

HOLINSHED' S CHRONICLE AS USED IN  
SHAKESPEARE' S PLAYS

## INTRODUCTION

EVERYTHING that bears upon the work of William Shakespeare has its own peculiar value, and chief among all the materials we possess for a study of his craft are the books which he used for the foundation of his plays. He sought widely for themes, situations, ideas and language, reworking old dramas, turning into tragedy and comedy ancient tales of Italy, discussing thoughts of Montaigne and Pythagoras. Above all the books of Shakespeare's library stand out two, the *Lives* of Plutarch and the *Chronicle* of Holinshed, the former used as the basis of the Roman plays, the latter for that of the *Histories*, of *Lear*, of *Macbeth*, of *Cymbeline*. Each of these two works Shakespeare must have known almost by heart ; each of these must have lain open on his desk as he penned scenes and dialogue. Through a study of each we may delve deeply into his dramatic methods and his dramatic purpose.

In presenting this selection of such passages in Holinshed as Shakespeare drew upon in his plays, it must be emphasised that the orientation of the present editors is towards drama rather than history. It is valuable to see wherein Shakespeare deviated from his sources, but it tells us nothing to note how history, as rewritten from more recently discovered documents and after generations of research, has been misinterpreted in his plays. The prime consideration is the dramatic work of Shakespeare, which, as a thing of art, stands apart from, and independent of, all actuality as expressed by historians. As a consequence no effort has been made in this volume to point out the shortcomings of Holinshed or to indicate those scenes in the plays where Shakespeare, basing his work on contemporary chroniclers, was misled.

That Holinshed has his grievous shortcomings need

hardly be emphasised. In the first place, it must be understood that the modern ways of scholarship, although they were being dimly recognised at this period, were still confused by gossip, rumour and anecdote, which, in the Middle Ages, had stood for history. The medieval mind was credulous; the characteristic of the modern mind is scientific acumen, and this the chroniclers of the Elizabethan period hardly possessed. A tale told by some far-off author, unsubstantiated and perhaps anonymous, finds as prominent a place as the accurate description in a contemporary official document of some formal event. A dragon, a prophetic comet, is as seriously narrated as a battle and a murder. In the second place, Holinshed's book is frankly a compilation. Its originator and part author, Raphael Holinshed, perhaps, according to Anthony à Wood, a minister of the Gospel, seems about 1570 to have planned out this work which was to be a compendious survey of history, starting with Noah and devoting special attention to the three kingdoms. Realising that such a work could not be undertaken unaided, Holinshed, while reserving for himself the history of England, commissioned William Harrison to pen his well-known *Description* of that country, Richard Stanyhurst and Edmund Campion to write the *Description* of Ireland and Richard Hooker to cover its history. Their joint efforts appeared in 1578 as *The Chronicles of England, Scotlande, and Irelande . . . faithfully gathered & set forth by Raphaell Holinshed*. Nine years later the whole collection, "newlie augmented & continued (with manifold matters of singular note & worthie memorie) to the year 1586," was reprinted. It would appear that Shakespeare read the work in the second and not in the first edition, for certain phrases in the former were repeated by him almost *verbatim* in several of his plays. As Holinshed's will was proved on April 24, 1582, he can hardly himself have had much to do with the 1587 reprint.

Regarding the *Chronicles* as a Shakespearean source book and not as a history, we may present it to modern readers in one of two ways. The whole compilation might be reissued (as it was in the year 1807), the Shakespearean amateur being left to wade through its thousands of pages

searching for that which had appealed to the dramatist. This, the ideal way, obviously would be impossible within the limits of an Everyman Library volume, and, even if it had been possible, would have demanded the ideal reader, amply leisured and scholarly of eye. The other method, adopted here and in Mr. W. G. Boswell-Stone's *Shakespeare's Holinshed* of 1896, necessitates a departure from the original ordering of material. Here Shakespeare's plays are taken as the standard, and such passages from the chronicler are presented as seem to have a bearing on those plays, with a few indications of the acts and scenes most coloured by the Holinshed matter. With other books, straightforward selections would have been possible, but Holinshed's vast work, when cut down to the limits here given, must have seemed largely unintelligible and would in any case have been of little value either to the lover of Shakespeare or to the student. In the arrangement here the usual First Folio order of the plays has been retained.

It must not be assumed, of course, that all the matter common to Shakespeare and to Holinshed was necessarily derived from the latter by the former. Sometimes Shakespeare may have gone to Holinshed's sources, sometimes he found that preceding dramatists had taken themes from the *Chronicles* and had worked them up into plays. The story of *Lear* had been put on the stage before Shakespeare's time and the history of *King John* was evidently derived more from an already existing drama than from Holinshed's prose account. Each play, therefore, must be studied separately and considered by itself, and in the consideration of each the reader must, if he wishes to use Holinshed aright, ask himself what Shakespeare was attracted by in the story presented to him, what he found unsuitable for dramatic treatment and what he took over almost unaltered from his original. There is, it is true, less to be learned of Shakespeare's purposes here than there is in a study, let us say, of *Othello* and of Cinthio's tale of the Moor of Venice. A certain external necessity led Shakespeare towards the histories as it did not lead him towards the *Othello* story. The Elizabethan audiences were clamouring for knowledge



of their own land. A new era had dawned, and with that new era nationalism had taken a fresh form. For ever were gone the vague, medieval ideals concerning a Holy Roman Empire, an all-embracing Catholic Church and a universal Latin tongue. England now stood by itself; its monarch was supreme; its Church was its own; its language vied with Latin, Spanish and Italian. What more natural than that in the youthful theatres which were but one manifestation of this new spirit, audiences should cry for and dramatists should provide records of the more glorious and the more thrilling events in the national history? Nothing impeded them. The English stage was romantically free. No heavy Unities fettered the playwrights within circumscribed limits. A whole reign could be shown to those naïf and imaginative spectators for whom the bare platform became a city-street and a couple of hirelings were an army. As always, Shakespeare showed himself willing to fall in with the popular demand. His predecessors, the University Wits, had applied themselves to the history-play; even the academic authors, straining after neo-classic decorum, had started their tragic efforts with what was then thought to be English history, the story of Ferrex and Porrex. In approaching the stage, then, about 1590, Shakespeare found already an enthusiasm for this type of drama and found, moreover, certain examples of this type being played in London. Such examples were of two kinds. Some, such as Marlowe's *Edward II*, were dramas of genius, and these Shakespeare left alone. Certain reigns, because he would not enter into rivalry with works of undoubted artistry, were barred for him. Other plays, however, had not this distinctive mark, and several of these, such as those on the reigns of John and Henry VI, Shakespeare proceeded to rewrite, besides applying himself to reigns which, so far as we know, had not been dealt with before his time. External necessity, therefore, to a certain extent dictated to him both choice of theme and choice of kind.

These remarks are made because one of the most interesting and perhaps one of the most neglected aspects of Shakespeare's artistic life is the consideration of his

choice of themes. The old-fashioned view that he was a careless genius, taking any old tale which met his eye, must, it seems, be put aside in favour of the other, which would, more sensibly, present Shakespeare as an artist, widely read and intelligently seeking for themes which might either prove eminently suitable for dramatic treatment or which might give him opportunities for developing certain ideas or types of character. In the Holinshed volume the most interesting stories from this point of view are those of *Macbeth*, *Cymbeline* and *Lear*. The first shows Shakespeare, courtier-like, choosing a theme designed to please the newly-crowned James I of England, a monarch who brought the Stuarts to England and thus united the long-severed kingdoms. One who superstitiously had renewed the practice of touching for the King's Evil and who himself had written a work on Demonology, must have looked with special interest upon this flattering tragedy written by one of his own company of players. In selecting the Macbeth theme Shakespeare left himself fairly free to develop a story in his own way. He was not here dealing with "historical" history but with a dim and distant past which even his rumour-loving and unscientific contemporaries felt need not be adhered to over scrupulously. We find accordingly that several elements in the original account are left untouched and that the killing of Duncan is made more thrilling by the adoption of the Holinshed record concerning the death of King Duff. For dramatic purposes, too, the youthful King Duncan of the chroniclers was turned into an aged monarch whose white hair reminded Lady Macbeth of her father. The stories of *Cymbeline* and of *King Lear* left the dramatist equally free. Both dealt with a pre-historic Britain, and could accordingly be rewritten, as the career of Henry IV could not. Out of the one Shakespeare created a rather amorphous tragi-comedy, full of vague romance and misty fantasy; out of the other he made one of his most powerful and poetic tragedies. The aged Lear is not with him brought back to a peaceful throne; for Shakespeare's purpose the King, after passing through a soul-tormenting madness—itsself virtually the creation of the dramatist—had to die, and

with him had to perish the strong-minded Cordelia. A comparison of *Cymbeline* and *Lear* tells us much. In style both are close together, and *Lear*, had it not been for that sterner treatment, might have been as *Cymbeline* is. In each we see the dramatist at work ; once as the stern creator from legendary fairy-tale of highest tragedy, once as the weaver of pleasant myth and dainty love-tale.

It is impossible here to indicate in detail the precise points of Shakespeare's indebtedness to Holinshed ; indeed it were not of much use thus to indicate the portions chosen and neglected. That study, the value of which lies in the revelation of Shakespeare's method of dramatic composition, must be undertaken by each individual student of Shakespeare. Unless the passages in Holinshed are compared carefully with Shakespeare's reworking, little understanding can be gained into the ways of his art. In this book indication is given, in the left-hand margin, of the volume and the page in the *Chronicle* from which each selected part is taken. Where such a passage bears directly upon a scene in Shakespeare and does not merely provide general material for the plot as a whole, there is inserted in the right-hand margin a reference to act and some of the play. These may serve at least as a general guide for the reader. As remarked above, the general plan of Mr. Boswell-Stone's edition has been followed, and to that edition the present editors wish to express their indebtedness. Perhaps sufficient is given here for the ordinary lover and student of Shakespeare's dramas, but it must be emphasised that this volume contains only a very small part of Holinshed's original, and that more detailed research into particular plays demands a direct investigation of the *Chronicle*, as well as a comparison of the *Chronicle* with earlier histories, and with later history-plays of non-Shakespearean authorship.

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## BIBLIOGRAPHY

THE Chronicles of Raphael Holinshed appeared in 1577 under the title: "The firste volume of the chronicles of England, Scotlande, and Irelande, conteyning the description and chronicles of England, from the first inhabiting unto the Conquest. The description and chronicles of Scotland, from the first originall of the Scottes nation, till the yeare 1571. The description and chronicles of Yrelande, from the firste originall, untill the yeare 1547. (The laste volume . . . conteyning the chronicles of Englande from William Conquerour untill this present tyme.)" The Chronicles were contained in three volumes.

Ten years later, in 1587, after Holinshed's death, there appeared an enlarged edition entitled: "The first and second volumes of Chronicles . . . newlie augmented and continued to the year 1586 by J. Hooker alias Vowell . . . and others" [Francis Thynne, Abraham Fleming and John Stow, etc.].

In 1806 a portion of the work was published in Arbroath as: "The Scottish Chronicle; or, a complete history and description of Scotland . . . continued from 1571 until 1586 by F. Boteville."

A complete six-volume edition appeared between the years 1807 and 1808, entitled "Holinshed's Chronicles of England, Scotland and Ireland."

In 1917 R. S. Wallace and Alma Hansen edited Holinshed's Chronicles: Richard II, 1398-1400, and Henry V; another edition, with Henry IV added to the title, appeared in 1923.

Shakespeare's debt to Holinshed's Chronicles is illustrated in the following works: "The history of Makbeth, from which Shakespeare took his tragedy of Macbeth. Reprinted from Holinshed's Chronicle," 1843; "Shakespeare's Macbeth: with the chapters of Hollinshed's



‘*Historie of Scotland*’ on which the play is based,” 1862; another ed., 1864; “*Macbeth*, by William Shakespeare. With the *Historie of Macbeth*, from R. Holinshed’s *Chronicle of Scotland*, 1577,” 1886; “*Shakespeare’s Holinshed. The Chronicle and the Historical Plays compared*, by W. G. Boswell-Stone,” 1896. See also the German work by L. Riechelmann: “*Zu Richard II. Shakespeare und Holinshed*,” 1860.

An interesting study of this period is given in W. H. D. Rouse’s “*England in the Sixteenth Century*,” 1906 and 1913.

As noted in the Introduction, the work of Boswell-Stone has been taken as the basis for this edition. The text, however, has been compared with the original and various alterations have been made in regard to the passages selected. Words in italic, as in Mr. Boswell-Stone’s “*Shakespeare’s Holinshed*,” are, for the most part, those which Shakespeare directly borrowed for his dramatic dialogue. Permission has been obtained for the use made of the larger work by Mr. W. G. Boswell-Stone for the purposes of this edition.

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# CONTENTS

	PAGE
JOHN . . . . .	I
RICHARD II . . . . .	20
FIRST PART OF KING HENRY THE FOURTH . .	52
SECOND PART OF KING HENRY THE FOURTH . .	62
HENRY V . . . . .	71
HENRY VI. PART I . . . . .	90
HENRY VI. PART II . . . . .	107
HENRY VI. PART III . . . . .	122
RICHARD III . . . . .	138
HENRY VIII . . . . .	177
MACBETH . . . . .	207
KING LEAR . . . . .	225
CYMBELINE . . . . .	228



# HOLINSHED'S CHRONICLE

## JOHN

[There is no doubt that Shakespeare based his play of *King John* on the older anonymous chronicle-history drama, entitled *The Troublesome Raigne of Iohn King of England*, which, first published in 1591, was reprinted in 1611 as by W. Sh. and in 1622 as by W. Shakespeare. His use of Holinshed was therefore at second-hand, although for the King's outburst when he learns of the supposed murder of Arthur it would seem that he had in mind the corresponding passage in the chronicler. This, however, appears to be the only (and it is doubtful) evidence to show Shakespeare's acquaintanceship with the original narrative. From the point of view of history, the most noticeable fact is the strange omission from both the old *Troublesome Raigne* and *King John* of the events connected with the sealing of Magna Charta.]

[*H.* iii. 157] Iohn the yoongest son of Henrie the [I. i] second was proclaimed king of England, beginning his reigne the sixt daie of April, in the yeare of our Lord 1199. . . . This man, so soone as his brother Richard was deceassed, sent Hubert archbishop of Canturburie, and William Marshall earle of Striguill (otherwise called Chepstow) into England, both to proclaime him king, and also to see his peace kept ; together with Geffrey Fitz Peter lord cheefe iustice, and diuerse other barons of the realme ; whilest he himselfe went to Chinon where his brothers treasure laie, which was foorthwith deliuered vnto him by Robert de Turneham : and therewithall the castell of Chinon and Sawmer and diuerse other places, which were in the custodie of the foresaid Robert. But Thomas de Furnes nephue to the said Robert de Turneham deliuered the citie and castell of Angiers vnto Arthur duke of Britaine. For, by generall consent of the nobles and peeres of the countries of Aniou, Maine, and Touraine, Arthur was receiued as the liege and souereigne lord of the same countries.

For euen at this present, and so soone as it was knowne that king Richard was deceased, diuerse cities and townes, on that side of the sea belonging to the said Richard whilst he liued, fell at ods among themselues, some of them indeuouring to preferre king Iohn, other labouring rather to be vnder the gouernance of Arthur duke of Britaine: considering that he seemed by most right to be their cheefe lord, forsomuch as he was sonne to Geffrey elder brother to Iohn.

Now whilst king Iohn was thus occupied in recouering his brothers treasure, and traueling with his subiects to reduce them to his obedience, queene Elianor his mother, by the helpe of Hubert archbishop of Canturburie and other of the noble men and barons of the land, trauelled as diligentlie to procure the English people to receiue their oth of allegiance to be true to king Iohn. . . .

[H. iii. 158] Surelie queene Elianor the kings mother was sore against hir nephue Arthur, rather mooued thereto by enuie conceiued against his mother, than vpon any iust occasion giuen in the behalfe of the child, for that she saw, if he were king, how his mother Constance would looke to beare most rule within the realme of England, till hir sonne should come to lawfull age, to gouerne of himselfe. . . .

When this dooing of the queene was signified vnto the said Constance, she, doubting the suertie of hir sonne, committed him to the trust of the French king, who, receiuing him into his tuition, promised to defend him from all his enimies, and foorthwith furnished the holds in Britaine with French souldiers. . . .

In the meane time [John's] mother [Acts II.-III.] queene Elianor, together with capteine Marchades, entred into Aniou, and wasted the same, bicause they of that countrie had receiued Arthur for their souereigne lord and gouernour. And, amongst other townes and fortresses, they tooke the citie of Angiers, slue manie of the citizens, and committed the rest to prison.

Finallie [John] entred into Aniou, and, comming to the citie of Angiers, appointed certeine bands of his footmen, & all his light horssemen to compasse the towne about, whilst he, with the residue of the footmen, & all the men of armes,

did go to assault the gates. Which enterprise with fire and sword he so manfullie executed, that the gates being in a moment broken open, the citie was entered and deliuered to the souldiers for a preie. So that of the citzens some were taken, some killed, and the wals of the citie beaten flat to the ground.

#### RICHARD'S WILL

[*H. iii. 155-156*] [Richard] feeling himselfe to wax weaker and weaker, preparing his mind to death, which he perceiued now to be at hand, he ordeined his testament, or rather reformed and added sundrie things vnto the same which he before had made, at the time of his going foorth towards the holie land.

Unto his brother Iohn he assigned the crowne of England, and all other his lands and dominions, causing the Nobles there present to sweare fealtie vnto him.

[*H. iii. 160*] King Philip made Arthur duke of Britaine, knight, and receiued of him his homage for Aniou, Poictiers, Maine, Touraine, and Britaine. Also somewhat before the time that the truce should expire; to wit, on the morrow after the feast of the Assumption of our ladie, and also the day next following, the two kings talked by commissioners, in a place betwixt the townes of Buteuant and Guleton. Within three daies after, they came togither personallie, and communed at full of the variance depending betweene them. But the French king shewed himselfe stiffe and hard in this treatie, demanding the whole countrie of Veulquessine to be restored vnto him, as that which had beene granted by Geffrey earle of Aniou, the father of king Henrie the second, vnto Lewis le Grosse, to haue his aid then against king Stephan. Moreouer, he demanded, that Poictiers, Aniou, Maine, and Touraine, should be deliuered and wholie resigned vnto Arthur duke of Britaine.

But these, & diuerse other requests which he made, king Iohn would not in any wise grant vnto, and so they departed without conclusion of anie agreement.

[*H. iii. 161*] Finallie, vpon the Ascension day in this second yeare of his reigne, they came eftsoones to a communication betwixt the townes of Vernon and Lisle



Dandelie ; where finallie they concluded an agreement, with a marriage to be had betwixt Lewes the sonne of king Philip, and the ladie Blanch, daughter of Alfonso king of Castile the 8 of that name, & neece to K. Iohn by his sister Elianor.

In consideration whereof, king Iohn, besides the summe of thirtie thousand markes in siluer, as in respect of dowrie assigned to his said neece, resigned his title to the citie of Eureux, and also vnto all those townes which the French king had by warre taken from him, the citie of Angiers onelie excepted, which citie he receiued againe by couenants of the same agreement. The French king restored also to king Iohn (as *Rafe Niger* writeth) the citie of Tours, and all the castels and fortresses which he had taken within Touraine. . . . The king of England likewise did homage vnto the French king for Britaine, and againe (as after you shall heare) receiued homage for the same countrie, and for the countie of Richmont, of his nephue Arthur. . . .

By this conclusion of marriage betwixt the said Lewes and Blanch, the right of king Iohn went awaie ; which he lawfullie before pretended vnto the citie of Eureux, and vnto those townes in the confines of Berrie, Chateau Roux or Raoul, Cressie and Isoldune, and likewise vnto the countrie of Veuxin or Veulquessine, which is a part of the territorie of Gisors : the right of all which lands, townes and countries was released to the king of France by K. Iohn, who supposed that by his affinitie, and resignation of his right to those places, the peace now made would haue continued for euer. And, in consideration thereof, he procured furthermore, that the foresaid Blanch should be conueied into France to hir husband with all speed. That doone he returned into England.

[*H. iii. 162*] King Iohn and Philip king of France met together neere the towne of Vernon, where Arthur duke of Britaine (as vassall to his vncle king Iohn) did his homage vnto him for the duchie of Britaine, & those other places which he held of him on this side and beyond the riuer of Loir, and afterward, still mistrusting his vncles curtesie, he returned backe againe with the French king, and would not commit himselfe to his said vncle, who (as he supposed) did beare him little good will.

## THE ELECTION OF THE ARCHBISHOP

[*H. iii. 170-171*] But after the pope was fullie informed of the manner of their elections, he disanulled them both, and procured by his papall authoritie the moonks of Canturburie (of whome manie were then come to Rome about that matter) to choose one Stephan Langton the cardinall of S. Chrysogon, and Englishman borne, and of good estimation and learning in the court of Rome, to be their archbishop. . . .

The king, sore offended in his mind that the bishop of Norwich was thus put beside that dignitie, to the which he had aduanced him, . . . wrote his letters vnto the pope, giuing him to vnderstand for answer, that he would neuer consent that Stephan, which had beene brought vp & alwaies conuersant with his enimies the Frenchmen, should now inioy the rule of the bishoprike and dioces of Canturburie. . . . He added hereto, that for the liberties of his crowne he would stand to the death, if the matter so required.

[*H. iii. 171-172*] The pope perceiuing that king Iohn continued still in his former mind (which he called obstinacie), sent ouer his bulles into England, directed to William bishop of London, to Eustace bishop of Elie, and to Mauger bishop of Worcester, commanding them that, vnlesse king Iohn would suffer peaceablie the archbishop of Canturburie to occupie his see, and his moonks their abbie, they should put both him and his land vnder the sentence of interdiction, denouncing him and his land plainelie accursed.

[*H. iii. 175*] The pope sent two legats into England, the one named Pandulph a lawier, and the other Durant a templer, who, comming vnto king John, exhorted him with manie terrible words to leaue his stubborne disobedience to the church, and to reforme his misdooings. The king for his part quietlie heard them, and, bringing them to Northampton, being not farre distant from the place where he met them vpon his returne foorth of Wales, had much conference with them; but at length, when they perceiued that they could not haue their purpose, neither for restitution of the goods belonging to

preests which he had seized vpon, neither of those that apperteined to certeine other persons, which the king had gotten also into his hands, by meanes of the controuersie betwixt him and the pope, the legats departed, leauing him accursed, and the land interdicted, as they found it at their comming.

In the meane time pope Innocent, after the returne of his legats out of England, perceiuing that king Iohn would not be ordered by him, determined, with the consent of his cardinals and other councellours, and also at the instant suit of the English bishops and other prelats being there with him, to depriue king Iohn of his kinglye state; and so first absolved all his subiects and vassals of their oths of allegiance made vnto the same king, and after depriued him by solemne protestation of his kinglye administration and dignitie, and lastlie signified that his depriuation vnto the French king and other christian princes; admonishing them to pursue king Iohn, being thus depriued, forsaken, and condemned, as a common enimie to God and his church. He ordeined furthermore, that whosoever imploied goods or other aid to vanquish and ouercome that disobedient prince, should remaine in assured peace of the church. . . .

But yet, that it might appeare to all men, that nothing could be more ioifull vnto his holinesse, than to haue king Iohn to repent his trespasses committed, and to aske forgiuenesse for the same, he appointed Pandulph, which latelie before was returned to Rome, with a great number of English exiles, to go into France, togither with Stephan the archbishop of Canturburie, and the other English bishops; giuing him in commandement that, repairing vnto the French king, he should communicate with him all that which he had appointed to be doone against king Iohn, and to exhort the French king to make warre vpon him, as a person for his wickednesse excommunicated.

[H. iii. 164] Queene Elianor, that was regent in those parties, being put in great feare with the newes of this sudden sturre, got hir into Mirabeau, a strong towne situat in the countrie of Aniou, and foorthwith dispatched a messenger with letters vnto king Iohn, requiring him of speedie succour in this hir present danger. In the meane