

“All would be royal”: The Effacement of Disunity in Shakespeare’s *Henry V*

I will none of your money.¹

Thus ends the confrontation between the soldier Michael Williams on one side and King Henry V and Fluellen on the other in what is one of the most troubling encounters within the history plays of Shakespeare. It is troubling in a number of ways, not least in the fact that there is no hint of resolution in the final response of Williams, and no further indication that the King understands or empathises with this response. It is a moment that is difficult in the sense that it seems to articulate a scene of difference, conflict and disunity between members of the same army. The confrontation erupts on the eve of the Battle of Agincourt, as Henry goes about the camp in disguise attempting, the Chorus informs us, to cheer his men in preparation for the following day’s exertions. The unreliability of the Chorus has been noted in this respect,² his words immediately followed by scenes in which Henry argues with Pistol, Williams and Bates. Despite this, a case has frequently been made for the kindness of “the English king comforting his men the night before the battle,”³ usually comparing him to the

¹William Shakespeare, *Henry V*, 4.8.69. All quotations are taken from the Arden edition of *Henry V*, ed. T. W. Craik (London: Routledge, 1996).

²Indeed, such commentary has become paradigmatic in any critical study of the play today. See for example: John Wilders, *The Lost Garden: A View of Shakespeare’s English and Roman History Plays* (Totowa, New Jersey: Rowman & Littlefield, 1978), pp. 11-12, and Alexander Leggatt, *Shakespeare’s Political Drama* (London: Routledge, 1988), pp. 123-5. In both of these studies it is possible to register a palpable discomfort with the King/Williams confrontation and the displacement of this discomfort onto the wholly rhetorical figure of the Chorus, allowing for a mild, playful and principally disengaged reading of events. More critical studies which examine both the ironic nature of the Chorus and the troubling confrontation of the King and Williams do exist however, and include the following: Alan Sinfield and Jonathan Dollimore, “History And Ideology: The Instance of *Henry V*,” in John Drakakis, ed., *Alternative Shakespeares* (London: Routledge, 1985), pp. 206-227; Chris Fitter, “A Tale Of Two Branaghs: *Henry V*, Ideology, And The Mekong Agincourt,” in Ivo Kamps, ed., *Shakespeare Left and Right* (London: Routledge, Chapman & Hall, 1991), pp. 259-275; Ralph Berry, *Shakespeare and Social Class* (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press International, Inc, 1988), pp. 87-94; Annabel Patterson, *Shakespeare and the Popular Voice* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1989), pp. 71-92.

³Lily B. Campbell, *Shakespeare’s ‘Histories’: Mirrors of Elizabethan Policy* (1947; London: Methuen & Co, 1977), p. 262. Any number of studies promote this view of Henry, including: E. M. W. Tillyard, *Shakespeare’s History Plays* (1944; London: Chatto and Windus, 1966), pp. 309-18; Irving Ribner, *The English History Play in the Age of Shakespeare* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1957), pp. 182-192; Wilders (1978), pp. 58-63; Leggatt (1988), pp. 114-138. The two major cinematic

pitiless French rulers who regard their soldiers as “superfluous lackeys and [...] peasants.”⁴ This juxtaposition forgets however to consider the fact that Henry also informs Williams that many of his own soldiers are criminals and murderers, who therefore deserve no better fate than to die, painfully, on the battlefield, and subsequently, in soliloquy, proceeds to call them fools, slaves, and beggars.⁵ The glossing over of contradiction has been a part of a greater tendency to transmit the idea of Henry V as the perfect monarch, the unifying force in the drive towards English nation-statehood that reached its zenith in the era in which the play itself was written, and which Shakespeare was celebrating.⁶ This is reflected in those traditional studies which regarded the play as a national epic whose primary theme was the binary opposition of order and disorder, the former term always being prior. More recent studies have tended to replicate this same dynamic, despite the order/disorder dichotomy being replaced by one of containment/subversion. The conclusions reached in the latter are almost identical to the former, although the means to these ends appear more sophisticated.⁷

The construction of the play as an effective example of propaganda which helped to underwrite the monarchy has been vigorously challenged, particularly over the last twenty years, and most effectively by the school of criticism broadly known as Cultural Materialism. A number of studies have investigated, among other things, the confrontation between Henry and Williams, and have indeed found the King seriously

films promote this same conceptualisation of the character of Henry: see *Henry V*, dir. Laurence Olivier, Two Cities Film, 1944, and *Henry V*, dir. Kenneth Branagh, Columbia Tristar, 1989.

⁴*H5*, 4.2.25.

⁵*H5*, 4.1.230-281.

⁶This has been the case in those studies of the play that can be regarded as historicist, whether of the old or the new variety.

⁷The older form of historicism reads the play as the routing of disorder by a God-given and natural order, while the more modern form reads it as deliberately producing subversion in order for it to be contained, and enabling the state to strengthen itself.

wanting.⁸ The sense of antagonism apparent in the confrontation has been remarked upon, and seen to register a definite moment of disquiet and disunity. Additionally, the force of the arguments put into the mouth of Williams, as well as the King's rather complacent responses, are held to demonstrate that the play is no simple valorisation of absolute monarchy. It is worth looking at the way in which the Henry/Williams exchange is perceived in a number of particularly important, widely available studies to see to what extent it has indeed been construed in terms of opposition and/or unity. In his introduction to the BBC version of *Henry V* in 1979, John Wilders registers the fact that Shakespeare regarded the King "as less than ideal,"⁹ the debate with Williams being one example of his ambiguous nature. Wilders believes that Williams' and Bates' concerns regarding the actual validity of Henry's invasion of France are "not really answered," and that the "plight of the ordinary soldier who goes unprepared to death is, however, something with which Henry will not concern himself."¹⁰ The latter is particularly revealing, and could enable the widening of focus here to include *1&2 Henry IV*, such a realisation casting grave doubts upon the notion, so important in traditional criticism, that these two plays are primarily concerned with the education of the future king, who spends so much time with the lower classes in order to make himself a more complete monarch, in touch with all sections of the population.¹¹ The fact that in *Henry V* the King seems to have little appetite for their worries and is unable to understand or empathise with them, bespeaks an individual who has learned nothing from his time amongst the common people. This is clearly shown in his interaction with the common characters in the play, where he attempts to buy Williams' respect,

⁸For example Sinfield and Dollimore (1985). See also the discussion of the confrontation (albeit in a different context) by Chris Fitter (1991) and by Annabel Patterson (1989).

⁹John Wilders, introduction, *Henry V* (London: BBC, 1979), pp. 9-16: p. 12.

¹⁰*ibid.*, p. 14.

¹¹Again, this is a conventional view held by, for example: Campbell (1977), p. 262; Tillyard (1966), pp. 309-318; Ribner (1957), pp. 182-192; Wilders (1978), pp. 51-52; Leggatt (1988), pp. 114-138.

enforces the execution of Bardolph, allows Falstaff to die, and encourages Pistol to fall back into a life of crime. If Henry has learned anything, it would seem to be contempt for the common people and their needs. Wilders does not register this however, and instead begins to backtrack, stating that Williams and Bates are finally “satisfied”¹² by Henry when he says: “Every subject’s duty is the King’s, but every subject’s soul is his own.”¹³ This seems rather harsh on Henry’s part given that Williams and Bates were no doubt pressed into service. Wilders does not have anything to say regarding this fact, but leaves us instead with Williams’ satisfaction ringing in our ears.

The recuperation of the common soldiers’ anger and the discord between members of the same army to which it testifies is evident also in the recently overhauled and extended Arden Shakespeare *King Henry V*. In his exhaustive introduction, T. W. Craik informs us that Henry “convinces the soldiers,” after Shakespeare “allows him to be drawn into an argument.”¹⁴ Craik’s conclusions are questionable in the sense that the soldiers are evidently not convinced, Williams promising to box Henry’s ears the next time they meet, nor have they dragged Henry into an argument. Not only are Henry’s motives for wandering around the camp in disguise suspect (and put his ability as a commander of an army into question),¹⁵ his uncharitable attitude seriously undermines his soldiers’ already low morale. In their first meeting, Williams explains to Henry the reasons for the low morale amongst the soldiers, detailing their main complaints. He says:

if the cause be not good, the King himself hath a heavy reckoning to make when all those legs and arms and heads chopped off in a battle shall join together at the latter day [...] some swearing, some crying

¹²Wilders (1979), p. 14.

¹³*H5*, 4.1.175-177.

¹⁴Craik (1996), pp. 1-111: p. 49.

¹⁵This point is eloquently investigated and affirmed in Nina Taunton’s “Night Watch: The Nocturnal Camp Scenes in Shakespeare’s *Henry V* and 1590s Militarism”, *Recherches Valenciennes* 5 (1998), which does indeed point to Henry’s serious shortcomings as an effective military leader.

for a surgeon, some upon their wives left poor behind them, some upon the debts they owe, some upon their children rawly left.¹⁶

This reflects the reality of the common soldier's lot in the army of Elizabeth, for whom, according to C. G. Cruickshank, "wars held only hardship and misery," and who were "powerless to alleviate their suffering."¹⁷ Cruickshank details the various hardships under which the soldiers suffered, corruption of the upper ranks and the consequent non-payment of wages (Williams' "debts they owe") being chief among them. This particular dramatised confrontation between the common soldier and his commander-in-chief is reminiscent of an actual confrontation which took place some years before the play was written. It is worth examining the real event in some detail in the current context.

In a letter preserved in the *Calendar of State Papers (Foreign)*, Captain Peter Crips reports on an event which occurred during the Netherlands campaign, in the army camp in Utrecht, on 28th March, 1586. Captain Crips's explanation of the origins of a mutiny by the soldiers is worth reproducing here at length:

The Earl of Leicester going to Count Maurice to dinner, there came certain soldiers of Capt. Thomas Poole's company, and one A. T. in behalf of the rest, demanded their pay. His Excellency conferred with Sir John Norreys, who commanded me, Peter Crips, then marshal, to take and hang the said A. T., whom I carried to prison. Then all the soldiers in the town 'grew into arms,' broke open the prison, carried away the said A. T. and offered to shoot at me and my men, staying me by force while the prisoner was carried away.

At that instant, two companies of 'Welshmen' came into the town, by whose aid the prisoner was again committed to prison, with nine of the chief mutineers. Sir John then ordered every company to march severally to camp, and when they were ready, came to his own company, and finding one using mutinous words, struck him and hurt him in the arm and sent him to the marshal; and another being not ready, cut him on the head, 'who are both living without danger of death, except they be hanged [...] but the report was that they were both dead.'

The companies then marched towards the camp, and being out of the town, those in the Marshalsea accused one Roger Greene of being 'one of the principal that brake up the prison.' Whereupon Sir John

¹⁶*H5*, 4.1.134-141.

¹⁷C. G. Cruickshank, *Elizabeth's Army* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1966), p. 13. Also important in this context is Lindsay Boynton, *The Elizabethan Militia, 1558-1638* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1967).

sent Captain Roper to fetch him. Being sent back, I carried him and the rest before his Excellency, who gave order that Doctor Clarke and I should examine them; who giving information to his Excellency he gave me commission for the [hangin]g of three of them in the presence of the other seven [...].¹⁸

This report refers to an event that took place thirteen years before the first performance of *Henry V*, but does in many ways articulate the same basic complaints voiced by Williams: the contempt in which the common soldiers are held by their military chiefs, and their inability to alleviate their situation. When compared with this incident, it would seem that Williams in fact escaped quite lightly in his confrontation with Henry, in the sense that he was not despatched immediately. Despite that, Crips's letter attests to the problems that characterised the relationship between ordinary soldiers and their commanders and, given the fact that these soldiers were pressed, demonstrates a lack of military competence on the part of these commanders, Henry included.

The contempt in which the ordinary soldiers were held by their military superiors characterised the subsequent Irish campaign particularly, as is demonstrated by the following report held in the *Calendar of State Papers (Ireland)*, for December 1596:

Of all the captains in Ireland, Sir Thomas North hath from the beginning kept a most miserable, unfurnished, naked, and hunger-starven band. Many of his soldiers died wretchedly and woefully at Dublin; some whose feet and legs rotted off for want of shoes [...].¹⁹

This is a typical example of the condition of the ordinary soldiers in Ireland, and one of many that reports the possibility of their mutiny.²⁰ According to Christopher Highley, such reports are significant in the sense that, against the “backdrop of these conditions [...] the reiterated image in *Henry V* of an English army starving and sick in the field had an inescapable topical valence.”²¹ Such is particularly the case given the fact that

¹⁸*CSP (Foreign) (Sept 1585-May 1586)*, p. 495.

¹⁹*CSP (Ireland) (1596-97)*, p. 195.

²⁰“[T]he nakedness of the soldiers for want of clothes, and their poverty for lack of their lendings, to buy them food [...] many of them show like prisoners, half-starved [...] we look daily for some great mutiny and disbanding[...].” (*CSP (Ireland) (1598-99)*, p. 357).

²¹Christopher Highley, *Shakespeare, Spenser, and the Crisis in Ireland* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), p. 139.

the Earl of Essex was so involved in the Irish campaign at the time the play was written, and is referred to by the Chorus in the play itself.²²

These contemporary records shed much light upon the confrontation of King Henry and Williams, articulating tension in the relationship of military leaders and their soldiers as well as clarifying the reasons for this tension. The “topical valence” of the Henry/Williams scene is further underlined with the appearance of Fluellen, and his response to Williams’ refusal to accept the gloveful of crowns offered by Henry.

Fluellen says:

It is with a good will. I can tell you, it will serve you to mend your shoes. Come, wherefore should you be so pashful? Your shoes is not so good. ‘Tis a good shilling, I warrent you, or I will change it.²³

The character of Fluellen can be seen, in his uncritical loyalty to Henry, as an example of the “Welshmen” that Captain Crips writes about and, in his recommendation that Williams accept the money in order to mend his shoes, to be articulating a contemporary need of the soldiers whose “feet and legs rotted off [...]”²⁴ Despite the fact that contemporary records demonstrate unresolved conflict, the confrontation of Henry and Williams has been read as one of resolution and unity. A further look at T. W. Craik’s introduction to the Arden *Henry V* will underline this fact.

In Williams’ final unambiguous words in which he refuses to be bought by Henry’s gloveful of crowns there is a clear articulation of a deeply held desire to be treated with dignity. Fluellen’s response is pragmatic, but does not attempt to deal with the contempt with which Williams feels he has been treated. In a footnote to these words of Williams, Craik, enlisting the help of Gary Taylor, writes:

I will ... money Williams not unnaturally resents Fluellen’s advice as to his future conduct. Fluellen’s conciliatory reply, and the

²²*H5*, 5.0.30-34. This is very much the foundation of Highley’s study of the play.

²³*H5*, 4.8.70-74.

²⁴This point is raised in a footnote by Highley (1997), p. 150.

fact that ‘silence normally gives consent to a direction implied in the dialogue’ (Taylor), make it clear that Williams takes the shilling.²⁵

There are a number of points to make here. Firstly, Taylor’s belief that silence gives consent is questionable. For, it is certainly not clear in the text that Williams takes the shilling, and nothing implied in Williams’ words suggests that he does anything other than reject Henry’s offer. These are Williams’ final words, and he does not appear again in the play. Secondly, Craik’s belief that “all ends in harmony between him [the King], Williams and Fluellen,”²⁶ is also questionable. Given Williams’ last words, there is no evidence for such a supposition. Indeed, the only evidence suggests the opposite. Lastly and most importantly, given the nature of contemporary records, the fact that the conflict is not resolved seems to be a most compelling negotiation of the many hardships suffered by ordinary soldiers at that time. In the light of the evidence, Williams is an individual who could use the money offered to him more than any other. Yet he apparently refuses it.

If Williams were to accept Henry’s money he could, in a sense and despite his hardships, be said to have his price, like those who pressed him into service, and those who made illicit earnings from the military campaign in Ireland.²⁷ Williams does not appear to want the money however. Nor does he want to fight wars that seem to him to lack good cause, and which seem to promise either a horrible death or maiming. Henry, it would seem, has little time or care for such matters, just as actual commanders in the Low Countries and in Ireland. The perception of harmony by Craik and Wilders in this situation fails to register the disunity and disruption that the play articulates, as well as the conflict that existed at that time. And Taylor’s belief that Williams takes the money adds to such a perception. For it discredits Williams, valorises the King and, by

²⁵Craik (1996), p. 328.

²⁶ibid., p. 53.

²⁷See Cruickshank (1966), pp. 17-40 and pp. 143-158.

extension justifies those practices he unleashes on the body and soul of Williams, and all of the other common soldiers.

The representation of Michael Williams thus seems to reflect both an actual contemporary problem and a reality known to many of Shakespeare's audience.²⁸

However, the valorisation of the King at the expense of Williams is continued in more modern readings of the play, such as Stephen Greenblatt's "Invisible Bullets:

Renaissance Authority and its Subversion, *Henry IV* and *Henry V*."²⁹ While Greenblatt has very little to say about the Williams/Henry confrontation specifically, he does believe that the play registers Henry's contempt for the common people generally, and "deftly registers every nuance of royal hypocrisy, ruthlessness, and bad faith."³⁰ This is demonstrated most clearly in the King's inability to empathise with "anxious, frightened troops sleeplessly await[ing] the dawn."³¹ Greenblatt goes on to say that this however does not undermine any positive representation of the king, for the play is "a celebration, a collective panegyric to 'This star of England', the charismatic leader who purges the commonwealth of its incorrigibles and forges the martial national State."³²

The subversive and negative aspects of Henry are thereby immersed in a more persuasive context of praise and glorification, and these (apparently) subversive aspects "serve paradoxically to intensify the power of the king and his war."³³ We are therefore won over by Henry's compelling presence, and in the confrontation between Williams and the King, "the very doubts that Shakespeare raises serve not to rob the king of his charisma but to heighten it."³⁴

²⁸Shakespeare's audience was made up of all sections of the population, including disbanded soldiers.

²⁹Stephen Greenblatt, "Invisible Bullets: Renaissance Authority and its Subversion, *Henry IV* and *Henry V*," in Alan Sinfield and Jonathan Dollimore, eds., *Political Shakespeare: Essays in Cultural Materialism* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1985), pp. 18-47.

³⁰ibid., p. 42.

³¹ibid., p. 43.

³²ibid., p. 42.

³³ibid., p. 43.

³⁴ibid., p. 43.

Greenblatt is most concerned to theorise the Elizabethan audience's perception of a theatrical event such as *Henry V*, and to demonstrate their subjectification through such cultural events. He writes:

The audience's tension [...] enhances its attention; prodded by constant reminders of a gap between real and ideal, facts and values, the spectators are induced to make up the difference, to invest in the illusion of magnificence, to be dazzled by their own imaginary identification with the conqueror. The ideal king must be in large part the invention of the audience.³⁵

This assumes of course that all members of the audience would identify with the King, or wish to construct an imaginary ideal monarch. However, given the fact that Shakespeare's audience comprised many members of the poorer classes in Elizabethan London, it is possible that they would identify instead with characters such as Williams. Rather than have to in some way construct for themselves an ideal sovereign from that individual who appeared before them on stage, they would be able to see the representation of matters that concerned their own lives in the words and actions of Williams. Such a possibility is confirmed by specific contemporary evidence, a fact which questions Greenblatt's theoretical trajectory.

Greenblatt's theorisation of the Elizabethan audience is centred around the work of Michel Foucault, particularly his formulation of the spectacular nature of early modern societies in his *Discipline and Punish*.³⁶ This allows Greenblatt to perceive in the Elizabethan theatre those same qualities of spectacle that Foucault assigned to public executions. In *Renaissance Self-Fashioning* for example, Greenblatt felt able to write:

Each branding or hanging or disembowelling was theatrical in conception and performance, a repeatable admonitory drama enacted on a scaffold before a rapt audience [...]. This idea of the 'notable spectacle,' [...] extended quite naturally to the theatre itself.³⁷

³⁵ibid., p. 43.

³⁶Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1977).

³⁷Stephen Greenblatt, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning: From More to Shakespeare* (1980; Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1984), p. 201.

The theatrical experience is therefore a normative one in which the stage “is the expression of those rules that govern a properly ordered society and displays visibly the punishment [...] that is meted out upon those who violate the rules.”³⁸ One is to understand that in the confrontation between Williams and Henry the idea of a properly ordered society forbids identification with Williams, and the audience become “dazzled by their own imaginary identification with the conqueror.”³⁹ This being the case, in “such a theatre-State there would be no social distinction between the king and the spectator, the performer and the audience; all would be royal.”⁴⁰ In a sense then the audience becomes Henry, no matter what his actions are, because they have no way of imagining themselves to be anything different. They cannot identify with Williams. In contrast to Greenblatt’s theorisation, *The Acts of the Privy Council* for 16th October, 1592, relate that in Holborn a number of “dysorderlie persons” participated in a riot at an “execucion don of an offender that had killed an officier.”⁴¹ The report goes on to say that this was no isolated event, and stresses “how manie of these dysorders have of late ben commytted in divers places of the cyttie of London.”⁴² In rioting, these Elizabethan audiences question the “rules that govern a properly ordered society,” they “violate the rules,” and reject the normative desire of officialdom. Greenblatt’s assumption of the spectacular verisimilitude of the public execution and the public stage is clearly problematic given these facts. For, if it was possible for an Elizabethan audience to identify with an opponent of authority at an execution, it is possible that any theatre audience witnessing the Williams/Henry confrontation could, like those in Holborn and other London locations, have resisted any “identification with the

³⁸ibid., p. 253.

³⁹Greenblatt (1985), p. 43.

⁴⁰ibid., p. 43.

⁴¹*Acts of the Privy Council (1592)*, p. 242.

⁴²ibid., p. 242.

conquerer” and have identified with Williams instead. As in the readings by Craik, Wilders and Taylor, the rupture apparent in the conflict between Williams and Henry is denied in Greenblatt’s interpretation, and the representation of contemporary problems in Shakespeare’s play minimised. The conclusion reached is one in which it is impossible to see from below, as below simply does not exist.