

e-Luminations: Henry VIII

A Sumptuous History

Henry VIII continues the restless, ambitious experimentation that marked Shakespeare's genius throughout his career. It is nearly the last play he wrote; only *The Two Noble Kinsmen* and the lost *Cardenio* (written, like *Henry VIII*, in collaboration with playwright John Fletcher) come later. The other new kind of play to which Shakespeare devoted the last half-dozen years of his life in the theatre—the romance—is familiar to us from frequent performances of *The Tempest* and *The Winter's Tale*.

Henry VIII, however, stands alone. It is radically different from the nine English histories which Shakespeare had written as a young playwright, a dozen and more years earlier. These more numerous, more familiar plays are likely to shape the expectations we bring to *Henry VIII*, partly because the mid-20th-century innovation of performing the contiguous histories in sequence has left the once-popular *Henry VIII* (and *King John*) neglected.

This very unfamiliarity (a quarter-century has passed since the last OSF production) presents a wonderful opportunity for 21st-century audiences to experience the play with fresh eyes and ears. If *Henry VIII* is new to you, part of its appeal will spring from new instances of Shakespeare's familiar art—from the soaring language of such powerful characters as Cardinal Wolsey and Queen Katherine, to the subtle mirroring that complicates our perceptions and judgments of character. Anne Bullen's pity for Katherine, the Queen whom she nevertheless replaces, is refracted in Katherine's grudging pity for Wolsey, the man who helped ruin her. Henry's indignation at the way Wolsey has repaid his trust echoes the language his queen uses earlier to reproach him for discarding her.

Shakespeare wrote *Henry VIII* in 1613, just 80 years after the events took place. That's dangerously near his own time, so the play's approach to English history is different from the historiographical method of the Prince Hal or *Henry VI* plays.

Henry VIII resembles more the tragicomic romances that Shakespeare was writing around the same time, plays in which a providential design—not always apparent to the mortals buffeted by its ups and downs—overcomes human predicaments to achieve an almost miraculous end. In *The Tempest*, Prospero's lost dukedom is restored, and Ferdinand and Miranda marry to unite the crowns of Naples and Milan. In *The Winter's Tale*, the “dead” Hermione is restored to Leontes, and Bohemia and Sicily are reconciled with the marriage of Perdita and Florizel.

—Alan Armstrong

This is an excerpt from OSF's 2009 Illuminations, a 64-page guide to the season's plays. For more information, or to buy the full Illuminations, [click here](#). Members at the Donor level and above and teachers who bring a school group to OSF receive a free copy of Illuminations.