



The Tudor Myth

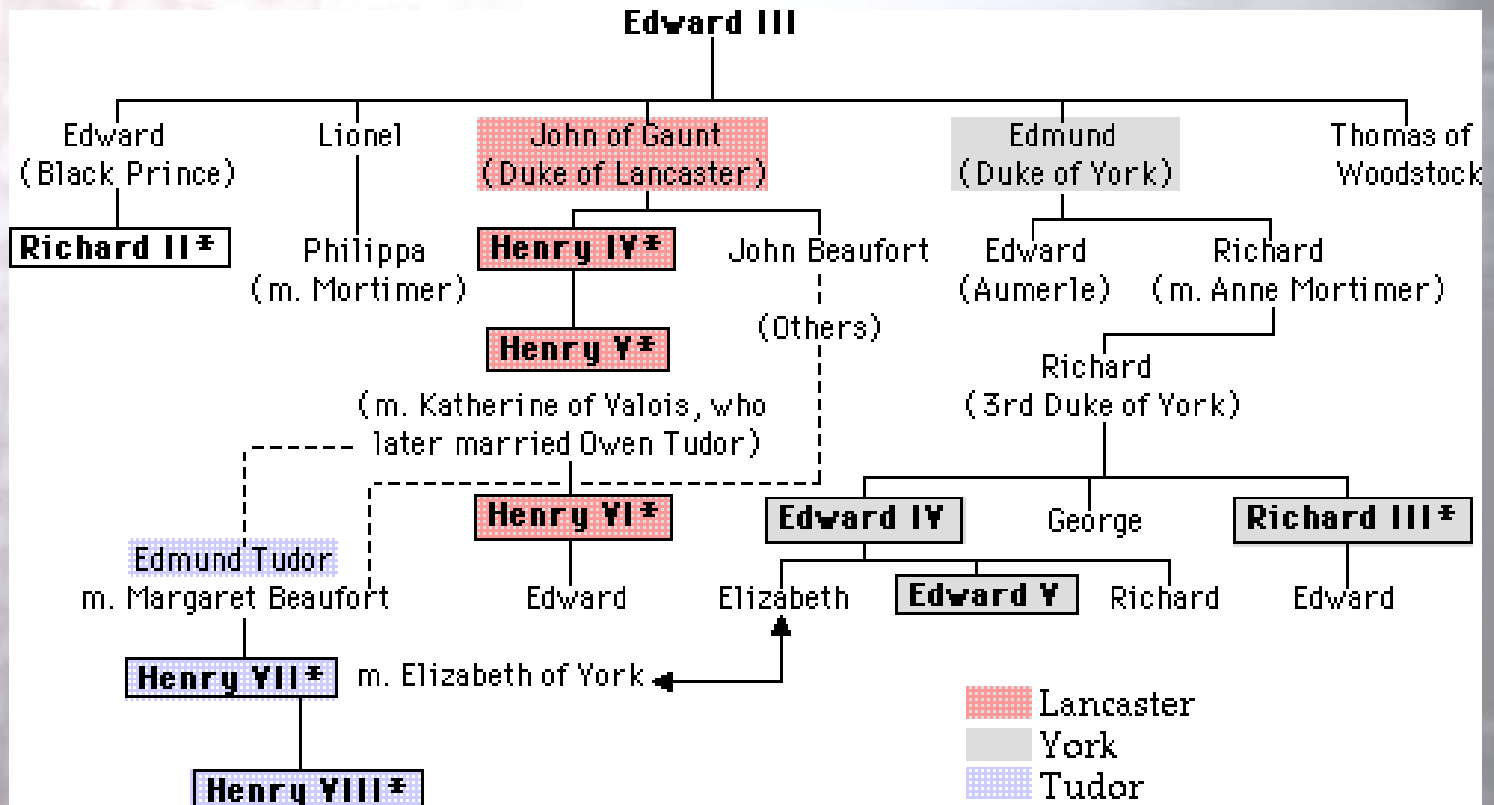
and the Place of the Stage

Shakespeare's History Plays

- Two tetralogies (series of four plays):
 - First Tetralogy (1590-93):
 - *Henry VI, parts 1, 2 and 3*
 - *Richard III*
 - Second Tetralogy (1595-1599):
 - *Richard II*
 - *Henry IV, parts 1 and 2*
 - *Henry V*
 - plays not written in historical sequence:
Shakespeare's art more sophisticated in second tetralogy, concerning earlier history

Shakespeare's History Plays

A dramatized version of English history from deposition of Richard II through accession of Henry Tudor, Queen Elizabeth's grandfather:



The Tudor Myth

History told according to the needs of Tudor monarchs, with a moral theme:

- Guilt of Henry IV (1st Lancastrian king) in deposing an anointed king, Richard II (last Plantagenet king), leads to moral and political chaos for next century
- Wars of the Roses (1377-1485): dynastic struggles between two noble houses, Lancaster (red rose) and York (white rose)
- Wars capped by Richard III, embodiment of evil
- Harmony restored by Henry Tudor, last Lancastrian, God's "white knight," who defeats Richard III (Yorkist)
- By marrying heiress of York, Henry Tudor—King Henry VII—unites rival dynasties (Tudor Rose combines white and red)
- Accession of Henry VII is divinely sanctioned: wrong of Richard II's deposition finally made right

The Tudor Myth

An oversimplified view of history:

- Ignores wrongs committed by Richard II himself
- Misrepresents causes of the Wars of the Roses as dynastic struggle (real causes still debated)
- Leaves out non-elite players
- Omits or adapts important events and persons for sake of symmetry and moral pattern

The Tudor Myth: Why tell history this way?

Consider Henry VII's reign:

After Wars of the Roses, 16th c. English rulers and subjects need a strong and unified government because they feel insecure about the stability of the Tudor monarchy—

Tudor Myth celebrates a new dynasty

Henry VII is a successful king because he is a skillful politician –but does he have divine sanction?

Tudor Myth grants divine right

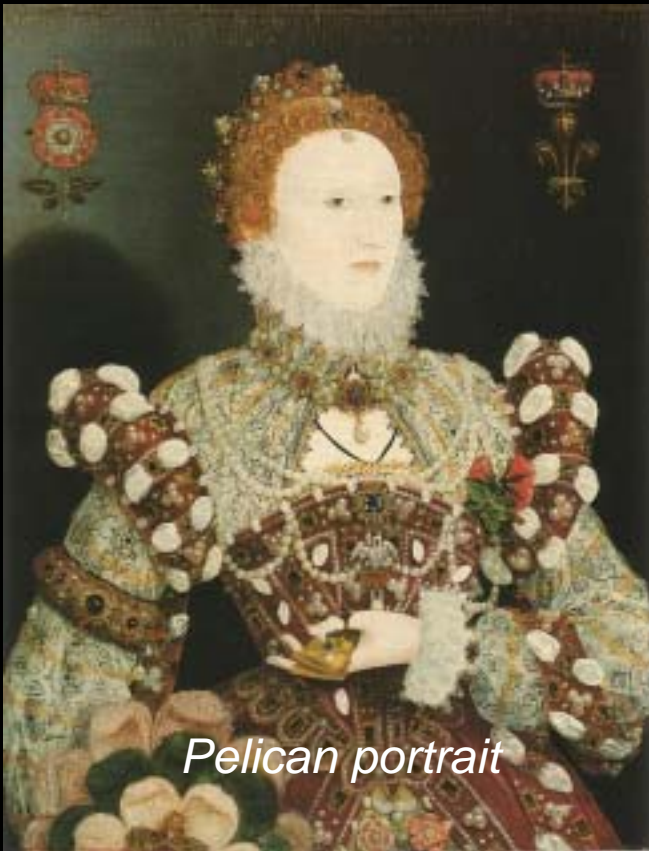
And what about the succession? Henry VII has two sons, Arthur and Henry. Arthur dies, laying dynasty's survival on ten year old boy (later Henry VIII). War likely at Henry VII's death.

Tudor myth implies God watches over England

Tudor Myth provides ideology and symbol for the first Tudor king

The Tudor Myth

Tudor Myth continues with reign of Elizabeth (daughter of Henry VIII), portrayed as physical embodiment of Tudor Rose



Pelican portrait



Ditchley portrait

Her body, uniting red and white...

The Tudor Myth

Tudor Myth continues with reign of Elizabeth (daughter of Henry VIII), portrayed as physical embodiment of Tudor Rose



Ditchley portrait

*Her body, uniting red and white...
symbolic equivalent of united England (map at her feet)*

Why the Tudor Myth?

What does Tudor Myth accomplish for Elizabeth (monarch during Shakespeare's time)?

Review recent history for Elizabeth:

- Henry VIII (Elizabeth's father) had great trouble producing a royal heir.
 - He divorced Katherine of Aragon (mother of a girl child) to marry Anne Boleyn; had to break with Catholic Church to do this
 - Anne Boleyn (Elizabeth's mother) bore only a girl child
 - He was well over 45 before he had a legitimate male heir
- Henry VIII (d. 1547), leaving boy king (Edward VI), who soon fell ill and died. Edward's reign lasted two years and saw two serious rebellions.
- Catholic Mary Tudor (1st daughter of Henry VIII) ascended to throne, and hardly soothed things:
 - married to Philip of Spain—Spain archenemy of England
 - faced armed rebellion from Protestants during her reign
 - reign marked by terrible religious persecutions; she's known as "Bloody Mary"

Why the Tudor Myth?

Add Elizabeth's own experience to recent history:

- Elizabeth assumed throne in 1558. She reigned until 1603, but never produced an heir. Her reign was seriously threatened on multiple occasions by rebellions and threats of political assassination.
- Mary, Queen of Scots, Elizabeth's cousin, was dethroned by her subjects and fled in 1568 to England to demand protection from the English court. Her presence in England stirred many Catholics to open rebellion.
- Elizabeth's early death, without an heir, could have led to serious bloodshed.
- The Tudor Myth, reproduced by historians, can
 - sanction Elizabeth's reign
 - reassure Elizabeth's subjects
 - erase dissent and disagreement from the record

Where does Shakespeare fit in?

- **Was Shakespeare a political flunky faithfully parroting the Tudor propaganda line?**
 - His acting company enjoyed court favor
 - He retired to Stratford a wealthy man
- OR
- **Did Shakespeare use the Tudor myth for his own purposes?**
 - myth stressed moral order of universe, perhaps reflected his own deepest moral convictions
 - Perhaps used myth to explore nature of kingship:
 - how is kingship secured and sanctioned?
 - what role should morality play in kingship?
 - what role should popular appeal have in kingship?

Where does Shakespeare fit in?

OR

Shakespeare's plays may not reinforce the conservative ideology of the Tudor myth at all.....

Where does Shakespeare fit in?

Signs of a more subversive approach:

- **Characterization:**
 - Richard is divinely appointed but weak and abusive king
 - Bullingbrook is strong and effective: the people's choice, not God's
- **Reaction of at least one audience member: Queen Elizabeth saw herself as Richard:**
 - not as Tudor monarch by divine right, but as the victim of potential usurpers
 - once usurpation is presented as possible, why should it stop because some "divine" plan has been achieved?

The Place of the Stage

How does the physical place of the stage allow the play to express ambivalence toward the prevailing ideology?

The Place of the Stage



London in panorama, 1611

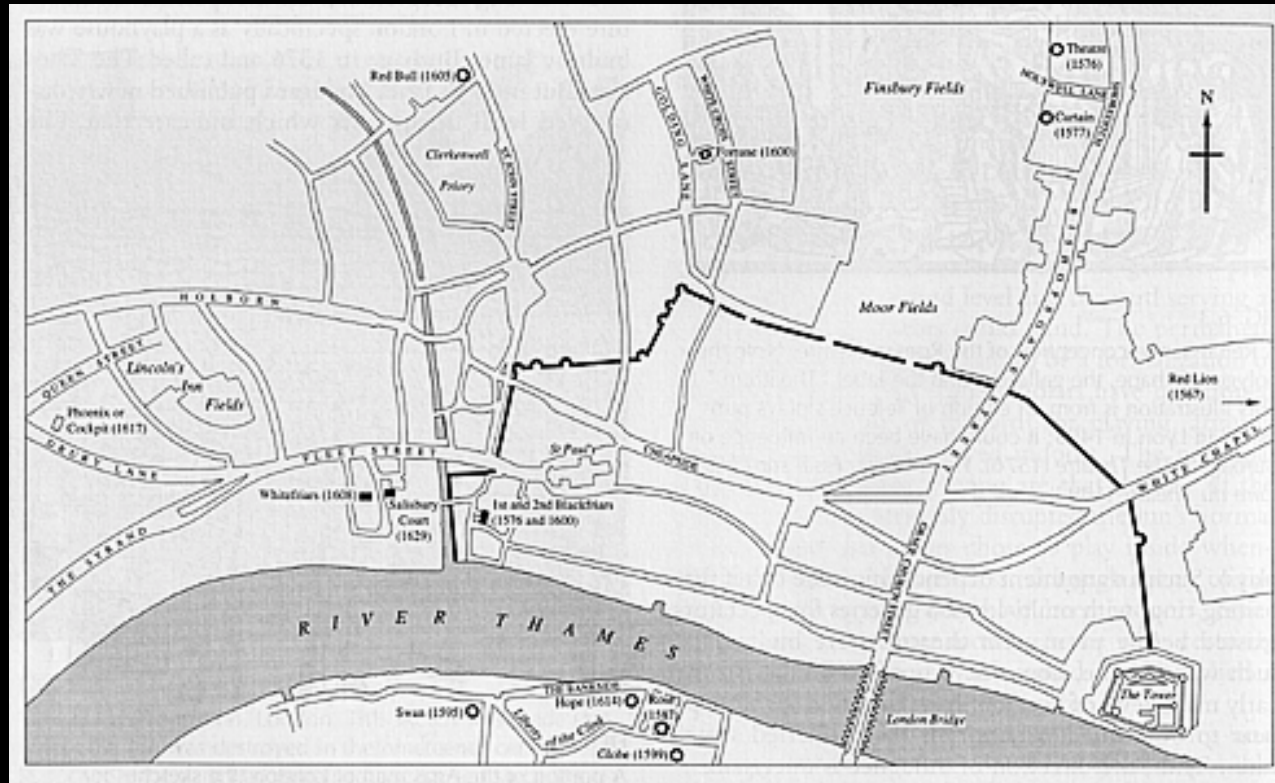
Note the position of the theatres: across the river, outside the walls of the City of London, outside the Royal City of Westminster—in the “liberties”

The Place of the Stage



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The Place of the Stage



The plays are *given* license and they *take* license.

Questions

- **Is the margin an empowered place: does the critique have teeth because it comes from outside?**
- **Or does being marginal make the critique only an allowed gesture, not a real threat? Is Shakespeare acting as a court fool (a licensed critic no one needs to take seriously)?**

More broadly,

- **What is the place of art in any culture? Can it ever criticize, or is it always allowed? Does the place it occupies (physically, economically, socially) affect the role it can have?**