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Rabbits, Ducks, or Janus? Generational Implications and *Henry V*



Figure 1 (Statue of Janus at the Vatican)

When Norman Rabkin wrote “Rabbits, Ducks, and *Henry V*,” he solidified a metaphorical way of grappling with the questions of character that Shakespeare raises in *Henry V* regarding the eponymous hero. Rabkin writes: “... 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” (279).¹ Rabkin’s argument resonates with scholars because it acknowledges that there is a strong case to be made for Henry being a Christian hero *or* an unscrupulous Machiavel – but not both at once.

While I quite enjoy Rabkin’s argument and feel that his reading of *Henry V* is deeply insightful, I would like to suggest another metaphor for *Henry V*, which is in

¹ Norman Rabkin, “Rabbits, Ducks, and *Henry V*,” *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 28.3, Summer, 1977.

conversation with the quote above. When Rabkin says the play “points in two directions,” the image that comes to my mind is that of the classical Roman god Janus (see Figure 1). Janus, in my view, is a perfect metaphor not only for Henry V the character,² but for *Henry V*, the play. Janus is “the god who presides over beginnings... in his earliest form he was connected with water, especially with crossing places and bridges... As a god of entrances and exits he could look both before and behind.”³

This last phrase “he could look both before and behind” makes me think *Henry V* and Janus are connected symbolically. Because *Henry V* was the last play written out of all eight of the tetralogical plays, but serves as a bridge between them, to me, the play feels much like a play that is looking both before and behind. There is always a sense that the past and future weigh in on every minute of the action. Henry IV’s usurpation is always hanging over the stage. The future loss of France and war between the Lancasters and Yorks, “which oft our stage hath shown,” undermine the glorious victories within this play when all is said and done. Here, in the world of *Henry V*, we have a Janusian bridge between the usurping past and the reclaiming future. *Henry V*, like Janus, is both a beginning (showing the beginning of Henry’s incredible career) and an ending (of Shakespeare’s Elizabethan period treatment of history). The famous victories shown in *Henry V* are the climax of this long historical project Shakespeare undertook in the 1590s, but it’s telling that

² As one of the most ancient gods of the Romans, Janus was considered to be “one of the oldest, holiest, and most exalted of gods,” according to *The Dictionary of Classical Mythology, Religion, Literature, and Art*, Oskar Seyffert, 1995. This same sort of reverence is popularly given to Henry V as an exemplar king.

³ *Classical Mythology*, Ed. Mark P.O. Morford, et al, Oxford: Oxford UP, 2003, p. 660-1.

Shakespeare ends his project outside of linear chronology. Ending a long series in the middle signifies that there are no happy endings to be had in history plays. History stubbornly refuses to stop marching on, to stop having implications, and to allow great men to live forever.

I would like to suggest that there are two characters in *Henry V* who, though minor, challenge us to always be looking “before and behind,” to be aware of the past and the future within the cycle of medieval political history. Those characters are Edward of Norwich, Duke of York; and Richard of Conisburgh, Earl of Cambridge. (Hereafter, York and Cambridge.) These two brothers, both sons of the Edmund Langley, the Duke of York from *Richard II*, were born twelve years apart, but died within months of each other in 1415. Cambridge was executed on August 5, 1415, at Southampton for conspiring to kill the king, along with Scrope and Grey. York died at Agincourt, October 25, 1415. The brothers were on opposite sides – one against the king; one supporting the king. Childless, York leaves his estate to his four-year-old nephew, Richard Plantagenet – the son of the recently executed Cambridge. Had Cambridge lived, he would have inherited his brother’s estate and become quite powerful.⁴ Instead, he was executed but not attainted, so Richard Plantagenet was heir to both his uncle and his father. The brother-against-brother positioning foreshadows the civil upheaval that will manifest in the Wars of the Roses.

⁴ Barker, p. 378. Baker makes a case for Cambridge, the younger brother, being jealous of his older, more powerful brother. She writes that there is an irony to the fact that York dies soon after Cambridge’s execution: “Had the earl of Cambridge remained loyal to Henry V, he would have inherited his brother’s title, lands, and wealth, and achieved the position of power and influence he craved, without resorting to the treason that cost him his life” (378).

Both York and Cambridge had conspired against a Lancastrian king at some point in their lives. York, who in his younger days was the Duke of Aumerle, conspired to assassinate Henry IV after the usurpation of Richard II's throne. At the end of *Richard II*, Aumerle's conspiracy is discovered by his father, York. Previous to the discovery, we learn that York is his son's guarantor – that is, he pledges to make sure that Aumerle⁵ will be loyal to the new king. Thus, not only is York upset that his son plans to assassinate the king, but also, York's honor is on the line, as “his truth / And lasting fealty to the new-made King” has already been broken (*Richard II*, 5.2.44-5).⁶ When the Duchess of York 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). Surprisingly, Henry IV pardons Aumerle. Shakespeare portrays the pardon as a comic scene, with the Duke of York pleading for his son's execution, and the Duchess of York and Aumerle both begging the king for clemency. Henry IV pardons Aumerle based on the goodness of the Duke of York. Henry says, “Thy overflow of good converts to bad, / And thy abundant goodness shall excuse / This deadly blot in thy digressing son” (*Richard II*, 5.3.62-5). Although the Duchess also pleads for Aumerle's life, Henry has clearly already decided to pardon Aumerle before she arrives.

Shakespeare portrays both pardons and executions selectively in order to illustrate the political and historical implications of justice being served. This is never more true than with the brothers Aumerle and Cambridge. Generally

⁵ Aumerle actually lost his title, as York points out, and should be called “Rutland” now. For clarity sake, I will call him Aumerle when discussing *Richard II* and York when discussing events that follow after 1402, when he inherited the Duchy of York.

⁶ All Shakespeare quotes refer to *The Norton Shakespeare*, 2nd Edition, 2008.

speaking, both pardons and executions are assertions of a king's power. Whom a king chooses to pardon or to execute reveals nuances of the power dynamic between a king and his people and strongly influences a king's relationship with his subjects. Crime and punishment in the historical landscape are not only political, but in a monarchy, they are also personal. Foucault states: "... by breaking the law, the offender has touched the very person of the prince; and it is the prince – or at least those to whom he has delegated his force – who seizes upon the body of the condemned man and displays it marked, beaten, broken" (*Discipline and Punish* 49). By "touching the very person of the prince," as Foucault says, crime becomes a personal affront, and punishment becomes personal revenge codified by the state. The result is that punishment is "an exercise of 'terror'" (*Discipline and Punish* 49). This terrorism is not simply a way to eradicate crime, for it is meant as a way to "encourage the others"⁷ with the Machiavellian policies of using fear to compel subjects to behave in certain ways. As Foucault notes, "The public execution did not re-establish justice; it reactivated power" (*Discipline and Punish* 49). For usurpers who are never fully secure in their reigns, reactivating power, time and again, is essential. Serving justice conveniently doubles as a reifying of monarchical power.

⁷ In Chapter 23 of Voltaire's *Candide*, Candide and Martin approach the shore of England and witness a British admiral being executed on his own ship. When asked why the admiral is being executed, a man replies: "...in this country it is considered useful now and again to shoot an admiral, to encourage the others" (69, emphasis added). This comment on the admiral's execution is meant to be darkly humorous, but it also illustrates perfectly why people are executed: in order to compel or to intimidate others into behaving well. Voltaire casts a sinister light on "example making" and implies that political expediency is the final arbiter in determining whether a king pardons or executes a criminal.

In the history plays, pardons and executions have a particularly interesting role to play because of dramatic irony. With historic narratives, the audience always holds an advantage over the characters within the fiction of the play. The audience knows what the implications of events will be, since the real-life history has already unfolded. For instance, the audience would probably have known that Cambridge's son, Richard Plantagenet, would eventually become the Duke of York who opposes Henry VI in the Wars of the Roses. They would further know that Richard of York is killed in his efforts, but that his sons eventually do succeed in overthrowing the Lancasters, making Edward IV the king.

With Aumerle, Shakespeare shows him as a prominent character in *Richard II*, but we do not see Aumerle's character again in either part of *Henry IV*, despite the fact that historically he was a part of Henry IV's court and dedicated his famous hunting treatise, *The Master of Game*, to Prince Hal.⁸ Aumerle reappears as the Duke of York in *Henry V*, but so briefly that an unschooled theatregoer might wonder why he is eulogized. I think that the fact that York is eulogized without commentary on why he is important suggests that Shakespeare's original audience would have known who he was and why he was important to the Lancastrian dynasty. One of Shakespeare's sources for the Henriad, *The Famous Victories of Henry V*, gives York a role in court, if not a particularly prominent one, and his funeral procession is comically used as a way to return stowaway common soldiers back to England.

Perhaps Shakespeare dismisses York in *1 & 2 Henry IV* because he has served his political purpose by the end of *Richard II* – that is, he has played an antagonistic

⁸ Barker 301-2

role in the ascension of Henry IV. Not only is Aumerle philosophically against Henry; he also instigates the conspiracy to assassinate him at Oxford in act 4. The pardon reveals that Henry can be merciful, despite the fact that he has also been portrayed as a calculating usurper. The dual use of clemency and cruelty is the mark of a true Machiavel. However, York's presence in *Henry V* makes a pointed rhetorical impression – that the past is still alive in the fiction of the play. That is, a former enemy of the Lancasters, someone who was a favorite of the deposed king, had been given a second chance to show his loyalty to the Lancasters via Henry IV's pardon. In concert with the king's prayer the night before Agincourt, when Henry mentions Richard II by name, York's presence at the battle and his willingness to lead what appears to be a suicide mission shows that York is honor-bound to serve the Lancasters – a hold-over from times past. When York dies, his last words, spoken to Exeter, are, "Dear my Lord, / Commend my service to my sovereign" (*Henry V*, 4.6.22-3). Thus, York fulfills his life-debt to the Lancasters and dies with honor as a loyal subject to the king.⁹

With Cambridge's conspiracy, the already-staged Wars of the Roses darken what could easily be seen as a swift ferreting out of rebellion that would end with the executions of the accomplices. But as Shakespeare shows in all the histories,

⁹ Elsewhere, I have argued that when Henry IV pardons Aumerle (York) that it creates a particular debt of honor called a life-debt, in which the person whose life is saved owes his life to his savior (in this case, pardoned of a capital crime, Aumerle's life has been saved by Henry IV). That debt can only be repayed through life-long service, or one's death. The latter is the case for York. Since he dies in the cause of a Lancastrian king, he has paid the life-debt that he owes. (Unpublished manuscript: "Thy Digressing Son': Prodigality and Debt in The Henriad," presented at MMLA, November 2012.)

putting down rebellions isn't that simple, and can often be generational. It's not until *1 Henry VI* that we meet Richard Plantagenet, Cambridge's son, but in the Temple garden scene, Act 2, scene 4, we see Richard's defensiveness regarding the death of his father. He denies that he was a traitor: "My father was attached, not attainted; / Condemned to die for treason, but not traitor – / And that I'll prove on better men than Somerset, / Were growing time once ripened to my will" (2.4.96-9). In the next scene, Richard goes to visit Mortimer in prison, and learns the history behind Henry IV's usurpation, Mortimer's claim to the throne, and his own legitimate claim to the throne by way of being Mortimer's heir. Despite Mortimer's warnings to be wary, Richard does the unthinkable. He says, "But yet methinks my father's execution / Was nothing less than bloody tyranny" (2.5.99-100). The implication of questioning the justice of Cambridge's execution is that Richard is calling Henry V a tyrant. This is a strong accusation against a king about whom Richard's father, Cambridge, had claimed: "Never was monarch better feared and loved" (*Henry V*, 2.2.25). Despite the fact that Cambridge says this line just before he's caught in a treasonous plot, we have no reason not to believe that Henry V is adored by practically everyone, minus the conspirators, within the fiction of his own play. In the Wars of the Roses plays, York's disdain for the popular Henry serves as an economical way for the audience to choose sides in the depiction of the civil war. And although the Yorks had a stronger claim to the throne than the Lancasters, proclaiming a well-loved king a tyrant would win the Yorks no sympathy.

The English Renaissance anxiety about Elizabeth I's successor may have been one of the reasons that Shakespeare and his contemporaries spent so much time

and stage effort mulling over the political past. The philosophical tensions within the history plays ask us to question, “What is legitimacy? What makes a good ruler?” By looking back into the medieval past, to Henry V as an exemplar, writers – not just Shakespeare – tried to tease out the nature of kingship and to understand why Henry V was so beloved and popularly considered successful as a ruler. I would argue that Shakespeare doesn’t allow us to make as clear a judgment as deciding if Henry V, the character, is successful – no matter whether he is a rabbit or a duck. His rabbit/duck-ness is almost irrelevant when you consider whether or not he was a successful ruler, because “success” is a loaded term, difficult to define or to gauge. The real question, rather than whether Henry is successful, is whether or not there can *ever* be an exemplar king, one *worth* imitating if you had a choice of whom to model.

Within the fictional history of *Henry V*, the king is cunning, skilled, and lucky. The Chorus wants us to remember him as the “star of England” (Epilogue, line 6). Yet, the end of *Henry V* is not only ambivalent because “they lost France and made his England bleed” but also because there are some – particularly Richard Plantagenet – who think of Henry V as a tyrant, “which oft our stage hath shown” (Epilogue, line 12-13). In highlighting the deaths of the two brothers York and Cambridge, I think that Shakespeare urges the audience to remember what has come “before and behind” this famous king. With the atrocities of the medieval past staring down the audience, recalled through York and Cambridge, as well as with support from the Chorus, Shakespeare mulls over what qualities a king should

possess in order to be a good and just leader. I think he finds all of the medieval kings wanting.