Henry VIII
William Shakespeare

Henry VIII

This is Shakespeare's dutiful tribute to one of the most imposing and terrifying rulers in European history. The kingdom trembles as the giant monarch storms through his midlife crisis, disposing of the faithful Katharine of Aragon and starting a new life and, the king hopes, a line of succession with the captivating young Anne Bullen. Unlike his predecessors, Henry has no doubt about the security of his tenure on the throne, and dominates the royal court with absolute authority. The extent of the King's power is graphically illustrated by the fate of the Duke of Buckingham, who goes calmly to execution while deploring, not the unjust despotism of the king. but rather the machinations of the unscrupulous advisers who led their sovereign astray.

As in Henry V, Shakespeare's other portrait of a relentlessly triumphant monarch, the interest of the audience is maintained by the sheer busyness of the action and the lively interpolations from minor characters such as the ambitous Old Lady. The play has a surprisingly modern flavour: the presentation of the drama has a journalistic aspect almost completely absent from Shakespeare's other history plays. There is even a set of "Royal watchers" − the three gossipy gentlemen! (Summary by Algy Pug)

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