

The epic tone in Shakespeare's *Henry V*

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The richness of Shakespeare's language is present in every single line of *Henry V*, where, in a series of extraordinary hyperboles, there emerge like frightful caricatures, the beast-violences of action and the histrionic strains of ferocity.

The verse is usually strong and interesting, forthright and uncomplicated, at its best animated, eloquent and rich. Most of its serious speeches are addresses with an aim in mind. This is appropriate to the demonstrative nature of plot and character, and it is extremely well done.

The Chorus emphasizes the epic tone: it speaks five prologues and an epilogue. Undoubtedly the speeches of the Chorus are epic in tone, but they have another epic function, for in the careful way they recount the omitted details of the well-known story, they secure unity of action. Shakespeare follows the ancient writers of tragedy.

The Chorus, in addition to the bridging gaps in time and place and enlarging the scene to epic proportion, also translates action into description: movement related becomes arrested. The effect, however, is not of lifelessness but of motion arrested. We envision the English sailing to France, or the camp on the eve of battle as we see a huge canvas all at once and with the figures caught, frozen, in the middle of action, but, at the same time, with the impression of energy and movement, colour and sound given to us by the voice of the Chorus:

From camp to camp through the foul womb of night
The hum of either army stilly sounds,
That the fixed sentinels almost receive
The secret whispers of each other's watch.
Fire answers fire, and through their paly flames
Each battle sees the other's boastful neighs
Piercing the night's dull ear, and from the tents
The armourers, accomplishing the knights,
With busy hammers closing rivets up,
Give dreadful note of preparation. (IV.0. 4-14)

The fourth Chorus is, in a different manner from its precursors, superb in significance of atmosphere and mood. Henry is now to be not only leader but friend, and the language becomes tender in evoking the endangered English and the "little touch of Harry in the night", which is to hearten and encourage them; and Shakespeare plays with the idea of darkness ("night") and "cold", in contrast with "colour", light and warmth ("sun"):

Upon his royal face there is no note
How dread an army hath enrouned him
Nor doth he dedicate one jot of colour
Onto the weary and all-watched night,
But freshly looks and overbears attaint
With cheerful semblance and sweet majesty,
That every wretch, pining and pale before,

Beholding him, plucks comfort from his looks.
 A largest universal, like the sun,
 His liberal eye doth give to everyone,
 Thawing cold fear, that mean and gentle all
 Behold, as may unworthiness define,
 A little touch of Harry in the night. (IV.0. 35-47)

The crucial eve before Agincourt gives all that could be asked for.

Heroic poetry is supreme for a moral reason: it is above everything concerned to promote the image of the greatest of men, whom it exhibits in action and in glory for our admiration and imitation. Henry was a king whose life was immaculate. Such was the idea of heroic poetry at that time.

A close study of Henry's language will show different levels of his oratory:

The eloquence and irony in his answer to the gift of tennis balls (which constitute a mock to Henry's revealing youth) show the wisdom in a young king that cannot be easily deceived, but who can turn the mock to his own advantage:

When we have match'd our rackets to these balls,
 We will in France (by God's grace) play a set
 Shall strike this father's crown into hazard.

... ..

... tell the pleasant Prince this mock of his
 Hath turn'd his balls to gunstones ... (I.ii. 261-282)

Henry's speech to the conspirators, and particularly to Scroop, is a richly felt and moving address, it sounds the tenor of tragic emotion as Henry discovers that one so trusted has proved so false. It creates a particular tone which the scene needs, that of reconciliation in tragic parting, through grief shared between the king and conspirators, so that even their intended treachery ends in prayers for the safety of the land. Henry's speech is heartfelt, tender and dignified.

There is not the slightest suggestion of personal anger. Henry's emotions are not his own but one in the control of an order larger than his limited human self. That his emotion is enlarged and controlled is manifested in the formality of his rhetoric:

... 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. (II.ii. 124-128)

The stylistic devices - rhetorical questions, repetition (both present in the latter quotation), metonymy (substitution of subject for adjuncts or adjuncts for subject): "Their cheeks are paper" (II.ii.71), metastasis (the turning back of an objection against he who made it):

The mercy that was quick in us but late
 By your own counsel is suppressed and killed.
 You must not dare, for shame, to talk of mercy,
 For your own reasons turn into your bosoms,
 As dogs upon their masters, worrying you. (II.ii. 76-80)

And periphrasis (the use of a descriptive phrase for a common name, often to give an air of solemnity or elevation or to avoid a harsh word); the lines:

You have ...
 Join'd with an enemy proclaimed and fixed,
 And from his coffers
 Receiv'd the golden earnest of our death (II.ii. 163-166)

- might have come straight from a Renaissance book of rhetoric. They are purposely exaggerated to emphasize the control of passion by an ordered, ordering judgement in the character of the king. The speech of the ideal king, like every other of his attributes, is measured and controlled. The acuteness with which he follows the argument through and the sharpness and concentration of the argument itself are signs of an earnest engagement with the subject at a level of hypothesis. The whole argument is well followed and properly concluded.

King Henry delivers two formal orations in the play, the first before the final attack on Harfleur, the second before the battle of Agincourt.

The first encourages, inspires and exhorts the soldiers. At every juncture in the play where action or passion might threaten to disturb measured order, the agitating force is brought under control by a highly formal rhetorical style. Henry's exhortation to the troops, for example, arrests, and formalizes movement:

Once more unto the breach, dear friends, once more,

 I see you stand like grey hounds in the slips,
 Straining upon the start. The game's afoot.
 Follow your spirit, and upon this charge
 Cry, "God for Harry! England and Saint George! (III.i. 1-34)

It is, of course, as general of his armies and not as knight that Henry addresses his troops, though it is as king that he declares war. In addressing to the Governor of Harfleur, Henry speaks of himself as a "soldier": "A name that in my thoughts becomes me best".

But, though he claims to be a "plain soldier", his challenge to the Governor of Harfleur is framed in such exaggerated rhetoric that it becomes Senecan - i.e. horrible subject matter is rendered as still as statuary by stylistic formality:

Therefore in fierce tempest is he coming,
 In thunder and in earthquake, like a Jove,

 Opens his vasty jaws; and on your head
 Turns he the widow's tears, the orphan's cries,
 The dead men's blood, the pining maidens' groans,
 For husbands, fathers, and betrothèd lovers
 That shall be swallowed in this controversy. (II.iv. 99-109)

Here the formal measure achieved in such devices as balance, the use of triplets ("husbands", "fathers", "lovers" - "claim", "threatening", "message"), and paramoron is enhanced by elevation and conventionality of diction ("vasty jaws", "widow's tears", "dead men's blood", "pinning maidens"). Elemental violence and horror is here described in highly wrought literary terms.

The second speech, though a soliloquy, is really a public address, eloquent and memorable. Yet, eloquent though he is, this is the speech of status; even in its very privacy it discourses to the audience about kingly cares and humble content. Tell-tale phrases betray an unexpected petulance or self-pitying extravagance - phrases like "every fool, whose sense no more can feel" or "horrid night, the child of hell". These touches of irrationality may be signs that Henry is under strains, the speech is not without Shakespeare's humanizing psychology:

What infinite heartsease
 Must kings neglect that private men enjoy?
 And what have kings that privates have not too,
 save ceremony, save general ceremony? (IV.i. 233-236)

As regards the speech of Agincourt, technically, there is also the excitement of the supreme expected occasion: this is the crowning exercise of all those in which Henry must direct his words

to a prescribed end. The thoughts come with ease and power, born along infallibly by the rhythmical flow and resonant melody of the lines, and heightened by the heady refrain about St. Crispin's day. The daring paradox by which the very fewness of his soldiers is made to sound a source of strength is carried off with irresistible conviction; the mounting vision of victory and fame is offered in the words both heroic and human; and from the initial stress on the king's own honour there spread out widening circles of contagious emulation, until all his men feel the spell of brotherhood, their thoughts lifted beyond present peril to the prospect of honour, old age and brave memories. This comment merely rewrites flatly what Henry says exactly; the great thing about the exaltation is that it blends itself with intimate human feeling, with neighbourliness, and humour, and hopes and proper pride.

Although king Henry has abjured the frivolity of his youth, he is not all seriousness. Young prince Hal's love of a jest and of fellowship with ordinary men reappears in king Henry when he provokes Michael Williams (whose powerful prose deserves to be mentioned) to challenge the glove which the king has induced Fluellen to wear in his cap.

What is specially remarkable is the way his tone becomes plain when he addresses the French, specially to Catherine. King Henry does not speak French when he addresses the French nobility: In Agincourt, not only did the English army defeat the French, but also did English language defeat French. He only speaks French when he addresses to Catherine. Why to her and not to the rest? Perhaps because the same way England defeated France, Henry's love is subjected to Catherine and viceversa. Consequently, Henry attempts to speak French and Catherine tries to learn English. Or it might be that his use of French were a very deliberate contrivance, since the affectation of bumbling ignorance is surely a strategy of power.

The richness of the speeches in *Henry V* contribute to emphasize the epic tone of the play, not only implied by the presence of the Chorus, but also reinforced by the serious speeches uttered by Henry. This confirms Ben Johnson's lines in a poem prefacing the 1623 Folio edition of Shakespeare's plays:

For a good Poet's made, as well as borne.
And such wert thou.

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