

Ben R. Schneider, Jr
Department of English
Lawrence University
Appleton, WI 54912

ben.r.schneider@lawrence.edu
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Work in progress

Chapter V of Shakespeare's *Morals*: Hal Imitates The Sun

People wonder why, after announcing in the Epilogue of Part 2 that more Falstaff interludes were on the way, Shakespeare gave us only one pitiful description of Falstaff's death at the beginning of *Henry V*, and then said goodbye forever. But as Hal said in his "Machiavellian" speech of Part 1, he would "imitate the sun." Falstaff, being a highwayman, called himself the "Moon's minion." He is not the chaste moon, as he comically insists, but, as anyone can see, the inconstant moon. When the sun rises, the moon fades away, just as it did when Portia returned to Belmont after vanquishing Shylock.

I really liked Kenneth Branagh's movie of *Henry V*. It was so frank about the horrors of war that I even thought it might not rile the pacifistic critics. I was dead wrong. When I read my e-mail from the SHAKSPER Electronic Conference, where 1200 Shakespeare aficionados discuss issues in text or performance or "lurk" in SHAKSPERian cyberspace, I found that I had radically underestimated my colleagues. *Henry V*, whether by Branagh, Olivier, or Shakespeare drives a great many of them up the wall, including some very heavy hitters. It arouses more temper tantrums than any other topic on the bulletin board. Here is a typical reaction:

I have just finished reviewing a week's worth of SHAKSPER-mail and am amazed and nauseated by the amount of defensive and reactive commentary in defense of Branagh [actually very little, comparatively]. . . . I find it hard to believe that so many presumably credible people could be anything but bored by Branagh's cheap, flat, un-ironic exercises in trivial spectacle and self-promotion. The key moment for me is in *Henry V* when, after ruthlessly hanging Bardolph for stealing a pax from a church, Branagh introduces one of his stupid and unilluminating flash-backs to the tavern The cut back to the present shows Branagh-as-Henry with a tear running down his face. . . . [The production is] idolotrously fascistic. The scenes with Katherine--those terrible scenes of King Henry's smug coyness--, his perfect ease with conquer and rape, scenes which should be difficult for anyone short of Goebbels to read as delightful, are played as frothily as possible by Branagh, who winds up as smug and twee as Henry himself.

The reason for the fury directed at *Henry V* is probably that it celebrates a war hero. The root of postmodernism is certainly the Vietnam war, and the anger of "Hell no, we won't go" lives on in Shakespeare criticism. (There is an article called "Henry V and the Mekong Agincourt." [Kamps]) So the heroic Henry is picked apart (deconstructed) and the ironic reading becomes the correct reading. By this device Henry can be accused of trumping up flimsy reasons to fight France, threatening a helpless besieged city with unbridled rape and murder, losing a debate

with a soldier on the theological implications of the conflict, killing prisoners, hanging an old friend, making a holy war out of a ruthless conquest, and hypocritically wooing a princess who had no choice but to marry him anyhow. He did all these things, it is true, and, viewed in the wrong light, they are very bad things to do. But it is the wrong light.

War

Once we adjust to the notion that war can be beautiful, we may begin to appreciate the early modern *Henry V*. The authorities can also help us with some of the details that have soured modern appetites. There is first the matter of Henry's trumped up reason for going to war with France: the far-fetched argument that France has usurped English rights to the throne of their kingdom by insisting on the Salic Law against female succession. The real reason, put forward several times in the *Lancastrian tetralogy*, being that a foreign war will unite the quarrelsome English barons. From the Archbishop's incomprehensible exposition of the English claim to the French throne, we do make out that the English nation has been deprived of territory that they believe is rightfully theirs. In fact Henry's war had been waiting happen for a long time; he did not invent it. Part of the real reason (not mentioned in the play but probably familiar to the audience) was the need to ensure the safety of Calais. This city had belonged to England since Edward III seized it in 1347 as a base for English trade with the continent, a sort of Hong Kong or Singapore. France didn't repossess the city until 1558. When Shakespeare wrote his play, England still had a strong territorial interest in the other side of the channel, as Elizabeth's expensive wars in France and the Low Countries testify. In truth the centuries-long Anglo-French war in which Agincourt played a small part didn't really stop until the battle of Waterloo. There must always have been a reason for England to fight France or France to fight England. As Cicero observes in *De Officiis*, Rome sometimes fought for power, sometimes for glory, and sometimes for supremacy; he favored wars for supremacy, and I would argue that Henry's war falls into this category. (41, 361) Since the war is there to be fought, since war is good for the soul and the Archbishop takes full responsibility for its justice, isn't the fact that it solves some internal problems just an added incentive to embark on it?

Fluellen's pedantic comparison of Henry to Alexander the Great in Act 4, however ridiculous, does tell us where the play's classical antecedents lay, and it is not just Plutarch's life of Alexander, but all of Plutarch's lives against which we must measure Henry V, just as Plutarch measures worthy against worthy,--but morally, not factually, as the literal-minded Fluellen does. Certainly this is the context in which the play was written and it's hero inevitably judged in its own time. Alexander cannot help appearing to us as a mad adventurer, a master trumper up of justifications for conquering countries, little different from Hitler. But Montaigne thought Alexander "the greatest man that ever was." (above, p. xx) Why? "The continuance and greatness of his glory unspotted, untainted, pure and free from all blame or envie: (2.563)." He thinks Caesar, on account of his "vile . . . subversion of his country (2.564)," must come second, although he conquered more territory.

In measuring human greatness in terms of frequency of valorous acts and area of territorial expansion, Montaigne shows us just how anachronistic is our life-oriented scale of victimology and compassion for the evaluation of Henry's exploits in France.

Harfleur

Even harder to take than Henry's flimsy reasons for going to war are his brutal threats to the city of Harfleur. If it should refuse to surrender

look to see
The blind and bloody soldier with foul hand
[Defile] the locks of your shrill-shreeking daughters;
Your fathers taken by the silver beards,
And their most reverend heads dash'd to the walls;
Your naked infants spitted upon pikes,
Whiles the mad mothers with their howls confus'd
Do break the clouds. (3.3.33-40)

Actually, in Tasso's *Gierusalemme Liberata* (translated 1590), such an atrocity was in fact committed on the historical/fictive city of Jerusalem:

Blood, murder, death, each street, house, church defiled,
There heaps of slain appear, there mountains high;
There, underneath th'unburied hills up-piled
Of bodied dead, the living buried lie;
There the sad mother with her tender child
Doth tear her tresses loose, complain and fly;
And there the spoiler, by her amber hair,
Draws to his lust the virgin chaste and fair.
(19.30, Fairfax translation, 1600)

This was the climax of a specifically Christian enterprise. The poem writes it off as punishment for the sin of refusing to give up the holy city after the wall was breached. Hugo Grotius, the Renaissance authority on laws of war (*De Jure Belli et Pacis*, 1625) holds that a commander should give a city a chance to surrender just before he plans to breach the wall. He says that those who surrender on condition that their lives be spared ought to be spared. And if they don't? An army may, according to Grotius's laws of war, kill any belligerent man, woman, or child (647-50, 739), though rape is deplored. Obviously the mere threat of a full-scale sack would win some cities without any further bloodshed, and that was what Henry's horrendous threat was intended to accomplish and did. Montaigne takes for granted that the "rage" of common soldiers cannot always be restrained, "the rights of covetousnesse and revenge supplanting those of authority and military discipline." (1.26-7) We watch in horror the mass rapes and slaughter that go on in 20th-century Bosnia and Rwanda. Can a commander really be responsible for what his troops will do when a fiercely-resisting city suddenly caves in? Over and over in Plutarch, it is only sunset or fatigue that stops the massacre of losing armies. There is good reason to suppose that Henry was only being realistic in his parley with the city fathers of Harfleur.

Prisoners

Another sticking point with modern critics is Henry's instant decision to kill all enemy prisoners when he hears that the French, after vacating the field, have renewed hostilities. The tactical reason is obvious: each soldier who took a prisoner was *_hors de combat_*. The English army was so badly outnumbered that it really couldn't afford the luxury of prisoners, unless it was certain that the French had left the field for good, and they had not. The episode in which Pistol becomes the owner of war-weary Monsieur Le Fer shows us exactly what is entailed. An enemy soldier buys his life with the promise to pay a ransom, pawning his living body as security. In other words he is dead if he doesn't pay. So if the captor forgoes the ransom, the prisoner owes his life. Whatever the case, Henry couldn't set them free, because they might then add themselves to the enemy force so as to appear loyal when the wind shifted. He couldn't keep them captive, because that subtracted their guards from his own meagre force. The only motive for taking prisoners was ransom (poor soldiers either ran or got killed) and only cowards would buy their lives, the prisoners were worthless even to their own side. They were an impediment that must be disposed of. Some time after World War II, Nicholas Montserrat wrote a book, called *_The Cruel Sea_*, about an anti-submarine destroyer whose commander was faced with a terrible choice: either to be sunk by a U-Boat or drive right through a sea full of English sailors, necessarily killing many of them. This was same dilemma Henry faced, except that the men he sacrificed were the enemy. Grotius recognizes the right of belligerents to kill prisoners. (649)

We moderns would prefer it if Henry agonized over these tough decisions, more in the style of Hamlet. In the absence of such agonizing, he is often accused of coldness and lack of compassion. But agonizing exacts a price, and in affairs of state the Fortinbras (or J. F. K.) personality has some merit. However that may be, many modern critics are not happy with Henry's summary banishment of Falstaff, although he warned us and him in *_Henry IV, Part 1_* ("I do, I will [2.4.481]."); or with execution of his old crony Bardolph ("We would have all such offenders so cut off [3.6.107.]); or with his inadequate response to the Archbishop's elaborate exposition of England's right to the throne of France ("May I with right and conscience make this claim? [1.2.96]); or with his decision in respect to the French prisoners ("[Let] every soldier kill his prisoners [4.6.37-].") The faster a commander makes a decision the more likely it is to receive assent, because the speed indicates that he has forethought this exigency and knows how to deal with it. Cicero had forethought it too:

People's trust can be won in two ways: first, if we possess the reputation of having acquired wisdom that is combined with justice. We trust those men who, we think, understand more than we and who, we believe, can foresee the future, who improvise an action and who can produce a plan quickly when an event is underway and has reached a crisis; for men think that such abilities are useful and genuine wisdom. (Edinger 33)

Watching how fast Henry handles the sudden renewal of French hostilities, the character Gower, who was put there just to say this line exclaims, "O, 'tis a gallant king!" (4.7.10)

Williams

The Williams episode, in which Henry in disguise argues that the king is not responsible for the souls of his soldiers who die in battle "when death is their argument" and when they have no chance to say their prayers, seems to be an extension of the Warwick thesis, that Henry is engaged in affable intelligence gathering. Falstaff is banished, but Harry still consorts with the people--this time much better people--to keep in touch with what's on their minds. Therefore he willingly hears and genuinely answers Williams's objections.

The chorus refers to his nocturnal visit as "a little touch of Harry in the night." In Tacitus's *Annals* (translated 1598) the beloved Roman general, Claudius's brother Germanicus, made a similar visit to his troops the night before a crucial battle with the Germans. Editors of *Henry V* note the fact but doubt that Shakespeare knew the story. But if Shakespeare is devouring the ancients in a furious attempt to bring himself *au courant* with his betters in the audience, as I think is actually the case, and since Germanicus was much admired by the Romans and cut off in his prime like Henry, and since the Williams episode is not suggested by Shakespeare's English sources, I nominate Tacitus's account of the great Germanicus for the honor of inspiring Henry on the night before Agincourt.

Williams seems satisfied with Henry's theology, but that's not his only problem: he thinks the King will give himself up for ransom at the battle of Agincourt and let his troops fend for themselves. Henry denies this so vehemently that Williams challenges him to a duel after the battle, and Henry accepts. They will identify each other by the glove each takes from the other and wears on his headgear. The vignette of LeFer seeking mercy from the braggart coward Pistol by offering himself for ransom, focusses the play still more on the issue of ransom. A good commander shuns no hardship to which he exposes his troops. The worst possible thing that Harry could do would be to desert his troops and spend several months in the lap of French luxury waiting for the money to be collected, while his troops, what's left of them, straggle home through hostile territory. Shakespeare, to help us measure Henry's courage and sense of responsibility, makes sure that we know how easily he could escape this perilous fight that pits five fresh French against each tired Englishman.

The upshot reflects on Henry's severity with Falstaff and Bardolph by showing his downright admiration of Williams's offence, which the lightweight Fluellen, when the secret is out, thinks is high treason. Williams, reminding us somewhat of Job prostrate before God, loses all rebelliousness and asks pardon for his transgression. Plain dealing subordinates are exactly what a king needs most, and Henry expresses his gratitude by returning Williams's glove full of gold. This magnanimous gesture parallels his giving his brother John the honor of freeing Douglas at the end of *Henry IV, Part 1*, in contrast to Hotspur's refusal to release any captives to the King.

Williams will not accept the niggardly pittance Fluellen offers him in imitation of the king's generosity, and it appears that this is the place where Shakespeare gives Fluellen his come-

uppance, in which he is shown up as an essentially mean (as opposed to generous) person. Some scholars misread this scene as further evidence of a Williams rebellion against arbitrary and oppressive authority (notably Marilyn Williamson [SEL 1969]). The passage can be read so as to indicate that Henry tries to pay off Williams but is rebuffed. But it is after Fluellen offers his paltry shilling that Williams refuses the money. Has he not already accepted Henry's glove full of gold? But take a measly shilling from a man that wants him executed for high treason? He won't accept a gift from a person he could not serve in return. At any rate, Fluellen needs to be rebuffed before the play ends, for continually and boringly promoting himself as a military expert.

It is Fluellen's function, as I see it, to frame Henry's plain dealing with his verbose, Polonius-like pedantry. Pistol serves this function also, too, doing a turn as the *_miles gloriosus_* who is revealed as a coward in the end (when he lets Fluellen cudgel him). Seneca declares that "Philosophy teaches us to act not to speak," and both of these gentlemen talk too much. Any kind of self-promotion is taboo, and what we want is a form of speech that is, as Montaigne recommends, "not Pedantical, nor Frierlike, nor Lawyer-like, [nor Polonius-like, nor Fluellen-like nor even Archbishop of Canterbury-like] but rather down-right, Souldier-like." I add the Archbishop to the list in honor of his boring dissertation on "In terram Salicam mulieres ne succedant" (1.2.38) that made Henry so impatient at the beginning of the play.

Wooing Catherine

Henry's long proposal of marriage to Catherine has bothered critics from Samuel Johnson (who thought it smacked too much of Hotspur) to today's feminists (who think the proposal is hypocritical when the marriage will take place willy-nilly). Johnson is right about Hotspur, because except for his ridiculous obsession with glory, he was indeed a Plain Dealer, who hated foppery or pedantry of any kind. To the feminists one might say, how do you know what Henry was going to do if she refused him? Or, how would you like it if he were to encounter her for the first time at the altar? The proposal, I would suggest, in spite of such objections, is meant to be one more example of Henry's generous humanity. It is indeed somewhat self-regarding, a fault which I would lay to the fact that Henry is literally defining himself as a plain dealer in the speech; it's the first chance we have to see the king as a private person, and Shakespeare makes the most of it. My italics and bracketed annotations are designed to bring out his Plain Dealing characteristics.

Fair Katherine, and most fair,
Will you vouchsafe to teach a soldier [diffidence] terms,
Such as will enter at a lady's ear,
And plead his love-suit to her gentle heart? . . .

[He switches to unassuming prose:]

I am glad thou canst speak no better English, for if thou couldst, thou wouldst find me such a *_plain_* king that thou wouldst think I had sold my farm to buy my crown.
[diffidence] I know no ways to mince it in love,

[amateurism] but directly to say "I love you"; [plain dealing] then if you urge me farther than to say "Do you in faith?" I wear out my suit [amateurism]. . . . Marry, if you would put me to verses, or to dance for your sake, Kate, why, you undid me: for the one, I have neither words nor measure; and for the other, I have no strength in measure, yet a reasonable measure in strength. If I could win a lady at leap-frog, or by vaulting into my saddle with my armor on my back, under the correction of bragging [self-criticism] be it spoken, I should quickly leap into a wife. Or if I might buffet for my love, or bound my horse for her favors, I could lay on like a butcher, and sit like a jack-an-apes, never off. But, before God, Kate, I cannot look greenly, nor gasp out my eloquence, nor I have no cunning in protestation; [amateurism] only downright oaths, which I never use till urg'd, [being as good as his word he suspects a formal oaths] nor never break for urging. [constancy] If thou canst love a fellow of this temper, Kate, whose face is not worth sunburning, that never looks in his glass for love of any thing he sees there, [diffidence] let thine eye be thy cook. I speak to thee plain soldier. If thou canst love me for this, take me! if not, to say to thee that I shall die, is true; but for thy love, by the Lord, no; [plain dealing, as in "My mistress's eyes are nothing like the sun"] yet I love thee too. And while thou liv'st, dear Kate, take a fellow of plain and uncoin'd constancy, for he perforce must do thee right, because he hath not the gift to woo in other places; for these fellows of infinite tongue, that can rhyme themselves into ladies' favors, they do always reason themselves out again. [amateurism] What? a speaker is but a prater, a rhyme is but a ballad; a good leg will fall, a straight back will stoop, a black beard will turn white, a curl'd pate will grow bald, a fair face will wither, a full eye will wax hollow; but a good heart, Kate, is the sun and the moon, or rather the sun and not the moon; for it shines bright and never changes, but keeps his course truly. [constancy] . . .

The Plain Dealer's clear-eyed, self-deprecatory nature inevitably produces in him a sense of humour, and from this derives his ever-present wit. One might include wit under the heading of Generosity in my list of virtues, because it takes effort, and if it's diffident, it can be construed as a gift to good cheer. In this passage Henry does Katherine the honor of a full display of wit, showing by this effort how much he is willing to do in her behalf. His wooing is the plain-dealing equivalent of a love-sonnet sequence.

Non nobis

Henry's detractors would have it that his repeated emphasis on God's hand in the battle of Agincourt is a cloak for the shady business it actually is: he wants divine sanction for dirty deeds. But I think the references to God point elsewhere. The Merchant of Venice is Shakespeare's best meditation on the question raised here, and its answer, I take it, is Portia's line, "In the course of justice none of us should see salvation." The merchant Antonio loses his temper when Shylock defends usury by telling how Jacob tricked Laban out of most of his sheep.

This was a way to thrive [says Shylock], and he was blest;

And thrift is blessing, if men steal it not.

Antonio won't have any of this:

This was a venture, sir, that Jacob serv'd for,
A thing not in his power to bring to pass,
But sway'd and fashion'd by the hand of heaven.

(1.3.89-93)

But Shylock, having trick'd Antonio into giving a pound of his flesh as security for a loan (a gesture of "friendship"), goes to court when Antonio defaults, to collect said pound as an absolute right, like Laban's sheep. Not heeding Portia's warning, he seeks he seeks salvation "in the course of justice." _The Merchant_'s many references to "fortune," (sometimes referred to as "heaven") bring to mind continually the major premise of Stoicism: we have no power over anything in the world except our bodies and our wills. No amount of work or merit or legal right will guarantee any outcome. All material happiness is temporary. Under these circumstances it is the greatest vanity in the world to take pride in one's achievements or acquisitions. One's wealth is always one's "fortune."

I would argue that Henry's references to heaven are simply restatements of the Lord's Prayer's humble submission, "Thy will [not mine] be done," and it's conclusion: "For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever and ever." To assume that God bestows the victory because the king and his people deserve it would be to take Shylock's line and to "assume desert" as one of Portia's ill fated suitors did. As Henry's dialogue with Williams reminds us, some soldiers are certainly _not_ favorites of the Lord, and on close inspection, hardly any of them are saints. And for Henry there is still the matter of his father's usurpation of Richard II's throne. Henry is not such a sanctimonious prig as to "assume desert," and that's why he orders his troops to sing "Non nobis" (4.8.123) in thanksgiving for the victory: "Not unto us, O Lord, not unto us, but unto thy name give glory" (Psalm 115.1) This is diffidence, this is graciousness, of the most fundamental kind.

The fact that he does not take credit for any accomplishments is the greatest thing about Henry, who much more prefers to give credit to others, sometimes at his own cost: in the First Part of Henry IV to Falstaff, Douglas, and Prince John; in the Second Part to the Justice who convicted him; and in his own play to footsoldier Williams, whose plain-dealing questions must have shook his confidence and made his crown lie uneasy on his head.

Onus, not _honos_

All alone in the night after Williams and Bates move on, Henry delivers his eighty-four line soliloquy, beginning "Upon the King . . ." It is a complaint, to be sure, but only to himself, on the theme of "Onus, not honos" later to be a theme of King James 's advice to his son.

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! . . .
'Tis not the balm, the sceptre, 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 fill'd and vacant mind,
Gets him to rest, cramm'd with distressful bread . . .
[This] slave, a member of the country's peace,
Enjoys it; but in gross brain little wots
What watch the King keeps to maintain [that] peace.
(4.1.238-84)

No one but a man who takes full responsibility for the welfare of his people would say such words; no one but a man who has no illusions of superiority and loves his people one at a time, can love them well enough to feel such responsibility, and no place is more likely to bring home this feeling than Agincourt, on the eve of battle, after talking to soldiers like Bates and Williams. Before his conversion in the hovel, Lear believed in ceremony: "Allow not nature more than nature needs and man's life is cheap

as a beast." Confronted with Mad Tom, he cries "Off, you lendings," and tears off his clothes, for Tom "is the thing itself." "The king is a man as I am," says Henry, with a wink at the audience, as he begins his "touch of Harry in the night," but as is so often the case in Shakespeare, a joke is the point of the play. Seneca said, "I am a man, and nothing in man's lot do I deem foreign to me." What Lear learned too late we would like to think that Henry learned early, at the Boar's head tavern, or perhaps looking down at dead Hotspur, who could so easily have been looking down at him. At any rate, he knows it now. His father was wrong. It is better to be loved than feared.