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“Thy Digressing Son”:

Prodigality and Debt in *The Henriad*

Shakespeareans have long noted that the Duke of York was the highest ranking noble to die at the Battle of Agincourt, and also that York is the same character as the Duke of Aumerle in Shakespeare's *Richard II*. In *Henry V*, that acknowledgment is frequently where the analysis of York's role ends. However, I contend that York's reappearance in *Henry V* after being absent from the plays *Henry IV, Part One* and *Two*, does illustrate something more important and noteworthy than a footnote might suggest. Keeping in mind York's history as a former conspirator against Henry IV and the pardon that he received, I contend that when York leads the charge at Agincourt and subsequently dies, he is repaying a debt of honor that he owes to the Lancasters, specifically to Henry IV. This repayment is necessary for York, who, like Henry V, is the protagonist of his own prodigality narrative, one created by the usurpation of Richard's throne by Henry IV. Both Aumerle and Prince Hal are thrust into a political identity crisis by the usurpation, and they react with subversive behavior, although the political significance of their rebellious behavior is exponentially different. Aumerle seeks the King's life, conspiring with the Abbot of Westminster and others. Hal, on the other hand, flees from court and rebels in the tavern – a safer rebellion, indeed. Both men engage in prodigality narratives that leave them indebted to the king and others, but the

debts Aumerle and Hal accumulate are not the sorts of debts that can be repaid with mere money. The debts of these men can only be repaid by risking their lives.

Prodigality narratives, by their very nature, are narratives of debt. If we looked at the story in Luke's Gospel in today's terms, we see that exchanges of debt begin when the prodigal son asks for a cash advance on his inheritance. The inheritance is something that he feels is "owed" to him, which, ironically, puts the father in a position of debt. Having paid the son, the father has fulfilled his financial obligation – paying his debts – and the son is free to use the money in any way he'd like. However, the son's carelessness and wastefulness put him in a terrible position – his own position of debt. In order to be freed of that debt, the son has to work and change his lifestyle to a pay-as-you-go system. Soon, the son realizes that he would have less hardship if he humbled himself and went back to his father's house to work. He does not expect a bail out. The father has already paid his debt to his son, and the son has no leverage to ask for more inheritance. But the son does expect that his father would pity him enough to hire him, and allow him to pay his own way. Instead, the son is unequivocally pardoned.

Or is he? The son is given rings, a robe, and a fatted calf. Having been restored to his previous position, the son is *actually now* in even greater debt, a debt that cannot be repaid with money. His debt is a debt of honor that binds him to his father. The father, having been merciful, wields the power of "honor debt" over his son. In forgiving him for being so foolish, the father ensures that the son's indebtedness metaphorically enslaves the son to the father AND subsequently to the moral path.

Taking the concept of honor debt even further, we can look at the case of "life-debt." In his book *Debt: The First 5000 Years*, David Graeber notes that if you "Save

someone's life, they owe you a life, and a life owed had to be paid back" (140). The life-debt described by Graeber is a specific kind of honor debt, in which one's honor would be called into question should that life-debt be left unpaid. Graeber also states later that "one becomes a slave in situations where one would otherwise have died" (169). The implication is that if one's life is spared, then the life-debt accumulated makes the debtor a slave, whether literally or metaphorically. Thus, forgiveness of transgressions becomes a tool of enslavement, and like the prodigal son, the person who is forgiven will never be free from the obligation to repay that debt.

This same forgiveness-as-bondage narrative is used in Henry IV's pardoning of Aumerle in *Richard II*. From the beginning of the play, it is apparent that Aumerle has no love for his cousin, Bolingbroke. In Act 1, scene 4, he says of Bolingbroke's departure into banishment, "Marry, would the word 'farewell' have lengthened hours / And added years to his short banishment / He should have had a volume of farewells, / But since it would not, he had none of me" (1.4.16-19). Aumerle only pays Henry the respect that he manages to counterfeit. Since Aumerle has no relationship with Henry, other than of mutual disdain, it is no surprise that Aumerle wishes to plot against him once it becomes clear that Richard's reign is over. Aumerle and his associates concoct a plot to assassinate Henry, which through Aumerle's carelessness is discovered by his father, the Duke of York.

Aumerle, York, and the Duchess of York all fly to Henry to plead for either a pardon or an execution of Aumerle for his prodigal actions. In a 2012 mini-series, *The Hollow Crown*, which portrays the entire second tetralogy, the pardoning scene and its aftermath emphasize Aumerle's debt to Henry. The temptation toward farce in these

scenes is removed by focusing on the uncomfortable position Henry is put in by having to consider pardoning Aumerle for treason. When Henry pardons Aumerle, he says, “Your mother well hath prayed, and prove you true”; there is no doubt that “and prove you true,” is interpreted in this production such that Aumerle, like the prodigal son, has become indebted to his pardoner for life (5.3.144). By sparing Aumerle’s life, Henry has ensured that Aumerle owes him a debt that no money can repay. But the emphasis on repayment doesn’t end there. In this production, Exton speaks NOT to a *servant* about murdering Richard, but to *Aumerle*. Aumerle, in turn, goes with Exton to Richard’s cell, where Aumerle shoots the first of three fatal arrows at Richard. Later, when Richard’s death is announced, Aumerle drags in a coffin and reveals the martyred body of Richard. Henry is upset, but does not punish Aumerle, and Exton is nowhere to be seen. While this production takes liberties in this and other places, sometimes delving in to the melodramatic, this interpretation that Aumerle becomes personally involved in Richard’s death shows the depth of Aumerle’s indebtedness to Henry and his attempt to balance the scales.<sup>1</sup>

Aumerle’s enslavement to the Lancasters is only metaphorical, but his life-debt is real. He owes his life to the family that spared him in an otherwise execution-worthy offence. One might think that the debt would be canceled with the death of Henry IV, but life-debt isn’t that simple. Life-debt remains an open promise until the death of the

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<sup>1</sup> The series has significant problems with continuity. In *Richard II*, Henry’s character is played by Rory Kinnear, but in *I Henry IV*, Henry is played by Jeremy Irons. But more relevant to this paper is the fact that Aumerle is played by a white man in *Richard II* and a black man in *Henry V*. Either the people working on the mini-series didn’t realize that Aumerle and York were the same person, or they didn’t think that that detail mattered much. I contend that that detail is extremely important, as I will show.

person who is in debt, not the other way around. Thus, Aumerle is bound to serve the Lancasters until his own death.

In the meantime, between the plays *Richard II* and *Henry V*, quite a lot of dramatic action unfolds. Aumerle is nowhere to be found in *Henry IV part 1 and 2*. If Shakespeare had continued to feature Aumerle in Parts 1 and 2 of *Henry IV*, it may have distracted the audience from the Hotspur rebellion and the rebellion at Gaultree Forest, or at least made Shakespeare's position about the Lancasters less ambiguous, depending on Aumerle's engagement in those plays. But Aumerle's assassination plot in *Richard II* differed from these conspiracies in that the telos of Aumerle's plot was to reestablish Richard as king and remove the usurper from the throne. With Richard dead, the rebellions led by Hotspur and others had somewhat different goals in mind. If the Hotspur rebellion had succeeded, the country would have been divided in three instead of consolidated under one authoritative ruler, Richard's heir, Mortimer. I believe Hotspur's rebellion is motivated by his desire to redeem himself for what he now sees as a prodigal error in helping Henry IV to the crown. However, his disdain for Henry fuels the rebellion even more than his repentance.

In one of Shakespeare's sources, the play *The Famous Victories of Henry V*, York has a minor presence at court, tending to the French ambassadors, but when he dies in battle, there is no extensive eulogy, as there is in Shakespeare's *Henry V*. Instead, *The Famous Victories* portrays York's funeral procession as a way for low-born characters John and Derrick to stow away home to England. York's absence in Shakespeare's Lancastrian court is notable in that, historically, according to John Julius Norwich, he was working with both Henry IV and Henry V on a regular basis (124). I believe that

Shakespeare left Aumerle out of the picture intentionally until his historic death at Agincourt in order to highlight his reemergence as a way of settling old debts, specifically his life-debt.

Debt is on Henry V's mind the night before Agincourt, too. Having disguised himself and spoken to his soldiers, Hal's mind lingers on the burden of kingship and the *worth* of that burden. Financial language runs throughout the king's soliloquy. Directly he speaks of "debt," the "rents" and "comings in," and says, "O ceremony, show me but thy *worth!*" (4.1.227, 240, 241, emphasis added). Indirectly, in Henry's comparison between the levels of society, he concludes that the peasant is wealthier than a king in what truly matters – peace of mind. Whether one is a legitimate or illegitimate king, the burden of kingship is onerous. However, when one is the legitimate heir of an illegitimate king, the king's genuine right to govern is questionable, which makes the king's burden even more difficult to bear. How can the king claim to be working within the bounds of justice, when, if justice were maintained, that king would not be king at all? Henry seems to know this when he recalls the great Lancastrian debt of usurpation and murder, saying:

Not today, O Lord,  
 O, not today, think not upon the fault  
 My father made in compassing the crown!  
 I Richard's body have interred anew;  
 And on it have bestow'd more contrite tears  
 Than from it issued forced drops of blood. (4.1.290-4)

Hal fears the implications of that unpaid debt. There is no immediate textual evidence that can help us understand Hal's interpretation of his own role in the pre-usurpation tensions between Henry IV and Richard. But Hal does react negatively to the usurpation itself – the evidence being his disrespectful lack of participation in his father's court and his desire to distance himself from his father's troubled reign. On the night before Agincourt, Hal's recollection of Richard's unlawful death suggests a guilt that goes beyond superstition. Hal's guilt leaks into the realm of debt, in this case debt that creates what Hal perceives as a moral obligation. Not only is Hal trying to repay his father's debts with his new internment of Richard's body, but he is also providing paid mourners to pray and sing for Richard's soul.

The obligation Hal feels to repay the debt of his father fuels his anxiety and increases the burden of his kingship. When Richard is deposed, he gives up the crown almost as if he knows what the implications will be – a debt for Bolingbroke, and his subsequent heirs, that could never be repaid, despite Hal's attempts. The Bishop of Carlisle had forecasted the troubles that would haunt the Lancasters for generations:

O, if you raise this house against this house,  
 It will the woofullest division prove  
 That ever fell upon this cursed earth.  
 Prevent it, resist it, let it not be so,  
 Lest child, child's children, cry against you woe! (4.1.136-40)

Despite Carlisle's predictions and Hal's anxieties, the debt of the Lancasters does not have a supernatural impact on the French invasion. But since the time of miracles is past in *Henry V*, we can't count on the victory at Agincourt to stand for God's balancing of

accounts for the Lancasters. This victory is only temporary, as the Chorus states in *Henry V*'s epilogue, and the Wars of the Roses would muddy any claims of God's unquestioning approval on either the Lancaster or York houses.

In the meeting of Hal and Aumerle in Act 4, scene 3 of *Henry V*, an alliance is shown between the Lancasters and the Yorks just before the battle of Agincourt when York – that is, Aumerle – asks to lead the charge. This is the only moment in the Henriad where these two prodigal sons share a scene. It is a brief exchange, only heightened in significance by knowing what came before and what is to come after. As the former enemy of Henry IV, York, here, shows that the debt of honor he owes to the Lancasters transcends generational boundaries. He risks his life, and loses his life, not because he has been a political actor in these last few plays, but because he owes the king a death, but since that king is dead, Hal becomes the surrogate creditor.

Aumerle's absence from the middle plays of the tetralogy, I argue, is, indeed, notable – a lacuna that can be explained by Shakespeare's desire to show Aumerle's indebtedness to the Lancasters at Agincourt and how that indebtedness has produced a man whose debt can only be paid with his death. Aumerle knows when his conspiracy is discovered that his life is forfeited for treason. When his mother asks him why his father is so upset, Aumerle says, "It is no more / Than my poor life must answer" (*Richard II*, 5.2.81-2). Answer it does – only it happens not immediately, but many years later. For the generations to come, the implications of the usurpation of Richard's throne and the debts it establishes for all involved continue as well.





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