As Henry V approaches its climax in the Battle of Agincourt, Shakespeare apparently presents his audience with two different versions of Henry's actions during the night before the battle. First the Chorus describes the King making his way through his camp, lifting the weary and dejected spirits of his soldiers by the inspiration of his royal presence:

> With cheerful semblance and sweet majesty;  
> That every wretch, pining and pale before,  
> Beholding him, plucks comfort from his looks.

(IV. Prologue. 40–2)²

But the scene that follows hardly confirms this account. Instead of showing his royal face to the common soldiers, Henry borrows Sir Thomas Erpingham's cloak to move through the camp incognito. And instead of dispensing encouragement to his men, he seems rather to need their reassurance. After a brief encounter with that scurvy knave, Pistol, and a spot of eavesdropping upon the two captains, Gower and Fluellen, Henry is accosted by three ordinary men-at-arms, John Bates, Alexander Court and Michael Williams. This meeting provides the main business of the scene, as Henry, reduced to the ranks as it were, awkwardly attempts to defend the King against the sturdy scepticism of the common soldier:

> King. I myself heard the King say he would not be ransom'd.

¹A lecture delivered in the John Rylands University Library on Wednesday, 18 November 1981.
²Quotations from Shakespeare are taken from The Complete Works, ed. P. Alexander (1951).
Will. Ay, he said so, to make us fight cheerfully; but when our throats are cut he may be ransom'd, and we ne'er the wiser.

King. If I live to see it, I will never trust his word after.

Will. You pay him then! That's a perilous shot out of an elder-gun, that a poor and a private displeasure can do against a monarch! You may as well go about to turn the sun to ice with fanning in his face with a peacock's feather. You'll never trust his word after! Come, 'tis a foolish saying.

(IV. i. 188–200)

Henry's discomfiture at this unanticipated and forthright expression of an ordinary soldier's point of view is channelled into his ensuing soliloquy, meditating uneasily on the responsibilities of kingship and revealing him at the moment of greatest stress and lowest morale.

Clearly, there is an ironic discrepancy between the terms in which the Chorus sets the scene of Henry's nocturnal perambulation and the dramatic action itself. Since Holinshed's Chronicles, Shakespeare's main source, does not say what Henry did on the eve of Agincourt, no appeal is open to the historical record. The inconsistency is Shakespeare's invention. Yet it is commonly assumed that Choruses and Prologues are dramatic devices used to convey necessary and reliable information, that their official function is to speak on behalf of the play, not at variance from it. Characters within a play may have a point of view that is partial in awareness and attitude, but Chorus and Prologue are supposed to have a formal obligation to guide us, to put us in the picture and even to tell us what to think. As Hamlet says of the Prologue to 'The Murder of Gonzago', 'We shall know by this fellow.' But the prologue to my own argument, the example from Henry V, suggests that Shakespeare's Prologues and Choruses do not always, if ever, keep strictly to the rules. If the Chorus that prepares us for 'A little touch of Harry in the night' appears not to have read the playscript, the Prologue to 'The Murder of Gonzago' is discreet to the point of secretiveness:
For us, and for our tragedy,
Here stooping to your clemency,
We beg your hearing patiently.

(Ill. ii. 144–6)

He gives absolutely nothing away.

Shakespeare’s use of such formal devices, of course, has behind it a long dramatic tradition reaching back to classical models, and Elizabethan dramatists were infinitely resourceful in adapting and experimenting with their conventional stock-in-trade. The Prologue (deriving from the comedies of Terence and Plautus) and the Chorus (deriving from the tragedies of Seneca), figures originally distinct in function, are essentially means of offering a perspective on the dramatic action. In the latitude of the popular stage towards the end of the sixteenth century, not only do Choruses often serve as Prologues, preparing the audience for what is to come as well as reflecting on what has happened, mingling as it were news with editorial comment, but also they tend to lose their impersonality and to assume a dramatic identity of their own. Sometimes the functions of Prologue and Chorus are taken over by characters in the play itself, and sometimes they are performed by two or more figures in a dialogue or dumb show that virtually constitutes a little drama in itself, as in the Christopher Sly episode that serves as the Induction to The Taming of the Shrew. Underlying this proliferation of inventive ways of offering a perspective on the main dramatic action, complicating and sophisticating the traditional roles of Prologue and Chorus, there were two principal factors. In the first place, the Elizabethan dramatists inherited from the earlier Tudor interludes and courtly entertainments a theatrical convention in which different planes of reality freely intersected, permitting dramatic characters to acknowledge the presence of the audience by directly addressing it, and employing allegorical or mythological presenters of a plot or pageant over which they supposedly exercised control. So, for instance, Cupid appears as Prologue to the love-tragedy, Gismond of Salerne (performed in the late 1560s), but he not only introduces the play, he presides over the passions of the lovers as well. In addition to being assimilated to such
framing devices, the uses of Prologue and Chorus were also subject to modification as the popular stage became less overtly didactic towards the end of the sixteenth century. This is the second factor governing their dramatic deployment: they become more oblique and equivocal in their relationship to the action of the main play, less disinterested and less impartial in the perspective they offer to the audience. So the Chorus in Henry V, as I have suggested, is rather one-sided in his view of Henry and his version of events.

But before returning to Shakespeare, the kind of developments outlined above can be seen in the work of two of the dramatists who dominated the popular stage at the beginning of Shakespeare's career, Thomas Kyd and Christopher Marlowe. Kyd's The Spanish Tragedy opens, not with an anonymous Prologue to set the scene, but with the Ghost of Don Andrea and the Spirit of Revenge. After Don Andrea has told us who he is and why he and his companion have come from the underworld, Revenge promises him (and the audience) that he shall see the downfall of his enemy:

> Then know, Andrea, that thou art arriv'd  
> Where thou shalt see the author of thy death,  
> Don Balthazar the prince of Portingale,  
> Depriv'd of life by Bel-imperia:  
> Here sit we down to see the mystery,  
> And serve for Chorus in this tragedy.

> (l. i. 86–91)\(^1\)

This spectral Chorus remains on the stage throughout the play, unknown to the other characters, commenting on the unfolding plot at the end of each Act. But, having a vested interest in the proceedings, instead of offering sententious wisdom to the audience in the manner of a Senecan Chorus, they cast an ironic perspective on the action they supervise, as Revenge performs the rôle of Presenter for Don Andrea's benefit:

> I'll turn their friendship into fell despite,  
> Their love to mortal hate, their day to night,

Allegorically, of course, Revenge is the driving force of the play, but as dramatic presenter he does not reveal how he will bring about these reversals. With each twist and turn of the action, therefore, Don Andrea's impatience and suspense is answered by the assurance of Revenge that he is in control, but he does not, Prologue-like, divulge the secrets of the plot beforehand. Clearly, what we do not know by this fellow is as important as what he does tell us, and the dramatic effect reinforces the primary function of this Chorus in relation to the play, which is to embody the idea of fate or destiny. While the characters in the main plot seem to be autonomously pursuing their own ends, the stage-presence of Don Andrea and Revenge shows them to be serving the purposes of a wider scheme of things of which they remain unaware. Kyd's theatrical inventiveness replaces the traditional Senecan homily on the inscrutable workings of fortune.

Marlowe's use of Prologue and Chorus is less ingenious than Kyd's framing device, but in its variety it displays the characteristic boldness of his way with dramatic convention. The Prologue to the First Part of Tamburlaine the Great is a brief but resonant fanfare, a mere eight lines announcing not only 'the Scythian Tamburlaine/Threat'ning the world with high astounding terms', but also, one feels, the no less aggressive advent of this playwright, come to take the stage by storm, 'From jigging veins of rhyming mother-wits,/And such conceits as clownage keeps in pay'. These contemptuous allusions to the unlearned traditions of the popular theatre are followed by Marlowe's version of the Prologue's conventional appeal for a sympathetic reception: 'View but his picture in this tragic glass,/And then applaud his fortunes as you please.' This Prologue is suitably audacious, and significantly he makes no attempt to moralize his subject. The Prologue/Chorus of Doctor Faustus, on the other hand, is quite explicit in condemning the 'self-conceit' which leads Faustus to surfeit 'upon cursed necromancy', and at the end of the play his Epilogue is also didactic:
Faustus is gone: regard his hellish fall,
Whose fiendful fortune may exhort the wise
Only to wonder at unlawful things,
Whose deepness doth entice such forward wits,
To practise more than heavenly power permits.

(4–8)

While these sentiments are perfectly proper in a Chorus, their effect is to simplify and distance our view of the tragedy. The Chorus is obviously right, but too obviously, since Marlowe compels an interest in his protagonist’s experience that engages us much more deeply than the cautionary tale summarized by the Chorus. This reductive use of the Chorus, which Shakespeare was to turn to his own purposes, actually stimulates us to greater awareness of our own responses by setting up an inadequate frame of reference upon which we feel we must refine.

Marlowe’s most inventive Prologue is the guest appearance of Machiavelli to introduce The Jew of Malta. This is another instance of the Prologue as tutelary spirit, but Machiavelli is not content to stick to his brief, ‘to present the tragedy of a Jew’. Before he comes to that little matter, he has a bone to pick with those (present company not excluded) who give him a bad name in public but who study his works in private:

To some perhaps my name is odious;
But such as love me, guard me from their tongues,
And let them know that I am Machevill,
And weigh not men, and therefore not men’s words,
Admir’d I am of those that hate me most.
Though some speak openly against my books,
Yet will they read me. . . .

(lines 5–11)

By this sleight-of-hand, Machiavelli, himself a by-word for cunning and duplicity, denounces and exposes the crafty dishonesty of this world. He proceeds to reel off a catalogue of his supposed doctrines, scornfully dismissing all religious and moral sanctions as

1 Quotations from Marlowe are taken from The Plays of Christopher Marlowe, ed. R. Gill (1971).
humbug, and thereby setting himself up as the arch-undeceiver:

I count religion but a childish toy,
And hold there is no sin but ignorance.
Birds of the air will tell of murders past.
I am ashamed to hear such fooleries!
Many will talk of title to a crown:
What right had Caesar to the empery?
Might first made kings, and laws were then most sure
When like the Draco's, they were writ in blood.

(lines 14–21)

This is a brilliant mockery of the old-fashioned moralizing Prologue. We shall indeed know by this fellow, for this fellow knows how the world goes. As for the traditional appeal to the audience to give the play a fair reception, Machiavelli instead goads the spectators with this final provocative flourish in the direction of the Jew:

I crave but this: grace him as he deserves,
And let him not be entertain'd the worse
Because he favours me.

(lines 33–5)

One can almost hear the booing and hissing.

Clearly, then, by the time that Shakespeare was writing his first plays, Prologue and Chorus had become quite sophisticated and equivocal devices, their functions and dramatic effectiveness ranging beyond the mere purveying of information and moral instruction. Far from establishing any clear rules or even guidelines for the use of such figures, Shakespeare's predecessors in the popular theatre were more intent on varying and adapting the convention, discovering new possibilities in what was provided by tradition and ingeniously extending the guises in which they appear. In these respects Shakespeare continued where his predecessors left off, with his prodigious virtuosity and theatrical instinct. There is, however, one respect in which Shakespeare's use of Prologue and Chorus adds an extra dimension to the tradition: as with other well-worn dramatic and literary conventions, they come in time to seem old-fashioned
and therefore to lend themselves to playful pastiche, if not to outright parody. Shakespeare's early plays contain a great deal of pastiche and parody, showing that he did not follow literary and dramatic fashions uncritically. One such play is Richard III, in which the villain-hero mimics and mocks his way through a diversity of stock roles and their appropriate styles, including those of Petrarchan lover, stage-tragedian, morality-play Vice, holy man, patriotic warrior-king and, I would suggest, Prologue to his own tragedy.

To have Richard himself open the play with a soliloquy is a stroke of dramaturgical genius. As Shakespeare well knew, there were precedents in the old morality plays for beginning the action with a speech delivered to the audience either by an allegorical figure of virtue or else by the Vice, comic villain and manipulator and therefore dramatic ancestor of Richard himself. But, with the other exception of Richard II, in none of Shakespeare's tragedies does the hero appear at the opening of the play; his entrance is delayed, usually until the second scene, and, even in cases such as Coriolanus and Antony and Cleopatra, Shakespeare's normal practice is to set the scene before the protagonist makes his first entry. In the case of Richard III, Richard is there alone to introduce the play by direct address to the audience, and he begins in a lofty heroic vein, full of rhetorical amplification and formal pomp, until it is bathetically subverted by a sudden and unmistakable shift of stylistic idiom and rhythm in the twelfth line, as the sardonic tone of Richard's own voice takes over:

Now is the winter of our discontent
Made glorious summer by this sun of York;
And all the clouds that lour'd upon our house
In the deep bosom of the ocean buried.
Now are our brows bound with victorious wreaths;
Our bruised arms hung up for monuments;
Our stern alarums chang'd to merry meetings,
Our dreadful marches to delightful measures.
Grim-visag'd war hath smooth'd his wrinkled front,
And now, instead of mounting barbed steeds

1So, for instance, Charity in Youth and Avaryce in Respublica.
To fright the souls of fearful adversaries,
*He capers nimbly in a lady’s chamber*
*To the lascivious pleasing of a lute.*
But I—that am not shap’d for sportive tricks. . . .

(l. i. 1–14)

It is as though Richard assumes the orotund impersonal manner of a Prologue to toss it aside contemptuously and reveal himself as he takes the audience into his private confidence. Thus Shakespeare establishes Richard’s superior awareness and manipulative control over the ensuing action.

Shakespeare’s first Prologue/Chorus proper belongs to *Romeo and Juliet*. His introduction to the play certainly offers a simplified view of it, and critics have often pointed out that his stress upon the importance of fate and the feud is not altogether borne out by the play itself:

Two households, both alike in dignity,
    In fair Verona, where we lay our scene,
From ancient grudge break to new mutiny,
    Where civil blood makes civil hands unclean.
From forth the fatal loins of these two foes
    A pair of star-cross’d lovers take their life;
Whose misadventur’d piteous overthrows
    Doth with their death bury their parents’ strife.
The fearful passage of their death-mark’d love,
    And the continuance of their parents’ rage,
Which, but their children’s end, nought could remove,
    Is now the two hours’ traffic of our stage;
The which if you with patient ears attend,
    What here shall miss, our toil shall strive to mend.

(The Prologue, lines 1–14)

No sooner has the Prologue left the stage than the feud is made the subject of bawdy quibbling between two comic servants, and when fighting does break out later in this opening scene, Capulet and Montague are evidently too old to take effective action. ‘A crutch, a crutch! Why call you for a sword?’ Capulet’s wife says to him. ‘Their parents’ strife’ is an extinct volcano; only the fiery
Tybalt seeks to reactivate it, and when he recognizes Romeo at the Capulet feast, old Capulet actually prevents a fight and speaks in praise of Romeo. Romeo’s subsequent killing of Tybalt in a duel is certainly crucial to the tragic turn of events, although he is avenging, not his family honour, but Mercutio’s death. Similarly, the Prologue’s fatalistic view of Romeo and Juliet as ‘a pair of star-cross’d lovers’ places too much emphasis on external agency. While it is true that each of the lovers has at different times a premonition of disaster, they are far from being merely the passive victims of fate. Their intense all-consuming passion, about which the Prologue says nothing, itself makes love the supreme value, worth even more than life, and it is perfected rather than destroyed in their suicides. The tomb’s a fine and private place, and Romeo and Juliet there embrace.

The Prologue’s oblique perspective on the play is not simply perverse. It is a point of departure, stressing the familiar Senecan topics of vengeance and doom. Indeed, Seneca’s Thyestes concerns mortal hatred between two households ‘both alike in dignity’ in which children are the victims of ‘their parents’ strife’. The resemblance to Romeo and Juliet does not extend any further; after his brother Atreus has raped his wife, Thyestes takes the terrible vengeance of murdering the children of Atreus and serving their flesh to his brother at a banquet. Shakespeare had already drawn on Thyestes in concocting the horrors of Titus Andronicus. In making romantic love the central concern of Romeo and Juliet, he was choosing an unusual theme for a tragedy, since love was more frequently associated with comedy. This is another dramatic justification of the Prologue, for if he was not there to warn us otherwise, the first two Acts of Romeo and Juliet are light-hearted enough to hold out the possibility of a happy ending. Not until the deaths of Mercutio and Tybalt, with the consequent banishment of Romeo, does the play take a decisive turn towards tragedy. And if the Prologue has little to say about the lovers’ passion, he does significantly frame his speech in the form of a sonnet, the form which for the Elizabethans was the love poem par excellence.

The Chorus makes one further appearance, interposed between the first meeting of Romeo and Juliet at the Capulet feast,
when their dialogue together is also in sonnet form, and their second encounter, when they declare their love to each other in the Balcony Scene. Here too the Chorus speaks a sonnet, reflecting on the sudden change in dramatic circumstances, but also revealing a change in his own point of view, for now he celebrates love as sonnets should do:

Now Romeo is belov’d, and loves again,  
Alike bewitched by the charm of looks;  
But to his foe suppos’d he must complain,  
And she steal love’s sweet bait from fearful hooks.  

(Chorus, lines 5–8)

This is in a much more lyrical vein than his Prologue, as if we are gradually entering a sonnet world, for *Romeo and Juliet* is a play in which the well-worn metaphors and paradoxes of sonneteering language come to life as dramatic realities. As the play unfolds, the imagery of love’s woeful pageant ceases to be mere poetic fancy. If it was conventional for the sonneteering lover to see himself as at war with his mistress, a loved one who is also a foe, wounding or even slaying him, making him suffer a living death, thirst for delicious poison, be happy in his misery, endure parting and absence, and so forth, then such commonplace topics and conceits are translated into action in the play. When she realizes she has fallen in love with a Montague, Juliet says, ‘My only love sprung from my only hate’ (I. v. 136). Romeo, overhearing Mercutio’s mockery of his lovelorn state, comments, ‘He jests at scars that never felt a wound’ (II. ii. 1), but a few scenes later Mercutio is fatally wounded and makes a jest of it, too. The play can be seen as a critical exploration of the sonnet’s conventional concern with love, suffering and metaphorical death. As the sonnet world begins to come to life, then, the Chorus’s preparatory function in the play has been performed, and he is needed no more.

Having identified *Romeo and Juliet* as the first play in which Shakespeare uses the Prologue/Chorus in the full formal sense, I must allow for the possibility that the priority belongs to *A

Midsummer Night's Dream. The two plays are very close in date as well as in theme: "The course of true love never did run smooth" (MND, I. i. 134). If Peter Quince's Prologue to 'Pyramus and Thisby' represents Shakespeare's earliest treatment of the device, the burlesque is a demonstration of the pitfalls that more judicious Prologues must avoid. Tripped up by his hilariously misplaced punctuation, Quince flounders through his opening courtesies to the audience and then proceeds to introduce each of the characters in turn before telling the entire story of his play. It says something about Shakespeare's other Prologues and Choruses that Quince is the most truthful, informative and authoritative of them all.

Such simple truth-telling is hardly to be expected from the allegorical figure of Rumour (painted full of tongues), who introduces the Second Part of Henry IV. A traditional figure in medieval and Renaissance iconography, Rumour derives ultimately from Virgil's depiction of Fama in Book IV of the Aeneid. Shakespeare's use of this familiar false witness is brilliantly equivocal and ironic, even more so than Marlowe's summoning of Machiavelli to present The Jew of Malta, but much in the same manner. Rumour begins his address to the audience with an aggressive taunt:

Open your ears; for which of you will stop
The vent of hearing when loud Rumour speaks?
(Induction, lines 1–2)

His allegorical identity and his dramatic purpose as Induction require that he should describe himself truthfully as the purveyor of untruth:

Upon my tongues continual slanders ride,
The which in every language I pronounce,
Stuffing the ears of men with false reports.
(lines 6–8)

But recognizing that he is at home in the presence of this audience, he cuts short his self-description, again casting a gibe at the spectators:
He then completes his office by ushering in the opening scene, in which false news of the Battle of Shrewsbury is brought to Hotspur's father, the Earl of Northumberland. While the very idea of casting Rumour in the role of Prologue is wittily subversive of the trust we supposedly place in our official guide to the play (a history play, moreover, grounded upon recorded fact), there is nevertheless a particular appropriateness to his presence. He is the tutelary spirit to the play as a whole, in which slander and false report spread through the body politic like a virulent disease, distorting men's judgements of past, present and future, particularly affecting anticipations of what will happen when Hal succeeds to the crown.

If Hal lives under the shadow of Rumour in Part Two of \textit{Henry IV}, his unblemished fame and honour as Henry V are the special concern of the Chorus in the play of that name. In his sustained eulogy of 'the warlike Harry' and the glorification of his achievements, the Chorus is the exact converse of Rumour, upon whose tongues 'continual slanders ride'. He is also the polar opposite in his attitude to the audience; instead of gibing abrasively at the spectators, he woos them with courteous deference:

\begin{quote}
Admit me Chorus to this history;  
Who, prologue-like, your humble patience pray  
Gently to hear, kindly to judge, our play.  
\end{quote}

(Prologue, lines 32–4)

So evenly contrasted are they in their roles that it is tempting to suppose that the Chorus of \textit{Henry V} grew out of Rumour in Part Two of \textit{Henry IV} as his counterpart. But, while Rumour has a thematic relevance to the play he introduces, the extended use of the Chorus in \textit{Henry V} is less readily justified.

This is Shakespeare's most sustained and elaborate deployment of the framing device, as the Chorus appears before each of the
five Acts and also speaks an Epilogue. Yet, as Dr Johnson objected, it cannot 'be easily discovered why the intelligence given by the Chorus is more necessary in this play than in many others where it is omitted'. Why, for instance, does the Chorus on his first appearance make such a profuse apology for the limitations of the stage?

But pardon, gentles all,
The flat unraised spirits that hath dar'd
On this unworthy scaffold to bring forth
So great an object. Can this cockpit hold
The vasty fields of France? Or may we cram
Within this wooden O the very casques
That did affright the air at Agincourt?
(Prologue, lines 8–14)

Considering the number of stage-armies and stage-battles in Shakespeare's earlier history plays, there is perhaps something disingenuous about the Chorus's sense of theatrical inadequacy on this occasion.

It is often said that Henry V is a play aspiring to the condition of epic, that Henry is Shakespeare's ideal king and that the Chorus is the playwright's mouthpiece, his means of supplementing the deficiencies of stage-performance. I find this view unsatisfactory in the light of the evident tendency in late Elizabethan drama for the Prologue/Chorus to assume a persona of his own and to adopt an oblique relationship to the play itself. Rarely if ever is such a figure used to tell the whole truth or to embody, Quince-like, the authorial point of view. He sets the scene by more ingenious and indirect means; otherwise, he were indeed a flat unraised spirit.

The Chorus of Henry V is above all else eloquent; his verse is far more spirited, energetic and vividly descriptive than that of other Prologues and Choruses, because his address is essentially to the imaginations of his auditors. His Prologue is the conventional appeal for a sympathetic reception writ large. Because the stage is an 'unworthy scaffold', we must use our imaginations:

1Johnson on Shakespeare, ed. W. Raleigh (1908), p. 133.
‘WE SHALL KNOW BY THIS FELLOW’

And let us, ciphers to this great accompt,
On your imaginary forces work.
(lines 17-18)

Piece out our imperfections with your thoughts.
(line 23)

Think, when we talk of horses, that you see them
Printing their proud hoofs i’th’ receiving earth.
(lines 26-7)

It is a theme which he frequently resumes in his subsequent appearances, compelling us with his urgent and imagistic mimesis, as well as with his graceful courtesy, to ‘entertain conjecture’. The King is the focus of the Chorus’s attention, and his idealized picture of Henry is one that lives in the mind’s eye.

The Henry who appears in the play itself is much more a creature of flesh and blood. It is impossible to conceive of the Chorus’s Henry speaking thus to the common soldiers, Bates, Court and Williams:

I think the King is but a man as I am: the violet smells to him as it doth to me; the element shows to him as it doth to me; all his senses have but human conditions; his ceremonies laid by, in his nakedness he appears but a man; and though his affections are higher mounted than ours, yet, when they stoop, they stoop with the like wing. Therefore, when he sees reason of fears, as we do, his fears, out of doubt, be of the same relish as ours are; yet, in reason, no man should possess him with any fear, lest he, by showing it, should dishearten his army.
(IV. i. 99–111)

This Henry is fallible, vulnerable, burdened by his responsibilities, and though a great leader he does not know what we and the Chorus know: that he is going to achieve a great victory in the Battle of Agincourt. Even when he inspires his army with the Crispin Crispian speech, he knows within himself how heavily the odds are in favour of their defeat. It is not the limitations of the stage that prevent this Henry from living up to the almost
mythical stature of the Chorus’s portrait, nor is the Henry called to
our minds by the Chorus merely imaginary. The Chorus interposes
the hindsight of Henry’s historical fame, but the Henry of the play
and his circumstances are altogether more complex.

Close in date to Henry V is Troilus and Cressida, and there are
certain echoes of the Chorus to the history play in the Prologue to
this tale of the Trojan War. Both figures present characters and
events of great renown, though the Prologue to Troilus and
Cressida goes one better, as it were, in actually wearing armour
himself. He begins by striking the epic note, in long sentences with
syntactic inversions and latinate diction:

In Troy, there lies the scene. From isles of Greece
The princes orgillous, their high blood chaf’d,
Have to the port of Athens sent their ships
Fraught with the ministers and instruments
Of cruel war.

(Prologue, lines 1–5)

But there is something pompous and bombastic about this iron-
clad Prologue, and his over-inflated manner can drop disconcert-
ingly into bathos:

Priam’s six-gated city,
Dardan, and Tymbria, Helias, Chetas, Troien,
And Antenorides, with massy staples
And corresponsive and fulfilling bolts,
Sperr up the sons of Troy.
Now expectation, tickling skittish spirits,
On one and other side, Troyan and Greek,
Sets all on hazard.

(lines 15–22)

That ‘tickling’ deflates heroic pretension, and the Prologue, for all
his swaggering phrases about ‘the princes orgillous’ with their
‘crownets regal’, ‘war-like fraughtage’ and ‘brave pavilions’, invites
neither praise nor blame for either side but discharges his role with
a phlegmatic lack of concern:

The ravish’d Helen, Menelaus’ queen,
With wanton Paris sleeps—and that’s the quarrel.

(lines 9–10)
He preserves a dry indifference to what he calls ‘those broils’ and ends with an anticlimactic shrug of his pauldrons at the audience:

Like or find fault; do as your pleasures are;
Now good or bad, ’tis but the chance of war.
(lines 30–1)

Troilus and Cressida are not even mentioned.

He sets the prevailing tone of this disenchanted, world-wearied play, in which characters do as their pleasures are, values and principles being much debated but not acted upon. *Troilus and Cressida* is ‘fraught’, to use one of the Prologue’s favourite words, with rhetorical display, but so divorced from the sordid realities of action that it is, as Troilus bitterly complains, ‘Words, words, mere words, no matter from the heart’ (V. iii. 108). In its disengagement from the scene, the Prologue’s swelling and clangorous style is a hollow shell, like a suit of armour, a pastiche of epic rather than the genuine article. And if, as is sometimes suggested, Shakespeare’s ‘Prologue arm’d’ is a satiric riposte to Ben Jonson’s ‘armed Prologue’ in *Poetaster*, another squib let off in the so-called ‘War of the Theatres’, then it reinforces the hint of parody communicated by this Prologue.

Pastiche of a more sympathetic kind certainly characterises Shakespeare’s later and, as it turned out, final Chorus figures, in *Pericles* and *The Winter’s Tale*. Without becoming entangled in the vexed problems of the authorship and text of *Pericles*, which Heminge and Condell did not include in the First Folio, we may have to allow someone other than Shakespeare the credit for introducing the figure of John Gower as Chorus to the play. Gower, of course, was the fourteenth-century poet whose version of the ancient romance, *Apollonius of Tyre*, is the play’s main source. He not only presents his own story, but he does so in irregular octosyllabic couplets and archaic diction that are obviously meant to be reminiscent of Gower’s own verse. However, this is not a parody of an old-fashioned literary style, like Peter Quince’s ‘Pyramus and Thisby’. The intention is rather to present the play from a perspective of quaintness and assumed artlessness appropriate to an old romance, as the opening lines of Gower’s Prologue suggest:
To sing a song that old was sung,
From ashes ancient Gower is come,
Assuming man's infirmities,
To glad your ear and please your eyes.
It hath been sung at festivals,
On ember-eves and holy-ales;
And lords and ladies in their lives
Have read it for restoratives.
The purchase is to make men glorious;
*Et bonum quo antiquius, eo melius.*

(Prologue, lines 1-10)

'And the older a good thing is, the better it is': Gower describes himself as 'an old man' (line 13), and his sententiousness and readiness to fill in the gaps of the story between the scenes do lend a naïve and primitive effect that suits well with the remote, archaic world of the play. On some of his appearances, he also presents episodes in dumb-show, again distancing and stylizing the action in keeping with the non-naturalistic tableaux and pageants that occupy the opening scenes of the play.

Perhaps I am giving too much credit to the playwright, whoever he was, in asserting that Gower's artlessness and quaintness are intentional. Nevertheless Gower is retained in the Shakespearian part of the play, and Shakespeare makes him beguilingly draw attention to his own usefulness as Chorus in telescoping time and space, appealing, like the Chorus in *Henry V*, to the audience to let their imaginations license the liberties he takes:

Thus time we waste, and longest leagues make short;
Sail seas in cockles, have an wish but for't;
Making, to take our imagination,
From bourn to bourn, region to region.
By you being pardon'd, we commit no crime
To use one language in each several clime
Where our scenes seem to live. I do beseech you
To learn of me, who stand i'th'gaps to teach you
The stages of our story.

(IV. iv. 1-9)
In *Pericles*, the treatment of an antique tale is linked to an old-fashioned, but much more recent, dramatic form. There has been much speculation about Shakespeare's reasons for turning to romance at the end of his career, but, whatever else he was doing, he was in effect reviving a kind of play that had been popular on the public stages a generation earlier. It was the kind of play that Sir Philip Sidney had ridiculed in his *Apologie for Poetrie*, written in the early 1580s: the rambling, ramshackle and implausible dramatic romance:

where you shal have Asia of the one side, and Affrick of the other, and so many other underkingdoms, that the Player, when he commeth in, must ever begin with telling where he is, or els the tale wil not be conceived. Now ye shal have three Ladies walke to gather flowers, and then we must beleive the stage to be a Garden. By and by, we heare newes of shipwracke in the same place, and then wee are to blame if we accept it not for a Rock. Upon the backe of that, comes out a hideous Monster with fire and smoke, and then the miserable beholders are bounde to take it for a Cave. While in the meantime two Armies flye in, represented with foure swords and bucklers, and then what harde heart will not receive it for a pitched fielde? Now, of time they are much more liberal, for ordinary it is that two young Princes fall in love. After many traverces, she is got with childe, delivered of a faire boy; he is lost, groweth a man, falls in love, and is ready to get another child: and all this in two hours space.1

*Pericles* is a backward glance at the immediate past of the Elizabethan stage as well as at the more distant past of literary romance. To the Jacobean audience, flatteringly and knowingly addressed by 'ancient Gower' as 'you, born in those latter times, When wit's more ripe' (Prologue, lines 11–12), the play and its ingenuous Chorus standing 'i'th'gaps' must have seemed, not crude and outdated, but a disarming and playful pastiche in which the dramatist reveals some of the tricks of his trade while demanding the suspension of disbelief. *Et bonum quo antiquius, eo melius.*

*The Winter's Tale*, written a few years after *Pericles* was performed by the King's Men, offers similar pleasures as a dramatic romance. Its title implies popular traditions of storytelling, and the miraculous reunions and reconciliations at the end of the play provoke several characters into drawing comparisons between the events taking place and old tales that stretch

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credulity. It was surely the precedent of 'ancient Gower', with his several allusions to passing swiftly over intervals of time, that prompted Shakespeare to introduce Time himself as Chorus to The Winter's Tale, assisted no doubt by the fact that his main source, an old tale by his old rival Robert Greene, was entitled Pandosto but sub-titled 'The Triumph of Time'. Time as Chorus makes his single appearance in the middle of the play, as Shakespeare's final twist to this most flexible conventional device, and appropriately he enters to authorize a leap over sixteen years between the first part of the play and the second. One wonders what Sidney would have made of this piece of special pleading:

Impute it not a crime
To me or my swift passage that I slide
O'er sixteen years, and leave the growth untried
Of that wide gap, since it is in my pow'r
To o'erthrow law, and in one self-born hour
To plant and o'erwhelm custom. Let me pass
The same I am, ere ancient'st order was
Or what is now receiv'd. I witness to
The times that brought them in; so shall I do
To th'freshest things now reigning, and make stale
The glistening of this present, as my tale
Now seems to it. Your patience this allowing,
I turn my glass, and give my scene such growing
As you had slept between.

(IV. i. 4–17)

Time as Chorus declares himself to be, not only the presiding spirit of the play (which, considering its concern with the older and younger generations and with the successive seasons of Nature, is an allowable claim), but also the arbiter of dramatic conventions, fashions and rules. If the play requires an interval of sixteen years between the first three Acts and the last two, so be it. No need here to apologize for the limitations of stage-representation; instead, Time proclaims the liberty of the popular Elizabethan stage-traditions to 'o'erthrow law' and 'to plant and o'erwhelm custom'. It is fitting that he should be Shakespeare's final Chorus figure, for the planting and overwhelming of custom, from 'the
ancient'st order' to 'th'freshest things now reigning' is reflected in
the mutations and modulations of this versatile dramatic device
throughout Shakespeare's work.