

The Other Play in *Mansfield Park*: Shakespeare's *Henry VIII*

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Although much has been written about the significance of Kotzebue's *Lovers' Vows* in *Mansfield Park*, or of the importance of theatricality and role-playing in *Mansfield Park*,¹ scant attention has been paid to the other play featured in the novel, Shakespeare's last history play, *The Famous History of the Life of King Henry the Eighth; or, All is True* (1613).² The allusion to *King Henry VIII* occurs in Volume III, Chapter 3, after Edmund Bertram and Henry Crawford join Fanny and Lady Bertram after dinner in the drawing-room at Mansfield Park. "Fanny has been reading to me . . .," Lady Bertram tells them.

And sure enough there was a book on the table which had the air of being very recently closed, a volume of Shakespeare.—"She often reads to me out of those books; and she was in the middle of a very fine speech of that man's—What's his name, Fanny?—when we heard your footsteps."

Crawford took the volume. "Let me have the pleasure of finishing that speech to your ladyship," said he. "I shall find it immediately." And by carefully giving way to the inclination of the leaves, he did find it, or within a page or two, quite near enough to satisfy Lady Bertram, who assured him, as soon as he mentioned the name of Cardinal Wolsey, that he had got the very speech. (336-37)

We, however, are not as easily satisfied as Lady Bertram; we doubt Henry has managed to locate the precise speech which Fanny had been reading.

But no matter. Henry proves to be an excellent reader. He "could always light, at will, on the best scene, or the best speeches. . . . The King, the Queen, Buckingham, Wolsey, Cromwell, all were given in turn . . ." (337). In fact, Crawford reads so well that Fanny, despite her determination to pay him no attention, "was forced to listen" until, as Edmund observes, her needle drops from her hands.³ He has literally enchanted her. Only when Crawford's attention turns to Fanny is "the charm" broken (337).

Austen is deliberately vague about "the best speeches" which Henry reads to Lady Bertram, but then her original audience was more likely to be familiar with the play than we are and probably could make a shrewd guess as to which speeches Henry selects. If Austen's catalogue of characters—"The King, the Queen, Buckingham, Wolsey, Cromwell"—represents the order in which Henry reads their speeches, then almost certainly he is skipping around for juicy bits rather than developing the themes of the play chronologically. This is consistent with contemporary taste; it is also consistent with Henry's superficial character that he should go for the set-pieces in order to display his talents to Fanny and to charm her needle from her fingers. The scene thus works wonderfully to reveal Henry's thoughtless, selfish style of courtship and Fanny's vulnerability to his power as an actor if not as a lover—but thus far it might have been effective with any text. In a novel as resonant as *Mansfield Park*, however, Austen's use of *Henry VIII* in this

scene is surely not accidental, nor is the reading of it incidental to the plot (Kirkham 114-16, Kelly, 44-45).

King Henry VIII is Shakespeare's most courtly and masque-like play, more akin to the late romances than to the earlier histories. It consists largely of a sequence of tragic falls from fortune: The Duke of Buckingham, Queen Katherine, Cardinal Wolsey, and, almost-but-not-quite, Archbishop Cranmer, each in turn loses the favour of the King, faces a trial, and suffers exile or death. These characters first defend themselves with spirit, then nobly and heroically accept their fate while forgiving the King who destroys them. The play concludes with a splendid procession celebrating the christening of the infant Princess Elizabeth while Archbishop Cranmer prophesies the coming glories both of her reign and that of her successor James. (Shakespeare, with great political tact, avoids any reference to the unhappy fates of Anne Bullen and Thomas More.)

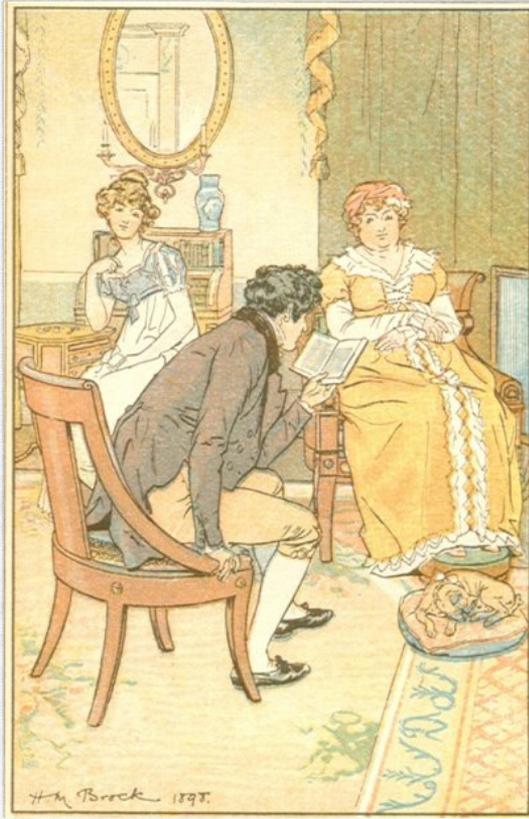
Within the terms of the play, the King's persecutions of Buckingham and Katherine and the ambitious plots of Wolsey prove providential, for they lead to the miraculous birth of the royal babe Elizabeth. Both Queen Katherine and Anne Bullen are presented sympathetically (another example of Shakespeare's extraordinary tact), each of them a victim of the teleology of Tudor history: the virtuous, noble, Catholic Katherine must be unjustly put aside to make way for the virtuous, beautiful, Protestant Anne, in order that England might be led to triumph and glory by Anne's daughter, the saintly Elizabeth, in the next generation.

Modern critics tend to focus on motivation more than pageantry.⁴ Henry, Wolsey, and Anne are complex characters who act from complex motives which are questioned and examined by themselves and others. King Henry, although the eponymous hero whose authority and passions determine the fates of the other prominent characters, is a relatively minor figure whose motives remain ambiguous. On the question of the King's divorce, for example, when Wolsey pleads for the Queen to be permitted to call upon "Scholars allowed freely to argue for her," Henry agrees:

Ay, and the best she shall have; and my favour
 To him that does best, God forbid else.
 . . . O my lord,
 Would it not grieve an able man to leave
 So sweet a bedfellow? But conscience, conscience;
 O 'tis a tender place, and I must leave her. (2.2. 111-13; 139-42)

After the Queen walks out of her trial, Henry refers to her fondly, even sentimentally:

Go thy ways, Kate;
 That man i'the world who shall report he has
 A better wife, let him nought be trusted,
 For speaking false in that . . .
 She's noble born,
 And like her true nobility, she has
 Carried herself towards me. (2.4. 131-34; 139-41)



She was forced to listen.

CHAPTER XXXIII

Unlike his sources, however, Shakespeare sets the scene showing Henry's first meeting with Anne Bullen before that which describes his attack of conscience over his marriage to Katherine. Thus, despite Henry's eloquent speeches about his religious scruples, the audience is left to infer that sexual attraction to Anne might be the real cause of the King's guilty conscience over his technically incestuous marriage to Katherine.

Anne's conscience, too, is subject to ironic comment. After unwittingly attracting the King's favour, Anne expresses pity for the unhappy Queen Katherine, whom she serves as lady-in-waiting, declaring to her fellow courtier, an Old Lady, that Katherine is:

So good a lady that no tongue could ever
Pronounce dishonour of her. . . .

I swear, 'tis better to be lowly born
And range with humble livers in content,
Than to be perked up in a glistening grief
And wear a golden sorrow. . . .

By my troth and maidenhood,
I would not be a queen. (2.3. 3-4; 19-22, 24)

After the Lord Chamberlain enters to announce that the King has bestowed the title of Marchioness of Pembroke and a thousand pounds a year upon Anne, the Old Lady teases her:

There was a lady once ('tis an old story)
That would not be a queen, that would she not
For all the mud in Egypt: have you heard it?

Anne replies:

Make yourself mirth with your particular fancy,
And leave me on't. Would I had no being
If this salutes my blood a jot; it fain't me
To think what follows.
The queen is comfortless, and we forgetful
In our long absence: pray do not deliver
What here y'have heard to her. (2.3. 101-07)

These moral ambiguities, however, did not particularly interest Jane Austen's contemporaries, despite the play's undoubted popularity. In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, *King Henry VIII* was the third most popular Shakespeare play in the London repertoire, performed no fewer than 126 times between 1751 and 1800 (Hogan). The role of Queen Katherine was one of Sarah Siddons's favourites (Kirkham 115). Unfortunately, we have no evidence that Jane Austen saw any of these productions during her visits to London.⁵ Henry Crawford possibly attended a performance of the play, as he tells Edmund: "I once saw Henry the 8th acted.—Or I have heard of it from somebody who did—I am not certain which" (338). John Kemble produced *King Henry VIII* at Drury Lane in 1789 and again during the 1811-12 season; perhaps this latter performance was the one which Henry Crawford either saw "or heard of . . . from somebody who did." If so, we can speculate what it might have been like.

The theatre of Siddons, Kemble and Kean emphasized pageantry and spectacle rather than psychology. Contemporary audiences relished the pathos of the farewell speeches by Buckingham and Wolsey (this latter speech is the one with which Henry Crawford begins his performance at Mansfield Park) and the drama of Queen Katherine's trial; they expected to see elaborate sets and costumes for the staging of the trial scene, the banquet scene, and the processions. They enjoyed the pathos of Queen Katherine's suffering but were less interested in the prophetic conclusion of the play. Samuel Johnson, for instance, claims that 4.2. was "above any other part of Shakespeare's tragedies, and perhaps above any scene of any other poet, tender and pathetic, without gods, or furies, or poisons, or precipices, without the help of romantic circumstances, without improbable sallies of poetical lamentations, and without any throes of tumultuous misery." He adds:

"The play of *Henry the Eighth* is one of those which still keeps possession of the stage by the splendor of its pageantry. . . . Yet pomp is not the only merit of this play. The meek sorrows and virtuous distress of Katharine [*sic*] have furnished some scenes which may be justly numbered among the greatest efforts of tragedy. But the genius of Shakespeare comes in and goes out with Katharine."

Contemporary reviews, by and large, show that Regency audiences wanted boring political dialogue cut and pathos and brilliant spectacle laid thickly on (Kirkham 115; Odell II. 88, 102, 425-27).⁶

The play as performed at Covent Garden, Drury Lane or the Haymarket, therefore, was a far cry from the text as we know it. The eighteenth century, indeed, had none of our respect for textual integrity; actors and producers deleted, added, adapted, and "improved" Shakespeare as it suited their taste and commerce. From the mid-eighteenth century on, performance texts of *Henry VIII* severely cut all of the prologue and epilogue, most of 4.1. (the coronation procession of Anne Bullen), 4.2. (the vision and testimony of the dying Katherine), and up to 300 other lines (Hogan).

Since several of the "acting editions" were published, including Kemble's, Mrs. Inchbald's, and Bell's, Fanny might have been reading aloud from just such a truncated version of the play, but I prefer to think that the "volume of Shakespeare" in Sir Thomas's library is Johnson's rather than one of the acting editions (Odell 15-16). Fanny, of course, has never been to a real theatre (131), so the version of the play she knows is more likely to be Shakespeare's than Kemble's. Nevertheless she would know it well. After all, as Lady Bertram assures Edmund and Henry: "'She often reads to me out of those books'" (336).

Why, then, does Fanny select this particular play at this particular moment to read aloud to her aunt? (I am assuming that the choice of play is Fanny's; it is highly improbable that Lady Bertram, who cannot distinguish one speech from another when Henry begins to read, would have anything as decided as a preference for one play over another. One can almost hear her now: "Fanny, pray, what shall you read me today? You always know my taste.") In Charlotte Brontë's *Shirley*, when Caroline Helstone reads a Shakespeare play aloud with her Belgian cousin Robert Moore, ostensibly to help him perfect his English, her reasons for choosing *Coriolanus* are plain: she fears that her cousin shares Coriolanus's pride and wishes him to avoid Coriolanus's fate. No such didactic motive, however, springs immediately to mind in Fanny's case. Henry Crawford may bear some resemblance to the charming, talented, much-married, murderous Henry VIII, but Fanny explicitly declines to play moral mentor to him as Caroline does to Robert (412), and in any case she has chosen this play to read to Lady Bertram, not to Henry Crawford. She sets it aside when he approaches the drawing room; by the time he enters, she is silent. Surely, then, Fanny was indulging her own taste and mood when she selected *Henry VIII*. What, then, draws her to this play?

Margaret Kirkham has suggested that Fanny identifies with the wronged Queen Katherine, an exemplar of gentle, dignified obedience who nevertheless refuses to bend her conscience to suit her husband her King, much as the normally tractable Fanny refuses to act in *Lovers' Vows* or to wed Henry Crawford despite the urgings of the Bertrams (116). Their situations are not entirely parallel, of course: Queen Katherine is pressed to consent to the annulment of a marriage, while Fanny is exhorted to undertake one. Never-

theless both characters share the same steadfast moral courage in their spirited resistance to patriarchal authority.

In addition to finding similarities between the characters and situations of Fanny and Queen Katherine, Kirkham argues that several scenes in *Mansfield Park* parallel or echo scenes in *Henry VIII*. She cites the “trial” of Fanny by Sir Thomas in Volume II, Chapter 1 and the mock-heroic “Solemn procession, headed by Baddely, of tea-board, urn, and cake-bearers” which delivers Fanny from Crawford’s persecution at the conclusion of Volume III, Chapter 3 (115-16), as allusions to the trial and procession scenes in Shakespeare’s play.

I’d like to suggest some further parallels. In Shakespeare’s play, King Henry’s adulterous passion for Anne Bullen begins when he is masked, literally playing a role. In *Mansfield Park*, of course, sexual mischief begins with masks: Henry Crawford and Maria Bertram, Edmund Bertram and Mary Crawford all experience the erotic possibilities of role-playing while rehearsing *Lovers’ Vows*.

In Shakespeare’s play, moreover, nobles give way to commoners, the old order to the new: thus the noble Duke of Buckingham is replaced by the plebian Wolsey, royal Katherine by commoner Anne, Catholic Wolsey by Protestant Cranmer. In Austen’s novel the poor Portsmouth cousins, Fanny and Susan Price, replace the wayward Bertram daughters at Mansfield Park, and Aunt Norris, like Wolsey, falls from favour as trusted advisor. As well, characters like Maria Bertram and Mary Crawford must fall from fortune and favour in order to pave the way for Fanny’s eventual triumph, just as the Princess Elizabeth’s blessed birth is a consequence of the falls of Buckingham, Katherine and Wolsey.

Moreover, Fanny, although scarcely like the sexually dangerous Anne Boleyn of popular history, is not unlike the passive, modest, even saintly Anne Bullen of Shakespeare’s play, who neither seeks nor purports to welcome her good fortune in attracting the King’s favour. Other characters beside Henry attest to Anne’s beauty and virtue. Wolsey, for instance, even as he plots against Anne, claims:

What though I know her virtuous
And well-deserving? yet I know her for
A spleeny Lutheran, and not wholesome to
Our cause. . . . (3.2. 97-100)

And a “Gentleman” describing Anne’s coronation cries:

Heaven bless thee!
Thou has the sweetest face I ever looked on.
Sir, as I have a soul, she is an angel; (4.1. 42-44)

If Fanny resembles Anne in attracting the unsought passions of an unstable Henry, then Austen’s Henry Crawford shares certain obvious characteristics with Shakespeare’s Henry VIII, whose namesake he—just possibly—may be. Neither Henry is capable of faithful love. They admire virtue but lack the self-knowledge and self-discipline to acquire it. Crawford, like King Henry, expresses tenderness for the woman whom he injures, subjecting Fanny to “a grievous imprisonment of body and mind” in the

drawing room at Mansfield which parallels King Henry's imprisonment of Queen Katherine. This "imprisonment" occurs after the play-reading when Henry and Edmund shift the topic of their discussion from reading Shakespeare aloud to reading sermons. Henry acknowledges that his desire to preach is motivated by vanity, not vocation: "I must have a London audience. I could not preach, but to the educated; to those who were capable of estimating my composition. And I do not know that I should be fond of preaching often . . . ; it would not do for a constancy'" (341). He urges Fanny to explain her "shake of the head" until she tells him, "'Perhaps, Sir, . . . I thought it was a pity you did not always know yourself as well as you seemed to do at that moment'" (343).

Self-knowledge is Shakespeare's great theme in *Henry VIII* as much as it is Austen's in *Mansfield Park*. Wolsey assures Cromwell after his fall that he is now

Never so truly happy, my good Cromwell,
I know myself now, and I feel within me
A peace above all earthly dignities,
A still and quiet conscience. (3.2. 377-80)

After Wolsey's death, Queen Katherine's servant Griffith tells her: "His overthrow heaped happiness upon him; For then, and not till then, he felt himself" (4.2. 64-65). Fortunate indeed is the fall which brings self-knowledge.

In *Mansfield Park*, only those who are conscious "of being born to struggle and endure" achieve this self-knowledge (473). Fanny, unlike the Crawfords or her cousins, spends many bitter hours in her chilly East room examining her conscience. She is not, as Henry Crawford believes, naturally good; rather, she struggles for her moral status. Henry Crawford, deeply attracted to Fanny's "touches of the angel," would rather marry virtue than achieve it through self-examination and self-discipline. Several times he tries to make Fanny responsible for his conscience, a responsibility which she roundly rejects:

"When you give me your opinion, I always know what is right. Your judgment is my rule of right."

"Oh, no!—do not say so. We have all a better guide in ourselves, if we would attend to it, than any other person can be." (412)

The Crawfords never learn this lesson, but young Tom does: "He had suffered, and he had learnt to think, two advantages that he had never known before" (462). Sir Thomas, too, comes to "acknowledge the advantages of early hardship and discipline" (473). By the conclusion of *Mansfield Park*, Fanny and her siblings have brought "true merit and true love" to Mansfield, like the royal infant Elizabeth in Shakespeare's play, of whom Archbishop Cranmer predicts in the final scene:

God shall be truly known; and those about her
From her shall read the perfect ways of honour,
And by those claim their greatness, not by blood. (5.5. 37-39)

Fanny, like Gloriana, becomes the moral exemplar in whom "those around her . . . read the perfect ways of honour," and whose claim to "greatness" or worldly advancement depends upon her moral struggle and achievement, not her "blood."

No wonder, then, that Fanny chooses to read a play which celebrates the virtues of conscience and self-knowledge, which portrays women suffering from patriarchal authority, and which predicts the triumph of female merit over birth and fortune. She can identify with the wronged, rejected Queen Katherine, the sexually vulnerable Anne Bullen, and the triumphant Princess Elizabeth. In the drawing room at Mansfield Park, Fanny must find solace where she can, and she finds it in Shakespeare's *King Henry VIII*.

NOTES

- ¹ See, for instance, Gary Kelly, "Reading Aloud in *Mansfield Park*," *Nineteenth-Century Literature*, 37 (1982) 29-49; Joseph Litvak, "The Infection of Acting: Theatricals and Theatricality in *Mansfield Park*," *ELH*, 53 (1986) 331-55; Dvora Zelicovici, "The Inefficacy of *Lovers' Vows*," *ELH*, (1983) 531-40; Elaine Jordan, "Pulpit, Stage, and Novel: *Mansfield Park* and Mrs. Inchbald's *Lovers' Vows*," *Novel*, 20 (1987) 138-48; C. Knatchbull Bevan, "Personal Identity in *Mansfield Park*: Forms, Fictions, Role-Play, and Reality," *SEL*, 27 (1987) 595-608; Penelope Gay, "Theatricals and Theatricality in *Mansfield Park*," *Sydney Studies in English*, 13 (1987-88) 61-73; Syndy McMillen Conger, "Reading *Lovers' Vows*: Jane Austen's Reflections on English Sense and German Sensibility," *Studies in Philology*, 85 (1988) 92-113; William Galperin, "The Theatre at *Mansfield Park*: From Classic to Romantic Once More," *Eighteenth-Century Life*, 16 (1992) 247-71; and Margaret Kirkham, *Jane Austen: Feminism and Fiction* (New York: Methuen, 1986), 93-98, 110-12. Kirkham also gives a full account of Austen's allusions to *King Henry VIII*, 114-16.
- ² This is the play which notoriously caused the Globe Theatre to burn to the ground on 29 June 1613 when a cannon fired off stage (possibly during 2.4.) ignited the thatch.
- ³ Fanny's dropping needle is echoed by Captain Wentworth's dropping pen in Vol. III, Chapter XI, of *Persuasion*.
- ⁴ See, for example, Peter Rudnytsky, "Henry VIII and the Deconstruction of History," *Shakespeare Survey*, 43 (1990) 43-57; or Frank V. Cespedes, "'We Are One in Fortunes': The Sense of History in *Henry VIII*," *ELH*, 10 (1980) 413-38.
- ⁵ Kirkham suggests that Austen almost certainly saw *Henry VIII* at the Theatre Royal in Bath in March 1803 (112).
- ⁶ Surely some Regency theatre-goers found piquancy in a play about a monarch who sets aside a first wife in order to marry a second. In 1785 George IV, while still a young prince, secretly married a Catholic widow, Mary Anne Fitzherbert, in defiance of the Act of Succession. In 1795, however, he agreed to marry his Protestant cousin, Princess Caroline of Brunswick, as the price for having his debts paid. The marriage was not a success, and the Prince and Princess of Wales separated. Jane Austen took the Queen's part in this royal scandal, which raged while she was writing *Mansfield Park*: "I suppose all the World is sitting in Judgement upon the Princess of Wales' Letter. Poor woman, I shall support her as long as I can because she *is* a Woman, & because I hate her Husband. . . ." Letter 78.1: To Martha Lloyd, 16 February 1813, in *Jane Austen's Letters*, ed. R. W. Chapman, 2nd ed. (London: Oxford University Press, 1952).

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- Bradbrook, Frank W. *Jane Austen and her Predecessors*. Cambridge University Press, 1966.

I know myself now, and I feel within me
 A peace above all earthly dignities,
 A still and quiet conscience.

Cromwell, I charge thee, fling away ambition,
 By that sin fell the angels; how can man then,
 The image of his maker, hope to win by it?
 Love thyself last, cherish thou hearts that hate
 thee;

Corruption wins not more than honesty.
 Still in thy right hand carry gentle peace
 To silence envious tongues, Be just, and fear not;
 Let all the ends thou aim'st at be thy country's,
 thy God's and truth's; then if thou fall'st, O
 Cromwell,

Thou fall'st a blessed martyr.
 Serve the king; and prithee lead me in:
 There take an inventory of all I have,
 To the last penny; 'tis the king's. My robe,
 and my integrity to heaven, is all
 I dare now call mine own. O Cromwell,
 Cromwell,

Had I but served my God with half the zeal
 I served my king, he would not in age
 Have left me naked to mine enemies.

V. iv.: Cranmer's Prophecy at the Christening of Princess Elizabeth

This royal infant—heaven still move about her!—
 Though in her cradle, yet now promises
 Upon this land a thousand thousand blessings,
 Which time shall bring to ripeness. She shall be
 (But few now living can behold that goodness)
 A pattern to all princes living with her,
 And all that shall succeed. Saba was never
 More covetous of wisdom and fair virtue
 Than this pure soul shall be. All princely graces
 That mould up such a mighty piece as this is,
 With all the virtues that attend the good,
 Shall still be doubled on her. Truth shall nurse
 her,

Holy and heavenly thoughts still counsel her;
 She shall be loved and feared. Her own shall bless
 her,

Her foes shall shake like a field of beaten corn,
 And hang their heads with sorrow. Good grows
 with her;

In her days, every man shall eat in safety
 Under his own vine what he plants, and sing
 The merry songs of peace to all his neighbours.

† The color image has replaced the original black and white image for the on-line edition of this essay. – C. Moss, JASNA Web Site Manager