Figuring the King in *Henry V*: Political Rhetoric and the Limits of Performance

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It seems somewhat perverse to use *Henry V* to talk about the limitations of rhetoric when the play is substantially about the way the heroic English king uses rhetoric to fashion an unforgettable image of himself and the nation-building enterprise on which he is embarked. But while the play does chronicle Henry's military victories in France, it ends with a vision of his death and the squandering of his legacy. It is surely worth considering that if rhetoric was a major source of Henry's strength, it might also contain the seeds of his undoing. Rhetoric is the vehicle by which Henry V establishes himself as an irresistible king, but it is also the vehicle that enmeshes him in contradiction, in the condition of loss, and in the messiness of collaboration, where other points of view complicate his self-presentation.

My starting point is the Chorus to act 5, which indirectly raises ideas about rhetoric circulating in Shakespeare's culture. The Chorus breaks the historical frame and explicitly refers to the Earl of Essex's military expedition to Ireland. Essex's expedition lasted through the late spring and summer of 1599, the exact time, it seems, that Shakespeare was writing this play. The act 5 Chorus is the holy grail for historicist scholars, the one indisputable place where Shakespeare unequivocally refers to a contemporary political event. It is a celebratory passage, comparing Henry V not only to Essex, but also to Julius Caesar, and endowing all three figures with military greatness. Here is the Chorus describing Henry's welcome home from his victory in France:

> How London doth pour out her citizens.
> The Mayor and all his brethren, in best sort,
> Like to the senators of th'antique Rome
> With the plebeians swarming at their heels,

> Go forth and fetch their conqu'ring Caesar in—
> As, by a lower but high-loving likelihood,
> Were now the General of our gracious Empress—
> As in good time he may—from Ireland coming,
> Bringing rebellion broached on his sword,
> How many would the peaceful city quit
> To welcome him![1]

Celebratory as it may be, this passage turns out to be anything but clear. Through the two figures with whom Henry is linked, the Chorus evokes the specter of overweening ambition: Caesar's triumphs prompted speculation that he aspired to be king, which led to his assassination, chronicled in *Julius Caesar*, the play Shakespeare wrote immediately after *Henry V*. Essex, of course, engaged in rivalry and brinksmanship with the most powerful figures in the English court, up to and including the queen; his assignment to lead English forces in Ireland was both a reward and a curse to him, and it ended in a failure exceeded only by his later failed rebellion against the queen in February 1601. Although Shakespeare could not have known about the disastrous conclusion to Essex's career when he wrote *Henry V*, he did know about Essex's ambition. It is surely significant that at the height of Henry V's success, Shakespeare links his English hero king with two charismatic military figures whose victories paled in the face of questions about their personal ambitions.[2]

Thinking through some of the links connecting Henry, Essex, and Caesar, I was drawn to the issue of rhetoric because all three of these figures pursued their ambitions through rhetorical performance; in all three cases, their ascendancy, while guaranteed by military conquest, depended heavily on rhetoric. Given the heights all three figures reached, one aspect of rhetoric that merits scrutiny is the possibility that the skilled rhetor can use language to approximate the condition of a god.[3] I want to examine the political implications of rhetoric that promises to make men like gods, to lift them beyond the ordinary sphere, perhaps to lift them beyond their proper sphere. The topic of rhetoric has great cultural and theoretical potential and it also has a rich theatrical immediacy: in a play like *Henry V* that features so many rhetorical flights, we can test anything we say about rhetoric against how it plays in the theater; also, any director of the play and actor of the part need to confront the question of Henry's relationship to rhetoric and what it means in terms of his political, ethical, and theatrical status.

Elizabethans who wrote about rhetoric stressed its nearly limitless powers of transformation. In *The Garden of Eloquence*,

Henry Peacham says that the orator's rhetorical skill makes him "in a manner the emperor of mens minds and affections, and next to the omnipotent God in the power of persuasion."[4] Like God, the skilled rhetor creates new realities, even if those new realities exist only in other people's minds. In *The Art of English Poesy*, George Puttenham suggests that rhetorical prowess is capable of pulling a poet "first from the cart and thence to school, and from thence to the court," where he can be preferred to the Queen's service;[5] in other words, rhetorical skill allows an individual poet to transform himself socially, raising himself from humble origins to the center of power. In both these quotations, rhetoric confers dizzying power: a gifted rhetorician can change men's minds and his own stature; he is like a god in his ability to alter the givens of reality.

While rhetoric holds exhilarating promise, it also raises concerns about social control. The powers of rhetoric challenge social categories designed to protect reality and confine individuals to culturally sanctioned roles. Trading in rhetoric, Shakespeare explores the danger of the skillful orator's ability to transcend prescribed categories. If we consider *Julius Caesar*, which Shakespeare was thinking about when he wrote *Henry V*, we might notice that the title character often refers to himself in the third person, thereby assuming a monumental status that dwarfs his fellow Romans and raises the possibility that he will become king. To the Soothsayer, Caesar says, "Speak. Caesar is turned to hear" (1.2.19); in the Senate, he asks "What is now amiss / That Caesar and his Senate must redress?" (3.1.31-2). And he refers to himself in superhuman terms: "I am constant as the Northern Star, / Of whose true fixed and resting quality / There is no fellow in the firmament" (3.1.60-2). Through his grandiose rhetoric, Caesar challenges the basic principle of shared political participation on which the Roman Republic depends. Although it is unclear in Shakespeare's play whether or not Caesar really wishes to become king, his explicit intentions are less important than his use of a sovereign rhetorical mode directly opposed to Rome's republican principles. Crucially, when Caesar refuses to go to the Senate on the Ides of March, he justifies his decision in terms of his sovereign will: "The cause is in my will; I will not come. / That is enough to satisfy the Senate" (2.2.71-72). This sovereign rhetoric explodes the categories designed to limit Caesar's or any Roman's political ascendancy and as such it presents an intolerable threat to Rome—Caesar literally gets killed for it.

In the case of the Earl of Essex, whom Shakespeare was also thinking about while writing *Henry V*, the link between rhetoric

and the sovereign will was again a problem. In Elizabeth's England, the existence of a sovereign will *per se* was of course *not* a problem, although the appropriation of the sovereign's rhetorical position by someone other than the queen herself was cause for grave concern. One of the reasons the Earl of Essex got into trouble was that he aspired to a sovereign use of rhetoric, a mode in which he would be the ultimate authority, able to reprimand even the queen when she steered off course, as he often believed she did. On one such occasion, in the summer of 1598, Essex was enraged when Elizabeth rejected his advice about whom to appoint as Lord Deputy in Ireland; the earl responded by turning his back on the queen in the middle of their consultation; she in turn boxed his ear and sent him away. Trying to make peace between the two, the Lord Keeper Thomas Egerton wrote to Essex, specifically reminding him of the limits of his own position as subject, not sovereign: "Policy, duty, and religion, inforce you to sue, yield, and submit to your Sovereign, between whom and you there can be no proportion of duty."[6] Essex chafed at this advice, writing to Egerton, "What, cannot Princes err? Cannot subjects receive wrong? Is an earthly power or authority infinite? Pardon me, my good Lord, I can never subscribe to these principles."[7] Essex's dilemma was that as Elizabeth's subject, his proper rhetorical relation to the queen was one of subjection, yet he disdained having to forego the possibility of self-aggrandizement that an aggressive use of rhetoric could afford him. Thus the general Shakespeare celebrates so enthusiastically in *Henry V* was locked in an ongoing contest with the queen that, among other things, dealt with the appropriate rhetorical positions available to each of them.[8]

Like Caesar and Essex, Henry depends upon artful rhetoric to define himself; but their examples show the cultural anxiety swirling around rhetoric and its powers. Cultural ambivalence about rhetoric may account for why Henry puts such a major part of his rhetorical energy into disavowing rhetoric, in the same way that Antony in *Julius Caesar* engages in brilliant oratory even while insisting "I am no orator as Brutus is" (3.2.208). For Henry, the disavowal of rhetoric is not merely calculated modesty; it is also the strategy on which his long-term transformation to heroic king depends. What makes this character so attractive theatrically in the *Henry IV* plays, although so questionable politically, is the plenitude of his rhetoric. He congratulates himself on his facility at speaking the language of many different kinds of people: "I am so good a proficient in one quarter of an hour that I can drink with any tinker in his own language during my life" (*I Henry IV*, 2.4.15-17).

To mark his transformation into Henry V, though, this king disavows plenitude, the quality that defined his earlier self; he will no longer brag about his linguistic dexterity and play multiple roles, but rather will be "like himself," in the words of the Prologue. Paring down his language, he will make good on his promise in *Henry IV, Part I* to learn the language of the tavern dwellers only to reject it when the time is right: "I'll so offend to make offense a skill, / Redeeming time when men think least I will" (1.2.194-95). When it comes to redeeming time, Henry bides his time so that even at the end of *Henry IV, Part II*, his father still worries that his wild character unfits him to be king. Warwick soothes the dying king by repeating the narrative of the prince's imminent reformation, which he figures in terms of language:

> The Prince but studies his companions,
> Like a strange tongue, wherein, to gain the language,
> 'Tis needful that the most immodest word
> Be looked upon and learnt, which once attain'd,
> Your highness knows, comes to no further use
> But to be known and hated. (4.3.68-73)

The plan is a bold one: to reject linguistic fullness in favor of an uncontaminated kingly language. While Henry does emerge as a hero king in *Henry V*, he does not do it through paring down his language. The stated plan to purify his language is a red herring because the prince's transformation into Henry V requires every bit as skilled a rhetorical performance as did his self-presentation as the wayward heir to the throne. We should ask, then, how he pulls it off; how this skilled rhetor creates the impression of linguistic artlessness; and how he uses this impression to persuade his subjects to support him in a foreign war. When all is said and done, Henry V's greatest performance may lie not in his stirring set speeches, but rather in passing off those speeches as the blunt language of a warrior "for the working day" (4.3.110).

I will argue that even as Henry promotes himself through walking a rhetorical tightrope, there is something in the condition of rhetoric itself that brings him down—he is not brought down in the shocking manner of Caesar or Essex, to be sure, but as the final Chorus makes clear, Henry's legacy is disaster, both to his dynasty and to his country. The problem may lie in the fact that, fashioning himself rhetorically, Henry necessarily engages in performance—the verbal performance of self—and performance is always slippery and transient: it is glorious in the moment, but it cannot deliver the enduring heroic legacy that Henry craves.

If Caesar shapes his rhetorical self-presentation in the context of ideas about the inviolability of republican Rome, and if Essex shapes his rhetorical self-presentation in relation to the queen's sovereignty, Henry V shapes his rhetorical self-presentation in relation to a world in which his own primacy is in doubt, especially initially. Henry compensates for his vulnerable position by asserting the inexorability of his sovereign will. For example, he says, "France being ours we'll bend it to our awe, / Or break it all to pieces" (1.2.224-25): here Henry assumes the right to employ the royal *we*, assert possession, and threaten destruction. But despite claiming a position of unrivalled power, Henry strategically dilutes his sovereignty throughout the play by deferring scrupulously to God, much as Egerton advised Essex to defer to the Queen. Thus, before he declares his intention to invade France, Henry secures the support of his religious advisers, asking the Archbishop of Canterbury to "justly and religiously unfold" the justice of his claim to the French throne (1.2.10); later, on the night before Agincourt, Henry prays, "O God of battles, steel my soldiers' hearts. / Possess them not with fear" (4.1.271-72); after the battle is won, he insists that "God fought for us" (4.8.114) and decrees, "be it death proclaimed through our host / To boast of this, or take that praise from God / Which is his only" (4.8.108-10). By subordinating himself so thoroughly to God, Henry achieves a paradoxical effect: he comes to seem less like God's servant and more like God's partner or even a god himself—the Prologue introduces this possibility (albeit with the protection of a pagan cover) when he wishes that the warlike Harry would "assume the port of Mars" (Prologue, 6).

Shakespeare intensifies the impression of Henry as god-like through a couple of significant changes to the source materials in Holinshed. For example, in Holinshed when Henry discovers that Scroop, Cambridge, and Grey are conspiring against him, he calls them before him and simply exposes their treason. In Holinshed, Henry speaks directly to the traitors: "Having thus conspired the death and destruction of me, it maie be no doubt but that you likewise have sworn the confusion of all that are here with me," and he pronounces their deaths;[9] only in the play does Henry engage in a cat-and-mouse game with the traitors, pretending to seek their counsel and then using their own words to damn them. As Bedford says, "The king hath note of all that they intend / By interception that they dream not of" (2.2.6-7). The King's knowledge runs deep, surpassing the comprehension of his subjects in a way that reinforces his all-seeing and all-knowing godlike image.[10]

Shakespeare further alters his sources to strengthen the divine aura around Henry in the circumstances of the English victory at Agincourt. In both Holinshed and the anonymous source play, *The Famous Victories of Henry the Fifth*, credit for the victory goes to the technology of the English longbow and to the king's excellent military strategy. In *The Famous Victories*, Henry explicitly commands that "every archer provide him a stake of / A tree, and sharpe it at both endes, / And at the first encounter of the horsemen, / To pitch their stakes down into the ground before them, / That they may gore themselves upon them, / And then to recoyle back, and shoote wholly altogether, / And so discomfit them."[11] *The Famous Victories* thus takes much more care to account in rational military terms for the success of the outnumbered English. In Shakespeare, the king says, "How thou pleasest, God, dispose the day" (4.3.133); and once he wins the battle against the fiercest odds, he adds, "O God, thy arm was here!" (4.8.100), explicitly suggesting a divinely sanctioned victory.

While on the one hand, Shakespeare's play supports Henry's heroic rhetoric by connecting it with God, on the other hand, the play massively undercuts Henry's godliness and calls his use of godly rhetoric into question. The irony begins in the first scene of the play where the bishops of Canterbury and Ely determine to support Henry's war in France in return for his opposition to a parliamentary bill deeply hostile to the church's interests. To win Henry to their position, they propose filling the coffers for his French war with "a greater sum / Than ever at one time the clergy yet / Did to his predecessors part withal" (1.1.80-82). At this stage of the play, the bishops already know that their offer has been received "with good acceptance of his majesty" (1.1.84), so in the next scene, when Henry solemnly asks Canterbury to "unfold / Why the law Salic that they have in France / Or should or should not bar us in our claim" (1.2.10-12), his rhetorical presentation is exposed, to the audience at least, as a fraud: he and the bishops have already agreed about a matter that they now pretend is an open question.[12]

The disjunctive gap between the first two scenes suggests that the King's godly self-presentation is untrustworthy, and here I would suggest that the play exposes not just the King, but also rhetoric itself as an always insufficient mode for stabilizing identity. The first two scenes of the play show that rhetoric can never be a neutral conduit for conveying reality; rather, rhetoric fashions the very reality it purports to describe. This exposure of rhetoric puts us in the world of Machiavelli, who advised princes to pursue power

ruthlessly even while they publicly justified their actions in the language of common values, which in the case of *Henry V* would be the value of deference to the church. The exposure of rhetoric puts us, too, in the world of George Puttenham, who recognizes in *The Art of English Poesy* that the artful use of language is effective precisely because of its power to misrepresent persuasively: thus of metaphorical language, Puttenham says, "As figures be the instruments of ornament in every language, so be they also in a sort abuses, or rather trespasses, in speech, because they pass the ordinary limits of common utterance, and be occupied of purpose to deceive the ear and also the mind, drawing it from plainness and simplicity to a certain doubleness, whereby our talk is the more guileful and abusing."[13] If figures of speech are essentially deceptive, then Henry V is compromised from the moment the Chorus wishes for "the warlike Harry, like himself" to "assume the port of Mars" (Prologue, 5; 6); Harry is not going to *be* Mars, he is going to put on the demeanor of Mars; even worse, he is not going to *be* himself, he is going to *perform* himself. The language suggests that Harry is always necessarily playing a role, which in Machiavellian terms means the possibility of deception and dissonance. The danger of "like" plays out in *Julius Caesar* as well, where Brutus, drinking wine with Caesar "like" a friend, mourns the fact "that every like is not the same" (2.2.128).

Because Henry is described rhetorically, he is buffeted by the play of signs—he is like Mars, like himself, like the strawberry under the nettle, like a king. Always the product of linguistic play, he can never be the transcendent signifier who guarantees the rightness and stability of the entire linguistic system. Indeed, the figurative speech that defines Henry heralds the imminence of loss, because the assertion of likeness, however appropriate it might seem in a given moment, is also an assertion of transience: likeness may exist in the moment but it does not last forever. Rhetoric thus does not fashion a permanent reality but rather outlines a present reality and persuades others to accept it, for now. As Puttenham sees it, rhetoric is perfectly suited for improvisational persuasion because it "is decked and set out with all manner of fresh colours and figures, which maketh that it sooner inveigleth the judgment of man and carrieth his opinion this way and that, whithersoever the heart by impression of the ear shall be the most effectively bent and directed."[14] Again, rhetoric is not about conveying the truth; it is about creating an impression of the truth that others are willing to accept.[15] Puttenham's verbs, *decking*, *inveigling*, *bending*, and *directing*, suggest that the rhetorical process is subject to abuse.

In this context, it is interesting to note that at crucial moments, Shakespeare's play echoes Puttenham's verbs: "'tis your thoughts that now must *deck* our kings," says the Prologue, and the Epilogue reports that "Thus far, with rough and all-unable pen, / Our *bending* author hath pursued the story" (Prologue, 28; Epilogue, 1-2, italics mine). Our *bending* author. It's not clear what is being bent: whether the author is bending himself to the authority of the historical sources, or bending the historical sources in the service of his play, or bending his body in the physical act of writing. Whatever the case, the image suggests that the transmission of narrative is not straightforward and the author himself emerges as a "crooked figure" (Prologue, 15).[16]

Henry V might himself be called a bending author in that he frames events in a motivated way in pursuit of his goals. Chief among those goals is the political legitimacy that initially eludes him because of his father's usurpation of the throne and because of his own performance as the wastrel prince.[17] At the beginning of the play, the Dauphin can legitimately taunt Henry with a tun of tennis balls because Henry has not yet proved his political seriousness. And on the eve of the decisive battle, Henry can be legitimately nervous about his political past because his own claim to the throne rests on his father's theft: "Not today, O Lord, / O not today, think not upon the fault / My father made in compassing the crown" (4.1.274-76). Here, past moments of rhetorical performance, such as Prince Harry's wildness or Henry IV's success in persuading the English nobles to accept him as king, come back to haunt the present, and we see how no rhetorical performance, no matter how initially successful, can hold the field forever.

To build legitimacy at this new moment requires new acts of rhetoric, and Henry delivers them. Before the besieged city of Harfleur, he delivers a masterful combination of apocalyptic threats—"look to see / The blind and bloody soldier with foul hand / Defile the locks of your shrill-shrieking daughters" (3.3.110-12)—alongside questions designed to place responsibility for the promised destruction on the people of Harfleur themselves: "What is't to me, when you yourselves are cause, / If your pure maidens fall into the hand / Of hot and forcing violation?" (3.3.96-98); "What say you? Will you yield, and this avoid? / Or, guilty in defense, be thus destroyed?" (3.3.119-20). Henry's bravura performance prompts the surrender of the town; the degree to which the speech may simply be rhetoric without force to back it up is brilliantly suggested in Kenneth Branagh's film where the shots reveal that the effort required merely to deliver the speech exhausts the King;

Branagh's Henry is deeply relieved when the Governor of Harfleur capitulates, freeing him from the need to make good on his threats. In Branagh's interpretation, rhetoric alone creates the impression that Henry's small and sickly army could overrun a fortified city.

Henry is equally rhetorically successful in rousing his troops before the Battle of Agincourt. In the Saint Crispin's Day speech, he famously inspires his army by defining them as a band of brothers: he uses terms like "share" and "fellowship" to insist that there is no hierarchy on the battlefield, and he promises that participation in the fighting will literally create a social parity between king and common soldier: "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" (4.3.61-63). Of course, the king's promise of shared gentility is worthless in the long run; reading the list of the dead a few scenes later, he reasserts a hierarchical world view, painstakingly cataloguing the names of dead French aristocrats but giving short shrift to English commoners when he reads the list of his own side's casualties: "Edward the Duke of York, the Earl of Suffolk, / Sir Richard Keighley, Davy Gam Esquire; / None else of name, and of all other men / But five-and-twenty" (4.8.97-100). Henry never again mentions his promise to gentle the condition of his brothers in arms, although a fleeting exchange between Williams and Gower hints that the soldiers remember it: when the King sends Williams for Gower, Williams tells his fellow soldier, "I warrant it is to knight you, Captain" (4.8.1). Wrong he is: Henry has simply sent Williams away to set up the joke he will play by putting Williams's glove into Fluellen's cap, thereby prompting an argument between them. But while the King apparently has no intention of *actually* gentling his soldiers' condition, his rhetorical construction of a band of brothers serves its purpose—the men win a stunning and unexpected victory.[18]

Basing his identity so heavily on rhetoric, Henry inexorably links himself to performance, because rhetoric is the *performance* of language to persuade others. Effective use of rhetoric requires a performer's expert attention to shifting circumstances; a skillful rhetorician must be capable of adapting rhetorical modes to meet the demands of changing conditions. For example, Henry's joke at Williams's expense may respond to the changing circumstances after the Battle of Agincourt. Having won the battle, Henry's goal shifts from needing to unite his army into a victorious fighting force; his goal is now to create the peace on favorable terms, one of which is the reinstitution of internal hierarchy in his own army. Henry does this by shifting from a heroic to a comic rhetorical

mode. We usually recognize that the shift from martial to comic rhetoric occurs in the play's final scene, where Henry woos fair Katherine of France, but the shift actually begins while the army is still on the battlefield. In an unexpectedly playful mood, Henry toys with the common soldier, Williams, who is unaware that the man he challenged the previous evening was the king himself. Rather than confront Williams directly, Henry gives the soldier's glove to Fluellen so that Williams will challenge Fluellen when he recognizes it. It may seem bizarre and degrading that Henry stage-manages a comic scene of conflict between his soldiers even before the names of the battle dead have been announced. Henry doesn't even let the loyal Fluellen in on the joke, but perhaps he cannot afford to. On the battlefield, Fluellen has come closer than any commoner to enjoying the brotherhood Henry promised them all; the King may then find it imperative to reinstate a difference between himself and Fluellen by manipulating the unknowing Welshman as part of his joke.

The King intensifies his shift into a comic register in his scene with Katherine of France. Wooing her, Henry insists he is "a fellow of plain and uncoined constancy" (5.2.149); part of the pleasure of the scene comes from the clumsiness with which the King shifts from a heroic mode to a romantic mode, wooing Katherine in garbled French that is a far cry from the English poetry which flowed so easily from his lips on the battlefield. Stumbling in French, Henry takes the opportunity to disavow rhetorical facility: "For these fellows of infinite tongue, that can rhyme themselves into ladies' favours, they do always reason themselves out again. What! A speaker is but a prater, a rhyme is but a ballad" (5.2.151-54). Henry is audacious to critique "fellows of infinite tongue" in a speech lasting thirty-four lines, but once again the point of his speech is not to present the objective "truth" about himself; the point of his speech is to represent himself artfully, rhetorically, in a way that will earn the princess of France's free consent to what is in effect a forced marriage.[19]

As if to emphasize Henry's strength as a performer, Shakespeare goes to great lengths to make Henry's comic rhetoric possible, altering the source material in Holinshed and *The Famous Victories*, where Katherine figures differently than she does in the play. Holinshed writes of "a certaine sparke of burning love" that "was kindled in the kings heart by the sight of the ladie Katherine";[20] in the simplest terms, this is a story about love at first sight. In *Henry V*, by contrast, the King refers to Katherine as "our capital demand" in the peace negotiations with France (5.2.96);

Shakespeare thus frames the scene between them by stressing that Henry's romantic rhetoric responds to a political imperative. There is also a significant difference from *The Famous Victories*, where Katherine possesses a much greater command of English than she does in *Henry V*, allowing her to be a more equal partner to Henry. At one point in the earlier play, she even engages in a political argument with him: "I would to God, that I had your Majestie / As fast in love, as you have my father in warres, / I would not vouchsafe so much as one looke / Until you had related all these unreasonable demands."[21] Diminishing Katherine's linguistic competency, Shakespeare creates much more room for Henry to perform, allowing him to play not only his own part, but also Kate's: "At night when you come into your closet you'll question this gentlewoman about me, and I know, Kate, you will to her dispraise those parts in me that you love with your heart" (5.2.186-89); "Take me by the hand and say, 'Harry of England, I am thine!'—which word thou shalt no sooner bless mine ear withal, but I will tell thee aloud, 'England is thine, Ireland is thine, France is thine, and Henry Plantagenet is thine'" (5.2.220-23). Like Bottom in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Henry V aspires to play all the parts; more to the point, King Henry is like his earlier self, Prince Harry of the *Henry IV* plays, who could drink with any tinker in his own language: as king, Henry speaks comically as well as heroically, French as well as English, the woman's part as well as the man's. To complete his victory, Henry must re-engage his linguistic plenitude; the military triumph of the historical king must be supplemented with the performative triumph of the theatrical character who plays multiple roles in multiple languages.

Directly contradicting his pose of the blunt-spoken soldier, the king's rhetorical self-fashioning is fraught with the misrepresentations potential in any use of rhetoric: "List [the king's] discourse of war," says the Archbishop of Canterbury, "and you shall hear / A fearful battle rendered you in music" (1.1.44-45); apparently the king's ability to entice his followers into war depends on his ability to reorder the messiness of war into controlled measures. It depends, too, as any rhetorical performance depends, on the audience's willingness to assent to various acts of misrepresentation. Henry cannot succeed without his audience's willing collaboration, whether his audience is other characters in the play or paying customers in the playhouse. In the play, there are occasional moments of dissent, as when Nym contradicts Henry's exhortation, "Once more unto the breach" (3.1.1), by saying to Bardolph, "Pray thee, corporal, stay. The knocks are too hot,

and for mine own part I have not a case of lives" (3.2.2-3). But for the most part, characters accept the king's words, even when the audience in the playhouse might be more critical: thus the audience might be uneasy when the Hostess in the tavern says of Falstaff that "the King has killed his heart" (2.1.79), and Nym replies, "The King is a good king, but it must be as it may" (2.1.114), seemingly willing to overlook Henry's betrayal of friendship. Similarly, after Henry orders Bardolph executed against Pistol's express plea to the contrary, Pistol nonetheless affirms that "The King's a bawcock and a heart-of-gold" (4.1.45).

Capable of giving an audience in the theater pause for critical reflection, the dissonance in perspective is a danger inherent in any rhetorical performance. Rhetorical performance is a collaborative art; saying this is another way of saying that rhetorical performance requires an audience; it requires "buy-in"; it requires audiences to let performers work on their imaginary forces. But once a play engages the audience's imagination, it implicitly licenses multiple perspectives, some of which may directly contradict each other. For example, in assenting to the king and supporting his agenda, even Henry's most devoted friends introduce perspectives that call his words into question. Multiple voices, even voices of confirmation, highlight the problem of rhetorical misrepresentation. Thus, in the midst of the battle, the king's most terrible command, the order to kill the French prisoners, is almost immediately misrepresented by one of the king's fervent supporters: Henry says, "The French have reinforced their scattered men. / Then every solider kill his prisoners. / Give the word through" (4.6.36-38). The king's command is a preemptive measure against the possibility of a French counterattack, but just a few lines later it is misrepresented as a defensive retaliation against the French for killing the English boys: Gower reports that "'tis certain there's not a boy left alive . . . Besides, they have burned and carried away all that was in the King's tent; wherefore the King most worthily hath caused every solider to cut his prisoner's throat" (4.7.4; 5-8). Far from assuaging an audience's concerns about the king's harsh order, Gower's misrepresentation of Henry's actions is just as likely to intensify those concerns. Jarring with what the audience has just seen and heard, Gower's words permit the audience to activate its critical sensibilities. The same dynamic holds true with the Chorus, which time and time again offers a perspective on the action that is positive toward Henry, but that also misrepresents the action of the play itself. For example, in introducing act 4, the Chorus speaks of Henry walking among his soldiers before the

battle: "Forth he goes and visits all his host, / Bids them good morrow with a modest smile / And calls them brothers, friends, and countrymen. / … / That every wretch, pining and pale before, / Beholding him, plucks comfort from his looks" (4.0.32-34; 40-42). This description is worlds away from the scene that follows of the King in disguise sounding out his troops to learn what they really think of him, and disputing with them when they question the justice of his war.[22]

As multiple perspectives proliferate, one way to hold the king's identity in place is to generate more rhetoric. In the case of *Henry V*, this rhetoric relates to war, which Machiavelli says is the indispensable topic for a successful ruler to consider: "A prince must have no thought or objective, nor dedicate himself to any other art, but that of war with its rules and discipline, because this is the only art suitable for a man who commands."[23] Committed to the prosecution of wars, a king must therefore also be committed to a rhetorical campaign meant to show those wars in the most favorable light. In *Henry IV, Part II*, the old King also advocates war, advising his son to "busy giddy minds / With foreign quarrels," a course of action that Henry V follows in France (4.3.341-42). But victory in France is not sufficient; when he projects himself into the future, Henry V imagines nothing so easily as further wars, asking Katherine, "Shall not thou and I, between Saint Denis and Saint George, compound a boy, half-French half-English, that shall go to Constantinople and take the Turk by the beard?" (5.2.193-96). The rhetorical self-presentation held in place by victory in one war is apparently so precarious that it can only be preserved through further fighting.

If ongoing war is essential to preserving the king's image, then death presents a special challenge. What is left to keep the king's image in place once he can no longer conduct further wars or engage in further rhetorical self-fashioning around war? This question is important to Henry, concerned as he is with the perpetuation of his image. In the St. Crispin's Day speech, the King imagines his victories living on in the stories war veterans will tell their friends and family: "He that shall see this day, and live old age, / Will yearly on the vigil feast his neighbors / And say, 'Tomorrow is Saint Crispian.' / … / … Then shall our names / … / Be in their flowing cups freshly remembered" (4.3.44-46; 51; 55). In Henry's imagination, his victory at Agincourt will live on in the form of story, or, if we recast the terms slightly, in the form of theater, where past heroic deeds are given new life by being embodied on the stage. "How would it have ioyed brave *Talbot*

(the terror of the French)," asks Thomas Nashe in *Pierce Penilesse his Supplication to the Divell*, "to thinke that after he had lyne two hundred yeares in his Tombe, he should triumphe againe on the Stage, and have his bones newe embalmed with the teares of ten thousand spectators at least … what a glorious thing it is to have *Henrie* the fifth represented on the Stage leading the French King prisoner, and forcing both him and the Dolphin to swear fealty."[24] Brave Talbot might indeed have seen it as a tribute to be brought back to life two hundred years after his death, but being reincarnated is also a curse because it suggests that living once isn't enough; accomplishments are not in and of themselves sufficient. If accomplishments are to survive, they must be revived, bodied forth again, but this time by a generation of players whose actions are imitations and whose performances come and go faster than the original.

By the end of the play, Henry V's own dependence on an endless cycle of rhetorical performances is made clear: "Small time," says the Epilogue,

> but in that small most greatly lived
> This star of England. Fortune made his sword,
> By which the world's best garden he achieved,
> And of it left his son imperial lord.
> Henry the Sixth, in infant bands crowned king
> Of France and England, did this king succeed,
> Whose state so many had the managing
> That they lost France and made his England bleed,
> Which oft our stage hath shown. (Epilogue, 5-13)

Henry's legacy survives through the repeated work of Shakespeare's own company. Yet however much *Henry V* celebrates the king, the Epilogue poignantly reminds us that Henry leaves a legacy of loss, both through his own early death and through military defeat in the next generation.

Interestingly, though, Shakespeare's play gives us a tantalizing hint that England's upcoming losses were not simply the result of the lords who mismanaged Henry VI's state, but also the result of a moment of rhetorical failure on Henry V's part. As I mentioned, before he goes to France, Henry unmasks a nest of traitors from the ranks of his own aristocracy. In pronouncing their doom, Henry unleashes a torrent of magisterial rhetoric designed to assert his superiority over the men he is condemning. Perhaps the pressure of his own rhetorical performance leaves Henry less attentive to the rhetorical performances of the traitors when they confess their

guilt and accept their fate. One of them, Richard, Earl of Cambridge, says, "For me, the gold of France did not seduce, / Although I did admit it as a motive / The sooner to effect what I intended" (2.2.150-52). This is a strange moment; it openly contradicts Henry's claim that the traitors turned against him for financial profit, but nobody comments on the discrepancy. The moment is amplified in Holinshed, however, where it is clear that Cambridge's cryptic remark points to his desire to place his own dynasty on the English throne. Here is Holinshed:

> Diverse write that Richard Earl of Cambridge did not conspire for the murdering of King Henry to please the French king withal, but only to the intent to exalt to the crown his brother in law Edmund Earl of March as heir to Lionel Duke of Clarence; after the death of which earl of March … the earle of Cambridge was sure that the crown should come to him by his wife, and to his children, of hir begotten. And therefore (as was thought) he rather confessed himself for need of monie to be corrupted by the French king, than he would declare his inward mind and open his verie intent and secret purpose, which if it were espied, he saw plainlie that the Earl of March should have tasted of the same cuppe that he had drunken, and what should have become of his owne children he much doubted.[25]

In Shakespeare's play then, Cambridge's quasi-confession that he betrayed the king for French gold must be a carefully wrought rhetorical performance designed to protect his family and preserve them for a later challenge to the English throne, a challenge that played out in the Wars of the Roses, "which oft our stage hath shown." It is perhaps too hard to blame Henry for being misled by this rhetorical performance; after all, it passes in a moment and is never referred to again. But the fact that Henry overlooks a crucial threat to his own dynasty reminds us that whoever manipulates rhetoric is also subject to being manipulated by it. Even the sovereign is just one player in the crowded linguistic marketplace, and if for a while he has a good claim to being the dominant player, in time his dominance wanes and he owes his continued existence to the labors of the bending author and of the players, who recreate his triumphs even as they subject him to the judgment of the theater audience and who perform his glorious rhetoric even as they hint at those moments when, taken in by the rhetoric of a condemned man, he fails to recognize the danger to himself.

Notes

1. William Shakespeare, *Henry V*, in *The Norton Shakespeare*, ed. Stephen Greenblatt, Walter Cohen, Jean Howard, and Katharine Eisaman Maus (New York: Norton, 1997), 5.0.24-34. All quotations from Shakespeare are taken from *The Norton Shakespeare*.

2. For accounts of Essex's expedition to Ireland and his rebellion against the queen, see G.B. Harrison, *The Life and Death of Robert Devereux Earl of Essex* (London: Cassell and Co., 1937); James Shapiro, *1599: A Year in the Life of William Shakespeare* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2005); and Penry Williams, *The Later Tudors: England, 1547-1603* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995).

3. Stephen Greenblatt, *Shakespearean Negotiations: The Circulation of Social Energy in Renaissance England* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988). Showing how English explorers used their technological superiority to cast themselves as gods in the new world, Greenblatt argues that this self-serving approach, while shocking, also characterizes Henry V's strategies of self-presentation. See also Joel Altman, "'Vile Participation': The Amplification of Violence in the Theater of *Henry V*, *Shakespeare Quarterly* 42, no. 1 (Spring 1991): 1-32. Altman considers the ways in which the King may read as a kind of god.

4. Henry Peacham, *The Garden of Eloquence* (1593), quoted in Frank Whigham and Wayne A. Rebhorn, introduction to *The Art of English Poesy: A Critical Edition*, by George Puttenham, ed. Frank Whigham and Wayne A. Rebhorn (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2007), 35.

5. George Puttenham, *The Art of English Poesy: A Critical Edition*, ed. Frank Whigham and Wayne A. Rebhorn (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2007), 378.

6. Harrison, *The Life and Death of Robert Devereaux*, 197.

7. Ibid., 201.

8. Shapiro, *1599: A Year in the Life of William Shakespeare*. For Essex's self-presentation in the months leading up to his appointment as the leader of English forces in Ireland, see esp. 43-57.

9. Raphael Holinshed, *Third Volume of Chronicles,* 1587 edition, in *Narrative and Dramatic Sources of Shakespeare,* ed. Geoffrey Bullough, vol. 4 (New York: Columbia University Press, 1962), 385.

10. Altman, "Vile Participation," 23. Speculating about Henry's intelligence system, Joel Altman suggests it may evoke an image of "the sinister spy network like those operated by Walsingham, the Cecils, and Bacon."

11. Anonymous, *The Famous Victories of Henry the Fifth* (1598), in *Narrative and Dramatic Sources of Shakespeare*, ed. Geoffrey Bullough, vol. 4 (New York: Columbia University Press, 1962), 333.

12. Numerous scholars have noted that the multiple perspectives in the play complicate Henry's self-presentation. See, for instance, Andrew Gurr, introduction to *King Henry V*, by William Shakespeare (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 2. Gurr notes the uneasy juxtaposition of the "patriotic triumphaslism of a Chorus who glorifies Henry's conquests" to "a strong hint of skepticism about the terms and the nature of his victories."

13. Puttenham, *The Art of English Poesy*, 238.

14. Puttenham, *The Art of English Poesy*, 44.

15. Phyllis Rackin, *Stages of History: Shakespeare's English Chronicles* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990), 28. Rackin suggests that on a deep structural level, *Henry V* thematizes the unavailability of any objective truth: refers to the "disquieting dramatic structure that sets the historical narrative of the chorus

against the dramatic action on stage and suggests the impossibility of ever discovering the full truth about the past."

16. For a discussion of the "bending" author, see Altman, "Vile Participation," 20.

17. Ibid., 7. Discussing the carefully constructed image of the wastrel prince that comes back to haunt Henry, Altman argues that "the Prince has disadvantaged himself to gain a larger advantage."

18. Andrew Gurr, introduction to *Henry V*, 33, argues that the victory at Agincourt "allows Henry to adjust his attitude back again to its former strong sense of the differences in degree"; Phyllis Rackin, *Stages of History*, 229, notes that "the common English soldiers, unlike the nobles who died in both armies, have no names in the historical record."

19. See Lisa Jardine, *Reading Shakespeare Historically* (London: Routledge, 1996), 9-10, for a discussion of how the comic wooing elides questions of force in her account of the scene.

20. Hollinshed, *Third Volume of Chronicles*, 404.

21. Anonymous, *The Famous Victories*, 339.

22. Altman, "Vile Participation," 25, argues that the scene of the king among his soldiers is not meant to illustrate what the Chorus has just described; Altman holds that Shakespeare is "resuming the action from where the Chorus left off." While this argument is tenable, I think it depends upon the luxury of retrospect: during the speech, it is reasonable to assume that the Chorus is previewing actions that the audience is about to see. When this assumption is proved wrong, dissonance occurs.

23. Niccolò Machiavelli, *The Prince*, in *The Essential Writings of Machiavelli*, ed. and trans. Peter Constantine (New York: Random House, 2007), 56.

24. Thomas Nashe, *Pierce Penilesse his Supplication to the Divell*, 1592, in *The Elizabethan Stage*, ed. E.K. Chambers, vol. 4 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1923), 238-39.

25. Hollinshed, *Third Volume of Chronicles*, 386.