

English History Plays in the Restoration Period★

Takayuki Yamato

I

Whereas the Restoration plays are frequently acted and many companion books about them are published in England and the US, there is little opportunity to perform them and few such books are published in Japan. What is the cause of this? One reason might be that the so-called Renaissance plays have mainly been given prominence in Japan. While many works of the Renaissance dramatists, such as Robert Greene, Christopher Marlowe, Thomas Kyd, Ben Jonson, William Shakespeare, Thomas Middleton, Philip Massinger, John Ford, John Webster have been translated and dealt with as popular research subjects, translations and research of the Restoration plays are limited in number, showing that the Renaissance plays seem to have been considered more significant in Japan.

Of course, many academics have published and presented papers or translations on the Restoration plays, yet the number is quite small, compared with those on the Renaissance plays. Are the Restoration plays inferior to the Renaissance plays in quality? If so, that would be a reasonable explanation for the unbalance between them. However, as far as I know, the Restoration plays have characteristics to satisfy the tastes of the audience of the period, which cannot be ignored.

This paper will trace a series of English history plays written in the Restoration period, focusing mainly on the plays representing the history of England. There are two aims: first, to release ourselves from the bond of Ribner's original view (1965), which still has a strong influence on those who are interested in English history plays, and to realize the existence of the genre of English history plays in the Restoration

period; second, to ensure that the Restoration plays have their own characteristics equal to those of the Renaissance plays, and to back-focus the characteristics of the latter by comparing plays written in both periods.

II

Following the accession of James I the history play passes into a period of rapid decline, with only a momentary rise at the very end of the great age of English drama in the *Perkin Warbeck* of John Ford. It is not only that there are fewer history plays but that the ones that are written lack the vitality or artistic merit of the earlier species. (Ribner, *The English History Play in the Age of Shakespeare*, 226)¹

By the view of Ribner quoted here, the English history plays are supposed to have rapidly decayed in Jacobean times, and we can agree with only the last rise in John Ford's *Perkin Warbeck* (1633).² In a sense, Ribner's assertion might be right since his study covers mainly those written before the Civil War. However, if his assertion has influence over the plays written after the Civil War, a factor which would make us misunderstand that in the Restoration period the genre of English history plays was lost, that would be a crucial problem: for they were still being written in the Restoration period, showing new dramatic variations with vitality and some artistic merit in the lineage of the traditional genre.

The author's claim that we are swayed by Ribner's assertion derives from the grounds that scholars of Restoration plays have not paid enough attention to the genre of history plays in the period. Robert D. Hume's *The Development of the English Drama in the Late Seventeenth Century* (1976), a pioneering book written on the genres of plays, for example, does not discuss the history play as an independent genre.³ Also, Derek Hughes's *English Drama 1660-1700* (1996) has the categories of comedy, tragedy, tragicomedy and opera, but not that of history. Even Owen's recent and well-received *A Companion to Restoration Drama* (2001) has no chapter where history is discussed alone.

Considering this, is it difficult to deny the influence of Ribner's assertion over the study of the Restoration plays which gives the impression that the genre reached

its peak in the Renaissance? As illustrated in the following chapters, the genre of English history did exist in the Restoration period. It is, therefore, important to be conscious of the fact. One could say, once tracing the development in the genre closely, the changes in English history plays, which had previously been ignored, can be ascertained.

III

There are two history plays about Henry V: the familiar Shakespeare's *Henry the Fifth* (1599), and the less well-known *The History of Henry the Fifth* (1664) by Roger Boyle, first Earl of Orrery.

Comparing the title pages of Shakespeare's Q1(1600), F1(1623) and that of Boyle's first edition (1668), we find that both plays belong to the same genre, history. Although the titles of both works are similar, they are completely different in content.

The characteristics of Boyle's *The History of Henry the Fifth* are as follows:

- i . it has a historical setting with noble males in England and many female characters in France
- ii . it depicts how good subjects such as Young Tudor and La Marr, or the villain, the Duke of Burgundy, win and lose both in public and in private
- iii . the subplot accesses to the main plot where the marriage of Henry V and Princess Katherine is achieved in the last scene
- iv . it has no such dramaturgy of preparing any scenes of battle, cruelty, communication among the characters of different ranks on the stage, as familiar in the Elizabethan history plays
- v . it is written in heroic couplets throughout the play, sometimes lofty and sometimes comical in tone. There is an episode that at that time Boyle insisted on the effect of rhyme and began to write plays by the order from Charles II who suggested he practice it.⁴ Boyle, in the same way as

Shakespeare had written *Richard II* in verse, tried to create his own English history in a lofty verse, to be a play worth watching.

There are two reports on how Boyle's *The History of Henry the Fifth* was received by the audience in those days: one by the diarist Samuel Pepys and the other by the play's prompter John Downes. Downes states,

This Play was Splendidly Cloath'd: The King, in the Duke of York's Coronation Suit: *Owen Tudor*, in King Charles's: Duke of *Burgundy*, in the Lord of *Oxford*'s, and the rest all New. It was Excellently Perform'd, and Acted 10 Days Successively. (Downs, *Roscius Anglicanus*, 27–28)⁵

Judging from this description, the play seems to have pleased the playgoers greatly. The Duke's Company, which revived *King Henry VIII* in a magnificent stage production in 1663 and staged the magnificently rewritten *Macbeth* in 1663–64 as well, was known to show the potential power of the theatre to bring about dramatic effects full of spectacle. So, particularly these new, splendid costumes, that Downes mentioned here, must be one of the great appeal points of the new English history play in the Restoration period.

Next, in Pepy's diary we find,

To the new play, at the Duke's house, of "Henry the Fifth"; a most noble play; writ by my Lord Orrery; wherein Betterton, Harris, and Ianthe's parts are most incomparably wrote and done, and the whole play the most full of height and raptures of wit and sense that I ever heard; having but one incongruity, that King Harry promises to plead for Tudor to their mistress, Princess Katherine of France, more than, when it comes to it, he seems to do; and Tudor refused by her with some kind of indignity, not with a difficulty and honour that it ought to have been done in to him. (Pepys, *Diary* [Saturday 13 August, 1664])⁶

The part of Princess Katherine played by Mrs. Betterton seems to have left Pepys with the feeling that something was amiss. Did the only problem Pepys rebuked, "one incongruity" caused by the player's unnatural action, have anything to do with the failure of the actress's performance or the difficulty of dramatic situation which the characters were put in? Such a question, closely connected with the degree of the

professional actress's skills, is interesting enough, however discussion of that should be left to another time, since it strays from the aim of this paper. Here, we shall confirm the fact that the English history play written in heroic couplets gave Pepys the impression of a noble atmosphere with wit and sense. This is a characteristic of the English history play at the beginning of the Restoration, although it will change from heroic to pathetic in the period.

While Shakespeare dramatized the great achievement of English men to accomplish the unbelievable triumph led by Henry, in Boyle's *The History of Henry the Fifth*, the Queen of France and La Marr's wit and capacity for managing to avoid crises are presented as a historical meritorious deed. Both French women see through the plot of the two rebellious malcontents the Dauphine and De Chastel, who deceive the Queen of France to indulge themselves in battles, and avoid the plot successfully, which leads to the denouement of the play where Henry marries Katherine. Apart from the wit of the queen of France who suggests making a counterpart letter in order to resolve the situation, La Marr, who obtained the information of their plot in detail by questioning from De Chastel, is described as an unhistorical heroine. By this, Boyle's *The History of Henry the Fifth* already has the right to be categorized in the genre of the history of describing active parts for women, which is quite different from the male-dominated heroic history of the Renaissance plays.

On the other hand, both texts have similarity: where the masculinity for war is focused, the phenomena occurs that the contemporary history of the dramatist colours the history of the source, that of Henry V. A topical allusion, important for England's foreign policy is mentioned there.

Were now the general of our gracious empress,
(As in good time he may) from Ireland coming,
Bringing rebellion broachèd on his sword,
How many would the peaceful city quit
To welcome him? (Shakespeare, *Henry V*, 5.0.30-34)⁷

The suggestion which considers this to be an ironical, topical allusion to the Earl of

Essex who withdrew the army in the midst of the settlement of Ireland against the orders of Elizabeth I is famous, although these lines can only be found in the Folio not the Quarto.

On the other hand, there are the descriptions at the opening of Act 5 in Boyle's *Henry V* about the battle between England and France in the mouth of the Seine. The lines by Bedford in a narrative mode report that the King of Portugal's navy, has joined in England's side as a mighty aid and token of friendship to the King of England.

But whilst to gain the wind both navies plied,
Both to the southward a third fleet descried,
Whose course, by bearing, to our fleet 'was bent:
We thought to them, they feared to us, 'twas sent.
When drawing near us, 'twas perceived by all
Their flags displayed the arms of Portugal.
That prosp'rous king, your kinsman and your friend,
His royal navy to your aid did send,
Hearing the French had rigged a numerous fleet.
(Boyle, *The History of Henry the Fifth*, 5.1.21-29)⁸

It is obvious that these lines which proudly admire the beautiful friendship over territorial waters, in other words, water diplomacy, are an allusion to the alliance between England and Portugal formed by the marriage of Charles II to Catherine of Braganza on the 21st May, 1662. Boyle, a distinguished nobleman, considering the phenomena of colouring the history stated above, might positively foreground the national profit, brought by the royal marriage, in Act 5 the same place where Shakespeare had satirized Essex as a rebel. This could be associated with the theme of the play, admiration of loyalty, and contributes to guide the audience's expectation toward Charles II.

IV

Owing to the emergence of professional actresses on the stage, Restoration playwrights started trying to represent their own version of English history, by

focusing on the emotions of female characters. The distinguished dramatist, John Banks, is said to have been the pioneer of this. But, seen in the history of plays which show admiration for the actions of women in the historical context, Boyle's *Henry V* was already showing signs of this, as mentioned above.

The English history plays which highlighted the anguish of female characters of aristocratic birth, putting forward women's emotions into a tragic structure, began to be produced in large quantities in the 1680s: John Banks' tragedies, *The Unhappy Favourite, or Earl of Essex* and *Virtue Betray'd, or Anna Bullen* were staged in May and April 1681 respectively; John Crowne's tragedy *Henry the Sixth, the First Part* (the adaptation of Shakespeare's *The Second Part of King Henry VI*) was staged in April 1681 and later banned. Also in this vein, in 1684 three years after the Exclusion Crisis (1678–81), John Banks's *The Island Queens, or The Death of Mary Queen of Scotland (The Albion Queen)* however this was banned. So, until 1685, the penultimate year of the Charles II's reign, plays dramatizing the misfortunes of a royal subject who was betrayed by the king's vile surroundings were produced in succession. The series of these 'royal subjects' who lost their lives to their masters have a common feature in that the execution was carried out backstage. *The Unhappy Favourite, or the Earl of Essex* is one such play but displays a new characteristic in focusing on the emotions of a male character.

Even though the memory of Essex's rebellion was beginning to fade, why did Banks dare represent the Earl of Essex in *The Unhappy Favorite* in the midst of the Exclusion Crisis? From Dryden's prologue for the performance in the presence of the King and Queen, we can understand that this play was designed to be royalist propaganda.

Our land's an Eden, and the main's our fence,
While we preserve our state of innocence;
That lost, then beasts their brutal force employ
And first their Lord, and then themselves destroy:
What Civil Broils have cost we know too well,
Oh, let it be enough that once we fell,

And every heart conspire with every tongue
Still to have such a King, and this King long.
(Banks, *The Unhappy Favorite*, 'Prologue', 27-34)⁹

This is the last part of the prologue which rings an alarm for the misery of civil war, and we recognize a patriotic view of history here, appropriate for the dramatization of the unfounded execution of Londoners' favorite courtier Essex.

To avoid the destruction of the nation, it was necessary to reenact history plays which would remind the audience of the royal courtier who died guiltlessly on the scaffold. They, mass-produced in this period, highlighted both the dilemma of the English kings, who were dominated by bad subjects, and the stable loyalty of good subjects. In any such play, stage props such as letters, rings, handkerchieves and children, were brought on stage to enhance the pathos of the last scene. In *The Unhappy Favorite*, there is a remarkably tragic aspect to the scene just before the execution of Essex as he sheds tears in manly way, whilst embracing Southampton.

Banks, who represented the Earl of Essex as the 'royal' courtier of misfortune and made the secret personal affection of Elizabeth toward Essex known in melo-drama, seems to intend to let the audience sympathize with Charles, through the compassion with Elizabeth, or sympathize with Charles's illegitimate son, the Duke of Monmouth, or Charles's favorite courtier the Duke of Buckingham, who both have some analogy with the Earl of Essex. However, since the audience would have been conscious of the difference between Elizabeth and Charles, its contemporary sense has become complex.

We should not overlook the fact that the source of *The Unhappy Favourite* is an anonymous novel in octavo entitled *The Secret History of the Most renowned Q. Elizabeth and the E. of Essex* (1680). As David Wykes¹⁰ explained in detail, it is a translation of the French novel *Le Comte d'Essex* (1678). In short, the material of Essex in English history, was re-imported from France, and dramatized from a novel. Banks satisfied the tastes of the audience, by reenacting a famous romance from

English history on stage, converted from descriptions of the character's feelings in the novel. Banks thus gave new vitality and artistic merit to English history plays.

V

In the 1690s, as distinguished in the plays of John Bancroft and John Dryden, the voluptuous beauty of the actresses became the new spectacle in English history plays. The forerunner is John Dryden's dramatic opera, *King Arthur; or the British Worthy*, staged in March 1691 by the United Company. This play, full of dramatic devices such as scenes, songs, female bodies, mechanics and music, developed the potential of the new spectacular in the semi-opera by collaboration with Henry Purcell. Bancroft's tragedies *Edward III with the Fall of Mortimer*¹¹ and *Henry II, King of England, with the Death of Rosamond*¹² were staged in November 1690 and November 1692 respectively by the United Company. These new English history plays have spectacle scenes in common, which put forward the voluptuous beauty of the female bodies: in *King Arthur* the temptation scene with the two naked sirens; in *Edward III* the scene of the crises of Maria's chastity before Hereford; in *Henry II* the scenes of the secret meeting of Rosamond and the king at Woodstock Palace, and when Eleanor of Aquitaine's breaks in and forces Rosamond to choose the dagger or the poisoned wine. These are good examples of sensual scenes, highlighted for the first time in the genre.

After experiencing the so-called Glorious Revolution in 1688, the dramatic entertainment world in London seems to reorganize the genre of history plays, by introducing a new pattern. What they produced in the 1690s was all based on somewhat too ancient materials. For England, after having undergone the power technique of inviting a foreigner from Holland in 1689 to ascend the throne with his wife to be, King William III and Queen Mary II, it might be difficult to ask for history plays to be a media for ensuring national identity. We can recognize the dramatist's

embarrassment when confronted with such a situation in the dedication of Dryden's *King Arthur*.

VI

We have illustrated that the genre of the English history plays did exist in the Restoration period, and that those written from 1660 to the end of the century changed in form with the times as did Renaissance plays. By considering some of the characteristics of the Restoration history plays, it is hoped that some characteristics of the Renaissance plays are back-focused.

This paper has considered the political meaning of representations of Henry the Fifth and the Earl of Essex. There are more plays in the Restoration period which represented such historical figures as Edward III who was described in the Renaissance, too. It must be hereafter a common theme to those who are interested in English history plays in the Restoration, when and why such a play was written. Furthermore, it is necessary to connect this task with some of the characteristics of Restoration plays on the stage such as (i) the absences of a Chorus and low life characters, and (ii) the increasing number of male characters who shed tears.

In the 18th century, the age of opera in England, the historical theme of Rosamond's tragedy featured in Bancroft's *Henry II* was to be performed in opera by choice.¹³ While the material itself is known as one dealt with by Samuel Daniel in his romance poem, that in the 1690s Dryden reenacted the historical romance *King Arthur* in a new form of performance, the semi-opera, full of scenic music – as in the 1680s Banks put the historical romance *The Unhappy Favorite* based on the historical novel in order to satisfy the audience's tastes – was a remarkable innovation from the viewpoint of the genre of the English history play. Now that the trials which gave new vitality and artistic merit to the English history play are confirmed, we should release ourselves from the spell of Ribner's view and turn our eyes to the genre in the

Restoration period.

NOTES

*A Japanese version of this paper was read in Seminar 3 “Reading the Restoration plays: from the viewpoint of changes of the genres” at the 43rd Annual Conference of the Shakespeare Society of Japan held at Doshisha University in October 2004. I would like to thank all the members, Professors Miki Suehiro, Akinori Konishi, Kazuki Sasaki, Eiichi Hara, Wataru Fukushi, Ryuta Minami, Junko Yamazaki, and Katsuhiko Engetsu, who kindly read an early draft and offered invaluable advice. My colleague, Steve Cother, helped me in stylistic improvement. Any surviving errors are, of course, all my own.

- 1 Irving Ribner, *The English History Play in the Age of Shakespeare* (1965; New York: Octagon Books, 1979), p. 226.
- 2 Harbage’s *Annals* set the limits of date as c. 1625–1634. Alfred Harbage, *Annals of English Drama 975-1700*, 2nd edition, rev. S. Schoenbaum (London: Methuen, 1964), pp. 132–33.
- 3 Hume only uses the expression “historical tragedy,” but never “history” alone. See, Robert D. Hume, *The Development of English Drama in the Late Seventeenth Century* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1976), for example, p. 399.
- 4 Stephan P. Flores (ed.), Roger Boyle, *The History of Henry the Fifth*, in J. Douglas Canfield (general editor), *The Broadview Anthology of Restoration & Early Eighteenth Century Drama* (Tronto: Broadview, 2001), p. 2.: “Orrery had already written a rhymed play at the request of Charles II: *The Generall*—a heroic drama in rhymed iambic-pentameter couplets—was produced by the King’s Company, opening in September 1664 at the Bridges Street playhouse.”
- 5 John Downs, *Roscious Anglicanus*, ed. Judith Milhous and Robert D. Hume (London: The Society for Theatre Research, 1987), p. 61.
- 6 Samuel Pepys, *The Diary of Samuel Pepys* (Everyman’s Library, No. 53), deciphered by the Rev. J. Smith, ed. Lord Braybrooke and with a Note by Richard Garnett (London: Dent, 1906), Vol. 1, p. 510.
- 7 William Shakespeare, *King Henry V* (The New Cambridge Shakespeare), ed. Andrew Gurr (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1992), p. 191.

- 8 Flores (ed.), pp. 28–29.
- 9 J. Douglas Canfield (ed.), John Banks, *The Unhappy Favorite*, in *The Broadview Anthology of Restration & Early Eighteenth Century Drama*, p. 105.
- 10 David Wykes, “The Barbinage and the She-tragedy: On John Banks’ *The Unhappy Favourite*” in Douglas Lane Patey and Timothy Keegan (eds.), *Augustan Studies: Essays in honour of Irvine Ethrenpreis* (Newark: University of Delaware Presses, 1985), pp. 79–94.
- 11 There is a doubt about the authorship of the work whose dedication is written by William Mountfort. See Hume, p. 399. For the biographical information about Mountfort, see Albert Borgmann, *The Life and Death of William Mountfort* (Harvard Studies in English, 16), (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1935). For a political meaning of *King Edward III*, see Derek Hughes, “Restoration and settlement: 1660 and 1688” in Deborah Payne Fisk (ed.), *Cambridge Companion to English Restoration Theatre* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2000), p. 137.
- 12 There is a short review of the play in *The Gentleman’s Journal: or The Monthly Miscellany* in November 1692, says, “*Henry the Second, King of England*, A new Play, by the Author of that call’d *Edward the Third*, which gave such universal satisfaction, hath been acted several times with applause. It is a Tragedy, with a mixture of Comedy, and represents chiefly that part of *Henry the Second’s* Life that relates to the famous *Rosamond*. Had you seen acted, you would own that an Evening is pass’d very agreeably, when at a Representation of that pleasing Piece.”
- 13 As for the changes of representation of Henry II, see Thomas M. Jones, “Henry II in Drama: Changing Historical Outlooks” in *Comparative Drama* 12 (1978), 309–25.