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## **‘Sick interpreters’: Criticizing Historical Adaptations of Cardinal Wolsey in Shakespeare’s *Henry VIII***

*This article examines the ways in which Shakespeare’s Henry VIII self-consciously and thematically reflects on representing the historical Cardinal Wolsey onstage. In so doing the play rewrites history by moving away from the type-cast images in chronicles and earlier Jacobean history plays that represent the cardinal as pure evil. Shakespeare furthermore invites audience members to reflect on the fact that the characters represented were once England’s real-life leaders, who carefully presented and protected their image, just as the leaders of Shakespeare’s own day did in the ‘here and now’ of 1613. The following case study explores Shakespeare’s criticism of the act of ‘interpreting’ historical figures, including his own act.*

On 2 July 1613 Sir Henry Wotton reported in a famous letter to Sir Edmund Bacon that the Globe theatre had burned down that week during a performance of *All Is True*, ‘representing some principal pieces of the reign of Henry 8’, performed by the King’s Players.<sup>1</sup> Wotton described this play, better known as Shakespeare’s *Henry VIII* (1613),<sup>2</sup> as a performance of ‘extraordinary circumstances of pomp and majesty’.<sup>3</sup> He explicitly mentioned the costumes actors wore for the roles of the knights of the order, and the guards, and noted the apparent realism in the clothing details, and ritual elements, whilst also declaring them to be somewhat excessive: ‘sufficient in truth within a while to make greatness very familiar, if not ridiculous’.<sup>4</sup> As with many recordings of plays and dramatic events that scholars use as eye-witness accounts, this one does not necessarily tell us what we want to know; we cannot even be certain that Wotton had actually been present at the Globe when the accident took place. Possibly, he was simply conveying news that he had heard, because he thought that it would interest Sir Edmund (‘Now, to let matters of state sleep, I will entertain you at the present with what has happened this week at the Bank’s side’).<sup>5</sup> Indeed, Wotton strikes a

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tone of perhaps deliberate vagueness when it comes to detail. For example, when describing the particulars of the moment during which the fire broke out, Wotton refers to those watching this disaster happen using the phrase 'their eyes', which appears to belong to unnamed agents.<sup>6</sup> We may assume that he means the spectators of 'the show', or that perhaps he includes the actors on stage watching the 'masque', as it was performed for both onstage and offstage audiences. The phrase may also simply indicate all persons present at the Globe when the fire broke out. Furthermore, Wotton does not mention who thought it was 'but an idle smoke' and also does not indicate who 'shot off' the 'chambers'.<sup>7</sup>

Wotton, when noting casualties, strikes a tone of light-heartedly anecdotal commentary, which reads as the stuff of comedy: 'only one man had his breeches set on fire, that would perhaps have broiled him, if he had not by the benefit of a provident wit put it out with bottle ale'.<sup>8</sup> Wotton (if he was indeed present at the performance) clearly relished the theatrics of spectators and their ale bottles, and the description of the spreading fire blurs the reality of the 'real action' of the fire by drawing it into the realms of fictionality: Wotton presents the fire to have occurred in the 'here and now' of Wolsey's house, as well as on the stage that is part of the audience's reality, as a vehicle for fictitious narrative. Wotton writes:

Now King Henry making a masque at the Cardinal Wolsey's house, and certain chambers being shot off at his entry, some of the paper, or other stuff, wherewith one of them was stopped, did light on the thatch, where being thought at first but an idle smoke, and their eyes more attentive to the show, it kindled inwardly, and ran round like a train, consuming within less than an hour the whole house to the very ground.<sup>9</sup>

As Wotton does not distinguish between the 'inside' and the 'outside' of the scripted theatrical event, 'Wolsey's house' signifies as a place that is both an imagined representation of a historically real, or real historical place, as well as a theatrical invention. Indeed, Wotton records that the fire took place in 'Cardinal Wolsey's house', but also mentions 'the thatch' in clear reference to the Globe. Furthermore, his reference to the 'whole house' having been burned to the ground indicates the theatre. The multi-layered allusion to 'Wolsey's house', as Wotton communicates it, betrays an understanding of the event of the fire as a spectacle, caused by special effects gone wrong, taking place on set as well as in the fictional realm of the play, and leading to comic, almost theatrical, real-life situations occurring at the location normally reserved for fiction. Ironically, spectacle-making, which Wolsey uses in *Henry VIII* to manifest himself politically,

to attempt to buy the king's favour, and to exercise control, but which the play also criticizes, would lead to a drama in the non-theatrical sense of the word in the world outside the play. Was Wotton innocently recording the scene in the play during which the fire started, or was he aware of this irony when he wrote his account, perhaps attributing historical significance to the suggestion that the event of the cardinal's masque should indirectly be held responsible for the burning down of the Globe theatre?<sup>10</sup> If he was aware of the irony, was Wotton's opinion informed by his prior knowledge or preconceptions of the actual late cardinal, or his prior knowledge of Shakespeare's 'character Wolsey'? If the latter were the case, the premature ending of the play would have meant that first-time viewers would not have been given the opportunity to understand fully the complexity of Shakespeare's Wolsey. Indeed, this article will argue that where other late Elizabethan and early Jacobean history plays presented their audiences with a type-cast villain and his resulting downfall, Shakespeare's *Henry VIII*, whilst informed by these sources for its plot development, is actually more critical of Wolsey's historic characterisation. Indeed, Shakespeare self-consciously and thematically reflects on representing the historical Cardinal Wolsey onstage, so that he finds himself rewriting history by moving away from the type-cast images in chronicles and earlier Jacobean history plays that represent the cardinal as pure evil. At the same time Shakespeare invited audience members to reflect on the fact that the characters represented were once England's real-life leaders, who carefully presented and protected their image, just as the leaders of Shakespeare's own day did in the 'here and now' of 1613. Finally, I will observe that Shakespeare criticizes the act of 'interpreting' historical figures, such as his own.

Martin Wiggins has observed that the year 1601 saw a fashion for early Tudor history drama, including a number of 'Wolsey plays', such as the lost plays *The Rising of Cardinal Wolsey* (1601), written by Henry Chettle in collaboration with Anthony Munday, Michael Drayton, and Wentworth Smith,<sup>11</sup> and its prequel, *Cardinal Wolsey* (1601), written by Chettle almost immediately after.<sup>12</sup> The Admiral's Men performed both plays at the Fortune. The character Wolsey also features in the anonymous *Thomas Lord Cromwell* (1602),<sup>13</sup> which the Lord Chamberlain's Men performed, probably at the Globe. Wiggins notes that where some of these plays, such as *Cardinal Wolsey*, list Henry VIII as one of the 'other characters' in the *dramatis personae*, the late king was likely not represented onstage, although his father, Henry VII, was.<sup>14</sup> The death of Elizabeth I in 1603, which brought about the accession of James I, and the end of the Tudor line, allowed for representations of the late Tudor king, as long as they were complimentary to the current monarch, and endorsed the family legacy.<sup>15</sup> Both

Shakespeare's *Henry VIII* and Samuel Rowley's *When You See Me, You Know Me* (1605),<sup>16</sup> therefore, would have been innovative in their staging of representations of King Henry. Mark Rankin has explored the mechanisms of offering counsel through these two Jacobean plays, and has observed that both Rowley and Shakespeare represented Henry VIII as 'a dynastic predecessor to Stuart rule'.<sup>17</sup> Shakespeare and Rowley framed this character's actions and utterances so as to appeal to the 'interests and agendas' of both James I and his son and heir Henry Frederick.<sup>18</sup> The performance of kingship onstage as a means of offering counsel or seeking royal favour has been extensively studied,<sup>19</sup> and in the context of Jacobean plays on early Tudor history any dramatic representation of the current monarch's predecessors is reflective of the current monarch rather than of the deceased, represented sovereign. The dramatic representation of non-royal historical personages who lived under the Tudors, however, especially courtiers and politicians, was less clear-cut. Spectators would have brought to the theatre their preconceptions about the historical cardinal, informed by the chronicles, for example, by Edward Hall,<sup>20</sup> Raphael Holinshed,<sup>21</sup> John Foxe's *Acts and Monuments*,<sup>22</sup> George Cavendish's *The Life of Cardinal Wolsey*,<sup>23</sup> or the poetic account of Wolsey's life by Thomas Storer,<sup>24</sup> and by earlier performances that dramatized Tudor events featuring fictional representations of the cardinal. These were not the only factors informing spectators' understanding of the character. As a letter from Richard Hadsor to Sir Robert Cecil from 1602 shows, some political decisions Wolsey made during his lifetime could, seven decades later, still monetarily or hereditarily impact the descendants of the cardinal's contemporaries, meaning that those affected could either have a markedly more positive or negative view of the historical cardinal, which they would bring along to the theatre. In his letter, Hadsor refers to Henry Chettle's *Cardinal Wolsey* when relating the current earl of Kildare's attempts to retrieve the lands that were taken from his grandfather — Thomas FitzGerald, the 10th earl of Kildare — following his attainder, that is, legal death.<sup>25</sup> Paulina Kewes has observed that Hadsor represented the dramatic performance of Kildare's attainder for treason 'as if it were a factual report'.<sup>26</sup> Hadsor writes:

If the title should be denied him, there are other men of his family that would pretend title, not only to the honour, but also to lands of great value which fell to the Crown in England and Ireland upon the attainder of his grandfather 'by the policy of Cardinal Wolsey as it [is] set forth and played now upon the stage in London'; alleging that they have an ancient title before the attainder, which would not be

convenient for her Majesty to be called in question, the same lands being disposed of [...] — 25 July, 160[2], *torn off*.<sup>27</sup>

Kewes reminds the reader that Chettle, when writing the play, relied on Raphael Holinshed's *Chronicles of England, Scotlande and Irelande* (1577), and consequently adopted Richard Stanyhurst's account of recent Irish history in Holinshed's work, as well as the latter's bias in favouring Kildare and criticizing Wolsey.<sup>28</sup> Hadsor, in his letter, did not share this anti-Wolsey bias, as he pronounces himself in favour of the Crown having taken the Kildare lands.<sup>29</sup> Hadsor treated the plot as historical, but the interpretation of the Wolsey character as less so.

An eyewitness account from 1628 pertaining to Shakespeare's *Henry VIII* reveals the likelihood that the play invited spectators to reflect on the historical reality of the staged depictions of leaders from the relatively recent past, and conceptually connected them to the leaders of their own day. The account also reveals that spectators were watching one another's responses to the play, suggesting that the contents would have invited a range of responses, of which some would have been more favourable than others in the play's performance context. In this letter Robert Gell writes to Sir Martyn Stuteville that the duke of Buckingham, who was also present at the performance, watched the play until the scene in which the fictional representation of his historical namesake met his end. Gell commented that: 'Some say, he should rather have seen the fall of Cardinall Woolsey, who was a more lively type of himself, having governed this kingdom 18 yeares, as he hath done 14'.<sup>30</sup> The spectator Buckingham referred to in the letter was George Villiers, first duke of Buckingham, who was given the title in 1623 by King James I.<sup>31</sup> He was no blood relation of the historical Edward Stafford, third duke of Buckingham, whose title was lost to the Stafford family along with his death, and who found himself represented on Shakespeare's stage. The duke of Buckingham apparently found himself more dissatisfied with the dishonour inflicted on the dramatic representation of his titular predecessor, which indirectly impacted upon his own honour, than with Shakespeare's plot choices with regards to the Wolsey character.

The eyewitness accounts above suggest that spectators attending a performance of *Henry VIII* could bring to the theatre their preconceptions about the historical leaders represented in the play, due to their historical knowledge about these characters obtained from the chronicles, histories, or fictional representations of the cardinal. Political decisions Wolsey made during his lifetime still impacted some spectators, and others keenly watched the responses of contemporary leaders as they watched the downfall of their titular predecessors.

The following section discusses how the Wolsey plays *Thomas Lord Cromwell* and Rowley's *When You See Me You Know Me* navigated spectators' preconceptions about the Wolsey character represented onstage by downplaying the plays' historical value and pushing the work into the realms of fiction. Shakespeare's play, however, sought to allow historical understanding of those parts of the play invested in character-description, while signposting the fictional nature of those parts to do with plot decisions.

*Thomas, Lord Cromwell* features Wolsey as a minor character who is charged with plotting against the state. Cromwell's reflection on Wolsey's death helps to place the former politically and in terms of loyalty:

He was my Maister  
 And each virtuous part  
 That I lived in him, I tenderd with my hart  
 But what his head complotted gainst the state  
 My countries loue commands me that to hate.  
 His sudden death I greeue for, not his fall,  
 Because he sought to worke my countries thrall. (D4r)

The Chorus explains that the play does not intend to focus on Wolsey's life, as it is more interested in staging Cromwell's fall. Wolsey's death, however, can appear to catalyze Cromwell's own demise, as the latter's association with Wolsey taints his good name, and as his position as Wolsey's secretary leads to accusations of having facilitated treasonous acts:

CHORUS Now Cromwells highest fortunes doth begin  
 Wolsay that loued him as he did his life:  
 Committed all his treasure to his hands,  
 Wolsay is dead, and Gardiner his man,  
 Is now created Bishop of Winchester.  
 Pardon if we omit Wolsey's life,  
 Because our play dependes on Cromwell's death.  
 Now sit and see his highest state of all:  
 His height of rising: and his sodaine fall. (D3v)

The Chorus combines the roles of chronicler and expositor, as he reminds the audiences of their own knowledge of Tudor history and offers additions to this history that are necessary for understanding the play, while also using the moment to justify the playwrights' decisions about the plot ('pardon if we omit Wolsey's life'), and to tell the audience how to behave ('now sit and see') and what to expect

from the rest of the play ('his sodaine fall'). The Chorus demonstrates the simultaneous narration of past and future in the playhouse, as theatrically, the play uses the power of hindsight that makes Cromwell's death look inevitable, whilst also situating the events firmly in spectators' awareness as a historical past made fictional through the emphasis on what is happening in *this* play ('because our play dependes') as opposed to other accounts relaying Wolsey's and Cromwell's histories.

Rowley's *When You See Me You Know Me* also pointedly does not stage Wolsey's death; instead, Wolsey predicts his own downfall, and foresees his death, noting that he will 'proudly pass as cardinal' (76). The play opens in medias res with an exemplary speech demonstrative of Wolsey's pride and ambition, as we find him scheming with the French ambassadors rather than with a prologue framing the play by telling spectators what to expect (3).

This opening sets the tone for the cardinal's type-casting and heavily-set villainy. Indeed, Wolsey aligns himself with classical strategists who used their counsel to influence the decisions of kings and other leaders:

So toil'd not Caesar in the state of Rome,  
 As Wolsey labours in th' affairs of kings;  
 As Hannibal with oil did melt the Alps,  
 To make a passage into Italy,  
 So must we bear our high-pitch'd eminence,  
 To dig for glory in the hearts of men,  
 Till we have got the papal diadem  
 ... Wherefore was Alexander's fame so great,  
 But that he conquer'd and deposed kings?  
 And where doth Wolsey fail to follow him,  
 That thus commandeth kings and emperors? (5)

To spectators in the audience, Wolsey would have been as much a figure of legend as the leaders with whom the cardinal seeks to identify. The 'fame' that the character Wolsey aspires to here, ironically is that which the historical Wolsey obtains through plays such as these. Rowley, however, does not engage with this notion, and does not self-consciously reflect on history telling through playmaking. In the play — without interest in the historical reality of the Wolsey outside the play — Wolsey achieves glory and 'an eternal name' (6), as he predicts, through misleading King Henry. As a typical villain in a play set at court, Wolsey introduces himself to the audience as the archetype of the 'bad counsellor', one who has the king's ear, but who is using it for his own ends:

Great England's lord have I so won with words,  
 That, under colour of advising him,  
 I overrule both council, court and king.  
 Let him command, but we will execute. (6)

The mechanisms of 'good council' mean that a king seeks advice from councilors, so as to appear a tolerant ruler.<sup>32</sup> For an advisor to seem to overtly feed the monarch ideas, however, would not do. Henry VIII did not like to be told how to rule; more importantly in the context of this play's performance, however, nor did James I. Throughout the play, Wolsey's statements to the audience are boastful claims about the decisions that he has made through his 'command of the king'. For example, he claims to have had a hand in Anne Boleyn's downfall, as he responds to Bishop Gardiner's fears about the spread of the 'false Luther's doctrine' (15). Speaking about himself in the third person, he notes that he has successfully stopped Anne from becoming all too powerful: 'Wolsey wrought such means, she lost her head' (16). Furthermore, anxious about the 'Lutheran' influences of the schoolmasters bringing up the king's children, Wolsey contemplates the deaths of Latimer and Ridley, Elizabeth's tutors, whom he contrasts to Princess Mary's tutors as 'not sound Catholics', who should therefore be removed (39). 'Tis better, they should die', Wolsey tells Will Somers, 'than thousands fall' (40). Wolsey's ambitious schemes in the hope of becoming pope enable the spectator to polarize Henry and the church of Rome, which would have appealed to the Protestant James I. The play, however, at times carefully seeks to remove the emphasis from the closeness of the historical Wolsey's lifetime. First of all, the play muddles up the dates. In the play, for example, Jane Seymour gives birth in Wolsey's lifetime, when in reality he died in 1530, and she married Henry VIII in 1536.<sup>33</sup> Secondly, Rowley's play transfers Wolsey to a much earlier, and thus less politicized, timeframe, as it invites spectators to understand him within a biblical framework as he is banished from court:

KING For which, sir, we command you leave the court:  
 We here discharge you of your offices,  
 You that are Caipas, or great cardinal  
 Haste ye with speed unto your bishopric,  
 There keep you, until you hear further from us.  
 Away and speak not. (76)

The way in which this banishment takes place self-consciously reflects on the role of the historical Wolsey within the fictional realms of play. That is to say that by calling Wolsey 'Caipas', the king emphasizes the treachery of which he accuses



the cardinal, evoking the biblical high priest who is known for his involvement in Christ's death. Indeed, the reference places the character Wolsey within a framework of late medieval biblical plays in which Caiaphas is a 'necessary evil' whose terrible deed makes possible the crucifixion, and therefore the salvation of humankind. By portraying Wolsey as Caiaphas, the play could imply that Wolsey's 'evil' deeds, like Caiaphas's, were performed for a greater good. Furthermore, this portrayal appears to address the political mechanism of appointing scapegoats when larger objectives are at stake, both in fiction and in the world outside the play tradition. As the Caiaphas reference distances the character Wolsey from the historical Wolsey, it furthermore reflects on the difficulty of dramatically portraying historical characters about whom the audience is bound to have an opinion.

Where Rowley goes out of his way to present the Wolsey character as literary or legendary rather than historical, avoiding the intricacy of depicting a historical leader through the dramatic medium, Shakespeare opens his play with the Prologue urging the spectators to understand the characters as their historical counterparts:

Think ye see  
 The very persons of our noble story  
 As they were living; think you see them great  
 And followed with the general throng and sweat  
 Of thousand friends; then, in a moment, see  
 How soon this mightiness meets misery. (Prologue 25–30)

The Prologue, however, also advises that spectators may decide for themselves if they want to pull the spectacle they are about to see into the realms of history or playmaking:

Such as give  
 Their money out of *hope they may believe*,  
 May here find truth, too. *Those that come to see*  
*Only a show or two*, and so agree  
 The play may pass — if they be still, and willing,  
 I'll undertake may see away their shilling  
 Richly in two short hours. (Prologue 7–13, emphasis mine)

Bruce McConachie reminds the reader that spectators, when watching a performance, always face the problem of the 'doubleness' of the actor/character, the blending of two concepts in order to form a new 'reality'. He argues that audience members at times — in the words of Coleridge — 'suspend disbelief' about an actor

‘being’ his or her role, momentarily accepting, for example, that Kenneth Branagh can be Hamlet when he is performing the part, while at other times taking a more sceptical attitude towards the role.<sup>34</sup> Shakespeare, in the Prologue, separates the representation of the characters from the stage action. Here the representation favours the understanding of the characters in their role, acknowledging that the role is historical rather than fictional, and allowing for the staged action to take the freedom to combine scenes that rely on historical sources, as well as maintaining discretion to freely add to these sources.

In terms of plot choices, *Henry VIII* takes Rowley’s lead in refraining from staging the cardinal’s death, but instead scripts an elaborate farewell speech for Wolsey, reinforced by Cromwell’s emotional farewell:

O, my lord,  
 Must I then leave you? Must I needs forgo  
 So good, so noble, and so true a master?  
 Bear witness, all that have not hearts of iron,  
 With what a sorrow Cromwell leaves his lord.  
 The King shall have my service, but my prayers  
 For ever and for ever shall be yours. (3.2.422–8)

Cromwell’s addressing the audience to ask them to ‘bear witness’ to his ceremonial farewell — thus inviting them to temporarily become witnesses at a historical moment, rather than spectators of a play — culminates in an ambiguous pledge. If the cardinal shall have Cromwell’s prayers, this pledge does not necessarily mean that his heart will not be with the king as the contrast in the word ‘but’ suggests. Cromwell’s careful weighing of his words that affirm his loyalty to the king suggests a political context in which one can never be too careful in one’s expressions of loyalty, since ‘treason’ accusations are easy to make. Perhaps spectators were reminded that Cromwell himself fell out of favour with Henry VIII after arranging his marriage to Anne of Cleves, and was executed for treason in 1540. Such a reminder transfers the spectator to the ‘here and now’ of 1613 and invites an awareness of their own spectatorship, with the benefits of knowing what the future will hold for the historical Cromwell.

In terms of Wolsey’s portrayal, more space for spectators’ sympathy lies with the cardinal, due to the seemingly unbiased posthumous in-play sympathy for both the character and the historical Wolsey as offered by Katherine — she refers to the cardinal as ‘the great child of honour, Cardinal Wolsey’ (4.2.6) — and Griffith, who describes Wolsey’s final hours in words of compassion:

So went to bed, where eagerly his sickness  
 Pursued him still; and three nights after this,  
 About the hour of eight, which he himself  
 Foretold should be his last, full of repentance,  
 Continual meditations, tears, and sorrows,  
 He gave his honours to the world again,  
 His blessed part to heaven, and slept in peace. (4.2.24–30)

As in Rowley's play, Wolsey here reportedly predicts his own death, and Griffith in *Henry VIII* erases any doubt spectators might have about the cardinal's after-life. If this play portrays Wolsey as more treasonous and less innocently ambitious than in *When You See Me*, the description of his final hours offer spectators the assertion that Wolsey made his peace with his maker, and repented his mistakes (in Protestant fashion). The strategically didactic construction of Katherine and Griffith's conversation enables the audience to first hear Katherine reflecting on all the cardinal's sins, before moving on to describe his virtues:

KATHERINE Of an unbounded stomach, ever ranking  
 Himself with princes; one that by suggestion  
 Tied all the kingdom. Simony was fair play;  
 His own opinion was his law. I'th' presence  
 He would say untruths and be ever double  
 Both in his words and meaning. He was never,  
 But where he meant to ruin, pitiful.  
 His promises were, as he then was, mighty  
 But his performance, as he is now, nothing.  
 Of his own body he was ill and gave  
 The clergy ill example. (34–44)

Griffith's words overrule Katherine's. Griffith also mentions the cardinal's 'humble stock', but prefers to see the virtue in Wolsey's being 'fashioned to much honour' (48–9, 50). Griffith emphasizes the cardinal's scholarship as 'exceeding wise, fair-spoken, and persuading; / lofty and sour to them that loved him not, / but to those men that sought him, sweet as summer' (52–4). In other words, Wolsey's scholarship may not have been to everybody's taste, but some people respected him. Griffith further mentions Wolsey's craving for worldly goods (he was 'unsatisfied in getting, which was a sin' [55–6]) but emphasizes his generosity in giving to others ('yet in bestowing, madam / he was most princely' [56–7]). Griffith elaborates on this notion by referring to 'those twins of learning', (58), the colleges of Ipswich and Oxford, of which the former did not 'outlive the good

that it did' (60). Griffith notes that the college at Oxford, however, will continue to be a reminder of the cardinal's generosity in the future: 'The other, though unfinished, yet so famous, / So excellent in art, and still so rising, / That Christendom shall ever speak his virtue' (61–3). Finally, Griffith seeks to change Katherine's and the audience's perception of the cardinal's fall by calling it a blessing. He says: 'His overthrow heaped happiness upon him; / For then, not till then, he felt himself, / And found the blessedness of being little' (64–6). Humility, then, is the greatest gift and honour that the cardinal was to receive during his lifetime, and, Griffith concludes: 'he died fearing God' (68). Until this point the play would have portrayed Katherine as Wolsey's greatest enemy, because he is scripted to have caused her ruin. She speaks, however, the final verdict about his character: 'Whom I most hated living, thou hast made me, / With thy religious truth and modesty, / Now in his ashes, honour. Peace be with him' (73–5). As Katherine suggests, distance in time makes possible the redemption of historical figures after their death, when the evaluator is no longer troubled by the personal distress that the deceased has caused. Along these lines, Shakespeare appears to suggest that plays staging a recent historical past can be more objective about people once their death has stripped their existence clear of politics. This notion, however, conflicts with the thematic bias addressed towards historical personages that reverberates throughout the play. Wolsey, for example, comments self-consciously on the construction of rumour and reputation. He thus reminds the audience members of his status as a character in a play that plays with constructions of rumours and hearsay, but also of his status as a recent historical figure about whom much has been written, said, and, crucially, performed since his death:

If I am

Traduced by ignorant tongues — which neither know  
 My faculties nor person, yet will be  
 The chronicles of my doing — let me say  
 'Tis but the fate of place and the rough brake  
 That virtue must go through. We must not stint  
 Our necessary actions in the fear  
 To cope malicious censurers, which ever  
 As rav'nous fishes do a vessel follow  
 That is new trimmed, but benefit no further  
 Than vainly longing. What we oft do best,  
 By sick interpreters — once weak ones — is  
 Not ours or not allowed; what worst, as oft

Hitting a grosser quality, is cried up  
 For our best act. If we shall stand still  
 In fear our motion will be mocked or carped at,  
 We should take root here where we sit  
 Or sit state-statues only. (1.2.72–89)

Referring to the 'chronicles' of his doing and the 'sick interpreters', Wolsey appears to comment on chroniclers like Holinshed and Foxe, but also on Shakespeare himself. The ironic tension between a dramatic representation of a historical figure showing insight into the future representations of this figure, temporarily oversteps the boundaries of time, thus inviting spectators to appreciate the 'here and now' of the play, while also being aware of their own knowledge and context, conscious of the artifice of the performance and its part in a larger body of artificial and historical constructions. Spectators taking the Prologue's advice to heart will momentarily watch the character Wolsey as the historical Wolsey speaking about the injustice inflicted upon him by writers of history after his death. At the same time, a certain amount of hypocrisy is evident in the character Wolsey's claim about 'malicious censurers', as he shows himself self-consciously aware of how to construct reputations to advantage, and cunningly plays with his own representation towards the in-play 'outside world' for the purpose of personal advancement:

The grievèd commons  
 Hardly conceive of me. Let it be noised  
 That through our intercession this revokement  
 And pardon comes. (105–8)

The character Wolsey's affirmation of his insights in the workings of propaganda also evokes Buckingham's assertion at the beginning of the play that Wolsey is growing too powerful and is too involved in managing crowds:

The devil speed him! No man's pie is freed  
 From his ambitious finger. What had he  
 To do in these fierce vanities? I wonder  
 That such a keech can, with his very bulk,  
 Take up the rays o'th' beneficial sun,  
 And keep it from the earth. (1.1.52–7)

Buckingham's reaction reveals his hypocrisy, in that he first deems the Field of Cloth of Gold 'this great sport', but loses enthusiasm on learning that it had

been, in Norfolk's words: 'ordered by the good discretion / of the right reverend Cardinal of York' (47, 50–1). Shakespeare offers spectators a string of untrustworthy characters. Buckingham and Wolsey contradict their own opinions about image making through their in-play actions, and Katherine's ideas challenge the workings of the play itself. These characters offer their ideas about political self-presentation through spectacle, and demonstrate the lack of control over reputation after death. The play thus reflects on its own medium, as well as on the historical side of things, acknowledging that these characters were once actual real-life leaders, who used spectacle and performance of self to present and protect their image. The spectators receive their share in the playwright's anxiety of how to portray a historical figure when their actions remain relevant for the society in which the play is performed. Shakespeare's play thematically addresses this anxiety, and turns unease into pleasure as he has his characters self-consciously reflect on themselves as historical figures, as fictional constructions in a play, and as characters at the mercy of their writers, their 'sick interpreters', for the image they will leave to posterity.

## Notes

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- 1 E.K. Chambers, *William Shakespeare*, 2 vols (Oxford, 1930), 2.343–4; Stanley Wells and Gary Taylor et al., *William Shakespeare: A Textual Companion* (Oxford, 1987), 29–30.
- 2 Following recent editorial practice, I will refer to this play as Shakespeare's throughout this article, while acknowledging the collaboration with John Fletcher. See Jay L. Halio, 'Introduction', *The Oxford Shakespeare. William Shakespeare, King Henry VIII, or All Is True* (Oxford, 2000). The current article refers to Halio's edition. References to page numbers will appear parenthetically in the text.
- 3 Chambers, *William Shakespeare*, 2.344.
- 4 Ibid.
- 5 Ibid, 2.343–4.
- 6 Ibid, 2.344.
- 7 Ibid.
- 8 Ibid.

- 9 Ibid.
- 10 William Prynne in his *Histrion-Matrix* (1633) attributes the burning of the Globe to God's judgement on the players. This attribution, however, does not necessarily reflect common opinion in 1613. See William Prynne, *Histrion-Matrix* (London, 1633; STC: 20464), *Early English Books Online* (EEBO). See *Early Modern London Theatres*, <http://www.emlot.kcl.ac.uk/db/record/document/391/>.
- 11 This play is also known as *The First Play of Cardinal Wolsey*, or *The Cardinal*. See Martin Wiggins and Catherine Richardson (eds), *British Drama 1533–1642: A Catalogue* (Oxford: 2014), 346. A reference in Henslowe's 'diary' refers to the payment for this play, naming the authors: 'Lent vnto the company the 12 of novmbr 1601 to paye vnto antony monday & harye chettell mihell drayton & smythe in fulle paymente of the firste pt of carnowll wollsey'. *Henslowe's Diary*, ed. W.W. Greg (London, 1904), 150 (94v).
- 12 This play is also referred to as *Cardinal Wolsey's Life*, *The Second Part of Cardinal Wolsey*, *The Second Part of Wolsey*, *The Cardinal*. See Wiggins, *British Drama*, 307. Henslowe's 'diary' registers: 'Lent vnto Roberte Shawe to lend vnto hary chettell & antony mondaye & mihell drayton in earneste of a Booke called the Rissinge of carnowlle wolsey the 10 of octobr 1601'. *Henslowe's Diary*, 149 (94r)
- 13 Anonymous, *The True Chronicle Historie of the Whole Life and Death of Thomas Lord Cromwell As it hath beene sundrie times publikely acted by the right honorable the Lord Chamberlaine his seruants* (London, 1602; STC: 21532), EEBO. Further citations from this play refer to this edition. See Wiggins, *British Drama*, 302–6. This work is sometimes attributed to Wentworth Smith.
- 14 Wiggins, *British Drama*, 279 and 346.
- 15 Ibid, 308.
- 16 Samuel Rowley, *When You See Me, You Know Me Or, the Famous Chronicle History of King Henry the Eight, with the Birth and Vertuous Life of Edward Prince of Wales, as it was playd by the High and Mightie Prince of Wales His Servants* (London, 1605; STC: 21417), EEBO. The current article refers to the following edition: Karl Elze (ed.), *When You See Me, You Know Me*, by Samuel Rowley (London, 1874). References to page numbers will appear parenthetically in the text. Scholars of early English drama mostly ignore this play, and when they refer to it, they often compare the play to Shakespeare's *Henry VIII* or study it for its historical inaccuracies. See, for example, Joseph Candido, 'Fashioning Henry VIII: What Shakespeare Saw in *When You See Me, You Know Me*', *Cahiers Elizabethains* 23 (1983), 47–59. See Rankin for a study on the representation of kingship in both Shakespeare's *Henry VIII* and Rowley's *When You See Me*: Mark Rankin, 'Henry VIII, Shakespeare, and the Jacobean Royal Court', *SEL: Studies in English Literature 1500–1900* 51.2 (2011), 349.

- 17 Rankin, 'Henry VIII, Shakespeare', 349.
- 18 Ibid, 362.
- 19 See, for example, Greg Walker, *The Politics of Performance in Early Renaissance Drama* (Cambridge, 1998); Greg Walker, *Plays of Persuasion: Drama and Politics at the Court of Henry VIII* (Cambridge, 1991); Peter Happé, 'Dramatic Images of Kingship in Heywood and Bale', *SEL: Studies in English Literature 1500–1900* 39.2 (1991), 239–53.
- 20 Edward Hall, *The Vnion of the Two Noble and Illustre Famelies of Lancastre [and] Yorke* (London, 1548; STC: 12722), *EEBO*.
- 21 Raphael Holinshed, *The Chronicles of England*, 2nd edn (London, 1587; STC: 13569), *EEBO*.
- 22 John Foxe, *Acts and Monuments* (London, 1563. Printed by Peter Short, 1596; STC 11226), *EEBO*.
- 23 George Cavendish, *The Life of Cardinal Wolsey* (London, ca 1553. Printed for William Sheares, 1641; Wing: C1619aA), *EEBO*.
- 24 Thomas Storer, *The Life and Death of Thomas Wolsey, Cardinal* (London, 1599; STC: 23294), *EEBO*. See also Wiggins, *British Drama*, 346.
- 25 'Cecil Papers: July 1602, 21–25.' Calendar of the Cecil Papers in Hatfield House, vol. 12, 1602–03. Ed. R.A. Roberts (London, 1910), 239–52. *British History Online*, <http://www.british-history.ac.uk/cal-cecil-papers/vol12/pp239–252>.
- 26 Paulina Kewes, 'A True Genre', Richard Dutton and Jean E. Howard (eds), *A Companion to Shakespeare's Works: The Histories* (Oxford, 2008), 173.
- 27 'Cecil Papers', 239–52.
- 28 Kewes, 'A True Genre', 174.
- 29 Ibid.
- 30 Chambers, *William Shakespeare*, 2.348.
- 31 John Oglander commented in his commonplace book that 'I never saw any fond husband make so much or so great dalliance over his beautiful spouse as I have seen King James over his favourites, especially the Duke of Buckingham'. *A Royalist's Notebook: The Commonplace Book of Sir John Oglander, kt., of Nunwell, Born 1585, Died 1655* (London, 1936), 196. See: David M. Bergeron, 'Writing King James's Sexuality', Daniel Fischlin and Mark Fortier (eds), *Royal Subjects: Essays on the Writings of James VI and I* (Detroit, 2002), 348.
- 32 Walker, *Politics of Performance*, 66.
- 33 Halio, 'Introduction', 15.
- 34 Bruce A. McConachie, 'Falsifiable Theories for Theatre and Performance Studies', *Theatre Journal* 59.4 (2007), 559.