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Michele Stanco

A KINGDOM FOR A STAGE

shakespeare's theatricalisation of history*

> At this point, we are to philosophise, we are to
> analyse carefully what feelings Darius must have had:
> pride, perhaps, and elation; or, may be,
> something like a sense of the vanity
> of greatness. The poet ponders this deeply.
> Constantinos Kavafis, *Darius*

1. Introduction: emblematic rulership in Shakespeare's English history plays

In its blend of *historical* and *theatrical* elements, the *history play* is – by definition – an ambivalent dramatic genre. Its structural complexity is perhaps one of the reasons why the history play was so successful in Renaissance Europe, and particularly in Elizabethan England.

As this paper will be attempting to show, history plays are the result of a sort of adaptation of historiographical material to theatrical codes. In Shakespeare's time, this 'adaptation' mostly meant a transcodification of the historiographical material into the theatrical conventions of comedy or tragedy, and their respective poetics of closure. Such an adjustment was rather problematic even because the very theatrical genres of comedy and tragedy were far from being neatly defined. Moreover – as we shall also try to show – rewriting history as 'comedy' or as 'tragedy' had important political and ideological implications.

Dramatists themselves have sometimes metatheatrically examined the relationship between *history* and *theatricality* in their historical plays. Shakespeare himself did so in several parts of his *histories*, and more explicitly in the «Induction» to *Henry IV. Part Two* and in the «Prologue» to *Henry V*.

Indeed, the «Induction» to *Henry IV. Part Two* analyses how 'facts' are framed (and distorted) into a 'historical narrative'. On the other hand, the «Prologue» to *Henry V* further explores how a 'historical narrative' is, in its turn, transcoded into a 'historical drama'.[1] The double transition from facts-into-narratives-into-dramas fuzzes the veridictional status of *res factae* and turns them into aesthetic – and, consequently – non-referential signs (*res fictae*). Beside the visual and scenographic adaptation of the historical context into the theatrical space, it is the very historical narrative that is filtered with a view to its theatrical performability.

[*] An earlier version of this essay (with the title of *Historico-Tragico-Comical Kings. Genre Conventions and/as Emblems of Power in Shakespeare's* Histories) appeared in G. E. Szonyi, R. Wymer (eds.), *The Iconography of Power. Ideas and Images of Rulership on the English Renaissance Stage*, Szeged, jate Press, 2000, pp. 117-145. References to Shakespeare will be to the current «Arden» editions (see bibliography, below). In all quotations, italics are mine unless otherwise indicated. I wish to heartily thank Dr. Adrian Belton for his precious linguistic suggestions.

[1] The chorus in the «Prologue» to *Henry V* particularly insists on the symbolic quality of the theatrical sign and the need for the spectators' interpretive and imaginative cooperation. Shakespeare's audience is expected to imagine an «unworthy scaffold» as a battlefield or a royal court. A very similar point is made in contemporary treatises on poetry. In his *Apologie* Sidney writes: «two armies fly in, represented with four swords and bucklers, and then what hard heart will not receive it for a pitched field?» (Sir Ph. Sidney, *An Apology for Poetry*, Edited by Geoffrey Shepherd, 1965; revised and expanded by R. W. Maslen, Manchester and New York, Manchester University Press, 2002, p. 111).

In drawing historical material from his sources, Shakespeare singled out, in particular, those sequences of events that led themselves be used for a *tragic* or a *comic* treatment. A royal deposition or a military success are historical events which could provide an appropriate turning point for a tragic or a comic poetics of closure.[1] Thus, Richard II's dethronement and death might be regarded as 'tragic', whereas Henry V's victory at Agincourt could be seen as 'comic' (in the sense of 'beneficial' and 'positive').

On the other hand, one and the same event could take on a different meaning if seen from another perspective: Richard II's deposition was no tragedy for the antiroyalist party, in much the same way as Henry V's success represented no comedy (that is, no happy ending) from the French point of view.

In other words, the final result depends on the *mode* of the authorial presentation: a tragic or a comic effect are achieved by means of an ideological filtre in the showing of the action. Generally speaking, the authorial point of view seems to manifest itself more explicitly in the characters' comments and asides, as well as in the chorus (rather than in dialogues). However, even in these cases, speeches may be ironic and points of view may be ambivalent. They, thus, should not too literally be taken as mirrors of the author's viewpoint.

In Shakespeare's history plays, the representation of dynastic or baronial struggles and overseas wars – that is, the representation of power strategies – is ambivalent and multifocused. In the following pages I will try to show that the plays making up the *histories* do not fit into a single, well-defined dramatic genre (since they combine historical, tragical and comical patterns) and that their *generic opacity* emblematically suggests a parallel *opacity in the elaboration of power*.

2. Genre conventions and the representation of power

The theatrical representation of power implies a definition – and, eventually, a reshaping – of power in terms of aesthetic categories and discourse. Displaying power on the stage means treating a political topic from an aesthetic viewpoint. The very distinction between the king's two bodies – natural and political – suggests the presence of fictional elements in the representation of the royal *persona*.[2] As a matter of fact, the 'natural'/'political' opposition which was used in relation to the king's double persona can be regarded as at least partly overlapping with the 'natural'/'artificial' antonymic pair which was so pervasive in Renaissance treatises on poetry. From such a perspective, the 'political' can be seen as intrinsically 'artificial' – and, therefore, aesthetic. In contemporary treatises on poetry, the poetics of dissimulation, which was proposed by the critics to the courtly poets, makes an aesthetic counterpart to the politics of dissimulation, which was the core of Italian and European treatises on the art of government. It should not be overlooked that government was indeed regarded as an 'art': Thomas Elyot's *The Booke Named the Governour* (1531) or George Puttenham's *The Arte of English Poesie* (1589), although they deal with different topics – politics and poetics, respectively – undoubtedly exhibit common cultural patterns. Principles or rules such as order, measure and proportion apply equally well to political and poetical arts.

In 1586, Queen Elizabeth said to a parliamentary deputation: «We princes are set on stages in the sight and view of all the world».[3] This is not dissimilar from what the Bastard

[1] On Shakespeare's poetics of closure in the *histories*, see B. Hodgdon, *The End Crowns All. Closure and Contradiction in Shakespeare's History*, Princeton (nj), Princeton University Press, 1991.

[2] On the representation of the king as a *persona ficta*, see D. Montini, *I discorsi dei re. Retorica e politica in Elisabetta I e in Henry V di Shakespeare*, Bari, Adriatica, 1999.

[3] Quoted in J. E. Neale, *Elizabeth I and Her Parliaments, 1584-1601*, 2 vols.: ii, London, Cape, 1965, p. 119.

says of the Angiers citizens in *King John*: they «gape and point» at the kings of England and France «as in a theatre» (II.i.375). As has been observed by Stephen Greenblatt, «Elizabethan power [...] depends on its priviliged visibility».[1] In fact, Elizabethan power was displayed through a number of 'theatrical' celebrations: public processions, ceremonies and, of course, dramatic representations. However, the discursive modes and generic forms through which power made itself visible (in other words, the aesthetics of power) still remain partially unexplored.

Given the patent aesthetic elements in the Elizabethan representation of power, such aesthetic categories as those of literary genre also concurred in defining power. Indeed, from a very general point of view, the very predominance of certain discursive types and stylistic conventions may be said to represent a form of (aesthetic) power.

Literary genres both contribute to the production of power discourse and, in their turn, are part of the very power discourse they contribute to produce.[2] Therefore, the dramatic use of historico-tragico-comic genre conventions should not be regarded from a merely aesthetic perspective but, rather, as an intrinsic and emblematic constituent of a play's political significance.

As we have already remarked, events are neither tragic nor comic in themselves. The issue of a battle can either be seen as a 'victory' or a 'defeat', depending on whose perspective is adopted. Representing the battle of Agincourt as a victory and giving it a comic form obviously implies seeing things from an English and royalist perspective. The same event would presumably have been handled in a tragic form by a French dramatist. On the other hand, a royal deposition does not make up an entirely tragic event if it is shown as paving the way for a better form of government. In other words, comic and tragic patterns are intrinsically linked with the ideological perspective by which the author filters the action and which is supposed to orientate the spectators' emotional and ethical response.

As is well-known, the thirty-six Shakesperean plays collected in the First Folio in 1623 were subdivided by the editors into three main dramatic genres: *Comedies, Histories & Tragedies*. Such a generic distinction has undoubtedly influenced the way we approach Shakespeare's 'histories'.[3] Indeed, in spite of the definition proposed by the editors of the Folio, a number of plays which were grouped under the headings of 'tragedies' or 'comedies' could equally well be defined as history plays and, in much the same way, many 'histories' could be labelled as either tragedies or comedies. It should be further noted that Heminge and Condell's generic subdivision did not coincide with other Elizabethan typological classifications. In *Palladis Tamia* (1598), Francis Meres had already divided Shakespeare's works into the two main classical genres of tragedy and comedy (thus implicitly denying the existence of the history play as a genre in itself).[4] A clue to this generic impasse is perhaps indirectly provided by Shakespeare himself. In an oft-quoted speech, Polonius suggests the impossibility of drawing clear-cut boundaries among dramatic gen-

[1] S. Greenblatt, *Invisible Bullets* (1981), in *Shakesperean Negotiations. The Circulation of Social Energy in Renaissance England*, Oxford, Clarendon, 1988, p. 64. On the theatrical display of power in the age of Shakespeare, see L. Di Michele, *La scena dei potenti. Teatro Politica Spettacolo nell'età di William Shakespeare*, Napoli, Istituto Universitario Orientale, 1988. As Di Michele points out, «sul palcoscenico [...] è tracciata la storia dell'autorità e quella dei sudditi» (p. 7).

[2] On the politics of genre, cf. L. Tennenhouse, *Power on Display*, New York and London, Methuen, 1986.

[3] A similar generic classification had been proposed by W. Webbe who subdivided English poetry into «Comicall, Tragicall, Historiall» (*A Discourse of English Poetrie*, 1586, in G. G. Smith (ed.), *Elizabethan Critical Essays*, 2 vols., Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1904: I, pp. 226-302, 249-250).

[4] According to F. Meres, comedies include: *Gentlemen of Verona*, *Errors*, *Loue Labors Lost*, *Loue Labors Wonne*, *Midsummers Night Dreame*, *Merchant of Venice*; while tragedies are represented by *Richard the 2*, *Richard the 3*, *Henry the 4*, *King Iohn*, *Titus Andronicus*, *Romeo and Juliet* (*Palladis Tamia*, in G. G. Smith (ed.), II, pp. 308-324: 318). As can be seen, Meres's classicistic approach leads him to classify as 'tragedies' those very plays which would later be labelled as 'histories'.

res. Plays can be «pastoral-comical, historical-pastoral, tragical-historical, tragical-comical-historical-pastoral» (II.ii.393-95). Notwithstanding the parodico-ludicrous intent of such a definition, through the character's words the author hints at what is perhaps the most conspicuous aspect of contemporary drama: generic mixture. In fact, the generic fuzziness worded by Polonius not only refers to the repertoire of the 'players' in *Hamlet*, but may also be said to ironically apply to the Shakesperean canon itself. Indeed, the «mingling» of dramatic genres had not passed unnoticed by contemporary critics, both in England and on the continent.[1]

Even a rough reading of the ten plays labelled as 'histories', reveals that they do not form a generically homogeneous group. As some critics have justly argued, «lumping the plays together [...] as histories may be convenient, but it skates over some real difficulties».[2] Indeed, the titles of the Elizabethan and Jacobean quarto and folio editions of *Richard II* indirectly reveal to us that Shakespeare's contemporaries considered the play not only as a 'history', but also as a 'tragedy'.[3] Such uncertainty as to a play's generic affiliation was no less common in the Elizabethan age than it is nowadays.

From a theoretical point of view, the classification of Shakespeare's plays into *comedies*, *histories* and *tragedies* clearly mixes dishomogeneous typological criteria. While 'comic' and 'tragic' markers are to be essentially looked for in the progression of the action and the poetics of closure, 'historical' traits may be identified in the conveyance of a sense of pastness which is independent of the play's *dénouement*. In fact, as is indirectly shown by Shakespeare's *histories*, a historical sequence can be dramaturgically structured in terms of a tragic or a comic development. This is particularly evident in the second tetralogy. Therefore, instead of thinking of those plays as a monogeneric 'historical' sequence, it would be more accurate to refer to them as a multigeneric group consisting of a 'historical tragedy' (*Richard II*), two 'historical *Bildungskomödien*' or 'historical comedies of formation' (the two parts of *Henry IV*) and a 'historical comedy' (*Henry V*).

3. The historical mode and its opacity

What is, then, the 'historical' mode, and how does it structurally combine with comic or tragic patterns? A definition of the historical mode in fiction may be conveniently sketched out by means of a double comparison between: i) historical fiction and historiography, ii) historical fiction and other fictional modes or genres.

Over the last decades, the line of demarcation between historiography and fiction has been made thinner by some historiographical schools – notably, the 'New Historicism'. New Historicists – and their pioneer Hayden White – have claimed that historiographical texts should be regarded as literary artifacts.[4]

However, the identification of a poetics of the historiographical discourse does not, in itself, imply – as New Historicists have assumed – that historiographical prose may or

[1] See, for instance, Sidney's attack on the «mingling» of «kings and clowns» and on «mongrel tragi-comedy» (*Apology*, p. 112).

[2] C. W. R. D. Moseley, *Shakespeare's History Plays: Richard II to Henry V. The Making of a King*, Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1988, p. 82.

[3] The first part of the titles of Q1, 2, 3, 4 and 5 reads (with minor typographical variations): *The Tragedie of King Richard the Second*, whereas in the folio edition the play's title is *The Life and death of King Richard the Second*. Terming the play *Life and death* instead of *Tragedie*, Heminge and Condell probably intended to emphasise the historical and chronicle – rather than the tragic – elements in it. Needless to say, such a critico-editorial choice is coherent with the inclusion of the play within the section of the «Histories» (pp. 23-45). Unlike Heminge and Condell, Meres regarded *Richard II* as a tragedy (see n. 8, *above*). As can be seen, the Elizabethans were not in agreement as to questions of genre classification.

[4] H. White, *Metahistory*, Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973, and *Historical Text as Literary Artifact*, in R. H. Kanary and H. Kozicki (eds.), *The Writing of History. Literary Form and Historical Understanding*, Madison, University of Wisconsin Press, 1978, pp. 41-62.

should be assimilated into fiction. Indeed, historiographical texts are supposed to comply with a set of well defined, culturally (that is, historiographically) accepted strategies of veridicality.[1] None of these are required in fictional texts.[2] While a historiographical discourse is – or is supposed to be – referential, a fictional discourse is – declaredly – pseudoreferential. Since historiographical assertions are assumed to be verifiable (and to have been verified), historiographical texts must avoid all those discursive (narrative or dramatic) techniques which can only generate unverifiable assertions.

At the origins of historiography, historical records were said to be founded upon direct testimonial evidence. In fact, the very term 'history' is connected with an Indoeuropean root (**wid-*, **weid-*) which means «to see».[3] Therefore, the historian's account was shown as a narrative of what the 'histor' had personally seen.

The testimonial function and the discursive forms which are appropriate to historiographical recording are intrinsically associated with an *external focalisation*. Thus, the historian's view cannot penetrate the historical characters' inner thoughts and feelings, or capture their subjectivity.

As has been shown by Genette, there are certain discursive types which are intrinsically fictional and cannot be adopted by historiographical reports: for instance, interior – or dramatic – monologues and, generally speaking, any discursive form which implies or requires an internal focalisation.[4] For very similar reasons, sustained dialogues, such as those of drama, go beyond the possibilities of historiographical recording and thus, at least implicitly, present themselves as fictional.[5]

Historical fiction draws – more or less extensively – on the *historical encyclopaedia*:[6] it retells historical facts or topics within discursive forms which are peculiar to fiction. So, in spite of a certain degree of historicity in its contents, historical fiction keeps the *illocutionary status* of fictional discourse. Thus, an historical novel or play directly or indirectly shows itself as *a fictionalised representation of historiographical material.*

As is implicitly suggested by Kavafis' poem which we have cited as an epigraph, the task of historical poetry or fiction is to catch at least a glimpse of the *historical subject*. This can be realised by imagining him or her in a given historical situation. Such a goal is splendidly achieved, for instance, by the Shakesperean representation of King Richard II. King Richard's speech – «I live with bread like you, feel want, / Taste grief, need friends...» (III.ii.175-6) – may be said to emblematise that same sense of the vanity of greatness which Kavafis looked for in the historical representation of Darius. It is historical fiction, more than historiography, that tries to *imagine* historical selfhood, and capture the shaping of *a historical subject* within a given cultural context or situation. Indeed, if we interpret the adjective 'historical' in its proper historiographico-testimonial sense, the very syntagm 'historical subject' appears as oxymoronic (since an eye-witness type of report does not allow any introspective representation or discourse). While the analysis of Darius' or Richard's feelings need not necessarily concern the historian, it is essential to the histori-

[1] J. LOZANO, *El discurso histórico*, Madrid, Alianza, 1987; U. ECO, *Prefazione* to the Italian translation of Lozano's work *Il discorso storico*, Palermo, Sellerio, 1991, pp. 11-15.

[2] P. PUGLIATTI, *Raccontare la storia*, in L. INNOCENTI, F. MARUCCI, P. PUGLIATTI (eds.), *Semeia. Itinerari per Marcello Pagnini*, Bologna, il Mulino, 1994, pp. 39-49.

[3] See Lozano's account (in *El discurso histórico*) of Benveniste's etymological reconstruction of the term *ístó* (E. BENVENISTE, *Le Vocabulaire des Institutions Indoeuropéennes*, 2 vols., Paris, Minuit, 1969).

[4] G. GENETTE, *Fiction et diction*, Paris, Seuil, 1991.

[5] This point was clearly understood by Sidney: «Herodotus [...] and all the rest that followed him either stole or usurped of Poetry their passionate describing of passions, the many particularities of battles, which no man could affirm, or [...] long orations put in the mouths of great kings and captains, which it is certain they never pronounced» (*Apology*, p. 83).

[6] The term 'encyclopaedia' is here used in the current semiotic sense (cfr. U. ECO, *A Theory of Semiotics*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1976).

cal poet. May be one of the scopes of historical fiction is (also) to compensatorily recover those historical themes or contents which are somewhat excluded or marginalised from the proper historiographical domain by the very discursive form and illocutionary status of historiography (as well as by its epistemic goals).

Although historical fiction and historiographical prose are distinguishable in terms of their respective discourse types, it must be noted that in the Elizabethan age the boundary line between them was made somewhat problematic by some characteristics of sixteenth-century historiography. Elizabethan historiographical reports – such as Holinshed's *Chronicles* (1587) – made a certain use of dialogic forms and, if judged in terms of twentieth-century standards of historiographical discourse, could be regarded as fictional. However, it must be stressed that *on the whole* their discursive forms were, and may be, fairly neatly distinguished from those of fiction. As a matter of fact, the difference between the illocutionary status of historiographical and fictional texts was clearly acknowledged by the Elizabethans themselves. As Sidney pointed out, unlike the historian, the poet – and, therefore, the poetic text – «nothing affirms, and therefore never lyeth».[1] In spite of some fictional elements in them, historiographical texts were thus separated from fictional ones.

If historical fiction has a different illocutionary status (and, thus, also a different scope) from historiography, then the term 'historical', when it is associated with fiction, must be interpreted in a sense which is consistent with the illocutionary status of fictional discourse. Such a definition of 'historical' permits us to distinguish between historical fiction and other fictional modes. When it is related to fictional discourse, the adjective 'historical' does not imply or suggest any historiographical authenticity but rather seems to point to *a chronologico-cultural distance between the time of representation (or the authorial time) and the represented time*.[2]

In other words, historical fiction exhibits a more or less evident *cultural alterity* between the author's time and the time of the story. In *Richard II*, the cultural difference between Elizabethan and late medieval times is suggested by the use of a somewhat obsolete and 'poetic' language, as well as by the representation of archaic customs (such as King Richard's use of a trial by battle as a form of judiciary evidence). However, often – if not always – the time of representation and the represented time are incongrously mixed. Such mixtures are conventionally accepted as intrinsic to historical fiction as such. No Elizabethan spectator would have been surprised, even less scandalised, in hearing Roman characters speak contemporary English. Historical fiction may therefore be said to be based on a *poetics of anachronism*, that is on an incongrous cultural interaction between the representational and the represented time. Different types of anachronism can be distinguished within historical fiction: besides linguistic or expressive anachronisms, semantic and para-textual anachronisms can be found as well. Semantic anachronisms can be exemplified by the appellative «ladies» which is improperly used by Cominius to designate the Roman matrons in *Coriolanus* (i.ix.5), or by the definitions of «nationalist» and «protestant» which are given to the heroine in G. B. Shaw's *Saint Joan*.[3] In both cases, the represented historical context is – anachronistically – attributed semantic units, and cultural patterns, which pertain to the

[1] P. Sidney, *Apology*, p. 103. Even if diversely from Sidney, also Holinshed emphasised the distinction between historiography and fiction: «My speech is plain, without any rhetoricall shew of eloquence, having rather a regard to simple truth, than to decking words» (*The Third Volume of Chronicles*, London, 1587, Aiii).

[2] By authorial time we mean the time pertaining to the *implied author* that can be reconstructed with various degrees of exactness on the ground of exclusively *textual* categories – the so-called 'internal evidence' (even if we have no clue who the *empirical author* is).

[3] Semantic anachronisms serve different specific functions in historical fiction. A preliminary distinction could be made between 'intentional' and 'unintentional' anachronisms (although, in many cases, such a distinction would be rather problematic). For instance, the anachronisms in *Saint Joan* which we have mentioned above should be regarded as 'intentional', in that they suggest a form of historiographical interpretation: in her being an evolutionary heroine, Joan 'anticipates' nationalism and protestantism.

representational context. Finally, para-textual anachronisms refer to the material aspects of the text:[1] for instance, to the anachronistic contrast between the cellulose (not calfskin-made) pages of a modern volume and the Celtic adventures represented in it.

In their pointing to a cultural distance – and a dialectical exchange – between two different historical contexts, anachronisms can be regarded as genre-markers of 'historical fiction', as well as forms of (meta-)historical interpretation. Since they are essential to historical fiction, anachronisms must be visible and can only partially be dissembled. The narrator of *Ivanhoe* deems it necessary to specify that, for practical reasons, the characters' Anglosaxon conversation – which is registered by him in an eye-witness type of report – has been 'translated' into contemporary, nineteenth-century English. Walter Scott was obviously aware of the fact that linguistic anachronism undermines the historiographical credibility or truth value of an assertion. At the same time, of course, he did not really want his characters' speeches to be regarded as real but only as realistic. It is also because of its quasi-overt display of anachronisms that historical fiction is distinguishable from *forgery*. In fact, unlike historical fiction, forgery is based upon the concealment of all those – expressive, semantic and paratextual – elements which pertain to the representational context. A historical writer pursues different scopes from, say, the author of the *Donatio Sancti Petri*. Similarly, the stylistic imitation of antiques is something different from the fraudulent production of pseudo-antique furniture. However, the dividing line between historical fiction and forgery is not always so neat. There are literary forms, such as the pseudo-medieval poems composed by some preromantic poets (which partly inglobated and refounded authentic material), that seem to stand halfway between forgery and historical fiction and would need a separate discussion.

The dialectic interplay between two different historical (con-)texts which marks historical fiction can sometimes be ambivalent, or opaque. As we have anticipated, the cultural models represented in Shakespeare's English or Roman history plays partly relate to the Elizabethan context, partly exhibit a medieval, or a Roman, *pastness* Besides a sense of the 'remoteness' of the historical past, Shakespeare's audience was also expected to recognise the 'contemporaneity' of the past. From this point of view, the so-called «Longleat manuscript» (1595) can be regarded as emblematic: the illustration of half-Roman, half-Elizabethan costumes used for a production of *Titus Andronicus* indirectly shows how, on the Elizabethan stage, the past was both distanced as culturally remote and anachronistically brought nearer as culturally contemporary (the Roman past being metaphorically 'dressed' in Elizabethan clothes).

A certain ambivalence in the representation of the past can be regarded as an intrinsic constituent of historical fiction. The past, of course, can only be seen from a present perspective. This has its advantages and disadvantages. On the one hand, some aspects of the past become clearer when they are viewed from the present. For instance, in modern times, feudalism has undoubtedly become a much better understood economico-cultural phenomenon than it was in the Middle Ages. On the other hand, in viewing the past from the present we inevitably lose a number of things. For instance, we can only have a pale and distorted idea of the actual experience of life in feudal times.

Shakespeare's histories exhibit both a deep understanding of the cultural and feudal alterity of a late medieval past and an ambivalent projection into it of contemporary Elizabethan cultural patterns and policy.[2]

[1] As to a definition of 'paratext', see G. Genette, *Seuils*, Paris, Seuil, 1987.

[2] Some critics have regarded Shakespeare's representation of the past as a mirror of *contemporary* culture and policy (L. B. Campbell, *Shakespeare's Histories. Mirrors of Elizabethan Policy*, London, Methuen, 1947); others have pointed out Shakespere's understanding of the *alterity* of the past (G. Holderness, *Shakespeare Recycled. The Making of Historical Drama*, New York, Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1992). Perhaps, the truth is in the middle. Shakespeare's representation of the past might be defined as 'opaque', as a mingling of past and contemporary codes – which, as shown above, is typical of the history play as a genre.

Graham Holderness has suggested that at least three schools of historiography can be identified in Elizabethan England: a providential, a humanist and an antiquarian historiography. Unlike the first two, which are either based on the idea that the course of history is metaphysically predetermined (providential-theological historiography) or on the idea that historical situations can repeat themselves (pragmatico-humanist historiography), the antiquarian approach to history is peculiarly marked by an authentic sense of the diversity – or pastness – of the past.[1] For Holderness the Shakesperean history plays reveal a profound, quasi-antiquarian understanding of feudal laws; they «can be read as serious attempts to reconstruct and theorize the past», in that they «embody a conscious understanding of feudal society as a peculiar historical formation».[2]

Shakespeare's *histories*, no doubt, reveal such an 'antiquarian' understanding of the past. However, their treatment of history is more complex than any single definition may account for. The feudal past which is represented on the Shakesperean stage is interpreted on the basis of a 'providential' scheme,[3] as well as recreated with a view to its 'pragmatic' exemplarity.[4] In his work, it is thus possible to discern the influence of all three historiographical methods. On the one hand, Shakespeare's histories hint at a linear, providential historical paradigm, from chaos following the deposition of a legitimate king to the re-establishment of order and harmony. On the other hand, they also suggest a circular or cyclical historical pattern, implying the pragmatic exemplarity of historical events. The king's deposition in *Richard II* might be – and was – interpreted by Shakespeare's contemporaries both from a monarchist and an anti-monarchist standpoint. As a matter of fact, it was both – orthodoxically – seen as the representation of an original sin leading up, after a long and inevitable period of anarchy and political turmoil, to the Tudor pacification, and – unorthodoxically – as an act implying the possibility that the present Queen herself might similarly be deposed.[5]

The ambivalence in the historicisation of juridico-political structures is matched by a corresponding ambivalence in the representation of the historical subject. Richard II, for instance, is seen, at the same time, as a *late medieval* and an *Elizabethan* monarch. Although the ordealistic judicial decisions (about Bolingbroke and Mowbray) made by King Richard are typically medieval, much of the symbolism which defines him is eminently Elizabethan. In a similar way, although Henry V shows many historical features of a fifteenth century monarch, he is also partly modelled on the royal *persona* of the Queen herself, so much so that his dramatic monologues appear to have been modelled on Queen Elizabeth's public speeches.[6]

In conclusion, the present-past relations which characterise the historical mode are 'opaque', and so are the historicisation of power and public structures as well as the historicisation of the self.

Indeed, as we shall see, the texts which make up the second tetralogy are not only opaque in their historical representation, but are no less opaque in their tragic or comic generic forms.

[1] G. Holderness, *Shakespeare Recycled*, pp. 1-20.

[2] Idem, *Shakespeare Recycled*, pp. 13-14.

[3] On the influence of Providential historiography, especially of Edward Hall's *Union*, E. M. W. Tillyard's theses, nothwithstanding their one-sidedness, can still prove very helpful – provided that one reads them in a selective and critical way (E. M. W. Tillyard, *Shakespeare's History Plays*, Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1944, pp. 47-56).

[4] As is shown by the Bastard's final speech in *King John*, the past can be used as a source for present moral and political instruction («Nought shall make us rue / If England to itself do rest but true!»: v.vii.117-118). Such a pragmatic approach to the past is typical of humanist historiography.

[5] The Queen herself is reported to have said: «Know ye not, I am Richard». Because of such a subversive implication, the deposition scene (iv.i.154-316) was censored and could only be printed in Q4, 1608.

[6] D. Montini, *I discorsi dei re. Retorica e politica in Elisabetta I e in* Henry V *di Shakespeare*, Bari, Adriatica, 1999.

4. The opacity of tragic and comic genre conventions and the opacity of power discourse

Fictionalising history for a Renaissance playwright almost necessarily involved adapting a historical sequence to the conventions of tragedy or comedy. The literary (narrative) patterns of historiographical discourse had to meet with a poetics of dramatic closure. In his dramatic production, Shakespeare conformed to the two most important conventions of his time: a five-act structure and a threefold division of the action into protasis-epitasis-catastrophe (or dénouement).[1]

Far from forming a generically homogeneous group, Shakespeare's 'histories' can be divided into 'historical tragedies' and 'historical comedies', in that their onward movement from start to finish follows a progressive – tragic or comic – scheme. Such a dramatico-theatrical adaptation of the historiographical discourse has obvious political implications. Historical events in themselves do not exhibit the linear, progressive movement of either tragedy or comedy. Encoding a historical event into a historiographical narrative implies overcoding it with ideological evaluations. Adjusting a historiographical narrative to a tragic or comic pattern implies imposing upon it *further* ideological structures. Genre conventions reveal themselves as intrinsic constituents of power discourse.

However, even if Shakespeare's *histories* conform to tragic or comic generic patterns, they also – at least partly – question, and disrupt, those very patterns. In fact, the presence of tragic and comic genre conventions is made opaque by a number of anti-tragic or anti-comic elements. The plays' treatment of power is likewise opaque. This point will be illustrated in relation to *Richard II*, *Henry the Fourth. Part One* and *Henry V*. Indeed, as we have already suggested, each of these plays can be taken to exemplify a particular generic type.

4. 1. Richard II *as a 'Tragedy'*

Richard II may be defined as a 'historical tragedy'. In fact, the historical events represented in the play are shown as progressively leading to a tragic ending. As has been pointed out by some critics, the play's historical action is tripartite.[2] The evenemential sequence may be easily reconducted to a conventional dramatic evolution, from the protasis to the epitasis and catastrophe. Things start evolving tragically for King Richard from the play's very beginning, that is from the moment when he banishes his cousin, Henry Bolingbroke, and is faced with the news of the Irish rebellion (I.i-II.i). Bolingbroke's invasion and the transference of real power mark a second step towards tragedy (II.ii-III.iii). The catastrophe – or the culminating moment – is represented by the deposition and killing of King Richard (III.iv-V.vi). However schematic it may appear, this threefold partition seems to faithfully mirror the tragical form and development of the historical action.

On comparing *Richard II* with what is now commonly regarded as its main historiographical source – Raphael Holinshed's *Chronicles* –, one of the most striking differences can possibly be found in the very selection of historical events from King Richard II's reign. While Holinshed's narrative covers the whole reign of Richard II (1377-1399/1400), Shakespeare only deals with King Richard's final years (1398-1400).[3] The reason for such a

[1] H. L. Snuggs, *Shakespeare and Five Acts. Studies in a dramatic Convention*, New York, Vantage, 1960; M. T. Herrick, *Comic Theory in the Sixteenth Century*, Urbana, University of Illinois Press, 1964.

[2] G. Melchiori, *Introduzione* a *Riccardo II*, in William Shakespeare, *I drammi storici*, t. I, a cura di G. Melchiori, Milano, Mondadori, 1979, pp. 14-17.

[3] On the theatrical transcoding of the historiographical sources in Shakespeare's second tetralogy, see Serpieri *et alii*, *Nel laboratorio di Shakespeare. Dalle fonti ai drammi* (critical contributions by S. Payne, S. Cenni and A. Celli), 4 vols., Parma, Pratiche, 1988: vols. 1 and 3.

choice is plain: Shakespeare rearranged the chronicle flux of events with a view to a dramatic development, and a progressive tragic structure. Bolingbroke's banishment is the historical event in Richard's reign which was best suited as a first step towards an overall tragic movement. Thus, in Shakespeare's tragedy, the action is driven forward by means of a set of fast- and slow-moving episodes, which finally evolve into death and destruction.

As is indirectly shown by Falstaff's end in *Henry V* (II.iii), death is not tragic per se: it is the way it is presented on the stage that eventually makes it tragic. In *Richard II*, it is mostly the character's comments on King Richard's loss of power and death that inspire a tragic feeling of pity: Queen Isabella's speeches, Bolingbroke's final comments and repentance. Above all, it is the king's self-pity and his «antic disposition» which suggest a similar emotional response in the public.[1]

However, King Richard's death is not only tragic because of the emotional answer which it evokes, but also because of its ideologico-political implications. A king's death is not the same as Everyman's death. A royal death, especially if it is not a natural but a violent one following a deposition, symbolises a corresponding violation of a natural, political and divine order. Thus, King Richard's private tragedy is matched by the public tragedy of the *body politick*.

According to some critics and writers, tragedy is characterised by blind necessity and a sense of inescapability. In tragedy, sorrow is inevitable; above all, it is purposeless. This is the view proposed by classical, Greek tragedy. For George Steiner, tragedy is alien to the Christiano-Judaic justification of suffering: the doctrine of Divine Providence led to the death of tragedy, which was based on the Greek sense of Fate.[2]

If analysed from a Steinerian viewpoint, *Richard II* may be said to show an ambivalent tragic structure. On the one hand, its action as well as the characters' comments on the events seem to participate in the proper, fatal spirit of Greek tragedy. King Richard's end is – at least partly – shown to be the result of blind necessity: it appears as inscribed *ab ovo* in the course of events. Queen Isabel prophetically foresees a tragic movement: her «nameless woe» (II.ii.40) anticipates the king's deposition and death. In a partially similar way, in *Julius Caesar* Calphurnia foresees Caesar's murder (II.ii). In both plays, a sort of premonition of sorrow makes a tragic development appear as unavoidable: «...What can be avoided/Whose end is purpos'd by the mighty gods?» (*Julius Caesar*, II.ii.26-27). Richard's life (no less than Caesar's) is shown as obscurely predetermined by Fate.

On the other hand, *Richard II* also exhibits some comments and interpretations which problematise its fatal/tragic pattern. In York's perspective, Richard's deposition is not shown as a form of purposeless suffering, but is justified on a providential ground: «heaven hath a hand in these events» (V.ii.37). Those – as well as other – providential and redemptive elements at least partially undermine the play's tragic pattern.

However, the tragic structure of *Richard II* can be defined as ambivalent even if it is seen from other critical and ideological viewpoints: for instance, from a cultural materialist perspective. Confuting Steiner's theses, Dollimore has argued that human suffering and conflict, rather than being necessarily determined by religious superstructures, appear as the contingent effect of «social and historical forces focussed in state power».[3] Considered from a materialist standpoint, York's providential interpretation of King Richard's deposition appears as a form of political mystification (since York's religious argu-

[1] In many respects, as some critics have pointed out, King Richard's malaise prefigures Hamlet's nihilism (L. Potter, *The Antic Disposition of* Richard II, «Shakespeare Survey», XXVII, 1974, pp. 33-41).

[2] G. Steiner, *The Death of Tragedy*, London, Faber, 1961.

[3] J. Dollimore, *Radical Tragedy*, New York, Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1984; 2nd edn. 1989, p. xviii.

ments merely aim at legitimising Bolingbroke). Perhaps Shakespeare's (and, generally speaking, Elizabethan) tragedies do not exclude a religious interpretation of human affairs – as cultural materialist critics seem to imply – but rather combine it with forms of political pragmatism. However, whether we see York's speech from a religious or a political perspective, its suggestion is that Bolingbroke's accession to the throne is beneficial for the body politic, since King Richard did not represent the ideal king. King Richard's deposition and death make possible the accession to the throne of a new king, Henry IV, who – as is sometimes insinuated, sometimes explicitly stated – promises to be a more appropriate king than the dethroned Richard had been.[1] This idea that Richard's personal tragedy, however sad it may be, is necessary to the political wellfare pervades the play and problematises its overall tragic effect.

Thus, *Richard II*'s generic opacity emblematises a parallel opacity in the representation of power. In proposing multiple perspectives which – directly or indirectly – undermine one another, the play questions both canonised genre conventions and culturally accepted views of power and principles of rulership.

4. 2. Henry IV. Part One *as a 'Historical* Bildungskomödie'

The historical action of *Henry IV. Part One* can similarly, and conventionally, be divided into three parts (I.i-II.iv; III.i-III.ii; III.iii-V.v).[2] The action's progressive movement leads to a happy dénouement. The happy ending is represented by the royal victory over the rebels' coalition. This is made possible by the process of education which the hero undergoes. Thus, the dissipated and unruly prince Hal is gradually transformed, until he becomes capable of recognising and firmly pursuing truly 'princely' tasks. The crucial moment of Hal's growth is marked by his chivalric display of honour at the battle of Shrewsbury against his fierce opponent, Harry Percy (V.iv).[3] Finally, at the end of the play, Hal may be said to fully embody the princely ideal.

A *Bildungsroman* or a *Bildungskomödie* is characterised by the development of the main character, that is his/her personal growth through experience: at the end, the hero fulfils his/her objective (an objective which, at first, he/she had not been able to fully recognise) by gradually reforming his/her desire and behaviour. From this point of view, *Henry the Fourth. Part One* can be conveniently defined as a 'historical comedy of formation' (and/or as a 'historical conduct comedy'). In fact, it is the prince himself who, speaking about his future «reformation» (I.ii.208), indirectly hints at the play's generic structure.[4] (The idea that one's character might be improved or reformed by means of apprenticeship was also at the basis of the contemporary vogue of conduct books, many of which dealt with political conduct).

In *Henry the Fourth*, the author, although outwardly conforming to such a model, inwardly undermines it by strewing the text with anti-formative elements. These may be

[1] In the *histories*, 'dynastic legitimacy' does not always coincide with 'personal appropriateness'. Cf. G. E. Szonyi, *Matching the* Falles of Princes *and* Machiavell. *Tradition and Subversion in the Historiography and Iconography of Shakespeare's* Histories, in G. E. Szonyi, R. Wymer (eds.), *The Iconography of Power. Ideas and Images of Rulership on the English Renaissance Stage*, pp. 5-31. The legitimacy versus appropriateness principles as rules governing royal succession are implicitly discussed by King Henry IV, when he states that Percy would make a much better king than Hal: «He hath more worthy interest to the state/Than thou the shadow of succession» (*Henry IV. Part One,* III.ii.98-99).

[2] G. Melchiori, *Introduzione* a *Enrico IV. Parte I,* in W. Shakespeare, *I drammi storici*, t. I, a cura di G. Melchiori, Milano, Mondadori, 1979, pp. 273-275.

[3] Hal's display of honour at Shrewsbury had already been prepared by the scene of his reconciliation with his father King Henry IV (III.ii).

[4] Other Shakespearean plays exhibit partly similar formative models: among those, *The Taming of the Shrew* and *The Tempest* (the former comedy is about Katherina's, the latter about Prospero's «reformation»).

summed up into two main points: i) there are some unconvincing aspects in the prince's transformation; ii) all the prince's former Eastcheap companions remain unreformed – Falstaff, above all, proving totally irredeemable. Unlike what happens in other types of more conventional *Bildungs-texts*, in *Henry the Fourth. Part One* the 'subversive' elements are not fully or convincingly 'contained' by the conclusion.

From his very first appearance (I.ii), prince Hal is characterised by a dual – almost schizofrenic – personality whose conflicting halves do not seem to be completely aware of each other. On the one hand, the prince's political self has to stage all those ethico-juridical principles or constraints which act as a guarantee of social and political order (surveillance and repression being obviously part of a ruler's duties). On the other hand, the prince appears as marked by that same anarchy of desire which he punningly suggests should be severely chastised in Falstav. Surprisingly enough, Hal predicts for Falstaff – or, rather, threatens him with – a future of «gallows» or, at least, a «robe of durance» (I.ii.38,42). And he does so when he is still unreformed and guilty of those very crimes he would like to see punished in his comrade. The inflexibility of the ethico-judicial code by which the prince judges his Eastcheap companions, sharply contrasts with the exceedingly self-indulgent judgements which he passes on himself.[1] No signs of repentance or self-criticism can be seen in him (still less any shadow of Hamletic self-horror). Instead of suggesting a process of spiritual growth, the prince's conversion seems rather the result of a strategical self-adjustment to the reasons of the body politic.

Moreover, the prince's «reformation» is unaccompanied by an analogous conversion of his Eastcheap companions. In fact, the 'low' characters continue with their eating, drinking, sleeping, whoring and stealing. As has been suggested by Greenblatt, they may be said to embody «a dream of superabundance».[2] The Eastcheap group impersonates a sort of folk carnival humour and release. Carnival, as Holderness suggests, «was a contradictory social institution: its whole *raison d'être* was that of opposition to established authority», yet «it was countenanced, permitted, even fostered by those very authorities».[3] In other words, Carnival revelry allows a temporary inversion of social hierarchy. Such a hierarchical inversion is pervasive throughout the play. It is perhaps most evident when Falstaff tries to play the king's role and thus implicitly presents himself as a carnivalesque king of fools: «This chair shall be my state, this / dagger my sceptre, and this cushion my crown» (II.iv.373-74).[4]

However, although he impersonates a carnivalesque Lord of misrule, Falstaff is – above all – a picaresque rogue. The choice of the inn as a setting for the Eastcheap group is very 'picaresque'. In spite of their embodying «a dream of superabundance», these low-life characters have to cheat or steal in order to survive. This is much more in the picaresque vein than in the carnival custom. Falstaff's picaresque traits are implicitly pointed out by Hal himself: for instance when, on asking him «What a devil hast thou to do with the time of the / day?» (I.ii.6-7), the prince calls attention to Falstaff's life-style. Like a picaresque rogue, he has no projects but rather obeys his spur-of-the-moment impulses.

[1] In several respects, the play's ethico-juridical code is no less problematic than the one chracterising *Measure for Measure*.

[2] S. Greenblatt, *Invisible Bullets*, in *Shakesperean Negotiations. The Circulation of Social Energy in Renaissance England*, Oxford, Clarendon, 1988, pp. 21-65.

[3] G. Holderness, *Shakespeare's History*, Dublin, Gill and Macmillan, 1985 (also in G. Holderness ed. and intr., *Shakespeare's History Plays.* Richard II *to* Henry V, London, Macmilllan, 1992). Holderness's reading of *Henry IV* is declaredly indebted to M. Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, Engl. transl. Helen Iswolski, Cambridge (MA), CIT Press, 1968.

[4] This episode is analogous to Stephano and Trinculo's mock-coronation in *The Tempest*. Even Richard II, when he loses his royal power, stages this same paradigmatic inversion («O that I were a mockery king of snow»: IV.i.260). Of course, the carnivalisation of the king as fool is pervasive throughout *Hamlet* and *King Lear*. On Shakespeare's fools, see V. Gentili, *La recita della follia. Funzioni dell'insania nel teatro dell'età di Shakespeare*, Torino, Einaudi, 1978, and R. Mullini, *Corruttore di parole: il* fool *nel teatro di Shakespeare*, Bologna, Clueb, 1983 and *Il* fool *in Shakespeare*, Roma, Bulzoni, 1997.

A picaresque reading of the play has a number of socio-political implications. Carnival represents a form of temporary and legalised infraction, the court fool enjoying a sort of legal immunity. Unlike the court-fool, a picaro does not live in the cultural centre of his country. He is a marginal person, as well as an outlaw. Prince Hal's punning threats to Falstaff in *Henry IV. Part One* (I.ii.38,42) are symbolically realised by the hanging of Bardolph in *Henry V* (III.vi.104-05). Far from being guaranteed a clown's immunity, picaresque crimes can be severely punished. The subversive elements of a picaresque action are not so easily reabsorbed or contained as carnivalesque infractions are. Rather than legalised or temporary inversion, the low-life characters of Eastcheap represent a much less authorised *alternative* cultural model. They make up a subtext of popular culture and 'minor' history which, in its very illegality, radically interacts with courtly and dynastic history.[1]

Also from the point of view of the play's overall construction, the – typically picaresque – loose and episodic structure of the Eastcheap scenes contrasts with, and opposes, the progressive movement of Hal's «reformation». The 'imperfect' or only partial reproduction of the generic structure of a *Bildungskomödie* suggests a parallel opacity in the representation of power. Even after the prince's repudiation of his former companions, royal and popular, legal and criminal codes keep interacting and transfusing into one another. Above all, the play's mingling of picaresque, clownish and kingly aspects within one and the same character, points to the existence of complex, internally 'split' historical subjects, rather different from those represented by more conventional *Bildungs-texts*.

4. 3. Henry V *as a 'Historical Comedy'*

Henry V exhibits symbolico-emblematic relations between generic opacity and the opacity of power not dissimilar from those which we have observed in *Richard II* and in *Henry* IV. We have defined the play as a 'historical comedy' because of its historically contextualised happy ending.[2] The historical time theatricalised in «an hour-glass» covers the years from 1414 to 1420, stretching to 1422 in the epilogue. Although the emblematic interludes divide the dramatic sequence into five parts, the story may be said to be structured into three main episodes: the justification of – and preparations for – the military campaign in France (I.i-II.iv); the actual expedition to France culminating in the victory of Agincourt (III.i-IV.viii) and the peace treaty of Troyes with the nuptial agreement between Henry and Katherine (V.i-ii). Other episodes (such as the discovery of the plot against the king's life, in the second act), however important they may be in terms of the play's overall ideological structure, are merely digressive and do not speed the action on to its conclusion.

The presence of the chorus, the opening epic-like invocation to the Muse, the heroico-chivalric tone which pervades most characters' speeches and the providential view of history manifested by King Henry V, all contribute to show the evenemential sequence – and essentially the English triumph at Agincourt – as theologically and teleologically oriented. In King Henry's words: «O God, thy arm was here, / And not to us but to thy arm alone / Ascribe we all» (IV.viii.107-09).

[1] On 'minor' and popular history, see C. GINZBURG, *Il formaggio e i vermi. Il cosmo di un mugnaio del '500*, Torino, Einaudi, 1976; Engl. transl. *The Cheese and the Worms. The Cosmos of a Sixteenth-Century Miller*, Baltimore and London, The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980. On the Shakesperean representation of popular culture and minor history, see ROBERT WEIMANN, *Shakespeare and the Popular Tradition in the Theatre*, Baltimore, The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987; P. PUGLIATTI, *Shakespeare the Historian*, London, Macmillan, 1996, especially pp. 179-245.

[2] On the one hand, *Henry V* continues the action of the two *Henry iv* plays; on the other hand – in its treatment of the Hundred Years' War – it makes a link with the first historical tetralogy, and especially with *Henry VI. Part One* (as is clearly illustrated by the epilogue).

However, the hagiographic picture of the battle of Agincourt and of Henry V's behaviour is undermined by a number of seemingly minor and subsidiary themes and textual implications. The question of the legitimacy of the English claims over the French throne is only juridically voiced through the English perspective (the French limiting themselves to invectives). In spite of that, even such an internal or domestic juridical perspective is shown as ambivalent. In fact, Canterbury's 'bribing' demystifies from the inside the «true titles» of the English (I.i.87). As a consequence of that, Henry's behaviour and the credit which he gives to the bishop's arguments ambivalently suggest either political naivety (Henry is deceived by the bishop) or, rather, political opportunism (Henry finds it convenient to let himself be deceived).

Most English treatises on the 'art' of war were published about the same years when *Henry V* was composed. These military treatises had been preceded and influenced by translations of classical and continental works, such as Machiavelli's *Dell'arte della guerra* (1519-1520, transl. as *The Art of Warre* by Peter Whitehorne, 1560). In military leaders, the chivalric ideals of knighthood were to be inextricably fused with eminently political talents. Such contradictory traits show through in Henry V. Is King Henry V a «Christian king»,[1] a *homo politicus*, or both? The historical recreation of a fifteenth century royal subject appears as quite problematic. In fact, the play seems to advocate a form of 'Christian policy' which proves, in its turn, basically ambivalent. As in *Richard II*, it is not clear whether providential views suggest a metaphysics of power or they are contrarily to be understood as cunningly dissembled strategies of legitimation. Likewise, the romantic aura which is apparently cast on the wedding between King Henry V and princess Katherine is demystified by the suggestion that the royal marriage has been inspired by political opportunism. The doubts that the play raises on the legitimacy of the English claims over France as well as the obvious political elements in King Henry's marriage throw a shadow on its happy *dénouement*.

Moreover, it is the process itself of history-making that is put into question. In the «Induction» to *The Second Part of King Henry the Fourth*, the very possibility of historiographical falsification «with false reports» («Induction», 8) had already been put forward. Rumour, acting as a presenter, exemplified referential falsity. In its turn, the Prologue to *Henry V* faces the different but related question of the transposition of the historiographical discourse into theatrical performance. The speeches of many characters also allude or refer to the play's indebtedness to – and transformation of – historiographical sources.[2] The overall implication is that, either in the chronicles or in their theatrical transposition, historical events may (have) be(en), if not referentially falsified, at least ideologically distorted. In this respect, the very speech of King Henry on the eve of Saint Crispin's day (that is, the day before the battle of Agincourt) is rather ambivalent. The epico-celebrative note which pervades the king's speech is not entirely justified if we judge his words in terms of dramatic realism. Although the battle has not yet been fought (let alone won), it is evoked as if from the triumphal oral accounts of the English soldiers who defeated the French army. On showing scars which they have not yet received, the soldiers are imagined to comment: «These wounds I had on Crispin's day» (IV.iii.48). King Henry's epic fantasy is slightly anachronistic from a point of view of dramatic time: the very words «[t]his day is called the feast of Crispian» (IV.iii.40), which are used instead of a more plausible 'should we win, this day might be called the feast of Crispian', either reveal an authorial lapsus or – more probably – are a form of (wilful) authorial obtrusiveness. Maybe, the king is able to anticipate the result of the battle simply because he shares some-

[1] It is the king himself who suggests such a definition (I.ii.242).

[2] See Fluellen's reference to the chronicles (...«as I have read in the *chronicles*»: IV.vii.93-94).

thing of the ... author's historical knowledge. In the oral historical narrative imagined by the king, the English victory will be blown up or remembered «with advantages» by its protagonists (IV.iii.50) – which is what he himself does.

Far from being harmless, the king's humorous remark hint at a possible ideological distortion of historical events by the winner. Henry V's speech raises a number of questions: what is history? how is a historical event turned into historiographical discourse? are the chronicles' – and the play's – epico-celebrative tones appropriate, or are they results of the winner's falsification? above all: what – or, rather, whose – (the French or the English) historiographical version is the audience watching on the stage?

The following anti-heroic scene (IV.iv), with its display of plundering and cowardice, further demystifies the king's – as well as the chorus' – epic tone. Pistol's bombastic style and empty eloquence also work as a form of, albeit indirect, criticism of certain types of nationalist and chauvinist historiographical discourse. In synthesis, the play's comic or happy ending is made less convincing by the presence of a quasi-parodic treatment of military rhetoric which can be detected under its celebrative surface.[1]

The revival of the chivalric ideal and military honour which is seemingly proposed by King Henry's bombastic eloquence is at least partially obscured by his very *realpolitik*. The new *historical subject* which emerges from the play does not so much construct himself in terms of «Christian» or of heroic values, but rather shapes his identity with a view to economico-political aims.

5. Some conclusive remarks

Although adhering to – and rehearsing – the generic conventions or modes of history, comedy and tragedy, Shakespeare's *histories* also contribute to redefine them. In *Richard II*, the fatal/tragic pattern is partly disrupted by a polyphonic combination of providential elements and political pragmatism. In *Henry the Fourth. Part One*, a flow of picaresque looseness contrasts with – and questions – the comic/progressive scheme of Hal's «reformation». In *Henry V*, a parodic, anti-epic vein minimalises the celebrative tone of the linguistic surface and the conventional happy ending. In short, in all those plays, the mingling of different genres and views of power gives life to a new type of historico-dramatical construction.

The most evident difference between the representational forms of historiography and those of historical (and dramatic) fiction is that the truth-value of the former can hypothetically be verified, whereas the assertions of the latter are mostly unverifiable. The very dialogic structure of the history play implicitly belies the veridictional status of what goes on the stage. Historical fiction is eminently based on what George Eliot termed «historical imagination». The dialogico-imaginative structure of the history play lets the author not only explore the *historical forms of power elaboration*, but also the *historical construction of the subject*. Perhaps, the most interesting achievement of Shakespeare's history plays is their profound analysis of *how the 'public' dynamics of power historically affect the 'private' formation of the self.*

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[1] The Shakesperean history play can be said to 'anticipate' different types of historiographical research and approaches: among these, Ginzburg's attention to social and 'minor' history, or Aries's and Duby's interest in the forms of historical subjectivity and private life (cf. the Renaissance section in vol. 3). On the Shakesperean fusion of the public and private aspects of kingship, cf. G. M. Gregson, *Public and Private Man in Shakespeare*, London and Canberra; Croom Helm, Totowa (NJ), Barnes & Noble, 1983, pp. 26-94.

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