**Henry V**

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Dr Johnson wrote, “Shakespeare is above all writers…the poet of nature; the poet that holds up for to his readers a faithful mirror of manners of life…His persons act and speak by the influence of those general passions and principals by which all minds are agitated”. Henry V is such a universal figure, and has been called by many critics “Shakespeare’s only hero”. First performed in 1599, Henry V is the last history the Bard would pen for a decade. It is the last in a set of 4 plays that includes Richard II, and Henry IV parts 1 and 2.

Let us look to Henry IV to set the stage for our play. Richard II’s reign was challenged by Henry Bolingbroke who allied himself with English nobles to overthrow the King. In 1399, Bolingbroke was crowned Henry IV, and Richard died later that year. The new King turns immediately to quelling uprisings from the north and east, even turning on former allies who fought against Richard. In the Henry IV plays we are first introduced to Prince Hal who will ascend to the throne at his father’s death.

The young Prince Hal of Henry IV lacks maturity and kingly qualities. In fact the young prince keeps company with thieves and braggarts, Pistol, Bardolph and Falstaff among them. But in Henry V we see a new man. The action opens with a conversation between the Bishops of Canterbury and Ely regarding Hal’s change in character:

The course of his youth promised it not

But that his wildness, mortified in him,

Seemed to die too; yea at the very moment Consideration like an angle came

Leaving his body a paradise t’ envelop and contain celestial spirits.

(Henry V, Act 1, Scene 1)

At the conclusion of Henry IV’s wars he dies leaving Prince Hal a relatively peaceful kingdom. Prince Hal must turn his attention to other conquests, his gaze falling on France. W. H. Auden comments, “Bolingbroke’s behavior is dictated by the need to contrast himself with Richard, Hal’s by the need to contrast himself with his father. In politics you have to surprise. As he is dying Henry gives Hal Machiavellian advice:

Be it thy course to busy giddy minds

With foreign quarrels, the action, hence borne out,

May waste the memory of the former days.”

(2 Henry IV, Act 4, Scene 1)

To “busy the giddy minds” of English nobles the Prince turned King, "awakens the sleeping sword of war”. (Henry V, Act 1, Scene 1).

The chorus in Act 2 tells us that Henry is “the mirror of all Christian Kings” (Henry V, Prolog Act 2). He is certainly matured as a soldier and a leader of men, rousing his troops to victory at Harfleur and Agincourt. At Harfleur he urges:

Once more into the breach dear friends, once more

Or close up the wall with our English dead…

…

…when the blast of war blows in our ears,

Then imitate the action of the tiger;

Stiffen the sinews, conjure up the blood,

Disguise fair nature with hard-favored rage…

(Henry V, Act 3, Scene 1)

And this at Agincourt on St Crispin’s Day:

This story shall the good man teach his son;

And Crispin Crispian shall ne’er go by,

From this day to the ending of the world,

But we in it shall be remembered—

We few, we happy few, we band of brothers;

For he today that sheds his blood with me

Shall be my brother, be he ne’er so vile

This day shall gentle his condition,

And gentlemen in England, now abed,

Shall think themselves accursed they were not here;

And hold their manhoods cheap whiles any speaks

That fought with us upon Saint Crispin’s day.

(Henry V, Act 4, Scene 3)

These scenes and speeches show us Henry at his best. They reveal a man that has left behind the knavery and barrooms of his youth. Unlike Hamlet, bound by inaction, this prince has become a King – Hal has become Henry – and his purpose is resolute; the expansion of his Kingdom. The nationalistic tones of the play find consonance in the courageous action of an out numbered army, the puissance of its rising conquering King, and the grand embarrassment of France. Critics have often written the pro-English "flag waving" in Henry V is unmatched in any other Shakespeare play.

But while the reader is left with a full appreciation for this war-time leader, we must also question the righteousness of the campaign. Peter Liethart notes, “ Shakespeare wrote a play that continually raises doubts about Henry’s character and the justice of his cause”. He goes on to cite several examples, chief among them the fact that the entire campaign is financed by the Church in exchange for a favorable ruling against a law that threatens to take half its property (Act 1, Scene 1). Likewise, Henry V’s entire legitimacy to the throne of England rests on his father’s bloody and subversive conquest of Richard II. He even seems aware of this hypocrisy, praying:

O, not today, think upon my fault

My father made in compassing the crown!

I Richard’s body have interred new

And on it have bestowed more contrite tears…

And I have built two chantries,

Where the sad and solemn priests still sing

For Richard’s soul. More will I do:

(Henry V, Act 4, Scene 1)

There are other examples. Transforming from Hal to Henry means shedding old associations, abandoning Bardolph and Falstaff to their deaths. He shows a complete lack of mercy for the conspirators in Act 1 (though he himself played the part of conspirator in his father's ascension). He reacts violently to the Dauphin’s childish gift of tennis balls, swearing to turn those “balls into gunstones” (Henry V, Act 1, Scene 2). Even at the end when addressing Katherine, Henry swears he will not part with a single French village….thus is the depth of his lust for power.

Dr. Johnson believed the chief duty of the writer is to instruct morally. His chief criticism of Shakespeare was that he, “sacrifices virtue to convenience, and is so much more careful to please than to instruct, that he seems to write without any moral purpose.” Such is the case for Henry V. His greatness as a man is brought low by the meanness of his mission. So despite the laudable maturity of a Prince turned King and despite the national pride embodied in him, the moral edifice on which the play is constructed, as if wearied of its own firmness, melts away and we are left to consider Henry anew.