Henry VIII on the Anglophone contemporary stage: iterating an unpopular play

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Abstract: This article reflects on the iterability of a specific play on the contemporary stage: Shakespeare's and Fletcher's *Henry VIII*. The text, deemed to be a "bad" play compared to others in the Shakespearean canon, is often criticized for its lack of a clear structure. Nonetheless, two companies decided to stage it recently: Shakespeare's Globe (UK) offered a rewriting of the text and made it part of its summer season in 2022, and the Baltimore Shakespeare Factory (USA) staged it in April 2023 for its first in-person performance since the pandemic. This article articulates how the play was perceived by audiences and critics with the artistic endeavors of both companies. Using data collected through surveys and interviews with spectators, it reflects on the reception of an unpopular play, and questions its iterability on the contemporary anglophone stage.

Résumé : Cet article réfléchit à l'itérabilité de la pièce *Henry VIII* de Shakespeare et Fletcher sur la scène contemporaine. En effet, ce texte, considéré comme une « mauvaise pièce » parmi le canon shakespearien, est souvent critiqué pour son manque de structure. Malgré cela, deux compagnies ont choisi de mettre en scène cette pièce récemment. Le théâtre du Shakespeare's Globe (RU) a proposé une réécriture du texte dans le cadre de sa saison d'été en 2022, et la Baltimore Shakespeare Factory (USA) l'a mis en scène en avril 2023 pour sa première représentation en présentiel depuis la pandémie. Cet article articule la réception de la pièce par les critiques et les publics avec les efforts artistiques entrepris par ces deux compagnies afin de mettre en scène ce texte. Les données récoltées lors d'enquêtes et d'entretiens avec les spectateurs ont permis de réfléchir à la réception d'une pièce impopulaire, et d'interroger la possible itérabilité de ce texte sur la scène contemporaine anglophone.

Keywords: Drama; Shakespeare, William; Fletcher, John; *Henry VIII*; adaptation; reception; audiences; canonicity

Mots-clés : théâtre ; Shakespeare, William ; Fletcher, John ; *Henry VIII* ; adaptation ; reception ; publics ; canonicité

"Let's be honest: it's a red flag when the most famous English writer of all time has a play about one of the most obsessed-over eras of English history and it almost never actually gets staged" (Lukowski). *All is true*, best known today as *Henry VIII*, does not currently count amongst Shakespeare's most beloved plays. Contrary to staple texts such as *Richard III*, *Hamlet*, *King Lear* or *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, it is rarely performed. The question of its iterability on the contemporary stage is thus at stake for any company willing to produce it. As Anne Teulade underlines, "Elle demeure largement considérée comme une pièce monologique, patriotique et propagandiste, destinée à célébrer la dynastie Tudor dans une perspective providentialiste" (par. 7). This was not always the case: in the seventeenth and eighteenth century, *Henry VIII* was one of Shakespeare's most beloved plays. As Gordon McMullan explains, "[The play] has, in fact, had one of the longest and most stable theatrical histories of any play in the Shakespearean canon, something which has been both an immense advantage and also, for a range of reasons, an unfortunate burden" (8). This specific performance history leads us to reflect on the play's iterations in the twenty-first century: the notion of repetition and iteration is at stake for all of Shakespeare's texts, but here, the particular status of the play challenges its iterability in a specific way. Although it is not often iterated on the contemporary stage, Shakespeare's Globe (London, UK) decided to make it part of its summer season in 2022, and the Baltimore Shakespeare Factory[1] (Baltimore, USA), a semi-professional company with a limited budget, also chose to perform *Henry VIII* for its first in-person performance since the pandemic, in April 2023.[2] These two companies relied on very different means to produce the

play. The Globe's production (directed by Amy Hodge) offered a partly rewritten text by author in residence Hannah Khalil, working in "collaboration" with Shakespeare and Fletcher. She added new scenes with a feminist point of view, following the trail of the musical *Six,* which gave a voice to Henry VIII's six wives. The BSF performance (directed by Jeff Miller), on the contrary, decided to follow the text closely, with minimal cuts. The contemporary stage is an opportunity for these two directors to revive and reiterate a play which still suffers from a bad reputation. How is this early modern text, now rarely staged, envisioned by the two companies, both working on a very different scale? How do these two iterations deal with the bad connotations associated with the play? To answer these questions, I will analyze the reception of these two adaptations using audience data I collected at several performances of both plays (through surveys and interviews). In October 2022, I attended four performances of *Henry VIII* at Shakespeare's Globe, during which 143 surveys were filled out by playgoers and 23 short interviews conducted, either during the interval or after the play. In April 2023, I went to six performances of the play by the BSF, collected 128 surveys and ran 21 interviews on Zoom in the weeks after the show. This work with audiences takes place in the wider context of my PhD, which focuses on Shakespearean twenty-first century audiences, and which aims to explore, as Helen Freshwater puts it, "the road less travelled" (27), asking audiences directly for their opinion, rather than basing myself on what reviewers might write.[3] To do so, I rely on mixed methods research, using both quantitative and qualitative approaches drawn from sociology. The first step for each performance was to hand out a survey before the beginning of the play. The survey has a quantitative goal: I aim to measure gender, age, professional category, and yearly theatrical attendance. It also has a qualitative component, as I ask the playgoers why they had decided to come to the play, what their expectations were, or what they associated with the name Shakespeare. At the end of the survey for the BSF, the spectators were free to leave an email address or a phone number, so that I could contact them to conduct an interview on Zoom. At Shakespeare's Globe, I talked to

random spectators directly at the end of the play or during the interval. The Shakespeare's Globe study was conducted at the beginning of my PhD, at a time when I was still trying out different approaches: my interactions with the spectators were limited to what we may call "vox pop" or "street interview", only asking audience members what they thought of the performance, and what they had expected the performance to be like before coming in. The BSF study is composed of longer interviews, each lasting between forty minutes to an hour, asking twenty questions related to the performance, theatrical habits, and perception of Shakespeare. The Shakespeare's Globe's shorter interviews allowed me to get direct reactions from the spectators, right after they had seen the play, while the BSF interviews were more in-depth, but also more distant, as the interviews happened a few days or a week after the performance. For both studies, the survey was elaborated with the Plateforme Universitaire de Données (PUD) at the Maison des Sciences de l'Homme in Clermont-Ferrand, to make sure the quantitative data would be valid.[4] As of today, I have collected 1665 answers to the survey, working with theatres in France, Germany, the UK and the USA. In terms of these two specific studies, the BSF production attracted a very small crowd (around twenty spectators for each performance), and except for a dozen spectators who did not wish to fill out the survey, I was able to have it completed by all the playgoers. The Shakespeare's Globe performance drew a much larger crowd, and I was of course unable to survey the entire audience. Surveys should always be considered carefully, as spectators can misunderstand a question, and as they do not reflect the entire audience. As for the interviews, they should not be equated with truth either. As Hervé Dumez underlines about the work achieved through qualitative methodologies: "[C]e matériau est structurellement lacunaire : le chercheur ou l'équipe de recherche n'ont pas pu interviewer tout le monde ; ils ont pu observer certaines situations ou interactions, mais pas d'autres ; certaines archives ont disparu ou ne sont pas ouvertes" (21). Mixed methodologies have their limits, but they allow us to understand audiences in a better way, through their own discourse, and through quantitative data,

which offer some distance with what spectators formulate about their playgoing habits. The aim of the questions asked during the interview was not to validate a specific hypothesis – which would have led to directed and biased questions, beside enhancing the risk of circularity[5] – but to gather material on audiences' theatrical practices, and their impressions of a specific production. By exploring the interviews and surveys I have collected here, I do neither imply that my research represents all the playgoers present, nor that what spectators have to say about a production should be taken at face-value. My goal is rather to illustrate a reflection on *Henry VIII*'s contemporary reception by representing some of the audience's voices. To do so, I will analyze the difficulties of iterating an ill-loved play on the contemporary stage, before turning to how the two companies under study decided to tackle this challenge. Lastly, I will focus on what kind of audiences the two companies tried to target.

The challenge of iterating an ill-loved play

Before turning to our two productions, it seems necessary to delve into the text's reception and performance history. Indeed, *Henry VIII* was not always unpopular. As Gordon McMullan explains, "it was performed in every decade, and in every year of some decades, from the mid-seventeenth century well into the nineteenth century, and later nineteenth-century productions became showpieces of contemporary theatrical fashion" (3-4). Yet, McMullan also states that "critics remained largely lukewarm about *Henry VIII*, treating it at best as 'minor Shakespeare' and often ignoring it altogether. Certain key roles – Katherine and Wolsey, in particular – were considered powerful, but the play from which they were drawn was felt to be deeply flawed" (3-4). Performing *Henry VIII* became a challenge around the middle of the nineteenth century (Margeson 6). Indeed, at this point, the play's authorship started being questioned, and Fletcher's supposed participation to the writing of the play was pointed out as the main reason for its deficiencies. It was James Spedding who, in 1850, first suggested that Fletcher could have collaborated with Shakespeare and

criticized the play for this reason.[6] Moreover, the rise of Bardolatry in the nineteenth century has much to do with its definition as "bad" Shakespeare, according to Ilka Alter:

> By 1850 adoration of the Bard had become very much a part of English culture. Just as Shakespeare was viewed as the paradigmatic artist, so too was his work perceived to be the very model of aesthetic achievement. Not surprisingly, what constituted the perfection of his art was defined by Victorian literary standards, and what shaped dramatic response was Victorian theatrical convention. (179)

Indeed, the lack of unity in the "episodic structure" of the play was one important reason for its negative criticism in the twentieth century (McMullan 4). Rather than providing a clear message, or a detailed portrait of the monarch, the play does not lead its audience towards a specific meaning: this negative vision is also linked with the generic classification of the text, considering *Henry VIII* only as a history play. Instead of seeing the "mixing of dramatic genres" that is at stake in *All is True*, some critics have disregarded its possible status as a "tragicomic romance", which could explain why it has been perceived as lacking structure (Greenblatt 807). The text was thus considered as imperfect, incoherent and inconsistent (Alter 179), making the shared authorship with Fletcher the only plausible explanation for the text's flaws. As Alter explains: "Rather two authors, one of whom is clearly less able, than a deficient or inadequate Shakespeare" (179). Since then, the play has been reappraised by scholars (McMullan, Alter, and Gossett to name a few): however, it is still associated by theatrical critics (as the many negative reviews for the Globe's 2022 production have demonstrated) with a "bad" play, lacking a clear structure, with too many procession scenes, and an unfortunate collaboration with Fletcher.

What interests me here is not to determine if the play is actually good or bad – since, as the reception history of the play proves, aesthetic appraisal is subjective and ever-changing – but to emphasize how much this appraisal of *Henry VIII* as one of Shakespeare's "bad ones" weighs on audiences' expectations, before, during, and after the performance. In fact, criticism by George C. D. Odell, Professor

of English at Columbia University, first published in 1920, strongly echoes with how spectators perceived the play in the two productions I have studied. Odell states: "The trouble with *Henry VIII* is that it is impossible to maintain interest in its story after the fall of Wolsey and the death of Katherine; the bits about the christening of Elizabeth and the trial of Cranmer are actually glued on the first part in order to eke out the necessary five acts" (qtd. in Alter 179). More than a hundred years later, spectators at the BSF indicate: "the play has three trial scenes. I'm like, really? There's a third one?"; "And instead of making the play two and a half hours, if it was two hours and fifteen minutes… I mean, the last bit, you know, you're sort of done. The story's kind of done. Let's get to the christening." This negative appraisal of the play started even before the beginning of performance. Thus, one spectator at the Globe mentioned in the survey: "Should be good, even though probably not a terribly good example of Shakespeare, probably written mostly by John Fletcher", and another: "Not favorite play, love *Comedy of Errors* and *Henry V* more." The collaboration with Fletcher appeared as a bad starting point, as one spectator even mentioned "a lower standard of writing" in the survey.[7] One spectator from the BSF explained after seeing the production: "I know the history pretty well and skimmed this text in college, so I already knew I was in for a long show that isn't terribly exciting." Another evoked the fact that the play felt like a piece of propaganda from Shakespeare: "The fact of it is, *Henry VIII* is certainly not his best play. And I think there's a reason that it never gets produced. It's not very good. And as soon as the curtain came down, my first thought was, Shakespeare was such a suck up. And it was clear, it's always been clear that he knew who his patron was. And he cut and pasted his plays to make sure that the patron was happy at the end of it".[8]

Contrary to nineteenth and twentieth century disapproval of the play, blaming Fletcher for the "defects" of the text, contemporary spectators did not shy away from criticizing Shakespeare directly. The dislike of the production was not imputed to the company or the way they staged the play, but to the text itself. Performing *Henry VIII* on the contemporary anglophone stage is therefore linked to a set of

preconceptions that are hard to overcome. Any iteration of *Henry VIII* on the contemporary stage thus needs to deal with the "burden" of the play's status. How did our two productions take on this challenge, and what visions of the play did they offer?

Rising to the challenge: staging *Henry VIII*

The two productions under study took a very different path to iterate the play. Let us note that this difference is partly due to the scale of both companies. Shakespeare's Globe is a major company on London's theatrical scene, attracting both tourists and locals to its productions, with financial means considerably superior to those of the BSF. The BSF is a local company, attached to playing Shakespeare with minimal cuts to the text, universal lighting, and limited scenic designs. However, each director's dramatic choices in staging the play make the comparison of the two productions worth analyzing. First, Shakespeare's Globe offered a new version of the text. The company had already staged *Henry VIII* twelve years prior in a production that lasted three hours and made few cuts to the original (directed by Mark Rosenblatt in 2010). This time, the theater presented a partly rewritten text by writer-in-residence Hannah Khalil. She explains:

> My brief was to sculpt the play into an exploration of the female experience. I took threads that already existed within the play and stitched them into richer seams, pruning other sections that felt less relevant to this reimagining. To compose more language for the characters, I worked 'collaboratively' with Shakespeare, by mining the treasure trove of 37 plays and 154 sonnets. I 'magpied' snippets of text, putting new words in the mouths of the characters to deepen the exploration of their experiences and to tell a story that feels more relevant to now.

Cutting some passages (such as Cranmer's trial at the end of the play) while putting to the fore female characters (Anne Boleyn, Katherine of Aragon and Mary Tudor) gave a feminist dimension to the text. One spectator related the use of music and the refocusing of the story on women's point of view to the musical *Six*, which was performed at the same time in London's West End. This was a way to

make the iteration of the play speak to contemporary concerns and interests, as Professor Peter Kirwan underlines in his review of the performance:

> Amy Hodge's *Henry VIII* is the first major mounting of Shakespeare and Fletcher's play since *Six: The Musical*, in an era that has also seen a Black woman play Anne Boleyn on television, Thomas Cromwell become a leading figure in Hillary Mantel's book/television/film juggernaut, and Shakespeare's Globe stage more confrontations with its own history, most prominently Morgan Lloyd Malcolm's channelling of Emilia Lanier to demand that we 'burn the fucking house down'. (2022)

The characterization of Henry as an immature King, unable to control himself also echoed current political issues, amid the "partygate" scandal. The feminist lens chosen by Khalil was appreciated by several of the women spectators I spoke to: "I love how real it is and it's still real today. Women's right, women's privilege, lack of privilege"; "Yeah, I thought it was absolutely wonderful, the cast were incredible, the take on the relationships and how they turned it into a complete kind of empowerment of women at the end was really a lovely spin on Shakespeare's original." The production was frequently punctuated with songs, notably one making Katherine's words in 3.1 into an anthem: "unmannerly we women, we women lacking wit".[9] The Globe tried to free itself from the play's reputation to offer a new version of the text, in touch with contemporary interest in the Tudor period and in the rereading of the history of Henry VIII through a feminist lens. By doing so, however, it was also in touch with a long tradition of focusing the play on its female characters, as Susanne Gosset analyzes:

> In one way the reception of *Henry VIII* has been continuous from Victorian times to the present: in its focus on the two queens. The drama seems oddly current, the tale of an older, devoted spouse replaced by a fertile trophy wife many years younger. Anne's own uncertainty, the way in which she is pushed into her position and yet cannot help seeking it, nicely embodies contemporary ideas about the objectification of women and the internalised false consciousness that abets it. (197)

Despite its choice of rewriting the text, the Globe's iteration thus stayed aligned with a long tradition of selecting specific roles from

the play to put them forward – rather than trying to represent the different perspectives present in the text.

The BSF chose a very different line, making few cuts to the script. It laid strong emphasis on the gossip and the role of the courtiers in the making of information. This echoes with Anne Teulade's analysis of the play, as she demonstrates that an ironic reading of the initial title can be made: "La pièce démontre que tout est faux, de sorte qu'il est possible de la concevoir comme une incitation à réfléchir sur la construction et la fabrique de l'histoire" (par. 7). Instead of the traditional providential understanding of the text, implied by Cranmer's praise during Elizabeth's baptism at the end of the play (5.4), Teulade offers to read *Henry VIII* as a reflection on how truth is distorted and reported in historical accounts. Indeed, Shakespeare and Fletcher's text constantly stages rumors and lies. At the beginning of the play, Cardinal Wolsey asks a secretary to spread the belief that he was the one to make the king cancel an unpopular tax, when it was Queen Katherine's doing: "let it be noised / that through our intercession this revokement / And pardon comes" (1.2.105-6). The play is rife with the courtiers' gossip and alludes to the distortion of history, and to Teulade, the cumulative succession of actions, rather than being a weakness in the construction of the play, puts forth the absence of any logical link between cause and consequences (par. 24). This vision of the play is clearly the one chosen by director Jeff Miller. While Henry was confronting Wolsey for instance, the courtiers sneaked out of the room and slid a wooden panel that connected the theater to the backstage area that was visible and they watched the scene while commenting on it and rejoicing in the Cardinal's demise, before sliding the panel shut again. In the program of the play, one can read:

> In a play with no sword fights, no wars, and no bloodshed, the most powerful men and women in the world rise and fall through pen-strokes and word-of-mouth. As the alternate title (All is True) implies, the notion of what is fact and what is fiction pervades this play, and rumor runs rampant as political factions vie for power. (BSF 5)

Several audience members felt confused by this lack of "sword fights" and "bloodshed" and by the portrayal of Henry VIII, which proved disappointing for those knowing Tudor history, as this spectator underlines: "I'm familiar with the story, very into Tudor history, but I just never read that play and it's strange because I found the context of the play to be not as exciting as I expected it to be, considering everything that happened in Henry VIII's life, but I think the cast did a great job." Yet, one might argue that this unsettling representation of history is exactly what the play aims for. As Nadia Thérèse Van Pelt explains:

> The spectators receive their share in the playmaker'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. (40)

The BSF production tried to represent this unease on stage, and to emphasize the gap between historical truth and theatrical representation. What both companies had to decide was whether the text is "a complex play with an underlying unity" or "a collection of lively shows and unrelated emotional scenes" (Margeson 32-33). In the Globe version, the script was no longer considered as a self-sufficient unit; the stronger passages were chosen, laying emphasis on Katherine and Wolsey's characters, and were reinforced with additions by Khalil. On the contrary, the BSF's focused on the play as a coherent whole, unified by the theme of gossip and the complex representation of historical truth.

Both performances, however, focused on their relationship with their audiences. With its pageant scenes and trials, *Henry VIII* appears as a constant spectacle, which is commented live by the courtiers, like a social media feed and creates a strong metatheatrical dimension. As John Margeson underlines:

> Irony is apparent in the structure of *Henry VIII*, it is also theatrically active as dramatic irony in specific scenes, and it affects much of the play through such devices as diverse observation and commentary, since almost everyone in the play becomes involved in watching others and speculating about their reactions or motives. (43)

The play continuously stages the question of reception, a fact that the Globe and the BSF did not overlook. In the Globe's production, two wooden platforms were installed in the middle of the pit, and the two gentlemen of the original text became two women in the production. They were on the platforms for most of the performance, commenting on what was going on onstage. They often started booing or laughing, which initiated reactions from the audience. Peter Kirwan explains:

> These two women played a semi-choric function, often deployed to clean up or attend on others and later progressing to be nurses, but regularly returning to their commentary role. Against the parade of immaculately dressed purple men – Kevin McMonagle's ludicrously bewigged and officious Chamberlain, Esmonde Cole's confident Surrey, Baker Mukasa's joyless and somewhat prissy Norfolk – the women spoke for this London, restless and unhappy, waiting to intervene. (2022)

Thus, they paved the way for the actual audience members by showing them that the theater had become a court, in which they were active participants, a crowd rather than an audience. For instance, Katherine invoked the support of the audience when she was pleading her cause during her trial, and the audience often applauded her exit, which she did by crossing the pit to go through one of the theater's doors, as if dividing a crowd of townspeople who had just watched the trial. The same is true of the BSF open production. The company played its production in a large room inside a church building. The room had a small proscenium stage, but instead of using this stage throughout the play, the actors played mostly amongst the spectators and the stage was reserved for trial scenes and official moments within the play. When Katherine knelt to pray for instance, she did this right in the middle of an alley between the spectators' seats. The action was played very close to the audience, and spectators felt like privileged

witnesses to history. The courtiers were constantly commenting on the action in the middle of the spectators. This reinforced the play's ambiguous representation of truth and historical facts, which the company aimed to expose. Audiences were at the center of both productions' approaches.

"Who's there?": planning *Henry VIII*'s reception and targeting the audience

Given the difficulty of adapting Shakespeare and Fletcher's play today, what kind of audiences did both companies target when programming *Henry VIII*? Linda Hutcheon insists on the importance of repetition in the pleasure of adaptation: "Like a ritual, this kind of repetition brings comfort, a fuller understanding, and the confidence that comes with the sense of knowing what is about to happen next" (114). But with *Henry VIII*, a majority of the audience mentioned that they were seeing the play for the first time. I evoked the weight of expectations at the beginning of this article, yet the Globe and the BSF might also have hoped to surprise their audiences. As Warren Chernaik underlines:

> With yet another production of plays in the standards repertory, it is sometimes hard to break free from the burden of tradition, the memory of having seen Laurence Olivier or Ian McKellen, Peggy Ashcroft or Judi Dench, in a particular part. With *Henry VIII*, hardly any members of the audience are likely to have seen productions, or even read the play (…) At the very least, there is the possibility of discovering something new, and finding out what the actors can make of the material. (101)

Thus, audiences could be pleased to discover a new text by Shakespeare, leaving room for surprise and novelty. However, several reviews of the Globe's production indicated that the performance could only please a specific type of spectators. The *Evening Standard* made it clear that only Shakespeare fans were likely to enjoy the play: "There's enough going on here to please nerds and Shakespeare completists, but I can't honestly recommend it to anyone else" (Curtis). Yet, the real audience was far from being composed only of "nerds"

and "completists", i.e. spectators trying to see all of Shakespeare's plays performed. At Shakespeare's Globe, due to its status as a tourist attraction, 60,5% of the audience had never been to the Globe before.[10] This indicates that an important part of the audience was not familiar with the company and the type of work it is pursuing. Thinking that the play is made for "completists" only does not come close to the truth. Staging *Henry VIII* at the Globe is actually a precarious balancing work, between audiences who are unfamiliar with Shakespeare (like this Globe spectator: "It's my first Shakespeare, it's my first time seeing Shakespeare at the Globe so I didn't know what to expect") and playgoers who attend the performance with very specific expectations, as was the case with this other Globe spectator: "I'm actually a history student so I'm comparing it to real life history […]. They don't really explain why Henry is so adamant on divorcing Catherine in favor of Anne Boleyn." Commenting on site-specific performances of *Henry VIII*, Johanna Schmitz evokes the 2010 production of the play at the Globe directed by Mark Rosenblatt:

> Knowing that this was the play during which the first Globe so famously caught fire and burned to the ground on June 29, 1613, I wonder how many in the audience looked up in act one, as the cannon fired two shots, 'chambers discharged' (1.4.49), to acknowledge the several visible sprinkler heads protruding so unapologetically above the pitch of the new Globe's thatched roof. (691)

This time, the Globe's 2022 production did not employ a proper cannon, but a pistol firing confetti that Henry used just after meeting Anne Boleyn. Rather than producing "a proximity to the theatrical past we so desperately hope to find" (Schmitz 692), the Globe's 2022 production tried to anchor the performance in the present. The costumes used contemporary elements like Nike sneakers or flip-flops, making the characters closer to us, as one spectator underlines: "I've never seen something live before but I saw a recording of *Twelfth Night* and it was very…the costumes were older and that type of stuff. So I'm surprised how they're wearing like sandals and these nice… they're wearing stuff I would wear!" The shift from cannon to confetti, from traditional costume to a mix of traditional and modern

elements, indicated that the Globe tried to build a performance not only for completists, but also for those who knew nothing about the play. Rather than alluding to the cannon that set fire to the Globe in 1613, a fact that completists and Shakespeare fans were bound to know, the performance emphasized a sense of spectacle and fun that was accessible to all. Completists were not forgotten, as the play was a patchwork of famous snippets taken from Shakespeare's other – and more famous – works: "Shakespeare enthusiasts will enjoy spotting which play or sonnet is being pilloried at any given time" (Hood). Indeed, a stewardess reported that a spectator, during one of the performances, exclaimed "but that's from *Henry VI*!" and the line "the lady does protest too much, me thinks" (*Hamlet*, 3.2.254) triggered laughter from the audience at the four performances I attended. The Globe's adaptation thus tried to please both newcomers and experts, taking into account what these different audience members would react to.

On the other hand, the BSF audience was mostly composed of spectators looking for this specific play, with a smaller number of newcomers discovering the company's work (60% had already been to a BSF performance). The BSF kept closer to the text, presumably because it is the artistic line of the company, which sets a strong focus on Original Practices, which can be described as "the means by which modern theater practitioners attempt to perform Shakespearean and other English Renaissance drama as they believe Shakespeare and his theatrical contemporaries might have done" (Weingust 1474). As Dr Farah Karim-Cooper explains, Original Practices are about "experimentation": thus, they go beyond historical reconstruction, as they aim not only to reconstruct and recreate but also to use and experiment with created artifacts such as architecture, costume, and to explore lighting, modes of playing, direction, language… (Shakespeare's Globe and Farah Karim-Cooper) One might assume that this is what the BSF audience, composed mainly of Shakespeare aficionados, was looking for. Several of the spectators mentioned being Shakespeare fans, and having already visited the Globe in London and Shakespeare's birthplace in Stratford-Upon-Avon. As one of them

declared, "I'm a bardologer. I'm a, you know, […] I'm a Shakespeare worshiper for better or for worse". For this type of audience, the performance of *Henry VIII* was perceived as a special occasion: "Well I was very happy to see it, because it was the first time I've ever seen it live on stage. And it's not a play that's done very often. I'd seen recordings of the Globe production and so on. So this was a wonderful, rare opportunity to see the play live." The spectators of the BSF also prepared for the performance in advance: several mentioned having read the play, or watched online performances, as well as doing general research about it, and listening to podcasts or online conferences about Shakespeare. One spectator even had an Excel file listing all the Shakespeare productions he had attended: "So I've seen 34 out of the 39. I haven't seen any of *Henry VI* or *Two Noble Kinsmen* or *Troilus and Cressida*. *Henry VIII* was the most recent new edition. I had never seen that before. I've seen A *Midsummer Night's Dream* 11 times, the 'Scottish Play' nine times, and *The Tempest* nine times. *Romeo and Juliet* eight times, and then *As You Like It*, *Hamlet*, and *Richard III* all six times." These highly prepared spectators came to the performance with in-depth knowledge of Shakespeare and the play. The BSF thus emphasized textual proximity, something that the spectators – some of whom could be described as bardolaters and Shakespeare's enthusiasts – appreciated, as coming to *Henry VIII* was a rare opportunity to see the text performed. Therefore, bardolatry, which in the nineteenth century had much to do with the play being labeled as "bad" because of Fletcher's role in the writing, brought spectators to a play which still suffers from its difficult reputation.

Conclusion

Adapting the "rambling script from William Shakespeare and John Fletcher" (Nathan) proves a difficult challenge for contemporary directors. As Ilka Alter underlines, "given the infrequency with which *Henry VIII* is performed in our century, its relative popularity in earlier periods seems unexpected to say the least, raising inevitable questions about what factors ultimately determine the ongoing theatrical vital-

ity of plays within the canon" (180-181). The reception of the two productions at stake has shown that *Henry VIII* still suffers from its categorization as a "bad" play, but also demonstrates a desire to rise to the challenge posed by Shakespeare and Fletcher's text. The Globe production, with its contemporary rewriting, offered a new text, going beyond debates on authorship or structure. At the same time, it took up again a century-long vision of the play, putting forward female roles, reinforcing the belief that the play could only be iterated through the erasure of Henry's importance in the performance. As Ilter pleads for "a further exploration of the extent to which theatrical tradition and performance history shape what we have previously assumed to be the intrinsic meanings of a particular play" (184), one may wonder if the reappraisal of the play by scholars will lead to a new popularity on stage. *Henry VIII*'s place in the Shakespearean canon also invites us to reflect on the lack of popularity on the contemporary stage of other plays, such as *King John,* or *The Two Noble Kinsmen*, and on what contemporary audiences project on Shakespeare, the status of the plays being deeply affected by "social attitudes" towards them (Gossett 186).

Appendix

Survey, Shakespeare's Globe, *Henry VIII*

How old are you? ☐ less than 18 y. old ☐ 18-25 ☐ 26-35 ☐ 36-50 ☐ 51-70 ☐ over 70

What best describes your gender? ☐ Agender ☐ Female ☐ Male ☐ Gender fluid ☐ Non-binary ☐ Transgender ☐ Prefer not to say ☐ Other:

Is it your first visit to Shakespeare's Globe? ☐ yes ☐ no

Is it your first time seeing a Shakespeare play? ☐ yes ☐ no

How often do you go the theatre? ☐ 1-2 times a year ☐ 3-5 ☐ 6-10 ☐ 10-20 ☐ more than 20

Today, you came: ☐ alone ☐ accompanied

Do you live in the UK? ☐ yes ☐ no / Do you live in London? ☐ yes ☐ no

What are three words you associate with Shakespeare?

What are three words you associate with the play *Henry VIII*?

Why did you come to today's performance?

What are your expectations for the show?

Did you read any critical reviews about the play? ☐ yes ☐ no

Did you prepare yourself for the performance (by reading the play, articles, doing some research?)

Do you think the play will be ☐ easy to understand ☐ somewhat complex ☐ very difficult to understand

In your opinion, Shakespeare should be ☐ played as traditionally as possible ☐ modernized

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1 Now referred to as BSF.

2 I wholeheartedly thank Shakespeare's Globe and the BSF for letting me work with their audiences and being so very welcoming to me. I would also like to express my gratitude for the anonymous reviewers who gave me very precious advice on this article.

3 On reception and audience theory, see (to name but a few) Bennett, Freshwater, Kennedy, Mervant-Roux and Purcell. On the sociology of audiences, see Coulangeon and Pasquier.

4 The survey was conceived with Axel Delarue, a study engineer at the PUD. I have provided the Shakespeare Globe's survey in the Appendix.

5 The risk of circularity is when the collected data is used to verify a specific theory, thus leading the researcher to select data that will only confirm his or her hypothesis (Dumez 11).

6 "Spedding disliked the play, finding that it lacked a clear moral design, and did not believe that Shakespeare could have written the whole of it at the end of his career, even though he recognised that certain scenes showed the master's hand" (Margeson 6).

7 Interestingly, as Peter Kirwan mentions, the 2010 production of *Henry VIII* at Shakespeare's Globe erased Fletcher from all publicity materials (2010). The inclusion of Fletcher in the 2022 production indicates a new era in the Globe's marketing strategy, reinforced with its "Editing in Action" Project in the summer of 2022, when audience members were invited to explore extracts from Fletcher's plays with academics and actors (Shakespeare's Globe).

8 This vision is strongly reductive. Even though Shakespearean criticism saw a propaganda purpose in the historical plays in the 1940s, this vision has been largely contested and nuanced since then, as Anne Teulade explains: "Il fait consensus depuis les études Phillys Rackin (*sic*) que ces pièces sont davantage des réflexions sur l'agencement de l'histoire que de simples représentations de l'his-

toire, et qu'elles ne défendent pas une représentation monologique des desseins divins" (pars.3-4).

[9] Shakespeare and Fletcher's text reads: "Do what ye will, my lords and pray forgive me; / If I have used myself unmannerly, / You know I am a woman, lacking wit/ To make a seemly answer to such persons" (3.1.174-177). All quotes are from the New Cambridge Shakespeare edition.

[10] This is according to my survey. The Globe also indicates in its 2022-2023 report that in 2022, when the tourism market was still recovering from Covid-19, 40% of their audiences came from outside the UK.