THE GUILD

# Shakespeare

KING JOHN

HENRY VIII

BY

*WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE*

EDITED BY

*JOHN F. ANDREWS*

Foreword by Donald Sinden

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# *FOREWORD*
to
*HENRY VIII*
by Donald Sinden

Henry the Eighth is a bloody awful part.

"I come no more to make you laugh . . ." That is the rather ominous first line of Shakespeare's *Henry VIII* and it pretty well holds good for the rest of the play. Indeed there is hardly a laugh in it, which distresses me as an actor as I enjoy getting laughs. The scholars, who should know about these things, tell us that *Henry VIII* was not the unaided work of Shakespeare but was written in collaboration with a young playwright named John Fletcher. Sometimes these scholars are right, and, having spent a year of my life playing the part of Henry, I find myself agreeing with them wholeheartedly.

Let me tell you my own theory about the authorship of the

DONALD SINDEN, one of England's leading actors, has performed the title roles in *Henry VIII, King Lear,* and *Othello,* as well as Malvolio in *Twelfth Night,* Benedick in *Much Ado About Nothing,* Lord Foppington in





play. At some time during the middle of his playwriting years, Shakespeare first conceived the idea of a play about the father of Queen Elizabeth the First. Possibly in 1597, which would have been the fiftieth anniversary of Henry's death. Having mapped out his original plan, he found himself in trouble. In all honesty, and he was a playwright who could never be dishonest, he would have to show Henry the Eighth as the ogre and tyrant that he undoubtedly was. This would not have been exactly wise with his daughter Elizabeth still on the throne and herself noted for wielding a pretty bloody axe. But, having done considerable research on the subject, Shakespeare was loth to waste it. What if he were to concentrate on the early years of Henry's reign when Cardinal Wolsey was his Chancellor? What a splendid, colourful character he would be! Henry could be shown as the David who overthrew this Goliath. He could show Wolsey's rather than Henry's fall from grace. Henry's first wife Katharine could be the villain of the piece as well. The audience would sympathise with Henry over the divorce. The young, beautiful and innocent Anne Boleyn could be Shakespeare's heroine because she finally gave birth to, guess who?—Elizabeth, Our Elizabeth, Good Queen Bess. There was, however, no getting away from the fact that Henry the Eighth was the villain. The audience could not be expected to forget that he had chopped off the head of Elizabeth's mum, and possibly the heads of their own parents as well. He had no alternative but to drop the idea. If he offended the

*The Relapse,* Dr. Stockmann in *An Enemy of the People,* Sir Harcourt Courtly in *London Assurance,* and Undershaft in *Major Barbara.*





Queen and the Court, he and his colleagues would be out of work or, worse still, in the Tower. So Shakespeare put all the relevant speeches he had drafted into his desk and set about writing something less contentious.

The years rolled by and Shakespeare entered the mature years of his playwriting. *Twelfth Night* and *Hamlet* fell from his pen. Queen Elizabeth died in 1603 and James I became King. Merrie England was a thing of the past and Shakespeare set to work on the great tragedies of *Othello, Measure for Measure, King Lear, Macbeth* and *Antony and Cleopatra.* His last play, his swan-song, *The Tempest,* was produced in 1611 and from then on he could enjoy retirement in Stratford-upon-Avon. His place as resident playwright to the King's Men had been taken by a young fellow called John Fletcher who, while clearing out his predecessor's desk, came across a bundle of notes on the subject of Henry the Eighth. He wrote to the grand old man at Stratford and asked if he could please make use of the notes. "Of course you can, my boy," replied Shakespeare. "You'll find it a very difficult task. Take my advice and make all the speeches ambiguous and call the play *All is True.* If you need my help just let me know. I enclose two or three speeches you can use, one for Buckingham, several for Wolsey and Katharine. Good luck, and for heaven's sake don't put my name on the playbills. Yours, W.S."

Well that, as I said, is my own theory. However, the play, under its title of *Henry VIII,* first appeared in print as being the work of William Shakespeare in the collected edition of his works edited by John Heminge and Henry Condell in 1623. Poor Fletcher doesn't get a mention.

The play is rarely produced today because of the enormous

cost involved. The cast list is the longest of any play by Shakespeare. There are scenes of magnificent pageantry: a great ball given by Wolsey, an enormous courtroom scene, a splendid coronation procession for Anne Boleyn, the dancers who appear to Katharine in a vision and, finally, the impressive baptism ceremony for the infant Elizabeth. Just think of the costumes! The Court of Henry the Eighth did not stint themselves, so when the play is presented today it must look sumptuous. Wolsey is the only character who can get away with only one costume. It would be a cardinal error to dress him in anything but red.

So why bother to do the play? Well, it contains two rewarding parts, Queen Katharine and Cardinal Wolsey, and over the centuries leading actors and actresses have wanted to play them (in our production they were played by Peggy Ashcroft and Brewster Mason). The part of Buckingham is pretty good too, but the part of Henry is a stinker! He is one of those few historical characters whose appearance is known to every man in the street. More than any other monarch, with the possible exception of Queen Victoria, everybody has a preconceived idea of what Henry looked like because of those endless reproductions of Holbein's portrait. There he stands, this great bulk of a man, his feet astride, hands on hips, with vast, hunched shoulders. All the poor actor can do is try to look like that portrait and therein lies the problem. Whereas he is quite safe with Richard II, Henry IV, Henry V and Henry VI, because nobody knows what they looked like, if you don't look like Holbein's Henry, the public think you have failed. I found this to my cost when I played the part.

By measuring the inside of Henry's armour which stands in the Tower of London, we know that he was six foot three inches





tall. Very few actors are that tall. (I am six foot.) Then comes the costume—calamity! If you make a study of the human anatomy, you will discover that the distance between the knee and the ground is one quarter of the overall height of a man. Holbein has cheated! In trying to make Henry's vast bulk look in proportion, he has made the distance a *third* of Henry's height! Now no actor will undergo a bone graft, especially not for a part as poor as Henry, so when he dons the skirt-like lower part of the costume his shin-bone is too short and again it appears to be the fault of the actor. In the portrait, Henry's calves are at least six inches in diameter. Well, that at least is easy enough to overcome, so on go enormous padded calves. To underline Henry's virility, Holbein shows a massive codpiece protruding from a split in the skirt. The wardrobe made me one of equal size but at each move the skirt covered it up. Painter's licence I suppose. Then comes the problem of the hat. The one in the portrait is totally two-dimensional. The moment an attempt is made to reproduce it "in the round" it looks quite wrong unless the actor faces front the whole time. Then on go great padded shoulders and the cloak with enormous sleeves which covers the dagger on the belt, unless the actor keeps his hand on it all the time.

What can one do about the face? I wore a padded wig glued to my forehead to make my head look larger. My own eyebrows were obliterated and false ones stuck in their place. I had a false nose glued on and a moustache and beard were gummed into position. There was Henry's face but where was mine? There I stood, gummed up, stuck up, glued up, padded up, fed up and encased in a costume weighing a ton. I looked stupid and had no freedom to add much of myself to the character.





The important scenes of the play concern the fall of Buckingham, the greatest man in the kingdom, the meeting between Henry and Anne Boleyn, Henry's divorce from Katharine of Aragon to whom he had been married for twenty years, the fall of Cardinal Wolsey whose ambition has overreached itself, the death of Katharine and, finally, the birth of a daughter, Elizabeth, to Anne. Now remember that *All Is True* is the alternative title of the play. But, if you study history, you will find that practically everything shown or talked about in the play is only a veneer of the truth.

The divorce scene is really the centre-piece, so one needs to understand the historical background. Katharine of Aragon had been married as a child to Henry's elder brother, Arthur, when he was also a child. She had always maintained that the marriage was never consummated and when Arthur died, still a child, she was allowed by the Pope to marry his brother Henry, now heir to the throne. During their twenty years of marriage, Katharine produced many children, all of whom either died at birth, or shortly after, except for one daughter, Mary, who thus became heir to the throne. It grieved Henry that he had no son to carry on his line so, when he fell hat over codpiece for Anne Boleyn, he was determined to get rid of Katharine and marry Anne. But how to do it? The Roman Catholic Church did not countenance divorce. Perhaps an annulment, on the grounds that his entire marriage to Katharine was illegal because he should never have been allowed to marry his brother's wife, would be acceptable? It all hinged on two quotations from the Bible, one from Leviticus and the other from Deuteronomy. One maintains that a marriage is a marriage once you have "taken a wife" whilst the other maintains that a





marriage is only a marriage once it is consummated. Ecclesiastics from all over the world argued about that. Henry of course took the side that would suit him best, but the Pope took the other. It was a very difficult situation for Wolsey. As a Catholic who did not want to act against his King, he was caught between King and Pope. Luckily for Henry, all this occurred at the time when the Reformation was gaining ground in Europe. Henry jumped on the bandwagon, made himself head of the Church in England and granted his own divorce.

In the play the divorce scene takes place in and around a consistory court, staged in a sort of fenced-in area in the centre of a large room. Katharine is ordered several times to "come into the court." She refuses to acknowledge the court's authority and will not enter because there she would have been under oath. If Henry were to win, their daughter, Mary, would be branded illegitimate. She kneels before the King and makes a long, magnificent and impassioned plea.

Throughout the scene Shakespeare, brilliant as ever, does not allow Henry to speak one word to her. He has been married to her for twenty years but what could he say? Her argument is unanswerable. If he dared to join in, his cause would be lost, so it is better to keep his mouth shut. If he were even to look at her and see her tears, compassion would get the better of him. It is far safer to turn his head away and try not to look or listen. He remains silent until, when Katharine makes her exit, Henry speaks for the first time and shouts after her: "Go thy ways, Kate."

That half-line raises an interesting point of how Shakespearean verse should be spoken. We work on a principle at

Stratford-upon-Avon that one should not pause during, but only at the end of a line. With the major part of Shakespeare written in iambic pentameters—a beat of five feet to the line—one should keep that stress going throughout each line. If a full stop is in the middle of the line, one can break the line, but not stop. The last words of Katharine's speech are:

> Upon this business my appearance make
> In any of their courts.
>
> HENRY: Go thy ways, Kate.

There must be no pause between her half-line and Henry's. After he has said "Kate" he can pause, for an hour if he likes, but before that he must keep the rhythm going. He's got to slap in his half-line immediately after Kate's speech. He then embarks upon a very long, very dreary speech—obviously pure, unadulterated Fletcher—in which he tries to excuse himself. He finishes up with the very clever ruse of saying words to the effect of "If you can't see my argument that the marriage was *unlawful,* the onus is on you to prove that it was *lawful.*"

After that boring speech the play moves on to the glorious scene of Wolsey's downfall. This man has risen from being the son of an Ipswich butcher to become the greatest man in the kingdom, only to be finally disgraced. In magnificent phrases that soar and swoop like an eagle, Shakespeare brilliantly makes us feel sorry for the man. It illustrates the very English attitude of not wanting to kick a man when he is down.

We next see Queen Katharine on her death-bed in a tragic scene in which she sends her blessing to Henry, who has by now





married Anne Boleyn. After this the play might just as well be over and everybody might just as well go home. The fireworks have all fizzled out. In what follows it is up to the actor playing Henry to try to keep the play alive for the next half-hour. Nothing happens of any real interest until Cranmer introduces the infant Elizabeth and prophesies what a wonderful reign she will have. (If you were in—yes; if you were not—no.) All is true? Again we are left with the question-mark. The play finishes with an epilogue which begins, " 'Tis ten to one this play can never please/All that are here." Between them Shakespeare and Fletcher had skated over some very thin ice.

At the end of the play, in Trevor Nunn's production, the assembled characters sang a magnificent "Gloria" beautifully set to music composed by Guy Woolfenden and then left the stage in a stately procession. Only Henry remained in a spotlight, holding the infant Elizabeth who has just been christened. Here I tried to do a most difficult thing. The end of the play is a cry for peace in the time of the future Queen Elizabeth (the First) and in a few brief seconds I, as Henry with no lines, looked into the future, saw the horror that was to come, questioned why, realised the failure of the hope, crashed into the twentieth century and pleaded silently that where the sixteenth century had failed those of the future may succeed.

Many people told me that it was a most moving moment.

I can't say I enjoyed the part except for certain scenes—and, of course, rehearsals. It was wonderful to be working with Peggy Ashcroft again. Unfortunately she had injured her knee and to assist her in the great trial scene, when she had to kneel for a long time on the steps of the throne, a section of the step was decep-





tively replaced with foam rubber. This got over her discomfort but added to mine: when I descended from my throne I was inclined to bounce into the court.

After rehearsal one day as Trevor Nunn and I walked through the theatre gardens towards the church I asked, "How do you think it's coming along?"

"All right—but you are still missing something."

"I know—but what is it?"

"Well, it's not a very helpful thing to say, but you need more —more—more Henry the Eighthness."

So for the rest of the rehearsal period I spent my days trying to develop my Henry the Eighthness.

Now, for my breakfast I always have a bowl of muesli—in fact I have nine different mueslis and I enjoy the moment of deciding which one it shall be—on which I pour rather too much cream. One morning I filled my bowl from the packet but to my horror found no cream in the fridge. I called out to Diana and she explained that the roundsman had omitted to leave the required order. I have only Diana's words for what happened next. Apparently I bellowed in stentorian tones, "Kindly see to it that I am not without cream tomorrow!" and strode off to rehearsal. Diana telephoned the manager of the dairy who explained that the regular roundsman was on holiday, he would do his best to see that we had cream tomorrow but he was having problems with the replacement roundsman. He was somewhat stunned when in desperation Diana cried, "It's all very well for you, but I'm living with Henry the Eighth."

On 9th October—my forty-sixth birthday—I walked on to





the stage for the morning rehearsal and Guy Woolfenden's band struck up "Happy Birthday" instead of the expected "Gloria." This helped to relax our first-night nerves as the play was due to open that very day. Possibly due to my Eighthness exertions, I had developed during the previous ten days a blockage in my eustachian tubes which considerably impaired my hearing—it was the same feeling and pain that I experience when landing in an unpressurised aeroplane—but as I waited in the wings that evening, gummed up, stuck up, glued and padded up, I felt a big glug in my ears and miraculously they cleared just in time for my first entrance. So far so very good but when we came to the trial scene my luck ran out. Peggy knelt at the foot of the steps to my throne and began Katharine's famous speech. Henry's head was turned away to the right, determined not to look at her as he listened and the actor inside his costume marvelled at Peggy's superb performance. On and on she went for eighty or so lines while I remained fixedly glowering away to my right. At the end of her speech Peggy rose from her padded step and swept from the stage to a tumultuous round of applause. I jerked my head round and, almost unheard by the audience, roared after her departing back, "Go thy ways, Kate!" ready to begin my very long, very boring speech. But the violent movement was too much for the spirit-gum and, with a twang, half of my beard came unstuck . . . I had rehearsed certain movements and gestures all of which had to be forgotten because I was forced to speak sixty-eight intricate lines, and then make an exit, with my arms folded while one hand held the beard to my cheek.

In the audience Diana was sitting near our wig-and-beard-

maker Ken ("See a pin and pick it up and all the day you'll have a pin") Lintott, who at the moment of the unsticking rushed from the theatre and wasn't seen again for twenty-four hours. I wished I could have done the same.



# Editor's Introduction to *KING JOHN* and *HENRY VIII*

"Some Sins do bear their Privilege on Earth." With these words of comfort to his guilt-ridden mother, the illicit son of the late Richard the Lionhearted excuses—indeed, commends—the breach of matrimony that resulted in his royal patrimony. In the process he stakes his claim to special status in a realm in which "Legitimation" is more likely to derive from "strong Possession" than from "Right." And without yet realizing it, he embarks on a journey that will expose him to all "the Thorns and Dangers of this World" before it eventually points him to the fulfillment that issues from "true Subjection everlastingly" *(King John,* I.i.261; I.i.248, 39; IV.iii.139, V.vii.105).

The unconventional youth who reassures Lady Faulconbridge at the end of the first scene of *King John* has just received confirmation of the illegitimacy that he and others have long suspected. Most men would have been humiliated by so shameful a disclosure. But not Philip Faulconbridge; he takes pride in the





maculate conception that infused him with the "very Spirit of Plantagenet" (I.i.262). Rather than spurning his mother for the infidelity that led to his birth, this Bastard maintains that she did the correct thing when she yielded herself to the "commanding Love" of a Lord with the prowess to rob "Lions of their Hearts." Under the circumstances, the newly dubbed "Sir Richard" insists, Lady Faulconbridge would have committed a transgression only if she'd responded to her absent husband's prepossessing superior with an intractable "nay" (I.i.264, 268, 275–76).

At the outset the saucy scion of the redoubtable Cordelion bears a disturbing resemblance to the Machiavel who bids the Heavens "stand up for Bastards" in a later Shakespearean treatment of misconception and its consequences. Like the Edmund who defrauds a true-begotten brother, betrays a fond father, and does his worst to make *King Lear* the most heart-rending of all tragedies, the sharp-witted Bastard of *King John* is a figure who understands the role that "tickling Commodity" plays in transactions prompted by personal interest (II.i.572). He shares Edmund's devotion to the vitality of raw "Nature," and he anticipates that realist's cynicism about the fopperies of social and political "Custom" *(King Lear,* I.ii.1–22).

But the closer we look at Shakespeare's portrayal of the embattled reign of King John (1199–1216), the more clearly we perceive that the observer at the center of the drama is not in fact the worshipper of "Gain" he initially proclaims himself to be (II.i.597). In an early indication of how much he differs from Edmund, Philip Faulconbridge cheerfully relinquishes his "Land" to the younger brother to whom it has been bequeathed (I.i.183). Acquiescing to a last will and testament that he might





readily have overridden with an appeal to the laws of primogeniture (I.i.57, 116–29), the Bastard chooses instead to hazard his fortunes on a more exalted inheritance (I.i.151, 163–64). By so doing he garners an appointment as steward to the King, and in the events that ensue he faithfully supports his new patron even when the policies of that uncertain ruler propel others to desert their sovereign and align themselves with England's adversaries.

In due course matters reach a crisis, and the debilitated monarch puts all his power into the Bastard's hands. At the moment when another man of royal blood might have chosen to be "great" in a manner that would advance his own aspirations, the Bastard now dedicates his efforts to "the Ord'ring of this present Time" (V.i.45, 77). He rallies the country's scattered forces in the name of the liege he steadfastly obeys, and after the King's death he kneels in fealty to the youthful Prince who will inherit John's scepter as Henry III. He thereby proves himself to be the very model of a native son: a real patriot who ministers to his country's "Infection" with the only kind of "Physic" that will salve her festering wounds (V.ii.20–21).

By taking the steps necessary to bring England's barons home again and restore the integrity of a hereditary monarchy, the Bastard provides his nation a fresh opportunity to live up to the dictates of her better nature. As he notes in the comment with which the action concludes, if Albion will only "rest but true" to her self in the future, she can redeem her tarnished past and rebuff any would-be "Conqueror" with the temerity to put her noble mettle to the test (V.vii.115, 102, 113).

That a man who came to his post "a little from the Right" (I.i.170) turns out to be the champion who finally preserves a

wayward kingdom from the errors of her designated leadership is but one of the paradoxes in a drama that oscillates with ambiguity. Like the history play that seems to have followed it in the Shakespearean canon, *King John* frequently "sets the Word it self against the Word" *(Richard II,* V.iii.119). Like the tragedy that probes most intently into mankind's puzzled will, it depicts the "Purposes mistook" that proceed from misguided "Indirection" (compare III.i.274–76 with *Hamlet,* V.ii.396 and II.i.63). And like the tragicomedy with the playwright's most eloquent reflections on Original Sin and its implications, it reminds us that "the Web of our Life is of a Mingl'd Yarn, Good and Ill together" *(All's Well That Ends Well,* IV.iii.83–84).

In *King John* as in the work that joins it in this volume of *The Guild Shakespeare,* we are repeatedly cautioned that nobody's perfect and that every institution that arrays itself in the vestments of divinity is subject to exploitation by a humanity that remains corrupt to the core. At the same time we are offered several illustrations of a theology in which no one and no human activity, however debauched, is assumed to be beyond the reach of a gracious "Heav'n" that "has an End in all" *(Henry VIII,* II.i.124).

Though a legitimate offspring of the founder of the Plantagenet dynasty (King Henry II, who had ruled from 1154 to 1189), the title character of *King John* is a magistrate who attained his royal seat by means other than "lineal Entrance" (II.i.85). Had it not been for the "dying Voice" *(Hamlet,* V.ii.368) of the heirless King Richard I (who had presided over England and her territories from 1189 to 1199), the throne bequeathed to King John would have descended instead to the twelve-year-old son of his





older brother Geffrey, who had expired shortly after conceiving Prince Arthur in 1186.

According to Shakespeare's sources, among them Raphael Holinshed's *Chronicles of England, Scotland, and Ireland,* Henry II's widow, Elinor of Aquitaine, was afraid that her grandson's mother Constance would dominate England if the delicate Arthur were given the royal orb. So Elinor shored up baronial support for Richard the Lionhearted's controversial decision to sidestep the traditions of primogeniture and leave the commonwealth in the hands of his younger brother John. To counter Elinor's maneuverings, the aggrieved Constance took her son and his cause to the court of Philip II. In Arthur's behalf the French sovereign declared war on John and sought to win over those erring English subjects who had accepted a "usurper" as God's anointed.

Along with his mother Elinor, the English King we observe in Shakespeare's play admits in private that his youthful nephew carries a stronger birthright to the title. John is thus compelled to maintain his "borrow'd Majesty" not by the sanctions of precedent but by the prudent exercise of an authority bestowed upon him by his regal predecessor (I.i.4, 39, II.i.190–91). His position in the state is inherently problematic, in other words, and in a way that parallels the Bastard's.

Each man claims the identity defined by an irregular will, and in each case the instrument that confers validation is ipso facto the instrument that casts doubt upon the legitimacy of the person thus validated. If the Bastard is a genuine Plantagenet, he can assume that royal surname only by avowing that he was falsely coined. By the same token, if the King is a true ruler, he can wear





the golden round only by disallowing the procedures that normally prescribe dynastic succession (I.i.16). From the viewpoint of those who side with Arthur, the bequest that bars the proper titleholder from his throne has no more legal standing than the parchment by which Sir Robert Faulconbridge has sought to prevent the Bastard from inheriting the property due him notwithstanding the counterfeit involved in his begetting.

Given the play's debate about "whose Right" to Albion's scepter is "worthiest," it is not surprising that the spokesman for a fortress in England's French provinces refuses to arbitrate the "undetermin'd Diff'rences" (II.i.280, 354) of two irreconcilable claimants for his town's fidelity. The dilemma Angiers faces is one that can be resolved only (a) by a battle to see who emerges as the King in deed, or (b) by a settlement that will subordinate one principal—and one principle of adjudication—to the other. A skirmish results, and after the opposing armies have fought to a martial standoff the besieged mayor comes up with a marital solution to the dispute. Hubert's scheme provides no satisfaction for the distraught Constance and her son, but at first it does appear to give John a way to retain his hold on the crown and pacify his challengers from abroad.

As soon as the two sides have ceased their hostilities, however, a Papal Legate appears with word that on an unconnected matter King John has alienated the Church and must either accede to Rome's decrees or face excommunication. In a rejoinder that looks forward to the designation a more assertive sovereign would apply to the English monarchy some three centuries later, John refers to himself as "Supreme Head" of the English branch of Christendom; he goes on to denigrate the haughty "Italian





Priest" who presumes to lord it over a "sacred King," and he tells the Pope's "meddling" messenger to mind his own business (III.i.155, 153, 163). Once John has taken his stand against papal hegemony, Cardinal Pandulph forces King Philip to choose between his newly forged alliance with England and his longstanding ties with the Roman Catholic Church. The French King does so, and what follows is a revived division between Philip and John that leads to further bloodshed and in time to a Gallic invasion of "that white-fac'd Shore / Whose Foot spurns back the Ocean's roaring Tides" (II.i.23–24).

In the immediate aftermath of Pandulph's intervention King John's forces capture Prince Arthur. England's ruler thus finds himself with the wherewithal to be rid of a rival. Taking care to eschew "express Words," the "mis-plac'd John" conveys to his nephew's "Keeper" a dark intent that both men later wish unexecuted (IV.ii.234, III.iii.133, III.ii.74). The result, despite the changes of heart that mitigate John's culpability for a lamentable sequence of "Strange Actions" (III.iii.182), is the King's own ruin.

Persuaded that John has had his nephew murdered, the peers of the realm forsake him for what they regard as the lesser of two evils. In short order they discover that their new-found friend is a true Frenchman, and they rush back to the fold. By now, though, King John is on his deathbed, poisoned by a monk who appears to have been operating as an agent of Rome.

For Protestant Elizabethans, King John was a martyr of the Faith, a proto-Reformer whose defiance of the Pope almost accomplished in the thirteenth century what Henry VIII finally managed, for reasons of his own, in the sixteenth. Shakespeare

offers hints of such a heroic personality, but in the end he qualifies them, at least in part, by displaying John's abasement to the papacy in an "inglorious League" that merely makes a bad situation worse (V.i.65). Interestingly, the drama includes no reference to Magna Carta, the pivotal document that King John was constrained to sign in 1215. But the playwright supplies the background for that granting of parliamentary and civil prerogatives when he emphasizes the monarch's inability to sustain the obedience of his feudal nobility.

In the absence of indisputable evidence for the dating of *King John,* there are some who see it as the source of an anonymous play, *The Troublesome Reign of King John of England,* that appeared in two 1591 quartos. Because of its philosophical and stylistic sophistication, however, *King John* strikes most readers as a work the dramatist could have written only after he had matured his craft by composing several other plays. The usual view is that Shakespeare drew upon *The Troublesome Reign,* along with the same sources he used later for *Henry VIII*—Holinshed's *Chronicles* (1587) and John Foxe's anti-Catholic *Acts and Monuments of the Church* (1563 edition)—and that he came to *King John* around 1594 or 1595. If so, he probably produced this drama shortly after he completed his four plays on the Wars of the Roses *(Henry VI, Parts 1–3,* and *Richard III)* and not long before he commenced a second tetralogy on the origins of those dynastic broils *(Richard II, Henry IV, Parts 1–2,* and *Henry V).* As with *Henry VIII,* the only authoritative text for *King John* is the one to be found in the 1623 First Folio.

In all likelihood the playwright finished his tenth and final play on English history at or near the end of his career. The





earliest recorded performance, when the work appears to have been billed as *All Is True,* was on the afternoon of June 29, 1613. This was not a happy occasion, because a spark from one of the cannons ignited the Globe's thatched roof and burned that matchless theatre to the ground. Whether this calamity occurred during the first public presentation of *Henry VIII* is uncertain. Even if it did, however, the play's allusions to King James and his progeny encourage us to speculate that His Majesty's Players had unveiled their flattering latter-day Holbein previously in some private gallery, possibly at Court in February, when James's daughter Elizabeth married Frederick, the Elector of Palatine.

Frederick was a leader of the Protestant movement, and it would have been fitting for Shakespeare and his company to honor him with a drama about the roots of an English Church with close affinities to the Continental Reformation. Meanwhile it would have been even more fitting for the King's Men to pay tribute to their patron's daughter with a drama prophesying her perpetuation of all the glories of a famous namesake.

In many respects *Henry VIII* is the capstone to Shakespeare's epic cycle of English chronicles. It focuses on responsible kingship as the key to a nation's political and social stability, and it depicts the Tudor-Stuart dynasty the way it saw itself: as God's means of bringing peace, prosperity, and empire to an England whose greatness had reached unparalleled heights during the reigns of Elizabeth and James. At the same time it displays or hints at some of the sixteenth-century tragedies that had made that royal flowering possible: the downfall of Cardinal Wolsey, the divorce and lonely demise of the virtuous Queen Katherine, the martyrdom of Sir Thomas More, and the executions of such





figures as the Duke of Buckingham, Sir Thomas Cromwell, and three of the King's own wives, not least among them the spirited Anne who gave birth to the "Maiden Phoenix" Elizabeth (V.iv.41).

*Henry VIII* allows us to glimpse the spiritual frailities and fleshly proclivities of a title character whose "Conscience" might subject him to blame under less providential auspices (IV.i.47). It shows us how quickly a powerful nobleman could slip from Fortune's summit in a treacherous Renaissance court. But above all else, it essays to make us "believe" in a "chosen Truth" that prevails even when "Mightiness meets Misery" (Prologue, lines 8, 18, 30).

The action is structured around a series of "trials," each of which serves to sift out a character's chaff and highlight the fruits of self-knowledge, humility, and compassion. In the opening moments of the play, Buckingham is snared by Wolsey's machinations. From all indications the eminent Duke is more sinned against than sinning, but as he proceeds to his death he forgives his enemies and prays for the King who has sentenced him. Katherine, another of Wolsey's victims, pleads forcibly in her own defense; but once her fate is settled she resigns herself with patience to the destiny prepared for her. She goes so far as to express pity for her arch-enemy the Cardinal, and before she expires she is granted a beatific vision of a better world to come. As for Wolsey, once he realizes that there is no escape from the noose he has unwittingly devised for himself, he is suffused with penitence. He tells the mournful Cromwell not to grieve for him, because his disgraced master was "never so truly Happy" as he is now that he has "found the Blessedness of being Little"





(III.ii.377, IV.ii.64–66). In each of these instances defeat is swallowed up in a victory of sorts, and the sequence as a whole suggests that even in the often brutal arena of English political intrigue all's well that ends well.

The King himself progresses from a passive instrument of Wolsey's "Policy" to a "dread Sov'reign" who exercises his office with an exemplary combination of strength, sagacity, and sympathy. He regrets the suffering he feels it necessary to inflict upon Katherine, a wife for whom he never utters an unkind word, and he seems to be sincere in his belief that the only thing spurring his desire to annul his marriage is a moral scruple. It takes the King longer than one might expect to see the Lord Chancellor for the schemer he is; but once Henry discovers the incriminating contents of Wolsey's miscarried packet, he acts justly and decisively. By the time he reaches this point in his growth, the King has acquired enough wisdom to merit the Cardinal's comment that the monarch "has gone beyond" his former advisor (III.ii.408). But it is not until he looks down upon the kangaroo court to which Cranmer is subjected that England's sovereign fully manifests himself as "one above 'em" (V.ii.26).

Once this occurs, the King is prepared for the epiphany that constitutes the final cause of *Henry VIII:* the moment at the climax of the drama when a newly winnowed Archbishop Cranmer takes the "Royal Infant" from his liege's hands and speaks as "Heav'n now bids" him (V.iv.18, 16). Shakespeare's audience would have recognized Cranmer as the godfather of the Church of England, the man who was to compile the Book of Common Prayer and define the *via media,* a distinctive "middle way" between the extremes of Catholicism and Protestantism. They'd have known

that Henry was soon to have himself declared the spiritual leader of that Church. But they would also have known that a bloody counter-reformation would intervene before Elizabeth succeeded Katherine's daughter Mary and put her seal upon the ecclesiastical revolution that had been foreshadowed by King John and consummated by Queen Elizabeth's father.

For those who rejected Henry VIII's reordering of the English polity, the King was an infidel. Catholics refused to recognize his divorce from Katherine, and in their eyes the Queen who derived from Anne Bullen (Boleyn) was a usurping bastard. The playwright was by no means unaware of this perspective on the Elizabethan era. But if the concluding lines of *Henry VIII* are any sign of his own stance, it would appear that, however questionable the circumstances of her conception, his "Bird of Wonder" had immortalized herself as "A Pattern to all Princes living with her, / And all that shall succeed" (V.iv.41, 23–24).

As Donald Sinden notes in his delightful Foreword to this volume, there are many who doubt that Shakespeare was the sole progenitor of *Henry VIII.* There is no external basis for this skepticism, however, and the internal, stylistic criteria that have been deployed to test the play's pedigree have proven anything but definitive. Until further evidence comes to light, then, we may perhaps be excused if we prefer to emphasize the artistic integrity of *Henry VIII* and credit the testimony of the compilers of the 1623 First Folio, who published this majestic piece of royal pageantry as an unblotted product of "the Author himself."



# *KING JOHN*