On Shakespeare's *Henry VIII*:

What It Tells Us

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*Henry VIII* has proved to be the most difficult of Shakespeare's histories because of a suspicion of double authorship. In spite of its unchallenged inclusion in the First Folio of 1623, some critics with good ears sensed an un-Shakespearean tone in the play. As early as 1758, the problem of authorship was first mentioned by Dr. Johnson. He had an impression that the Prologue and Epilogue were not of Shakespeare and thought it possible that Ben Jonson had supplied those parts. It was not, however, seriously attacked until 1850, when James Spedding announced his famous investigation. He detected in parts of *Henry VIII* the presence of two styles: one with a lot of complex imagery, the other with a small proportion of fancy to words and images and a great number of lines with an unaccented eleventh syllable which was often seen in the plays of Fletcher. He divided the play into two parts, based on his idea and attributed the first three acts to Shakespeare and the rest to Fletcher. It was in the same year that Samuel Hickson, working independently, suggested his division "which has become established as an orthodoxy amongst those who find Fletcher's hand in *Henry VIII*." He assigned I. i-ii, II. iii-iv, III. ii. 1-203, V. i, to Shakespeare.

Once their theory was accepted, most of the critics afterwards just tried to refine their attributions. W.A. Wright (1891), D. Nichol Smith (1893) and C.K. Pooler (1915) were among them. Although Peter Alexander (1930) and G. Wilson Knight (1947) asserted Shakespeare's sole authorship, based on the different points of view, they are rejected strongly by A.C. Partridge (1949) who maintained Fletcher's presence in the work, based on the theory of Hickson, using his own table of the habits of two writers in which he found out the word "ye" came out in Shakespeare's part only once but in Fletcher's part fifty-nine times. Yet none of these theories are perfect, for there always exist exceptions. As Foakes asserts, "in any case stylistic evidence is notoriously unreliable."²

Foakes approached this problem especially from the treatment of sources by Shakespeare and Fletcher. In *Henry VIII* three or four sources are used.
"If two authors wrote the play," he insists, "they read the same parts of these authorities with a strangely similar attention to detail." He points out that Fletcher never made literal borrowings when he used Holinshed as a source in writing Bonduca, while there are many in Henry VIII. He concludes his argument on this problem as follows:

... I think his share must have been considerably less than the usual division ascribes to him, and that he worked only as an occasional reviser or toucher-up, who perhaps contributed one or two scenes. 4

At any rate nobody knows the truth. It still remains mystery whether Henry VIII was written by Shakespeare only or not.

Besides its authorship problem, it is really difficult to understand what Henry VIII is about.

Shakespeare wrote Henry VIII in 1613 and it became his last historical play. It was more than ten years from the time when he finished the last of his earlier histories, Henry V in 1599. Though he came back to the history again, he did not write it in the same way as his earlier one.

One of the reasons is the change of the current of the time. He must have noticed it and taken the circumstances into consideration when he wrote the play. Irving Ribner points out as follows:

The difference between Henry VIII and the earlier Lancastrian plays may be accounted for most readily, I believe, by the general decline in the history play which had taken place by the time that Henry VIII was written. The great age of the history play was now over. 5

Realizing that decline in the history plays, he intentionally omitted the didactic purpose which was the main theme in his earlier histories. The second reason is that he enriched his experience in writing wide variety of characters in different types of plays. It is no wonder, therefore, that he showed the results of a ripened experience in Henry VIII. The third reason is the nearness of the period of the play to the time in which Shakespeare really lived. He must have taken heed of his dealing with kings. If he had happened to disgrace or insult Henry, who was the hero of the Tudor kings, in the play, he might have been very dangerous. In order not to hurt any royal figures what he could do was very limited. On such condition, what did he want to tell us?
In constructing the plot of the play, Shakespeare is careful to make contrasts and oppositions. While he is closely following his source, Holinshed's *Chronicles* (1587), sometimes referring to other sources such as Fox's *Acts and Monuments* (1597), John Speed's *The History of Great Britain* (1611), and probably Hall's account of the reign of *Henry VIII*, he rearranges the events, destroying time sequence. At some places, he changes the order of the events so much from the original history that he needs help of gentlemen who comment on the happenings in the play, explaining the course of things.

He begins the play with the scene of the peace treaty at the Field of the Cloth of Gold (1520). Buckingham’s arrest, trial and execution (1521) are placed in the same period of the rebellion of the weavers (1525). Though Henry meets Anne at the masque which is held by Wolsey in the play, she did not attend that masque actually and their meeting is thought to be in 1527. Anne received a title of Marchioness of Pembroke in 1532 but that event comes before the commencement of divorce proceedings by Henry against Katherine which was probably in 1527 and also before the trial of Katherine which was in 1529. The royal wedding of Henry and Anne (1532) is presented before the fall of Wolsey (1529). Wolsey died in 1530 and Katherine died in 1536, but his death comes before hers. The birth and christening of the Princess Elizabeth (1533) follows soon after the death of Katherine and Cranmer's close escape which was probably in 1544.

Through the survey of the Shakespeare's arrangement of the events, it becomes clear that he deliberately brings the contrast between sad scenes and happy scenes. At the beginning we hear about the spectacle, the gorgeous appearances of two kings and other people at the peace treaty. An expectation of peace is presented. Then suddenly Buckingham is arrested and the gay atmosphere disappears. Next comes the scene of the council room where Katherine stands face to face with Wolsey. This is a scene of opposition between them to prove their political influence upon Henry. The banquet scene which appears next helps to ease strain of the previous scene. It restores the atmosphere of gaiety. Anne is introduced at this scene as a beautiful, charming woman with quick wits. She is apparently described in contrast to Katherine. When Henry chooses her as a dance partner, we are able to sense that she will come to be opposed to Katherine, though they never meet face to face and Katherine never refers to Anne in the play. Both of them, however, are presented as good women.

Act II begins with the report on the trial of Buckingham. The mood of the scene changes into sadness. His farewell speech fore-shadows the coming fate of Wolsey. The ominous effect which is caused by his unfortunate fall
lasts throughout this act. With the arrival of Campeius who has come from Rome to examine the legitimacy of Henry’s marriage, Henry reveals his mind that he wants to divorce Katherine. Next scene presents Anne who shows pity for Katherine. She is depicted not only as a sympathetic, humble lady but also as a lady who has ambition, because when she is offered a title, she does not refuse it. In spite of her saying, “I would not be a queen/For all the world” (II.iii. 46), we all know she will be a queen after all. At the same time, the fact that Henry offered her a title reinforces contrast of the fate of Anne and Katherine. A hint of the birth of Elizabeth is also woven in this scene, when the Lord Chamberlain guesses aside,

    and who knows yet
    But from this lady may proceed a gem
    To lighten all this isle.                   (II.iii. 77-79)

This hint becomes a link with Act V. The light conversation between Anne and Old Lady produces a momentary gaiety between the two falls of Buckingham and Katherine. At the trial, Katherine shows hostility to Wolsey instead of Henry who does not help her at all at her pleading. She overcomes Wolsey in vain. Wolsey’s fall is also implied here.

The sad air which has been produced in the last act is still dominant in Act III. Wolsey succeeds in persuading Katherine to take his advice, but the current of things does not flow favourably for him. Soon after the marriage between Henry and Anne is announced, it comes to be known that Wolsey’s device has been disclosed by Henry. At his fall he understands the danger of ambition and of pride but does not regret his wrongdoings in his past. He declines in resignation to fate, in other words, the rotation of Fortune’s wheel, because his fall comes neither from his wrongdoings nor from his moral blemishes. He ruins, thinking about Thomas More, Cranmer and Anne, those who are rising in place of his downfall.

Act IV is described in the opposite mood. Detailed stage direction portrays the magnificent spectacle of the coronation of Anne. The cheerful description of the commons at her coronation and the report on Anne’s beauty express joy of people. Its presentation of splendour can compensate for the darkness of the last act. At the same time, unsteadiness of fortune is told by two gentlemen:

    2 Gent. These are stars indeed --
    1 Gent. And sometimes falling ones.       (IV.i. 54-55)
On hearing them say thus, we are made to remember the fate of Buckingham, Wolsey and Katherine. Then there returns to the scene of sadness, the scene of the death of Katherine. Her vision of heavenly coronation apparently contrasts with the earthly coronation of Anne. One is a promise of permanent happiness and the other is a promise of vanity. By the death of Katherine in the scene of sorrow, grief and pity are brought to an end.

The beginning of Act V shows us an intrigue at the court which is still going on. We hear ill feelings of the lords toward the rising people: Cranmer, Cromwell and Anne. Especially Cranmer is to be sacrificed. We also see Henry is in anxiety for Anne who is going to have a baby with great pain. Atmosphere of uneasiness continues until the moment of Old Lady’s informing us the birth of Elizabeth. Then comes the scene of the trial of Cranmer. As we have seen Henry give him his ring as a token of his reliance and friendship, we do not worry about his fate as much. As we have expected, he is saved by Henry. The scene of ease follows close. The joyful atmosphere of the scene is emphasized in the words of Porter. Then comes the last scene of the christening of Elizabeth. The play ends with the happy prophecy of Cranmer which promises the peace and prosperity of England and the greatness of Elizabeth and of her successor. In this way, the play ends, restoring the atmosphere of gaiety, joyfulness and peace.

We are able to notice some repetitious movement of the play through the replacement of joy and sadness. There are not only good things in a life, but we have bad things, too. We all know there are light and shade in a life and their alternate appearance forms a cycle in a life. It seems that Shakespeare develops and enlarges this life-cycle to apply to present history. Through the repetitions of falls, he presents not only a personal rise and fall due to the movement of the wheel of Fortune but also the change of the times. The generation change is proceeding and it does not end at the last scene of the christening of Elizabeth. A hint of its continuity is given in the prophecy of Cranmer.

In this play there are three or more centers. They appear in each fall. When one fall is completed, the situation begins to develop into another fall. In this way, a reader’s interest is not concentrated in one point or an action as in the case of tragedies. If there is any turning point in *Henry VIII*, it seems to be in the fourth act in which all the falls come to an end. The fifth act starts a new movement towards future, implying another beginning of the cycle.

There is, however, a defect in this cyclic structure. That is its regularity in placing scenes of gaiety and sadness. In other words, its repetitious nature.
Though the play ends in the atmosphere of gaiety and glory for the future, we can anticipate the next to come. Since Shakespeare took his materials from the real history of England, the audience at that time must have known what actually happened afterwards. However glorious the Cranmer’s prophecy may be, we all know that the people who are rising in the play had to fall before Elizabeth came to the throne. Thomas More resigned his chancellorship in 1532 and Anne was beheaded on a probably alleged charge of adultery with five different men, one of them her own brother, in 1536. Cromwell was accused of treason and went to the block in 1540 and Cranmer was burned. They could not escape from their fate of falling and their fate impresses us the recurring pattern which is not terminated at the end of the play.

It may be an unexpected effect for Shakespeare if he simply wanted to write a pagent or a panorama. But as his careful construction of scenes of gaiety and sadness and his treatment of of historical events show by intentionally disregarding the chronological order, it is certain that he wanted to tell us not only the splendour of the time but also his larger perspective of life which he had acquired through his experience in writing wide variety of plays.

NOTES


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