

“An Improbable Fiction”:
The Marriage of History and Romance in Shakespeare’s *Henriad*

by

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ABSTRACT

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The Marriage of History and Romance in Shakespeare’s *Henriad*

This study concerns how historical narrative is formed in Shakespeare’s second tetralogy, *Richard II*; *Henry IV, Part 1*; *Henry IV, Part 2*; and *Henry V*. I argue that the influence of romance narratives within this set of plays is important to the overall series because Shakespeare’s focus on individuals, rather than the state, subverts the epic agenda of the plays, and opens them to the motifs and concerns of romance. Some of the distinct romance narratological devices used in these plays include narrative anachronies, digressions, and extradiegetic narratives. Gerard Genette’s *Narrative Discourse* is my theoretical focal point, because like Genette, I am interested in how narratives are formed and structured. However, this study goes beyond a structural exploration. I also use close reading to investigate romance themes within these history plays, including the tension between providence and contingency, the prodigal son theme, and the ethical problems of self-interest.

While scholars have acknowledged for some time that genres do not have impermeable boundaries, I argue that applying the classifications of romance to the history plays helps us to gain a better understanding of Shakespeare’s project, and characters, on the whole. As part of my project, I include the previously apocryphal play, *Edward III*, in my analysis as a prequel to *Richard II*. Essentially, adding *Edward III* to the canon has made it possible to look at the history plays as a cycle that not only follows

the Lancastrian line through the usurpation of Richard II's throne through the Wars of the Roses but also as a series that documents the entire Hundred Years' War as a romance drama. In order to show connections between the history and romance genres, I use Thomas Lodge's *Rosalynde*, Robert Greene's *Pandosto*, and John Lyly's *Euphues: The Anatomy of Wit*, among others, for comparison with Shakespeare's *Henriad*.

PREVIEW

Preface

My husband and I got married in May 2001, and for our honeymoon, we went to the Stratford Festival of Canada, spending the first week of our married life watching Shakespeare plays. That season, the Stratford Festival presented the *Henriad* (*Richard II*, *1 Henry IV*, *2 Henry IV*, and *Henry V*) in its entirety, with each actor playing the same character throughout the series. Because of our schedule during the trip, we were only able to see two of the four plays – *1 Henry IV* and *Henry V*. At the time, I had only just discovered my love of Shakespeare, so I hadn't read the whole tetralogy, only *1 Henry IV*. I was very interested to see how things worked out in the rest of the series. *1 Henry IV* was an excellent production, starring Graham Abbey as Prince Hal. I was delighted to see this play on stage, because I had fallen in love with it when I initially read it. We saw *Henry V* a day or so later. Once again, Abbey played Hal – now Henry V – and the other actors played their same parts. It was a very different production – very dark and serious. I cringed at Bardolph's on-stage hanging, before which he yelled, "Long live the king!" in a throaty, betrayed voice. But the production wasn't all quite as disturbing as that moment. There were a couple of high moments in the play, too. The first was the Boy's speech about the Eastcheap men. This actor was incredible – subtle, funny, and insightful. His second soliloquy stood out just as well as the first. The obvious climax of the play was the St. Crispin's Day speech, which I believe moved everyone in the house. The play itself, though there was an anti-war feel to it, still had a sort of epic grandeur to it that seemed all the more pointed because of the Chorus.

At the end of watching *Henry V*, my husband and I were talking as we made our way out of the theater. I said to him, “Wasn’t that guy great who did those two speeches? You know, the Boy, I mean.” He replied, “Yeah, he was tremendous. What was his name?” I said I didn’t know – neither the character’s name, nor the actor’s name. He said, “Hey, what ever happened to that guy?” Again, I didn’t know. The production went by too fast for me to catch everything that had happened, and I hadn’t read the play previously. “I’ll have to read it, so I can figure it out,” I said. “And I’ll have to read 2 *Henry IV*, too,” I said. “I don’t know what in the world happened to Falstaff.”

A few semesters later, I had to read *Henry V* for an assignment. Since I had not gotten around to it after our honeymoon, I decided I would read 2 *Henry IV* first. In my naivety, it never occurred to me that Prince Hal outright rejected Falstaff when I skipped over 2 *Henry IV* previously. When I read the end of 2 *Henry IV*, I was shocked. It sounds ridiculous to me now to acknowledge my astounded reaction, but I was utterly amazed at how things had turned out between Hal and Falstaff. And this amazement changed everything about this series of plays for me. I suddenly felt an extreme amount of ambivalence toward the character Prince Hal/Henry V, whereas before, having only seen a (very good) production, I quite admired him – despite some of the dark moments in *Henry V*. But the more I read and reread the *Henriad*, the more questions I had about not just Henry, but everything in this tetralogy. The *Henriad* came to be the focus of this dissertation because of the visceral reaction to it I had so many years ago. Although we who study literature are meant to set aside our emotive reactions to the works we analyze, I cannot help but admit that my study of this tetralogy is due to my intense reactions to it

– both good and bad. The ambiguity in it fascinates me, and every time I reread the tetralogy I find something new both to delight and to confound me.

I've long since answered the plot questions that my husband and I had after viewing *Henry V*. The Boy whom we had liked so well has no name in the play, and I never did find out the actor's name. The character dies – just one of the many casualties that slip out of the picture as the war marches on. All of the Eastcheap characters die, except Pistol, and he alone had no relationship whatsoever with Prince Hal. Still, Pistol, even though he lives on, is a broken man in the end, vowing to become a thief. And of course, Falstaff dies, broken-hearted from the rejection that he didn't see coming. (Admittedly, I didn't either, though in retrospect I know the clues were there all along.) Falstaff is the sticking point for most of us who love this series, as both one of the many reasons why we *do* love it and the reason why we cannot unequivocally fall into line with the supposed epic trajectory of the tetralogy.

Several years after my interests in the *Henriad* became fixed, I took a class with Dr. Amelia Zurcher, the subject of which was the intersection of romance and history in the Renaissance. As the class proceeded, I found myself mentally making notes of all the similarities I saw between many of the prose romances we were reading and the *Henriad*. This class was during my last semester of course work for my doctorate, and it inspired me to investigate further the connection between romance and these history plays. The result is this dissertation. In the end, I have come to believe that even Shakespeare couldn't fall in line with an epic trajectory in writing these plays. Instead, the qualities of romance which show up repeatedly lead me to believe that Shakespeare saw the limitations of epic and embraced the open possibilities in writing history as a romance.

Even if the results of writing history as a romance are ambiguous – “an improbable fiction,” if you will – still, employing romance in these plays feels true to the way life itself is: often full of questions, sometimes scarce on answers, but ultimately, a journey well worth taking.

PREVIEW

Acknowledgements

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PREVIEW

Dedicated with Love to the Memory of

Barbara Dunham

*Fear no more the heat of the sun,
Nor the furious winter's rages;
Thou thy worldly task hast done,
Home art gone, and ta'en thy wages:
Golden lads and girls all must,
As chimney-sweepers, come to dust.*
– Cymbeline 4.2.258-63

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Introduction

History and Romance Engaged

In 1960, the BBC produced a televised series entitled *The Age of Kings*, which was based on eight of Shakespeare's serial history plays.¹ Emma Smith reports that the production of the series made no use of the typical television paradigms for serial adaptations – no summaries for those who might have missed an episode and no interpolated forecasting of events (138). There was some emphasis placed on scenes in the plays that used foreshadowing, Smith writes, but not much emphasis on flashbacks. Smith's conclusion about this choice of emphasis is that the series focused on an epic teleology in the production, based on critical scholarship that was popular in the mid-twentieth century: "This teleological impetus – towards an endpoint and towards a final resolution, links the ideology of *An Age of Kings* with the orthodoxies of contemporary criticism" (138). The contemporary criticism Smith cites is the influential but now much disputed E.M.W. Tillyard's reading of the history plays – the "cumulative unfolding of the 'Tudor myth,' by which the accession of the Tudors on the defeat of *Richard III* was narrativized as a providential restitution of rightful sovereignty interrupted by the usurpation of Richard II and expiated through the bloodletting of the Wars of the Roses" (138).² Tillyard was not alone in seeing the history plays as epic literature. In *Shakespeare, Theory and Performance*, Douglas Lanier writes of Lawrence Olivier's and Kenneth Branagh's film versions of *Henry V*, referring to Olivier's version as a "cinematic epic" and acknowledging that the issue in Branagh's version is "whether the callow Henry can become an adult epic hero" (192). On the following page, Lanier calls

Henry an “epic character” (193). In writing about *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, Peter Erickson compares the eponymous wives with Prince Hal, and when referring to *Henry V*, he calls it an “epic history play” (128). When discussing the history plays in performance, especially *Henry V*, the “epic” label is applied more often than not – so often, in fact, that it is easy to wonder whether these critics have deeply considered what that label means. I think this characterization of the history plays, including *Henry V*, is somewhat careless. I would like to examine performance issues and why performance critics are so eager to categorize Shakespeare’s histories as epics at another time, but at present, I feel that we should examine what exactly is happening in the narratives of the history plays, and why, I believe, they are *not* epic literature after all, despite the persistently casual use of the term by performance critics.

In this dissertation I will argue that if we pay close attention to the narrative devices that Shakespeare uses in his history plays, we will see that the plays are not so teleologically driven, nor as epic, as many performance critics represent them. This claim, I will argue, applies particularly to the second tetralogy: *Richard II*, *1 Henry IV*, *2 Henry IV*, and *Henry V*, which cumulatively are also known as the *Henriad*. The purpose of this dissertation is to argue that Shakespeare’s *Henriad* should not be interpreted as an epic historical tetralogy, but instead should be read as a romance historical tetralogy because of the narratological and thematic similarities that the *Henriad* shares with Renaissance romances.

Irving Ribner writes in his *English History Play in the Age of Shakespeare* that “romance is a part of all history plays” in the sense that nostalgia and legendary materials populate the histories with romantic ambiance (25). However, Ribner goes on to say that

plays – such as Robert Green’s *James IV* – which “draw upon the romance of history, but accomplish none of the accepted purposes of history” vulgarize history and reduce its “serious purposes” (25). The so-called “romance histories” that Ribner discusses are plays that use historical figures in a fictional story. As Anne Barton notes, these plays often feature a king in disguise among his subjects and “the people they meet come from the world of balladry and legend” (96). Robin Hood, Maid Marian, George a Greene, and other legendary figures make appearances in these plays, and generally, “the meeting between subject and king in disguise has generated harmony, good fellowship, and mutual understanding” (Barton 96). These plays, obviously, differ from Shakespeare’s *Henriad* since the *Henriad* portrays the major events of chronicle sources, not strictly fictional narratives. Yet the scholarly work that associates the *Henriad* with romance focuses primarily on Henry V’s disguised venture the night before Agincourt in *Henry V*, comparing it with similar episodes in romance history plays like Thomas Dekker’s *The Shoemaker’s Holiday*, Thomas Heywood’s *1 Edward IV*, and George Peele’s *Edward I*. Paul Dean, Anne Barton, and Joanne Altieri all write about these comparisons, and each attempts to unite *Henry V* with the comic perspective of the “romance history” plays mentioned above. I see problems with this position. First, let us state the obvious – romance was not considered a genre of drama during the Renaissance, so if we are truly going to take seriously the notion that Shakespeare employed romance devices, narratives, and themes in his history plays, then it would behoove us to consider prose romance, a category recognized in the Renaissance, as our point of comparison – not anachronistically labeled “romance” dramas. The closest genre drama had to romance in the Renaissance was tragicomedy.³ Second, the scholars who have worked with the

Henriad and romance show a critical bias that has plagued romance for centuries, suggesting that romance is merely “light,” comic writing, and its use in Shakespeare’s histories is an attempt to inject comic narratives into the serious business of war. None of these writers acknowledge what Shakespeare himself seems implicitly to stress: that romance is a profound, legitimate, complex genre in which we find debates over significant philosophical issues such as (1) who or what governs the universe, (2) sin and redemption, and (3) self-interest as an ethical dilemma. In the *Henriad*, Shakespeare takes on these very same debates, and, in doing so, he appropriates both narratological aspects and themes of prose romance.

I would like to argue that particular aspects of the influence of romance are important to discover in the *Henriad*, because contrary to what, for instance, Ribner thinks, Shakespeare’s use of romance devices elevates these plays to a level of sophistication and complexity that was unknown prior to their production.⁴ Of course, we have always known that these plays are complex – there’s nothing new about that statement. However, I believe that without some of the specific narratological and thematic parallels to romance that I will later outline, we would be reading very different plays. If we read the *Henriad* as an epic, then the triumph of Henry V – which is the obvious teleological end to the series – is fulfilled, and we are not asked to question the ethics of Henry’s actions up until that point. The plays then would not force us to question our reactions to them nearly as much, because we would assume that Henry V’s Kierkegaardian “teleological suspension of the ethical” would be warranted by a *higher* universal system of ethics. But as I will show in this dissertation, Henry’s teleological suspension of the ethical is *not* justified according to the textual evidence in the series

because his self-interest is behind his suspension of the ethical, not the community's interest as in epic, or God's interest as in the Abraham and Isaac story, which Kierkegaard writes about in *Fear and Trembling*. Additionally, if Shakespeare were writing an epic, there would likely be no double-plot, no Falstaff, but most importantly there would be diminished ambiguity in the *Henriad*. Viewing the *Henriad* with a romance lens gives us a new way to look at the *Henriad* – as a venue in which the tensions of romance polemics are explored, such as the controversy between provident and contingent design, the ambiguity of moral deviance found in prodigality narratives, and the ethical problems of self-interest. All of the themes above are debated with sophistication in Renaissance romances, and Shakespeare appropriates them for his own purposes in the *Henriad*. In doing so, he reinvents the history play as something that is much more interesting than a nostalgic retelling of legendary or chronicled events, and far more profound than a king-in-disguise romp. The *Henriad*, instead, is a marriage of history and romance that creates undeniable searching: searching that asks the audience to struggle mightily with fundamental questions of agency, ethics and egoism.

In order to understand Shakespeare's particular contribution to the idea of romance history plays, we should first consider the context of "history" in the Renaissance in a more general fashion. Renaissance interest in history manifested itself within several historical writing methods of the age, including the chronicle, the politic⁵ history, and the chronicle and the comic history play, among others. Shakespeare, likely the most famous historical dramatist of the Renaissance, wrote eleven English chronicle-style history plays⁶ based on the reigns of famous kings. Playgoers would be familiar with these tales of kings through reading chronicles and hearing oral histories, folk tales,

ballads and legends that were passed down over time. His history plays account for about a quarter of Shakespeare's canon, written for the most part in the late sixteenth century, with the one exception being *Henry VIII*.⁷ The period from 1587 to 1600 is roughly the high point of history plays, not just for Shakespeare, but for his contemporaries as well. Part of the reason for the surge in historical plays was that religious conflict, nationalism, and the threat of war with Spain were significant to the cultural landscape during that time period and so historical entertainment appealed to people as a way to meditate on contemporary issues. In the 1590s, "... the morality of war became a subject for sermons and numerous books exhorting their readers about the God-fearing man's loyal duty to his country and his monarch. The theatres took an active part in this jingoism, with imitations of conquering Tamburlaine and accounts of English seafaring heroes" (Gurr 2). National pride was at a high point after the defeat of the Spanish Armada in 1588, which could also account for the proliferation of English historical drama of the late sixteenth century. After Queen Elizabeth's death in 1603, however, the popularity of historical drama slackened. Andrew Gurr notes that "some people may already have been skeptical about the jingoism of the writers and preachers by 1599," and thus became less interested in chronicle history plays after a time.

Chronicles – large volumes of literature that mainly focused on the reigns of kings – were the major sources of Shakespeare's history plays, in addition to previous history plays, which also followed the chronicles for their source material. The writers of the chronicles set a precedent of using poetic license in the writing of history. Particularly their license was used to show causal relationships, as Philip Sidney notes: "Manie times [the Historian] must tell events, whereof he can yield no cause, of if he do, it must be

poetically” (*Defense of Poesie*). Renaissance historiographers were keenly aware of the gap between historical facts and the legendary material with which they had to work, and often their poetic license filled in the gaps with the assertion that providence governed the workings of events. M.A. Fitzsimons shows the connection between providence and history:

Belief in providence provides an assurance to man that the world in which he must act to live has an order (in the main, and ultimately, favorable), that the complex interplay of historical events, though beyond human control, fulfills a divine purpose and that, for man who must die, there must be a loving Father. (386)

The providential design of history was made clear throughout the chronicles of the Renaissance as a way of finding causality and as a teleological construct. For instance, Hall’s chronicle shows how the workings of providence lead to the ending triumph of Henry VII. Still, the chronicles made no claims to being *incontrovertibly* true, despite the fact that they purportedly wrote about God’s plan and purposes in the human world. In his *Chronicles of England, Scotland and Ireland*, Holinshed writes:

But sith the original in manner of all nations is doubtful, and even the same for the more part fabulous (that always excepted which we find in the holy scriptures) I wish not any man to lean to that which shall be here set down as to an infallible truth, sith I do but only shew other men’s conjectures, grounded nevertheless upon likely reasons, concerning that matter whereof there is now left but little other certainty, or rather none at all. (Holinshed)

As Holinshed notes above, his chronicle does not report the “infallible truth” and in fact has no “certainty” in it at all – it does include poetic license and the application of providence. This assumption of providence within the writing is immediately made clear by Holinshed’s narrative, which starts with the mythological aftermath of Noah’s flood. So connected did the chronicle writers show the worlds of the human and the divine, it would make perfect sense not to question when or where to commence the histories they were writing. God clearly had a plan, and the writers were going to reveal it, even if it took some poetic license to do so.

Yet, despite the license that was taken in matters of providential chronicle writing, Philip Sidney notes that historical writers had more limits than poets:

the Historian [is] bound to tell things as things were, cannot be liberall...
the Historian wanting the precept, is so tied, not to what should be, but to
what is, to the particular truth of things, that his example draweth no
necessary consequence, and therefore [is] a lesse fruitfull doctrine.

(Defense of Poesie)

Although Sidney argues that historians could not always produce “necessary consequence[s]” for historical actions, the writers often did interpolate meaning into events. For example, in Hall’s *Chronicle*, the section on Henry V shows the glory of God through reformation. The section begins with Henry’s ascension to the throne. Hall explains that as a prince, Henry had engaged in “wanton pastime & riotous disorder” (1r). This explanation of Henry’s past, which Holinshed faithfully reproduces, is what Shakespeare draws on to create the characters of Eastcheap – Falstaff, Bardolph, and

others. Hall continues, on the verso page, with the story of Henry's reformation and the example he provides for his subjects in a long didactic digression:

For it is daily seen, that a vicious prince doth muche those hurte with his pernicious example to other, then to hymself by his owne peculier offence.

For it is not so muche euill, as he by his euill doynge to corrupt other, because it is daily seen, that as princes change, the people altereth, and as

kynges go, the subjectes folowe. ("Reign of Henry V; First Year" 1v)

Hall writes about the duty of a king to be a good example to his people for another twenty-seven lines – around three-quarters of a page – implicitly juxtaposing both Richard II and Edward II with the contrite and reformed Henry V. Hall had already addressed some of Richard's failings previously in the section on Henry IV's usurpation of the throne, and Edward II's indiscretions were well known through Polydore Vergil's *Anglica Historia*. Hall implies in the digression that Henry V very well could have repeated the mistakes of these particular ancestors, but by the grace of God's providence, he avoided a similar downfall.

Renaissance historiographers were "expected to take liberties with historical events in order to produce imaginative fictions that were true to what events meant" (Curran 3). However, the liberties that were taken could not, for instance, change an important fact, like the outcome of a particular battle. Instead, the license that chronicle writers used went toward a method of explanation of events, particularly in the use of providence. The self-awareness with which the chronicle writers reported their somewhat imagined histories shows the attitude that the chronicle as an art form was more interested in didacticism than it was in discovering objective truth about the past. There

was no attempt to hide this fact. Sidney writes in his *Defense* that all literature is to be didactic, but of course, each kind of literature went about its instruction in its own way. The method the chronicles used simply provided “a good national story that yielded a wealth of wholesome examples” (Curran 4).

There was a social aspect to chronicles that may not be readily apparent. D.R. Woolf points out: “the very nature of historical knowledge was such that it was intended to be socially circulated: once read in a book, it was supposed to be put to practical moral or political use, talked about, shared with friends and family, and interactively revised and reshaped by the reader” (*Reading History* 80). The sharing of chronicled history in social networks added to the fluidity of history. Readers and listeners – as chronicles were often read aloud in a larger group – appropriated the stories of historical people and made them their own (80). The readers/listeners participated in a sort of reader-response activity with the chronicles they absorbed, and as a result, chronicles became more than a repository of knowledge – they were a social and cultural narrative that was always being revised.

Chronicle writers were constantly revising and reproducing each other as well. Edward Hall, for instance, lists thirty-six authors at the beginning of his chronicle as sources for his work, as well as “diuers other Pamphlettes, the names of whom are to moft menne unknowen” (A4r). Holinshed’s list of referenced authors is an alphabetized index, two pages long.⁸ As noted above, the chronicle writers often reproduced whole passages of a predecessor’s work, barely tweaking it to fit a new format. The medieval works of Geoffrey of Monmouth and the Brut chronicles, which mingled legend, myth and history freely, were among the first recorded “histories” of England, and these

writings influenced later historiography immensely. It was not until Polydore Vergil's *Anglica Historia*, commissioned by Henry VII, that legends were for the most part eliminated from historical writing, despite Henry VII's desire to be associated with the legend of King Arthur (*Reading History* 23). The English tradition of chronicle writing was, both before and after Vergil, that chronicles were collaborative and cumulative. They were a part of the nation's fight against oblivion – history's dreaded enemy – and as such, the chronicle writers depended on the works of their predecessors in order to move forward with the collecting tradition of Renaissance historiography.

The didactic goal of chronicle writing was instruction through the analysis of precedent. In Hall's *Chronicle*, the dedication to Prince Edward gives us a perfect example of what we are to learn from history. Hall states that the enemy of nations is the “deadly beast Oblivion,” and his meaning is that when people forget their past, they are not only bound to repeat it, but also doomed not to learn from it. Hall's purpose in writing his partial history of England is to show British people where they have been (beginning with the usurpation of Henry Bolingbroke, Hall chronicles the murder of Richard II, the rebellions under Henry IV, the glory of Henry V, and the destruction of the War of the Roses) and where they are going (the providential triumph of Henry VII and the reign of Henry VIII). By writing about these events, relatively recent to the first edition readers, Hall means to instruct later generations about the past in order for them to learn how to live their lives now, as well as to shed light on contemporary events. Hall's warning not to let history fall into oblivion illustrates the Renaissance belief that we learn how to conduct our lives through reading about rulers in history – how they lived, the mistakes they made, and so on. Hall's dedication is an argument of sorts, explaining to

his young dedicatee, eleven-year-old Prince Edward who would later become Edward VI, why history is important in developing a virtuous nation. He cites “the noble Augustus,” and the less admirable Nero and Caligula, saying: “wrytyng is the keye to enduce vertue, and repreffe vice. Thus memorie maketh menne ded many a thoufande yere ffill to liue as though thei wer prefent: Thus fame triumpheth upon death, and renoune upon Obliuion, and all by refon of wrytyng and hiftorie” (Preface Aii). In this conjuring of the past through chronicle writing, the leaders of great nations and even empires are ultimately resurrected in an instant. However, the chronicle writers, as noted above, adapt the stories of these leaders to make them more obviously educational and providentially ordered. In other words, fact and fiction were fused in such a way as to make the “story of history” most instructionally and rhetorically effective. This mingling of historical events and fictional interpolation is precisely what Renaissance dramatists implemented when they translated chronicled history into stagecraft.

Romance was the cousin of history in the Renaissance, but few people held romance in as high regard – Philip Sidney is a notable exception. The predominant attitude of the time was that romance was nothing more than “musty old tales” and that “reading romances was a morally dangerous pastime” (Moore 319). The sexual license, magical practice, and proliferation of a fictional, often idealized world within romance were considered to be a dangerous influence on impressionable minds (Moore 319). The general opinion was that history built character and romance corrupted it, which Sidney makes clear in his argument against this objection to “poesie” in his *Defense*, saying that in history: