y como siempre ha sido
lo que más ha alegrado y divertido
la representación bien aplaudida,
y es representación la humana vida,
una comedia sea
la que hoy el cielo en tu teatro vea.

The Maker to the World, in Calderón,
El gran teatro del mundo

Und jetzt an des Jahrhunderts ernstem Ende,
Wo selbst die Wirklichkeit zur Dichtung wird . . .
Schiller, Prologue to Wallenstein

Vergangenes historisch artikulieren heisst nicht, es erkennen "wie es denn eigentlich gewesen ist." Es heisst, sich einer Erinnerung bemächtigen, wie sie im Augenblick einer Gefahr aufblitzt.

Walter Benjamin, "Geschichtsphilosophische Thesen"
PREFACE

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FREQUENTLY CITED EDITIONS

The following works will be cited in the notes by the author’s name and volume number alone.


Racine, Jean. *Oeuvres complètes*. Ed. Raymond Picard. Paris: Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, 1950. Since all citations are from volume 1, the volume number will not be given in the notes.


ONE

HISTORICAL DRAMA
AND HISTORICAL REALITY

LEVELS OF REALITY

Before you study the history study the historian... Before you study the historian, study his historical and social environment.


Die Geschichte objektiv denken ist die stille Arbeit des Dramatikers; nämlich alles aneinander denken, das Vereinzelte zum Ganzen weben: überall mit der Voraussetzung, dass eine Einheit des Planes in die Dinge gelegt werden müsse, wenn sie nicht darinnen sei.

Nietzsche, "Vom Nutzen und Nachteil der Historie für das Leben"

If historical fact establishes a work’s claim to represent reality, historical drama should be the most realistic of dramatic forms. The much-vaunted realism of writers such as Ibsen and Chekhov is, after all, built out of imagined characters going their fictional rounds; an audience’s acceptance of their worlds as “real” must be based on its faith that the everyday problems and household objects with which these dramatists are concerned present a more plausible, or intense, or significant version of reality than the public scenes traditional to historical plays. What we accept as “real” differs widely from age to age: a serious mind of the late nineteenth century would have felt it could better experience reality in *Ghosts* or *The Father* than in those highly theatrical performances of Edwin Booth or Henry Irving impersonating Richard III.

The issue of whether or not we experience “reality” in a literary work (an issue present in one form or another since Plato) has become especially intense during recent generations. Throughout most of the Western tradition, writers (or at least their critics) made verisimilitude rather than reality itself the goal toward which they strove. They could thus present a historical character or action within a broad framework of accepted notions. Historical material had the same status as myth: both belonged to what Horace called “publicly known matters” (“publica materies”) and both depended—indeed, still do depend—on an audience’s willingness to assimilate the portrayal of a
familiar story or personage to the knowledge it already brings to the theater. 2 Achilles must be portrayed as “restless, irascible, unyielding, and hard,” Horace tells us, and Medea as “fierce and invincible.” 3

In publicly known matters, reality or plausibility exists essentially within the consciousness of the audience. Commentators on the first part of Henry VI never tire of reminding us that Shakespeare’s audience knew Joan of Arc only as an evil force. In the twentieth century her story has become generally known to the point that any writer is forced to recognize and cope with those aspects of her career which we are all familiar with—her voices, her death at the stake, her heroic role in battle. If he wishes to secularize her voices, or bring her back, as Shaw does, to face her friends or enemies after death, he is still working within the system of meanings we attach to her. Schiller, writing of her before she had entered the popular consciousness to the degree she has in our own century, could allow her to die actively in battle instead of passively at the stake, and we allow him this freedom (as we allow Shakespeare to blacken her name) through our historical sense that even the most public stories change their meanings from one era to another. A playwright writing about George Washington for an American audience today could doubtless portray a measure of Machiavellianism beneath Washington’s noble exterior, and he could even endow him with a sizable group of imaginary children; yet given our consciousness of at least the existence, if not the precise personality of Martha Washington, under no circumstances could be make him a bachelor. A poet is better off never having met his historical characters, said Goethe, referring to Egmont, whom he presented as an amorous bachelor instead of a husband with a dozen children as his sources indicated. 4 What a spectator doesn’t know, to take off from the old saying, will not harm his response.

“Where the event of a great action is left doubtful, there the Poet is left Master.” Dryden wrote in his preface to Don Sebastian, a play whose historical background was sufficiently thin to leave Dryden’s imagination ample room for creativity. 5 Dryden was, of course, living at a time when people had begun to distinguish carefully between truth and legend, but when the doctrine of verisimilitude still forced one to think twice about falsifying known or even obscure facts. 6 Getting one’s dates wrong could make a writer especially vulnerable in seventeenth-century France—far more so than inventing a love interest for a character when none was known to exist. Racine, already under fire for some minor anachronisms in Britannicus, in his preface to the play anticipates an objection which he had not yet heard, but which he feared might arise when the play was read rather than seen: “I have made Junie join the vestal order, to which, according to Aulus-Gellius, no one under six years of age, or over ten, was received. But the people here take Junie under their protection, and I thought that in consideration of her birth, her virtue, and her misfortune, they would dispense with the legal age limits, as they have dispensed with age limits for the consulate in the case of so many deserving great men.” 7 Racine’s defensiveness, clothed in what seems to us an absurd legalism, is an extreme instance in the long and complex conflict between poetry and history which has been a central issue in criticism since Aristotle. I might add that we today would be concerned not with the legal propriety of Junie’s becoming a vestal virgin but with its dramatic propriety: since it is difficult for us to share the seventeenth century’s conception of the convent as a proper refuge for a raped woman, we can all too easily view Junie’s flight as the only inauthentic action within what is otherwise one of the greatest of historical dramas.

Although we may be considerably less literal-minded than the seventeenth century in evaluating a dramatist’s use of history, we retain considerable awareness of the relationship of a play to its source. Our modern prefaces to older historical plays generally expend a goodly amount of space on how the writer used the chronicles he was working from; often, in fact, the relevant source material is reprinted in an appendix. Although our tendency to stress the importance of sources is doubtless a product of the “positivist” mode of scholarship which dominated literary study earlier in our century, it is also, I think, a kind of “common-sense” attitude which we have learned to take for granted: our first notion in reflecting about a history play is not to view it as an imaginative structure in its own right but to ask how it deals with its historical materials. Thus, we have learned to marvel at the way famous passages such as Enobarbus’s description of Cleopatra on her barge and Volumnia’s final plea to Coriolanus utilize much of the diction and even syntax of their sources, or at the fact that about one-sixth of Danton’s Tod (Danton’s Death) consists of close paraphrase or translation of Büchner’s sources. 8 Conversely, we marvel at the way Corneille built Cinna out of mere three pages each in Seneca and Montaigne, or how Racine, as he himself boasts in his preface, created Bérénice out of even sparser materials—a line or two in Suetonius; 9 or at how such youthful-seeming heroes as Shakespeare’s Hotspur, Goethe’s Egmont, and Kleist’s Prince Friedrich von Homburg would all have portrayed as middle-aged if their authors had been sticklers for accuracy. Whether we stress a work’s closeness to or independence from its sources, we are thinking within a framework based on a play’s relationship to the external historical reality it purports to imitate. I might add that, if the reality of a historical figure or context is defined according to the standards of contemporary academic historical writing, all but a few historical plays of the past would seem scandalously inaccurate; to cite one of the most flagrant examples, Shakespeare’s depiction of Richard III, deriving as it does from Thomas More and the Tudor historians, bears little resemblance to the portrait which Paul Murray Kendall gives in his modern biography of the king. 10
of his two historical plays) took himself more seriously as a historian than any other Renaissance dramatist, he did not hesitate to alter a characterization (for instance, his Agrippina, who is a more favorable character in *Sejanus* than in *Tacitus*) whenever it suited the moral design of his play.11 Jonson’s often pedantic display of learning, coupled as it is with the transformations to which he subjected his material, illustrates in an extreme way a phenomenon characteristic of historical dramatists of most eras—on the one hand, the pretense that they are rendering historical reality as such; on the other hand, an acknowledgment that a play creates its own world with a closed, internal system of references.12

But these two extremes by no means exhaust the images we form of history plays. One could argue that the sources of many plays consist less of the historical materials on which they are purportedly based than on the theatrical conventions which give them their essential form. In reading through the English historical dramas of the romantic and Victorian poets, from Blake’s *Edward III* fragment to Tennyson’s sprawling plays about Becket and Mary Tudor, one often feels less aware of the “history” being depicted than of the overpowering presence of Shakespeare, whose language and stage conventions they sought (without much success) to imitate. To cite an “eclectic” play whose greatness nobody would dispute today, *Dantons Tod*, for all its faithfulness to the histories of the French Revolution which Büchner used, not only is based on an Elizabethan conception of dramatic form, but its very texture—for example, its crowd scenes out of *Julius Caesar* and *Coriolanus*, the Juliet-like death of Danton’s wife, and the crowing of the roosters taking the Dantonists to the guillotine—evokes a specifically Shakespearean world as much as it does the world of the Revolution; and on a less obvious level *Dantons Tod* parodies Schiller’s much more heroic conception of what a history play should be. In a persuasive essay on *Edward II*, David M. Bevington has argued that many of the “complexities” and “inconsistencies” we have read into Marlowe’s characters stem from the fact that the play has two, often conflicting, sources: the “real” history of Holinshed’s chronicle and the theatrical conventions that derive from the morality-play tradition.13

The neoclassical conventions determine the kind of history we experience in plays written in seventeenth-century France: the need for decorum eliminates the possibility of surging crowds on the streets, of battle scenes, indeed of virtually all the forms of local color which Elizabethan and Spanish drama so assiduously cultivated, while the temporal and spatial compression created through the observance of the unities occasions an image of the past as essentially a moment of crisis instead of the gradually developing historical processes which we witness in plays such as *Richard II* and Goethe’s *Götze von Berlichingen*.14 Since the seventeenth century it has been customary to remark that the characters in a French play are more like contemporary Frenchmen (one remembers Dryden’s snide remark about Racine’s *Mousieur Hippolyte*)15 than like the historical or mythological personages they represent. But this is not the most precise way of describing the phenomenon: I doubt, for instance, that many of Louis XIV’s courtiers spoke in anything resembling Racine’s Alexandrines. Rather, instead of saying that a Turk has been turned into a seventeenth-century Frenchman (which is what Racine’s enemies apparently said of *Bajazet* when the play was first performed)16 or, for that matter, a medieval English feudal lord into an Elizabethan courtier, one should speak of the translation of a historical source into a contemporary dramatic convention, one which, by its very nature, implies its own system of character relationships, poetic language, and dramatic progressions in time. The seeming discrepancy between source and contemporary dramatic treatment is perhaps at its most conspicuous in neoclassical versions of certain folkloric Old Testament passages, for instance Milton’s translation of Samuel’s adventures into what he took to be the form of Greek tragedy, or Alfieri’s of the event-laden story of Saul into the rarefied and lofty inward action to which all his work aspired.

But the contemporary meaning of a historical play cannot be defined simply in terms of the dramatic conventions within which it is expressed. It has long been a commonplace that historical plays are at least as much a comment on the playwright’s own times as on the periods about which they are ostensibly written. Whether or not we accept the recent theory that Jonson’s *Catiline* was intended as a *drame à clef* about the Gunpowder Plot of 1605,17 no one would deny that both his historical plays, for all their vast learning about ancient Rome, tell us a good deal about politics and society in London in the early seventeenth century. Shakespeare’s English history plays, as Lily B. Campbell and other scholars have been at pains to show, allude to such specifically Elizabethan problems as the succession to the crown and the danger of Catholic subversion and invasion.18 If such matters need to be pointed out to us, it is not simply because the modern reader would not catch the allusions which were probably obvious to their first audiences, but also because we are no longer in the habit—as our culture has been until recently—of scanning history primarily for the lessons it can afford the present. On one level *Götze von Berlichingen* is of course “about” the early sixteenth century, but on another level it attempts to restore certain medieval virtues which Goethe found lacking in eighteenth-century civilization (on still another level, one might add, its deliberately Shakespearean chronic form serves as a critique of the neoclassical form which, for the young Goethe, characterized that civilization). Kleist’s last two plays, *Die Hermannsschlacht* (*Hermann’s Battle*) and *Prinz Friedrich von Homburg*, are of course in one sense about Roman and seventeenth-century Germany respectively; yet in another sense which is more obvious to us than it is with Shakespeare’s English histories, they are “about” the present in which they were written, namely, French occupied Prussia of 1808–11. But the word “about” implies that they
HISTORICAL DRAMA AND HISTORICAL REALITY

merely reflect their environment; much more fundamentally, they are meant to exhort the author's contemporaries to political action.19 If academic historians since Ranke have attempted to break the ancient tie which linked past theme with present-day matter, modern historical dramatists have been as shameless as their predecessors in reading the present into the past; to cite one of the more memorable examples, witness Brecht's rewriting of Leben des Galilei (Life of Galileo) in response to the dropping of the first atomic bomb.

The continuity between past and present is a central assertion in history plays of all times and styles. One of the simplest ways a writer can achieve such continuity is to play on the audience's knowledge of what has happened in history since the time of the play. At Richard II's deposition the bishop of Carlisle can solemnly warn of future disorders (IV.1.134-49) which the audience knows will ultimately take the form of the War of the Roses (disorders, moreover, which Shakespeare had already described in detail in the Henry VI plays and Richard III). The aged Horace in Corneille's Horace goes to great rhetorical effort to predict the future Roman glory which we all know is to come true.20 When Racine's Agrippine tells her son Nero "Et ton nom paraîtra, dans la race future, / Aux plus crus tyrans une cruelle injure,"21 the author can rest assured the audience will know what he is talking about. Bucher's Danton can predict that Robespierre will follow him to the guillotine before six months are up.22 In one sense, of course, such statements provide an easy means of asserting the historical reality of what is happening on stage, but in another sense they serve as a way of breaking the illusion, at least to the extent that we see the events on stage spilling over into a historical continuum with which we are already familiar. And although they help break the illusion, such statements also increase our participation in the play, for through our hindsight about how things eventually worked themselves out in history, we flatter ourselves that we, in effect, can sit like demigods presiding omnisciently over the action.

To the degree that a segment of the past is intended to link up with the present-day reality of the audience, the latter's own national past has a special status among thematic materials. Coleridge attempted to distinguish Shakespeare's English history plays from his other works with a relatively simple test: "In order that a drama may be properly historical," he wrote, "it is necessary that it should be the history of the people to whom it is addressed."23 Coleridge's words "to whom it is addressed" suggest the active relationship which a drama on national history can establish with its audience. The possibilities of interchange between audience and drama are endless: a play can work to confirm or kindle patriotic feelings (Henry V), it can warn a ruler of possible dangers (Gorbuduc), flatter a ruler (Macbeth), or, for that matter, attempt to undermine a ruler or powerful figure in the audience's eyes (The Crucible). In our earliest history play, The Persians, Aeschylus depicts the hybris of the invaders who had been defeated at Salamis only a few years before in order to warn his victorious fellow Greeks of their own hybris. In one of the most recent of famous history plays, Der Stellvertreter (The Deputy), Rolf Hochhuth was willing to court aesthetic disaster in order to arouse the maximum degree of guilt within his fellow Germans for their crimes during World War II. In Lope de Vega's Fuenteovejuna even a foreign reader can sense the symbolic authority which Ferdinand and Isabella exercise during their brief appearance — and he is equally aware that they lack such authority when they appear in Dryden's Conquest of Granada. The powerful effect that a drama on a people's own national history can exert is often lost when it is presented in a foreign environment, for this effect is predicated on the audience's awareness that it is witnessing the enactment of its own past.24 Except for Shakespeare's histories, scarcely any national plays have been able to acclimate themselves abroad (one suspects that today even in England Shakespeare's histories, except during wartime, are appreciated for other than national reasons). Ibsen's and Strindberg's national dramas, fine though some of them are, are not played, in fact scarcely read, outside their respective countries. Prinz Friedrich von Homberg was successful in post-World War II Paris in spite of its German nationalist sentiments and only because of the existentialist statements its audiences discovered in it.

Yet among the distinguished historical dramas one could name, perhaps only a minority are actually based on "national" materials. Indeed, literary historians have generally attributed the "inspiration" for these plays to moments of intense national consciousness: whatever the truth of such statements, it remains a fact that nearly all the great English history plays were written during the decade following the defeat of the Armada. The few significant plays on German history coincide with the awakening of the German national past during the age of Goethe. Another group of fine plays — for instance, Grillparzer's König Ottokars Glück und Ende (King Ottokar's Rise and Fall) and Ein Bruderzwist in Habsburg (A Hapsburg Internal Quarrel), Pushkin's Boris Godounov and Mickiewicz's Forefathers (both can be tied in one way or another to the upsurge of nationalism during the post-Napoleonic period. Despite the aggressively nationalist foreign policy of France during the seventeenth century, French drama is notoriously lacking in French themes: the analogy between past and present which is characteristic of all historical drama could better be served by Roman history than by what must have seemed a much too "rude" French national past. Under an authoritarian regime national themes, though they may serve patriotic purposes (as they did in the Elizabethan period and the Spanish Golden Age), are often too touchy for an author to risk. It is significant, for instance, that no play within Shakespeare's English cycle was set in the time of the Tudors; Henry VIII, moreover, was not only written during the Stuart reign, but it is far less "political" in content and method than the pre-Tudor plays. With a few exceptions such as the anonymous plays on Thomas More and Thomas Cromwell, Elizabethan plays on recent history were normally set in foreign places, most notably France. Chapman's Bussy D'Ambois and
Byron allowed their author to play on the audience's knowledge of very recent historical events without risking local political consequences. 25 The events of Marlowe's crude propaganda play, The Massacre at Paris, were so recent that Henry of Navarre could be presented as a Protestant hero, though his real-life prototype was to render the play obsolete soon after through his conversion to Catholicism. Whatever the setting, Elizabethans could be expected to give a “foreign” play a local application, as one gathers from Thomas Heywood's statement of 1612, “If we present a foreigne History, the subject is so intended, that in the lines of Romans, Grecians, or others, either the vertues of our Country-men are extolled, or their vices reproved.” 26

If national history has enjoyed a special status, so too has ancient, particularly Roman, history. Roman history, after all, is a part of the national consciousness of all modern Europe: not only did the events of ancient Rome have the exemplary function indicated by Heywood's statement, but to feel historical continuity between the present and the ancient Roman imperium was to endow one's own history with a measure of dignity. When Casca, directly after the murder of Julius Caesar, speaks these lines—

How many ages hence
Shall this our lofty scene be acted over,
In states unborn, and accents yet unknown!

(III.i.111-13)

we are aware both of the exemplary nature of the action (exemplary, as always with Shakespeare, in a very complex sense, especially through the irony with which we read the words “lofty” and “acted”) and of the continuity between Roman greatness and the Elizabethan present. The first audience of Cúrna, while listening to Augustus's speeches on the grandeur of the state he was consolidating, must surely have felt both the analogy and the continuity between the achievements of the first Roman emperor and those of Richelieu.

At particular moments in history, subjects other than Rome or one's own national past can establish analogies and continuities between a play's overt subject and the audience's present. As partisans of Protestantism and the Enlightenment, Goethe and Schiller could utilize an anti-Spanish and an antiabsolutist perspective in Egmont and Don Carlos, and thus achieve something of the effect of national drama. One might add that both writers felt the lack of appropriate German materials for their plays: Schiller, for instance, in his notes toward his brilliant fragment from Russian history, Demetrius, listed the lack of a German subject as one of the disadvantages of his project. 27 While Goethe, reading through Scott's novels during his old age, complained of the “poverty” of German in comparison with English history (ironically enough, the historical method of Scott's fiction owes a good bit to the fact that Scott had translated Götz von Berlichingen in his youth). 28 For a radical such as Georg Büchner nothing within German history could have had the immediacy or relevance of the history of the French Revolution; the lines he wrote to his fiancée during the year before the composition of Dantons Tod—“I was studying the history of the Revolution. I felt myself as though crushed under the frightful fatalism of history... The individual a mere froth on the wave, greatness a mere chance, the dominance of genius a puppet's game, a ridiculous struggling against an iron law, the recognition of which is the highest achievement, but which to control is impossible”—reveal an intensity of identification with the past such as no dramatist reading his own national history can ever have surpassed.

To the degree that Hegelian and/or Marxist approaches to history have created a new sense of continuity during the past century, “universal” history has been able to address itself to an audience with something of the immediacy which was formerly the province of national history. Among nonnational subjects, only Roman history could convince Elizabethan or French seventeenth-century audiences of its essential continuity with their own civilization. But once every era anywhere—at least within Western culture and its Near Eastern appendages—could be interpreted as part of an ongoing historical process which must culminate in the audience's present, even the most remote historical contexts might be expected to reveal their relevance. During the composition of Emperor and Galilean, his long panoramic drama on the life of Julian the Apostate, Ibsen wrote to Edmund Gose justifying his choice of so “remote” a theme: “The historical theme I have chosen... has a closer connection with the currents of our own age than one might at first think. This I regard as an essential demand to be made of any modern treatment of material so remote, if it is, as a work of literature, to be able to arouse any interest.” 30 The dramatist could thus seek out eras whose essential conflicts seemed to point forward, in fact to anticipate those later stages of the historical process with which the audience might experience some emotional identification. Ibsen in his world-historical fable could address himself to the mid-nineteenth-century conflict between what Arnold, writing about the same time, called Hebraism and Hellenism.

Indeed, writers could seek out periods in which an older, reactionary view of life was colliding with some newer, more attractive dispensation: by identifying with the proponents of the new, the audience not only would feel it was experiencing the force of historical continuity, but it could flatter itself for being on the side of progress. The collision (to use an appropriately Hegelian term) between Oriental callousness and Christian compassion which Hebbel depicted in Herodes and Mariamne, or between medieval Catholic authoritarianism and Protestant free-spiritedness which Shaw made the central issue in Saint Joan, is presented in such a way that the audience cannot help but sympathize with the values of the new era, while at the same time the playwright can remind his public not to resist the historical process which is still going on in their own world. Brecht, though a firm enough
believer in the historical process, managed to complicate the scheme in Galileo—indeed, Galileo: in the collision between ecclesiastical authoritarianism and scientific freedom which he presents, we are unable to align ourselves wholeheartedly with the newer values once we see how Galileo has sold out to the churchmen and helped bring on our present woes.

Thus far I have stressed three levels of reality which shape our consciousness as we experience a history play: first, the historical materials which the play derives from its sources ("correct" or not) and which it purports to reenact; second, the theatrical conventions into which these materials are recast; and third, the sense of historical continuity which the author gives to that segment of the past which he has dramatized. But there is still another aspect to our experience with every older work, namely, the influence of our present situation on our interpretation of the work. Like history itself, a history play changes its meaning for us according to the shifting historical winds.

When Richard II (minus its explosive deposition scene) was revived in London during the Essex Rebellion of 1601, it had obviously become charged with more meanings than those which its first audience would have seen in it a mere six years before. All great literary works, of course, acquire new meanings for us with changing times: to cite some famous extreme readings, one need only mention the weak, introspective Hamlet of Goethe and Coleridge or the post-Beckett Lear of Jan Kott and Peter Brook. But history plays, to the extent that they concern themselves with politics and power, enjoy a more intense relationship with reality than other works: an audience which is led to view Richard II (not to speak of Richard III) as a portrait of its current ruler will experience a political thrill distinct from the psychological or ideological titillation of, say, a juvenile delinquent Hamlet, or a racially victimized Othello.

The political events of history plays have a way of "repeating" themselves in a more readily interpretable manner than private, psychological events. The various forms of political unrest and change—riots, conspiracies, coups, as well as most types of repression—do not, despite improvements in the technology with which they are put into effect, change their basic configurations from one age to another. When Goethe, while finishing Egmont in Rome, heard news of the Belgian revolution of 1787, he remarked that the early scenes he had written years before about the unrest in Brussels in the 1560s were now being enacted on that city's streets; since his drama had already achieved a new level of significance before it was even complete, he expressed the fear that it might be interpreted as a lampoon. In his play Die Plebejer proben den Aufstand (The Plebeians Rehearse the Uprising), a sharp attack on Brecht's refusal to support the East Berlin riots of 1953, Günter Grass found an apt literary analogy in the crowd scenes of Coriolanus, which he could tie specifically to his protagonist through the fact that Brecht had recently adapted Shakespeare's tragedy for his theatrical company. Whatever relationship, if any, Coriolanus had to the food riots of 1607, it has proved a potent force in generating later meanings, as one might note in the near-riots occasioned by the rightist adaptation performed in Paris in 1934, or in Brecht's Marxist version, which managed to enoble the tribunes and the crowd and to make the hero even more unpleasant than he is in the original play. Some plays, of course, fail to generate new meanings once their initial relevance has worn off. Jonson's Catiline, despite the fascination it may have had for contemporary audiences who knew how to read its intended political meanings, by 1668 could elicit Samuel Pepys's comment that it was "the least diverting" play he had ever seen. Occasionally a play cultivates sufficient ambiguity to keep its political meanings unclear even in its own time: Addison's Cato, for instance, was espoused by both Whigs and Tories as partial to each—the Whigs casting Marlborough as the hero Cato, while the Tories preferred to see him as the tyrant Caesar.

In an attempt to place Fuenteovejuna in its original historical context, Joaquín Casalduero distinguished between a play's interpretability by theater directors and by critics: whereas the former must attempt to capture a play's present-day meanings, the latter must isolate what the play would have meant to its initial audience. Casalduero's essay on Lope's play, which depicts the successful uprising of a small town against its tyrannical local feudal ruler, is an attempt to correct those interpretations (represented, for instance, by the late-nineteenth-century "liberal" critic Menéndez y Pelayo and by contemporary radical theater directors) which stress the play's revolutionary content. Our modern conceptions of "left" and "right," which go back to the struggle against absolute monarchy that began in the Enlightenment, have little, if any, applicability to Spanish politics of the sixteenth century, a period in which the monarchy sought to consolidate its position by allying itself with the szlasy against the feudal nobility. Critics who exalt what they take to be popular revolution" in plays such as Fuenteovejuna or Calderón's El alcalde de Zalamea (The Mayor of Zalamea) must cope with the fact that the Spanish dramatists of the Golden Age were able to combine hostility toward feudalism with unbridled loyalty to absolute monarchy and to the Catholic religion.

If critics run into problems transferring a political category to a period in which it does not fit, they encounter another type of problem in approaching writers to whom they feel so ideologically akin that they are incapable of distinguishing between what is actually "in" the work and what they take to be the writer's ideology. Brecht's plays are notoriously dangerous subjects for Marxist critics of any but the shrewdest and most flexible sort. Even Georg Lukács, who could be marvelously acute in approaching conservative writers such as Scott or Balzac, went awry with a hero of the German radical tradition such as Georg Büchner: in writing about Dantons Tod, Lukács could...
insist (with the perversity characteristic of a critic whose ideological commitments might otherwise be threatened) that Büchner was not only attacking Danton's passivity but also arguing for the continuance of the Revolution.39 Liberal and Marxist critics, of course, wear their biases more openly than those historical scholars who, in our century, have taken it upon themselves to demonize the literature of the past. Although literary history has shown considerable success in riddling us of the kind of "unhistorical" readings which Casalduero exposed in his essay on Fuenteovejuna, it is unable to avoid a more subtle sort of bias. For literary historians, no more than the political and social historians whose supposed objectivity they seek to attain, are themselves thoroughly immersed in the attitudes toward the past which prevail in their own time. Anybody who has followed the course of American historical writing during the twentieth century is aware of a succession of changing frameworks through which the American past has been viewed: the so-called "progressive" historians of the early part of the century gave way to the "consensus" historians at the end of World War II, and these, in turn, have been challenged by the "revisionists" since the mid-1960s. One need only look at the shifting image of the early years of the American republic as one moves (to cite some extreme examples) from Charles A. Beard to Daniel J. Boorstin and thence to Staughton Lynd to note that a man's view of the past cannot be separated from the political and social milieu in which he works and thinks.40 If academic historians are influenced by their immediate environments, it is hardly surprising if critics of historical drama have a hard time escaping the preconceptions of their own worlds. It is easy enough today to attack a statement such as the following written a century ago by Edward Dowden in his once-influential book on Shakespeare: "Brutus is the political Gironde. He is placed in contrast with his brother-in-law Cassius, the political Jacobin."41 We can look condescendingly at such lines because of the very obviousness with which Dowden reads Julius Caesar according to late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century political categories—categories, moreover, which impose their own, peculiarly modern, coloring on a historical world completely foreign to them.

But even the more "responsible" approaches to literary history which have been developed during our own century are, despite their insistence on documentation and their commitment to placing a work within its own time, unable to escape the biases of their practitioners' own time. When I was a graduate student in the early 1950s, it seemed as though the last and, in fact, only word on Shakespeare's English histories had been uttered by Lily B. Campbell and E. M. W. Tillyard, both of whom saw the plays as expressions of official Elizabethan attitudes toward order and rebellion, indeed as a dramatization of the so-called Tudor myth which Shakespeare would have absorbed from the various historians he had read. Despite much useful information in their work, we can no longer accept their interpretations as either the last or only word; indeed, with a quarter century's distance between them and us, we can easily see how each manages to make Shakespeare look like a spokesman for patriotism and authority: Miss Campbell, reading Shakespeare through the perspective of the Elizabethan books and pamphlets she found at the Huntington Library, naturally stressed the plays' relationships with the official attitudes that prevailed in the various nonliterary texts circulating during Shakespeare's time, while Tillyard just as naturally stressed what one would expect of a conservative Cambridge don writing in a beleaguered England during World War II. Tillyard, in fact, displayed his bias quite openly when he defended his reading of Henry IV as an expression of the Elizabethan doctrine of order:

The school of criticism that furnished [Falstaff] with a tender heart and condemned the Prince for brutality in turning him away was deluded. Its delusions will probably be accounted for in later years through the facts of history. The sense of security created in nineteenth century England by the predominance of the British navy induced men to rate that very security too cheaply and to exalt the instinct of rebellion above its legitimate station. They forgot the threat of disorder which was ever present with the Elizabetans. Schooled by recent events we should have no difficulty now in taking Falstaff as the Elizabetans took him.42

If the nineteenth-century British navy encouraged too soft a view of Falstaff, the "recent" events which "schooled" Tillyard perhaps encourage an unduly harsh view of him. During the last decade or two critics have come to make a crucial distinction between the ideas which stand behind a play and the actual embodiment within the work. The most eloquent statement of what later became a characteristic point of view is that of A. P. Rossiter, whose public lectures on Shakespeare, though written soon after Tillyard's book, did not become generally known until after their posthumous publication in 1961:

...the Tudor myth system of Order, Degree, etc. was too rigid, too black-and-white, too doctrinaire and narrowly moral for Shakespeare's mind: it falsified his fuller expression of men. Consequently, while employing it as FRAME, he had to underwrite it, to qualify it with equivocations: to vex its applications with sly or subtle ambiguities: to cast doubts on its ultimate human validity, even in situations where its principles seemed most completely applicable. His intuition told him it was morally inadequate.43

One does not need to take a thoroughgoing Marxist view of a critic's relation to his own age to note that during the decade in which Rossiter's statement made a satisfying statement of Shakespeare's relationship to the ideas of his time our culture has developed an increasingly skeptical attitude toward the
HISTORICAL DRAMA AND HISTORICAL REALITY

kind of order and authority which Shakespeare had been thought to espouse only shortly before. Indeed, by the early 1970s the tension that Rossiter noted between Elizabethan ideas of order and the statements the plays were making began to give way to a more radical skepticism which questions how seriously the Elizabethans (not to speak of their dramas) ever entertained these ideas. When Robert Ornstein, for instance, claims that the "Tudor myth system" was never taken seriously by Shakespeare's contemporaries, or when J. W. Lever writes that "the so-called 'chain of being' was in an advanced state of rust by the end of the sixteenth century," we recognize that within less than a generation the view of Elizabethan history and drama enunciated by Campbell and Tillyard has been turned into its opposite. The reality of the past is at best a slippery thing.

APPRING REALITY

...can this cockpit hold
The vastly fields of France? or may we cram
Within this wooden O the very casques
That did affright the air at Agincourt?

Henry V, Prologue

Slippery though it may be, reality (above all, its relation to the theatrical illusion the audience is witnessing) has remained a traditional problem within historical plays, and, in fact, has often emerged as one of their central themes. The relation Shakespeare sets up in the lines quoted above takes the most simple form which a statement about illusion and reality can take: at the start of each act the Chorus comes forward to exhort the audience to accept the theatrical illusion as real.

O, do but think
You stand upon the rivage and behold
A city on th' inconstant billows dancing 

(III. Chorus. 13-15)

Work, work your thoughts, and therein see a siege, 

(III. Chorus. 25)

But now behold,
In the quick forge and working-house of thought,
How London doth pour out her citizens.

(V. Chorus. 22-25)

As the Chorus works upon our collective imagination, the historical world of distant, past expeditions, battles, and homecomings gradually comes into focus and assumes a reality of its own—only to disappear temporarily as he returns to remind us of the illusory nature of the action and to exhort us once more to believe in the theatrical illusion. Shakespeare's insistence on maintaining an explicit distinction between illusion and reality is in one sense quite unnecessary, for anybody who bothers going to the theater surely knows that a play is just a play. To cite Dr. Johnson's famous defense of Shakespeare against those who held his "violation" of the unities against him:

The truth is, that the spectators are always in their senses, and know, from the first act to the last, that the stage is only a stage, and that the players are only players. . . . An action must be in some place; but the different actions that compleat a story may be in places very remote from each other; and where is the absurdity of allowing that space to represent first Athens, and then Sicily, which was always known to be neither Sicily nor Athens, but a modern theatre.45

Johnson's statement, as one might expect, makes superb common sense, but it by no means exhausts the relationships our minds set up between drama and reality. For the notion of theatrical reality as an illusion is as thoroughly built into the history of drama as the notion of novelistic reality as an illusion has been an essential part of the history of fiction at least since Don Quijote. Within literature written since the Enlightenment, the problem has characteristically manifested itself in terms of the writer's self-consciousness, of his skepticism about the possibility of rendering external reality in adequate terms. Thus, Schiller introduces the central historical action of Wallenstein with an elaborate series of devices which serve to keep the hero out of view, first by a lengthy prologue in which the poet addresses the audience and then by the curtain raiser, Wallenstein's Lager (Wallenstein's Camp), which is virtually a play in its own right. "In jenes kringes Mitte stellt euch jetzt / Der Dichter," Schiller writes in his prologue and then proceeds to guide us into the historical past in something of the manner of Shakespeare's Chorus in Henry V:

Sechzehn Jahre der Verwüstung,
Des Raubs, des Elends sind dahingeflohn,
In trüben Massen garet noch die Welt,
Und keine Friedenshoffnung strahlt von fern.

Ein Tummelplatz von Waffen ist das Reich,
Verödet sind die Städte, Magdeburg
Ist Schutt...46

It is as though a piling up of concrete detail about looting, weapons, and despair can conjure up a past whose existence an audience would otherwise be loath to accept.

A similar proceeds with a long description of his hero but suddenly interrupts it with the reminder that Wallenstein will not even appear in the first night's play: "Nicht er ists, der auf dieser Bühne heut / Erscheinen wird." Instead,
the audience is to see him first from a distance through the eyes of his
followers:

Doch in den kühnen Scharen,
Die sein Befehl gewaltig lenkt, sein Geist
Beseelt, wird euch sein Schattenbild begegnen,
Bis ihn die scheue Muse selbst vor euch
Zu stellen wagt in lebender Gestalt

Schiller’s image of the “shy muse” who waits before she “dare” bring forth the
hero “in living form” is emblematic of the hesitation of the modern poet who
holds back through fear that the reality he wishes to apprehend may elude
him. Forgive the poet for delaying, he asks his audience:

Darum verzeiht dem Dichter, wenn er euch
Nicht raschen Schritt mit einem Mal ans Ziel
Der Handlung reisst

Before he can move to his main drama, he must first present a series of scenes
of low life in which the great personages and events can be seen, as it were,
from below. It is as though the poet can only gain a foothold on the “higher”
political realities he will present if he focuses first on the “lower” realities of
the peasants, hawkers, soldiers, and itinerants surrounding Wallenstein’s
camp. As far as the action of the main drama is concerned, Wallenstein’s
Lager contributes little more than a picture of the loyalty that the hero’s
soldiers feel toward him; more important, however, the introductory play
works to establish a concrete reality within which the more lofty sentiments of
the main drama can take root. Written as it is in Knittelsers, that form of
doggerel which automatically rings folk-like to the German ear, Wallenstein’s
Lager contrasts sharply with the trilogy’s two succeeding plays, both of which
evoke an elevated world defined by the formal language of blank verse and an
essentially classical structure.

I have deliberately cited the example of Schiller, for in his essay Uber naive
und sentimentalische Dichtung (On Naive and Sentimental Poetry), written in
1795, shortly before Wallenstein, Schiller provided the first great statement
of a problem peculiar to the modern writer, namely his inability to apprehend
reality (for which he used the characteristically eighteenth-century term
“nature”) with the directness of vision and the immediacy that many writers
of the past such as Homer and Shakespeare possessed. Unlike the “naive”
writers of the past (as well as Schiller’s contemporary Goethe, whose successful
example caused Schiller to speculate about his own dilemma), the modern or
“sentimental” writer must employ a conscious effort of the will to render that
reality which, he believes, came all too naturally to the naive writer. Although
Schiller was writing specifically about the relation of a writer to the external
world which he attempts to apprehend, his essay, by implication, extends to
the relation of readers or audiences to the world which they see depicted. If

a writer despairs of his ability to render a world adequately, he does so
precisely because he fears his audience will lend neither its credulity nor its
curiosity to the world he is creating. The self-consciousness of the modern
writer is essentially a crisis of confidence—a fear, first, that an audience will
 refuse to suspend its disbelief in, let alone its indifference to, this imagined
world, and, in its more radical form, a fear that no significant communica-
tion between author and public can take place at all. What Schiller, in his
great theoretical essay, saw as a problem between the author and an external
world out of which he shapes his creation has come to manifest itself as a
problem between the author and an external world which he desperately
hopes may be willing to accept his creation as credible, perhaps even (if he is
fortunate) as significant.

Consider the problem of a writer today who sets out to write a play about,
say, Savonarola. Even if his initial motive is his fascination with Florence in
the late fifteenth century, he cannot count on a serious modern audience
to share this fascination or even to allow itself to be persuaded toward
such a fascination. The presence of local historical color as a central object
of interest was possible only in the nineteenth century, and even then much
more appropriately in fiction than in drama. If immersion in history is
 demanded to leave an audience indifferent, the audience might at least be
asked into finding some interest in the character of the hero. But sympathy
for Savonarola would be hard to summon up, unless the author shaped his
material to present his hero as a martyr to an evil political machine; even
then the author would be forced to deemphasize those characteristics of his
hero which could not awaken a favorable modern response—his vituperations
against luxury, for instance, or the traditional Christian terms within which
he expressed his mission. Despairing in his search for a viable hero, the author
could shift his center of interest to some issue which the audience might find
relevant to contemporary needs. Thus, Florentine problems of the 1490s
could be “translated” into some paradigm of political confrontation—be-
tween a callous ruling elite and a lower order seeking an adequate political
voice, or, if one prefers a more specifically economic interpretation, between
the affluence of the Medicis and the relative poverty of a deprived class.

But even if the play is centered around issues rather than characters, the
author would quickly recognize that Savonarola’s hell-fire-and-brimstone
praise cannot be translated into political or economic terms without a violent
and quite conspicuous distortion of what we normally consider historical fact.
Thinking simply of character or issues is not enough to recreate the past
within a present-day context. The dramatic convention within which the
author works is even more fundamental than either character or issues in
 shaping his material. The only contemporary convention which seems
generally viable for historical matters is Brechtian epic theater, which, with
its constant reminders to the audience not to lend too wholehearted a credence to the events depicted on stage, creates a kind of frame through which we can view the past from an unashamedly present-day vantage point. Indeed, Brecht's famous "alienation effect," whereby an audience is encouraged not to identify with the characters and actions it witnesses, provides the perfect accommodation between an author's and audience's desire for a "real" historical world and their desire to invest this world with contemporary meaning. Like the many other devices in post-Enlightenment literature that question the separation of fiction and reality (the "irony" cultivated by the German romantics, Pirandello's constant testing of dramatic illusion, not to speak of the countless novels and poems which purport to tell us about the process of writing novels and poems), the alienation effect is a means of coping with the problem of self-consciousness—not merely the self-consciousness of the author who fears the rejection of the fiction he is trying to present, but also that of the audience which feels inhibited about suspending its disbelief without some explicit coaxing or manipulation. Unless it is reminded, by some technique or other, that what it witnesses is illusionary, a present-day audience could scarcely, in fact, be expected to display much interest in the characters or the action.

If written within the convention of the epic theater, a play about Savonarola could be created with a maximum of imaginative freedom: with his frank admission that he is writing from the point of view of the present, the author could shape his events within most any philosophy of history which might suit his needs. He might, for instance, interpret Savonarola's movement as a regression toward a static, medieval view of life, one that was "doomed" to fail because it rejected the "progressive" tendencies of Renaissance culture; or he might view this regression positively, as an assertion of certain "higher" values which the Florentine Renaissance had come to neglect. Or he might interpret the movement as progressive rather than regressive, and the heretic priest as a harbinger of the Reformation. Like Shaw's Saint Joan, Savonarola could thus play the role of one who was "tragically" born before his appropriate time; or he could be seen as foolish rather than tragic, a potential hero of progress who misused his historical opportunity by clothing his mission in theological rather than economic or social terms. One could even conceive of a play which would utilize all these theories and, in a veritable triumph of self-consciousness, attempt to explore how we go about making historical judgments and generalizations. It may well be, however, that at our present moment in history both author and audience have come to see the Brechtian mode as just another cliché, a convention which has outworn its potential to the point that self-consciousness will work to inhibit the very self-consciousness of its devices. Indeed, one could imagine a Savonarola play which is essentially a parody of these devices just as the play that Max Bechhofer inserted into the story of "Savonarola" Brown" parodies the essential unself-consciousness inherent in the sublime type of the pseudo-Shakespearean historical dramas of the nineteenth century. 50

The Brechtian mode, of course, has parody, if not necessarily self-parody, built into its very method. The parody is directed, among less specifically literary targets, at German classical dramas, especially those of Schiller, who for Brecht evoked the smugly held middle-class values of typical culture-hungry German theatergoers. Thus, Die heilige Johanna der Schlachten (Saint Joan of the Stockyards) and Arturo Ui, are both written in a style like rhymed verse that at virtually every moment (no matter what social or economic matters are on the author's mind) calls our attention to the parodies of an earlier theatrical mode which for Brecht did not have sufficient self-consciousness about itself. (It is a typical irony of German history that Germany's greatest modern dramatist should direct his work at that earlier dramatist who provided the first powerful statement of the problem of self-consciousness in modern art.) The extremity of its pseudo-Shakespearean historical dramas of the nineteenth century culture suggests; third, through the structure of a number of individual scenes which it imitates, the world of Shakespeare's Richard III and fourth, through the obvious allegorical meaning toward which all the book is designed to point, the world of Adolf Hitler's rise to power and, even more fundamentally, the idea expressed by the play's full title, Der aufgebrochene Aufstieg des Arturo Ui (The Resistible Rise of Arturo Ui)—that in German history might have been different if anybody had bothered to stop Hitler early enough.

As though vying with Brecht at the same time that he questioned his novelty, Günter Grass built his play Die Plebejer proben den Aufstand out of similarly complicated network of historical perspectives: ancient Rome and Elizabethan London, as suggested by Coriolanus, the play-within-a-play which is being rehearsed in the course of Grass's play; the world of the early 1960s, suggested on one level by Brecht's adaptation of Shakespeare, with its Massel lessons for the masses, and on another by the ideological rigidity which results in his refusal to shelter workers during the Berlin uprising; finally, the world of the 1960s, as portrayed through the indirect presence of the author, who, as everybody in the audience knows, is exhibiting his own literary and political pretensions while questioning those of his predecessor. 51 (Attacking one's literary fathers in the most blatant possible way has been traditional within the German cultural system.)
HISTORICAL DRAMA AND HISTORICAL REALITY

In theory, at least, the so-called documentary dramas of the 1960s (among which Grass's play is generally classified) should afford the closest approximation to historical reality conceivable in drama. These plays have usually concerned themselves with recent history—with persons and situations still existing within their audiences' living memory: the extermination camps of Der Stellvertreter and of Peter Weiss's Die Ermittlung (The Investigation), the American political atmosphere in the plays about the Chicago and Catonsville trials. A writer who can depend on an audience's knowledge of what are virtually current events does not need to expend much effort on "exposition" or most of the traditional devices necessary to coax an audience into the world of the play: in documentary drama the problem of self-consciousness, from the point of view of both audience and author, should not exist at all. To the extent that many of these plays purport to be drawn from documents—the Heinar Kipphardt play from the transcripts of the Oppenheimer security-clearance hearing (In der Sache J. Robert Oppenheimer—in the Matter of J. Robert Oppenheimer), the Weiss play from those of the Frankfurt war-crimes trials of 1963-65—the audience can be expected to think itself present at the reenactment of events whose proximity to reality it is willing to accept from the start. The accommodation of theatrical to historical reality would seem virtually complete in those reenactments of the Chicago Eight trial which were planned in 1970 to employ seven of the actual defendants as actors (since the eighth, Bobby Seale, was still in prison, his part was to be taken by his brother). Only one more step would be necessary to create a total fusion of theatrical and historical reality: arousing the consciousness of those who participate in the public world so that they see themselves playing roles on some great stage of history (those who have witnessed the history of recent years—for example, the spectacle of an American president secretly tape-recording events within the highest councils of government while he is himself a participant—may well have wondered if a significant demarcation line between theater and reality still exists).

Despite its pretensions about apprehending reality directly, documentary drama, like any form of drama, offers a very selective view of history. Indeed, the documentary plays of the 1960s are notable for the high degree of manipulation which their authors—or "arrangers"—have applied to the documents from which the plays are drawn. Die Ermittlung, despite the fact that its words are drawn from trial testimony, was originally shaped as an oratorio, which was to establish from the start the religious aura within which the play could be experienced. The carefully paired lawyers and witnesses in Kipphardt's play about the Oppenheimer case are conceived with an absoluteness and a symmetry which remind one of the virtues and vices in morality plays. Documentary plays are scarcely "dramatic literature" in the traditional sense (some which were much in the public mind while I was thinking out this book were quite forgotten by the time I got to my final revisions). Most, in fact, seem dead on the printed page, for they depend for their effects on their ability to establish a sense of community with their audiences. To cite an extreme example, the projected Chicago Eight play has been described in the following terms: "Each performance in each city is booked upon as a huge 'cell meeting' for the movement in that city." The communal experience that emerges from performance has become the central goal of such drama; even Brecht, for all his attempts to achieve a powerful theatrical and political effect at once, seems very much a "literary" dramatist when compared to his documentary successors. Indeed, performances need not even be professional in any traditional sense, as one can conclude from the following advertisement in a radical newspaper:

People's Actors Needed: Want to give People's acting a try? We're getting a play together on the Stanford Hospital struggle and the People's Medical Center in Redwood City. No acting experience necessary—just a Dare to Struggle attitude.

Finally, one suspects, we reach the point of drama as therapy, as in that play within-a-play about recent political history staged by the inmates of the Dorenstein in Weiss's Marat/Sade. (Audiences, for that matter, are no longer essential to our conception of drama: in view of such contemporary phenomena as the "psychodrama" practiced in ordinary therapy, or the role playing that popular psychiatric books tell us we constantly engage in, we are beginning to define our everyday lives in dramatic terms; if drama once defined itself through its ability to imitate life, in certain contemporary contexts life justifies itself by the quality and intensity of its drama.)

Rhetorically, documentary plays generally attempt to shame some character or group (Pius XII and Churchill in Hochhuth's plays, Judge Julius Hoffman in the various plays built around the Chicago conspiracy trial, the United States in Weiss's Viet Nam Diskurs, Stanford University in the play announced in the advertisement above) and/or to celebrate the victim or opponent of those who are being shamed; at the same time they try to shame or compliment the audience to the extent that the audience's sympathies have been faulty or correct. Structurally, documentary plays tend to take the form of trials—either actual trials, as in the plays on Oppenheimer and the extermination-camp personnel, or symbolic trials in which the audience is expected to serve as judge of whatever villains and/or martyrs the author has set up.

Trials have been a persistent element of drama. One thinks of the "actual" trials as that of Orestes in Oedipus Rex and Strindberg's The Father, of Adam and Eve in Keats's The Eve of St. Agnes. Indeed, one could speak of a natural affinity between drama and trials, an affinity that is in no way exhausted by such a journalistic cliché as "courtroom drama." A
trial is, for one thing, an abstraction of reality in which issues become sharply dichotomized and reduced to essentials. Details which are not relevant to the central issues are ruthlessly expunged so that opposing forces may confront one another with an absoluteness that allows for no consideration of other viewpoints. Like a well-made play, a trial attempts to move unalterably toward the uncovering of some truth which, in one way or another, was hidden at the start. (The notion of a trial as a mode of action is suggested in those European languages which designate a trial with cognates of the English word "process.") In most of the great trial-plays of the past, despite the strongly antagonistic attitudes which are voiced throughout, the audience’s sympathies are directed not to the espousal of a single side of the conflict but to a recognition of human complexity: Shylock, though he loses his case in Portia’s court, has, after all, remained a considerable problem for the play’s interpreters, while Kleist’s Adam, though guilty in any legal sense, is, like his biblical namesake, situated ethically some place between good and evil. What starts as an attempt to uncover a single truth culminates in the insight that final positions are ultimately equivocal (indeed, not even final).

Yet the trial-like plays of the 1960s are notable for their refusal to argue for human complexity—which is only to say, of course, that they served as expressions of the political tensions within the Western world during that period. Despite the claims that documentary plays have made about their faithfulness to reality, their real intent and effect cannot be described in traditional mimetic terms. Rather than being “imitative” they often attempt to be explosive. “Putting Pius XII on stage at all is a highly charged act,” Eric Bentley wrote of Der Stellvertreter, “and, so far from being illegitimate, a feeling of shock that he was put on stage is part of the game, and was on the cards from the beginning.” One could develop Bentley’s observation to show that there is a difference in kind between the impersonation of “real” people and that of characters whom the audience recognizes to be fictional. If the situation in Hochhuth’s play had been fictionalized and the recent pope transformed into an imaginary spiritual leader in some distant time and place, the play would surely have failed in that explosive effect which is its principal reason for being. An audience which knows that real historical personages are being represented on stage is willing not only to grant a high degree of credence to the events it sees, but it also allows itself to be worked upon with relative ease by the author’s persuasiveness. (A potentially explosive dramatic situation greatly lessens the need for "good writing"—a fact that becomes quite evident to anyone who has tried to read a number of documentary plays.) Given its explosive intent, documentary drama quite naturally seeks out recent rather than more distant history: as long as he remains within an audience’s living memory, a Lyndon Johnson or a Richard Nixon will retain a far greater explosive potential than a George Washington.

As the central (if also behind-the-scenes) figure of the televised Watergate hearings of 1973, Nixon far surpasses in public interest the various heroes, martyrs, and villains of documentary plays of the 1960s. Like the Joseph McCarthy hearings of 1954, the Watergate investigation would seem the ultimate in documentary drama. We not only witness real political personages who impersonate themselves, but their actions are also thoroughly supervisory in nature, for they are busy making history in the very process of doing. Like much drama, such hearings are retrospective, for the “real” events of McCarthy’s attempts to keep a favorite from being drafted by the Army, Nixon’s presumed knowledge of, or collusion in, the Watergate burglary and its subsequent coverup—take place in a past whose exact nature the drama seeks to determine. And again, like much drama, these hearings employ the structural principle of the trial, though less rigorously (and thus more colorfully) than in actual court trials. During the drama itself neither the audience nor the actors can know the outcome—whether McCarthy or Nixon will be vindicated or thrown from power; indeed, one suspects that the outcome to some degree depends on the public opinion generated within the audience in the course of each hearing.

The relation of investigation to audience, as in much drama, is a complex one. There are, for instance, three audiences each participating in and helping motivate the action in a different way: first, the “audience” of investigators who listen to and draw out each witness; second, the audience which is visible and audible within the hearing chamber and whose laughter and occasional applause serve as signals as to how the action is to be evaluated; and third, the vast audience of television watchers whose shifting dispositions to the actors are regularly sampled by the opinion polls. One could even postulate a fourth audience in the Watergate hearings, namely, himself, whose reactions while viewing the hearings—if he viewed them at all—are continually present within the imagination of the other three audiences. (If televised hearings such as these should become a permanent feature of political life in our culture, they may well succeed in rendering all other modes of political and dramatic action, even documentary drama, obsolete.)

The documentary plays of the 1960s attempted not only to shock their audiences but also to inspire them, often, indeed, in the same play. In Der Stellvertreter, Pius XII may well, because of the shock effect he creates, become the most memorable character, but the example of Kurt Gerstein, the heroic German who joined the SS to subvert the Nazi regime from within, is meant to provide the audience with a positive example they should emulate (to feel guilty about, at their inability to emulate). If the scientists and bureaucrats who attempt to remove Oppenheimer’s security clearance are to horrify us at the lengths that America will go to oppress its dissenters, the
HISTORICAL DRAMA AND HISTORICAL REALITY

figure of Oppenheimer himself is designed to inspire us with the exemplary force characteristic of martyr plays since the Middle Ages. The inspirational power which the represented actions of great and famous men can exercise on an audience has long been used as a defense against those who (doubtless with some right) fear the disruptive power of the theater; thus, Thomas Heywood, in the same defense of the stage from which I quoted earlier, wrote:

To turne our domestick histories, what English blood seeing the person of any bold English man presented and doth not hugg his fame, and hunnye at his valor, pursuing him in his enterprise with his best wishes, and as beeing wrapt in contemplation, offers to him in his hart all prosperous performance, as if the Personater were the man Personated, so bewitching a thing is liuely 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.57

If Heywood were correct about the “bewitching power” in the impersonation of a great man, one might hope to see the world redeemed by theater.

But the representation of “real” situations, despite the power it can exert, in one sense is also a limiting factor on the effects which a dramatist can achieve. Whenever an audience is aware that it is watching real people and events on the stage, it remains conscious that what it experiences is essentially the reenactment rather than the enactment of an action. The historical past becomes a kind of closed book, one which is to be reenacted much as a religious ritual reenacts some hallowed myth. We retain a double view of the action, participating in its reality at the same time that we recognize its actors as “only” actors; the true reality is one which the representation can at best point to but never fully embody. (The open-endedness of televised political investigations such as the McCarthy-Army and the Watergate hearings has given us a special awareness that historical drama, even of a documentary kind, is at best a reenactment.) In a fictive action the only reality is the one enacted before us; the actor, instead of being “only” an actor, is much more likely to “become” the personage whom he claims to represent. Timothy J. Wiles, in a seminar paper, has written of the “tendency [of historical plays] to make their characters actors who reenact rather than act—they set up ideal and cyclic models which each new set of dramatis personae fulfill, rather than posing unique and undetermined histories with open futures which the characters can still effect.” The closed character of the action creates a certain distance between the action and audience, at least to the extent that we know in advance the central points through which the action must progress and the goal toward which it must move. Our interest tends to shift from the what to the how: how, for instance, will author and actors approach the killing of Caesar, or how will they play on the image we already possess of a monstrous Richard III or Robespierre, or, for that matter, a heroic Henry V

APPREHENDING REALITY

or God? How will they go about using materials we are already familiar with to shock or inspire us? And how will they succeed in winning the spectator so that, to echo the passage from Heywood above, the spectator will want to offer to [the actor] in his hart all prosperous performance, as if the Personer and Cleopatra would be to risk irrelevance, while to treat the Passion as Christ’s neurotic rebellion against the social order would be to risk parody through such parody is itself a dramatic subgenre, and, for that matter, a play of this sort is quite conceivable in our own day).

If documentary drama stands at one extreme in the bond it claims with actual historical occurrences, at the other extreme once can cite a type of play which is centrally concerned with historical issues without being based on any real history at all. I do not refer to any traditional or even readily definable genre, but to a particular way of approaching history which one can find in such a “fictional” work as Hofmannsthal’s Der Turm (The Tower): one could, for lack of any known term, describe such a work as an “unhistorical history play.” By freeing itself from the limitations imposed by a familiar historical action, a play of this sort can focus on the thematic content of history without bondage to the day-by-day political events which are the exemplary material of political plays. Some mythological plays have, in fact, been able to get at the central stuff of history more powerfully than many overtly historical dramas. Shelley created a more potent image of a political oppressor in the Jupiter of Prometheus Unbound than he did in the title character of his more conventional (though uncompleted) historical play, Cymbeline. In the final act of Faust, Part 2, the hero’s destruction of a pastoral idyll in the name of economic and technological progress provides a model as it took a Marxist critic such as Lukács to remind us—of the conflict between the modern industrial world and the traditional culture which it has displaced. A writer can improvise upon a myth such as Prometheus or Faust with far greater imaginative ease than he can upon a well known historical action.

In Der Turm, Hofmannsthal was able to accommodate within his fiction such themes as historical drama as the growth and education of a ruler, the nature and continuity of power, and the threat of rebellion to established authority—yet in a manner that seems particularly relevant to the world of the early twentieth century. Hofmannsthal’s play is the dramatic equivalent of works such as The Waste Land and Ulysses, both of which, with similar comprehensiveness of scope, employ older myths which, to use Holt’s words in his review of Joyce’s book, provide “a way of controlling, of
ordering, of giving a shape and a significance to the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history." Indeed, in writing years later about Der Turm, Eliot spoke of Hofmannsthal's "loading this play, in symbolism which perhaps has more than one level of significance, with all the burden of his [Hofmannsthal's] feelings about the catastrophe of the Europe to which he belonged, the Europe which went down in the wreck of empires between 1914 and 1918." Despite all its obvious contemporary relevance, Der Turm is set in a deliberately archaic world (a seventeenth-century Poland that seems more mythical than historical) which, with its central plot situation—the sudden maturing of a ruler who had spent his youth imprisoned in a tower in animal-like isolation—is borrowed from Calderón's La vida es sueño (Life Is a Dream). The contemporary meanings, in fact, emerge with all the more clarity through the archaic setting, with its age-old hierarchies and its rule by divine right: it is as though Hofmannsthal's deeply conservative concerns could find their most appropriate expression when translated into an overtly fictional form without the intrusion of those distracting facts which might compromise either the absoluteness or the complexity of his vision. Moreover, by improvising on an old fiction, Hofmannsthal could manipulate his view of history according to the dictates of his experience: in the play's earlier version (1925), he was able to temper his disillusionment with a measure of apocalyptic hope, while in the final version (1927), he voiced an equally apocalyptic sense of doom.

The contemporary reality which the play attempts to express is less properly historical than an ideological reality, one which stands at an opposite extreme, for instance, from that of another great "unhistorical history play" of our time, Brecht's Mutter Courage. Like Der Turm, Brecht's play is based on a seventeenth-century fiction, which provides it more with a concrete historical milieu than with the kind of history centered around famous personages and public events. With its leftist bias Mutter Courage deliberately turns its back on that conception of history which attributes the highest significance to the doings of the great; as the heroine puts it when she hears General Tilly's funeral described as a "historical moment," "For me, it's a historical moment that they've wounded my daughter in the forehead." Standing though they do at opposite ends of the political spectrum, Der Turm and Mutter Courage both present heroes who are to serve as representative portraits of humanity: Sigismund, the visionary whose downfall signifies the fragility of good in a permanently evil world; Mother Courage, the mean and grasping vendor whose callousness in her desperate attempt to survive is meant to tell us that an economic change could create a better human being. Whereas the conservative play is essentially elegiac, telling its readers, in effect, to join in mourning for a lost world (and also to defend what little is left of its values), the radical play exhorts its readers and audiences to look closely at the capitalist system it is depicting (though in seventeenth-century

In the quotation from Henry V which stands at the head of this essay, Shakespeare admits the illusory nature of his play as a means of disdaining the "reality" of the events he wishes to portray; the theatrical metaphor, at least from a modern point of view, becomes a way of expressing self-consciousness. In Richard III Shakespeare assigns to the title character the multiple roles of playwright, stage manager, and intermediary between the audience and the play: from his opening soliloquy, Richard plunges into his confidence and, in effect, works in collusion with us to stage...
the bloody events out of which the play is built. Not only does the relationship he establishes with us make these events (as well as Richard himself) plausible, but they cause us to see the play from an unexpected and special angle, one which, by virtue of the fact that we have temporarily joined forces with a character whom we know from the start to be morally reprehensible, forces us to reexamine our conventional ways of looking at reality.

The theatrical metaphors with which Richard II is suffused work not only to "expose" the king's histrionics, they also help him regain a measure of sympathy from the audience. Though we recognize the playacting in which he engages in his great speeches for what it is, through our very act of recognition our critical faculties are satisfied, and we can allow ourselves to share something of the pity he lavishes upon himself. "Thus play I in one person many people. / And none contented" (V. v.31-32), he tells us in the last and most reflective of his soliloquies, by which time he has come to see the uselessness of the roles he had tried out earlier. As we watch him assume his final role, that of "nothing" (V. v.41), we recognize that a theatrical role is a poor but at least dignified substitute for a role in the "real" world. Similarly with Racine's Bérénice, who, after her rejection by Titus, takes her leave in the play's next-to-last lines with a thoroughly theatrical flourish:

Adieu: servons tous trois d'exemple à l'univers
De l'amour la plus tendre et la plus malheureuse
Dont il puisse garder l'histoire douloureuse.
Tout est prêt. On m'attend. Ne suivez point mes pas.
Pour la dernière fois, adieu, Seigneur.63

As actress, she runs the gamut from the grand, impersonal rhetoric of the first three lines to the feigned urgency (with its clipped, conversation-like sentences) of the fourth line. Having been robbed of an active role in the historical world, she consoles herself by viewing herself retrospectively as a character in history. (Only Antiochus, with his famous "Hélas!" which ends the play, is fully taken in by her theater-making.) When Shakespeare's Cleopatra expresses her horror at seeing her story enacted upon the Roman stage ("...and I shall see / Some squeaking Cleopatra boy my greatness / In the posture of a whore"—V. ii.218-220), she (or at least her author) is implicitly commenting on the attitude toward her she has engaged throughout the play—and, in fact, is about to resume in her death scene.

Theater and theatricality are of course the natural themes through which a play can express its consciousness of itself. In much the same way, novels habitually discourse about other books, as in a succession of novels from Don Quijote to Les Faux-Monnayeurs (and a multitude of successors), and poems can talk about poetry and the idea of a poem, as in a succession of poems from the Eclogues to the work of Wallace Stevens. One of the explicit conventions of the classical epic is the relation of the individual poem to the tradition as a whole. Every genre can turn back upon itself as a means of escaping the simpleness of which ultimately destroys one's belief in the illusions which art creates. Illusions must constantly be tested or broken in order to reassert and sustain themselves. What one might call "generic self-consciousness" is one of a number of rhetorical instruments which an artist employs to give an appropriate complexity and resonance to the human materials which he takes it upon himself to work. The self-consciousness which Schiller saw as the dilemma of the modern artist is perhaps only a special instance of the self-consciousness which feeds on great art at all times. It is significant, I think, that Schiller was unable to restrict his discussion of the problem to modern artists, but pointed to Euripides, Horace, and Milton as examples of "sentimental" as against "naive" artists.64

If the idea of theater and theatricality has been particularly relevant to historical drama, it has also enjoyed a peculiar affinity with the writing of history itself. When history becomes self-conscious of itself, it often expresses itself in theatrical terms. Stanley Cavell, in a brilliant exploration of the nature of theatrical representation, has written of "the all but inescapable temptation to think of the past in terms of theater. (For a while I kept a list of the times I read that some past war or revolution was a great drama or that some historical figure was a tragic character on the stage of history. But the list got too long.)"65 Behind all Cavell's examples there stands the great traditional figure of the theatre mundi, which in the long list of instances which Ernst Robert Curtius gives from Plato to Hofmannsthal,66 has proved itself one of the most imaginatively potent images in Western culture. When history invokes theater, it can, like Richard II or Bérénice, console itself, assert its essential dignity in the face of those who would suggest its meaninglessness. To the extent that continuity and progression are of the essence in Hegel's philosophy of history, the theater, with its sustained plotting within a specified site, provides an ideal form for his portrayal of historical development; thus Hegel can write of "the theater—that of world history—in which we observe spirit in its most concrete reality."67 It is no accident, moreover, that the word "collision" ("Kollision"), which figures so prominently in Hegel's theory of tragedy (as in the "collision" of Antigone and Creon) is also used to describe the conflicts which take place in the historical process itself.68 The philosopher of history views and reflects upon the spectacle of history much as an audience views and experiences a theatrical spectacle.69 The dramatizations of history found in Hegel and other philosophers of history are only a more lofty and spun-out version of the journalistic histories which Cavell finally gave up trying to list. But the theatrical analogy in historical writing can work in two ways: though it purports to give dignity and meaning to history, as well as to assert its continuities, by its very nature it also suggests the ultimate disparities (that history reveals itself merely through also movingly) as theater.
NOTES

Chapter One


2. Corneille recognized the difference in attitude between antiquity and his own time in the following lines from his "Discours de la tragédie": "la fable et l'histoire de l'antiquité sont si mêlées ensemble, que pour n'être pas en péril d'en faire un faux discernement, nous leur donnons une égale autorité sur nos théâtres" (in Corneille, p. 101). What matters to a modern audience (whether in the seventeenth or the twentieth century) is not the historical accuracy of the fable, but the fact that, whether historical or mythical, the material is "publicly known."

3. scriptor honoratum si forte reponis Achillem,
impiger, iracundus, inexorabilis, acer,
 iura neget sibi nata, nihil non arroget armis.


6. "Dating" a change of sensibility is one of the more exhilarating, yet also riskier, activities of the historical imagination. Although we conventionally pick the seventeenth century as the time when people "began" to feel self-conscious about separating truth from fiction, the distinction goes back in varying ways to ancient literary theory. See Herschel Baker's discussion of the distinction during the Renaissance (as well as in antiquity) in The Race of Time: Three Lectures on Renaissance Historiography (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1967), esp. pp. 79-89; for a discussion of the origins of the distinction in antiquity, see Wesley Trimpi, The Ancient Hypothesis of Fiction: An Essay on the Origins of Literary Theory, vol. 27 in the monograph series Traditio (New York: Fordham University Press, 1971).

7. "... je fais entrer Junie dans les Vestales, où, selon Aulu-Gelle, on ne recevait personne au-dessous de six ans, ni au-dessus de dix. Mais le peuple prend ici Junie sous sa protection, et j'ai cru qu'en considération de sa naissance, de sa vertu et de son malheur, il pouvait dispenser de l'âge prescrit par les lois, comme il a dispensé de l'âge pour le consulat tant de grands hommes qui avaient mérité ce privilège" (Racine, p. 406).

8. For an edition of Dantons Tod which provides easy reference to the relevant passages which Büchner took over, see La Mort de Danton, ed. Richard Thieberger (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1953).


NOTES TO CHAPTER ONE

11. Note, for instance, the comparisons of text and sources in Sejanus, ed. Jonas Barish (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1960), pp. 181-203. The classical sources which Jonson quoted in the margins of the Sejanus quartos provide a display of learning that would have done honor to any humanist scholar.


14. One is especially aware of the differences in those instances when Elizabethan and Spanish plays have been “rewritten” in neoclassical terms: comparing Guillén de Castro’s Las macedades del Cid with Corneille’s play, or Antony and Cleopatra with All for Love, makes for an ideal school exercise.

15. . . we may take notice that where the poet ought to have preserved the character as it was delivered to us by antiquity, when he should have given us a picture of a rough young man of the Amazonian strain, a jolly huntsman, and both by his profession and his early rising a mortal enemy to love, he has chosen to give him the turn of gallantry, sent him to travel from Athens to Paris, taught him to make love, and transformed the Hippolytus of Euripides into Monseigneur Hippolite “(All for Love, ed. David M. Vieth [Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1972], pp. 16-17 [Preface]). Needless to say, Dryden himself had few compunctions about modernizing older texts for his own imitations. Racine’s audiences, incidentally, might well have viewed his characters as existing in a timeless world, at least if one can judge from the costumes, which, as John C. Lapp explains, “artfully combined the Roman costume with . . . the dress of the time” (Aspects of Racinean Tragedy [Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1962], p. 191).


18. The contemporary Elizabethan political meanings of the history plays are central to the section entitled “History as Ceremony” in Chapter 3.

19. Within the neoclassical system, the depiction of a recent historical event could be taken as a violation of the decorum proper to tragedy. Racine, in his preface to Bayazet, a play based on a quite recent incident in Turkish history, sought to excuse himself by asserting that distance in place could substitute for distance in time and then cited The Persians as precedent for a play on recent events staged in a distant place (Racine, pp. 548-49).


24. For an exhaustive study of the social, economic and political background of these plays, see Noel Salomon, Recherches sur le theatre payan dans la “comedia” au temps de Lope de Vega (Bordeaux: Institut d’Etudes ibériques et ibero-americanas de l’Universite de Bordeaux, 1965), especially pp. 4, 741-91. The fact that this learned study was written by an avowedly Marxist scholar should remind us that the historicist bias central to Marxism can help motivate, as it does here, a thoroughly researched investigation of a text that may seem a strange historical situation to the modern mind.


NOTES TO CHAPTER ONE


42. Shakespeare’s History Plays, pp. 350.
44. See Ortezn, A Kingdom for a Stage: The Achievement of Shakespeare’s History Plays (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1972), pp. 1-32, and Lever, The Tragedy of State (London: Methuen, 1971), p. 5. Lever’s study is not, properly speaking, about Shakespeare’s histories, but about the Jacobean historical tragedies of the succeeding decade; yet the context surrounding the remark I quote indicates that he is referring to the period of Shakespeare’s histories as well. In a study which appeared after my own had been completed, Moody E. Prior locates the ideological background of Shakespeare’s histories in “practical-minded” historians such as Machiavelli and Guicciardini rather than in the providential historians whom Tillyard locates the ideological background of Shakespeare’s histories in “practical-minded” historians who presents an image of economic and social conflict sharply opposed to the optimistic image of the New Left image clearly expressed in its very title. For a recent, more academically “respectable” study that stresses the radical nature of the Revolution, see Bernard Bailyn, The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1967): unlike Lynd, who presents an image of economic and social conflict sharply opposed to the optimistic image of the Revolution, Bailyn is concerned rather with the Revolution’s political ideology, which he sees as stressing disruption rather than continuity.

46. The poet is now setting you in the midst of that war. Sixteen years of devastation, of plundering, of misery have fled away, the world is still fermenting in dark masses, and no hope of peace radiates from afar. The Empire is an arena of arts, the cities are deserted, Magdeburg is rubble” (Schiller, 8: 5 [Prologue, 79-80]).
47. “It is not he who will appear on this stage today. But among the bold forces which his contemporary spirit inspires, he will encounter his phantom, until such time that the sky must dare to bring him before you in living form” (p. 6, ll. 11-16).
48. “Therefore forgive the poet, if he does not draw you with a quick step to the action’s goal at once” (ll. 11-21).
49. Goethe himself applied Schiller’s distinction to Wallenstein while describing the function of Wallenstein’s Lager within the trilogy: “Wenn die alten Dichter ganz bekannt Mythen, und noch dazu teils, in ihren Dramen, vortrugen, so hat ein neuer Dichter, der sich ihm in Halbmaß, als Vorstehung, eine auf dem Theater, auf dem wir ihn betrachten, in der Weltgeschichte, in der Politik, in der Geschichte sich auf, und doch, was er tun will, um das, was er tun will, zu tun, was er tun will, zu tun, was er tun will, zu tun, was er tun will, zu tun, was er tun will, zu tun, was er tun will, zu tun, was er tun will, zu tun, was er tun will, zu tun, was er tun will, zu tun, was er tun will, zu tun, was er tun will, zu tun, was er tun will, zu tun, what he has often enough been treated dramatically, I know of no major plays centered around his role in Florentine history. At least two major writers have tried their hand (though not very successfully) at the material—George Eliot in her novel Romola (1863) and Thomas Mann in his only drama, Florenz (1905). Mann’s play, notably lacking in dramatic action, is formally perhaps closer to the manner of a conversation than to any standard theatrical convention. Mann translates Florentine history into cultural and psychological terms borrowed above all from Nietzsche. Thus, the Medicis, together with their court intellectuels, emerges as representatives of a splendid but decadent culture awaiting its apocalyptic doom at the hands of Savonarola; the latter, whose detailed characterization Mann was able to avoid by not introducing him until the final act, comes plausible to Mann’s audience through the resonances he bears to the ascetic type of priest figure for whom Nietzsche, in Zur Genealogie der Moral, had provided the classical analysis.
52. For an interesting attempt to place German documentary dramas within the context of pop art and (in the sense of) the movement of the 1960s, see Jens Homberg, “Wirklichkeit als Kunst: Pop, Dokumentation und Reportage,” Bata 2 (1971): 58-52.
53. The Village Voice (New York), April 2, 1970, p. 11. I have found no evidence that these plans for a Chicago Eight play were ever implemented, though I know of at least two professional productions which utilized material from the trial transcripts.
55. If I stress this tendency in recent years to define our actions as role-playing, I might add that we are also coming to interpret figures of the distant past in similar terms. For instance, an engaging recent book which views role-playing and theatricality as the key to an understanding of Sir Walter Raleigh (and also, by implication, of other than Renaissance figures as Sir Thomas More and Sir Philip Sidney): see Stephen J. Greenblatt, Sir Walter Raleigh: The Renaissance Man and His Roles (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1973), especially pp. xii and 1-36. Could it be that life-as-theater is all pervasive in human history or that we have simply learned to read the past through the framework of newly formulated insights?
61. "Mir ist ein historischer Augenblick, das sie meiner Töchter und der Geschlagen haben" (Brecht, 7: 157 [sc. 6]).
64. Schiller, 50: 432, 439, 471. Note the following statement: "Wir haben auch in neueren ja sogar in neuesten Zeiten naive Dichtungen in allen Klassen wenn gleich nicht mehr ganz reiner Art, und unter den alten lateinischen ja selbst griechischen Dichtern fehlt es nicht an sentimentalischen" (438). Schiller unabashedly uses his distinction between naive and sentimental both as a description of the course of history and as a typological system.
67. "Der Geist ist aber auf dem Theater, auf dem wir ihn betrachten, in der Weltgeschichte, in seiner konkreten Wirklichkeit" (Werk 14: 129), and the "anti-aesthetic" movement of the 1960s, see the Hollissohn hat ... durch Grund in einer Verzweiflung, welche nicht als Verzweiflung bleiben kann, sondern aufgehen werden muss” (Werk 13: 267). The progress within history and within in
NOTES TO CHAPTER TWO

individual work of art is marked not only by a collision of discernible forces, but by a certain violence accompanying the whole process (note the word "erleiden" in each passage).

69. Hegel's descriptions of the spectacle of world history stress verbs of seeing, above all "sehen," "betrachten," and "erleben," all of which occur in the following clauses within a single long sentence: "Wenn wir dieses Schauspiel der Leidenschaften betrachten und die Folgen ihrer Gewalttätigkeit, des Unverstandes erleben ... wenn wir daraus das Uebel, das Böse, den Untergang der blühenden Reiche, die der Menschengeist hervorgebracht hat, sehen ..." (italics mine) (Werke, 12: 34). Note also the idea of seeing embedded in the very word for drama, "Schauspiel." 

Chapter Two

1. "I cannot easily excuse the printing of a play at so unseasonable a time, when the great plot of the nation, like one of Pharaoh's lean kine, has devoured its younger brethren of the stage" (Works, ed. Walter Scott and George Saintsbury [Edinburgh: William Paterson, 1888] 6: 5 (Dedication to Limberham)).


6. For an extended commentary on the tendency of history plays to seek out a middle ground—whether political, ethical, rhetorical or whatever—see the section "History as Middle Ground" in Chapter 4.

7. Among his notes toward Demetrius Schiller included two parallel columns entitled "Gegen Warbeck" and "Fur Warbeck," in which he weighed the advantages and disadvantages of the Warbeck theme against one another (and by implication against the Demetrius theme) (Schiller, 11: 179).

8. One does not have to use Pirandello to read this problem into Renaissance plays, for, as Jackson L. Cope has shown in his discussion of Ford's Warbeck play, the problem belongs to the epistemological framework of Renaissance Platonism (see The theater and the Dream, pp. 122-35).


14. Racine, p. 959 (V.vi).


16. Voltaire's changing and quite ambiguous opinions of the play are recorded on pp. 127-39.

17. Racine, p. 892.

18. "Et l'Ecriture dit expressément que Dieu n'extermina pas toute la famille de Jorah, voulant conserver à David la lampe qu'il lui avait promis. Or cete lampe, qu'était une chose que la lumière qui devait être un jour révéla aux nations?" (p. 892).


20. P. 926 (III.iii).


22. For a powerful argument that Polyeucte should be viewed primarily as a political rather than as a Christian drama, see Serge Doubrovsky, Corneille et la dialectique du héros (Paris: Gallimard, 1963), pp. 225-61. Martin Turrnell gets around the conflict by avoiding the usual answers about what Polyeucte belongs to the political and to the religious realm: "Some critics have denied that [Corneille] is properly speaking a religious poet at all, while others have described Polyeucte, which is certainly his greatest play, as a masterpiece of religious poetry. In spite of its subject it is neither more nor less religious than any of Corneille's other works. What is religious in all Corneille's best work is not the subject or the setting, but his sense of society as an ordered whole and of man as a member of this hierarchy" (in The Classical Moment [1947; reprint ed., London: Hamish Hamilton, 1964], p. 99).

23. For a discussion of growth in plays which do not treat martyrdom, see the section "Drama as Growth" in Chapter 5.


25. For an extended discussion of ceremonial drama, see the section "History as Ceremony" in Chapter 3.

26. For a lucid explanation of what precisely separates the modern mind from Christian martyr stories in the contextus mundi tradition, see Morton Bloomfield, "The Man of Law's Tale: A Tragedy of Victimization and a Christian Comedy," PMLA 87 (1972): 384-90. Bloomfield's term "tragedy of victimization," though he applies it specifically to a narrative poem, would be useful in discussing many plays of our own century. One might also cite Robert B. Heilman's apt term "innocence neurosis" to describe the characters of martyr plays: In defeat," Heilman writes, "the innocence neurosis makes one always a victim who does not deserve his fate, and who finds it irrational and untimely; in victory it makes one guilty; and in all the actions of life ... it makes one the voice of justice and honor" (in Tragedy and Melodrama: Versions of Experience (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1968), p. 114).


28. A martyrdom that would have looked admirable in the hero of a seventeenth-century play might not necessarily have been so for a medieval figure. As Donald R. Howard reminds me, the Middle Ages could have interpreted Eliot's fourth temptation as leading to the sin of pride or vainglory.

29. "Mein Namen [ist bald] im Pantheon der Geschichte" (in Büchner, 1: 52 [III.iv]). "Wir wollen uns beieinandersetzen und schreiben ... Griechen und Götter schreiben, Römer und Stauber machen fortdie Zeit" (p. 61). "Die Einen waren so gut Epicuraer wie die Andern. Sie machten sich ein ganz behagliches Selbstgefühl zurecht, Es ist nicht so tiefel seine Toga zu drapieren und sich umzusehen ob man einen langen Schatten wirft" (p. 71 [IV.vi]).

30. As Norman Rabkin reminds me, the modern skepticism toward martyrdom that we see in John's 'Tod' and in many plays of our own century can also be seen in Shakespeare's treatment of the title character of Richard II. We do not have to view Shakespeare as a character sensitive modern sensibility to account for this, but simply to note that an absolute attitude toward martyrdom would be thoroughly incompatible with the extraordinary complexity of attitude that Shakespeare takes to the political problem around which the play is centered.


32. "Ich kann Grotowski's Production only by way of the theories expressed in his book, Towards a Poor Theatre, as well as the accounts of friends who have seen his productions. (I had hoped to attend a performance, but in fact had obtained a ticket for one he was to give nearby, but the famous director cancelled his whole engagement after learning that the theater management had sold more tickets than it had been instructed to: for Grotowski, a severely limited audience is necessary to insure the appropriate communal experience in his essentially ritual form of drama.) Those who have seen his performances tell me that verbal interchanges play a greater role than Grotowski's theories imply. Moreover, his version of El principe constante is a modernization of Calderon's play, but on the adaptation of the play by the Polish Romantic poet Julius Slowacki. A German translation of Grotowski's original scenario, which later underwent considerable improvisation in performance and which was itself an extreme condensation of the Calderon-Slowacki play, has been published in Theater heute 12 (August-September, 1952).

33. Grotowski, Towards a Poor Theatre, p. 97.

34. New Yorker, October 25, 1969, p. 139.

35. Grotowski, p. 98.

36. The document is reprinted in Büchner, 1: 487-549.