



“This holy fox, or wolf, or both”: *Henry VIII*

By Gavin Hollis. First published in the *ISE Chronicle*.

For the production: *Henry VIII* (2014, Shakespeare Theater of New Jersey, USA). See production details at the end of the review.

THE PHENOMENON THAT IS HILARY MANTEL'S *WOLF HALL* IS COMING TO BROADWAY IN March. We perhaps should not be surprised, therefore, that enterprising theatre companies have revisited Shakespeare and Fletcher's *Henry VIII or All is True*. The Chicago Shakespeare Theater and the Hudson Stage Company have both mounted productions in the past year, and this Fall the Shakespeare Theater of New Jersey followed suit. While director Paul Mullins makes no reference to *Wolf Hall* in his director's notes, I doubt I'm being unfair by suspecting STNJ's decision to revive *Henry VIII* (its first production of the play since 1985) was spurred by the success of Mantel's novels.

Shakespeare and Fletcher's *Henry VIII*, however, is not *Wolf Hall*. Mantel's novels detail the rise (and, in the final, much-anticipated concluding part, *The Mirror and the Light*, the fall) of Thomas Cromwell. Meticulously researched and hewing closely to historical events, the novels are part- political thrillers, part-character studies, with Cromwell our eyes and ears to a remarkable, distant past of Henrician court machinations. *Henry VIII* has its court intrigues, of course, most notably revolving around the fall of Buckingham in act one, the royal divorce in act two, the fall of Cardinal Wolsey in act three, and the rise of Archbishop Cranmer at the end of the play. But in contrast to *Wolf Hall*, and in contrast to Shakespeare's own 1590s histories, his late collaboration with John Fletcher lacks a clear central character, its title character oddly displaced for much of the action. The play elides some of the most famous aspects of Henry's life (the action concludes prior to the death of Anne Bullen) and nods only obliquely at others (the break with Rome). And it is heavily episodic, “made up of a great many patches” as Samuel Pepys noted, and not confined to a singular narrative through-line—spectacular and theatrical rather than “dramatic.” It is perhaps not coincidental that Thomas Cromwell has a more prominent role in this production: while hardly the main player he is in Mantel's novels,

and nowhere close to her brilliant schemer, this production's Cromwell takes over from the Duke of Suffolk in the role of Henry's confidante in act five scene one as Henry awaits news of Anne's expectancy.

Shakespeare's *Henry VIII* should be one of the most-performed plays in the canon, if for no other reasons that it revolves around one of English history's most out-sized figures as imagined by English literature's favourite son. Indeed, it was a popular play in eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. But despite the recent productions, the play has a rough time of it, often vying with *King John* as the least popular of the history plays (Pepys hated it). As some critics have argued, however, its reputation may be unfair. Gordon McMullan argues that *Henry VIII* is

a sophisticated play, at once celebratory and cynical about display, which mediates on the progress of Reformation in England, reading English life since Henry VIII's day as a series of bewildering changes in national and personal allegiance, and presenting history as the product of testimony that is by its very nature varied, contrary, and irresolvable. [...] The play was, moreover, written at a highly charged moment in national consciousness, a moment which brought to a head certain key issues of the relationship of past, present and future upon which its source texts had reflected and which provided an immediate context for its first audience's engagement with current events even as they watched an apparent representation of the past. It thus deliberately encouraged critical self-positioning on the part of the audience in 1613, inviting its members to imagine the texture of English history, and it deploys a range of dramatic strategies to reach the different constituent parts of that audience (McMullan, "Introduction," *Henry VIII*, Arden Shakespeare, 6–7).

As McMullan suggests and Iska Alter argues forcefully in an essay on the propensity of critics and audiences to label certain plays "bad," the fault in *Henry VIII* may be in us, or rather our own displacement from the events of 1613 and our own expectations of good and bad dramatic action (expectations conditioned perhaps less by drama and more by the novel and cinema). That is not to say that McMullan's reading of history, politics, and ritual is the only way to make *Henry VIII* work on stage. But attempting to shape *Henry VIII* into a straighter narrative does not necessarily make the play any more interesting either, even if it may make the action of the play less, well, patchy.

For understandable reasons, Mullins attempts to smooth many of the text's complications, seemingly with the intent of constructing something more recognizably "Henrician." It is perhaps fair to assume that audiences familiar with Shakespeare but

unfamiliar with this particular play would expect the title character to dominate in the way that Hamlet does Hamlet or Henry V does Henry V. While David Foubert's king is hardly a solo turn, he features in the production more than Henry does in the text, where he is missing in over half of the scenes—a result of some judicious cutting. Mullins' production also cuts down markedly on the spectacle and ritual: the masque at Wolsey's home and the procession at the beginning of the divorce proceedings at Blackfriars are rendered effectively yet sparingly; less effective is Katherine of Aragon's vision of "a blessed troop," which is unstaged, with the suggestion being that the Dowager Princess of Wales is hallucinating. By so doing, Mullins devised a production that while worthy and well-performed (in particular by Jessica Wortham as a powerful Katherine) never fully trusted the play, removing its fantastical elements without replacing them with anything particularly vital.

The scenic design too seemed to try to compensate for what the play can't quite articulate, with mixed results. Charlie Calvert's design was dominated by a raised, wooden dais at a 45-degree angle to the stage, flanked by two latticed screens. The stage right screen resembled the bars of a prison, appropriate for a play with multiple forms of incarceration, while stage left resembled a garden trellis, a nod perhaps to the elements of romance in the play. Both screens together reminded one of the rood screens in mediaeval church architecture—perhaps anticipating the dissolution of the monasteries, which began only a few years after *Henry VIII's* narrative purview. The raised dais also suggested that these characters are always on view—on stage, as it were—and pointed to the self-consciously theatrical and spectacular moments in the play. However, the production didn't always seem to know what to do with its own scenery, which at points limited the movement of the actors. Some characters were forced to make awkward exits. Having informed Anne (Katie Wieland) that she has been made Marchioness of Pembroke, Michael Early's Lord Chamberlain exited into what has been articulated as Anne's home, even though he states that he is going "to the King." While this may have been an example of poor blocking, the prison-like stage at times seem to limit the actors rather than the characters. At other points, actors had to walk rather awkwardly around the dais while attempting to carry on intimate conversations. Indeed, it wasn't always clear why certain parts of the play happened on the dais and others on the rest of the stage. Although effective for some scenes (the trial at Blackfriars, the party at Wolsey's), at other points the set was cumbersome.

Mullins' reshaping of the play had some notable moments, some of which worked better than others. The first half ended with Wolsey's lines about Anne, whose "candle" Wolsey

must “snuff,” but in the production they are used in terms of the coming threat of Thomas Cranmer. In a neat moment of staging, Philip Goodwin’s Wolsey clicked his fingers on the phrase “snuff it” at the same moment the stage went to blackout for the interval. However, any tension engendered by this moment of stage business came undone within at the beginning the second half with the news that Wolsey’s letters to the Pope “to stay the judgment o’th’ divorce” have “miscarried / And came to th’eye o’th’King.” We were only ten minutes into the second half and Wolsey, so ascendant one scene earlier, was being forced to “render up the great seal.” Goodwin’s performance, charismatic and scheming to almost (but mercifully just shy of) pantomimic levels of cackling glee left a hole in the production that it never quite filled again. Moreover, the directorial imperative to shape the play into a more cohesive narrative was undermined by *Henry VIII*’s structure, which features its chief antagonist being brought low half way through.

There were other effective ideas. The choric gentlemen of act two scene one and act four scene one are the Duke of Norfolk (Matt Sullivan) and Lord Abergavenny (here the Duke of Suffolk, played by Damian Baldet) from the play’s very first scene, lending continuity to the many scenes of recording and reporting. The production’s closing tableau, which seemed to endorse the prophecy about the birth of the Elizabethan golden age, was neatly offset by the uneasy expression on the face of Queen Anne, who seemed to know (as of course we all do) that Henry would be none too taken with the birth of his daughter and that her own ascendancy would not long continue. The scene between old Lady (here recast as a much younger, albeit more experienced, confidante, and played by Blythe Coons) and Anne underscored the realities of Henry’s courting of her. And in a nice touch, the portrait of Katherine that adorned the upstage left’s wall was replaced by one of Anne during the interval, marking the fall of the first queen and the rise of another.

Overall, then, the Shakespeare Theater of New Jersey produced a commendable version of *Henry VIII*, with flashes of ingenuity and solid performances. But STNJ played it straight, and *Henry VIII* is not a straight play.

Production Details

General

<i>Title</i>	Henry VIII
<i>Year</i>	2014
<i>Theater Company</i>	Shakespeare Theater of New Jersey

Cast

DUKE OF SUFFOLK	DAMIAN BALDET
CRANMER/SURVEYOR	CLARK SCOTT CARMICHAEL
LADY (FRIEND TO ANNE BOLEYN)	BLYTHE COONS
LORD CHAMBERLAIN	MICHAEL EARLY
KING HENRY VIII	DAVID FOUBERT
STEPHEN GARDINER	JOSEPH HAMEL
BUCKINGHAM/GRIFFITH	THOMAS MICHAEL HAMMOND
LORD SANDS	ERIC HOFFMAN
SIR THOMAS LOVELL	ALEXANDER KORMAN
CARDINAL CAMPEIUS	MATTHEW SIMPSON
DUKE OF NORFOLK	MATT SULLIVAN
ANNE BOLEYN	KATIE WIELAND
PATIENCE	ELISABETH WILLIS
QUEEN KATHERINE	JESSICA WORTHAM

Creatives

DIRECTOR	PAUL MULLINS
COSTUME DESIGN	HUGH HANSON
SET DESIGN	CHARLIE CALVERT
LIGHTING DESIGN	MICHAEL GIANNITTI
SOUND DESIGNER	STEVEN L. BECKEL
CHOREOGRAPHER	GERRY MCINTYRE
PRODUCTION STAGE MANAGER	KATHY SNYDER