

All Is True (Henry VIII)

BY WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE AND JOHN FLETCHER

INTRODUCTION

ON 29 June 1613 the firing of cannon at the Globe Theatre ignited its thatch and burned it to the ground. According to a letter of 4 July the house was full of spectators who had come to see 'a new play called *All is True*, which had been acted not passing two or three times before'. No one was hurt 'except one man who was scalded with the fire by adventuring in to save a child which otherwise had been burnt'. This establishes the play's date with unusual precision. Though two other accounts of the fire refer to a play 'of'±±which may mean simply 'about'±±Henry VIII, yet another two unequivocally call it *All is True*; and these words also end the refrain of a ballad about the fire. When the play came to be printed as the last of the English history plays±±all named after kings±±in the 1623 Folio it was as *The Famous History of the Life of King Henry the Eighth*. We restore the title by which it was known to its first audiences.

No surviving account of the fire says who wrote the play that caused it. In 1850, James Spedding (prompted by Tennyson) suggested that Shakespeare collaborated on it with John Fletcher (1579±±1625). We have external evidence that the two dramatists worked together in or around 1613 on the lost *Cardenio* and on *The Two Noble Kinsmen*. For their collaboration in *All is True* the evidence is wholly internal, stemming from the initial perception of two distinct verse styles within the play; later, more rigorous examination of evidence provided by both the play's language and its dramatic technique has convinced most scholars of Fletcher's hand in it. The passages most confidently attributed to Shakespeare are Act 1, Scenes 1 and 2; Act 2, Scenes 3 and 4; Act 3, Scene 2 to line 204; and Act 5, Scene 1.

The historical material derives, often closely, from the chronicles of Raphael Holinshed and Edward Hall, supplemented by John Foxe's *Book of Martyrs* (1563, etc.) for the Cranmer episodes in Act 5. It covers only part of Henry's reign, from the opening description of the Field of the Cloth of

Gold, of 1520, to the christening of Princess Elizabeth, in 1533. It depicts the increasing abuse of power by Cardinal Wolsey; the execution, brought about by Wolsey's machinations, of the Duke of Buckingham; the King's abandonment of his Queen, Katherine of Aragon; the rise to the King's favour of Anne Boleyn; Wolsey's disgrace; and the birth to Henry and Anne of a daughter instead of the hoped-for son.

Sir Henry Wotton, writing of the play, said that the play represented 'some principal pieces of the reign of Henry 8, which was set forth with many extraordinary circumstances of pomp and majesty.' It has continued popular in performance for the opportunities that it affords for spectacle and for the dramatic power of certain episodes such as Buckingham's speeches before execution (2.1), Queen Katherine's defence of the validity of her marriage (2.4), Wolsey's farewell to his greatness (3.2), and Katherine's dying scene (4.2). Though the play depicts a series of falls from greatness, it works towards the birth of the future Elizabeth I, fulsomely celebrated in the last scene (not attributed to Shakespeare) along with her successor, the patron of the King's Men.