

Henry V: Dichotomy of Expectations and Reality

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Shakespeare's *Henry V*, while categorized as a history play, is not "history" in the way a modern audience would expect. It is not a compilation of indisputable, impersonal "facts" gathered from historical texts and then produced as a play but rather a dramatization of part of the reign of Henry V. This means that while Shakespeare undoubtedly consulted historical sources, Holinshed's 1587 edition of *Chronicles* being the chief among them, he was by no means bound or limited by them. Following or departing from Holinshed as he saw fit, Shakespeare wove a history that juxtaposed his audience's expectations of an idealized and heroic King Henry V as an emblem of national pride with the unpleasant reality of war for the common soldiers who were fighting Henry's battles.

In Elizabethan England, Henry V was a popular and well-loved historical figure (Holderness 133); even before Shakespeare's *Henry V* was written, another play, *The Famous Victories of Henry the Fifth* (ca. 1585), had already been staged with great success (Shapiro 86). This is because Henry V represented to many the ideal Christian and heroic king (Hodgdon 186), and was a source of pride as a symbol of both the English nation and their heroic past (Shapiro 91). In writing *Henry V* Shakespeare took steps to portray the Henry of popular imagination, and many of the heroic and Christian themes he used were gleaned from Holinshed (Hodgdon 186). An example of this is the Salic Law speech, drawn almost word for word from the *Chronicles* (Taylor 29): a speech which, filled with names of past rulers and technical legalities, is convoluted and challenging to follow (Taylor 37-38). That Shakespeare stays so faithful to his source indicates just how important the speech's goal was: to justify the English claim to the French throne (1.2.9-12). The speech is as much for the audience as it is for Henry, because how the audience interprets it is critical to whether or not they accept Henry's war as legitimate. In following Holinshed so closely, Shakespeare reproduces the historical legal argument for Henry's claim to the French throne, lending Henry's war an air of sanctified authority (Bullough 350). That Henry is concerned about ensuring his right in going

to war (Taylor 38) also demonstrates that he is not a mere warmongering tyrant looking to do battle or conquer because he can but a prudent and moral king, genuinely concerned over not overstepping his bounds and spilling “guiltless drops” (1.2.25). In the next scene, keeping with the theme of justified war, Shakespeare slightly departs from Holinshed by having Henry receive a barrel of tennis balls from the Dauphin *after* Henry has already decided to go to war with France rather than before it (Bullough 352). By making this small but significant change to the historical Henry’s timeline, Shakespeare successfully eliminates any possibility of the war on France being a petty revenge for the insult from the arrogant Dauphin (Bullough 352).

Where the Dauphin is pompous and insulting, in both Shakespeare and Holinshed, Henry V often appears as the “mirror of all Christian kings” (2.0.6). Like the historical Henry V, Shakespeare’s Henry commands that the French are to be shown mercy, not stolen from or abused (3.6.108-112). He does not allow his army to take advantage of the French, even though they are enemies, and goes so far as to condone the execution of one of his old Eastcheap friends, Bardolph (3.6.108), who had stolen a pax from a church (3.6.38-39). Shakespeare, however, makes Henry show even greater compassion than the historical king by departing from Holinshed. Historically Henry V raided Harfleur after the French town had surrendered to the English army (Taylor 31), while in Shakespeare Henry refrains from following through on his threat of destruction once the town surrenders (3.3.133-135). This modification of history gives Henry another chance to display his admirable, god-like, clemency to his enemies in the midst of a war (Taylor 31). Yet even while he strives to exemplify Christian traits of mercy and compassion, Henry is careful to attribute his successes to God and give God the thanks he is due (Boyce 206), ordering “holy rites” to be performed after their defeat of the French at Agincourt (4.8.120). Once more following the *Chronicles*, Shakespeare has Henry refuse to have his helmet paraded before him on his return to London (5.0.18-20), lest people attribute the English victory to their own strength rather than God (4.7.83, 5.0.21-22), thereby displaying Henry’s piety and humility. Henry’s piety and the notion of Providence are also present in the successful unraveling of the plot to assassinate Henry (Bullough 358). Like Holinshed, Shakespeare has Henry attribute the revelation of the plot as a sign of the mercy of God (383) and proof that God is working to the benefit of the English to smooth all obstacles in their path (2.2.184-85). So not only can Henry’s court, and the

audience, be proud of their king as merciful and Christian, they are also given the ultimate justification of Henry's war by the show of God's grace.

Yet while Henry V of popular legend is admired for such traits of mercy, humility, and morality, he is perhaps most honoured for his military prowess. In Holinshed, among many other things, he is praised for being so skilled in guiding his army that the French had the opinion he would never be defeated in battle and that his genius in saving his army when in trouble was so incredible as to be unbelievable if not seen with one's own eyes (Holinshed 407). Such rhetoric is commonly found in Shakespeare in the Chorus that frames the beginning of each act (Clouse 264). For instance, Henry is described by the Chorus when returning to London as a "conquering Cesar" (5.0.28); in using such imagery, Shakespeare is invoking both the popular and historical conception of Henry as the great martial hero of England, a figure of national pride. Shakespeare also strengthens the image of Henry as a great military leader by downplaying the English's advantages while increasing the formidability of the French. For one, he deliberately chooses to erase any mention of the English superiority in the longbow (Boyce 208). He also drops any mention of Charles' VI intermittent insanity and the resulting civil discord in France (Taylor 31). All three factors were, historically, great contributors to the French's defeat by the English (Taylor 31). By deviating from Holinshed in creating an unhistorically strong France, and stacking the odds against England, Shakespeare makes the English's final defeat of the French an even greater accomplishment to be proud of (Taylor 31). He also does this by not only mentioning the disparity in numbers between the small English army and the impressive French army (4.3.3) but also the disparity in their dead. Shakespeare numbers the French dead at ten thousand (4.8.78) against only four English nobles and twenty-five common soldiers who have died (4.8.101-104). Technically the number twenty-five is taken from the *Chronicles*, but Holinshed makes it clear that "other writers of greater credite" put the number of English dead as high as six hundred (Holinshed 400). Six hundred is still a small number of dead compared to the French, but in choosing twenty-five over six hundred as the number of English dead Shakespeare makes a deliberate choice that implies both great skill on the behalf of the English, and (once again) proof of God's blessing and protection. Another change Shakespeare made was to condense Henry V's five year campaign to France into one (Bullough 355). This has the dual purpose of allowing for

an easier dramatic set-up (Bullough 351, 355), as well as giving the impression that the campaign was not a difficult, drawn-out affair but a relatively quick and decisive win over the French.

Yet, like so many other plays, Shakespeare's *Henry V* cannot so easily be defined, and it was actually far from the "romp" through war that *Famous Victories* and Holinshed's *Chronicles* indicated it was (Shapiro 87). Perhaps reflecting the growing sentiments of unease and disapproval against war and the campaign to Ireland (Shapiro 91-92) that were beginning to infect the Elizabethans' patriotic fervor, Shakespeare works throughout *Henry V* to simultaneously reinforce the image of Henry as the heroic king and to challenge it. This dichotomy is most obviously shown through the discrepancy between the Chorus' lofty rhetoric and what actually occurs on stage (Shapiro 93), a discrepancy only possible because Shakespeare, unrestrained by historical sources, departs freely from Holinshed by inserting multiple scenes of common soldiers. These scenes give insight into the unpleasant realities of war for the soldiers who were fighting it, presenting them not all as epic heroes ready for battle but as flawed humans, scared for their lives. Once such scene occurs in Act 2 Scene 1, immediately after the Chorus has finished describing how "all the youth of England are on fire" (2.0.1), eager to follow Henry into war. The next scene, however, opens with Pistol, Nim, and Bardolph not fervently discussing war but fighting over a domestic marriage dispute (2.1.16-37). When they do discuss war it is with reluctance, and only because they believe they can cheat and steal their way through the war do they ever head off (2.1.102-110). Upon arrival in France and after Henry's patriotic and rousing "Once more!" speech (3.1.1-34) has been given, they do not rush forward but instead straggle behind (3.2.1-4), only following the charge when forcibly beaten into it by Fluellen (3.2.18-26). Here the Boy also admits that he would give up all his "fame for a pot of ale, and safety" (3.2.10-11), foreshadowing Bates's wish that the king should be ransomed to save the lives of the soldiers (4.1.117-118). These voices and actions directly contradict the romanticized view of Henry's war as a noble endeavor to lay down one's life for. Shakespeare shows that not all soldiers fighting in the war have a vested interest in it, and some, if not many, are legitimately concerned about losing their lives.

The soldiers' worries do not simply center on loss of life, however, but also on the cause of war. To the common soldiers, even if Henry's war is justified and commendable, they have far more immediate concerns,

such as having left behind dependent wives and children in England (4.1.134-135), than defeating the French. Williams takes this concern a step further by questioning the very reasoning and justification for soldiers dying in a bloody war for a cause that very well may not be righteous (4.1.138-140). Williams's doubts may on one level be sympathized with; he is being asked to give up his life for a cause never fully explained to him. But, as previously mentioned, Shakespeare has already spent a significant amount of time supporting the reasons for going to war with the French. Yet despite the lengthy appeals to legal arguments and to Providence, Shakespeare undermines it all by placing doubt in the heart of Henry at one of the crucial moments of Agincourt, where he does not question the war, but his very legitimacy as king (4.1.280-93). While it is conceivable the historical Henry V may too have held doubts, such insecurities have no place in the Henry of Holinshed or popular imagination. To portray a doubting Henry V violently drags him down from his position as a semi-legendary king, confident and justified in everything he does. He becomes almost pitifully human and small, capable of mistakes, while the previously stable belief in his legitimacy is thrown into question. His admission of uncertainty also undermines the audience's confidence in Henry by revealing the disconnect between how he appears and what he thinks and feels. If he can look assured in something as critical as his kingship while secretly concealing doubts, it is conceivable there are other issues that are not as straightforward as he has led others to believe.

The most gut-wrenching of Shakespeare's additions to the historical narrative, however, is not the relation of cowardly soldiers and an all-too-human king. It is his unflinching display of the brutalities of battle and its effects, not only on the soldiers, but the innocents as well. The Boy is an excellent example of this. Ideally, the audience slowly comes to admire the Boy (Clouse 270) as a maturing young man gone to test himself in war, wise enough to note the negative influences of Bardolph, Nim, and Pistol, and responsible enough to take charge of his own fate (3.2.49-51). For Shakespeare to reveal his sudden and pointless murder at the hands of the French (4.4.67-70, 4.7.4) in a raid that breaks the conventions of war (4.7.1-2) is unexpected and angering. The Boy represents the innocent lives lost in war (Clouse 270), the preventable deaths that should not occur but inevitably do. Shakespeare actually draws the occurrence of the raid on the English camp from Holinshed, but the slaughter of the boys is mentioned, only briefly, as the last in a number of destructions the English suffered (Holinshed 397). It is only through a

personal connection with a character, like the one Shakespeare gives us in the Boy, that the full tragedy of a life unfairly cut short is realized. It is also hard to condone war at all when the details of battle, which are glossed over in Holinshed save to mention the outcome (Holinshed 399-400), are described in detail. Through Williams, Shakespeare describes not only the number of dead but also the horrific way they died: in a haze of pain, fear, and regret, as they lay bloody and broken on a field far from home, with their “legs and arms and heads” chopped off (4.1.130-140). The deaths of the innocents and the soldiers are both an emotional shock and ethically monstrous. Shakespeare does not make their sacrifice any easier by, say, ending *Henry V* with a reminder of the sole gain in the war. Instead the only recollection of the English triumph over France is to take notice of how quickly it was lost under the reign of Henry V’s own son (Epilogue 1-12). And so the play ends on a note of poignant and bitter shame instead of the expected victorious exhilaration.

In writing *Henry V* Shakespeare freely followed, modified, or departed, from Holinshed’s *Chronicles* to, on one hand, make him an even greater heroic king and symbol of national pride than Holinshed had, but, on the other hand, reveal the horrific effects war had on the common people. Influenced by the campaign to Ireland in 1599, Shakespeare indulges the public call for patriotic rhetoric that reminds them of their marital past while loved ones march to war. He does this by expanding upon the basic tenets of the conception of Henry V and his reign found in popular imagination and historical chronicles: creating an account of war that is a glorious battle, justified by the legal system, sanctified by God, and led by the ideal Christian warrior king to overcome a larger and stronger nation, in a show of power and Providence. Yet Shakespeare, who at the same time was cognizant of growing public restlessness with war, as well as the obvious gap in official histories which focused not on the people of a nation but its rulers, also gives an account of war that is a sad and gruesome affair. Indiscriminately victimizing the innocents, it is ordered by a king doubtful of his legitimacy, and fought by soldiers who ultimately sacrifice everything for nothing in return. Shakespeare’s history play *Henry V*, in the end, is not so much about Henry V as it is about presenting two competing views of both history and war, reflecting the division of opinions in society. And of course, Shakespeare gives no easy answer as to which view (if either) supersedes the other, leaving it up to the audience to think critically about what they’re watching and become their very own historians.

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