

Once More: The Case for a (Mindful) Reading (Ironic) of *Henry V*

Mark E. Alcamo

None of Shakespeare's plays is so persistently and thoroughly misunderstood as *Henry V*, and one is tempted to think that there is no play which is more important to understand . . . Shakespeare can scarcely have intended that force of preconception should, hundreds of years after his death, still be preventing the careful, the learned, and the sympathetic from seeing what he so definitely put down. The play is ironic: that is, I venture to think, a fact susceptible to detailed proof.

- Gerald Gould (1919)¹

Although *Henry V* does not typically make a short list of Shakespeare masterpieces, the critical history of the play is one of the most interesting in the canon, and although it is generally not considered a "problem play," it is "by far the most controversial of the histories."² The controversy is generally acknowledged to have been started by William Hazlitt (1817), the first critic to attempt noticing a chink in the armor of King Henry V, and although Hazlitt's essay seamlessly seems to sway back and forth between comments pertinent to the historical King Henry V versus the play's King, he does label the play character "a very amiable monster,"³ which should sound at odds with him being referred to in the play as "the mirror of all Christian kings" (2.0.6).⁴ During the next hundred years of commentary there arose a few more disparaging comments about the King and the war presented by Shakespeare, including from William Watkiss Lloyd and W.B. Yeats,⁵ but for those who see something beyond a gung-ho war play in *Henry V*, the next definitive milestone in the play's criticism was from Gerald Gould in the essay quoted above, where he unequivocally states "the play is ironic." And although the Academy by no means jumped onboard Gould's bandwagon, from this point on a review of the criticism that chances to interpret the play will clearly show a noticeable concern with discerning discussions of the protagonist King, his actions and his character; and on the war, from the cause and effect of it, to how it is presented. For almost three hundred years the play had been almost beyond reproach seen as a patriotic panegyric to a heroic king and his impossible victory at Agincourt (George Bernard Shaw even termed it jingoistic⁶), but Gould had definitely thrown down a gauntlet challenging this view that the Academy deemed necessary to consider and respond to. If you were of a mind to celebrate English hegemony in martial matters, with an accent on their heroic and noble aspects, Gould's essay might be seen as analogous to an opening of Pandora's box: *Henry V's* world hasn't been the same since.

A summary of critical opinions of the play in the almost hundred years since Gould's essay is risky of course, even beyond the over-simplification of the vast spectrum of approaches to literary criticism which have been developed during this span; I will accordingly instead focus on the noticeable antipodal views which Gould's assertion substantially initiated and which delimit the controversy: in *Henry V*, is it Shakespeare's intent to present King Henry V as an exemplar, a mirror for other monarchs to emulate, and to glorify his incredibly improbable victory at Agincourt, or was Shakespeare being less than upfront with his motivation to actually show a reversed reflection of this magisterial ideal and, as Gould writes, presents "a satire on monarchical government, on imperialism, on the baser kinds of 'patriotism', and on war."⁷ Today the vast majority of critical views would be in neither of these camps, yet they still set a framework out of which most other opinions rise, or at least make use of to contrast against their own—and much of the criticism of the past fifty years may be characterized as making efforts to reconcile the

two extreme views. On the side of *Henry V* being a patriotic pageant, an almost epic celebration of King Henry V and his Agincourt victory, stand such well-respected critics as John Dover Wilson and J.H. Walter,⁸ while across the aisle stand a small band of also reputable critics led by Gould, Harold Goddard, Roy Battenhouse and a relatively few others.⁹ Yet everything has not been for naught, and a substantial number of critics have also noted the crux of the matter, as Andrew Gurr observes:

To a remarkable degree *Henry V* has been a paradigm for the debate about Shakespeare on stage or page. If you take seriously the view that a stage production is a reading of the play, a director's or a small group's interpretation, then almost the whole history of the play as performed amounts to a series of patriotic and emotional readings rather than the analyses of its ambivalence that reading the play in private study has evoked.¹⁰

In this regard, the Chorus character in particular is often noted as exhibiting this disjunctive nature between what is said, and what actually happens in the play, as Sharon Taylor aptly reflects, "for nearly four hundred years audiences have been seeing what is described rather than what is staged." And as Phyllis Rackin writes, the "heroic words of the chorus are repeatedly contradicted by the events enacted on stage,"¹¹ and I suggest this observed character flaw of the Chorus may serendipitously be recognized as a microcosm of the ironic phenomena that may be found throughout the play and which it is my intention to highlight in this essay. Simply put, the play *in performance* stages most credibly as Wilson and Walter read it, Henry as the Elizabethan "star of England," while some have questioned below the veil of what *appears* in print and take a closer read; most of these closer reads recognize a sticky web of ambiguities from which a few have emerged believing Shakespeare had an *authorial intent* that his readers experience an ironic view of the action. Along these lines, my own study of the play has uncovered what I believe is persuasive evidence of Shakespeare's true (ironic) intent with the play, and this evidence is revealed by insightfully interpreting what's on the page, paradoxically, most of which is not intended to be realized on stage.

First it may be prudent to clarify even further the chasm between the two extreme views of the play. Some have employed a patriotic versus pacifist dichotomy to shape the issue, but I suggest less confrontational and more neutral terms concerning the play's subject, King Henry and the Battle of Agincourt, would be the praise-worthy versus the cautionary tale versions; this doesn't marginalize patriots as warmongers or ironists as pacifists. More important however, is the necessity to recognize that a large majority of those who find significance in the ambiguities and complexities and nuance available in the play are still a far cry from those few who take the leap to realize the playwright intends we experience his play ironically. This large faction covers a considerable range of criticism less than enthusiastic about a celebratory *Henry V*: many find an irreconcilability between being a good person and wielding the authority of office, many note that real life heroes still have blemishes like the rest of us, while some recognize Machiavellian tendencies in Henry, and some have taken their Henry criticism so far as to be pejoratively labeled Hal-haters.¹² There are also those who willingly steep themselves in the messy ambiguities of war, those who sense there are no real winners in war, and even those who conclude that war is in fact, hell; but none of these necessarily find a home in realizing *Henry V* is essentially an ironic work. In other words, branches have sprouted in every which direction from the doubts sown by Gould and the earlier nonconforming commentators, but few have committed to pronounce as he had, "the play is ironic." From my own reading of this criticism I suggest the most prevalent objection to reading the play as ironic is the belief this is reductionist, that by taking the ironic path we are constrained

from a complete appreciation of the play and diminish a full view of the richness present in the play. Rather than address this observation too specifically at this stage, I will volunteer that it may prejudicially be a premature concern—we don't necessarily diminish the beauty of a forest by saying, "You're in Sequoia National Park, home of the giant redwood"; we obviously don't lose the forest for the trees with this recognition—it's just the opposite. As Wayne Booth writes in *A Rhetoric of Irony*, "if there is virtue in revealing ambiguities beneath what looked like simplicities, there is also value in discovering clarities beneath what looked like confusions."¹³

A second obvious objection to seeing the play through an intentionally ironic playwright's eyes is that it may seem to give precedence to one authoritative interpretation or ultimate meaning of the work and is therefore labeled exclusionary, or more to the point, anti-postmodern—in conflict with the myriad minded commentators who confess the reader is part of the interpretive process and therefore we must submit all interpretations are influenced by personal experience and interests, biases and prejudices (unavoidable) subjectivity versus (unattainable) objectivity, *etcetera*. Once more, I defer addressing this too specifically except to suggest it's something of a shame to pronounce Shakespeare may be accessed via the doors of almost eighty different schools of literary criticism,¹⁴ but the plurality of choices these same doors offer may be predisposed not to admit Shakespeare himself; it's the proverbial throwing out the baby with the bathwater if it turns out he's given us a round peg and we try forcing him to fit nicely through our square doors, regardless how pluralistic the options. I again cite Booth's studied view:

I spend a good deal of my professional life deploring "polar" thinking, reductive dichotomies, either-or disjunctions. And here I find myself saying that ***only in strict polar decisions can one kind of reading [ironic] be properly performed***. On the one hand, some of the greatest intellectual and artistic achievements seem to come when we learn how to say both-and, not either-or, when we see that people and works of art are too complex for simple true-false tests. Yet here I am saying that some of our most important literary experiences are designed precisely to demand flat and absolute choices, saying that in fact the sudden plain irreducible "no" of the first step in ironic reconstruction is one of our most precious literary moments. [My bold italics.]¹⁵

As I asserted earlier, I suggest there is persuasive evidence *in the text* that provides a more substantial foundation to the ironist point of view, and it is surprisingly found in one of the most famous speeches in the play, the King's rhetorically rich motivational speech urging his men, once more, to charge into the breach of the wall made during the siege of Harfleur. A word by word glossing of the speech is certainly not necessary to illustrate my point, and although everyone is plausibly over familiar with the speech, the view I outline should need to withstand the challenges of a reasonably skeptical reception and therefore the speech is furnished in its entirety for the critical eye of each reader to readily test my discovery as much as desired.

King Henry: Once more unto the breach, dear friends, once more,
Or close the wall up with our English dead.
In peace there's nothing so becomes a man
As modest stillness and humility,
But when the blast of war blows in our ears,
Then imitate the action of the tiger.

Stiffen the sinews, conjure up the blood,
 Disguise fair nature with hard-favoured rage.
 Then lend the eye a terrible aspect,
 Let it pry through the portage of the head
 Like the brass cannon, let the brow o'erwhelm it
 As fearfully as doth a gallèd rock
 O'erhang and jutty his confounded base,
 Swilled with the wild and wasteful ocean.
 Now set the teeth and stretch the nostril wide,
 Hold hard the breath and bend up every spirit
 To his full height. On, on, you noblest English,
 Whose blood is fet from fathers of war-proof,
 Fathers that, like so many Alexanders,
 Have in these parts from morn till even fought
 And sheathed their swords for lack of argument.
 Dishonour not your mothers; now attest
 That those whom you called fathers did beget you.
 Be copy now to men of grosser blood,
 And teach them how to war. And you, good yeoman,
 Whose limbs were made in England, show us here
 The mettle of your pasture; let us swear
 That you are worth your breeding—which I doubt not,
 For there is none of you so mean and base
 That hath not noble lustre in your eyes.
 I see you stand like greyhounds in the slips,
 Straining upon the start. The game's afoot.
 Follow your spirit, and upon this charge
 Cry, "God for Harry! England and Saint George!"

Alarum, and chambers go off. Exeunt

(3.1.1–34)

The intended surface meaning of the speech is relatively straight forward, the stage is set for war heroics when a breach has been made in the city's wall and the King is now inspiring his men to prove their mettle by throwing themselves into the fray at this very dicey focused point of intense violence (with the French, no doubt, similarly being inspired to stop them from their side of the hole in the wall); successfully swarming through a breach in defensive walls is often seen as a cliché turning point in an assault.¹⁶ What has been missed in understanding this speech however, is the covert poetic imagery which Shakespeare has deftly started using with the King's appeal to his men's animal "tiger" nature—there is much more going on below than first meets the eye, and woven in parallel with the King inciting the selfless courage of his men, the action being imitated is quite convincingly actually that of a male masturbating. Although camouflaged in oblique inferred language, the intent is physiologically explicit once we grant Shakespeare his poetic license, let loose our own imagination a bit, and recognize the key word associations: Stiffen the sinews, conjure up the blood, hard-favored, let the eye pry through the portage of the head, let the brow overwhelm the brass cannon, *etcetera*. Incredibly, he's not using the

usual suspects for sexual euphemisms, but is poetically (covertly) describing this self-gratifying action. This is not just offhand gratuitous sexual innuendo, it's as if Shakespeare himself is directing Henry's coming of age debut in pornography, "Now set the teeth and stretch the nostril wide, / Hold hard the breath and bend up every spirit / To his full height. On, on, you noblest English." When we consider the persistence of this imagery throughout Henry's inspired imploring of his men to charge into harm's way—contextually, an incredibly inappropriate moment to say the least—we might judge this speech as particularly filthy on Shakespeare's part, but it's been unnoticed up until now because of his intentionally artful hiding of it. It is certainly a genius example of *ars est celare artem*, the art is to hide art, as an Elizabethan might say (who is prone to ironic twists and having benefited from a smattering of Latin). It becomes quite elementary at this point to recognize the overarching sublime irony of the picture painted: the King caught with his pants down minding to his own self-gratification, while simultaneously exhorting self-sacrifice from his men; this is of course, also imponderably subversive. With the levee now broke, the problem soon unravels into a variation on the Monty Python's nudge nudge wink wink skit: where do we draw the line on what is intended sexual innuendo and when might we be reading too much in once the flood begins.¹⁷ For example, besides the now applicable bawdy allusions of limbs and mettle, for some "pasture" may metaphorically echo the Shakespeare narrative poetry verse from *Venus and Adonis* so frequently cited as an example of his erotic writing.¹⁸ And then to follow the noble lustre in the eyes with "greyhounds" in the slips leaves little room to doubt our playwright knows no bounds and seems to have called upon his most supreme poetic powers to pull off this masterpiece of covert ironic subversion (with monumental distinction). Continuing with his genius insight and taking the ironic vein even further, note how Shakespeare makes reference to honoring the men's warrior ancestors, which of course relates once more to the seed which we now understand the King is poetically spilling while compelling the spilling of blood to take the breach. The game's certainly afoot: muse with what genius Shakespeare knowingly stood up embraced, these blood-spilling and seed-spilling images related to a death-taking breach as well as an *imaginary* life-giving breach. As the "mirror of all Christian kings," consider that man (or Prince) of peace versus this man (or Prince) of *piece*. Clearly the undeniable result is this ultimate test of courage moment has been completely, *literally*, irreversibly turned topsy-turvy 180° on its (ironic) head. On the stage, we experience the thesis of this set-piece moment, the King inspiring fearless bravery for a greater cause, now juxtaposed against its antithesis—the page *read*—and the greater cause, distilled out, is actually the King in a clearly compromising confession of self-indulging self-interest. (And it's not much of a leap to then synthesize out that Humpty Dumpty has had a great fall – let us sit upon the ground and tell sad stories of the death of Kings.) The overwhelming images of ironic intent are so manifestly present in this speech that I suggest it may be termed the smoking gun (or the missing piece), to signify the sense of it providing compelling collaborative evidence of the author's mindset; i.e.) the King has been caught *in flagrante delicto*, it's definitively *not* "Support the Troops" bumper sticker material. Rather than considering the play is ironic is by some necessity reductionist, I will show the ironic orientation brings the correct focus to the play, and truly sets the play free for the well-tuned reader. The King's Breach Speech provides a path into understanding the play much deeper than simply a history play celebrating British fortitude at Agincourt to more (literally) a tragicomedy sense, and as I'll show it's Shakespeare's intent to exact revenge on the tragedy of war by subversive humiliation of King Henry (as the aggressor in this war and the personification of a warrior king). The response to postmodern enthusiasts denying the ironic genius of this speech based on literary criticism dogma should echo Galileo's attributed response to the Inquisition, *eppur si muove*, and yet it moves. Whether one subscribes to Shakespeare having anticipated Derrida or not, it should be coming apparent to

discerning readers that Derrida didn't anticipate Shakespeare: as I will continue to show, *Henry V* is a horse of a different color.¹⁹ But for those still unconvinced it's the author motivating my manner of interpreting the King's Breach Speech, it's plausible the low character commentary given in the very next speeches may provide further insight:

Bardolfe: On, on, on, on, on! To the breach, to the breach!

Nym: Pray thee corporal, stay. The knocks are too hot,
and for mine own part I have not a case of lives. The
humor of it is too hot, that is the very plainsong of it.

(3.2.1–6)

While “On, on, on, on, on!” obviously parodies the King's martial shake-spear speech, it is now more explicitly a parody (and grand finale) for the sexual innuendo shake-spear sub-version, where editors correctly punctuate the line ejaculated (!) As for Nym's own part, the humor of it is in fact, now too hot—that's the very plainsong of it.²⁰ It may becoming evident, in fact, that these commoners have crossed the line from good natured parody to infer more of a mocking attitude toward the King's inspired moment, now that the inside joke Shakespeare planted has been made visible. It's important here to reiterate, I am asserting that Shakespeare, *in this play*, has made a leap from writing exclusively for the stage, to providing a sense of his own narrative voice *on the page* via his specific word choices and poetic imagery—which are (ironically) antithetical to the perceived patriotic and heroic activities being rhetorically endorsed on stage. As with all of Shakespeare's use of a play within a play, this discernible play of words within the framework of the play comments on, and makes a statement about, the main plot. A correct appreciation and understanding of this new level of perception in the play, as will be illustrated, is as a *reader* being a spectator to the play (on the page), rather than being pulled in as participants of the play on the stage. The key is to respond with our detached intellectual capacities (to *think*), versus our normal *empathetic* and intimate immersion with the onstage drama. Another way to orient your response to the play is by considering the ironic connotation of the motto for Shakespeare's Globe Theater, “All the world's a stage,” in the sense that stages are where dissembling goes on, theatric representations are artifice, appearances are not reality—and discerning Shakespeare's nuanced way with words in *Henry V* tips his hand to reveal a playwright taking near-unconscionable liberties with his self-sacrificing King and his just war. Normally, a script is read with the inferred end game being imagining its staging, but I have found a close and *discerning* read shows *Henry V* should not be stage-bound in this way, and that a correct reading of the play transcends its realization on stage. Although this play realized in reading switch deviates from the textbook approach to studying and considering a script, commentary that considers Shakespeare as literature transcending his drama can be found from the earliest days of criticism on his works. When we consider the ease with which Shakespeare experimented and deviated from the norm and the expected, and given his penchant for turning and inverting and inventing to his own liking, and considering the prevalence of the theme of appearance versus reality throughout the Shakespeare canon, then approaching *Henry V* as essentially a “closet drama” may not be such a stretch; just consider the full spectrum of variety displayed by his works, his large and comprehensive imagination, and remain open-minded on this hypothesis. And for those who still have reservations about accepting a favored precedence for the *literal* ironic intent of the author in *Henry V*, it may be beneficial to consider how *deliberately* Shakespeare has pulled a red herring diversion in front of the noses of the ephemeral theatric audience—distracting their attention with the “action of a tiger” in this speech—to

obviously throw the scent off his covert subversive tracks that are actually focused on more than one breach in this speech. Look again at the poetic imagery immediately following his invocation of the tiger and honestly ask yourself which is the better fit, a tiger in action, or the actions of a male in pursuit of his own self-interest. Considering the care taken by our playwright to divert attention from this subversive landmine, but having now taken his bait, the naturally curious will obviously attempt a more disciplined pursuit of our playwright to discern what's really going on in *Henry V*, because the inconvenient truth of the matter is, once more, that for near four hundred years we've understood the fury in the King's words, but not Shakespeare's words. Given the subtlety of the subversion, the dissembling and the camouflage—the genius that Shakespeare used to create the Breach speech—and given the wit he then used in immediately alluding to it—*on, on, on, on, on!*—it's pretty clear he has, in effect, thrown down the gauntlet to his readers. The enigma isn't that the reader plays a part in interpreting the play, it's that the reader needs to recognize his role—we're actually in a battle of wits with the playwright: "Shake-spear" says it all. And given the constant interest in searching for Shakespeare in his writing, he's even presented us a bonus gift, we may now also coincidentally note, with the King's Breach Speech our Shakespeare literally (momentarily), drops his anonymous cover story, and signs his own name, both martially, and *wit* sexual innuendo.

Although I've cited reductionist and exclusionary as the primary objections to realizing *Henry V* is ironic, there may also be a less conscious obstacle which I believe stems from Gurr's stage versus page observation: it may be out of bounds to many that our preeminent English dramatist could have intentionally created a play which we inevitably realize is also covertly commenting on the naïve credulity of its audience; intentionally creating a play which on the surface *stages* very well as a Henry celebrating jingo salute to war and its heroes, while undercover of this Trojan horse tribute Shakespeare's true heart, as I will *literally* show, has an iron *sage* poet point—when the dust has settled, the insubstantial pageant faded, this is such stuff as dreams are made on. We may however forgive Shakespeare for his inferred unflattering view of the audience (plausibly even equated to an unpatriotic view by some), when we recognize how deliberately Shakespeare helps pull in the audience by Henry's appropriation of the other side of the coin, taking note of the manner in which King Henry is constantly invoking a prop to support the necessity and legitimacy of his actions, uncredited in the *dramatis personæ* yet Best Supporting Actor, the near-omnipresent "God's will," which in actuality should represent some *more perfect* ideal worked toward rather than a blank check covering every whim springing out of one's anointed head.²¹ In other words, I suggest a key to thinking of the ironic play as you read *Henry V* is to realize *Shakespeare* clearly sees the King as that backward reflection of a (truly) Christian king, rather than representing an exemplar for same.²² The fact is, for near four hundred years, behind our backs, Shakespeare has been playing a game of Charades on his patrons and admirers, but once we tune into his *actual* (disingenuous and ironic) backward view of Henry, the damaged reputation to the *staged* King and country pale compared to the teased out art found in the pages closely read and *mindfully* considered. And we'll find giving Shakespeare the benefit of the doubt, our realigned thinking shows *Henry V* is a message play, that our ever-living poet focused his poetic powers on the very ironic core of war, the evident tug of war on humanity (it inspires lofty rhetoric and stages well, especially when invoking a Mission from God orientation, *etcetera*), while reason and experience always seem to circle back around to the time and war-worn adage, *dulce bellum inexpertis*, war is sweet for those who have not tried it.²³ Thus while Gurr and others have recognized rich ambiguities and "rabbit or duck" dichotomies of the play performed versus the play read,²⁴ I'm suggesting the altogether reasonable and necessary next step is to allow Exhibit A, the King's Breach Speech, to provide us with probable cause for further serious

investigation into the ironic reading *and realization* of *Henry V*. This would seem the particularly relevant manner of proceeding given the ironic case history of the play I've already noted as initiated by the Gould essay in 1919 and struck again by at least a dozen serious commentators since then. But before delving further into the ironic read of the play, some further background considerations may provide more accessibility for the ironic interpretation.

It's a happy coincidence that the OED cites a Shakespeare contemporary, George Puttenham, for an example of the use of the word "irony," quoting from his *Art of English Poesy*:

Ye do likewise dissemble when ye speak in derision or mockery, and that may be many ways: as sometime in sport, sometime in earnest, and privily, and apertly, and pleasantly, and bitterly. But first by the figure *ironia*, which we call the Dry Mock. As he that said to a bragging ruffian that threatened he would kill and slay, "no doubt you are a good man of your hands."²⁵

We may find it useful to keep these two simple words, Dry Mock, in mind when reading and thinking about the ironic read of *Henry V*. A couple more academic insights from Booth are also pertinent and worthwhile to keep in mind for the task of reading irony.

Booth mentions in *A Rhetoric of Irony* a few metaphors used to illustrate the *process* of reading irony: its parallel with translating (referring to the author's intended meaning as opposed to the surface meaning), its sense of decoding and deciphering the author's meaning, or the most common image being that of seeing behind the author's mask, where an *iron* mask fits quite nicely when we consider the dry ironist keeps a straight poker face (refrains from acknowledging the *true* meaning is undercover of the mask), and because we don't literally see the lips move if someone is talking from behind an iron mask. We need to make that decision—to *understand* it is the author behind the mask. But having made a comprehensive study and deeply considered his subject, Booth invents his own metaphor for reading ironic works, "reconstruction," to emphasize the need to tear down the old surface meaning, and rebuild our understanding in a new place alongside the author, "the process is in some respects more like a leap or climb to a higher level than like scratching a surface or plunging deeper."²⁶ This is a particularly helpful prompt for my reading of *Henry V*, because as you read and think about the play, it's helpful to shift gears and imagine yourself joining the author *above the fray*, in the narrative literature sense, rather than in the trenches with the actors working to stage the script. An additional mention Booth makes more than once, is the necessity to make a slow read of the work, allowing a "play of mind over almost every phrase."²⁷ Almost prepared now to come with full power into *Henry V*, it's prudent to lastly consider that a genius of Shakespeare's magnitude who is *intentionally* careful about hiding out—and *camouflaging*—his true intention with the play will take our best focus of word-nuanced attention, particularly attuning to word and image associations, considering we've already noted his *sleight of hand* ability in the King's Speech. In this regard, I add my own mixed metaphor for teasing out Shakespeare's amazing ironic work in *Henry V*—we need to correctly connect-the-dots to realize the picture, including the necessity to be reasonably sensitive to reading between the lines to note his (ironically) disingenuous misdirection. Just reconsider the almost imponderable artful deception he's crafted in the King's Speech—if ever there were verse for Case Study consideration where by indirection we find Shakespeare directly out, this may be it; and it should certainly deepen further our sense of wonder at the extent of Shakespeare's genius. To recap before proceeding: I have thus far illuminated evidence making a compelling case to attempt following our author on an elevated ironic path—if you were willing to fall off your horse at the stunning revelation

behind the King's Speech, then the rest of this essay may interest, rather than annoy you. Now, the time is *a*' hand to cross the Rubicon.

There are readily found a couple dozen spot-on reasonable and substantive ironic observations that have been made about *Henry V*, and I won't regurgitate this evidence already available in the commentary.²⁸ For those willing to see the King's Speech as a mother lode of irony, I state my thesis with two-prongs: (1) Shakespeare scholars have either denied or vastly undervalued the claim of those commentators who recognize the very ironic core around which the play is constructed, and (2) the ironic vein, as dry as it often appears, still has plenty of undiscovered life within it yet to be appreciated. I begin with a couple ironic observations already published to illustrate the type of nuggets that show up with a closer (slower) gleaning of the text.²⁹

Ralph Berry provides excellent ironic commentary on the play which includes at least one compelling theatric discovery which has not penetrated the mainstream of commentary on the play, and this is discerning that the first scene of the play, with the conspiratorial bishops Canterbury and Ely (1.1.1–99), quite clearly displays two levels of dialogue, one for outward public consumption, and the other, the private reality.³⁰ To paraphrase, the first with elevated ruffles and flourishes: we're celebrating the very moment Prince Hal became King Henry and he miraculously matured, and not only that, despite never cracking open a book, he became the smartest guy in the room; versus the second real world level: they're making a run on the Church's assets, we need to bless the war on France or it gets considerably worse. The scene is actually a masterpiece exhibiting the very idea behind ironic works: the disjunction between outward appearances and the underneath truth of reality. Berry points out how Shakespeare illuminates the difference between truth for public consumption versus what's really going on by changing the tone of the dialogue back and forth between the formal public oratory sop and the colloquial private talk. For a *dry* ironist, the entire scene is an incredible comic send-up; I provide a couple specific samples why.

One very fun aspect is to note how Ely catches the drift regarding the *New & Improved* King Henry V, and we get to witness Canterbury coaching him step by step through the new story line and Ely confirming his understanding with one ironic zinger after another,³¹ but my favorite moment in the scene is when Ely creatively makes necessity a virtue (rationalizing reality), by deftly wrapping the King's metamorphoses not in a cocoon, but with a simile, citing how strawberries ripening under nettles is akin to how Henry must have been ripening underneath the cover of his baser quality Eastcheap cohorts.

Bishop Ely: The strawberry grows underneath the nettle,
And wholesome berries thrive and ripen best
Neighbour'd by fruit of baser quality;
And so the Prince obscured his contemplation
Under the veil of wildness – which, no doubt,
Grew like the summer grass, fastest by night,
Unseen, yet crevice in his faculty.

(1.1.60–67)

We read so much about how artfully rich and precisely appropriate Shakespeare's figures of speech are, and here he has put one in Ely's mouth which, upon further reflection, we should recognize has been turned completely on its (ironic) head. Crop husbandry cannot deny strawberries grow in concert with their nettles, but when it comes to the animal husbandry of raising our young, no one would suggest we

get the best fruit by allowing them to hang out with the rotten ones; it's outrageously funny because the exact opposite is true—parents act as the nettles to keep the bad influences away.³² The same thought extends to the grass growing at night—parents are *more* concerned with what their children do under the cover of dark—they *don't* want them growing under their dark influences.³³ Putting ourselves in the playwright's shoes, he's having great (disingenuous) fun here, and although it is obviously beyond the scope of this essay, my experience working through the entire play shows there are *many* similar instances displaying Shakespeare's penchant for dry mock hijinks—just ripe for the picking. It's also interesting to consider how a studied ironic realization of this scene actually sets the ironic tone for proceeding in the play, not only providing this two-level model to apply but also in the sense of developing a sense of detachment from what's shown by surface appearances.

The second existing ironic example I would like to add comment on is actually the one most frequently debated in the commentary: is Shakespeare serious in presenting Canterbury's "Roadmap to France" speech as just cause for the war?³⁴ The short answer is of course, "No," but rather than run through all the ironies that might be readily apparent (from usurpers being cited for legitimate precedence, to the fact that the argument does more to undermine the integrity of Henry's claim to the English throne than prop up his claim to the French throne), I perceive there is another inside joke which reasonable prompting may help bring to fruition. The speech is so tedious and obfuscatory that the joke inevitably played on is after fifty three lines, the bishop catches his (ironic) breath with "So that, as clear as is the summer's sun" (1.2.86) before the final sprint of nine more lines to the finish. But I strongly suspect Shakespeare's intent included having some fun with the King's deadpan response, "May I with right and conscience make this claim?" (1.2.96), which we should all understand, is exactly what the *King* is supposed to decide. He's been presented this evidence that he first needs to understand, and with his conscience as a guide, judge what action needs to be taken. In essence, his response says he hasn't a clue about the legitimacy of his *right* to the French throne and he willingly abdicates his own conscience to the judgment of Canterbury, "The sin upon *my* head, dread sovereign" (1.2.97) (and then the only book of the Bible specifically mentioned in all of Shakespeare is misquoted by the head of the Church.³⁵) A more appropriate in command monarchial response could have reflected he had some clue about what Canterbury had so deftly delineated, or he might have gone out on a limb to ask for a simplified Executive Summary (in English) to let him know the coast is clear to invade France, but while cutting to the chase in his response, it actually sounds like the long and winding road explanation was lost on him—it may just as easily have been a Cautionary Tale about the inscrutable Roadmap to Peace. I acknowledge this may sound like I'm nitpicking in a pedantic sense on King Henry, but the fact is, it's Shakespeare via *Canterbury* who's (having fun) picking on Henry, and we had the set-up cluing us in during that first scene with Ely.

Recall in (1.1) as part of the rehearsal for the King's "Saint Potemkin Parade," Canterbury described some of the King's new clothes, the speech beginning with "Hear him but reason in divinity / And, all-admiring, with an inward wish / You would desire the King were made a prelate" (1.1.39-41) goes on another nineteen lines brushing up the King's other new-recognized talents for executing the responsibilities of his office. When we are willing to experience the ironic subtext in this scene, we recognize this speech is a send-up and readily resonates with the (ironic) Yiddish saying, "With money in your pocket, you are wise and handsome and you sing well"; and when you are newly crowned, you may "Turn him to any cause of policy, / The Gordian knot of it he will unloose, / Familiar as his garter" (1.1.46-48). Because if ever a Gordian knot were put to sixty-three lines, Canterbury does it with great panache in his Salic Law speech, his audience captivated throughout in mute wonder. When the ironic

sense is willingly considered, it does become quite funny witnessing the King's adept untying of the Salic Law knot, "May I with right and conscience make this claim?"³⁶ Insightful and decisive, or lost and confused, you be the judge. And upon further close review of this first scene, we find Shakespeare actually gives us yet another clue that the illegitimate Salic Law speech is just some paperwork pretense for invading France when we learn that the King already liked, "with good acceptance" (1.1.84) what was wrapped in that shuffling paper, "As touching France, to give a greater sum / Than ever at one time the clergy yet / Did to his predecessors part withal" (1.1.80–82). In other words, it's clearly evident with a close following of the conversation that the King was pleased with his war chest, before learning of his just cause for going to war: the cash cart has been put before the warhorse (and *that's* dry-ironic funny). Time and again, if we actually *think* on his words, a luxury that is not afforded to *in the moment* theatric productions, the words show Shakespeare is having difficulty being serious with his subject, that's the matter needing the footlights with this play.³⁷ We might even note with the opening salvo of the speech illuminating the King's new-miraculous theological prowess: in Canterbury (as senior Church bishop), stating he wishes the King instead a prelate, he is under his breath insinuating the King would then be working for him. (And Shakespeare once more, without going through chapter and verse, also goes out of his way to exhibit the walking on water depth of the King's theological comprehension.³⁸) A slowed and careful approach continually reveals it's simply a matter of allowing our playwright was actually conscious of all the *contrariness* evident when we read, leaving it for us to diligently consider what's really going on behind the poetic word-music of this play.³⁹ Now for a couple examples of where scholars have had their hands on the pertinent pieces, but being generally unwilling to seriously stop, reorient their thinking, and consider the ironic interpretation, they've failed to appreciate what Shakespeare has wrought (iron-wise).

As is often the case in Shakespeare, once we note some subtle thing he's done, we should be alert to him coming back to the same theme. As I've already alluded to, Canterbury is a great ironic character in this play, and having noted Ely's ability to distort reality to the circumstances with the strawberry metaphor, Canterbury can't help but jump into the fray concerning their impending war strategy by invoking the allegory of the bee commonwealth, in which the admired productive and orderly bees are stood up as exemplar for the kingdom to organize for war around, except the allegory is egregiously misquoted, or better, misdirected. Per Andrew Gurr there are several plausible sources for the fable, but he focuses on Erasmus's *The Education of a Christian Prince* and notes, "Shakespeare's version ends up pointing in precisely the opposite direction from Erasmus."⁴⁰ While Erasmus had used it to encourage Christian Princes *toward peaceful ends* (the king, he has no sting), the incorrigible good Will Shakespeare has the indubitably well read Canterbury add to the zealotry of the war party by invoking their well organized *warlike* nature, "Others like soldiers, armèd in their stings, / Make boot upon the summer's velvet buds, / Which pillage they with merry march bring home" (1.2.193–95). Characteristic with what I've been showing for this play, this *ironic* employment of the plight of the humble bee is just our poet once more having some fun bending the lesson plan completely upside down.⁴¹

While I have thus far taken focus primarily on Shakespeare taking aim on King Henry V in this play, I have also asserted its objective is to undermine war as a noble pursuit. Many commentators have noted the play doesn't actually have any first hand battle scenes in it, other than conceivably the clownish comedy scene with Pistol, the boy, and the French prisoner, *arbitrarily* named *Monsieur le Fer*, Mr. Iron (4.4). Elizabethan's loved swordplay on stage, but not withstanding the Chorus preparing us for a poor imitation, the inestimably great victory the play is supposed to be celebrating is actually missing in action. Harold Goddard very astutely walks over the play as Shakespeare fields it, and shows that given the five

scenes devoted to the battle itself, “If Shakespeare had deliberately set out to deglorify the Battle of Agincourt in general and King Henry in particular it would seem as if he could hardly have done more.”⁴² The replay of Agincourt might be seen as peculiarly downbeat when we consider Shakespeare actually had the perfect *mano-a-mano* opportunity from Holinshed’s to make the Duke of Alencon a conquest for Henry but only alludes to him with the glove gambit, particularly considering Shakespeare exhibited no scruples when inventing heroics for Hal at the Battle of Shrewsbury, having him slay Hotspur in *I Henry IV* (5.4).⁴³ (The glove charade itself is packed with irony, initiated by Williams (4.1), championed by Fluellen (4.7), and brought to its vaudeville slapstick cockfight conclusion (4.8), it’s a couple of the ragged foils that parody defending chivalric honor.) Yet there’s still fun in store from the battle scenes, because the one plausible exception where the battlefield is sanctified with ennobling blood, the heroic apotheosis-like epic send-off given to the Duke of York and the Earl of Suffolk (4.6), is not what it appears. Not only pro-Henry supporters such as J.H. Walter and Derek Traversi make comments about the quality of the poetic imagery surrounding the kiss of death York and Suffolk receive in battle (4.6.7–32), but some of those with reservations about Henry or with the play, such as Hazlitt and Van Doren do as well, except there’s another shoe needing to fall here.⁴⁴ As Peter Saccio points out, “Shakespeare’s Exeter gives these two noblemen a brilliant chivalric epitaph; history, however, adds its usual sour note by pointing out that York perished, not by the sword, but by suffocation or a heart attack after falling off his horse. He was quite fat.”⁴⁵ Now consider *precisely* how exactly does Shakespeare describe York’s death throes?

Exeter: The Duke of York commends him to your majesty.

King: Lives he, good Unckle? ***Thrice within this hour
I saw him down, thrice up again*** and fighting.
From helmet to the spur, all blood he was.
(4.6.3–6, my bold italics)

In other words, it was a Tudor commonplace that the Duke had died something of a pathetic death, that girth of waist and weight of armor had plausibly prevented him from extracting himself from the mud and he was trampled underfoot, let alone giving Suffolk his poignant send-off which he close-by follows. How does Shakespeare dramatize this myth? Like so much of the play, he inverts it, and accordingly invents his own salute to York by giving us the Early Modern ironic spoof equivalent of our, “Help, I’ve fallen and can’t get up” scenario, having him down and back up *three* times—it’s not just dry humor, it’s admittedly adolescent humor, but there’s more evidence in the text he’s deliberately and with intention provided us the connection I’ve made. Once more, witness the lines given Orleans just before this scene begins, “We are enough yet living in the field / ***To smother up the English*** in our throngs, / If any order might be thought upon” (4.5.7–9); followed close-by from the Constable, “Disorder that hath spoiled us friend us now. / ***Let us on heaps*** go offer up our lives” (4.5. 16–17, my bold italics)—enough French *to smother* the English *in heaps*, and York we know, stepped up in the breach to lead the charge. The thought of poking fun at a hero’s death is never popular, but there is no doubt Shakespeare intends an armchair experience of overarching irony in this play, and we just need to remember he’s only using second hand stage blood here—no harm is actually done. More important though, I suggest he’s given us this rather lowbrow humor with an intent for us to reflect on a quite poignant earlier moment, during the campfire scene with Williams and *his* band of brothers (4.1). One undeniable concern of this discussion was whether they were bringing the battle to France in a just cause, and apart from the intractable issues

involved there, Williams counterpoints the idea of a glorious battlefield death with one particular searing observation, “I am afeard / there are few die well, that die in a battle, for how can they / charitably dispose of anything, when blood is their argument? (4.1.135–37) Where *charitably* dispose also has a certain echo of Christian notions about loving one’s neighbors. We now have a triptych to view for consideration: for Public consumption, to one side, York’s heroic apotheosis-like battlefield death, opposite this are allusions to an unfortunately realistic myth portraying his actual rather pathetic battlefield demise, and centered, the common man Williams, with a philosophic (and theological) concern whether we should actually be romanticizing the brutality of war. When we make these *in context and reasonable* connections, we see Shakespeare has transformed cannon fodder into food for thought, as well as for worms. As an aside, the first time I read the play I felt the poetry of Exeter’s speech was too purple for my personal liking, but I had absolutely no idea how purple it honestly is. To reiterate, in each of these two examples scholars had their hands on the pertinent evidence, but their reluctance to engage the author’s irony left them short of pulling the intended trigger.

Before moving into an entirely new way to read and appreciate this play I will highlight one final example of my thesis for Shakespeare’s dramatic *modus operandi* for the play that spotlights his ironic intent. Prior to King Henry and his nobles meeting the French embassy (1.2) we are aware there has been some talk of Henry’s rights in France, and thanks to Canterbury’s succinct summary, his claim to the crown (and every village), of France, and we obviously understand France will disagree. The chronicles cover diplomatic efforts to resolve the impasse between the two countries but what Shakespeare actually shows in the first meeting between the parties is an aside incident between the Dauphin and Henry—a tun of tennis balls is delivered by the French embassy that Henry had not ordered, an Early Modern prank. *Except*, rather than have a good laugh about it with the Dauphin, Shakespeare not only provides an additional adrenaline rush for the upcoming war, but he slips in quite a noteworthy character revealing moment—and consistent with the ironic tone underneath the entire play, it’s funny when you think about it. We know these two are mortal adversaries in competition for the prize jewels mounted in the crown of France, and it’s the Dauphin’s intention to insult Henry, alluding to his younger prodigal ways. So how does Henry respond? Pretty much as the Dauphin baited him to—it takes one to know one, and boys will be boys, i.e.) he vows to revenge, greatly to find quarrel in a straw when honor’s at the stake after all. An abbreviated account of how fast the worm turns out for the Dauphin:

King Henry: What treasure, uncle?

Exeter: (opening the tun) Tennis balls, my liege.

King Henry: We are glad the Dauphin is so pleasant with us.

His Present and your pains we thank you for.

When we have matched our Rackets to these Balls,

We will in France, by God’s grace, play a set

Shall strike his father’s Crown into the hazard.

Tell him he hath made a match with such a Wrangler

That all the Courts of France will be disturbed

With Chases. And we understand him well,

How he comes o’er us with our wilder days,

Not measuring what use we made of them.

We never valued this poor seat of England,

And therefore, living hence, did give ourself

To barbarous licence – as 'tis ever common
 That men are merriest when they are from home.
 But tell the Dauphin 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.
 For that I have laid by my Majesty
 And plodded like a man for working-days,
 But I will rise there with so full a glory
 That I will dazzle all the eyes of France,
 Yea strike the Dauphin blind to look on us.
 And tell the pleasant Prince this Mock of his
 Hath turned his balls to Gunstones, and his soul
 Shall stand sore chargèd for the wasteful vengeance
 That shall fly with them – for many a thousand widows
 Shall this his Mock mock out of their dear husbands,
 Mock mothers from their sons, mock Castles down;
 Ay, some are yet ungotten and unborn
 That shall have cause to curse the Dauphin's scorn.
 But this lies all within the will of God,
 (1.2.257–89)⁴⁶

On the surface we're supposed to recognize the tennis balls will become an object lesson for the Dauphin in the "Don't mess with Texas" vein, as the balls now packed with gunpowder are volleyed back into the French court. Unfortunately, reasonably, we also readily see that realistically the King's response exposes the Dauphin having successfully pushed his buttons, a point of pride has been pricked by the Dauphin, he has taken the insult personally and insinuated the Dauphin will get his due even though the English already knew they'd be invading France (based on irrefutable legal jargon). Of course any lines can reasonably be delivered in a number of ways and line readings are the foundation for an actor's interpretation of his role, but this speech as written certainly seems to show a deliberate ramping-up in emotional intensity, both Olivier and Branagh show this in their performances, and because Branagh's is wholly cinematic, this is particularly evident: it's apparent in the heat of the moment the King has let the Dauphin get under his skin. We might easily infer he finally lets it out with five staccato invocations using the word "mock"; (which in our new ironic vernacular, we might imagine as akin to Bardolph's "On, on, on, on, on"). My proof of Shakespeare's ulterior intent once more is in the text, because just prior to the King's flight of heightened rhetoric, the French ambassador has told Henry he may want to receive the Dauphin's gift in private, and the King assures them that isn't necessary, "We are no tyrant, but a Christian king, / Unto whose grace our passion is as subject / As is our wretches fettered in our prisons" (241–43). (Whether serendipitous or Freudian, both Olivier and Branagh delete the King's assertion his passions are under his control.) Paraphrased: by the Grace of God, my passions are under control, always acting on reason, *etcetera* (boilerplate Classical and Christian philosophy the King would have picked up during his Virtue 101 course of study, no doubt). Passions under control until, without merit or provocation, the Dauphin finds his Achilles heel—foul served tennis balls—this means war. This coming from the serious monarch who earlier clearly recognized the consequences of a decision to invade France,

King Henry: For never two such kingdoms did contend
 Without much fall of blood, whose guiltless drops
 Are every one a woe, a sore complaint
 'Gainst him whose wrong gives edge unto the swords
 That make such waste in brief mortality.
 (1.2.24–28)

Once more, perhaps we should cut the King some slack when he loses focus over the Dauphin biting his thumb toward him, in tennis after all we get one bad serve. *Except* once more, Shakespeare seems to go out of his way to drive home the point—four scenes and over *five hundred lines* later the matter is still of import, as Exeter echoes the King's opinion of the Dauphin's impertinence with this face to face salvo:

Exeter: Scorn and defiance; slight regard, contempt;
 And anything that may not misbecome
 The mighty Sender, doth he prize you at.
 Thus says my King: an if your Father's Highness
 Do not, in grant of all demands at large,
 Sweeten the bitter Mock you sent his Majesty,
 He'll call you to so hot an Answer of it
 That Caves and Womby Vaultages of France
 Shall chide your Trespass and return your Mock
 In second Accent of his Ordnance.
 (2.4.117–26)⁴⁷

The word “mock” used five times in Henry's speech is invoked twice more in this speech that Exeter delivers in reference to the earlier international incident. It may be worthwhile for those still in mute wonder over what's really going on in this play to ask, could there be something else turning about in Shakespeare's mind with all these loose mocks? Consider how the King's earlier *passions under control* “mock” speech finishes:

King Henry: But this lies all within the will of God,
 To whom I do appeal, and in whose name
 Tell you the Dauphin I am coming on,
 To venge me as I may, and to put forth
 My rightful hand in a well-hallow'd cause.
 So get you hence in peace. And tell the Dauphin
 His jest will savour but of shallow wit,
 When thousands weep more than did laugh at it. –
 Convey them with safe conduct. – Fare you well.
Exeunt Ambassadors
 (1.2.289–97)

I am coming on, [to revenge], my right full hand in a well-hollowed cause: in small wordplay, the King's Speech—but of shallow wit, greatly lived. I have no theological qualifications, but I'd have to believe that looking past (or putting aside) such a small transgression against oneself is a fundamental teaching of Jesus (especially when weighing sides regarding just war), and for this Christian mirror to be bent so completely out-of-shape over a juvenile taunt when lives are acknowledged to be at stake makes me wonder how miraculous the King's reformation actually was. Once more, it's Shakespeare who's turning not just the tables on the King, butt his cheeks as well: it's actually the self-righteous King being mocked *throughout* this ironic masterpiece. I reiterate, the manner in which I have connected these dots is neither arbitrary nor obscure; the web of evidence I've presented in these few examples reveals a discernible, organic and coherent pattern that is present *throughout* the play – (for those willing to allow Shakespeare an ironic view). Taking a cue from Canterbury, we may this infer, that many things having full reference to one consent, may work contrariously, as many arrows loosed several ways come to one mark: the *sine qua non* to realize *Shakespeare's Henry V* is his ironic intent. We may very aptly synthesize it all in plausibly the one line most pertinent to the entire play: "Minding true things by what their mockeries be" (4.0.53).

Looke, hee's winding vp the watch of his wit, By and by it will strike . . .
(*And Monarchs "to be" hold the swelling Scene!*)

I have already tipped my hand several times concerning a new understanding for this play that I suggest is readily discernible now that the King's hand has been laid out: Shakespeare adapts his covert intentions cipher-like, for all intents and purposes, to the entire play. The key is to tune into his *leitmotif*—(generally speaking), bawdy mocking allusions to the King—via more imaginary freedom to his wordplay and a discerning consideration of the text. Each of the examples I have given since revealing the covert subversive imagery behind the King's Speech have been comments pertinent to theatric considerations about character, themes and plot. Although I contend these sort of ironic observations should be rich fodder for the study and productions of Shakespeare to consider, the truth is that Shakespeare raises the bar even further with this play. As the King's Speech shows, our poet has an almost unfathomable genius for using ambiguous language that may readily convey one thing to a viewing audience, while packing an entirely different punch for the well-tuned reader. And now that we *know* Shakespeare has the goods on the King (as his friends endorse), it's time to read him again and again. And what we find is the wholly different (ironic) play that's been advertised but not sufficiently realized. It's a commonplace in Shakespeare Studies to assert the plays need stage realization for their true expression, but with the King's Speech under our belt, we'll see *Henry V* is miraculously transformed into a rich new experience at the DNA word-conscious level—*for the reader*. I provide a very simple example to illuminate my claim.

I began this essay by tracing a controversy concerning *Henry V* back two hundred years to William Hazlitt's comments about the character of King Henry V. Although Gould's essay a hundred years later hit the nail on the head focusing on the intended ironic construction of the play, the commentary about the King's character has continued to attract far more attention than attempting to read the mind of Shakespeare in discerning an ironic intent. A 1983 bibliography of published items for *Henry V* compiles over two thousand listings, over six hundred of which are classified "Criticism."⁴⁸ The index shows there were 323 items pertinent to judgments of King Henry's character, 154 favorable, 58 unfavorable, and 111 mixed—meaning, of those committing to one side of the fence or the other, almost three out of four

knowledgeable commentators thought positively of the King's character. Now, given we're willing to entertain an ironic reading of *Henry V*, why don't we allow the King himself to don a mask which allows him to let down his guard such that self-revelation trips off his tongue less self-consciously.⁴⁹ I am referring to the King's well-known "little touch of Harry" tour the night before Agincourt. To set the scene, the King *in disguise* wants to feel out his troops and put them at ease where the subtext is the incredibly dire straits they are caught in—the French with insurmountable odds in their favor are essentially forcing the English to fight the next day. While the chronicles have Henry busy doing everything within his martial powers to level the playing field, Shakespeare has the King trying the Early Modern sensitive approach to boost morale, where the level of difficulty is raised to "imponderable" by putting him in disguise. The King has lied like a king, and told the common soldiers, Alexander Court, John Bates and Michael Williams,⁵⁰ he serves under Sir John Erpingham, and Williams asks him what Erpingham thinks of their chances.

King Henry: Even as men wrecked upon a sand, that look to
be washed off the next tide.

Bates: He hath not told his thought to the King?

King Henry: No, nor it is not meet he should. For though I
speak it to you, I think the King is but a man, as I am. The
violet smells to him as it doth to me; the element shows
to him as it doth to me. All his senses have but human
conditions. His ceremonies laid by, in his nakedness he
appears but a man, and though his affections are higher
mounted than ours, yet when they stoop, they stoop with
the like wing. Therefore, when he sees reason of fears, as
we do, his fears, out of doubt, be of the same relish as ours
are. Yet, in reason, no man should possess him with any
appearance of fear, lest he, by showing it, should dis-
hearten his army.

(4.1.95–109)

The King answers Williams with a wonderfully poetic and poignant yet stoic sentiment (95–96), but then we note how Bates *baits* the King to bring the King into this pow-wow (97). Both the surface meaning and the impression made in the King's response seem pretty clear-cut (98–109), paraphrased: no, Erpingham wouldn't tell the King his fatalistic outlook because the King is just like any of us, and if he recognized the truth he'd be scared like the rest of us (and that would be as bad for morale as the imagery behind the King's Speech). The audience responds positively toward Henry because he speaks plainly and truthfully with his soldiers about the fear felt before battle, showing a humble self-effacing common humanity with them. And he's witty given his disguise: "for though I speak it to you, I think the King is but a man." I note only one plausible ironic revelation, which is that no one should actually be honest with the King is a policy that the King himself endorses might be realized as humorous. *But-* with just a slight tweaking of wordplay by the reader (my bold italics), the speech becomes downright dumbfounding:

King Henry: I think the King is ***butt*** a man, *ass* I am. The

violent smells to him as it doth to me; the element shows to him as it doth to me. All his senses have *butt* human conditions. His ceremonies laid by, in his nakedness he appears *butt* a man, and though his affections are higher mounted than ours, yet when they stoop, they stoop with the like wing. Therefore, when he sees reason of fears, as we do, his fears, out of doubt, be of the same relish as ours
i.e.) Something stinks.⁵¹

Commentators have associated “they stoop with the like wing” with a falcon’s dive down on its prey, but in the context of pre-battle nerves, the *fear – butt – violent smell taking wing* wordplay is both more in context and is consistent with the subversive and adversarial attitude the ironic read reveals. To fill in the blanks a bit more we might say the King’s affections for his higher mounted throne don’t leave him less vulnerable to the fear of battle, where stooping, bending, is appropriate both as a gesture in deference to the King and in preparing to defecate. Consider the superimposed wit here: it’s the King (disguised) speaking wittily of his self-effacing humble self, unconscious of the actual wit Shakespeare has emanating from his mouth. It’s really quite an artfully crafted speech, once more, all the more impressive given its effectiveness as a covert four hundred year old time bomb. Later, the commoner Williams is charged with being unapproachably out of place to have challenged the disguised King, *but-* “Your majesty *came not like yourself*: you appeared to me *but* as a common man” (4.8.49-50, my bold italics, *but-* the readily discernible allusions to the King’s Speech and their earlier fireside chat are Williams’s and Shakespeare’s). And Will Jr. is then handsomely rewarded for his innocent chutzpah—just as William Shakespeare presumably cashed in on his rudimentary Latin: *ridendo dicere verum* – laughingly to speak the truth.

And the beat goes on *throughout* the text when we recognize the King’s Speech inspired a coded vernacular of euphemistic wordplays: from “our sleeping sword of war” (1.2.22), to “the noble sinews of our power” (1.2.223); from “We are but warriors for the working-day” (4.3.110), to referring to Katherine as “our capital demand” (5.2.96)—there are dozens of bawdy mocking allusions permeating the play (although not all are straight from the horse’s mouth). Tune-in to this double entendre dialogue between King Henry and his traitorous bedfellow, Lord Scrope of Masham:

King Henry: We therefore have great cause of thankfulness,
And shall forget *the office of our hand*
Sooner than quittance of desert and merit,
According to the weight and worthiness.

Scrope: So service shall *with steeled sinews toil,*
And labour shall refresh itself with hope,
To do your grace incessant services.

(2.2.32–38; my bold italics)

It becomes not too much a stretch of the imagination to realize allegory-wise, the conflict is England has an erection, and France gets to deal with it in the end. Read how the King redirects efforts toward France after his handling of the traitors:

King Henry: Since God so graciously hath brought to light
 This dangerous treason lurking in our way
 To hinder our beginnings. We doubt not now
 But every rub is smoothed on our way.
 Then forth, dear countrymen. Let us deliver
 Our Puissance into the hand of God,
 Putting it straight in expedition.
 Cheerly to sea, the signs of war advance:
 No king of England, if not king of France.
 (2.2.182–90)

If the reader is *willing* to engage the covert vernacular I have asserted is intentionally there, the reasonable (and work enriching) conclusion must be that Shakespeare was having a private good time writing this play (at the King’s expense). With the last line above the question now is: May we infer Shakespeare is expressing an opinion Henry wasn’t much of a king of England because he never became king of France? I’d have to say that sort of conjecture is up for grabs.⁵²

The space limitations of the essay format prevent me from continuing to illustrate how effectively Shakespeare has woven his ironic voice throughout the text, but just a couple fair game examples where he coincidentally alludes to “iron.” First, Shakespeare’s appropriation of Nym’s character to give us a wink:

Nym: For my part, I care not. I say little: but when time shall
 serve, there shall be smiles – but that shall be as it may.
 I dare not fight, but I will wink and hold out mine
 Iron. It is a simple one, but what though? It will toast
 cheese, and it will endure cold, as another man’s sword
 will – and there’s an end.⁵³
 (2.1.4–9)

Again, genius exposed—in its now transparent double entendre sense. And the King himself, later while courting Kate, alludes to the poet trusting his irony would eventually be found out.

King Henry: Now beshrew
 my fathers ambition! He was thinking of civil wars when
 he got me; therefore was I created with a stubborn out-
 side, with an aspect of iron, that when I come to woo
 ladies I fright them. But in faith, Kate, the elder I wax the
 better I shall appear.
 (5.2.216–20)

Consider that *the player* King Henry is fathered by Shakespeare’s imagination and that Shakespeare is confident his *just* misbehaving with the King will eventually be exposed—the longer it takes, the better the joke.⁵⁴

Finally once more, I'd like to reemphasize the ironic realization of the play isn't reductionist, but actually enhances, enriches, and surprises us with new recognitions of Shakespeare's imponderable wit. And, although we are at a disadvantage being in a battle of wits with Shakespeare, at least he left us *armed*. Consider probably the most famous bawdy in the play until now has been Princess Kate's English lesson (3.4) where the ladies inadvertently fall into the innuendo, "*De foot and de count? Oh, good heavens, those are words that sound wicked, corrupting, and rude, and not for ladies of honour to use!*" (3.4.47–53).⁵⁵ But the truth is our playwright has already had a field day mocking the King with this innocuous English lesson—because it's not so much an English lesson as an *anatomy* lesson. Everyone knows the scene's subtext, the Princess is being prepared to be married to Henry as part of the peace settlement, and sure enough the first lesson echoes (in mock counterpoint) the very anatomy employed in the King's Speech: hand, fingers, nails, arm, elbow. Ask yourself: Can this honestly be dismissed as just a coincidence? As Roy Battenhouse notes, with the First Folio's hacked up French, an auditor may even *hear* innocent wit in Katherine's first question,

Katherine: What is (the) Man called in English?
Alice: (The) Man, he is called the Hand.⁵⁶

Later in Act V, the bawdy innuendo between Burgundy and King Henry (5.2.272–307) now takes on an enriched level of meaning where not just love is blind, but Henry is unconscious of the allusions to his little indiscretion at the breach in Harfleur. This is just after Katherine won't let the King kiss (or even shake) her hand, giving us an early indication just how tough she intends to be in their own *piece* negotiations⁵⁷—the ironic evidence once more asserts a precedence for considering the play a closet drama (in more ways than one). As with the King's Speech, all we need do is recognize that in *Henry V* Shakespeare has intentionally broken down the fourth wall of stage productions to let us into his private (ironic-literal) narrative, the considerable challenge is to follow his oft-winking wit.

But the proof of the pudding is in the eating, or as Shakespeare might implore, "Vouchsafe to those that haue not read the Story, / That I may prompt them": if one is willing to try the ironic *read* as I've outlined, they will not be disappointed (but will be all the more convinced it is by design). With an ironic orientation to our prism when reading (and thinking) about *Henry V*, it is quite reasonable the reader will sense he's experiencing the play as Shakespeare wrote it. Fortunately, it appears Shakespeare has given *heightened* attention to the Prologue similar to that found in the King's Speech; thus in regard to causes now in hand, a few simple word-pun glosses are provided:⁵⁸

<i>O For a Muse of Fire, that would ascend</i>	Muse of Fire ⁵⁹ / Wood ascend!
<i>The brightest Heauen of Inuention:</i>	<i>inventio</i> – in rhetoric, "discovery" ⁶⁰
<i>A Kingdome for a Stage, Princes to Act,</i>	Kingdom a Stage – for <i>Acting</i> (dissembling)
<i>And Monarchs to behold the swelling Scene.</i>	Monarchs to be- <i>hold</i> the <i>swelling</i> Scene
<i>Then should the Warlike Harry, like himselfe,</i>	War-like Henry does "like himself"
<i>Assume the Port of Mars, and at his heeles</i>	Ass-sume Port—for parking, at heels
<i>(Leasht in, like Hounds) should Famine, Sword, and Fire</i>	(Doggy-style) / Apocalyptic imagery
<i>Crouch for employment. But pardon, Gentles all:</i>	Crouch – butt / Gentle – (ironic)
<i>The flat vnrayesd Spirits, that hath dar'd,</i>	not unrayesd for long
<i>On this vnworthy Scaffold, to bring forth</i>	Scaffold – imagery of death
<i>So great an Obiect. Can this Cock-Pit hold</i>	Cock-pit in bawdy sense

<i>The vastie fields of France? Or may we cramme</i>	cramme – submission sense
<i>Within this Woodden O, the very Caskes</i>	Wooden “O” ⁶¹ / Caskes puns on caskets
<i>That did affright the Ayre at Agincourt?</i>	a-fright the Hair (Aside – <i>argh.</i>)
<i>O pardon: since a crooked Figure may</i>	crooked – bent, erect? Or something not right
<i>Attest in little place a Million,</i>	<i>possibly</i> poetic reference to semen
<i>And let vs, Cyphers to this great Accompt,</i>	Cyphers – relative to coded writing
<i>On your imaginarie Forces worke.</i>	imaginary – mindful force ⁶²
<i>Suppose within the Girdle of these Walls</i>	mocking allusion to the King’s Speech
<i>Are now confin’d two mightie Monarchies,</i>	two mighty Monarchs making ...
<i>Whose high, vp-reared, and abutting Fronts</i>	high up-reared butt-fronts
<i>The perillous narrow Ocean parts asunder.</i>	Man-love - parts asunder
<i>Peece out our imperfections with your thoughts:</i>	Piece out / note 61
<i>Into a thousand parts diuide one Man,</i>	<i>possibly</i> poetic reference to semen
<i>And make imaginarie Puissance.</i>	could be ironic sense of worldly power
<i>Thinke when we talke of Horses, that you see them</i>	Horseplay as sexual euphemism ⁶³
<i>Printing their prowde Hoofes i’t’h’ receiuing Earth:</i>	poetic spilling of seed
<i>For ’tis your thoughts that now must deck our Kings,</i>	note 61 / Kings getting decked
<i>Carry them here and there: Iumping o’re Times;</i>	
<i>Turning th’ accomplishment of many yeeres</i>	see Epilogue – and <i>Alexandrian</i> sense ⁶⁴
<i>Into an Howre-glasse: for the which supplie,</i>	<i>imagine</i> Hour glass a mock – female figure
<i>Admit me Chorus to this Historie;</i>	humble Chorus
<i>Who Prologue-like, your humble patience pray,</i>	humble patience
<i>Gently to heare, kindly to iudge our Play.</i>	judge kindly (our ironic) play ...

While Gould titled his article revealing an ironic interpretation “A New Reading of *Henry V*,” it is now apparent the more revealing sentiment should be, “A New *Way of Reading Henry V* (poetic-ironic),” because what the King’s Speech and the Prologue clearly show is that *as a play* the past four hundred years have revealed a variety of realizations may be read or performed, but as a revelatory *Poem* unlimited, a correctly considered study will show beyond a reasonable doubt, the play is an ironic masterpiece.⁶⁵

The author lives in the Pacific Northwest and has been reading and studying Shakespeare for many years. He has also written a more focused essay on the ironic Henry V, “Henry V: A Genius (Ironic) Hoax?” that can also be found on the Internet, as well as a comprehensive book on the ironic interpretation of Henry V titled, A Genius Hoax: Shakespeare’s Trojan Horse War Play.

¹ Gerald Gould, “A New Reading of *Henry V*,” *The English Review*, 29 (July, 1919): 42–55, esp. 42.

² Edward Berry, *The Cambridge Companion to Shakespeare Studies*, ed. Stanley Wells (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1986), 255. Virtually every commentator who has seriously reviewed the debate would probably agree with the apropos witticism of James Lochlin, “*Henry V* is a battleground of interpretations,” *Henry V; Shakespeare in Performance* (Manchester: Manchester UP, 1996), 2.

Coincidentally, Jonathan Hart analyzes the play using problem play criteria and judges it *does* fit the mold (primarily based on all the irony he sees), in “Shakespeare’s *Henry V*: Towards the Problem Play,” *Cahiers Elisabethains*, 42 (Oct 1992), 17–35.

³ William Hazlitt, *Characters of Shakespeare’s Plays* (London: C.H. Reynell, 1817; citing reprint, Charleston: BiblioBazaar, 2006), 173. Presenting the opposing view, Richard Levin has written extensively *against* the ironic interpretation of *Henry V* and also disagrees that Hazlitt should be cited as being a source for recognizing ironic elements in the play, “Hazlitt on *Henry V*, And the Appropriation of Shakespeare,” *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 35/2 (1984): 134–41.

⁴ Unless otherwise indicated, quotations from Shakespeare’s *Henry V* are from *Oxford World Classics: Henry V*, ed. Gary Taylor (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1982).

⁵ William Watkiss Lloyd, *Critical Essays on the Plays of Shakespeare* (London: George Bell and Sons, 1875; citing facsimile reprint Boston: Adamant Media Corp, 2005), 251–67. William Butler Yeats, *Ideas of Good and Evil* (London: A.H. Bullen, 1903), ch. “At Stratford-on-Avon,” 142–67.

⁶ Bernard Shaw, *Shaw on Shakespeare: An Anthology of Bernard Shaw’s Writings on the Plays and Productions of Shakespeare*, ed. Edwin Wilson (London: E.P. Dutton, 1961; citing reprint New York: Applause, 2002), 96–97, esp. 102.

⁷ Gould, 44.

⁸ John Dover Wilson, ed., *The New Shakespeare: King Henry V* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1947). J.H. Walter, ed., *The Arden Shakespeare: King Henry V* (London: Methuen & Co, 1954).

⁹ I provide a short bibliography of ironic commentators as the final footnote of this essay. Also noteworthy, although criticism the past one hundred years presents a full spectrum of views, no edition of *Henry V* has ever endorsed an author intended ironic view, while editions endorsing predominantly patriotic readings (at least for an Elizabethan audience) have been the relative norm throughout the play’s history, the Dover and Walter editions representing patriotic readings without reservation. Taylor’s *Henry V* perfunctorily dismisses the ironic interpretation on page one of his Introduction, while other modern editions typically provide greater allowance for ironies from an author intentionally dramatizing fallible human nature and the mire of war.

¹⁰ Andrew Gurr, ed., *King Henry V* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1992), 37–38. As my essay illuminates, I consider the ironic intent of the author is not only the legitimate realization of the play, but that it needs to be *read* and considered as literature (essentially a closet drama), vice being considered only a work in progress script.

¹¹ Sharon Tyler, *Theatric Space (Themes in Drama, No. 9)*, ed. James Redmond (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1987), “Minding True things: the Chorus, the audience, and *Henry V*,” 69–80, esp. 76. Phyllis Rackin, *Stages of History: Shakespeare’s English Chronicles* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1990), 30. There is a substantial amount of commentary on the Chorus character and rather than include more, I refer you to Gurr, 7n, for a reasonable starting point.

¹² “Hal-haters” is a term coined by Michael Manheim, *The Weak King Dilemma in the Shakespearean History Play* (Syracuse: Syracuse UP, 1973), 194. Although he recognizes Henry’s Machiavellian traits, he ironically uses the expression to disparage those who are too critical of the King’s character.

¹³ Wayne C. Booth, *A Rhetoric of Irony* (Chicago: Chicago UP, 1974), xi.

¹⁴ Michael Groden, Martin Kreiswirth, Imre Szeman, ed. *The Johns Hopkins Guide to Literary Theory and Criticism* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins UP, 2004; citing Duke U online reference, http://library.duke.edu/services/classes/western_european/german_264s_crit_schools.html (accessed 2 February 2012)).

¹⁵ Booth, 128.

¹⁶ Illustrative of the heroics available at such a point, one may go back to the Iliad, to the end of Book 12, when Troy's Hector breaks through the Greek defenses at the sea. And of course we're all familiar there's more than one way to breach the walls, when the cunning Odysseus devises the Trojan horse to circumvent the problem of assaulting Troy's walls.

¹⁷ For those unfamiliar with the skit, a synopsis may be found online at: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nudge_Nudge (accessed 2 February 2012).

¹⁸ See e.g. *William Shakespeare: The Complete Works*, 2nd ed., gen ed. Stanley Wells and Gary Taylor (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2005), *Venus and Adonis*, ll. 229–40. These verses are discussed by Eric Partridge, *Shakespeare's Bawdy* (London: Routledge, 1968), 7.

¹⁹ For those unfamiliar with my allusion, Terry Eagleton famously observed, “Though conclusive evidence is hard to come by, it is difficult to read Shakespeare without feeling that he was almost certainly familiar with the writings of Hegel, Marx, Nietzsche, Freud, Wittgenstein and Derrida,” wryly stating a prophetic nature to Shakespeare's art. Unknown to Mr. Eagleton, he then follows with his own now prophetically realized, “Perhaps this is simply to say that though there are many ways in which we have thankfully left this conservative patriarch behind, there are other ways in which we have yet to catch up with him,” *William Shakespeare (Rereading Literature)* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986), ix–x.

²⁰ “My own part” speaks for itself, “hot” refers to semen, knocks echoes, “On, on, on, on, on” and “case” is covered in Partridge, 76–77. The humor of it is not only too hot—it's now outrageous.

²¹ “In no other play is the name of God so omnipresent, and in no other play does the language intimate so directly the terrible distance between what is divine and what is human,” Ronald Berman, ed., *Twentieth Century Interpretations of Henry V* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1968), 7. Allan Gilbert notes that Henry refers to God “some thirty five times, far oftener than any other Shakespearean character” *Studies in Shakespeare*, ed. Arthur Matthews and Clark Emery (Coral Gables, FL: U Miami P, 1953), ch. “Patriotism and Satire in *Henry V*,” 40–64, esp. 62. This is in notable contrast to working class characters Fluellen and Macmorris who profanely invoke God's name a dozen times.

²² When I note Christian imagery, it is not intended by any means to imply an exclusionary attitude nor to limit accessibility for secular modern sensibilities. The obvious fact is, whether one chooses to think Shakespeare's religious leanings were Catholic or (reformed) Anglican or Puritanical, agnostic or atheistic, it's evident via the many pious invocations of the Christian God by Henry (well beyond commonplace usages), that I read this Christian aspect of seeking God's will be done as the foil with which to view Henry—Christianity and a system of humanist morality certainly permeated Elizabethan culture, while execution of same just as certainly fell short of the ideal.

²³ Desiderius Erasmus, *The Adages of Erasmus*, ed. William Barker (Toronto: U of Toronto P, 2001), 317.

²⁴ Many readers already know the allusion to rabbits and ducks regarding *Henry V* is in reference to the well known and influential essay on the play by Norman Rabkin, “Rabbits, Ducks, and *Henry V*,” *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 28/3 (Summer 1977), 279–96. (A revised version appeared as ch. 2, “Either/Or: Responding to *Henry V*,” *Shakespeare and the Problem of Meaning* (Chicago: U Chicago P, 1981), 33–62, and it has been anthologized, *Shakespeare: An Anthology of Criticism and Theory 1945–2000* ed. Russ McDonald (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2004), 245–63.) What many may not know however, is Booth used this identical metaphor to assert that for ironic works it’s not enough to recognize a literary work may resemble this optical illusion, and that while we might appreciate the dissembling ambiguities attending irony, we must strive to join the author in reconstructing his ironic intent; Booth, 127–29.

²⁵ George Puttenham, *The Art of English Poesy*, ed. Frank Whigham and Wayne A. Rebhorn (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 2007), 273–74. For the OED, I used the online version. Note the second OED definition for irony, “A condition of affairs or events of a character opposite to what was, or might naturally be, expected; a contradictory outcome of events as if in mockery of the promise and fitness of things.” Once more coincidentally, the OED gives a relevant example: “a1657 G. Daniel *Trinarchodia: Henry V* cxcviii, in *Poems* (1878) IV. 150 Yet here: (and ’tis the Ironie of Warre Where Arrowes forme the Argument,) he best Acquitts himselfe, who doth a Horse præfer To his proud Rider.” Although the imagery is open to debate, my sense of the irony is the idea of chance being the determining factor in who is the victor—the non-reasoning horse decides—rather than the justness of either cause (or God’s will).

²⁶ Booth, 36.

²⁷ Booth, 129.

²⁸ Although my final bibliographic note will provide a starting point for ironic commentary, again I note, a significant proportion of modern commentators make ironic observations which they acknowledge the author must have intended, yet they reject an ironic anvil as Shakespeare’s foundation stone that he hammers on throughout the play—it’s my thesis that their commitment to the ironic realization of the play is less than Shakespeare’s.

²⁹ To the best of my recollection, each unattributed ironic gloss I cite is based on my own study of the play, *mea culpa* if I’ve overstated my part.

³⁰ Ralph Berry, *The Shakespearean Metaphor: Studies in Language and Form* (Totowa, N. J.: Rowman & Littlefield, 1978), ch. “*Henry V*: The Reason Why,” 48–60. This scene is discussed under the section III heading where Berry clearly delineates the public oratory tone (for show) versus the intimate (private - reality) concerns.

³¹ For example, a synopsis of the ironic reading for (1.1.7–38):

<i>Bishop Canterbury:</i>	[Explains the raid planned on the Church, ll. 7–19.]
<i>Bishop Ely:</i>	This would drink deep. [i.e.) a deadpan of “Yikes!”]
<i>Bishop Canterbury:</i>	’Twould drink the Cup and all. [“No kidding,” where the Communion cup is a symbol of self-sacrifice.]
<i>Bishop Ely:</i>	But what prevention? [Bawdy play on “butt.”]
<i>Bishop Canterbury:</i>	The King is full of grace and fair regard. [“Now repeat after me ...”]
<i>Bishop Ely:</i>	And a true lover of the holy Church. [Got it - wit a modicum of ; -)]
<i>Bishop Canterbury:</i>	[And fortunately the King has turned from his wanton

youthful ways and is reformed, ll. 25–37.]

Bishop Ely: We are blessèd in the change. [Tuned in - wit a modicum of ; -)]

³² This simile also sounds an ironic echo to the apropos proverb, “The rotten apple injures its neighbor” (14th century), or “just as one bunch of grapes takes on its sickly colour from the aspect of its neighbor” (Juvenal, Satire 2.81); and of course, the Bible abounds with warnings about keeping bad company. Calling a spade a spade, we must admit that Hal was sowing his wild oats while gathering rosebuds in Eastcheap.

³³ Regarding youth maturing at night, *crescive* is an archaic word meaning “Growing, in the growing stage,” where the OED original source example (1566) also has a particularly ironic sense about it, “The dragons / With propper brestes / Do nurse theyr cresyue yonge.” I am not suggesting an intentional Shakespeare pun here, but there is a tempting potential sense of wordplay between *crescive* and *crevice* which brings to mind a Biblical teaching about seeds (which here could allude to our children), which can sprout in rocks, but without good roots then wither away (Luke 8:6,13).

³⁴ The Salic Law speech begins, “Then hear me, gracious sovereign, and you peers,” and sixty one lines later finishes with, “Usurped from you and your progenitors” (1.2.33–95). Coincidentally, the commentary on the speech is just as long-winded and is almost as counterproductive, easily running hundreds of pages. Gary Taylor refers to it as “the play’s greatest crux of interpretation” (34). His own vehement defense of the speech runs five pages in his Introduction, 34–38.

³⁵ For in the Book of Numbers is it writ, / “When the man dies, let the inheritance / Descend unto the daughter” (1.2.98–100). Shakespeare writes “*is it writ*”, versus *it is* (actually) writ: “When a man dieth and hath no son, ye shall turn his inheritance unto his daughter” Numbers 7:28, quoted by Hall and Holinshed—Shakespeare’s Canterbury conveniently forgets “and hath no son”—Philip IV of France had three sons, who’s *personae non gratae* status in this sanctified justification might only confuse the obvious endgame, given the cut & dry, open & shut nature of the case. (Coincidentally, if Salic Law wasn’t recognized in France, the female issue of one of those non-issued sons (Louis X), Joan II of Navarre would have become France’s first queen regnant (1316)—a French Court ruled otherwise. And for those interested in the Biblical take on the matter, Roy Battenhouse points out that Canterbury “has ignored Numbers 36:3, where in regard to the same case, Moses gave the ruling that a daughter who marries outside her tribe loses all right to her father’s lands.” (This is the case for Isabella the She-wolf of France and queen consort of England’s Edward II, the genesis of Henry’s claim.) “*Henry V in the Light of Erasmus*,” *Shakespeare Studies*, 17 (1985), 77–85, esp. 81.

³⁶ He had been specific: concerning “some things of weight / That task *our thoughts*, concerning us and France.” He directed Canterbury to “justly and religiously” unfold how the Salic Law fits in with England’s claim to France. Then after the 63-line ironclad explanation he essentially asks again, “May I with *right and conscience* make this claim?” indeed rhyming with “justly and religiously” unfold. Canterbury in deed unfolded the map to France but the King had missed a few of his turns (men and their reluctance to admit they’re lost). This is funny stuff (if you have a mind for dry mock hijinks).

³⁷ We should always be alert with Shakespeare that something is happening when we least expect it. The Canterbury speech is frequently cited as an example of when “Shakespeare nods,” appearing to have gotten lazy and just near-copied Holinshed. Today it would be considered plagiarism were it not in parody of it, because the greater truth in the art of irony is to execute a turning of the tables without the

mark noticing, and using their own words against them is akin to scoring a touchdown. First consider the King's sincere injunction "We must have clean hands" speech (1.2.8–32), including.

And God forbid, my dear and faithful lord,
That you should fashion, wrest, or bow your reading,
Or nicely charge your understanding soul,
With opening titles miscreate, whose right
Suits not in native colors with the truth:

(1.2.13–17)

This is followed *immediately* by Canterbury's Salic Law speech. As Harold Goddard notes, "clear is the one thing it does not seem to be. The sixty-odd lines Canterbury devotes to it makes it one of the most complicated passages of pure exposition in Shakespeare and one of the most difficult to assimilate without an opportunity to study it," *The Meaning of Shakespeare; Vol 1* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1951), 215–68, esp. 220. Shakespeare soon confirms his (disingenuous) point by having Exeter reiterate to the King of France, "Tis no sinister nor no awkward claim, / Picked from the worm-holes of long-vanished days, / Nor from the dust of old oblivion raked" (2.4.85–87). As Goddard once more notes, "Exeter's vehement denial that there is anything far-fetched in Henry's claim is the poet's oblique way of telling us that shady and far-fetched is exactly what it is" (222). Some critics have asserted that Dynastic War was lawful and the norm in the Middle Ages and Early Modern England—if this were actually a legitimate claim—one need only consult from John Gower to the quite vocal Erasmus to find the endorsement less than unanimous. For more on the subject see Ben Lowe, *Imagining Peace: A History of Early English Pacifist Ideas, 1340–1560* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State UP, 1997). In other words, Shakespeare in dry mock mode when painstakingly laying out for posterity Henry's legal thesis to justify reinvigorating the Hundred Years' War, also happens to provide food for thought when he later presents a campfire scene with common soldiers Williams and company where the very subject of just war gets an airing from those providing the bulk of the cannon fodder (4.1.84–217). When we recognize the debate as the antithesis of the Salic Law speech, we can then enjoy the incredible deadpan irony from Williams in this exchange,

King: I dare say, you love him not so ill, to wish him
here alone, howsoever you speak this to feel other men's
minds. Methinks I could not die anywhere so contented
as in the King's company, his cause being just, and his
quarrel honourable.

Williams: That's more then we know.
(4.1.119–24)

Note how Shakespeare has the King go out of his way to (once more) set himself up by initiating the subject of just cause.

³⁸ There are actually several places where Henry hazards a chance on theological allusions, and they are invariably near-malapropisms in comprehension, i.e.) You don't wash sin clean in your conscience, even by invoking baptism (1.2.29–32); you don't feast during a vigil (that's a no-no) (4.3.44–46); and Crispin Crispian were *two* Saints, Crispin *and* his brother Crispinian (4.3.57). These of course, are Shakespeare just having fun at the King's expense, but having the King invoke Holy Communion to sanctify his

martial pursuits has considerably more solemn ramifications (4.3.61–63); *etcetera*. (Serious consideration will show the Band of Brothers speech (4.3.17–67) with its twinned martial and religious imagery to sanctify the battle to come stands as an ironic bookend to the King’s Speech with its interwoven martial and sexual imagery.)

³⁹ To the best of my knowledge, Bernard Shaw coined the phrase “word-music” to describe Shakespeare’s art. “It was Shaw’s contention that the magic of Shakespeare’s language owes more to the music of the verse, the sheer sound of the words, than its meaning or even its imagery” (xix.). Ironically, Shaw was always critical of Shakespeare’s morality, yet we find *behind* the word-music in *Henry V* an incredibly moral message every vocal critic of Shakespeare’s morality wishes they could have penned, including Voltaire, Shaw, Tolstoy, *et al* (even Samuel Johnson found fault with Shakespeare’s morality).

⁴⁰ Andrew Gurr, *Shakespeare Survey 30*, Kenneth Muir, ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1977), “*Henry V* and the Bees’ Commonwealth,” 61–72. The consistent theme among the versions cited as potential sources is the pacifist allegory lighting. Regarding Erasmus, it’s almost humorous how often he also tucks into his *Adages* the observation that the king bee has no sting (Erasmus, 190, 284, 294). As Barker points out, “The tradition that the king (i.e. queen) bee’s lack of a sting, or reluctance to use it, as a symbol of royal clemency derives from Pliny *Natural History* 11.17.522–23 and Seneca *De clementia* 1.19.3” (309). Taylor cites several plausible sources from Elyot’s *The Governor* to Virgil’s *Georgics* to Pliny’s *Natural History* to Lyly’s *Eupheus* (110), noting Shakespeare doesn’t seem to follow them. T.W. Craik, ed., *The Arden Shakespeare: King Henry V* (London: Routledge, 1995), cites the same plausible sources as Taylor (143) while omitting Walter’s earlier references to Chelidonium and St Ambrose (xvii.): the consistent thread of all editors is their failure to communicate any notion of Shakespeare having ironic fun poking the beehive with the King’s sword.

⁴¹ Roy Battenhouse, “*Henry V* in the Light of Erasmus,” *Shakespeare Studies*, 17 (1985): 77–85, esp. 78–80 comments extensively on the irony of this bee society analogy.

⁴² Goddard, 256.

⁴³ Besides Holinshed’s account of Henry fighting Alencon, he also writes of another heroic display by Henry: “The duke of Glocester the kings brother was sore wounded about the hips, and borne downe to the ground, so that he fell backwards, with his feet towards his enimies, whom the king bestrid, and like a brother valiantlie rescued from his enimies, and so saving his life, caused him to be conveied out of the fight, into a place of more safetie.” Shakespeare manages to not stage this heroic dramatic moment as well.

⁴⁴ Generally speaking, scholarship has had generally nice things to say about the heroic send-offs given York and Suffolk. From Hazlitt, “it is in no whit inferior to the rest in heroic beauty” (179); from Derek Traversi, on the scene being “remarkable for the romantic deaths of Suffolk and York” and “the romantic and decorative elements prevail in a thoroughly theatrical comradeship of death,” *Shakespeare: From Richard II to Henry V* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1957), 194; from Mark Van Doren conceding, “The deaths of York and Suffolk the next day are images of how young knights should die,” *Shakespeare* (New York: New York review Books, 1939), 148; from JH Walter, “York and Suffolk die in the right epic way, their love ‘passing the love of women’ is fulfilled in death” (xxviii.). All doff their hats to the heroic “pretty and sweet manner” of York and Suffolk’s deaths without noticing the elephant in the room—the play account doesn’t follow the Elizabethan popular version, and there’s *actually* no heroic action shown at Shakespeare’s Agincourt.

⁴⁵ Peter Saccio, *Shakespeare's English Kings; History, Chronicle, and Drama* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1977), 84. Modern historian Juliet Barker states, "The legend that he [York] was fat, and was therefore trampled underfoot and suffocated, is a late Tudor invention, though it is still repeated unquestioningly by modern historians," *Agincourt: Henry V and the Battle that Made England* (New York: Little, Brown and Co., 2005), 302–3.

⁴⁶ Note: I have included the Emphasis Caps shown in the First Folio version. Holinshed records Henry's response to the gift with: "Wherefore the K[ing] wrote to him, that yer long, he would tosse him some London balles that perchance should shake the walles of the best court in France." Shakespeare transmutes a witty thank you note into a king's tirade. It's also interesting to note how the King in this speech lets his guard down when he confesses the truth about his earlier prodigal ways (267–71).

⁴⁷ I once again include the First Folio splattering of Emphasis Caps that are not always appreciated by scholars because a perceived inconsistency of their appearance in the canon has made a hobgoblin of understanding them, whereas I suggest, if the shoe fits, wear it. In this instance the several Emphasis Caps convey Exeter's annunciations should be felt in the fifth row back (spit-wise).

⁴⁸ Joseph Candido and Charles Forker, *Henry V: An Annotated Bibliography* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1983). It's interesting to note the authors compiled over two thousand items while primarily focusing on just the forty-year period through 1979.

⁴⁹ As Oscar Wilde observed, "Man is least himself when he talks in his own person. Give him a mask, and he will tell you the truth."

⁵⁰ With the ironic reading, the names of the soldiers become interesting to reflect on (only John Bates's name is actually said in performance): Alexander Court might readily equate to the theme of the scene—Alexander the Great being a mirror exemplar for esteemed conqueror is on trial around this campfire. It has been commented by some that Michael Williams, plural of William (as in Shakespeare), often sounds like he has appropriated a humble and straight-shooting William Shakespeare's sentiments.

⁵¹ Coincidentally, one OED citing for "shit", to void excrement, echoes the King's observation:

a1450 Castle Perseverence (1969) l. 1968 *Pei schul schytyn for fere.* [shit for fear]

Additionally, the well-known opening passage from *Twelfth Night* includes a reference to a bank of violets having an overdone (surfeiting) smell, the end effect being the same as the wordplay I've shown here: "Tis not so sweet as it was before." *Twelfth Night*; 1.1.1–8.

⁵² This is a line easily thrown away as echoing lines from *Famous Victories of Henry V*, but given the preceding lines show clear ironic marks, maybe Shakespeare had more in mind?

⁵³ Both critics and performers have recognized the swordplay in this scene is intended to be in a humorous vein where the swords infer phallic imagery. The crux in how to think about the scene is whether we are to recognize their behavior mocks the nobility or is intended as a contrasting foil. I suggest Shakespeare is winking here, holding out yet more of his Iron (for his clued-in audience).

⁵⁴ As Shakespeare's Spanish contemporary, Cervantes, wrote, "Patience, and shuffle the cards" and "Time ripens all things." Or, because I insist this play is themed around War and Peace, we can consider Tolstoy, "The strongest of all warriors are these two—Time and Patience."

⁵⁵ For translations of the French, I refer to Gurr's notes, 130n. The translation continues, "I would not wish to pronounce such words in front of the lords of France for all the world! Tush! *De foot and de count!* None the less, I shall recite my whole lesson through once more: *de hand, de fingres, de nâils, d'elbow, de nick, de sin, de foot, the count.*" In typical Shakespearean wit, first she's so embarrassed for having said such words—and then she repeats them again, and again.

⁵⁶ Roy Battenhouse, *Essays on Shakespeare and Elizabethan Drama in Honor of Hardin Craig*, ed. Richard Hosley (Columbia, MO: U of Missouri P, 1962), ch. "Henry V as Heroic Comedy," 163–82, esp. 181.

⁵⁷ When Henry has Katherine's concession that she'll marry him, he proposes to seal the deal by kissing her hand. She is startled at his presumptuous assumption that her hand is automatically a part of the deal; per Andrew Gurr's *New Cambridge Shakespeare* edition 205n:

Let go, my lord, let go, let go! On my word, I would never wish
you to lower your dignity by kissing the hand of an unworthy servant of
your lordliness. Excuse me, I beg you, my most mighty lord.'

(5.2.228–31)

Shortly before this, the King wanted to shake (clap) her hand to which she responds, "*Sauf vostre honneur, me vnderstand well*": now, not only *she*, but *we* understand well—no longer saving his honor, this alludes to the King's hand in the King's Speech. As naughty as Shakespeare *personally* is, it appears he'll go to extreme measures to protect the good reputation of a Lady.

⁵⁸ I revert here to the First Folio text, e.g., William Shakespeare, *The Life of Henry the Fifth*, annotated Neil Freeman (Vancouver CA: Applause, 1998), to favor our original source, and also to allude to beginning anew wit [*sic*] our understanding of the play. Given are lines 1–37.

⁵⁹ I am somewhat reluctant to include this note because it conjecturally spins further into the play than is possible within the scope of this essay, but game-plan-wise, it's interesting to note how *Henry V* echoes a certain ancient myth, where the *other* Muse of Fire, Vulcan, is the cuckolded husband who takes revenge on Mars and Venus (Love & War) for their illicit trysts using an imperceptibly fine spun iron net to catch them in the act: "But now behold, In the quick Forge and working-house of Thought," after all, is where this play is realized. The subplot of the royal nuptials for Henry (assuming the part of Mars) and Kate (his capital demand) having taken such a noticeable role in the play makes reasonable sense in the context of a Shakespearean desire to reflect on the myth.

⁶⁰ "The brightest *Heaven* of invention"—it's my strong suspicion he is alluding here to his searching out for ironic elements to dramatize in the play. From the Salic Law speech, to the tun of tennis balls, to the hanging of Bardolph for the theft of a "pax of little price" (3.6.44), to the massacre of the innocent baggage boys and the execution of the French prisoners (4.7)—all to the regular backbeat invocation that God's will be done—it should now be recognized our poet went into his study with a predisposition to intentionally weave this ironic masterpiece.

⁶¹ Nothing will forever be a more painful reminder for actors to remember their humility (even when they play before a full house), than to now see "Wooden O" readily alludes to an encore for the King's hand (a Royal Straight Flush).

⁶² This is the first of several prompts to give leeway to our imagination, not just what you see on stage; i.e.) apply your imagination (to what you are *reading*); ironically, most are from the Chorus, that character who most calls into question the problem of reconciling appearance and reality. Other prompts include:

Piece out our imperfections with your thoughts:	(1.0.23)
For 'tis your thoughts that now must deck our kings.	(1.0.28)
Therefore let every man now task his thought,	(1.2.309)
Work, work your thoughts, and therein see a siege.	(3.0.25), pun on seize
Minding true things by what their mock'ries be.	(4.0.53)
All things are ready, if our minds be so	
Perish the man, whose mind is backward now.	(4.3.71–72), backward – ironic

And finally (the lines immediately preceding “Once more ...”):

Still be kind, / And eke out our performance with your mind. (3.0.34–35)

⁶³ Partridge, 41–42, shows (3.7) is in essence bawdy, but as with the English anatomy scene, it requires once more knowing how to tease out Shakespeare’s naughty side.

⁶⁴ In the epilogue, Shakespeare makes clear all the glory of Agincourt was soon for naught, as France never came under English rule, and what gains were made by Henry V were lost during the reign of his son, King Henry VI (Epilogue.1–14). I propose one way of thinking about the play is to see Shakespeare putting war on trial, represented by Henry V and his admired progenitor, Alexander the Great. Shakespeare comes to the same *memento mori* conclusion as the famous and often quoted anonymous (ironic) epitaph for Alexander: “A tomb now suffices him for whom the world was not enough.”

⁶⁵ This is a short bibliography of items tending to take aim on the ironic slant in their comments about the play. Gould, Goddard, Battenhouse (1962 and 1985), and Berry already cited provide in my opinion, the best ironic commentary available on the play, Goddard being by far the most thorough. In chronological order, some others include:

John C. McClosky, “The Mirror of All Christian Kings,” *Shakespeare Association Bulletin*, 18 (1943), 36–40.

C.H. Hobday, *Shakespeare Survey 21*, Kenneth Muir, ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1968), ch. “Imagery and Irony in *Henry V*,” 107–13.

John Bromley, *The Shakespearean Kings* (Boulder: Colorado Associated UP, 1971), ch. “The Shakespearean Bestiary; 1 and 2 *Henry IV* and *Henry V*,” 75–92.

Roy Battenhouse, *Shakespeare Survey 27*, Kenneth Muir, ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1974), “The Relation of *Henry V* to *Tamburlaine*,” 71–79.

Gordon Ross Smith, “Shakespeare’s *Henry V*: Another Part of the Critical Forest,” *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 37 (1976), 3–26.

John Arden, *To Present the Pretence: Essays on the Theatre and Its Public* (London: Methuen & Co, 1978), 195–208.

Phillip Mallett, *The Fool and the Trickster; Studies in Honor of Enid Welsford*, Paul Williams, ed.

(Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1979), ch. “Shakespeare’s Trickster-Kings: Richard III and Henry V” 64–82.

Addressing Henry as a man of action curiously unable to accept responsibility for same:

W.L. Godshalk, “Henry V’s Politics of Non-Responsibility,” *Cahiers Élisabéthains*, 17 (1980), 11–20.

H.R. Coursen, *The Leasing out of England: Shakespeare’s Second Henriad* (Washington, D.C.: UP of America, 1982), 151–219.

Anthony Hammond, “‘It must be your imagination then:’ the Prologue and the Plural Text in *Henry V* and Elsewhere,” in John W. Mahon and Thomas A. Pendelton, ed. *Fanned and Winnowed Opinions: Essays Presented to Harold Jenkins* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1988), 133–50.

Chris Fitter, *Shakespeare Left and Right*, ed. Ivo Kamps (New York: Routledge, 1991), ch. “A Tale of Two Branaghs: *Henry V*, Ideology and the Mekong Agincourt,” 259–75.

Anthony Brennan, *Twayne’s New Critical Introductions to Shakespeare; Henry V* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1992).

Tim Spiekerman, *Shakespeare’s Political Realism: The English History Plays* (Albany, NY: State U of New York P, 2001), 125–52.

Ronald Knowles, *Shakespeare’s Arguments with History* (New York: Palgrave, 2002), ch. *Henry V*, 87–101.

Michael Bogdanov, *Shakespeare: The Director’s Cut* (Edinburgh: Capercaillie Books, 2013), 267–91. (*Henry V* essay first published in 2005).

John S. Mebane, “‘Impious War’: Religion and the Ideology of Warfare in *Henry V*,” *Studies in Philology*, 104, 2 (Spring 2007), 250–66.

... But he is always great, when some great occasion is presented to him:
No man can say, he ever had a fit subject for his wit, and did not then
raise himself as high above the rest of poets,

“Quantum lenta solent inter viburna cupressi.” *

- Samuel Johnson; *Preface to Shakespeare* (1765)

* “As great as the cypresses are accustomed among the supple wayfaring trees.”

- Virgil; *Eclogues* 1, 25