

Humanities Institute  
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## ***Henry VIII*** 1613

William Shakespeare, others

### **Overview.**

**Flatness.** *Henry VIII* is one of Shakespeare's last works, and in fact one in which we least find that instinctive sense, of the quality of history, for which we most treasure, say, the *Henriad* (concerning Henry IV and V) or perhaps *Julius Caesar* and *Coriolanus*. The sense of loss, as a result, is rather like that cast over us by reading *Henry IV, Part One*, then picking up *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, and wondering what has happened to the fascinating vitality of the character of Falstaff. The author's inventiveness, metaphorical audacity, and breadth of human feeling are all sluggish in *Henry VIII* and in the creation of a late stage Falstaff, who seems a caricature of the Falstaff who caroused with Prince Hal, in *Henry IV, Part One*.

**Authorship.** Honesty, however, compels that we immediately declare the fact that Shakespeare was only one of the authors of *Henry VIII*. Scholars have long pick nicked over the rival theories of authorship, for this never extremely popular play; theories which were generated in the nineteenth century and have grown increasingly technical—stylistic studies, handwriting studies, publication dates studies—with a residue of conclusions which do little to heighten our literary valuing of the present play. Among the conclusions, fairly agreed on, is that Shakespeare, as collaborator in the whole work, probably wrote five scenes of it, all of them in the first two acts, not including of course whatever wide sweet editorial role he played. (The structure and grandeur, if not exactly the soul, of the play are reminiscent of *The Bard*.)

### **Characters**

Henry VIII; King of England  
Cardinal Wolsey; Archbishop of York  
Queen Katherine; later divorced by Henry  
Anne Bullen; later Queen Anne

Duke of Buckingham  
Thomas Cranmer; Archbishop of Canterbury  
Stephen Gardiner; Bishop of Winchester  
Lord Chamberlain  
Duke of Norfolk  
Duke of Suffolk  
Earl of Surrey

Cardinal Campelus; Papal legate, judge of the legitimacy of Henry's marriage to Katharine  
Caputius; Ambassador of Charles V to the English court  
Sir Thomas Cromwell  
Lord Sands  
Lord Abergavenny  
Bishop of Lincoln  
Sir Thomas Lovell; Chancellor of the Exchequer  
Sir Henry Gulldford; Master of the Horse  
Sir Nicholas Vaux; Governor of Guines  
Sir Anthony Denny; Groom of the Stool  
Dr. Butts; Henry's physician

## STORY

**Narrative.** The historical material covered by Shakespeare, in his historical plays, dates as far back as the end of the fourteenth century. (The reign of Henry IV begins in 1399). In the last play of Shakespeare, *Henry VIII*, we track events which pertain to the reign of the influential Tudor King (Henry VIII, 1509-47) who was, after many birthing efforts, to become father of Elizabeth I, 1558-1603, who oversaw the historically rich developments of the English Protestant Reformation, the empowerment of the British naval Empire, and the emergence of a British drama, whose greatness--Shakespeare was only part of it--included flashpoints like Marlowe and Kyd and the early Ben Jonson.

**History.** In other words Shakespeare was working through material, in touching on Henry VIII and his time, which only slightly predated Shakespeare's own birthdate (1564), and thus formed the setting for his whole conscious life. While admitting that Shakespeare was only a collaborator on the present play, we need to see what a pregnant piece of his own history the present play represents, culminating as it does in the birth of the greatest of the Tudor Monarchs, Elizabeth I.

**Intrigue.** The prologue to the present play warns the audience that they are in for sadness and tragedy, and should be prepared to keep their handkerchiefs on the ready. As the present play opens, we are introduced to high level political talk, within the royal palace hierarchy of lords and high church officials, concerning the great influence exercised over Henry by the Archbishop of York, Cardinal Wolsey—seemingly the chief personal advisor to the King. (Issues facing the throne, and about these dignitaries are as often those involving rivalries and conflicts with the throne of France.) Wolsey, allegedly son of a butcher, has by his brilliance and personal persuasiveness jockeyed himself into a position of mastering power in the court, and he is duly resented. The substantive in-house topic, among the debates occupying the palace, concerns the charges of treason against the Duke of Buckingham, whose pitiable trial for treason will dominate the first act, and whose unhappy fate will play into the widespread theme of sadness and tragedy in the entire play.

**Banquet.** As a landmark, in the royal shuffle for power, Cardinal Wolsey throws a banquet—this play is full of pomp and festivities, forerunners to the eventual coronation of the new Queen, whose birth will crown the events of the play itself. Wine, a festival for all the appetites, and in the midst, at the end of Act Two, masked and disguised revelers intrude on the festivities, and join in the dancing. One of the intruders, easily recognized as King Henry himself, joins in dancing, choosing as partner a charming young lady, a charmer at court, and the future Queen Anne. She will be the second of Henry's six wives, and her choice by the King coincides, oddly, with an historical event—the explosion on 29 June 1613 of a cannon, used for special dramatic effects, a powerful blast which blew off the roof of the Globe Theater, in which *Henry VIII* was being performed.

**Katharine.** Katharine, Henry's first wife, becomes in Act Three the poster child for the pervading sense of morose fall, which pervades this entire play. (Henry's search for a male heir has led him to implore the Pope for permission to remarry, and Katharine, six years Henry's elder, is the target of the upcoming tumultuous divorce, which is to herald in the Reformation of the English Church, with the concurrent implications for British political alliances and state independence. ) In Act Three, in the presence of various court dignitaries, Katharine unburdens herself of heavy complaints against her treatment by the court; as well as raising a cry of sympathy for the economically downtrodden of the kingdom.

**Wolsey.** The political forces, led by Wolsey, have gladly interceded with Rome, to enable Henry to divorce her, and turn a pretty deaf ear to her entreaties, as well as to her political and social sympathies. From this point on, in her gradual disassembly into death, Katharine will be the play's most sympathetic figure, expressing to the end her loyalty to the King who abandoned her in his quest for an heir, and remaining true to her old friend Buckingham, who has by this time been executed for treason.

**Elizabeth.** Henry VIII, father of Elizabeth I, begets Elizabeth I with Anne Bullen--the charmer he danced with at Wolsey's banquet--and the last Act of the present play treads delicately on material which was playing out historically, virtually at the time of the writing of the present play. Henry himself, who has been carefully treated throughout the play, imagines himself one day in Heaven, looking down on his blessed

progeny. Elizabeth herself, 1588-1603, will be the final fruit of Henry's search for an heir, and will preside over the noblest period of British Empire.

## THEMES

**Intrigue** The ingredients for high level intrigue are amply distributed over the first three acts. The play itself concerns the ultimate intrigue of the time, the planning around getting Henry VIII a divorce from his first wife, in contravention of the doctrine of the Roman Catholic Church. These plannings, on which hung the affairs of states and nations, were stage managed by Cardinal Wolsey, and compliantly followed by many of the King's courtiers.

**Infighting.** Intrigue means infighting, as we see in the first two acts. The attempt to undermine the power of Lord Buckingham is a driver for the King and Wolsey, who assemble their forces throughout the play, in carefully prepared and code-adaptable palace chit chat.

**Fidelity.** The noblest writing in the play centers around the pathos filled figure of Katharine of Aragon, the first wife of Henry VIII. She remains touchingly faithful to Henry, despite their divorce.

**Pomp.** The coronation of Queen Anne, Henry's second wife, is surrounded by written pomp, in a transport of high royal style, that showcases both the folks on the street, as they ogle in awe, and the grandees in their carriages and regal robes. Shakespeare et al expend themselves fully into the embossed and glorifying language of this panoply, though without touching the deep language of pathos we know from Shakespeare in his grandeur.

## HENRY VIII

**Character.** Henry VIII is the central character in the play simply because he wields ultimate influence over the succession issue. As the father to be of Elizabeth 1 Henry will forever be associated with the apogee of British imperial power, naval might, grandeur of culture—though as portrayed in the present play Henry seems like a moderate temporizer, eager to say the right thing, ready to yield at once to the insights and machinations of Wolsey, and happy enough to provide the backstage repressive clout that overtaxes the little guy in order to help pay for foreign involvements in France. With an eye to the trustees of official history, in his own time, Shakespeare and his collaborators went as far as they could toward presenting an unexceptionable and uncontroversial royal figure.

**Parallels.** Two kings from classical epic come to mind, Agamemnon (in Homer's *Iliad*) and Aeneas (in Virgil's *Aeneid*). Both of these leaders seem to have been chosen by destiny, to lead their people toward (Agamemnon) or to a new promised land, Latium (Aeneas.) Neither character has much executive strength, both characters have a shaky relation to women, like Henry, and in the end both characters become best known for the history that is ultimately made of them.

## Illustrative moments

**Dependent.** When first we see Henry, in this play, he is leaning on the shoulder of Wolsey, and in subsequent conversation and body manners, Henry shows his dependence on this plotting man, whom he, Henry, will ultimately come to hate.

**Feigning.** Although conversation, in Act One, brings out the rotten state of the royal finances, Henry refuses to admit knowledge of the real crime: that he is overtaxing the commoners in order to collect money for foreign conflicts, especially in France.

**Malicious.** Though Henry has a long history linking his own family to that of Buckingham, he is easily persuaded, by the drift of rumor in the opening of the play, to oppose Buckingham, and to stay on board with the trial for treason. Henry is spiteful and easily swayed.

**Impetuous.** At Cardinal Wolsey's banquet, in Act I, Henry enters the party abruptly and in disguise, choosing Ann Bullen, his wife to be, for his dancing partner. He is passionately interested in manipulating his chances for an heir to the throne.

**Resentful.** Because he is so keen on the succession question, Henry deeply resents the intervention of Wolsey with the Pope, to try to block the remarriage of Henry. His change of attitude toward Wolsey, from dependence to resentment, is the trademark of his character instability.

### **Discussion questions**

Can you discern features of the present play that might lead you to consider it a 'collaborative work.' Does it lack a single unified authorial voice? (How would you know that? Would it be useful to apply stylistic and grammatical tests to different parts of the play, to see if and what kinds of variations you would find? If in fact you did find such variations, how would you discern, say, the language areas that suggest Shakespeare as their author?)

Katharine, the divorced wife of Henry, is perhaps the most touching figure in the play. Does she seem to you to be the axis around whom the whole work turns? Who but Katharine reaches lovingly back into Henry's past? But does anyone of the other characters reach out to her? Does this play, which dooms itself to sadness and loss, already in its prologue, present any character, other than Katharine, who rises above gloom?

Do you find indications that the present play has been created carefully—because it deals with very recent history—so as not to displease the traditions of Tudor greatness, which was already being memorialized as the heroic age of 'modern Britain'?