

Shakespeare: did he get his history right?

Was Henry V really a master speechmaker? Did the houses of York and Lancaster really wear emblematic roses? Dan Jones separates fact from fiction in the bard's history plays.



Henry VI (1421-1471): the fiction and the fact? At left, Graham Butler as Henry VI in The Globe's 2013 touring production; at right, an anonymous painting of Henry VI circa 1540. Photo: Globe Theatre / Alamy

By Dan Jones

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Any historian who sits down to write about the fifteenth century is battling Shakespeare from the moment he lifts his pen. It is a battle he will probably lose.

Shakespeare's portraits of the Plantagenet kings, queens and nobles who ruled and ruined England are so potent that they have, in many cases, become mythically fused with the real, historical men and women themselves.

Who, for example, can think of Henry V without burping up a line or two from the St Crispin's day speech, when 'we happy few, we band of brothers' gave the dauphin what for? (Henry V 4.3.60). Who is Margaret of Anjou, Henry VI's unfortunate queen, if not the 'She-wolf of France, but worse than wolves of France,/Whose tongue more poisons than the adder's tooth'? (3 Henry VI 1.4.551-2).

And when Richard III's skeleton was removed from a Leicester car park last autumn, did not the public excitement basically turn on the chance to discover whether it would resemble that of Shakespeare's hunchbacked spider? Whether we like it or not, Shakespeare's genius informs our imagination of the late Plantagenet kings as surely as Holbein's brush informs our mental picture of the early Tudors.

This summer Shakespeare's Globe will tour the three Henry VI plays at venues across England – including open-air performances at several Wars of the Roses battlefields. So it is worth asking exactly what the bard can tell us about the 'real' history of the fifteenth century. Is there anything that we can usefully take away from the plays? Or are they all just one great enjoyable distortion?

Shakespeare wrote in whole or part ten English history plays (eleven if we count Edward III), mostly concentrated in two short creative bursts at the beginning of his career. Between 1590 and 1592 he wrote the plays commonly now grouped together as the 'first tetralogy', comprising the three parts of Henry VI and Richard III.

After a short hiatus, he returned to history between 1595 and 1599, producing the 'second tetralogy' – Richard II, 1 Henry IV, 2 Henry IV and Henry V. Confusingly, the historical events of these four plays precede those of the first tetralogy, but there are some connecting historical themes. (You might want to think of it like Star Wars, with Richard II as The Phantom Menace.)

During this second period, probably in 1596, he also wrote King John – an outlier, in the sense that it is set in the twelfth century. Much later, in 1613, came the collaborative Henry VIII, but this is, frankly, a pretty ropey piece of nostalgic Elizabethiana, about which we will say no more. The point is that by the end of the sixteenth century, Shakespeare had written an epic cycle of historical plays mostly touching events that took place between 1397 and the triumph of his own Queen Elizabeth's grandfather Henry VII in 1485.

In this, he was conventional. From the 1580s there had been a trend for 'chronicle' plays bringing English royal history to the stage, thanks to the new availability of serious historical works to mine for material. Key among them were Edward Hall's *The Union of the Two Noble and Illustre Families of Lancaster and York* (1548) and Raphael Holinshed's *Chronicles of England, Scotland and Ireland* (1577/1587). Other sources included John Foxe, whose *Actes and Monuments* had been published in 1563, John Stowe and Thomas More, whose fairly slanderous *History of Richard III* informed the cracked and poisonous monster Shakespeare was in turn to create.

From his sources, Shakespeare inherited a fair amount of historical bias. Most obviously he

picked up the enduring ‘Tudor view’ of the Wars of the Roses as a divine punishment somehow earned by the rebellion against natural order that took place when Richard II was deposed. This idea is most keenly felt in Richard II, the three Henry VI plays and, to an extent, Richard III.

In Richard II, the dirty work of deposition is done by Bolingbroke, rightful duke of Lancaster, and Edmund Langley, duke of York, both of whom are dogged by the gloomy bishop of Carlisle muttering ominous things like, ‘the blood of English shall manure the ground/And future ages groan for this foul act.’ (Richard II 4.1.138-9).

And doesn’t it just? In 1 Henry VI we see the nobles of England lining up in factions represented by white and red roses. ‘I’ll find friends to wear my bleeding roses,’ says the duke of Somerset (1 Henry VI 2.4.73), and what follows over the course of the rest of the tetralogy is a veritable hog-slaughter, only ended with Richard III’s death and the marriage between the ‘Lancastrian’ Henry VII and Elizabeth of York, ‘the true succeeders of each royal house’, by whose union ‘civil wounds are stopped, peace lives again.’ (Richard III 5.7.30/40).

Few historians today would endorse that view of the Wars of the Roses. There was, for example, no ‘Lancastrian’ red rose used during the fifteenth century wars: the red-rose/white-rose dichotomy was largely invented during Henry VII’s reign in order to fuse the two emblems in one Tudor rose, which would promote the idea of unity restored through dynasty.

Nor was Henry VI quite the saint that Shakespeare makes him out to be - this was another piece of early Tudor propaganda that had seeped into official histories by Shakespeare’s day, designed to bolster the reputation of Henry VII’s Lancastrian ‘ancestor’. Countless other characters, too, are bent out of shape in Shakespeare, not least among them the haughty and ambitious Humphrey duke of Gloucester, whose reputation is heavily sanitised; and the aforementioned Margaret of Anjou, whose name is painted very black.

Then we must consider that plenty of what Shakespeare wrote was allegorical comment on his own times in the 1590s: an age of dynastic insecurity, foreign menace and noble foment.

Elizabeth I once bitterly joked on seeing a manuscript of Richard II that ‘I am Richard II, know ye not that?’ – a reference to the fact that the play had been pointedly staged in London in 1601, during the earl of Essex’s revolt against her government.

But even this was not the main point. What we should always remember is that Shakespeare wrote plays primarily to entertain – his plays were never supposed to comprise a history lesson, but simply drew an audience by virtue of its historical setting. This is perhaps most true of the two parts of Henry IV, in which an immature and riotous Prince Hal quarrels with his beleaguered father. This was a pronounced exaggeration of the real relationship between Henry

IV and the future Henry V, between whom there was certainly friction in 1412-13, but not of the nature depicted by Shakespeare. Neither did the famous rivalry between Hal and Hotspur ever resemble that depicted by Shakespeare, who (among many other distortions), altered the age of Hotspur and amplified their personal enmity, the better to create a story examining how a prince should learn the art of being a king. In that sense, 1 and 2 Henry IV are not really plays about 'Henry IV' at all. They are a family soap opera, a meditation on kingship and an exciting action caper in period dress.

It would be impossible and tedious to list all the examples of Shakespeare's historical distortions. As every good Hollywood screenwriter today knows, a cracking story always comes before historical accuracy. Using Shakespeare's Henry VI plays to learn about the wars of the roses is about as wise as trusting Saving Private Ryan to tell you the true story of the second world war.

Yet of course, having said all this, there are moments when Shakespeare can be surprisingly historically accurate.

The purple speeches he gives Henry V are entirely invented, yet if we read the letters the real Henry dictated (in English) from the front line of his campaigns in Normandy after Agincourt, there is a stridency and grandeur to his tone that is unmatched in dictations by any of his other aristocratic captains. Shakespeare's grown-up Hal thunders true to the spirit, if not the letter, of his real-life counterpart.

And on occasion, the drama is quite literally lifted from the historical page. My own favourite passage from all the history plays – Richard II's depressive soliloquy 'For God's sake let us sit upon the ground/And tell sad stories of the death of kings...' (Richard II 3.2.155-6), delivered after he discovers that Bolingbroke has arrived in England to depose him, is intriguingly close to an eyewitness account by the chronicler Adam of Usk of a maudlin after-dinner speech that the real Richard gave during his imprisonment in the Tower of London, concerning the doleful legacy of English history, and this realm's tendency to kill off its kings.

In Shakespeare's hands, this speech is given a new location in time and space, new words, and a dramatic meaning removed from its historical context. But the link between the drama and the history is still there: surprisingly, almost bracingly direct. To my mind, that is where Shakespeare's greatest genius as a historian-dramatist resides.

Dan Jones is the author of *The Plantagenets: The Kings Who Made England* (William Collins), which is published in paperback next month.



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