

Henry V (Fall–Winter 2009)

O for a Muse of fire, that would ascend
The brightest heaven of invention;
A kingdom for a stage, princes to act
And monarchs to behold the swelling scene!

[Prologue, 1–4]

Henry V begins with four of the most stirring lines ever written. Shakespeare captures the playwright’s dilemma—how can rehearsed words and gestures recreate the stuff of life?—and, as he so often does (with what degree of irony we may wonder), begs “pardon” from his audience for daring

On this unworthy scaffold to bring forth
So great an object. Can this cockpit hold
The vasty fields of France? Or may we cram
Within this wooden O the very casques
That did affright the air at Agincourt?
O, pardon!

[Prologue, 8–15]

These lines are spoken not by an actor standing outside the play but by a character within it, who proclaims himself “Chorus to this history” [Prologue, 32]¹ and who quickly emerges as an unabashed cheerleader for its eponymous hero. Yet for all his anxiety concerning theatrical illusion, the Chorus finds himself battling Shakespeare more than the design team for control over King Henry’s representation. In speech after speech, the Chorus’s version of history is challenged, if not flatly contradicted, by Shakespeare’s. Thus the Chorus can proclaim that “all the youth of England are on fire” to follow their king to France, and that “honor’s thought / Reigns solely in the breast of every man” [II.Cho.1–4]; the next scene, however, features those aging swaggerers

¹ For simplicity, I shall refer to the Chorus as male. This is partly because in every production I have seen, the Chorus has been played by a man, but also because *Henry V* (more so perhaps than other Shakespearean histories) is a thoroughly male-dominated play. I find it difficult to imagine a female Chorus treating Henry with such reverence.

Pistol, Bardolph, and Nym, who nearly come to blows over a debt of eight shillings.

Pistol does not pretend to desire only (or any) honor in France: “For I shall sutler be /

Unto the camp, and profits will accrue” [II.i.106–7].²

Likewise, the Chorus appears before Act Four to praise Henry’s leadership on the eve of battle:

For forth he goes and visits all his host,
Bids them good morrow with a modest smile
And calls them brothers, friends, and countrymen.
Upon his royal face there is no note
How dread an army hath enrouned him;
Nor doth he dedicate one jot of color
Unto the weary and all-watched night,
But freshly looks, and overbears attain
With cheerful semblance and sweet majesty;
That every wretch, pining and pale before,
Beholding him, plucks comfort from his looks.

[IV.Cho.32–42]

Set against this breathless description, Henry’s first lines following his entrance seem almost comically perverse: “Gloucester,” he addresses his brother, “’tis true that we are in great danger; / The greater therefore should our courage be” [IV.i.1–2]. He jokes that “we should dress us fairly for our end” [IV.i.10], then disguises himself to approach three of those “pining and pale” wretches described by the Chorus. Yet far from offering them “cheerful semblance and sweet majesty,” Henry compares their plight to “men wracked upon a sand, that look to be washed off the next tide” [IV.i.96–7] and picks a fight, prompting one astonished soldier to exclaim, “Be friends, you English fools, be friends! We have French quarrels enow, if you could tell how to reckon” [IV.i.216–7].

² Lest we miss his point, several scenes later he repeats it: “Let us to France, like horse-leeches, my boys, / To suck, to suck, the very blood to suck!” [II.iii.53–4].

We shall investigate this scene more closely later. For now, it is sufficient to note the Chorus's wonderful poetry has an insidious purpose: to distract us from the messy business that actually happens onstage, to substitute imagination for eyesight and rhetoric for reason. He admits this himself in his opening speech, albeit in grander terms:

... let us, ciphers to this great account,
 On your imaginary forces work.
 Suppose within the girdle of these walls
 Are now confined two mighty monarchies,
 Whose high-upreared and abutting fronts
 The perilous narrow ocean parts asunder.
 Piece out our imperfections with your thoughts:
 Into a thousand parts divide one man
 And make imaginary puissance.
 Think, when we talk of horses, that you see them
 Printing their proud hoofs i' th' receiving earth;
 For 'tis your thoughts that now must deck our kings ...

[Prologue, 17–28]

Do not dwell on imperfections, he urges, but imagine each man stronger than he is. Most importantly, dress the king in the flattering robes of gracious thoughts, lest he reveal himself naked and flawed. Better words for a PR man than a poet.

Yet in critiquing the Chorus, am I being fair to Henry? He has not yet spoken a word, and already I am assuming the worst. Is it possible that two plays after first posing the question, we are no closer to an answer: Who is this man? More to the point, who is this *king*? Is the one reconcilable with the other? One thing seems clear—King Henry will not permit us to know more of him than we knew of Prince Hal, especially now that Falstaff is no longer around to humor him. What we have instead are those famous speeches—at times every scene seems declamatory—and the subtler ways in which Shakespeare juxtaposes his characters' words and actions, and particularly those of his hero,

King Henry

Henry's dramatic arc in the *Henry IV* plays is bookended by a pair of speeches. The first is intensely private—a prince's delighted confession that the inner man does not resemble the outer:

I know you all, and will awhile uphold
The unyoked humor of your idleness.
Yet herein will I imitate the sun,
Who doth permit the base contagious clouds
To smother up his beauty from the world,
That, when he please again to be himself,
Being wanted, he may be more wondered at
By breaking through the foul and ugly mists
Of vapors that did seem to strangle him. . . .
I'll so offend to make offense a skill,
Redeeming time when men think least I will.

[1 *Henry IV*, I.ii.188–210]

In contrast, the second speech is loudly, purposefully public—a king's premeditated farewell to those “base contagious clouds” of his youth, and in particular “the fat knight with the great pelly doublet” (as he shall later be called, under very different circumstances, in *Henry V* [IV.vii.46–7]), Sir John Falstaff:

I know thee not, old man. Fall to thy prayers.
How ill white hairs become a fool and jester!
I have long dreamed of such a kind of man,
So surfeit-swelled, so old, and so profane,
But, being awaked, I do despise my dream.
Make less thy body hence, and more thy grace.
Leave gormandizing. Know the grave doth gape
For thee thrice wider than for other men.
Reply not to me with a fool-born jest.
Presume not that I am the thing I was,
For God doth know, so shall the world perceive,
That I have turned away my former self.
So will I those that kept me company. . . .

[2 *Henry IV*, V.v.47–59]

Hal's outward meaning here is deceptively simple—he compresses it into a single line: “Presume not that I am the thing I was,” namely “surfeit-swelled,” riotous, “profane.” Now, he assures his subjects, he is a man. Much later, he shall woo Katherine of France using words that—in outward meaning, at least—might also have wooed England: “If thou would have such a one, take me; and take me, take a soldier; take a soldier, take a king” [V.ii.165–7]. Long after he slew Hotspur, Henry has fully covered himself in the martial ideal, in studied contrast to Falstaff, Hotspur's eating, jesting, wenching antithesis.

Yet we need only think back to that initial, introductory speech to remember that Falstaff was not Hal's kindred spirit but his foil, and that Hal *never* was that “thing” which Henry now rejects. This is not to say Henry has not changed. On the contrary, the change can be heard clearly in the second speech I quoted, and throughout *Henry V*—in Henry's words, that is, far more than his actions, for his words are thoroughly those of one who now lives his life in public. What Henry has all but obliterated from his personality by ascending the throne is not the prodigal son but the private man. With a single exception, we shall never again hear him speak in that confessional voice.

The King and the Archbishop

But we are leaping ahead when we should move deliberately. Let us return to Henry's first entrance in the play—or rather, to the scene immediately prior. Two bishops enter, deeply troubled by a proposed bill that would deprive the English church of “the better half of [its] possession” [I.i.8]. Yet the men remain hopeful their new king will reject the measure, for he is “full of grace and fair regard,” “a true lover of the holy Church” [I.i.22–3]. (He also stands to gain, in exchange for his support, “a greater sum /

Than ever at one time the clergy yet / Did to his predecessors part withal” [I.i.79–81]—money that could fund a power grab in France.) Indeed, if depth of faith is measured in public utterances, Henry is the holiest king in Shakespeare; in the aftermath of Agincourt he dedicates to God his victory no fewer than five times, including four in the span of fifteen lines [IV.viii.104–18].

But the churchmen find more to praise in Henry than mere devotion to their cause. Marvels the Archbishop of Canterbury:

The breath no sooner left his father’s body
 But that his wildness, mortified in him,
 Seemed to die too. Yea, at that very moment
 Consideration like an angel came
 And whipped th’ offending Adam out of him,
 Leaving his body as a paradise
 T’ envelop and contain celestial spirits.

[I.i.25–31]

Even as hyperbole this is astonishing—the archbishop improves Henry’s own story by re-imagining Hal’s “wildness” not as some foil against which reformation might shine more brightly, but as an “offending Adam” now scourged from Eden, leaving the king as close to God and paradise as if the Fall had never happened. Far from being a reformed sinner, Henry is cleared of sin entirely! Is it any wonder he turns to Canterbury to sanction his invasion and plunder of France? “For we will hear, note, and believe in heart / That what you speak is in your conscience washed / As pure as sin with baptism” [I.ii.30–2], he reassures the archbishop, then sits back to be reassured.

Before we examine Canterbury’s notorious deconstruction of French sovereignty, let us conclude this brief scene between the bishops, for in their continued praise of Henry are clues to his leadership style. So effusive is Canterbury, we might wonder if the Chorus has re-entered:

Hear him but reason in divinity,
 And, all-admiring, with an inward wish
 You would desire the king were made a prelate;
 Hear him debate of commonwealth affairs,
 You would say it hath been all in all his study;
 List his discourse of war, and you shall hear
 A fearful battle rendered you in music;
 Turn him to any cause of policy,
 The Gordian knot of it he will unloose,
 Familiar as his garter; that when he speaks,
 The air, a chartered libertine, is still,
 And the mute wonder lurketh in men's ears
 To steal his sweet and honeyed sentences;
 So that the art and practic part of life
 Must be the mistress to this theoretic ...

[I.i.38–52]

The first thing to note here is that Canterbury is speaking to an underling on an otherwise empty stage. Were he making this speech publicly, or even privately to Henry's council, we might dismiss it as mere flattery. But the archbishop has no cause to flatter Henry before a bishop whose function in the scene is purely expository; thus, we may reasonably conclude the praise is sincere and Canterbury has been won over by the king's "honeyed sentences."

Assuming this, the second thing to note is whether Henry evinces these praiseworthy qualities at any point in the play. And the short answer—which I shall develop through the remainder of this essay—is no, with one exception: Henry's "discourse on war." For the other qualities, not once do we see Henry debating commonwealth affairs or questions of divinity or untangling knotty problems of state. For evidence we need only turn to the following scene, when Henry, after unprecedented buildup—in what other play does Shakespeare devote so many lines to establishing what a great guy his protagonist is?—finally enters. What to do about France—whether to prepare for war or relinquish Henry's claim to the French crown—certainly qualifies as a

“cause of policy.” A bad decision imperils not only the commonwealth but the king’s own soul, as Henry himself acknowledges in his first extended speech. “We charge you in the name of God take heed,” he warns the archbishop,

For never two such kingdoms did contend
Without much fall of blood, whose guiltless drops
Are every one a woe, a sore complaint
'Gainst him whose wrongs gives edge unto the swords
That makes such waste in brief mortality.

[I.ii.23–8]

Were Henry truly the man described by Canterbury, we might expect him now to lead a vigorous debate on this issue. Instead, he cedes the stage to the obviously biased archbishop, who speaks without interruption for a staggering 63 lines—by far the longest speech in the play. Canterbury’s disquisition on the Salic Law that requires all French kings to inherit from the male—and therefore bars Henry, whose claim derives from his great-great-grandmother, the French princess Isabella—is a veritable actor’s nightmare for the same reasons it is crucial to understanding the scene (and by extension the play). It is long-winded, impossibly dense, and pockmarked with historical references that no one—whether upon the stage or in the audience—cares to follow. A taste will suffice to show why Canterbury’s description of his argument—“as clear as is the summer’s sun” [I.ii.86]—is as funny as anything you will hear an archbishop say:

Hugh Capet also, who usurped the crown
Of Charles the Duke of Lorraine, sole heir male
Of the true line and stock of Charles the Great,
To find his title with some shows of truth,
Though in pure truth it was corrupt and naught,
Conveyed himself as th’ heir to th’ Lady Lingard,
Daughter to Charlemain, who was the son
To Lewis the Emperor, and Lewis the son
Of Charles the Great. Also King Lewis the Tenth,
Who was sole heir to the usurper Capet,
Could not keep quiet in his conscience,

Wearing the crown of France, till satisfied
 That fair Queen Isabel, his grandmother,
 Was lineal of the Lady Ermengard,
 Daughter to Charles the foresaid Duke of Lorraine ...

[I.ii.69–83]

I shall leave it to historians to critique the accuracy of this account.³ Regardless, the denseness of the language suggests the archbishop is substituting learnedness for truth—a claim that is truly “clear” should not require such verbal contortions. Nor can it be an accidental irony (at least not by Shakespeare) that Canterbury emphasizes the example of Lewis the Tenth, “sole heir to the usurper Capet” and grandson of an Isabel, in his speech to Henry, heir to the usurper Bolingbroke and great-great-grandson of an Isabella. For in Lewis’s example lies Henry’s great weakness—and trump card. Once usurpation displaces legitimacy on the throne, appeals to law and tradition become irrelevant. Henry can take his army to France and demand the crown not because it is his right but because it is his pleasure. If he succeeds, as Falstaff might have put it, so; if not, he becomes a soldier’s death as well as another. Recall the deathbed advice Henry IV gave his son—“Be it thy course to busy giddy minds / With foreign quarrels, that action, hence borne out, / May waste the memory of the former days” [2*HIV*, IV.v.213–5]—and the ultimate purpose of the French campaign is unmistakable: to legitimize Henry’s claim not to the French crown but to the English.

The memory of that advice gives us reason to believe Henry made up his mind to invade France long before the church bribes him to do so—indeed, his brother John is already predicting war at the end of *Henry IV, Part 2*. Yet Henry makes a show of

³ Isaac Asimov does a fine layman’s job in his [Guide to Shakespeare](#) [454–9].

seeking Canterbury's advice, and he remains silent as one by one his councilors prove to be hawks:

Canterbury: Go, my dread lord, to your great-grandsire's tomb,
 From whom you claim; invoke his warlike spirit,
 And your great-uncle's, Edward the Black Prince,
 Who on the French ground played a tragedy,
 Making defeat on the full power of France,
 Whiles his most mighty father on a hill
 Stood smiling to behold his lion's whelp
 Forage in blood of French nobility.
 O noble English, that could entertain
 With half their forces the full pride of France
 And let another half stand laughing by,
 All out of work and cold for action!

Ely: Awake remembrance of these valiant dead,
 And with your puissant arm renew their feats.
 You are their heir; you sit upon their throne;
 The blood and courage that renowned them
 Runs in your veins; and my thrice-puissant liege
 Is in the very May-morn of his youth,
 Ripe for exploits and mighty enterprises.

Exeter: Your brother kings and monarchs of the earth
 Do all expect that you should rouse yourself
 As did the former lions of your blood.

West.: They know your grace hath cause, and means, and might—
 So hath your highness! Never king of England
 Had nobles richer and more loyal subjects,
 Whose hearts have left their bodies here in England
 And lie pavilioned in the fields of France.

Canterbury: O, let their bodies follow, my dear liege,
 With blood, and sword, and fire to win your right!
 In aid whereof we of the spirituality
 Will raise your highness such a mighty sum
 As never did the clergy at one time
 Bring in to any of your ancestors.

[I.ii.103–35]

If this is what passes for reasoned debate and policy in the English court, it is no wonder Henry has so impressed his subjects. The “arguments” can be summarized as follows: 1) Your ancestors made war with France; 2) You're young and ripe for war with France; 3) All the other kings expect you to make war with France (the French king

included, as Shakespeare shall make embarrassingly clear); 4) Your loyal subjects want to join you in war with France (all but the poor ones, whose opinion is not sought). Add to these the obvious superiority of English soldiers to French and the clergy's (enforced) generosity, and it would seem the only question remaining is whether to set sail immediately or first to dismiss the French ambassadors. But Henry finally breaks his silence with an objection:

We must not only arm t' invade the French,
But lay down our proportions to defend
Against the Scot, who will make road upon us
With all advantages.

[I.ii.136–9]

Compared to the glories of conquest, this would seem a mere quibble, and Canterbury treats it as such. “They of those marches,” the archbishop replies, “Shall be a wall sufficient to defend / Our inland from the pilfering borderers” [I.ii.140–2]—conveniently omitting the recent history of England's marches, or borderlands, which in the *Henry IV* plays are the locus of multiple rebellions against Lancastrian rule, the home of such rebels as Northumberland, Worcester, and Edmund Mortimer, misidentified by Shakespeare (following Holinshed) as the Earl of March.⁴

Still Henry persists in his fear of a Scottish attack. This time Canterbury proposes a more robust defense, prefaced by one of the strangest speeches in the play, an extended metaphor in which he compares “the act of order [in] a peopled kingdom” to the natural order kept by honeybees [I.ii.187–9]. Honeybees—as Harold Goddard wittily notes—

⁴ The actual Earl of March, another Edmund Mortimer, is technically—were Henry to honor inheritance from the female in England, as he demands it be honored in France—England's king, for his grandmother was the daughter of the third son of Edward III, whereas Henry's grandfather, John of Gaunt, was Edward's fourth son. Of course, neither Mortimer nor his superior title is mentioned in *Henry V*.

“have nearly everything in their community that men have except archbishops and armies” [223–4], though the archbishop does attempt an analogy between the spoils of human warfare and the “pillage” bees take from flowers [I.ii.193–5]. The absurdity of the comparison highlights the speech’s only conceivable dramatic purpose, which is to suggest that artificial hierarchies (as epitomized by the archbishop) and armed combat are *unnatural* creations. If Henry and his warmongering friends want to follow the example of honeybees, they should stay home and perfect their own kingdom.

Of course, the archbishop derives a different moral from his comparison:

As many several ways meet in one town,
 As many fresh streams meet in one salt sea,
 As many lines close in the dial’s center;
 So may a thousand actions, once afoot,
 End in one purpose, and be all well borne
 Without defeat. Therefore to France, my liege!
 Divide your happy England into four,
 Whereof take you one quarter into France,
 And you withal shall make all Gallia shake.
 If we, with thrice such powers left at home,
 Cannot defend our own doors from the dog,
 Let us be worried, and our nation lose
 The name of hardiness and policy.

[I.ii.209–21]

When Henry’s captains bemoan the five French soldiers to every Englishman at Agincourt [IV.iii.3–5], they somehow fail to recall this moment, when the archbishop gravely counseled leaving three-quarters of their power in England to guard against “the dog.” Never mind that Shakespeare promptly drops all mention of the Scottish threat—indeed, the only Scotsman we meet in the play is the “marvelous valorous” Captain Jamy (to quote an admiring Fluellen [III.ii.75]). More galling (at least to my American ears) is the hubris that goes unpunished in the English court even as Shakespeare devotes whole scenes to mocking “the confident and overlusty French” [IV.Cho.18].

Overconfident or not, Henry makes no more objections, heartily endorsing the call to arms in words he would be wise never to repeat across the Channel:

Now are we well resolved, and by God's help
And yours, the noble sinews of our power,
France being ours, we'll bend it to our awe
Or break it all to pieces.

[I.ii.223–6]

Henry's uncritical acceptance of the hawkish arguments put forth by his councilors is further evidence that he made up his mind *before* soliciting their advice. In creating the illusion that theirs were key voices in the "debate," he binds them to the very course he had always planned to take—but as volunteers rather than conscripts. Nor is this the only time Henry passes apparent responsibility for his actions to others; on the contrary, it is one of his favorite tactics. He employs it before the French ambassadors later in the scene, turning the Dauphin's "gift" of tennis balls into a pretense for the war he had already resolved to wage ("And tell the pleasant prince this mock of his / Hath turned his balls to gunstones, and his soul / Shall stand sore charged for the wasteful vengeance / That shall fly with them" [I.ii.282–5]), and again before Harfleur when he demands the besieged citizens "yield ... / Or, guilty in defense, be thus destroyed" [III.iii.42–3]. We shall also see how it factors into his fallacious justification of his motives when they are questioned by common soldiers. And it is behind every reference to God and invocation of divine favor: "We are in God's hand, brother, not in theirs," Henry proclaims [III.vi.167]; and again, "O God, thy arm was here! / And not to us, but to thy arm alone, / Ascribe we all!" [IV.viii.104–6]; and again, "Take it, God, / For it is none but thine!" [IV.viii.109–10].

That Henry is quick to use others, whether human or divine, to further his ends is no surprise—he confesses as much throughout *Henry IV*, and his most memorable scenes in those plays are essentially performances that reduce friend and foe alike to props. He saves his most insufferable performance, though, for *Henry V*:

The King and the Traitors

Having set a course for war, Henry exits with his knights and the Chorus re-enters. His first words since the prologue are predictably chauvinistic—it is here we learn that Henry is “the mirror of all Christian kings” [II.Cho.6] and that “all the youth of England” are ablaze with patriotism—yet midway through the speech he turns elegiac:

O England! model to thy inward greatness,
 Like little body with a mighty heart,
 What mightst thou do that honor would thee do,
 Were all thy children kind and natural!
 But see, thy fault France hath in thee found out,
 A nest of hollow bosoms, which he fills
 With treacherous crowns; and three corrupted men—
 One, Richard Earl of Cambridge, and the second,
 Henry Lord Scroop of Masham, and the third,
 Sir Thomas Grey, knight, of Northumberland—
 Have, for the gilt of France (O guilt indeed!),
 Confirmed conspiracy with fearful France,
 And by their hands this grace of kings must die ...

[II.Cho.16–28]

This might preface a highly suspenseful scene—how will Henry foil the plot on his life?—except Shakespeare releases the tension almost immediately. Before the traitors even enter, we learn “the king hath note of all that they intend / By interception which they dream not of” [II.ii.6–7]. Secure in his knowledge, Henry feigns ignorance, allowing the unsuspecting trio to advise him on the appropriate punishment for a petty offender. (Naturally the conspirators argue against mercy, “lest example / Breed by his sufferance more of such a kind” [II.ii.45–6].). He also prods them to request wartime

commissions befitting their “worthiness” [II.ii.69]; when they do, Henry hands them copies of their treason and watches their faces betray them:

Why, how now, gentlemen?
 What see you in those papers that you lose
 So much complexion?—Look ye, how they change!
 Their cheeks are paper.—Why, what read you there
 That hath so cowarded and chased your blood
 Out of appearance?

[II.ii.71–6]

This sadistic impulse seems to disprove a remark Henry made in the previous scene to the French ambassadors, who feared displeasing him with their embassy: “We are no tyrant, but a Christian king, / Unto whose grace our passion is as subject / As is our wretches fettered in our prisons [I.ii.242–4].”

If we knew anything about the conspirators—if we were in any way invested in their fates—this scene, with its heavy dramatic irony, might still be engaging. But the sum of their characters is little more than three names, and even these Shakespeare divests of meaning—he never mentions the family connections that likely motivated the historical Lord Scroop (nephew of the rebellious Archbishop of York in *Henry IV, Part 2*) or Cambridge (brother-in-law to Edmund Mortimer, the Earl of March and “legitimate” king of England) to conspire against their king.⁵ And so we watch, unmoved, as Henry unfetters his righteous passions, outraged to have been betrayed by such dear friends:

See you, my princes and my noble peers,
 These English monsters! My Lord of Cambridge here—
 You know how apt our love was to accord

⁵ Also ignored here by Shakespeare is Cambridge’s son, another Richard, who grows up to be the same Duke of York who figures so prominently in the *Henry VI* plays (and whose own son, of course, becomes Richard III). Nothing must risk diminishing the legend of Henry V.

To furnish him with all appurtenants
 Belonging to his honor; and this man
 Hath, for a few light crowns, lightly conspired
 And sworn unto the practices of France
 To kill us here in Hampton; to the which
 This knight, no less for bounty bound to us
 Than Cambridge is, hath likewise sworn.

[II.ii.84–93]

How interesting that Cambridge asserts, in spite of Henry's charge, "For me, the gold of France did not seduce, / Although I did admit it as a motive / The sooner to effect what I intended" [II.ii.155–7]. That intent, we can only infer, was to place his brother-in-law (Mortimer) on England's throne—an act that, while treasonous, does not warrant a lecture from the inheritor of an usurped crown. As for the details of that lecture—specifically Henry's claims that Cambridge and Grey are "for bounty bound" to him—we cannot even infer their truth. For all that Shakespeare actually shows of their relationships, Henry might just as credibly say he gave Cambridge a rocket ship and funded Grey's expedition to Atlantis.

Still, Cambridge and Grey get off easy compared to Scroop, who (we are told) has been the king's "bedfellow" [II.ii.8], and whom an apparently devastated Henry describes as "cruel / Ingrateful, savage, and inhuman . . . / Thou that didst bear the key of all my counsels, / That knew'st the very bottom of my soul, / That almost mightst have coined me into gold" [II.ii.94–8]—were Henry to stop here he could hardly sound more ridiculous. The brilliant politician of the *Henry IV* plays, who gave the smitten Falstaff only so much love as could be used to hang him, whose instinct at his father's deathbed was to seize the crown from his pillow, who kept his counsel so close we never could discern where the performance ended and the true man (if indeed we ever met him) began—upon becoming king *this man* exposed his secret self to the first fair-spoken lord

off the street? But Henry is just warming up! Having cynically manipulated the kingdom into swallowing his reformation tale, he is now *stunned* to discover men may not be what they seem:

O, how hast thou with jealousy infected
 The sweetness of affianced! Show men dutiful?
 Why, so didst thou. Seem they grave and learned?
 Why, so didst thou. Come they of noble family?
 Why, so didst thou. Seem they religious?
 Why, so didst thou. Or are they spare in diet,
 Free from gross passion or of mirth or anger,
 Constant in spirit, not swerving with the blood,
 Garnished and decked in modest complement,
 Not working with the eye without the ear,
 And but in purged judgment trusting neither?
 Such and so finely bolted didst thou seem;
 And thus thy fall hath left a kind of blot
 To mark the full-fraught man and best indued
 With some suspicion. I will weep for thee;
 For this revolt of thine, methinks, is like
 Another fall of man.

[II.ii.126–42]

Henry never does get around to weeping for his friend—in fact, he never again mentions him. For whose benefit then does he enact the tragedy of Lord Scroop? Certainly not for ours—again, we have seen too much of Henry not to see through him here. Nor for the benefit of the conspirators, three otherwise insignificant men who, were it not for the king's long-windedness, would already be dead. Is he warning still-loyal lords who might similarly be tempted by French gold? But such a warning requires only that he execute the traitors—when several scenes later Henry has Bardolph hanged for robbing a church, he does not preface the deed with a 60-line speech, though the hapless Bardolph can make a stronger case for Henry's affection.

The only remaining alternative is that Henry speaks these words because he believes them, at least in the passion of the moment. Never mind that they are hollow or

that “one by one [they] point out his own sins” [Goddard, 229]—ingratitude, hypocrisy, even treason and murder if we judge the son by the father’s crimes (as Henry begs God *not* to so judge him at Agincourt [IV.i.282–99]). In its unconscious irony, Henry’s speech to the traitors is not unique but increasingly characteristic. Not since Titus Andronicus has a Shakespearean protagonist spoken with so little self-awareness, nor can I think of an example of this type following Henry, “Shakespeare’s last attempt at the great man who is also simple” [Van Doren, 149].⁶

It is important to note that my criticism applies only to the king of *Henry V*. Prince Hal is endlessly fascinating as he wrestles with ambition. But then Hal was kept honest by Falstaff; he also had ample leisure to observe and reflect, though he found such leisure increasingly chafing. King Henry has near-absolute power to act and no real checks on his tendency toward self-aggrandizement; the result is that for most of the play—whether condemning traitors, rallying troops, or wooing princesses—he seems mainly interested in the sound of his own voice.

The King at War

King Henry’s first words in the heat of battle are among his most famous:

Once more unto the breach, dear friends, once more,
Or close the wall up with our English dead!
In peace there’s nothing so becomes a man
As modest stillness and humility,
But when the blast of war blows in our ears,
Then imitate the action of the tiger:
Stiffen the sinews, summon up the blood,
Disguise fair nature with hard-favored rage;
Then lend the eye a terrible aspect:
Let it pry through the portage of the head

⁶ Perhaps it is fairer to say that Henry simply does not acknowledge the chasm between his rhetoric and his actions; still, if a character does not speak any lines indicative of self-awareness, what else should we conclude but that he is not self-aware?

Like the brass cannon; let the brow o'erwhelm it
 As fearfully as doth a galled rock
 O'erhang and jutty his confounded base,
 Swilled with the wild and wasteful ocean.
 Now set the teeth and stretch the nostril wide,
 Hold hard the breath and bend up every spirit
 To his full height!

[III.i.1–17]

Beyond its memorable imagery, what is most interesting about this speech is the lack of context. We can infer that the English have breached the walls of Harfleur and that Henry is ordering his troops to charge through and take the city. But we can only guess at the mental state of those troops, and it is here that a director will tell us much about her reading of the play. Are the men eager to race “unto the breach,” so that Henry is stoking an already hot fire, or are they weary and reluctant? Does Henry lead them offstage or drive them from behind? Do they echo his “God for Harry, England and Saint George!” [III.i.34] or is there gaping silence, and if so, how does he respond? Henry sees his men “like greyhounds in the slips, / Straining upon the start” [III.i.31–2], but is this an accurate description or a desperate one?

In suggesting these divergent possibilities, I am not endorsing one over the others. (I am more interested if Henry struggles to engage his men, but the opposite route is justifiable—his speech is the centerpiece of the scene; when well delivered, its muscular rhythms are nearly impossible to resist.) Regardless, however ferociously the English charge, they do not make it through the breach—when the dust settles and the smoke clears, Harfleur remains in French hands and Henry gives another, less celebrated speech:

How yet resolves the governor of the town?
 This is the latest parle we will admit:
 Therefore to our best mercy give yourselves,
 Or like to men proud of destruction
 Defy us to our worst; for as I am a soldier,

A name that in my thoughts becomes me best,
 If I begin the battery once again,
 I will not leave the half-achieved Harfleur
 Till in her ashes she lie buried.
 The gates of mercy shall be all shut up,
 And the fleshed soldier, rough and hard of heart,
 In liberty of bloody hand shall range
 With conscience wide as hell, mowing like grass
 Your fresh fair virgins and your flow'ring infants.

[III.iii.1–14]

At its core this speech, though more savage, is the logical extension of the philosophy of war Henry articulates in his better-known exhortation. Few beasts in their “hard-favored rage” could commit such atrocities as Henry imagines before Harfleur:

Therefore, you men of Harfleur,
 Take pity of your town and of your people
 Whiles yet my soldiers are in my command,
 Whiles yet the cool and temperate wind of grace
 O'erblows the filthy and contagious clouds
 Of heady murder, spoil, and villainy.
 If not—why, in a moment look to see
 The blind and bloody soldier with foul hand
 Defile the locks of your shrill-shrieking daughters;
 Your fathers taken by the silver beards,
 And their most reverend heads dashed to the walls;
 Your naked infants spitted upon pikes,
 Whiles the mad mothers with their howls confused
 Do break the clouds, as did the wives of Jewry
 At Herod's bloody-hunting slaughtermen.

[III.iii.27–41]

Let us not be distracted by the unanswerable question of whether Henry really means this. (The simplest answer is that his threats have their desired effect—the governor of Harfleur, exhausted after a prolonged siege and apparently abandoned by the Dauphin, whose “powers are not yet ready,” acknowledges that “we no longer are defensible” and surrenders without further bloodshed [III.iii.44–50].) A better question is which side, English or French, more closely resembles Henry's martial paradigm—that

is, who most *sounds* the part? Consider the French response to Henry's victory at

Harfleur:

Fr. King: Where is Montjoy the herald? Speed him hence;
 Let him greet England with our sharp defiance.
 Up, princes! and with spirit of honor edged
 More sharper than your swords, hie to the field. . . .
 Bar Harry England, that sweeps through our land
 With pennons painted in the blood of Harfleur.
 Rush on his host as doth the melted snow
 Upon the valleys whose low vassal seat
 The Alps do spit and void his rheum upon.
 Go down upon him—you have power enough—
 And in a captive chariot into Rouen
 Bring him our prisoner.

Constable: This becomes the great.
 Sorry am I his numbers are so few,
 His soldiers sick and famished in their march;
 For I am sure, when he shall see our army,
 He'll drop his heart into the sink of fear
 And, for achievement, offer us his ransom.

Fr. King: Therefore, Lord Constable, haste on Montjoy,
 And let him say to England that we send
 To know what willing ransom he will give.

[III.v.36–63]

This message the herald delivers, adding further boasts and ultimatums of his own:

England shall repent his folly, see his weakness, and admire our sufferance. Bid him therefore consider of his ransom, which must proportion the losses we have borne, the subjects we have lost, the disgrace we have digested; which in weight to re-answer, his pettiness would bow under. For our losses, his exchequer is too poor; for th' effusion of our blood, the muster of his kingdom too faint a number; and for our disgrace, his own person kneeling at our feet but a weak and worthless satisfaction. To this add defiance; and tell him for conclusion he hath betrayed his followers, whose condemnation is pronounced.

[III.vi.122–33]

But for sheer bravado, nothing compares to the French knights at Agincourt—the pre-battle dawn is the occasion for speeches that might have been uttered by the Persians at Marathon or the Spanish upon their “invincible” Armada:

Constable: To horse, you gallant princes! straight to horse!
 Do but behold yond poor starved band,
 And your fair show shall suck away their souls,
 Leaving them but the shales and husks of men.
 There is not work enough for all our hands,
 Scarce blood enough in all their sickly veins
 To give each naked curtle axe a stain
 That our French gallants shall today draw out
 And sheathe for lack of sport. Let us but blow on them,
 The vapor of our valor will o’erturn them. . . .

Grandpré: Why do you stay so long, my lords of France?
 Yond island carrions, desperate of their bones,
 Ill-favoredly become the morning field.
 Their ragged curtains poorly are let loose,
 And our air shakes them passing scornfully.
 Big Mars seems bankrupt in their beggared host
 And faintly through a rusty beaver peeps.
 The horsemen sit like fixed candlesticks
 With torch-staves in their hand; and their poor jades
 Lob down their heads, dropping the hides and hips,
 The gum down roping from their pale-dead eyes,
 And in their pale dull mouths the gimmaled bit
 Lies foul with chewed grass, still and motionless;
 And their executors, the knavish crows,
 Fly o’er them all, impatient for their hour.

[IV.ii.15–52]

The French rant and bluster and speak bloody words—albeit none so bloody as Henry’s—and they are soundly defeated (and roundly mocked) in battle after battle. In contrast, Henry’s men are less interested in speechmaking, though their workmanlike efforts to capture Harfleur give Henry ample occasion for oratory. These men include the English captain Gower, the Welsh captain Fluellen, the Scottish captain Jamy, and the Irish captain Macmorris, whose failed attempts to undermine Harfleur draw Fluellen’s scorn—and provide one of the play’s few insights into military tactics⁷:

⁷ Indeed, if all we knew of Agincourt came from *Henry V*, we would conclude the French lost because they were fops and because the English had God and Saint Crispin on their side—as opposed to longbows, greater mobility, and the superior position on a rain-drenched battlefield.

Gower: Captain Fluellen, you must come presently to the mines. The Duke of Gloucester would speak with you.

Fluellen: To the mines? Tell you the duke, it is not so good to come to the mines; for look you, the mines is not according to the disciplines of the war. The concavities of it is not sufficient; for look you, th' athversary, you may discuss unto the duke, look you, is digt himself four yard under the countermines. By Cheshu, I think 'a will plow up all, if there is not petter directions.

Gower: The Duke of Gloucester, to whom the order of the siege is given, is altogether directed by an Irishman, a very valiant gentleman, i' faith.

Fluellen: It is Captain Macmorris, is it not?

Gower: I think it be.

Fluellen: By Cheshu, he is an ass as in the orld! I will verify as much in his peard. He has no more directions in the true disciplines of the wars, look you, of the Roman disciplines, than is a puppy-dog.

[III.ii.53–72]

Fluellen is interrupted by Jamy and Macmorris himself, who enters cursing the order—apparently just given—to abandon the mines:

Gower: How now, Captain Macmorris? Have you quit the mines? Have the pioneers given o'er?

Macmorris: By Chrish, law, tish ill done! The work ish give over, the trompet sound the retreat. By my hand I swear, and my father's soul, the work ish ill done! It ish give over. I would have blowed up the town, so Chrish save me, law, in an hour. O, tish ill done! tish ill done! By my hand, tish ill done!

Fluellen: Captain Macmorris, I beseech you now, will you voutsafe me, look you, a few disputations with you, as partly touching or concerning the disciplines of the war, the Roman wars? In the way of argument, look you, and friendly communication; partly to satisfy my opinion, and partly for the satisfaction, look you, of my mind, as touching the direction of the military discipline, that is the point.

Jamy: It sall be vary gud, gud feith, gud captens bath, and I sall quit you with gud leve, as I may pick occasion. That sall I, mary.

Macmorris: It is no time to discourse, so Chrish save me! The day is hot, and the weather, and the wars, and the king, and the dukes. It is no time to discourse. The town is beseeched, and the trompet call us to the breach, and we talk, and, be Chrish, do nothing. 'Tis shame for us all. So God sa' me, 'tis shame to stand still, it is shame, by my hand! and there is throats to be cut, and works to be done, and there ish nothing done, so Chrish sa' me, law!

Jamy: By the mess, ere these eyes of mine take themselves to slomber,

ay'll de gud service, or ay'll lig i' th' grund for it! ay, or go to death! And ay'll pay't as valorously as I may, that sall I surely do, that is the breff and the long.

[III.ii.85–117]

Beneath their eccentricities and occasional squabbling, one senses in Henry's men a competence and a determination to win, whatever the odds, that Shakespeare rarely concedes to the French, who bicker over petty points of honor and are by turns openly contemptuous of their prince and their general:

Rambures: My Lord Constable, the armor that I saw in your tent tonight—are those stars or suns upon it?

Constable: Stars, my lord.

Dauphin: Some of them will fall tomorrow, I hope.

Constable: And yet my sky shall not want.

Dauphin: That may be, for you bear a many superfluously, and 'twere more honor some were away.

Constable: Ev'n as your horse bears your praises, who would trot as well, were some of your brags dismounted.

Dauphin: Would I were able to load him with his desert! Will it never be day? I will trot tomorrow a mile, and my way shall be paved with English faces.

Constable: I will not say so, for fear I should be faced out of my way: but I would it were morning, for I would fain be about the ears of the English.

Rambures: Who will go to hazard with me for twenty prisoners?

Constable: You must first go yourself to hazard ere you have them.

Dauphin: 'Tis midnight; I'll go arm myself.

Exit.

Orleans: The Dauphin longs for morning.

Rambures: He longs to eat the English.

Constable: I think he will eat all he kills.

Orleans: By the white hand of my lady, he's a gallant prince.

Constable: Swear by her foot, that she may tread out the oath.

[III.vii.68–95]

How much more would Captain Macmorris despair—he who was so ashamed to “talk, and, be Chrish, do nothing”—were his fellows to talk like this? Instead despair strikes the French, as their glorious dreams become nightmares at Agincourt:

Dauphin: O perdurable shame! Let's stab ourselves.

Be these the wretches that we played at dice for?
Orleans: Is this the king we sent to for his ransom?
Bourbon: Shame, and eternal shame! nothing but shame!
 Let us die in honor. Once more back again!
 And he that will not follow Bourbon now,
 Let him go hence, and with his cap in hand
 Like a base pander hold the chamber door
 Whilst by a slave, no gentler than my dog,
 His fairest daughter is contaminated.
Constable: Disorder, that hath spoiled us, friend us now!
 Let us on heaps go offer up our lives.
Orleans: We are enow yet living in the field
 To smother up the English in our throngs,
 If any order might be thought upon.
Bourbon: The devil take order now! I'll to the throng.
 Let life be short; else shame will be too long.

[IV.v.8–24]

The French are so out of practice—“spoiled” not by disorder but by Henry’s old nemesis, idleness—that in their moment of crisis they can do nothing but charge fatalistically to their deaths. Had the English army consisted mainly of Macmorrises—the least capable of Henry’s multinational captains⁸—Agincourt might well have turned out differently. The French desperately need a Jamy to puncture their self-pity with a pointed vow to “de gud service,” a Fluellen to remind them of the “disciplines of the wars.” It is men like these, far more than the Pistols and Nymys of the world, whom Henry brings with him to France and who ultimately are responsible for his (no longer so) extraordinary victory—something we’d do well to remember each time Henry insists “God fought for us” [IV.viii.118]. God may or may not have favored the English, but Henry is certainly fortunate to have enlisted so many more Gowers and Fluellens than Orleanses or Bourbons.

All of which is to say that Henry’s style, at least in this play, is more French than

⁸ The proverbial “hotheaded” Irishman, Macmorris gives Shakespeare an easy target.

English. The king makes great speeches, but it is the common soldiers who back his words on the battlefield—as Goddard notes, “Anyone fresh from a reading of it thinks the fourth act of this play gives the picture of a dashing hero leading his little army with indomitable courage, physical and moral, to victory over a foe overwhelmingly superior in numbers. But if asked for the evidence of Henry’s part in the battle he searches the text in vain” [256]. Instead Henry makes his chief mark before the fighting starts, in a speech that—like Hamlet’s “To be or not to be” or Shylock’s “Hath not a Jew eyes”—has for many people become famous *outside* its play. Yet the surest way to misunderstand great playwrights is to strip the dramatic context from their words. Henry’s “Saint Crispin’s Day” speech is so exquisitely cued, it almost seems stage-managed.

The scene is the English camp at dawn. Both armies have assembled on opposite sides of the battlefield; we learn that the French outnumber the weary English five to one and that Henry has ridden off to view the adversary for himself. His men anxiously await his return; finally the Earl of Salisbury can wait no longer:

Salisbury: God’s arm strike with us! ’Tis a fearful odds.

God be wi’ you, princes all; I’ll to my charge.

If we no more meet till we meet in heaven,

Then joyfully, my noble Lord of Bedford,

My dear Lord Gloucester, and my good Lord Exeter,

And my kind kinsman, warriors all, adieu!

Bedford: Farewell, good Salisbury, and good luck go with thee!

Exeter: Farewell, kind lord: fight valiantly today;

And yet I do thee wrong to mind thee of it,

For thou art framed of the firm truth of valor.

Bedford: He is as full of valor as of kindness,

Princely in both.

Enter the King.

Westmoreland: O that we now had here

But one ten thousand of those men in England

That do no work today!

[IV.iii.5–19]

The graciousness of the English, facing all-but-certain death, makes another stark contrast with French arrogance; Shakespeare's stage direction, which puts Henry's entrance at the exact moment Westmoreland steers the conversation back to those "fearful odds," is only slightly subtler. Yet reread this section of dialogue, forgetting if possible the famous speech that follows—is not Westmoreland's exclamation a non sequitur? Henry could not have asked for a timelier entrance, and he picks up his cue as though he has been waiting for it all along:

What's he that wishes so?
My cousin Westmoreland? No, my fair cousin.
If we are marked to die, we are enow
To do our country loss; and if to live,
The fewer men, the greater share of honor.

[IV.iii.19–23]

This is not to suggest Shakespeare intended us to infer that Henry has fed Westmoreland his lines (though such an interpretation could make for fascinating staging). I simply wish to call attention to the perfect artifice that Shakespeare has constructed—Henry's timing here is literally too good to be true. We must not forget the artifice as we listen to the words, however magical they may sound. And in fact Henry's purpose is to perform a kind of magic trick, one he has already outlined for us in a prayer before Agincourt:

O God of battles, steel my soldiers' hearts,
Possess them not with fear! Take from them now
The sense of reckoning, if th' opposed numbers
Pluck their hearts from them.

[IV.i.282–5]

Clearly his soldiers have not forgotten the "opposed numbers." So Henry changes course—his Saint Crispin's Day speech is above all an attempt to make his men *glad* to be outnumbered:

God's will! I pray thee wish not one man more.
 By Jove, I am not covetous for gold,
 Nor care I who doth feed upon my cost;
 It yearns me not if men my garments wear;
 Such outward things dwell not in my desires:
 But if it be a sin to covet honor,
 I am the most offending soul alive.
 No, faith, my coz, wish not a man from England.
 God's peace! I would not lose so great an honor
 As one man more methinks would share from me
 For the best hope I have. O, do not wish one more!

[IV.iii.24–34]

Yet Henry has already summoned another man to Agincourt, for these are Hotspur's words, polished and repurposed by a shrewder mind. The parallels run deeper than a shared love of honor. When Henry confronted the great rebel at Shrewsbury Field, it was Hotspur who found himself outnumbered, thanks largely to his father's refusal to come to his aid. Though his allies feared defeat, Hotspur remained defiant:

I rather of [my father's] absence make this use:
 It lends a luster and more great opinion,
 A larger dare to our great enterprise,
 Than if the earl were here; for men must think,
 If we, without his help, can make a head
 To push against a kingdom, with his help
 We shall o'erturn it topsy-turvy down.
 Yet all goes well; yet all our joints are whole.

[IHIV, IV.i.60–83]

As always, there are crucial differences between Henry and his handpicked foil. Hotspur, characteristically, is bent on destruction—eager to tear down a kingdom, he gives no thought to what should be built in its place. Henry has a keener sense of the future; it is this promise of glory—not only today but tomorrow as well—that makes his words so compelling:

This day is called the Feast of Crispian.
 He that outlives this day, and comes safe home,
 Will stand a-tiptoe when this day is named

And rouse him at the name of Crispian.
 He that shall see this day, and live old age,
 Will yearly on the vigil feast his neighbors
 And say, "Tomorrow is Saint Crispian."
 Then will he strip his sleeve and show his scars,
 And say, "These wounds I had on Crispin's day."

[IV.iii.41–9]

Nor is this glory fleeting—it shall endure, in Henry's vision, as long as men have tongues to speak and ears to hear:

Old men forget; yet all shall be forgot,
 But he'll remember, with advantages,
 What feats he did that day. Then shall our names,
 Familiar in his mouth as household words—
 Harry the King, Bedford and Exeter,
 Warwick and Talbot, Salisbury and Gloucester—
 Be in their flowing cups freshly remembered.

[IV.iii.50–6]

But the longer Henry speaks, the more his vision proves illusory. Whose are these "names" that old men shall remember? Henry acknowledges neither common soldier nor captain; we hear nothing of Fluellen or Gower, of Michael Williams or John Bates. There is only the king and his nobles. "Talbot" is not even a character in the play, yet Henry suggests *his* name shall be more familiar to the veterans of Agincourt than those of comrades with whom they fought and bled.

What remains of the speech is even more hollow, though Shakespeare slyly conceals the hollowness until after the battle. "This story shall the good man teach his son," ordains Henry,

And Crispin Crispian shall ne'er go by,
 From this day to the ending of the world,
 But we in it shall be remembered—
 We few, we happy few, we band of brothers;
 For he today that sheds his blood with me
 Shall be my brother. Be he ne'er so vile,
 This day shall gentle his condition;

And gentlemen in England now abed
 Shall think themselves accursed they were not here,
 And hold their manhoods cheap whiles any speaks
 That fought with us upon Saint Crispin's day.

[IV.iii.57–68]

The rousing conclusion—inevitably followed by an ear-splitting roar from every soldier onstage—makes it easy to forget the promise that precedes it: “For he today that sheds his blood with me / Shall be my brother. Be he ne'er so vile, / This day shall gentle his condition”—those are Henry's words. Five scenes later, the English having won the battle, Henry calls for the lists of the dead. He reads aloud the names of fifteen slaughtered French lords, then turns to his fallen countrymen:

Edward the Duke of York, the earl of Suffolk,
 Sir Richard Ketly, Davy Gam, esquire;
 None else of name; and of all other men
 But five-and-twenty.

[IV.viii.101–4]

Henry honors the sacrifices of fifteen men from the enemy camp, yet when it comes to his own men he has breath for only four? The rest—“But five-and-twenty” and “None else of name”—are not “gentled” but dismissed. The inference is clear: In spite of his fine speeches, Henry feels greater kinship with French aristocrats (soon to be in-laws) than with common Englishmen.

But what of those who survive the battle—shall they not at least return to England in triumph? Certainly Henry does. The Chorus describes the homecoming scene, and for once his account sounds likely enough:

Behold, the English beach
 Pales in the flood with men, wives, and boys,
 Whose shouts and claps outvoice the deep-mouthed sea,
 Which, like a mighty whiffler 'fore the king,
 Seems to prepare his way. So let him land,
 And solemnly see him set on to London.

So swift a pace hath thought that even now
 You may imagine him upon Blackheath;
 Where that his lords desire him to have borne
 His bruised helmet and his bended sword
 Before him through the city. He forbids it,
 Being free from vainness and self-glorious pride;
 Giving full trophy, signal, and ostent
 Quite from himself to God. But now behold,
 In the quick forge and working-house of thought,
 How London doth pour out her citizens!
 The mayor and all his brethren in best sort,
 Like to the senators of th' antique Rome,
 With the plebeians swarming at their heels,
 Go forth and fetch their conquering Caesar in ...

[V.Cho.9–28]

Several lines warrant closer inspection, as always, to locate the discrepancy between word and deed. Concerning Henry's "bruised helmet and his bended sword," Goddard writes:

'You may imagine [Henry],' if you will, dealing and receiving blows from the beginning to the end of the battle, but you will be put to it to find in the text the scene in which he bruised his helmet and bent his sword. Indeed, the whole account comes closer to giving the impression that the King saw the battle from a vantage point than that he mixed in the fighting. [257]

To further make this point, Goddard summarizes the five scenes in Act IV that dramatize Agincourt—not once does Henry unsheathe his sword, let alone defend himself from another's. Based only on what Shakespeare shows us—and not what star-struck directors have accustomed us to expect—we might well conclude that Henry "forbids" the displaying of his helmet and shield at Blackheath because they show no evidence of fighting at all.

Keeping these considerations in mind, let us return to the first scene of the battle. The opening stage direction calls for the standard alarums and excursions. As trumpets sound and soldiers dart across the stage, we look for the king, or at least a figure of some

eminence. Instead it is Pistol who enters. Incredibly, he manages to capture a French soldier and—with help from Falstaff’s former pageboy, who has followed the Eastcheap rowdies to France—negotiate a ransom. The whole sequence seems at first glance little more than comic relief. Still, Pistol—swaggering, cowardly, ridiculous Pistol—has done something undeniably brave.

Now the battle is all but over; the French generals, astounded by their mounting losses, determine to end their shame in death, and the scene shifts to the English camp. Henry enters at last. Exeter gives a romanticized account of the final moments of two English lords, who died proclaiming that “in this glorious and well-foughten field / We kept together in our chivalry” [IV.vi.18–9]; Henry is so moved by the sentiment, he gives possibly the most infamous—and least chivalric—order in the play: “The French have reinforced their scattered men. / Then every soldier kill his prisoners!” [IV.vi.36–7].

In Henry’s defense, if he did believe the French were sending reinforcements to the field, he might well have been reluctant to spare even a single fighting man for guard duty. Even so, the ensuing scenes already bear the mark of revisionism. Fluellen and Gower enter, horrified by another offstage massacre: The boys who had been guarding the English luggage (including, we may infer, Falstaff’s former page) have all been murdered by “cowardly rascals that ran from the battle,” whereupon the king, Gower explains, “most worthily hath caused every soldier to cut his prisoner’s throat” [IV.vii.1–10]. Several lines later Henry enters. He too suggests that executing the prisoners is merely payback for slaughtering the luggage boys—in fact, Henry speaks as though the prisoners are still alive and the French, rather than reinforcing their numbers, are dallying far afield:

I was not angry since I came to France
 Until this instant. Take a trumpet, herald;
 Ride thou unto the horsemen on yond hill.
 If they will fight with us, bid them come down
 Or void the field. They do offend our sight.
 If they'll do neither, we will come to them
 And make them skirr away as swift as stones
 Enforced from the old Assyrian slings.
 Besides, we'll cut the throats of those we have;
 And not a man of them that we shall take
 Shall taste our mercy. Go and tell them so.

[IV.vii.54–64]

How should this be sorted if not chronologically? The fact is that Henry gave the regrettable order to kill the French prisoners before he learned anything about the luggage boys. Though the order might still be tactically justifiable, the conflicting narratives offered *ex post facto* by Henry and Gower betray their anxieties that more is at stake than military victory. Henry suggests as much in an earlier scene, arguing that “when lenity and cruelty play for a kingdom, the gentler gamester is the soonest winner” [III.vi.108–10], and we find this antithesis playing out at Agincourt. In a sense, Shakespeare reduces the famous battle to a pair of episodes involving prisoners. In the first, Pistol wins a prisoner on the battlefield; in the second, Henry orders that all such prisoners be killed. When lenity and cruelty play for a kingdom, and we begin to identify the cutpurse with lenity and the king with cruelty, something has gone wrong indeed. We may seek out the root of this wrong in the one scene in which Henry permits us to enter his inner life:

The King and His Conscience

The first scene of Act IV begins, as do so many scenes, with a speech by Henry. Though ostensibly he is speaking to his brothers, they do not add a word to the conversation, leaving us again with the sense that Henry’s only true audience is posterity:

Gloucester, 'tis true that we are in great danger;

The greater therefore should our courage be.
 Good morrow, brother Bedford. God Almighty!
 There is some soul of goodness in things evil,
 Would men observingly distill it out;
 For our bad neighbor makes us early stirrers,
 Which is both healthful, and good husbandry.
 Besides, they are our outward consciences,
 And preachers to us all, admonishing
 That we should dress us fairly for our end.
 Thus may we gather honey from the weed
 And make a moral of the devil himself.

[IV.i.1–12]

For all its humorless moralizing, this speech—so easily forgotten in light of what follows—is loaded with ironies, and its concluding antitheses may be read either of two ways. Henry emphasizes virtuous outcomes: The French threat forces the English to adopt “healthful” habits and “good husbandry.” Yet the fact that the English derive benefit from their “bad neighbor” does not make the neighbor any better—“outward consciences” may be inwardly corrupt, and the devil is still the devil, however pleasing he seems. (For that matter, only an invader could claim with a straight face that defending one’s borders makes one a bad neighbor.)

The relevance of this to Henry’s own conscience is not immediately apparent, though Henry implies he is troubled by more than the adversary’s advantageous numbers. It is the night before the great battle, and rather than pass the time with princes and peers, he requests a rare moment of solitude: “I and my bosom must debate awhile, / And then I would no other company” [IV.i.31–2]. Disguising himself in a borrowed cloak, he steps away from the campfires, only privacy eludes him—three times Henry finds himself a foil amongst his men, and the comparisons do not favor the king.

The first to intrude upon the scene is Pistol, who affects his typical bluster but, when pressed by Henry, softens unexpectedly:

Pistol: Che vous la?
King: A friend.
Pistol: Discuss unto me, art thou officer;
 Or art thou base, common, and popular?
King: I am a gentleman of a company.
Pistol: Trail'st thou the puissant pike?
King: Even so. What are you?
Pistol: As good a gentleman as the emperor.
King: Then you are a better than the king.
Pistol: The king's a bawcock, and a heart of gold,
 A lad of life, an imp of fame,
 Of parents good, of fist most valiant.
 I kiss his dirty shoe, and from heartstring
 I love the lovely bully.

[IV.i.35–48]

Pistol, of course, has no idea he is praising the king to his face; his words bear the stamp of sincerity—remarkable given the extent to which he and his fellows have been ruined by their royal association. Henry has broken Falstaff, condemned Bardolph to hang (and possibly Nym⁹), and compelled Pistol to leave his new bride¹⁰ and risk his neck in a foreign land—yet Pistol remains not only loyal to Henry but deeply moved by their (supposed) friendship. For his part, Henry sheds more tears for the traitorous Lord Scroop than he ever sheds for Falstaff, Bardolph, Mistress Quickly (who dies, we may infer, of syphilis caught from her husband [V.i.77–8]), or anyone else from his prodigal days.

Pistol is followed by Fluellen and Gower, who enters seeking the Welsh captain; this time Henry remains in the shadows, eavesdropping:

Gower: Captain Fluellen!
Fluellen: So! in the name of Cheshu Christ, speak fewer. It is the greatest admiration in the universal orld, when the true and aunchient prerogatifes and laws of the wars is not kept. If you would take the pains but to examine the wars of Pompey the Great, you shall find,

⁹ See IV.iv.69–72

¹⁰ Mistress Quickly, in the play's most amusing surprise

I warrant you, that there is not tiddle taddle nor pibble pabble in Pompey's camp. I warrant you, you shall find the ceremonies of the wars, and the cares of it, and the forms of it, and the sobriety of it, and the modesty of it, to be otherwise.

Gower: Why, the enemy is loud; you hear him all night.

Fluellen: If the enemy is an ass and a fool and a prating coxcomb, is it meet, think you, that we should also, look you, be an ass and a fool and a prating coxcomb? In your own conscience now?

Gower: I will speak lower.

Fluellen: I pray you and beseech you that you will.

[IV.i.64–82]

The allusion to Pompey is interesting, and I shall return to it at the close of this essay. For now, the more illuminating line is Fluellen's memorable dig at those "prating coxcombs" across the battlefield. In his eccentric way, Fluellen is making the same point that Henry made earlier in the scene: one person's bad behavior (whether threatening or merely incompetent) can make another look good by comparison. As the ensuing sequence demonstrates, foolish prating is not exclusive to the French camp—nor even to common Englishmen, like Pistol.

Henry stumbles upon three such men now. Their names are unremarkable—John Bates, Alexander Court, Michael Williams—yet their nearness to death has clarified their vision, and their ignorance of Henry's position (they, like Pistol, believe him to be simply "a gentleman of a company") frees them to speak their minds, even as Henry leans on their expected allegiance, as subjects, to their king:

King: For though I speak it to you, I think the king is but a man, as I am.... Therefore, when he sees reason of fears, as we do, his fears, out of doubt, be of the same relish as ours are. Yet, in reason, no man should possess him with any appearance of fear, lest he, by showing it, should dishearten his army.

Bates: He may show what outward courage he will; but I believe, as cold a night as 'tis, he could wish himself in Thames up to his neck; and so I would he were, and I by him, at all adventures, so we were quit here.

King: By my troth, I will speak my conscience of the king: I think he would not wish himself anywhere but where he is.

Bates: Then I would he were here alone. So should he be sure to be ransomed, and a many poor men's lives saved.

King: I dare say you love him not so ill to wish him here alone, howsoever you speak this to feel other men's minds. Methinks I could not die anywhere so contented as in the king's company, his cause being just and his quarrel honorable.

Williams: That's more than we know.

Bates: Ay, or more than we should seek after, for we know enough if we know we are the king's subjects. If his cause be wrong, our obedience to the king wipes the crime of it out of us.

[IV.i.99–130]

Though he accuses Bates of speaking “to feel other men's minds,” Henry is clearly doing the same.¹¹ His every line is an opportunity for the men to affirm their courage and commitment to his “just” and “honorable” war. Instead Court says nothing and Bates clings gratefully to ignorance. Williams goes much further:

But if the cause be not good, the king himself hath a heavy reckoning to make when all those legs and arms and heads, chopped off in a battle, shall join together at the latter day and cry all, “We died at such a place,” some swearing, some crying for a surgeon, some upon their wives left poor behind them, some upon the debts they owe, some upon their children rawly left. I am afeared there are few die well that die in a battle; for how can they charitably dispose of anything when blood is their argument? Now, if these men do not die well, it will be a black matter for the king that led them to it; who to disobey were against all proportion of subjection.

[IV.i.131–43]

Henry should recognize these arguments—he said as much in warning Canterbury not to awaken without cause “our sleeping sword of war,” lest every drop of blood shed

¹¹ The comparison may seem outrageous, but in skulking, disguised, amongst his men, Henry resembles no Shakespearean king more than Richard III, who pronounces, on the eve of battle, “Under our tents I'll play the eavesdropper, / To see if any mean to shrink from me” [R3, V.iii.222–3]. It is difficult to imagine Hal doing such a thing at Shrewsbury, let alone Faulconbridge, Othello, or any of Shakespeare's other great generals in their campaigns.

be “a sore complaint / ’Gainst him whose wrongs gives edge unto the swords” [I.ii.21–8]. Nor does he hesitate to pile responsibility for that bloodshed upon his French foil, the Dauphin, whose scornful gift of tennis balls made a convenient pretext for invasion. As Henry proclaims, “many a thousand widows / Shall this his mock mock out of their dear husbands, / Mock mothers from their sons, mock castles down; / And some are yet ungotten and unborn / That shall have cause to curse the Dauphin’s scorn” [I.ii.285–9]. Yet when his subjects, from whom he demands, if necessary, total sacrifice, demand in return he accept responsibility for their sacrifice, Henry not only refuses to take it, he hides behind a rhetorical screen so ragged even he lacks words enough to plug every hole:

So, if a son that is by his father sent about merchandise do sinfully miscarry upon the sea, the imputation of his wickedness, by your rule, should be imposed upon his father that sent him; or if a servant, under his master’s command transporting a sum of money, be assailed by robbers and die in many irreconciled iniquities, you may call the business of the master the author of the servant’s damnation. But this is not so. The king is not bound to answer the particular endings of his soldiers, the father of his son, nor the master of his servant; for they purpose not their death when they purpose their services.

[IV.i.144–55]

Henry grabs at the one ambiguous line in Williams’s otherwise pointed speech—“I am afeared there are few die well that die in a battle”—and twists it until the point turns back on the speaker. Surely Williams did not mean to imply that, unbeknownst to Henry, he has committed “irreconciled iniquities” since coming to France. Perhaps he has killed a man in battle—perhaps he has killed several—but that is not his chief concern, for men are killed in every battle; that alone does not prevent a soldier from dying “well.” Rather, *if* Henry’s men do not die well, it is because the *cause* of the battle “be not good.”

To amend a strained analogy, if a father sends his son to claim *stolen* merchandise, the father must bear the blame if the son ends badly—that is the point against which Henry must defend himself, though again he has already made the argument for his accuser:

“Methinks I could not die anywhere so contented as in the king’s company, *his cause being just and his quarrel honorable.*”

In brief, it is not the souls of Henry’s men but Henry’s own soul that is on trial.

Yet Henry deftly, unconscionably, shifts the burden of guilt to his men:

Besides, there is no king, be his cause never so spotless, if it come to the arbitrement of swords, can try it out with all unspotted soldiers. Some peradventure have on them the guilt of premeditated and contrived murder; some, of beguiling virgins with the broken seals of perjury; some, making the wars their bulwark, that have before gored the gentle bosom of peace with pillage and robbery. Now, if these men have defeated the law and outrun native punishment, though they can outstrip men, they have no wings to fly from God. War is His beadle, war is His vengeance; so that here men are punished for before-breach of the king’s laws in now the king’s quarrel. . . .

[IV.i.155–67]

And so it goes, for fourteen more lines, until Williams is too bewildered to realize he has been conned. “’Tis certain,” he finally mutters, “every man that dies ill, the ill upon his own head—the king is not to answer it” [IV.i.182–3]—and we howl to hear outrageous and misleading arguments go unchallenged. Not long ago Hal boasted he could “drink with any tinker in his own language” [*IHIV*, II.iv.18], yet Henry’s speech in this scene is overstuffed with propaganda and sophistry, nothing like the plainness of plain men. Indeed, for all his talk of God, Henry would keep better company with the Archbishop of Canterbury; he has long since adopted the Archbishop’s style—pompous, fat, leaving no room for interruption.

Still, Williams has stirred his king's conscience—when the soldiers exit, leaving Henry alone to deliver his first soliloquy of the play, he devotes another fifty lines to his own defense. Yet so out of practice is Henry at introspection, he can achieve little more than self-pity; the soliloquy is a patchwork of thoughts that have already been articulated more memorably by others. He begins by simply being rude:

Upon the king! Let us our lives, our souls,
 Our debts, our careful wives,
 Our children, and our sins, lay on the king!
 We must bear all. O hard condition,
 Twin-born with greatness, subject to the breath
 Of every fool, whose sense no more can feel
 But his own wringing!

[IV.i.223–9]

As we have seen, Henry has consistently laid responsibility for his war on others—Canterbury, the Dauphin, the citizens of Harfleur (“guilty in defense”). Yet a man who argues otherwise—that responsibility ultimately belongs to the king—is a “fool” conscious of nothing but his own suffering. Perhaps . . . but who in the audience finds Henry's own “wringing” (for really, what is this speech but a dressed-up complaint that it is hard to be king?) more convincing than Bates's “I believe, as cold a night as 'tis, he could wish himself in Thames up to his neck; and so I would he were, and I by him . . .” or Williams's “We died at such a place . . .”?

Henry's father, haunted by sleepless nights, concluded—in an uncharacteristically eloquent soliloquy—“Then happy low, lie down! / Uneasy lies the head that wears a crown” [2*HIV*, III.i.30–1]. Henry's son—the only Lancastrian king who truly regrets his crown—finds more affecting eloquence in a much earlier play:

O God! Methinks it were a happy life
 To be no better than a homely swain.
 To sit upon a hill, as I do now;

To carve out dials quaintly, point by point,
 Thereby to see the minutes how they run . . .
 So minutes, hours, days, weeks, months, and years,
 Passed over to the end they were created,
 Would bring white hairs unto a quiet grave.

[3HVI, II.v.21–40]

Henry V borrows this theme—he even borrows a few phrases—but he cannot improve what has already been well-stated twice. Perhaps he does not want to—his focus is not the “happy low” of his father nor the “homely swain” of his son, and when he does turn to his subjects, it is with a more condescending eye. They are fools and “wretched slave[s]” [IV.i.261], yet as Henry sees it, their lives are preferable to his in every respect but one . . . and it is on this point that he attempts to break new philosophical ground:

What infinite heart’s ease
 Must kings neglect that private men enjoy!
 And what have kings that privates have not too,
 Save ceremony, save general ceremony?
 And what art thou, thou idol Ceremony?
 What kind of god art thou, that suffer’st more
 Of mortal griefs than do thy worshippers?
 What are thy rents? what are thy comings-in?
 O Ceremony, show me but thy worth!
 What is thy soul of adoration?
 Art thou aught else but place, degree, and form,
 Creating awe and fear in other men?
 Wherein thou art less happy being feared
 Than they in fearing.
 What drink’st thou oft, instead of homage sweet,
 But poisoned flattery?

[IV.i.229–44]

Whatever his talents as an orator, as a thinker Henry V is quite ordinary; this speech, with its awkward repetitions and rhetorical questions, only confirms that impression. A more thoughtful man would not be satisfied merely to question an apostrophized Ceremony—he would push himself to answer his questions. At the very least, he would acknowledge that Ceremony—or that which makes Ceremony possible:

power, authority, order—is the fundamental reason why he can lead an army on a quest to enlarge his borders, and why he is far more likely than his countrymen to survive. Williams recognizes as much—to Henry’s ironic boast, “I myself heard the king say he would not be ransomed,” Williams has a quick retort: “Ay, he said so, to make us fight cheerfully; but when our throats are cut, he may be ransomed, and we ne’er the wiser” [IV.i.186–90].

Even the interesting points Henry makes are borrowed from a wittier, weightier source. “O, be sick, great greatness,” he proclaims,

And bid thy ceremony give thee cure!
Think’st thou the fiery fever will go out
With titles blown from adulation?
Will it give place to flexure and low bending?
Canst thou, when thou command’st the beggar’s knee,
Command the health of it? No, thou proud dream,
That play’st so subtly with a king’s repose.

[IV.i.244–51]

This line of thought echoes Falstaff, who with a flick of his wit demolished Hotspur’s notion of Honor:

Can honor set to a leg? No. Or an arm? No. Or take away the grief of a wound? No. Honor hath no skill in surgery then? No. What is honor? A word. What is that word honor? Air—a trim reckoning! Who hath it? He that died a Wednesday.¹²

[IHV, V.i.131–5]

¹² To object that Henry cannot be “borrowing” lines from Falstaff (or from his father or son) because he was not present for the originals is to miss the point. Shakespeare was present for all, and he would surely have given Henry more than a pale imitation of past glories had Henry warranted more. It takes no great wit to question the practical value of Ceremony, Honor, or any other ideal—the mark of brilliance is not in the argument itself but in how the argument is made, just as each generation of poets and philosophers remakes old truths in fresh language. We remember—and value—Falstaff more because his words are more worth remembering.

The key difference is that Falstaff truly did not care for honor, and so his words are authentic; Henry criticizes Ceremony yet covets it, just as in his father's death chamber he reached for the crown he claims to scorn. This covetousness forms the subtext of Henry's soliloquy, and we hear it clearly in the next lines he speaks:

I am a king that find thee; and I know
 'Tis not the balm, the scepter, and the ball,
 The sword, the mace, the crown imperial,
 The intertissued robe of gold and pearl,
 The farced title running 'fore the king,
 The throne he sits on, nor the tide of pomp
 That beats upon the high shore of this world—
 No, not all these, thrice-gorgeous ceremony,
 Not all these, laid in bed majestical,
 Can sleep so soundly as the wretched slave,
 Who, with a body filled, and vacant mind,
 Gets him to rest, crammed with distressful bread;
 Never sees horrid night, the child of hell;
 But like a lackey, from the rise to set,
 Sweats in the eye of Phoebus, and all night
 Sleeps in Elysium; next day after dawn,
 Doth rise and help Hyperion to his horse;
 And follows so the ever-running year
 With profitable labor to his grave;
 And but for ceremony, such a wretch,
 Winding up days with toil and nights with sleep,
 Had the forehand and vantage of a king.

[IV.i.252–73]

I quote this sentence in its entirety—for it is all one sentence—because it takes a sudden turn midway through and ends in a very different place. The ending, with its professed admiration for common, hardworking souls, sounds like those previously quoted lines of Henry's son. Yet the beginning, in which Henry so carefully details every aspect of "thrice-gorgeous ceremony"—the balm, the mace, the golden robe inlaid with pearl—betrays the conclusion. We have heard this style before, and from a very different king, when Richard II deposes himself to spite his enemies:

Now mark me how I will undo myself.
 I give this heavy weight from off my head
 And this unwieldy scepter from my hand,
 The pride of kingly sway from out my heart.
 With mine own tears I wash away my balm,
 With mine own hands I give away my crown,
 With mine own tongue deny my sacred state,
 With mine own breath release all duteous oaths.
 All pomp and majesty I do forswear;
 My manors, rents, revenues I forgo;
 My acts, decrees, and statutes I deny.

[*RII*, IV.i.203–13]

One does not fill so many lines cataloguing—in perfect blank verse—items that one despises or wishes to lose. By the time Henry turns back to the “wretched slave,” he has lost all interest in rational comparisons. Particularly absurd is his claim that poorer men sleep with “vacant mind” through the “horrid night”—Williams, Bates, and Court refuted this upon entering:

Court: Brother John Bates, is not that the morning which breaks yonder?

Bates: I think it be; but we have no great cause to desire the approach of day.

Williams: We see yonder the beginning of the day, but I think we shall never see the end of it.

[IV.i.85–90]

Clearly these men have been up all night fearing the dawn. Directors are fond of placing Henry in the midst of his slumbering army—the only man still conscious of the battle to come. In their eagerness to make Henry’s point for him, they miss the larger point—it is not the king’s position but his solipsism that isolates him. Blinds him, too—how else do we explain perhaps the most self-deceiving conclusion to a soliloquy in Shakespeare:

The slave, a member of the country’s peace,
 Enjoys it; but in gross brain little wots
 What watch the king keeps to maintain the peace,
 Whose hours the peasant best advantages.

[IV.i.274–7]

“What watch the king keeps to maintain the peace”—can this possibly be ironic? For Henry to utter the word “peace” in France would be hilarious were he not so deadly serious. In the play’s final scene, the French Duke of Burgundy—his country demoralized and festering—demands to know “why gentle peace / Should not expel these inconveniences / And bless us with her former qualities.” Henry, secure in his militarism, is unmoved:

If, Duke of Burgundy, you would the peace
Whose want gives growth to th’ imperfections
Which you have cited, you must buy that peace
With full accord to all our just demands ...

[V.ii.65–71]

An unbiased observer, hearing these lines, would probably not infer that Henry has suffered sleepless nights *maintaining* the peace. Rather, what sleep he has lost has put him in position to dictate a *new* “peace”—one we have already seen, in the three parts of *Henry VI* and their coda, *Richard III*, rupture in both France and England.

Henry loses sleep for another reason, which we learn in a rare moment of honesty. As dawn breaks over Agincourt, Henry says a quick prayer to Mars:

O God of battles, steel my soldiers’ hearts,
Possess them not with fear! Take from them now
The sense of reckoning, if th’ opposed numbers
Pluck their hearts from them.

[IV.i.282–5]

Henry speaks urgently, as though for the first time recognizing the odds stacked against him and the possibility of defeat or death. It is with these dark thoughts that he turns to the Christian God whose blessing he has continually claimed:

Not today, O Lord,
O, not today, think not upon the fault
My father made in compassing the crown!
I Richard’s body have interred new;

And on it have bestowed more contrite tears
 Than from it issued forced drops of blood.
 Five hundred poor I have in yearly pay,
 Who twice a day their withered hands hold up
 Toward heaven to pardon blood;
 And I have built two chantries,
 Where the sad and solemn priests sing still
 For Richard's soul. More will I do:
 Though all that I can do is nothing worth,
 Since that my penitence comes after all,
 Imploring pardon.

[IV.i.285–99]

Here at last is that confessional voice that has been absent from the play. Yet if Henry's style throughout this scene has been an amalgam of his predecessors' and his own, his conclusion points to a later Shakespearean king. Midway through *Hamlet* (which follows *Henry V* by perhaps a year), the usurper Claudius utters his own self-serving prayer:

O, my offense is rank, it smells to heaven;
 It hath the primal eldest curse upon't,
 A brother's murder. Pray can I not,
 Though inclination be as sharp as will.
 My stronger guilt defeats my strong intent,
 And like a man to double business bound
 I stand in pause where I shall first begin,
 And both neglect. . . .

“Forgive me my foul murder”?

That cannot be, since I am still possessed
 Of those effects for which I did the murder,
 My crown, mine own ambition, and my queen.

[*Hamlet*, III.iii.36–55]

The analogy is not perfect—Henry IV is guilty of Richard's blood, not Henry V—yet along with the crown, Henry has inherited from his father a powerful sense of guilt, and he shares with Claudius the private knowledge that God will not be placated with words. Claudius chooses to stay home, devouring the fruits of his crime, until his kingdom is torn apart by dissension and he is finally, brutally dispatched. Henry, much

shrewder, sets out “to busy giddy minds / With foreign quarrels,” but the blast of war cannot quiet his own mind, and his ill-gotten empire shall barely outlive him. Earlier we wondered with Goddard why Henry makes so little impression on the battlefield at Agincourt. Listening to this fearful prayer, we begin to find the answer. The valiant prince who defeated Hotspur in single combat did not try to bargain with God the night before. That Henry resorts to such measures as king is more revealing than anything he might say on Saint Crispin’s Day.

The King and the Princess

Henry’s “courtship” of the French princess Katherine makes an appropriate coda to the play. Not because the conquering hero is rewarded with love (“Is it possible dat I sould love de *ennemie* of France?” Katherine asks, and Henry’s glib reply, “I love France so well that I will not part with a village of it—I will have it all mine,” is hardly reassuring [V.ii.169–74]), but because the themes of aggression and conquest are transferred from the battlefield to the bedroom. Watching Henry pretend to star in a romantic comedy, my predominant emotion is discomfort—the more charming the actor, the more unsettling the scene.

I shall not spend much time here because it is nearly empty of drama—as Goddard notes, “All the zest of love-making rests in the uncertainty of the result, but in this case the result is a foregone conclusion” [263]. The point is not simply that Katherine has no say in the matter—no one in France has a say, yet Katherine must do her utmost to seem pleasant even as Henry, as has become his custom, leaves her almost no opening to speak. Her first words to him are apologetic: “Your majesty shall mock at me. I cannot speak your England” [V.ii.102–3]; what then should we make of what follows except

mockery? Henry begins with lame puns: “O fair Katherine, if you will love me soundly with your French heart, I will be glad to hear you confess it brokenly with your English tongue”; “An angel is like you, Kate, and you are like an angel” [V.ii.104–6 & 110–11].

When this fails to charm her, he affects bluntness:

King: I know no ways to mince it in love but directly to say, “I love you.”
Then, if you urge me farther than to say, “Do you in faith?” I wear
out my suit. Give me your answer, i’ faith, do: and so clap hands
and a bargain. How say you, lady?

Katherine: Sauf vostre honneur, me understand well.

[V.ii.128–33]

In truth, the scene should end here—Henry cannot articulate his position more clearly than “clap hands and a bargain.” But the king cannot allow an inferior the last word—certainly not an ironic one. Instead, he fills the remainder of the scene with speeches of thirty-five, nine, fourteen, twenty-seven, and twelve lines, determined to overwhelm her with sheer numbers, as the French failed to do to him, and all the while protesting, “I have no cunning in protestation” [V.ii.145]. (“What! A speaker is but a prater,” he adds [V.ii.159].) Meanwhile, Katherine’s lines range from three words (the apt “I cannot tell” [V.ii.194]) to a few sentences, and her own protest—that it is improper for French ladies to kiss before marriage—is ignored by Henry. “We are the makers of manners,” he announces (another privilege of Ceremony he is happy to claim), “and the liberty that follows our places stops the mouths of all findfaults, as I will do yours for upholding the nice fashion of your country in denying me a kiss” [V.ii.270–4].

Katherine never speaks again—a fate common to newly betrothed women in Shakespeare. The English and French lords re-enter, Henry exchanges bawdy jokes with Burgundy about the princess (“Then, good my lord, teach your cousin to consent winking” [V.ii.302–3]), the French king grants all of Henry’s demands, and everyone

exits with the best intentions to uphold the peace. The play is nearly done. All that remains is for the Chorus to give one last speech:

Thus far, with rough and all-unable pen,
 Our bending author hath pursued the story,
 In little room confining mighty men,
 Mangling by starts the full course of their glory.
 Small time; but in that small most greatly lived
 This Star of England. Fortune made his sword,
 By which the world's best garden he achieved,
 And of it left his son imperial lord.
 Henry the Sixth, in infant bands crowned king
 Of France and England, did this king succeed;
 Whose state so many had the managing
 That they lost France and made his England bleed:
 Which oft our stage hath shown; and for their sake,
 In your fair minds let this acceptance take.

[Epilogue, 1–14]

As befits a sonnet, this one turns from the reverent first ten lines to the elegiac conclusion: Henry V gains the world but can neither take it with him nor ensure it survives his untimely death; the heir who he boasts “shall go to Constantinople and take the Turk by the beard” [V.ii.207] grows into the meek and peace-loving Henry VI, humbled by French women at home and abroad. “If you mark Alexander’s life well, Harry of Monmouth’s life is come after it indifferent well; for there is figures in all things” [IV.vii.31–3], Fluellen muses at Agincourt. Alexander the Great and Henry V: two conquerors who did not live to enjoy their conquests—an irony that Fluellen could not have intended, though he has already demonstrated a knack for identifying Henry with great men of antiquity for the wrong reasons. Recall that the Welsh captain also compared Henry’s camp at Agincourt to Pompey’s [IV.i.68-71]—for all his achievements, the Roman general was finally defeated by a smaller army led by the more capable Julius Caesar.

Needless to say, from this perspective it is Caesar, not Pompey, who should represent Henry, yet in the end it scarcely matters which long-dead general he most resembles—the crucial point is that all have died, as Henry too must die, and his England must suffer the same reversal of fortune as Alexander’s Macedonia and Caesar’s and Pompey’s Rome. Not even the Chorus can ignore time’s ultimate victory over man, and neither can Shakespeare. He returns to this theme in play after play; it is the subject of some of his greatest speeches—from “All the world’s a stage” to “Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow” to “Our revels now are ended”—and in *Henry V* he makes it the final word on his otherwise indomitable hero.

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