

SHAKESPEARE ON
MASCULINITY

ROBIN HEADLAM WELLS



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CHAPTER I

*The chivalric revival: 'Henry V' and
'Troilus and Cressida'*

Now help, o Mars, þat art of knyȝthod lord,
And hast of manhod the magnificence!

John Lydgate, *Lydgate's Troy Book*, Prologue, lines 36–7, vol. 1, p. 2

Introducing the second act of *Henry V*, Shakespeare's Chorus paints a striking picture of a country on the eve of a foreign campaign:

Now all the youth of England are on fire,
And silken dalliance in the wardrobe lies;
Now thrive the armourers, and honour's thought
Reigns solely in the breast of every man. (II. Chorus.1–4)

No intelligent audience can fail to respond to such imaginative scene painting. But for contemporary playgoers the most remarkable thing about the Chorus' words must have been not the ekphrasis but the politics. The reference to 'honour's thought', together with the allusion in the Act v Chorus to the Earl of Essex's anticipated return from Ireland – the single explicit topical allusion in Shakespeare – must have sounded like a surprisingly audacious endorsement of Essex and all that he stood for. But if the earl's supporters were encouraged by such a stirring evocation of national war fever, they must have been less pleased by the distinctly unheroic scene that immediately follows. In place of the Chorus' idealized picture of England's youth on fire with noble thoughts of war, we have the unromantic reality of brawling soldiers, broken promises, and 'wilful adultery and murder' (II.i.36). Unimpressed by Pistol's heroic posturing, Bardolph offers to act as mediator in the absurd quarrel between him and Corporal Nym: 'Come, shall I make you two friends?' Then reminding them that they are about to embark for France, he asks: 'Why the devil should we keep knives to cut one another's throats?' (86–8). The audience is left to decide for itself whether Bardolph is thinking

about France or Mistress Quickly's tavern when he reflects on the futility of fighting.

The subplot of *Henry V* looks very much like a parody of the play's heroic main plot.¹ Its characters are pilferers, fools, and braggarts motivated by self interest and an absurd sense of pride in the dignity of the 'manly heart' (II.iii.3). The resulting ambivalence makes it one of Shakespeare's most puzzling plays. Critical opinion is broadly divided between those who see the play's hero as a mirror of all Christian kings, and those who see him as a cynical deceiver who, according to Mistress Quickly, has killed his friend's heart (II.i.84). For J.H. Walter, Shakespeare's Henry combines the character and action of the epic hero with the moral qualities of Erasmus' Christian prince;² for Norman Rabkin he is 'the kind of exemplary monarch that neither Richard II nor Henry IV could be, combining the inwardness and the sense of occasion of the one and the strength of the other with a generous humanity available to neither';³ for Gary Taylor he is 'a study of human greatness'.⁴ But New-Historicist and materialist criticism takes a very different view of Henry. In one of his most influential essays⁵ Stephen Greenblatt argues that throughout the three plays in which he appears Henry is a Machiavellian 'juggler' and 'conniving hypocrite'. The final play of the series, says Greenblatt, 'defly registers every nuance of royal hypocrisy, ruthlessness, and bad faith'.⁶ Neither of these positions will bear close scrutiny.

It is true that Shakespeare's portrait of Henry is in many ways a notably sympathetic one. Henry's rhetoric is exhilarating; his courage in battle is exemplary; his piety seems indisputable, and his

¹ Graham Bradshaw writes well on what he calls 'dramatic rhyming' in *Henry V* in *Misrepresentations: Shakespeare and the Materialists* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1993), pp. 63–80.

² J.H. Walter, ed., Introduction to Arden edition of *Henry V* (London and Cambridge, Mass.: Methuen and Harvard University Press, 1954), p. xvi.

³ Norman Rabkin, *Shakespeare and the Common Understanding* (1967; repr. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1984), p. 98. However, Rabkin later revised this view: see *Shakespeare and the Problem of Meaning* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1981), pp. 33–62.

⁴ Gary Taylor, ed., Introduction to *Henry V* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1982), p. 72.

⁵ Arthur Kinney describes 'Invisible Bullets' as 'perhaps the most important and surely the most influential essay of the past decade in English Renaissance cultural history' (Arthur F. Kinney, ed., *Rogues, Vagabonds and Sturdy Beggars: A New Gallery of Tudor and Stuart Rogue Literature* (Amherst, Mass.: University of Massachusetts Press, 1990), p. 1).

⁶ Stephen Greenblatt, *Shakespearean Negotiations: The Circulation of Social Energy in Renaissance England* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988), pp. 41, 56.

honour bright. By the final scene of the play any lingering doubts about the legitimacy of his claims to France are easily forgotten in the superficially playful charm of the wooing of Katharine. When even the French king and queen seem delighted with 'brother England' and the terms of his proposed alliance, what reason is there to doubt the integrity of this now plain-speaking soldier with a heart that 'never changes, but keeps his course truly' (v.ii.164–5)? But as many critics have pointed out, this concluding scene of international and domestic harmony, almost like a comedy in its stylized conviviality,⁷ has many ironies. Unlike the typical Elizabethan romantic comedy, which ends with an unfulfilled promise of future happiness, the final Chorus of *Henry V* takes us back to a future that is already past. We know all too well that not one of Henry's hopes will be realized: Katharine will never be a 'soldier-breeder'; the king himself will not live to see old age; the peace between England and France will hold only a few short years. As the Chorus reminds us of the English blood that will soon be shed in the Wars of the Roses, it is difficult to suppress memory of all the other disquieting events we have witnessed in the play: the scheming clergy so eager to support a war that is conveniently in their own interests; Henry's brutal threats to the citizens of Harfleur; the casuistical argument with Williams; the cold-blooded killing of the prisoners at Agincourt.

But if it is true that Henry's militant brand of Christianity is a far cry from the pacifism of Erasmus' Christian prince, there is little evidence in the play to support the claim that he is a Machiavellian hypocrite. Modern historians speak of the historical Henry's 'messianic streak'⁸ and his religious bigotry.⁹ Even Allmand, his most admiring biographer, describes him as 'a man with an obsession'.¹⁰ Henry was identified by his contemporaries with the world conqueror of popular apocalyptic prophecy.¹¹ According to early fifteenth-century millenarian writers, the last universal emperor

⁷ Rabkin compares the play to a comedy in *Shakespeare and the Common Understanding*, pp. 99–100.

⁸ G.L. Harriss, ed., Introduction to *Henry V: The Practice of Kingship* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), p. 24.

⁹ J.R. Lander describes Henry as 'a bigot of near-heroic mould whose intense religiosity equalled only his intense legalism over feudal property rights' (*Conflict and Stability in Fifteenth-Century England* (London: Hutchinson, 1969), p. 58).

¹⁰ C.T. Allmand, 'Henry v the Soldier, and the War in France' in *Henry V*, ed. Harriss, p. 129.

¹¹ Lesley A. Coote, *Prophecy and Public Affairs in Later Medieval England* (York: York Medieval Press, 2000), ch. 5.

would free the Holy Land from the infidel and yield up his throne in Jerusalem, after which the world would be consumed by fire in 1500.¹² Henry seems to have believed in that prophetic, imperial vision and to have seen himself as the instrument of providence. For the author of the propagandist *Gesta Henrici Quinti* (1416), writing almost certainly under Henry's direction, England's warrior-king is 'the true elect of God';¹³ for Henry's uncle and political mentor, Henry Beaufort, Bishop of Winchester, he is a divinely favoured warrior greater even than Alexander the Great or Judas Maccabaeus.¹⁴

Fifteenth-century writers fostered the myth of the reformed prodigal¹⁵ and drew parallels between Henry and Sextus, the world-conqueror of the *Prophecia Merlini*, who was also supposed to have reformed after a misspent youth.¹⁶ Shakespeare's Henry also has that obsessive, single-minded zeal that is characteristic of the religious convert who sees himself as an instrument of heaven's will. It is not hypocrisy but a heroic conviction in the justice of his cause that is his most disturbing quality. That too is something that must have had an ironic resonance for contemporary audiences. *Henry V* and *Troilus and Cressida* are highly topical plays. Written at a time when apocalyptic belief in England's role in a universal providential programme was once again attracting popular assent (see below, pp. 36–7), they are both about that kind of nationalistic sense of honour which the Elizabethan armorer Gerard Legh defined as 'glory gotten by courage of manhood'.¹⁷ *Henry V* was written when Essex's career was in the balance. The earl was a man of whom, in Gervase Markham's words, 'it behove[d] every man to be careful how to write'.¹⁸ Two years later, after Essex had betrayed not just the queen but his own supporters, and after the bubble of Elizabethan chivalry had burst, Shakespeare returned to the question of military honour. Now he could afford to be less ambivalent. Where

¹² London, British Library MS Cotton Cleopatra BI, cited by Coote, ch. 5.

¹³ *Gesta Henrici Quinti: The Deeds of Henry the Fifth*, ed. and trans. Frank Taylor and John S. Roskell (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), p. 4.

¹⁴ *Letters of Queen Margaret of Anjou, and Bishop Beekington, and others*, ed. Cecil Monro, Camden First Series 86 (London: Camden Society, 1863), p. 4.

¹⁵ Charles Lethbridge Kingsford, *English Historical Literature in the Fifteenth Century* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1913), p. 66.

¹⁶ *The Historia Regum Britannie of Geoffrey of Monmouth*, ed. Neil Wright (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1985), pp. 384–97, cited by Coote, *Prophecy and Public Affairs*, ch. 5.

¹⁷ Gerard Legh, *The Accedens of Armory* (1562; repr. London: 1597), fol. 13.

¹⁸ Gervase Markham, *Honour in his Perfection* (London, 1624), p. 26.

Henry V is necessarily guarded in its critique of military values, *Troilus and Cressida* is a devastating satire on that exaggerated sense of manly honour that is the essence of chivalry.¹⁹

THE CHIVALRIC REVIVAL

When the Act II Chorus tells us that all the youth of England are on fire with thoughts of war, and that 'honour's thought / Reigns solely in the breast of every man', it looks very much as if Shakespeare is alluding to the warlike 'General of our gracious Empress' (v. Chorus.30) who was expected shortly to return from Ireland 'Bringing rebellion broachèd on his sword' (32). But if the Chorus *was* alluding to Essex, he was grossly overstating his case. Though honour's thought certainly reigned supreme in the breasts of Essex and his followers, the earl's aggressive militarism was by no means universally welcomed in 1599. After twenty years of heavy expenditure on the war with Spain, and with Tyrone's rebellion in Ireland making increasing demands on the exchequer, there was widespread resentment at the relentless increase in taxation. Not only had direct levies risen threefold during the war years, but the government was forced to resort to various indirect ways of raising income, all of them highly unpopular. These included ship money, disposing of crown lands, control of church revenues, and the hated sale of monopolies. In 1599 the exchequer's balance had fallen to its lowest level ever.²⁰ Faced with the embarrassment of continual complaints from their constituents, members of parliament protested their disapproval of England's continued involvement in foreign wars. W.B. Wernham writes: 'there was a crescendo of complaint and criticism, rising from the grievances voiced in 1589 and the restrictions attempted in 1593 to the great outcry in the monopolies debates of 1601'.²¹ Nor is it surprising that among the populace in general support for war was less than overwhelming. The main beneficiaries of a new campaign in Europe would have been a nobility eager for offices and appointments. For the common soldier the reward of victory would no doubt

¹⁹ I would accept, with reservations, Jan Kott's description of the play as 'a sneering political pamphlet', but not his equation of the Trojans with Spain and the Greeks with England (*Shakespeare our Contemporary*, trans. Boleslaw Taborski (London: Methuen, 1964), p. 65).

²⁰ Penry Williams, *The Later Tudors: England 1547-1603*, *The New Oxford History of England* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), p. 382.

²¹ *The Making of Elizabethan Foreign Policy, 1558-1603* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 1980), p. 90.

have been much like that of Pistol: no honours and titles, but a life of begging and stealing (v.i.81–5). Little wonder that those unfortunate enough to be conscripted to fight England's foreign wars expressed their resentment by desertion and mutiny.²² To suggest that honour's thought reigned in the breast of every Englishman in 1599 – assuming, that is, that these lines were indeed intended as an oblique allusion to contemporary events – is grotesque misrepresentation, and further evidence of the unreliability that many critics have seen as one of the chief characteristics of *Henry V*'s Chorus.²³ For the majority of English men and women the possibility of an escalation of the war with Spain was not a welcome prospect.

However, that is not to deny that honour played an important part in the contemporary debate on foreign policy. The Privy Council was deeply divided. Although both sides recognized the need for military preparedness, one side favoured a defensive strategy, while the other argued for an aggressive approach towards Spain. Supported by her Secretary of State, Elizabeth was anxious to avoid committing English troops on the Continent if she could possibly help it; her natural inclination was to maintain a balance of power in Europe by playing off the two Continental superpowers against each other. Essex was passionately opposed to this policy of caution. From the late 1580s he had assiduously built up his power and influence at court by surrounding himself with professional soldiers and intelligence agents. His spectacular success in destroying the Spanish fleet in Cadiz harbour in 1596 did much to redeem the failure of the siege of Rouen in 1592 and to establish his reputation as a national hero and leader of the war party. His personal campaign to persuade the government to adopt a more assertive foreign policy was in tune with the mood of apocalyptic hysteria that characterized extreme militant Protestantism in the 1590s.²⁴ In 1596 George Gifford argued that the faithful servants of God must seek

²² *Ibid.*, p. 91.

²³ See Andrew Gurr, ed., *Introduction to 'King Henry V'* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), pp. 6–16.

²⁴ Bernard Capp, 'The Political Dimension of Apocalyptic Thought', *The Apocalypse in English Renaissance Thought and Literature*, ed. C.A. Patrides and Joseph Wittreich (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984), pp. 93–124. See also Richard Bauckham, *Tudor Apocalypse: Sixteenth-Century Apocalypticism, Millenarianism and the English Reformation* (Abingdon: Sutton Courtenay, 1978); Paul Christianson, *Reformers and Babylon: English Apocalyptic Visions from the Reformation to the End of the Civil War* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1978); Katharine R. Firth, *The Apocalyptic Tradition in Reformation Britain 1530–1645* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979).

revenge 'even to the full' on Rome for its corruption of the church.²⁵ Even more violent in its anticipation of militaristic vengeance is Arthur Dent's *The ruine of Rome*. Dent prophesied that 'when the armies of the [Catholic] Leaguers . . . and all other Popish armies shall joyne & band themselves together against the christian kings and defenders of the Gospell: their dead carkasses shall even cover the earth'.²⁶ In 1598 Essex wrote his own pamphlet praising the heroic mind and arguing the case for an all-out attack on Spain.²⁷ Though the apocalyptic sermons of clerics like Gifford provided religious support for the ambitions of the war party, Essex himself was less interested in eschatology than in the personal glory that would accrue from a successful Continental campaign. Essex saw himself as the inheritor of an ancient chivalric tradition that had been allowed to decay under the influence of civic humanism. He believed that England, like Claudius' Denmark, should declare itself a 'warlike state'.

It was in the context of this highly politicized quarrel between the war party and its opponents that *Henry V* was written. By beginning the play with an invocation to Mars, patron god of chivalry, attended by 'famine, sword and fire' straining like leashed greyhounds at his heels (Prol. 1–8), Shakespeare could hardly have given a clearer indication of the topical issues he meant to address.

HOLY WARRIOR

Because Shakespeare's Henry is a natural autocrat, post-Foucauldian criticism has portrayed the play, perhaps predictably, as an essay on power. For Stephen Greenblatt *Henry V* is a classic example of the way authority produces and contains subversion. Insofar as it is concerned to illustrate a transhistorical paradigm of power politics, Greenblatt's essay is, strictly speaking, a-historicist. For all its rhetorical persuasiveness, it suffers from the inevitable limitations of its analogical methodology. When flexible use is made of the text,²⁸ and when external appeal is made, not to proven source material or contemporaneous political debate, but to unconnected 'reiterations'

²⁵ George Gifford, *Sermons upon the Whole Booke of the Revelation* (London: 1596), p. 346.

²⁶ Arthur Dent, *The ruine of Rome* (London: 1603), p. 240.

²⁷ Robert Devereux, 2nd Earl of Essex, *An Apologie of the Earl of Essex* (London: 1603).

²⁸ On Greenblatt's rhetorical strategies, analogical method, and flexible treatment of texts see Tom McAlindon, 'Testing the New Historicism', *SP* 92 (1995), 411–38.

of an *a priori* principle, it becomes difficult either to prove or disprove his thesis. A more truly historicist case for seeing Henry as scheming Machiavel has recently been made by Steven Marx.²⁹ The idea of the benign Machiavel using deception for the good of the state is not a new one in Shakespeare criticism.³⁰ But Marx goes, not just to Machiavelli, but to one of Machiavelli's own sources for his political analogues. Noting the presumably intentional parallel between the miracle of Agincourt and God's deliverance of Israel (the *Non nobis* that Henry orders to be sung after the battle is the Latin title of Psalm 115 celebrating the defeat of the Egyptian armies at the Red Sea), he argues that the Old Testament provided Renaissance humanists with a political history as rich and revealing as those of the classical world. Citing a number of biblical figures who use trickery to defeat their enemies, Marx suggests that Shakespeare shows Henry deliberately and cynically using holy war as a political device to inspire faith in his followers and awe in his enemies.

Based as it is on proven sources rather than on tendentious readings of entirely unconnected texts, Marx's argument is a much more convincing one than Greenblatt's. But again the play itself does not support the claim that Henry is unscrupulously manipulating religion for political ends. Ruthless Henry undoubtedly is, but to accuse him of bad faith is to deny him his most outstanding and most dangerous characteristic, namely his frank and single-minded fidelity to his cause.

It is true that in *Henry IV* the prince uses deception to enhance his reputation, announcing at the beginning of Part 1 that he will 'falsify men's hopes' by 'redeeming time' when people least expect it (*1H4*, 1.ii.208–14). Whether or not his reformation at the end of Part 2 is authentic, he appears, when we see him at the beginning of *Henry V*, to have all the characteristics of the reborn Christian of fifteenth-century prophetic writings about Henry. From the conversation between Canterbury and Ely in the first scene we learn that he does indeed seem to be the 'new man' described in *The First English Life of Henry V* (1513), and rehearsed by the sixteenth-century chroniclers:³¹

²⁹ Steven Marx, 'Holy War in *Henry V*', *ShS*, 48 (1995), 85–97.

³⁰ John F. Danby, *Shakespeare's Doctrine of Nature: A Study of 'King Lear'* (London: Faber & Faber, 1961), pp. 81–101.

³¹ For discussion of Pauline allusions in *Henry IV* see J.A. Bryant, 'Prince Hal and the Ephesians', *SewR*, 67 (1959), 204–19; D.J. Palmer, 'Casting off the Old Man: History and St Paul in *Henry IV*', *CQ*, 12 (1970), 267–83. See also Robin Headlam Wells, *Elizabethan*

Never was such a sudden scholar made;
Never came reformation in a flood,
With such a heady currance scouring faults;
Nor never Hydra-headed wilfulness
So soon did lose his seat – and all at once –
As in this king. (i.i.33–8)

As well as showing an impressive grasp of theological and political matters, the reborn king is a compelling orator, especially on the subject of war. ‘List his discourse of war,’ says Canterbury, ‘and you shall hear / A fearful battle rendered you in music’ (i.i.44–5). It is Henry’s passion for war that particularly interests the bishops. Seeing in this a way out of the church’s own problems, Canterbury makes the king an offer: if he will guarantee the security of church lands, the clergy will support a re-opening of the war against France. But before Henry will agree to this proposal he insists on satisfying himself that he does have a legitimate claim to the French crown. The ground is thus prepared for the notorious debate on Salic Law.

If it was Shakespeare’s intention to portray Henry as the mirror of Christian kings and to justify his aggressive military policies, Canterbury’s exposition of Salic Law seems an odd way of going about it. To establish the legality of Henry’s claim to France, Shakespeare could easily have had a group of courtiers discussing the Plantagenet dynasty. One of them might begin by reminding the court that English kings had ruled the Angevin empire since time immemorial (that is to say, since the eleventh century); another might say that Edward III had a better claim to the French throne than anyone else, better certainly than Philip VI; a third might rejoin that Philip’s confiscation of the Duchy of Aquitaine in 1337 was quite illegal; a fourth might point out that when Henry’s father met the dukes of Berry, Bourbon, and Orléans in Bourges in 1412 all had agreed that Aquitaine was rightfully English. All this could have been done quickly and emphatically. Alternatively, Shakespeare could have followed the example of the *Famous Victories of Henry V* where the question of Henry’s legal claims to France is dealt with in two sentences. In response to the king’s request for advice Canterbury simply says ‘Your right to the French crown of France came by your great-grandmother, Isabel, wife to King Edward the third, and sister to Charles, the French King. Now, if the French King deny it, as

likely enough he will, then must you take your sword in hand and conquer the right'.³² What could be simpler? The king has a clear legal right and he must defend it. By contrast, Shakespeare reproduces more or less word for word from Holinshed a forensic argument of such tortuous casuistry that no theatre audience could possibly follow it. Holinshed's own view of Canterbury's tactics comes across fairly clearly. Winding up what Holinshed calls 'his prepared tale', the archbishop shifts to a different register as he exhorts Henry to 'advance forth his banner to fight for his right' and 'spare neither bloud, sword, nor fire' in defence of his inheritance. Parliament responds to this emotive rhetoric with cries of 'Warre, warre; France, France'. Carried away by its own jingoism, the House forgets the more mundane question of church lands, and votes enthusiastically for war. Holinshed comments dryly: 'Hereby the bill for dissolving of religious houses was cleereleie set aside, and nothing thought on but onelie the recovering of France, according as the archbishop had mooved'.³³

With his keen interest in the unscrupulous use of political oratory – *Julius Caesar* was probably written in the same year as *Henry V* – Shakespeare clearly saw the dramatic potential of such material. But if Canterbury's motives are dishonourable, this does not mean that Henry is necessarily a conniver. Indeed he is insistent that the archbishop explain the crown's legal position 'justly and religiously' (1.ii.10). Warning him not to 'fashion, wrest, or bow' the facts to suit convenience (14), Henry soberly reminds the court of the consequences of going to war. In contrast to Canterbury's casuistical exposition of Salic Law, the king's response is a simple question: 'May I with right and conscience make this claim?' (96). As in Holinshed, Canterbury's reply is an emotive appeal to national pride:

Gracious lord,
Stand for your own; unwind your bloody flag;
Look back into your mighty ancestors.
Go, my dread lord, to your great-grandsire's tomb,
From whom you claim; invoke his warlike spirit. (100–4)

³² *The Oldcastle Controversy: Sir John Oldcastle, Part I and the Famous Victories of Henry V*, Revels Plays edn., ed. Peter Corbin and Douglas Sedge (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 1991), p. 175.

³³ Raphael Holinshed, *Holinshed's Chronicles* revised edn. (1587), 6 vols, ed. John Vowell (London, 1807–8), vol. III (1808), p. 66.

Taking up the archbishop's theme, Ely urges Henry to think of 'exploits and mighty enterprises' (121). Unlike Hamlet, whose reaction to an appeal to dynastic honour is an impassioned declaration of vengeance, Henry remains cool, quietly reminding the court of the need to prepare, not only for a foreign campaign, but also for the possibility of an attack from Scotland. The debate concludes with the archbishop's emollient parable of the beehive. Obedience to the rule of nature, says Canterbury, is the key to social harmony: just as members of a beehive work together under the direction of a king, so national success depends on each member of society working for the common good.

Canterbury's parable is meant as an illustration of the general principle that Exeter has just stated in the preceding speech. 'Government,' says Exeter,

though high and low and lower,
Put into parts, doth keep in one consent,
Congreeing in a full and natural close,
Like music. (180–3)

Musical harmony is a key metaphor in political debate in this period.³⁴ In formulating their constitutional arguments both apologists for and critics of the crown appeal to the laws of a nature whose characteristic feature is 'harmonicall agreement' and 'due proportion'.³⁵ That Exeter's appeal to these familiar Pythagorean principles should make Canterbury think of bees is not in itself surprising. The association is conventional. The *inscriptio* of an early seventeenth-century emblem illustrating the principles of social harmony explains that

As busie Bees unto their Hive doe swarme,
So do's th' attractive power of *Musicke* charme . . .
This *Harmony* in t' humane *Fabricke* steales
And is the sinewes of all Common-weales.³⁶

³⁴ See below ch. 6.

³⁵ Pierre de La Primaudaye, *The French Academie* (London, 1586), p. 743.

³⁶ *The Mirrour of Maiestie: or, The Badges of Honour* (1618), facsimile copy, ed. Henry Green and James Croston (London, 1870), Sig. F2. The beehive analogy is a commonplace in classical, medieval, and Renaissance political writing (see J.H. Walter's notes to 1.ii in his Arden edition of *Henry V*, p. 22). In the *Education of a Christian Prince* (trans. with introduction by Lester K. Born (New York: Columbia University Press, 1936)), which Shakespeare is known to have used when he was writing *Henry V*, Erasmus uses the beehive analogy to caution the prince against the temptation to enlarge his territories (cited in Andrew Gurr, 'Henry V and the Bees' Commonwealth', *ShS*, 30 (1977), 61–72).

The significant thing about the archbishop's little clerical homily is not its content – which is conventional enough – but the context in which it is made and the lesson that Canterbury draws from it. The irony of Canterbury's speech is that he should appeal to harmonist principles, not in order to defend the Orphic arts of peace, but to argue for war. In what seems no less of a *non sequitur* than Hector's abrupt volte-face at the end of his eloquent exposition of natural law in *Troilus and Cressida* (II.ii.173–92), the archbishop concludes his parable of social harmony with a call to arms: 'Therefore to France, my liege' (I.ii.213).

Behind Canterbury's speech lies a long debate on the arts of war and peace.³⁷ At the end of the play there is another reminder of that debate. In an extended natural image, ironically of great beauty, the Duke of Burgundy reflects sadly on the way peace, the 'nurse of arts', has been 'mangled' by war. As nature reverts to wildness, so humanity seems to return to its primal savagery:

An all our vineyards, fallows, meads, and hedges,
Defective in their natures, grow to wildness;
Even so our houses and ourselves and children
Have lost, or do not learn for want of time,
The sciences that should become our country;
But grow, like savages – as soldiers will
That nothing do but meditate on blood. (v.ii.54–60)

But Henry, unlike the effeminate Richard II, is no 'nurse of arts'. Above all he is a holy warrior. Having satisfied himself that he has good legal and religious grounds for going to war, he announces his decision. With calm deliberation he declares that once France is his he will either bend it to his will or 'break it all to pieces' (I.ii.224–5). When the French ambassadors arrive he informs them that he is 'no tyrant, but a Christian king' (241). J.H. Walter has shown that Shakespeare knew Erasmus' *Education of a Christian Prince* well and was probably working closely with it when he wrote *Henry V*.³⁸ But Henry's notion of what it means to be a Christian king could not be more different from Erasmus'. For Erasmus clemency is one of the prince's cardinal virtues.³⁹ So too is it for Shakespeare's Portia. If

³⁷ See Robert P. Adams, *The Better Part of Valor: More, Erasmus, Colet, and Vives on Humanism, War, and Peace 1496–1535* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1962); Philip C. Dust, *Three Renaissance Pacifists: Essays on the Theories of Erasmus, More, and Vives* (New York: Peter Lang, 1987).

³⁸ Introduction to *Henry V*, pp. xvii–xviii.

³⁹ *The Education of a Christian Prince*, trans. Born, p. 209.

mercy 'becomes / The thronèd monarch better than his crown' it is because 'It is an attribute of God himself' (*MV*, IV.i.185–192). By contrast Henry sees himself as the scourge of a vindictive God. In retaliation for the Dauphin's insult, Henry tells the ambassadors to warn their prince that

his soul

Shall stand sore chargèd for the wasteful vengeance
That shall fly at 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,
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-hallowed cause. (I.ii.282–93)

It would be difficult to think of a more aptly ironic comment on such cold savagery than Exeter's 'This was a merry message'(298).

Dramatically the whole scene is of crucial importance in establishing one of the play's central thematic concerns, that is the dangers of single-minded idealism. Many critics and historians – including, I suspect, Holinshed – are suspicious of Canterbury's motives. Legally his arguments may be sound,⁴⁰ but the effect of his speech is not to clarify matters but to confuse them. That Henry himself seems to be satisfied with the archbishop's exposition of Salic Law does not mean that he is a 'conniving hypocrite'. What we see of Henry in this scene is in keeping with fifteenth-century apocalyptic interpretations of his providential role as the scourge of God: first he confirms that he has a 'well-hallowed cause'; then he coolly and openly tells his enemies what they can expect if they dare to oppose his will. The truly frightening thing about him is the sense he has of the absolute rightness of his cause. Having 'whipped th' offending Adam out of him' (I.i.30), he is now a man driven by a powerful sense of missionary zeal. Though he claims to be a Christian king, it is really Mars who is his true god, and Henry is his scourge. By contrast, the clergy with whom he deals are not idealists inspired by a divine mission, but cynical politicians who are prepared to see

⁴⁰ See Theodor Meron, *Henry's Wars and Shakespeare's Laws: Perspectives on the Law of War in the Later Middle Ages* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), pp. 27ff.

England go to war rather than lose their lands. Defending Canterbury's speech against the usual charges of tedium and incomprehensibility, Gary Taylor argues that the archbishop's performance is 'both comprehensible and dramatically necessary': comprehensible because Elizabethans were apparently interested in Salic Law and were used to listening to long speeches, and dramatically necessary because if one wants to build up to a thrilling climax (Henry's riposte to the Dauphin) one has to begin at a low pitch.⁴¹ Taylor needs to defend the archbishop's speech because he believes that Shakespeare approved of Henry's policies and wanted to justify them. Dramatically, however, what comes over most strongly in these crucial opening scenes is not the transparent justice of Henry's cause, but the inherent danger of unholy alliances between unscrupulous cynicism and single-minded idealism, a motif that Shakespeare was later to develop to devastating effect in another tale about an idealistic soldier and a Machiavellian cynic.

But Henry is no Othello; a steely self control is one of his most impressive characteristics. It is not just that he is good at mastering his feelings; as he admits when he learns of the killing of the luggage boys, normally he is simply not prone to strong emotions. But in this case anger is an entirely appropriate response. The other occasion when he allows his anger to show is in the argument with Williams.

The disguised king who shows his true humanity by mingling with his people in a brief interlude of benevolent deception is a common motif in Elizabethan fiction.⁴² It is just such a stereotype that the Chorus evokes as he asks us to imagine Henry passing among his 'ruined band' of soldiers and raising their spirits with his 'cheerful semblance and sweet majesty' (iv. Chorus.29, 40). But the reality is rather different. Instead of cheering his men, Henry quarrels with them, provoking Bates to call him and Williams a pair of 'English fools' (iv.i.220). It is Bates who triggers the argument by innocently suggesting that at a moment like the present the king is probably wishing he were anywhere but at Agincourt. Henry tells him that, 'his cause being just and his quarrel honourable' (126-7), it is unlikely that the king would want to be anywhere else. Bates is not interested in challenging the point, but Williams immediately picks it

⁴¹ Introduction to *Henry V*, pp. 34-8.

⁴² Anne Barton, 'The King Disguised: Shakespeare's *Henry V* and the Comical History', in *The Triple Bond: Plays, Mainly Shakespearean, in Performance*, ed. Joseph G. Price (University Park and London: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1975), pp. 92-117.

up: 'But if the cause be not good, the King himself hath a heavy reckoning to make' (133-4). We thus return to the play's central politico-religious problem. In an apocalyptic image of dismembered bodies joining together at the day of judgment, Williams speculates on the horror of dying unattended on the battlefield knowing that wives and children are left unprotected and debts unpaid. If the cause for which these men are about to die is not a good one, he says, 'it will be a black matter for the King that led them to it' (143-4). Unknowingly Williams has touched on something that is dear to Henry's heart. Little wonder that he becomes angry, for who is Williams, a common soldier, to question the scourge of God? Henry's response is a long speech absolving the king of any responsibility for the souls of men who die with 'irreconciled iniquities' (152); such men, he tells Williams, cannot expect to escape the wrath of God, for 'War is his beadle. War is his vengeance' (167-8). Williams and the king are clearly talking at cross-purposes: one is thinking about soldiers dying with unprotected dependants; the other is concerned to obey the will of a vindictive 'God of battles'. Henry's theology is harsh and, so far as Williams is concerned, irrelevant. But it is not said in bad faith. If Henry fails to answer Williams' worries it is because he is apparently incapable of understanding the concerns of a common soldier. As he admitted when he threatened the citizens of Harfleur with 'heady murder, spoil, and villainy' (III.iii.115), 'What is it then to me' if the innocent suffer? 'What is 't to me?' (98, 102). Henry's mind is on loftier things than the sufferings of common people. As we hear him pray to his God of battles at the end of the scene there is no question of his sincerity. Henry's fault is not 'juggling' hypocrisy, but an apocalyptic idealism that is incapable of doubting its own validity. If there is a moral in this play it must be: beware of men with visions.

The debate with Williams does not show Henry to good advantage. But the following morning he is in his true element. His rallying cry to his troops in the Crispin's Day speech is not a piece of cynical bravado, but an expression of unaffected joy in doing the one thing that, for the chevalier, gives meaning and purpose to life:

We few, we happy few, we band of brothers.
For he today that sheds his blood with me
Shall be my brother. (iv.iii.60-2)

For the medieval knight war provides the ultimate test of his virtue; it is something for which his whole training in the chivalric arts has been a preparation. This is why Henry tells Westmoreland that he would not wish for any additional men, since that would diminish the glory of the hour:

I would not lose so great an honour
As one man more methinks would share from me
For the best hope I have. O do not wish one more. (31–3)

War does not just provide a test of a knight's prowess; to die well is a consummation devoutly to be wished. Johan Huizinga quotes a passage from Jean de Bueil's *Le Jouvencel* (c. 1466) that captures wonderfully the idealized sentiments that war is capable of inspiring:

It is a joyous thing, is war . . . You love your comrade so in war. When you see that your quarrel is just and your blood is fighting well, tears rise to your eye. A great sweet feeling of loyalty and of pity fills your heart on seeing your friend so valiantly exposing his body to execute and accomplish the command of our Creator. And then you prepare to go and die or live with him, and for love not to abandon him. And out of that there arises such a delectation, that he who has not tasted it is not fit to say what a delight it is. Do you think that a man who does that fears death? Not at all; for he feels so strengthened, he is so elated, that he does not know where he is. Truly he is afraid of nothing.⁴³

Idealization of battle is the very core of medieval chivalry. It is the knight's moment of true glory. The same sentiments as those described by Jean de Bueil are expressed in Exeter's account of the deaths of Suffolk and York in Scene vi. Exeter's speech is a powerfully moving piece of theatre. In dramatic contrast to the disorder and confusion among the demoralized French (Scene v), we are now given a picture of heroic self sacrifice and sublime emotion as two noble warriors, brothers in chivalry, are united in death. Exeter reports how, tenderly kissing the torn and bleeding face of his companion in arms, York cries

‘Tarry, dear cousin Suffolk.
My soul shall thine keep company to heaven.
Tarry, sweet soul, for mine, then fly abreast,
As in this glorious and well-foughten field
We kept together in our chivalry.’ (iv.vi.15–19)

⁴³ J. Huizinga, *The Waning of the Middle Ages* (1924; repr. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1982), p. 73.

Holding Exeter's hand, the dying York asks him to commend him to the king. Then he kisses the lips of his dead companion once more;

And so espous'd to death, with blood he sealed
A testament of noble-ending love. (26-7)

No conventional love scene in Shakespeare is so affecting. Indeed so moving is Exeter's story that even Henry is almost moved to tears – almost, but not quite (iv.vi.33-4). If this battle scene had been written in the fifteenth century it might just have been possible to take it seriously. A century later it is the purest kitsch.⁴⁴

But Shakespeare, always the self-conscious dramatist, distances us from the artfully constructed pathos of the scene. As if to signal the fact that Exeter's romantic chivalry is no more than theatrical sentimentality, the mood of maudlin heroism is abruptly broken by an alarum signalling that the French have regrouped, and we are brought back abruptly from a dream of heroic romance to the killing field. With brutal efficiency Henry immediately orders the prisoners to be killed. Since the prisoners are actually on stage at the time the order is given, Gary Taylor is probably right in suggesting that the killing would have taken place in front of the audience.⁴⁵ Whether or not circumstances on the battlefield at Agincourt meant that it was tactically necessary to kill the prisoners is something that no theatre audience would have time to consider. Dramatically, though, its impact is powerful. This time it is Gower who provides the commentary. Supposing, wrongly, that Henry had ordered the killing of the prisoners in retaliation for the slaughter of the luggage boys, he says, 'O, 'tis a gallant king' (iv.vii.10).

THE DANGERS OF IDEALISM

One effect of the meeting between Henry and his bishops at the beginning of the play is to make us warm to Henry's integrity. Confronted with such blatant episcopal cynicism, it is not difficult to admire the man of honour. As Robert Ashley wrote in a treatise entitled *Of Honour* (c. 1600):

By honour are vertues kindled and encouraged, by honour are vices eschewed, by honour ignoraunce, error and folly, sloth and sluggishness,

⁴⁴ On kitsch in *Henry V* see also Robin Headlam Wells, 'Neo-Petrarchan Kitsch in *Romeo and Juliet*', *MLR*, 93 (1998), 913-14.

⁴⁵ Introduction to *Henry V*, p. 32.

hatred and fear, shame and ignoraunce, and all evill affecciions are alayed.⁴⁶

Henry is a man inspired by a heroic ideal. At Agincourt his integrity and his valour are set off to even greater advantage by the foolish boasting of the Dauphin (iii.vii). When the man of honour is as gifted an orator as Henry is, the combination of missionary zeal and impassioned eloquence is almost irresistible. Against our better judgment we respond to his inspiring words and forget for the moment the cruel reality behind the noble rhetoric. Yet repeatedly the play brings us back to that reality. Even as the Act II Chorus describes how England's youth are fired with thoughts of war, he tells us that they follow Henry to battle like 'English Mercuries' (ii. chorus.3-4, 7). Like so many of his Olympian clients, Mercury has a double nature. He is both peacemaker and thief.⁴⁷ Which of them Henry is depends on one's point of view. Lydgate described the historical Henry as a 'prince of pes' resolving an ancient dynastic dispute (*Troy Book*, v.3416); the author of the *Gesta Henrici Quinti* says he is 'the true elect of God'. Shakespeare's Henry also sees himself as a peacemaker. Ironically it is on the eve of a battle in which some ten thousand men are about to lose their lives that Henry reflects on his peacemaking role. As he ponders the cares of office he thinks ruefully how the peasant little knows 'what watch the King keeps to maintain the peace' (iv.i.280). But Erasmus had no time for millenarian fantasies. He saw Henry's campaigns as a classic example of the folly of attempting to extend territory. To him the chivalric ideals that endorsed them were simply a means of promoting war under a veneer of glory. What Shakespeare thought about Henry we can only guess. However, it is interesting that, having given us a heroic image of chivalrous English warriors setting off to do battle for their country's honour, he then immediately produces some English Mercuries of a very different kind in Scene ii. The ironic parallel between Henry's exploits and those of his soldiers is underlined by Fluellen's comparison of him to Alexander the Great: 'If you mark

⁴⁶ Robert Ashley, *Of Honour*, edited with an introduction by Virgil B. Heltzel (San Marino, Calif.: The Huntington Library, 1947), p. 30.

⁴⁷ On Mercury as a symbolic representative of peace, government, and control see Douglas Brooks-Davies, *The Mercurian Monarch: Magical Politics from Spenser to Pope* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1983), p. 2; see also Edgar Wind *Pagan Mysteries in the Renaissance* (London: Faber, 1958), p. 912. On his thieving habits see the Homeric *Hymn to Hermes*; see also Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, ii.685ff.; ii.815ff.

Alexander's life well, Harry of Monmouth's life is come after it indifferent well' (iv.vii.30–2).

There are several allusions to Alexander in the play (i.i.46; iii.i.19; iv.vii.13ff). But the anecdote from Alexander's life that is most damaging to Henry is the general's meeting with a pirate he has taken prisoner. In St Augustine's version of the story Alexander asks Dionides how he dare 'molest the seas'. Dionides replies: 'How darest thou molest the whole world? But because I doe it with a little ship onely, I am called a theefe: thou doing it with a great Navie, art called an Emperour'.⁴⁸ In the light of Erasmus' deprecation of war between neighbouring rulers when disagreements could easily be settled by arbitration,⁴⁹ Bardolph's complaint at the pointless brawling of his companions sounds very much like an oblique comment on his betters.

If, as Fluellen says, 'there is figures in all things' (iv.vii.32), we have to ask what the function of these subplot scenes is with their foolish squabbling, petty thieving, and preposterous heroics. Is it to reveal 'true things by what their mock'ries be' (iv. Chorus.53), and in this way to show to advantage the 'gret manhode' for which Henry was praised by his contemporaries?⁵⁰ Or is it to suggest that, for all Henry's noble rhetoric, his foreign policy is merely thievery on an international scale? In 1599 Shakespeare had good reasons for not declaring his hand.

THE COLLAPSE OF CHIVALRY

Henry V was written and performed while Essex was out of the country. Until news began to filter back to London of the truce that he had been forced to conclude with Tyrone in September 1599, no one could have predicted with certainty the outcome of the earl's mission to suppress the Irish rebellion. Success might lead to a reconciliation with the queen and the rehabilitation of his own reputation as crusading national hero; failure would in all probability mean the end of his political career, at least while Elizabeth

⁴⁸ St Augustine of Hippo, *Of the Citie of God*, trans. J. Healey (London, 1610). For this point I am indebted to Janet M. Spencer, 'Princes, Pirates, and Pigs: Criminalizing Wars of Conquest in *Henry V*', *SQ*, 47 (1996), 160–77.

⁴⁹ *The Education of a Christian Prince*, trans. Born, pp. 252–3.

⁵⁰ William of Worcester, *The Boke of Noblesse: Addressed to King Edward III on his Invasion of France*, with an introduction by John Gough Nichols (London: J.B. Nichols, 1860) p. 20.

was alive. In dealing with a historical figure with whom the earl was so closely identified, Shakespeare had to tread with extreme caution. The dangers of linking oneself too closely with the earl are vividly illustrated by the imprisonment of Sir John Hayward in July 1600. Hayward's crime was that of publishing what Elizabeth regarded as a seditious history of Henry IV. His injudicious choice of subject matter was compounded by the extravagant praise he offered to Essex in the dedication of *The First Part of the Life and Raigne of King Henry IIII*. At Hayward's trial it was put to him that, by dealing with the deposition of a reigning monarch by a group of discontented noblemen, and by writing about it in a way that seemed to invite readers to draw parallels with contemporary events, he was in effect inciting rebellion.⁵¹ Whatever Shakespeare's personal views of Essex were, the Hayward trial cannot have been reassuring. Not only was Hayward dealing with precisely the same period of history that he himself had already dramatized in the first three plays of his second historical tetralogy, but Hayward's allegedly seditious theory of history was actually no more pointed than the Tacitean views that Shakespeare had put into the mouth of Warwick in the second part of *Henry IV* (III.i.75–87). With Hayward still in the Tower, the Chamberlain's Men were understandably reluctant when they were asked by Essex's supporters in February 1601 to put on a performance of a play called *Richard II*. Had they known that a military coup would be attempted the very next day, it is unlikely that they would have agreed.

Essex's supporters knew that their leader's political career depended on the outcome of the Irish campaign. What no one could have predicted in the summer of 1599 was the extraordinary nature of the events that would follow his return from Ireland.⁵² While Essex's quarrel with the queen; his house arrest; the trial in June 1600; his plans for seizing the centres of power – while all these were the ingredients of high political drama, the coup itself was more like farce. Instead of rallying to his cause, as Essex had expected, the

⁵¹ *The First and Second Part of John Hayward's 'The Life and Raigne of King Henrie IIII'*, ed. with an introduction by John J. Manning, Camden Fourth Series, vol. 42 (London: Royal Historical Society, 1991), pp. 31–2.

⁵² The story of the rebellion has been told many times. See especially G.B. Harrison, *The Life and Death of Robert Devereux, Earl of Essex* (London, Toronto, Melbourne, and Sydney: Cassell, 1937); Robert Lacey, *Robert, Earl of Essex: An Elizabethan Icarus* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1971); Mervyn James, *Society, Politics and Culture: Studies in Early Modern England* (1978; repr., Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), pp. 416–65.