Theatrical Temporality and Historical Consciousness in
*The Famous Victories of Henry V*

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At one point in his 1605 treatise *The Proficience and Advancement of Learning*, Francis Bacon addresses a major concern in Renaissance culture, the question of how the present seeks to know and in some sense possess the past:

> It is not possible to have the true pictures . . . of Cyrus, Alexander, Caesar, no, nor of the kings or great personages of much later years; for the originals cannot last, and the copies cannot but lose [lose, cause the loss] of the life and truth. But the images of men’s wits and knowledges remain in books, exempted from the wrong of time and capable of perpetual renovation.¹

The “ originals” of the past are lost, but there is potential compensation for this absence in a series of textual inscriptions “in books.” Bacon draws attention here to history as represented in writing, but that was not the only form historical representation took in early modern England. The late Elizabethan period saw the rise of a new genre, the history play, in which the past was “personated” onstage.² While both writing and staging history seek to compensate for the loss of which Bacon speaks, there is a crucial difference between these forms: the enactment of the past is defined by the temporality of the theatrical event, which, unlike a text, unfolds live. What, then, does performing history add to our sense of the emerging historical consciousness of a period noted for its commitment to exploring the past?

A close look at the anonymously authored *The Famous Victories of Henry V* (c. 1587) can suggest some answers to this question. Generally regarded as the first English history play to be performed on the popular stage, *The Famous Victories of Henry V* has been recognized for demonstrating the commercial viability of the past as subject material in the competitive milieu of the Elizabethan theatrical world, as well as specifically

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for its influence on Shakespeare’s plays 1 and 2 Henry IV and Henry V. The Famous Victories has been overshadowed by these, obscuring its innovative presentation of the relationship between historical representation and theatrical form, which underwent profound changes in sixteenth-century England. A key to my reading of this play is in its relation to the era’s changing notions of temporality, both in historiographic and theatrical terms. My analysis aligns The Famous Victories of Henry V with these shifts by focusing on the character Derick, played by the famous Elizabethan clown Richard Tarleton. Through his clowning, The Famous Victories emphasizes the physical presence of performance and works to stimulate the audience’s consciousness of the theatrical event in enacting history. Tarleton signifies the history-play genre at the time of its inception as being oriented toward a real-time engagement with the past, and thereby suggests the material process of theatrical performance to be analogous to the practice of producing historical knowledge. This genre poses several challenges: epistemological (the problem of how to know history), and representational (the problem of how to show history). Renewed consideration of The Famous Victories suggests the paradigm of theatrical performance’s response to these intellectual and ontological crises of historicism. In this seminal play, the concept of history and historical consciousness itself are both presented as variegated productions that, like all plays, are continually “under construction” as they are continually dissolving.3

**Historical Time / Theatrical Time in Sixteenth-Century England**

Early modern author and playgoer Thomas Nashe described the spectacle of Lord Talbot’s death in Shakespeare’s play 1 Henry VI (c. 1592) as one where “ten thousand spectators at least (at seuerall times)” amid their “teares . . . imagine they behold him [Talbot] fresh bleeding.”4 Nashe points to the affective power of being present in the theatre for this sight—it elicits tears—as well as to the fact that this scene was presented on multiple occasions. Other early modern discourses on theatre similarly explore performance as both an intensely material presence and as a repeatable practice. Many discourses focus more on this repeatability as a kind of transience, thereby characterizing theatre as a presence that is evaporating and elusive. This sense of theatrical temporality is linked to innovations in technology and in the consciousness of history in the early modern period that emphasize an awareness of the passing of time in everyday life. In a more static view, time is an undifferentiated mass of human experience in which typological correspondences trump “the moment by moment annihilation of the present” in any attempt to comprehend the meaning of human actions.5 A new, persistent focus on what theorist Reinhart Koselleck calls the “temporalization of history,” or what might be called a move into “historical time” is evident in the early modern era and constitutes a major component of perspectives on historiography in

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3 This phrase comes from Elin Diamond, who writes that the past is “always under construction” (emphasis in original). “Modern Drama / Modernity’s Drama,” Modern Drama 44 (2001): 5.


There is some dispute over whether Nashe is referring to Shakespeare’s play, or another now lost play that includes the death of Talbot. The important point here, of course, is simply that he is referring to a play that was performed on the popular stage.

the Renaissance. In this view, time differentiates the past from the present, thereby creating distinctions between entire centuries and eras as well as between one minute and the next. Hence, for scholars of early modern thought like Peter Burke, awareness of anachronism and efforts to eliminate its presence in historical representation become key elements of an emerging perspective on historical time during the Renaissance because sensitivity to anachronism implies an investment in the notion of history as linear and differentiating. This emphasis on linearity increasingly entailed an emphasis on secularity as well, and together these developments indicate the beginnings of a sense of the world in which, in the Newtonian formulation, time “flows without relation to anything external.” Such a sensibility of time makes the past seem distant and perpetually receding, if not elusive or irrecoverable.

The introduction of clocks to urban communities is an important part of this transition. For much of the medieval period, people in urban areas “relied on a system of time proclaimed by church bells,” while by the later sixteenth century, public clocks were commonplace in Western Europe (the first public clocks in London date to the late 1300s). These helped to create a situation in which “hours were of central significance to city dwellers, [for] whom buying and selling had already initiated into the vogue of quantification.” Throughout the early modern period this new concept of time was increasingly institutionalized and commodified in the context of the “growing commercial, capitalistic, and urban culture of the late Middle Ages and early Renaissance.” Michael Bristol helps to position controversies about the popular stage within this emergent economy:

What was novel and perhaps threatening or disruptive about the commercial theaters could not have been the simple fact of theatricality itself. What the theaters were able to accomplish was the transformation of otherwise familiar performance practices into merchandise.

As Bristol notes, the mimetic impulse in England did not appear ex nihilo with the opening of The Theatre in 1576. But in the predominant English ludic traditions that came before, performance existed in itinerant, courtly, liturgical, or festival contexts. The last of these are best seen in the medieval mystery plays, performed by townspeople during particular religious seasons and for the most part using makeshift or impermanent playing spaces. The new theatre scene that emerged in London during the

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8 Newton is quoted here in Andrew Motte’s 1729 translation, which can be found in *Sir Isaac Newton’s Mathematical Principles of Natural Philosophy and His System of the World*, ed. Florian Cajori (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1934), 6.
late Elizabethan period provided purpose-built, continually operating playhouses and almost daily opportunities to attend plays. Theatre proprietors like Philip Henslowe, now in charge of a permanent business, were acutely aware of time as money. As part of turning performance “into merchandise,” the newly professionalized, commercial theatre necessarily became a time-sensitive institution.

The enactment of a stage play within this time-sensitive framework necessarily involves the passing of minutes and hours.\textsuperscript{12} Time was in fact the boundary of theatre in ways that align it with other forms of labor during the period. Renaissance plays commonly gesture toward their own time limits, ostensibly emphasizing a fear of becoming tedious. A greater practical issue, though, was natural lighting. Theatre was subject to the same constraints that most other professions were. As one historian notes, work regulations issued by authorities across Western Europe during the later Renaissance “consistently stipulate the full period of daylight as the standard measure of daily work,” and that “working time was determined in part by daylight.”\textsuperscript{13} That theatre was a professional practice taking place during the regular workday was, of course, a source of the traditional hostility toward it by city authorities and moralists. In one typical fulmination against theatre, Geoffrey Fenton in 1574 writes that “Players . . . corrupt good moralities by wanton shewes and playes: they ought not to be suffred to prophane the Sabbath day in such sportes, and much lesse to lose time on the dayes of travayle [travail].”\textsuperscript{14} This objection indicates how the theatre industry, along with other ostensibly shady entertainment ventures such as gaming and bearbaiting found just beyond the reach of city officials, had an unusual temporal existence within early modern London’s economy. Such activities were themselves governed by market forces, but their vitality rested in part on their ability to distract and disrupt the progress of other businesses. The theatre sought to lure at least a portion of its audience members away from their own professional commitments. Unlike in, for instance, the medieval mystery pageants, where virtually an entire community might suspend most normal activities to attend and put on the shows, in the new professional theatres, performances went on simultaneously with the normal activities of the city.\textsuperscript{15}

As the increasing spread of public clocks would indicate, urban life now entailed a greater awareness of the passing of time. The theatre’s existence in this time scheme had philosophical as well as economic implications. Recognition of the temporality of playing is an important component of early modern theorizations of performance. Invoking the idea of simultaneity, in 1583 a minister named John Field could complain “that Theaters should be full and churches be emptie,” asserting that, even on the

\textsuperscript{12}On this point, see Kastan, \textit{Shakespeare and the Shapes of Time}; Tom F. Driver, \textit{The Sense of History in Greek and Shakespearean Drama} (New York: Columbia University Press, 1960); Rackin, \textit{Stages of History}; and Benjamin Griffin, \textit{Playing the Past: Approaches to English Historical Drama, 1385–1600} (Woodbridge, UK: D. S. Brewer, 2001). Each has argued that it is because of this awareness of temporality that there is a special relationship between theatre and history.

\textsuperscript{13}Dohrn-van Rossum, \textit{History of the Hour}, 292, 293.

\textsuperscript{14}Quoted in Chambers, \textit{The Elizabethan Stage}, 4:195, my emphasis. Similar moralistic complaints are a convention of the antitheatrical polemic; see also Jean Howard’s \textit{The Stage and Social Struggle in Early-Modern England} (New York: Routledge, 1994), chapter 2, especially 23–27.

\textsuperscript{15}In \textit{Shakespeare the Actor and the Purposes of Playing} (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), Meredith Anne Skura writes that the Elizabethan theatre is “outside the workaday world” and is “a permanent holiday on the south bank” (33). My point is that the differentiation of the theatre industry from the workaday world is a misleading antithesis.
Sabbath when by law they should be closed, there is no “Theater that can be found empty.” Fenton’s complaint about plays quoted above points out that they are time-consuming, thereby causing spectators “to lose time on the dayes of trauyale.” He later speaks of all the wickedness that transpires in “those twoo or three howres that those plays endure.” Shakespeare famously refers to the “two hours’ traffic of our stage” in the prologue to Romeo and Juliet, and George Whetstone likewise makes reference to the “three howers” of a stage play—hours that, in the words of yet another pamphlet, is “time . . . so shamefully mispent.” In Kind-Hartes Dreame (1592), Henry Chettle presents the voice of the recently deceased theatrical clown Richard Tarleton (a figure I discuss in detail below) as he muses on some aspects of the theatre business. Tarleton notes that to see a play, a man must “spende his two pence on them in an after-noone,” and explains that “while Playes are usde, halfe the day is by most youthes that have libertie spent uppon them.”

Plays were both timed events and part of a diurnal professional enterprise, a fact most evident when reviewing Henslowe’s Diary, which, along with other information about the theatre industry, charts the daily performance of plays in London in the late sixteenth century. Plays were enacted and completed only to be enacted again in successive days or in revival after several months or even years. Recognizing the temporal and diurnal nature of plays is a reminder of their own historicity, as things that took place in time. And to take place in time is to expire, to be, to adapt Chettle’s words, used up. A common word employed to describe both early modern players and the act of playing itself is “shadow.” Through this term, playing is associated with the insubstantial and fleeting in countless metaphors found in plays throughout the period. When Shakespeare in A Midsummer Night’s Dream makes use of the shadow–actor metaphor as well as comparing performance in theatres to dreaming, he calls attention to the imaginative mystery of the stage as well as to its evanescence, its being there and then not being there.

The temporality of theatre has provocative implications for historical consciousness when the past is dramatized. To perform history is to consume time in pursuit of the past, rather than to stop the flow of time forward or momentarily suspend its passing. Conceptually, to represent history in this scheme does not involve a reversal of diachronic time, wherein historiography would go back in order to recover the past and then inscribe it in some permanently legible form. Rather, it becomes a synchronic form of thought, where the past emerges within the present. History plays suggest that historical knowledge is supplementary to the present, and that it exists only insofar

17 Ibid., 4:195.
18 Ibid., 4:201.
19 Ibid., 4:202.
as the present attends to it.\textsuperscript{22} To perform history produces an experience of pastness that highlights a sense of loss and distance, provoked by the knowledge that historical people and events, like the theatrical people and events representing them onstage, are fleeting. As Bacon attests, the people and events of the past are themselves gone and irretrievable, just as the performances will soon be. The stage can produce the likeness of these absent things, even repeatedly, but its transience as a form posits that history can only exist when it is performed. The evanescence of the theatrical event, its status as taking place in time, helps spectators to understand the idea of historical knowledge as being similarly transient and dependent on the type of willful engagement evident in the work of theatrical production in order to be intelligible.

**Performing Historical Time in The Famous Victories of Henry V**

I want now to argue that *The Famous Victories of Henry V*, which was originally written and performed in the mid-1580s, exemplifies the cultural shifts and theoretical principles outlined above.\textsuperscript{23} The Queen’s Men, a select group of famous players formed during the early 1580s, put on *The Famous Victories*. This troupe favored a loose performing style that engaged its audience more than some of its rival companies, which were moving toward a quasi-illusionistic theatre wherein dramatic fictions were becoming more structured and self-contained.\textsuperscript{24} The result for *The Famous Victories* is a text that generations of scholars have found to be too haphazard and too lacking in poetic sophistication to take seriously. Its significance is often limited to its status as raw material for Shakespeare’s own *Henry IV* and *Henry V* plays. Reconsidering the play here might not go far in changing its literary reputation, but focusing on its investigation of theatrical form as a mode of historical consciousness can help us to see how its aesthetic both reflects and promotes an emerging attitude toward the past.

*The Famous Victories* depicts temporal movement through charting the alteration of the Prince of Wales from mischievous youth to warrior king. The progress of this plot involves an expenditure of theatrical time that demonstrates how prior happenings—some represented in the play, others merely alluded to—are given shape as historical knowledge only at a growing distance from the original event. In the opening scene of the play, the Prince asks his companions, after a highway robbery, “But tell me, sirs, think you not that it was a villainous part of me to rob my father’s

\textsuperscript{22}The term “supplement” carries a great deal of baggage from poststructuralist theory. Jacques Derrida’s sense of the supplement does apply to the performance of history, but here I use “supplement” more in the general sense of it as it is defined in the *Oxford English Dictionary* online (http://dictionary.oed.com [accessed 23 October 2006]): “something added to supply a deficiency”; or, to be more accurate in this case, I use it to convey the sense of deficiency that underwrites the present’s desire for the past.

\textsuperscript{23}As noted above, *The Famous Victories of Henry V* can be identified as the first popular play on English history produced on the early modern stage, but the authorship and precise composition date of the play are uncertain. The text of the play was licensed for publication in 1594, but the earliest extant version is from 1598. For my purposes, it is enough to note that, based on one piece of external evidence I discuss below, some version of the play featuring Tarleton and containing elements key to my reading dates from the early-to-mid-1580s.

\textsuperscript{24}I am relying mainly on Scott McMillian and Sally-Beth Maclean’s excellent study, *The Queen’s Men and Their Plays* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), especially chapters 4 and 6, for this discussion of Tarleton’s, and his company’s, acting style.
receivers?” The Prince asks the question with a tone of self-deprecation, as if to say “I’m a scoundrel for what I’ve just done, aren’t I? One attendant replies, “Why no, my lord, it was but a trick of youth” (1.7–10). The Prince responds to his lackey’s softening of his own characterization by agreeing, “Thou sayest true” (1.11), and thus refigures his own interpretation of how his past actions define him.

The Prince in the opening scene moves from understanding his thieving as “villainous” to regarding it as a “trick of youth.” His father, King Henry IV, and his lords likewise reassess their interpretation of the Prince’s wasted years. The King had once been convinced that after his death England would fall to “ruin and decay,” a dark presentiment that was shared by the King’s advisors and friends (5.67). But, as he is on the verge of dying, the King pronounces: “Now trust me, my lords, I fear not but my son will be as warlike and victorious a prince as ever reigned in England,” to which his nobles respond, “His former life shows no less” (8.62–65). Given that the Prince has yet to offer any evidence that this might be so, the court’s revisionist confidence appears to originate more in a desire to stay in line with the official discourse of the dying King and less from a sincere belief that the Prince’s riotous days do indeed signal great things. The Prince is the future Henry V, a model for Christian kings according to popular English history. The Famous Victories charts the progression of how the youthful exploits of the Prince emerge and modulate into a story with a transmissible meaning—that the seemingly wild actions of youth can be necessary practical training for kingship—and thus posits that the meaning of the past is itself something that evolves over time. Historical knowledge is neither immanent nor embedded in historical action, but rather is created, even negotiated, as time lengthens from the original event.

The play likewise depicts the Prince’s own historical consciousness as something that dawns over time. As he lay dying, the old King speaks regretfully of his guilt for having usurped the throne. Passing his crown to his son, he warns: “God knows, my son, how hardly I came by it [the crown], and how hardly I have maintained it.” The Prince’s reply indicates an awareness only of the present moment: “Howsoever you came by it, I know not; but now I have it from you, and from you I will keep it” (8.56–59). The Prince is free of the guilt of usurpation against King Richard II that so haunts his father, innocent, in other words, of the knowledge of the process by which he came to be heir to the English throne. An awareness of the genealogy of his kingship emerges later in the play when, as King Henry V, he makes a claim to the French throne based on the Archbishop of Canterbury’s advice: “Your right to the French crown of France came by your great-grandmother, Isabel, wife to King Edward the third, and sister to Charles, the French King. Now, if the French King deny it, as likely enough he will, then you must take your sword in hand and conquer the right” (9.53–57). The Prince initially claims to live in an eternal present, where the only thing he understands about the monarchy is that he is king when his father dies. It is with his father’s impending death that the Prince can proclaim he is “born new again” (7.37); this rebirth entails an eventual intellectual movement into the past, as he transitions from seeing history as blank slate—“Howsoever you came by it, I know not”—to history as knowledge.
that enables, even demands, action in the present: “you must take your sword in hand and conquer the right.”

In these moments, The Famous Victories depicts history as a kind of rhetoric that is generated and shaped over the course of time. This representation of history as a verbal construct is inflected by forms of theatrical presentation that further emphasize theatre as an experience of time. In one instance, awareness of time passing in the play is emblematized by the stage property of a cloak or gown that has the needles used in making it still hanging from it. The Prince wears this strange costume as he awaits word of his father’s death. The Prince’s friend Oldcastle asks him, “Will you go to the court with that cloak so full of needles?” To which the Prince replies, “Cloak, eyelet-holes, needles, and all was of mine own devising; and therefore I will wear it,” as, he explains, “a sign that I stand upon thorns till the crown be on my head” (5.36–38, 40–41). The passing of time is here brought into focus for the audience through a vivid material metaphor, the pricking needles that adorn the Prince’s clothes. Such emphasis on the moment-by-moment advance of time reinforces the notion that the enactment of a history play is one marker of how the past to which it refers grows continually more distant. It is the figure of Derick, who embodies theatrical energy in The Famous Victories, and the man playing Derick—the celebrated clown Richard Tarleton—who in combination most insistently demonstrates performance as a measure of that distancing, and also as a strategy for comprehending it.

One of the preeminent theatrical celebrities of the late Elizabethan period, Richard Tarleton was so well-known that his performance style inspired Gabriel Harvey (albeit as an insult to Robert Greene) to coin the term “Tarletonizing” to describe a signature brand of “extemporizing.” That The Famous Victories has not met with long-term success as a printed text can be attributed in part to its reliance on Tarletonizing, for the clown’s extemporal antics do not easily translate into print. As Andrew Gurr explains, “Tarlton’s kind of audience, drawn by his fame and united by comedy into intimacy with the players, did not long outlast the 1580’s.” Tarleton played the rustic carrier turned cobbler Derick in The Famous Victories. Tarleton / Derick’s position in the play can perhaps best be glimpsed through one of the great anecdotes of the Elizabethan theatre, which offers some insight into how Tarletonizing worked. Tarleton’s Jests (c. 1594), a book detailing the legends of Tarleton’s career that was published after his death, tells this story under the heading “An excellent jest of Tarleton suddenly spoken,” which, the narrator assures us, “to this day I have heard... commended for rare”:

At the Bull at Bishop’s Gate was a play of Henry the fifth, wherein the judge was to take a box on the ear; and because he was absent that should take the blow, Tarlton himself, ever forward to please, took upon him to play the same judge, beside his own part of the clown. And Knell, then playing Henry the fifth, hit Tarlton a sound box indeed, which made the people laugh the more heartily because it was he [Tarlton]. But anon the judge goes in

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26 Corbin and Sedge provide a brief gloss on this costume in ibid., 164n36.
29 Quoted in ibid., 155.
and immediately Tarlton in his clown’s clothes comes out and asks the actors what news. "O’ saith one, ‘hadst thou been here, thou shouldst have seen Prince Henry hit the judge a terrible box on the ear.’ ‘What, man’, saith Tarlton, ‘strike a judge! . . . and it could not be but terrible to the judge, when the report so terrifies me, that methinks the blow remains still on my cheek, that it burns again.’ The people laugh at this mightily."

On one level, this anecdote speaks to Tarlton’s recognizable status onstage. As the author notes, when the clown takes on the persona of the judge and is struck, “the people laugh the more heartily because it was he.” The “Knell” referred to as playing Henry V is William Knell, a player in the Queen’s Men. The story perhaps speaks also to a capacity of some spectators to distinguish not just Tarleton, but also his fellow players from their fictive roles, an effect that could be due to the familiarity of Tarleton himself.

But most importantly for my purposes, the anecdote establishes that Tarleton created a metatheatrical effect through his performance in this play, by which he was able to connect directly with audiences even from within the potentially distancing frame of historical representation. Tarleton was particularly noted for the physicality of his performances and for his genius of extemporizing, both of which are on display here and which largely elude the formal, captured version of the play that the published quarto represents. It is true that the “jest” refers to a single performance, but rather than its being an anecdote of a unique event, I regard this as merely one recorded instance of what could easily have happened in every performance of The Famous Victories: Tarleton drawing on his own celebrity as a means of highlighting the play’s status as a play for comic effect.

Not surprisingly, this anecdote from Tarleton’s Jests points to the most memorable scene featuring Derick in The Famous Victories. In this scene, Derick the carrier has been robbed by Cutbert Cutter, a servant and friend of the Prince. The beginning of this scene features a historicizing moment. The Chief Justice’s Clerk announces that the robbery in question took place on “the twentieth day of May last past, in the fourteenth year of the reign of our Sovereign Lord, King Henry the Fourth” (4.18–20). While the Clerk specifies this past moment as a means to set forth the putative time of the acts taking place onstage, as the “excellent jest [at] the Bull” reveals, and as we will see upon examining the scene itself, Tarleton’s presence and antics render this historicizing gesture ineffectual by addressing the audience and drawing attention to his own persona as star comic player through his Tarletonizing with his companion, John. The Prince comes before the Chief Justice in order to save his partner in crime from punishment. He immediately upbraids the Chief Justice for proceeding with the trial of Cutbert at all: “Why, my lord, this is my man. ‘Tis marvel you knew him not long before this” (4.37–38). In the face of the Prince’s increasingly hostile words, the Chief Justice remains resolute in refusing to spare the thief, announcing, “I must needs do justice” (4.60). The conflict culminates in the Prince pronouncing of Cutbert, “Then I will have him,” at which point the stage directions tell us that “He [the Prince] giveth him [the Chief Justice] a box on the ear.” The Prince then threatens to beat him further (s.d. 69).

This incident and the immediate reaction to it can tell us something about the play’s sense of representation. The Chief Justice in fact invokes the idea explicitly, as he explains

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30 The modern spelling version of this anecdote is quoted in The Oldcastle Controversy, 26–27.
to the Prince the gravity of what he’s done: “In striking me in this place you greatly abuse me; and not me only but also your father, whose lively person here in this place I do represent. And therefore to teach you what prerogatives mean, I commit you to the Fleet [prison] until we have spoken with your father” (4.78–82). The Chief Justice pronounces his status as a stand-in for the absent king and thus invokes the concept of political substitution. Along with its participation in political theory, the language of the “lively person” he uses can’t help but also resonate in terms of theatrical substitution. There, in a reverse of the Chief Justice’s formulation, it is the animated body of the player who represents an absent being; in history plays, this means the actor who is a present-tense, living and breathing stand-in for a missing historical personage. The Chief Justice’s sentence against the Prince precipitates a lively act of representation—which is truly a re-presentation—from Tarleton. The Prince is indeed hauled off to jail, and all clear the stage except for Derick and his friend John Cobbler, who have been watching the trial. They are amazed by what they have seen. In a direct address to the audience, Derick exclaims, “’Zounds, masters, here’s ado when princes must go to prison!” He then addresses his companion, “Why, John, didst ever see the like?” Their ensuing dialogue (4.87–100) is worth quoting at length:

John: O Derick, trust me, I never saw the like!
Derick: Why, John, thou may’st see what princes be in choler. A judge a box on the ear! I’ll tell thee, John, O John, I would not have done it for twenty shillings.
John: No, nor I. There had been no way but one with us—we should have been hanged.
Derick: ‘Faith, John, I’ll tell thee what; thou shalt be my Lord Chief Justice, and thou shalt sit in the chair; and I’ll be the young prince, and hit thee a box on the ear; and then thou shalt say, ‘To teach you what prerogatives mean, I commit you to the Fleet.’
John: Come on; I’ll be your judge! But thou shalt not hit me hard?
Derick: No, no.

As John takes the Chief Justice’s chair, the two men reenact the event they just witnessed. They begin with simple bantering about the details of the case before they approach the real broil (106–12):

Derick: Shall I not have my man? Say ‘No’ and you dare! How say you? Shall I not have my man?
John: No, marry, you shall not!
Derick: Shall I not, John?
John: No, Derick.
Derick: Why, then, take you that [Boxes his ear.] till more come! ’Zounds, shall I not have him?

John repeats the response of the Chief Justice to the Prince, while Derick begins to depart from the earlier script (113–19):

John: Well, I am content to take this at your hand. But, I pray you, who am I?
Derick: Who art thou? ’Zounds, dost not know thyself?
John: No.
Derick: Now away, simple fellow. Why, man, thou art John the Cobbler.
Derick: Oh, John, mass, thou sayst true, thou art indeed.
John then delivers the sentence of sending the Prince to the Fleet, and Derick, adding more threats and insults than the Prince did at this point, exits, only to immediately reappear, and end the playlet (123–26):

Oh, John, come, come out of thy chair. Why, what a clown wert thou to let me hit thee a box on the ear! And now thou seest they will not take me to the Fleet. I think that thou art one of these worenday [weekday] clowns.

This scene is a key moment in which the play calls attention to itself as a reflection on the project of history-telling. The men are so shocked by what they’ve seen that they turn to playacting as a means to understand it. Very soon into their charade the roles they assume begin to break down though. Derick addresses John as John, and John in turn addresses Derick by name, departing almost immediately from their fictionalized identities as the Prince and the Lord Chief Justice (109–10). This breakdown becomes even more explicit when it threatens to end the act. John echoes the words of the Chief Justice, who had asked the Prince: “Who am I?” (4.75). Derick confuses John by deflecting the question back at him, “Dost not know thyself?” Derick is quick to supply the answer when John says “No.” The carrier tells the cobbler: “Why, man, thou art John the Cobbler.” John recovers his part and insists on his identity as Chief Justice, prompting Derick to fall back into the playlet as well, allowing John to pronounce his sentence and send the Prince to the Fleet before Derick returns to upbraid John for allowing himself to be hit as part of the act at all.

John and Derick’s attempts to reenact the trial of Cutbert reveal both the pleasures and problems involved in performing the past. Reenacting the incident allows them to reflect on it and at the same time offers them the thrill of assuming aristocratic identities and of participating in the transgression of the Prince’s indecorous strike, while John literally gets to sit in the seat of power. In the course of their playlet, though, Derick disrupts the mimetic moment in which he and John are engaging and, by so doing, mirrors how the larger mimetic framework of the play as a representation of the past cannot be sustained. Derick’s mischievous play within the playlet, whereby he denies the frame of representation both he and the play at large have set up, is part of the clown’s own crowd-pleasing prerogatives: performance practices that work to undermine mimesis of the past.

In his study of the Elizabethan clown, David Wiles compares the clown to another fixture of the early English dramatic tradition: “While the Vice exists in a moral / philosophical dimension, the clown exists in a social dimension.” This social dimension in which Derick exists is that of the Elizabethan theatrical milieu. This mode of playing is recalled in Richard Brome’s Caroline play *The Antipodes* (c. 1638), where a
lord admonishes a comic player for being too much like old clowns from Tarleton’s era because he holds “interlocutions with the audients.” The clown of Tarleton’s milieu traditionally seeks a communion with the audience that keeps the plane of the performance grounded in the now of the enactment. As Wiles’s statement above suggests, Tarletonizing, despite its carnivalesque revelry, is not ahistorical. Regardless of its potentially anarchic qualities, it does not deny history or create a suspended, festive moment that is outside time; rather, it makes the sense of being in the present while at the theatre more palpable, most vividly when the comic player holds “interlocutions with the audients.”

The general metatheatricality of the clown is amplified in *The Famous Victories* by virtue of Tarleton’s own fame. The best-known player of his era, his own persona, or at least the public comic persona he cultivated, could always spill over into his putative stage roles. As one critic notes, “It seems likely that there was often tension between Tarlton’s known identity as clown and the fictive role he played in a production.” The unique power of Tarleton’s physical presence is attested to by audience accounts of the period that he could provoke uproarious laughter by just peeking out from behind a door or screen onstage and making a comic face. Audience awareness of Tarleton thus places a peculiar frame around the representation of the past that the play purports through presenting the story of Henry V’s youth and kingly exploits. Tarleton’s outsized persona reminds audiences that the play is all an act, in the same way that his Derick does in the playlet with John the Cobbler.

The physical force of Tarleton’s presence in particular keeps the audience grounded in an awareness of the present moment of the performance. Traces of the physicality of Tarleton’s performance can be detected throughout the play. For instance, as he is being conscripted for the war in France, Derick brawls with John’s wife after he attempts to steal the lid of her pot to use as a shield in battle. Stage directions in this scene include “She beateth him with her pot-lid”; “Here he shakes her”; and “She beateth him” (s.d. 10.18–22). Such directions are hints of what were no doubt moments when, as in the jest reported above, the audience laughed “mightily.” The play here relies on Tarleton’s ability to engage in physical humor, a type of comedy that is heightened onstage through the continuum between player and playgoer opened up by the clown’s existence in a social dimension contemporaneous with the audience. Tarleton establishes and maintains this social dimension in his verbal gestures toward the playgoers as when, after the striking of the Chief Justice, he addresses the audience directly with “’Zounds, masters, here’s ado when princes must go to prison!”

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Another important moment of audience address occurs later in the play during the climactic war against the French. Derick appears on the battlefield and fools a French soldier into giving him his sword through a ridiculous swindle. While the Frenchmen cowers, Derick, now in possession of the sword, according to the stage direction “turns his back” to the man, perhaps to face the playgoers directly. The solider then runs away from him, and Derick, left alone, confides to the audience: “What, is he gone? Mass, I am glad of it; for, if he had stayed, I was afraid he would have stirred again and then I should have been spilt” (17.17–18). He later confides in John that he has earned the honorific title the “bloody solider” through a special trick: “Every day when I went into the field I would take a straw and thrust it into my nose and make my nose bleed” (19.15–17). The battlefield on which Derick commits these acts is one of the most famous in all English history. King Henry himself consecrates it as the site of a great event when he names it after a nearby castle: “I will that this be forever called the Battle of Agincourt” (15.35), where English “swords are almost drunk with French blood” (15.1–2) and where this “honourable victory” has signified God’s favor to England (15.10–11). But even as Henry delivers readymade historical knowledge to the audience when he titles the battle and interprets its providential meaning, Agincourt is represented not as only a distant, static diorama of English prowess and national destiny, but simultaneously as an arena in which Tarleton can romp clownishly. The play transports a creature of the time and place of the Elizabethan stage to a celebrated venue in the distant English past where he engages in tomfoolery and speaks to the audience; in other words, where he displays the tools of the theatrical clown. Derick’s words and actions dilute, perhaps even negate, Henry’s heady, proto-nationalist rhetoric. But alongside this political parody, Tarleton as Derick ensures that the historical event known as Agincourt—in many respects the centerpiece of a past the play seeks to represent—cannot be separated from the theatrical process that brings it forth onstage. Agincourt, Tarleton’s presence insists, is a historical event that is here being created by actors.\(^{36}\)

There is not space here to pursue in detail the legacy of *The Famous Victories* in the development of the history-play genre in the late Elizabethan era. But one example from a subsequent history play can indicate some of the ways that the influence of Derick’s role as a present-tense mediator in the representation of the past was felt beyond *The Famous Victories*, and even beyond plays featuring a Tarletonesque clown. The example is well-known: Shakespeare’s *Henry V* (written c. 1599), a work that derives in part from *The Famous Victories*. Shakespeare’s play, in the version of it published in the First Folio (1623), features a Chorus that explicitly bridges the history being presented and the site of representation in the theatre, often through emphasizing the limits of theatrical representation: “Can this cockpit [i.e., the playhouse] hold / The vasty fields of France?”\(^{37}\) As a mediating figure, the Chorus addresses the audience throughout, and in so doing reflects on the belatedness of historical representation. The temporal limit of the play is frequently invoked: in the prologue, the Chorus tells

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\(^{36}\)On this point, see Rackin, *Stages of History*, 86–145, which speaks of this aspect of historical representation more specifically in terms of anachronism.

\(^{37}\) *Henry V*, Prologue 11–12. Citations from *Henry V* refer to *The Riverside Shakespeare*, 2nd ed., ed. G. Blakemore Evans et al. (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1997), and will appear parenthetically. The first printed versions of the play (quartos from 1600, 1602, and 1619) were published without the Chorus’s lines.
that the play will compress “th’ accomplishment of many years / Into an hour-glass,” (Prologue 30–31) and later in the play, the Chorus delivers a longwinded recapitulation of material from the chronicles, the “due course of things” that, it explains, “cannot in their huge and proper life / Be here presented” (Act 5, Chorus 4–6). The events of the past that the play putatively covers exceed the temporal moment allotted for a stage play. The Chorus continually reminds the audience of the consequences of such limits: that for the play to succeed, it must be aware that it is not watching history as it really happened and must commit its imagination to accepting the story as it has been shaped by the “rough and all-unable pen [of a] bending author” (Epilogue 1–2) and enacted by “flat unraised spirits” (Prologue 9), the actors who cannot be the figures they enact. The sense that this is a project that is taking place within a time scheme shared by the actors and the audience—and thus necessarily separated from the past—is emphasized over and over by the Chorus’s use of the imperative mood: “Think, when we talk of horses, that you see them” (Prologue 26); “Suppose that you have seen” (Act 3, Chorus 3); “[S]it and see” (Act 4, Chorus 52); the imperative further establishes the presentness of the play when it is joined with the direct invocation of the present moment: “Now entertain conjecture” (Act 4, Chorus 1); “But now behold” (Act 5, Chorus 22; all emphases mine).

The plot of the play itself revolves around King Henry’s attempt to conquer France, and Agincourt is again the climax. Before the battle, the Earl of Westmerland complains of the great odds the English face and laments, “O that we now had here / But one ten thousand of those men in England / That do no work to-day!” (4.3.16–18). The reference to those in England that “do no work to-day” straddles the represented world of the anxious commanders contemplating the coming battle and the present-tense world of the London playhouse in which it is actually delivered. Those present in the audience are precisely those who are seemingly doing no work. Like the idle Englishmen to whom Westmerland alludes, who are separated by distance from the battle in France, those in the theatre audience cannot be a part of the event of Agincourt because they are necessarily separated from it by the gulf of time. But in another sense, those in the theatre are in fact involved in a kind of work: the communal labor of making history. As the Chorus directs at one point, in order to have access to the sight of the English coming forth to greet the return from France of King Henry, they must “behold” this spectacle in the “working-house of thought” (Act 5, Chorus 22–23).

The Famous Victories is the first popular Elizabethan history play; Shakespeare’s Henry V can be regarded as being one of the last. The Chorus asserts that to provide some experience of history, plays need to activate the “working-house of thought” in audiences through theatrical techniques such as direct address and metatheatrical dialogue. The performance of Tarleton as Derick and other different, but ultimately related techniques and moments embed The Famous Victories in the temporality of the professional theatre by maintaining audience awareness of the play’s status as aesthetic event. Realizing that the past presented onstage is a contemporary production helps to stimulate in audiences an impulse to behold the history represented as the work of performance and thus dependent on the audience’s attention in order to be intelligible. A hint of this might be evident in the label Derick applies to John when he calls him a “worenday clown,” which the play’s most recent editors gloss as meaning “weekday.”

If this is accurate, as weekday / work-a-day clowns Derick / Tarleton and John are
marked as professional players, recognizable to the audience as a part of the working theatre industry. As Tarletonizing alerts us throughout the play, the set-in-the-past historical time that *The Famous Victories* enacts is enfolded in “worenday” theatrical time—the unfolding present time—in which the performance proceeds.

Tarleton’s performance is itself expiring as it happens. It is thus coeval with the spatial-temporal particularity of the late sixteenth-century stage space. This is the space of professional drama, where time is “borrowed” from everyday life.39 The clowns make a deliberate decision to borrow time from the present in order to perform the past when, for instance, they act out the trial scene they witnessed. In this way, their playlet is a figure for the performance of history in *The Famous Victories* itself and on the Elizabethan stage at large, where those in the audience that “do no work today” can in fact work their imaginations through a fantasy of access to the past that is mediated by the performing players.

**The Shoe-Taker’s History**

Herbert Blau concisely formulates the relation of performance to precession when he writes that “it is only in terms of the living that we imagine the world of the dead.”40 This is a compelling reminder about the temporality of the history play, for the terms of the living in performance means the performative present, that which is necessarily other from the performed past. Blau’s formulation becomes especially poignant for *The Famous Victories* when, late in the play, Derick describes his contact with the bodies of the dead French soldiers he comes across. The stage directions have Derick enter his final scene “with his girdle full of shoes” (s.d. 19.1). He explains to John: “And I have got some shoes; for I’ll tell thee what I did. When they [Frenchmen] were dead I would go take off all their shoes” (19.29–30). The image of Derick scavenging the battlefield and stealing the shoes off of corpses, the final battlefield image evoked in *The Famous Victories*, parodies the English invasion of France as a brutal act of theft. It is also a reminder that the performance of history of which the shoe stealing is a part is itself a kind of appropriation from the dead, in and on the terms of the living. *The Famous Victories* stages this appropriation simultaneously as a playful, pointed, and purposeful manipulation of the materials of the past as they are capriciously plucked from the world of the dead and made to serve the needs of the present in the real-time unfolding of a play.

In the most recent study of the development of the history play in sixteenth-century England, Benjamin Griffin has argued that *The Famous Victories* straddles the broad, cultural shift from festive time to historical time. He argues that while this play is part of modern London’s “dramatic economy,” it “draws its idea of human existence in time from the rural calendar.” Griffin’s analysis makes use of the carnival structure of the Prince’s trajectory from anarchic indulgence to controlled temperance in viewing the change as ultimately signaling a move from “May-game to Lenter-stuff.” This reading is dependent on his effective expurgation of Tarleton from the play. He concentrates entirely on the Prince’s “reformation,” feeling that “the sub-plots are negligible.”41

40 Ibid., 174.
In this, Griffin agrees with other critics of the play, such as Irving Ribner, who was thinking of the Derick scenes when he wrote of *The Famous Victories* that “as drama the play is formless and incoherent and, in general, worthless.” What Griffin, Ribner, and others miss by ignoring or denigrating the significance of Tarleton’s presence in the play is precisely how the clown’s historicizing presence can make audiences aware of their own temporal moment at the theatre, and thus push the plays in which they appear toward the province of the new professional dramatic environment—and time scheme—of urban London. Tarleton’s brand of playing may not have lasted long past his death in 1588, but his scenes in *The Famous Victories* do show his supposedly old-fashioned brand of clowning at work, perhaps even thriving, to judge by the anecdote of the “excellent jest of Tarleton” discussed above in the context of the new diurnal, commercial stage. Formally, *The Famous Victories* demonstrates that the enactment of history—showing the past—must unfold in the present tense of theatrical time and so asserts that the historical time of the history play is an institutionalized construct produced in and on theatrical terms. As narrative and a model for knowing history, *The Famous Victories* demonstrates how the interpretation and production of the past as a story develops as a condition of the passing of time. The formal and narrative elements of the play I have been discussing in sum present a perspective on the past wherein historical knowledge is cut from a similar cloth as theatrical practice and thus can be viewed as a continually changing human artifact.

In a recent, perceptive attempt to theorize the performance of history, Freddie Rokem addresses the status of the present performer in the face of the temporal gap between the now of the theatre and the then of history by suggesting that the actor in a history play is a “witness to the historical event.” Rokem writes that “the actors serve as a connecting link between the historical past and the ‘fictional’ performed here and now” of the theatre. While Rokem is clear that history plays announce themselves as re-doings, his formulation of the actor as witness is still too suggestive of continuity between the past and the present representation of the past. Performance, in its physical presence, reinforces the absence of the past by calling attention to the real, present, removed-from-history bodies onstage. It is the status of history as the report of witnesses that dramatic historiography denies. When theatre purports to reenact the past, the eyewitness report that might lend authority to the script is repressed. The actual reporting witness is absent and the report itself is mediated by player stand-ins who mouth invented words removed from their original context. The living, breathing body onstage disrupts rather than effects continuity and thus highlights how the temporality of drama forces audiences into awareness that the actual past is always irrecoverable and so always under construction. To perform history is to make this evident.

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45 On this point, see ibid., 14.
The past that performance makes in *The Famous Victories of Henry V* exists in a narrative space that is carved out of the present through popular dramatic techniques. Performers in this play make room in the present to create and cultivate particular historical narratives, but more importantly to create and cultivate a general consciousness of how those narratives are generated and how the wider concept of the past is necessarily elusive and precarious. Like theatre, history only really exists in the present through conscious, imaginative acts. *The Famous Victories* establishes history as, if not quite a kind of Tarletonizing, at least a form of cultural production that exists only insofar as it is continually produced and disseminated. Tarleton’s mediation between the imagined past and the performative present emblematizes the phenomenology of theatre as an expenditure of time, a physical process under constant temporal pressure. *The Famous Victories* offers this phenomenology as one way to address the ontological quandary of historical knowledge in the context of a linear concept of time. The popularity of *The Famous Victories* and its role in launching an important dramatic genre suggests that in the early modern period, audiences could take pleasure in an emergent *sine qua non* of historical consciousness: satisfying the desire to encounter the past—indeed, having history at all—requires commitment to a communal act of secular conjuring, an act of production in the performative present: in other words, to a theatrical imagination.