

SHAKESPEARE'S HENRY V: PERSON AND PERSONA

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In this same interlude it doth befall,
That I, one Snout by name, present a wall:
And such a wall, as I would have you think,
That had in it a cranny'd hole, or chink.¹

With the Pyramus and Thisbe ‘play within the play’ of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* V.i, Shakespeare had parodied the age-old device of scene setting quite mercilessly. It is most surprising, then, to see him make such extensive use of the same device in *Henry V* some five years later. At the beginning of each of the five acts the Prologue apologizes, *ad nauseam*, for the limitations of the Elizabethan stage, its lack of props. When the purpose of a dramatic work is to re-enact the grandeur and majesty of Good King Harry, the epic sweep of his victories on French soil, the best efforts of the set designers of the day are found wanting:

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?¹

¹ William Shakespeare, *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, ed. Sylvan Barnet (1963; rpt. London: The new English Library Ltd., 1965), V.i. 133-6.

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Directors have always felt sorry for the poor old Prologue; have done their level best to supply him with the finest backdrops money could buy. Over the past two hundred years especially, no expense has been spared to keep him happy: moving 'dioramas', even cinematic projections of twentieth century warfare,² have been employed in an attempt to make the settings more realistic. And what is the result? Simply that this 'character', whose job it was to draw attention to the artifice of the play, has been made redundant. This is bad enough in itself: your humble patience, pray, 'to behold a swelling scene' in which the king is borne 'Towards Calais: grant him there' (*Henry V*, Prologue to Act V, vii) while a videoclip of a French seaport flickers across the back-cloth.

My real point, however, is that such Spielbergian touches, in ridding the audience of the need for a Prologue, destroy the whole essence of the play. A piece of dramatic artifice himself, he introduces acts (and the action contained therein) which are also, by his own admission, nothing more or less than crafted, preconceived. But who has preconceived them? The dramatist, obviously: yet the character he creates, King Henry, is himself a manipulator - of the other characters, of a whole country's fate. What I wish to show, in fact, is that the Prologue acts as symbol for what happens - or rather is made to happen - in the main body of the drama, where individuals are used as mere puppets to serve the King's political aims.

It is my contention that, in every last scene of this play in which he 'appears' King Henry is acting out the starring rôle of kingship. He has usually written his own script (most especially in I.ii where he has, in all probability, suggested the scenario to those attributed with 'authorship', the Archbishops of Canterbury and Ely) but occasionally is required to extemporize. In such situations he fares rather badly, and must result to bombast and histrionics to pull off a respectable performance. I refer to scene IV.i especially, where a confrontation with the soldier Williams forces the King-as-actor to try to come to terms with what little he remembers of Henry the man. There is also the small matter of the 'indifferent or uncomprehending audience' of minor characters. These listen to Henry's nationalistic and political speechmongering but then

¹ William Shakespeare, *Henry V*, ed. Sylvan Barnet (1963; rpt. London: The New English Library Ltd. 1965), Prologue to Act I. 10-14. All quotations taken from this play refer to this edition and will appear in the text in brackets.

² John Russell Brown, "Introduction", in *Henry V*, op. cit., p. xxiii.

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blithely ignore it; Henry's sophisms are undercut by the harsh realities of war and partisanship (I am thinking particularly of the Fluellen-Macmorris quarrel in III.ii) Note my use of words here: 'undercut' as opposed to 'undermine': 'small matter'. The point is that while the actions and (in the case of Bardolph) fate of these characters make us, the audience of *theatre-goers*, question the King's policies, hardly anyone in the play itself dares to do so. Williams is the exception, but as a common soldier he poses no real threat to royal decree: Henry has no foil -in other words, no secondary figure strong enough to rubbish his pretensions; 'for Falstaff he is dead'. (*Henry V* II.iii. 5). By killing him off Shakespeare effectively burnt his boats as far as dramatic tension was concerned. He meant to. This was never intended to be a play in which authority is seen to be questioned; rather, it is a study of the damage that such authority can do (to a whole people, to one individual's soul) when it is given free rein.

Let us analyze each of the scenes mentioned above. In I.ii Henry insists upon discussing certain proposals made (according to *him*) by Canterbury and Ely. These proposals relate to the King's demand for possession of French lands, even for the kingship itself. Edward III, his great-grandfather, had considered himself in line to the French throne by right of his mother Isabella, daughter of Philip IV; this in spite of the Salic Law which debarred females from the succession. The bishops (so it seems) have analyzed all the technicalities, and Henry wants a report of their findings before he decides what to say to the French ambassador, who awaits an audience:

We would be resolved
Before we hear him, of some things of weight
That task our thoughts concerning us and France.
(*Henry VI* I.ii. 4-6)

The problem here is the word 'our'. Is it a simple case of the 'royal we', or is Henry referring to a previous meeting between himself and church leaders? If we take this scene literally then it is obvious that even if such a meeting had taken place, no firm decision had been reached in it. This, however, is simply not the case, as is made abundantly clear in I.i. There Canterbury tells Ely that the king, by wielding the threat of confiscation, has forced the church to give him its support in a war against France. That this would take place was already a foregone conclusion:

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If it [Henry's bill] pass against us,
We lose the better half of our possession;
(*Henry VI*. I.i. 7-8)

but

... I have made an offer to his Majesty -
upon our spiritual Convocation,
And in regard of causes now in hand,
Which I have opened to his Grace at large,
As touching France - to give a greater sum
Than ever in one time the clergy yet
Did to his predecessors part withal.
(*Henry V*, I.i. 75-81)

Which is as good as saying 'if we do not contribute willingly, the king will bleed us dry. Better not the latter.' What the king has engineered by such threats, however, is a situation in which the Church, not he, appears to be at the forefront of the 'war effort'. He knows full well what the consequences of such a war may be for England, and is very careful, before the court as 'audience', to place the responsibility for it on Canterbury's shoulders;

For God doth know how many now in health
shall drop their blood in approbation
of what your reverence shall incite us to
(*Henry V*, I.ii. 19-20)

It is wondrous to behold, though, how easily Henry is convinced - or convinces himself - that the Lord's representative in Canterbury can only be as guilty as his Heavenly Master, whose poor vessel he is. God has spoken to his worthy Archbishop, the latter has taken the message to His Majesty. All three have given their blessing to the French campaign. Since God is never wrong, then, by definition, neither are the other two shareholders in this particular Holy Trinity. The following is only one amongst a multitude of references to the Divine Right of Kings:

For we have now no thought in us but France,
Save those of God, that run before our business.
(*Henry V*, I.ii. 302-3)

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But what does Henry hope to gain by flinging England into such hostilities? Foreign possessions, granted, but there are far higher stakes involved. One should always bear in mind that it is not so much his right to the French as to the English throne that is in question here. Henry IV, who usurped the kingship from Richard II and suffered all the consequences (civil war, in a word) had, with his dying breath, given his son some very good advice as to how to skip out of the way of the same pitfall; ‘Keep the Yorkist factions so occupied with foreign wars that they will forget about you. And more; make sure that you turn your war into a Holy Crusade, so that anyone who refuses to join you will become, by definition, a religious dissenter’:

To lead out many to the Holy Land
Lest rest and lying still might make them look
Too near unto my state. Therefore, my Henry,
Be it thy course to busy giddy minds
With foreign quarrels.¹

And this is *precisely* what Henry is trying to do here. The French are his infidels, Paris his Palestine. But what are the consequences of his playing the part of the righteous Christian king?

Possession of the crown has turned Henry into the soulless shell of a man. This fact is thrown most sharply into relief by his cynical disregard for human life. In actual fact, as Shakespeare is at pains to emphasize (IV.viii. 105-8) British losses at Agincourt were small, but this is beside the point. The French army was far superior in number to the English king’s, and what turned out to be a victory might easily have been a bloody rout. When Henry reads the list of war dead he cannot believe his luck, and does not forego the opportunity to point out that, yes, this proves his decision to open hostilities has been approved by God all the time:

O God, thy arm was here!
And not to us, but to thy arm alone,
Ascribe we all! (*Henry V*, IV.viii. 108-10)

¹ William Shakespeare, *2 Henry V*, ed. Sylvan Barnet (1963; rpt. London: The New English Library Ltd., 1965), IV.v. 210-14.

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The problem is that one of his main arguments for declaring war on a common enemy ('in the midst of the fray, any British subject who ever had a bad word to say against a kinsman will become that kinsman's friend') is the purest hokum:

Once more into the breach, dear friends, once more;
Or close the wall up with our English dead.
(*Henry V*, III.i. 1-2)

One of the best known exhortations to patriotism in world literature: but before we accept it at face value, let us analyze what these words 'friends' and 'English' actually come to mean, beginning with the latter.

After the Owen Glendower revolt (1045), Henry was very well aware that the Welsh were a force to be reckoned with; the Scots and Irish also posed a threat. In III ii we see that the Welsh and Irish contingents (represented by Fluellen and MacMorris) may fight under the British flag, but have no intention of forgetting their ancestral differences. When Fluellen implies that MacMorris is the Shakespearean equivalent of a stupid Kerrymen, the latter retorts that Ireland is far superior to the other parts of the United Kingdom;

Fluellen: -Captain MacMorris, I think, look you , under your correction,
there is not many of your nation -
MacMorris: -Of my nation? What ish my nation? Ish a villain and a
bastard, and a knave, and a rascal. What ish my nation? Who
talks of my nation?
(*Henry V*. III.ii. 122-6)

The war, then, creates only makebelieve Englishmen, draftees who only fight together because they have no other choice. If these squabble during battle, what will happen when the battle is over?

And as for 'friends'; who was Bardolph if not a friend, a personal friend, of Hal/ Henry? And how anxious Henry is to rid himself of former acquaintances! Falstaff with his heart killed, Bardolph strung up for stealing a holy relic. Pleas for clemency have been made, via Fluellen, by Pistol, the pseudo-Falstaff, another old drinking companion. All Henry has

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to say is: ‘We would have all offenders so cut off.’ (*Henry V*, III.vi. 1-12) This would be all very well (the Good King sacrificing personal interests for the sake of Justice) were it not for what happens in IV i. Here Henry states categorically that war is acceptable because it rids England of such scum as are enlisted as soldiery;

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 is now the King’s quarrel.

(*Henry V*, IV.i. 170-4)

The point is this; if Bardolph were one of those who had ‘before gored the gentle bosom of peace with pillage and robbery’ (*Henry V*, IV.i. 169-70) he should at least have been sent to the French equivalent of the Russian Front to die in battle and thus atone for his sins. Henry, however, did not allow him to get even that far: this particular reminder of a misspent youth was best disposed of as quickly as possible. Henry has no real friends any more, only subjects; these, by noble-sounding but empty words and the shock tactics of summary execution, are manipulated into doing his dirty work for him.

The lines just quoted are taken from one of the most crucial scenes in the play. The king, disguised as the common soldier Harry le Roy, goes out amongst the English army on the night before Agincourt. He wants to see for himself what shape his men are in, physically, mentally, and spiritually. One should note that our old friend the Prologue has given a false impression of what is to occur here:

For forth he goes and visits all his host,
Bids them good morrow with a modest smile,
And calls them brothers, friends, and countrymen ...
... With cheerful semblance and sweet majesty! ...
(*Henry V*, Prologue to Act IV, 32-34, 40)

Henry may well be putting on a show, a semblance, but it is hardly a cheerful one. Far from wishing to inspire courage his aim is to test it, and to

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do so he appears not in person, but persona. Not that he is really concerned as to whether his theoretical attribution of the qualities of courage, comradeship and loyalty to his 'fellow Englishmen' will be shot down in flames. Like many a politician who has preached his ideas to an apparently uncritical public from the safety of the rostrum, Henry has convinced himself that his policies are beyond reproach; he is only slightly ill at ease. What a shock to his system (physical and political) when the soldier Williams questions absolutely everything he has done! Henry is not prepared for this. An actor from the outset, he suddenly finds that the double rôle of King Henry / Harry le Roy is too much for him. He had always worked with a prepared script (the final, memorized, draft of political speeches) and is now required to improvise. Ambition has overstretched itself and he falls flat on his mask. Williams on the justification for war:

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 in the latter day and cry all "We died at such a place." (*Henry V*, IV.i. 136-40)

The only reply that Henry can think to make to this is the 'war cleanses us of criminals' speech already quoted. Doubtless, given time, he would have concocted a nicer answer, but here, he has no time. What did he mean by starting this conflict? What justification did he think he could plead to the widows and orphans of the fallen? Despite all pretensions to the contrary (as demonstrated by his 'confrontation' with Canterbury) it is obvious that he has never really wanted to consider these questions seriously.

After this shock rebuff, he feels obliged to make at least the token attempt to do so. Unfortunately, though, 'token' is the only suitable word to describe what follows, the soliloquy of lines 235-289. If such 'soul searching' proves anything it is only that there is enough of Henry the Man left intact to realize that he has become nothing more than a soulless political machine. Far from lamenting such a decline, however, (any tears shed here are for himself, not for others) he does everything in his power to justify it.

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The dominant tone is one of petulance: ‘So, there’s a war. And of course, everyone blames poor little me for the consequences’. Here, Good King Harry parodies what, to him, are the mere whinings of his detractors:

“Upon the King! Let us our lives, our souls,
Our debts, our careful wives,
Our children, and our sins, lay on the King!”
(*Henry V*, Iv.i. 235-7)

“My foreign policy has created warwidows and orphans, and they blame *me* for it!” Even the Bardolphs, the criminals who have ‘outrun native punishment’ are granted a mention. Henry is attempting to justify the improvised rubbish he has just tried to make Williams swallow. It is as if Bardolph has actually been granted the right to die nobly and atone for his sins on the battlefield, but has then turned in his grave and given a vampirish bite to the hand that fed him.

Henry, rational enough to pinpoint the nonsequiturs in this emotional outburst, quickly changes tack. Realizing that he cannot hope to justify war on moral grounds, he concentrates upon the political necessities behind it. His line of reasoning in this; the ruler of a nation has to be so conscious of his image (that of the All-powerful, Omniscient King) that he has no time to relax and allow himself the luxury of self blame. There will always be commoners aplenty who *do* have the time to criticize him, however, and since every one of these is a potential rebel who will flatter and pay homage before stabbing him in the back, he can have no friends. Any loyalty shown him will be pledged out of fear, not fellow feeling. If peace is to be maintained within the realm, this is the price he must pay.

Cynical, Machiavellian, thoroughly realistic; little here that one could, in all honesty, blame the son of an usurper for. In this resumé, however, we have not touched upon the driving force behind, the subtext of, the speech, and it is this that makes it horrific. Who is it that will try to oust Henry? Men of wealth and political influence, obviously; but it is not so much these as the mindless rabble of peasant armies they will organize that terrify him, fill him with an almost psychotic loathing and disgust. Well can they afford the luxury of criticism, of an easy conscience, of a good night’s rest! The brainless, manipulated multitudes will throw the country into civil war, go on the rampage and then, presumably, drink

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themselves into unconsciousness of the damage they have done. He starts by speaking of the simple peasant who, after a day's work in the fields,

... with a body filled, and vacant mind,
bets him to rest, filled with distressful bread: ...
(Henry V, IV.i. 274-5)

Yet it is the same labourer who will take advantage of any lowering of Henry's guard, who

... in gross brain little wots
What watch the King keeps to maintain the peace,
Whose hours the peasant best advantages.
(Henry V, IV.i. 287-9)

The king has learnt a valuable lesson from the Wat Tyler revolt of 1381 - the masses are not to be trusted. Now it becomes clear that the speech addressed to Williams is no simplification of his own thinking after all: 'those low and stupid enough to fight in private armies are dangerous; let us rid ourselves of peasant scum'. What Henry will *not* admit, however is that *he himself* has instigated a useless war to do so, that *he himself* has been a manipulator of those commoners he chooses to class as peasants.

This is because he thinks like these commoners; knows full well how best to manipulate them; has taught himself to do so during years of acquaintance with Falstaff and his gang. He has also learnt how to think like a peasant mercenary. As Hal, member of Falstaff's robber band, he thoroughly enjoyed freedom from scruples. But now that this particular rôle is played out, what is left? Its twin brother, Ceremony: the act that a peasant, a peasant manipulator, must put on when he wants to play King for a change. And rôleplay here is seen as a cancerous disease, one which eats the actor away until nothing remains but the mask. A few choice words in the right quarter will, in turn, blow this mask off to reveal the soullessness, the nothing, that lies beneath it:

O hard condition,
Twin-born with greatness, subject to the breath
Of every fool, whose sense no more can feel
But his own wringing. *(Henry V, IV.i. 238-41)*

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At very least the Prologue, in admitting that the show he puts on for the assembled masses is just that -*a show*-, is telling nothing more or less than the truth. Henry would never dare admit as much.

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