victorious a prince as ever reigned in England'.⁹³ However, the Prince attacks the war in France in much the same vein as his previous exploits.⁹⁴ It may be no coincidence that, near the beginning of the play, John the Cobbler says of the Prince: 'I dare not call him a thief, but sure he is one of these taking fellows' (2.11-12), and by the end of the play he has 'taken' France. For better or for worse, this play seems to suggest, these are the traits that make for a successful monarch.

The Famous Victories of Henry V is not the only history play structured like a comedy to consider the dangers that present themselves when the monarch threatens to transgress legal and moral boundaries; another is *Edward III* (1596). The action of Act 2 concerns King Edward's attempt to seduce the Countess of Salisbury. The language of these two scenes gives ample clues as to the seriousness of the transgression that the King's abuse of his power in this manner represents. Social positions are inverted as the King describes the Countess as 'Of such estate, that hers is as a throne,/ And my estate the footstool where

⁹² See *Famous Victories*, scenes 10 and 17.

⁹³ See Champion, *The Noise of the Threatening Drum*, p. 21. Strictly speaking, Champion says the lords claim the Prince's former life betokens a 'successful' reign, which is perhaps not quite the same as what the king has said.

⁹⁴ Unlike Shakespeare's play, this play does mention Henry V's strategy of halting the French cavalry at Agincourt with long pointed staves, mentioned by Holinshed (see Holinshed's *Chronicles* (1587), vol. 6, p. 553). This may make the victory seem slightly more the product of Henry's cunning rather than pure Providence.

she treads'.⁹⁵ Edward further insists on identifying the Countess with the sun, an image usually reserved for association with kings,⁹⁶ and his flirtation also raises questions of 'counterfeiting'.⁹⁷ When the King compares the Countess' voice to that of a nightingale, the undercurrents of the reference to the story of Philomela strike too close to home:

And why should I speake of the nightingale?
The nightingale sings of adulterate wrong,
And that, compared, is too satirical;
For sin, though sin, would not be so esteemd,
But rather virtue, sin ; sin virtue deemed (ll. 459-63).

The Countess' speech at the end of the scene summarises the consequences of the King's transgression of the law:

No marvel though the branches be then infected,
When poison hath encompasséd the root;
No marvel though the leprous infant die,
When the stern dame invenometh the dug.
Why then, give sin a passport to offend,
And youth the dangerous [rein] of liberty;
Blot out the strict forbidding of the law,
And cancel euery canon that prescribes
A shame for shame or penance for offence (ll. 772-80).

The King's abuse of his power poisons the 'root' of the law, thereby undermining the entire system.

⁹⁵ *Edward III*, in *Six Early Plays Related to the Shakespeare Canon*, ed. by E. B. Everitt and R.L. Armstrong (Copenhagen: Rosenkilde and Bagger, 1965), pp. 195-250 (ll. 454-5). All references to this text are to this edition.

⁹⁶ Later, when the Countess' father, Warwick, tries to justify her sleeping with the king, he tells her 'The king will in his glory hide thy shame;/ And those that gaze on him to find out thee,/ Will lose their eyesight, looking in the sun' (ll. 752-4).

⁹⁷ The courtier Lodwicke describes his observations of the two of them:

Why did he then thus counterfeit her looks?
If she did blush, 'twas tender, modest shame,
Being in the sacred [presence] of a king;
If he did blush, 'twas red, immodest shame,
To [vail] his eyes amiss, being a king;
If she looked pale, 'twas silly woman's fear
To bear herself in presence of a king:
If he looked pale, it was with guilty fear,
To dote amiss, being a mighty king (ll. 360-371).

Lodwicke's speech highlights the way in which the same outward sign can have opposite meanings. 'Counterfeiting' appears again as the Countess warns the King 'He that doth clip or counterfeit your stamp/ Shall die, my lord; and will your sacred self/ Commit high treason against the king of heauen/ To stamp his image in forbidden metal' (ll. 607-10). The Countess' warning echoes the King's vocabulary of monetary exchange as the King tries to persuade her: '(Nor beg I do not, but I rather buy)/ That is, thy love; and for that love of thine/ In rich exchange, I tender to thee mine' (ll. 598-600).

A key feature of the legal element of this episode is the importance of oaths and the conflict of loyalties which ensues when a king requires his subjects to break their oaths. Although the Countess has sworn to do as the King asks, once she discovers what he wants, she argues that it is not within her power to give,⁹⁸ and that vows of marriage take precedence over vows made to a king.⁹⁹ The King then similarly traps her father into swearing to do what he asks, and attempts to hold him to it:

King: What wilt thou say to one that breaks an oath?
 War: That he hath broke his faith with God and man.
 And from them both stands excommunicate,
 King: What office were it to suggest a man
 To break a lawful and religious vow?
 War: An office for the devil not for man.
 King: That devil's office must thou do for me,
 Or break thy oath, or cancel all the bonds
 Of love and duty 'twixt thyself and me;
 And therefore, Warwick, if thou art thyself,
 The lord and master of thy word and oath,
 Go to thy daughter, and in my behalf
 Command her, woo her, win her any ways
 To be my mistress and my secret love.
 I will not stand to hear thee make reply:
 Thy oath break hers, or let thy sovereign die (ll. 688-703).

Edward is keen to emphasise that Warwick has sworn both 'a lawful and religious vow' and attempts to close any loopholes which Warwick could use to get out of the oath.

These conflicting loyalties also create problems of identity; as the Countess' father wonders how he will broach the subject with her, he tells the audience:

How shall I enter in this graceless errand?
 I must not call her child, for where's the father,
 That will in such a suit seduce his child?
 Then 'wife of Salisbury'; shall I so begin?
 No he's my friend, and where is found the friend
 That will do friendship such endamage? –
 Neither my daughter nor my dear friend's wife,
 I am not Warwick as thou thinkst I am,
 But an attourney from the court of hell (ll. 727-35).

⁹⁸ *King*: 'Didst thou not swear to give me what I would?' *Countess*: 'I did, my liege, so what you would, I could' (ll. 595-6).

⁹⁹ 'To be a king is of a younger house/ Than to be married' (ll. 614-5).

The episode takes a turn towards domestic tragedy when the Countess asks the King to agree to murder both her husband and the Queen before she will agree to his demands.

The King initially objects:

King: Thy opposition is beyond our law.
 Count: So is your desire. If the law
 Can hinder you to execute the one,
 Let it forbid you to attempt the other (ll. 968-71).

Shockingly, Edward agrees, saying:

King: Thy beauty makes them guilty of their death,
 And gives in evidence that they shall die.
 Upon which verdict I their judge condemn them.
 Count: O perjured beauty, more corrupted judge!
 When to the great Star-chamber o'er our heads
 The universal sessions calls to count
 This packing evil, we both shall tremble for it (ll. 983-9).¹⁰⁰

In the end the Countess threatens to kill herself before the King is finally 'ashamed' (l. 1013) and abandons his suit.¹⁰¹ Edward's transgression creates a threat of self-destruction for either the Countess, or for the entire political state should she agree to the King's desires. As in *The Famous Victories*, the solution is for the monarch not to transgress.

The question of oath-keeping appears again in relation to the Countess' husband. He has captured a French knight called Villiers during his campaigns in Brittany on behalf of the King. In return for Villiers' release, Salisbury asks him to obtain a promise of safe passage from his lord Prince Charles, son to John of Valois, the King of France. Charles initially rejects Villiers' request of safe-passage for Salisbury, but is impressed when Villiers elects to return to captivity, having failed to fulfil the terms of his ransom. As Villiers explains:

Vil: [...]it is mine oath, my gracious Lord,
 Which I in conscience may not violate,

¹⁰⁰ The Countess' reference to the 'great Star-chamber' refers both to heaven and to Elizabeth's Star Chamber, the highest court in Elizabethan England. Both moral and legal judgement are at stake, and the audience are perhaps invited to consider what the providential consequences might have been if Edward had chosen to pursue the Countess.

¹⁰¹ The King then commends the Countess as a 'true English lady, whom our isle/ May better boast of than ever Roman might/ Of her whose ransacked treasury hath tasked/ The vain endeavour of so many pens' (ll. 1016-9). This is presumably a reference to the story of Appius and Virginia.

Or else a kingdom should not draw me hence.
 Ch: Thine oath? Why, that doth bind thee to abide.
 Hast thou not sworn obedience to thy prince?
 Vil: In all things that uprightly he commands:
 But either to persuade or threaten me
 Not to performe the covenant of my word,
 Is lawless, and I need not to obey (ll. 1850-8).

By asking a subordinate to contravene his or her oath a superior is acting 'lawlessly', thereby forfeiting the right to be obeyed. The scene is repeated when Salisbury is captured by King John, who threatens to execute him. King John tells Charles:

Thou and thy word lie both in my command.
 What canst thou promise that I cannot break?
 [...]
 Thy word, nor no man's, may exceed his power
 Nor that same man doth never break his word
 That keeps it to the utmost of his power.
 The breach of faith dwells in the soul's consent;
 Which if thyself without consent do break,
 Thou art not chargéd with the breach of faith (ll. 2161-70).

Charles, however, manages to convince his father by threatening to stop fighting on his behalf.¹⁰² Thus, the play seems to vindicate Villiers' position that a monarch who transgresses the 'lawful' boundaries of his or her power forfeits the obedience of his or her subjects.

In the history play, then, 'romantic' elements can contribute to overarching themes in noticeably political ways. Their 'fictionality' makes the material of the history play more mouldable to the playwright's designs, whatever they may be. The episode with the Countess of Salisbury is a 'romantic' addition to the factual history of Edward III's reign, and at the end of it Edward says 'I am awakéd from this idle dream' (l. 1022), as if acknowledging the fictitiousness of the episode. However, the incident takes a form more similar to domestic tragedy than romantic comedy, and deals with issues that contribute to the political stance of the play as a whole. Tragedy is averted, but only just. *The Famous*

¹⁰² Charles also argues that: 'Upon my soul, had Edward, Prince of Wales,/ Engaged his word, writ down his noble hand/ For all your knights to passe his father's land,/ The royall king, to grace his warlike son,/ Would not alone safe conduct giue to them,/ But with all bounty feasted them and theirs.' (ll. 2178-83.)

Victories and *Edward III* are patriotic plays, but it is an open-eyed kind of patriotism, aware of the potential for the abuse of power. Nevertheless, *Edward III* ends on a moment of triumph, with Edward having conquered John of Valois and ‘proven’ the righteousness of his claim to the throne of France, and *The Famous Victories* ends with Henry’s conquest of France and betrothal to Princess Katherine. Nevertheless, just as Henry will soon be dead and his achievements lost by his son, a significant portion of *Edward III* features Prince Edward’s actions in proving himself a worthy successor to his father; as the audience would have known, Prince Edward pre-deceased his father, and a nine-month old Richard II succeeded to the throne instead. Thus, although these plays are structured like comedies, the threat of tragedy lurks in the background. Unlike entirely fictional ‘comedies’, the unchangeable ‘what happened next’ of the history play means that apparently ‘happy’ or triumphant endings are unsettled by the spectre of future events.

History and Tragedy

Critics have been more willing to accept an overlap between history and tragedy.¹⁰³ After all, several of Shakespeare’s ‘histories’ had been previously published as ‘tragedies’ in quarto editions, and, as John Wilders points out, if we were to exclude all of Shakespeare’s plays that could make any claim to being historical, we would be left with only *Othello* and *Romeo and Juliet* under the heading of ‘tragedy’.¹⁰⁴ Indeed, Wilders further points out that (because of a mis-reading of Aristotle’s *Poetics*) it was sometimes claimed in the sixteenth century that ‘whereas the characters and plots of comedy are invented out of the poet’s imagination,

¹⁰³ I have already cited Ribner’s rejection of Lily B. Campbell’s attempt to draw a line between the two genres on the basis that one is primarily concerned with public and the other with private affairs (see introduction to Chapter Two, above). John Wilders joins him in saying that ‘[t]o this extent at least, Shakespeare’s history plays resemble his tragedies in that a man’s public life cannot be separated from his private life’ (John Wilders, ‘History and Tragedy’, in *The Lost Garden: a view of Shakespeare’s English and Roman history plays* (London: Macmillan, 1978), pp. 1-10 (p. 3)).

¹⁰⁴ See Wilders, ‘History and Tragedy’, p. 4.

those of tragedy are usually based on historical fact.¹⁰⁵ Such an assumption may underlie William Webbe's description of tragedy as

expressing onely sorrowfull and lamentable Hystories, bringing in the persons of Gods and Goddesses, Kynges and Queenes, and great states, whose parts were cheefely to expresse most miserable calamities and dreadfull chaunces, which increased worse and worse, tyll they came to the most wofull plight that might be deuised.¹⁰⁶

The doings of 'Kynges and Queenes, and great states' certainly seems to indicate an overlap with historical subject matter. It is therefore more intriguing that Webbe felt the need to distinguish history as a genre in its own right and might possibly reflect a growing contemporary awareness of the difficulties of imposing genre onto history.

In *Radical Tragedy* Jonathan Dollimore identifies a conflict between a tendency towards mimetic realism and the problem of representing the workings of providence.¹⁰⁷ If the 'real' world does not bear out supposedly 'universal' truths, then how can they be said to be 'true'? In fact, this problem is related to the question that Philip Sidney raises in his *Apology for Poetry* when he asks which is more useful for the purpose of teaching moral lessons, history or poetry? According to Sidney, the answer is poetry because it can depict the world as it should be rather than as it is. When tragedy is entirely fictional, then what, asks Dollimore, is the ontological status of this fictional world created by the poet: 'if it is accepted that what is being apprehended (and imitated) is a metaphysical ideal with real ontological status, then the prescriptive force of poetry is considerable; conversely, if the object of imitation is ideal in a fictive sense only, it cannot thus prescribe.'¹⁰⁸ Fictional tragedy runs the risk of being too obviously manipulated by the poet, and losing some of

¹⁰⁵ Wilders, 'History and Tragedy', p. 4. Wilders cites Joseph Scaliger and Ludovico Castelvetro as two contemporaries who made this claim, and also suggests that people may have been familiar with the idea through the fourth-century scholar Evanthius' essay on Terence's comedies. Certainly, however, such a claim by no means represented a firm rule.

¹⁰⁶ Webbe, *Discourse*, p. 39.

¹⁰⁷ See Jonathan Dollimore, 'Renaissance Literary Theory: Two Concepts of Mimesis' and 'The Disintegration of Providentialist Belief' in *Radical Tragedy*, 2nd edn. (London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1989) pp. 70-82 and pp. 83-108 respectively.

¹⁰⁸ Jonathan Dollimore, *Radical Tragedy*, p. 75.

its claim to didactic authority. When the topic of tragedy is historical, however, it retains its ‘prescriptive force’, and the question of how and what it prescribes takes centre stage.

To explore these issues I would like first to consider the example of *The True Tragedy of Richard III*. Not to be confused with *The True Tragedy of Richard Duke of York* (Shakespeare’s *3 Henry VI*), this play is a good example of a non-Shakespearean play that has been largely ignored except for speculation about its possible relationship to Shakespeare’s *Richard III*.¹⁰⁹ According to Irving Ribner, its ‘crude mixture of rough blank verse, fourteeners, and stilted prose [...] not only affirms the play to be the work of an amateur, but it [the printed quarto] obviously does not give a faithful version of that work.’¹¹⁰ Tillyard notes the play primarily as an ‘extreme example’ of the ‘factual element’ of the chronicle play.¹¹¹ Citing the closing speech, which details the succession of the crown from Henry VII to Elizabeth, he writes: ‘It was only a very serious desire for facts that could have tolerated such writing when the play’s business had done.’¹¹² In addition to its writing style, the play’s subject matter was also deemed unsophisticated. Ribner comments:

There is only one discernible historical purpose in the play, and that is to assert the blessings of peace and to affirm the traditional Tudor doctrine, embodied in Edward Hall’s chronicle, that this had been the fruit of the blessed union of the houses of York and Lancaster.¹¹³

Like the *Famous Victories*, the *True Tragedy* is another play from the repertoire of the Queen’s Men, and was possibly performed at court in December 1589, a fact which seems to

¹⁰⁹ At least one exception is G. K. Hunter (see *English Drama*, pp. 187-193), and even he ends his analysis by explaining the ways in which Shakespeare’s play is superior. Scott McMillin and Sally-Beth MacLean also make some interesting points about the play in their chapter on ‘Dramaturgy’ in *The Queen’s Men and their Plays* (pp. 121-154). Furthermore, McMillin and MacLean also argue that critics should begin to categorise plays according to acting company rather than author, suggesting that ‘acting companies were responsible for the plays they performed and can be evaluated according to that responsibility’ (*The Queen’s Men and their Plays*, p. xii). I agree that this would be one way to provide a fresh angle on material and enrich our understanding of drama in the period. It might also mean that an anonymous play like *The True Tragedy*, which can be identified with an acting company but not an author, might receive more critical attention than it has in the past. However, I would not go so far as to say this should entirely replace the organisation of material according to author, as McMillin and MacLean seem to suggest.

¹¹⁰ Ribner, *The English History Play*, p. 86.

¹¹¹ Tillyard, *Shakespeare’s History Plays* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1961) first published 1944, p. 99.

¹¹² Tillyard, *Shakespeare’s History Plays*, p. 100.

¹¹³ Ribner, *The English History Play*, p. 87.

support Ribner's claim for its political orthodoxy. However, while I agree that the play is relatively orthodox in nature, I believe it attempts to make a more sophisticated point about the workings of providence than Ribner allows for.

In some ways it is interesting that the play chooses to call itself a 'tragedy'; seen from Richmond's perspective it almost has the structure of a comedy, replete with his marriage to Elizabeth of York at the end of the play. Furthermore, it is figured as a revenge tragedy.¹¹⁴ However, it is not quite like other revenge tragedies of the period; although Richmond once admits 'revenge' as a motivating factor, it is not the personal, single-minded, all-consuming kind of revenge we see in dramas such as *The Spanish Tragedy* or *The Revenger's Tragedy*. Richmond says:

My right it is, and sole inheritance,
And Richard but usurps in my authority;
For in his tyranny he slaughtered those
That would not succour him in his attempts,
Whose guiltless blood craves daily at God's hands,
Revenge for outrage done to their harmless lives:
Then courage, countrymen, and never be dismayed,
Our quarrel's good, and God will help the right (ll. 1649-56).

Rather than revenge that threatens the social order, this is revenge that seeks to restore it.

If anyone in the play is consumed by the idea of revenge, it is Richard himself – but only in the sense that he expects to be its victim:

The hell of life that hangs upon the crown,
The daily cares, the nightly dreams,
The wretched crews, the treason of the foe,
And horror of my bloody practice past,
Strikes such a terror to my wounded conscience,
That sleep I, wake I, or whatsoe'er I do,
Methinks their ghosts comes gaping for revenge,
Whom I have slain in reaching for a crown.

¹¹⁴ The appearance of the ghost of the Duke of Clarence at the beginning of the play bearing the Latin motto: '*Cresce cruor! Sanguis satiatur sanguine! Cresce, Quod spero citò. O citò, citò, vendicta!*' ('Increase, blood! Let blood be satiated by blood! Rise up that which I hope for, quickly! O quickly, quickly, revenge!') indicates the play's links with the conventions of Senecan revenge tragedy (*The True Tragedy of Richard III*, ed. by Robert Brazil, transcribed by Ramon Jimenez (2005), <<http://www.elizabethanauthors.org/truetragedy01.htm>>, [accessed 20/07/2013], ll. 1-2. All references to this text are to this edition). There has not been a printed edition of the play since W. W. Greg produced one for the Malone society in 1929, another possible reason for the lack of critical attention the play has received. For the play's links to Senecan drama, see Ribner, *The English History Play*, p. 87.

Clarence complains, and crieth for revenge.
 My nephew's bloods [sic], "Revenge, revenge," doth cry.
 The headless peers come pressing for revenge.
 And every one cries, let the tyrant die.
 The sun by day shines hotly for revenge.
 The moon by night eclipseth for revenge.
 The stars are turned to comets for revenge.
 The planets change their courses for revenge.
 The birds sing not, but sorrow for revenge.
 The silly lambs sits bleating for revenge.
 The screeking raven sits croaking for revenge.
 Whole herds of beasts come bellowing for revenge.
 And all, yea all the world, I think,
 Cries for revenge, and nothing but revenge.
 But to conclude, I have deserved revenge (ll. 1874-96).

This is not personal, but divine revenge. According to this rhetoric, it is not so much living people who will avenge the dead, as the dead who will avenge themselves, and the whole of the natural world will help them do it. The play certainly seems to reject the suggestion that historical events do not bear out the existence of providence.

Ribner notes an important difference between the presentation of the characters of Richard and Richmond:

Richard III, the villain, never calls upon God for assistance, or attributes events to the will of providence. He relies entirely upon himself, and it is always upon fortune that he calls for aid [...]
 Henry of Richmond, on the other hand, constantly calls upon God, as the guiding force of the universe, for help in his cause[.]¹¹⁵

This is not quite accurate. Richard and Richmond do not 'call upon' fortune or providence (respectively) to aid their cause; strictly speaking, they attribute events to them. For example, Richard says: 'Doth fortune so much favour my happiness,/ That I no sooner devise, but she sets abroad?' (ll. 393-4). And, in the example given from Richmond's speech by Ribner himself:

Our quarels good, and God *will helpe* the right,
 For we may know by dangers we haue past,
 That God *no doubt* will *giue* vs victorie (ll. 1652-3).¹¹⁶

¹¹⁵ Ribner, *The English History Play*, pp. 88-9.

¹¹⁶ Cited by Ribner in *The English History Play*, p. 89, emphasis mine.

Richmond is not *asking* for help, although he is entirely confident that it will be provided. Moreover, Richard is not the only character to invoke ‘fortune’, which undermines Ribner’s conclusion that the play shows us ‘the hero affirming an orthodox Christian philosophy of history and the villain affirming its pagan opposite.’¹¹⁷ Although it is true that Richard is the only character to embrace fortune, Jane Shore, a generally sympathetic character, also attributes her rise and fall to fortune:

O fortune, wherefore wert thou called fortune?
But that thou art fortunate?
Those whom thou favourest be famous,
Meriting mere mercy,
And fraught with mirrors of magnanimity,
And fortune, I would thou hadst never favoured me (ll. 195-200).

Because Jane attributes her rise to ‘fortune’, she predicts that she will also inevitably ‘fall’, and asserts that to be the work of ‘fortune’ also. Generally speaking, characters attribute events that disrupt the social order to fortune, and ones that restore it to providence. This holds even in relatively extreme cases; when the Duke of Buckingham is arrested, having switched sides from Richard to Richmond, he accepts his fate and acknowledges that his arrest is his ‘reward’ for the part he played in bringing Richard into power:

Ah Richard, did I in Guild-Hall plead the orator for thee, and held thee in all thy sly and wicked practices, and for my reward dost thou allot me death? Ah Buckingham, thou playedst thy part and made him King, and put the lawful heirs besides. Why then is Buckingham guilty now of his death? (ll. 1353-8).

These attributions do not quite add up to a cohesive argument about the relationship between providence and fortune, which remains problematic, but they show a concern for explaining the causes of events.

Peter Womack observes that *The Mirror for Magistrates*:

[...] fluctuate[s] between two kinds of answer [to the question of why the various figures depicted have suffered]: one invokes Fortune (permanence is confined to Heaven – on earth the wheel is always turning), and the other invokes Providence (the speaker’s prosperity covered some act of injustice, which God punished in

¹¹⁷ Ribner, *The English History Play*, p. 89.

the end). In theory, these explanations conflict, but in the text they work closely together to take agency away from the human actor and subject him to a divine order.¹¹⁸

On the surface it would seem that the *True Tragedy* is doing something similar. However, I would argue that the play also shows a concern for *how* events come about that allows it to put forward a somewhat more sophisticated thesis about how human agency is working alongside these more fatalistic ideas. My argument here rests primarily on two scenes that Ribner describes as 'long extraneous passages of lamentation by Mistress Jane Shore which add nothing to the play.'¹¹⁹ In terms of plot, these scenes are indeed isolated from the other events of the play, but Ribner does not consider the possibility that they serve some thematic purpose. In the first scene (scene 3) Jane Shore learns of King Edward's death and bewails what she believes will be her imminent fall. Three characters (Lodowick, Citizen and Morton), each of whom she has helped in the past, enter and assure her that they will not desert her should she find herself in need. In the second (scene 11) Richard has confiscated her wealth and threatened to do the same to any who offer her help. Each of the three characters from scene 3 enters successively and, predictably enough, refuses to help her.

On one level these scenes seem to confirm the inevitability of fate and the powerlessness of humans to change it. However, this is not quite what we are shown. Each of Jane Shore's would-be helpers has a speech in which they (significantly) *decide* not to help her. First of all, Lodowick says:

I cannot deny but my lands she restored me, but shall I by relieving
of her hurt myself? No, for straight proclamation is made that none
shall succour her. Therefore, for fear I should be seen talk with her,
I will shun her company (ll. 1073-7).

Lodowick explicitly allows the threat Richard has made to influence his decision. Similarly the Citizen, who, when he believes she is an acquaintance of Mistress Shore rather than

¹¹⁸ Peter Womack, *English Renaissance Drama* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing Ltd., 2006), p. 68.

¹¹⁹ Ribner, *The English History Play*, p. 87.

Mistress Shore herself, says ‘for her sake I’ll give thee somewhat’ (l. 1116), then abruptly changes his mind when he realises who she is because ‘the proclamation is so hard by King Richard’ (ll. 1120-1). Also like Lodowick, the Citizen makes reference to being watched (‘hedges haue eyes and high-ways haue eares’, ll. 1103-4). Finally, Morton, in full knowledge of who she is, does nearly give her something but, on the entrance of Richard’s page, exclaims ‘I cannot do what I would, I am watcht’ (l. 1153). These exchanges foreground elements of human agency: each character *decides* to allow himself to be cowed by Richard’s threat and by the (until the entrance of Richard’s Page) invisible people ‘watching’ to enforce Richard’s tyranny.¹²⁰ Revealingly, Lodowick enters bemoaning ‘fortune’:

Ah time, how thou suffrest fortune to alter estates, and changest
the minds of the good for the worst. How many headless peers
sleep in their graves, whose places are furnish with their inferiors?
(ll. 1037-40).

He ends this speech by saying ‘But God do all for the best, and that the right heirs may not be utterly overthrown’ (ll. 1046-7). Lodowick therefore highlights the apparent contradiction between the world as it is, and as it ‘should’ be, before contributing to that injustice through his own actions. Near the end of the scene the Page debates with Mistress Shore about why she has become a victim of events; she attributes her bad fortune to Richard (‘none but thy Lord sought my misery and he hath undone me’, ll. 1166-7), but the Page sees it as a punishment from God (‘thy wicked and naughty life hath undone thee’, ll. 1168-9). Like Lodowick, the Page, who is complicit in Richard’s schemes, obscures his responsibility for events by referring to forces beyond his control. What this play suggests is that, predictable or inevitable as events may be, they are enacted through the decisions of individuals.

¹²⁰ It may even be that these references to ‘watchers’ metadramatically identify the audience with Richard’s spies, implicating them in Richard’s actions as well.

It may be true, as Ribner asserts, that ‘Richard dominates the action’ of the play, but, unlike in Shakespeare’s play, he does not do so through his own actions; he does not appear on stage until scene 4, and only appears in seven out of the twenty scenes in the play.¹²¹ Instead, what we are shown is a great deal of people acting in response to him.¹²² Richard’s Page is one of the most intriguing characters in this respect.¹²³ He first enters with Richard in scene 4 where Richard asks him about the mood at court (l. 453). Thus, the Page is already acting as something like a spy for Richard. After this exchange Richard leaves and the Page is left on stage alone to deliver his thoughts about events. Thus, it is through this low-class character that the audience gets an assessment of the situation at court. This, however, is the Page’s conclusion:

But what do I meddling in such matters, that should meddle with the untying of my Lord's points, faith do even as a great many do beside, meddle with Princes matters so long, til they prove themselves beggars in the end. Therefore I, for fear I should be taken napping with any words, I'll set a lock on my lips, for fear my tongue grow too wide for my mouth (ll. 483-9).

As with Mistress Shore’s ‘friends’, self-interest and fear of being observed overtakes positive action. Consequently, the Page not only does nothing, but comes to actively collude with Richard’s schemes; the Page first helps to set up the ambush of the young King Edward and his protectors at an inn (scenes 6-8) and then arranges for the two princes to be murdered (scenes 10 and 12).¹²⁴ Indeed, their murder is a good example of

¹²¹ Ribner, *The English History Play*, p. 87.

¹²² Or, as G. K. Hunter puts it, Richard ‘is witnessed more clearly by the way people respond to his pressures than by his presented actions’ (*English Drama*, p. 190).

¹²³ Described by Hunter as ‘[t]he most interesting fictional character created in his play’ (*English Drama*, p. 190).

¹²⁴ There is another instance of self-interest winning over doing the right thing when the Page convinces the Host of the Inn to facilitate the ambush of the young King Edward in scene 6. The Page asks the Host to lock his guests in and give the keys to Richard. The Host complains: ‘Alas, what shall I do? Who were I best to offend? Shall I betray that good old Earl that hath lain at my house this forty years? Why and I do, he will hang me. Nay, then on the other side, if I should not do as my Lord Protector commands, he will chop off my head. But is there no remedy?’ The Page responds shortly: ‘Come sir, be brief. There is no remedy’ (ll. 569-74). The Host is, of course, caught in an impossible position, falling foul of one side or another no matter what he does. The deciding factor in his decision making is what will leave him alive rather than what is the right thing to do. I do not think the play exactly condemns such characters for this, and indeed, I think the play invokes some sympathy especially for low-class characters caught in such a position. But, as I shall argue, the play holds up those characters who do struggle against Richard as more noble for it.

how some of Richard's plans are relatively half-formed until someone else on stage jumps in with the details.¹²⁵ So, unlike Shakespeare's play, which builds Richard as the ultimate Machiavellian schemer, this play depicts the ways in which his success is dependent on the actions (or, in some cases, inaction) of others.

In contrast to those characters who do nothing or become complicit in Richard's rise to power, we are also shown a few characters who deliberately act against their own self-interest in order to bring Richard down. One, as I have already mentioned, is Buckingham, who is betrayed by an ally and subsequently executed by Richard (see scene 8).¹²⁶ The other is Lord Stanley, Richmond's step-father. Fearing that he will send aid to Richmond, Richard takes Stanley's son as a hostage for his good behaviour. Although initially reluctant, Stanley eventually enters the battle on Richmond's side, knowing that his action will probably mean his son's death. Thus, in contrast to the characters who mind their own self-interest and allow Richard's tyrannical reign to continue, Buckingham and Stanley actively sacrifice their self-interest in order to bring his 'providential' fall about.

This emphasis on the inter-relation between providence and human actions means that the play comes very close to depicting the overthrow of a tyrannical monarch by his subjects as something legitimised by God. Despite Richard III's villainous reputation, this was still dangerous ground which required the Elizabethan playwright to tread somewhat cautiously. The play is careful to present Richard's rule as illegitimate to begin with; Truth's speech describes Richard Duke of York (father to Edward IV and Richard III) '[c]laiming the crown by wars, not by descent' (l. 20), and further stresses how, even after the Act of Parliament which 'entailed to him/ The crown and titles to that dignity' (ll. 23-4) after the death of Henry VI ('as the chronicles make manifest', l. 11), nevertheless he 'by outrage suppressed that virtuous King' (l. 29). Richard III further usurps the crown from his elder

¹²⁵ See *True Tragedy*, scene 10.

¹²⁶ Buckingham is betrayed by his servant Banister, who claims to be acting as a faithful subject ('Ah my Lord, my obeisance to my Prince is more.' Buckingham upbraids him saying 'Ah villain, thou betrayedst me for lucre, and not for duty to thy Prince' (ll. 1342-4). Self-interest once again facilitates Richard's cause.

brother's children when he has the princes murdered. Richmond, on the other hand, is depicted as God's chosen king, appointed by providence.¹²⁷ Furthermore, the 'tribute' to Elizabeth that closes the play presents her as the exact opposite in character to Richard.¹²⁸

The need to tread carefully may also explain the play's 'extreme' emphasis on 'truth' in its use of chronicle material since historical veracity would provide an added defence should anyone in authority take issue with the themes of the play. The play opens with a dialogue between Truth and Poetry that addresses some of the problems of mimetic realism identified by Dollimore in *Radical Tragedy*: Poetry makes 'shadows' upon the stage, and Truth must 'add bodies to the shadows' (ll. 9-10). Like Veritas in *Kynge Johan*, Truth delivers a summary of events that includes interpretive elements that are guaranteed by the character's status as truth itself. The ending of *A True Tragedy* employs the characters onstage to explicate the action of the play in a way that takes those characters outside of their historically specific identities. The play therefore borrows strategies from the morality play to fix a 'correct' interpretation, which, with a few added nuances, is that of the providential rise of the Tudor dynasty. Without these strategies, the final meaning of the action would be rather more open to interpretation.

The extent to which the history play can leave interpretation more 'open' in comparison to the morality play can be seen in the anonymous play *The Troublesome Reign of King John*.¹²⁹ As the title might suggest, the *Troublesome Reign* concentrates far more than Bale's *Kynge Johan* on the more 'troubling' aspects of King John's reign. One such problematic detail absent from Bale's play is the presence of Philip, 'the Bastard'. The question of whether or not he is indeed Richard I's illegitimate son invokes a more general question about whether we can ever have certain knowledge of the truth. His brother

¹²⁷ Although, interestingly for a play so concerned with 'facts', Richmond's genealogical claim to the throne is not detailed.

¹²⁸ For example: 'She is that lamp that keeps fair England's light, And through her faith her country lives in peace./ And she hath put proud Antichrist to flight,/ And been the means that civil wars did cease' (ll. 2234-8).

¹²⁹ Probably written in the 1580s, the first quarto of this play appeared in 1591 (see E. B. Everitt, *Six Early Plays*, p. 143).

Robert admits that ‘the world reposes him [Philip] lawful heir;/ My father in his life did count him so,/ And here my mother stands to prove him so’ (1.140-2). Yet Robert claims to know better, despite speaking of events that happened before he was born. His evidence is, therefore, circumstantial, but his mother, the only person onstage whom might know the truth, does not speak throughout the public interview except to ask to leave the stage and to affirm that Sir Robert Falconbridge was Philip’s father.¹³⁰ It is only once the matter has been settled that she admits privately to Philip that he is Richard’s son.¹³¹ To decide the matter, Philip, who is in no better a position than Robert to know, is asked three times who his father is. The third time he is asked, Philip has what is either some kind of divine revelation, or a fantasy of glory, that makes him renounce the name of Falconbridge. The imagery of his soliloquy to the audience describing this revelation depicts nature ‘whispering’ to him that he is Richard’s son, but he also shows himself to be preoccupied with ideas of honour: ‘How art thy thought’s ywraught in Honour’s heaven?’ (1.276) He also says:

Let land and living go; ’tis honour’s fire
That makes me swear King Richard was my sire.
Base to a King, adds title of more state,
Than knight’s begotten, though legitimate (1.293-6).

It is ‘honour’s fire’ that makes Philip claim Richard for his father, making his realisation seem a little less like divine revelation.

¹³⁰ See *Troublesome Reign*, 1.154-61 and 1.243 respectively.

¹³¹ The circumstances of Philip’s conception sound remarkably similar to what might have happened in the episode with the Countess of Salisbury in *Edward III* had the Countess not managed to convince Edward to abandon his pursuit of her. When his mother finally admits to her infidelity, she tells Philip:

Or if thou knewst what suits, what threats, what fears,
To move by love, or massacre by death,
To yield with love, or end by love’s contempt,
The mightiness of him that courted me,
Who temp’red terror with his wanton talk,
That something may extenuate the guilt.
But let it not advantage me so much:
Upbraid me rather with the Roman dame
That shed her blood to wash away her shame (1.414-22).

Like Edward’s pursuit of the Countess, Richard’s seduction of Philip’s mother is an abuse of his power as King, and she implies that she should have killed herself (like the ‘Roman dame’, presumably another reference to the story of *Appius and Virginia* which also appears in *Edward III*) rather than submit to it.

Rather than a crusade against the Church (John's sole motivation in Bale's play), the action of *The Troublesome Reign* is motivated by the challenge to the succession posed by Arthur of Brittany being pushed by King Philip of France. Before leaving for France, John commands:

And towards the main charges of my wars
I'll seize the lazy abbey-lubbers' lands
Into my hands, to pay my men of war.
The Pope and popelings shall not grease themselves
With gold and groats that are the soldiers' due (1.327-31).

John's seizure of Church property is mainly a convenient way of financing his campaign to defend his claim to the throne. Furthermore, the question of John's right to the throne is a thorny one; as the son of one of John's older brothers, Arthur may have the better claim in terms of 'lineal' descent. However, since Arthur's father was never king himself, it is possible John's claim might have been preferred. In addition to this, 'Arthur of Brittany' is only a boy whose claim would be impossible without the aid of the King of France; he might therefore be viewed as a 'foreign' claimant, a prospective child king, whose rule might be overly influenced by Philip of France. There are patriotic reasons, therefore, why John might seem like the better candidate. Nevertheless, the positive presentation of Arthur's character compared to John's relatively self-serving motives leaves it extremely unclear whose claim the audience is 'meant' to prefer.

More troubling still is the possibility that it does not matter who the characters or the audience might consider preferable since the decision belongs to God and not to men.

Asked to arbitrate on the matter, the Citizen of the town of Angiers responds:

And it please your highness, we control not your title, neither will we rashly admit your entrance. If you be lawful king, with all obedience we keep it [the town] to your use; if not king, our rashness to be impeached for yielding without more considerate trial. We answer not as men lawless but to the behoof of him that proves lawful (1.652-7).

Legal rhetoric presents the succession as a kind of automatic process, but in reality there are a number of possible claimants and no one with the authority to choose between them.¹³² The people of Angiers are put in an impossible position because, as the First Citizen says, ‘we control not your title’. Someone *is* king, but it is difficult to know who without some kind of divine intervention. The only solution John and Philip of France can come up with is to battle it out on the basis that God will defend the right. When this strategy also proves inconclusive, the two sides threaten to unite their armies against the town of Angiers. At this point the townspeople propose a match between Blanche, John’s niece by his sister Eleanor, and the son of the French King. This solution appeases the ambitions of the two people in control of the armies (John and Philip), but fails to address the question of who is ‘rightfully’ king. Arthur’s claim is abandoned for entirely materialistic and self-serving reasons and God conspicuously fails to intervene.

As a morality play, Bale’s *Kynge Johan* was able to reach outside of the historically specific to continue the action beyond the death of King John. Because Bale considers John’s conflict with the Church as a kind of abortive precursor to the English Reformation, the ending can be read as either taking place in an abstract and a-historical place where ‘truth’ can finally be asserted beyond doubt, or as representative of early Tudor England where Henry VIII has finally succeeded in establishing the ‘true’ faith. But whether we read this ending as historically situated or not, it allows the play to end triumphantly rather than on the ‘tragedy’ of King John’s failure and death. Within the context of the morality play, to end the play at the point of John’s death would leave the action drastically unfinished; the logic of trial by combat might imply that the Church’s ability to triumph over John

¹³² This is not dissimilar to the situation that Patrick Collinson describes Elizabethans envisioning should Elizabeth die without an obvious successor. (See Collinson, ‘The monarchical republic of Queen Elizabeth I’ in *The Tudor Monarchy*, ed. by John Guy (London: Arnold, 1997), pp. 110-134.)

proves their right to do so, as Sedition suggests at the beginning of the play.¹³³ By reaching outside of the historically specific, Bale is able to establish the ‘true’ meaning of events.

The Troublesome Reign, however, does not adopt the morality play’s strategies to explicate the action of the play. Instead, the characters of John and the Bastard are used to present the ‘lesson’ of the play from within their historically situated positions. John makes a prophesy predicting that

From out these loins shall spring a kingly branch,
Whose arms shall reach unto the gates of Rome,
And with his feet tread down the strumpet’s pride
That sits upon the chair of Babylon (2.1140-3).

The Bastard’s final speech also offers the patriotic moral: ‘Let England live but true within itself,/ And all the world can never wrong her state’ (2.1249-50). Our acceptance of the Bastard’s moral depends on the extent to which we can consider him to embody a ‘correct’ morality, and while it is true that the Bastard’s loyalty to John can be considered commendable, it is his idea for the French and English armies to unite against the otherwise peaceful (and possibly defenceless) people of Angiers and he also shows his political ambitions in his desire to marry Blanche before she is bestowed on the French Dauphin.¹³⁴ The Bastard may be an exemplary subject to the King, but he lacks the absolute authority of characters like ‘Truth’ and ‘Veritas’. History plays which do not reach outside of the historically specific put more of the onus of interpretation on the audience.

Historical tragedies especially must address on some level (even if only to question) why such a breakdown of social order has occurred in a world supposedly governed by God’s providence. In *A Troublesome Reign* John’s death can be considered as both an evil and unjust murder on the part of the monk, Thomas of Swinstead (who nevertheless

¹³³ See *Kynge Johan*, p. 10. See also p. 110 in ‘History and Morality’, above.

¹³⁴ Indeed, the Bastard’s suggestion that the two armies unite against the town is what prompts the Citizen to propose the match with Blanche. Citizen: ‘how should your strengths be knit?/ Not to oppress your subjects and your friends,/ And fill the world with brawls and mutinies;/ But unto peace your forces should be knit,/ To live in princely league and amity’ (1.774-8). Then, when Blanche is asked if she will accept the French Dauphin, Philip interrupts, appealing to Eleanor of Aquitaine: ‘Grandam, you made me half a promise once,/ That Lady Blanche should bring me wealth enough/ And make me heir of store of English land’ (1.828-30).

resolutely believes that he'll 'be canoniz'd for a holy saint' (2.928) for his actions), as well as a just punishment for John's actions in life, as he himself interprets it:

How have I liv'd but by another's loss?
 What have I lov'd, but wrack of other's weal?
 When have I vow'd and not infring'd mine oath?
 Where have I done a deed deserving well?
 How, what, when and where, have I bestow'd a day
 That tended not to some notorious ill?
 My life, replete with rage and tyranny,
 Craves little pity for so strange a death (2.1112-9).

This is a complete contrast to John's death speech in Bale's play:

But now I perceyve that synne and wyckednesse
 In thys wretchyd worlde, lyke as Christe prophesced,
 Have the overhande: in me it is veryvyed. (Kynge Johan, p. 83.)

In Bale's play John's death is blamed on the machinations of the Church and the failure of Nobility, Commonality and Civil Order to play their proper parts; John himself is blameless. The *Troublesome Reign*, however, presents a more complicated picture that is troubling because his death is simultaneously the providential fall of a tyrant, in the manner of *A Mirror for Magistrates*, and the result of a terrible injustice perpetrated by the Church and the nobility.¹³⁵ The tension between these two possibilities cannot be resolved without either infidelity to the historical 'facts' or the introduction of some independent narrator with the authority to explain the 'correct' interpretation. Different history plays employ both of these strategies to varying degrees and effects, but ultimately what appears is the complexity of the process of interpreting the meaning of history.

History: the 'Mongrel' Genre

Michael Hattaway writes that:

Although 'history' plays had been written by others before Shakespeare, these tended to be developments of Morality plays devoted to mapping the road to salvation for the common weal

¹³⁵ Indeed, assuming that the same actor who played Arthur would also play John's young son Henry, then if any 'Imperial Majesty' is seen to be resurrected at the end of *The Troublesome Reign* it is that of Arthur rather than John. However, any interpretive implications this might have only appear if the play is directly compared to Bale's *Kynge Johan*, and there is no solid evidence to suggest that the author of *The Troublesome Reign* was familiar with Bale's play, let alone his audience.

rather than that for the individual. Shakespeare invented the history play, which may be defined as a dramatisation of historical narrative that seeks to investigate not only the course of past events but the way in which they had been and were now perceived; to investigate by idealisation (sometimes) and demystification (sometimes) the power structures of its chosen period; and to draw parallels between, and thereby anatomise, past and present political institutions and social realities.¹³⁶

Hattaway acknowledges that ‘archaism need not imply primitivism’, yet like so many critics he is reluctant to allow many non-Shakespearean plays the full title of ‘history’ play.¹³⁷ I hope that I have sufficiently shown that, while early history plays do employ aspects of morality play conventions, they, too, need not be regarded as ‘primitive’. Like Shakespeare’s works, these plays also scrutinise the power structures of their chosen periods and draw parallels between past and present political institutions and social realities. This may mean that we need to re-examine Shakespeare’s claim to having ‘invented’ the genre.

The application of the conventions of other artistic genres provides frameworks for the interpretation of the action depicted in historical drama, with varying effects. Comedic elements, shared with the morality play, add a multivocality that disrupts a straightforward interpretation by offering alternative, often satiric points of view (as Edricus does in *Edmund Ironside*, or the clowns, Derick and John, in *Famous Victories*). ‘Romantic’ and ‘heroic’ episodes that stray from the strict ‘facts’ of history are often included in order to add serious notes to the political themes of a play, as the episode with the Countess of Salisbury in *Edward III* demonstrates. The open-endedness of the history play allows the future to ‘haunt’ apparently happy endings with the threat of impending tragedy, and where plays end tragically, some explanation in the manner of a morality seems to be desired (although not always supplied). Comedy is haunted by tragedy, tragedy demands the answers provided by the morality play, and the morality play dissolves back into comedy. Thus, whatever mode a history play chooses to adopt, it seems always to point towards

¹³⁶ Michael Hattaway, ‘Introduction’, in *The First Part of Henry VI*, ed. by Michael Hattaway (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), pp. 1 - 57 (p. 7).

¹³⁷ Hattaway, ‘Introduction’, p. 6.

other genres and, with them, other interpretive frameworks. The result is a ‘mongrel’ genre with a great deal of either prescriptive or interrogative potential (depending on how a given dramatist wishes to deploy that potential) in political, social and moral matters.

History was only vaguely conceived of as an independent dramatic genre in the early 1590s, giving it a unique kind of artistic freedom and potential for generic experimentation. According to Paul Hamilton, the distinction between poetry and history in Aristotle’s *Poetics* created an odd paradox for the historian:

In poetry, probability was all; history, on the other hand, had to attend much more to what was possible. Provided a fiction was coherent, provided it contained a beginning, middle and end and reached a cathartic conclusion, it served its purpose: one that modelled the philosophical end of apprehending events in their entirety, with nothing necessary to their elucidation left out. History must resign itself to what could have taken place, however improbable this might be, and however its improbability might threaten the coherence of history’s relation of events, leaving readers frustrated rather than cathartically purged of their desires for explanation.¹³⁸

Perhaps unexpectedly, history was *less* confined to the realms of the probable than fictional narratives, since the playwright could always appeal to the ‘facts’ of history to defend the inclusion of seemingly unlikely events. With history, it was not always the fault of the playwright if the audience left feeling ‘frustrated’ and unable to assimilate the actions of the play into a cohesive interpretation. It was this potential for a kind of licensed incoherence that made the representation of history in the history play a topic to attract the most ambitious of playwrights.

¹³⁸ Paul Hamilton, *Historicism*, 2nd edn. (London: Routledge, 2003), p. 7.

Chapter Three: Shakespeare's First Tetralogy

'Ambitious' is a word that can certainly be used to describe the plays of the first tetralogy. If the original artistic vision only encompassed 2 and 3 *Henry VI*, the end result was nevertheless a continuous narrative spread across four interlinked plays. As Thomas A. Pendleton notes, 'no one else, not even Shakespeare himself in the Second Tetralogy (which is the closest approach), ever does this again.'¹ However, although it concludes the larger narrative of the conflict between the houses of York and Lancaster and the rise of the Tudor dynasty, *Richard III* stands apart from the *Henry VI* plays in a number of ways. With its unified and self-contained plot, it has also received considerably more critical attention than the other plays of the first tetralogy. For these reasons I have treated the *Henry VI* plays and *Richard III* separately. *Richard III* offers a kind of focused summary of the themes and issues raised by the *Henry VI* plays, and as such provides a fitting conclusion to this chapter.

Like the plays in the previous chapter, the *Henry VI* plays borrow from the conventions of other genres in order to experiment with the representation of the past. They show an awareness of the historiographical problems identified in Chapter One, and while I would not claim Shakespeare as the 'inventor' of the history play, these plays may well have had a significant role in the formation of the genre. My principal concern here, however, is the outlook on history presented in the four plays of the first tetralogy. In light of the uncertainties surrounding the dating and authorship of the *Henry VI* plays, I have not made any assumptions about the existence of the plays pre-1592.² Shakespeare's authorship is also not integral to my claims, although his name provides a convenient shorthand. I begin the chapter with a look at the structure of the plays of the first

¹ Thomas A. Pendleton, 'Introduction', in *Henry VI: Critical Essays*, ed. by Thomas A. Pendleton (London: Routledge, 2001), pp. 1-26 (pp. 15).

² Indeed, since I am using the Oxford *Complete Works*, my readings are largely based on the 1623 Folio versions of the plays.

tetralogy, before examining some key themes of the *Henry VI* plays. The sections ‘Comedy and the Commonwealth’, ‘A Record of Loss’, and ‘The Will of God’ explore the plays in relation to the genres of comedy, tragedy and morality (respectively), while ‘The Bloody Rose’ considers attitudes to law in relation to determining the line of succession. Finally, ‘The Use of History’ examines the outlook on history I believe is evident in the *Henry VI* plays.

The Structure of the First Tetralogy

The order of composition of the first tetralogy has implications for whether or not we can regard the four plays as a unified ‘tetralogy’ at all. The issue, as Graham Holderness summarises it, is between two apparently opposite positions:

- (i) That ‘Shakespeare’s history plays’ formed from the outset a unified, cohesive, organic totality of dramatic and historical writing (though the individual plays have often been disaggregated, in criticism and theatrical practice, for particular local reasons).
- (ii) That ‘Shakespeare’s history plays’ were from the outset a diversified, discontinuous, fragmentary series of historico-dramatic explorations, each individually and independently shaped by contemporary cultural pressures (though the individual plays have often been integrated, in criticism and theatrical practice, for general ideological reasons).³

The possibility that the plays were not composed in order may suggest that they were not intended to be considered as a unified tetralogy. However, it is not necessary for the author(s) to have intended to write a ‘tetralogy’ from the outset for it to be legitimate to treat them as a unified sequence of plays. What is important is the shape of the eventual result. Certainly the Folio suggests that the plays came to be regarded as part of a sequence by Hemmings and Condell, if no one else.⁴

³ Graham Holderness, *Shakespeare: The Histories* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2000), p. 8.

⁴ Nevertheless, the Folio suggests seeing all ten of Shakespeare’s English history plays as a sequence rather than as two tetralogies plus *King John* and *Henry VIII*. 2 and 3 *Henry VI* were also published in a single volume as *The Whole of the Contention between the two Houses of York and Lancaster* in 1619, which may support the idea that *Parts 2 and 3* were originally conceived of as a two-part play in the fashion of *Tamburlaine*, with *Part 1* coming later as the vision of the whole developed.

Nevertheless, the order of composition may have had some consequences for the shape of the plays we have today, and internal evidence from the plays themselves has been put forward to support the idea that *Part 1* was written later than *Parts 2* and *3*. In the opening scene of *Part 2* Gloucester mourns the loss of lands in France:

What – did my brother Henry spend his youth,
His valour, coin, and people in the wars?
Did he so often lodge in open field
In winter's cold and summer's parching heat
To conquer France, his true inheritance?
And did my brother Bedford toil his wits
To keep by policy what Henry got?
Have you yourselves, Somerset, Buckingham,
Brave York, Salisbury, and victorious Warwick,
Received deep scars in France and Normandy?
[...]
And shall these labours and these honours die?
Shall Henry's conquest, Bedford's vigilance,
Your deeds of war, and all our council die?⁵

Both Henry V and the Duke of Bedford, who take pride of place on Gloucester's list, died of illnesses during military campaigns in France. Bedford's death is depicted in *Part 1* at the end of 3.5; unable to fight himself, Bedford witnesses the English retake Rouen before he dies, but his death pales in significance to Talbot's at the end of the play. Unlike Henry and Bedford, Talbot dies in battle fighting for English interests, making the omission of Talbot's name in Gloucester's speech in *Part 2* odd if it had been written after *Part 1*. In *Part 1* Talbot repeatedly re-conquers cities in the name of characters who have died,⁶ and for Gloucester not to use Talbot's name in a similar manner seems conspicuous unless such a pattern had not yet been established at the time *Part 2* was written.

⁵ *2 Henry VI*, in *The Oxford Shakespeare: Complete Works*, ed. by Stanley Wells and Gary Taylor (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2001), pp. 55-89 (1.1.75-94). All references to Shakespeare's works are to this edition unless otherwise specified.

⁶ In 2.2 Talbot dedicates the capture of Orléans to Salisbury, who was killed in 1.6 (see *1 Henry VI*, pp. 153-182 (2.2.4-17)), and Talbot also has a short speech (seven lines) memorialising Bedford after the capture of Rouen (3.6.17-23).

This, and the omission of the rose motif that features in *Parts 1* and *3*,⁷ have been cited as evidence that *Part 2* was written first.⁸ To this I would like to add the role of Exeter, who in *Parts 1* and *3* plays a semi-independent commentator on events, but who is entirely absent from *Part 2*.⁹ In *Part 1* Exeter has two prominent soliloquies at the end of 3.1 and 4.1 which serve to highlight some of the political subtext of the court scenes and recall prophecies foreshadowing the conflict to come. In *Part 3* Exeter has an exchange with Henry VI in which he admits that the Yorkist claim is stronger than the Lancastrian, although he chooses to remain loyal to Henry.¹⁰ Exeter seems to provide an interpretive point of view that is relatively impartial and with which the audience can generally agree. Such an interpretive viewpoint is entirely absent from *Part 2*, possibly suggestive of an idea that was only developed after *Part 2* was written.

Nevertheless, there are good reasons for regarding the plays as a unified sequence. Thomas A. Pendleton points out that the ending of each of the *Henry VI* plays seems to foreground problematic issues immediately taken up in the next play:

Part 1 ends with Suffolk planning to dominate the king by means of the marriage to Margaret of Anjou, and *Part 2* opens with his presentation of her to Henry; *Part 2* ends with the Yorkists, victors at the battle of St. Albans, encouraging one another to get to London before the Lancastrians, and *Part 3* opens with their doing so; *Part 3* ends with Richard's asides threatening to undermine the time of peace his brother Edward celebrates, and *Richard III* of course opens with his soliloquy announcing his commitment to destroying 'this weak piping time of peace.' The result is a narrative that is not just continuous from play to play but that is 'to be continued'.¹¹

⁷ The white rose of York is only mentioned once in *2 Henry VI* in York's soliloquy at the end of 1.1 (in both quarto and folio texts). However, there is no mention of the red rose of Lancaster in *Part 2*, or evidence of characters wearing roses in their hats, as established in *1 Henry VI* (2.4) and mentioned again in *3 Henry VI* (1.2).

⁸ See Pendleton, 'Introduction', pp. 4-5.

⁹ It is only an assumption that the Exeter who appears in *Part 1* is meant to be the same person as the Exeter in *Part 3*. However, the two characters do seem to have a similar function in both plays and Exeter's death is not mentioned in the interim.

¹⁰ See *3 Henry VI*, pp. 91-124 (1.1).

¹¹ Pendleton, 'Introduction', pp. 14-5.

If *1 Henry VI* was not written first, it nevertheless seems to have been retrospectively designed to begin the sequence of the four plays. In answer to the opposition set up by Graham Holderness, therefore, while the sequence is not inseparable and each play makes sense as an individual unit, it is certainly worth considering the ways in which the plays link together.

In the plays examined in the previous chapter, a single dominant genre can usually be identified that dictates the dramatic structure: *Kynge Johan* is a morality play first and foremost, *The True Tragedy of Richard III* is formulated as a tragedy (although Richmond's victory is presented as a desirable result) and *The Famous Victories of Henry V* can be broadly described as a comedy. In each case identification with a particular genre unifies the action of the play and provides a framework for interpretation, although the historical subject matter does not always sit comfortably with the conventions of the chosen genre. There is also usually a central character on whom to focus the action (King John, Richard III and Henry V, respectively). A similar argument can be made for *Edward III*, *The Troublesome Reign of King John*, *Woodstock*, *King Leir* and Marlowe's *Edward II*. There are, of course, exceptions: *Gorboduc* follows the conventions of a tragedy but does not have a central figure, and *Edmund Ironside* unifies the action of the plot with the expectation of a tragic ending, but then subverts that expectation with the sudden truce between Edmund and Canute (who also dominate the play relatively equally).

Unlike these plays, the *Henry VI* plays are not unified by a single genre or by a central figure. They do, however, use some of the conventions of other genres at particular points in the action. The deaths of Talbot (*Part 1*), Gloucester (*Part 2*), Rutland, York, Prince Edward and Henry (*Part 3*) are figured as 'tragic', but they are all denied the structural position in the narrative that would make them the climactic event of a 'single'

tragedy.¹² *Part 1* begins with the funeral of Henry V, and, as Hattaway observes, his coffin on stage ‘seems to have been displaced in a discomfoting way from the end of a tragedy or tragical history.’¹³ While it is true that the plays have a generally ‘tragic’ tone and trajectory, they do not present the unified tragedy of a single central protagonist. Instead, they present multiple tragedies happening in tandem to disparate and often opposing characters. At odds with this tragic ethos, *Parts 1* and *3* end (almost) like comedies; at the end of *Part 1* Henry agrees to marry Margaret of Anjou, and *Part 3* ends with Edward IV presenting his new-born son, banishing Margaret, and looking forward to a peaceful future.¹⁴ In each case these apparently ‘happy’ endings are undercut by discordant elements in the court; in *Part 1* both Humphrey and Exeter voice objections to the match with Margaret (5.7), and in *Part 3* Richard promises to destroy his brother’s hopes in his asides to the audience (5.7). In the *Henry VI* plays, therefore, comic and tragic elements do not feed into an overarching structural framework, but are instead brought into tension with each other, denying the audience a single, ‘correct’ interpretations of the action. This may suggest a discord between artistic conventions of representation and the ‘real’ world.

Michael Hattaway writes that ‘critics have found them [*1-3 Henry VI*] disappointingly based on narrative rather than significant structure, lacking both psychologically complex characters and the kinds of verbal density that Shakespeare was to attain in his later plays.’¹⁵ The episodic structure has posed problems for critics who

¹² The lack of a central figure and the episodic nature of the narrative is also indicated in the titles for the quarto edition of *Part 2* (*The First part of the Contention betwixt the two famous Houses of Yorke and Lancaster, with the death of the good Duke Humphrey: And the banishment and death of the Duke of Suffolke, and the Tragical end of the proud Cardinall of Winchester, with the notable Rebellion of Jacke Cade: And the Duke of Yorke's first claime vnto the Crowne*) and the octavo edition of *Part 3* (*The True Tragedie of Richard Duke of Yorke, and the death of good King Henrie the Sixt, with the Whole Contention betweene the two Houses, Lancaster and Yorke*). The title for *Part 2* simply lists the various events of the play, while in *Part 3* the Duke of York’s ‘tragedy’ is over by the end of the first act. Henry’s death in *Part 3* is *almost* in a position to make it climactic, but by making it the penultimate scene of the play the final interest lies with Henry’s murderer, Richard of Gloucester, rather than with Henry.

¹³ Michael Hattaway, ‘Introduction’, in *The First Part of Henry VI*, ed. by Michael Hattaway (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), pp. 1-57 (p. 6).

¹⁴ Edward: ‘For here, I hope, begins our lasting joy’, *3 Henry VI*, 5.7.46. Unlike *Part 1*, this play also ends on a rhyming couplet, suggesting a positive and harmonious outlook, but the rhyme is, forebodingly, between ‘sour annoy’ and ‘lasting joy’. Edward’s ‘I hope’ makes the peace seem especially tenuous.

¹⁵ Michael Hattaway, ‘Introduction’, pp. 4-5.

consider it incompatible with the ‘serious’ interest in history that they want to claim for Shakespeare; Ribner, for example, describes the ‘episodic structure’ as ‘carry[ing] on the dramatic tradition of the miracle drama as it developed through the Digby *Mary Magdalene*, *Cambises* and *Tamburlaine*’, but feels the need to confirm that ‘[h]istory for Shakespeare was never mere pageantry’.¹⁶ The episodic structure is particularly problematic for Tillyard, since it means that the *Henry VI* plays deserve the title of ‘chronicle play’ far better than many of the plays Tillyard designates as such. While acknowledging the ‘shortcomings’ of *Henry VI*, Tillyard attempts to circumvent the lack of a central figure by arguing:

If this play had been called the *Tragedy of Talbot* it would stand a much better chance of being heeded by a public which very naturally finds it hard to remember which part of *Henry VI* is which [...] And if we want something by which to distinguish the play, let us by all means give it that title. It is one that contains much truth, but not all. The whole truth in this matter is that though the action revolves around Talbot, though he stands pre-eminently for loyalty and order in a world threatened by chaos, he is not the hero. For there is no regular hero either in this or in any of the other three plays; its true hero being England or Respublica after the fashion of the Morality Play[.]¹⁷

Ribner agrees: ‘England, like a morality hero, brings evil upon herself’.¹⁸ Nevertheless, Ribner admits that the idea that the Wars of the Roses are punishment for the deposition of Richard II is ‘never strongly emphasised’ in the tetralogy, making it less than clear exactly what ‘England’ is being punished for.¹⁹

If Shakespeare intended ‘England’ to be the central figure in an historical morality play, then his failure to make this apparent would speak rather poorly of his abilities as a writer. Indeed, Ornstein advances the idea of the development of Shakespeare’s skills as evidence for the sequence of the plays; he writes, if ‘*Part I* followed *Parts II* and *III*, then we can find no satisfactory explanation for the fact that *Part I* is so much more primitive

¹⁶ Irving Ribner, *The English History Play in the Age of Shakespeare* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957), p. 100 and p. 101 (respectively).

¹⁷ E. M. W. Tillyard, *Shakespeare’s History Plays*, first published 1944 (London: Chatto & Windus, 1961), p. 163.

¹⁸ Ribner, *The English History Play*, p. 101.

¹⁹ Ribner, *The English History Play*, p. 99.

artistically than its “predecessors.”²⁰ Yet in terms of dramatic structure, Ornstein seems to favour *Part 1* over *Parts 2* or *3*; he praises the Temple Garden scene as ‘[a] triumph of dramatic imagination over the inartistic formlessness of Tudor historiography’ and speaks of how, ‘[b]oldly ignoring chronology and Chronicle “fact,” he [Shakespeare] interweaves the destinies of Talbot, Joan of Arc, and York by making Talbot, Joan’s adversary and victim, and York, Joan’s nemesis and counterpart.’²¹ In contrast, he writes of *Part 2*: ‘Shakespeare’s instinct for dramatic form, so evident in the shaping of the plot of *Henry VI Part I*, was apparently unable to check the onward rush of the historical narrative in *Part II*.’²² And of *Part 3* he writes: ‘The plot of *Part III* seems even more episodic and long-winded than that of *Part II*, although the plays are approximately the same length, because *Part III* does not have the central core of action provided in *Part II* by the unfolding of York’s conspiracy.’²³ Ornstein appears to attribute this unravelling of artistic structure partly to the dictates of the historical material itself, but also implies Shakespeare’s boredom with the subject and eagerness to get on to *Richard III* may also have been a factor.²⁴

While I agree with the general direction of Ornstein’s observation about the structure of the three plays, I would argue that it is no coincidence that the artistic structure breaks down at the same time as the political order falls apart. In *Part 1* the loss of English territory in France provides the backbone of the action. On the level of subplot we are shown the beginnings of the division between Yorkist and Lancastrian factions in the

²⁰ Robert Ornstein, *A Kingdom for a Stage* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1972), p. 35.

²¹ Ornstein, *A Kingdom for a Stage*, p. 36 and p. 37 (respectively).

²² Ornstein, *A Kingdom for a Stage*, p. 52.

²³ Ornstein, *A Kingdom for a Stage*, p. 52.

²⁴ ‘The perfunctory quality of some of the plotting in *Part III* makes one suspect that Shakespeare is more interested in developing Richard as a Machiavellian conspirator than in chronicling the final events of the civil war. He also seems less concerned with creating a satisfying dramatic form in *Part III* than with laying the groundwork for Richard’s brilliant scheming in *Richard III*. This is not to suggest that Shakespeare treated *Part III* as nothing more than an obligatory task which he had to perform before he could plunge into More’s fascinating narrative of Richard’s rise and fall. But certainly the peaks of poetic and dramatic inspiration in *Part III* [...] stand out among much else that seems relatively uninspired’ (Ornstein, *A Kingdom for a Stage*, p. 53).

Temple Garden scene (2.4), as well as division within the Lancastrian faction in the bickering between Gloucester and Beaufort. These plots run relatively separately until Act 4 when Henry comes to Paris to be crowned (4.1). By the end of Act 4 York's rivalry with Somerset has led to the death of Talbot (4.7), and Act 5 concludes the action with the capture of Joan (5.4) and the betrothal of Henry and Margaret (5.5). Margaret's first appearance in a scene sandwiched between Joan's capture and execution creates a link between the two women, and Henry's betrothal creates further division within the English court. Thus, Act 5 recoups some control over events, but also sows the seeds of future breakdown.

In *Part 2* the subplot of *Part 1* becomes the main plot, and the play depicts York's rise to power through his manipulation of the divisions within the Lancastrian faction (Suffolk and Margaret join with Beaufort against Gloucester). If there is a subplot in this play it is the lot of the commons. In Act 1 we see the petitioners who are intercepted by Margaret and Suffolk (1.3). In Act 2 we have the 'miracle' at St. Albans (2.1), which is discredited by Gloucester, and the trial by combat between Horner and his apprentice Peter (2.3). In Act 3 the commons demand Suffolk be banished for the death of Gloucester (3.2) and (like *Part 1*) this subplot culminates in Act 4 with the Cade rebellion (4.2-8). But unlike Act 5 of *Part 1*, where the fighting is nominally brought under control, in *Part 2* the situation degenerates into all-out war between the nobles as York makes his bid for the crown (5.3). Thus, the breakdown of artistic structure observed by Ornstein closely mirrors the breakdown into violence and political chaos.

In *Part 3* it is impossible to distinguish between plot and subplot as the action becomes a seemingly endless sequence of battles, deaths and switched allegiances. York breaks his oath to Henry in Act 1 in the interests of winning the crown sooner rather than later (1.2). The King of France promises aid to Margaret but then self-interestedly switches his support to Edward on the arrival of Warwick, and back again when his pride is

wounded by the news of Edward's marriage to Elizabeth Woodville (3.3). Warwick also switches to the Lancastrian side on hearing this news as a result of wounded pride. Later Clarence does the same (4.7), but soon switches back again (5.1). Artistic structure is reduced to the level of foreshadowing and echoing.²⁵ Structuring the action in this way makes events seem repetitive and inevitable, but not necessarily inevitable in the sense of being divinely ordained. The pattern of the play is a pattern of pride, self-interest and revenge, more reflective of the desires of the characters than any discernable divine plan.

Richard III is a very different play from the *Henry VI* plays; structured as a unified tragedy, the action is not episodic and Richard provides a central figure around whom the action is organised. Indeed, the play is so 'unified' that, as Janis Lull observes, '[f]or all its huge cast, *Richard III* has no subplots.'²⁶ Furthermore, although *Richard III* continues the themes and refers to the events of the *Henry VI* plays, knowledge of them is not necessary to understand the play. *Richard III* stands alone in a way that the other three plays of the tetralogy do not. In *Richard III*, as events move towards the accession of Henry Tudor and the establishment of a stable political order, a unified artistic structure asserts itself for the first time in the tetralogy. According to Phyllis Rackin, the *Henry VI* plays:

[...] are set in a Machiavellian universe. Linked together by open-ended conclusions that conclude nothing but initiate actions to be pursued in the subsequent play, their episodic plots depict an increasingly chaotic and meaningless world and an action that seems devoid of ethical significance or providential purpose until it is explained in retrospect in *Richard III*.²⁷

In *Richard III*, on the other hand:

²⁵ For example: at the end of Act One the Lancastrian forces kill York's son Rutland shortly before they kill York himself. At the end of Act Five, Henry's son Edward is killed by the Yorkist faction shortly before Richard murders Henry in the tower.

²⁶ Janis Lull, 'Plantagenets, Lancastrians, Yorkists and Tudors: 1-3 *Henry VI*, *Richard III*, *Edward III*', in *The Cambridge Companion to Shakespeare's History Plays*, ed. by Michael Hattaway (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), pp. 89-105 (p. 96).

²⁷ Phyllis Rackin, *Stages of History: Shakespeare's English Chronicles* (Ithaca NY: Cornell University Press, 1990), p. 62.

Prophesies, prophetic dreams, curses that take effect – all suggest that supernatural forces are involved in the events that Richard believes and claims are completely under his control.²⁸

Finally:

Richard III offers a neat conventional resolution to the problem of historical causation. All cards have been stacked in advance, and the entire play reads like a lesson in providential history.²⁹

Thus, for Rackin, the *Henry VI* plays depict a chaotic world governed by Machiavellian principles, while *Richard III* asserts a more providential view of historical causation.

At first glance, Rackin's view of the four plays fits nicely with what I have argued about the artistic structure of the tetralogy. But convenient as it would be to say that Shakespeare explores Machiavellian realpolitik in the *Henry VI* plays only to wrap it all up in a providential bow in *Richard III*, things are a little more complicated. Not only are ideas of providential design not nearly so straightforward in *Richard III*, but the *Henry VI* plays are by no means free from the indicators of providential design cited by Rackin. In *Part 1* Exeter is the mouthpiece for a prophesy that 'Henry born at Monmouth should win all,/ And Henry born at Windsor should lose all' (3.1.202-3), and the 'prophesies' of Joan of Arc can never quite be discounted as total fabrications.³⁰ In *Part 2* the prophesies produced by the conjurors on behalf of the Duchess of Gloucester all come true, and Gloucester has a prophetic dream predicting his own downfall. In *Part 3* Henry VI prophesies the future success of Henry Tudor (4.7), and dies predicting the chaos of Richard III's reign (5.6). Structurally speaking, *Richard III* does indeed present a much more providential outlook made possible by the unity of its artistic structure. However, irony pervades the play,

²⁸ Rackin, *Stages of History*, p. 63.

²⁹ Rackin, *Stages of History*, pp. 63-4.

³⁰ Exeter does not credit the prophesy to Henry V directly, but the story appears in Holinshed's *Chronicles* of how Henry V left England during Katherine's pregnancy adamant that his son should not be born at Windsor because of this prophesy. In the *Chronicles* it is not clear how Henry came to be aware of this prediction: 'were it that he warned by some prophesie, or had some foreknowledge, or else iudged himselfe of his sonnes fortune' (see Holinshed's *Chronicles of England, Scotland and Ireland*, ed. by Paulina Kewes, Ian Archer, Felicity Heal and Henry Summerson (1587 edition), <<http://www.english.ox.ac.uk/holinshed/texts>>, [accessed 14/11/2013], volume 6, p. 581). For Joan's role as a prophetess, see pp. 179-82 in 'The Will of God', below.

making the outlook on providence presented by the play less straightforward.³¹ The division between Machiavellian realpolitik and providential design is therefore not quite as neat as Rackin would like to make it.

The influence of postmodern historicism means that we need no longer consider an episodic structure as evidence of either a lack of ‘serious’ interest in history or a lack of skill on the part of the playwright(s). Rather than unifying the plot with reference to a single overarching genre, the *Henry VI* plays employ generic conventions on a micro-level with the effect of creating multivocality, not only with the multiple voices of different characters, but also with the way in which multiple kinds of stories unfold. Thus, while the dramatic structure and artistic patterning of the plays suggests a kind of inevitability possibly indicative of a providential pattern, this multivocality pushes against that apparent inevitability to problematise it in various kinds of ways. Like Holinshed’s *Chronicles*, instead of a unified grand narrative, the *Henry VI* plays present something more like a series of interrelated *petits récits* that put the onus of interpretation on the audience. In doing this Shakespeare may have been engaging with the social and historiographical ‘project’ that Annabel Patterson believes underlies the *Chronicles*, which she explains by way of Jürgen Habermas’ concept of *bürgerliche Öffentlichkeit*, or ‘civic openness’:

Öffentlichkeit is explained as including media of public communication, along with voluntary organisations or institutions ‘which are neither bred nor kept by a political system for purposes of creating legitimation.’ Rather they are sites where the ‘common consciousness’ society has of itself ‘can be concentrated and more clearly articulated around specific themes and ordered contributions’.³²

The *Chronicles*, Patterson believes, created a *textual* space in which this kind of ‘common consciousness’ could be articulated. Robert Zaller concurs with Patterson:

³¹ This idea will be explored in more depth in the section on *Richard III* below.

³² Annabel Patterson, *Reading Holinshed’s Chronicles* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), p. 20, citing Jürgen Habermas, ‘The Normative Content of Modernity’, in *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, trans. by Frederick Lawrence.

For those whose obligation is merely to respond to legitimation cues and to obey appropriate commands, however, the act of reading creates a new, private space, an appeal not merely to duty or conscience but to a hitherto unexercised faculty of judgement. In Holinshed's day, no public sphere existed in which such a faculty could have scope. It was already being reflected, however, in the new London theatre, where great men and groundlings came together to witness the spectacle of a nation unfold, not merely as pageant but as drama.³³

By leaving interpretation so much to its audience, the theatre of the *Henry VI* plays provided a physical and public space in which Elizabethans could engage critically with the creation of a collective national history.

The *Henry VI* Plays

Comedy and the Commonwealth: Representing the Lower Classes

In the *Henry VI* plays, comedy is used to both entertain and interrogate the conditions of representation that give rise to certain stereotypes, and as such contributes to the creation of the kind of critically aware audience discussed by Patterson and Zaller above. In *Part 1* comedy is provided mainly by the French, who are presented as cowardly (despite some bold rhetoric) and devious; in 1.2 Charles, the Dauphin, declares 'Him I forgive my death that killeth me/ When he sees me go back one foot or flee' (1.2.20-1), only to be immediately driven back on stage, fleeing from the English in the next scene. To explain why they have retreated, and further bolster the English sense of national pride, Alençon mentions that 'Froissart, a countryman of ours, records/ England all Olivers and Rolands bred' (1.3.8-9); the English have apparently come to embody the French heroic past better than the French themselves.³⁴ However, although structurally speaking it is *Parts 1* and *3* that end like comedies, it is *Part 2* that contains the most comedic scenes. In *Part 2* comedy is usually associated with the lower-class characters, who revealingly inherit this mantle

³³ Robert Zaller, 'King, Common, and Commonweal in Holinshed's *Chronicles*', *Albion*, 34.3 (2002), 371-390 (p. 389).

³⁴ The *Henry VI* plays give less cause to interrogate French national stereotypes than they do the representation of the English lower-classes, and so class stereotypes are my principal concern in this section. Nevertheless, the French are used in a limited fashion in *1 Henry VI* to consider the function of patriotism (see pp. 179-80 in 'The Will of God' below).

from the French in *Part 1*, suggesting a rather negative view of the ‘common people’ of England.³⁵ However, I believe that *2 Henry VI* also signals that this attitude is a consequence of the way in which the interests and concerns of the nobility dominate both culture and the writing of the historical record, and may even suggest that a fuller understanding of history can only be achieved once such attitudes are overcome.

The first appearance of low-class characters in *Part 2* involves the petitioners in 1.3, where they are, significantly, seeking a forum in which their concerns can be heard.³⁶ Not familiar with the court, they do not recognise the different nobles, mistaking Suffolk for Gloucester, with the result that their petitions are misdirected. The first petitioner complains that one of the Cardinal’s men is ‘keeping my house and lands and wife all from me’ (1.3.18). Ironically, given Suffolk’s implied relationship with the Queen, he responds ‘Thy wife too? That’s some wrong indeed’ (1.3.20). The second petition is against Suffolk himself regarding his enclosure of common land. Thus, both petitions highlight areas of guilt for Suffolk. Instead of addressing the petitioners’ concerns, the Queen rips up their petitions and only carries forward the complaint that furthers her and Suffolk’s agenda against the Duke of York.³⁷ Non-court centred concerns are marginalised and dismissed. Denied an outlet, low-class characters become more rebellious as the play progresses, resulting eventually in the Cade rebellion of Act 4. Like the French in *Part 1*, the Cade rebels represent a real threat to social order which is neutralised before the end of the play. Instead, it is the dissent between the nobles that erupts into all-out war at the end of the

³⁵ Indeed, Larry Champion notes the number of insults in all three *Henry VI* plays that are based on derogatory references to the lower classes, and writes: ‘the nobles must constantly confirm their assumptions of superiority through expressions of contempt for those beneath them; their deeds, to the contrary, prove that such social status is only the accident of birth, wealth, and the power it confers’ (*The Noise of the Threatening Drum: Dramatic Strategy and Political Ideology in Shakespeare and the English Chronicle Plays* (London and Toronto: Associated University Presses, 1990), p. 80).

³⁶ James Holstun notes that ‘[p]etitions formed a crucial discursive genre of populist revolt in Tudor England’ (‘Damned Commotion: Riot and Rebellion in Shakespeare’s Histories’, in *A Companion to Shakespeare’s Works: The Histories*, ed. by Richard Dutton and Jean E. Howard (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing Ltd., 2006), pp. 194–219 (p. 199)).

³⁷ Margaret’s dislike of the custom of petitioning (‘Is this the fashions in the court of England?/ [...] And this the royalty of Albion’s king?’ 1.3.45–8) marks her as French, and also suggests such ‘freedoms’ are a peculiarly English accomplishment.

play. *Part 2* thus presents an aristocratic history in which the needs of the general populace are conspicuously dismissed and marginalised.

The intended recipient of the petitioners' complaints is the Duke of Gloucester, whose reputation as a champion of the common people provides some hope that their concerns might be addressed. However, the episode of the false miracle at St. Albans (2.1) may suggest that his attitude towards these low-class characters is not entirely free from a certain court-centred arrogance. The earliest source for this episode is Thomas More's *Dialogue Concerning Heresies*, where More uses the story to argue that God ensures that all false miracles will come to light. For More's fictional messenger, however, the incident suggests that there may be more false miracles that are never discovered. The episode also appears in *Acts and Monuments*, where More's lesson about miracles is omitted and the incident instead demonstrates 'how Duke Humfrey had not onely an head to discerne and disseuer truth from foreged and fained hipocrisie, but studye also and diligence likewise was in him, to reforme that which was amisse.'³⁸ The play makes a few small alterations to these sources; as well as being given a name, 'Simpcox' is also given a wife, and pretends to be lame in addition to being blind.

Simpcox's lameness serves several purposes; it creates a secondary reason for Gloucester to suspect that Simpcox has not been blind from birth, since he claims to have been lamed falling out of a tree (2.1.98). It also sets up a joke about the gullibility of the peasantry, who believe a second miracle has been performed when Simpcox leaps up to escape a beating. Also unlike the sources, the play seems to depict Gloucester as suspicious of the miracle from the start; his first comment is an aside in response to Simpcox's wife, who affirms that Simpcox has been blind from birth, to say 'Hadst thou been his mother/ Thou couldst have better told' (2.1.8-3). It is as though Gloucester is criticising Simpcox and his wife for not constructing a more convincing falsehood. But the comedy of the

³⁸ *The Unabridged Acts and Monuments Online* (1583 edition), (HRI Online Publications, Sheffield, 2011) <<http://www.johnfoxe.org>>, [accessed 01/03/14] book 6, chap. 8, p. 729.

scene is undercut by Simpcox's wife's final line: 'Alas, sir, we did it for pure need' (2.1.159). Motivation for faking the miracle is not suggested in any of the sources, but rather than pursuing it, Gloucester responds by sentencing them both to 'be whipped through every market-town/ Till they come to Berwick, from whence they came' (2.1.160-1). Simpcox's wife's final line suggests a fuller story that fails to come to light since it is dismissed as unimportant by the noble judges. Instead, Margaret, the Cardinal and Suffolk make a joke of the situation, and Gloucester administers a fairly severe punishment outside of a formal legal setting.³⁹ The dismissal of Simpcox's wife's final line implies the way in which the play presents low-class characters from the perspective of the nobility, for whom the episode is little more than a diverting entertainment.

The plight of the common people provides a similar kind of entertainment for the nobles in the trial by combat enacted between Horner and his apprentice Peter. As in the St. Albans scene, Salisbury makes light of the situation with a witty quip.⁴⁰ As Jean E. Howard observes, 'the combat is moved close to farce by the fact that the master turns up drunk and the apprentice does not know how to handle a sword. The audience beholds something perilously close to a parody of a chivalric encounter.'⁴¹ When the combat was initially set, Horner willingly accepted while Peter doubted his ability.⁴² Nevertheless, in the combat itself, Peter prevails, thereby 'proving' Horner guilty. In an epic tale like *The Song of Roland*, Thierry's manifest inferiority to Ganelon's defender, Pinnabel, heightens the sense

³⁹ Margaret says 'It made me laugh to see the villain run' (2.1.157), the Cardinal declares, 'Duke Humphrey has done a miracle today' (2.1.162), to which Suffolk responds 'True: made the lame to leap and run away' (2.1.163). These three are, of course, the least sympathetic characters on stage, while Gloucester refrains from making a joke of it but seems fairly proud of his display of logic, and Henry's response is 'O God, seest thou this and bear'st so long?' (2.1.156) in exasperation with the continued gullibility of the commoners after Simpcox has been exposed.

⁴⁰ On discovering that Peter's surname is 'Thump' he says, 'Then see that thou thump thy master well' (*2 Henry VI*, 2.3.90).

⁴¹ Jean E. Howard, *The Stage and Social Struggle in Early Modern England* (London: Routledge, 1994), p. 137. It may be worth noting, however, the combatants are not given swords; according to a stage direction, they fight with a 'staff with a sandbag fastened to it' (See *2 Henry VI*, 2.3).

⁴² 'I cannot fight [...] O Lord, have mercy upon me – I shall not be able to fight a blow!' (*2 Henry VI*, 1.3.218-22).

that his victory represents the judgement of God.⁴³ Here, however, Horner's complacency and resulting drunkenness seem more to blame. This scene seems to mock the idea, voiced by Henry before the combat begins, that 'God defend[s] the right' (2.3.55). Nevertheless, Horner confesses with his dying breath (2.3.98). The trial seems to serve its purpose of bringing the truth to light, but the comedy of the scene, combined with its casual brutality, make it difficult to identify this as a case of divine intervention.

One place where low-class characters do not play an obviously comical role is the scene of Suffolk's death, although Suffolk seems unable to recognise the fact that they are not the ridiculous figures he assumes.⁴⁴ In 4.1 it is Suffolk's snobbery that is almost comical; he tells Walter that 'Thy name is Gualtier, being rightly sounded' (4.1.38),⁴⁵ and makes it clear to the Captain the role he expects him to play:

Obscure and lousy swain, King Henry's blood,
The honourable blood of Lancaster,
Must not be shed by such a jady groom.
Hast thou not kissed thy hand and held my stirrup?
Bare-headed plodded by my foot-cloth mule
And thought thee happy when I shook my head?
How often hast thou waited at my cup,
Fed from my trencher, kneeled down at the board
When I have feasted with Queen Margaret?
Remember it, and let it make thee crestfall'n,
Ay, and allay this thy abortive pride,
How in our voiding lobby hast thou stood
And duly waited for my coming forth?
This hand of mine hath writ in thy behalf,
And therefore shall it charm thy riotous tongue (4.1.51-65).

⁴³ See *The Song of Roland*, trans. by Glyn Burgess (London: Penguin, 1990), laisses 284-293.

⁴⁴ Although critics regularly call Suffolk's captors 'pirates', as Thomas Cartelli points out Walter claims the title of 'gentleman', and 'it seems at first blush odd that a character acting the role of pirate or, at best, privateer, should so boldly claim this distinction' ('Suffolk and the Pirates: Disordered relations in Shakespeares 2 *Henry VI*', in *A Companion to Shakespeare's Works: The Histories*, pp. 325-343 (p. 326)). Walter also forgoes the opportunity of ransoming Suffolk on the basis that 'when merchant-like I sell revenge,/ Broke be my sword, my arms torn and defaced,/ And I proclaimed a coward through the world' (4.1.42-4). This is not dissimilar to the rhetoric of nobles bent on revenge in *3 Henry VI*.

⁴⁵ As Linda Gregerson notes, this French form of Walter's name would also not endear Suffolk to the pirates; 'Suffolk tries to escape his English ruin by appealing to French pronunciation – Gualtier for Walter. French is the last resort of a scoundrel' (see 'French Marriages and the Protestant Nation in Shakespeare's History plays', in *A Companion to Shakespeare's Works: The Histories*, pp. 246-262, (p. 253)).

In 'reality' it seems unlikely that the Captain has done these things, especially since he does not recognise Suffolk at the beginning of the scene. If the Captain is not meant to have a history of service at court, then this indicates the way in which, for Suffolk, all low-class people are essentially the same. However, the actor playing the Captain may well have been in the background of previous scenes playing these kinds of roles (potentially seething with resentment at the treatment of other low-class characters, or on the receiving end of negative treatment himself). Either way, the Captain's reaction is not to be 'crestfall'n', but rather the opposite, as he decides to 'stab him [Suffolk] as he hath me' (4.1.67). The Captain's reaction makes it all the more incongruous when Suffolk calls the pirates 'paltry, servile, abject drudges' (4.1.105), since they are being manifestly anything but 'servile'. Suffolk is clinging desperately to an image of the common people that, in this location outside of a courtly setting, is totally antithetical to reality.

The gap between Suffolk's rhetoric and the reality of the situation is framed by an opposition between words and deeds:

Suffolk:	It is impossible that I should die By such a lowly vassal as thyself. Thy words move rage, and not remorse in me.
Captain:	But my deeds, Suffolk, soon shall stay thy rage (4.1.110-3).

Suffolk considers the social hierarchy to be divinely sanctioned and therefore believes it immune to insurrection. However, Suffolk's words are exposed as empty rhetoric with no power to alter the Captain's deeds. The implication is that secular authority cannot always be equated with divine authority, and even that the social hierarchy may not be divinely sanctioned at all. The insubordination of the pirates foreshadows the inversions of the Cade rebellion, which begins in the following scene. In this scene, however, the pirates' behaviour is less of an inversion than a natural response to Suffolk's behaviour.

The possibility of the concerns of the lower classes being 'heard' is compromised once again as the rebellion is hijacked by York's agent Jack Cade. Cade's attempt to claim

the throne replicates the concerns of the nobility in a new setting, which, while satirising those concerns, means that the desires and complaints of the people are again side-lined. When the Staffords parley with the rebels, it is only Cade's claim to the throne that is addressed.⁴⁶ Unusually for Cade, but appropriately given the circumstances, he speaks in verse:

Cade: [...] Edmund Mortimer, Earl of March,
 Married the Duke of Clarence's daughter, did he not?
 Stafford: Ay, sir.
 Cade: And by her he had two children at one birth.
 Stafford's Brother: That's false.
 Cade: Ay, there's the question – but I say 'tis true.
 The elder of them, being put to nurse,
 Was by a beggar-woman stol'n away,
 And, ignorant of his birth and parentage,
 Became a bricklayer when he came to age.
 His son I am – deny it an you can (4.2.134-44).

By claiming through the Mortimers, Cade implies his connection to the Duke of York and burlesques the scene in which York revealed his claim to Salisbury and Warwick earlier in the play (2.2). Cade also offers to allow Henry to remain king for his lifetime if he can be named Protector, as York does early in *Part 3*. In addition, Cade plays with the problem of historical evidence; his claim sounds like the unlikely plot of a romantic comedy, yet it is impossible definitively to disprove it. The truth of history becomes whatever the people wielding the greatest force will 'credit'.⁴⁷

It is by an appeal to history that the Cade rebellion is finally quelled, as Clifford uses history to manipulate the mob to behave according to his wishes:

Is Cade the son of Henry the Fifth
 That thus you do exclaim you'll go with him?
 Will he conduct you through the heart of France
 And make the meanest of you earls and dukes?

⁴⁶ Cade can, therefore, be vilified from both sides of the social spectrum: to the nobles he is a rebel and a troublemaker, and to the commons he fails to represent their concerns, thereby obstructing their goals. Thus, both 'sides' are united in seeking his punishment, making him an effective scapegoat. Cade's association with York makes him a figure of subversion generated by the establishment to deliberately mask the real challenge the rebellion might otherwise have posed.

⁴⁷ Stafford asks 'And will you credit this base drudge's words/ That speaks he knows not what?' To which the rebels respond, 'Ay, marry, will we' (4.2.149-51). The deaths of the Stafford brothers are reported in 4.4 (ll. 33-4).

[...]
 To France! To France! And get what you have lost!
 Spare England, for it is your native coast (4.8.189-205).

The popular memory of Henry V and the promise of being made ‘earls and dukes’ excites a patriotic enthusiasm for future conquests in France that wins out over Cade’s supposed Yorkist claim. Clifford’s tactic works, although no further forays into France materialise, and Cade wryly observes that: ‘The name of Henry the Fifth hales them to an hundred mischiefs’ (4.8.209-10). This is an end to the rebellion that resolves nothing, a lack of resolution that is perhaps highlighted by the way that the Cade rebellion in *2 Henry VI* is, as Linda Gregerson puts it, ‘liberally conflated with aspects of the earlier (1381) and very different Peasants’ Revolt, distilled for theatrical embodiment, adapted to the colors and politics of comic relief.’⁴⁸ Despite the comedy, the unresolved concerns of a previous revolt resurface in the Cade rebellion, making it seem probable that they will surface again in the future.⁴⁹ Furthermore, the rebels display the kind of comical fickleness and gullibility as the crowd observing the miracle at St. Albans. It is as though a serious conversation about the welfare of the people is impossible; it has been made so by the way the nobility dominate politics and the writing of the historical record.

Nevertheless, in *Part 3* low-class characters get a limited chance to act out tragedy in 2.5, Henry VI’s famous ‘molehill’ scene. The scene begins with Henry’s reflections on the battle, before he presents the audience with a kind of pastoral fantasy about the supposedly ‘secure’ (2.5.50) and ordered life of the lower classes. Henry’s fantasy, however, is rudely interrupted by the harsh reality embodied by the father who has killed his son and the son who has killed his father. This is not the only place in the *Henry VI* plays where a father-son relationship features under tragic circumstances. In this scene Henry sits

⁴⁸ Gregerson, ‘French Marriages’, p. 248.

⁴⁹ As Thomas Betteridge writes, Cade’s rebellion is ‘at once historical and provocatively Elizabethan. It is as if Shakespeare was seeking to emphasise the extent to which the issues that caused Cade’s revolt, utopian fantasies, the consciousness of injustice and political scheming, were still potent sources of popular disorder in the 1580s’ (*Shakespearean Fantasies and Politics* (Hatfield: University of Hertfordshire Press, 2005), p. 47).

voluntarily on a molehill and witnesses the tragedy of these anonymous soldiers; in 1.4 York was made to sit on a molehill and mocked with the murder of his son Rutland, linking York's experience to that of these anonymous soldiers. The death of Talbot and his son is also echoed in the father's words 'These arms of mine shall be thy winding sheet;/ My heart, sweet boy, shall be thy sepulchre' (2.5.114-5).⁵⁰ Thus, this scene echoes other tragic moments in the *Henry VI* plays and has generally been read as exemplifying the 'horrors of civil war'.⁵¹

The question is whether this scene exemplifies the consequences of civil war for the whole of society, or if it offers a more specific kind of critique. While Kathryn Schwarz accepts that this scene demonstrates the way in which families are torn apart by civil war, she nevertheless observes that '[f]amilies have a kind of wild cohesion in *3 Henry VI*, coming together rather than falling apart in the wake of civil violence.'⁵² This is true, I would suggest, for the nobility, where fathers and sons have the luxury of fighting on the same side. These lowly soldiers, however, have been pressed into service on opposite sides of the battle; the son tells the audience 'From London by the King was I pressed forth', while his father, 'being the Earl of Warwick's man,/ Came on the part of York, pressed by his master' (*3 Henry VI*, 2.5.64-6).⁵³ The nobility, able to choose their own courses of action, are not subject to this particular kind of tragedy. Thus, these anonymous soldiers do exemplify the terrible consequences of civil war, but specifically the consequences for the

⁵⁰ Compare to 'Now my old arms are young John Talbot's grave' (*1 Henry VI*, 4.7.32).

⁵¹ Ribner: 'This horror of civil war is portrayed throughout the three plays, but perhaps most forcefully in Act II, scene v of *3 Henry VI* [...] The scene, of course, is artificial and stylised, but as an allegorical symbol of the horror and pathos of civil war it is nevertheless very effective' (*The English History Play*, pp. 110-111). Tillyard: 'Coming after the pomp and rhetoric and forthright horror, it expresses worthily the breakdown of violent human action into something humiliated and devitalised' (*Shakespeare's History Plays*, p. 195). J. P. Brockbank calls it 'the most moving of Shakespeare's comments on the civil wars' ('The Frame of Disorder – *Henry VI*', in *Shakespeare's Histories: An Anthology of Modern Criticism*, ed. by William A. Armstrong (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1972), pp. 92 – 122 (p. 117)).

⁵² Kathryn Schwarz, 'Vexed Relations: Family, State, and the Uses of Women in *3 Henry VI*', in *A Companion to Shakespeare's Works: The Histories*, pp. 344-60 (p. 349).

⁵³ Dominique Goy-Blanquet observes: 'The horrors of Blore Heath and Towton are fused in the continuous fighting scene, while the tableau of the anonymous father and son sums up the sinister toll of the press-gang in rural hearths' (*Shakespeare's Early History Plays: From Chronicle to Stage* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), p. 144).

lower classes. The scene provides the single instance in the *Henry VI* plays where ‘the common people’ are presented entirely seriously.

The *Henry VI* plays present a conspicuously aristocratic version of history in which the interests of the common people are routinely marginalised and dismissed, yet it does so without endorsing such an approach to history. The comical presentation of the lower-classes contributes to a trivialisation of lower-class concerns, and so the plays seem to suggest that even the artistic conventions of representation are complicit in privileging an aristocratic agenda, questioning the adequacy of those conventions to represent the past. The presentation of low-class characters in the *Henry VI* plays suggests the need for a new kind of history that can make space for the representation of the concerns of the ‘common weal’, and perhaps for a new kind of comedy in history which Shakespeare develops in the Eastcheap scenes of the second tetralogy.

A Record of Loss: Tragedy and Recorded History

In the *Henry VI* plays, the difficulty of explaining tragic events within a providential framework is used to heighten the sense of tragedy. At the funeral of Henry V in *1 Henry VI*, Bedford’s opening lines begin the play with a complex and even confusing attitude towards providence:

Hung be the heavens with black! Yield, day, to night!
Comets, importing change of times and states,
Brandish your crystal tresses in the sky,
And with them scourge the bad revolting stars
That have consented unto Henry’s death (1.1.1-5).

A tension is set up between comets, heralds of change and mutability, and the stars, fixed in their courses and often used as metaphors for heavenly immutability. The comets foreshadow the unquiet times to come, and, perhaps oddly, Bedford appeals to them rather than the stars. Bedford’s imagery raises a number of questions. The ‘revolting’ stars have ‘consented unto Henry’s death’, but the exact nature of their ‘revolt’ is questionable. While the idea of being ‘in revolt’ suggests an active part in bringing about Henry’s death,

‘consent’ suggests only a passive role. Either Bedford believes that Henry’s death is part of the providential plan to which the stars have ‘consented’, in which case they are not ‘revolting’, or they have revolted and brought about Henry’s death contrary to providence. The nature of the power that lies behind the stars and comets remains obscure, making it difficult to locate Henry’s death in relation to a providential plan. Resort to the supernatural mystifies the relationship between events and their causes, and fails to provide a logical narrative or sufficient explanation for Henry’s death.

The opposition between action and inaction set up by this tension between active ‘revolt’ and passive ‘consent’ plays an important role in the scene. For example, Bedford and Gloucester disagree over what effect the news of losses in France will have on Henry’s corpse:

Bedford: Speak softly, or the loss of those great towns
 Will make him burst his lead and rise from death.
 Gloucester: Is Paris lost? Is Rouen yielded up?
 If Henry were recalled to life again,
 These news would cause him once more yield the ghost (1.1.63-7).⁵⁴

Their disagreement raises the question of whether action or inaction constitutes an appropriate response to events.⁵⁵ Bedford and Gloucester’s disagreement over Henry V’s imagined response to losses in France also demonstrates the ways in which the nobles cannot agree on how the story of Henry V should be told. Similarly, Gloucester also disagrees with his other brother, the Bishop of Winchester (not yet Cardinal Beaufort); for Beaufort, Henry was ‘a king blest of the King of Kings’ (1.1.28), and he claims ‘[t]he Church’s prayers made him so prosperous’ (1.1.32). Gloucester disagrees: ‘Had not Churchmen prayed,/ His thread of life had not so soon decayed’ (1.1.33-4). These disagreements and the lords’ eulogies begin the process of writing the historical narrative of

⁵⁴ It is perhaps appropriate that Bedford, whose job it will be to win back these territories, imagines the news as impetus towards action, whereas Gloucester, who presides over the peace in England, imagines the opposite.

⁵⁵ This opposition is important since it informs our reading of Henry VI’s extreme passivity over the course of the three plays and relates to questions about historical causality. As we shall see, Henry VI’s passivity arises largely out of faith that providence will run its course regardless of the actions of men (see pp. 192-3, below). Henry’s attitude, however, is shown to be wholly inadequate for running a country.

Henry's reign, and, as Michael Hattaway suggests, 'Henry V is presented not as a man but as a rhetorical construct fashioned out of hyperbole, as a heroic image or heraldic icon'.⁵⁶

Exeter's speech differs from the others, and implies a gap between the image of Henry created by the lord's eulogies and the reality of his life and death:

Henry is dead, and never shall revive.
 Upon a wooden coffin we attend,
 And death's dishonourable victory
 We with our stately presence glorify,
 Like captives bound to a triumphant car.
 What, shall we curse the planets of mishap,
 That plotted thus our glory's overthrow?
 Or shall we think the subtle-witted French
 Conjurers and sorcerers, that, afraid of him,
 By magic verses have contrived his end? (1.1.18-27).

Exeter questions the adequacy of supernatural explanations for Henry's death. For Exeter 'Henry is dead', all that is left is a wooden coffin, and the lords' elaborate eulogies do more to glorify death itself rather than Henry. Indeed, the image of the lords as captives being dragged behind a Roman triumph is a striking one. Exeter's speech suggests the futility of the attempt to explain or memorialise the past and raises the question of what exactly it is meant to achieve. The rhetoric of the lords fails to fulfil the promise, claimed by Hall, that history can 'maketh menne dead many a thousande yere still to liue as though thei were present'.⁵⁷

Talbot's death finalises the tragedy of Henry V's death. As David Bevington notes, 'Talbot keeps alive the spirit of Henry V when that heritage proves to be squandered in the royal successor'.⁵⁸ Indeed, Henry and Talbot are connected in a number of ways. When the nobles are eulogising Henry, the longest speech in the scene is actually a tribute to Talbot, delivered by a messenger.⁵⁹ When Talbot delivers the ultimatum to the French town of Bordeaux shortly before his death, he warns 'You tempt the fury of my three attendants - /

⁵⁶ Michael Hattaway, 'Introduction', p. 5.

⁵⁷ Hall, *Hall's Chronicle*, ed. Henry Ellis (London: 1809) p. vi.

⁵⁸ David Bevington, '1 Henry VI', in *A Companion to Shakespeare's Works: The Histories*, pp. 308 - 324 (p. 312).

⁵⁹ See *1 Henry VI*, 1.1.108-40.

Lean famine, quartering steel, and climbing fire' (4.3.10-11). These three 'attendants' appear again in the opening chorus speech of *Henry V*, where 'famine, sword, and fire/ Crouch for employment' at Henry's heels.⁶⁰ And when it becomes clear that help will not reach Talbot in time, Lucy equates Talbot's death with the loss of Henry's conquests in France.⁶¹ Talbot stands for the same ideals that the glorified memory of Henry V stands for: popular leadership, English battle prowess and conquest in France.

The sense of tragedy at Talbot's death in Act 4 derives chiefly from the way it is portrayed as inevitable, yet at the same time seemingly avoidable and pointless. In 4.2 the French General reveals that Talbot is surrounded, and predicts:

For ere the glass that now begins to run
Finish the process of his sandy hour,
These eyes that see thee now well colouréd
Shall see thee withered, bloody, pale, and dead (4.2.35-8).

The General effectively sets a countdown to Talbot's death, and the sense of tragedy is heightened as every possibility of averting disaster is systematically extinguished; the next two scenes reveal that help will not be sent to Talbot in time and that his son, whom he has not seen in seven years, has joined him and will probably die too.⁶² The additional death of Talbot's son means the loss of any future for the patriotic ideals of honour and courage that Talbot represents. The loss of a physical manifestation of these ideals is inevitable because of a kind of Catch 22, evident in his son's argument that:

Flight cannot stain the honour you [Talbot] have won,
But mine it will, that no exploit have done.
You fled for vantage, everyone will swear,
But if I bow, they'll say it was for fear.
There is no hope that ever I shall stay
If the first hour I shrink and run away (4.5.26-31).

⁶⁰ *Henry V*, pp. 567-598 (ll. 7-8).

⁶¹ Lucy: 'Thus while the vulture of sedition/ Feeds in the bosom of such great commanders,/ Sleeping neglect doth betray to loss/ The conquest of our scarce-cold conqueror/ The ever-living man of memory/ Henry the Fifth.' (4.3.47-52).

⁶² Lucy: 'Then God take mercy on brave Talbot's soul,/ And on his son young John, who two hours since/ I met in travel towards his warlike father./ This seven years did not Talbot see his son,/ And now they meet where both their lives are done' (4.3.34-8). The historical Talbot had other sons as well, but they do not feature in the play, heightening the tragedy of this scene.

If Talbot's son flees the battle, he can never claim to represent the same ideals as his father. If he stays and fights, he will be true to those ideals, but he will be dead. And despite what he says of Talbot, the same applies to him. Either way, the destruction of any physical manifestation of those ideals is assured.

According to Phyllis Rackin, 'Talbot and his son both make the heroic choice [...] sacrificing their lives to preserve their honor and their heroic titles.'⁶³ This is the 'process by which human mortality is translated into textual immortality' in the form of the historical record.⁶⁴ Thus, rather than representing the destruction of the ideals for which they stand, their deaths preserve those ideals in a way that would not be possible if they attempted instead to preserve their lives.⁶⁵ For Rackin, history is overwhelmingly patriarchal and anti-materialist in the *Henry VI* plays, while women present a kind of materialistic threat to the 'historical project'.⁶⁶ Joan's final comment on Talbot's death seems to support this:

Lucy: But where's the great Alcides of the field,
Valiant Lord Talbot, Earl of Shrewsbury,
Created for his rare success in arms
Great Earl of Wexford, Waterford, and Valance,
Lord Strange of Blackmere, Lord Verdun of Alton,
The thrice victorious Lord of Falconbridge,
Knight of the noble order of Saint George,
Worthy saint Michael and the Golden Fleece,
Great *Maréchal* to Henry the Sixth
Of all his wars within the realm of France?
Joan: Here's a silly, stately style indeed.
The Turk, that two-and-fifty kingdoms hath,
Writes not so tedious a style as this.
Him that thou magnifi'st with all these titles
Stinking and flyblown lies here at our feet (4.7.60-76).⁶⁷

⁶³ Rackin, *Stages of History*, p. 155.

⁶⁴ Rackin, *Stages of History*, p. 149.

⁶⁵ As a converse example, Joan's desperation to do anything to preserve her life compromises the possibility of leaving a positive legacy (see *1 Henry VI*, 5.6).

⁶⁶ According to Rackin, the opposition between Joan and Talbot is defined as a conflict 'between the historical record that Talbot wishes to preserve and the physical reality that Joan invokes to discredit it' (*Stages of History*, p. 151).

⁶⁷ Lucy's lines are taken from Talbot's tomb in Rouen (see *Stages of History*, p. 153).

This exchange performs a kind of *memento mori* by contrasting Talbot's titles and achievements whilst alive with the image of him 'stinking and flyblown'. According to Joan, the titles by which Talbot will be remembered are a 'magnification' of who and what he was which she dismisses as 'silly' and 'tedious'. Instead, she draws attention to the physical reality.⁶⁸

For Rackin, the project of the *Henry VI* plays is to discredit such a materialist view of history in order to preserve a more heroic, masculine ideal. However, I believe something more complex is happening. Like Exeter's speech at the beginning of the play, Joan's comment questions the purpose of this kind of glorification of the past. It is not unproblematic that in order to translate 'human mortality' into 'textual immortality' Talbot and his son must embrace destruction, leaving the patriotic ideals they supposedly represent without a concrete signifier. The result is a keener sense of loss rather than a sense of cynicism. As Rackin acknowledges:

[A] problem arises (as it did for historians during Shakespeare's own lifetime) when history, the second party to this trade, comes to be seen as itself subject to mutability. Faced with a growing consciousness that the historiographic text was not necessarily identical with the historical past, an increasing sense of alienation from the past, and repeated demonstrations that physical evidence could be more reliable than ancient texts, the authority of historical writing was breaking down. [...] Thus undermined, history loses its power to make the hero immortal.⁶⁹

It may be true, as Rackin says, that Joan's interpretation is not allowed to derail the masculine project of heroic history, but it does prevent a straightforward glorification of it. As Lucy takes the bodies of Talbot and his son from the field, he predicts that 'from their ashes shall be reared/ A phoenix that shall make all France afeard' (4.7.92-3). This is the

⁶⁸ Though not, it should be noted, the physical reality of the stage, which is why, as Rackin observes, these women are 'always vulnerable to metadramatic attack' (*Stages of History*, p. 154).

⁶⁹ Rackin, *Stages of History*, p. 149.

only prophesy in the *Henry VI* plays that fails to come true no matter how subsequent events are construed.⁷⁰

In Chapter One we saw how Thomas More considered scripture incapable of fulfilling Christ's promise of continued presence because of the kind of 'mutability' Rackin describes.⁷¹ Significantly, both Henry and Talbot suffer from a 'problem of presence' that derives from their association with the written historical record. The problem is more obvious in the case of Henry, whose memory, when it is invoked, reminds the audience of his relatively recent absence from the historical scene.⁷² The problem of presence associated with Talbot is evident in his encounter with the Countess of Auvergne. When the Countess declares him a prisoner, she triumphantly explains:

Long time thy shadow hath been thrall to me,
For in my gallery thy picture hangs;
But now the substance shall endure the like (2.3.35-7).

Talbot builds the distinction between 'shadow' and 'substance' into a paradox:

Talbot: I laugh to see your ladyship so fond
To think that you have aught but Talbot's shadow
Whereon to practice your severity.
Countess: Why? Art thou not the man?
Talbot: I am indeed.
Countess: Then have I the substance too.
Talbot: No, no, I am but a shadow of myself.
You are deceived; my substance is not here.
For what you see is but the smallest part
And least proportion of humanity.
I tell you, madam, were the whole frame here,
It is of such a spacious lofty pitch
Your roof were not sufficient to contain't.
Countess: This is a riddling merchant for the nonce.
He will be here, and yet he is not here.
How can these contraries agree?
Talbot: That will I show you presently (2.3.44-60).

⁷⁰ However, David Bevington suggest this might have some contemporary resonance with the figure of the Earl of Essex (see Bevington, *1 Henry VI*, p. 314).

⁷¹ For Thomas More's view on scripture, see pp. 39-40 in "Thomas More and William Tyndale", above.

⁷² Phyllis Rackin writes that: "The image of Henry V, the mirror of all Christian kings, hovers just beyond the frame of both tetralogies. Henry is the lost heroic presence that the entire historical project is designed to recover" (*Stages of History*, pp. 29-30).

At this point the audience might be forgiven for expecting a confession that, in truth, it is all a play and he is only an actor. Instead, Talbot calls in his troops and gives them the credit for being his real ‘substance’. According to Rackin, ‘Shakespeare contrives Talbot’s encounter with the Countess so that she, and the audience along with her, will be clearly instructed in the superiority of report over physical fact.’⁷³

In this scene the ‘superiority of report over physical fact’ is established in a way that associates the historical record with a kind of violence. The Countess intends to capture Talbot in order to win fame, foregrounding a concern with the historical record early on in the scene.⁷⁴ When Talbot arrives she questions his identity, calling ‘report [...] fabulous and false’ (2.3.17), pointing out a possible gap between reality and report and raising the question of the accuracy of historical accounts. When Talbot foils the Countess’ plot by calling in his troops, she apologises:

Victorious Talbot, pardon my abuse.
I find thou art no less than fame hath bruited,
And more than may be gathered by thy shape. (2.3.67-9.)

It is the ‘substance’ of Talbot’s soldiers, and the implicit threat they represent,⁷⁵ that persuades the Countess to fall in line with the general assessment of Talbot’s character, which is also ‘proven’ by his victory. History is written by the victors, and its ‘truth’ value is affirmed by violence. Furthermore, the way in which ‘report’ subsumes the identities of Talbot’s soldiers into the ‘substance’ of Talbot himself may be suggestive of the way in which the historical record also does violence to the physical past it purports to represent; the destruction of the past is the condition for the existence of the past as history. It is this focus on the violence and destruction associated with the historical project that makes the claim that it can truly ‘make the past present’ deeply problematic.

⁷³ Rackin, *Stages of History*, pp. 153-4.

⁷⁴ ‘The plot is laid. If all things fall out right,/ I shall be as famous by this exploit/ As Scythian Tomyrus by Cyrus’ death’ (2.3.4-6).

⁷⁵ The Countess pleads ‘Let my presumption not provoke thy wrath’ (2.3.70).

Like the deaths of Henry V and Talbot in *Part 1*, the death of Humphrey, Duke of Gloucester, seems equally inexplicable within a providential framework and poses questions about the relationship between the historical record and the material reality of the past. The injustice of Gloucester's death is emphasised by the way in which the legal case against him is presented as an entirely rhetorical construct fabricated by the conspirators in an attempt to find a 'colour for his death' (*2 Henry VI*, 3.1.236). Margaret even attempts to construe Gloucester's apparent innocence as proof of his guilt.⁷⁶ The scene becomes a battle of rhetoric, and nothing in the way of actual evidence is offered.⁷⁷ Gloucester begins his defence by picking up on York's use of the passive voice in his accusation against him:

York: 'Tis thought, my lord, that you took bribes of France
 [...]
 Gloucester: Is it but thought so? What are they that think it? (3.1.104 and 107).

Gloucester denies the charges, and the conspirators fall back on vague allusions to 'mightier crimes [...] / Whereof you cannot easily purge yourself' (3.1.134-5).⁷⁸ Gloucester realises that 'I shall not want false witness to condemn me, / Nor store of treasons to augment my guilt' (3.1.168-9).

Gloucester's defence is a *tour de force* of rhetoric:

Ah, gracious lord, these days are dangerous.
 Virtue is choked with foul ambition,
 And charity chased hence by rancour's hand.
 Foul subornation is predominant,
 And equity exiled your highness' land.
 I know their complot is to have my life,
 And if my death might make this island happy

⁷⁶ Margaret: 'Ah, what's more dangerous than this fond affiance?' (3.1.74). After Gloucester is murdered Margaret also tries to use the fact that she had motive to kill him as evidence of her innocence: 'So shall my name with slander's tongue be wounded / And princes' courts be filled with my reproach. / This get I by his death' (3.2.68-70).

⁷⁷ Two specific charges are laid against Gloucester: that he has withheld soldiers' pay in France (3.1.104-6) and that he has abused his legal powers as Lord Protector (3.1.121-3). Privately (i.e. before Gloucester comes on stage) Suffolk also accuses him of instigating the Duchess' crimes ('The Duchess by his subornation, / Upon my life, began her devilish practices', 3.1.45-6). Of course, it was Suffolk himself who instigated the Duchess' crimes, and the accusation is dropped when they actually confront Gloucester.

⁷⁸ When the conspirators enumerate Gloucester's 'crimes' to Henry before Gloucester's entrance, Buckingham also rounds off the list by saying 'tut, these are petty faults to faults unknown' (3.1.64).

And prove the period of their tyranny,
 I would expend it with all willingness.
 But mine is made the prologue to their play,
 For thousands more that yet suspect no peril
 Will not conclude their plotted tragedy.
 Beaufort's red sparkling eyes blab his heart's malice,
 And Suffolk's cloudy brow his stormy hate;
 Sharp Buckingham unburdens with his tongue
 The envious load that lies upon his heart;
 And doggéd York that reaches at the moon,
 Whose overweening arm I have plucked back,
 By false accuse doth level at my life (3.1.142-60).

The opening of this speech sounds like the description of an allegorical drama and several 'play' and 'writing' metaphors are used ('period', 'prologue', 'play', 'plotted tragedy'). Finally, while the conspirators have tried to use Gloucester's appearance of virtue against him, he in turn reads guilt in their appearances. Although the Cardinal complains that 'his railing is intolerable' (3.1 l. 172), Suffolk acknowledges that Gloucester's words are 'clerkly couched' (3.1 l. 179). His words are dangerous precisely because they are not 'railings' and, as Buckingham warns, '[h]e'll wrest the sense' (3.1.186). Gloucester defends himself using rhetoric that highlights the artificiality of his accusers' narrative ('their plotted tragedy') and attempts to take control of that narrative himself. The conspirators' fear that he will succeed prompts their decision to give up persecuting him through legal means and resort to a more clandestine solution.

In the play the 'fact' of Gloucester's murder is presented as unequivocal, but historically it was not absolutely certain. Here is the report of Gloucester's death in Holinshed's *Chronicles*:

But all indifferent persons (as saith Hall) might well vnderstand that he died of some violent death. Some iudged him to be strangled, some affirme that an hot spit was put in at his fundament, other write that he was smouldered betweene two featherbeds, and some haue affirmed that he died of verie gréeffe, for that he might not come openlie to his answer.⁷⁹

⁷⁹ Holinshed's *Chronicles* (1587 edition), volume 6, p. 627.

Only speculation about the cause of death is recorded, and even amid this speculation the possibility remains that that his death was natural. In *Acts and Monuments* there is further speculation over why God might allow such a thing to happen:

[...] whether it was through the fatall and vnfortunate lucke of the name of that house, which is but a vayne and friuolous obseruation of Polydore, and Halle which followeth him, [...] or whether it was that the nature of true vertue commōly is such, that as the flame euer beareth his smoke, and the body his shadow: so the brightnes of vertue neuer blaseth, but hath some disdayne or enuye waiting vpon it: or els whether it was rather for some diuorcement from his wife, or for some other vice or trespasse done (as seemeth moste like truth) which God as well in Dukes houses correcteth, as in other inferiour persons, especially where he loueth: But howsoeuer the cause is to vs vnknown[.]⁸⁰

Even *A Mirror for Magistrates* can only offer a moral about ‘what daunger they are in,/ Which next they king are to succede in place’ and to therefore not ‘too much embrace/ The people’s loue’.⁸¹ The ‘facts’ surrounding Gloucester’s death in the historical record contain troubling gaps.

In the play, when Gloucester’s death is discovered, the Cardinal attempts to construe it as a providential sign of his guilt.⁸² However, as Warwick informs the King before Gloucester’s body is even inspected, ‘It is reported, mighty sovereign,/ That good Duke Humphrey traitorously is murdered/ By Suffolk and the Cardinal Beaufort’s means’ (3.2.122-4). The mob who so quickly demand the death and banishment of Suffolk before any actual proof of foul play has been established may seem, therefore, to enact the vengeance of God.⁸³ However, it is a vengeance that comes too late to save Gloucester, leaving the relationship between the ‘plotted tragedy’ devised by the conspirators and

⁸⁰ *Acts and Monuments*, book 6, chap. 8, p. 729. In *Part 3* Richard III seems to be aware of the bad luck associated with the title of Gloucester and is reluctant to accept the title from his brother (see *3 Henry VI*, 2.6.106-7).

⁸¹ *A Mirror For Magistrates*, 2 vols, ed. by Joseph Haslewood (London: 1815), II, p. 145.

⁸² Cardinal: ‘God’s secret judgement. I did dream tonight/ The Duke was dumb and could not speak a word.’ *Henry VI*, 3.2.31-2.

⁸³ The Cardinal is taken ill and exits the stage shortly before the mob demand Suffolk’s death. The fact that his name is not included in their demands may reflect the fact that, as a Cardinal, he would likely not be subject to a secular court. Rather than make a point about secular versus ecclesiastical power here, however, the play avoids the issue by having God exact a more direct vengeance in the form of his sudden illness and death.

God's providential plan rather ambiguous; either the conspirators' plot contravenes God's will, prompting the question of how it could have succeeded, or it is somehow contained within it. When Warwick describes Gloucester's body he concludes that 'It cannot be but he was murdered here./ The least of all these signs were probable' (3.2.177-8). Where the eye-witnesses in Holinshed's account read multiple possibilities from Gloucester's dead body, here Warwick presents a single, undeniable conclusion. Furthermore, Warwick, privy to York's plan, is not an 'indifferent' person; a more cynical reading might consider the speed with which the mob receive the news, Warwick's role as the mob's mouthpiece and the suppression of York's part in the conspiracy as a sign that York, rather than God, has managed affairs to take Suffolk out of the picture.

The gaps in the historical record suggest the possibility that there may be some unknown cause ('some other vice or trespassed done') for which Gloucester has been punished. However, with the loss of any knowledge of what that 'trespassed' might have been goes the loss of a fuller understanding of the working of God's providence. The promise implicit in the story of the miracle at St. Albans in Thomas More's *Dialogue* is that the truth will eventually come to light. In the *Henry VI* plays, however, history is a record that can never fully recover what has been lost. As David Scott Kastan writes:

Shakespeare finds in the act of writing histories the deepest truth of history writing; that it is not the representation of the *past*, but is the *representation* of the past. The past cannot be fully recovered from 'the swallowing gulf/ Of dark forgetfulness and deep oblivion' (*Richard III* 3.7.128-9), and its representation is therefore inevitably partial, in both senses of the word, a product both of the incomplete traces that have survived and the shaping concerns of those who seek and study them.⁸⁴

This 'partialness' of history means that there is insufficient information to make a 'true' judgement about the meaning of the past. Nevertheless, we cannot help but try to piece

⁸⁴ David Scott Kastan, 'Shakespeare and English History', in *The Cambridge Companion to Shakespeare*, ed. by Margreta De Grazia and Stanley Wells (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), pp. 167-182 (p. 181), italics in the original.

together some kind of explanation, either human or divine, and the seeming futility of this project is used to heighten the tragic tone of all three plays.

The Will of God: Providence and Morality-play Conventions

Despite its role in explicating the will of God, the a-temporality of the morality play makes it unsuited to explicating the workings of providence, which is a manifestation of God's will over time. In the Elizabethan history play, on the other hand, the question of providence is almost impossible to avoid. The *Henry VI* plays exploit this mismatch between morality play and providence to highlight the difficulties of extrapolating universal meaning from historically specific events. For example, in Chapter Two I argued that the morality vice becomes a much more complex character when translated outside of the morality play setting. Similarly, J. P. Brockbank writes that, in *Part 1*, Shakespeare makes Joan of Arc

[...] a manifestly evil angel of light, and as the trick of turning devil into seeming angel was a Morality-play commonplace, a technique of presentation lay to hand. But the figure was much easier to accept under the old allegoric conventions of the Morality play that Shakespeare had all but discarded than under the new historical documentary ones he was forging.⁸⁵

In a morality play the audience is privy to the vice's identity as a vice from the outset. The audience of *1 Henry VI*, on the other hand, sees Joan in the same way as the characters on stage, making it more difficult to see through her 'disguise'. Like Seditio in Bale's *Kynge Johan*, Joan professes a holy mission while manipulating characters ignorant of her true purposes into doing what she wants. It is only when she conjures devils in 5.3 that her disguise is 'revealed'.⁸⁶ But unlike Seditio, Joan's 'real' agenda remains unclear.

Recognising Joan as a 'vice' character before 5.3 depends on the audience's sensitivity to the conventions used in her presentation and the rhetoric used in relation to her.

⁸⁵ Brockbank, 'The Frame of Disorder', p. 99.

⁸⁶ Since there are no other characters on stage, this revelation is primarily for the benefit of the audience.

Despite her protestations of divine affiliation, the rhetoric used in relation to Joan has markedly pagan elements. The Bastard of Orléans introduces Joan in 1.3 as a ‘holy maid’,

Which, by a vision sent to her from heaven,
Ordained is to raise this tedious siege
And drive the English forth the bounds of France.
The spirit of deep prophesy she hath,
Exceeding the nine sibyls of old Rome.
What’s past and what’s to come she can descry (1.3.30-6).

While the title of ‘holy maid’ and the reference to ‘heaven’ suggest links to Christianity, she is more explicitly associated with the pagan tradition of ancient Rome. Charles’ praise of her is similarly littered with non-Christian associations:

Was Mohammed inspirèd with a dove?
Thou with an eagle art inspirèd then.
Helen, the mother of great Constantine,
Nor yet Saint Philip’s daughters were like thee.
Bright star of Venus, fall’n down on earth,
How may I reverently worship thee enough? (1.3.119-24).

The references to the mother of Constantine and the prophetess daughters of St. Philip are non-biblical, and at any rate Charles considers them *unlike* Joan rather than like her.

Instead, she is the ‘bright star of Venus’, linking her again to ancient Roman paganism, and possibly also to Lucifer, the ‘Morning Star’. Furthermore, Charles inverts the social order,⁸⁷ figuring himself as a ‘prostrate thrall’ (1.3.96), and idolises Joan by worshipping her rather than the divine power she claims to represent. Charles seems uninterested in the origin of her power; she claims ‘Christ’s mother helps me,’ but Charles responds, ‘Whoe’er helps thee, ’tis thou that must help me’ (1.3.85-6). The line between Roman Catholicism and ancient Roman paganism is blurred and Joan’s influence highlights the French lords’ superstition and self-interest.

The source of Joan’s power is primarily her command of rhetoric. When she convinces the Duke of Burgundy to abandon the English cause and join the French, she

⁸⁷ Charles: ‘Let me thy servant, and not thy sovereign be’ (1.3.90).

inspires him in typically patriotic terms which, if applied to England, would probably not be questioned:

See, see the pining malady of France;
Behold the wounds, the most unnatural wounds,
Which thou thyself hast given her woeful breast.
O turn thy edgéd sword another way,
Strike those that hurt, and hurt not those that help.
One drop of blood drawn from thy country's bosom
Should grieve thee more than streams of foreign gore (3.7.49-55).

However, the Dauphin spurs her on to 'enchant him [Burgundy] with thy words' (3.7.40), an idea echoed by Burgundy himself: 'Either she hath bewitched me with her words,/ Or nature makes me suddenly relent' (3.7.58-9). Joan's words are *either* enchantment, *or* they appeal to a 'natural' patriotism.⁸⁸ This glimpse of French patriotism prompts the audience to consider its similarities with English patriotism and leaves open the possibility that it, too, might be considered a form of 'enchantment' intended to manipulate behaviour. Once Burgundy has yielded, Joan undermines the sincerity of her own argument in an aside to the audience: 'Done like a Frenchman – turn and turn again' (3.7. 85). Like a morality vice, Joan seems fully aware at this point of the immorality of her actions and willing to laugh along with the audience at the results of her machinations. Unlike a morality vice, however, the logic of the argument she makes to Burgundy seems relatively sound.

There is some question, though, whether or not Joan's 'magic' stems entirely from her command of language, or whether she has access to more esoteric powers. According to Sandra Billington, the disorder Joan instigates:

[...] is governed by the supernatural and, from the English point of view, it is excusable that even the upright warrior, Talbot, should be powerless against it. Joan's power controls and distorts true government and the subsequent course of events.⁸⁹

⁸⁸ Moreover, if, as an audience member, you cannot see exactly why Burgundy should not be swayed by such 'natural' patriotism, then you too have fallen victim to Joan's spell. Conversely, if you can, then it is probably the result of a similar English patriotism biasing your perception.

⁸⁹ Sandra Billington, *Mock Kings in Medieval Society and Renaissance Drama* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), pp. 140.

It is in English interests, therefore, to believe that there may be something more than rhetoric to her power. In the battle for Orléans Joan encounters Talbot and predicts, 'tis only I that must disgrace you' (1.7.7). Nevertheless, after a short bout, she decides '[t]hy hour is not yet come' (1.7.13), and leaves the fight unfinished. The encounter between Talbot and Joan can be acted in one of two ways; either it can be played for laughs, with Talbot gaining the upper hand and Joan backing out because she knows she will lose, or seriously, with Joan getting the upper hand and sparing Talbot's life. The latter would suggest that Joan has some genuine belief in her powers of prophesy, and certainly Talbot seems strangely affected by her.⁹⁰

True to Joan's promise, the French successfully take the town of Orléans, but it is as quickly retaken by the English. When the French nobles blame her for the loss of the town just as strongly as they praised her for winning it, she responds:

At all times will you have my power alike?
 Sleeping or waking must I still prevail,
 Or will you blame and lay the fault on me? –
 Improvident soldiers, had your watch been good,
 This sudden mischief never could have fall'n (2.1.56-60).

If Joan can foresee success, why not failure too? Can she foresee anything at all or is it just convenient rhetoric to inspire the French? The term 'improvident soldiers' suggests either that divine providence can be circumvented by something as small as a careless watchman, or that Joan's version of what is 'providential' is highly relative. Faced with failure Joan shows a very practical side:

Question, my lords, no further of the case,
 How or which way. 'Tis sure they found some place
 But weakly guarded, where the breach was made.
 And now there rests no other shift but this –
 To gather our soldiers, scattered and dispersed,
 And lay new platforms to endamage them (2.1.73-8).

⁹⁰ Talbot: 'My thoughts are whirlèd like a potter's wheel./ I know not where I am nor what I do./ A witch by fear, not force, Like Hannibal/ Drives back our troops and conquers as she lists./ So bees with smoke and doves with noisome stench/ Are from their hives and houses driven away' (*1 Henry VI*, 1.7.19-14). It may be significant that, at the end of the play Joan is not directly responsible for Talbot's death, as she seems to predict here, but then again, all she actually claims she will do is 'disgrace' him.

For the majority of the play Joan's success seems to derive mainly from her practicality combined with a rhetorical ability to inspire people to follow her rather than any unequivocally supernatural ability or divine favour.

With the conjuring of devils in 5.3, however, Joan's association with black magic is revealed seemingly beyond doubt.⁹¹ But if the devils' refusal to help her reflects God's will in the outcome of events, then they are either suddenly unable to work against his will, or they have been working for him all along. For Tillyard, Joan is 'not a mere freakish emissary of Satan, but a tool of the Almighty, as she herself (though unconsciously) declares in her words to Charles after her first appearance, "Assign'd am I to be the English scourge."⁹² Although she may not be divinely affiliated in the way that she claims, her actions may nevertheless serve a providential agenda. The problem which Joan presents, therefore, is not whether she is 'really' either a divine agent, or an evil witch, but the possibility that she might be *both*. The characterisation of Joan fully exploits the ambiguity between the two possible roles (saint or witch), prompting questions about how evil can be fought if it is doing God's work, and why God would chose to work in such a way. As Talbot says in response to his encounter with her, 'Heavens, can you suffer hell so to prevail?' (1.7.9).

Although presented as the French champion in opposition to Talbot, Joan is not directly responsible for Talbot's death. Instead, it is the failure of York and Somerset to send aid that seals Talbot's fate. York accuses Somerset of failing to send the troops, while Somerset accuses York of failing to request them.⁹³ This may simply be an innocent miscommunication, intended to show the inability of the English to work together against the French. However, it is also possible that York has deliberately not called for additional

⁹¹ Her line 'Where I was wont to feed you with my blood,/ I'll lop a member off and give it you' (5.3.13-4) suggests that this is not the first time she has done it, although her desperation is greater since the tide of battle has turned against her.

⁹² Tillyard, *Shakespeare's History Plays*, p. 164.

⁹³ See *1 Henry VI*, 4.3 and 4.4.

troops in an effort to discredit Somerset.⁹⁴ This would make York, rather than Joan, principally responsible for Talbot's death, and it is York, rather than Talbot, who eventually captures, humiliates and executes Joan. In *Part 2*, York plays a kind of 'Machiavel', which, as I have suggested in the previous chapter, was a character connected to the morality vice.⁹⁵ York is significantly less villainous than other Machiavels to appear in English drama, and he cannot be dismissed as straightforwardly immoral. Like Joan, therefore, he represents a more complex kind of 'vice' than appeared in morality plays, or indeed previous history plays. The 'old' morality vice represented by Joan is replaced by the 'new', Machiavellian version, and trouble abroad moves closer to home.⁹⁶

In *2 Henry VI* the sequencing of scenes following the miracle at St. Albans is interesting in the way that it interrogates the idea that God ensures the truth will come to light. In the St. Albans episode, the falseness of the miracle is revealed, but further explanation of why it was faked to begin with is obscured by the nobles' lack of interest. The trial by combat then seems to serve its purpose of revealing the truth, but the implications of that truth (that Horner does believe York to be the legitimate ruler and that York may therefore pose a threat to Henry's reign) are not acknowledged by anyone present. Immediately preceding the trial by combat, the Duchess of Gloucester is sentenced for conjuring devils to predict the future. Her punishment in the next scene appears to function emblematically as a warning that 'pride goes before a fall', since her

⁹⁴ This is at any rate Michael Hattaway's impression, who writes: 'Talbot is rather a victim – of the aspiring and contriving York who is prepared to let Talbot die so that Somerset will take the blame' ('Introduction', p. 17).

⁹⁵ Although Joan's pragmatism suggests 'Machiavellian' tactics, she falls short of being a 'Machivel' because she does not have the characteristic soliloquies explaining her mischiefs. These would disrupt the uncertainty about her nature that the play tries to maintain.

⁹⁶ Margaret is also connected to Joan by being introduced in between Joan's capture and execution. Margaret's journey to England signals the translation of the female and foreign threat formerly represented by Joan from France into England. Nevertheless, York inherits other aspects of the threat represented by Joan, and perhaps represents a greater challenge since he is already an 'insider' in the English court. This seems like a good example of how the 'subversion' represented by Joan is apparently 'contained' with her execution, but not resolved, and reappears in other forms.

pride and ambition blind her to the trap set by Suffolk and the Queen.⁹⁷ However, the Duchess' 'fall' is as much the result of their desire to cast suspicion on Gloucester as it is her own fault, yet their involvement fails to be made known. Although the Duchess tries to warn her husband that her own fall is likely to be part of a plot against him, he fails to listen and the plots of the nobles conspiring against him fail to come to light in time to do Gloucester any good. The problem, therefore, is the timescale in which the 'truth' can be expected to be made known, if it will be made known at all.

Morality-play conventions are invoked in connection with the Duchess' punishment; Stanley tells her she will be taken to the Isle of Man:

Stanley: There to be used according to your state.
 Duchess: That's bad enough, for I am but reproach;
 And shall I then be used reproachfully?
 Stanley: Like to a duchess and Duke Humphrey's lady,
 According to that state you shall be used (2.4.96-100).⁹⁸

The Duchess figures herself as an allegorical personification from a morality play, but Stanley reminds her of her character in *this* play, where different rules apply. This dislocation of genre highlights a gap between historical reality and the interpretive framework of the morality play; the Duchess' allegorical identity as 'Reproach' makes no material difference to her fate, questioning the relevance of such a moralising interpretation. These morality-play conventions are then juxtaposed with those of tragedy as the scene points forwards to the death of Gloucester. His faith in the legal process makes him refuse to intervene in the Duchess' sentence and deaf to her warnings.⁹⁹ He confidently asserts:

I must offend before I be attainted,

⁹⁷ See *2 Henry VI*, 2.3 and 4. The Duchess' punishment is primarily a legal one, administered in the name of secular justice, but there are some potential problems with the administration of 'justice' in scenes 2.3 and 2.4; 'justice' for her lower-class accomplices means death rather than a comfortable prison, and despite masterminding the plot, Suffolk and Margaret are not implicated at all.

⁹⁸ The Duchess' identity as 'Reproach', rather than 'Pride' or 'Ambition', emphasises the judgements of others rather than her own part in earning her punishment. Although the Duchess sees the emblematic nature of her situation, she resists the interpretation we might expect.

⁹⁹ 'Wouldst have me rescue thee from this reproach? Why, yet thy scandal were not wiped away,/ But I in danger for the breach of law' (2.4.65-7).

And had I twenty times so many foes,
 And each of them had twenty times their power,
 All these could not procure me any scathe
 So long as I am loyal true and crimeless (2.4.60-4).

The Duchess' actual guilt and the moral interpretation offered by the emblematic presentation of her punishment discourages Gloucester from looking further to see what else can be deduced from her story. Unlike the Duchess, he is 'loyal, true and crimeless', and so believes he has no reason to fear punishment.

The deaths of Cardinal Beaufort and the Duke of Suffolk following Gloucester's death both invite strongly providential interpretations. This is especially true in the case of Beaufort, who is primarily responsible for Gloucester's murder.¹⁰⁰ His death is brought about by a sudden illness that strikes soon after the body is discovered, leading him into a kind of delirious confession. His line 'O, torture me no more – I will confess' (3.3.11) possibly suggests that his sickness is sent as a deliberate 'torture' meant to encourage confession of his crimes, blurring the line between legal and religious confession.¹⁰¹ Furthermore, Beaufort's death can be considered as punishment for more than just the murder of Gloucester; the only representative of the Church to play a significant role in the tetralogy, Beaufort is far from a shining example of piety. By the end of *Part 1* he has bought himself the position of Cardinal (demonstrating the sin of simony), and Exeter comments:

Then I perceive that will be verified
 Henry the Fifth did sometime prophesy:
 'If once he come to be a cardinal,
 He'll make his cap coequal with the crown' (5.1.30-4).

Beaufort represents the typical post-Reformation stereotype of corrupt Roman-Catholic clergy: he is ambitious, he promotes Church authority above secular authority, and he

¹⁰⁰ Beaufort: 'Say you consent and censure well the deed,/ And I'll provide the executioner' (2 *Henry VI*, 3.1.275-6).

¹⁰¹ It is worth noting, however, that Beaufort does not mention Gloucester by name in his confession.

participates in the corrupt practices of the Catholic Church.¹⁰² The Church's imposition of a truce (negotiated by Beaufort) between England and France at the end of *Part 1* is also given partial blame for England's ultimate loss of France. Beaufort's death, therefore, seems richly deserved on a number of counts.

The characters present at Beaufort's death in *Part 2* explicitly interpret it to be a punishment from God; Henry asks Beaufort to make a sign that he is thinking 'on heaven's bliss' (3.3.27), but he 'dies and makes no sign' (3.3.29).¹⁰³ Henry comments 'Ah, what a sign it is of evil life/ Where death's approach is seen so terrible' (3.3.5-6), and Warwick agrees.¹⁰⁴ Interestingly, the ending of this scene varies between the Folio and the quarto edition of 1594. In the quarto it appears like this:

Salisbury: So bad an ende did neuer none behold,
 But as his death, so was his life in all.
 Henry: Forbeare to iudge, good Salsbury forbear,
 For God will iudge us all.
 Go take him hence, and see his funerals be performede.¹⁰⁵

In the Folio it appears like this:

Warwick: So bad a death argues a monstrous life.
 Henry: Forbear to judge, for we are sinners all.
 Close up his eyes and draw the curtain close,
 And let us all to meditation (3.3.30-3).¹⁰⁶

In both versions Henry bids them (and the audience) to 'forbear to judge', and both contain half lines that suggest a pause for meditation, more emphasised in the Folio where Henry specifically suggests it. The quarto has this pause interrupted by Henry himself,

¹⁰² At the end of the opening scene of *Part 1* Beaufort plans to kidnap the king in order to 'sit at chiefest stern of public weal' (1.1.177). When he denies Gloucester entrance to the tower, Gloucester is furious that the servingmen obey the Bishop's authority over his own as Lord Protector. Beaufort threatens to take the matter before the Pope (1.4.51), and Gloucester complains to the Mayor of London that Beaufort 'regards nor God nor king' (1.4.59).

¹⁰³ As in Marlowe's *Faustus*, such an inability to think about God or ask forgiveness was usually considered as a sign of damnation.

¹⁰⁴ Warwick: 'So bad a death argues a monstrous life' (*2 Henry VI*, 3.3.30).

¹⁰⁵ *The First Part of the Contention*, (London: Thomas Creed, 1594), Malone (Bodleian Arch.G e.17), <<http://special1.bl.uk/treasures/SiqDiscovery/ui/record.aspx?Source=text&LHCopy=103&LHPage=40&RHCopy=103&RHPage=41>>, [accessed 01/09/2013], p. 40.

¹⁰⁶ Stanley Wells and Gary Taylor also include a stage direction ('drawing the curtains. The bed is removed') which is in neither original edition, although the mention of a curtain by Henry in the Folio makes it a reasonable surmise.

while in the Folio it is interrupted by the entrance of Suffolk and his captors in the next scene. In both versions this scene appears to take on some of the functions of a morality play, encouraging the witnesses to apply the moral of Beaufort's death to their own lives. The Folio version, however, amplifies the theatricality of this; instead of Beaufort's funeral rites, we have a 'curtain', so drawing attention to the formal tableaux that has been created. But the Folio version also emphasises the problem of interpretation; in the quarto Salisbury simply observes that Beaufort's bad end mirrored his bad life, but the Folio is less definitive (Beaufort's death only 'argues' a bad life) and we are asked to 'meditate' on the scene without 'judging' it.¹⁰⁷ While the changes in staging strengthen the emblematic appearance of the final tableaux, the changes to the dialogue highlight the difficulty of interpreting and shy away from offering a definitive moral judgement.

Suffolk's death follows directly on the heels of Beaufort's demise.¹⁰⁸ Walter Whitmore, to whom the opportunity to ransom Suffolk is given by the Captain, shows every intention to kill Suffolk even before he knows who he is, and his implacableness could be interpreted as a sign that he is acting as some kind of divine agent. Walter's name (pronounced like 'water') reminds Suffolk of the prophesy that he will 'die by water', and this reminder of the prophesy also seems to suggest that his death is pre-ordained.¹⁰⁹ However, compared with Beaufort's death scene, it is less clear whether Suffolk's death is the will of God, the will of the people, or just the will of the pirates. Suffolk's guilt for Gloucester's murder is not foregrounded, and his insulting treatment of his captors

¹⁰⁷ These differences may support Steven Urkowitz's case that Folio version may be the result of authorial revision (see Urkowitz, 'Texts with Two Faces: Noticing Theatrical Revisions in *Henry V*', in *Henry VI: Critical Essays*, pp. 27-38). Another reason this section may have needed to be revised is that a law against blasphemy had been introduced in the intervening years which meant that Henry's reference to 'God' would not have been allowed. However, as I have shown, the changes go further than simply removing this reference.

¹⁰⁸ Tillyard interprets both Beaufort's and Suffolk's deaths as providential: 'The judgement of God, invoked by Henry, is quick in striking two of Gloucester's murderers. Cardinal Beaufort dies in an agony of evil conscience, Suffolk is captured by a warship off the coast of Kent and put to death after the ship's captain has recited a list of his crimes. The two other plotters of Gloucester's death, York and Queen Margaret, get their punishment in the next play' (*Shakespeare's History Plays*, p. 183).

¹⁰⁹ See 4.1.34-6. Dying by 'Walter' instead of 'water' seems a slightly equivocal way for the prophesy to come true, but as Suffolk is beheaded over the side of a boat, he dies 'by water' as well.

provides a more direct and human reason for his death. The Captain at first encourages Walter to spare Suffolk, but changes his mind when he discovers who he is. If Walter represents the judgement of God, then the Captain seems to represent the judgement of the people.¹¹⁰ Like Joan in *Part 1*, the pirates are rather dubious candidates for the role of 'divine agent'. Similarly, the prophesy foretelling Suffolk's death was generated by conjurers he hired to trap the Duchess of Gloucester who were at best charlatans and at worst genuine conjurers of demons. Their prophesies nevertheless appear to have tapped into some kind of genuine knowledge about the future.

If we are meant to regard the Wars of the Roses as God's punishment to England for the deposition of Richard II, then Suffolk, too, is a kind of divine agent for his role in bringing the wars about. At this point the providential narrative becomes rather tangled; is Suffolk a punishment for the people or are the people (in the form of the pirates) punishment for Suffolk? Or is the bad behaviour of both parties divinely sanctioned? Throughout the *Henry VI* plays, if God's will appears at all, it manifests itself in rather dubious ways. What is clear in the plays is that a providential interpretation is rarely a 'simple' explanation for events as the wider implications are complex and often troubling, associating God with less than moral actions. Although the possibility of a providential plan is never ruled out, the interweaving of different kinds of 'plot', in both the narrative and conspiratorial sense, leaves it impossible to tell who has ultimate control. In terms of conspiracies, Margaret and Suffolk facilitate a plot which the Duchess believes to be her own, and their plot against Gloucester is in turn incorporated into York's plot for the crown. In terms of the narrative, the conventions of comedy, morality and tragedy clash,

¹¹⁰ The Captain's condemnation of Suffolk echoes that of the commons who demanded Suffolk's death or banishment from Henry in 3.2, although while Warwick portrays the commons' demands as arising from concern for Henry (see 3.2.245-271), the Captain's rehearsal of Suffolk's crimes bears a more Yorkist slant: 'The princely Warwick, and the Nevilles all,/ Whose deadful swords were never drawn in vain,/ As hating thee, are rising up in arms;/ And now the house of York, thrust from the crown,/ By shameful murder of a guiltless king/ and lofty, proud, encroaching tyranny./ Burns with revenging fire, whose hopeful colours/ Advance our half-faced sun, striving to shine,/ Under which is writ, "*Invitis nubibus*"' (2 *Henry VI*, 4.1.91-9). '*Invitis nubibus*', or 'obscured by clouds', was the motto adopted by the Duke of York when he challenged Henry for the crown, although this scene occurs slightly before he has openly declared himself.

denying the audience a stable interpretive framework for the history played out before them. It is this clash of genres that foregrounds the interpretive process and encourages the creation of the kind of critically aware audience described by Patterson and Zaller.¹¹¹

The Bloody Rose: Law and the ‘Rights’ of York and Lancaster

Unlike Hall’s *Chronicle*, the titles of the 1594 quarto of *2 Henry VI* and the 1619 quarto of *2* and *3 Henry VI* focus on the ‘contention’ between the houses of York and Lancaster, rather than their ‘union’. At the beginning of *1 Henry VI* the reign of Henry V has effectively eclipsed the Yorkist claim to the throne. Indeed, according to Gloucester, Henry has apparently provided a literally ‘shining’ example of kingship:

His brandished sword did blind men with his beams.
His arms spread wider than a dragon’s wings.
His sparkling eyes, replete with wrathful fire,
More dazzled and drove back his enemies
Than midday sun, fierce bent against their faces (1.1.10-4).

Yet all of this hyperbole is still inadequate for Gloucester, and Henry’s deeds ‘exceed all speech’ (1.1.15). This image of Henry is so ‘blind[ing]’ and ‘dazzl[ing]’ that it appears to have eclipsed history itself (‘England ne’er had a king until his time’, 1.1.8). So much so that, in *Part 1*, Richard Plantagenet (not yet Duke of York) seems entirely ignorant of his potential claim to the throne or the reason behind his father’s execution and his uncle’s long imprisonment.

As the afterglow of Henry’s life fades, the way is cleared for the gradual coming to light of the Yorkist claim, beginning with 2.4, the Temple Garden scene. At first it is not clear what the quarrel between Somerset and Richard concerns, and at the end of the scene the full implications of their argument remain ambiguous. Somerset calls Richard a ‘yeoman’, to which Warwick responds:

His grandfather was Lionel Duke of Clarence,
Third son to the third Edward, King of England.
Spring crestless yeomen from so deep a root? (2.4.83-5).

¹¹¹ See pp. 156-7, above.

Lionel Duke of Clarence was in fact Richard's maternal great-great-grandfather, but it was through him, rather than his paternal grandfather Edmund Langley, the fifth son of Edward III, that the Yorkist claim to the throne arose. Thus, the basis of Richard's claim is stated in this scene, but its implications are not made clear until the next.

Mortimer's revelations in 2.5 remind the audience of a suppressed history of Yorkist rebellion against the Lancastrian line during the reigns of Henry IV and V.

Mortimer is symbolic of this act of suppression, and he tells the audience:

Since Henry Monmouth first began to reign –
 Before whose glory I was great in arms –
 This loathsome sequestration I have had;
 And even since then hath Richard been obscured (2.5.23-6).

Mortimer appears to be the only character in possession of the historical knowledge relating to Richard's claim to the throne, and it is locked away with him.¹¹² His sole function in the play is to pass this information on to Richard, who in turn determines that he will 'lock his counsel in my breast' (2.5.118), consigning it once again to another kind of prison. Rather than being a natural consequence of his legitimate right, therefore, the 'peace' achieved by Henry V has been actively imposed on the country and its nobility. The force asserted by Henry successfully moulds the narrative of history into a shape suggestive of his providential right to the throne, while potentially more legal 'rights' lie just beneath the surface. York must also actively create the conditions in which his 'right' can be heard, and while *Part 1* depicts the breakdown of Henry V's legacy, *Part 2* follows the process by which York builds his up.

The Yorkist claim is presented as the more legal of the two. When Richard and Somerset compete over which of their positions has the greater 'truth' in the Temple

¹¹² As Kenneth Muir notes, however, 'Shakespeare's indebtedness to the *Chronicles* is shown by the way he follows them in their confusion of one Edmund Mortimer, who was never imprisoned, with another Edmund, his uncle, who was imprisoned by Glendower and afterwards married his captor's daughter, as we know from *1 Henry IV*' (Kenneth Muir, *The Sources of Shakespeare's Plays* (London: Methuen & Co, 1977), p. 28). In fact, historically, it was Mortimer who informed Henry V of the plot for which the Earl of Cambridge, Richard of York's father, was executed.

Garden scene, Richard claims ‘The truth appears so naked on my side/ that any purblind eye may find it out’ (2.4.20-1), whereas Somerset’s ‘truth’ is ‘well apparelled’ and so ‘shining’ ‘[t]hat it will glimmer through a blind man’s eye’ (2.4.22-4). Unfortunately for Somerset, the deliberate one-up-man-ship of his rhetoric associates his claim with artifice and craft rather than plain truth. Furthermore, the way in which Somerset’s language echoes Gloucester’s eulogy links Somerset’s ‘truth’ with the narrative of success so artfully spun by Henry V during his reign. When the question is put to a vote, the lawyer Vernon, the only character with professional expertise in the law, votes on the side of York, while Suffolk, Somerset’s chief supporter, admits:

Faith, I have been a truant in the law,
And never yet could frame my will to it,
And therefore frame the law unto my will (2.4.7-9).

Furthermore, despite his oath, Somerset does not abide by the results of the vote, indicating a lack of respect for the agreed upon rules. In *2 Henry VI*, York explains to Salisbury and Warwick that the Lancastrians hold the crown ‘by force and not by right’ (2.2.30), and this scene demonstrates the way in which the Lancastrian faction favours ‘force’ over ‘right’.

An ominous note is struck when Somerset connects the redness of the Lancastrian rose to bloodshed, warning Vernon ‘Prick not your finger as you pluck it off,/ Lest, bleeding, you do paint the white rose red’ (2.4.49-50). After the vote, when Richard asks ‘Now, Somerset, where is your argument?’, Somerset responds: ‘Here in my scabbard, meditating that/ Shall dye your white rose a bloody red’ (2.4.59-61). The image of dyeing the white rose red does more than indicate Somerset’s preference for ‘force’; it also foreshadows the fact that, while Richard may hold the ‘right’, in *Parts 2 and 3*, he will need to resort to increasing levels of ‘force’ in order to win the crown. Just as the bloody white rose is indistinguishable from the red, the actions of the Yorkist faction in *Parts 2 and 3*

make them indistinguishable from the Lancastrians.¹¹³ Indeed, in the opening scene of *Part 3*, when the legality of each claim is finally discussed openly, York reiterates this argument that ‘force’ cannot establish ‘right’:

Henry: For Richard [II], in the view of many lords,
 Resigned the crown to Henry the Fourth,
 Whose heir my father was, and I am his.
 York: He rose against him, being his sovereign,
 And made him to resign his crown perforce.
 Warwick: Suppose, my lords, he did it unconstrained –
 Think you ’twere prejudicial to his crown?
 Exeter: No, for he could not so resign his crown
 But that the next heir should succeed and reign
 (1.1.139-47).

According to Exeter, a king does not have the right to choose his successor, and the crown must go by lineal descent.¹¹⁴ Nevertheless, by the end of the scene York agrees to keep the peace for the remainder of Henry’s life in return for being adopted as Henry’s heir, thereby disinheriting his son by Margaret. Significantly, the case of Richard II and Bolingbroke appears to replay itself with York in the role of Bolingbroke and Henry in the role of Richard, and the same problems of legality apply. History, then, begins to look like a series of repetitions rather than a linear event.

Although the Yorkist faction comes increasingly to resemble their Lancastrian counterparts, York and Henry are presented as polar opposites. The nature of this contrast is perhaps best encapsulated by the conclusion of the trial by combat in *Part 2*:

York: (to an attendant, pointing at Horner) Take away his weapon.
 (To Peter) Fellow, thank God and the good wine in thy
 master’s wame.
 [...]
 Henry: (to attendants, pointing at Horner)
 Go, take hence that traitor from our sight,
 For by his death we do perceive his guilt.
 And God in justice hath revealed to us
 The truth and innocence of this poor fellow,
 Which he had thought to have murdered wrongfully (2.3.99-108).

¹¹³ It is also worth noting the lengths *The True Tragedy of Richard III* went to to present the Duke of York’s bid for the throne as a forceful usurpation (see p. 192 in ‘Tragedy and History’, above).

¹¹⁴ This is a point that may have resonated with Elizabethan audiences, since Elizabeth’s brother Edward had disinherited Elizabeth and Mary in his will in an attempt to ensure a Protestant successor.

The actions of York and Henry mirror each other with small but significant differences; both issue commands, but York steps in first.¹¹⁵ While York is attentive to more earthly possible causes, Henry is convinced of God's hand in events. York's comment to Peter is an informal aside in prose, while Henry's speech is in verse and directed at everyone observing the combat. Moreover, in the scene as a whole York shows an awareness of what is at stake in the combat, and does not defend Horner even though his crime is essentially loyalty to York. Henry, on the other hand, seems entirely oblivious to the implications of Peter's victory.

Henry's extreme passivity, arising from his faith that 'God defends the right', is emphasised in all three plays and constitutes the main reason for his failure as a monarch. Instead of commanding Gloucester and Beaufort to reconcile when their bickering disrupts his coronation in Paris in *Part 1*, Henry entreats them 'if prayers might prevail' (3.1.68). When France is finally fully lost in *Part 2*, his only response is 'Cold news, Lord Somerset; but God's will be done' (3.1.86). Furthermore, although Henry does not believe the accusations against Gloucester, he considers himself powerless to intervene.¹¹⁶ He leaves the stage, telling the conspirators 'what to your wisdoms seemeth best/ Do or undo, as if ourselves were here' (3.1.195-6). Henry assumes that the law will be observed with or without effort on his part. And when he suspects foul play after Gloucester's death, he is nevertheless reluctant to 'judge'.¹¹⁷ Finally, in *Part 3*, having been dismissed from battle, he indifferently comments 'To whom God will, there be the victory' (2.5.15). Henry's faith in providence renders him unwilling to influence events himself, and therefore unable to perform the role of king.

¹¹⁵ York gives orders for Horner's weapon to be taken (ll. 99-100), and Henry gives orders for his body to be taken away (l. 104).

¹¹⁶ He describes himself as a helpless mother cow who 'runs lowing up and down,/ Looking the way her harmless young one went,/ And can do naught but wail her darling's loss' (3.1.214-6).

¹¹⁷ Henry: 'O thou that judgest all things, stay my thoughts,/ My thoughts that labour to persuade my soul/ Some violent hands were laid on Humphrey's life./ If my suspect be false, forgive me God,/ For judgement only doth belong to thee' (3.2.136-40).

In contrast to Henry, York's activeness is striking; he subtly helps Suffolk and the Queen manufacture the downfall of Gloucester, making sure that it sows the seeds of their own destruction as well. He also manipulates them into giving him an army.¹¹⁸ In fact, it is possible to see York's hand in events even where he has not explicitly stated his involvement to the audience, as in the case of the mob demanding Suffolk's head shortly after Gloucester's death. When he reveals his plan concerning Gloucester to Salisbury and Warwick in *Part 2*, he says: "Tis that [Gloucester's death] they seek, and they, in seeking that,/ Shall find their deaths, if York can prophesy' (2.2.75-6). York's 'prophesy' is not supernatural, but based on observation and his own actions in manipulating events. When York reveals himself at the end of *Part 2* he tells Henry:

That head of thine doth not become a crown;
 Thy hand is made to grasp a palmer's staff,
 And not to grace an awful princely sceptre.
 That gold must round engird these brows of mine,
 Whose smile and frown, like to Achilles' spear,
 Is able with the change to kill and cure.
 Here is a hand to hold a sceptre up,
 And with the same to act controlling laws.
 Give place! By heaven, thou shalt rule no more
 O'er him whom heaven created for thy ruler (5.1.96-105).

Despite York's evident megalomania at this point, it is difficult to disagree with his assessment of Henry's abilities, or the natural aptitude that he claims for himself. Henry's faith in providence is presented as a liability, and action as a surer way to success.

York's death provides an exception to my argument that tragedy in the *Henry VI* plays is most commonly associated with characters whose deaths are difficult to explain within a providential framework. The 'true' tragedy of the Duke of York in *Part 3* can be considered providentially deserved because of his decision to break his oath to Henry, although it is presented as no less tragic for this; like Talbot in *Part 1*, and Henry VI later in

¹¹⁸ See York's speech in 2 *Henry VI*, 3.1.331-383.

Part 3, York is predeceased by his son Rutland.¹¹⁹ The viciousness of Clifford's attack on Rutland and Margaret and Clifford's attack on York shortly after (which even makes their accomplice Northumberland uncomfortable)¹²⁰ creates sympathy for York. This sympathy preserves something of the dual perspective on York's death presented in Holinshed:

Manie déemed that this miserable end chanced to the duke of Yorke, as a due punishment for breaking his oth of allegiance vnto his souereigne lord king Henrie: but others held him discharged thereof, bi| cause he obtained a dispensation from the pope by such suggestion as his procurators made vnto him, whereby the same oth was adiudged void, as that which was receiued vnaduisedly, to the preiudice of himselfe, and disheriting of all his posteritie.¹²¹

In *3 Henry VI* there is no mention of seeking dispensation from the Pope, and instead York's sons talk him out of his oath in 1.2, the scene directly after he takes the oath to begin with.

According to Edward, 'for a kingdom any oath may be broken./ I would break a thousand oaths to reign for one year' (1.2.16-7). This does not bode well for Edward's future reign, although he is at least open about the actions he is willing to take and the reasons behind them. Richard, on the other hand, exclaims, 'No – God forbid your grace should be foresworn' (1.2.18), and comes up with a more legalistic excuse that manages to sway his father:

An oath is of no moment being not took
Before a true and lawful magistrate
That hath authority over him that swears (1.2.22-4).

According to Richard, if Henry is not the 'rightful' king, then oaths sworn to him are not binding. Richard totally disregards the role of personal honour, seemingly requiring every

¹¹⁹ Although historically Rutland, York's second son, was seventeen when he died (and older than the soon-to-be Richard of Gloucester), here he is a young boy. This is probably due to confusion in the chronicles; both Hall and Holinshed presents him as twelve years old (see Hall's *Chronicle*, p. 251). In Holinshed: 'This earle was but a child at that time of twelue yeares of age, whome neither his tender yeares, nor dolorous countenance, with holding vp both his hands for mercie (for his speach was gone for feare) could moue the cruell heart of the lord Clifford to take pitie vpon him, so that he was noted of great infamie for that his vnmercifull murder vpon that yoong gentleman' (Holinshed's *Chronicles* (1587 edition), volume 6, p. 659).

¹²⁰ Northumberland: 'Had he [York] been slaughter-man to all my kin,/ I should not, for my life, but weep for him,/ To see how inly sorrow gripes his soul' (1.4.170-3).

¹²¹ Holinshed's *Chronicles* (1587 edition), volume 6, p. 659.

oath to be sworn in a legal setting before a 'lawful magistrate'. Furthermore, by this logic, if no (earthly) magistrate is considered as having 'authority over' the rightful king, then only an oath before God can bind him to anything. This leaves kings to operate almost entirely according to their whims. York is convinced, and begins making plans to rally his supporters, leaving 'the King not privy to my drift,/ Nor any of the house of Lancaster' (1.2.46-7). York's plans are interrupted by Margaret's attack, so his decision to break his oath could easily have been omitted to preserve his integrity. This scene, however, makes a point of showing it. Nevertheless, despite his role as the morally dubious 'Machiavel', York is not presented as entirely 'villainous'; instead, the play presents him as both the more legal claimant and, almost *because* of his use of Machiavellian tactics, the more suited to the role. The opposition between Henry's piety and York's pragmatism seems to dramatize Machiavelli's observations in the *Discourses* that Christian ideology had compromised people's willingness to act.¹²²

In the *Henry VI* plays, the seemingly subjective nature of historical 'truth' makes knowing the 'correct' application of a law based on historical precedents extremely difficult; even if York and Henry can agree that the overthrow of Richard II was unlawful, that truth does not erase the oaths sworn to Henry on his coronation. Although Salisbury argues that 'It is a sin to swear unto a sin,/ But greater sin to keep a sinful oath' (2 *Henry VI*, 5.1.180-1), the recurring problem of oathbreaking in 3 *Henry VI* suggests that the question of when it is lawful to break a vow is an extremely complex issue. History, law and morality are tightly interwoven concerns, and the tendency to interpret history in ways that validate the legality or morality of certain personal desires (such as, in York's case, the desire for the throne, or in Clifford's case, the desire for revenge) means that history comes to obscure, rather than illuminate, properly legal or moral actions. In a world where 'rights' are not achieved without 'force', continuing conflict seems inevitable.

¹²² See pp. 53-4 in 'Boethius and Machiavelli', above.

The Use of History

While the Duke of York uses history to back his legal claim to the throne, Lord Saye's address to the Cade rebels in *2 Henry VI* represents a traditional scholarly application of history as a rhetorically persuasive tool in the orator's armoury:

Kent, in the commentaries Caesar writ,
Is termed the civil'st place of all this isle;
Sweet is the country, because full of riches;
The people liberal, valiant, active, wealthy;
Which makes me hope you are not void of pity (4.7.59-63).

Saye's reference to Caesar's commentaries is intended to demonstrate his own educated credentials, compliment the Kentish rebels and inspire a similar civility in them. Saye's use of history is designed to be rhetorically persuasive, so that, as he concludes, 'Unless you be possessed with devilish spirits,/ You cannot but forbear to murder me' (4.7.74-5).

However, this kind of learned eloquence is everything the rebels have declared themselves against, and, as Cade tells the audience: 'I feel remorse in myself with his words, but I'll bridle it. He shall die an it be but for pleading so well for his life' (4.7.102-4). Despite its rhetorical persuasiveness, this moment represents a failure of the traditional scholarly use of history.

Rather than inspiring civility, Saye's reference to the history books achieves the opposite, highlighting a lack of continuity between past and present in the evident difference between the Kentish people of Caesar's time and the Cade rebels, and foregrounding the danger of basing judgements about the present on information about the past. This is a contrast to similar uses of history in other plays of the period; in *Gorboduc*, Arostus, Philander and Eubulus offer advice concerning the King's plan to split the realm between his two sons. Arostus and Philander base their arguments on general principles and decide that the plan is generally good, although they offer different advice about how to implement it. Eubulus, however, condemns the plan, citing numerous historical examples to show that, despite the general principles of brotherly affection and

filial obedience, such division never ends well.¹²³ In *Gorboduc*, basing assumptions about the present on information about the past allows Eubulus to predict the future outcome of the King's plan; in *2 Henry VI* this is presented as a less than reliable method. Instead, it is Clifford's equally empty but more immediately emotive invocation of Henry V, along with the promise of making their fortunes through future conquest in France, that persuades the rebels to abandon their cause.

The pattern of repetitions that structure the *Henry VI* plays seem to imply an underlying continuity between past and present that would make Saye's use of history valid; its failure, however, demonstrates that such an assumption of an underlying continuity may well be faulty. In fact, history is used in this manner remarkably little in the *Henry VI* plays. Instead, characters more frequently rely on natural imagery that at least appears to have a more secure link to 'eternal' truth than history. For example, in order to persuade Henry of the danger posed by Gloucester, Margaret and Suffolk employ metaphorical examples taken from nature. Margaret argues:

Now 'tis spring, and weeds are shallow-rooted;
Suffer them now, and they'll o'ergrow the garden,
And choke the herbs for want of husbandry
(*2 Henry VI*, 3.1.31-3).¹²⁴

And Suffolk tries to construe Gloucester's apparent innocence as a mark against him:

Smooth runs the water where the brook is deep,
And in his simple show he harbours treason.
The fox barks not when he would steal the lamb (3.1.53-5).¹²⁵

These kinds of arguments can be persuasive because they appear to draw on the unchanging laws of nature, but their association with the likes of Suffolk and Margaret and

¹²³ See Thomas Norton, *Gorboduc*, in *Minor Elizabethan Tragedies*, ed. by T. W. Craik (London: J. M. Dent & Sons, 1974), pp. 1-58 (1.2).

¹²⁴ This garden metaphor will, of course, be deployed at greater length in the famous garden scene of *Richard II*.

¹²⁵ Suffolk uses the fox metaphor again when arguing to the other conspirators that Gloucester should be killed: '[W]ere't not madness then/ To make the fox surveyor of the fold,/ Who being accused a crafty murderer,/ His guilt should be but idly posted over/ Because his purpose is not executed?/ No – let him die in that he is a fox,/ By nature proved an enemy to the flock,/ Before his chaps be stained with crimson blood' (ll. 252-9).

their use as a weapon against the Duke of Gloucester makes the conclusions drawn from them suspect.

Like Suffolk and Margaret, Clifford employs examples from nature, rather than history, when making a case for war in *3 Henry VI*:

To whom do lions cast their gentle looks?
 Not to the beast that would usurp their den.
 Whose hand is that the forest bear doth lick?
 Not his that spoils her young before her face.
 Who scapes the lurking serpent's mortal sting?
 Not he that sets a foot upon her back.
 The smallest worm will turn, being trodden on,
 And doves will peck in safeguard of their brood (2.2.11-8).

Clifford reduces the case for war to a simple law of action and reaction which he presents as natural, and indeed, Henry acknowledges that 'Full well hath Clifford played the orator,/ Inferring arguments of mighty force' (2.2.43-4). Clifford's argument for war resonates because, based as it is on an apparently 'natural' law of action and reaction, it provides a less complicated explanation for events than providence; revenge, a virtual requirement within the heroic ethos of the aristocratic honour system, is the most obvious motivating factor for most of the action of *Part 3*. What 'Clifford's law' significantly lacks is any acknowledgement of the Christian admonition to 'turn the other cheek', or the idea that human beings may want to rise above the level of the animals used by Clifford to illustrate his point. The result is a cycle of violence which, if 'natural', is also undeniably brutal.

Henry, however, is unconvinced by Clifford's argument:

But Clifford, tell me – didst thou never hear
 That things ill got had ever bad success?
 And happy always was it for that son
 Whose father for his hoarding went to hell?
 I'll leave my son my virtuous deeds behind,
 And would my father had left me no more (2.2.45-50).

Unlike Clifford, Henry only presents the moral, and fails to back his position up with any rhetorical examples, historical or natural. His own oration therefore lacks the persuasive

power of Clifford's, and Margaret dismisses it as 'soft courage' (2.2.57).¹²⁶ Henry only vaguely alludes to a history that he leaves unspoken. While it is possible to conclude that Henry regards his fortune as punishment for Bolingbroke's usurpation, it is only 'fathers', and not explicitly his grandfather, that he refers to, and so the precise way in which Henry intends this history to be construed is left unclear. Henry's refusal to 'play the orator' may also suggest a certain exhaustion with forms of rhetoric that have so far failed to convince anybody to rise above their 'nature'. The repetitions in the structures of the *Henry VI* plays that seem to point towards a providential pattern in fact chiefly arise from characters' *failure* to learn from the lessons of history and avoid catastrophe. The challenge of how to break the cycle of violence thus becomes the central problem of the tetralogy.

But while a message of Christian charity seems to be what is lacking from Clifford's oration, Henry's debilitating piety is not presented as a viable solution to the problem. In this respect, Richard III and Henry VI occupy opposite ends of the spectrum of action and inaction. Mediating the contrast between these two figures are the characters of York (initially set up in contrast to Henry) and Edward IV; in *Part 3* a similar opposition is constructed between Edward and Richard as existed between Henry and York. Edward is not the saint that Henry is, and York is not the villain that Richard will become, but there are nevertheless some parallels. When Richard begins to describe the death of Henry's son, Henry exclaims:

Ah, kill me with thy weapon, not with words!
My breast can better brook thy dagger's point
Than can my ears that tragic history (5.6.26-8).

Similarly, when the messenger arrives bearing news of York's death, Edward exclaims: 'O, speak no more, for I have heard too much' (2.1.53). Richard, on the other hand, demands: 'Say how he died, for I will hear it all' (2.1.54). When hearing the story, Edward mourns:

¹²⁶ Henry's failure to convince is also evident in this scene when he tells his son to 'learn this lesson: draw thy sword in right' (2.2.62). Edward responds by saying: 'I'll draw it as apparent to the crown,/ And in that quarrel use it to the death' (2.2.64-5).

Sweet Duke of York, our prop to lean upon,
Now art thou gone, we have no staff, no stay (2.1.68-9).

Later in the scene he tells Warwick:

[...] on thy shoulder will I lean,
And when thou fail'st – as God forbid the hour –
Must Edward fall, which peril heaven forbend! (2.1.189-91).

The language of 'prop', 'staff' and 'lean[ing]' recalls Duke Humphrey's words that: 'Thus King Henry throws away his crutch/ Before his legs be firm to bear his body' (2 *Henry VI*, 3.1.189-90) and makes Edward seem perhaps overly dependent on his nobles rather than active in his own right.

Reacting to the tale of his father's murder, Edward imagines his own death:

Now my soul's palace is become a prison.
Ah, would she break from hence that this my body
Might in the ground be closed up in rest (2.1.74-6).

Richard, however, takes a more active stance:

To weep is to make less the depth of grief;
Tears, then, for babes – blows and revenge for me! (2.1. 85-6).

Like Henry and York, Edward is constructed as passive while Richard is active. The two then begin to wrangle over what part of York's legacy they each inherit:

Richard: Richard, I bear thy name; I'll venge thy death
Or die renowned by attempting it.
Edward: His name that valiant Duke hath left with thee,
His dukedom and his chair with me is left.
Richard: Nay, if thou be that princely eagle's bird,
Show thy descent by gazing 'gainst the sun:
For 'chair and dukedom', 'throne and kingdom' say –
Either that is thine or else thou wert not his (2.1.87-94).

Although Edward is York's legal heir, it is Richard who takes his place in the narrative, including taking up York's Machiavellian plotting, asides and soliloquies.¹²⁷

These parallels mean that when Edward makes a marriage that threatens to divide his supporters, the sense of history repeating itself is unmistakable. Edward's blunder

¹²⁷ It is possible that these parallels offer very subtle support to Richard's claim in *Richard III* that Edward was illegitimate.

comes just as a relatively stable peace might have been established, but instead his marriage to Elizabeth Woodville causes the revolt of Warwick and Clarence and a further round of bloodshed. Edward's decision to marry against the wishes of his nobles is especially ironic because he had previously been particularly vocal against Margaret; earlier in *Part 3* he tells her:

Hadst thou been meek, our title still had slept,
And we, in pity of the gentle King,
Had slipped our claim until another age (2.2.160-2).

Edward's words here point towards a world where disaster could have been, if not completely averted, then at least delayed, and the Yorkist claim would have 'slept [...] until another age'. There are, in fact, several instances of these kinds of lost futures in the plays. In the scene before he is murdered, Henry's son gives a speech to his troops, and Oxford responds with:

O brave young Prince, thy famous grandfather
Doth live again in thee! Long mayst thou live
To bear his image and renew his glories! (5.4.52-4).

The audience, of course, knows this will never be, but they are asked to consider what kind of a king this Edward might have been. Like the Duke of York, however, he will never get that opportunity. These moments serve to heighten the sense of tragedy, presenting the audience with the possibility of being lifted out of the cycle of violence which is then ripped away.

The *Henry VI* plays present the 'partialness' (as Kastan puts it, 'in both senses of the word')¹²⁸ of the historical record, where exclusions are made based on the interests of the ruling elite. This 'partialness' means that characters are acting on 'partial' information, not only because of their own personal biases, but also the biases of those who have gone before, handing down an incomplete and partial record of their times. Thus, the historical project only compounds the problem of ideological bias for future generations,

¹²⁸ Kastan, 'Shakespeare and English History', p. 181.

compromising their ability to make a clear and impartial judgement about any given situation. Nevertheless, choosing not to judge, as Henry does, is presented as having equally damning consequences for the future course of events. The failure of characters to ‘learn the lessons of history’, however, is not altogether condemned, since the plays show an appreciation of the extraordinary difficulty of exercising judgement from within the historical moment. The ways in which the interpretation of history is dictated by individual subjectivity limits its usefulness for directing people towards an ideal or utopian future for the ‘common weal’.

Richard III

In a passage of *Richard III* often commented on by critics, the young Prince Edward reveals his plan for achieving lasting fame in the manner of Julius Caesar:

An if I live until I be a man,
I'll win our ancient right in France again.¹²⁹

For Edna Zwick Boris, ‘After the several dynastic changes of the Lancastrian-Yorkist struggle, length of accomplishment as a goal to be striven for is a lesson understood even by the young prince’.¹³⁰ As with the Lancastrian Prince Edward in *3 Henry VI*, this moment presents the audience with a lost possible future, begging the question of what kind of king the Yorkist prince might have been, and where the country would be if he had had a chance to reign. Also like the Lancastrian Edward, whom Oxford hails as an image of his ‘famous grandfather’ Henry V (*3 Henry VI*, 5.4.52), the Yorkist prince’s vision for the future is a recovery of past glories.

Shortly before this declaration, Edward has inquired whether or not it is true that Julius Caesar built the Tower of London:

Buckingham: He did, my gracious lord, begin that place,
Which since succeeding ages have re-edified.
Prince Edward: Is it upon record, or else reported

¹²⁹ *Richard III*, pp. 183-222 (3.1.91-2).

¹³⁰ Edna Zwick Boris, *Shakespeare's English Kings, the People, and the Law* (London: Associated University Press, 1978), p. 103.

Successively from age to age, he built it?
 Buckingham: Upon record, my gracious liege.
 Prince Edward: But say, my lord, it were not registered,
 Methinks the truth should live from age to age,
 As 'twere retailed to all posterity
 Even to the general all-ending day (3.1.70-8).

The tradition that Julius Caesar built the Tower of London was a medieval one generally rejected by the chroniclers of the sixteenth century, beginning with Polydore Vergil, who notes that Caesar ‘made noe mention of London’.¹³¹ Having asserted that the ‘truth should live from age to age’ somehow independent of the material record, the Prince suddenly reverses his position:

Prince Edward: That Julius Caesar was a famous man:
 With what his valour did t'enrich his wit,
 His wit set down to make his valour live.
 Death made no conquest of this conqueror,
 For yet he lives in fame, though not in life (3.1.84-8).

Prince Edward imagines Caesar writing the record of his own fame, despite the fact that Caesar’s own writings offer no support for the tradition of his having built the Tower. He ignores the way in which later attempts to ‘re-edify’ that legacy, as the Tower has also been ‘re-edified’ by subsequent generations, might compromise the continuity between the Caesar who lived over a thousand years before, and the one who lives on through his ‘fame’.

Phyllis Rackin notes the anachronism of the Prince’s observations:

For it was not until the sixteenth century that the English subjected the records and monuments of the past to the kind of critical scrutiny that the doomed prince brings to bear on his final prison. The difficulty of recovering the past, the need to check written records against physical relics and to compare both with oral tradition, were not likely to have occurred to historians in Edward’s time, let alone to a child.¹³²

For James R. Siemon, the exchange highlights the variety of historical sources:

¹³¹ See Polydore Vergil, *Polydore Vergil's English History*, ed. by Henry Ellis, trans. by anonymous (London: Camden Society, 1846), p. 40. For more on the tradition that Caesar built the tower, see Homer Nearing, Jr., ‘Julius Caesar and the Tower of London’, *Modern Language Notes*, 63.4 (1948), 228-233.

¹³² Rackin, *Stages of History*, p. 13.

History could be found embodied in monument, institutional record, oral report, and memoir, as well as, of course, in the historical poem [...] or drama. They also suggest apparent contradictions between a faith in *the* truth and an investment in the power of verbal self-fashioning, suggesting early modern interest in the longstanding problem of the relationship between history and language.¹³³

Edward's assertion that 'the truth should live from age to age/ As 'twere retailed to all posterity' is representative of an older way of reading history that is undermined by his inquiry into the manner in which historical knowledge is transmitted into the present. As Peter Womack observes, in *Richard III* 'the two modes of history interact, sometimes jarringly.'¹³⁴ Thus, while this scene points towards anachronistically modern ways of reading history, 'the climactic scene in which Richard is haunted by the ghosts of his victims is as close as anyone gets to putting the *Mirror for Magistrates* on the stage.'¹³⁵

The unified structure of *Richard III* does, however, as Rackin argues, present the audience with a more obviously providential outlook on history than the *Henry VI* plays. Curses and prophecies, even the one fabricated by Richard at the beginning of the play, 'that "G"/ of Edward's heirs the murderer shall be' (1.1.39-40), inexorably come true. Indeed, the providential bent is enough to even make a grudging believer out of Richard himself. In 4.2 he says:

I do remember me, Henry the Sixth
Did prophesy that Richmond should be king,
When Richmond was a little peevish boy.
A king... perhaps... perhaps (4.2.98-101).

Richard also recalls another prophesy that 'a bard of Ireland told me once/ I should not live long after I saw "Richmond"' (4.2.105-9). As the play progresses Richard becomes more and more haunted by that 'perhaps'; before the Battle of Bosworth he observes, 'The sun will not be seen today./ The sky doth frown and lour upon our army' (5.6.12-3).

¹³³ Siemon, 'Reconstructing the Past: History, Historicism, Histories', in *A Companion to English Renaissance Literature and Culture*, ed. by Michael Hattaway (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2003), pp. 662-673, pp. 662-3.

¹³⁴ Peter Womack, *English Renaissance Drama* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing Ltd., 2006), p.70.

¹³⁵ Womack, *English Renaissance Drama*, p.70.

Uncertain whether or not the weather has any larger significance, Richard tries to rationalise his fears:

Not shine today – why, what is that to me
More than to Richmond? For the selfsame heaven
That frowns on me looks sadly upon him (5.6.15-7).

Richard is right to point out that the overcast sky may equally be a portent for Richmond, but the audience knows that it is not.¹³⁶ Nevertheless, the text also plays with the problematic linguistic strategies that have been employed to create this providential shape and the political purposes to which this particular history has been ‘re-edified’.

The shape of the plot is laid out in 1.3 by Margaret’s curses.¹³⁷ Her appearance in this scene is deliberately unsettling; her presence is anachronistic and when she first appears on-stage, providing an embittered commentary on the action, it is some time before anyone acknowledges her, making her easily mistakable for a ghost calling for revenge in true Senecan style. When she is acknowledged, Rivers asks, ‘I muse why she’s at liberty’ (1.3.303), further highlighting the strangeness of her presence. Her complaints in turn prompt an argument over the meaning of events in the *Henry VI* plays – a question over which the otherwise divided characters manage to reach a consensus:

Richard: The curse my noble father laid on thee –
When thou didst crown his warlike brows with paper,
And with thy scorns drew’st rivers from his eyes,
And then, to dry them, gav’st the duke a clout
Steeped in the faultless blood of pretty Rutland –
His curses then, from bitterness of soul
Denounced against thee, are all fall’n upon thee,
And God, not we, hath plagued thy bloody deed.

¹³⁶ Richard frequently swears ‘by St. Paul’, and his usage of this oath is revealing of his state of belief. Paul is a saint famous for his sudden conversion on the road to Damascus after many years spent persecuting Christians (see Galatians 1:11-16). When Richard intercepts Anne with the body of Henry VI, he swears at the bearers ‘set down the corpse, or by Saint Paul/ I’ll make a corpse of him that disobeys’ (1.2.36-7). This oath is ambiguous because Richard is literally ‘by’ St. Paul’s Cathedral, meaning that Richard is not necessarily calling on the saint himself. Later in the play, when Richard awakes from the dream of his victims in 5.5, he exclaims: ‘By the apostle Paul, shadows to-night/ Have struck more terror to the soul of Richard/ Than can the substance of ten thousand soldiers’ (5.5.170-2). This oath is less ambiguous because he specifically says ‘by *the apostle Paul*’, suggesting that Richard’s belief in such superstitions is growing.

¹³⁷ Margaret’s curses are not quite perfect prophecies in all cases; as well as predicting the death of Queen Elizabeth’s son Edward (Margaret says nothing of Richard of York), she curses Elizabeth to ‘Die, neither mother, wife, nor England’s queen’ (1.3.206). Although Elizabeth loses her two sons, she remains the mother of England’s future queen since her daughter, Elizabeth, marries Henry Tudor.

Elizabeth: So just is God to right the innocent.
 [...]

 Dorset: No man but prophesied revenge for it (1.3.171-84).

However, Richard conflates his father's curse with providential punishment, a fact which

Margaret points out:

Did York's dread curse prevail so much with heaven
 That Henry's death, my lovely Edward's death,
 Their kingdom's loss, my woeful banishment,
 Should all but answer for that peevish brat?
 Can curses pierce the clouds and enter heaven?
 Why then, give way, dull clouds, to my quick curses! (1.3.188-93).

Although Margaret's curses provide an outline for the plot, she herself questions whether curses can really prompt such 'providential' revenge.¹³⁸

Theologically speaking, curses should not function in this manner; God is constant and unchanging, a trait that should also apply to his plans for the world. Of course, this does not rule out the possibility that 'punishments' were worked into the providential plan from the beginning, but, as in Boethius' *Consolation*, that prompts the question of how free individuals are in choosing the actions for which they are 'punished'. Moreover, the connection between providence and curses presented in the play associates providence with a kind of petty vengefulness that is problematic. As A. P. Rossiter observes, 'God's will it may be, but it sickens us: it is as pitiless as the Devil's (who is called in to execute it).'¹³⁹ Once again, if a providential pattern of punishment for the deposition of Richard II is to be described in the first tetralogy, then Richard III tops the list of dubious 'divine' agents sent to enact that punishment. Furthermore, as Rossiter also writes:

¹³⁸ Rackin writes that '[i]n *Richard III*, Margaret is transformed from a destructive French interloper [...] to the voice of divine vengeance' (Rackin, *Stages of History*, p. 176). However, Marie-Hélène Besnault and Michel Bitot observe that '[a]lthough the Biblical Rachel could be considered as a Christian antecedent, Margaret's laments are more likely to evoke the bereavement of Hecuba or Andromache' ('Historical legacy and fiction: the poetical reinvention of King Richard III', in *The Cambridge Companion to Shakespeare's History Plays*, pp. 106-125 (p. 118)). Margaret's presence may also evoke the figure of Cassandra. Like Joan in *Part 1*, therefore, the Margaret of *Richard III* evokes pagan associations that problematise her function as a mouthpiece of providence.

¹³⁹ A. P. Rossiter, 'Angel with Horns: The Unity of *Richard III*', in *Shakespeare's Histories: An Anthology of Modern Criticism*, pp. 123-144 (p. 141).

This overall system of *paradox* is the play's unity. It is revealed as a constant displaying of inversions, or reversals of meaning; whether we consider the verbal patterns (the *peripeteias* or reversals of act and intention or expectation); the antithesis of false and true in the histrionic character; or the constant inversions of irony.¹⁴⁰

The play does not reject providence, but it asks its audience to think about its full implications, pushing the contradictions to their limits. What is disrupted is the comfort of believing that God administers 'justice' in this manner.

The 'reversals' observed by Rossiter manifest themselves principally through a strong thread of verbal and dramatic irony that weaves through the play. Irony is created primarily through the disjunction between what Richard says to the other characters, and what the audience knows of his true intentions. This is apparent in the opening scene when Richard 'reassures' his brother Clarence that 'this deep disgrace in brotherhood/ Touches me nearer than you can imagine' (1.1.112-3), and 'your imprisonment shall not be long' (1.1.115). Irony is also evident where characters are ignorant that what they say will apply to them in the near future. In the case of Hastings, the irony could not be more pointed; shortly before his arrest he says to Catesby:

Hastings: O monstrous, monstrous! And so falls it out
 With Rivers, Vaughan, Gray – and so 'twill do
 With some men else, that think themselves safe
 As thou and I, who as thou know'st are dear
 To princely Richard and to Buckingham.
 Catesby: The Princes both make high account of you –
 (*aside*) For they account thy head upon the bridge. (3.2.61-7)

Hastings turns the fate of Rivers, Vaughan and Gray into a kind of political exemplum, but fails to consider that the lesson might apply to himself.

Further irony is created when characters inadvertently curse themselves. This happens in the case of Anne when she curses Richard's future wife, saying:

If ever he have wife, let her be made
 More miserable by the death of him
 Than I am made by my young lord and thee. (1.2.26-8)

¹⁴⁰ Rossiter, 'Angel with Horns', p. 141 (*italics in the original*).

When Margaret curses Richard, he attempts to make her curse herself by substituting her name instead of his own at the end of her speech.¹⁴¹ Curses can also be linked to oaths; Buckingham inadvertently curses himself in 2.1 when he swears reconciliation with the Queen:

Whenever Buckingham doth turn his hate
Upon your grace, but with all duteous love
Doth cherish you and yours, God punish me
With hate in those where I expect most love.
When I have most need to employ a friend,
And most assurèd that he is a friend,
Deep, hollow, treacherous, and full of guile
Be he unto me. This do I beg of heaven,
When I am cold in love to you or yours (2.1.32-40).

Later, when Buckingham is led away to execution, he envisions the souls of the dead as 'moody, discontented souls' who 'through the clouds behold this present hour,/ Even for revenge mock my destruction' (5.1.7-9), and recalls his oath from 2.1:

That high all-seer which I dallied with
Hath turned my feignèd prayer on my head,
And given in earnest what I begged in jest (5.1.20-22).

Buckingham affirms his punishment to be providential, but it is a providence that works as a kind of sick joke, 'giv[ing] in earnest what I begged in jest', as the souls of the dead gleefully 'mock' him from above.¹⁴²

While Richard's plots provide a source of irony at the beginning of the play, he begins to fall victim to irony as the play progresses. In 3.1 Prince Edward refuses to believe

¹⁴¹ See 1.3.230-1. The may also indicate that there is a superstitious side to Richard from the outset of the play.

¹⁴² The bitterness of Buckingham's outlook on 'providence' is especially apparent when compared to Buckingham's final speech in *The True Tragedy of Richard III*. In *True Tragedy* an attempt is made to rescue Buckingham, but he stops his rescuers and continues to his execution voluntarily, philosophically accepting his punishment as unfortunate, but fair: 'And let me take this punishment in peace./ Ah Buckingham, was not thy meaning good/ In displacing the usurper to raise a lawful king?/ Ah Buckingham, it was too late./ The lawful heirs were smothered in the Tower' (*The True Tragedy of Richard III*, ed. by Robert Brazil, transcribed Ramon Jimenez (2005), <<http://www.elizabethanauthors.org/truetragedy01.htm>>, [accessed 20/07/2013], ll. 1383-7). In Shakespeare's play the outlook is altogether bleaker and there is no attempted rescue. As in *The True Tragedy*, providence enacts a form of revenge, but Shakespeare's *Richard III* reinstates the personal, all-consuming aspect of traditional revenge tragedies.

that his maternal uncles, whom Richard has arrested but not yet executed, could have been plotting against him and Richard explains that:

No more can you distinguish of a man
Than of his outward show, which God he knows
Seldom or never jumpeth with the heart (3.1.9-11).

Richard's warning applies more to himself than to Edward's maternal uncles, but this is the kind of irony Richard is fully in control of. At the end of the scene, however, when Edward's brother suggests that the ghost of the Duke of Clarence might be haunting the tower, Edward declares:

Edward: I fear no uncles dead.
Richard: Nor none that live, I hope.
Edward: An if they live, I hope I need not fear (3.1.146-7).

Fearing a double meaning behind Edward's words, Richard attempts to deflect possible suspicion, thereby undermining his previous assertion of Rivers' and Gray's guilt. This scene marks the turning point at which Richard begins to lose control over the doubleness of meaning he himself has generated. Ultimately, despite Richard's personal outlook on history as a kind of story he can manipulate, he nevertheless loses control over the narrative.

A scene that I believe encapsulates the outlook on history presented in *Richard III*, and possibly the tetralogy as a whole, is 4.4. It begins with the lamentations of Margaret, Queen Elizabeth and the Duchess of York, which highlight the difficulties of understanding or coming to terms with providential 'justice' as it seem to have been enacted:

Duchess: Edward Plantagenet, why art thou dead?
[...]
Elizabeth: Wilt thou, O God, fly from such gentle lambs
And throw them in the entrails of the wolf?
When didst thou sleep, when such a deed was done?
Margaret: When holy Harry died, and my sweet son (4.4.19-25).

Elizabeth and the Duchess both question why God has allowed the death of the two young princes and Margaret offers additional examples of apparent lapses in divine attentiveness. But whereas in 1.3 Elizabeth was among those assuring Margaret her sorrows were a punishment from God, now it is Margaret who takes the providential line by explicating the justice of each death.¹⁴³ According to Margaret the deaths of Edward IV, Clarence, and the Queen's sons Edward and Richard are all the punishment of an 'upright, just, and true-disposing God' (4.4.55) for the single death of Margaret's son.¹⁴⁴ Yet Margaret must explain why Richard, '[t]hat foul defacer of God's handiwork' (4.4.51), has not yet been punished:

Richard yet lives, hell's black intelligencer,
 Only reserved their factor to buy souls
 And send them thither; but at hand, at hand
 Ensues his piteous and unpitied end.
 Earth gapes, hell burns, fiends roar and saints pray,
 To have him suddenly conveyed from hence (4.4.71-6).

The praying saints, whose purpose coincides with that of 'fiends', seem incongruous here, and Margaret's explanation betrays the paradoxical role apparently played by Richard in this construction of history. Margaret's version of the past is distorted not so much because it is factually false, but because it portrays such an evident interpretive bias.

The way in which the past becomes distorted is made more evident when Elizabeth asks Margaret to teach her how to curse:

Margaret: Forbear to sleep the nights, and fast the days;
 Compare dead happiness with living woe;
 Think that thy babes were sweeter than they were,
 And he that slew them fouler than he is.
 Bett'ring thy loss makes the bad causer worse.
 Revolving this will teach thee how to curse.
 Elizabeth: My words are dull. O quicken them with thine!
 Margaret: Thy woes will make them sharp and pierce like mine. (*Exii*)

¹⁴³ However, in an aside before she addresses Elizabeth and the Duchess, Margaret determines to 'say that right for right/ Hath dimmed your infant morn to aged night' (4.4.15-6), which may suggest that Margaret does not fully believe the assertions she makes over the course of the scene and makes them more for the sake of her own desire for vengeance.

¹⁴⁴ Margaret explains to Elizabeth: 'Thy Edward, he is dead, that killed my Edward;/ Thy other Edward dead, to quite my Edward;/ Young York, he is but boot, because both they/ Matched not the high perfection of my loss;/ Thy Clarence, he is dead, that stabbed my Edward,/ And the beholders of this frantic play –/ Th'adulterate Hastings, Rivers, Vaughan, Gray –/ Untimely smothered in their dusky graves.' (4.4.63-7). Describing Richard of York's death as 'but boot' seems particularly callous.

Duchess: Why should calamity be full of words?
 Elizabeth: Windy attorneys to their client woes,
 Airy recorders of intestate joys,
 Poor breathing orators of miseries.
 Let them have scope. Though what they will impart
 Help nothing else, yet do they ease the heart (4.4.118-31).

Curses are a deliberate exaggeration of past events, once again not altogether factually false, but manifestly biased. Furthermore, this distortion of the past is linked to rhetoric and words, which become ‘attorneys’ pleading their clients’ cases.¹⁴⁵ It is this rhetorical exaggeration that creates the story of Richard III and ‘his piteous and unpitied end’ (4.4.74). It is difficult not to regard Elizabeth’s answer to the Duchess as a comment on the historical project as a whole, not necessarily ‘helpful’ to future generations, but emotionally cathartic for the present.

In the second half of the scene Richard attempts to convince Elizabeth to agree to his marriage to her daughter. Elizabeth is understandably resistant to this idea, threatening to name her daughter a bastard (falsifying the historical record) if it will protect her from Richard’s attentions (4.4.211). She and Richard also disagree over the cause of her sons’ deaths:

Richard: Lo, at their births good stars were opposite.
 Elizabeth: No, to their lives ill friends were contrary.
 Richard: All unavoids is the doom of destiny.
 Elizabeth: True, when avoided grace makes destiny (4.4.216-9).

Richard uses the rhetoric of ‘destiny’ to avoid his own guilt in the matter. But Elizabeth is on the alert for the ambiguity of language that Richard relies on:

Richard: Then know that, from my soul, I love thy daughter.
 Elizabeth: My daughter’s mother thinks that with her soul.
 Richard: What do you think?
 Elizabeth: That thou dost love my daughter *from* thy soul;
 So *from* thy soul’s love didst thou love her brothers,
 And *from* my heart’s love I do thank thee for it.
 Richard: Be not so hasty to confound my meaning.

¹⁴⁵ Importantly, the ‘joys’ are ‘intestate’, or un-bequeathed to future generations, whereas Margaret has just made a point of passing the burden of her miseries on to Elizabeth. Margaret: ‘Now thy proud neck bears half my burdened yoke – / From which, even here, I slip my weary head,/ and leave the burden of it all on thee’ (4.4.111-3).

I mean, that *with* my soul I love thy daughter,
 And do intend to make her queen of England.
 Elizabeth: Well then, who dost thou mean to be her king? (4.4.242-51).

Elizabeth's insistence on picking apart Richard's words puts her in control, while for once Richard follows behind trying to anticipate how she will 'mis'-interpret him.

Elizabeth's efforts to make Richard say what he means, and mean what he says, result in a challenge to find an oath by which Richard can swear convincingly:

Richard: No by my George, my garter, and my crown –
 Elizabeth: Profaned, dishonoured, and the third usurped.
 Richard: I swear –
 Elizabeth: By nothing, for this is no oath.
 Thy George, profaned, hath lost his holy honour;
 Thy garter, blemished, pawned his lordly virtue;
 Thy crown, usurped, disgraced his kingly glory.
 If something thou wouldst swear to be believed,
 Swear then by something that thou hast not wronged.
 Richard: Then by myself –
 Elizabeth: Thy self is self misused.
 Richard: Now by the world –
 Elizabeth: 'Tis full of thy foul wrongs.
 Richard: My father's death –
 Elizabeth: Thy life hath that dishonoured.
 Richard: Why then, by God –
 Elizabeth: God's wrong is most of all (4.4.297-308).

This exchange reveals the extent to which all guarantors of meaning have been undermined by Richard's doubleness. Eventually Elizabeth goads Richard into an oath that, like Buckingham, results in a kind of curse:

Richard: As I intend to prosper and repent,
 So thrive I in my dangerous affairs
 Of hostile arms – myself myself confound,
 Heaven and fortune bar me happy hours,
 Day yield me not thy light nor night thy rest;
 Be opposite, all planets of good luck,
 To my proceeding – if, with dear heart's love,
 Immaculate devotion, holy thoughts,
 I tender not thy beauteous, princely daughter (4.4.328-36).

Richard's insincerity in this oath becomes apparent as soon as Elizabeth leaves the stage and Richard exclaims 'Relenting fool, and shallow, changing woman' (4.4.62), unaware that events are now out of his control.

One of the items Richard suggests he swear by is '[t]he time to come' (4.4.318), creating an intriguing interrelationship between past, present and future as well as ideas of self-hood. Elizabeth responds:

That thou hast wronged in the time o'erpast,
For I myself have many tears to wash
Hereafter time, for time past wronged by thee.
The children live, whose fathers thou hast slaughtered –
Ungoverned youth, to wail it in their age.
The parents live, whose children thou hast butchered –
Old barren plants, to wail it with their age.
Swear not by the time to come, for that thou hast
Misused ere used, by times ill-used o'erpast (4.4.319-27).

The memory of past suffering returns to haunt the future, which is 'misused ere used'. This idea explains the seemingly unbreakable cycle of violence witnessed in the *Henry VI* plays, where characters either could not learn from the mistakes of the past, or could not let go of them to achieve a peaceful solution. However, Richard presents his marriage to Princess Elizabeth as a way of achieving such an end to violence:

Death, desolation, ruin and decay.
It cannot be avoided but by this;
It will not be avoided but by this (4.4.340-2).

He persists in his appeal to the future and to 'what I will be, not what I have been;/ Not my deserts, but what I will deserve' (4.4.345-6).

Richard's appeal is based on the hope that he might redeem himself in the future; the only thing standing in the way of this redemptive future, is the memory of the past. The difficulty in achieving this utopian future lies in the way that identity is inextricably linked to history:

Elizabeth: Shall I forget myself to be myself?
Richard: Ay, if yourself's remembrance wrong yourself.
Elizabeth: Yet thou didst kill my children.
Richard: But in your daughter's womb I bury them,
Where, in that nest of spicery, they will breed
Selves of themselves, to your recomfiture (4.4.351-6).

In order to forget the past, one must also forget one's self; Elizabeth cannot forget that Richard killed her children and remain who she is. But the problem is not simply that Elizabeth fails to forgive, because Richard also fails to live up to his vision of a redemptive future, even rhetorically; his final image, with its disturbingly incestuous mix of sex and death, fails to break free of the past and instead falls back into reproducing copies of what went before.

Richard III, however, does break from the past of the *Henry VI* plays while also returning to a more traditional form of drama. But it is a return with a difference, where the strong note of irony that runs through the play pushes against the overtly providential and traditional reading of history that the play seems to present. Ultimately, Richard is too implicated in the wars of the *Henry VI* plays for peace to be possible under his reign, and so Richmond, who, apart from a brief appearance as a child in *3 Henry VI*, has not been an actor in these plays and, indeed, is barely involved in *Richard III*, seems to offer the possibility of breaking with the past and achieving peace. Nevertheless, according to Wilbur Sanders, '[...] the kind of human/critical awareness which Shakespeare has set in motion in the course of the play makes short work of the platitude with which he [Richmond] tries to wind it [the play] up. He [Shakespeare] has created an audience which is now too wary of simplifications to be fobbed off with this one.'¹⁴⁶ However, Richmond's final lines are not a 'platitude' directed at the audience, but a prayer to God:

Abate the edge of traitors, gracious Lord,
That would reduce these bloody days again
And make poor England weep forth streams of blood.
Let them not to live to taste this land's increase,
That would with treason wound this fair land's peace.
Now civil wounds are stopped; peace lives again.
That she may long live here, God say, 'Amen' (5.8.35-41).

What the play leaves us with, therefore is the hope, and not the guarantee, of a positive and providential future for the country. Nevertheless, this hope for the future is still based on

¹⁴⁶ Wilbur Sanders, *The Dramatist and the Received Idea* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1968), p. 72.

the violent, and seemingly divinely sanctioned, punishment of those who would rebel against Richmond's 'peace'. In that sense, the violence of history remains unresolved.

The plays of the first tetralogy acknowledge the necessity of building the future on the foundations of the past, while also implying a need to break away from the limitations history imposes on future possibilities. The 'historical project' appears as something integral to identity, but also emotionally motivated and produced for the benefit of the present moment, rather than the preservation of the past or the building of a future. The idea of a lost 'golden age', be it the time of Henry V, Edward III, or Julius Caesar, appears as a rhetorical construct never fully recoverable and possibly fictitious in nature. Oddly enough, J. A. R. Marriott's pronouncements of 1918 may have some merit:

National unity; an end to dynastic strife; a truce between parties; harmony between classes; this was the supreme need of the hour; this was the lesson which the Chronicle Plays of Shakespeare were intended to pre-eminently enforce.¹⁴⁷

However, while the plays may acknowledge these 'needs', they show considerable wariness of the idea that there is a simple solution, especially in the form of adherence to the status quo, that can be 'enforced'. Rather than seeking to expound moral lessons, the aim of the plays is to create an audience aware of the problems. While the plays present 'force' as effective in the short term, they suggest a need to find new, more collaborative strategies that can establish a more lasting stability for the future.

¹⁴⁷ J. A. R. Marriott, *English History in Shakespeare* (London: Chapman and Hall Ltd., 1918) p. 8.

Conclusion

In what Marjorie Garber calls a ‘packed little scene [which] demonstrates at once the play’s preoccupation with writing and the preemptive – indeed *prescriptive* – nature of its political design’,¹ a scrivener appears in *Richard III* with Hastings’ indictment:

Here is the indictment of the good Lord Hastings,
Which in a set hand fairly is engrossed,
That it may be today read o’er in Paul’s –
And mark how well the sequel hangs together:
Eleven hours I have spent to write it o’er,
For yesternight by Catesby was it sent to me;
The precedent was full as long a-doing;
And yet, within these five hours, Hastings lived,
Untainted, unexamined, free, at liberty.
Here’s a good world the while! Who is so gross
That cannot see this palpable device?
Yet who so bold but says he sees it not?
Bad is the world, and all will come to naught,
When such ill dealing must be seen in thought.²

The Scrivener is engaged to produce an explanation for events which, when he begins his work, have not yet happened, and while the indictment may be ‘fairly’ written in an aesthetic sense, the ‘good’ Lord Hastings treatment is far from ‘fair’.³ Signs of artfulness and cohesion (‘mark how well the sequel hangs together’) indicate an historical record that has been doctored to suit a political purpose. Moreover, while the ‘palpable device’ may be visible to all, conditions are such that the ‘truth’ goes unacknowledged.

The year 1623 is notable not only for being the year in which Shakespeare’s *First Folio* was published, but also the year in which the first Chair of History was appointed at Oxford University in honour of William Camden.⁴ The designation of ten of Shakespeare’s

¹ Marjorie Garber, ‘Richard III and the Shape of History’, in *Shakespeare’s Histories*, ed. by Emma Smith (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2004), pp. 42 – 66 (p. 52), italics in the original.

² *Richard III*, in *The Oxford Shakespeare: Complete Works*, ed. by Stanley Wells and Gary Taylor (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2001), pp. 183-222 (3.6.1-14). All references to Shakespeare’s plays are to this edition.

³ As Garber notes, ‘The Scrivener’s indignation is both moral and professional’ (‘Richard III and the Shapes of History’, p. 52).

⁴ For a discussion of the historiography of Degory Wheare, the first professor to be appointed to the post, see J. H. M. Salmon, ‘Precept, example, and truth: Degory Wheare and the *ars historica*’, in *The Historical*

plays as ‘histories’ in the Folio alongside the creation of a new scholarly post at Oxford suggests that 1623 was a year in which history received not only popular recognition as a distinct literary genre, able to be ranked alongside the classical genres of tragedy and comedy, but also official recognition as an independent subject worthy of scholarly interest. It was the ‘new historical awareness’ instigated by humanist bibliographical and philological scholarship in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries that made such ‘devices’, referred to by the Scrivener in *Richard III*, finally ‘palpable’, making a text like the *Donation of Constantine*, which had been accepted as authentic for centuries beforehand, suddenly visible as a forgery. However, the ability of humanist methods to unveil the ‘truth’ in this manner was limited, and the mutability of the historical record was also highlighted. Rather than a source of constant and unchanging ‘truth’, it became increasingly apparent that the past was remembered differently from age to age depending on the records available and the biases that shaped the composition of that record. Indeed, the Reformation in England made the extent to which the same historical facts could be re-written to arrive at an entirely different narrative particularly evident. Nevertheless, although humanist methods revealed the ‘text’ of history to be far from constant, the difficulty of recovering a God-like understanding of events from within the historical moment had always been acknowledged, and a ‘textual’ approach to interpreting the past remained prevalent.⁵

The Elizabethan ‘history play’ appeared, therefore, at a time when attitudes towards history were in flux, and the history plays of the 1590s played an important part in reshaping history’s role in culture. While I have rejected some of the divisions that critics have sought to make between different plays’ use of historical material, some characteristics, such as a concern for politics, the genre’s open-endedness, and some

Imagination in Early Modern Britain: History Rhetoric and Fiction, 1500-1800, ed. by Donald R. Kelly and David Harris Sacks, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), pp. 11-36.

⁵ A view of history as a ‘text’ is also evident in Shakespeare’s plays; in the Temple Garden scene York tells Somerset and Suffolk, ‘I’ll note you in my book of memory’ (*1 Henry VI*, pp. 153-182 (2,4,101)), and in *2 Henry VI* Gloucester tell the lords that Henry’s marriage to Margaret will result in ‘Blotting your names from the books of memory’ (*2 Henry VI*, pp. 55-90 (1.1.97)). In the second tetralogy, Henry IV wishes that ‘one might read the book of fate’ (*2 Henry IV*, pp. 509-540 (3.1.44)).

privileging of national history, usefully describe the genre when applied with a certain flexibility. As Irving Ribner writes: ‘The history play cannot be defined on the basis of dramatic form, for the forms in which we find it are many.’⁶ Thomas Heywood’s *Apology* suggests that ‘English’, or sometimes ‘British’, history can be regarded as a significant sub-genre of the history play in which patriotism and the question of a national identity played an important role.⁷ The function of fictional elements alongside factual history is an area deserving of greater scrutiny; as we saw in the case of *Edward III*, the inclusion of ‘romantic’ fiction of Edward’s attempted seduction of the Countess of Salisbury contributed to the serious political themes of the play, and was not merely a diverting entertainment. History was not exactly a ‘genre’ so much as a subject matter, and to make that subject matter intelligible, writers, as well as dramatists, employed the formal elements of other genres to provide a framework for interpretation. Because of this, there is no absolute separation between history and the genres of comedy, tragedy, and morality.

Perhaps most interesting is the history play’s relationship to the morality play genre and its use of allegory. Although it would be an oversimplification to say that the history play straightforwardly ‘replaced’ the morality play, Janette Dillon suggests that, with increased censorship under Elizabeth I:

[...] players came to realise a different function for allegory, one that might protect them from both censorship and punishment; and thus it is that allegory ceases to play a role *within* the history play as history itself *becomes* allegory. Within a regime which forbids plays to dramatize matters of contemporary politics or religion, the apparently literal dramatization of historical events and concerns can become a veil for dramatizing contemporary events and concerns.⁸

The idea of history *as* allegory, especially an allegory that drew parallels between different historical periods, was already well established in the form of Augustine’s theory of biblical

⁶ Irving Ribner, *The English History Play in the Age of Shakespeare* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957), p. 9.

⁷ See p. 22 in ‘Shakespeare and the English History Play’, above.

⁸ Janette Dillon, ‘The Early Tudor History Play’, in *English Historical Drama, 1500-1660*, ed. by Tessa Grant and Barbara Revelhofer (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008) pp. 32-57 (p. 48), italics in the original.

exegesis. For Elizabethan playwrights, however, it was the *difficulty* of interpretation that made history a ‘safer’ mode of writing that might allow authors (of both plays and other historical works) a chance to evade censorship. While some authors may have used the uncertainty of historical interpretation to mask politically charged ‘messages’, others, such as the author of *Edmund Ironside*, seem to have become interested in the problem of interpretation itself. The artificiality and abruptness of the end of *Edmund Ironside* has the effect of offering a seemingly neat conclusion to the action that strains credulity in such a way as to leave the overall interpretation unsettled. Supposedly bound to the ‘facts’ of history rather than poetic rules of aesthetic form, history plays had the scope to disregard the need for a ‘cathartic’ or ‘satisfying’ ending, giving it a special interrogative potential made only more powerful (especially in the case of English history) by the direct relationship between the world of the play and the world of the audience.

Dillon also notes the way that Elizabethan censorship distinguished between two audiences: a courtly one with the ‘authority, learning, and wisdom’ to understand the ‘proper’ treatment of political and religious matters, and a popular one that did not.⁹ The importance this difference made to the interpretation of a play can be seen in the case of a play like *The Famous Victories of Henry V*, which, played before the Queen, highlights the need for the monarch to respect legal boundaries and avoid transgression in the well-established tradition of giving ‘advice to princes’. Played before a popular audience, however, the play could suggest a need for more explicit curbs on royal power and a system whereby the monarch could be held to account. As David Scott Kastan notes, the authorities distrusted the notion that ‘an audience of commoners [might] begin to think of itself as a competent judge – whether of manners, plays, or matters of state.’¹⁰ According to Kastan, the act of representing royalty on stage is inherently subversive because it begs the question of what exactly separates actors from kings; putting counterfeit royalty on stage

⁹ See Dillon, ‘The Early Tudor History Play’, pp. 47-8.

¹⁰ David Scott Kastan, *Shakespeare After Theory* (New York: Routledge, 1999), p. 119.

had the potential to highlight the extent to which genuine royalty depended on similar strategies of representation and legitimation.

Written for a popular, rather than courtly, audience, the *Henry VI* plays foreground the issue of interpretation and the audience's role in judging the action; not only do the plays ask them to consider the nature of Henry's failure as king, but also (with the presentation of the Duke of York) what qualities are desirable in a prospective ruler. While the plays present an aristocratic version of history, it is presented for evaluation by a socially diverse audience. However, the concern the plays show for the difficulty of judging the meaning of history indicates a genuine interest in the nature of historical knowledge and the function of history in culture rather than a simple 'veiling' of a politically unorthodox message. While non-Shakespearean plays like *Edmund Ironside* show some experimentation with generic conventions, none take it to the extreme of the *Henry VI* plays, where no overarching genre apart from 'history' finally appears. Such generically unstable plays possibly highlighted the oddness of historical drama, contributing to its recognition as a separate dramatic genre. However, it is not my desire to suggest another way in which Shakespeare could be said to have 'invented the genre', and I believe this is more usefully viewed as a contribution to the process (already in motion) of the formation of the history play genre.

The first tetralogy presents an outlook on history that is both linear and repeating, with moments in time simultaneously continuous and discontinuous from each other. Discontinuity is apparent where the mutability of history or the historical record is foregrounded, whereas continuity is principally evident in the emotional impact the past has on individuals and its power to shape identity. Thus, Lord Saye's scholarly reference to Caesar's commentaries fails to sway the Kentish rebels, but Clifford's invocation of the more recent memory of Henry V (as well as the promise of being 'earls and dukes' (*2 Henry VI*, 4.7.192) in France) does. In this way, at the same time as being irrecoverable, the past is

also impossible to escape, with the result that, as in the writings of Machiavelli, there are limitations on how far individuals can re-shape themselves to suit the demands of the times.¹¹ Knowledge of the past can contribute to one's power to shape the future; the historical knowledge passed on by Mortimer in *1 Henry VI*, for example, begins Richard Plantagenet's self-transformation from 'yeoman', to 'duke', to would-be 'king'. Consequently, it is York's 'plots' that underlie some of *Part 1*, most of *Part 2*, and set the scene for *Part 3*. In contrast, a young Clifford witnesses the death of his father in *2 Henry VI* and swears to avenge it.¹² In *3 Henry VI* Clifford equates this with a natural kind of cause and effect that seems eternal, eclipsing alternative possibilities and making Clifford a slave to his own rhetoric, fated to endlessly repeat the cycle of violence.¹³ The extent to which an individual can re-shape himself is pushed to its limits in *Richard III*. Able to mould himself seemingly to any occasion, Richard's other roles (as murderer to the princes, usurper of the crown, 'devil', 'dog') finally prevent him from being able to 'play the lover' to the Princess Elizabeth and transform himself into England's providential saviour principally because he cannot convince Queen Elizabeth of his sincerity.

Richard's failure in this case is revealing of the way in which history shapes the present more generally in the plays of the first tetralogy. On the one hand history is a story like any other, able to be re-told to suit the purposes of the teller. However, the extent to which it can be re-shaped is limited by both the established 'facts' of what has happened, and by what a given audience is willing to accept as credible. The *Henry VI* plays

¹¹ 'Nor do we find any man shrewd enough to know how to adapt his policy in this way; either because he cannot do otherwise than what is in his character or because, having always prospered by proceeding one way, he cannot persuade himself to change' (Machiavelli, *The Prince*, trans. by George Bull (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1995), p. 79).

¹² Clifford: 'York not our old men spares;/ No more will I their babes. [...] Come, thou new ruin of old Clifford's house/ (*He takes his father's body up on his back*) As did Aeneas old Anchises bear,/ So bear I thee upon my manly shoulders./ But then Aeneas bare a living load,/ Nothing so heavy as these woes of mine' (*2 Henry VI*, 5.3.51-2). The comparison with Aeneas (the supposed ancestor of Brutus, the founder of Britain) and his escape from the ruined Troy is interesting here, especially as Clifford points out the differences between the two stories as well as the similarities. Aeneas suffers for the sake of a 'living load' (his still living father), and his progeny will go on to provide foundation myths for most of Western Europe. Clifford, in contrast, carries a kind of 'dead weight' of history on his back, and his threat to kill 'babes' is indicative of a mentality that sacrifices the future for the sake of the past.

¹³ See *3 Henry VI*, 2.2.

experiment with how to represent history in all its complexity and undecidability; to appropriate Catherine Belsey's description of new historicist criticism, they 'propose no programme; they offer the minimum of evaluations and transformations, except in so far as they transform into its opposite the grand narrative itself'.¹⁴ Yet they also dramatize how the narratives created by those in power create resistance that 'returns to endanger their seamless mastery'.¹⁵ The previously suppressed narrative of the Yorkist claim to the throne demolishes the already disintegrating legacy of Henry V, and is in turn compromised by its own rhetoric of 'right' over 'force' as the Yorkist faction attempts to enforce its 'right'. This is not power versus a powerless 'subversion', but competing sites of power within a society attempting to establish the grounds of its collective culture. *Richard III* returns to a more aesthetically unified and traditional form of drama, but does so in a way that challenges its audience to consider whether it can accept the underlying paradox of Richard as simultaneous devil and divine agent.¹⁶ The first tetralogy is an experiment in creating a critically aware audience 'rapt in contemplation' of their collective history.¹⁷

The difficulty of knowing the past is not unrelated to the difficulty of knowing the future. This idea is more fully articulated in the second tetralogy; in *2 Henry IV*, Henry IV exclaims:

O God, that one might read the book of fate,
And see the revolution of the times
Make mountains level, and the continent,
Weary of solid firmness, melt itself
Into the sea.¹⁸

¹⁴ See Catherine Belsey, 'Making histories then and now: Shakespeare from *Richard II* to *Henry V*', in *The Uses of History: Marxism, Postmodernism and the Renaissance*, ed. by Francis Barker, Peter Hulme and Margaret Iverson (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1991), pp. 24-46 (pp. 29-30).

¹⁵ Belsey, 'Making histories', p. 31.

¹⁶ A paradox best articulated by Margaret's lines in *Richard III*: 'Richard yet lives, hell's black intelligencer,/ Only reserved their factor to buy souls/ And send them thither; but at hand, at hand/ Ensues his piteous and unpitied end./ Earth gapes, hell burns, fiends roar, saints pray,/ To have him suddenly conveyed from hence' (4.4.71-6).

¹⁷ Thomas Heywood, *An Apology for Actors, Shakespeare's Theatre: A Sourcebook*, ed. by Tanya Pollard (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004), pp. 213-54

¹⁸ *2 Henry IV*, pp. 509-540 (3.1.44-8).

Henry imagines knowledge of the future as a disintegration of current certainties. He asks Warwick how it is that Richard II could predict the revolt of Northumberland at a time before he himself (he claims) had any intention of taking the crown. Warwick responds:

There is a history in all men's lives
Figuring the natures of the times deceased;
The which observed, a man may prophesy,
With a near aim, of the main chance of things
As yet not come to life, who in their seeds
And weak beginnings lie intreasurèd.
Such things become the hatch and brood of time;
And by the necessary form of this
King Richard might create a perfect guess
That great Northumberland, then false to him,
Would of that seed grow to a greater falseness,
Which should not find a ground to root upon
Unless on you (3.1.75-87).

For Paul Dean, this scene:

[...] raises the discussion of history to a plane of abstraction hardly paralleled elsewhere in Shakespeare's work, and nowhere in Elizabethan historical drama outside it. It is no overstatement to say that Henry and Warwick discuss questions now associated with the philosophy of history. Warwick articulates a Neoplatonic idea of time as a 'necessary form' whose archetypal nature enables us to 'create' the future in our imaginations, to 'guess' but to guess perfectly. The King's question 'Are these things then necessities?' is unanswered; all we can do is act as if they were. [...] Such historical imagining produces, not 'truth', whatever that may be, but a balance of probability, a reasonable conjecture, issuing in political decisions which are also acts of faith.¹⁹

Similarly Henry VI's 'prophesy' of the career of Richard III at the end of *3 Henry VI* is based entirely on the circumstances of Richard's birth; it is a guess, but a perfect guess.²⁰

However, although the plays of the first tetralogy present the apparent 'necessity' of events, they also question it. The 'lost possible futures' suggested by the kings-that-might-have-been (the Duke of York and both the Lancastrian and Yorkist Prince Edwards) and Edward IV's tactical blunder in marrying Elizabeth Woodville heighten the sense of tragedy associated with the course events *did* take, leading to the audience's present, and

¹⁹ Paul Dean, 'Shakespeare's Historical Imagination', *Renaissance Studies*, 11.1 (1997), 27-40 (p. 34).

²⁰ See *3 Henry VI*, 5.6.35-56.

also raise the question of whether or not the outcome of these events were pre-determined from the start, or whether they only *look* predetermined from the perspective of the ‘future’ occupied by the audience’s present – the perspective from which all history is written. These moments question the perspective on the past provided by the present, but they do not provide an answer. According to Kiernan Ryan, Shakespeare is aware that ‘the future will place a different construction on the past from the one it originally appeared to support’, but he also presents us with the possibility of ‘the future’s capacity to apprehend the full significance of present words or deeds’.²¹ For Ryan, ‘Shakespeare’s dramatic imagination perceived the reality of his world in the future perfect tense, as the way it *will have been*: as the prospective past of an unknown future, which was already germinating within that reality.’²²

In this sense Shakespeare views not only the past, but also the audience’s present, from the perspective of the future. Ryan writes: ‘Shakespeare seems to have had little doubt that the deeds he was staging and the words he was penning were destined to reverberate down through the centuries in places and languages impossible for him to imagine’.²³ Most obviously, this is evident in the later Roman histories when Cassius predicts the scene of Caesar’s murder being acted ‘In states unborn and accents yet unknown’, or when Cleopatra imagines ‘Some squeaking Cleopatra boy my greatness/ I’th’posture of a whore.’²⁴ It is a perspective made possible in part by a teleological, Christian concept of history as a record of the whole of creation. Ryan recognises this to an extent, since he also acknowledges more obviously Christian manifestations of a similar viewpoint in the writings of John Donne and the poet Richard Crashaw,²⁵ but he warns that such

²¹ Kiernan Ryan, ‘“Here’s a fine revolution”: Shakespeare’s Philosophy of the Future’, *Essays in Criticism*, 63.2 (2013) 105-127 (p. 112).

²² Ryan, ‘Shakespeare’s Philosophy of the Future’, p. 111.

²³ Ryan, ‘Shakespeare’s Philosophy of the Future’, p. 109.

²⁴ *Julius Caesar*, pp. 599-626 (3.1.114), and *Anthony and Cleopatra*, pp. 1001-1036 (5.2.216-7).

²⁵ See Ryan, ‘Shakespeare’s Philosophy of the Future’, pp. 115-6.

'historicist' observations have a tendency to reduce texts to a mere 'sign of the times'.²⁶

However, it is important to note that the *existence* of this Christian concept of time did not necessitate an identical outlook from every individual. So, for example, we have seen that William Tyndale considered everything of importance to have been revealed in scripture, while subsequent history could only confirm and reiterate that truth. For Thomas More, however, there was always the possibility of further revelation, and this was why the Church needed the capacity to develop and change in some respects.²⁷

What Shakespeare seems to have realised is the peculiarity of a teleology whose end point lies obscured in an unknowable future, making it impossible to know at any given time beforehand what details will ultimately prove the most important. This creates a crisis in which historical knowledge is always only provisional until some final moment that will make sense of it all. The promise that our own knowledge of 'future' history can provide a valid contribution to the meaning of the plays is what, as Ryan observes, helps the plays to 'reach forward to us as we reach back to them'.²⁸ Judgement Day becomes for Shakespeare not only a time when human beings will be judged, but when they will also be able to judge the final shape of history in full knowledge of the truth. It is this emphasis on *human* judgement, rather than divine, that makes Shakespeare's outlook on history unique in his time and which informs the new kind of history play the first tetralogy begins to shape.

²⁶ See Ryan, 'Shakespeare's Philosophy of the Future', p. 113.

²⁷ See p. 40 in 'Thomas More and William Tyndale', above.

²⁸ Ryan, 'Shakespeare's Philosophy of the Future', p. 114.

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