"MAIMED NARRATIONS": SHAKESPEARE’S *HENRY VIII* AND THE TASK OF THE HISTORIAN

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The last decade of the sixteenth century and the early years of the seventeenth are crucial to the development in England of new methods of historical writing—to a great extent the work of intellectuals like Henry Savile, John Hayward, Francis Bacon, or Edmund Bolton. The so-called “politic historians” are responsible for the replacement of Livy’s discursive style with Tacitus’s concise writing, the insistence upon the value of history as purveyor of political rather than moral wisdom, and the belief that secondary or human causes were at least as relevant as, or perhaps more relevant than, divine Providence in the description of historical processes.¹ A reaction to Christian humanism, the new historiography defends an analytical, rational, quasi-scientific pursuit of historical truth. And, in this respect, its goals and methods should be apparently regarded as opposite to the most popular form of history-writing at that time, namely, the Elizabethan chronicle play. Entertainment becomes the task of the playwright: his selection of events, his invention of set-speeches, or his licenses with historical time must serve this dramatic principle before any scientific commitment to truth. And yet, at least since F. J. Levy’s *Tudor Historical Thought*, it is a critical commonplace, to consider Elizabethan historical drama, and, more specifically, Shakespeare’s plays, an important precedent of the procedures of the politic historians (Levy 226–33). In Levy’s words,

[Shakespeare’s innovative] method of construction saw history in terms of the operation of ideas. There is a resemblance to Hall in this, but Shakespeare was much less mechanical. And because he was a dramatist, with only a brief space at his disposal, his selection had to be more rigorous . . . No one expected that of a playwright. Organized history, which became much more common with the “politic” historians, appeared first in the theater, and Sir John Hayward and Lord Bacon, two of its principal exponents, were well aware of the fact.

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If the Tudor chronicle play, with Shakespeare as its main representative, is the origin of politic history, one should wonder whether Stuart historical drama is its aftermath. Much has been written on Shakespeare's handling of history in *Henry VIII* (1611–13), his only historical play of the Stuart period, and there is no critical consensus in making the late Shakespeare a new historian. Thus, Howard Felperin, in a seminal essay, maintained that the author of *Henry VIII* endorsed a teleological notion of historical processes through an unambiguous belief in Christian providence. Felperin's reading has been contested by later critics, who regard the play as a more complex and cryptic work, the effect of a cynical, Machiavellian critique of Christian historical thought. And yet recent criticism has proved that none of these views can fully disallow the other: *Henry VIII* is caught within the ideological crossroads where teleological and circular, Christian and politic notions of history meet. Moreover, what to attribute to the author's Christian beliefs or to his Machiavellian convictions becomes a more than slippery issue.

Even if most of these questions may remain unsolved, there is the possibility to throw some light upon them if we recognize that critics have paid little attention to two basic points: first, *Henry VIII* is a post-Elizabethan play, and its handling of history is necessarily the effect of a reflection on and a revision of earlier Elizabethan conceptions; second, most critical conclusions on the play's politics and philosophy of history derive from an analysis of its content rather than its forms. Both points have been observed by Ivo Kamps, whose study of Stuart history plays sustains that the playwrights "were the ones whose texts reveal a conceptual breakthrough in historical thinking" (4). Kamps's thesis is groundbreaking in considering the distinctiveness of Stuart from Elizabethan historical drama in the light of new philosophies of history, which resulted from innovations in both the theory and practice of history-writing. The new impulse of the Stuart history play is due to its appropriation of "not only the substance or content of sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century historiography, but also its various conceptual and methodological innovations" (Kamps 6). And yet his study continues to be more observant to the politics of historiography than the rhetorical strategies that constitute its material support.

This essay intends to fill what I consider a gap still in the play's critical history, namely, the specific forms through which Shakespeare conveys historical meaning. I shall study the play's dramatic rhetoric in the hope of proving a double contention: first, that the main images and analogies that sustain the new conception of history are objects of scru-