

All is True

Henry VIII

W.Shakespeare

January 11, 2012

How to write a play about a process that takes several years? A drastic element of telescoping is called for. Much of the action cannot be re-enacted on the scene but has to be narrated by extras on the stage. What remains is to display a few core scenes. Such as the seizure of the Lord of Buckingham (and his execution?). The first encounter between Henry VIII and Anne Boleyn. The trial and the defiant act of submission played by the Queen at the trial of the divorce. That would make an excellent operatic aria by the way. The fall of Cardinal Wolsey. The banishment of the Queen. The birth and Christening of Elizabeth. After thirty finely printed pages it is all done. Was it worth it?

It certainly is one of the more obscure of Shakespeare's plays, and written at the very end of his active reign. Shakespeare is supposed to have stopped at the height of his powers, and after all in artistic endeavor, accumulated experience can only enhance never detract. Yet at the very end of his activity there seems to be more of a dusk than high sun, more obscurity than clarity. For one thing, why was it written, and was it even written by Shakespeare, and if so, maybe only in parts. To the first question it is tempted to speculate that it was a play written more out of obligation than inspiration. After all he has a whole slew of historical dramas, and of course it would hard to pass by such a personage as Henry VIII, whose likeness still is instantly recognized by most British subjects. In a way he is the very embodiment of the King of Fairy Tales. Impetuous, willful to the point of whimsy, charming not to say charismatic, and above all cruel and unpredictable. When in doubt chop off a head. Yet, politically while Elizabeth I still in power, any staging of his reign would be fraught with danger. It had to wait. The result is a bit disappointing. There is very little drama, although a lot of opportunity for pomp, explaining why the play can still be worth to put on stage. This brings us back to the second query, was it written fully by Shakespeare himself?

Apart from the usual doubts that Shakespeare wrote his dramas, the only reasonable alternative to this being that the plays of Shakespeare have no single authorial voice but are the result of anonymous actors working in haphazard collaboration; it is now assumed that 'Henry VIII' is the result of a collaboration of Shakespeare with a certain John Fletcher. But what is by the hand of the great bard, and what is the work of an obscure contemporary? In the view of the American literary critic, Shakespeare in English literature provides the firmament against which all other authors are to be measured. His words are priceless and immortal, and thus embarrassing would it be indeed to read the efforts of a local hack as the outpouring of the great bard himself. But how can you tell? This is the classical quandary of authentication in art. With paintings there are the options of objective analysis of the material traces; such do not exist in literature, where in principle we only have the words themselves to go on. Some lines are short, such as 'At

thy pleasure' or 'Posh' and anyone could have penned those? When does it make sense to submit a fragment to literary analysis, and on what grounds? The obvious one would be the emotional impact made on the reader, but of course such a subjective reaction very much depends on knowledge of the author. An obvious suggestion would be a 'line up'. A short text is presented along with similar texts the authorship of which are known, or at least not known to be of Shakespeare. It might go some way, yet the method is crude to the point of being ludicrous. It is as pointless to lift a piece out of a play, as a fragment out of a symphony or a detail out of a painting, in order to gauge the emotional charge. The emotional reaction to a work of art pertains to it as a whole, not to bits and pieces thereof removed out of their proper context. What can be done with fragments is a technical analysis, it may disclose a certain competence as to handiwork as well as disclose personal idiosyncrasies as to grammar and choice of words, so to speak fingerprinting. On the basis of such fingerprinting certain segments of the play has been attributed to Shakespeare. A cursory reading of the play, however, does not reveal any lack of uniformity. In fact most people would not be able to tell the difference between a play by Shakespeare and one by a contemporary, but would of course be rather upset would they be told that the fare they have been served and ostensibly enjoyed and treasured was fake.

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