

Reading Shakespeare Historically:  
'Postmodern' Attitudes and the History Plays

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As the 1990s draw to a close it seems as if the dust that has been raised by the onslaught of 'theory' on literary studies since the 1970s is about to settle again. The achievements of literary theory become available in common-sensical introductions,<sup>1</sup> and formerly severely questioned or even discarded concepts, such as the author, authorial intention, history, and value, are once again scrutinized in a critical but less radical manner.<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless, the surge of literary theory in the 1970s and 80s has certainly resulted in a new awareness of historical contingency with regard to both the text *and* its readings. Nowhere is this more clearly discernible than in the field of Shakespeare studies, where both Shakespeare's works *and* past and present reactions to them have been thoroughly historicized and contextualized<sup>3</sup> from all kinds of angles.<sup>4</sup> The new attitude is nicely captured in the most recent edition of Shakespeare's works, the 1997 *Norton Shakespeare*.<sup>5</sup> Alluding to the traditional notion of Shakespeare's universality by quoting Ben Jonson's famous eulogy "He was not of an age, but for all time!"<sup>6</sup> as an epigraph for the "General Introduction", the editors go on to describe Shakespeare's universality as a historically contingent fact, rooted both in

1 Cf. Jonathan Culler, *Literary Theory: A Very Short Introduction*, Oxford, 1997.

2 See, for example, Steven Earnshaw, *The Direction of Literary Theory*, Basingstoke/London, 1996.

3 For an overview cf. Gary Taylor, *Reinventing Shakespeare: A Cultural History from the Renaissance to the Present*, New York, 1989.

4 Accordingly, a multitude of only partially overlapping Shakespeares have emerged, most prominent among them the new historicist Shakespeare, the Marxist/materialist Shakespeare, and the feminist Shakespeare. For a hysterical reaction on behalf of a proponent of traditional Shakespeare studies see Brian Vickers, *Appropriating Shakespeare: Contemporary Critical Quarrels*, New Haven/London, 1993. On the theoretical issues involved cf. Christoph Bode, "Eigenumsfragen", *Shakespeare Jahrbuch* 132 (1996), 226-232.

5 Cf. Stephen Greenblatt, Walter Cohen, Jean E. Howard, Katharine Eisaman Maus (Eds.), *The Norton Shakespeare*, New York/London, 1997. All quotations from Shakespeare's works are taken from this edition.

6 Cf. Ben Jonson's commendatory poem prefixed to the First Folio edition of 1623.

Christoph Bode, Wolfgang Iser, eds.,

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to describe Shakespeare's universality as a historically contingent fact, rooted both in "peculiar historical circumstances and specific conventions, four centuries distant from our own" and in "centuries of response" well up to the present.<sup>7</sup> In this spirit, the text of the *Norton Shakespeare* is on the one hand based on the most accurate and up-to-date historical edition available; the 1986 *Oxford Shakespeare* (Gen. Eds. Stanley Wells and Gary Taylor).<sup>8</sup> On the other hand, however, it is the first and foremost aim of the Norton editors "to present the modern-spelling Oxford *Complete Works* in a way that would make the text more accessible to modern readers."<sup>9</sup> The result is an eminently readable edition that nevertheless broaches the most topical problems of Shakespeare philology to students and interested lay readers.<sup>10</sup>

On a more theoretical understanding, the double sense of "reading Shakespeare historically"<sup>11</sup> discernible in the *Norton Shakespeare* may serve to illustrate a somewhat paradoxical general observation: on the one hand there is a clearly discernible self-reflexive tendency in contemporary critical discourse and even in contemporary culture at large,<sup>12</sup> while on the other hand one of the few ideas shared by many people today is the conviction that a consciousness cannot see through the historical conditions that have formed it.<sup>13</sup> It should be profitable to take this peculiar

7 Stephen Greenblatt, "General Introduction", in: Greenblatt, Cohen, Howard, Eisaman Maus (Eds.), 1-76, 1 and 75.

8 The Oxford editors' interest in historical accuracy was most strikingly emphasized by their decision to publish both modern- and original-spelling versions of their text.

9 Greenblatt, "Introduction", 74. It was in this spirit that the Norton editors felt that they could not ignore centuries of response in the name of editorial policy, as the Oxford editors had done by reverting to Falstaff's original name, Sir John Oldcastle, in *1 Henry IV*. A translation of Greenblatt's discussion of this editorial problem could even be found in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* (14th Nov, 1997, 48), again testifying to Shakespeare's far-reaching cultural appeal.

10 The most interesting example in this respect is the inclusion in the *Norton Shakespeare* not only of the two distinct versions of *King Lear* established in the *Oxford Shakespeare* on facing pages, thus making parallel readings conveniently manageable, but also of a third version along the lines of the conflated text established by Pope and Theobald in the 18th century, on which both the teaching of the play and theatrical productions have relied ever since.

11 For a personal as well as programmatic outline of the approach from a feminist angle cf. Lisa Jardine, *Reading Shakespeare Historically*, London/New York, 1996, 1-18.

12 For a survey of persuasive examples of "universalised reflexivity in our lives" (3) cf. Slavoj Žižek, "You May!" [About the Post-Modern Super-Ego], *London Review of Books* 21: 6 (1999), 3-6.

13 On this fundamental problem and the two attitudes towards the possibility of theory it generates cf. Stanley Fish, "Critical Self-Consciousness, or Can We Know What We're Doing?", in: *Doing What Comes Naturally*, Oxford, 1989, 436-467, vs. Richard Shusterman, *Pragmatist Aesthetics: Living Beauty, Rethinking Art*, Cambridge, MA/Oxford, 1992, 59-61, and Christoph Bode, "Why Theory Matters", in: Rüdiger Ahrens, Laurenz Volkmann (Eds.), *Why Literature Matters: Theories and Functions of Literature*, Heidelberg, 1996, 87-100.

brand of doublethink to be the defining characteristic of what Agnes Heller describes as the "post-modern historical imagination", liberated from the chains and the reassurances of the grand narratives of modernity, but still caught in the "prisonhouse of contemporaneity/history".<sup>14</sup> In fact, the conflicting implications of 'postmodernity' can be reconciled in the notion, reassuring and suspect at the same time, that we live under historical conditions which condone a certain degree of self-reflexiveness in order to increase possibilities of knowledge at the cost of undermining its stability and accessibility. We can no longer believe in naturalized grand narratives, but their demise offers larger scope for self-consciously constructed narratives of all kinds and scales, whose plausibility will have to be validated in practice and against the plausibility of other narratives.

In this sense, readings of Shakespeare's works always imply large-scale narratives comprising the whole historical range from Shakespeare's early modernity via modernity proper to our own self-reflexive 'postmodernity'. Shakespeare's two tetralogies of history plays dealing with, on the one hand, the reigns of Richard II, Henry IV (two parts), and Henry V, as well as, on the other hand, Henry VI (three parts) and Richard III, are perhaps the most obvious case in point, unfolding before us a late 16th century Renaissance/early modern view<sup>15</sup> of the 15th century late medieval/pre-modern transitional phase of history, i.e. a reading/construction of events which are of crucial importance for the self-descriptions of modernity in its widest sense. In this respect, all readings of the plays can be regarded as highly symptomatic of different stages of modern historical consciousness, and never have the subtle shifts and mixtures between under- and overhistoricizing stances been more scrupulously examined than today.<sup>16</sup> On the whole, it seems fair to state that aesthetic motivations tended to outbalance historicizing impulses well into the 20th century, either in the name of neo-classical 'clarification' and edification or, later on, under the banner of Romantic universality. Nevertheless, historicizing has always been part of or at least a negative foil of the argument,<sup>17</sup> and it seems somewhat paradoxical but also symptomatic that late 20th-century explicit realizations of this fundamental dialectic of modern historical consciousness and the clearly discernible

14 Agnes Heller, *A Philosophy of History in Fragments*, Cambridge, MA/Oxford, 1993, viii-ix.

15 On the implications of the Renaissance vs. early modern distinction cf. Leah S. Marcus, "Renaissance/Early Modern Studies", in: Stephen Greenblatt, Giles Gunn (Eds.), *Redrawing the Boundaries: The Transformation of English and American Literary Studies*, New York, 1992, 41-63.

16 Again the strange mixture of both attitudes can surely be read as a sign of the times (cf. Terry Eagleton, *The Illusions of Postmodernism*, Oxford/Cambridge, MA, 1996, 49: "In over-historicizing, postmodernism also underhistoricizes, flattening out the variety and complexity of history in flagrant violation of its own pluralistic tenets." [original emphasis]).

17 For a recent survey of critical attitude towards *Richard II* and Shakespeare's history plays in general, cf. Charles R. Forker (Ed.), *Richard II*. Shakespeare: The Critical Tradition, London/Atlantic Highlands, NJ, 1998, 1-64.

new dominance of the historicizing impulse tend to be classified as 'postmodern'.<sup>18</sup> The following remarks will provide a (necessarily cursory) reading of Shakespeare's history plays against the backdrop of the modern/postmodern distinction.

### History/His Story

In narratology the problem of historical reference has occasionally been dealt with by extending widely used two-level models like *fabula* vs. *sujet* or story vs. discourse with a referential third category,<sup>19</sup> and a similar scheme should be profitable for an approach to Shakespeare's history plays. For this at least partly unnarratological application Karlheinz Stierle's general distinction between "events", "history" and "historical text" seems to be most useful.<sup>20</sup> For Stierle, "events" as such have no inherent meaning, they merely form a "boundless field of representabilities"<sup>21</sup> from which "history" as a chronological sequence of selected events is reductively constructed. Thus, "history" as a first "act of appropriating events"<sup>22</sup> establishes a preliminary meaning which can only be "materialized within the bounds of a given language"<sup>23</sup> so that the "historical text" emerges as a culturally charged version of "history", governed not only by linguistic possibilities and limitations, but also by rules of genre and contextual structures of interests. Moreover, the writing of history is rarely based on the actual experience of events. Instead, earlier "historical texts" have to be used as a point of departure, and Shakespeare's histories, which draw heavily upon Holinshed's *Chronicles of England, Scotland and Ireland* (1577, 2nd ed. 1587), Hall's *The Union of the Two Noble and Illustre Families of Lancastre and Yorke* (1548) and lots of other sources are an exemplary case in point. What emerges from this textual network is the observation that "history" in Stierle's sense, i.e. a chronological sequence of selected events considered to be important, was quite uncontroversial at the time: what mattered was the sequence of the reigns of kings, the decisive battles etc. On the other hand, the multitude of historically oriented texts

18 For an illuminating view of the relationship between modern and 'postmodern' attitudes, cf. Niklas Luhmann, "Why Does Society Describe Itself as Postmodern?", *Cultural Critique* 30 (1995), 171-186.

19 Cf. Dorrit Cohn, "Signposts of Fictionality", *Poetics Today* 11: 4 (1990), 775-804, esp. 777-784.

20 Cf. Karlheinz Stierle, "Geschehen, Geschichte, Text der Geschichte", in: Reinhard Koselleck, Wolf-Dieter Stempel (Eds.), *Geschichte - Ereignis und Erzählung*. Poetik und Hermeneutik V, München, 1973, 530-534. Cohn (1990, 779) adapts this to her narratological purposes as "reference/story/discourse".

21 Stierle, 531 (my translation).

22 Stierle, 532 (my translation).

23 Stierle, 534 (my translation).

testifies to an urge for historical understanding that could only be satisfied by widely varying "historical texts", and Shakespeare's history plays illustrate this dynamic with their unfolding of increasingly complex textual strategies in a newly created genre.<sup>24</sup>

In this respect, it is interesting to note that the reading process of "mapping past onto present", which Richard Halpern has recently described as a modernist practice under the headline of "historical allegory"<sup>25</sup> but which could also be generalized for modernity in its widest sense, can be based on either predominantly 'historical' or on predominantly 'textual' constructions of sequence. Historically speaking, the two tetralogies can be taken to tell the following story, exemplified in Tillyard's influential reading of the plays:<sup>26</sup>

Here the whole sequence of Shakespeare's English chronicle dramas becomes a grand illustration of the operation of divine providence in human affairs, with the deposition and murder of Richard II initiating a disruption of the universal order, a century of social chaos and civil war, the eventual punishment of those responsible and their descendants by the exercise of divine wrath - a process ended only by the 'succession' of Henry VII, the first Tudor monarch, to the English throne.<sup>27</sup>

It is clear that, in accordance with contemporary historiography, 'history' as historical chronology marks *Richard III* as the ultimate (pre-)destination of the whole sequence, especially in the light of the fact that the plays were written while the Tudor dynasty was still in power and could reasonably be expected to have an interest in establishing a "Tudor Myth" along the lines suggested by Tillyard. It is equally clear, however, that such an overall reading diminishes the scope for readings of single plays in the sequence, particularly with regard to the first four plays culminating in *Henry V* and suggesting that Divine Right can be successfully replaced by mere politics. Tillyard, for example, manages to integrate *Richard II* to *Henry V* into his "Tudor Myth" scheme only at the cost of voicing deep misgivings about *Henry V*, a play which he considers to be marred by the absence of "some great political principle."<sup>28</sup> Clearly, the answers to the question of legitimization put forth in *Richard III* and *Henry V* are fundamentally incompatible or at least mutually subversive:<sup>29</sup> a focus on the "Tudor Myth" exposes the apotheosis of Henry V as a

24 For a recent view of Shakespeare in the context of contemporary historiography cf. Paola Pugliatti, *Shakespeare the Historian*, Basingstoke/London, 1996.

25 Cf. Richard Halpern, *Shakespeare Among the Moderns*, Ithaca/London, 1997, 1-14, 13.

26 E.M.W. Tillyard, *Shakespeare's History Plays* (1944), London, 81969.

27 Graham Holderness (Ed.), *Shakespeare's History Plays: Richard II to Henry V*, Basingstoke/London, 1992, 2f.

28 Tillyard, 304-314, 305.

29 On the late 20th-century relevance of the polarity between Richard III and Henry V cf. Lois Potter, "Bad and Good Authority Figures: *Richard III* and *Henry V* since 1945", *Shakespeare Jahrbuch* 128 (1992), 39-54.

short-lived and ultimately futile attempt to replace providence with human endeavor and personal qualifications, while a focus on Henry V exposes the "Tudor Myth" as mere political strategy. Each position can view the other only in its own terms, and the fact that the doubling of positions still persists in Tillyard's groundbreaking study in 1944 suggests that modernization as a process is not as clear-cut as some theorists would have it.<sup>30</sup>

However, a more unequivocally modernizing stance emerges when the focus is on "historical text" rather than "history", and such an orientation is obviously the most important single consequence of 'theory'. From this angle, the fact that the historically first tetralogy of plays, *Richard II* to *Henry V*, was only written after the three *Henry VI* plays and *Richard III*<sup>31</sup> suggests an alternative construction of sequence, moving from an enactment of (the failure of) archaic, archetypal and mythical norms in the (textually) first tetralogy of plays (*1,2,3 Henry VI* and *Richard III*) towards an integrated analysis of political processes in the later second tetralogy.<sup>32</sup> In this account, the ending of *Richard III* loses its aura of historical conclusiveness, and the "Tudor Myth" immediately appears in a more ambiguous light: Richard is the obvious villain, but in a corrupt world his politics are successful to the point of absurdity (cf. his wooing of Lady Anne, *R III I*, ii) as long as he plays them purely pragmatically in the pursuit of self-interest. It is only when his motives become entangled with problems of traditional legitimacy that the tide turns decisively against him in the wake of the murder of Edward IV's legitimate heirs.<sup>33</sup> What seems to be at stake at this point are the political ineffectiveness of traditional political concepts and the striking discrepancy between political effectiveness and personal qualification in a moral sense.

It is to these problems that the second tetralogy turns in a manner that takes for granted the textual development of the first tetralogy from an episodic dramatization of history towards a condensed and personalized form of historical drama. In a first step, *Richard II* can be read as an attempt to locate the origins of the problems in

30 It is worth noting, however, that 1944 was also the year of Laurence Olivier's unequivocal film version of *Henry V*, a powerful vehicle of politically effective morale-boosting firmly in the tradition of the great nationalistic epic of England and largely unfettered by the subtleties of Shakespeare philology. Cf. Anthony Davis, "Laurence Olivier's *Henry V*", in: Robert Shaughnessy (Ed.), *Shakespeare on Film*, Basingstoke/London, 1998, 43-60.

31 The *Norton Shakespeare* gives the following conjectural dates for the writing of the plays (q = year of first quarto edition): *1 Henry VI*: ? (early 1590s); *2 Henry VI*: 1591 (q1594 as *The First Part of the Contention of the Two Famous Houses of York and Lancaster*); *3 Henry VI*: 1591 (octavo 1595 as *The True Tragedy of Richard Duke of York and the Good King Henry the Sixth*); *Richard III*: 1592-93 (q1597); *Richard II*: 1595 (q1597); *1 Henry IV*: 1596/97 (q1598); *2 Henry IV*: 1597/98 (q1600); *Henry V*: 1598/99 (q1600).

32 Cf., for example, Wolfgang Iser, *Staging Politics: The Lasting Impact of Shakespeare's Histories*, Trans. David Henry Wilson, New York, 1993.

33 Cf. Iser, 44-68, esp. 50.

question, and, while still taking its cues from contemporary historiography, the play makes use of the personalizing or even psychologizing achievements of *Richard III* in order to scrutinize a paradigmatic clash of tradition and historical change, office and personality. Furthermore, the arch of Richard III's rise and fall is dismantled and synchronized into a doubled plot simultaneously describing the fall of Richard II and the rise of Bolingbroke, later Henry IV, the first standing for the old, transcendently grounded feudal order and the latter embodying pragmatic politics. In his justly famous bucket-and-well speech Richard provides a multi-layered metaphor illustrating both his and Bolingbroke's situation and the structure of the play, thus short-circuiting "history" and "historical text" for a brief flash of recognition:

Now is this golden crown like a deep well  
That owes two buckets filling one another,  
The emptier ever dancing in the air,  
The other down, unseen, and full of water.  
That bucket down and full of tears am I,  
Drinking my griefs, whilst you mount up on high.  
(*R II IV*, i, 174-179)

D(owned) by the tears of his personal failure and the burden of tradition, Richard acknowledges the indisputable fact that Bolingbroke is "up", but at the same time he alludes to the fact that Bolingbroke will not be able to use the crown as a well of power as he himself, though stricken with doubt, still thought he could on his return from Ireland (cf. *R II III*, ii). The act of usurpation has turned kingship into an empty bucket because, in a strange inversion of hierarchy, the usurper did not come from the bottom of the well and may not return to it. Due to this irremediable imbalance the well ceases to function and the empty bucket, can from then on only be replenished with air or with water from elsewhere. In fact, even Richard himself has an inkling of where elsewhere might be when he points to Bolingbroke's "courtship of the common people" (*R II I*, iv, 23), and Bolingbroke in turn accuses Richard of depriving him of traditional signs of worthiness (ownership of land, his coat of arms and heraldic emblems), leaving him "no sign./ Save men's opinions and my living blood./ To show the world I am a gentleman." (*R II III*, i, 22-27)<sup>34</sup>

But as this quotation indicates, Bolingbroke has become the empty bucket by historical circumstance, and part of him wants to restore the old order. Although his pragmatic character seizes the opportunities as they come along, he is not able to construe the parameters of his position in general terms: it is the much more articulate and imaginative Richard and not the materialistic Bolingbroke who realizes that under the new dispensation "reaching into one's own ground actually means becoming aware of one's groundlessness", as Wolfgang Iser puts it nicely in terms of the bucket-and-well metaphor.<sup>35</sup> It will take another generation to adapt to this new

34 Cf. also *I H IV III*, ii, 39-45, where Bolingbroke/Henry IV explicitly acknowledges "Opinion, that did help me to the crown" (42).

35 Iser, 106.

ideological frame, and the remaining three plays of the second tetralogy trace the progress of Bolingbroke's son, Prince Hal, on his way towards a newly fashioned monarchic ideal, while his father is primarily concerned with a culturally retrogressive attempt at atonement by mounting a crusade.

One of the most persuasive accounts of this development has been put forward by Norman Rabkin, who points out that *Richard II*

poses a question that arches over the entire tetralogy: can the manipulative qualities that guarantee political success be combined in one man with the spiritual qualities that make one fully open and responsive to life and therefore fully human?<sup>36</sup>

According to Rabkin, the first part of *Henry IV* offers a positive answer to this question, suggesting "the possibility of a public man who is privately whole."<sup>37</sup> Part 2, on the other hand, replays a similar sequence of events and provides the opposite answer, thus retrospectively characterizing as "illusory" the mood of "comic optimism" discernible in part 1.<sup>38</sup> As a result of this doubling, *Henry V* can be read in two mutually contradictory ways, depending on which perspective one adopts:

If *Henry V* had followed directly on *I Henry IV*, we might have expected to be made merry by the comedy such critics as Dover Wilson have taken that play to be, for we have seen a Hal potentially larger than his father, possessing the force that politics requires without the sacrifice of imagination and range that Bolingbroke has had to pay. But *Part Two* has told us that *Part One* deceived us, for the day has had to come when Hal [...] would be required to make his choice, and the Prince has had to expel from his life the very qualities that made him better than his father. Have we not, after *Part Two*, good reason to expect in the play about Hal's kingship the study of an opportunist who has traded his humanity for his success, covering over the ruthlessness of the politician with the mere appearance of fellowship that his past has endowed with him?<sup>39</sup>

As Rabkin amply documents, readings of *Henry V* have always tended to come down decisively in favour of one of these two possibilities, and while conceding that, as he himself demonstrates, it is possible to switch from one reading to the other and back again, he maintains that it is not possible to experience both readings simultaneously.<sup>40</sup>

This, however, is exactly what theory seems to have enabled recent critics to do. Focusing on the dialectic of subversion and containment/ideology, new historicists and cultural materialists manage to have their cake and eat it, too.<sup>41</sup> Even more

36 Norman Rabkin, "Either/Or: Responding to *Henry V*", *Shakespeare and the Problem of Meaning*, Chicago/London, 1981, 33-62, 37.

37 Rabkin, 38.

38 Rabkin, 38.

39 Rabkin, 43.

40 Cf. Rabkin, 60.

41 Cf., for example, Stephen Greenblatt, "Invisible Bullets", in: *Shakespearean Negotiations: The Circulation of Social Energy in Renaissance England*, Berkeley, 1988: 21-65, and Jonathan

strikingly, the success of Kenneth Branagh's famous film version of 1989 seems to rely heavily on exactly this doubling, combining worship of Branagh/Henry and a nationalistic undertone with a politically correct anti-war stance.<sup>42</sup> All this suggests that in "postmodern" retrospect, the *Henriad*<sup>43</sup> emerges as an epic of modernity, prefiguring the structural evolution of modern society with its displacement of epic heroes and traditionally moulded concepts of personal integrity and identity.<sup>44</sup> After the fall of Richard II, the traditional paradigm of identity and unity is gradually replaced by paradigms of difference which undermine the persistent attempts at construing them in terms of identity, both in the world(s) of the plays and in the world(s) of their audiences and readers.

In the process, increasingly flexible strategies of fictionalization can be observed in Shakespeare's "historical texts", i.e. a type of fictionalization emerges that leaves behind conventional modes along the lines of the tragedy/fall-of-princes model still prevalent in *Richard III* and *Richard II*. Accordingly, *I Henry IV* introduces a whole range of fictional characters, which supplement the world of "history" with its foil of everyday "events", a world that could not have been reconciled with the conventions of tragedy at the time. The resultant shift towards comedy, which is quite in keeping with the positive spirit of the play, is then counterbalanced and exposed as idealization in *2 Henry IV*. Here the everyday life of the common people is generalized and demonized from the beginning as "the blunt monster with uncounted heads." The still discordant wavering multitude" (*2 H IV* Induction, 18/19). Its embodiment in the personification of Rumour, who opens the play clad in a robe painted full of tongues, turns out to be a kind of framing device which controls the play's discordant world in a sinister way and introduces a metahistoriographical

Dollimore, Alan Sinfield, "History and Ideology: *Henry V*" (1985), in: Graham Holderness (Ed.), *Shakespeare's History Plays: Richard II to Henry V*, Basingstoke/London, 1992, 182-199. For a historical placing of the play's ambiguity in the context of Elizabethan London in 1599 cf. Joel B. Altman, "Vile Participation: The Amplification of Violence in the Theater of *Henry V*", *Shakespeare Quarterly* 42 (1991), 1-32.

42 Probably due to these parallels Branagh's film and ensuing productions of *Henry V* have received an enormous amount of critical/academic attention. See, for example, Curtis Bright, "Branagh and the Prince, or a 'royal fellowship of death'" (1991), in: Robert Shaughnessy (Ed.), *Shakespeare on Film*, Basingstoke/London, 1998, 126-144, Peter S. Donaldson, "Taking on Shakespeare: Kenneth Branagh's *Henry V*", *Shakespeare Quarterly* 42 (1991), 60-71, and, most recently, Courtney Lehmann, "Much Ado About Nothing? Shakespeare, Branagh, and the 'National-popular' in the Age of Multinational Capital", *Textual Practice* 12: 1 (1998), 1-22, and Robert Shaughnessy, "The Last Post: *Henry V*, War Culture and the Postmodern Shakespeare", *Theatre Survey* 39: 1 (1998), 41-61.

43 Cf. Alvin B. Kernan, "The *Henriad*: Shakespeare's Major History Plays", in: Alvin B. Kernan (Ed.), *Modern Shakespeare Criticism: Essays on Style, Dramaturgy, and the Major Plays*, New York, 1970, 245-275.

44 Cf., from a feminist angle, Jean E. Howard, Phyllis Rackin, "Gender and Nation: Anticipations of Modernity in the 'Second Tetralogy'", *Engendering a Nation: A Feminist Account of Shakespeare's English Histories*, London/New York, 1997, 135-215.

element. In the course of the play, Rumour and the associated tongue motif appear several times to point out different aspects of the unstable relationship between language and truth (compare 2 *Henry IV*, i, 67ff./ii, 138-143/iii, i, 89-94) before Falstaff corroborates the impression that his role in 2 *Henry IV* is much more unfavourable than in 1 *Henry IV* by identifying himself with the principle (cf. 2 *Henry IV*, ii, 16-20). But then, so does the play itself by ending in an undramatic prose epilogue presented by a somewhat disenchanted Epilogue figure ("My tongue is weary" 27/28) trying to make amends for the lack of dramatic amusement by dancing ("If my tongue cannot entreat you to acquit me, will you command me to use my legs?" 15/16) and for the play's interference with reality by disclaiming the Falstaff-Oldcastle connection.<sup>45</sup>

The bleak vision of reality displayed in the second part of *Henry IV*, culminating in Prince John's restoration of order by means of betrayal and his favourable comments upon Hal's renunciation of his past, implies an untheatrical marginalization of characters by circumstance that can only be remedied superficially by the dancing Epilogue. How can such a world be rescued for theatrical purposes? It seems as if *Henry V* can also be read as an attempt at answering this question. Finally Hal, who seems to have been strangely diminished in his stature as unofficial hero of the *Henry IV* plays by the end of part II, has reached the top of the bill, a place which historical record and historical consciousness have accorded him in the most favourable terms from Shakespeare's days to the present.<sup>46</sup> Accordingly, Shakespeare had to stay close to his sources, but at the same time he had to take into account what the *Henry IV* plays had already done to this character. The result is a double strategy which combines a focus on the historical "fact" of the battle of Agincourt (1415)<sup>47</sup> with an equally strong focus on theatricality. The latter is achieved by the introduction of a mediating Chorus figure providing a Prologue, an Epilogue, and introductory remarks to each act of the play. Most of the time the Chorus is self-consciously enacting the rhetorical modesty topos with regard to the possibilities of representing reality and history in the theatre, asking the audience to overcome the limits of any theatrical representation of *Henry V*'s historical achievements with their imagination. It is striking, however, that it is not the inadequacy of the theatre which refutes heroic expectations of readers and audiences but rather the dramatic action itself, which is full of deeply unheroic details from the very beginning. The first two scenes after the heroic announcements of the Chorus's Prologue cast severe doubts on the justness of

45 See above, note 8. When 1 *Henry IV* was first performed, Falstaff was called Sir John Oldcastle, and it seems that Shakespeare was forced to change the name in the wake of protests from descendants of the historical Oldcastle (cf. Greenblatt, "Introduction", 75).

46 Even Katharine Eisman Maus's introduction to the play in the *Norton Shakespeare* opens with the acknowledgement that "[f]rom a military point of view, *Henry V* was perhaps the most capable king England ever had." (*The Norton Shakespeare*, 1445)

47 While *Richard II* and the two parts of *Henry IV* are definitely not plays about Richard's Irish expedition or *Henry*'s battles against the rebels, "which form the historical scaffolding of the respective plays [and] remain rather marginal" (Iser, 169), *Henry V* is a play about the battle of Agincourt as much as it is a play about its eponymous hero.

*Henry*'s war in France (*Henry V*, i/ii), which appears as a shrewdly pragmatic political move<sup>48</sup> supported by an equally pragmatic clergy providing the legalistic groundwork. But, as Lawrence Danson points out,

the shock to our heroic expectations is exactly the point: this heroic King *Henry* does live - must, because he did live - in the real world he inherited and did not make. Like the actors on the stage, the actor in history is a being strictly limited by his medium.<sup>49</sup>

Thus, the parallel between the King's and the Chorus's virtuoso performances (both make more of less in their respective media, i.e. life and the theatre) marks a shifting of emphasis from questions of 'being' to questions of 'acting'. In this sense, the play does not present history as a result of *Henry V* 'being' the ideal king. Rather it presents *Henry V* 'acting' the ideal king against the backdrop of specific historical circumstances, and while there is no doubt that his 'acting' is effective, it is also clear that effective political 'acting' affects his 'being' in an unfavourable way, substituting ambiguity for identity and contingency for virtue.

### Modern/Postmodern'

"Thoroughly Modern *Henry*"<sup>50</sup> one might feel tempted to say, and indeed, as various critics have noted, the central ingredients of modernity are all addressed (or one could even say constructed) in Shakespeare's late 16th century presentation of early 15th century history. Norman Rabkin, for example, emphasizes "the difference between Hal's ability to thrive in a world of process by employing time as an instrument and the oddly similar unwillingness of both Hotspur and Falstaff [and, one might add, *Henry IV* as well as, before him, Richard II - C.R.] to do so"<sup>51</sup>, thus pointing to a specifically modern experience of time.<sup>52</sup> This in turn has severe consequences for a notion of history. Wolfgang Iser shows that Shakespeare's presentation of *Henry V* as an instance of possible moments of fulfilment in history is conceived in strictly

48 In the light of the preceding play it is obvious that Hal is heeding advice from his father who on his deathbed told him: "Be it thy course to busy giddy minds/With foreign quarrels, that action hence born out/May waste the memory of the former days." (2 *Henry IV*, iii, 341-343)

49 Lawrence Danson, "*Henry V*: King, Chorus, and Critics", *Shakespeare Quarterly* 34 (1983), 27-43, 36. See also Lanson's general observations on the role of the Chorus: "Undoubtedly there are gaps [...] between some of the things [the Chorus] tells us and some of the things we actually see performed. Each such gap becomes an opportunity for interpretation, and the Chorus is clear in his directions 'gently to watch, kindly to judge, our play'" (35).

50 Cf. Howard, Raackin, 3.

51 Rabkin, 37.

52 For a general approach to this topic cf. Niklas Luhmann, "The Future Cannot Begin: Temporal Structures in Modern Society", *Social Research* 43 (1976), 130-152.

"historical rather than eschatological terms."<sup>53</sup> As this was "an idea alien to the early modern age" it turned Henry's success into "a singular event",<sup>54</sup> illustrating a modern concept of history which Iser sums up as follows:

[...] Shakespeare ends the tetralogy with a ruler who is singularly successful, but whose unique success cannot be repeated by adhering to any presumed law. [...] Instead, Shakespeare uncovers the driving force that generates historical events, but such a force does not in any way define the events it gives rise to. [...] Certainly history springs from the actions of rulers, but it proliferates in its effects [...]. It is the uncontrollability of these effects through which actions themselves constitute the contingency of history.<sup>55</sup>

But then, the transitoriness of Henry V's success was quite in keeping with the semi-secular compensatory eschatology of the "Tudor Myth", which as a 20th-century construction of the contemporary Elizabethan context emerges as a proto-modern strategy of couching modern politics in pre-modern language. In this respect, the Chorus's evocation of the historically later but textually earlier plays of the first tetralogy in the final lines of *Henry V* reestablishes the focus on "history" rather than "historical text" and turns out to be an effective move of containment with regard to the play's subversion of contemporary political orthodoxy.<sup>56</sup> At the same time, the subversiveness of historical contingency as staged in *Henry V* introduces a number of elements which become part of future orthodoxies. Jean E. Howard and Phyllis Rackin start their "feminist account of Shakespeare's English histories" (subtitle) from the assumption that "[t]he history plays Shakespeare wrote in the 1590s helped produce what are now regarded as 'traditional' gender relations and the divisions between what we now call the public and the private domains",<sup>57</sup> while other critics concentrate on emerging notions of nationhood and state.<sup>58</sup>

53 Iser, 182.

54 Iser, 186.

55 Iser, 174.

56 It is also worth noting, however, that the Chorus repeats the modesty topos and sums up the achievements of Henry V one last time in the highly artificial form of a sonnet whose historical turning point towards Henry VI comes, in continental fashion, after verse 8, while the final couplet introduces the textual reference to the first tetralogy mentioned above.

57 Howard, Rackin, 10.

58 Howard and Rackin (10) hint at the "interconnections between Englishness, aggressive masculinity, and closeted womanhood" in the history plays. See also J.L. Simmons, "Masculine Negotiations in Shakespeare's History Plays: Hal, Hotspur, and 'the foolish Mortimer'", *Shakespeare Quarterly* 44 (1993), 440-463, or, in more general terms, Graham Holderness, "What Is My Nation? Shakespeare and National Identities" (1991) and Claire McEachern, "Henry V and the Paradox of the Body Politic" (1994), both in: Ivo Kamps (Ed.), *Materialist Shakespeare: A History*, London/New York, 1995, 218-238 and 292-319, as well as David J. Baker, "Imagining Britain: William Shakespeare's *Henry V*", in: *Between Nations: Shakespeare, Spenser, Marvell, and the Question of Britain*, Stanford, 1997, 17-65.

It seems as if this astonishing alertness to processes of emergent modernity can to a certain extent account for Shakespeare's unprecedented and seemingly undiminishing cultural authority.<sup>59</sup> On the one hand, all of his works (and the histories in particular) can be read as paradigmatic ur-texts of modern literature, even or perhaps especially in its most emphatic high modernist variety. Fredric Jameson, for example, talking about Kafka's *The Trial*, points out that

[i]t is [...] the peculiar overlap of future and past, [...] the resistance of archaic feudal structures to irresistible modernizing tendencies - of tendential organization and the residual survival of the not yet 'modern' in some other sense - that is the condition of possibility for high modernism as such.<sup>60</sup>

and surely this is exactly the historical state which Shakespeare's history plays address explicitly. On the other hand, Shakespeare's works have their origins in the non-, or rather not yet, sacralized semi-literary sphere of Elizabethan theatre, and in spite of all attempts at appropriation from 'highbrow' circles of clarifying classicists, reading romanticists, and mystifying modernists they have retained their practical adaptability and potential for 'mere' entertainment, thus singularly combining Cultural and cultural authority.<sup>61</sup> Moreover, from a modern point of view, the texts' early modern provenance supports both affirmative readings or productions chiming in with the emergent modern concepts of self, gender, love, politics, history, nation etc. and critical readings or productions focusing on pre-modern elements in Shakespeare's works as a yardstick against which the drawbacks of modernization can be measured. So, astonishingly enough, historical coincidence combined with outstanding personal abilities enabled Shakespeare to create texts which transcend the most fundamental distinctions in the field of cultural productivity such as elitist vs. popular, aesthetic vs. political, affirmative vs. critical, progressive vs. conservative, historicist vs. universal, etc. In the light of this encompassing quality it seems quite plausible to read his works and their reception as a kind of mimesis of the process of modernization itself. Cultural authority is in this case clearly based on cultural pervasiveness, and Shakespeare's universality is indeed a historically contingent fact.<sup>62</sup>

59 For a recent attempt to come to terms with this question cf. Michael D. Bristol, *Big-Time Shakespeare*, London/New York, 1996. A topical survey of Shakespeare's theatrical presence can be found in Peter Holland, *English Shakespeares: Shakespeare on the English Stage in the 1990s*, Cambridge, 1997.

60 Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, London/New York, 1991, 309.

61 For a highly illuminating historical overview with regard to the development of Shakespeare's cultural standing from the 19th to the 20th century cf. Lawrence W. Levine, "William Shakespeare in America", *Highbrow/Lowbrow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America*, Cambridge, MA/London, 1988, 11-81.

62 Read in this spirit, Harold Bloom's recent universalizing *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human*, New York, 1998, makes perfect historical sense.

If one starts from here and follows Fredric Jameson's suggestion that modern culture well up to modernism "is characterized by a situation of incomplete *modernization*",<sup>63</sup> then it becomes clear that all modern readings or productions of Shakespeare's works are caught up in continuity with Shakespeare, so to speak. 'Postmodern' readings and productions, on the other hand, can assume a certain degree of independence from this continuity because, as Jameson observes, "[o]urs is a more homogeneously modernized condition; we no longer are encumbered with the embarrassment of non-simultaneities and non-synchronicities," and in this sense "postmodernism is *more* modern than modernism itself."<sup>64</sup> Continuity is still there, but it has lost its evolutionary structural grip on us, resulting in a "postmodernity evidently disinterested in thematizing and valorizing the New as such any longer."<sup>65</sup> From this new angle it is no longer exclusively the positive, negative, or ambiguous effects of modernization which catch our interest but rather the process itself, inextricably and finally explicitly bound up with the ('post-)modern notion of historical contingency. In this respect, the 'postmodern' outlook substitutes 'acting' for 'being' in a way quite similar to Shakespeare's in *Henry V*, and it certainly favours Jaques's playfully melancholic "All the world's a stage,/And all the men and women merely players" (As *You Like It* II, vii, 138/139) over the Duke of Northumberland's anti-modern "And let this world no longer be a stage/To feed contention in a ling'ring act" (2 *H IV* I, i, 155/156). 'Postmodernity' is surely still modern enough to guarantee Shakespeare's cultural authority, and it does so in a newly self-conscious way which draws on a sense of historical bracketing marked by the epithets 'early' and 'post-'. Things past redress are certainly not past care with us.

63 Jameson, 310 (original emphasis).

64 Jameson, 310.

65 Jameson, 311. It is this change of quality which Jameson has in mind when he argues tentatively "that what is also thereby lost from the postmodern is *modernity* as such" (310).

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