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FIGURE, IMAGE, AND THE SHAPE OF TIME IN SHAKESPEARE'S HISTORY PLAYS

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Abstract

Shakespeare began his career as a dramatist by writing the first of a series of plays remarking upon English history from the Middle Ages through the reign of Henry VIII. Most notable of this historic chronicle are the eight plays, or two tetralogies, that dramatize the tumultuous period of civil conflict between 1399 and 1485. Some critics of Shakespeare's tetralogies have argued Shakespeare's intent to produce a single, unified, and providentially-ordered chronicle in which the deposition of Richard II may be viewed as the nascent event for the civil wars that culminated in Tudor accession to the crown. Nevertheless, more recent scholarship has disregarded this notion, preferring instead to view the two tetralogies as separate entities for which there is no compelling evidence that Shakespeare intended a relationship, much less a sweeping thematic narrative spanning eight plays.

However, I suggest that Shakespeare had a Medieval source, the dramatic chronicles of biblical history known as the Corpus Christi plays, from which he may have derived the pattern for connecting together seemingly disparate episodes in history into one richly-textured historiographic body. Through the examination of corresponding scenes from each tetralogy, I demonstrate that Shakespeare's history plays are indebted to the Corpus Christi cycle drama for idea, imagery, and their essential form as an architecture of figural connections. Together, I conclude, these elements impart a greater didactic significance to Shakespeare's history plays and substantiate the conception of Shakespeare's two tetralogies as an important and coherent unit.

England's glorious defeat of the Spanish armada in 1588 and its seeming impenetrability to foreign aggression spawned great nationalist fervor among Elizabethans, among whom was the young playwright Shakespeare, who subsequently devoted a series of plays to English history. Ironically, however, these plays have as their subject the much less auspicious days of England's past. Eight of these history plays, generally grouped

into two tetralogies, are concerned with the period of time between 1399 and 1485, during which England was besieged by the bloody civil conflicts known as the Wars of the Roses. Some scholars, most notably E. M. W. Tillyard, have argued that Shakespeare's two tetralogies of English history may be read as a coherent and providentially-ordered historiography in which the deposition of Richard II results in a long period of civil war that ultimately finds amelioration in Henry Tudor's union of the houses of York and Lancaster and leads to the golden age of Shakespeare's immediate audience. Tillyard cites as evidence for this view three works with which Shakespeare was thoroughly familiar and which, according to Tillyard, provide the "outlines of a pattern"¹ for chronicling providential history: Hall's *The Union of the Two Noble and Illustre Families of Lancaster and York*, Daniel's *The Civil Wars*, and the *Mirror for Magistrates*. However, more recent scholarship has preferred to view the two tetralogies as relatively unrelated chronicles and has disregarded altogether the idea of Divine Providence. Irving Ribner writes that these plays "cannot be conceived of as a single epic unit" and that, furthermore, "the cycle of plays which begins with the deposition of Richard II ... culminates in the glorious victories of Henry V,"² not in Tudor accession to the crown. Similarly, Robert Ornstein contends that the two tetralogies "are too separate and too different from one another to be regarded as the complementary halves of a single oddly constructed panorama of English history."³

I would like to suggest that there is another source from which Shakespeare may have derived a providential pattern for ordering history. The Medieval chronicles of biblical history known as Corpus Christi or mystery plays have long been accepted as one of the many influences upon Shakespeare's art. It is significant, however, that the writers of the Corpus Christi plays, in selecting biblical stories for sequential dramatic representation spanning the real time period between creation and judgment day, chose those Old Testament events that found some correspondence in the New Testament and, therefore, formed a meaningful historical bridge or a relationship in which a greater spiritual truth might be understood. V. A. Kolve

explains this use of patterning as theological *figura*, or the idea of *umbra* and *veritas*, which has as its purpose to connect together seemingly disparate episodes in history and produce "a cycle sequence charged with ... meaning."⁴ My object is to demonstrate that Shakespeare's two historical tetralogies are indebted to the Corpus Christi plays for their form, and that form, as an architecture of figural connections, imparts to Shakespeare's history plays a richer texture and more significant meaning while also substantiating the relationship between the tetralogies. In addition, I wish to show that the history plays are further informed by the Medieval cycle drama in their use of idea and imagery from those plays, which both reinforce the figural structure of the tetralogies and enhance its meaning.

Two significant events in Shakespeare's first tetralogy find a dramatic correspondence in events depicted in *Richard II* and, thus, help to establish a deliberate link with the second tetralogy. The first of these is found in the first scene of the final act of *2 Henry VI*, in which York returns from Ireland, having along the way amassed a large and formidable army. Addressing the audience, he discloses the impetus for his march on England: to remove the king and re-establish Plantagenet rule. However, when confronted by King Henry's messenger, he offers the more palatable excuse of removing a supposed traitor to the crown and swears his allegiance to the king. *Richard II* presents another such ambitious man arriving in England with an army in tow. Bullingbrook claims his return to English soil has no other purpose than to reclaim his lands and title and to rid Richard's court of three traitorous men. And like York, he pledges loyalty to his king on bended knee. However, he sails for England before he is actually stripped of his inheritance, suggesting the ulterior motive of seizing the crown from his inept cousin, Richard II. The *figura* that is York's march on England to claim the throne of England finds in its correspondence to Bullingbrook's march on England a fulfillment that illuminates the latter event in dramatic time. Although Bullingbrook will not confess his genuine motivation, we can look to the earlier dramatic *figura* of York for conformation that Bullingbrook has, like York, intended the crown all along. Thus, by the simple use of Medieval *figura*, we can "read" the later event by seeing it in terms of the former one.

A second and perhaps more dramatic example of *figura* in Shakespeare's history plays lies in the opening scene of *3 Henry VI*, in which York and his men have gained illegal access to Westminster Hall in order to confront King Henry VI, whom they intend to depose. Henry enters the room to find his rebelling Duke of York firmly established upon his throne, a grave insult to Lancastrian authority. In an exchange fraught with tension, Henry demands York's submission but is instead compelled to defend the validity of his kingship. Yet, some sixty years earlier, as Raphael Holinshed reports in his *Chronicles*, this same throne in this very same hall first proved itself contentious.⁵ Then, another Plantagenet and another Lancaster argued who should

be king, a question in which the right of primogeniture was and would forevermore be pitted against the right of might, ability, and conscience. In this earlier scene (in historic rather than dramatic time), however, it is a Lancaster, in the person of Henry Bullingbrook, who has taken possession of the throne and sits on high, and the Plantagenet king, Richard II, who stares up at him with the knowledge that he must either re-establish his claim to the throne or relinquish it forever. The deposition of Richard II in Westminster Hall in the year 1399, in historic time, foreshadows the scene that Shakespeare depicts in the first act of *3 Henry VI*, and its awful veracity is much upon the minds of those who contemplate the right to rule in Westminster Hall in 1461. Thus, when York ascends the throne, his act is the fulfillment of the earlier *figura* or premier event of Lancaster's own ascension.

With the use of *figura* and by selection of parallel scenes, Shakespeare teaches his audience how it might better understand the characters of Bullingbrook and York. In this same way, the authors of the Corpus Christi plays laid a pattern with analogous scenes, intended to direct their audience to a difficult or meaningful insight. Derived from the well-rehearsed liturgy of the church, the *figura* and patterning of the Corpus Christi plays would have been quite familiar to Elizabethans. And as Harry Levin notes, Shakespeare would have had the opportunity to see the mystery cycles first-hand, played much as they had been for 200 years: "Certainly in his youth he must have visited the neighboring cathedral town of Coventry, still a centre for the street performance of Biblical cycles, and watched the pageant representing the Slaughter of the Innocents, where Herod rants in the manner that Hamlet describes."⁶ Thus, we may credit a young Shakespeare with not only the knowledge of figural events but the ability to apply them to his own craft.

This first scene of *3 Henry VI* would also seem to be quite rich in idea and imagery borrowed from the Corpus Christi drama, for we may find within it a neatly constructed correspondence with the first play of each of the Corpus Christi cycles, the Fall of Lucifer. As York would ascend to the throne of England, so Lucifer aspires to the rule of heaven. He therefore assumes the throne of God and, like York, proclaims his right to rule. But, as John D. Cox points out, the right of God to rule heaven and earth in the Corpus Christi play is beyond question, while the right of Henry to the crown of England is not.⁷ In an attempt to maintain his power, Henry asserts his right of primogeniture; however, York's name, Plantagenet, by itself establishes for him an older and stronger claim to power than Henry's. Indeed, Henry's supporters begin to fade as York declares that Henry's grandfather attained the crown, not by conquest, but by rebellion against his king and unlawful usurpation of his office. To this, Henry turns aside to the audience and whispers his defeat. To secure peace, Henry is forced to offer the throne to York upon his death, but this so-called reconciliation of the houses of Lancaster and York plunges England back into a state of war. Thus, the distinction of Lucifer's fall from glory

is imparted to York's ascent to the throne in Westminster Hall. By this, we may understand the fall of the House of York as germinating in an act of hubris, the usurpation of a throne by one, like Lucifer, who feels himself more entitled to it. The correspondence demands that, as York ascends the throne, his fall, and that of his offspring, is determined and imminent in a dramatic mimesis of time in a world that is providentially ordered. But as York will fall, so will Henry in a seemingly retributive act by time and providential justice for the 1399 deposition of Richard II.

Therefore, the true end of England's civil dissension may be found at the end of *Richard III* with Henry Tudor's victory and his subsequent marriage, decisively uniting Lancaster with York. As Shakespeare would have it, and Hall before him, the deposition of Richard II in 1399 and Tudor accession to the crown in 1485 stand as the particular junctures around which the procession of English history may be understood, in what has often been termed England's "salvation" history. However, far from limiting Shakespeare's history plays to simple Tudor propaganda, a larger concept of history and its meaning may be found in a reading that accepts a fall-and-redemption pattern to the long course of historical events depicted and the figural patterning of the *Corpus Christi* plays. Where one event finds its fulfillment or completion in a later event, a dialogue between those two events and between those two episodes in space and time is formed, effecting a dramatic and meaningful abridgment of time itself and blurring the boundaries between past, present, and future. So applied, narrative history, like that of the *Corpus Christi* plays, is made subtly yet richly didactic, broadening its aim beyond the practical application of historical lesson to encompass the meaning of history and time itself. Thus, only such a reading imparts significance to Shakespeare's immediate audience (which must grapple with the import of these events to future time) and grants to Shakespeare a purpose in writing the history plays beyond the mere employment of historical material for dramatic purposes.

Given the heady days of the 1590s, when it may have seemed as though England was invulnerable, Shakespeare's history plays may be understood as a warning. But even as these plays point back to the past, they also point forward to present and future time, offering both a terrifying glimpse of what could occur again and hope for a different shaping of time. Shakespeare achieves a certain middle ground between the Medieval notion of the present as a time for amendment and preparation in order to avoid certain doom, as informs the *Corpus Christi* plays, and the more Renaissance idea of time as a place where man, however mortal, might make his indelible mark upon the universe.⁸ For as certainly as Shakespeare's history plays warn of the imminent doom that will befall England should factious unrest again splinter peace, and advise the attention and diligent response of the Medieval drama, they announce the glory and power that is England's when civil strife is laid to rest. In this way,

Shakespeare offers to his audience a dramatic device for visualizing and monitoring the shape of time to come.

Notes

¹ E. M. W. Tillyard, *Shakespeare's History Plays* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1948) 149.

² Irving Ribner, *The English History Play in the Age of Shakespeare* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1957) 160.

³ Robert Ornstein, *A Kingdom for a Stage* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1972) 31.

⁴ V. A. Kolve, *The Play Called Corpus Christi* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1966) 58.

⁵ Richard Hosley, ed., *Shakespeare's Holinshed: An Addition of Holinshed's Chronicles, by Raphael Holinshed* (New York: G. P. Putnam & Sons, 1968) 85.

⁶ Harry Levin, introduction, *The Riverside Shakespeare*, 2nd ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1997) 19.

⁷ John D. Cox, "3 Henry VI: Dramatic Convention and the Shakespearean History Play," *Comparative Drama* 12 (1978-1979): 50-51.

⁸ Georges Poulet, *Studies in Human Time*, trans. Elliott Coleman (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1956) 10.

Faculty comments

Ms. Walker's mentor, Joseph Candido regards her as a "seasoned scholar." He says:

I am delighted to be able to give Susan Walker's scholarly submission to *Inquiry* my highest and most enthusiastic endorsement. Last semester I had the pleasure of watching Susan's project take shape in my senior seminar on Shakespeare's history plays as it grew from the germ of an idea into a mature, sophisticated, and original statement about Shakespeare's indebtedness to the medieval cycle drama. I believe that her work is now worthy of publication in a professional journal. Unlike all the other students in the class who were thoroughly challenged (and sometimes overmatched) by the sheer difficulties of Shakespeare's language, Susan quickly moved past that hurdle to probe beneath the surface of the history plays in a way that led her to consider how these plays might have taken shape in Shakespeare's imagination. She spent a month last summer studying drama in England, and during that time took a trip to York on her own initiative to see some performances of the medieval cycle drama (plays on biblical events) first hand. In my class she soon became fascinated by how closely the staging of some key scenes in Shakespeare's *Henry VI* resembled the sort of staging practices of these older medieval plays, and began wondering if the same cyclical and typological ideas of time and eternity propounded in the cycle plays could in any way be seen as informing Shakespeare's more linear notion of time in the histories. And if it were so that the cycle plays influenced Shakespeare (as she convinced all of us it was,) just what would be the political, moral, and eschatological implications of such a connection for



Susan Walker

our understanding of Shakespeare's notion of historical time? What sorts of ironies, particularly as regards the singularity of human achievement, would arise as a result of seeing a later event as shadowed (often ominously) by an earlier one, and, even more importantly, what *sense* of history does Shakespeare impart, say, to the accomplishments of Henry V by forcing us to see these "heroic deeds" as shadowed by failures in plays *written earlier* but plays that actually deal with *later* historical events? As you can see, this is no territory for a timid or derivative intellect, but Susan entered it with glee and soon mastered it as well as any student, undergraduate or graduate, I've had here at Arkansas in my more than twenty years of teaching. Her conclusions are, quite simply, stunningly original. They force us to reconsider the whole temporal framework of Shakespeare's two great tetralogies of history plays—a question that has dogged critics of these plays from the eighteenth-century onward. In short, Susan has entered a long-standing scholarly argument, and entered it with distinction. I should add that her writing is clear, forceful, and evidential. It gives the impression of the work of a seasoned scholar rather than that of a bright undergraduate. I recommend it for publication in *Inquiry* with great enthusiasm and without reservation. Indeed, I would do the same if I were reviewing it for a top-drawer journal in Shakespeare or Renaissance drama.

English professor, William A. Quinn, describes Ms. Walker as one of the best students he has taught. He comments:

It has been my privilege to have Susan Walker participate in three of my classes: Introduction to World Literature, Part 1; Survey of British Literature, Part 1; and an upper-level /graduate class on Chaucer. In all three classes, Susan was by far the best student. Indeed, I consider Susan Walker to be one of the very best and most promising undergraduates that I have taught in my more than twenty years at the University of Arkansas.

Although I consider these percentiles highly subjective and speculative on my part, I would rank Susan among the top 5% of English majors in terms of her critical acumen and writing skills. I would likewise rank her in the top 1% in terms of her scholarly self-discipline and enthusiastic commitment to mastering the subject. Immediately after reading Susan Walker's first exam, I recruited her to apply for our departmental honors program. She was just as immediately accepted and (I know from the frequent compliments of my colleagues) has flourished as one of our most promising Honors candidates.

Susan is extraordinarily self-disciplined. She has somehow managed in the last two years to excel as both a non-academic employee and a returning student. She actually submitted two "A+" essays for me well before their due dates. I sometimes worry that there's no time for fun or even a good nap in Susan's busy life. But then she assures me of the sheer joy she is having in returning to the university. In conclusion, my overall impression of Susan Walker is that she is a profoundly good as well as an extraordinarily intelligent person—a giver and a caretaker, modest and generous. Everything about Susan Walker suggests that she will be an extremely splendid teacher in the not too distant future.