The good prince ought to have the same attitude toward his subjects, as a good paterfamilias toward his household—for what else is a kingdom but a great family? What is the king if not the father to a great multitude?—Erasmus,

*The Education of a Christian Prince*
Chapter I

INTRODUCTION

If man stands at the center of drama, in Shakespeare’s history plays it is public man, man as ruler, courtier, warrior, or citizen. We may see love and friendship and the intimacies of private life, but they are secondary to a panoramic view of public events. The reign of King John and the civil wars of the fifteenth century come to dramatic life in all their turbulence and suffering in the nine history plays that Shakespeare wrote just at the end of the sixteenth century. Implicit in the events and explicit in the speeches of the characters are some of the timeless issues of public life. A humanist in at least this broadest sense as he deals with history, Shakespeare seeks guidance for the present in the events of the past. Yet he is first of all a dramatist; unlike the historian Edward Hall and the poet Edmund Spenser, he is inclined to dramatize the events and issues without drawing an explicit moral. In short, his plays are not didactic, but they are political drama. They have a richly varied interest, but central to them is a contrast between order and wise government on the one hand and disorder and war on the other.
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It is hardly surprising that even in such plays men have a private existence as well as a public one. Kings are sons and husbands like other men, and courtiers fall in love or quarrel with their brothers even while they share in the rise and fall of nations. But family life plays an especially prominent role in the language, characterization, and dramatic structure of these plays. Indeed, frequent references to the family help to define the issues shown on a national scale in the public world. At times the family becomes a miniature of the kingdom, and its life provides direct or ironic comment on the life of the commonwealth. My purpose is to study how Shakespeare develops this analogic relationship between family and state in ever richer and subtler ways through the nine history plays of the 1590s.

The Elizabethan family was not identical to our contemporary institution. For one thing, it was a larger group with more varied bonds among the members; in that sense it was already closer to the public realm, less autonomous. The great noble families were one of the main political institutions of the world that Shakespeare dramatizes in the history plays. Even the individual household was a broad group including several generations and sometimes other members without blood ties, such as apprentices or pages. Most Renaissance moralists follow Aristotle in counting the servants as part of the family. Another difference is that childhood did not yet have the distinctive role and value that we give to it. Also, especially in the noble houses, personal relations often seem to have been more formal and less intimate than in the modern middle-class fam-
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ily. Still, human feelings change less than social forms; the drama of family relationships in Shakespeare is surprisingly open to our intuitive apprehension even while we have to make some allowances for historical alteration.

No doubt moral theorists of the Renaissance make the ideal family sound more different than was the reality, but their ideas on the family and the state can be useful to us as readers and viewers of the history plays, especially because Shakespeare could assume considerable familiarity with these ideas in his audience. Erasmus's quotation at the head of this chapter is a common sentiment in Elizabethan writing, both learned and popular; and it suggests one basic difference between Shakespeare's day and ours. What sounds to us like a mere figure of speech has metaphysical reality for Erasmus. In the divinely governed order of nature, the king is to the commonwealth as the father is to the family, the sun in the sky, the lion among animals, the eagle among birds, and so on. Omens demonstrate the reality of this symbolic order. In Macbeth an owl kills a falcon, which is above it in the hierarchy of birds, shortly before Macbeth kills his king. God made the world a living organism in which one part affects the other by mysterious ways, and He also made it a book to be read by man. The wise man understands the present and even sees hints of the future by studying these correspondences, as E. M. W. Tillyard calls such patterned relationships. One of the most commonly observed correspondences in the Renaissance is that between the family and the state. Though Shakespeare's handling quickly develops beyond the conven-
tions of his age, the comparison is for him not a private symbol but a publicly recognized mode of thought.

What parts of family life do Renaissance thinkers associate with the state? What lessons do they draw? Fortunately there is little difference on these matters. Catholics and Protestants may differ on the relative merits of single and wedded life and on the proper grounds for divorce, but the clergy who write moral essays on the family, the writers of courtesy books, and the countless pedagogues who prescribe a suitable education for princes and nobles all find about the same political lessons in the family, lessons that often derive from Aristotle and Cicero. In a much-paraphrased description, Cicero sums up a whole body of thought about the home: “This is the foundation of civil government, the nursery, as it were, of the state.”

Thomas Pickering develops the idea in a typical way: “Upon this condition of the Familie, being the Seminarie of all other Societies, it followeth, that the holie and righteous government thereof, is a direct meane for the good ordering, both of Church and Commonwealth.”

Such a connection between the family and the state is all the easier because in Renaissance handbooks the science of government is typically a study of individual virtues applied to public questions. When they prescribe an education for kings and magistrates, writers like Erasmus and Sir Thomas Elyot base their discussions on the four cardinal virtues. A good king is simply a good man on a heroic scale. Machiavelli, who seemed to deny this truism of the age, was anathema. If James I is typical, kings themselves proclaimed the orthodox
view. His book of advice to his son derives a moral lesson from the history of his own family: “Haue the King my grand-fathers example before your eies, who by his adulterie, bred the wracke of his lawfull daught­­er & heire; in begetting that bastard, who vnnaturally rebelled, & procured the ruine of his owne Souerane & sister.” Such moralizing on his grandfather’s grave may sound priggish to our ears, but that kind of priggish­­ness is frequent in Renaissance homilies.

Books like William Perkins’s *Christian Oeconomie* concentrate on three family relationships: husband and wife (including courtship), parent and child, and mas­­ter and servant. Texts aimed at a more aristocratic audience often show awareness of the broader family group, the noble house; but all writers focus on hus­­band and wife and parent and child when they make connections with the state. A husband should rule over his wife like reason over the passions or the mind over the body; Stefano Guazzo puts it into political terms: “And as men oughte to observe and keepe the lawes and statutes of the countrey: so women ought to fulfill the commaundements of their husbandes.” But women are not to be completely servile. Pierre de la Primau­­daye echoes a popular sentiment (ultimately from Aristotel’s *Politics*) that a man should be to his wife like the government of “a popular state,” to his children like a king.

The relationship that fascinates these writers is the tie between father and son. Typically the mother is less significant, simply a bad influence of varying de­­grees of importance. Not only is the son the father’s immortality, but he is also the moral inheritor of the
family tradition. The whole idea of nobility rests on the assumption that men inherit at least an inclination toward virtue or vice. Henry Peacham is completely orthodox: "As for the most part, we see the children of Noble Personages to bear the lineaments and resemblance of their Parents; so in like manner, for the most part, they possess their virtues and Noble dispositions, which even in their tenderest years will bud forth, and discover it selfe." Even the tutors, with their vested interest in the claims of nurture, make an important place for nature.

The imagery of planting and growing is a constant vehicle of this doctrine, one that Shakespeare often uses. Annibale Romei pronounces the inheritance of virtue in typical form: "In a manner it alwayes falleth out, that in armes, and vertuous actions, the most singular and excellent men, be of nobility: For Nature hath inserted a certaine secret vertue, in the seede of all things, which giueth them force and property, to be like the beginning, from whence they are deriued." If noble birth signifies potential virtue, bastardy as a violation of natural order implies moral degeneration. The moralists hesitate to damn all bastards, but Thomas Becon suggests that most do sooner or later go wrong. And at least on the Elizabethan stage they normally live up to their reputation.

Moral inheritance is a special bond between the family and the state because it is central to the theory of royal succession. In Shakespeare as in the chroniclers, one major link in the chain that leads to the Wars of the Roses is Bolingbroke's seizure of the throne, displacing Richard II's rightful line. For orthodox thinkers
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nature itself demands that kings inherit by primogeniture, and that is so because the new king naturally inherits his father's heroic virtue. Even the most idealistic knew that such was not always the case, and Shakespeare makes quiet irony of the fact that the son whom Henry V and Katherine compound for will be no conqueror of the Turk but the weak Henry VI. Still, the full irony depends on our consciousness of the doctrine. Like the theorists of moral inheritance, poetic Platonists knew that beautiful women are not always virtuous. Such facts are signs of a degenerate world; ideally, according to nature, a fair skin means a beautiful soul, and a heroic king engenders a heroic prince. Hence the welfare of the kingdom itself rests on the king as a father. Erasmus, that most sensible of idealists, points the moral by adding nurture to nature: "It is a great and glorious thing to rule an empire well, but none-the-less glorious to pass it on to no worse a ruler: nay, rather it is the main task of a good prince to see that he [the son] does not become a bad one."13

These ideas about the family and the state pervade the writing of the time and so provide a public basis for Shakespeare's art. He need not imply acceptance of these principles: if Edmund in King Lear illustrates the degeneracy of the bastard, Faulconbridge in King John inverts the commonplace with equally striking dramatic effect. Shakespeare's audience is prepared to see connections between the family and the state and hence to perceive one kind of dramatic structure in the history plays.

Still the possibility of such connections does not define the kind of plays Shakespeare will write, nor does
it solve all the dramatic problems. His history plays are much more complex and sophisticated in their handling of political ideas than those of other Elizabethan writers, but the ideas that characters talk about are those of the popular treatises, not those of Machiavelli, Guicciardini, and Bacon with their subtle analysis of statecraft. The plays themselves share this concern with broader, more easily accessible issues. Even if one is inclined to find Tillyard’s picture of a cycle on the Tudor myth too tidy, there is no disputing his emphasis on the theme of order and succession. Whereas it would be narrowing to say that King Lear is about wisdom through suffering or any other one phrase, it is more accurate to say that the Henry VI plays are about disorder in the state.

The unifying vision of all nine plays is of an ideal state bound by majesty, as Max M. Reese calls it, and epitomized by England under Henry V. Contrasted with that vision is the terrible reality of England in civil war. Such a theme might suggest a general, rather impersonal drama, what in fact we see in Gorboduc. That play focuses on the public side of men, on the ruler and his advisers. The medieval dramatic themes of man’s fall and redemption are more personal, more expressive of the whole being of the characters, than the theme of order and succession in the state.

In the pattern of political drama that Gorboduc illustrates, certain kinds of material are less congenial than others. Its severe balances of character and event and above all its rigidly formal rhetoric are appropriate to characters conceived of in their public roles, as political and ethical types. With this kind of high cere-
monial technique, Henry V can meet the French ambassadors, but Hal in the tavern is a problem. The audience can respond to a kingly declamation on ideological and patriotic grounds, but they know their taverns intimately and personally. A Shakespeare who wrote high moral tales in his histories would seek techniques to subdue the private sides of his characters to an overriding public tone. Actually, however, Shakespeare appeals to the whole range of response in his public audience, including the familiar and personal. He must devise techniques for maintaining public language and themes in harmony with a more intimate realism than Gorboduc can afford.

The dramatic problem is especially acute in scenes involving family relationships, which raise to a new level of complexity the issue of realism in characterization. A character in a play seems realistic to the extent that he evokes attitudes and emotions that we would feel toward such a man in real life, whereas a stylized character evokes a narrow range of responses. We know all that we need to know about the stylized figure Talbot in 1 Henry VI when we see that he is the English hero. The nature of our response is set to the extent that we are, at least imaginatively, good English patriots. Although Prince Hal is also the English hero, he is a far more complicated dramatic figure. His characterization is more realistic than Talbot's, not because his motivation is clearer, but because he shows more sides of the complex reality that we perceive in men.

The same alternatives are possible with the family. Talbot and son embody a family relationship, father and son; but what we see of them is only one element
in the rich complex of emotional bonds possible: chivalric loyalty to each other. Hal too displays such loyalty to his father in the battle at Shrewsbury, but the emotional drama is complicated. He dislikes and shuns the court; his father misunderstands his nature even while grasping their estrangement with full human feeling. Thus a family relationship can be as stylized or as realistic as an individual character. Shakespeare’s dramatic problem is to maintain a thematic focus on the public issues of Tudor political theory without deadening the family by turning it into just an emblem. As the question poses itself even in the earlier, simpler plays, can he make dramatic capital of Henry VI as a henpecked husband while showing him as a well-intentioned but weak king?

Almost inevitably the solution of this technical problem implies an attitude toward the role of the personal in public affairs. Is it true, as Derek Traversi argues, that a Shakespearian hero’s political success forces him to sacrifice his full humanity, that part of Hal must die before Henry V can reign? Or is the opposite true; is the family “the school of those sentiments of loyalty and kindness which must be extended into other human relationships if organized society is to exist”?

Recent study of medieval and Renaissance dramatic tradition has greatly enriched and complicated our understanding of the variety of forms available to Shakespeare at the end of the sixteenth century, but it is still useful in looking at the history play to contrast the influences of classical tragedy and medieval drama. In the classical tradition the plays of Seneca and his Renaissance followers offer a model for serious drama
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about public figures. The Senecan tradition—severe, formal, and rhetorical—provides a rigid structure for the most flamboyant matter, a useful quality for Elizabethan playwrights. Also, Seneca shapes his plays around a small, clear body of ideas not totally different from the concerns of Shakespeare's histories. Finally, the Senecan form can be reconciled with much of the morality form, the severest side of the native tradition, as the fusion of the two in Gorboduc shows.

In an age that was seeking models for literary form, Seneca must have been a more imposing figure than he can be today. Reinforced by similar elements in Ovid's poetry, Seneca's lurid tragedies were one major influence on the developing tragedies and history plays of the 1580s and 1590s. In particular they offered a collection of melodramatic horrors along with a means of keeping them under dramatic control. Curiously enough, given his bloody themes, Seneca is the most impersonal of playwrights, a moralist contemplating depravity from the stoic heights. His abstractly rhetorical language depersonalizes his characters into models of various ethical conditions. Hence their sufferings are not so horrible as to shock us into unbelief. Seneca's ethical themes endure this process of abstraction well since his ethic is based on a highly theoretical view of human nature.

To develop this ethic, he groups his characters in two equally artificial types, the same figure sometimes vacillating between the two. One type includes men so overcome by passion—usually love, hatred, or revenge—that their actions are wildly irrational. Such a figure can be the tyrant-villain, like Nero in Octavia, a favor-
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ite pattern for the Renaissance Senecans. The other
and rarer type is the stoic, austere in controlling his
passions and full of good advice. Both kinds of char-
acter are little more than abstract embodiments of
Seneca's ideas. If for one moment Atreus and Thyestes
were real, Thyestes would be an intolerable and there-
fore incredible horror. The artistic success of the play
(and it is a minor one) is to govern the melodrama of
its fable by its stern impersonality.

Like their Greek models, Seneca's tragedies are based
on conflict within the family, and the Greek plays dem-
onstrate how deep the emotional intensity of such
themes can be. Seneca, however, is at his most rigidly
impersonal in dealing with family relations. He uses
the lofty rank of his characters to justify their public,
almost oratorical quality. His aristocrats live in a spe-
cial dramatic world like the moral world that Clytem-
nestra claims for them: "lex alia solio est, alia privato
in toro" ["There is one law for thrones, one for the pri-
ivate bed"].

The Senecan rhetoric that delighted the Renaissance
can be sheer poetic exuberance, but it is also a means
of distancing the characters, keeping them from too
familiar a reality. In the dying Hercules' words to his
mother, Seneca earns a splendid rhetorical force with
understated irony: "Herculem spectas quidem, / mater"
["Hercules thou seest indeed, my mother"]. It is inter-
esting to see how the personal tone of John Studley's
Tudor English version shatters the decorum: "I am
your Hercules mother deere." In an attempt to arouse
pathos, Studley brings his Hercules too close to ordi-
nary men.
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Even the Troades, more pathetic than most of Seneca, is in this lofty vein. The fine irony of Hecuba's bitter reaction to the deaths of Polyxena and Astyanax is epigrammatic:

concidit virgo ac puer;
bellum peractum est.

[A maiden and a boy have fallen; the war is done.]²⁴

As the general nouns indicate, the specific identities of the maiden and boy are unimportant in the power of this figure.Violation of family ties is the greatest of Seneca's melodramatic horrors, but his impersonal method typically relies on the labels of family relationship for a generalized pathos. When Medea kills her children, it is mother stabbing child, not individuals, because the audience knows nothing of the children and she herself is a rhetorical passion more than a woman.

The whole movement of Senecan rhetoric is toward abstract ideas rather than toward the personal. The broken fraternal bond of Thyestes and Atreus suggests, not pathos or ironic images of happy domestic life, but epic images of the cosmos shattered when family ties break. When Thyestes looks on the severed heads of his sons, he laments with cosmic scope:

sustines tantum nefas
gestare, Tellus? non ad infernam Styga
tenebrasque mergis rupta et ingenti via
ad chaos inane regna cum rege abripis?

[Canst thou endure, O Earth, to bear a crime so monstrous?]
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Why dost not burst asunder and plunge thee down to the infernal Stygian shades and, by a huge opening to void chaos, snatch this kingdom with its king away?]

In its language Gorboduc is a worthy imitator of Seneca's scope and abstract vision, though it lacks his compactness and melodramatic vigor. More than the Renaissance Senecans, Shakespeare can recapture this style when he wants to, as parts of Richard III show with splendid energy.

If the Roman dramatists were an important influence on Elizabethan drama, still its parentage lies rather in the native tradition. John Ruskin describes Gothic naturalism with its emphasis on the concrete and particular as central to medieval art, but that is only one side of the truth. The medieval drama is a vehicle for Christian ideas, especially the central theme of man's fall and redemption. If the Tudor descendants drift away from these themes, the more serious among them turn rather to secular morality than to pure storytelling. Both medieval and Tudor dramas use a number of the same commonplaces as Seneca, his "small coin of philosophy." Senecan maxims constantly note the futility of ambition and the omnipotence of Fortune. As a result of this similarity of purpose, the unreal, the stylized, the typical are denizens of the medieval theater too; but they are curiously mixed with a more familiar reality. As a brilliant discussion by Erich Auerbach contends, the Christian tradition of combining sublimity and humility justifies a mixture of styles in order to domesticate theological truth. Characters like Everyman and Mankind are abstractly conceived, but
their speech combines sententiousness with the language of ordinary men facing ordinary problems. Everyman's cousin refuses to join him in his journey to Death, not with an elaborate show of theological sophistry or libertine philosophy, but because he claims to have a cramp in his toe. Such language and details bring theological truth close to the domestic experience of the audience.

The popular audience found something that they liked and wanted more of in the comic or realistic language and details that colored their religious drama. When they watched *Mankind*, one mood responded dutifully to the high sentences of Mercy, while another delighted in the irreverent interruptions of Mischief. He relied on what they knew, not lofty reasoning and aureate phrases, but plain English country life: "Corn seruit bredibus, chaff horsibus, straw fyrybusque." Indeed, the courtly and scholarly audience was not too proud for such indecorum; the French Senecans could not have produced *Gammer Gurton's Needle*.

The fragile decorum of Seneca's drama would collapse at such brushes with the familiar, and the English playwright's problem is to avoid such a catastrophe. The double structure of the *Second Shepherds' Play* involves one kind of solution to that problem, parodic contrast. Mak's wife and the stolen sheep are a grotesque parallel to the Virgin and Child, but the distorted echo suggests both the imperfection of the fleshly world in which we dwell and its dim connection with the Divine, at that moment completing the link by the miracle of the Incarnation. Not blasphemous laughter but comic awe is the final tone as the humble
shepherds come to Christ's birth with their gifts of cherries, bird, and ball. Perhaps because the Christian theme of Incarnation embodies a full conception of humanity, it can survive this contact with the familiar and personal.

If realistic comedy can be combined with ritualism and solemn morality, so can domestic pathos. In The Sacrifice of Isaac the suffering of Abraham and the naïve fears of his son are touching even while they embody one of the great theological mysteries. Later drama is not always so skillful. John Bale does not dare to trust his Kynge Johan and the militant Protestant code that he embodies under the clear light of realistic language, and so he turns such language and familiar details to account in satirizing the evil Popish schemers. Here, as in Mankind, the effect is to split the play into serious-heroic and comic-familiar parts with little organic connection between the two. From such origins come the cruder forms of Elizabethan comic relief.

Not all the early Tudor plays are so divided, however. John Phillip's The Play of Patient Grissell, registered for publication in 1565/66, applies the techniques of the Tudor interlude to one of the great medieval stories (most familiar in Chaucer's version, the Clerk's Tale). This story comments on the themes of marriage and the relationship between the aristocracy and the lower classes. Despite his nobles' reluctance, Walter, a marquis, chooses a lowborn bride named Grissell. During their marriage he tests her submissiveness, spurred on in his tests by a Vice figure called Politic Persuasion, who recites the commonplace of jocular medieval anti-feminism. By manifesting the patience that has made
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her name proverbial, Grissell wins back her children and her husband’s trust along with the full loyalty of the nobles.

An overlay of classical learning does not conceal the fundamental morality structure of the play with its episodic plotting, stylized handling of time and place, Vice figure, and emblematic characters like the courtiers Fidence, Reason, and Sobriety. In her “symple Smocke” Grissell is the vehicle of a great deal of lofty preaching, yet there is no split between the didacticism of the play and its immediacy. Its merits are on the whole those of the genre and the story; Phillip is not an especially able craftsman; but he demonstrates that, in developing a family theme, a playwright can unite realism and a lofty moral tone.

One group of plays is especially significant in showing the potentialities of a family theme. During the early Tudor period, dramatic representations of the Prodigal Son story became widely popular. This story fitted naturally into the medieval tradition of the Psychomachia, and an older classical influence than the Senecan also helped to develop it. The northern humanists had developed a school drama patterned on Terence, of which one example was the Dutch William de Volder’s Acolastus, acted in 1528. With considerable ingenuity the play adapts the parable of the Prodigal Son to Terentian form with a primarily didactic purpose. Pelargus, the father, has a wise friend and counselor named Eubulus, and Acolastus, the son, an evil counselor named Philautus. Acolastus, taught by Philautus to ignore his father’s good advice and even the Bible given to him, leaves home for the sinful city
of Rome. There he falls into the toils of two parasites and a courtesan, the three of them closely imitated from Latin comedy. Stripped of his money and clothes, Acolastus sinks lower and lower until, when his father prays for him, he feels a mysterious infusion of grace and returns to his father’s joyful reception. With a timid piling-up of negatives, a "Peroratio" asserts that the play has allegorical import:

Nolo putes spectator optime, hic nihil
Mysterij latere tectum, ludicra
Sub actione. (p. 179)

[I do not want you to think, noble spectator, that there is no mystery here, hidden under the comic action.]

The play is more ingenious than inspired, but it was immediately popular, going through some twenty editions by 1540, the year in which John Palsgrave translated it into English. Such English counterparts as Nice Wanton, The Disobedient Child, and Misogonus soon appeared in England.

The theme of the Prodigal Son has at least three potential dramatic interests. First there is the secular morality on the temptations of youth, which earlier plays like The Interlude of Youth and Wit and Science also represent. In the Tudor interlude this level is not inconsistent with another, a vigorously realistic exploration of the taverns and brothels where the youth is tempted and falls. But finally, behind this story, there always lurks the potentiality of its original meaning, the straying of the soul from God the Father and its return. The extent to which the story is secularized can
be marked by the extent to which the Prodigal's father loses this overtone and becomes a Latin-comedy father. In Acolastus, for example, both sides are there, albeit in awkward juxtaposition. The father is too much of a fool to carry the allegorical weight De Volder wants to give him. This awkwardness may explain the apologetic tone with which the "Peroratio" announces the "hidden" allegory.

In Thomas Ingelend's The Disobedient Child, published about 1560 and perhaps written a decade earlier, the father has lost most of this allegorical overtone. Designated only as "The Rich Man," he is even more a fool than Pelargus until his son's follies teach him wisdom. When the son, now tied to a shrewish wife, comes home repentant, his father pities him and gives him money but tells him that he must endure his lot. This turn may represent a sterner, more Calvinistic theology, but only at the expense of obscuring the original meaning of the parable. The traditional happy ending can be varied because the son is no longer a figure for mankind or even youth, a development that reflects the growing particularity of the genre.

Although The Disobedient Child is a bookish and homiletic play, it shows the way for a much livelier example of the genre. Misogonus was probably written in the 1560s or 1570s. Philogonus, the father, is quite foolishly human, though still interminably didactic; and Misogonus, the corrupted son, is involved in some of the most vigorous tavern scenes of the tradition. The author adds a new element, an Italianate romance plot with a long-lost elder brother. (The elder brother of the parable had dropped out of many of the earlier
versions, but now he reappears in this odd transformation.) As one might expect, the varied elements of this play do not entirely mesh. Although the text is incomplete, it is hard to imagine how the missing last act could attain any greater harmony, whether Misan­gonus's repentance in Act IV lasts or not.

George Gascoigne's *The Glass of Government*, published in 1575, and *Eastward Ho*, a joint production of Chapman, Jonson, and Marston published in 1605, represent later variants of the tradition, which is humorously glanced at by *Histrio-Mastix*, performed in 1599, as well as by Falstaff. In time the Prodigal Son is again lost in the witty youth of Latin comedy, as in the impecunious rake of Stuart and Restoration drama; but this process is slow and irregular, as even this brief survey has suggested. It will be necessary to ask what levels are being exploited when Shakespeare alludes to the Prodigal Son theme, as he does most importantly in the Henry IV plays. In addition, this popular genre shows how other playwrights were coming to terms with some of the problems that Shakes­peare faced in the history plays.

If Shakespeare can be thought of as primarily in the native tradition, then he must have felt called on to include the details of familiar life that his audience had come to expect, the tavern scenes and the "symple Smockes." That is at least the simplest explanation for those ingratiating bits of Elizabethan local color in *The Comedy of Errors*, the most classical of his plays. But Plautus and Terence are more easily reconciled to this technique than Seneca because of their low style and domestic plots, as relatively successful combina-
tions like *Jack Juggler* and especially *Gammer Gurton's Needle* illustrate. Serious drama takes up the public stories of kings and princes, who (except for an occasional Prince Hal) do not normally frequent taverns and brothels, nor does the loss of a needle exercise them greatly. However, they do have families; that is one point of contact with the everyday lives of their audience. None of the men in the audience had lost a kingdom like Henry VI, but presumably many of them had shrewish wives. Whether Shakespeare could afford to exploit this potentiality of his themes or whether he had to veil the family of his kings and nobles in Sene- can impersonality remains to be explored.

It would be possible to use the doctrine of correspondences as a source of references to the family in a very impersonal way. Since the family is a mirror of the state, events in the one can symbolize those in the other. An example of this device in *Gorboduc* parallels Shakespeare’s early use of the family. Toward the end of the play, in piling up the misfortunes that come from disorder in the state, Eubulus laments:

> The father shall unwitting slay the sonne;  
> The sonne shall slay the sire, and know it not.  

Shakespeare expands the idea of these lines into a dramatic exemplum of the chaos in the state when in 3 *Henry VI* the ineffectually saint-like king watches the battle of Towton. As he looks on, the stage direction explains: “Alarum. Enter a Son that hath kill’d his Father, at one door; and a Father that hath kill’d his Son, at another door” (II.v.54).
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Here the family is introduced to a political play and subordinated to the political theme. As in Seneca, the appeal is to the labels of family life, to father and son in general rather than to concrete individuals. The language of the characters, rigidly stylized, culminates in an almost operatic lament by the son, father, and King Henry. Verisimilitude is deliberately banished in order to focus attention on the thematic significance. Shakespeare uses the family as a correspondence, direct or ironic, all through the history plays. There are extended scenes like this one or the parallel scene of Aumerle's treason and his father York's denunciation of him in Richard II, and there are single poetic figures like the Gardener's simile in that play:

Go, bind thou up young dangling apricocks,
Which like unruly children make their sire
Stoop with oppression of their prodigal weight.85

Within this emblematic technique Shakespeare can dramatize some of the most important political issues of his plays. Indeed, many dramatists of the 1590s and earlier use the family in this way. Perhaps the most obvious device is making the family a microcosmic parallel to the disorder of the state or an ironic contrast. Rebellion is the same principle whether it operates in the state or in other parts of the social fabric. Hence the Homily Against Disobedience and Wilful Rebellion argues:

For he that nameth rebellion, nameth not a singular or one only sin, as is theft, robbery, murder, and such like:
but he nameth the whole puddle and sink of all sins against God and man, against his prince, his countrymen, his parents, his children, his kinfolks, his friends, and against all men universally.\textsuperscript{36}

Conversely, family disorder embodies the same evil as political rebellion.

One sees this technique entering the drama when \textit{Respublica (1553)} allegorizes the imperiled commonwealth as a gullible widow. In that curious adaptation of Seneca to English political purposes, Thomas Hughes’s \textit{The Misfortunes of Arthur (1587/88)}, political disorder is constantly expressed by disorder in the family. Thus Cador vows to fight in support of Arthur:

\begin{verbatim}
Were it to goare with Pike my fathers breast,
Were it to riue and cleaue my brothers head,
Were it to teare peecemeale my dearest childe.\textsuperscript{37}
\end{verbatim}

The spectacle of intrafamilial warfare between Arthur and Mordred supports these rhetorical figures. Obviously, such a technique is useful for melodramatic intensification, but it can also yield quieter effects. In \textit{The Massacre at Paris}, as Harry Levin points out, the fact that the Guise is cuckolded demonstrates his isolation and hidden weakness.\textsuperscript{38}

Another idea of central importance is moral inheritance. A man’s role in the state is determined by his birth, and he learns how to assume that role through his blood and the example of his ancestors. To argue this doctrine in \textit{The Book of the Courtier}, Castiglione uses the stock metaphor of inheritance as a plant grow-
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ing from its seed: “Because nature in every thing hath deeply sowed that privie sede, which geveth a certain force and propertie of her beginning, unto whatsoever springeth of it, and maketh it lyke unto her selfe.” It is typical that, even while imitating Marlowe's Tamburlaine, Robert Greene makes his Alphonsus in The Comical Historie of Alphonsus King of Aragon son of the rightful heir to the throne. Thus the hero’s virtù is given roots in a noble heritage. The Raigne of King Edward the Third, one of the Shakespeare apocrypha, goes more deeply into the process of moral inheritance than most of the other non-Shakespearian history plays. We see the Black Prince emulating the heroic virtue of his father, and he proclaims his victory as a pattern for future generations:

Now, father, this petition Edward makes
To thee, whose grace hath bin his strongest shield,
That, as thy pleasure chose me for the man
To be the instrument to shew thy power,
So thou wilt grant that many princes more,
Bred and brought vp within that little Isle,
May still be famous for lyke victories!

Finally, dramatists exploit an old and very natural technique in measuring a political event by its impact on the family. The Homilies constantly argue that rebellion disrupts the whole order of the state and hence the welfare of the family. Rebellion will lead “the brother to seek, and often to work the death of his brother; the son of the father, the father to seek or procure the death of his son, being at man's age.”
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Another attack on rebellion gives a picture of disorder that foreshadows the speech of Ulysses in *Troilus and Cressida*:

> Take away kings, princes, rulers, magistrates, judges, and such estates of God’s order, no man shall ride or go by the high way unrobbed, no man shall sleep in his own house or bed unkilled, no man shall keep his wife, children, and possession in quietness, all things shall be common; and there must needs follow all mischief and utter destruction both of souls, bodies, goods, and commonwealths.42

The device has obvious theatrical possibilities. Cambises shows his tyranny by killing a boy before his father’s eyes in Thomas Preston’s lurid tragedy. (The incident is a stock exemplum among the moralists and pedagogues.) At greater length, in the two parts of *King Edward the Fourth*, Thomas Heywood shows how a king’s weakness can put a citizen in an impossible dilemma of loyalties. When his wife becomes mistress to one king and hence an object of the next king’s anger, Matthew Shore can neither reject her nor take her back. Hence he must refuse her offer to give up the king and return to virtue. To save her from adultery is to be a traitor.43

Thus in many Elizabethan plays the family is an emblem of larger issues in the state. The technique is apparent all through Shakespeare’s history plays. If that is their only use of the family, then clearly the handling is in the Senecan tradition, Seneca Elizabethanized by an elaborately figurative and imagistic style and perhaps reinforced by the abstractions of the
moralities, but unchanged in his rigid impersonality. In this emblematic habit there is nothing of the native drama's appeal to familiarity and realism. That would only distract the kind of attention necessary.

Manifestly, however, there is another side of the matter. In *King John* there may be something symbolic about Faulconbridge's bastardy and his vigorous affirmation of descent from Richard the Lion-hearted, but there is nothing abstract and metaphorical about his characterization. In the councils of kings and nobles he bluntly utters what the Englishman in the audience would like to say. He is in one part of his nature the essence of common sense. Faulconbridge is a successful characterization above all because of this appeal to familiar qualities, not because of his abstract symbolic meaning. Is it possible to combine these two modes of handling a character, or does the one necessarily counteract the other, so that common sense demands omitting any metaphorical significance in Faulconbridge's birth? Samuel L. Bethell's theory of multiconsciousness suggests that the Elizabethan audience was able to respond to different levels of meaning at the same time. Hence we need not assume that only one of the traditions can be functioning.

I shall discuss Shakespeare's history plays in their approximate order of composition (the precise order is a vexed problem) so as to observe their developing skill in relating the family and the state. There are figures and analogies based on the family and relying on the Elizabethan habit of seeing correspondences. There are scenes of family life injected into the middle of historical events but more or less distinct from them,
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like those of Hotspur and his wife. Finally, there are passages and even whole plays in which the family is inextricably mixed with the political situation through characters portrayed both in their public roles and as members of their families. Henry IV and Hal are king and heir-apparent, but they are also father and son, with all the potentialities of that relationship for dramatic development.

One cannot study Shakespeare's craftsmanship in any detail without taking into account the significance of the plays. The distinction between structure and theme is a slippery one, since the theme of a play gives it one kind of structure. Thus in *contemptus mundi* tragedy, the theme of man's dominance by the Wheel of Fortune gives schematic form to the plot. This form is used even by such comparatively advanced plays as *The Book of Sir Thomas More*. Even more popular in Elizabethan drama is the cycle of crime and punishment motivated by revenge, which gives pattern to *Richard III* as well as many lesser plays. Use of such schematic themes as a formal pattern need not imply the author's intellectual commitment to them as descriptions of reality, and so easy generalizations about Shakespeare's growing political wisdom as reflected in the later history plays are dangerous. The didactic passages in 1 and 2 *Henry IV* are not notably wiser than those in the Henry VI plays. To what extent the more complex structure of the later history plays represents philosophical growth and to what extent it is more subtle craftsmanship, or whether the craft of imitating life is much the same as the wisdom to understand it: these are not easy questions to decide. At any
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rate, the two sides—the ideas and the craft—must be studied together.

Finally, I cannot discuss the technique and function of references to the family without considering the kind of response that an Elizabethan audience might have given, and this consideration involves the traditions on which Shakespeare draws. Such traditions are agreements (in part, unconscious) between the writer and his audience that the writer will order certain kinds of material certain ways in order to command a special kind of attention from the audience. Much writing in recent years has described how Shakespeare and other dramatists allude to the morality figure of the Vice in some of their characterizations and so evoke a special range of responses in their audience beyond the potentialities of naturalistic drama. John Dover Wilson among others has found the same kind of significance in Falstaff's ancestry. I shall need to discuss what potentialities of the classical and native traditions Shakespeare uses in his handling of the family. All of this is only one small part of his drama, but if it offers a microcosm of his development in technical skill and the ability to give form to a meaningful vision of life, then it is surely worth detailed study.

1For a more consistently didactic and topical reading than mine, see Lily B. Campbell, Shakespeare's "Histories": Mirrors of Elizabethan Policy, 3d ed. (San Marino, Calif., 1963). For a judicious study of topical elements in drama from late medieval times to 1603, see David Bevington, Tudor Drama and Politics (Cambridge, Mass., 1968).
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3 Dedication to his translation of William Perkins, *Christian Oeconomie* (London, 1609), fol. 3r.
4 See the introduction to Lester K. Born's edition of *The Education of a Christian Prince* (New York, 1936) and his article, "The Perfect Prince: A Study in Thirteenth- and Fourteenth-Century Ideals," *Speculum* 3(1928), 479-504, for discussion of the origins and early growth of this literature.
17 Although this discussion implies more influence from Seneca than Howard Baker would admit, his pointing to Ovid as an alternative influence is an important corrective. In style, in characterization, and in some of the specific maxims and turns of phrase, the early Shakespeare is at least as much Ovidian as Senecan, though the two modes are often hard to distinguish. Likewise the medieval influences Baker...
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cpyoints to are themselves partly Ovidian and Senecan. See Induction to Tragedy (Baton Rouge, 1939).

One cannot precisely distinguish Shakespeare's contribution from that of other writers, since little is known about the early development of the history play. The texts are few, often bad, and difficult to date. At any rate, Shakespeare's second tetralogy carries the genre far beyond what the other extant plays offer.

Octavia may not be by the author of the other tragedies, but most Renaissance readers attributed them all to Seneca. It is in the Senecan pattern and has influenced Elizabethan drama like the others. Also it is a kind of history play, though not a useful model to Shakespeare in its way of narrating complex events.


Hercules Oetaeus, II. 1345-46

Seneca His Tenne Tragedies Translated into English, ed. Thomas Newton (New York, 1927), II, 238.

Troades, II. 1166-67.

Thyestes, II. 1006-9.


Of a passage in the twelfth-century Mystère d'Adam, he writes: "The episode which is here presented to us in dramatic form is the starting point of the Christian drama of redemption, and hence is a subject of the utmost importance and the utmost sublimity from the point of view of the author and his audience. However, the presentation aims to be popular. The ancient and sublime occurrence is to become immediate and present; it is to be a current event which could happen any time, which every listener can imagine and is familiar with; it is to strike deep roots in the mind and the emotions of any random French contemporary" (Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature, trans. Willard Trask [Garden City, N.Y., 1957], p. 131).

Line 57. Quoted from Chief Pre-Shakespearean Dramas, ed. Joseph Quincy Adams (Boston, 1924), p. 305.


There is a concise history of the genre in Felix E. Schelling, Elizabethan Drama 1558-1642 (Boston, 1908), I, 63-66.

The Comedy of Acolastus, ed. P. L. Carver, Early English Text
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Society (London, 1937). The introduction and notes are a massive source of information about this play and its influence.


34 V.ii.213-14. Quoted from Chief Pre-Shakespearean Dramas. Shakespeare need not have known this passage, since a phrase in Hall could have given the clue from which he developed the scene in 3 Henry VI (if a clue was necessary). For the quotation from Hall, see H. C. Hart's note on the stage direction at II.v.54, The Third Part of King Henry the Sixth, Arden Edition (London, 1910). The stage direction in the text is quoted from Hart, who substantially follows the First Folio.

35 The last line seems to imply the Prodigal Son theme, though not very importantly here.

36 Certain Sermons or Homilies Appointed to Be Read in Churches (Oxford, 1822), p. 524 (hereafter cited as Homilies).


44 A popular audience, uncontaminated by abstract and tendentious dramatic theory, will attend to several diverse aspects of a situation, simultaneously yet without confusion" (Shakespeare and the Popular Dramatic Tradition [New York, 1944], p. 28).

45 The Fortunes of Falstaff (New York, 1944).

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