

Shakespeare, Johnson, and Wolsey: A Community of Mind

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In a letter to Samuel Johnson on 28 February 1778, Boswell, clearly trying to make the last point in an argument he had lost months before, concludes with a pair of allusions:

. . . I never differed from you in politicks but upon two points, — the Middlesex Election, and the Taxation of the Americans by the British *Houses of Representatives*. There is a *charm* in the word *Parliament*, so I avoid it. As I am a steady and a warm Tory, I regret that the King does not see it to be better for him to receive constitutional supplies from his American subjects by the voice of their own assemblies, where his Royal Person is represented, than through the medium of his British subjects. I am persuaded that the power of the Crown, which I wish to increase, would be greater when in contact with all its dominions, than if “the rays of regal bounty” were to “shine” upon America through that dense and troubled body, a modern British Parliament. But, enough of this subject; for your angry voice at Ashbourne upon it, still sounds awful “in my mind’s ears”.¹

With characteristically pugnacious ingratiating, at the end of his argument Boswell combines phrases from Johnson’s discussion of Cardinal Wolsey in *The Vanity of Human Wishes* with a misquotation from *Hamlet*. Although juxtaposing the *Vanity* and Shakespeare may strike us as an obvious psychological ploy, an eighteenth-century audience would have regarded the pairing of Wolsey and Shakespeare as traditional. Boswell’s use of the lines from *Vanity* reflects one dimension of Johnson’s dramatic portrait of Wolsey’s rise and fall, a portrait long admired for its emphatic abruptness, syntactic majesty, and ironic symmetry:

In full-blown Dignity, see *Wolsey* stand,
Law in his Voice, and Fortune in his Hand:
To him the Church, the Realm, their Pow’rs consign,
Thro’ him the Rays of regal Bounty shine,
Turn’d by his Nod the Stream of Honour flows,
His Smile alone Security bestows:
Still to new Heights his restless Wishes tow’r,
Claim leads to Claim, and Pow’r advances Pow’r;
Till Conquest unresisted ceas’d to please,
And Rights submitted, left him none to seize.

1 James Boswell, *Life of Johnson* ed. George Birkbeck Hill, rev. L.F. Powell (Oxford: Clarendon, 1934), III, 221.

At length his Sov'reign frowns — the Train of State
 Mark the keen Glance, and watch the Sign to hate,
 Where-e'er he turns he meets a Stranger's Eye,
 His Suppliants scorn him, and his Followers fly;
 At once is lost the Pride of aweful State,
 The golden Canopy, the glitt'ring Plate,
 The regal Palace, the luxurious Board,
 The liv'ried Army, the menial Lord.
 With Age, with Cares, with Maladies oppress'd,
 He seeks the Refuge of Monastic Rest.
 Grief aids Disease, remember'd Folly stings,
 And his last Sighs reproach the Faith of Kings.²

Although Johnson's editors have recognised the possibility of some Shakespearean influence on these lines, that recognition is hedged with conditions, reservations, and qualifications. David Nichol Smith and Edward L. McAdam's note to this passage typifies the practice:

If Johnson's Wolsey is indebted to any one work more than another, it is *Henry VIII*. A description so condensed and generalized of a theme so well known cannot have a 'source', but some of the details suggest recollection of the Shakespearean play. Shakespeare's Fall of Wolsey is quoted at length in Dodsley's *Preceptor* (published 7 April 1748), i, 70-3; a work with which Johnson was connected. But he was, at this time, reading extensively for the *Dictionary*.³

The breadth of Johnson's reading is, of course, indisputable. One result of that reading would have been a familiarity with the pamphleteers' use of the cardinal to symbolize corruption in government, especially in Walpole's government.⁴ Another result, however, would have been to reinforce in his mind not just the image of Wolsey but Shakespeare's image of Wolsey as an emblem of the proud statesman falling precipitously from greatness. Although Wolsey is merely one of a series of *de casibus exempla* in *Henry VIII*, his was the image that appealed both to early editors of Shakespeare, who called special attention to lines by and about the

2 *The Poems of Samuel Johnson*, ed. David Nichol Smith and Edward L. McAdam, 2nd edn (Oxford: Clarendon, 1974), pp. 119-20.

3 *Poems*, p. 119. The first edition (Oxford, 1941) contained the first two sentences and McAdam's edition with George Milne for the Yale Johnson (New Haven, 1964) echoes this view.

4 Paul L. Wiley, 'Renaissance Exploitation of Cavendish's *Life of Wolsey*' *SP*, 43.2 (1946), 121-146 and C. B. Ricks, 'Wolsey in *The Vanity of Human Wishes*', *MLN*, 73.8 (1958), 563-8.

cardinal, and to compilers of that curiously eighteenth-century phenomenon generically known as the 'beauties' of the English stage. In the years following the publication of *Vanity* (1749), moreover, Johnson's writings reflect a continuing interest in Shakespeare's Wolsey.

Even *Henry VIII's* most enthusiastic admirers recognize that the play is more stately than dramatic and acknowledge, as R. A. Foakes has pointed out, a general critical 'dissatisfaction with the structure of the play'.⁵ In the stylized, ritual pattern of *Henry VIII*, however, the encounter between Henry and Wolsey offers a highly dramatic episode. After the cardinal finishes asserting his love and loyalty, the king confronts him with a secret inventory of his wealth. The royal dismissal and stage directions immediately following sharply contrast with the formal pageantry that characterizes most of the work:

Read o're this,
And after this, and then to Breakfast with
What appetite you haue.
*Exit King, frowning upon the Cardinall, the Nobles
throng after him smiling, and whispering.*⁶

With ironic economy Shakespeare has captured Wolsey's downfall. What follows is a succession of farewell speeches by the cardinal to himself and to Cromwell. As the last lines of his first speech, a soliloquy, indicate, Wolsey's primary emphasis is on the rapidity and extent of his reversal:

Nay, then farewell:
I haue touch'd the highest point of all my Greatnesse,
And from that full Meridian of my Glory,
I haste now to my Setting, I shall fall
Like a bright exhalation in the Euening,
And no man see me more.

(Act III, Scene ii.)

It should not be surprising that Shakespeare's conception of this scene, with its direct action, strong images, and clear moral, would prove memorable.

- 5 *King Henry VIII*, 3rd edn (1957: rpt. London: Methuen, 1966) p. xlvii. Less sympathetic critics, like W. A. Wright, editor of the 1891 Clarendon edition, have found the play, 'Without plot, without development, without any character on which the interest can be concentrated throughout' (p. xxii).
- 6 Charlton Hinman, ed., *The First Folio of Shakespeare: The Norton Facsimile* (New York: Norton, 1968), p. 221. All quotations in the text from *Henry VIII* are from this edition.

Alternative, less dramatic versions of the incident were available to Johnson. Foremost among these were the remembrances of George Cavendish, one of the cardinal's servants. Although Cavendish's *The Life and Death of Thomas Wolsey* was not published until 1641, Shakespeare may have had access to the original manuscript or a copy of it. If he did, he ignored its version of the confrontation. In Cavendish's account when Wolsey visits Henry, impatient with the progress of his annulment, 'dyvers of noble persons and gentelmen beyng [the cardinal's] lovyng frendes, came to visit hyme; which dyd hyme no small pleasyr, and caused hyme to be the more redely provyded of sufficyent excusys for his defence.'⁷ Immediately after this welcome, the king and cardinal begin a long conversation:

The kyng was in long and earnest commynycacion with hyme, in so myche as I hard the kyng say. Howe can that be? Is not this your owen hand? And plukked owt frome hys bosome a letter or wrytyng and shewed hyme the same; and as I perceyved that it was answerd so by my lord that the kyng had no more to say in that matter, but sayd to hyme. My lord, goo to your dynner, and all the lordes here wyll kepe you company; and after dynner I wyll resort to yow agayn, and than we wyll commen further with you in this matter, and so departed.⁸

Despite Cavendish's recognition of the tension, his Wolsey never completely loses favour with the nobles. Only the intervention of Anne Boleyn provokes Henry into dismissing Wolsey. Johnson would have had access to Cavendish's book, because its popularity led to three new editions in the seven years before *Vanity* (1742, 1745, and 1748).

Shakespeare's version of the encounter, however, proved even more popular. The play's performance history in London during the first half of the eighteenth century attests to its increasing appeal. In the first fifteen years of the century, *Henry VIII* was performed only four times (1705, 1707, 1708, and 1709). But from 1716 it appeared yearly until 1742, then from 1744 through 1747, and again in 1749. In 1745 and 1746 London audiences could have seen it at both Drury Lane and Covent Garden.⁹

Paralleling the strength of Shakespeare's plays with the public

7 George Cavendish, *The Life and Death of Thomas Wolsey* (Chipping Camden: The Alcuin Press, 1930), p. 97.

8 Cavendish, p. 98.

9 Charles Beecher Hogan, *Shakespeare in the Theatre 1701-1800* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1952), Vol. I.

was a developing scholarly interest in them; the first serious attempts at Shakespearean biography, criticism, and editing — often by the same hands — occurred during Johnson's century. And the first two important editors, Nicholas Rowe and Alexander Pope, called special attention to Wolsey's role in *Henry VIII*. Johnson thought enough of Rowe's 'Some Account of the Life, &c of Mr. William Shakespear', the first work to draw together the facts and legends, to place it in the introduction to his own edition. Rowe's comments on the play established the context for future discussions by emphasizing the emblematic value of the contrasts in Shakespeare's use of Wolsey:

. . . certainly nothing was ever more justly written, than the character of Cardinal Wolsey. He has shewn him insolent in his prosperity; and yet, by a wonderful address, he makes his fall and ruin the subject of general compassion. The whole man, with his vices and virtues, is finely and exactly described in the second scene of the fourth act.¹⁰

Rowe called even more attention to these issues in his topical 'Index' under two categories, 'Advice of a falling Favourite to a Friend' and 'Favourite (Wolsey) his Decline,'¹¹ and in his 'Remarks on the Plays of Shakespear', where he praises the scenes with Wolsey and quotes from them under the headings 'The State of Man' and 'Ambition'.¹²

Johnson thought less of Shakespeare's second editor, Pope, than he had of Rowe. In fact, he acknowledged only one virtue in Pope's edition: 'The observation of faults and beauties is one of the duties of an annotator, which some of Shakespeare's editors have attempted, and some have neglected. For this part of his task, and for this part only, was Mr Pope eminently and indisputably qualified'.¹³ Pope observed these beauties, especially noteworthy passages, by setting them off in quotation marks. *Henry VIII* has five such passages.¹⁴ The first four, all spoken by Wolsey, occur immediately after the confrontation scene. In the last, a speech by Griffith to Queen Katherine, the only section Pope selected is a quotation from Wolsey:

- 10 *The Plays of William Shakespear*, ed. Samuel Johnson (London, 1765), I, clxi.
 11 *The Works of Mr William Shakespear* ed. Nicholas Rowe (London, 1714), Vol. VIII.
 12 Rowe's edition, IX, 318.
 13 *Proposals for Printing, by Subscription, the Dramatick Works of William Shakespear, Corrected and Illustrated* (1756; rpt. London: Humphrey Milford, 1923), p. 7.
 14 *The Works of Mr William Shakespear*, ed. Alexander Pope (London, 1923), vol. IV.

At last, with easie-Rodes, he came to Leicester,
 Lodg'd in the Abbey; where the reuerend Abbot
 With all his Couent, honourably receiu'd him;
 To whom he gaue these words. *O Father Abbot,*
An old man, broken with the stormes of State,
Is come to lay his weary bones among ye:
Giue him a little earth for Charity.
 So went to bed; where eagerly his sicknesse
 Pursu'd him still, and three nights after this,
 About the houre of eight, which he himselfe
 Foretold should be his last, full of Repentance,
 Continuall Meditations, Teares, and Sorrowes,
 He gaue his Honors to the world agen,
 His blessed part to Heauen, and slept in peace.

(Act IV, Scene ii.)

The speech as a whole provides an effective postscript to the play's view of Wolsey. Stressing only the italicized portion, like calling attention only to Wolsey's speeches, creates the impression that the cardinal's fall is the central action of the play rather than merely one of a series of falling figures in the episodic work.

What Rowe and Pope had emphasized continued to appeal to their century's tastes, especially in those collections of passages from English drama which attempted to combine aesthetic and didactic goals by organizing memorable passages topically. In 1737 the two volume *Beauties of the English Stage*,¹⁵ for example, included quotations from *Henry VIII* under the headings 'Ambition', 'Frown', 'Greatness and Power', 'King', 'Man', 'Thoughts', 'Weeping', and ironically, 'Welcome'. A similar work, limited to Shakespeare, *The Beauties of Shakespeare*,¹⁶ offers Wolsey's 'Nay, then Farewell' speech on the fifth page under the heading 'Ambition'. William Dodd used the same title for a volume which arranged quotations by play and then assigned headings to individual speeches.¹⁷ Almost half of the passages he chose from *Henry VIII* deal with Wolsey. To these he gave such headings as 'Anger, its external effects', 'Falling Greatness', 'The Vicissitudes of Life', 'Cardinal Wolsey's Death', and 'His Vices and Virtues'.

Within such a context of regarding Shakespeare's Wolsey as emblematic of falling greatness, it should not be surprising that

15 *The Beauties of the English Stage* (London: Ward and Chandler, 1737), 2 vols.

16 *The Beauties of Shakespeare* (London: G. Kearsley, 1783).

17 *The Beauties of Shakespear*, 2nd edn (London: T. Waller, 1757), vol. II. This practice continued through the century in such works as *Beauties of English Drama* (London, 1777), four vols. and *The Thespian Oracle; or, A New Key to Theatrical Amusments* (London: J. Barker, 1791).

Johnson would turn to this image for his *Vanity* or that after 1749 his work would reflect a pattern of continuing interest in the Wolsey Shakespeare had created. Johnson's edition of the plays in 1765 suggests some ambivalence towards the cardinal. A note at the end of the play observes that, except for Katherine, '[e]very other part may be easily conceived, and easily written'.¹⁸ The appearance of the play in his edition, however, reveals an understanding of the confrontation scene's dramatic energy. Each of the five plays in the fifth volume of Johnson's edition has one full page plate. The illustration for *Henry VIII*, entitled 'Read o'er this', showing the king handing the cardinal the inventory, faces that line. Whatever reservations the critic might have had about Wolsey's lines were subordinated to the bookman's recognition of their effectiveness.

A decade before his edition of Shakespeare, Johnson offered in his dictionary extensive evidence of his familiarity with *Henry VIII*.¹⁹ Using lines from the play to explain a fairly unusual word like 'bladder' might be expected. But relying on it for such common words as 'convent', 'gripe', [grip], 'hat', 'holyness', and 'lute' implies an expectation that his audience would recognize and accept the source. Even more suggestive, given the similarity of themes in *Henry VIII* and *Vanity*, is Johnson's use of lines from Shakespeare's play to illustrate a cluster of words that underline the emblematic role of Wolsey. *Henry VIII* provides, for example, the first quotation for 'pride' and the third one for the first (of sixty-four) definitions of 'fall'. It also offers two quotations under 'honour,' as well as one, possibly for good measure, for 'honourably'. This theme recurs with other words which Johnson links to the play, including 'evening', 'founder', 'greatness', 'high-blown', 'meridian', 'values', and 'whisper'. The prominence of such quotations, most of which refer to lines by and about Wolsey, suggests the ease with which Johnson found the cardinal fitting an illustrative role.

Although evidence supporting the influence of Shakespeare's portrait of Wolsey on Johnson's use of the cardinal in his imitation of Juvenal's *Tenth Satire* is circumstantial, it is more extensive than Johnson's editors have acknowledged. Moreover, anxieties about that influence stem from a failure to recognize how appropriate an extended allusion to Shakespeare is in a poem devoted to establishing contemporary examples for Juvenal's principles. Rather than regarding allusion, quotation, and imitation as limited

18 Johnson's edition, V, 491.

19 *A Dictionary of the English Language* (London: W. Strahan, 1755), 2 vols.

or limiting, Johnson saw them as emphasising possibilities for integrating human experience. It is precisely this principle that he defended against John Wilkes when that odd couple dined. After Wilkes censured quotation as pedantry, Johnson replied, 'No, sir, it is a good thing; there is a community of mind in it.'²⁰ Adding to an imitation of a Roman poet a second level of imitation of an English predecessor certainly reinforces and extends that community.

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²⁰ *Life of Johnson*, IV, 102.