ABSTRACT

Title of dissertation: STAGING THE MIDDLE AGES: HISTORY AND FORM IN EARLY MODERN ENGLISH DRAMA

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Early modern conceptions of what it meant to be "medieval" continue to shape our own conception of what it means to be "modern." Writers of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries claimed to separate historical fact from literary fiction more effectively than their medieval forebears. And yet, many widespread ideas about the Middle Ages that persist to this day—including the idea of a "Middle Ages" at all—are the fictional inventions of early modern writers, from chroniclers and antiquarians, to poets and playwrights. Focusing on the affordances and limitations of dramatic form, this dissertation examines how enduringly popular visions of the Middle Ages crafted by Shakespeare and other early modern playwrights (including John Bale, Thomas Hughes, and Elizabeth Cary) still inform our historical understanding. These writers shaped their revisionist historiographical narratives for the Renaissance stage in a host of generic guises, not only in Elizabethan chronicle history plays, but also in secularized morality plays, Senecan tragedies, and closet drama. These early modern depictions of the medieval past gave new life to older dramatic forms characteristic of both classical and medieval theatre, such as the chorus and various forms of theatrical spectacle, while also employing new formal strategies such as the soliloquy, the dumbshow, and the play-within-a-play. All the plays examined here—including John Bale's *Kynge Johan*, Shakespeare's *King John* and *Richard II*, Thomas Hughes's *The Misfortunes of Arthur*, and Elizabeth Cary's *The Tragedy of Mariam*—engage in self-conscious medievalism. Remediating earlier chronicle accounts as well as contemporary historiographical controversies (or "battles-of-the-books"), these plays fashion

new fictions of when the Middle Ages ended and when modernity began. The dissertation concludes with an analysis of modern dramatic medievalism in Tony Kushner's twentieth-century stage epic, *Angels in America*, a play that witnesses the continuing power of premodern dramatic and historical models as tools for reimagining ideas of national and cultural identity. Examining the formal strategies employed by all these playwrights provides insight into the ways that readers and writers have understood the medieval past, the modern present, and the shape of history itself.

STAGING THE MIDDLE AGES:
HISTORY AND FORM IN EARLY MODERN ENGLISH DRAMA

By

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Introduction

The historian, essentially, wants more documents than he can really use; the dramatist only wants more liberties than he can really take.

– Henry James, Preface to *The Aspern Papers*

Every era negotiates the distinction between historical fact and literary fiction anew. Where does one end and the other begin? For English writers of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, this question was essential, both to their understanding of the past as well as to their efforts to distance themselves from it. In order to establish their own modernity, Tudor and early Stuart writers called for a sharper, more rigorous distinction between these two forms of writing; on one hand, there was what humanist Thomas Blundeville classified as "fables, poesies, and poetical Hystories," and, on the other, the writings of "true Philosophers and Historiographers, whose office is to tell things as they were done."[1] In seeking to redefine history as a category of writing beyond the rhetorical historiography characteristic of medieval chroniclers, these self-proclaimed "true" historiographers saw themselves as advocating for a more definitive line between fact and fable, political past and poetry. Yes, ironically, many popular ideas about medieval history, including some that persist to this day, are themselves the fictional inventions of the early modern historical imagination, an imagination that was shaped by chroniclers and antiquarians as well as by poets and playwrights. In this body of work, we can see the tension captured with characteristic wit by Henry James, who calls attention to the seemingly conflicting agendas of the historian and the dramatist. Even as they share this ideal of historical plenitude, modern historians and literary critics have borne out James' assessment, documenting the

[1] Thomas Blundeville, *The True Order and Methode of Wryting and Reading Hystories* (London: Thomas Seres, 1574), § "Of the dutye and office of hystoriographers," unnumbered page.

former's love of source-hunting and the latter's free hand with the sources that they have adapted. Yet recent scholarship has also shown that the two groups have much in common. It is now a scholarly truism that early modern historians and chroniclers, like contemporary dramatists, also inevitably want more liberties than they can really take—and take more liberties than they pretend.

This dissertation will argue that attention to form offers a key to understanding how early modern English historical values were created by the overlap between these two genres of writing, even as early modern historians insisted ever more emphatically that the two were quite separate. For some early modern writers, as well as for some twenty-first century scholars, the historian and the dramatist are separated less by their diverging methodologies (or even their professed intentions) than by the forms in which their narratives ultimately took shape. Sixteenth-century antiquarian Johnathan Prise, stresses the importance of form in the first chapter of his *Historiae Britannicae Defensio* (A Defense of British History, 1573). In attempting to create a historically accurate assessment of King Arthur, Prise emphasizes his own strict adherence to "credible" historical documents and his rejection of "fables about him [Arthur] invented from other sources and added to history."[2] Though he rejects these fables, he nevertheless concedes the importance of fabulous sources as an effective means of historical representation, precisely because (rather than in spite) of their form:

> It seems that the tales told by poets are fabricated in such a way as to be enveloped in some wonderful form of narrative, all so that the more amazing they appear the more lasting the impressions they make on men's memories and the more readily they are called to mind.[3]

[2] Jonathan Prise, *Historiae Britannicae Defensio* (*A Defense of British History*), ed. and trans. Ceri Davies (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, 2015), 61.
[3] Ibid., 55.

For Prise, the "wonderful form of narrative" which "envelopes" a historical record is the very thing that creates the "lasting impression" of these histories. Poets (a class of writer in which Prise would have included James's "dramatists") may not tell the story accurately, but they often tell it effectively. Prise's own intentions in arguing along these lines are explored in more detail in Chapter 2; however, this brief quotation addresses one of the main concerns of this dissertation as a whole: how the form of the historical narrative shapes both the content and the reception of that narrative.

Modern as well early modern historians concede the same point made by Prise, often with the same degree of chagrin. As Curtis Perry and John Watkins observe in *Shakespeare and the Middle Ages*, "almost any book written about the Hundred Years War or the Wars of the Roses begins by explaining just how Shakespeare got it wrong."[4] Dramatic fictions shape our understanding of the past as much as authentic histories, if not more. The degree to which historians "bemoan the persistence of Shakespearean interpretations of the Middle Ages," Perry and Watkins continue, "suggest[s] that people do read Shakespeare for history, or at least that Shakespeare colors historical understanding."[5] Though Shakespeare "may have gotten the Middle Ages wrong, […] he also made it matter to thousands of English readers for whom figures like Richard III, Richard II, Henry IV, and even Henry V would have been virtually indistinguishable had Shakespeare never written."[6] Shakespeare and his contemporaries, including John Bale, Thomas Hughes, Elizabeth Cary, and other early modern dramatists discussed in this dissertation, condition the way that we as twenty-first century readers understand the Middle Ages, the early modern period, and the shape of history itself. It is the

[4] Curtis Perry and John Watkins, "Introduction," to *Shakespeare and the Middle Ages*, ed. Curtis Perry and John Watkins (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 1.
[5] Ibid., 2.
[6] Ibid., 2.

contention of this dissertation that understanding the workings of literary and dramatic form are essential to our sense of how events from the past come to be represented, preserved, and ultimately understood.

The chapters that follow examine how variations in genre, style, and formal strategies affect our understanding of historical content as well as how the perceived difference between "history" and "literature" changes from the end of the medieval period into early modernity. The central question of the project is: What happens when medieval history leaps from the pages of chronicles and from the pageants of civic municipal drama onto the stages of Renaissance playhouses? My analysis builds on critical conversations in both early modern medievalism and in the wider scholarly debate concerning the relationship between formalist and historicist methodologies. I examine early modern plays which remediate medieval history in various theatrical forms—as well as one twentieth century American play which self-consciously uses medieval models of both theatre and history to represent the recent past to a contemporary audience.

Formalism / Historicism / Medievalism

In focusing on the relationship between dramatic form and historical content, my analysis draws on and extends recent scholarship in Historical Formalism, an approach that attempts to unites two complementary methodologies once thought to be incompatible: formalism and New Historicism. I apply this methodology to scholarly discussion of early modern medievalism, arguing that the shape of plays reveals how early modern dramatists understood, represented, and ultimately invented the Middle Ages.

Mark David Rasmussen, in his introduction to *Renaissance Literature and Its Formal Engagements*, observes that "in recent years many have come to feel that the new historicist paradigm, at least in its present orientation towards cultural studies, appears to be exhausted, its initial excitement now long since cooled."[7] Two decades later, despite this skepticism, New Historicism's impact on early modern studies is still felt strongly. In a special issue of *Poetics Today* focusing on the topic "Beyond the New Historicism," John Drakakis and Monika Flundernik write that, "although there have in recent years been many pronouncements of its demise, the 'death' of New Historicism has been greatly exaggerated."[8] Perhaps one reason for New Historicism's persistence is that so many of the "tenants that are shared by most of the first-generation New Historicists have now become general features of the wider early modern critical landscape."[9] The success of New Historicism lies less in its former novelty than its integration into the scenery. In many ways, it is difficult not to historicize when reading early modern history plays. This is partly because, as Neema Parvini writes, "reading Shakespeare in itself is an inextricably historical experience, since the plays come to us from the remote past," and partly because history plays in particular represent the playwright's own attempt to think historically about the recent past.[10] Early modern writers of history plays and twenty-first century scholars of these history plays are often faced with many of the same questions. Not least among them: how does the process of remediating a historical sequence of events for the stage define the shape, scope, and meaning of the narrative?

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[7] Mark David Rasmussen, "Introduction: New Formalism?" *Renaissance Literature and its Formal Engagements*, ed. Mark David Rasmussen (New York: Palgrage, 2002), 3.

[8] John Drakakis and Monika Flundernik, "Introduction: Beyond New Historicism?" *Poetics Today* 34:4 (Winter 2014), 497.

[9] Drakakis and Flundernik, 503. Among the "first-generation New Historicists," the authors name "Greenblatt, Montrose, Joel Fineman, Stephen Orgel, Leonard Tennenhouse, and Nancy Armstrong" (503).

[10] Neema Parvini, *Shakespeare's History Plays: Rethinking Historicism* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2012), 72.

Several critics have advanced the idea of looking at form as a way to think historically while moving beyond New Historicism. In his essay, "How Formalism Because a Dirty Word, and Why We Can't Do Without It," Richard Strier calls attention to the false binary that literary studies has asserted between "formalism" and "historicism" as methodologies.[11] More recently, Lara Dodds and Michelle M. Dowd have demonstrated in "The Case for a Feminist Return to Form," that while the "New Historicist opposition to form has at times been overstated," nevertheless, "historicist and cultural criticism tended to separate questions about history or culture from questions about form, giving precedence to the former over the latter."[12] The approach that Stephen Cohen terms "Historical Formalism" combines these two methodologies, looking at how "a text's form shapes and is in turn shaped by its raw material—when ideologies of form and content meet."[13] Unlike its avowedly apolitical (one might say, "isolationist") formalist predecessor, New Criticism, this Historical or "New" Formalism engages with literary forms in light of the historical and cultural circumstances that produced them. Building on the work of these scholars, I show how the constraints and affordances of various dramatic forms determine the historical content of early modern works for the stage.

Because of the early modern insistence on distinguishing between the genres outlined above, Historical Formalism has proved a useful tool for discussing early modern medievalism. Examining literary form in the context of its historical moment, I use this methodology to show how our understanding of historical events is itself is shaped by the forms available to dramatists. David Bevington, echoing Hayden White's theory of narrative "emplotment," argues that

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[11] Richard Strier, "How Formalism Because a Dirty Word, and Why We Can't Do Without It," in *Renaissance Literature and Its Formal Engagements*, ed. Mark David Rasmussen (New York: Palgrave, 2002), 207–15.

[12] Lara Dodds and Michelle M. Dowd, "The Case for a Feminist Return to Form," *Early Modern Women: An Interdisciplinary Journal* 13, no. 1 (Fall 2018), 83.

[13] Stephen Cohen, "Between Form and Culture: New Historicism and the Promise of a Historical Formalism," *Renaissance Literature and its Formal Engagements*, ed. Mark David Rasmussen (New York: Palgrave, 2002), 32.

"history is existential."[14] Events occur, but the unending sequence of events recorded in the historical archive

> does not lend itself easily to the generic shapes of comedy or tragedy. At the same time, because history cries out to be interpreted, the search for dramatic form impels a dramatist and his acting company to satisfy the cravings of their audience for a meaningful shape.[15]

Playwrights, like historians, must craft these events into some kind of meaningful shape. It would be anachronistic to say that in so doing, writers of Renaissance history plays were themselves, performing a kind of Historical Formalism. However, they were necessarily articulating a historical narrative by containing it within the limits of a particular literary form.

This type of analysis reveals that the very concept of a "Middle Age" of human history is itself a fiction, an invention. In the words of Brian Cummings and James Simpson, the "humanists of the late fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, conceptualized their own place in history not so much by inventing the modern as by inventing the 'medieval.'"[16] David Perry takes this a step further: "There's no such thing as the Middle Ages and there never was." This era is fictional in the way that "all eras are fictions. […] And yet, the Middle Ages undeniably exist. They've been roaring through cultural imaginations more or less constantly over the last five or six centuries."[17] While the period now known as the Middle Ages may be the "fictional" invention of sixteenth-century humanists and reformers hoping to draw a boundary line between

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[14] David Bevington, "Conclusion: The evil of 'medieval'," in *Medieval Shakespeare: Pasts and Presents*, eds. Ruth Morse, Helen Cooper, and Peter Holland (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 226. For White's "emplotments" see Hayden White, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth Century Europe* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973).

[15] Bevington, 226.

[16] Brian Cummings and James Simpson, "Introduction," to *Cultural Reformations: Medieval and Renaissance in Literary History*, ed. Brian Cummings and James Simpson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 3.

[17] David Perry, "Introduction," to *Whose Middle Ages? Teachable Moments for an Ill-Used Past*, eds. Andrew Albin, Mary C. Erler, Thomas O'Donnell, Nicholas L. Paul, and Nina Rowe (New York: Fordham University Press, 2019), 1.

the recent past and their own modern present, the conceptual category of this temporal period as it reaches us today owes as much to playwrights as it does to these "true historiographers," to use Blundeville's term.

Staging the Middle Ages: Historical Controversy and Dramatic Form

Medieval history furnished the material for numerous early modern controversies, some of which had been ongoing for centuries before taking new shape in the Renaissance and some of which had become controversial for the first time during the Renaissance. In their debates over the significance of figures and events of the medieval past, early modern chroniclers, antiquarians, and historically-minded polemicists established the battle terrain of Tudor and Stuart historiographical debate, defending and attacking positions on issues both scholarly (such questions of historical methodology) and social (particularly religion and politics). Was King John, for example, a sacrilegious usurper or an upright proto-Protestant reformer? Was King Arthur a real proto-Tudor monarch with national and international political aspirations or a fairytale produced by monks? What does medieval drama show us about a biblical tyrant like Herod that early modern humanist historiography cannot? Can events from medieval history show us when and how the world will end? Moreover, how do the answers to these questions contribute to the concept of a Middle Ages of human history that was imagined as a link between antiquity and the modern present?

Early modern history playwrights, I argue, participate in these historiographical debates alongside authors of print histories, engaging with arguments on both sides and showing a clear understanding of the stakes involved. While sometimes showing a partisan support for one side or another, more often than not, early modern history plays present a third, alternative

perspective not captured by either of the received two sides in the historical debate. By virtue of their dramatic form—including the representation of past events through dialogue, the physical embodiment of dead historical figures in the living persons of actors, and the live performance of staged action before an audience of spectators—history plays provide answers to historiographical questions that printed sources cannot.

The playwrights discussed in this dissertation remediate various forms of historical writing into an equally various array of dramatic forms. Drawing on both medieval and early modern print chronicles as well as historical treatises, polemic, prophesy, and what we might call the "living chronicle" of medieval cycle drama, writers of early modern history plays reshape their sources in numerous ways. Medieval history reaches the Renaissance stage not only in the English chronicle history plays of Shakespeare, but also as secularized morality play, Senecan tragedy, and closet drama. These plays, in turn, draw on an arsenal of formal strategies to achieve their ends, including the on-stage dialogue between characters as well as in soliloquy, chorus, dumbshow, and various forms of theatrical spectacle.

Examining the formal strategies employed by early modern playwrights provides insight into the ways that early modern readers and writers understood history. The ways that this history is represented on stage consequently shapes the way people understand what happened in the past. The reign of King John, for example, will convey a different meaning if represented as an Elizabethan chronicle history play like Shakespeare's *King John* rather than a late-medieval morality play like John Bale's *Kynge Johan*. The end of the world takes on different meanings when conveyed through the suffering body of Christ in a medieval civic pageant, as in the Chester *Last Judgement* play, as opposed to the suffering body of a self-eulogizing medieval king, as in Shakespeare's *Richard II*. This medieval apocalyptic vision continues to influence

playwrights well beyond the pre- and early modern period, extending into the historical drama of our own time and place, as in Tony Kushner's Pulitzer-prize winning *Angels in America* that transforms the physical and psychological suffering of an HIV+ gay man during the height of the AIDS crisis into a national epic. In each of these cases I will argue, not only does the form shape the content but also the formal strategies adopted shape our understanding of what the Middle Ages was (and for whom).

Plan of the Dissertation

Each of the following chapters presents a case study that focuses on a different historical figure and a different early modern theatrical form. Each chapter explores the limits of historical representation on the stage as well as on the page in order to show how dramatists conceptualized their own modernity by redefining a separate, medieval past.

King John (d. 1216) represents the unusual case of a medieval king whose reputation remained consistently negative throughout the Middle Ages, only to undergo a radical and highly flattering revision during the Reformation. My first chapter, "Spurious Truths," contrasts two plays that arise from a lively (and, on one occasion, deadly) sixteenth-century controversy concerning this king's legacy: John Bale's *Kynge Johan* (1538) and Shakespeare's *The Life and Death of King John* (c. 1595). The vitriolic Protestant polemicist Bale invokes John's medieval reign to assert the superiority of its own newly post-medieval moment at the dawn of the English Reformation. Written in the form of a late-medieval morality play, *Kynge Johan* shows the twelfth-century king interacting with allegorical and semi-allegorical figures representing an array of social groups, political vices, and other abstract concepts. Bale's drama presents a vision of history dominated by moral absolutes, one in which John's power-struggles with the papacy

foreshadow the moral triumph (as Bale sees it) of Henry VIII's Reformation. The play is most explicitly didactic when a character identifying himself to the audience as Verity condemns centuries of false reports about John written by medieval monastic chroniclers and early modern Catholic humanists alike; Verity even denounces Henry VII's court historian Polydore Vergil by name for his negative depiction of John. Establishing himself as the voice of historical record within the play (what I call the play's "choric historian"), Verity asserts that readers cannot trust everything they read about the past. By contrast, Shakespeare's *King John*, written almost fifty years later, confronts the failed promises of the Reformation, the unbroken, centuries-long cycle of self-interest and ineptitude which the Reformation attempts to interrupt but which cannot ultimately be reformed. Though an Elizabethan chronicle history play rather than a morality play, Shakespeare's *King John* also contains a choric historian who mediates and glosses the historical action in a series of soliloquies and asides. The illegitimate son of Richard the Lionheart (often referred to in the play simply as "the Bastard") makes it clear that all historical records are suspect, especially ones officially endorsed by those in power. Offering a counter-narrative to the one established by John and the other royals and nobles, the Bastard's acerbic commentaries establish *King John* as both a history play and an anti-history play, showing how events that the audience witnesses in once scene become misremembered or misunderstood in the next. Whereas both plays address the unreliability of historical reporting, one celebrates early-modernity's break with its medieval past, while the other sardonically suggests how much remains the same.

Scholars of Arthurian literature have traditionally looked at the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries as a period of decline in the legend's popularity. My second chapter, "Arthurian Uncertainties," looks not at the decline in Arthurian *literature* in this period, but what might

instead be called a crisis in Arthurian *history*: What does a nation do with its history once it can no longer be called by that name? Despite the early Tudors' claims of lineal descent from Arthur, his historical existence was the subject of heated scholarly debate in the sixteenth century. While new strands of humanist historiography questioned the Arthurian myth, others perceived this skepticism as an attack on English national identity. The only Arthurian play of the Elizabethan era engages directly with this controversy. Thomas Hughes's *The Misfortunes of Arthur* (1588) was performed before Queen Elizabeth at Greenwich Palace by a group of amateur actors and dramatists from Gray's Inn—all humanists and scholars as well as professional lawyers. Drawing on medieval and early modern chronicles, including Geoffrey of Monmouth's twelfth-century *Historia regum Britanniae,* the play presents an Arthurian history divested of all supernatural elements. Ostensibly written as a neo-Senecan tragedy, this heterogenous and often bizarre theatrical experiment remediates the chronicle accounts in a variety of theatrical forms including a moralizing chorus reminiscent of medieval *de casibus* tragedy, a series of lavish, visually symbolic dumbshows, narration by a ghost, and an appearance within the play by the sixth-century British chronicler Gildas—the only known chronicler who could have provided a contemporary account of Arthur's reign, but who vexingly (to some early modern humanists) makes no mention of the king. By representing Arthur's fall through these various dramatic devices, the play provides not a single history of this earlier British king, but multiple histories, each with its own interpretation conveyed through its own distinct formal strategy. Framing the historical content in this way, the play presents a compelling case for Arthur's continued importance as a unifying cultural symbol, while remaining tactfully agnostic about his historical authenticity.

While the first half of the dissertation focuses primarily on the staging of medieval monarchs, the second half explores how medieval understandings of biblical history were activated afresh by early modern playwrights. My third chapter, "Offstage Histories," looks at the reception of the figure of Herod from medieval biblical drama across several genres, including early modern humanist chronicle and Elizabeth Cary's closet drama *The Tragedy of Mariam* (likely written 1602, published 1613). This chapter examines how questions of dramatic scale influence historical reception for early modern audiences. Cary's play has frequently been compared to its immediate source, Thomas Lodge's 1602 translation of the works of the first-century Judeo-Roman chronicler Josephus. My argument extends this scholarly work by showing how Cary also draws on Herod's enduringly popular representation in late medieval biblical drama—a figure designed to project exaggerated menace into the open-air playing spaces of medieval cities. Combining elements of the early modern chronicle with elements of late medieval civic pageantry, Cary's play reworks both traditions within the close, formal confines of the early modern closet drama. Writing this history in a dramatic form designed for private, domestic consumption (either as solo reading or private "on-book" performance within the home), Cary's play demonstrates that the king's public political tyranny is mirrored in his private marital relations. In doing so, Cary brings the medieval Herod "indoors," domesticating the alarming and violent king played in the medieval common square. Cary represents the psychological suffering of Herod's wife Mariam in ways that were unavailable either to the earlier extroverted form of medieval civic drama, or to the later narrative sequences offered by the humanist chronicle translation. Ultimately, Cary's play suggests that private, domestic conflicts can determine the narrative arc of a king's reign just as much as public, national ones.

Whereas Cary's play takes one singular biblical figure as its focus, my last chapter broadens out to consider how later playwrights rewrote medieval biblical history in an eschatological key. Envisioning the end of the world has proved an effective way for dramatists to conceptualize their own place within the broader sweep of human history. My fourth chapter, "The End(s) of History," uses the theoretical construct of queer time to show how dramatic depictions of the apocalypse—either literally or in metaphorical terms—can disrupt the orderly chronological experience of time for audiences attending a theatrical performance. Three plays—one medieval, one early modern, and one recent—achieve this effect by focusing audience attention on a metatheatrical spectacle of the suffering male body. In the Chester *Last Judgement*, the resurrected Christ directs the audience's gaze to his own maimed body as a strategy for teaching the historical significance of the Crucifixion. Reenacting the Passion Play as part of his Last Judgement of the souls of humankind, Christ's metatheatrical performance collapses the distance between the ancient biblical past, the unknowable and potentially remote future, and the medieval present into a single spectacular moment. Shakespeare's chronicle history play, *Richard II* (1595) reenacts these medieval versions of the Passion and the Last Judgement plays but now within a secular context. Richard attempts to transform his own deposition into a metatheatrical spectacle of suffering, one that he hopes will delegitimate the transfer of power to his usurper. Hoping to convey a historical lesson on the nature of kingship to his former subjects, Richard shows instead that he has misunderstood the significance of his identity as king, mistaking his own personal and political day of judgement as a national, transhistorical doomsday. Extending this historical study into our own time and place, this chapter concludes by examining how Tony Kushner's self-consciously medievalist *Angels in America* (1991) makes the AIDS crisis and the apocalypse into metaphors for each other.

Remediating medieval apocalyptic ideas and theatrical tropes into a modern stage epic about twentieth-century American history, Kushner's play establishes the suffering of his HIV+ protagonist as a metonym for the transhistorical suffering of humankind. Kushner's *Angels in America* might more properly be called an anti-apocalypse play, one that ultimately invites audiences to envision a future in which pain and suffering, though not eliminated, are no longer intensified by secrecy and social shame, but rather are made endurable through the consolations of a community imagined in both personal and political terms.

Chapter 1
Spurious Truths: Choric Historians in the King John plays of Bale and Shakespeare

The historical legacy of King John, as recorded throughout the Middle Ages and into the Renaissance and Reformation, shows how sudden changes in national mood can affect the posthumous fortunes of a king. Some medieval English kings were controversial both during their lifetimes and in the historical assessment of later centuries (Richard II). Others seem to have acquired a polemical reputation during their lives or directly after death that has largely captured the popular imagination—despite more nuanced assessments persistently urged by later historians (Henry V, Richard III). John, however, presents the unusual case of a medieval king whose reputation remained unchanged for centuries of historical writing, then underwent a startling and rapid about-face at the start of the Reformation. Though reviled for cruelty and impiety by nearly all chroniclers for more than three hundred years following his death in 1216, John's historiographical legacy becomes the focal point of a lively (and, in at least two cases, deadly) controversy in the 1530s—praised by reforming historians not only as a just, temperate administrator and reformer, but a proto-Protestant martyr to boot. This sudden change in John's reputation is a direct result of the sweeping religious and cultural changes ushered in by Henry VIII, who saw John's thirteenth-century conflict with the pope as precursor to his own. Though John's rehabilitated image would not survive the century, dwindling to a markedly mixed assessment by the end of Elizabeth's reign in the 1590s, enthusiasm for John burned brightly in the writings of zealous Protestant writers for nearly half a century, from the 1530s to the 1570s.

Perhaps because of this historical controversy, John's reign has proved a generative topic for dramatists grappling with the believability (or unbelievability) of various forms of historical

reportage. Amid the changes in his legacy, John becomes a recurring figure on the sixteenth-century English stage, rendered into dramatic form by writers as diverse as John Bale, antiquarian scholar and vitriolic religious polemicist, and William Shakespeare, then approaching the height of his powers as a commercially successful professional playwright. Both dramatists were aware of John's historical legacy, and, both in their own ways, are concerned with the unreliability of historical reporting on his reign. The historiographical controversy surrounding John in the 1530s is even addressed directly in Bale's play, *Kynge Johan*. Late in the action of the play, a character identifying himself as Verity articulates Bale's own opinions when he singles out, by name, the most recent major historian to offer a negative depiction of John:

> I assure, ye, fryndes, let men wryte what they wyll,
> Kynge Iohan was a man both valeaunt and godlye.
> What though Polydorus reporteth hym very yll
> At the suggestyons of the malicyouse clergye?
> Thynke yow a Romane with the Romanes can not lye? (2193-97)[1]

Bale, in this passage, is declaring war on three centuries of historical representation of King John. Bale's "Polydorus," Henry VII's court historian, Polydore Vergil, is primarily remembered as a humanist—an Italian import, responsible for introducing many of the changes in attitude and methodology that signal the shift from medieval to early modern historical writing in England. For Bale, however, he is only the latest in a centuries-long sequence of medieval, Catholic historians, who have unfairly tarnished John's reputation—not a near-contemporary, but a writer just on the other side of a seismic historical rupture that leaves even earlier humanists on the other side. For Bale, this rupture is the Reformation. Yet even as he repudiates medieval historical tradition, Bale uses the tools of medieval historians by appealing to a sense of historical typology: John's long-lasting confrontation with papal authority makes him, in Bale's

[1] All references to *Kynge Johan* use Barry B. Adam's edition for the Huntington Library (San Marino: The Huntington Library, 1969).

conception, the typological predecessor of Henry VIII, whose Reformation in the 1530s ultimately breaks the cycle of medieval, Catholic tyranny in England. Shakespeare, writing in post-Reformation England, also depicts John's reign in light of the events of Henry VIII's, though, as we shall see, to radically different effect.

This chapter contrasts two plays: John Bale's *Kynge Johan* (1539) and Shakespeare's *The Life and Death of King John* (c. 1595). Bale's play, written at the height of John's historical rehabilitation during the early stages of the English Reformation under Henry VIII, depicts a saintly John's struggle against an openly corrupt Catholic church, ending with his assassination by a monk. With its idiosyncratic blend of historical and allegorical elements, the play marks a significant literary milestone as both the first example of an early modern English chronicle history play, as well as one of the last late-medieval morality plays. Shakespeare's play, by contrast, written during a period of ambivalence towards this king's legacy, addresses John's papal conflict amid an array of other domestic and international problems, including war with France, rebellious barons at home, and a dynastic struggle with his nephew. Appearing at the height of the vogue for English history plays at the waning of the Tudor dynasty under Elizabeth, Shakespeare's play both expands and undermines the generic expectations of what was, by then, a familiar popular theatrical form. Though there has been much excellent scholarship on the ways both Bale and Shakespeare quite naturally use historical material to comment on political concerns of their own time, I examine these plays as explorations of the uses and limitations of historical reporting itself.

Both plays, I contend, use John's reign to call attention to the unreliability of historical reporting, offering readers and spectators a cautionary tale: Don't believe everything in history

books—or, indeed, everything in a history play. But, while in agreement on this point, these plays diverge radically in their attitudes towards the nature and purpose of historical storytelling.

Bale's play suggests that once the false reports and malicious inventions of prior chroniclers have been cleared aside, the diligent historian can, in fact, arrive at historical veracity. The truths revealed by the study of John's reign are, for Bale, transcendental ones. According to Bale's interpretation, the historical lessons of John's early thirteenth-century conflict with papal authority prefigure the spiritual truths of Henry VIII's Protestant Reformation—the event which, again for Bale, definitively separates England from the ignorance and bondage of its medieval Catholic past. Even as he repudiates the medieval historical tradition, however, Bale, whose training in history dates from his pre-Reformation time as a Carmelite monk, uses the tools of medieval Catholic historians by appealing to a sense of typology. In Bale's conception, John offers a *type* of Henry VIII—what Erich Auerbach, in his extensive study of this medieval method of historical back-reading, identifies as a *figura*, "something real and historical which announces something else that is also real and historical."[2] Just as medieval theologians would routinely read Moses and other Old Testament heroes as pre-figurations of Christ, whose incarnation breaks the laws of the old system and introduces a promised new one, so for Bale, King John prefigures King Henry VIII, whose Reformation disrupts the cycle of medieval Catholic tyranny (as well as medieval Catholic historical teaching), introducing a new age of English spiritual autonomy and rectitude. This is a complicated typology, and Bale's use of it here is counterintuitive. Not only is Bale using this medieval analytical technique to ring the death-knell, as he sees it, of the Middle Ages in England, but he locates the origins of this freedom in a medieval Catholic king—framing John's

[2] Erich Auerbach, *Scenes from the Drama of European Literature*, "Figura" (University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 29.

administrative squabble with Pope Innocent III as a proto-Protestant gesture of national historical significance that both anticipates and is brought to fruition by Henry VIII's break with Rome.[3] Rejecting a centuries-long corpus of chronicle history that valued accuracy as much as "didactic significance"—or, in the words of Chris Given-Wilson, "the 'universal truths' to be deduced from any specific episode"—Bale has offered a radical new alternative history of John, but within the same analytical framework as his medieval forbears.[4]

Moreover, in addition to its approach to historical analysis, Bale's play is also complicated and counterintuitive in its use of literary form. Use of a traditional (and, by the 1530s, already archaic) medieval English construct, the morality play, to represent a medieval English king, would seem to make sense. But the morality play is also highly didactic, designed to convey moral lessons in a (hopefully) entertaining manner; and as with Bale's use of typology, the moral lessons delivered via this medieval, Catholic form celebrate what he sees as the end of both Catholicism and of the Middle Ages in England. Both in his tools of historical analysis and in his mode of literary expression, therefore, Bale uses medieval Catholic traditions in service of the Protestant Reformation. "Despite his enthusiastic embracing of the 'new learnyinge'," in the words of Cathy Shrank, "Bale is the product of a 'medieval' upbringing, and it is therefore unsurprising that he should turn to didactic gestures familiar from his boyhood—such as mystery and morality plays—to instruct his audience toward the 'true' religion."[5] This tension or dissonance between old and new, I argue, articulates a sense of historical rupture or discontinuity

[3] The conflict between the John and Pope Innocent, dramatized in both Bale's and Shakespeare's plays, arose out of a disagreement of who had the right to name the Archbishop of Canterbury and ended after a brief period of excommunication for John. For more on this, see Christopher Harper-Bill, "John and the Church of Rome," in *King John: New Interpretations*, ed. S. D. Church (Woodbridge, UK: The Boydell Press, 1999), 289-315.

[4] Chris Given-Wilson, *Chronicles: The Writing of History in Medieval England* (London: Hambledon and London, 2004), 2.

[5] Cathy Shrank, "The Formation of Nationhood," in *The Oxford Handbook of Shakespeare*, ed. Arthur F. Kinney (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 184.

between past and present which marks *Kynge Johan* as the first work of literary medievalism in English—in so far as it is the first work of English literature to conceptualize a distinct historical period we now call "the Middle Ages," separate from both the ancient past and the modern present. Ultimately, though Bale's scheme of periodization makes the church its focal point, his play shows that the causes and consequences of this historical rupture are deeply political. In Bale's vision, theater is the catalyst for religious and political epiphany based on historical understanding.

Shakespeare's expression of historical distance and the unreliability of historical reporting functions differently. Both writers are highly conscious of historical change; both acknowledge in their plays that the world is markedly different than a century before. Though this is cause for celebration in Bale, in Shakespeare's play, we are disconcertingly adrift, never quite able to touch historical bottom. History, for Shakespeare, does not embody transcendental truths. Rather, I argue that Shakespeare uses history as a laboratory or play-space to explore the many possible outcomes of contingent human interactions. History, rather than conveying predetermined truth, is something that we devise—both as we go along, and after the fact. What we discover in Shakespeare's *King John* is a model of kingship practiced by flawed, fallible human kings.

Shakespeare's use of dramatic form reflects this historical vision in two ways. First, his mode of dramatic expression embraces drama's inherently polyvocal nature. Unlike Bale, who must introduce "Verity" to speak the single possible truth allowed within the world of his play (as, indeed, within the world of Bale's reality), Shakespeare is comfortable with allowing multiple, competing versions of historical truth. In this regard, Shakespeare's dramatic approach reflects the historical methodology of his main chronicle source, Holinshed's *Chronicles*. This

text, as Annabel Patterson has shown, recognized that "a national history should not and could not be univocal, but must shoulder the responsibility of representing diversity of opinion"—hence the *Chronicles* record "verbatim what they found in earlier historians or contemporary witnesses."[6] This means that Shakespeare is capable of much greater sympathy than Bale for the medieval chroniclers, who Shakespeare would have encountered mediated through and cited in Holinshed's omnivorous compilation.

But perhaps more significantly, Shakespeare's primary innovation in *King John* is its use of the history play form in ways that seem counterproductive and potentially self-defeating to convey historical content—using this play not to deliver historical truths, but rather to illustrate precisely the difficulty of conveying historical truths. Even events that we see performed before our eyes in one scene become murky, unclear, and open to wildly different interpretation when described or discussed in the next. Though all of Shakespeare's history plays have been read to reveal cynical critiques of the historical self-narratives crafted by those wielding political power, *King John* is openly, even blithely, cynical in its outlook on historical accountability. As well as being a history play, therefore, *King John* is also an anti-history play in which the history it purports to convey proves increasingly illusive and unverifiable as the action progresses.

Grappling, as they do, with the question of historical unreliability, both plays express skepticism through the figure of a choric character or narrator, who both observes and mediates the historical action of the play to the spectators. In Bale's *Kynge Johan*, the allegorical figure Verity narrates an aggressively revisionist commentary to the historical events of the play. As his name suggests, he represents the historical truth that both he and his play profess, in opposition to previous versions. The historical action of Shakespeare's *King John*, by contrast, is disrupted

[6] Annabel Patterson, *Reading Holinshed's Chronicles* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press. 1994), 7.

by the soliloquies and asides of the semi-historical Philip Faulconbridge, also referred to as Philip the Bastard, or simply the Bastard. Rather than affirm the events of his play, the Bastard's commentary repeatedly serves to undermine the historical actions we have just witnessed. Pleasingly (and presumably, coincidentally), the names of these choric historians convey nearly opposite meanings—or at least, suggest opposing concepts of legitimacy and illegitimacy, truth and falsehood. These opposite connotations are entirely appropriate to their roles, since, while both function as choric historians within their history plays, their historical narration creates radically different effects—one unsubtly and indeed almost belligerently asserting his own version of the truth, the other destabilizing the credibility of the narrative in which he himself is a character.

Though I place these plays side-by-side for comparison, I do not argue for any direct relationship between the earlier and later play. Shakespeare is unlikely to have encountered *Kynge Johan* in any form; its only known performance occurred in 1539, and it remained unpublished until the nineteenth century.[7] However, Bale's depiction of John closely resembles that of other political and historical writers of the Reformation, including William Tyndale, Simon Fish, and John Foxe.[8] Drawing on chroniclers as early as John's near contemporaries, Gerald of Wales and Matthew Paris (both of whom are mentioned by name in *Kynge Johan*), and

[7] *Kynge Johan* has a somewhat complicated textual and performance history, but key points are as follows: The play was likely written late in 1538 and was staged in January of 1539 as part of the Christmas festivities at the home of Archbishop of Canterbury Thomas Cranmer. Though Bale continued to revise the play as late as the early 1560s, perhaps with the hope of remounting the work before England's newly-crowned Protestant queen, Elizabeth, there is no record of it ever having been staged again in Bale's lifetime. The play survives in a single manuscript, dating from this period of later revision in the early 1560s. The first roughly 1,700 lines of the manuscript are written in a scribal hand; an additional 900 lines, with corrections and changes to the preceding lines, are written in Bale's own hand. After Bale's death in 1563, no mention of the play survives until the manuscript's rediscovery by John Payne Collier in the private library of the Duke of Devonshire in the 1830s. Collier published his edition in 1838. The manuscript currently resides in the Huntington Library. For further details, see Barry B. Adam's 1969 critical edition of the play, 20-24, and Phillip Schwyzer, "Paranoid History: John Bale's *King Johan*," *The Oxford Handbook of Tudor Drama,* ed. Thomas Betteridge and Greg Walker. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 503-04.

[8] See Peter Happé. *The Complete Plays of John Bale*, Vol. 1 (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1985), 149-50.

as recent as the aforementioned Polydore Vergil, Bale and his fellows call attention to earlier representations of John only to reject and overturn them. From these revisionist histories, the view of John as proto-Protestant martyr passes into the cultural mainstream—including into the later, more politically-neutral Elizabethan chronicles published after Bale's death, such as Stowe's and of course Holinshed's. These omnibus compilations jumble information from early Protestant writers with the medieval chronicles they repudiated. From Holinshed in particular, this information passes into early modern history plays about John—both Shakespeare's and George's Peele's slightly earlier chronicle play, *The Troublesome Reign of King John*, which Shakespeare uses as a source.[9] In this way, though Shakespeare was extremely unlikely to have known of Bale's play, evidently he was still familiar with the basic representation of John offered by Bale, albeit filtered through other channels.[10] (For a brief visual summary of who was reading whom, see Fig. 1.) Given this, I will be looking at Bale's play and Shakespeare's play, not in terms of direct influence, but rather as two mutually illuminating examples of how historical reporting changes on the sixteenth-century stage, and thus what is suggested both about change from the waning of the Middle Ages and dawning of the

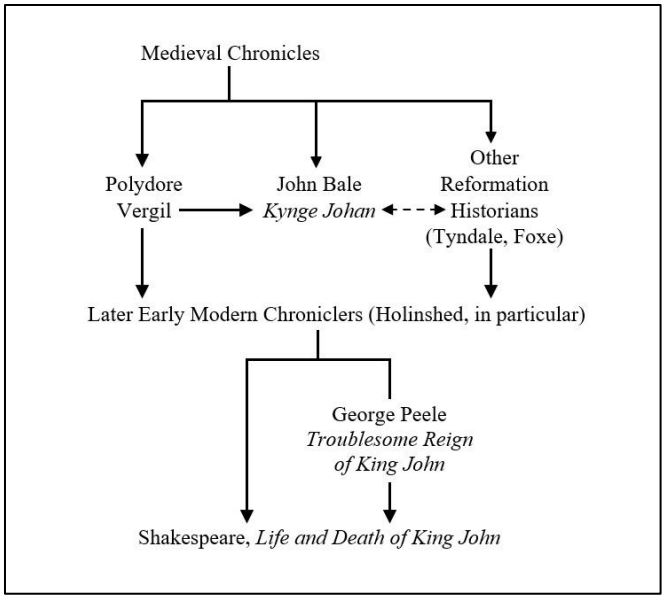

Figure 1:Reception of sources on King John (simplified)

[9] All but a small minority of critics now believe that Shakespeare used Peele's play as a source, rather than the other way around. For more on this point, see Charles R. Forker's introduction to Peele's *The Troublesome Reign of John, King of England* (Revels Plays series, 2011), 79-86. See also: Charles Whitworth, "George Peele" in *The Cambridge Guide to the Worlds of Shakespeare: Shakespeare's World, 1500-1660,* ed. Bruce R. Smith. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 908-13.

[10] In contrast to Bale's play, Shakespeare's has been with us the whole time, so to speak—staged in the mid-1590s and first printed in the First Folio of 1623.

Reformation to the height of the Renaissance in England, and the evolution of the history play form, from its earliest example to the height of its popularity.

The first part of this chapter explores the complexities of Bale's use of King John as a historical type for his own sovereign. First, examining John's controversial legacy in the 1530s, the chapter illustrates how partisans on both sides of the English Reformation invoked John as a historical example in support of their own causes. Next, the chapter shows how this controversy is directly addressed in Bale's play by the character Verity, who not only articulates the view of John as a heroic proto-Protestant reformer, but also represents Bale's idealized conception of the Protestant revisionist historian and his role in the English Reformation. Bale makes his own position very clear throughout his play, however, records of early audience response to *Kynge Johan* show how this message was subject to differing interpretations even in his own time. The second half of the chapter turns to Shakespeare's play, arguing that its critique of John's reign may stand for a critique of the shortcomings of the history play itself as a form. Next, an examination of the play's opening scene reveals the work's awareness of the untidy processes by which "official" (i.e., royally-authorized) histories come to be written. The next two sections track the changing perspective of the play's choric historian, the Bastard Faulconbridge, as he provides first a skeptical counter-narrative to the play's historical events, then eventually acts as the main spokesperson for the "official" narrative within the play. Finally, this chapter concludes by examining John's death in Shakespeare's version as an episode in which all the aforementioned problems of historical unreliability culminate.

John Bale's *Kynge Johan*: History and Truth

Bale's play purports to offer us a hitherto untold version of King John's life and reign—a revisionist history play, premised on the idea that everything we are likely to have heard or read about King John is a lie. As Verity asserts in the passage quoted above: "let men wryte what they wyll, / Kynge Iohan was a man both valeaunt and godlye / What though Polydorus reporteth hym very yll / At the suggestyons of the malicyouse clergye?" (2193-96). I repeat these lines here and will return to them again in greater detail because they are essential to Bale's project in *Kynge John*, both as a dramatist and historian. It is no accident that Bale uses John's reign, as opposed to that of some other medieval king, as the occasion for articulating a sense of historical rift or transition, conceptualizing the idea of the "Middle Ages" as something separate or distinct from the present. But before examining Bale's play-text, it is first necessary to examine the controversy surrounding John's legacy at the time Bale was writing. Why, after three hundred years of historiographical consistency was King John suddenly controversial?

A Medieval Monarch in King Henry's Court: Contextualizing Bale's Kynge Johan

From our historical vantage point, it is difficult to imagine the reign of King John as a historical lightning rod for partisans of a violent cultural conflict. For those born in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, John is perhaps best remembered, in the word of literary scholar Igor Djordjevic, as the "greedy king waging financial war and oppressing a poor commonalty defended by Robin Hood and Maid Marian," memorably depicted in Disney's rendition as a "thumb-sucking, maneless lion wearing a crown two sizes too big for his head."[11] For the Henrician English across the social spectrum, however, John conjured different associations—

[11] Igor Djordjevic, *King John (Mis)Remembered: The Dunmow Chronicle, the Lord Admiral's Men, and the Formation of Cultural Memory* (London: Ashgate, 2015), 8.

either positive or negative depending upon the speaker's attitude towards the current state of affairs in England. Two documents from the 1530s illustrate differing attitudes towards John and his legacy in the early stages of the English Reformation.

At the center of the English Reformation, Henry VIII himself evidently saw parallels between John's reign and his own, as recorded in a 1533 letter from the Spanish ambassador, Eustace Chapuys, back to King Carlos. Chapuys remarks how King Henry, in conversation, had complained that popes throughout history have mistakenly "claimed all the kings of Christendom as their feudatories," but that Henry intended to show them otherwise—to "repair the error of kings Henry II and John, who, by deceit, being in difficulties, had made this realm and Ireland tributary" to the pope.[12] Furthermore, Henry planned to achieve this reparation in a very material manner, by returning "to the Crown the goods which churchmen held of it." This, of course, he would later go on to do—just as John had also used his argument with the Pope as a pretext for sacking and dissolving monasteries, seizing their wealth to deliver himself from financial straits three hundred years earlier. Just as Elizabeth would later comment on the parallels between herself and her predecessor, Richard II, Henry was also keenly aware of the similarities between his own papal conflict and John's—with the critical distinction that history would not, this time, repeat itself: Know ye that I *am not* King John, nor do I intend to be.

Henry's opinions were controversial. Chapuys, a professional diplomat, politically adds in his letter, "I let him talk on without contradiction"—a line which, in rendering the scene for the Spanish king, does not actually describe Henry as ranting, self-involved, or potentially unhinged, but which, like an implied stage direction, seems calculated to conjure that image. But

[12] Letter 235, *Letters and Papers Foreign and Domestic of the Reign of Henry VIII*. Vol. VIII, ed. James Gardiner, (London: Longmans & Co., 1885), 109.

where Chapuys opted for reticence, others were more outspoken on the parallels between John and Henry.

In 1535, two years after the above letter, two clerks, Robert Fernon and John Hale, were executed on charges of treason for allegedly wishing that King Henry might meet the same death-by-assassination supposedly suffered by King John. Unlike his fellow clerk of rhyming name, John Bale, this John Hale is recorded to have expressed a wholly negative view, both of King John and King Henry. According to the official report, Hale describes Henry as a "treader under foot of Christ and of his Church continually applying and minding to extinct the same," adding "I beseech God" that Henry's death "may be like to the death of the most wicked John, sometime king of this realm, or rather to be called a great tyrant than a King."[13] The death to which this statement refers, presumably, is the traditional (and fabricated) belief that John was poisoned by a monk, Brother Simon of Swinsett Abbey, acting either on orders of assassination sent directly from Rome, or of his own volition in revenge for John's abuses of the English clergy. Even if Simon of Swinsett never actually existed, the legend was still credited in the sixteenth century. For a clerk to express this wish, therefore, is arguably even more provocative than it would have been for an ordinary English subject, since Hale, a member of the secular clergy, was himself in a position to effect just such a royal death by clerical poisoning.

It is perhaps not surprising that John's dispute with the clergy should be on the minds of the English at the same moment that Henry entered his own conflict with the Pope. What is surprising, however, is the changing context in which this reference to John is invoked. Prior to the Reformation, stories of John's assassination by a monk had tended to sympathize more with the monk than with John. Prior to the appearance of Simon of Swinsett, chronicles attribute

[13] Letter 609, *Letters and Papers,* 230.

John's death to dysentery, brought on by eating large a quantity of stone fruits, either peaches or plums.[14] The story of John's monkish assassin originates in French romance, making its first appearance in English in a short verse chronicle, c. 1307, roughly ninety years after John's death.[15] In this account, the monk Symon sacrifices his own life in order to kill John—deliberately poisoning the plums, then tasting them at John's insistence to prove their safety.[16] In so doing, Symon is cast in the role of a martyr-hero—something along the lines of a male, medieval Charlotte Corday, or an Ildico to John's Attila the Hun, bringing down the unsuspecting tyrant at his moment of leisure. The narrator assures us that Symon "ȝaf kyng Jon his poison" for no other end, "Bot for to saue al Englond" from John's tyranny, adding "God ȝive his soule goud day" for the deed.[17] John's soul, by contrast, is wished elsewhere: "I*n* helle ic*h* hope he haþ his mede" (i.e., reward).[18] In this account, intended as much for popular entertainment as anything else, John appears as a hyperbolic, pantomime villain—a caricature of a tyrannical king rather than a representation of an actual, historical person. But the story, it seems, was too good not to repeat.

By the 1530s, this episode had become dispersed through numerous historical narratives in English, both scholarly and popular. Polydore Vergil prefaces his account of John's poisoning in the *Anglica Historia* with the begrudging proviso, "I do not desire to omit this, so as to satisfy the vulgar," indicating that, by this time, the story had become an indispensable feature of John's

[14] See Matthew Paris, *Historia Anglorum, sive, ut vulgo dictor Historia Minor*, Vol. II (1189-1245), ed. Frederic Madden (London: Longmans, Green, Reader, and Dyer, 1866), 190-93.
[15] *An Anonymous Short English Romance*, ed. Ewald Zettl (London: EETS, Oxford University Press, 1971). Generically, this work occupies an unusual middle ground between scholarly medieval chronicle and chivalric romance, taking as foundation the events of the former and embellishing and presenting them in the form and style of the later. For more on Bale's relationship with this text, see Barry Adams's edition of the play, 33.
[16] Ibid., lines 947-1010.
[17] Ibid., lines 1015-19.
[18] Ibid., line 953.

narrative.[19] Yet even while this comment registers Polydore's skepticism, or perhaps even distaste for the anecdote, he offers no alternative explanations for John's death. The text through which this story "gained its widest circulation," according to Barry Adams, however, was not the *Anglica Historia*, but a mid-fifteenth century version of the *Prose Brut,* first printed by Caxton in 1480 and reprinted by him so often it came to be known as *Caxton's Chronicle*.[20] The narrator of this text makes his sympathies clear, stating that John, among his other misdeeds, "dede so miche shame & vilony to God & the holy cherche," and glossing the "pitouse deþ" of the monk with the words, "o*n* whos soule God haue mercy, Amen!"[21] I mention this last text in particular because, despite its negative depiction of John, Bale uses it as one of his major sources in writing *Kynge Johan*.[22] It therefore offers an example of the way Bale was acutely aware of John's depiction in prior chronicles, but also was not opposed to using and adapting these sources for his own purposes, even while repudiating them.

Though the basic narrative of John's life and death remains the same throughout these accounts, the significance of these details change in the hands of Bale and his fellow reformers. Those opposing Henry's Reformation could still invoke John's death as a cautionary tale of tyranny punished, while for those supporting the Reformation, the story takes on new meaning. The first major Protestant retelling, William Tyndale's *The Obedience of a Christian Man* (1529), another source for Bale, sketches John's death more or less unchanged in plot, but

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[19] Polydore Vergil, *Anglica Historia (1555 version): A Hypertext Critical Edition*, Ch. XV, ed. Dana F. Sutton (University of California, Irvine. Posted August 4, 2005. Last modified May 25, 2010).

[20] Adams, 33. Cf. *Chronicles of England, In the yere of thyncarnacion of our Lord Ih[es]u Crist M.CCCC.lxxx.* (London: William Caxton, 1480). For a modern edition, see *The Brut*, ed. Brie (cited below).

[21] *The Brut, or The Chronicles of England, edited from MS Rawl. B 171, Bodleian Library*, ed. Frederich W. D. Brie. (London: EETS, Oxford University Press, 1960), pg. 166-67, 170. Here, incidentally, the monk poisons John, not with plums as in the earlier version, but with the venom of a toad mixed into a cup of wassail (pg. 169-70)—the same method as in Bale's play, lines 2086-2136.

[22] Adams, 33-35.

stresses its significance as an example of Catholic perfidy.[23] Under the influence of these reformers, John's historical legacy was about to undergo a drastic revisionist overhaul—of which Bale's play is a significant part.

Before this chapter proceeds to Bale's play and its connection to this rehabilitation of John's image, there is one additional feature worth noting about the two records from the reign of Henry VIII discussed above—Chapuys' letter and the records concerning Vernon and Hale. Both recorded statements reveal the propensity of state documents to generate distinct, original speeches and to put them into the mouths of other speakers—or, to put it another way, to engage in the act of playwrighting. In addition to the lengthy direct quotations that it purports to relate, I have also already noted the implied stage directions in Ambassador Chapuys' letter. Even if we give Chapuys the benefit of the doubt, the words ascribed to the condemned Hale are palpably and unavoidably the product of literary invention, rather than a direct transcription. Hale is quoted extensively: roughly four hundred and fifty words. We are told that Hale's interlocutor Fernon "wrote down in Latin these words spoken by Hale in English"—appropriately enough, perhaps, given his station as a clerk—meaning that Hale's speech would have been translated first from English into Latin as he was speaking, then from Latin back into English for the sake of the official testimony quoted above.[24] So even if the luckless Hale did express roughly these sentiments, it is virtually impossible that we are reading his exact words. This document, then, as with any history play on the early modern stage, presents the fictional speech of a real person, spoken in the past—albeit, in Hale's case, the very recent past. Unlike the literary genre of the history play, however, these state documents presume that their readers will accept their contents as fact. Thanks to their inclusion in these documents Hale's words are now part of the historical

[23] Cf. Peter Happé. *The Complete Plays of John Bale*, Vol. 1 (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1985), 149.
[24] Letter 609, *Letters and Papers*, 230.

record of his time—ironically preserving for posterity the very opinions that Henry's legal apparatus sought to suppress. Punishable by death at the time, this speech is now fodder for the researcher seeking to make sense of Henry's reign and its relationship to John's in ways contrary to the intent of those recording them. Is it true, for example, as Hale is alleged to have said, that "three parts of England" in four were "against the King" at this time of Henry's break from Rome?[25] It is difficult to say. But had Hale not been executed for allegedly saying so, we might not now have cause to wonder whether this was in fact the case.

Kynge Johan sits at the nexus of the issues addressed in the documents above, including English royal sovereignty, papal authority, and historical applicability. Writing under the patronage of Thomas Cromwell at a time when theatre, in the words of one recent monograph on the morality play, was "unabashedly embraced as an effective disseminator of Protestant doctrine by propagandists," Bale puts fictional words into the mouths of historical persons to prove a rhetorical point about current politics.[26] In *Kynge Johan*, Bale—a historian, theologian, and polemicist as well as a dramatist—uses models of historical analysis and medievalism in dramatic form to mediate medieval history in an essentially didactic manner. But in so doing, *Kynge Johan* also embodies the problems of its author's approach to history.

History Fractured, Truth Restored: Verity as Bale's Choric Historian

Since its earliest critical notice, scholars have called attention to *Kynge Johan's* half-morality, half-history form as one the play's most striking features.[27] As a history play, *Kynge Johan* represents the first example of a dramatic form which did not exist at the time, but which, in

[25] Ibid., 230.
[26] Ineke Murakami, *Moral Play and Counterpublic: Transformations in Drama, 1456-1599* (New York: Routledge, 2010), 64.
[27] It is, in fact, among the first things noted by John Payne Collier in his introduction to the first printed edition of the play (1838), pg. iii.

retrospect, we can identify as having its origins in this play. Its relationship to the morality form is perhaps more complicated: "Form," in Murakami's words, "remains a vexed concept for those studying morality plays."[28] Though not precisely on its way out in Bale's lifetime, the morality play was certainly changing from the structurally-precise spiritual allegories of the fourteenth century into something more secular and heterogenous.[29] *Kynge Johan*, with its historical plot, is part of this sixteenth century transformation of morality drama, while also invoking a form which would have seemed somewhat archaic to Henrician audiences. This generic distinction is crucial to the analysis that follows insofar as it affects the play's setting in time.

Kynge Johan contains characters representing historical persons (notably, King John), as well as broad, trans-historical social groups. This second category includes England (personified as a virtuous, grieving widow) as well as the estates: Nobility, Clergy, and Civil Order, i.e., the "great ivges [judges] and lawers" (146) of England's legal bureaucracy, and a brief appearance by Commonalty. A third category, adapting the morality convention of characters personifying abstract moral qualities or values, presents a quartet of vices—with the twofold innovation that they are political rather than theological vices, and that, as part of the narrative of the play, these characters also transform into (or perhaps, reveal themselves to be) John's historical opponents: Usurped Power is also Pope Innocent III, with whom John quarreled about the selection of a new Archbishop of Canterbury; Private Wealth is Cardinal Pandulph, the papal emissary to England (also a character in Peele's and Shakespeare's plays); Dissimulation is John's monkish assassin, Simon of Swinsett; and Sedition, the principal Vice, doubles as the Pope's choice for Archbishop

[28] Murakami, 8.
[29] See Blair Hoxby, "Allegorical Drama" in *The Cambridge Companion to Allegory*, ed. Rita Copland and Peter Strunk (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 193-94. See also Murakami, 8-9.

of Canterbury, Stephen Langton.[30] Insofar as this transformation occurs on stage, *Kynge Johan* not only *is* a hybrid morality-history play, but also *performs* the transition from morality drama to historical drama at work in the sixteenth century. As a consequence of this heterogenous cast of characters, some dramatic characters are rooted in specific historical moments, some exist across multiple historical periods, and some do both simultaneously.[31]

Among the characters who stand for trans-historical concepts as well as specific persons is Verity (also sometimes called Veritas within the dialogue). Verity not only represents historical truth in the abstract, but, as Dan Breen has discussed, additionally represents the ideal or prototypical English, Protestant historian—and also articulates the personal views of Bale himself.[32] This three-fold identity embodies a concept, an idealized social role or type of person, and a specific person.

The word "verity," moreover, carries specific connotations for Bale within the context of literary representation—as used, for example, in his later interpretive commentary on the Book of Revelation, *The Image of Both Churches*.[33] This work repeatedly invokes the concept of "verity" as the inherent truth or substance of a thing, in contrast to "figure" as the outward form

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[30] The transition from abstract quality to historical person occurs onstage midway through the action of the play, as the Vice characters resolve to embody themselves in the form of John's adversaries. This is first expressed in the surviving manuscript in the stage directions: "Here go owt Vsurpid Powr / and Privat Weth and Sedycyon. Vsurpyd Power shall dreese for pope, Privat Welth for a cardynall, and Secycyon for a monke" (983-84); shortly thereafter, it is spoken in the dialogue: as Usurped Power / Pope Innocent explains to his cronies, "thow shalte be callyd Pandvlphus; / Thow Steuyn Langton," etc. (1056-57).

[31] It is worth noting that this combination is highly unusual, compared with both the spiritual morality plays which precede it, and the mixed moralities which follow. In *Everyman* (c. 1495), for example, figures like Fellowship, Good Deeds, and Strength maintain constant identities throughout. In *Cambyses* (c. 1560), historical monarchs, fictional commoners, and pagan gods share the stage with figures such as Shame, Diligence, Murder, and Small Ability, but there is never any suggestion that these entities embody more than one of these identities (whether historical, fictional, mythological, or conceptual) at any given time.

[32] Dan Breen, "The Resurrected Corpus: History and Reform in Bale's *Kynge Johan*," *Renaissance Retrospections: Tudor Views of the Middle Ages*, edited by Sarah A. Kelen (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 2013), 16-18.

[33] This scriptural commentary (c. 1548) interprets the "Book of Revelation" as a description of the ongoing struggle between a true church and a false church across historical epochs. In his own historical moment Bale identifies the true and false churches as the Protestant church and the Church of Rome, respectively. Peter Happé states that "its main purpose being to rewrite history in terms of the Book of Revelation" (Happé, *John Bale*, 46).

or physical manifestation of a thing. Bale establishes a clear dichotomy between the two in his preface to the work when he states: "Like as *th*e light is more precious than the shadow, the verite_than the fygure, the new Testame*n*t than the old, & the gospell than the law, so is this holye oracle [i.e. Revelation] more precious" than the works of earlier prophets.[34] In this series of dichotomies, verity is placed alongside light, the New Testament, and the gospel in contrast with figure (verity's opposite number), shadow, the Old Testament, and the Law—these later, Bale asserts, depend on the former for their meaning.[35] "*Figura*," as Auerbach explains, is typically held by medieval thinkers to be "not *veritas*, but *imitatio veritas*"—the imitation of truth or reality.[36] However, Bale's alignment of the famously metaphorically dense and symbolically opaque Book of Revelation with "lyght" and "veritie" as opposed to "shadowe" and "figure"—and indeed, his choice to begin an extensive interpretative decoding of this text with the comparison—shows that the simple dichotomy is not as simple as he makes it seem. The verity and the figure are not as easy to separate as this short list of opposites suggests. In *Kynge Johan*, therefore, we have a *figure* whose name is *Verity*. The two opposite or complementary concepts collapse into one seemingly indissoluble entity.

A third concept in this constellation of terms also warrants note: *Historia,* as distinct from both *figura* and *veritas* in Aurerbach's explanation of the medieval interpretative tradition, is "the literal sense or the event related; *figura* is the same literal meaning or event in reference to the fulfilment cloaked in it, and this fulfillment itself is veritas."[37] In other words, figure, in the sense of outward representation, is the means by which history conveys truth. The character

[34] John Bale, *The Image of Both Churches*, The English Experience: Early Printed Books Published in Facsimile, No. 498 (New York: Da Capo Press, 1973), "A Preface to the Christian Reader," ii.v.
[35] See a similar list later in the same work: "Both the lawe and gospell, the fygure & veritie, the commanndeme*n*t & promise" (Part 2, Chapter XVI, Paraphrase of the third text, line 3), p.i.
[36] Auerbach, 44.
[37] Auerbach, 47.

Verity, as I have said, is simultaneously a concept, an idealized social role or type of person, and a specific person. In Bale's vision, Verity both embodies truth itself and expounds a version of history that also embodies or conveys truth. Figural representation, history, and truth are, for Bale, indissoluble.

The moment in Bale's play discussed at the start of this chapter—the sudden appearance of Verity following John's death—is essential to understanding Bale's relationship with his country's medieval past. Cathy Shrank has argued that "Bale's version of history" as "an ongoing, epic struggle between for the forces of light and darkness" offers an "essentially repetitive view" of history—one which "makes history cyclical rather than something that can be divided into distinct periods."[38] I argue that, at least in *Kynge Johan*, Bale expresses a vision of history in which this cycle at last is broken, with the Reformation conceptualized as the rupture point between one era and the next. Verity's appearance, if not precisely dramatizing the bifurcation of the medieval and early modern, at least signals an understanding of such a rupture by the play's author and by his allegorical stand-in. For Bale, history has become fractured. And it is Verity who signals that this fracture has occurred in history, even as a chronological split occurs in the action of the play. Verity's appearance, as Adams notes, moves the action from the reign of King John to the reign of Henry VIII: "In this final scene the setting changed without warning from thirteenth- to sixteenth-century England."[39] Even if the play has already had one foot in English history and the other in the realm of allegory, the chronological jump not only occurs without warning, but even without acknowledgement from the characters in the play.

The transition from the depiction of John's death to the discussion of his posthumous historical reputation is so rapid, in fact, that it warrants close examination. We have just seen

[38] Shrank, 180.
[39] Adams, 190.

Dissimulation, in the guise of Simon of Swinsett, giving John the fatal draft of wassail—poisoned wine, by this time, having replaced the poisoned plums in most variations of the story. Succumbing to the poison, John speaks his final words to Widow England, asking her to "prouyde for my buryall / A widowes office is to burye the deade" (2184-85). England then escorts the body of John, either still dying or having died at exactly that moment, offstage—"Alas, swete masitre, ye waye so heauy as leade" (2186)—but not before seizing the moment to curse the clergy as "a cruell sort of disguyesed blood souppers" (2189). England's final lines of the play voice the expectation that, in future, the clergy will do all they can to malign the good king's memory: "Report what they wyll in their most furyouse madnesse, / Of thys noble kynge muche was the godlynesse" (2191-92). After England speaks this line, the stage direction "Exeunt," written in Bale's own hand in the play's sole surviving manuscript, dictates that, one way or another, both John and England make their way off stage. At this moment, Verity immediately enters and addresses the audience:

> I assure, ye, fryndes, let men wryte what they wyll
> Kynge Iohan was a man both valeaunt and godlye.
> What though Polydorus reporteth hym very yll (2193-95)

With these three lines, we are taken from John's death in 1216—which, in terms of the performance time, has barely had time to occur—to Polydore Vergil's account of John in the *Anglica Historia*, first printed in 1534. Unlike the more famous appearance of Time in the fourth act of *The Winter's Tale*, who explicitly tells us that the action is jumping ahead sixteen years, Verity shifts the action ahead 350 years, not by telling the audience that this is happening, but instead by describing what has happened in historiographical writing in that intervening timespan. This may partly explain why Verity fails to provide his much needed historical intervention until four-fifths of the play has already elapsed; as the character partly representing

Bale himself, he cannot enter prior to John's death, because, of course, Bale would not be born until hundreds of years later.

Nobility, Clergy, and Civil Order, who, until this moment, have been conspicuously poor allies to John in his papal conflict, re-enter having missed John's on-stage poisoning. Yet they already speak of him as someone from the past, alive only in memory: "He was a man of a very wicked sorte," and "He was never good to vs, the santifyed clergye" (2223 and 2240). But while the estates speak of him in the past tense, Verity's reply to this last remark by Clergy is delivered in the present tense: "Wyll ye knowe the cause before thys worshypfull cumpanye? / Your conuversacyon and lyues *are* very vngodlye" (2242, italics mine). It would seem then that the Clergy who interacted with the thirteenth-century John throughout the play is the same Clergy that now joins Verity in this present moment near the end of the play. In fact he is within the scope of this dramatic representation, since Clergy (like Nobility and Civil Order) is played by the same actor throughout. Like the social groups they represent, these three characters exist across multiple centuries—as much a part of Henry VIII's society as John's. The point is further driven home by Verity's reference in the above line to "thys worshypfull cumpanye"—presumably Nobility and Civil Order, but also surely the assembled audience to whom Verity spoke directly before the entrance of the three estates. In addition to their thirteenth-century members, Nobility, Clergy, and Civil Order thus also represent the same nobility, clergy, and legal officials in the audience at the moment of *Kynge Johan's* performance—which for our purposes must mean the play's only known staging, in January 1539 at the home of Archbishop Cranmer.[40] Past and present collapse into a single moment of sustained duration in which the events of John's reign are still immediately relevant.

[40] Cf. Adams, 20, 39.

But in addition to shifting the temporal setting of the play from 1216 to 1539, Verity's speech also shifts the focus of the play from history (events of the past) to *histories* (written records of those events). The play's preceding 2,200 or so lines have shown us history, of a kind. The final one-fifth of the play dramatizes not the reign of John, but the historiographical debate concerning his legacy then taking place in the speech and writing of English subjects across the social spectrum. Verity plunges us immediately into this historiographical controversy of John's legacy, mentioning two specific historians by name:

> What though Polydorus reporteth hym very yll
> At the suggestyons of the malicyouse clergye?
> Thynke yow a Romane with the Romanes can not lye?
> Yes! Thefor, Leylond, out of thy slumber awake,
> And wytnesse a trwethe for thyne owne contrayes sake. (2195-99)

Verity contrasts the Italian-Catholic humanist Polydore Vergil with the English-Protestant nationalist historian and antiquarian John Leland, Bale frames this historiographical controversy in partisan terms.[41] Polydore Vergil's account of John, according to Verity, can be dismissed out of hand because that historian's inevitable religious and political biases make him an unreliable source. If this were not enough, Verity elaborates further on John's legacy:

> For hys valeauntnesse many excellent writers make,
> As Sigebertus, Vincentius, and also Nauclerus;
> Geraldus and Mathu Parys with his noble verues take –
> Yea, Paulus Phrigio, Iohan Maior and Hector Boethius. (2200-03)[42]

Any still unconvinced about Polydore Vergil might compare his depiction of John with the accounts of these seven "excellent writers," all of whom praise John for his "valeauntnesse."

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[41] Numerous scholars (including Adams, 23, 191) have pointed out that the word "slumber" may refer either to the period of mental illness suffered by Leland between 1547 and his death in 1552, if the lines were first written during that period, or to his death, if the lines were written after. Leland never wrote on the reign of King John, so in either case, Bale seems to be lamenting a missed opportunity.

[42] Sigebert of Gembloux (1030-1112); Vincent of Beauvais (1184-1264); Johannes Nauclerus (1425–1510); Gerald of Wales (1146 – c. 1223); Matthew Paris (1200-1259); John Major (1467-1550); Hector Boece (1465–1536). See Adams, 27-30, 191.

Finally, as if to hammer the point home, he then adds, "Nothynge is allowed in his lyfe of Polydorus" (2204).[43]

This relatively short speech by Verity reveals several key points regarding Bale's expectations of his audience as well as his conception of his own work—both as a historian and a dramatist. The very presence of this speech tells us that Bale expects his audience to be familiar with unflattering depictions of John. If not, why bother to reassure us that this story is false? Despite this list of chroniclers, Verity's aim as a historian is primarily revisionist—calling attention to the received narrative in order to rewrite it. In defense of John's reputation, then, Bale musters two rhetorical points which may seem somewhat contradictory.

First: Verity insists that previous negative depictions of John must be rejected because the authors' prejudices make these accounts unreliable. On the face of it, this point is perfectly valid. Like any good modern historian, Verity is asking his auditors to reevaluate the writings of past historians in light of those historians' inevitable personal biases and agendas. Even if few modern historians would ascribe to John many of the kingly qualities valued by medieval and early modern chroniclers, it is also generally agreed that his medieval monastic chroniclers exceed all bounds of probability in describing his malice and cruelty.[44] Nevertheless, Bale is also conspicuously blind to the possibility that this truth also cuts the other way: that Bale's own enthusiastic defense of John's historical legacy may derive less from John's merits, or lack

[43] Verity's fondness for citing sources is conspicuous in the play and not limited to this speech. In the fifty lines of dialogue that follow, Verity also quotes or paraphrases Ecclesiastes (2227), Saint Jerome (2231), Solomon (2243), Saint Matthew (2249), Aristotle (2252), Plato (2259), Mantuan (2268), Chrysostom's commentary on Isaiah (2273), and Seneca (2279); all "sayth" or "reporteth" something relevant to the discussion. This way of speaking sets Verity apart from the other characters, including even Clergy and Civil Order, who, appropriate to their professional unfitness in the play thus far, tend not to be overly bookish in their speech.

[44] Carol Levin, *Propaganda in the English Reformation: Heroic and Villainous Images of King John*. Studies in British History, Vol. II (Queenstown: Edwin Mellen Press, 1988), 35.

therof, and more from his ill-treatment of Bale's personal adversaries. The enemy of my enemy must be my friend.

Second, however, there is an additional point on which this first point seems to depend: Even if we are not prepared simply to dismiss Polydore Vergil's account automatically, Verity assures us that the overwhelming number of positive depictions of John's reign should be enough to outweigh the reports of this single, negative outlier. And this point raises two issues of its own: It is worth noting in passing that none of the sources that Verity lists do, in fact, praise John—many unleash vitriol well beyond what Polydore Vergil delineates.[45] As Adams points out, the closest to a positive depiction of John in Verity's reading list (the account given by John Major) actually uses Polydore Vergil as its source![46] Verity, it seems, does not live up to his name in this instance. It is odd, therefore, that Bale would call attention to this. Such an elaborately detailed lie may sound convincing in the moment, but surely the details only make it easier to disprove. Admittedly, it seems unlikely that any audience members would have been able to remember the names of these seven historians, rendered into Latin and rattled off at speed by an actor in the middle of a long play—let alone seek out their tomes post-performance. On the other hand, some of Bale's audience of court elites may possibly have read one or two of the texts named by Verity, and may therefore be able to recall an account of John wholly at odds with the information Verity maintains these books contain. If anyone watching the play had read, for example, Matthew Paris or Gerald of Wales (two of the more popular historians named by Verity at the time, and also two of the more scathing in their accounts of John)—and it is not impossible that they had—it might rather spoil the dramatic effect for these spectators to have Verity outright lie.

[45] Levin, 28-39.
[46] Adams, 27.

But more importantly, even if Verity's assertions were correct, and these chronicles praise John as Verity claims, why then would this act of historical revisionism even be necessary? Why this particular intervention in John's legacy? Has our historical understanding of this king been so unfairly poisoned by one recent, unfavorable account so as to obliterate this otherwise laudatory historical record? If Verity was telling the truth, why do we need Bale's play in the first place?

Verity's spurious works cited list, his very presence in this play, and ultimately the entire play all point tacitly but insistently to the idea that, until now, those watching Bale's play have been duped into believing a false narrative. Historical truth, according to *Kynge Johan*, is not to be found in the chronicles of the past three centuries—rather, truth must be rediscovered and reclaimed. This is "not a rejection of the past," as Cathy Shrank writes, "but an assimilation of it."[47] The story we have just witnessed must be wrested from the hands of those who have been deliberately misstating it for the past three hundred years, and restored to those who will tell it correctly—even if that does not mean with strict accuracy. Bale, guilty of a deliberate falsehood in having Verity lie about his sources in this way, is conveying a historical *truth*, as he sees it, which transcends historical *fact*.

For Bale, this shift in historical understanding has a reciprocal relationship with the new realities that came with the Reformation. On one hand, Henry's break with Rome marks the beginning of a new historical age—one in which, among other things, history can be truthfully revealed to an interested public. But on the other, this shift in historical understanding—the realization that all medieval history is, in essence, a lie—is necessary for Henry's Reformation to take effect in the minds of his subjects from the top down: his nobility, clergy, civil order, and

[47] Shrank, 184

commonalty. Bale, as I have said, uses John as a "type" of "figure" for Henry—a "figural prophesy" in Auerbach's words, which offers "the interpretation of one worldly event through another; the first signifies the second, the second fulfils the first."[48] Henry's Reformation fulfills the promises of spiritual enfranchisement attempted but not achieved by John. However, English society must be brought to acknowledge and understand the historical origins and ramifications of this Reformation for it to take effect.

With its articulation of historical rupture, *Kynge Johan* is the first work of English literature to express the idea of a "Middle Ages"—a period between the founding of the early church and the present moment– and is therefore the first example of medievalism in English literature. Fifty years before Spenser's landmark of archaic style, *The Faerie Queen* (1590), and sixty years before Thomas Speight's first scholarly, annotated (and reverent) edition of the complete works of Chaucer (1589), *Kynge Johan* draws a clear conceptual line between the old era and the new. The period to which Verity gestures would not be given the name "Middle Ages" for another two decades. The term is coined by Bale's friend and likely collaborator on other projects, John Foxe, in his *Acts and Monuments*[49]—in the words of Mike Rodman Jones, "one of the most fully-realized medievalist texts of the period,"[50] Foxe conceived of the Middle Ages as did Bale, as a period dominated by monkish superstition—a notion persisting in popular imagination to this day. The "Moonkes of the middle age of the church," writes Foxe, "much more did swymme in superstition, and pharisaicall hipocrisy […] that not onely thei had lost Christes religion, but also almost the sense and nature of men." [51] The monks condemned by

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[48] Auerbach, 58.
[49] On Bale's relationship with Fox, see Peter Happé, *John Bale*. Twayne's English Author Series, ed. Arthur Kennedy (New York: Simon and Shuster, 1996), 20 and 298. See also Cathy Shrank, 183.
[50] Mike Rodman Jones, "Early Modern Medievalism" in *The Cambridge Companion to Medievalism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 95.
[51] John Foxe, *The Unabridged Acts and Monuments Online* (1570 edition) (The Digital Humanities Institute, Sheffield, 2011). Available from: http//www.dhi.ac.uk/foxe, Book 3, 216.

Foxe for the "superstition, and pharisaicall hypocrisy" are the same "malicyouse clergye" derided by Verity for their monastic chronicles. For both men, the Reformation is the event which marks the end of one age and the beginning of the next. And both men, in the words of Mike Rodman Jones, "sought to demonstrate how the medieval past could be reclaimed by the reformed present."[52] But the English of the sixteenth century can only participate in this enfranchisement by understanding historical context—which means, for a start, renouncing three centuries of historical writing on John.

On stage, Nobility, Clergy, and Civil Order experience their moment of epiphany listening to Verity's speech on the merits of King John and the unreliability of historical reporting. Though they have participated in the action of the play up to this moment, they cannot understand the historical significance of either John's actions or their own. Only after Verity's history lesson do the estates understand the narrative in which they have been playing a part—how their failure to support their king has helped to perpetuate centuries of political and spiritual bondage at the hands of a foreign power. When they finally do realize this, they acknowledge their past conduct with shame and alarm, resolving to live differently henceforth:

> *Cler.* All the worlde doth knowe that we haue done sore amys.
> *C. Ord.* Forgyue it vs, so that we may neuer heare more of thys.
> *Ver.* But are ye sorye for thys vngodly wurke?
> *Nob.* I praye to God! Els I be dampned lyke a Turke! (2307-10)

Verity's rhetoric has, in the case of these three characters at least, the desired effect. The lesson is confirmed by the appearance of Imperial Majesty—a figure who, like Verity, represents both an abstract, trans-historical quality as well as a specific, living person (Henry VIII himself). Only once Verity has brought the estates to realize their error, can Imperial Majesty begin to guide his subjects towards a more enlightened future—though not without first congratulating Verity on

[52] Jones, 96.

his success: “I perceyue, Veryte, ye haue done wele your part, / Refourmynge thes men. Gramercyes with all my heart!” (2335-36). Having thus achieved the “refourmynge” of Nobility, Clergy, and Civil Order, Verity exits with Imperial Majesty’s blessing to spread the message to Commonalty (2337-43). Verity’s speech on historiography has evidently done the trick.

This realization has political as well as religious implications. Only after Verity’s harangue does Clergy realize that Imperial Majesty, and no one else, must act as “supreme head of þe churche” (2389), a role which Imperial Majesty tells him has been God’s will all along (2391-99). This question of the monarch’s role in the church is, moreover, an urgent matter of national security. We learn that Imperial Majesty—who exists as an abstract quality throughout time, but who also represents the reigning Protestant Tudor monarch at the moment of the performance—would have inevitably suffered the same fate as John were it not for Verity’s timely intervention. Sedition confesses as much before he is justly hanged for his treachery: “I sought to haue serued yow lyke as I ded kynge Iohn, / But that veryte stopte me. The deuyll him poison!” (2575-76). Or, as a modern unmasked villain might paraphrase these lines: And I would have gotten away with it too, if it weren’t for you meddling Protestant historiographers! Verity, with his historical knowledge, is therefore necessary not merely to the success of Imperial Majesty but to his survival as well.

This moment on stage between Verity, Imperial Majesty, and the estates, functions as a miniature of the play as a whole. Verity’s speech triggers the religious, historical, and political epiphany for the estates. But it is the play itself which Bale evidently hopes will generate this epiphany for his audience—the turning point in their conception of King John, his relationship with the Catholic clergy, and his relevance to the reign of Henry VIII. Verity’s didactic lesson comes not in the form of an epilogue, customary in morality plays, but within the action of the

play itself. He speaks not only to the audience, but to Nobility, Clergy, and Civil Order, characters also representing members of the audience—the "worshypfull cumpanye" assembled at Cranmer's residence. Bale stages first the message, then the response he hopes and expects it will elicit from his audience. If Henry's Reformation is the seismic event for English society as a whole, then watching this performance, Bale hopes, will be the event which inaugurates this change in the minds of those watching. Theater is the catalyst for religious and political epiphany based on historical understanding.

Allegory is Bale's mode of historical representation in this play. *Kynge Johan* is a morality play that is also a history play. But for Bale, history itself is a morality play. Transcendental historical truths do exist and can be found, if only by the right historians. But historical truth, at least in this instance, must be mediated to audiences through allegory in order to be effective—both in the dramatic form of the play as a whole, and through the figure of Verity, who represents historical truth in the abstract, the ideal English Protestant Historian in general, and Bale in particular. Unlike the Vice characters, Verity does not transform, but conveys his trinity of identities simultaneously for the duration of his time on stage. Sedition assumes the form of Archbishop Stephen Langton, but whether Langton is simply a disguise worn by Sedition, or whether Sedition is given true embodiment in the person of Langton, makes no difference; the shadow and the substance cannot be separated. King John remains himself throughout the play, but also prefigures King Henry. Imperial Majesty may also represent King Henry as well as sovereignty in its ideal form—but, as Bale revised the play later and later into the century, may also represent the newly-crowned Queen Elizabeth. No one is ever simply oneself. This conception of character as inherently dual-natured (both historical and metaphysical, in *figure* and in *verity*) obliges us constantly to keep both the allegorical identity

and historical identity of its characters in mind. It is the audience's perception of this duality on which the success of the Reformation depends.

Early Audience Response to Kynge Johan

The previous analysis has laid considerable stress on what appears to have been Bale's expectations of his audience's reception of his play. But if Bale imagined a revised medieval past as central to the playing of reformed history, this revision was not always received by the play's audience as intended. The archive preserves the opinions of three audience members of this first and only performance at Cranmer's residence, January 1539. Considering John's controversial reputation at this time, it is not surprising that audience reactions to this performance were divided.

Two in attendance that night register an enjoyment that seems more ideological than aesthetic. One spectator, a man by the name of John Alforde, states that he saw, "an interlude concerning King John at my lord of Canterbury's at Christmas time," and later remarked to fellow-spectator Thomas Brown, "that it was a pity the bp. [bishop] of Rome should reign any longer, for he would do with our King as he did with King John."[53] Thomas Brown is recorded to have liked the play equally well, stating that "that he had heard, at my lord of Canterbury's, one of the best matters that ever he saw touching King John."[54] We can imagine that Bale would have been no less pleased by this compliment than he would to learn of the man's changed opinion of John's reign, and its implications for present-day England. Brown states that he, "had heard priests and clerks say that King John 'did look like one that had run from burning of a

[53] "Letters and Papers: January 1539, 11-15," in *Letters and Papers, Foreign and Domestic, Henry VIII, Volume 14 Part 1, January-July 1539*, ed. James Gairdner and R H Brodie (London: Her Majesty's Stationery Office, 1894), 22-29. *British History Online*, accessed March 17, 2020, http://www.british-history.ac.uk/letters-papers-hen8/vol14/no1/pp22-29

[54] Ibid.

house','" but having seen the play, he "knew now that it was nothing true, for, as far as he perceived, King John was as noble a prince as ever was in England." Despite the play's suggestion that we cannot believe all that we are told about history, Brown seems ready enough to believe what he saw in the play. Perhaps the drama confirmed opinions he already possessed. He adds, critically, that through this play he and his fellows "might perceive that he [John] was the beginner of the putting down of the bishop of Rome, and thereof we might be all glad."[55]

Another spectator, however, the interlocutor of Alforde and Brown, one Henry Totehill, did not approve. In response to Alforde's assessment, Totehill "answered it was pity and naughtily done to put down the Pope and St. Thomas [Beckett]; for the Pope was a good man and St. Thomas saved many such as this deponent was from hanging." It is unclear from the record whether by "this deponent" Totehill is referring to himself or to Alforde. The word "deponent," however, meaning "one who gives evidence" is used in this record because Alforde and Brown are here committing evidence against Totehill. The document that records their opinions is a deposition of a "naughty communication" of Totehill "concerning the bp. of Rome," and the evidence alleged against him is his poor opinion of the play. The words are recorded in a letter sent from Cranmer himself to Thomas Cromwell, in light of "Cromwell's office of punishing those who break the King's injunctions."[56]

If there is anything surprising about this, it should be that this reaction was so mixed, even among the private guests of a bulwark of the English Reformation like Cranmer—though it may be that members of the Commonalty were present after all, as the document describes Totehill as a "shipman."[57] But if there is anything which should fail to surprise about this, it is

[55] Ibid.
[56] Ibid.
[57] Ibid.

that here, again, we have reason to be skeptical of what we read in the historical record. The charged political atmosphere that created the conditions for this play and this performance are the same reasons to be suspicious of these recorded reactions. In the words of Greg Walker, the 1530s brought "a new anxiety to avoid public expression of contentious opinion, a wariness of the kind of outspoken criticism of government policies which brought unprecedented numbers to the attention of Thomas Cromwell" for "speaking unwisely in streets and alehouses."[58]

Did Alforde and Brown actually enjoy the play, absorbing the lessons that Bale hoped they would learn? Or, in a period of state surveillance, are they merely expressing opinions which are likely to keep them out of trouble?

As the first history play, written at the outset of the Reformation, *Kynge Johan* offers a new, hybrid form of drama for what Bale experiences as a transitional historical moment. There is continuity here, as Bale still uses the tools of medieval exegesis for his historical analysis and the forms of medieval drama for his theatrical presentation. But as these diverse audience responses suggest, and the next century of English history confirms, the Reformation does not break the cycle of unreliable historical reporting any more than it breaks the cycle of religious and political ignorance and corruption. Instead, as Shakespeare's play shows us, history only repeats itself.

Shakespeare's *King John*: History is Illegitimate

Though Shakespeare is unlikely to have ever read Bale's play, his intimate familiarity with George Peele's near contemporary work, *The Troublesome Reign of King John* (c. 1590) has

[58] Greg Walker, "When Did 'The Medieval' End? Retrospection, Foresight, and the End(s) of the English Middle Ages," in *The Oxford Handbook of Medieval Literature in English*, ed. Elaine Treharne, Greg Walker, and William Green. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 736.

been well documented.[59] Though unflattering in its depiction of John, Peele's *Troublesome Reign* is nevertheless still decisively anti-foreign, anti-Catholic, and pro-English Protestant—straightforwardly nationalistic and full of "Tudor tub-thumping."[60] But while much scholarship has understandably focused on the Peele play in comparison with Shakespeare's, an examination of Bale's is more useful for the purpose of tracking both the shifts in historical thinking and innovations in the history play form across the sixteenth century. Although John's depiction is starkly different in both plays, Shakespeare's *The Life and Death of King John* is a fitting successor to *Kynge Johan* as both use the reign of this king as the occasion to register skepticism about past historical reporting—an element conspicuously absent from Peele's intervening potboiler. Likewise, as shall be seen, *King John*'s choric historian, the Bastard Faulconbridge, offers an illustrative counter-gesture to *Kynge Johan*'s Verity. The illegitimate son of the late Richard the Lionheart, who rises to prominence and power in John's court, Faulconbridge is a figure briefly mentioned in the chronicles, and later developed into a significant dramatic role by Peele, to be further expanded and embellished by Shakespeare.

Critics for the past half century have focused on the play's interest in the legitimacy (or illegitimacy) of *de facto* political power, and its cynicism concerning political corruption and the pursuit of self-interest or "Commodity" as the Bastard calls it (2.1.573).[61] Setting the tone for much of what follows, Virginia M. Vaughan writes in 1988 that *King John* "successfully deconstructed the received text," i.e., Peele's *Troublesome Reign*, and "restructured the play to

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[59] As noted above: for more on the relationship between the two plays, see Charles R. Forker's introduction to Peele's *The Troublesome Reign of John, King of England* (Revels Plays series, 2011), 79-86. See also: Charles Whitworth, "George Peele," in *The Cambridge Guide to the Worlds of Shakespeare: Shakespeare's World, 1500-1660,* ed. Bruce R. Smith. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 908-13.

[60] Richard Wilson, "A Scribbled Form: Shakespeare's Missing Magna Carta," *Shakespeare Quarterly,* Vol. 67, No. 3 (Fall 2016), 347.

[61] All references to *King John* from the Arden 3 edition, eds. Jesse M. Lander and J. J. M. Tobin (London: Bloomsbury, 2018).

show where ideology breaks down."[62] For Jesse M. Lander and J. J. M. Tobin, "an attitude of disillusionment towards political action is palpable."[63] A related strand of recent criticism also points to the ways the play troubles the idea of the stability of nationhood.[64] Most relevant here, however, is the critical notice the play has received for its reworking of both Shakespeare's chronicle sources and of the history play as a genre. Writing in the 1980s, David Scott Kastan and A. R. Braunmuller both note how the play calls attention to the fact that history itself, is a constructed phenomenon—what Kastan calls the play's "sense not of history, but of fiction. Kingship and kingdoms, Shakespeare comes to see, are no less artifacts created and preserved by human effort and will than plays that represent them."[65]

Building on these critics, my own reading of Shakespeare's play, alongside Bale's, points to *King John*'s concern with the unreliability, not of individual political leaders (in the thirteenth, sixteenth, or any century), but of chroniclers, dramatists, and other conveyers of historical narratives. Both authors use form in counter-intuitive and even seemingly self-defeating ways. Bale's play, as we have seen, uses medieval Catholic theatrical forms and modes of critical analysis to argue against medieval Catholic historical tradition. Shakespeare's play builds upon the conventions of the by-now commercially popular English chronicle history and its attention to the problems of historical representations of any kind. But where Bale's choric historian Verity questions the legitimacy of certain historical traditions only to assert his own alternate

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[62] Virginia Mason Vaugh, "King John: A Study in Subversion and Containment," in *King John: New Perspectives*, ed. Deborah T. Curren-Aquino (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1989), 74.

[63] Lander and Tobin (*King John*, Arden 3), 34.

[64] See Cathy Shrank, "The Formation of Nationhood," *The Oxford Handbook of Shakespeare* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 571-86; Michael Gadaleto, "Shakespeare's Bastard Nation: Skepticism and the English Isle in King John," *Shakespeare Quarterly*, Vol. 69, No. 1, (Spring 2018), 3-34; and Khalil M. Habib, "The Bastard in King John; or, On the Need for a Unified English Nation," in *The Soul of Statesmanship: Shakespeare on Nature, Virtue, and Political Wisdom*, edited by , Khalil M. Habib and L. Joseph Herbert Jr. (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2018), 117-139.

[65] David Scott Kastan. "'To Set a Form upon that Indigest": Shakespeare's Fictions of History." *Comparative Drama*, 17:1 (Spring 1983), 15. See also: A. R. Braunmuller. "*King John* and Historiography." *ELH*, 55:2 (Summer, 1988), 309-332.

version, Shakespeare's Bastard undermines the legitimacy of all forms of historical representation including his own play. The following analysis shows how *King John*, among other things, reveals the limitations of the history play as a theatrical form—and indeed, how all literary and historical forms are capable of ironic self-defeating failures.

Form and Counter-Form

One episode particularly illustrates how form in *King John* frequently undermines its own purported generic function. Late in the action of the play, the king stages a second coronation ceremony so that he may, in his words, "sit, once again crowned," "possessed with double pomp," "And looked upon, I hope, with cheerful eyes" (4.2.1-9). Historically, this was John's third coronation, not his second, but in Shakespeare's play, even two are enough to be problematic. Historian Michael Jones has discussed how medieval kings would sometimes stage a second coronation ceremony as a slate-wiping gesture—a means to reassert their royal authority after a period of domestic turmoil.[66] Unfortunately for John, the gesture causes the opposite of the intended result. In the absence of any clear motive for this second coronation (such as, for instance, the restoration of order after a rebellion) the king's seemingly unprompted reassertion of his legitimate right to rule creates a similar effect as might a suspected philanderer renewing his wedding vows. The formal, public ceremony only confirms, in the eyes of the world, the existence of the past, secret indiscretion that it ostensibly expunges. In this case, John's nobles suspect (correctly) that John has ordered the murder of his young nephew, Arthur, the cruelty of which transforms their discontent into open revolt. Rather than marking the end of a rebellion in Shakespeare's version, John's second coronation triggers one.

[66] Michael Jones, *Bosworth:1485*, (Stroud, UK: The History Press, 2002).

Telling the king that his re-coronation has only raised their suspicions, the lords Salisbury and Pembroke use language which metatheatrically highlights the dramatic interplay between historical fact and theatrical fiction:

> PEMBROKE: This act is as an ancient tale new told,
> And in the last repeating, troublesome
> Being urged at a time unseasonable.
> SALISBURY: In this the antique and well-noted face
> Of plain old form is much disfigured (4.2.18-22).

This restaging of old content, John's nobles inform him, does not make for a compelling performance. This description of John's coronation may just as easily serve as a description of the history play as a theatrical genre, in the mid-1590s even then at the height of its popularity. The play itself offers "an ancient tale new told," in which "the antique and well-noted face / Of plain old form is much disfigured," as its author plays fast and loose with his sources—both the chronicle histories that ostensibly contained true and accurate versions of events, as well as earlier drama.[67] With Shakespeare's play appearing shortly after Peele's, it is also hard to hear Pembroke's word "troublesome" and not think of *The Troublesome Reign of King John*.

More importantly, however, the failure of the second coronation within this scene also illustrates something conveyed by the play as a whole: namely, it calls attention to the idea that forms—particularly staged forms, such as a coronation or a play—can produce unexpected and counterintuitive effects. This is a crucial aspect of Shakespeare's approach to historical reporting in *King John,* which, more than any other of his history plays, is openly skeptical in its approach to historical representations of any kind. This moment exemplifies the self-defeating nature of generic form (literary and historical) in Shakespeare's play. The coronation rather than uniting

[67] On the early modern understanding of historical veracity in chronicles, see Neema Parvini, *Shakespeare's History Plays: Rethinking Historicism* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2012), 72-104.

John's subjects under his authority, leads them to rebel; the history play, containing this coronation scene illustrates why we cannot believe what we see or learn in history plays.

The scene also contrasts noticeably with a parallel moment in Bale's play. The differences suggest not only the playwrights' divergent beliefs about how power resides in the monarch, but also the ways in which performance conveys that power. In Shakespeare, the English nobility use John's moral failings to justify their rebellion, just as, in Bale, the character Nobility also uses John's perceived unfitness to justify his disloyalty. In Bale, however, Nobility's receives this rebuke from Verity:

> *Nob.* Sir, he was a man of a very wicked sorte.
> *Ver.* Ye are much to blame your prynce so to reporte.
> […] he [i.e., one] is of no renowne
> But a vyle traitor that rebelleth agayst the crowne.
> *Cler.* He speaketh not agaysnt the crowne but the man, per dee.
> *Ver.* […] The crowne of it selfe without the man is nothynge (2223-35).

Just as Shakespeare's Bastard will chastise the rebellious English nobles later in *King John*—"you degenerate, you ingrate revolts, […] blush for shame!" (5.2.151.53)—so Bale's choric historian chastises Nobility and Clergy. According to Verity, their disloyalty to John is disloyalty to the crown of England itself. The man and office are inseparable in Verity's conception of kingship; the King's Two Bodies, to borrow Ernst Kantorowicz's phrase, cannot be divided. In Shakespeare's play, it is precisely the opposite—the institutional role has somehow failed to adhere to the man. John asks rhetorically in Act II, "Doth not the crown of England prove the king?" (2.1.273). But by the Act IV, it is increasingly evident that this is not the case. John cannot get his kingship to stick. The failure of the second coronation does not merely call attention to John's lack of legitimacy, but, for Pembroke and Salisbury, proves it. Performance in Shakespeare's *King John* is not a tool used for establishing or revealing transcendent truths as in Bale. Rather, since John's legitimacy derives not from divine will but from the will of his

subjects, the validity of John's kingship depends on the effectiveness of the performance—and performance is subjective, volatile, and often ironically self-defeating.

One further point of contrast between Bale's depiction and Shakespeare's warrants mention because it concerns not what Shakespeare's play includes, but what is excluded. While religious differences are at the forefront in Bale's presentation, critics have repeatedly noted that this element is markedly downplayed in Shakespeare's. The anti-Catholic sentiment vital to Bale's dramatic vision is also featured prominently in Peele's *Troublesome Reign*. Shakespeare, however, "passes up the opportunity," in the words of Ralph Hertel, to exploit John's narrative either for Catholic or Protestant propaganda.[68] Comparisons between King John and Henry VIII, too, are sparingly invoked, and therefore conspicuous mainly by their absence. Peele's play, written sixty years after Bale's, reveals that the Elizabethan authors were still mindful of Henry when they thought of John and his legacy. Peele's John even invokes comparison, apostrophizing: "Thy sins are far too great to be the man / T'abolish Pope and popery from thy realm. / But in thy seat, if I my guess at all, / A king shall reign that shall suppress them all" (Pt. 2, Sc. 2, 170-73). Even if his own moral and political shortcomings prevent him from inaugurating an English Reformation himself, this late Elizabethan John still recognizes the need for one, and the relevance for it his reign will one day hold.

Shakespeare's depiction of John also invokes the legacy of Henry VIII, certainly. In words closely reminiscent of Henry's reported speech to Ambassador Chapuys (quoted earlier in this chapter), Shakespeare's John demands of Cardinal Pandulph, "What earthly name […] Can test the free breath of a sacred king?"—adding, "No Italian priest / Shall tithe or toll in our dominions," where "we, under God, are supreme head." (154-55). This speech summarizes a

[68] Ralph Hertel, *Staging England in the Elizabethan History Play* (Surrey: Ashgate, 2014), 144.

rhetorical refrain to which Bale returns again and again throughout his play, but there are few other direct evocations in Shakespeare's version. Where Peele gives us an extended comic scene of royal officials pillaging a monastery of lecherous monks, Shakespeare only briefly makes allusion to such an event, with John bidding the Bastard "shake the bags / of hording abbots" (3.3.7-8). Henry's Reformation and its aftermath lurk in the background of *King John*, emerging in occasional flashes of direct relevance. This comparative downplaying of the similarities between John and Henry VIII, though without eliminating them entirely, is significant to Shakespeare's conception of history. *King John* shows us that history does repeat itself—though, as in *Kynge Johan*, in such a way that one king's failure prefigures another's success in an ongoing, monumental struggle. Unlike Bale's play, which presents the Reformation as a period of historical rupture, Shakespeare's, sixty years and three Tudor monarchs later, reveals how both pre- and post-Reformation society are subject to the same cyclical patterns of human failure.

The Bastard's Origins in King John *and the Origins of Historical Representation*

If the entirety of *King John* offers an extended commentary on the spurious nature of historical reporting on stage, then its opening scene presents a critique of the means by which historical knowledge may be acquired and transmitted. This is nowhere clearer than the first appearance of Philip the Bastard, a character adapted from a prominent plotline in Peele's play, but only scantly mentioned in medieval and early modern chronicles and wholly absent in Bale's version.

Many critics have pointed out that the legal dispute between brothers Faulconbridge brought before John in the play's opening scene represents, in miniature, the same questions of political legitimacy and inheritance rights that hound the royal characters throughout the action

of the play.[69] The dispute also establishes early in the play the difficulty of trying to identify exact truths about the past. Is Philip Faulconbridge the legitimate son and heir of old Sir Robert Faulconbridge? Or is he, as his brother young Robert alleges, the bastard son of the late king, Richard Coeur de Lion? For the two brothers, these questions refer to what are, in effect, historical events. Admittedly, at this point, these are quite recent historical events, having occurred only a few decades prior. Yet both men are unable to speak from personal experience about events occurring before they were born. Two of the three principal figures in the story are dead—old Sir Robert and King Richard—and the only living person able to speak with authority on the question (Philip's mother Lady Faulconbridge) is conspicuously absent from this scene. For the two, therefore, the issue is largely one of conjecture.

Both brothers initially describe the question of Philip's paternity as a matter of simple, verifiable truth. In young Robert's version of events, after sending old Sir Robert on an embassy to Germany, King Richard, "sojourned at my father's, / Where how he did prevail, I shame to speak. / But truth is truth" (1.1.103-05). This shame is evidently a pose; or, at least, his hope of material gain outweighs any shame he may feel at his mother's alleged infidelity. And though he never actually names the key event on which his case depends, referring to it only by allusion and *occupation* (as above), his meaning is perfectly clear. His assertion, "But truth is truth," implies that the manifest verity of past events must be allowed to speak for themselves—or at least, that truth ought to be allowed to prevail in a legal procedure.[70]

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[69] See, for example, Allison Findlay, *Illegitimate Power: Bastards in Renaissance Drama* (New York: New York University Press, 1994), 25-27; Marjorie Garber, *Shakespeare After All* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2004), 274.

[70] Robert C. Jones, "Truth in King John," *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900*, Vol. 25, No. 2, Elizabethan and Jacobean Drama (Spring, 1985), 398.

Where does this knowledge of truth originate? Young Robert's case appears to be partly founded on hearsay—he claims Philip was conceived while his father was abroad, "as I have heard my father speak himself" (1.1.107)—and partly upon verifiable evidence. The claim that Philip "came into the world / full fourteen weeks before the course of time" (1.1.112-13) could be verified by records, as a modern historian might try to do, checking birth and baptism records against documents relating to old Sir Robert's travel (if any such documents survive at the start of the play). At the very least, young Robert presumably has his father's will, disinheriting Philip and leaving the estate to the younger son.

Philip, for his part, refers to the past in slightly more agnostic terms. Both sons came "most certain of one mother," as he phrases it, "But for the certain knowledge of that truth [i.e. their paternity], / I put you o'er to God and to my mother" (1.1.59-62). Even if these past events are, in themselves, true facts, any "certain knowledge" of these facts may prove difficult to establish. Philip also curiously seems to possess a foreknowledge of the controversy's outcome. He barely takes the trouble to deny the charge of bastardy, speaking of his paternity almost exclusively in conditional terms: "But *whe'er* I be as true begot or no…" (1.1.75), and "*If* old Sir Robert did beget us both…" (1.1.81). Indeed, he appears to give some credence to his brother's version of events even as he argues the contrary, remarking that Sir Robert's will seems "Of no more force to dispossess me, sir, / Than was his will to get me, as I think" (1.1.132-33).

But if either brother was hoping for a straightforward ruling based on historical truth, they are disappointed. Flimsy as Philip's defense is, John lands comfortably on the side of conventionalized legal fiction based on seemingly irrelevant technicalities: "Sirrah, your brother is legitimate: / Your father's wife did after wedlock bear him" (1.1116-17). Philip was born after his mother was married. Therefore, he is legitimate. And that is apparently all there is to say

about the matter. Such is the nature of marriage in the eyes of the law: “If she did play false, the fault was hers – / which fault lies on the hazard of all husbands” (1.1.118-19). Remarkably, John, like Philip, appears to believe Robert’s version of events, even as he rules against Robert’s claim. John has already agreed with Eleanor regarding Philip’s pronounced physical resemblance to the late king, finding him a “perfect Richard” (1.1.90). The truth, it turns out, is true, but irrelevant. The official version of events is at odds with the actual facts of the matter, but neither John nor Philip sees any problem in this.

What begins as a simple question of past truth in the minds of the opponents is quickly filtered through the external factors of the technicalities of preexisting law and, ultimately, the whims and inclinations of those in power. First John and then Eleanor invites Philip to choose which version of this reality he would prefer to have endorsed by royal ruling. This is how history becomes written—through a combination of evidence, hearsay, tradition, institutional precedent, royal prerogative, and the self-interest of the chronicler. The version that Philip choses happens to be the historically accurate one, as Lady Faulconbridge later confirms, though only well after the outcome has already been decided (1.1.253-59). But Philip’s governing concern is not, of course, historical accuracy, acting as he is out of bald self-interest. Rather than an insignificant member of the landed gentry, Philip choses to be “the reputed son of Cordelion” (1.1.136), and reap the benefits of this (even suspect) patrimony. In contrast to his half-brother’s “But truth is truth” earlier in the scene, Philip avers: “And have is have, however men do catch” (1.1.173). The material considerations of the one, outweighs the metaphysical considerations of the other. What the man formerly known as Philip Faulconbridge, now newly-dubbed Sir Richard Plantagenet, has gained in this case is not land (the cause of so many Shakespearean family disputes), but rather a chance to participate in a more interesting, high-stakes narrative:

ELEANOR: Wilt thou forsake thy fortune,
Bequeath thy land to him and follow me?
I am a soldier, and am bound to France.
BASTARD: Brother, take you my land, I'll take my chance. (1.1.148-52)

Had he chosen the land, he certainly would have dropped out of Shakespeare's play as young Robert does. In "tak[ing] his chance," Philip writes himself out of his inheritance and into the historical record—or at least, into a history play.

The Bastard's sudden appearance in this history play, perhaps reflects the fact that so little is known of his extra-dramatic historical origins. We believe that King Richard did, in fact, have an illegitimate son known as Philip of Cognac, who is Richard's only known child of any provenance. His name appears in only one surviving medieval chronicle, the *Chronica* of Roger of Howeden or Hoveden (c. 1201).[71] In this Latin text, Philip is mentioned just once, in a single sentence, which eventually finds its way, through one path or another, into Holinshed's *Chronicles*, a major source for both Shakespeare and Peele for their *King John* plays. In Holinshed, the sentence is rendered into English as follows: "Philip bastard sonne to king Richard, to whome his father had giuen the castell and honor of Coinacke, killed the vicount of Limoges, in reuenge of his fathers death, who was slaine (as yee haue heard) in besieging the castell of Chalus Cheuerell."[72] This would seem to be the genesis of the bastard's vendetta in Peele and Shakespeare against the Duke of Austria, who anachronistically claims credit for King Richard's death in both authors' versions.[73] Whether the reconfiguration of this scantly-mentioned Philip of Cognac into the heroic and nationally-significant Philip Faulconbridge is

[71] Roger of Hoveden, *Chronica*, Vo1. 4, ed. William Stubbs (London: Longman, & Co. 1871), 97.
[72] Raphael Holinshed, *Holinshed's Chronicles of England, Scotland and Ireland in Six Volumes* (London: J. Johnson, 1807, reprinted New York: AMS Press, 1965), Vol. II, 278.
[73] In actuality, both Leopold of Austria and Aimar V of Limoges were historical opponents of Richard I. Leopold held Richard hostage from 1192 to 1194. Aimar (or Vidomar)'s castle was besieged by Richard in 1199; during the siege, Richard was fatally shot with a crossbow from the battlements. Both Peele and Shakespeare present both men as a single character who holds both titles. See *Troublesome Reign*, ed. Forker, 108.

purely Peele's invention, or whether there is a lost tradition of material surrounding Philip that would connect Roger of Howeden's little-more-than-footnote to Peele and Shakespeare's dynamic stage character, is difficult to determine. Philip remains an elusive figure. But whatever path brought him to the sixteenth century English stage, there is no evidence to suggest that he was anything approaching the vital military administrator and trusted councilor we see in Peele and Shakespeare.[74]

Appropriately then, the "certain truth" of the Bastard's historical origins is as difficult to pinpoint as his biological origins within the first scene. He stands, like Falstaff, as a figure of semi-historical origins, but largely the product of fictional invention. Robert C. Ward stresses, however, that unlike Falstaff, that "other great fictive presence in the history plays," the Bastard acts as a significant force in the historical narrative of the play in ways that Falstaff never does. As Robert Jones puts it: "If Falstaff often takes the center of Shakespeare's stage, he is never allowed to take a pivotal place in England's affairs, as the Bastard is here. The crucial difference can be measured by trying to imagine Henry IV saying to Falstaff at Shrewsbury, as John says to the Bastard in 5.1, 'Have thou the ordering of this present time' (line 77)."[75]

The Bastard seems to allude to his own fictional status or ahistoricalness early in the play, using the form of the aside to do so. Reflecting in soliloquy on the qualities needed to get ahead in this world, the Bastard remarks that "he is but a bastard to the time / that doth not smacks of observation" (i.e., discernment), adding "And so am I, whether I smack or no" (1.1.208-09). The

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[74] Besides what has been noted above, Chris Given-Wilson and Alice Curteis sketch the few other surviving details. In addition to the Castle at Cognac, "Amelie, daughter of the lord of Cognac, may also have been given to him in marriage" by King Richard (126). Following this, "Philip is next heard of in England in 1201, when he sold his lordship to King John and promptly disappeared from the records" (126-27). Given-Wilson calls the murder of the Viscount of Limoges the "only noteworthy exploit attributed to Philip" but adds, "whether there is any truth in the story—recorded in only one chronicle [Howeden's]—it is difficult to say." *Royal Bastards of Medieval England* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1984), 126.

[75] Robert Jones, "Truth in King John." *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900,* Vol. 25, No. 2, Elizabethan and Jacobean Drama (Spring, 1985), 398.

comment conveys several meanings at once: Whether Philip is a "bastard to the time," in the primary sense of being unable to suit himself to the demands of the moment, remains to be seen—as he is perfectly aware when he makes this remark. It is also true, moreover, that he is a bastard in the literal sense, whether he "smacks" of illegitimacy "or no." But the comment also seems to tacitly acknowledge his status as a fictional character in a history play; he is a bastard to the time in that, unlike John and Eleanor, he does not legitimately belong to the period represented on stage. Philip Faulconbridge is not Philip of Cognac. He is an interloper in the play, just as his illegitimacy marks him as an interloper within a family context—whether a welcome one, as viewed by John and Eleanor, or unwelcome, as viewed by old Sir Robert. It is therefore appropriate that the spokesperson for historical skepticism within this history play should, himself, be a fictionalized, largely ahistorical figure.

In addition to his lack of legitimacy (historical and paternal), there is one additional feature of his character which sets him apart from the other characters on stage, and it relates to his formal construction. Unlike his predecessor in Peele, Shakespeare's bastard speaks and behaves in a markedly different manner from the other characters with whom he shares the stage. Paraphrasing Machiavelli in a medieval English setting (as the Bastard does when he reflects: "he is but a bastard to the time"), is not a unique type of anachronism for a Shakespearean history.[76] It is however, unique within the context of *King John* as no other characters seem able to cast their philosophy forward in this manner of anachronistic paraphrase. Unlike Bale's Verity who quotes authors from the past, the Bastard quotes authors from the future. The Bastard, moreover, represents a dynamic and compelling presence in the action of the play—for many

[76] Cf. Jesse Lander and J.J.M. Tobin, eds., *King John* (Arden 3), 158, n. 207-208: "See Machiavelli, *The Prince*, Chapter 25: 'He will prosper most whose mode of acting best adapts itself to the character of the times; and conversely, he will be unprosperous, with whose mode of acting the times do not accord.'"

readers and viewers its most engaging feature, if not its only one. He also represents, as numerous critics have pointed out, a key point in Shakespeare's development as a literary artist in the depiction of human personalities, en route to the creation of such celebrated, realistic, inwardly reflective and self-aware characters as Falstaff, Rosalind, and Hamlet. This distinction is largely conveyed through his use of soliloquies throughout the play.

The Bastard as Choric Historian: Narrative and Counter-Narrative

King John's first scene, as I have shown, establishes how multiple historical narratives compete for supremacy in the form of royal endorsement. In this case, the historically accurate narrative carries the day, if only narrowly and coincidentally. But we are at least sure, in the case of Philip's paternity, which of these two competing narratives was the correct one. In other instances, however, the play does not prioritize one version of history over another. Again, as I will argue below, a comparison to Bale's play is instructive. While Shakespeare's Faulconbridge appears to be the opposite of Bale's Verity, they occupy analogous roles: it is through their voices that the audience learns the exemplary lessons or cautionary tales that history holds for sixteenth-century audiences.

King John juggles jostling and scrambling multiple voices, like young Robert and Philip in the first scene, to establish the supremacy or truth of their own historical narratives—that is, their own version of past events leading to the current set of circumstances. During the course of the play, we hear differing versions of recent history asserted first, by John and Eleanor (who, in the early acts, articulate what might be called the "official" narrative of English history), then by Constance and Arthur (the widow of John's late brother, and her son), as well as the French King and the Dauphin, Cardinal Pandulph, and the English nobility. Not all these narratives are mutually exclusive. At the start of Act II, for example, Constance and the French king are united

in a shared historical narrative of John's usurpation of the English throne. By the end of that act, as we will see, the French king abandons this narrative (and his support of Constance) and collaborates on a new, separate narrative with John. The English nobles, who appear fleetingly in the early acts, only become important to the action of the play when, as discussed above, they cease to credit John's narrative, and form their own rebellious splinter narrative of English history; this narrative in turn merges with the narrative of the French, by this time John's enemies again. Most of these historical narratives are used to justify or impugn someone's legitimate right to rule. Whether a character believes John is the rightful king or a usurper arises both from the character's sense of recent history, and also shapes the representation of that history to others.

Amid all these narratives competing for "official" status, the Bastard offers what can be thought of a counter-narrative to the prevailing "official" narrative of the moment, conveyed to the audience through soliloquies and asides. The Bastard is, in fact, the only character in the play who speaks directly to the audience, or who is able to express himself in soliloquy.[77] This privilege is not even extended to the eponymous John who arguably evinces as much mental anguish as Shakespeare's two other infanticidal kings, the ever-soliloquizing Richard III and Macbeth. The interplay between the public dialogue of the monarchs and nobles on one hand and the Bastard's soliloquies and asides on the other, shows us not just *that* past truths are difficult to establish with certainty but also *why* this is so, as we see different characters crafting contradictory historical narratives to explain the events of the plot.

[77] Other characters occasionally make brief remarks, speaking private thoughts with no other characters on stage appearing to hear them. These are Hubert (4.1.25-27, 33-35), King John (4.2.216-18), as well as King Philip//check spelling// (3.4.61-67), who speaks about the distraught Constance in the third person in her presence without her taking notice. In all three of these cases, the aside provides no information not brought out later in the dialogue. The only instance of a character besides the Bastard speaking while alone on stage is Arthur's short speech before his fatal leap (4.3.1-10).

One striking example is the hastily arranged marriage between Lewis, the Dauphin, and John's niece, Lady Blanche. This is a transparently political match, drawn to secure the new alliance between England and France, yet for some reason, within the "official" narrative crafted by English and French leaders, the marriage is discussed almost exclusively in terms of the love between the two young strangers. First proposing the match, the Citizen of Angiers frames the issue as a question of romantic attraction, asking the assembled French and English:

> If lusty love should go in quest of beauty,
> Where should he find it fairer than in Blanche?
> If zealous love should go in search of virtue,
> Where should he find it purer than in Blanche?
> If love ambitious sought a match for birth,
> Whose veins bound richer blood than Lady Blanche? (2.1.426-31)

Here, the language suddenly enters a heightened, artificial register, most conspicuously in the parallel phrasing in each pair of lines. The Dauphin's response continues in this same register. His praise of the lady— "in her eye I find / I wonder, or a wondrous miracle: / the shadow of myself formed in her eye, / which being but the shadow of your son, / becomes a sun and makes your son a shadow" (2.1.496-500)—with its elaborate punning conceits, exceeds the bounds of believability, or even the demands of the moment.

This scene between Lewis and Blanche appears to shift the play into a different genre than the shrewd, political history we have been watching up to this point—something akin to the love-at-first-sight in *Romeo and Juliet,* written around the same time. For the moment at least, we have moved into the usually fictitious narrative of two warring countries reconciled by the romantic attraction of royal youth from opposing sides. But this is less a story in which the characters find themselves, and more of a story in which they are inventing themselves. Watching this exchange, we are watching historical fiction being written live in the moment, as

members of the new royal alliance consciously craft a false narrative—a kind of pastiche of a love story—to or rationalize the expediency of a political match.

The sentiment is undercut somewhat by the catalogue of counties rattled off by John between the love speeches. John promises that, "If that the Dauphin there, thy princely son, / Can in this book of beauty [i.e. Blanche] read 'I love'," John will give, first, "Anjou and fair Touraine, Maine, Poitiers" (2.1.484-87)—then, adding an additional province later in the scene: "Volquessen, Touraine, Maine, / Poitiers and Anjou, these five provinces" (2.1.527-28). I include both lists in full to register the effect of these named counties, which are the actual material considerations shaping the peace treaty, juxtaposed against its stated motive of the Dauphin's potential love for Blanche.

We might be tempted to wonder why such an alliance—which forestalls further armed conflict and brings amity to warring neighbors—even needs this official love-fiction to dress itself up in. Even if it is actually prompted by material self-interest, with such other laudable motives ready at hand, the lie hardly seems worth telling. We might answer that this idea of the couple's romantic love need not be thought of as real, necessarily, but is instead emblematic of the new love between the two countries. But if this is the case, there is certainly no indication within the scene itself, where the characters all speak as though in earnest. What we see, then, is the composition of a historical account which self-consciously incorporates elaborate metaphorical literary conceits as a way to express historical fact. In so doing, John, King Philip, the Dauphin, and Blanche, are performing a false history, or at least a heavily fictionalized one—establishing or reading into the record a pleasing but fictional motive where none really exists or needs to exist. The two lovers, in other words, are both playing parts scripted for them by circumstance and royal elders. This scene is all the more conspicuous since there is nothing

remotely like it in Holinshed, who notes the marriage in passing huddled among a number of other points of business concerning England and France.[78] Here the emphasis is placed squarely on considerations of land and money. Nor is this heightened love rhetoric to be found in Peele's *Troublesome Reign,* where the scene unfolds in a similar structure, but at a much brisker pace, focusing again, on land and money.[79] If this scene in Shakespeare highlights any significant difference between a history play and a chronicle, it is that history plays need not hold themselves to the same degree of plausibility.

All of this serves to establish what I have been calling an "official" narrative within the play—that is, a narrative crafted by and agreed to by the political leaders in this scene, and acted or declared in a public manner: Let the record show that Lewis and Blanche are now in love, and England and France are now allies. Whether Lewis actually loves Blanche is irrelevant to the construction of this narrative—this is what the story calls for at the moment. In contrast, we can now look at what I have been terming the counter-narrative, as spoken by the Bastard. In contrast to the official narrative, which is, in effect, publicly declared, the Bastard's counter-narrative is isolated from the rest of the scene's action, and takes the form of a series of asides heard only by the audience, followed by a soliloquy once the others have left the stage.

During the main action of the scenes, the Bastard's asides invariably puncture the sentiment just declared within the official narrative. The Dauphin's protestation, "I do protest

[78] Holinshed, 279: "finallie they con|cluded an agreement, with a marriage to be had betwixt Lewes the sonne of king Philip, and the ladie Blanche, daughter to Alfonso king of Castile the 8 of that name, & néece to K. Iohn by his sister Elianor. In consideration whereof, king Iohn, besides the summe of thirtie thousand markes in siluer, as in re|spect of dowrie assigned to his said néece, resigned his title to the citie of Eureux, and also vnto all those townes which the French king had by warre taken from him, the citie of Angiers onelie excepted, which citie he receiued againe by couenants of the same a|gréement. The French king restored also to king Iohn (as Rafe Niger writeth) the citie of Tours, and all the castels and fortresses which he had taken within Touraine."

[79] *Troublesome Reign,* Part 1, Scene 4, Lines 65-189.

that I never loved myself, / Till now infixed I beheld myself, / Drawn in the flattering table of her eye" (2.1.501-03) is parroted by the incredulous Bastard:

> 'Drawn in the flattering table of her eye!'
> Hanged in the frowning wrinkle of her brow
> And quartered in her heart, he doth espy
> Himself a traitor. Love is pity now,
> That hanged, and drawn, and quartered, here should be
> In such a love so vile a lout as he. (2.1.504-09)

The Bastard seizes on the Dauphin's "drawn" (i.e., to be drawn into) and punningly builds on it as the second step in "hung, drawn, and quartered," implying that he will prove a "traitor" to his vows. This response, in the form of a parody verse or mock love-poem, both acknowledges and participates in this sudden shift to a high poetic register, while simultaneously undermining or subverting it. As this is an aside, only the audience is privy to this commentary, a dramatic move that seemingly privileges the audience's perspective above that of the characters on stage.

Once the rest of the characters exit with "unlook'd for, unprepared pomp" (2.1.560) to the place where "the rites of marriage shall be solemnized" (2.1.539)—another staged form which ultimately proves hollow in this play—the stage is cleared for the Bastard to offer his full commentary directly to the audience, beginning with the glib assessment: "Mad world! mad kings! mad composition!" (2.1.561). His commentary affirms what John's earlier catalogue of counties suggests—that above all, it is "that smooth-faced gentleman, tickling Commodity" (2.1.573) which motivates the match. Detailing the self-interested motives of both sides, the Bastard explains how John, "hath willingly departed with a part" of his kingdom only to "stop Arthur's title in the whole." (2.1.562-63). No better is the French King, "Whom zeal and charity brought to the field / As God's own soldier," to support Arthur's claim. Yet is brought, by the incentive of easy material gain, to a "most base and vile-concluded peace" (2.1.565-86).

This soliloquy offers a commentary or gloss on the historical content we have just witnessed. In contrast to the stately, self-conscious artificiality of the preceding scene, the Bastard's frank speech also serves as a moment of intimacy between actor / character and audience—particularly on the sunlit stage of an open-air Elizabethan playhouse where the Bastard would be able to make eye contact and directly interact with spectators. Watching the previous scene, it would be easy to imagine that we have seen and understood a representation of a historical event—at least, it is tempting to believe we understood what we just saw. But this is evidently not so. The Bastard's commentary effectively negates any but the most cynical interpretation of this royal posturing. With the false, official version dispensed with, we might think that here, at least in the Bastard's unofficial version offers us some kind of firm, reliable footing on which to ground our understanding. But this is not so either, as the Bastard tells: "And why rain I on this Commodity? For that because he has not wooed me yet" (2.1.587-88). No sooner does he expose the self-interested motives of the English and French royals in the official version, than he undermines his own account by revealing his own equally self-interested motives. His own interpretation, he tells us, us equally biased and suspect.

In Bale, history is monolithic. The choric character Verity enters and explains history; thanks to his timely intervention, the estates of England can act accordingly. Details which do not conform to the master narrative must be overwritten. For Shakespeare, the choric Bastard's asides and soliloquies, like Holinshed's wide-ranging compilations, suggest a conception of history as something composed of smaller pieces of knowledge to which only certain people have access. This approach allows Shakespeare to be in greater sympathy with the medieval chroniclers than Bale, who needs all medieval history to be wrong for his version of history to be right. Shakespeare, by contrast, can incorporate different—sometimes conflicting—historical

voices since each voice stands only against other voices. For the later dramatist, we cannot know history in its totality; the complete picture is inaccessible. Instead, all we have are fragments voicing one person's opinions as opposed to another's, a contrapuntal staging that warns the audience to remain on their historical guard.

Omitting and Inventing: The Bastard as "Official" Historian in King John

The Bastard's soliloquies and asides, then, are responsible for the prevailing atmosphere of historical skepticism that dominates the first half of *King John*. However, these abruptly disappear roughly halfway through the play, instead replaced by an entirely different form of historical narration. As John places greater trust in the Bastard, and the Bastard's engagement in national affairs increases, his engagement with the audience diminishes. This section first looks at the moment in the play where the Bastard's engagement with the audience abruptly ceases, then examines the Bastard's new, revised form of historical narration and its role in establishing the "official" English narrative of the play, rather than a counter-narrative. In this new role, the Bastard's historical reporting is marked by two seemingly opposite tendencies: omitting or withholding details, and inventing or embellishing them.

The Bastard's final true soliloquy in *King John* is the "commodity" speech, quoted above, which ends the second act. Following this, there are only two moments in the play which approach his previous direct access to the audience. The first of these is the Bastard's short, three-and-a-half-line speech at the start of Act III, Scene 2. This marks the final point in the play where the Bastard expresses his thoughts while alone on stage; from this point onwards, the Bastard never has the stage to himself, and therefore never has unhindered control of the narrative as he in his previous soliloquies in Acts I and II. This brief speech in 3.2, is in itself,

unremarkable. The Bastard informs us that he has achieved a longstanding ambition concerning his father's killer, the Duke of Austria:

> Now by my life this day grows wondrous hot.
> Some airy devil hovers in the sky
> And pours down mischief. Austria's head lie there
> While Philip breaths." (3.2.1-4)

Though the scene has, at best, a confused historical basis (since Richard I's illegitimate son allegedly killed the Viscount of Limoges, not the Duke of Austria), at least within the reality of Shakespeare's play, the action is the stuff of straightforward historical narrative—not ironic counter-narrative historical commentary. There is nothing in these lines, furthermore, to indicate this will be the Bastard's last declaration, either directly to the audience, or while alone on stage.

This moment, at the start of 3.2, is also significant because it marks another pivot-point in the play, from scenic continuity to discontinuity. Up to this juncture, occurring roughly halfway through the play, the action has taken place in just three long, continuous scenes.[80] Following this point, the action is divided into thirteen scenes, all of uneven length.[81] This abrupt switch from smooth, largely uninterrupted action to disjointed fragmentation creates an effect in performance that is subtle but palpable.[82] This moment of rupture, therefore, marks two changes occurring simultaneously—the play loses both the formal coherence of scenic continuity, and also the narrative coherence of a single, choric figure to guide the audience through the action. The Bastard's voice, henceforth, is only one among many.

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[80] These first three scenes are the single scenes that constitute Act I and II (276 lines and 598 lines, respectively), and the first scene of Act III (347 lines), totaling 1,221 lines altogether.

[81] Ranging from just 10 lines (3.2), to 269 lines (4.2), these thirteen scenes total 1,446 lines.

[82] It also makes *King John* structurally unique among Shakespeare's plays. In several of his plays, the action is divided into a small number of long, continuous scenes (*Midsummer, Tempest*). Others are split into a large number of much shorter scenes (*1 Henry VI, Antony and Cleopatra*). Most present a moderate number of scenes of varying lengths. *King John* is the only play to feature a largely continuous first half with few breaks in the action, and an extremely choppy second half.

Other than the Bastard's brief speech in 3.2, there is one other moment in the entire second half of the play when the Bastard comes close to soliloquy—though even here, he does not quite enter one. This is his poignant speech at the end of Act IV, as Hubert carries off the dead body of Prince Arthur (4.3.140-59). As with his two earlier soliloquies, which conclude Acts I and III, this speech offers a comment on the preceding action. Admittedly, this may fail to qualify as soliloquy only on strictly formal grounds since some lines within the speech are spoken directly to Hubert, rather than to the audience or to himself—as, for instance, "Bear away that child / And follow me with speed" (4.3.156-57). Other lines which express private reflection may be addressed to the present Hubert, or, depending on the staging, may be spoken as asides: "I am amazed, methinks, and lose my way / amid the thorns and dangers of this world" (4.3.140-41). Certainly, in this last line, the Bastard makes it clear he feels he has become enmired in a bad business, but refrains from meditating too deeply on all the implications. Tantalizingly, during this speech the Bastard even appears to suggest his belief that Arthur was the rightful heir to the English throne—an issue he had not hitherto addressed, nor will he mention again. Observing Hubert lifting Arthur's body, the Bastard remarks: "How easily dost thou take all England up" (4.3.142), adding, that from Arthur's body, "The right and truth of all this realm / Is fled to heaven" (4.3.144-45). But he does not allow himself to give this thought further expression. This mode of speaking, with its mixture of half-articulated, half-suppressed thought, "the pausing and phrasing" and "quiet tone of self-commuting reflection," as John Danby points out, is new for the Bastard in the course of this play, as well as for Shakespeare in his development as a literary artist.[83] Again, though a soliloquy—i.e., the speaking of inner thoughts

[83] John Danby, *Shakespeare and the Doctrine of Nature: A Study of Shakespeare's King Lear*, (London: Faber and Faber, 1968), 68.

aloud to the audience—seems to be practically bursting from him, and even half escapes, the Bastard manages to rein in his speech and curb further expression of this thought.

Though he no longer narrates the play through soliloquy or aside, the Bastard still serves an important function as historiographical narrator or chorus through the remaining action. This narration, however, takes a drastically different form in the second half of the play. The Bastard ceases to be a source of counter-narrative within the many competing voices of the play, and instead becomes the spokesperson of the "official" narrative of English royal power, stepping into a role previously filled by the now weakened John and deceased Eleanor. In abandoning his cynical asides, and speaking only to the other characters from this "official" position, however, the Bastard loses his intimate position with the audience.

This is most apparent in his speech to the French and rebel English forces before the final battle of the play. The Bastard offers his defiance, telling the Dauphin and rebellious English barons that John "is prepared, and reason too he should"—that "This unhair'd sauciness and boyish troops, / The king doth smile at" (5.2.130, 133-34). Even as he says this, however, we know he lies. We have just seen the Bastard endeavoring to rouse a cowering and physically enfeebled John in the previous scene: "But wherefore do you droop? why look you sad?" (5.1.44). It will readily be said, of course, that the Bastard has every good reason to read this lie into the official record of the play at this moment. In effect, his willingness to do so only fulfils his promise at the start of the play to suit his conduct to the demands of the moment—to avoid being a "bastard to the time."

In his following speech, however, the Bastard's form of historical narration undergoes a subtler transformation beyond merely the expediency of deliberate deception of enemy forces. Not only has he ceased speaking to the audience by this point, but his entire mode of historical

narration takes on a new form. In defying the French, the Bastard offers a description of the previous battle with the English, following the failure of the royal marriage to bring peace. This last battle is not fully staged, but takes place at the aforementioned point separating the halves of the play—between the first and second scenes of Act III. The battle occurring between these two scenes is denoted simply by the stage directions, "*Alarums, excursions*," and may be either staged or simply implied to a greater or lesser degree in production. But in defying the French, the Bastard offers a description of the battle that the play does not convey in any other form:

> That hand which had the strength, even at your door,
> To cudgel you and make you take the hatch,
> To dive like buckets in concealed wells,
> To crouch in litter of your stable planks,
> To lie like pawns lock'd up in chests and trunks,
> To hug with swine, to seek sweet safety out
> In vaults and prisons, and to thrill and shake
> Even at the crying of your nation's crow,
> Thinking his voice an armed Englishman –
> Shall that victorious hand be feebled here,
> That in your chambers gave you chastisement? (5.2.136-47)

The speech is undoubtedly imposing, but how accurate is it as a piece of historical testimony? In so far as John won this battle against the French, the general contours of the speech are accurate, just as Shakespeare typically adheres to the general contours of historical events in his plays. The details, however, smack of artistic license. Did the French, for example, "dive like buckets" into wells out of pure fear of the English, as the Bastard claims? Or hide "like pawns lock'd up" in their own "chests and trunks?" Or, as seems equally unlikely, did they "crouch in litter" of their "stable planks" and "hug with swine?"

These accusations are almost certainly false. But trying to prove the fallaciousness creates new difficulties. First, nothing within the text of the play at the moment of the battle gives us any information about what the clash, denoted simply with the stage directions

"*Alarums and excursions*," may actually have entailed—either in the thirteenth century, or on stage in performance. But even if the battle were staged at length in performance, the Elizabethan playhouse could certainly not depict a scene so overwrought with detail as the Bastard describes in these lines. As with the report of the battle at the start of *Macbeth* (2.1), this battle lives in our imagination through verbal description rather than physical reenactment. But unlike the description in *Macbeth*, the Bastard's speech does not follow immediately after the battle, but only after a long interval of other activity—two whole acts, from 3.2 to 5.2. The only information given directly, other than the Bastard's slaying of the Duke of Austria, is a contradiction of the report that Eleanor had been surprised and taken captive (3.2.5-10). The play therefore offers an account not of what happened, but what *didn't* happen. And if even those who fought in the battle are deluded by false report in this way, what hopes can the speaker or reader have? When we next see the French (3.4), curiously, they are discussing losses at sea, rather than their recent defeat on land— "a whole armada of convected sail / is scattered" not by the English, but by storms. So, there is no helpful information forthcoming from that quarter. We cannot have seen the battle when it originally took place in the early thirteenth century; and if we are watching the play performed, we have now missed it a second time (between 3.1 and 3.2), even though the battle actually "happens" in the play. No matter what we may have seen, we certainly have witnessed nothing like the Bastard's description—the only "historical" account contained in the play. The Bastard, who actually fought in this battle, could presumably give an eyewitness account, but even if his description is unlikely to be accurate, it is merely a case of his word against anyone else. It is, perhaps, testament to the power of literary invention that when the Dauphin dismisses the Bastard— "We grant thou canst outscold us: fare thee well; / We hold our time too precious to be spent / With such a brabbler" (5.2.160-63)—even though he is perfectly

correct to do so, we disbelieve him, and not the Bastard. We feel the rhetorical power of the Bastard's speech.

Critics, particularly those who invested in the idea of a moral or providential order in Shakespeare's history plays, have traditionally praised the Bastard's maturity in the second half of the play as he shifts from a flippant, self-interested young man to a badly-needed leader in a moment of national crisis.[84] Certainly, he does alter his attention from pure self-interest to national concerns, but in the course of this change, the audience loses his asides, his soliloquies, and his frank, undisguised (and, as far as we can tell, largely accurate) assessment of what is "really" going on. He becomes, instead, a mouthpiece for the narratives required by the forces of power that he had earlier exposed and derided. He ceases to become our narrator or our moderator, our trusted commentator, and becomes yet another "official" voice in the play, publicly entering its own agenda into the record. In so doing, the Bastard's narration takes the play into historical territory where the audience, sadly, cannot follow. History, for Shakespeare, is still a chorus of competing voices; as the Bastard finds his own way, the audience loses its guide.

He becomes, in effect, something closer to Bale's Verity—a figure who stakes a partisan claim to what constitutes correct historical reporting, to the exclusion of all other variant versions. Even if Shakespeare's play, as a whole, does not necessarily make this shift at this point (as will be seen in the next section) the Bastard, as a historical narrator changes functions from one who navigates the discrepancies between multiple subjective viewpoints to one who asserts a single "correct" version that even he himself presumably knows is inaccurate. These lies, spoken to the French and the English rebels, are perhaps no great stain upon his character as

[84] See, for example, E. M. W. Tillyard, *Shakespeare's History Plays* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1964), 225-29.

truth-teller, since he is acting in the interest of national security, but the motive is arguably irrelevant. John Bale, assuredly, also felt that his anti-Catholic diatribes and historical falsifying in Kynge Johan were carried out in the name of urgent national welfare.

The "Variable Reports" of the Death of King John

As discussed earlier in this chapter, John's death is depicted and interpreted in drastically different ways across the Middle Ages and Reformation, depending on the author's sympathies. More politically charged versions of the story depict John's death by poisoning at the hands of the monk, Simon of Swinsett, who is first the hero of the piece for medieval Catholic chroniclers, then the villain for Protestant historians of the Reformation. Peele's *The Troublesome Reign of King John* gives us this version in which a monk, now Brother Thomas rather than Brother Simon, commits the assassination with the blessing of his abbot. Peele's John is far from the saintly proto-Protestant martyr of Bale's version, but John is still poisoned on stage in full view of the audience, and the monk is still very much depicted as a villain.[85] More politically moderate versions, by contrast, ascribe John's death to the cause credited by most modern historians—namely dysentery, brought on by overeating some variety of stone fruit, either plums or peaches. Holinshed, notably, records both these versions as well as others, noting "the variable reports of writers concerning the death of king John," but declines to endorse one version over another.[86]

Shakespeare's play seems to follow Holinshed's historical agnosticism, offering several versions of John's death; yet, unlike Holinshed, Shakespeare dramatizes both possibilities in a way that leaves the audience in doubt. Though John does die at Swinsett Abby (or, Swinstead

[85] *Troublesome Reign*, Part 2, Scene 8.
[86] *Holinshed*, 336.

Abbey in Shakespeare's version) we are denied the satisfaction of a poisoning scene. What even the skeptical Polydore Vergil includes "so as to satisfy the vulgar," Shakespeare only briefly sketches as a piece of secondhand information.[87] Hubert informs the Bastard that John has, in fact, been poisoned by a monk.

> HUBERT: The king, I fear, is poison'd by a monk:
> I left him almost speechless […]
> BASTARD: How did he take it? who did taste to him?
> HUBERT: A monk, I tell you; a resolved villain,
> Whose bowels suddenly burst out: the king
> Yet speaks and peradventure may recover. (5.6.23-31)

This account would certainly seem to be straightforward enough. Yet even within this short exchange Hubert moves from the speculative or conjectural— "The king, *I fear*, is poison'd"—to utmost certainty, including the vivid corroborative details of the monk's exploding bowels. Later, John himself twice alludes to having been poisoned. When young Prince Henry asks, "How fares your majesty?" the king replies "Poisoned" (5.7.35), adding later: "Within me is a hell; and there the poison / Is as a fiend confined to tyrannize" (5.7.46-47). Such a description could doubtless be interpreted in opposite ways by strong partisans on either side of the Reformation—whether the "hell" within John foreshadows the hell to which he will shortly be consigned as just punishment for "tyrannizing" England as the poison now tyrannizes within him; or whether the poison in John's body was served by the same fiendish hand of papal overreach that "tyrannizes" the English body politic. Either way, the interpretation practically writes itself. But whatever the interpretation, these details leave little room for doubt that John was, in fact, poisoned.

[87] Polydore Vergil, *Anglica Historia (1555 version): A Hypertext Critical Edition*, Ch. XV, ed. Dana F. Sutton (University of California, Irvine. Posted August 4, 2005. Last modified May 25, 2010).

And yet, a few scenes prior, while still en route to the Abbey, John is already sick with the same malady that later appears to kill him. As he tells Hubert at the start of this short scene, "This fever that has troubled me so long / Lies heavy on me. O, my heart is sick" (5.3.3-4). And again, at the end of that same scene:

> Ay me, this tyrant fever burns me up
> […]
> Set on toward Swinstead. To my litter straight;
> Weakness possesseth me, and I am faint. (5.314-17)

This is the first time he mentions such any such illness, yet he speaks of "*this* fever" as though he expects we have already heard about it. In addition, he speaks of the same symptoms again in his death scene after he has evidently been poisoned:

> There is so hot a summer in my bosom,
> That all my bowels crumble up to dust (5.7.30-31)

He even uses the same metaphor of "tyranny" both scenes—first the "tyrant fever," then the fiend which is "confined to tyrannize" within him. But if John dies of poison, why is he already sick with the same internal burning—symptoms which work on his internal organs in a way vaguely reminiscent of dysentery—before he arrives at the Abbey?

Shakespeare, in effect, is giving us both versions of John's death. We may attribute this merely to sloppy storytelling, but whether this doubling is unintentional (Shakespeare meant to include only one version, but as the result of rushed revisions, etc., left both in), or intentional (Shakespeare is offering an ironic gesture towards the unreliability of historical narrative of exactly the kind that I have been discussing), we can never know, and the point holds either way. The play gives us two versions of John's death which do not corroborate each other. The monkish poisoning is present, but significantly downplayed from the earlier stage versions in Bale and Peele where we watched it happen on stage. Instead, we only hear it reported—mere

hearsay, as far as we and the Bastard are concerned. Having been away from John in the time leading up to his death, the Bastard, like us, is on the outside looking in. The true and accurate version, whatever it was, is as inaccessible to him as to the spectators of the play.

At the end of the play, it is, perhaps, John's metaphorical assessment of himself which is the most accurate:

> I am a scribbled form, drawn with a pen
> Upon a parchment, and against this fire
> Do I shrink up. (5.7.32-34)

John, throughout the play, has tried to craft a historical narrative of himself that he was not ultimately able to control. Peace collapses into war, his nobles rebel, and none of the character are ever able fully to patch together the details of the one narrative leading to John's disgrace and subsequent downfall—the jumble of confused information surrounding Arthur's death. John does not, finally, control history, but rather the reverse. Whether the character John knows it or not as he speaks these lines, the John we see on stage is not the historical John, but a conglomeration of various written reports gathered across multiple centuries—reports that are extremely fragile and subject to change.

In Bale, John's death is the tragic catalyst for revelations that follow—an example of the certain truth which, once explained by Verity, allows Nobility, Clergy, and Civil Order to actualize the Protestant Reformation through their spiritual and political thoughts and actions. In Shakespeare, John's death brings only doubt and further confusion, barely offering the hope of a better reign under a new monarch. In stark contrast to Peele's young Prince Henry, who overmasters the French in a decisive peace negotiation at the end of *The Troublesome Reign*, Shakespeare's Henry is so overwhelmed by his circumstances he can barely speak: "I have a

kind of soul that would give thanks / And knows hot how to do it but in tears" (5.7.108-09). Little help seems forthcoming from that quarter.[88]

The play ends instead with a highly equivocal speech by the Bastard that gestures towards the historical events which follow, without closure or decisiveness:

> This England never did, nor never shall
> Lie at the proud foot of a conqueror
> But when it first did help to wound itself.
> […] Naught shall make us rue,
> If England to itself do rest but true. (5.7.112-18)

This sounds reassuring, but in fact both of these seemingly optimistic statements are expressed as conditionals—the hopeful predictions moderated by "*but*" (except) and "*if*". In fact, if we read this speech as typical of the history play's generic tendency to make prophetic gesture towards the future (either the events of the sequel play or the current affairs in England), then this speech promises as much ill as it does good. Looking to the past, the Bastard states that England never succumbed to foreign force "but when" it was already suffering from internal division. But this, as English history shows us, was quite frequently. Looking ahead, he states that England has nothing to fear so long as it remains true to itself. But the history which follows John's reign brings four centuries of bloody (if intermittent) civil strife—as Shakespeare and his audience were aware. Looking both forward and back, poised as *King John* is between Shakespeare's two tetralogies, the observation both alludes to the terrible domestic turmoil depicted in his history plays already written (*1 Henry VI – Richard III*), as well as those soon to come (*Richard II – Henry V*). From any vantage point, therefore, the history which occurs between the reigns of John and Elizabeth, Shakespeare's past and the Bastard's future, is one of repeated self-inflicted

[88] Bale's play never mentions Henry III, focusing instead on Henry VIII as the successor to John's legacy.

misery and suffering. Not then, not now, and not in the time between would "England to itself […] rest but true."

Shakespeare knew in 1595 what Bale could not in 1538. Rather than offer another portrait of Henry VIII in the character of John, Shakespeare's play grapples with what Lander and Tobin call the "troubled legacy" of Henry VIII.[89] If Shakespeare's John prefigures Henry at all, it is not because John attempts a heroic act which Henry brings to fruition. Rather, it is because John's tumultuous reign (which includes a papal conflict among numerous others) foreshadows the "nationwide confusion of beliefs and allegiances," as Annabel Patterson phrases it, which Henry's Reformation creates.[90] The puritan Roger Williams would later express this sense of national and historical disorientation when he wrote that England, which was "all Popish under Henry the seventh," became "half Papist halfe-Protestant under Henry the eighth," then:

> From halfe-Protestantisme halfe Popery under Henry the eight, to absolute Protestantisme under Edward, the sixth; from absolute Protestation under Edward the sixt to absolute popery under Quegne Mary, and from absolute Popery under Queen Mary, (just like the Weathercocke, with the breath of every Prince) to absolute Protestantisme under Queene Elizabeth.[91]

The dizzying and seemingly arbitrary sequence conveyed in William's "somewhat parodic formulation," as Patterson describes it, seems less like the seismic shift of historical epochs promised by *Kynge Johan,* and more like the quick succession of broken and reforged alliances in the second and third acts of *King John*.[92] The "weathercocke" that determines the state

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[89] Lander and Tobin (*King John,* Arden 3), 28.
[90] Patterson, 22.
[91] Roger Williams, "Christenings make not Christians," in *The Complete Writings of Roger Williams* (New York: Russell & Russell, 1963), 7:36.
[92] Patterson, 22.

religion may equally represent the royal whims which arbitrate questions justice, genealogy, and the historical record in the first act of Shakespeare's play.

Unlike the medievalism of Bale's play, which seeks to separate its present moment from the long historical past, Shakespeare's play, and its final speech in particular, offers an ever-repeating sequence of human calamities. *Kynge Johan* casts the Reformation as the decisive turn that alters the course of history as we know it. *King John* reckons with the failure of the Reformation to live up to that promise. Bale's play insists that everything will be different if only we can learn the correct lessons from the historical past. Shakespeare play's shows the inability of future societies to learn any such lessons. The past sixty years of post- Reformation Tudor rule have confirmed that Bale's thesis, essentially, in *Kynge Johan* was false—the Reformation was not the hoped-for historical rupture that would change everything. Instead, as *King John* demonstrates, history invariably repeats itself.

Chapter 2
Arthurian Uncertainties: History's Variable Forms in Hughes's *The Misfortunes of Arthur*

In *The Advancement of Learning* (1607), Francis Bacon makes a passing allusion to "the story of King Arthur of Britain."[1] For Bacon, the legends of King Arthur differ as much "in truth of story" from authentic histories, such as Caesar's *Commentaries,* as magic differs from true science. "For," as Bacon writes, "it is manifest that Cæsar did greater things *de vero* than those imaginary heroes were feigned to do. But he did them not in that fabulous manner."[2] This comparison is part of a larger analogy in which Bacon seeks to explain to his readers the difference between science and magic, and so invokes the comparison between true and false history—rather than the other way around. In order to illustrate the potentially slippery distinction between the "credulous and superstitious conceits" of "natural magic" and the empirical "knowledge of physical causes," Bacon alludes to what he assumes is the obvious difference between two types of historical narrative—on one hand, Caesar's eyewitness account of the Roman conquest of Britain, and on the other, the risibly implausible tales of King Arthur and his knights. The success of this analogy rests on the authenticity of Caesar's firsthand account and the "fabulous" nature of the Arthur legends being manifestly clear to Bacon's readers in 1606.

Bacon's knowledge of Arthurian literary invention, like much of the empirical knowledge he championed, was learned through personal experience—in this case, through his participation in an odd theatrical experiment in historical revisionism. Two decades prior to *The Advancement*

[1] Francis Bacon, *The Advancement of Learning*, ed. David Price (London: Cassell and Co., 1893), Book II, §VIII (3) https://www.gutenberg.org/files/5500/5500-h/5500-h.htm
[2] Ibid.

of Learning, Bacon had acted in an Arthurian stage tragedy, *The Misfortunes of Arthur*, performed before Queen Elizabeth as one of a series of entertainments mounted at Greenwich Palace "betwixt Christmas and Shrovetide" early in 1587, and published later that same year.[3] Depicting the final, fatal conflict between Arthur and Mordred, this mélange of Senecan classicalism, early modern medievalism, and elaborate allegorical pageantry is the only surviving early modern play to depict Arthur as a character on stage.[4] Though attributed to Thomas Hughes in its original printing, the play was likely a collaborative effort by the eight members of Gray's Inn who performed the play, including the young Bacon and Hughes himself—all professional lawyers, as well as amateur historians and dramatists.[5]

The "misfortunes" of the title presumably refers to Arthur's downfall as king, but the play is equally interested in his declining fortunes as a historically credible figure. Appearing towards the end of a decades-long controversy concerning Arthur's authenticity, the play depicts a historically plausible Arthur, stripped of supernatural content. With no Lady of the Lake, no Merlin, and no Holy Grail, this disenchanted Arthurian court reflects the tastes and attitudes of its educated early modern authors and seems calculated to appeal to its elite, politically savvy audience—Elizabeth's guests at Greenwich. The play stands in contrast to the only other surviving early modern English play taken from Arthurian legend, William Rowley's much-later

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[3] That winter, seven plays were staged at Greenwich Palace "by the Children of Poles her Ma*iesti*es owne servants & and the gentlemen of grayes In," as well as various other "featt*e*s of Activitie And other shewes." See Albert Feuillerat, *Documents Relating to the Office of the Revels in the Time of Queen Elizabeth,* (London: David Nutt, 1908), 378. *The Misfortunes of Arthur* was originally published as: *Certaine deu[is]es and shewes presented to her Maiestie by the gentlemen of Grayes-Inne at her Highnesse court in Greenewich, the twenty eighth day of Februarie in the thirtieth yeare of her Maiesties most happy raigne* (London: Printed by Robert Robinson, 1587).

[4] On the lost Arthurian plays of the Tudor period, see Elisabeth Michaelsson, *Appropriating King Arthur: The Arthurian Legend in English Drama and Entertainments, 1485-1625* (Uppsala: Uppsala University Library, 1999), 116-117; and Paul Whitfield White, "The Admiral's Men, Shakespeare, and the Lost Arthurian Plays of Elizabethan England," *Arthuriana* 24:4, Winter 2014, 33-47.

[5] The play was originally published as *Certaine deu[is]es and shewes presented to her Maiestie by the gentlemen of Grayes-Inne at her Highnesse court in Greenewich, the twenty eighth day of Februarie in the thirtieth yeare of her Maiesties most happy raigne* (London: Printed by Robert Robinson, 1587). On the play's collaborative authorship, see Brian Jay Corrigan's critical edition, 1-3, 19.

The Birth of Merlin (1622). Depicting Merlin, Vortigern, and Uther (but not Arthur himself), this play delivers a supernatural spectacle of dragons, astronomical wonders, and the boy Merlin first summoning, then defeating the devil in an onstage magical battle.

The exclusion of supernatural material in *The Misfortunes of Arthur*, by contrast, speaks to an interest in early British chronicle history as opposed to later English chivalric romance. Rather than adapting material from Malory's *Morte Darthur*, still immensely popular in print a century after its first publication, Hughes and his collaborators bypass this later, mythological version of the Arthur narrative, returning instead to Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia Regum Britanniae* as their main source. Educated and Latin-literate, the dramatists could have accessed Geoffrey's chronicle directly in print.[6] But the wider, non-Latin-reading public would also have had access to Galfridian material through the summary and discussion of his work in an acrimonious battle of the books concerning Arthur's historical authenticity in the sixteenth century. A still wider circle of theatrical audiences would have found Geoffrey represented in several mid- and late-sixteenth century plays that use the *Historia* as their main source, including *Gorboduc*, *Locrine*, and *King Leir*. This variety of responses to Geoffrey across different media suggests a renewed interest in the chronicler and his role in recording Britain's early history. Whereas Malory's *Morte Darthur* stands as a late culmination of the "fabulous" Arthurian tradition, adapted from later English and French romances, Geoffrey's work serves as the point of origin for the native chronicle tradition of Arthurian writing. The dramatists responsible for *Gorboduc*, *Locrine*, and *Leir*, as well as *The Misfortunes of Arthur*, rely on Geoffrey's *Historia*

[6] The *Historia* received three early printings in its original Latin: in an edition by Ivo Cavellatus in 1508, a reprinting of this edition in 1517, and an edition by Jerome Commelin in 1587—the same year as *The Misfortunes of Arthur*. The *Historia* was not translated into English until 1718 in an edition by Aaron Thompson. See Lewis Thorpe, Introduction to *The History of the Kings of Britain*, by Geoffrey of Monmouth (New York: Penguin, 1966), 31-33.

in order to remove Arthur and other semi-historical figures from the realm of fantasy, and return them to the mundane world of true history. While the factual accuracy of Geoffrey's *Historia* had always been disputed, Geoffrey's relevance to the Arthur question in the sixteenth century invariably arises in the context of historical scholarship, not literary entertainment.

Traditionally, critics have looked at Hughes's play either as an exercise in Senecan tragedy or as a vehicle for humanistic aphorisms and advice on what it means to rule.[7] This chapter explores what can be gained by reading *The Misfortunes of Arthur* as a chronicle history play rather than as a classical or political tragedy—one depicting a more viably historical, non-supernatural Arthur narrative adapted from Geoffrey of Monmouth. I do not suggest that Hughes and his collaborators necessarily believed that Arthur was an authentic historical figure from British history, or that this play convincingly represents him as one. Instead, this chapter focuses on how the play achieves its particular historical effect—its "historicalness"—both responding to and contributing to sixteenth-century debate about Arthur, ultimately making a case for Arthur's continued cultural relevance, if not his authenticity.

In its depiction of Arthur, how does *The Misfortunes* address the fact that its kingly protagonist, once credibly believed to be a historical person by a majority of English readers, can now no longer be accurately described as such? Or, to put it another way, what do writers do with their national history once it is no longer credible as "history"? To answer this question, this chapter analyses and contrasts the play's several formal avenues for conveying historical information on stage.

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[7] William A. Armstrong, "Elizabethan Themes in *The Misfortunes of Arthur*," *The Review of English Studies*, 7:27 July 1956, 238-249; Giles Y. Gamble, "Power Play: Elizabeth I and *The Misfortunes of Arthur*," *Quondam Et Futuris* 1, 1991, 59-69; Gertrude Reese, "Political Import of *The Misfortunes of Arthur*," *Review of English Studies* 21, April 1945, 81-91; Irving Ribner, *The English History Play in the Age of Shakespe*are (London: Methuen & Co, 1957), 229-36.

In addition to the action and dialogue of the play itself, these formal strategies include a historical chronicler as a character, a chorus delivering metahistorical insights, a series of elaborate, pageant-like dumbshows, and a prologue and epilogue delivered by a semi-historical ghost. Each mode conveys the play's historical content in a different fashion, creating representations of events in complementary and occasionally conflicting ways. This chapter analyzes the effect of this multiplication of formal strategies—the concurrence of these contrasting theatrical modes within a single play and their individual and combined historical effects. How did the past misfortunes of Arthur, represented across these various forms, speak to the present fortunes of Elizabeth? And what does it mean for a group of middle-class lawyers to present a history lesson—or series of lessons—in early British history to a reigning queen famously sensitive to her relationship to past monarchs and their representation on the stage?

This chapter looks first at the depiction of the early British chronicler Gildas as a character within the action of the play. As one of the crucial figures in the sixteenth-century scholarly controversy surrounding Arthur's historical authenticity, the chronicler's presence onstage not only invokes this historical debate, but allows the play to assert a position within that debate, distinct from any of the contending historians. Writing the historical chronicler into the Arthurian narrative as a character, the play assigns to Gildas the "missing" reflection on Arthur's reign nowhere to be found in the early historical record, while also subtly suggesting a rationale for his failure to include Arthur in his chronicle. The discussion then shifts to two dramatic framing devices (what I have termed paradramatic). The chorus and dumbshows offer contrasting interpretations of the events of the play, each demanding a different type of response from the audience. The chorus, invoking the medieval *de casibus* tradition of historical tragedy, provides a pre-packaged interpretation of the events of the play that seeks to guide and, at times,

limit audience response. By contrast, the obscurely symbolic, allegorical pageantry of the dumbshows broaden the audience's interpretive responses to the history. The dumbshows, moreover, invoke the disparate Arthurian traditions of the Tudor court masque as well as the prophesies of Merlin in Geoffrey's *Historia*—each of which provides an established interpretive model for the audience. Finally, the chapter addresses the history lesson that the play intended for Queen Elizabeth, delivered in an epilogue by the Ghost of Uther Pendragon's fallen enemy, Gorlois. According to this last historical vision, the events of Arthur's reign inevitably point to the rise of the Tudors a thousand years in the future—and specifically to the reign of the play's royal spectator, Elizabeth herself.

Enter Gildas: Putting the Chronicler on Stage

Though history plays were an increasingly popular genre in the 1580s and 1590s, historians almost never appear as characters on stage; the arrival of the sixth-century chronicler Gildas in Act IV of *The Misfortunes of Arthur* is a dramatic rarity. A chronicler figure does occasionally appear in history plays as the chorus—for example, in Thomas Middleton's *Hengist, King of Kent* (c. 1615), the fourteenth-century monk and chronicler Ranulph Higden delivers the Prologue. In this instance, Higden introduces an "ancient" historical narrative, newly "raise[d] from his *Polychronicon*" onto the stage to entertain this "fair round ring" of spectators—mediating events that occurred centuries before his lifetime, but recorded by him centuries before the performance.[8] The *Polychronicon*'s enduring popularity in print makes Higden a familiar figure of recognized authority to the history-reading public, and hence a fitting personage to make this introduction. But this is markedly different from *The Misfortunes of Arthur*, where

[8] Thomas Middleton, *Hengist, King of Kent*, in *Thomas Middleton: The Collected Works*, ed. Gary Taylor and John Lavagnino (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2010), Prologue, line 2-10, page 1452.

Gildas appears, not simply commenting on the play from without, but actually participating in the same sequence of dramatic events as the play's protagonist king. To analogize the oddity of this dramatic gesture, imagine a version of Shakespeare's *Richard III* in which an adolescent Thomas More interacts on stage with members of Richard's court, noting what he sees and hears for possible inclusion in his later history of the reign. The effect would be radically (and jarringly) different.

For sixteenth-century readers of British history, Gildas's importance rests both on what he includes and what he excludes from his writings. Though he authored the earliest surviving chronicle of the period that would later come to be thought of as Arthurian Britain, he made no mention of Arthur himself. Gildas's chronicle, *De Excidio Britanniae (On the Ruin of Britain),* describes the conquest of early Britain by first the Romans, then the Saxons. As medievalist Geoffrey Ashe helpfully notes, this text is "the only early work covering the phase of British history to which Arthur is commonly assigned."[9] For those arguing either for or against Arthur's historical veracity throughout the Middle Ages and into the early modern period, Gildas represents the nearest thing to an authentic Arthurian chronicler available to later scholars. For the sixteenth-century English reader, Gildas was "the key text," in the words of historian John E. Curran: "though some Englishmen, Samuel Daniel prominent among them, criticized Gildas for overharshness to his fellow countrymen in castigating them for their sins, the majority of writers considered him a supremely authoritative source of information."[10] Because of his commanding position, however, his silence on Arthur placed Gildas at the center of the historical debate concerning Arthur that began in the 1530s and continued, off and on, through the remainder of

[9] Geoffrey Ashe, "Gildas," in *The New Arthurian Encyclopedia*, ed. Norris J. Lacy. (New York: Garland Publishing, 1996), 195.
[10] John E. Curran, Jr. *Roman Invasions: The British History, Protestant Anti-Romanism, and the Historical Imagination in England, 1530-1660* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2002), 47.

the century. For this reason, Gildas was fresh in the minds of learned English men and women interested in early British history at the time of the play's composition.

At a time when belief in a historical Arthur was waning, what does it mean to put a respected medieval chronicler on the same stage as a medieval king no longer held to be historical? Gildas's presence in *The Misfortunes of Arthur* calls attention to the missing historical record concerning Arthur—not simply the uncertainty about the events of his reign, but the complete absence of any contemporary mention of him. The play's representation of Gildas responds directly to the early modern scholarly controversy surrounding the medieval king, echoing points made by historians on both sides of the debate. Showing the powerful wish of some English writers for evidence of a historical Arthur, Hughes and his collaborators include the early chronicler most conspicuously silent on Arthur, in the Arthurian narrative by making him a character in an Arthurian play. Moreover, where the medieval chronicler Gildas makes no mention of Arthur, his dramatic counterpart in *The Misfortune of Arthur* makes the king the pivotal figure in all British history. The play dramatizes what the historical archive lacks—the voice of an authoritative early chronicler able to articulate Arthur's importance to British history and culture.

The Chronicler Reacts: Turning Events to "History"

Like the arrival of Verity late in Bale's *Kynge Johan* discussed in the previous chapter, the appearance of Gildas late in the action of *The Misfortunes of Arthur* marks a transition from the play's depiction of historical events (setting aside for the moment the question of their basis in fact) and toward the depiction of their historical recording and reception. The first three acts depict scenes in which Arthur, Mordred, Guenevora each interact with their chief advisors—including, the beleaguered councilor Conan, who, throughout the first two acts, repeatedly tries

and fails to dissuade Mordred from increasingly dangerous and treasonous actions in Arthur's absence. With the arrival of Gildas, the mode of dramatic representation shifts from those actions themselves to the reactions of the person who (as many early modern scholars believed) ought to have left some written record of them. At the start of Act IV, as Arthur's and Mordred's forces prepare for battle offstage, Gildas and Conan anxiously discuss, "the staggering state of Britain's troubled brains, / Headsick and sore encumbered in her crown" (4.1.13-14).[11] The mighty heroes and villains of the preceding three acts retire offstage, leaving the scene to two men of learning.

The play is at some pains to show how Gildas and Conan are ideally placed for this historical reflection. Ironically, while their bookish backgrounds prevent them from participating in the pivotal battle itself, their education and training have allowed them not only proximity to the key events thus far, but also the insight needed to reflect profitably on these events and speculate on what happens next. As Gildas remarks: "we that have not spent our time in wars, / But bent our course at peace and country's weal, / May rather now expect what strange event / And chance ensues of these so rare attempts" (4.1.34-36). Their training in civil affairs qualifies them, they claim, to treat the "headsickness" of the state—to advise their monarch in this moment of crisis, if only the monarch would listen. "How hard a thing / It is," Gildas reflects, "for minds train'd up in princely thrones, / To hear of ought against their humour's course" (4.1.1-3). In fact, these two men roughly resemble the actor-dramatists themselves: non-noble, non-fighting, and trained in the specific skills (law, history, political policy) useful to a monarch. And here it is tempting to imagine how Francis Bacon, who ended his career as a frustrated royal councilor, might have begun his career by playing one.

[11] All quotations from the play are taken from Thomas Hughes, *The Misfortunes of Arthur: A Critical, Old-Spelling Edition*, ed. Brian Jay Corrigan. (New York: Garland Publishing, 1992).

Heeded or not, however, the reflections of Gildas and Conan occupy the dramatic action at this critical moment, establishing an official record of early response to the play's historical content. Mordred's death, Arthur's fatal wounding, and the mutual destruction of their forces represent both the dramatic climax and the central historical events of the play—but the play does not actually depict these crucial events. Instead, Gildas and Conan react to news of the devastation, reported in the classical style by a messenger. They hear how Arthur, "staggering" from Mordred's fatal blow, "scant sustaind him selfe" and now lies dying— "the hope and braunch of *Brute* suppressed" (4.2.228-34). With Arthur's death fast approaching, the messenger says not only "the field" but "all the Realme, and Brytaines bounds" (3.2.26) have been lost. Hearing this news, Gildas and Conan are placed in the same position as the play's Elizabethan audience. Neither the characters nor the spectators see the action; both learn of it in the same moment. All they can do is react. But if Gildas's response does not reach the off-stage king, their responses instead guide the reactions of the audience—which, after all, would have included a queen.

For Gildas, as for the messenger, the news of Arthur's imminent death marks the endpoint of British history. The destruction of British lives and, more importantly, the loss of Britain's king, he says, have "wrought those wastes" that neither "age" (i.e., time) nor "all the broode of *Brute* shall e'r repaire" (4.3.6-7)—i.e., the offspring of Britain's legendary founder Brutus. He fears the annihilation, not just of individuals, but the entire British race. In the destruction wrought by ordinary warfare ("th'effect of woonted warres," as he says), the "seuerall *Fates*" of individual men affect those "seuerall men" only; Arthur's death, by contrast "containes the death of all a Nation here" (4.3.19-22). The event is catastrophic rather than merely tragic. With Arthur's death, there can be no Britain, and hence no further British history:

"Heere all the Realme and people finde one *Fate*" (4.3.20). The effect seems to be more symbolic than strictly causal. Britain has not been literally depopulated by the war. Rather, as a result of Arthur's death, the Britons will be erased, overrun, or absorbed by other ethnic groups: "Hencefoorth the *Kernes* may safely tread their bogges; / The *Scots* may now their inrodes olde renewe, / The *Saxons* well may vow their former claims, / And *Danes* without their danger driue vs out" (4.3.13-16). But whether symbolic or literal, the speech presents a catastrophizing vision of the destruction of the British people: "That future men may ioy the surer rest, / These wars preuent their birth and nip their spring" (4.3.8-9). Literally, the lives of future generations are preemptively ended because they will never be born. These lines more closely resemble prophesy than history, insofar as they predict the future more than they reflect on the past. In fact, the play makes no obvious reference to Gildas's well-known role as a chronicler of early British history. This sense of futureless annihilation seems antithetical to very idea of chronicle-writing. If "all the broode of *Brute*" are doomed to vanish from the earth, for whose benefit would those events be chronicled?

Gildas''s spontaneous response to Arthur's death performs the work of a historian. He looks backward across a span of time to identify both its beginning and its end; he is lamenting, but he is also periodizing. The previous chapter argued how Bale's representation of King John self-consciously positioned the English Reformation as the endpoint of a newly conceived "middle" age of human history, and the origin of a new era of spiritual rectitude. In *The Misfortunes of Arthur*, Gildas also understands Arthur's death as another such moment of historical rupture—a resetting of the clocks. However, unlike the triumph of Bale's imagined shift from the Middle Ages into early modernity, the play's events mark, for Gildas, the supreme catastrophe after which not only the British people but also British history must cease to exist.

Alluding to his countrymen as "the broode of *Brute*," Gildas brackets the complete span of early British history between a point of commencement and point of conclusion—between its legendary founder (a figure whose historical authenticity was only slightly less controversial than Arthur's in the sixteenth century) and the death of its current king. For Gildas, that moment of epoch-changing historical collapse is the present moment.

In assigning the character Gildas this speech *on the ruin of Britain*, the dramatists echo what is perhaps the most inescapable theme of his namesake's chronicle, *De Excidio Britanniae*—albeit in a different context and with radically different implications. Using words that would not sound out of place in the mouth of his dramatic avatar a full millennium later, the sixth-century chronicler begins his preface to *De Excidio* with this sweeping lamentation: "Alas! the subject of my complaint is the general destruction of every thing that is good, and the general growth of evil throughout the land."[12] The theme did not go unremarked by early modern scholars of British history. John Bale, for one, in his *Actes of Englysh Votaryes* (1551), notes Gildas's account of "the dolorouse destruction of hys contreye."[13] In the broadest possible sense, then, the stage-Gildas and the historical Gildas appear to be speaking on the same topic, but in the very next sentence of *De Excidio*, the two perspectives radically diverge. Having first acknowledged the wholesale destruction, the chronicler continues: "But that I rejoice to see her [Britain] revive therefrom: for it is my present purpose to relate the deeds of an indolent and slothful race, rather than the exploits of those who have been valiant in the field."[14] Gildas writes of this past destruction, not as a final statement on the fate of his people, but as a source of moral

[12] Gildas, *De Excidio Britanniae (On the Ruin of Britain)*, in *The Works of Gildas and Nennius*, trans. J. A. Giles (London: James Bohn, 1841), 1.
[13] Johan Bale, *Actes of Englysh Votaryes: Second part or contynuacyon of the English votarie*s (London: unknown printer, 1551), Preface, pages unnumbered.
[14] Gildas, *De Excidio*, 1.

instruction for the future. In this, the purposes of the chronicler Gildas—history as instruction—seem closer to those of the dramatists themselves than to their representation of him. In raising this point, it is not my purpose to cast aspersions on the dramatists for misrepresenting the chronicler's work—or, indeed, to suggest that they were under any artistic obligation to provide an accurate rendering of this real sixth-century chronicler in a play about an almost-certainly fictional sixth-century king. Rather, the differences between the dramatic Gildas and the historical Gildas have significant implications for the Elizabethan understanding of Arthur as a cultural figure.

While the medieval chronicler notably makes no mention of Arthur, his fictionalized early modern counterpart makes Arthur the central figure of British history. This change is a revolutionary gesture. For this stage-representation of Gildas to wax elegiac on Arthur's legacy flies in the face of the very element that makes the chronicler both essential and controversial among historians debating Arthur's existence. His lamentation on the loss of Arthur both echoes the early modern regret at the absence of Arthur in records of the early history, and compensates for that loss by providing that missing response. Though the chronicler Gildas fails to write Arthur into his narrative, Hughes and company instead write Gildas into Arthur's narrative.

Battle of the Arthurian Books: Historiographic Debate as Dramatic Conflict

In giving Gildas an Arthurian elegy, the play speaks directly to the controversy concerning Arthur's historicity that, while active for hundreds of years, had been revived more urgently in the half-century prior to this play's performance. Gildas is central to this debate. Those arguing against the existence of a historical Arthur invariably cited Gildas's failure to mention him in his chronicle. For the standard-bearer of Arthurian skepticism in the early sixteenth century, Polydore Vergil, Gildas was an essential source—even publishing an edition of Gildas's *De*

Excidio in 1525.[15] For Polydore, Gildas was a man "to whom nothing was more foreign than falsification, nothing dearer than reliance on the truth"—and so worthy to be taken at his word (or lack of it) where Arthur was concerned.[16] Polydore's description of Arthur in his *Anglica Historia* (published 1535, with new editions in 1546 and 1555) would incense his pro-Arthurian opponents. Polydore does not deny Arthur's existence outright—a politically inexpedient if not dangerous claim to assert during the reign of Henry VII, when Polydore first began writing his *Historia*. Henry, who hoped to buttress his wobbly claim to the throne by tracing the Welsh lineage of the Tudors back to Arthur himself, incorporated Arthurian images into court iconography and royal ceremonies, even naming his firstborn son Arthur.[17] Ironically, Henry himself had invited Polydore to England specifically so he might write a history of England using the latest humanist innovations in historical methodology—the same methodologies that, in the years following, would finally banish Henry's purported ancestor from the realm of history in the mind of early modern writers and readers. Polydore, however, rather than denounce Arthur as a historical impossibility, simply downplayed his importance so drastically as to almost expunge him from the narrative. In the single, brief paragraph that his *Historia* allots to Arthur, concrete details are minimal. Blandly stating that Arthur "was indeed such a man that, had he lived longer, he would have finally restored the British state, which was all but ruined," the *Historia* offers faint praise but avoids making claims about what the king may actually have done.[18] The bulk of this paragraph, instead, discusses the numerous false narratives that Polydore

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[15] Gildas, *Opus nouum. Gildas Britannus*, ed Polydore Vergil (Antwerp: Christoffel van Ruremund, 1525). The work was reprinted in 1567 and 1568 as: *Gildæ, cui cognomentum est sapientis, de excidio & conquestu Britanniæ* (London: Ioannes Daius).

[16] Polydore Vergil, *Anglica Historia (1555 version): A Hypertext Critical Edition*, ed. Dana F. Sutton (University of California, Irvine. Posted August 4, 2005. Last modified May 25, 2010), Book III, §18.

[17] Gordon Kipling, *Enter the King: Theatre, Liturgy, and Ritual in the Medieval Civic Triumph* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), 216-18.

[18] Ibid., Book III, §13.

claims have been ascribed to Arthur throughout the centuries: "For even now the common folk praise Arthur to the skies, for thrice he overwhelmed Saxon captains in war, gained possession over Scotland and the neighboring islands, defeated the Romans with their general (a certain Lucius) in the territory of Paris, laid waste to Gaul, and finally bested some giants in a fight."[19] It is easy to see why he drew fire from English historians championing Arthur's historiographical cause. The slighting comment about the "common folk" who "even now" continue to praise Arthur seems calculated to snub Arthur's defenders as unsophisticated provincials. Moreover, Polydore's jumbling together the relatively credible historical claims about Arthur (such as the Saxon defeat) alongside the indisputably fantastic ones (that he "bested some giants in a fight"), all in the same list, seems openly to insult the credulity of those believing any part of the story. This list of Arthur's alleged accomplishments, in fact, exactly matches the complaint of his educated defenders—the mingling of plausible history with false, fabulous embellishments.[20] Polydore's account of Arthur, like Bacon's derisive reference to the "imaginary heroes" quoted at the start of this chapter, invokes the king only so he may be dismissed.

Those arguing for a historical Arthur found it necessary either to discredit Gildas as a chronicler, or devise some reason for his omission of Arthur. John Leland, the most vocal advocate for a historical Arthur, responded directly to Polydore with his *Assertio inclytissimi Arturii regis Britannia* (1544). Published first in Latin, the work was translated into English in 1582 by Richard Robbins as *A Learned and True Assertion of the original, Life, Actes, and death* of *the most Noble, Valiant, and Renoumed Prince Arthure, King of great Brittaine*—making not

[19] Ibid., Book III, §10.

[20] See, for example, Johnathan Prise: "Of course, I leave to one side fables about him invented from other sources and added to the history, fables of the kind which tend to be made up about such men of distinction" *Historiae Britannicae Defensio* (*A Defense of British History*), ed. and transl. Ceri Davies (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, 2015), 61.

only Leland's rebuttal accessible to a wider readership, but ironically also the anti-Arthurian arguments that Leland's work rebuts. The tone Leland and his followers adopted is often impassioned. The proliferation of adjectives in the translated title, for example, conveys a degree of emotional urgency—a case of "adjectival insistence," in F. R. Leavis's phrase. Leland's rancor towards both Gildas and Polydore Vergil is undisguised: For Leland, *"Gildas* in deede is a fabler"—an "vnthankefull person & reprochfull towardes his countrie of Brittaine," and therefore not to be trusted in his account of British history.[21] *De Excidio,* he claims, is less a record of past events than an attack on the British race itself: "*Gildas* the Moncke of the City *Bangor,"* he writes, is concerned more with "flaying aliue, dismembring, and wounding to death the *Brittaines,* then allowing them with any value of virtue."[22] His work, therefore, deserves to be "layde foorth as an open praie vnto silly wormes and Moathes."[23] In his indignation, Leland makes some of his own objections redundant, first attacking Gildas for his falsehoods, then attacking Polydore for the alleged sloppiness of his edition of *De Excidio: "Gildas* his historie is published abroade of *Polidorus,* vndoubtedlie a fragment of y^{e} old *Gildas,* but it is lame, out of order, and maimed, so farre forth, as if he were now againe restored to life, the father would scarce knowe his chylde."[24] If the chronicle is the work of a mere fabler, worthy to be devoured by worms and moths, what matters it whether the edition is well-prepared or not?

Even where there is disagreement concerning what Gildas actually wrote, there is no disagreement as to the chronicler's authority. The antiquarian Johnathan Prise, like Leland, advocated strongly for the existence of a historical Arthur, but Prise's work evinces a more

[21] John Leland, *A Learned and True Assertion of the original, Life, Actes, and death* of *the most Noble, Valiant, and Renoumed Prince Arthure, King of great Brittaine, trans. Richard Robins* (London: *John Wolfe,* 1582), 33r - 33v.
[22] Ibid., 26v
[23] Ibid., 33v
[24] Ibid., 33r

complicated relationship with Gildas and his writing. His *Historiae Britannicae Defensio* (*A Defense of British History,* 1573) also reiterates the opinion that the Arthur-less *De Excidio* is ultimately not concerned with "the business of contracting any kind of history," and is little better than "an invective directed against the British people."[25] But curiously, though Prise denounces *De Excidio,* he praises Gildas throughout his treatise, denying that he could have been *De Excidio's* author. This chronicle, Prise deems the work of "an obscure and obviously untrustworthy author, a nonentity who falsely masquerades under the name of the Briton Gildas"—and it is this man "whose work Polydore has recently put into print."[26] Prise evidently shares the "high regard in which the name of Gildas is held among British records," but believes him, instead, to be the author of an entirely different early British chronicle—the *Historia Brittonum*, normally attributed (both then and now) to the later chronicler Nennius. Prise's extensive work with manuscripts lead him to the discovery of a version of the *Historia Brittonum* (now Hereford Cathedral MS P.V. 1) bearing an inscription, "written in red ink, like this: 'The beginning of the History of the British, composed by Gildas the Wise'."[27] Prise championed this work, even against the objections of Leland, as the work of Gildas.[28] The crucial difference between the two chronicles lies in the fact that, while *De Excidio* never mentions Arthur, the *Historia Brittonum* does. If Prise, conveniently, wishes the source that corroborates his argument to have been written by Gildas, he believes that the same is true of his scholarly opponents: "One

[25] John Prise, *Historiae Britannicae Defensio* (*A Defense of British History*), ed. and trans. Ceri Davies (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, 2015), 247.
[26] Ibid., 161.
[27] Ibid, 201; See also xlvi, n. 146, and 296, n. 13.
[28] Ibid., 201; On the attribution of the *Historia Brittonum*, Prise writes: "Leland thinks that Nennius, whoever he may have been, was the author of this book," 207. Whether there ever was such a person as Nennius has been disputed, but most historians from the Middle Ages onward have seemed content that, even if nothing else is known of his identity, "Nennius" should serve as shorthand for "the author of *Historia Brittonum*." So, while modern scholars share the same assessment as Leland the *Historia Brittonum* was written by "Nennius," they also echo Prise's "whoever he may have been."

might also mention the fact that the book which is currently circulating under Gildas's name is totally silent about Arthur: this, of course, is Polydore's recent doing, for he made sure that the book was printed with Gildas's name on it, all in order to add to the strength of the case against Arthur."[29]

Prise's title, *A Defense of British History*, suggests the importance of Arthur to Prise's conception of British history. Though it literally refers to a defense of the chronicle histories of the early Britons as a legitimate source of historical information (as opposed to records left by Romans or later, the Saxons), it also suggests that an attack on Arthur's authenticity is an attack on British history itself. His complaint against Polydore Vergil is that his work "has despoiled Britain not only of Arthur […] but also of its entire history."[30] For Prise, Arthur *is* British history. There can be no British history without Arthur. In a personal anecdote, uncharacteristic of Tudor historical writing, Prise describes the motives that first induced him write his *Defense*:

> When I, for my part, read in the British records, and then in Gerald of Wales, that it was commonly repeated, even in Gerald's time, that Gildas had previously made some references which redounded to the glory of Arthur but that he had then suppressed them on account of the murder of his brother Howel [Huail] perpetrated by Arthur, and that he then divulged and broadcast other things which were not so laudable about him, I confess that I found welling up inside me a huge longing to see for myself at least some of Gildas' own writings. So, with a greater degree of curiosity than usual I set about searching through the most ancient libraries of this realm.[31]

This "welling up" of emotion, and the "huge longing" to lay his hands on some authentic piece of writing that would fill what he believed were the missing gaps in Gildas's account, illustrate the powerful desire for a historical Arthur still felt by some in the sixteenth century. Prise's search for this "missing" Gildan material, though inevitably unsuccessful, lead him to find the

[29] Ibid., 207.
[30] Ibid., 11.
[31] Ibid., 201.

Nennius manuscript misattributed to Gildas. Like the fruitless attempt by so many to find Geoffrey of Monmouth's "very old book in the British tongue," the search for Gildas invokes the romance of the lost book, and the hope of its rediscovery.

Prise's impassioned declaration illustrates the emotional stakes of the Arthur question for early modern readers and helps to explain both the presence of Gildas in *The Misfortunes of Arthur* and his actions in that play. Even as the belief in a historical Arthur was rapidly declining, such that one of *Misfortunes'* actors could write so dismissively of him just two decades later, some people evidently still craved one. The play makes no attempt to discredit Gildas (the author of *De Excidio*, as everyone but Prise recognized him to be) as a mere "fabler." Nor does the play dramatize any of the implausible yet highly dramatic reasons alleged by earlier scholars for his failure to mention Arthur. The sight of Gildas gathering all the Arthurian documents he could amass and flinging them into the sea, as Prise read in Gerald of Wales' vivid account, would surely have been an effective stage gesture.[32] But the play does not seize the occasion afforded by its fictionality to dramatize this or any similar explanation for Gildas's perceived omission.

Instead, the play has Gildas speak aloud the words that Arthurian partisans so badly wished he had written. The historical Gildas and the stage-Gildas present inverse, or photo-negative versions, of each other. If the play never shows him doing the one action that he famously achieves (i.e., writing a chronicle), it also *does* show him doing, and with gusto, the one thing that he equally famously *never* does. The stage Gildas not only mentions Arthur, but, like Prise, makes him the pivotal figure of British history—the man on whom all British history,

[32] For this conjecture in Gerald of Wales, see *The Description of Wales,* in *The Itinerary through Wales and The Description of Wales*, ed. Ernest Ryhs (New York: J. M. Dent & Co., 1912), Bk II, Ch. 2, pg. 191: "Upon the same occasion [Gildas] threw into the sea many excellent books, in which he had described the actions of Arthur." Hence, "no authentic account of so great a prince is any where to be found." The story of Gildas' brother is also found in the twelfth-century saint's life of Gildas by Caradoc of Llancarfan.

from Brute onwards, depends. The play gives us what Prise sought, but never found—a statement by Gildas on Arthur and his legacy. In *The Misfortunes of Arthur,* Gildas says there can be no more British history without Arthur. This is also what Prise says, though in a different way, when he accuses Polydore Vergil of "despoiling" British history by removing Arthur from it. His speech dramatizes the nonexistent Arthurian passage absent from *De Excidio Britanniae*—the passage that so many British antiquarians of the sixteenth century evidently wished had been there.

Showing Gildas overwrought with grief, the play suggests an explanation no other historical scholars suggest concerning a reason for Gildas's failures to record Arthurian material. Far from destroying the evidence out of personal rancor towards the king, in this retelling, Gildas is so overwhelmed by Arthur's death that he despairs of any future heir to Arthur's chronicled legacy. Though he recognizes Arthur's death as the crucial, defining moment of his age, Gildas is able to do nothing but emote: "Let euery signe, that mournefull passions worke, / Expresse what piteous plightes our mindes amaze" (4.3.3-4). The attitude that renders him useless as a historical chronicler at this moment is also what makes him effective as a character in a stage tragedy. Seeking "expresse" the outward "signe[s]" of "mournefull passion"—to become, in effect, the human embodiment of the tragic mask—he perfectly meets the dramatic requirements of his situation. The play does what drama is uniquely qualified to do in representing a spontaneous emotional response bound within a particular moment in time. It also provides an emotionally plausible rationale for Gildas's omission. His speech fills a conspicuous and much-debated gap in the historical record, ventriloquizing a figure who (on this issue at least) had always been troublingly silent.

Counterpoint: History Beyond Arthur

While Gildas sees Arthur's death as the end of British history, his interlocutor Conan understands it as a recreated point of origin. Through his words, the play affords a glimpse of a larger historical picture—a version of British history that includes Arthur, but extends past him rather than ending with him. Conan's response to Arthur's death makes a direct and unambiguous appeal to the future reception of this narrative: "When *Fame* shall blaze these acts in latter yeares / And time to come so many ages hence / Shall efts report our toyles and *Britysh* paynes" (4.3.26-28). He does not contradict Gildas as to the enormity of the day's events, but gestures toward a hope that there will be an audience to receive this narrative with some sense of investment or ownership in Arthur. Conan praises Arthur as the "sole delay of *Fates*" (4.3.37), implying that destruction of the British people was inevitable, merely postponed by Arthur's greatness. Arthur may, at this point, be a Hamlet without a Horatio to tell his story, but that does not preclude the hope that a future Horatio might emerge someday. Conan does not specify, of course, how these later peoples might access to the story he hopes they will retell; the labyrinth of historical and literary byways through which the Arthur narrative descends to the early modern period are not important at this moment in the play. Instead, Conan forecasts that, "when perhaps our Childrens Children reade, / Our woefull warres displaid with skilfull penne," they will be moved to pity—then "*Arthurs* cause shall still be fauour'd most" (4.3.29-35). This prediction, of course, has already come true. The future audience for Arthurian history that Conan images is, as the dramatists very well know, present and assembled at the time of this performance. The potentially self-flattering mention of the "skilfull penne" gestures to the future storytellers, up to and perhaps including the present moment. Whether or not Arthur's cause is "fauour'd most" might be debated, since his legacy had been under renewed attack for the past

half century—or at least perceived to be. The fact that this is the only Elizabethan play about Arthur suggests that, on stage at least, other stories are more favored, either by playwrights, or audiences, or both. The remark seems to allege a claim rather than state a recognized fact.

But if not the Britons, then who would this new audience of Arthurian enthusiasts be? The audience envisioned by Conan looks remarkably like the Elizabethans watching the play, at least in terms of ethnic composition. Gildas earlier alluded to the ethnic groups that he feared would overrun the Britons, including Saxon, Scotts, and Irish Kerns (4.3.14-16). Conan also specifies certain ethnic groups with prophetic accuracy: "Let *Saxons* now, let *Normans*, *Danes* and *Scottes* / Enioye our medowes, fieldes, and pleasant plaines: / Come, let vs flye to Mountaines, Cliffes, and rockes" (4.3.46-48). Let these groups prosper on British soil, Conan says, while the remnant of Britons retreats into a landscape that seems to resemble Wales. There are evidently no hard feelings towards this new hybrid race that will occupy most of the island, and by extension possibly inherit Arthur's legacy. In this view, Conan and perhaps the dramatists themselves, resemble the newly-rich Major General Stanley in *The Pirates of Penance* who believes that, when he purchases the stately home of a déclassé aristocratic family, he also acquires all ancestors buried on the grounds—as though geography confers genealogy. The inclusion of the Normans here is especially telling, since it singles out a European ethnic group not remotely on the English mind of the fifth and sixth century, but which would become immensely relevant five hundred years later. Conan's final word on the matter— "Our leisure serues to thinke on former times, / And know what earst we were, who now are thus" (4.3.52-53)—serves as an open invitation to historicize. If Gildas does not go on to write an Arthurian chronicle, then someone else will.

Paradramatic Historical Commentaries: The Chorus and the Dumbshow

As characters within the play, Gildas and Conan show how the same unfortunate event, Arthur's death, can serve as both the end point and the beginning point of a historical epoch. But how is this event interpreted from theatrical perspectives outside the main action of the play? Both the moralizing Senecan chorus that concludes each act, and the elaborate masque-like dumbshows that begin each act comment on the events of the play from a historical vantage point not available to the characters within it. These two inverse theatrical forms (one, all speech and no action; the other, all action and no speech), divide the play into discrete units by pausing the events of the main narrative—forming short interludes between the acts that are a part of the play, if not a part of the plot.

The different style of commentary offered by the chorus and dumbshows is conditioned by the affordances of each of these theatrical modes. Both are designed to reveal the meaning of the main action of the play, but each demands different responses from the audience. In pronouncing a brief moral assessment of what has passed in the preceding act, the chorus is primarily concerned with "tidying up" the action—presenting the audience with a readily packaged analysis of the scenes they have just watched. The chorus creates a sense of providential inevitability, making the audience a passive witness to both the events of the play and their stated moral significance. The dumbshows, by contrast, present a wordless and surreal allegorical spectacle in which symbolic characters and objects pass across the stage, thereby forcing the audience into the role of hermeneut—trying to solve the living riddle presented to them on stage. In this active position, they supply the missing half of the scene; presented with these arcane spectacles, the spectators must decode the meaning themselves.

In consequence, while the chorus limits or distils the potential meaning of historical events, the dumbshows amplify their potential for varying interpretations. The first narrows, and the second expands. Looking at each of the five acts individually suggests a progression of analysis or interpretation that moves from open and broad, to narrow and rigid. Each act begins with the obscure spectacle of the dumbshows, and ends with the seeming tidiness of the chorus, but this structural neatness is undermined by the contrast of the juxtaposed choruses and dumbshows in performance, even as the chorus that ends each act is followed immediately by the dumbshow that begins the next. Presented in this order, the dumbshows destabilize the simplistic version of history declaimed by the chorus, presenting instead an array of interpretive possibilities that the chorus' sententious order can never wholly explain.

It is worth noting that both the chorus and the dumbshows (along with the vengeful ghost, discussed in the following section) are among the play's most overtly Senecan features, and place this work squarely within the English Senecan revival of the late Elizabethan period. Considerably critical attention has been paid to the way these elements announce the play's Senecan-ness.[33] Rather than discuss them in these terms, however, I examine the chorus and dumbshows as vehicles for historical commentary—alternative ways to historicize the content of the play, juxtaposed with the presence of the chronicler.

The Chorus as Didactic Moral History

Coming at the end of each act, the chorus calls attention to specific events of the preceding dramatic action and announces lessons to be taken: "Lo here the end that Kingly pompe imparts" (3.31), follows a scene of Arthur's mental suffering brought on by his royal responsibilities. "Lo, here the end that *Fortune* sends at last" (5.1) glosses the great ruler's inevitable death. Addressed

[33] See Ribner, 229-31.

directly to the members of the audience collectively— "Ye Princely Peeres" (2.1)—and perhaps inevitably to one royal audience member in particular, the chorus frequently presents advice to the great and powerful in epigrammatic form. Many lines seem ready-made for quoting in commonplace books. Advising against ambition, for example, the chorus warns: "Loe; heauing hie is of so small forcast, / To totter first, and tumble downe at last" (2.13-14). This tendency towards epigram aligns the chorus with the early modern fondness for wisdom literature or *sententii*. The parody of this genre found in Polonius's advice to Laertes— "neither a borrower nor a lender be" (1.3.74), etc.—speaks to the popularity of this form of writing, both in general and also, evidently, among certain types of readers and writers in particular. If the educated, middle-class authors of *The Misfortunes of Arthur* resemble Gildas and Conan, they also share many of the same demographic characteristics of Polonius himself.

Seeking to express transhistorical truths, these choric utterances connect past with present by extrapolating the moral lesson illustrated by the former, and relevant to the later. This passage from the chorus at the end of Act I, following Guenevora's confrontation of her lover Mordred following news of Arthur's imminent return to England, connects the action of that scene to the conventional wisdom that traitors never prosper:

> Whiles *Arthur* warres abroade and reapes renowne,
> *Guenevora* preferres his sonnes desire.
> And trayterous *Mordred* still vsurpes the Crowne,
> Affording fuell to her quenchlesse fire.
> But Death's too good, and life too sweete for thease,
> That wanting both should taste of neither's ease. (1.13-18)

Here the chorus is at pains to connect the wicked behavior of the characters with the just punishment they will inevitably receive—or at least, that they deserve. Mordred and Guenevora have both sinned against their lord (Mordred through his rebellion, Guenevora through her adultery); their present misery and inevitable death is brought upon themselves.

How accurate the analysis by the chorus may be, however, is another question. This chorus reminds the spectators how Guenevora betrayed her husband, and instead "prefers his son's desires," adding that "*Mordred* still vsurpes the Crowne, / Affording fuell to her quenchlesse fire." But though the queen did initially betray Arthur, the chorus's pronouncement seems not to have taken into account Guenevora's remorse and unequivocal rejection of Mordred in the previous scene: "Suppresse for shame that impious mouth so taught, / and to much skild t'abuse the wedded bed" (1.4.62-63). The reference to her "quenchlesse fire" that Mordred "still" fuels even echoes Guenevora's earlier rebuke to Mordred: "Why dost thou still stirre vp my flames delayde? / He strayes and errors must not moue my minde" (1.4.37-38). She has already used the same metaphor, but to the opposite effect of what the chorus alleges after the fact. Moreover, to say that "Death's too good, and life too sweete for thease" (e.g., Mordred, Guenevora, and possibly Arthur as well) does not square with Guenevora's actual end. She makes no further appearance on stage, and the only reference to her eventual fate appears in the stage directions of the dumbshow at the beginning of Act I, reminding us of "*the remourse and dispaire of* Guenevora," who "*tooke a Nunrie for her refuge*" (First Dumbshow, 18-19). By the time this first chorus has spoken, its assessment of events is no longer current or else fails to engage with the action of the play as it has just occurred. It seems more important that a morally efficacious and ethically defensible statement be made, rather than one that accurately reflects the complexity of Guenevora's situation.

In emphasizing the universal certainty of death and the uncertainty of fortune, the chorus aligns its vision of history with the medieval *de casibus* tradition of historical tragedy—reflecting on the downfall of great and powerful men in order to reveal the transcendent moral truths that the particular cases (*casibus*) illustrate. Despite being one of the more overtly Senecan

features, at least in terms of dramatic form, the chorus articulates what John Lydgate announces the reader could expect to find in his *The Fall of Princes* (1438)—that "noon so hih in his estat contune / Fre fre thawaityng [free from thwarting] & daunger of Fortune."[34] The *de casibus* genre was in fact, already ripe for pastiche, if not outright parody, half a century before Lydgate, as seen in Chaucer's *Monk's Tale*. The Monk, as he tells the other pilgrims, intends to "biwaille in manere of tragedie / The harm of hem that stoode in heigh degree."[35] In so doing, he ranges over the ruin of a number of great men of different ages and nations—from Julius Caesar, to Chaucer's contemporary, Pedro of Castile. The theme for all is the same:

> For certein, whan that Fortune list to flee,
> Ther may no man the cours of hire withholde.
> Lat no man truste on blynd prosperitee;
> Be war by thise ensamples trewe and olde.[36]

When good Fortune choses to abandons a man ("list to flee"), he can do nothing but endure his fate. The reader is therefore advised to be warned by these morally illustrative "ensamples," both "trewe and old." The Clerk's invocation of Fortune, as the governing agent of tragedy and the unconquerable antagonist of the great, finds echo both in the chorus— "Prowde Fortune ouerhippes [bypasses] the saffest Roades" (3.43)—and in the play's title. The connotation of Fortune or Misfortune in all three cases carries a sense of providential inevitability. The word "misfortune" in *The Misfortunes of Arthur* captures this same sense of preordained catastrophe, and the play's chorus echoes sentiments that would not seem out of place in the mouth of Lydgate's poet-narrator nor Chaucer's Monk: The "end that Kingly pompe imparts" (3.31), as

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[34] John Lydgate, *The Fall of Princes*, ed. Henry Bergin. Early English Text Society (Washington: The Carnegie Institute, 1924), Book I, lines 62-64, 2-3.
[35] Geoffrey Chaucer, *The Canterbury Tales* in *The Riverside Chaucer*, 3rd Edition, ed. Larry Benson (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1987), *The Monks Tale*, lines 1991-92, 241.
[36] Ibid., lines 1995-98.

the chorus reminds us, is the same end shared by common man. “That sithence death must once determine all / His life may sooner flie, than *Fortune* flitte” (5.28-29).

Though *de casibus*, with its emphasis on transhistorical moral truths and the inevitability of death, is its dominant mode, the chorus also occasionally slips into a mode of historical analysis concerned with the specific details of early British history, and in particular, early British ethnic conflict. The chorus that ends Act IV, following Gildas’s bleak sense of complete cultural collapse and Conan’s measured optimism, introduces a third perspective in this debate. We might say, the chorus continues the conversation where these two men left off, but with the benefit of hindsight, looking back at the historical events of the play from without. At first, the chorus voices the straightforward, nationalistic commonplace that foreign enemies could overwhelm the British, only when they had been first weakened by treachery and degeneration from within. Only “When Brytaine so desir’d her owne decaie” could the force of “so many nations” eventually “tumble down and quite subvert her state,” (11-15). In this, we hear an earlier version of Gaunt’s lament in *Richard II:* “That England, that was wont to conquer others, / Hath made a shameful conquest of itself” (2.1.65-66)

In the lines that follow, the chorus’ perspective stretches forward across the intervening span of time between Arthur and Elizabeth, inviting Elizabethan members of the audience to recognize some shared connection between themselves and the inhabitants of Arthurian Britain represented on stage.

> Would gods these warres had drawne no other blood,
> Than such as sproong from breasts of forreine foes:
> So that the fountaine, fedde with chaungelesse course,
> Had found no neerer vents for dearer iuyce.
> Or if the *Fates* so thirst for *Brytish* blood,
> And long so deepely for our last decaie:
> O that the rest were sparde and safe reseru'd,
> Both *Saxons*, *Danes*, and *Normans* most of all.

> Heereof, when ciuill warres have worne vs out,
> Must *Brytaine* stand, a borrowed blood for *Brute*. (4.25-34)

Imagining the ethnic composition of Britain in the centuries to come, the chorus proposes what it evidently believes would be an ideal state of national affairs—that the race of ancient Britons might survive perfectly intact: "Would Gods these warres had drawne no other blood, / Then such as sproong from breasts of forreine foes" In this scenario "the fountaine," of British blood, "fedde with chaungelesse course," continues uninterrupted. However, the Elizabethan audience knows that this is not, in fact, what happened. Monocultural Britain was long ago replaced by a succession of invaders leading to the modern English. Therefore, if the destruction of the ancient British race was, in retrospect, inevitable— "if the fates so thirst for British blood"—the chorus proposes an alternative: "O, that the rest [i.e., the non-British] were sparde and safe reseru'd. / Both *Saxons, Danes,* and *Normans* most of all." The reference to the Normans, reiterating Conan's earlier mention of them (4.3.46), stands out, especially given the remoteness of their relevance to this moment in British history—their invasion occurring roughly halfway between the time of Arthur and the time of Elizabeth. The result, however, is a "borrowed blood for *Brute*" rather than the "fountaine, fedde with chaungelesse course" envisioned at the start of the chorus. This choric vision of British history states more explicitly than the allusion by both Gildas and Conan—the idea that future success of the British race depends on the intermingling of native Britons with all the abovenamed invading groups. The modern Elizabethan is a composite that includes the ancestry of the ancient Britons as well as commingled Saxons, Danes, Normans, and other groups that followed. This genealogy makes the modern English inheritors of the Arthurian legacy, even if they are not literally his British descendants. The threat of ethnic extinction is belied by the audience's awareness of their own presence, as members of the audience believe themselves, to varying degrees, to be the progeny discussed. If

not the literal descendants of the ancient Britons, then they are at least the inheritors of Arthur's legacy.

Relying on this self-awareness, the chorus prompts the audience into a specific response through didactic explanation of the events of the preceding act and their moral or historical significance. The effect is always to narrow the potential meaning of the events and guide the audience into particular interpretive channels. But whether interpretation offered by the chorus reflects universal moral truths or a highly specific nationalistic perspective on the ethnic heritage of the spectators' ancestors, the audience is always made the passive recipient of the chorus's explanation. No interpretive work is required since the chorus has already made its pronouncement.

"Inexplicable" Dumbshows as Historical Prophesy

In contrast to the tidy packaging of the chorus, which performs the temporal and nationalistic interpretive work on behalf of the audience, the dumbshows instead demand historical interpretation. They invite the audience to participate in the process. They convey history in an affective mode, soliciting an emotional and dialectical response very different from the response solicited by the chorus, from the discussion between Gildas and Conan at the end of the Act IV, and from the contemporary historical discussion between historians like Polydore Vergil and John Leland.

Hamlet's derisive reference to "inexplicable dumb-shows" (3.2.12) in his advice to actors has, according to Jeremy Lopez, become so frequently quoted by scholars as to "over-determine" early modern criticism on this topic.[37] But whether or not dumbshows are, as Hamlet complains,

[37] Jeremy Lopez, "Dumb show" in *Early Modern Theatricality*, ed. Henry S. Turner (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), Lopez, 291.

always indecipherable, at the very least they are designed to require deciphering. The dumbshows in *The Misfortunes of Arthur* provide a highly symbolic form of theatre in which a wordless spectacle of nameless allegorical or semi-allegorical figures (defined by their costumes, stage props, and actions) convey information about the characters and events of the play. Deiter Mehl hypothesizes that the dumbshows in this play were included to contrast the "static and rhetorical" nature of the spoken scenes, and "provide some lively spectacle on stage."[38] Though they do provide spectacle, the dumbshows more importantly offer an additional dramatic medium through which the events of the play can be represented, and hence another way to reach the audience. Figures and actions in these dumbshows do not reveal the literary identity of the characters nor the material substance of their behavior, but rather their symbolic values. Consequently, they offer a mode of storytelling that is deliberately obscure, placing the audience in the role of interpreter.

One example illustrates this fact. The close of Act II shows Mordred rejecting the terms of peace offered by Gawain, who then exits to convey the news to Arthur. In the dumbshow following, the paragraph of stage directions specifies that first "two gentlemen attyred in a peaceable manner" lay a banquet. Next "two gentlemen apparelled like Souldiers" place "two naked Swordes" on the table. Finally, "two sumptuously attyred and warrelike" men enter and partake of the banquet, until receiving "certainne letters" from a messenger. After reading the letters, these two "furiously flung the banquet vnder feete, and violently snatching the Swordes vnto them, they hastily went their way" (Third Dumbshow, 2-14). The dumbshow ends.

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[38] Dieter Mehl, *The Elizabethan Dumb Show: The History of a Dramatic Convention* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1966), 53. Mehl takes a dim view of this play as a whole, stating that, though generally "less static and rhetorical then *Gorbuduc*, it must still have been rather weak and unexciting on the stage"—hence it was "the purpose of the dumb shows to counterbalance the undramatic dullness of the spoken scenes," 53. This theory does not explain why, if the dramatists felt that the work was "weak and unexciting," they chose to correct this defect, not by changing the writing of the play itself, but by adding short bursts of contrasting material between the acts.

What is to be made of this strange scene? Stage directions in the printed script make the matter clear: "By the first two that brought the banquet was meant the seruaunts of Peace, by the second two were meant the seruaunts of Warre: By the last two were meant *Arthur* and *Cador*," Arthur's father-in-law, the Duke of Cornwall (Third Dumbshow, 15-17). For those reading the play, no work is required to decipher this sequence of actions, but the audience at the original performance must have been left to puzzle it out. Even if the broad meaning is clear (bad news spoils a good feast), there is no reason why Arthur and Cador's identities should be obvious. The action at the start of the next scene gives some clue, as we see Arthur and Cador reacting to news that Mordred has rejected their peace overtures, but this dialogue only clarifies the dumbshow's meaning in retrospect.

What makes this specific dumbshow especially curious is that its message could easily have been expressed by characters in spoken dialogue. Two men hear news brought by a messenger and react. The inclusion of the banquet adds an extra degree of resonance, since it invokes the recurring Arthurian trope of the interrupted feast. But this *festus interruptus* could easily have been staged as part of the main action of the play, one that already provides actors depicting Arthur and Cador. The encoding of their characters as these dumbshow figures makes their identities deliberately opaque. If the main action of the play already exists at one degree of removal from the historical Arthur (had he ever existed), and several more degrees if we count the numerous historical and literary byways through which the story was passed before it reached Hughes and company, then the dumbshow provides an additional layer of theatrical artifice and hence an additional degree of removal from the play's historical subject. As the stage directions specify, the two "sumptuously attired and war-like" men are not the Arthur and Cador of the rest of the play, but rather by these two men "*were meant* Arthur and Cador." But of course, by the

actor playing Arthur in the main action of the play *is meant* the Arthur of alleged British history. The entire play is an artistic representation, but the dumbshow is a play-within-a-play, or perhaps in this case a play-without-a-play.

The dumbshows add an extra layer of separation between historical subject and artistic object. They indicate a deliberate choice on the part of the dramatists to convey this information in symbolic rather than representative terms.

One possible explanation for this style of symbolic theatre is that it invokes similar representations of Arthur in other royal court entertainments. The dumbshows in *The Misfortunes of Arthur* resonate with the masques, triumphs, and royal shows produced both by and for Tudor monarchs from Henry VII onward, in which Arthur appeared as a frequent figure. During a royal progress in 1498, for example, citizens of Coventry greeted Henry VII's son Prince Arthur with "a show of the Nine Worthies"—the prince's namesake principal among them.[39] Princess Katherine of Aragon was first welcomed to London as Prince Arthur's betrothed by a pageant in which St. Katherine and St. Ursula invoked Lydgate's concept of a "stellified" Arthur, in which the king was transformed into the star Arcturus at the time of his death, and set in the heavens to watch over England.[40] Under Elizabeth, the entertainment that the Earl of Leicester produced for the queen's stay at Kenilworth in 1575, provided an immersive and ongoing display of pageantry; moving about the castle grounds throughout her fortnight's visit, Elizabeth was greeting by a succession of costumed figures from classical mythology, native folklore, and chivalric romance including Merlin and the Lady of the Lake.[41] Invoking this tradition, the dumbshows provide visually lush, iconographic theatre, mustering in miniature the

[39] Elisabeth Michaelsson, *Appropriating King Arthur: The Arthurian Legend in English Drama and Entertainments, 1485-1625* (Uppsala: Uppsala University Library, 1999), 49.
[40] Ibid., 50-52
[41] Ibid., 71-83.

kind of allegorical pageantry associated with these royal entertainments—as well as the power underwriting them. Their description in the stage directions suggests that the dumbshows may have been fairly elaborate. Though the production budget for this individual play is is not known, the budget for the complete series of eight plays performed at Greenwich that Shrovetide was generous, as befitting its venue and audience.[42] The presence of the dumbshows between acts shifts the play into an elevated style that the authors deemed to be appropriate to their royal spectator. Though no one watching at Greenwich could have been likely to forget the presence of their royal hostess, the dumbshows nevertheless provide further reminder to the audience that they are watching a royal pageant—that is, a play of and for royalty.

Above all, the dumbshows call upon the audience to act as interpreters, deciphering the symbolic figures and their actions. Of five dumbshows in *The Misfortunes*, the one preceding the final act not only provides the opportunity for the most lavish spectacle, but also references the Galfridian historical tradition most overtly. Perhaps not coincidentally, it is also the most difficult to decipher without the explanatory stage directions. This dumbshow presents "foure gentlemen, all in blacke" each carrying a symbolic object or number of objects in one hand, and a "target" or shield in the other (Fifth Dumbshow, 1). One gentleman carries "the trunchion [shaft] of a speare an Helmet, an arming sworde, a Gauntlet, &c" (Fifth Dumbshow, 4-5). Another bears "a siluer vessell full of golde, pearles and other iewels" (Fifth Dumbshow, 11-12). The stage directions explain that the former represent the *Trophea*, or trophies of war; the other represents the *Spolia*, or spoils (Fifth Dumbshow, 5, 13). The decoration of the shields

[42] Brian Corrigan, in the introduction to his edition of the play, reports that "the total expenditure for Christmas and Shrovetide that year amounted to 184 pounds 6 pence, which suggests lavish spectacle", 14. A further suggestion about props and costumes comes from a reference in the records of the Revels Office to performances that Shrovetide "by the Children of Poles her Ma*iesti*es owne servants & and the gentlemen of grayes In on whom was Inployed diverse remna*n*ttes of Cloth of goulde other stuffe oute of the Store" (Feuillerat, 378; quoted by Corrigan, 14). As with the budget, it is not clear whether the cloth was given only to the members of Gray's Inn, or to both of the preceding groups.

themselves are more complicated, and therefore create the opportunity for more complex and varied interpretation by the audience. A gentleman holding "a *Pyramis* [pyramid] with a Lawrell wreath about it, representing victorie" also carries a shield decorated "with this device":

> A man sleeping, a snake drawing neere to sting him, a Leazard, preuenting the Snake by fight: the Leazard, being deadlie wounded, awaketh the man who, seeing the Leazard dying, pursues the Snake and kils it, this written aboue, *Tibi morimur.* (Fifth Dumbshow, 20-26)

Complicated as it is, the shield gives interpretive help where it is least needed. If there is any aspect of this image that does not warrant further explanation, it is the fact announced by the Latin declaration, "We die." Rather, what is immediately striking about this description is the difficulty of conveying this information pictorially on a shield. The sequence of events, including the order in which they occurred and motives of each of the figures involved, seems challenging to encapsulate in a static image. This shield performs a kind of dramatic compression, presenting—perhaps like a comic strip—a complex sequence of events graphically on a two-dimensional surface. Events are flattened, both in space and into a single moment. What this shield essentially seeks to portray is a scene. It has multiple characters performing multiple actions across a duration of time. It has a beginning, a middle, and an end. Ironically, this elaborate stage prop exists within an artistic medium ideal for depicting scenes—namely, a play. The dumbshow seems to be going out of its way to convey dramatic information in complex and counterintuitive ways. For readers with access to a printed edition of the play (either now, or when it first appeared in 1587), the meaning of this image is explained by the stage directions: All of this signifies "Gawin, king of Albany, slain in Arthur's defense by Mordred, whom Arthur afterwards slew" (Fifth Dumbshow, 26-27) It seems highly unlikely, however, that this interpretation could have been clear to audience members watching the play in its performance at

Greenwich. If the image itself may be absorbed more quickly than a staged combat, the same cannot be said of the time required to decipher the meaning of the image. Rather, this paraded visual series represents a version of history that demands the audience to act as detective.

The symbolic language of these images draws heavily on one of the key aspects of the Galfridian tradition, and one of the most relevant to the Tudors' claims of Arthurian ancestry—the prophesies of Merlin. Hotspur's complaint in *1 Henry IV* that Glendower detained him "some nine hours" with talk of "the dreamer Merlin and his prophecies" (*1H4,* 3.1.146-52), suggests the level of cultural currency the prophesies still had in Elizabethan England—if only as a touchstone for British (or Welsh) legendary history. If the Welsh Glendower hopes to position himself as a latter-day Merlin—claiming, among other things, that he can "call spirits from the vasty deep" (3.1.52)—Hotspur's complaint about the prophesies parallels Hamlet's about dumbshows: namely, their incomprehensibility. Understandable or not, however, the prophesies represent one the *Historia Regum Britanniae*'s most enduring elements. With an entire book of the *Historia* devoted to them, the prophesies ostensibly narrate the events of the remainder of chronicle and beyond, but do so primarily in the form of unexplained beast-allegory. They present a vision of history in which, for example, a Heron lays three eggs "and from them shall emerge a Fox, a Wolf, and a Bear. The Fox will devour its mother and then put on an Ass's head."[43] Or: "A man shall wrestle with a drunken lion, and the gleam of gold shall blind the eyes of the onlookers."[44] There is no explanation as to what future events these images refer to. In other instances, the level of symbolic coding is varied, as with the oft-mentioned "Boar of Cornwall" (undoubtedly Arthur), who will "bring relief from these invaders" and conquer an

[43] Geoffrey of Monmouth, *The History of the Kings of Britain*, ed. and trans. Lewis Thorpe. (New York: Penguin, 1966), 179.
[44] Ibid., 184.

unambiguously referenced Rome: "The House of Romulus shall dread the Boar's savagery."[45] Here, we have a mixed prophesy in which a symbolic entity interacts with a definite being. In contrast to these statements of pure or mixed allegory, predictions of clear and unambiguous events occur only rarely: "Cadwallader shall summon Conanus and shall make an alliance with Albany."[46] This mention of Cadwallader, the last of the kings chronicled in Geoffrey's *Historia*, calls attention to the fact that, since Geoffrey himself is recording these prophesies from his future vantage point centuries later, he already knows what will happen. It is therefore possible to image a version of the prophesies in which an uncannily prescient Merlin provides a brief allegorical summary of all that follows in the rest of the chronicle, only to be proven right again and again.

As well as their form, placement of the prophesies within the narrative structure of the *Historia* resembles the position of the dumbshows within the dramatic structure of *The Misfortunes of Arthur*. The prophesies are something of a set-piece in the *Historia*. In order to provide Merlin's predictions in full, Geoffrey pauses his narration of the chronicle at a particularly dynamic moment. Acting on the boy Merlin's inspired advice, Vortigern orders the excavation of the land surrounding his collapsed tower, revealing the Red and White Dragons slumbering beneath. As they awaken and begin their deadly battle, "breathing out fire as they panted," Vortigern urges Merlin to prophesy further, whereupon "Merlin immediately burst into tears. He went into a prophetic trance and spoke."[47] For modern readers, the extensive list of prophesies that follows seems an odd digression, as if the spectacle of two freshly-unearthed, fire-breathing dragons locked in deadly combat were not enough to hold the attention of

[45] Ibid., 172-73.
[46] Ibid., 175
[47] Ibid., 171.

Vortigern and all watching—or, for that matter, reading about it. In a narrative interjection, Geoffrey even offers an apology to his readers, stating that he initially had not planned to include the prophesies in his history, but was urged to do so "from all sorts of places," by "people of my own generation," chief among them, Alexander, Bishop of Lincoln.[48] At their insistence, he claims, the prophesies are inserted into the body of the chronicle at the exact point at which Merlin ostensibly speaks them. This mention of the bishop's request for their inclusion, along with Vortigern's request within the narrative for Merlin to speak them at all, calls attention to the artificiality of the prophesies as a piece of writing. They do not, strictly speaking, form part of the official narrative of the chronicle. Instead, they provide a kind of play-within-a-play in which the *Historia* shifts into a more heightened, artificial mode of representation—just as the dumbshows do in *The Misfortunes of Arthur*.

Similarly, appearing at the start of each act, the dumbshows offer a prophesy for the following scenes. Rather than reflect on what has already taken place in dramatic terms, they prefigure what is to come—even if the exact significance of that prefiguration is not clear at the time. They do not, as some critics have suggested, merely provide a dramatic shorthand by which action can be conveyed quickly and efficiently, through concise gesture.[49] As we have seen, the signs in these dumbshows are anything but concise. On the seemingly extraneous nature of many Elizabethan dumbshows, Jeremy Lopez asserts that most plays that contain them would be perfectly clear without—and, in fact, "might be considerably *more* legible" without them, "for we would not have to explain if and how particular dumbshow actions […] are re-presented in

[48] Ibid., 170.
[49] Mehl, 23, 52.

the main action."[50] With their symbolic encoding, and their ambiguous relationship to the rest of the play, they potentially make the work as a whole more difficult, not easier, to understand.

How then might the play's spectators interpret these dumbshows, live in the moment of performance, without the benefit of the printed stage directions? The prophesies of Merlin provide a model for this kind of prophetic interpretation. By the time Merlin finishes and the narrative action of the *Historia* resumes, the first of his prophesies (that the White Dragon will kill the Red) has already been fulfilled: "Alas for the Red Dragon, for its end is near. Its cavernous dens shall be occupied by the White Dragon, which stands for the Saxons whom you [Vortigern] invited over. The Red Dragon represents the people of Britain, who will be overrun by the White One."[51] In this instance, Merlin interprets the real (if spectacular) events of the moment as prophetic of future events. A pair of dragons battling to the death offers a powerful omen, even if its significance is not obvious. So, Merlin provides a gloss or interpretation, both for his listeners at Vortigern's tower and for the readers of Geoffrey's chronicle, demonstrating the method by which the remainder of his prophesies are to be interpreted. As Kimberly Bell notes, Merlin "demonstrates the proper way to read for Geoffrey's audience. Through his actions, Merlin instructs Geoffrey's readers on understanding his own prophesies, and, in a larger sense, the *HRB* as a whole."[52] Were all of his prophesies as explicit as "Cadwallader shall summon Conanus," the rest of the *Historia* would be superfluous. By contrast, the above-quoted prophesy in which "a Fox, a Wolf, and a Bear" emerge from three Heron's eggs, for example, prompts readers to consider which figures in the remainder of the chronicle have the symbolic

[50] Lopez, 300.
[51] Geoffrey of Monmouth, 171.
[52] Kimberly Bell, "Merlin as Historian: in *Historia Regum Britannie*," *Arthuriana*, 10:1, Spring 2000, 18.

value of a heron, a fox, a wolf, or a bear. The pleasure of such interpretation lies in the obscurity and complexity of the prophesies themselves.

It is precisely this emphasis on symbolic, as opposed to literal, meaning that invites readers to engage with the rest of the *Historia* on a symbolic rather than a literal level, and makes the prophesies engaging and attractive to readers. The dumbshows in *The Misfortunes of Arthur* invoke this mode of symbolic history. The episode depicted on the shield in which the lizard saves the sleeping man from the serpent uses the same mode of historical representation as the prophesies. If the combination of individual beasts does not appear in any of Merlin's actual prophesies, then at least it would not have looked out of place among them. Geoffrey's Arthurian history provides this mode of historical narration and interpretation, but audience members need not be intimately familiar with the *Historia*, with Merlin's prophesies, or this precise vocabulary of allegorical beasts, to recognize what is happening on stage—either with the images painted on the shields or the dumbshows more broadly. The key provided by the stage directions may give precise meaning, but it is not necessary for spectators to interpret meaning in order to understand the significance of what is presented.

In dramatizing a key element of the Galfridian tradition that would be otherwise unstageable, the dumbshows provide a vision of history in which figures are represented by their symbolic value rather than their literal identity. This suggests that history, or certain types of history, can best be understood in symbolic terms—that people and events are never simply themselves, but rather they embody enduring archetypical qualities. Just as, in the previous chapter, Bale was unable to separate the abstract concept of Sedition from the historical Stephen Langton (or vice-versa), the dumbshows reveal a version of history in which, for example, Mordred is represented by a serpent, and Arthur is represented by a sleeping man. Like Bale,

Hughes fuses these abstract mystical presentations of fantastical animal prophesy to the historical imagination of the dumbshows. The effect of representing this on stage is to shock the audience into an awareness of the myriad potential meanings of the historical persons and events of the play—to dazzle them with history's interpretive possibilities. The stage directions give one interpretation, just as the chorus does at the end of each act, but in the moment of performance, the dumbshows, like Merlin's prophesies, are open to any number of interpretations. They unravel the orderly significance of the adjacent chorus a moment before. The cumulative effect of these juxtapositions is that the play repeatedly provides one historical possibility, then immediately undermines it by presenting a different model from a different perspective.

Exit Ghost: A History Lesson for Queen Elizabeth

> OLD WOMAN: King of the who?
> ARTHUR: The Britons.
> OLD WOMAN: Who are the Britons?
> ARTHUR: All of us… we are all Britons. And I am your king.
> OLD WOMAN: I didn't know we had a king.[53]

Monty Python's twentieth-century dialogue reflects several of the sixteenth-century concerns articulated in this chapter: unease about Arthur and his perceived legitimacy as a British king, as well as anxiety at the loss of shared cultural identity. But for Hughes and company, unlike the members of Monty Python, these issues are not a fit subject for comedy. An Elizabethan might well ask, "Who are (or were) the Britons?"—an ethnic group overrun by the Saxons a thousand years before. And yet, antiquarian Jonathan Prise and dramatist Thomas Hughes both suggest that Englishmen and women of the sixteenth century might still access a shared sense of community from a shared early ancestry. If they cannot claim "we are all Britons," they are at

[53] *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*, dir. Terry Gilliam and Terry Jones (EMI Films, 1975).

least the nearest thing to them that survives. Like the romance of the lost book that drove Prise to search for the "missing" writings of Gildas, *The Misfortunes of Arthur* appeals to a romanticized sense of genealogical descent—the idea of having sprung from an ancient and glorious ancestry, now vanished from the world, but potentially alive in its modern descendants.

The Misfortune of Arthur is not unique in this regard; since the earliest days of the Tudor reign, others had made similar rhetorical gestures. As Jean Howard and Phyllis Rackin point out: "Invoking the legendary names of Brute and Arthur, Tudor historians produced fables of ancient descent and providential purpose to validate a new dynasty's claim to the English throne."[54] *The Misfortunes of Arthur* seems specifically calculated to appeal to royal tastes in its sense of history and genealogy. Elizabeth herself, after all, again in the words of Howard and Rackin, "traced her heritage to a Welsh grandfather who had turned to the dim mists of Welsh antiquity to buttress his tenuous genealogical authority, incorporating the red dragon of Cadwallader into the royal arms, and naming his eldest son Arthur."[55] Prise, in the *Defensio*'s dedicatory letter to Elizabeth's brother Edward VI, alludes to this heritage: "Your majesty's lineage descends not only from the famous and most illustrious kings of England and France, but also from the most ancient and distinguished stock of British kings. These are like streams flowing together from different springs to create one river of the greatest beauty."[56] Edward's English subjects, Prise says, may be satisfied by the Tudor union of the houses of York and Lancaster, but "the old Britons long for a king descended from their ancient princes, and in you they find that very person."[57] Counting himself, as a Welshmen, among the "old Britons," he describes how the

[54] Jean E. Howard and Phyllis Rackin, *Engendering a Nation: A Feminist account of Shakespeare's English Histories* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 46.
[55] Ibid., 168.
[56] Prise, 29
[57] Ibid., 29

ancient racial or ethnic divisions of Arthur's Britain have only recently been healed. "Even after their ruination," he asserts, "the Britons never willingly submitted to English rule, not until they acquired a prince of their own nation: I mean Henry the Seventh, who was indubitably descended from the royal stock of their own princes."[58] The "ruination" of the ancient Britons, variously treated by Gildas in the sixth century and in the dialogue and chorus of *The Misfortunes of Arthur* in the sixteenth, is mitigated in Prise's description by a surviving remnant of that race (the contemporary Welsh, if not the English), still alive and waiting to be revived in some sense by the restoration of a native king. And even if a certain amount of flattery may have been appropriate in a royal dedication, Prise's confessed "great longing" to recover lost documents to be used in "defense of British history" indicates that this is not mere expedient hyperbole.

To say that Henry VII was the first English monarch since Arthur to whom the Welsh ever "willingly submitted," is to establish the beginning and the end point of a remarkably long-lasting historical period. Prise alludes to a *longue durée* of historical absence. The previous chapter observed how Bale's *Kynge Johan* created a three-hundred-year "Catholic bracket" between the reigns of King John and Henry VIII. For Prise and for the authors of this Galfridian tragedy, a similar bracket exists between the death of Arthur and the ascent of the Tudors (in this case, a thousand-year non-British bracket). This periodization of British history both echoes and contradicts Geoffrey of Monmouth's own twelfth-century version of the Arthur story; his *Historia* is at pains to establish the conquering Normans as the legitimate descendants of the ancient Britons and their champion Arthur, thus ending the non-British bracket five hundred years before the arrival of the Tudors. The Norman Conquest is less a conquest in his conception than a restoration. In the history lesson provided by *The Misfortunes of Arthur*, however, his

[58] Ibid., 161

restoration is postponed until the author's present moment, reiterating Henry VII's claim that the Tudors were heirs of Arthur's lost lineage. Rather than merely healing the recent divisions of York and Lancaster, they also heal the divisions of Britons, Saxons, Danes, Normans, and the various other groups mentioned throughout the play.

At the play's close, an additional theatrical device shifts the focus to one further historical perspective, explicitly casting Elizabeth's England as the continuation of Arthur's Britain. The play ends with a speech by the ghost of Gorlois, the cuckolded and murdered husband of Igerna, subsequently Uther's wife and Arthur's mother.[59] In most Arthurian accounts, Gorlois stands as a symbol for Uther's sin at Arthur's conception, and therefore his first appearance in Act I seems fitting for the start of a revenge tragedy. Beginning the play with a long speech, part prologue and part precis of prior Arthurian history, the ghost explains that he has risen from the infernal regions to wreak revenge on the "*Brytaines* and *Pendragons* race" (1.1.26) for the wrongs inflicted during his lifetime. Following this first visitation, the ghost disappears from the play until the close of the final act, following the deaths of Arthur and Mordred and the destruction of Britain. This complete, his thirst for vengeance is finally satisfied— "blood is quit with blood" (5.2.3). But Gorlois's speech is to some extent belied by the very presence of the spectators watching the performance. Gorlois may have achieved his revenge against "*Brytaines* and *Pendragons* race," but the audience has already been invited to think of themselves—and may have already thought of themselves—as Arthur's descendants. Some, in the tradition of Geoffrey of Monmouth, may take this as literal truth, in the belief that Arthur was a historical figure, and

[59] The play assumes its audience's familiarity with the circumstances of Arthur's conception as they appear in Geoffrey and indeed in most other versions: Uther, aided by Merlin, takes on the likeness of Gorlois in order to lie with Gorlois's unsuspecting wife. Arthur is thereby conceived and the luckless Gorlois, killed in a skirmish mere hours before the event, leaving Igerna conveniently unattached and free to marry Uther, the father of the child she now carries.

hence that ancient Britons are ancestors. Others may interpret this metaphorically, in a mode of thinking more aligned with the symbolic dumbshows, holding themselves to be the cultural inheritors of his legacy, not distant blood relatives of his subjects.

The remainder of Gorlois's speech tries to resolve this potential cognitive dissonance. Rather than ending the play in customary Senecan fashion with a final curse, the ghost instead delivers an unexpected benediction to the spectators and to the English state. Turning attention from the past to the future, the ghost envisions a time "when many yeares and ages are expirde" (5.2.19), in which "some glorious starre must shine," whose "beames shall clear the mist of miscontent" (5.2.18-20). Gorlois vows he will never again rise from "*Plutoes* pit" (5.2.21) to plague Britain further, since –

> *Britaine* then becomes an Angels land
> Both Diuels and sprites must yield to Angels power,
> Vnto the goddesse of the Angels land.
> Vaunt *Brytaine* vaunt, of her renowmed raigne. (5.2.23-26)

The purpose of Arthur's reign, by this account, is to lead ultimately to the reign of Queen Elizabeth. The ghost, presumably one among those malevolent "Diuels and sprites," now surrenders the realm of Britain from his own tragic influence to the mastering overlordship of its new "goddesse." The transformation of Britain into England, the "Angels land," alludes to the well-known story related by Bede in which Pope Gregory, punningly noting the "angel" faces of the enslaved Angle boys for sale in a Roman market, resolved to Christianize their homeland of England.[60] This transformation from Britain to England may have occurred centuries prior in historical reality, but the wording of the ghost's speech seems to suggest that it has occurred only recently, under the auspices of the current queen. Like Prise, the ghost also periodizes a non-

[60] Bede, *Ecclesiastical History of England*, trans. A. M. Sellar (London: London, George Bell and Sons, 1907), Bk II, Ch. 1, 82

British bracket of time between Arthur and the Tudors, eliding the thousand years between Arthur and Elizabeth into the space of three lines.

If the play does not affirm the historicity of Arthur, it does establish Elizabeth as his legitimate heir, firmly asserting her place within the created historical framework. This invocation of Elizabeth and her power at the end of the play reminds her guests at Greenwich what they can hardly have forgotten: that they are watching this play in the royal presence. As Stephen Orgel points out, at court entertainments, "what the rest of the spectators watched was not a play but the queen at a play, and their response would have been not simply to the drama, but to the relationship between the drama and its primary audience, the royal spectator."[61] Given the play's Arthurian content, the connection must have been unmistakable, with the ostensible living descendant of the character on stage seated among them. Not merely Gorlois's final speech but the entire play seeks to reveal the relationship between King Arthur and Queen Elizabeth. The dramatists, as previously stated, resemble Gildas and Conan—not just in their backgrounds and expertise, or their desire to advise their monarch, but in their impulse to construe the events of the play in terms of their significance to British history. A play may prove an entertaining and therefore acceptable vehicle by which to deliver unsolicited advice to a monarch. But the history lesson offered by this play gives more than mere advice concerning good and bad rules as illustrated by historical ensamples. This play shows Elizabeth her relationship to past history—her place in the ongoing story of Britain.

Despite its chronicle source and engagement with ongoing historical debate, the play ultimately does not attempt to make the case for a historical Arthur. It does not put forth evidence in the same way the Polydore Vergil and John Leland do in their battle of books.

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[61] Stephen Orgel, *The Illusion of Power: Political Theater in the English Renaissance* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1975), 9.

Instead, the play is concerned with Arthur's enduring cultural value at the end of the sixteenth century. For Hughes and company, Arthur's death represents a lost dream of imperial expansion for an England ruined by civil war. Arthur could have conquered Rome if he was not called back to Britain by Mordred's treachery. *The Misfortunes of Arthur* presents a version of Britain's early history in which, rather than conquering other nations, absorbs those foreign nations into itself—and through this process laid the foundation to one day become Elizabethan England.

Reassuring as this is, the play is never content, even in its final moments, to allow one possible interpretation to take precedence over others. Though Gorlois speaks the final word of the play, his description of ancient conflict happily reconciled, is starkly contrasted by the subsequent epilogue, delivered by an unspecified member of the company. Following his exit, the epilogue summarizes the action of the play in the most tragic possible terms. "See here," it notes "the many mockes of life," the "easelesse brunts and broyles, / that man abides," but "most of all," the "sighes: the grones: the feares: the hopes: the hates: / The thoughts and cares, that Kingly pomp impartes" (Epilogue, 1-9). With its gesture towards summary, and its emphasis on the inescapable suffering and death of kings, no sooner has the ghost finished his benediction, the epilogue returns the play to the mode of *de casibus* moralizing found in the chorus. But here, the epilogue articulates a position that is more overtly *de casibus* than anything expressed by the chorus, surpassing even the fatalism of Gildas at the end of Act IV. Not only are the "crests of glorious Crownes" (24) subject to misfortune, but all men: "Youth tends to age, and age to death by kinde. / Short is the race, prefixed is the end, / Swift is the tyme, wherein mans life doth run" (46-48). One moment, the play praises, even deifies Elizabeth as the national savior, delivering her country from crises fully a millennium old. The next, it provides an uncompromising reminder that royal responsibilities bring care and suffering, and that all people, royal and

common alike, share the same inevitable fate. The juxtaposition is jarring, to say the least. But this final, disorienting gesture only follows the pattern that *The Misfortunes of Arthur* has established from the beginning. Hughes and his collaborators offer a composite version of early British history through varied dramatic gestures: the ventriloquizing of a medieval authority famously silent on Arthur; the narrow, rigid moral analysis didactically announced by the choruses; the encoding of historical events in symbolic pageantry; and the surprising volte-face of a once-vengeful ghost who blesses the descendants of his earthly enemies.

Each of these theatrical modes solicits a different response from the audience. None, ultimately, is given priority, or is established as the play's predominant mode of historical representation—whether nostalgic, nationalistic, aphoristic, mystical, prophetic, or conciliatory. Nevertheless, while all these forms comfortably co-exist within the same play, *The Misfortunes of Arthur* resists the idea that Arthurian history is simply whatever one makes of it or is an Arthurian "what you will." Rather, all these theatrical forms argue for Arthur's continued importance as a culturally unifying figure—for both sixteenth century English subjects and their reigning Tudor queen. By 1587, belief in an historically credible Arthur (even the Arthur of the chronicles) no longer held the power it once did. But whether or not Elizabeth is literally descended from the legendary king, or whether her guests at Greenwich are descended from the early Britons, his subjects, *The Misfortunes of Arthur*, through its varied use of dramatic form, asserts his importance as a unifying national symbol, linking modern England with her medieval past.

Chapter 3
Offstage Histories: Medieval Herod Plays and Cary's *The Tragedy of Mariam*

Hamlet's oft-quoted complaint that a particular style of histrionic overacting "out-Herods Herod" (3.2.14)[1] shows that King Herod, though long dead, was still alive and well in the early modern imagination—and in particular, in early modern theatre. "To see a robustious, periwig-pated fellow tear a passion to tatters, to very rags" (3.2.8-10), Hamlet claims, is to be reminded of this particular king. Hamlet's line refers to Herod not as a figure in ancient Jewish or Roman history, but as an enduringly popular character on the late-medieval stage—a ranting, cartoon tyrant written to project an exaggerated menace across the open-air playing spaces of populous medieval cities. The *Slaughter of the Innocents* plays, depicting Herod's massacre of the children of Israel in his attempt to destroy the newborn Christ (related in Matthew 2:1-18), provided medieval and early modern audiences a representation of stage villainy at its most manic and scenery-chewing extreme.

Elizabeth Cary's *The Tragedy of Mariam* (likely written 1602, published 1613) remediates the history of Herod as a closet drama—intended either for individual reading or salon-style private performance in a coterie setting, and representing a sequence of events within a single, indoor space.[2] The first original English drama known to be written by a woman, the play adapts the traditions of both medieval performance stereotypes and early modern chronicle history, revealing the innovative artistic and historical sensibilities of its aristocratic author,

[1] William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, ed. Ann Thompson and Neil Taylor, Arden 3, revised edition (London: Bloomsbury, 2016.)

[2] Elizabeth Cary, *The Tragedy of Mariam, The Fair Queen of Jewry, with The Lady Falkland: Her Life*, ed. Barry Weller and Margaret W. Ferguson (Berkely: University of California Press, 1994). All quotations from the play in this chapter reference this edition.

Elizabeth Cary, Viscountess Falkland. Both set and designed for consumption within a single, private, indoor space, the play depicts Herod's tyranny, not only of his kingdom, but also of his family—particularly his wife, Mariam—rendering her psychological suffering in subtle and poignant detail. Though *The Tragedy of Mariam* is unique among Cary's surviving works as her only play, it shows a close engagement with history that runs throughout her corpus. As well as a second, lost play set in ancient Syracuse, Cary wrote a chronicle history of the reign of King Edward II—a revisionist portrait of Edward's queen, Isabella, that circulated in manuscript form during Cary's lifetime, published only after her death.[3] Additionally, Cary's translation from the French of Jacques Davy du Perron's Catholic polemic, *The Reply of the Most Illustrious Cardinall of Perron* (published in 1630 and perhaps Cary's most widely read work during her lifetime) draws on both early church history and English medieval history in forming its arguments.[4] These three main surviving works—the play, the chronicle history, and the translation—reveal an author who was read in both manuscript and print during her lifetime, whose work draws on a wide range of English and continental history, and who was not afraid of controversy. As Heather Wolf observes, "allusions to her work by others suggest that she was deeply immersed in a variety of networks that transmitted literary and controversial manuscript texts."[5]

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[3] Reference to Cary's other play appears in John Davies's dedicatory verses to Cary prefacing his work, *The Muses Sacrifice* (London: T.S. for George Norton, 1612). He mentions that Cary has written "the Scenes of Syracuse and Palestine." The "scene" set in Palestine is, of course, *The Tragedy of Mariam*; the other work has never been found. On the complicated print history of Cary's *Edward II*, see Weller and Ferguson's Introduction to the edition of the *Tragedy of Mariam*, 12-17.

[4] On the use of historical material in *The Reply*, see Karen Nelson, "To Inform Thee Aright:'' Translating Du Perron for English Religious Debates," in *The Literary Career and Legacy of Elizabeth Cary, 1613-1680*, ed. Heather Wolfe. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 157-59.147-163, esp. 157-59.

[5] Heather Wolfe, "Introduction" to *The Literary Career and Legacy of Elizabeth Cary, 1613-1680*, ed. Heather Wolfe. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 1-14.

Cary's direct source for *The Tragedy of Mariam* is Thomas Lodge's translation of the works of the first-century Jewish chronicler, Flavius Josephus—an "erstwhile military leader," in the words of Beatrice Groves, "who had been captured by the Romans and defected."[6] Josephus's chronicles, *The Wars of the Jews* (*Bellum Judaicum*) and *The Antiquities of the Jews* (*Antiquitates Judaicae*), having enjoyed a steady European readership throughout the Middle Ages, also ranked among "the most popular texts of the European Renaissance."[7] The first English translation of Josephus's collected works, Lodge's *The Famovs and Memorable Workes of Iosephvs, a Man of Mvch Honovr and Learning Among the Iewes* (1602), placed the chronicler, in the words of Freyja Cox Jensen, "firmly within the canon of humanist historiography," as "part of a social program of translating the classics into the vernacular in large, expensive editions for an educated customer."[8] Despite the high cost of the printed edition, the translation rapidly became a best seller, running through twenty printings in the seventeenth century.[9] The account of Herod's reign presented by this chronicle is extensive, giving a broad perspective of Herod's numerous achievements, failures, and power struggles, both domestic and foreign. Cary's tragedy draws on a handful of scenes between Herod and Mariam described near the end of his reign—developing a nuanced dramatic narrative from material that, in the chronicle, is only briefly sketched.

Though Cary's use of Lodge's *Josephus* has been well established, less scholarly attention has been paid to the relationship between Cary's Herod and the Herod of medieval

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[6] Beatrice Groves, "'They represented at the preachyng of Ionas and beholde a greater then Ionas is here': *A Looking Glass for London and England*, Hosea, and the Destruction of Jerusalem," in *Early Modern Drama and the Bible: Contexts and Readings, 1570-1625*, ed. Adrian Streete (New York: Palgrave, MacMillan, 2012), 145.
[7] Groves, 145.
[8] Freyja Cox Jensen, "What Was Thomas Lodge's Josephus in Early Modern England?" in *Sixteenth Century Journal* 49, no. 1 (Spring 2018), 5-7.
[9] Erin E. Kelly, "Jewish History, Catholic Argument: Thomas Lodge's 'Workes of Josephus' as a Catholic Text," *The Sixteenth Century Journal* 34, no. 4 (Winter 2003), 993.

drama. In fact, Cary's representation of Herod draws on both traditions of this ancient king available to readers and playgoers in the early seventeenth century—the medieval stage tradition represented by the *Innocents* plays, and the early modern chronicle tradition represented by Lodge's new humanist translation. Cary's Herod retains many of the distinctive features of his medieval dramatic predecessor—his furious bombast, his deep-rooted suspicion and insecurity, and his tendency towards sudden, lethal violence. Crucially, however, her recontextualization of this character within the formal constraints of the closet drama, demonstrates how the tyrannic qualities that make Herod an unacceptable ruler also make him an unendurable husband. In drawing both on the *Innocents* plays as well as Lodge's translation, Cary's play asks: What happens when the Herod of the medieval stage comes indoors, both figuratively and formally, moving from the urban medieval playscape to the close generic and domestic confines of the early modern closet drama? What happens when this figure is shown not in his role as biblical monarch but in his role as husband, brother, and head of household? *The Tragedy of Mariam* remediates both medieval drama and early modern chronicle as closet drama, and in so doing, shifts the focus from Herod's administration of his kingdom to Herod's troubling home life.

Longstanding critical assumptions about the affordances and limitations of the closet drama form have undergone an upheaval of reevaluation in the past three decades. Mid-twentieth century critics (most notoriously, T. S. Eliot) tended to dismiss the closet drama as didactic, static, aesthetically reactionary, and anti-theatrical—contrasting what they saw as the vibrancy of Elizabethan commercial theatre with the literary efforts, in Eliot's words, of "shy recluses" attempting to "make head against the popular melodrama of the time."[10] In a critical revaluation beginning in the last decade of the twentieth century, scholars including Karen Raber, Marta

[10] See, T. S. Eliot, *Elizabethan Dramatists* (London: Faber, 1963), 43.

Straznicky, and Alison Findlay have explored the way that closet dramas, rather than being anti-theatrical, instead "elide the boundary between households and public spaces" in Raber's words, as texts that "interrogate their culture's investment in drama and performance."[11] Also remarkable for the "unusual number of women writers who adopt this dramatic genre," again as Raber notes, the closet drama is "the only dramatic genre in which women express *themselves* as opposed to being represented by male writers or male actors."[12] More recently, scholars including Lara Dodds and Michelle M. Dowd have further upended prior assumptions about the relationship between closet and commercial drama in nuanced readings of several closet drama plays—*Mariam* prominent amount them.[13] Dodds and Dowd argue that this play "resists any easy division between closet and professional drama," representing instead "a formal hybrid of different performance traditions."[14] As Dowd argues elsewhere, the play "evades any clear sense of distinction between stage and closet, public and private, theatrical and untheatrical."[15]

Certainly a "formal hybrid," *The Tragedy of Mariam* not only combines elements of early modern closet and commercial drama, but also, as this chapter examines, elements of medieval drama and early modern chronicle history. Situating Cary's work between these two versions of the Herod narrative reveals not how the play blurs the line between commercial and closet drama—but rather how it embraces and mobilizes the unique features that make closet drama as a form ideally suited to represent certain types of historical content. *The Tragedy of Mariam*

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[11] Karen Raber, *Dramatic Difference: Gender, Class, and Genre in Early Modern Closet Drama* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2001), 14, 13.
[12] Ibid., 13-14.
[13] For more on the history of closet drama scholarship from Eliot and his contemporaries to the present, see Daniel Cadman, "The Closet as Form and Theme in Cavendish and Brackley's The Concealed Fancies," in *A Companion to the Cavendishes*, ed. Lisa Hopkins and Tom Rutter (Arc Humanities Press, 2020), 242-43.
[14] Lara Dodds, Michelle M. Dowd, "Happy Accidents: Critical Belatedness, Feminist Formalism, and Early Modern Women's Writing," *Criticism* 62, no. 2 (Spring 2020), 180.
[15] Michelle Dowd, "Dramaturgy and the Politics of Space in The Tragedy of Mariam," *Renaissance Drama* 44, no.1 (Spring 2016), 101.

presents a compelling version of the Herod story, not because of the ways that it partially resembles commercial drama, but in the ways that it differs—in containing the entire action of the play within the limits of an interior domestic space, in conveying a sense of enclosure or confinement, and in focusing the action on private moments of historical significance rather than public ones.

The potential of closet drama as a form for dramatizing ancient chronicle history will be readily apparent by briefly contrasting Cary's play with a contemporary commercial tragedy also adapted from the recent humanist translation of an ancient chronicle. In Shakespeare's *The Tragedy of Julius Caesar*, the majority of the play takes place in outdoor or public spacing—the streets of Rome, the Capitol, the battlefield at Philippi. The only scenes set in private homes are, not coincidentally, the only ones that represent private conversation between husband and wife. The outcomes of the conversations, the play makes clear, have repercussions on the events that follow. In the second act, as Brutus contemplates the intended assassination of Caesar, his wife Portia grows apprehensive of her husband's increasingly erratic behavior and "ungentle looks" (2.1.241).[16] Attempting to convince him, throughout the scene, to share whatever is troubling him— "Make me acquainted with your cause of grief" (2.1.255)—she is repeatedly rebuffed with vague and transparently false excuses: "I am not well in health, and that is all" (2.1.256). Repeatedly asking why she has been made to "Dwell," as she phrases it, "but in the suburbs" of her husband's "good pleasure" (2.1.284-85), Portia at length articulates to her husband that his reasons for excluding her are precisely the reasons he should confide in her: "I grant I am a woman; but withal / A woman that Lord Brutus took to wife" (2.1291-92). Telling Portia, "Go in awhile; / And by and by thy bosom shall partake / The secrets of my heart" (2.1.303-05), Brutus

[16] William Shakespeare, *Julius Caesar*, ed. David Daniell. Arden 3 (London: Bloomsbury, 1998).

appears to end the terrible impasse of the scene, but in fact never acts on this promise. The scene calls into question how Portia's influence might have had an impact on her husband's involvement in the ensuing havoc of the play, but the conversation simply fails to take place.[17]

Portia appears only once again on stage (2.4). Hoping to forestall whatever conspiracy her husband part of, she vacillates in the street in front of their home before resigning herself to do nothing: "I must go in" (2.4.40). Her most memorable action in the remainder of the play, however, occurs offstage. In the hurried activity on the eve of Philippi, Brutus remarks to Cassius, amid a number of other bulletins: "Portia is dead" (4.3.145). Fearing that she would be taken captive by the opposing forces, Brutus explains that "she fell distract" and, while her attendants were elsewhere, she "swallowed fire" (4.3.154). Despite Cassius's shock— "O ye immortal gods!"—Brutus stoically changes the subject: "Speak no more of her" (4.3.155-56). The intense psychological desperation required to drive someone to such a drastic course of action is, in Shakespeare's version, conveyed only by suggestion. Unlike Caesar, Brutus, Cassius, and others whose deaths are represented on stage, we are left to infer or imagine the full circumstances of Portia's death based only on Brutus's disconcertingly brief verbal footnote.

By raising the issue of Brutus's ability or inability to confide in his wife, the domestic scene suggests how private conversations within marriages have an impact on major historical events. Shakespeare's tragedy acknowledges this idea, but includes it only peripherally. A version of the play that restricts the action to Brutus's home, however, would provide a radically different representation of the same set of historical events. An inverted or photo-negative

[17] The scene is followed by a similar one (2.2) in which Caesar's wife Calpurnia famously warns him not to go to the Capitol. Eventually persuaded, if not by her ominous dreams, then at least by an excuse that will spare his ego— "Call it my fear that keeps you in the house," she tells him, "and not your own" (2.2.53)—Caesar then changes his mind again on the advice of a senator "come to fetch" him to the Capitol (2.2.59). Telling his wife, "How foolish do your fears seem now, Calpurnia! / I am ashamed I did yield to them" (2.1.105-06), Caesar instead follows the man who has, in fact, come to lead him to his death.

dramatization, privileging domestic space instead of public space, would place Portia at the center of the action, with Brutus passing only briefly in the scene on the way to the public sphere. Exploring the circumstances that lead to the failure of communication with her husband, this hypothetical *Tragedy of Portia* would show the trajectory from her anxious resignation ("I must go in") to her final choice of self-destruction by such extreme, shocking means—exceptional even in the diverse and eccentric gallery of Shakespearean deaths. Cary's play presents just such a thought experiment, shifting the focus from the well-known tyrant to his wife.

Before looking in detail at *The Tragedy of Mariam*, and in light of the importance this analysis places on both physical, psychological, and dramatic constraints of indoor space, it may be appropriate to note the material conditions under which the play was written. Elizabeth Cary wrote *The Tragedy of Mariam* at the age of seventeen while living in the family home of husband, Henry Cary, the future Viscount of Falkland, shortly after their marriage. According to Cary's early biography, *The Lady Falkland: Her Life* (written by one of Cary's daughters), the marriage was not a happy one, Henry having "married her only for being an heir."[18] With Henry Cary living mainly at court during the early years of the marriage, the household was overseen by Elizabeth's mother-in-law, Dame Katherine, Lady Paget—a woman, according to the *Life*, who "loved much to be humored," and who evidently found her daughter-in-law unwilling or unable "to apply herself to it."[19] As a result, the *Life* tells us that Dame Katherine

> used her [Elizabeth Cary] very hardly, so far, at last to confine her to her chamber; which seeing she little cared for, but entertained herself with reading, the mother-in-law took away all her books,

[18] Quotations from *The Lady Falkland: Her Life* are taken from the version included in Weller and Ferguson's edition *The Tragedy of Mariam*, 188.
[19] Ibid., 188-189.

> with command to have no more brought her; then she set herself to make verses.[20]

The *Life* makes no mention of *The Tragedy of Mariam,* but if current scholarly consensus on the play's date of composition is correct, then the play would appear to be one of the "verses" that Cary wrote to occupy her formidable mind during this period of forced confinement. Much scholarly debate has taken place, in the words of Alison Shell, regarding "the inexact but striking analogies between the personal circumstances of the heroine and the author" of *The Tragedy of Mariam,* and to what extent these analogies can or should feature in critical discussion of the play.[21] Nevertheless, in considering the ways that the play's domestic setting shapes not only its narrative content but also creates a pervasive atmosphere of close containment, it seems worth acknowledging that the play was written, in the imposed absence of other diversions, while Cary was forcibly "confined to her chamber."

This chapter will first explore the differences between the two Herodic traditions available to Cary in the early seventeenth century (the medieval dramatic tradition and the chronicle tradition) to demonstrate how both are essential to Cary's vision of this king. Drawing on both traditions to craft the ideal antagonist for her heroine, Cary's representation of the king is also distinct from both traditions in that it focuses more on Herod's tyrannical behavior as a husband than as a monarch. Situating this hybrid Herod within the confined domestic form of the closet drama, Cary's play shows how events in the domestic lives of kings shape royal histories no less than the public events of their reigns. Cary achieves this by triangulating our view of

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[20] Ibid., 189.

[21] Alison Shell points to two major phases of critical debate on this point: "The first, pointing out the inexact but striking analogies between the personal circumstances of the heroine and the author, has been succeeded by skepticism about the autobiographical readings of *Mariam.* […] While this is a level-headed and understandable attitude, the biography still keeps intruding itself into critical consideration." Shell articulates the third and current broadly-held critical position on this issue, asserting that "this need not be a bad or an ahistoric thing if one is careful to distinguish between the autobiographical and the autodidactic," 57.

Herod long before he appears on stage—establishing multiple perspectives of the king from various members of his household. Here, the closet drama form is ideal for representing private, intimate conversations and interior monologue. The effect differs drastically both from the politics of spectacle characteristic of medieval plays, and from the scholarly antiquarianism of humanist biblical or classical history. Cary's historical vision substitutes Mariam for Herod as the locus of historical events, showing how female resistance to male violence is itself a historical driver equal to male political power. As the play shifts focus in its final two acts from Mariam as a historical figure to the discussion of Mariam's historical reputation by others, the play shows the limitations of other forms of historical reporting; *The Tragedy of Mariam* shows that history, in its totality, includes more than the events that previous male chroniclers and playwrights have identified as history—not only public spectacle but also what takes place inside both rooms and characters.

Whose Herod? The Mystery Play Herod and the Humanist History Herod

Cary places Mariam at the center of the dramatic action, but her representation of Herod is essential to her heroine's tragic situation. Considerable scholarly attention has been paid to Cary's use of Lodge's translation in creating her play.[22] Critics have also noted the influence of medieval Herod plays on early modern drama in general, and particularly on Shakespeare's infanticidal tyrants, Richard III and Macbeth.[23] By comparison, relatively little attention has been

[22] In addition to Beatrice Grove's book chapter cited above, see Alison Shell, "Elizabeth Cary's Historical Conscience: *The Tragedy of Mariam* and Thomas Lodge's *Josephus*," in *The Literary Career and Legacy of Elizabeth Cary, 1613-1680*, ed. Heather Wolfe. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 53-67. See also Peter Auger, "Playing Josephus on the English Stage," *International Journal of the Classical Tradition* 23, no. 3, Special Issue: "The Reception of Josephus in the Early Modern Period" (Oct. 2016): 326-332.

[23] Scott Colley, "Richard III and Herod," *Shakespeare Quarterly* 37, no. 4 (Winter 1986): 451-58; R. Chris Hassel, "'No Boasting Like a Fool'? Macbeth and Herod," *Studies in Philology* 98, no. 2 (Spring 2001): 205-24.

paid to *The Tragedy of Mariam*'s indebtedness to the medieval Herod tradition.[24] Jonathan Gill Harris asserts that "Shakespeare stands alone among the major playwrights of the early modern London stage in making repeated reference to Herod"—or at least, "his cycle-drama incarnation."[25] When Herod does "make an appearance in the drama of Shakespeare's contemporaries, such as Elizabeth Cary's *Tragedy of Maryam*," Harris continues, "it is as a historical character lifted from the pages of Thomas Lodge's 1602 translation of Josephus' *Of the Antiquities of the Jews*, and unrelated to the pageant Herod."[26] Both of these traditions, however, are essential to Cary's representation of this historical king. The version presented by Lodge's translation derives from ancient Jewish and classical history and represents a strain of early modern humanist scholarship intended for an elite (or at least aspiring) audience of readers. The popular medieval tradition remained durable, though it was showing signs of wear by the end of the sixteenth century. In blending these two traditions, Cary's play creates a distinct, hybridized Herod able to meet the demands of the historical thought experiment presented by her play.

Medieval Herod: "Herod the King, in his Raging…"

In the medieval theatre tradition, Herod's character shows remarkable consistency across the six *Slaughter of the Innocents* plays that survive.[27] Each has its own distinctive features and draws on its own range of scriptural, historical, and literary sources. Theresa Coletti has demonstrated that "the path from scriptural text to biblical play was circuitous and it was crossed by historians

[24] For a concise acknowledgment of Herod's stage legacy at the time Cary was writing, see Weller and Ferguson's Introduction to their edition of the play, 22-23, and Pamela Bickley and Jenny Stevens, *Shakespeare and Early Modern Drama: Text and Performance* (London: Bloomsbury, 2016), 112-13.

[25] Jonathan Gil Harris, "'Look not big, nor stamp, nor stare': Acting Up in The Taming of the Shrew and the Coventry Herod Plays." *Comparative Drama,* Vol. 34, No. 4 (Winter 2000-2001), 375.

[26] Ibid., 375.

[27] These plays can be found in the cycles of Chester (Play 10, The Gouldesmythes Playe), Coventry (Play 1, Shearmen and Taylors), N-Town (Play 20), Towneley (Play 12, "Herodus Magnus"), and York (Pay 19, The Gyrdillers and Naylers), as well as the Digby manuscript's stand-alone Candlemas play of "The Kyllyng of þe Children of Iseaelle," all variously cited below.

and exegetes who filled out the biblical narrative"—historians including medieval chroniclers such as Ranulph Higden and from medieval copies of Josephus. [28] However, specific aspects of the king's personality are always represented. First, Herod's bombastic self-aggrandizement and readiness to inflict pain are established in the long, ranting speeches that open each of the plays: "Say noe man anythinge is his / but onlye at my devyce," he warns the audience in the Chester version, "for all this world lyes / to spare and eke to spill" (Chester 10.5-6).[29] Viewing his subjects as mere objects for his use, he also reveals delusions about the true extent of his power, believing his dominion stretches across "all this world." His sudden furious outbursts and tendency towards impulsive violence are sometimes played for comic effect; in the Coventry play, for instance, he is moved to narrate his own outraged stage gestures: "I stampe! I stare! I loke all abowtt! […] I rent! I rawe [rave]! *and* now run I wode!" (Coventry 1.779-81).[30] Sometimes his anger is played for graphic shock. His instructions to his soldiers in the N-Town version are particularly grisly: "Popetys and paphawkys I shal puttyn in peyne! / With my spere prevyn, pychyn, and to pende (N-Town 20.11-12).[31] And for the infant Christ specifically, he directs them: "Hewe the flesch with the bon / And gyf hym wownde!" (N-Town 20.29-30). "The attempt to designate Herod as 'comic' or 'tragic'," Coletti notes, "reflects the problematic construction of character in medieval drama and its resistance to categorization by the modes of

[28] On the sources the Herod plays, see Theresa Coletti, "Re-Reading the Story of Herod in the Middle English Innocents Plays," in *Retelling Tales: Essays in Honor of Russell Peck*, ed. Thomas Hahn and Alan Lupack (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1997), 35-59.

[29] That is, "the all the world lies at my pleasure, either to spare its life or spill its blood." *The Chester Mystery Cycle*, ed. R. M. Lumiansky and David Mills, EETS no. 1 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1974).

[30] *Two Coventry Corpus Christi Plays*, ed. Hardin Craig, EETS no. 87 (London: Oxford University Press, 1931).

[31] *The N-Town Plays*, ed. Douglas Sugano, TEAMS (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 2007), https://d.lib.rochester.edu/teams/publication/sugano-the-n-town-plays. Sugano glosses "Popetys and paphawkys" and "prevyn, pychyn, and to pende" as "*Children and suckling babies*" and "*test, pierce, and stab" respectively.*

theatre."[32] In most versions, however, he manages to embody both sides of this seeming dichotomy—a bloodthirsty, child-butchering monster as well as a ranting, delusional oaf.

In addition to a particularly scene-chewing stage villain, "the Massacre plays," in Coletti's words, also "communicate, through spectacle, the violent narratives that attend anxieties about future societies and families in specific communities."[33] In dramatizing the attempts of women of Israel to prevent the murder of their infant children, these plays represent various forms of female resistance to tyrannical oppression. "We women shalle make ageyns you resistens," the women of the Digby play straightforwardly tell Herod's soldiers, "After oure powere, youre malice to encumber" (Digby 303-04).[34] The practical details of "after oure powere" (in our own fashion, with what power we have) takes various forms, sometimes within the same play. The first woman in the Coventry play attempts to appeal to the soldiers' "curtessee," or at least their vanity, imploring "S*i*r knyghtes […] shame not youre chevaldre" (chivalry) with the unknightly murder of innocent children (Coventry 1.487-88).[35] When words fail, the women attack the soldiers physically—sometimes reaching a level of slapstick equal to Herod's manic clowning. A few lines after the earlier quotation from the Coventry play, another of the women attacks the soldiers with a "pot-ladull," declaring if any one of them attempts violence, "I schall make his braynis addull," and "ley on hym, a[s] thogh I wode were" (Coventry 1.863-66). One woman in the Chester play similarly urges her "gossippes" to "ley on" and not let the soldiers "depart / Tylle of your distavys ye haue tak part!" (Chester 10.346-48).

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[32] Coletti, "Re-Reading the Story of Herod in the Middle English Innocents Plays," 36f n.4.
[33] Theresa Coletti, "Society and Family," in *A Cultural History of Medieval Tragedy*, eds. Jody Enders, Theresa Coletti, John. T Sebastian, and Carol Symes (London: Bloomsbury, 2020), 120.
[34] *The Late Medieval Religious Plays of the Bodleian MSS Digby 133 and E Museo 160*, ed. Donald C. Baker, John L. Murphy, and Louis B. Hall, Jr., EETS no. 283 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982).
[35] *Two Coventry Corpus Christi Plays*, ed. Hardin Craig, EETS no. 87 (London: Oxford University Press, 1931).

The use of distaffs, ladles, and other "womanly geyre" (Chester 10.863-67) as improvised weapons illustrates a specifically feminine form of physical defense and retaliation.

These different forms of resistance, however, all have the same result, as slapstick and shock are turned inevitably into pathos. Brawling between the women and soldiers in Coventry play is followed by the poignant music—part lamentation and part lullaby—of the traditional carol that bears the city's name— "Lully, lulla, thow littell tine child […] For thi parting / Nether say nor singe, / By by lully lullay" (Coventry, Song II). In contrast to Herod's braying, the grief of the mothers is rendered in concise, simple language: "Alas, for shame and syn. / Alas, that I was borne. / Of wepyng who may blyn [cease] / To se hir chylde forlorne?" (Towneley 12.495-99).[36] The York pageant in particular represents the mother's grief in specifically gendered terms: "Allas, that we wer wrought / In a worlde women to be, / The barne that wee dere bought / Thus in oure sighte to see / Disputuously spill" (York 19.226-30).[37] To be "wrought" a woman and more specifically a mother "in this worlde," according to the York play, is to endure suffering at the hands of callous and sadistic men. This version of Herod's cruelty played on stage from the fourteenth through the sixteenth centuries is therefore not only cruelty against his subjects in general, but against women in particular.

Humanist Herod: "Distracted by Contrarie Affection"

In contrast to the medieval stage Herod, Lodge's translation of Josephus represents a more scholarly, historically-minded view of this ancient king—one that appealed to an elite audience of early modern readers. As a Jewish convert to Roman paganism, Josephus had long been

[36] *The Towneley Plays*, ed. Garrett P. J. Epp, TEAMS (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 2018) https://d.lib.rochester.edu/teams/publication/epp-the-towneley-plays.
[37] *The York Corpus Christi Plays*, ed. Clifford Davidson, TEAMS (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 2011).

praised by Christian writers for his apparently unbiased testimony of historical events also found in Christian scripture.[38] Writing in the first century CE for an audience of elite Romans, his work had subsequently been used and quoted throughout the following centuries, a recognized authority "within sacred history, as well as within the classical tradition" for "early modern authors and readers," cited by both Catholics and Protestants during the Reformation.[39]

Thomas Lodge's 1602 translation, *The Famovs and Memorable Workes of Iosephvs, a Man of Mvch Honovr and Learning Among the Iewes*, in Freyja Cox Jensen's words, "demonstrably constructed itself as a humanist offering, informed by existing conceptions of morality, [and] providing early modern readers the learning of the ancient past."[40] Before turning, in the words of Beatrice Grove, "from original compositions to a prodigious career as a translator," Lodge produced a copious and varied body of literary works.[41] Noted particularly for satires, his writings include the prose romance *Rosalynde* (1590, used by Shakespeare as a source for *As You Like It*), and a Josephan stage tragedy, *A Looking Glass for London and England* (1592), coauthored with Robert Green, and based on Josephus's account of the fall of Jerusalem. Jensen has demonstrated how the printed edition of Lodge's *Josephus* was a "luxury item," brought to press by a group of "heavyweights in the hierarchy of the Stationers' Company," responsible for the publication of works by other prestigious historians including William Camden and Samuel Daniel.[42] Though his translation falls comfortably within the Ciceronian and Plutarchian traditions of historical writing embraced by most humanist scholars at the close

[38] Groves, 145.
[39] Martin Goodman and Joanna Weinber. "Introduction: The Reception of Josephus in the Early Modern Period," *International Journal of the Classical Tradition* 23, no. 3 (October 2016). Special Issue: The Reception of Josephus in the Early Modern Period, 167. On the readership and use of Josephus's writing continuously from his lifetime through the early modern period, see Erin Kelly, 997-98.
[40] Jensen, 16.
[41] Groves, 141.
[42] Jensen, 11-13.

of the sixteenth century, Allison Shell has demonstrated that the work also distinguishes Lodge from his contemporaries. Lodge's translation asserts the value of reading history as a tool for moral instruction—not simply by illustrating good and bad example from history, but by providing the reader tools for rigorous introspection and self-examination.[43] Inviting readers to direct their gaze not at the historical subjects but inward upon themselves, the translation evinces a "Lodgean" philosophy of history—what Shell calls Cary's "historical conscience."[44]

Acquiring a broad readership despite the prohibitive cost of its printed copies, Lodge's *Josephus* proved a popular source for dramatists. At least three early seventeenth-century English plays use Lodge's *Josephus* as a direct source—*The Tragedy of Mariam,* Gervase Markham and William Sampson's *Herod and Antipater* (composed 1613, printed 1622), and William Heminge's *The Jewes Tragedy* (composed 1626, printed 1662, and depicting, like Lodge and Green's play thirty years earlier, the fall of Jerusalem). The chronicler himself even appears as the chorus and as a character in these latter two plays, respectively.[45] The popularity of chroniclers as prologues or other choric figures in plays (as discussed in Chapter 2 with regard to *The Misfortunes of Arthur*) rests on their familiarity—recognized for their authoritative knowledge of historical maters and their ability to mediate or narrate those events. Peter Auger has emphasized, however, that while "Josephus' name and works" were "recognizable to scholars and aristocratic women," they were evidently less so "to readers of printed plays," and perhaps not at all to "popular play house audiences."[46] When the printed edition of *Herod and Antipater* credits "*Iosephus, the learned and famous Iew"* on its title page, it makes an

[43] Shell, 53-67, esp. 53-55.
[44] Ibid., 53.
[45] Auger, 327.
[46] Ibid., 327.

aspirational claim by asserting the pedigree of its historical source.[47] "References to Josephus in the printed text, reinstating the classical basis for the play," in Auger's words, "were partly a matter of elevating its status as a Jacobean drama."[48] As well as in English drama, Josephus chronicles had also become a popular source for continental plays by the early seventeenth century. Herod himself appears as a central character in multiple European plays, including Alexandre Hardy's French neo-classical tragedy *Mariamne* (c. 1600) and the Latin-language *Herodes Infanticida* (1632) by Dutch writer Daniel Heinsius, among others. These plays, like Lodge's English translation, situate Herod within a broader framework of humanist antiquarianism. Even Heinsius's play, which uses scripture rather than chronicle as its main source, reworks its Biblical material with an eye toward Aristotelian tragic sensibilities—presenting, in the assessment of literary scholar Russ Leo, dramatic "tragedy as a rational alternative to theological speculation."[49]

Examining Herod's depiction in Cary's chronicle source, Lodge's *Josephus*, reveals a more neutral and dispassionate attitude towards the king as a historical subject than the medieval plays, partly blaming and partly excusing Herod's anger and violence. Josephus's chronicle—which, according to Biblical scholar Geza Vermes, provides "our best informed witness" to the reign of Herod—does not include the likely ahistorical Slaughter of the Innocents.[50] Instead, the chapters devoted to his reign provide a wealth of other information including Herod's rise to power, his confirmation as "King of Iury" by the Roman senate, his alliance with Mark Antony

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[47] Gervase Markham and William Sampson, *The true tragedy of Herod and Antipater with the death of faire Marriam. According to Iosephus, the learned and famous Iew. As it hath beene, diuers times publiquely acted (with great applause) at the Red Ball, by the company of his Maiesties reuils* (London: George Eld for Matthew Rhodes, 1622).

[48] Auger, 330.

[49] Russ Leo, *Tragedy as Philosophy in the Reformation World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), 9.

[50] Géza Vermes, *The True Herod* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2014), 99. For Vermes's full of assessment of Josephus's depiction of Herod's reign, see 98-102.

and successful renegotiation of his position with Octavius Caesar after Antony's fall, as well as his ongoing and frequently fraught relationships with members of his family.[51] In Lodge's translation, of the twenty-two chapters recounting the reign of Herod, there are two with particular focus on his relationship with his wife. With regard to Mariam, Lodge's *Josephus* represents Herod, similar to his appearance in the medieval plays, as a man "sweltered and devoured in his passions," though his motives in this account are more complex.[52] Lodge informs us that Herod was "as inwardly touched with lawful love of *Mariamme,* as any other of whom the Histories make report."[53] This "lawful love" was accompanied, evidently, by a more sinister and possessive feeling towards her, in that "he had left orders concerning her," that "if so be he should happen to die," she should also be put to death.[54] Like his medieval dramatic counterpart, Lodge's Herod is governed by brutal selfishness, but here his motives are more subtly rendered and more complex.

The dispassionate attitude adopted by Lodge's translation extends to the circumstances surrounding Mariam's death, and includes an apology for Herod's ultimate decision to execute his wife. When Mariam learns of Herod's command from the servant charged with carrying it out (one Sohemus), Lodge records that Mariam was "verie sore displeased."[55] As Lodge records: "nothing so grieved her, but that she had not any hope to live after him."[56] When she finally makes her displeasure known to Herod, he accuses her of adultery with Sohemus and, ironically, conspiring to have him killed. As Lodge explains, Herod's suspicions were motivated partly by

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[51] See Book 14, Ch. 17-28, and Book 15, Ch. 1-11 of *The Antiqvities of the Iewes* in Lodge's Thomas Lodge, *The Famovs and Memorable Workes of Iosephvs, a Man of Mvch Honovr and Learning Among the Iewes* (London: *G. Bishop, S. Waterson, P. Short,* and *Tho. Adams,* 1602),

[52] Ibid., 397.

[53] Ibid., 398.

[54] Ibid., 396.

[55] Ibid., 397.

[56] Ibid., 396.

false evidence brought against Mariam by his sister Salome (who had seized the opportunity to act on the "great enmitie and unrecoverable hatred betweene the Ladies") and partly by the conduct of Mariam herself.[57] Despite his affection for her, in Lodge's words, "yet had she a certaine womanly imperfection and naturall frowardnesse" (here, peevishness), and consequently, that she "presumed too much upon the intire affection wherewith her husband was intangled; so that without regard of his person, who had power and authoritie over others, she entertained him oftentimes very outragiously."[58] In consequence, Herod's "mind travailed between love & hatred" until, at the urging of Salome, he ordered Mariam killed.[59] Though certainly no hero in Lodge's *Josephus*, Herod is essentially a man "distracted by contrarie affection," rather than simply vindictive or sadistic.[60] Nor is he so blinded by personal feeling that he forgets his own interests as king; translation shows him first weighing the potential political consequences of his acting on his "displeasure," before ordering Mariam's death.[61]

The chronicle's moderate view of Herod is not shared by Herod's subjects, according to the chronicle's own report. Becoming convinced of Mariam's innocence only after her death, Herod first grew "miserably distracted," then fell "into a grievous sicknes," that caused him "in some sort to rave and waxe mad," eventually claiming his life.[62] Reflecting on Herod's descent into madness and death, occurring at the same time that the city is struck by plague, Herod's subjects see both occurrences as signs of divine displeasure: "each man interpreted that this punishment was inflicted by God upon men, for the unjust death of the Queene."[63] Though it

[57] Ibid., 398. NB: This is not Salome of John the Baptist and the Seven Veils, but rather an earlier relation of hers sharing the same name. Certain character traits seem to have become attached to the name, as the Salome in the later story bears a striking resemblance to her namesake in both Josephus and Cary.
[58] Ibid., 398.
[59] Ibid., 397
[60] Ibid., 397.
[61] Ibid., 397.
[62] Ibid., 399.
[63] Ibid., 399.

places this judgement in the mouths of the people, rather than asserting it as the opinion of the author, Lodge's *Josephus* points to the moral significance of Herod's death as a historical example.

Cary's historical vision in *The Tragedy of Mariam* draws on both traditions of Herod (the chronicle and the dramatic) available in the early seventeenth-century. Lodge's humanist history presents a calculated assessment of Herod's reign, followed by a moralizing final pronouncement in which the supernatural explanation for his death is placed in the mouths of Herod's subjects—even if their assessment is tacitly endorsed by the chronicle. Alison Shell calls *The Tragedy of Mariam*, "an unusually pure example of the creative writer's response to source material."[64] Shell is referring to the extent to which Cary's play echoes Lodge's philosophy of history—namely, that the "correct reading of history demands self-examination" on the part of the reader, "locating a parallel within oneself to every external circumstance history relates."[65] But the same is also true on the more basic level of the play's adherence to the sequence of events outlined in the chronicle. Certainly, *The Tragedy of Mariam* renders Lodge's narrative into dramatic form far more faithfully than, for example, any of Shakespeare's English histories that adapt their source material from Holinshed. Though Lodge is Cary's main source, her play nevertheless evinces an artistic debt to the enduring and widely dispersed dramatic tradition of the medieval stage Herod who remained a recognizable cultural reference point for Elizabethan and Jacobean readers and playgoers. Cary intentionally hybridizes Herod to make him the perfect antagonist for her heroine. Taking from Lodge the basic framework of the narrative and the suggestion of a historically plausible king, Cary reproduces the visceral malevolence and explosive, violent rage

[64] Shell, 55.
[65] Ibid., 54.

of the medieval stage tyrant. *The Tragedy of Mariam* is as much reinvention of a medieval dramatic narrative as it is an adaptation of an early modern historical one. Looking at Cary's play in close detail reveals that both traditions are essential to the vision of history presented by her play.

History as Closet Drama: *The Tragedy of Mariam*

As a hybrid of elements of both traditions, how does Cary's antagonist function within the work itself? Cary's depiction of Herod combines the menace and the absurdity of the medieval stage plays, with the sense of historical plausibility and basic narrative outline taken from Lodge. The combination presents a ranting, delusional bully whose mania might be comical were it not for the psychological suffering that he inflicts in this dramatic representation. In addition to borrowing from both traditions, Cary's vision also distinguishes itself from them in focusing on effects of Herod's domestic, rather than his national or political tyranny. Without making reference to the Slaughter of the Innocents, and relegating the public events of Herod reign to the periphery, Cary's play focuses on the violence within Herod's household—showing how domestic and political cruelty are telescopic versions of each other. Early modern closet drama, as a form, is ideally suited to represent the domestic politics of Cary's play. Conventionally prioritizing speech (particularly inner monologue) over physical action, and containing the events of the play within a single domestic space, the intimate, almost suffocating atmosphere of the play allows Cary's readers or auditors to see the king's large personality "up close."

While the term "closet drama" uses the early modern definition of the word "closet," meaning a private room within a home—as in Ophelia's "as I was sewing in my closet" (2.1.74)—it is not known what term early modern readers and writers of the form would have

used, if they even had a specialized label for this dramatic category. Whatever phrase was used, surviving examples of the form show a remarkable degree of consistency in their formal characteristics. Daniel Cadman concisely describes seventeenth-century closet dramas as a "group of neoclassical tragedies," sharing

> a number of common aesthetic features, including long rhetorical speeches, a lack of direct action, sententious commentary, and the inclusion of choruses, along with a range of stylistic features including apostrophe and stichomythia.[66]

Most importantly, however, closet dramas are written not for performance on the commercial stage, but for use within private, domestic settings—either as solo reading, "on book" recitations in small groups, or entertainment presented for an honored guest. Stephen Orgel notes that these plays are "generally explained as drama not intended for performance," but are also "more properly in this period, drama in private settings"—both set in and read or performed in a single room in a private home.[67] An intimate, private version of a genre typically written for public performance, as Marta Straznicky notes in her groundbreaking monograph on the form, the closet drama by its nature explores the tension between public and private matters.[68] Whether these plays were read alone, in a small group with no other audience present, or before a select, private audience, the various options for domestic performance blur the lines between reading and performance.[69]

The aspect of the closet drama form that is unattractive to writers of the professional or commercial theatre—namely, that performances earn no money for the author—is also what makes the form a socially acceptable form of literary expression for two groups: aristocrats and

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[66] Cadman, 243.
[67] Stephen Orgel, *Wit's Treasury: Renaissance England and the Classics* (Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2021), 133.
[68] Marta Straznicky, *Privacy, Playreading, and Women's Closet Drama: 1550-1700* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 1-2.
[69] For more on this blurring between reading and performance, see Straznicky, 9-11.

women. For Karen Raber, the "one defining situational characteristic" that unifies all early modern closet dramas is their "production" and "consumption within an aristocratic household."[70] As the artistic labor of the writer's leisure time, and adapted typically from erudite source material, these plays are crafted to appeal to elite tastes and not the demands of the popular market. Again, in Orgel's words, "an audience of readers or an amateur performance was all very well for aristocratic authors like the Countess of Pembroke and Elizabeth Cary, Lady Falkland"—however, "for writers without independent means or a generous patron, the acting companies paid much better than publishers of plays."[71] Their separation of closet drama from public, commercial theatre, made this an acceptable form of literary endeavor—and in fact the only acceptable form of dramatic writing—available to women. "Given the prohibitions against women writing and performing on the professional English stage," Dodds and Dowd have recently noted that "although many early modern men wrote closet dramas, the category has tended to be associated with female authorship in the period."[72] With these factors in mind, it could be easily argued that Cary's artistic options were already heavily proscribed when she set about dramatizing the material she found in Lodge—though it could just as easily be objected that such an argument appears to rest on certain assumptions of Cary's intentions, regarding either her play or herself as a writer. (Had she written purely to please herself, for example, she need not have observed any set of rules beyond her own inclinations.) Whatever considerations informed her choices, for all the reasons listed above, the closet drama form is ideally suited to represent the issues addressed in Cary's play: domestic power dynamics, female agency, and the conflict between private and public conduct.

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[70] Karen Raber, *Dramatic Difference: Gender, Class, and Genre in Early Modern Closet Drama* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2001), 34.
[71] Orgel, 133
[72] Dodds and Dowd, "Happy Accidents," 180.

The Tragedy of Mariam, therefore, is a play whose form enacts its own content. Where medieval Herod dramas stage national atrocities before crowds in open-air playing spaces, Cary instead presents the injuries and suffering that occur within a single household in a dramatic form that corresponds to her narrative material. Though the play is Mariam's tragedy, the characters are primarily concerned with Herod. Like the titular villain in *Tartuffe*, Cary's Herod does not appear until the play is half over; and yet, as in Moliere's farce, almost the entire first half of Cary's tragedy is devoted to the discussion of this yet-unseen character. Herod looms over the first three acts of the play before finally appearing in the fourth, acting as a moral catalyst for the other characters despite his absence. As members of Herod's family react to reports of his death (later proved to be false), the play illustrates the nature of Herod's cruelty by showing its effects on his family.

When the play begins, Herod is away from home. Cary appears to assume that her readers are as intimately familiar with Josephus's history as she herself—but for those who are not, the historical events that immediately precede the play are explained in the brief, prefatory "Argument." Following the death of his ally, Mark Antony, Herod travels to Rome, apprehending that Emperor Octavian will be "likely to make an alteration in his [Herod's] fortune."[73] If Herod's diplomatic mission succeeds, he will maintain his hold on local power; if not, he may be replaced as king, imprisoned, or even possibly killed. The latter, in fact, is the highly plausible false report that precedes his return. Seeking the "historical content" of the play, we might be inclined to look here. A tragedy in which recognizable figures from classical or biblical antiquity jockey for political power is familiar dramatic territory. This, as shown above, is primarily what we find in Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*. It is also essentially what Gervase

[73] Cary, "Argument," 67.

Markham and William Sampson provide in their aforementioned commercial tragedy, *Herod and Antipater*, adapting the same material that Cary found in Josephus.[74] But this is emphatically different from the circumstance that Cary presents in *The Tragedy of Mariam*. In Cary's play, all of the Roman history occurs on the periphery. In its place, the play imagines what is missing from the official account of Jewish and Roman history by representing what occurs among the members of Herod's household in his absence.

Herod as Domestic Tyrant

The power that Cary's Herod wields over his family members primarily manifests itself in his control of their marriages. This includes, naturally, his wife Mariam, but also extends to his brother, Pheroras, and sister, Salome. The triangulation of these family relationships reveals Herod's character even before he sets foot on stage.

To his younger brother Pheroras, Herod represents less of an obstacle to his frustrated political objectives than his frustrated romantic ambitions. Or rather, political power is the tool by which Herod is able to intrude on his brother's personal or domestic freedom. Pheroras greets the news of Herod's death with undisguised relief: "How oft have I with lifted hands implor'd / This blessed hour." (2.1.5-6). Herod's death, he says, has "my wished liberty restor'd / And made my subject self my own again" (2.1.7-8), suggesting the extent to which Herod impinged on his brother's sense of autonomy—even his personhood. Specifically, Pheroras is now free to marry the woman of his own choice, rather than his brother's: "Had Herod liv'd, he would have pluck'd my hand / From fair Graphina's palm perforce" (2.1.15) and forced him instead to marry

[74] Sharing much of its plot with *Mariam*, Markham and Sampson's *Herod and Antipater* is tonally much closer to historical tragedy, like Shakespeare's *Henry VI* plays, than to Cary's treatment of the same material—i.e., a network of interrelated royals and nobles (some virtuous, some wicked), who attempt to outmaneuver and, in some cases, murder each other in a scramble for national sovereignty.

his own infant niece. As Pheroras exclaims with horror, had Herod lived, "I had had a baby to my bride" (2.1.16). Pheroras's engagement to a commoner is found in Lodge, though her name and character are both Cary's own invention. The meekest of the women in Herod's household, Graphina appears in only one scene where, alas, she is almost entirely subsumed in Pheroras's effusive doting. Indeed, most of her single speech serves merely to excuse herself for not speaking more: "If I be silent," she explains, "'tis no more but fear / That I should say too little when I speak" (2.1.49-50). A low-born woman, she confesses that she has long "admired" her princely suitor's overtures—using the word in same sense as Shakespeare's Ferdinand, meaning "to wonder at"—and appears not so much overjoyed as resigned to her situation: "Except your lowly handmaid's steadfast love / And fast obedience may your mind delight" (2.1.70-71), she tells her betrothed, but then adds "I will not promise more than I can prove" (2.1.72). As Lodge's *Josephus* darkly suggests, and Cary's play confirms, even the most affectionate husbands can overwhelm their brides. At the very least, however, Herod's death frees Pheroras from a loveless, politically expedient and, indeed, incestuous marriage, arranged by Herod for his own purposes.

Salome's relationship with her brother Herod also represents the imposition of tyrannic political power upon domestic freedom—though unlike Pheroras, Salome is canny enough to incite and guide her brother's vindictive political strength for her own personal ends. Herod has forced his sister into at least one unwelcome (and incestuous) marriage—to her own uncle, Josephus (no relation to the chronicler). By the time the play begins, however, Salome has come to think of her brother less as an enforcer of undesirable matches, and more as a tool for escaping them—exploiting Herod's tendency towards political suspicion and violence for her own ends. Salome's first husband, as she reflects in soliloquy, was executed by Herod for disloyalty based on evidence that she herself supplied (1.3.247-50). She mourns her brother's putative death only

as far as it prevents her from reprising the same trick—ridding herself of her now unwanted second husband, Constabarus, to make a third possible. Herod would have been useful in this circumstance, "but," as Salome bluntly remarks, "he is dead" (1.5.265), and that appears to be that. Whatever feelings she may have had for her late brother are eclipsed by her passion for her new lover: Herod's "death such store of cinders cannot cast / My coals of love to quench" (2.4.266-67). When she eventually learns that her brother is still alive, she registers the news primarily in relation to her marital problems: "Joy, heart, for Constabarus shall be slain" (3.2.57). Constabarus, independent of his soured marriage, has his own reasons to rejoice at Herod's death. They are more political than personal, and Salome hopes Herod will see them as grounds for Constabarus's execution.[75] In the case of both his brother and sister, however, the play shows how Herod's exertion of power within his family circle controls the arrangement, quality, and duration of their marriages. The mistaken belief of Herod's death reveals the connection between political power and domestic autonomy—Herod's siblings' freedom, or lack thereof, to arrange their own private lives.

Mariam, believing the reports along with the rest of the household, is aware of many reasons to share in the collective joy at Herod's apparent death. However, her relief is complicated by feelings of genuine regret. Logically, she knows she has no reason to mourn the husband who has caused her so much suffering: "When Herod lived, that now is done to death / Oft have I wished that I from him were free" (1.1.15-16). Nevertheless, she weeps:

> But now his death to memory doth call
> The tender love that he to Mariam bare:
> And mine to him; this makes those rivers fall
> That by another thought unmoisten'd are. (1.1.31-34)

[75] Out of a sense of chivalrous fair play, Constabarus has been harboring two of Herod's vanquished political enemies whom Herod had ordered him to execute.

This reaction baffles Mariam's mother, Alexandra, who is somewhat scandalized that Mariam should feel conflicted: "What means these tears? […] What weep'st thou for thy brother's [murd'rer's] sake?" (1.2.79-81). In response to her daughter's tears, Alexandra enumerates the ways that, in his marriage to Mariam as in all other relationships, Herod has used political power to inflict domestic cruelty. As Alexandra is quick to note, Herod's marriage to Mariam, who is of royal descent, is, at its root, politically motivated, designed to help legitimize his own Rome-appointed status as king. Based on lineage alone, "What kingdom's right could cruel Herod prove" (1.2.99), Alexandra asks. Herod's reason for marrying her (i.e., her birth), Alexandra continues, is the same reason Herod murders, first Mariam's grandfather, and then her brother, whom he rightly sees as potential rivals to his claim: "My father and my son he slew / to royalize by right your prince-born breath" (1.2.119-29). Finally, Alexandra reminds Mariam that Herod had even ordered Mariam's death in the event of his own. Echoing Lodge, Cary's prefatory Argument ascribes a fanatical devotion to Mariam as Herod's motive, stating, "out of violent affection (unwilling that any should enjoy her after him) he gave strict and private commandment, that if he were slain, she should be put to death."[76] Alexandra, however, as if in direct response to this assertion, begs the rhetorical question: "Was it for love, can Mariam deem it true, / That Mariam gave commandment for her death?" (1.2.121-22).[77]

Mariam attempts to make sense of her own conflicting feelings, not through the political reasoning of her mother, but through extended close analysis of recent history—puzzling through her response to her husband's death by reflecting on Julius Caesar's reaction to the death of his great adversary, Pompey. In the play's opening speech, Mariam reconsiders her past public

[76] Cary, "Argument," 67.
[77] As Weller and Ferguson gloss this syntactically baroque pair of lines, "Was it love that gave a death sentence to Mariam?", 155, n.122.

denunciations of Caesar— "How oft have I with public voice run on…" (1.1.1)—for his hypocrisy in mourning the death of his fallen enemy. Caesar pursued Pompey to the death, and yet "he wept when Pompey's life was gone" (1.1.3). Now, "by self-experience taught," she realizes that "one object yields both grief and joy" (1.1.9-10). Allison Shell points to this passage as one of the play's most Lodgean moments, in that it exemplifies Lodge's view that readers should use historical events as the occasion for moral self-reflection.[78] Mariam uses the example of Caesar to make sense of her own complex and contradictory emotions, grieving the death of her husband whom she is otherwise happy to learn is dead. Apostrophizing the dead Caesar, she adds: "So at his [Pompey's] death your eyes true drops did rain, / Whom dead, you did not wish alive again" (1.1.13-14). In this extended analogy, Mariam identifies herself with Caesar, and her presumed-dead husband, with Pompey.

This reflection points to the way that historical as well as political conflicts overlap with those that are domestic. For Mariam, Caesar is not merely the remote figure of antiquity as he was for Cary and her seventeenth-century readers, but someone whose actions had an immediate impact on her and her family. Recent Roman imperial history is also Mariam's private family history. Rome has given control of Jerusalem to Herod, a circumstance that has, in turn, led to the murders of her brother and grandfather, and to her own personally disastrous marriage. Herod's tyranny extends from his political life to his domesticity. He is not merely a tyrant who leaves his tyrannizing at work, so to speak, the better to enjoy his private life with wife and family. The lives of Mariam and Alexandra's relatives are contingent upon the threat they pose to Herod's sovereignty. Mariam's own life is subject to the success of Herod's negotiations with Caesar, just as the lives of Salome's first two husbands depended on their continued ability to

[78] Shell, 55-56.

satisfy her. As Mariam, Alexandra, and Salome show, domestic politics influence national and international politics, and hence national and international history.

Establishing the action firmly within the domestic sphere, the play shows the tension among these three women before any male voices intrude. The rancor, perhaps unsurprisingly, is expressed mainly in slighting remarks about birth and family connections. “Still twit you me with nothing but my birth” (1.3.239), Salome demands of Mariam. When Salome coolly tells Alexandra, “Your daughter’s betters far, I dare maintain, / Might have rejoic’d to be my brother’s bride,” Mariam immediately interposes, “My betters far! Base woman, ‘tis untrue, / You scarce have ever my superiors seen” (1.3.221-24). Salome may not have strong political ambitions as such, but she does have her pride: “More than once your choler have I borne” (1.3.228). She is perfectly ready to use her brother’s credulity and malice to ensure Mariam’s death in the same way that she disposed of her first husband.

These rivalries are more keenly felt because of the formal constraints of the play. *The Tragedy of Mariam*, like most closet dramas, and in strict adherence with the unities, has the entirety of the action taking place within a single, indoor space. Moreover, the work is designed to be read or “performed” under the same enclosed circumstances, within a private home. Consequently, the play creates a feeling of being forcibly contained. The women, in a sense, are trapped indoors by the formal conventions of the play in such a way that intensifies their dislike for each other. Shakespeare’s English history plays range across a wide variety of interior and exterior settings, from palaces, to taverns, to battlefields. *Antony and Cleopatra*, set in the same ancient Mediterranean world as *Mariam*, famously ping-pongs between Egypt and Rome to the point that it strains the suspension of disbelief. Even the medieval Herod plays show the Holy Family fleeing into Egypt to escape the king’s rampages. The formal constraints of Cary’s play,

however, provide no such avenues of escape. The plot requires that Herod travel to Rome before the action begins, but it is difficult to imagine the women of his household making such a journey from the confined, closet drama world of the play. Closet drama, in Cary's sensibility, is claustrophobic drama.

Herod Returns: Domestic Tyranny in Action

The structure of the second half of *The Tragedy of Mariam*, from Herod's return onwards, inverts the structure of the *Innocents* plays. When Herod unexpectedly reappears in Cary's play, the action swiftly unravels into havoc. Within minutes of his entrance, Herod's outrage at his discoveries leads to the summary execution of three household members: Mariam, Constabarus, and (for his loyalty to Mariam) the servant Sohemus. The action follows the same structure as a medieval Herod play, but modified to reflect Herod's private rather than his public life. As in the medieval versions, Herod enters and immediately delivers a long, bombastic, and self-aggrandizing speech. Confronted with news that he interprets as a threat to his power, he orders a number of speedy and gratuitous executions in a fit of apoplectic rage. Then, only after it is too late, he finally registers the horror of what he has done. Cary's play turns the medieval version outside-in; Herod's violence is not dispersed throughout his kingdom, towards his subjects en masse, but rather contained within his home and concentrated on members of his family.

The reception Mariam gives Herod shows a form of subtle but decisive female resistance to male power and instigates all subsequent action of the tragedy. In a display less overt than the ones offered to Herod's soldiers by the women of the medieval plays, Mariam nevertheless asserts her position firmly and refuses to yield to her husband's varied and increasingly

unpleasant methods of argument. Mariam and Herod share only one scene together.[79] In just under 200 lines, Herod exhibits a rapid about-face from exuberant doting to homicidal rage. Initially, Herod is overjoyed to see his wife: "Oh, haste thy steps, rare creature, speed thy pace: / And let thy presence make the day more bright" (4.1.10-11). Before his arrival, however, Mariam has resolved that she will not conceal her resentment. As she tells Sohemus: "I will not to his love be reconcil'd" (3.3.133). Though aware that she could manipulate Herod if she chose in effectively the same way that Salome does—that she "could enchain him with a smile, / and lead him captive with a gentle word"—Mariam states that do so would be to debase herself: "I scorn my look should ever man beguile" (3.3.164-66). Accordingly, she enters in black, and when Herod asks what these "dusky habits" portend, she replies that her outer clothes match her mood. It does not immediately occur to Herod that he is the cause of her unhappiness, and he offers to perform a series of grand gestures to restore her spirits. She then speaks the only words of defiance she will direct toward her husband in the play:

> Your offers to my heart no ease can grant,
> Except they could my brother's life restore.
> No, had you wish'd the wretched Mariam glad,
> Or had your love to her been truly tied:
> Nay, had you not desir'd to make her sad,
> My brother nor my grandsire had not died. (4.3.112-16)

Mariam's black clothes, acknowledged in the dialogue since they cannot be represented visually, announce a reversal of the feelings appropriate to the sudden return of her husband; contrary to expectation, Mariam has just learned that she is *not* a widow. As she informs Herod, she is mourning the death of her murdered brother and grandfather. Her clothing is a silent declaration that precedes the spoken declaration that follows. Her black attire is also, perhaps,

[79] Though representing a continuous, unbroken span of time, Cary's neoclassical system of scene division actually marks it as two scenes (Act IV, Scenes 3 and 4) because of the entrance of an additional character, Herod's butler, halfway through.

acknowledgment that her marriage, at least as it has continued up to this point, has come to an end. Mariam is not mourning the death of her husband, nor even the life of her husband, but rather the end of her past relationship to him.

For the rest of the scene, Mariam barely speaks as Herod buries her under a stream of hyperbolic abuse, beginning with mere annoyance— "Wilt thou believe no oaths to clear thy lord?" (4.3.117)—and moving quickly to veiled threats. Closely echoing Lodge's allusion to Mariam's "womanly imperfection and naturall frowardnesse," Herod warns her, "This froward humour will not do you good" (4.3.140).[80] With a combination of cajolery and menace, he even assures Mariam that he will overlook her "peevishness" (4.1.149), if she is prepared to suppress her true feeling and submit to his will: "Yet smile, dearest Mariam, do be smile, / And I will all unkind conceits exile" (4.3.143-44). Mariam replies that she cannot nor will not play a role so antithetical to her true feelings: "I cannot frame disguise, nor never taught / My face to look dissenting from my thought" (4.3.145-46). The tension escalates with the appearance of a butler bearing "a drink procuring love, / The queen desir'd me to deliver" (4.4.159-60). In fact, he has been suborned by Salome to make Herod believe Mariam is attempting to poison him, but the thought was evidently in Herod's mind already. He leaps to that very conclusion before the butler can utter another word of his charade, commanding him, in the next line: "Confess the truth, thou wicked instrument / of her outrageous will, 'tis [poison] sure" (4.4.163-64).[81] The butler cannot even confirm whether this is the case before Herod turns to Mariam, accusing her of attempting his murder and, even more baselessly, for adultery with the servant Sohemus (4.4.179-80). Herod's ranting reaches a pitch that would not be misplaced in any medieval *Innocents* play:

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[80] Lodge, 398.
[81] The brackets in this quotation are not mine but Weller and Ferguson's in their edition of the play.

> Now do I know thy falsehood, painted devil,
> Thou white enchantress. Oh, thou art so foul,
> That hyssop cannot cleanse thee, worst of evil!
> A beauteous body hides a loathsome soul! (4.4.175-88)
>
> Hell itself lies hid
> Beneath thy heavenly show. (4.4.203-04)
>
> Bright workmanship of nature sulli'd o'er,
> With pitchèd darkness now thine end shall be:
> Though shalt not live, fair fiend, to cozen more. (4.4.211-13)

The structure of the scene seems calculated to beg the comparison between Mariam's few lines of defiance and Herod's many of reaction.[82] Mariam's bewildered response to Herod's accusations, "Is this a dream?" (4.4.184), may register the disbelief of the reader as well her own. Up to this point, the play shows what Josephus's chronicle cannot have been privy to, and what the medieval plays, with their extroverted mode of expression and emphasis on physical action, do not express—the private thoughts and actions that Mariam has experienced out of public view. The reflective suffering and self-analysis that she undergoes in the first half of the play disproportionately overshadow the amount of speech which gives vent to her feelings. In crafting the narrative this way, Cary creates an effect toward which surely all history plays ultimately aspire—capturing "how it must really have been." In this instance, the truth has been lost not only across an impossibly long span of time, but also across an unbridgeable gulf between what is seen in public and what occurs in private. But *The Tragedy of Mariam* creates the illusion of close intimacy with a long-dead figure of history.

[82] Across this scene (or pair of scenes, 4.3 and 4.4), Mariam speaks 21 lines to Herod's 147.

Cary's Herodic History

Cary's use of the closet drama form enables her to capture a version of domestic history that other forms of historical reporting do not. But what, ultimately, does this history convey? In Cary's version of the narrative, as distinct from earlier versions, Mariam becomes the locus of historical agency. The historical content of the play resides not in Herod's rantings but in Mariam's refusal to capitulate. Her choice to resist rather than simply placate her husband, though it defies all logic of self-interest, is the turning point that drives history.

The remainder of the play, following her scene with Herod, explores the consequences of that moment of resistance by showing the various ways in which Mariam passes from a historical figure to a historical subject. In the scenes leading up to and following her death, focus shifts from the thoughts and actions of her life to her posthumous reputation—shown through discussion of her actions by other characters, but also crucially by Mariam herself and the play's chorus. This assessment or analysis of Mariam's character both echoes and questions her historical legacy as recorded by Josephus and Lodge. In addition to examining this legacy, the play also invites us to imagine how its historical events are contingent, easily changed, and subject to drastic alteration—in this case, by depicting interaction between Mariam and Herod's divorced first wife, Doris. Finally, the royal Nuncio's eyewitness testimony of Mariam's execution, in addition to meeting the formal requirement that all violent action take place "off stage," more importantly reveals the limitations of public visual spectacle as material for future recorded histories. These features of the play show us that history is not limited to events that previous male dramatists identified as "historical." Public history constitutes only a small part of history in its totality. As this play illustrates, not all history occurs in public.

"Am I that Mariam?" Interrogating History

Much of the play is concerned with Mariam's alleged outspokenness—a feature of her character that, by Cary's time, had become the defining feature of her historical reputation, as recorded in Lodge's *Josephus*. Within the play, the issue seems to be a matter of debate among members of the royal household. As Raber observes, "Mariam's public denunciations are not precisely the locus of her own anxiety in the play, but they become a primary source of other's reactions to her."[83] Herod manifestly believes this to be a genuine fault of hers, as expressed in his warning paraphrase of Lodge, "This froward humour will not do you good" (4.3.140). By contrast, Mariam's chivalrous brother-in-law, Constabarus, praises the "sweet-fac'd" Mariam in a soliloquy for her modesty and innocence (1.6.487-93). Mariam's mother, Alexandra, as we have seen, castigates Mariam for not being outspoken enough. Which of these interpretations is correct? The play appears to be at pains that we should ask this question. In addition to her immediate family, the question is also considered by Mariam herself in moments of introspection, and by the play's Senecan chorus, in their moralizing reflections at the close of each act. Both Mariam and the chorus conclude that her reputation for outspokenness is deserved and that this trait is indeed a fault. As the main action of the play shows, however, these assessments are flawed, and defective in a way that suggests the limitations of traditional forms of historical reporting.

Mariam's perception of her own character echoes the traditional view handed down in the chronicles. As showed above, Mariam herself refers to this posthumous reputation for "frowardness" in the opening line: "How oft have I with public voice run on…" (1.1.1). The question is rhetorical, but may also be asked genuinely. "How oft," precisely, the play does not

[83] Raber, 155.

show, since the question refers to events before it begins. For evidence, there is only Mariam's conduct within the play and the divided testimonies of voices within that same play. Mariam reiterates the question in a modified form in her final scene, offering her own forthrightness as a reason for her death sentence: "Am I the Mariam that presum'd so much, / And deem'd my face must needs preserve my breath?" In asking this, Mariam again speaks as though she is aware of her own historical legacy. Like "frowardness," Mariam's phrase "presum'd so much," is another direct paraphrase of Lodge, who writes that Mariam "presumed too much upon the intire affection" of her husband.[84] But Mariam's question may be asked genuinely as well as rhetorically. Is she, in fact, "the Mariam that presum'd so much?" Yes and no. The Mariam of Cary's dramatic invention is not the Mariam of Lodge's *Josephus*, but a separate and distinct representation of that historical figure. Cary's Mariam answers her own question in the affirmative: "Ay, I it was that thought my beauty such, / That it alone could countermand my death" (4.8.524-27). But there does not appear to be any evidence in the play that supports her own interpretation. At no point does the play present her as being preoccupied with her own beauty. As noted above, in her final scene before confronting her husband, she resolves decisively to eschew her charms to beguile or placate him: "I know I could enchain him with a smile: / And lead him captive with a gentile word, / I scorn my look should ever man beguile" (3.3.164-66). Instead, Mariam appears to be grasping for a reason that might explain her downfall and settles on an erroneous one, blaming her presumption as the cause of Herod's rage and suspicion. Mariam's outspokenness resides in Josephus's chronicle, in Lodge's translation, and even her own self-assessment more than in her conduct throughout the play.

[84] Lodge, 398.

In addition to its characters, Mariam's historical reputation is also discussed by the chorus that concludes each act. The play's list of "Names of the Speakers" designates the chorus as "a company of Jews," suggesting that they are Herod's subjects, contemporary with the events of the play—the voice of the people in Herod's kingdom.[85] As discussed in the previous chapter on *The Misfortunes of Arthur*, the function of the chorus is to summarize the preceding scenes, and express a concise lesson for the benefit of the audience. We have already seen Herod's subjects doing this kind of interpretive work in Lodge; when the king is struck down by fever and madness, "each man interpreted that this punishment was inflicted by God" for his unjust actions.[86] Cary's chorus closes the play with the observation, "This day alone, our sagest Hebrews shall / In after times the school of wisdom call" (5.1.293-94), asserting that, first, the play illustrates numerous edifying lessons (enough to fill an entire "school"), and second, that the chorus itself is aligned with the voice of posterity—the "sagest" minds of future age

Characteristic of early modern dramatic choruses, as in *The Misfortunes of Arthur*, the chorus in *Mariam* tends to flatten nuance and complexity rather than acknowledge or engage with it. At the close of Act I, in which Mariam expresses conflicting feelings on Herod's death, the chorus observes that, although "Mariam wished she from her lord were free," she now "grieves" to find it so. And yet, they speculate, "Were Herod now perchance to live again / she would again as much be grieved at that" (1.522-23). In fact, this speculation does prove the case in Act III. Offering the advice, essentially, to "be careful what you wish for," the chorus provides a sensible, if slightly reductive, comment on the complex feelings that Mariam has already unpacked with greater deftness and nuance. Similarly, the Act II chorus responds to the royal

[85] Cary, "The Names of the Speakers," 65. The description is original to the first printing of the play, *The Tragedie of Mariam, The Faire Queen of Iewry, Written by that learned, vertuous, and truly noble Ladie, E. C.* (London: Thomas Creede for Richard Hawkins, 1613).
[86] Lodge, 399.

family's diverse expressions of joy and relief at Herod's apparent death by observing that people are often led into error by their own wishes: "To hear a tale with ears prejudicated, / It spoils the judgement and corrupts the sense" (2.401-02). Though this is also perfectly rational and correct, as with the conclusion of Act I, the chorus's analysis leaves a nagging sense of something uncaptured by their concise moral statement. In their reductive flatness, these choric pronouncements are insufficient to convey, for example, either the intensity or the complexity of feeling in Pheroras's undisguised declaration of relief on hearing his brother has died (2.1.5-8). The way his fervent and sincere wish for his brother's death has become entwined with his sense of restricted autonomy is a subtlety that the summary judgements of the chorus cannot bottle. Whatever insight we gain from reading or hearing the scenes, and attending to the surprising and often contradictory range of human reactions they depict, these pat analyses inevitably fall short. The exchange of dialogue still occurs after the fact, and the chorus is ultimately unable to convey a sense of nuance or immediacy.

The Act IV chorus, however, presents a drastic deviation in tone. While continuing its moralizing function, its uncompromising condemnation of Mariam is quite unlike the preceding bland aphorisms. Its opening observation, "The fairest action of our human life / Is scorning to revenge an injury" (4.629-30), may put the reader in mind of Herod, who has just sentenced three people to death without trial or even any evidence beyond the hearsay. The following five stanzas elaborate on this theme— "In base revenge there is no honor won" (4.638)—until the final stanza reveals that Mariam, not Herod, is the one who should have followed these precepts. Though conceding that Mariam's complaints were just, the chorus nevertheless asserts that "had Mariam scorn'd to leave a due unpaid" and "not have been by sullen passion sway'd" then "Long famous life to her had been allowed" (4.659-64). This pronouncement stands in stark

contrast with the play's depiction of sustained internal suffering of the first three acts, followed by the explosive violence of the fourth—at best, glaringly tone deaf, at worst, deliberately perverse. In yet another echo of Lodge's "certaine womanly imperfection and naturall frowardnesse," the chorus reiterates the conventional wisdom attached to Mariam as a historical figure. This fictional "company of Jews" may perhaps even be imagined to include Josephus himself. Nearly contemporary with the events of the play, the early modern imagination certainly ranked him among the "sagest Hebrews" whom the chorus asserts will later comment on these events. And yet the chorus's assessment is emphatically out of keeping with the events of the play up to this point. The chorus provides the voice of historical posterity, but they historicize poorly. The contrast between dramatic action and choric reflection highlights the range of private female experiences that Cary's play depicts, but that past male chronicle reporting does not, or cannot, take into account.

This jarring disparity between the action and chorus in *Mariam* is distinctly different from the relationship between action and chorus in the medieval Herod plays. An important part of medieval dramatic tradition, as well as Senecan tradition, the choric or expository figures of the Herod plays serve essentially the same function as the chorus in *Mariam*—to summarize the action and expound the moral significance. However, in the medieval plays, the closing morals appropriately fit the preceding action. In the Chester version, the epilogue is spoken by the demon who has come "to fetch this kinges sowle here present / into hell" (Chester 10.443-44). Describing his function to the audience, he issues a clear warning: "all false beleevers I burn" (Chester 10.439), and as such, Herod's example should serve as a warning. Those gathered to watch may expect to share Herod's damnation if they do not heed: "I will bring you thus to woe / And come agayne as fetch moe" (Chester 10.454-55). In the N-Town version, Death himself

directs the closing lines to the audience, reminding spectators that, despite his kingly pomp, Herod has met the same fate as all unrepentant sinners: "Now is he ded and cast in care / In helle pytt evyr to abyde! / His lordchep is al lorn" (N-Town 20.252-54). The same lesson applies to those watching, not to be caught unaware. Death may come "sodeynly" at any time, and must come inevitably for all, "And sle them, evyn indeed" (N-Town 20.270-71). In both of these cases, as in choric pronouncements delivered throughout *Mariam*, the moral is simple and straightforward. The soul of the child-massacring king, like that of all unrepentant sinners, is damned to Hell, and Death eventually comes for us all. Unlike *Mariam*, however, these moral epilogues have the virtue of being inarguably appropriate to the events of the preceding play. The aptness of the medieval epilogues calls attention to the inappropriateness of *Mariam*'s historicizing choruses.

A matter of debate among the characters within the play, Mariam's alleged outspokenness is crucially misinterpreted both by herself and by the play's chorus. Both echo the view of Marian expressed in the chronicles, but do not accurately reflect the Mariam of Cary's play. The chorus in particular carries the authority of the "sagest Hebrews," both alluding to and reiterating the depiction of Mariam rendered by Josephus. The action of the play, however, belies this interpretation, and invites us to imagine private historical events that lie out of the reach of the chronicles.

Imagining Alternative Histories: Alexandra, Mariam, and Doris

As well as presenting a vision of the private, hitherto unrepresented histories, *The Tragedy of Mariam* also shows how public historical outcomes are themselves frequently contingent, unpredictable, and arbitrary. The play not only prompts us to imagine histories that occur behind

closed doors, but also envisions entire alternative histories radically different from those handed down by posterity.

Though the play itself is a historical reimagining, the characters within the play also speculate how other historical realities may have unfolded. The first to do so is Mariam's mother, Alexandra, as she discusses how she once had the opportunity to become Mark Antony's consort— "I sought to captivate / The warlike lover" (1.2.171-72). Though she does not explain why this never came to fruition, she assures her daughter that, had fortune favored her, "The Roman had been overtaken quite" (1.2.176). Her most detailed speculation, however, imagines a marriage, not between Mark Antony and herself, but Mark Antony and Mariam. Had he once seen her, she claims, "He would have lovèd thee, and thee alone, / And left the brown Egyptian clean forsaken" (1.2.189-90). Both Roman and Jewish history, in Alexandra's vision, would have been drastically different from their current, tragically unsatisfying realities:

> Then great Antonius' fall we had not seen,
> By her that fled to have him hold the chase.
> Then Mariam in a Roman's chariot set
> In place of Cleopatra might have shown. (1.2.193-96)

In place of Antony's calamitous love affair with Cleopatra, his imagined union with Mariam would have saved him from his humiliating defeat at Actium. Instead of Mariam's current disastrous marriage to the murderer of her grandfather and brother, and the usurper of their throne, her imagined husband is a conquering Roman hero. The alliance envisioned by Alexandra between Rome and Judea would have placed Mariam and her family at the seat of Roman imperial power. As an alternative to the two separate tragedies that history and literature have produced (Cary's *Mariam* and Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra*), Alexandra suggests a hypothetical *History of Antony and Mariam*—a *Famous Victories* chronicle play of the ancient world. Itself a historical reimagining, Cary's play also contains within it further historical

reimagining on an even grander scale, as if to suggest how avoidable its tragic events actually are.

In contrast to Alexandra's purely speculative flights of historical fancy, other moments explore how alternate or revised histories sometimes are actually written into existence. This aspect of the play is illustrated most vividly by the surprising appearance of Herod's first wife, Doris. Divorced and exiled by Herod years earlier when the union with Mariam became politically expedient, Doris is drawn back to Jerusalem by the false news of Herod's death. Making her first appearance briefly in Act II, Doris's main dramatic function arrives in Act IV, when she and Mariam confront each other. This ahistorical meeting, found nowhere in Josephus, is entirely Cary's invention; Doris appears to have been introduced into the action of the play specifically for the purpose of dramatizing this fictional interaction. As Mariam awaits her execution, Doris appears suddenly, and bitterly attacks Mariam for, as she sees it, usurping her husband and crown. "'Twas you that Doris from his side remov'd, / And robb'd from me the glory of my life" (4.8.585-86). The allure of queenship is, perhaps, not to be underestimated. But the irony that Doris, at this of all moments, should resent and even envy Mariam for taking her place as Herod's wife is lost on the former queen. Doris's announcement of herself— "I am that Doris that was once beloved, / Beloved by Herod, Herod's lawful wife" (4.8.583-84)—calls attention to Mariam's misfortunes as Herod's current "lawful wife" who was "once beloved" by the king. Even the structure of Doris's declaration, "I am that Doris," echoes Mariam's earlier self-interrogation, "Am I the Mariam…?", highlighting the parallels between the two women.

Though ahistorical, this fictional scene shows how chains of historical events come to exist in reality. In the same way that Mariam and Doris have shared the same royal husband, the pairing of these two women provides a real example of Alexandra's game of historical "what if."

Herod's divorce and remarriage end one historical plotline and generate a new one. Mariam's entire marriage to Herod is a palimpsest, written over the cancelled lines of Doris's reign as queen. The hypothetical proposed by Alexandra is given form. But what, the play asks, is the result of this change? In this case, the marriages of both women have ended deplorably—with Doris fallen from favor and exiled, and Mariam about to be executed by Herod on false charges. If Alexandra's speculative matchmaking expands the potential of imagined historical possibilities, this scene shows the limited range of actual historical possibilities. Neither Mariam nor Doris finds herself in an enviable position. The play's representation of women's limited options for unrestrained speech and direct political action may explain why these exercises in historical speculation, whatever their outcomes, are only practiced by the women of the play. In contrast to Herod's feverish suspicions and unfounded accusations creating a fictional alternative version of the present, the women imagine different pasts and different futures—with Alexandra's future histories left unwritten and Doris's past history erased and written over.

Mariam's Post-Mortem: Herod and the Nuncio

In addition to stressing the importance of private domestic histories as a component of wider history, *The Tragedy of Mariam* makes clear the limitations of public spectacle as a form of history-making. These limitations are revealed nowhere more clearly than the description of Mariam's execution, its account delivered to Herod by the royal Nuncio in the final act. Unlike the on-stage violence of the medieval Herod plays, Cary's play cannot depict Mariam's death as a visual spectacle within the conventional parameters of closet drama. Instead, we hear the Nuncio's description of her death only after it has occurred "off stage." The result of this speech, as seen in the previous two chapters, is a shift in the play's mode of representation—from the dramatization of historical events to the dramatization of the *reporting* of those events. In this

instance, the imperfect description of the Nuncio shows the limitations of eyewitness reports of public historical events. When Mariam is made a public spectacle, led to the scaffold for execution in a manner typical of early modern executions, she is taken from the domestic, closet drama world of the play, and ironically, becomes less accessible to us as readers or auditors of the play. This reenforces the idea that, just as not all histories are public, not all public events can be accurately translated into histories.

The Nuncio explains how Mariam, for reasons he does not understand, chose him to be the witness and chronicler of her death: "She pick'd me out from all the crew: / She beckon'd to me, call'd me by my name, / For she my name, my birth, and fortune knew" (5.1.60-62). The Nuncio's surprise is itself surprising, since his function is to convey royal messages to and from the king. Mariam ironically knows more about this man than Cary's readers do, since the play only records his title, not his name, nor any other details mentioned. As the play has already shown, Mariam is privy to much information that traditional forms of history do not record. The Nuncio then repeats Mariam's last words, seemingly verbatim, for the benefit of Herod and history:

> NUNCIO: "Tell thou my Lord thou saw'st me lose my breath."
> HEROD: Oh, that I could that sentence now control.
> NUNCIO: "If guiltily, eternal be my death" –
> HEROD: I hold her chaste ev'n in my inmost soul.
> NUNCIO: "By three days hence if wishes could revive,
> I know himself would make me oft alive." (5.1.73-78)

Mariam's final, prophetic words come true more quickly than she predicts, as Herod regrets her death immediately, rather than "three days hence." Though she is already dead, the alternation between Mariam's last words and Herod's emotional interjections makes this passage the royal couple's final exchange in the play. But though Herod repeatedly interrupts the Nuncio's recitation, Cary's ABAB rhyme scheme ensures that Mariam's lines form a complete and

poetically independent pair of couplets, unaffected by the intervening lines spoken by her husband. The passage presents a grim inversion of the effect created in *Romeo and Juliet* when the young lovers' first exchanged lines famously intertwine to form a sonnet (1.5.90-107). Here Mariam's autonomously rhyming final verse has at last freed itself from Herod's incessant loquacity.

Though delivered by a seemingly trustworthy source, the Nuncio's account is inevitably incomplete:

> HEROD: But forward in thy tale.
> NUNCIO: Why on she went,
> And after she some silent prayer had said,
> She did as if to die she were content. (5.1.83-85)

Here, the "silent prayer," known only to Mariam, could not have been recorded even by the most attentive witnesses. But following his rendition of Mariam's purportedly exact words, the vagueness that follows— "Why, on she went"—lands rather pathetically. This description offers, in effect, a memorial reconstruction of a public performance. The Nuncio's speech is not a "pirated edition" per se, like the bad quarto of *Hamlet*, since it was authorized by Mariam herself. But it does rely on the same method of production. It is as if, while jotting down the most memorable and quotable lines of her death speech, the Nuncio missed lines that followed. We have only a flawed, partial version of Mariam's final words before dying. The transition from private thought to public speech has been messy and imperfect.

As Herod grapples with the finality of his wife's death, the exchange between Nuncio and the king presents a reflection on the history play genre as a whole. At first, Herod cannot accept Mariam's death, asking: "Is there no trick to make her breathe again?" (5.1.89). In his desperation, he stretches his imagination towards some unprecedented method for reanimation:

> Why, yet methinks there might be found by art

> Strange ways of cure; 'tis sure rare things are done
> By an inventive head and willing heart. (5.1.90-93)

In lines that might serve as an epigraph for Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, Herod is thinking in purely literal terms of Mariam's life and death. However, the "trick to make her breathe again," discovered "by art," and carried to resuscitation by an "inventive head and willing heart" also describes Cary's work as a dramatist. The position of the Nuncio, in trying to conjure Mariam's words, parallels the position of Cary herself. It would be easy to envisage Cary imagining Mariam calling to her from the pages of Lodge's *Josephus*, had "pick'd me out from all the crew" to tell her story. And yet the Nuncio's next words reject this fantasy, as he tells Herod, "Let not, my lord, your fancies idle run" (5.1.95). He expresses the impossibility of Mariam's reanimation in a chronological comparison: "It is as possible it should be seen, / That we should make the holy Abraham live / Though he entomb'd two thousand years had been" (5.1.96-98). Mariam is now as dead to Herod and the Nuncio as the dead of two millennia prior. Or, to extend the implications of the Nuncio's simile, she is as dead to Herod in that moment as to Cary and her readers in their own time. The infinity of death flattens out time. To be dead for five minutes is to be as dead for sixteen hundred or two thousand years. No art, however brilliant or well-intentioned, can revive her.

The final historicizing gesture of the play is performed by Herod. The action ends as it begins, with a character grieving a dead spouse whom they themselves had wished dead. In the last lines of the play, Herod historicizes his own legacy as Mariam had done throughout the play: "Oh, when you think of Herod as your king, […] Thus act to your remembrance likewise bring: / 'Tis I have overthrown your royal line" (5.1.175-79). Certainly, Herod is remembered as one who has stamped out future generations through his own ill-judged malice—whether those generations are imagined to spring from the royal Jewish bloodlines represented by his wife and

her family, as they do in this instance, or from the slaughtered infant children of subjects throughout his kingdom. Herod imagines his own epitaph: "*Here Herod lies, that hath his Mariam slain."* His monument will stand, in a very literary sense, as a monument to Mariam's death. Herod's legacy is now Mariam's legacy. "I am the villain that hath done the deed / the cruel deed, though by another hand" (5.187-88), he realizes. "I am the villain," indeed.

The Tragedy of Mariam draws on both of the traditional versions of Herod available at the start of the seventeenth century, but Cary's use of the closet drama form represents this material in ways that neither of these earlier versions can accomplish. As the play powerfully illustrates, not all history occurs in public view, and therefore not all forms of written or performed history can accurately convey these private narratives. The depiction of Mariam's suffering, coupled with the discussion of Mariam's posthumous reputation throughout the play, illustrates the divide between what occurs in history and what traditional forms of written history can report. Above all, it shows that female resistance to male political power is as strong a driver of historical events as male political power itself.

Chapter 4
The End(s) of History: Playing the Apocalypse from the Chester *Last Judgement* to *Angels in America*

On June 16, 1457, Margaret of Anjou, then Queen of England, attended the day-long sequence of plays staged at Coventry for the Feast of Corpus Christi. According to surviving records, "alle the Pagentes" were "pleyde" that year, except one.[1] The Drapers' *Last Judgement* or "domes day" play, which should have completed the sequence, disappointingly "myght not be pleyde for lak of day."[2] The record does not specify whether darkness overtook the final performance following unforeseen delays—such as, for example, a wagon breakdown, a sudden burst of bad weather, an accident with prop weapons or stage machinery, or any number of other mishaps likely to occur during a day-long series of mobile biblical pageants—or whether the organizer simply misjudged the available time. Details of the play are also a matter of conjecture. The Draper's *Last Judgement*, as all but two plays in the Coventry cycle, have been lost, so, like Margaret herself, we can make only a rough surmise as to what the performance might have included.

The cancellation of a play may seem a counter-intuitive anecdote to begin a discussion of theatrical performance. However, this brief record of a play that "myght not be pleyde" is emblematic of the difficulties of staging an event that has not yet happened—but at which, medieval Christians believed, we would all be assigned roles. Unlike most history plays, the surviving *Last Judgement* pageants of the late Middle Ages dramatize a historical event that is

[1] R. W. Ingram, ed., *Records of Early English Drama: Coventry* (Toronto: University of Manchester Press, 1981), 37.

[2] Ingram, *REED: Coventry*, 37. "On corporis christi yeven at nyght the next suyng came the queen from kelyngworth to Couentre at which tyme She Wold not be met but came preuely to se the play there on the Morow and She sygh then alle the Pagentes pleyde saue domes day which myght not be pleyde for lak of day."

broadly participatory; it is the eschatological stage on which all humanity acts. Queen Margaret's inability to see the Coventry play captures the representational difficulties of staging any futurity beyond ourselves—of depicting onstage something that must be experienced in order to be understood. Since no eyewitness account survives of any medieval Last Judgement play, modern scholars attempting to envision its performance, like the medieval dramatists trying to envision the End of the World itself, are left to extrapolate from oblique references and incomplete information.

What might Margaret have witnessed on that June evening had daylight lasted a little longer? The record of annual expenses for the Drapers' Doomsday pageants extends as far as 1534. Had the performance intended for Margaret resembled these later incarnations, the queen would have witnessed the ultimate destruction of the world presented as a lavish theatrical spectacle—in the estimation of the drama historian Clifford Davidson, perhaps "the most spectacular of all the Last Judgement pageants in England."[3] Encompassing the highest and lowest reaches of creation, the performance would have included: words from the mouth of God, placed high above the crowd in a decorated "welke" or heaven;[4] the accompanying music of an angelic "trompyttar," and the rejoicing and the lamentation of saved and damned ("whytt" and "blake") souls;[5] and the opening of a "Hell Mouth" through which devils emerged from beneath the wagon and dispersed throughout the crowd before fetching the damned "blake" souls down to their fate.[6] These spectacles culminated in the play's most memorable feature: the burning of the world itself, accompanied by the sight (and smell) of a "gonne powther" pyrotechnics display

[3] Clifford Davidson, "The Coventry Mysteries and Shakespeare's Histories," *Early Drama, Art, and Music* 6 (2016): 17. On the evolution of the Coventry *Last Judgement* over time, see Pamela King and Clifford Davidson, eds., *The Coventry Corus Christi Plays*, Early Drama, Art, and Music Monograph Series (Medieval Institute Publications, Western Michigan University, 2000), 44-53.
[4] Ingram, *REED: Coventry*, 224
[5] Ibid., 475
[6] Ibid., 474

and the rumblings of an "yethe quake," simulated by a theatrical contrivance made from a barrel.[7] The significant sum of two shillings (as much as the amount divided among all four actors playing angels) was paid for the construction of "iij worldys," one to set ablaze at each of the play's three playing stations along the pageant route; interestingly, it was paid to one Roberte Croo—a guild member who also appropriately played "goddess p[ar]te" one year.[8] The ultimate destruction of the earth was represented by "settynge the worldes on fyre."[9] The effect of this last piece of stagecraft, according to Davidson, "would have been all the more effective since the timing of the performance, coming at the end of the day, was probably at dusk."[10] Had the performance begun before sunset, Queen Margaret would have had the opportunity to sit in the spreading darkness as she watched the world burn.[11]

The representation of the end of the world onstage offers a compelling metaphor for the contemplation of history onstage. While the idea of apocalypse may conjure endings (the end of time, millenarianism, final judgements), it can also be an occasion for envisioning alternatives to the present: whether utopian aspirations, political lessons, or shifts in historical understanding, as well as social mores. In this final chapter, I explore this potential in three works that all engage medieval apocalyptic thinking in various ways: the medieval Chester *Last Judgement* play, Shakespeare's chronicle history play, *Richard II* (1595), and Tony Kushner's *Angels in America*

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[7] Ibid., 474.

[8] Ibid., 474, 221. See also 217, 230, 237, 242, 246.

[9] Ingram, *REED: Coventry*, 230. See also *Two Coventry Corpus Christi Plays*, ed. Hardin Craig, Early English Text Society, no. 87 (London: Oxford University Press, 1931), 98-102.

[10] Davidson, "The Coventry Mysteries and Shakespeare's Histories," 18.

[11] On the burning of the world in the Coventry *Last Judgement*, see also Pamela King and Clifford Davidson, ed. *The Coventry Corus Christi Plays*, 47-48; John. C. McGavin, "Performing Communities" in *The Oxford Handbook of Medieval Literature in English*, ed. Greg Walker and Elaine Treharne (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 214-15; and Jill Stevenson, "Poised on the Threatening Edge: Feeling the Future in Medieval Last Judgement Performances," *Theatre Journal* 67:2 (May 2015), 278-79.

(1991), the Pulitzer Prize-winning commercial success that remediates medieval ideas about endings in order to fashion a new nationalist and queer history.

The chapter begins with a consideration of how and to what ends the apocalypse is staged in the Chester *Last Judgement*, one of four medieval Doomsday plays to survive.[12] Like the other three (which complete the cycles of York, Towneley, and N-Town), the Chester play dramatizes the end of the world as imagined not in *The Book of Revelation*, but rather in the description of Christ's return to earth to judge the souls of humankind as recorded in Matthew (25:31-46). Staging a future event, the *Last Judgement* is what we might call a "future history" play. As a moment of live performance, the Chester play's distinct representation of Christ's body at the Second Coming distorts the orderly chronology of past, present, and future in ways that recent critical theorists have termed "queer time." As expressed by medievalist Carolyn Dinshaw, the concept of queer time offers "another kind of time beyond" the "empty and homogeneous" temporal "linearity" that became the hallmark of modernity.[13] Resisting a unidirectional, teleological, chronology of successive single moments, queer time opens up chronologies that are "out of sync with the ordinarily linear measurements of everyday life, that engage heterogeneous temporalities or that precipitate out of time altogether." These "forms of being," Dinshaw argues, "are queer by virtue of their particular engagements with time."[14] The Chester *Last Judgement*, as I will argue, queers time by collapsing a time sequence that includes events from the future (the Last Judgement itself), the past (the Crucifixion, reenacted by Christ in the course of *The Last Judgement*, the play), and the present (the play's live performance)—locating

[12] All quotations in this chapter refer to *The Chester Mystery Cycle*, ed. R. M. Lumiansky and David Mills, Early English Text Society s.s. 3, vol. 1 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1974).
[13] Carolyn Dinshaw, *How Soon is Now? Medieval Texts, Amateur Readers, and the Queerness of Time* (Duke University Press, 2014), 4.
[14] Ibid., 4.

all these moments on the physical body of the player acting the role of Christ, through his direct interaction with the play's spectators.

This mode of what we might call "affective apocalypse"—the embodiment of an ending (and potentially a new beginning) in the suffering male body—also appears in Shakespeare's *Richard II*.[15] In examining Shakespeare's uses of apocalyptic rhetoric, critics have understandably gravitated towards the great tragedies—particularly *Hamlet, Macbeth*, and most notably *King Lear*—rather than his English histories.[16] For these critics, Shakespeare's stand-alone tragedies provide a sense of finality that aligns comfortably with early modern cultural notions of the apocalypse. This chapter extends these readings, asserting that history plays such as *Richard II* are also deeply engaged with the medieval apocalyptic rhetoric still current in various early modern incarnations—including versions of the medieval Last Judgement plays that continued to be staged throughout Shakespeare's boyhood.[17] Shakespeare's Richard attempts to represent his downfall in apocalyptic terms, casting himself in the role of the martyred Christ and representing his overthrow as a national Doomsday or Day of Reckoning from which the state will not recover. Shakespeare stages Richard's messianic view of himself in order to explore whether or not the downfall of a king can properly be considered a national apocalypse. In dramatizing this political problem, the play intentionally revises the ways in

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[15] Shakespeare, William. *King Richard II*, ed. Charles R. Forker, Arden 3, revised edition (London: Bloomsbury, 2002).

[16] On Shakespeare and the apocalyptic, see Joseph Anthony Wittreich, *"Image of that Horror": History, Prophecy, and Apocalypse in King Lear* (San Marino, California: Huntington Library, 1984), and R. M. Christofides, *Shakespeare and the Apocalypse: Visions of Doom from Early Modern Tragedy to Popular* Culture (London: Bloomsbury, 2012). See also *Apocalyptic Shakespeare: Essays on Visions of Chaos and Revelation in Recent Film Adaptations*, ed. Melissa Croteau and Carolyn Jess-Cooke (London: McFarland and Company, 2009), which includes essays on adaptations of the tragedies as well as *The Merchant of Venice*.

[17] On Shakespeare's familiarity with medieval cycle drama, see Davidson, "The Coventry Mysteries and Shakespeare's Histories;" Michael O'Connell's "Blood begetting blood: Shakespeare and the mysteries," in *Medieval Shakespeare: Pasts and Presents*, eds. Ruth Morse, Helen Cooper, and Peter Holland, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013); and Kurt Schreyer's recent monograph, *Shakespeare's Medieval Craft: Remnants of the Mysteries on the London Stage* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2014).

which medieval writers repeatedly "invoked historical schemes, narratives, prophesies, and apocalyptic scenarios" (in the words of religious historian Brett Edward Whalen) as a way "to theorize the proper ordering of the world."[18]

In making a self-consciously theatrical spectacle of his own suffering in order to illustrate a didactic point of history, Richard's behavior in the deposition scene calls on the visual vocabulary of apocalypse characteristic of the medieval Last Judgement plays. Richard conspicuously performs his dethronement as simultaneously both Passion Play and Doomsday play. Like the Chester *Last Judgement*, the scene flattens time in a characteristically typological way, conflating the past (the Crucifixion) with the future (the Last Judgement). Richard's use of apocalyptic prophesy, moreover, queers the chronological distance between Richard's medieval past and Shakespeare's present. In the act of conjuring a future history for England for his on-stage audience of fourteenth-century English nobles, Richard also metatheatrically speaks to his off-stage audience of sixteenth-century English theatre-goers—inhabitants of a future age, though not quite the sympathetic audience that Richard could have hoped for. Richard's vision of kingship and his use of prophetic language turn him into the prophetic voice of apocalypse. While Richard frames his deposition in these terms, the play as a whole challenges Richard's anagogical vision of kingship, theology, and history. Though Richard intends the spectacle of his suffering body as a history lesson for his former subjects, the play suggests that his body is not coextensive with the realm itself. For Shakespeare, the death of a monarch, whether Plantagenet or Tudor, is not the end of the world.

While it may be tempting to think of apocalyptic drama as a premodern phenomenon, it has also had a surprisingly sustained presence in modern American theatre—most conspicuously,

[18] Brett Edward Whalen, *Dominion of God: Christendom and Apocalypse in the Middle Ages* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009), 4.

in Tony Kushner's two-part stage epic, *Angels in America*.[19] Arguably the most important late twentieth-century American play, Kushner's *Angels* combines elements of supernatural stage spectacle with realistic human suffering, drawing on the premodern affective apocalyptic imagination in order to critique late twentieth-century historical events, as well as to spur audiences towards imagining a different future beyond the threshold of the next millennium. Presenting the AIDS crisis and the apocalypse as metaphors for each other, Kushner's play represents the suffering of those living with and dying from HIV during the height of the crisis in the 1980s, even as it envisions a more hopeful future in which suffering– even if it cannot be eradicated—need not be experienced as a purely private and shameful secret nor as an unspeakable public truth.

Subjected to a range of earthly miseries as well as cosmic (and occasionally comic) trials, Kushner's newly-diagnosed protagonist, Prior, appears caught in the crosshairs of history, a man plagued by a tumultuous past and facing a disastrous future. The past, represented by a long succession of ancestors stretching back to the Norman Conquest, is captured in Prior's name; he is literally that which came before. The future, apocalyptic or otherwise, is represented by the coming millennium to which the play's characters variously refer with guarded hope, subdued dread, and blind terror. Prior's relationship with time becomes most dramatically flexible at the moment in which he steps out of earthly time and ascends into the heavens in order to choose between two versions of humankind's future—one characterized by a perpetual stasis or living death for the species, the other marked by pain but also by continued progress toward a more livable version of the world. Though sick, Prior ultimately rejects a vision of history defined by suffering, martyrdom, and inevitable destruction. His suffering stands as a metonym for the

[19] Tony Kushner, *Angels in America: A Gay Fantasia on National Themes* (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1995.)

suffering of humankind—not like the suffering of Christ as a sacrifice to atone for Original Sin, but as an emblem of endurance and persistence in the face of terrible pain and sorrow. Given its complex relation to the spectacle of male suffering, *Angels in America* might be classified not as an apocalypse play, or even pre-apocalypse play, but rather as an anti-apocalypse play. In rewriting the trope of affective apocalypse centered on suffering male bodies, it defiantly calls for "more life" even in the face of life's greatest cruelties.[20]

The Medieval *Last Judgement*: A Once and Future History Play

When would the world end? Was there any way for us to know? For medieval chroniclers interested in eschatological history, these questions were the subject of ongoing debate with some nominating earlier dates and others imagining a deferred doomsday. Still others argued that the question could not be answered from a human vantage point. The work of medieval dramatists also engages with these questions in ways that use these historical debates as a point of departure, but also goes beyond them. Rather than attempting to pin the date of the future event to a particular point in time, the medieval Last Judgement plays dramatize how human beings might experience the shift from earthbound time to eternal time—a transition that makes questions like "when" irrelevant. By virtue of their live performance, these plays—and in particular one notable moment in the Chester *Last Judgement*—dramatize the experience of human consciousness moving beyond clear delineations of past, present, and future. In so doing, the plays dramatize the critical concept of queer time mentioned above. After first further discussing the relevant features of this notion, my analysis will turn to how this mode of temporality is typically not (or only rarely) conveyed in medieval chronicle debate concerning

[20] Kushner, Epilogue, 280.

the date of the end of the world. Medieval eschatological drama, by contrast, utilizes this strategy as part of its ongoing dialogue with chronicle debate. Close analysis of Christ's spectacular display of bodily suffering in the Chester play shows how time is queered in live performance, locating the occurrence of that temporal queerness on the person of the actor portraying Christ. Finally, I look at the ways in which the Chester play also represents the popular medieval and early modern historical concept of *de casibus* tragedy and shows the play's conception of history a cumulative, cyclical phenomenon—at least, up to the point when it finally comes to an end.

Queer Time: Beyond Past, Present, and Future

As originally posited in theorist Jack Halberstam's *In a Queer Time and Place* (2005), the "queerness" of queer time referred to the way in which lives of queer individuals have traditionally been less rigidly structured by the socially prescribed milestones of marriage and reproduction with an eye towards future posterity. As the term has expanded to include experiences beyond those of queer individuals, the "queerness" of queer time is, like other aspects of queer theory, becomes metonymic to a certain extent.[21] Carolyn Dinshaw characterizes the word's multiple meanings by stressing that "queerness," in this context as elsewhere, is inherently neither one thing nor another:

> By "queer" I thus don't mean only "gay" or "homosexual" […] And I don't mean just "odd" or "different," though there's inevitably some of that here, too. In my theorizing of temporality, I explore forms of desirous, embodied being that are out of sync with the ordinarily linear measurements of everyday life, that

[21] The expansion of the meanings of the word "queer" in theoretical discourse to include identities, behaviors, issues, and concepts not directly connected to ideas of "queerness" based on gender and sexuality has been the subject of ongoing debate within queer studies itself. See, for example, *What's Queer about Queer Studies Now?* ed. Jack Halberstam, José Esteban Muñoz, David L. Eng, *Social Text* (Special Issue) 23:3-4, 2005. Acknowledging the just and, I think, extremely sensible objections of some queer scholars that the meaning of any word (including "queer"), to borrow the language of Shakespeare's marvelously queer Joan of Arc, "is like a circle in the water, / Which," if it "never ceaseth to enlarge itself" will "by broad spreading disperse to naught…" (*1 Henry VI*, 1.2.133-35), the term "queer time" nonetheless functions as the most widely-used description of the temporal phenomenon described above.

> engage heterogeneous temporalities or that precipitate out of time altogether—forms of being that I shall argue are queer by virtue of their particular engagements with time.

To inhabit a body is occasionally to experience a feeling of time that is "out of sync with the ordinarily linear measurements of everyday life." As a "form of embodied being," live theatrical performance is uniquely positioned to represent time in precisely this queered way. This is not to say that all live drama not strictly adhering to the "unity of time" demanded by classical and neoclassical rules of playwriting is queer. The representation of time in the medieval Last Judgement plays is queer in the sense defined by Halberstam and Dinshaw in that it collapses and confuses notions of what constitutes past, present, and future into a single moment simultaneously all and none of these. Additionally, following Halberstam, we can see how the Last Judgement plays make problematic the idea of thinking about the future by thinking about posterity. After the apocalypse, there is no posterity through which we can imagine ourselves. Jaclyn I. Prior has recently argued that drama has been underexplored by literary scholars examining the queer time phenomenon, and that live performance is uniquely suited to representing what Prior identifies as "time slips"—that is, "moments in live performance in which normative conceptions of time fail, or fall away, and the spectator or artist experiences an alternative, or queer temporality."[22]

The Last Judgement plays in general, and the Chester play in particular, present just such a "time slip" to spectators. In so doing, they offer an alternative to answers provided by medieval chroniclers in the ongoing debate concerning the end of the world. Medieval discussion of the forthcoming apocalypse, in plays and chronicle alike, brings together several strands of thought that modern scholarship traditionally separates, but that "both medieval intellectuals and ordinary

[22] Jaclyn I. Prior, *Time Slips: Queer Temporalities, Contemporary Performance, and the Hole of History* (Chicago: Northwestern University Press, 2017), 9.

people," according to Caroline Walker Bynum and Paul Freedman, "would have seen as closely linked;" namely "death, the afterlife, the end of time (whether terrestrial or beyond earth), and theological anthropology or the theory of the person."[23] The medieval Last Judgement plays represent the collision of these issues in such a way that shows how live performance occasionally queers time. However, the question and issues of time that surround these plays—including the knowability (or unknowability) of the date of the world's end, the importance of charting the narrative arc of human history (both past and ongoing), and the impact, if any, on how we experience what constitutes "the present"—are taken from the ongoing debate between medieval chroniclers interested in the apocalypse as a historical phenomenon.

The Apocalypse in the Medieval Historical Imagination

In the medieval biblical conception of history, creation and the apocalypse represented the two fixed endpoints between which lies all human history. As historian Chris Given-Wilson notes, when the predestined end of the world would come, "only God knew."[24] Despite, or perhaps because of, the certainty of the event and the uncertainty of the date, the apocalypse featured prominently in the medieval imagination as the culmination towards which all human activity had always been heading. From our vantage point, we now know the world did not end between the fourteenth and sixteenth centuries when the Last Judgement plays were first staged. However, writers and performers of the plays could not be sure this would be the case. In fact, they had every reason to suspect it might not.

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[23] Caroline Walker Bynum and Paul Freedman, "Introduction," to *Last Things: Death and the Apocalypse in the Middle Ages*, ed. Caroline Walker Bynum and Paul Freedman (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2000), 1.

[24] Chris Given-Wilson, *Chronicles: The Writing of History in Medieval England* (London: Hambeldon and London, 2004), 116.

A distinct aspect of English medieval historical writing was the belief that history had entered not a middle period, but its final stage. Given-Wilson observes that, though various schemes of periodization were credited in the Middle Ages, they all shared a "mutual reinforcement of the notion that this was no 'middle' age, but the last age of the world."[25] According to "the scheme of historical periodization that enjoyed the most widespread currency during medieval times," the Six Ages of the World, conceived by Augustine of Hippo a thousand years before, the world had already entered its sixth and final period.[26] However, "given that Augustine believed the end of the world was nigh even in the early fifth century, it might be thought surprising that, in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, his scheme was still widely accepted."[27] Other historical and theological writers hoped to triangulate the date of the world's end using knowledge of both present and historical events as represented in scripture. "Christian eschatology," as Brett Edward Whalen explains, "did not simply relate to the future, but also depended upon a close reading of the past that informed the present and pointed toward events approaching on the horizon."[28] History, in this model, has a cumulative effect and continually builds upon itself: "Christ's Second Coming in Final Judgement could not be understood without grasping the reality of his first Incarnation in the flesh. The Incarnation […], in turn, led one back into the mysteries of the Jewish scriptures," a model of infinite regress from the fixed (yet unknowable) point of doomsday.[29]

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[25] Ibid., 116.

[26] Ibid.,115. The Six Ages theorized by Saint Augustine are summarized by Given-Wilson as follows: The first lasted "from the Creation to the Flood; the second from Noah to Abraham; the third, from Abraham to David; the fourth from David to the Babylonian Captivity of the Jews; the fifth, from the Babylonian Captivity to the appearance of Christ on earth; with the sixth, which had begun with the life of Christ, would last until his Second Coming and the Last Judgement, following which the world would end and Eternity (the seventh age) would follow," 115.

[27] Ibid., 115.

[28] Whalen, 3.

[29] Ibid., 3.

Individual chroniclers differed as to how near or far they imagined the end to be. Matthew Paris, for example, concluded his *Chronica Majora* in the year 1250, the year in which, Laura Smollett indicates, he thought would be the world's last.[30] This sense of imminent doom pervades the chronicler's massive universal history of a world that, he believed, would soon be coming to a close. Events are dated not only in relation to the Creation but also to Doomsday, specifying the number of years by which they follow one and precede the other. His account of the Nativity, for example, dates the event twelve-hundred and fifty years *prior* to the arrival of the Anti-Christ, who, of course, initiates the end of the world. The clear difference in years shows not only how near he thought the end was, but also, in the words of Suzanne Lewis, demonstrates the "important medieval conception of a closed historical chronology and moved through clearly defined periods towards the Last Judgement and the end of time."[31] If Matthew represents an extreme example, the extremity lies in the nearness and certainty of the date, rather than simply his conviction that the world would end.

At the opposite end of the apocalypse spectrum was the earlier Henry of Huntington, for whom the question of the exact date of the world was both reassuringly unanswerable and irrelevant to individual daily life. As Henry writes in his *Anglica Historia*, since "no one knows the extent of time except for the Father of all," there was little point in speculating.[32] "We see the folly," Henry points out, "of the theory of those who thought that after the Lord's Passion the world would only last a thousand years."[33] The end of the world may be an important event in the conceptualization of history, but it does not follow that this event can be taken into our

[30] Laura A. Smoller, "Plague and the Investigations of the Apocalypse," in *Last Things: Death and the Apocalypse in the Middle Ages*, ed. Caroline Walker Bynum and Paul Freedman (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2000), 164.
[31] Suzanne Lewis, *The Art of Matthew Paris* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), 102-03
[32] Henry of Huntington, *Historia Anglorum: The History of the English People*, ed. and transl. Diana Greenway (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), 499
[33] Ibid., 499

historical calculations in any meaningful way. Ultimately the date of the end of Creation made little difference to individuals. For each person, Henry writes, "the day on which you die is, for you, the end of the world. Christ, however, is the conclusion of time."[34] The death of each individual is indistinguishable from the destruction of all Creation, including time itself, as caused by the Second Coming of Christ—at least from the individual's point of view. In consequence, there was nothing humans could do about an event that might happen tomorrow or after another millennium.

Despite his stated position that all conjecture is impossible, Henry Huntingdon's epilogue to the *Anglica Historia* hazards a guess on how near or far off the end might be. Firmly anchoring his work and his contemporary readers to a specific moment in time, Henry writes, "we are leading our lives, or—to put it more appropriately—we are holding back our death in what is evidently the 135th year of the second millennium," i.e., the year 1135.[35] He then addresses a hypothetical reader a thousand years hence in "the 135th year of the third millennium," asking that, if they should happen to read his book, they will pray for his soul:

> I, who will already be dust by your time, have made mention of you in this book, so long before you are to be born, so that if—as my soul strongly desires—it shall come about that this book comes into your hands, I beg you, in the incomprehensible mercy of God, to pray for me.[36]

Pivoting from his immediate present to the impossibly distant future, Henry speaks to his imagined future reader directly. This gesture not only deflates any sense of urgency about the end of the world, but, more importantly, shifts our attention from a certain but chronologically unguessable event (the apocalypse) to a merely potential but chronologically specific event (a

[34] Ibid., 499.
[35] Ibid., 495.
[36] Ibid., 497.

reader encountering his text a thousand years hence). Henry's direct address to his imagined, future reader shows a kind and indeed surprisingly intimate regard. Though he will be "dust" so long "before you are to be born," he has taken care to include them in his book; Henry imagines his historical vision through his readerly posterity. It is the fervent wish of his soul, he says, that this meeting, of sorts, may take place. Stephen Greenblatt famously writes that he was motived to study literature by "a desire to speak with the dead."[37] And though any act of writing for posterity argues a desire to be heard by future ages, it is unusual for the dead to speak to us on such intimate terms—a tête-à-tête between individuals from two different times who have never, and can never, actually meet. After the passing of so many centuries, Henry's hypothetical reader has, presumably, still not yet been born, even at the comparatively late date at which I write. Unless Henry's future reader encounters his work at age 113, we are still wading through the gulf of time between Henry's written comment and this hypothetical reader's birth.

To overhear the chronicler's voice from the remote past calling over our heads, as it were, in the present moment, to an individual who exists only in the future, creates both the illusion of a collapsed time sequence that both envelopes and excludes us, as well as a profound sense of chronological whiplash. Reading Henry's words in only the twenty-second year of the third millennium, the feeling of suspended time is much stronger, I suspect, than it would be for someone in the year 2135– for in that case, the chronological collapse would occur only between past and the present, without including a future.

I have described Henry of Huntingdon's historical vision of an apocalyptic future at such length because it is this sense of an assured ending that medieval apocalypse drama sought to upend. Unlike Henry's almost cozy intimacy with futurity, the live performance of the Last

[37] Stephen Greenblatt, *Shakespearean Negotiations: The Circulation of Social Energy in Renaissance England* (Berkley: University of California Press, 1988), 1.

Judgement plays conveys a different feeling. To a medieval English believer watching these plays in the fourteenth or fifteenth century, the sense of belonging to a long historical moment, beginning where Scripture leaves off and continuing into the future, is lost. Instead, these plays convey the message that one's own time is only a momentary historical hiccup between the Ascension of Christ and the End of the World.

Unlike the historically-based biblical cycle drama, chronicle as a written form tends to have a fairly stable temporal relationship with its readers. From the point of view of the chronicler, the writing describes what happened in the past, written from the chronicler's present vantage point, for the benefit of those reading in the future (even if only the very near future, in the case of contemporary readers). Readers encountering the work in their own present moment, confronts what the chronicler wrote in the past, describing events that occurred at an even more remote past. The moment of Henry's direct address to a reader in what is (from our perspective) still the comfortably distant future, presents a rare moment in chronicle reading. In live theatre, however, the relationship between performance and spectator juggling past, present, and future is radically different. Sharing the present with each other, performer and spectator collectively create a temporally queer event (the performance) that represents separate, imagined events (the narrative content of the play) that may be past, present, or future—or all three at once.

Always Already the Apocalypse: Christ's Body in the Chester Last Judgement

In telling the history of the world from Creation to Doomsday, the medieval cycle plays dramatize biblical history through the Ascension (or thereabout), before jumping ahead to the apocalypse. The omitted stretch of time between these two events includes the moment at which the play is performed—as well as the entire lives of the performers, the spectators, their families, neighbors, and anyone ever met in the generations leading up to that moment and extending for

an unknown duration into the future.[38] Staging a future event as described by writers in the past in a moment of live performance creates the illusion of a jumbled or distorted relationship between past, present, and future. Nowhere in the four surviving Last Judgement plays does the difference become more confused than the moment in the Chester play when the wounds Christ suffered at the Crucifixion spontaneously reopen and bleed afresh during his Second Coming. As well as presenting a surprising (and, as far as I can tell, novel) theatrical effect, the moment has significant implications for the way historical time can be represented onstage. The Chester *Last Judgement*, like its counterparts in the York, Towneley, and N-Town Cycles, depicts Christ's return to earth to judge the souls of humankind and initiate the end of the world; as such, it presents a future event, or a "pre-enactment," staged in a moment of a live performance.[39]

However, the Chester pre-enactment also contains a reenactment of a past event. The Crucifixion functions metatheatrically as a play-within-a-play in the Chester *Last Judgement*, a set piece that references both the original "historical" event of the Crucifixion as described in scripture, as well as its representation in the Chester Crucifixion play staged in the previous day's sequence of performances.[40] In so doing, the play creates a moment where temporality and

[38] The points between which this chronological jump occurs are different in each cycle. In the interest of completeness, they are: Towneley jumps from *The Ascension* (Play 26) to *The Last Judgement* (Play 27). N-Town jumps from *The Assumption of Mary* (Play 41) to *The Last Judgement* (Play 42). York, similarly omits the history between *The Assumption of the Virgin* and *The Coronation of the Virgin* (Plays 45 and 46) and *Doomsday* (Play 47).

[39] Before entering into a close analysis of the Chester *Last Judgement*, it may be helpful to note some of the main features which differentiate the remaining three plays from the Chester version and from each other: The York *Last Judgement* or *Doomsday* (Play 47, Mercer's Guild) stands as the most archetypal and perhaps least distinctive example of the four—a basic template from which the remaining three present variations. The N-Town version (Play 42), only a fragment, is most distinctive in its emphasis on the bodily horrors of the resurrected dead and the torments awaiting the damned (both briefly discussed later in this chapter). The Towneley version (Play 27) uses the text of the York play for scenes representing Christ and the dead, but adds an extended comic sequence, prescient of *The Screwtape Letters*, in which two demonic bureaucrats and their apprentice prepare to manage the massive influx of damned souls. Conjectured to be the work of the "Wakefield Master," it is by far the longest of the four, and therefore (at least in its current form) possibly intended for a stand-alone performance rather than the culminating play of a cycle.

[40] Part of the Whitsun celebrations, the complete Chester Cycle took three days to perform. Plays dramatizing the Biblical narrative from Creation to the Nativity were shown on the first day, from the Slaughter of the Innocents to the Harrowing of Hell on the second, and from the Resurrection to the Last Judgement on the third.

embodiment co-construct the apocalyptic imagination, a moment where time is functionally queered by the theatrical display of Christ's body.

In its conception of the apocalypse, the Chester *Last Judgement* makes Crucifixion the central element of onstage spectacle, constantly linking the future event with the past. The play first invokes the Crucifixion though words and, significantly, through images. As the play begins, Deus (in this instance, God the Father) initiates the beginning of the end by commanding his Angels to fetch "my crosse […], my crowne of thornes, sponge and speare, / and nayles" (24.17-19). Though prominently enthroned in the upper level of the pageant wagon that represented the Heavens, the deity has not yet made his entrance back into the world to be beheld by the souls of humanity. Though part of the Chester *Last Judgement*, this scene is not part of the biblical conception of the Last Judgement, which does not properly begin until God reappears on earth in the person of Christ. His instructions to his angels create the impression of a star actor giving directions to his stagehands before making a grand entrance. When the deity moves from Heaven to Earth as Christ, spectacularly descending, according to the stage directions "quasi in nube, si fieri poterit" (as if in a cloud, if possible) his accompanying angels have gathered the appropriate props—the cross, the crown of thorns, the spear, and other "instruments" of the Crucifixion (Chester 24.355-56).[41]

The Crucifixion is therefore already present in emblematic form when Christ reminds the gathered souls that, for their sake, he "dyed on the roode-tree / and my blood shedd, as thou may see" (Chester 24.381-82). Multiple meanings resonate from the words "as thou may see." Their most evident meaning directs the gaze of the spectators to the grim condition of Christ's body.

[41] "Jesus quasi in nube, si fieri poterit […] Stabunt angeli cum cruce, corona spinea, lancae, et instrumentis aliis" (355-56). The "si fieri poterit" (if possible) which qualifies his descent "as if in a cloud," hints at both the aspirations and limitations of theatrical spectacle in the mounting of these Last Judgement plays.

Appearing not as after the Resurrection, but immediately following the Crucifixion, Christ's "bodye ys all torent" (24.417), lacerated from top to bottom. As he explains to the gathered souls, "No lymme on me but yt is lent / From head right to the heele" (419-20). But in describing his body as an object to behold— "as thou may see"—Christ blurs the line between the assembled souls of the dead within the play and its gathered spectators.

The connection between the "onstage" and "offstage" audience is complex enough that it must be unpacked in greater detail later in this section. For the moment, the play makes clear that Christ's message, conveyed through the visual spectacle of his body, is as much for the "offstage" audience of spectators as the "onstage" audience of souls. Christ's aim for both audiences, however, is didactic. He offers his body not just as a visual spectacle but as one illustrating a rhetorical point.

The references to the Crucifixion thus far—Christ's words and wounds, the emblems born by the angels—have been static. The words refer to an event that has already happened, and the props and costumes have (again, so far) remained inert, unchanging objects. In this, the Chester *Last Judgement* resembles the York and Towneley versions in which Angels bear emblems, and Christ appears in a similar physical condition. "Here may ye see my wondes wide," he announces in the York version, itemizing his injuries "through harte and heed, foote, and hand and hide" (47.245-46). However, the Chester *Last Judgement* takes this blazon of wounds a step further with a notable theatrical contrivance of stagecraft by which Christ spontaneously begins to bleed anew. Christ tells those assembled before him:

> Nowe that you shall apperlye see
> Freshe blood bleede, man, for thee –
> […]
> Behold now, all men! Look on me
> And see my blood freshe owte flee
> That I bleede on roode-tree

For your savatyon. (24.421-28)

He tells the spectators that they "shall apperlye see / Freshe blood," and he does not disappoint them. This speech is accompanied by the stage direction "Tunc emittet sanguinem de latere eius"—*Then his side will emit blood* (24.428-29). The use of the word "apperlye"—perceptibly, in plain view—has an emphatic, indexical effect as he directs the vision of the spectators towards a sight that, as the word implies, is already clearly visible.

The nature of the play's representation of the Crucifixion changes in this moment from static to dynamic. Previous chapters of this dissertation have discussed the ways that history plays, at some point in their action, inevitably shift focus from the representation of historical *events* to the representation of historical *reporting*. In this case, the change occurs in the opposite direction; the gesture does not merely refer to the past historical event already "reported on" by Christ throughout the play, but actually recreates or restages it. Christ does not actually mount the cross a second time, but his body reenacts its response to that event. History is coming to its end, but history is also repeating itself. Christ's earlier reference to the "blood [he] shedd, *as thou may see*" (24.382) now takes on an additional and more urgent meaning. Christ does not simply mean "*as thou may see* has already occurred, based on condition of my body" (present continuous tense), but rather *"as thou may see* in just a moment, if thou continue to watch" (future conditional). The Chester *Last Judgement* changes the Crucifixion from an emblem to an action.

Christ becomes the impresario of the spectacle of his own maimed body in order to make a rhetorical point as he draws the history of the world to a close. The point is man's salvation, and the theatrical device used for conveying this point is Christ's blood. The dramatists responsible for staging the pageant appear to have been pleased with their stage contrivance and

hoped to make the most of it. In the seventy lines between Christ's entrance and the stage direction "Tunc emittet sanguinem de latere eius," he commands the spectators to watch, lest they fail to witness his "blood freshe owt flee," no fewer than six times. Between his first announcement, quoted above— "my blood shedd, as thou may see" (24.381-82)—and the two mentions directly before the emission, he calls attention to it three additional times.[42] The point of this repetition, other than to tout a novel piece of stage machinery is, as Christ explains, to illustrate a lesson:

> The which blood—behouldes yee—
> Freshe-houlden tell nowe I would should be
> For certayne pointes that lyked mee
> Of which I will now say. (24.385-88)

His announcement that the spectators must watch carefully—a statement whose syntax apparently mirrors the tortured condition of the speaker's body—may be paraphrased as, "Behold! I tell you now, I will it that my blood should be freshly-beheld" (285-86). The statement is offered in support of "certayne pointes" that it pleases him to make. Those points, "of which I will now say," also concern his blood. He offers it to his Father, as sacrifice to atone for the numerous sins of mankind (389-96). His blood that "nowe shewed ys" has been put on display in order that "the good therebye maye have blys" and the "evyll" may "have greate sorrowe in sight of this" (24.404-410). Or, as he tells the spectators without mentioning his blood specifically: "Behould on mee and you may lere [learn]" (24.402). The play offers a historical as well as spiritual lesson—namely, that the ultimate fate of every individual human soul depends on one particular event that occurred in central Palestine roughly a millennium-and-a-half before

[42] Lines 381, 385, 398, 405, 424, and 426. The occurrence is also announced by Deus prior to his descent in the person of Christ: "wake you each wordlye wight / that I maye see all in my sight / that I blood forth can bleede" (14-16).

the staging of this play. That historical lesson, in this instance, is a living image rather than simply a spoken one.

The repetition also reflects the conditions of performance. In a noisy, crowded, public space, in potentially failing light, it seems unlikely that everyone would have their gaze fixed on the action for the duration of the performance. Within the context of the play, Christ can presumably count on the undivided attention of the assembled souls, but the same could not be said for the actor playing Christ and before the assembled "offstage" spectators. The final component of the play's effect of a collapsed past, present, and future into a single moment of live performance is the presence of the audience. Christ's moral, bodily spectacle, in fact, depends on two audiences: the "onstage" audience comprised of the souls of "all mankynd" (34) and the "offstage" audience of spectators gathered to watch the performance. The first lies clearly within the limits of the play's dramatic representation. The second appears to exist outside these limits, but are made a part of the play by attending to Christ's words and following his instructions to "behold." The effect is distinctly different from moments in other plays in which a character on stage addresses a large crowd of people that nominally includes the audience of spectators. For example, when King Herod addresses the spectators at the start of the *Innocents* plays as though he were their king, he is, in the words of John McGavin, "challenging spectators to accept membership of a new fictive community—his subjects." Faced with this challenge, audiences may react in various ways; "as Christians they can loathe Herod, as subjects they are free to despise and reject this king's commands, […] but as theatre-goers" they have, after all, "come to hear him," and so may choose to obey the command.[43] However, when Christ, or more properly the actor portraying Christ, addresses the double audience of actors portraying

[43] McGavin, 210.

souls and spectators watching the play— "You good and evil that […] come to our judgement" (357)—the relationship between play and reality is drastically different. Medieval English men and women would never be Herod's subjects outside of this brief imaginative context—however they will (ostensibly) be among the dead addressed by Christ at the actual Last Judgement.

The point is relevant here to the Last Judgement plays because it is the souls of "all mankynd" onstage that represent the souls watching the play. A medieval believer could have understood the performance in the following terms: Christ's words are not only addressed to the dead souls represented onstage but also to the live souls gathered to watch the play. They are watching a dramatic representation of a future event at which their souls will, in fact, be present. The fully realized stage performance is merely a dress rehearsal for the real event to come. The onstage audience is a dramatic representation of the offstage audience. When, as the stage direction stipulates, "omnes mortui de sepulchris surgent" (all the dead shall rise from their graves, Chester 24.40-41), we realize that this group includes everyone watching. Spectators may "behold" Christ but they also behold versions of themselves, as though in a mirror. Though lines are assigned to the Saved and Damned Pope, Emperor, etc., if the Chester *Last Judgement* resembled its counterparts in the other cycles, these figures would have been joined by a silent chorus of supernumerary souls to represent the rest of humanity. Surviving records for York and Coventry indicate costumes for souls dressed in robes, wigs ("chevrules") and anonymizing masks ("viserns"); the presence of these figures would allow spectators to see themselves represented on stage, if only abstractly, among either the doomed or the saved.[44]

Believers could understand the appearance of Christ in the Chester *Last Judgement* play on several levels. First, like everything else in the *Last Judgement*, the sight of Christ's newly-

[44] "The York Mercers' Indenture," in *The Broadview Anthology of Medieval Drama*, ed. Christina M. Fitzgerald and John T. Sebastian (Ontario: Broadview Press, 2012), 138.

bleeding wounds is part of a future event—or at least an imagined representation of a future event. Within that imagined future moment, however, the reopening of Christ's wounds also reenacts the imposition of those wounds at the Crucifixion. Originally the result of blows delivered by human hands, they "bleed afresh" in the *Last Judgement* play for spiritually symbolic reasons—linking the enactment of the past event (Christ's sacrifice) to the outcome of the future event (the salvation or damnation of each soul). In performance, therefore, the bleeding of the wounds represents to the spectators a present enactment of a future historical event that reenacts both a past historical event and a prior theatrical event (i.e., the performance of the Crucifixion play the day before).[45] The wounds are symbolic—doubly so since, within the context of the play, they have spiritual rather than physical causes, but also, as part of a theatrical performance, the wounds are artificial rather than real. However, they are also part of the summary aspect of the Last Judgement plays that gather together previous moments from the history of the world and from the cycle of plays.

The issue of Christ's bloody wounds and their relation to chronological time calls to mind a later reflection on the representation of history onstage. In his oft-quoted reflection on the popularity of the English chronicle play of the commercial stage of the 1580s and 90s, Thomas Nashe observes of Shakespeare's *Henry VI, Part 1*:

> How would it have joyed brave Talbot (the terror of the French) to think that after he had lain two hundred years in his tomb, he should triumph again on the stage and have his bones new embalmed with the tears of ten thousand spectators at least (at

[45] Ironically, though the Chester *Last Judgement* features the Crucifixion so prominently, it draws very little on the *Crucifixion* play itself. Though the two events (one past, one future) are closely connected in the *The Last Judgement*, the two plays are not. The emphasis on Christ's body and on the "instruments" of the Crucifixion, for example, are accorded more emphasis in the *Last Judgement* than in the *Crucifixion* itself. The nailing of Christ to the cross requires a lot of stage business by the semi-competent soldiers charged with the task, but Christ's body itself does not receive comment either by the soldiers or the other spectators. Mary makes a single reference in passing to the "crown of thorne" (Chester 16.253) that her son bears, but otherwise, with the obvious exception of the cross itself, the other "implements" receive no mention in either the dialogue or the stage directions.

> several times), who, in the tragedian that represents his person,
> imagine they behold him fresh bleeding.

Though speaking of a character in an English chronicle history play by Shakespeare, Nashe's description of a protagonist who had lain "in his tomb," but who then rose to "triumph again," analogizes Talbot with Christ. As with the Passion Play, the spectators "imagine they behold" Talbot's wounds "fresh bleeding." Their tears, which Nahse says "embalm" Talbot's dead bones into a state of restored animation, call to mind the tears that Passion Play spectators are alleged to have shed in great profusion—at least, according to the anonymous Wycliffite author of the "Tretise of Miraclis Pleyinge," who denounced those "that wepen for the play of Cristis passioun" as shallow and superficially pious.[46] Nashe, unlike his anti-theatrical predecessor, intends the observation as praise for both the play and the playgoers, and imagines that it would "joy brave Talbot" to see both. At a time when the English chronicle play was at the height of its popularity, Nashe praises the effect of Shakespeare's play in performance by comparing it to the performance of medieval religious drama. For dramatists and playgoers in the Middle Ages as well as the early modern period, the difference between historical drama, as it is now understood, and religious drama, as it is now understood, was slipperier than we might imagine—and this generic flexibility works in both directions.

The Chester Cycle: Temporality and De casibus *Tragedy*

The Chester *Last Judgement* also distinguishes itself from the three other surviving Last Judgement plays in placing the greatest emphasis on post-biblical history. All of the cycles, as noted earlier, omit the long stretch of time between the end of the Bible and the end of the world that includes the play's moment of performance. However, the Chester *Last Judgement*, far more

[46] *A Tretise of Miraclis Pleyinge*, ed. Clifford Davidson, Medieval Institute Publications (Kalamazoo: University of Michigan Press, 1993), 102.

than its counterparts, alludes to the intervening history in its representation of the way that history will end. Whereas the other plays represent the souls of humankind as two large groups (the Anima Bona and Anima Mala), Chester depicts individual souls as representative of different social ranks or stations. A Saved Pope, Emperor, King, and Queen stand opposite their counterparts among the damned—as well as among two of the damned from further down the social hierarchy, a Judge and a Merchant. We might call this "estates apocalypse" by analogy with the popular medieval genre of estates satire that criticized members of various social classes for their respective failings to the common profit.

In addition to the Chester play's obsession with distinguishing social ranks at the Day of Judgement, the form of in which the play survives also emphasizes a mediated temporality. All of the medieval cycles, in their current textual form, represent snapshots of dramatic works tha evolved over time, changing gradually through repeated performances and revision from the late-fourteenth to the late-sixteenth century. But of the four surviving cycles, the Chester plays bear the latest and most drastic marks of revision. The earliest surviving records indicate that, by 1422, the performance of the Chester plays was already a long-established tradition. But as Theresa Coletti and Gail McMurray Gibson have shown, "the scriptural dramas comprising the extant Chester Cycle, in text and performance, are manifestly mid- to late-Tudor phenomena," surviving "in five complete manuscripts, written between 1591 and 1607."[47] In his study of the Chester plays, *Recycling the Cycle*, David Mills has done much to parse which moments in the cycle's surviving late-Tudor form appear to have entered the plays before the Reformation and what was incorporated after.[48] As it now stands, the Chester Cycle has been interpreted to reveal

[47] Theresa Coletti and Gail McMurray Gibson, "The Tudor Origins of Medieval Drama," *A Companion to Tudor Literature*, ed. Kent Cartwright (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 230.
[48] David Mills, *Recycling the Cycle: The City of Chester and Its Whitsun Plays* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1998).

numerous contradictory and polemic meanings. Evincing what Coletti has described as an "openness to alignment with conflicting religious and doctrinal positions," the cycle's religious ideology is as mobile as its sixteenth-century pageant wagons."[49] The plays of the Chester Cycle, like those of Shakespeare, ultimately confound critical attempts to pin down their precise religious affiliation or whether it is properly to be considered a medieval or an early modern theatrical event.

Just as the Chester *Last Judgement* is already an early modern remediation of a late medieval play, the pageant also displays another type of medievalism: the continued early modern English affection for the medieval *de casibus* tradition of historical writing—episodic histories describing various cases (*casibus)* of great men fallen from power into ruin. Offering a *de casibus* model of history, the Chester play does not specify the precise identities of any of these past historical figures. In contrast, for example, to the Chester *Harrowing of Hell* (Play 17) that shows Adam, King David, John the Baptist, and various other recognizable biblical figures awaiting the arrival of their savior in the afterlife, the figures in *The Last Judgement* are identified not by whatever names they used in their lifetimes, but only according to their rank and their fate ("salvatus" or "damnatus"). And though certain aspects suggest or invoke specific historical figures—for example, the Damned King's line, "Relygion I reaved against the right," appears to be a post-Reformation reference to Henry VIII and the Dissolution of the Monasteries—they remain emblematic types of good and bad monarchs, rather than lampoons of specific ones. Like figures in a *de casibus* tragedy, their function is exemplary. As has already been discussed, Henry VIII was not the only English king to ransack a monastery. The figures represented on stage are recognizably "historical," in the sense that they represent kings, queens,

[49] Theresa Coletti, "The Chester Cycle in Sixteenth-Century Religious Culture," *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 37, no. 3 (Fall 2007): 534-35.

and popes who are not currently alive. However, they also simultaneously stand for all of them, none of them, and any of them.

Shakespeare's *Richard II*: "I Wasted Time, and Now Doth Time Waste Me"

Whereas the Chester *Last Judgement* invokes *de casibus* tragedy as a genre of historical writing in order stage a representation of the apocalyptic, Shakespeare's chronicle history play does the reverse, using apocalyptic rhetoric, imagery, and prophesy to stage what is, in effect, an example of *de casibus* tragedy. Characteristic of the *de casibus* form, Shakespeare's play represents the fall of a monarch—in this case, the overthrow of King Richard II by his cousin, Henry Bolingbroke, Duke of Lancaster in the year 1399. At the moment of Richard's deposition, Bolingbroke (now King Henry IV in all but name) understands the business at hand as a simple transfer of power between individuals, legitimized by the consent of Richard and the assembled English nobility. This is *de casibus* on a national scale, the fall of one powerful man and the rise of another. Richard, however, understands his downfall as an endpoint rather than part of a cycle, imagining his dethronement as an apocalyptic moment for the nation as a whole rather than merely an individual misfortune.

Employing the same theatrical techniques used by Christ in the Chester *Last Judgement*, Richard transforms the deposition scene from a short, if painful, transition of royal titles that Bolingbroke expects into a self-consciously theatrical spectacle, part Passion Play, part Doomsday Play, and part history lesson. Drawing attention to his own suffering body as a didactic illustration or symbol for his on-stage audience of assembled English nobility, Richard queers the time between his deposition, the Crucifixion, and the Last Judgement, collapsing all three into one moment. For Shakespeare's off-stage audience, however, Richard's performance

queers time in a different way. As both the remaining action of the play and the historical consciousness of the Elizabethan audience prove, the version of history that Richard envisions never comes to pass. Elizabethan England is not post-apocalyptic England. The "future" from which Richard's off-stage audience is watching, according to Richard, should not exist. Richard's prophetic vision (like his understanding of the dissolution of his rule and) is wrong. Richard's deposition is not a national apocalypse and the state will survive the death of any monarch. Richard's apocalyptic imagination allows him to envision an English future which never comes to be. But the lesson which his deposition actually illustrates—that historical continuity survives the consequences of regicide—presents a very dangerous idea to the political imagination of Shakespeare's Elizabethan audience.

Though Shakespeare's *Richard II* shares an interest in ceremonial pageantry with the medieval Last Judgement plays, this meditative and frequently understated historical tragedy is tonally very different from the heightened, pyrotechnic spectacles of Coventry, Chester, and elsewhere. However, of his histories, Shakespeare's *Richard II* is the most emblematic of the political uses of the apocalypse. Critical discussion of apocalyptic elements in *Richard II* appears, curiously, to have thus far been confined to French scholarly discourse. Yan Brailowsky discusses the way in which the play, poised on the brink of two new centuries (i.e., the fourteenth and the sixteenth), engages both pre- and post-Reformation notions of apocalypse.[50] Charles Forker's article "From Political Revolution to Apocalypse"—an English-language article in the overwhelmingly French-language anthology—reads the apocalypticism of *Richard II* as a

[50] Yan Brailowsky's "'Let me prophesy': apocalypse et inspiration prophétique dans *Richard II* de Shakespeare," *Journée d'étude sur les auteurs et sujets des concours*, ed. Michel Naumann and Dominique Daniel (Tours: Presses Academics François-Rabelais, 2006), 81-99.

precursor to that found in *King Lear*.[51] My analysis, by contrast, will focus on the continuities and disjunctions that Richard's apocalyptic self-fashioning lays bare.

Critics of Shakespeare's medieval histories from the Old Historicists to the New Historicists and beyond have emphasized the ways in which events of the past, appear to lead directly to Shakespeare's own historical moment. English men and women living and writing in the fifteenth century (between the reigns of Richard II and Richard III) imagined the chronological relationship between their time and the end of the world—rather than the relationship between their own time and the reign of a late-sixteenth century queen of a not-yet-founded dynasty or the work of her age's most influential dramatist. The play itself refers to the apocalypse only once directly, though in a very broadly proverbial sense. Richard, in a last muster of courage before his hope of reinforcement and his resolution fail him, addresses his absent adversary: "Proud Bolingbroke, I come / To change blows with thee for our day of doom" (3.2.188-89). He does not appear to be thinking in apocalyptic terms as yet. However, he appears to be more right than he knows.

Richard's actions during the deposition scene (Act 4, Scene1) create a spectacle of suffering similar to the one metatheatrically performed by Christ in the Chester *Last Judgement*. Christ reenacts the Crucifixion within *The Last Judgement* as a play-within-a-play—didactically illustrating a lesson in theological history through the image of his maimed body. Richard similarly makes his own suffering body the focal point of a self-consciously theatrical display during this scene in order to make a didactic historical point. Like Christ's reenactment of the Crucifixion in *The Last Judgement*, Richard also attempts to stage his deposition as a crucifixion scene of sorts—a Passion Play in which he is the central figure of suffering and pathos.

[51] Charles Forker, "From Political Revolution to Apocalypse" *Richard II de William Shakespeare: Une Oevre en Contexte* (Caen: Equipe Literature et Societes Anglophones, 2005).

However, he performs this scene in ways that far more closely resemble Christ's magisterial persona in the *Last Judgement* play, rather than his famously meek, understated character in the medieval Passion Plays themselves. In so doing, he creates a "time-slip."

In asserting the similarity of these two metatheatrical strategies (Christ's and Richard's), I am not arguing, of course, that Shakespeare was personally familiar with the Chester *Last Judgement*, or that this work serves as an unrecognized source for his chronicle play. Shakespeare's familiarity with medieval drama in general is well-documented. However, both Shakespeare's Richard and the Chester *Last Judgement*'s Christ draw on broadly circulated notions of apocalyptic history. Both figures use the body as a living illustration of a historical lessons or concepts. Both rely on the active participation of an audience. And both do so in a way that queers the familiar, comfortable separation of past, present, and future. However, Richard's performance has a more complicated relationship with historical chronology than Christ's.

Unfortunately for Richard, the performance has mixed results. Unlike the omnipotent judge of the medieval plays, Richard is unable to command the attention of his spectators (at least, those onstage). Though the deposition scene moves a small number of Richard's followers to a mount a quickly-suppressed rebellion later in the play, for most of the assembled lords, and for Richard's most important audience member, the ascendant King Henry, the performance falls flat. His onstage audience members are mainly unmoved by a dramatic history lesson that it is in their material interests to ignore.

In contrast to his onstage audience, however, the scene has proved a long-standing favorite among playgoers for the past four centuries. A theatrical set piece, noted for its rhetorical and poetic power, the deposition scene provides a demonstrably effective moment of dramatic representation, thanks to Richard's heightened, self-conscious performance of

suffering. Both the deposition scene within the broader context of the play, and Richard's "scene" within the context of his deposition present emblematic lessons on the nature of history. However, they are not the lessons that Richard himself appears to think may be inferred from the spectacle of his suffering body.

Making a Scene: Richard's Spectacle of Suffering

At the moment of his deposition, Richard makes a spectacle of his own suffering figure in order to demonstrate a historical lesson to the nobles, courtiers, clergy assembled at Westminster Hall. Richard attempts to illustrate to his on-stage audience that his deposition reenacts the actual Crucifixion of Christ (i.e., the event recorded in scripture). He repeatedly invokes the comparison in order to establish himself as a type for Christ in the minds of his hearers. He also hopes that his deposition (like the reenacted Crucifixion that occurs in the midst of the Chester play) may act function as a Last Judgement—a kind of national apocalypse so grievous that the country cannot ever be restored, cannot go back to the way things were before. For those in political control at this point in the play, Henry and his allies, the scene is intended to function as Richard's Judgement Day—i.e., the day in when he will be judged. Richard intends that even if his actions have no political consequences, he will assume the role of judge.

For Shakespeare and his sixteenth-century audience, however, the deposition scene not only reenacts an event in the life of a fourteenth-century English king, it is also a moment in a fifteenth-century play such as the Chester *Last Judgement* (or one from a cycle similar to it), that is itself a performance of both a past and a future event. By representing an event in the historical medieval past (the deposition of King Richard II), in terms evocative of a later medieval play (*The Last Judgement*), that is itself a representation of both a past event (the Crucifixion) and a future event (the Last Judgement), Act IV, Scene 1 of Shakespeare's *Richard II* bundles all of

these moments into a single moment of late-sixteenth-century performance. The scene is a chord that strikes all of those notes at once—the Crucifixion, the deposition, the performance itself, and the Last Judgement.

Shakespeare's Richard wants to make his deposition into a scene of martyrdom—a Passion Play featuring himself in the role of Christ. Twice in the course of the scene he compares himself directly to Christ. First, referring to the assembled lords, he asks rhetorically, "Did they not sometime cry, 'all hail!' to me?" (1before answering himself: "So Judas did to Christ" (4.1.170-71). Literary critic Michael O'Connell notes that this is one of two references Shakespeare makes to Judas greeting Christ with the words "All hail" (the other is found in *3 Henry VI*, 5.7.34)—words found "not in the Gospel texts," but in "the text of the Chester [Crucifixion] play."[52] Later in the scene, again speaking rhetorically to the lords, Richard makes the comparison even more explicit:

> Though some of you with Pilate wash your hands
> Showing an outward pity; yet you Pilates
> Have here delivered me to my sour cross,
> And water cannot wash away your sin. (4.1.239-42)

His references make it unambiguously clear that he is inviting his treacherous subjects, as he sees them, to understand his role and his suffering as analogous to the role and suffering of Christ. The analogy is self-conscious and rhetorically deliberate. His subjects may have "delivered" him to his "sour cross," but the choice to invoke this particular metaphor is Richard's own. The comparison is rhetorical but Richard's execution is theatrical. He establishes the "script" he wishes the deposition to follow and cast himself in the starring role of the martyred Christ. However, though Richard thinks of this scene as Passion Play, it is more accurate to say that his

[52] Michael O'Connell, "Blood begetting blood: Shakespeare and the mysteries," in *Medieval Shakespeare: Pasts and Presents*, ed. Ruth Morse, Helen Cooper, and Peter Holland (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 178.

reenactment more closely resembles the play-within-a-play Crucifixion that occurs midway through the Chester *Last Judgement,* as opposed to the representation of the Crucifixion offered by the medieval Passion Plays themselves.

In the Middle English Crucifixion plays of Chester, York, and elsewhere, Christ famously appears in an understated role. Though placed at the center of the action of a play that stands at the thematic center—we might say "at the crux"—of the complete mystery cycles, Christ himself has remarkably little to do in these plays. In the Chester play, Christ speaks only 30 of the play's 480 lines—the stoic figure caught between a torrent of bloodthirsty gloating from Cayphas, Annas (both non-scripturally present at the Crucifixion itself in this play), and a quarter of pharisaical judges on one side, and the impassioned lamentations of the three Marys, John, and other allies on the other. In the York play, perhaps the most notable example of Christ's reticence, Christ delivers only two short speeches (in total just 22 of the play's 300 lines), with the rest of the action and speech left to the four callously work-a-day soldiers charged with carrying out the task.

Richard's behavior at his deposition is markedly different from this figure of patient suffering, commandeering and dominating the focus of an event at which he was evidently expected to act meekly. From his entrance, he resists attempts to be stage managed by York, Northumberland, and Henry himself. When York informs Richard that he has been summoned "to do that office *of thine own good will* / Which tired majesty *did make thee offer*," (4.1.178-79, emphasis mine), York appears to be trusting to his own powers of suggestion, hoping that Richard will take the hint. Richard, however, will not be told how to play the scene. Later, when Northumberland attempts to force Richard to read aloud from a document listing the "grievous crimes / Committed by your person and your followers / Against the state," he refuses to be

scripted in this way. Henry is forced to drop the point— "Urge it no more, my Lord Northumberland"—reluctantly conceding that Richard must be allowed to play out the scene in his own way if they are to get through the business at all. The position that Richard assumes is, of course, audaciously inappropriate since it is his own earthly Judgement Day to which he has been summoned.

Like the Christ of *The Last Judgement*, Richard assumes the central position of dramatic power (if not political or physical power), giving stage directions rather than following them. "Here cousin," he tells Henry, "Seize the crown" (4.1.182). He then proceeds to "unking" himself, like the York Christ's itemization of his wounds, with an itemization of his deconsecrated body:

> I give this heavy weight from off my head
> And this unwieldy sceptre from my hand,
> The pride of kingly sway from out my heart;
> With mine own tears I wash away my balm,
> With mine own hands I give away my crown,
> With mine own tongue deny my sacred state,
> With mine own breath release all duteous oaths. (4.1.204-10)

His first three body parts (head, hand, heart) mirror the locations of Christ's injuries on the cross, accepting "heart" as a near enough approximation of "side." He would have only needed to mention his feet to complete the cruciform set of references. Richard's appropriation of ceremonial props is also central to the performance. The "instruments" of the Crucifixion in the Chester play are originally intended ironically by Christ's oppressors as tokens of mockery and shame—but, in a double irony, become the supreme emblems of Christ's triumph as he makes his reentrance into the world. In Richard's case, the relationship between "actor" and "prop" is reversed. Richard takes the physical symbols of his kingship, the crown and scepter, and deliberately misappropriates them as ironic symbols of his own unkinging. These parallels

between Richard's deposition, the Crucifixion, and the Last Judgement, cast connecting threads that suspend the moment of Richard's forced abdication between the biblical past and the imagined future. Richard attempts to frame the scene as both a Passion Play and a Doomsday Play with his own person as the central figure of both dramas simultaneously. Shakespeare's *Richard II* and the Chester *Last Judgement* appear less like literary analogues than parallel versions of the theatrical gesture, a century apart.

Using his own body as rhetorical illustration, he rejects the written document proffered by Northumberland and instead calls for a mirror, declaring: "I'll read enough, / When I do see the very book indeed / Where all my sins are writ, and that's myself" (4.1.273-75). The document presented to Richard is mentioned in Shakespeare's chronicle sources—though here, it is not read aloud either. Holinshed records that at Richard's formal resignation, a list of "33 solemne articles" outlining "manie heinous points" of Richard's "misouernance" were "drawne and ingrossed vp, and there shewed readie to be read," but "for other causes more needfull as then to be preferred, the reading of those articles at that season was deferred."[53] Reading this description in retrospect, after Shakespeare's scene, the bland but plausible excuse of other matters "more needfull as then to be preferred" sounds suspiciously vague—as though the phrase were a deliberate evasion within the "official" record of the event, a textual fig leaf in place of a full description of Richard's theatrics. Richard's choice to read his own history, not as written on paper by his antagonists, but as written upon "the book" of his own body presents such a grand and unexpected gesture of defiance, it almost suggests a self-assertion the history play genre itself as a live, embodied form of narrative (here momentarily incarnate in the person of Richard), against the written histories of the chronicles.

[53] Raphael Holinshed, *Holinshed's Chronicles of England, Scotland and Ireland in Six Volumes* (London: J. Johnson, 1807, reprinted New York: AMS Press, 1965), Vol. II. 859, 864.

Examining his face in the mirror, Richard calls attention to the difference between insides and outsides: "No deeper wrinkles yet? Hath Sorrow struct so many blows upon this face of mine / and made no deeper wounds?" (4.1.277-79). Read variously as an expression of Richard's vanity or as a gesture of humanist pursuance of truth and self-knowledge, Richard also literalizes or emblematizes the use of the word "mirror" to denote a genre of history writing—the *de casibus* tragedy tradition of Lydgate's *Mirror for Princes* and its early modern descendant *A Mirror for Magistrates*. The function of *de casibus* tragedy, as discussed in Chapter 2, is to describe the tragic "cases" (*casibus*) of fallen powerful men, specifically to illustrate a didactic lesson—typically on the unreliability of earthy fortune. As Chaucer's Monk declares, in the prologue to the Canterbury Tale that parodies this genre, the fates of the various historical figures in his tale warn readers, "Lat no man truste on blynd prosperitee; / Be war by thise ensamples trewe and olde."[54] Richard had already situated his downfall within the context of this historical genre— "For God's sake, let us sit upon the ground / And tell sad stories of the death of kings"—but here he seems consider not just his story but himself or his body to be a living *de casibus* tragedy. When Richard declares, "Give me the glass, and therein will I read" (4.1.276), he locates the history of his reign in his own physical form.

The scene also re-writes a moment in the N-Town *Last Judgement* in which the devils released from hell terrifyingly read the sins of the damned souls by looking into their faces. One demon remarks to a soul he has in his clutches, "[I] fynde here wretyn in thin forheed: / Thu wore so stowte and sett in pryde," Another devil says to a second damned soul: "And in thi face here do I rede […] On covetyse was all thy thought." There is nothing in the N-Town text that indicates that the words naming each sin were necessarily literally written on the faces (or more

[54] Ibid., lines 1995-98.

likely on the masks) of the actors playing the damned souls. Rather, the text suggests, as Richard hypothesizes, that the deeds of one's life leave a legible physiological mark on the human face. In performance, depending how close a devil might put his face up to the face of a damned soul in order to read the sins there, the staging possibilities are electrifyingly frightening. This idea carries through to well-known modern queer literature. The idea that one's sins are written on the body seems to have had a particular resonance for Oscar Wilde. In Wilde's *Dorian Gray*, though the anti-hero enjoys the appearance of perpetual youth, the young Dorian's inadvertent pact with the devil ensures that, one way or another, his sins will be legible on his face.

This moment of sinful self-recognition culminates in Richard smashing the mirror into "a hundred shivers." Like the rent and lacerated body of Christ, Richard offers his own shattered image as part of a rhetorical point that he is making. When he says to Henry, "Mark, silent king, the moral of this sport, / How soon my sorrow hath destroyed my face" (4.1.290-91), he not only explicitly directs Henry's attention ("mark") towards an instance of theatrical play-acting ("sport") that he is self-consciously performing, but does so in order to create a didactic lesson—a kind of living parable. In this instance, the message or moral that Richard expounds is that the glory of kings, like the lives or identities of kings, are as fragile as the mirror in which Richard sees his image reflected: "A brittle glory shineth in this face. / As brittle as the glory is the face" (4.1.297-98). But beyond this literal message, Richard's "sport" also illustrates a lesson on the nature of historical representation in live performance. Henry quickly corrects Richard; it is only the "shadow of his sorrow"—a phrase Richard paraphrases as the "external manners of laments" that give physical expression to his inner "unseen grief"– that has destroyed the "shadow" or "image" of his face (the mirror). But of course, the Richard onstage is himself only an artificial image of the historical king—no more real than the second artificial image of Richard in the

mirror (or rather, the image of the image of Richard). Richard complains that his deposition has stripped him of his identity: "Alak the heavy day / That I have worn so many winters out / And know not now what name to call myself" (4.1.291). In this scene, he would like to be Christ at the Crucifixion and at the Last Judgement, but he cannot be either—he cannot even be himself.

Richard's Failed Prophesy: Apocalypse (Not) Now

Richard frames his deposition as a kind of national apocalypse from which there will be no return. The play, however, ultimately shows that revolutions of state do not constitute the apocalyptic destruction of that state. Yet even as Shakespeare's play disallows this analogy, it argues that a monarch's personal apocalypse has repercussions for how we understand both time and history. Throughout *Richard II*, time is shown to be simultaneously recursive and teleological, a queer temporal medievalism.

Even within the relatively short duration of time represented within the play, history is represented as an endlessly repeating cycle. We see history already repeating itself in scenes 1.1 and 4.1, scenes that each show a king presiding over a dispute between two nobles accusing each other of murdering the Duke of Gloucester. Both scenes 1.3 and 5.6 (the final scene) end in a banishment. These dramatic recursions enact medieval typological ways of thinking about history as cyclical. It would not have appeared contradictory to a medieval writer to think of history as both an endlessly self-repeating cycle as well as a unidirectional trajectory moving towards a single, permanent endpoint in the Day of Reckoning. Even though the play denies Richard the status of apocalyptic prophet, it does show that his personal reckoning has historical consequences. While Richard's overthrow and death do not constitute an apocalypse per se, they do initiate a century-long civil war. It is the spectacle of Richard's embodied, end-directed suffering that initiates England into a new, terrible era of its history.

Kushner's *Angels in America*: AIDS and the Apocalypse

Reimaging the apocalypse for the contemporary stage, Tony Kushner's *Angels in America* has enjoyed canonical status in American theatre since its first productions in the early 1990s. Not a part of a cycle, like the Chester *Last Judgement* or Shakespeare's *Richard II*, but a pair of plays—*Part One: Millennium Approaches* (1991) and *Part Two: Perestroika* (1992)—*Angels in America* depicts a series of events between October 1985 and February 1986 in a mixture of historical fiction, political commentary, and supernatural theatrical spectacle. *Angels in America* shares with *Richard II* a feeling of being poised on some kind of historical threshold—at or just before a moment of decisive transition. Whereas Shakespeare's play stands on the brink between two new centuries (set at the turn of the fourteenth, performed at the turn of the sixteenth), *Angels in America* was written in and is set on the precipice of the third millennium.

Among its numerous plotlines, the play depicts two HIV positive gay men—one historical, the other fictional. The first of these who appears on stage, the closeted McCarthyite lawyer turned New York powerbroker, Roy Cohn (1927-1986) was, Kushner writes in the play's preface, "all too real."[55] The "acts attributed" to Cohn in the play, continues Kushner, "are to be found in the historical record." These details include Cohn's death due to AIDS-related illness in 1986, along with his "illegal conferences with Judge Kaufmann during the trial of Ethel Rosenburg," whom Cohn helped to prosecute.[56] A political ally of the Reagans, Cohn was also the mentor to a young Donald Trump. In a line reminiscent of "my kingdom for a horse," Trump is alleged to have reacted to the news that Attorney General Jeff Sessions would be recusing himself in the Muller investigation with the question, "Where's my Roy Cohn?"[57] While

[55] Kushner, 11.
[56] Ibid., 11.
[57] Michael S. Schmidt, "Obstruction Inquiry Shows Trump's Struggle to Keep Grip on Russia Investigation," *The New York Times* (New York, NY), January 5, 2018.

Kushner concedes that his representation of Cohn is "a work of dramatic fiction"" Roy's presence on the play, like the repeated references to the Ronald Regan, root the action to a specific moment in time.[58]

In contrast to the play's all too real anti-hero Cohn, the fictional Prior Walter is not meant to embody a particular historical person. Though he can trace his family ancestry back to an ancestor stitched into the Bayeux Tapestry, he is now, by his own description, "just a sick lonely man" (II, 2.2.179).[59] A gay Everyman in his early thirties living in New York, Prior is coping with both his recent HIV diagnosis and his subsequent abandonment by his partner, Lewis. These disasters are followed by a secular Annunciation of sorts: an Angel identifying herself as the Continental Principality of America crashes through his bedroom ceiling and hails him as the Prophet of the coming Millennium. Prior's ambivalence towards this unchosen role eventually leads to a scene near the end of the two-part sequence (though, crucially, not *the* end), in which Prior rejects the play's vision of an apocalyptic future. Drawing on the language of conscious medievalism, Kushner stages a theatrical inversion of the medieval Last Judgement plays. *Angels in America* presents a version of eschatological history that both complements and flouts the one provided by its premodern predecessors. Instead of depicting an event in which God comes to earth to judge humankind and initiate the apocalypse, the play shows a living human's ascent into heaven, where he forestalls the apocalypse and pronounces judgement on a negligent, absentee God.

Scholars have already noted the similarities between *Angels in America* and medieval drama. Theater scholar Benilde Montgomery, writing within a few years of the play's premiere,

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[58] Kushner, 11.

[59] Adapting, for the sake of consistency, the conventional shorthand for early modern play citation, parenthetical citations for *Angels in America* give the part, act, scene, and (in lieu of line number) page number.

called attention to the numerous ways in which *Angels in America's* form and content are indebted to the biblical cycle plays. In its sense of historical chronology, Montgomery points out that *Angels*, like the medieval cycles, both begins with the creation and fall in its "allusions to a more perfect and, significantly, Jewish past, now fallen from grace," and looks forward to an impending Doomsday—the "Capital M Millennium."[60] Kushner himself graduated from Columbia University with an undergraduate degree in Medieval Studies, and had planned to become a Medieval Studies professor before his discovery of the work of Bertold Brecht prompted him to pursue a career in theater.[61] When asked about the influence of medieval culture on *Angels in America* in an interview with David Savran, Kushner (with characteristic ambivalence) said that the Middle Ages were "of no relevance to anything" in his work, but then praised them for "the great richness [that] can come from societies that aren't individuated."[62]

Kushner's sense of the apocalyptic shares with the medieval sense of the apocalyptic a readiness to see universal catastrophes and mundane, local, or personal catastrophes as reflections of each other. In the words of historians Jennifer Spinks and Charles Zika, these were "the multitude of smaller disastrous events that formed part of the pattern of life in late medieval and early modern Europe."[63] Kushner's play mobilizes the potential inherent in dramatic depictions of the apocalypse as a way to envision change, in the same way that, according to Brett Edward Whalen, medieval "radicals, moderates, and conservatives alike invoke the providential design of history calling for revolutionary changing [of] current institutions, appealing for their modest reform, or celebrating their power in transcendent terms."[64]

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[60] Benilde Montgomery, "Angels in America as Medieval Mystery," *Modern Drama* 41, no. 4 (Winter 1998): 598.
[61] David Savran, "Theatre of the Fabulous: An Interview with Tony Kushner," in *Essays on Kushner's Angels*, ed. Per Brask (Winnipeg: Blizzard Publishing, 1995), 134.
[62] Ibid., 134-45.
[63] Jennifer Spinks and Charles Zika, "Introduction" to *Disaster, Death and the Emotions in the Shadow of the Apocalypse, 1400-1700*, ed. Jennifer Spinks, and Charles Zika (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 4.
[64] Whalen, 7.

With its emphasis on the "Capital M Millennium," Kushner's play presents AIDS and the apocalypse as metaphors for each other, with the approaching death of the individual and the imagined destruction of the world inextricably bound up with each other. Looking first at the role of apocalyptic imagery in early accounts of the AIDS crisis, the end of this chapter explores the connections between *Angels in America* and the premodern visual and verbal rhetoric of apocalypse that center on the spectacular representation of afflicted male bodies. Turning towards the message of the Angel herself and Prior's response, this analysis shows how the play represents an eschatology that both responds to and confounds the one offered by its premodern dramatic predecessors, presenting an alternative mode for conceptualizing history through its representation onstage.

AIDS and the Apocalyptic Imagination

Claims that either "the past" or "the future" is no longer "what it used to be" have been variously attributed; the same might be said of the end of the world itself. Writing in the year 2000, medievalists Caroline Walker Bynum and Paul Freedman observe that, despite the "widely credited truism that we live in apocalyptic times," the early twenty-first century's conception of the apocalypse provides only a pale shadow of its counterpart in the medieval past. "The investigation of medieval ideas of last things," they write, "shows just how little our era dwells on apocalyptic apprehensions in a meaningful way."[65] Despite the hubbub of anticipation which accompanied the turn of the new millennium, they note:

> The year 2000 is an event surrounded by largely artificially generated excitement that will certainly be thrown into the already massive dust heap of popular culture […] Its one semi-serious aspect, the threatened 'Y2K' computer failure, in fact, exemplifies

[65] Bynum and Freedman, 15.

> the evanescent quality of the event. Few people expect computer problems to bring about the end of the world as we know it.[66]

In describing the "artificial excitement" surrounding the non-event, Bynum and Freedman seemingly register their disappointment. Their allusion to the "already massive dust heap of popular culture," appears to invoke Walter Benjamin's allegory of the Angel of History, who looks with dismay at the fecklessness of humankind. "Where we perceive a chain of events," according to Benjamin, the worrying and woebegone figure of the Angel, "sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. […] The pile of debris before him grows skyward."[67] The importance of Benjamin's angel in relation to Kushner's angel will be explored below. While Benjamin's "pile of debris" would presumably include the "already massive dust heap of popular culture" noted by Bynum and Freedman, it must also include the "medieval ideas of last things" that their edited collection examines. The actual apocalypse, were it finally to arrive, would have an equalizing effect on all cultural productions as well as varying concepts of history, consigning all of them to the same heap of "wreckage."

In their critique, Bynum and Freedman pronounce on the shallowness of the "artificial" apocalypticism that surrounded the Year 2000, at least, as expressed in popular culture. But what about individuals who, in the words of the queer cultural critic Stephen Beachy, "aren't members of the General Population?"[68] This section borrows its title from Beachy's 1994 essay of the same name, written not long after he and his partner both received their HIV diagnoses, a "true history," as Shakespeare's contemporaries might have called it, describing the AIDS crisis from the point of view of those living through it. "I've never met the General Population," Beachy

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[66] Ibid., 15.
[67] Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," in *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn and ed. Hannah Arendt (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), 257-58.
[68] Stephen Beachy, "AIDS and the Apocalyptic Imagination," in *Next: Young American Writers of the New Generation*, ed. Eric Liu (New York: W.W. Norton, 1994), 21.

writes, but conjectures that, should this group actually exist, its members' sense of time and mortality would differ drastically from his.[69] Contextualizing his reaction to his diagnosis within the "apocalyptic imagination," Beachy shows how the AIDS crisis shaped perceptions of time, history, and the end of the world for those living through it.

For Beachy, like the members of the medieval communities who staged the Last Judgement plays, the uncertainty is part of what makes the looming threat of annihilation difficult to bear: "HIV is in no way, at this point, the same as a death sentence. If it ever has been. How it functions in our imaginations is a different story. We've been expected to die for so long that we believe it ourselves, and live accordingly."[70] Like the medieval Day of Reckoning, its appearance might be in a matter of years or at any moment. The contrast between the continued, dull monotony of daily life and the sense of impending doom can play strange tricks with the way that people experience the passing of time. Queer theorist Tim Dean writes that "AIDS has always raised questions of time (formulated most basically as, 'How long?')."[71] Noting the psychological effects of this question, Dean continues, "an unanticipated side effect of the changed temporality of HIV/AIDS is subjective anxiety, based on the radical uncertainty of prognosis."[72] Writing in 2008, just before widespread availability of antiviral medication, PrEP (which keeps viral loads undetectable in HIV+ individuals, and so prevents the virus from developing into AIDS), Dean echoes Beachy when he observes: "If an HIV-positive diagnosis used to be understood as an inevitable death sentence, now it is a sentence whose terminus remains unknown and whose meaning therefore remains radically ambiguous."[73]

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[69] Ibid., 23. He also speculates that members of this mythical "General Population" are "all white heterosexuals with money who don't shoot speed," 23.
[70] Beachy, 19.
[71] Tim Dean, "Bareback Time" in *Queer Times, Queer Becomings*, ed. E. L. McCallum and Mikka Tuhkanen (New York: Suny Press, 2011), 75.
[72] Dean, 75.
[73] Ibid., 75.

As a way to subdue this temporal unsettling into a manageable shape (for his readers if not for himself), Beachy utilizes a variety of narrative forms. Having learned "The Script" of the apocalypse during his Christian upbringing, Beachy writes that "the idea of apocalypse still obsesses me," an obsession that was intensified by his diagnosis.[74] Facing the horrors of a life-threatening illness simultaneously with the tedium of his life's ongoing, mundane demands, Beachy invokes a fatalistic brand of camp: "Let me play the role of the gay aesthete, the horrified queen… oh honey, that civilization has GOT to GO."[75] For Beachy, the imminent destruction of the individual inevitably conjures thoughts of the destruction of the world as a whole. Beachy's sentiment is an uncanny echo of Henry of Huntington's pronouncement five hundred years earlier that, "the day on which you die is, for you, the end of the world."[76] But Beachy's inherited "Script" for the end of the world— "plenty of guilt, salvation, repressed sexuality, and fire from above"—can be traced back to his childhood. The narrative template for personal and domestic tragedy that Beachy feels he must address is provided by bad television.[77] Writing not just about his own but also his partner's diagnosis, Beachy observes: "Perhaps you know what it's like to be so in love with a handsome dying young man because you've seen it on TV. You had to dab the moisture from your eyes with a Kleenex, sniffle, blow your nose. Well, it isn't like that at all."[78] There is no "cathartic moment of tragedy" in their own realization of their mortality; "the real tragedy" consists "not in our dying but in our living."[79] Like the anonymous fifteenth-century Wycliffite who mocked the tears of those "that wepen for the play of Cristis passioun," Beachy evinces nothing but disdain for the shallow "mediated shorthand for grief"

[74] Beachy, 23.
[75] Beachy, 18.
[76] Henry of Huntington, 499.
[77] Beachy, 23.
[78] Ibid., 20.
[79] Ibid., 20-21.

that his society provides.[80] For Beachy and Kushner, as for Shakespeare's Richard II, the "substance" of the tragedy is not to be found in the "external manners of laments," (4.1.299, 296) but inside the sufferers themselves.

The Spectacle of Suffering Bodies in Angels in America

Like medieval writers attempting to grapple with the representational difficulties of staging the end of time, Kushner's apocalyptic vision, pivots on the interplay between the universal and the personal. This interplay is nowhere more conspicuous than in Prior's response—both physical and psychological—to his infection. The play deals candidly with the physical realities of HIV and AIDS, making Prior's afflicted body the embodiment of the illness. However, it also shows the psychic effects of his diagnosis in theatrically spectacular terms. Like Beachy, Prior experiences his anxiety following his diagnosis amid a range of broader, unnamable anxieties—the sense that irrevocable changes of uncertain origins and consequences will soon descend upon the world. The theatre scholar Benilde Montgomery notes the similarities between "the suffering body of Christ" in the mystery plays and "the suffering body of Prior Walter" in *Angels in America*, stating that "both bodies dominate their plays not simply as graphic images of physical pain, but primarily as interpretive paradigms."[81] Prior's suffering body presents a historical statement precisely because of the ways in which it can be interpreted more broadly, as representative of the suffering of people with HIV, of gay men, of marginalized groups, and of humans in general. Kushner's play captures the apocalyptic anxiety brought on by the AIDS crisis in such a way as to make the crisis and the apocalypse function as metaphors for each other.

[80] *A Tretise of Miraclis Pleyinge*, 102.
[81] Montgomery, 601.

The play graphically details the physical effects of AIDS on the human body, even as it places the body's dissolution in the mundane medical realities of contemporary healthcare. Like the Christ of the York *Last Judgement*, who enumerates his five wounds to the souls of humanity, Prior enumerates his AIDS-related health problems to his nurse, Emily:

> Ankles are sore and swollen, but the leg's better. The nausea's mostly gone with the little orange pills. BM's pure liquid but not bloody anymore, for now, my eye doctor says everything's OK, for now […] My glands are like walnuts, my weight's holding steady for week two. (I.3.2.103-104)

This anti-blazon of Prior's physical state quickly turns to his mental state: "So I guess I'm doing OK. Except for of course I'm going nuts." (I.3.2.104). The inextricability of physical and metaphysical is neatly summed up by Prior's friend the nurse Belize: "There's the weight problem and the shit problem and the morale problem" (I.3.2.103).

Though Prior's sense of dread is rooted in his physical illness, his anxieties quickly spiral upward and outward until they reach the cosmic level. It is as if Prior is applying a medieval exegetical strategy to his own personal situation, a situation in which material, formal, and eschatological causes are all entwined. Prior feels that humankind is teetering on the brink of a threshold that will send the world hurtling towards either its destruction or some other unknown but equally terrible fate. Even Prior's first disclosure of his diagnosis to his partner is announced in ominously supernatural terms: "Lesion number one. Lookit. The wine-dark kiss of the angel of death. […] Don't you think I'm handling this well? I'm about to die" (I.1.2.27). From the language of bodily suffering, Kushner fashions a quasi-epic moment, the "wind-dark kiss" of Kaposi's sarcoma calling to mind Homer's "wine dark sea." Later, after his abandonment, Prior tells his nurse, "I feel like something terrifying is on its way, you know, like a missile from outer space, and it's plummeting toward the earth, and I'm ground zero" (I.3.2.104). The subtitle of

Angels in America's first part conveys this anxiety succinctly: *Millennium Approaches*. The concept of the Millennium (as Prior clarifies, the "capital-M Millennium, not the year 2000," II Epilogue, 279), traditionally carries a double meaning. It is both a seismic, epoch-shattering upheaval as well as a period of utopian peace. Either way, the concept is deeply enmeshed with questions about the end of the world. As Whalen writes of this medieval vision: "the earliest Christians vigorously debated the nature of those Last Things, including the question of whether there would be a 'millennial' age of peace and prosperity on earth before the end of time."[82] This sentiment is echoed by Kushner when the irrepressible prophetic ghost of Ethel Rosenberg tells Roy Cohn, "History is about to crack wide open. Millennium approaches" (I.3.6.118). Set at a specific moment in the recent past, *Angels in America*, like the Last Judgement plays, also looks ahead to a future historical event, using both the AIDS epidemic broadly and Prior's HIV diagnosis in particular as the impetus for this imagining.

The sense of intense but vague unease take shape over the course of Part 1 in the form of various supernatural phenomena, phenomena that recall the spectacular allegorical machinery of the medieval Last Judgement plays as well as Shakespeare's Ricardian self-dramatization. Both of the play's HIV positive men are visited by ghosts. Roy is haunted by the above-mentioned ghost of Ethel Rosenberg, but it is debatable which of the two presents the more gruesome figure. Shortly after Roy brags that her death—achieved through illegal "ex-parte communication with the judge" throughout the trial—is his most satisfying accomplishment, Ethel manifests before the sick man (I.3.5.114). Undaunted, Roy demands: "What is this Ethel, Halloween? You trying to scare me? […] Well, you're wasting your time! I'm scarier than you any day of the week" (I.3.5.117). Though Roy presumably refers to his own powers of

[82] Whalen, 1.

malevolence, the horrors visited on Roy's ravaged body also mark him with a kind of living death. When Ethel's ghost remarks that Roy's once "zaftig" build has dwindled, Roy replies, "Now I look like a skeleton. They stare" (I.3.5.117). Whether or not Roy is truly so emaciated that people state at him, the combination of macabre images—the animate skeleton arguing with a ghost—echoes the horrors of the risen dead at the *Last Judgement*.

Like Ethel and Roy, Prior is also imposed on by ghosts, a supernatural visitation that places Prior in a liminal position halfway between life and death. Though the event which he dreads—the "missile from outer space […] plummeting toward the earth"—is later revealed to be the Angel herself, her arrival is preceded by the appearance of two of Prior's long dead ancestors who each share his name; one is medieval, the other early-modern, but both were plague victims. These two "heralds," the seventh-century Prior explains, were chosen "I suspect, because of the mortal affinities," they share with their descendant: "In a family as long-descended as the Walters there are bound to be a few carried off by plague" (I.3.1.93). Prior is their literal relation, but he is also their kindred by the "affinity" of their shared sicknesses. The thirteenth-century Prior gives an account of his medieval plague experience that matches any description of AIDS provided by the play: "The pestilence in my time was much worse than it is now. Whole villages of empty houses. You could look outdoors and see Death walking in the morning, dew dampening the hem of his black robe. Plain as I see you now" (I.3.1.92). Plague, the play reminds us, has always been with us.

These ghostly visitors, explaining that they have not come to terrify Prior, but rather to "strew rose petal and palm leaf" in advance of the Angel, find Prior more confused than frightened. Like Roy, Prior finds the physical state of his own body far more frightening than these apparitions. The play has already shown him assessing his own appearance in drag in an

earlier scene, “I look like a corpse—a corpsette! Oh my queen; you know you’ve hit rock-bottom when even drag is a drag” (I.1.7.37). Seated at a “makeup table, […] applying the face” (I.1.7.36), Prior’s self-evaluation in the mirror echoes the rhetoric of fallen royalty in Richard II’s mirror moment. But unlike Richard, who finds “no deeper wrinkles yet” (4.1.277) to match his inner suffering, Prior’s opinion of his outer appearance reflects what he believes to be his physically corrupted inner body: “My heart is pumping polluted blood. I feel dirty” (I.1.7.40). His body, he claims, has become something alarming and macabre, both inside and out. His description of himself, like Roy’s, recalls not so much the body of Christ in the Chester play as the vivid representation of bodily corruption characteristic of the resurrected dead in the N-Town *Last Judgement*. Here, Christ’s description of the resurrected dead indicates that the bodies are at first quite rotted and disgusting: “though fowle wyrmys from you yow falle […] My blessynge […] clensyth yow clere, / All fylth from yow fade.” The dead are so physically corrupted that foul worms fall from them as they rise. And though Christ’s blessing cleanses the good souls of this bodily dissolution, Prior expects no such supernatural intervention.

With the physical effects of AIDS on the human body as its starting point, the play modulates through a rage of related metaphors and associations, including the psychological toll of this physical suffering, the visitations of the dead upon the living, and the dread of an unknown apocalyptic force, speeding towards earth, that will crack history “wide open.” But the play never lets us forget the associations that all of these have with the illness itself. Part of Prior’s apocalyptic anxiety comes from the physical effects of AIDS on his body, but the spectacle of his suffering body on stage offers a physical embodiment of those apocalyptic anxiety.

Returning to the scene which Prior "enumerates" his symptoms, we see that this passage seeks to activate all of these premodern tonal registers. As Prior's nurse, Emily, inspects his Kaposi's sarcoma (KS) lesions, she instructs him to strip, which he does:

> EMILY: Shirt off, let's check the…
> *(Prior takes his shirt off. She examines his lesions.)* […]
> EMILY: Only six. That's good. Pants.
> *(He drops his pants. He's naked. She examines.)*
> (I.3.2.103)

The use of nudity on stage, which at first might appear gratuitous, signals the importance of this moment through its frankness. Theater is a form which represents narrative using the action of physical bodies, showing rather than telling. The stage directions do not specify how Prior's illness is to be presented, though the fact that he has "only six" KS lesions is seen as a good thing. The extent to which his body resembles the body of a real person in a similar condition will vary from production to production. Like the medieval cycle theatre, the theatre of Tony Kushner's *Angels in America* does not aspire to realism. In describing the "flying" of the Angel on stage, for example, Kushner famously writes in his preface to the printed edition of the play that "it's alright if the wires show, and maybe it's good that they do."[83] The same philosophy may also apply to the representation of Prior's body on stage. The affliction visited upon Prior's body at this moment is representational—both in the sense that it is depicted through artificial means on stage and that it also represents something larger than simply itself. Kushner, like his medieval antecedents, is intent on spectacle rather than verisimilitude.

The sight of Prior's naked, wounded, and (we might say) martyred body also presents a history lesson. The purpose is less explicitly didactic than Christ's body in the Chester pageant. And there is no hint here of the suggestion alarmingly given life in the N-Town play (and echoed

[83] Kushner, 11.

in *Richard II*) that the body bears the legible marks of one's sins. Prior's suffering is not a ritual sacrifice intended to redeem mankind. Rather, the play inverts this idea, showing how, in its handling of the AIDS crisis, society in failed hundreds of thousands of individuals living in its midst. Prior's illness is what alienates him from the rest of society—including, most immediately, his abandonment at the hands of his partner, Lewis. Lewis, demonstrably unsuitable as a romantic partner and, in the experience of many theatre goers, little better as a stage presence, is at least savvy enough to observe that "what AIDS shows us is the limits of tolerance, that it's not enough to be tolerated, because when the shit hits the fan, you find out how much that tolerance is worth. Nothing" (I.3.2.96). As Prior himself observes in Part II, "we're just a bad dream the real world is having, and the real world's waking up" (II.2.1.168). And yet, his suffering, in Montgomery's words, "has an analogue in the common suffering of all that is human."[84] Unlike Christ, Prior does not willingly take upon himself all the suffering of the world—but his suffering metonymically represents the suffering of the world.

Angels of History: Kushner, Benjamin, and the Mystery Plays

On the subject of angels in art and literature, C. S. Lewis once complained that modern representations fail to capture these beings' most conspicuous quality: "in Scripture the visitation of an angel is always alarming; it has to begin by saying 'Fear not.' The Victorian angel looks as if it were going to say 'There, there.'"[85] On this point at least, Lewis would have had no cause to complain of Kushner's depiction of the Angel who visits Prior. She does not say, "Fear not," but she has every reason to. In response to her first utterance— "Greetings, Prophet! / The Great Work Begins: / The Messenger has arrived"—Prior's initial burst of pure terror— "Oh God

[84] Montgomery, 602.
[85] C. S. Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters*, revised edition (New York: Macmillan Publishing, 1961), ix.

there's a thing in the air, a thing, a thing"—soon gives way to terror mixed with bathos— "Oh, Shoo! You're scaring the shit out of me, get the fuck out of my room" (II.2.2.170). Given her formidable appearance as well as the amount of time that the play devotes to anxieties about the coming Millennium, the Angel's message to Prior is obtuse not just to Prior but to the audience. The world may indeed be coming to an end, but not in the way that either Prior nor the medieval chroniclers and dramatists had been imagining.

The vision of the future presented by the Angel essentially offers two possible options. If Prior accepts the call to action, he will secure (how, it is not fully clear) one destiny for human kind; should he refuse the call, the other will occur. Faced with this choice, Prior stands as a representative for the audience as a whole. Like Christ in *The Last Judgement*, the Angel appears to be speaking directly to us—offering each of us individually the same choices as Prior. According to her explanation, the main problem facing the universe is as follows: God, weary of the Angels and envious of man's capacity for movement and change, has abandoned Heaven and all divine responsibilities, and is now somewhere at large in the cosmos. God's abandonment (which occurred April 18th, 1906, the day of the Great San Francisco earthquake) left humanity prey to all of the chaos and horror inflicted upon it throughout the twentieth century. There would seem to be a paradox here: God's absence is motived by envy of the human capacity for movement and progress, but his absence has made life increasingly difficult and painful for the humans whom he wishes to emulate. His absence is also causing earthquakes in heaven, or "heaven-quakes." As the Angel describes the situation (both celestial and terrestrial) to Prior, she declares:

> Surely you see towards what We are Progressing:
> The fabric of the sky unravels:
> […]
> Before the boiling of blood and the searing of skin

> Comes the Secret catastrophe:
> Before Life on Earth becomes finally merely impossible,
> It will for a long time before have become completely unbearable. (II.2.2.178)

Unlike the medieval Last Judgement, this vision of the end is brought about by God's prolonged absence from the world, not by his sudden re-entry into it. With God at large, the looming threat of divine intervention posed by the medieval conception of the Last Judgement has been indefinitely suspended. In Kushner's cosmos, there is no evidence that God will ever return at all—much less that He will judge the souls of the living and the dead and end Creation as we know it. But in His absence, the fate of the world appears more horrifying than the Last Judgement itself, with all of humankind (not just the wicked) doomed to a living hell on earth. The vision of a world sketched by the Angel's minimal but suggestive phrasing, in which "the fabric of the sky unravels," and humans are left to endure "the boiling of blood and the searing of skin," is not an appealing alternative to the fate offered by the Last Judgement plays—and indeed echoes the language of the devils describing the punishments of the damned.

In order to avoid this fate, the solution devised by the Angels and expounded to Prior is simple: stop moving. As she elaborates:

> Forsake the Open Road:
> Neither Mix Nor Intermarry Let Dee Roots Grow:
> If you do not MINGLE you will Cease to Progress:
> Seek Not to Fathom the World and its Delicate Particle Logic:
> You cannot Understand, You can only Destroy,
> You do not Advance, You only Trample. (II.2.2.178)

To save the world from destroying itself, the Angels appear to be trying to engineer a modified partial apocalypse. To offer a scriptural paraphrase, the angel is not telling humanity, "We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed […] at the last trumpet" (1 Corinthians 15:51-52). Rather, since there will now be "no last trumpet," humanity must "sleep" in order to avoid a different but equally terrifying "change." What the Angel describes is not the end of the world,

but rather an end to *history*—at least according to its modern conceptualization. Humans may exist, but there must be no more *events*: "Cease to Progress."

Though the presence of an angel on stage brings to mind the many supernatural beings that populate medieval drama, this Angel's mandate to Prior it is distinctly unlike the edicts of the angels in medieval Last Judgement plays, appearing to respond to a distinctly modern set of problems. Kushner's Angel differs from the angels the Chester pageant who are willing stage managers of God's apocalyptic performance. The contrast is even more marked in Last Judgement plays where the angels play a more active role. In the York version, the angels do not merely assist God, but actually execute his plans, commanding the dead souls, "Rise and fecche youre flessh that was youre feere [companion]" during life (York 47.85-86), before they appear before their judge: "For I am sente fro hevene king / To calle you to this grette assise" (York 47.93-95). Their presence in the play, if nothing else, at least resembles Kushner's Angel as an element of supernatural theatrical spectacle. The surviving inventory of costumes, props, and scenery known as the York Mercer's Indenture specifies that each angel would have been costumed with a "pair angel wings with iron in the ends" (Kushner's angel wings, incidentally, are described as "steel") and equipped with "trump[et]s of white [silver] plate."[86] With their striking costumes and bland dialogue, the York Angels may have been, as Prior describes the Angels in his play, "sort of fabulous and dull all at once" (II.2.2.175). In addition to the actors portraying angels, however, the stage machinery of the York pageant included numerous angelic representations of varying size ("vii *great* angels holding the Passion of God"), brilliance ("iiii smaller angels, *gilded"* also "holding the Passion") and mobility. In this last regard, four "smaller angels painted red" could be made to "run about in the heaven," by working "a long,

[86] *Mercers' Indenture,* 138-39.

small [thin] cord." The effect of this production in live performance cannot now be definitely known, but Kushner's observations on his own work may, surprisingly, offer a clue. Kushner describes the intended effect of his various "moments of magic," which he stipulates "are to be fully realized, as bits of wonderful? theatrical illusion." He continues, "I have now seen many productions of the two parts of Angels. The only ones that really succeed are the productions in which the director and designers invent great, full-blooded stage magic for *every single magical appearance and special effect*." The designers of the York *Last Judgement* seem to have taken the same approach.

Resembling her medieval theatrical predecessors mainly in these superficial ways, Kushner's Angel instead unmistakably echoes the vision of human history articulated in Walter Benjamin's well-known analogy or quasi-parable of the "Angel of History" mentioned earlier. Kushner has unambiguously stated that Walter Benjamin's theories of history have been extremely influential on his work. Prior Walter, in fact, is named for him.[87] Drawing his inspiration from the Paul Klee painting *Angelus Novus,* Benjamin describes a figure whom he designates "the angel of history," who regards human progress from a remote vantage point: "Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet." The angel would like to forestall the inevitable, calamitous result of this movement or progress, "to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise. […] The storm is what we call progress." Similar to the way in which Shakespeare occasionally uses Holinshed or Plutarch, much of Benjamin's description is quoted nearly verbatim, or at the very least, adapted for the stage in a strikingly literal way.

[87] Savran, "Theatre of the Fabulous," 145.

A form of existence without any kind of change or movement, is, to the modern imagination, logistically impossible if not completely unimaginable. Critic David Savran has identified "two opposing concepts of time and history running through the play"—first, "the time of the Angels (and of Heaven), the time of dystopian 'STASIS,'" and second, "directly opposed to this concept is human temporality," marked by such concepts as "change," "progress," and "desire."[88] As Savran continues, "without desire (for change, utopia, the Other) there could be no history."[89] Kushner places at the center of a drama which borrows heavily from medieval theatre a concept (progress) which was utterly alien to the medieval understanding of time and history. Prior is understandably baffled by these demands. He cannot see how the form of living which they proscribe is functionally any different from death: "I don't understand what you want from me. […] Stop moving. That's what you want. You want me dead. Answer me." The Angel sees history along the lines of Benjamin's angel; but the concept of history, as represented throughout *Angels in America,* is defined by a series of "great journeys"—the journeys of Prior's WASP ancestors on the Mayflower, of Eastern European Jewish immigrants to Brooklyn, of early Mormon settlers across the American continent, as well as the journeys of those, as the play acknowledges in a nod to America's centuries-long importation of slaves, who "didn't exactly *choose* to migrate." Change and travel, for good or bad, are defining features of the play's conception of modern history. What would this imposed stasis even look like on the ground if it were attempted in the late twentieth century? The Angels offer no practical suggestions about how to implement their proposed policy, and Prior cannot envision it—nor does he want to.

[88] David Savran, "Ambivalence, Utopia, and a Queer Sort of Materialism: How Angels in American Reconstructs the Nation" in *Approaching the Millennium: Essays on Angels in America*, ed. Deborah R. Geis and Steven Kruger (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press: 2000), 20-21.
[89] Ibid, 21.

"More Life": Angels in America *as Anti-Apocalypse Play*

Called by the Angel to act as a prophet for this new theology of stasis, Prior ultimately rejects the call. In a scene that offers parody of the medieval Last Judgement plays, Prior is summoned to heaven to appear before an ad-hoc committee of angels, who are unsuccessfully attempting to manage the world's chaos in God's absence. Prior unequivocally rejects their message, instead opting for "more life," the movement and change of human history as we know it—even if this flux ultimately leads to the final apocalyptic destruction of the world one way or another. This effectively is the Last Judgement turned upside down. Instead of God coming to earth to judge humankind and initiate the apocalypse, a human travels to heaven, where he judges the absent God and forestalls the apocalypse. Prior brings the apocalypse to the divine rather than the other way around.

Weighing his metaphysical options. Prior concedes that the Angel does have a few valid points in the current circumstances: "It's 1986 and there's a *plague*, half my friends are dead and I'm only thirty-one" (181). In this situation, her imperative— "Be still. Toil no more" (182)—is not without appeal. "I believe I've seen the end of things. And having seen, I'm going blind, as prophets do. It makes a certain sense to me" (182). Even if it means embracing the kind of living-death, or at the very least non-life, described by the Angel, that might be preferable to the way things have been managed thus far. If this is the point that human history has come to, perhaps it would better to simply stop moving. Prior, however, ultimately rejects the prophesy he's been given and instead calls for "more life."

If the Angels directive to abandon progress is unimaginable to the modern historical imagination, then Prior's advice to the Angels—that should God ever return, they should put Him on trial—would have been the most unimaginable thing from the point of view expressed

by the medieval Last Judgement plays. Prior's suggestion that the Angels "sue the bastard" should he ever return to heaven reverses the entire premise of the Last Judgement. God judges humans, not the other way around. The later reveals that the Angels have taken Prior's advice to heart, and that God will indeed be prosecuted.

Critics have pointed to this as evidence that the play ultimately contains a historical message along the lines of traditional liberal progressivism—sailing between the extremes of doom-hungry, right-wing religious fervor on the one hand and a kind of post-modern nihilism on the other. I would argue instead that its medievalism offers a radical revision of the apocalypse as presented in the Last Judgement plays insofar as it suggests that humanity can reject the end of the world through sheer force of spirit. Kushner's *Angels in America* ultimately rejects the medieval apocalypse play, instead preferring to stage an anti-apocalypse play. Faced with the choice, Prior refuses to accept the offer of death (whether in the form of his own personal death from AIDS or the death of all humankind). In the context of the AIDS crisis, this rejection of death and acceptance of life make a stronger statement than would first appear. When it seems like everyone else in the world at large actively wishes that you and people like you would all die, to refuse to do so is both radical and progressive.

Conclusion: More Apocalypse, More Life

The Chester *Last Judgement* presents a future history play to its spectators: a representation of an event that has not yet occurred, but at which everyone watching the play will one day be present in reality. But the judgement of humanity by Christ, according to medieval historiography as well as theology, is not simply an event that will take place at a future point in time; rather, it is the end of time itself. The Chester play captures this aspect of the event by engaging the audience as direct participants in a "time slip" moment of stage performance. In making a

spectacle of his own maimed, suffering body, Christ metatheatrically reenacts his crucifixion at the Last Judgement—a Passion Play within a Doomsday Play. Through this performance, the zones of temporality normally designated as the past (represented by the crucifixion), the present (represented by the moment of performance), and the future (represented by the Last Judgement itself) become queered into one moment of live theatre. In so doing, the play not only identifies the crucifixion as the central, pivotal event in human history—the event which gives every other historical moment, from creation to doomsday, its meaning—but also provides a way to imagine what is an essentially unimaginable event. By queering time in live performance, the Chester *Last Judgement* represents the passage of each individual human consciousness from the earth-bound time of human history into the eternal time that lies beyond history.

This apocalyptic rhetoric is reactivated in Shakespeare's *Richard II*, where the former monarch uses the apocalypse as a metaphor for his dethronement. Like Christ in the Chester play, Shakespeare's Richard "makes a scene," transforming what his opponents hope will be a tense but expedient transfer of power into a metatheatrical spectacle focused on his own suffering body. Giving a performance that is typologically both a Passion Play and a Doomsday Play, Richard queers the chronological distance between the medieval past and Shakespeare's present. Unfortunately for Richard, the play shows that his interpretation of his own historical moment—as well as his own fate—is incorrect. He is no more the martyred Christ than his deposition is the end of the world. The teleological vision of history advocated for by Richard's prophetic language—the nation will end with him—is undermined by and the vision of history presented by the play itself as well as in its reception by an early modern audience who sees the continuity (rather than dislocation) of historical time.

Like these earlier affective apocalypses, Kushner's pre-millennial stage epic invokes eschatological imagery and suffering male bodies in order to bring provoke discussion of the shortcomings of a contemporary historical imagination. Using the apocalypse and the AIDS crisis as metaphors for each other, Kushner establishes Prior's suffering as a metonym for the suffering of humanity. However, unlike Richard, Kushner remediates medieval ideas of the end times not as an apocalypse Play but rather as an anti-apocalypse. When Prior momentarily steps beyond earth, time, and history into eternity to plead the case for human existence, he reverses the narrative trajectory of Christ's return to earth at the Last Judgement. In staging this moment, *Angels in America* prompts its audience to imagine a different social and political reality, one in which pain and suffering need not be endured shamefully in isolation, but in which the world is made more livable through the consolations of human community.

Coda
Medievalisms, Past and Present

Early modern writers may have invented what it meant to be medieval, but their conception of the Middle Ages continues to shape our own conception of what it means to be modern. This dissertation began by quoting the Puritan minister Roger Williams, who pithily catalogued the significant religious whip-saws that had marked the previous century-and-a-half of English history. Williams observes that

> England was all Popish under Henry the seventh, [then] half Papist halfe-Protestant under Henry the eighth. From halfe-Protestantisme halfe Popery under Henry the eight, to absolute Protestantisme under Edward, the sixth; from absolute Protestation under Edward the sixt to absolute popery under Quegne Mary, and from absolute Popery under Queen Mary, (just like the Weathercocke, with the breath of every Prince) to absolute Protestantisme under Queene Elizabeth.[1]

Comparing changes of religion to changes in the wind, the rhetorical effect of this passage is dizzying. England may have been "all Popish" under Henry VII, but, as the early modern writers quoted throughout this dissertation witness, it had also been "all Popish" for a thousand years—for longer, in fact, than it had been "England." As a minister, Williams was chiefly interested in the rapid changes in state religion. But he could have equally called attention to the numerous other cultural and literary changes of the Tudor period, changes that included: the decline of feudalism and the rise of both modern bureaucratic government and of market capitalism, the ascendance of print books over manuscript books, the transition from Middle English to Early Modern English, and the shift from civic, religious drama to professional secular drama as the

[1] Roger Williams, "Christenings make not Christians," in *The Complete Writings of Roger Williams* (New York: Russell & Russell, 1963), 7:36. Quoted in Chapter 1, above.

dominant mode of theatre.[2] From the early modern vantage point, it is easy to overstate the degree of cultural uniformity that existed throughout the Middle Ages, but, as Williams shows, the nature and speed of the changes wrought by the sixteenth century could have a disorienting effect on those living through it.

When Williams wrote these words in 1643, he had already experienced his own series of "Weathercocke" transformations—emigrating from England to Boston, from Boston to Salem, from Salem to Plymouth, and, following his banishment from Plymouth, establishing what would later become the state of Rhode Island. Given this trajectory, William's sense of a changeable religious past lies at the foundation of America's future. Leaping ahead in time to the end of the twentieth century, this same idea appears in the first part of Tony Kushner's *Angels in America*. When Prior's former partner Louis attempts to answer the question, "Why has democracy succeeded in America?" (I.3.2.95), his reflections lead him historically backward from the Reaganism of his present time, through America's history of slavery and Indian genocide, past the "property-based Rights-of-Man" values of the founders, back across the Atlantic to such Old-World matters as the English Civil War and Jewish racial identity in medieval and early modern Europe (I.3.2.95-102). This fictional conversation emblematizes the genealogy of America's modern political identity—how our understanding of the present resonates with early modern English writers such as Williams, and their own understanding of the relentless changeability of history. By imagining their own present as the culmination of a series of rapid (and sometimes inscrutable) reversals, early modern writers attempted to distance

[2] All of these seemingly easy dichotomies between the medieval and the early modern, of course, become complicated when subjected to critical scrutiny. As noted previously, what we now think of as "medieval" drama continued to be performed well into the reign of Elizabeth, to give just one brief example.

themselves from the newly-conceptualized "medieval," a rhetorical gesture that, for Kushner, also lies at the heart of Americas foundation myths.

The concept of a "Middle Ages" was not just a tool employed by early modern playwrights (and their occasional contemporary avatars). It has continued to develop in many forms, from Romantic and Victorian iterations of medievalism right up to our own present moment. In recent years, the use of the Middle Ages as a historical reference point has taken on an alarming new dimension, in the demonstrations of right-wing extremists on both sides of the Atlantic. In the United States, emblems inspired by medieval iconography were displayed by white supremacists at the Charlottesville riots of August 2017 and again at the Capitol Insurrection of Jan 6, 2021. The use of white shields decorated with red crosses at Charlottesville, in the words of medievalist Matthew Gabriele, "conjures the Knights Templar and the so-called 'Crusades,' an allusion confirmed by the words flanking the cross, 'Deus Vult' [god will's it]"—the alleged battle cry of the "army of Christians" that "marched toward the conquest of Jerusalem in 1099."[3] Joining these imagined "Crusaders," who reappeared at the Capitol Insurrection three years later, other rioters masqueraded as fictionalized Vikings—a style of costume derived not from ninth-century Norse history, but from medievalist historical fantasies of "a pure, Romantic, hypermasculine ancestry for a nascent German nation," invented by scholars, artists, and poets in the nineteenth-century and "heartily endorsed by the Nazis" in the twentieth.[4]

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[3] Matthew Gabriele, "After Charlottesville: Historians Tackle White Supremacist Nostalgia for an Imagined Past," *Perspectives on History: The Newsmagazine of the American Historical Association*, Jan. 2, 2019, https://www.historians.org/publications-and-directories/perspectives-on-history/january-2019/after-charlottesville-historians-tackle-white-supremacist-nostalgia-for-an-imagined-past

[4] Matthew Gabriele, "Vikings, Crusaders, Confederates: Misunderstood Historical Imagery at the January 6 Capitol Insurrection," *Perspectives on History: The Newsmagazine of the American Historical Association*, Jan. 12, 2021, https://www.historians.org/publications-and-directories/perspectives-on-history/january-2019/after-charlottesville-historians-tackle-white-supremacist-nostalgia-for-an-imagined-past

A resurgence in racism stoked by far-right politics and a fictionalized medievalist rhetoric has been on the rise not only the United States but also in the United Kingdom. In May 2015, members of the Neo-Nazi organization called the British Movement gathered at Lincoln Cathedral to venerate the tomb of "Little Saint Hugh of Lincoln," a thirteenth-century English boy alleged to have been ritually murdered by Jews.[5] In an essay on the longevity of medieval "blood libel" myths, historian Magda Teter, describes how the priest who confronted these white supremacists, explaining that, though "Little Hugh" was indeed a historical person, he was not in fact murdered by Jews. Notwithstanding this, the fictional medieval story resulted in the wrongful deaths of eighteen innocent Jewish people in 1255.[6] The priest then directed the white supremacists towards a sign by the side of the tomb denouncing "a shameful example of religious and racial hatred, which, continuing down through the ages, violently divides many people in the present day."[7] The white supremacists declared the message on the sign to be "an abomination and an insult to the memory of Little Saint Hugh," citing Matthew Paris as the "true" historical source of the anti-Semitic legend. They then left an offering of "symbolic red and white roses" at the tomb.[8]

All three of these instances present theatrical forms of medievalism that seek to occupy public spaces in order to declare narrow, exclusive ideas of national identity. Emblems,

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[5] The story was retold throughout the Middle Ages in numerous forms, including in the chronicles of Matthew Paris and, most notably, in Chaucer's "The Prioress's Tale."

[6] Magda Teter, "Blood Libel, a Lie and its Legacies," in *Whose Middle Ages? Teachable Moments for an Ill-Used Past*, eds. Andrew Albin, Mary C. Erler, Thomas O'Donnell, Nicholas L. Paul, and Nina Rowe (New York: Fordham University Press, 2019), 44-45. See also: John Hick, "Interpretation and Reinterpretation in Religion," in *The Making and Remaking of Christian Doctrine Essays in Honour of Maurice Wiles*, ed. David Arthur Pailin, Sarah Coakley (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), 64.

[7] The words of the priest and the plaque echo the words of Mayor of Lincoln who denounced the legend in 1934 against the backdrop of the rise of European fascism: "That 'Little St. Hugh' existed […] and that his dead body was discovered, there is, I presume, little doubt. But that he was done to death by the Jews for ritual purposes cannot be other than a libel, based upon the prejudice and ignorance of an unenlightened age." See, "British Mayor Slaps at Myth of 'little Hugh'," *Jewish Daily Bulletin* (New York, NY), XI, no. 2895: July 12, 1934: 3 https://www.jta.org/archive/british-mayor-slaps-at-myth-of-little-hugh

[8] Teter, 45.

costumes, props (including real weapons), and gestures (whether purely symbolic or physically violent) are used to stage quasi-historical medievalizing fantasies of how the past continues to shape modern idea of communal belonging. And though the non-violence of the incident at Lincoln Cathedral distinguishes it from its American counterparts, all three use historical disinformation to valorize fictions of a medieval past with the goal of spreading violence, racial hatred, and the misappropriation of political power. Even within the political mainstream of twenty-first century America—a terrain which has been strenuously renegotiated over the last decade at least—George W. Bush's famous assertion that the War on Terror would be a "crusade" to "rid the world of the evil-doers" invokes a medieval-flavored style of militarism and anti-Islamism.[9] These are but a few examples of how the contested dividing line between medieval history and medievalist fiction continues to influence our public discourse.

Each of the plays in this dissertation presents a different vision of the Middle Ages by virtue of its dramatic form; each text makes a self-conscious statement about the relationship between its own moment and the imagined medieval past. Of the post-medieval plays examined in this dissertation, Bale's *Kynge Johan* is the most explicitly medievalist, both in its use of medieval dramatic form and in its insistence on the separation of the medieval past from the newly modern present. Bale conceptualizes the "Middle Ages" as the period of English spiritual and political thralldom to the Catholic Church, with the Reformation standing as its decisive endpoint. King John becomes a type for Henry VIII in Bale's play. Both kings stand on the same side of an ongoing religious and political controversy that, for Bale, represented the unceasing struggle between the forces of good and evil across human history. But where John's reign ends in tragedy, Henry's brings triumph. Bale needs medieval history in order to

[9] Bush, George W., "Remarks by the President Upon Arrival," transcript of speech delivered at the White House South Lawn, Washington, DC, September 16, 2001, https://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2001/09/20010916-2.html

make this point. Understanding England's fraught medieval past (or at least, Bale's version of it) is crucial to understanding how theatre acts as a vehicle for historical revisionism, an understanding whose explanatory power applies not just to early modern cultural views but also to our own as well.

By contrast, the version of the Middle Ages represented in Shakespeare's *King John* differs both from the medievalism of Bale's play and from Shakespeare's other history plays. Unlike Bale, Shakespeare's play stresses the continuity from the Middle Ages into his own time. The political concerns that plague John's reign in Shakespeare's play—papal conflict, war with neighboring kingdoms, rebellion at home, rival claimants to the throne—are to be found throughout the medieval past as well within the modern present. The Reformation is not the dividing line between periods, rather it is just another event within the same continuous stretch of time. Using medieval history in an inherently cynical, even satiric fashion, Shakespeare's emphasis on the unreliability of historical narrative does not encourage audiences to expect or even learn much from the past. In the historical vision of *King John*, history does not break out of the cycle of moral failures that marked it; it only continues to repeat them.

Thomas Hughes's *The Misfortunes of Arthur* looks to legendary medieval history in order to explain what it means to be English under Queen Elizabeth. For Hughes and his fellow amateur dramatists, theatrical invention is a way to engage with controversies over medieval history without having to take sides explicitly. The courtiers and lawyers who produced the play seem to have been unwilling to stake any historical claims they cannot safely defend. Striking a balance between humanist learning and English nationalism, the play combines early British chronicle history with neoclassical dramatic form in order to produce a scrupulously learned, Renaissance humanist history play. And yet the play also takes considerable liberties. Though this Arthurian world is fully non-magical, the play reintegrates magical elements within the supernatural symbolism of its dumbshows. Similarly, the universalizing chorus evades the

question of historical accuracy altogether; instead, these interludes offer truisms rather than emphasizing the moral and political causes (or consequences) of the characters' actions. The play also inserts into the mouth of the medieval chronicler Gildas statements that would have been unrecognizable to his historical counterpart. When this on-stage Gildas wonders how any sense of national identity can continue now that Arthur is no more, he echoes the worries of Elizabethan historians concerned, not by Arthur's death but rather by the possibility that he never lived. In answer, both the response of Gildas's scene partner and the epilogue spoken Ghost assert that, though the racial or ethnic identity of early Briton has become splintered by the successive invasions of Saxons, Danes, Normans, and other groups, these disparate parts will eventually combine to form a new national whole. The presence of Queen Elizabeth in the audience testifies that all of these groups were eventually reunited under the modern reign of the Tudors. According to this dramatized scheme of periodization, the Middle Ages began with the death of King Arthur and only ended with the reign of Elizabeth. Ultimately, however, the profusion of formal strategies allows the play to remain safely agnostic about Artur's historical existence while still making the case for his continued relevance as a cultural figure.

In the case of Elizabeth Cary's *The Tragedy of Mariam*, there is less of a sense of opposition or conflict between the medieval past and her own modern present than there is a synthesis of medieval and early modern sensibilities—both historical and dramatic. Unlike the first two plays, the historical content of *The Tragedy of Mariam* is not itself medieval, but rather biblical, as the Judeo-Roman Josephus seems to straddle the categories of biblical chronicle history and ancient classical chronicle history. However, the element of doomed female resistance to tyrannical male power so central to her narrative stands in closest sympathy with the medieval Herod tradition of the *Innocents* plays. In this play, Cary does not attempt to define

herself as modern in opposition to the medieval past. Rather her medieval sources, like her humanist early modern source, Thomas Lodge's *The Famovs and Memorable Workes of Iosephvs*, are weighed and considered in crafting a historical drama. In so doing, Cary draws the medieval into her understanding of the modern. The play is not simply a dramatic adaptation of material found in an early modern humanist chronicle, but also a reintegration of the medieval version back into that story.

Shakespeare's *Richard II*, different in many respects from his *King John*, plays with the temporal distance between his characters and his audience in order to critique both medieval conceptions of kingship and early modern conceptions of the Middle Ages. Richard metatheatrically appropriates elements of the medieval Passion Play and Last Judgement Play, turning his deposition into a performance of spectacular suffering. In so doing, he queers time in a way reminiscent of the medieval plays themselves, blending into a single moment the past event of the Crucifixion, the future event of the Last Judgement, the medieval moment of Richard's "performance" for his on-stage audience of nobles, and the early modern moment of the play's performance for its off-stage audience of Elizabethan spectators. This sense of polyphonic temporality extends the conception of queer time—as expressed in Dinshaw's writings on queer temporality and queer medievalism—to envelop not just the asynchronous one-way interaction of writer and reader, but the synchronous mutual awareness of actor and audience. Despite the effectiveness of this temporal queerness on stage, Richard's performance suggests that he misunderstands the medieval ideas of cosmology, kingship, and theatre that his play evokes. Richard's claims are so grandiose and extravagant as to exceed the probability that the real Richard II or any other medieval king could have actually believed them. Like the bad

actor who, according to Hamlet, "out-Herods Herod," Shakespeare's tragic protagonist out-Richards Richard, or, we might say, out-medievals the medieval.

The end of the dissertation turned to examine the contemporary example of dramatic medievalism found in Tony Kushner's rewriting of medieval conceptions of the end of the world, a revision that stresses not so much our distance from the medieval past as the long duration of continuous history that connects us to it. Despite Kushner's explicit claim that the Middle Ages were "of no relevance to anything" in his work, *Angels in America* shows a clear debt to both medieval theatre and medieval conceptions of history.[10] Kushner needs both to tell his story on stage. Medieval biblical drama provides an essential model for his conception of civic theatre on an epic scale—a mixture of local partisan politics, historical reenactment, metaphysical and moral inquiry, bathetic comedy, and supernatural spectacle. Like Bale, Kushner situates a cosmic, transhistorical struggle within the political issues of his time, staking a clear claim on one side. Unlike Bale, however, Kushner's medievalism becomes a tool for combatting extremism, social ignorance, and self-hatred. The cosmic struggle that the play dramatizes takes place not only within in the individual, but within the nation state as well.

Living in a historical moment in which ideas appear to become old very quickly, we (like our early modern predecessors) constantly need to reorient ourselves with regard to the past. Prior, at the conclusion of *Angels in America*, famously summarizes the trajectory of human history with the phrase, "The world only spins forward" (II, Epilogue, 280)—a conclusion that rightly embraces the continued hope for cultural progress. However, as the works discussed in this dissertation remind us, we must also continue to be vigilant, seeking more fully to understand the visions of the medieval past that continue to shape that future.

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[10] David Savran, "Theatre of the Fabulous: An Interview with Tony Kushner," in *Essays on Kushner's Angels*, ed. Per Brask (Winnipeg: Blizzard Publishing, 1995), 134.

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