Rabbits, Ducks, and *Henry V*

NORMAN RABKIN

The greater plays leave us knowing we should be perplexed. No explication satisfies us that *Macbeth* or *King Lear*, *Hamlet* or *Othello* or *The Winter's Tale* has been safely reduced to a formula that answers all our questions. Such plays tell us that mystery is their mode; the questions aroused by them seem unanswerable, because each play in its own way creates an image of a world that is unfathomable where we most need to understand it.

*Henry V* is no such play. Rather, it repeatedly elicits simple and whole-hearted responses from its critics, interpretations that seem solidly based on total readings of a consistent whole. This is not to say, however, that the critics agree with each other. As a matter of fact, they could hardly disagree more radically. "For some" of them, a recent writer remarks, "the play presents the story of an ideal monarch and glorifies his achievements; for them, the tone approaches that of an epic lauding the military virtues. For others, the protagonist is a Machiavellian militarist who professes Christianity but whose deeds reveal both hypocrisy and ruthlessness; for them, the tone is predominantly one of mordant satire."

One way to deal with a play that provokes such conflicting responses is to try to find the truth somewhere between them. Another is to suggest that the author couldn't make up his mind which side he wanted to come down on and left us a mess. A third is to interpret all the signals indicating one polar reading as intentional, and to interpret all the other signals as irrepressible evidence that Shakespeare didn't believe what he was trying to say. All of these strategies have been mounted against *Henry V*; and all of them are just as wrong as most critics now recognize similar attempts to domesticate the greater plays to be.

I am going to argue that in *Henry V* Shakespeare creates a work whose ultimate power is precisely the fact that it points in two opposite directions, virtually daring us to choose one of the two opposed interpretations it requires of us. In this deceptively simple play Shakespeare experiments, perhaps more shockingly than elsewhere, with a structure like the gestaltist's familiar draw-

---

1 Karl P. Wentersdorf, "The Conspiracy of Silence in *Henry V*," *SQ*, 27 (1976), p. 265. See Wentersdorf's notes 3 and 4 for representatives of both points of view. Though inconclusive itself, Wentersdorf's essay presents evidence apparently intended to suggest that the truth lies somewhere between, a position to be discussed below.

NORMAN RABKIN, Professor of English at the University of California, Berkeley, and Visiting Professor of English at Harvard University in the spring of 1977, has recently co-edited, with Russell A. Fraser, a two-volume collection of *Drama of the English Renaissance*.
We can see the picture as either a rabbit or a duck. It is easy to discover both readings. It is less easy to describe what happens when we switch from one interpretation to the other. Clearly we do not have the illusion that we are confronted with a "real" duck or rabbit. The shape on the paper resembles neither animal very closely. And yet there is no doubt that the shape transforms itself in some subtle way when the duck's beak becomes the rabbit's ears and brings an otherwise neglected spot into prominence as the rabbit's mouth. I say "neglected," but does it enter our experience at all when we switch back to reading "duck"? To answer this question, we are compelled to look for what is "really there," to see the shape apart from its interpretation, and this, we soon discover, is not really possible. True, we can switch from one reading to another with increasing rapidity; we will also "remember" the rabbit while we see the duck, but the more closely we watch ourselves, the more certainly we will discover that we cannot experience alternative readings at the same time. Illusion, we will find, is hard to describe or analyze, for though we may be intellectually aware of the fact that any given experience must be an illusion, we cannot, strictly speaking, watch ourselves having an illusion.2

If one considers the context of Henry V, one realizes that the play could scarcely have been anything but a rabbit-duck.

Henry V is, of course, not only a free-standing play but the last part of a tetralogy. Some years earlier, when his talent was up to Titus Andronicus rather than to Hamlet, Shakespeare had had the nerve, at the very beginning of his career, to shape the hopelessly episodic and unstructured materials of his chronicle sources not into the licensed formlessness of the history play his audience was used to, but rather into an integrated series of plays each satisfying as a separate unit but all deriving a degree of added power and meaning from being parts of a unified whole. It is scarcely credible that, with this tetralogy behind him, Shakespeare should have approached the matter of Lancaster without thinking of the possibility of a second unified series of plays. I can think of no other explanation for the fact that already in Richard II Hotspur—a character completely unnecessary to that play—has been made practically a generation younger than his model. The implication of the change is that in 1595 Shakespeare already intended a play about Prince Hal. And as one notices the innumerable cross-references and links and parallels among the plays of the second tetralogy, one feels more confidently than in the first cycle that such connections are not afterthoughts, backward indices in one play to what already existed in earlier plays, but evidence of conscious through-composition.

In any event, whether or not, as I think, Shakespeare knew four or five years beforehand that he would write Henry V, he certainly did know in 1599 that this drama would be the capstone to an edifice of plays tightly mortared to one another. And as with each part of Henry IV, he must have derived enormous power from the expectations his audience brought from the preceding plays. In each of the first three plays the audience had been confronted at the beginning with a set of problems that seemed solved by the end of the

RABBITS, DUCKS, AND Henry V

preceding play but had erupted in different forms as soon as the new play began. Thus the meaning of each of the plays subsequent to Richard II had been enriched by the audience's recognition of the emergence of old problems in a new guise. By the time the cycle reached Henry V, the recurrent and interlocking set of problems had become so complex that a reflective audience must have found it impossible to predict how the last play could possibly resolve them.

The unresolved thematic issue at the end of Richard II is the conflict of values embodied in the two kings who are its protagonists: Bullingbrook's talent as opposed to Richard's legitimacy; Bullingbrook's extroverted energy and calculating pursuit of power as opposed to Richard's imagination, inwardness, and sense of mortality. Richard's qualities make possible in him a spiritual life that reveals him as closer—even in his inadequacy—to the ideal figures of the comedies than is his successor, who none the less has the sheer force to survive and to rule to his country's advantage. If the play is structured to force one by the end to choose Bullingbrook as the better king—one need only contrast his disposition of Exton at the close with Richard's of Mowbray at the opening—one nevertheless finds one's emotions rather surprisingly committed to the failed Richard. Richard II thus poses a question that arches over the entire tetralogy: can the manipulative qualities that guarantee political success be combined in one man with the spiritual qualities that make one fully open and responsive to life and therefore fully human? Or, to put it more accurately, can political resourcefulness be combined with qualities more like those of an audience as it sees itself?

I Henry IV moves the question to a new generation, asking in effect whether the qualities split between Richard and Bullingbrook can be united in Hal. And in the manner of a comedy, it suggests optimistically that indeed they can. Thus Hal's famous schematic stance between the appropriately dead Hotspur and a Falstaff equally appropriately feigning death indicates not so much a compromise between their incompatible values as the difference between Hal's ability to thrive in a world of process by employing time as an instrument and Hotspur's and Falstaff's oddly similar unwillingness to do so.

For Hotspur, there is only the present moment. Even an hour is too long for life if honor is not its definition, and a self-destructive recklessness leads Hotspur to fight his battle at the wrong time, hoping naively thereby to gain more glory. For Falstaff, time is equally irrelevant. Like the Forest of Arden he needs no clock, since he has nowhere to go. He lives cyclically, recurring always to the same satisfactions of the same appetites, playing holiday every day, denying the scars of age and the imminence of death. Both of Hal's alter egos preposterously deny time, Hotspur to meet his death characteristically in midphrase—a phrase that Falstaff has already completed as "Food for powder"—and Falstaff to rise emblematically from his own death and shamelessly assert once again his will to live.

But Hal's affection for both men, so symmetrically expressed, suggests that he is in tune with something in each of them. Unlike his heavy father, but like both Hotspur and Falstaff, he is witty, ebulliently verbal, social, warmly responsive to others. For one illusory moment Shakespeare suggests the possibility of a public man who is privately whole. If the Prince's soliloquy has vowed an amputation he sees from the beginning as necessary, if the play extempore has ended in a suddenly heartbreaking promise to banish plump Jack and banish all the world, followed by the knock of the real world on the
door, *I Henry IV* nevertheless puts us in a comic universe in which Hal need never reject Falstaff in order to reach his father's side in the nick of time; it entices us with the hope of a political world transformed by the life of comedy.

But the end of *Henry IV*, Part One marks only the halfway point, both in this massive tetralogy and in the study of Prince Hal, and Part Two brutally denies the comic optimism we might have expected to encounter once again. With the exception of Hotspur, all the ingredients of Part One seem to be present again, and in some respects they seem stronger than ever. Falstaff is given a scene (II. iv) perhaps even more endearing than Gadshill and its aftermath; he captivates Doll Tearsheet and, against her better knowledge, the Hostess. Ancient Pistol, who adds fresh attraction to the tavern world, performs one of the functions of the missing Hotspur by giving us a mocking perspective on the rhetoric and pretensions of the warrior.

And yet, despite all this and more, the effect of *Henry IV*, Part Two is to narrow possibilities. The rejection of Falstaff at its end seems to be both inevitable and right, yet simultaneously to darken the world for which the paradise of the Boar’s Head must be lost. Hotspur’s absence, emphasized by the dramatic device of the series of rumors from which his father must pick it out at the beginning, roots out of the political world the atmosphere of youth, vigor, charm, and idealistic commitment that Hotspur almost alone had lent it before. And Hotspur’s widow’s just reproaches of her father-in-law stress the old man’s ugly opportunism. Northumberland’s nihilistic curse—

> Let heaven kiss earth! now let not Nature's hand
Keep the wild flood confin'd! let order die!
And let this world no longer be a stage
To feed contention in a ling'ring act;
But let one spirit of the first-born Cain
Reign in all bosoms, that each heart being set
On bloody courses, the rude scene may end,
And darkness be the burier of the dead!
(I. i. 153–60)

—that curse makes clear the destructiveness of his rebellion, a thing far different from his late son’s chivalric quest, and it creates an unequivocal sense that Hal has no choice but to oppose it as effectively as he can. No longer can we assent to Falstaff’s observation, plausible in Part One, that the rebels “offend none but the virtuous” (III. iii. 191), so that opposing them is almost a game. The harshness of the rebels’ cause and company in Part Two demands of the audience a Hotspurrian recognition that this is no world to play with mamms and tilt with lips.

Yet the attractiveness of the King’s cause is reduced too. If in some moments—as in his sensitive meditation on the crown and his emotional final reunion with Hal—Henry IV is more likable in Part Two than he was in Part One, he is no longer an active character (he doesn’t even appear until the third act). And his place is filled by Prince John, as chilling a character as Shakespeare would ever create. Many a villain has more superficial charm than Hal’s upright brother, and the priggish treachery by which Prince John overcomes the rebels arouses in us a distaste for political action, even when it is necessary,

---

such as no previous moment in the plays has occasioned.4 If Shrewsbury implied that a mature politics was compatible with the joy of life lived fully and spontaneously, Gaultree now shows political responsibility as masked and sinister, an ally of death.

Given this characterization of the political world as joyless and cruel whether right or wrong, one might expect Falstaff to carry the day. But in fact Shakespeare reduces him as much as he reduces the workaday world. It was a delicate paradox in Part One that allowed us to admire Falstaff for his ridiculous denial of mortality—"They hate us youth"; "young men must live." Falstaff might worry about how he was dwindling away, but we had no fear of losing so eternal a companion. Or, to put it more accurately, we loved him for allaying such fears; for all his grumbling at Gadshill, he could run when he had to. But in Part Two, Falstaff is mired in gross physicality and the ravages of age, obsessed with his diseases and bodily functions, commanding that the Jordan be emptied, confirming as Doll caresses him ("I am old, I am old") his stage audience's observation that desire has outlasted performance. He is the same Falstaff, but the balance is altered.

As if to reenact his great catechism on honor in Part One, Falstaff is given a similar aria in Part Two. But the praise of sherris sack, funny as it is, is no more than a witty paean to alcohol, and a description at that of the mechanical operation of the spirit, whereas the rejection of honor in Part One was convincing enough almost to undo our respect for anyone who subordinates life to ideals. Or again, the charge of foot for whom Falstaff is responsible in Part One never becomes palpable, except to elicit his sympathetic "Food for powder," which puts him essentially on their side. In Part Two, however, we are introduced to his men by name, we see him choosing them (for the most self-serving reasons), and we are aware of the lives and families that Falstaff is ruining. No longer can we see him as the spokesman of life for its own sake; his ego is self-serving, as not before, at the expense of others.

If the tavern world is no longer alluring for us, it is even more unattractive for Hal. Physically separated from Falstaff in Part Two as not in Part One, the Prince is ready at any moment to express his discomfort, his guilt, his eagerness to be away. The flyting he carries on with Poins is unpleasant: if Hal feels so out of place consorting with commoners, why doesn't he simply stop doing it? We are tempted to agree with Warwick, who tells the King that Hal's only reason for spending time with his companions is his opportunistic scheme to use them:

The Prince but studies his companions
Like a strange tongue, wherein, to gain the language,
'Tis needful that the immodest word
Be look'd upon and learnt, which once attain'd,
Your Highness knows, comes to no further use
But to be known and hated.

(IV. iv. 68–73)

The diseases literally corrupting Falstaff's body are endemic in 2 Henry IV. Sickness and death pervade every element of the plot, virtually every scene, and it is no accident that it is here, not in Part One, that we meet Justice Shallow, in senile debility only a step beyond the aged helplessness of Northumberland

and the King. If the medium of action in Part One was time seen as hidden road that leads providentially toward a fulfilling moment, the medium of Part Two is repetitious and meaningless process drawing relentlessly to universal annihilation. Could one “read the book of fate,” the moribund King reflects, one would have to see the revolution of the times
Make mountains level, and the continent,
Weary of solid firmness, melt itself
Into the sea, and the other times to see
The beachy girdle of the ocean
Too wide for Neptune's hips.

(III. i. 45-51)

What we recognize here is the time of the sonnets, of Ecclesiastes; and War-wick can cheer the King only by reminding him that at least time is inevitable. The sickness that infects both Falstaff and the body politic is the sickness of life itself, joyless and rushing to the grave. In such a world Prince Hal cannot play. He must do what he can for his kingdom, and that means casting Falstaff aside.

About the necessity for the rejection we are not given the chance to have any doubts: Falstaff, after all, has just told his companions that the law is his now, and, as A. R. Humphreys notes,6 Richard II had assured his own fall by making precisely this Nixonian claim. Yet we are forced to feel, and painfully, what an impoverishment of Hal's life the rejection causes.6 And we recognize another aspect of that impoverishment in the drive that moves Hal to take the crown prematurely from his dying father: his commitment to political power has impelled him, as the King recognizes bitterly, to a symbolic gesture that reveals an unconscious readiness for parricide. At the end of Henry IV, Part One, Hal seemed able to accommodate all of England into his family as he moved toward its symbolic fatherhood. By the end of Part Two, in order to become King of England he has reached out to murder both of his fathers.

II

If we fancy ourselves arriving, on an afternoon in 1599, for the first performance of Henry V, we must imagine ourselves quite unsure of what to expect. Some months earlier the Epilogue to 2 Henry IV had promised that “our humble author will continue the story, with Sir John in it, and make you merry with fair Katherine of France, where (for any thing I know) Falstaff shall die of a sweat, unless already 'a be kill'd with your hard opinions; for Oldcastle died [a] martyr, and this is not the man.” This disingenuous come-on allows for both sympathetic and hostile readings of Falstaff, while disclaiming any knowledge of the author's intentions. But the plays that precede Henry V have aroused such ambivalent expectations that the question of the Epilogue is trivial. If Henry V had followed directly on 1 Henry IV, we might have expected to be made merry by the comedy such critics as Dover Wilson have taken that play to be,7 for we have seen a Hal potentially larger than his father,

7 J. Dover Wilson, The Fortunes of Falstaff (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1943).
possessing the force that politics requires without the sacrifice of imagination and range that Bullingbrook has had to pay. But Part Two has told us that Part One deceived us, for the day has had to come when Hal, no longer able to live in two worlds, would be required to make his choice, and the Prince has had to expel from his life the very qualities that made him better than his father. Have we not, after Part Two, good reason to expect in the play about Hal's kingship the study of an opportunist who has traded his humanity for his success, covering over the ruthlessness of the politician with the mere appearance of fellowship that his past has endowed him with? Surely this is what Goddard means when he calls Henry V "the golden casket of The Merchant of Venice, fairer to a superficial view than to a more searching perception."8

As we watch the Prologue stride across the stage of the Curtain, then, we are ready for one of two opposed presentations of the reign of the fifth Henry. Perhaps we hope that the play now beginning will resolve our doubts, set us right, give us a single gestalt to replace the antithetical images before our mind's eye. And that, as is demonstrated by the unequivocal interpretations good critics continue to make, is exactly the force of the play. We are made to see a rabbit or a duck. In fact, if we do not try obsessively to cling to memories of past encounters with the play, we may find that each time we read it it turns from one shape to the other, just as it so regularly does in production. I want to show that Henry V is brilliantly capable of being read, fully and subtly, as each of the plays the two parts of Henry IV had respectively anticipated. Leaving the theatre at the end of the first performance, some members of the audience knew that they had seen a rabbit, others a duck. Still others, and I would suggest that they were Shakespeare's best audience, knew terrifyingly that they did not know what to think.

III

Think of Henry V as an extension of 1 Henry IV. For the generation who came to know it under the spell of Olivier's great film, it is hard to imagine Henry V any other way, but Olivier's distortions, deletions, and embellishments only emphasized what is already in the play. The structure of the entire cycle has led from the beginning of conflict in a quarrel to its end in a wedding, from the disruption of royal power to its unchallenged reassertion. If Richard II at the beginning transformed the normally episodic chronicle form into tragedy, Henry V at the end turns it into comedy: the plot works through the troubles of a threatening world to end in marriage and the promise of a green world. Its protagonist, like Benedick returned to Messina, puts aside military exploits for romance, and charms even his enemies with his effervescent young manhood. Its prologue insists, as the comedies always do, on the importance of imagination, a faculty which Bullingbrook, wise to the needs of a tragic world, had rejected in Richard II as dangerous. And as in all romantic comedy providence guides the play's events to their desired conclusion.9

To be sure, Olivier's camera and Walton's music prettied up the atmosphere, transporting their war-weary audience to the fairy-tale world of the Duc de Berry. But they found their cues in the play—in the Chorus's epic

8 Harold C. Goddard, The Meaning of Shakespeare (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1951), 1, 266.
9 Whether or not the King is hypocritical, as Goddard claims, in crediting his victory to God, this is certainly one reason for the assertion.

285
romanticizations of land and sea, his descriptions of festooned fleets and nocturnal campfires and eager warriors, and his repeated invitations to imagine even more and better. Nor did Olivier invent his film’s awe at the spectacle of the past. In Henry V, as nowhere before in the tetralogy, Shakespeare excites us by making us conscious that we are privileged to be watching the very moments at which event transforms itself into history:

Mont. The day is yours.
K. Hen. Praised be God, and not our strength, for it!
What is this castle call’d that stands hard by?
Mont. They call it Agincourt.
K. Hen. Then call we this the field of Agincourt,
Fought on the day of Crispin Crispianus.
(IV. vii. 86–91)

Ultimately, it was not Olivier’s pictures but the play’s language that made his Henry V so overwhelming, and the rhetoric of the play is extraordinary, unprecedented even in Shakespeare. Think, for example, of the King’s oration to his troops on Saint Crispin’s day (IV. iii. 19–67). Thematically, of course, the speech is a tour de force, subjecting motifs from the tetralogy to Aeschylean or Wagnerian transmutations. Like the dying John of Gaunt, Harry is inspired by a vision of England, but one characteristically his own, made as romantic by the fantasy of neighborhood legionnaires and domestic history lessons as by the magical names of England’s leaders. Unlike Richard II, Harry disprizes trappings, “outward things.” Like Hotspur, he cares only about honor and wants to fight with as few troops as possible in order to acquire more of it: “the fewer men, the greater share of honor.” Like Falstaff, he is finicky about the kind of company he adventures with: “we would not die in that man’s company / That fears his fellowship to die with us.” Again like Falstaff, he thinks of the “flowing cups” to come when the day’s work is done and sees the day’s events in festival terms. Gaily doing battle on the Feast of Crispian, he is literally playing at war like Hotspur, paradoxically uniting the opposed principles of the two most enchanting characters of the cycle.

Such echoes and allusions give Henry’s speech a satisfying finality, a sense of closure. He is the man we have been waiting for, the embodiment of all the virtues the cycle has made us prize without the vices that had accompanied them before. “He is as full of valor as of kindness,” we have heard just before the speech, “Princely in both,” and the Crispin’s day exhortation demonstrates precisely the combination of attributes that Sherman Hawkins has pointed out as belonging to the ideal monarch postulated by Elizabethan royalism.10 But even more powerful than its thematic content is the stunning rhetoric of the King’s tirade: its movement from the King’s honor to his people’s; its crescendo variations on St. Crispin’s day, reaching their climax in the last line; its rhythmic patterns expanding repeatedly from broken lines to flowing periods in each section and concluding climactically in the coda that begins “We happy few”; its language constantly addressed to the pleasures, worries, and aspirations of an audience of citizens. As Michael Goldman perceptively argues, such a speech almost literally moves us. We recognize it as a performance; we share the strain of the King’s greatness, the necessary effort of his image-projecting. “We are thrilled,” Goldman says, “because he is brilliantly meeting a political

10 Hawkins, pp. 313–20 and passim.
challenge that has been spelled out for us. . . . It is a moment when he must respond to the unspoken needs of his men, and we respond to his success as we do when a political leader we admire makes a great campaign speech: we love him for his effectiveness."

The fourth act of Henry V, in the third scene of which this speech has its place, is a paradigm of the King's virtues. It begins with the Chorus's contrast between the "confident and over-lusty French" and the thoughtful and patient Englishmen at their watchful fires on the eve of Agincourt, visited by their generous, loving, brave, and concerned royal captain—"a little touch of Harry in the night." The act moves, first through contrasting scenes in the two camps, then through confrontations of various sorts between the opposing sides, to the victory at Agincourt and the King's call for the charitable treatment of the dead as he announces his return to England. In the course of the act we see Harry, constantly contrasted to the stupid and corrupt French, in a triumphant show of bravery and high spirits. But we see him also in a kind of inwardness we have seldom observed in his father, listening as neither Richard II nor Henry IV could have done to the complaints and fears of a common soldier who knows what kings impose on their subjects that they do not themselves have to risk. His response is a soliloquy as powerful in its thematic and rhetorical complexity as the public address we have just considered (IV. i. 230–84).

In some respects this soliloquy, which precedes by only a few moments the Crispin's day speech, is the thematic climax of the entire tetralogy, showing us that at last we have a king free of the crippling disabilities of his predecessors and wise in what the plays have been teaching. Recognizing that all that separates a king from private men is ceremony, Harry has escaped Richard's tragic confusion of ceremony with reality: "Is not the King's name twenty thousand names?" Unwittingly reenacting his father's insomniac soliloquy in the third act of 2 Henry IV, Harry too longs for the heart's ease of the commoner. But where the old King could conclude only, "Uneasy lies the head that wears a crown," recurring despairingly to his posture of perennial guiltiness and to his weary sense of mortality, his young son ends by remembering his responsibility, his life of service, and sees that—"what watch the King keeps to maintain the peace"—as the defining mark of the King. Moreover, in his catechistic questioning of ceremony Harry shows that he has incorporated Falstaff's clear-sightedness: like honor in Falstaff's catechism, ceremony consists only in what is conferred by others, bringing no tangible good to its bearer, unable to cure disease, no more than a proud dream. But the lesson is not only Falstaff's; for, in the dark backward and abysm of time, before Hal ever entered the scene, a young Bullingbrook had anticipated his son's "Thinks thou the fiery fever will go out / With titles blown from adulation?" with a similar repudiation of comforting self-deception:

O, who can hold a fire in his hand
By thinking on the frosty Caucasus?
Or cloy the hungry edge of appetite
By bare imagination of a feast?
(Richard II, 1. iii. 294-97)

---

These multiple allusions force us to see in Henry V the epitome of what the cycle has taught us to value as best in a monarch, indeed in a man; and the King’s ability to listen to the soldier Williams and to hear him suggests, like his subsequent fooling with Fluellen in the same fourth act, a king who is fully a man. All that is needed to complete him is mature sexuality, scarcely hinted at in the earlier portraits of Hal, and the wooing of Princess Katherine in the fifth act brings finality to a lively portrayal of achieved manhood, a personality integrated in itself and ready to bring unity and joy to a realm that has suffered long from rule by men less at ease with themselves and less able to identify their own interests with those of their country.

It was such a response to Henry V that led me years ago to write:

In only one play in his entire career does Shakespeare seem bent on making us believe that what is valuable in politics and in life can successfully be combined in a ruler as in his state. . . . There can be no doubt that [the play] is infectiously patriotic, or that the ideal of the harmonious commonweal ... reflects the highest point of Shakespeare’s civic optimism. And Henry is clearly presented as 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. . . . In Henry V Shakespeare would have us believe what hitherto his work in its genre has denied, that in the real world of the chronicles a man may live who embodies the virtues and experiences the fortune of the comic hero.”

Reading the play thus optimistically, I had to note nevertheless how many readers respond otherwise to it, and I went on to observe that the play casts so many dark shadows—on England after Agincourt, for instance—that one can scarcely share its optimism, and that “in this respect Henry V is the most melancholy of the history plays.” But I have now come to believe that my acknowledgment of that darker aspect of the play hardly suggested the terrible subversiveness with which Shakespeare undermines the entire structure.

IV

Taking the play, as we have just done, to be an extension of the first part of Henry IV, we are almost inevitably propelled to optimism. Taking it as the sequel of the second part of Henry IV, we are led to the opposite view held by critics as diverse as H. C. Goddard, Roy W. Battenhouse, Mark Van Doren, and H. M. Richmond. Think of those dark shadows that cloud the comedy. The point of the stock ending of romantic comedy is, of course, its guarantee of the future: marriage secures and reinvigorates society while promising an extension of its happiness into a generation to come. Like A Midsummer Night’s Dream, Henry V ends in a marriage whose blessing will transform the world:

K. Hen. Now welcome, Kate; and bear me witness all,
That here I kiss her as my sovereign queen. Flourish.
Q. Isa. God, the best maker of all marriages,
Combine your hearts in one, your realms in one!
As man and wife, being two, are one in love,
So be there ’twixt your kingdoms such a spousal,

That never may ill office, or fell jealousy,
Which troubles oft the bed of blessed marriage,
Thrust in between the [paction] of these kingdoms,
To make divorce of their incorporate league;
That English may as French, French Englishmen,
Receive each other. God speak this Amen!
All. Amen!
K. Hen. Prepare we for our marriage; on which day,
My Lord of Burgundy, we'll take your oath,
And all the peers, for surety of our leagues.
Then shall I swear to Kate, and you to me,
And may our oaths well kept and prosp'rous be!
Sentent. Exeunt.

We don’t really know very much about what was to happen in Theseus’s Athens. But we know a good deal about Plantagenet England; and in case any member of the audience has forgotten a history as familiar to Elizabethans as our Civil War is to us, the Chorus appears immediately to remind them—both of what would soon happen, and of the fact that they have already seen a cycle of Shakespearean plays presenting that dismal story:

Small time, but in that small most greatly lived
This star of England. Fortune made his sword;
By which the world’s best garden he achieved,
And of it left his son imperial lord.
Henry the Sixt, in infant bands crown’d 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;
Which oft our stage hath shown; and for their sake,
In your fair minds let this acceptance take.

“But if the cause be not good,” Williams muses on the eve of Agincourt (IV. i. 134–42), “the King himself hath a heavy reckoning to make, when all those legs, and arms, and heads, chopp’d off in a battle, shall join together at the latter day and cry all, ‘We died at such a place’—some swearing, some crying for a surgeon, some upon their wives left poor behind them, some upon the debts they owe, some upon their children rawly left. I am afeard there are few die well that die in a battle.” Replying to Williams, the King insists that the state of a man’s soul at the moment of his death is his own responsibility. Though to Dr. Johnson this appeared “a very just distinction,” the King’s answer evades the issue: the suffering he is capable of inflicting, the necessity of being sure that the burden is imposed for a worthy cause. The end of the play bleakly implies that there is no such cause; all that Harry has won will be lost within a generation. The Epilogue wrenches us out of the paradise of comedy into the purgatory of Shakespearean time, where we incessantly watch

the hungry ocean gain
Advantage on the kingdom of the shore,
And the firm soil win of the wat’ry main,
Increasing store with loss, and loss with store.

Contemplation of "such interchange of state, / Or state itself confounded to decay" (Sonnet 64) does not incline one toward attempting apocalyptic action. It is more likely to encourage reflections like those of Henry IV about the "revolution of the times," or of Falstaff in the very next scene of 2 Henry IV: "let time shape, and there an end" (III. ii. 332).

But the implication that the cause is not good disturbs us well before the aftermath of Agincourt. The major justification for the war is the Archbishop of Canterbury’s harangue on the Salic Law governing hereditary succession, a law the French are said to have violated. The Archbishop's speech to the King follows immediately on his announcement to the Bishop of Ely that he plans to propose the war as a means of alleviating a financial crisis in the Church. The speech itself is long, legalistic, peppered with exotic genealogies impossible to follow; its language is involuted and syntactically loose. The very qualities that make its equivalent in Shakespeare’s sources an unexceptionable instrument of statecraft make it sound on the stage like doubletalk, and Canterbury’s conclusion that it is "as clear as is the summer’s sun" that King Henry is legitimate King of France is a sardonic bit of comedy. Olivier, unwilling to let on that Shakespeare might want us to be less than convinced, turned the episode into farce at the expense of the Elizabethan actor playing the part of Canterbury. Denied the resources of a subsidized film industry, scholars who want to see the war justified must praise the speech on the basis of its content, ignoring its length and style. Thus in the words of one scholar, "The Archbishop discharges his duty faithfully, as it stands his reasoning is impeccable apart from any warrant given by the precedent of Edward III's claims. Henry is not initiating aggression." Bradley, whose argument the critic just cited was answering, is truer to the situation: "Just as he went to war chiefly because, as his father told him, it was the way to keep factious nobles quiet and unite the nation, so when he adjures the Archbishop to satisfy him as to his right to the French throne, he knows very well that the Archbishop wants the war, because it will defer and perhaps prevent what he considers the spoliation of the Church." J. H. Walter points out that Henry’s reaction to the insulting gift of tennis balls from the Dauphin is strategically placed, as not in the play’s sources, after the King has already decided to go to war, and he argues that Shakespeare thus “uses [the incident] to show Henry's christian self-control.” This is an odd description of a speech which promises to avenge the gift with the griefs of "many a thousand widows" for their husbands, of mothers for their sons, and even of "some [who] are yet ungotten and unborn" (I. ii. 284–87). Since the tennis balls are a response to a challenge already issued, Henry’s claim that France is his by rights, the King’s rage seems just a little self-righteous. Henry’s insistence throughout the scene that the Archbishop reassure him as to his right to make the claim insures our suspicion that the war is not quite the selfless enterprise other parts of the play tempt us to see.

14 Goddard (I, 219–21) brilliantly analyzes the speech to show how self-defeating the argument is, and how it undercuts Henry's claim to his own throne in England as well.
17 Walter, p. xxv; sic.
RABBITS, DUCKS, AND Henry V

Our suspicions are deepened by what happens later. Harold C. Goddard has left us a devastating attack on Henry V as Shakespeare’s model Machiavellian. Goddard’s intemperate analysis, as right as it is one-sided, should be read by everyone interested in the play. I want to quote only one brief excerpt, his summary of the “five scenes devoted to” the battle of Agincourt; the account will be particularly useful to those who remember the battle scenes in Olivier’s film.

1. Pistol captures a Frenchman.
2. The French lament their everlasting shame at being worsted by slaves.
3. Henry weeps at the deaths of York and Suffolk and orders every soldier to kill his prisoners.
4. Fluellen compares Henry with Alexander and his rejection of Falstaff to the murder of Cleitus. Henry, entering angry, swears that every French prisoner, present and future, shall have his throat cut... The battle is over. The King prays God to keep him honest and breaks his word of honor to Williams.
5. Henry offers Williams money by way of satisfaction, which Williams rejects. Word is brought that 10,000 French are slain and 29 English. Henry gives the victory to God.

If Shakespeare had deliberately set out to deglory the Battle of Agincourt in general and King Henry in particular it would seem as if he could hardly have done more.

Admittedly, Goddard’s analysis is excessively partisan. He ignores the rhetoric we have admired, he sees only the King’s hypocrisy on Agincourt eve, and he refuses the Chorus’s repeated invitations to view the war as more glorious than what is shown. But the burden of Goddard’s argument is difficult to set aside: the war scenes reinforce the unpleasant implications of the Salic Law episode. Consider the moment, before the great battle, when the King bullies the citizens of Harfleur, whose surrender he demands, with a rapacious violence that even J. H. Walter does not cite as an instance of “Henry’s christian self-control”:

If I begin the batt'ry once again,
I will not leave the half-achieved Harflew
Till in her ashes she lies buried.
The gates of mercy shall be all shut up,
And the flesh’d soldier, rough 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 flow’ring infants.
What is it then to me, if impious War,
Arrayed in flames like to the prince of fiends,
Do with his smirch’d complexion all fell feats
Enlink’d to waste and desolation?
What is’t to me, when you yourselves are cause,
If your pure maidens fall into the hand
Of hot and forcing violation?
What reign can hold licentious wickedness
When down the hill he holds his fierce career?

(III. iii. 7–23)

18 Goddard, I, 215-68.
19 Goddard, I, 256.
In such language as Tamburlaine styled his "working words," the King, like the kind of aggressor we know all too well, blames the rapine he solicits on his victims. The alacrity of his attack makes one understand Yeats's description of Henry V as a "ripened Fortinbras"; its sexual morbidity casts a disquieting light on the muted but unmistakable aggressiveness of his sexual assault on Katherine in the fifth act.

Henry's killing of the French prisoners inspires similar uneasiness. Olivier justified this violation of the putative ethics of war by making it a response to the French killing of the English luggage boys, and one of the most moving moments of his film was the King's passionate response: "I was not angry since I came to France / Until this instant." After such a moment one could hardly fault Henry's

Besides, we'll cut the throats of those we have,
And not a man of them that we shall take
Shall taste our mercy.

(IV. vii. 55–65)

In the same scene, indeed, Gower observes that it was in response to the slaughter of the boys that "the King, most worthily, hath caus'd every soldier to cut his prisoner's throat. O, 'tis a gallant king!" But the timing is wrong: Gower's announcement came before the King's touching speech. In fact, Shakespeare had presented the decision to kill the prisoners as made at the end of the preceding scene, and while in the source it has a strategic point, in the play it is simply a response to the fair battlefield killing of some English nobles by the French. Thus the announcement comes twice, first as illegitimate, second as if it were a spontaneous outburst of forgivable passion when it actually is not. In such moments as this we feel an eloquent discrepancy between the glamor of the play's rhetoric and the reality of its action.

Henry IV, Part One is "about temperance and fortitude," Part Two is "about wisdom and justice," and Shakespeare's "plan culminates in Henry V." So argues Sherman Hawkins.20 "Henry's right to France—and by implication England—" he claims, "is finally vindicated by a higher power than the Archbishop of Canterbury."21 God's concern that France be governed by so ideal a monarch culminates, of course, in the ruins so movingly described in Act V by the Duke of Burgundy, to whose plea the King responds like the leader of a nation of shopkeepers with a demand that France "buy [the] peace" it wants according to a contract Henry just happens to have had drawn up. What follows is the King's coarse wooing of his captive princess, with its sexual innuendo, its repeated gloating over Henry's possession of the realm for which he sues, and its arch insistence on his sudden lack of adequate rhetoric. Dr. Johnson's judgment is hardly too severe: the King "has neither the vivacity of Hal, nor the grandeur of Henry. . . . We have here but a mean dialogue for princes; the merriment is very gross, and the sentiments are very worthless."22

Henry's treatment of France may suggest to the irreverent that one is better off when providence does not supply such a conqueror. And his impact on England is scarcely more salubrious. The episodes in which the King tricks

---

21 Goddard, p. 341.
22 Johnson on Shakespeare, p. 566.
RABBITS, DUCKS, AND Henry V

Fluellen and terrifies Williams recall the misbehavior of the old Hal, but with none of the old charm and a lot more power to do hurt. In 2 Henry IV it was the unspeakable Prince John who dealt self-righteously with traitors; in Henry V it is the King himself. In the earlier plays wars were begun by others; in Henry V it is the King himself, as he acknowledges in his soliloquy, having apparently decided not to go on pinning the blame on the Archbishop of Canterbury. And England must pay a high price for the privilege of the returning veterans to show their wounds every October 25.

We do not have to wait for the Epilogue to get an idea of it. At the end of Act IV, as we saw, the King calls for holy rites for the dead and orders a return to England. The Chorus to the ensuing act invites us to fantasy the King’s triumphant return, his modesty, and the outpouring of grateful citizens. But in the next scene we find ourselves still in France, where Fluellen gives Pistol, last of the company of the Boar’s Head, the comeuppance he has long fended off with his shield of preposterous language. Forced to eat his leek, Pistol mutters one last feeble imprecation (“all hell shall stir for this”), listens to Gower’s final tonguelashing, and, alone on the stage at last, speaks in soliloquy:

Doth Fortune play the huswife with me now?
News have I that my Doll is dead i’ th’ spittle
Of a malady of France,
And there my rendezvous is quite cut off.
Old do I wax, and from my weary limbs
Honor is cudgell’d. Well, bawd I’ll turn,
And something lean to cutpurse of quick hand.
To England will I steal, and there I’ll steal;
And patches will I get unto these cudgell’d scars,
And [swear] I got them in the Gallia wars.

(V. i. 80–89)

The pun on “steal” is the last faint echo of the great Falstaff scenes, but labored and lifeless now as Pistol’s pathetic bravura. Pistol’s Exit occasioned Dr. Johnson’s most affecting critical comment: “The comick scenes of the history of Henry the Fourth and Fifth are now at an end, and all the comick personages are now dismissed. Falstaff and Mrs. Quickly are dead; Nym and Bardolph are hanged; Gadshill was lost immediately after the robbery; Poins and Peto have vanished since, one knows not how; and Pistol is now beaten into obscurity. I believe every reader regrets their departure.” But our regret is for more than the end of some high comedy: it is for the reality of the postwar world the play so powerfully conjures up—soldiers returned home to find their jobs gone, falling to a life of crime in a seamy and impoverished underworld that scarcely remembers the hopes that accompanied the beginnings of the adventure.

It is the “duty of the ruler,” Hawkins says, “to make his subjects good.” For the failure of his subjects, the play tells us, we must hold Henry V and his worthless war responsible. Unsatisfactory though he was, Henry IV was still the victim of the revolution of the times, and our ultimate attitude toward him, hastened to his death by the unconscious ambition of his own son, took a sympathetic turn like that with which we came at the end to regard the luckless Richard. But Henry V, master manipulator of time, has by the end of the cycle

23 Johnson, p. 563.
24 Johnson, p. 346.
immersed himself in the destructive element. The blows he has rained on his
country are much more his than those of any enemy of the people, and all he
has to offer his bleeding subjects for the few years that remain is the ceremonial
posture which he himself has earlier had the insight to contemn. Like the
Edmund of *King Lear*, another lusty and manipulative warrior who wins,
woos, and dies young, Henry might have subscribed himself “in the ranks of
death.”

V

Well, there it is. Should one see a rabbit or a duck? Along the way I’ve cited
some critics who see an exemplary Christian monarch, who has attained, “in
the language of Ephesians, both the ‘age’ and ‘stature’ of a perfect man.” And
I have cited others who see “the perfect Machiavellian prince,” a coarse and
brutal highway robber. Despite their obvious differences, these rival views are
essentially similar, for each sees only a rabbit or a duck. I hope that simply by
juxtaposing the two readings I have shown that each of them, persuasive as it
is, is reductive, requiring that we exclude too much to hold it.

Other positions, as I suggested at the outset, are possible. One of them began
with Dr. Johnson, was developed by some of the best critics of a generation
ago, among them Tillyard and Van Doren, and found its most humane
expression in a fine essay in which Una Ellis-Fermor argued that by 1599
Shakespeare no longer believed what he found himself committed to create. Having achieved his portrait of the exemplary public man, she suggests,
Shakespeare was already on the verge of a series of plays that would ever more vexingly question the virtue of such virtue. Never again would Shakespeare ask
us to sympathize with a successful politician, instead relegating such men to the
distasteful roles of Fortinbras and the two Octavii, Alcibiades and Aufidius.
The success-to-be Malcolm is a terrible crux in *Macbeth*. Between quarto and
Folio texts of Lear, Shakespeare or his redactor is unable to devote enough
attention to the surviving ruler of Britain for us to be able to identify him
confidently. The governance of Cyprus and Venice are slighter concerns in
*Othello* than the embroidery on the Moor’s handkerchief. “Not even Shake-
spere,” Dr. Johnson said of what he considered the failure of the last act of
*Henry V*, “can write well without a proper subject. It is a vain endeavour for
the most skilful hand to cultivate barrenness, or to paint upon vacuity.”

A. P. Rossiter’s seminal essay “Ambivalence—the Dialectic of the His-
tories” sensitively shows Shakespeare’s double view of every important issue in
the earlier history plays. But when he comes to *Henry V*, Rossiter abandons his
schema and decides that Shakespeare momentarily lost his interest in a prob-
lematic view of reality and settled for shallow propaganda on behalf of a
character whom already he knew enough to loathe. But *Henry V* is too good a
play for criticism to go on calling it a failure. It has been performed success-

---

26 Goddard, I, 267
27 Goodard, I, 260.
28 Una Ellis-Fermor, “Shakespeare’s Political Plays,” *The Frontiers of Drama* (London:
Methuen, 1945).
29 *Johnson on Shakespeare*, p. 556.
30 A. P. Rossiter, “Ambivalence—The Dialectic of the Histories,” *Angel with Horns* (New
fully with increasing frequency in recent years, and critics have been treating it with increasing respect.

A third response has been suggested by some writers of late: *Henry V* is a subtle and complex study of a king who curiously combines strengths and weaknesses, virtues and vices. One is attracted to the possibility of regarding the play unpolemically. Shakespeare is not often polemical, after all, and a balanced view allows for the inclusion of both positive and negative features in an analysis of the protagonist and the action. But sensitive as such analysis can be—and I especially admire Robert Ornstein's study in *A Kingdom for a Stage*—it is oddly unconvincing, for two strong reasons. First, the cycle has led us to expect stark answers to simple and urgent questions: is a particular king good or bad for England? can one be a successful public man and retain a healthy inner life? has Hal lost or gained in the transformation through which he changes name and character? does political action confer any genuine benefit on the polity? what is honor worth, and who has it? The mixed view of Henry characteristically appears in critical essays that seem to fudge such questions, to see complication and subtlety where Shakespeare's art forces us to demand commitment, resolution, answers. Second, no real compromise is possible between the extreme readings I have claimed the play provokes. Our experience of the play resembles the experience Gombrich claims for viewers of the trick drawing: "We can switch from one reading to another with increasing rapidity; we will also 'remember' the rabbit while we see the duck, but the more closely we watch ourselves, the more certainly we will discover that we cannot experience alternative readings at the same time."

VI

The kind of ambiguity I have been describing in *Henry V*, requiring that we hold in balance incompatible and radically opposed views each of which seems exclusively true, is only an extreme version of the fundamental ambiguity that many critics have found at the center of the Shakespearean vision and that some years ago, borrowing a bit of jargon from physics, I called "complementarity." What we are talking about is the perception of reality as intransigently multivalent. Though we are poignantly convinced of basic truths—complementarity is a far cry from skepticism—we know that rabbits are always turning into ducks before our eyes, bushes into bears.

Such ambiguity is not a theme or even the most important fact in many plays in which it figures. I have argued that it is extraordinarily important in *Hamlet*, but to reduce *Hamlet* to a statement about complementarity is to remove its life. Though one perceives it informing plays as different from one another as *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *King Lear*, one cannot say that it is what they are "about," and readings of Shakespearean plays as communicating only ambiguity are as arid as readings in which the plays are seen to be

33 Rabkin, pp. 20-26.
about appearance and reality. But in Henry V, it seems to me, Shakespeare’s habitual recognition of the duality of things has led him, as it should lead his audience, to a point of crisis. Since by now virtually every other play in the canon has been called a problem play, let me add Henry V to the number. Suggesting the necessity of radically opposed responses to a historical figure about whom there would seem to have been little reason for anything but the simplest of views, Shakespeare leaves us at a loss.

Is it any wonder that Julius Caesar would follow in a few months, where Shakespeare would present one of the defining moments in world history in such a way that his audience cannot determine whether the protagonist is the best or the worst of men, whether the central action springs from disinterested idealism or vainglorious egotism, whether that action is virtuous and necessary or wicked and gratuitous? Nor is one surprised to see that the most romantic and comic of Shakespeare’s history plays was created at the moment when he was about to abandon romantic comedy, poised for the flight into the great tragedies with their profounder questions about the meaning of action and heroism. The clash between the two possible views of the world of Henry V suggests a spiritual struggle in Shakespeare that he would spend the rest of his career working through. One sees a similar oscillation, magnified and reemphasized, in the problem plays and tragedies, and one is tempted to read the romances as a last profound effort to reconcile the irreconcilable. The terrible fact about Henry V is that Shakespeare seems equally tempted by both its rival gestalts. And he forces us, as we experience and reexperience and reflect on the play, as we encounter it in performances which inevitably lean in one direction or the other, to share his conflict.

Henry V is most valuable for us not because it points to a crisis in Shakespeare’s spiritual life, but because it shows us something about ourselves: the simultaneity of our deepest hopes and fears about the world of political action. In this play, Shakespeare reveals the conflicts between the private selves with which we are born and the public selves we must become, between our longing that authority figures can be like us and our suspicion that they must have traded away their inwardness for the sake of power. The play contrasts our hope that society can solve our problems with our knowledge that society has never done so. The inscrutability of Henry V is the inscrutability of history. And for a unique moment in Shakespeare’s work ambiguity is the heart of the matter, the single most important fact we must confront in plucking out the mystery of the world we live in.