

Shakespeare's History Plays and His Embedded Political Commentary on

Elizabethan Government

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Background History and Origins

By the end of the 16th century, Queen Elizabeth's health was failing and members of Parliament and the aristocracy were beginning to question her ability to lead the nation. Questions arose concerning the British presence in Spain, the lack of any direct heir produced by Elizabeth herself, and whether Elizabeth had engineered a "Golden Age" or was simply lucky. It was a time of political inquiry and those contributing to the literary community took note.

Unfortunately, however, it was illegal to depict the ruling class unflatteringly and written material of all kinds was censored or banned on a regular basis. William Shakespeare did not enjoy the kind of guaranteed freedoms that we enjoy today; thus, it was necessary for him to couch any political sentiments within the text of his prose. Shakespeare was particularly effective in burying illegal political sentiments in his History Plays; I intend to prove that he did so within *Richard II*, *Henry IV Part One*, and *Henry V*, hereafter known as the *Richard II* tetralogy.

This theme of political dissent that Shakespeare employed is interesting given its past and present day relevance. Shakespeare used the *Richard II* tetralogy to comment on his contemporary political atmosphere, but the themes employed by this particular tetralogy extend into the 21st century. Far-reaching themes are an important contribution to the longevity of the *Richard II* tetralogy, but they are not the only factors contributing to Shakespeare's long-felt presence in literary and theatrical mediums. As plays, his works were meant to be performed and reinterpreted visually. It is this reinterpretation of his plays that perpetuates his recurring themes to modern audiences. It will become an important part of my research to study not simply the language employed by Shakespeare but the production history of the *Richard II* tetralogy. I will determine if the *Richard II* tetralogy was produced and updated more during times of political upheaval in the United States and Britain.

Originally, I approached this project as a means to a more detailed study within an area of literature to which I had limited exposure, but the *Richard II* tetralogy has opened interdisciplinary doors that link contemporary political thought to sixteenth century British Literature. Not only will an intense study of the History Plays widen my experience with Shakespearean literature, but this concept of political dissent has real life connections. William Shakespeare advocates the highly democratic ideal of challenging the policies of authority figures if one does not believe that figure has the benefit of the nation in mind.

As a kind of theoretical goal to strengthen the foundation of this research, it has always been a dream of mine to expose more people to Shakespeare, in order for them to attain a greater appreciation for his talent of expression. Failing that, it is important to acknowledge that Shakespeare has defined many of our literary norms, many norms concerning verse-writing and is a pervasive contributor to popular culture. On a more specific level, however, I have a set of four target questions that I wish to address over the course of the ten week research program.

Major Questions, Goals and Objectives

The History Plays are generally uncharted territory for me, and I have lingering questions based on a Cultural Studies analysis of the text that was touched upon in Dr. Lisa McDonnell's Shakespeare course, but, in the interest of time, was not fully analyzed.

To address these questions, I must first explain the concept of Cultural Studies within literary theory. It is the goal of cultural critics to find the language within literature that is imbued with a certain ideological set, which may include criticism of society-driven institutions—government, for example. Other concepts typically addressed by this kind of literary theory are marriage, sexual orientation, gender, religion, and race.

My questions fall under this literary theory: 1) How did the political climate of Elizabethan England manifest itself in Shakespeare's writings; 2) Did Shakespeare incorporate in the text of *Richard II*, *Henry IV Part One*, and *Henry V* (the *Richard II* tetralogy) a critique of the final years of Queen Elizabeth I's reign; 3) Did the performance of these three wildly popular plays, at the time, serve as a kind of mild or even overt political protest; and, finally, 4) Have these plays been performed throughout history during times of political unrest as methods of political expression?

Throughout the course of my research I will study both the text and the performance history of *Richard II*, *Henry IV Part One*, and *Henry V* to form a larger picture of the cultural climate as it affected Shakespeare as a writer. I am particularly excited to investigate the causes of the long-term relevance of these three plays. This longevity is due to more than simply the brilliance of the writing. It would be naïve and unrepresentative of Shakespeare's talent to credit his writing as the sole reason that *Richard II*, *Henry IV Part One*, and *Henry V* are still performed. He wrote the plays to be shown to a wider audience. Thus, I intend to prove that within these performances he embedded a critique of the central government at that time, and this theme still applies in times of political upheaval in the United States and Britain.

As a student at the crossroads of her college career, this project comes at a significant time. Should I decide to go to law school or to pursue my graduate degree in British Literature, this research project, as an embodiment of my time spent in a liberal arts institution, will prepare me for either of these futures. Given the interdisciplinary nature of this research project combining a pillar of the British Literature canon with an in-depth study of both Elizabethan political history and the production history of the *Richard II* tetralogy, this will be a true learning experience. I will increase my familiarity with reading and analyzing primary and secondary sources from a Cultural Criticism stance, and I will have the ability to conduct and complete a large scale research project.

Methodology

Because I wish to study the effects of the political climate in England at the time of Shakespeare's production of *Richard II*, *Henry IV Part One*, and *Henry V*, it will be crucial to begin my research with an intensive examination of said political climate. It will be my goal to pull out the significant political events from the period of 1585-1599 in Elizabethan England and compare these later years of Elizabeth I's reign to the text of the *Richard II* tetralogy. I will spend a full week investigating this period of history in order to incorporate it accurately in my analysis of Shakespeare's works.

Further, I will use the first week to establish my Research Journal. This journal will aid me in compiling my research in the early weeks of the project into one medium. I will summarize critical analyses of the plays and any other relevant literature. The journal will also serve to delineate between sources which will blur together over the course of 5 or 6 weeks of

research, and I will be able to take thoughts from my journal and incorporate them into the finalized paper. This preliminary writing process will serve as both a forum for brainstorming and pre-writing. It will also provide me with tangible progress to present to Dr. Bryan in our bi-weekly meetings.

I plan to use Dr. Bryan's vast historical knowledge of stage productions in Elizabethan England to help me form a complete picture of the effect of the *Richard II* tetralogy on his audiences. It will be intriguing to examine these three plays as, potentially, early forms of political protest plays. I wish to understand if the popularity of these three plays was connected to the political messages that were theoretically inserted into them.

As with any in-depth literary research, it will be important for me to choose a method of analysis. I feel that the most relevant branch of literary theory that will be useful in analyzing these three plays will be cultural analysis. Cultural studies in literary theory is considered more "political" than other types of analysis because it searches for cultural messages that imply society-held ideologies within the text of the literature. A cultural analysis involves looking directly for commentary about society, gender, government, class, etc.; as my research will concern Shakespeare's commentary on the Elizabethan political system, this method is the most appropriate.

Finally, I will begin the formal writing process of my paper in the fourth week of my research. This will allow me plenty of time at the end of the ten week period to revise and finalize my final paper. By writing in steady increments in my Research Journal from the outset of my research and incorporating those chunks of analysis into my formal paper, I will have a significant portion of the writing completed by the seventh week of my project. This will leave me with ample time to review and revise my paper at the end of the ten weeks. I feel that I have a realistic time projection for my project that is spread over the ten week period in manageable increments. Weekly writings culminating in the final paper will contribute to a fluently composed research project.

Schedule

Week One

- **Twice weekly Meeting with Dr. Bryan** to discuss schools of thought regarding research of Elizabethan drama
- **Intensive Historical Research** regarding the period of Queen Elizabeth I's reign from 1585-1599 in order to draw parallels from it to Shakespeare's *Richard II*, *Henry IV Part One*, and *Henry IV*
- **Begin Research Journal** detailing important events in that period of Elizabeth's reign
- **Twice weekly Meeting with Dr. Bryan** to present historical research compiled about the political climate in England from 1585-1599

Week Two

- **Close Reading of *Richard II*** and search for further literary criticisms of the play, particularly from a historically relevant standpoint

- **Twice weekly Meeting with Dr. Bryan** to discuss connections between historical research and *Richard II*
- **Compare notes** on historical research to critical analyses of *Richard II* and write summaries of relevant information within the sources in Research Journal.
- **Twice weekly Meeting with Dr. Bryan** to present research and progress in Research Journal

Week Three

- **Close Reading of *Henry IV Part One*** and search for further literary criticisms of the play
- **Twice weekly Meeting with Dr. Bryan** to discuss connections between historical research and *Henry IV Part One*
- **Compare notes** on historical research to analyses of *Henry IV Part One* and summarize relevant information in Research Journal, specifically targeting research including historical connections
- **Twice weekly Meeting with Dr. Bryan** to present research and progress in Research Journal

Week Four

- **Close Reading of *Henry IV*** and search for further literary criticisms of play
- **Twice weekly Meeting with Dr. Bryan** to discuss connections between history research and *Henry V*
- **Compare notes** on historical research to critical analyses of *Henry V* and summarize relevant information in Research Journal
- **Twice weekly Meeting with Dr. Bryan** to present research and progress in Research Journal
- **Outline body of paper** and write introduction

Week Five

- **Twice weekly Meeting with Dr. Bryan** to present outline and discuss production history of *Richard II*, *Henry IV Part One*, and *Henry V*
- **Research production histories** and document findings in Research Journal, while incorporating findings in paper outline
- **Twice weekly Meeting with Dr. Bryan** to present finished outline and research on production history
- **Begin drafting body of paper** in order to present it to Dr. Bryan the following week

Week Six

- **Twice weekly Meeting with Dr. Bryan** to discuss drafting of paper
- **Continue drafting body of paper** and fill in any holes in research, using Research Journal as integral part of writing process
- **Twice weekly Meeting with Dr. Bryan** to present half of first draft

Week Seven

- **Twice weekly Meeting with Dr. Bryan** to present further progress on draft
- **Continue drafting paper** and write conclusion (continuing to fill in any holes in research)
- **Twice weekly Meeting with Dr. Bryan** to present progress on draft

Week Eight

- **Twice weekly Meeting** with Dr. Bryan to discuss draft and any lingering questions regarding research
- **Finish drafting paper** and begin revising process
- **Present final paper** and early revisions to Dr. Bryan at the second weekly meeting

Week Nine

- **Twice weekly Meeting with Dr. Bryan** to discuss final draft
- **Continue revising final paper**
- **Present revisions to Dr. Bryan** in second weekly meeting

Week Ten

- **Twice weekly Meeting with Dr. Bryan** to discuss any final revisions and paper presentation
- **Finalize paper** and ready it for presentation
- **Write presentation** and create poster for official presentation
- **Final Meeting with Dr. Bryan** to review presentation

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