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SHAKESPEARE'S ENGLISH HISTORY PLAYS  
AS A DRAMATIC GENRE

When in 1623 John Heminge and Henry Condell prepared the first folio edition of the collected works of their friend William Shakespeare, they divided his plays into 3 groups: comedies, histories and tragedies. Under the heading of histories they included:<sup>1</sup>

- 1) *The Life and Death of King John,*
- 2) *The Life and Death of Richard the Second,*
- 3) *The First part of King Henry the fourth,*
- 4) *The Second part of King Henry the fourth,*
- 5) *The Life of King Henry the Fifth,*
- 6) *The First part of King Henry the Sixth,*
- 7) *The Second part of King Henry the Sixth,*
- 8) *The Third part of King Henry the Sixth,*
- 9) *The Life and Death of Richard the Third,*
- 10) *The Life of King Henry the Eighth.*

These "histories" also called "chronicle plays" and "history plays" are the subject of my study. My aim is to present them as a dramatic genre.

The very classification of the histories as a separate group in the first folio draws attention to the fact that they possessed according to their editors, certain common features. Enumerated in the order of chronology of historical events presented, and not in the sequence of their creation, they have as a common theme the history of England from the beginning of the thirteenth century to the middle of the

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<sup>1</sup> The titles of the plays according to the contents of the first folio edition of Shakespeare's plays *A Catalogue of the Seuerall Comedies, Histories and Tragedies Contained in this Volume*. See: *The Riverside Shakespeare*, G. B. Evans et al., (ed.), Boston 1974; p. 69. All the references to the texts of the plays in question are to this edition.

sixteenth century.<sup>2</sup> Their titles seem also to be important as they each contain the name of a king, sometimes with the additional information that it is his "life" or his "life and death". The kings then are the central characters in each of the plays, and the plots are determined by their reigns.

Certain types of composition can be distinguished in Shakespeare's English history plays. One of them is the above mentioned "chronicle", the term which is sometimes mistakenly applied to the whole group of plays. Chronicle plays, as L. C. Knights and C. Leech<sup>3</sup> point out, are plays consisting of series of events, with neither a compact plot nor a clearly defined philosophy of history. In respect of their composition they resemble an epic chronicle. It seems to me that Shakespeare's first English history plays, i.e. the trilogy of Henry VI, can be classified thus.<sup>4</sup>

The plays on King John, Richard II and Richard III, the titles of which in the table of contents of the first folio are additionally described as "life and death", have a composition typical of tragedies, in the sense in which the term "tragedy" was understood by the Elizabethans, defined by Chaucer as:

Tragedie is to seyn a certeyn storie,  
As olde bokes maken us memorie  
Of him that stood in greet prosperitee  
And is y-fallen out of high degree  
Into miserie, and ended wrecedly<sup>5</sup>

We can see in this medieval conception of tragedy the influence of Boccaccio's *De Casibus Virorum Illustrium* which constitutes the basis of the construction of Shakespeare's historical tragedies built around the central, tragic character of the king.

The classification of the plays as tragedies is supported by Francis Meres "Master of both Universities, and Student of Divinity" who in

<sup>2</sup> That Shakespeare chose the history of England as a completely separate theme for this group of plays is evident from the fact that it does not contain any plays which present Scottish history or the legendary Celtic history of Britain i.e. *Macbeth*, *King Lear* and *Cymbeline*.

<sup>3</sup> L. C. Knights, *Shakespeare: The Histories*, "Writers and Their Work", London 1971; C. Leech, *Shakespeare: The Chronicles*, "Writers and Their Work", London 1962.

<sup>4</sup> See also: T. P. Courteney, *Commentaries on the Historical Plays of Shakespeare*, London 1840; G. Sandoe, *King Henry the Sixth, part II*, "Theatre Annual", 1955, nr 8; J. P. Brockbank, *The Frame of Disorder—Henry VI*, "Early Shakespeare—Stratford-upon-Avon Studies", 1961, nr 3; I. Ribner, *The English History Play in the Age of Shakespeare*, London 1965.

<sup>5</sup> G. Chaucer, *The Monkes Tales*, W. W. Skeat (ed.), [in:] G. Chaucer: *The Canterbury Tales*, Oxford 1945, p. 224.

his famous work *Palladis Tamia, Wit's Treasury, Being the Second Part of Wit's Commonwealth* (1598) said:

As Plautus and Seneca are accounted the best for comedy, and tragedy among the Latins, so Shakespeare among the English is the most excellent in both kinds for the stage. For comedy, witness his *Gentlemen of Verona*, his *Comedy of Errors*, his *Love Labour's Lost*, his *Love Labour's Won*, his *Midsummer Night's Dream*, and his *Merchant of Venice*; for his tragedy, his *Richard the 2*, his *Richard the 3*, *Henry the 4*, *King John*, *Titus Andronicus* and his *Romeo and Juliet*.<sup>6</sup>

Besides that, on the title pages of *Richard II* and *Richard III* in the quarto editions we also find the designation "tragedy".<sup>7</sup>

The composition of the plays on Henry IV and Henry V are typical of composition of history plays which present war.<sup>8</sup> The former is a picture of civil war, and the latter is a study of war with an external enemy. The tendency to deepen popular patriotism by penetrating analyses of political events can be found in both parts of *Henry IV* and in *Henry V*. Shakespeare presented in these plays a cross-section of English society, supplementing historical characters with fictitious ones. He also included moral and sociological elements in his vision of history. The plays have quite a complex construction and they include dramatic tension.

The play about Henry VIII, written in the reign of King James I has quite a distinctive form of a pageantry. The characters of the play are static and the plot is very weak. It is rather a historical pageant than a play.<sup>9</sup> There is also a "masque" (I.IV), and unparalleled in any of

<sup>6</sup> See: S. Schoenbaum, *William Shakespeare: A Compact Documentary Life*, Oxford 1978, s. 190. It is worth noting that F. Meres enumerated *Henry IV* among tragedies, although the composition of this play is a composition of a historical drama. We may suspect that either we have here a printer's mistake, as more likely *Henry VI* may be classified by this term, or that Meres called *Henry IV* by the term tragedy because of the character of the Falstaff. See also K. Kuja-wińska-Courtney, *Sztuki Szekspira o historii Anglii w świetle badań i w teatrze angielskim*, doctoral thesis (unpublished), BUŁ, Łódź 1985.

<sup>7</sup> The play *King John* was for the first time ever published only in the first folio.

<sup>8</sup> See also: C. Leech, *op. cit.*; L. Knights, *op. cit.*; G. K. Hunter, *Henry IV—the Elizabethan Two Part Play*, "Review of English Studies", 1954, nr 19; M. M. Reese, *The Cease of Majesty: A Study of Shakespeare's History Plays*, London 1961; M. M. Richmond, *Shakespeare's Political Plays*, New York 1967; R. Ornstein, *A Kingdom for a Stage—The Achievement of Shakespeare's History Plays*, Cambridge (Mass.) 1972; *Shakespeare—King Henry IV part I and II*, G. K. Hunter (ed.), Casebook Series, Hong Kong 1982.

<sup>9</sup> See also: M. Doran, *Henry VIII*, "Journal of English and Germanic Philology", London 1957; *The Arden Shakespeare—Henry VIII*, R. A. Foakes (ed.), Methuen and Co. Ltd., London 1966; H. M. Richmond, *Shakespeare's "Henry VIII": Romance Redeemed by History*, "Shakespeare Studies", 1968, nr 4.

Shakespeare's other plays, precise stage directions, giving the order of the royal procession, a description of costumes etc.

Seeing the thematic, structural and artistic complexity of Shakespeare's history plays, it is not surprising that, although many critical works have been devoted to them, none of these works has provided us with a fully satisfying definition of a genre, though the search for the plays' discriminants as a genre has not been completely fruitless. It only started in the twentieth century with the development of Renaissance study and an increased knowledge of Elizabethan theatre which led to analysis of the plays from the point of view of Shakespeare's philosophy of history and his artistic intentions. The Elizabethan attitude to history came to be regarded as a necessary condition for the understanding of Shakespeare's English history plays, as L. Wright says

the Elizabethan citizen shared the belief of his learned and courtly contemporaries that the reading of history was an exercise second only to a study of Holy Writ, in its power to include good morality and shape the individual into a worthy member of society.<sup>10</sup>

This reference to the Bible here is not coincidental, as Lily B. Campbell and E. M. W. Tillyard<sup>11</sup> prove in their works. History was connected in those times with theology, and moralities were the first political and historical plays. It is worth mentioning here the work of P. Milward *Shakespeare's Religious Background*,<sup>12</sup> in which among other things he conducts an analysis of Shakespeare's history plays in the context of Catholic tradition, the beginnings of Protestantism and the Puritan attacks which were rapidly growing in strength.

A very important role in the shaping of the Elizabethan philosophy of history was played by contemporary political convictions, which gave history a new moral dimension. Thus, an adequate interpretation of Shakespeare's English histories seems to indicate that they should be studied in the light of the sixteenth century philosophy of history, in compliance with Reformation theology and the new political theories. But at the same time we should bear in mind H. B. Charlton's opinion that "the real hero of English history plays is England".<sup>13</sup>

The works of Lily B. Campbell *Shakespeare's Histories—Mirrors of Elizabethan Policy* and E. M. W. Tillyard's *Shakespeare's History Plays* are undoubtedly most important when analyzing these plays. In studying the Elizabethan philosophy of history the authors agree that

<sup>10</sup> L. Wright, *Middle Class Culture in Elizabethan England*, Ithaca, New York 1958, p. 297.

<sup>11</sup> L. B. Campbell, *Shakespeare's Histories—Mirrors of Elizabethan Policy*, London 1977, pp. 33—42; E. M. W. Tillyard, *Shakespeare's History Plays*, London 1980, pp. 21—64.

<sup>12</sup> P. Milward, *Shakespeare's Religious Background*, London 1973.

<sup>13</sup> See: *Shakespeare—The Histories. A Collection of Critical Essays*, E. M. Waith

it was an expression of the "Tudor myth".<sup>14</sup> The Tudors wanted to present their dynasty as the one chosen by God for the redemption of England from the atrocities of civil war. Lily B. Campbell even says that Shakespeare saw his contemporaneous political events in the "mirrors of history",<sup>15</sup> in which deeds of good and bad sovereigns were lessons for their followers.

As the starting point for her research on Shakespeare's English histories Lily B. Campbell takes the opinion of W. D. Ross, who says that

Aristotle does not forget in the *Ethics* that the individual is essentially a member of society, nor in the *Politics* that the good life of state exists only in the good lives of its citizens,

and proposes her own definition of the plays:

Tragedy is concerned with the doings of men which in philosophy is discussed under *Ethics*; history with the doings of men which in philosophy is discussed under *Politics*.<sup>16</sup>

This definition, however, seems a little vague, as not all the dramas in which the main stress is put on the public good are historical. Later in her work Lily B. Campbell herself adds that we cannot separate the public good from the individual good in the Renaissance conception of kingship.<sup>17</sup>

Moreover, her definition stating that the historical plays are only on politics is only justified by simplification, because it excludes their moral and ethical aspects. In relation to the plays in question, A. P. Rossiter for example uses the term "moral plays", saying among other things, that in these dramas we

have the shadow-show of a greater drama of state plays which is continually behind the human characters sometimes upon something as large as the cyclorama of the stars.<sup>18</sup>

It seems to me that the richness and the psychological depth of Shakespeares' English histories is brought about by encounters of the impersonal world of policy with the moral and ethical ideas of the sovereigns who shape this world. It is interesting that the sources of the plays are mainly concerned with the external description of historical events,<sup>19</sup> while Shakespeare in his soliloquies analyzes the psychological and moral states of his heroes, giving them a new more human dimension.

(ed.), "Twentieth Century Views", New York 1965, p. 5.

<sup>14</sup> L. B. Campbell, *op. cit.*, pp. 55—84; E. M. Tillyard, *op. cit.*, pp. 29—31.

<sup>15</sup> L. B. Campbell, *op. cit.*, p. 16.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 16.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 28—32.

<sup>18</sup> Woodstok, *A Moral History (1592—95)*, A. P. Rossiter, (ed.), London 1946, p. 9.

<sup>19</sup> See: G. Bullough, *Narrative and Dramatic Sources of Shakespeare*, London 1957—64.

It should however be stressed that apart from the inadequacy of the very definition of Shakespeare's English histories, Lily B. Campbell's work is fundamental because it draws attention to their aim to present Elizabethan philosophy of history. This aim is limited to the popular "Providential view of history" in the official interpretation of its philosophy. It was an extended version of the views of the chronicler Edward Hall, regarded by E. M. W. Tillyard as the discriminant of Shakespeare's English history plays. In his *Elizabethan World Picture*<sup>20</sup> and later in the above mentioned work *Shakespeare's History Plays* he says that Shakespeare was a propagator of the idea of order, hierarchy, and the role of Providence in the world based on the "Tudor myth".

It seems however that the Tudor philosophy of history cannot be regarded as the only discriminant of Shakespeare's English history plays. The plays definitely do not constitute an epic whole. Their heroes, as has been stressed, are not just politicians, but human beings — not always acting rationally, often changing their points of view and opinions. The fact that Shakespeare did not write the plays in the chronological order of the historical events is also important. He started the cycle from the reign of Henry VI, when according to the Tudor philosophy of history, England suffered for the disturbance of the order in the universe in the reign of Richard II. It is really difficult to believe the theory that the young playwright began the cycle of plays on English history from the later periods, having carefully planned their sequence.<sup>21</sup> It should also be remembered that these plays were created at various stages of Shakespeare's artistic and intellectual maturity. The period between the first (*Henry VI* part I) and the last (*Henry VIII*) covers about twelve years.<sup>22</sup> Moreover Shakespeare was an artist and it is rather a doubtful theory that ten of his plays (about 40% of his whole artistic work) were devoted to the presentation of political propaganda, the aims of which were constantly changing during these years.

This conception has also been rejected by H. Zbierski, who regards it as the crowning of the "medievalists' revolt", and states that the conception of order in state and society should be seen in terms of "philosophical naturalism", which attempts to find analogies between political phenomena and those of nature. He reminds us that Shakespeare in his arguments on the necessity of order in the state, refers predominately to the order in the universe, and concludes his opinion saying:

If Shakespeare had wanted, he could of course have referred to the stereotypes

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<sup>20</sup> E. M. W. Tillyard, *The Elizabethan World Picture*, London 1978.

<sup>21</sup> See: S. Schoenbaum, *William Shakespeare—A Compact Documentary Life*, Oxford 1980, pp. 143—158.

<sup>22</sup> See: G. B. Evans et al. (ed.), *op. cit.*, p. 47—56.

of theological origin mentioned, but apparently nature was his "teacher", although in a different sense than for Wordsworth.<sup>23</sup>

The presentation of discriminants of Shakespeare's English history plays would be incomplete without reference to I. Ribner's work *The English History Plays in the Age of Shakespeare*.<sup>24</sup> He says that the only touchstone of historical plays is their aim, resulting from two sources—classical and humanistic philosophies popular in Elizabethan England and the medieval Christian philosophy. The former of these sources embraces nationalistic glorification of England, the analyses of contemporaneous home and foreign events as examples and admonitions for statesmen, the use of past historical events as guidelines for the present and the study of past political disasters. The latter sees Providence as the power ruling the world (mainly in political events) and it also analyzes the rational plan of human activities in categories which confirm God's wisdom and justice.

We may then define history plays as those which use, for any combination of these purposes, material drawn from national chronicles and assumed by the dramatist to be true, whether in the light of our modern knowledge they be true or not. The changing of this material by the dramatist so that it might serve either his doctrinal or his dramatic purposes did not alter his essential historicity in so far as his Elizabethan or Jacobean audience was concerned. Source thus is an important consideration, but it is secondary to purpose. Plays based upon factual matter which nevertheless do not serve ends which Elizabethans considered to be legitimate purposes of history are thus not history plays. John Webster's *White Devil* and *Duchess of Malfi* might be included among examples of such plays. Whether a dramatist considered certain matter mythical or factual is often impossible now to determine. Ultimately each play must be judged individually with all the modern knowledge brought to bear upon it, and still there will be plays about which we can never be entirely certain. But if a play appears to fulfill what we know the Elizabethans considered to be legitimate purpose of history and if it is drawn from a chronicle source which at least a long part of the contemporary audience accepted as factual, we may call it a history play.<sup>25</sup>

Not wishing to seem to diminish the value of this definition. I should like to point out D. Traversi's opinion who warns that

the increased attention given to the background of the plays in terms of contemporary political thought, in many ways has not been without dangers of its own.<sup>26</sup>

It is primal that Shakespeare was first of all a poet, not a politician, and as J. Dover Wilson stressed

<sup>23</sup> H. Zbierski, *Literatura angielska*, [in:] *Dzieje literatur europejskich*, vol. 2, part I, Warszawa 1982, p. 361. All translations by the author of this article.

<sup>24</sup> I. Ribner, *op. cit.*

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 24—25.

<sup>26</sup> D. Traversi, *Shakespeare: The Roman Plays*, California 1963, p. 9.

Shakespeare had artistic or dramatic consideration in mind rather than any concern for the commonwealth or glorification of the House of Tudors.<sup>27</sup>

The work of J. Kott devoted to Shakespeare's English history plays is very subjective and provocative.<sup>28</sup> Analyzing them through the prism of political experiences of our century he treated the plays in a sense extra-historically. Shakespeare's protagonists of the struggle for power admittedly have various names, but as J. Kott says "the drama, which is presented, is always the same".<sup>29</sup>

In generalizing, J. Kott separated these dramas from their contemporaneity, and wishing to get a clearer picture of the unmistakable influence of the Grand Mechanism for Power, he equalized and simplified the plays. Kott's paradox is that by trying to prove that Shakespeare was not only an illustrator of historical events, but also a genial philosopher of mankind's history, he reduced his genius to an obsession moved by the one thought—power and its consequences; to the world of "Realpolitik". Z. Stříbný in an excellent essay *Henry V and History* rightly opposes Kott's interpretation of Shakespeare's English history plays stressing, among other aspects, their artistic differentiation and very important human moral and ethic responsibility.<sup>30</sup>

It is also interesting to view Shakespeare's English histories in the context of other genres, for example pseudo-historical romance and historical novel. Pseudo-historical romance,<sup>31</sup> very popular in Shakespeare's times, tells us about popular people and events in such a way that it concentrates many fictitious events around a few historical facts. Its main attraction resulted from the fictitious events which were very appealing thanks to their fairy-like and fantastic elements. Their authors did not take into account authenticity or reflection of the atmosphere and reality of the past. Comparing this genre with Shakespeare's English history plays we should stress that the readers of the latter are mainly concerned with the historical events, presented in a realistic way. History is then the main motor of the plot and it makes the plays dramatic. We may however find in them many fictitious characters and events, but they are always closely connected with historical reality. It should also be noted that Elizabethans were unaware of the need for adaptation of the language to the epoch presented,<sup>32</sup> and generally the plays

<sup>27</sup> *The New Cambridge Shakespeare—Richard III*, J. Dover Wilson (ed.), Cambridge 1954, p. XI.

<sup>28</sup> J. Kott, *Szkice o Szekspirze*, Warszawa 1963, pp. 1—46.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 18.

<sup>30</sup> Z. Stříbný, *Henry V and History* [in:] *Shakespeare—Henry V—Casebook Series*, M. Quinn (ed.), Hogn Kong 1980, pp. 171—189.

<sup>31</sup> See: R. Leszczyński, *Hasło: Romans pseudohistoryczny*, „Zagadnienia Rodzajów Literackich”, Vol. 10, f. 2(20).

<sup>32</sup> This problem was skillfully solved by W. Scott in the nineteenth century.

about English history are more faithful to Shakespeare's than to medieval reality.

The differences and similarities between historical plays and historical novels seem to be essential in the discussion on the discriminants of Shakespeare's English histories. A spacious quotation from the definition of historical novel given by W. Ostrowski may be a good starting point:

Historical novel: known also, mainly in the beginning, as historical romance [...] is nowadays a multiform genre, many forms of which are connected by the intention of the presentation of the historical truth. The material of which the contents of historical novel is built, is based on historical facts connected in various degrees with literary fiction. The author should be faithful to the facts in the presentation of material, space and time background. It should exert the impression of a definite epoch in a definite geographical region. It influences the formation of the characters and the plot, but it does not interfere in the free composition of quite fictitious characters and events—under the condition, that they do not deform the essential flow of the generally accepted history. Far reaching freedom in the interpretation of the sense of historical events, in their evaluation and in the evaluation of the historical characters, moving sometimes to the falsification of their objective part in history, are traditionally accepted features of historical novel; because such a novel is to a large extent a transmitter of the author's own philosophy of history he may e.g. use historical material to form his own interpretation and evaluation of his contemporary times. Besides this freedom, very natural and proper for historical novel is the tendency towards realism and historical truth. Each novel of this kind must contain a substantial proportion of realism in the structure of world of literary fiction.<sup>33</sup>

Shakespeare's English history plays are also a multiform genre, embracing dramatic chronicles, tragedies, historical plays and pageantry. The differences between the individual plays of this genre result mainly from the scope and way of presenting the past. The dramatic form almost completely excludes the epic narration of historical novel based on the presentation of long periods of time. Thus, while creating a drama out of, for example, a chronicle the plot should be shortened, which is not an easy task.

Analyzing Shakespeare's English history plays from the point of view of their chronology of creation, we can see the author's tendency towards gradual and better and better ways of condensing the presented period, despite the preservation in the title of the description "life and death". For instance the trilogy *Henry VI* created at the beginning of Shakespeare's dramatic career presents a period of fifty years, while *Henry VIII* written at the end of his life presents thirteen years. The prologue to *Henry V* proves the fact that Shakespeare himself was aware of the difficulties involved in transferring history into theatrical conditions:

<sup>33</sup> W. Ostrowski, *Hasło: Powieść historyczna*, „Zagadnienia Rodzajów Literackich”, Vol. 11 f. 1(20).

... But pardon, gentles all,  
 The flat unraised spirits that hath dar'd  
 On his unworthy scaffold to bring forth.  
 So great an object: can this cockpit hold  
 The vasty fields of France? or may we cram  
 Within this wooden O the very casques  
 That did affright the air at Agincourt?  
 O, pardon! since a crooked figure may  
 Attest in little place a million;  
 And let us, ciphers to this great accompt,  
 On your imaginary forces work.  
 Suppose within the girdle of these walls  
 Are now confin'd two mighty monarchies,  
 Whose high upreared and abutting fronts  
 The perilous narrow ocean parts asunder:  
 Piece out our imperfections with your thoughts;  
 Into a thousand parts divide one man,  
 And make imaginary puissance;  
 Think, when we talk of horses, that you see them  
 Printing their proud hoofs i'the receiving earth;  
 For 'tis your thoughts that now must deck our kings,  
 Carry them here and there, jumping o'er times,  
 Turning the accomplishment of many years  
 Into an hour-glass: for the which supply,  
 Admit me Chorus to this history;  
 Who prologue-like your humble patience pray,  
 Gently to hear, kindly to judge, our play.

(Chorus I, 8—34)

All the forms of Shakespeare's English histories as well as the forms of historical novel are united by the "intention to present the true history". Shakespeare distinctly states this intention in the play about Henry VIII. Its subtitle is *All is True*, and in its prologue he refers three times to the fact that he presents truth (9, 18, 21). This "truth" connected with literary fiction, as it also is in historical novel is the essence of Shakespeare's English history plays.

The remark, on historical novel, that the literary fiction should not distort "the main course of the generally accepted history" is also valid in relation to the plays in question. It is inseparably connected with historical facts, which it not only enriches but also evaluates. Thus, we have in these plays the fate of common people, sometimes fictitious, tied with national events, because for Shakespeare national history is not only created by the few, who because of their birth can influence its course, but also by ordinary people, who although they have not such a great influence, play an important role in its development. The plays have then as their heroes not only members of the royal family and aristocrats but also commoners. Family scenes, tavern scenes and country scenes are the pictures in which the subjects entangled in a historical situation, cope with it and interpret it. It is the richness

and variety of the human portraits such as Pistol, Doll Tearsheet, Justice Shallow, the eternal Falstaff and the placing of the action on authentic maps of historical England which intensify the impression of "a definite epoch in a definite geographical region".

The characterization of historical heroes in Shakespeare's English histories is also tinted with literary fiction. It is mainly because their political and personal motives constitute a oneness. Suffolk arranges the marriage between Henry VI and Margaret of Anjou not only because through her he wants to influence the running of the country, but also because he loves her and he wants to have her close to him. Hotspur joins the rebellion against Henry IV not only because he wants to support Mortimer's right to the throne but also because of his quarrel with the king. This complication of the motives for the action of the main characters is thus because in Shakespeare's English history plays (as in history) fifteenth century policy depended on family connections. All the main historical characters in *Richard II* are descended from Edward III, as when Richard confiscates Henry Bolingbroke's property, he confiscates the property of his cousin. The War of Two Roses is between two families—at the heads of which are respectively the Duke of York with his four sons and Henry VI with his wife. The political calamities shown in these plays strongly influence our imagination because Shakespeare presents them first and foremost as human misfortunes. We are shocked by the defeat of the English army on the French soil in *Henry VI* part I when we see Talbot holding his slain son in his arms; the laws ruling the political world seem to be ruthless when prince Hal rejects his friend Falstaff. In the composition of such scenes Shakespeare uses literary fiction, which it is true, falsifies its objective role in history, but it also intensifies the dramatic tension.

As I have mentioned above all Shakespeare's English history plays are centered around the historical sovereigns introduced in the titles. The causes of the national unity and disarray, prosperity and disaster are then connected to a large extent with their characters, their sometimes tragic fate and their relation to the nation. To understand the situation presented in the plays we should understand these "national leaders", unmasking their real faces not in the royal councils or in the thronal chambers, but in private. Shakespeare, limited by the dramatic form, presented this private, psychological and ethical side of the sovereigns' lives in soliloquies. The deposition of Richard II, the rebellion during Henry IV's reign and the battle of Bosworth—are all tragic from the point of view of the individual heroes, but at the same time they lose this tragic aspect in the context of national history with the passing of time. The twofold point of view of the historical situation, in which we can see the kings of England, forms at the recipient, as A. P. Ros-

siter says "a condition in which two opposed judgements are subsumed and both are valid". He also observes that these plays

are only fully experienced when both opposites are held and included in a "two-eyed" view, and all "one-eyed" view simplifications are not falsifications; they amount to a denial of some part of the mystery of things.<sup>34</sup>

The consequence of these "two opposed judgements" is that although five of the title heroes of Shakespeare's English history plays die tragically, their deaths do not give the impression of an irreversible end, but the impression of continuation and even the announcement of something new. After the death scenes we usually have scenes presenting the beginning of the new sovereign's reign, who pronounces his political and moral creed. In accordance with the widespread Elizabethan theory of "the king's two bodies" in these plays the king as a human being dies, but the king as an institution lives on.<sup>35</sup> The death of the monarch is then as S. Langer says "an incident in the undying life of a society that meets good and evil fortunes on countless occasions but never concludes its quest and progress".<sup>36</sup>

W. Ostrowski defines historical novel "as to a large extent a transmitter of its author's own philosophy of history".<sup>37</sup> In Shakespeare's English history plays this is connected with the tendency to interpret history in ethical terms (*ananke*, *hybris*, Providence, punishment for bad deeds, reward for good ones), even when such tendencies cannot be convincingly illustrated by historical events. The form of the novel, as an epic work, gives the author unlimited possibilities, he may use description, characterization, letters, diary etc. In drama such commentaries are found mainly in soliloquies given by the main characters. In his English history plays Shakespeare also directly comments in the prologue, epilogue (*Henry IV* part I and II, *Henry VIII*) and in the chorus (*Henry V*). The function of his commentary on the historical material very often refers, like in historical novels, to "the evaluation of his contemporary times". The fact that Elizabethan were quick to find allusions to their contemporaneous situation is shown by the activities of censorship.<sup>38</sup>

It is necessary to stress once more here that Shakespeare usually respects "historical truth" because he is as H. Heine said:

... not only a poet, but a historian: he wields not only the dagger of Melpomene, but the still sharper stylus of Clio. In this respect he is like earliest

<sup>34</sup> After J. Wilders, *The Lost Garden—A View of Shakespeare's English and Roman History Plays*, London 1978, p. 7.

<sup>35</sup> See: E. H. Kantorowicz, *The King's Two Bodies—A Study in Medieval Political Theology*, New Jersey 1981.

<sup>36</sup> S. Langer, *Feeling and Form*, London 1953, p. 334.

<sup>37</sup> W. Ostrowski, *op. cit.*

<sup>38</sup> See: K. Kujawińska-Courtney, *op. cit.*

writers of history, who also knew no differences between poetry and history, and so gave us no mere a nomenclature of things done, or a dusty herbarium of events, but who enlightened truth with a song, and in whose song was heard only the voice of truth.<sup>39</sup>

In conclusion I would like to propose the following generic discriminants of Shakespeare's English history plays. According to the material I have analyzed here they are:

1) They have as their source the history of England (XIII—XVI centuries);

2) They can be characterized by a multiform composition—dramatic chronicles, tragedies, historical plays and a historical pageant;

3) They have in their title and in the plot the central character of a sovereign, who is a dramatic and tragic hero, seen as the king and as a man;

4) They show in what way political situation and the character of the title hero shape not only the fate of the nation but also his own future, which produces the drama. The plays seen as a unity emphasize the transitoriness of the monarchs and the permanency of the nation;

5) They are based on historical events, but we have here also literary fiction which plays an inferior role in the relation to history;

6) They present the fate of the nation not only through the fate of the royal family and aristocracy but also the common people who are most frequently fictitious characters, but always part of the main historical plot;

7) They present the tendency to see history in ethical terms (*ananke*, *hybris*, Providence, punishment for bad deeds, reward for good ones); the dramatist cannot however convincingly illustrate this tendency which gives weight to the claim that Shakespeare tries to respect "historical truth".

## SZTUKI SZEKSPIRA O HISTORII ANGLII JAKO GATUNEK DRAMATYCZNY

### STRESZCZENIE

Terminem „sztuki Szekspira o historii Anglii” oznaczono 10 dramatów Szekspira, które wymieniono w pierwszym wydaniu zbiorowych dzieł poety (tzw. First Folio) z 1623 r. jako „historie”. Na przestrzeni wieków nazywano je również „kronikami dramatycznymi” i „sztukami historycznymi”.

Sztuki Szekspira o historii Anglii nie są gatunkiem dramatycznie jednorodnym. Wpływa to przede wszystkim z faktu, że przekładając materiał epicki na język dramatu, Szekspir za każdym razem w inny sposób starał się rozwiązać problem scenicznej kompozycji poszczególnych dzieł. Obejmują one: kroniki dramatyczne

<sup>39</sup> After B. C. Warner, *English History in Shakespeare's Plays*, New York 1899, p. 3.

(trylogia *Henryk VI*), tragedie (*Ryszard III*, *Król Jan* i *Ryszard II*), sztuki historyczne (dwuczęściowe dzieło *Henryk IV* i *Henryk V*), oraz widowisko (*Henryk VIII*).

Niezależnie od kompozycji wszystkie te dramaty łączą jednak wspólne cechy, które stanowią o ich odrębności. Wobec braku odpowiedniej definicji sztuki historycznej Szekspira, autorka, na podstawie przeprowadzonych badań proponuje przyjąć właśnie te wspólne cechy jako wyróżniki określające gatunkowo ten cykl.

Podstawą tych dzieł jest temat — przedstawienie historii Anglii od wieku XIII do wieku XVI. W tytułach i akcji centralnej każdego z utworów występuje postać władcy, bohatera dramatycznego i tragicznego, który pokazany jest jako król i jako człowiek. Sztuki te ukazują, w jaki sposób sytuacje i charakter tytułowego bohatera kształtują nie tylko losy narodu, lecz także jego własną przyszłość, z czego wynika ich dramatyczność. Dramaty Szekspira o historii Anglii widziane jako całość uwypuklają przemijalność władców przy nieprzemijalności narodu. Choć wydarzenia historyczne są główną osnową tych sztuk, odnaleźć w nich można także fikcję literacką, która pełni w stosunku do historii rolę służebną. Życie narodu przedstawione jest nie tylko poprzez losy rodziny królewskiej, lecz także ludu — najczęściej postaci fikcyjnych, które zawsze łączą się z główną akcją historyczną. W utworach daje się zauważyć tendencja do widzenia historii w kategoriach etycznych (*ananke*, *hybris*, Opatrzność, kara za złe uczynki, nagroda za dobre). Tendencja ta nie zawsze jednak daje się dramaturgowi przekonująco zilustrować wypadkami historycznymi, co świadczy o szanowaniu przez Szekspira „prawdy historycznej”.