

A harry situation: shakespeare's henry v and the historical drama



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It is not necessary to have authored seven historical dramas, as Shakespeare had when he set to work on Henry V, to conclude that history is frequently not very dramatic. Chronicles of the past have the subjectivity and subtlety of national anthems – they are about appropriating the truth, not approaching it. Noble causes and giant killing abound in these documents, often at the cost of fact and explanation. All this adds up to an account of the past in which the winners reign victorious before the battle even begins, while the losers' natural iniquity contributes as much to their defeat as enemy swords and soldiers. Readers in the present may wonder that their ancestors ever felt twinges of suspense as the events wore on, for according to historians, the outcome of these clashes was, as King Henry would say, “as gross/ As black on white” (2. 2. 104). It is as predictable, the Elizabethans might have said, as a bad play. And yet there was suspense and anxiety in days gone by, as surely as political maneuvering in the present sows seeds of unrest. Shakespeare realized this and came to a startling conclusion – there is a gap between the events of the past and historical narrative. The proclivities of the historian become the very shape of history, cramming the past with mighty deeds and epic heroes. But this shape is warped, fashioned, as it is, in the likeness of famous men and dubious motives. Historians see the past as a straight and singular line; Shakespeare knew its course could neither have been quite so direct nor quite so simple. Henry V is his attempt to reinsert the complexities of the past into the straightforward narrative of history, to dramatize, so to speak, the historical drama. The Bard does this not because he thinks he will succeed but because he knows he will fail, for the sensibilities of history cannot accommodate those of drama (and visa-versa). Henry V demonstrates that, according to Shakespeare's

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understanding of history, "historical drama" is an oxymoron. If the aim of Henry V is to fall ostensibly short of two targets (history and drama), the presence of the Chorus goes a long way towards achieving this end. He book-ends the whole play and each of the acts, nominally to apologize for the inadequacies of staging history and to remind the audience to use its imagination to provide what the acting company cannot. "But pardon, gentles all," the chorus entreats in the epilogue, "The flat unraised spirits that hath dared / On this unworthy scaffold to bring forth / So great an object" (1. 0. 8-11). If the audience had not considered the motley pairing of the "unworthy scaffold" of the theatre and the "great object" of history before this apology, they are certainly attentive to it now. The Chorus's apologies only diminish the illusion of reality that spectators usually manage without instruction. This was precisely Shakespeare's point, though. Through his ironic pleas for pardon, the Chorus offers a "historical" counterpoint to the "dramatic" action of the play. He is, like the historical drama itself, a paradox: a feature wholly belonging to the drama yet drolly representing the sensibilities of history. "We'll force our play," he promises at the beginning of the second act (2. 0. 32). And this is indeed what he does. His regular appearances before each act give this "history" a very "dramatic" shape, without providing any of the attendant tensions or interests. If the play followed the trajectory described by the Chorus, there would be no need to enact the intervening scenes at all, for he provides a rather verbose summation of everything that happens off stage. As a dramatic figure, the Chorus is wholly self-defeating, just as history is wholly self-defeating as dramatic material. Both are simply too one dimensional in perspective, both hint at the end too soon. Fortunately, Shakespeare uses the action of the <https://assignbuster.com/a-harry-situation-shakespeares-henry-v-and-the-historical-drama/>

play to subvert what otherwise would sound like a monolithic narration of history. In the first act, for instance, the Chorus promises “two mighty monarchs” (1. 0. 20). Shakespeare delivers two greedy clerics. There is a similar ruse in Act II, when talk of royalty at Southampton leads directly to a London Tavern. In the fourth act, the Chorus reports of a pep talk by the King with the whimsical comment: “behold, as may unworthiness define/ A little touch of Harry in the night” (4. 0. 46-47). What follows is a morally sophisticated discussion of kingship and its responsibilities. The presence of the Chorus is a constant reminder of how historical and dramatic techniques diverge, for Shakespeare, to the point of being ironically irreconcilable. It is not only the truths of the Chorus and dramatic action that are at odds in Henry V. Shakespeare further complicates things by dividing the dramatic action into two (sometimes intersecting) plot lines. The story of the King, his noblemen, and their military coup represents the “historical” plot line – morally impregnable, unswerving from its final aim of victory, and of course, well-known to anyone with a remedial knowledge of English history.

Underpinning the official perspective of history, though, is a comic plot, dramatically interesting but compelled by a rough-hewn group of historical nobodies. Their presence in the play is a constant reminder of history’s “forgetfulness” when it comes to the common man, its tendency to simplify the cast of characters in historical actions to those with wealth and power. Shakespeare uses the comic plot to restore these un-noblemen to the stage of history, for they demand things from it that their royal counterpoints happily gloss over. The first glimpse Shakespeare gives of this comic plot is at the beginning of the second act, when the scene suddenly shifts to a

London tavern and a death bed. The setting is familiar because it is the <https://assignbuster.com/a-harry-situation-shakespeares-henry-v-and-the-historical-drama/>

former haunt of Prince Hal, now King Henry. But the mood could not be more different from the Henry IV plays. There is no revelry, no drunkenness, no witty banter. The pall of the dying Falstaff hangs over everything. "The King has killed his heart," Mistress Quickly solemnly intones (2. 1. 87). Bardolph agrees and Nym adds: "The King hath run bad humours on the knight, that's the even of it" (2. 1. 120-121). The fat knight was sufficient to the task of serving as Prince Hal's carousing companion, but the historically dignified King Henry cannot abide by such a ridiculous figure. So he cuts him out of his life, just as history cuts such men of "base" quality out of its annals. While Falstaff has all the characteristics to make him the favorite dramatic figure of the HIV plays, history, like Harry, cannot accommodate the complications he brings with him. He is poor, intemperate, morally dubious, ridiculous. These are not qualities that get recorded in history, but they do make for interesting drama. By killing off Falstaff at the beginning of HV, Shakespeare seems to indict history for caching its more "common" participants and thus rendering itself insipid, un-dramatic, and unreliable. Henry's denial of Falstaff later instigates a rather absurd but revelatory discussion of historical greatness between the captains Fluellen and Gower. Fluellen asks Gower what the birthplace of "Alexander the Pig" was in order that he might draw a comparison between the great conqueror of history and their own King Harry (4. 7. 13). The joke, of course, is that the lispig Fluellen cannot say the letter B. "The pig, or the great, or the mighty, or the huge, or the magnanimous, are all one reckonings," he retorts when Gower corrects his phrasing (4. 7. 15-17). The banter is funny, but like the whole of the comic plot, Shakespeare uses it to say something very serious. The "great" figures of history, he slyly implies here, often behave the most swinishly. As Fluellen

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develops his comparison, Shakespeare's critique becomes more apparent. "As Alexander killed his friend Clytus, being in his ales and his cups," the Welshman explains, "so also Henry Monmouth, being in his right wits and his good judgments, turned away the fat knight with the great-belly doublet...I have forgot his name" (4. 7. 44-49). Can Falstaff be so soon forgotten? The answer is yes, for as Shakespeare unhappily observes in this little dialogue, the "pig" players in history have a way of crowding out all their little friends upon assuming power. Fluellen notes the parallel situations because he thinks the monarchs' rejection of personal ties was what allowed them to become great. Shakespeare would probably have said that it allowed them to become "pig," but not great. For in ascending to the throne, Henry gains a crown, but loses personality and humanity. He has become as official and morally simple as a historical document. If the death of Falstaff was an indication that the historical Harry is not the dramatic Hal, the comic plot thereafter shows that the aristocratic King is not the same as the "man-of-the-people" Prince. Henry is rich, powerful, and a figure belonging to history. He shows he has an aristocrat's conscientious awareness of history when, speaking of all his troops, he hopes that the chronicles "shall with full mouth/ Speak freely of our acts, or else our grave/ Like Turkish mute shall have a tongueless mouth" (1. 2. 231-233). What the king doesn't understand is that history remembers monarchs and not masses. His distance from the ethos of the everyman is further underscored by his disguised encounter with the soldiers Court, Bates, and Williams. Bates complains that the quarrel with France belongs only to the King, though his soldiers are paying the price for it. "I would he were here alone," he says of Harry, "so should he be sure to be ransomed, and a many poor

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men's lives saved" (4. 1. 119-120). The actions of the King have historical ramifications, but those most deeply affected are the ones history forgets – the impoverished soldier, the destitute widow, the abandoned orphan, and all the other “ poor men's lives” that go unrecorded. For Harry, though, these are not individuals, but “ subjects” and “ every subject's duty is the King's, but every subject's soul is his own” (4. 1. 174-175). On the battlefields of history, personal responsibility or moral reckoning does not exist. Harry passes his own responsibility off from his person to his office, and encourages his subjects to do the same since they serve the office of the King. Again, Shakespeare contrasts the historical sensibilities of Henry with the dramatic sensibilities of the comical commoners. While the King views the war as a morally avouched conquest, the soldiers raise more complicated questions about the sovereign's moral authority and the relationship of the “ common cause” to the common man. These concerns, though, like history and drama are mutually exclusive. In order for the historical events of the war to occur, the dramatic complications of personal responsibility must not interfere. Likewise, for the moral intricacies of drama to be fully investigated, the simple justifications of history must be abnegated. No true “ historical” king can have the “ dramatic” interests of the individual at heart. This is not a conclusion hastily drawn, for Henry spends a great deal of time meditating on the nature of kingship. Just as Shakespeare is concerned about the gap between historical and dramatic interpretations of truth, the King worries about the space between the sovereign as an individual and as the possessor of an office. King Henry is the historical figure in this pair, Harry the man the dramatic. As such, swift and simple decisions for the King are often complicated and agonizing decisions for the man. For an effective <https://assignbuster.com/a-harry-situation-shakespeares-henry-v-and-the-historical-drama/>

ruler, as Shakespeare shows, it is almost impossible to be a fully “dramatic” man, concerned with the personal and moral intricacies that accompany action. On the same note, such a man cannot be a true “historical” figure, for the coda of these chronicles of the past demands heroes who think and act with an unflinching sense of absolute righteousness. Henry V bears witness to Harry’s full assumption of his “historical” role, as well as his rejection of his “dramatic” role. That he struggles initially with the choice between the two is made clear in the second act, when the King exposes the treachery of Cambridge, Scroop and Grey. “Touching our person we seek no revenge,” he tells them, “But we our kingdom’s safety must so tender,/ Whose ruin you have sought, that to her laws/ We do deliver you” (2. 2. 175-178). He punishes their subterfuge, he explains, not out of personal anger at his would-be killers, but out of kingly concern for national welfare. And yet Harry is not fully King Henry at this point, for try as he might to banish personal feeling from his royal rhetoric, he cannot. He tells the traitors: ...My lord of Cambridge here, You know how apt our love was to accord To furnish him with all appertinents Belonging to his honour; and this man Hath for a few light crowns lightly conspired To kill us here in Hampton. To the which This knight, no less for bounty bound to us Than Cambridge is, hath likewise sworn. - But oh, What shall I say to thee, Lord Scroop, thou cruel, Ingrateful, savage, inhuman creature, Thou didst know the key of all my counsels That knewst the very bottom of my soul (2. 2. 84-97) It is evident here that Harry’s person is indeed “touched” by this perfidy, despite claims to the contrary. He lapses from the royal “we” - his historical voice - to the self-referential “I” - his dramatic voice - despite strained efforts to maintain the dignity of his office. The pain caused by Scroop’s betrayal triggers some of the most

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emotional words uttered by Henry in the entire play. "Ingrateful, savage, inhuman creature" he calls the conspiring Lord. As Harry gradually gets a hold of his rhetoric, though, he comes to relinquish all these personal investments in state politics. He deserts the complicated credence of the man for the simple battle cry of the ruler. "No king of England, if not king of France!" he declares at the close of the scene. Shakespeare makes it clear in this scene that as long as he allows his dramatic sensibilities to flare up, Harry will never truly be a viable historical king. In suppressing the complex and embracing the absolute, though, a fully formed King Henry emerges, ready to pursue his myopic quest to the ends of the earth. As Henry comes to embrace history, though, Shakespeare eschews it by showing how it creates a sovereign who is, as William Hazlitt observes, "a very amiable monster, a very splendid pageant." After this scene, any personal attachment to his kingly actions vanishes, allowing Henry to move with the swift absolutism history demands. Shakespeare's hero now belongs to history and not to drama. At the war ravaged gates of Harfleur, for instance, Henry coolly warns the governor that if the town doesn't surrender, the English will have "their most reverent heads dashed to the walls, / [their] naked infants spitted upon pikes" (3. 3. 37-38). Following this atrocious threat, he offers the town two options possible only in the morally reductive pages of history: "What say you? Will you yield and this avoid? / Or, guilty in defense, be thus destroyed?" (3. 3. 41-42). Henry refuses to admit the possibility of any action that is not either entirely right (i. e. English) or entirely wrong (i. e. French), despite the fact that he indicts the Harfleurians for the very crime from which he absolves his own soldiers - serving the wishes of their king. Furthermore, the King fails to see the parallel between <https://assignbuster.com/a-harry-situation-shakespeares-henry-v-and-the-historical-drama/>

the English attack on France and “ the weasel Scot’s” invasion of England (1. 2. 170). If a dramatic hero would eventually realize his folly and compromise, the hero of history must be absolutely unyielding. Defender or offender, all Harry knows is that England is always in the right. He brings this attitude to the post-bellum bargaining table with France, where he tells his defeated colleagues “ you must buy that peace/ With full accord to all our just demands” (5. 2. 70-71). Victory and peace always cue the curtain to fall on history, but for the dramatist this is a most unsatisfactory ending. For drama is not about winning or losing, but learning. The efficacy of the ending depends upon some knowledge gained and revealed in the course of the play. But history, as the cliché goes, repeats itself, and so does Harry. The King consistently fails to cope with the dramatic issues that present themselves - his right to the French throne, his threats to Harfleur, his underdog attack on Agincourt - and, in fact, Henry seems to un-learn some of the humanity he let peak out while chastising Scroop early in the play. In this way, Shakespeare suggests that the historical hero is the very antithesis of the dramatic hero. For while the dramatic hero comes to know himself and his world by the final act, the historical hero ends by becoming alienated from his true self, a chameleon whose color matches whatever duty he is carrying out. It may seem absurd to assert that someone who inhabits many roles is not dramatic, but Henry is an actor on history’s stage, and for Shakespeare this is obviously an important distinction. Actors in drama depict people; actors in history always play caricatures. A dramatic role demands a nuanced performance representing the multi-faceted nature of human existence; all of Henry’s roles refer back to the single-faceted needs of his kingship. Whether enacting Harry Le Roi, the brave captain, or the

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merciful conqueror, Henry dedicates his performance to his crown. There is nothing in his histrionics that suggests that he has anything but a Machiavel's interest in creating a character of reasonable verisimilitude. Harry's great coup as a historical actor coincides with the final scene of the play, in which he woos the French princess, Katharine. "She is our capital demand," Henry announces to the King and Queen, and the room clears out so that he can make the appropriate overtures to his would-be bride (5. 2. 96). He tries briefly to entreat her with poetry, but switches over to a plain-spoken prose style when he realizes this approach better suits his needs. Playing the earnest amant, Henry wins the French princess with the same single-mindedness with which he won the French crown. Although marriage ought to be a union based on personal affection, Shakespeare implies that this one is yet another of Harry's political maneuvers. As he kisses a prim, reluctant Kate, he points out to her that "nice customs curtsy to great kings" (5. 2. 266). This is hardly a declaration of love and devotion. The real object of Henry's affection here, as in all the roles he plays, is his own sovereign power, and he plans to wed not Kate, but the political dowry she brings with her. The marriage of Henry and Kate is truly a historical marriage, bypassing love for the sake of politics. It simplifies what could be a complicated situation - ruling two countries at once - by providing a solution that is both politically savvy in nature and felicitous in appearance. And for this very reason, Shakespeare hints, the union will fail. Whereas drama spends five acts exploring complications in order to arrive at a resolution, history is so resolved from the outset that it never pauses to deal with complexities as they arrive. There is no "happily ever after" in history because these issues inevitably return to haunt the historical figures who ignored them in the first

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place. The solution to one problem ends up being the basis of the next. The Chorus confirms this fact when he reports that the son Kate bears Harry, whom he had hoped would “ go to Constantinople and take the Turk by the beard,” ends up undoing all the gains of King Henry’s reign (5. 2. 205-206). The ultimate legacy of Harfleur, of Agincourt, of all the glorious deeds recorded in the chronicles about Henry V, ends up being no more than a son, Henry VI, “ whose state so many had the managing/ That they lost France and made his England bleed” (Epilogue 11-12). This is no ending fit for drama, no ending fit for history. But, Shakespeare seems to say, Henry V’s combination of tenuous happiness and confirmed demise sounds the perfect final note for that mongrel, the historical drama. There can be no compromise between the dueling sensibilities present in this genre, so all must end in ambiguity and embattled tendencies, pulling the play (and the playwright) in two opposing directions, bearing down upon the English history play until it finally explodes.