



Henry the Eighth, Then and Now

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For the production: King Henry VIII (2013, Hudson Shakespeare Company).

THERE'S NO LONGER ANY DOUBT THAT SUMMER HAS ARRIVED IN JERSEY CITY. I'VE SEEN Shakespeare in Van Vorst. The Hudson Shakespeare Company is at it again, this season presenting the rarely performed *Henry VIII*.

Considered a history, the play is the next in the sequence after *Richard III* and is believed to have been coauthored with John Fletcher, who collaborated with Shakespeare his other later work, *The Two Noble Kinsmen*. Like *Kinsmen*, *Henry VIII* is a problem play.

I've only read it once and didn't really like it. It's Shakespeare's most ahistorical history. The Henry VIII story is well known – against the ruling of the Pope, he divorces his barren first wife, Katherine, marries Anne Bullen in the hopes of siring a male heir to the throne – but the Shakespeare play either ignores or white washes the darker turns of this period of reformation history, the executions of his wives – Bullen and Sir or Saint (depending on your Christian denomination) Thomas Moore – the star of *A Man for All Seasons*, the penultimate –and not ahistorical – play and film of the same events.

Shakespeare was a royalist, although his pandering towards the political power structure of his day was never purely blatant – criticism of the power abound, even if partially concealed and watching the performance I became more aware that Shakespeare was well aware of the audience – the play retells the birth of his major patron, Queen Elizabeth, yet barely notes the break with Rome, which gave birth to the Church of England, which was part of the wave or “Protestantism” sweep across parts of Europe. But England's break was not just more political than theological (compared with Lutherans), but gradual and it took a few decades before subjects and the aristocracy fully embraced non-Roman Catholic Anglicism. These tensions are just boiling below the surface of the play, and Shakespeare – most likely a recusant catholic, in other words, a panderer to the ruling class who was careful not to let his personal beliefs prevent him from pleasing his royal funders – sometimes seems coy about these tensions.

My guru in Bardolatry, Harold Bloom, calls *Henry VIII* more a dramatic poem than a play, and also that it has great roles but no great characters. The performance of the play, by a company adept at identifying and expressing the myriad of subtext Shakespeare contains, raised my personal rating of the play several notches. It was much better live than read – which is really more the exception than the rule, especially with the problem plays, perhaps two thirds of the oeuvre – and even though it is talky and not much happens – what really happens – the bloody schism from Rome, Henry's brutal attempts to hold on to power – doesn't happen onstage or even off-stage, but in the real world and those memories were still fresh in the audiences when *Henry VIII* premiered, exactly 400 years ago this summer.

The rainy season persists in our Climate-changed world and this was my first Gazebo Bard. I've been lucky enough that the only outdoor Shakespeare I've seen has been on clear nights. Inclement weather forces the Hudson Shakespeare Company to perform their play under the gazebo.

Even more so than the obscurity of this play, the weather thinned out the audience considerably. The setting of the play gave the performance an off-off-off-broadway feel. Actors pretend to make eye contact with the audience, especially with Shakespeare which is so filled with asides – and this one has a Prologue and Epilogue where the audience is specifically addressed – the audience is an acknowledged, if not active, participant in the proceedings. Within the forced intimacy of the Van Vorst Park Gazebo, shrouded by the often heavy intermittent rain, the performance gained an avante garde intensity. Everyone there – less than a dozen, alas – had a front row seat. We were all groundlings, although well behaved. It's weird to be about three feet from an actor playing a character, changes the entire aspect of theater. One gazebo gain though was audibility – you could hear every word (and occasional fumble) of the text. Sometimes during these outdoor performances one has to strain to catch the phrase against the sounds of traffic and dogs barking and passing pedestrians shouting into their cellphone.

Perhaps because of *Man For All Seasons*, our perception of the actual king is cartoonish, a narcissistic ruler driven to dictatorship by his appetites. Kingship is a sacred duty, the problem the king faces is that means necessary for maintaining power are contrary to the Laws of the Judeo-Christian God who has granted him the throne.

As portrayed by Bradley J. Sumner, we get a very pensive king who is gradually realizing that his court is besieged by corruption and betrayal, who is unhappy to deal with the lack of male heir issue. He becomes more and more antagonized, given to sullen silences, enhanced by the Gazebo-induced intimacy, made the audience fully aware of the strain of responsibility the ruler must bear. While not unfit for the throne like Richard II, Henry seems unsuited to wisely

confront the issues of his day – France, lack of an heir, relations with the Church (although as mentioned, Shakespeare ignores the whole excommunication issues). Sumner makes us believe in a king who is realizing that he may be unsuited to his fate, but determined to do the best he can. When he hooks up with Ann Bullen – “a woman most dainty” – at party, which is all set up by the corrupt cardinal Wosley, he is a horn dog, but later when Wosley’s corruption is revealed and Henry sentences him, this conflict inside him, the fact he cannot deny the adulterous guilt and when he finally realizes Wosley’s malfeasances and condemns him to the tower, part of him is blaming the Cardinal for bringing out the worst in him (who is he kidding, the audience wonders, yet in this version even this act of self-delusion becomes understandable). This Henry glowers from the throne, sometimes slumping over with frustration. The physicality of the acting made us understand the conflicts eating away at him, only hinted at in the text and yet the conflicts are only logical, given the known history of his reign – conflicts the original audience of the play were all to cognizant of. Sumner made Henry VIII credible as a person, a very human king that encourages our empathy, a striking contrast to our preconceptions of this monarch, and perhaps closer to reality, or at least more recognizable to the perceptions of the original audience for which the play was first intended.

Henry VIII was written after *The Tempest*, and Bloom says it is a farewell play – the main speeches by three main characters Katherine of Aragon (Noelle Fair), Duke of Buckingham (Joshua Triplet), and Cardinal Wosley, David C. Neal – all of whom are executed – are all farewells, essentially last words. Bloom says Shakespeare was saying farewell to his “late career talent,” which I don’t quite buy but there is a feeling in this play that the author is saying a good bye. But I think it’s more of a good bye to a political world of the renaissance than his personal adieu. The world of the play, and the world the original audience lived in, where absolute kingship was supported by the innocent faith of subject, was rapidly vanishing from both stage and existence. My take is that the farewells in the plays are more a bidding good bye to those worlds than his art.

Buckingham’s farewell speech links 8 with the rest of the Henriad – *Richard II*, *Henry IV* (parts I & II), *Henry V*, *Henry VI* (parts I, II, & III), and *Richard III* – the bard’s historical soap opera that reveal the intrigue of the court, shifting allegiances and power grabs between royal families and war after war – mostly with France, a bloody saga that I have (and recommend) reading in order and only by Triplet’s performance, not as I mentioned earlier by simply reading the play. The monologue references the earlier histories, reminding the audience of the backstory leading up to the present kingship saga, but also, as the actor talked about his impending execution – “divorce by steel” – he also gave credibility to what might otherwise baffle modern audiences – “My vows and prayers, yet are the king’s and, till my soul forsakes, shall cry blessings for him” –

he is loyal to the king, even though he is being executed unjustly. Shakespeare's audiences would understand this loyalty, which is the absence of separation twixt the personal and the political, but also the adherence is not just to an individual ruler, but the order of that world (God is in his heaven and the king is on his throne).

The most moving and – and involved – Farwell came from Noelle Fair as Queen Katherine. At one point, when the corrupt Cardinal Wolsey, begins to sentence her in Latin, “No Latin” she cries, adding “A Strange Tongue makes my cause more strange.”

Wolsey is trying to persuade her to stop contesting the divorce, which she refuses to do. Now, by bringing in the Latin, Shakespeare is also making a political statement, since a major reformation issue was what language services and scripture should be in. Shakespeare was one of the translators of the original King James. Fair's performance, emotional, gripping, overcame an inherent contradiction – she is standing up for her rights as queen, thus is feminist, but her cry for justice comes within the context of a misogynist system, where an infertile woman can be condemned to die. “We are a queen or long have dreamed so, certainly a daughter of a king.”

Katherine was the daughter of the King of Spain, and the marriage with Henry ensured the peace between the two countries. Spain of course remained aligned with Rome and soon after the premier of *Henry VIII*, would fight a prolonged war with England. Katherine's plea for her life is also a plea for political stability and that stability is the larger order for the universe. Her love for Henry is genuine – and Fair makes that known – but also the love is the love of duty, the support of the larger system is not just political in the temporal equivalent of preferring liberals over conservative. The system for Katherine is the nothing less than the entire order of the universe, earth and heaven. Henry's rejection will result in a turmoil she as a royal has a God-given responsibility to prevent. Unlike the Katherine of History, in the play, she dies a natural death – something that bothered me when I read the play and I can still imagine the audience of the time snickering. In the play, she has a dream vision where there are ghosts and visions of a royal processions, all the props of royal ceremony. In the Hudson Shakespeare Company's version, the dream sequence, the queen and the king, both garbed in flimsy white robes, perform a romantic dance, an insightful touch, also a remedy to a the budgetary infeasibility of producing a royal procession. The dreamed dance also played to the intimate strengths of the gazebo setting.

Bloom says, not an Iago but an Administrator. Indeed, his evil seems one of paper work and his undoing the same – paperwork is discovered implicating him colluding with France. Neal portrays him as simpering and pompous, and sort of dim – the cardinal sets up the king to meet Anne Bullen, then is surprised when they wed – and the actor's trademark physical humor was

somewhat more focused, perhaps because the role is more subdued as well as the natural constraints of the gazebo stage. In his Farwell, Wolsey bemoans: “Had I but served my God with half the zeal I served my king, He would not in mine age have left me naked to mine enemies,” – which when written can sound like an individual so self absorbed he is not cognizant of the wrong he’s done, this portrayal makes Wolsey more of a man who is flawed and weak, who set in motion machinations that were far above his ability to execute. Neal made the plea sound like a sincere repentance, and we in the gazebo were inclined to forgive.

Of course, this roller coaster of sympathy for the Shakespeare heavies is part of the fun – and power – of the bard. Characters often spend scenes appalling us only to die with our sympathies.

Henry VIII is an imperfect Shakespeare, with some careful editing – some scenes were shortened or lost and I think may have been shifted in sequence – Hudson Shakespeare found the play’s strength. The ensemble always has a briskness to its pace, which makes their productions always compelling and this one played like a royal soap opera, and you are caught up in the story. Also, the small company means multiple parts for some players – for instance, Emily Ludolph, lithe yet not as innocent as she appears as Anne Bullen in what is an under-written role, also plays a lady courtier of Katherine in the opening scene, which ties the entire play together, adding another layer of the intrigue and betrayals interwoven throughout what is essentially a royal melodrama. Casting also switches gender and Emily Dalton plays Sir Thomas Lovell, whose dialog basically states the action of the play to the other characters, which is obvious to them but not always obvious to this audience. This kind of gender switch up, softens some of the misogyny of Shakespeare’s era, and worked well here in this tale of a man changing wives.

England’s contemporary Royal Family is expecting a new heir and this play concludes with the birth of Queen Elizabeth. Besides Wolsey and Katherine, Bullen and other main characters here, Cromwell and Cranmer would likewise be beheaded and burned at the stake, respectively, by Henry VIII. Shakespeare knew his audience at the time would know this. Is *Henry VIII* an apologia for the king’s ruthlessness, a depiction that gives us a deeper understanding of the complexities of kingship, or a royalist polemic that whitewashes history, advising its contemporary audience to support the current regime? Well, it could be all of the above and certainly the controversies of Henry VIII are either ignored or understated. (Bloom: “Even the Catholic-Protestant confrontation is so muted that Shakespeare hardly appears to take sides.”).

The play begins with the question about why a “man can weep on his wedding day” and The Hudson Shakespeare Company brought out the humanity of the ruling class caught in a paradoxical dilemma – how will power be maintained when an heir cannot be produced.

Finding the truth in these characters made us modern day citizens of a non-monarchical democracy recognize ourselves in the tragedy that unfolds, but we also got a better understanding of how those subjects of a monarchy would have understood the same tragedy on the stage. 400 years may separate the Van Vorst audiences from those who saw the original summer premier of *Henry VIII*, but the Hudson Shakespeare Company enabled us to recognize the distance separating us from them is really not very far at all.

The Scene editors were unable to determine authorship of two reviews that appeared on the ISE Chronicle in 2013. We believe both of them to have been contributed by the same person. ISEC did allow for anonymous publication. If anyone knows the author of these two reviews, we would be happy to give credit where credit is due.