

Hal, Falstaff, Henry V, and Prose*

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Robert Crosman's essay on "The Pivotal Position of *Henry V* in the Rise and Fall of Shakespeare's Prose" offers an admirably fresh look at a sometimes hackneyed subject. I wonder though whether it does not depend—more heavily perhaps than its author realizes—on certain received ideas that might benefit from an even more vigorous shaking than he gives them. Crosman marks out the territory thus: "Shakespeare's use of prose was linked to certain ideas of what was 'appropriate' to certain moods, characters and situations. In the stage conventions of the 1590s, which Shakespeare did more than anyone to establish, prose is more appropriate for lower-class than for upper-class characters, and more suited to 'realistic' speeches than to 'idealistic' ones." So much, in general terms, may be accepted. Very broadly speaking, prose does (after 1590) find itself more comfortable in comedy than in tragedy, among plebeian rather than high-born characters, and amid down-to-earth rather than elevated materials. It is true that following such plays as Gascoigne's *Supposes* (1566) or the court comedies of John Lyly (1584-c.1588-90), or popular history plays like *The Famous Victories of Henry V* (1586), in all of which prose constitutes the prevailing medium with no regard to the social level of the characters, or the degree of solemnity or jocosity of their utterances, or the familiar or exalted treatment of the materials, a rough working distinction between the two domains begins to emerge and then crystallize in the late 80s and early 90s.

But Shakespeare is from the beginning hard to pin down, as we learn from a scene quoted by Professor Crosman himself in 1 *Henry IV* 5.3.39-

*Reference: Robert Crosman, "The Pivotal Position of *Henry V* in the Rise and Fall of Shakespeare's Prose," *Connotations* 2.1 (1992): 1-15.

61, where Hal meets Falstaff on the battlefield at Shrewsbury. This is a moment when Falstaff's self-centered earthiness finds no answering echo in the prince, wholly focused as the latter is on the battle being fought just off stage, out of sight of the spectators, and on his own need of a weapon. The cross-purposes in the dialogue here find reinforcement in its contrasting rhythms. The oscillations between verse and prose are heard as fitting and natural, with Hal's "hard-breathing" blank verse (in Crosman's apt term) being set against Falstaff's jaunty refusal, in prose, to abandon his role as clown, his subversive insistence on making the saving of his own hide and the catering to his own creature comforts, along with his irrepressible jesting and dallying, even amid scenes of carnage, the only things his mind will entertain. But it is odd to hear it said that "Bevington [sets] up Hal's speeches as verse," as though this constituted an innovation on Bevington's part, when to set them as verse has long been standard practise with editors, since apart from the auditory evidence the lines have the authority of the First Folio, which also sets them as verse.

As for Hal, perhaps it is true for the most part that the principle governing his speeches is that he "speaks 'every man's language'," so that he "must continue speaking prose to characters not capable of speaking verse"—yet on the Shrewsbury battlefield, as we have just seen, he does *not* continue speaking prose to Falstaff, despite the latter's "incapacity" to respond in the more "elevated" medium. With Poin on the other hand, in their opening scene in *Part 2*, as Crosman points out, he does indeed move from prose as levity to prose as expressive of the private and sincere, and one therefore tends to react as if prose were "the medium, and perhaps the index, of his sincerity." But to make Hal's prose addressed to Poin the index of his sincerity would seem to ignore those occasions on which his *verse* self sets the highwater mark for sincerity. Was Hal *not* sincere or was he *less* sincere when he pleaded with his father (in *Part 1*, 5.3) not to misjudge him for his "wildness"?

Is he insincere or less sincere in the later interview (in *Part 2*, 4.5) when having removed the crown, he defends himself anew, this time against the charge of wishing for his father's death—arguing so eloquently as altogether to persuade the dying king (and us) of his loyalty and love? It seems to me that there are dangers in deriving a general *principle* from

a valid and useful insight that scarcely extends beyond the specific scene itself.

Something comparable occurs in the discussion of the scene in *Henry V* where Hal, now King Henry V, perpetrates “the apparent indecorum of doffing his royal garments in order to mingle with his social inferiors,” which “enforces the further indecorum of speaking of serious matters in prose.” But Shakespeare has always been ready to treat serious matters in prose when it suited his purpose, as in *The Merchant of Venice* (1596), for example, in Portia’s tonally playful but nevertheless deeply serious exchange with Nerissa concerning the tyranny of her father’s will and the shallowness of her suitors; or in Shylock’s turning of the tables on his tormentors Salerio and Solanio with an impassioned affirmation of the moral parity between himself and the Christians.

As for the supposed indecorum of the king disguised as a commoner, this was by 1599 a well developed convention of the English stage, as also of printed romance and ballad,¹ much more likely to have been felt simply as conventional than as indecorous. In such cases, the question is: indecorous from whose point of view? Surely not that of an Elizabethan spectator caught up in the dramatic and human substance of the scene. That would be retrospectively to impose on the said spectator a pedantic notion of decorum that it seems highly unlikely he could have possessed. Probably the most one can say is that if such constraints did operate, they were lightly felt, since Shakespeare never treats them as constricting, but deals with each local situation on its own terms, as it arises, for whatever dramatic values it proves to contain or imply.

The truly unexpected features of the incident at the campfire in *Henry V* would seem rather to lie, first of all, in the soldiers’ blunt cynicism about their plight, in answer to the king’s patient courtesy in argument—their lack of deference, in short. They make no allowances, as other dramatic characters of other playwrights of the time might have made, for the fact that whether *they* know it or not, *we* after all know that their interlocutor is the king, who must therefore be addressed only with due respect. Rather, these commoners tax their king in harsh deflating terms: he may put on a brave countenance, but if truth were known he would rather be up to his neck in Thames; if he were alone on the battlefield,

he would be sure to be ransomed; if his soldiers do not die well, it will be a "black matter" for him; however the soldiers die, he may as well be ransomed, for all the good it will do the soldiers once they themselves are dead, etc. And they dismiss with contempt their visitor's effort to vouch for the trustworthiness of "the king's" word.

Even more disconcerting is the sequel to this on the following day, when Williams, having learned the identity of his nocturnal antagonist, stands his ground with respectful but dogged honesty, is rewarded with the glove filled with crowns, for which he offers no thanks, and at length scornfully rejects Fluellen's proffered shilling, as if to repudiate *anyone's* attempt to patronize or pacify him with a bribe. All this does indeed constitute a breach of conventional expectation, but whether in so doing it has much relevance to the specific choice of prose over verse is less easy to say.

In any case the king's unmistakable defeat in this encounter would be an exception—an important exception—to Crosman's sweeping claim that he "has language for every occasion, and for every audience," and that he is "equal to every rhetorical task that a King must deal with." On the other hand it is acute of Crosman to see that in the Act 5 wooing scene "Henry doesn't speak prose because the Princess speaks broken English; rather the reverse—she is given broken English so that their interview can be conducted in 'Franglais,' and in prose," and that the purpose in this case is "dramatic variety." King Henry, observes Crosman astutely, is at this point improvising, experimenting with fresh artillery of rhetorical tactics, and in the process concealing much of his thought from us and leaving it open to contradictory interpretations. "There are mysteries in this scene that we can guess at, but not know."

Yet the critic offers a clue: "the key to this scene is *mastery*," a mastery achieved "by being in control of the arts of language, of war, and of princely rule" and above all, of himself, adding to all these a final role to those he has already played so brilliantly, "that of loving, faithful spouse," in achieving which he "adds to his own unique accomplishments and yet merges with every one of us who have been or can expect to be spouses." This last is well said, and it doesn't at all conflict with the fact that in the scenes with Bates and Williams King Henry is *not* in control and comes off badly, since even the most masterful of heroes

can hardly show his kinship with lesser men more unmistakably than by being, like them, subject to such lapses.

Finally, it might be suggested that despite all the evidence of versatility in the figure of Henry V, Crosman takes him somewhat too readily at face value, accepts too uncritically the simply heroic version of him set forth by the Chorus, as against the more skeptical view held by numerous commentators of our own time—e.g., Harold C. Goddard, Mark Van Doren, D. A. Traversi, Roy W. Battenhouse, Karl P. Wentersdorf, Norman Rabkin, not to mention Kenneth Branagh, in his scathing movie—according to whom there is much to set down to this king's discredit, hero though he may be.

In his concluding paragraphs Crosman reopens, but then disappointingly drops, a matter he has earlier touched on: Elizabethan hopes for a popular monarchy followed by the death of those hopes on the accession of James I. It is at least a plausible hypothesis that during Elizabeth's reign Shakespeare "believed in kings who supported and were supported by 'the people,' kings who knew how to speak the common language when occasion called for it"—as Elizabeth herself demonstrated with her oration at Tilbury prior to the expected attack from the Armada—and whose love for her populace was so lavishly celebrated and lovingly reciprocated by that populace in poem and ballad. All of which contrasts sharply with the arrival of a different kind of monarch, one who openly espoused the doctrine of the divine right of kings, who ruled over a people to whom he had come as an alien, almost an occupying power, who preferred to dispense authority from the top down, caring little for the rites of mutual affection between monarch and subjects, and whose own shiftiness and manipulateness may have foreshadowed such manifestations of rulers not merely disguised, but skulking in disguise and pulling strings behind the scenes, as is the case with Duke Vincentio in *Measure for Measure*. It may be that the falling off in the central position of prose in Shakespeare's later plays owes something to this changed milieu in which he found himself.

The Crosman essay in any case raises valuable questions, and in so doing welcomingly spurs further debate. If there is one recommendation one might venture it would be that Crosman could apply more widely his own reference to "dramatic variety" in his discussion of Henry V's

verbal highjinks in the courtship of Princess Katherine. "Dramatic variety" explains much, and so does a principle I would call something like "local option." Despite the rough guidelines provided by rank, realism, and (shall we say) risibility, as criteria for prose, Shakespeare remains less bound to any formula than to his own freedom at every moment to pursue the destinies of his characters and to extract the optimum theatrical excitement afforded by a given situation. The web of his verse and prose is of a mingled yarn, its strands sometimes nearly impossible to disentangle by any simple rule of thumb.

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NOTES

¹Anne Barton, "The King Disguised: Shakespeare's *Henry V* and the Comical History," *The Triple Bond: Plays, Mainly Shakespearean, in Performance*, ed. Joseph G. Price, publ. as tribute to A. C. Sprague (University Park: Pennsylvania State UP, 1975) 92-117.