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Shakespeare's Holinshed
Remarks from Early Modern Bibliophilia: A Celebration of the Chrzanowski Collection
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The webpage for the collection describes how, twenty-five years ago, Paul Chrzanowski set out to acquire texts that Shakespeare “likely read or could have read in some form.” The book I will be remarking on briefly today—the 1587 edition of Raphael Holinshed’s *Chronicles of England, Scotland, and Ireland*—is one we know that he read, and reread, and reread again. Shakespeare turned to it as a budding playwright for the Henry VI plays and returned to it toward the end of his writing life for wild ride of *Cymbeline*. Nearly a third of his works bear traces of Holinshed.

Of Holinshed himself, we know little. Born in Cheshire in the 1520s, by mid-century, he was assistant to the London printer and bookseller Reyner Wolfe on a *modest* project: a multivolume universal history of every nation in the world *and* a cosmography as well for good measure. When Wolfe died, Holinshed reined in the scope (limiting it geographically to the British Isles, though not temporally), and hired a team of writers to assist in completing the history. With lavish illustrations, the monumental first edition (which is also, we are fortunate, part of the Chrzanowski collection), was released in 1577 in its full 2,835 folios of glory. With revisions (and excisions due to censorship), the second edition was released ten years later, about the time when a young William Shakespeare would have been making his way down from Stratford to London to try his hand at theater. We all know how that worked out, and the 1587 edition, now known affectionately as “Shakespeare’s Holinshed,” would be a reliable resource for a career rich in language, character, and imagination, if short on original plot.

By the middle of the 17th-century’s first decade, Shakespeare would be writing for James I. As a King’s Man, he was authorized to perform at court, at the Globe, and on tour throughout

the realm. The realm, however, was in a state of crisis. After resolving the issue of succession, which had preoccupied England in the 1590s, the early 1600s brought bouts of plague, nationalist opposition in parliament to James's declaration of himself as "King of Great Britain," and the Gunpowder Plot on the new monarch's life. Beyond regicide and the explosion of the House of Lords, the plot intended to incite a popular revolt in Warwickshire (the playwright's backyard), kidnap James's nine-year-old daughter Elizabeth—who, if only a child, at least was Catholic—and put her on the throne. James Shapiro argues that "it would be hard to find many individuals in Jacobean England more intricately linked than [Shakespeare] was to those whose lives were touched by the Gunpowder Plot." When Shakespeare and his father applied for a coat-of-arms, they emphasized their connection to Edward Arden of Park Hall, who was uncle to two of the leading conspirators, Robert Catesby and Francis Tresham. That's a decision he may have been regretting, Shapiro surmises, in November of 1605.

What this all has to do with Holinshed is clear in Shakespeare's immediate dramatic response. At a time of uncertainty and unrest, he looked into his expansive history of the British Isles. The following quotation from Holinshed, covering the years around 800 BC, will sound familiar to any of you who have read the first play Shakespeare wrote after the Gunpowder Plot (I'm omitting a key name so you can guess the work):

[H]e had by his wife three daughters without other issue, whose names were Gonorilla, Regan, and Cordeilla, which daughters he greatly loved but specially Cordeilla the youngest farre aboue the two elder. When [he] therefore was come to great yeres, & began to waxe unweldie through age, he thought to understand the affections of his daughters toward him, and preferre hir whom he best loued, to the succession over the kingdome.

I expect you recognized the set-up for the love test that begins *King Lear*. We can also locate the next play he would write, set in the 11th century, in the *Chronicles*. Reading from Holinshed (and I am again omitting a key name so you can guess):

Suddenlie in the middest of a laund, there met them three women in strange and wild apparell, resembling creatures of elder world, whom when they attentiuely beheld, wondering much at the sight, the first of them spake and said: “All haile, [] thane of Glamis!” . . . The second of them said: “Haile, [] thane of Cawder!” But the third said “All haile . . . that hereafter shall be king of Scotland!”

That is what I’ll call the Scottish play, just in case there is a theater close by. So, here we have two of Shakespeare’s finest tragedies (he would continue this remarkable run with *Antony and Cleopatra* later the same year) emerging, at least in part, out of the wonder of Tudor historiography that is Holinshed.

If you are like me when it comes to the histories and legacies of texts (and I suspect at an event called *Early Modern Bibliophilia* that many of you are), turning the pages of Holinshed and tracking these connections is a joy in itself. But I would like to conclude by going beyond pointing to Shakespeare and Holinshed and marking their similarities. I’d like to suggest something more about the business and pleasure of books. With both his mind and his kingdom unraveling before him, Lear asks, “Who is it that can tell me who I am?” The Fool responds, “Lear’s shadow.” Amidst the widespread confusion and fright following the gunpowder plot, Shakespeare used Holinshed to write two tragic masterpieces preoccupied by ideas of the nation, the ethics of governance, and the bonds, given or chosen, of family, language, and culture. In unsettled times, to distinguish the self from its shadow—or the qualities of a union from its dark mirror—we often turn to history, to story, and the questions found there.

The 1587 Holinshed, Shakespeare's Holinshed, is a rare gift, and I am extraordinarily grateful to have it here at the Clark.