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Plantagenets, Lancastrians, Yorkists, and Tudors: *1–3 Henry VI, Richard III, Edward III*

By transforming the chronicles of Tudor historians into drama, Shakespeare and his contemporaries brought English history onto the English stage. History and performance converged, attracting thousands of spectators. For the Elizabethans, history meant political history, particularly stories of kings and high officials, who were seen as embodying the health of the state. As William Baldwin put it in *The Mirror for Magistrates* (1559), 'where offices are duly ministered, it can not be chosen, but the people are good, whereof must needs follow a good common weal. For if the officers be good, the people cannot be ill. Thus the goodness or badness of any realm lieth in the goodness or badness of the rulers.'[1]

The evaluation of rulers, however, was not the only goal of sixteenth-century historiographers. They wanted to know not only whether Henry VI had been a good or bad king, but also why. What were the causes of political success and failure, and what lessons could be drawn from English political history? In these concerns, Tudor historians resembled students of history today. Where they differed was in their interest, or lack of it, in accuracy. For example, Edward Hall (1548) and Raphael Holinshed (1587), the chroniclers most used by Shakespeare, gathered their narratives of medieval English history not from primary documents or eyewitness accounts, but from earlier chronicles and literary stories. Tudor historians were generally less interested in true accounts of distant events than in using those events to point out good examples and cautionary tales. Sir Philip Sidney's assertion that literature ('poetry') was a loftier form than history relied on the perceived moral superiority of literature. The purpose of studying both history and literature was to see 'virtue exalted and vice punished', and in Sidney's view, 'that commendation is peculiar to poetry, and far off from history'.[2]

This overlap of history with literature in Shakespeare's time made history a natural subject for the stage. Neither the chroniclers nor the playwrights cared as much about the facts as they did about the possibilities. Perhaps the historical Black Prince had not been the consummate warrior sketched

in *Edward III*, and perhaps aristocratic society did not really fail the child-king Henry VI in the ways shown by Shakespeare's plays. Nevertheless, an Elizabethan might have replied, it could have happened that way, and our era needs to understand and imitate – or avoid – such situations. In the course of turning chronicle into drama, the Elizabethan playwrights also attempted to satisfy contemporary interest in how virtue and vice may be seen at work in great public events.

Structures and styles in the early histories

A Tudor playwright had technical advantages over a Tudor historiographer in dealing with English history. Where Holinshed evidently felt tied to a year-by-year chronicle structure, for example, Shakespeare did not. Following the chroniclers, the playwright focused on the fifteenth century, when England had been splintered by the ruinous civil wars known as the Wars of the Roses. But unlike his sources, Shakespeare usually started in the middle of the story. Although the plays are difficult to date, the first Shakespearean drama about English history was most likely not *Edward III*, which portrays the Plantagenet ancestor of the Yorkists and the Lancastrians, nor *Richard III*, the story of the last Plantagenet king. Instead, Shakespeare probably began in the middle, with the Lancastrian Henry VI, a great-great-grandson of Edward III. Henry became king of England at nine months of age and sat uneasily on the throne until he was murdered at age fifty (1471). During the boy-king's early years, England lost Henry V's conquests in France, a defeat portrayed in *1 Henry VI*. *2 Henry VI* depicts domestic disintegration under the young King Henry, concluding with the first battle in the Wars of the Roses. *3 Henry VI* traces the other major battles in these wars, ending with the Yorkist triumph and King Henry's death. *Richard III* picks up where *Henry VI* leaves off, but differs from the three earlier plays by turning its chronicle material into tragedy. Finally, in a mode that might almost be called political comedy, *Edward III* looks back to fourteenth-century England. The play is not funny, but unlike any of the other early histories, it has a happy ending.

1 HENRY VI: juxtaposition and suggestion

The protagonist of the *Henry VI* plays is the reign, not the king. At first glance, this seems to contradict the Tudor axiom that 'the goodness or badness of any realm lieth in the goodness or badness of the rulers'. Yet the character of the monarch remains a central concern in these plays, even in *Henry VI*, where the king does not appear until Act 3. Rather than showing

how historical circumstances emanate from the personality of the ruler, the *Henry VI* plays show the interdependence of character and circumstance. The guardians of Henry VI use and abuse him when they should be nurturing him, and the resulting weaknesses in Henry's character lead to near-fatal weaknesses in the English state.

The success and failure of the ruler's actions cannot serve as a structural principle for *1 Henry VI* because Henry never gets a chance to act. Instead of building a plot around the king as central character, Shakespeare reveals the emptiness at the centre of English society through a series of juxtaposed displays. The play opens with the funeral of Henry V, conducted by his brothers, Bedford and Gloucester, and his uncles, the Duke of Exeter and the Bishop of Winchester. Gloucester eulogises Henry as history's ideal monarch:

> England ne'er had a king until his time:
> Virtue he had, deserving to command;
> His brandished sword did blind men with his beams,
> His arms spread wider than a dragon's wings;
> His sparking eyes, replete with wrathful fire,
> More dazzled and drove back his enemies
> Than midday sun fierce bent against their faces.
> What should I say? His deeds exceed all speech:
> He ne'er lift up his hand but conquerèd. (1.1.8–16)

This is the sovereign and father that the country and young Henry VI have lost. The question of whether England has anyone to take his place is soon answered in the negative. Gloucester, the well-meaning Lord Protector, cannot serve as an adequate foster father for the realm or for the infant king because he cannot control his temper around other courtiers, especially the scheming Winchester. As soon as Winchester speaks, Gloucester picks a quarrel with him, and the high-flown lamentations end in wrangling. Messengers begin to arrive with news of defeat in France, the first one offering a chorus-like explanation of England's military collapse:

> No treachery, but want of men and money.
> Amongst the soldiers this is mutterèd:
> That here you maintain several factions
> And, whilst a field should be dispatched and fought,
> You are disputing of your generals. (1.1.69–73)

Following this hint, Shakespeare generally allows his audience to infer how an event reflects on other characters and conduct in the play, using juxtaposition to imply causal connection. Spectators must make the link, for example, between the bickering of Henry's 'guardians' and the young ruler's

stunted personality. Similarly, as the action switches between England and France, members of the audience must see for themselves how incidents in one location echo and explain those in the other.

The central section of *1 Henry VI*, which consists entirely of incidents that Shakespeare invented, furnishes an extended illustration of the playwright's comparative method in this play. Act 2 begins with a fictitious English victory over the French (2.1). This is followed by a courtesy call on the Countess of Auvergne by the victorious English general, Lord Talbot (2.2 and 2.3), then the 'Temple Garden' scene (2.4), which imagines the Wars of the Roses originating in a disagreement among young English law students. Finally, we witness a meeting between Richard Plantagenet, Duke of York, and his Uncle Mortimer in an English prison (2.5). These scenes move from France to England and from one group of characters to another with little overt continuity. Sometimes, as in 2.1, connections to earlier action are easy to see. Shakespeare invents a temporary English victory to parallel the French victory at Orléans, just as he earlier invented a fight between Talbot and Joan La Pucelle as representatives of the two armies (1.5). In other cases, such as the encounter between Talbot and the Countess of Auvergne, parallels may seem less immediately obvious. Yet the contest between Talbot and the Countess, like the single combat between Talbot and Joan, comments emblematically on the larger public struggles in the play. Both of these scenes suggest, for example, why the English cannot rely on the old-fashioned chivalric values embodied by Talbot. The Hundred Years War, as represented here, is not the kind of honourable test of strength in which a Talbot might be expected to triumph. Instead, it is an extension of complex psychological and political motives like those of the countess. Talbot's superior military tactics win him temporary victories at Orléans and at the Countess' castle. In the end, however, he has to depend on politicians – York (Plantagenet) and Somerset – and he suffers defeat.

2 *HENRY VI*: story and episode

2 Henry VI has an even more episodic structure than its predecessor, presenting a succession of striking characters who play their parts and disappear: the duchess's conjurers, Horner and Thump, the Simpcoxes, the murderers of Suffolk, Cade and his rebels. In addition to this series of episodes, however, the play also traces the fortunes of several recurring figures who gradually evolve into two factions, the Yorkists and the Lancastrians. On the Lancastrian side, only Gloucester is completely loyal to the king, while the others are held together chiefly by their conspiracy against Gloucester. The Yorkists are a smaller but more cohesive group, consisting of the Yorks themselves and the Nevilles, Salisbury and Warwick.

Many of the isolated episodes in *2 Henry VI* involve commoners, while the more continuous story of the approaching civil war focuses on the nobility. As in *1 Henry VI*, however, episodes serve as emblems: to complete their meanings, audiences must compare such moments to other actions in the play. The behaviour of common people, for example, often echoes and comments on the behaviour of England's leaders. The trials of Saunder Simpcox and of Horner and Thump travesty aristocratic legal proceedings, with gullible King Henry unable to serve as an impartial judge. The king wills himself to believe in Simpcox's bogus 'miracle', then condemns the drunken Horner for losing an unfair fight to the sober Thump. Superficially, Henry's moral condition looks like a metaphorical inversion of Simpcox's fraud. Simpcox pretends he cannot see when he really can, whereas Henry pretends to see when he cannot. Warwick comments ironically on the king's apparent blindness to the guilt of Winchester and Suffolk: 'Who finds the heifer dead and bleeding fresh / And sees fast by a butcher with an axe, / But will suspect 'twas he that made the slaughter?' (3.2.188–90).

But Henry has already used images similar to Warwick's in lamenting Gloucester's fall. The similarity between Warwick's language and the king's implies that, Henry, like Simpcox, sees perfectly well:

> And as the butcher takes away the calf
> And binds the wretch and beats it when it strains,
> Bearing it to the bloody slaughter-house,
> Even so remorseless have they borne him hence;
> And, as the dam runs lowing up and down,
> Looking the way her harmless young one went
> And can do naught but wail her darling's loss,
> Even so myself bewails good Gloucester's case
> With sad unhelpful tears and, with dimmed eyes,
> Look after him and cannot do him good;
> So mighty are his vowèd enemies. (3.1.210–20)

The deepest flaws in Henry's leadership derive not from an inability to see, but from an inability or unwillingness to act. In a way, both Simpcox and the king shirk responsibility out of 'pure need' (2.1.156). Simpcox needs a physical means of survival, while Henry needs a psychological one. But need does not excuse Simpcox, and it cannot excuse Henry. In the second half of this play and in *3 Henry VI*, the king becomes more observer than ruler, while his subjects, with chaotic results, take matters into their own hands.

As the Duke of York's faction grows, he incites Jack Cade and his artisans to rebellion, devising for Cade a false family tree that mimics York's own claims to the throne. Yet Cade's revolt is not merely a caricature of York's sedition; it mocks all misuse of authority. At the beginning of the play, for

instance, King Henry is infatuated with his new wife and impulsively confers a new title on Suffolk, who has brought Queen Margaret from France:

> Lord Marquess, kneel down:
> We here create thee the first Duke of Suffolk,
> And gird thee with the sword. (1.1.60–2)

In Jack Cade, Shakespeare creates a parody of both Henry's mismanagement and York's self-promotion. Faced with opponents who are gentlemen, the rebel leader seeks to bring himself up to their level by knighting himself:

> MICHAEL Fly, fly, fly! Sir Humphrey Stafford and his brother are hard by, with the king's forces.
> CADE Stand, villain, stand, or I'll fell thee down. He shall be encountered with a man as good as himself: he is but a knight, is 'a?
> MICHAEL No.
> CADE To equal him, I will make myself a knight presently. [*Kneels*] Rise up, Sir John Mortimer. [*Rises*] Now have at him. (4.2.93–100)

At the close of the play, none of England's 'rulers' has achieved a stable government, and the audience knows the war will go on.

3 *HENRY VI*: losers and winners

3 Henry VI presents a more continuous story line than the other two *Henry VI* plays because its major incidents all depict battles in the Wars of the Roses. Act 1 begins where *2 Henry VI* ends, after the first battle of St Albans. At the end of the act, Margaret and Clifford kill the Duke of York at the battle of Wakefield (1.4). In Act 2, Warwick describes the second battle of St Albans (2.1), and King Henry observes the battle of Towton (2.5). Henry is held prisoner in Act 3 until Warwick the 'kingmaker' changes sides, takes the crown from Edward (4.3) and restores it to Henry (4.6). Act 5 portrays the battle of Barnet, where Henry was recaptured, and the battle of Tewkesbury, where Margaret was defeated and her son Edward killed. Historically, these events took place over ten years, from 1461 to 1471, and the play is crowded with violent incidents as the balance tips back and forth. Yet Shakespeare manages to shape the narrative of these battles into a dramatic structure in which the decline of the Lancastrians is counterpoised by the rise of York's two sons, Edward and Richard.

After entailing his crown to the Duke of York and disinheriting his own son, Henry VI stands on the sidelines as battles are waged in his name. In a scene that recalls the emblematic method of *1* and *2 Henry VI* (2.5), the king laments as two soldiers drag the bodies of their enemies on stage. When the first soldier discovers he has killed his father and the second discovers he has

killed his son, Henry grieves for the 'bloody times' that have engulfed them all. Like the two soldiers, however, he regards himself as a victim and not an instigator of civil war, dreading censure without admitting fault:

> SON How will my mother, for a father's death,
> Take on with me, and ne'er be satisfied?
> FATHER How will my wife, for slaughter of my son,
> Shed seas of tears, and ne'er be satisfied!
> KING HENRY How will the country, for these woeful chances,
> Misthink the king and not be satisfied! (2.5.103–8)

Henry attributes events to chance, fortune, and the will of God, never to his own will. On the other side stand the wilful Yorks, especially Richard of Gloucester. Even as he struggles to maintain his brother Edward on the throne, Richard also begins a campaign for himself:

> I can add colours to the chameleon,
> Change shapes with Proteus for advantages,
> And set the murderous Machiavel to school.
> Can I do this and cannot get a crown?
> Tut! Were it farther off, I'll pluck it down.
> (3.2.191–5)

Edward is still king at the end of the play, but it is Richard and Henry who face off as the champions of two opposing responses to history: complete fatalism and complete defiance of fate. When Richard comes to kill Henry in the Tower, the king's only resistance is prophecy:

> Teeth hadst thou in thy head when thou wast born
> To signify thou cam'st to bite the world;
> And if the rest be true which I have heard,
> Thou cam'st –
> GLOUCESTER I'll hear no more: die, prophet, in thy speech,
> *Stabs him*
> For this, amongst the rest, was I ordained.
> KING HENRY Ay, and for much more slaughter after this,
> O God forgive my sins, and pardon thee! *Dies*
> (5.7.53–60)

Richard admits the truth of Henry's vision, but rejects the king's submissive attitude. The heavens may rule Richard's life, but they cannot make him like it:

> Then, since the heavens have shaped my body so,
> Let hell make crook'd my mind to answer it.
> I had no father, I am like no father;

I have no brother, I am like no brother;
And this word 'love', which greybeards call divine,
Be resident in men like one another
And not in me: I am myself alone. (5.7.79–85)

The audience knows that Richard does resemble his father and once loved him deeply, yet now he denies all influences except self. In Henry's view, the forces of history leave him no room to choose or act on his own. Richard stands for self-determination, refusing to make any concessions at all to causes not arising in his will. Henry is a good man and Richard is an evil one, but they are both extremists, and neither is fit to govern, as Shakespeare demonstrates here and in *Richard III*.

RICHARD III: the tragic pyramid

In the histories section of the First Folio, only *Richard III* is called a 'tragedy'.[3] It unites the chronicle play, which Shakespeare had been developing in the three parts of *Henry VI*, with a tragic structure showing the rise and fall of a single protagonist. For all its huge cast, *Richard III* has no subplots. Opposing groups of characters – Margaret, Richard's brothers, Elizabeth's family, the York women, the York children, courtiers such as Hastings, Stanley, Buckingham, Ratcliffe, and Catesby, and the Earl of Richmond – all are used in various combinations to advance Richard's story. This single focus gives the play a classic pyramid structure: 'rising' action to the peak of the pyramid, climax, crisis, then 'falling' action to the end.[4] Beginning with the exposition in Richard's opening soliloquy, the rising action – Richard's ascent to the throne – continues until 4.2, Richard's first entrance as king. Having achieved the crown, Richard has also reached the peak of his fortunes. Immediately, the crisis or turn occurs. The new king begins to falter, expressing an uncharacteristic lack of confidence to the puzzled Buckingham:

Thus high, by thy advice and thy assistance,
Is King Richard seated.
But shall we wear these glories for a day?
Or shall they last, and we rejoice in them?
BUCKINGHAM Still live they, and forever let them last.
RICHARD Ah, Buckingham, now do I play the touch
To try if thou be current gold indeed.
Young Edward lives; think now what I would speak.
BUCKINGHAM Say on, my loving lord.
RICHARD Why, Buckingham, I say I would be king.
BUCKINGHAM Why, so you are, my thrice-renownèd lord.
(4.2.4–14)

From this point on, Richard gradually loses his earlier ability to control his environment. He continues his murders, killing the princes and possibly Anne, but Richmond gathers strength at a distance, and Margaret scents catastrophe:

So now prosperity begins to mellow
And drop into the rotten mouth of death.
Here in these confines slyly have I lurked
To watch the waning of mine enemies.
A dire induction am I witness to,
And will to France, hoping the consequence
Will prove as bitter, black, and tragical.
(4.4.1–7)

Historically, Margaret left England in 1476 and died in 1482, three years before Richard's defeat at Bosworth. In her anachronistic appearance in Shakespeare's play, she predicts the main action with her curses and prophecies (1.3), then returns at the opening of 4.4 to underscore the prophecies' fulfilment. The theatrical vocabulary of Margaret's soliloquy here – words such as 'induction' and 'tragical' – calls attention to the neatness of the play's structure: not only the pyramidal shape of the action and Margaret's prophetic antagonism, but also the several paired or 'mirror' scenes that enhance the impression of destiny fulfilled. The wooing of Anne is matched and to some degree inverted by the wooing of Elizabeth (1.2 and 4.4). Clarence's dream and the murderers' debate about conscience (1.4) are matched by Richard's dream and his debate about conscience with himself (5.3). Similarly, Margaret's speech at the start of 4.4 matches and transforms Richard's famous self-introduction at the beginning of the play as it transforms his seasonal images. In Richard's soliloquy, the winter of discontent, his favourite season, gives way to a 'glorious summer' that holds no delight for him. When Margaret enters for her fourth-act speech, it is the autumn of Richard's reign, a time most congenial to her, and she watches greedily while the tyrant's overripe prosperity begins to decay. As she tells the Duchess, 'I am hungry for revenge, / And now I cloy me with beholding it' (4.4.61–2).

Shaken by the ghosts of his victims (5.3), Richard recovers the bravery he showed in *3 Henry VI* and dies fighting fiercely. The triumph of Richmond, however, seems curiously flat. The new King Henry VII says all the right things – pardoning Richard's soldiers and promising peace – but somehow he evokes no joy. It is not Richard we mourn for, exactly, but Richard's tragic defiance of his fate. As Emrys Jones points out, *Richard III* supports historical determinism from the outset, not only by dealing with events of known outcome, but also by repeatedly reminding us of what we know.[5]

Yet Richard's heroic end, like the sketchy characterisation of Richmond and the withdrawal of the women from the end of the play, allows playgoers to leave the theatre still a bit on Richard's side.

EDWARD III: parallel lives

The structure of *Edward III* involves an apparent digression (1.2 and 2.2) that superficially resembles the allegorical episodes in the first two *Henry VI* plays. On closer inspection, however, King Edward's adulterous lust for the Countess of Salisbury appears more explicitly tied to the main action of this play – Edward's triumph over the French – than are many of the interludes in the *Henry VI* series. In 2.2, Edward himself draws the moral of his infatuation: 'Shall the large limit of fair Bretagne / By me be overthrown, and shall I not / Master this little mansion of myself?' (93–5). The virtuous Countess is a symbolic obstacle thrown in the path of the king as he sets out to conquer France. It takes the Countess's threat of suicide to bring Edward out of his 'idle dream' (199), suggesting that even an English hero needs moral counsel from a 'true English lady, whom our isle / May better boast of than ever Roman might' (192–3).

Later, the king receives guidance from another woman, this time his queen. As Edward prepares to execute the sacrificial citizens of Calais, Queen Phillipe reasons with him in words reminiscent of Portia's 'mercy' speech in *The Merchant of Venice* or Isabella's in *Measure for Measure*:

> Ah, be more mild unto these yielding men!
> It is a glorious thing to stablish peace,
> And kings approach the nearest unto God
> By giving life and safety unto men:
> (5.1.39–42)

Again, the play makes an explicit connection between Edward's mastery of his emotions and his success as a warrior. He agrees to spare the citizens, adding that 'it shall be known that we / As well can master our affections / As conquer other by the dint of sword' (50–2).

Between these two moral moments, the king conducts both the war in France and the martial initiation of his son Edward, the Black Prince. Giving Prince Edward his first battle dress, King Edward also tries to invest him with the moral armour of self-mastery:

> Edward Plantagenet, in the name of God,
> As with this armour I impall thy breast,
> So be thy noble unrelenting heart

> Walled in with flint and matchless fortitude,
> That never base affections enter there.
> (3.3.179–83)

When French forces surround the prince in battle, King Edward insists that his son must fight it out alone (3.4). 'O cruel father', Audley exclaims (67), but young Edward's victory vindicates the king's judgement and wins the prince a knighthood.

A subplot focused on the French neatly parallels the efforts of the English king to master his impulses and educate his son. Charles Duke of Normandy, son to King John of France, is persuaded by the honesty of Lord Villiers to give the Earl of Salisbury safe conduct through his country. Having given his word, Charles, in turn, persuades his father:

> Upon my soul, had Edward Prince of Wales
> Engaged his word, writ down his noble hand,
> For all your knights to pass his father's land,
> The royal king, to grace his warlike son,
> Would not alone safe-conduct give to them,
> But with all bounty feasted them and theirs.
> (4.5.97–102)

Both the English and the French behave honourably, but the English eventually win, suggesting that fate takes Edward's side. Certainly his right to the French throne through the female line is treated less ironically in this play than are the similar claims of York in *1 Henry VI* or King Henry in *Henry V*. Even the French citizens think Edward deserves to win: 'But 'tis a rightful quarrel must prevail: / Edward is son unto our late king's sister, / Where John Valois is three degrees removed' (3.2.35–7). King John puts too much faith in his own interpretations of destiny and, like Macbeth, misconstrues prophecies that predict his defeat (4.3.74–82). The English king sees the will of heaven in his successes, although he carefully refrains from over-interpreting:

> Just-dooming heaven, whose secret providence
> To our gross judgement is inscrutable,
> How are we bound to praise thy wondrous works,
> That hast this day give way unto the right,
> And made the wicked stumble at themselves.
> (3.4.18–22)

Edward had become a legendary figure by Shakespeare's time, the progenitor of all subsequent Plantagenets – Lancasters and Yorks alike – and more secure on the throne than any of them. In *Edward III*, he and the Black

Prince achieve a victory in France that is clouded only by what the audience knows of later English losses.

Language

In addition to the arrangement of their scenes, the structures of Shakespeare's early history plays also depend on their formal language. The study of classical rhetoric formed the basis of Shakespeare's humanist education, and he used it more overtly at the start of his career than he did later.[6] Figures such as *anaphora* – beginning each clause in a sequence with the same word – and *epistrophe* – repeating the same word at the end of each clause – occur abundantly in the early histories. Such verbal repetitions are particularly appropriate in these works because they suggest the repeating patterns of death, sorrow, and revenge engendered by internal division and civil war.

William Shakespeare: A Textual Companion includes a chart of 'colloquialism-in-verse', tracing contractions and other abbreviated linguistic forms.[7] By these measures, *1 Henry VI* is the least colloquial of Shakespeare's plays. Not until *Richard III* do audiences hear language such as Richard's casual observation on the eve of battle, 'we must have knocks, ha, must we not?' (5.3.5). Yet all five of these plays tend to observe the conventions of formal oratory more faithfully than Shakespeare's later works. There is very little prose in the early histories, and none at all in *1 Henry VI*, *3 Henry VI* or *Edward III*. Only *2 Henry VI* contains a substantial amount of prose, because only this play has many scenes involving commoners. Ordinary people almost always speak prose in the early histories, especially when their scenes contain comic material. Aristocrats and gentlefolk speak mainly in balanced, end-stopped lines of verse, as when Henry VI stands and muses on the battle taking place before him:

> This battle fares like to the morning's war
> When dying clouds contend with growing light,
> What time the shepherd, blowing of his nails,
> Can neither call it perfect day nor night.
> Now sways it this way, like a mighty sea
> Forced by the tide to combat with the wind;
> Now sways it that way, like the selfsame sea
> Forced to retire by fury of the wind.
>
> (*3H6*, 2.5.1–8)

In elaborate rhetorical similes, Henry compares the civil war to the struggle of night with day and the contention of sea and wind. Pauses in thought occur at the ends of lines, which also use rhyme and repetition to enhance the impression that the king is creating an artefact in his mind, setting up an

orderly construct to oppose the chaos of battle. In general, however, rhyme appears infrequently in these works. Fewer than ten per cent of the verse lines in *Richard III* are rhymed – a proportion similar to the *Henry VI* series but smaller than later history plays.[8] Rhyme is used for emphasis, as when Richard III suggests that his birth was a comfort to his mother, and she replies: 'No, by the holy rood, thou know'st it well, / Thou cam'st on earth to make the earth my hell' (4.4.166–7). A couplet often provides a sense of closure at the end of a speech or scene, as when the French citizens in *Edward III* flee the invading English forces: 'Ah, wretched France, I greatly fear thy fall: / Thy glory shaketh like a tottering wall' (3.2.75–6).

The causes of history

Like most of Shakespeare's works, these early dramas take destiny seriously as a force in human affairs. The characters must reckon not only with their own actions and the actions of those around him, but also with providence or fate. Yet the attitude of these plays toward destiny is not always easy to see. Henry VI, miseducated by his guardians, embraces a passivity which he mistakes for piety: 'To whom God will, there be the victory!' (*3H6*, 2.5.15). Far from reaping divine rewards, Henry's helplessness brings on civil war. The self-reliant Yorks, on the other hand, defy prophecy even when they believe it. Henry's resignation opens the way to faction and rebellion, while the Yorks' defiance leads to savagery.

Perhaps the best way to understand Shakespeare's use of fate in his political plays is to associate it with universal determinism, the idea that every event is part of a chain of causation stretching back to the beginning of the universe. If one could know everything, one would be able to see the inevitability of historical events.[9] This kind of determinism should be distinguished at once from the fatalism to which Henry VI subscribes. He believes he can do nothing to affect the course of events, while determinists – Edward III is one – see their actions as causes like any others. *Edward III* implies that the English win because their claims are lawful. When King John tells Prince Edward, 'Thy fortune, not thy force, hath conquered us', the prince replies, 'An argument that heaven aids the right' (4.7.10–11). This view of historical causation connects historical outcomes directly to a religious standard of virtue and vice. Yet Edward is free to choose the unlawful pursuit of the Countess of Salisbury over his just wars in France, and he nearly does.

In the *Henry VI* series, no such clear association between destiny and morality appears. The three *Henry VI* plays show the king developing from a neglected infant into an idealistic figurehead who has never exercised his putative power. Unlike the decision of Edward III to master his passions,

vever, Henry's fatalism is not a choice, but simply the result of his up-
ıging. Yet it is a mistake, and England must pay for it. Civil discord arises
ıediately upon the death of Henry V, in the enmity between Gloucester
Winchester. As one partisan says, 'if we be forbidden stones, we'll fall
t with our teeth' (*1H6*, 3.1.89–90). In *2 Henry VI*, Cade's revolt, al-
ugh provoked by the Duke of York, also suggests what can happen when
masses are left out of the political process. Failure is reciprocal, as con-
acy and rebellion weaken King Henry, and Henry's weakness encourages
›rder. *3 Henry VI* focuses on the queen and the nobles who should be Eng-
l's leaders after Henry's default, revealing them instead to be absorbed
he treachery and brutality of civil war.

hakespeare uses the government of Henry VI to explore the causes and
dangers of a weak monarchy. He also examines, in his portraits of the
ce of York and his son Richard, the kind of mad ambition that leads
yranny. A monarchical nation must somehow avoid both paths, and
enry VI offers a glimpse of a better attitude toward the causes of history
ı either Henry's or the Yorks'. As Shakespeare's audience would have
wn, Henry is right when he predicts great things for the young Earl of
ımond:

> This pretty lad will prove our country's bliss.
> His looks are full of peaceful majesty,
> 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.
> (*3H6*, 4.6.70–6)

he end of *Richard III*, Richmond will finally end the Wars of the Roses
cilling Richard and assuming the throne as Henry VII. Yet Somerset,
› believes King Henry's predictions for Richmond, neither defies them
abandons the boy to his fate:

> As Henry's late presaging prophecy
> Did glad my heart with hope of this young Richmond,
> So doth my heart misgive me, in these conflicts,
> What may befall him, to his harm and ours.
> Therefore, Lord Oxford, to prevent the worst
> Forthwith we'll send him hence to Brittany
> Till storms be past of civil enmity. (*3H6*, 4.6.92–8)

ıry knows that destiny will be fulfilled, but refuses to serve as its active
ıument. Richard thinks that destiny will be fulfilled, but refuses to submit.

Somerset and Oxford, more prudent than either Lancaster or York, manage to resolve the paradox by walking a middle way. They take for granted a determined outcome, but precisely because they do not know everything, they assume that they must act and hope for the best.

As in *Edward III*, the world of *Richard III* appears to be governed by a providential determinism associated with right and wrong. But this is not the 'special providence' that arranges each historical event; God does not necessarily contrive or even notice the fall of every sparrow. Queen Elizabeth, for example, rails against divine indifference to the deaths of her sons: 'Wilt thou, O God, fly from such gentle lambs / And throw them in the entrails of the wolf? / When didst thou sleep when such a deed was done?' (4.4.22–4). Margaret immediately answers with another such injustice: 'When holy Harry died, and my sweet son' (4.4.25). The providence of *Richard III* is rather the grand design of human salvation and damnation. God's will is shown not by the victory of one nation or one political faction over another, but by the fate of the human soul – in this case, Richard's. He is in this sense a tragic hero, opposing the will of the universe with his own, 'all the world to nothing' (1.2.241).

In Richard's remarkable soliloquy on Bosworth eve (5.3.180-206), many critics have seen the beginnings of modern tragedy. '[D]etermined to prove a villain' from his first appearance (1.1.30), Richard unexpectedly confronts the possibility of repentance – 'Have mercy, Jesu!' (5.3.181) – then reaffirms his earlier course: 'Soft, I did but dream. / O coward conscience, how dost thou afflict me? (5.3.181–2). He makes this choice not from despair, but as an assertion of will. Finding no pity in himself, he will ask for none. As Robert Weimann puts it, in *Richard III* 'It is not *Schicksalsdrama*, not the inscrutable workings of the gods, that finally tips the scales of life and death but the *Charakterdrama* of an individual passion and a self-willed personality.'[10] Richard's destiny is to die and be damned. The reason that he is finally tragic rather than pathetic is that he forces his own will into the deterministic equation.

Staging the early history plays

Shakespeare's early history plays were designed to be performed in Elizabethan public amphitheatres for audiences of two or three thousand.[11] Plays produced in these large, open theatres used little pictorial scenery and only the sorts of properties the actors themselves could carry on and off the stage. Scene changes were signified not by replacing one set with another, but simply by having one group of actors leave the stage and another enter. The generalised settings and the fast-paced dialogue characteristic of Elizabethan

acting allowed Shakespeare to shift rapidly between locations, as in *1 Henry VI*, for instance, without losing the attention of his audience.

It is difficult to tell which were Shakespeare's most popular history plays in the Tudor–Stuart period, although the six early editions of *Richard III* suggest that it was very well received. After the Restoration in 1660, the early histories seem to have been performed infrequently until the poet–actor Colley Cibber adapted *Richard III* in 1700. By cutting other parts, Cibber made the character of Richard even more prominent than it is in Shakespeare's version, and many noted actors used the role to establish or enhance their reputations. The *Henry VI* plays, by contrast, enjoyed relatively few productions between the Restoration and the end of the nineteenth century, and *Edward III* saw none at all.[12]

At the beginning of the twentieth century, a more scholarly approach to Elizabethan drama led to more productions of the *Henry VI* series and to an early revival of *Edward III*. It was not until midcentury, however, that the increasing use of a spare, symbolic staging more like that of the Elizabethan public theatres brought greater popularity to the chronicle plays.[13] Several twentieth-century productions cut and combined the three *Henry VI* plays into two, increasing the pace for a modern audience. Two Royal Shakespeare Company productions exemplify this technique: *The Wars of the Roses*, adapted by John Barton and directed by Peter Hall (1963), and *The Plantagenets*, a trilogy including *Richard III*, directed by Adrian Noble (1988).[14]

Along with the twentieth century's return to unlocalised staging came productions focused on the political allegory inherent in the history plays. During the Second World War, for example, the English actor Donald Wolfit incorporated his impressions of Hitler into his portrayal of Richard III.[15] A recent production of *Edward III* (1987) emphasised the development of Prince Edward into an exemplary leader.[16] Yet the absence of star parts in these plays (except for *Richard III*) continues to render them less popular as vehicles for contemporary actors, many of whom now want to capture their Shakespearean productions on film.

By and large, Shakespeare's early English histories are ensemble plays. Their effects are often achieved by indirect means, such as the juxtaposition of superficially dissimilar scenes in *1* and *2 Henry VI*, or the implied comparison between a group of women in *Richard III* and the single, aggressive male lead. A BBC video from the 1980s series captures some of this subtlety of design. Jane Howell directed the *Henry VI* sequence and *Richard III* using the same anti-realistic set throughout. Repeating roles such as Henry, Margaret, and Richard are played by the same actors, whose often restrained interpretations are reinforced by the intimacy of television. To watch all four tapes in this series certainly makes for a very long theatrical experience, but

it is one in which modern sympathies clearly make contact with many of the nuances of Shakespeare's political drama.

NOTES

1 Dedication, Campbell 1938.
2 Sidney 1965, p. 111.
3 The play is titled *The Tragedy of Richard III* on its first page in the Folio. Subsequent pages carry the running title 'The Life and Death of Richard the Third'.
4 This triangular structure is sometimes called Freytag's Pyramid, after Gustav Freytag, who described it in his *Technique of the Drama*, 1863. See Freytag 1896.
5 Jones 1977, pp. 222–3.
6 On Shakespeare's education, see Baldwin 1944.
7 Wells and Taylor 1987, p. 99, pp. 102–5.
8 *Ibid.*, p. 96.
9 For a definition and discussion of universal determinism, see 'Determinism in History' in Wiener 1973, II, 18–21.
10 Weimann, 1978, p. 160. See also Rabkin 1967, p. 251: 'At this moment, crucial both in the play and in Shakespeare's career, the play turns to tragedy.'
11 See Gurr, 1992.
12 See *E3*, ed. Melchiori 1998, p. 46.
13 See *1H6*, ed. Hattaway 1990, p. 44.
14 See Barton and Hall 1970, and Noble 1989.
15 See Colley 1992, p. 168.
16 *E3*, ed. Melchiori 1998, p. 48.