

## Did the English History Play Decline during the Reigns of James I and Charles 1?

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## Did the English History Play Decline during the Reigns of James I and Charles I?

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It is generally believed that following the accession of James I the English history play passed into an era of decline. This paper reconsiders this accepted notion and argues that, although history plays written after the accession of James I lack the literary merits of Elizabethan history plays, such as those of Shakespeare, the history play was one of the most popular dramatic genres in the Jacobean age, particularly so in the first decade of James's reign, and staged until a much later time than has hitherto been maintained.

A shortcoming found in many accounts of the stage history of English Renaissance drama derives from a tendency among writers to focus on first performances of plays. Theatre historians should also give due consideration to revivals because, as Henslowe's *Diary* indicates, revivals were a very important part of the playing companies' activities in Renaissance England.

The *Diary*, which documents the titles and dates of plays presented at the Rose playhouse on the Bankside from February 1592 to October 1597, shows that revivals account for approximately 20 percent of all known performances during the period. Although the percentage of revivals varies according to the season, it nevertheless seems too large to be ignored in describing the stage history of the period.

Henslowe's *Diary* also suggests that the more popular a play was, the more frequently it was revived. *The Spanish Tragedy*, first given sometime between 1582 and 1592, was one of the most popular plays of the period and revived very often in later years. The play was given at least

sixteen times in the years 1592-93 and twelve times between January and July in 1597.

*The Spanish Tragedy* was not only revived on the stage very frequently but also published in many quarto editions (at least four quartos during the Elizabethan era). It is significant to note that almost all of the plays revived at the Rose between 1592 and 1597 that were printed in quarto had been staged shortly before — usually one or two years ahead of — publication. *The Spanish Tragedy*, revived in 1592-93 and in 1597, was published in quarto in 1594 and in 1599. *1 Tamburlaine* and *2 Tamburlaine*, each revived in 1594-95 and in 1597, were published in 1597. *The Jew of Malta*, first staged in 1589-90, was revived in 1592-94 and presented at least twenty-eight times during the period. Although no Elizabethan quarto of this play was extant, it was entered in the Stationers' Register on 17 May 1594 and may have been published soon after its registration. It is thus highly probable that most of the plays published in quarto, even if their performance records have not survived, were presented on the stage shortly before publication.

In the first decade of James I's reign, many Elizabethan history plays, such as *Richard III* and *Richard II*, were printed in quarto. Their title pages almost invariably mention that they were presented by Jacobean playing companies rather than by Elizabethan companies, strongly suggesting that they were revived in the early years of James's reign. In addition to these 'old' history plays a number of 'new' histories were presented on the stage, indicating that the history play was much in demand in the first half of the Jacobean age.

History plays were staged in the latter years of the Jacobean age, and during the reign of Charles I as well, though perhaps less frequently than in the first decade of James's reign. There is evidence that some Elizabethan and early Jacobean history plays were revived on the Caroline stage, and several 'new' history plays were produced in the 1630s. Thus, history plays survived on the stage well into the Caroline age.