

THE SWAN SONG OF HISTORICAL ROMANCE: *THE FIFTH QUEEN TRILOGY*

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How fine – how very fine! It is in fact – the whole cycle – a most noble conception. ... I asked myself whether this was not the Swan song of Historical Romance.

Joseph Conrad to Ford, 20 February 1908¹

In ‘Creative History and the Historic Sense’ (1903-4) Ford Hermann Hueffer bemoaned the English habit of regarding history as a ‘branch of polemics’. When eminent historians, he argued, contended over the battlefield of Truth – with a capital T – they misunderstood the nature of their undertaking. The positivist battle cry of ‘history as it actually was’ led on a false grail, one in which tendentious conjecture often attempted to masquerade as fact. According to Ford, a proper regard for the narratives of history left ample room for imaginative creativity; indeed, the historian pursued an artistic calling different in degree, rather than kind, from the novelist. ‘Let his writing be “documented” down to the bottom’, he remarked of the historian, but let it also be ‘colloquial of the vernacular, and above all let it be interesting. He may leave his readers to draw their own morals’.² Ford’s solution, then, to the intractable epistemological problems faced in the writing of history anticipates the anti-positivist drift of twentieth-century historiography, for example R. G. Collingwood’s belief that ‘historical knowledge is the re-enactment in the historian’s mind of the thought whose history he is studying’.³ Moreover, Ford’s reluctance to let history become mired in pedantic squabbles over fact restates, *mutatis mutandis*, Aristotle’s reflection that imaginative literature is more ‘philosophical’ than history: it aspires to express the universal and not the merely particular.

‘Creative History and the Historic Sense’ was ostensibly a review of A. F. Pollard’s *Henry VIII* (1902). The appearance of this sumptuously produced volume had forestalled Ford’s own projected

‘The Life and Times of Henry VIII’.⁴ Ford had immersed himself in the recently opened state papers from the reign of Henry VIII, and they fired his historical imagination – above all, a fascination with Henry’s doomed marriages. He eventually recast this research in the historical trilogy, *The Fifth Queen* (1906-8), his first major commercial and critical success as a novelist. The choice of genre was a happy one. Although as a schoolboy Ford had studiously refused to read Lockhart’s *Life of Sir Walter Scott*, he had, nevertheless, developed a liking for historical fiction – Fenimore Cooper’s *The Last of the Mohicans* was among his boyhood favourites. His taste was not unusual: while the didactic Victorian biography was falling into decline, the historical novel was enjoying something of a revival among the general reading public. In 1902 over 2,000 historical novels were published in England alone, making the form a natural choice for any writer as ambitious (and impoverished) as Ford.

Of course, Ford’s high-minded aestheticism would not permit him to write a pot-boiler. However, he was faced with some difficulty in finding the right approach to the historical novel. Ford rejected the empiricism of Tolstoy’s masterpiece, *War and Peace*, grounded in a meticulous reconstruction of the effects of vast, world-historical events upon the lives of dozens of characters. Ford’s understanding of history, as we have seen, subordinated fidelity to recoverable facts to the broader, imaginative brush-strokes of ‘creative history’.⁵ He found a more useful model in Maurice Hewlett’s popular retelling of the life of Mary Queen of Scots, *The Queen’s Quair* (1904), which he claimed ‘taught me a good deal’ (CE 47). What Ford learnt from Hewlett was partly a matter of technique and plot arrangement, partly a matter of the twentieth-century recreation of Tudor vernacular; not so much a pastiche of Tudor idioms and speech rhythms as, to adopt a phrase used by A. S. Byatt, the necessary ‘ventriloquism’ of the historical novel.⁶ Ford once claimed that even the best historical fiction was more or less ‘fake’. Such disclaimers belie the success with which the *Fifth Queen* trilogy conjures up in the vocabulary, syntax and poetic cadences (often Shakespearean) of the writing, the spirit of an age. The archaic words and syntactical inversions are not introduced without an element of risk – they can grate upon the ear as

mannerism or solecism, a sort of verbal mock-Tudor – and yet the triumph of the *Fifth Queen* is undoubtedly a triumph of style.

Ford's discussions of style habitually refer to terms such as 'rendering' and 'composition' that are more frequently associated with painting. Commentators have agreed that the most impressive sections of the *Fifth Queen* are the elaborate, 'painterly' set-pieces, descriptive passages that owe something to Henry VIII's court painter Hans Holbein the Younger. Pollard's *Henry VIII* was lavishly illustrated with reproductions of Holbein's portraits of the King, Anne of Cleves, Thomas Cromwell, Archbishop Cranmer, the Duke of Norfolk, and a miniature of Katharine Howard, those 'grave, saturnine' heads, as William Hazlitt characterized them, imbued with 'a slight indication of sly humour, kept under by the manners of the age or by the pretensions of the person'.⁷ Ford, who inspected these paintings at first-hand for his 1905 monograph on Holbein, claimed that his subject was the 'earliest of modern painters – to have looked at men and women, first of all, with the "modern" eye'.⁸ The observation makes two important points that are worth spelling out: first, that although times change, human nature remains recognizably the same; secondly, that Holbein's portraits provide an unparalleled window into the minds and hearts of the men and women of Henry VIII's court.

Holbein presented Ford with a vivid and compelling picture of the world he would describe in the *Fifth Queen*. Take, for example, the widely admired scene introducing Thomas Cranmer, Lord Privy Seal:

The Lord Privy Seal was beneath a tall cresset in the stern of his barge, looking across the night and the winter river. They were rowing from Rochester to the palace at Greenwich, where the Court was awaiting Anne of Cleves. The flare of the King's barge a quarter of a mile ahead moved in a glowing patch of lights and their reflections, as though it were some portent creeping in a blaze across the sky. There was nothing else visible in the world but the darkness and a dusky tinge of red where a wave caught the flare of light further out.

He stood invisible behind the lights of his cabin; and the thud of oars, the voluble noises of the water, and the crackling of the cresset overhead had, too, the quality of impersonal and supernatural phenomena. His voice said harshly:

'It is very cold; bring me my greatest cloak.'⁹

A brooding Cromwell, an apostle of Machiavellian statecraft, fond of quoting precepts from *Il Principe*, strains his eyes to spy into the world of Tudor politics, a shadowy world of intrigue, plots and counter-plots. Holbein's portrait of Cromwell, captured in a pose of calculating ratiocination, lurks in the penumbra of this thematic 'blackness'. Nor is it fanciful to compare Ford's impressionist technique here – fiery dabs of red speckling the dark, night waters – with Monet's evocative studies of the Thames, especially when one recalls that these paintings had been exhibited in Paris *en masse* in 1904.

Ford's narrative methods in the *Fifth Queen* have been well described by William Gass as 'slow, intense, pictorial'.¹⁰ In a work where the dramatic action takes place, for the most part, offstage, the *Fifth Queen* sometimes has the air of a great Tudor tapestry: the plot strands interwoven into a series of richly, ornamented tableaux or atmospherically lit *mise-en-scènes*. For example, the long-awaited encounter between Katharine Howard and Anne of Cleves, dispelling at a stroke the narrative longueurs of *Privy Seal*, is a bravura piece of writing. Anne is seated in the painted gallery at Richmond:

Whilst the maids sewed in silence the Queen sat still upon a stool. Light-skinned, not very stout, with a smooth oval face, she had laid her folded hands on the gold and pearl embroidery of her lap and gazed away into the distance, thinking. She sat so still that not even the lawn tips of her wide hood with its invisible, minute sewings of white, quivered. Her gown was of cloth of gold, but since her being in England she had learned to wear a train, and in its folds on the ground slept a small Italian greyhound. About her neck she had a partelet set with green jewels and with pearls. Her maids sewed; the spinning-wheels ate away the braided flax from the spindles, and the sunlight poured down through the high windows. She was a very fair woman then, and many that had seen her there sit had marvelled of the King's disfavour for her; but she was accounted wondrous still, sitting thus by the hour with the little hounds in the folds of her dress. Only her eyes with their half-closed lids gave to her lost gaze the appearance of a humour and irony that she never was heard to voice. (*FQ* 365-6)

Ford's historical imagination has been seized by Holbein's subtle study of Anne, housed in the Louvre: the portrait that persuaded

Henry to send for her as his consort. Ford follows Holbein's rendering of Anne's round face and pale complexion, elegantly framed by a broad headdress, and, at the compositional level, he reproduces the sitter's pose of arms gently folded beneath resplendent jewelry. Most revealingly of all, Ford, after Holbein, captures Anne's tolerant, patient smile; her half-closed eyes suggesting a 'humour and irony' that remain unvoiced under the King's appropriative and disapproving gaze.

The succeeding interview between Anne and Katharine marks a crucial moment in the trilogy, tilting the balance of power at court from the Protestant to the Catholic factions, but it is not overplayed for melodrama. Ford understood that perilous fluctuations on the 'slipper top of court's estate' owed as much to the urbane strategies of diplomacy as to forcible acts of violence. One of the nicest touches has Anne negligently brushing dust from her lap as she renounces her crown, an innocent gesture that seals the downfall and eventual execution of Cromwell for treason. Throughout, the interview is overseen by a triptych depicting Henry as St George – issuing from his urban citadel, vanquishing his proverbial fire-breathing antagonist, rescuing a fair damsel – in an allegorical display of patriarchal power. The iconography is more complex than it might at first appear. By juxtaposing England's patron saint with Anne and Katharine, busy negotiating the King's future happiness, Ford presents the modern reader with a striking demonstration that the women branded by official state propaganda as 'dragons' who threaten to unsettle the nation's *status quo* were, upon closer inspection, little more than Henry VIII's oppressed wives.

Henry and Katharine's romance is an attachment that remains, in the last analysis, troubling. Ford's portraits of Katharine, often showing her in stilted, 'gestural' poses, the saintly whiteness of her face radiating a symbolic goodness, are instantly recognizable as the type of female beauty idolized (and idealized) by the Pre-Raphaelites. The settings, too, can sometimes resemble the grand, historical paintings of Ford Madox Brown. At the beginning of the *Fifth Queen Crowned*, Katharine surveys the English countryside from the fortifications at Pontefract Castle:

[T]he Queen walked from the sunlight into shadow and out again. This great terrace looked to the north and west, and, from the little hillock, dominating miles of gently rising ground, she had a great view over rolling and very green country. The original builders of the Castle of Pontefract had meant this terrace to be flagged with stone: but the work had never been carried so far forward. There was only a path of stone along the bowshot and a half of stone balustrade; the rest had once been gravel, but the grass had grown over it; that had been scythed, and nearly the whole space was covered with many carpets of blue and red and other very bright colours. In the left corner when you faced inwards there was a great pavilion of black cloth, embroidered very closely with gold and held up by ropes of red and white. Though forty people could sit in it round the table, it appeared very small, the walls of the castle towered up so high. They towered up so high, so square, and so straight that from the terrace below you could hardly hear the flutter of the huge banner of St George, all red and white against the blue sky, though sometimes in a gust it cracked like a huge whip, and its shadow, where it fell upon the terrace, was sufficient to cover four men. (*FQ* 426-7)

The writing is unmistakably Pre-Raphaelite in terms of the exuberant use of colour and in the rapt accumulation of detail. A preponderance of greens, Katharine's favourite colour, redolent (she claims) of Hope, catches the eye:

A little pavilion, all of green silk, at the very edge of the platform, had all its green curtains looped up, so that only the green roof showed; and, within, two chairs, a great leathern one for the King, a little one of red and white wood for the Queen, stood side by side as if they conversed with each other. At the top of it was a golden image of a lion, and above the peak of the entrance another, golden too, of the Goddess Flora, carrying a cornucopia of flowers, to symbolize that this tent was a summer abode for pleasantness. (*FQ* 427)

The marriage of Henry and Katharine certainly allows new expanses of light and colour into the *Fifth Queen*. Ford's sensuous evocation of midsummer is, emblematically, a vision of England's 'green and fertile land' (*FQ* 484). After the King's unconsummated marriage with Anne, Katharine's accession to the King's side (and bedchamber) promises a bountiful harvest, a cornucopia no less. However, beneath the idyllic surface deeper disquietudes are at work. When, moments later, Katharine looks out again over the northern

landscape she spies an ‘unroofed abbey’, a visible reminder of the dissolution of the monasteries, together with evidence of land enclosure and depopulation. These are ominous signs that powerful landowners – whether Protestants like Cranmer, or Catholics like her wily uncle, the Duke of Norfolk – will not readily disgorge what they have swallowed.

Ultimately, the course of the *Fifth Queen* trilogy conforms to the pattern of Shakespearean tragedy: Katharine’s emblems of hope, like those of Cordelia, Ophelia and Desdemona, will be trampled beneath the contending blows of mighty opposites. Critics have deplored Katharine’s apotheosis from the girlish, half-educated and, at best, spectacularly reckless figure from the history books into Ford’s learned, articulate and highly principled martyr for the Old Faith. Ford’s self-conscious ‘whitewashing’ of Katharine’s sexuality definitely lends a Pre-Raphaelite halo to this historical romance. But that should not blind readers, as A. S. Byatt points out, to the abundant evidence that enables us, in accordance with Ford’s prescription for good historical writing, to draw our own conclusions (*FQ* xiii-iv). It is possible to cast a cold eye on what the Fordian narrator terms Katharine’s ‘childish logic and wild honour’ (*FQ* 347). This ‘woman with an itch to meddle in the righting of the world’ (*FQ* 371), to quote the words of mild-mannered Anne, is also a woman who can at times be vain, self-righteous, bad-tempered and even downright vindictive in the pursuit of her goals, qualities she displays in the operatic denouement. What is it that motivates Katharine to claim that she would rather die the wife of beefwitted Thomas Culpepper, than of Henry, whom Ford has taken considerable pains to portray as every inch a king? The remarkable, closing *coup de canon*, in which Katharine darkly hints that there might, after all, be some truth in her confession of adultery, has surely left more than one reader, like the King himself, dumbstruck, hurling their (metaphorical) hat on the floor.

In ‘Creative History and the Historic Sense’ Ford remarked: ‘each man may see in the case of Henry VIII what he most desires to see’ (*CE* 7). Ford’s critical biographers have seen more than a trace of autobiography in the turbulent marital life presented in the *Fifth Queen*.¹¹ It is debatable to what extent Ford recreated Henry VIII –

that ruthless and terrible tyrant – after his own image, although his fiction can flaunt Freudian fantasies of power and omnipotence.¹² What is clear, however, is that Ford saw the convulsions of Henry VIII's reign as a defining moment for the modern British state – democratic, industrial, imperialist and Protestant. Ford, a self-styled agrarian 'Tory-Catholic' imaginatively coupled the downfall of Katharine Howard with the terminal decline of the aristocratic courtier, and, most importantly of all, an apparently irrevocable breach with Rome. Like several other literary modernists, he brooded nostalgically upon the continuing felt presence of the past, experienced as fragments surviving from some profound rupture in the cultural inheritance. Having said that, he was also deeply ambivalent about the efficacy of chivalric ideals in the modern world. Long before Stephen Greenblatt, Ford had read in the harsh features of Holbein's courtiers and officials the lineaments of contemporary power politics: long before the New Historicism Ford was a master of 'creative history'.

After Joseph Conrad had read the *Fifth Queen* trilogy, with great admiration it should be remembered, he claimed to have heard the 'swan song' of the historical romance. Quite the contrary, the genre thrived during the early part of the twentieth century, not least in Conrad's own tales of adventure set in the Napoleonic wars. It is hard to believe that Ford's exemplary development of the possibilities of the historical novel had not influenced his erstwhile collaborator.¹³ Furthermore, it is impossible to miss the stylistic affinities between the *Fifth Queen* and George Moore's *Héloïse and Abélard*, published in a *de luxe* edition in 1921. Moore's painterly, almost mannered, narration; his lavish descriptions of long vanished architectural glories; above all, his slow, operatic rendering of the classic Augustinian struggle between spiritual aspiration and worldly desire, are perhaps inconceivable without the example of the *Fifth Queen*. Ford himself commented upon the creative reciprocity he enjoyed with Conrad and Moore. Praising these two authors in the *English Review* in 1909, in the same breath that he mentioned the 'Master', Henry James, Ford observed that these artists:

We may regard as being wholly concerned with their Art, as belonging to the school which represents the mainstream of the current of European

THE FIFTH QUEEN TRILOGY

literature, and as having no external considerations for anything but their individual presentations of life.¹⁴

The European mainstream enunciated here flowed principally, of course, from the high artistic seriousness of Gustave Flaubert; but it also contained a small nevertheless important tributary from Sir Walter Scott and the origins of the European historical novel.

NOTES

1. *The Collected Letters of Joseph Conrad: Volume 4, 1908-1911*, ed. Frederick R. Karl and Laurence Davies, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990, p. 47.
2. See 'Creative History and the Historic Sense', *Ford Madox Ford: Critical Essays*, ed. Max Saunders and Richard Stang, Manchester: Carcanet, 2002 – henceforth *CE*; pp. 4-14.
3. For Collingwood's 'idea of history' see *Essays in the Philosophy of History*, ed. William Debbins, Austin: University of Texas Press, 1965.
4. For details, see Charles G. Hoffmann, "'The Life and Times of Henry VIII': An Original for Ford Madox Ford's *Fifth Queen* Trilogy", *Notes and Queries*, 14 (July 1967), 248-50.
5. Ford's dedication to *Ancient Lights*, London: Chapman and Hall, 1911, expressed a 'profound contempt' for facts, adding 'I try to give you what I see to be a spirit of an age': p. xviii.
6. See *On Histories and Stories: Selected Essays*, London: Vintage, 2001, pp. 43-8.
7. *Selected Essays of William Hazlitt*, ed. Geoffrey Keynes, London: The Nonesuch Press, 1944, p. 746.
8. Ford, *Hans Holbein the Younger*, London: Duckworth, 1905, p. 106.
9. Ford, *The Fifth Queen*, 'Penguin Classics' edition, introduction by A. S. Byatt, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1999 – henceforth *FQ*; pp. 24-5.
10. See 'The Neglect of Ford Madox Ford's *Fifth Queen*', *Habitations of the Word*, New York: Simon and Schuster, 1985, pp. 50-72.

11. See, for example, Arthur Mizener, *The Saddest Story*, London: Bodley Head, 1972, pp. 469-77 and Max Saunders, *Ford Madox Ford: A Dual Life*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996, vol. 1, pp. 212-17.

12. Mischievously, Ford claimed that he based Henry VIII on Henry James: 'I may as well now confess that in drawing Henry VIII in one of my own novels I was rendering the Master in externals – and mighty life-like the Press of the day found the portrait to be': *Thus to Revisit*, London: Chapman and Hall, 1921, p. 123. See Angus Wrenn's essay on pp. 163-71 of this volume.

13. Robert Hampson has noted marked similarities between the *Fifth Queen's* 'painterly' prose and Conrad's *The Arrow of Gold* (1919). See 'The late novels', *The Cambridge Companion to Joseph Conrad*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996, p. 147.

14. 'The Critical Attitude', *English Review*, 3:4 (November 1909), 659.