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Exploring Omissions from Historical Chronicles in  
Shakespeare's Second Tetralogy

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Requirements for Departmental Honors in English

Bridgewater State University

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Shakespeare excludes far more information than he includes from the Tudor chronicles that provide a historical basis for his English history plays. His many exclusions or omissions from the historical records of his time can be more illuminating than his inclusions, even as they tend to receive less attention from critics. The works of Edward Hall and Raphael Holinshed make up the bulk of background material for the plays' historical narratives. Eight of the ten (or eleven, if one includes *Edward III*) English history plays are divisible into two broad groups: the first tetralogy, consisting of the three parts of *Henry VI* along with *Richard III*, and the second tetralogy, made up of *Richard II*, the two parts of *Henry IV*, and *Henry V*. This analysis will focus on Shakespeare's omissions from historical chronicles in plays from the second tetralogy. The pattern of the playwright's exclusions from Holinshed in the second tetralogy draws attention to the lack of a fixed framework of historical causation in the English history plays.

One issue of import is Shakespeare's use of multiple historical sources for his history plays. Given the available evidence, we cannot know for certain why he used one work in place of another, but there is ample room for educated guessing. For reasons that remain murky, Hall provides the bulk of the background material in the first tetralogy, while Holinshed takes on a much greater role in the second, and there are numerous other sources, whether definite, probable, or possible. These range from the anonymous plays *Thomas of Woodstock* and *The Famous Victories of Henry V* to Samuel Daniel's epic poem *Civil Wars*, Froissart's *Chronicles* (in translation), *A Mirror for Magistrates*, and John Stow's *Annals of England*. We also know that Holinshed was not the sole author of the *Chronicles*. They were the work of multiple authors, each with differing religious views and political agendas. The large number of sources has led a few critics, such as J. Dover Wilson, to speculate that Shakespeare based at least some of his English history plays on works that are now lost, written by a long-forgotten person who was

steeped in English history to an extent that Shakespeare was supposedly incapable of reaching. This seems unlikely. It should not seem surprising that the playwright had an interest in English history and a corresponding appreciation for the multiple perspectives available in historical chronicles. Why should he limit himself to Hall or Holinshed? It is possible, too, that Shakespeare derived some of his historical knowledge not from written texts, but rather, from personal conversations with others or from viewing performances of plays such as *Woodstock* and *The Famous Victories of Henry the Fifth*. In any case, Shakespeare's lack of a college education or aristocratic background did not prevent him from being well-read.

It appears that the only sort of English historical records that Shakespeare failed to consult were ones available only in manuscript form at the time. Without being a professional historian, he must have lacked the time, inclination, and perhaps social influence to access these. Instead, the exigencies of theatrical performance took precedence. His occasional "minor confusions of names or muddles of fact," as Robert Ornstein has termed them, indicate that he was a playwright first and foremost, not an historian, but this does not allow us to conclude that he was uninterested in factual accuracy (Ornstein 22). Indeed, it is surprising that he does not make more errors in such a large body of work as his English history plays, given that most of his audience would not have expected strict historical accuracy in every detail.

The history of criticism on Shakespeare's English history plays also needs to be recognized. A convenient way to frame this discussion is through *Shakespeare's English Kings*, in which Peter Saccio situates Shakespeare's English history plays in the context of English history as it is now understood. His text is concerned with the historical events on which the plays are based rather than with the works' literary merits. Saccio does acknowledge that he, like other Shakespeareans trained in the 1960s, tends to reflect the influence of E. M. W. Tillyard in

his interpretation of the plays (229). This includes viewing the English history plays within a providential framework of historical causation founded on Christian doctrine.

Many of Tillyard's contemporaries shared this view, and a few critics continue in the same vein, but for the most part, Tillyard's argument for divine providence as the principal causal force in the English history plays has fallen out of favor. This summary will treat Tillyard as representative of all critics of his time, when in actuality Tillyard and his fellow critics were not a homogenous group. His work was highly influential, however, and his thesis is not so easily dismissed. In order to understand what later critics of the English history plays are reacting against, we must understand the Tudor myth. Saccio also credits the criticism of Robert Ornstein, who offers a strong counterargument to Tillyard in his *A Kingdom for a Stage*. Ornstein, too, is not the only critic to present a challenge to Tillyard, but he is a prominent example. The main point on which Ornstein differs from Tillyard is in arguing for Shakespeare's non-adherence to any "orthodox" Elizabethan view of history that emphasized the central role of divine providence as the ultimate cause of historical events. Tillyard saw Shakespeare's vision of history in the English history plays as a reflection of the zeitgeist of his time, if it can even be said that there was any one "conventional" outlook in the Elizabethan era, whether toward historical causation or otherwise. The tendency of more recent critics to dismiss Tillyard's views is due in part to a greater understanding that this was not the case. Ornstein, writing much later than Tillyard, emphasizes Shakespeare's role as an individual artist whose creative ingenuity allowed him to depart from orthodoxy without committing a flagrant breach of prevailing attitudes or expectations. Ornstein challenges Tillyard's emphasis on the teleological "Tudor myth" as a driving force behind Shakespeare's depiction of English history. It could be argued that the lack of overt social criticism or political underpinnings in the work of such critics as Tillyard is a

political statement in itself, one that is conservative in the sense that it rests on an assumption of unity and stability in the modern world order, with the result that one can examine artistic works such as Shakespeare's almost as if they were self-contained entities, situating them in their own historical context but refusing to judge them in the context of our contemporary political realities.

Ornstein argues against Tillyard's rendering of the Tudor myth as a driving force behind Shakespeare's depiction of the past, but he accepts that the playwright still had to work under various constraints in his portrayal of English history. Shakespeare could not, at least to a certain extent, simply make things up, for example. He could not depart from historical chronicles to such a degree that it would change the course of history: Henry cannot decide to stay in exile after Richard banishes him and his son still needs to win at Agincourt. Shakespeare's audience would have been annoyed otherwise. This is less true for the Roman history plays, with their much greater distance from Shakespeare's time, which eases suspension of disbelief, and for *King Lear*, which is more tragedy than history, more legendary than authentic in its account. At the same time, however, there is an enormous amount of flexibility in the material that makes up the Tudor historical record. Shakespeare takes full advantage of this malleability. The reality of his relative orthodoxy or heterodoxy – whether he was a conventional Tudor royalist as Tillyard suggests or, on the other hand, a subversive historical revisionist – was somewhere between the two extremes.

Late 20<sup>th</sup> century historiography, Saccio observes, has shifted our understanding of historical events closer to how Shakespeare depicts the past in his history plays. Given this revelation, it is tempting to conclude that Shakespeare, with his viewpoint now more closely aligned with our own (or with ours now closer to his), clearly must have understood how

medieval people think, with the assumption that "we," as whatever consensus exists with regard to our contemporary understanding of the past, clearly know how medieval people think.

Whether or not we make such an assumption, it seems clear that the history plays largely complement rather than contradict today's scholarship: given what we now know about English history, "Shakespeare is quite right to stress the personalities of his kings and their relationships with their nobles" and to show that "kings and other people operate out of a complexity of motives," as Saccio argues (236). Indeed, Shakespeare's account of history is often more compelling, despite its many inaccuracies and omissions, than the "reality" of historical fact as we understand it, albeit imperfectly. It is not unusual for a 21<sup>st</sup> century person's knowledge of the past to rely, in part, on Shakespeare's representation of the past, as with Richard III, whose scoliosis (in reality) is exaggerated in *Richard III* to make him a hideous hunchback. Despite our knowledge that the deformation of Richard's spine was not sufficient for this to be the case, it is safe to assume that many people who are familiar with the play will continue to ascribe qualities of the man in the play to the man that existed in actuality. Shakespeare's Richard evokes a stronger feeling of authenticity than the historical record ever can. Richard, as represented through the lens of a theatrical production, is more real to us than the Richard that becomes evident through studying his long-buried skeletal remains and examining dry historical chronicles.

In contrast to claims of Shakespeare's ideological orthodoxy, he in fact goes to great lengths to portray the flaws and limitations of English kings. Through his representation of history, he recognizes that issues such as the question of monarchical succession are not cut and dried. Rather, there is much moral ambiguity, uncertainty, and anxiety, whether in Henry Bullingbrook's time or in Shakespeare's own time. This is a more accurate reflection of reality

than what some earlier critics from the 20<sup>th</sup> century, such as Tillyard, presume to claim as Shakespeare's view or approach, and it is far from being orthodox propaganda. At the same time, the dramatist is beholden to the constraints of his chosen medium. He is likely to disregard any detail that would distract from or contradict the flow of the narrative. For instance, in his account of Henry IV's reign, Holinshed tells of a rumor that Richard was still alive (Bullough 186). Shakespeare makes no mention of it. This is because, with the performance of *Richard II*, he has already definitively killed off Richard's character, so it would be counterproductive for him to bring up an unnecessary distraction such as this tall tale. When Shakespeare makes use of Holinshed, he often takes material from the *Chronicles* but modifies and magnifies it. In the process, it becomes more compelling and suitable for a dramatic work.

Shakespeare's treatment of the Battle of Agincourt differs significantly from Holinshed's account, despite the fact that Holinshed was the playwright's main chronicle source for *Henry V*. In Holinshed's chronicle account, Henry overhears one of his men lamenting the fact that the French greatly outnumber them ("I would to God there were with vs now so manie good soldiers as are at this houre within England!"), which prompts him to respond:

I would not wish a man more here than I haue, we are indeed in comparison to the enimies but a few, but if God of his clemencie doo fauour vs, and our iust cause (as I trust he will) we shall spée well inough. But let no man ascribe victorie to our owne strength and might, but onelie to Gods assistance, to whome I haue no doubt we shall worthilie haue cause to giue thanks therefore. And if so be that for our offenses sakes we shall be deliuered into the hands of our enimies, the lesse number we be, the lesse damage shall the realme of England susteine: but if we

should fight in trust of multitude of men, and so get the victorie (our minds being prone to pride) we should thervpon peradventure ascribe the victorie not so much to the gift of God, as to our owne puissance, and thereby prouoke his high indignation and displeasure against vs: and if the enimie get the vpper hand, then should our realme and countrie suffer more damage and stand in further danger. But be you of good comfort, and shew your selues valiant, God and our iust quarrell shall defend vs, and deliuer these our proud aduersaries with all the multitude of them which you see (or at the least the most of them) into our hands.

(3.553)

Shakespeare attributes the initial comment about soldiers to Westmorland and modifies it thus: "O that we now had here / But one ten thousand of those men in England / That do no work today" (4.3.16-18)! Superficially, the revised version of the line does not seem very different, except for the part about men who "do no work," which reads like an attempt at guilt-tripping Englishmen into participating in military expeditions. The king quickly finishes Westmorland's half-line with "What's he that wishes so?" before launching into his famous St. Crispin's Day speech. The above passage from Holinshed has about as much (or little) dramatic interest as the chronicle ever does, but Shakespeare's rather loose adaptation of the same speech is in another league. The dramatist's version of Henry's speech is one of the more stirring moments in the play. The most obvious difference in the *Henry V* passage is the use of verse in place of prose. This choice by itself would make any passage more memorable, but the use of verse does not explain the speech's high regard.

The passage's use of repetition as a rhetorical device is probably its most distinctive feature, with Henry's repeated references to St. Crispin's Day that lend a sense of cohesiveness to his impassioned plea. Holinshed also makes reference to that day, 25 October, being St. Crispin's day. He calls it a "daie fair and fortunate to the English, but most sorrowfull and unluckie to the French," but he otherwise neglects the opportunity to appropriate the feast day for nationalist purposes, as Shakespeare does (3.553). It is unclear whether Holinshed, in this case, relied on Hall as a source, as he often did, or if he pulled Henry's speech out of thin air, as Hall undoubtedly did before him. In his own account, Hall notes that the battle took place on St. Crispin's Day but, like Holinshed, he does not make any mention of the day in Henry's oration (Hall 65-8). The speech that Hall attributes to Henry bears little resemblance to the Holinshed speech, and the rambling rant that he attributes to the Constable of France is absent from Holinshed and Shakespeare in any form. In both Shakespeare's Agincourt and Holinshed's Agincourt, the English win the battle, but the similarities end there, for the most part. Shakespeare's approach, in short, is to take a few small details from Holinshed and greatly expand on them, while leaving out the rest.

Another major way that Shakespeare's Henry oration differs from Holinshed's oration is the fact that it makes little mention of God. Henry seeks to convince his men that the opportunity to achieve earthly fame and glory is worth fighting for. "This story shall the good man teach his son," Henry tells his army, "And Crispin Crispian shall ne'er go by / From this day to the ending of the world / But we in it shall be remembered" (4.4.56-9). Crispin and Crispinian are Christian martyrs, but Henry's speech treats them more like props to support his passionate emotional appeal. Neither he nor any of his soldiers wants to become a martyr for his cause, as far as we know. Holinshed, in contrast, is very concerned with the possibility of God offering clemency

and assistance: if they win the battle, all thanks will be due to God. Given this discrepancy, we might conclude that *Henry V* posits a Machiavellian (as opposed to providential) view of historical causation that sees military victories, such as the English victory at Agincourt, and other earthly events as the result of human will rather than divine providence. But that would be an oversimplification. The reality of the play's balance between the different systems of thought is more opaque.

Henry's motivation for winning at Agincourt, as Phyllis Rackin describes it, is to erase the taint of his father's crime in usurping the throne. Bullingbrook's usurpation "threatens Henry's own aspirations for worldly power and success" (79). The reason Henry is so insistent, in speaking to his army, that they win the battle through their own efforts, without any mention of divine intervention aside from oaths like "God's will," is that he sees Agincourt as a divinely ordained trial by combat (4.3.23). Here he will have the opportunity to prove himself in the way that his father was denied at Coventry in the opening scene of *Richard II*. Henry seeks to prove by winning the battle that divine providence is on his side and thereby legitimate his rule, having demonstrated (though not conclusively) that "right makes might." Henry hides the fact that his apparent belief in divine providence is a sham: he is as pragmatic and Machiavellian as his father. After the battle, he insists that all credit is due to God, but this is no different from the victor of a trial-by-combat attributing his victory to divine favor. To think otherwise would threaten the legitimacy of Henry's crown.

Shakespeare, in spite of what some have argued, also made mistakes, whether in his use of historical chronicles or elsewhere. The truth of this would be impossible to acknowledge if we simply venerated him as a genius or believed that his errors were somehow volitional. Specifically, he made mistakes in his use of information from historical chronicles. Some of

them were the result of vague phrasing, ambiguity, and grammatical or typographical errors in the chronicles themselves. Geoffrey Bullough notes in his selections from Holinshed for *1 Henry IV* that one small mistake caused Shakespeare to think that Murdoch, the Earl of Fife, was the son of the Earl of Douglas. The offending passage, which lists men taken prisoner in the Battle of Humbleton Hill early in Henry's reign, mentions "Mordacke earle of Fife, son to the govenour Archembald earle Dowglas, which in the fight lost one of his eies" (Bullough 183). An omitted comma after the word "govenour" led Shakespeare to error (183n4). Another point of confusion occurs when, in *1 Henry IV*, Shakespeare repeats the mistake of conflating Edmund Mortimer, the man who married Owen Glendower's daughter after he was sent to Wales, with his nephew, also named Edmund, who was at the time Earl of March – not to be confused with George Dunbar, the Scottish Earl of March. This understandable error is present in both Holinshed and Daniel's *Civil Wars*.

In his third volume, Bullough discusses the history of English historiography and its relevance to Shakespeare, including many works with which the dramatist was likely familiar, even if they are not quoted directly on the stage. John Hardyng, for example, is notable insofar as Holinshed, Hall, and Stow use him as a source (Bullough 7). Whether or not the dramatist read him directly, then, he has at least an indirect influence. Hardyng is also a primary source for much of the material that he covers, though this does not necessarily make him more reliable, and the simplistic language of his verse-chronicle shows the limitations of any one eyewitness account. With the English history plays, Shakespeare fuses multiple historical narratives into a unified account of English history that benefits from the increased depth of historical nuance that thus use of the chronicles provides.

Polydore Vergil would also have influenced Shakespeare in some fashion. Unlike Hardyng, Vergil was innovative, for his time, in his preoccupation with being factually accurate. As a foreigner, he was skeptical of peculiar English beliefs and customs, such as the absurd yet commonplace Trojan origin story of Britain. He was concerned with cause and effect, seeing history as a cycle of connected events, although the supposed causal relationships that he susses out from the mists of time may seem dubious to us. His idea of causation was rooted in his conception of divine providence. Viewing the period of English history from the reign of Richard II to Henry VII, Vergil sees "the justice of God punishing and working out the effects of a crime, till prosperity is re-established in the Tudor monarchy" (Tillyard 36). Vergil acted on an inclination to build order out of chaos, to find meaning in the seeming randomness and senselessness of human history. Rather than attributing historical happenings to fickle Fortune, Vergil found God's hand at work throughout history. For this reason, he was an important precursor influence on Hall and Holinshed.

Holinshed's own omissions, in his case from Hall, whose chronicle provides much of his material relating to English history, are numerous, as are the distortions and outright errors that are introduced in the process. It is important to note that Holinshed was not the sole author of the chronicle that bears his name. Holinshed died in 1580, long before the 1587 edition of the *Chronicles* (that Shakespeare used) was published. Holinshed was, however, primarily responsible for the sections on English history that Shakespeare employed. With Holinshed, and unlike most other chroniclers of his time, it is not always easy to determine what the author's underlying ideology might be. There is often a protective coating of objectivity in Holinshed, as when he describes Thomas Percy, Earl of Worcester, as one "whose studie was ever (as some write) to procure malice" (Bullough 184). Holinshed's frequent use of the phrase "as some write"

allows him, in this case, to pass judgment on Worcester's character without the judgment being attributed to himself or even making a direct attribution at all. Then again, it is possible that Holinshed and his fellow Tudor chroniclers merely had a benign intention to achieve a sort of objectivity, or at least a neutral point of view, by collecting as many reputable (which is to say, derived from the written record of the elite) accounts of history as possible and presenting them in such a way that a "parallax" effect is achieved by viewing any given historical event through multiple complementary lenses.

One can sense a number of different motivations in Shakespeare's numerous omissions from Holinshed in *Richard II*. Bullough names a few of them: "Richard's courage during the Peasants' Revolt in 1381, Walworth's killing of Wat Tyler, the King's restlessness under tutelage, Gaunt's exploits abroad, the ebb and flow of relations with France and Scotland," and the entire issue of the Lollards (362). Though each of these events has potential dramatic interest, none of them relates directly to the play's primary concerns in terms of Richard's fall and the legitimacy of Henry's usurpation, and chronologically, the topics are too far removed from the rest of the events in the play. The Lollard controversy would best be avoided because of its religiously divisive nature. More than anything else, the time constraints of theatrical performance would prevent the play from reaching anything like the comprehensiveness of a historical chronicle. It seems clear that if *Richard II* were our only source of knowledge on Richard as a real historical figure, our view of the man would be woefully incomplete. Shakespeare's chosen omissions from the chronicles are a major determinant of the audience's emotional response to Richard's dramatic portrayal. This is true to an even greater extent in *Richard III*, where the king is portrayed as an outright Machiavellian villain without any redeeming qualities, despite what historical chronicles might suggest to the contrary.

Furthermore, there are significant differences between the content of *Richard II* as originally performed and the play as it was first printed. In the first three quartos of the play, the now-famous Deposition Scene was not printed, presumably because it was censored (Bullough 353). This was not the case with Holinshed's own account of the deposition, for which there is no evidence of censorship, despite there being other censorship in the 1587 edition of the *Chronicles* (Clegg 58). The fact that a work of historiography escaped censorship on this point while a play did not could indicate that there was a double standard at work with regard to censorship of various print media. Or perhaps the attitude toward censorship changed over time, becoming more draconian at some point between the publication of the *Chronicles* and the *Richard II* quartos. Or it might simply be the result of inconsistent enforcement mechanisms between Tudor historiography and English history plays as literary genres, or between print and stage performance as media.

Many of Shakespeare's modifications have the effect of casting Richard in a more sympathetic light. If we cannot be certain of Shakespeare's intentions, we can be more certain of the consequences of his artistic decisions. Bullough writes:

Some of Shakespeare's omissions were obviously for dramatic concentration.

Thus, Richard's campaign in Ireland (his second, for he had been over in 1394 and achieved remarkable success in pacifying both the 'savage Irish' and the 'rebel Irish') was only relevant to what happened in England insofar as it took him out of the country, to his disadvantage when Bolingbroke landed, and also increased his financial difficulties. Shakespeare ascribes his 'farming' his 'blank charters' and

his seizure of Gaunt's valuables to the needs of the campaign—a mild explanation of his extortionate practices. (363)

Similarly, Hall omits Richard's invasion of Ireland because it would distract from his focus on the conflict between Richard and Bullingbrook. Another example of Shakespeare's attempt to garner audience sympathy for Richard is his treatment of the articles of deposition that are read to the king. Rather than covering the full 33 articles that Holinshed enumerates, giving a full account of Richard's misrule, Shakespeare only mentions enough to show the seriousness of Richard's peril and thereby positions him as an underdog that deserves our sympathy. Holinshed had a different motivation. By enumerating the articles of deposition in painstaking detail, Holinshed emphasizes Parliament's role in Richard's deposition, and in doing so, subtly critiques the monarch's authority (Patterson 114). Shakespeare and other chroniclers, such as Hall, may have found such an approach to be too politically charged, if they had any reason to go that route.

Investigating Shakespeare's use of historical chronicles in the first part of *Henry IV* helps to illuminate his methodology as a playwright. For instance, Shakespeare has Henry explicitly tell Hal that Hotspur is "no more in debt to years" than young Hal (3.2.103). This would mean that they are about the same age, which is factually incorrect. In actuality, Hotspur was older than Henry himself. The playwright nonetheless must have felt that this lie was necessary in order to help establish a rivalry between the two. Other changes are the result of constraints inherent to the Elizabethan stage. The Battle of Shrewsbury is shown as a series of small-scale duels rather than one epic encounter. In comparison with Holinshed, Hal's role in Shrewsbury is emphasized to an ahistorical degree, while the King's role is de-emphasized.

More generally, the playwright's treatment of the Battle of Shrewsbury and its aftermath provides a useful illustration of the many ways in which he selectively includes, omits, and modifies portions of his source material. The most striking difference is Shakespeare's choice to make Hal kill Hotspur (5.4.59-110). In Holinshed, the situation is nebulous: after claiming that Henry slew 36 foes in the battle, Holinshed notes that "the other on his part incouraged by his doings, fought valiantlie, and slue the lord Persie, called sir Henrie Honspurre" (Bullough 191). The context does not make clear to whom "the other" refers. In Hall's chronicle, it seems almost certain that Hal was not responsible for Hotspur's death, but this was clearly not the source that Shakespeare relied on in this case (191n6). Holinshed, in his usual borrowing from and compression of Hall, has left out details here for the sake of brevity, with the result that he writes in a vague way that is open to interpretation. *1 Henry IV* shows no such ambiguity on this point, choosing to interpret Holinshed's "the other" to mean Hal.

Falstaff is the most prominent example, in any of the English history plays, of a fictitious insertion into the historical narrative. No violation of historical verisimilitude could be more felicitous. Mostly because of Falstaff's substantial presence, *1 Henry IV* relies on historical source materials less than any of the other history plays, yet the play's numerous Falstaff scenes derive much of their importance from their relationship with the play's historical narrative, and vice versa (Kastan 14). Falstaff radiates a sense of historical anachronism. One of his more amusing properties is that he carries a pistol (5.3.52). It is difficult to imagine the play without him, yet the history of his inclusion in the play shows that his original incarnation, as "Oldcastle," was removed and replaced with the "Falstaff" name with which we are now familiar. In his discussion of *1 Henry IV*, Bullough identifies the aforementioned *Famous Victories* as a source. From this Shakespeare lifts a great deal of material, including a few

character names, most notably that of Oldcastle. Most of all, though, Shakespeare learned from *Famous Victories* "how to fuse comedy and history" into a cohesive whole (168). The play's comic scenes are integral to the historical plot.

The overall effect of the playwright's approach to English history is a vividness and dramatic intensity that is diametrically opposed to the plodding, tedious, mundane state of affairs that the historical chronicles often convey. Shakespeare compresses the major crises of Henry's reign in such a way that "shape and spread and moral meaning" are extracted from Holinshed, often taking what amount to vague hints from the historical record and molding them into compelling characters, like Mortimer, Glendower, and others, using the chronicle as raw material to construct a work that is greater than the sum of its parts (Baker 885). To use a historical anachronism (in the spirit of Elizabethan drama), there is much that gets left on the cutting room floor, such as Henry's years of toil to enact ecclesiastical reforms toward the end of his reign. This would not make for gripping drama. There can be such shifting and compressing of events, often with the aim of achieving certain dramatic effects, that the result bears little resemblance to the chronicle on which it is based. Some material is simply too boring, too lacking in dramatic potential, or otherwise unsuitable for the stage. For the most part, however, we are left with highly concentrated character portraits, not easily forgotten, that capture the essence of people and the age in which they lived while simultaneously telling us about ourselves.

In the same vein, Shakespeare departs from Holinshed whenever it serves his dramatic purpose, as when he leaves out minor, unnecessary details that would distract from the flow of the narrative. An example of a more bizarre item from the chronicles is Holinshed's account of the Earl Douglas's fate after losing at Shrewsbury. He writes that Douglas fell "from the crag of an hie mounteine" as he fled from the battle, perhaps (if we might speculate) due to his poor

depth perception after having lost an eye at Homildon. When he fell, the earl "brake one of his cullions" or testicles (Bullough 191). Shakespeare tells us simply that he is "so bruised" after "falling from a hill" that his pursuers are able to catch up with him (5.5.21). The chronicle's more colorful details are toned down to fit the mood of the play's concluding scene.

Hall, whose chronicle plays a major role as a source for the first tetralogy, and to a lesser extent, the second, sees a "moral purpose" working across historical events (Bullough 10). He tries to show the role of divine providence throughout English history, forging a link between "the union of mariage" as a religious sacrament and "peace betwene realme and realme" (i.e., political unity), achieved through "The Union of the two noble and illustre famelies of Lancastre and Yorke," which is also the first part of the very long title of his chronicle. In other words, Hall is referring to the marriage of Henry VII and Elizabeth of York, which united the Houses of York and Lancaster and (mostly) ended the Wars of the Roses (Bullough 17). Hall is preoccupied with the horrors of disorder and internal strife, whether in England or elsewhere:

What mischeife hath insurged in realmes by intestine devision, what depopulacion hath ensued in countries by civill discencion, what detestable murder hath been committed in citees by seporate faccions, and what calamitee hath ensued in famous regions by domestical discord & unnaturall controversy: Rome hath felt, Italy can testifie, Fraunce can bere witnes, Beame can tell, Scotlande maie write, Denmarke can shewe, and especially this noble realme of Englande can apparantly declare and make demonstracion. (Bullough 16)

For Hall, the union of Lancaster and York provided a solution to this "unnaturall devision" in both a literal and a symbolic sense (16). He exalts a political event to a spiritual level. This ideology, for Tillyard, makes Hall responsible for formulating and advancing the Tudor myth (42). Tillyard reads a pattern in Hall's moralizing of history in such a way that an alternating series of English kings, beginning with Henry IV, pays penance for the sinful usurpation of Richard II, until finally order is restored with the glorious reign of the Tudors, beginning with Henry VII and continuing into Shakespeare's relatively stable Elizabethan present.

Other changes that Shakespeare made in his adaptation of historical chronicles reflect an Elizabethan worldview generally and could be expected regardless of Shakespeare's own peculiarities. Especially when we consider *Richard II*, there is a good chance that Shakespeare read the *Chronicles* of Jean Froissart, as translated by Lord Berners earlier in the century. Froissart, a privileged French chronicler and poet who visited England in Richard II's time and became a member of his court, had an aristocratic, medieval worldview that permeated his chronicles. One of Froissart's concerns with Richard is that he failed to prevent division and conflict from arising among the English aristocracy, whereas Shakespeare is much more concerned with Richard's "farming" of the realm, which reflects the Elizabethan reality of far greater political unity within Britain (Bullough 368). The emerging nationalism present in Shakespeare and his contemporaries, including Elizabethan historiographers, stands in contrast to the relative lack of nationalist sentiment in earlier history writers, such as Vergil, who, for his part, had the added distinction of being a non-Englishman.

Another possible explanation for Shakespeare's numerous omissions from historical chronicles lies in the playwright's assumptions (or, what we assume to be his assumptions) about his audience's knowledge of history. The anonymous play *Woodstock* almost certainly influenced

Shakespeare's composition of *Richard II*. Though Shakespeare's play is not a "sequel" to *Woodstock*, it does seem that Shakespeare assumed audience members at performances of *Richard II* would be familiar with aspects of the plot and background information in *Richard II* because this material had already been covered in *Woodstock*. If this was the case, it would fit into the argument that the illiterate portion of Shakespeare's play-going audience learned about English history almost entirely through the medium of theatrical performances, whether through the work of Shakespeare or his contemporaries. In this case, the role of the dramatist in shaping people's perceptions of history, and thus history itself, becomes all the more significant. His choices to include, modify, or omit material could have a more lasting significance than historical events themselves.

Source studies scholars face difficulties in attempting to show the influence of one author's work on the work of another – in this case, demonstrating the influence of other authors on Shakespeare. Aside from cases where the playwright quotes from an historian directly, there is inevitably going to be a great deal of subjectivity in any judgment of a supposed correspondence between the two. Bullough himself is quick to acknowledge that the links he finds are often less than conclusive. In the case of Froissart's influence, he admits that "such minor resemblances" as he has uncovered "do not prove that Shakespeare owed much specifically to Froissart" (369). He goes on to say, however, that he has "no doubt" that the playwright read Lord Berners's translation of Froissart's work, and that it provided Shakespeare with "hints" for his characterization of Gaunt, his use of the Queen as a source of pathos, and his "unusually sympathetic attitude" toward Richard (369). This is a judgment call on Bullough's part, not a definitive statement of fact. If he is perhaps slightly over-enthusiastic on occasion in his diligent search for evidence of connections between Shakespeare and other authors, it is

forgivable. We must keep in mind, as Bullough does, the possibility that some parallels "may be explained as coincidences," as he remarks in his analysis of a French manuscript known as the *Traison* chronicle (370). One must not be too quick to claim that there is a causal relationship between a Shakespearean work and some chronicle or other when direct evidence of the link is lacking. It is natural for us to want to find such a connection and we may even disregard evidence that contradicts our prior assumptions in the quest for confirmation of our pet theories. Unfortunately, in order for useful results to come from Bullough's field of work, the required degree of certainty with which we can draw conclusions must be less stringent than, say, applied physics. It is a truism that "correlation does not imply causation," but since we cannot prove causation in Shakespearean source studies, the best we can hope for is a high degree of probability that any given conclusion is correct.

Even if there is a certain amount of inescapable uncertainty in source studies when trying to evaluate the influence of a particular author or work, we can still identify a number of common threads that run through works such as Shakespeare's English history plays. One of the many Elizabethan commonplaces present in Shakespeare's work is the notion of order or degree, in which earthly affairs correspond with the divine order of the universe. Tillyard cites a passage from *Troilus and Cressida* as the exemplar of Shakespeare's perspective. "O, when degree is shak'd, / Which is the ladder of all high designs," Ulysses exclaims,

The enterprise is sick. How could communities,  
Degrees in schools, and brotherhoods in cities,  
Peaceful commerce from dividable shores,  
The primogenity and due of birth,

Prerogative of age, crowns, sceptres, laurels,  
 But by degree stand in authentic place?  
 Take but degree away, untune that string,  
 And hark what discord follows. (1.3.101-10)

It is unusual for an Elizabethan commonplace to be stated in such explicit terms, perhaps because it was difficult to make such statements eloquently, without sounding trite, even during the Elizabethan era. John of Gaunt's paean to England in *Richard II* is a similar expression of an idealized vision of English society, showing what Shakespeare saw as the late medieval ideal of English kingship, but also providing evidence of a providential strain of thought that runs through the first tetralogy and into *Richard II*, reinforcing the notion that Henry Bullingbrook's actions run counter to the medieval kingship ideal (2.1.31-68). The playwright's statement of this doctrine resembles Hall's lamentation of the history of English political discord and his fantasy of the union between Lancaster and York as both an earthly and divine resolution to past strife. The difference between the two statements is that Hall makes a normative claim, expressing his argument that English history should be viewed a certain way, while Shakespeare seems more interested in exploring English history in all its complexity without making a definite claim to the legitimacy any single doctrine.

It should come as no surprise to find evidence that Shakespeare appropriates Hall's providential narrative, considering the pervasive influence of this narrative in Tudor political affairs. But it would be a mistake to conclude, given this revelation, that either of them views historical causation as entirely providential in nature. In the works of Hall and other chroniclers of his time, "moralistic judgments stand side by side with shrewdly realistic observations of

political life," such that we cannot pin them down as having exclusively either a providential or Machiavellian view of historical causation (Ornstein 20). Even if Hall or some of the other Tudor chroniclers saw God's will as the first or ultimate cause of historical events, this did not necessarily prevent them from exploring proximate or second causes in the everyday, earthly affairs of human beings. Although the Machiavellian view is sometimes portrayed as an "atheist" doctrine, the two perspectives need not be fully incompatible. The medieval monks who served as the earliest English historical chroniclers were willing enough to attribute human causes to an event, provided it were understood that the ultimate cause is always divine providence. There could be any number of secondary causes for which humans or other forces are responsible, leading back to the primary cause in chain of causal events stretching to the dawn of time.

In Shakespeare's case, there is no single defining vision of history that directs the English history plays. The unity that some critics have sought to identify in the plays falls apart under closer scrutiny. As David Scott Kastan writes in his introduction to *1 Henry IV*:

Indeed the eight plays are each so different in their use and conception of history that on that ground alone it is impossible to see them as the individual tesserae of a single grand mosaic. No single model of history emerges from the plays. If they do not uniformly enact or affirm God's providential design, neither do they inevitably assert the truth of a Machiavellian *Realpolitik*: the pious Henry VI is destroyed by a Machiavellian monster, but that monster is in turn undone by what are seemingly the actions of a benign providence (Rackin, esp. 27-30). The plays explore different ways of understanding and ordering the past, and Shakespeare experiments with various formal strategies as he seeks to turn history into

dramatic form: chronicle history, homiletic tragedy, saturnalian comedy, the prodigal son play, epic, and these often in improbable mixtures that bring incompatible versions of history into contact and conflict. (12)

The binary opposition between providential and Machiavellian views of causation forms a dialectic in which the conflict between thesis and antithesis is left unresolved, and the audience is given the impossible task of trying to synthesize the two perspectives. The dramatic energy that results from this conflict is no accident. It is the life-blood of the English history plays, taken collectively. History is treated as a subject open to interpretation and reinterpretation, continually re-enacted on stage. Phyllis Rackin emphasizes the importance of the plays as playscripts that are meant to be performed in the theatre rather than read as inert works of literature. For Rackin, among others, theatrical performance has a polyphonic or multi-voiced quality in being subject to a greater degree of unpredictability and random chance than other art forms. In comparison with a typical literary work, where a single author can exert a moderate amount of control over how his or her ideas are expressed and disseminated, an Elizabethan playwright, such as Shakespeare, had less control.

The Tudor historical chronicles, Rackin argues, are at the opposite end of the expressive spectrum. "Authoritative and univocal," they "mystified and obscured cultural contradictions," whereas the enactment of a theatrical performance exposed contradictions and tensions "in a cacophony of contending voices" (23). In this sense, the most significant thing that the English history plays "leave behind" from the historical chronicles is the written medium itself, when they are performed. In the act of performance, the plays become a hybrid medium with the advantages of both writing and speaking, but with the possibility of overcoming their respective

disadvantages. Women and plebeian men have an opportunity to be represented on the Elizabethan stage, albeit in a severely limited fashion. Unwritten history, otherwise ignored, gets acted out. The audience is invited to grapple with the ideological battles that play out on stage. "Exploring the dramatic implications and exploiting the theatrical potential of rival theories of historical causation," Rackin writes, "the plays project into dramatic conflict an important ideological conflict that existed in their own time, not only by having dramatic characters speak and act from opposing ideological vantage points but also by inciting these conflicts among their audiences" (44-5). Stage performance of the history plays is, in part, a cooperative, reciprocal process of filling in gaps in the historical record that results in a multiplicity of new historical perspectives that vary between any given performance of a play and any individual viewer,

My intention is not to evaluate the factual accuracy of Shakespeare's plays or the historical chronicles of his time in their portrayal of history. The extent to which Shakespeare values factual accuracy in his English history plays is debatable. The chroniclers themselves are not necessarily any more reliable. It is safe to say that historiography has come a long way since the Elizabethan era. On a humorous note, Tillyard draws attention to Holinshed's obtuse belief in the genuineness of an oration by the Duke of York in Hall's chronicle that is clearly a fabrication. "It takes no very sharp eye," Tillyard writes, "to detect that the Duke of York's speech is entirely fictitious and purely dramatic, but Holinshed has not got beyond an uneasy feeling that perhaps it isn't all genuine" (51). As we see, then, the chroniclers themselves were unable to determine the veracity of other chronicles, or indeed, their own chronicles. They, like the viewers of a play, were willing to suspend disbelief for the sake of constructing a cohesive, coherent historical narrative that had a comforting air of authenticity. Reading the plays at a great distance from their original performance, we are now forced to question Vernon's assurance to Hotspur that

Prince Hal spoke of Hotspur's "deservings" in a way that sounded "like a chronicle," with the implication that Hal's praise of Hotspur was "as detailed and truthful as in a historical record" (5.2.57n). An additional implication of this line is that the history play, of which Vernon is unwittingly a part, is positioned as less detailed and truthful than a chronicle. It is arguable whether the plays are more or less "detailed" than the chronicles, depending on whether one includes details of the plays that are complete fabrications, convincing as they may be. As for the second quality, the assumed "truth" of the historical record, there is little doubt that the history plays have a certain truth of their own in their ability to capture human nature in a way that captivates us.

Part of the accomplishment of the English history plays is to enact scenes from the unwritten oral histories of the common people, whom historical chroniclers once ignored in favor of the elite minority whose exploits they recorded with great care. Editors of Shakespeare's English history plays are quick to note when a scene has "no historical basis," as David Scott Kastan often does in the Arden edition of *I Henry IV*, but these scenes do serve a dramatic purpose. They lend a feeling of depth to the historical plot, making the history that the playwright depicts seem more realistic than it otherwise would, as when Williams, a common soldier at Agincourt, reveals his innermost thoughts to the disguised king. If the king's cause for conquering France "be not good," Williams tells Henry,

the King himself hath a heavy reckoning to make when all those legs and arms  
and heads chopped off in a battle shall join together at the latter day and cry all  
'We died at such a place', some swearing, some crying for a surgeon, some upon  
their wives left poor behind them, some upon the debts they owe, some upon their

children rawly left. I am afeard there are few die well that die in a battle, for how can they charitably dispose of anything when blood is their argument? Now if these men do not die well it will be a black matter for the King, that led them to it, who to disobey were against all proportion of subjection. (4.1.134-46)

Such a statement might be considered treasonous if it were not for the fact that the King himself sought the man's opinion. Williams "gives voice to the forgotten casualties of Henry's great historic enterprise," expressing what a historical chronicle could not (Rackin 244). The dialogue between Henry and Williams that follows the above passage is also written in prose. It is a more accurate representation of the speech of common people and the oral tradition that they carry on. Aside from indicating the reduced formality that goes along with Williams's low social status, the use of prose means that these lines will be more difficult for actors to memorize than verse lines. As a result, some improvisation was more likely to happen during performance, and this would also make censorship more difficult to impose, since the censors typically read the playscript ahead of time without expecting, or perhaps without caring, whether actors improvised their lines during the actual performance. This may sound like a minor thing, an insignificant victory over the Elizabethan status quo, but it is only a small part of the powerful forces that theatrical performance set loose in early modern England.

Despite the many deficiencies of Holinshed and his contemporaries, they were adequate for their time, and most importantly for our purposes, they were adequate for Shakespeare. Critics such as Annabel Patterson, Paola Pugliatti, and Paulina Kewes have called for a greater recognition of the *Chronicles* as a significant work in itself, in contrast to the traditional tendency to think of it as a dry and dusty tome (or stack of tomes) valuable only insofar as Shakespeare

used it. Patterson makes a case that the *Chronicles* are multivocal in their religious and political ideology in the same way that Shakespeare's English history plays exhibit multivocality. On this point, she disagrees with Phyllis Rackin, who views the chronicles as basically univocal. The chroniclers themselves were generally not aristocrats but rather, were members of the emerging middle class. Like the printed editions of Shakespeare's works, the *Chronicles* came from commercial printers, not royal commission. A consequence was that Holinshed and other professional historians subverted the idea of power and authority in Tudor England even as they worked from within the system as members of the educated elite. Kewes and other critics have further explored this approach to Holinshed and attempted to extrapolate it to other Elizabethan cultural productions. Whether or not Patterson's claim of multivocality in Holinshed is accurate to its full extent, it is increasingly evident that the Tudor chroniclers were not mere compilers of information. Their work reflects and participates in the broader circulation of social energy in Renaissance England, showing that historiography can serve as an expression of national identity while subverting and transforming that identity in the process.

When contemplating the extent of Shakespeare's indebtedness to Raphael Holinshed in the second tetralogy, it is easy to forget the role of Edward Hall. In addition to Hall's influence on Holinshed, whose own influence on Shakespeare is evident throughout the second tetralogy in particular, Tillyard stresses Hall's importance as a "shaper of Tudor historical thought" (42). Also, to a greater extent than Holinshed, Hall's historical narrative has literary merit. With the benefit of hindsight, we can see that Hall's major themes involve a moralistic view toward history, a transition from the Middle Ages to the Renaissance, an ongoing waning of religious authority, and a growing sense of nationalism. Perhaps most significant, however, is Hall's talent for dramatizing history, presenting the chain of historical events as a never-ending moral drama.

Vergil and Thomas More, in their own histories, engage in a similar kind of dramatizing, but their drama lies with presenting historical events as dramatic moments in themselves, whereas Hall's great innovation is to interconnect these events in a coherent moral framework. Hall's moralistic didacticism is intended mainly to give a good example for princes. This may seem like a very narrow focus, but as Tillyard observes, the approach is in line with an increasingly narrow telescoping of didacticism throughout English history (49). Shakespeare, in comparison, had both the blessing and curse of working with a mixed audience. He may have had the opportunity to instruct and instill virtue in princes, if he wished, but he also had to entertain the groundlings.

Nonetheless, there was much that Shakespeare could assume that his audience already knew, and in a sense, this body of knowledge forms a large part of what Shakespeare omits. The content might include historical details, such as the background information that the audience of *Richard II* may have already picked up from a performance of *Woodstock* or other history plays. A thorough familiarity with the Bible was assumed. More broadly, the audience's shared cultural memory would include more abstract commonplaces of the Elizabethan era, such as the view that "history teaches us what to imitate and what to shun" (Tillyard 56). These ideas are not often stated directly, as in *Troilus and Cressida*. We must also consider the role of other literary works, such as *A Mirror for Magistrates* and *Gorboduc*, that form a bridge between the dramatization of history in Hall's chronicles and the far more sophisticated drama of the Elizabethan stage. The *Mirror* is itself, in part, an extrapolation of Elizabethan commonplaces, with its moral/didactic view of history. It forms part of the tradition that Shakespeare uses as a jumping-off point for his own work and serves as a reminder that Shakespeare was not starting from scratch. As with any work of literature – or perhaps anything at all, given a cyclical view of

history – none of his work can be called "original" in the sense that it is completely independent of prior art.

Igor Djordjevic observes that Shakespeare himself, like many of his contemporaries, recognized that the study of history has didactic value (513). He refers to a passage from *2 Henry IV* in which Warwick tells Henry that

There is a history in all men's lives,  
Figuring the nature of the times deceas'd,  
The which observ'd, a man may prophesy,  
With a near aim, of the main chance of things  
As yet not come to life, who in their seeds  
And weak beginning lie intreasured. (3.2.80-5)

Warwick speaks of a certain kind of historiographical knowledge that allowed Richard to predict Northumberland's betrayal of Henry, but Warwick's notion of historiography is wrapped up in mystical terms of "prophesy," which seems out of place in a statement about "history." There is a suggestion that Henry will face divine retribution for his "foul sin" of usurping Richard's throne, and that Northumberland's treachery is a manifestation of that divine punishment (3.2.76). This characterization of historiography may seem to be at odds with the notion that we can derive didactic value from studying the past. If the future is already written in the "history of all men's lives," waiting for those who are discerning enough to read it, aren't one's own actions already predetermined as well? If so, what is the point of studying history to determine what one's future course of action should be if that action can never be changed? But this isn't necessarily the case.

Warwick refers to the "main chance" or general probability of things as being deducible from such an investigation, which suggests that there is an element of uncertainty and randomness in life that unavoidably clouds one's view of the future. For some, this might be a source of comfort, an affirmation of free will. For Henry, though, it is a source of anxiety. "O God," he laments, "that one might read the book of fate, / And see the revolution of the times" (3.2.45-6). He is no longer his old self, no longer confident in the expediency of his Machiavellian schemes. It is surprising that Henry would turn for solace to the concept of fate instead of relying on divine providence – assuming that he does not conflate the two. Even if we assume that he distinguishes between fate (associated with natural law in Catholic theology and operating beneath God) and providence, how can Henry expect a perfect knowledge of fate to save him from the divine punishment that he fears for his "foul sin" of usurping the throne (3.2.76)? The answer may lie in the second tetralogy's ambiguous treatment of historical causation.

In his *Defence of Poesy*, Philip Sidney famously disparages history-writing and the study of history as too concerned with minute particularities. Philosophy, with its pointless preoccupation with abstract generalities, is at the opposite pole. Literature, meanwhile, is the perfect blend of both. Given this stance, it is notable that Sidney refers to *A Mirror for Magistrates* in a positive light, since the *Mirror* is a literary work that, like Shakespeare's English history plays, is derived largely from the historiography that Sidney criticizes. Sidney argues that literature is superior to the study of history because literature can smooth out the moral ambiguity, seeming meaninglessness, and horror that haunt human history. Literature gives a clear view of right and wrong. The problem is that this approach belies the reality of human suffering and the problem of evil. Shakespeare's English history plays, especially when they are viewed as a sequence, confront ambiguity and uncertainty head-on rather than trying to ignore

the historicity of human experience. With Shakespeare, history was absorbed into the realm of literature to an unprecedented degree. Literature became valuable as an expression of what we think human experience is, or was, or will be, not just what it should have been or should be. Of course, what we think and write about history is distinct from "history" itself, which remains inaccessible. That the terms "history" and "historiography" are so often conflated owes a debt to Shakespeare, whose second tetralogy, in particular, came closer than any prior work of literature or history-writing to achieving the ideal of a literary work that produces a perfect illusion of causality and authenticity.

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