

**Q. 1. Write a note on Shakespeare as a writer of historical plays. Consider Henry IV, Part I as a typical historical play of Shakespeare.**

**Ans..** In Shakespeare's time three types of drama were popular: the comedy, the tragedy and the history. The tragedy dealt with unhappy events and usually ended in murder, bloodshed and suicide. The comedy dealt with humour, fun and romance in a lighter vein usually ending in marriage of lovers. The history play, popularized first by Marlowe, dealt with historical subjects. But so far its structure was concerned, it was a mixed genre, including tragic as well as comic elements, which combined well, so long as the dramatist followed the accepted outline of history with reasonable accuracy.

It is apt to note that Shakespeare's history plays mark a great advance over the earlier chronicle plays, both in matter of form, and in depth of ideas. Shakespeare in them presents a world of larger and wider dimensions than do the earlier writers in the chronicle plays. Shakespeare's interests and sympathies are wider than the sympathies and interests of other dramatists. That is why he succeeds in the presentation of a world not exclusively of kings, courts and camps, but a world at whose two extremities stand royalty and ragamuffins—a world inhabited on the one side by kings, and courtiers, and on the other by thieves and public women. He does not cause us a far or a jolt while transporting us from one world to the other in one and the same play.

Another, important thing to note is that Shakespeare's history plays mark a stage in the development of his mind and art, and as such, they help us to understand his personality, at least to a certain extent, at a certain period of his dramatic career. While writing his histories, Shakespeare's views life differently from what he does later on when he comes to write, say his tragedies. In his histories, he is mainly interested in the world of practical affairs; and so his characters in the historical plays are conceived chiefly with reference to action. In his historical plays, Shakespeare deals with the problem on man's success or failure in this world. His vision is limited only to this earth; he does not go to discover the regions beyond it:

To undiscover'd country, from whose bourn  
No traveller returns.

Shakespeare's history, plays are certainly different from his tragedies. In the great tragedies we are concerned more with what

man is than with what he does. Consequently, man in the historical plays is not such an enigma as he is in the great tragedies. In the great tragedies life with its problem of joy, sorrow and suffering, is a mastery, which baffles our attempt at solution. Good ultimately triumphs, but at the cost of its own suffering and destruction. We stand puzzled before an unfathomable mystery—the mystery of a world in which good also suffers and is subjected to waste. Shakespeare's tragedies reveal to us the depth of human soul, the limit of man's suffering and the height of human character. But history plays do not deal with such philosophic considerations. They do not deal with "infinite issues of life and death". They only deal "with the finite issues of failure or success, the achieving of practical ends ; and the feeling which they leave with us is that of a wholesome, mundane pity and terror, or a same and strong mundane satisfaction."

Shakespeare has given us six full-length portraits of English Kings in his historical plays. Three of them, namely *King John*, *King Richard II* and *King Henry IV* are studies in kingly weakness, while the other three, *King Henry IV*, *King Henry V* and *Richard III* are studies in kingly strength. King Richard II is a weak, sentimental, though graceful monarch. Richard III is a royal criminal, but strong in his crime, Henry IV the usurping Bolingbroke, is a man of resolution, policy, caution and daring ; and these qualities are the source of his strength. "The strength of *Henry V* is that of plain heroic magnitude thoroughly sound and substantial, founded upon the eternal virtues".