

The Ethics of Disobedience in Shakespeare's *Henry V*

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As we know, one important component of the methodology of deconstruction involves analyzing the logic of binary oppositions, particularly those binaries wielding great cultural and ideological influence, such as presence/absence, speech/writing, male/female, etc. A deconstructive methodology approaches such binaries from a variety of perspectives, including identifying them and explicating the structure in which they mutually function; this structure usually means that one element of the binary pair largely defines the structure of the whole, dominating and marginalizing the other. Deconstruction also incorporates historical processes and does so in at least two ways; first, by what Jacques Derrida in *Positions* calls 'a phase of overturning,' an effort to reverse 'the hierarchy at a given moment.' Perhaps more importantly, however, is the second mode of this Derridean 'double science,' transcending the very structure of a given binary opposition by articulating 'the irruptive emergence of a new "concept," a concept that can no longer be, and never could be, included in the previous regime' (41-2).

In examining the processes of historical change as they relate to binary oppositions, we might look at one of the most powerful binary oppositions characterizing the early modern period: that between obedience and disobedience. In particular, this paper argues that Shakespeare's *Henry V* offers a demonstration of the complex interactions between these terms and also outlines ways in which their dynamic was being transformed in the early modern period. Specifically, I argue that in this play, we can observe disobedience becoming a virtue in its own right, an essential quality of the ambitious English individual. In effect, *Henry V* offers a new pedagogy of obedience and disobedience wherein it becomes less and less possible to distinguish the two traits.

I

The early modern period was one that praised obedience highly and vehemently opposed disobedience. The Elizabethan homily entitled 'An Homily Against Disobedience and Willful Rebellion' prepared in 1571 in the light of the 'Northern Rebellion' against Queen Elizabeth I offers a concise reminder of what E.M.W. Tillyard was to famously call *The Elizabethan World Picture*, a complex model of the universe that insisted on the interactions of all created things and, crucially, on the necessity of obedience in maintaining this world order. The homily begins by emphasizing that people are the obedient subjects of God and the very fall of man resulted from disobedience to God's commands:

And as GOD would haue man to be his obedient subiect, so did he make all earthly creatures subiect vnto man, who kept their due obedience vnto man, so long as man remayned in his obedience vnto GOD: in the which obedience if man had continued still, there had beene no pouerty, no diseases, no sickenesse, no death, nor other miseries wherewith mankinde is now infinitely and most miserably afflicted and oppressed (Homily II.21.1-15-21)

Eventually, the homily comes to the question: ‘What shall Subjects doe then? shall they obey valiant, stout, wise, and good Princes, and contemne, disobey, and rebell against children being their Princes, or against vndiscreet and euill gouernours?’ (Homily II.21.1-177-9). The brief, predictable answer – ‘God forbid’ -- stresses that obedience is so essential to the proper functioning of the world, in both its political and metaphysical dimensions, that disobeying even wicked rulers can produce chaos: ‘all sinnes that may bee committed against man, who seeth not that they bee contained in rebellion?’ (Homily II.21.3-653-4). This homily drives its point home with statements such as the following:

Wherefore good people, let vs, as the children of obedience, feare, the dreadfull execution of GOD, and liue in quiet obedience, to bee the children of euerlasting Saluation. For as heauen is the place of good obedient subiectes, and hell the prison and dungeon of rebels against GOD and their Prince: so is that Realme happy where most obedience of subiects doth appeare, being the verie figure of heauen. (Homily II.21.3-816-21)

Homilies such as this one represented the official position of the Church of England and were ordered to be read weekly in Sunday worship services. In their effective conjunction of religious and political ideologies (and particularly by raising the specter of civil war) such documents set the tone for authoritative discourse in the early modern English nation. And as Tillyard’s book makes abundantly clear, such language was by no means restricted to the pulpit and the crown. Tillyard opens his study by citing similar sentiments from a literary source, Ulysses’s speech on disobedience from Shakespeare’s *Troilus and Cressida*, a speech that analogises between the position of the Sun in the heavens and the monarch on the throne and insists on the chaos which will result if ‘degree’ is not maintained and the subordinate does not obey the superior.

In short, obedience was the watchword of the early modern period, the foundation of the relationships between parents and children, husbands and wives, masters and servants, kings and subjects, aristocrats and commoners, and most importantly, humans and God; both the Old and New Testaments are veritable textbooks about the virtues of faithful obedience and the sinfulness of distrusting God. Early modern Protestant writers such as Luther, Tyndale, and Calvin all wrote on the necessity of obedience to secular authorities, and Catholic writers too emphasised the need to obey the teachings of the Church.¹ Almost a century after the ‘Homily Against Disobedience’ was written, John Milton’s epic *Paradise Lost* begins in almost the same manner, referring to ‘Man’s First Disobedience and the Fruit’ thereof (1.1); it is certainly possible to argue that *Paradise Lost* is a sustained paean to the virtues of obedience.

I would stress here that even on occasions when disobedience was encouraged, it was usually conveyed as obedience to some higher principle. For example, in *King Lear*, the nameless servant who tries to stop his master Cornwall from blinding the helpless Gloucester says: ‘I have served you ever since I was a child/but better service have I never done you/than now to bid you hold.’ In his analysis of the scene, Richard Strier argues persuasively that here ‘Shakespeare is presenting the most radical possible sociopolitical act in a way that can only be interpreted as calling for his audience’s approval’ (119). Yet even as Strier uses this example to stress Shakespeare’s skepticism towards the power of secular authority, he must also acknowledge that the servant’s act is not only an act of disobedience, but also a display of

¹ For useful summaries of the role played by obedience in early modern England, see the essays by Richard Rex and Richard L. Greaves.

obedience, even loyalty. The servant rejects his master's spoken wishes but he obeys higher laws – those of his God and his 'conscience'. These forces influence him to serve his master's better nature instead of his master's angry impulses. To resist or even disobey a king can be obedience to God.

Strier in his essay seeks in his essay to find spaces for disobedience in Shakespeare's world, but it seems that in the early modern period the language of disobedience has little maneuvering space; it always becomes transformed into obedience to something higher. Thus the challenge posed by competing forms of obedience (for instance, in *King Lear*, a servant's conflicting duties to his master and to his conscience) are reconciled simply by hierarchizing the demands of obedience; when God and king conflict, the virtuous person must obey God. For some, of course, obeying God was by definition to obey the rulers He had selected; the 'Homily Against Disobedience' presents this view. For others, however, obedience to God and obedience to kings could be fundamentally different. Catholics who opposed Queen Elizabeth I did so on the basis of obedience to the Roman Catholic Church; Protestant radicals, such as John Ponet, who advocated the murder of Catholic Queen Mary I argued their position in almost identical ways, stressing that obedience was owed to God and not to unlawfully empowered princes.

As can be seen from these examples and from the perspective of a deconstructive methodology, obedience has numerous ways of consolidating its conceptual power in both political and religious contexts. In early modern consciousness, it is readily associated with such ideas as 'law' and 'conscience' and actions like 'love' and 'service.' As Anthony Low points out in a discussion of obedience in *Paradise Lost*, 'Only love can make service palatable. Without love, service to God becomes nothing but empty knee-worship, "warbl'd Hymns" and "Forc't Hallelujahs"' to use the words of Satan's cynical cohort, Mammon' (Low 353). In *Paradise Lost* and in Christian thought generally, such obedience is so powerful as to ally itself with terms that one might expect to usher in an ethos of disobedience. For instance, Christian "freedom" for Milton means not the absolute freedom to do whatever what wants, but a freedom that is keenly aware of its responsibilities to obey those in power.

Of course as obedience becomes associated with an extensive range of virtues, so too disobedience becomes associated with such sins as perverse self-will and dissimulating hypocrisy. In this sense, disobedience is constructed as the dangerous simulacrum of obedience, that merely superficial loyalty that characterises flatterers and traitors. As Christopher Pye points out in a discussion of treason in early modern England, some modes of disobedience could be so terrifying as to become unspeakable, opening the mind to thoughts and concepts that simply should not be entertained. As Pye notes, when it came to early modern treason, even thinking about it was a punishable crime (117).

As a result of such cultural constructions, it may have been nearly impossible to imagine an ethical alternative to obedience in the early modern consciousness. For example, John Milton's contemporary, Thomas Hobbes, had a very different view of social relationships than Milton and a very different vocabulary. But for both writers, disobedience is almost inseparable from rebellion and destruction, narrow-minded and shortsighted self-will. In Hobbes's blunt formulation: 'every man is supposed to promise obedience, to him, in whose power it is to

save, or destroy him' (153). While Milton would reject the brutality of the language he would not object to Hobbes's insistence on obedience as the ultimate guarantor of social stability.

In the light of these examples, a difficult question can be raised: 'what would it mean to articulate a viable theory of disobedience in the early modern period?' This possibility is suggested, perhaps, by Christopher Marlowe's plays where subversion is entertained for the sake of it, or at least for the sake of entertainment. Other plays, including Shakespeare's *Henry V* also suggest this option; Henry V claims, for instance, that the villainous Lord Scroop can have no reason to rebel against him, except a love of 'the name of traitor' for its own sake (2.2.120).

Yet while this is one of the positions expressed in *Henry V* in relation to obedience and disobedience, the play as a whole has a more complex view of the relationship between the two terms. Indeed, I think *Henry V* offers a fuller exploration of the concepts of obedience and disobedience in relation to English politics and nationalism than that seen in playwrights such as Marlowe. This paper argues in effect that the play encourages members of the English nation to conceive themselves as both obedient and disobedient simultaneously.

II

On the surface, such a reading of *Henry V* seems to contradict the impulses of a play that appears to encourage the most emphatic modes of both secular and religious obedience.² In *Henry V*, civil rebellion is characterised as the greatest of sins, associated with 'treason and murder' (2.2.105), directly inspired by the forces of Satan (2.2.111-125), and fully analogous to the original 'fall of man' (2.2.142). As Grey, one of the traitors, puts it after Henry upbraids him: "Never did faithful subject more rejoice/At the discovery of most dangerous treason/Than I do at this hour joy o'er myself,/Prevented from a damned enterprise" (2.2.160-4). It is as if Grey rejoices to see the great chain of being restored, with Henry V as God's properly chosen monarch, even if the cost of such a recognition is his own imminent death. The play's insistence on presenting Henry as both religiously and politically glorious is offered early on, so that audiences cannot fail to overlook it. The Archbishop of Canterbury comments, privately, about Henry's qualities as follows: 'the breath no sooner left his father's body/But that his wildness, mortified in him,/Seemed to die too; yea, at that very moment . . . ' (1.1.25-7). By stressing the instantaneous nature of the change from Prince Hal to Henry V, Shakespeare deliberately mystifies politics by evoking instead the concept of the king's two bodies, a theory that fully participates in the logic of obedience as a divinely sanctioned concept. At the very moment Hal becomes king, he serves not his own impulses but acts as a conduit for rules of universal order that are ultimately guaranteed by God. Thus those who

² For instance, in their well-known essay on *Henry V*, Jonathan Dollimore and Alan Sinfield write that '*Henry V* is only in one sense "about" national unity: its obsessive preoccupation is insurrection' (216). Hence, 'What really torments Henry is the inability to ensure obedience' (218). Interestingly, the evidence cited for this claim involves such things as Henry's contempt for his people, such as his references to the common man as a 'wretched slave' and a 'lackey.' To Dollimore and Sinfield, these remarks indicate 'the king's fear of being disobeyed and opposed' (218). This essay argues, however, that the king's fears are more focused on losing the war with France, and in such a context the contempt he displays for some of his subjects also includes a distaste for their obedience.

follow the king's command and fight on Crispin's' Day will be freshly remembered always -- as will all the conditions of this battle in which God fought on the side of England. In short, one can argue that disobedience in *Henry V* is figured as demonic and perverse, associated with unproductive subversion for its own sake.

And yet disobedience is also praised in this play, figured as an interpersonal mode that can empower both the subject and recipient of disobedience. Moreover, it is in the surprising context of war and the proper behavior of soldiers – a context that might seem to emphasise obedience more than any other -- that such productive disobedience takes shape. To begin with a small example, Henry V refers at one point to a captain who serves him loyally, Sir Thomas Erpingham. Henry imagines that Erpingham lacks confidence in him and that Erpingham believes England will lose the upcoming battle at Agincourt. Henry is asked whether or not Erpingham has 'told his thought to the King' (4.1.100) and Henry responds, 'No, nor it is not meet he should. . . .no man should possess him [the king] with any appearance of fear, lest he by showing it, should dishearten his army' (4.1.101-12). Here, Erpingham is portrayed as a good soldier and perhaps more, worthy of being a good leader. What makes him so is his ability to take the initiative when it comes to determining the nature of obedience. He decides for himself what information to share with his king, and although his decision is an obedient one (since it conforms with the king's own wish not to be informed of his soldiers' fears) it is also disobedient to the degree that it demonstrates lack of faith in the king's mission and by extension the level of divine approval given for that mission. Erpingham calls the king's men outcasts, 'even as men wrecked upon a sand, that look to be washed off at the next tide' (4.1.98-9); he does not fervently believe in the king's ability to carry out his aims, suggesting lack of faith if not disloyalty, qualities usually associated with disobedience. Yet Erpingham's disobedience is fully approved by the king since it aids the king's objectives. Erpingham, in other words, is concerned with the success of the king's mission and does not wish to jeopardise it; yet at the same time, he believes that true obedience at least occasionally involves withholding part of oneself from the figure to whom obedience is owed.

When the stakes of battle become even greater, the potential disobedience of Henry's soldiers becomes an essential element of the king's power. As he threatens the French at Harfleur, Henry makes clear that his very authority stems from the potential disobedience of those soldiers whom Henry cannot control when they are ravaging a city:

We as may bootless spend our vain command

Upon th'enraged soldiers in their spoil

As send precepts to the leviathan

To come ashore. (3.3.24-7)

Yet this lack of control is both a weakness, a limitation of the king's ability to command obedience, and a strength, since the disobedience of his soldiers can also serve the king's larger aims.

In the play's most extensive discussion of the nature of obedience, Henry debates its meaning and significance with two of his common soldiers, Bates and Williams, on the eve of the St. Crispin's Day battle. The men's conversation begins by suggesting a tremendous value for the virtue of obedience. Bates says that he is a loyal subject to the king: 'we know enough if we know we are the King's subjects. If his cause be wrong, our obedience to the King wipes the crime of it out of us' (4.1.131-3). Bates thinks that to obey a king is not only to be a dutiful subject but also to be a faithful religious man, one who will be forgiven by God for the crimes he may commit as a result of his obedience to his lawful king.

Yet by the time the conversation is over, obedience has lost much of its value. In the first place, as Vivienne Westbrook points out in her discussion of obedience in this play, Bates's obedience is insufficiently fervent; in the early modern period, following earlier configurations of Christian obedience, "mindless obedience to the Law was not Obedience at all" (78). In this sense, despite his uncompromising devotion to the king's cause, Bates's mode of obedience is disturbingly passive; obedience becomes a lesser virtue, appropriate to weak-minded followers. Alexander Leggatt in this context calls it "an equivocal virtue, freeing underlings from moral responsibility" (133). Indeed, by the time the scene ends, both Bates and Williams have specifically repudiated Bates's original view of obedience. Williams says, "'Tis certain, every man that does ill, the ill upon his own head; the King is not to answer it,' and Bates himself concurs: 'I do not desire he should answer for me, and yet I determine to fight lustily for him' (4.1.185-8).

It appears that obedience is not precisely what is being solicited by Henry V nor, by extension, by the Christian God who is so often evoked in the play. Such obedience certainly does not provide the subject with many rewards. In theological terms, obedience to a secular ruler cannot bring the subject closer to God as Bates would have it; it cannot 'wipe' away the crimes that are committed in its name. In contrast, 'every subject's soul is his own' (4.1.176-7) and, as Henry puts it, obedience to one's master is only one of our many duties. The son who is responsible for his father's 'merchandise' (4.1.148) or the servant who carries his employer's 'money' (4.1.152) is not necessarily divinely blessed for fulfilling that particular duty. Obedience thus takes shape as one duty among others; to use the terminology of Shakespeare's Reformation age, the damned (or reprobate) soul as well as the saved (or elect) person is capable of obedience, and even of doing good as a result of obedient behavior.

Perhaps more interesting than the weakness of obedience in theological terms is that it cannot greatly help the subject in a secular forum either. After the soldiers depart, Henry presents his first and only soliloquy, wherein he sarcastically reinforces the conclusions of the previous scene:

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 all. O hard condition,

Twin-born with greatness, subject to the breath

Of every fool whose sense no more can feel

But of his own wringing! (4.1.227-33)

People give their obedience to their king and expect some reward for doing so, but Henry refuses to provide one. He will not take responsibility for the ‘sins’ of his subjects, any more than he will accept the burden of their ‘lives . . . souls . . . debts . . . careful wives [or] . . . children.’ To submit to such demands would be to cater to the ‘breath/of every fool’ and Henry does not intend to create a nation of fools. He mocks ‘the slave’ who ‘in gross brain little wots/What watch the King keeps to maintain the peace,/Whose hours the peasant best advantages’ (278-81). Instead of admiring peace-loving peasants, Henry seems to consider them inert and unproductive, contributing little to their nation. In contrast, Henry seeks those who, like himself, are on the ‘watch’ for chances to benefit from their opportunities. In this play, the primary opportunity is the war against France, but in Shakespeare’s time, there were many other ways to achieve success in expansionist enterprises – not only through Essex’s attempts to subdue Ireland (a significant subtext of *Henry V*) but in other economic contexts as well. In this challenging environment, the ‘obedience’ associated with the common man, whether peasant or soldier, is not praised. In fact, Henry, in his discussion of war as God’s battlefield (4.1.165-72), almost implies that the very purpose of this obedient soldier is to die in the ‘king’s quarrel’ which, in Henry’s syntax, seems indistinguishable from the ‘vengeance’ of God: ‘War is his beadle, war is his vengeance; so that here men are punished for before breach of the King’s laws in now the King’s quarrel.’ (4.1.168-70). Henry’s subjects, in other words, are perhaps better off if they do not rely on their king who will not ‘bear all’ their burdens for them (4.1.230).

However, in contrast to the pathetic ‘wretched slave’ who ‘can sleep so soundly’ every night with ‘a body filled and vacant mind,’ thinking that others will take responsibility for him, there is another mode of soldiership hinted at in *Henry V*, one that has more affinities with Henry’s own complex rhetorical approaches. As he continues to discuss the nature of war with Bates and Williams, Henry offers a lesson to these men:

Therefore should every soldier in the wars do as every sick man in his bed, wash every mote out of his conscience, and dying so, death is to him advantage; or not dying, the time was blessedly lost wherein such preparation was gained; and in him that escapes,

it were not sin to think that, making God so free an offer, he let him outlive that day to see his greatness and to teach others how they should prepare (4.1.177-84).

These words provide more than a traditional theological consolation for dying courageously as a good Christian. They also offer a lesson to survivors: that the man who outlives the king's battles can use this very survival to empower himself. The possessive pronoun 'his' that precedes 'greatness' might refer not only to God but to the soldier himself, one who has become 'greater' not only through fighting but through effective self-presentation; what such a soldier is preparing for is thus not only to die but how to present himself after the battle is over.

The most famous speech in *Henry V*, the Crispin's Day speech, provides further evidence for this line of interpretation. Its purpose is not only to urge the soldiers to fight and win but to imagine the beneficial political consequences of doing so. In some of Shakespeare's most potent writing, Henry V says that "He that outlives this day and comes safe home/Will stand a-tiptoe when this day is named/And rouse him at the name of Crispian. . . Then will he strip his sleeve and show his scars,/And say "These wounds I had on Crispin's day" . . ." (4.3.41-48). The speech continues, gloriously, in a similar vein and its words attest to the power of language in self-creation. The subject does not attain power through obedience (fighting the battle) so much as through presenting the circumstances of that battle in ways that make one seem heroic. It is not, therefore, Henry V's admonitions to obedience that empower his men; rather it is the way his rhetoric urges people to create themselves – by utilizing obedience as one tool among others. "For he today that sheds his blood with me/ Shall be my brother; be he ne'er so vile,/This day shall gentle his condition" says Henry (4.3.61-3). As the next line makes fully clear ("And gentlemen in England now abed" [4.3.64]), Henry does not actually intend to reward the obedience of his men with noble titles. Rather, the gentling of these soldiers' 'condition' is in their own hands, making of this day what they will. And a great deal was made from examples such as this one – and in fact this particular example -- in enabling the English nation to its imperial and industrial successes on the world stage.³

III

Clearly, Henry V's lessons are not easy to learn. Many characters in this play (as in the earlier plays featuring Henry -- *1 Henry IV* and *2 Henry IV*) try to attain Henry V's pedagogical power but are not successful. Pistol, for example, tries to fashion himself along the lines of Henry's recommendations, as a heroic warrior. But Gower offers a long deprecatory analysis of Pistol's efforts at self-fashioning: "Why, 'tis a gull, a fool, a rogue, that now and then goes to the wars to grace himself at his return into London under the form of a soldier" (3.6.66-8). Even Falstaff's boy page recognises Pistol's incapacity to attain the obedience of others: "I did never know so full a voice issue from so empty a heart" (4.4.66-7). Pistol would behave like a soldier but, aside from his cowardice, one of his problems is that his language is insufficiently

³ For instance, Laurence Olivier's 1944 film of *Henry V* is dedicated 'to the Commandos and Airborne Troops of Great Britain – the spirit of whose ancestors it has been [*sic*] humbly attempted to recapture . . . ' (Chapman 245). The chorus's Prologue to Act 1 offers a similarly solicitous and empowering gesture by referring to its audience as 'gentles all' (Prologue 8).

See Joel Altman's essay for some thoughts on how *Henry V* worked on its audiences' imaginations in the context of the Earl of Essex's 1599 expedition to Ireland.

disobedient. He has mastered iambic pentameter, but his milieu remains resolutely pre-Shakespearean; ‘I will have forty moys,/Or I will fetch thy rim out at thy throat/In drops of crimson blood’ is a typical example of his style (4.4.13-15). Falstaff had used a similar superficial approach when mimicking Henry IV in the famous tavern scene of *1 Henry IV* (‘There is a thing, Harry, which thou hast often heard of, and it is known to many in our land by the name of pitch’ [2.4.406-8]), and the result of that scene was the almost ritualistic transfer of power from Falstaff, the old king, to Henry V the new king: “I do, I will” says Hal, affirming Falstaff’s eventual fate. Pistol likewise is merely obedient to an older idiom (‘this roaring devil i’th’ old play’ [4.4.70-1]), lacking the initiative that would allow him to emerge from the invasion of France with greater rather than lesser prestige.

Fluellen likewise, is not fully able to utilise Henry V’s lessons to fashion a self of his own. Pistol speaks in iambic rhythms he associates with the nobility because he has seen too many stage plays; Fluellen takes his idiom instead from the many Latin texts he has read which he translates too literally into English. Consequently he is little attuned to the subtleties of English; he does not see, for instance, the difference between Alexander the Great and ‘Alexander the Pig’ (4.7.12). Such differences in phrasing are inconsequential to Fluellen: ‘is not pig great? The pig, or the great, or the mighty, or the huge, or the magnanimous, are all one reckonings, save the phrase is a little variations’ (4.7.15-18). Henry V, however, teaches that rhetoric is an essential element of success, one that might, for instance, prevent the English from laughing quite so loudly at the Welsh. In such ways, Henry V continues to provide opportunities for his men --not only the chance for his soldiers to pillage from the French but also to advance themselves once the war is over if they can avail themselves of his lessons and integrate some disobedience into their sense of duty.

As part of the process by which this play articulates the nature of the empowered subject, one who combines obedience and disobedience, *Henry V* may even offer a specific faculty that mediates between obedience and disobedience: that of imagination. The play’s chorus repeatedly urges its audience to let its ‘imaginary forces work’ (1 Prologue 18) on the play’s content, turning history into drama, mediating between the ‘flat unraised spirits’ (1 Prologue 9) or players who enact the drama and the glorious potential of England’s military might, embodied in Henry V himself. In one sense, these comments of the chorus enjoin obedience. In allowing one’s imagination to be swayed by the words of the chorus, one is swept away by the tide of nationalistic fervor, thus allowing one to accept numerous assumptions the play puts forth about England’s military power and providential righteousness in war.⁴ The play proposes that England has a right to rule other nations such as France (and perhaps by extension, Ireland), that England can successfully invade and conquer France, and that those who oppose Henry V are rightfully discovered and punished. If one imagines oneself opposed to the English mission, one’s imagination is similarly controlled -- but rather than empowerment, the result is victimisation. The citizens of Harfleur are encouraged to imagine their wives and children assaulted if they refuse to participate in Henry’s project. Henry’s rhetoric conjures up such

⁴ In a variation of this argument, Jeffrey Knapp suggests that what is happening in *Henry V* is not that the imagination is being harnessed to support a war, but that it is being nurtured by Henry (and by Shakespeare) to strengthen the theatre, which is, after all, a primary site of the imagination.

vivid images of their defeat ('in a moment look to see/The blind and bloody soldier with foul hand/Defile the locks of your shrill-shrieking daughters' [3.3.33-5]) as to make the prospect of resisting Henry's wrath a terrifying one.

However, in *Henry V*, the imagination does not only direct subjects towards obedience, but also towards independence and subversion. To utilise one's imagination in relation to *Henry V* is not only to accept the directives of king or chorus, but also to behave disobediently by remembering elements of the history of Henry V that the play deliberately, aggressively effaces: the king's untimely death, the resultant War of the Roses, the actual reasons for Cambridge's betrayal of Henry, the impracticality of England ruling France, and the actual battle casualties which Shakespeare presents as limited to twenty-nine persons (4.8.104-7).

One scene in the play seems specifically aimed at highlighting such ludicrousness and again in service to the functioning of the imagination. We are told of the tragic deaths of two of the dead nobles, York and Suffolk, but the situation is so deliberately archaic that it raises the question about what sort of mode of heroic death would be less anachronistic and more suitable for late sixteenth-century warfare. The play may not provide answers, but in the tension between the manner of York and Suffolk's deaths, 'a testament of noble-ending love' (4.6.27) and the words of Henry a few seconds later, "every soldier kill his prisoners" (4.7.37), lie the poles that people would have to negotiate in order to become useful citizens to an increasingly powerful England. In this sense, York and Suffolk's deaths are indeed a testament to a sort of love that can only be seen as having ended, albeit nobly, along with the ideologies of obedience that had accompanied it.

At one point in the play, Henry V uses his own imagination to explore the contours of the English nation, trying to configure a sense of kingship that is not precisely dependent upon obedience, and hence might be more appropriate to the early modern period. In imagining this new form of kingship, what Henry rejects first, and perhaps predictably, is ceremony:

And what have kings that privates have not too,

Save ceremony, save general ceremony?

And what art thou, thou idol ceremony?

What kind of god art thou . . . (4.1.235-8)

As many critics, including Stephen Greenblatt and David Scott Kastan have argued, the early modern period was beginning to aggressively question the concept of ceremony, particularly in the context of a Protestant England that wished to attack Catholics for embracing it. Thus speaking perhaps as a good Protestant, Henry V mocks 'the balm, the sceptre and the ball,/The sword, the mace, the crown imperial,/The intertissued robe of gold and pearl,/The farced title running 'fore the king,/The throne he sits on . . .' (4.1.257-260). David Scott Kastan comments in relation to these lines that Henry recognises here the fact that ceremonies are mere 'props for the mystification of power' (121). Stephen Greenblatt notes similarly that such an attack on ceremony can even be used as an attack on religion itself, given the longstanding symbiosis between the two. As Greenblatt puts it in his famous essay 'Invisible Bullets' that also deals

with *Henry V*: ‘We have then, as in Machiavelli, a sense of religion as a set of beliefs manipulated by the subtlety of priests to help instill obedience and respect for authority’ (26). Both Greenblatt and Kastan can also conclude that such subversion of religion is (as King James himself recognised) potentially subversive of that secular priest, the king. Thus Kastan can take this argument yet a step further, commenting that the theatre is one of the main cultural contexts for making such subversion concrete; to see a player act as a king is also to empower oneself to see a king without his clothes, without the trappings of ceremony, as a mere player (120).

As Kastan, Greenblatt and others note, Henry V, like other Protestants, is, in his words about ceremony, effectively deconstructing the concept to suggest that its ‘signified’ (the spiritual qualities possessed by those who are supposed to be ceremoniously obeyed) is actually lacking and that the ‘signifiers’ (those “thrice gorgeous” trappings [4.1.263]) are in fact in control of the sign system. In such a context, these critics suggest that what Henry is seeking is a new semiotic, a more reliable way to maintain power. Surely in this soliloquy, the inspired king does seem to be on the verge of offering some new definition of kingship, one that rejects ceremony yet somehow remains ‘theatrical.’ Kastan suggests that this new definition involves promoting rhetoric and spectacle, ‘pageant and progress’ (117) as that which can attain power; in this context ‘rule’ becomes ‘role’ and ‘power passes to him who can best control and manipulate the visual and verbal symbols of authority’ (121).

Without disagreeing with Kastan’s basic point about the value of rhetoric and spectacle in formulating power in the early modern period, I would point out that Kastan’s focus on such terms as ‘control’ and ‘manipulate’ suggests that the aim of Henry (and by extension such monarchs as Elizabeth I and James I) is to continue to enforce obedience but in a more effective way.⁵ As such, Henry would want to generate an alternative to ceremony that can more reliably and potentially induce the same effects: ‘awe and fear in other men’ (4.1.244).

I would propose, in contrast, that it is not Henry’s primary aim to produce ‘awe and fear’. As we have seen, these are qualities associated with obedience, but also with the passivity and foolishness of the type who Henry consistently insults, especially in this speech, as ‘slave’ and ‘peasant,’ ‘lackey’ and ‘wretch’ (4.1.265-281). After all, Henry’s shrewd advisors are not drawn to him out of awe and fear, although they politely use such ceremonious language when they speak. Instead they follow him out of an ever-increasing awareness of what he can do for them. For Canterbury, there is the hope that Church lands will not be possessed by a rapacious King like Henry VIII, and for all the plays’ characters we might imagine similar inducements to serve the king. In such a new, pre-modern version of kingship, the king does not rule by commanding obedience, controlling and dominating his subjects, but by offering the possibility of using their imagination in conjunction with his own. In this way, Henry’s function within

⁵ As Dollimore and Sinfield point out, another problem with a version of kingship that relies on ‘ceremony’ is that ‘ceremony’ is easy to fake: ‘the same ceremonies or role-playing which constitute kingship are the means by which real antagonisms can masquerade as obedience – “poison’d flattery”’ (218).

the play is to create subjects who are as independent and ambitious as the King himself and equally able to manipulate others and circumstances for their own benefit.⁶

IV

I close with a notation to the play's first specific reference to the quality of obedience, in a speech by the Archbishop of Canterbury. Canterbury's words follow the comments of his fellow Churchman, the Bishop of Ely, who uses the metaphor of music to describe the proper, obedient functioning of the commonwealth: 'For government, though high and low and lower/Put into parts, doth keep in one concert,/Congreeing in a full and natural close/Like music' (1.2.180-3). Canterbury continues the thought, bringing up the Virgilian trope of the nation as a beehive. This motif is usually put forth as a way to stress the need for order and structure in any society (natural, divine, or human); the key term to explain the necessary oil that lubricates this complex mechanism is precisely obedience. The Archbishop puts it as follows:

Therefore heaven doth divide
The state of man in diverse functions,
Setting endeavor in continual motion,
To which is fixed, as an aim or butt,
Obedience. (1.2.183-7)

However, obedience in this speech does not function in its usual manner. For example, in the similar speech by Ulysses in *Troilus and Cressida*, obedience is seen in its usual way, praised as the essential quality for maintaining social stability which is equated with maintenance of an aristocratic hierarchy. For Ulysses, the failure of Achilles to obey the great chain of command is the key problem. But when Canterbury talks of obedience, he does not, as Ulysses does, align it with order or hierarchy or any centralised regulatory structure. This is especially surprising since the speech begins in the expected manner, praising the pedagogical facility of obedience to 'teach/The act of order to a peopled kingdom' (1.2.188-9). Yet while Shakespeare perhaps began by writing a speech about obedience, as the lines continue, the ideal polis Canterbury imagines and Henry V symbolises is not characterised by obedience but by multiplicities of perspective and variations in occupation, or calling. This is a kingdom that works not obediently but 'contrariouly' (1.2.206) and its monarch does not command or desire obedience so much as initiative and ambition. These aims may entail disobedience as well as obedience, such as that displayed by the bee soldiers (analogous to those Elizabethan pirates like Francis Drake whom Elizabeth criticised in public but may have appreciated in private) who merrily 'pillage' the belongings of the enemy and diffuse such riches throughout the country. In such a polis, the enemy is not the disobedient but the unproductive person, the

⁶ As Kastan notes, such 'empowering' of the English subject eventually led to the execution of Charles I.

‘lazy yawning drone’ (1.2.204) who may obediently follow the rules but makes little contribution to the economic growth of the nation.

In contrast, the successful English engage in continual work, and such work is often the work of imagination, that “quick forge and working-house of thought” (5.0.23), a political skill which is constantly devising plots and plans and which serves its possessor even more than it serves one’s king. In such a context, we can observe the binary opposition between obedience and disobedience taking on more of its modern shape and less of its medieval one. In today’s world, obedience is generally a superficial virtue, appropriate to some contexts but largely discredited in the light of world wars and experiments in social psychology like those of Stanley Milgram; Milgram’s conclusion to his frightening demonstrations of people’s willingness to inflict pain on others rather than disobey authority is that:

Men do become angry; they do act hatefully and explode in rage against others. But not here. Something far more dangerous is revealed: the capacity for man to abandon his humanity, indeed, the inevitability that he does so, as he merges his unique personality into larger institutional structures (188).

In these contexts of modern, liberal democracy where it is incumbent upon all of us to develop a ‘unique personality,’ obedience is an uncomfortable position to inhabit. This feeling may account for the numerous twentieth-century studies of *Henry V* that stress the disturbing consequences of the play’s admonitions to obedience; such readings highlight the many ways in which obedience to the King means complicity in his foolhardy war ventures and imperialist rhetoric. Many critics take this argument further, suggesting, sensibly enough, that the play itself predicts this reception and subverts the character of Henry consciously and deliberately; moreover, these critics suggest audiences watching the first performances of the play in 1599 would have been as alert as we are today to the subversive qualities in the play’s presentation of the king’s character.⁷

What such studies may overlook in their presentation of how *Henry V* functions is that it is not only the play, but also the man, who exhibits this ‘conscious’ awareness of his own multifaceted nature. As such, it is Henry’s own rhetoric that largely fashions the frustrating intermixture of praise and criticism of Henry that characterises the play.⁸ Careful examination of Henry’s language leads, moreover, not only to a sense of Henry as a person, but also to the nature of an early modern England that his rhetoric may have, to some degree, produced, and certainly must have reflected. For, as Claire McEachern has argued, in imagining Henry, Shakespeare is not precisely creating a ‘character’ but representing something both literal and symbolic; one might say Shakespeare is envisioning a more politically nuanced conception of the theory of ‘The King’s Two Bodies’ so ably articulated by Ernest Kantorowicz and which

⁷ It certainly seems hard for any audience to overlook Henry’s self-contradictory nature; he can, at one point, stress the responsibility he has for the souls of his subjects (1.2.24-8) and, later, and with equal sincerity, argue that he has none. He can, even within the space of a single line of dialogue, see a fellow soldier as both ‘vile’ and as his ‘brother’ (4.3.62).

⁸ As Altman summarises these positions, ‘Shakespeare is either celebrating the mirror of all Christian kings, criticizing his calculatingly brutal *Realpolitik*, or being amazingly large-minded in contemplating both possibilities’ (2).

appears often in discussions of this play. In *Henry V*, this theory becomes not only a theory of kingship but also of nationhood; and the contradictions that constitute the “king’s two bodies” theory (the king is both a man and a semi-divine figure) are also the contradictions of an emerging nation. One important aspect of this self-contradictory rhetoric, explored in this essay, is the nature of obedience and disobedience as Henry imagines them and disseminates them among others. For Henry, we might say, the structure of this binary opposition is that obedience is to be enjoined – Henry constantly reminds us of the King’s subordination to God and the duty of his subjects to follow his commands – but also disobedience, in Henry’s frequent suggestions that the qualities of obedience are not adequate offerings to this semi-divine ruler.

In the end, what I am arguing is that Henry seeks in his subjects not obedience but rather indications that they can be like him: seeing many things at once and from multiple perspectives, and capable of acting decisively to further their own interests. One can assert, as Greenblatt does, that such a method of conceptualizing kingship is strongly absolutist: ‘In the ideological apologies for absolutism, the self-interest of the monarch and the interest of the nation are identical, and both in turn are secured by God’s overarching design’ (60). Yet such formulations seem to describe a medieval mode of obedience rather than an early modern one. In the early modern period, as reflected in *Henry V*, the nation is not exactly coextensive with Henry’s personal aims. Rather than representing an aspiration towards successful absolutism as Greenblatt would claim or a ‘powerful Elizabethan fantasy’ of ‘a single source of power in the state’ (as opposed to the debilitating aristocratic infighting that in fact characterised English politics in 1599) as Dollimore and Sinfield argue, Henry can be said to represent the transformation of English political life from a monarchy to what might be termed a Parliamentary Republic – one where competing interests are nurtured and not only seen as obstacles to development.⁹ As such, Henry is a sort of composite man, embodying at the same time monarchy and Parliament, past and future. Henry is the medieval warrior King of England who died in 1422 and enjoined obedience to his royal will as the manifestation of God; but he is also the figure presented in the frontispiece to Hobbes’s *Leviathan* of 1651 -- a symbolic representation of a nation in the form of a single man.

Thus if England is to perpetuate Henry’s power, this play is saying that the emerging nation must produce men who are like Henry – they cannot be monarchs but they can be hypnotic and alluring and persuasive and charismatic, like the Chorus itself which echoes Henry by evoking simultaneously his language of glorious self-promotion and wry self mockery. In the end, what Henry does for this audience is to teach it; he teaches his subjects that they can become empowered by using the skilful political techniques he deploys, rhetoric foremost among

⁹ McEachern, in writing about *Henry V*, concludes that she would ‘urge the rehabilitation of ideology as the enabling medium of collectivity as well as that which [quoting Dollimore and Sinfield, 211-12] “legitimate[s] inequality and exploitation”.’

For a related reading, see Jonathan Baldo’s “‘Into a Thousand Parts’” which emphasises the importance of Parliament in Shakespeare’s *Richard II* and *Henry V*. As Baldo puts it, ‘devices by which the realm is presented in *Henry V* more nearly resemble the modern representative principle imputed to Commons than the medieval, mystical notion of the king as representative body of the kingdom . . . [the play] oscillates between the representational aspect of commons and the idea of a self-representative nobility’ (71).

them.¹⁰ Hence the final words of the French King ('that never war advance/his bleeding sword
'twixt England and fair France' [5.2.348-9]) can serve both as a closing prayer for peace and a
threatening reminder, perhaps especially relevant in the context of Ireland, that peace between
England and France requires an end to English military occupation.¹¹ By understanding
Henry's complex duplicities, audiences too can constitute themselves, as the French King does
here, within languages of obedience and disobedience simultaneously, stressing the necessity
of an ordered commonwealth even as all its members act, as Henry V does, for their own
particular ends.

¹⁰ There are many critical views regarding how *Henry V* transforms its audience. Knapp, for example, argues (in contrast to Altman) that the play could make its initial audiences more peace-loving, attaining a 'fellowship transcending class' and even making the theatre a more '*peaceable* institution' – in specific contrast to the more violent discourses of aristocracy, monarchy, and even religion (136; emphasis in original).

¹¹ In 1558, the year Elizabeth ascended the throne, the English finally surrendered Calais, the last part of its Continental empire, back to France. See Jonathan Baldo's 'Wars of Memory' for a discussion of this aspect of *Henry V* in the context of historical memory.

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