Melville’s Measures

Henry VIII by William Shakespeare and John Fletcher, directed by Amy Hodge (2022),
Performance Review

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Factual information about the show

1 Performers
2 Cardinal Wolsey: Jamie Ballard
3 Surrey / Cromwell: Esmonde Cole
4 Princess Mary: Natasha Cottriall
5 Anne Bullen: Janet Etuk
6 King Henry VIII: Adam Gillen
7 Woman I / Patience / Elizabeth: Debbie Korley
8 Chamberlain: Kevin McMonagle
9 Norfolk / Sands: Baker Mukasa
10 Buckingham / Cardinal Campeius: Jonah Russell
11 Woman 2 / Hope: Anna Savva
12 Queen Katherine: Bea Segura
13 Musicians
14 Percussion: Joley Cragg
15 Narrator / Singer: Genevieve Dawson
16 Double bass: Nina Harries
17 Accordion: Garance Louis
When Shakespeare and Fletcher’s *Henry VIII* was first performed in 1613, Elizabeth I had been dead for ten years but her memory still suffused English political and cultural life. It is a rather interesting coincidence that the year 2022, that saw the revival of *Henry VIII* at the Globe, was also a year marked by celebrations in honour of the other Queen Elizabeth, first with the Platinum Jubilee and then with the tributes following her recent passing. The opening night of Amy Hodge’s production coincided with the week of the national festivities marking Elizabeth II’s 70 years of reign. Cranmer’s prophetic celebration of Elizabeth I at the end of the play must have had already some sort of renewed meaningfulness. “She shall be to the happiness of England / An aged princess; many days shall see her / And yet no day without a deed to crown it” (5.4.65-67), Cranmer claims about his goddaughter. In 2022, after Elizabeth II had managed to reign even longer than her namesake and had been celebrated in her own way, these words could easily be applied to the present time. Cranmer’s speech focused as much on Elizabeth as it did on King James VI/I, and in June 2022 it already heralded the questions regarding the future King Charles III.

Shakespeare’s play focuses on truth, deception, justice and manipulation, and Amy Hodge decided to broach them from a gendered point of view: she wanted to “give space to the female voice”, to chart “the journeys of Katharine, Mary and Anne within Henry’s sphere” and to examine “how they navigate a world which men hold the key to”. At odds with the current trend of gender-blind casting, Hodge chose to have every actor match the gender of his/her character. The stage was thus crowded with men so as to visually represent women being outnumbered and their impotence.

The trial of Katherine of Aragon (Bea Segura) during which she stood all alone against an army of English men trying to disown her exacerbated her position as a female stranger among a male-dominated English court. She was forced to harangue the audience with a detectable Spanish accent emphasizing her enduring otherness amidst the crowd of English characters and international audience. The choice of a Spanish actress to play the role of Katherine enabled the director to address issues that are only suggested on paper. When Cardinal Wolsey starts addressing her in Latin she claims her desire to speak in English only: “O, good my lord, no Latin! / I am not such a truant since my coming / As not to know the language I have lived in” (3.1.46-48). In the Globe production, if Katherine’s English was flawless grammatically speaking, showing her commitment to blend in among the Englishmen, the Spanish accent of Bea Segura’s
Katherine, as well as the Spanish words she occasionally let out, testified to her impossibility to fit in both another country and in a male-dominated world, as she claims herself during the trial: “I am a most poor woman and a stranger, / Born out of your dominions, having here / No judge indifferent nor no more assurance / of equal friendship and proceeding” (2.1.18-21). This echoed contemporary British policy of creating a hostile environment which was aggravated by Brexit: the uncomfortable reaction of the audience confirmed Katherine’s treatment felt a bit too close to home, especially in a city as cosmopolitan as London is. If Katherine is unlucky enough to be doubly estranged because of her foreign and female status, the introduction of Anne Boleyn’s (Janet Etuk) character, but especially her fate and that of her daughter in the face of Henry VIII’s (Adam Gillan) obsession to father a male heir, showed that the real issue was not Katherine’s nationality but her gender.

If Henry’s tyrannical political behaviour is subtly suggested in the original script, this production toned down Henry’s arbitrary rule and political mood-swings. The emphasis was on his tyrannical behaviour towards women and obsession with fathering a male heir. From the moment Henry heard that Buckingham (Jonah Russell) was allegedly plotting to seize the throne if the king was to die without any male issue Henry became obsessed with having a son. While the original script does not mention the gender of this potential heir, it was modified in Hodge’s production so as to fit its particular interest in the politics of gender.

Figure 1

Anna Savva as Hope, Adam Gillen as King Henry VIII
Photographer: Marc Brenner

The obsession with a conquering masculinity was first expressed during Cardinal Wolsey’s (Jaimie Bullard) banquet which quickly turned into an orgy in which a gigantic golden phallus-shaped balloon became the centre of attention. Henry sat on it so as to show his power originating from his status as a man, as well as his desire to produce an heir. More generally, it referred to the patriarchal framework of monarchy. Yet this ruling masculinity kept being challenged as shown in the parallel use of plastic
pink balloons for Elizabeth’s baby shower (fig. 1). Henry’s frantic piercing of the balloons conveyed his frustrated need to control his succession. His visible disappointment at the birth of Elizabeth strongly contrasted with the atmosphere of general rejoicing conveyed in Cranmer’s original words, spoken by Cromwell in this production.

In this particular scheme of fathering a male heir, Anne was clearly shown to be used for her ability to bear children. From a black and white costume when she first met Henry, she ended up wearing a long purple gown, the colour of royalty and power worn by Henry and his court, suggesting her integration into the king’s project of producing a male heir. This incorporation was all the more striking as she progressively took off her original costume while discussing the possibility of marrying the king with her servant Patience (Debbie Korley). Anne Boleyn’s sartorial dynamics contrasted with Katherine’s who was progressively stripped from her original purple clothes and wore just a sleeping gown in her final scene (fig. 2). Her agonising, her religious devotion and the choice of a plain white fabric echoed Cardinal Wolsey’s downfall: both evoked executions rather than a peaceful passing. Katherine was executed because of her gender, Wolsey because of his religious politics.

Figure 2

Bea Segura as Queen Katharine
Photographer: Marc Brenner

In Hodge’s production, Henry’s craving for a male heir intended to represent the fate of women in this story and in history in general. Hodge focused on Henry’s dismissal of women much more than on Wolsey’s disgrace, as evidenced by the addition of the character of Mary (Natasha Cottriall), Henry and Katherine’s daughter, who was hardly mentioned in the original quarto (fig. 3). She roamed about the stage throughout the play, like a ghost already long forgotten, witnessing her mother’s humiliating downfall. This added part enabled the audience to both draw a parallel between and oppose the two sisters. If they are both shown being dismissed by their father because of their gender, the final scene where an adult version of Elizabeth (Debbie Korley) walks the
stage in a golden gown bearing the symbols of royalty – the sceptre and the orb – testifies to the contrast existing between the two queens in the collective imagination.

Figure 3

Natasha Cottriall as Princess Mary
Photographer: Marc Brenner

Besides the discussion of masculine rule and the wedges it drives within a fragile sorority, the production subtly alluded to the question of territorial and religious otherness through Katherine, but mainly through Cardinal Wolsey. His ending was particularly chilling as the audience was urged to heckle and did it gladly. While Shakespeare and Fletcher remained nuanced vis-à-vis the Cardinal, Amy Hodge chose to plainly expose his crimes for the audience to identify him as a corrupt Catholic and an enemy of the crown. This performance insisted on the antagonism between Protestants and Catholics, in order maybe to better hint at an inevitable break with Rome. This was first visually represented by the choice of colours in costume. While Cardinal Wolsey, Cromwell (Esmond Cole) and Campeius (Jonah Russell) wore red robes (fig. 4), all the other characters – to the exception of the two ladies standing for the two gentlemen in this performance – wore purple clothes, the colour of Henry’s royalty, as well as that of the official visual of Elizabeth II’s Platinum Jubilee. In addition to this chromatic contrast which suggested both Wolsey’s attachment to the office of Cardinal and his submission to papal authority before that of the king, Wolsey was very clearly shown plotting against his enemies. More striking was his bribing of the Chamberlain to have Buckingham arrested, while in the original text it is only suggested. His licentiousness was also displayed during his banquet which quickly turned into an orgy, demonstrating the disastrous influence of the Catholics on the English court. This foreign corruption peaked with Wolsey and Campeius’s suggested physical abuse of Katherine. Towards the end of the play, he appeared one last time after his downfall in a particularly moving scene during which he progressively undressed, giving up all the riches and benefits of his religious office. However, this scene, far from nuancing the
Amy Hodge's production gave more importance to depicting women's stories than to discussing matters relating to history. The subtitle of Shakespeare's *Henry VIII* is "all is true" suggesting in itself a concern regarding truthfulness in recounting history: Hodge's production had decided to be true to history in the making and showed the relevance of an old text to discuss current pressing issues of tolerance and exclusion. In the Globe's theatre yard, two raised platforms had been installed in the middle of the groundlings. On them were inflatable thrones in the shape of a teddy bear. Before the play had even begun, two female attendants (Debbie Korley and Anne Savva) – the two gentlemen in the original play – took a seat on those thrones amidst the crowd. They watched the play unfold from these platforms and also participated in the action. In the original script, these characters are men. In Hodge's production they were women in a dual position of spectators and actresses of a gendered history. Whether on their throne or on the stage, they observed and listened very closely to the characters' conversations. Just like the audience, they appeared invisible to the characters who shared their inner thoughts with those two ladies who could, throughout the play, gossip about the events taking place. As they worked as shoe-shine girls for Norfolk and Surrey, the latter did not seem to care about their presence and openly discussed the king's divorce, mentioning his desire to marry Anne Boleyn. The same actresses later played the roles of the allegorical character of Hope and Patience, respectively Anne's and Katherine's servants, with whom both the Queens did not hesitate to share her worries for one, her hopes for the other. The continuity thus created between those two set of roles – the two ladies and the two servants – because they were played by the same actresses enabled to see the servant characters as witnesses of history rather than participants. The mirror held up to the actual audience was a subtle incentive to
critical agency. Yet the production may have failed to make this performative as shown by the spectator's merciless reactions to Wolsey's pathetic exit.

NOTES

1. Director Amy Hodge in the programme of her *Henry VIII* production

ABSTRACTS


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**Keywords:** early modern English drama, William Shakespeare, John Fletcher, Globe Theatre, history play, gendered reading of history, Elizabeth I, Elizabeth II

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