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"I will . . . Be like a king": Henry V Plays Richard II

by BARBARA H. TRAISTER

IN BOTH Richard II and Henry V, the first and last plays of the second tetralogy, kings engage in highly theatrical activity. Each play, however, has a very different metadramatic focus.

In Richard II acting becomes a metaphor for the way Richard sees himself. The focus of audience attention is the narcissistic royal actor whose principal concern is his own posturing and who is his own greatest, and eventually only, admirer. Richard is an actor and dramatist, the embodiment of Elizabeth I’s comment: “We Princes, I tell you, are set on stages, in the sight and view of all the world duly observed” (quoted in Neale 1957, 2:19). However, his self-absorption and blindness to the world around him lead the audience to make few, if any, connections between him and the actor-dramatist who created him. The play is nearly empty of self-reflexive dramatic overtones despite its complex portrait of a player king.

In Henry V metadramatic metaphors almost entirely disappear. Anne Righter, who traces the acting metaphor through the Henriad, remarks: “Once he has actually been crowned, Hal is no longer associated with the actor, except by those concerned to describe his past life” (1964, 129). Suppressing verbal references to his role as player king, Henry simply begins to act, to fashion his kingship through a number of carefully directed scenes which permit him to shift, however briefly, away from the center-stage position which Richard so coveted. Henry is just as accomplished an actor and dramatist as Richard, but, unlike Richard, he understands the political uses of drama and fashions his roles with much greater awareness of and attention to his audience’s responses.

Shakespeare demonstrates how drama is created in Henry V: Henry crafts his productions, distorting and underplaying as necessary to create the optimal dramatic effect. In addition, shifts in the play’s tone, contradictions in plot details, and differing perspectives on a single action suggest that Shakespeare intends his audience to be aware of the crafting and creating in which Henry is

1. Dollimore and Sinfield (1985, 217) offer a parallel instance of suppression on the verbal level of what is obviously happening on stage: “The very thought [in Henry V] that the actual purpose of the war might be to distract from troubles at home would tend to undermine the purposed effect. The thought is voiced twice in 2 Henry IV. . . . It is suppressed in Henry V—yet it twice surfaces obliquely (II.i.90–92; IV.i.228–29).”

2. Danson (1983) also compares the two kings on this point, commenting on their “talent for imaginative self creation.”
engaged. Henry’s struggle, to turn complex reality into drama which will please and influence his multiple in-play audiences, is analogous to the playwright’s struggle to create drama from the complexities of history. The king must be responsible to his subjects much as the playwright must be responsible to his audience. Without the support of the crowd, neither king nor playwright has any occupation.

*Henry V* repeatedly presents alternative versions of its stories. Most obvious is the contrast between the dramatic version of Henry’s French conquest and the version presented by the Chorus (Lanham 1976, 190–200). The Chorus speaks of waving banners, pawing horses, cheering crowds, royal heroism, and tumultuous victory celebrations, heaping scorn on the stage for its inadequate reflection of these glories. The stage action shows political maneuvering, petty thievery, carefully chosen rhetoric, intolerable cold and hunger, and a king who manipulates others confidently but who occasionally needs personal reassurance. It makes no attempt to portray the world described by the Chorus. Shakespeare calls attention to the stage production in *Henry V* more clearly and persistently than in any other play, except perhaps *The Tempest*, partly to emphasize these discrepancies.

Richard pays as little attention to physical reality and to accuracy as the Chorus of *Henry V*. He, too, is swept away by the impressive pictures his words paint. Richard envisions himself as a glorious, mythic king, untouchable and immune to criticism.

For every man that Bullingbrook hath press’d
To lift shrewd steel against our golden crown,
God for his Richard hath in heavenly pay
A glorious angel; then if angels fight,
Weak men must fall, for heaven still guards the right.3 (III.ii.58–62)

The Chorus claims a similar invincibility for Henry V.4 But Henry understands, as Richard did not, that myths are built in very practical ways, not merely asserted verbally. He painstakingly follows in Richard’s footsteps, attempting to become a king of the stature Richard claimed. But situations which Richard manipulated for the satisfaction of his own ego Henry turns to practical political advantage.

Several scenes in *Henry V* parallel scenes in *Richard II*. *Richard II* opens with the quarrel between Bullingbrook and Mowbray which Richard, powerless to resolve, transmutes into a ritual of chivalric combat. Richard devises a public show of kingly power, halting the proposed combat at the last second with a drop of his warder and pronouncing a predetermined sentence of banishment on the combatants. Modifying his role as omnipotent king to that of magnanimous royal kinsman, Richard then shortens Bullingbrook’s period of exile, another self-dramatizing gesture which he had clearly considered in advance. All this empty ceremony is, of course, designed to show Richard off, for his public magnanimity

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3. All quotations from Shakespeare’s plays are from *The Riverside Shakespeare* (ed. Evans 1974).
4. Lanham (1976, 201–02) compares the outlooks of Richard and of the Chorus: “Like the Chorus . . . [Richard] accepts the public, serious definition of reality uncritically . . . He takes, literally, seriously, what was meant metaphorically, rhetorically; he believes his own myth; he thinks like the Chorus.”
soon dissolves to private rapaciousness when he seizes Bullingbrook’s land to finance his Irish wars. Critics have long recognized Richard’s foolishness and egotism here. What is seldom remarked is that Henry V does something similar, though for very different reasons and with entirely different results.

The lengthy second scene of Henry V is another empty ceremony—justification by the clergy of the invasion of France—to cover a decision Henry has already made. The French Ambassador makes clear that Henry has already laid claim to “certain dukedoms, in the right / Of ... [his] great predecessor, King Edward the Third” (I.ii.247–248), long before Canterbury’s tedious explication of Salic law.

Henry’s use of Canterbury is pure show, religious coloration and sanction for the invasion upon which he has already determined. The Church is happy to provide the coloration, indeed to pay for the war, in order to distract Henry from the seizure of its lands. The quid pro quo is obvious—and politically effective. Henry will finance his wars, not as Richard did by seizing the wealth of the nobility but by a voluntary donation from the Church. His court ceremony is as empty as Richard’s, but its goals are far more practical. Far from a mere display of personal power, Henry’s ceremony is designed to garner support from his audience and to shift the responsibility for his decision away from himself and onto the Church:

Therefore take heed how you impawn our person,
How you awake our sleeping sword of war—
We charge you, in the name of God, take head. (I.ii.21–23)

Henry wields power and strives to appear not to; Richard, with no idea of the proper use of power, strives in every circumstance to appear in control, even finally of his own unkinging.

Similarly, Henry revises Richard’s methods of handling opposition. Richard banished Bullingbrook and Mowbray, glorying in his power to order other men’s lives. In II.ii of Henry V, Henry stages a drama which removes responsibility for the conspirators’ death sentence from himself and places it squarely on the conspirators themselves. Henry does not accuse them but hands them scrolls in which they read of their own plots; they then confess without prompting from Henry. Henry gives them no mercy, not—as he is careful to point out—because he is not merciful but because the conspirators themselves have urged punishment earlier in the scene.

The mercy that was quick is us but late,
By your own counsel is suppress’d and kill’d.
You must not dare, for shame, to talk of mercy. (II.ii.79–81)

Freed from the responsibility for their harsh sentences, Henry is able to express his personal loss, so that the conspirators’ crime becomes not only treason but violation of the bonds of friendship as well. Henry’s sorrowful account of their betrayal of his friendship deepens the onlookers’ sense of the traitors’ guilt. Richard’s banishment of Bullingbrook and Mowbray leaves almost everyone in the English court dissatisfied or disappointed. After Henry’s
sentence of death upon the three traitors, all—including the conspirators themselves—rejoice that the conspiracy has been discovered.

Henry V moves between his public and private personas constantly. When the conspiracy is revealed, the traitors are condemned not only for public treason but perhaps even more strongly for their personal betrayal of Henry. A similar public/private response is given to the Dauphin’s gift of tennis balls in I.i, to which Henry answers first as monarch, politely and genially: “We are glad the Dolphin is so pleasant with us. / His present and your pains we thank you for” (ll. 259–60). This tone continues for fourteen lines. Then we hear his personal reaction to the insult: “But tell the Dolphin I will keep my state, / Be like a king, and show my sail of greatness / When I do rouse me in my throne of France” (ll. 273–75). Henry is consciously concerned here to be like a king. Only at this one moment does he articulate his awareness that he is creating a role.

Henry’s double identities are most obvious in IV.i, when he borrows Thomas Erpingham’s cloak in order to walk around his army as a private man, leaving behind his public identity as monarch, but staunchly defending his public role with his private voice. The wooing of Katherine (V.ii)—as staged a scene as the earlier one with Canterbury—again demonstrates his determination to carry through on the personal level what has already been determined on the public. Henry knows they must marry; Katherine knows they must marry (and indeed has been working on her English). But still the personal offer must be made and accepted.

Doubleness in Henry V is not confined to the differing stories presented by the Chorus and the staged action or to the difference between Henry’s public and private personae. Double presentation of situations is frequent, the reinterpretation and dramatization of decisions already made, one of the play’s distinctive metadramatic features. Policy is continually embodied, acted out, or explained for the benefit of Henry’s various audiences. The invasion of France, the discovery and sentencing of the traitors, and the wooing of Katherine: all exemplify situations in which Henry first determines political expediency and then dramatizes his decision, altering it slightly in production to make it more palatable to his audience.

The most critically debated instance of such reworking is, of course, Henry’s decision to kill the French prisoners during a crisis in the Battle of Agincourt (IV.vi). The context of that decision is informative. Exeter finishes a tearful account of the death of York, but as Henry is responding with appropriate sentiment—“hearing this, I must perforce compound / With [mistful] eyes, or they will issue too” (11.33–34)—an alarum sounds indicating that the French are sending up reinforcements. Henry’s sentiment vanishes abruptly—“Then every 5. Because Henry so constantly plays a role, there is little assurance that he has a “self” though he certainly has a private persona. Henry’s creation of personae resembles that Renaissance self-fashioning explored by Greenblatt (1980). Greenblatt’s chapter on Thomas More comments on the role-playing of a man who shifts, like Henry, between public and private selves. Taylor (1982, 55) notes his own fascination with Henry “partly because his private self is visible only through the starts and fissures of his public one.”
6. Wilcox (1985) argues persuasively that the wooing of Katherine is designed to counterpoint that almost sexual rapaciousness with which Henry and his army have conquered France. Such a reading also makes clear the staged nature of the wooing scene.
soldier kill his prisoners, / Give the word through" (11. 37–38). In the face of renewed fighting, Henry decides for military expediency; the French prisoners must be neither threat nor distraction as his men meet the French reinforcements. The expedient action is not heroic, however, and its juxtaposition against the account of York’s death emphasizes how anti-heroic it is.7

In the next scene Fluellen and Gower provide Henry with a more attractive explanation for this action: the French have killed the English baggage boys and plundered the King’s tent, “wherefore,” explains Gower, “the King, most worthily, hath caus’d every soldier to cut his prisoner’s throat. O, ‘tis a gallant king!” (IV.vii.9–10). If there is irony in Gower’s final comment, it is not his own irony, for he believes as implicitly as the Chorus in his heroic leader. Gower’s explanation is reinforced as Henry enters “angry,” presumably about the baggage boys and his tent. He sends a messenger to the French, bidding them to come fight or leave the field, and threatens, “we’ll cut the throats of those [prisoners] we have” (IV.vii.63). A generation of editors has noted that these prisoners are new ones who enter with Bourbon at line 56. But Henry’s threat here has the effect of erasing his earlier command, as though the initial throat-cutting had never been more than a rhetorical threat, like the slaughtered infants Henry threatened earlier at Harfleur. Holinshed records all three pieces of the action, but in his account the French plunder of the English tents precedes both Henry’s command to slay the prisoners and his later threat to cut more prisoners’ throats. In Shakespeare’s play the anti-heroic but practical political action is taken first, but then it is verbally softened and reworked.8 Henry is a master of public relations.

Henry V has voices appropriate to all situations. Unlike the almost monotonic poetic voice which characterizes Richard II, Henry V brings together many disparate languages: French; the English of the nobility; the colloquial English of the tavern world; the cadences of the Chorus; and the dialects of the Welsh, Irish, and Scotch army officers. A world with such a variety of languages and accents must also offer a variety of interpretations of any given event.9 Such plurality helps explain from another perspective the multiple versions of a single decision or action which the play provides.

Henry himself has as many rhetorics as there are audiences to be persuaded. To his men before Harfleur he speaks as their friend Harry, leader of his band of

7. The importance for the interpretation of Henry’s character of this detail about the throat-cutting of the prisoners is evident, by its omission, in Kenneth Branagh’s brilliant new (1989) movie version of Henry V. In this film Branagh obviously wishes to portray Henry with sympathy, as a man sensitive to the horrors of war though convinced of the necessity of just aggression. In order to produce this version of Henry, Branagh—among many other changes designed to make Henry less troublingly ambiguous—omits both the lines about cutting the prisoners’ throats and Fluellen’s supremely ironic comparison of Henry with Alexander the Great, which points out that both leaders killed their friends (IV.vi.29–46).

8. Henry’s refusal of responsibility and his retroactive verbal reshaping of action may be taken one giant step further. Of Henry’s edict that no soldier is to boast of the Agincourt victory on pain of death, since the praise is God’s only, Greenblatt (1988, 60) writes, “By such an edict God’s responsibility for the slaughter of the French is enforced, and with it is assured at least the glow of divine approval over the entire enterprise, from the complex genealogical claims to the execution of the traitors, the invasion of France, the threats levelled against civilians, the massacre of the prisoners.”

9. Calderwood (1979, 166–69) discusses the languages of Henry V, seeing them all subsumed by the King’s English.
heroic countrymen. To the citizens of Harfleur he speaks in the voice of the battle-hardened soldier, a voice clearly borrowed from Tamburlaine. If the town does not surrender immediately, Henry will be unable to control his men, whom he depicts not as noble and patriotic countrymen fighting under God’s banner but rather as savages:

The blind and bloody soldier with a foul hand  
[will defile] the locks of your shrill-shrieking daughters;  
Your fathers taken by the silver beards,  
And their most reverend heads dash’d to the walls;  
Your naked infants spitted upon pikes,  
While the mad mothers with their howls confus’d  
Do break the clouds, as did the wives of Jewry  
At Herod’s bloody-hunting sloughermen. (III.iii.34–41)

The rhetoric achieves its purpose: Harfleur surrenders to Henry’s “soft mercy” and no blood is spilled.

One final example of Henry’s rhetorical fluidity comes just before the battle at Agincourt when Westmoreland wishes for additional soldiers. In a dramatic illustration of making a virtue of necessity, Henry gives a response which might have come—and whose argument did indeed come—from the lips of Hotspur:

If we are mark’d to die, we are enow  
To do our country loss; and if to live,  

.........................

The fewer men, the greater share of honor.  

... I would not lose so great an honor  
As one man more methinks would share from me,  
For the best hope I have. (IV.iii.20–33)

At no other point does personal honor loom large in Henry’s concern. But here, for a brief time, the “Hotspur world-view” is perfect, and Henry plays it to the hilt. Later, of course, the army is not permitted to claim personal honor from the victory but must rather give all praise to God. By then, however, Henry has moved on to another stance and as humble recipient of God’s grace must not concern himself with worldly honor.

In fact, Henry plays the role which Richard failed to maintain—that of unquestioned and unquestionable monarch—with almost total success. The Chorus, one part of his audience, is a gauge of his effectiveness. Henry has made it blind to political maneuvering, cowardice, and petty quarrels, and it sees only what is glorious and heroic. Shakespeare’s audience, unsettled by the Chorus’s scorn of the stage and by its mistakes, may look more closely at the play’s action than the Chorus does and observe Henry’s heroic kingship in creation, myth being fashioned.

Another metadramatic concern of both Richard and Henry is audience. For Richard the issue is simple: his audience is himself. Thus he shows no dissatisfaction after the abortive tournament, though others of his court do; he has pleased himself. Indeed, his chief concern is always himself. Bullingbrook orders his men to “Mark King Richard how he looks” (III.iii.61), but Richard has
no eyes for Bullingbrook in return. He is too busy putting his own responses in Bullingbrook’s mouth.

This need to play all roles, to be both audience and actor, is most clear in Richard’s abdication scene. Richard looks briefly to the spectators to acknowledge his kingship, but then immediately decides to play their roles himself so that the full drama may take place:

God save the king! Will no man say amen?
Am I both priest and clerk? Well then, amen.
God save the King! although I be not he,
And yet amen, if heaven do think him me. (IV.i.72–75)

Richard is far more concerned with the interior drama he experiences than with what his subjects think of his position. If they are unwilling to give their standard response to his role as king, then he will do it for them. By requesting a mirror, Richard quite literally turns to see the effect of his latest role on his chief audience, himself: “Was this face the face / That like the sun, did make beholders wink?” (IV.i.281–82). Richard constantly evaluates himself and his position, but his own response is all he tests.

From the very different perspective of a study of speech acts in the tetralogy, Joseph Porter confirms these observations about audience. Richard’s speech, he observes, has the effect of his talking to himself even when he appears to be talking to others. In contrast, Henry V shows a consciousness of the impression he makes not only on the person he addresses but on other auditors as well (1979, 145–48).

This contrast between the two monarchs is highlighted by comparison of their moments of self-scrutiny, which perhaps coincidentally occur in Act IV, scene i of each play. At that point in Richard II, Richard’s self-image shatters, and he subsides in eloquent resignation. In Henry V, after a moment of self-examination, Henry moves confidently forward to conquest. Like Richard, Henry checks the responses his acting evokes, but he looks outward rather than inward for his self-definition. This is the scene in which Henry moves in disguise among his troops. Like Richard, he has removed his kingly accoutrements, though for him they are abandoned only temporarily. Like Richard, Henry seeks a way to see himself. But rather than Richard’s mirror (solipsistic and vain), Henry relies on the perceptions of his soldiers (objective and politic). Bates and Williams offer a view of the King which is less than reassuring:

Bates: We know enough, if we know we are the King’s subjects. If his cause be wrong, our obedience to the King wipes the crime of it out of us.

Williams: But if the cause be not good, the King himself hath a heavy reckoning to make, when all those legs, and arms, and heads, chopp’d off in a battle, shall join together at the latter day. (IV.i.131–37)

This interview with his soldiers provides Henry the only direct criticism he receives in the play, criticism particularly difficult to swallow because it places on Henry the responsibility which he has attempted publicly to place on others.
since the play’s opening, Canterbury was responsible for Henry’s invasion of France; the conspirators were responsible for their own death sentences; but now his men tell him he is responsible for their fate. For the first time he must acknowledge that, as king, he is not all-sufficient and all-inspiring to his soldiers: even his versatile acting and rhetoric cannot make men happy to face death. His only recourse is to pray that God will “steel my soldiers’ hearts” (IV.i.289). This is the only moment in the play when Henry is on stage alone, and the moment when he seems least to be playing a role. With no audience except himself and Shakespeare’s audience (whom Henry, unlike the Chorus, never acknowledges), he is prompted to introspection (Danson 1983, 41). In this private moment Henry remembers Richard and, in his prayer, recounts his efforts to atone for “the fault / My father made in compassing the crown!” (IV.i.293–94).

Henry’s strategy has been to rebuild, through conscious role-playing and manipulation of audience, the kingship Richard gave away. Henry’s model is not his own father, who in 1 and 2 Henry IV had withdrawn from public roles, even employing surrogates to ride for him in battle. Despite a promising beginning as a royal actor, wooing the crowds before he took the crown from Richard, Henry IV never capitalized on the public roles of kingship. He bore his position as a burden, made weighty by the guilt which accompanied its acquisition. Henry V, like Richard, has inherited the crown; his guilt is not so direct as his father’s. But he inherits a kingship which has been demythologized, its charisma dissipated through self-indulgent misuse by Richard and by Henry IV’s might-makes-right policy. Henry’s self-appointed task is to reinvigorate the myth of the omnipotent English king. To this end he imitates the actor Richard. Unlike Richard, however, he knows that the royal actor must be aware of his audience and be capable of producing alternative versions of predetermined policies to color and soften political necessity.

This juxtaposition of the two plays and their two actor kings demonstrates a radical difference in dramatic focus. In Richard II Shakespeare’s emphasis is on character, richly explored in Richard’s language and self-scrutiny, and through contrast to his foil, Bullingbrook. Richard’s self-awareness is limited and grows slowly throughout the play; the audience could advise and correct him at any time. Shakespeare’s play offers it the material to do so; the audience’s understanding surpasses Richard’s own. Shakespeare uses the metaphor of acting, in conjunction with other metaphors, to deepen our understanding of his player king.

In Henry V, however, Shakespeare’s focus shifts from character to technique and structure. Henry plays heroic king to within-the-play audiences which are almost totally engaged with his drama. Only occasionally—in the tavern at Falstaff’s death, in Fluellen’s comparison of Henry and Alexander, and in the words of Bates and Williams—do Henry’s varied audiences demonstrate any critical detachment. Of course, it is in Henry’s interest to promote his audiences’
engagement; he never mentions the stage or acting and is careful to avoid overt plays-within-the-play. Shakespeare, on the other hand, forces detachment on his audience by a variety of techniques: an unreliable Chorus; a cacophony of languages and accents; differing explanations of certain plot events; and Henry's role-playing and rhetorical shifts. This play does not stretch beyond its hero in the way Richard II does. We do not understand Henry any better than, and perhaps less well than, he understands himself. We observe his adroit performance and realize that the good king in Shakespeare's canon is not born but "self-fashioned." And "good" in Shakespearean kingship is more an evaluation of competence than of moral character.

Henry V examines the craft of dramaturgy. The usual way of reading the "world is a stage" topos is to stress what playing has to tell us about reality. This play, however, presents a different emphasis. Henry's successful creation of his kingship tells us about dramatic creation. Just as Henry can sustain his political illusion only temporarily—as the final Chorus bluntly reminds us—stage illusion is also temporary. But within these two hours' traffic of the stage the political utility of effective drama has been graphically illustrated by Shakespeare's self-reflexive hero.

Works Cited


11. Mack (1962) has pointed out the necessary equipoise between audience engagement and detachment in Shakespearean drama. In Richard II and Henry V the balance points are different: in Richard II Shakespeare asks for a good deal of audience engagement; in Henry V he repeatedly uses devices which promote detachment.


