The Elizabethans and History

The Elizabethans believed that history was full of moral lessons to be learned.

- To the Elizabethans, History was not simply a collection of documentary evidence that colors reality in black and white. They did not excavate a dusty field and prove one thing or another based on the archaeology. Raphael Holinshed was a historian in the sense that he wrote about past events. The events he wrote about came from family chronicles written by scholars in the pay of the great family they wrote about. There was very little distance or dedication to "the facts" in these biographer/scholars and Holinshed wrote out of this tradition. Much of fact was contained in his book, but it was not the holy grail of our modern tradition. To them, history was entertainment and enlightenment all in one and no less valid when not "historically valid"

- History chronicles had in them what a reader could learn that might improve their morals, their minds or their practice of life and religion.

The Elizabethans believed that history was a tool, not just for enlightenment but also for control.

- History offered the ruling monarch justification and reason to rule, to exist. The Tudor dynasty often encouraged its own version of history to support the status quo.
- In historical fact, Banquo apparently helped Macbeth kill King Duncan in ancient Scotland. By the time Shakespeare wrote his play Macbeth, he made Banquo the progenitor of kings, though not a king himself. Macbeth kills him but to no avail. His son escapes and James I of England (James V of Scotland) is descended from Banquo. He was Elizabeth heir and nephew.
- Many regimes, governments or belief systems have used "history" in this way. More often than not they are condemned for it.

From Shakespeare's Reading, Robert S. Miola:

"In order to write his play s about English history Shakespeare turned to contemporary history books, called chronicles, particularly those by Edward Hall and Raphael Holinshed. Recounting the past sequentially, these books discussed politics, weather, local events, disasters, and marvelous occurrences like the birth of a baby with two heads. The chronicle accounts of kings, queens, rebellions, battles, wars, councils, and the like entertained as well as informed; they provided a long-running series on the lives of the rich and famous, who happened also to be the royal, the powerful, the good, and the evil.
The millions of people today who eagerly read historical novels, watch BBC specials or films like Oliver Stone's JFK, or devour materials on Princess Diana's life and death, would have turned to chronicles in Shakespeare's day. They substituted for our histories, docu-dramas, journals, films, and in some cases, even our soap operas. Chronicles offered the excitements of historical research as well as those of popular non-fiction and fiction.

Confronting so rich a record of human achievement and folly, chroniclers often read in English history political and moral truths. Everywhere they saw, or at least said they saw, the evils of dissension and rebellion, for example, or the inevitable workings of divine justice. Shakespeare inherited these thematic focuses as he shaped chronicle materials, often loose, formless, into sharp conflicts between compelling individuals; sometimes he darkened them into tragedy, as in Richard II; sometimes he brightened them into comedy, as in Henry V. To some extent, Shakespeare created the form of the history play as he went along."

Vocabulary words

Ransom

Letters patent

Buff Jerkin

Deposition

Usurpation

Words invented by Shakespeare and appearing in his histories for the first time

Richard II

Accused
Shooting Star

Henry IV Part 1

Anchovy
Backing
Downstairs
Dwindle
Forward
Upstairs
Luggage
Dwindle
Forward
Misquote
Retirement
Skim Milk

Henry IV Part 2

Bet
Deafening
Investment
Kickshaw
Roadway
Swagger
Tardily

Henry V
Addiction
Deracinate
Dawn
Leapfrog
Puppy dog
Savagery