ENGENDERING A NATION

A feminist account of Shakespeare's English histories

Jean E. Howard and Phyllis Rackin

London and New York

First published 1997
by Routledge
11 New Fetter Lane, London EC4P 4EE
29 West 35th Street, New York, NY 10001

Typeset in Garamond by
Ponting–Green Publishing Services, Chesham, Buckinghamshire
Printed and bound in Great Britain by
Biddles Ltd, Guildford and King's Lynn

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data
Howard, Jean E. (Jean Elizabeth)
Engendering a nation: a feminist account of Shakespeare's English histories / Jean E. Howard and Phyllis Rackin.
p. cm. – (Feminist readings of Shakespeare)
Includes bibliographical references and index.
1. Shakespeare, William, 1564–1616 – Histories. 2. Shakespeare, William, 1564–1616 – Political and social views. 3. Feminism and literature – England – History – 16th century. 4. Women and literature – England – History – 16th century. 5. National characteristics, English, in literature. 6. Historical drama, English – History and criticism. 7. Great Britain – History 1066–1687 – Historiography. 8. Masculinity (Psychology) in literature. 9. Nationalism in literature. 10. Sex role in literature. I. Rackin, Phyllis. II. Title. III. Series.
PR2982.H67 1997 96–31661
822.3'3—dc20 CIP

ISBN 0–415–04748–X (hbk)
ISBN 0–415–04749–8 (pbk)

For Jim Baker and Donald Rackin

power (Hawkes 1986: 51–72). Shakespeare's representations of England's medieval past, moreover, have done more to shape popular conceptions of English history than the work of any professional historian. In short, Shakespeare not only represents the greatness of his nation's heritage; he also serves in the popular imagination as the leading historian of England's past. As a result, when this play is used in modern productions to figure gender in a specific way, one can be sure that those figurations will have immense cultural authority. It is our contention in this book that Shakespeare's cultural authority is deeply implicated in the production of the very ideology that Branagh's film expresses. The history plays Shakespeare wrote in the 1590s helped produce what are now regarded as "traditional" gender relations and the divisions between what we now call the public and private domains. The interconnections between Englishness, aggressive masculinity, and closeted womanhood that emerge so clearly in Branagh's film are present in Shakespeare's text, marking it with a modernity that bears investigation.

2

THE HISTORY PLAY IN SHAKESPEARE'S TIME

There were no buildings dedicated solely to the public, commercial performance of plays in England until 1576, when James Burbage built The Theatre on the south bank of the Thames and opened the doors to paying customers (Gurr 1992: 31). Before that, religious theater had been performed, usually by town guild members, on wagons in the street; or traveling players had performed in the great houses of the nobility or had rented temporary playing spaces in inns and innyards. Shakespeare came to London sometime in the late 1580s from his home in Stratford and quickly – as writer and actor – became involved in what was thus a relatively new and rapidly expanding commercial theater industry. By the 1590s various kinds of plays were being written for that theater, including a number that dramatized events from the reigns of England's former kings. Collectively, these have become known as English "history plays." What distinguishes them from other types of drama is above all their subject matter. They deal with *English* history, and they typically focus on the reign of a particular monarch. The sources for many of these plays lie in the great prose chronicles written during the sixteenth century – works such as Raphael Holinshed's *Chronicles of England, Scotland and Ireland* (2nd edn. 1587) and Edward Hall's *The Union of the Two Noble and Illustre Famelies of Lancastre & Yorke* (1548).

The interest of the sixteenth-century English in the history of their own country can be seen as one aspect of the complex process by which England was slowly emerging as a modern nation state. In the medieval period, states were typically decentralized entities. Their boundaries were fluid, readily changed when dynastic marriages united them or when conquest led to the absorption of

one state by another (Anderson 1974: 31–2). Medieval subjects owed allegiance to a feudal overlord and to the monarch, but not to the fixed entity we usually designate as "a nation." England was one of the first European powers to develop some of the practices and institutions of a modern nation state (Smith 1984; Greenfeld 1992). The Tudors came to the throne in 1485, and for the next one hundred years they worked to wrest political power from the feudal barons and centralize it in the person of the monarch, and to wrest religious authority from the Church of Rome and vest it, as well, with the king. When Henry VIII through the Act of Supremacy in 1534 became head of the Church of England, he united – at least symbolically – temporal and spiritual authority in one person. Equally important, the Tudors developed a centralized administrative infrastructure for the country, making local justices of the peace, for example, accountable to London authorities, and extending bureaucratic control of taxation and judicial review. Ironically, however, the Tudors' relative success at building a more unified and centralized state created conditions in which the centrality of the monarch as the focus of allegiance could diminish. England's geography, commercial vitality, laws, and language could all become points of pride that focused attention less on the monarch than on what were perceived as the natural and essential aspects of the country itself as an entity with an organic and essential integrity (Helgerson 1992).

Of course, no nation is a "natural" entity. Nations are artificial creations, and the unity of a nation is a carefully constructed fiction. In Benedict Anderson's telling phrase, nations are "imagined communities," that is, they are communities that are imagined into being by certain cultural practices and ideas, rather than pre-existing entities that have only to be recognized and named (Anderson 1983: 14–16). In sixteenth-century England, trade between London and the rest of England increased markedly (Thirsk 1995). As products moved from Bristol to London, for example, people, money, and ideas moved with them. This material practice – increasing internal trade – helped to bind England's different regions together. Discursive innovations such as mapmaking, linguistic standardization, and the development of a self-consciously national literature also contributed to the nation-building process. In short, conceptions of national unity both enabled and were enabled by a set of evolving material practices.

It is important to recognize, however, that an imagined community can never be as unified as it is represented as being. In sixteenth-century England, for example, many Catholics still lived in what had supposedly become a Protestant country. If, to many, Englishness became synonymous with Protestantism, then Catholics could easily be seen as non-English. This was certainly the case with John Foxe whose immensely popular *Book of Martyrs* represented Catholics, in particular, as conduits through whom dangerous foreign ideas and practices entered the body of the nation (Helgerson 1992: 254–68), even though many of these "foreign" Catholics had been born in England. As critics of nationalism have repeatedly shown, the fictive unity of a nation is often created by insisting on the utter difference between those who are designated as belonging to the nation and those, whether inside or outside the nation's boundaries, who are seen as alien on the basis of religion, complexion, or customs.

Modern forms of racial distinctions, supposedly based on somatic differences, were also beginning to emerge in this period. The word "race," which earlier referred simply to lineage, designating those persons descended from a common ancestor, was beginning to take on its modern meaning of a tribe, nation, or people distinguished by common physical characteristics such as color or physiognomy (Hall 1996). By the late sixteenth century, England was beginning to solidify its national identity and its commercial strength through a vast expansion of overseas trading activities; the opening decades of the seventeenth century saw English ships sailing the shores of Africa and India, Java and North America, while English overland traders were established in Moscow and in Fez (Brenner 1993: 51–91). As England consolidated as a nation state, English traders were increasingly involved in a global economic system in which their ability to extract maximum profits from their endeavors was facilitated by the gradual racialization of those with whom they came in contact (Newman 1991: 73–93; Hendricks and Parker 1994). By the mid-seventeenth century, among the goods regularly carried in English ships were African slaves. In short, as scholars such as Etienne Balibar and Samir Amin have made clear, European nationalism was from its inception intertwined with the emergence of modern forms of racialization (Balibar and Wallerstein 1991: 37–67; Amin 1989).

But one did not have to look so far afield in the late sixteenth

century to see how much English nationalism depended on the racializing of other groups, especially when colonization was the objective. England's war against the Irish in the 1590s was often described as a war against a racialized other (Jones and Stallybrass 1992: 157–71; Neill 1994: 1–32). English texts depicted the Irish as different from the English in language, religion and dress, and even in the way they wore their hair. At the same time, the leaders of the invading forces feared that English soldiers sent to fight these Irish kerns might intermarry with them, adopt their customs and language, and cease to be English. This anxiety tellingly reveals the fragility of fictions of racial and national difference. Englishness could not be an essence if it could so easily evaporate through contact with the Irish. With Scotland and with Wales the story was equally complicated. Wales had been officially incorporated into England in 1535 and the use of the Welsh language forbidden in many contexts. Neither the Welsh tongue nor Welsh national feeling was eradicated, however, and in many texts of the period Wales is still imagined as a foreign and threatening place, rather than as a region of England like any other region. In the first decade of the seventeenth century James I tried to effect a formal union between the kingdoms of England and Scotland. He failed, and the union did not occur until 1707. In the early modern period, therefore, there was always potential ambiguity about the very territory which the word "England" was to designate. In this book we speak of "English" nationalism and the "English" nation, but with the recognition that these are problematical terms. Great Britain did not exist in the 1590s, but to use "England" to refer to any entity containing part or all of Wales, Ireland, or Scotland can be a form of verbal imperialism that elides the historical struggles, and the perceived differences, among these regions. We will indicate when, in plays such as *Henry IV* and *Henry V*, such struggles are part of the historical material being negotiated.

Viewed in the context of this process of national consolidation and national self-definition, the vogue for national history and the national history play in late sixteenth-century England appears as an important component of the cultural project of imagining an English nation. Like their historiographic sources, the plays performed the necessary function of creating and disseminating myths of origin to authorize a new national entity and to deal with the anxieties and contradictions that threatened to undermine the nation-building project. These stories had an obvious selective

function as well; that is, they highlighted some players in the nation's history and sidelined or erased others.

The history play was probably one of the first types of drama in which Shakespeare worked. Of the plays we have, most scholars agree that among the earliest written are three plays we now know as *Henry VI, Part I, Part II,* and *Part III* (usually dated 1589–92) and *Richard III* (*c.* 1593).[1] These four plays together comprise what has become known as "the first tetralogy," a term used by modern scholars to indicate both that the plays dramatize historically connected events and that they were written before the other history plays with which Shakespeare's name is associated. Many scholars have argued, however, that the Henry VI plays were not entirely Shakespeare's work. Collaborative authorship was common in the period, and as a young playwright Shakespeare may have joined with others in composing these early works (Taylor 1995). However, by 1592 at least one of those plays was clearly associated with his name. Robert Greene, in *Greene's Groatsworth of Wit*, made fun of his rival playwright by saying he fancied himself "the onely Shake-scene in a countrie" and describing him as "an upstart Crow, beautified with our feathers, that with his *Tygers heart wrapt in a Players hide*, supposes he is as well able to bombast out a blanke verse as the best of you" (Greene 1592, in Chambers 1923: 4: 241–2). This is an echo of a famous line in *Henry VI, Part III* in which the Duke of York reproaches Margaret, Henry's queen, for tormenting him after his capture by her forces at the Battle of Wakefield. In rage and grief, York lashes out at the ruthless queen, accusing her of having a "tiger's heart wrapp'd in a woman's hide" (I.iv.137). This scene apparently lingered in the memory of spectators, and Greene uses this particular line to deride the rival who was obviously making a name for himself as a writer of bravura dialogue.

Perhaps encouraged by the success of these early plays, Shakespeare continued writing English histories. *King John* was probably composed some time between 1594 and 1596; and in the period 1595 to 1599 Shakespeare wrote the plays that are now known as "the second tetralogy": *Richard II, Henry IV, Part I* and *Part II,* and *Henry V.* It is these nine plays with which we will be chiefly concerned in the following pages.[2] Two of these plays, *Henry VI, Part I* and *King John*, were never published in Shakespeare's lifetime. Along with about half of Shakespeare's entire canon, they were first printed in the 1623 folio in which John

Heminges and Henry Condell, senior members of The King's Men (the theatrical company with which Shakespeare had been associated for most of his career), published the first collected edition of his plays. The other seven history plays, like many of his other dramatic works, appeared in individual quarto or octavo versions before the folio was issued. The titles of Shakespeare's plays in these early printed versions were sometimes different from those in the folio, and sometimes there were major textual differences among various versions of one play. The play we have come to know as *Henry VI, Part II*, for example, appeared in the 1623 folio as *The Second Part of Henry the Sixth*, but it also appeared in a quarto version of 1594 with the title *The First part of the Contention betwixt the two famous Houses of York and Lancaster*. Quarto versions bearing approximately the same title appeared again in 1600 and 1619. While the folio title focuses attention on the reigning king, Henry VI, whose weak rule invited usurpers to lay claim to his throne, the quarto title draws attention to the warring dynastic factions who, capitalizing on Henry's weakness, embroiled England in civil war.

How the quarto and folio versions of this play are related to one another is a puzzle that has long occupied editors. The quarto is one third shorter than the folio text, and it has very full stage directions, suggesting that it may record some version of a performance of the play. Since the 1920s these features have led most editors to conclude that *The First part of the Contention* is a memorial reconstruction of the folio text; that is, that it represents a transcript of what actors who had performed in the folio version could remember (Wells and Taylor 1987: 175). If this theory is correct, the many differences between the quarto and the folio, and the quarto's shorter length, could be explained by the imperfect memories of the actors who were reconstructing the text. On the other hand, some scholars such as Stephen Urkowitz feel that the quarto text may represent Shakespeare's own early draft of the play, that the folio represents a later draft, and that each text has its own integrity and should be studied as an independent entity (Urkowitz 1988b). The real question is whether the folio text represents the only authoritative version of the play, while the quarto is a "bad" redaction of it; or if the quarto is of interest in and of itself, either because it is Shakespeare's early draft or because, whatever its origins, it represents a version of the play in circulation, on stage and on the page, in the 1590s.

Differences among various versions of these plays can have important interpretive consequences. The 1600 quarto version of *Henry V*, for example, includes neither the Choruses which open each act of the folio text nor the concluding epilogue. These may have been excised because one of the Choruses contains a controversial comparison of Henry V to the Earl of Essex, one of Elizabeth's nobles who in the late 1590s led a campaign to subdue the Irish. When the play was initially written, hopes were high that the campaign would be successful. It failed, however, and Essex returned home in disgrace. Soon thereafter he led an unsuccessful attempt to seize the throne from Elizabeth, an action for which he lost his life. With the excision of the Choruses, the 1600 quarto omits all reference to Essex. It also deletes a number of other passages, such as the discussion in the first scene between two prominent churchmen in which they consider offering to support the king's war in France in order to prevent him from supporting a bill seizing ecclesiastical property. (For a fuller account of the differences between the two versions see Patterson 1989: 71–92.) Read on its own, the quarto *Henry V* is more unabashedly patriotic and less politically ambiguous than the folio version.

These examples suggest that for at least some of the multiple-text history plays, the differences among the existing versions deserve careful critical attention. We do not believe that it is always possible to determine how much responsibility Shakespeare himself had for the various texts that have survived, but in our view that is less important than acknowledging that there are striking differences between many quarto and folio versions of the same play. It is at least as important to discuss the theatrical and critical consequences of those differences as to speculate about their origins. Many modern editions of the plays, however, do not foreground these textual matters. *The Riverside Shakespeare* does not, and it is the text we cite in this book when referring to any of Shakespeare's plays. We chose to use this edition because for some time it has been one of the most widely used single-volume texts of Shakespeare's plays available. At some points in our analysis we supplement *The Riverside* by discussing important points of difference between folio and quarto versions of the history plays, but an examination of the facsimile reproductions of the First Folio and the early quarto and octavo texts will provide many other examples.

The number of dramatic histories which Shakespeare wrote or helped to write indicates the popularity of this genre in the 1590s. Clearly, theatergoers had a taste for these plays; and the number of early printed versions that were produced suggests that readers did, also. Collectively, in their multiple versions, these plays incited patriotic interest in England's past and participated in the process by which the English forged a sense of themselves as a nation. When apologists for the theater wished to defend it against attacks from critics who saw it as a place of idleness and moral danger, they often held up the history play as an example of theater's value. And they did so in terms that stressed the role of history plays in preserving the memory of English heroes and of encouraging patriotic feelings in the spectators. Thomas Nashe, for example, praised the genre because in it "our forefathers valiant acts (that have line long buried in rustie brasse and worm-eaten bookes) are revived, and they themselves raised from the Grave of Oblivion, and brought to pleade their aged Honours in open presence. . . . How would it have joyed brave *Talbot* (the terror of the French) to thinke that after he had lyne two hundred yeares in his Tombe, hee should triumphe againe on the Stage, and have his bones newe embalmed with the teares of ten thousand spectators at least (at severall times), who, in the Tragedian that represents his person, imagine they behold him fresh bleeding?" (Nashe 1592, in Chambers 1923: 4: 238–9). The reference to Talbot suggests that Nashe had in mind Shakespeare's *Henry VI, Part I*, in which Talbot and his son are slaughtered in a battle against the French in which they face overwhelming odds but from which they refuse to flee. For Nashe, what matters is that the history play lets English heroes from the past live forever in the memories of ordinary Englishmen, many of whom would not have been able to read the sixteenth-century prose chronicles by Holinshed, Hall, and others from which much of the subject matter of these plays was drawn. The stage makes the dead arise, forging a continuity between those who have embodied Englishness in the past and those who are the heirs of that legacy.

Thomas Heywood's *An Apology for Actors* also described the inspiring effects of "our domesticke hystories." "What English blood," he wrote, "seeing the person of any bold English man presented and doth not hugge his fame, and hunnye at his valor, pursuing him in his enterprise with his best wishes, and as being wrapt in contemplation, offers to him in his hart all prosperous

performance, as if the Personator were the man Personated, so bewitching a thing is lively and well spirited action, that it hath power to new mold the harts of the spectators and fashion them to the shape of any noble and notable attempt" (Heywood 1612: I: sig. B4^{r}).[3] The theater makes the dead arise, but it also has the power to refashion the malleable spectator into a person fit for heroic action. It helps, in short, to create subjects defined by a common "English blood," who identify with the notable deeds of their "forefathers."