

## Shakespeare's Use of History in Escalas' Criticism

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Rafael Ballester Escalas (1916-1993) deserves to be regarded as one of the most distinguished scholars within the field of Shakespearean criticism in Spain. His contribution is mainly devoted to the study of Shakespeare's use of history in his dramas. He was concerned with the historical dimension of Shakespeare's plays. And the reason for his critical interest in Shakespeare's histories lies in the fact that he, himself, was a historian who wrote books on different aspects of world history and taught Ancient History at the universities of Barcelona and Tarragona. His academic involvement in historical studies and research together with a deep knowledge of Shakespearean drama and a personal feeling for Shakespeare's dramatic achievement led him to study the historical material of Shakespeare's plays.

His admiration for Shakespeare began early and remained one of his greatest academic interests throughout his life. His doctoral thesis on Shakespeare's dramatic use of history was entitled *El historiador William Shakespeare (ensayo sobre el espíritu del siglo XVI)*. He translated *Julius Caesar* and *Coriolanus* and played a minor role in *Twelfth Night*, taking part in the Shakespearean debates and controversies of his time.<sup>1</sup> These activities give an accurate idea of his comprehensive experience and understanding of Shakespeare, for whom, both as a man and as a historian, he had an enduring passion. It is interesting to note how often Escalas refers to Shakespeare in his works. The Bard is always there as one of the most active and creative elements in his mind. Whenever he has the opportunity, he refers to him as a classic author, like Homer, rating him with the greatest historiographers of all times such as Herodotus, Thucydides and Livy (Escalas 1961: 6). The references to Shakespeare are frequent when he deals with English history, especially with Elizabethan and Jacobean history. He also published a survey of world literature where he devotes a whole chapter to Shakespeare and his Elizabethan contemporaries and includes a brief summary of his thirty-seven plays.<sup>2</sup> His concern is almost exclusively with drama and there is only a brief reference to Shakespeare's poetry.

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<sup>1</sup> He translated some of the English classics like *Robinson Crusoe* and *Oliver Twist* into Spanish.

<sup>2</sup> It deals with English literature from Beowulf to the modern period, taking his account as far as T. S. Eliot and Rabindranath Tagore. It is not a complete study of the periods of the different national literatures but a general and brief outline of some of the most relevant literary facts with a selection of what, by his own criteria, are the most representative authors and works.

He was interested not only in Shakespeare's history plays but also in Shakespeare himself and saw him as a subject for historical study and analysis. He shared the modern view on Shakespeare's life. He believed that there was little that was known about his life for certain since it might be described as chaos between two legal documents: a birth certificate and a death certificate (Escalas 1945: 29-30). As in the lives of other men of genius like Virgil, Euripides and Cervantes, we seem to have only negative data. Hence Shakespeare's biography is largely an account of what we do not know (Escalas 1950: 11). He based his conclusions on the evidence produced by the Shakespearean documents at Stratford which he thought were of little historical value, because they could not prove much about Shakespeare's life. He is critical of Astrana's *Vida inmortal de Guillermo Shakespeare*, for he thinks there is no such clear evidence about Shakespeare's life as Astrana suggests. Most of Escalas' ideas on Shakespeare's biography appears in the introduction to his translation of *Julius Caesar* and in *El historiador William Shakespeare* where he is especially concerned with Shakespeare's religious beliefs, for religion was a matter of particular interest to Escalas as a consequence of the Spanish situation after the Spanish Civil War when it became a touchstone for Shakespearean criticism in Spain<sup>3</sup>. His aim was to present an updated account of Shakespeare's life and times based on the limited, reliable, documentation. And for him the plays remain the most authentic proof of his existence because his writings are the only reliable documents. It is interesting to notice how sceptical he is about Shakespeare's life while he has no doubt about Shakespeare's authorship, in spite of knowing that it was still a matter of dispute.

Shakespeare's concern with history is, for Escalas, a major interest and one of the most outstanding features of his dramatic output. At different stages of his career Shakespeare dramatises and uses history from many different periods. This is not only true of all the so-called historical dramas but also of plays like *Hamlet* and *Macbeth*. Besides, history, according to Escalas's view, has a didactic function. It serves to educate. Dramatic history should, in his view, present the great ideals to the general public. This is precisely what Shakespeare and Lope de Vega did in England and Spain respectively. The popular appeal of their drama brought about a new historical consciousness and patriotic feelings and sometimes even facilitated social change. Therefore history is thought to have an instrumental function within the theatrical context where all Shakespeare's heroes have a metahistorical dimension as they have a meta-theatrical existence beyond the stage. They become part of world history and culture. However, he admits that further research would be needed to establish the significance of history in Shakespearean drama. He provides a bibliography of the most interesting historical works available in his lifetime,<sup>4</sup> complaining that historical studies were practically nonexistent within Spanish criticism or if they existed, as in the case of Astrana, were general approaches to Shakespeare's sources. *El historiador William Shakespeare* sets out to make his personal contribution to the study of Shakespearean historical drama in two ways: to provide a rationale for the historical material we find in Shakespeare's plays and to emphasise the importance of history in Shakespearean drama. He is also conscious of the limitations of his criticism carried out under unfavourable conditions in the 1940s when the critical possibilities were limited since he could not have access to all the available historical studies.

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<sup>3</sup> Luis Astrana Marín, who, for the first time, translated all of Shakespeare's works into Spanish, is very much concerned with Shakespeare's religious views, for they are "of great importance". Astrana (1941: 301). Escalas thinks that Shakespeare manifests contradictory religious feelings and ideas for, although he shows himself to be a truly religious man in his writings, he sometimes appears to be anticlerical. He doubts that Shakespeare could have died a Catholic, but believes he might covertly have been a "Papist". For him, the question of Shakespeare's religion will remain a mystery (Ballester Escalas 1961: 1152).

<sup>4</sup> Dalgleish (1862), Boswell-Stone (1867), Marriot (1918), Mac Callum (1910), Wolffhardt (1919) and Stapfer are strongly recommended for their deeper understanding of Shakespeare's history.

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The consideration of Shakespeare as a historian is one of the outstanding features of his critical contribution.<sup>5</sup> He emphasises that the aim of *El historiador William Shakespeare*, his critical masterpiece on Shakespearean drama, is to analyse Shakespeare's history as a vehicle for dramatic creation with an instrumental value since Shakespeare used historical material for theatrical purposes and his dramatic achievement would not have been the same without it. Consequently Shakespearean history should not be viewed simply as plot material. It serves a twofold function: to reflect a personal intention and to show a dramatic concern of Shakespearean drama. Escalas stresses the point that, by the standards of his time and, taking into account the personal and even imaginative nature of the limited historical accounts available to him, Shakespeare's use of history was remarkably accurate and contained fewer distortions than one might have expected. He praises Shakespeare's historical instinct even though the sources were not reliable documents. Hence Shakespeare can be considered not only as a classical historian for his objectivity and realism but also as a contemporary historian, for he takes into account the Elizabethan views and interpretations of the past. We can see this for example in the epic presentation of Henry V, which is a consequence of his historical reevaluation as a great monarch as he is presented in Shakespeare's play. However, objectivity does not necessarily mean impartiality. Shakespeare, of course, uses the historical material according to his personal judgement of the dramatic needs, as he is primarily a playwright. He uses and even adapts historic "facts" for theatrical purposes. Thus Shakespeare is considered a "player of history" since he dramatises it for special reasons and intentions. At this point Escalas is confronted by the problem of anachronisms as something negative for a historian. However he not only admits them but also tries to justify them because he thinks that they, which are found even in playwrights of the Spanish Golden Age, have no great dramatic significance.

A whole chapter of *El historiador William Shakespeare* is devoted to a taxonomy of Shakespeare's history plays based on historical criteria.<sup>6</sup> "El teatro histórico de Shakespeare" is a critical attempt to establish a new classification of Shakespeare's plays in order to give unity and coherence to a great variety of historical material. The plays are divided into cycles according to the periods of the history dramatised: Greek cycle (*Troilus and Cressida* and *Timon of Athens*), Roman cycle (*Coriolanus*, *Julius Caesar*, *Antony and Cleopatra* and *Titus Andronicus*), Celtic cycle (*Cymbeline*, *King Lear*, *Hamlet* and *Macbeth*). We come across the national English cycle which is also divided into different sections according to the historical events reflected in the plays. *King John* is a kind of prelude or introduction which is followed by the Lancastrian epic (*Richard II*, *1 and 2 Henry IV* and *Henry V*) and the Wars of the Roses trilogy (*1, 2 and 3 Henry VI*). Finally there are the plays dealing with episodes at the close of the Middle Ages (*Richard III*) and with contemporary history (*Henry VIII*). The methodology used in the analysis of the different plays follows a fixed pattern which starts with the study of sources in order to determine the historical implications and the relationship of the dramatic text to history. Next he undertakes a critical appreciation of the historical events dramatised. This occupies much of the space devoted to the study of Shakespeare's history which becomes a subjective exposition of his commitments and ideas which rests upon a particular historical vision.

The historical sources of Shakespeare's history play a decisive role in the process of his dramatic oeuvres. For Escalas they do not diminish the originality of his drama. The sources provided Shakespeare with the necessary information to set up the historical action. Two kinds of relevant sources should be considered in Shakespearean drama: ancient sources and national sources.

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<sup>5</sup> The term historian is also used to refer to other playwrights. Only Lope de Vega, the Spanish dramatist, can be considered a historian for the same reasons (Ballester Escalas 1945: 126). The idea of the playwright as a historian not only means that the playwright selects objective history but also that he manipulates it according to personal intentions. This would be a further stage in the consideration of the function of dramatic history. See González Fernández de Sevilla (1994: 72-82).

<sup>6</sup> Escalas expresses the difficulty in classifying Shakespeare's dramatic works in general as the comic, the historical and the tragic are mixed up everywhere (Ballester Escalas 1945: 323).

Plutarch's *Lives* is the main historiographical work for Greek and Roman history, while Holinshed's and Hall's *Chronicles* are the sources for the national historical plays. Escalas is critical of the reliability of these historiographies for Hall and Holinshed's *Chronicles* as well as Grafton and Stowe were not scientific accounts but just simple compilations with little historical value as these writers had no concern with the presentation of accurate information. Besides, Shakespeare had to face another difficulty for Holinshed's historical account as well as Plutarch's are full of legends which appeal to the imagination. They present history in a childish, superficial, uncompromising manner (Escalas 1945: 262). Escalas goes on to distinguish between legend and history because there is a lack of evidence in the sources since the historical information is based on stories which are susceptible to factual proof. But this fact does not reduce the historical quality of Shakespearean drama for Herodotus' historiography also contains legends and he is considered "the father of historiography". Legends are a part of history since they also reflect reality. Moreover we come to know the greatness of men when legends and myths appear (Escalas 1945: 321). In spite of being exaggerations, legends are not lies. They belong to a different kind of reality which makes them historical. This is not an obstacle for Shakespeare's dramatic intention because history is also reproduced in legends.

The Roman tetralogy is also based on legend rather than historical evidence as, for example, in *Coriolanus* which is "essentially a political drama" (Escalas 1950: 9). Escalas praises the "modernity" of the speeches as contemporary politicians speak in the same way. He does not agree with critics who believe that the anachronisms in the play sully Shakespeare's reputation as a historian. The fact that the election of Coriolanus in Shakespeare's play is a consequence of the people's decision while historically it was decided by the aristocracy, is a result of Shakespeare's reticence on the Plutarchian source. Julius Caesar is one of Escalas' favourite historical characters and *Antony and Cleopatra* one of Shakespeare's masterpieces, certainly the most perfect of his ancient plays. It is, basically, both a play of love and of political action where there are two chronological omissions: there are no references to the time when Anthony was fighting the Parthians, or to the time which elapsed between the battle of Actium and his last defeat in Africa. *Titus Andronicus*, the final play of the Roman cycle, is highly praised for its greatness and uniqueness in spite of being a tragedy of blood, evil, and horror.

The Celtic cycle stands between the Roman cycle and the English cycle. The first difficulty arises from the use of the term to refer to plays like *Cymbeline*, *King Lear*, *Hamlet* and *Macbeth* which does not seem to be the most adequate. Escalas himself recognises that some of these plays are only Celtic in intention. Surprisingly enough there are few comments on plays like *Hamlet* or *King Lear*. Escalas only gives a brief account of the dramatic sources as well as his critical appreciation of *Macbeth* where Lady Macbeth becomes a central character despite the few lines devoted to her in Holinshed's *Chronicles*. She is dramatised as a very ambitious character who tries to get power at any cost. But it is the magic element of the play which attracts Escalas' most original criticism. The important question for him is not so much to know the origin of Shakespeare's ideas on magic as to find out its function and purpose. The cycle closes with an unexpected reference to the Stuarts for there are allusions to James I in *Macbeth*.

The national English cycle is the most extensive of all the cycles into which Shakespeare's dramatic history is divided. There cannot be the same doubts about its historical base since the source material is more adequate, precise, and reliable. *King John* opens the cycle and is considered its prologue although there is a significant historical gap between King John and Richard II's reigns since we move from the twelfth century to the second half of the fourteenth, thought to be one of the most terrible of the Middle Ages. These troublesome times are tragically reflected in *Richard II*. History, on this occasion, coincides with the theatrical presentation of the king as a lonely, intelligent man since the dramatic and the historical Richard are basically the same. Usurpation is a keyword for the dramatic interpretation of *Richard II*. It should not be considered as an isolated event, since it is the consequence of a climax which the king himself creates as soon as he becomes a tyrant. The abdication scene, the most controversial episode in the play, is a combination of legal action and

human passion. Escalas refers to the omission of the abdication scene and the author's name in the 1597 quarto for social and political reasons. Escalas' major concern, at this point, is to make clear that Shakespeare did not take part in the Essex revolt. However the play can be taken as Shakespeare's warning about the political situation because Elizabeth I followed policies similar to those of Richard II.

Bolingbroke, for his part, is presented as an Octavius Caesar, whose banishment was a pretext to get power. And the exercise of power against rebellion is a major theme in the two parts of *Henry IV* which make up a complete dramatic unity, with the first part strongly connected to the second. Escalas complains about the lack of a more detailed account of Hal's life in the play, for what we get are minor biographical details. However, this cannot be used as an argument for criticising Shakespeare's historical sense because biography is not his greatest interest. The real problem is to know why his personality changes from being a dissolute young man to a worthy prince. Shakespeare uses Hal's contrasting life-styles as a way of illustrating and strengthening his development into a national hero with a propaganda motive, which reaches its peak in *2 Henry IV*, act V and is used as a basis for the almost mythical Hal who is presented in *Henry V* where he is idealised to become the prototype of the ruler and the symbol of English identity. In this way Shakespeare contributes to the process of the royal aggrandizement of the Lancasters which can, in Escalas' view, be justified because they abolished feudalism. Hence the killing of Hotspur by Hal makes historical sense, for it means the end of Anglo-Saxon feudalism and the beginning of absolutism. Falstaff, on his part, plays a decisive role in Hal's regeneration and he has no literary precedent, in opposition to Astrana's idea, as the similarities between him and Sancho Panza are not consistent, for both characters belong to different times and places. Escalas thinks that they cannot be separated from the historical situation because they represent different cultures and belong to different literary worlds.

He goes on to study the historical material of the three parts of *Henry VI* for he prefers to deal with them according to the time when the events dramatised took place. The historical interest, therefore, prevails over other literary considerations. In the trilogy, whose dramatic unity is strongly underlined, the characters are introduced in the first part, the tragic element is taken to its final stage in the second part and Richard III, the future tyrant of England, is portrayed in the third. Richard is characterised as a dangerous young man whose deformity is not only something physical but also a manifestation of the moral corruption he shows in his actions and intentions, for he is even more wicked than Macbeth himself. He is a mixture of the Machiavellian prince and the Hobbesian utilitarian egoist. *Richard III* is considered one of Shakespeare's greatest history plays. Certainly it was his historical masterpiece of the "grand-style". However, Richard III's historicity is a matter of controversy for the vagueness of the historical documents available about his crimes, which can neither be proved nor denied. His dramatic characterisation as well as his deformity have been taken from legends provided by the Tudor chroniclers. So we have a king who does not seem to be human and yet appears to be real. And it is precisely in this realistic presentation that Shakespeare's mastery lies.

History becomes a central issue in *Henry VIII*, which closes Escalas' analysis of Shakespeare's history cycles. The Tudor king has a special attraction for him, as he often refers to him in some of his historical works. Besides he wrote *Enrique VIII*, a book devoted to answer some controversial questions on his life and times. Once more religion becomes an important issue, because the Tudor king was responsible for the breaking with Rome which meant that England would no longer be a Catholic nation. However Shakespeare does not pay much attention to the religious schism caused by the king falling into heresy. Escalas openly manifests his sympathies for the characters on the Catholic side, especially for Queen Katherine, who is always showing exemplary conduct in a time of unrest and uncertainty. Moreover he believes that there is a dramatic manipulation of the life of Henry VIII according to a particular interpretation of the biographical material, since the play dramatises only a part of his life, omits important events such as the execution of Thomas Moore and gives a particular interpretation of characters and episodes: for example in the silent role played by Bishop

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Fisher during Katherine's trial or in the reasons adduced for Cardinal Wolsey's fall. Shakespeare's selection of events, therefore, contributes to a positive presentation of the Tudors. He emphasizes some historical episodes which are meaningful for his dramatic purpose. This is perfectly acceptable for he is partial in the selection of the history dramatised but not in the reflection of the historical facts.

Escalas succeeded in showing the relevance of history within Shakespearean drama, which cannot be reduced to mere plot, since it is one of Shakespeare's major sources of dramatic inspiration and theatrical interest. Thus history contributes to create a stronger dramatic effect as well as a deeper historical consciousness for Shakespearean drama would not have been the same without Shakespeare's historical concern.

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