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FOUR HISTORY PLAYS

A Study of Henry V, 2 Henry IV, 1 Henry IV and Richard II

Wim A. van Voorst van Beest

A Thesis

in

The Department

of

English

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ABSTRACT

FOUR HISTORY PLAYS

A Study of Henry V, 2 Henry IV, 1 Henry IV and Richard II

Wim A. van Voorst van Beest

In this thesis an attempt has been made to define the historical perspective implied in Shakespeare's Richard II, 1 Henry IV, 2 Henry IV and Henry V. By using as touchstones a series of basic historical conceptions that historians have worked with through the ages, I hoped to arrive at a clear statement of the extent to which Shakespeare subscribes to or deviates from those conceptions, and consequently at a definition of Shakespeare's concept of history in terms of basic historical notions, such as the notion of facts as describable data, the notion of history as a patterned continuum and the notion of a given historical situation as a patterned entity. As a result of my inquiries I found that the histories could best be described as anti-history in that the plays challenge the validity of fundamental historical concepts. Thus the plays speak of the elusiveness and unknowability of facts; they present history as a chaotic process, and a specific historical situation as a disorganized entity. A detailed illustration of these points forms the major portion of this thesis. But if the history plays are on the whole negative in their implications, it is nevertheless argued that we should continue to value the plays, because precisely through their destructiveness they open up the possibility of an examination of the basic concepts of history. Other historical works never lead to examinations of this kind, because they are the embodiment of and silently accept as absolutely valid those notions which the plays hold up as objects of inquiry.

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INTRODUCTION

Point of View

Critical practice tells the student of Shakespeare's histories that broadly speaking there are two well-established though different ways of looking at the plays. Either the plays are primarily viewed as history, or they are treated as dramatic compositions whose historical content mainly serves to provide the scaffolding for human drama. Either we work on the assumption that at the centre of the plays there is a serious historical purpose, or we take it that the playwright was chiefly interested in history in so far as it supplied him with characters. Judging from existing major studies of the histories, most scholars have felt it necessary to focus on one, and only one, of two aspects of the plays.¹ Of course I am oversimplifying. Strictly speaking it is

¹Naturally, the divisions are not always quite so clear-cut. More often than not it is mainly a question of emphasis; but even so major studies of the history plays roughly fall into two groups. Among recent exponents of the dramatic approach I would include the following: John L. Palmer, Political Characters of Shakespeare (London, 1945); Derek Traversi, Shakespeare from 'Richard II' to 'Henry V' (Stanford, Calif., 1957); James Winny, The Player King: A Theme of Shakespeare's Histories (New York, 1968); John Bromley, The Shakespearean Kings (Boulder, Colo., 1971); Robert Pierce, Shakespeare's History Plays: The Family and the State (Columbus, O., 1971); Robert Ornstein, A Kingdom for a Stage: The Achievement of Shakespeare's History Plays (Cambridge, Mass., 1972). Of those who are mainly interested in the historical aspect of the plays the foremost representatives are: E.M.W. Tillyard, Shakespeare's History Plays (London, 1944); Lily B. Campbell, Shakespeare's 'Histories': Mirrors of Elizabethan Policy (San Marino, Calif., 1947); Irving Ribner, The English History Play in the Age of Shakespeare, rev. ed. (London, 1965); M.M. Reese, The Cease of Majesty: A Study of Shakespeare's History Plays (London, 1961); Henry Kelly, Divine Providence in the England of Shakespeare's Histories (Cambridge, Mass., 1970); Moody E. Prior, The Drama of Power: Studies in Shakespeare's History Plays (Evanston, Ill., 1973).

not a matter of either history or drama. There has always been a certain amount of overlap. If he does his job well, the scholar who discusses the history plays as history never loses sight of the fact that Shakespeare's medium was theatre; that Shakespeare wrote plays, not philosophical treatises. Similarly, the commentator who concentrates on the human content of the plays cannot but admit that the plays speak of certifiable historical events and that some sort of historical perspective, however unintentional, must needs be implied in the plays. But granted that there is some common ground, my initial assertion that the two approaches are different in purpose still stands. It is not surprising therefore that no one has dealt with the history plays without at some point committing himself to one of the two basic approaches.

The obvious lesson to be learned from the experiences of other commentators is that for a study of the history plays to be successful, the author first of all has to decide which aspect of the plays he will focus on, the historical or the dramatic. And given that both approaches have time and again proven their worth, it is in the final analysis not the merit of each approach but the preferences of the individual scholar that should determine which of the two perspectives he is going to adopt. In the light of this conclusion I want to be quite clear about one matter. The following pages contain a reading of Richard II, 1 Henry IV, 2 Henry IV and Henry V, and though I have attempted never to ignore the fact that these works were written for the stage, I have viewed the plays solely as historical entities. The reader should never be in doubt as to

the nature of my intentions, for one consequence of my determination has been that throughout this study I have referred to Shakespeare as an historian and to his plays as historical works. Also I have assumed that everything in the plays (language, plot, characters) serves to convey an historical perspective. Thus characters have not been treated as human beings of flesh and blood, but as Artaudian puppets that, through the manipulations of the playwright, contribute to and are part of a central vision.

I am aware of the limitations of my approach. Those who prefer to deal with plays in terms of immediate dramatic experience will be disappointed, for though some of my observations reflect direct audience response, I was not primarily interested in recording what the audience goes through while it is in the theatre. Instead I have described what the audience may do with its theatrical experience in the process of reflection. I wanted to talk about ideas rather than sentiments. There may be something reductive about transforming the history plays into arid statements about history, in so far as such a procedure takes the life out of the plays. On the other hand, there is also something enriching about it, in that it makes explicit what the plays merely hint at. In any case, as I indicated above, experience would seem to teach us that in discussions of the history plays one approach to a large extent tends to exclude the other.

Method

My method has been a simple one. Having decided to describe the historical perspective implied in the four history plays enumerated above, I began my investigations by drawing up a list of conceptions that are absolutely fundamental to virtually every historical methodology. Also I made sure to include only those concepts that are neither specifically Elizabethan, nor modern, nor limited to any other period. After much sifting, I ended up with the following list of essentials: (1) the notion of facts as more or less fixed, describable and objective data of human experience; (2) the notion of history as an horizontally structured process: such concepts as causality, continuity, teleology and evolution are articulated on this notion; (3) the notion of an historical situation as a vertically structured entity: to this category belong the concept of pivotal events as the common centre of all aspects of a given historical situation, and the concept of the leader or hero as the central figure around whom revolve all other historical figures who participate in a specific historical situation. The idea behind compiling a list of fundamentals (all of which will be discussed in detail in the body of this study) was to use them as touchstones for determining how Shakespeare handles the elementary building blocks of the historian. Stated differently, by starting out from a series of generally accepted concepts that have been used in all ages by practically every historian, I hoped to arrive at a clear statement of the extent to which Shakespeare subscribes to or deviates from those conceptions, and consequently at a definition of

Shakespeare's concept of history in terms of basic historical notions.

The reader will recognize that what I have done is different from anything he may have read about the history plays. Leaving aside the writings of scholars who have not addressed themselves to the historical aspect of the plays (such writings are of secondary interest to me, as I have explained), the reader is likely to be familiar with discussions of Elizabethan attitudes, specifically the scope of Elizabethan historiography, whether considered separately or ontogenetically, say against the background of medieval or classical historiography; or discussions of the correspondences and differences between the history plays and possible sources, or between the history plays and unrelated historical works of the same or other periods. The crucial difference between these studies and mine is that the former have used as an instrument of inquiry what I intended to use as an object of investigation. Let me give some examples. A scholar who talks about Elizabethan attitudes must first believe that these attitudes can indeed be described, i.e. he must posit that it is possible to accurately determine the facts of the past. Similarly, a critic who writes about the relation between the history plays and their sources must first of all accept the notion of continuity; if he does not there is no point in examining sources. Again, someone who sets out to trace the development of historiography from the Middle Ages to Shakespeare's history plays, must suppose that history is a structured, evolutionary process. Finally, a commentator who describes the histories as the central expression of Elizabethan historiography, must postulate that it is valid and meaningful to arrange all historical works of a given period around a common

centre which is then called the culminating expression of all the other historical works. What I am trying to say is that existing studies of the historical aspect of the history plays are based on, make use of and unquestioningly accept those very concepts (facts, continuity, evolution, pivotal points and so on) that I wished to use as objects of research. Perhaps I can clarify my point by drawing a comparison between myself and today's scientist on the one hand, and between Shakespearean scholars and scientists of an earlier age on the other. Formerly, scientists worked with the notion of physical constants which were looked upon as absolutes and which served to describe all phenomena in the physical universe. Nowadays, however, these physical 'constants' have been isolated and have themselves become objects of inquiry; also they are no longer considered absolute, but relative values that may explain one group of phenomena while they do not at all account for other phenomena. Similarly, Shakespearean critics, who have dealt with the historical aspect of the histories, have worked with the notion of historical constants which were looked upon as absolutes. I, however, have regarded these 'constants' as concepts whose suitability is open to question.

The most important effect of my experimental approach has been that I was able to ask a series of fundamental questions of the histories which others had bypassed. It is easy to see why this is so. I have argued that up to now those who have turned their attention to the historical angle have assumed, for the purpose of their own writings, that the fundamental elements of historiography, as I have listed them,

are absolutes. And because existing studies are founded on and could not have been written without those absolutes, their authors were unable to ask the elementary questions that I wanted to ask of the plays.

Such questions were beyond the epistemological horizon of these authors.

In a sense the questions did not exist, for the essential elements of historiography, as summarized above, were considered the given, the self-evident, the unquestionable - and exactly because they were regarded as the given they could not possibly be used as objects of inquiry either in relation to the books that the commentators were writing, or, more importantly, in relation to the plays that they were writing books about.

The thesis

As for the result of my inquiries, that is the core of this study. And there is nothing which I might say here that has not already been said there. But what it comes down to is this: Shakespeare's histories have little to do with English history, but have everything to do with the concept of history in general as it is traditionally conceived of. I would describe the history plays as probing, and often profoundly disturbing, examinations into the validity of the central concepts of historiography that I have sketched out in the preceding section and that will be treated in detail in the context of my discussion of the plays. In each of the history plays a concerted effort is made to challenge one or more of the three basic concepts; or, skirting the ever tricky problem of conscious authorial intent, perhaps I should say that in and of themselves the histories raise the question of the

validity of traditional historical notions. Thus the plays undermine the concept of facts as retrievable traces of human activity; they present history as an essentially unstructured process upon which man arbitrarily imposes patterns; the notions of heroes and pivotal events are questioned; in effect the past is declared incomprehensible, unknowable, uninterpretable. I am not aiming at completeness in this enumeration; nor do I expect the reader to understand exactly what I am driving at. I merely want to give the reader a foretaste of what is to come - also because I have to explain to him the following. From my remarks the reader will have gathered that I view Shakespeare's plays as anti-history plays, i.e. history plays that bid defiance to the beliefs, assumptions, premises and procedures of most historians. And in order to capture in my own text something of the contrary spirit of the histories I have discussed the plays in reverse order: Henry V comes first, Richard II last. My unorthodox arrangement serves a second purpose as well, in that it illustrates my contention, hinted at earlier, that tracing a continuity is one of many things that Shakespeare was not trying to do. Finally, it is my hope that by reading the chapters in the order in which I have presented them, the reader will experience something of a Dantean bouleversement. The reader will remember that on reaching the pit of hell Dante has to turn a hundred and eighty degrees round his axis in order to be able to proceed to purgatory and see things from a different perspective. It seems to me that in much the same way the history plays ask us to obtain a new perspective. However, I must stress that though my chapter arrangement is calculated, it is at the same time arbitrary in that ultimately it does not matter in which order

the chapters are read. Each chapter concerns itself with only one play, each play is discussed as a separate unit, and no chapter contains a single reference to another chapter. There is a reason for this too. I did not want to give the reader the feeling that I was building up a case, developing a theme or revealing a pattern, because I do not believe that the history plays, taken as a group, combine to yield a single unified vision. They are individual plays which occasionally overlap, but for the most part move on different levels. What links the plays is that they all ask basic questions about basic concepts in historiography. For the rest, the plays are dissimilar. Hence the non-thematic blanket title of this thesis.

Acknowledgements and a glance forward

After the previous sections it should be clear to the reader that I could not expect much help for my undertaking from the criticism of the history plays. The critics who had not looked at the historical aspect of the plays were not directly relevant, while the ones that had were also of little use, because even though I and they shared a common interest, I found myself on a different epistemological level from theirs right from the start. There is great irony in this latter fact, because it was the writings of the historical critics that had initially encouraged me to examine the plays from the historical angle. But from the moment I started my enterprise I had already cut myself off from my source of inspiration. And by the time I had completed my investigations I had produced a reading of the histories which like a boomerang came back to

strike down the pillars of all historical inquiry including that of my onetime inspirers. Yet where help was scarce I have not been working in a vacuum. In unexpected ways the insights of Robert Ornstein, Sigurd Burckhardt and particularly Richard Lanham were useful.² And I owe a debt to a man who is neither a Shakespearean nor even a literary critic: the French thinker Michel Foucault. I know that to many Foucault is anathema, especially to those who refer to themselves as the standard bearers of the humanist tradition. But, though I understand the unease of these self-styled humanists, I do not share their sentiments. As I see it, Foucault is someone who in the best humanist tradition poses questions about important human issues. Foucault may be an iconoclast, but I respect the Foucaultian kind of naysaying for reasons which will be explained in the afterword, in which I shall attempt to define the value of Shakespeare's equally iconoclastic history plays. For the moment suffice it to say that Foucault's The Archaeology of Knowledge proved to be a helpful point of reference during my work on the histories.³ It is a book which bears close affinities to the history plays.

² Robert Ornstein, A Kingdom for a Stage: The Achievement of Shakespeare's History Plays (Cambridge, Mass., 1972); Sigurd Burckhardt, Shakespearean Meanings (Princeton, 1968), pp.144-205; Richard A. Lanham, The Motives of Eloquence: Literary Rhetoric in the Renaissance (New Haven, 1976), pp.190-209. Ironically Ornstein was helpful even though he takes the dramatic approach.

³ Michel Foucault, The Archaeology of Knowledge, trans. A.M. Sheridan Smith (London, 1972).

Like Shakespeare, Foucault casts doubt on the validity of many traditional historical concepts, for instance those of causality and continuity. I have refrained from quoting from Foucault because, where The Archaeology and the histories are similar in kind, they are different in degree, emphasis and, most of the time, different in the specific nature of the problems posed. Thus the knowability of facts is a major issue in the plays, while to Foucault it is no problem at all. But though the reader will not find references to Foucault in the following pages, he should know that the skeptical, investigative spirit of Foucault is everywhere.

All quotations from the plays have been taken from the current Arden editions.⁴

⁴ John Walter's edition of Henry V (London, 1954); A.R. Humphreys' edition of 2 Henry IV (London, 1966); A.R. Humphreys' edition of 1 Henry IV (London, 1960); Peter Ure's edition of Richard II (London, 1956).

CHAPTER ONE

HENRY V

1.

History deals with facts as opposed to fiction. The historian describes events that actually took place as distinct from events that may be imagined to have taken place. Sidney's statement on the matter could serve as motto for the basic aim of historiography. The historian, he says, 'brings you images of true matters, such as, indeed, were done, and not such as fantastically or falsely may be suggested to have been done.'¹ Sidney's pronouncement is confident, unambiguous and authoritative. Yet his words raise a question which is so fundamental that we normally prefer not to ask it. The question is quite simply: 'How does an historian distinguish between fact and fiction?' It is fine to tell an historian what to do, but how is he to go about it? For instance, what does an historian do if not all the facts are known? What if his sources are incomplete? The Greek and Roman historians often found themselves in this predicament. Their solution was to rely on the imagination. Thus they invented speeches for the historical figures whose actions they described. But are these speeches fact or fiction? Thucydides thought that they were fact, for though 'the words that were actually used' are not known, he wrote, 'my method has been ... to make

¹'The Defence of Poesy,' in The Miscellaneous Works of Sir Philip Sidney, ed. W. Grey (New York, 1966), p.80.

the speakers say what ... was called for by each situation.'² In other words, to Thucydides' way of thinking the speeches enabled the readers to get closer to the facts, even if strictly speaking the speeches were fictional. But naturally the Greek historiographer's method is fraught with danger. We all know Poe's instructive story 'Mellonta Tauta,' a futuristic tale which takes place eight centuries from now, and in which an amateur historian studies the inscription on the monument which commemorates Washington's victory over Lord Cornwallis. Unable to make head or tail of the telegraphic inscription, the historian in question uses the imagination to supply additional facts which lead to the inevitable conclusion that Washington was the chief of a band of cannibals who made sausages out of a dealer in corn, named Cornwallis. No one can deny that Poe has a point. No matter how noble the historian's intentions, he is liable to err at the crucial point of developing and interpreting evidence.

Of course it could be argued that Thucydides and Poe's heroine Pundita were just unfortunate. Therefore take the impossible case of an historian whose sources are complete down to the minutest detail. Could such an historian, working in ideal conditions, be trusted to come up with a full statement of the facts? Not really. First, though complete, the sources may be contradictory, as Thucydides realized when he complained that even 'eye-witnesses give different accounts of the same event.'³

² The Peloponnesian War, trans. Rex Warner (Harmondsworth, 1954), p.24.

³ The Peloponnesian War, p.24.

Second, though complete and mutually corroborative, the sources may be unreliable as a body. Sidney was aware of this possibility when he referred to the historian as a twaddling beast of burden 'laden with old mouse-eaten records, authorizing himself, for the most part, upon other histories, whose greatest authorities are built upon the notable foundation of hearsay.'⁴ Third, though complete, mutually corroborative and reliable, the sources may not be representative. Peasants, soldiers and merchants make history, but do not write it, as Tolstoy used to say. History is written by intellectuals, and intellectuals, in Tolstoy's opinion, tend to write about themselves.⁵ Therefore what is presented in the sources as general history may just be the biography of a few eccentrics. There is no guarantee that the extant documents of a given age are the repositories of all the thought, ideals, struggles and frustrations of that age. Fourth, though complete, mutually corroborative, reliable and representative, it is doubtful that the sources can be interpreted objectively. The historian has his personal predilections and prejudices to contend with. When Alan Bullock, writing on the emotion-laden subject of the career of Adolf Hitler, stated that he was determined to avoid the pitfalls of subjectivity, to write his book 'without any particular axe to grind or case to argue,' and to reach down to the 'solid substratum of fact,'⁶ he was no doubt sincere. But we do not for

⁴ 'The Defence of Poesy,' p.75.

⁵ See War and Peace, particularly the second epilogue.

⁶ Alan Bullock, Hitler: A Study in Tyranny, rev. ed. (Harmondsworth, 1962), p.14

a moment believe that he succeeded in his enterprise, because Bullock inevitably took a personal interest in his topic.

To say then that history deals with facts as opposed to fiction is to make a claim which is as platitudinous as it is outrageous. Platitudinous because it has been said so often. Outrageous because no one has been able to draw the dividing line between fiction and fact. Or, if someone has managed to do so, we would not know it. How could we find out? Perhaps it is better therefore to admit that we are not sure what we mean when we speak of facts, and to accept that history deals with fact and fiction. Our perception of reality, including historical reality, is to a considerable degree determined by the tautologies imposed by our linguistic, conceptual and emotional baggage. Hence what we perceive is always an inextricable jumble of subjective and objective reality, of fact and fiction. What we believe to be objective reality may be subjective and vice versa. And even if we could separate the one from the other there is no reason why we should not posit the objectivity of both objective and subjective reality, of fiction and fact. After all, to what extent is fiction less real than fact? Fiction becomes fact as soon as enough people believe in it. Suppose that on the basis of factual evidence an historian were to prove that Christ was an incompetent juggler whose poorly executed disappearance act happened to receive favourable write-ups from a number of corrupt journalists.⁷ What difference would it make for a Christian's appreciation of Christ? Would

⁷ Cf. De Sade's pamphlet 'La Religion, la Charité, l'Adultère,' in La Philosophie dans le Boudoir.

he reject the 'fiction,' in which he believes, for the 'facts'?

Not everyone will agree with the epistemological position which I have adopted. Particularly those historians whose livelihood depends on the validity of the assumption that facts are recoverable entities which can and should be distinguished from fiction may wish to sign off at this point. They are free to do so, but the problem remains. 'How does an historian distinguish between fact and fiction?' It is a haunting question whether one likes it or not. It is also a real question, not just because I have asked it, but because it lies at the heart of the play which is the subject of this chapter.

2.

The central concern of the present chapter is to define the historical perspective which emerges from Henry V. It is my contention that in Henry V Shakespeare poses the problem which I have described in the opening section of this chapter. I am going to argue that Henry V deliberately erases the dividing line between fact and fiction; that the playwright chops up history into unrecognizable chunks, and forces the audience to swallow the hotchpotch whole, thereby compelling them to accept the perspective which dispenses with the traditional distinction between historical fact and fiction. Most scholars have come to Henry V expecting to find a conventional history play, i.e. a play that dramatizes facts. Not surprisingly, they could not agree on what the facts are. It is not just that they differed on the interpretation of details, but they came up with two mutually exclusive readings of the play. Some could only

see a factual dramatization of the deeds of an heroic king, others a factual dramatization of the misdeeds of a royal criminal.⁸ Both groups, I believe, are wrong, because both asked the wrong question about the play. The question is not: 'What are the facts?' but: 'What are facts?' I do not think that Shakespeare cared in the least whether Henry was a good or a bad king. What he was interested in is that we are unable to determine what Henry was.⁹ In this connection I should like to draw attention to Lanham's analysis of Henry V to which I owe a considerable debt. Lanham says that the play spans the full range 'from certifiable fact to pure romance, and often piles one atop the other.'¹⁰ What Lanham means is that there is simply no way in which we can separate 'certifiable fact' from 'romance.' Within the world of the play it is impossible to get a clear idea of what is fiction and what is fact.

The most intriguing feature of Henry V are the play's choruses. Not, as some think, because Shakespeare did not use choruses in any other play, but because the choruses present the problem of the relationship between fact and fiction in all its complexity. Before going into detail,

⁸ See Karl P. Wintersdorf, 'The Conspiracy of Silence in Henry V,' SQ, 27 (1976), 264-5. Wintersdorf summarizes the two opposing points of view, and lists the main representatives of each.

⁹ Norman Rabkin makes the point in 'Rabbits, Ducks and Henry V,' SQ, 28 (1977), 279-96. 'The inscrutability of Henry V is the inscrutability of history,' Rabkin says (p.296).

¹⁰ Richard A. Lanham, The Motives of Eloquence: Literary Rhetoric in the Renaissance (New Haven, 1976), pp.190-200. The quotation is from p.199.

I shall summarize the multi-faceted effect which the choruses produce on the audience. First the choruses will be considered separately, then in relation to the play. Let it be understood that what I describe as a diachronic process is actually synchronic, except for the fourth and final stage.

(1) In some places the choruses give an objective account of facts as the traditional historian conceives of them, i.e. events that actually took place and that can be described factually. But the facts are conveyed in a condensed manner and in matter-of-fact prose-like verse, so that we retain little of the factual information. As audience we begin to look upon objective facts as uninteresting, or at the very least as slippery and difficult to hold on to.

(2) In other places the choruses beg us to realize that the 'real facts' cannot be presented directly; that for the audience to get an idea of what actually happened an effort of the imagination is required. Put differently, we are urged to accept the position that to get a clear conception of what the facts are, we must fictionalize facts. As audience we begin to believe that fiction may be superior to and more real than objective fact.

(3) In yet other places the choruses do the fictionalizing for us. The choruses assail the audience with impressive imagery and intoxicating language. The rhetoric employed is so powerful and has such a dramatic appeal that, if we forget everything else about the play, we remember the rhetoric. As audience we begin to see fiction

as the only reality.

The list is incomplete, because thus far I have merely looked at the choruses in isolation. Turning from the choruses to the play, we have to add one more item which throws everything into confusion.

(4) It seems natural to assume that the events of the play represent objective fact in so far as they literally and directly re-enact an historical situation by displaying it before our eyes. But the problem is that the facts of the play do not match the fictionalized facts of the choruses, and no amount of fictionalizing on the part of the audience can bridge the gap. Now, since the audience has come to regard the fiction of the choruses as fact before getting to the action on the stage, a difficult mental somersault is required to reject the 'facts' of the choruses in favour of the facts of the play. But we also cannot ignore the events of the play, because, after all, we see them with our own eyes. The result is that we accept both the fiction of the choruses and the facts of the play as fact, thereby admitting that we cannot separate the one from the other, even though, perplexingly, they are incompatible and therefore cannot both be true to the rational mind.

Let me give a series of examples from the text. Here are some excerpts, written out in prose, in which the Chorus supplies the audience with facts in the objective language of the traditional historian. This is what the Chorus says about the conspiracy against Henry:

The French, advis'd by good intelligence of this [i.e. the English] most dreadful preparation, shake in their fear, and with pale policy seek to divert the English purposes ... three corrupted men, one, Richard Earl of Cambridge, and the second, Henry Lord Scroop of Masham, and the third, Sir Thomas Grey, knight, of Northumberland, have for the gilt of France ... confirm'd conspiracy with fearful France (2.12-5,22-7).

Here is the Chorus's comment on the events that precede the siege of Harfleur:

... th'ambassador from the French comes back; tells Harry that the king doth offer him Katharine his daughter; and with her, to dowry, some petty and unprofitable dukedoms: the offer likes not (3.28-33).

This is the Chorus's rendering of the events that take place between Agincourt and the peace talks in France:

Now in London place him [i.e. the king]; as yet the lamentation of the French invites the King of England's stay at home; the emperor's coming in behalf of France, to order peace between them; and omit all the occurrences whatever chanc'd, till Harry's back-return again to France (5.35-40).

Finally, here is the Chorus's description of the aftermath:

Henry the Sixth, in infant bands crown'd King of France and England, did this king [i.e. Henry V] succeed; whose state so many had the managing that they lost France and made his England bleed (Epilogue, 9-12).

The terse sentences, the relative infrequency of qualifiers, the dry enumeration of the names and titles of the conspirators, the laconic description of the negotiations before Harfleur and after Agincourt, the curt comment on the outcome of the war, all these things are typical of the style and therefore the outlook (the two are inseparable) of the traditional historian. These are facts presented factually. But if the Chorus had omitted 'All occurrences whatever chanc'd,' as he asks the

audience to do, we would not have missed much. We cannot memorize the details anyway. They follow each other in such rapid succession and are communicated so unimaginatively, that all we remember from the quoted passages is that some people, whoever they were, conspired against the king; and that ambassadors, kings, soldiers and emperors bounced back and forth between several European cities like so many tennisballs from the Dauphin's 'tun of treasure' (1.1.255) - all to no avail, because the war did not produce results. If we recall the facts at all we are likely to think of them as dull and useless fragments of information. When the Chorus begs us 'to admit th'excuse/Of time, of numbers, and due course of things' (5.3-4), he takes the words out of our mouths. We do not in the least mind being spared a detailed treatment of 'whatever chanc'd,' also because the Chorus has an attractive alternative.

On several occasions the Chorus draws attention to the limitations of the theatre: 'this unworthy scaffold,' 'this cockpit,' 'this wooden O,' he says, cannot hold 'The vasty fields of France,' for the 'little room' of the stage confines 'mighty men' and mangles 'the full course' of their glory' (1.10-13; Epilogue, 3-4). Apart from spatial there are also temporal limitations. We are requested to 'brook abridgement,' because for practical reasons the play turns 'the accomplishment of many years/Into an hour-glass' (5.44; 1.30-1). Lastly, the actors have 'flat unraised spirits,' and the stage props are inadequate: 'four or five most vile and ragged foils, /Right ill-disposed in brawl ridiculous' cannot do justice to 'The name of Agincourt' (1.9; 4.51-3). Read the Chorus's statements literally and what they assert is one of three things. Either the Chorus says that

a play is not the real thing. But which playgoer in his right mind needs to be reminded of that? We know that we are in the theatre, that the medium is drama and that we have to play a let's-pretend game. Or the Chorus means that for the sake of brevity not everything that happened can be shown on the stage. But that does not make sense, since, as we shall see shortly, in the majority of cases the Chorus talks about events that immediately afterwards are acted out. Or Shakespeare, using the Chorus as mouthpiece, admits to being a bad playwright who cannot manage a big spectacle on the stage. But that explanation is even less convincing than the two previous ones. It is not as if Henry V was Shakespeare's first play. There was no need for him to make polite disclaimers. Obviously a literal reading of the Chorus's words is unsatisfactory. Something else is meant then. It seems to me that the Chorus uses the jargon of his medium metaphorically. He is not talking about the dichotomy between play and reality, but about the discrepancy between 'facts' and 'real facts.' What the reporting voice, discussed above, tells us about, and what we see on the stage are 'facts': objective representations of things that actually took place. 'Real facts,' on the other hand, cannot be staged or communicated objectively. They can only be imagined. Thus if we want to know what Henry was really like ('warlike Harry, like himself,' 1.5) there is no point in looking at the frail puppet on the stage with a piece of tinsel on his head. Rather we should close our eyes and dream up a mighty mythological creature who has 'the port of Mars,' at whose heels 'Leash'd in like hounds' 'famine, sword and fire/Crouch for employment,' and who is attended on by 'English Mercuries'

'With winged heels' (1.6-8;2.7). We have to increase the value of small numbers by 'adding a crooked figure,' which 'may/Attest in little place a million' (1.15-16). Small numbers correspond to 'facts.' A 'million' to 'real facts.' To transform the one into the other we need the imagination. 'Play with your fancies,' the Chorus says encouragingly, and 'Piece out our imperfections with your thoughts' (3.7;1.23). 'Grapple your minds,' 'Work, work your thoughts,' 'eke out our performance with your mind,' 'minding true things by what their mock'ries be,' 'In the quick forge and working-house of thought' (3.18,25,35;4.53;5.23). The Chorus also offers to help us form an idea of what really took place: ''tis your thoughts that now must deck our kings,' he says, but to aid you in this ('for the which supply') 'Admit me Chorus to this history' 'And let us .../ On your imaginary forces work' (1.28,31-2,17-8). Since we are already dulled by 'facts,' the effect of the Chorus's incessant exhortations is that the distinction between fact and fiction is no longer clear to us. We are prepared to go along with the Chorus. He may be right. Perhaps metaphorical reality and fictionalized fact are more real than objective fact.

And not only does the Chorus give the audience instructions, he also puts theory into practice by fictionalizing a number of facts for us. Here are some excerpts in which the Chorus supplies us with 'real facts' in the passionate verse of the enkindled imagination. This is what the Chorus says about the mood in England on the eve of the invasion of France:

Now all the youth of England are on fire,
And silken dalliance in the wardrobe lies:
Now thrive the armourers, and honour's thought

Reigns solely in the breast of every man
 They sell the pasture now to buy the horse,
 Following the mirror of all Christian kings,
 With winged heels, as English Mercuries. (2.1-7)

Here is the Chorus's comment on the English army's crossing of the Channel:

 behold the threaten sails,
 Borne with th'invisible and creeping wind,
 Draw the huge bottoms through the furrow'd sea,
 Breasting the lofty surge. O, do but think
 You stand upon the rivage and behold
 A city on th'inconstant billows dancing;
 For so appears this fleet majestical (3.10-16)

This is the Chorus's rendering of the near hopeless situation in which the English find themselves hours before the battle at Agincourt:

 The poor condemned English,
 Like sacrifices, by their watchful fires
 Sit patiently, and inly ruminate
 The morning's danger, and their gesture sad
 Investing lank-lean cheeks and war-worn coats
 Presenteth them unto the gazing moon
 So many horrid ghosts. (4.22-8)

Finally, here is the Chorus's description of the reception of the returning army:

 Behold, the English beach
 Pales in the flood with men, with wives and boys,
 Whose shouts and claps outvoice the deep-mouth'd sea,
 Which, like a mighty whiffler, 'fore the king
 Seems to prepare his way (5.9-13)

The long, flowing sentences, the emotive language, the intense descriptions of the high expectations of the invading army, of the apprehensions of scared soldiers and of the homecoming of the victorious king, all these suggest a heated imagination. These are imagined facts presented imaginatively. Again, we may not recall the details, but now it does not matter. We remember the excitement, the despair, the ultimate triumph and

the stirring rhetoric through which the events and accompanying emotions are communicated. The language employed in the quoted passages establishes its own reality. And it is a reality which, once glimpsed, we never forget. Because we listen with eagerness, we confer upon the Chorus's words a veritable objectivity. Fiction has become fact. I defy the reader to give me the full titles of the conspirators at this point. But would he ever forget the 'English Mercuries' at Southampton or the 'horrid ghosts' at Agincourt? And surely a remembered scene, even if unreal, is more factual than a forgotten one. Proust needed seven volumes to make the point, but we all know it to be true.

On the basis of what we have seen so far the reader may argue that there is nothing unusual about Henry V. I have stressed the fictionalizing aspect of the choruses, but it could be objected that the fact/fiction dichotomy which I have raised is artificial. It might be said that Shakespeare, like Thucydides, uses rhetoric to recreate an historical reality which could not be reconstructed in any other way. One would still have to account for the unhistorical indifference with which the choruses treat factual information, but that could be explained by saying that Shakespeare was less interested in meticulously recording factual details than in conveying an overall impression. In other words, the reader might maintain that Henry V is another War and Peace or The Red Badge of Courage. Following that line of thought, we would have to conclude that as an historian Shakespeare believed in evocative rather than scientific history. I would be happy with that conclusion, were it not demonstrably wrong.

Let me recapitulate. It is true that I have argued that the cumulative effect of the choruses is to lead the audience away from the concept of scientific to that of evocative historiography. The effect is produced in three stages: (1) factual detail is shown to be tedious and irrelevant ('omit/All occurrences whatever chanc'd'); (2) the choruses state persuasively that only the imagination can show us what actually happened ('Play with your fancies,' 'Work, work your thoughts'); (3) the tremendous rhetoric makes an indelible impression on the audience so that, whether we like it or not, we accept as fact what is frankly presented as fiction ('behold/A city on th'inconstant billows dancing;/For so appears this fleet majestic'). Now, if the historical reality thus evoked were corroborated by the events of the play, we could only infer that Shakespeare was trying to write non-scientific imaginative history. Put differently, if the play authenticated the historical vision called up by the choruses, thereby justifying the imaginative effort we are asked to make, we would be right in calling Shakespeare a precursor of Tolstoy and Crane. But the truth is that the play consistently contradicts the historical vision of the choruses. The facts of the play are so decidedly at odds with the fictionalized facts of the choruses that even the imagination cannot assimilate or reconcile the discrepancies.

In the first prologue the Chorus holds out a promise of exciting battle scenes. But the play has no battle scenes worth mentioning. From the stage directions we gather that there is a bit of noise before Harfleur. A handful of soldiers scurry across the stage with scaling-ladders. And that is it. Agincourt is equally unexciting in terms of

military displays. In the only scene in the play in which a Frenchman and an Englishman meet face to face on the battlefield, Pistol booms 'Yield, cur!' to his French opponent before the two come to blows (4.4.1). The Frenchman obeys immediately and that is as close as we ever get to a real battle. Also, throughout the play the French are portrayed as indecisive boasters who are either unwilling or unable to put up much of a fight. Like the observant Jews in the second book of the Maccabees who refused to defend themselves against aggressors on the Sabbath, the French are killed like flies by a small band of conquerors. At Agincourt, for instance, the French offer so little resistance that when the dust settles 'ten thousand French ... in the field lie slain' (4.8.82-3), while the English have lost less than thirty men. But given that the French, in spite of their numbers, are no match for the English, where are we to imagine heroic encounters and the shock of battle? Similarly, the Chorus asks us to 'Think, when we talk of horses, that you see them/Printing their proud hoofs i' the receiving earth' (1.26-7). But in the play little or no attempt is made to suggest proudly charging horses. Instead horses appear as the subject of debased dalliance, as when the French discuss their amorous adventures in terms of horse (i.e. whores) riding: 'my horse is my mistress' (3.7.45).

In the second prologue the Chorus maintains that 'all the youth of England are on fire ... and honour's thought/Reigns solely in the breast of every man' (2.1-4). However, in the scenes which follow we are confronted with the dishonourable noblemen who have been bribed by the French to assassinate Henry. Also, we learn that many of Henry's

prospective soldiers are either cowards ('I dare not fight; but I will wink and hold out mine iron,' 2.1.6-7) or unscrupulous opportunists who go to war for private gain ('Let us to France; like horse-leeches, my boys, /To suck, to suck, the very blood to suck!,' 2.3.56-7). In the third prologue, as we have seen, the Chorus depicts Henry's 'fleet majestical' in grandiloquent terms. But in the play we are to find out that Henry's army and presumably the fleet as well are actually quite small and insignificant. In the same prologue Henry's men are referred to as 'cull'd and choice-drawn cavaliers' (3.24), while the play offers a rather different version. While the siege of Harfleur is underway Pistol and his 'choice-drawn' cronies make a brief appearance, but judging that 'the knocks are too hot' (3.2.3) quickly vanish again. In the meantime, a group of 'cull'd' officers, apparently unconcerned about the progress of the siege, amuse themselves with an aimless discussion about the pros and cons of killing with swords and killing with explosives. And as for their being 'cavaliers,' how does that fit the Scottish captain's threat to decapitate his Welsh colleague: 'so Chrish save me, I will cut off your head' (3.2.136). Finally, in the fourth prologue the Chorus describes how Henry visits and cheers his soldiers on the eve of Agincourt. Like a concerned and responsible king 'forth he goes and visits all his host' (4.32), the Chorus says,

With cheerful semblance and sweet majesty;
That every wretch, pining and pale before,
Beholding him, plucks comfort from his looks.

(4.40-2)

Again, the play offers a different picture. Henry hides his 'sweet

majesty' from his troops by disguising himself, as if reluctant to assume his kingly responsibilities. Furthermore, he does not encourage his soldiers at all. Rather, he concedes that given the size of the French army the English are like 'men wracked upon a sand, that look to be washed off the next tide' (4.1.97-8). Lastly, how are we to imagine Henry to look cheerful when, dreading defeat, he offers up an anguished prayer, in a soliloquy, no less: 'Not to-day, O Lord! / O not to-day' (4.1.298-9).

What are the implications of the discrepancy between play and choruses? Three responses are possible. Two have been given by those who treat Henry V as Shakespeare's answer to the question: 'What are the facts?' The scholars who see Henry V as a factual dramatization of a glorious war of conquest hold that there are no implications other than that we should literally omit 'whatever chanc'd.' According to them we ought to dismiss the events of the play as irrelevant and listen to the choruses only. In other words they see Henry V as evocative history. The critics who view Henry V as a factual dramatization of a 'brawl ridiculous' maintain that there are no implications other than that the choruses pay lip service to the patriotic myth concerning Henry, while the play undermines that myth. According to them the choruses sound hollow and insincere, while the play tells the truth about Henry. In other words they think that Henry V is scientific history. Again, it seems to me that both answers are wrong. They are wrong, partly because they are the product of closet reading. No one can sit through a performance of Henry V, and, on the one hand, completely ignore the

events of the play, or, on the other, deny the genuineness of the choruses whose powerful language establishes an historical vision whose actuality we cannot but acknowledge. They are wrong too, because the original question 'What are the facts?' is wrong. The third response, which I take to be the correct one, is to say that Henry V answers the question: 'What are facts?', the answer being that in the conventional sense of the term there are no facts. In Henry V, to go beyond Sidney's phrase, facts are both matters such as are done and matters such as fantastically may be suggested to be done. The events of the play are factual, because we see them happen. To say that they do not take place is to say that we have not seen them. The fiction of the choruses is factual, because we believe in it: To say that the choruses are fictitious is to say that we have not heard them. That the play and the choruses tell mutually exclusive stories is bewildering - as bewildering as Poe's claim that in 2848 it may be possible to prove conclusively that Washington fed on human flesh. But there is no way out of this bewilderment. It will not do to posit an objective historical reality outside Henry V and then say that certain aspects of Henry V conform to that reality, while the ones that do not are either irrelevant or tongue in cheek, depending on which objective reality one prefers to regard as the true one. That is not how Henry V works in the theatre, not to mention that Henry V denies that such an objective reality can be established in the first place. The world of Henry V is an autonomous entity, and within that world we can distinguish between the choruses and the events of the play. Limited by our inadequate vocabulary, we may

then use traditional terminology and label the choruses 'fiction' and the events 'fact,' but since in effect we accept the choruses as well as the events as factual the labels are as arbitrary as are algebraic symbols for unknown quantities. The one thing that we do know for a certainty is that in Henry V 'fiction' and 'fact' are contradictory. But that is a confusing certainty, since we cannot choose between the two. Henry V forces us to concede the factuality of either.

Henry V can be approached from a different angle as well. If the choruses in combination with the play blur the dividing line between fact and fiction, the play considered in isolation does so as well. Employing a strategy which runs exactly parallel to that used in the choruses, Shakespeare hit upon the brilliant device of presenting his titular protagonist as a man who in his own life and through his own exploits manages to convert fiction into fact. The remainder of this chapter will be taken up by a discussion of the role of Henry in the play. In my reading of Henry V, the king, along with his counsellor Canterbury, serves to restate the problem of the relationship between fact and fiction.

Henry V deals with a war between France and England. Canterbury furnishes Henry with a motive for making war, while the king himself is in charge of the campaign. Dramatically, therefore, Canterbury and Henry are the most important characters in the play. Both of them are 'choral' characters in that together they supply an accurate imitation of the choruses. Shakespeare uses the archbishop first to demolish facts as they are traditionally conceived of. Then he makes Canterbury substitute

fiction for fact. And finally he has Henry transmute Canterbury's fiction into new facts. The three phases in the gradual process of conversion will be discussed in chronological order, which is also the order in which they appear in the play.

The Church prelate's discourse on the legitimacy of Henry's claim to the French crown forms the first phase. Canterbury's speech is objective, factual historiography pushed to its limits. We are overwhelmed by names, dates, bald summary and unadorned facts. The following passages are typical. This is a prose version of the archbishop's account of the conquest of Salic:

... the French [did not] possess the Salic land until four hundred one and twenty years after defunction of King Pharamond ... who died within the year ... four hundred twenty-six; and Charles the Great subdued the Saxons, and did seat the French beyond the river Sala, in the year eight hundred five. (1.2.56-64)

And here Canterbury discourses on the genealogy of the French royal house:

Hugh Capet ... who usurp'd the crown of Charles the Duke of Lorraine, sole heir male of the true line and stock of Charles the Great ... convey'd himself as heir to the Lady Lingare, daughter to Charlemain, who was the son to Lewis the emperor, and Lewis the son of Charles the Great ... King Lewis the Tenth, who was the sole heir to the usurper Capet, could not keep quiet ... wearing the crown of France, till satisfied that fair Queen Isabel, his grandmother, was lineal of the Lady Ermengare, daughter to Charles the foresaid Duke of Lorraine (1.2.69-83)

Canterbury's enumeration of the facts is as dull as are the corresponding passages in the choruses. The language in which they are communicated has little appeal in the theatre, even though long-winded bombast sometimes has its charm. And this time we not only spurn facts because they are dull, but also because upon analysis Canterbury's treatment of the facts

turns out to be so erratic that we are hard put to it to make any sense of them at all. In the quoted passages, for instance, Canterbury implies that 'four hundred one and twenty' plus 'four hundred twenty-six' adds up to 'eight hundred five,' and also that Charlemagne was both father and son of Lewis the emperor. Things become more confusing still if we study the passages in context. What emerges from the cataract of names and dates is an absurd self-defeating argument in the course of which facts cancel each other out. It would seem that Canterbury is saying that because Henry as well as Charles of France descend from Charlemagne through the female line, it follows that Henry is the rightful king of France, while for precisely the same reason Charles is a usurper.¹¹ Of course during a performance we do not have the time to analyze Canterbury's speech in detail, but even so the archbishop leaves us with a general feeling that objective facts are tedious and useless playthings, which neither prove nor disprove anything and which do not deserve serious consideration. Henry gives voice to our tedium when he interrupts Canterbury with the impatient question: 'May I with right and conscience make this claim?' (1.2.96). The remark clearly suggests that to Henry's mind the archbishop's speech, though apparently grounded on solid fact, has nothing substantial to offer. The sole effect of

¹¹For a detailed and amusing discussion of the absurdity of Canterbury's speech, see Harold C. Goddard, The Meaning of Shakespeare (Chicago, 1951), pp.220-1.

Canterbury's words on Henry is that he wants to hear something more exciting than facts. The king (and we with him) are ready for the second phase.

After Henry has swept Canterbury's facts under the carpet, the archbishop adopts a different tone. He no longer tries to establish a factual justification for the French campaign, but instead asks the king to play with his fancies and work his thoughts. In true choral fashion Canterbury gets Henry's 'imaginary forces' to visualize fictionalized facts which prove to provide a far more powerful motive for going to war than the preceding jumble of objective facts. The archbishop asks Henry to invoke the 'war-like spirit' (1.2.104) of his great-grandfather and the latter's son

Who on the French ground play'd a tragedy,
 Making defeat on the full power of the French
 Whiles his most mighty father on a hill
 Stood smiling to behold his lion's whelp
 Forage in blood of French nobility. (1.2.106-10)

The reference is to an actual historical event, but the awesome vision of a superhuman figure standing on an elevation and smiling with divine detachment, as down below events unroll in accordance with his wishes, belongs to the realm of fiction - a fiction memorable enough to be almost indistinguishable from fact. At first Henry does not work his thoughts hard enough, for he raises the level-headed objection that in his absence the Scots may invade England. But switching from fictionalized historical fact to pure fiction, Canterbury fuels the vision by drawing an entrancing picture of Henry as a mighty emperor bee, lording it over the lowly inhabitants of the beehive who either slave away in the emperor's

service, or else are delivered 'o'er to executors pale' (1.2.203).

No sooner has Canterbury finished than Henry explodes into an impassioned battle cry: 'Now are we well resolv'd ... France being ours, we'll bend it to our awe/Or break it all to pieces.' And using terms which refer back to the images of the figure of the hill and the emperor bee, he continues:

... there we'll sit,
Ruling in large and ample empery
O'er France and her almost kingly dukedoms (1.2.222-6)

Factually Henry may not have much of a case, but the king now commences to convert Canterbury's fiction into new facts -- and fully succeeds in doing so. Whether Henry has a factual right to the French crown becomes increasingly unimportant. He grabs for the crown, and that is a fact if ever there was one.

The third phase begins. Throughout the play Henry sows images that befit his role as omnipotent monarch. Using language that has a rhetorical appeal surpassing even the most thrilling passages in the choruses, Henry repeatedly describes himself and his army as an unstoppable force that will trample underfoot everything that appears in its path. For instance, on receiving the Dauphin's insulting gift of tennis-balls, the king threatens France with total annihilation in terms that make an indelible impression on us: 'I will dazzle all the eyes of France' (1.2.279), Henry says,

... for many a thousand widows
Shall this his mock [the Dauphin's] mock out of their dear husbands;
Mock mothers from their sons, mock castles down;
And some are yet ungotten and unborn
That shall have cause to curse the Dauphin's scorn. (1.2.284-8)

Similarly, before Harfleur Henry refers to his soldiers as dehumanized war-engines that, once in motion, will mow down each and every citizen of the besieged city:

... in a moment look to see
The blind and bloody soldier with foul hand
Defile the locks of your shrill-shrieking daughters;
Your fathers taken by the silver beards,
And their most reverend heads dash'd to the walls;
Your naked infants spitted upon pikes,
Whiles the mad mothers with their howls confus'd
Do break the clouds. (3.3.33-40)

Lastly, at Agincourt, Henry suggests that even in case of defeat his army will strike at the French from beyond the grave, 'Killing in relapse of mortality' (4.3.107). Addressing himself to the French herald, he says:

... though buried in your dunghills,
They [the English] shall be fam'd; for there the sun shall greet them,
And draw their honours reeking up to heaven,
Leaving their earthly parts to choke your clime,
The smell whereof shall breed a plague in France. (4.3.99-103)

The language is hyperbolic. Henry does not really carry out his threats: he does not have to. His soldiers, judging from what we see of them, are not half so courageous and irrepressible as Henry maintains. On the other hand the king's rhetoric is unforgettable. It would be wrong to call it myth making; Henry makes facts in the same way in which the comparable passages in the choruses establish facts. Nor is it a matter of rhetoric alone. Henry is not an historian who describes events in the past, but is a participant in and prime force behind historical events. Henry is not an idle boaster, for when the action is over France is in a shambles. Regardless of whether Agincourt was a 'brawl ridiculous' or a glorious fight, the upshot is that the fields of France lie fallow

('all her husbandry doth lie on heaps,' 5.2.39), the French army has been crushed ('ten thousand French' lie slain in the field), Charles resigns and swears fealty, and Henry acquires the title of 'Roy d'Angleterre, Héritier de France' and 'Rex Angliae, et Haeres Franciae' (5.2.358-60). By the end of the play Henry is the mighty figure on the mountain. What began as a rather outlandish fiction is a fait accompli. A dream has generated an undeniable fact. Literally wiping out the dividing line between fact and fiction, Henry makes fiction come true. We may feel a little uneasy about his blatant imperialism, but Henry pulls it off, and on the whole we admire him for it. And in so doing, have we not become his accomplices? Have we not admitted that fact cannot be separated from fiction? Or that the impossibility of drawing the boundary line between fact and fiction is an inescapable aspect of the human condition? After Henry V, how are we to define 'fact' and 'fiction'? In Henry V 'fact' and 'fiction' are made and unmade at will.

CHAPTER TWO

2 HENRY IV

The first task an historian usually sets himself is to distinguish between relevant and irrelevant events, for even the most meticulous chronicler would not attempt to include all events of a given period in his description. After a process of selection the historian will decide that civil war is important, while a street fight is not; the inauguration of a new head of state demands attention, a brawl in a red-light district does not; the death of a king is in, the life of a streetwalker is out. The serious historian deals with grand events and leaves out the irrelevant. As an historical work 2 Henry IV is extraordinary for the fact that it does not make a choice between the relevant and the irrelevant, presenting both as equally important and unimportant. Not that the play is an exhaustive catalogue of everything that happened during the years covered by the play. Certainly not. The play is a very compressed historical account, and in that sense a selection has been made. But the principle of selection is an odd one. Shakespeare has selected events in such a way as to suggest that he has not selected them - not with any degree of consistency, that is. Simple stocktaking will illustrate my point.

The action of the play is evenly distributed between the world of high politics and Falstaff's tavern world. The audience gets equal exposure to both, and each is alternately presented as important and insignificant, so that it never becomes clear where the true centre of interest lies. Sometimes the irrelevant is suppressed and the relevant

highlighted, as we would expect in a serious work of history. At other times the reverse is true: insignificant events are blown up out of all proportion, while crucial events are ignored. Starting with the world of kings and princes we notice that a number of scenes stress the significance of events that are historically important in that they affect the entire nation, while others do just the opposite. In other words, some scenes suggest that Shakespeare was writing serious history as it is traditionally conceived of, others imply that he was doing nothing of the kind. Proper emphasis is placed on the confrontation between the king's men and the rebels, the altercation between the king and the heir apparent when the latter takes away his father's crown, the king's final words of advice to his son, the reappointment of the Lord Chief Justice by Henry V and the establishment of order in the kingdom. On the other hand, Northumberland's critical decision to abandon the cause of the rebels is treated scantily, his ultimate defeat is barely touched upon, the king's death and the coronation of his successor take place off-stage, while the new king, far from being given a chance to assert himself at the conclusion of the play, is made to disappear from sight before the action is over: after the king is gone, decided inferiors hold the stage - Falstaff among others. In short, in some places Shakespeare brings out the full significance of events that we normally think of as important, while in others he makes so little of them that we are hardly aware that they take place.

Turning from the world of high seriousness to the tavern world, we observe that some scenes dwell at length on the lives of whores and petty crooks, thus leaving the audience with the feeling that the irrelevant is all

that matters, or possibly that Shakespeare was primarily interested in examining the effect of grand events on the common people. But then there are other scenes which bring out the utter insignificance of Falstaff and his environment, and which therefore seem to have been written from the point of view of the serious historiographer. The tavern scene at the end of act two, for instance, is by far the longest scene in the play, while in the briefest scene Falstaff's female acquaintances are rapidly disposed of by officers of the law (the scenes run to 387 and 31 lines respectively). The one scene suggests that the play's emphasis is on Falstaff and his comrades, the other that no such emphasis is intended. In much the same way an inordinate amount of attention is given to Falstaff's recruiting practices, as if to indicate either that the focus is on Falstaff, or that Falstaff's abuse of the king's press will significantly affect the outcome of the struggle with the rebels. But in a subsequent scene (again a brief one), the emphasis shifts from Falstaff to Prince John, who lets us know that, since by the time Falstaff arrived at the battlefield the rebels had already been captured, it is not of the least importance what Falstaff did or did not do. Similarly, Falstaff's doodling and merrymaking at the house of Shallow is treated in great detail as if it were a major event, while his rejection by the king is a matter of a few words. The former scene implies a keen interest in the irrelevant, the latter exposes the irrelevant for what it is.

To sum up, 2 Henry IV is not orthodox historiography, but it also is not purely anecdotal history. The emphasis is not entirely on the tavern world or on the king's world. Nor are Falstaff's world or the world

of high politics consistently discredited. Sometimes Shakespeare pays attention to the irrelevant, at other times he does not. In some places the dramatist concentrates on the relevant, elsewhere he consciously refrains from doing so. The question now arises: 'What kind of history was Shakespeare trying to write in 2 Henry IV? What is the historical perspective that emerges from the play?' Of course, 2 Henry IV is not without precedent or parallel in the Western world. In many respects 2 Henry IV has close affinities with the type of digressive history as we know it from Herodotus and Plutarch. The Histories and the Lives also present the relevant and irrelevant, the big and the small as equally significant or insignificant. But where the Greek historians could be accused of primitivism, no such charge could be levelled against Shakespeare who seems to know exactly what he is doing.¹ 2 Henry IV can hardly be called a mistake. The pattern outlined above is too chaotic not to be deliberate. Also, there is a parallel between 2 Henry IV and modern journalism which presents contemporary history as an odd jumble of gossip and serious news. But where today's news media can claim lack of perspective, Shakespeare was writing about events that took place some two hundred years before he was born and that had been fully documented. Given that Shakespeare was neither a primitive nor badly informed, what are we to make of the inchoate succession of uprisings, drinking bouts, coronations and

¹ But perhaps Herodotus and Plutarch are not primitive. Perhaps they merely look at history in a different way. Their 'digressions' may be part and parcel of a valid and sophisticated historical perspective - one which rejects the distinction between relevant and irrelevant.

street fights, which are offered as history in 2 Henry IV? What are the implications of such an approach to history?

I think the answer is as follows. Earlier I said that the historian's first task is to distinguish between the relevant and the irrelevant. In 2 Henry IV that process of selection is avoided, or, to be more precise, great events and minor incidents are alternately deflated and inflated, so that in the end the terms 'great' and 'minor,' 'relevant' and 'irrelevant' cease to signify anything. Selection is a form of interpretation. If in an historical work every principle of selection is rejected, except for that principle whereby history becomes meaningless hodgepodge, the possibility of interpreting history begins to disappear. Now when we move from an external description of 2 Henry IV (specifically the length of each scene) into the play itself, we soon discover that the play's external features have been designed to reflect the central concern of the play, which is exactly the question whether it is at all possible to understand history. Selection is one form of interpretation which the play questions. But selection alone is not the aim of historiography. An historian does not merely draw up a chronological list of important events, but organizes the raw material of history around one or several central figures who may be said to bring about those events. In a sense historiography is always biographical. Whether man does or does not believe that the planet he occupies has a preferred position in time and space, he never abandons belief in his centrality. Man does not explain the events of the past in terms of scientific laws as he does when talking about the interaction of atoms or the generation of heat. He places himself at the centre of an

event. Events are viewed as caused by specific individuals. In 2 Henry IV, however, we search in vain for central figures for the simple reason that the play has no hero. Just as Shakespeare refuses to discriminate between the relevant and irrelevant, so he also declines to arrange his material around a pivotal character.

Starting with the characters who wield political power, who among either the rebels or the king's party qualifies as a major character? The opening scene of the play suggests that Northumberland will play a role of some importance in subsequent events, but he does not. He makes one brief appearance later on, then passes out of the story. The other rebels figure in a handful of scattered scenes, but fail to leave a lasting impression on the audience. We may remember the archbishop, because as a churchman he makes an improbable rebel. But apart from his title there is not anything noteworthy about him. Prince John is instrumental in the defeat of the rebels, but we hear virtually nothing of him in the rest of the play. The Lord Chief Justice is equally unimportant dramatically. Twice we meet him wandering through the streets of London. Then he vanishes and does not re-enter the play until the very end where Henry V plays a cat-and-mouse game with him. Prince Henry's role is minimal too. At unequal intervals he moves in and out of the play, but never is he a compelling presence on the stage. Early in the play he is downright boring, as when he exchanges dull and pointless jokes with Poins and Falstaff. Later, whenever there is action of some kind, as at Gaultree Forest where the rebel army has gathered, he is conspicuously absent. He never says or does anything memorable apart from stealing his dying father's crown, and, as indicated above, at the moment when he could emerge as the hero

(be it somewhat belatedly) by establishing himself firmly as the new man in power, he makes a graceless exit while the play continues. Finally, most striking of all is that the play's titular protagonist could not have had a less onerous role. In the third act we catch a glimpse of him for the first time, and when he comes back he only does so to die. Yet his actual death does not take place on the stage, as if it is an event not worth recording. The deathbed scene is abruptly broken off to make way for Shallow's and Falstaff's dallying in the orchard of the country justice. Of course a character can have a small part and nevertheless be the hero of the play. Shakespeare's Julius Caesar is a case in point. We do not see much of Caesar on the stage, but throughout the play everybody always discusses him. In 2 Henry IV it is different, however. The characters listed above rarely meet or even mention each other. They seem to lead isolated existences. Moving on separate planes, they occasionally bump into one another and then are off again into the unknown. With reference to the Lord Chief Justice, one commentator has written that 'he does not so much enter the plot as move through its interstitial spaces.'² The same holds true for the other characters from the political world of 2 Henry IV. Nobody is in control. No one stands out. No character in particular is talked about more than any other.

² Robert Ornstein, A Kingdom for a Stage: The Achievement of Shakespeare's History Plays (Cambridge, Mass., 1972), p. 155.

If we now return to Falstaff's world, we meet the one character in the play who has been given a major part: Falstaff himself who makes more appearances and has more lines than the king and his son together. But does that turn Falstaff into the hero of 2 Henry IV? Not really. Falstaff has none of the characteristics of a hero. He is a repulsive lecher, and, if the truth be known, a dreadful bore despite his mythic aura and his absurd claim that he is not only witty in himself 'but the cause that wit is in other men' (1.2.9). At best the Falstaff of 2 Henry IV is an anti-hero like Fellini's clowns or the tired comedian in Chaplin's Limelight who has lost the ability to entertain and does not know it. His tedious jokes ramble on for ever without reaching a punch line. Falstaff may be the hero of his own private play, but as audience we never look forward to his next appearance. Here is a representative excerpt from one of his tiresome monologues:

A good sherris-sack hath a twofold operation in it. It ascends me into the brain, dries me there all the foolish and dull and crudy vapours which environ it, makes it apprehensive, quick, forgetive, full of nimble, fiery and delectable shapes, which delivered o'er to the voice, the tongue, which is the birth, becomes excellent wit. The second property of your excellent sherris is the warming of the blood (4.3.95-102)

In this vein Falstaff goes on and on. It takes a naive audience indeed to be amused by this autistic gabble. In any case, even if Falstaff was a thoroughly engaging character, he still would not be the hero, no matter how large his part is. As I hinted earlier, it is made very plain that Falstaff has not the least impact on the historical events in which he is caught up. Whenever confronted with a character from the other camp, whether the Lord Chief Justice, or Prince John, or Prince Henry, he is shoved aside as a

mere nobody. And where he, along with his cronies, does seem to function as spokesman for the man in the street, that does not make him a hero either, because, as I pointed out, 2 Henry IV as a whole does not specifically concern itself with little-people-history.

If the distinction between important and unimportant events is one form of interpretation, and the choice of a pivotal figure another, the historian also decides on a central event in his attempts to comprehend history. The historian shows how a series of events leads up to a climactic event which explains and gives meaning to all the others. History is in its essence teleological. Not necessarily in a theological sense, but in that behind every work of history lies the assumption that man's actions have an innate purpose, that human endeavour leads somewhere. The historian traces continuities. It is his bread and butter. The society in which he lives pays him for it. Starting out from a meaningless succession of events, the historian is expected to ask himself: 'What is the focal point? What is the culminating event? To which event can all other events of a given period be meaningfully related?' He is also expected to come up with answers. In 2 Henry IV, however, the questions are neither posed nor answered. Just as Shakespeare refuses to separate the relevant from the irrelevant and to arrange his material around a central figure, so he also declines to give the audience a sense of direction.

In 2 Henry IV one scene after the other evokes a picture of pointless activity, frustrated energy, and of characters plotting on the basis of false expectations with no idea where they are going. The theme is announced in general terms by Rumour, the character who delivers the prologue and who in a way presides over the play. Rumour is the arch liar

who holds out false promises, raises false hopes and spreads false reports only to thwart expectations, dash hopes and withdraw his statements. Rumour both externalizes man's desire to discover a telos and exposes the notion of telos as a paltry lie. Throughout 2 Henry IV the theme is played out in endless variations. On hearing of his son's death, for instance, Northumberland works himself up to a frenzy, threatening to cause universal destruction; shortly afterwards, however, judging that the risks are too great, he flees the country with his tail between his legs - and gets killed in his place of refuge like the gardener from the Oriental fairy-tale who hoped to escape from the claws of Death. The pattern is typical of 2 Henry IV: a plan or a sudden outburst of energy, followed by a reversal of the original intentions or instant failure. Falstaff sends his page on an errand to obtain silk on credit; the page returns empty-handed. The Lord Chief Justice addresses Falstaff to berate him for his role in the Gad's Hill robbery; Falstaff simulates deafness. York and his fellow conspirators plan to overthrow the king, but are worried that their army may not be large enough; it all does not matter, for on the battlefield not a blow is struck and York is outwitted by the juvenile delinquent Prince John. The Hostess sues Falstaff for unpaid debts; attempts to arrest Falstaff fail and the old man manages to get the Hostess to drop charges against him. The Lord Chief Justice pronounces the Hostess an honest woman; later he has her picked up. Prince Henry and Poins intend to disguise themselves and spy on Falstaff; they are recognized almost immediately and are summoned to court before getting an opportunity to carry out their plan. Falstaff looks forward to a night of revelry with Doll and the Hostess; halfway through the night he is told to pack his bags and go to war. Pistol attempts to

gain forcible entry into the Boar's Head Tavern where he is not wanted; Falstaff throws him out. At one o'clock in the morning the sleepless king calls his advisers out of bed to discuss what measures are to be taken against the rebels; he is reminded that he has already done all there was to be done and his advisers go back to bed. Shallow wants Falstaff to enlist Mouldy and Bullcalf, the best men in the village; they bribe Falstaff and are allowed to stay home. Falstaff hopes to impress his superiors by single-handedly capturing a rebel; Prince John informs him that even before his arrival the rebellion had been quenched. The king reiterates his decision to organize a crusade; hours later he dies. Prince Henry steals his father's crown, when for once the latter is not plagued by insomnia; the king wakes up and Henry has to return his booty. Shallow lends Falstaff a thousand pounds, hoping to obtain influence at court through Falstaff; Falstaff is banished by the new king. The self-righteous Lord Chief Justice makes an impressive display of unflinching integrity; Henry V first appoints him chief adviser at court, then drops him like a brick.

And there is more. It is not just the events of the play which create a mood of futility, ill-directed energy and frustration. There are also the countless references to illness, decay, old age, weariness and infertility. If the characters move anywhere at all, it is towards death, the end of all activity and purpose. The women in the play are either widows or whores. They do not give birth to normal offspring but to 'Unfather'd heirs and loathly birth of nature' (4.4.122), or, as in Doll's case, to cushions. Northumberland's castle is a 'worm-eaten hold of ragged stone' in which 'old Northumberland, / Lies crafty-sick' (Induction 35-7). The Lord Chief Justice is advanced in years. Falstaff has 'more diseases than he knew for,'

'every part about him' is 'blasted with antiquity'; he is a 'withered elder,' a 'dead elm' (1.2.3-4, 183; 2.4.256, 328). Prince Henry is 'exceeding weary' (2.2.1). His father suffers from sleeplessness and a 'whoreson apoplexy' (1.2.107). York is grey, Bullcalf has a cold, Shallow's former acquaintances are either dead or on the way out, and Shallow too will not make it much longer: 'We shall all follow, cousin,' Silence says to him (3.2.35). The kingdom itself is 'Gasp[ing] for life' and rank with diseases 'near the heart of it' (1.1.208, 3.1.40). On those rare occasions when a character displays some vigour it is invariably with a destructive purpose in mind. As when Northumberland calls out for universal chaos, or when Pistol threatens to kill Doll and the Hostess, or when Prince Henry grabs his father's crown, or when the ruthless hangman Prince John orders the execution of the leaders of the rebellion. The one thing in the play which carries the positive suggestion of fecundity and new life is Shallow's orchard. But its owner is a corrupt Justice who lets criminals go scot-free at the request of his servants: 'a knave should have some countenance at his friend's request' (5.1.40-1), Davy says to Shallow who cravenly complies. Moreover, Shallow himself refers to his land as 'Barren, barren, barren' (5.3.7).

Finally, the play has no climax. The audience never has the feeling that it is going somewhere. We remember the play for individual scenes: Falstaff wobbling across the stage, the fight at the Boar's Head, Prince John committing one of the blackest acts of treachery on record, the death-bed scene and so forth. But there is not one particular scene which could be called the culminating point of the action. How could there be a climax

in a play which keeps going off on tangents, which has no dominating characters and in which the relevant matters as much or as little as the irrelevant? The plot of 2 Henry IV lacks a centre. 2 Henry IV is a series of self-contained mini-plays. The narrative drifts, plods on, bogs down, meanders off, breaks up, lingers over trivial scenes, skips essential ones, but goes nowhere.

It may be necessary to elaborate a little on this point, for it has been argued that the Lord Chief Justice should be seen as ideal justice personified, and that Prince Henry's acceptance of justice at the end of the play constitutes something of a climax.³ I find myself in complete disagreement with that reading for a number of reasons.⁴ First, since both characters play minor roles and never meet until the last scene of the play, I do not see how the scene in question could possibly strike the audience as climactic. To my mind no one can stage the meeting of Prince Henry and the Lord Chief Justice in such a way that the audience suddenly feels that this is the moment it has been waiting for, the crowning event that drives home the point of that deliberately disorganized sequence of preceding events. As far as I can see the scene is just another disjointed incident. Second, nowhere in the play does Prince Henry transgress the law. Reference is made to Prince Henry's striking the Lord Chief Justice, but we do not see this infraction of the law take place on the stage.

³ I am referring to the familiar theory proposed by E.M.W. Tillyard. See Shakespeare's History Plays (London, 1944), p. 265.

⁴ In my comments on the Lord Chief Justice and the implications of the confrontation between him and Prince Henry, I amplify a series of observations made by Robert Ornstein in A Kingdom for a Stage: The Achievement of Shakespeare's History Plays (Cambridge, Mass., 1972), pp. 152-5; and Sigurd Burckhardt in Shakespearean Meanings (Princeton, 1968), pp. 157-62.

Furthermore, Prince Henry repeatedly disassociates himself from the lawless Falstaffians. To Poins he says: 'What a disgrace is it to me to remember thy name!' (2.2.13). And there is no lightheartedness, but only disgust in the words he utters while watching Falstaff and Doll: 'Look whe'er the withered elder hath not his poll clawed like a parrot' (2.2.256-7). Then what is so remarkable about his public acceptance of justice? The Prince may manage to fool some characters in the play, but he certainly does not surprise anyone in the audience. We knew all along that he was on the right track. Third, it is not true that Prince Henry wholeheartedly submits himself to the authority of the Lord Chief Justice. He calls him father and says that he will seek his counsel on every occasion. But as soon as he gets the chance he starts ordering the Lord Chief Justice about like a messenger boy, without consulting him or anyone else: 'Be it your charge, my Lord, /To see perform'd the tenor of my word,' he says, referring to the arrest and banishment of Falstaff (5.5.69-70). This is surely very different from: 'I will stoop and humble my intents /To your well-practis'd wise directions' (5.5.120-1). In other words, the startling transformation which the Prince had planned does not really amount to much. Fourth, in his two earlier appearances the Lord Chief Justice is portrayed as a mildly foolish figure, which is a far cry from ideal justice personified. Rather than seeking out criminals the Lord Chief Justice inadvertently stumbles upon them. Running into Falstaff in London's red-light district, he says: 'How now, Sir John? ... Doth this become your place, your time, and business?' (2.1.63-4). But if the Lord Chief Justice is amazed to find Falstaff on homeground, should we not be more amazed at the Justice's ineffectual meanderings through London? Also, in his first meeting with Falstaff, the

Lord Chief Justice shows himself ignorant of the finer points of the law and displays an objectionable tendency to use a double standard, which is the last thing we would expect from someone of his profession. The Lord Chief Justice accuses Falstaff of failing to respond to a summons. In reply Falstaff points out that since he was on military duty, he was immune from prosecution: 'As I was then advised by my learned counsel in the laws of this land-service, I did not come' (1.2.133-4). The Justice then chides Falstaff for his loose behaviour. At his age he should know better, the Justice says. At the same time, the Lord Chief Justice has arranged for Falstaff to join the expedition against the rebels. Falstaff aptly comments that 'If ye will needs say I am an old man, you should give me rest' (1.2.216-7).

I have discussed the role of the Lord Chief Justice in 2 Henry IV, and the significance, or rather insignificance, of his confrontation with Prince Henry in some detail, not just to dispell a persistent critical myth, but because the Chief Justice strikes me as an excellent example of someone who might have been an imposing figure or even the central character in a different play, but definitely is not in 2 Henry IV. Similarly his meeting with Prince Henry nicely illustrates how a scene which could have been a thrilling climax in another context is just a sorry affair in the play under discussion. One can only conclude that 2 Henry IV is literally a pointless play. The endless succession of purposeless activities, the imagery and characterization, and lastly the absence of a truly climactic moment collectively unprop accepted belief in history as a meaningful progression, a going-towards something other than death and nothingness.

The following passage from one of the king's speeches expresses the nihilist defeatist mood of the play well:

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, and other times to see
 The beachy girdle of the ocean
 Too wide for Neptune's hips; how chance's mocks
 And changes fill the cup of alteration
 With divers liquors! O, if this were seen,
 The happiest youth, viewing his progress through,
 What perils' past, what crosses to' ensue,
 Would shut the book and sit him down and die. (3.1.45-56)

To separate the relevant from the irrelevant, to choose a central figure, to determine the telos of a sequence of events are all attempts at interpreting history. 2 Henry IV thwarts these attempts, so that history becomes essentially an incomprehensible process. And the play undermines the possibility of understanding history in yet another way. An historian selects important events, arranges them around a villain, a genius or a hero, and demonstrates how they lead up to a climactic event, but he does more than that. The historian also wants to know why things happened the way they did. Why did a prince spend his days in the tavern? Why was a king dethroned? Why did civil war break out? The historian works backwards as well as forwards. He is not only interested in the telos, but also in the origin of things. A series of events being known, he will try to define causal relationships between them. The question of causality lies at the heart of every historical inquiry. Deny that things can be explained in terms of cause and effect, and the edifice of history collapses. It is a shock therefore to encounter a serious historical work which posits the meaninglessness of the notion of cause, but 2 Henry IV is such a work. Considered

from the point of view of the characters, the play categorically refuses to explain the cause of anything except in terms of chance, caprice and blind fate. The characters insist that they have no control over the events in which they participate, that they do not understand them, and cannot be held responsible for them. As they see it, things happen for no reason at all - or at least not for reasons which the rational mind can grasp.

The characters fall into three groups. The first and least interesting comprises the characters who populate Falstaff's tavern world. These characters lead mainly private lives and are therefore, like most of us, in the fortunate position of not having to explain their actions. However, as soon as they are forced out of their privacy, their universe disintegrates. Confronted with the law in the final scenes of the play they are crushed like Kafka's characters. They are called to account and fail to come up with satisfactory answers. Doll and the Hostess emit inarticulate screams, the vociferous Pistol lapses into silence and the big talker Falstaff mumbles something about the king not being serious: 'That can hardly be... I shall be sent for in private to him' (5.5.76-77).

The main representatives of the second group are the king and his son. Because they hold public offices they may be expected to account for their motives in detail, or at least to lie coherently about them, but they do not. Prince Henry's erratic behaviour defies rational explanation and his feeble attempts at explaining himself only deepen the mystery. He despises Poinz, but nevertheless persists in seeking his company because he hopes to impress his future subjects with an unexpected transformation which he has been publicly announcing for years. It would be hard to think of a

more nonsensical reason. He is overcome with grief at his father's illness, or says he is ('my heart bleeds inwardly that my father is so sick,' 2.2.45-6), but refuses to comfort the dying man for fear that people may take him for a hypocrite! The logic is that of a madman. Believing his father to be dead, he does not deem it necessary to inform the nobles at court, but puts on the king's crown and walks off. Pressed for an explanation he can do no better than resort to the old I-was-just-looking trick. He behaves like a child that is caught red-handed with an empty tin of biscuits and claims not to have touched the contents. What it boils down to is that Prince Henry has no idea why he behaves so peculiarly. It is astonishing to hear an historian say that Prince So-and-so did such and such a thing for the hell of it, but that is exactly what the play implies about Prince Henry. That Shakespeare derived his account of the Prince's childish escapades from his sources is immaterial. The point is that he could have supplied Henry with a motive, but did not do so.

The Prince's father is another character who does not know why he does whatever it is he does. In two reminiscential passages, in which he talks about the deposition of Richard II, he states emphatically that his usurpation was a matter of necessity. Personally he somehow did not have a hand in it: it just happened. 'I had no such intent,' he says,

But that necessity so bow'd the state
That I and greatness were compell'd to kiss. (3.1.72-4)

Or, as he puts it later, in his son's presence:

God knows, my son,
By what by-paths and indirect crook'd ways
I met this crown. (4.5.183-5)

The operative words are 'necessity,' 'compell'd,' and 'met.' What the king is saying is that he was not out to get Richard's crown, but happened to cross its path. The implication is that the act of dethroning Richard cannot even be explained by the man who performed the act. Properly speaking, it was no act, since nobody did it and nothing caused it. It is tempting to see the king's remarks as transparent rationalizations after the fact. But the king is not just being evasive about a tricky issue. Rather his refusal to state causes is a habit of mind, an epistemological position, for he is just as ready to accept other men's actions as inexplicable 'necessities' as his own. Referring to York's rebellion, he says: 'Are these things then necessities? Then let us meet them like necessities' (3.1.92-3).

The most intriguing group consists of the characters who are directly involved in the uprising against the king. Rebellion is something out of the ordinary. Therefore someone who starts a revolt presumably has done some thinking first, for he should be prepared to justify his unusual action. How else can he hope to gain a following? Even the most anarchistic revolutionary movement has its ideologists, particularly if the overthrow it wishes to bring about is largely the work of a minority, as is the case in 2 Henry IV. The ideology may be invalid, but no rebel will admit that he has no cause whatsoever. In the play the leader of the rebellion is a learned archbishop. If even an irresponsible anarchist will claim to have reasons for rebelling, a high ranking churchman may be expected to have excellent reasons. Yet no matter how long we ransack the play for clues, it never becomes clear what York's reasons are. One conspirator says that

York 'Derives from heaven his quarrel and his cause' (1.1.206). York himself speaks of 'our cause' (1.3.1). At one point he gives a representative of the king a document which he describes as 'the summary of all our griefs,' 'a schedule' which 'contains our general grievances' and 'The parcels and particulars of our grief' (4.1.73, 168-9; 4.2.36). It is hinted that the rebellion has something to do with the deposition of Richard. Morton says that York 'doth enlarge his rising with the blood/ Of fair King Richard, scrap'd from Pomfret stones' (1.1.204-5). And on the battlefield Mowbray too implies that there is some connection between Bolingbroke's usurpation and the present uprising. The rebels want revenge for those that 'by indictment and by dint of sword/Have since miscarried under Bolingbroke' (4.1.128-9). But all this remains vague and unsubstantiated. How the rebels really see themselves becomes clear from a series of very explicit statements which indicate that the rebels have no cause and cannot be bothered to make one up either. They cause havoc because they must.

When asked by Westmoreland,

Wherefore do you so ill translate yourself
 Out of the speech of peace that bears such grace
 Into the harsh and boist'rous tongue of war. (4.1.47-9)

York replies: 'Wherefore do I this?', as if it had never occurred to him to think of a reason, and then continues: 'so the question stands.' It does indeed and it is never answered, for now York says:

Briefly to this end: we are all diseas'd,
 And with our surfeiting, and wanton hours
 Have brought ourselves into a burning fever,
 And we must bleed for it. (4.1.53-7)

The argument is tautological. According to York, the rebels act in a deranged manner because that is what they do. Perhaps the archbishop means that the disease he speaks of is the rebellion, but that of course explains nothing. In an earlier scene, York states it this way. It is not he, the leader of the uprising, who is deranged or causes the revolt, but the people of England. Addressing the populace he exclaims:

Thou beastly feeder, art so full of him [i.e. the king]
That thou provok'st thyself to cast him up. (1.3.95-6)

The reflexive pronoun 'thyself' says it all. The rebellion is cause and effect at once. There is no explanation or justification, because the revolt generates itself. 'The commonwealth is sick of their own choice' [i.e. the king] (1.3.87). Just that. The nature of the sickness is not diagnosed. Similarly when Prince John repeats Westmoreland's question, York answers: 'The time disorder'd Doth crowd us and crush us to this monstrous form' (4.2.33-4), just as earlier he had said that the rebels 'are enforc'd By the rough torrent of occasion' (4.1.71-2), or as Hastings put it: 'We are time's subjects, and time bids be gone' (1.3.110). But what is the 'time disorder'd' and the 'rough torrent' if not the rebellion itself? The circular argumentation undermines the distinction between cause and effect. The latter does not follow from the former, because the two are identical, with the bewildering result that neither explains the other. Do the bad times cause the rebellion or are they caused by it? Does the revolt spring from a sickness or vice versa? The rebels do not know and neither do we.

It would be wrong to say that York's faulty logic implies an authorial comment on the invalidity of his cause. The question of validity

never enters the play. Both the rebels and the king's nobles view the rebellion as a necessary event, something that had to take place and for which there is no explanation. Warwick speaks of the 'necessary form' of history, 'The which observ'd, a man may prophesy/With a near aim, of the main chance of things' (3.1.82-3,7). In other words, history is viewed as an inevitable, self-propelled, mechanical process which can be observed and described, but not influenced or understood. The notion of cause as a force residing in the participants in historical events is unknown to the characters in 2 Henry IV. To them the sole reason why things happen is that they happen. All they can do is limp along. In this vein Westmoreland tells the rebels to

Construe the times to their necessities,
And you shall say, indeed, it is the time
And not the king, that doth you injuries. (4.1.104-6)

The statement could be paraphrased thus: 'In so far as you have grievances, do not point to the king as a possible cause. Simply concede that there is no cause, that you have grievances because you have them.'

Throughout this chapter I have maintained a series of negative conclusions. To prove a negative is, I think, technically impossible. By contrast it is easy and reassuring to 'prove' that the rebels have a good cause, that Prince Henry's behaviour is perfectly normal, that the Lord Chief Justice is the true hero of the play, and that the play's final scene is a tremendous climax. It is easy because we have been taught to think along those lines. It seems to me, however, that 2 Henry IV requires us to reverse our habitual mode of thinking. 2 Henry IV is an examination into the nature of history. And what emerges from the play are a number of

statements which cast doubt on the assumption that man is capable of comprehending his own history. In summary:

1. It is impossible to say that one event is more important than another.
2. No one historical figure deserves more attention than another.
3. It is not given to man to know if there is a purpose behind his actions.
4. We cannot explain the origin of events, even if it is we who take part in those events.

2 Henry IV declares history incomprehensible.

In retrospect we can perhaps detect a climactic scene in 2 Henry IV. The scene is set in the tavern world and occurs quite early in the play where we would least expect a climax. On the other hand, the scene draws attention to itself in that it contains the only act of violence on the stage in 2 Henry IV. More importantly, the scene emphasizes the central concern of the play which I have defined as an inquiry into the knowability of history. I am thinking of the scene in which Pistol tries to enter the Boar's Head. Pistol is history personified. He uses the idiom of a former age and his speeches are packed with historical allusions, such as Plato, Erebus, Caesar, Troyant Greeks, Cerberus, Calipolis, Atropos and so on. Pistol is a walking history book. Also Pistol is the unknown. There is a good deal of confusion about who or what Pistol is. Is his name Pistol or Peesel? Is he a captain, an ancient (i.e. an ensign-bearer) or an ancient (i.e. an old man)? Is he a 'swaggerer' or a 'tame cheater' (2.4.95)? Pistol's speeches are just as mysterious as his identity:

Then feed and be fat, my fair Calipolis!
 Come give's some sack.

Si fortune me tormente sperato me contento.

Fear we broadsides? No, let the fiend give fire!

Give me some sack; and sweetheart, lie thou there!

Come we to full points here? -And are etceteras nothings?

(2.4.175-180)

When Falstaff and Bardolph kick Pistol off the stage, it seems as if
 thereby history is pronounced a dispensable exercise in futility.
 History is incomprehensible and no one can do anything with it. 'Get
 you downstairs' (2.4.199).

CHAPTER THREE

1 HENRY IV

1.

Historiography is normally seen as an attempt to state the facts of the past either for didactic purposes or simply to satisfy man's curiosity about himself. Hence one of the prime criteria by which we judge an historical work is the comprehensiveness and clarity of its factual content. Of course we expect a good deal more from an historian than a mere statement of the facts: we would also like to have an interpretation of the factual material. But as a minimum requirement we want a complete and unambiguous description of the facts. The facts of the past are the foundation of historiography. Without interpretation we cannot understand the past, but without facts we cannot even know it. Starting out from the generally accepted assumption that facts are the sine qua non of history without which the past is radically unknowable and consequently useless for didactic or scholarly purposes, 1 Henry IV is an unusual historical work, because it conceals as many facts as it reveals. 1 Henry IV contains enough facts to enable us to recognize the play as history in that it talks of verifiable historical events such as the rebellion of York and the Percies, the conversion of the heir apparent, the king's victory at Shrewsbury and so forth. But if the play supplies a substantial amount of historical material (thereby insisting that it be treated as history), it also keeps us uninformed about many events, and makes us aware that we are being kept in the dark.

For instance, on the basis of the play we cannot tell if the king succeeds in defeating the rebels or not. It is a curious thing because in one way or another most of the action of the play is directly or indirectly connected with the rebellion. The uprising is not presented as a minor event, and though it may not be the sole concern of 1 Henry IV, there is hardly a scene which does not make mention of the rebellion. Given the centrality of the rebellion we expect the play to tell us the complete story. Yet when the play is over, nothing has been concluded. The king has won a battle, but two more rebel armies lie in wait for him, and there the action stops. As a result 1 Henry IV leaves us with a question: 'Did the king crush the rebellion or did he not?' 1 Henry IV ends with a lacuna, an historical ambiguity: a fact is missing.

Nor is the play's inconclusive ending an accident or an isolated case. Throughout 1 Henry IV we are made to ask ourselves: 'What has happened? What are the facts?' But the answers do not come. The play contains a number of enigmas of a very basic, factual kind. As audience we often are in the same position as the robber Gadshill in the opening scene of act two. Gadshill accosts the coachmen of a London bound coach in the hope of obtaining information concerning their travelling plans. But his questions meet with evasive responses from which little can be learned. 'Sirrah carrier, what time do you mean to come to London?', Gadshill asks. 'Time enough to go to bed with a candle,' is the vague reply (2.1.40-2). The robber is also literally kept in the dark. The scene in question takes place at night, and when Gadshill asks the coachmen for the loan of a lantern the request is refused. In much the same

way the play frequently declines to enlighten the audience when it demands a clear statement of the facts. Thus, there is for instance the dispute about Henry's acquisition of the crown. The issue could be described as an unresolved and unresolvable quarrel about facts. The king depicts the deposition of Richard as an act of the people of England. Because the former king 'Mingled his royalty with cap'ring fools' (3.2.63), Henry says, Richard lost the respect of his subjects who then made Henry himself king, a man 'wonder'd at' 'like a comet' and less 'common-hackney'd' than Richard, the 'skipping king' (3.2.40,47,60). 'Opinion,' Henry explains, 'did help me to the crown' (3.2.42). The rebels, however, see things differently. Henry, they say, is a 'vile politician' (1.3.238), whom they rescued from exile on the understanding that Henry would 'not'ing purpose 'gainst the state' (i.e. Richard, 5.1.43). But instead, they claim, Henry took advantage of the situation by unjustly deposing Richard, 'that sweet lovely rose' (1.3.173). Not the will of the people, but deceit and usurpation, the rebels maintain, helped Henry to the throne. Who is telling the truth, we wonder. The two versions are incompatible. Is Henry a true or a false king? What happened in the days of Richard? Did the populace make Richard resign or was Henry solely responsible? The play does not tell us. We have our doubts about the rebels' honesty, but we cannot actually know where they stop telling the truth and start lying. 1 Henry IV indeed presents a world in which truth can hardly be distinguished from falsehood. To further illustrate my point I have selected four specific incidents of varying degrees of dramatic and historical importance, all of which give us the feeling

that factual information has been withheld or obscured.

One such incident is the mysterious encounter between Glendower and Mortimer, first mentioned by Westmoreland in the play's opening scene. According to Westmoreland Mortimer fought against the Welsh, was defeated by 'the irregular and wild Glendower' and taken prisoner (1.1.40). The king, however, flatly denies that the incident ever took place: Mortimer 'never did encounter with Glendower ... he durst as well have met the devil' (1.3.113-4). The king's view of the matter is that Mortimer turned traitor and voluntarily went over to the enemy: 'the foolish Mortimer ... hath wilfully betray'd [his men],' the king says (1.3.79-80). Hotspur gives the opposite version in the form of what purports to be an eye-witness account of a combat between the two commanders: Mortimer 'did confound the best part of an hour/In changing hardiment with great Glendower' (1.3.99-100). But are we to believe Hotspur? He was not present at the scene, since at the time he was in the north of England. Moreover his inflated language suggests that he is making things up. The problem is compounded when we learn on the one hand that a ransom was demanded for Mortimer, which would indicate that Mortimer had been captured, and on the other that Mortimer was in love with and married to Glendower's daughter, which lends weight to the king's version. So what precisely took place between Mortimer and Glendower at the Severn? Did Mortimer turn against the king or did he remain loyal? Mortimer's involvement in the rebellion does not throw any light on the question either. In the council scene at Bangor, in which Hotspur, Glendower and Mortimer draw up plans to divide England

between them, Mortimer remains strangely aloof, and though he is instrumental in patching up the breach between the other two rebels, he appears on the whole more interested in his private affairs than in the national issue: as for the rebellion he is 'as slow/As hot. Lord Percy is on fire to go,' as Glendower comments (3.1.257-8). And the truth is that Mortimer's 'revolt' never gets beyond the planning stage. He is not present at Shrewsbury, so that there is a real possibility that Mortimer did not in fact espouse the cause of the rebels. Again, was Mortimer a rebel or was he not? The answer is nowhere to be found. What did Mortimer do when he met Glendower at the Severn? We do not know.¹

Another incident which leaves us with an insoluble puzzle is the confrontation between Hotspur and 'a certain lord' (1.3.32) at Holmedon. The 'lord' in question demanded in the king's name that Hotspur surrender the Scottish noblemen captured in the battle at Holmedon. Apparently, the courtier returned empty-handed and reported to the king that Hotspur was unwilling to give up his prisoners. But did Hotspur actually refuse to comply with the king's order or did he not? The king insists that he did: 'The prisoners ... To his own use he keeps' (1.1.91-3). But Hotspur himself disclaims the charge emphatically. His explanation is that,

¹ The confusion about Mortimer has been accounted for by assuming that Shakespeare unwittingly conflated two different historical Mortimers. But I am not convinced by that explanation, unless it can be demonstrated that all other instances of 'missing facts' in 1 Henry IV are also blunders of a bungling playwright.

angered by the superciliousness and dandy-like appearance of the courtier, he used words that could be construed to imply a refusal, but, he states, 'I did deny no prisoners' (1.3.28). Northumberland and the king's trusted adviser Blunt agree with Hotspur; the former may be prejudiced, but the latter certainly is not. Hotspur's father thinks that the report delivered to the king sprang from 'Either envy ... or misprision' (1.3.26), while Blunt maintains that whatever Hotspur said to the courtier, the words were spoken in anger and constitute no evidence of disloyalty on Hotspur's part. Westmoreland is non-committal. He neither confirms nor denies the king's accusation, but says that even if Hotspur refused to yield the prisoners, it was all Worcester's doing, not Hotspur's:

'This is his uncle's teaching, this is Worcester' (1.1.95). The king, however, calmly repeats his charge: 'Why, yet he doth deny his prisoners' (1.3.76). Whom should we believe? Did Hotspur disobey the king or not? What happened between Hotspur and the courtier? At a later point, Hotspur's alleged refusal appears unequivocal: 'I'll keep them all;/ He shall not have a Scot of them' (1.3.212-3), Hotspur says, but then certainty dissolves again when we realize first that, infuriated by the king's intransigence, Hotspur is overreacting, and second that Hotspur's final statement on the matter does not necessarily tell us something about his initial position at Holmedon. Once more, what took place at Holmedon? The issue is raised, and then left in doubt for the play stubbornly refuses to give up its secret.

Both of the incidents referred to occur off-stage. It could be objected therefore that because the events at the Severn and at Holmedon

are not enacted, it follows that Shakespeare was not interested in the details of the two incidents, and that there is no reason why we should be. But I do not think that the objection stands close scrutiny, since there are also a number of incidents (among them the most memorable of the play) that do take place on the stage and still give rise to historical ambiguities that make the audience ask itself: 'What are the facts? What has transpired?'

Take for instance the second scene of the opening act in which we watch Hal bantering with Falstaff and planning the mock robbery with Poins. From what we hear and see there can be little doubt that Hal relishes the company of his comrades. There are obvious suggestions that a change is in the offing, as when Hal warns Falstaff that if the old man does not mend his ways he will end up on the scaffold as a 'rare hangman' ('rare,' because Falstaff will not be an ordinary hangman, but a hanged man, 1.2.64-5). But in spite of these ominous hints, the dominant impression we get is that Hal is having a glorious time. No man can act so energetically, curse so coherently, speak with so much wit and radiate such self-confidence, if he is not thoroughly enjoying himself. For all we can tell Hal is quite comfortable in his role as thief. Also, it is Hal who asks: 'Where shall we take a purse tomorrow?' (1.2.96). But then, as a baffling non-sequitur, comes the soliloquy. The gist of Hal's speech is that he despises Poins and Falstaff, that he seeks their acquaintance in order to project a prodigal-son image of himself, and that by the time everyone in England will have lost faith in him, he will turn around and surprise the nation by denouncing his profligate associates. In other

words, Hal tells us that, far from genuinely enjoying himself, he has been playing a devious game with two wastrels in whom he takes no personal interest. What is baffling about Hal's soliloquy is that there is little or nothing in the rest of the scene to indicate that Hal was actually manipulating Poins and Falstaff. So how are we to take Hal's speech? Is Hal lying to himself? Is the soliloquy a transparent rationalization which enables Hal to conceal from himself his affection for Falstaff? Is Hal a true thief and a false prince - or is it the other way about? Is Hal telling the truth? Is he actually carrying out a premeditated plan? Is he a true prince after all? We are never quite sure - not at this stage in Hal's life anyway. What we do know is that we feel taken in as we listen to the soliloquy. The speech is like the denouement of a bad mystery novel in which all of a sudden new factual information is supplied that does not in any way follow from earlier chapters. The effect the speech has on the audience is that it begins to entertain serious doubts as to the accuracy and reliability of the presentation of historical events in 1 Henry IV. What really went on in Hal's chambers in London? We cannot be certain.²

² The problem with the soliloquy disappears if we assume, as many have done, that the speech is not really a confession on Hal's part, but a reassuring piece of authorial intervention, in which the playwright tells us that all will be well with Hal in the end. But is that how the soliloquy strikes us in the theatre? Do we feel that Shakespeare is clarifying matters for us? I would say that the opposite is the case. We are puzzled by the speech - far more puzzled than we would have been had there been no soliloquy. And if Shakespeare knew anything about theatrical effects, surely he must have anticipated that the soliloquy would be confusing, i.e. it must have been his intention to confuse us.

Finally there are the Gad's Hill robbery and Eastcheap scenes in the second act. The robbery is put on the stage from beginning to end, so that we are spectators to all the proceedings: the preparations of the thieves, the arrival of the coach, the robbery, and in particular the successful execution of Poins's 'jest' (1.2.57) which sends 'the fat rogue' Falstaff roaring down the hill (2.2.106). Here at last, it would seem, we have a detailed and realistic presentation of the facts; everything is set down before us; there is no room for uncertainty - or is there? In the Boar's Head Tavern Falstaff's astounding 'By the Lord, I knew ye as well as he that made ye' (2.4.263) makes us question the soundness of our observations. Falstaff's claim is that he recognized Hal and Poins immediately, but decided to play along so that the joke would be on them. And the uncanny thing is that we, who were witnesses to the event, have no real grounds for disbelieving Falstaff. When Falstaff makes 'Eleven buckram men' out of two (2.4.214), we know that he is lying, but does Falstaff expect to be taken literally on that point? Is he not rather putting his listeners on by uttering the 'incomprehensible lies' (1.2.180-1) they expected to hear, only to surprise them with his irrefutable claim that he voluntarily let himself be robbed in order to make Poins and Hal victims of their own 'jest'? The answer, as always, is that we do not know. We are sure though that Hal's childishly triumphant 'These lies are like their father that begets them, gross as a mountain, open, palpable' (2.4.220-1) could not be further from the truth. During the robbery scene we could have sworn that Falstaff's version (had we known it at the time)

was a lie, but after the tavern scene, we are no longer certain. What happened at Gad's Hill? Who fooled whom? We have seen the robbery with our own eyes, but the questions are unanswerable.

The incidents discussed can also be approached from the point of view of the characters, but the conclusions remain the same. If the audience is incapable of arriving at a clear statement of the facts, the characters are so too. The characters confront each other with mutually exclusive versions of the same event, but when it comes to proving the accuracy or veracity of the facts they are quite powerless. With reference to Mortimer's actual or supposed defection, the king and Hotspur accuse each other of lying, but neither is able to substantiate his claim: 'let him not be slander'd with revolt,' Hotspur says of Mortimer, but the king counters with: 'Thou dost belie him, Percy, thou dost belie him,' and there the issue remains deadlocked (1.3.111-2). Similarly, Hotspur begs the king not to let the courtier's report 'Come current for an accusation' (1.3.67), but is unable to refute the report. The king charges Hal with 'inordinate and low desires,' 'mean attempts,' and 'vile participation' (3.2.12-3, 87), but Hal coolly states that the king should not be so foolish as to pay attention to 'tales devis'd' 'By smiling pickthanks, and base newsmongers' (3.2.23,25). In the Gad's Hill affair Hal and Poins think that they have a clear idea of the facts, because they themselves have pre-arranged those facts. But Falstaff pulls the rug from under their feet by presenting them with a conflicting fact (or a lie?) that cannot be disproved. In other words the characters are just as confused about

the facts as the audience. Neither audience nor characters have a firm grip on the facts.

What I have been trying to suggest in the preceding pages is that 1 Henry IV punches deadly little holes in the big balloon of traditional historiography: the notion that history is a form of knowledge founded on facts. Repeatedly the play implies that the past cannot be known with any degree of accuracy, that facts are elusive data of past human experience that lead an ephemeral existence beyond the reach of positive knowledge. It is true that the play does not demolish the traditional conception of facts as retrievable, describable traces of human activity. If that were the case we would not even perceive the play as history; we would not know that a statement about history was being made. Thus 1 Henry IV does not deny or obscure the fact that Henry IV and Hotspur existed, that the Percies organized a rebellion against the king, or that a battle took place at Shrewsbury. But though the play allows us to recognize these historical figures and events, it never ceases to make us conscious of the indeterminate nature of facts. 1 Henry IV leaves a considerable number of facts standing as the still, impressive ruinous remains of what may be imagined to have been a massive building. But these ruins serve to provide the stage upon which the play carries out its erosive work, for what solidity facts in 1 Henry IV possess is in constant danger of pulverization. Shrewsbury too may go the way of Gad's Hill (and would have done so a long time ago, paradoxically, if it had not been for 1 Henry IV). In the play facts disintegrate under our very eyes. They are not the solid building blocks

of the traditional historian, but are fluid, malleable, irretrievable.

Particularly through its deceitful characters the play shows how effortlessly the process of disintegration can be brought about. Two examples may be cited here. When Worcester returns from his parley with the king at Shrewsbury, and tells Hotspur that 'The king will bid you battle presently' (5.2.30), Worcester is misrepresenting the facts.

Instead of calling for bloodshed, the king had offered peace: 'take the offer of our grace ... and you, yea, every man/Shall be my friend again' (5.1.107-8). But Hotspur does not see through his uncle's deception, even though he would have preferred to avoid full-scale war: 'that no man might draw short breath today/But I and Harry Monmouth!!' (5.2.48-9).

And acting on Worcester's lie Hotspur issues orders to attack: 'Arm, arm with speed' (5.2.75). Similarly, Falstaff's absurd claim that he has killed Hotspur remains unchallenged. The one character in the play who knows that Falstaff is lying is the man who actually killed Hotspur.

That man is Hal, but Hal, a master of lies himself, is prepared to corroborate Falstaff's story: 'if a lie may do thee grace,/ I'll gild it with the happiest terms I have' (5.5.156-7). The two scenes clearly imply that depending on the skill or authority of the speaker the most blatant lies can pass for facts. Of course the audience is aware that Worcester and Falstaff do not tell the truth. But that insight does not give us the feeling that the facts of a case can be determined after all (if not by the characters, then at least by us). Far from it, the ease with which Falstaff and Worcester get away with flat falsehoods impresses upon us the impossibility of ever obtaining a clear statement of the facts.

2.

At the beginning of the first section of this chapter I stated that historiography is usually seen as an expression of man's desire to learn something about himself, and also that this desire cannot be satisfied if the historian does not first of all know the facts of the past. We can now say that 1 Henry IV does not fit conventional definitions of historiography. Even if we approach the play with modest expectations, not demanding that it give us an understanding of the past but asking only for a lucid statement of the facts, we return empty-handed. Normally we study historical works to learn something about the events of the past, but from 1 Henry IV little can be learned. And if we accept the play's thesis we may have to admit that nothing much can be learned from any study of the past, because in the play history does not appear as a positive discipline. The play does not accept the premise that facts are fixed, knowable entities. On the contrary, it openly attacks that premise. As a result the play leaves us in a vacuum, and as a further result the play requires us to radically modify our usual culture-bound epistemological attitude towards the past. The play forces us to bring about an epistemological mutation of history. We can no longer hold on to the assumption that history is a form of knowledge, but have to conceive of history in different terms. Of course the play does not and cannot compel us to deny that there is such a thing as the past. The past exists for all of us in some shape or another. And even the most unsophisticated among us are interested in the past, if only in the form of personal memories and cherished knick-knacks. It may not be possible to accurately know the past, but that obviously does not mean that the past does not exist.

But if the play cannot erase the past altogether, and at the same time maintains that the past cannot be known, then we begin to wonder: 'Why do we continue to take such a keen interest in the past, if strictly speaking the past is unknowable? Why not abandon a lost cause? What does the past mean to us? What do we do with the past? And finally: could it be that we do not want knowledge from the past but something else?' These are the questions which Henry IV ultimately invites us to ask. And this time the play contains some answers.

However, before returning to the play, let me speculate a little further. I have hinted that something other than a desire for knowledge may be involved in our interest in the past. What we wish to know now is what that 'something' is. What exactly do we look for in the past? The psychology of man's historical impulse has not, I think, been written, so to some extent we are entering unknown territory. On the other hand, if there is no scientific analysis of the historical impulse available there are a number of literary works that point at possible directions which such an analysis might take. One of these works is Keats's 'Ode to a Grecian Urn.' In the 'Ode' Keats suggests that we turn to the past, not because we are interested in the past as such, but because we cannot bear the flux and shapelessness of the present. The poem implies that we need the past because it affords a reassuring illusion of permanence and definite forms. In other words, the historical impulse is not viewed as a positive desire for specific knowledge, but as a negative defense mechanism without which the present would be intolerable. Consequently, the historian is not seen as an earnest

seeker of knowledge, but as the incarnation or externalization of man's longing for those hints of stability and of sharply outlined forms which the present denies him. Doubtless there is something to be said for Keats's view. Few things in life are fixed apart from the beginning and end of individual existence and of the entire sample of matter which we populate. But in the past we find suggestions of permanence and fixedness, whether the past presents itself to us in the form of a vase that has withstood the ravages of time, or by extension, in the shape of a monument, a building, an ancient text, a memory, a familiar story or a tradition. All these things have a definiteness about them, a static quality quite unmatched by anything we experience in daily life. And the illusion of immortality and stable forms which they evoke is certainly important to us. How important can be gauged by our sense of shock when we hear of cases in which the past has been obliterated or is in danger of being erased: vandals blow up a palace; the retaining wall of an ancient temple mound is desecrated; Artaud speaks of his readiness to destroy all literary masterpieces produced by our civilization;³ Joyce describes the past in terms of a sickening heap of corpses that beg to be left alone.⁴ To hear of these things invariably makes us feel insecure. Not necessarily because we experience a sense of personal loss, or because

³ Antonin Artaud, 'No More Masterpieces,' in The Theatre and its Double, trans. Mary C. Richards (New York, 1958), pp.74-83.

⁴ See the 'Nestor' episode in Ulysses.

we are saddened by the disappearance of specific traces of the past (though depending on individual interests that may be the case too), but because the emergence of the phenomenon of fragmentation in the one area where we hope to discover stability calls up the spectre of eternal flux. The reader will recognize that if we accept the historical perspective hinted at by Keats our attitude towards history changes completely. Questions such as: 'What has transpired? What are the facts? What precisely happened?' cease to be relevant, or rather we begin to see those questions as misguided substitutes for other questions: 'Where can stability be found? How can we escape from the formlessness of the present? How can the flux of the present be covered over with a layer of illusory unchangeability?' Also, an exact knowledge of the past is no longer important. First because history becomes a grab bag from which we take whatever is available or whatever is needed, given the circumstances. Second, because it does not matter if what we produce from the grab barrel is accurate historical fact or fiction, as long as it affords an illusion of definiteness and stability through its antiquity and historical associations.

If we now turn back to the play and view 1 Henry IV against the background of the ideas set out above, we see a very different play from the one that we saw before. Initially we looked at the play as history, and on the basis of customary definitions of history we mistakenly expected the play to tell us something about the past. Now, however, we approach 1 Henry IV as a play about history, or to be more precise, as a play about how and why man as historian uses the past. And we shall


discover that through its characters the play communicates an historical perspective that could be roughly identified as Keatsian. Trapped in a world of great uncertainty and ugliness the characters use the past to give themselves a sense of purpose. Living in a fluctuating present they turn to the past for suggestions of stability, and like Keats's persona they find the stability that they need. They derive from the past specific programmes for action, or inversely, they transform the amorphous present into the definite shapes of the past. My discussion of the characters' use of the past will concentrate on Falstaff, the king, Hal and some of the rebels. My strategy is simple. Each time I will show first that a particular character lives in a state of uncertainty or insecurity, and then how this character resorts to the past for a workable illusion of stability with which the present cannot supply him.

A fine example of a character who leads a life of insecurity is Falstaff. Walking a tightrope on the periphery of society and suspected by the court of leading the heir apparent astray, the petty criminal spends his days drinking, whoring and stealing. So far his title and his friendship with Hal have prevented the judiciary from taking punitive measure against him, but this situation will not last, as Falstaff realizes. Set in his habits, too old to alter his present way of life, Falstaff knows that one day the law will catch up with him. Thus Hal's ominous references to the 'gallows' and a 'buff jerkin' (i.e. a constable's jacket, 1.2.38,42) early in the play produce a revealing effect on Falstaff. Ignoring Hal's remarks, Falstaff first tries to change the subject: 'is not my hostess of the tavern a most sweet wench?' (1.2.39-40). Then,

when Hal persists, Falstaff attempts to turn Hal's veiled threats into a joke: 'How now, how now, mad wag ... What a plague have I to do with a buff jerkin?' (1.2.43-5). But when Falstaff has finally managed to get Hal to talk about something other than the law, he himself returns to the subject, thus betraying a profound uneasiness under his display of cheerfulness: 'shall there be gallows standing in England when thou art king?', Falstaff inquires apprehensively (1.2.57-8). Given the uncertainty of Falstaff's situation, and with Keats's thesis in mind, it is interesting to observe that Falstaff's utterances are packed with historical allusions. No matter what the subject is Falstaff always harks back to the past. He refers to the Bible in phrases such as: 'I regarded him not, and yet he talked wisely, and in the street too' (1.2.84-5); 'Pharaoh's lean kine' (2.4.467); 'Dives that lived in purple' (3.3.31); 'in the state of innocence Adam fell' (3.3.164-5); 'slaves as ragged as Lazarus' and 'prodigals lately come from swine-keeping' (4.2.24-5,34-5). He describes himself in mythological terms: 'let us be Diana's foresters,' for as thieves 'we that take purses go by the moon ... and not 'by Phoebus, he that wand'ring knight so fair'' (1.2.13-5,25). When imitating the king in the extempore play in the Boar's Head, Falstaff spontaneously gives an archaic picture of the king in a quaint old-fashioned style: 'I will do it in King Cambyses' vein,' Falstaff says, employing such lines as 'Weep not, sweet Queen, for trickling tears are vain' and 'I do not speak to thee in drink, but in tears ... not in words only, but in woes also' (2.4.301-2,306,410-2). Falstaff also makes repeated use of the phraseology of the ancient institution of the Church: '[I am] little better than one

of the wicked,' 'tis no sin for a man to labour in his vocation' (1.2.91-2,101-2) and 'thou art ... the son of utter darkness' (3.3.34-6). It may be that on the surface Falstaff's expressions serve a humorous purpose, but if Keats is right, Falstaff's use of the past also satisfies a psychological need. In order to compensate for the insecurity of the present, Falstaff surrounds himself as it were with relics from the past. Falstaff may mock those relics by misquoting and misapplying holy texts, by making fun of the sanctimonious phrases of Puritan preachers, and ridiculing the style of oldfangled plays, but he needs his jumbled collection of antiquities all the same. Without them he might be silenced; he might be forced to take a hard look at himself and the crumbling foundations on which his present life style is based. With them he can bolster his image of himself, reduce the threat of the outside world and view himself as part of a seemingly indestructible past. To be a forester of Diana is a good deal better than to be a lecherous crook who may be clapped into jail any moment. To be the former spells immortality.

Another character who badly needs images of stability is the king. The situation Henry finds himself in as the play opens could be sketched as follows. His subjects are discontented; wages are low, prices high; there is the threat of an energy crisis, because horsefodder has become too expensive; everything has taken a turn for the worse: 'this house is turned upside down since Robin Ostler died,' as one of the coachmen at Rochester says, using words that are equally applicable to the Rochester Inn as to England as a whole (2.1.9-10). The king's leadership has been shrewd, moderately effective, but inglorious. There are disturbances at



the Welsh and Scottish borders. The king is plagued by stories of his son's insubordination and Hotspur's triumphs: 'riot and dishonour stain the brow' of the former, while the latter is 'sweet Fortune's minion and her pride' (1.1.82,84). Rumour has it that Hal might even attempt to usurp the throne: the king has been told that Hal may be base enough to fight against him 'under Percy's pay' (3.2.126). There are the theoretical possibility of Mortimer's raising the embarrassing question of succession, and the real threat of the disgruntled Percies. The realm is infested with criminals. The king has been unsuccessful militarily; the play mentions that the king was personally involved in three campaigns against Glendower, all three of which ended in failure: 'I [have] sent him/Bootless home and weather-beaten back,' Glendower boasts (3.1.62-3). By contrast, Hotspur, a 'Mars in swathing clothes,' an 'infant warrior' (3.2.112-3) succeeded in beating back the Scots three times. Clearly the king must feel threatened. And like Falstaff he turns to the past for relief. To get the confusion in the realm and his inner confusion about Hal and Hotspur under control, Henry evokes a picture of himself as a crusader, a man who not only must have appeared to Henry as belonging to the past,⁵ but also a man who in his turn had made it his life's ambition to impose a perspective of immutability on the flux of the present by restoring to life an even more distant past. A crusader is someone who

⁵ Since the fall of Acre, well over a century before the events of 1 Henry IV, crusades to the Holy Land had ceased to be a practical venture. In Henry's days some 'pseudo-crusades' were fought on the continent, but no one would contemplate going to the Holy Land.

hopes to arrest the flow of time by establishing a link between the present and a series of events that took place at the beginning of the Christian era ('fourteen hundred years ago,' Henry points out, 1.1.26). The crusader attempts to model the present on the past by reconquering the Holy Land. Of course Henry does not for a moment seriously consider going on a crusade. We are not surprised therefore when the king cancels his plans for a crusade only moments after announcing them. Quite apart from the fact that a crusade to the Holy Land must have been a ridiculous anachronism in Henry's days, it would have been instant political suicide for Henry to leave England at a time when his kingdom is in a state of virtual collapse. But if Henry does not literally see himself as a crusader, he needs the aura of the great soldier of Christ: 'shaken' and 'wan with care' (1.1.1) Henry delves into the grab bag of history, searching for an image of stability. And what image would suit him better than that of a glorious warrior of the past who himself had striven (and not without temporary success) to articulate the present on the past?

In the confrontation with Hal the king again uses the past for the purpose of obtaining an illusion of fixed points of reference, only this time the past serves not just as an incentive, as in the previous examples, but also as a deterrent. Also in the scene in question it is not really the king who needs stability but his drifting son who lacks purpose and who cannot seem to decide between the attractions of the tavern world and his princely responsibilities. Henry offers Hal the choice between two connections with the past, two opposing historical

strands, two alternative modes of giving shape to the present with the aid of the past. First Henry gives a detailed account of his conflict with Richard, the point of the historical discourse being that if Hal persists in following his baser instincts, leading a life of vulgarity and mixing with the lower classes, the prince is bound to go the same way as Richard: 'As thou art to this hour was Richard then,' the king tells Hal (3.2.94). Like Hal, the king argues, Richard 'Enfeoff'd himself to popularity' and as a result 'was but as the cuckoo is in June, / Heard, not regarded' (3.2.69,75-6). And just as the populace did not respect Richard, 'Being with his presence glutt'd, gorg'd, and full' (3.2.84), so they will not accept Hal as king, being weary of his 'common sight' (3.2.88). Alternatively, Henry says, Hal can opt to follow in his father's footsteps. 'By being seldom seen,' the king explains, 'did I keep my person fresh and new.' 'My presence,' he adds, '[was] Ne'er seen but wonder'd at' (3.2.46,55-7). The implication is that by imitating his father Hal, like the king himself, will be stared at with 'extraordinary gaze, / Such as is bent on sun-like majesty' (3.2.59,78-9). Then the king fortifies his argument by introducing another link with the past. Pointing to Hotspur as an example, the king reminds Hal how much honour would be bestowed upon him if Hal were to play his proper role in life. The concept of honour in 1 Henry IV is an interesting one in the context of this discussion, not only because honour, like so many conceptions and ideals, is a traditional value and as such vaguely associated with the past, but also because in the play honour is literally seen as an hereditary quality which is handed down from one champion to the next and which thus provides continuity between

the past and the present. At later points in the play both Hal and Hotspur refer to the idea that one who defeats an opponent succeeds to the honours he had won. Thus Hal says that should he manage to subdue Hotspur, the latter 'shall render every glory up' (i.e. to Hal, 3.2.150). Similarly, addressing Hal at the moment of death, Hotspur bewails the loss of 'those proud titles thou [i.e. Hal] hast won of me' (5.4.78). In other words, in the world of 1 Henry IV to win honour is quite literally to shape the present according to the guide lines of the past. To gain honour is to add one's name to a long line of warriors, all of whom had repeated the past in the present. Having preserved silence through most of his father's speech, Hal, who up to this point in the play had appeared irresolute, now decides on a specific course of action. Without further shilly-shallying he picks the second of the two historical alternatives proffered by the king, thus giving form to an amorphous present with the help of the clear contours of the past. He is going to renounce his former life, play his designated role as prince, and join his father in the struggle against the rebels, not, as he had said before with typical flippancy, because the confusion of civil war might enable him to 'buy maiden-heads as they buy hob-nails, by the hundreds' (2.4.358-9), but because by worsting Hotspur, Hal may replace the 'northern youth' (3.2.145) as the latest exponent of a succession of renowned warriors. The shapeless present has been cast in the mold of the past.

Lastly there are the rebels whom for greater simplicity I shall treat as a group without paying much attention to individual differences.

Like Falstaff, the king and Hal, the rebels live in uncertainty. First, because their enterprise is a dangerous one. They cannot predict the outcome of their revolt. They have great difficulty organizing themselves. They do not trust each other and are never quite sure who will actually be present at Shrewsbury to meet Henry's army - and justly so, for many of the rebels fail to make an appearance. But what makes them even more uncertain is that they do not have a clear motive for rebelling against the king, at least not a motive that anyone would like to admit to himself. There are feelings of inferiority: 'we ... Live scandaliz'd and foully spoken of' (1.3.151-2). There is daredevilry: 'Send danger from the east unto the west, / So honour cross it from the north to south' (1.3.193-4). There is also the will to destroy: 'We must have bloody noses, and crack'd crowns' (2.3.94). There are unfounded suspicions: '[the king] doth begin / To make us strangers to his looks of love' (1.3.283-4): There is greed, as when two of the rebels quarrel about who is going to take possession of the small area between Wales and the river Trent: 'I'll cavil on the ninth part of a hair,' one of them says (3.1.134). There is also jealousy, personal ambition, frustration, moodiness and many other things, but what is conspicuously missing is a respectable motive. The king's description of the rebels hits the nail on the head: they are 'moody beggars starving for a time / Of pellmell havoc and confusion' (5.1.81-2). Falstaff too sums up the matter well in a sneering comment directed at one of the leaders of the uprising: 'Rebellion lay in his way, and he found it' (5.1.28). And so it is. The rebels have not one valid reason for causing havoc, and what is

more, they are aware that they have not. In that sense the rebels live in a present that is uncertain because they will not know it. It is a present that no one could live with because of its foulness. And to make the present tolerable, to smother up its ugliness the rebels turn to the past. Private ambition is dubbed honourable, i.e. an impermissible impulse is replaced by an historical value (for which see above):

'methinks it were an easy leap/To pluck bright honour from the pale-
fac'd moon ... So he that doth redeem her thence might wear/Without
corrival all her dignities' (1.3.199-200,204-5), one rebel says, using words that betray the underlying sentiment of megalomaniac greed. Also, the rebels conjure up the adventurous world of medieval romance with the obvious implication that through their reckless actions they may somehow become part of that world. Their cause, they say, is a 'matter deep and dangerous,'

As full of peril and adventurous spirit
As to o'er walk a current roaring loud
On the unsteadfast footing of a spear. (1.3.188-91)

The reference is to the perilous sword-bridges of outdated chivalric tales. Evidently there is no connection between the rebels' senseless desire to 'gall and pinch' (1.3.226) the king and the storybook world of an earlier age, but even so the image of the dauntless medieval knight performs the same function for the rebels as does the crusader image for the king: the past provides the rebels with a setting, it gives them a stage upon which to act, it lends stability to a chaotic present. Finally, the rebels entangle themselves in lengthy historical arguments, some of which purport to show that they champion the cause of Mortimer

who had historical rights to the throne (was Mortimer not 'proclaim'd, / By Richard that dead is, the next of blood?', 1.3.143-4), while others are meant to demonstrate that their rebellion is justifiable on the grounds that the king had maltreated them time and again since the days when they rescued him from banishment: they complain of 'unkind usage' and accuse the king of 'dangerous countenance' and 'violation of all faith and troth' (5.1.69-70). Their arguments, which Henry qualifies as 'hurlyburly innovations' (5.1.78) amount to very little though, and the rebels know it. Thus, after one rebel has just completed an involved account of all the occasions upon which the king had mistreated the rebels, and is then asked by Sir Walter Blunt, the king's negotiator: 'Shall I return this answer to the King?', the illogical answer is: 'Not so, Sir Walter. We'll withdraw awhile' (4.3.106-7). And as for Mortimer, the rebels have no intention of actually putting him on the throne. At best they will allot him one third of the kingdom. Also Mortimer himself does not appear interested in becoming king. Nowhere in the play does he so much as mention his rights to the crown. But if the historical arguments of the rebels do not stand scrutiny, they nevertheless evoke an historical ambience in which the rebels can move with a certain degree of confidence - at least as long as they are amongst themselves. (Think of the revealing phrase: 'We'll withdraw awhile.') Considered separately each of their arguments is invalid, but by their sheer volume these arguments collectively create the illusion that somehow the present actions of the rebels are the necessary result of a remote past. The least that can be said is that the past works

for the rebels. It enables them to pursue their destructive designs until the bitter end.

3.

So there it is. On the basis of commonly accepted definitions of historiography I first approached 1 Henry IV as history, i.e. a play which documents the facts of the past in order to contribute to man's knowledge of himself. My analysis was a frustrating experience, for the play gave me neither facts nor knowledge. As a result I began to question the validity of existing concepts of historiography. And gradually I came to see 1 Henry IV both as a play which deliberately undermines these widely accepted notions, and as a play which speaks of a very different conception of history, one which denies that history is a form of knowledge and instead proposes that history is a kind of lucky dip from which man, plagued by uncertainty about himself, brings up stories and images which make it possible for him to confer upon the shapeless present an appearance of stability and definite form. The stability remains an illusion, because the aims of the forester of Diana, the crusader and the courageous knight are violently at odds. But within the private world of each character the illusion works: the past enables a lewd villain to continue down the path of larceny and debauchery; it helps an embattled king to get hold of himself; a prince to find a purpose in life and become reconciled with his father; and a group of rebels to persist in causing disruption. Thus the historical perspective which

emerges from 1 Henry IV is double-edged:

1. The past cannot be accurately known,
nor do we really want to know it.
2. For better or for worse history is effective
only as a rhetorical device: it enables man
to give the present a semblance of shape.

CHAPTER FOUR

RICHARD II

Traditionally, the notion that disorder is the natural state of man has never been a dominant feature of Western historiography. History may present itself in the shape (or, more properly, shapelessness) of inexplicable accidents, coincidents, chaotic sequences of occurrences and so forth, but the historian of the West has usually worked on the assumption that the disorderly phenomenal surface of history is but an illusion beneath which there exists an orderly structured reality which it is his task to uncover. Thus the author of the Pentateuch does not record the wanderings of the Israelites for their own sake, but in order to reveal the divine plan which underlies the kaleidoscopic series of incidents from the flight out of Egypt to the crossing of the Jordan. Similarly, Virgil does not relate the voyage of Aeneas to entertain his readers with an odyssean adventure story, but to bring to light the divine design hidden under the episodic succession of events from the sack of Troy to the conquest of Latium. Moses and Aeneas suffer many setbacks on the way and neither takes the shortest route to the ultimate destination, yet both men are shown to be engaged in an unfaltering search for their promised lands. Illusory disorder is on the surface, while underneath there is an ordered reality.

Nor is the implicit distinction between a disorderly surface and an orderly substratum typical of providential historiography alone. Thucydides' configuration theory, which in the first half of our century was revived by Toynbee, also posits the existence of an underlying pattern.

In The Peloponnesian War, the secular Greek historian declares that, although he is interested in determining the facts of the war between Athens and Sparta (i.e. the phenomenal), his main concern is to set down once and for all a basic pattern of history. 'My work,' Thucydides says, 'was done to last for ever,' because the events described in it 'will, at some time or other and in much the same way, be repeated in the future.'¹ Similarly, Toynbee speaks of recurrent models which, in his view, can be detected in the history of man.² Needless to say, the pattern which Thucydides and Toynbee have in mind is of a different kind from that which their Jewish and Roman counterparts propose. The one is a pattern of endless repetition, the other one of uninterrupted growth. But in either case the central assumption is that history has some degree of structure, some design which is both concealed under and more real than the incidents that appear on the surface.

The four historians mentioned are representative figures who lived at different times and in different geographical areas, and as such may be said to exemplify the mainstream of Western historical thought. However, there has also always been a skeptical counter current to which belong those thinkers who hold that nothing exists beyond the purely phenomenal, that

¹ The Peloponnesian War, trans. Rex Warner (Harmondsworth, 1954), pp. 24-5.

² I am thinking of Toynbee's Hellenic, Chinese and Jewish models. Toynbee's most concise statement on the matter can be found in his own (rather than Somervell's) abridgment of the original twelve volume edition of A Study of History. See Arnold Toynbee and Jane Caplan, A Study of History (New York, 1975), pp. 15-72.

the disorderly phenomenal is the only reality. Particularly today that latter mode of thinking has (again) gained some acceptance. Behind it, I think, is the idea that the mind is incapable of distinguishing between man-made patterns and patterns that exist outside the mind; and the subsequent idea that given the uncertainty of our knowledge, patterns as such are suspect, because potentially, if not actually illusory. Another way of putting it would be to say that, according to the kind of skepticism that I am trying to describe, models and patterns are arbitrarily imposed on reality from without, while we cannot be sure to what degree they correspond to that reality. There is even the extreme possibility that that reality does not exist at all, because it may have been called into being by the models through which we think that we are describing it. In any case, the skeptic looks upon stable patterns with suspicion. To him they are an artificial element introduced from without by the unreliable thinking mind. To him they do not reveal the true state of man, but conceal it. Applied to the study of history, the skeptical approach amounts to a complete reversal of history in its classic form. The traditional historian takes orderly structures to be the 'real' which is to be uncovered from underneath the illusory phenomenal. His skeptic opponent takes the disorderly phenomenal to be the 'real' which has to be cleared of the illusory patterns that have been superimposed upon it.

All this may seem an odd preamble to a discussion of Richard II, but the fact is (a phenomenal non-illusory fact) that in the above I have given the reader a handle for laying hold of Shakespeare's history play. In Richard II, as I hope to demonstrate, Shakespeare adopts the

stance of the skeptical historian who has taken upon himself the twin tasks of showing up his classic counterpart's preoccupation with pattern, and of presenting historical reality as a series of disorderly phenomena which resist attempts at patterning. The majority of historians of Shakespeare's age fall into either of the two categories of traditional historiographers. There were the pious historians who established providentialist patterns, such as the patterns now known as the Yorkist, Lancastrian and Tudor myths. And there were also worldly-minded historians who detected in history patterns such as the Machiavellian model of interminable power struggle. But Shakespeare, I believe, stands apart from both groups. His is the boldness of the questioning historian who challenges the validity of the notion of underlying patterns as such.³

To illustrate my statements concerning the historical perspective implied in Richard II, and also to give the reader an insight into Shakespeare's method, I shall begin my analysis with the famous garden scene, located appropriately at the centre of the play. An awareness of the implications of that scene will take the reader to the heart of Shakespeare's Janus-faced presentation of history. Ostensibly the scene in question has nothing to do with history. However, we are explicitly asked to interpret the garden symbolically. Shakespeare himself draws a comparison between the state and the garden which is said to be a 'model' of 'the

³ Am I modernizing Shakespeare by implying that his mind conceived of models, patterns and world pictures as man-made, and therefore potentially illusory? The reader may consult Sigurd Burckhardt's analysis of the history plays, in which a similar suggestion is made. See Shakespearean Meanings (Princeton, 1968), pp. 144-205, but esp. pp. 144-6, 163-73 and 179-85.

whole land' (3.4.43). Given that the garden stands for society, it may by extension also stand for a general philosophical position, of which a particular view of society is one aspect and a corresponding view of history another. It is the latter aspect that I am interested in.

The scene is set in a postlapsarian garden as the references to the story of the Fall indicate. The gardener is called 'old Adam's likeness,' who has been seduced by 'Eve,' a 'serpent,' and has brought about 'a second fall of cursed man' (3.4.73, 75-6). Traditionally the most distinctive feature of the postlapsarian garden is that in it art and nature are diametrically opposed. Nature does not follow an internal organizational principle as it did before the Fall, but is essentially a chaotic jungle whose wild luxuriance can only be kept in check by artificial means. The setting then is one of external order and internal disorder, orderly appearance and disorderly reality. In this setting, not surprisingly, the gardener and a servant discuss the discrepancy between art and nature, pattern and phenomenal reality. According to the servant the garden had best be left untended in order that it more closely resemble the society which it symbolizes. 'Why should we keep law and form,' seeing that the land

Is full of weeds, her fairest flowers chok'd up,
Her fruit-trees all unprun'd, her hedges ruin'd,
Her knots disordered, and her wholesome herbs
Swarming with caterpillars? (3.4.40,41,44-7)

Clearly, the servant's point of view parallels that of the skeptic historian: if chaos is the order of the day, then chaos should be accepted as the only reality. Orderly patterns, under such circumstances, are illusory.

The gardener's position, on the other hand, corresponds to that of the traditional historian as seen through the eyes of the skeptic. The gardener exhibits a passion for pattern and regularity. 'Go, bind thou up young dangling apricocks,' he says to his servant, 'Give some supportance to the bending twigs' and 'Cut off the heads of too fast growing sprays,' 'while I will go root away/The noisome weeds' (3.4.29,32,34,37-8). But if the gardener wants to see order and pattern everywhere, he will have to bring them in from without. Shakespeare did not choose to place the gardener in an unfallen environment, in which order would have been the underlying norm and in which the gardener's situation would have been perfectly analogous with that of the traditional historian. Instead he placed him in a fallen garden, not neglecting to make us aware of the fact, so that we realize that in this garden order is not even latently present: it has to be enforced from outside and is therefore artificial by the standards of the skeptic. A comparison with Milton's prelapsarian garden is perhaps enlightening. In Paradise Lost, the unfallen garden is just slightly chaotic, and Adam and Eve have to work regularly to keep things under control, but their labour is primarily restorative because order is inherent in the garden. In Richard II, the gardener does not restore order, but imposes it on something decidedly disorderly. Order is not brought up from deep down, but pasted on from above. From the point of view of the skeptic, the gardener does to the garden what the classic historian does to history.

I now ask the reader to visualize the scene described above. First, think of the servant who without conviction goes about his task of

pruning the overgrown garden. And what the reader sees before him is Shakespeare, or his persona, in Richard II. In his dramatization of the events that took place during the last years of the reign of Richard, Shakespeare presents history as a basically disorderly process, that can be given a semblance of order, but never more than a semblance: History is like a wild garden, and no amount of pruning can conceal the fact. In Shakespeare's conception, what pattern there is in history, as in the fallen garden, is a surface illusion; beneath it is disorder. Shakespeare achieves his double-edged purpose as follows. On the one hand, he employs a number of literary and dramatic devices to create an illusion of order, stability and pattern. Thus he has his characters move about the stage like ballet dancers and express themselves in extremely controlled, balanced verse. Also, he shapes the play in such a way as to suggest harmony. On the other hand, he exposes the order, stability and pattern as deceptive. Partly, by making us aware that the movements are too restrained, the verse too delicate and the composition too neat to be credible. Partly, by letting us know through the text and the events of the play, that underneath the semblance of order there is a chaotic historical reality, that in Richard II the universe itself is in a permanent state of disorder.

Second, think of the gardener who eagerly pulls out weeds in the hope of bringing to the surface the pattern which he believes is hidden in the wilderness. And what the reader sees before him are Shakespeare's characters. Surrounded by chaos, they never cease to search for and somehow find stable structures which simply are not there except as projections of the mind. As participants in the events that form the subject of the play

they create a semblance of order, but the world they live in is a wild garden (though the characters, like the gardener, are reluctant to admit as much), and no amount of weeding on the part of the characters can conceal the fact from the audience. On the one hand, the characters claim to uphold conceptions and institutions that ideally should spell order, stability and pattern in a human society, such as the regal office, the sacredness of oaths and the right of inheritance. On the other, they unwittingly expose this order, stability and pattern as deceptive. Partly, because in the hands of the characters the stabilizing institutions are a mere show. Thus Richard has all the trappings of royalty, but none of the kingly virtues: he has a splendid court, but in order to be able to maintain it, plunges the country into a state of near bankruptcy. Partly, because the institutions in question make contradictory demands upon the individual, and therefore cancel each other out. Thus Richard, in seizing Gaunt's possessions, ruptures the right of inheritance on the grounds that he needs the money to carry out his royal duties, specifically the suppression of the Irish rebellion; while Bolingbroke, in returning from exile, breaks his pledge of obedience to Richard on the grounds that he has come to claim his inheritance. The remainder of this chapter will serve as a testing ground for the ideas developed above. I shall first examine the play from the point of view of the skeptic servant-playwright, then from that of the deluded gardener-characters.

The most striking feature of Richard II is undoubtedly the enormous discrepancy between the play's highly artificial orderly surface and its explosive content. Richard II is a time bomb in a gift wrapper.

The events of the play take place against a background of universal disorder. Chased away by meteors, 'the fixed stars of heaven' leave their proper sphere (2.4.9). The sea encroaches upon the land, while 'the silver rivers drown their shores' (3.2.107). Houses are deserted and have 'empty lodgings and unfurnish'd walls, / Unpeopled offices, untrodden stones' (1.2.68-9). Castles are in a state of disrepair: they have 'ruin'd ears' (i.e. loopholes) and 'tottered battlements' (3.3.34,52). The 'bay-trees' are 'all wither'd,' the 'fruit-trees' 'overproud in sap and blood' (2.4.7,3.4.58-9). Animals that are usually loyal now obey whoever cares to command them, as when Richard's favourite horse Barnaby proudly carries Bolingbroke, while its master is in prison. The world is out of joint.

In this setting of widespread disruption, England yields its possessions in France that in more glorious days had been 'achiev'd with blows' (2.1.254). Rebels 'stand out in Ireland' (1.4.38), while at home noblemen plot against their king. When Richard is in power, Northumberland and his fellow conspirators announce plans to shake off their 'slavish yoke' (2.1.291); after the take-over it is Bolingbroke's turn to become the target of a conspiracy. His cousin Aumerle, joined by churchmen, intends 'To rid the realm of this pernicious blot' (i.e. Bolingbroke, 4.1.325). Authority counts for nothing, for people, like dogs, are 'easily won to fawn on any man' (3.2.130). Political assassination, fierce quarrels, unfair trials and the break-up of families are the order of the day. Richard has had his uncle Gloucester killed; Exton murders Richard. Mowbray and Bolingbroke fling abuse at each other in front of Richard; later Aumerle and his enemies do the same in Bolingbroke's presence. Richard punishes

Bolingbroke for a crime which he did not commit; Bolingbroke has Richard's courtiers executed at a time when he has no legal status in England, let alone judicial authority. The Duchess of Gloucester is widowed as a result of the activities of Richard's henchmen; Bolingbroke is separated from his father, Richard from his queen; Bolingbroke's marriage plans are thwarted by Richard. Disorder reigns supreme.

Outwardly, however, everything is under control. The composition and language of the play, and the action on the stage are extremely orderly. But, as in the garden, order is evidently an illusion effected by a colossal pruning job which gives the garden a pleasant appearance to the casual observer, though if we look more closely we see the chaos underneath. We are in a wild garden in which the semblance of order mocks the 'real order' which the classic historian believes to be present in his illusory Eden.

First, a carefully worked-out mirror symmetry shapes the play, as if to indicate that the world of Richard II is in perfect harmony with itself. The mirror line coincides with the garden scene at the centre, so that the second half of the play repeats the first half in inverse order, in many cases transmuting tones and colours into their opposites as we move 'From Richard's night to Bolingbroke's fair day' (3.2.218). The action begins just after the murder of Gloucester, it stops after the murder of Richard who was responsible for Gloucester's death. In the play's opening scene Bolingbroke refers to Gloucester as Abel, in the final scene he associates Richard's murderer with Cain (1.1.104, 5.6.43). The trial of Mowbray and Bolingbroke, presided over by Richard, is paralleled by Aumerle's trial,

presided over by Bolingbroke (1.1,4.1). The abortive tournament at Coventry is matched by the jousts at Oxford in honour of the new king (1.3,5.2); Gaunt's parting from his son by Richard's parting from the queen (1.3,5.1); York's hesitant professions of loyalty to Richard ('how long/Shall tender duty make me suffer wrong,' 2.1.164-5) by his firm protestations of allegiance to Bolingbroke ('To Bolingbroke are we sworn subjects now,' 5.2.39); the plot against Richard by the plot against Bolingbroke (2.1,4.1) and so forth. A somewhat different symmetrical design is apparent in certain individual scenes, notably the first and third scenes of the opening act. In turn Mowbray and Bolingbroke are asked the same questions pertaining to their grievances, identity and loyalty: 'say who thou art,' 'Speak truly on thy knighthood,' 'wherefore com'st thou hither,' 'what's thy quarrel' (1.3.11,14,31,33). In reply they make identical gestures, swear the same oaths and give similar answers. If the issues at stake were not deadly serious, they might have been engaged in a charming pas de deux.

Second, the language of the play is consistently formal and restrained.⁴ All characters, gardeners and kings, noblemen and grooms, express themselves

⁴ My analysis of the language and dramatic action of Richard II derives from E.M.W. Tillyard, Shakespeare's History Plays (London, 1944), pp.245-52; and R. Ornstein, A Kingdom for a Stage: The Achievement of Shakespeare's History Plays (Cambridge, Mass., 1972), pp.103-6. Tillyard accounts for the contrast between form and content in Richard II by making the unverifiable claim that in Elizabethan eyes such a contrast was typical of Richard's medieval days. Ornstein, on the other hand, hits the nail on the head, I think, when he speculates that Richard II 'describes an ideal cosmological scheme in its poetry' and mocks that scheme in its events; that Richard II speaks of 'the universality of contention and change' and of 'man's will to discover pattern and stability in a universe of disorder and flux' (p.105).

in finely constructed conceits. The surface of Richard II has a smoothness and uniformity not found in any other Shakespearean play. What is particularly striking is that during moments of great emotional stress the language remains controlled. The passions rise to fever pitch but there is no corresponding suspension of formalities. For instance, when Bolingbroke hears that he is banished for ten years (it is not until later that his sentence is reduced), he says to Richard:

Your will be done; this must my comfort be,
That sun that warms you here, shall shine on me,
And those his golden beams to you here lent
Shall point on me and gild my banishment (1.3.144-7)

Scanning these verses and reading them aloud helps to show up their absurdity. The words fit the underlying sentiments as comfortably as a straitjacket. Who can doubt that Bolingbroke is enraged at Richard's flagrant injustice? Yet in his carefully phrased reply there is not the slightest hint of protest or menace. His father's reaction to the verdict is equally surprising. Gaunt's 'grieved heart' is mirrored 'in the glasses' of his eyes (1.3.208,9), but this is what he says:

Look what thy soul holds dear; imagine it
To lie that way thou goest, not whence thou com'st.
Suppose the singing birds musicians,
The grass whereon thou tread'st the presence strew'd,
The flowers fair ladies, and thy steps no more
Than a delightful measure or a dance. (1.3.286-91)

Notice in particular the reference to dancing where there should have been a reference to frenzied stamping. It is hard to think of a more formal farewell speech, especially in view of the fact that Gaunt expects to die before his son's return. In the parallel parting scene involving Richard and the queen the language is also exceedingly restrained. Again it is important to recall

the circumstances. Richard and his wife are obviously fond of each other; their separation is final and an ignominious fate awaits them both. Yet when they exchange kisses for the last time, they behave like two automatons:

Rich. One kiss shall stop our mouths and dumbly part;
Thus give I mine, and thus take I thy heart.
Queen Give me my own again; 'twere no good part
To take on me to keep and kill thy heart. (5.1.95-8)

These chilly couplets with their mechanical repetition of the rhyme words need no further comment, I trust. This is pruning with a vengeance where the branches will not be pruned.

Third, the dramatic action is just as formal and restrained as the language. Though in Richard II the world is in a state of upheaval, we get to see just two acts of violence in the entire play, and even those have a definite ceremonious quality. The first occurs in the deposition scene, in which Richard, after playing a game of tug-of-war with Bolingbroke over the crown ('On this side my hand, and on that side thine,' 4.1.183), smashes a mirror in frustration: an inconsequential, ritualistic gesture, appropriately described by Richard as a 'sport' (4.1.290). The second is Richard's murder; though, brutal as that scene may be, it too is a far cry from phenomenal reality. Richard dies in the manner of the hero of an opera who sings louder and better as his strength diminishes. 'Mount, mount, my soul,' Richard gasps, and then has enough breath left for a final couplet: 'thy seat is up on high, / Whilst my gross flesh sinks downward, here to die' (5.5.111-2). And apart from these two brief outbursts of violence there is nothing in the action on the stage to indicate that in Richard II the universe itself is in a shambles. Throughout the play the characters bow, kneel, hug the ground and stand up again. Mowbray stoops before Richard during the trial. In the lists

at Coventry, Richard descends from his throne to embrace Bolingbroke; both Mowbray and Bolingbroke bend down to kiss Richard's sword. On his return from exile Bolingbroke throws himself down before York. Face to face with Richard at Flint Castle, Bolingbroke kneels in a gesture of submission. After Aumerle has been exposed as a traitor, York, his wife and Aumerle himself stoop before Bolingbroke, and so on. Again a metaphor from ballet comes to mind. Were it not for the seriousness of the issues (duels, usurpation, treason), it would appear that the characters collectively perform an orderly dance, expressive of stable hierarchical principles. On the face of it, we are in a world in which everything is done in accordance with well-established rules of decorum and mutual respect. Even when the characters fling gages on the ground, openly threatening to take each other's lives, as they do abundantly in the two trial scenes, things never get out of hand. In fact, their challenges are slightly comical, as when Aumerle finds himself surrounded by so many foes that he runs out of disposable articles of clothing. 'Some honest Christian trust me with a gage,' he exclaims (4.1.83).

To sum up. In Richard II form and content are strikingly at odds. The harmonious symmetrical structure does not match the anarchic reality. The overly formal language in no way corresponds to the strong, often violent, emotions that lurk beneath the surface. And the restrained movements of the characters belie the disruptive nature of their actions. Outwardly the play suggests order, inwardly we sense disorder. Form is enforced upon, but wholly divorced from reality. Paradoxically, form does not give shape to reality, but distorts it. In Richard II form is as deliberate as it is

unreal. We do not believe that the historical situation which the play dramatizes is like a 'delightful measure or a dance,' or that there is anything harmonious or restrained about it. Instead we see a pandemonic historical reality upon which an illusion of pattern and stability has been superimposed. We are made to view history as the skeptic views it, and at the same time we are taught to be suspicious of the supposedly underlying patterns of traditional historiography.

The next point to be considered is what role the characters play. As indicated before, it is my belief that Shakespeare uses the characters both to fortify the historical perspective described in the preceding paragraph and elsewhere, and to convey that perspective in a different way. Perhaps I can clarify this statement as follows: (1) Shakespeare employs literary devices to evoke an illusion of order, while he has the characters use conceptions that are articulated on the assumption that order is the natural state of man. Instances of these conceptions will be discussed shortly. They include monarchy, the judiciary, family ties, the right of inheritance and the inviolability of oaths; (2) where the dramatist consciously shatters patterns by presenting them as false superstructures, the characters do the same unconsciously. The characters are the manipulating author's pawns who believe they see patterns and order which the play's universe of flux and disorder denies them; (3) Shakespeare smashes his own patterns by contrasting them with a disorderly reality, and also by making the patterns appear so artificial that they annihilate themselves. He smashes the characters' patterns either by juxtaposing them with a chaotic reality, or by having the patterns clash and destroy each other. The final

part of this chapter will be devoted to a discussion of a series of examples of each of the two last-named techniques.

The play's central figure is the embodiment of the contrast between a seemingly stable structure and chaotic actuality. Richard has all the accoutrements of the regal office which normally serves to provide stability to a community. Unlike his successor Bolingbroke, Richard is a legitimate king, 'God's substitute, / His deputy anointed in His sight' (1.2.37-8). He has a 'gorgeous palace,' a 'gay apparel,' 'figur'd goblets,' a 'sceptre' (3.3.148,149,150,151) and a 'crown.' He is surrounded by 'pomp, and majesty,' possesses 'manors,' collects 'rents' and 'revenues,' and issues 'acts, decrees, and statutes' (4.1.208,211,212,213). He also has a household of 'twelve thousand,' or, as is stated elsewhere 'ten thousand men' (4.1.171,283). But if Richard's title and royal attributes suggest order, the reality of his reign spells disorder writ large. Richard is implicated in the assassination of Gloucester. He exiles his troublesome cousin Bolingbroke for bringing up the Gloucester affair. Nor does he have scruples about inflicting a similar punishment on his loyal follower Mowbray. Richard turns a deaf ear to experienced counsellors like Gaunt and York, because he prefers to listen to the 'flattering sounds' and 'lascivious metres' of his cozening courtiers who bring him 'Report of fashions in proud Italy' (2.1.17,19,21). He is hated by the poor from whom he extorts 'grievous taxes' (2.1.246), and despised by the wealthy whom he forces to sign 'blank charters' (1.4.48) and from whom he obtains instant cash advancements in the form of 'benevolences' (i.e. forced loans, 2.1.250) or in exchange for promises of a share in the profits from the 'royal realm' (i.e. royal taxes, 1.4.45). But the 'burthenous taxes notwithstanding,' Richard is 'bankrout

like a broken man' (2.1.260,257). Not because the money is spent on such a legitimate enterprise as a war of conquest, for unlike his forebears Richard does not venture across the Channel. Instead the money is wasted on private splendour, so that, when Richard is called upon to quell an uprising in Ireland, he is compelled to seize the 'plate, coin, revenues and moveables' of the Lancasters (2.1.161), so as to be able to buy coats for his soldiers. In short, Richard is king in name only, not in substance. And it would seem that the play invites us to infer not just that Richard, considered as an individual, is a bad king, but that the entire system of monarchy is an illusion. Order, once again is an outward appearance which far from concealing the inner core of chaos, brings it out in stark relief.

A similar contrast between a suggestion of order and a reality of disorder is implied in the characters' use of the judicial system. Like the monarchy, the judiciary is an institution devised to exert a stabilizing influence on the commonwealth. In Richard II the judiciary, like the monarchy, is a mere name. The characters make a point of going through the motions prescribed by the legal system, but use the law to pursue their private destructive designs. In the play's opening scene, for instance, Richard sits in judgment on the Gloucester murder case. Bolingbroke is the heart-broken relative, who accuses Mowbray, among other things, of killing his uncle Gloucester whose blood, he says, 'cries ... To me for justice' (1.1.104,6). Mowbray is the maligned defendant who pleads innocent in the face of incriminating evidence. Richard is the incorruptible judge. Putting on an impressive display of impartiality, he questions Gaunt on the point of the sincerity of his son's motives, while assuring Mowbray that the close

family tie between himself and Bolingbroke will not 'partialize' his 'unstooping firmness' (1.1.120-1). He allows the two noblemen to state their respective cases frankly and in elaborate detail, and finally acts as a peacemaker begging the 'Wrath-kindled gentlemen' to 'Forget, forgive and be agreed' (1.1.152,6). To all appearances we are in a fairy-tale courtroom. However, justice is not as firmly enthroned as she seems to be, for what we are watching is not a fair trial but a complete inversion of justice. First, because the hearing has evidently been pre-arranged by Richard who earlier claimed want of 'leisure' (1.1.5) and now after considerable preparation stage-manages the proceedings from beginning to end; so much for Richard's impartiality. Second, because in accusing Mowbray of Gloucester's murder Bolingbroke is actually judging Richard who had 'caus'd his [i.e. Gloucester's] death,' as Gaunt explains later (1.2.39): 'in other words, Richard who acts as judge is really the accused; Bolingbroke who acts as plaintiff is judge, while Mowbray, who appears to be the accused and is ruthlessly victimized by Bolingbroke, has little to do with the whole affair. Third, because in the upshot Mowbray, who had protected Richard by keeping quiet about the latter's involvement in the case, is banished for life; Bolingbroke receives a reduced sentence, for Richard, in spite of claims of neutrality, cannot afford to offend Bolingbroke's influential father too much; and Richard, the criminal, goes scot-free. Fourth, because, confusingly, Bolingbroke could not care less about his uncle's death; he is not the revenging nephew, as he seems to believe, but is using the Gloucester affair as a means of getting at Richard; just as later in the play, at a time when the real culprit Richard has fallen into the hands of the outlaw Bolingbroke,

the latter uses the affair a second time to calumniate his innocent cousin Aumerle. The picture of chaos is complete.

A third stable structure which, like the 'tottered battlements' of Flint Castle, is in a state of collapse is the family. Blood relationship is usually some guarantee of stability, but not so in Richard II. The play is somewhat like a family party, because everybody is related to everybody else. The text is literally packed with terms denoting kinship. Throughout the play the characters insist on pointing out the exact relationship between them, using phrases like 'my father's brother's son' (1.1.117), 'thy sometimes brother's wife' (1.2.54), 'He is our cousin, cousin' (1.4.20), 'my brother Edward's son' (2.1.124), 'his father Edward's son' (2.1.125), 'It is my son ... Sent from my brother' (2.3.21,22), 'uncle me no uncle, / I am no traitor's uncle' (2.3.86-7), '[your] son, Aumerle, my noble cousin ... should have found his uncle Gaunt a father' (2.3.124, 6), 'Cousin, I am too young to be your father' (3.4.204), 'loyal father of a treacherous son' (5.3.58), and 'Uncle farewell; and cousin too, adieu: / Your mother well hath pray'd' (5.3.142-3). But at this particular family party the relatives do not have dinner and dances in a spirit of companionship. Instead they prey on one another, kill each other or are violently separated from one another. No textual support is needed to illustrate the point, I trust, since the preceding pages contain all the evidence. Once more, there is a telling contrast between an illusion of order evoked by the frequent references to consanguinity and a reality of disorder conveyed through the events of the play. Family, in Richard II, is a meaningless biological fact which confers no obligations or

responsibilities upon the relatives.

Monarchy, the judiciary and kinship are not the only stable structures to which the characters pay lip service while in effect they crush those very structures. Two more should be mentioned. I am thinking of the right of inheritance and the inviolability of oaths. Both concepts afford stability in that they stem the flow of time and freeze a state of flux. A person who swears an oath commits himself to a course of action from which he cannot swerve under any conditions. The right of inheritance is based on the paradoxical notion that time is a static continuum, that in the future things will be much the same as they are at present. In Richard II, however, oaths are as easily sworn as broken, while the right of inheritance, though invoked by several characters, is non-existent in practice. I shall not discuss separate examples of these latter two cases of a contrast between illusory stability and actual chaos. Instead I shall deal with them in the context of a discussion of the second method used by Shakespeare to shatter the characters' patterns.

In the world of the characters, stable structures are like a heap of sticks in a game of jackstraws. They all point in different directions. They are not hierarchically arranged. And it is virtually impossible to safely remove a stick without disturbing one or several of the others. Thus when Gloucester's widow asks Gaunt to revenge his brother's murder, she is trying to pull out the kinship stick. Gaunt and Gloucester were 'branches springing from one root' (1.2.12,13), she says. Gloucester's blood, she reminds Gaunt, 'was thine' and 'the bed ... that fashioned thee/Made him a man' (1.2.22,23-4). But since Richard was mainly

responsible for Gloucester's death, the duchess cannot extract the blood relationship stick without upsetting the stick marked 'monarchy.' In effect she is asking Gaunt to assassinate the king. She upholds one stable structure at the expense⁷ of another. Gaunt's position is just the reverse. He concentrates on the monarchy stick. 'I may never lift an angry arm' against my king, he exclaims, because he is 'God's substitute' (1.2.41,37). But in trying to take out the monarchy stick, Gaunt inevitably dislodges the kinship stick in that he allows his brother's murderer to go unpunished. The situation is typical of much in the play. Time and again we watch the characters attempting to rescue at least one stick only to find that their attempts invariably cause the dislocation of another. Here are some examples.

In the name of justice and to avoid the impression of partiality Gaunt ratifies Richard's decision to banish Bolingbroke for ten years. But in being just, Gaunt ignores the demands of kinship. Gaunt himself draws attention to the fact. Richard, he says, forced him to speak 'as a judge,' where he would have preferred to 'argue like a father' (1.3.237,8). 'Against my will,' he explains, 'I was too strict' (1.3.246,4). Justice and kinship are irreconcilable. When Richard decides to take the regal office seriously for once and prepares to crush the Irish uprising, he finds that he cannot raise an army because the state's coffers 'with too great a court/And liberal largess, are grown somewhat light' (1.4.43-4). He solves the problem by seizing Gaunt's 'plate, his goods, his money and his lands' (2.1.210). But in so doing he ruptures the inheritance pattern, as York points out to him. Gaunt's possessions should go to Bolingbroke,

York says, and in taking the latter's 'rights away' Richard 'takes from time/His charters, and his customary rights' (2.1.195-6). Monarchy and the right of inheritance clash. Bolingbroke returns from exile to claim his 'inheritance of free descent' (2.3.135), but coming back 'Before the expiration of thy time,' York tells him, 'amounts to gross rebellion and detested treason' (2.3.110,108), in that Bolingbroke breaks his pledge of obedience to Richard. In endorsing the right of inheritance Bolingbroke nullifies the value of oaths. As governor of England in Richard's absence it is York's task to confront the rebellious Bolingbroke. York agrees with Bolingbroke that according to the inheritance pattern 'the king hath wrong'd' (2.2.114) the Lancasters by seizing Gaunt's dukedom. He also believes that in accordance with his 'oath' it is his 'duty' (2.2.112,113) to take Richard's side and arrest Bolingbroke. Finally, the blood relationship pattern demands of York that he support both, since Richard as well as Bolingbroke are his 'kinsmen' (2.2.110). The three patterns are incompatible. In the end York washes his hands of the affair, thereby rupturing all three structures. Refusing to help either Richard or Bolingbroke, he says: since 'All is uneven,/And everything is left at six and seven' 'I do remain as neuter' (2.2.120-1, 2.3.158). On accidentally discovering his son's involvement in a conspiracy to kill Bolingbroke, York hurries to the king to impeach Aumerle. What motivates him is his view of the duties of a loyal subject. 'To Bolingbroke are we sworn subjects,' as he puts it (5.2.39). The duchess's entreaties that he spare the life of his only son by covering up Aumerle's part in the plot meet with an impatient 'Away, fond woman/Were he twenty times my son I

would appeach him' (5.2.101-2). York preserves the oath pattern, but destroys the kinship structure. His wife does just the reverse. We are in the universe of Arthur Rimbaud in which uncontrollable forces shatter the limits of things from within, thereby exposing those limits as false.

To sum up. In the world of the characters, conceptions which suggest stability are strikingly at odds with a chaotic reality. Richard calls himself monarch but causes havoc in his kingdom. There are trials but no justice. The characters are intimately related but fail to carry out their family obligations. Furthermore, though stable patterns exist in theory, they interact in such a way as to cancel each other out. The patterns do not combine into a single grand pattern, but are so hopelessly contradictory that in the end they all dissolve into a fluid indeterminate mass from which no normative principle emerges. With a certain desperation the characters clutch at straw patterns and conceptions that evoke an illusion of order, but the audience becomes increasingly aware of the disorder underneath. In Richard II history is like Richard's mangled body encased in the coffin which holds the centre of the stage in the play's final scene. The presumably ornamented coffin with its rigid shape is the handiwork of the traditional historian and the gardener-characters. But the coffin is form, not content. As such it is a painfully accurate symbol for the writings of the historian who in the eyes of the skeptic somnambulates through the nightmarish past forever designing tombstones, building caskets and embalming corpses.

AFTERWORD

What now? I have argued that Henry V, 2 Henry IV, 1 Henry IV and Richard II undermine the validity of basic historical conceptions. Henry V speaks of the inscrutability of history and the impossibility of distinguishing between fact and fiction. 2 Henry IV declares history incomprehensible by questioning the notions of causality, teleology, central figures and pivotal events. 1 Henry IV implies that though the past is unknowable, we nevertheless need the past because without it the present would be unbearable. And Richard II presents historical reality as essentially chaotic, while exposing whatever patterns man detects in history as illusory. In short, the histories do not leave a stone of the edifice of history standing, and for that reason present us with a momentous question: how are we to respond to this assault on the traditional concept of history? Should we take the plays literally and with Henry Ford conclude that history is bunk? Should we follow Foucault and attempt to develop a radically new historical methodology?¹ Or should we admire the histories for their skepticism on the questionable grounds that the skeptical stance is in itself commendable? Or should we perhaps call Shakespeare a 'poet of chaos'² whose work is in a perverse way

¹ Foucault is prepared to do away with traditional history completely. The major portion of The Archaeology is an attempt to develop a new historical vocabulary, based on notions which are roughly the reverse mirror images of conventional historical concepts.

² The phrase is John Bromley's. See The Shakespearean Kings (Boulder, Colo., 1971), p.1.

valuable to us because we live in an 'anguished, catastrophic period'?³ Should we become hypochondriac narcissists and say with Bromley and Artaud that because we live in a bad world it is good to have plays in which things are just as bad, if not worse? Or, lastly, should we dismiss the plays as unpleasant products of an immature mind? It seems to me that we should do none of these things. It is true that if we approach the plays as history, the histories are negative in their implications. Of the four plays 1 Henry IV alone suggests that something positive can be done with history. Though it must be added that this positive element is of ambiguous value: the past is just as useful for destructive as for constructive purposes. On the whole therefore, there is something definitely shocking about the plays: in effect we are asked to give up a whole series of concepts that over the centuries have been judged to be useful. But there is also another side to the picture which makes that aspect of the plays which I have explored immensely valuable. The histories do not give us yet more facts, causes, continuities, teles, heroes and climactic events. But unlike any other historical work that I know of, they make it possible for us to talk about history in terms of those basic historical notions precisely by destroying them, by defeating our expectations, by doing what as history plays they are not supposed to do. The histories give rise to the type

³ Antonin Artaud, 'The Theater and Cruelty,' in The Theater and its Double, trans. Mary C. Richards (New York, 1958), p.84.

of discourse that this thesis consists in; other historical works cannot produce that effect of themselves, because they secretly accept the absolute validity of the central notions of history. Like Foucault, another man of negative capabilities, Shakespeare gets us to think about what history is by wresting from anonymity, isolating, challenging and finally annihilating the basic assumptions of historiography - assumptions which we do not normally examine either because we are hardly aware of their existence, or because we prefer to think of them as self-evident a priori (facts, causality) or as hazy axiomatic articles of faith (teleology, man's centrality) rather than as analyzable assumptions. The histories pull us out of our torpor. By indirection they split up that nondescript something that we call history into describable entities. The histories lay the foundation for a positivist examination of the concept of history. And there is a second reason why we should value the plays. Of course, after the histories, we can no longer look upon the historian as a guardian of truth. In that sense we lose something: we can see historiography as only an ultimately arbitrary 'way of looking at things,' based on assumptions not absolutes. But in the loss lies our gain. At least we acquire an insight into how the historian in man operates. The histories tell us something about ourselves, and that is good, though the lesson is a hard one.

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