Chapter 4

Dramatic Time in Shakespeare’s History

In some ways, we, as humans, are fools to time, never able to win the day in which we are born into the world and leave it. Time does fly and it does not take us along for the ride after a while. Dust to dust, ashes to ashes. Shakespeare wrestles with time in the sonnets and creates a dramatic tension between temporality and eternity, the beauty of the young man and the enduring nature of poetry, not to mention doom or the Last Judgment. This situation applies to free men and women and slaves, to kings and servants and all those between. In the lyric and drama, in the history of a place such as England, or in the movement of the peoples globally among Africa, Asia and the Americas, the language of representation and the drama of meaning strain against themselves in theory and practice, the human voice, ear, eye trying to make sense, alone and together, of the desire for oneness with God or the world and the alienation or fallenness, the dividing and contradictory consciousness in and away from nature and the world that also attempts, recoils, impresses in the beautiful but awful situation.

In the Sonnets, Shakespeare has a sense of the theatrical and dramatic that enables an interest in the reader that is beyond the private even if the themes are personal. In these poems, Shakespeare represents the limits of language and the challenge of time. He is able to show the human predicament, the evanescence of youth in love, the yearning and frustration of desire. In love and history, Shakespeare understands how people are caught in the predicament of time. In the history plays he sees the overlap of private and public in the family and the state: the royal family is also those who rule and govern the nation. The politics of theatre and the theatre of politics are aspects of how Shakespeare represents history when England is in a civil war and fighting with France. In this chapter, I shall discuss
these and related matters in the Second Tetralogy or Lancastrian Tetralogy (*Richard II, 1 and 2 Henry IV, Henry V*). The private–public language of politics is something we can observe in Shakespeare and later in Obama, but first let us turn to these Shakespearean histories, a genre in which this playwright might be said to be the greatest innovator in Renaissance or early modern England and perhaps in Europe since the Middle Ages.

**History, Drama and Dramatic History**

Drama, and especially historical drama, emphasizes the temporal nature of writing, reading or viewing. Historical drama makes the past present, for the players embody the dead king and subjects. The presence of representation is gone even as we say the word. This literal and literary emptying out of the present is one of the primary difficulties that we face in literary criticism and historical writing. Shakespeare’s history plays represent the problems of joining world and word, life and art, showing us their relation but distinguishing between them. As the actor plays, the audience identifies actor and role, present and past but at the same time differentiates them. It is as if the audience experiences both the lure of Aristotelian representation and the distance of the Brechtian alienation effect. Dramatic time, the three hours traffic of the stage, contrasts, if not collides, with the more diffuse historical time. Owing to the telescoping of the vast flow of history, historical drama makes us conscious of the possibilities and limitations of time and mimesis.

In each of the four plays—*Richard II, 1 and 2 Henry IV* and *Henry V*—the characters call attention to time. A reference to time occurs in the first line of *Richard II*, and *Henry V* begins and ends with concerns over the relation of dramatic and historical time. The preoccupation with temporality is not identical with a sense of history, although both are closely related because history is concerned with time and anyone who is aware of time is likely to have considered history. A playwright and an audience focus on dramatic time, the few hours it takes to play out the play, but within historical drama, there are numerous references to past and future as well as the present, and the present of a history play is past for the audience. The awareness of the complexity of time becomes a central preoccupation as dramatic or existential time enables and opposes historical time. When we think about the Lancastrian Tetralogy, we observe that important characters like Richard the Second, Bolingbroke, Hal, Falstaff and the Chorus are taken up with temporality either consciously or not. In examining the problem of temporality, we shall find that, if anything, the difficulties increase as the tetralogy