

Shakespeare's Histories

What the Elizabethans Believed About History

"In order to write his plays 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."

Shakespeare's Reading, Robert S. Miola

Five Things Every Elizabethan Knew

1. The Divine Right of Kings

The Divine Right of Kings is the belief that monarchs rule by God's direct appointment. This doctrine is based on the belief that the monarchy is a divinely ordained institution, kings are accountable for their acts to God alone, and that non-resistance and passive obedience on the part of subjects is enjoined by God. Online Highway www.onwy.com

2. The Duties of a Prince

People believed that the hand of God directed and guided the affairs of princes. There was also a firm conviction that God bestowed victory in battle to vindicate the right of the victor. A king was the Lord's anointed, hallowed at his coronation with holy oil. His chief functions were to protect his people by defending them against their enemies, to govern with justice and mercy, and to preserve and enforce the law of the land. A king was not only expected to protect and defend his realm but also had to be seen as a competent warrior. A king who inclined towards peace courted adverse public opinion, for most people placed great value on success in arms and the glorification of the nation's reputation. *The War of the Roses*, Alison Weir

3. The Duties of the Aristocracy

The Magnates of England were a group of incredibly rich and powerful men who inherited wealth, titles and honor thru long lines of succession often going back centuries. The greatest of these Magnates during this history cycle were John of Gaunt and 2 of his brothers, the Lords of York and Gloucester. These men were 3 of the 8 sons of Edward III, whose eldest son, Edward the Black Prince, fathered Richard II of England. Often wealthier and more powerful than their Kings, all the men of these titles controlled vast fortunes of gold, land, food and men-at-arms. It was their duty to supply their King all 4 in times of war or need.

They provided the fighting force to conquer new territories and if they did not believe the cause was just or worthy of their time they might withhold both to control the monarch. Note in Richard II that after Henry Bolingbroke, John of Gaunt's son, is banished and John dies, Richard confiscates all his land and goods to finance his ill-advised conquest of Ireland. Henry comes out of exile simply to regain his rightful land and titles and then ends up crowned King of England.

4. The Great Chain of Being

Late medieval man held a deep-rooted belief that society was also ordered by God for the good of humanity, and this concept of order expressed itself in a pyramidal hierarchy that had God enthroned at the summit, kings immediately beneath Him, then in descending order the nobility and prelates of the Church, the knights and gentry, the legal and professional classes, merchants and yeoman, and at the bottom the great mass of peasants. Each man was born to his degree, and a happy man was one who did not question his place in life. *The War of the Roses*, Alison Weir

By the time of Shakespeare, the Great Chain of Being was almost Court doctrine because the Tudor monarchs, Queen Elizabeth I being the greatest of them, used the Great Chain to enforce their right to rule so absolutely. Shakespeare seems to have believed in this also, yet in many of his plays his greatest characters do battle with the consequences when they rise above their station and grasp at what is not, by the will of God, their own to keep. The tremendous dramatic conflict he wrote about regularly in part arose from the war between the old ways of the world and the human need to grasp more and more before death.

Another thought- by Shakespeare's time many things that supported this Chain of Being- illiteracy, vast hordes of dirt-poor peasants, no middle-class wealth, the Roman Catholic Church and the ascendancy of her priesthood- were changing. The Renaissance and its thinkers questioned long-held religious and societal beliefs. The Plague regularly mowed down priest, peasant, lord and prince alike. The middle-class had wealth and education and writers like Shakespeare questioned what it meant to be born into one place and fight your way to another place on the Chain of Being.

5. Oh, all those names!!

King Henry IV is called Henry Bolingbroke or Henry of Hereford in Richard II. His son, Prince Hal is Harry or Henry Monmouth in Richard II and Henry IV, parts 1 & 2. Henry Percy, the son of Lord Northumberland, is called Hotspur, Harry and Harry Percy in Henry IV parts 1&2. Many men had one Christian name, and were titled according to the physical place they were born- hence Henry (of) Monmouth or John of Gaunt. Many had family names, hence Harry Percy. Many went by their title, hence Lord Northumberland, Hotspur's father. Nicknames abound, so we hear Hal and Hotspur- shortening the name or using an outstanding characteristic to label the man. Don't be too confused by all the different names- check out our family tree and familiarize yourself with the actor playing the role.

Five More Things to Know About Shakespeare's Histories

1. Thomas of Woodstock, Duke of Gloucester- Richard II

The Duke of Gloucester was the youngest son of Edward III and already dead at the beginning of Richard II. He was one of the five "Lords Appellant" who secured conviction of Richard's counselors for treason in the Merciless Parliament. When Richard regained power they reconciled but on a trip to Ireland Gloucester was suddenly arrested and imprisoned. He was murdered there a few days before he was "appealed" and condemned for treason by the same procedure as that used for Richard's counselors. These events happen before Richard II begins, but by the beginning of the play, Richard is reaping the ill will of that foolish move. We meet the Duke of Gloucester's wife in the beginning of Richard II, arguing with her brother-in-law, John of Gaunt.

2. The Welshman Owen Glendower, magic and ransom- Henry IV pt 1

The Elizabethans had a medieval notion that the Welsh, generally, had access to dark, magic rites. This was partly the difference in culture. The Welsh had traditions dating back to before the Anglo-Saxons came, and these mystic, Druid-born matters were strange, and therefore frightening, to the English. Asimov's Guide to Shakespeare

Owen Glendower was a powerful Welshman with large land holdings and the ability to raise quite an army of his own. He was also thought to be a magician. At the beginning of Henry IV pt 1 he has captured Hotspur's brother-in-law, Edmund Mortimer. Hotspur asks the King to ransom his wife's brother. Normally a king would immediately do so when asked by one of his powerful Magnates and supporter of his usurpation of the crown. However, this particular Mortimer, who Shakespeare may have confused with his nephew the 5th Earl of March, in our play just happens to be the heir of Richard II, who was passed over as King when Henry IV took the crown from Richard. No wonder Henry IV will not accede to Hotspur's demand for ransom! Shakespeare's history source was Holinshed, who apparently got the Mortimer heir and his uncle mixed up. It certainly ratchets up the dramatic conflict if Henry IV is asked to pay for the freedom of the one man who might legitimately claim the throne from him.

3. The Boars Head Tavern- Henry IV pt 2

With the introduction of Falstaff, Hal, Nym, Pistol, Doll Tearsheet and Mistress Quickly Shakespeare put his most ardent fans onstage with a king. This mixing of Elizabethan current reality and kingly dignity was unprecedented for the Elizabethan playgoer. Playwrights like Marlow and Ben Jonson often had lower class characters in their plays but never before had a playwright given such heart, eloquence and character development to so many denizens of the Bankside and Eastcheap. Falstaff is "a miracle in the creation of personality." So says the eminent Shakespearean scholar Harold Bloom, in his book Shakespeare: the Invention of the Human. Never had a prince and a reprobate shared stage time and audiences hearts like Hal and Falstaff in the Henry IV's. Check in with what Falstaff has to teach us about wine, disease, honor, thieves and food. Falstaff was such a popular character that Queen Elizabeth is said to have requested a play about Falstaff in love, so Shakespeare gave the world The Merry Wives of Windsor, a Tavern favorite.

4. The Salic law- Henry V

In Henry V this ancient set of laws, handed down from the Salian Franks, is the law used by the French to prevent King Henry from claiming the throne of France. The "law Salique" refers to a restriction on the rights of inheritance of land through the female line. Not only could a daughter not inherit, but neither could the male descendant of a daughter. King Henry V's claim to the French throne was through his descent from Edward III, whose mother was Isabella, daughter of Philip IV of France.

The explanation of all this is long and convoluted. Don't worry if it doesn't make sense. I doubt Shakespeare really wanted it to make sense. The real issue is war. If Henry is distracted by war with France he may not go after the Church's vast holdings of land, untaxable by Parliament and untouchable by the King. It will cost the Church less to help fund Henry's war than it will to lose all that property.

It is also very important to note that Henry V is very concerned that his claim be legitimate, considering the vast loss of life a campaign in France could cost him. He says "For God doth know how many now in health Shall drop their blood in approbation of what your reverence shall incite us to."

5. The Welsh and leeks- Henry V

It was customary for Welshmen to wear leeks on St. David's feast day, since St. David encouraged Welsh fighters to wear leeks in a victorious battle opposing Saxon men in 540 A.D. To offer to knock off a Welshman's leek on St. David's day is to insult not only him, but also his very Welshness. Asimov's Guide to Shakespeare

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Words First Invented or First Seen in Print by Shakespeare

Richard II
Accused
Shooting Star

Henry IV Part 1
Anchovy
Backing
Downstairs
Dwindle
Forward
Upstairs
Luggage
Misquote
Retirement
Skim Milk

Henry IV Part 2
Bet
Deafening
Investment
Kickshaw
Roadway
Swagger
Tardily

Henry V
Addiction
Deracinate
Dawn
Leapfrog
Puppy dog
Savage