

Hurricanes and Hampton Court

Susannah Brietz Monta, University of Notre Dame

Abstract

This essay thinks about Hurricane Katrina and the play *Henry VIII* together, a conjunction shaped both by the author's schedule in the late summer and early fall of 2005 and by her training. The play characterizes political turmoil through images of tempests; it both celebrates and undermines its title character's assertions of conscience; it uses carnivalesque discourse as a solvent on the pieties of political ceremony; and it asks whose historical narratives, finally, will prevail, and at what cost. Hurricane Katrina too may be thought about in these terms. It was a phenomenon combining nature with a political neglect both systematic and acute; it exposed the frailties of our nation's conscience; south Louisiana carnival skewered the attempts at all levels of government to put a brave face on the terrible ineptitudes that rendered an already-devastating hurricane catastrophic. Finally, though, this essay raises (but does not definitively answer) questions about the propriety of personal narratives proffered from the academic sidelines. Whose stories get told, whose repressed? May we think about Katrina through and with Shakespeare, without subsuming the hurricane's terrible material effects into comfortable academic modes of analysis, without rendering ourselves the academic equivalents of the play's gossiping gentlemen, trivializing commentators on a moment that forever divides then from now?

Shakespeare's play *Henry VIII* (possibly co-authored with John Fletcher) bears a subtitle that has long proved intriguing to scholars: "All is true." As I was contemplating the Hudson Strode Program's symposium on Shakespeare after Katrina — and, frankly, panicking a little about how to say what I felt, and *what* I ought to say — I kept returning to this play for reasons that will soon be clear. Its subtitle indicates in shorthand what is dwelt upon at length in the play: the problem of perspective on major historical events, or of historical narratives and their discontented remainders. Whose view of Henry's divorce will finally dominate the play's history? And what are the costs of that domination; who and what must be repressed in order to turn England's most famous divorce into a tale of conscience, reform, and renewal? The play refuses to reconcile its diverging perspectives on the history of the divorce and its aftermath, insisting instead in a remarkable paradox that "all is true."

Taking a cue from Shakespeare, we might well ask: who has a proper view of Hurricane Katrina? How do we begin to narrate an event so complex, so controversial, and so utterly devastating, to fit it into the span of a conference paper or an academic article, forms that seem to me as I write this piece much more constricted than they once did? What counts as knowledge about Katrina? What place do personal narratives have in the histories of Katrina, alongside discussions of demographics, civil engineering, global warming, and political corruption? So much is still unknown — and perhaps unknowable — about the precise mechanics of levee failures, even about the numbers of the displaced and dead. I find myself a bit lost without familiar methods and materials for research: what does one say, and why? And if without traditional methods of research we turn to witnessing, then whose personal narratives count? I am privileged in so many ways: through the good fortune of my education and my placement in the American academy, through the fact that my home institution in 2005, Louisiana State University, was built in Baton Rouge, six feet above sea level, rather than on lower ground. Do those of us who took a glancing blow and then watched in horror as the hurricane's aftermath forever changed our region have anything worth saying or worth listening to? Or are we more like the gossiping gentlemen in Shakespeare's play, bystanders whose commentary on those at the center of a rupture forever dividing then from now creates a mere history of hearsay, trivializing as it purports to witness? As I finalize this essay, the answers to these questions remain evasive. While it is important to tell, and retell, and aggregate, individual stories of Katrina experiences in hopes of forestalling a growing national amnesia about the storm, I still feel traces of guilt as I narrate from the economic and academic safety of the sidelines, for that act of narration feels uncomfortably close to usurpation.

I tried to take some comfort in *Henry VIII's* improbable claim that *all* is true as I prepared my talk for the Strode symposium. I felt I might be able to say something true about Katrina if all is true — for I am a Katrina fraud. Or at least I felt that way when, six days after the hurricane pummeled southeastern Louisiana and southern Mississippi, I boarded a plane headed for Henry VIII's luxurious former palace of Hampton Court. I was to give an invited talk, a response to a keynote address on the play *Henry VIII*. Although I had looked forward to this trip for nearly a year, in the days immediately after Katrina I considered staying to help with relief efforts. Persuaded by my husband that there would be plenty to do when I returned — and that I could perhaps do some good by telling my colleagues about the devastation first-hand — I flew to the U.K. on September 4, 2005. My memories of Katrina are thus filtered inevitably through Shakespeare, through the play *Henry VIII* on which I was to talk, and through Hampton Court itself. But thanks to the dynamics of subjective reading so familiar to our profession, my reading of the play itself, a play I knew well, was also inevitably tinged by Katrina. Hurricanes circulate; they curve and swerve, grow and

contract — they do not move in straight lines. Neither has my thinking about Katrina and *Henry VIII*, as I read them through and with each other, my experiences with the hurricane circulating into and back out of the language of the play.

In August of 2005, I was busy at work on my talk, rereading the play and finalizing my remarks even as the Weather Channel's broadcasts became increasingly breathless, as they sent more and more hapless junior weather-people to be blown about on the Gulf coast, as if we needed to watch people losing their hats and microphones in order to appreciate the urgency of the situation. As I finished preparations on my talk, I also began preparations at my Baton Rouge home for Katrina's arrival. I lived in an older neighborhood, with a dicey electric grid; if you sneezed hard enough, you lost power. We knew from experience with Hurricane Georges and Tropical Storm Allison how to ready ourselves: we gathered batteries, heatless lanterns, canned food for us and for our two sons; we attended hurricane parties around the neighborhood; we filled our cars with gasoline; we cleared our yard of its usual decor: plastic toys, dog bowls, disreputable-looking lawn tools. When we lost power at 11:00 pm on August 28, we felt we were ready. For two days, we lived in ignorance of the devastation that dozens of levee failures had wrought on New Orleans, that massive storm surges, winds, and rainfall had brought to southeastern Louisiana and southern Mississippi; we had only battery-powered radio, and the talking heads had, as usual, no real information. Like the gossipy gentlemen in the play — one of whom remarks, disingenuously, "I do not talk much" (2.1.146) — they made dire inferences and predictions, which in our hot and darkened home we chose for the moment to set aside.¹ We ate lots of beans and tuna, watched nervously as trees continued to fall beneath a mercilessly bright sun, and waited.

When we regained power, we were transfixed by CNN's images of New Orleans's plight. Accompanying those images was the steady drone of helicopters flying over our house en route to LSU's Pete Maravich basketball arena, where evacuees received emergency medical treatment before being transported elsewhere. LSU was shut down for a week to serve as a staging ground for FEMA (it also functioned as a make-shift morgue, though this was not publicized at the time). I was proud to be part of LSU's community as colleagues and students dedicated time and money to the emergency. Many LSU basketball and football players turned up at the arena and found unusual work assembling medical equipment and infant cribs, organizing emergency supplies and body bags. The men's basketball team's star player, all 6-foot-9 inches and 310 pounds of him, became a human I.V. pole, draping tubes across his massive shoulders and arms to deliver hydration to a parched and shocked evacuee enduring an emergency procedure. One of my English department colleagues presented herself at the arena a couple of days after the hurricane to help. When asked

about her medical skills, she responded that she had plenty of money. After a few puzzled looks, she was assigned a task: purchase as much denture cream as possible. Numerous evacuees found it impossible to eat, since they left New Orleans with only the clothes on their backs and the teeth in their heads. My colleague promptly bought out as many pharmacies as she could reach. My husband set to work building a database to register displaced teachers and professors; secondary and post-secondary institutions around the state used the database to find faculty and staff to serve their suddenly swollen student bodies. Lacking any discernibly useful skills, I donated all my baby clothes and equipment to a local church serving as a shelter for pregnant evacuees (thus ensuring my third pregnancy shortly thereafter) and sorted tons of clothing donations at St. Vincent de Paul. I learned many things from this experience: how dedicated St. Vincent de Paul's workers and volunteers are; how many tons of clothes they ship overseas and around this country — and what their priorities are, established after years of practical experience. For instance, I learned that one should *not* donate sequined gowns in the wake of a hurricane; although dozens of Louisiana residents apparently felt such evening wear might prove useful, it is not in fact needed, at least not right away. And yet I felt I was facing Katrina's aftermath in my own version of a sequined gown, as I left behind, temporarily, the chaos that Baton Rouge and LSU's campus had become, overwhelmed by a massive influx of evacuees, for the serenity of an English autumn and the glory of Hampton Court.

On that trip, I noticed an immediate change from my earlier visits to the U.K.: I no longer had to explain to anyone where Louisiana was. I was asked certain questions repeatedly: How could an American government capable of waging war halfway around the world fail to deliver water to people stranded in downtown New Orleans? How could the world's richest nation systematically and over decades abandon its most vulnerable city to the sea? Did the fact that most of the evacuees stranded at the Superdome and at the Convention Center were African-American and poor affect their treatment? (The answers to some of these questions were glaringly obvious.) My British colleagues watched aghast as the hurricane laid bare America's weaknesses. Like many European intellectuals, despite an almost casual anti-Americanism they held exaggerated views of America's strengths and capabilities. The only excuse I could offer on behalf of my country in the face of their disbelief — that the area devastated by Katrina was over 90,000 square miles, nearly as large as the entire U.K. — was itself half-hearted; I too was in disillusioned shock. Conversations circulated almost effortlessly from dramatic representations of the Tudors (the subject of the meeting at Hampton Court) to the Katrina disaster. Perhaps as a result of this unusual conjunction, the play gave me language that began to shape my perceptions of the hurricane and its aftermath, and the

hurricane in turn redirected and in some ways darkened my reading of the play. I had to process the hurricane through and with the play; my schedule demanded it, my training determined it.

My talk at Hampton Court was to respond to an address concerning the play and contemporary court politics. The talk took up a number of questions that have dominated recent historicist discussions of the play, questions having to do with determining which religio-political court faction the play most supports. I have always read the play more skeptically, as concerned with the hollowness of political showmanship more generally. In act 2, for instance, Henry awkwardly insists that his "conscience" is a "tender place" that forces him to leave his first wife — an "able bedfellow," as he calls her (2.2.140-42). But given the sexual connotations of "able bedfellow," that "tender place" seems not particularly spiritual, and his insistence that he leaves Katherine for conscience is undercut immediately by Anne, who enters at the beginning of the following scene speaking the very next line the audience hears: "Not for that, neither" (3.1.1). As I studied the play after Katrina, the character of Katherine came to seem less tame than I had previously understood, her eventual submission to the demands of Henry's turbulent conscience laced with passive defiance of Henry's pious platitudes. Even as she dies, she insists that her handmaidens "Strew me o'er with flowers, that all the world may know I was a chaste wife, to my grave" (4.2.168-70). *Contra* Henry's insistence that she had consummated her marriage with his brother, she would stage her own death as a defiant tableau, her final argument a visual protest against Henry's unstable conscience.

In the wake of Katrina, my study of Henry's fraught conscience — so often undercut in the play — became for me a gloss on political leaders' consciences in the wake of the hurricane; Katherine's passive but proud defiance reminded me of Gulf Coast residents who watched with growing anger as political performances of conscience slowly frayed. Governor Blanco wept and wrung her hands in public, but schemed with advisors in private about how best to preserve her image and the potential for a reelection bid, a bid scuttled at least partly because that scheming and its cynical timing came to light. I watched a film clip of President Bush posing awkwardly for photos with Katrina survivors in southern Mississippi, who clung to him tightly, his hand reaching slowly and tentatively for those unwashed and desperate people. Katherine's bitter words on Wolsey after Wolsey's fall had new resonance for me as I watched all layers of government fail the vulnerable people of the Gulf coast: he was "ever double / Both in his words and meaning . . . / [. . .] His promises were, as he was then, mighty; / But his performance, as he is now, nothing" (4.2.38-39, 41-42).

Indeed, *Henry VIII* habitually deflates mighty promises and performances, staging elaborate pageants — complete with Shakespeare's most detailed stage directions, often taken directly from

Holinshed — and then undercutting them. For instance, in the midst of the majesty of Anne Boleyn's coronation, the second gentleman remarks, upon seeing her beauty, "I cannot blame his conscience" (4.1.47), reminding the audience at the moment of Anne's triumph of the conflation of Henry VIII's "conscience" with his sexual desires. Although the play's prologue promises us only "state and woe," and seems to ban carnivalesque comedy when it tells us we will see no "bawdy" play (Prologue, 3, 14), no clowns dressed in yellow and motley; carnival discourse does appear in the play, used to undercut political pageantry. At Anne's coronation, the third gentleman both describes boisterous rejoicing and invokes the specter of tempests:

Believe me, sir, she is the goodliest woman
 That ever lay by man; which when the people
 Had the full view of, such a noise arose
 As the shrouds make at sea in a stiff tempest,
 As loud and to as many tunes. Hats, cloaks,
 (Doublets, I think) flew up, and had their faces
 Been loose, this day they had been lost. Such joy
 I never saw before. 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. (4.1.69-81)

This carnival outburst belies the serenity and grandeur of the coronation pageant. The people's reaction is joyous, to be sure, but likening it to a tempest is ominous, and the failure of those in the crowd to be able to say "This is my wife there" comments ironically on Henry VIII's efforts to find what he would deem a true wife and a true marriage. The christening of the baby Elizabeth is treated similarly. References to "ale and cakes," "May-day morning," and Moorfields — a favorite spot for holidays — set the stage for the porter's remark about the "Fry of fornication" he sees in the people's wild celebrations: "this one christening will beget a thousand" (5.4.9, 13, 31, 34-35). Here as so often, carnival discourse challenges official pieties. The crowd is joyous but unruly, tamed only with difficulty as the play's noble and royal figures enter in procession. This familiar passage juxtaposing tempests and carnival was for me deeply suggestive of the political function of carnival in Katrina's wake.

In the play, carnival discourse challenges the visual rhetoric of political pageantry, the ceremonial argument for the reassertion of orderly continuity. In south Louisiana after Katrina, carnival seemed to me to function in a similar way, its unruliness belying claims that all would soon be back to normal. Despite political figures' insistence that recovery was on track, Louisiana residents knew better. We could do nothing about the fundamental unhelpfulness of various leaders, policies, and agencies, but we certainly could skewer them in Mardi Gras floats. At Baton Rouge's famously irreverent Spanish Town parade, organized in 2006 under the theme "FEMAture Evacuation," I saw a float containing a porta-potty that bore a big sign reading "FEMA trailer" and another marked with the letters F.E.M.A. — standing for "Fix Everything My Ass." There was a float celebrating "Row v. Wade" — the only ways to get out of New Orleans — and one proclaiming the heart-warming sentiment that "Home is where the tarp is." An Egyptian-themed float identified Governor Blanco as "Queen of D'Nile," and another advertised a fictional swimming academy run by President Bush and Mayor Nagin — preparations for the next hurricane, presumably. The images are cruder than Katherine's deathbed tableau of virginal flowers, to be sure, but the impulse is similar: a visual protest of suffering subjects against the fictions constructed by their governors.

It is easy enough to flip the carnivalesque finger at inept and unhelpful government officials. But in the aftermath of the hurricane I read hollow promises and hypocrisy in many places, and found myself deeply frustrated with the reaction of my own professional organization. In my idiosyncratic calendar, carnival season follows on the heels of MLA season. New Orleans's Mardi Gras after Katrina was cut to eight days and scaled down in other ways as well. I was there, six months pregnant, not exactly a great-bellied ram, but feeling like one. In the spring of 2006, New Orleans's carnival drew crowds willing to put up with many more inconveniences than in years past in order to support the city, both economically and emotionally. As we walked to our usual parade spot on the neutral ground of St. Charles Avenue, we passed dozens of dark houses, still without power months after Katrina and marked with spray paint indicating the results of searches: whether bodies were found, what sort (animal, human), when. And yet as I watched that carnival, staged as a challenge to the hurricane and in defiance of the very real difficulties still swamping the city, I found myself wondering why my own profession didn't do more to help New Orleans recover in the only meaningful way it could, in the way the smaller but dedicated Mardi Gras crowds did: by being there and spending money.

In 2005, the Modern Language Association was to meet in New Orleans, but changed venues in September to Washington, D.C. amid worries (certainly legitimate) about accommodations, transportation, and city services, among other things. Still, it is no longer the autumn of 2005, and despite the MLA's history of earnest resolutions in support of America's disenfranchised, the

MLA has yet to use its convention to support the survivors of the worst natural disaster ever to strike the U.S. — for the 2006 convention was, of course, also held elsewhere, in Philadelphia, which had enjoyed the largesse of the MLA just two years prior; the 2007 meeting convened in Chicago; in 2008 the convention was in San Francisco; in 2009 it returned again to Philadelphia. The convention is the sole means the MLA has of contributing substantially to the economic recovery of a region whose lifeblood is the tourism and convention business, and yet in the years following Katrina, New Orleans has been left out of the MLA's plans. Contrast this with the actions of the American Library Association, whose president sent a letter to all members on September 14, 2005 — just over two weeks after the storm — promising to do all he could to see that the ALA meeting would be held in New Orleans in June 2006 as planned. He kept his word; in June of 2006, the ALA brought its huge annual meeting of over sixteen thousand librarians to a grateful city to enjoy its food, jazz, and carnival atmosphere and to contribute financially and through volunteer work to its recovery. In Shakespeare's play, carnival challenges Henry's attempt to regulate his own turbulent desires with ceremony and pageantry. As I watched New Orleans's carnival in the spring of 2006, as I watched Bacchus roll and the flambeaux march, the carnival crowd, enduring considerable discomfort for the sake of the city and its remaining inhabitants, challenged what I saw as the MLA's flawed priorities.

Perhaps most obviously, for me Katrina also highlighted the use of tempests as an ongoing metaphor in *Henry VIII*. The play messes up easy critical chronologies, for of course Shakespeare does not, like Prospero, end all his charms after writing *The Tempest*. In *Henry VIII*, composed after Shakespeare penned Prospero's final words, the central image from the earlier play figures the turmoil lurking beneath the play's many shows of ordered pageantry and ordered government. In the play's opening, the truce between England and France celebrated at the famed Field of the Cloth of Gold is revealed to be hollow, for a "hideous storm" or "tempest" that struck at the Field foretold the renewal of French-English quarrels that would divorce the "married" glory of the alliance (1.1.90, 92, 15). In Henry's narrative of the chronology of his misgivings, the king describes his state of mind as he weighed his options, "hulling in / The wild sea of my conscience" (2.4.197-98). This remark is juxtaposed uneasily with Henry's insistence that he has proceeded properly and legally — calmly, in fact, for Shakespeare alters the chronology of his sources to suggest that Henry's conscience is calculating, not tempestuous. Yet other language in the play suggests that although Henry may have no true tempest in his conscience, what he has unleashed on his country's religious and political structures is akin to the tempest that emerged when the "marriage" between France and England was dissolved. The image also takes on a more threatening cast. In 3.1, Wolsey advises Katherine to

. . . consider what you do,
How you may hurt yourself, ay, utterly
Grow from the King's acquaintance, by this carriage.
The hearts of princes kiss obedience,
So much they love it; but to stubborn spirits
They swell and grow, as terrible as storms.
I know you have a gentle, noble temper,
A soul as even as a calm. Pray think us
Those we profess, peacemakers, friends, and servants. (3.1.159-167)

The storm analogy warns Katherine not to trouble the neat narrative of conscientious unease, divinely-sanctioned divorce, and hopeful remarriage that Henry wishes to inscribe. As I thought about these images in the aftermath of Katrina, they grew more poignant, for the storm, it seemed, never ended; it metastasized from a physical storm to engulf and overwhelm emergency structures, local governments, entire communities. The play's metaphor of tempests as storms unleashed by the powerful resonated with the devastating conspiracy of nature and sheer incompetence and mismanagement that together bred the phenomenon of Katrina. Griffith's reporting of Wolsey's final self-characterization — that he was "an old man, broken with the storms of state" (4.2.21) — could serve as well as a sad commentary on the place I lived, broken with storms *and* state.

Even as I put these reflections together for the Strode symposium, I wondered about their appropriateness. Does it trivialize Katrina to read the storm and its aftermath through a play composed hundreds of years earlier? Does it render the phenomenon academic, in the most pejorative, arid sense? May we in fact think with Shakespeare — to borrow Julia Reinhard Lupton's phrase — without obscuring the nasty realities that still hamper recovery? The symposium followed closely on the heels of a debate my students held in a humanities seminar I was teaching, a course that spans from ancient to medieval literatures. We read from Plato's *Republic* its famous attack on poets. They are not good for anything, Socrates says: Homer cannot teach carpentry, or civil engineering, or government, or tell us how to reform our educational systems, or train better politicians. (If he could, oh, how New Orleans would need him.) Because mimesis is at a third remove from eidos, from forms, poetry is not *useful*. I asked my freshmen to analyze this argument and to consider whether they agreed. Notre Dame's freshmen are nothing if not earnest, and they desperately wanted to believe that Plato was wrong on this score, that great literature was still somehow both great and relevant. The experience of writing this essay has made me long to embrace that earnestness, for I want to believe that we can think through and with literature. The

play *Henry VIII* did help me think about and reflect upon the hurricane, and Katrina did modify the way I read the play. Yet as much as I looked to Shakespeare for language to characterize an experience beyond my capabilities to describe, I also found, it must be admitted, something of a shield, as I was able to use the play to stay within sight, at least, of academia's familiar fortress. The play helped me articulate what I saw and heard, but it also inevitably changed that articulation, shaping it into something a bit closer to academic discourse and a bit further from the material urgency and raw immediacy of the hurricane's impact.

I am also quite aware that this essay falls short of the usual academic standards. My students would delight in pointing out that I have articulated no thesis, cited very little evidence, and not developed my essay in linear fashion. My only excuse may be that there *is* no real argument to advance, no evidence to marshal — only language to trap, somehow, as it circulates between the play and my memory, with the inevitable hint of violence that trapping implies. As I complete this essay, I still feel a bit of a fraud. All acts of witnessing are not, cannot, claim equal status: my ruminations on the hurricane get published by virtue of my profession and Sharon O'Dair's persistence, while others will never be read. Shakespeare's play insists on the ineluctable place of the subjective in historical narration, refusing neatly to reconcile disparate views on history. It also gives nearly as much time to its gossipy bystanders as it does to several of its main characters; presumably their truths, too, figure into the claim of its subtitle about an aggregated, unreconciled truth. If a paradox is a suitable resting place for an essay — and I am not at all sure it is — and if, in the shaping of history from conflicting memories, all is or *might* be true, then perhaps within that "all," as the Strode audience kindly insisted, sideline narrations have a place. Perhaps despite that distorting violence, something about my trapped words tells a story of some value, even if it finds only an uneasy home within the usual academic strictures.

Notes

1. All references to Shakespeare's *Henry VIII* are to *The Complete Pelican Shakespeare* (2002).

Permissions

Photographs by Brad Robbert and Martin Sachs. By kind permission.

References

Shakespeare, William. 2002. *The Complete Pelican Shakespeare*. Edited by Stephen Orgel and A. R. Braumuller. New York: Penguin.