Warfare, According to Shakespeare

by Theodore Dalrymple (February 2024)

King Henry V, Artist Unknown, 16th or 17th century

When I was a boy, which sometimes seems but yesterday and at other times seems a very long time ago (but not both at any given moment), Shakespeare's *Henry V* was taught in England as a straightforwardly patriotic play. Perhaps this was because the schoolmasters and mistresses who taught it had lived through the war years, and 'We few, we happy few, we band of brothers' had for them a Churchillian ring. Henry V was Churchill and Churchill was Henry V, leading his country to an unlikely victory over a stronger and better-armed foe. It was in this spirit that Laurence Olivier's wartime film of the play was made. It uplifted the national spirit as a teddy bear reassures a child.

Of course, this purely patriotic interpretation was simplistic, and the play is much more complex than any such reading of it would suggest. Shakespeare, who was so alive to the ambiguities and contradictions of life, would hardly have written anything so morally and psychologically crude. *Richard III*, an earlier piece of work, might no doubt be construed as a justification of the Tudor dynasty under which he then lived, and which he was hardly free to criticise (the greatest literature has mostly been written under conditions of censorship, and it would be interesting to speculate as to why), but it would hardly have continued to fascinate audiences to this day of that were *all* it were. Few fail to thrill at the monstrous evil of Richard who attributes his own deformation of soul to the deformation of his body, a claim disproved by the fact that he is able, by means of the fascination of his personality and his smooth-talking tongue, to seduce in short order the wife of a man whom he has just killed, thus giving the lie to the assertion in his opening soliloquy that because he could not 'prove a lover…' he was 'determined to prove a villain.' His self-explication of his own character was, in fact, was a forerunner of the kind of explanations we give ourselves today, encouraged to do so by

the monstrous regiment of psychologists and psychotherapists.

That *Henry V* is not straightforwardly patriotic is proved by the final chorus, in which it is made clear that Shakespeare expected his audience to be familiar with the three parts of his *Henry VI* 'which oft our stage hath shown.' Everyone knew that Henry V died young, succeeded by a very weak monarch:

> *Henry the Sixth, in infant bands crowned King*
> *Of France and England, did this king succeed,*
> *Whose state so many had the managing*
> *That they lost France and made his England bleed…*

Thus, the victory was soon followed by defeat, and while victory is fleeting, defeat is lasting. Nemesis is stronger than hubris; triumphalism is foolish. He left nothing that endured, surely the mark of a great ruler: his reign was like an attempt to light a city with fireworks.

Moreover, Henry V himself, though clearly a hero, is in some important ways not an attractive man—as heroes often are not. His earlier brutal disavowal of Falstaff after his ascent to the throne ('I know thee not, old man'), after having spent so much time cavorting with him, might have been wise or necessary from the state's point of view, but from the human point of view is distinctly unpleasant. It is rarely pleasing to see a poacher turn gamekeeper, and in any case Falstaff might have proved a better adviser in the matter of making war than those flatterers and deceivers to whom Henry gave ear—even if he gave them ear only because his mind was already made up. Falstaff, being a coward who knew what war really was, would have advised against it and thereby avoided the disaster that ensued.

Shakespeare shows Henry V, or rather *his* Henry V, to have been

a hypocrite, a double dealer. He listens patiently to the Archbishop of Canterbury's lengthy and pedantic exposition of why the implementation of the Salic law in France was historically unjustified, being applicable only in Germany, which in turn justified his claim to the French throne, but knows at the same time that his claim to the throne of England is illegitimate, for it is based upon the usurpation of it by his father, Henry Bolingbroke, self-proclaimed Henry IV, who set off nearly a century of civil war by his overweening ambition. True, the Richard II whom he overthrew and had killed was not a good monarch; but monarchy itself is not justified by the moral qualities of the monarch, legitimacy of succession being vital to it if it is not to descend into chaos. Only extremity of need could justify usurpation, and it did not exist in Richard and Bolingbroke's case.

Henry V is fully aware of this. On the very eve of battle, he soliloquises:

> *Not today, O Lord,*
> *O not today, think not upon the fault*
> *My father made in compassing the crown.*

His sense of guilt is not fleeting, either, a matter of momentary doubt:

> *I Richard's body have interred anew,*
> *And on it have bestowed more contrite tears*
> *Than from it issued drops of blood.*
> *Five hundred poor I have in yearly pay,*
> *Who twice a day their withered hands hold up*
> *Toward heaven to pardon blood…*

To a modern sensibility, at least, there is something unctuous about this, for Henry's guilt and awareness of his own political illegitimacy does not cause him to forego anything—his crown, for example—and indeed he is perfectly willing to lead thousands of men to their death out of loyalty to himself. By comparison the recherché discussion of the applicability or inapplicability of the Salic law to France, the recent usurpation of the crown seems vastly more morally salient. In short, the great national hero Henry V is revealed to be a practitioner of ruthless self-interest. Even Claudius in *Hamlet*, another usurping king, is more self-aware than Henry, and he is certainly no hero:

> *But O, what form of prayer*
> *Can serve my turn: 'Forgive me my foul murder'?*
> *That cannot be, since I am still possessed*
> *Of those effects for which I did the murder.*
> *My crown, mine own ambition and my Queen.*
> *May one be pardoned and retain th'offence?*

Furthermore, Henry is shown to be a man who might serve as a forerunner of contemporary viciousness. At the siege of Honfleur, he tells the governor of the town that unless he surrenders:

> *The gates of mercy shall all be shut up,*
> *And the fleshed soldier, tough and hard of heart,*
> *In liberty of bloody hand shall range*
> *With conscience wide as hell, mowing like grass*
> *Your fresh fair virgins and your flowering infants.*

In this case, there will be nothing Henry can do about it, because:

> *We may as bootless spend our vain command*
> *Upon th'enraged soldiers in their spoil*
> *As send precepts to the leviathan*
> *To come ashore.*

Henry paints a picture of what will happen if there is no surrender: the rape of young girls and the murder of old men. Then, with moral effrontery as great as any ever known, he asks the governor:

> *What say you? Will you yield and this avoid?*
> *Or, guilty in defence, be thus destroyed?*

On Henry's moral theory, the robber who stabs a victim to death, having warned him of what he would do if he does not hand over his money, is absolved of his crime and can think of himself as innocent. I need hardly point out the parallels in the modern world.

Moreover, Henry subscribes to the theory that two wrongs do make a right. During the battle of Agincourt (according to Shakespeare's Henry V, the author having followed Holinshed's account of events pretty closely), French knights raided and robbed English tents defended only by young boys, whom they killed. For Henry, this justifies the order that all French prisoners are, against the laws of war, to be killed, though the prisoners to be killed were not personally responsible for

the deaths of the boys. No doubt in the heat of war it is an unrealistic counsel of perfection that no one should be held, without evidence, to be collectively responsible; but in a supposed hero, such open espousal of the theory of collective moral responsibility (which would justify the massacres and hostage taking of Hamas, for example, in the eyes of many Palestinians) is not very attractive.

I admit that I am looking at these questions from the perspective of a modern sensibility, that of the liberal individualist. Maybe there were no such people in Shakespeare's day: perhaps an audience of 1599 (the almost certain date of the play) would have taken it for granted that the prisoners taken from an army should be held collectively responsible for the bad conduct of their fellow soldiers. *Of course*: but if so, it is part of the genius of Shakespeare that, centuries later, *of course* is not to be found in his work.

There is a revealing parallel between two speeches in *Richard II* and *Henry V*. It is surely no coincidence that the two kings should say something similar. While Richard is in no sense a hero, however, his speech is very moving; while Henry is a hero, or commonly taken as such, his speech is not moving and seems insincere and self-serving. Adversity is often the midwife of sincerity.

After his destitution from the crown, Richard reflects on the existential equality of mankind:

> *For you have but mistook me all this while:*
> *I live with bread like you, feel want,*
> *Taste grief, need friends: subjected thus,*
> *How can you say to me, I am a king?*

Henry V, under disguise as he tries to draw out the opinion of him of his common soldiers, says:

> *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…*
> *Therefore when he sees reason of fears as we do, his fears, out of*
> *doubt, be of the same relish as ours are.*

This speech has not the emotional impact that Richard's lament has, precisely because it is being used as an instrument. Richard's speech has no such instrumental purpose but is pure desolation.

Naturally, Henry in Shakespeare's depiction has qualities. He is brave (though it must be remembered that bravery in a bad cause is not what Sellar and Yeatman—authors of *1066 and All That*—would have called 'a good thing.' Bravery is not self-sufficient as a virtue: it requires the addition of some other moral quality to make it a moral quality itself.).

Henry is intelligent and has a good grasp of human nature, which is necessary for a man to be an effective ruler. Pitying himself for the burden of being king, he knows how eager his subjects are to make him responsible for everything:

> *Upon the King! 'Let us our lives, our souls,*
> *Our debts, our careful wives,*

Our children and our sins lay on the King!’
We must bear it all. O hard condition,
Twin-born with greatness, subject to the breath
Of every fool whose sense no more can feel
But his own wringing!

Replace the word King by government and you have the predicament of the governors today: though a hard condition as it may be to be a governor, yet there seems to be no shortage of people ready to assume it. But to me, this self-pity of a guilty king rings unpleasantly in the mind’s ear.

Henry is eloquent, but like many a politician he pretends, when eloquently wooing Katherine, the daughter of the defeated French king, to be a plain-speaking man without sophistication. In this, he is a little like Richard III when he claims not to be able to play the lover on account of his deformity. Does Henry know that his choice and delivery of words contradict their own meaning, or does he both know and not know at the same time? Even as he woos, he says something that, to modern ears at least, sounds distinctly sinister.

When Alice, Katherine’s lady-in-waiting confirms to Henry, as he tries to kiss Katherine, that ‘It is not a fashion for the maids in France to kiss before they are married’, Henry says:

O Kate, nice customs curtsy to great kings. Dear Kate, you and I
cannot be confined within the weak list [limits] of a country’s
fashion. We are the makers of manners, Kate, and the liberty that
follows our places stops the mouth of all find-faults…

We have no great kings any more, of course, but we have great people who cannot be confined within the weak list of a country's fashion. And since all men are created equal, they are indeed the makers of manners, not necessarily to the advantage of society as a whole. But at the very least, Henry's pretensions to modesty are here revealed as false and hypocritical. He is every inch a king, an absolute monarch. He might even be considered a monarchical populist.

Certainly, we may say that Henry is not a straightforward patriotic hero, at least not in the text. He can be presented as such in the theatre with perfect plausibility. Shakespeare, be it remembered, was writing both for the gentles and for the groundlings, who would have had different levels of understanding: and even the gentles, without the text before them, might have had difficulty catching some of the psychological nuances as the play rushed past them in performance, the 'bending author' having 'pursued the story/ In little room confining mighty men,/ Mangling by starts the full course of their glory.' It is one of the glories of Shakespeare, though, that he, like life itself, is capable of being interpreted at different levels simultaneously without absurdity.

To the religious aspects of *Henry V* I will turn shortly.

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Theodore Dalrymple's latest books are *Neither Trumpets nor Violins* (with Kenneth Francis and Samuel Hux) and *Ramses: A Memoir* from New English Review Press.

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