

HISTORICITY IN SHAKESPERIAN PLAYS.

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Abstract: *Shakespeare is widely regarded as the greatest writer in the English language and the most renowned dramatist in history. He is known as England's national poet and the 'Bard of Avon'. William Shakespeare lived between the second half of the sixteenth century and the early half of the seventeenth century. He has written thirty-nine plays, one fifty-four sonnets, three long narrated poems and a few other verses with uncertain authorship. He is the most influential writer in the English language. Shakespeare's plays can be divided into three main styles or genres: comedies, tragedies and histories. In this article, we are gleaning into the historicity of Shakespearian plays. His plays deal with real people, mostly kings and queens from English history. He did not stick to historical facts, he used his imagination to build characters and make a good story. Shakespeare also wrote about historical plays from Rome and Egypt such as Julius Ceaser, Mark Antony and Cleopatra. His history plays include Henry V, Richard III, Henry IV Parts 1 and 2. Richard II and Henry VI parts 1 to 3.. Shakespeare's plays can be divided into English history plays and Roman history plays. He referred Rafael Holingshed's Chronicles to narrate English history plays, whereas his Roman and Greek plays are based on Plutarch's Parallel Lives from Sir Thomas North's translations. Through this article we are trying to explore historical facts and fiction in Shakespeare's works.*

Keywords: *Shakespeare, Historicity, Historical plays*

INTRODUCTION

Historicity is the historical actuality of persons and events, meaning the quality of being a part of history instead of a historical myth, legend or fiction. Shakespeare has used historical elements in his plays but very few plays are categorized as true Shakespeare histories. The "history plays" of Shakespeare are somewhat different in tone, form and focus from his other plays. Shakespeare history plays can be divided into Roman history plays and English history plays. While writing plays Shakespeare followed the theatrical fashions of the time. Some of Shakespeare's plays like Julius Ceaser, Antony and Cleopatra, Hamlet, Cymbeline are set in the historical past and have themes like kingship and revolution. While the historical plays of Shakespeare follow the same pattern. They are set in the medieval England

and deal with the rise and fall of the House of Lancaster – What the later historians often referred to as the ‘War of the roses.’ The first series of plays written during the start of his career (1589-1593) were Henry VI parts 1, 2 and 3 and Richard III. These plays deal with the fall of Lancaster dynasty. The second series of plays written at the height of his career (1595-1599) deals with the rise of Lancastrians and consist of plays like Richard II, Henry IV parts 1 & 2 and Henry V.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The Assassination of Julius Ceaser—A People’s History of Ancient Rome by Micheal Parenti helped reveal Julius Ceaser's real history. History of Rome by Mary Beard gives us keen information on the history Roman Republic especially the age of the second triumvirate. Plutarch’s Paralell lives by John Dryden helped in comparing the sources of Shakespeare’s work with Shakespeare’s Roman plays. Rapheal Holinshed work The Chronicles of England, Scotland and Ireland was the major sources of Shakespeare’s plays. Edward halls work on the Two families of York and Lancasters helped to decipher the real history of Shakespeare’s English Plays.

METHODOLOGY

The methodology employed here involves descriptive analysis. This consists of reading Shakespeare's works and comparing them to actual historical texts, thereby deciphering the plays' historicity.

HISTORICITY IN SHAKESPEAREAN PLAYS

The historical works of William Shakespeare are broadly divided into Roman historical plays and English historical plays. Roman historical plays consist of Coriolanus, Julius Ceaser, Mark Antony and Cleopatra. English historical plays consist of King John, Edward III, Richard II, Henry IV part 1 and 2, Henry V, Henry VI part 1, 2 and 3, Richard III and Henry VIII. The other plays such as King Lear, Macbeth and Hamlet were not considered as historical plays however, they have some elements of historical themes and covers some history.

Coriolanus a play which he wrote during 1608 A.D. deals with the republican times in Roman history. The play deals with the ambitious general named Coriolanus who was exiled due to Patrician-Plebian conflict. Shakespeare used the Plutarch’s ‘Life of Caius Martius Coriolanus’. Some historians believe that Coriolanus is a fictitious character but Shakespeare

through the play 'Coriolanus' conveys the historical characters of Early Roman Republic and its conflicts both internal and external.

Julius Caesar a play based on the true story of his assassination in 44 B.C. Shakespeare wrote it in 1599 A.D. The sources of this play was Thomas North's translation (1579) of Plutarch's work 'Lives of Noble Greeks and Romans.' Plutarch's work 'Lives of Noble Greeks and Romans' was not entirely an accurate depiction of history. Modern historian may find lacking in historical facts. Plutarch himself has testified his work to be not historically accurate. In this work Plutarch wants to convey the glory of ancient Greek state and Roman empire to inspire the society during his time.

Antony and Cleopatra is one of the most historically accurate plays written by Shakespeare. This play covers the entirety of Roman Empire during the time of its setting which involves the parts of Egypt, Rome and Mediterranean area. The source of this work was Thomas North's translation of Plutarch's 'Lives of Noble Greeks and Romans'. It documents the period of second triumvirate (43 B.C – 33 B.C) during the final days of Roman republic.

King John was written by Shakespeare during 1596 A.D. The play covers the life and times of John the King of England during the 13th century A.D. Unlike his other plays which deals which involves the infighting between royals in War of the Roses, King John deals with comprehensive accounts of the events in his's life. Shakespeare tries to paint history as an unfolding of unpredictable events, which man has no real control. Shakespeare using the life of King John was really commenting on the challenges faced by his contemporary Queen Elizabeth(1533-1603 A.D.)

Richard II was written during 1595 A.D. This is one of the first plays that deals with the rise of the House of Lancaster. King Richard's philosophical expositions on the kingship and his responsibilities were greatly valued. The story deals with the reign of Richard II the King of England from 1377 to 1399 A.D. Shakespeare depicts the reign of Richard II and his eventual disposition as the real reason for War of the Roses.

Henry IV part 1 was written in 1596 A.D. It depicts the reign and challenges of King Henry IV of England. Shakespeare narrates the rise of the House of the Lancasters. The play is set in the 15th century and forms part of four plays known as Henriad. It deals with Prince Harry's transformation from an irresponsible, wayward youth to a more capable man and later King. Prince Harry received assistance from the charismatic Sir John Falstaff, who helped the prince to navigate the political trials and tribulations of Henry IV. Finally, he

faces the rebellion by Hotspur. The sources used by Shakespeare for Henry IV were Holinshed's Chronicles on England, Scotland and Ireland, Annales of England, The Civil Wars Between the Two Houses of Lancaster and York by Samuel Daniel and The Union of the Two Illustrious Families of Lancaster and York by Edward Hall.

Henry IV part 2 was written in 1598. This is one of the four plays known as Henriad. This deals with the rise of the House of Lancaster. Like the part 1 of Henry IV, this follows the political challenges of Henry IV during his reign. This also follows prince heir to the throne Prince Harry. He transforms from rebel to the responsible prince of the realm. Unlike the part 1 this work has little historical aspect but the activities of Sir John Falstaff, an adventurer.

Henry V was written in 1599. This is one of the most famous plays by William Shakespeare. It follows the works like Henry II, Henry IV part 1 and Henry IV part 2, where he depicts the rise of House of the Lancasters. It features entertaining characters, memorable speeches, and brave, under-equipped natives who triumph against the odds. Shakespeare used the same sources he used in the in Henriad.

Henry VI, Part 1 is a historical drama attributed to William Shakespeare, believed to have been written around 1591, possibly with contributions from Thomas Nashe. It is the first play in a trilogy about the English king who reigned from 1422 to 1461 and again from 1470 to 1471. This play serves as an early illustration of English nationalism, as it addresses the political and national conflicts between the English and the French during the Hundred Years' War. Additionally, it portrays the events leading up to the English Civil War, known as the War of the Roses, which was triggered by the collapse of the English political system due to clashes driven by personal ambitions and greed. The sources for Henry VI, Part 1 include the "Chronicles of England, Scotland and Ireland," written in 1577, and Edward Hall's "The Union of Two Noble and Illustrious Families of Lancaster and York," published in 1548.

Henry VI, Part 2 is a play by William Shakespeare that was probably penned in 1591. This work is the second part of a tetralogy that details the War of the Roses, which also comprises Henry VI, Part 1, Henry VI, Part 3, and Richard III. The narrative revolves around the events during the rule of King Henry VI of England, including the uprising led by Jack Cade and the onset of the Wars of the Roses. Within the backdrop of political machinations, family disputes, and evolving loyalties, the play delves into the themes of governance, fidelity, and

the repercussions of unrestrained ambition. The source for this play was the same as Henry VI, part 1.

Henry VI, Part 3 is a play written by William Shakespeare, likely composed in 1591 and first published in 1595. It serves as the concluding part of Shakespeare's trilogy regarding King Henry VI's reign in England and is the third section of his tetralogy detailing the War of the Roses. The play narrates the events surrounding the Wars of the Roses, a series of civil conflicts waged between the opposing houses of Lancaster and York for dominance over the English throne. Henry VI, Part 3 delves into themes of authority, treachery, and the tragic repercussions of political ambition.

Richard III a historical tragedy by William Shakespeare, was likely penned between 1592 and 1594, and it dramatizes the ascent and demise of Richard III, the notorious Duke of Gloucester. Set against the backdrop of the English civil war known as the Wars of the Roses, the narrative chronicles Richard's brutal and cunning pursuit of power, characterized by political manoeuvring, deception, and murder. Richard's charming villainy and his direct engagements with the audience referred to as soliloquies, enhance the play's psychological complexity and the depiction of one of Shakespeare's most intriguing antagonists. The main source of this play was Sir Thomas More's History of King Richard III in addition to the works of Edward Hall and Raphael Holinshed which we mentioned earlier.

Henry VIII is a play authored by William Shakespeare that delves into the life and reign of the renowned English monarch. It is thought to have been composed in 1613 and was initially staged that same year. The story reveals political scheming, unions, and the establishment of the Church of England. The play examines the intricacies of power, the nuances of royal relationships, and the repercussions of political manoeuvring. Henry VIII is also referred to as All Is True, the name it held before being published as Henry VIII in the First Folio in 1623.

The above-mentioned works of Shakespeare are historical works of Shakespeare. However, other works also have aspects of history. They include King Lear, Hamlet and Macbeth.

"King Lear," a play by William Shakespeare composed circa 1605-1606, is regarded as one of the most tragic and significant works of the Bard. Taking place in ancient Britain, the narrative follows King Lear, who, in a moment of grave error, chooses to allocate his realm to his three daughters according to how deeply they profess their affection for him. The fallout from this misguided choice results in treachery, insanity, and eventual catastrophe.

The sources used by Shakespeare include The Chronicles of England, Scotland, and Ireland: Written by Raphael Holinshed, released in 1587. The True Chronicle History of King Leir and His Three Daughters by an anonymous drama published in 1605. The Faerie Queen authored by Edmund Spenser, published in 1590. A Mirror for Magistrates compiled by John Higgins, published in 1574. The History of the Kings of Britain penned by Geoffrey of Monmouth, published in 1135.

Macbeth, a tragedy penned by William Shakespeare around 1606, is a timeless exploration of the destructive consequences of unrestrained ambition. Set in medieval Scotland, the narrative follows Macbeth, initially a noble and courageous general, as he faces a dramatic change in fortune. His life spirals when he meets three witches who foretell that he will become king. Tempted by the prospect of power and encouraged by his ambitious wife, Lady Macbeth, he succumbs to committing a series of murders to secure the throne. As Macbeth rises to power, the story reveals a compelling examination of the psychological impact of guilt, paranoia, and moral degradation. The main historical reference for Macbeth was Raphael Holinshed's The Chronicles of England, Scotland and Ireland. The Macbeth is a play that happened in Scotland. However, some put the Story of 'Chatiyan Chandu' (Chandu the traitor) of Vadakkan Pattukal is an adaptation of Macbeth. In the Vadakkan Pattu Chandu became Guru to Eighteen Schools of martial art through treachery by Killing Aroomal and others.

Hamlet, written by William Shakespeare, was first released in 1603. The play is set in Denmark and follows Prince Hamlet as he confronts grief, betrayal, and the quest for justice following the unexpected death of his father, the King. The plot progresses amidst political machinations and family disputes, with Hamlet's internal struggle and philosophical musings enriching the story. The play's famous soliloquies, such as "To be or not to be," exemplify Shakespeare's brilliant examination of the human mind. William Shakespeare's Hamlet draws inspiration from various sources, including Scandinavian tales and a historical account from the 12th century. This is one of the most timeless plays by William Shakespeare, it had many adaptations in recent times, where it is shown in a theme of 19th century, this is because its ideas span ages.

The Merchant of Venice, authored by William Shakespeare and thought to have been composed between 1596 and 1599, is an engaging play that explores the overlaps of comedy and drama. The tale takes place in the vibrant city of Venice, focusing on the antisemitic

Christian trader Antonio, who requests a loan from the Jewish lender Shylock to help his friend Bassanio woo the affluent Portia. The story takes a turning point when Antonio cannot repay the loan, leading to a court battle in which Shylock insists on a pound of Antonio's flesh as security. The drama portrays the economic and social dynamics of the era, enriching its investigation of themes like love, justice, and prejudice. The historical background is essential for grasping Elizabethan perspectives on Jewish individuals and the legal complexities illustrated in the play. Among Shakespeare's plays, *The Merchant of Venice* is notable for its complex depiction of racial and religious prejudice and continues to be contentious. William Shakespeare employed a range of medieval and early modern texts to compose *The Merchant of Venice*, including *Il Pecorone*, *Gesta Romanorum*, *The Orator*, and *The Jew of Malta*. Though this is not a historical play it gives a glimpse into the times it is portrayed.

CONCLUSION

William Shakespeare drew upon various sources to write his historical plays. Being a product of his time, he utilized these historical themes to express his views on contemporary world events, particularly those of the Elizabethan era. As a dramatist in Elizabethan England, he needed to create works that would entertain his audience, and he effectively combined historical themes with contemporary political issues to engage them. Many of his sources included popular history books from his time, such as "Chronicles of England, Scotland and Ireland" and "The History of the House of York and Lancaster."

The rise and fall of the House of Lancaster had a profound impact on the psyche of the English population. When Henry VIII was unable to produce a male heir, there was widespread fear of a new War of the Roses, prompting Henry to seek more martial alliances and eventually leading to the emergence of the Church of England. Shakespeare incorporated this historical context into his plays.

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