



The History Plays

William Shakespeare

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It is part of Shakespeare's extraordinary contribution to our culture that, through his dramas based on English history, he played a unique part in forming our view of ourselves and our nationhood. From *King John*, in which through Magna Carta the king's absolute power was first limited and the people's freedoms assured, to--almost in his own lifetime--*Henry VIII*, Shakespeare wrote a series of ten plays portraying the course of history. It represents almost one third of his entire dramatic output.

The overarching theme of these plays is the vital importance of the sovereign's legitimacy if the nation is to be stable. They cover revolutionary times and events--the deposition and murder of Richard II, the Wars of the Roses, the usurping of the throne by Richard III--but they always affirm the principle that a legitimate king, circumscribed by an agreed constitution, is the only proper guarantee of the nation's liberties.

There are many other ways in which Shakespeare's patriotism has become definitive. In Henry V's St. Crispin's Day speech to the troops before Agincourt, for example, or John of Gaunt's 'scepter'd isle' speech, a sense of Englishness is expressed which still lives in English minds today. The Elizabethan's pride in nationhood was perfectly embodied by Shakespeare, but the poetry of it transcends its own time.

In this edition the history plays are brought together with a large group of illustrations which echo and amplify their themes. Gloriously vivid images of England's story are presented here, putting the great plays in a magnificent setting.

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