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**AB OVO OR IN MEDIAS RES? REWRITING HISTORY FOR THE
EARLY MODERN STAGE
OR, HOW ELIZABETHAN HISTORY PLAYS COLLAPSED
REFERENTIALITY**

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Admit this history

Can this cockpit hold
The vasty fields of France? Or may we cram
Within this wooden O the very casques
That did affright the air at Agincourt? [...]
For 'tis your thoughts that now must deck our kings,
Carry them here and there, jumping o'er times,
Turning th'accomplishment of many years
Into an hourglass: for the which supply,
Admit me Chorus to this history,
Who Prologue-like your humble patience pray,
Gently to hear, kindly to judge our play. (*Henry V*, Prologue, 11-14, 26-34)¹

1. Shakespeare's Prologue to *Henry V* points to the bareness of the Elizabethan stage, which required the audience's "thoughts" and "patience" to imagine the epic scale of the adventures that were about to be performed. The Chorus thus points to the referential crises of the Elizabethan stage, which could not possibly *show* the "vasty fields of France" in a confined space, yet seemingly

¹ W. Shakespeare, *The Norton Shakespeare*, ed. Stephen Greenblatt et al., 3rd ed. (New York / London: W. W. Norton, 2016). All quotations from Shakespeare are from this edition. The author wishes to thank the anonymous reviewers for their helpful suggestions.

rivalled God's Creation by making these fields appear in the minds of the playgoers. Theater had the uncanny ability to summon the past on stage, re-enacting or re-creating history on a bare, wooden, "unworthy scaffold" (Prologue, 10), breathing life again into legendary characters. Elizabethan dramatists were aware of this poetic sleight of hand: the opening rhetorical questions ("Can this cockpit hold...? Or may we cram...?") show that the Chorus self-referentially questions the truthfulness of the account to come. Instead of seeing the "very casques" of Agincourt, the audience is told that "this history" will be "jumping o'er times", depicting "many years into an hourglass" to avoid trying their "patience."

2. Revealingly, despite the necessary manipulation of time and space for practical or narrative purposes, despite the practical shortcomings of "this wooden O" — designating with a deictic the wooden structure used for both plays and cockfights ("this cockpit") — Shakespeare's dramatic portrayal of the battle of Agincourt has become, for the English, the *de facto* dominant historical recollection of their most famous victory against the French enemy. In fact, one could argue that many of Shakespeare's portrayals of historical characters, from Julius Caesar to Richard III, from Macbeth to Margaret of Anjou, have replaced the narrative sources which the playwright used, notably Plutarch's *Lives* for characters from Roman history, or Raphael Holinshed's *Chronicles* for topics from British history.² Although professional historians have offered numerous critical re-evaluations of the posthumous reputation of these famous characters, it is Shakespeare's dramatic and semi-fictional portrayals which endure in the popular imagination, suggesting that these *representations* of history have *replaced* history itself. This posits one of several referential crises which this contribution will try to address. Through its representation of the world and history, Shakespeare's histories rivalled not only with God's Creation but also clashed with budding modern historiographical methods, challenging the relationship between a subject and its representation.

3. If history is defined as a narrative account which weaves together a set of facts and testimonies from the past — and the narration evolves as "new" facts are discovered, and "old" facts reinterpreted —, Shakespeare's histories are part of a series of historical narratives, many of which transformed people's vision of the past, sometimes challenging dominant theories. Shakespeare's histories have become part of history itself. His plays could serve the dominant *status quo*, extolling the Tudor dynasty for instance, but they could also serve revolutionaries, as they mixed dramatic genres and challenged neo-classical aesthetics and ideology. Neo-classical rules regarding dramatic histories posited the need to *select* material to provide audiences with *one* interpretation of the past,

² Plutarch, *Plutarch's Lives*, Englished by Sir Thomas North.

thereby giving meaning to chaos. Elizabethan theater, however, delighted in such chaos, offering playgoers *several* strands of interpretation, various layers of meaning, with plots and subplots actually often *deviating* from history.

4. We will begin by briefly recalling how Shakespeare altered history, before his Histories were altered by subsequent editors as taste evolved. This will bring to the fore the debate on the Aristotelian notion of *mimesis*, largely ignored by early modern playwrights, yet mentioned by Sir Philip Sidney's claim that dramatists had to distinguish "reporting and representing," rather than deviating from the classical rules of poetry. Playwrights' deviations were also the object of attacks, by State censors and Puritan pamphleteers. The former feared theater's ability to affect the present-day world by rousing people to rebel against authority; the latter resented theater's unspoken rivalry with the Church, as playgoing in the Elizabethan era could be confused with the holy experience of Communion, which incarnated another form of remembrance of times past. For critics of theater, dramatic creations rivaled divine Creation, as poets "made" worlds through words, *ex nihilo*, affecting the "real" world in the process. Puritan antitheatricalists inveighed against such blasphemy which could make it possible to confuse theater's codes of representation with holy rituals as illustrated by speeches from *Henry V*. In what follows, we will offer a closer analysis which will reveal that rather than recreating the past and collapsing referentiality, as if the past became (or even replaced) the present, Elizabethan dramatic histories played with contradictory modes of expression, toying with our collective nostalgia for the past, and our eagerness to divine the future. The crises of referentiality created by Elizabethan history plays were set against competing discourses: that of Christian eschatology, on the one hand, and of empirical historiography, on the other. Against these two interpretive models, the world of the Elizabethan stage dislocated referentiality, and — contrary to King Lear's famous rebuke to his youngest daughter — made *something* out of "nothing."

Altered history and "altered" Shakespeare

5. Shakespeare was not the first, nor the last, writer to have influenced English historiography, defining what we *think* we know of times past. The playwright was preceded by, among others, Geoffrey of Monmouth in the 12th century, whose *History of the Kings of Britain* almost single-handedly launched the Arthurian legend, with King Arthur and the knights of the Round Table, adding to what was a patchy history a host of details and anecdotes and, dare we say it, inventions

which were subsequently developed and celebrated by other chroniclers.³ Geoffrey was perhaps more successful than most in creating history this way. The writing of history was still dependent on medieval collections of annals, chronicles and proto-historical narratives, the latter building on the former to produce ever-increasingly cogent accounts of the past, albeit sometimes through dubious efforts at reconstructing historical missing links, or through disputable amplification of anecdotal references.⁴ The compound effect of additions and reconstructions was felt centuries later, when Shakespeare and his contemporaries plundered sources for material for their plays. William C. Carroll has thus recently shown how the famed weird sisters in Shakespeare's *Macbeth* appeared only gradually in historical sources, transforming a largely secular account of a power struggle in medieval Scotland to a story of demonic proportions which resonated with the immediate context of the 1605 Gunpowder Plot, months before *Macbeth* was first performed.⁵

6. If the examples of *Henry V* and *Macbeth* are anything to go by, Elizabethan drama may offer a unique perspective into the way playwrights could write about and contribute to *making* history. In this respect, Shakespeare seems to have played a commanding role. When John Heminges and Henry Condell published his collected works in 1623, they divided his dramatic output into three categories: *Comedies, Histories, & Tragedies*, introducing “histories” as a third term or an “in-between” category to complement the customary dual division between comedies and tragedies inherited from the Ancients. The First Folio's generic division has been challenged and reconfigured by critics ever since, some suggesting that adding sub-genres such as Romances, Roman plays or Problem plays, among others, could better describe the Shakespearean corpus.⁶ These attempts have floundered, however, as the critics' failure in neatly dividing the plays by genre questions the heuristic uses of generic categorization of Elizabethan drama. Shakespeare's contemporaries did not, for the most part, seem to care about the question of genre, as suggested by the varied manner in which the *same* plays were titled over the years — the same play, which could be tragic or comic or both, could be called *The History of...*, *The Tragedy of...*, *The Life of...*, *The True Account of...* in different editions.

7. For today's critics specializing in drama of this period, English drama's generic indeterminacy or malleability is no longer overly problematic — one could even argue that it is Elizabethan

3 J. Burrow, *A History of Histories*, 231–38.

4 One thinks of what distinguished the two founding trends in historical writing: Herodotus, with his artful (fictional) recreations of speeches by key characters, and Thucydides, whose works strove for greater historical accuracy.

5 W. C. Carroll, “‘Strange Intelligence’: Transformations of Witchcraft in *Macbeth* Discourse”, 173–89; see also G. Wills, *Witches and Jesuits: Shakespeare's Macbeth*.

6 M. Hattaway, ed., “The Shakespearean History Play”.

drama's *raison d'être*, and what sets it apart from other theatrical traditions. Conversely, this generic instability still jars with critics accustomed to the Continental interpretive tradition in which neo-Aristotelian theory, notably the rule of the three unities and the principles of credibility and verisimilitude, still casts a long shadow.⁷ This shadow even affected literary criticism in England after 1642, when Puritans closed London theaters. When theaters reopened in 1660 with the Restoration of the monarchy, British audiences had been converted to the Continental taste, and Shakespeare was no longer celebrated as Britain's nonpareil playwright. His plays had to be rewritten and repackaged in "altered" versions to conform to the now dominant neo-classical style, as with Nahum Tate's adaptation of *King Lear* (1681), in which he removed the character of the Fool and concluded the play with a happy end (Cordelia's marriage to Edgar), "to rectify what was wanting in the regularity and probability of the tale".⁸ Shakespeare was no longer a writer of Histories, but an anachronic playwright, whose works needed to be "altered" and tailored for the new dominant worldview.

8. After a century and a half of *ersatz* Shakespeare, the nineteenth century rediscovered virtually unadulterated texts of the Bard's plays, as writers in England and elsewhere began to question their reliance on neo-classical decorum, and on history more generally. In France, Victor Hugo celebrated the English playwright's blending of genres or, as he would have it in his "Préface de *Cromwell*" (1827) or in his book on Shakespeare's "genius," the interplay between the "sublime and the grotesque."⁹ Challenging genre and Aristotelian rules had now become fashionable — even revolutionary. The rediscovery of Shakespeare's original plays participated in the aesthetic and political revolutions of 19th century Europe, suggesting Shakespeare's enduring appeal in shaping, or commenting on, historical narratives.¹⁰

The difference betwixt reporting and representing

9. This brief sketch of Shakespeare's influence in shaping drama and our understanding of history must be further contextualized to highlight the problems that his "history" plays posed for his

7 F. Dupont, *Aristote : ou, Le vampire du théâtre occidental*.

8 N. Tate, *The History of King Lear*; see also Florence March, "La Scène de Reconnaissance: Allégorie politique et métaphore de l'adaptation dans *The History of King Lear* de Nahum Tate (1681)".

9 V. Hugo, "Préface de *Cromwell*"; V. Hugo, *William Shakespeare*. On the evolving history of editing Shakespeare's texts, see J. Jowett, "Editing Shakespeare's Plays in the Twentieth Century", and G. Egan, *The Struggle for Shakespeare's Text*, among others.

10 For a recent discussion on Shakespeare's political relevance, see E. Fernie, *Shakespeare for Freedom: Why the Plays Matter*, 158–59.

own contemporaries, particularly viewed from an aesthetic perspective. In the early days of Elizabethan theater, Sir Philip Sidney famously argued against the drama of his own time. In his *Defence for Poesy*,¹¹ the aristocratic soldier-poet lambasted his contemporaries' "mongrel tragi-comedy," comparing it unflatteringly to the models of the Ancients:

Our Tragedies and Comedies (not without cause cried out against), observing rules neither of honest civility nor of skilful Poetry [...] [are] faulty both in place and time, the two necessary companions of all corporal actions. For where the stage should always represent but one place, and the uttermost time presupposed in it should be, both by Aristotle's precept and common reason, but one day, there is both many days, and many places, inartificially imagined. [...]

How then shall we set forth a story, which containeth both many places and many times? And do they not know that a tragedy is tied to the laws of Poesy, and not of History; not bound to follow the story, but, having liberty, either to feign a quite new matter, or to frame the history to the most tragical conveniency? Again, many things may be told which cannot be showed, if they know the difference betwixt reporting and representing. [...]

[I]f they will represent an history, they must not (as Horace saith) begin *ab ovo*, but they must come to the principal point of that one action which they will represent.¹²

10. Sidney's argument was openly Aristotelian, downplaying the role of narration as compared to *mimesis* ("the difference betwixt reporting and representing") which was the key to all poetic art. By arguing that "tragedy is tied to the laws of Poesy, and not of History," Sidney paraphrased the opening lines of Aristotle's *Poetics*, in which the Stagirite had first argued that "epic-making and the making of tragedy, and comedy too, and the art of making dithyrambs, and most of the art of composing to the flute and lyre — all these happen to be, by and large, *mimeseis*."¹³
11. For Sidney and the educated elite, "art" had "laws" which required poets to "frame the history" to reach its tragic and moral potential. This required efforts at selecting historical elements and fashioning them to fit the realities of a staged performance: playwrights ought to keep *only* what was needed to develop "the principal point." This practical advice was ignored by Shakespeare and his ilk, considered by Sidney as mere popular scribblers of a barbarous age, producing works full of "scurrility" and "doltishness:"

But besides these gross absurdities, how all their plays be neither right tragedies, nor right comedies,

11 Also known as *Apology for Poetry*, it was published posthumously in 1595, but probably written over a decade earlier, before Shakespeare produced his first histories (two of the *Henry VI* plays were first performed in 1591).

12 Ph. Sidney, *An Apology For Poetry*, 110–11.

13 Aristotle, *Aristotle's Poetics*, 45 (1447a, §2).

mingling kings and clowns, not because the matter so carrieth it, but thrust in clowns by head and shoulders, to play a part in majestical matters, with neither decency nor discretion, so as neither the admiration and commiseration, nor the right sportfulness, is by their mongrel tragi-comedy obtained. [...] So falleth it out that, having indeed no right comedy, in that comical part of our tragedy, we have nothing but scurrility, unworthy of any chaste ears, or some extreme show of doltishness, indeed fit to lift up a loud laughter, and nothing else [...]¹⁴

12. Elizabethan drama was thus notable in its own time for the blending of genres, the “mingling [of] kings and clowns”, and it was also criticized for its lack of “decency,” and — far from sticking to “the principal point” — for the inordinate complexity of its plots and characters which contravened Sidney’s ideal of “tragical conveniency.” As noted by Eric Auerbach, Shakespeare clearly followed the opposite path, revelling in superfluous “entanglements:”

Quite often Shakespeare makes the setting of a play some fairyland only loosely connected with real times and places. [...] Shakespeare’s drama does not present isolated blows of fate, generally falling from above and involving but a few people in their effects, while the milieu is limited to the few persons indispensable to the progress of the action; on the contrary, it offers inner entanglements [...] in which not only the milieu but even the landscape, even the spirits of the dead and other supernatural beings participate. And the role of these participants often contributes nothing at all or at least very little to the progress of the action, but instead consists in a sympathetic counterpoint—a parallel or contrary motion on various levels of style.¹⁵

13. In this respect, Auerbach sided with Sidney, arguing that Shakespeare did not begin *in medias res*, as required to advance “the progress of the action;” but he did not go as far as to argue that the playwright developed a plot entirely *ab ovo*. Instead, he suggested the plays developed competing strands, subplots offering “a sympathetic counterpoint,” a “parallel or contrary motion” to the main plot, providing a multiplicity of critical entry points. The result were plays that were more than the sum of their parts, in which the main *plot* is not the same as the main *point* of the play — if there is any. Rather than providing playgoers with a historical narrative and moralizing conclusion, not unlike medieval morality plays, Shakespeare may have invited audiences to challenge the deceptive referential relationship between past and present. Instead, playgoers could revel in the complexity and aporetic nature of history — celebrating, as it were, the playwright’s artful *deviation* from history and *recreation* of the past, rather than aiming for verisimilitude or historical accuracy. If anything, such deviation was the Poet’s prerogative, one which set him against more exacting proto-scientific writers, stressing the Poet’s imaginative use of language.

14 Sidney, *Apology*, 112.

15 E. Auerbach, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, 322.

Theater and/vs Creation

14. From an early modern rhetorical perspective, one could compare what Auerbach called “inner entanglements” to a popular figure of speech favored by Renaissance humanists: amplification. By developing a single idea through a growing web of complex sentences and ideas, not unlike Geoffrey of Monmouth’s fantastical development of a minor reference to a king into a trove of details to create the Arthurian legend, Shakespeare and his contemporaries produced plays which both relied on, and contributed to, mythography, i.e. the writing of *pseudo*-historical material, or what some have called “mythistory,” i.e. history in which myths play a persistent role.¹⁶ In so doing, early modern drama contributed to collapse the referential framework of the histories they supposedly portrayed by developing stories which had no referential foundation, or mixing the historical plot with ahistorical subplots.
15. Attending a performance of *Henry V* is thus not simply being the witness of a re-presentation of the battle of Agincourt and its aftermath. It is an experience which connects present-day audiences with the events of 1415 and, through the hyperbolic retelling of Henry’s feats, to the mythographical foundations of England’s history, which is portrayed as an offshoot of the Creation of the universe itself.¹⁷ *Henry V* thus compares the English king’s victory against the French to the moment when God created the world through divine *fiat*. The Chorus suggests as much when s/he reappears at the beginning of Act 4 and asks audiences to “entertain the conjecture of a time / When creeping murmur and the poring dark / Fills the wide vessel of the universe” (*Henry V*, 4.0.1-3). Although the lines describe the small hours of the night before the decisive battle, they also echo the opening chapter of *Genesis*, before God created the world, when “the earth was without form, and void; and darkness was upon the face of the deep” (Ge 1:2), effectively suggesting Henry’s victory was akin to the creation of a new world, one ruled by the English king.¹⁸
16. The Biblical context needs to be considered alongside the earlier reference by the Chorus to the figure of the “wooden O.” The metaphor embodies not only the *topos* of the *theatrum mundi* (in the sense of “all the world’s a stage”), it also underlines the vacuity of the stage at the beginning of the play, i.e. at the beginning of the time of the performance — or from a diegetic perspective, at the beginning of time *tout court* for the playgoers —, as expressed by the nought (“O” or “0”), the

16 J. Mali, *Mythistory: The Making of a Modern Historiography*.

17 On the fraught interpretations of *Henry V* and its relationship with history, myth-making, and ideology, see J. Dollimore and A. Sinfield, “History and Ideology: The Instance of *Henry V*”; G. Walch, “*Henry V* as Working-House of Ideology”, among others.

18 Biblical quotations are taken from the Authorized Version (1611).

roundness and emptiness of which is aurally prepared by the vowel sound that precedes it (/ˈwʊː.dən/). Shakespeare had already linked the figure of an empty circle to power and existential nihilism in *Richard II*, probably written in 1595-6, three years before *Henry V*. The reference to the void and the way in which history may be obliterated occurs in the deposition scene in Act 4. As the scene in *Henry V* (also in Act 4), the scene in *Richard II* is littered with Biblical images, such as when the bishop of Carlisle prophesies another “Golgotha” (*Richard II*, 4.1.138) and Richard compares himself to Christ betrayed by Judas (164). The king then repeatedly speaks of the void, first describing “this golden crown like a deep well” (177), then, when asked if he is indeed relinquishing the crown: “Ay, no; no, ay — for I must nothing be” (193), punning on both the first person personal pronoun (“I”) and the affirmative (“ay”) to signify that “ay/I” is “no[thing]”. In *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, probably written in the same period as *Richard II*, Shakespeare also links such “nothing” to the poet’s ability to create — or destroy — a world out of thin air, using quasi-Biblical undertones, speaking of “heaven” and “earth:”

The poet’s eye, in a fine frenzy rolling,
Doth glance from heaven to earth, from earth to heaven.
And as imagination bodies forth
The forms of things unknown, the poet’s pen
Turns them to shapes and gives to airy nothing
A local habitation and a name. (*Dream*, 5.1.12-17)

17. By making something out of an “airy nothing,” “the poet’s pen” illustrated the commonplace paronomastic pun between “nothing” and the act of writing itself, “noting.”¹⁹ The pun posits a link between the self-referential act of creation and the meta-literary awareness that this creation is paradoxically predicated on an absence. This illustrated, in turn, the ability of the “Poet’s pen” to rival God’s Creation.

18. Elizabethan audiences could readily compare theater’s ability to create worlds through words with the Creation of the universe from the divine Word, as suggested by the Chorus in the Prologue who makes the “vasty fields of France” appear by hypotyposis, almost with a performative use of language as the Chorus’ invocation summons in the minds of the beholder the fabled location of the

19 For an example of the wealth of puns around “nothing” and “noting” in Shakespeare, see P. Parker, “*Cymbeline’s* Much Ado about Nothing, Noting, (K)not Knowing, and Nothus”.

events of 1415.²⁰ In fact, although the world of the stage was a poetic invention giving “a local habitation” to “airy nothings,” the poet’s dramatic creation could have a bearing on history itself, either commenting on its future development, or perhaps actively contributing to shaping it.

19. Sidney recalled, in his *Defence*, that poetry was intimately linked to prophecy in Antiquity: “Among the Romans a poet was called *vates*, which is as much as a diviner, foreseer, or prophet,” and that the etymology of poet was “*poiein*, which is ‘to make’ [...] calling [the poet] ‘a maker:’ which name, how high and incomparable a title it is”.²¹ In the historical world, the poet’s ability “to make” was occasionally put to the test, as illustrated by attempted *coups* or political assassinations directly inspired by some of Shakespeare’s most prophetic plays, i.e. plays which featured self-styled prophets. Thus, in 1601, Robert Devereux, Earl of Essex, attempted to rouse followers against Elizabeth I after a performance of *Richard II* (in which the Bishop of Carlisle prophesies England’s ruin in the aforementioned deposition scene), and, in 1865, John Wilkes Booth assassinated Abraham Lincoln at Ford’s Theatre in Washington, D.C., inspired by his own performances in *Julius Caesar* (in which a Soothsayer repeatedly warns Caesar to beware the ides of March).

20. The poet’s ability to rival with or affect God’s Creation, and to potentially unleash havoc in the process, was naturally met with hostility in some quarters. From a political standpoint, the State required that all plays be licensed by the censor to avoid the most egregious examples of rebellious calls to arms which may disturb public peace, which may explain why stories performed onstage were never openly linked to contemporary history. Just as Montesquieu criticized France through his *Lettres persanes* in 1721, Elizabethan dramatists could only depict treason and rebellion using plots from *past* English history or from foreign lands. It was only after Elizabeth’s death in 1603 that semi-hagiographical plays which portrayed the early years of her life appeared in London, such as *If You Know Not Me, You Know Nobody* (1605) by Thomas Heywood, *The Famous History of Sir Thomas Wyatt* (1607) by Thomas Dekker and John Webster, or *Henry VIII* (1613) by Shakespeare and John Fletcher — early *Jacobean* histories dealing with *Tudor* history, portraying key events of a now-defunct dynasty, depicting recent events from the history of England that were *only (sic)* half a century old.²²

21. In addition to State censorship, threats against theater also appeared among the civil population, particularly from the “godly” folk. In Reformation England, Puritans opposed to all instances

20 J. L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words*.

21 Sidney, *Apology*, 83, 84.

22 Th. Heywood, “If You Know Not Me, You Know Nobody Part 1”; Th. Dekker and J. Webster, *The Famous History of Sir Thomas Wyat, with the Coronation of Queen Mary, and the Coming in of King Philip*.

of idolatry and superstition took exception to theater's use of, and meddling with, history. London playhouses were, for antitheatricalists such as Stephen Gosson, veritable cesspools; contemporary playwrights were prime peddlers of poisonous pagan fables, the perniciousness of which was hidden under a veneer of beauteous ornaments:

[...] pull off the vizard that Poets mask in, you shall disclose their reproach, bewray their vanity, loth their wantonness, lament their folly, and perceive their sharp sayings to be placed as Pearls in Dunghills, fresh pictures on rotten walls, chaste Matrons' apparel on common Courtezans. [...] No marvel though *Plato* shut them out of his School, and banished them quite from his common wealth, as effeminate writers, unprofitable members, and utter enemies to virtue.²³

22. That Gosson should mention *Plato* was another testimony of the antipathy of the would-be elite *vis-à-vis* the new popular public theaters in which plays did not conform to the virtuous aims and masculine rules of classical drama. It also pointed to a profound distaste for drama, particularly non-religious performances, which risked reigniting people's appetite for idolatrous pastimes. Gosson's critique resonated with Protestant debates around representationality, particularly regarding Eucharistic doctrine — a bone of contention between Catholics and Protestants, as well as between different strands of Protestantism. In other words, theater's ability to incarnate and revive pagan histories blasphemously competed with the only acceptable representation of the past, one best incarnated by the sacramental ceremony of the Last Supper and its wording.²⁴

23. In the context of the Elizabethan Settlement, the wording of the Eucharistic celebration found in the 1559 Book of Common Prayer emphasized that churchgoers partook in the ritual of communion in "remembrance" of Christ's "death and passion" — a wording which, I would argue, momentarily transformed churches into theaters, as the faithful participated in a weekly re-enactment of Christ's Last Supper. The ambiguous wording of the two possible versions of public prayer which followed the ritual of communion²⁵ continued in this vein, emphasizing the commemorative aspects of the ceremony. This contrasted with the overtly incarnational model of the Catholic

23 S. Gosson, *The Schoole of Abuse Containing a Plesaunt Invectiue against Poets, Pipers, Players, Jesters, and Such like Caterpillers of a Commonwelth*. Although *The School of Abuse* often reads like a Puritan pamphlet, Gosson himself was a Conformist minister of the Church of England. See A. F. Kinney, "Gosson, Stephen (Bap. 1554, d. 1625), Anti-Theatrical Polemicist and Church of England Clergyman Bookseller".

24 For J. A. Knapp, "early modern English debates over the relative worth of representational practices—poetic, historical, philosophical, visual, etc.—were driven by a tension resulting from the contrast between existing representational practices and the new word-centered religion." J. A. Knapp, *Illustrating the Past in Early Modern England: The Representation of History in Printed Books*, 76.

25 One version hoped that God would grant the remission of sins "through faith in his blood" — a wording acceptable to Calvinists —; the other version spoke of "these holy misteries, with the spiritual food of the most precious body and blood of thy son, our saviour Jesus Christ" — a wording more amenable to those still harboring Catholic sympathies. *The Book of Common Prayer: King James, Anno 1604*.

Church, for whom the Eucharist was synonymous with transubstantiation, making the ritual not a historical *re-enactment* but an actual *transformation* of wine and bread into the blood and body of Christ.²⁶

24. In light of this religious context, one can re-interpret Sidney and Gosson's hostility for a popular theater — which played fast and loose with time and space — as a fear that audiences could confuse the effects of communion in church with that of attending a dramatic performance in a playhouse. Albeit communion was a holy ritual, both experiences were highly codified and equally communal. The confusion between the spiritual and the temporal worlds was all the more vivid as the battle of Agincourt re-enacted onstage could be linked, or confused, with the liturgical calendar. In Shakespeare's play, the king suggests this reading when he names the day of the battle according to the saints' calendar (Saint Crispin's day), rather than the civil calendar (October 25), peppering his speech with sacramental language:

And say, "Tomorrow is Saint Crispian."

Then will he [a soldier] strip his sleeve and show his scars

And say, "*These wounds* I had on Crispin's day."

Old men forget; yet all shall be forgot

But he'll *remember*, with advantages,

What feats he did that day. Then shall our names,

Familiar in his mouth as household words—

Harry the King, Bedford and Exeter,

Warwick and Talbot, Salisbury and Gloucester—

Be in their flowing cups freshly remembered.

This story shall the good man teach his son,

And Crispin Crispian shall ne'er go by

26 The doctrine of transubstantiation was first approved during the Fourth Lateran Council in 1215 and the theological underpinnings were confirmed during the Council of Trent (1545-1563). The actual liturgy for communion used in Catholic churches varied considerably, however, making it difficult to compare the wording of the Book of Common Prayer with that used in a Catholic mass. See L. Palmer Wandel, ed., *A Companion to the Eucharist in the Reformation*, 4–5; and I. Levy, G. Macy, and K. Van Ausdall, eds., *A Companion to the Eucharist in the Middle Ages*.

From this day to the ending of the world

But we in it shall be *rememberèd*,

We few, we happy few, we band of brothers—

For *he today that sheds his blood with me*

Shall be my brother. (*Henry V*, 4.3.46-62, emphasis added)

25. Henry's repeated talk of remembrance, of wounds and scars and "shed[ding] blood" and "flowing cups," and his call to arms with its Christological and eschatological implications ("Crispin Crispian" anaphorically recalls "Christ", and "From this day to the ending of the world" points to the Apocalypse), echo the religious ceremony of communion described earlier. Here, soldiers seemingly partake in Henry's Last Supper, as it were, only to revive the next day from what was thought to be certain death, justified by God ("We few, we happy few"), united through a sacrifice of blood ("we band of brothers ... that sheds his blood with me").

Anachronism and *paragone*

26. The dangers of conflating past and present started to become apparent by the late sixteenth century. While the Church continued to link the time of Christ's life and death with the present in expectation of His Second Coming, fashioning history through the prism of eschatology, Renaissance historians started to lay the groundwork for the modern historical method, distinguishing fact from fiction, past from present, discovering the pitfalls of anachronism in the process.
27. For poets and playwrights, however, anachronisms were unimportant, even necessary to make the past relatable, which is why Shakespeare's histories playfully staged chiming clocks in Caesar's Rome (*Julius Caesar* 2.1.192-3) or placed a sea in landlocked Bohemia (*The Winter's Tale*, 3.3.1-2).²⁷ In this respect, Sidney's condemnation of his contemporaries' haphazard treatment of history did not stand up to his own practice. As noted by Samuel Johnson, who wrote in the mid-eighteenth century in a period dominated by neo-classical decorum and interest in historical accuracy, Shakespeare's historical foibles were not his alone: "[...] for in the same age Sidney, who wanted not the advantages of learning, has, in his *Arcadia*, confounded the pastoral with the feudal times,

²⁷ P. Rackin, *Stages of History: Shakespeare's English Chronicles*.

the days of innocence, quiet and security, with those of turbulence, violence, and adventure.’’²⁸

28. Johnson’s critique points to the troubled times of the Elizabethan period, when even pastoral settings were beset by war and treachery — as when Shakespeare sets “the golden world” of *As You Like It* (1.1.104) against a backdrop of double fratricide, with Duke Frederick usurping the power of his elder brother, Duke Senior, exiled in the forest of Arden, and Oliver conspiring to kill Orlando, his youngest brother. The wistful tone of Duke Senior in the forest, who claims that “Sweet are the uses of adversity” (2.1.12) as he feels “the penalty of Adam” (5), is repeatedly echoed by melancholy Jaques, making the pastoral setting one redolent of the Bronze Age, rather than the supposed “golden world” mentioned in the opening act.
29. Instead of anachronism, perhaps one could speak of what Phyllis Rackin has called early modern “nostalgia,” best illustrated by the deposition scene in *Richard II* quoted earlier:

More than any other scene in Shakespeare’s histories, it answers the nostalgic desire to make the past present. It situates the action in an atemporal ritual space that dissolves the divisions separating the present audience from the historical objects of representation. But here, just as in Gaunt’s speech, the nostalgic moment is fraught with paradox: the point at which the audience can finally achieve the desired recovery of the lost world of Richard II is also the point that dramatizes its loss.²⁹

30. Thus, rather than celebrating the (re-)creation of worlds through words, and making the past alive again, the poet-playwright may have been making audiences keenly aware of the impenetrability of time, memorializing a past long dead, remembering glorious moments never to be equaled again in human history. Instead, histories and other plays which are anchored in a referential relationship with the past served to heighten the often puny nature of present day squabbles, including that which divided the arts and inspired Sidney to demean his contemporaries’ dramatic output. This may be one way of interpreting the opening discussion in *Timon of Athens* between a Poet and a Painter, in which each artist compares the relative worth of their arts in the *paragone* debate.³⁰ The Painter thus claims the supremacy of visual arts over words:

PAINTER ‐Tis common:

A thousand moral paintings I can show

28 S. Johnson, *Mr. Johnson’s Preface to His Edition of Shakespeare’s Plays*, a3r.

29 P. Rackin, *Stages of History*, 127.

30 On the interplay between visual and verbal representations in early modern English theater, underlining the differences between writers cognizant of Italian studies on perspective in art, and those who were not, see C. Porter, *Making and Unmaking in Early Modern English Drama: Spectators, Aesthetics and Incompletion*.

That shall demonstrate these quick blows of Fortune's

More pregnantly than words. (*Timon*, 1.1.90-3)

31. Contrariwise, Apemantus, the cynic philosopher, pointedly mocks the Poet's art, calling it all lies:

APEMANTUS [...] How now, poet?

POET How now, philosopher?

APEMANTUS Thou liest.

POET Art not one?

APEMANTUS Yes.

POET Then I lie not.

APEMANTUS Art not a poet?

POET Yes.

APEMANTUS Then thou liest. (*Timon*, 1.1.211-220)

32. Arguably, these "lies" are rather what Sidney called "conveniency," readily agreeing to the limitations of poetic expression, since "many things may be told which cannot be showed." In this respect, theater stood partly at the crossroads between painting and poetry, using both visual and verbal cues as complementary modes of expression, allowing "lies" to either tell, "show" or "demonstrate" the workings of history, relying on audiences to transform these "lies" into a shared belief. As argued by Erika Lin, early modern English drama continually played with such contradictory modes of expression, mixing fiction and realism, challenging modern distinctions between mimetic and allegorical readings of the world — in Shakespeare's world, "Mimesis was itself always already allegorical."³¹ Other poets also distinguished poetry, or dramatic history (which contains both "story" and "history"), from the proto-scientific approach of "historiography," as the new form of history was often called. Thus, Edmund Spenser distinguished the "orderly" approach of the latter from the poet's ability to depict actions *in medias res* for dramatic and aesthetic purposes:

An Historiographer discourseth of affairs orderly as they were done, accounting as well the times as the actions, but a Poet thrusteth into the midst, even where it most concerneth him, and there

31 E. Lin, *Shakespeare and the Materiality of Performance*, 72.

recoursing to the things forepast, and divining of things to come, maketh a pleasing Analysis of all.³²

Crises of referentiality

33. A combination of historical and aesthetic factors provided fertile ground for Shakespeare's histories, one in which several sets of referential worlds collided: the world of Christian eschatology, in which the Creation, the birth of Christ, and the promise of an Afterlife serve as referential touchstones; the world of empirical historiography, in which ascertained facts in history are the ultimate point of reference; and the world of the stage, in which referentiality is interpreted by audiences from a combination of visual and verbal cues which imitate, albeit sometimes allegorically, the world beyond.
34. The world of Christian eschatology was marked by the iconoclastic crises of the early 1550s and early 1560s, which curtailed audiences' access to spectacular representations of history, as many churches had been whitewashed and idolatry was frowned upon. This paradoxically succeeded in whetting people's appetite for *new* forms of visual representations which depicted the past, and gave them a glimpse into the future (in line with Christian eschatological expectations) — stories portrayed in historic and “prophetic” plays such as *Richard II* or *Julius Caesar*. These plays were especially enticing given that, as many writers argued, the times of miracles was past.³³
35. The world of proto-scientific historiography, on its end, was marked by the Elizabethan Settlement and its insistence on the commemorative nature of religious rituals; by the relative peace enjoyed by England in the midst of European wars of religion, which prompted the English to celebrate their glorious past, as in *Henry V*; and by the growing veneration for Elizabeth as the Virgin Queen and last heir of the Tudor dynasty, the origins of which were depicted in Shakespeare's tetralogies.
36. Finally, the world of the stage was a place in which playgoers explored the past both “poetically” (in the sense suggested by Sidney, in which the poet-playwright “makes” the world) and “counterpunctually” (as suggested by Auerbach, by providing several parallel narrations from the past). Elizabethan drama thus produced complex plots and subplots, made considerable temporal and spatial shifts, continually dislocating the referential moorings of the Messianic and histori-

32 Letter to Sir Walter Raleigh, quoted by Rackin, *Stages of History*, 19. Spelling modernized.

33 R. Scot, *The Discoverie of Witchcraft*, 87.

ographic worlds that dominated the Elizabethan worldview from without the “wooden O.” This “wooden O,” despite its simplicity, could encompass whole worlds; and players, despite the fact that they were only men, could depict all walks of life, kings and clowns, women and children, young and old, English or foreign-born. On the Elizabethan stage, the sensible world deferred to the words of the poet-playwrights, giving “airy nothing[s] / A local habitation and a name,” often replacing historical sources with (semi-)fictional accounts which have since taken up a life of their own. For many, Shakespeare’s history plays have become the point of reference of history itself.

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