

# **The Making and Remaking of History in Shakespeare's History Plays**

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This work has not been submitted in substance for any other degree or award at this or any other university or place of learning, nor is being submitted concurrently in candidature for any degree or other award.

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### **Summary of Thesis:**

History is a problem for the history plays. The weight of 'true' history, of fact, puts pressure on the dramatic presentation of history. Not fiction and not fact, the plays occupy the interstitial space between these opposites, the space of drama. Their position between the binary opposites of fact and fiction allows the history plays to play with history. They view history as a problem to be solved, and the different ways in which each play approaches the problem of history gives us a glimpse of how they attempt to engage and deal with the problem of creating dramatic history.

Each history play rewrites the plays that preceded it; the plays present 'history' as fluid and shifting as competing narratives and interpretations of the past come into conflict with each other, requiring the audience to act as historians in order to construct their own narrative of events. In this way the plays dramatise the process of remaking history. This can be seen in the relationship between the two parts of *Henry IV*, which restage the same narrative in a different emotional key, and the way that Henry IV's retelling of the events of *Richard II* from his own perspective at the conclusion of *I Henry IV* forces the audience to re-evaluate the events of the earlier play, reinterpreting the dramatic past and imaginatively rewriting the play in light of the new perspective gained on events.

The history plays thus create a new, dramatic history, a history without need for historical precedent. The plays deliberately signal their departure from 'fact' through anachronism, deviation from chronicle history and wholesale dramatic invention. In this sense the plays deliberately frustrate audience expectations; knowledge of chronicle history does not provide foreknowledge of what will happen onstage. History in the

theatre is new and unpredictable, perhaps closer in spirit to the uncertainty of the historical moment rather than the reassuring textual narrative of the chronicles.

## Contents

|   |            |
|---|------------|
| <b>Introduction.....</b>  | <b>6</b>   |
| <b>Chapter I: History and the Histories.....</b>                    | <b>23</b>  |
| <b>Chapter II: The Making of History in <i>Richard III</i>.....</b> | <b>49</b>  |
| <b>Chapter III: <i>Richard II</i>: Competing Histories.....</b>     | <b>86</b>  |
| <b>Chapter IV: <i>1 Henry IV</i>: Echoes of History.....</b>        | <b>118</b> |
| <b>Chapter V: <i>2 Henry IV</i>: Rumours of History.....</b>        | <b>155</b> |
| <b>Chapter VI: Other Histories.....</b>                             | <b>197</b> |
| <b>Conclusion: A New History.....</b>                               | <b>224</b> |
| <b>Bibliography.....</b>  | <b>226</b> |

## Introduction

Anyone writing about Shakespeare's histories has to wrestle with certain intractable problems. The first of these is the issue of which plays to consider. Shakespeare wrote eleven history plays throughout his career, some of them by him alone, some in collaboration with other playwrights. Some remain of doubtful authorship, but are generally considered to be at least partly his work.<sup>1</sup> The history plays, and in particular the first tetralogy, thus present us with a patchwork history, comprised of different writers and different kinds of play.

Shakespeare's histories are generally grouped into two major sequences,<sup>2</sup> with some plays existing outside this pattern. The so-called first tetralogy consists of the three parts of *Henry VI* and *Richard III*; the second tetralogy comprises *Richard II*, the two parts of *Henry IV*, and *Henry V*. This seemingly straightforward arranging of the plays itself causes problems, partly because the second tetralogy, although written later, depicts events that occurred before the first tetralogy. This means that Shakespeare completed his first history play sequence with *Richard III* and then began another, earlier, sequence starting with *Richard II*. Such an ordering could be taken to indicate that initially Shakespeare did not plan to continue the series.<sup>3</sup> However, the placing of plays in two distinct tetralogies also raises the problem of the plays which do not fit into this pattern. *Edward III*, *King John* and *Henry VIII* are all chronologically distant from the plays

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<sup>1</sup> These include *Edward III*, the three parts of *Henry VI* and *Henry VIII*. See Giorgio Melchiori, 'Introduction', William Shakespeare, *Edward III*, ed. Giorgio Melchiori (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 14 and John Margeson, 'Introduction', William Shakespeare, *King Henry VIII*, ed. John Margeson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), pp. 4-5 for more information.

<sup>2</sup> Graham Holderness, *Shakespeare: The Histories* (London: Macmillan Press Ltd., 2000), pp. 1-2.

<sup>3</sup> Nicholas Grene argues that Shakespeare conceived the first tetralogy as a sequence of plays, but that the second tetralogy, initially at least, was not planned as such. Cf. Nicholas Grene, *Shakespeare's Serial History Plays* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), p. 247.

which constitute the tetralogies, and clearly do not readily fit into any history play sequence. In turn, this raises the question of whether the plays actually form a sequence at all, or whether critics have imposed a historical structure on a series of ‘essentially disaggregated’ plays.<sup>4</sup>

There are, in fact, compelling arguments for treating each play as a unique, stand-alone entity with only tangential links to other plays. For example, Richard of Gloucester, later Richard III, appears to be a completely different character in *Henry VI* than he is in *Richard III*. Similarly, it is hard to reconcile the tongue-tied Henry V with the quick-witted Hal who so ably matches wits with Falstaff. The disconnection between the two versions of the same character is so marked as to suggest that each play occurs in its own continuity, completely separate from the other histories. Even those plays which appear to continue a single narrative, such as the two parts of *Henry IV*, seem to be separated from the plays which precede them.<sup>5</sup> This apparent disjunction between plays is complicated, however, by the fact that characters often look back at the history previously dramatised, explicitly referring to the events of previous plays. This would appear to fix the plays in the same continuity, but the accounts of the dramatic past related onstage often differ from what was actually dramatised in the earlier plays. Are the plays misremembering or deliberately reconstructing the past? Or are they referring to a different past, one similar to but ultimately quite different from the one the audience has seen? The relationships between the plays are not as straightforward as they first appear; the dramatic history they present is complex, multifaceted and contradictory, but also one that deeply involves the audience.

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<sup>4</sup> Holderness, *Shakespeare: The Histories*, p. 8.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Grene, *Shakespeare's Serial History Plays*, p. 27.

Faced by such questions it is tempting, of course, to assign an overarching narrative to the histories, but any narrative imposed on the plays proves illusory at best. The two tetralogies are so different in tone, style and themes that it is difficult to see any concrete links between them.<sup>6</sup> The first and second tetralogies appear to be relating two entirely different kinds of history as well as different periods of history. Taken together the plays do not readily constitute a unified whole; indeed, ‘disaggregation’ appears to be the hallmark of the histories. Instead of approaching the tetralogies, then, as a grand narrative, with all the assumptions about dramatic history which such an approach entails, or examining each play as an isolated history bearing tangential connections to other plays, I seek to show that the plays are closely related but ultimately singular narratives that nevertheless look to a common past variously related. Because I do not wish to present a grand narrative, I have limited my main discussion to *Richard III*, *Richard II* and *Henry IV*, though in the final chapter I look across Shakespeare’s other histories.

My main thesis is that each history play refers back to the plays that precede it, creating a web of dramatic history which appears to link the plays together as a tapestry. Although it is possible to read the later plays as presenting a new history emerging out of the old, providential history of the first tetralogy, this linear approach ignores the fact, for example, that the second tetralogy is set before the first, and that any movement to a new history will be temporary at best. An audience viewing the triumphs of Henry V at Agincourt thus does so with the knowledge that his son will squander the territories Henry has fought so hard to gain, but also possibly with its own memory of the past dramatised in the first tetralogy. There is thus a kind of circularity of history in the plays and their performance. However, while the plays do not dramatise a new kind of fictional

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<sup>6</sup> Cf. Grene, *Shakespeare’s Serial History Plays*, pp. 25-7.



history emerging from the old, I will argue that they do show Shakespeare's evolving ideas about history, dramatic history and what it entails to transform one into the other. Critics have largely read the plays in terms of Elizabethan historiography and early modern conceptions of history. While I take account of this research in my thesis, I argue that a new approach is needed, one that examines the problems of history in Shakespeare's text through the lens of modern historiographical theory and criticism such as Hayden White's theory of emplotment and Michel de Certeau's ideas about the writing of history in order to arrive at a new understanding of how history is made and remade in the plays.

### **Earlier Critical Readings**

Critical perspectives on Shakespeare's histories have altered greatly with the passage of time. E. M. W. Tillyard, writing in 1944, analysed the history plays in terms of order and chaos, seeing Shakespeare as deeply committed to upholding Elizabethan principles of order. He argued that 'the picture we get from Shakespeare's Histories is that of disorder',<sup>7</sup> going on to say that:

Behind disorder is some sort of order or 'degree' on earth, and that order has its counterpart in heaven. This assertion has nothing to do with the question of Shakespeare's personal piety: it merely means that Shakespeare used the thought-idiom of his age.<sup>8</sup>

Tillyard's argument that the histories reflect a pervasive Elizabethan concern for order is now largely regarded as a one-dimensional reading of the plays which does not fully

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<sup>7</sup> E. M. W. Tillyard, *Shakespeare's History Plays* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1944), p. 15.

<sup>8</sup> Tillyard, *Shakespeare's History Plays*, p. 16.

engage with the manifold and complex concerns of the drama. His preoccupation with order and disorder stemmed from the circumstances in which he wrote, as Catherine Belsey observes:

E. M. W. Tillyard [...] read a number of Renaissance plays to find a commitment to order. [...] This investment in the past was symptomatic of an anxiety about the present, the crisis of the postmodern, precipitated by the Second World War.<sup>9</sup>

Reading the plays as comforting narratives of order eventually triumphing over chaos, Tillyard contended that 'if the Elizabethans believed in an ideal order animating an earthly order, they were terrified lest it should be upset, and appalled by the visible tokens of disorder that suggested its upsetting'.<sup>10</sup> This description reflects Tillyard's thinking far more than that of the Elizabethans. Shakespeare's history plays do not reflect the Manichean dichotomy Tillyard sees; chaos and disorder are the pattern of history in these plays, even its very core. Although some of the plays, such as *Henry VI* and *Richard III*, appear to relate a providential history, this teleological narrative is in practice deeply ambiguous. It is unclear whether the events onstage actually are providential in nature, or whether they are constructed as such by the retrospective recasting of events into a narrative mould, in this case the narrative of providential redemption. Even if it is accepted that the first tetralogy relates a providential narrative, this cannot be said of all the plays. Some plays, like *King John*, appear to reject the idea that events have any meaning at all, but present them as being merely the natural consequences of actions previously taken, or the unintended results of accident and happenstance.

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<sup>9</sup> Catherine Belsey, *Shakespeare in Theory and Practice* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2008), pp. 120-1.

<sup>10</sup> E. M. W. Tillyard, *The Elizabethan World Picture* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1943), p. 16.

Perhaps the most influential part of Tillyard's analysis is his contention that 'Shakespeare conceived his second tetralogy as one great unit',<sup>11</sup> an assertion that continues to divide critics. Nicholas Grene, for example, argues that Shakespeare wrote the histories in a 'tentative progression, taking it one play at a time rather than planning a series as such', adding that this pattern 'continues through the second history play sequence'.<sup>12</sup> John D. Cox and Eric Rasmussen raise a number of questions about Tillyard's conception of the plays, stating:

It is not clear that Shakespeare's plays were intended as a cycle. If they were, why did Shakespeare begin in the middle (with the death of Henry V) and proceed to the end, then go back to the beginning (the overthrow of Richard II) and proceed to the middle?<sup>13</sup>

There are no easy answers to these questions, if there are any answers at all. Early critics like Tillyard tend to see the first and second tetralogy as part of one great sequence, while recent criticism, with some exceptions, has argued that the plays are essentially, as Graham Holderness puts it, 'disaggregated'. Holderness argues that separating Shakespeare's histories into two tetralogies limits the interpretations that can be drawn from the plays:

Once the histories had been collected into compilation and metanarrative, the disaggregated units reorganised into a linear temporal sequence, the overall framework began to prescribe certain interpretative horizons.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Tillyard, *Shakespeare's History Plays*, p. 240.

<sup>12</sup> Grene, *Shakespeare's Serial History Plays*, p. 27.

<sup>13</sup> John D. Cox and Eric Rasmussen, 'Introduction', William Shakespeare, *King Henry VI, Part 3* (London: Arden Shakespeare (Third Series), 2001), p. 109.

<sup>14</sup> Holderness, *Shakespeare: The Histories*, p. 9.

It is these interpretative horizons that I intend to challenge in my thesis. I argue that each history play rewrites the plays that came before it, and that the critical commonplace of grouping the histories into tetralogies does not therefore fully take into account the complex and shifting relationships between the plays as they formulate their history. I argue that Shakespeare wrote the plays as individual histories, with no immediate intention of placing them into a sequence. However, the constant references they make to the events of previous plays and the way they look forward to the dramatic future makes it clear that they do form a sequence, however loose. In particular, the way events from previous plays are recalled and rewritten onstage links the plays in a patchwork, chaotic history which subverts the linear narrative one might expect from an orderly sequence of plays. History is made in one play and then remade in the next. The contradictory histories of the chronicles are presented in a new way, in a form unique to drama.

Tillyard argues that the two tetralogies, taken together, form a single narrative relating England's emergence from political chaos to divine order. In particular, he sees the second tetralogy as dramatising the transformation of England from the Middle Ages to Elizabethan modernity, an argument briefly summarized by James L. Calderwood thus:

Tillyard regarded the transition from *Richard II* to *Henry V* as an epic representation of England's passage from medieval to Renaissance culture, from feudal monarchy to Machiavellian realpolitik.<sup>15</sup>

Although it is tempting to impose an overarching narrative on the plays, their essentially singular nature makes it difficult to conceive of the separate, loosely connected manifold

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<sup>15</sup> James L. Calderwood, *Metadrama in Shakespeare's Henriad: 'Richard II' to 'Henry V'* (Berkeley and London: University of California Press, 1979), p. 1.

histories they relate forming a single dominant narrative. Imposing a grand narrative on the tetralogy is problematic in other ways too. The plays themselves evince a strong distrust of grand narratives and take pains to complicate any conception of 'history' as a singular narrative; they constantly emphasise that there can be no single, dominant history which will capture the past in its entirety. Tillyard seems to be working against this notion; his interpretation of the plays is diametrically opposed to the view of the past the plays appear to convey. This reading has been challenged by critics such as Holderness, who argues that, in *Richard II*, 'the victorious forces are not new but old: feudal reaction rather than political revolution'.<sup>16</sup> In this reading the play does not relate the death of the old, feudal ways and the birth of a Machiavellian modernity; instead, it dramatises the crushing of a new political order by old reactionary forces. Attempts to read a single, dominant narrative in the plays are, however, ultimately futile; the histories Shakespeare dramatises are too complex, multifaceted and multifarious to easily be contained in a single 'history'. Similarly, the idea that the histories dramatised the transformation of England from chaos to order, or indeed that they dramatised any transformation at all, is restrictive in approach.

In contrast to Tillyard's providential view of the histories, Lily B. Campbell, writing in 1947, saw Shakespeare's use of history as political and argued that the plays alter history in order to better address the political problems of the time. She suggested that 'while the larger outlines of historical fact must be preserved to be convincing, the details are often altered to make them more reminiscent of the present', going on to stress the importance of 'the effect of contemporary political situations upon the selection and

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<sup>16</sup> Graham Holderness, *Shakespeare Recycled: The Making of Historical Drama* (London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1992), p. 71.

alteration of historical fact in the plays'.<sup>17</sup> This interpretation has been largely rejected by recent critics. Although the plays, as all fictions must, reflect the time in which they were written, Campbell over-emphasises the influence of the contemporary political situation on Shakespeare. Her argument that he altered the facts of history to reflect the contemporary political situation does not seem to be borne out by the evidence. It is my contention that Shakespeare alters the 'facts' of history primarily to signal the departure of the plays from the restrictions of chronicle history. The plays are examinations of what it entails to 'make history'; viewing them as political parables not only restricts their interpretive range but seems to diminish the power of the drama.

Campbell's contention that Shakespeare alters the details of the past to suggest the Elizabethan present, on the other hand, is broadly correct; this is particularly visible in *Henry IV*, where Hal's tavern companions exist in an overtly anachronistic early modern world. I argue that the deliberate anachronisms in the plays distance the audience from the 'history' the plays present, breaking the theatrical illusion and reminding them that they cannot escape their place in the present. The illusion of contact with the vanished past is shattered. Instead, the plays occur in a 'nowhere space', not quite in the past and not quite in the present. They occur, that is, in the unreal place of drama.

Robert Ornstein, writing in 1972, departed from the conservative readings of the plays by Tillyard and Campbell. He argued that the critical focus on the plays as offering Elizabethan orthodoxy limited the scope for analysis, suggesting that:

The scholarly insistence on the orthodoxy of the History Plays would be more tolerable if it were tinged with some regret that the Soul of the Age lent his great

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<sup>17</sup> Lily B. Campbell, *Shakespeare's "Histories": Mirrors of Elizabethan Policy* (London: Methuen, 1964), p. 125.

art to doctrinaire purposes. But instead of regret, there seems to be pleasure in the scholarly discovery of the orthodoxy of this character's thought and the 'correctness' of that character's acts.<sup>18</sup>

Ornstein rightly identifies the conservative tone and staid assumptions that dominated critical readings of the histories after Tillyard. Invariably, such readings of the histories focused on a very small element of the plays, neglecting the variety and diversity of narrative voices which make Shakespeare's histories so unique. Shakespeare does far more in the histories than merely reflect the dominant Elizabethan values of his time. His focus on competing and dissenting voices, his questioning of the history he dramatises and the plethora of narratives he presents, all indicate that 'history' is not a singular orthodox narrative in these plays. As A. P. Rossiter, one of the few dissenters from the Tillyard line, put it:

Looked at *one* way, the Histories present a triumphal march of the destinies of England. But look at them another way – at the individual lives of men and women – and your conclusion will be [different].<sup>19</sup>

Selecting a single, 'correct' interpretation from the plethora of competing narratives ignores the manifold versions and views of the past presented in the plays and circumscribes their deeper understanding of the process of history, of what writing the past entails, that the plays encourage the audience to find. It is this larger problem of what is involved in the making of history that is the subject of my thesis, and which I explore in more detail below. Shakespeare's histories relate many different, and sometimes

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<sup>18</sup> Robert Ornstein, *A Kingdom For A Stage: The Achievement of Shakespeare's History Plays* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1972), p. 3.

<sup>19</sup> A. P. Rossiter, *Angel With Horns: Fifteen Lectures on Shakespeare*, ed. Graham Storey (London and New York: Longman, 1961), p. 41.

competing, narratives, and the plays are a great deal more cynical about history, and the politics of history, than many earlier critical readings admit.

### **More Recent Criticism**

If Tillyard was strongly influential on earlier criticism, Jan Kott's argument that the history plays dramatise the never-ending (and ultimately doomed) struggle to gain and maintain power and his contention that 'for Shakespeare history stands still' has been influential for many subsequent readings and productions of the plays.<sup>20</sup> Kott sees history in the plays in terms of stagnation and repetition:

Every chapter opens and closes at the same point. In every one of these plays history turns full circle, returning to the point of departure. These recurring and unchanging circles described by history are the successive kings' reigns.<sup>21</sup>

This idea that history turns full circle in the plays is valuable, but I believe that Kott's reading can be taken further: in this thesis I will argue that dramatic history is characterised more by rewriting rather than by repetition. Each history play, that is, rewrites the plays that preceded it. *Richard III*, for example, rewrites the *Henry VI* plays, *Henry IV* rewrites *Richard II* and *Henry V* rewrites all the history plays that come before it. The recurring narratives described by Kott are, in reality, anything but 'unchanging'. Shakespeare's history is always shifting; history does not repeat itself in the history plays.

Kott's argument, and its limitations, are summarised by Ronald Knowles thus:

Jan Kott's conception of Shakespeare as the dramatist of bleak and bloody political power struggle – a mechanism of history symbolized for Kott by the

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<sup>20</sup> Jan Kott, *Shakespeare Our Contemporary*, trans. Boleslaw Taborski (London: Methuen, 1964), p. 6.

<sup>21</sup> Kott, *Shakespeare Our Contemporary*, p. 6.



‘staircase of power’ which all ascend only to topple off as those behind clamber bloodily upwards. [...] Its limited ideas are no more than extremely diluted and dehistoricized versions of Boccaccio’s *de casibus* representation of the rise and fall of Fortune’s wheel, Machiavellian ‘policy’ and Hobbesian power politics.<sup>22</sup>

Knowles’ focus on the limitations of Kott’s argument raises some of the issues inherent in his conception of the plays. Kott’s interpretation of the histories, as influential as it has been, offers a very limiting view of ‘the mechanism of history’ – his reading of the plays as dramas of political struggle, although offering some valuable insights, ignores the multifaceted threads of history which make up the plays, substituting instead a single, restricting interpretation of a single history, ignoring the richness of the multiple histories that the plays present.

As Knowles notes, Kott’s reading is largely dehistoricised. By contrast, Phyllis Rackin describes her analysis of the plays as ‘an attempt to historicize Shakespeare’s historical practice – to situate his English history plays in the context of Tudor historiography, in his theatre and in his world’.<sup>23</sup> She emphasises the theatrical nature of Shakespeare’s history, noting that ‘Shakespearean texts are reconstituted as playscripts designed for performance in a volatile theatrical setting, where the erasures in the official historical record could be restored and the voices silenced by the repressions of the dominant discourse could speak and be heard’.<sup>24</sup> My thesis expands upon Rackin’s contention that the stage offered a place where the erasures of the historical record could be reconstructed through the medium of drama. Rackin describes her analysis as

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<sup>22</sup> Ronald Knowles, ‘Introduction’, William Shakespeare, *King Henry VI, Part 2*, ed. Rowland Knowles (London: Arden Shakespeare (Third Series), 2001), p. 13.

<sup>23</sup> Phyllis Rackin, *Stages of History: Shakespeare’s English Chronicles* (Ithaca and New York: Cornell University Press, 1990), p. ix.

<sup>24</sup> Rackin, *Stages of History*, p. xi.

‘resituating Shakespeare’s history plays in terms of [...] oppositional histories and representing them as a series of negotiations between separate, and often opposed, discursive fields’.<sup>25</sup> I later draw on Rackin’s view of the plays as negotiations between separate discursive fields, applying her ideas to the ever-shifting oral accounts of the past which fill the history plays. The tension between the history related onstage and what ‘actually happened’ in an earlier play creates, I propose, a new kind of history, a liminal history which exists in the spaces between the narratives. This is one of the threads of history which this thesis will attempt to unpick.

Writing, as Rackin did, in the 1990s, Graham Holderness describes his approach to the plays as ‘the reading of Shakespeare’s history plays as history’, going on to argue that ‘the accepted definitions of these plays’ historical status can be extended so far as to claim that they represent a type of Renaissance historiography’.<sup>26</sup> As with Rackin, I draw on this argument and expand it, arguing that Shakespeare’s histories create a new, dramatic history, which ultimately supersedes the chronicles. This new form of historiography necessarily deviates from chronicle history, emphasising the unpredictable nature of events and placing the audience in a position of uncertainty as to what will happen onstage. In this way the theatre becomes the place of a new kind of history, a history not completely known.

As noted above, the thesis draws on elements of Holderness’ and Rackin’s approach to the plays, but the crux of my analysis will be based on James L. Calderwood’s view of the histories as ‘a relatively self-contained meta-drama in which

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<sup>25</sup> Rackin, *Stages of History*, p. xi.

<sup>26</sup> Holderness, *Shakespeare Recycled*, p. 1.

the playwright subjects the nature and materials of his art to radical scrutiny'.<sup>27</sup> While I agree with this view, I suggest that Calderwood's method does not go far enough; the meta-drama in the histories is more complex than has often been suggested since it includes elements of intertextuality. 'History' in the plays becomes an intertextual dramatic history which relies on knowledge of previous history plays for its full meaning. Shakespeare examines how history is made and remade, in the theatre and in reality. The history plays are multi-layered explorations of history, scrutinising how the past is created, recreated and understood by successive generations. They are interrogations of what it means to stage the past.

The plays' complex intertextuality can be seen in the way that they encourage the audience to recall incidents and conversations from previously written plays, compare them to what is being related onstage, and realise the differences between them. In addition, my argument that the histories rewrite the plays that came before them suggests a far greater degree of intertextual meta-theatrical engagement than has previously been thought by critics. I explore the implications of this new way of engaging with the drama. In general, critics have looked at the plays from the outside, but I wish to look at how they generate history within this dramatic framework and how they manage the history they create. The histories are far more than dramatised versions of the chronicles; their concern with history, with how it is told and retold, and their examination of their place in this retelling all suggest that the plays form a remarkable tapestry of dramatised events caught up in the process of making history. I summarise this process briefly below before going on in subsequent chapters to look at the problem of history and the individual plays.

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<sup>27</sup> Calderwood, *Metadrama in Shakespeare's Henriad: 'Richard II' to 'Henry V'*, p. 1.

## **The Plays**

Shakespeare's histories dramatise many different forms of history, and ways of making it. *Richard III* engages with several different modes of history at once, juxtaposing oral history with written history and presenting the audience with several different versions of an ultimately unknowable historical past. The line between truth and fiction is blurred in the play; not only do characters lie to each other and themselves about what happened in the past, but historical figures that were in reality dead at this time such as Margaret or Henry VI are anachronistically present onstage. Their ghostly ahistorical presence onstage unsettles the audience's expectations and fixed conception of events and blurs the time frame of the play. The play reminds the audience that they are watching a play of events, and a play on events. It is fiction that occurs before them, not history.

Abandoning the packed history of *Richard III* for a more singular history, *Richard II* stands apart in the canon. Shakespeare faced several problems when writing the play. After finishing the narrative of the 'Tudor myth' with *Richard III* he now had to return to the beginning, to unpick the strands of history he seemed to tie together at the conclusion of *Richard III*. In contrast to the plays that precede and succeed it, *Richard II* is a curiously constrained play, seemingly empty of the history that bursts out of *Richard III* and *Henry IV*. Past events are endlessly discussed, interpreted and reinterpreted in the play, but the momentous events that make up the drama are dealt with in a curiously flat manner; almost none of the characters in the play seems to appreciate that the events depicted are of any real importance. The future is simultaneously absent and present in *Richard II*. It is always on the horizon, always just about to arrive, while history in the

play is a series of possibilities. Indeed, there is almost a sense that the play depicts an empty world waiting to be filled with history. This seeming emptiness is deceptive, however. Underneath the calm surface of the play Shakespeare examines the issues of perspective, truth and rumour, issues which he will expand upon in *Henry IV*, a play free from the restrictions imposed on *Richard II*.

To 'history' is an active process in *1 Henry IV*; it requires the audience to think like historians, comparing and contrasting different accounts and interpretations of the dramatic past previously dramatised and deciding which is most likely to be accurate. In the way that it encourages the audience to compare the accounts of the past related onstage with the past that was previously dramatised in *Richard II*, *1 Henry IV* is the first of Shakespeare's history plays that involves the audience in the making, or perhaps remaking, of history. This rewriting of history is the major theme of *1 Henry IV*; almost all the main characters rewrite history for their own ends, 'redeeming time' by recasting the past in a different, more flattering, light.<sup>28</sup> This creates a tension between images of the past imagined through language and the 'reality' of events, a tension that is only clearly visible within the larger context provided by seeing the play in light of the events of *Richard II*.

*2 Henry IV* examines how history is created from rumour, distortions and misunderstanding. Rumour's sardonic rewriting of *1 Henry IV* in the Induction precedes the rewriting and restaging of *1 Henry IV* which will occur in the play as a whole. The character of Rumour makes clear the ease with which the past can be written and rewritten at will, a theme that dominates the history plays. Indeed, Rumour's role in the

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<sup>28</sup> William Shakespeare, *The History of Henry the Fourth*, I. ii. 195, in *The Norton Shakespeare*, ed. Stephen Greenblatt, Walter Cohen, Jean E. Howard, Katherine Eisaman Maus (New York and London: Norton, 1997). All further references are to this edition and are given in the text.

Induction can be seen as analogous to Shakespeare's role as dramatist. The theme of rewriting history is reinforced by the structure of the play: Rumour, in the Induction of 2 *Henry IV*, tells the audience how history is made from lies, distortions and unconfirmed reports and the play itself shows this process actually occurring.

Henry's recollection of Richard's words to Northumberland in III. i. is one of the few times in the history plays where a previously dramatised scene is remembered and restaged in such vivid detail. His account is notably illuminating for its subtle elisions, offering a glimpse into the hidden history behind his words. Perhaps for Henry the history that actually occurred is a base on which to construct (knowingly or unknowingly) a false narrative of events. Unconvincing in his attempts to rewrite the past, Henry creates a kind of anti-narrative as the audience reads a different, opposing history concealed in the absent places in his account. While appearing to relate one narrative, he in fact relates an entirely different history, reflecting the main project of Shakespeare's history plays as an evolving analysis of the way history is made and remade. Before turning to explore the plays in more detail, however, it may be helpful to take a wider look at the critical problems of writing about 'history'.

## **Chapter I: History and the Histories**

History is a problem for the history plays. The weight of 'true' history, of fact, puts pressure on the dramatic presentation of history. Not fiction and not fact, the plays occupy the interstitial space between these opposites, the space of drama. Their position between the binary opposites of fact and fiction, however, allows the history plays to search out history. They view history as the history play itself, and the different ways in which each play approaches the problems of dramatising history gives us a glimpse of how they attempt to engage and deal with the problem of creating dramatic history.

The problem faced by Shakespeare's histories is that the plays already know the future – twice, both as history and as history play. The audience also know it. This creates the problem of how 'the future' is to be defined in the plays. There is a theatrical future and a theatrical past, both like and unlike the 'real' past and the real future alluded to by the plays. They could be seen as meta-pasts and meta-futures, as stand-ins or substitutes. At the same time the histories offer the audience a glimpse of how events may have occurred differently, of how theatrical history may have been altered. They do this in the knowledge that the theatrical past, like the real past, cannot be changed.

Each of Shakespeare's history plays attempts to solve this problem of history in a different way. Graham Holderness observes that:

It can be argued, particularly from textual evidence, that from the very outset these plays functioned in an essentially disaggregated way, each individually shaped by particular local pressures and fashions in convention and style; each

enacting not only discrete and singular dramatic structures, but radically different visions of history.<sup>1</sup>

It is these ‘radically different visions of history’ that I examine in the following pages, paying particular attention to how history is made and remade in the plays. By studying how events are selected, shaped and placed in a dramatic framework we can analyse how each play’s ‘discrete and singular dramatic structure’ engages with, and attempts to solve, the problem of history. Geoffrey Cubitt observes that ‘historical narrative is based on selection [...] in retaining some things, it represses others [...] in promoting one kind of memory, it obstructs other ways of remembering’.<sup>2</sup> The histories deviate from this pattern: they promote more than one kind of memory; they dramatise multiple versions of the past and the future, encouraging the audience to consider which is more likely to be ‘true’. By selecting events from the chronicles and shaping them to fit into the structure a play, Shakespeare does more than alter existing history or create his own. He emplots history: shaping his narrative by emphasising some events and de-emphasising others, Shakespeare acts as a historian. Hayden White defines emplotment as ‘the encodation of the facts contained in the chronicle as components of specific *kinds* of plot structure’.<sup>3</sup> By emplotting history into a dramatic structure, by shaping and altering a pre-existing narrative, transforming it into a new and radical form, Shakespeare transforms history into dramatic history, creating a new narrative in the process.

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<sup>1</sup> Graham Holderness, *Shakespeare: The Histories* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2000), p. 8.

<sup>2</sup> Geoffrey Cubitt, *History and Memory* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2007), p. 53.

<sup>3</sup> Hayden White, *Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism* (Baltimore and London: John Hopkins University Press, 1978), p. 83.



Appleby, Hunt and Jacob observe that 'like memory itself, every work of history has the structure of a plot with a beginning, middle, and end'.<sup>4</sup> The histories are intensely aware of the working of historical, personal and dramatic memory and play on the tensions and contradictions between what we believe happened in the past, what others remember and what 'actually happened'. The plays understand how we process the past; they use this knowledge to create multiple historical narratives, based on the conflicting memories of characters, which need to be analysed and untangled for an understanding of the past to develop.

The relationship between drama and history, however, is a complex one. Drama tells stories in a fundamentally different way from any other art form because it performs them, encoding meaning in the speech and movements of the actors onstage. The performing of history brings the past to life in a way that written history cannot. Brian Walsh observes that 'of all the forms of history, performance alone supplies a pretence of sensual contact with the vanished past through the bodies that move and speak on stage'.<sup>5</sup> This 'sensual contact' would have brought the past to life to Shakespeare's audience in a way that the chronicles could not. The theatre transmitted history in a way that had never existed before. Walsh argues that 'Renaissance performances gave audiences a distinct sense of the past that no chronicle, ballad, or even woodcut, sculpture, or painting could'.<sup>6</sup> It is this distinct sense of the past, the theatrical past, which will be examined in this thesis.

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<sup>4</sup> Joyce Appleby, Lynn Hunt and Margaret Jacob, *Telling the Truth About History* (New York and London: W. W. Norton & Company, 1994), p. 231.

<sup>5</sup> Brian Walsh, *Shakespeare, the Queen's Men, and the Elizabethan Performance of History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), p. 1.

<sup>6</sup> Walsh, *Shakespeare, the Queen's Men, and the Elizabethan Performance of History*, p. 218.

The history plays, I have suggested above, create a new, dramatic history, a history without need for 'actual' history. The plays signal their departure from 'fact' through anachronism, deviation from chronicle history and wholesale dramatic invention. Knowledge of chronicle history does not provide foreknowledge of what will happen onstage. History in the theatre is new and unpredictable, perhaps closer in spirit to the uncertainty of the historical moment rather than the reassuring, sequential textual narrative of the chronicles. Each history play rewrites the plays that preceded it; the plays present 'history' as fluid and shifting as competing narratives and interpretations of the past come into conflict with each other, requiring the audience to act as historians in order to construct a new narrative of events. In this way the plays dramatise the process of remaking history. As I will show, this can be seen in the relationship between the two parts of *Henry IV*, which restage the same narrative in a different emotional key, and the way that Henry IV's retelling of the events of *Richard II* from his own perspective at the conclusion of *1 Henry IV* encourages the audience to re-evaluate the events of the earlier play, reinterpreting the dramatic past and imaginatively rewriting the play in light of the new perspective gained on events.

Jean E. Howard and Phyllis Rackin observe that 'Shakespeare's representations of England's medieval past [...] have done more to shape popular conceptions of English history than the work of any professional historian'.<sup>7</sup> In this reading, theatrical history has broken its notional boundaries and invaded the world outside the theatre. This comment gives us a glimpse of the power of theatrical representation, and in the chapters that follow I argue that in Shakespeare's plays this theatrical history actually supersedes 'real'

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<sup>7</sup> Jean E. Howard and Phyllis Rackin, *Engendering a Nation: A Feminist Account of Shakespeare's English Histories* (London: Routledge, 1997), p. 10.

history. Linda Hutcheon, discussing the way historical narratives are told, argues that ‘the meaning and shape are not *in the events*, but *in the systems* which make those past “events” into present “historical” facts’.<sup>8</sup> In its ability to deviate from known facts and to invent incidents and dialogue theatrical history is free to create its own narrative, a narrative based on, but not beholden to, the events of the past. Freed from the limitations of fact, Shakespeare’s histories can recreate the uncertainty of the historical moment in all its manifold possibilities, not least because the audience do not always know what is going to happen onstage.

Theatrical history, then, can and does deviate from the chronicles, inventing a new history in the process. The stage becomes the place of history, a new kind of history: drama. Before continuing with my analysis of the plays, however, I wish to investigate some of the issues and problems surrounding the term 'history' and historiography as well as further drawing out the thread of my argument and critical approach.

### **Shakespeare’s Sources**

Shakespeare drew upon a great deal of early modern historiography when writing the history plays. His main sources for the plays were: *The Mirror for Magistrates* (1559), Polydore Vergil’s *Anglica Historia* (published in four distinct variations in 1512-13, 1534, 1546 and 1555), Hall’s *The Union of the two noble and illustre Families of Lancaster and York* (1542, 1548 and 1550), Holinshed’s *Chronicles of England, Scotland and Ireland* (1577, 1587), Daniel’s *The First Four Books of the Civil Wars* (1595) and Sir Thomas More’s *History of King Richard III* (1543). Much critical attention has been

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<sup>8</sup> Linda Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction* (New York and London: Routledge, 1988), p. 89.

devoted to comparing and contrasting the history plays to their sources; however, this is not the approach I take in this thesis. Rather, I argue that the history plays are distinct entities, inspired by the chronicles but ultimately inherently different from their source material. I contend that the plays foreground this distinction, encouraging the audience to see them in terms of difference from their sources. The plays emphasise the fictionalised nature of the events they dramatise by conspicuously deviating from the chronicles, and drawing attention to these diversions from history. They highlight the fact that it is drama, not history, which occurs onstage.

Critical readings of the plays have often resorted to consulting the chronicles to address and resolve any ‘problems’ or ambiguities in Shakespeare’s histories. Dominique Goy-Blanquet observes that ‘Arden 3 and Cambridge [...] tend to bring the texts in conformity with the chronicles when they detect “errors” in their copy’.<sup>9</sup> I believe that this critical reliance on the chronicles to ‘fix’ textual issues or tangles is ultimately a reductive approach to the plays. The histories have a complementary relationship to the chronicles, but they also exist on their own terms. They present dramatic history, not chronicle history, and attempting to consult the chronicles to resolve perceived problems in the plays is to ignore the fact that the plays exist outside of ‘real’ history. As Kenneth Muir argues, ‘if Shakespeare consulted recondite sources it would not be for the sake of historical accuracy, but rather as a stimulus to his imagination, and as a means of amplification’.<sup>10</sup> The history plays can and will deviate from chronicle history, in the process creating a new kind of history: dramatic history. This thesis will argue that this dramatic history ultimately supersedes chronicle history, constructing the theatre as the

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<sup>9</sup> Dominique Goy-Blanquet, *Shakespeare’s Early History Plays: From Chronicle to Stage* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp.16-17.

<sup>10</sup> Kenneth Muir, *The Sources of Shakespeare’s Plays* (London: Methuen, 1977), p. 47.

place of this new way of engaging with the past even as the plays explore the making of history.

Shakespeare adapts the contradictory, shifting histories of the chronicles, taking elements of character and narrative from the texts and inventing his own. While a study of Shakespeare's sources offers valuable approaches to the text, comparison between chronicle and drama, however, offers critics only a limited perspective on the plays. The plays, I contend, create a new kind of historiography, not quite fact and not quite fiction, which blurs the boundaries between them. It does this while giving the audience a sense of physical contact with the vanished past through their proximity to the actors onstage. The vanished past is, in a sense, present in the theatre. Shakespeare, however, deliberately shatters this fantasy in the plays; the histories constantly draw attention to their fictionality, breaking the theatrical illusion and distancing the audience from the events onstage. This new, theatrical history exists outside historical precedent; the plays remind spectators that they are viewing drama, not history. The histories make clear their independence from their chronicle sources by their deviations, both subtle and obvious, from the 'facts' of history.

### **History in the Early Modern Period**

Ivo Kamps, examining the impact of historiography on drama in the early modern period, notes that:

Beginning in the early decades of the sixteenth century under the pressures of internal ideological shifts and continental influences, English historiography metamorphosed from a chiefly united medieval practice into a methodologically

eclectic endeavour: different historians came to embrace different philosophies of history and different historiographical practices. [...] The Reformation especially brought about changes in the “inner logic” of the content of history.<sup>11</sup>

The metamorphosis of early modern historiography from a relatively homogenous discourse to a heterogeneous, hybrid narrative had an immense effect on early modern epistemology and conceptions of history. The new, hybrid historiography of the early modern period is reflected in the plethora of conflicting histories that the plays present. Shakespeare’s approach to the chronicles is analogous to the historian’s approach to the past: he sifts the material, deciding what elements to include and omit from his account. Analysing the plays in relation to the chronicles allows us to see which parts of the narrative Shakespeare chose to incorporate in his plays, and which he chose to ignore. I argue, however, that there are limits to what we can learn about the plays from this approach. The histories are not dramatisations of the chronicles; they stand alone, to a degree, and they signal this distance through their deviations from fact.

My central argument draws on Annabel Patterson’s contention that ‘Holinshed initiated a procedure whereby “the reader was left to be his own historian”’.<sup>12</sup> I argue that this can be applied to Shakespeare’s histories, in which the audience is encouraged to act as historians of dramatic history. I go on to examine the ways in which the plays encourage the audience to sift through competing accounts of the dramatic past, to compare these accounts with what ‘actually happened’ in a previous play, and to form their own conclusions and their own narrative to an extent, creating their own historical narrative in the process. Characters remember, misremember and lie about the past

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<sup>11</sup> Ivo Kamps, *Historiography and Ideology in Stuart Drama* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), p. 9.

<sup>12</sup> Annabel Patterson, *Reading Holinshed’s Chronicles* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), p. 6.

throughout these plays; the plethora of competing narratives challenges the audience to create their own view of the past and its meanings, and actively to engage with the history onstage.

‘History’ itself as a discipline underwent a paradigm shift during the English Renaissance. Old, medieval conceptions of history as a providential, teleological narrative became supplanted by a new humanism, focusing on history as a history of man.<sup>13</sup> This was coupled with a new understanding of the past in terms of difference, focusing on its alien and strange aspects. Graham Holderness describes early modern historical discourse as entering ‘a transitional period in which different ideas of history competed for dominance’.<sup>14</sup> The boundaries between these conceptions of history were by no means clearly delineated, however. It was common for differing, and occasionally contradictory, ideas of history to co-exist in the same narrative. Phyllis Rackin observes that:

Despite the widespread interest in history and the overwhelming chorus of praise for the benefits its study could confer, there was no clear consensus about its nature and purpose; for this was a period of transition, when radically different conceptions of history and historiography were endorsed, often by the same writer.<sup>15</sup>

The early modern uncertainty about what constituted ‘history’, combined with the ideological and methodological ambiguity of historiography, and the plethora of competing narratives which interpreted the past in different ways, left its mark on

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<sup>13</sup> Phyllis Rackin, *Stages of History: Shakespeare’s English Chronicles* (Ithaca and New York: Cornell University Press, 1990), p. 6.

<sup>14</sup> Graham Holderness, *Shakespeare Recycled: The Making of Historical Drama* (London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1992), p. 8.

<sup>15</sup> Rackin, *Stages of History*, p. 5.

Shakespeare, and on his history plays. The history plays negotiate these differing strands of historiographical practice without attempting to reconcile them. The plays do not conform to any one idea about history; instead, they shift from mode to mode, often in the same play. This is most visible in *Richard III*, which simultaneously relates a humanist, Machiavellian history and an apparently providential narrative of divine order and punishment. These antithetical conceptions of history co-exist in the same narrative; no attempt is made to harmonise them. In this way dramatic history operates in a similar, but not identical way, to chronicle history. Below I examine some of the ways Shakespeare's dramatic history signals its difference and independence from chronicle history and the strictures of 'fact'.

Personal memories of the past played a large part in the early modern understanding of what constituted history, as Graham Holderness observes:

History was thought of as equivalent to the individual memory: as solemn memory retains or revives the past, so 'grave' history recalls and revivifies antiquity. Personal memory, a restricted and fragmentary record of particularised experience, could thus be supplemented by the larger collective memory of times past, history.<sup>16</sup>

Renaissance historiography shows an awareness of the problems caused by this approach: if individual memories provide a 'restricted and fragmentary record of particularised experience', a history constituted largely from personal accounts of the past will not be wholly reliable. Shakespeare's histories take the further step of dramatising this issue onstage by drawing the audience's attention to the unreliability of memory. The plays are filled with a multitude of characters who misremember or falsify the past; personal

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<sup>16</sup> Holderness, *Shakespeare: The Histories*, p. 51.



memories are always compromised in some way in the plays. By taking early modern historiography's understanding of the problems inherent in memorial reconstruction and dramatising them, Shakespeare thus implicates the audience in the actual process of history.

Phyllis Rackin observes that:

Shakespeare's history plays occupy various sites of contention, between older and newer conceptions of history and between the emergent distinctions that defined history and poetry in terms of mutual opposition.<sup>17</sup>

Shakespeare wrote the history plays at a time when the epistemological demarcation between historiography and drama was not clearly delineated. The plays occupy, that is, an interstitial space between fact and fiction; they have elements of each, but are fundamentally separate from both. This unfixed status allows them to play with the history they dramatise; by altering events and inventing new, ahistorical characters, the history plays signal their departure from 'fact'. They use this freedom to question the history they relate, arguably becoming a new kind of historiography in the process. This new form of history writing raises questions about the attempt to recapture the past by examining how history is made from unreliable and conflicting accounts. The plays thus come to present the past as fundamentally unknowable, and construct as deeply problematic the process of attempting to revive the vanished past.

In their radical questioning of the very principles of early modern historiography, Shakespeare's histories also acknowledge the impossibility of recovering the past, even as they accept the importance of attempting it. The plays question the making of history, but they also question their place in this process. As Holderness argues, 'in the historical

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<sup>17</sup> Rackin, *Stages of History*, p. 21.

plays themselves we can find examples of drama both claiming a truth-function, and admitting its own insubstantiality'.<sup>18</sup> By dramatising the manifest ways in which history is a fundamentally unreliable enterprise, the plays implicate themselves in this process of historical distortion: they, too, lie about history. The histories transcend this, however, by openly admitting their inherent insubstantiality and the fictionalised nature of the events they dramatise. Not entirely fiction and not entirely fact, the history plays occupy a space between the two, simultaneously implicated in and detached from the issues inherent in relating the past. By acknowledging their liminal status as drama, the plays claim a freedom to criticise historiography even as, paradoxically, they present their own, unique, version of history.

### **Defining History**

There is some difficulty in adequately delineating precisely what is meant by the term 'history'. The *OED* defines 'history' as 'a written narrative constituting a continuous chronological record of important or public events (esp. in a particular place) or of a particular trend, institution, or person's life'.<sup>19</sup> This definition focuses on history as a record, a publicly available account of the past. It does not recognise the importance of memory or oral testimony in constructing history. Anne Rigney, writing about the relation between history and Romantic literature, defines history in opposition to memory, arguing that 'history, as distinct from personal memory, is knowledge of the

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<sup>18</sup> Holderness, *Shakespeare: The Histories*, p. 43.

<sup>19</sup> 'history, n.', *OED Online*, Third edition, March 2011 and online version June 2011. Available at <http://www.oed.com.abc.cardiff.ac.uk/view/Entry/168836> [accessed 16 May 2012].

past based on the mediation of publicly available sources'.<sup>20</sup> In this reading 'history' is a public, communal endeavour which relies on exoteric sources and exists in opposition to the private, personal history of memory. I draw on Rigney's idea that personal memory and public history are distinctly separate forms of memorial reconstruction in my analysis of the plays. I question the differences between these distinct ways of remembering, and examine the consequences when the divisions between them break down.

R. G. Collingwood, examining the idea and philosophy of history, identifies the requisite parts of historical narrative thus:

The essential things in history are memory and authority. If an event or a state of things is to be historically known, first of all some one must be acquainted with it; then he must remember it; then he must state his recollection of it in terms intelligible to another; and finally that other must accept the statement as true. History is thus the believing some one else when he says that he remembers something.<sup>21</sup>

Collingwood's insistence on the 'authority' of the speaker is problematic: who decides whether a historical narrative is authoritative, and how is this agreed? His contention that history 'is the believing some one else' who 'remembers something' ignores the major problems which compromise accounts of the past based on memory. Inevitably mediated, whether consciously or unconsciously, to some degree, memory is a fundamentally unreliable historical resource. Memorial accounts of the past require independent verification before they can be considered as reliable resources to help us understand the

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<sup>20</sup> Ann Rigney, *Imperfect Histories: The Elusive Past and the Legacy of Romantic Historicism* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2001), p. 121.

<sup>21</sup> R. G. Collingwood, *The Idea of History* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), pp. 234-5.

past, a fact that Collingwood does not address. By contrast, Richard J. Evans, writing in his seminal work *In Defence of History*, defines a historical fact as ‘something that happened in history and can be verified as such through the traces history has left behind’.<sup>22</sup> This modern definition of ‘history’ as being constructed from the verifiable traces of the past – whether through written traces, memories, oral accounts or rumours – is one this thesis will largely draw on in its analysis of Shakespeare’s history plays. I also acknowledge the extent to which memory is part of the historical tapestry, as is writing itself. This eclectic approach to ‘history’ mirrors to some extent, I hope, the ‘different practices’ Ivo Kamps discusses above rather than imposing a single definition on the plays.

### **Writing the Past**

Dominique Goy-Blanquet, analysing the history of Shakespeare’s early chronicle plays in print and stage, offers a cynical view of the historian’s role in writing the past, noting that ‘history is what the historian chooses to tell’.<sup>23</sup> This reading suggests that what the historian chooses not to tell is equally, if not more, important than what is told. John Tosh, analysing the historian’s craft and the methodology of historiography, broadly agrees with Goy-Blanquet, arguing that ‘historical writing of all kinds is determined as much by what it leaves out as by what it puts in’.<sup>24</sup> Historical narratives in this reading are defined by exclusion, by incidents which could have been included but were not. This approach to history is particularly relevant to Shakespeare’s later history plays, which in many ways are defined by their exclusion or alteration of narratives and incidents from

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<sup>22</sup> Richard J. Evans, *In Defence of History* (London: Granta Books, 1997), p. 76.

<sup>23</sup> Goy-Blanquet, *Shakespeare’s Early History Plays*, p. 8.

<sup>24</sup> John Tosh, *The Pursuit of History, 5<sup>th</sup> Edition* (London: Longman, 2010), p. 183.

previous plays. They draw attention to these gaps and elisions in the text; in Shakespeare's histories the absent presence of the past is never far away.

Michel de Certeau, in *The Writing of History*, redefines what it means to write history by examining the links between historiography and the legitimisation of political power. His radical redefinition of what the practice of 'history' entails makes a point of noting the conflict between an event and the narrative of the event, arguing (like Tosh) that history is based on a principle of exclusion. He contends that 'historiography (that is, "history" and "writing") bears within its own name the paradox – almost an oxymoron – of a relation established between two antinomic terms, between the real and discourse'.<sup>25</sup> For de Certeau the contradiction and opposition between the reality of lived experience and the discourse of historiography is unbridgeable. This tension between the 'real' and what could be described as the imagined past is ever-present in Shakespeare's histories. My analysis of the plays will draw upon de Certeau's postmodern conception of historiography as essentially an imaginative exercise, in particular his argument that 'the past is the fiction of the present'.<sup>26</sup> Applying de Certeau's theories of history to Shakespeare's plays offers us a new way to engage with the unreliable narrators and problematic narratives which make the telling of history such an equivocal project in the plays.

There are other influences on the thesis' understanding of history. In *Shadowtime*, his study of the uses modern historiography can be put to when analysing nineteenth-century literature, Jim Reilly addresses some of the problems of historiography, asking:

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<sup>25</sup> Michel de Certeau, *The Writing of History*, trans. Tom Conley (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), p. xxvii.

<sup>26</sup> de Certeau, *The Writing of History*, p. 10.

Is history an event or discourse? Is there anything prior to discourse? What guarantees veracity if an event is inextricable from the surely never purely objective telling of the event?<sup>27</sup>

These paradoxical questions, exposing the contradiction, and opposition, between an event and its telling, offer us a new way of reading Shakespeare's histories. The plays themselves, I contend, engage with the problem of historiography; they question what exactly constitutes a historical narrative and what 'making history' entails, calling into question whether an event, its telling or its repeated retelling is what constitutes 'history'. Applying modern theory about historiography to the problems of writing (and rewriting) dramatic history gives us rich insights into how the histories engage with and attempt to resolve these intricate problems.

## **Memory**

The unreliability of memory is perhaps the biggest obstacle facing a historian attempting to recover traces of the vanished past. Tosh lists some of the many ways that memory is unreliable, observing that 'memory is neither fixed nor infallible: we forget, we overlay early memories with later experience, we shift the emphasis, we entertain false memories, and so on'.<sup>28</sup> We rewrite the past in light of our present preoccupations, unconsciously altering and editing our memories as our understanding of the past changes with the passage of time. This can make reconstructing the past a difficult project for historians. In this thesis I argue that Shakespeare shows a thorough and sophisticated understanding of the problem of memory in historiography throughout his history plays. My research

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<sup>27</sup> Jim Reilly, *Shadowtime: History and Representation in Hardy, Conrad and George Eliot* (London and New York: Routledge, 1993), p. 10.

<sup>28</sup> Tosh, *The Pursuit of History*, p. 2.

draws on the work of Lina Perkins Wilder in her book *Shakespeare's Memory Theatre* on the importance of recollection in Shakespeare's theatre, as well as her analysis of mnemonic objects onstage.<sup>29</sup> In particular, her examination of Falstaff's role as mnemonic object for Hal and Henry in *Henry IV*, as well as the effect of his absence in *Henry V*, have influenced my arguments on the role of memory in the plays, although my focus and conclusions differ from Wilder's.<sup>30</sup> I argue that the dramatic past is a constant absent presence in the plays; when characters recall their past, they are reconstructing the events of earlier plays, of previous performances the audience may have seen. This creates a tension between the distorted version of the dramatic past related onstage and 'what really happened'; remembering the past means recalling the theatrical past in these plays.

The unfixed and shifting nature of memory is one of the leitmotifs of the plays. Characters frequently misremember the events of a previous play, or retell a story previously told differently, with the emphasis shifted and facts elided. This misremembering might be visible to an audience familiar with the history previously dramatised. Memory is always unreliable in the plays; there is no instance of the past being remembered and related onstage without the account being compromised in some way. Tosh, summarising the postmodern argument that history and social memory are essentially the same, states that 'the aspiration to re-create the past is an illusion, and all historical writing bears the indelible impression of the present – indeed tells us more about the present than the past'.<sup>31</sup> I argue that Shakespeare is acutely aware of this

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<sup>29</sup> Lina Perkins Wilder, *Shakespeare's Memory Theatre: Recollection, Properties, and Character* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), pp. 1-24.

<sup>30</sup> Wilder, *Shakespeare's Memory Theatre*, pp. 83-107.

<sup>31</sup> Tosh, *The Pursuit of History*, p. 22.

problematic relationship between social memory and history. This is particularly visible in his later history plays, such as *Henry IV*, when characters reconstruct their past to reflect the loyalties, fears and pressing concerns of the present. In *1 Henry IV* Hotspur describes his first meeting with Bolingbroke, which occurred in *Richard II*, in a completely different, diametrically opposed way to the events in the earlier play. He swaps roles with the man he detests, remembering Bolingbroke approaching him with unctuous courtesy, when in reality it was Hotspur who humbled himself before the usurper. Likewise, Henry IV rewrites the events of the earlier play while lying on his deathbed at the end of *2 Henry IV*, claiming that he did not desire the crown when he first rebelled against Richard, an account which contradicts his earlier version of events related in *1 Henry IV*. In Shakespeare's histories characters remember and rewrite their past in light of their present concerns. This rewriting in its various guises informs the central thrust of this thesis and its argument.

### **Competing Histories**

Tosh continues his analysis by arguing that our understanding of the past is inextricably conditioned by our knowledge of the events that followed:

We can never recapture the authentic flavour of a historical moment as it was experienced by people at the time because we, unlike them, know what happened next; and the significance which we accord to a particular incident is inescapably conditioned by that knowledge.<sup>32</sup>

This conditioning of our responses to the past caused by the knowledge of what is to come is enormously significant for Shakespeare's histories, which create meaning

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<sup>32</sup> Tosh, *The Pursuit of History*, p. 194.



through anticipation and foreshadowing of the dramatic future. The audience enters the theatre with at least a vague knowledge of how events will occur. An audience watching *Richard III*, for example, would be aware that Richard does not triumph at the battle of Bosworth. This kind of foreknowledge creates a problem for the histories: if the future is already known, how can they recreate the uncertainty and doubt of the moment of history? The plays attempt to solve this problem by inventing their own history, their own dramatic history, with its own events and chronicle.

Perhaps not surprisingly, the plays deviate from traditional chronicle history in manifold ways, from the ahistorical supernatural appearance of Henry VI's ghost at the end of *Richard III* to Richard II slaying some of his assassins in a prison brawl. Such deviations from the chronicles signal that dramatic history is not beholden to facts and long-accepted accounts of the past in its portrayal of history. Their dramatic representation of the past is a new kind of history, drawn from the past but not reliant upon the literal facts of history for their meaning. In the chapters that follow I use these ideas and postmodern theories of history in my analysis of the competing histories and the multiple versions of the past which abound in the plays. I argue that the plays display a unique understanding of the instability inherent in any attempt to impose a narrative on the past, especially when the narrative is as fragmented and contradictory as that of the chronicles.<sup>33</sup> Shakespeare takes these uneasy, occasionally incompatible, histories and addresses the issues they raise in a different form, fashioning shifting, simultaneously continuous and contradictory dramatic history from the static textuality of the chronicles.

In addition to the above concerns, this thesis argues that Shakespeare's histories in some ways anticipate the postmodern focus on, in Anne Rigney's words, 'the difficulty

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<sup>33</sup> Patterson, *Reading Holinshed's Chronicles*, pp. 1-6.

of reducing the wealth of local histories to some “Great Story” or “Idea of the Whole” in light of the fact that there is always another aspect of the past that might also be taken speculatively into account’.<sup>34</sup> Postmodern theories of history address many of the same concerns Shakespeare contends with in his treatment of dramatic history, in particular the problems inherent when historians attempt to reduce the multifaceted, multifarious past in all its complexity and ambiguity to one single narrative. The narrativisation of history is a problem for the plays, a problem they raise but ultimately do not attempt to resolve. In the past critics have read the histories primarily in terms of early modern historiography, with a particular focus on how Shakespeare shaped and altered his source texts. This thesis takes a different approach. I argue that the study of Shakespeare’s sources, as valuable as this can be, is of limited use in understanding the new, dramatic, history he is creating in these plays. I contend that reading the plays through the lens of modern theories about the writing of history offers us valuable insights into the problems of writing and rewriting the past that the plays address. This approach also illuminates Shakespeare’s changing conceptions of what staging the past entails. ‘History’ becomes increasingly hybridised as the sequence continues; the plays move from the more traditional monolithic, single-narrative history presented in *Henry VI* to the focus on differing interpretations of the past in *Richard III*, to the full-scale rewriting and reinterpretation which occurs throughout the second tetralogy.

### **The Audience as Historian**

In this thesis I argue that the plays encourage the audience to act as historians of dramatic history by taking these other aspects of the past into account. Deviating from the single-

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<sup>34</sup> Rigney, *Imperfect Histories*, p. 137.

narrative focus on the monarch, his nobles, and the threats to their power that characterise his early histories, the plays I study show Shakespeare broadening his scope to include the marginal figures of history. These minor players in great events assume greater importance as the sequence continues. The anonymous architects of history in *Richard III*, such as the Scrivener or Clarence's assassins, occupy a liminal yet vital place in the drama. Their anonymous fictionality draws attention to the forgotten stories and unremembered voices of the peripheral figures of the past. As the plays progress they move from the fringes of history, gaining names, growing in importance and eventually threatening to shift the focus from the powerful to themselves. This is most obvious in Falstaff, whose questioning and undercutting of the 'serious' plot in *1 Henry IV* nearly overbalances the play. I read this development in light of the attempts of postmodern historians to recover the forgotten voices in history, a project broadly summarised by Richard J. Evans as an attempt 'to re-establish the place of the individual in history, though [...] in a very different mode from the political historians' traditional cult of 'great men'.<sup>35</sup> He goes on to summarise the main preoccupations of postmodernist history as 'suspicion of the mainstream, [...] privileging of the marginal, the bizarre and the obscure'.<sup>36</sup> Shakespeare deviates from the focus of the chronicles on the 'great men' of history by allowing the unrecorded voices and actions of the apparently insignificant to be heard and seen onstage. In this way he creates a new kind of speculative history which takes its basic facts and the overall shape of the narrative from the chronicles, but which fictionalises the events themselves. This hybrid history form, not quite fact and not quite fiction, furthers the illusion of physical proximity to the past through the presence of the

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<sup>35</sup> Evans, *In Defence of History*, p. 189.

<sup>36</sup> Evans, *In Defence of History*, p. 189.

actors onstage. A radical departure from the linear narratives and bound textuality of the chronicles, dramatic history offers the audience a new way of experiencing the past, while the conflicting narratives question whether the past itself can truly be known at all.

The historian Lawrence Stone, analysing the problems postmodernism raises for traditional ideas about writing the past, particularly in terms of the ambiguous relationship between signifier and signified in historiography, observes that 'if there is nothing outside the text [...] then history as we have known it collapses altogether, and fact and fiction become indistinguishable from one another'.<sup>37</sup> This is a somewhat exaggerated and alarmist view of the destructive effect of postmodernism on historical practice, but Stone's comment raises issues which must be engaged with. In particular, his contention that fact and fiction could become indistinguishable, while overstating the case, sheds light on the problems inherent when writing history. The enormous power of historians to shape their accounts of the past, essentially to invent their own history by selecting events and emplotting them in a narrative structure, poses serious, perhaps insuperable, problems for anyone seeking to understand the events of the past.

These apparently insurmountable problems are a major concern for the histories; the plays foreground the ways in which the meaning of a narrative is encoded in its form. They do this in a variety of ways. By selecting historical incidents from the chronicles, shifting the emphasis or altering the content and placing them into a dramatic structure, Shakespeare is himself acting as a historian. The plays are unreliable versions of history, and they foreground this fact; the audience is constantly aware that they are watching a fictionalised version of the past. By emphasising this shaping of history, I argue that the

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<sup>37</sup> Lawrence Stone, 'History and Post-Modernism', *Past and Present*, 131 (1991), 217-8 (pp. 217-8).

plays encourage the audience to question how historical narratives are constructed by their authors. This focus on the inherent artificiality of historiography is reinforced by the way characters relate false histories onstage. Their biased, unreliable accounts emphasise how easy it is to alter the past by shaping the facts of history to fit into a narrative mould. They act as historians of dramatic history, in this case bad ones.

In the chapters that follow I also draw on Hayden White's theories about historiography, with a particular focus on his theories about the role of emplotment and genre in shaping accounts of the past. Taking White's argument that historiography is fundamentally literary in structure, I apply this idea to Shakespeare's plays, reading the histories as reflexively self-aware examinations of the problems inherent in writing the past. I argue that the plays address what White refers to as 'the problem of the relation between narrative discourse and historical representation',<sup>38</sup> while being aware of their liminal place outside the realms of early modern historiographical practice. It is precisely because of their extramural status as works of dramatic history that they are able to question the practice of historiography in such a radical way.

Collingwood acknowledges the seemingly insurmountable problems faced by historians attempting to reconstruct the past, arguing that:

The historian's picture of his subject, whether that subject be a sequence of events or a past state of things [...] appears as a web of imaginative construction stretched between certain fixed points provided by the statements of his authorities.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> White, *Tropics of Discourse*, p. ix.

<sup>39</sup> Collingwood, *The Idea of History*, p. 242.

Collingwood's recognition of the tension between the 'fixed points' of verifiable fact and the 'web of imaginative construction' which link them offers a valuable way to approach the difficulties entailed in transforming chronicle history into drama. Indeed, this description appears better suited to dramatic history than to historiography. Historians retrace the contours of past events through a combination of factual analysis, conjecture and interpretation; their task is to reconstruct the past, not construct it. Collingwood's dichotomy between the fixed points of apparently unquestionable facts and the historian's insubstantial webs of imagination similarly seems to oversimplify the complex tensions between fact, speculation and unreliable sources which are an intrinsic part of any attempt to recover the vanished past. When applied to the task Shakespeare faces in writing his history plays, however, the image is entirely fitting. The plays take certain 'fixed points' which cannot be altered, such as the outcome of the Battle of Bosworth or Richard II's deposition, and weave a fictionalised, but never entirely fictional, narrative around them. Hal's tavern companions, for example, although undoubtedly fictional, have their origins in fact. They are imaginative reconstructions of people whom history has not recorded, at least not to the same degree as Hal or Henry IV. In this way, Shakespeare's plays weave fact, fiction and fictionalised fact together to create the unstable admixture of illusion and reality that is dramatic history.

Historiography, the writing of history, entails more than placing the 'facts' of the past before the reader. The bare facts of history do not speak for themselves; they require a historian to evaluate and record them in a sequential narrative, as Rowland Wymer, writing about Shakespeare's approach to history, observes:

There are many different stories we can tell about the past depending on the kind of questions to which we want answers; but conceding the narrative and ‘constructed’ element in all historical writing does not compel the conclusion that history is simply another form of fiction.<sup>40</sup>

Wymer, in contrast to Collingwood, does not believe that accepting an element of imaginative conjecture in historiography leads to the conclusion that all history is fictional in one form or another. This view allows us to differentiate between chronicle history and dramatic history, even as we acknowledge the similarities between writing a history and writing a history play. This resemblance is most clearly evident in the problem narrativisation presents for historiography, in the inescapable problem that placing events into a linear narrative necessarily imposes meaning on them. Because of this every account of the past is biased to some degree.

As noted above, in the chapters that follow I use Hayden White’s theory of emplotment to illuminate the extent to which placing events in a narrative mould creates meaning in Shakespeare’s history plays. I also draw on the postmodern critical work of Linda Hutcheon, in particular her theories on self-reflexivity in literary texts. Hutcheon, discussing emplotment in historiography, observes that ‘it is historiography’s explanatory and narrative emplotments of past *events* that construct what we consider historical *facts*’.<sup>41</sup> In my analysis of Shakespeare’s histories I question the process by which an event is turned into a fact, in historiography and drama, and examine the role played by emplotment in this transformation. I analyse how Shakespeare’s plays dramatise the

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<sup>40</sup> Rowland Wymer, ‘Introduction’, *Shakespeare and History*, ed. Holger Klein and Rowland Wymer (Lewiston, N. Y. and Lampeter: Edwin Mellen Press, 1994), p. 2.

<sup>41</sup> Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism*, p. 92.

process of emplotment, and study the ways they draw attention to this process even as they engage in it.

In her analysis Hutcheon argues that ‘historiography and fiction [...] *constitute* their objects of attention; in other words, they decide which events will become facts’.<sup>42</sup> This process is particularly visible in Shakespeare’s histories, especially in *Richard III* and *Henry IV*. The audience witness the way narratives are created from misremembered, misunderstood or distorted accounts of the past; they are situated at the moment of history, when events become facts. These distorted memories gain a new meaning because they are set in sequence, giving the events the appearance of teleological progression. Their placement in a narrative structure gives meaning to disaggregated and haphazard events. Hayden White notes that ‘this relation becomes a problem for historical theory with the realization that narrative is not merely a neutral discursive form [...] but rather entails ontological and epistemic choices with distinct ideological and even specifically political implications’.<sup>43</sup> The plays emphasise the choices which are made, consciously or unconsciously, when relating a narrative. Shakespeare thus dramatises the process of narrativisation and allows the audience to formulate their own conclusions about how narrative history is created. In this way the plays encourage spectators to question the process of making history, both onstage and outside the theatre. Refashioning the bound textuality of his sources into a living experience of history, Shakespeare constantly questions the illusory coherence that we call history.

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<sup>42</sup> Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism*, p. 122.

<sup>43</sup> White, *Tropics of Discourse*, p. ix.



## Chapter II: The Making of History in *Richard III*

Critical opinion appears to be in broad agreement that the history *Richard III* presents is providential in nature. E. M. W. Tillyard asserts that ‘for the purposes of the tetralogy and most obviously for this play Shakespeare accepted the prevalent belief that God had guided England into her haven of Tudor prosperity’.<sup>1</sup> Of course, Tillyard’s view of the play’s history as providential is linked to his problematic view of the histories as relating a single grand narrative. Lily B. Campbell agrees with this view, going even further in assigning Richard a divine role in this providential schema:

The matter of the divine vengeance which is inexorably meted out for sin is, moreover, associated with the unstinted use of the supernatural in divers ways throughout the play. [...] God may and often does make use of an evil instrument in the execution of his divine vengeance, and Richard, like Tamburlaine, functions as the scourge of God.<sup>2</sup>

This interpretation is a tendentious one; it is difficult to see how the murder of the Princes in the Tower can be interpreted as Richard fulfilling God’s will. It simply cannot be said that Richard acts as ‘the scourge of God’ in the drama. I argue that, while the history the play presents undoubtedly has a providential character, in reality it is more ambiguous than it first appears. Robert Ornstein argues that the supernatural elements in the play shift its emphasis from history to tragedy, stating that Shakespeare ‘imagines the darkness before the dawn of Tudor deliverance as the setting for a vast revenge tragedy which unfolds with prophesies of doom and choric lamentations, a full freight of

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<sup>1</sup> E. M. W. Tillyard, *Shakespeare’s History Plays* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1944), p. 210.

<sup>2</sup> Lily B. Campbell, *Shakespeare’s “Histories”: Mirrors of Elizabethan Policy* (London: Methuen & Co., 1964), p. 313.

medieval moralizing, a chilling figure of Nemesis, and a pageant of accusing ghosts'.<sup>3</sup> In this reading, the overt presence of the supernatural pushes the play through genres, away from history and into tragedy, though still in the mode of a didactic lesson about the Tudors.

In contrast to Ornstein, Phyllis Rackin sees *Richard III* very much as a history play, the culmination of the series so far, retrospectively making sense of the chaos of the *Henry VI* plays and shifting the mode of the drama to accommodate this:

The first three plays are set in a Machiavellian universe. [...] Their episodic plots depict an increasingly chaotic and meaningless world and an action that seems devoid of ethical significance or providential purpose until it is explained in retrospect in *Richard III*.<sup>4</sup>

This chapter will draw on elements of Rackin's argument, but I arrive at very different conclusions. I argue that *Richard III* does retrospectively recast the earlier drama, but not as Rackin suggests. The play rewrites the earlier histories, recreating them onstage when characters speak about the vanished past, altering it in the retelling. The play rewrites the *Henry VI* plays, retrospectively recasting the history presented into a new shape, a providential one. I argue that Rackin's idea that the random chaos of history is given retrospective meaning as chaotic events are placed into a divine pattern is a valuable interpretation, but not the only one possible.

Nicholas Grene argues that *Richard III* is a definitive end to the first tetralogy, observing that 'Bosworth is climax and closure not only for *Richard III* but for the whole

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<sup>3</sup> Robert Ornstein, *A Kingdom For A Stage: The Achievement of Shakespeare's History Plays* (Harvard: Harvard University Press, 1972), p. 61.

<sup>4</sup> Phyllis Rackin, *Stages of History: Shakespeare's English Chronicles* (Ithaca and New York: Cornell University Press, 1990), p. 62.

history play series and the wars it has dramatised'.<sup>5</sup> There are problems with this argument. Shakespeare concluded one sequence of history plays with *Richard III* in 1592-3 and embarked upon another by writing *Richard II* in 1595, a series set chronologically before the first, which ends with the death of Henry V and the ascension of the doomed Henry VI to the throne, thereby beginning the events of *Henry VI*. As much as it concludes one series, *Richard III* looks forward to another, reminding us that history itself does not end with the conclusion of the play. History, both real and dramatic, still continues, both into the present and the future, as the play suggests.

*Richard III*, I propose, presents the audience with a plethora of competing narratives relating the vanished past, rather than a single view of history. Similarly, the line between truth and fiction is blurred in the play; not only do characters lie to each other and themselves about the events of the past, but historical figures that were dead at the time of the play such as Margaret or Henry VI are anachronistically present onstage. Their unhistorical (and apparently supernatural in the case of Henry VI) presence unsettles the audience's expectations and complicates the time frame of the play. Throughout, *Richard III* reminds the audience that it is drama that occurs before them, not history. This can be seen in the play's opening line, which unsettles the historical moment of the play by establishing the time as 'now'.

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<sup>5</sup> Nicholas Grene, *Shakespeare's Serial History Plays* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), p. 93.

## ‘Now’

As Edward Burns has noted, *Richard III* ‘opens with startling immediacy [in] a shared present tense, established with the opening syllable – “now”’.<sup>6</sup> Richard’s first line fixes the historical moment of the play in the immediate moment:

Now is the winter of our discontent  
Made glorious summer by this son of York.<sup>7</sup>

But Richard also fixes his place in history in these opening lines, establishing that ‘now’ is his time, and the time of the play. His references to the seasons in his opening speech bring to mind the inevitable passage of time: winter is followed by summer, and the dark times of the York–Lancaster war are followed by victory and peace. Two seasons are compressed into one moment of time by Richard’s words, a violation of the natural rhythm of nature as two clashing times collide. The passing of the seasons, however, is cyclical, as are the events of the play; as time passes, summer will eventually become winter again and the temporary peace will descend into bloodshed. The seasonal imagery in the opening lines reminds us that history is a circular process that repeats itself in different ways. Bloodshed will follow peace just as frost will follow sunshine and, like the seasons, this change is a part of nature, in this case, human nature.

Another time shift swiftly follows in Richard’s speech, as the events of the *Henry VI* plays are referred to in the following lines as Richard celebrates the Yorkists’ victory over their enemies:

And all the clouds that loured upon our house

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<sup>6</sup> Edward Burns, *William Shakespeare’s ‘Richard III’* (Devon: Northcote House, 2002), p. 18.

<sup>7</sup> William Shakespeare, *The Tragedy of King Richard The Third*, I. i. 1-2, in *The Norton Shakespeare*, ed. Stephen Greenblatt, Walter Cohen, Jean E. Howard, Katherine Eisaman Maus (New York and London: Norton, 1997). All further references are to this edition and are given in the text.

In the deep bosom of the ocean buried.

(I. i. 3-4)

Richard severs the present from the past, constructing the recent past as a time of darkness, when clouds 'loured upon' his family and the chaos of war made the future an uncertain one. The imagery he employs in the next sentence once again suggests a violation of nature; Richard has buried the clouds in the ocean, and the threat to his family has ended. His constant use of unnatural imagery prefigures his obsession with his own deformity; he sees himself as hideous and unnatural, an abomination, and he cannot help but construct the natural world in the same way.

Immediately after subconsciously revealing his malign worldview, Richard again repeats the word 'now', indicating his desire to seize the present time for himself:

Now are our brows bound with victorious wreaths,  
Our bruised arms hung up for monuments,  
Our stern alarums changed to merry meetings,  
Our dreadful marches to delightful measures.

(I. i. 5-8)

As before, Richard constructs the present in opposition to the past. The brutal weapons of war employed in the York–Lancaster conflict are now 'hung up for monuments'. Defined by the OED as 'a tomb, a sepulchre' and 'a statue, building or other structure erected to commemorate a famous or notable person or event',<sup>8</sup> the word 'monuments' has multiple meanings, significantly so in this case. The other characters in the play want nothing more than to forget the blood that has been spilled in the recent past, but Richard does

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<sup>8</sup> 'Monument, n.', *OED Online* (March 2011). Available at <http://www.oed.com.abc.cardiff.ac.uk/view/Entry/121852?rskey=Y6oVR4&result=1&isAdvanced=false#eid> [accessed 5 April 2011].

not. He continues to contrast the peace of the present in opposition to the past, but the fact that he constantly mentions war first makes it clear which he ultimately favours. This is made explicit later in the soliloquy:

Why, I in this weak piping time of peace

Have no delight to pass away the time.

(I. i. 24-5)

'Time' has two meanings here. Richard dismisses the present as 'this weak piping time of peace', once again contrasting the present with the past. In this sense 'time' is the present moment, the here and now; it refers to the precise historical moment that Richard is presently occupying. This definition of time is complicated in the very next line when Richard speaks of 'pass[ing] away the time'. Here the word is used in the sense of the irreversible progress of temporal sequence. Richard simultaneously defines time as the present moment and as a constantly moving sequence. His repetition of 'now' throughout his soliloquy reinforces his desire to seize his moment, but even as he attempts this his historical moment is fading fast: 'now' is always becoming the past.

Richard's plan to seize power relies on his ability to manipulate the present in order to ensure that the future occurs exactly as he wants it to. He reveals to the audience towards the end of the soliloquy how he intends to take power:

Plots have I laid, inductions dangerous,

By drunken prophecies, libels and dreams

To set my brother Clarence and the King

In deadly hate the one against the other.

(I. i. 32-5)

Richard's use of the word 'induction', meaning a preface or prologue as well as the more common meaning of 'inducing by persuasion',<sup>9</sup> indicates that he sees his machinations against his brothers as merely the beginning of his tale. This moment marks the beginning of Richard's journey to the crown, and his journey into history. He appears to hold in contempt the methods he uses to divide Clarence and the King, referring dismissively to 'drunken prophecies, libels and dreams', making no distinction between them. To Richard a prophecy is as false as a dream; he does not believe in the ability to predict the future. In a sense however, Richard does believe in the power of prophecy, or at least its hold over others; here he cynically uses false prophecy to create the future he wants by sowing seeds of division between the King and his brother. As Graham Holderness has noted:

Richard displays an acute consciousness of history's 'shadow', of that marginal space where history is made not only by deaths and accessions, battles and executions, but also by the potency of the shadow-world, the dimension of dreams and fantasies, self-fulfilling prophecies and enabling fictions.<sup>10</sup>

Richard describes prophecy in purely secular, Machiavellian terms, as a way of creating unrest and division, leaving the course clear for him to seize power. The irony, of course, is that his false prediction that 'G' will be the murderer of Edward's heirs will come true, with Richard's murder of the princes. The play proves his prediction to be accurate,

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<sup>9</sup> 'Induction, n.', *OED Online* (March 2011). Available at <http://www.oed.com.abc.cardiff.ac.uk/view/Entry/121852?rskey=Y6oVR4&result=1&isAdvanced=false#eid> [accessed 5 April 2011].

<sup>10</sup> Graham Holderness, *Shakespeare: The Histories* (London: Macmillan Press Ltd., 2000), p. 85.

perhaps indicating the providential nature of history in *Richard III*, or perhaps suggesting this is merely an example of the countless ironies that occur throughout history.<sup>11</sup>

## **Memory**

The past that Shakespeare dramatised in the *Henry VI* plays is referred to throughout *Richard III*. Margaret, the only surviving Lancastrian from the previous plays, haunts the stage as a spectre of the past, a wraith that will not die. As the final play of the first tetralogy, *Richard III* has a rich and complex history behind it, a history which the characters will return to time and time again. Throughout the play Richard and Margaret restage history by relating their memories of what happened in the *Henry VI* plays. Their clashing accounts of the past create two alternative histories, or versions of history, onstage. History thus occurs more than once in *Richard III*, as each character recalls events both outside and inside the play. By doubling history the play doubles time as well, bringing the past into the present and violating the natural order of temporality. This implicit violation of the principles of history will become explicit by the play's conclusion with the intrusion of ghosts from previous history plays into the present historical moment in V. v. In this way *Richard III* rewrites and redramatises the past, creating its own history, a history which occurs 'now'.

The first character to refer back to events previously dramatised is Lady Anne, who, when Richard begins to woo her, reminds him that he murdered her previous husband:

In thy foul throat thou liest. Queen Margaret saw

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<sup>11</sup> Cf. Jan Kott, *Shakespeare Our Contemporary*, trans. Boleslaw Taborski (London: Methuen and Co. Ltd., 1964), pp. 3-55.



Thy murd'rous falchion smoking in his blood,  
The which thou once didst bend against her breast,  
But that thy brothers beat aside the point.

(I. ii. 93-6)

There are two events and two histories here: Margaret's history and Anne's retelling of it. The aftermath of Richard's murder of Edward was witnessed by Margaret, but it did not involve her. She was a bystander watching events unfold before her. It was only when Richard threatened to kill her that she became directly involved. She relates two narratives: one that she witnessed and one that she took part in. Lady Anne did not witness these events, and has therefore to rely on Margaret's testimony. This doubling causes tension within the play, as an audience that has not seen *3 Henry VI* will not know whether these events actually happened, or whether Margaret is lying. The veracity of reported events is a theme which the play explores in greater depth later, but it is first introduced here.

In order to counter Lady Anne's account of his depredations, Richard gives his own memorial account of the cruelty of the Lancastrians during the war by remembering his reaction to the murder of Rutland:

*These eyes, which never shed remorseful tear –  
No, when my father York and Edward wept  
To hear the piteous moan that Rutland made  
When black-faced Clifford shook his sword at him;  
Nor when thy warlike father like a child  
Told the sad story of my father's death*

*And twenty times made pause to sob and weep.*<sup>12</sup>

(I. ii. 154.1-7)

Richard conflates several past events and stories into one account of history in the same way that he conflated the seasons in his opening soliloquy. The murder of Rutland and the death of Richard's father occurred at different times; Richard presents them in close sequence to create his own narrative, a narrative of Lancastrian cruelty. Another, third, form of history is thus created, where events can be moved to shift emphasis and subtly alter the interpretation of events. Acting as a historical dramatist, Richard can use the facts of history as raw material to be selected, reshaped and presented to his audience in a new, fictionalised form. He was not actually present at the murders of Rutland or his father; what Richard is describing is his reaction to the oral testimony of others. A fundamentally unreliable form of history, oral accounts of the past are inevitably mediated, and altered in the telling. Like Lady Anne, Richard did not actually see the events he reports; he is relying on the testimony of others for his interpretation of the past. Graham Holderness argues that Richard:

Is actually at this point himself acting as a historian, narrating the personal response of an important witness to a key incident of what has already become history; drawing from the past an instructive example to demonstrate some issue of the present, and to guide some direction of the future.<sup>13</sup>

Richard is doing more than this; he is moving events from their proper place in order to unfix them; he is altering history for his own ends. Richard is indeed acting as a historian here, but a bad one. The history he narrates is a false history, created by taking historical

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<sup>12</sup> The Norton Shakespeare uses italics to indicate lines not included in the base text and numbers them accordingly.

<sup>13</sup> Holderness, *Shakespeare: The Histories*, p. 92.

events out of sequence and out of context and using them in order to put forward an interpretation of the past that has already been decided upon. Richard does not follow the facts to an interpretation; he chooses the facts to support his pre-existing prejudice. Of course, this may not be immediately obvious to an audience unfamiliar with *3 Henry VI*. Lacking any alternative interpretations of events, the audience would have to examine the source of the narrative and might conclude that the fact that it is Richard, the born dissembler, who speaks these words makes his narrative extremely unreliable. The 'instructive example' Richard draws from the past is not meant to educate Lady Anne; it is another salvo in Richard's war of words with her. By showing Richard acting as a kind of historian in such an obviously biased way, Shakespeare casts doubt on the veracity of all historians who argue that there is only one interpretation of events.

By the end of the scene Richard's distortion of the past has progressed to new extremes:

Nay, do not pause, for I did kill King Henry;

But 'twas thy beauty that provokèd me.

Nay, now dispatch: 'twas I that stabbed young Edward;

But 'twas thy heavenly face that set me on.

(I. ii. 167-70)

Lady Anne knows that this is not true, but overwhelmed by Richard's eloquence she gives in. She accepts his account of the past and surrenders to him. Richard's success in wooing Lady Anne demonstrates the danger posed by uncritical acceptance of unreliable narratives. Anne is unable to contradict his account of the deaths of Rutland and York because she cannot draw on opposing historical accounts in order to argue against him.

Richard dominates her with history; his knowledge of the past (and his use of this knowledge) is far superior to hers and she cannot contradict him. Richard does not move to outright falsehood until the end of his speech; before then he merely distorts actual events of the past in order to legitimise his narrative of events. He does not need to lie; he merely misrepresents.

Other characters in the play do not seem to share Richard's self-awareness about the constructed nature of the history they are relating. Michel de Certeau observes that 'the past is the fiction of the present',<sup>14</sup> that is, the past is narrated by the present and reveals just as much, if not more, about the present than the past it seems to relate. The characters in *Richard III* appear to believe the fictions they tell about the past. Almost everyone in the play rewrites their histories to some degree, creating themselves anew in the process. In the absence of a knowable past, a false history is perhaps the only history that can exist. If history cannot be accepted at face value because it is so easy to falsify, there seems little alternative but to accept the fiction, unless the play itself offers an alternative to this false history.

Unlike Margaret, who dwells obsessively on the past, King Edward attempts to forget the violent way in which he has reached the throne. His desire to escape his past leads to tragedy when the imprisoned Clarence is executed on his orders. Upon hearing of Clarence's death, the distressed Edward asks emotionally, if somewhat rhetorically:

Who told me how the poor soul did forsake

The mighty Warwick and did fight for me?

Who told me, in the field at Tewkesbury,

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<sup>14</sup> Michel de Certeau, *The Writing of History*, trans. Tom Conley (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), p.10.

When Oxford had me down, he rescued me,  
And said, 'Dear brother, live, and be a king'? [...]  
All this from my remembrance brutish wrath  
Sinfully plucked, and not a man of you  
Had so much grace to put it in my mind.

(II. i. 110-4, 119-21)

Edward argues that it is the duty of others to remind him of Clarence's loyalty, but why could he not have remembered it himself? Is he shifting the blame for his brother's death? Memory here is not a personal recollection of events, but a communal institution, a shared restructuring of the past into an intelligible account of history. Edward did not remember Clarence's loyalty because others did not remember it. The only memory in the play is shared memory; there are no personal recollections. Edward's reason for forgetting the past is that 'brutish wrath' made him forget. Edward, however, did not really forget him; he merely chose what to remember. The selective memory of the king and court leads to Clarence's death, and Edward's complaint that he was not reminded of his brother's good deeds is a weak and futile attempt to pass the blame for his own disregard of the past onto others. The speech suggests how easily history is forgotten by the present when it wants to forget, and gives us a glimpse into how the tapestry of history is full of gaps.

Anne's decision to marry Richard, her husband's murderer, is the play's most notable instance of a character forgetting the past in order to survive in the present.

Richard himself gleefully comments on this:

Hath she forgot already that brave prince,

Edward her lord, whom I some three months since  
Stabbed in my angry mood at Tewkesbury?

(I. ii. 226-8)

Anne begins the scene denouncing him as a murderer and ends it extolling his penitence. She has forgotten her past and failed to remember Richard's responsibility for the deaths of Henry VI and her husband. Earlier in the scene she denounced him, but now she accepts him. What prompts this change in her attitude? Jean E. Howard and Phyllis Rackin argue that it is Richard's 'theatrical power that made her forget the past', going on to state that 'for the audience as well as Anne, the seduction requires the suspension of moral judgment and the erasure of historical memory'.<sup>15</sup> Just as *Richard III* rewrites the *Henry VI* plays, so Anne rewrites the Lancastrian past she lived through by forgetting her husband and marrying Richard. She abandons her past in order to embrace the present, acting as a polar opposite to Margaret. Anne is an emblem figure for how history is forgotten so quickly in *Richard III*; it has been only three months since Richard murdered her husband. The play dramatises how forgetting the past can be dangerous: Anne's wilful disregard of her previous experience of Richard will lead her to misery and death, just as Edward too late remembers Clarence's loyalty to him after he has been executed.

### **The Dramatic Past**

In *Richard III* the making of history is complicated by the continuity of characters. Unlike other plays which begin as a blank slate, history plays are always burdened by the past, which they are forced to continue. Paulina Kewes notes that:

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<sup>15</sup> Jean E. Howard and Phyllis Rackin, *Engendering a Nation: A Feminist Account of Shakespeare's English Histories* (London and New York: Routledge, 1997), p. 112.

Contrary to tragedies and comedies which require formal closure, history plays [...] are “open-ended”, for when the play ends, history continues. [...]

Not only the endings, but the beginnings of history plays are said to be “open”, for scenes of genealogy which rehearse events preceding the start of action proper direct the audience to locate what they see along a historical continuum.<sup>16</sup>

History plays preserve a moment in time separated from the past and future in which it is situated, endlessly repeated in production after production, always different but always the same. They separate history from temporality and by doing so place the audience in the privileged position of knowing what will happen during the play as well as what came before and after. This is particularly true for *Richard III*, as an audience will almost certainly be aware of the outcome of the battle of Bosworth before they enter the theatre. They will also be aware of the Wars of the Roses, though not necessarily in depth. In its opening soliloquy *Richard III* offers a quick summary of past events in order to make the audience aware of what has gone before, but Edward Burns sees this need to refer back to events outside of the play as a potential problem:

The reference back to a tangle of complex and often horrific events dramatized in those Shakespearean plays which deal with the precedent history creates a problem for director and audience. But we need to be aware of this weight, not necessarily in precisely detailed knowledge, but as the force of accumulated memory. The characters in *Richard III* discuss history a lot – or at least they

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<sup>16</sup> Paulina Kewes, ‘The Elizabethan History Play: A True Genre?’, in *A Companion to Shakespeare’s Works, Volume II: The Histories*, ed. Richard Dutton and Jean E. Howard (Oxford: Blackwell, 2003), p. 177.

continually present to each other competing versions of what has happened in their uneasily shared past.<sup>17</sup>

Burns seems to view the history of the characters in *Richard III* as a burden to director and audience alike. This, however, seems unnecessarily pessimistic: constant references to past events show the audience that a rich history, full of incident and intrigue, lies behind the events of the play, a history which dominates the characters' lives and affects their present actions. They are prisoners of their shared past. Burns is correct in saying that an audience does not need to know the precise details of the past in order to appreciate it. An awareness of the difference between the history the characters describe in *Richard III* and the history shown in the *Henry VI* plays, whether gained before or after seeing the play, however, will add to the experience by encouraging the audience to confront and question the process of making history. History is at once a tapestry of woven events but it is also like a palimpsest, still visible in its absent presence.

The history referred back to in *Richard III* is an asset for director and audience, not a problem. Nowhere is this better exemplified in the play than in Richard's description to Margaret of how she killed his father:

The curse my noble father laid on thee –  
When thou didst crown his warlike brows with paper,  
And with thy scorns drew'st rivers from his eyes,  
And then, to dry them, gav'st the duke a clout  
Steeped in the faultless blood of pretty Rutland –  
His curses then, from bitterness of soul  
Denounced against thee, are all fall'n upon thee,

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<sup>17</sup> Burns, *William Shakespeare's 'Richard III'*, p. 41.



And God, not we, hath plagued thy bloody deed.

(I. iii. 171-8)

To an audience that has not seen *3 Henry VI* it must be difficult to understand the precise events to which this passage refers. However, its importance relies not on understanding its precise meaning, but on acknowledging how the events Richard describes has shaped and scarred the speakers in this scene. Richard loved his father, and it was only after his death that he began plotting his murderous path to the crown. Margaret, who had lost so many to York, took her gruesome revenge on him, and has suffered the consequences ever since. Once again Richard conflates two different events in one speech in order to alter the past and present the Yorkists as victims, not aggressors, in the Wars of the Roses.

Richard and Margaret have a similar approach to their shared past: they both misremember it for their own ends. Margaret's words to Queen Elizabeth later in the play give the audience a glimpse of how she sustains her rage against the Yorkists by creating her own history, focusing on female loss and disempowerment:

Compare dead happiness with living woe;

Think that thy babes were sweeter than they were,

And he that slew them fouler than he is.

Bett'ring thy loss makes the bad causer worse.

(IV. iv. 119-22)

In order to maintain her bitter hatred, Margaret knowingly misremembers the past. She remembers her children to be better than they were, and imagines Richard, their murderer, as 'fouler than he is'; Margaret invents the narrative of her life. She claims

deliberately to deceive herself, abandoning the future in order to live in an imagined past; she is trapped in the past, unable to escape the trauma that has scarred her and forced to relive it by her constant remembering and reimagining. Edward Burns observes:

Margaret in some sense represents history – if we see history as a process of repetition. [...] Perhaps she represents a form of anti-history – the treasuring and obsessive representation of trauma are the antidote to history if we see history as a way of moving forward.<sup>18</sup>

Richard and Margaret are both anti-history, but in different ways. Margaret obsessively rewrites the past in order to dwell upon the injustice she feels she has suffered. Her falsified version of the past consumes her present, making the past and present one for her. She is stagnant; she cannot move forward in the flow of time. By contrast, Richard loves the bloody time of war that has recently ended, and would like it to continue indefinitely. He too brings the past into the present by reintroducing war and terror to the realm. Robert Ornstein observes that ‘his plots are an attempt to call back the yesterday which the other characters shudder to remember’.<sup>19</sup> His lament in his opening soliloquy decrying the ‘weak, piping time of peace’ is a call for a return to the martial valour of the recent past. Graham Holderness comments that:

Richard’s famous opening soliloquy is an elegy for the loss of a heroic past, a warrior nostalgia that laments the passing of war, and expresses a witty and scathing contempt for the boredom and triviality of peace.<sup>20</sup>

Richard’s actions in the play bring the bloody horror of the past civil war into the peaceful present. Ornstein observes of Richard that ‘like Margaret, he is an anachronism,

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<sup>18</sup> Burns, *William Shakespeare’s ‘Richard III’*, p. 44.

<sup>19</sup> Ornstein, *A Kingdom For A Stage*, p. 65.

<sup>20</sup> Holderness, *The Histories*, p. 81.

a creature for whom time has stopped'.<sup>21</sup> Margaret can only observe, trapped by her obsession with the past, while Richard sets about bringing the horror of the past back to the present. The two thus mirror each other; both trapped in the past and unable to move on, they invent and distort history for their own malign purposes.

### **Curses**

Richard claims that it is Margaret's torture and murder of York that has caused her present misfortune because his curses upon her have come true. He theorises history, seeing it as a form of punishment for past misdeeds. Whether he actually believes this is problematic. He sees curses and prophecies as useful tools which can be used to manipulate events in his favour, but he does not appear to believe in their actual efficacy. It seems likely that he interprets history as a form of divine punishment in this scene in order verbally to dominate Margaret. His providential reading of the past does not really hold up to scrutiny.

Many curses and predictions are uttered in *Richard III*, and while many come true, some do not. At the beginning of the play Anne curses Richard with the words:

If ever he have child, abortive be it,  
Prodigious, and untimely brought to light.

(I. ii. 21-2)

The curse is never again mentioned in the play, and it does not have any effect whatsoever; no mention is made of Richard fathering any children. Writing about the historical Richard III, Peter Saccio notes that 'his only legitimate son (not mentioned in

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<sup>21</sup> Ornstein, *A Kingdom For A Stage*, p. 65.

the play) died in April 1484'.<sup>22</sup> Anne's curse might raise expectations in the audience that Richard would father an 'untimely' child who would be 'abortive', but this never happens. The possibility is brought up and then abandoned, a dramatic thread that goes nowhere. Not every curse will be answered, not every prophecy will come to pass, not every past event recaptured. The precise course that history will take is out of the characters' control.

Nicholas Grene observes of the history plays that 'a violent death is a fairly safe prediction for almost any of the male characters in these plays'.<sup>23</sup> Violent death is inevitable in war. It is the retrospective attribution of curses as the cause of these deaths that imposes a narrative of divine punishment where none exists. Richard's bloody path to the crown seems to be paved with victims who too late realise that Margaret's curses have come true. It must be remembered, however, that Richard's rise to power is inevitably fuelled by victims; it is merely retrospective reinterpretation of the past that makes his victims believe that their downfalls have been caused by Margaret's curses. As Hayden White observes, 'we do not *live* stories, even if we give our lives meaning by retrospectively casting them in the form of stories'.<sup>24</sup> In *Richard III* curses come true because characters look back at their lives and impose a story on their past, in this case the story of divine punishment for past misdeeds. It is a cause and effect narrative, with a beginning, middle and end. They use pre-existing narratives to shape the events of their lives; their guilt for crimes they have committed makes them believe that God has been waiting to punish them, and now the moment has arrived. This becomes less believable

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<sup>22</sup> Peter Saccio, *Shakespeare's English Kings: History, Chronicle, and Drama* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 181.

<sup>23</sup> Grene, *Shakespeare's Serial History Plays*, p. 143.

<sup>24</sup> Hayden White, *Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism* (Baltimore and London: John Hopkins University Press, 1978), p. 90.

the more it occurs. Buckingham's acceptance of his fate is perhaps the most telling example of this phenomenon:

This is the day which, in King Edward's time,  
I wished might fall on me, when I was found  
False to his children and his wife's allies.  
This is the day wherein I wished to fall  
By the false faith of him whom most I trusted.

(V. i. 13-7)

Buckingham sees his impending death as being a direct result of his perjury. It is intriguing that he refers to taking this oath 'in King Edward's time', suggesting that he sees the course of history not as an unbroken chain of events, but as a succession of kingly reigns. He imposes an order and structure onto history, an order that does not exist. Buckingham sees history not as an impersonal passage of time, but as the chronicle of human endeavour, of triumph and loss. This historical perspective allows him to make sense of the horrific events of the past, to rationalise the horror and bloodshed as a necessary step on the way to establishing King Edward on the throne. The killing was necessary to establish 'King Edward's time'. Buckingham thus retrospectively arranges events into an intelligible narrative in order to give meaning to the murders he was complicit in. At the point of his death his Machiavellian view of history becomes a providential one, or perhaps his Machiavellian actions become something else retrospectively. History here might be thought of as a process of becoming, as actions taken for one reason suddenly alter in the light of subsequent events. Buckingham retreats even further from seeing the world in all its random chaos; instead he chooses to believe

that he has been divinely punished for his perjury – he invents a fantasy to give his life retrospective meaning. Throughout the play characters similarly interpret events in a particular way in order to give much-needed meaning to the traumatic events they have experienced, even as they discover, like Buckingham, that order has its own ruthless mechanism.

### **Providence**

Phyllis Rackin argues that ‘In *Richard III* Shakespeare reconstructs the history he has already written, retroactively imposing a providential order that makes sense of the Machiavellian chaos he depicted in the Henry VI plays’.<sup>25</sup> To argue that Shakespeare imposes a providential order on the play in order somehow to explain the chaos of the previous plays is to make a rather large interpretative leap. Rackin’s view that a new providential order replaces the Machiavellianism of the preceding plays ignores the ambiguity of most of the providential events in the play. Prophecies and curses are shown to be unreliable in the play, and the Machiavellian Richard uses them to his own ends. Events occur which are subsequently claimed to be providential, but there is no clear evidence that these events actually are providential in nature. The ghost scene, for example, appears to be unambiguously providential, but Richard and Richmond are asleep when the ghosts appear to them. As Agnes Heller observes, ‘The difference between dreams and visions depends on one’s state of mind’.<sup>26</sup> Providence is not the only interpretation that is possible.

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<sup>25</sup> Rackin, *Stages of History*, p. 65.

<sup>26</sup> Agnes Heller, *The Time Is Out of Joint: Shakespeare as Philosopher of History* (Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield, 2002), p. 275.

The providential interpretation of the play rests in no small part on the fact that the future can apparently be predicted by supernatural means, or caused to happen by cursing. Stephen Greenblatt does not entirely endorse this interpretation of *Richard III*, instead arguing that the power of curses and prophecies may lie in their perceived link to the supernatural world, 'the [...] pervasive sense that there is something eerie and disturbing about curses, as if through incantatory verbal ritual they magically touch the hidden order of things'.<sup>27</sup> There is, as Greenblatt suggests, something unsettling about curses, and when they are fulfilled it is easy to believe that it is because they carry a providential power, touching 'the hidden order of things' which humanity cannot understand.

The providential reading of the play removes human agency as the main catalyst in history. The characters no longer make their own history; they follow a pre-determined path which has already been set. The logic of this is set out by Stuart Hampton-Reeves and Carol Chillington Rutter thus:

If the future is foreseeable and there really are spirits capable of seeing it, then history is inevitable and inescapable. Indeed, the moral of any prophecy is that you cannot escape the future.<sup>28</sup>

The moral of any prophecy is that history is only a future. However, when applied to *Richard III* this interpretation is complicated by the fact that not all of the curses in the play are effective, as Agnes Heller observes:

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<sup>27</sup> Stephen Greenblatt, '*Richard III*' in *The Norton Shakespeare*, ed. Stephen Greenblatt, Walter Cohen, Jean E. Howard, Katherine Eisaman Maus (New York and London: Norton, 1997), p.509.

<sup>28</sup> Stuart Hampton-Reeves and Carol Chillington Rutter, *The 'Henry VI' Plays* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1991), p.7.

Several predictions never come true; and although the murderers meet a violent death, so do many innocent men, women, and children. [...]

Had [Shakespeare] put into the mouths of his heroes only prophecies that were later confirmed, he would have made a case for the total predictability of history.

The false prophecies are there for a purpose; they testify to the unpredictability of the historical future.<sup>29</sup>

A providential history is a history that is already known, a history that cannot deviate from the path set out for it. Predictions and prophecies are not always successful in the play because a foreknowledge of the future would ignore the random chaos of history, a chaos that Shakespeare had already dramatised in the *Henry VI* plays. In *Richard III* the future may be glimpsed but not known; to the characters, history is as yet unwritten.

Phyllis Rackin, however, offers an intriguing view of how the audience could view providence in the play:

The audience came into the theater knowing Richard's history and they came to see a play called "The Tragedy of Richard III." That knowledge offers the audience a privileged vantage point, removing them from the flux of human temporality and placing them in the omniscient position of providence itself.<sup>30</sup>

Although it is unclear how much historical knowledge an audience would have had, and what form this knowledge would have taken, Rackin is correct to suggest that an audience could be expected to have some knowledge of Richard's history, however vague. The history, or the main line of events, presented to the audience in the play is a familiar one; it can offer no surprises to them. They enter the theatre armed with the

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<sup>29</sup> Heller, *The Time Is Out of Joint*, pp. 16-7.

<sup>30</sup> Rackin, *Stages of History*, p. 64.



knowledge that the Princes will be murdered in the Tower and that Richmond will be victorious at Bosworth. Rackin is correct in suggesting that the very nature of a history play means that it cannot offer suspense or surprise to an audience that is familiar with the events it relates. She argues that this knowledge places them outside of the temporal order of the play. Even as it begins, the audience is aware that it will end with Richard's defeat and death. An audience watching *Richard III* is watching history unfold in the precise way that they know it must, and this knowledge necessarily changes the way they view history in the play. The plural paths that history can take, the endless opportunities offered by chance, are reduced to one path that history must take, because to do otherwise would be unhistorical. The 'flux of human temporality' that Rackin describes is lost in the history play, because there is only one way that events can happen. Instead of being aware of the manifold possibilities open to the characters at the beginning of the play, the audience is encouraged to see history as a march along a single path to a destination that is already known. Rackin sees this as placing the audience in the position of providence itself, watching events unfold as they have been foretold, and ending with the new rule of the Tudors. There is, however, a difference between watching events and controlling them, and between foretelling events and knowing them as history. The conclusion of *Richard III* complicates the relationship between providence, history and the theatre.

Kristian Smidt observes that '*Richard III* is the most conclusive of Shakespeare's English history plays. It leaves no loose ends and prepares for no continued action'.<sup>31</sup> It is thus tempting to view *Richard III* as the definitive conclusion of the narrative begun in *Henry VI*. In this reading the ascension of Richmond at the play's conclusion signals that

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<sup>31</sup> Kristian Smidt, *Unconformities in Shakespeare's History Plays* (London and Basingstoke: Macmillan Press, 1982), p. 69.

the usurpation of Richard II has been avenged, and order has been restored. The providential interpretation of *Richard III* propounded by Rackin, however, seems overly simplified when set against the ambiguity of providence in the play, particularly when Richmond's role as divinely-ordained saviour is closely examined.

Richmond's role as the saviour of the kingdom is based in part upon Henry VI's prediction that he would one day ascend the throne. This prophecy justifies Richmond's attempt to seize power; the actual legitimacy of his claim is weak. Richard III himself remembers Henry VI's prediction about Richmond thus:

I do remember me, Henry the Sixth  
Did prophesy that Richmond should be king,  
When Richmond was a little peevish boy.  
A king...perhaps...perhaps.

(IV. ii. 98-101)

Perhaps this prophecy touches 'the hidden order of things',<sup>32</sup> or perhaps its effectiveness comes from the fact that it was spoken to a child. Richmond's success in claiming the throne rests in no small part on this prediction. Henry's prophecy becomes self-fulfilling: it comes true because it is believed. The prophecy begins in *3 Henry VI*:

Come hither, England's hope.  
[KING HENRY] *lays his hand on [Richmond's] head*  
If secret powers  
Suggest but truth to my divining thoughts,  
This pretty lad will prove our country's bliss.  
His looks are full of peaceful majesty,

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<sup>32</sup> Greenblatt, '*Richard III*' in William Shakespeare, *The Norton Shakespeare*, p.509.

His head by nature framed to wear a crown,  
His hand to wield a sceptre, and himself  
Likely in time to bless a regal throne.  
Make much of him, my lords, for this is he  
Must help you more than you are hurt by me.

(IV. vii. 68-76)

Henry attributes his prophecy to 'secret powers' which 'suggest but truth' to him. He frames his endorsement of Richmond with the claim that his prophecy is divinely ordained, that God wishes Richmond to one day succeed Henry as king. He follows this with a list of Richmond's virtues. Henry does not know Richmond, however, and so the list of kingly attributes he attributes to him focus exclusively on his outward appearance. Richmond's 'looks are full of peaceful majesty', 'his head by nature framed to wear a crown'. This may be true, but in practical terms it means nothing. Richmond has the appearance of a king, but does he have the inner substance needed? This seems doubtful. In *Richard III* he does not evince any particularly kingly attributes; he is welcomed as England's saviour chiefly because he is not as bad as Richard. He may be a symbolic figure, appearing good by contrast to Richard. Henry VI's prophecy that he will one day be king is followed by a command to his lords to 'make much of him'. Henry then follows his divinely inspired prediction of Richmond's future greatness with a secular command that will ensure that his prophecy will one day come true. Far from being divinely ordained to be king, Richmond owes his rise to the political patronage of the lords. Of course, Henry's prophecy proves useful in capturing the hearts of the common people and terrifying Richard III, but it is merely a smokescreen which obscures the

political reason for Richmond's rise to power. Behind the providential rhetoric lies a cynical understanding of the effectiveness of realpolitik and its place in making history and crowning kings. Ironically, a line in Richmond's final speech echoes the tyranny of Richard: 'What traitor hears me and says not "Amen"?' (V. viii. 22). The language of treason is common to Richard and Richmond, as it is common to every king. History is full of verbal echoes, making a different kind of oral history, the history of kingly power and its ever-present potential for misuse.

### **Making History**

*Richard III* contains a number of unhistorical characters such as the Scrivener, who are entirely fictional characters who exist outside of the history the play dramatises. *Richard III* mixes fact and fiction, raising the question of where historical accuracy ends and drama begins – what Holderness calls 'the paradox of history as a real finite past, and a constructed contemporary narrative'.<sup>33</sup> The unhistorical characters are free to comment upon the manipulation of history in the play. By drawing attention to the way that history can be distorted and fictionalised, the Scrivener in particular comments upon the dubious veracity of the historical facts that the audience take for granted. Drawing attention to the indictment of Hastings that he has written at Richard's command, he observes:

Eleven hours I have spent to write it over,  
For yesternight by Catesby was it sent me;  
The precedent was full as long a-doing;  
And yet, within these five hours, Hastings lived,  
Untainted, unexamined, free, at liberty.

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<sup>33</sup> Holderness, *Shakespeare: The Histories*, pp. 95-6.

(III. vi. 5-9)

History is simultaneously written and re-written here. It is written in the literal sense by the Scrivener, who spends eleven hours writing out the indictment of Hastings, legitimising his execution on Richard's orders. It is re-written in the sense that the Scrivener creates a document which retrospectively legitimates a course of action already taken, for very different reasons. He creates a historical text, a source that will be examined by future historians who will believe its distorted version of history as fact. As Holderness observes:

The manipulation and fixing of legal documentation is manifestly an attempt to rig the verdict of history, to put in place a phoney record from which a particular interpretation of the past can then be drawn.<sup>34</sup>

This scene dramatises the process of making history, of creating a false history that never happened. The purpose of the false history that the Scrivener writes is not only to make Richard's actions seem legitimate in the present, but also to make them seem legitimate to future generations; future historians will read the false indictment of Hastings and come to the wrong conclusion about events.

The Scrivener sees through this deception but is too scared to take any action:

Here's a good world the while! Who is so gross  
That cannot see this palpable device?  
Yet who so bold but says he sees it not?  
Bad is the world, and all will come to naught,  
When such ill dealing must be seen in thought.

(III. vi. 10-4)

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<sup>34</sup> Holderness, *Shakespeare: The Histories*, p. 96.

The Scrivener casts doubt on the accuracy of written history by showing how easily it can be falsified, or even invented. If the past can be re-written so easily, then no historical account can be trusted. The very process of making written history is cynically encapsulated in this brief scene. Un-named, the Scrivener appears in one scene and then vanishes from the action, never to reappear. He is one of the anonymous, humble, unacknowledged yet indispensable architects of history. His role in creating history is powerful: he can shift the time and order of events; he can rewrite the past. In his vital role in shaping history, he is the very opposite of the grand scheme of providence.

The Citizens in II. iii also articulate the terror felt by the common people as they view the state slipping into chaos:

SECOND CITIZEN Hear you the news abroad?

FIRST CITIZEN Yes, that the King is dead.

SECOND CITIZEN Ill news, by'r Lady; seldom comes the better.

I fear, I fear, 'twill prove a giddy world.

(II. iii. 2-5)

The news that Edward is dead has spread quickly, and the citizens are worried, even before they mention the possibility of Richard ascending the throne:

FIRST CITIZEN No, no, by God's good grace his son shall reign.

THIRD CITIZEN Woe to that land that's governed by a child.

[...]

FIRST CITIZEN So stood the state when Henry the Sixth

Was crowned in Paris but at nine months old.

THIRD CITIZEN Stood the state so? No, no, good friends, God wot.

For then this land was famously enriched  
With politic, grave counsel; then the King  
Had virtuous uncles to protect his grace.

(II. iii. 10-1, 16-21)

The First Citizen's belief that Edward's son will reign is a belief in the patriarchal male order of history, a belief in history defined by lineage and succession. It is this pattern of succession that Richard will break. The Citizens view history as the history of governance; they define history by kings. Their analysis of the state and how it can best be served is based on their experience of the past; their understanding of the past heavily informs their present. They are anxiously debating amongst themselves whether a child can successfully rule, and reach back into the recent past for examples to bolster their arguments. The First Citizen's attempt at reassurance is attacked by the Third Citizen, who exposes a weakness in his reasoning: there are no 'virtuous uncles' to protect the anointed heir this time. Instead, there is only Richard. Interestingly, Richard's name is invoked only once in this scene: 'O full of danger is the Duke of Gloucester' (II. iii. 27). The Citizens are behaving exactly as the Scrivener will observe later in the play; they see the danger, understand it, but cannot speak of it explicitly. Richard has not come to power yet, but fear of what may be keeps the commoners from talking about him. Even before seizing the throne, he has seized the commoners, who are scared into silence. Here fear informs history. In these small figures *Richard III* offers yet another counter history, one not based in grand theories but in the anonymous figures of citizens and artisans as the play continues to develop its varying perspectives of fact and fiction.

## Ghosts

A fascinating example of the tension in the play between fact and fiction is encapsulated in Margaret. Edward Burns observes that ‘her entrance must have been a surprising moment for the original audience, as it is ahistorical, not to be predicted from knowledge of the sources’.<sup>35</sup> This reading implies a very strong knowledge of the sources on behalf of the audience; this, of course, may not have been the case. Janis Lull also observes that ‘historically, Margaret left England in 1476 and died in 1482, three years before Richard’s defeat at Bosworth’.<sup>36</sup> The Margaret of *Richard III* is an anachronism in the play, not least because the real Margaret was dead at this time. The Margaret of *Henry VI* is, however fictionalised, at least based on a real person; the Margaret of *Richard III* is entirely fiction. She is a wraith, a ghostly, insubstantial shadow of her former self. In *Richard III* Margaret lives again, resurrected by Shakespeare, and, as Rackin notes, she speaks ‘like a voice from the dead, from a vantage point beyond that of the represented historical action’.<sup>37</sup> She exists simultaneously within the action of the play and beyond it, outside the history it presents. Margaret and the corpse of Henry VI, brought onstage at the beginning of I. ii., are the only physical embodiments of the Lancastrian past in the play. Both are dead, though not in the same way, but Margaret can still speak, can still curse and denounce her enemies. She is the silent voice of the past, silenced no more.

The play, however, does not look too deeply at Margaret’s unlikely return. It is left to Richard to question her on her return from banishment:

*RICHARD GLOUCESTER* Wert thou not banishèd on pain of death?

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<sup>35</sup> Burns, *William Shakespeare’s ‘Richard III’*, p. 43.

<sup>36</sup> Janis Lull, ‘Introduction’, William Shakespeare, *King Richard III*, ed. Janis Lull (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p. 7.

<sup>37</sup> Rackin, *Stages of History*, p. 93.



*QUEEN MARGARET I was, but I do find more pain in banishment*

*Than death can yield me here by my abode.*

(I. iii. 165.1-3)

Margaret appears to be saying that she has risked death by returning from her banishment, as the pain of death is less than the pain of exile. However, it also appears as if she is punning on her fictional status by acknowledging the fact that the historical Margaret was dead by this time. Indeed, the characters in the play make no effort to have her executed for returning from exile, and no sufficient explanation is given for allowing her to wander the court cursing people. Rivers wonders out loud 'I muse why she's at liberty' (I. iii. 303), but the question goes unanswered. Margaret is indeed like a ghost, the ghost of the past which has returned to haunt the survivors of the Wars of the Roses. Shakespeare chose a dead woman to be the mouthpiece of that history. She is the voice of the dead, returned from the grave to warn the living that the past will repeat itself, that blood will be shed again. Her warnings, however, are ignored; it is as if the other characters cannot hear her. By ignoring the past they leave themselves vulnerable when events repeat themselves. If the Scrivener and the Citizens are the equivalent of a Chorus in the play, then Margaret is Cassandra, forever uttering dire warnings about the future which pass unheeded. Her discounted warnings demonstrate the inherent danger in ignoring the past; when history is disregarded, the knowledge needed to change the future is disregarded too. It is, then, no accident that Shakespeare chose an anachronistic figure to embody this message. By drawing attention to her fictionality, he draws attention to the fact that history cannot speak for itself; it is always mediated. In reality the dead cannot rise from their graves to warn the living that the past will repeat itself.

Ironically, of course, the dead do rise at the conclusion of *Richard III*; ghosts of the murdered dead from the entire tetralogy rise from their graves to curse Richard and endorse Richmond's cause. Prince Edward, murdered in *3 Henry VI*, is the first to curse Richard:

Let me sit heavy on thy soul tomorrow,  
Prince Edward, son to Henry the Sixth.  
Think how thou stabbedst me in my prime of youth  
At Tewkesbury. Despair, therefore, and die.

(V. v. 71-4)

Prince Edward's return is a pivotal moment in the play; simultaneously dead and alive, he is a living spectre of the past which cannot be dismissed. Murdered in a previous play, his ghost rises from the grave to denounce Richard. Not even death can silence his voice, or the voices of the others Richard has slain. His entrance on stage acts as a reminder to the audience that there is a rich history behind the events of the play, that *Richard III* is the culmination of a series of plays and that all the history they present is brought together at its conclusion. The past is anachronistically transported to the present by the ghosts, acting as the metaphorical voices of the silenced dead. Their appearance in the play could be seen as a kind of wish-fulfilment as men and women unjustly slaughtered return in order to denounce their murderer and take revenge upon him. The mute dead of history are provided with a voice: Prince Edward identifies himself to Richard before he curses him, and reminds him of where he was slain. No longer silenced by death, the victim reminds the murderer of his crime.

In this final scene, then, Shakespeare appears to make explicit the supernatural nature of the history the play presents; it seems suddenly to become Greenblatt's 'hidden order of things'. Up until this point the play seems to be ambiguous about whether the history it presents is providential, or whether this is merely an interpretation retrospectively imposed on the random chaos of history. Now any ambiguity is lost as Shakespeare dramatises, in Tillyard's phrase, 'the working out of God's will in English history',<sup>38</sup> his message communicated to Richard and Richmond through the medium of the ghosts. Instead of being comforting, however, the intrusion of the supernatural into the play at its conclusion is deeply disturbing. The ghosts are dead; they should remain in the past instead of rising to influence the world of the living. The effect created is one of inertia and decay as the past which will not remain in the past unnaturally returns and imposes its will upon the present. It is reminiscent of Karl Marx's observation that 'the tradition of all the dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brain of the living'.<sup>39</sup> Every character in the play is haunted by the past to some degree and this haunting becomes literal instead of metaphorical in this scene. The past that they have worked so hard to forget returns to haunt them. Graham Holderness remarks that:

Memory can [...] be a haunting, in which the present consciousness is overwhelmed by images of the past; disabled by nostalgia or the sense of loss, unnerved by the unbearable burden of recollection.<sup>40</sup>

Edward may be a representative of God's will, but his presence in the play is anachronistic and wrong; he died in a previous play and he should have remained there. His presence onstage is a violation of the rules of history and temporality; he is an affront

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<sup>38</sup> Tillyard, *Shakespeare's History Plays*, p. 215.

<sup>39</sup> Karl Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* (London: Laurence & Wishart, 1984), p. 10.

<sup>40</sup> Holderness, *Shakespeare: The Histories*, p. 53.

to the natural order of things. He should not be present in the world of *Richard III*. The past is constantly referred to in the play, but to have a physical manifestation of the past return from the dead to influence the world of the living is disruptive of the principles of history. The past haunts the present, inescapable and terrible. Henry VI appears early in the play as a corpse, a mute reminder of crimes committed in the *Henry VI* plays. To have him resurrected at the play's conclusion, to move and to speak onstage is deeply disturbing. Henry VI is dead; his reign is over and he should not be returning to influence the present. His ghostly presence in the play makes history stagnant. How can time move forward if the past will not stay in the past? The presence of the ghosts also leads to the ominous question that if Henry and Edward can rise from the dead and influence the present, what is to stop Richard from doing the same?

The final scene delineates the division between history and drama, between fact and fiction in the play. *Richard III* is based on historical events, but it is a fictionalised representation of the events, not a historical account. The presence of the ghosts in the play is entirely fictitious, as history shades into drama, drawing the past to an end to finish the sequence. Shakespeare brings the ghosts onstage to underscore the climactic finality of the play as the conclusion of the tetralogy. This is the end of the history he has dramatised and the presence of characters from the previous plays onstage serves to emphasise the sense of closure and ending of the series. It is drama that occurs in this scene, not history. The ghosts are a signal to the audience of the fictionality of the history they have witnessed. As Catherine Belsey observes, 'brilliant fictions, and perhaps equally brilliant propaganda, the history plays are understood to be precisely art, not life,

imagination and not truth'.<sup>41</sup> The ghosts underscore this point, pointing out the fictionality of the play while bringing its history to a close. Real history, the audience is reminded, does not end so neatly. Shakespeare will write another tetralogy, but there will be no sense of resolve at its conclusion. As Phyllis Rackin argues, 'the first tetralogy Shakespeare wrote ends in providential redemption; but although the second recapitulates that process, it does so in much more problematic terms'.<sup>42</sup> The simple, apparently unambiguous ending of *Richard III* will not occur again; the second tetralogy offers a much more cynical view of history than the first. History repeats itself, but in a different way, with no happy endings.

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<sup>41</sup> Catherine Belsey, *Shakespeare in Theory and Practice* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2008), p. 119.

<sup>42</sup> Rackin, *Stages of History*, p. 61.

### Chapter III: *Richard II*: Competing Histories

Critical readings of *Richard II* have a great deal to say about the history, or histories, presented in the play. Graham Holderness observes that ‘even though it is clearly incorporated into a series by the *Henry IV* plays, its individual treatment of history remains distinctive’.<sup>1</sup> Holderness sees the play as fundamentally different from the later plays which fix it in a sequence, so that it stands apart and alone in the tetralogy. Nicholas Grene agrees, arguing that ‘the writing in *Richard II* is its own thing, distinct from the style of the *Henry IV* plays or *Henry V*, as none of the earlier history plays is distinct from the others’.<sup>2</sup> The play, he suggests, presents not one, but two narratives of Richard’s rule, which exist simultaneously; Richard embodies both of the prevailing interpretations of his rule that were to be found in the chronicles.<sup>3</sup> As Margaret Healy observes, ‘through bringing the two interpretations of Richard’s life into startling and unsettling collision (Richard the tyrant and Richard the martyr), the play inevitably raises questions about writing the past’.<sup>4</sup> I argue that by presenting two competing (and antithetical) interpretations of Richard’s reign in one narrative, embodied in one character, Shakespeare questions the legitimacy of attempts to fix the past in a ‘grand narrative’. Richard is, indeed, simultaneously tyrant and martyr; he is a complex and three-dimensional character, in a way that Richard III is not. Shakespeare’s dramatic

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<sup>1</sup> Graham Holderness, *Shakespeare’s History* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1985), p. 40.

<sup>2</sup> Nicholas Grene, *Shakespeare’s Serial History Plays* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), p. 26.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Charles R. Forker, ‘Introduction’, William Shakespeare, *King Richard II*, ed. Charles R. Forker (London: Arden Shakespeare (Third Series), 2002), p. 152.

<sup>4</sup> Margaret Healy, *William Shakespeare: ‘Richard II’* (Plymouth: Northcote House, 1998), p. 2.

history is moving away from the emphasis on plotting seen in *Richard III* into a more subtle, nuanced view of the complexity of our attempts to understand the past.

E. M. W. Tillyard sees history in the play in terms of contrast, arguing that: *Richard II*, although reputed so simple and homogenous a play, is built on a contrast. The world of medieval refinement is indeed the main object of presentation but it is threatened and in the end superseded by the more familiar world of the present.<sup>5</sup>

Tillyard sees the play in terms of a clear division between the past and the present, in which the present overwhelms the past. Charles Forker agrees with this interpretation, asserting that 'a new spirit of aggressive individuality seems finally to dissolve the settled harmonies of medieval tradition and hierarchical order'.<sup>6</sup> By contrast, Graham Holderness argues that the deposition of Richard is:

Not [...] the overturning of a traditional order by new, ruthless political forces, but [...] the consequence of an attempt by a later medieval monarch to impose on feudal power an absolutist solution. The victorious forces are not new but old: feudal reaction rather than political revolution.<sup>7</sup>

In this reading the forces of feudalism suppress the move to curb their power, triumphing over an attempt at change. The triumph of Bolingbroke is the victory of the old over the new, as change is halted and reversed. Holderness' very different reading of the play suggests that there is a great deal hidden beneath the apparently simple surface of the play. There are, in fact, several different forms of history in *Richard II*, and several

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<sup>5</sup> E. M. W. Tillyard, *Shakespeare's History Plays* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1944), p. 265.

<sup>6</sup> Forker, 'Introduction', William Shakespeare, *King Richard II*, p. 3.

<sup>7</sup> Graham Holderness, *Shakespeare Recycled: The Making of Historical Drama* (London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1992), p. 71.

different historical narratives which jostle for prominence and the audience's attention. Although the history presented in the play appears straightforward, in reality it is anything but.

*Richard II* dramatises a different kind of history from *Richard III*. This is no longer a world where curses have an immediate and visible effect. In *Richard II* providential history appears to be created by retrospective reinterpretation instead of actual divine influence. The past is constantly interpreted and reinterpreted in the play, but the future is simultaneously absent and present in *Richard II*. It is always on the horizon, always just about to arrive. History in *Richard II* is a series of possibilities. There is a sense that the play depicts an empty world waiting to be filled with history. This seeming emptiness is deceptive; underneath the apparently calm surface of the play Shakespeare examines the issues of perspective, truth and rumour, issues which he will expand upon in *Henry IV*.

### **The Past**

*Richard II* opens with Richard's line 'Old John of Gaunt, time-honoured Lancaster',<sup>8</sup> fixing the play's dual concern with age and the passing of time from its opening line. Richard addresses Gaunt respectfully as 'time-honoured', equating his age with honour and making it plain that he is an old man, a man out of his time. Significantly, the audience is not yet made aware of precisely why he is honoured, except perhaps for his age, suggesting that merely surviving the passage of years is enough to make one venerable. A survivor of the vanished world of Edward III, Gaunt is one of the few

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<sup>8</sup> William Shakespeare, *The Tragedy of King Richard The Second*, I. i. 1, in *The Norton Shakespeare*, ed. Stephen Greenblatt, Walter Cohen, Jean E. Howard, Katherine Eisaman Maus (New York and London: Norton, 1997). All further references are to this edition and are given in the text.



characters in the play who has a personal memory of the vanished past, and he is the only one to relate it onstage. This retelling is filled with malign significance: his memories of the past are used chiefly as a weapon against Richard in II. i., when the dying Gaunt excoriates him in brutal terms, claiming an ability to predict the future:

Methinks I am a prophet new-inspired,  
And thus, expiring, do foretell of him.

(II. i. 31-2)

As Gaunt, the last remnant of the old world, fades away he claims that he is imbued with a prophetic ability to predict what the future will hold for Richard. His assertion that he can prophesy the future is reminiscent of Henry VI's similar prediction that Richmond will overthrow Richard III.<sup>9</sup> As in that play, it is unclear whether the gift of prophecy is truly providential in nature or whether the prophecy made is a secular one. Although both prophecies eventually come to pass, in their very utterance they create the conditions needed for their fulfilment. This creation of the future by predicting it is an activity that Richard will engage in later in the play, and is one of the major concerns of *Richard II*. The play examines how future understandings of the past can be created by prefiguring interpretation and deliberately creating the circumstances needed for history, or a certain version of history, to occur.

In II. i. Gaunt relates his prophecy for the future at some length, his vision notable for its rather trite language:

His rash, fierce blaze of riot cannot last,  
For violent fires soon burn out themselves.  
  
Small showers last long, but sudden storms are short.

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<sup>9</sup> Made in IV. vii. of *3 Henry VI*.

(II. i. 33-5)

This is prophecy couched in cliché; its use of such everyday expressions robs Gaunt's speech of the apocalyptic power it should have. This is prophecy as a mundane, quotidian activity, related in the pedantic, moralising language of the elderly. It quickly becomes clear that Gaunt reads the future as he reads the past, through his own preoccupations.

His description of England is so idealised that it bears no relation to reality at all:

This other Eden, demi-paradise,  
This fortress built by nature for herself  
Against infection and the hand of war,  
This happy breed of men, this little world,  
This precious stone set in the silver sea.

(II. i. 42-6)

Once again, Gaunt's language blunts his meaning. His use of rhetoric robs his peroration of its power; the language used in phrases like 'this precious stone set in the silver sea' is so overblown that it calls attention to the hollowness of his words. The association of England with Eden turns Gaunt's speech into a bittersweet nostalgic fantasy with very little relation to reality. The comparison is far-fetched, as David Norbrook has observed, noting that 'the reference to Eden does conjure up a nostalgic mood, but it should also be noted that greater emphasis is placed on the island's prowess in war, a somewhat un-Edenic activity'.<sup>10</sup> The idealised image collapses as soon as it is articulated; Gaunt's evocation of a perfect world now vanished is a myth, like Eden itself. The history he

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<sup>10</sup> David Norbrook, 'A Liberal Tongue': Language and Rebellion in *Richard II*, in *Shakespeare's Universe: Renaissance Ideas and Conventions – Essays in Honour of W. R. Elton*, ed. John M. Mucciolo (Aldershot: Scolar Press, 1996), p. 42.

relates exists only in his mind, as do all histories to some extent, but this narrative is clearly not based on a verifiable past.

Gaunt, then, projects his own preoccupations upon the past; the history he relates is not history at all. There are many references to the past in the play but Gaunt is one of the few characters who was actually there to witness it. Now, knowingly or unknowingly, he distorts it in the telling. As John Tosh observes, 'it is when the past is slipping away before our eyes that we seek to re-create it in the imagination'.<sup>11</sup> At the end of his life, Gaunt is a tragic figure as he denounces the present because it does not live up to a past that never existed. According to Charles Forker, 'Gaunt's speech [...] locates the object of his celebration in an irretrievable past'.<sup>12</sup> He seems to celebrate the past precisely because it cannot be recovered; he enjoys the nostalgic yearning he feels for his imaginary perfect world. 'Time-honoured Gaunt' has succumbed to the nostalgic self-deception of old age, and the past he remembers is not his past at all. Misremembering and reconstruction of the past occurs often throughout Shakespeare's history plays, but seldom in such an extreme form as this. Gaunt is a tragic figure; cut off from an irrecoverable past, he is adrift and lost.

Later in the scene the past, present and future collide with startling effect as Gaunt berates Richard's degeneracy:

O, had thy grandsire with a prophet's eye  
Seen how his son's son should destroy his sons,  
From forth thy reach he would have laid thy shame,  
Deposing thee before thou wert possessed.

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<sup>11</sup> John Tosh, *The Pursuit of History*, 5<sup>th</sup> edn (London: Longman, 2010), p. 17.

<sup>12</sup> Forker, 'Introduction', William Shakespeare, *King Richard II*, p. 122.

(II. i. 104-7)

Once again Gaunt mentions prophecy, but instead of claiming to possess the gift of foresight himself he imagines what might have happened if Edward III had been able to see the malign influence that Richard would have on England. He argues that if he had, he would have taken steps to prevent Richard ascending the throne. This is an astonishing, and dangerous, claim to make. If Gaunt were not dying he would face execution for treason. The prophecy cuts Richard so deeply because it refers to a shameful incident in his past; Gaunt's line 'seen how his son's son should destroy his sons' is a powerful reminder that Richard may be responsible for the murder of a blood relative in Gaunt's brother Woodstock. Referring to the vanished, but ever-present and inescapable past gives Gaunt's prophecy the rhetorical power it requires to cut the guilty king to the quick. Richard has not only caused irreparable damage to the tradition of succession, but by murdering Woodstock he has committed a grievous crime against the past itself, especially against his glorious grandfather Edward III. The seven sons of Edward are living reminders and continuations of his spirit and body. Though dead, he lives in them. By allegedly murdering Woodstock Richard has murdered Edward III, killing his likeness in the present. Richard has struck and destroyed the past by attacking its manifestation in the present.

Gaunt views Richard as a man who simultaneously harms the present and the past. His words 'deposing thee before thou wert possessed' are a trenchant and treasonous strike at Richard's patrimony and his claim to the throne. Gaunt reverses Richard's attack on the past, instead imagining a world where his grandfather deposed Richard in advance of his crowning, a world where the past anticipates the present and

acts to change the future. Looking forward as well as backwards, the speech anticipates the deposition of Richard which will occur very soon; Gaunt's imaginary world becomes reality, but a belated reality which is effected by a usurper instead of someone with a true claim to the throne. Gaunt's wish comes true, but not in the way he would have wanted. Such is the irony of prophecy and of the pattern of history itself: events never occur precisely as we imagine they will.

### **Time**

Time is a major concern in *Richard II*; timeliness can be seen as the leitmotif of the drama and as a vital component of the project of making history. Bolingbroke overthrows Richard and gains the throne because he chooses precisely the right time to launch a rebellion; he is in the right place at the right time, and he acts quickly, seizing the advantage. Conversely, Richard is defeated because time is not on his side, as Salisbury makes clear after disbanding his army:

One day too late, I fear me, noble lord,  
Hath clouded all thy happy days on earth.  
O, call back yesterday, bid time return,  
And thou shalt have twelve thousand fighting men.  
Today, today, unhappy day too late,  
Overthrows thy joys, friends, fortune, and thy state.

(III. ii. 63-8)

Salisbury's speech shows how small the difference between success and failure is for Richard: he is one day too late, and because of this small amount of time, a drop in the

ocean of eternity, he will lose his kingdom. Shakespeare is dramatising the moment of history here, and the importance of seizing that moment. Bolingbroke, unlike Richard, acts quickly to make his dreams of the future a reality. He first demonstrates this when he returns from exile with an army shortly after Richard departs for Ireland, leaving the country vulnerable. Indeed, his mustering an army at such short notice is somewhat suspicious; Shakespeare appears to have telescoped time here for dramatic effect, concomitantly casting doubt on Bolingbroke's professed motive for his return, as Charles Forker observes:

Shortening the interval between his exile and return in [this] way suggest[s] that he had been planning his enterprise even before he could have known about the loss of his estates and, in fact, almost as soon as he could be sure that Richard had embarked for Ireland.<sup>13</sup>

Perhaps, despite first appearances, Bolingbroke's success is based more on planning and preparation than luck. He not only seizes the moment, but prepares for it, creating the conditions needed for events to fall in his favour. Time may be a consequence of human action rather than human action being a consequence of time.

Richard's belated realisation that all is lost is followed by an apparently total loss of hope and craven capitulation to his enemies. His passive reaction to the news serves to reinforce the differences between the two men:

For God's sake, let us sit upon the ground,  
And tell sad stories of the death of kings.

(III. ii. 151-2)

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<sup>13</sup> Forker, 'Introduction', William Shakespeare, *King Richard II*, p. 129.

Richard acts as a complete opposite to Bolingbroke here; throughout the play Bolingbroke is forever moving forward, gaining ground with immense speed while Richard is content passively to await events. His desire to ‘tell sad stories’, to relate historical or fictional narratives, is portrayed as a waste of valuable time. Elsewhere the play celebrates stories and storytelling, as when Richard tells his queen to carry on his tale in V. i., but here it is seen as irrelevant. Telling stories is an important and worthwhile activity, but only when it is appropriate. Richard, however, attempts to substitute tale-telling for decisive action; he chooses the wrong moment, the wrong time, to tell stories.

Shakespeare does not give his characters a great deal of time to tell stories about the vanished past; with the exception of the brief interlude offered by the garden scene in III. iv., *Richard II*'s ever-moving rush of action does not slacken its pace until it draws to its conclusion. The garden scene offers a brief interval from the historical plot; Linda Bamber observes that ‘time moves differently’ in this scene, which is unique in the play for having no historical basis at all.<sup>14</sup> The scene is pure ahistorical fiction. With the exception of Richard’s soliloquy in the tower, it is the only moment in the play when time slows its onward rush and seems to stand still. Bamber argues that ‘with Isabel’s crucial scenes we get a sense of stop-action, a quick descent into a different world. [...] When we are with her nothing happens’.<sup>15</sup> Empty of history and devoid of frantic action, time meanders onward in the garden. The scene’s opening lines, spoken by the Queen, give an indication of its shift in mood:

What sport shall we devise here in this garden,

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<sup>14</sup> Linda Bamber, ‘History, Tragedy, Gender’, in *Shakespeare’s History Plays: ‘Richard II’ to ‘Henry V’*, ed. Graham Holderness (London: The Macmillan Press Ltd., 1992), p. 65.

<sup>15</sup> Bamber, ‘History, Tragedy, Gender’, in *Shakespeare’s History Plays: ‘Richard II’ to ‘Henry V’*, p. 65.

To drive away the heavy thought of care?

(III. iv. 1-2)

The weight and worry of events are not wholly absent, but are present in a much less overt way in this scene than in the rest of the play. Bolingbroke's rebellion overshadows every scene in the play to some degree, but here it is almost relegated to the background. The scene itself is a conspicuously artificial interlude, free from the burden of history that is such a major concern in the rest of the play. Unlike Richard's lonely ordeal in the tower in V. v., time does not seem to stop in the garden scene, but merely slows. Phyllis Rackin argues that:

The stylized unreality of the garden scene distances the audience from the characters' medieval time-situation and reminds them that what they are watching is a representation of an exemplary tale, an action completed long ago whose interpretation is not disputable but an established convention.<sup>16</sup>

Rackin argues that the play here calls attention to its artificiality; it reminds the audience that they are watching drama, not history. In this way it anticipates *Henry IV's* focus on the artificiality of the events it dramatises. The scene, however, not only reminds the audience that they are watching a play, but also that the narrative presented to them has accrued meanings, interpretations and connotations in the intervening time; the history of Richard's downfall has been fitted into different interpretative frameworks in the years since his fall. Perhaps by drawing attention to its fictionality, the play is attempting to encourage its audience to recognise and perhaps even to rethink the assumptions inherent in such a framework, and in the making of history.

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<sup>16</sup> Phyllis Rackin, *Stages of History: Shakespeare's English Chronicles* (Ithaca and New York: Cornell University Press, 1990), p. 126.



Despite the languor of this scene, the action of the play continues offstage; Bolingbroke is still advancing and Richard is still retreating. What the garden scene offers is a different perception of time passing. Isabella and the gardeners are not personally involved in the history which occurs around them, and so they feel the time passing differently. There is no sense of urgency here. Perhaps *Richard II* presents female history as moving at a different pace from the male-dominated history which is the main focus of the play. Isabella's passive role means time moves differently for her, as it does the other women in the garden idyll. Perhaps women's history, too, moves at a different pace from men's history. Isabella is, of course, a minor character, and her story is never really told. There is a sense that her history is not important to the play. She seems to exist primarily to commiserate with Richard after his fall, when he makes her promise to tell his tale, to carry his story to future generations. Isabella's history begins only after the play's conclusion, when she will relate the story of Richard's deposition. Her history is retrospective history: she will only be a part of events when she retells them. When the actual events occur in *Richard II* she is conspicuously absent.

Nevertheless, Isabella's garden is a real garden inside the play's action, as opposed to the vanished Eden that Gaunt celebrates. It is a practical garden of growth and change and acts as a reminder of everyday history. Time here is spent in dancing and bowls; it is pleurably wasted. This is a significant contrast to Richard's ruminations about time in the prison scene:

I wasted time, and now doth time waste me,

For now hath time made me his numb'ring clock.

My thoughts are minutes, and with sighs they jar.

(V. v. 49-51)

Time, moving with agonising slowness, is seen here as a form of torture. The painfully slow passage of time is felt intensely in Richard's words which present time as an ordeal which must be suffered. His words 'my thoughts are minutes, and with sighs they jar' make it clear that he is inflicting this torture upon himself, constructing it in a curiously mechanical way, almost like a clock. Richard is his own jailer and his own torturer. Richard's enemies, by removing him from the palace, the place where history is made, and confining him, use time itself as a weapon against him. The deposed king tortures himself, turning his mental anguish and recrimination inwards. It is clear that Richard does not blame Bolingbroke for his current abject state, but blames himself for his misfortune. This uncharacteristically astute realisation signals Richard's maturing view of himself and the world that surrounds him. It is a bitter irony that, like all his actions in the play, his self-realisation comes too late.

### **Scriptural History**

*Richard II* is unique in the histories for the amount of scriptural analogy and allusion in the play. Characters frequently refer back to the scriptural past, providing the play with a framework of much earlier history, a scriptural past rich in meaning and interpretation. Biblical parallels are frequently cited as parallels to events onstage. This can most obviously be seen in Richard's rather self-serving comparison of himself with Christ when excoriating his betrayers:

Did they not sometime cry 'All hail!' to me?

So Judas did to Christ. But He in twelve

Found truth in all but one; I, in twelve thousand, none.

(IV. i. 160-2)

In this passage Richard seems to construct his suffering as being greater than that experienced by Christ, an assertion that comes perilously close to blasphemy. Simultaneously evoking and diminishing the suffering of Christ, Richard demonstrates an insipid self-importance which weakens any sympathy his status as victim might give him. The comparison is grandiose and self-serving but strangely apposite, as Holderness observes, stating that 'by comparing himself to Christ, Richard is not only claiming a supreme metaphysical status and authority, he is also anticipating his own martyrdom'.<sup>17</sup> He attempts to remind his listeners of the divine basis of his power even as he acknowledges its loss. Richard constructs himself as a martyr, a blameless victim of others, a good man. But this cannot be seen as an entirely apt comparison, as John Roe observes, noting that 'it is a dubious martyrdom, perhaps, because he has in part contrived his own downfall through actions which do not square easily with a good conscience'.<sup>18</sup> Richard's attempt to shape his narrative into one analogous with that of Christ is unsuccessful because of the problematic things he has done to maintain and secure his power. Moving away from scriptural analogy, he realises that the comparison does not quite work – 'am I both priest and clerk? Well then, Amen.' (IV. i. 164), – and so shifts from analogy to a recognition of how earthly powers have deprived him of the crown.

Following his words above Richard constructs another history, a new history, which tells of the deposition of a king and the crowning of a usurper, a history which had

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<sup>17</sup> Graham Holderness, *William Shakespeare: 'Richard II'* (London: Penguin Books, 1989), p. 50.

<sup>18</sup> John Roe, *Shakespeare and Machiavelli* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2002), p. 30.

never before occurred in England. His words demonstrate that he knows his place in this narrative even as he constructs it: ‘God save the King, although I be not he’ (IV. i. 165). It is true that a precedent existed for deposing a bad king, but, as Peter Saccio observes, the law of succession had never been challenged in all of England’s history:

A precedent existed for deposition in the case of Edward II seventy years earlier, but there the successor was Edward’s son. Although a reign was artificially terminated, the natural inheritance of the crown was not tampered with.<sup>19</sup>

Tellingly, at the moment of the creation of this new history, Richard refers back to ancient scriptural history, citing the betrayal of Christ as a precedent for the actions onstage. This moment bring to mind Marx’s famous observation:

Just when they seem engaged in revolutionising themselves and things, in creating something that has never yet existed, precisely in such periods of revolutionary crisis they anxiously conjure up the spirits of the past to their service and borrow from them names, battle-cries and costumes in order to present the new scene of world history in this time-honoured disguise and this borrowed language.<sup>20</sup>

In this case the ‘borrowed language’ is ancient indeed, drawn as it is from the Bible, as is the shape of the narrative as a whole. Richard glosses events as they happen, turning them into ‘history’ rather than allowing later figures to do so. By constructing his own history as the events occur he can impose his own narrative and meaning, ensuring that his tale will be remembered the way he wants it to be. More particularly, he shapes their meanings by invoking scriptural parallels of the greatest betrayal in human history. In Act Four the play stands on the cusp of a new history; Richard’s deposition is an event

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<sup>19</sup> Peter Saccio, *Shakespeare’s English Kings: History, Chronicle and Drama*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 30.

<sup>20</sup> Karl Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* (London: Lawrence & Wisheart, 1984), p. 10.

without precedent, an event that will irrevocably destroy the old world and create a new world, a new time, but at the moment when Richard realises and accepts this, he cannot help but refer back to an earlier history, setting current events into context by citing a scriptural precedent. By citing the crucifixion of Christ as a parallel, Richard turns political history into sacred history; he refuses to see his deposition as a political act. He thus robs the narrative of the meaning his enemies have imposed on it, shifting the focus from his political malfeasance to the sacredness of his status as king, as God's chosen representative on Earth. Betraying him is like betraying God. Richard takes victory away from Bolingbroke and his helpers, regaining a kind of moral, divine power even as he loses the crown, the kingdom, and soon, his life.

In the above lines Richard writes his own history, deliberately citing a precedent for his murder that, ironically, ensures it will take place. As Holderness observes:

The play does not simply represent the tale of Richard's martyrdom as a reality that came into being through certain historical circumstances. Rather it demonstrates the specific conditions from which Richard's myth of royal martyrdom was composed as a narrative structure; and in particular it reveals the key role of Richard's own agency in fostering its composition.<sup>21</sup>

Once the image of Richard as Christ has been placed into the minds of his betrayers his death is the only possible conclusion. At the moment when the world and time of *Richard II* is shattered and remade into the world of *Henry IV*, at a moment when a new history is created, Richard contrives to write himself into the history that will occur, to ensure his place in the future, even as a memory. He turns history into his own personal history. He writes his future, and by extension he writes the future of Henry IV, the guilty king

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<sup>21</sup> Holderness, *William Shakespeare: 'Richard II'*, p. 48.

tortured by memories of Richard, forever promising expiation and never delivering. As Holderness puts it:

In the *longue durée* of history the myth of the deposed king will live far longer than the practical achievements of his enemies. Here, for once, history is not written by the victors, but unforgettably formulated by the dispossessed, in a poignant poetry of defeat and inconsolable loss.<sup>22</sup>

In one of the many historical ironies which litter the play, Richard's narrative of defeat will eventually overpower and supersede the narrative of those who deposed him. He writes his own history, a history of failure and betrayal. Although Henry appears to have triumphed, his victory is short-lived. In his lifetime Henry will see the history of the man he deposed become the justification and notional cause of widespread rebellion to his rule. Richard's narrative will become more and more powerful even as Henry IV's authority and grip on the realm weakens. More powerful in death than in life, Richard's memory, and the force of the narrative he created, will continue to haunt Henry until his death.

Despite the key allusions to seminal events in biblical history such as Eden and the crucifixion, it could be said that *Richard II* is a secular play, as Graham Holderness argues:

The construction of Richard's personal myth, together with the circumstances of his fall and of Bolingbroke's rise, are all shown taking place within a historical process that seems to proceed by secular laws of historical development, rather than by the management of divine Providence.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Graham Holderness, *Shakespeare: The Histories* (London: Macmillan Press Ltd., 2000), p. 196.

<sup>23</sup> Holderness, *William Shakespeare: 'Richard II'*, p. 99.

In contrast to *Richard III*, providence as a supernatural force is not invoked in the play. Instead, the play dramatises the secular creation of the conditions needed for providential history to come into being. The play shows Richard constructing his own historical myth; his prediction of a bloody future for his enemies is almost a self-fulfilling prophecy:

My master, God omnipotent,  
Is mustering in his clouds on our behalf  
Armies of pestilence; and they shall strike  
Your children yet unborn and unbegot.

(III. iii. 84-7)

This prophecy, for all its threatening, powerful language, which brings to mind the Old Testament, is so vaguely phrased that it could be applied to anything. Richard's prediction cannot help but be fulfilled, in one form or another. His prognostication that God will strike down the children of his betrayers has long been understood to be a reference to the Wars of the Roses, previously dramatised by Shakespeare in the *Henry VI* plays. Phyllis Rackin argues that:

When Richard attributes the Wars of the Roses to divine vengeance for the sin of deposing him, the audience is prepared to believe him, not only because he is echoing the standard Tudor party line, but also because his ability to foretell the Wars establishes his inspirational credentials.<sup>24</sup>

Richard does not foretell the Wars of the Roses, however: he merely threatens a supernatural vengeance for the sin of deposing him. His threat can certainly be read as predicting the internecine conflict that is to come, but it can also be read in secular terms

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<sup>24</sup> Phyllis Rackin, 'The Role of the Audience in Shakespeare's *Richard II*', *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 36.3 (1985), 262-81 (p. 262).

as a curse that will be given retrospective meaning after the Wars of the Roses have occurred. As Holderness observes, ‘we see the characters manufacturing history before it happens, preconfiguring the event in line with their own interpretative strategies’.<sup>25</sup> Richard’s prophecy is much more ambiguous than it first appears. This is no longer the world of *Richard III*, where curses have an immediate and visible effect. The world of *Richard II* is a secular world, where providential history appears to be created as much by reinterpretation as by actual divine influence, to belong to the future looking back, as opposed to the present looking forward.

### **Imagined Futures**

The future, defined by the *OED* as ‘of or pertaining to time to come [...] relating a time to come; describing an event yet to happen’,<sup>26</sup> is simultaneously absent and present in *Richard II*. It is always on the horizon, always just about to arrive. This is particularly noticeable in the duel scene between Bolingbroke and Mowbray in I. iii., which presents the audience with more than one possible future. The scene is full of possibilities, full of many paths that events can follow, but by the end of the scene these possibilities have been reduced to a single path that history must take.

Mowbray is the first to articulate his vision of the future when he states his motive for fighting:

By the grace of God and this mine arm

To prove him, in defending of myself,

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<sup>25</sup> Holderness, *Shakespeare: The Histories*, p. 183.

<sup>26</sup> ‘Future, adj. and n.’, *OED Online* (December 2011). Available at <http://www.oed.com.abc.cardiff.ac.uk/view/Entry/75853?rskey=GJvGC5&result=1&isAdvanced=false> [accessed 12 January 2012].



A traitor to my God, my king, and me.

(I. iii. 22-4)

In Mowbray's vision of the future he will have proven his innocence of Bolingbroke's charge by killing him in battle. The moment that he speaks these lines one version of the incipient future comes into being, one imaginary vision of the possible outcome of the scene. Of course, Bolingbroke's idea of the future is different:

To prove by God's grace and my body's valour

In lists on Thomas Mowbray, Duke of Norfolk,

That he is a traitor foul and dangerous.

(I. iii. 37-9)

The tension between these two possible futures and the competing versions of the past which lie behind them drives the scene. It dramatises the ever-present cusp of history, the fleeting instant when all the possibilities that are open to the characters are reduced to one course of action, the moment that will create the future and simultaneously create history. The build-up to the combat increases the tension as the audience waits to see who will win and claim the future that is rightfully theirs. When Richard throws down his warder he violently interrupts this moment and disrupts the flow of history. None of the outcomes that seemed about to occur actually come to pass; history is made in this moment, but it is not the history that was expected. Instead, history takes a very different, totally unpredictable path. The future cannot be predicted in *Richard II*; unlike *Richard III*, it cannot be created by curses or prophecy. The abrupt, jarring transition from the two possible versions of the incipient future remind us of how swiftly events can take a

different, and devastating, course. Richard's gesture, however, will have enormous consequences for the realm, consequences which ultimately lead to his own death.

The trial by combat later assumes a near-mythical status in *2 Henry IV*; it becomes the vital moment when all the different possible outcomes, all the futures which could have occurred, were reduced to a single path which events had to take. Graham Holderness observes that in *2 Henry IV* 'the trial by combat exists only in a kind of 'virtual history': it is one of the things that might have been, one of the doors history chose not to open'.<sup>27</sup> The 'virtual history' of the combat scene, however, is not entirely virtual. The imagined future exists as a real possibility, a real historical potential, for the characters and the audience up until the moment the warder is thrown down. Before this sudden interruption it seems to be the only history possible: the rhythm of the scene rushes onwards to the inevitable moment of battle, Bolingbroke and Mowbray each confident of his victory. Although some in the audience might know that the combat was interrupted, it would not be entirely unprecedented for Shakespeare to alter the past in a history play. In this scene, however, it is Richard who acts to prevent the future, giving his reason as:

For that our kingdom's earth should not be soiled  
With that dear blood which it hath fosterèd,  
And for our eyes do hate the dire aspect  
Of civil wounds ploughed up with neighbours' swords.

(I. iii. 124-7)

Richard's words are deeply ironic: by attempting to forestall civil war and bloodshed he has set in motion the very events that will lead to its occurrence. Shakespeare has already

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<sup>27</sup> Holderness, *Shakespeare: The Histories*, p. 184.

dramatised the ultimate effects of Richard's deposition in the civil war of the *Henry VI* plays; in this scene he dramatises the accidental beginnings of the conflict. The bloodshed and misery that is to come ultimately stems from this moment.

Richard justifies his decision to banish Mowbray and Bolingbroke by imagining a terrible future:

*With rival-hating envy set on you  
To wake our peace, which in our country's cradle  
Draws the sweet infant breath of gentle sleep,  
Which, so roused up with boist'rous untuned drums,  
With harsh-resounding trumpets' dreadful bray,  
And grating shock of wrathful iron arms,  
Might from our confines fright fair peace,  
And make us wade even in our kindred's blood.*

(I. iii. 127.3-132)

The speech makes it clear that Richard has taken the drastic action of banishing the combatants because of a possibility, because their conflict may lead to civil war. He has imagined a possible future and based his present actions upon his fear. In this speech Richard portrays peace as a sleeping infant lying in the cradle of England, an emotive metaphor which emphasises how precious and fragile the current peace is. The full horror of civil war is subtly articulated as Richard imagines what the future could be like if Bolingbroke or Mowbray were to unleash their violence upon their own people. Graham Holderness observes that 'throughout the speech of proclamation there runs a powerful positive sense of what the kingdom might be if violent militaristic disruptions like the

quarrel of Bolingbroke and Mowbray could be averted'.<sup>28</sup> This idyllic utopian potential for peace will never be fulfilled. There are, in fact, two visions of the future in Richard's speech: the vision of the bloodshed that could be unleashed by Bolingbroke or Mowbray, and the vision of what the kingdom might be like if the threat they represent was removed. Once again, the audience are presented with two antithetical futures, only one of which can occur. The proclamation scene powerfully presents the creation of history by dramatising the motives that drive actions which create history. In this case, imagination creates history, the imagination of what horrors may occur in the future. History, in the scene then, is a series of possibilities: Richard, Bolingbroke and Mowbray imagine what the future may be like, creating it in light of their preoccupations and concerns, but it is a future that is always already history for the play's audience.

### **Telling Stories**

Ironically, Richard does not alter the future in the way he originally intends, by banishing Mowbray and Bolingbroke and ensuring that the violence he foresees does not come to pass. In fact, he does not alter the future by actions at all; he alters it with words, by creating a historical narrative that favours himself, a narrative that relates his version of events. The play dramatises the struggle between Richard and Bolingbroke for ownership of the future, a struggle that does not manifest itself in armed combat or violence but a war of words, a war of storytelling. It is a war that the taciturn Bolingbroke cannot hope to win. Richard's eloquent evocation of grief and dispossession in his conversation with his queen in V.i. and his exhortations that she tell his tale to others ensure that the story of his wrongful deposition will live on:

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<sup>28</sup> Holderness, *William Shakespeare: 'Richard II'*, p. 35.

In winter's tedious nights, sit by the fire  
With good old folks, and let them tell thee tales  
Of woeful ages long ago betid;  
And ere thou bid goodnight, to quit their griefs  
Tell thou the lamentable fall of me,  
And send the hearers weeping to their beds.

(V. i. 40-5)

The telling of stories is here presented as a communal institution, an activity which brings together and unites a group. Telling tales is a sharing of narrative, a sharing of history. The 'good old folks' that Richard refers to are sharing their memories of 'woeful ages long ago betid', ensuring that the past will be remembered in the present. They are engaged in the construction of memory. Richard wants his own story inserted into this ritual of communal remembering; he wants the aged storytellers to remember his story instead of theirs. Once again, Richard interferes with the flow of time, usurping the aged storytellers' prerogative of memory and replacing their tales with his own. 'Tell thou the lamentable fall of me' constructs the story as a tragedy or a tragic history; Richard seeks to make sure that the tale told around the fire relates his own history and not Bolingbroke's. By emphasising the 'lamentable' nature of the tale he portrays himself as the victim and ensures that the response to the story will be sympathetic.

Richard's tale gains its power by the way the events are moulded into a narrative archetype; he emplots his history as a tragedy. Hayden White defines emplotment as 'the encodation of the facts contained in the chronicle as components of specific *kinds* of plot

structure'.<sup>29</sup> In this case, Richard encodes the facts of his deposition into a tragic plot structure. His history is presented as a story, and this is the key to its affective power. It is Richard's history, not Bolingbroke's, that will come to dominate the rest of the plays in the tetralogy; it is his story that is remembered. Richard's memory is invoked to legitimate rebellion, support pretenders to the throne and act as the spectral reminder of the human cost of Bolingbroke's rise to power. Richard's personal history becomes the public history of England itself, suggesting, in Tosh's phrase, that 'the past is not the property of the individual but a community possession'.<sup>30</sup> As we have seen, Richard constructs the future by re-constructing the past. He ensures that his interpretation of history will be the one that survives and echoes down the ages, creating a second kind of historical writing in the process, writing his own chronicles and shaping his narrative into a new kind of public personal history.

Richard's desire to have his tale told and his words remembered will be fulfilled: two plays after the one that bears his name he is still quoted and his words are still discussed. Even amongst the triumphant rhetoric of *Henry V* the titular king takes time before his great battle at Agincourt to beg forgiveness from God for the murder of Richard:

Not today, O Lord,  
O not today, think not upon the fault  
My father made in compassing the crown.  
I Richard's body have interrèd new,  
And on it have bestowed more contrite tears

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<sup>29</sup> Hayden White, *Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism* (Baltimore and London: John Hopkins University Press, 1985), p. 83.

<sup>30</sup> Tosh, *The Pursuit of History*, p. 313.

Than from it issued forcèd drops of blood.<sup>31</sup>

Richard is long dead, as is Henry IV. The victim and his murderer have passed into history, and yet their memories remain, haunting the present. This is the only mention of Richard II in *Henry V*, the only mention of the dark, hidden history that allowed the triumphant Henry V to ascend the throne. His soliloquy strikes a note of guilty fear, an emotion that appears alien to the confidence and pride so evident in the rest of the play. Shakespeare could have avoided mentioning Richard II; he could have avoided reminding the audience of the hereditary guilt carried by Henry V, whose triumphant victories are built on this bloody and shameful past. Indeed, this reminder conflicts with the mood of patriotic victory of the play. If England's finest king is the son of a usurper and murderer, what does this mean for England? History, however, repeats itself again: just as Henry IV was tormented by the memory of Richard in *2 Henry IV*, so Henry V is racked with fearful guilt. While Richard lived he was held in contempt by Bolingbroke and the rebels, but now his spectre is a grim reminder of bloody crimes committed in the past which will need to be answered in the future. Henry's repetition of 'not today' acknowledges this, simultaneously fixing the current moment as 'today' while passionately desiring that the inevitable divine justice for Richard's murder take place another time, an unspecified time in the future. Henry attempts to defer justice, again. Interestingly, he refers to Richard by name while referring to Henry IV as 'my father', not deigning to name him by his royal title. This prosaic view of Henry IV's role may represent a subconscious acceptance of the fact that he was never a true king but merely a usurper.

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<sup>31</sup> William Shakespeare, *The Life of Henry the Fifth*, IV. i. 274-9, in *The Norton Shakespeare*, ed. Stephen Greenblatt, Walter Cohen, Jean E. Howard, Katherine Eisaman Maus (New York and London: Norton, 1997). All further references are to this edition and are given in the text.

Richard's prophecy that providence will strike at 'your children yet unborn and unbegot' (III. iii. 87) is fulfilled. Henry V, as the final Chorus informs us, will be struck down in his prime, his dream of embarking upon the pilgrimage to the holy land that his father bequeathed him destined to remain unfulfilled. As we have seen, Richard's prediction was phrased so vaguely that it could be applied to almost any circumstances; subsequent events have been read, analysed and decoded in terms of his prophecy. Henry V's desperate prayer before Agincourt clearly demonstrates the extent to which his worldview has been constructed in terms of Richard's prophecy. Henry has gone to the extreme length of having Richard's corpse exhumed and reburied in order to try and avoid the divine punishment he believes is coming. The fact that Henry V, the most successful king in the whole of Shakespeare's history plays, sees the world in terms of a prophecy made by the weak king deposed by his father is a testament to the enduring power of words over action, of narrative over actual event.

### **The Dramatic Future**

Gaunt and Richard are the most notable characters who prophesy the future in *Richard II*, but there is a sense that their accounts are tainted and therefore unreliable. Gaunt's prophecy is an expression of anger and despair against Richard, whereas Richard is deliberately trying to shape the future through a self-fulfilling prophecy. It could be argued that the only character in the play who clearly sees what the future will hold is the Bishop of Carlisle. He is the figure of the future in the play. It is his voice which warns of the disaster to come, and it is his voice which is ignored. His words to Bolingbroke in the instant before he ascends the throne ring with prophetic power:



My lord of Hereford here, whom you call king,  
Is a foul traitor to proud Hereford's king;  
And if you crown him let me prophesy  
The blood of English shall manure the ground,  
And future ages groan for this foul act.

(IV. i. 125-9)

Like Richard, the Bishop of Carlisle prophesies future bloodshed. The difference between them is that while Richard's prophecy is designed to create the future he describes, Carlisle's words do not spring from a desperate desire to be posthumously remembered, but from a genuine concern about the future. He wishes to avert the destruction he prophesises; he wants to change the future for the better, not control it. Carlisle sees the future with perfect clarity. His words are simple and stark, a contrast to the hyperbole that characterises Richard's prediction. The brutal simplicity of the words 'and future ages groan for this foul act' cuts directly to the point. The warning Carlisle issues could not be clearer, and yet it is ignored and he is arrested for his prediction. His attempt to warn the nobles of the horror to come is swiftly silenced by Northumberland:

Well have you argued, sir, and for your pains  
Of capital treason we arrest you here.

(IV. i. 141-2)

Northumberland sees the future in prosaic terms; he is more interested in prefiguring the future he wants, as evidenced by his repeated demands that Richard admit his crimes in front of his subjects: 'My lord, dispatch. Read o'er these articles.' (IV. i. 233)

Northumberland has no time for prophecy or prediction unless it is secular, false and in his interest. He is a man who will thrive in the new world Bolingbroke has created.

Northumberland's attempt to force Richard to read out loud the crimes he is supposed to have committed is unsuccessful and so, as Madhavi Menon observes, 'his crimes remain – despite Bullingbrook's triumph – in the realm of unread textuality'.<sup>32</sup> The incident raises questions about the power of written history as opposed to oral history which the play does not answer, preferring to move on to the deposition itself instead. Alun Munslow observes that 'written history is always more than merely innocent storytelling, precisely because it is the primary vehicle for the distribution and use of power'.<sup>33</sup> Perhaps writing history is a way to justify it. In this scene written history is presented as being less powerful than oral history, as merely seeing a list of Richard's crimes written down lacks the memorable dramatic effect of having him read them aloud to his people. Richard, by refusing to acknowledge the written accounts of his crimes, denies the usurper his textual authority for the legitimacy of the deposition. Richard forces Bolingbroke into the realm of oral history, where he has already prefigured interpretation. Here the written word must yield to the spoken word in terms of historical power.

At the conclusion of his prophecy Carlisle explicitly predicts the history that Shakespeare has already dramatised in his previous history plays:

If you rear this house against this house

It will the woefullest division prove

That ever fell upon this cursèd earth!

(IV. i. 136-8)

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<sup>32</sup> Madhavi Menon, 'Richard II' and the Taint of Metonymy', *ELH*, 70:3 (2003), 653-675 (p. 670).

<sup>33</sup> Alun Munslow, *Deconstructing History*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn (London and New York: Routledge, 2006), p. 15.

‘This house against this house’ seems to refer both to the York – Lancaster conflict of the *Henry VI* plays and to the inter-familial murder dramatised in *Richard III*. These five words simultaneously predict and summarise the events of the first tetralogy, compressing four plays into five words. It is impossible to determine if this allusion refers in particular to any of the history plays because the events they dramatisate are all essentially the same: ‘this house against this house’. Here history is characterised by division, as it is in every one of Shakespeare’s history plays. The names of the kings change, as do the names of the men who oppose them, but in each play the pattern of division and conflict is the same.<sup>34</sup> Shakespeare dramatises a country perennially wracked by internal division. Indeed, while he is dramatising England’s history, Shakespeare is also dramatising the history of rebellion.

Paradoxically, *Richard II* reveals its most trenchant vision of the future in its moment of greatest levity. The play’s sudden descent into bathos in V. iii. abruptly changes the tone of the drama from a tragedy to a farce. The wild pleading of York for the execution of his traitorous son Aumerle reaches such extremes of emotion that the violence and unnaturalness of his intense desire to see his son murdered is forgotten in the laughter his behaviour invites when he turns on his wife:

Thou frantic woman, what dost thou make here?

Shall thy old dugs once more a traitor rear?

(V. iii. 87-8)

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<sup>34</sup> Cf. Jan Kott, *Shakespeare Our Contemporary*, trans. Boleslaw Taborski (London: Methuen and Co. Ltd., 1964), p. 6.

This incident calls to mind the terrible consequences of civil war, previously dramatised in *3 Henry VI*, when a son kills his father and a father kills his son on a battlefield.<sup>35</sup> Here this conflict is displaced, occurring in the supposedly safe environs of the court, which becomes a domestic battlefield. York's wild demands that his son be executed offer a blackly comic counterpoint to the theme of interrupted succession that runs through the play; like Bolingbroke, York does not respect the natural law of succession, substituting his own value system instead. His loyalty is to the institution of kingship instead of to his family.

The newly crowned Henry IV spares Aumerle with the words 'I pardon him as God shall pardon me' (V. iii. 129), hinting that perhaps his desire to see Aumerle spared for plotting to kill him is twinned with his own desire to escape divine punishment for seizing the throne. Of course, an audience watching *Richard II* would be aware that Henry's decision was to have a momentous effect on the history of England, as Barbara Hodgdon observes:

The unfolding York family comedy very deliberately alludes to Aumerle's former position as Richard's chosen successor, calling attention to his lost title and his new name, Rutland. Rather than exploring either that rival claim or its corollary – that, had Bolingbroke not spared Aumerle, he would have ended the Yorkist line and thus prevented the Wars of the Roses – *Richard II* translates the issue of Aumerle's political legitimacy into domestic betrayal.<sup>36</sup>

In V. iii. *Richard II* rewrites the beginning of the conflict in the *Henry VI* plays as domestic comedy, compressing the earlier history of internecine bloodshed and betrayal

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<sup>35</sup> This scene occurs in II. v. of *3 Henry VI*.

<sup>36</sup> Barbara Hodgdon, *The End Crowns All: Closure and Contradiction in Shakespeare's History* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1991), p. 138.

into a few minutes of family squabbling. The stakes of the squabble may be high, as Aumerle's life hangs in the balance, but the form of the argument is calculated to make an audience forget this fact and enjoy the farcical arguing in the scene. Every history play rewrites the ones that preceded it, but *Richard II* is the only play to wring comedy out of the horrendous events previously dramatised. This comedic rewriting brings to mind Marx's famous claim that 'all facts and personages in world history occur, as it were twice. [...] The first time as tragedy, the second as farce'.<sup>37</sup> In this case, however, the maxim is reversed. The outcome of this domestic comedy will be horror and bloodshed on an unprecedented scale. Like Richard, Bolingbroke, attempting to avert bloodshed, has created the circumstances which guarantee that it will occur.

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<sup>37</sup> Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, p. 10.

## Chapter IV: *1 Henry IV*: Echoes of History

Critics have long been divided as to whether *The History of Henry the Fourth* (1596-7) and *The Second Part of Henry the Fourth* (1597-8) constitute one play divided into two parts or whether *Part Two* is a sequel to *Part One*.<sup>1</sup> Dover Wilson and E. M. W. Tillyard have treated *1* and *2 Henry IV* as a single play divided into two parts,<sup>2</sup> while more recently Nicholas Grene has addressed the two *Henry IV* plays as parts of a single narrative, arguing that:

Though *2 Henry IV* has struck some critics as having the thinness of material associated with a cash-in sequel, it should be said that, as far as the chronicle is concerned, Shakespeare has saved up for a second part the whole of Henry IV's reign after the battle of Shrewsbury in 1403, ten more years and another crop of rebellions.<sup>3</sup>

One difficulty concerning the relationship between the two plays is summarised by A. R. Humphreys as 'the problem by which Hal, redeemed in *Part 1*, is unredeemed again in *Part 2*, with no one showing any cognizance of the excellence he so eminently displayed at Shrewsbury'.<sup>4</sup> Harold Jenkins seeks to settle this problem of Hal's twin reformations by arguing that 'in the two parts of *Henry IV* there are not two princely reformations but two versions of a single reformation. And they are mutually exclusive'.<sup>5</sup> David Scott Kastan suggests that, 'less a continuation than a commentary, *Part Two* does not so much

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<sup>1</sup> Henceforth referred to as *1 Henry IV* and *2 Henry IV* respectively.

<sup>2</sup> E. M. W. Tillyard, *Shakespeare's History Plays* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1944), p. 215.

<sup>3</sup> Nicholas Grene, *Shakespeare's Serial History Plays* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), p. 27.

<sup>4</sup> A. R. Humphreys, 'Introduction', William Shakespeare, *King Henry IV Part 2*, ed. A. R. Humphreys (London: Arden Shakespeare (Second Series), 1981), p. xxvi.

<sup>5</sup> Harold Jenkins, *The Structural Problem in Shakespeare's 'Henry the Fourth'* (London: Methuen & Co. Ltd, 1956), p. 25.

bring the events of *Part One* to conclusion as reimagine the actions of the first play in a more sombre key', going on to say that 'the second play revisits and revises the first'.<sup>6</sup> Giorgio Melchiori concurs with Kastan, stating that *2 Henry IV* is 'a deliberate revisitation of the same situations in a shifted key'.<sup>7</sup> This contention, that Shakespeare is revisiting and rewriting the history, and possibly the kind of history, that he has previously dramatised can be applied to both plays and will form the central argument of this chapter.

Grene concludes his argument for treating *Henry IV* as one play by saying:

Whatever the degree of planned relationship between the two parts, they each have a separate dramatic structure (even if it is the same structure repeated), and they each have a distinct stylistic signature, with the energy and verve of the first play giving way to a mortality-laden lassitude in the second.<sup>8</sup>

Kastan offers an intriguing view of the effect this change of tone can have on an audience, arguing that, 'seen in the harsher light of the second play, the brilliance of the first may seem tawdry; certainly the social and political satisfactions of its ending seem more fragile than they do when the play is viewed upon its own'.<sup>9</sup> In this reading an audience watching *2 Henry IV* will reinterpret the events of *1 Henry IV* in the light of its sequel. I will argue that *2 Henry IV* thus acts as a kind of mirror to *1 Henry IV*, reflecting and refracting characters and situations in a different emotional key, prompting a re-evaluation of the events that Shakespeare has previously dramatised. It is less a

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<sup>6</sup> David Scott Kastan, 'Introduction', William Shakespeare, *King Henry IV Part 1*, ed. David Scott Kastan (London: Arden Shakespeare (Third Series), 2002), pp. 22-3.

<sup>7</sup> Giorgio Melchiori, 'Introduction', William Shakespeare, *The Second Part of King Henry IV*, ed. Giorgio Melchiori (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), p. 18.

<sup>8</sup> Grene, *Shakespeare's Serial History Plays*, p. 27.

<sup>9</sup> Kastan, 'Introduction', William Shakespeare, *King Henry IV Part 1*, p. 17.

reimagining of the play than an imaginative reconstruction of it, what Melchiori calls a 're-elaboration from different angles of pre-used theatrical materials'.<sup>10</sup> Simultaneously two parts of one play and two separate narratives, one of which rewrites the other, *Henry IV* thus occupies a unique, and problematic, place in the canon.

In addition to this mirroring of the plays I wish to suggest that, just as *2 Henry IV* acts as a reconstruction of *1 Henry IV*, so *1 Henry IV* acts as a reconstruction of *Richard II*, more specifically, a type of memorial reconstruction. An audience watching *1 Henry IV* is encouraged to remember and reinterpret the events of *Richard II* in relation to new perspectives on the past revealed by the later play. Spectators that are watching the characters remembering, misremembering and reinterpreting the events of the earlier play might compare the accounts of the past given in *1 Henry IV* with what 'actually happened' in *Richard II*, and draw their own conclusions about history as a result. *1 Henry IV* seems to require that the audience think like historians, comparing and contrasting different accounts and interpretations of the past – the dramatic past – and deciding which is most likely to be accurate. In the way that it encourages the audience to compare the accounts of the past related onstage with the past that was previously dramatised in *Richard II*, *1 Henry IV* is the first of Shakespeare's history plays that involves the audience in the remaking of history. Critics commenting on the similarities between the two parts of *Henry IV* do not appear to have seen that, in addition to their similarities in terms of plot, action and characters, the two plays are fundamentally linked by the radically different way with which they view the making of history. This new form of making history seems to be a theatrical experiment confined to the *Henry IV* plays, as Shakespeare was never to attempt it again.

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<sup>10</sup> Melchiori, 'Introduction', William Shakespeare, *The Second Part of King Henry IV*, p. 1.



Giorgio Melchiori observes that *2 Henry IV* contains Shakespeare's only recorded use of 'history' as a verb.<sup>11</sup> It occurs in IV. i. when the Archbishop assures Hastings that Henry will accept their terms because he has realised that punishing the rebels will merely lead to more unrest:

Therefore he will wipe his tables clean,  
And keep no tell-tale to his memory  
That may repeat and history his loss.<sup>12</sup>

The OED defines the verb 'history' as 'to relate in a history or narrative; to record, narrate, recount'.<sup>13</sup> These various meanings suggest that 'history' in these plays has three strands: to make history, to perform history and to be part of history. It is in this verb that the very different history of the two plays is signalled.

### **The Moment of History**

Time plays an important part in *1* and *2 Henry IV*; it could be argued that time is the leitmotif of the drama. Perhaps, indeed, it is the passing of time and not the making of history which is the main theme of these plays. There is a sense that, despite the energy and verve of *1 Henry IV*, time is running out for the characters. As the unhappy Henry IV stumbles towards death, his dissolute son is aware that his pleasant existence in Eastcheap must soon come to an end. The first lines spoken in *1 Henry IV* address this problem of time running out:

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<sup>11</sup> Melchiori, 'Introduction', William Shakespeare, *The Second Part of King Henry IV*, p. 60.

<sup>12</sup> William Shakespeare, *The Second Part of Henry the Fourth*, IV. i. 199-201, in *The Norton Shakespeare*, ed. Stephen Greenblatt, Walter Cohen, Jean E. Howard, Katherine Eisaman Maus (New York and London: Norton, 1997). All further references are to this edition and are given in the text.

<sup>13</sup> 'History, v.', *OED Online*, Third edition, March 2011 and online version June 2011. Available at <http://www.oed.com.abc.cardiff.ac.uk/view/Entry/87325?rskey=xn6fRU&result=2&isAdvanced=false> [accessed 5 April 2011].

So shaken as we are, so wan with care,  
Find we a time for frightened peace to pant  
And breathe short-winded accents of new broils  
To be commenced in strands afar remote.  
No more the thirsty entrance of this soil  
Shall daub her lips with her own children's blood.<sup>14</sup>

The play begins in haste, with 'frighted peace' 'short-winded' and desperately panting for breath. These are turbulent times for Henry; at the conclusion of *Richard II* no sooner had he gained the throne than a plot against him was hatched. Rebellion has followed rebellion ever since. Time is a precious commodity in these lines, a commodity in short supply. The line 'find we a time for frightened peace to pant' presents time as something that must be actively sought out and seized. In this case 'time' is not merely the inevitable progression of moment to moment that constitutes history, but refers to a fleeting moment of opportunity which must be seized at once or lost forever. The image of frightened peace panting for breath calls to mind a hunted animal hiding from predators, suggesting the difficulty of seizing the moment in a world as beset by rebellion and danger as the one in which Henry finds himself. The mention of 'new broils' taking place in 'strands afar remote' is the first indication of Henry's desire to wage war in other lands, a desire which is doomed to be frustrated precisely because, as Nicholas Grene observes, it 'represent[s] an impossible dream of turning back the historical clock'.<sup>15</sup>

Henry is no longer seizing the historical moment; he is merely reacting to events as they

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<sup>14</sup> William Shakespeare, *The History of Henry the Fourth*, I. i. 1-6, in *The Norton Shakespeare*, ed. Stephen Greenblatt, Walter Cohen, Jean E. Howard, Katherine Eisaman Maus (New York and London: Norton, 1997). All further references are to this edition and are given in the text.

<sup>15</sup> Grene, *Shakespeare's Serial History Plays*, p. 165.

occur – he no longer has time for his crusade. His lines remind the audience that the play has barely begun and that time is already running out.

It could be argued that Henry is describing his own state in the lines above (I. i. 1-6), and describing it in language strikingly similar to that used by Richard himself. Now that he has achieved the throne, Henry finds himself beset by rebels, as Richard was, and playing with images of time, as Richard did shortly before his death. The aggressive and threatening Henry from *Richard II* who constantly threatened Richard with the spectre of civil war has vanished, seemingly to be replaced by a mirror image of the dead king. The first few lines of *1 Henry IV* evoke memories of *Richard II* by echoing phrases and lines from the previous play. The effect is a subtle one, acting as a contrast to the explicit invocations of the past that come later. For example, Henry's reference to 'the thirsty entrance of this soil' in this scene is a subtle echo of his lines expressing outrage at the murder of Woodstock in *Richard II*:

Which blood, like sacrificing Abel's, cries  
Even from the tongueless caverns of the earth  
To me for justice and rough chastisement.<sup>16</sup>

The repeated images of blood and soil create a sense of continuity with the previous play, suggesting that in some ways Henry is still the man he was then, despite his ascension to the throne. By contrast, Henry's next line, 'shall daub her lips with her own children's blood', is strongly reminiscent of Richard's plea against civil war in *Richard II*:

For that our kingdom's earth should not be soiled  
With that dear blood which it hath fosterèd.

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<sup>16</sup> William Shakespeare, *The Tragedy of King Richard The Second*, I. i. 104-6, in *The Norton Shakespeare*, ed. Stephen Greenblatt, Walter Cohen, Jean E. Howard, Katherine Eisaman Maus (New York and London: Norton, 1997). All further references are to this edition and are given in the text.

(I. iii. 124-5)

Henry's concern that the earth's soil will be tainted with 'her children's blood' does not sound like the Bolingbroke previously seen; in fact, it sounds a lot more like Richard in *Richard II*. As Holderness observes, 'his speech is full of images of peace and unity, images which echo directly the speech of Richard'.<sup>17</sup> In *Richard II* Bolingbroke is constructed as the strong, masculine opposite to Richard's feminine weakness but in this play the distinctions have broken down. Henry has abandoned his former sanguine attitude towards the possibility of civil war; in fact, he now seems to view the possibility with fear. Gaining the throne has changed Henry. As a rebel he was willing to sacrifice lives, but now his main concern is to preserve the lives of his people. This is an early indication that Henry may have become more like Richard than he is willing to believe.

Henry's desire to lead a crusade is doomed to failure almost as soon as the idea is mentioned; after a speech in which he relates his detailed plans to the nobles he ruefully admits that:

This our purpose now is twelve month old,  
And bootless 'tis to tell you we will go.

(I. i. 28-9)

Henry has been making plans for an expedition which he knows will almost certainly never occur; he has been constructing an imaginary future for himself. His dream of the future is based not on the hope of likely success, but on an ultimately futile desire to escape the rebellions which plague his reign. This point is underlined by Westmorland's reply to Henry as soon as he has finished his speech:

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<sup>17</sup> Graham Holderness, *Shakespeare Recycled: The Making of Historical Drama* (London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1992), p. 91.

My liege, this haste was hot in question,  
And many limits of the charge set down  
But yesternight, when all athwart there came  
A post from Wales, loaden with heavy news.

(I. i. 34-7)

Westmorland's words emphasise how fleeting the moment of history can be. The alliteration 'this haste was hot in question' propels the sentence onward, giving his words a sense of action and continuity which is suddenly stopped by the simple, staccato 'but'. 'Yesternight' everything changed. The moment of history has passed. Before, the crusade seemed was a genuine possibility; now, the historical circumstances are different. Henry is forced to react to events rather than to cause them; he is constantly scrambling to maintain his position, raising the possibility that the moment of history has passed him by.

### **Redeeming Time**

*I Henry IV*'s concern with time is nowhere more visible than in the tavern scene in I. ii. The scene begins with Falstaff asking 'Now, Hal, what time of day is it, lad?' (I. ii. 1). Crucially, instead of answering his question, Hal replies with an extended metaphor:

What a devil hast thou to do with the time of the day? Unless hours were cups of sack, and minutes capons, and clocks the tongues of bawds, and dials the signs of leaping-houses, and the blessed sun himself a fair hot wench in flame-coloured taffeta, I see no reason why thou shouldst be so superfluous to demand the time of the day.

(I. ii. 5-10)

The frantic movement of the first scene with its preparations for war is forgotten as Hal enjoys the idyll of the Boar's Head. His line 'what the devil hast thou to do with the time of day?' is a sarcastic reminder to Falstaff that he has no responsibilities or pressing demands on his time, and so it should be of no concern to him what time of day it is. The juxtaposition of 'hours', 'clocks' and 'dials' with 'sack', 'bawds' and 'leaping-houses' – the ephemera of Hal and Falstaff's dissolute existence – reconstructs time itself, replacing the ordered progression of Christian, teleological progression with an areligious, almost sacrilegious, focus on bodily excess and moral decay. Hal plays with time, reconstructing and debasing it, remaking Christian time into a corrupted parody of his debauched life.

Hal's play on words offers an instructive parallel to Richard's grappling with the nature of time when trapped in the tower in *Richard II*, as Joseph A. Porter observes:

Richard's last major speech is the soliloquy in which [...] he plays desperately and nervously with the figures of clocks, dials, minutes, and hours. [...] In Hal's first speech he plays with the same figures, not nervously but with easy assurance.<sup>18</sup>

If Richard plays with the same imagery as Hal, the conclusion to his meditation could not be more different from Hal's:

I wasted time, and now doth time waste me,  
For now hath time made me his numb'ring clock.  
My thoughts are minutes, and with sighs they jar.

(V. v. 49-51)

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<sup>18</sup> Joseph A. Porter, *The Drama of Speech Acts: Shakespeare's Lancastrian Tetralogy* (California: University of California Press, 1979), p. 79.

If time rushes onward for Henry, it stands still for Hal but drags interminably for Richard. They create their own ways of measuring time, constructing it in light of their present circumstances. *1 Henry IV* presents the passing of time as psychoreactive: how one experiences it differs depending on one's mental state. Suffering his interminable torment in prison, Richard sees himself as a clock, a passive recorder of time's inevitable onward flow. Hal, enjoying his debauched idyll in Cheapside, compares time to 'sack' and 'wench[es]'. However, his repeated references to the passing of time makes clear his awareness that his carefree tavern existence cannot continue indefinitely. Even as he mocks the passing of time, he is aware of its effect. By contrast, Falstaff appears to believe that the tavern idyll will continue forever, even after Hal is crowned. He is wrong. At the conclusion of the tavern scene Hal reveals himself to be aware that the time of his wild youth is coming to an end, that soon he must cast off his low companions. He concludes the scene with the cryptic couplet:

I'll so offend to make offence a skill,  
Redeeming time when men think least I will.

(I. ii. 194-5)

The phrase 'redeeming time' is ambiguous; what exactly does Hal mean here? Herbert Weil and Judith Weil note that there are multiple meanings to the phrase. It can mean to pay back time (as in repaying a debt), to make amends for lost time or to make the best use of time.<sup>19</sup> It could also be argued that Hal will 'redeem' the time he has apparently squandered in Eastcheap by making use of his experiences, both as a propaganda tool and as a learning experience. The phrase raises the possibility that 'wasted' time can be

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<sup>19</sup> William Shakespeare, *The First Part of King Henry IV*, ed. Herbert Weil and Judith Weil (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), I. ii. 177. n.

recovered and redeemed, an idea that appears nowhere else in the play, or in the histories as a whole. For Henry and Richard time which has passed can never be recovered, but Hal can make use of wasted time by portraying it in a new light. By altering his story, by altering history, he can recover the time he has lost. He will turn his dissolute life into the basis of a legend. As Lina Perkins Wilder observes, 'he directs this future time by constructing the present as a scene to be remembered'.<sup>20</sup> By shifting perception Hal will make history, a history based on myth, and Shakespeare places the audience in a privileged position where they can see history being made (and remade) as Hal constructs the narrative of his reformation before their eyes. Shakespeare thus demystifies the beginning of this aspect of the historical process, showing the deliberate falsification of history by a man whose life will eventually become a legend. In effect, Hal here creates his own myth. Seeing this cynical exercise in historical distortion enacted before them might indeed cause an audience to question how the history that they know and take for granted has been made.

### **Restaging the Past**

The following scene (I. iii.) shows the Percies 'redeeming time' by rewriting history on a much bigger scale than Hal. Hal rewrites his own history; the Percies seek to rewrite the history of the realm in order to redeem their family from shame. Worcester's comment about Mortimer makes clear the threat that he could pose to Henry's reign:

Was he not proclaimed

By Richard, that dead is, the next of blood?

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<sup>20</sup> Lina Perkins Wilder, *Shakespeare's Memory Theatre: Recollection, Properties, and Character* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), p. 90.



(I. iii. 143-4)

It is striking that Worcester feels the need to remind his family that Richard is dead. Surely that is something they should know, as they were the main instrument of his overthrow. His use of the word 'blood' brings to mind the blood that was shed by Richard in his dying moments as well as the royal blood that Mortimer carries in his veins. Worcester links violence, kingship and succession in one sentence, while the phrase 'the next of blood' seems to hint that Mortimer could well become a victim of Henry in his attempt to solidify his grip on the throne.

Northumberland's reply is further revealing in its distortion and elision of history:

He was; I heard the proclamation.

And then it was when the unhappy King,

Whose wrongs in us God pardon, did set forth

Upon his Irish expedition,

From whence he, intercepted, did return

To be deposed, and shortly murderèd.

(I. iii. 145-50)

His words 'I heard the proclamation' situate Northumberland at the moment of history: he claims to be a witness to the event he describes. This would appear to make him a reliable source of historical knowledge, but his next words undermine this. Summarising the events of *Richard II* in five lines, Northumberland completely eliminates the pivotal role played by himself and his family in Richard's deposition. His use of 'intercepted', meaning 'interrupted',<sup>21</sup> gives no hint of the momentous nature of Bolingbroke's rebellion. 'To be deposed, and shortly murderèd', in its simplicity, elides the betrayal and

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<sup>21</sup> William Shakespeare, *The First Part of King Henry IV*, ed. Herbert Weil and Judith Weil, I. iii. 149. n.

entrapment of Richard by Northumberland as well as his increasingly brutal attempts to force Richard to admit his crimes in *Richard II*. His words ‘whose wrongs in us God pardon’ is an indirect appeal for forgiveness which projects his feelings of guilt onto Richard. He rewrites history, casting the blame onto the victim of his machinations. Northumberland’s history is created more by what is omitted than what is included in the historical account. To those aware of the events of *Richard II*, which includes those onstage, Northumberland’s silence on his role in the murder of an anointed monarch speaks volumes.

In stark contrast to Northumberland’s taciturn account of the Percy family history, Hotspur’s passionate outburst against Henry, although (initially at least) it seems to be a more honest account of events, still betrays the misremembering and remaking of history which seems inevitable in any account of the past:

Shall it for shame be spoken in these days,  
Or fill up chronicles in times to come,  
That men of your nobility and power  
Did gage them both in an unjust behalf,  
As both of you, God pardon it, have done:  
To put down Richard, that sweet lovely rose,  
And plant this thorn, this canker, Bolingbroke?

(I. iii. 168-174)

Hotspur’s concern with the ‘shame’ that is ‘spoken in these days’ betrays a deep fear of oral history, the most unpredictable and uncontrollable form of historical report. The Percy family’s reputation is under threat because they cannot rewrite oral history; its

unfixed and shifting nature makes it a dangerous force to be reckoned with. Significantly, Hotspur sees clearly the mechanics of the historical process: the history that is 'spoken in these days' will 'fill up chronicles in times to come'. Unfixed historical rumour today will become accepted fact tomorrow, as Graham Holderness observes:

Contemporary public opinion forms the basis of future historical tradition: that which is 'spoken in these days' may determine the subsequent interpretations couched in historical 'chronicles' not yet written. If the Percies [...] allow themselves to be subjugated by Bolingbroke, they will permit the formulation of a Lancastrian dynastic history.<sup>22</sup>

This early glimpse of the power of oral history foreshadows the introduction of Rumour itself onstage in *2 Henry IV*. For the Percies, the struggle to recuperate their reputation is a struggle to establish their own dynastic history and to rewrite the version of the past that is currently favourable to Henry. Even as he laments the shame attached to the account of Richard's betrayal by the Percies, Hotspur is, consciously or unconsciously, rewriting the past as he speaks. His description of Richard as a 'sweet lovely rose', for example, is so saccharine and false that it might draw the audience's attention to how differently Richard was described in *Richard II*. As Nicholas Grene says, 'we notice the new graciousness in the image of the dead king now the political case is altered'.<sup>23</sup> Now that he is dead Richard can be eulogised and given the praise that was so conspicuously lacking in the earlier play. A new time calls for a new version of the past, a version more suited to the present circumstances. Ironically, even as the Percies castigate Henry for his part in Richard's death, unbeknownst to them, they are drawing the audience's attention

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<sup>22</sup> Graham Holderness, *Shakespeare: The Histories* (London: Macmillan Press Ltd., 2000), p. 162.

<sup>23</sup> Grene, *Shakespeare's Serial History Plays*, p. 176.

to their own culpability. Their attempt to rewrite the past will not succeed, for the narrative of their past is inextricably tied to Henry's.

Hotspur's speech above, then, draws attention to what can be seen as one of the main themes of the *Henry IV* plays: the rewriting of history. As Nicholas Grene observes:

There are [...] a number of instances in the *Henry IV* plays where we seem to be asked to observe characters re-writing history, and know that is what they are doing because we have seen the original history dramatised in *Richard II*.<sup>24</sup>

The Percies are intensely aware of the chronicles, where history will be written and secured in bound textuality. It is this future inscription that worries them. Hotspur's speech is the first explicit instance of this in the play. His exaggeration seems to be intended to be ridiculous, but he can be regarded as merely the most extreme example of the phenomenon of misremembering the past which is such a major feature of the *Henry IV* plays: Henry IV, Falstaff, Northumberland and Shallow all misremember and distort their past to some degree. Members of the audience that had seen *Richard II* would know that history is being retold before their eyes; the play encourages them to think back to *Richard II*, remember how events were portrayed, and realise that Hotspur is distorting the past. Of course, an audience that has not seen *Richard II* would have no choice but to accept the Percies' version of events as 'true'. In certain circumstances, then, false history can be 'true'.

There is, however, a further layer to this issue. The audience of the history plays is encouraged to question not only the dramatised events of the past on stage but also chronicle history. In this way their recall of dramatic history validates the theatre as the place of a new kind of history. As it does so, it raises other questions: does the theatre

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<sup>24</sup> Grene, *Shakespeare's Serial History Plays*, p. 175.

turn drama into history, or history into drama, or does it replace the chronicle of the past to some extent? Indeed, it could be argued that drama actually supersedes history in this scene. The veracity of the historical past can never be verified, but dramatic history can be recalled and re-experienced; it provides the audience with a personal memory of the theatrical past. But also, as noted, it encourages the audience to think like historians, comparing and contrasting different accounts and interpretations of the past and deciding which is most likely to be 'true'.

Hotspur's speech above requires active participation from the audience in order to unravel the full meaning of the scene; it asks them to unpick the threads of history which make up the tapestry of the play. It involves them in the very process of history so that it is no longer merely a flat narrative. Later, in III. ii., the audience will again be required to compare competing and mutually exclusive accounts of the past in Henry's venomous description of Richard as he chastises Hal. The difference between his portrayal of Richard and the Richard previously seen onstage makes it clear that historical distortion is by no means limited to the self-deluding and vainglorious Hotspur. All in the *Henry IV* plays manufacture history to their own ends. History becomes relative, circumspect, provisional. The problem of *Henry IV* is that of how can history be known. Although having two different versions of the past to compare can help to untangle the threads of history there is a danger that these competing narratives can replace the history they seek to relate.

Hotspur's concern with Richard's fate seems to evaporate as the scene continues. After his initial angry peroration at his family's part in his death he later refers to Richard in a notably casual way:

In Richard's time – what d'ye call the place?  
A plague upon't, it is in Gloucestershire.  
'Twas where the madcap Duke his uncle kept –  
His uncle York – where I first bowed my knee  
Unto this king of smiles, this Bolingbroke.

(I. iii. 240-4)

The shame attached to his family momentarily forgotten in his hatred of Henry, Hotspur mentions 'Richard's time' in passing, insouciantly establishing the time of *Richard II* as an era that is irrevocably past. 'Richard's time' is a time which can never be returned to, and Hotspur's deceptively casual way of mentioning it gives no hint that his family were instrumental in ending it. As Joseph Porter observes, 'Richard can be mentioned easily and straightforwardly, without the magnitude of the effects of his fall being felt'.<sup>25</sup>

Richard's fall has shattered the basic tenets of kingship by establishing that an anointed monarch can be deposed and replaced by a usurper. His dethronement has set a very dangerous precedent – the rebellion the Percies are about to embark upon would be impossible without it. All this is glossed over in Hotspur's reference to 'Richard's time'.

Hotspur has, however temporarily, forgotten that the blood of Richard is on his family's hands as well as Henry's. He has also forgotten the precise location where the incident he is describing took place. Unable to remember, he vaguely recalls that it was in Gloucestershire, 'where the madcap Duke his uncle kept'.<sup>26</sup> Hotspur's memory is playing him false here; he is reading the past in light of his own preoccupations. Referring to Bolingbroke, dignified and conspicuously silent in *Richard II*, as 'the madcap Duke' is so

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<sup>25</sup> Porter, *The Drama of Speech Acts*, p. 53.

<sup>26</sup> In *Richard II* Hotspur first met Bolingbroke on the way to Berkeley in Gloucestershire, in II. iii.

strange that it might jar an audience that has seen *Richard II* into the realisation that Hotspur is flagrantly distorting the past. He has allowed his present detestation of Henry to overturn his memory of events. As he notes himself, at the time he is describing, he bowed his knee to Henry. His account of the past is so distorted that it creates fundamental contradictions in his narrative: if Bolingbroke was as pernicious as he claims here, why did he bow his knee to him? And how can a madcap be king?

Hotspur's contemptuous dismissal of Henry's behaviour towards him is notable for its venom:

Why, what a candy deal of courtesy

This fawning greyhound then did proffer me!

(I. iii. 247-8)

His image of Henry as a servile dog offering him honeyed words to win his support is so overwrought as to be scarcely believable. The incident Hotspur is making such rhetorical capital from was dramatised in *Richard II*, in a very different way. An audience watching *1 Henry IV* might remember that in reality it was Hotspur who offered Henry 'a candy deal of courtesy' in *Richard II*:

My gracious lord, I tender you my service,

Such as it is, being tender, raw, and young,

Which elder days shall ripen and confirm

To more approvèd service and desert.

(II. iii. 41-4)

Hotspur reverses the past; the events previously dramatised in *Richard II* are retold in precisely the opposite way in *1 Henry IV*, as if the play holds up a distorting mirror to the

events of *Richard II*. The young Hotspur promising Henry ‘service’ which in ‘elder days shall ripen’ is historical irony at its most trenchant, irony which only becomes fully apparent when the events of *Richard II* are remembered by an audience watching *1 Henry IV*, or when an audience that has already seen *1 Henry IV* watches *Richard II*. The later play is indeed full of historical ironies which are not immediately obvious. Instead, they require an audience to think outside the play, back to an earlier history and to make connections between the history they have previously seen and the history they hear recalled before them, but also to negotiate the discrepancy between the competing narratives.

In *1 Henry IV*, then, the audience is momentarily distracted from the flow of events before them and forced to think back to a previous performance, to a theatrical past which can never be repeated exactly. History no longer flows in a single stream of events. The momentary break might remind the audience that the past, dramatic or otherwise, is irretrievable. The audience are no longer merely being presented with a narrative of events: they must construct their own history, drawn partly from their memories of *Richard II*. As Eva Hoffman observes:

We live forwards, but we understand backwards. And, as we acquire new experiences, or new perspectives on the old ones, as we sometimes expand our understanding or deepen our insights, so the interpretation of the past can change over time.<sup>27</sup>

The audience’s perception, or memory, of events in *Richard II* alters with the new knowledge they gain during *1 Henry IV*. The new historical insights gained cast the past in a new light, encouraging the audience to rethink the history they have taken for granted

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<sup>27</sup> Eva Hoffman, *Time* (London: Profile Books Ltd., 2009), p. 107.



and to create it anew in light of what they have now learned. To ‘history’ is an active process in *1 Henry IV*; unlike previous history plays it encourages audience analysis and scepticism to match the new fragmented history of the plays. *1 Henry IV* is perhaps the first of Shakespeare’s history plays that involves the audience in a new way of making history as it suggests new implications for what history might be.

### **Performing History**

Many critics have noted that the comedy in *1 Henry IV* comments on the main plot, mocking the serious business of ‘history’ in the play. Kiernan Ryan observes that the comic characters’ ‘liberty from the burden of advancing the historical plot permits them to explore the cost and consequences of that history, to reinstate the exclusions and suppressions that made it possible’.<sup>28</sup> I would like to argue that the comic scenes do more than comment on the main historical plot of the drama: they defamiliarise and undercut the very concept of a history play, and question exactly what it means to ‘perform history’.

This questioning of the concept of ‘performing history’ is at its most obvious in II. iii., when Falstaff and Hal take on the roles of king and heir, roles which they then swap. Falstaff’s casual appropriation of everyday tavern paraphernalia as props for his acting calls attention to the arbitrary nature of the symbols of kingship:

This chair shall be my state, this dagger my sceptre, and this cushion my crown.

(II. v. 344-5)

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<sup>28</sup> Kiernan Ryan, ‘The Future of History: *1* and *2 Henry IV*’ in *Shakespeare’s History Plays*, ed. R. J. C. Watt (London: Longman, 2002), p. 156.

On the stage, naming a cushion a crown makes it so. Falstaff defamiliarises the accoutrements of kingship, making them ridiculous in the process and, as Holderness observes, ‘explicitly drawing attention to the mundanity of the materials on which such illusion (in this kind of theatre) is always based’.<sup>29</sup> The cushion that Falstaff uses for a crown is merely a prop; the crown that Henry IV wears onstage is also a prop, as is Elizabeth I’s crown. The scene simultaneously calls attention to the theatrical illusion of drama and the theatrical illusion of ‘real’ kingship. Hal’s question to Falstaff, ‘Dost thou speak like a king?’ (II. v. 394), asks a pertinent question. What does it mean to speak like a king, and can this form of speaking be co-opted by Falstaff, or the actor playing Falstaff? Can a plebeian actor successfully impersonate royalty? Is royalty itself an act? (This is an important question in a play named after an usurper). The play raises these subversive questions even as it draws attention to its own fictional nature, questioning the fictions of the real world while revealing itself to be a fiction.

*I Henry IV* draws attention to its fictionality in a way that no previous history play has, even to the extent of mocking Shakespeare’s previous history plays. When Falstaff, playing Henry, says ‘Weep not, sweet Queen, for trickling tears are vain’ (II. v. 357), he is not playing Henry IV but Richard II, and he is mocking the lachrymose excess of Richard’s tearful farewell to his queen in V. i. of *Richard II*.<sup>30</sup> Drama collapses into itself here: an actor playing Falstaff is ostensibly playing Henry IV, but actually playing Richard II. This plethora of meanings mimics the structure of the play itself: history is

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<sup>29</sup> Holderness, *Shakespeare Recycled*, p. 164.

<sup>30</sup> Herbert and Judith Weil and David Scott Kastan argue in their respective editions of the play that Falstaff is parodying Greene’s *Alphonsus, King of Aragon*, which is itself probably a parody of Marlowe’s *I Tamburlaine*. No-one seems to have entertained the idea that Shakespeare is parodying himself here even as Falstaff parodies Henry IV. See William Shakespeare, *The First Part of King Henry IV*, ed. Herbert Weil and Judith Weil, II. iv. 323. n. and William Shakespeare, *King Henry IV Part 1*, ed. David Scott Kastan, II. iv. 381. n. for more information.

piled upon history, meaning upon meaning, until the framework of the 'history play' looks set to collapse. *1 Henry IV* is so packed with meaning, with competing histories that challenge each other, that it takes the genre of 'history play' as far as it can go, then breaks out of it and becomes something new. It becomes, that is, a one-of-a-kind theatrical experiment which will not be repeated, even in *2 Henry IV*.

### **Misremembering (I)**

*1 Henry IV* can, however, also be seen as a link play connecting *Richard II* and *2 Henry IV*, creating a new kind of historical sequence focused not on events but on previous drama. *1 Henry IV* establishes drama as the link in this chain of history. The events of *Richard II* loom over the present, casting an inescapable shadow over the lives of those involved in the deposition of the rightful king. The Percies appear deliberately to misremember the past, but Henry's refusal in III. ii. to admit any guilt for his actions seems to stem from a desire to avoid blame for the usurpation:

I know not whether God will have it so  
For some displeasing service I have done,  
That in his secret doom of my blood  
He'll breed revengement and a scourge for me.

(III. ii. 4-7)

Henry's words betray a fear that God will take revenge on him for his actions, a fear passed on to Hal, who will re-state the sentiment fearfully on the night before Agincourt:

Not today, O Lord,  
O not today, think not upon the fault

My father made in compassing the crown.<sup>31</sup>

While Henry V can ‘think [...] upon the fault’ of his father, Henry IV cannot bring himself to name the deed for which he could be punished. Ever the politician, he carefully conceals his thoughts, perhaps even from himself. The obliqueness of the words ‘for some displeasing service I have done’ carefully elides the brutality inherent in the imprisonment and murder of Richard which he implicitly ordered. Is Henry deceiving himself here? Can he really be uncertain why God might punish him? His professed ignorance of any motive is almost beyond belief. Henry, however, restates a revealing leitmotif of *Richard II* with his words ‘secret doom of my blood’. In *Richard II* John of Gaunt castigates Richard on his deathbed, telling him that if his grandfather had known that ‘his son’s son should destroy his sons’ (II. i. 105) he would have deposed him before he gained possession of the crown. This curse of blood, this fear of an unworthy son proving an undeserving successor to the throne, pervades the *Henry IV* plays, lending the past an air of biblical allegory.

Henry himself sees Hal as Richard’s heir, his licentious and pleasure-seeking nature a reflection of the behaviour of the dead king he deposed. Hal’s answer to his father’s denunciation of him is significant, as it introduces the idea of tales and stories as a part of an oral culture which eventually becomes history, a theme which will become personified in the figure of Rumour in 2 *Henry IV*:

Such extenuation let me beg

As, in reproof of many tales devised –

Which oft the ear of greatness needs must hear

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<sup>31</sup> William Shakespeare, *The Life of Henry the Fifth*, IV. ii. 274-6, in *The Norton Shakespeare*, ed. Stephen Greenblatt, Walter Cohen, Jean E. Howard, Katherine Eisaman Maus (New York and London: Norton, 1997). All further references are to this edition and are given in the text.

By smiling pickthanks and base newsmongers.

(III. ii. 22-5)

Hal's phrase 'which oft the ear of greatness needs must hear' anticipates Rumour's sardonic observation in *2 Henry IV* that no-one can choose not to listen 'when loud Rumour speaks'.<sup>32</sup> The importance of public opinion in the deposition of Richard has shifted the balance of power in the state from the ruler to the ruled, as Ian Mortimer, commenting on the reign of the historical Henry IV, observes:

Considering the people's proven ability to dethrone a king, popular rumour could easily result in a real plot if left unchecked. The line between rumour and rebellion was not as clear as it had once been.<sup>33</sup>

Henry sees the pernicious rumours about Hal's behaviour as having sullied his kingship before he has even ascended the throne:

The hope and expectation of thy time  
Is ruined, and the soul of every man  
Prophetically do forethink thy fall.  
Had I so lavish of my presence been,  
So common-hackneyed in the eyes of men,  
So stale and cheap to vulgar company,  
Opinion, that did help me to the crown,  
Had still kept loyal to possession,  
And left me in reputeless banishment,

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<sup>32</sup> William Shakespeare, *The Second Part of Henry the Fourth*, 'Induction', 2, in *The Norton Shakespeare*, ed. Stephen Greenblatt, Walter Cohen, Jean E. Howard, Katherine Eisaman Maus (New York and London: Norton, 1997). All further references are to this edition and are given in the text.

<sup>33</sup> Ian Mortimer, *The Fears of Henry IV: The Life of England's Self-Made King* (London: Vintage Books, 2008), p. 250.

A fellow of no mark nor likelihood.

(III. ii. 36-45)

The optimism in the words ‘the hope and expectation of thy time’ is cruelly dashed by the brutal and blunt ‘is ruined’, mimicking how the people’s hopes in Hal have been disappointed, even before he has gained the throne. Henry’s speech shows the power of rumour to make or unmake kings. Hal’s attempt to create his own history, the narrative of a licentious prince who repents upon his coronation, has had the unforeseen consequence of creating an image of debased kingship which his subjects and his father have taken to be reality. If, as Holderness observes, ‘the Prince’s well-known soliloquy in which he distances himself from his low-life companions, shows him deliberately and punctiliously constructing his own historical legend’,<sup>34</sup> then this scene shows the negative effects of his attempt to shape history. His future subjects have taken his narrative at face value and judged him accordingly. Hal has provided the people with a reason to dread his rule and anxiously await his fall; he has lost control of his historical narrative and learned too late that history and its narratives cannot be so easily controlled. Creating history is shown to be a double-edged sword; although Richard managed to write the historical narrative of his fall by casting himself in the role of a martyr betrayed by his people (a narrative which, as we have seen, the Percies disseminate) it was only after his death that it was accepted, and indeed required his martyrdom as an essential component of the legend. ‘Opinion’ is a different kind of oral report. It was the rumour of his death that caused Richard’s army to disband, leading to his dethronement, and now Hal seems to be in the same position. Henry explicitly constructs him as another Richard, a weak king whose

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<sup>34</sup> Holderness, *Shakespeare: The Histories*, p. 163.

subjects 'prophetically do forethink thy fall'. Rumour and prophecy are linked: what is a prophecy if not a rumour of the future?

Henry moves from haranguing Hal to reminiscing about the way he manipulated public opinion to dethrone Richard:

I stole all courtesy from heaven,  
And dressed myself in such humility  
That I did pluck allegiance from men's hearts,  
Loud shouts and salutations from their mouths,  
Even in the presence of the crownèd King.

(III. ii. 50-4)

This retelling has a curious tone, as if Henry is nostalgic for the time he struggled to attain the throne, when his fate, and even his life, were in the balance. His retelling of the events of *Richard II* from his own perspective sheds some light on the motivations for his actions and provides a glimpse of his political personality. He reveals himself to be a cunning and calculating politician who deliberately courted the masses. This means that Richard was quite correct to suspect Bolingbroke's motivations in *Richard II* when he said:

What reverence he did throw away on slaves,  
Wooing poor craftsmen with the craft of smiles.

(I. iv. 26-7)

What in *Richard II* appeared to be sarcastic jealousy at Bolingbroke's success with the commoners is revealed in *1 Henry IV* as a clear-sighted understanding and prophetic foreshadowing of how Bolingbroke's false courtesy would usurp popular support from

the anointed king. Once again, the audience are encouraged to think back to the previous history play and reinterpret previous events in the light of new information. The audience's understanding of the dramatic past is changing as they view *1 Henry IV*, as differing versions of a vanished dramatic past compete for their attention and figures of history distort the past in their self-representations. History in *1 Henry IV* can thus be seen as chameleon in nature, forever changing and inconstant.

Versions of the past continue to collide in this scene as Henry describes Richard in particularly bitter terms:

The skipping King, he ambled up and down  
With shallow jesters and rash bavin wits,  
Soon kindled and soon burnt, carded his state,  
Mingled his royalty with cap'ring fools,  
Had his great named profanèd with their scorns.

(III. ii. 60-4)

Herbert and Judith Weil define 'skipping' as 'flighty',<sup>35</sup> while David Scott Kastan defines it as 'frivolous'.<sup>36</sup> This description applies as much to Hal as it does to Richard. The most striking feature of these lines, however, is their inaccuracy. The Richard presented onstage in *Richard II* is not the Richard Henry describes here. A careless, obtuse and spoiled monarch he may have been, but to describe Richard as 'the skipping King' is so inaccurate that it might jolt an audience that has seen *Richard II* out of the moment, and make them think back to the earlier history play. Richard was a rather lonely figure in *Richard II*, his only companions his wife and his advisors. It simply cannot be said that

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<sup>35</sup> William Shakespeare, *The First Part of King Henry IV*, ed. Herbert Weil and Judith Weil, III. ii. 60. n.

<sup>36</sup> William Shakespeare, *King Henry IV Part 1*, ed. David Scott Kastan (London: Arden Shakespeare (Third Series), 2002), III. ii. 60. n.



he ‘mingled his royalty with cap’ring fools’, as this does not seem to have been the case. This description is far more suited to Hal than to Richard, suggesting that the two have become synonymous in Henry’s mind. As Geoffrey Cubitt observes, ‘to remember something is to rework it mentally, within the present’s habitual structures of thought and assumption’.<sup>37</sup> Henry has reworked Richard in the image of Hal. It is not only the grasping Percies or the buffoonish Falstaff who misremember history for their own ends; here the King of England reconstructs his shameful past by portraying the monarch he deposed as an unworthy king. It is unclear whether Henry deliberately reconstructs the past or has fallen prey to what Ricoeur called ‘the traps that imagination lays for memory’,<sup>38</sup> and in a sense it does not matter. Imaginative distortion of the past is inevitable; it is the form that these distortions take that reveals the fears, denial and desire that lurks in the unconscious. The falsified version of events that Henry relates is true for him and in its elisions and distortions it reveals far more about him than an accurate account would. As Paul Thompson observes, ‘one part of history, what people imagined happened, and also what they believe *might* have happened – their imagination of an alternative past, and so an alternative present – may be as crucial as what did happen’.<sup>39</sup> This is the hidden history of *Richard II*, obliquely revealed in the realms of the unconscious. Henry’s venom conceals his guilt. His obsessive denigration of Richard’s profligate rule is a shallow justification for usurpation and murder; his unconvincing

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<sup>37</sup> Geoffrey Cubitt, *History and Memory* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2007), p. 79.

<sup>38</sup> Paul Ricoeur, *Memory, History, Forgetting*, trans. Kathleen Blamey and David Pellauer (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2004), p. 55.

<sup>39</sup> Paul Thompson, *The Voice of the Past: Oral History*, 3<sup>rd</sup> edn (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 162.

attempt to construct Richard as a king who deserved his fate only serves to make the audience question his narrative of events, and to see them as ‘narrative’, as a story.

Henry’s speech is of pivotal importance in the play as, like Hal’s tavern scene in I. ii. it acts, in Humphreys’ phrase, as ‘a fulcrum prompting revaluations of the past [...] and shaping expectations of the future’.<sup>40</sup> In this way history in *1 Henry IV* is in a constant state of flux. New information changes our view of the past; the historical narrative changes as the play continues. This dramatic churning of history is repeated throughout *1 Henry IV*, as the audience is encouraged to reinterpret the dramatic past and the dramatic future in the light of new information. The narrative of the play is unsettled and constantly shifting as histories, self-representations, interpretations and reinterpretations of the past vie for supremacy. There is, indeed, no single narrative in the play: *1 Henry IV* is characterised by complex and shifting history, a history that requires reinterpretation and which cannot fully be captured in a linear narrative form.

The latent comparisons that Henry draws between Hal and Richard are made explicit at the conclusion of his speech: ‘In that very line, Harry, standest thou’ (III. ii. 85). The pun on ‘in that very line’ reveals the irony of Hal’s position as heir to a usurper. Descended from Richard in temperament but not in blood, he is Richard’s spiritual and Henry’s biological heir as he straddles the two very different worlds of *Richard II* and *Henry IV*. Henry believes that the past lives on in Hal, that he is a living embodiment of Richard’s profligacy. Of course, even though the real Richard was not as dissolute as Henry believes, what Hal embodies are the worst qualities of Richard, magnified by Henry’s guilty conscience. Although Richard himself is long dead, to Henry’s horror his spirit appears to live on in his own son. James Black observes that:

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<sup>40</sup> Humphreys, ‘Introduction’, William Shakespeare, *King Henry IV Part 2*, p. 14.

Richard will not be dismissed as the trivial fellow who deserved to be overthrown; to Henry's dismay he seems to be living on in Hal. It is in this scene that we glimpse both the extent and the delimiting nature of Henry's obsession with the memory of Richard.<sup>41</sup>

There seems to be a tension within Henry between the compulsion to remember and the desire to forget. Henry thus embodies both of the extremes of what Ricoeur calls 'repetition-memory':

What some cultivate with morose delectation, and what others flee with bad conscience, is the same repetition-memory. The former love to lose themselves in it, the latter are afraid of being engulfed by it.<sup>42</sup>

The 'morose delectation' which we would expect Henry to feel when remembering how he gained the throne is absent; instead, he seems to exult in the way he 'pluck[ed] allegiance from men's hearts' (III. ii. 52) 'even in the presence of the crownèd King' (III. ii. 54). This gloating reliving of his greatest success is clearly a source of pleasure for Henry. This is no surprise: in many ways the high point of his life has been gaining the throne; the rest of his reign has been a battle to keep it. He 'love[s] to lose himself in' his memories. His rewriting of history, however, is not without its psychic toll. Henry's almost compulsive re-living of his past, the propulsive and excited language he uses when describing Richard's overthrow and his near-complete elision of the dubious circumstances in which he gained the throne create a sense of desperation, of a man taking refuge in a rewritten past to escape the terrible burden of the present. His 'bad conscience', carefully suppressed, is projected onto Hal; Hal becomes the resurrected

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<sup>41</sup> James Black, 'Henry IV's Pilgrimage', *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 34.1 (1983), 18-26 (p. 23).

<sup>42</sup> Ricoeur, *Memory, History, Forgetting*, p. 79.

figure of the guilty king, heir to Henry in blood but Richard in temperament. The figure Henry has done all he can to suppress and deny returns, with bitter irony, in the form of his heir, a point Henry makes explicit in the same speech:

For all the world,  
As thou art to this hour was Richard then,  
When I from France set food at Ravenspurgh,  
And even as I was then is Percy now.  
Now by my sceptre, and my soul to boot,  
He hath more worthy interest to the state  
Than thou, the shadow of succession.

(III. ii. 93-9)

The past and present collide: 'this hour' becomes 'then', which becomes 'now', repeated twice. It is almost as if time is collapsing into itself and all the events which have occurred are still occurring now. Henry's reference to Hal as 'the shadow of succession' has multiple meanings. It suggests that he is hiding as a ghostly past. The comparisons between the majesty of the king and the sun is something of a leitmotif in *Richard II*; by resurrecting the image in the more cynical and less majestic fallen world of *Henry IV* Henry is inadvertently demonstrating how royalty has been cheapened by his overthrow of Richard. Henry's intention in employing this image appears to be obliquely to construct Hal as merely a shadow cast by Henry's royal sun, lacking in regal majesty and unfit for the throne. Of course, to the Elizabethans, 'shadow' also referred to the actors themselves, so that Henry constructs Hal as merely an actor playing royalty, which in reality is exactly what he is. The theatrical illusion collapses for an instant and the

audience is reminded that the historical past can never be reclaimed or re-experienced; they are not experiencing history, for they are watching a play.

Hal's false narrative, the story of how the wastrel prince reformed and became a model king, has been too successful. His narrative has escaped his control and become a rumour, a rumour that is widely believed, even by his own father. He has accidentally constructed himself as the heir to Richard, in temperament if not in blood. As if to reinforce this, and to reinforce how different the current king is from Richard, the scene ends with Henry's efficient call to action:

Our hands are full of business; let's away

Advantage feeds him fat while men delay.

(III. ii. 179-80)

Henry's businesslike attitude towards crushing rebellion might remind an audience of the weakness displayed by Richard in the previous history play. The comparison portrays Henry in a positive light as a contrast to the 'skipping king', showing him as competently taking measures to stem a rising, a monarch who, unlike Richard, is committed to restoring order to a fraught land. The audience are reminded that Henry's kingship is very different from what has come before, and that the vanished and irrecoverable world of *Richard II* was perhaps, in some ways, inferior to the new order of things.

### **Misremembering (II)**

Henry's account above of the usurpation of Richard is later followed by Hotspur's account of the events of *Richard II*, an account told from the Percies' present perspective as enemies of the king:

My father and my uncle and myself  
Did give him that same royalty he wears;  
And when he was not six-and-twenty strong,  
Sick in the world's regard, wretched and low,  
A poor unminded outlaw sneaking home,  
My father gave him welcome to the shore.

(IV. iii. 56-61)

Just like Henry's narrative of *Richard II*, the Percies' account reveals a new dimension to past events even as it tries to distort them. Beginning with the claim that his family 'did give him that same royalty he wears', it seems as if Hotspur's speech is to be another violent rant against Henry, a rant characterised as much by its inaccuracy as its vitriol, but this is not the case. Hotspur's subsequent description of Bolingbroke returning from banishment as 'a poor unminded outlaw sneaking home' is jarring not because it is accurate (Herbert and Judith Weil define 'unminded' as 'disregarded' and point out that in *Richard II* 'several lords eagerly rush to support Bullingbrook'),<sup>43</sup> but because it strips away the veneer of legitimacy Henry's rebellion has accrued because of its success, and reveals it for the base, illegal act that it was. Henry's return from banishment has not been described in this way so far, seemingly proving John Harrington's maxim, 'treason doth never prosper: what's the reason? Why if it prosper, none dare call it treason'.<sup>44</sup> Although couched in Hotspur's typical exaggerated rhetoric, his description of Henry casts a new light on the history of *Richard II*.

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<sup>43</sup> William Shakespeare, *The First Part of King Henry IV*, ed. Herbert Weil and Judith Weil, IV. iii. 58. n.

<sup>44</sup> Sir John Harrington, '5 of Treason', in *The most elegant and witty epigrams of Sir John Harrington* (Cambridge: Chadwyck-Healey, 1992), [n. pag.].

Hotspur goes on to excoriate Henry's duplicity in lines which recall Henry's own words:

And when he heard him swear and vow to God  
He came but to be Duke of Lancaster,  
To sue his livery, and beg his peace  
With tears of innocency and terms of zeal,  
My father, in kind heart and pity moved,  
Swore his assistance, and performed it too.

(IV. iii. 62-7)

Hotspur's claim that the scheming Northumberland acted from 'kind heart and pity' is laughable; it is tempting to reject his entire speech as being a hagiographic account of how the Percy family was duped into treason by the scheming Bolingbroke. In the midst of this biased retelling of history the accuracy of Hotspur's description of Henry is easily overlooked. An audience familiar with *Richard II* will be able to recall that Henry did 'swear and vow to God' that he 'came but to be Duke of Lancaster', and realise that, for once, Hotspur is not exaggerating. Henry's duplicity is made plain, needing no embellishment. Hotspur's usual embroidering of the past soon returns in full force, however, with his assertion that Henry 'beg[ged] his peace [...] with tears of innocency and terms of zeal'. Here, as before, Hotspur's exaggeration serves to highlight, not distort, the hypocrisy of Henry's actions. An audience thinking back to *Richard II* would be aware that Henry did not actually shed tears while professing his innocence, but they might recall the fervour of his claims that he came only to seek his dukedom. They will also perhaps recall Bolingbroke's honeyed assurances to Richard:

Henry Bolingbroke

Upon his knees doth kiss King Richard's hand,

And sends allegiance and true faith of heart [...]

Provided that my banishment repealed

And lands restored again.

(III. iii. 34-6, 39-40)

Hotspur's embellished account of this pivotal meeting between Bolingbroke and Richard, a meeting that he did not attend, presents the audience with a revised and rewritten history. However, his rant about Henry's perfidy, as well as distorting the past, also reveals some of the elisions present in the narrative of *Richard II* which are easily overlooked in the earlier play's rush of action. For example, in *Richard II* Richard's favourites are tried, sentenced and led offstage to execution in the space of thirty-five lines in III. i., although Bolingbroke has no legal authority to order their deaths. At this stage in the play Bolingbroke is still claiming that he has returned merely to recover his dukedom. His assumption of the right to execute subjects of the king before he has gained the throne suggests that it was always his intention to depose Richard, but this is glossed over in the play, or left for the audience to surmise.

It is only when Hotspur relates this event in *1 Henry IV* that the full implications of the act become clear. He states that Bolingbroke:

Proceeded further, cut me off the heads

Of all the favourites that the absent King

In deputation left behind him here

When he was personal in the Irish war.



(IV. iii. 87-90)

This passage makes clear that Richard's favourites, left behind while the king fought in Ireland, effectively acted as the king's deputies. Bolingbroke symbolically killed the king long before Richard was actually murdered. Hotspur's account reveals the inherent criminality of Bolingbroke's actions, a criminality that seems to be elided in *Richard II*. The deviousness of Bolingbroke, who waited until Richard was absent from his kingdom and unable to assert his authority before he struck, is made clear, in stark contrast to the heroic Richard, who was 'personal in the Irish war'. This description sheds a new light on Richard, portrayed as a weak monarch in *Richard II*, constructing him as a king unafraid of risking his life by personally going to war in Ireland. In a stark reversal of the way they are portrayed in *Richard II*, here Richard is the valiant fighting king and Bolingbroke the cowardly knave who uses underhand methods to secure his advantage. This reversal is the key to unlocking the way history is presented in *1* and *2 Henry IV*. Even as he reverses the way events were portrayed in *Richard II*, Hotspur is also guilty of directly reversing his account of his own actions in that play.

Hotspur continues his narrative, his pace quickening:

In short time after, he deposed the King,

Soon after that deprived him of his life,

And in the neck of that taxed the whole state.

(IV. iii. 92-4)

The speed of Bolingbroke's takeover is emphasised here. The clipped, short words Hotspur uses and the alliteration of 'short time' with 'soon' and 'deposed' with 'deprived' reinforces how quickly Richard's usurpation and murder came about. The

sheer cynical criminality of Henry's actions stands revealed here, Hotspur's occasional embellishment serving to highlight the parts of the narrative that need no exaggeration. It is easy for an audience watching *Richard II* to see Bolingbroke as, in Jan Kott's phrase, 'a positive hero; an avenger'.<sup>45</sup> Hotspur's speech strips away the veneer of legitimacy gilding Bolingbroke's rebellion and encourages the audience to reconsider the events of *Richard II*. It achieves this simply by summarising Bolingbroke's actions in the play; hearing Hotspur list Bolingbroke's crimes in sequence prompts us to rethink our assumptions and opinions of Henry, and to re-examine how *Richard II* seems to gloss over his crimes, inspiring its viewers to support the reign of a traitor and regicide. The reversals of the earlier history in *I Henry IV* throws doubt on the accuracy of the history previously dramatised. Once again in his history plays Shakespeare draws the audience's attention to the inaccuracy and distortion of historical narratives – in this case, ironically, his own.

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<sup>45</sup> Jan Kott, *Shakespeare Our Contemporary*, trans. Boleslaw Taborski (London: Methuen and Co. Ltd., 1964), p. 14.

## Chapter V: 2 *Henry IV*: Rumours of History

The relationship between history and rumour is a pervasive concern in 2 *Henry IV*. The *OED* defines rumour as ‘general talk or hearsay, not based on definite knowledge’ and ‘an unverified or unconfirmed statement or report circulating in a community’.<sup>1</sup> 2 *Henry IV* begins with the allegorical presenter Rumour directly addressing the audience:

Open your ears; for which of you will stop

The vent of hearing when loud Rumour speaks?<sup>2</sup>

This is an unusual opening, as Paolo Pugliatti observes, noting that ‘this particular *Induction* may seem rather surprising as an introduction to a historical play because it is eminently and overtly destabilising’.<sup>3</sup> The first of Shakespeare’s history plays to utilise the dramatic device of a presenter, 2 *Henry IV* begins with a powerful statement of its theatricality.

Rumour’s presence gives a new meaning to the idea that the plays present history to the audience. The *Induction* reverses the pattern audiences have come to expect: here history, or a form of narrative transmission, presents a play. As Loren M. Blinde observes, ‘rumor is history’s foundation, and thus for Shakespeare history is, in many ways, rumor’.<sup>4</sup> It is significant that the presenter of the *Induction* is personifying rumour, the most uncontrollable and unpresentable form of oral history. This raises the problem of how the stage can hope adequately to present the unpresentable. Logically, of course, it

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<sup>1</sup> ‘rumour | rumor, n.’, *OED Online*, Third edition, March 2011 and online version June 2011. Available at <http://www.oed.com.abc.cardiff.ac.uk/view/Entry/168836> [accessed 07 July 2011].

<sup>2</sup> William Shakespeare, *The Second Part of Henry the Fourth*, ‘Induction’, 1-2, in *The Norton Shakespeare*, ed. Stephen Greenblatt, Walter Cohen, Jean E. Howard, Katherine Eisaman Maus (New York and London: Norton, 1997). All further references are to this edition and are given in the text.

<sup>3</sup> Paola Pugliatti, *Shakespeare the Historian* (London: Macmillan Press Ltd. 2002), p.107.

<sup>4</sup> Loren M. Blinde, ‘Rumored History in Shakespeare’s 2 *Henry IV*’, *English Literary Renaissance*, 38.1 (2008), 34-54 (p. 35).

cannot do so. To personify oral history, to have it 'speak' directly to an audience is a profoundly dislocating moment that exposes the artifice inherent when a play claims to present history. In this way *2 Henry IV* begins with an announcement of its own theatricality as Rumour blurs the boundaries between drama, 'history' and fact.

More particularly, Rumour draws attention to the unreliable nature of historical narrative by retelling, then rewriting, the events of *1 Henry IV*:

I run before King Harry's victory  
Who in a bloody field by Shrewsbury  
Hath beaten down young Hotspur and his troops,  
Quenching the flame of bold rebellion  
Even with the rebels' blood. But what mean I  
To speak so true at first? My office is  
To noise abroad that Harry Monmouth fell  
Under the wrath of noble Hotspur's sword,  
And that the King before the Douglas' rage  
Stooped his anointed head as low as death.

(*'Induction'*, 23-32)

The juxtaposition of two directly contradictory narratives unsettles the audience and perhaps casts doubt on the history Shakespeare has previously dramatised in *1 Henry IV*. The effect on an audience of hearing Rumour playfully rewrite the theatrical past could easily be one of confusion, requiring them to think back to the conclusion of *1 Henry IV* in order to separate the 'true' narrative from the false. As Pugliatti observes, 'the implication is clear: what has already been told about this story – in the first play of the

sequence – may have suffered from falsification'.<sup>5</sup> Although it could be argued that even an audience that had not seen *1 Henry IV* would know that in reality Hal was not killed by Hotspur at Shrewsbury, the presence of Rumour onstage makes it clear that it is drama, not history, that the audience are viewing. As we have seen, dramatic history can depart from chronicle history; an audience's knowledge of the chronicles does not presuppose knowledge of the play. As he has done previously, Shakespeare can, and will, alter the 'facts' of history.

In the Induction Rumour is mocking the ease with which the past can be written and rewritten at will, a theme that dominates the history plays. Rumour's rewriting of *1 Henry IV* could also be seen as preceding the rewriting or restaging (in a different emotional key) of *1 Henry IV* which will occur in the play as a whole. Two versions of the same events co-exist within one speech, much as two versions of the same narrative can be said to co-exist in the *Henry IV* plays. The story is told and then re-told. Rumour demonstrates how easy it is convincingly to falsify the past. It is clear, however, that Rumour does not lie indiscriminately. His description of the battlefield as 'a bloody field by Shrewsbury' fixes the site of the battle with some precision, a factual verification that encourages the listener to believe the veracity of his words. This is swiftly undercut by the speed with which he moves from telling the truth to lying. Changing his tale from moment to moment, Rumour shifts from history to fiction with barely a pause. In his previous history plays Shakespeare dramatised the misreading and misremembering of history, but at the beginning of *2 Henry IV* Shakespeare casts doubt on all historical narratives, even his own.

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<sup>5</sup> Pugliatti, *Shakespeare the Historian*, p. 107.

Loren M. Blinde argues that, 'as the first figure the audience sees, Rumor serves both as *2 Henry IV*'s organizing principle and its guiding spirit'.<sup>6</sup> Rumour's influence, then, far transcends the brief time he is onstage; the concerns about narrative truth raised in the Induction dominate the play as a whole. His reflection on the unreliability of hearsay is borne out in the very first scene of the play when Lord Bardolph recites to Northumberland the false account of the battle that Rumour has just recounted to the audience. Indeed, Rumour announces the beginning of the play proper by drawing attention to his influence on the sequence of 'news' that constitutes the play's initial depiction of 'history':

The posts come tiring on,  
And not a man of them brings other news  
Than they have learnt of me.

(‘Induction’, 37-9)

Hearing Bardolph reiterate Rumour's false tidings by proclaiming to Northumberland the death of Hal and the triumph of the rebels at Shrewsbury could make the audience question whether the version of events they remember from *1 Henry IV* or the chronicles is actually the correct one. Shakespeare has altered history in his plays before and it would not be unprecedented for a dramatist to alter the past in this way. As Barbara Hodgdon observes, 'Rumour and the messengers' news unsettle *1 Henry IV*'s account of Shrewsbury and invite its reinterpretation'.<sup>7</sup> All of Shakespeare's histories rewrite each other but Rumour makes this process visible. Indeed, Rumour's role in the Induction can be seen as analogous to Shakespeare's role as dramatist, or to the role of a historian.

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<sup>6</sup> Blinde, 'Rumored History in Shakespeare's *2 Henry IV*', p. 34.

<sup>7</sup> Barbara Hodgdon, *The End Crowns All: Closure and Contradiction in Shakespeare's History* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1991), pp. 166-7.

Unlike 'real' history, however, the dramatic past is not fixed. It can be restaged, rewritten and re-experienced. This tension between 'real' history and dramatic history, articulated so trenchantly by Rumour, runs throughout the play. The rest of this chapter looks in particular at the opening scene, Act Three and Act Four as characters struggle with the past, both their own and that which they remember in different degrees.

### **Refashioning History**

If Rumour, in the Induction of 2 *Henry IV*, tells the audience how history is made from lies, distortions and unconfirmed reports, then I. i. shows this process actually occur. The scene opens with Lord Bardolph's false account of Shrewsbury, an account which echoes Rumour's own:

The king is almost wounded to the death;  
And, in the fortune of my lord your son,  
Prince Harry slain outright.

(I. i. 14-6)

Entering immediately after Rumour's exit from the stage, Bardolph recapitulates Rumour's opening speech, using nearly identical language. The continuity between the Induction and the play itself is almost seamless, suggesting that in this history play the division between drama and 'history' is not merely blurred, but so fluid as to be almost nonexistent. Bardolph continues his oration to Northumberland, surpassing even Rumour's invention in the process:

O, such a day,  
So fought, so followed, and so fairly won,

Came not till now to dignify the times

Since Caesar's fortunes!

(I. i. 20-3)

The comparison to Caesar, intended to glorify Hotspur's conduct by invoking an earlier, outstanding, historical precedent, has the effect of making Bardolph's narrative hollow. The juxtaposition between the conquering Caesar and the reckless Hotspur serves only to emphasise the differences between the two men. Far from 'dignify[ing] the times', the parallel reinforces how far the reality of the battle of Shrewsbury is from the glorious past Bardolph invokes. It also raises the issue of how reliable accounts of 'Caesar's fortunes' might be. If the historical narrative of Shrewsbury, a comparatively recent event, has been so misrepresented, the history of Caesar's time might bear no relation whatsoever to real events.

Reiterating and reinforcing Rumour's warning about the problems of narrative distortion, Bardolph acts as his proxy in the play. Perhaps, as Giorgio Melchiori argues, 'Lord Bardolph [...] as the bringer of the false tidings that Rumour had announced, is the incarnation in the world of history of a moral allegory'.<sup>8</sup> Bardolph, more obviously as another incarnation of Rumour, is a further unsettling of the play as we come to recognise the past as a version of Rumour. In *2 Henry IV* the relationship between history, drama and truth is thus from the very start of the play more complex than it has been in previous plays as the unreliable figure of Rumour is multiplied through the other characters.

Northumberland responds to Bardolph's panegyric with a shrewd question about the source of his information:

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<sup>8</sup> Giorgio Melchiori, 'Introduction', William Shakespeare, *The Second Part of King Henry IV*, ed. Giorgio Melchiori (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), p. 16.



How is this derived?

Saw you the field? Came you from Shrewsbury?

(I. i. 23-4)

Bardolph's reply makes it clear that his account of the battle is severely compromised:

I spake with one, my lord, that came from thence,

A gentleman well bred and of good name,

That freely rendered me these news for true.

(I. i. 25-7)

Attempting to assuage Northumberland's doubts about the veracity of his account, Bardolph inadvertently reveals how distant he is from the events he describes. He lacks primary information about the battle of Shrewsbury; his narrative is derived from a secondary source, a source whose reliability cannot be determined, despite Bardolph's assurances. His description of the 'gentleman well bred and of good name' underscores the unconscious and deeply significant assumptions made by historians when formulating their accounts of the past. Bardolph accepted the man's tale because he seemed like a gentleman, a weak justification which Northumberland is rightly suspicious of. The audience is left with the distinct impression that Bardolph believes what he wants to believe. As Cass Sunstein observes, 'rumours often arise and gain traction because they fit with, and support, the prior convictions of those who accept them'.<sup>9</sup> Bardolph, in his insistence upon the veracity of his tale despite not having witnessed the events he describes, is emblematic of the dislocation of historians from the events they record. Confidently reporting a very recent history that is wrong in every respect, Bardolph acts

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<sup>9</sup> Cass R. Sunstein, *On Rumours: How Falsehoods Spread, Why We Believe Them, What Can Be Done* (London: Penguin Books, 2010), p. 6.

as a failed historian, distorting the past he means to illuminate by taking Rumour's word for truth.

Bardolph is not the only character in this scene to echo Rumour; Northumberland's heartbroken realization that the battle is lost and his son is dead also plays with phrases used by Rumour in the Induction:

This thou wouldst say: 'Your son did thus and thus,  
Your brother thus; so fought the noble Douglas',  
Stopping my greedy ear with their bold deeds;  
But in the end, to stop my ear indeed,  
Thou hast a sigh to blow away this praise,  
Ending with, 'Brother, son, and all are dead.'

(I. i. 76-81)

Northumberland's phrase 'stopping my greedy ear with their bold deeds' might remind an audience of Rumour's comments heard only a few minutes previously:

Upon my tongues continual slanders ride,  
The which in every language I pronounce,  
Stuffing the ears of men with false reports.

('Induction', 6-8)

Within minutes of Rumour's exit after his one sole physical appearance in the play, Bardolph appears onstage to recount a false narrative based on hearsay and Northumberland replies by echoing the words spoken by Rumour in the Induction. The scene thus makes it clear that rumour is a shifting force, here moving from speaker to speaker. Even as Bardolph and Northumberland converse, they both simultaneously

embody Rumour as they echo his words. This repetition, the echoes of the obviously theatrical Induction in the notional world of history, suggests that *2 Henry IV* is moving away from theatrical continuity with *1 Henry IV* towards a new kind of drama. *2 Henry IV* interweaves drama, history and meta-theatre in a new form. If, as previously argued, *1 Henry IV* draws attention to its fictionality in a unique and unprecedented way, then *2 Henry IV* goes even further in its analysis of the history play genre. This can be seen particularly clearly in the relationship between the Induction and I. i., where real historical personages are placed within an allegorical theme by repeating and reinforcing the words of the allegorical presenter of the drama. *2 Henry IV* is perhaps the first, and only, history play to present the self-reflexive meta-theatrical synthesis of drama and history as a fertile cross-pollinating process, a process which makes manifest the oblique tensions and conjunctions between them.

The tension between drama and history emblematised by Rumour's continued influence in the drama after the Induction has ended is perhaps most visible in the character of Falstaff. The curious similarity of the two characters has long been a critical commonplace; Joseph A. Porter, for example, observes that 'he is the play's most prominent practitioner of the act named by Rumour, slander',<sup>10</sup> and suggests 'the possibility that he is the main action's embodiment of the presenter, Rumour'.<sup>11</sup> Loren Blinde makes the further observation that 'Rumor and Falstaff are both figures with multiple tongues: Rumor's tongues are all over his cloak, and Falstaff's are in his belly'.<sup>12</sup> It is possible that the actor playing Rumour doubled as Falstaff, further

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<sup>10</sup> Joseph A. Porter, *The Drama of Speech Acts: Shakespeare's Lancastrian Tetralogy* (California: University of California Press, 1979), p. 99.

<sup>11</sup> Porter, *The Drama of Speech Acts*, p. 100.

<sup>12</sup> Blinde, 'Rumored History in Shakespeare's *2 Henry IV*', p. 46.

highlighting the parallels between them. Of all the characters in the play it is Falstaff who most closely resembles Rumour in his verbal inventiveness and the gleeful pleasure he takes in deceiving others, but the relationship between them goes deeper than these superficial similarities.

Falstaff is perhaps *2 Henry IV*'s most striking illustration of the potential power of rumours, as Meredith Evans observes:

The rumor that it was Falstaff who killed Hotspur invests Falstaff with a power he lacks. In *1 Henry IV*, this falsehood is simply a lie. [...] But in *2 Henry IV* the [...] lie has become a rumor – one which, having reached the rebel Colville's receptive ears, is enough to convince him to yield to the fat knight without a struggle.<sup>13</sup>

Just as rumours of Richard's defeat caused his army to disband in *Richard II*, in *IV. ii.*

rumours of Falstaff's martial prowess cause Colville to surrender without a fight.

Rumours invest Falstaff with a strength he does not possess and paradoxically makes it unnecessary for him to demonstrate the strength and ferocity he is rumoured to have.

History thus repeats itself in the surrender scene, in a tawdry parody of the past. Once again we are reminded of Marx's famous maxim that 'all facts and personages of great

importance in world history occur, as it were, twice [...] the first time as tragedy, the

second as farce'.<sup>14</sup> Rumour as a historical phenomenon has been debased from a force

powerful enough to topple kings to a way that allows a fat old knight to triumph over a

stronger opponent. As we have seen, *2 Henry IV* demystifies rumour as a form of

narrative transmission by showing how it is created from lies, distortions and

unconfirmed conjectures, but the play goes further than this, demonstrating the sordid use

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<sup>13</sup> Meredith Evans, 'Rumor, the Breath of Kings, and the Body of Law in *2 Henry IV*', *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 60.1 (2009), 1-25 (p. 11).

<sup>14</sup> Karl Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* (London: Laurence & Wishart, 1984), p. 10.

often made of rumours by the often repulsive figures who use them for personal gain. A rumour is at heart a lie, and the way Falstaff makes use of rumours for self-aggrandization are not so different from Prince John's actions in IV. i. when he does not lie, but simply allows the rebels to deceive themselves that the king will redress their concerns and allow them to live. The rebels assume that Henry will show them mercy much as Colville assumes that Falstaff is the hero of Shrewsbury and Richard's army assumed that he was dead. Perhaps, in the final analysis, in *2 Henry IV*, history is made by misunderstanding, lies and distortion rather than by an informed understanding of events.

In the form of Falstaff, then, Rumour once again intrudes into the world of 'history', and perhaps even more explicitly than before. Like Rumour, Falstaff is a theatrical construct in the notionally world of history who exposes the lies, contradictions and fictionality of the world he inhabits. The main difference between them is that Rumour draws attention to the play's fictionality from the Induction, from a point outside the drama itself. By contrast, and more subversively, Falstaff does this while participating in the theatrical illusion he seeks to demystify.

### **History in the Making**

The opening scene of *2 Henry IV* dramatises one way that historical narratives are created. As Graham Holderness observes, it 'shows us precisely history in the making, as inconclusive and fragmentary reports are assimilated into a definitive interpretation'.<sup>15</sup>

The scene depicts the transformation of unfounded rumours into accepted historical narratives, and makes it clear how unreliable the sources of these narratives can be, as the

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<sup>15</sup> Graham Holderness, *Shakespeare: The Histories* (London: Macmillan Press Ltd., 2000), p. 159.

audience hears three different versions of a single event, each competing narrative drawn largely from the same sources. The very recent past proves difficult to authenticate. Even an audience that has seen *1 Henry IV*, or is familiar with the chronicles, confronted with these multiple narratives and aware that fidelity to historical 'fact' is not a requirement of drama, might be uncertain which account of Shrewsbury to believe. Like Northumberland, the audience is beset by competing narratives and unsure which is true.

It is a particularly striking feature of the opening scene that, as Holderness observes, 'historical parallels exist to articulate the equally possible outcomes of Hotspur's defeat or his triumph, his death or his victorious survival'.<sup>16</sup> Whatever the actual outcome of Shrewsbury is, precedents can be cited, moulds exist into which the events can be fitted and shaped into an acceptable, and understandable, narrative. It is almost as if the actual events are less important than the precedents they are compared to; Bardolph's comparison of Hotspur to Caesar, although based on a false assumption, nevertheless establishes the parameters of the narrative of Hotspur's life; the comparison fixes the terms in which he can be discussed. Even when the actual outcome of Shrewsbury is revealed, making it clear that the battle was catastrophic for the rebels, Hotspur is still portrayed as a hero rather than an overweening failure. Morton's rebuke to Northumberland for his eagerness to sacrifice his son, while acknowledging his failure, does not depart from the dominant conception of Hotspur as a brave martyr for the rebellion:

You knew he walked o'er perils on an edge,

More likely to fall in than to get o'er.

You were advised his flesh was capable

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<sup>16</sup> Holderness, *Shakespeare: The Histories*, p. 168.

Of wounds and scars, and that his forward spirit  
Would lift him where most trade of danger reigned.  
Yet did you say, 'Go forth'.

(I. i. 169-74)

The terms in which Shrewsbury is discussed, despite the tacit acknowledgement that the battle was a lost cause, make it clear that Hotspur died valiantly, as a hero. The making of this historical narrative can be witnessed in *1 Henry IV* as Hal gazes at the newly slain Hotspur's corpse:

Adieu, and take thy praise with thee to heaven.  
Thy ignominy sleep with thee in the grave,  
But not remembered in thy epitaph.<sup>17</sup>

Hal advocates distorting history; Hotspur is to be falsely remembered. The daring which was so integral to his personality is remembered, but the ignominy and catastrophic failure it led to is to be forgotten. The emphasis of his narrative is shifted from his folly to his bravery in battle; the revision of his history has begun. In this way Hotspur's narrative parallels that of Richard II; with both, the idealised narratives fail to convey the complexity and ambiguity of their lives.

The only dissenting voice among the rebels contradicting the accepted version of Hotspur's demise comes from Lord Bardolph, who sums up Hotspur's conduct at Shrewsbury in a particularly cynical manner:

And so, with great imagination  
Proper to madmen, led his powers to death,

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<sup>17</sup> William Shakespeare, *The History of Henry the Fourth*, V. iv. 98-100, in *The Norton Shakespeare*, ed. Stephen Greenblatt, Walter Cohen, Jean E. Howard, Katherine Eisaman Maus (New York and London: Norton, 1997). All further references are to this edition and are given in the text.

And winking leapt into destruction.

(I. iii. 31-3)

Bardolph has altered his narrative since the events of I. i., and the story he tells now in I. iii. to the Archbishop of York is directly contradictory to the one he related so confidently before. Members of the audience that had seen *1 Henry IV* would perhaps recognise the veracity of this description, but an audience that had not would have no indication of which of Bardolph's narratives is accurate, or even if either of them are. Hotspur thus becomes an ambiguous figure of the past in *2 Henry IV*; interpretations of his conduct at Shrewsbury differ depending on who is relating the narrative, and who is listening. History, it seems, is fast turning into a series of small narratives, the *petits récits* that Catherine Belsey sees as opposing grand narratives.<sup>18</sup>

As he has done in *Richard II* and *1 Henry IV*, Shakespeare, in *2 Henry IV*, dramatises the limitations that historical narratives impose on history, revealing how, as soon as an idealised version of the past has gained acceptance, it closes down other interpretations of events. Even as *1 Henry IV* shows how Richard's self-created myth of betrayal and martyrdom gained acceptance, contrasting the narrative with the more complex reality seen in *Richard II*, so *2 Henry IV* demonstrates how Hotspur's foolish decision to fight at Shrewsbury and his subsequent defeat by Hal are distorted in the retelling in order to lionise what can easily be seen as a catastrophic miscalculation and mistake. Both examples have the effect of drawing attention to the often arbitrary nature of historical narratives and the superficiality inherent in widely-accepted interpretations

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<sup>18</sup> Catherine Belsey, *Shakespeare in Theory and Practice* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2008), pp. 123, 130-1.



of events. The reality of Shrewsbury is lost in the narrative conventions of the rebels' panegyric to Hotspur.

*2 Henry IV* also emphasises the irony that historical reputations are judged by the actual consequences of decisions taken, as opposed to the projected consequences imagined at the time; Henry V will fight a similar battle against great odds at Agincourt and posterity will honour him for his daring. As Robert Ornstein observes, 'had Hotspur won at Shrewsbury the kind of victory against enormous odds that Harry will win at Agincourt, history would have recorded his "folly" as magnificent soldiership'.<sup>19</sup> The comparison between Caesar's victory and Hotspur's failure denigrates the events of Shrewsbury, constructing the battle as a debased parody of the glorious past. In this case, present history is a shallow imitation of what has come before. This disdain for the present, coupled with nostalgia for the vanished past, whether ancient or modern, appears to be one of the main themes of the play. Figures as diverse as Henry IV, Falstaff, Shallow, Hal, Westmorland and Mowbray recall, relive and rewrite the past, looking back longingly to a vanished time which can never be recovered.

### **The Audience as Dramatist**

On one level the main action of *2 Henry IV* is motivated by a desire to return to a vanished time, the time of *Richard II*. Richard's crimes seemingly forgotten by those who were instrumental in his downfall, his memory now acts as the legitimising force of Northumberland's rebellion. Indeed, the self-created narrative of Richard's martyrdom appears to have gained credence, at least among the rebels, for whom such a myth is

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<sup>19</sup> Robert Ornstein, *A Kingdom For A Stage: The Achievement of Shakespeare's History Plays* (Harvard: Harvard University Press, 1972), p. 147.

politically expedient. The hagiography of Richard's life has taken greater hold in *2 Henry IV* than in the previous play; when Morton tells Northumberland later in I. i. that the Archbishop of York is leading the rebellion against Henry, he adds:

He's followed both with body and with mind,  
And doth enlarge his rising with the blood  
Of fair King Richard, scraped from Pomfret stones.

(I. i. 202-4)

The historical precedents cited in the scene move from ancient history to biblical history, from secular to religious, as Richard's blood becomes a relic, a holy reminder of his Christ-like martyrdom. The historical narrative authored and shaped by Richard in *Richard II* has become 'fact'. As Morton demonstrates, once again in I. i. historical precedents are invoked to glorify recent history, regardless of their accuracy.

In order to fully understand the events of I. i., the audience must evaluate each competing narrative in relation to what they may have witnessed dramatised in *1 Henry IV*, what they may know of the 'real' history of these times, and by considering the biases, elisions and distortions apparent in the testimony of the characters onstage. As they were at certain moments in *1 Henry IV*, the audience is encouraged to act as historians of dramatic history, but here the process is different. From its very first scene *2 Henry IV* places the audience in a position of uncertainty, beset by competing testimonies of Shrewsbury in the frenzied whirl of activity following the battle. It is clear from the outset that they will need to fully engage with the dramatic history of the play if they desire a full understanding of events, and this entails approaching the drama as a tapestry which needs to be unpicked and reworked. This process of unpicking the threads of

narrative in the play and weaving them into a coherent account of history to some extent places the audience in the position of the dramatist, as well as the historian, choosing elements from different histories and weaving them together into a new narrative. In the way that it encourages them to create their own narrative of events, it could be argued that *2 Henry IV*, in order to be fully appreciated, requires its audience to write their own history and presents them with the materials to do so.

Perhaps the most striking feature of I. i. is the difficulty the characters (and by extension the audience) have in accurately reconstructing recent history. The history of Shrewsbury manifests itself in a plethora of competing narratives; it will take time for them to become synthesised into a single, accepted narrative. I. i. dramatises this process of sifting and eventual synthesis. As Graham Holderness observes, the process proves problematic:

The conflicting accounts of the battle's outcome provided by Lord Bardolph, Travers and Morton demonstrate both the difficulties involved in authenticating historical fact, and the ease with which historical interpretations spring so readily from such shifting and unreliable sources.<sup>20</sup>

The ease with which it is possible to interpret events wrongly, basing historical narratives on flawed or faulty testimony from unreliable sources, reminds us that history, however trustworthy the narrative may seem, has its beginnings in rumour and is fundamentally specious. In an important sense, I. i. dramatises the very beginnings of historical narrative, offering the audience a privileged position witnessing history at the moment of its creation, illustrating the distortion and misunderstanding upon which our understanding of what happened in the past is too often based.

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<sup>20</sup> Holderness, *Shakespeare: The Histories*, p. 167.

### **Re-remembering History**

The distortion, misremembering and recreating of the past is a major theme of Shakespeare's histories but, as we have seen, is particularly apparent in *2 Henry IV*. The play has a rich dramatic history to draw upon, a history which some of its audience will have experienced first-hand. This provides a unique opportunity for Shakespeare to play with the expectations and precedents of history, to alter the events the audience has previously seen as well as the events they are currently viewing. However, each history play dramatises its own unique history, only tangentially related to the other plays. This offers another explanation for the apparent inconsistencies between them. Could it be the case that when characters are apparently misremembering the past they are in fact correctly remembering their past, which is distinct from the past the audience has viewed? Shakespeare's history plays could be seen as presenting one version of how events might have occurred; they are by no means a definitive record of how these events actually occurred. The history the characters remember is not necessarily the same history dramatised in a previous play. In *2 Henry IV* Shakespeare rewrites his own history, suggesting that a definitive record of the past, even when it is as apparently easily verifiable as dramatic history, is fraught with difficulties.

The pattern of history for Shakespeare is, then, one of constant rewriting. The dramatic past is never fixed, but is constantly shifting, assuming new forms as later events shed light on the past or as the audience learns more about the motivations and actions of previously ambiguous figures or, indeed, as a new history is written. This is reflected in the structure of the drama: each of Shakespeare's history plays rewrites his

previous plays. As *1 Henry IV* rewrites the events of *Richard II* by revealing history previously hidden from the audience, such as the Machiavellian plotting which lurks behind Bolingbroke's inscrutable mask, so *2 Henry IV* rewrites *1 Henry IV*, even as it repeats the events of that play, mirroring its structure and plot, replaying the same events in a shifted emotional key. Of course, in addition to rewriting history, each history play also restages it. *Richard II*, *1 Henry IV* and *2 Henry IV* all share the same basic structure and plot: a conflict between monarch and rebels. In these plays the basic shape of history, but not the actual events, repeats itself. In addition to this, it appears that every history play remembers what has occurred before, but it does not remember accurately. When characters refer back to the dramatic past their memories of events are rarely accurate. Perhaps in a sense the past does not exist in a history play; there is only the present moment. David Kastan argues that 'drama, as it unfolds in time, provides an analogy to and an experience of the flow of history'.<sup>21</sup> The audience are witnessing an event which cannot be repeated; each performance of a history play is unique, fleeting and irrecoverable, much like the historical moment. What occurred in a past play may be referred to but is ultimately immaterial: what is important is the 'now', the radical temporality of the moment of history being depicted onstage.

This focus on the present moment might explain why the history plays appear to contradict each other. When characters misremember the past it can be seen as a reflection of the idea that in a history play only the present moment has any meaning. The past, dramatic or otherwise, is irrecoverable. What occurs in the history plays, particularly *Richard III* and *Henry IV*, is the use of history as a tool in order to alter

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<sup>21</sup> David Scott Kastan, *Shakespeare and the Shapes of Time* (Hanover, New Hampshire: University Press of New England, 1982), p. 4.

present circumstances. Just as Richard III falsifies the past for his own ends, so Hotspur distorts the past, knowingly or unknowingly, for the purpose of self-aggrandisement in *1 Henry IV*. Like Shakespeare himself, they mine the past for material which can be reshaped for their present needs, even as they reflect on that history, as Henry, like other kings in the plays, does in Act Three of *2 Henry IV*.

### **Conceptualising History**

Henry's laments about humanity's inability to see the future in III. i. is notable for being curiously textual in nature:

O God, that one might read the book of fate

And see the revolution of the times.

(III. i. 44-5)

Unlike in *Richard III*, where knowledge of history is granted to the characters in dreams and visions, in a living process, here history is static and dead, secured in bound textuality. The flow and ebb of the past, the myriad choices of the instant, the sense of the present as a vibrant, living moment, rich in possibilities, is lost here, replaced by a linear and static conception of history. If history is written in 'the book of fate', then it is an orderly and measured narrative which has a fixed beginning, middle and end. Cause and effect are easily discernible, one following on from the other in a linear, predictable manner. It is strange that a man who has benefited from the vagaries of fate as much as Henry should see history as such a static process. His rise to the throne has been predicated on chance; if Richard had not disbanded his army or offered to resign the throne, then Henry's narrative would be very different. Perhaps it is because his rise to

power was so unpredictable and contingent on luck that Henry takes refuge in the idea that history is pre-ordained, that it cannot be changed because it is already written. In this way he appears to forget that his history was created by his own agency, by taking appropriate action when chance appeared. It seems that Henry has forgotten the risks he ran to attain the throne, and how easily circumstances could have conspired against him. For Henry, the flux of history, in all its richness and uncertainty, has been reduced to a predictable, linear narrative.

This interpretation is complicated by Henry's next lines, which, directly contradicting what he has just said, depict history as a plural, as histories, constructing the past as an admixture of flowing, unpredictable 'divers liquors':

How chance's mocks

And changes fill the cup of alteration

With divers liquors!

(III. i. 50-2)

Moving from one conception of history to another and awkwardly mixing his metaphors, Henry rejects his previous construction of the past as a linear narrative, instead imagining a chaotic turmoil characterised by 'alteration', by sudden unpredictability. The past is no longer a solid tome which can be controlled; it is liquid: uncontrollable and ungraspable. In an unguarded moment Henry reveals his secret fear about history: that it cannot be directed. One can attempt to control the shape of the future, the history to come, by altering the present, but history is fickle and success cannot be guaranteed. Henry's fear of the unpredictability of history can be seen in two ways: as a realisation of how his victory over Richard was based more on luck than on any action taken by him, and a fear

of the judgment history will eventually impose on his actions. This fear of how future generations may judge his actions will come to dominate the rest of Henry's speech, but for a moment he briefly rejects the disturbing chaos of history as 'divers liquors' and returns to his metaphor of history as a book:

*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.*

(III. i. 52.1-4)

This image of the past as safely bound in textuality, of history circumscribed by the imposition of a narrative on its vagaries, is no longer as reassuring as it was even a few lines ago. At least there Henry can imagine 'read[ing] the book of fate' and take comfort in the fantasy that history is predetermined and that there is only one path through life. Here Henry derives no comfort from this fantasy. The youth he imagines reading the book of fate would derive no advantage from it; instead, he would despair. It is strange that Henry, a man known for his clear-sighted apprehension of events and ability to act quickly to capitalise on them, does not consider how valuable this knowledge of the future might be. He imagines that suicidal hopelessness would be the only possible result of glimpsing the future and viewing the 'crosses to ensue'. The gentle yet driving rhythm of the words 'shut the book and sit him down and die' makes it seem like the only logical conclusion, itself mirroring the apparent straightforwardness of Henry's conception of history. If history is a linear path which cannot be deviated from, the only action possible upon viewing the course of one's life would be to despair. This cynical self-pity coming



from Henry would surprise an audience familiar with the confident Bolingbroke of *Richard II*. Such an apparent change in Henry's character is perhaps a reflection of guilt for his actions, a guilt obliquely expressed but manifest in the distortions and elisions which characterise his (sometimes conflicting) accounts of the past. It is only when Henry has the leisure and security to think back on the past that he has time to rue his actions. When the rush of history is over, when events have taken their course, then it can be reflected upon, understood and regretted.

As the scene continues Henry moves away from attempting to define history into reliving his memories of the past. Significantly, he begins his ruminations by precisely defining when the events occurred:

'Tis not ten years gone  
Since Richard and Northumberland, great friends,  
Did feast together; and in two year after  
Were they at wars. It is but eight years since  
This Percy was the man nearest my soul,  
Who like a brother toiled in my affairs,  
And laid his love and life under my foot,  
Yea, for my sake, even to the eyes of Richard  
Gave him defiance.

(III. i. 52-60)

The words "'Tis not ten years gone' conveys the shortness of time and a sense of regret that time has passed so quickly, and that it continues to flow. The logic of events is overwhelming. It suggests that Henry resents the passing of time and in some ways

would prefer it if time stood still, frozen at the moment of his greatest triumph. But time continues, as do Henry's memories. The passing of the years is the focal point of this passage: 'ten years gone' is followed by 'two year after' and 'eight years since', creating the effect of time rushing onward, the years passing with exaggerated speed as Henry's life rushes past him. The passage calls to mind the inconstancy of human affairs as well as the implacable march of time; Richard and Northumberland were friends, before political expediency caused Northumberland to betray his king. Now history appears to repeat itself as Henry is betrayed, as he sees it, by Percy. Henry seems to cast himself in the role of Richard, with Percy as his betrayer. As Jan Kott observes:

In *Richard II* Bolingbroke was a "positive hero"; an avenger. He defended violated law and justice. But in his own tragedy he can only play the part of Richard II.<sup>22</sup>

It can, of course, be debated whether Bolingbroke was in fact a 'positive avenger' in *Richard II*, but it could also be argued that this is how Henry saw himself and his actions in the earlier play. Now, in the theatre of his mind, he plays the part of Richard. Although it seems to Henry that history is repeating itself, in reality history never repeats itself. Events may share a superficial similarity, but time moves on and new history is made in different historical circumstances than the past to which it is compared. Richard's time is over, but Henry seems unable or unwilling to abandon his idea of the past. Trapped by the past, Henry lives out the life of the king he deposed, casting himself as Richard in the play that bears his name.

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<sup>22</sup> Jan Kott, *Shakespeare Our Contemporary*, trans. Boleslaw Taborski (London: Methuen and Co. Ltd., 1964), p. 14.

Henry's reminiscences move from the general to the specific as his speech continues:

You, cousin Neville, as I may remember –  
When Richard, with his eye brimful of tears,  
Then checked and rated by Northumberland,  
Did speak these words, now proved a prophecy? –  
'Northumberland, thou ladder by the which  
My cousin Bolingbroke ascends my throne' –  
Though then, God knows, I had no such intent,  
But that necessity so bowed the state  
That I and greatness were compelled to kiss –  
'The time shall come' – thus did he follow it –  
'The time will come that foul sin, gathering head,  
Shall break into corruption'; so went on,  
Foretelling the same time's condition,  
And the division of our amity.

(III. i. 61-74)

Henry breaks the flow of his report in order to justify himself, and he seems to cut short his account before its conclusion. The phrase 'as I may remember' is a strange one, signalling the possibility that Henry's memories may be unreliable. The fact that he admits this himself is significant. By suggesting that his memories of the past may be falsified or distorted, Henry opens himself to the realisation that the narrative of his life he has related to himself all these years may not be entirely true. He may even have

reached the realisation that, as the very structure of the *Henry IV* plays reinforces, the past is not one narrative but a plethora of competing and sometimes mutually exclusive interpretations of events which may or may not be remembered correctly. An audience familiar with *Richard II* might recall that, in fact, neither Henry nor Neville were present when Richard spoke these words in the earlier play. Henry is not remembering, he is reporting. The fact that he does entirely recognise this raises troubling questions about how memory can alter and distort the past; if Henry can recall these events as if he had been present at the time, and imagine that Neville was also present, what other false memories has Henry related? Does he know that he is inventing the past?

Perhaps Henry views the events of the past as a factual base on which he can build his own historical narratives. In cases where Henry recalls an event that has not been dramatised, it could be argued that the audience has no option but to accept his version of events, flawed as it may be, as the closest thing to truth. This is not entirely true, however; even when Henry's narrative is the only one available, his unreliability elsewhere in the play when relating the past means that an audience is predisposed to doubt him, to actively distrust his words and to seek alternative interpretations of the events he describes. In essence, Henry creates a counter-history, a narrative concealed in the elisions, ellipses and shadows of his tale. This anti-narrative gains its shape in the empty spaces of Henry's story and in a real sense does not exist. It must be created by an audience prepared to question the narratives related onstage and able to formulate their own narrative of events, drawing upon existing narratives as a base on which to construct their own interpretations.

Henry's recollection of Richard's words to Northumberland is illuminating for its subtle elisions. This scene is one of the few times in the history plays where a previously dramatised scene is remembered so vividly. Characters in the plays look back at the past often, but rarely with such an eye for detail. The apparent accuracy of Henry's retelling is notable. A side-by-side comparison with the scene as dramatised in *Richard II* reveals only minor distortions, easily rationalised as the inevitable mistakes which inherently occur when the past is recalled so long after the events. In fact, it is these apparently minor deviations from what happened in *Richard II* that shed the greatest light on how the guilty king re-remembers his murderous past.

The most telling detail in Henry's speech lies in the way he interrupts his recollection, disrupting the flow of the narrative, in order to justify his actions and claim that Richard was mistaken in his assessment. His words 'though then, God knows, I had no such intent' sound as if he is protesting too much; if his conscience was as clear as he claims, he would have no need to justify his actions in this way. Another interpretation of history can be inferred from his words, an opposing one, a counter-history. Henry unconsciously reveals the hidden historical narrative of his past even as he attempts to relate a version more favourable to himself. This opposing interpretation of his words is compounded by the rather weak way he attempts to justify his actions, claiming that 'necessity so bowed the state' that he had no option but to take action, with the result that '[he] and greatness were compelled to kiss'. Henry uses the language of coercion; he did not actively seek the throne, but was 'compelled' to by 'necessity'. He portrays himself as a helpless cork bobbing on the tide of events. This claim of passivity does not appear to tally with his actions in *Richard II*. Although in the earlier play Bolingbroke appeared

to cultivate the image of taking no active part against the king, the way events constantly fell in his favour seemed to be the result of Machiavellian plotting as opposed to luck. As we have seen, Henry's own confession of his plot to steal public support from Richard in III. ii. of *1 Henry IV* confirms that he is not as innocent as he pretends to be here. But the question remains: is his denial of seeking Richard's throne merely a lie, or has he come to believe it himself? This raises the troubling idea that false memories, over time, can be transformed into historical narratives that we accept as real.

In order to fully appreciate Henry's deviations from the truth of what happened in *Richard II*, it is necessary to compare his account with what Richard actually said in the earlier play:

Northumberland, thou ladder wherewithal  
The mounting Bolingbroke ascends my throne,  
The time shall not be many hours of age  
More than it is ere foul sin, gathering head,  
Shall break into corruption. Thou shalt think,  
Thou he divide the realm and give thee half,  
It is too little helping him to all.  
He shall think that thou, which know'st the way  
To plant unrightful kings, wilt know again,  
Being ne'er so little urged another way,  
To pluck him headlong from the usurpèd throne.  
The love of wicked friends converts to fear,  
That fear to hate, and hate turns one or both

To worthy danger and deservèd death.

(V. i. 55-68)

The most striking aspect of this speech is undoubtedly its accuracy; Richard's prophecy has been fulfilled in almost every detail. The meaning of the speech alters significantly when the events of *Henry IV* are known. What could be seen as a general prediction in *Richard II*, a prophecy oblique in detail like those in *Richard III*, is revealed to be an accurate and precise blueprint of how events will unfold. This is a new and unexpected form of prophecy in the history plays, a secular reading of the future in terms of cause and effect instead of divine influence. Henry's near word-for-word repetition of the prophecy makes clear the prescient and troubling efficacy of Richard's predictions.

It must be remembered that Henry was not present in *Richard II* when this scene occurred, and his account of it derives from oral report, itself a notoriously unreliable form of historical transmission. Compounding this level of narrative distortion is Henry's predilection for inventing details and altering the past, imaginatively constructing events as he wants them to have happened instead of how they actually did. This can clearly be seen in the way Henry alters Richard's pejorative reference to him, substituting the innocuous 'my cousin Bolingbroke' for the loaded phrase 'the mounting Bolingbroke'. This elision reveals a great deal about Henry's ambivalent feelings about the way he gained the throne. Previously it has been unclear whether his repeated protestations of innocence are designed to convince his audience or himself, but this seemingly small change in his account of the past appears to be an unconscious alteration, suggesting that Henry is unknowingly changing history, reading or rather re-reading the past in terms of the present. Henry turns the uncrowning into a personal response by Richard, shown in

his tears and so omits the ceremoniousness and sanctity of the moment. An event of enormous religious significance – the uncrowning on an anointed monarch – is turned into a secular, personal response. This seemingly minor inaccuracy in an otherwise faithful retelling of events reveals a great deal about Henry’s psychological state and the prism of denial through which he views the past.

It is significant that Henry, after reporting Richard’s words more or less accurately, chooses to omit completely the end of his speech, where Richard directly and accurately predicts the precise causes for the division between Henry and Northumberland. Instead, Henry chooses to elide it:

So went on,  
Foretelling this same time’s condition,  
And the division of our amity.

(III. i. 72-4)

The rather dismissive ‘and so went on’ brings to mind a rather feeble and unmemorable Richard traducing Henry at tedious length, an image which is completely at odds with what actually occurred in *Richard II*. As we have seen, Richard predicts the dissolution of Henry and Northumberland’s alliance lucidly and, as events have proven, with devastating accuracy. Henry’s dismissive language cannot conceal the accuracy of Richard’s prophecy, and even an audience unfamiliar with *Richard II* might be expected to spot Henry’s clumsy elision of the rest of Richard’s speech. It is clear that Henry is withholding information which affects him deeply. Relating one narrative, he inadvertently reveals an opposing narrative, barely visible but all the stronger because of its tenuous existence in the shadows and depths of guilty memory.



Upon hearing Henry's recollection of Richard's words, Warwick attempts to comfort the king by rationalising Richard's prediction, determinedly situating the prophecy in secular, not religious, terms:

There is a history in all men's lives  
Figuring the natures of the times deceased;  
The which observed, a man may prophesy,  
With a near aim, of the main chance of things  
As not yet come to life, who in their seeds  
And weak beginnings lie intreasurèd.  
Such things become the hatch and brood of time;  
And by the necessary form of this  
King Richard might create a perfect guess  
That great Northumberland, then false to him,  
Would of that seed grow to a greater falseness,  
Which should not find a ground to root upon  
Unless on you.

(III. i. 75-87)

This passage exemplifies two contrasting and antithetical ways of approaching the past; as Agnes Heller observes, 'what is the mysterious power of prophecy in the eye of Henry is a politically sound guess in the eye of Warwick'.<sup>23</sup> Warwick disdains a supernatural explanation for Richard's prophecy, arguing instead that the defeated monarch would have been able to foretell Henry's fate by looking at the circumstances of his own

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<sup>23</sup> Agnes Heller, *The Time Is Out of Joint: Shakespeare as Philosopher of History* (Lanham, MD.: Rowman & Littlefield, 2002), p.127.

downfall and extrapolating. Interestingly, his use of the phrase ‘the natures of the times deceased’, while acknowledging that the past is dead and cannot return, also subtly recalls Richard’s murder, an event that Henry has scrupulously avoided explicitly mentioning. The phrases ‘a man may prophecy’ and ‘with a near aim’ make manifest the absurd nature of prophecy when examined closely and hints at the contempt Warwick feels for those that view the workings of history with a superstitious eye. By referring to Richard as a ‘man’ he avoids any reference to his role as a divine king. There is also a suggestion that Warwick views Henry with contempt; his image of Northumberland ‘grow[ing] to a greater falseness’ by ‘find[ing] a ground to root upon’ constructs Henry as base earth, a fertile soil for incubating treachery. Perhaps he is subtly suggesting that Northumberland’s perfidy was only made possible because Henry’s duplicitous nature naturally fosters such betrayal. Warwick’s final words, ‘unless on you’, appears to place the blame for Northumberland’s actions squarely upon Henry. Like Henry, Warwick conceals his true meaning in the interstitial spaces of his narrative. The difference between them is that Warwick is aware of this, whereas Henry seems oblivious. Apparently relating one narrative while in fact relating another, Warwick hints at the true reason that Richard was able to predict the future so accurately: the treacherous, duplicitous natures of Henry and Northumberland made it inevitable that they would betray each other just as they had betrayed Richard. History would repeat itself. Henry’s apparent belief that Richard’s prediction may have been supernatural in nature, in its tendentious but subtle disavowal of complicity in the events that precipitated his downfall and caused the present crisis, suggests that Henry views the past through a prism of denial, a denial Warwick does not remove by his references to ‘King’ Richard.

The antithesis inherent in Henry and Warwick's opposing conceptions of history is mirrored in the difference with which history is portrayed in *Richard III* and *Richard II*. In *Richard III* history can be predicted by apparently supernatural means, and even brought about by cursing, whereas *Richard II* appears to signal the birth of a new, rival secular history based on an informed reading of the past and future. It is this concept of history that continues in the *Henry IV* plays, and into *Henry V*. This secularization can be seen in Henry IV's dying exhortation to Hal:

Be it thy course to busy giddy minds

With foreign quarrels.

(IV. iii. 341-2)

Henry, reading the future in the light of the past, sees that the best way to distract the attention of his subjects from civil unrest is to engage in 'foreign quarrels'. Henry plants the seed of the future in Hal's mind, just as Richard did in his. This only becomes clear when the events of *Henry V* are seen in relation to their antecedents in *2 Henry IV*, just as much of *1* and *2 Henry IV*'s meaning comes from the way they conform exactly to Richard's prediction at the end of *Richard II*. Once again we are reminded of Eva Hoffman's observation that 'we live forwards, but we understand backwards'.<sup>24</sup> It is only when looking back at previous history plays that the full significance of the events we are watching becomes clear.

### **Reshaping the Past**

In the case of the abortive combat between Bolingbroke and Thomas Mowbray in I. iii. of *Richard II*, the full significance of the event does not become apparent until *2 Henry IV*,

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<sup>24</sup> Eva Hoffman, *Time* (London: Profile Books Ltd., 2009), p. 107.

in IV. i., when Mowbray's son and namesake bickers with Westmoreland about the duel that never was between his father and Bolingbroke:

What thing in honour had my father lost  
That needed to be revived and breathed in me?  
The King that loved him, as the state stood then,  
Was force perforce compelled to banish him.

(IV. i. 111-4)

This scene shows Mowbray's endless fascination with his family's past and demonstrates the fascination of the past itself. Mowbray's account of the relationship between Richard and his father, although not technically false, nevertheless betrays a subtle distorting of the past, a reshaping of events by interpretation. His claim that Richard 'loved' his father seems to be overstating the case; in *Richard II* the relationship between the two men is characterised by the formal obedience of subject to monarch that is only to be expected. Mowbray takes the bare facts of history and imposes his own interpretation upon events; this is made manifest in his next words:

And then that Henry Bolingbroke and he,  
Being mounted and both roused in their seats,  
Their neighing coursers daring of the spur,  
Their armèd staves in charge, their beavers down,  
Their eyes of fire sparkling through sights of steel,  
And the loud trumpet blowing them together.

(IV. i. 115-20)

Mowbray has allowed his imagination to run away with him here; his romantic description of the scene before the duel is so overblown and idealised as to be scarcely believable. His description owes far more to the chivalric ideal of honour than reality, and it is significant that he chooses to resurrect this ideal in the fallen world of *Henry IV*, a world where chivalry is conspicuously absent, if indeed, it can ever be said to have existed.

Hearing this description of the combat that never was, it is easy to imagine Richard's court as a place of medieval honour. This impression is false, and it easy to forget, as Andrew Gurr notes, 'how carefully Richard's ritualist court conceals a brutal murder'.<sup>25</sup> The world Mowbray describes never really existed, a fact that would be clearly visible even to an audience that has not seen *Richard II*, because the vainglorious fantasy of Mowbray's language emphasises the constructed, fictionalised nature of his narrative. The audience has watched many characters rewriting the past in *1* and *2 Henry IV*, but there is always some ambiguity about whether they are distorting history knowingly or unknowingly, and, for an audience unfamiliar with previous history plays, whether the past may not actually have occurred as the characters describe. But here the historical narrative draws attention to its own artifice even as it is being related. This is the creation of a new history: an obviously fictional or fictionalised account of the past which, even in its artifice, reveals something of the 'truth'. In this case the account reveals a psychological truth rather than a historical one. Mowbray's narrative does not relate how events occurred, but how he would have liked them to occur. Factually unreliable, his story is nevertheless true for him. In turn, this suggests a new form of

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<sup>25</sup> Andrew Gurr, 'Introduction', in William Shakespeare, *King Richard II*, ed. Andrew Gurr (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), p. 56.

history: a history derived from a psychological rather than a factual basis. This 'imaginary history', as we have seen with Henry and others, appears to be prevalent in the history plays, leading to the question of which is more 'real': the history that actually happened or the history that we believe occurred?

Mowbray's enthusiasm in telling his tale increases as it reaches its conclusion:

Then, then, when there was nothing could have stayed  
My father from the breast of Bolingbroke –  
O, when the King did throw his warder down,  
His own life hung upon the staff he threw;  
Then threw he down himself and all their lives  
That by indictment and by dint of sword  
Have since miscarried under Bolingbroke.

(IV. i. 121-7)

Mowbray locates the inception of all the history that has unfolded after the abortive duel in the one seemingly minor gesture of Richard dropping his warder. This, to Mowbray, is the beginning of his troubles, and the troubles of the nation as a whole. As Nicholas Grene observes, 'a generation later, the King's dramatic gesture of throwing his warder down becomes in retrospect a crucial turning-point leading on to all the disasters that followed'.<sup>26</sup> The temptation to imbue Richard's gesture with a meaning it did not have at the time is an understandable, but misguided impulse. History is not this simple. Mowbray's interpretation of Richard's gesture appears to be characterised more by wish-fulfillment than actual facts. Richard's dropping of the warder was merely one of a

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<sup>26</sup> Nicholas Grene, *Shakespeare's Serial History Plays* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), p. 180.

number of events that precipitated his downfall; it cannot be said that this was the focal point of all that followed. A more convincing candidate for the moment that doomed Richard and sacrificed the realm would be the disbanding of Richard's army in III. ii., as this was a moment when the pendulum of events swung unambiguously against Richard, but even this oversimplifies the matter. Historical events are constructed from myriad actions themselves motivated by countless shifting impulses; the urge to seek to fix a single decisive moment must be avoided if any real understanding of the past is to be gained from history.

The shifting nature of historical interpretation is made manifest in Westmorland's rejoinder to Mowbray, which places an entirely different, and directly contradictory, interpretation upon events:

You speak, Lord Mowbray, now you know not what.

The Earl of Hereford was reputed then

In England the most valiant gentleman.

Who knows on whom fortune would then have smiled?

But if your father had been victor there,

He ne'er had borne it out of Coventry;

For all the country in a general voice

Cried hate upon him, and all their prayers and love

Were set on Hereford, whom they doted on

And blessed and graced, indeed, more than the King.

(IV. i. 128-37)

Westmorland's account is no less problematic than Mowbray's; there is no evidence that the people 'cried hate upon' Mowbray in *Richard II*. Mowbray and Westmorland reconstruct the past in a way that goes beyond interpreting events in light of their biases and prejudices. Instead, they appear to create an imaginary past, using the events that actually occurred as a base upon which to construct their hypothetical accounts of what might have happened had the combat occurred. As Graham Holderness observes:

The historical narrative is rewritten to support two different and conflicting interpretations of history, two different and opposing present political loyalties. We need to remind ourselves, sorting through these multiple analyses and reconstructions, that the combat *never actually happened*.<sup>27</sup>

Mowbray and Westmorland rewrite history in a fundamentally different way than we have previously seen. Instead of reshaping the past, subtly altering and emphasizing certain facets of historical narratives, thereby altering a past that actually occurred, they move into the realms of fantasy, reshaping a narrative that has never occurred except in their imaginations. Their imagined versions of the past, however, are as real for them as any historical account related by the likes of Henry, Hal, Hotspur and Falstaff. The only difference is that it is often ambiguous whether these characters are knowingly or unknowingly reconstructing the past, whereas Mowbray and Westmorland make it clear that the events they discuss and debate never actually occurred.

In IV. i. history is discussed and dissected in terms of potential consequences as opposed to actual outcomes; a kind of 'history of possibility' is thus created. The conflicting accounts of the trial by combat can be seen as taking the historian's art of extrapolating from the known facts and tracing the possibilities of contingent historical

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<sup>27</sup> Holderness, *Shakespeare: The Histories*, p. 173.



moments to such extremes that it becomes a preposterous parody. Here history is characterised more by fantasy than any definable reality. As Holderness argues again, ‘the combat is shown to be essentially what all history is – words, visions, fantasies of what was or might have been’.<sup>28</sup> Taken to such extremes as this, the historian’s art becomes ridiculous. The writing of history appears to be as much a work of imagination as it is of research. Indeed, bickering over their differing conceptions of a history that never was, Mowbray and Westmorland are strangely pathetic figures, trapped in an imaginary past, seemingly unable to move on and embrace the present moment. In this respect they resemble King Henry. They are all scarred by the events of *Richard II*, but in subtly different ways. Their escape from the past is to rewrite it, taking the bare facts of history and using them as a solid foundation upon which to build their ever-more extravagant fantasies of what might have been.

This rewriting of history is a process clearly visible throughout *2 Henry IV*, a process that reaches its apex in IV. iii., when Hal, asked by the dying Henry IV why he has taken the crown from his pillow, shamelessly rewrites the events of a few moments ago:

Coming to look on you, thinking you dead,  
And dead almost, my liege, to think you were,  
I spake unto this crown as having sense,  
And thus upbraided it.

(IV. iii. 283-6)

This account is quite different from what Hal actually said upon taking the crown:

Lo where it sits,

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<sup>28</sup> Holderness, *Shakespeare: The Histories*, p. 185.

Which God shall guard; and put the world's whole strength  
Into one giant arm, it shall not force  
This lineal honour from me.

(IV. iii. 173-6)

Hal's conspicuous rewriting of events is unique in the histories because of the speed with which it follows the events themselves. When the past has previously been rewritten or misremembered the events referred to occur in an earlier play, which the audience may or may not have seen, but Hal removed the crown from Henry's pillow only moments ago, and the memory of his action and his words are fresh in the mind of the audience. The rewriting of the past here is thus instant, the very moment after the events occurred.

Another feature of Hal's speech which could be seen as unique is the knowing hypocrisy with which he falsifies the past. When other characters misremember events it is never wholly clear whether they are deceiving themselves as well as their listeners. But Hal's cynical rewriting of the very recent past, as he knowingly lies to his dying father about why he took the crown, is an extreme example of calculated historical distortion. The possibility exists, however, that he is lying in order to please his father; do you tell the truth to dying men? Perhaps lying to his father is an act of kindness for Hal. History is not reshaped or retold as much as it is invented; unlike Henry, who bases his imaginative retellings of events on a solid bedrock of truth, Hal does not hesitate to invent the past at will, falsifying history for his own ends. His lies to his dying father can, however, also be seen as an exposure of all the false accounts of the past presented to the audience in the course of the play, as well as the course of the tetralogy. His account is not a disputed version of events, or a narrative distorted by memory; it is not a subtly reshaped version

of the past: it is a lie. Perhaps Shakespeare is dramatising the extremes to which rewriting of the past can go.

Hal follows this initial lie with a totally false account of what he said when he upbraided the crown, ending triumphantly with the words:

Thus, my royal liege,  
Accusing it, I put it on my head,  
To try with it, as with an enemy

(IV. iii. 292-4)

Compounding his initial lie (or reinforcing it) with repetition, Hal leaves the audience doubting the motives behind his reimagining of history. Once again Shakespeare dramatises the process of inventing history; as with Mowbray and Westmorland, 'history' here is characterised by fantasy and invention instead of any definable relationship with reality.

As James Bulman observes, 'Hal's memory of what he has said [...] amounts to a theatrical fiction intended to exculpate him – the sort of revisionism at which Hal repeatedly proved himself skilled'.<sup>29</sup> Reaching the apex of cynical historical distortion, Hal's account of the immediate past lays bare the many different motives which can (and frequently do) lie behind a misremembered account of the past. Whether prompted by age, forgetfulness, denial or complicity, this incident suggests that recreating the past, for whatever reason, is dangerous. Distorted memories lead to distorted realities as the misremembered past becomes the misunderstood present. We have seen this already in I. ii. of *1 Henry IV* as Hal systematically creates his own historical narrative, crafting his

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<sup>29</sup> James C. Bulman, 'Henry IV, Parts I and II' in *The Cambridge Companion to Shakespeare's History Plays*, ed. Michael Hattaway (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), p. 168.

reputation and future success by inventing a past that never was. Casting doubt on the veracity of all histories, and the motives which lie behind the telling (or retelling) of history, Act Four of 2 *Henry IV* continues what can be seen as the project of the history plays: to defamiliarise and question the concept of 'history', illuminating the contingency of how the past is constructed and reconstructed, and to examine the motives which lie behind its telling, as well as its telling lies.

## Chapter VI: Other Histories

In the preceding chapters I have looked in detail at *Richard III*, *Richard II*, *1 Henry IV* and *2 Henry IV*. I have argued that the plays reflect and rewrite each other, they restage the same conflicts in different ways and in different emotional keys. The themes of usurpation and legitimacy run through all four plays, linking them together in an interconnected tapestry of history. Of course, this approach to the histories has gone against the usual grouping of the history plays as two tetralogies and also excluded several of Shakespeare's other history plays. In this final chapter I will briefly sketch how these other plays fit into my argument and how they relate to the four key plays.

### *Henry VI*

In my analysis of *Richard III* I argue that it rewrites the *Henry VI* plays, and that it can also be said that the three parts of *Henry VI* rewrite each other, but in a different way. In contrast to the composition order of the other histories, it is possible that Shakespeare wrote the first part of *Henry VI* after he had finished the second and third parts; it is the only instance in the canon of Shakespeare returning to a reign he has already dramatised in order to expand the narrative. If, as the Oxford editors argue, the first part of *Henry VI* was written later but as a prequel to the other parts,<sup>1</sup> then a large part of its meaning for the original audience would be retrospective, as they would be aware of the dramatic future of the play. The future is already known and, as a prequel, *1 Henry VI* gains its meaning from this knowledge of the future. It is thus debatable whether the play can be

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<sup>1</sup> Jean E. Howard, 'The First Part of Henry the Sixth' in William Shakespeare, *The Norton Shakespeare*, ed. Stephen Greenblatt, Walter Cohen, Jean E. Howard, Katherine Eisaman Maus (New York and London: Norton, 1997), p. 436.

fully appreciated in isolation or whether it requires at least a vague awareness of the other two parts of the narrative to be dramatically satisfying.

Written non-consecutively, history in the *Henry VI* plays, it seems, is disjointed, a patchwork, event-driven broken sequence that reflects the events it chronicles. It is notable that neither *2 Henry VI* nor *3 Henry VI* explicitly refers back to the earlier play; it can be seen as an unconnected prequel which, although it sheds light on later events, is not essential to the narrative. By contrast, *2 Henry VI* and *3 Henry VI* do not stand alone. They are two parts of the same narrative. *2 Henry VI* ends abruptly with York and his rebels setting off to pursue the fleeing Henry, offering no real resolution. Continuing the action immediately after *2 Henry VI*'s conclusion, *3 Henry VI* resumes the narrative without recapitulating the events of the earlier play. Knowledge of the preceding play is essential to fully grasp what is happening onstage. Its history relies on a pre-existing knowledge of the theatrical past.

In their onward rush of history the *Henry VI* plays do not pause to explain past events to the audience; the swift pace of the drama does not falter, and an audience viewing *3 Henry VI* with no experience of the earlier plays would, at least temporarily, find themselves adrift. John D. Cox and Eric Rasmussen observe that:

*3 Henry VI* is defined [...] as a history play not only in theme and characterization but also in its open-endedness. The play begins in the midst of an ongoing conflict which is not explained by reminiscence or arriving messenger, so the past is not enclosed retrospectively in the present: soldiers enter boasting and bearing battle

trophies; one occupies a throne; they are confronted by an angry party who claim the first group is illegitimate – all without explanation or resolution.<sup>2</sup>

This focus on events themselves, as opposed to the motivations which drive them, or the way past events are remembered, is characteristic of the *Henry VI* plays, but a marked contrast to the way *Richard III*, the final part of the first tetralogy, deals with the problem of the dramatic past. The past is ever-present in *Richard III*; the murders of Rutland, York, Prince Edward and Henry VI in *3 Henry VI* are painfully remembered by Richard and Margaret. The presence of Henry VI's corpse onstage in I. ii. provides a physical reminder of the vanished past dramatised in the earlier plays. *Richard III* thus engages with its dramatic past; it restages crucial events from *Henry VI* by retelling them onstage. In this way the vanished past is recreated verbally, providing the audience with an oral version of the events themselves. Of course, when the events are related, they are inevitably distorted in the telling. The accounts of the past we hear in *Richard III* are unreliable, coloured as they are by emotion and retrospectively rewritten. The vanished past of *Henry VI* cannot be recovered in *Richard III*, and an audience that has not seen the earlier plays cannot gain a true picture of what happened in *Henry VI* from the speeches in *Richard III*. The dramatic past cannot be re-experienced or retold – it can only be rewritten. *Richard III* marks the discovery of the need for this dramatic past, the discovery that the history play has to have some kind of history. It cannot produce this history except by rewriting it.

Significantly, the *Henry VI* plays relate separate historical narratives: *1 Henry VI* chronicles the Hundred Years' War, and *2 Henry VI* and *3 Henry VI* tell the story of the

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<sup>2</sup> John D. Cox and Eric Rasmussen, 'Introduction', William Shakespeare, *King Henry VI, Part 3* (London: Arden Shakespeare (Third Series), 2001), p. 102.

Wars of the Roses. The plays relate two different histories, with only a tangential connection between them: the fact that Henry VI was on the throne when the events occurred. A weak king, Henry VI, unlike his father or grandfather, reacts to events instead of instigating them. Events seem to happen in spite of Henry, not because of him. Indeed, the *Henry VI* plays are unique among Shakespeare's histories for not presenting a monarch as the focal point of the drama. This emphasis on events instead of the monarch's role in instigating them is a reflection of the portrayal of Henry VI in the chronicles, as Michael Hattaway observes:

Unlike the reigns of Henry V or Richard III, that of Henry VI was not dominated by the personality of its monarch; Edward IV's rule during the last years of Henry's reign is stark evidence of this. Rather it was a period of war between nations (the Hundred Years' War) and within the kingdom (the Wars of the Roses).<sup>3</sup>

Uniquely in Shakespeare's histories, in *Henry VI* it is history itself that takes centre stage rather than a monarch. This 'history' closely follows the format of the chronicles, and manifests itself as a particular sort of early modern history play, described by Maurice Morgann as a 'drum and trumpet' play.<sup>4</sup> This kind of play was soon to be obsolete as the 'drum and trumpet' genre of history was replaced by a new kind of history, and a new type of history play, as Shakespeare's sequence continued. This dramatising of 'old history' is a theatrical experiment that Shakespeare chose not to repeat. In *Henry VI* the

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<sup>3</sup> Michael Hattaway, 'Introduction', William Shakespeare, *The First Part of King Henry VI*, ed. Michael Hattaway (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), p. 1.

<sup>4</sup> Maurice Morgann, 'An Essay on the Dramatic Character of Sir John Falstaff', *Eighteenth Century Essays on Shakespeare*, ed. D. Nichol Smith (New York: Clarendon Press, 1963), p. 226.



process of history itself becomes the focal point of the drama. Michael Hattaway, for example, argues that:

*1 Henry VI* may well have been written to show how the history of a nation is never to be understood in isolation. The Wars of the Roses, which form the subject of the second two parts of the sequence, can be fully understood only in the context of the Hundred Years' War, dramatised incidents from which formed the substance of the first play.<sup>5</sup>

In this account, as noted above, *1 Henry VI* is a history that looks forward rather than back, and is dramatically effective because it anticipates a dramatic future which is already known.

There are, however, other aspects to this composition order of the plays and their events. The fragmentary and incidental structure of the tetralogy creates tensions within the plays, and within the history the plays present. The character of Richard (son of York, and later Richard III), for example, varies greatly from play to play, first appearing as a bloodthirsty but loving and loyal son in *2 Henry VI*. He then becomes the devious Machiavellian figure we are familiar with late in the narrative of *3 Henry VI*, having given no hint of this in the earlier plays. The narratives as well as the characters the plays present are disjointed, and it is not completely clear whether each play occurs in the same continuity as the others.

Michael Hattaway argues that *Henry VI* is Shakespeare's political treatise on medieval politics. He suggests viewing the plays 'not simply as 'adapted history' or as dramatic biography but as a complex essay on the *politics* of the mid fifteenth century –

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<sup>5</sup> Michael Hattaway, 'Introduction', William Shakespeare, *The Second Part of King Henry VI*, ed. Michael Hattaway (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), p. 6.

an essay which, of course, offers reflections on [Shakespeare's] own times'.<sup>6</sup> This conception of the plays as studies of medieval aristocratic conflict, and their ultimately disastrous effects on the nation, offers some valuable insights into the drama. Ultimately, however, viewing the plays as an essay on medieval politics instead of as 'adapted history' raises its own problems. Shakespeare's history plays are fundamentally about history, and the *Henry VI* plays, taken as a whole, place history and the process of history centre stage. *Henry VI* does examine the politics of the mid-fifteenth century after the death of Henry V, but its dramatisation of the aristocratic feuding that tore the realm apart cannot readily be described as 'a complex essay' on the period. Indeed, it is debatable whether the fast-moving pace of these plays allows time for a complex examination of the political feuding behind the Wars of the Roses. The reasons for the conflict are examined, but not in as much depth as Hattaway suggests. Shakespeare paints the broad strokes behind the aristocratic feuding, attributing the causes to a mixture of ambition, desire to maintain lineal honour and personal dislike between some of the most powerful people in the realm. Shakespeare dramatises history, he does not write complex essays, and although he does pause to examine the political ferment which led to the Wars of the Roses, he does not lose sight of the fast-moving sweep of history which is the main theme of all three *Henry VI* plays.

This onward rush of history dramatised in the plays proceeds in different dramatic registers. As Hattaway observes, 'the heroic idioms and scenical strutting of *1 Henry VI* disappear from the stage to be replaced by more workaday theatrical registers as Shakespeare traces the wane of England's glory and the mounting ferment of political

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<sup>6</sup> Hattaway, 'Introduction', William Shakespeare, *The First Part of King Henry VI*, p. 1.

intrigue'.<sup>7</sup> The stylistic difference between the first part of *Henry VI* and the second and third parts is jarringly apparent. The swaggering, almost invincibly heroic Talbot of *1 Henry VI* does not seem to belong to the same world as the plotting Richard Gloucester who will achieve such later prominence. Perhaps this disconnection was deliberate on Shakespeare's part, intended to show how far the old, heroic England, and by extension its old history, had fallen by the play's conclusion. Of course, the conclusion of *3 Henry VI* is not a conclusion at all; it is a fleeting glimpse of the horrors to come in *Richard III*, and takes the form of an unwittingly ironic, and ultimately doomed, hope for a happy and stable future spoken by the newly crowned King Edward IV:

Farewell, sour annoy!

For here, I hope, begins our lasting joy.<sup>8</sup>

This hope is destined to be cruelly dashed, as Richard himself has made clear earlier in the play during his lengthy soliloquy in which he reveals his desperate yearning for the crown:

Ay, Edward will use women honourably.

Would he were wasted, marrow, bones, and all,

That from his loins no hopeful branch may spring

To cross me from the golden time I look for.

(III. ii. 124-7)

Richard's soliloquy and the ending of *3 Henry VI* make sense only if the audience have some knowledge of the historical Richard III. They are encouraged to anticipate the

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<sup>7</sup> Hattaway, 'Introduction', William Shakespeare, *The First Part of King Henry VI*, p. 2.

<sup>8</sup> William Shakespeare, *Richard Duke of York (3 Henry VI)*, V. vii. 45-6, in *The Norton Shakespeare*, ed. Stephen Greenblatt, Walter Cohen, Jean E. Howard, Katherine Eisaman Maus (New York and London: Norton, 1997). All further references are to this edition and are given in the text.

dramatic future of *Richard III*, although it is ambiguous whether Shakespeare had decided to continue his narrative at this point. The ending of *3 Henry VI* looks forward to the suffering Richard will inflict on the realm. Hattaway observes that:

Spectators or readers coming to *3 Henry VI* after their experience of the first two parts of the play may, justly perhaps, be expecting an ending that is a conclusion, a redemptive or tragic vision to set against their overall experience of political duplicity and martial carnage. They will not, however, find it.<sup>9</sup>

Instead, *3 Henry VI* ends on a note of menace, constructing the future as something to be dreaded. If Shakespeare had finally ended the first tetralogy with *3 Henry VI* the effect would have been quite different. Richard's speech at the play's conclusion lacks any sense of closure, in marked contrast to the triumphant ending of *Richard III* which provides the audience with an unmistakable and unambiguous conclusion to the drama. By contrast, the ending of *3 Henry VI* bleeds into the new history of *Richard III* as Shakespeare uses the *Henry VI* plays to grow new ideas and new characters, to experiment with dramatic history.

None of the *Henry VI* plays offer closure or anything approaching a conclusion to the audience. *Henry VI* refuses to resolve history; the plays end, but they do not conclude. In this they mimic the movement of history itself. The reign of Henry VI can be separated into two distinct periods: the ignominious conclusion of the war with France, and the Wars of the Roses, but these divisions are later constructions which were not readily apparent at the time. *Henry VI* understands this; the defining events of Henry's reign are shown to be interrelated by a variety of complex factors. The loss of France, the deadly division between the aristocracy and the rise of Richard III, although later seen as

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<sup>9</sup> Hattaway, 'Introduction', William Shakespeare, *The First Part of King Henry VI*, p. 1.

discrete events, cannot be separated from the whole tapestry of history that Shakespeare presents in these plays.

*Henry VI*, then, presents us with a paradox: three compartmentalised parts of one flowing narrative, each part disjointed in relation to the others. In *Henry VI* Shakespeare offers us a shifting history which cannot easily be categorised, an untidy, disordered history which alters its dramatic mode, defies generic boundaries and intrigues and frustrates its audience in equal measure. Unique among the histories for having no clear beginning or end to the narrative, *Henry VI* gives us a glimpse of the chaos which lies at the very core of history, and which subverts any attempt to clearly define a historical narrative from the disordered mass of events which make up the past. Together, the three plays do form a sequence, but one informed by different conceptions of what it means to write history, as Shakespeare develops 'drum and trumpet' chronicle into spectacular disorder. *Edward III* (1594) and *Henry VIII* (1613) mark the start and end of the larger sequence and pattern of this development.

### ***Edward III and Henry VIII***

Critics have suggested that the disjointedness between the individual parts of *Henry VI*, which becomes apparent when the play is considered as a whole, may be a result of Shakespeare collaborating with other playwrights when writing the play. This is also the case with *Edward III*; although most of the drama appears to have been the work of other playwrights, some passages are believed to have been written by Shakespeare, and the play itself deserves some consideration as an addition to the sequence of Shakespeare's histories. Giorgio Melchiori observes that the play was 'apparently written and performed

in the same years as *1 Henry VI* [...] and *Richard III*.<sup>10</sup> *Edward III* itself continues the narrative begun by Marlowe in *Edward II*, which ended with Edward III ascending the throne after his father's usurpation and murder, and relates the history of his triumphant invasion of France. The play can be seen as a sequel to Marlowe's play, and Shakespeare's involvement in writing it raises the intriguing idea that he continued the history Marlowe began, dramatising the reigns of England's kings from Edward III to Henry VIII.

*Edward III* conforms to the pattern of the histories in its focus on the flawed and contradictory character of its king. Edward is portrayed as an impulsive and irresponsible monarch; his demands that the Countess of Salisbury violate her marriage vows and surrender herself to his lust, and his stubborn refusal to rescue his son from almost-certain death at the hands of the French army, seem deliberately designed to make him an unattractive figure. The play's examination of the flawed character of its titular monarch continues the project of the early histories, and prefigures Shakespeare's later in-depth examinations of the problem of weak or corrupt kings. As Giorgio Melchiori observes, '*Edward III* introduces and develops the basic themes that sustain the whole historical cycle in exactly that mode of ideological ambiguity that transforms them from mere chronicles into explorations of policy confronted with human passion'.<sup>11</sup> *Edward III* is indeed a play where the basics of history are explored; it introduces the themes that Shakespeare will go on to examine in his later plays. The themes are introduced with a sophistication and nuance seemingly absent from *Henry VI*, and collaboration and concerns over authorship should not distract us from the way *Edward III* anticipates the

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<sup>10</sup> Giorgio Melchiori, 'Introduction', William Shakespeare, *Edward III*, ed. Giorgio Melchiori (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 41.

<sup>11</sup> Melchiori, 'Introduction', William Shakespeare, *Edward III*, p. 40.

focus of the later plays on the creation of history, the ambiguity of historiography and the problems a weak monarch causes for the state. Viewed this way, the play lies closer to the tetralogies than has sometimes been suggested.

Discussing the canonical status of *Edward III*, and its comparative lack of critical attention, Melchiori argues that:

The extent and the quality of Shakespeare's contribution to the creation of this collaborative play [give] it as much right to 'canonical' status as that enjoyed not only by *Pericles* or *The Two Noble Kinsmen*. But also by some of the Folio plays, such as on the one hand the early *I Henry VI* and on the other the late *Henry VIII*.<sup>12</sup>

Like *Edward III*, *Henry VIII*, Shakespeare's final history play, has also been overlooked, despite its position as a continuation of the narrative apparently completed in *Richard III*.<sup>13</sup> Gordon McMullan observes that '*Henry VIII* has suffered from critical neglect during much of its existence, largely because [...] most scholarly interest in the play has been devoted to the question of its authorship',<sup>14</sup> going on to argue that:

It makes enough allusions to the characters and events of *Richard III* for it to be thought of as a continuation of the story begun at the end of that play, when Richmond comes to the crown as Henry VII. Certainly, the references Buckingham makes to his father seem almost clumsy reminders to the audience of

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<sup>12</sup> Melchiori, 'Preface', William Shakespeare, *Edward III*, p. ix.

<sup>13</sup> A comprehensive discussion of prevailing critical attitudes to the play can be read in Gordon McMullan, 'Introduction', William Shakespeare, *King Henry VIII*, ed. Gordon McMullan (London: Arden Shakespeare (Third Series), 2000), pp. 3-8.

<sup>14</sup> Gordon McMullan, 'Introduction', William Shakespeare, *King Henry VIII*, p. 22.

what happened in *Richard III*, and the name of the aristocrats are, of course, the same from generation to generation.<sup>15</sup>

*Henry VIII*'s repeated references to the events of *Richard III* seem designed to establish beyond doubt that the play is a direct sequel, occurring in the same timeline as the earlier play. The play goes to great lengths to remind us of this earlier history, and these reminders recapitulate and rewrite the events of *Richard III* from a new, previously unavailable, perspective. The references to the earlier play are in fact full of detail, and it is striking how the events of *Richard III* are related and reimagined in the new, and very different, world, of *Henry VIII*. Early in the play, for example, Buckingham's surveyor falsely claims to Henry that Buckingham intends to murder him, just as his father formerly planned to murder Richard III, quoting him thus:

'I would have played  
The part my father meant to act upon  
Th' usurper Richard who, being at Salisbury,  
Made suit to come in's presence; which if granted,  
As he made semblance of his duty, would  
Have put his knife into him.'<sup>16</sup>

Strikingly, there is no indication in *Richard III* that Buckingham meant to assassinate Richard himself. Buckingham's surveyor may be telling a double falsehood, or he may be shedding light on an incident that was not revealed in the earlier play. The history plays

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<sup>15</sup> John Margeson, 'Introduction', William Shakespeare, *King Henry VIII*, ed. John Margeson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), p. 107.

<sup>16</sup> William Shakespeare, *All Is True (Henry VIII)*, I. ii. 195-9, in *The Norton Shakespeare*, ed. Stephen Greenblatt, Walter Cohen, Jean E. Howard, Katherine Eisaman Maus (New York and London: Norton, 1997). All further references are to this edition and are given in the text.



always leave us with conflicting possibilities, in a way that historical records do not, so undermining 'history' as an absolute, as a closed moment.

Later in the play Buckingham relates some of the events that occurred after Richard's fall, and after the triumphant and apparently unproblematic ending of *Richard III*:

My noble father, Henry of Buckingham,  
Who first raised head against usurping Richard,  
Flying for succour to his servant Banister,  
Being distressed, was by that wretch betrayed,  
And without trial fell. God's peace be with him.  
Henry the Seventh succeeding, truly pitying  
My father's loss, like a most royal prince,  
Restored me to my honours, and out of ruins  
Made my name once more noble.

(II. i. 108-16)

Of course, this narrative conveniently ignores the fact that it was Buckingham's father who helped 'usurping Richard' to the throne, and was complicit in many of his crimes. *Henry VIII* thus perhaps alters, and perhaps overwrites, the events of *Richard III*.

In his previous histories Shakespeare encourages the audience to think back to an earlier history, but because of the distance in time between the writing of the plays, this is unlikely to be the case here. The history play was an outmoded genre by the time of *Henry VIII*, as Margeson observes, commenting on the similarities and differences between the play and Shakespeare's previous history plays:

In formal terms, *Henry VIII* is an old-fashioned history play, concentrating much of the historical narrative into a short compass, highlighting several major characters (like the three parts of *Henry VI* and the two parts of *Henry IV*), and making use of the central figure of a king to link episodes together. What is lacking is the momentum given to the narrative line in the earlier plays by powerful motives like ambition or revenge.<sup>17</sup>

This sense of disconnection, of time having moved on, is compounded by the temporal distance between the worlds of *Richard III* and *Henry VIII*. Although only a generation has passed in real terms, the institution of monarchy and court have been fundamentally altered. The murderous plotting which underlies the ceaseless quest for power is still evident, but is expressed in a much more subtle form. The rhetorical mastery of Richard III and the murders he arranges have no place here; violence has been replaced by policy. As Margeson observes:

There are no armed insurrections, no rival armies, no ultimate decisions by means of murder or battle. *Henry VIII* is remarkable in being a history play without corpses.<sup>18</sup>

The differences between the two plays are not stylistic, but largely in terms of tone as the bloody excess of the earlier play is replaced by a more retrained scrabble for influence. The temporal difference between the plays is eclipsed by this tonal dissonance. *Henry VIII* does not, however, belong to the more modern court of James I, instead being a throwback to the Elizabethan history play which was obsolete at this time. It thus occupies a paradoxical place in the canon, being an old-fashioned history play which

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<sup>17</sup> Margeson, 'Introduction', William Shakespeare, *King Henry VIII*, p. 33.

<sup>18</sup> Margeson, 'Introduction', William Shakespeare, *King Henry VIII*, p. 33.

deals with the relatively recent past, but written at a time to which it does not belong. In brief, it is an anachronism.

The process of remembering earlier history is different for an audience watching *Henry VIII* and making connections to the earlier narrative of *Richard III* than it would have been for an audience viewing *Henry IV* and thinking back to *Richard II*. The gulf of time between the writing of *Henry VIII* and *Richard III*, as well as the different style of the drama, works to discourage the kind of association between plays that Shakespeare's previous histories appear to foster. This leads to the problem of the past in *Henry VIII*: when Buckingham refers to the events of *Richard III*, is he relating 'real' history or dramatic history? Can the two even be differentiated? The possibility also exists that the narratives related onstage have, knowingly or unknowingly, been rewritten or falsified, so that the idea of remembering is much more ambiguous than in previous plays.

This ambiguity about the past, and about accessing it, may stem from the time the play was written, as McMullan argues:

To write a play about Henry VIII in 1612-13 [...] is to tap into a history of equivocal representations that obliges the audience to seek its own interpretation of Reformation history, one only possible with the benefit of hindsight.<sup>19</sup>

The play is also shadowed, and to an extent overshadowed, by the birth of Elizabeth at its conclusion. *Henry VIII* anticipates the future throughout, but this is most visible in Gardiner's reaction to the news that Anne Boleyn may die in childbirth:

The fruit she goes with

I pray for heartily, that it may find

Good time, and live. But, for the stock, Sir Thomas,

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<sup>19</sup> McMullan, 'Introduction', William Shakespeare, *King Henry VIII*, p. 93.

I wish it grubbed up now.

(V. i. 20-3)

The meaning of this speech relies on an audience's knowledge of the real, not the dramatic past. The execution of Anne Boleyn lies far into the future, outside the scope of the play, which concludes with the birth of Elizabeth, but Anne's death haunts the play; the spectre of her rejection by Henry is a constant looming presence in the drama. More, her anticipated death undercuts the apparently uncomplicated happy ending of the play, which concludes with the birth of Elizabeth and the promise of a new golden age. This wondrous future is prophesied by Cranmer thus:

Good grows with her.

In her days every man shall eat in safety

Under his own vine what he plants, and sing

The merry songs of peace to all his neighbours.

God shall be truly known, and those about her

From her shall read the perfect ways of honour.

(V. iv. 32-7)

The birth of Elizabeth heralds the dawn of a new age, and the conclusion of the history plays. Shakespeare's dramatic history is at an end, although, as McMullan observes, 'history is represented in the play not as pure sequence but as cycle'.<sup>20</sup> The problems raised in the play, however, are not all solved: the scheming of Henry's courtiers to topple Anne Boleyn is in its infancy at the play's conclusion, and the issue of the court's corruption is never properly addressed. There is a sense that the promised new

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<sup>20</sup> McMullan, 'Introduction', William Shakespeare, *King Henry VIII*, p. 95.

Elizabethan age will not solve these endemic problems which plague the court. As we have seen before, dramatic history ends, but there is no real sense of closure.

*Henry VIII* continues the narrative begun years before in the *Henry VI* plays, the Tudor narrative apparently already concluded at the end of *Richard III*. Once again, Shakespeare reminds us that history has no conclusion; events defy any attempt at neat categorisation. Margeson observes that 'we have moved in this play into a Renaissance court where the authority of the monarch is not questioned, and where political rivalries, favourites and their factions have replaced competing armies'.<sup>21</sup> The world of *Henry VIII* is a radical departure from the time of *Richard III*, but between the 'old history' of the earlier play and the Renaissance history of *Henry VIII* comes Shakespeare's 'new history' plays, the so-called second tetralogy. The medieval world has changed beyond recognition and, although *Henry VIII* appears at first to dramatise the new Renaissance order which replaced it, the play is so old-fashioned and oddly wrought that the effect is ultimately paradoxical.

### ***King John***

*The Life and Death of King John* (1596) is an anomaly in the history play sequence; its events taking place several hundred years before any of the other histories. Written in 1596, between *Richard II* and *1 Henry IV*, it exists wholly apart from the sequence of plays which comprise the second tetralogy. It lies outside of the history previously dramatised, offering a uniquely isolated narrative with no provisions for continuing action at the play's conclusion. Its liminal place in the sequence of Shakespeare's histories is summarised by Walter Cohen thus:

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<sup>21</sup> Margeson, 'Introduction', William Shakespeare, *King Henry VIII*, p. 33.

Temporally, *King John* differs from Shakespeare's other history plays of the 1590s: it treats the early thirteenth rather than the late fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. In addition, it is not part of a tetralogy, and hence it does not develop the resonance of "England" by depicting the sequence of reigns.<sup>22</sup>

Breaking from the sequence of history Shakespeare has established, and in complete contrast to the *Henry VI* plays, which impose a framework of order on the random chaos of history by selecting and ordering events in a linear narrative, *King John* presents history as a series of separate, unrelated incidents which bear no more than a tangential relation to each other. The narrative of the play relies on misdirection, as Cohen observes:

The apparent trajectory of events repeatedly proves illusory; seemingly decisive moments turn out to be mere episodes in the open-ended, ironic, unpredictable movement of history. The play thus breaks with the providential conclusion to Shakespeare's first tetralogy.<sup>23</sup>

Providence is indeed conspicuously absent in *King John*; events seem to occur at random, quite outside of any recognisable framework, and without any orderly meaning. The play constantly frustrates audience expectations; sudden reversals and unexpected deaths occur so often that they border on parody. The fate of Arthur, legitimate heir to the English throne, is a case in point: a report of his death causes John's nobles to defect to the French, assuming that John has ordered Arthur's murder, only for it to be revealed that he is, in fact, still alive. Shortly after this Arthur dies after jumping from a castle wall, and the nobles again assume that John has had him murdered. The play is full of

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<sup>22</sup> Walter Cohen, 'The Life and Death of King John' in William Shakespeare, *The Norton Shakespeare*, ed. Stephen Greenblatt, Walter Cohen, Jean E. Howard, Katherine Eisaman Maus (New York and London: Norton, 1997), p. 1017.

<sup>23</sup> Cohen, 'The Life and Death of King John' in William Shakespeare, *The Norton Shakespeare*, p. 1015.

blackly comic ironies as events take unexpected turns. The abruptness of John's death by poison at the play's conclusion, swiftly following on the heels of the Dauphin's defiant vow to pursue him and 'to try the fair adventure of tomorrow',<sup>24</sup> is especially jarring. History constantly unfolds unexpectedly in this play, but without any seeming deeper significance.

In *King John*, then, the providential history of *Henry VI*, where the horrific slaughter of the Wars of the Roses appears to ultimately fulfil a divine plan, is replaced by a cold and random indifference. L. A. Beaurline observes 'the impression is that this is a fallen world, from which God is removed and alien; His ways are mysterious',<sup>25</sup> adding:

The cosmic structure of divine providence, sacred authority, and the rest of 'Tudor Doctrine' is in doubt, and the notion of absolute obedience is not a sure guide through a play like *King John*. When there is a *de facto* and a *de jure* king, whom does a subject obey, especially if the ruling monarch is powerful and the rightful king is young and weak?<sup>26</sup>

Engaged in internecine warfare with his nephew for the throne of England, John attempts to maintain his power by war, diplomacy and assassination. His lineal claim to the crown is unconvincing; his authority seems to rest on the fact that Arthur is much younger than him, and his personality is weak. In this way Arthur is reminiscent of Henry VI, raising the question of whether England would be any better if he was king instead of the

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<sup>24</sup> William Shakespeare, *The Life and Death of King John*, V. v. 22, in *The Norton Shakespeare*, ed. Stephen Greenblatt, Walter Cohen, Jean E. Howard, Katherine Eisaman Maus (New York and London: Norton, 1997). All further references are to this edition and are given in the text.

<sup>25</sup> L. A. Beaurline, 'Introduction', William Shakespeare, *King John* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), p. 48.

<sup>26</sup> Beaurline, 'Introduction', William Shakespeare, *King John*, p. 47.

vainglorious, bumbling John. The play examines the questions of legitimacy and usurpation that Shakespeare deals with in all his history plays, but in a much more cynical mode. *King John* is pitiless in its skewering of human ambition pitted against the whims of fate; John's increasingly frantic scramble to maintain his authority in the face of so much opposition is alternately farcical and tragic as he is forced to compromise his kingdom to maintain his grasp on the throne. Unlike the providential history of *Henry VI* and *Richard III*, there is no sense that history has a purpose in *King John*. There does not appear to be any design behind events, except the meanings characters impose on them.

*King John* poses questions about monarchical power and legitimacy but ultimately refuses to answer them. It is a play of possibility, both in terms of its dramatic construction and in terms of the interpretations that can be placed on events. The play sets up audience expectations, making it appear that events will follow a particular path, only to deviate from it suddenly and devastatingly. This lack of certainty is mirrored in the issues the play presents. Does John act prudently, when confronted by several competing armies at Angiers, in order to avoid bloodshed, or does he cravenly sell his niece to the French to buttress his increasingly shaky claim to the throne? This ambiguity is reflected by the citizens of Angiers who, when asked to choose their rightful king, reply:

He that proves the king,

To him will we prove loyal; till that time

Have we rammed up our gates against the world.

(II. i. 270-2)

This equivocal answer parallels the structure of the play as a whole. *King John* poses the same questions about legitimacy and the role of providence in history that Shakespeare



has already raised in *Henry VI* and *Richard III* but, unlike the earlier plays, it does not attempt to answer them. The play seems, as Cohen suggests, episodic and without real order. By contrast, *Henry V* seems, with its choruses, the most ordered of Shakespeare's histories, where events are catalogued and controlled. This apparent order, however, belies the difficulties presented by history in perhaps Shakespeare's most famous history play.

### ***Henry V***

History is a complex problem for *Henry V*. Graham Holderness usefully argues that 'the play [...] simultaneously presents history, and unpicks the fabric of its own representation'.<sup>27</sup> The history the play dramatises is undercut and challenged even as it is being presented to the audience. This subversion is most visible in the grandiloquent speeches of the Chorus, as Phyllis Rackin observes, noting that 'the historically authorized, heroic words of the chorus are repeatedly contradicted by the events enacted on stage and challenged by the irreverent voices of vulgar theatrical clowns'.<sup>28</sup> This contrast between the glorious image presented by the Chorus and the political reality onstage casts doubt on the play's representation of history, suggesting that events have been shaped and distorted in order to fit into a narrative mould. This tension between image and reality is a familiar one in the second tetralogy, which frequently dramatises the rewriting of history, whether by the characters onstage, the dramatist or the audience. *Henry V*, however, reverses the usual pattern: the Chorus, instead of rewriting events after they happen, constructs an interpretative framework before each act begins,

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<sup>27</sup> Graham Holderness, *Shakespeare: The Histories* (London: Macmillan Press Ltd., 2000), p. 152.

<sup>28</sup> Phyllis Rackin, *Stages of History: Shakespeare's English Chronicles* (Ithaca and New York: Cornell University Press, 1990), p. 30.

prefiguring the events onstage and encouraging the audience to interpret them in a certain way. The events are revised even before they occur, and this creates a new past which is reinterpreted before it happens instead of rewritten afterwards.

The persuasiveness of the Chorus' rhetoric is such that it is easy to overlook the extent to which the events themselves contradict the interpretation which has been imposed on them. Andrew Gurr observes that 'in some significant respects *Henry V* offers on its surface the patriotic triumphalism of a Chorus that glorifies Henry's conquests, while through the story itself runs a strong hint of scepticism about the terms and nature of his victories'.<sup>29</sup> There is a kind of self-contradiction between the Chorus and the events, a gap that is equivalent to the gap between actual events and narrative in history itself. The role of the Chorus as presenter of history is thus inherently an ambiguous one. Reshaping events, prefiguring interpretation, the Chorus tells the audience what events mean. This acts as a constant reminder that they are watching a play; the Chorus' knowledge of future events breaks any suspension of disbelief and reminds the audience that what they are experiencing is a theatrical illusion, that what they are viewing is theatre, not history. Previous plays in the sequence have emphasised their fictionality at certain points in the drama, but in *Henry V* the emphasis is sustained throughout the play. It distances the audience from the events onstage, excluding them from full participation in the drama. As we shall see, much of the history in *Henry V* is characterised by exclusion.

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<sup>29</sup> Andrew Gurr, 'Introduction', William Shakespeare, *King Henry V*, ed. Andrew Gurr (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), p. 2.

## Exclusionary History

Phyllis Rackin argues that '*Henry V* ends the two tetralogies in a play of unresolved contradictions'.<sup>30</sup> Perhaps the main contradiction in the play is the marked difference between the Prince Hal of the previous plays and Henry V. The discontinuity between the two characters is one of the many jarring aspects of *Henry V* when the play is considered in relation to Shakespeare's previous histories. The play itself seems curiously empty of historical narratives; the plural histories which characterised the *Henry IV* plays are here reduced to a single narrative line. It is almost as if Shakespeare is closing down the plethora of histories he opened up in the *Henry IV* plays. If so, to this extent *Henry V* can be seen as presenting a single version of events, the authorised narrative of Henry's reign. Although competing voices are allowed to speak against Henry, they are swiftly silenced, and the play as a whole does not directly challenge or reinterpret his problematic actions during the invasion of France.

Nicholas Grene questions whether 'the changed dramatic mode of the last play in the series make it possible to say we are dealing with the same character', asking 'is Henry V recognisably the Hal of the *Henry IV* plays turned monarch-like, or is he in fact someone else again, the king that the new form of epic history demands?'<sup>31</sup> Certainly the mode of history has changed in *Henry V*; the focus on dissenting voices and the marginalised of history such as commoners and rebels, that played such a large role in *Henry IV*, has been replaced by a narrow concentration on the monarch and his followers, albeit with one or two dissenters. As Grene observes, *Henry V* presents the audience with a 'new form of epic history'. This new form does not conform to the pattern of history

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<sup>30</sup> Rackin, *Stages of History*, p. 82.

<sup>31</sup> Nicholas Grene, *Shakespeare's Serial History Plays* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), pp. 219-20.

previously established in the plays; indeed, it can be seen as a wholesale departure from the inclusive history of *Henry IV*. Raising its central character to near-mythical status, the play, despite its contradictions and occasional questions about the legitimacy of Henry's actions, does not deviate from its central focus on Henry's myth. In turn, the concentration on Henry's triumph limits the scope of the drama; the play lacks the grand historical sweep of *Henry IV*. In this sense history in *Henry V* is characterised by exclusion: in stark contrast to the multiple interweaving plot threads of *Henry IV*, history in *Henry V*, is reduced to one narrative, with no alternative interpretations offered. This makes *Henry V*, like *Richard II*, a curiously empty play. It is as if with the double play of *Henry IV* Shakespeare had taken the traditional history play as far as it could go and, faced with the challenge of continuing the series and concluding the tetralogy, altered the mode of the drama. The unresolved contradictions created by the shift in genre means that *Henry V* seems unsatisfactory as a conclusion to the tetralogy.

*Henry V* is such a contrast to the previous plays that it is easy to see why critics such as Grene have found it difficult to believe that the characters are the same ones we have become familiar with, and to question whether the play is a continuation of the series at all. Despite the fact that it takes elements from the *Henry IV* plays, such as Hal's tavern companions, refers back to the events of *Richard II*, and notionally at least occurs in the same continuity as the previous plays, *Henry V* seems to lie outside of the sequence. If, as I have argued, every history play rewrites the plays that came before it, *Henry V* presents us with the most comprehensive rewriting of all, but not in the same way. It subsumes all the ambiguity of the previous plays, elides all the questions they asked about kingship, usurpers and the right of succession and sublimates them in the

new genre of epic history.<sup>32</sup> This new genre, in its idealised and nearly unquestioned telling of a single narrative, is antithetical to the plural histories presented in Shakespeare's other central history plays. The play takes as its theme the unease of history as narrative; a purported closure finally occurs at the play's conclusion, but this is swiftly undone by the epilogue, which reminds us that all Henry's triumphs will be squandered by his heir. In particular, the epilogue reminds us of the disastrous reign of Henry VI, 'which oft our stage has shown'.<sup>33</sup> It is clear that the past the audience are asked to remember is explicitly theatrical in nature as once again, Shakespeare turns recall of the past into remembrance of the dramatic past. *Henry V* concludes by simultaneously looking backwards and forwards, to a dramatic history that is to come but is already in the past, already rewritten.

There is, then, something unsettling about *Henry V*'s approach to history and the way that it creates more questions than it answers. Robert Ornstein observes that 'the wonder is [...] that it succeeds as well as it does in celebrating English heroism when it makes such damaging admissions about the motives and the methods of the conquerors of France and speaks so candidly of the human cost of their great adventure'.<sup>34</sup> The human cost of Hal's transformation into Henry V can be measured most obviously in the deaths of his disreputable tavern companions from the previous plays. In particular, Henry's untroubled reaction at the news that Bardolph is to be hung appears to signal that he has repudiated his former dissolute ways. His phrase 'we would have all such

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<sup>32</sup> Cf. Gurr, 'Introduction', in William Shakespeare, *King Henry V*, p. 9.

<sup>33</sup> William Shakespeare, *The Life of Henry the Fifth*, 'Epilogue', 13, in *The Norton Shakespeare*, ed. Stephen Greenblatt, Walter Cohen, Jean E. Howard, Katherine Eisaman Maus (New York and London: Norton, 1997). All further references are to this edition and are given in the text.

<sup>34</sup> Robert Ornstein, *A Kingdom For A Stage: The Achievement of Shakespeare's History Plays* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1972), p. 175.

offenders so cut off' (III. vi. 98) can be seen as a belated reply to Falstaff's exhortation in *I Henry IV*: 'do not when thou art king hang a thief'.<sup>35</sup> This would appear unambiguously to settle the issue of Hal's former life and how it can be reconciled with his new role as monarch. In reality, however, the removal of Hal's tavern companions from the narrative, instead of settling the questions that linger over his past, draws attention to them. The past is elided, yet there remains a residual trace; the past becomes a gap, a space in the narrative. The sudden removal and subsequent absence of his former companions from the play leaves a lacuna, which is highly visible in its absent presence.

In *Henry V* the inclusive, wide-ranging history of the *Henry IV* plays is, then, streamlined into a simplified historical narrative, but the process of streamlining is a dislocating one. Nor can the play but help draw attention to the tensions inherent in any historical narrative, particularly one as stylized and exclusionary as *Henry V*. As Robert Kagan, responding to Francis Fukuyama's theory of the end of history, argues:

The focus on the dazzling pageant of progress [...] ignored the wires and beams and the scaffolding that had made such progress possible. It failed to recognize that progress was not inevitable but was contingent on events – battles won or lost.<sup>36</sup>

Similarly, critics who regard the play's conclusion as the perfect end to the tetralogy do not seem to notice the betrayal, mendacity and ruthlessness that underpin Henry's 'triumph'.<sup>37</sup> The focus on *Henry V* as the grand ending to Shakespeare's histories ignores

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<sup>35</sup> William Shakespeare, *The History of Henry the Fourth*, I. ii. 54, in *The Norton Shakespeare*, ed. Stephen Greenblatt, Walter Cohen, Jean E. Howard, Katherine Eisaman Maus (New York and London: Norton, 1997). All further references are to this edition and are given in the text.

<sup>36</sup> Robert Kagan, *The Return of History and the End of Dreams* (London: Atlantic Books, 2008), p. 104.

<sup>37</sup> A. C. Bradley is perhaps the most famous proponent of this view, in his essay 'The Rejection of Falstaff', in *Oxford Lectures on Poetry* (Toronto: University of Toronto, 2011), pp. 258-9.

the distortions and elisions as well as the deaths which make such an 'ending' possible. In particular, their interpretation of the play does not take into account the complex demands made upon it as the final play in the tetralogy. The *Henry IV* plays take the history play as far as it can go in terms of the writing of history and the past; Shakespeare, writing *Henry V*, is faced with the problem of how to close down the hybrid histories he has opened. Ultimately the play fails to engage with this seemingly intractable problem, ignoring these issues instead of resolving them. As a result of this *Henry V* does not satisfy as a sequel to *Henry IV*, or as a conclusion to the tetralogy. As the play's Epilogue reminds us, the events of *Henry VI* are already in being: the end of *Henry V* does not entail the end of history, dramatic or otherwise.

## **Conclusion: A New History**

Shakespeare's ideas about history evolved throughout his writing career. This progression can be traced in the radically different approaches he takes to the problem of history. In *Richard III*, *Richard II* and *Henry IV* Shakespeare creates a new form of history play which places the process of history, its making and remaking, centre stage. Dramatising the past while drawing attention to the present moment, these histories break the theatrical illusion by constantly reminding the audience that they are watching a play, that the past is irrevocably lost and that history is always more than a single narrative.

Concluding his dramatisation of England's history with *Henry V*, Shakespeare turned away from writing histories, but continued to explore the concerns and tensions of these plays, in different generic modes. This can perhaps best be seen in *Hamlet*, which takes the themes of the histories, such as the legitimacy of usurpation and the politics of power, and examines them in a new way, unfettered by the constraints inherent in writing a history play. In the end, the histories cannot deal fully with the effects of deposition on the realm, the people and the usurpers themselves because of the political implications this would have. Explicitly questioning the legitimacy of past English monarchs, and showing how easily power can be seized, might carry severe consequences for a dramatist. The fate of John Hayward, imprisoned in the Tower in 1600 for writing a supposedly seditious history of Richard II,<sup>1</sup> gives an indication of how seriously the Elizabethan authorities treated what they perceived as challenges to the legitimacy of the monarchy.

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<sup>1</sup> Rebecca Lemon, *Treason by Words: Literature, Law, and Rebellion in Shakespeare's England* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2006), p.23.



Writing an English history play could be dangerous; when dealing with such sensitive issues, Shakespeare was forced to limit his examination of power and legitimacy within certain boundaries. Later in his career, he examines the same issues in a different context, free from the restrictions intrinsic to writing an English history play. Exporting the theme of murderous usurpation to the foreign court of Denmark allows Shakespeare a new freedom to approach these topics. Unrestrained by political concerns, or the weight of chronicle history, he is at liberty to invent his own narrative, plot and characters and allow events to play out as he wishes. He is free to fully engage with the consequences of usurpation, dramatising the collapse and dissolution of the realm. This would have been impossible when adapting the chronicles; the weight of 'history' necessarily proscribes a dramatist's creative freedom when writing a history play. History, in the end, limits the history plays, as well as the dramatist. For all the plays' concern with rewriting and remembering, they are finally caught in the web of the past.

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