THE THEATRICAL AND DRAMATIC FORM OF THE SWORDFIGHT IN THE

CHRONICLE PLAYS OF SHAKESPEARE

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ABSTRACT

This study of the swordfights in Shakespeare's chronicle plays has three interrelated purposes: (1) to reconstruct, as accurately as possible, the enactment of the swordfights as the Elizabethans would have seen them, (2) to examine the manner in which Shakespeare uses this form of stage combat to illuminate plot, character, and theme in the relevant plays, and (3) to offer some opinions as to how these swordfights can best be presented on the contemporary stage in the light of (1) and (2).

Essentially, then, my dissertation is a study of Elizabethan stage business, and it is written with the view that the stage business, however ephemeral, is as integral a part of Shakespeare's plays as are the printed texts.

The work is divided into two parts: Part One is intended to give a general overview of swordfighting in Elizabethan drama, including a discussion of the style of such swordfights, and an investigation of the manner in which Elizabethan dramatists before Shakespeare included or failed to include displays of swordfighting in their plays. Distinctions are drawn between the various types of swordfight: battle scenes, the brawl or sudden fight, trial by battle, the duel, and combat sport. Other matters undertaken in Part One are an attempt to learn what armor and weaponry the actors would have used in Shakespeare's chronicle plays when engaged in stage combat, and
finally, given that the visual aspect of a Shakespearean play is essentially a part of the visual imagery of the Elizabethan age, other facets of this imagery, which, it will be argued, was essentially "neo-medievalist," are discussed in an endeavor to find some thematic connection between it and the swordfighting sequences of Shakespeare's chronicle plays.

Part Two is an examination of the plays themselves: the eight plays of the Lancastrian history cycle, *King John*, *Troilus and Cressida*, *King Lear*, and *Macbeth*—the reasons for including these as chronicle plays while excluding others are given in the course of the study.