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All is True (Henry VIII): The Unbearable Sex of Henry VIII

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The Unbearable Sex of Henry VIII

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If I see a man that is Hot, Hairy, high-coloured, with a black thick curled head of haire, great veines, & a big voice, I dare be bold to say, that that man hath a hot and dry Liver, and his Generative parts are also of the same Temper; & that consequently he is inclined to lustfull desires.

—James Ferrand, *Erotomania*, 170

Hot, hairy, and big. Were it not for the archaic language and suspicion of “lustfull desires,” this passage from James Ferrand’s treatise *Erotomania* (1645) could come from hairyboyz.com or any website devoted to “bears”—those chubby, bearded, and hirsute gay men who constitute a significant modern subculture. Nor was Ferrand the only premodern writer to figure an erotic—or is it a pornographic?—of pogonotrophy. Clement of Alexandria had argued that God adorned man “with a beard like a lion, making him tough, with a hairy chest, for such is the emblem of strength and empire.”¹ Marcus Ulmus contended in 1603 that “Nature gave to mankind a Beard, that it might remaine as an Index in the Face, of the Masculine generative faculty.”² In a similar vein, John Bulwer argued in *Anthropometamorphosis* (1654) that “shaving the chin is justly to be accounted a note of Effeminacy.”³ Indeed, according to Will Fisher, the clean-shaven man in early modern England “quite literally becomes ‘lesse man’ or even a ‘woman,’”⁴ a prejudice Fisher finds in Phillip Massinger’s play *The Guardian* (1658). Massinger suggests that a husband without a beard is worse than an adulterer because the former risks being considered sodomitical; lacking facial hair, he was supposed incapable of sexual regeneration.⁵ And in the opinion of Johan Valerian (1533), the shaven face ranks its holder among “chyldren” and “gelded men”⁶—that is, the smooth, shaved, barely adolescent twink that is the current front-runner of gay desire.

For the contemporary bear lover, though, the happy hunting grounds that

extend to the Lone Star Bar find a particularly rich den in early modernism. After a centuries-long chaetophobia inspired by the early Christian conviction that body hair was the mark of the Beast on fallen man, the fur flew back onto the faces of the sixteenth-century man. In English culture, the papa of these bears is Henry VIII, as shown most readily in Hans Holbein's famous portrait of him of 1540 (figure 1). Here Henry's face offers immediate satisfaction to the beard lover, both for what is there and for what is to come. Thanks to Henry's introduction of the beard to the English court, English Renaissance portraiture from Holbein on would be dominated by bearded figures. Bearded and bearish: The corpulent body in Holbein's canvas at least whets the appetite for the hairy chest that is metonymically suggested by the ermine draping over the king's shoulders and down across his nipples. The sashes under the belly, the sweep of the costume toward the remarkably genital knot of the belt, the right arm directing our gaze down across the stomach to the left hand placed tantalizingly on the hilt of a dagger—all of this leads viewers so inclined to fantasize about how long that dagger really is and what it might prick. With a remarkable and pointed clarity, the filigree of Henry's *costume* images his actual bodily *flesh*, a Henry stripped bare to become Henry the bear (figure 2).

Such a perverse reading of His Majesty's magisterial body is not beside the point in early modern figurations of Henry. Shakespeare opens *Henry VIII* with the spectacle of not one but two big, burly, kingly bodies on display. Moreover, Shakespeare gives them an erotic dynamism that the Holbein portrait can only hint at. The Duke of Norfolk begins the play by describing to Buckingham the famous summit at the Field of the Cloth of Gold in which Henry meets the equally large (and equally hirsute) King Francis I:

I was then present, saw them salute on horseback,
Beheld them when they lighted, how they clung
In their embracement as they grew together,
Which had they, what four throned ones could have weighed
Such a compounded one?
... Men might say
Till this time pomp was single, but now married
To one above itself.⁷

This is the play's first spectacle of huge bodies growing together, melding or "marrying" into an undifferentiated one—the first, but certainly not the only. During Anne Boleyn's coronation in Act 4, we read that

FIGURE 1. Henry VIII, in the manner of Hans Holbein, circa 1540

FIGURE 2. Photographed by Wayne Brereton; modified by Sue Healy

Great-bellied women,
 That had not half a week to go, like rams
 In the old time of war, would shake the press,
 And make 'em reel before 'em. No man living
 Could say "This is my wife" there, all were woven
 So strangely in one piece. (4.1.78–83)

And at the baptism of the baby Elizabeth, we have the crowds turning the court into a version of Paris Garden ("a park for bear- and bull-baiting") to catch sight of the child, as if "some strange Indian with a great tool [has] come to court" (5.3.32–33). "Bless me," cries the Porter, "what a fry of fornication is at the door! On my Christian conscience, this one christening will beget a thousand. Here will be father, godfather, and all together" (5.3.33–36). If the great bellies of Act 4 vie for space with the great tool of Act 5, the effect is merely to embroider on the play's indulgence in swollen bodies entering strangely into one piece—women like phallic rams, great tools and great bellies producing many papas. Papas, and *Papa Bears*, for while the marriage of pomp and circumference at the Valley of the Cloth of Gold does not mention hair, we know it is covered in the stuff: Francis was one of the first European heads of state to sport a beard (figure 3), in defiance of medieval Christian practice, and Henry, in imitation (in identification? in desire?) of Francis, quickly followed suit, bringing the hirsute home to England. In this sense Shakespeare's play opens with something of a girth-and-mirth orgy, where "two kings" become "but one" (1.1.28–32) to beget a thousand beards across the English landscape.

If the invocation of two beefy, hairy men embracing each other into oneness makes my bear-loving imagination run wild, it also brings it up short. I remember, of course, that Henry VIII is the story of a man who marries six different women to produce a kingly heir, and that two of these women end up on the chopping block. When Henry VIII wants someone to give head, he does not have my sort in mind. Moreover, I remember that the gropefest at the Valley of the Cloth of Gold failed to produce any stable and meaningful allegiance between its two monarchs; this particular love story was doomed to failure. But it is precisely these two "failures" to produce a future that cement for me the necessity of reading Henry within the discourses of queer temporality and corporality. Henry's large, fecund body, his beard figuring the seminal overflow of his generative parts,⁸ his lustful desires, the sexual and political prowess that adheres to his regal body all figure impotence and cas-

FIGURE 3. François Clouet, Francis I, circa 1520

tration, an inability to live up to the normative promises that Henry's body makes. How then might *Henry VIII* bear up under a sustained queer reading of its bearishness? How might those simultaneous signifiers of phallic excess and phallic failure help us to read an unregenerate queerness in Shakespeare's play? Let us begin again, with another bearish characteristic: fatness.

In an essay on fat children, ghosts, and animals, Kathryn Bond Stockton teaches us how to read for "sideways growth"—that is, how queer bodily contours and queer bodily acts often register a refusal to grow "up" (into normalcy, singularity, legibility) while nevertheless insisting on growing "out," "around," or "across" sites of meaning.⁹ Contemporary society, she contends, does not yet know what to do with the fat body other than to incorporate it into a pathologizing discourse of unsuccessful human development. Queers would do well, she suggests, to consider how sideways growth can figure a refusal of the strictures of normative development. Cast in other

terms (those of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari), sideways growth may signal the signficatory excesses of the rhizomic body, one that does not or will not align itself with the dictates of Oedipal health—that is, the imperative to grow *up*, straight and tall, with all the rights and normalcy pertaining thereto. While Stockton's preferred site for analysis of this anti-Oedipal, sideways growth is the fat child and the dog-loving lesbian, I suggest we consider the *ursine* as well. Given that the first English law prohibiting sodomy took effect under the reign of Henry VIII, and that it named as a crime the "ab-homynable vice of buggery commyttid with mankynde or beaste,"¹⁰ let us consider how mankind as beast—as bear—refuses to keep *Henry VIII* straight.

The list of male bodies that grow sideways in *Henry VIII* is as imposing as the bodies themselves. There is Henry of course, and his symbiotic Francis; but there is also Cardinal Wolsey, that "keech" (suet, "hunk of fat"; I.I.55) with "unbounded stomach" (4.2.34) who "can, with his very bulk, / Take up the rays o' th' beneficial sun, / And keep it from the earth" (I.I.55–57); and from whose "ambitious finger" "No man's pie is freed" (I.I.52–53). Sexually speaking, the pie that receives Wolsey's ambitious finger is doubtless female, but his clean-shaven face, in obedience to a century of papal dictates, telegraphs a celibacy bordering on the catamitic or the gelded. And if a fat *hairless* body is not condemning enough, let us fantasize hair onto it, as Buckingham and Norfolk do, to complete his moral degradation. Wolsey is a "fox, / Or wolf, or both," says Buckingham (I.I.158–59), animal hair acting as metaphor for bestial, degraded behavior. What is most interesting for my purposes, though, is how Wolsey's courtly ambitions also get figured in terms of sideways growth: not just a horizontal bear body for our Wolsey, but also a sideways *political* growth that bespeaks lack of proper allegiance to the Oedipal, filial, class-based inheritance that constituted Tudor aristocratic propriety. Norfolk's chief complaint about Wolsey is that his power, in addition to being pernicious, is undeserved by someone of his class. This "keech" is, after all, the son of a butcher, and

There's in him stuff that puts him to these ends [political ambitions].

For being not propped by ancestry, whose grace

Chalks successors their way . . .

[he] gives us note

The force of his own merit makes his way—

A gift that heaven gives for him which buys

A place next to the King. (I.I.58–66)

Not a proper Oedipal lineage propped by ancestry, then, but a sideways acquisition. The gifts of his own merit place Wolsey next to (not beneath) the king. Little wonder, then, that Wolsey should figure his undoing in terms of physical shrinkage and deflation. He has “ventured, / Like little wanton boys that swim on bladders, / . . . far beyond my depth” (3.2.359–62) and just as his “greatness is a-ripening, [Fortune] nips his root, / And then he falls” (3.2.358–59). But it is not Fortune that nips this boy’s root, it is Papa Bear. *Henry* breaks the wanton Wolsey’s bladder, removing a “load,” a “burden / Too heavy” from the cardinal’s shoulders (3.2.384–86). A grandeur gained sideways has been too much for Wolsey’s king to bear.

This anti-Oedipal charge bears weight elsewhere in *Henry VIII*. As Wolsey levels against his successor, Thomas Cranmer, the accusation that Cranmer has not risen to his position of power so much as he “hath crawled into the favor of the King” (3.2.104), we get a sense of the potbelly calling the kettle black. And according to the (possibly fallacious) testimony brought against the Duke of Buckingham, such sideways acquisition may also characterize Buckingham’s pretensions to the throne should Henry “without issue die” (1.2.135). But perhaps the most notable sideways growth, the most anti-Oedipal position in the play, belongs to Henry himself. In a passage that would make psychoanalytic readers of *Hamlet* green with envy, Henry decries his almost-but-not-quite Oedipal union with Katherine, the princess “dowager, / Sometimes our brother’s wife” (2.4.177–78). “My conscience first received a tenderness, / Scruple, and prick,” the king tells Wolsey, when the Bishop of Bayonne wonders whether Henry’s daughter, Mary, is the legitimate offspring of a man married to his brother’s wife (2.4.167–68). Is Henry properly a father (and Mary his direct, vertical descendent), or is he more like an uncle, constituted by a sideways relationship to his own brother’s wife?

This respite shook

The bosom of my conscience, entered me,

Yea, with a spitting power, and made to tremble

The region of my breast. (2.4.178–81)

Let us leave aside the entering, pricking, and spitting, the shaking bosoms and trembling breasts, to focus instead on what gets accomplished by this entrance into Henry’s already capacious and sensitive body (at least according to the logics of Shakespeare’s history play). From this anti-Oedipal union comes not only a crisis of sexual subjectivity but also a new marriage, the birth of Elizabeth I, the reformation of Catholicism’s hold over the English

monarchy, and the eventual establishment of the Church of England. That is quite a growth to come from the failure of reproduction—or, rather, from a reproduction that fails to authorize itself as legitimate.

Reading for bears in *Henry VIII*—that is, reading for masculine sexuality that refuses the ideological stabilizing of futurity—is ultimately to read for the ways in which sideways growth thwarts the normalizing fictions of heterosexual reproduction, the way it disfigures the Oedipal linearity of family power. Such lack of linearity takes us, richly and paradoxically, to the play's end, where the birth of Elizabeth I replicates the circular—or is it circumferential?—patterns I have been locating in the body of the bear. In the economy of the Tudor court, Elizabeth is both blessing and curse, an heir who should have been a boy and a virgin who should have been a mother. Yet while she is a female in name, she seems to be a male metonymically. At the moment of Elizabeth's birth, the old lady perversely announces to a panting father that Anne has been delivered

of a lovely boy. The God of heaven
Both now and ever bless her! 'Tis a girl
Promises boys hereafter. Sir, your queen
Desires your visitation, and to be
Acquainted with this stranger. 'Tis as like you
As cherry is to cherry. (5.1.165–70)

Elizabeth signifies as girl only to the degree that she promises boys, a reproductive futurity that empowers the court's masculine and misogynistic qualities, to be sure, but that also re-produces the same-sex economies of desire with which the play opened. Given the play's emphasis on sideways growth around or beyond the strictures of the Oedipal, it is not for nothing that the promise of boys hereafter is precisely the promise that Jacobean audience members at the time of the play's debut would have recognized not to have been honored. It is not for nothing that Elizabeth as metonymic boy is also Elizabeth as *metaphoric* boy, being as like to her father as cherry is to cherry. And it is not for nothing that her own succession, predicted metaphorically in Cranmer's famous speech of Elizabeth as a "maiden phoenix" who will "create another heir" out of her own ashes (5.4.40–41), produced no heirs at all. Rather, she proceeded by way of horizontal accommodation in the appointment of James I to the throne. (Plenty of boys hereafter in James's court perhaps, but not necessarily of the type Cranmer was forecasting.) What a delight, then, that *Henry VIII* stands as the last of Shakespeare's history

plays, since it not only dramatizes so profoundly how the story of this history reproduces the failure to reproduce but, in so doing, produces multiple other histories of queer cathexes, narcissistic pleasures, anti-linear interventions that must be read alongside, but are not equal to, its tyrannies and violence.

It is not for nothing, finally, that "bear" is a homograph—and, indeed, the first example of the trope to appear, innocently but fortuitously, in Lee Edelman's discussion of "homographesis." The homograph, we remember, is that singular signifier that collects different and unrelated meanings to it according to its different etymological histories.¹¹ In this sense, it goes to the heart of queer inscription, as it allegorizes the inscription of the queer: Given that the queer body must be read not just for its difference but for its difference masquerading as sameness, Edelman argues, normative masculinity must always

perform its self-evidence, must represent its own difference from the derivative and artificial "masculinity" of the gay man. The homosexual, in such a social context, is made to bear the stigma of writing or textuality as *his identity*, as the very expression of his anatomy, by a masculinist culture eager to preserve the authority of its own self-identity through the institution of a homographesis whose logic of legibility, of graphic difference, would deny the common "masculinity," the common signifying relation to maleness, of gay men and straight men alike.¹²

Henry VIII does not as a rule set masculine men against feminine men (the starting point for Edelman in his discussion of the twelfth-century sodomite as effeminate), but that is precisely my point. In a queerly anachronistic reading, Shakespeare's play exploits the homograph of the bear as it plays the sexualized body type (Old English *bera*: "a heavily-built, thick-furred plantigrade quadruped") against the imperatives to carry or support and to produce or give birth to (Old High German *ber-an*). Given the unstoppable play of expansion and explosion in *Henry VIII*, of hetero-sexed bodily demarcations that insistently turn back onto (or into) the erotic registers of sameness, and of a reproductive futurity rendered unbearable by the bear's bodily excesses, *Henry VIII* might well offer us ways to reconfigure the contemporary bear as the masculinity that is not one, but that nevertheless troubles the structures of the two.

Exit pursued by a bear. (The Winter's Tale, 3.3.57)

Notes

1. Reynolds, *Beards*, 8.
2. Fisher, "The Renaissance Beard," 174.
3. *Ibid.*, 179.
4. *Ibid.*, 168.
5. *Ibid.*, 177.
6. *Ibid.*, 179.
7. *All Is True* (Henry VIII), in Greenblatt et al., *The Norton Shakespeare*, 1.1.9–21.

Citations in parentheses are to this edition.

8. Fisher, "The Renaissance Beard," 174.
9. Stockton, "Growing Sideways, or Versions of the Queer Child," 279.
10. Goldberg, *Sodometries*, 3.
11. Edelman, *Homographesis*, 13.
12. *Ibid.*, 12.