Review: King Henry VIII, or All Is True

Journal Article**Author(s):**

Vickers, Brian

Publication date:

2002

Permanent link:

<https://doi.org/10.3929/ethz-b-000423110>

Rights / license:

[In Copyright - Non-Commercial Use Permitted](#)

Originally published in:

The review of English studies 53(209), <https://doi.org/10.1093/res/53.209.119>

bound, definition of performance. It is one thing to associate the critique of performance practice advocating the pre-eminence of authorship with a generation of playwrights most vocally represented by Jonson; it is quite another to imply that there was a denigration of the actor. Marston, in particular, repeatedly drew attention to the power of the actor and the life of the play in performance.

In the introduction to *Author's Pen and Actor's Voice* Weimann discusses the current rapprochement between textual and performance studies, of which his book is a fine example. Yet it is attention to performance studies which most informs this one, as Weimann magisterially co-ordinates histories of performance, as in the work of John Astington and the REED volumes, with performance and cultural theory. The present conjunction of text and performance studies provides some impetus for the extension of material in Weimann's much earlier and highly influential *Shakespeare and the Popular Traditions in the Theater* (1978). Recent bibliographical studies, contesting the new bibliography and its emphasis on the recovery of an uncontaminated authorial document, have sought to rehabilitate and establish as viable those play-texts previously dismissed as corrupted by performance and its transmission. The first quarto of *Hamlet* is, with good reason, the most frequently cited illustration of a text based on the play in performance. Weimann provides suggestive readings of key passages in Q1 to reveal aspects of performance practice (greater fluency between dialogic representation and the actors' performant function) and of staging (the different uses of *locus* and *platea*, familiar from his earlier work). The textual history of *Hamlet* substantiates Weimann's thesis of the multiple authorities operating in early modern theatre practice. As we have now come to appreciate more fully, interceptions between page and stage, including those of plotters, players and licensors, were many. But there is a danger to which Weimann is alert: 'The reduction or, even, obliteration of the agency of dramatic writing goes hand in hand with what must be viewed as the unwelcome assertion of an all-too-articulate, deliberately inventive editorial agency.' Editors presenting increasingly elaborate conjectures of modes of textual interception should heed Weimann's tacit warning of the limitations to the co-operation between textual and performance-orientated scholarship.

JANET CLARE *University College Dublin*

WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE. **King Henry VIII, or All Is True.** Edited by JAY L. HALIO. Pp. x+230 (World's Classics). Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999. £5.99.

WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE and JOHN FLETCHER. **King Henry VIII.** Edited by GORDON McMULLAN. Pp. xxiv+506 (The Arden Shakespeare). London: Thomson Learning, 2000. £7.99.

To have two editions of *King Henry VIII* appearing within a year of each other is a new phenomenon. Previously we had the New Arden edition of R. A. Foakes in 1957, followed five years later by J. C. Maxwell's Cambridge New Shakespeare; Foakes's revised edition appeared in 1962, Maxwell's revised edition in 1968, an equally clear lapse of time intervening. In 1990 Cambridge replaced Maxwell's edition with the much less scholarly one by John Margeson; Gordon McMullan now replaces Foakes, and Jay L. Halio's is the first separate Oxford edition to appear.

Halio's edition is agreeably compact. The introduction runs to sixty-one pages, including sections on 'Henry VIII, Shakespeare, and the Reformation in England', on the sources, date, authorship, and printing, a discussion of the play as a whole, a separate (rather disappointing) section on its language, and the obligatory survey of

theatre history since the Restoration. Halio, who earlier produced an excellent edition of *The Merchant of Venice* in this series, does a thoroughly professional job on the play's historical background. He gives a concise account of the actual historical events on which Shakespeare and Fletcher based themselves, and shows that both dramatists used the same historical sources (Holinshed, Cavendish, and Foxe), evidently reflecting their preliminary discussions on the play's scope and shape. He shows that both dramatists avoid going into detail about the Reformation, judging that 'Shakespeare was well advised to steer clear of clerical and theological issues, for they could be very dangerous' (p. 10). He also shows the 'enormous amount of material . . . left out' of the play (p. 13), and in effect documents the way it focuses on the fates of three main characters, Buckingham, Queen Katherine, and Cardinal Wolsey. However, throughout the introduction, as a note informs us, 'for convenience' sake, the author is simply referred to as 'Shakespeare' (p. 63). This seems a rather perverse decision, inasmuch as Halio has earlier summarized the scholarly tradition since 1850, when James Spedding identified the scenes written by Shakespeare (I. i and ii, II. iii and iv, III. i. 1–204, and V. i), assigning the remainder to Fletcher. Halio gives a brief account of the authorship issue (pp. 18–24), omitting a number of important studies, but generally endorsing Spedding's attributions, which have been confirmed by every competent analysis since then. Indeed, he adds two further stylistic markers supporting the authorship division, first the contractions involving you—*y'are* (= you're), *y'haue*, and so on—counting a dozen of these, ten of which are in scenes assigned to Fletcher, and only two in Shakespeare's. Secondly, the frequency of parentheses in this play shows a comparable difference. In Shakespeare's scenes parentheses appear every 31.5 lines, in Fletcher's every 6.3 lines (pp. 20–1). Halio also draws the inevitable conclusion, which any reading of the play will confirm, that the characterization of the major characters clearly differs according to which dramatist is handling them. He cites Marjorie Hope Nicolson's pioneering essay (*PMLA*, 1922), which brought out the difference between the two dramatists' handling of Katherine, Wolsey, and Buckingham, and he might have added the demonstration by E. M. Waith in *The Pattern of Tragicomedy in Beaumont and Fletcher* (1952) that the valedictory speeches of Wolsey and Buckingham are written on exactly the same rhetorical plan.

As for the play itself, Halio argues that it is tightly constructed, despite the dual authorship, instancing its focus on 'the use and abuse of power' (p. 25), and some rather general thematic patterns, such as 'ambivalence' and the way in which King Henry 'begins to know himself' and Wolsey also 'comes to know himself' (pp. 29–35). It is not clear that these elements are in themselves sufficient to make a unified play, especially since Act V introduces a wholly new plot element, namely the clerical opposition to Cranmer and his subsequent vindication by the King, followed by the birth of the future Queen Elizabeth and Cranmer's speech prophesying a happy reign with all its virtues. The fact remains that Shakespeare and Fletcher jointly planned the play—so much is obvious from its coherent use of sources—but that Shakespeare willingly assigned to Fletcher responsibility for the three speeches which have become most famous, Wolsey's two soliloquies, and Cranmer's eulogy. This is a sign of confidence on Shakespeare's part in the abilities of his younger co-author, and it seems to me only just for Fletcher to be given full credit for having created half of this fascinating play. It may be 'convenient' to refer to the composite author as 'Shakespeare' throughout, but it seems perverse to do so in a discussion of the play's language, when the authorship division Halio has endorsed ascribes several of the speeches to Fletcher. Regrettably, Halio has not taken notice of the best discussions of the play's 'late' style, by A. C. Partridge, in *Orthography in Shakespeare and Elizabethan*

Drama (London, 1964), and John Porter Houston, in *Shakespearean Sentences* (Baton Rouge and London, 1988).

Halio fulfils the regular duties of an editor most competently, giving useful quotations in his footnotes from Holinshed and Foxe, and adding occasional helpful notes on the way in which the sources have been reshaped. His lexical annotation is efficient, if brief, and includes such helpful glosses as the fact that 'spiders were considered venomous'. Halio also has several sensible notes correcting the excess ingenuities of previous editors, of whom J. C. Maxwell proves the most reliable. It is striking, looking at the annotation as a whole, how much less glossing is needed for the Fletcher scenes. Fletcher's language is flatter, simpler than Shakespeare's, whether in syntax, imagery, or rhetoric. Still, even here, in what are obviously Fletcher scenes, Halio cites parallels to explain a particular usage from Shakespeare's plays, and gives virtually no parallels from Fletcher's. It does seem as if editors are still reluctant to acknowledge that for at least five plays Shakespeare worked with a co-author.

Gordon McMullan's Arden edition does not seem to have that problem, since it announces the play on its title page as being by William Shakespeare and John Fletcher. However, in order to discover why he gives Fletcher equal billing, one has to turn to the very end of an enormously long introduction (200 pages) to find a section on collaboration, which is unsatisfactory in several respects. McMullan muddles this issue by linking authorship studies to 'the prejudiced, bardolatrous environment out of which the study of authorship attribution grew' (p. 186). But although some of the early practitioners expressed a belief in Shakespeare's superiority, their primary goal was the empirical study of the play's language. The original essay on *Henry VIII* by James Spedding was an objective attempt to distinguish by linguistic means the presence of two styles which he, like many other readers, had noticed at work in the play. McMullan muddles the issue further by claiming that 'the New Bibliographers in the mid-twentieth century began to revisit and revise the long-dismissed "disintegrative" practices of the mid- to late nineteenth century, by which plays could be attributed scene by scene to the collaborating writers' (p. 185). But all the historical evidence indicates that co-authors did indeed usually write whole scenes (the switching of responsibility that takes place here in the middle of III. i is unusual), and to identify their respective shares is not to 'disintegrate' a play but to give its creators their due. McMullan's sole exemplar of this supposed 'disintegrative' revival is Cyrus Hoy, who produced a series of essays on the authorship of the plays in the Fletcher canon (*Studies in Bibliography*, 1956–62). But Hoy had nothing to do with the new bibliography of the generation from McKerrow to Greg and beyond, his interests being solely in devising a series of linguistic tests which would effectively distinguish Fletcher's work from that of his many collaborators—Beaumont, Middleton, Ford, and Shakespeare, among others. In so doing, Hoy was in a direct line of descent from earlier attribution scholars, such as F. G. Fleay (1874), A. H. Thorndike (1901), W. Farnham (1916), and, above all, E. H. C. Oliphant (1927). The tradition of authorship studies has nothing to do with either bardolatry or with the new bibliography. McMullan muddles this issue still further by invoking the 'ground-breaking work on the historical construction of the concept of authorship' by Michel Foucault, as processed by such critics as Stallybrass and Masten, who uncritically accept Foucault's claims that the individual writer's 'proprietaryship' of his work was a phenomenon of the eighteenth century and after (pp. 196–7). Foucault was an imaginative writer, but his deficiencies as a historian have been made clear by many studies over the last twenty years: by J. G. Merquior, Vincent Descombes, Ian Maclean, and, most recently, by Séan Burke, *The Death and Rebirth of the Author* (revised edition Edinburgh, 1998). Anyone who reads Elizabethan writers

regularly will notice how clear they are as to their own authorship of particular works, and their resentment when they have been plagiarized.

Collaboration was a frequent practice in the drama written between 1580 and 1642, and cannot be dismissed as an irrelevant issue either by invoking Foucault or by claiming that theatre is by its very nature 'collaborative'. All the performing arts are collaborative in the sense that they rely on a number of people bringing them to fulfilment in a particular space at a particular time, but that is very different from the kind of collaboration that Elizabethan dramatists took part in. McMullan surveys some of the scholarship which has clearly distinguished Fletcher's and Shakespeare's work, but in a disapproving manner, as in his reference to the 'best-known Victorian disintegrators, Fleay and Furnivall of the New Shakespere [*sic*] Society'—a pedantic parenthesis which ruins its point by not reproducing that society's true spelling, 'Shakspere'—without actually disclosing what methods they used. McMullan cites some of the scholarship in a footnote (p. 187), but gives no sign that he has actually absorbed their arguments or noticed the wide range of linguistic evidence that has been brought to bear on the issue. He also leaves out many important studies, by F. J. Furnivall (1874), John Ingram (1874), Marjorie Hope Nicolson (1922), Karl Ege (1922), Charles Langworthy (1931), Alfred Hart (1943), Ants Oras (1960), Marco Mincoff (1961), MacDonald Jackson (1962, 1997), David Lake (1969, 1970), Marina Tarlinskaja (1987), and Fredson Bowers (1989). Taken together, these studies add up to the strongest demonstration of the value of authorship studies. McMullan gives the main authorship division in a chart on pp. 448–9, listing only five authorities, one of whom is Fleay, not always reliable, who was convinced that Massinger had written three scenes in the play. However, the next authority cited, Willard Farnham, decisively disproved Fleay's thesis, as did Nicolson, Baldwin Maxwell, and Hoy. To cite Fleay here is to show that the basic scholarship on this issue has not been digested. McMullan mentions the recent and valuable discussion by Jonathan Hope, *The Authorship of Shakespeare's Plays: A Sociolinguistic Study* (Cambridge, 1994), for its critique of Hoy's attempt to reassign several Fletcher scenes to Shakespeare on the basis of one verbal marker only, but does not seem to realize that Hope totally demolished Hoy's case. It is misleading, then, to refer in the notes to every scene which Hoy attempted to reclaim for Shakespeare, just as it is to take evidence that Shakespeare and Fletcher had synchronized their use of Holinshed as proving 'the irrelevance of authorial attribution' (p. 344).

As mentioned, McMullan's introduction is the longest so far in the New Arden series. Confusingly enough, it begins by recounting the play's performance history (pp. 8–56), a useful survey with some good illustrations, but barely fulfilling the claim in the title to this section that it will discuss 'authenticities'. Then follows a section called 'All is True: Cultural History' (pp. 57–146), which covers a huge range of material, unfortunately in a verbose and overwritten style. For instance, Sir Henry Wotton's famous letter describing the first performance, at which the Globe burned down, is said to be 'an acute and subtle critical reading of the play', and three pages are devoted to arguing this highly improbable claim. Then the editor discusses the play's topicality, drawing freely on what he calls 'the politics of Protestantism' (p. 70). Apparently, this may include 'the Protestant insistence on Apocalypse', biblical history, and a 'history of equivocal representations that obliges the audience to seek its own interpretation of Reformation history' (p. 93). Subsequently McMullan quotes the claim of Annabel Patterson that the play is 'a meditation on the effects of the Reformation in England' (p. 166). However, as Jay Halio points out, Fletcher and Shakespeare specifically avoided any comments on the ecclesiastical or civic nature of

the Reformation, and it is symptomatic that in order to make this claim McMullan has to cite truly marginal evidence, such as the crowd scene in IV. i. Here a choric report that people were crushed together—'all were woven | So strangely in one piece'—is said to be an observation 'which arguably offers the most radical reading of English Reformation history in the course of the play, a reading which . . . [delivers] a crushing repudiation of the assumption that the individual subject was a product of Reformation' (p. 136). The discrepancy between the trivial verbal detail and the huge interpretative claim is disturbing. As someone displaying great debts to new historicism, it is not surprising that McMullan should apply to the Reformation that critical school's passion for finding everywhere evidence of 'subversion' or 'resistance'. The play is said to have an 'underlying coherence as a *comœdia apocalyptica* . . . of Christian redemption', but at the same time 'the play resists this linear structure' (pp. 92–3); in it 'Communication becomes a process which simultaneously transmits and degrades truth' (p. 102). The famous concluding prophecy is somehow 'undermined' (p. 109), while Katherine's deathbed vision points to 'the cultural transformation she resists'. On McMullan's reading the play 'seems . . . perversely to confuse' both the two queens and the transition from Catholicism to Protestantism (p. 132). Indeed, it shows 'the essential futility of the Henrician Reformation . . . both conclusive and inconclusive' (p. 135), and its 'apparently disparate episodes . . . form a comprehensible sequence which is then available for subversion' (p. 143)—the goal of all new historical narratives. Recurring terms in this discussion include 'questions', 'undercuts', 'scepticism', 'relativism', 'incompatible', 'fracturing', 'uncertainty', and 'productive multiplicity'. These simultaneous assertions and negations seem to be a critical mannerism rather than the result of a careful reading of the play.

Gordon McMullan joins to new historicism an allegiance to the Freudian–psychoanalytic–gender study approach so common in recent years. Readers familiar with the traditional image of King Henry as the bluff, macho ruler may be surprised to learn that 'Henry's masculinity is in crisis in this play' (p. 81). The evidence for this claim derives from the interpretation of a number of passages as containing sexual allusions, but the evidence often seems forced. In one of the Fletcher scenes, Henry, about to abandon Katherine, asks Cardinal Wolsey, 'Would it not grieve an able man to leave | So sweet a bedfellow?', and answers his own question: 'But conscience, conscience— | O, 'tis a tender place, and I must leave her' (II. ii. 139–42). McMullan believes that the word 'tender place' here refers to the Queen's 'vagina', and indeed he argues that throughout the play the word 'conscience' is given a sexual meaning. In his notes McMullan spells out the significances that he thinks to find here: the phrase 'tender place' is said to be 'one of the moments in the play in which *conscience* and *vagina* become curiously synonymous' (p. 289). Now I enjoy a bawdy joke as much as the next reader of Shakespeare, but there does seem to be a difference here. Schmidt defined *tender* as 'delicate in a physical and moral sense'; *OED* defines *tender* (11a) as 'susceptible to moral or spiritual influence . . . Now chiefly in the phrase "tender conscience"'. It ascribes to *conscience* (8a) the sense 'tenderness of conscience with regard to an act, scruple; also compunction, remorse' (citations from 1400 to 1608), and recognizes the adjective *tender-conscienced* as 'having a tender conscience, scrupulous', first used in 1617. If we look up the collocation *tender* + *conscience* in the Chadwyck–Healey database we find that the phrase *tender conscience* occurs several times in Massinger, in a play by Glapthorne, and in at least two plays by Fletcher. In *The Wild-Goose Chase* (c.1621), Mirabell, 'a Traveyl'd Monsieur, and great defyer of all ladies in the way of marriage', explains that he has 'put [women] off, because I lov'd them not', the reason why he remains single, not for 'the Contract sake',

Nor vows, nor oathes; I have made a thousand of 'em
 They are things indifferent, whether kept or broken;
 Meer veniall slips that grow not near the Conscience,
 Nothing concerns those tender parts, they are trifles

(II. i. 101–4)

The fact that Fletcher used a very similar phrase, 'tender parts' here, in the context of 'contract . . . vows . . . oathes . . . conscience', confirms that the 'tender place' in this passage is Henry's conscience. More appropriately, in the Oxford edition Halio cites an Elizabethan proverb, 'The conscience and the eye are tender parts'.

McMullan is equally fertile in finding sexual readings for other innocent passages. When Anne Boleyn is told by the Lord Chamberlain that the King has taken good notice of 'your many virtues' and has granted her a title and income of £1,000 a year, she replies:

I do not know
 What kind of my obedience I should tender.
 More than my all is nothing; nor my prayers
 Are not words duly hallowed . . .

(II. iii. 65–8)

I take the phrase 'more than my all is nothing' to be a hyperbole describing everything she has as being less than nothing, but for McMullan the term '*tender* recalls a sexualizing of the conscience' earlier, and therefore here '*nothing* has its early modern signification of "vagina"'. So the whole expression 'acknowledges that Anne's importance lies solely in her sexuality/procreativity' (p. 295). This remark fulfils another new historicist agenda, to argue the supremacy of patriarchy, but it does violence to the text. In the same scene the choric Old Lady bitterly comments that she has been 'begging sixteen years in court' without reward, while Anne, 'A very fresh fish here . . . have your mouth filled up | Before you open it' (II. iii. 86–7). To McMullan this is 'possibly an image of oral sex', and when the Old Lady asks Anne how her good fortune 'tastes . . . Is it bitter?', the editor adds: 'further play on the image of oral sex at 87–8, perhaps' (pp. 296–7). How oral sex can take place before the woman opens her mouth is a mystery. Physical possibilities are strained further in the editor's notes to the following scene (by Shakespeare), where Henry reverts to his conscience—the fact that both dramatists refer to this issue is a further sign of joint planning (it is much emphasized in the sources)—and records that 'My conscience first received a tenderness, | Scruple and prick on certain speeches uttered' (II. iv. 167–8) by the French Ambassador, who requested a 'respite' or interval in their meeting to consider whether Henry's marriage to Katherine was at all legitimate. The King recalls:

This respite shook
 The bosom of my conscience, entered me,
 Yea, with a spitting power, and made to tremble
 The region of my breast.

(II. iv. 178–81)

McMullan reasons that, given 'the previous ambivalent signified for *tender*—Anne's (or Katherine's) vagina—the echo of Holinshed's word *prick* (168) seems deliberately phallic. Henry again seems metaphorically feminized by the workings of his con-

science' (p. 310). The editor's comment on the second passage leaves readers in no doubt as to the further implications: 'Henry's conscience is again perceived as physical and perhaps sexual ("the bosom of my conscience") . . . making him tremble, and "forcing [its] way" into him. It is as if the *prick* is raping him' (p. 311). We have heard of anal rape, but thoracic rape is a distinct novelty. Joking apart, the serious issue here concerns the reader's judgement, when to recognize a sexual allusion and when not. If words like 'prick' and 'nothing' were always given a sexual sense, Shakespeare's text would soon be in a sorry state.

Fortunately, not all of McMullan's notes are of this kind. Some offer useful quotations from the sources (in fuller detail than Halio), and helpful paraphrases and explications. Among these I would cite the comments on 'sick interpreters' (I. ii. 82): '*sick* here means "envious"' (p. 238), and that on 'perniciously' (II. i. 50): 'enough to want him dead (derived from Latin *pernecare*, "to kill outright")' (p. 270). But surely 'illustrated' (III. ii. 181) means 'rendered famous, celebrated'. McMullan scores over Halio in one respect by including in his notes to the Fletcher scenes about twenty citations from parallel passages in Fletcher's other plays, a resource that can doubtless be exploited even more profitably. Among the sources used to gloss the text McMullan makes good use of Erasmus's *Adagia* (e.g. p. 221), and of the *New Grove* for musical instruments (p. 256). Several helpful appendices include an account of the role of music in the play, three uncollected sources/analogues, and a doubling chart.

Despite the great amount of work that McMullan has put in, Halio's edition seems to me preferable in nearly every way.

BRIAN VICKERS *Centre for Renaissance Studies ETH Zürich*

BEN JONSON. *The Magnetic Lady*. Edited by PETER HAPPE. Pp. xiv+238.
Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2000. £40.

The Magnetic Lady is a play that has never enjoyed popular success in the theatre, nor much esteem among critics. Three of Jonson's former satirical victims, Alexander Gill, Nathaniel Butter, and Inigo Jones, appear to have methodically disrupted the piece when it was first staged at Blackfriars in October 1632, laughing noisily at its supposed shortcomings. The play's subsequent performance history is exceedingly sparse. Though its final Chorus is said to have been 'changed into an epilogue to the king', there is no surviving evidence of a performance at court. Nor are there records of any public revivals of the piece before Peter Barnes's adaptation for BBC radio in 1987, and a stage production in 1996 at Reading University. For Alexander Gill, *The Magnetic Lady* was the child of Jonson's 'bedridden wit', Dryden famously placed it among his 'dotages', while Jonson's Oxford editors believed 'the stamp of old age' was 'surely set upon the play'. The revival of theatrical and critical interest in Jonson's late work over the past decade or so has not significantly affected the fortunes of *The Magnetic Lady*, and there has not, until now, been a full-scale re-editing of the play since the completion of the Oxford edition of C. H. Herford and Percy and Evelyn Simpson half a century ago.

The present edition is therefore more than ordinarily welcome, allowing as it does an extended opportunity to reassess the play in the light of recent scholarship. Peter Happé is a positive advocate for the play. He reminds us of Jonson's remarkable productivity and powers of invention during his final years, and argues that *The Magnetic Lady* is 'written with a purposeful intensity', showing 'a concentration of Jonson's most outstanding abilities'. He comes most nearly towards justifying this high