

**“WHEN THE BATTLE’S  
LOST AND WON”: THE  
OPENING OF  
SHAKESPEARE’S *1  
HENRY IV***

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As *1 Henry IV* opens, the King and his entourage receive reports of two battles: in the west, Mortimer has been defeated by Glendower; in the north, Hotspur has been victorious over the Douglas. This virtually simultaneous victory and defeat both validates and undermines the legitimacy of Henry’s ruling by Divine Right. Moreover, the manner in which these reports are presented to the court suggests that Henry, the consummate politician, has orchestrated the scene. He has Westmoreland tell of Mortimer’s defeat, thereby consigning the defeat to an underling; Henry then announces Hotspur’s success, thus by association attributing this victory to himself. Additionally, Shakespeare problematizes the episode by implying that in a sense the victory was a defeat and the defeat a victory. The last thing Henry needs is for Hotspur, of the contentious and soon to be openly rebellious Percy clan, to heighten his reputation as a warrior via his victory over the Scots. Conversely, Mortimer is Henry’s most significant rival for the crown, and his being defeated and captured by the Welsh both tarnishes his claim to the throne and removes him as a challenger to Henry for the kingship. Indeed, Henry may have placed the ineffectual Mortimer in charge of his forces with the hope that Mortimer would not only be defeated but killed. This constitutes a motif anticipating the battle at Shrewsbury which concludes the play: Hal gives Falstaff a charge of foot, perhaps taking more seriously than he pretends Falstaff’s assertion that walking a great distance will be the death of him, and Henry gives Hal a prominent position in the battle at least arguably with the hope that Hal will be killed; his position as heir apparent would consequently descend to his more respected and tractable brother John. In any case, the conflation of victory and defeat, of the battle’s being lost and won, tempers any enthusiasm regarding the Lancastrian victory at Shrewsbury. This also anticipates the latter part of *2 Henry IV*, in which the reporting of Lancastrian victories over Glendower and Scroop coincides with, and perhaps metaphorically precipitates, Henry IV’s death. Consequently, Shakespeare implies that in the topsy-turvy world of Lancastrian rule, battles are not lost or won, but rather lost and won, every defeat bearing the potential for political gain and, more importantly, every victory constituting in some sense a defeat.

One of the many startling lines in that short, incredibly rich opening scene of *Macbeth* consists of the Sisters agreeing that they will meet again “When the hurly burly’s done / When the battle’s lost and won” (1.1.3-4). Just prior to his first appearance, Macbeth has both won and lost a battle. He has won in the technical sense of being victorious over those rebelling against his King, but he

has also lost in that his victory and its attendant rewards inspire him to assassinate Duncan, an act which initiates his personal disintegration and political downfall. Thus, as a consequence of having won the battle Macbeth loses his inner peace, his mental stability, and ultimately his life. Similarly, Marc Antony in conjunction with Octavius Caesar defeats the forces of Brutus and Cassius, but this victory in *Julius Caesar* is merely a necessary prelude to Antony's defeat and death in *Antony and Cleopatra*. This paradox of losing one sort of battle by winning another and vice-versa constitutes a marked tendency in Shakespeare and one which appears conspicuously in the Lancastrian tetralogy, finding its most pronounced expression in the opening of *1 Henry IV*.

In the first scene of that play, the King is ill; by Shakespeare's day, of course, the motif of the ruler's ill health infecting his kingdom was well-established, and one might profitably compare the opening of *1 Henry* with that of *Oedipus Rex*, where Oedipus's moral illness has contaminated all of Thebes. Henry's sickness is at least in part generated by his having usurped the crown from Richard II. Importantly, Shakespeare never provides a coronation scene for Henry, thereby calling into question the extent to which Henry is legitimately king, a matter raised again at Shrewsbury by Henry's having others dressed in the royal regalia during the battle. Hence, not only is Henry's health imperiled but so is his claim to the throne, and just prior to the opening of *1 Henry* he has been beset on two fronts by rebels.

Partly as a means of forestalling further rebellion, Henry in his opening speech reiterates that intention mentioned at the end of *Richard II* to lead troops on Crusade. As becomes apparent in the Henriad, Henry's reasons for wanting to go on Crusade are many, religious zeal being the most obvious but least compelling among them. For instance, among his other motives Henry intends to posit the "heathen" as a common enemy and so repair the fractured political condition of his own country, to bring to an end "the intestine shock and furious close of civil butchery" (1.1.12-13) which has been ravaging his kingdom. In fact, Henry clearly indicates his hope that national unity will be a by-product of the Crusade, that the warring factions shall "March all one way and be no more opposed / Against acquaintance, kindred, and allies" (1.1.15-16). Henry also of course wants the Crusade to draw attention away from his recent usurpation of the crown, a desire he retains to the very end: on his deathbed Henry says that he "had a purpose now / To lead out many to the Holy Land / Lest rest and lying still might make them look / Too near unto my state" (*2 Henry*, 4.5.209-212). He also encourages Hal to adopt this practice when he becomes king, to "busy giddy minds with foreign quarrels" (*2 Henry*, 4.5.213-214). Hal, for once the dutiful son, follows his father's advice by instigating war with France shortly after coming to the throne.

Henry may additionally desire to validate Lancastrian rule by achieving a victory in the Holy Land, the implication of “God being on our side” having less of an ironic tinge in Henry’s (and Shakespeare’s) day than at present. Even should Henry’s forces lose the battle in the Holy Land, he could claim that he was attempting to perform God’s work and so imply that he therefore has made reparation for the execution of Richard. Should Henry not survive the Crusade, the Lancastrian political machine could then influence public opinion to alter Henry’s status from that of political assassin to that of Christian martyr. And it may well be that Henry does not anticipate returning from the Holy Land: although Shakespeare delays this revelation until late in *2 Henry*, it had been prophesied that Henry would die in Jerusalem, and so his fervent desire to make the journey suggests that guilt over the deposition and execution of Richard has made Henry crave extinction. While speaking to Hal, he also remarks that his death will clear away any taint appertaining to the Lancastrians’ claim to the crown: “To thee it will descend with better quiet, / Better opinion, better confirmation, / For all the soil of the achievement goes / With me into the earth” (*2 Henry*, 4.5.187-190). Consequently, Henry must feel that his going to the Holy Land would be for him and his line a win-win situation, even —or perhaps especially— if he were to lose his life in Jerusalem.

This conflation of victory and defeat appears again in the first scene of *1 Henry* when Henry and his entourage receive the reports of two very recent battles fought on Henry’s behalf: in the north, Hotspur has been victorious over the Scots; in the west, Mortimer has been defeated by the Welsh. At least in the most immediate sense, the victory in the north might be seen to validate Henry’s ruling by right as well as by might, while the defeat in the west would suggest otherwise. The manner of presenting these reports to the court suggests that Henry, the consummate politician, has orchestrated the scene. Henry very much considers politics to be a matter of public performance, as appears when, in a private conversation with Hal, he reveals his strategy in coming to the crown: “By being seldom seen, I could not stir / But like a comet I was wond’red at... And then I stole all courtesy from heaven / And dressed myself in such humility / That I did pluck allegiance from men’s hearts” (*1 Henry*, 3.2.46-52). Henry later uses specifically dramatic terms in retrospectively evaluating his career: “For all my reign hath been but as a scene / Acting [an] argument” (*2 Henry*, 4.5.197-198). As David Grene has noted, “Shakespeare saw the contemporary king as suggestively similar to the actor in his relation to the role” (1988: 47). This certainly applies to Henry, who employs an essentially Machiavellian strategy of audience manipulation with regard to the reporting of the battles’ results. Henry initially behaves as if he is unaware of the outcome of Mortimer’s foray. He calls upon Westmoreland to deliver to the court the decree of the Council meeting the previous evening concerning the expedition to the Holy Land. This meeting, according to Westmoreland, was interrupted with the

information that Mortimer was captured and his army decimated. Henry's being ignorant of this development, however, seems less than likely, and indeed hardly plausible. Henry would presumably have been informed of such a catastrophe immediately, but he feigns ignorance in order to distance himself personally from the stigma involved in the defeat. The presumption that Henry would immediately be given the report of a battle is supported in 1.1 by his receiving what he terms the "smooth and welcome news" (1.1.66) of Hotspur's victory from Blunt, who is "new lighted from his horse" (1.1.63). Blunt, however, does not deliver his report to the congregation at large, Henry reserving this honor for himself and thereby in effect claiming the victory by association.

However, as always with Shakespeare, other angles must be considered. Shakespeare implies that so far as Henry's interests are concerned in some ways Mortimer's defeat is a victory and Hotspur's victory a defeat. Granted, Hotspur was fighting for Henry against the Scots, but the last thing Henry needs is for Hotspur, of the contentious and soon to be openly rebellious Percy clan, to heighten his reputation as a warrior via this victory. On the other hand, although Mortimer's defeat jeopardizes Henry's western frontier, Mortimer is also Henry's most legitimate rival for the crown, and Mortimer's being defeated and captured by the Welsh both tarnishes his claim to the throne and physically removes him as a challenger to Henry for the kingship.

By the same token, however, Mortimer's being captured provides the Percies with an opportunity to insist upon his being ransomed. Knowing that Henry will not do so, the Percies can use Henry's refusal as an excuse for rebellion. Although they exploit this pretext in 1.3, just a short time later, when the rebels meet to discuss the division of a kingdom they have yet to conquer, the Percies have apparently decided that their support of Mortimer extends only to his being awarded one-third of the kingdom, another third of course going to them. For Mortimer, though, a third is better than nothing, so by losing the battle to Glendower, Mortimer has both won a wife—he marries Glendower's daughter—and at least in prospect gained one-third of a kingdom.

Just as the Percies use Mortimer and other means to manipulate Henry, Henry is not averse to manipulating the Percies—he is simply better at this somewhat sordid game of dramatic improvisation than they are. Phyllis Rackin observes that "[t]he Henry we see on stage in the second tetralogy anticipates the Tudors in using the resources of theatrical role-playing to produce the perfect image of royal authority that he could not inherit from the ambiguous genealogy that left him the throne" (1990: 70). Additionally, Harold Toliver feels that "[t]hroughout the Henry IV plays one improvised performance reflects another by analogy and thereby compounds it and calls attention to the

style of enactment itself.” (1983: 53). Consequently, Henry as an accomplished actor and indeed director has no trouble turning Hotspur’s victory at Holmedon against him: Henry forces the Percies’ hand by insisting that the hot-tempered and appropriately nicknamed Hotspur yield prisoners which were not Henry’s by the laws of chivalry to claim. Moreover, the effeminate messenger — “perfumed like a milliner” (1.3.36), using “many holiday and lady terms... like a waiting gentlewoman” (1.3.46; 55)— who insists upon Hotspur’s turning over the prisoners is precisely the sort of courtier whom Henry might employ to rouse Hotspur’s ire and so induce him to refuse to turn over the prisoners. Henry, unlike Prufrock, wants to force the moment to its crisis. The Percies are at this time unprepared for war, as the letter Hotspur receives in act 2 stipulates: “The purpose you undertake is dangerous, the friends you have named uncertain, the time itself unsorted, and your whole plot too light for the counterpoise of so great an opposition” (2.3.10-13).

Henry’s urgency in provoking the Percy rebellion may provide another reason for his refusal to ransom Mortimer. One must ask, however, why Henry would have sent Mortimer against Glendower in the first place. Mortimer’s qualifications as a military leader are never discussed directly in the text, but his sole appearance in *1 Henry* would certainly not inspire confidence in his martial abilities. He seems overly enamored of his spouse, despite —or perhaps because of— the fact that he and his wife speak different languages and so cannot understand one another. He also seems less than an imposing personality in other respects: in this scene, his future kingdom is being divided up and he does not register a single protest. And although he claims fervently that he will follow Hotspur “with all [his] heart” (3.1.264) to do battle against the Lancasters, he inexplicably fails to arrive at Shrewsbury. Hardly a galvanizing personality, Mortimer seems a very odd figure for Henry to have sent against the fierce Glendower, unless of course Henry was hoping that Mortimer would not survive the battle.

Possibly, Henry would not have been overly distressed had his side lost both of the battles reported in 1.1, just so long as Hotspur and Mortimer lost their lives in the process. Hotspur’s death would, of course, be a serious blow to the Percies and their rebellious intentions, and Mortimer’s death would remove Henry’s major rival for the throne. This giving of military commissions with the understanding that even a loss might produce the benefit of ridding oneself of a rival is a prominent pattern in the *Henriad*, a means, to use Falstaff’s trenchant phrase, of “turn[ing] diseases to commodity” (*2 Henry*, 1.2.247-248). Shakespeare may thus be playing a turn upon the biblical precedent of David and Uriah: desiring Bathsheba, David sent Uriah into battle having arranged it so that he would be killed by the enemy. That Shakespeare had the biblical David in mind while writing the *Henriad* appears in Falstaff’s reference to the

“whoreson Achitophel” in *2 Henry* (1.2.35). In *1 Henry*, Hal steals Falstaff’s horses at Gadshill, perhaps taking more seriously than he pretends his assertion to Poins that Falstaff’s walking back to London from that location would result in his “sweat[ing] to death” (2.2.107). And later in the play, Falstaff is given a charge of foot by Hal, who states that “Falstaff’s death will be a march of twelve score” (2.4.541). As Harold Bloom notes, Hal “forbears” from hanging Falstaff, “reasoning that it is more appropriate to kill the aged reprobate by a forced march, or even (honorably) in battle” (1998: 103). And at least arguably, Henry gives the untried and so far as he knows dissolute Hal a prominent position at Shrewsbury in order to dispense with his oldest son and have Hal’s position as heir apparent descend to his more respected and more tractable brother John, who has already taken over Hal’s place at Council.

Of course, by assigning troops to inexperienced commanders like Hal or those simply negligent like Falstaff in order to accomplish ulterior purposes, the ruling classes in England demonstrate a complete disregard for the subjects who will be fighting under these commanders. After the battle of Shrewsbury, for example, Falstaff admits, “I have led my ragamuffins where they are pepper’d; there’s not three of my hundred and fifty left alive, and they are for the town’s end, to beg during life” (5.3.35-38). Even the renowned warrior Hotspur engages in careless and quixotic rhetoric before Shrewsbury, stating “Die all, die merrily” (4.1.134); unfortunately, many of those fighting under his command do die, and his own death, as presented onstage, is certainly other than merry as he becomes “food for worms” (5.4.86-87). Hal, assumed by many readers to be the commoners’ friend, seems particularly guilty in this regard: during the battle of Shrewsbury he comments more than once on those who have died, but reserves such comments exclusively for nobles, never once mentioning the lower-class subjects lost in this dynastic squabble. This also underscores the hypocrisy in his speech in *Henry V* in which he refers to the nobles and the plebes together as a “band of brothers” (4.3.60). Falstaff’s jarring nonchalance in referring to his troops as “food for powder” who will “fill a pit as well as better [men]” (*1 Henry*, 4.2.65) consequently is not exceptional but rather representative of the attitudes of the nobles generally as they sacrifice one pawn after another in the ruthless and subtle ways in which they try to ensure that even if they lose they win.

In the battle at Severn as reported in the opening act of *1 Henry*, Mortimer loses not only the battle but also one thousand of his followers, “Upon whose dead corpse there was such misuse, / Such beastly shameless transformation, / By those Welshwomen done as may not be / Without much shame retold or spoken of” (1.1.43-46). Shame or no, it seems appropriate to speak of it here, since the symbolism of emasculation bears upon our sense of who has won, who has lost, and how to tell the difference; it also indicates that only the high-ranking nobles

bear the capacity to win by losing —the commoners most often simply lose out in their social superiors’ grasping for power, as occurs at the Severn. Holinshed’s *Chronicles*, one of Shakespeare’s sources, graphically describes the emasculation, but Westmoreland cannot bring himself to do so. In the relentlessly male world of Lancastrian politics, the male genitalia come to symbolize political power, and so emasculation constitutes such a threat that, despite its being alluded to time and again, it is never specifically described in the Henriad: it becomes the wound that dare not speak its name. Many of the references to emasculation involve Falstaff: for instance, in *2 Henry* Falstaff is wounded by the valiant Pistol, and Doll Tearsheet, who by her profession as a prostitute should be an expert in male anatomy, thinks that Falstaff has been wounded in the groin. Small wonder, then, that he desires to make Shallow “a philosopher’s two stones to me” (*2 Henry* 3.2.328), the word “stones” being used elsewhere in Shakespeare, and most notably in *The Merchant of Venice*, to suggest testicles. Falstaff’s lack of the “philosophers’ two stones” which he needs to transform the dross of himself into political gold suggests his lack of power in the Lancastrian world. However, although Falstaff gains Shallow’s money, he shortly thereafter officially loses Hal’s favor. In *1 Henry* as well, Falstaff tries to appropriate another’s “stones:” Falstaff’s striking Hotspur’s corpse “in the thigh” (5.4.149) would seem a curious choice of location unless one assumes that Falstaff is being uncharacteristically discrete in providing “thigh” as a circumlocution for “groin.” C. G. Thayer refers to this “thigh wound” as “a symbolic castration” (1983: 114), and more directly Gerard H. Cox states that Falstaff is “[n]ot content with castrating Hotspur’s corpse...” (1985: 144). Portia, in *Julius Caesar*, uses the same euphemism in describing the “voluntary wound / Here, in the thigh” (2.1.300-301) which she accepts as Brutus’s wife, clearly in this context a hymenal reference.

Falstaff’s emasculation of Hotspur, whether symbolic or literal, fails to achieve a metaphorical transference of Hotspur’s phallic power; clearly, though, this is what Falstaff anticipates, since he tells Hal that he expects to be made a Duke for his exploit. This of course does not happen, and indeed Falstaff’s mutilation of Hotspur’s corpse places Falstaff in a position analogous to that of the Welsh women who emasculated the English soldiers after the battle of the Severn. As Thayer notes, Falstaff’s depredation of Hotspur’s body becomes “a grim parody of the activities of the wild Welshwomen, more shocking because shown on the stage.” (1983: 114). Hotspur’s fate also dovetails with that of his second-in-command: although Hal gives a somewhat homogenized version of the wound in *1 Henry* (5.5.21), according to Holinshed, the Douglas, as he was fleeing the battle, “falling from the crag of an high mountain, brake one of his cullions” (cited in Hodgdon, 1997: 156). By losing a cullion, however, Douglas inadvertently saves his life. Symbolically speaking, the half-emasculated

Douglas no longer constitutes a threat, and after Hal rather cavalierly pardons him, the Douglas disappears from the *Henriad* thereafter.

However, even though Hotspur and the Douglas are dispensed with at Shrewsbury, Northumberland and Glendower remain. The opening of *2 Henry* focuses on Northumberland and provides an analogy which suggests Henry's knowledge of the outcome of the battles prior to their disclosure in *1 Henry*. According to Rumor, the allegorical figure who opens *2 Henry*, Northumberland has been "lying crafty-sick" (37), with a telling pun on the word "lying." Like Henry in the opening of *1 Henry*, Northumberland is palpably playing a role, and his accoutrements in doing so mimic those of kingship: his nightcap is a mock-crown, his staff a mock-scepter, and his nightclothes mock-regalia. As at the opening of *1 Henry*, in the first scene of *2 Henry* the news of a battle is reported, that which has just occurred at Shrewsbury. Northumberland seems unsurprised by both the rebels' defeat and Hotspur's death; upon Morton's entry, Northumberland looks at him and states, "Why [Hotspur] is dead. / See what a ready tongue suspicion hath! / He that but fears the thing he would not know / Hath by instinct knowledge from others' eyes / That what he feared is chanced" (83-87). This sorrow seems more than just a bit hypocritical, given that Northumberland and consequently the greater part of the rebels' troops failed altogether to show up at Shrewsbury. He may have refused to support his son at this crucial moment in the rebellion not only for reasons of personal safety but also to rid himself of his boisterous and impolitic son. In tortuous language and logic, Northumberland articulates how this ill news has made him well, how the loss of Hotspur has caused him to regain his vitality.

Conversely, Henry in act 4 is made ill by the welcome news of Northumberland's and Glendower's defeats, which coincide closely with and even seem to precipitate Henry's death: "And wherefore should these good news make me sick?... I should rejoice now at this happy news / And now... I am much ill" (*2 Henry*, 4.4.102; 109-111). So, and by this point perhaps predictably, the rebels' loss is also a victory in that it contributes to the death of Henry, their hated enemy. The specific circumstances of Henry's death coincide with Shakespeare's generally ambivalent presentation of the King. Henry's death occurring in the Jerusalem chamber adjoining Westminster Abbey technically fulfills the prophecy that Henry would die in Jerusalem, and so one might in that regard detect the hand of God involved in Henry's trajectory to the throne. On the other hand, the fact that Henry's death does not occur in the Holy City of Jerusalem as Henry had assumed it would may be taken as God's mocking Henry's pretensions as king and as crusader.

In 1.1, Henry knows that he will at the moment be unable to go on Crusade, and so he is very clearly acting a role when announcing his plan to do so. This deadly serious play-acting, so crucial to transforming loss into victory, seems to run in the family. As Stephen Greenblatt observes, “Hal’s characteristic activity is playing or, more precisely, theatrical improvisation” (1988: 46). In 1.2, Hal plays the role of fun-loving wastrel with Falstaff and company, Hal’s apparent *bonhomie* being exposed as merely an act by his soliloquy closing the scene in which he promises that transformation in which “imitat[ing] the sun” (1.2.197), he will rid himself of this lower-class company, these “base contagious clouds” (1.2.198), these “foul and ugly mists” (1.2.202), as he ungenerously refers to them. Hal’s similarity to his father in seeing politics as performance becomes even more apparent in the crucial 2.4: here, in the play impromptu, both Falstaff and Hal play the role of King Henry. Interestingly, during his brief stint playing Henry berating Hal, Falstaff calls for wine in order to redden his eyes so that he might appear to have been crying. In the actual interview which follows in the next act, while chastising Hal, Henry does appear to cry, but bearing in mind Falstaff’s preparation for his role as king tempers too great a sympathy for Henry in the scene with Hal. One might be further inclined to suspicion regarding Henry’s avouched sentiment when noting Hotspur’s claim in act 4 that Henry at Ravenspurgh falsely swore “but to be Duke of Lancaster / To sue his livery and beg his peace / With *tears of innocency* and terms of zeal” (4.3.61-63) and that shortly after Ravenspurgh Henry continued the act: “[He] Cries out upon abuses, *seems to weep* / Over his country’s wrongs, and by this face, / This seeming brow of justice, did he win the hearts of all that he did angle for” (4.3.81-84; my emphasis).

Henry, while undoubtedly troubled and guilt-ridden, simply does not seem to be the weeping sort. In this, too, Hal resembles his father. After coming upon Henry and presuming him dead, Hal seizes the crown and takes it elsewhere. When Henry awakens a short time later, Warwick’s report to him that Hal has been weeping in the other room is suspect at best, especially considering that when Hal first spies his father on the bed he not only does not shed a tear but addresses many of his remarks to the crown rather than to his prostrate father. Also, when Hal emerges from the room, having had sufficient time to generate some crocodile tears, the version that he gives to Henry of these remarks differs significantly from what he had actually said. Henry, however, is apparently convinced by Hal’s act: in fact, by having lost his father’s faith in him in this scene and earlier, Hal ultimately wins his way into a firmer position in Henry’s confidence and gains his father’s tacit blessing as heir.

Even prior to the opening of *I Henry*, the motif of winning by losing and losing by winning is established in the Lancastrian tetralogy. In *Richard II*, Henry wins out over Richard in their battle for the throne, but ends up losing his

health and corroding his conscience in the process. A desire to emphasize this fact may account for Shakespeare's telescoping Henry's reign into an unremitting state of contention against rebels, even though much of the historical Henry's reign was peaceful. Not so in Shakespeare, where every victory by Henry simply leads to another round of battle. Shortly after Henry accedes to the throne in *Richard II*, he is threatened with rebellion by Aumerle, and in the interim between the end of *Richard II* and the opening of *1 Henry* the battles at Severn and Holmedon have been fought, which in turn lead to other conflicts, most significantly that at Shrewsbury. Even after that apparently unqualified victory, Henry finds it necessary immediately to divide his troops to go against Northumberland and Glendower. The Lancastrian troubles continue even after Henry's death. As *Henry V* documents, Hal himself has to quash an internal rebellion, and his victory over the French and his attendant marriage to Princess Katherine lead to the reign of his young and naive son, to the Wars of the Roses, and to the loss not only of the French territories but also of the crown, which passes from the House of Lancaster to the House of York. Ultimately of course the entire Lancastrian reign might be seen as merely a blip on the screen of history, Shakespeare implying here, as elsewhere in his canon, that in the topsy-turvy, hurly-burly world of Lancastrian rule, battles are not lost *or* won, but rather lost *and* won, every defeat bearing the potential for political gain and, more importantly, every victory constituting in some sense a defeat.

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