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Review of Henry V (directed by Gregory Doran for the Royal Shakespeare Company) at the Royal Shakespeare Theatre, Stratford-upon-Avon, 28 September 2015

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The Prologue to Henry V stresses the role of the audience's imagination in creating a dramatic world, asking them to 'let us … On your imaginary forces work' (17-18). Gregory Doran chose to remain faithful to the words of the Chorus, offering a performance which provided few visual cues such as sets to fashion King Henry's world for the audience's eye, but made ample use of what setting and costume it did provide to create a context for his interpretation of the drama. But in their minimalism, the sometimes modern dress and sparse setting drew attention to how the performance might be told as a series of historical events and how it might be envisioned as enacted or constructed on stage and perceived in the spectator's mind. The performance, and the actors' methods of communicating characterization, in particular, highlighted the degree to which any individual performance is itself an interpretation, one of several possible impressions of figures such as Henry that are made available through the language they utter.

The opening comments of the Prologue remained true to the text, delivered by a Chorus (Oliver Ford Davies) who was dressed as an aged stage actor or professor in khaki pants, white shirt, red cardigan, and matching scarf, his white hair complementing his grandfather-like appearance. His was a lone figure, and apparently intended to be viewed as contemporary, set against a backdrop that appeared to recreate the backstage of a theatre with costumes of armour neatly hung and ladders awaiting use, which noticeably called the spectator's attention to the theatricality of the play. His appearance and dramatic voice were in keeping with the Prologue's stress on the limitations of 'this unworthy scaffold' (10) in offering a realistic depiction of

events, and on the role of the audience in bringing proposed spectacle to life. He framed a performance where actors repeatedly fixed the audience's attention on aspects of their rendering of the characters, and in so doing, the extent to which history is a reconstruction of the distant past and depends on the perspective of the storyteller or player. However, his mannerisms and speech were set up in stark contrast to the characterization of King Harry that followed.

In the early scenes of the play, Harry (Alex Hassell) appeared to be very much a young king who had yet to mature from the brashness and vanity of his youth. Though not depicted as engaging in drunken exploits, his tone and mannerisms suggested a hot-headed adolescent with little regard but for his pursuit of ambition. When angered that his three vassals Cambridge (Simon Yadoo), Scrope (Keith Osborne), and Grey (Obioma Ugoala) would dare commit treason, plotting to murder him in exchange for the favours of the French, he resorted to yelling and literally beating Grey in a venting of his anger. The discontinuity between this anger and the language of King Harry's speech, which expresses a sense of righteousness in the King's position, lent the words a certain irony: he seemed not quite ignoble, but less the hand of justice, avenging a personal grievance rather than addressing a crime. The noticeable difference between this and his tone and demeanour of affected graveness at Harfleur, in offering what sounded more like a subtle warning of what would ensue should the town continue to resist – of the pillaging, plundering, and rape of their women – reflected a certain degree of indifference to the culpability of his soldiers should these acts be committed. In a departure from the text of the drama, King Harry delivered the speech alone on stage, rather than in conversation with the Governor, so that the speech eerily seemed to reveal a new side of the King to the audience. He appeared not as a leader employing a particular tactic to dissuade the enemy or to show him a

face of bravery or bravado, but as a King who thought little of the consequences in pursuing his claims to the French throne, more calculated and less concerned with humanity.

In this production, the portrayal of King Harry and the other characters called the very pursuit of glory into question. The conflict between France and England at Agincourt was not one in defence of honour, but as the Chorus suggested more of a "brawl" (4.0.51) to which the players responded in true ruffian fashion "Shove off!" Harry's concession to Andrew Westfield as Westmorland (Warwick in the Quarto and in the *Oxford Shakespeare*) that he coveted honour had the ring of sincerity while his tone and demeanour communicated in a speech to all his lieutenants, though apparently only to Westmorland in the text of the drama, that their noble deeds on the feast of Crispian would live on in memory. This was, however, in keeping to the script, unlike with Pistol's disclosure to the audience of the end that had come to his exploits in France and of his plans to profit from the scars of a flogging which might be mistaken for those gained in war. Glory then seemed an illusion, an empty promise, gilded by the eye of him who covets it.

It is Harry himself, however, who frames the question of glory in a speech (4.1.227-81) telling of his inexperience in war and his desire for glory. Alone on stage, and thus seemingly speaking directly to the audience again as much as to himself, the King voiced visible doubt and disbelief that he would have been, as the soldiers in camp suggested, accountable for the souls of his men who followed him into battle should his cause have been unjust. A monologue that might have been delivered to defend the King's just position and persuade the audience of it instead seemed to be the words of a very human man, unsure of his position, reasoning so as to convince himself that his soldiers' blood would not lie on him at the day of reckoning. His

admission that he as a monarch was but a man, that sceptre and crown were idle ceremony, framed King Harry's exploits in war not as defence of country, or due to conviction, but motivated by a personal ambition whose human cost suggested its very dubiousness. The exchange between Gower (Obioma Ogoala) and Fluellen (Joshua Richards) in which Fluellen compared Harry of Monmouth to Alexander the Great, faulting both for their debauchery and fiery tempers, only added colour and perspective to a depiction of King Harry as yet unseasoned or mature. He seemed yet a boy playing soldier whose dreams of victory clouded his vision of war. Likewise the French Dauphin (Robert Gilbert) and his lieutenants' show of bravado in awaiting the dawning of the day of battle, which might have been used to portray King Harry as a contrastingly admirable figure, only added further doubt as to the wisdom and honour of any endeavour to suit self-interest.

Doran's production, or more specifically Hassell's performance, did not paint King Harry as a villain though. Free from overt political commentary in what could have been a more skewed re-telling of English history, the play showed in Harry a certain degree of development. In the closing scenes, the brash respondent to French ambassadors' taunts who in his private moments displays his doubt and vulnerability disappeared. Acknowledging God's hand in his victory at Agincourt, his offer on bended knees of the glory to God was expressed sincerely and with the awe and reverence befitting such a divine intervention. Such humility fittingly served as preface to Harry's second humbling of himself to court the French princess Katherine not as a king and soldier crowned by triumph, but as a man cognizant of his limitations yet sincerely desiring love. The play, as performed, thus offered an image of Harry not as the valiant hero of

war, but an all too human Harry, who consequently became real in our imaginations, and thus alive before our eyes.