20TH CENTURY CLASSICS

FORD MADOX FORD

THE FIFTH QUEEN

Introduced by A. S. Byatt

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PRIVY SEAL

THE FIFTH QUEEN CROWNED

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THE FIFTH QUEEN

FORD MADOX FORD was born in 1873, the son of a German musicologist and philosopher, Franz Hueffer, and grandson of the Victorian painter Ford Madox Brown. He grew up partly in Brown's house, amongst the brilliant and Bohemian Pre-Raphaelite set. In 1894 he married Elsie Martindale, then under age. The marriage was happy until Ford's affair with Violet Hunt the novelist. Both his own and Elsie's Catholicism made divorce virtually impossible to obtain and Ford was driven to breakdown. Later relationships, with the painter Stella Bowen and the artist Janice Biala, were happier.

He wrote eighty-one books—including a reflective autobiographical form he made his own (*Memories and Impressions*)—as well as political tracts and historical surveys, and was also a brilliant editor (the *English Review* and the *translantic review*). He was a friend of Conrad, Wells, and Galsworthy, as well as the young modernists, Pound, Hemingway, and Joyce.

He fought in the First World War, after which he changed his name from Hueffer to Ford. Later he lived in France and then in the United States. He died in 1939 on the way back to Europe.

His best known works are *The Good Soldier* (1915) and the Tietjens tetralogy, *Parade's End* (1924, 1925, 1926, 1928), which deals with the First World War.

A. S. BYATT was born in 1936 in Sheffield and graduated from Cambridge. She is the author of three novels, *Shadow of A Sun*, *The Game*, and *The Virgin in the Garden*—the first of a projected tetralogy. She has published critical work on Iris Murdoch, Wordsworth and Coleridge, Ford, Willa Cather, and Wallace Stevens. She reviews for *The Times* and other papers, and is a regular broadcaster on BBC radio.

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INTRODUCTION

BY A. S. BYATT

'Ford's last Fifth Queen novel is amazing. The whole cycle is a noble conception—the swan song of Historical Romance—and frankly I am glad to have heard it.' So, somewhat ambiguously, wrote Joseph Conrad (to whom *The Fifth Queen* is dedicated) to John Galsworthy in 1908. Ford's Tudor novels have often been discussed as a nostalgic exercise in an already outdated form. I think that their ideas, and their techniques, are much more interesting than that. For Ford, the past—the English past, the European past, his own past—was an integral part of present experience and understanding. This is not to say, either, that he uses the Tudor Court as an allegorical portrait of Edwardian England or of Ford Madox Ford. He was more subtle than that.

Ford published eighty-one books between 1891 and 1939, when he died. His father, Francis Hueffer, was German; his English grandfather was the painter, Ford Madox Brown. Ford grew up in Brown's house amongst artists and artistic debate; Graham Greene sees the imposing figure of Ford Madox Brown with his irascibility, fear of plots, enthusiasm, and melancholy behind the looming figure of Henry VIII in these novels. Ford's early books include a life of Brown, a study of Rossetti, and a book on the Pre-Raphaelites; in 1905 he published a monograph on Holbein. Some of the great set-piece descriptions in *The Fifth Queen* are reminiscent of the composition—and lighting—of Madox Brown's historical paintings of Chaucer at the court of Edward III, or Oliver Cromwell—talking to Milton and Marvell or brooding on a white horse amidst farmyard muddle. (Compare Thomas Cromwell on his barge, the carefuly composed interior portrait of

Anne of Cleves, the farmyard muddle surrounding Mary Hall or Lascelles.) Katharine Howard herself is often described stretching out, or dropping her arms, in hope or despair, like a posed figure 'caught' by the painter at a historical crisis. Ford preferred Brown's historical paintings to his 'decorative' work. 'As a Teuton, I like to think—and I feel certain—that whatever of Madox Brown's art was most individual was inspired by the Basle Holbeins.' The virtue of Brown's best work derived from 'the study of absolute realism and of almost absolute minuteness of rendering'.

This word, 'rendering', is a central word in Ford's many and varied discussions of the art of the novel. During the period of his collaboration with Conrad, the two of them discussed the techniques of narrative, the importance of 'accurate letters', and developed a set of ideas which Ford referred to, on the whole, as Impressionism. 'We saw', he wrote in his memoir of Conrad, 'that Life did not narrate, but made impressions on our brains. We in turn, if we wished to produce on you an effect of life, must not narrate but render . . . impressions.' Their masters were Stendhal, Maupassant, and above all Flaubert, with his insistence on *le mot juste*—a crafted, exact, descriptive language from which the author, both as rhetorical stylist and as moral commentator, should be absent. In English, both novelists turned to Henry James, who in his essay on 'The Art of Fiction' (1884) spoke of 'the air of reality (solidity of specification)' as 'the supreme virtue of a novel' and used the word 'render' and the analogy with painting to illustrate his meaning. 'It is here that the novelist competes with his brother the painter in *his* attempt to render the look of things, the look that conveys their meanings, to catch the colour, the relief, the expression, the surface, the substance of the human spectacle.' 'Rendering' tends to be concerned with evoking surfaces, especially visual surfaces. In Ford's work it usually carries moral connotations of authorial reticence, non-interference, impersonality. Here his ideas can be related to Eliot's idea of the imper-

sonal poet, Joyce's retired artist-God, paring his fingernails. While he admired their desire for accurate recording of natural objects, Ford mistrusted the moral fervour and nostalgic medievalizing of Ruskin and the Pre-Raphaelites. All this helped to shape his highly visual 'historical Romance'.

His book on Holbein, unlike his book on Rossetti or his life of Brown, is written with moral and aesthetic passion. He opposes Holbein to Dürer on its first page in a way that directly prefigures the opposition of the two forces that battle for the soul of Henry VIII (and England) in the *Fifth Queen* novels. The painters are 'the boundary stones between the old world and the modern, between the old faith and the new learning, between empirical, charming conceptions of an irrational world and the modern theoretic way of looking at life'. Dürer 'could not refrain from commenting upon life, Holbein's comments were of little importance'. It seems that Dürer is greater. 'Dürer had imagination, where Holbein had only vision and invention—an invention of a rough-shod and everyday kind.' But it is Holbein whose accuracy Ford is praising. Praising Samuel Richardson's 'craftsmanlike' approach to the novel, Ford said he was 'sound, quiet, without fuss, going about his work as a carpenter goes about making a chair and in the end turning out an article of supreme symmetry and consistence'. He compared Richardson to 'the two supreme artists of the world—Holbein and Bach'. He had already compared Holbein to Bach in the Holbein book itself, after praising Holbein's depiction of Henry VIII as 'an unconcerned rendering of an appallingly gross and miserable man'. 'Holbein was in fact a great Renderer. If I wanted to find a figure really akin to his I think I should go to music and speak of Bach.'

Ford, it seems, was interested in Holbein's art and in Henry VIII's court and the politics of Thomas Cromwell because of their 'realism'—and the word 'realism' draws together here both moral attitudes and aesthetic priorities. In the *Fifth Queen* novels Katharine Howard is presented

as a virtuous, highly intelligent woman who wishes to reverse the political and religious changes worked by Thomas Cromwell, Lord Privy Seal—to reintroduce the old faith, feudal values, monastic virtues. This figure bears little relation to what evidence we have about the real Katharine, although Ford teases the reader delicately and inconclusively about the truth of his Katharine's early relations with her alarming cousin, T. Culpepper. Ford himself was a Roman Catholic, of a kind (with more or less fervour at different times of his life), and liked to refer to himself as a 'radical Tory'. He argued for the independent smallholder, old continuities, aristocracy, against the depersonalizing effects of modern machinery and democracy. This has led critics of *The Fifth Queen*, almost universally, to see Katharine as its heroine. Arthur Mizener's comment, in his biography of Ford, *The Saddest Story*, is typical. 'In the end Ford's romantic need to turn her into an impossibly ideal figure makes her unconvincing.' Robert Green, who wrote a good and thoughtful book on Ford's 'prose and politics', noticed that Ford, in his non-fictional writings, praised Cromwell as a 'genius' and 'the founder of modern England', but says that he is portrayed in the novels with 'near-total disfavour'. Ford 'attempts to vilify' Cromwell, and idealizes Katharine's idealism. I think this view, both of what Ford intended to do, and of what he achieved, arises from a kind of stock response to the 'historical Romance' as a genre, and from a failure to appreciate Ford's scrupulous 'rendering' of his world and his characters' consciousness.

It is very illuminating to look at the books, collected as *England and the English*, that Ford was publishing during the same years as the Tudor trilogy. *The Spirit of the People: An Analysis of the English Mind* appeared in 1907 in the same year as *Privy Seal*, and a year before *The Fifth Queen Crowned*.

In this book, Ford claims that England's greatness 'begins with the birth of the modern world. And the modern world was born with the discovery of the political theory of

the Balance of the Powers in Europe'. *The Fifth Queen* is concerned with sex, love, marriage, fear, lying, death, and confusion—it is also concerned with the idea of the balance of power as a real force in men's lives. The Ford of *The Spirit of the People* leaves us in no doubt about his admiration for the Cromwell who was 'the founder of modern England'. He describes Henry VIII's ministers as 'Holbein's type', the 'heavy, dark, bearded bull-necked animal, sagacius, smiling, but with devious and twinkling eyes'. He goes on:

> And indeed a sort of peasant-cunning *did* . . . distinguish the international dealings of the whole world at that date. Roughly speaking, the ideals of the chivalric age were altruistic; roughly speaking, the ideals of the age that succeeded it were individual-opportunist. It was not, of course, England that was first in the field, since Italy produced Machiavelli. But Italy, which produced Machiavelli, failed utterly to profit by him . . . England *did* produce from its depths, from amidst its bewildering cross currents of mingled races, *the* great man of its age; and along with him it produced a number of men similar in type and strong enough to found a tradition. The man, of course, was Thomas Cromwell, who welded England into one formidable whole, and his followers in that tradition were the tenacious, pettifogging, cunnning, utterly unscrupulous and very wonderful statesmen who supported the devious policy of Queen Elizabeth—the Cecils, the Woottons, the Bacons and all the others of England's golden age.

The Tudor age, Ford said, was 'a projection of realism between two widely differing but romantic movements'. That is, the feudal-Catholic times were romantic because of the altruism, heroism, and chivalry of their ideals. In Ford's view, the post-Stuart times, the days after William III and the glorious Revolution, were paradoxically 'romantic' in a deeper sense than the 'picturesque' romanticism of the Stuart cause.

> For in essentials the Stuarts' cause was picturesque; the Cromwellian cause a matter of principle. Now a picturesque cause may make a very strong and poetic appeal but it is, after all, a

principle that sweeps people away. For poetry is the sublime of common-sense; principle is wrong-headedness wrought up to the sublime pitch—and that, in essentials, is romance.

Consider this opposition: 'the sublime of common-sense'/'wrong-headedness wrought up to the sublime pitch'. It has much in common with the opposition, in these novels, between Cromwell and Katharine—the realistic Machiavellian with his belief in England, the King, the health of the country, and the in many ways 'wrong-headed' Katharine, unprepared to come to terms with the greed of the nobles who have acquired the lands of the dispossessed monasteries, the venal nature of servants, or the distress of Margaret Poins who cannnot be married in Katharine's restored Roman Catholic dispensation. There is a further twist to this opposition. Later in *The Spirit of the People* Ford blames Protestantism for 'that divorce of principle from life which, carried as far as it had been carried in England, has earned for the English the title of a nation of hypocrites'. Katharine's Catholicism is like the 'female' Catholicism which Ford says these islands have discarded: the female saints, the Mother of God, 'an evolution almost entirely of the sentiments and of the weaknesses of humanity'. Katharine calls on the saints and on the Virgin throughout this book. But she also calls on the great classical moralists for what Ford would have called 'principles', and Throckmorton sums her up, in this context, shrewdly, as a Romantic puritan as well as a romantic Catholic woman: 'in all save doctrine this Kat Howard and her learning are nearer Lutheran than of the old faith.' (We remember that Ford, in his Holbein book, describes Holbein's portrait of Katharine's 'bitter, soured and disappointed' uncle, Norfolk as 'rigid and unbending in a new world that seemed to him a sea of errors' and pointed out that it was Norfolk who said, 'It was merry in England before the new Learning came in.') Katharine's appeal to Henry is essentially romantic: they speak of the Fortunate Isles and bringing back a golden age. And her

morals have the absolute quality of Ford's 'principle', against which the despairing cynicism of Cicely Elliott is set. Cicely Elliott says, 'God hath withdrawn himself from this world,' and to Katharine 'Why, thou art a very infectious fanatic . . . But you must shed much blood. You must widow many men's wives. Body of God! I believe thou wouldst.' And Katharine does not demur. She will kill out of her righteous principle as Cromwell will out of his expediency. In *The Spirit of the People* Ford remarks in parenthesis, contrasting his versions of Catholicism and Puritanism, 'I am far from wishing to adumbrate to which religion I give my preference; for I think it will remain to the end a matter for dispute whether a practicable or an ideal code be the more beneficial to humanity.'

A novel, Ford wrote, was 'a rendering of an Affair: of one embroilment, one set of embarrassments, one human coil, one psychological progression'. That the world of this novel is seen through Katharine's eyes more than any other has tended to make her appear to be a 'heroine'; but this, as I suggested earlier, is partly the result of Ford's attempt at what he called authorial 'Aloofness'. I believe she is morally judged, but she is judged by juxtaposition (another favourite term of Ford's, who admired Stendhal and Jane Austen for their gifts of dramatic juxtaposition of incidents which changed the reader's view of what had gone before). The moral work is done by the reader. We do not see so much of Cromwell, or Throckmorton, as we do of Katharine, and the King, passionate, bewildered, cunning, desiring virtue, dangerous, generous, cruel, is seen almost—not entirely—from the outside, a looming body at the end of dark corridors, behind doors. We guess at their motives, with Katharine, but not through her view of them. In his later masterpieces, *The Good Soldier* and *Parade's End*, Ford used bewildered innocent minds to depict the muddle, the horror, the endless unsatisfactory and painful partiality of knowledge of human motive, of what has 'really' happened, or why. This novel is not so subtle, but it is recognizably by the same man. Ford as a

writer was always preoccupied with the effect of lies, and the nature of worry and anxiety—they are his great themes, public and private. *The Good Soldier* and *Parade's End* are inhabited by grand, terrible liars. In *The Fifth Queen*, Udal's little lies run into Throckmorton's politic and murderous ones, as the sexual lies of Tietjens' wife in 1914–18 run into the public lies behind the Great War. In *The Spirit of the People* Ford wrote that the English are 'a nation of hypocrites' *because* Protestant virtue divorced principle from life. In *The Fifth Queen* he displays the workings of the divorce.

The 'solidity of specification' of the world of this novel is its great virtue. Ford claimed to have spent ten years before these novels were written working on a book on Henry VIII, whose private papers had just been published.

> I worried about his parentage, his diseases, the size of his shoes, the price he gave for kitchen implements, his relation to his wives, his knowledge of music, his proficiency with the bow . . . But I really know—so delusive are reported facts—nothing whatever. Not one single thing! Should I have found him affable, or terrifying, or seductive, or royal, or courageous? There are so many contradictory facts; there are so many reported interviews, each contradicting the other . . .

He used his 'facts' supremely well. He is at ease with clothes, food, rooms, roads, hangings. The world of this novel is largely an indoor world, dark, artificially lit, a world of staircases, spyholes, hangings that conceal listeners, alleys where men lurk with knives, walls that close people in. This both mirrors the confusions of Katharine's 'affair' and the new world of Tudor England.

> Holbein's lords no longer ride hunting. They are inmates of palaces, their flesh is rounded, their limbs at rest, their eyes sceptical or contemplative. They are indoor statesmen; they ideal in intrigues; they have already learnt the meaning of the words 'The balance of the Powers' and in consequence they wield the sword no longer; they have become sedentary rulers.

In the context of this observation, from Ford's Holbein book, it becomes easier to see why the archaic outdoor scenes are so moving. In the brief days of her happiness with Henry Katharine is portrayed out of doors, hunting, in the North, amongst farmers and peasants. In the marvellous scene in the stable yard (designed by Holbein) the old knight, survivor of a world of chivalric action, amongst the already outdated armour, drops his lance. Roy Strong, in *The Elizabethan Image*, wrote of the importance to the Tudors of the nostalgia for chivalry. In *When Did You Last See Your Father?* he wrote of the genuine historical and human concerns of Victorian historical painting. Ford understood—and rendered—both.

A word, finally, about the language. Ford believed—in the interest of excluding the writer from the reader's experience of the affair rendered—in plain words, current language, common speech. He distinguished three English languages: 'that of the Edinburgh Review which has no relation to life, that of the streets which is full of slang and daily neologisms and that third one which is fairly fluid and fairly expressive—the dialect of the drawing-room or the study, the really living language.' Nevertheless, in 1903 he wrote to H. G. Wells, advocating that we should learn from the Elizabethans to use current slang. 'If you will reconsider the matter you will see that slang is an excellent thing. (Elizabethan writing is mostly slang.) And as soon as practicable we should get into our pages every slang word that doesn't (in our selective ears) ring too horribly . . . we must do that or we shall die; we and our language.'

He uses Tudor language in the *Fifth Queen* novels with *this* kind of vitality—a pleasure in accuracy and sharpness, not a distant strangeness. His heroes and heroines tend to be excellent Latinists—Katharine Howard is related to Valentine Wannop in *Parade's End*. Ford's prose has the flexibility and elegance of a good Latinist and the roughness and brilliance of a writer interested in the quiddities of the vernacular. It is proper that his comic character

should be Magister Udal, looking back, like Katharine, to the Golden Age of Latin, unaware that he will be remembered as the father of the drama in the 'vulgar tongue' he so despises.

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