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History, Myth, and Early Modern Drama

History and myth have been rubbing shoulders ever since the first Renaissance humanists revived classical, regular tragedy: scarcely had Gian Giorgio Trissino composed his *Sofonisba* (1515) before his friend, Giovanni di Bernardo Rucellai, wrote *Oreste* and *Rosmunda*. Trissino's historical tragedy dramatizes a minor episode in the Punic Wars recorded by Livy and Appian. Rucellai's plays reanimate Euripides' mythic *Iphigenia in Tauris* and *Hecuba*. Trissino's decision to dramatize an episode of Roman history is striking because we know of only three plays from the fifth century BCE that dealt with verifiable history (as opposed to legendary material): Phrynicus' *Capture of Miletus* and *Phoenician Women*, and Aeschylus' *Persians*.¹ Only the last has been preserved for posterity. To be sure, the third-century BCE Latin poet Naevius did introduce a species of tragedy based on Roman history that was known as the *fabula praetexta* – thus founding a tradition to which Ennius, Pacuvius, and Accius contributed. The existence of this genre was attested by Cicero, Horace, Tacitus, Diomedes, Evanthius, and Donatus,² not to mention their Renaissance commentators, so it might have emboldened some humanists to write tragedies based on history, whether Rome's or their own. But it would be hard to imagine that authors from Miguel de Cervantes to William Shakespeare to Joost van den Vondel would *not* have dramatized national histories but for the classical imprimatur of the *fabula praetexta*: the impulse to dramatize history needed no impetus from the ancients.

The more important distinction on the early modern stage, I would argue, is not between myth and history but between material that is treated as if it were myth – distilled into a fable – and material that is treated as if it were history: composed of a series of events and happenstances, of individualized, even idiosyncratic, manners and dispositions, of recalcitrant particulars. The *locus classicus* of this distinction is Aristotle's *Poetics*, where the Stagirite asserts that “the poet's task is to speak not of events which have occurred, but of the kinds of events which *could* occur, and are possible by the standards of probability or necessity.” That makes poetry “both more philosophical and more serious than history, since poetry speaks more of universals, history of particulars.” “A ‘universal’ comprises the *kind* of speech or action which belongs by probability

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¹ Alan H. Sommerstein. “Tragedy and Myth.” *A Companion to Tragedy*, edited by Rebecca Bushnell. London: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009, pp. 164–180, p. 164.

² Gesine Manuwald. *Fabulae praetextae: Spuren einer literarischen Gattung der Römer*. Munich: Beck, 2001, ch. A.

or necessity to a certain *kind* of [person],” while “a ‘particular’, by contrast is (for example) what Alcibiades did or experienced.”³ From the sixteenth through the eighteenth centuries, this distinction was often invoked to censure early modern plays – such as those of Lope de Vega or Shakespeare – that were “neither right comedies, nor right tragedies” but “representations of history.”⁴ For as Thomas Rymer explains in *The Tragedies of the Last Age Consider’d and Examined by the Practice of the Ancients* (1678), the ancients had demonstrated “that *History*, grosly taken, was neither proper to *instruct*, nor apt to *please*; and therefore would not trust *History* for their examples, but refin’d upon the *History*; and thence contriv’d something more *philosophical* and more *accurate* than *History*.”⁵ Exemplary plays by Rymer’s standard might have included Jean Racine’s *Britannicus* (1670) and *Bérénice* (1671). In the preface to the former, Racine declared his preference for a “simple action burdened with little matter,” one that proceeded “step by step to its end.”⁶ In his preface to the latter, Racine claimed to take his subject from a single sentence in Suetonius: “Titus, who loved Berenice passionately, and who even, as was believed, had promised to marry her, sent her away from Rome, against his will and against hers, in the first days of his reign.” Suetonius’s under-elaboration of the incident, he claimed, permitted him as a poet “to write a tragedy of that simplicity of action which was so much to the Ancients’ taste.”⁷

Shakespeare’s histories and tragedies could scarcely be described as simple in Racine’s sense, and that proved a major sticking point for many of his readers in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, when critics often took their starting point from Aristotle. Lisideius’ judgment of Shakespeare’s history plays in *An Essay of Dramatick Poesie* (1668) may stand in for many others: they are, he complains, “rather so many Chronicles of Kings, or the business many times of thirty or forty years, crampt into a representation two hours and an half, which is not to imitate or paint Nature, but rather to draw her in miniature, to take her in little; to look upon her through the wrong end of a Perspective, and receive her Images not only much less, but infinitely more imperfect then

3 Aristotle. *Poetics*, translated and with a commentary by Stephen Halliwell. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1987, pp. 40–41, 1451 a36–b15.

4 John Florio. *Florios Second Frutes*. London: Printed for Thomas Woodcock, 1591, p. 123.

5 Thomas Rymer. *Tragedies of the Last Age*. London: Richard Tonson, 1678, pp. 15–16.

6 Jean Racine. *Œuvres complètes I: Théâtre-Poésie*, edited by Georges Forestier. Paris: Gallimard, 1989, p. 374.

7 Racine, *Œuvres complètes I*, pp. 450–451. See Alain Niderst. “Analyse de la preface de *Bérénice*.” *Ouverture et Dialogue: Mélanges offerts à Wolfgang Iser à l’occasion de son soixantième anniversaire*, edited by Ulrich Döring, Antiopy Lyroudias, and Rainer Zaiser. Tübingen: Gunter Narr, 1988, pp. 319–24. See also Forestier in Racine, *Œuvres complètes I*, p. 1468.

the life.” Equating truth with verisimilitude and *distinguishing* it from the particulars of history, Lisideius declares such plays ridiculous “because the Spirit of man cannot be satisfied but with truth, or at least verisimilitude.”⁸ Nicholas Rowe, Shakespeare’s first editor of note, was equally struck by Shakespeare’s refusal to confine himself to a single action, remarking that in all the plays taken “from the *English* or *Roman History*,” one finds “the Character as exact in the Poet as the Historian”: “so far from proposing to himself any one Action for a Subject,” Shakespeare often entitles his plays “lives.”⁹

Johann Gottfried Herder and Maurice Morgann’s seminal essays on Shakespeare in 1777 mark an important shift in the priorities of dramatic critics, a shift that coincides with a more general “historical turn” in Western philosophy,¹⁰ for they champion the historical quality of Shakespearean drama. Shakespeare “took history as he found it,” announces Herder: the “changes of time and place, over which the poet rules, proclaim most loudly: ‘This is not a poet but a creator! Here is the history of the world!’”¹¹ In the case of Shakespearean dramatis personae, said Morgann, “it may be fit to consider them rather as Historic than Dramatic beings.”¹² In Adam Müller, we find the complementary impulse to describe history as tragedy (rather than tragedy as history). Citing Friedrich Schlegel’s observation that England had “dealt in advance and single-handedly with all the revolutions that Europe as a whole [had] been forced to undergo,” Müller claimed that British history was itself “a drama in which Europe might find its own history reflected in coherent and idealized form.” He then added that

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⁸ John Dryden. *The Works of John Dryden*, vol. 17, edited by Edward N. Hooker and Hugh T. Swedenberg, Jr. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1956–89, p. 36.

⁹ William Shakespeare. *The Works of Mr. William Shakespear*, vol. 1, edited by Nicholas Rowe. London: Jacob Tonson, 1714, p. xxviii.

¹⁰ For the larger context of this historical turn, see Isaiah Berlin. *The Proper Study of Mankind: An Anthology of Essays*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1998, pp. 326–435; Herbert Butterfield. *Man on His Past: The Study of the History of Historical Scholarship*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1955; Friedrich Meinecke. *Historicism: The Rise of a New Historical Outlook*, translated by James E. Anderson. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1972; Hans Peter Reill. *The German Enlightenment and the Rise of Historicism*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1975; Robert Leventhal. *The Disciplines of Interpretation: Lessing, Herder, Schlegel and Hermeneutics in Germany, 1750–1800*. Berlin: de Gruyter, 1994; Theodore Ziolkowski. *Clio the Romantic Muse: Historicizing the Faculties in Germany*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2004; Frederick A. Beiser. *The German Historicist Tradition*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011.

¹¹ Herder quoted in Jonathan Bate, editor. *The Romantics on Shakespeare*. London: Penguin, 1992, pp. 168, 170–171.

¹² Maurice Morgann. “An Essay on the Dramatic Character of Sir John Falstaff.” *Eighteenth Century Essays on Shakespeare*, edited by David Nichol Smith, 2nd edition. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1963, pp. 278–364, p. 231, n. 1.

study of “the dramatic character of the British constitution,” which united a monological element in the shape of king, clergy, and aristocracy with the dialogical element in the shape of the House of Commons “to form a single beautiful and dramatic whole” was “a fine preparatory exercise for the dramatic poet” because it would teach him not to become engrossed in monologic contemplation of a single hero but to let his attention be seized continually by new ones.¹³ Georg W. F. Hegel’s contribution to this discussion would prove the most perdurable: Beholding in history a panorama of sin and suffering, he perceived in the very inadequacy of things as they were a groundwork for the individual exercise of moral freedom. To be sure, those who attempted to impose their private desires and personal conceptions of the good on society might fare no better than the typical tragic hero; but the conflicts of history produced the very gain that Hegel found in tragedy, for Spirit emerged exalted and glorified.¹⁴ This was the theory that Andrew C. Bradley developed with such brilliance in *Shakespearean Tragedy* (1904), thus naturalizing the relationship between history and tragedy for the twentieth century.

This newly discovered kinship between history and tragedy secured Shakespeare’s place in the canon as the poet who “wrote the text of modern life”¹⁵ while marginalizing many other dramatists who sought to distill history into myth. By writing as a “historian,” Shakespeare created a drama that could satisfy a new set of criteria for truth-claims by reproducing the particulars and the occlusions of history, one that could immerse audiences in the theatrical experience of enduring *being* through time.

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¹³ Müller quoted in Bate, *The Romantics on Shakespeare*, p. 85.

¹⁴ Hayden White. *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1975, pp. 88–131.

¹⁵ Ralph Waldo Emerson. *Representative Men*, edited by Pamela Schirmeister. 1850. New York: Marsilio Publishers, 1995, p. 142. See also Peter Holbrook. *Shakespeare’s Individualism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010.