

## Words, Weapons, and Role-players: A Reply to Stanley Hussey\*

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I read Stanley Hussey's "Comment" on my Shakespeare's prose article with pleasure, nodding frequently in agreement with his qualifications and refinements of my argument. We disagree in details, but I thoroughly approve of the way he goes about raising interpretive questions and then scrutinizing the text for answers. Still, no text reads itself: the reader brings his own assumptions, his own "interpretive strategies," to the text, and it seems to me that Professor Hussey sees a somewhat different text because he brings somewhat different assumptions to it.

Assumption no. 1: words are weapons. When Professor Hussey looks at Henry he sees someone who uses words to abuse power. His key metaphor for Hal's stylistic inventiveness is "a weapon" (257), which to my mind is not flat wrong but reductive, rather. Eloquent speech is certainly capable, sometimes, of defeating an adversary, and thus it can be likened to a weapon, but I don't think that Hussey or any professor of literature can really believe that language is always war by other means, that conversation is always a power-struggle, never a communication or an attempt at a meeting of minds. Even when Hal spars with Falstaff it is usually a game; when it gets more serious, it is usually a struggle for dominance. Hal wins his share of games, but he never does really dominate Falstaff: not when he fails to get his sword from him at the battle of Shrewsbury (*1 Henry V* 5.3), not even when he denies knowing Falstaff at the end of *2 Henry IV*. "I know thee not, old man"

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\*Reference: Robert Crosman, "The Pivotal Position of *Henry V* in the Rise and Fall of Shakespeare's Prose," *Connotations* 2.1 (1992): 1-15; Stanley Hussey, "A Comment on Robert Crosman, 'The Pivotal Position . . .,'" *Connotations* 2.3 (1992): 257-62.

(5.5.47) is more of a shield than it is a sword, and merely protects the King from an improper complicity in Falstaff's amusing crimes.

Words *can* be weapons, and Henry's sometimes are; my point is that it is reductive to think of them as *always* being so, even in a play like *Henry V* that is about a king waging war. Nor is a weapon always a contemptible thing, either: ask any people who need to defend themselves. True, Henry is not defending anything when he invades France beyond his own shaky claim to the English throne. Still, a country that had itself narrowly escaped invasion only a decade earlier may be forgiven for dreaming of turning the tables. When Shakespeare wrote this play England was not what she later, briefly became—the strongest country in the world. Shakespeare's England was weak in comparison to her neighbors, France and Spain, and was dreading the old queen's approaching death. As power slipped from the grasp of the last native dynasty into the hands of the Scottish Stuarts, it is small wonder if Shakespeare's audience thrilled to the image of an idealized English king who could cause England's foes to tremble.

Henry deploys the power of words once again in the "wooing scene" (5.2), and again Professor Hussey wants to see this as an abuse of power:

The scene is amusing, certainly, often touching, but it is hardly Henry being "only a man," or, if it is, the assumption of soldierly bluntness is one more example of the role-playing to achieve the desired end, albeit for the good of England, too. After all, Henry once more holds all the cards and, whether Katherine knows it or not, her hand in marriage is part of an already agreed treaty. (261)

Here, at least, Hussey portrays life as a game, not a war, but the implication of the trope, "hold[ing] all the cards," is that Henry is not inclined to share power, or acknowledge the rights of others. Now there is no doubt that Katherine is expected to marry whomever her father chooses—she says as much—but are *her* rights thereby infringed? On the contrary, the marriage to Henry looks highly advantageous to Katherine, and it is her vain and foolish brother, the Dauphin, who is the principle loser in this transaction. If Henry includes her in the decision-making process, it may be because he expects an easy acceptance, and is surprised he has to work so hard at persuading

Katherine to do what is clearly to her advantage—becoming Queen of England now, and Queen of France as well when her father dies.

I suppose Katherine's minimal acceptance of Henry—"Den it shall also content me" (247)—can be read as a sorrowful yielding to the inevitable, rather than (as I read it) the way a decorous French princess says "yes," but that reading conflicts with Katherine's earlier, rather spontaneous and even illicit interest in the invader's language. Why is she learning English if she has no interest in Henry—not in the man himself, whom she has apparently never met, but in the opportunity he represents? On the whole I think Katherine, too, is role-playing when she makes a show of reluctance in yielding to so desirable a suitor.

And so we come to a second interpretive assumption where I differ from Professor Hussey. Is Henry's "role-playing" really so bad? As I read Shakespeare's plays, they really *do* show that "All the world's a stage," and that we *all* are actors. So what matters is not the choice between being "sincere" and being a role-player, but the ability to act, appropriateness in the choice of roles, and above all the motivation behind that choice. If in wooing Katherine Henry compasses good ends—the acquisition of a loving wife and the peaceful union of their two realms—then the fact that he puts on a succession of roles to gain these ends is no condemnation of him.

Reading Shakespeare teaches many lessons, of course, but the greatest lesson I have learned from him is that we live in a universe of discourse. "To a great extent," I should add, since there is a divinity (not necessarily a kind one, either) that shapes our ends. But still, in Shakespeare whatever power human beings possess they wield largely by their command of language and other forms of communication, like gesture and facial expression. Therefore, a versatility with language and with roles is Shakespeare's way of conferring power on his characters to do good *or* ill.

So when Henry plays roles with Katherine he is not necessarily deploying "weapons" in the sense of trying to injure or defeat her. If she is property then he has already conquered her, and may marry her will-she nil-she. By wooing her Henry shows he knows that souls are not owned, and knows what is due to the free moral agent he wishes not merely to wed, but to love and be loved by. And Katherine ably

fends him off until he speaks the right words, which are not weapons but promises—holy oaths, in fact—and Henry, we know, keeps his promises. If Henry disarms Katherine, he does so by making treaties with her, not by wounding or enslaving her.

*Henry V* is of course not Shakespeare's last word on heads of state. *Hamlet, Lear, Macbeth, Measure for Measure, The Tempest*—virtually every play he subsequently wrote, in fact, portrays a ruler or rulers wrestling with the burden of power, which for Shakespeare is neither a secure nor an enviable possession. The notion he seems to have played with in *Henry V* is that if a man could be a good enough actor, if he could speak enough different languages and play enough different roles, then (God willing) he could pacify the realm and rule justly. To foist all this onto the historical Henry, whose death two years after his marriage threw England into the prolonged civil war known as the Wars of the Roses, is of course pure sleight of hand, but Henry was the most recent military hero to sit upon England's throne, and Shakespeare made do with what came to hand.

The real problem with Henry is that he couldn't exist. No one can think fast enough or well enough to switch roles with as much ease and effectiveness as Henry does. He is *too* verbally skillful to be a credible picture of a flesh-and-blood human being, and (even worse) his apparently effortless mastery of every situation drastically reduces his dramatic interest. All of Shakespeare's subsequent royal protagonists are more flawed, and many as a result are more deeply interesting to us in the flawed audience.

But I do not expect Professor Hussey to share my interpretation of Henry any more than I am converted to his, though he has helped me with one or two points, and perhaps I have similarly helped him. For the most part, however, I have teased out differences hidden in his choice of tropes. Fortunately this is no real battle but critical debate, and thus Professor Hussey and I are just performing parts in a *débat*—which, after all, was one of the dramatic forms anticipating Elizabethan comedy.