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TOM STERN

HISTORY PLAYS AS HISTORY

Abstract. History plays have a long history—about as long as the history of plays and about as long as the history of history. But philosophers of history have typically preferred to write about written history; and philosophers of literature have typically preferred to write about novels, occasionally historical novels. Yet, when we leave a performance of a history play, it still seems natural to ask: “I wonder if it happened like that?” The answer, I’ll argue, is “no.” But getting to that answer tells us something about history and something about drama.

I

NOW THAT SHE IS old enough to be taken to boring, so-called “cultural” events by her aging, academic relatives, we have just taken Anya to see a performance of *Julius Caesar*. When it’s over, we discuss the acting, the poetry, the famous lines. At some point, Anya asks: “I wonder if it happened like that?” Anya has not radically misunderstood what we just watched; she did not, for example, rush down and yell at Caesar that he’d better read that scroll. Her question is not uncommon as a response to a history play, from audience members both young and old. It is perfectly intelligible; I would like to give her an answer.

Before I sketch some possible answers, it is worth saying something more about Anya’s question. First, her question is comparative, not merely historical. She wants to know something about the relationship between the performance and the past. She isn’t asking only about the historical event, so it won’t do to hand her a history book. Second, Anya

isn't asking this question with any particular theory in mind: she is not (yet), let us suppose, a student of aesthetics or literature, in any of their varied forms. Third, Anya is not—or not just—asking about the truth-values of the propositions as they appear in the text of the play. We have just seen a performance, with actors in costumes, with scenery—with words, to be sure, but words with emphasis and intonation. Anya wants to know about the whole thing—the play—and its relation to the past. Finally, Anya isn't necessarily asking in order to say something about how *good* the play is. She might be asking because she would find the play more impressive (as a literary achievement) if it were historically very accurate, in addition to being beautiful, moving, powerfully acted, and so on. And if she does have that view, I don't think she is guilty of misunderstanding the nature of fiction or is subject to an embarrassing naivete. But our answer can remain neutral on that matter.

What, then, could we tell her? One answer, of course, might be “yes.” For a long time, Shakespeare's history plays have been thought to have considerable value as educational tools. We force children to sit through them, not just because we want them to learn about Shakespeare but also, perhaps, because we want them to learn about Rome. Georg II, Duke of Saxe-Meiningen, put on the Roman plays with the explicit intention of giving the audience a historical education. Often known as the first modern director, Georg had studied something very unmodern, namely archaeology; and he used recent archaeological discoveries to inform his productions.¹ But this won't quite do: Anya wasn't asking whether she could learn anything from *Julius Caesar*: I don't suppose anyone would deny that.² So we could tell her that Shakespeare used many of the same historical sources that modern historians use; but that wouldn't exactly answer her question.

Philosophers have also claimed that Shakespeare can give us deeper insight into history. Lukács famously argued that Shakespeare's historical dramas express, through the conflict between the characters, collisions inherent in Roman society at the time. The clash between Caesar and Brutus is the clash between Empire and Republic. Recently, Agnes Heller has argued that Shakespeare should be taken seriously as a historian, even as a philosopher of history.³

Anyone who wants to answer “yes” to Anya's question must deal, of course, with the factual inaccuracies and anachronisms in the play. For Georg II, this was no problem: he “corrected” them—moving Caesar's death from the capitol (where Shakespeare has it) back to the curia of Pompeii. For Lukács, there is a clear distinction between historical

accuracy and historical fidelity: Shakespeare may get a couple of facts wrong, but he is always loyal to the “collisions.” Indeed, wasting time and energy getting all the historical details in place might obscure the audience’s sense of the significant historical forces at play (pp. 150–56). Heller takes this further, arguing, for example, that one of the anachronisms in *Julius Caesar* makes it better *as a history* (p. 317).

I do not wish to pursue either of these views further, despite their interest. Lukács takes too much for granted that we no longer accept—notably his particular, Marxist account of history. More important, by his account Shakespeare’s plays are as much (if not more) about Shakespeare’s own time as about Caesar’s: Shakespeare happens to live in a social context that has so much in common with Rome that he can draw comparisons and write a successful play about both (pp. 155–56). As for Heller, even if we were to accept her controversial position, she is focused only on Shakespeare’s “perfect historical sense” (p. 143, pp. 279–80); I am looking to say something more general about history plays.

Alternatively, we could tell Anya that she has asked the wrong question, or one so confused that it does not have an answer. Aristotle wrote that drama (as a species of poetry) must treat universals, not historical particulars. Anya’s question should not be, “Did it happen like this?” but the rather clumsier “*Would* it happen like this (necessarily or for the most part)?” Following a standard interpretation, Aristotle is interested in what types of people do in types of situations.⁴ A second version of this response would tell Anya that she is asking about the relationship between fiction and history, and that these are in fact much the same thing. Shakespeare offers one narrative; other sources would offer other narratives; there is either no truth about what “really happened,” or, if there is, it is necessarily distorted by the mode in which we present it.⁵ I do not recommend giving either of these answers to Anya: Aristotle assumes a relationship between history, poetry, and philosophy that looks very implausible. It’s not clear how poetry expresses universals, or which universals a particular poem expresses; but supposing it does, I see no reason to think that history can’t. (Compare Aeschylus’s account of the defeat of Xerxes with Herodotus’s account of the same events.) As for the collapse of the history/fiction distinction: despite the significant insights that the various proponents of such views have offered (to some of which we will return presently), I share the common view that the more radical conclusions have not been firmly established.⁶

Finally, one could tell Anya that her question is mistaken for the very opposite reason: not, that is, because history and fiction are too similar,

but because history and fiction are completely different categories. *Julius Caesar* uses historical material for inspiration, but it is a work of fiction. The definition of “fiction” in question matters little. Perhaps Anya has mistakenly assumed that the apparently historical claims in *Julius Caesar* have been asserted, when in fact they have not. Or, without being aware of it, Anya has just been engaging in a game of make-believe, or perhaps a special kind of social practice; or she has been taking a stance toward the performance, which renders insignificant the connection with historical truth. If she wants to know about history, Anya should read (or perhaps watch) something nonfictional. Defenders of this last view, if they are not mad, are not suggesting that there is no connection between *Julius Caesar* and the historical events that inspired it, and which it depicts. Nor would they say that there is no route, as it were, between the fictional claims of *Julius Caesar* and the factual claims of the historian. What they are suggesting, I take it, is that the interesting and important features of *Julius Caesar* are best understood in terms of its essence as fiction.⁷ It ought to be construed as a work of fiction, not as a work of history. A variant of this would be to say much the same thing about *literature* and history: given its status as a literary work, *Julius Caesar* must not be construed as “a piece of reportive or fact-stating discourse,” in which scenes are included “to establish certain propositions as true in the mind of the reader”; indeed, say some, our literary appreciation depends upon *not* construing it in this way (Lamarque and Olsen, p. 280).⁸ The question of the play’s connection with the death of the historical figure is peripheral (which is not to say unanswerable), and ought to be recognized as such.

I do not wish to challenge these views of fictionality (or literature) in general. But I do want to reject the use of a firm distinction between history and fiction (or literature) to tell Anya that her question is mistaken or irrelevant. When asked about a history play, her question is not irrelevant. Instead, I suggest that we can sympathetically interpret Anya’s question in one of two ways, but that the answer to both is “no.” My case for saying “no” is not specific to *Julius Caesar*: I want to say something general about history plays and the past. To explain why, I’ll say more about what a history play is.

II

History plays have a long history—about as long as the history of plays and about as long as the history of history. The first history play,

Aeschylus's *The Persians*, is also (probably) the earliest extant play by the earliest playwright whose works survive. By coincidence, the events it depicts are also described by Herodotus, the so-called "father of history." Aeschylus got there first: most likely, his play was performed in Athens while Herodotus was still growing up in Helicarnassus. What makes a history play? Two initial criteria are important, but insufficient. First, history plays use proper names that refer to real people and real places: Caesar, Brutus, Rome. But Horatio also speaks of Rome, and *Hamlet* is no history play. Second, history plays depict events that really happened: Brutus did stab Caesar. To say this is not to preempt Anya's question: she knows that Caesar was stabbed by Brutus; she wants to know if it happened *like that*. Historical playwrights make up characters, meetings, and conversations; all I am saying here is that they do so in the process of depicting something that happened: the defeat of the Persians at Salamis, the murder of Caesar.

But we cannot leave things there. First, the events depicted by history plays must be more than just "real"; they must be public. Suppose *The Glass Menagerie*, which Tennessee Williams describes as a "memory play," depicts real events from Williams's past; even so, it is not a history play, because those events are known only to Williams (and a very few others). We do not have independent access to them, or independent reason to believe that they took place. Second, the history play requires something of its author: a responsible engagement with the sources. Suppose *Julius Caesar* was written after Shakespeare had heard only the barest details of Caesar's death; by pure coincidence, he happened to get much of it right. Knowing all of this, we would be reluctant, I think, to call it a history play.⁹ As it happens, we know that Shakespeare did engage closely with his sources—especially Plutarch, as well as Suetonius and others. Pushkin and Büchner also work closely with source materials: Pushkin was, in fact, an accomplished historian; we shall discuss Büchner presently. Finally, we must distinguish the history play from the counterfactual play. Suppose someone writes a play about the conspiracy against Caesar, an event that took place, refers to real people, and is public; suppose, too, that the author works closely with ancient sources and modern histories; and suppose, finally, that in the climactic scene, Caesar fights off Casca and escapes to join Mark Antony before Cassius, Brutus, and the others can lay a finger on him. There is no reason why such a play might not be a great success as a work of literature; but it is not a history play. We should add, then, that history plays do not alter the significant historical facts. It is clear that

the category of “significant historical facts” is loose; but it is also clear that, for the plays to be history plays, Caesar must die at the hands of the conspirators, Henry V must win at Agincourt, Robespierre must turn on Danton and Desmoulins, the Persians must lose at Salamis, and Boris Godunov must be crowned as czar.

One final point. Philosophers writing about fiction and history have tended to focus on historical novels.¹⁰ But the history play is not just the historical novel on stage. The historical novel uses historical events, or simply a certain historical context, as the backdrop to the story it wants to tell. *War and Peace* may feature Napoleon and Alexander as fleeting, minor characters, but it is the made-up story of Pierre, Andrei, Natasha, and Nikolai. A play of *War and Peace* wouldn't be a history play. Suppose Anya read *War and Peace* and asked if it happened like that: then we might think she had misunderstood what she was reading (or we would have to do more work to understand just what she meant). *Julius Caesar*, of course, is not the story of Caesar and Brutus set against the backdrop of turbulent times in the history of Rome: Caesar and Brutus *are* the turbulent times in the history of Rome; historical events and historical figures are the central subject of the play.¹¹

The various features of the history play, in particular this last comparison with the novel, explain why I don't think we should simply tell Anya that *Julius Caesar* just isn't the same kind of thing as a history. If your idea of historical fiction is *War and Peace*, not *Julius Caesar*, then the claim that historical fiction is primarily *fiction*, albeit inspired by history, is that much more plausible. But if a key feature of the history play is that it uses historical sources to depict central, historical figures taking well-known, documented actions, then one has to take Anya's question more seriously; one has to wonder, in fact, whether it is a question which (in some form or another) has guided the authors of history plays, ever since such plays have been written.

III

I mentioned before that there are two versions of Anya's question, each of which I would like to consider. She was asking about the relationship between the history play and history. To distinguish the two different questions, we must remind ourselves that there are two senses of “history.” First, when we say, for example, that there has been violence throughout human history, we use “history” to refer to past events—the events themselves. Second, when we ask, for another example, “Is his-

tory a science?” we use “history” to refer to the academic or intellectual discipline—this is also known as “historiography.” Feeding these back into Anya’s question, we are left with two rather different results:

1. The eyewitness question: Would it have looked and sounded like that? (History as events)
2. The history book question: How does my understanding of the event, having seen the play, compare to my understanding of the event if I were to read a history book? (History as discipline)

These are very different questions. Let’s take the eyewitness question first. We should briefly make, and then set aside, the important point that plays are very bad at looking like the events they depict (or looking like the fictional events they depict would look like if those events were really to take place). This has long been known, both to playwrights and to philosophers. As for playwrights, Pushkin notes in a draft preface to his history play, *Boris Godunov*, that theater is the least verisimilar of all the arts; Shakespeare has The Chorus in *Henry V* beg the audience to fill in the obvious gaps: “Think, when we talk of horses, that you see them / Printing their proud hoofs i’th’ receiving earth.”¹² As for philosophers: Lessing cites, with approval, Diderot’s thought experiment of bringing the foreigner (who is also a stranger to theater) to a theatrical performance while telling him that it’s real, to see how long it takes for him to get suspicious. The consensus is: not very long at all.¹³ (The tenuous idea that plays are even trying to look like reality probably owes its longevity to Plato, but we cannot pursue that thought here.)

Technically, such thoughts would probably suffice for a “no” to the eyewitness question. But Anya knows that Rome was bigger than the stage, and she knows that Caesar did not die in a theater, with lots of people watching. (Strictly, the Curia of Pompeii *was* in a theater, or at least part of a theater complex, but the point is clear.) So we could perhaps interpret her question more generously: imaginatively filling in some of the details (and imaginatively ignoring others), could it have looked and sounded like that to an eyewitness?

Again, though, the answer must be “no.” This time, we need to say something about eyewitnesses and history. First, to make the most obvious point, no single eyewitness could have seen what we see during the course of the play: Brutus in private conversation with Cassius, Mark Antony speaking to Caesar’s body, and so on. At least, then, the “eyewitness” view would suggest that we, as eyewitnesses, mysteriously accompany

the main events, without being seen or heard.¹⁴ But this suggests a further problem: what *are* the main events? Eyewitnesses very often don't have any idea what is going on in front of them. They are confused, disoriented, and sometimes afraid for their lives. Theater audiences at history plays are guided through the significant details, introduced to the important figures, and told about the important events that take place "out of sight"; they are offered a degree of understanding and insight that goes far beyond the level of the eyewitness. Finally, note that theater audiences don't merely know more than an eyewitness would happen to know: they know more than an eyewitness could possibly know—namely the future. The history play is the telling, or retelling, of the familiar story.¹⁵ Nothing could be further from a retelling of the familiar than the experience of the eyewitness, who is living through uncertain, turbulent times. All of this suggests that history plays do not turn audience members into eyewitnesses.

Suppose, though, that it's not a matter of having the experience that a contemporary Roman eyewitness would have had; instead, it's a matter of the experience that the modern audience member, Anya, would have if she were transported back in time to watch the events unfold. Of course, transporting Anya—shoving her into the Delorean and setting the clock for 44 B.C.—wouldn't do at all. Anya doesn't speak Latin or Greek; she wouldn't know where to go; she might not realize which one was Caesar, which Brutus. She would need a translator and a guide, who whispers the names of the people she sees, directs her gaze to the fateful moments, fills her in on some of the historical context and what has happened when she wasn't looking. If this is her experience of *Julius Caesar*, then we must see the playwright (and company) guiding her—a kind of invisible Super Virgil—through the streets of Rome. With his aid, we can understand why Anya knows much more than those around her—including how events will unfold and some of what their significance will be for the next couple of millennia or so. Perhaps, in that case, she is a witness of sorts?

But with that, we have something that looks more like an answer to the second question than an answer to the first. For what is the Super Virgil—the guide, the explainer, the translator (if necessary), the one who selects and emphasizes the historical events for our benefit and understanding, the one who explains the differences between our time and the time in which the events took place—what is he, if not the historian? And, inasmuch as Anya has been the receiver of this information, her question should be the second one: how does *Julius*

Caesar compare to the work of a historian? After all, *part* (though, as we shall see, certainly not all) of what the historian does is to give the reader some insight into what it might have been like to be there. When Plutarch praises Thucydides, he writes that Thucydides's goal is "to make his auditor a spectator." Hobbes, who translated Thucydides, approvingly cited this comment from Plutarch, adding that Thucydides "setteth his reader in the assemblies of the people and in the senate, at their debating; in the streets, at their seditions; and in the field, at their battles."¹⁶ Presumably what Hobbes and Plutarch mean is that the reader of Thucydides is given enough of the facts, context, and background information, together with (say) the words of Pericles, to understand what was going on. Obviously her understanding won't be the *same* as a contemporary spectator—as we have seen, in some ways she knows more, in others less. That much is true for the reader of the history book and for the spectator at the history play. With that in mind, we turn to the second (the "history book") question: to what extent does seeing the play compare to reading a history book about the same events?

IV

Note, first, that the potential answers to the history book question are rather different. Asking the eyewitness question, we were comparing (watching) the play to (watching) the event. Of course, the play could never be better than the event at *looking like* the event; nor, in fact, could it be nearly as good. It might have been like enough to the event that we could have answered "yes" to Anya's eyewitness question—though, as it happens, I have argued that we should answer "no." Turning to the history book question, matters are somewhat different. Anya is asking us to compare what she gets (in terms of historical understanding) from seeing the performance and from reading the history book. I'll say that her understanding is significantly worse; but note that (unlike with the eyewitness question) the answer could be that it is even *better*.

Might someone claim that the history play gives Anya a better understanding than the history book? Yes; and someone has, although perhaps it is no surprise that the someone in question is the author of a history play. Writing about his play, *Danton's Death*, Georg Büchner claimed: "The dramatist is in my view nothing other than a historian, but is superior to the latter in that he re-creates history: instead of offering us a bare narrative, he transports us directly into the life of an age; he gives us characters instead of character portrayals; full-bodied figures instead

of mere descriptions. His supreme task is to get as close as possible to history as it actually happened.”¹⁷

The context of this remark is, in part, a letter to his family in which the young Büchner is on the defensive about the play’s foul language (by contemporary standards). His point is partly, therefore, that he can’t be blamed for all the smut, because it was there in history and he was simply re-creating it, like any good historical playwright. Büchner does not elaborate on why the playwright is better than the historian, but it’s clear that the superiority is related to the play *as history*. It’s not that the play is more fun, more worthwhile, or (with Aristotle) more universal. A number of thoughts might motivate Büchner (or someone who argues to the same conclusion). Plays are more vivid than books. Perhaps they are easier to remember. Plays might (like diagrams, maps, or dioramas) be better ways of explaining things than written prose. This is all very well, but being vivid and easy to remember—welcome though it undoubtedly is—is not the mark of a successful history book. The same goes for better explanation: it’s welcome, of course, but if the information is there, it’s there.

Büchner’s defender might also want to elaborate on a difference between written and performed history. The actions that led to Caesar’s death were just that: actions. Written history faces a kind of translation problem: it must turn movement and action into words on the page. Translations are never perfect, one might say. Certainly, the notion that the task of writing down the past is a peculiar one—one that may ultimately fail—has been much discussed. De Certeau writes, for example, that “historiography (that is ‘history’ and ‘writing’) bears within its own name the paradox—almost an oxymoron—of a relation established between two antinomic terms.”¹⁸ History plays, one might argue, do not face this translation problem. “Stories are not lived but told,” wrote Louis Mink (p. 557); but plays are lived. History is action; plays are action, or, in Aristotle’s phrase, imitations of action; books are, well, books. To say all this is not to say that (written) history is fiction, or that there’s no truth about what happened in the past, or that any piece of writing about Julius Caesar is as valid or true as any other. All we are saying is that theater (as history) doesn’t obviously face the very same problem that (written) historiography faces.

Indeed, looking to the way that Büchner wrote *Danton’s Death*, it is possible that something (roughly) like this thought was on his mind (though just what was on his mind is not our focus here). *Danton’s Death* is a history play about some of the key figures in the French Revolution—

a play that, for whatever reason, has not achieved the same fame in the English-speaking world as it has elsewhere.¹⁹ The play depicts the events leading up to the execution of Danton, Desmoulin, and others at the hands of Robespierre. In addition to possessing all of the various features of the history play that we enumerated earlier, *Danton's Death* uses a great many historical speeches, cut and pasted directly from the sources. It has been estimated that one sixth of the play is composed of direct or indirect quotation; a great deal of this is direct.²⁰

So let us try to fill out Büchner's argument on his behalf. The historian, he would suggest, will tell you that Robespierre looked like this, that he said and did such-and-such; where there were speeches, he may provide the words for you to read on a page, and where there were actions, he will describe them. But Robespierre was a person, not a collection of speeches and biographical details. A historical account of his life will never, no matter how accurate, bridge the gap between the word on the page and the human being who lived, breathed, and was guillotined in 1794, having apparently shot himself in the face. Plays do not need to bridge the gap, because the gap does not exist. So a historical play featuring Robespierre will, Büchner suggests, always be better than its written equivalent. Of course, that won't be the case if the playwright makes up details about Robespierre. But if, like Büchner, the playwright uses the historical sources carefully—if she even has the historical characters giving speeches taken directly from the sources—then, he thinks, the result will be better *as history*, i.e., better when judged by the standards of what historians do.

Readers who know Büchner's play will know that in addition to quoting directly from the sources, he made up some of the characters (Marion) and also invented dialogue between real figures—most important, the final meeting between Danton and Robespierre (the conversation took place, but it is not known what was said). Since I am only using his claims as an example, this hardly matters here. One could just as easily imagine a play in which more than one sixth—perhaps even all of it—was direct historical quotation. (*The Laramie Project*, for example, is completely constructed from direct quotation; it is not a history play, but it suggests that such a play is possible.)

Two thoughts might seem to go against Büchner, although in fact they do not. First, one might complain that his play (or, perhaps, the imagined play that takes his method to the extreme) doesn't tell us the whole story. The trouble with this, as a criticism of historical theater, is that it also applies to any other kind of historiography. History books

leave out an enormous amount of detail. A history book about the French Revolution, for example, could justifiably tell its reader about the France of Louis XIV and Louis XV by way of explaining Louis XVI's France; it could also compare the monarchies of contemporary France, England, and Russia; it might discuss the French Enlightenment theories in which some of the key participants were steeped, not to mention the biographies of Robespierre and Danton, or those of the king and queen. And we have not even begun to talk about the events of the revolution itself—the storming of the Bastille or the flight to Varennes or the Battle of Valmy. It is clear that not every detail will find its way into even a comprehensive, expansive volume on the revolution. To be selective, to omit certain facts or discussions, does not make for a bad historian; indeed, a good historian knows what to leave out as well as what to include. This is just as true for the historical playwright as for the conventional historian, and so it cannot be a reason for rejecting the former in favor of the latter.

Second, one could point out that historical theater doesn't merely report facts. This is certainly true: historical theater is not merely a report of a set of facts about the past. Those facts are interpreted and a version of them is presented to the audience. As before, though, if this is a criticism, then it also applies to the history book. Historians do not merely reel off lists of facts. Hayden White's distinction between the narrative history and the "annals" is helpful here. The annals merely record events as they happen, with no apparent connection between them: "Year 1: X died; year 2: Y died." Although (presumably) a statement of facts, the annals are not a work of historiography (at least by modern, Western standards).²¹ To become such, annals would require a narrative structure, in which the events were in some way connected (did X's death have anything to do with Y's?). What's more, even a presentation of the facts can be deeply misleading. Suppose, when she was younger, that Anya had asked us who Julius Caesar was. And suppose we had answered: "Caesar was a Roman legal reformer and minor religious official who wrote a book about rhetorical style; he was the nephew of the famous general, Marius, who had rescued Italy from German invasion." We would be telling Anya something factual, but we would be misleading her if that's *all* we said.

On further examination, though, Büchner's claims struggle. For one thing, he is talking about "character portrayals" in written and dramatic history. But even if we agree with him that theater can do this better, we must note that character portrayal is only part, perhaps a small part,

of historiography. It might be the case, for example, that a history of modern Europe could not responsibly avoid a portrayal of the character of Napoleon, even of Robespierre. But it might be equally compelled to describe the changing population densities, comparative living conditions, development of trade routes, political systems, changes in modes of transport, military technology, and so on. None of these features, though very important, involves character portrayal, and there's no particular reason to think that character portrayal is more important than any of these in understanding the historical period in question. More decisive, there's no reason to think that theater could claim to portray them better than written history, if indeed it can portray them at all.

That was just to show that Büchner's claim, even if successful, must be restricted. But there are other reasons to think it won't be successful. For one thing, Büchner's play may be accurate in that it presents the sources—historical speeches—in an unusually direct and faithful manner. However, as Collingwood and others have long argued, it is not the historian's role merely to present the sources to the reader.²² There are a number of reasons why this incorrectly accounts for the work of the historian: first, some sources (such as pottery or ruins) are not presentable directly and in spoken form. Second, some sources are known to be unreliable, but there are interesting things to say about *why* they are unreliable, and how exactly they get it wrong. Büchner's direct-quotation method, taken to its extreme, would limit the playwright to presenting just the accurate, reliable source material. But historians want to explain where certain myths come from and why certain false claims might have been given credence. These explanations are a crucial part of what it is to be a good historian. The historian must always interpret and analyze the sources, drawing certain conclusions and presenting them. All of which suggests that even if Robespierre, the character, uses the speeches of Robespierre, the historical figure, that doesn't make for good historiography.

Second, even if Büchner presents the most historically accurate picture of what these characters were like, he cannot present rival interpretations and disputes about the facts; and he cannot, in the course of the play, flag which parts of the story are his own fictional inventions (Marion), which parts of the story really happened but are presented in more detail than is really known (Robespierre confronting Danton), and which are direct quotations from historical sources (Desmoulins's opening lines). This is not just a problem for Büchner's use of direct quotation. It is a problem for historical theater in general. For although historians, like

playwrights, cannot present the whole story, they can make clear where there are disputes about certain facts, and they can then make a case for interpreting the evidence one way and not another. This is what seems typically lacking in historical theater. To take a different example, the problem with *Julius Caesar*, then, is not that it doesn't tell the whole story; it's that it presents each element in the story as equally sure-footed, as equally justified. It does not explain where the evidence is lacking, or where the historian is speculating. This is important, because weighing the evidence—"showing your working"—is a paradigmatic feature of historiography. It is not optional for historians, whether or not they explain how secure their claims are.

Even so, we have left Büchner's principal claim untouched: namely, that there is a certain (if highly restricted) area—character portrayal—in which theater can do historiography better than a historian. But our further considerations have given us reason to doubt even this. What is it that Büchner adds to Robespierre, which the (written) history cannot offer? It is the full-bodied figure, living, breathing, and speaking. The Robespierre we see on stage does not merely *say* the words; he says them in a particular manner, with particular emphasis. He is not merely dressed in the kind of clothes Robespierre wore: he is wearing a shirt of a *particular* color. To "complete" the full-bodied figure, in short, the playwright (or director or actor) must make decisions about matters that cannot be known. We may know that Robespierre wore red, but was it *this* red? That his voice was high-pitched, but was it *this* pitch? It is not known, and yet a decision must be made, consciously or otherwise. In many cases, precisely the necessity of filling in the unknowns is what makes Robespierre on stage more "full-bodied"; but in that case, what we have is not better historiography at all. Of course, Anya didn't for a moment think that the costume colors and vocal pitches in *Julius Caesar* corresponded to those of Caesar's Rome. She has more common sense than that. But sometimes it's not clear; and, more important, there's no way in principle of knowing, from the performance, what has been invented and what hasn't. Büchner was claiming, as a benefit, the effect of one of the very features that makes his play worse, not better, as history.

I've argued that both versions of Anya's question should be answered "no." Though they are distinct, the two answers are related. To think that *Julius Caesar* could show us what Caesar's death looked like is to think the impossible. To think it could tell us how to understand Caesar's death is to misunderstand the problems that confront human beings

when they engage with the past. The impossibility of the former, I would suggest, is made clearer by an appreciation of the latter.

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1. See M. Booth, "Nineteenth-Century Theatre," in *The Oxford Illustrated History of Theatre*, ed. J. Brown (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995).
2. Not even "no-truth" theorists like Lamarque and Olsen: "Of course readers can pick up information about people, places, and events from works of fiction." P. Lamarque and S. Olsen, *Truth, Fiction and Literature* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994), p. 4.
3. G. Lukács, *The Historical Novel*, trans. H. and S. Mitchell (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1983); A. Heller, *The Time Is Out of Joint: Shakespeare as Philosopher of History* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2002).
4. Aristotle, *Poetics*, trans. M. Heath (London: Penguin, 1996), 51b, p. 16. For an interpretation in terms of "types," see, e.g., D. Frede, "Necessity, Chance and 'What happens for the most part'" in *Essays on Aristotle's Poetics*, ed. A. Rorty (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992).
5. Versions of this view are offered in H. White, "The Value of Narrativity in the Representation of Reality," *Critical Inquiry* 7, no. 1 (1980): 5–27, and R. Barthes, "The discourse of history," trans. S. Bann, *Comparative Criticism* 3 (1981): 7–20, amongst others. White is often accused of confusing the latter two. See N. Carroll, "Interpretation, History and Narrative," *The Monist* 73 (1990) for insightful criticism of White's view.
6. See Carroll, "Interpretation, History and Narrative," for discussion.
7. Hence, for example: "Fictionality has nothing to do with what is or is not real or true or factual; . . . It is hoped that asking whether a given work is fiction or nonfiction . . . will lead to a better understanding of what it is." K. Walton, *Mimesis as Make-Believe: On the Foundations of the Representational Arts* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990), pp. 102–3.
8. In addition to being literature as opposed to history, it is likely that *Julius Caesar* is also covered by "the fictive mode" for Lamarque and Olsen, since undoubtedly, as with *War and Peace*, "there is some undisputed fictional content" (p. 285).
9. Some have taken the opposite view in related discussions. G. Ryle, R. B. Braithwaite, and G. E. Moore, in "Imaginary Objects," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society, Supplementary Volumes* 12 (1933): 18–70, argue, for example, that had the *Pickwick Papers* been true, unbeknown to its author, it would in fact be a biography. This strikes me as mistaken.

“Biography,” like “history” and “history play,” implies a certain engagement between the author and the sources. It’s worth noting, though, that in applying the term “history play” to *The Persians* I am speaking anachronistically, not least because Herodotus—the first “historian”—was not yet on the scene at that time.

10. Especially *War and Peace*. See J. Searle, “The Logical Status of Fictional Discourse” in *Expression and Meaning* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979); Walton, *Mimesis as Make-Believe*, p. 94; Lamarque and Olsen, *Truth, Fiction and Literature*, p. 285.

11. This point plays a central part in Lukács’s comparison between historical drama and the historical novel, but its significance for contemporary discussions of history and fiction has been insufficiently recognized.

12. William Shakespeare, *Henry V*, ed. T. W. Craik (London: Arden Shakespeare, 1995), Prologue, 26–27; Pushkin quoted in M. Carlson, *Theories of Theatre: A Historical and Critical Survey, from the Greeks to the Present* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993), p. 241.

13. G. E. Lessing, *Hamburg Dramaturgy*, trans. H. Zimmerman (London: Dover Publications, 1962), Section 84, p. 211.

14. A related concern in film studies asks if viewers of films imagine themselves there at the events (or looking through the lens). See, for example, G. Currie, *Image and mind: film, philosophy and cognitive science* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), p. 171, who argues convincingly against this view.

15. The idea that historical discourse requires knowing more than an informed contemporary is a central claim in A. Danto, *Analytic Philosophy of History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1965). Louis Mink, “History and Fiction as Modes of Comprehension,” *New Literary History* 1, no. 3 (1970): 541–58 offers a similar analysis of storytelling in general.

16. Thomas Hobbes, *The History of the Grecian War, Written by Thucydides* (London: Whittaker, Parker and Bliss, 1822), p. vi. Hobbes also gives the Plutarch quotation. I’m grateful to my colleague, Marcus Giaquinto, for directing my attention to this quotation.

17. From a letter to his family, July 28, 1835, repr. in G. Büchner, *Complete Plays, Lenz and Other Writings*, trans. J. Reddick (London: Penguin, 1996), p. 201.

18. M. de Certeau, *The Writing of History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), p. xxvii.

19. F. Rokem explores this lack of success, with respect to its reception in America. See his *Performing History* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2000).

20. For a detailed analysis of Büchner’s use of sources, see G. Büchner, *Werke und Briefe* (Munich: Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag, 2006), pp. 485–98.

21. White, in “The Value of Narrativity,” certainly wouldn’t disagree with this statement, but he argues that, in not being placed in a conventional narrative, “the annals” has certain virtues that are overlooked by modern-day readers.

22. R. G. Collingwood, “Historical Evidence,” repr. in *The Idea of History: Revised Edition*, ed. J. van der Dussen (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994).