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Could *The Famous Victories of Henry the Fifth* have been written as early as 1548?

In 1598, *The Famous Victories of Henry the Fifth: Containing the honourable battle of Agincourt* was published anonymously. This old play depicts a series of colourful events in the life of King Henry V, including his wild exploits as Prince Hal, his reconciliation with his dying father, his challenge to the crown of France, and his stunning victory at Agincourt. *The Famous Victories* thus deals with approximately the same historical time span as Shakespeare's *Henry IV* (Parts I and II) and *Henry V*.

One of the more intriguing (and as yet unsolved) problems posed by *The Famous Victories* is the question of its authorship. The search for the author is bounded, on the one hand, by the certainty that the play was written no later than 1588. This terminal date is established by the fact that the part of the clown Derick in *The Famous Victories* was at one time played by the famous Elizabethan actor, Richard Tarleton. An anecdote which preserves a record of Tarleton's performance as the clown is found in *Tarleton's Jestes*:

At the Bull at Bishops-gate, was a play of Henry the fift, wherein the judge was to take a box on the eare; and because he was absent that should take the blow, Tarlton himselfe, ever forward to please, tooke upon him to play the same judge, besides his owne part of the clowne; and Knel then playing Henry the fift, hit Tarlton a sound boxe indeed, which made the people laugh the more, because it was he. But anon the judge goes in, and immediately Tarlton in his clownes cloathes comes out, and askes the actors what newes.

O, saith one, hadst thou been here, thou shouldest have seen Prince Henry hit the judge a terrible box on the eare: What, man, said Tarlton, strike a judge! It is true, yfaith, said the other. No other like, said Tarlton, and it could not be but terrible to the judge, when the report so terrifies me, that me thinkes the blow remains still on my cheeke, that it burnes againe. The people laught at this mightily: and to this day I have heard it commended for rare; but no marvel: for he had many of these. But I would see our clowns in these dayes do the like; no, I warrant ye, and yet they thinke well of themselves, to[o] (Hazlitt 219).

This anecdote about "a play of Henry the fift" in which Tarleton, as the judge, took "a box on the eare" clearly identifies the play in question as *The Famous Victories*, and establishes that the play was written prior to Tarleton's death on September 3, 1588 (Pitcher 181).

The earliest possible date of composition of *The Famous Victories* can also be determined with certainty. The play could not have been written earlier than the date of publication of the latest of its sources.

Pitcher claims that the play's author made use of four sources for the historical material found in *The Famous Victories*: Sir Thomas Elyot's *Book of the Governor* (1531), Hall's *Chronicle* (1548), Holinshed's *Chronicle* (1577), and Stow's *Chronicles* (1580). Pitcher's identification of the play's sources thus lead him to believe that *The Famous Victories* could have been written no earlier than 1580, the date of publication of Stow's *Chronicles*, the latest of the play's sources (199).

However, Pitcher's assumption that the playwright relied on both Stow's *Chronicles* of 1580 and

Holinshed's Chronicle of 1577 does not stand up to analysis.

In fact, the playwright's use of Holinshed can be discounted with relatively little debate: the historical details in *The Famous Victories* are clearly drawn from Hall, Holinshed's predecessor by almost thirty years. Pitcher himself cites only a single incident for which he feels the 1577 edition of Holinshed was the playwright's undisputed source. This incident is the Dauphin's insulting gift to King Henry of a tun of tennis balls; however, Hall's account, which uses the phrases "more meet for a carpet than a camp" and "tennis balls" (rather than "Paris balls"), corresponds more accurately to the version in *The Famous Victories* than does Holinshed's (Pitcher 43-4, 212-3, 215, 228). It should also be kept in mind that Holinshed himself made "copious use of Hall" in compiling his life of Henry V (Kingsford 90).

Similarly, Pitcher offers no firm evidence for his conclusion that the playwright of *The Famous Victories* relied on the 1580 edition of Stow's Chronicles. Stow's acknowledged sources for the life of Henry V were the *Vita Henrici Quinti* and/or the "Translator of Livius" (Kingsford 72, 86, 88-90), and the playwright of *The Famous Victories* may well have relied on this same original material, rather than on Stow as an intermediary. There is certainly nothing in the play to indicate otherwise.

The *Vita Henrici Quinti* was written about 1437 by Tito Livio of Forli, commonly referred to by the Latinized form of his name, Titus Livius (Kingsford 58-60). Three-quarters of a century later, an English translation and elaboration of the *Vita Henrici Quinti* was written in 1513 by an anonymous author known only as the "Translator of Livius" (Kingsford, 79, 92). As Fiehler points out, it was this latter work that supplied Elizabethan playwrights and historians with material for stories of "wild Prince Hal":

The "Translator of Livius" in his proem, tells that he supplemented Livius' Latin history with information from three other sources, the French of Enguerrant Monstrelet, the collection of London chronicles collectively known as the *Brut*, and the recollections of the Earl of Ormonde. The last of these supplementary sources has been identified as an account, now lost,

written about 1452 by James Butler, fourth Earl of Ormonde, a companion of Henry V on three of his French expeditions.

Additions from Ormonde include a statement about Henry's continence after his coronation, stories of his quarrel with his father and of his waylaying and robbing his own receivers, and finally the tale that after he was crowned he completely changed his ways and dismissed from him all his old evil companions. All of these details are clearly recognizable in *The Famous Victories* which also has in somewhat altered form the further story that the prince, disguised in a gown of blue satin worked with eyelets, came to the death-bed of his father, where the two were reconciled after a long conversation (Fiehler, 95, 120; see also Kingsford 86-7).

By Holinshed's time, copies of the "Translator of Livius" seem to have been relatively rare. However, it is on record that Stow possessed a copy, and Nicholas Harpsfield (d.1575) refers to the "Translator of Livius" in his *Historia Anglicana* (Kingsford 58, 72). It is thus entirely possible that the author of *The Famous Victories* had access to a copy of the "Translator of Livius".

In summary, the principal sources of *The Famous Victories* appear to have been four in number: the *Vita Henrici Quinti* of Titus Livius (1437), the anonymous English translation of the *Vita* known as the "Translator of Livius" (1513), Elyot's *Book of the Governor* (1531) and Hall's Chronicle (1548). *The Famous Victories* could thus have been written at any time between 1548, the date of publication of the first edition of Hall's Chronicle, and the death of Richard Tarleton four decades later in 1588.

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