

England's National Epic?

In the First Folio the plays attributed to William Shakespeare are listed by category as Comedies, Histories and Tragedies, and printed in the volume in that order. The Comedies begin with *The Tempest*, the Histories are then given chronologically in terms of subject matter, from *King John* to *Henry VIII* and lastly the tragedies follow, beginning with *Coriolanus*. In this grouping it is clear that the plays were regarded, by Shakespeare's friends and fellows, as a continuum, if not a comprehensive telling of the story of England. Many other countries have their national epics, and some, such as India, have more than one. Whether Shakespeare's History plays in fact add up to an English *Mahabharata*, or are an equivalent to *War and Peace* in the consciousness of the home country, let alone in the eyes of the rest of the world, is scarcely a question over which we must lose sleep, but it is sadly the case that this important collection of Shakespeare's plays is sometimes regarded less favourably by scholars, audiences and readers than the Comedies or the Tragedies.

There are many possible reasons for this. The three parts of *Henry VI*, while containing many excellent scenes and memorable characters, are clearly the work of a less accomplished dramatist than the author of *Hamlet*. *King John* might be considered less exciting for audiences than *King Lear*, for all that the two plays are drawn from the same original sources. Vigorous, exciting and entertaining though *Richard III* is, scholars might be inclined to argue that *Macbeth* is a more worthwhile exploration of the path to power and its corrupting effects. But many who love the plays by Shakespeare which they have read and seen would be unable to tell, for the very simple reason that the Histories are studied and performed far less frequently than others in Shakespeare's canon. Amongst the plays of Shakespeare the most frequently performed are *Hamlet*, *Macbeth*, *Romeo and Juliet* and *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, with *King Lear*, *Julius Caesar*, *Twelfth Night*, *Othello*ⁱ and others gradually ranking themselves behind the leading quartet. To be fair, some Comedies and Tragedies are rarely seen either. One has to go a long way to find a production of *All's Well That Ends Well*, and although *Titus Andronicus* is experiencing something of a revival of interest nowadays it was virtually absent from the stage in many countries for over two centuries. But the Histories are generally less frequently performed than the other two categories, and outside the Anglophone world this discrepancy is even more pronounced.

It is understandable that many people regard the Histories as dealing with the history of England. Each of the plays is set in the reign of a specific English king, and if one takes the central incidents of their historical reigns as providing the main action within their plots it could be argued that the plays lack the universal relevance of *King Lear* or *Macbeth*. The squalid story of the Wars of the Roses, one of the darkest and most dismal eras of English history, is so confusing that a professor wishing to discuss the history of the period to put the plays into context, or a director wishing to research the background for a production, might well be inclined to balk in the face of such Byzantine complexity. Why go to so much trouble in pursuit of a subject which many might regard as being solely of relevance to England?ⁱⁱ If indeed the plays are viewed as a straight telling of English history the critics have a point. But it is the contention of this author that the themes, the characters, the relationships and the drama are as universal as any of Shakespeare's plays.

The Histories listed in the Folio by Shakespeare's colleagues are *King John*, *Richard II*, *Henry IV parts I&II*, *Henry V*, *Henry VI Parts I,II&III*, *Richard III* and *Henry VIII*. Of these the first and last are

“outliers”, whereas the others make an almost continuous line tracing the reigns of those who were kings from 1377 to 1485. There are no plays of Edward IV or Edward V, but these kings are included as characters in the other plays. This historical period saw dynastic upheavals and civil wars, murders, usurpations and executions in large numbers. The climactic Battle of Towton is to this day the greatest loss of life of any battle on British soil, the catastrophic losses accounting, according to some estimates, for 1% of the entire English populationⁱⁱⁱ. The history of the period is a quagmire. In this context the throne is the prize, the squabbles between a small group of nobles so interrelated as to be virtually inbred the mechanism through which the crown changes hands. As Jan Kott has shown, there is always a Richard, a Henry and an Edward involved. Kott’s thesis regarding these plays is that they show the Grand Mechanism of History^{iv}, grinding down all within its cogs. This analogy draws also upon the view, held in Shakespeare’s time although drawn from classical sources, of human existence as the Wheel of Fortune, where one rises as another falls, but the wheel continues to turn, and he who rose can fall as another replaces him. Certainly some of the plays, such as *Richard II*, demonstrate this vividly, and taken as a whole the Histories dramatise a number of revolutions of the Wheel.

The History plays are all drawn from the same sources. The *Chronicles* of Hall and Holinshed provided the source material for the History plays, as Holinshed also did for *Macbeth*, *King Lear* and *Cymbeline*, but although those three are drawn from that same fountainhead, they are not categorised as Histories. The definition of a History play is therefore a little elastic. The plays categorised in this manner in the Folio are part of a recognisable genre for Jacobean audiences, but they also consist of plays where the reigns of the protagonists can be accurately dated, and have been widely recorded, albeit with varying degrees of accuracy. *Cymbeline* and *Lear* are located in a misty and semi-legendary past where such accuracy is impossible, and *Macbeth* in a country which was at the time of the play’s composition and also of its publication still a separate entity, although ruled by the same monarch. So taking the eight plays which are linked chronologically, and leaving aside the outliers, the cycle from *Richard II* to *Richard III*, covering the period from 1377-1485, is the body of work which has sufficiently strong linkages to allow consideration as a whole, and if any part of the canon might do so, these plays might make a claim to be a national epic.

Chronicle, or History, plays were a popular genre in the volatile political world of Elizabethan England. Developing out of the earlier plays depicting saints’ lives in the increasingly secular world of the English theatre, one of the earliest examples was *Kynge Johan*, by the Protestant polemicist John Bale, before the middle of the 16th century, but by the 1580s and 90s a number of such plays began to appear on a regular basis. Some of these plays were by Shakespeare, but Christopher Marlowe, Samuel Rowley, George Peele and others all produced Histories. These plays seldom cover the whole of a reign, but concentrate instead on the most significant incidents. It is important to state that the intention of the plays was not to educate, but to entertain, and it must also be noted that in context many of the plays are strongly political. Bale was vehemently anti-Catholic, at a time when religious affiliation was the central issue in politics, and other writers of history plays, like Anthony Munday, shared his views. Other writers, looking back to Norton and Sackville’s *Gorboduc* (1561) counselled against division in the kingdom, and there were other writers who followed this theme. But while the modern English state was still in its birth pangs, with considerable numbers of people still to lose their lives before the final definition of England, let alone Britain, could be clearly delineated, physically and ideologically, to discuss such themes even in an historical context was highly topical.

The use of historical context to comment on the present is common throughout theatrical history. In the Elizabethan world of constant oversight and censorship, where city authorities, churchmen and the Office of the Revels could all be at different times involved in allowing or banning, approving or disapproving of plays, where Jonson and Chapman could be imprisoned for political satire, as they were in 1605, where Marlowe's opinions as broadcast in his plays could lead to persecution and even murder, it was often wise to distance contemporary comment by camouflaging it as historical reportage. But whereas the text which would be submitted during the years of Shakespeare's career to Edmund Tilney, the Master of the Revels, for approval might indeed look sufficiently innocuous, in performance in a public playhouse it was a different matter. The plays were costumed in contemporary dress, so an Elizabethan groundling saw a play in which the words might relate to Ancient Rome, but the story he or she saw unfold was set in contemporary London. The appearance of Julius Caesar in Elizabethan dress might strike us today as being more incongruous than seeing him in a toga, or even in a pinstriped suit, but this is how he was seen by audiences in Shakespeare's theatre. Even though the Elizabethan and Jacobean audiences could readily identify, and indeed expected to see, the correct heraldic symbols for the various lords, often so hard for us to distinguish in a modern production. Although the battle scenes might feature some authentic suits of armour, still to be found easily enough in Shakespeare's day, the preponderance of costume to be seen in any production still located the plays in the eyes of the original viewers in their own time and place, Elizabethan and Jacobean London.

Shakespeare's rise to prominence was built, initially, upon his mastery of this genre. The first play of his to be acclaimed was one of the parts of *Henry VI*, probably in fact *Part II*, but the success of this quickly led to both a sequel and a prequel, and the Elizabethan theatre showed the same level of innovation in naming plays that contemporary Hollywood sometimes shows with its own sequels and prequels. Thus we have *The First Part of Henry VI*, *The Second Part of Henry VI* and *The Third Part of Henry VI*. Shortly afterwards he returned to the History play genre with *Richard III*. Clearly at this juncture in his career the creation of a tetralogy, whether based upon his own inclination or upon the demands of a theatre manager, had a strong commercial *raison d'être*. Shakespeare achieved prominence as a writer because audiences wanted to see his historical plays. It was after he had established himself as such a writer that he was able to find audiences for *Romeo and Juliet* or *Midsummer Night's Dream*. Shakespeare's original auditors were enthused by Talbot's dinning of the French, outraged by the perfidy of the satanic Joan La Pucelle, (difficult to recapture for modern audiences who now know her as St Joan of Arc) and entertained by the Machiavellian machinations of Richard of York, whose death at Bosworth had come within the lifetimes of some of their own grandparents. The plays have many commercial aspects, with a lot of violence, a great deal of treachery, the frisson of adultery, witchcraft and some pathos. The three parts of Henry VI were popular, but were overtaken by Shakespeare's other historical drama of the time, capturing the menace and

In any discussion of the Histories it is fundamental to discuss Shakespeare's blatantly propagandist, even libellous treatment of *Richard III*. At the point when Shakespeare was writing, the dynasty founded by Richard's vanquisher, Henry Tudor, was on the throne, but although the Wars of the Roses had ended in 1485, just over 100 years before, the Tudor dynasty had been constantly threatened by rebellion, wracked by the upheavals of the blood-soaked Reformation, and England still harboured a large number of dissidents. The sources from which Shakespeare drew were, as usual, Hall and Holinshed, but both of these chronicles drew upon the unfinished biography of

Richard, written by Sir Thomas More during the period while he was still in royal favour. More was originally one of the Tudor monarch's closest friends and allies, and he was writing his book far closer to the time of the events portrayed, writing very much as an apologist for Henry VII, in a clear case of the victors writing the history books. This portrayal of Richard's character was scarcely filtered by Hall and Holinshed, and made its way into Shakespeare's version, and it is this interpretation which Shakespeare uses fairly uncritically. While generations of historians have lamented this calumny, the world's perception of Richard III has been shaped much more forcefully by Shakespeare's fictional representation than the reality. It is almost impossible to discuss the play in relation to history, so far does it stray from actuality, but it has given audiences one of the most popular characters in world theatre, a villain who continues to delight four centuries later.

The chronologically earlier, if compositionally later, Histories, consisting of the other *Henries* and *Richard II*, reveal an altogether different approach. These plays are mature, and deep, and contain some of the most vigorously drawn characters in all of Shakespeare's writings. Hamlet may be Shakespeare's most complex character, but even he struggles to compete with the genius of Falstaff. Falstaff, this "... *whoreson, obscene, greasy tallow-catch... great hill of flesh...*" (1HIV, II,iv, 221, 236) is one of the most instantly recognisable of all of Shakespeare's creations. While morally questionable, a coward, a braggart, a liar, a thief, as corrupt a figure as any Shakespeare ever drew, he is also the most vibrant, the most human and the most alive. In a play where Shakespeare makes some of his more profound observations on the role of Kingship, on the complexities of paternal and filial relationships, of coming of age and on the nature of guilt and culpability, the most memorable character of all is the "roasted Manningtree ox" who lights up the stage whenever he enters, and according to Rowe reportedly won the heart of Queen Elizabeth herself, who commanded another play to be written, to show him in love. But the plays are all different. *Richard II* is a glowing medieval tapestry, with great tenor arias as Richard is eventually driven to give up his crown, *Henry V* is a trumpet voluntary, again driven by great rhetorical flourishes, but of an entirely different nature. The two parts of *Henry IV*, two different meditations upon similar themes, are the linchpin of the History plays, looking back to the previous play in the sequence but also presaging what is to come elsewhere in the historical procession. Each of the plays is capable of standing upon its own, although the *Second Part of Henry IV* is seldom presented on its own. But the transition from Richard's disastrous rule, via Bolingbroke's usurpation, his resultant guilt, the desperation to see his son become king untainted either by his father's sin or his own vices, Hal's growing maturity until the point where he can shun the companions of his youth and assume his position as the perfect warrior king, the triumph of a victory against all the odds, makes a wonderful, epic story. But underneath the surface, always a threat and often erupting, is chaos and darkness, and at the end of the four plays of this Henriad the closing note is one of foreboding:

*This Star of England: fortune made his sword;
By which the world's best garden he achiev'd,
And of it left his son imperial lord.
Henry the Sixth, in infant bands crown'd king
Of France and England, did this king succeed;
Whose state so many had the managing,
That they lost France, and made his England bleed:
(1 Hiv, V, ii, 388-394)*

The History plays have coloured perceptions of this period of history. Many people accept Shakespeare's version of events rather than the real history of the time they cover. Shakespeare creates a better story than the real turnings of the Wheel of Fortune, or the Grand Mechanism. But upon closer analysis, although superficially the Chronicles are followed, and the broad shape of history is discernible, in fact the story is Shakespeare's own, and at crucial junctures often departs significantly from recorded history. Thus the plays do not dramatise English history, they demonstrate Shakespeare's version of history, just as his Roman plays demonstrate his version of (North's version of Plutarch's version of) Roman history, and his version of Arthur Brooke's *Romeus and Juliet*, Thomas Lodge's *Rosalynde* or Plautus' *Menaechmi* differ significantly from, and in some cases completely transcend his sources. Shakespeare's Histories are no more closely based upon English history as recorded in his day than his Roman plays are based upon actual Roman history, and indeed in some cases much less so. Thus the non-English producer, professor, reader or spectator need not feel at any disadvantage at all by being less directly connected to the history of the island nations. In fact Shakespeare was making large parts of it up as he went along.

It has been argued, by John Arden amongst others, that Shakespeare goes further, and actually subverts the expectations of the genre. Arden, himself one of the foremost playwrights of his mid-20th Century generation, and one who has been more profoundly influenced by Shakespeare than most of his contemporaries, examines *Henry V* in this light^v. It is highly revealing. At the time Shakespeare was writing *Henry V* was considered in the popular imagination to be one of the two or three greatest of all of the kings of England. His martial exploits, culminating in the crushing victory over the French at Agincourt against overwhelming odds had made him an iconic figure. He was widely regarded as the perfect warrior prince. The expectation of a groundling making path to the south bank of the Thames to see, within the "wooden O" of the recently opened Globe Theatre the story of Henry would have gone expecting hagiography, no doubt a fair deal of action, and for good measure no doubt some strong nationalist sentiment. This was the content of a previous play upon the subject, which had been performed some years before. But what Shakespeare actually delivers is something much more nuanced, and while much of the crowd-pleasing heroism is on display, there is a lot more besides, some of which is directly at odds with the received version of Henry's exploits. Many people who have not had the opportunity to see the play in the theatre are familiar with it through the two film versions which have been seen all over the world, those of Laurence Olivier (1946) and Kenneth Branagh (1979). The most recent screen version, that within the BBC's *Hollow Crown* series (2012-13), although yet to be seen by quite as many people as the film versions, is catching up fast. But all of the film versions significantly alter the play as written by Shakespeare. In Olivier's case the film was made at the specific request of Winston Churchill, as a piece of jingoistic propaganda to raise morale during the Second World War. While this gave Olivier the resources to make what is a very fine film, it required an interpretation which conformed to certain heroic expectations, and where Shakespeare did not provide the material for these Olivier did. Olivier also removed a number of the darker elements in the play, such as the Scroop conspiracy, softened the harsher aspects of the siege of Harfleur and the massacre of the prisoners at Agincourt. His version of the Battle of Agincourt is entirely within the heroic tradition, and his depiction has now become the standard against which all subsequent versions have been judged. It is thrilling, it is iconic, but it bears no relation to the way that Shakespeare shows this incredible victory.

In Shakespeare's play there is no cavalry charge by the flower of French chivalry, no flight of arrows. In Shakespeare's play the battle is shown in a farcical episode of Pistol and a French knight, the

complaint by the Boy that only the juveniles are guarding the baggage train, a scene between the French Generals, then Henry and his train enter with prisoners. Then, upon hearing that the French are rallying, Henry gives the order to kill the prisoners. Subsequently the audience hear Fluellen and Gower lament the massacre of the boys. Re-enter Henry and his train, another order to massacre the prisoners unless the French surrender. They do. This is as far from the heroic depiction in Olivier's film as it is possible to achieve. Branagh's film, which gives a more cynical, anti-war interpretation than Olivier, still has the heroic battle scene, although much more in keeping with the Battle of Shrewsbury as envisaged by Orson Welles in *Chimes at Midnight*, (1965) with men colliding in the mud. Even Thea Sharrock's BBC television production attempts to replicate, with a far lower level of resourcing than even Branagh's low budget feature film, some version of the battle as shown in the two film versions rather than reverting to what Shakespeare actually wrote. In mounting Shakespeare it is all too often the case that the references are to tradition, rather than to the actual content of the original text. But it was ever thus. The most blatant example is the so-called "balcony" scene in *Romeo and Juliet*. Shakespeare never mentions a balcony, but woe betide any producer who fails to provide one. The tradition long ago established itself as the reality, to the point where it is no longer questioned. The traditions, as applied to the Histories, merely add another level of obfuscation to stories which are already distinct from historical reality, taking the plays deeper into the imaginative realm.

John Arden takes another view on the Histories^{vi}, and shows, by contrasting what is actually seen on stage with what is actually being said, a secret and rather subversive take on the story of England's perfect hero knight. But Shakespeare began his exploration of the character of Hal two plays earlier. In the two *Henry IV* plays Hal moves from the wastrel, the despair of his father to the man who can expiate his father's sin in usurping the crown, can understand and reach the common soldiers, and win a phenomenal victory against the odds. But his father, wracked by guilt, austere and cold, lacks the human touch which Hal learns in the stews of Eastcheap. Hal has to learn important lessons from his low companions, but he also has to reject them to become the ruler he needs to be. Having said that, the reader or spectator who witnesses his rejection of Falstaff finds it hard to accept. Hal has signalled early on that he has an element of calculation in his nature, in his soliloquy at the end of his first scene in the Boar's Head, where he tells the audience that he is dissembling. "*I know you all, and will a while uphold/The unyok'd humour of your idleness...*" (*1HIV*, I,ii 186 et seq).

Shakespeare is taking one of the most popular, and also one of the best known stories from English history, but taking considerable liberties with its telling. He is making the audience confront many of the aspects of the story that are uncomfortable, and forcing a closer examination of the received wisdom. At the same time some of the most vivid characters in the plays are those which are pure invention. Falstaff is a complex creation. His original name had been Oldcastle, and he was based extremely loosely on the historic Sir John Oldcastle, and also Sir John Fastolfe, a soldier in the Hundred Years' War. In the earlier play, *The Famous Victories of Henry V* (1588) the character of Sir John Oldcastle appears. He is one of Henry's companions, and is based to greater extent upon his historical source, although still far from accurately. Shakespeare used this earlier play as the basis for his version, although his play completely transcends its predecessor, and originally the character was named Oldcastle in Shakespeare's *Henry IV*, but when Lord Cobham, a descendant of Oldcastle's objected the name was changed. There are still traces within the text. For example Hal calls Falstaff "...my old lad of the castle..." (*1HIV*, I,ii 40-41). But the real Oldcastle was a very different character from Falstaff. He was a close companion of Hal's indeed, but was entrusted with many important

tasks by the Prince of Wales. He was part of an expedition sent by Hal, against his father's wishes, to aid the Burgundians in their fight with the King of France, and thereafter was regarded by Hal as "...one of his most trustworthy soldiers..."^{vii}. Oldcastle was a Lollard, one of a proto-Protestant sect which was much persecuted for heresy, and although for many years he was saved from prosecution by his connection to Hal, was imprisoned for his beliefs. Escaping from the Tower of London he then raised open rebellion against Henry, and for this was eventually captured and executed, where his punishment was to be hanged (a common punishment for treason for those not of noble birth^{viii}) and then burned "gallows and all", which is more in keeping with a punishment for heresy. The association of Oldcastle with the character was sufficiently strong to require Shakespeare to say, in the Epilogue to the *Second Part of Henry IV* "...for Oldcastle died a martyr, and this is not the man..."

Fastolfe, who appears as a character *Henry VI*, set later than *Henry IV*, was a brave soldier who fought throughout the campaigns in France, and was in charge of the attempt to raise Joan of Arc's siege of Orleans. He was a Knight of the Garter, the most exclusive order of English knighthood, and had many other honours piled upon him, but after the Battle of Patay in 1429 he was accused of cowardice. He contested this accusation, and a subsequent enquiry vindicated him, but for 13 years he suffered under an unjust reputation for cowardice^{ix}. The historical Fastolfe may have travelled to Jerusalem as a boy with Henry IV. These two historical characters lent certain aspects to the portrait of Falstaff, but the magnificence of Falstaff's creation is really Shakespeare's own.

Another character whose portrayal differs radically from his historical persona is Hotspur, in *Part One*. Henry Percy, or Harry Hotspur, is a character with a real counterpart, and in the broad outline of the story many of the things he does within the play are based upon his actual actions. He did defeat the Scots at Homildon Hill and take many prisoners, although he had also lost a battle against the same opponents, the Douglas family, at Otterburn. He was in trouble with the King over the ransoms of the prisoners. He did take part in a rebellion led by his father, the Duke of Northumberland. He did die at the Battle of Shrewsbury. He had a nickname, Hotspur, a term from cockfighting, which refers to a bird which fights ferociously and will not give in. But the similarities end there. In Shakespeare's play Hotspur and Hal^x are held up as contemporaries, as the two sides of the coin, by Henry IV:

*HENRY: Yea, there thou makest me sad and makest me sin
In envy that my Lord Northumberland
Should be the father to so blest a son,
A son who is the theme of honour's tongue;
Amongst a grove, the very straightest plant;
Who is sweet Fortune's minion and her pride:
Whilst I, by looking on the praise of him,
See riot and dishonour stain the brow
Of my young Harry. O that it could be proved
That some night-tripping fairy had exchanged
In cradle-clothes our children where they lay,
And call'd mine Percy, his Plantagenet!
Then would I have his Harry, and he mine.
(1HIV, I, i 78 et seq)*

Yet before the scene is over he has clashed with the fiery-tempered Hotspur, and a rebellion against him is fermenting. Hotspur's loose tongue has already brought trouble upon him, and he has been brought in front of the King. He is angered, feeling humiliated, and his thoughts turn to violence. Hotspur is impulsive, his youthful exuberance leads him into unwinnable situations, and in the end he is killed by the wastrel upon whom he has earlier heaped such contempt. Hotspur represents the older idea of chivalry, whereas Hal represents, to some^{xi}, the encroachment of the modern world, of *realpolitik*. Hal and Hotspur, in Shakespeare's version, are of an age, representing two different paths. Hotspur is valiant, dynamic and inspiring but archaic. Hal is morally ambiguous, dissembling but has a far greater understanding of the world. When in the end Hal vanquishes Hotspur he is saddened, recognising that something irreplaceable has been lost. But the defeat of Hotspur is an important milestone on Hal's journey towards victory in France.

The historical Hotspur was significantly different from Shakespeare's portrayal. Henry Percy, Harry Hotspur, was older than King Henry, had been a diplomat entrusted with complex international negotiations, and was killed by an arrow at the Battle of Shrewsbury when he raised his visor to have a better view of the battlefield. The real character is largely irrelevant to Shakespeare's portrayal. He wanted a figure with whom to contrast Hal, an alter-ego as a modern commentator might say, and he borrowed Hotspur's name. There are colourful legends which surround Hotspur in his native county, one of which relates to Lady Percy's comment, in Part Two, "...speaking thick, which nature made his blemish/Became the accents of the valiant..." (2HIV, II,iii, 24-25). In Northumbrian dialect there is a particular "r" sound, produced in the throat rather than in the mouth, which is unique in England as a feature of dialect, but which can be found elsewhere as a speech defect. The "speaking thick", which Lady Percy refers to is never defined, and over the years many actors and producers have come up with differing interpretations of this. Some say it is merely speaking quickly, which matches Hotspur's temperament. Olivier famously gave him a stammer on the letter "w", which led to a poignant moment when he dies. Hotspur says "...No, Percy, thou art dust and food for -..." but is unable to say the "w" of the next word, requiring Hal to finish the sentence "...-for worms, brave Percy. Fare thee well, great heart!..." (1HIV, V iv, 86-87). Other actors have tried many different speech characteristics, and some have indeed used the Northumbrian accent, including Michael Redgrave in a famous portrayal. But the tradition in his home town is that the particular feature of the Northumbrian dialect is in imitation of Hotspur's speech defect. The author, who lives in the town in question, has pursued this in consultation with the historians at Alnwick Castle, still owned by the Percy family, now the Dukes of Northumberland. There is no evidence that Hotspur had any speech defect at all, although it is conceivable^{xii} that if he had a Northumbrian accent he might have been perceived by others to have a speech defect. But after considerable research around this question the author can advance a different provenance for the speech defect.

The Percy family have been prominent in England since the Middle Ages, and despite several rebellions leading to confiscations, executions and incarcerations, continued to be one of the great families of the realm. In Shakespeare's time the Ninth earl, also called Henry, was the current denizen. Known as the "Wizard Earl" due to his interests in science and other more esoteric forms of knowledge, he was a friend of Raleigh's and a member of his so-called School of Night. He was eventually a neighbour of Shakespeare's in the Blackfriars. This Earl of Northumberland was a respected soldier, having fought in the Low Countries, and also at sea, against the Spanish armada, was extremely argumentative, "...perpetually quarrelling..." with his mother^{xiii} falling out with his own family and often involved in altercations of one kind or another. The Wizard Earl had a relative

called Thomas^{xiv}, who was one of the Gunpowder Plot conspirators. Due to this connection the Wizard Earl was put on trial, and although found not guilty, was imprisoned in the Tower of London for seven years^{xv}. This man was known to Shakespeare, as a prominent member of London society, and a mover in intellectual and political circles. At his trial it became clear that he was slightly deaf, and it reported that this gave him a slight speech impediment. Thus all of the traits which make up Hotspur's character are drawn, not from the historical figure, but may well have been modelled upon his contemporary descendant.^{xvi}

Thus it becomes apparent that Shakespeare, when ostensibly writing about English history, was not writing about English history at all. The broad outline of each story was to some extent known to his audience, although at a time when most of the population was illiterate, and book ownership even amongst the literate was scanty, the accuracy of that knowledge can well be called into question. The stories of some of those historical figures had already been dealt with by other dramatists on the public stage, but in every case Shakespeare departed significantly from other versions, and in some cases flatly contradicted the expectations which the audience would have brought with them. Shakespeare created his own versions of history, portraying events in surprising and sometimes iconoclastic ways. His historical characters were recreated to suit his dramatic needs, with scant regard for their actual personae. He wrote the plays for a contemporary audience, who saw them in contemporary costumes, and related them to their contemporary experiences. The story of the request by the followers of the Earl of Essex for a commissioned public performance of Richard II, with its deposition scene, the day before the launching of their rebellion, is well known, as is the widely reported but dubiously attributed comment of the Queen "...I am Richard II, know ye not that?..." Elizabeth herself saw the historical play as a comment on contemporary politics. In what may well have been a deliberate and calculated gesture the Queen commanded a performance at her court by Shakespeare's company the day before Essex's execution, as he had commanded a performance the day before his uprising.

The plays, therefore, need not be considered to be shackled to a real understanding of, or even interest in, English history. Shakespeare certainly never felt this constraint. Indeed to set the plays in other, contemporary contexts, or in different societies and cultures would be in keeping with what, in effect, Shakespeare was doing in the original presentations, and if the plays were interpreted in terms of contemporary political realities this too would be a fundamentally Shakespearean thing to do. It is possible to look at the plays as works of fiction, with universal themes, and containing some of Shakespeare's most memorable characters. Shakespeare wrote the plays with an eye for contemporary relevance, he changed characters and conflicts to create dilemmas with universal resonance. Scholars and audiences around the world deserve the opportunity to see these plays far more widely.

To return to the original question, however, these plays do create a continuum, they do join together into a sequence. Although this continuous line leaves two plays stranded outside consideration, and even within these parameters the sequence is not seamless, they cover around a century reasonably comprehensively. The plays are seen as cyclical by major theatre companies, and indeed require the resources of major theatre companies in order to mount them as such, but the Royal Shakespeare Company, the English Shakespeare Company and others have presented them as a series several times, and smaller sections, such as the Henriad, many times. Although the quality of the plays varies, and the best plays come in the earlier part of the cycle, both in the theatre and in

academe the plays are regarded as a cycle, and it is legitimate to consider them as such. Certainly the scale of the seven plays which comprise this central section are epic in terms of scale, and although dwarfed by the great Indian epics are comparable to *The Illiad* or *The Odyssey*, or to *War and Peace* or to Wagner's *Ring Cycle*. If such a definition is useful they can be described as England's national epic, but to regard them only as English, or only as a national epic unnecessarily restricts one of the great sequences of world drama, universally relevant in the examinations of the most profound themes common to all cultures, containing in parts some of Shakespeare's very greatest dramatic writing.

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ⁱ The frequency with which certain plays are performed varies in different cultures, and sources conflict, but the above is broadly true. In India *Othello* has always been very popular, whereas it is slightly less common in England. Judging by the author's entirely random collection of *Theatre Heute Jahrbuchs* on the shelf next to his computer, in some years nearly every state subsidised theatre in Germany has a production of *Midsummer Night's Dream* in the repertoire. According to Mikhail Morozov in the Soviet period in Russia at one time the two most popular plays were *Taming of the Shrew* and *Hamlet*, but then, faced with Stalin's personal dislike, *Hamlet* almost vanished for decades, only to enjoy a resurgence after his death.

ⁱⁱ Even within the UK this can be the case. The author once directed a professional production of *1Henry iv*, which toured into Scotland. A member of the Scottish Arts Council Drama Panel said in conversation "I'm not sure the play has much to say north of the Border"

ⁱⁱⁱ Jones, N, "Towton was our worst ever battle, so why have we forgotten this bloodbath in the snow?" *MailOnline* (2012) available <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/debate/article-2122067/Towton-worst-battle-forgotten-bloodbath-snow.html>

^{iv} Kott, J, (1967) *Shakespeare Our Contemporary*, London, University Paperbacks, p10 et sequiter

^v Arden, John *To Present the Pretence*, (1977) London, Eyre Methuen.

^{vi} Ibid. pp195-208

^{vii} Waugh, WT, "Sir John Oldcastle" (1905), *The English Historical Review*, XX, (LXXIX) pp435-446

^{viii} Only nobles were beheaded, and Oldcastle had married into the nobility, not been born into it

^{ix} He is portrayed in this light in *Henry VI*

^x Generations of students have struggled with the names of the various Henrys, Hal and Harry both being nicknames for Henry. Generally Henry refers to the King, Hal to the Prince of Wales and Harry to Hotspur, but it is by no means invariable.

^{xi} To give but one example, Herbel, J (2015) "Shakespeare's Machiavellian Moment: Discovering Ethics and Forming a Leadership Narrative in *Henry V*", *Public Integrity*, Vol. 17 Issue 3, pp 265-278

^{xii} A conjecture put forward in a private email to the author by Daniel Watkins, one of the historians and guides at Alnwick Castle, home of the Percys.

^{xiii} <http://www.luminarium.org/encyclopedia/northumberland9.htm>

^{xiv} Ironically Thomas Percy is the same name as the Earl of Worcester in *1HIV*, who is the even more unrepentant rebel. Throughout the history of the Percy family Henrys periodically found themselves in trouble due to the activities of relatives named Thomas

^{xv} His confinement was not harsh. He met Raleigh and others frequently, had a library at his disposal, and even installed a bowling alley in his quarters

^{xvi} This argument has never, to the best of the author's knowledge, been advanced in print before