The Problem of Henry VIII (or, Giving Shakespeare a Break)

by David Solway (August 2022)

The Vision of Catherine of Aragon, Johann Heinrich Füssli

Not that the summer is less pleasant now
Than when her mournful hymns did hush the night,
But that wild music burdens every bough,

And sweets grown common lose their dear delight.

Sonnet 102

The disputed *Henry VIII*, Shakespeare's presumably last play, has undergone more than its share of vicissitudes over the last century and a half, trailing along somewhere behind the great procession of plays like an uncoupled caboose propelled by its own failing momentum. Is it part of the train or not? Since Tennyson suggested that large sections of the play were ghosted by John Fletcher, much reputable scholarship has devoted itself to meticulous textual analysis tending to confirm Tennyson's suspicion.

Apparently cogent reasons have been adduced for the uncoupling: the barrage of end-stopped lines, weak or feminine endings, supererogatory syllables, thinned-down imagery, and sundry rhetorical tics which are presumably more reminiscent of Fletcher than of Shakespeare. In addition to these stylistic and tropological divergences, the "feeling" of the play seems out of sync with the mellower and pacific concerns of the late Romances which it succeeds. "Something of a corresponding serenity is demanded," writes G. Wilson Knight in his preliminary summary of the arguments against consistent Shakespearean authorship in his *The Crown of Life*. Moreover, commentators recognize that Shakespeare "has of late tended more and more to rely on symbol and ritual ending with *The Tempest*," features whose comparative absence incline certain readers to disqualify the play from its position of valedictory eminence.

Knight devotes the last chapter of his book to a convincing

refutation of these arguments. Using the same methods as his opponents, textual and stylistic comparisons, he demonstrates quite conclusively (as it seems to me) that *Henry VIII* does indeed belong in the canon. There are just too many echoes and allusions to, or repetitions of, passages in the earlier plays to be dismissed as accidental. If a connection is to be found, he suggests, it is to the earlier Shakespeare and not the later Fletcher.

Frank Kermode in his 1948 article on the play, "What Is Shakespeare's *Henry VIII* About," also takes up the cudgels on behalf of the play's authenticity. Kermode proceeds by casting doubt on the putative validity of the statistical method employed by critics like James Spedding, which he seems to regard as a kind of pseudo-objective frosting on a very subjective cake. More to the point is the important corollary of the Tennyson-Spedding critique that *Henry VIII* reflects "a collaboration of such a kind that no unity of conception and design ought to be expected of it." Kermode argues that the play is indeed a unified construction and "may be regarded as a late morality, showing the state from which great ones fall…and the part played in their falls for good or ill by a King who…is *ex officio* the deputy of God," thus echoing the *Mirror for Magistrates* theme that dominated the Bard's imagination.

But despite much excellent work on the play the malaise is still very much with us. The general consensus seems to weigh against the theory of a unitary Shakespearean authorship in much the same manner as *The Two Noble Kinsmen* is regarded as a late pastiche or *The Book of Thomas More* as a bastard production in which Shakespeare occasionally dipped his quill. In his influential *Shakespeare*, Mark Van Doren, one of a burgeoning tribe of skeptics, regards the play as nothing more than "an imitation of Shakespeare…whether the poet has imitated himself or been imitated by another." Although it bears certain resemblances to the romances—"tempests, shores,

flowers, music, and peace"—the central theme is not one of reconciliation but of resignation. "Either Shakespeare has lost the impulse which gave his stories their mellow power, or some other poet has never felt it." Henry himself is casually remanded as a "dummy king."

Van Doren exhibits that aprioristic and bardolatric tendency in Shakespearean criticism to impose categories deduced from the indisputably great work upon those passages or plays which seem to represent a falling-off. He derogates "a smoothness" in the verse of the Humpty-Dumpty characters, Buckingham, Katherine and Wolsey, which Shakespeare had ostensibly "long ago outgrown." He tells us apodictically that the style "of any good poet moves from simplicity to congestion, and once this end is reached return is difficult if not impossible."

It is true that the Romances exhibit at times a certain rhetorical congestion, a stylistic density or compression (particularly in *Cymbeline* and *The Winter's Tale*) re-enacting either the characters' confusion and suffering or carrying the playwright's presumably loaded intuitions about life and death and rebirth. At the same time, it is at least a trifle odd to consider "shortness of breath" as an ineluctable sign "of seriousness and power," as Van Doren does. To dismiss the purpler passages in *Henry VIII* as verse which "lives only within the phrase, dying at each fall to gasp again," is not only an intensely subjective impression, but testifies to that common predisposition to apply one's critical prejudices as if they were objectively constellated standards and Platonically immutable.

It seems fair to note that in the absence of reliable external data, the problem of authenticity is always to some degree with us. Statistical computation respecting stylistic, grammatical, pictorial and tropological frequencies is an attempt to respond to the dilemma in a way that resembles the methods of the "hard" or scientific disciplines, but that, given the nature of the subject, turns out in practice to be

little more than a technique for verifying one's prior assumptions and intuitions. One can make a justifiable case without employing such techniques for distinguishing between, say, Jonson's *The Alchemist* and *The Tempest* as the works of different hands even if their authors were unknown: the sensibilities for which the texts give evidence are demonstrably unlike.

The issue grows considerably more problematic when we try to disentangle various strands of authorship in a single work. In *Henry VIII* we find ourselves performing something that resembles chemical analysis or textual cupellation, trying to dissolve a compound into its constituent elements, one of which we call "Shakespeare" while variously distinguishing several others—a goodly amount of "Fletcher," a drop of "Beaumont," and a trace of "Massinger." At this point the entire experiment calls its own premises into question, for literary analysis is not a laboratory procedure. We are back in the realm of subjective impression and desire, in which the play is either not given any consideration whatsoever, is regarded as wholly or partially spurious, disparaged as an imitation, discarded as mere journeyman work, treated as a pretext for scholarly sleuthing—or jacked up to the zenith of mature accomplishment and ripest wisdom.

Perhaps the major reason for the problem of fitting *Henry VIII* into the general schematism of the late Romances is its uncomfortable proximity to *historically* recent events. To begin with, its title establishes it as a History play, not a Romance. Further, the "tragic" events leading to Katherine's death are recuperated not by miracle or wonder but by plain substitution. Hermione in *The Winter's Tale* "dies" and is magically *restored*, but here Katherine dies and is conveniently *replaced* by a young, vibrant and comely Anne. The romance theme is that of restoration; replacement fits rather into the turbulence of history itself. Finally, the romance plays are removed in time and place to an ideal or pastoral

locus, a *pratum felicitatis*. *Cymbeline*, for example, which like *Henry VIII* deals with a passage of British history, is hazed over by a sort of Leonardian *sfumato*. The events are legendary and easily repatriated to the country of their origin—the Imagination.

But the events recorded and glossed in *Henry VIII* enjoy no such immunity: the character of Anne Bullen is not only tarnished or compromised within the play by the nobility and dignity of her predecessor, but enters inevitably into the maelstrom of recent history and current politics. Theatre is now awkwardly and even dangerously close to reality. The world in which Anne Bullen lived shadows the play in which she did not die and functions willy-nilly as a sort of grim and parodic anti-masque or satyr-play. The audience completes the ellipsis with her execution.[1]

Thus, although the structure of the play broadly parallels that of the Romances—early tragedy followed by later comedy, resolution provided by the invariable daughter to the king (Marina, Imogen, Perdita, Miranda, and now Elizabeth over whom at the play's conclusion Henry enthuses, "This little one shall make it holiday"), the realm established and succession guaranteed—nevertheless the sense of uneasiness provoked by the knowledge of subsequent events knocks the play out of the Romance orbit and may account for the difficulty many students of Shakespeare have in locating *Henry VIII* among the Final Plays or accepting its place in the canon.

The real problem, then, is *psychological*, not textual. Readers have trouble coming to terms with the historical perspective that the play makes inevitable. But also, to some extent as a result of this temporal positioning of immediate response, we find that the categories we devise to help us make sense of experience—in this case of the experience of reading and understanding our greatest and most definitive poet—are violated and disrupted. The propensity to divide the world up into tidy, manageable units, the taxonomic impulse itself, is

very probably at the root of our difficulty. Just as we are predisposed to queue literary history into recognizable periods, complete with names, dates and thematic unities, as if we were performing a kind of spectrum analysis, so do we feel compelled to graph the career of the Bard, whom the Hungarian scholar Peter Davidhazi called "the second son of God," into detachable segments.[2]

The last group of plays shares so many crucial elements—structural, thematic, characterological, imagistic—that we are insensibly driven to postulate a prior "spiritual" state or philosophical consummation of which these plays are regarded as a transcription. From the evidence of the plays we formulate a theory about Shakespeare's "psychology" or the "position" he has arrived at with respect to the great issues of life. Our theory then proceeds quite illegitimately to reverse its direction and exert subliminal pressure on the evidence itself, forcing it to conform to a now-established psychological configuration. And so we find ourselves subjectively committed to reading the last plays as if they represented a consistent or even invariant unit of thought.

Consequently, we simplify the task of interpretation at the cost of reflexively mutilating the evidence. So long as our categories remain elegant and intact, we have no objection to using an *a priori* casting mold or applying Occam's razor a little too close to the throat. But there is no good reason to suppose that Shakespeare felt himself bound by the assumptions others have made in regard to the unity, integrity or comprehensiveness of this theologico-philosophical *summa*. For Shakespeare's "Final" period may not have been as final as we like to think. *Henry VIII* bears many salient resemblances to the Romance plays that preceded it; at the same time, as we have seen, its convergence on historical event must inexorably qualify our reading of it as a Romance. Reality is always present, commenting, modifying, counterpointing, so that as we

read or look on, we have the disquieting sense of historical interlineation.

Yet why should this constitute a hermeneutic predicament? Shakespeare was under no compulsion to submit to the formulaic manacles that presumably controlled his writing hand. What was there to prevent him from rounding off his career (if *Henry VIII* is in fact his last work) by presenting us with a play that has something in common with the Romances, something in common with the Histories, and nothing in common with the predicates of unitary thinking? Or from deciding to attempt marginal or even major alterations of style, that is, from enjoying the autonomy of change or allowing himself a certain susceptibility to influence? He may well have been following Polixenes' horticultural advice in *The Winter's Tale* and marrying a gentler scion to the wildest stock and so producing his own species of streaked gillyvor, a Romance *cum* History *cum* Spectacle play. Whereas those readers who insist on the rigorous unifications of a great creating Shakespeare resemble the ingenuous Perdita in their refusal to allow the dibble in the text for the bastard slips of the imagination.

As for the Prologue and Epilogue, which are usually attributed to Fletcher, what is perhaps most interesting about these andiron passages is their function as disclaimers, advising the audience to reconsider their categories and expectations. We are not to expect a comedy, a farce, or a clamorous History studded with battle scenes, but something "sad, high, and working"—which may still defer to the penny clientele who have come to see "only a show or two," that is, there will be spectacle too. Are we warranted in hearing an implicit caveat, not only to the audience but to all future playgoers who, like Wolsey, have their own ideas about leagues and alliances, their own "Duchess-of-Alençon" preferences? Such textual intriguing ignores the royal prerogative to its confusion. The play will be what it wishes to be and will not be what it does not wish to be. Our preconceptions are immaterial, especially

when they are applied *post hoc*.

The doubtful status accorded to *Henry VIII* is from this standpoint the result of what may be a natal tendency to read backwards. Our descriptive categories tend to become prescriptive, to take on an authority which legislates *to* rather than *from* the evidence. It is painful to think of Shakespeare as being so messy and willful as to breach the intellectual consistencies we have lovingly prepared for him. Once Prospero has dissolved the great globe itself, drowned his book deeper than did ever plummet sound and dis-mantled himself of theurgic numinosity, Henry's ringing "ha's!" may sound to some ears a trifle hollow, if not redundant.

Nevertheless, Heminges and Condell, editors of the 1623 First Folio, who were in a better position to judge than Tennyson and Spedding and their successors, do not seem to have been unduly disturbed by Henry's "Fletcherian" bravado when they set about compiling the Folio. As Shakespeare took his liberties with the three unities, he was, it seems, equally unspooked by the larger *post facto* unity of the Self, which those who were not his contemporaries have conjured into posthumous existence. If Shakespeare may be plausibly identified with Prospero, there is no reason to assume that he may not also resemble his wayward and thundering Henry who, in the last analysis, Ha!, does exactly as he damn well pleases.

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[1] The contemporary spectator would have been sufficiently aware of the dreary succession of wives, the executions, the ensuing political turbulence and the insecurities of the Jacobean moment not to have responded to the performance of the play without a modicum of skepticism. The Prologue, after all, is an invocation not to merriment and rejoicing but to solemnity, to the "weighty and serious brow" before the predictable unpredictabilities of fortune in which "mightiness meets misery." Henry marries Anne Bullen, but the spectator is

admonished:

> *And if you can be merry then, I'll say*
> *A man may weep upon his wedding day.*

A maid too, for that matter.

[2] Although this tendency is usually associated with the school of naïve biographism, it will always, I suspect, remain with us. Gottfried Gervinus, whose work on Shakespeare appeared in the middle of the 19th century, is considered to be the first critic who divided the playwright's oeuvre into periods hypothetically corresponding to a discernible spiritual development. Gervinus was followed by Edward Dowden, who went even further in this direction, drawing and quartering the canon into distinct temporal units, thus establishing the psychographic approach to the plays.

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David Solway's latest book is *Notes from a Derelict Culture*, Black House Publishing, 2019, London. A CD of his original songs, *Partial to Cain*, appeared in 2019.

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