

A Comment on Robert Crosman, "The Pivotal Position of *Henry V* in the Rise and Fall of Shakespeare's Prose"

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Robert Crosman's article does well to remind us of the importance of Shakespeare's prose, in the history plays as well as in the comedies. What follows here is less a criticism than a change of emphasis, away from the development of *Henry V* as shown by his prose style to the exploitation of a variety of styles, often involving a deliberate breach of decorum. Our interest is how Shakespeare constantly goes beyond the accepted view that, as Crosman expresses it, "prose is more appropriate for lower-class than for upper-class characters, and more suited to 'realistic' speeches than to 'idealistic' ones" (2). My reading is focused on a Henry who, from the beginning, knows full well what he is doing and for whom style is mostly a weapon.

Let me start with the question of Hal's style being modelled on Falstaff's. Crosman does not go quite so far as Brian Vickers, who sometimes seems to see Hal as little more than Falstaff's "straight man,"¹ but he makes the team Falstaff-and-Hal his point of departure for "discovering" the prose of *1 Henry IV* (3,4). It seems to me that there is more in this than Crosman has yet shown. Falstaff, though talking prose, sometimes does so in a deliberately stylized manner making fun of Euphuism and concluding with double puns on *countenance* and *steal*:

Marry then, sweet wag, when thou art king let not us that are squires of the night's body be called thieves of the day's beauty. Let us be 'Diana's foresters', 'gentlemen of the shade', 'minions of the moon', and let men say we be men of good government, being governed, as the sea is, by our noble and chaste mistress the moon, under whose countenance we steal. (1.2.23-29)²

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

Hal matches this with *his* pun about the hangman and *obtaining of suits*, but throughout Falstaff demonstrates his ability to use complex prose to equivocate, to attempt to wriggle out of his responsibility for drunkenness, debts and cowardice. He can easily outdo Bardolph and Mrs Quickly, and, later on, even silence the Lord Chief Justice. He has to admit defeat to Henry over the Gadshill robbery, although he does not go down without a struggle: "Was it for me to kill the heir-apparent? Should I turn upon the true prince?" In *1 Henry IV* there is more Falstaff than Hal—in prose, that is—since Hal necessarily has to talk of affairs of state in verse. When Falstaff plays the king he makes a fine rhetorical fist of it, as he does when the positions are reversed, rising to the crescendo of "Banish plump Jack, and banish all the world," only to be undercut by Hal's chilling rejoinder "I do; I will." Falstaff's soliloquies are in prose: the first, on recruiting (4.2) is not particularly rhetorical, the second, on honour, is marked by its catechetical construction, the third, as he rises up after shamming death near the body of Hotspur, is similarly a question-and-answer exercise. Hal's early soliloquy on "redeeming time" and his later one over Hotspur's body (although, strictly speaking, Falstaff is present) are both in verse.

From the close of 1.2 the audience knows that redeeming time is what Hal is doing, even though it may occasionally share some of King Henry's doubts. But Hal's method of undermining his opponent is that which he shows throughout *1 Henry IV* and on through *2 Henry IV* and *Henry V*: he copies the style of his opponents—occasionally parodies it, as Hamlet was to do—and shows that he is better than they are at their own game. His prose has to be better than their prose, although in *1 Henry IV* it is a close-run thing. In any case, he always holds the trump card: he is the heir.

Just as in *1 Henry IV* the first prose scene between Hal and Falstaff provides a low-style contrast to the high-style verse prologue (spoken, unusually for Shakespeare, by the monarch), so in *2 Henry IV* Rumour's Induction and its immediate manifestation in the fears of old Northumberland and the news of his son's death are followed by Falstaff, his page, and the Lord Chief Justice in prose. Once again, Falstaff's prose is both balanced and witty:

LORD CHIEF JUSTICE Your means are very slender, and your waste is great.

SIR JOHN I would it were otherwise; I would my means were greater and my waist slenderer. (1.2.141-44)

LORD CHIEF JUSTICE You follow the young Prince up and down like his ill angel.

SIR JOHN Not so, my lord; your ill angel is light, but I hope that he that looks upon me will take me without weighing. (166-68)

A good wit will, indeed, make use of anything, leaving the Lord Chief Justice to lament, in 2.1 "your manner of wrenching the true cause the false way." Yet, in 2 *Henry IV*, there are, as is regularly remarked, only two scenes (one of which is the rejection) between Hal and Falstaff. Scene 2.2 is a strange one. Falstaff is not present and, obviously, the audience is to be reminded (in prose) of the true state of affairs, that Hal is still in the business of redeeming time. What appears to be the reality may be seen in another prose scene shortly afterwards (2.4) where Hal and Poins are disguised as drawers. Falstaff still has an answer but this time it sounds lame: "I dispraised him before the wicked, that the wicked might not fall in love with him," and Hal is recalled to court:

By heaven, Poins, I feel me much to blame
So idly to profane the precious time (2.4.364-65),

dismissing his companion with a curt "Falstaff, good night." He has almost distanced himself from Eastcheap and the kind of behaviour, with its appropriate prose, that Eastcheap represents. Falstaff, although losing ground, apparently remains irrepressible, as appears in the prose scene involving the capture of Coleville and ending with the rhetorical encomium on sack. While Hal watches over his dying father and ponders the future of the crown (in verse), Falstaff is in Gloucestershire where Shallow and Silence are a much easier mark. For them Shakespeare has developed a different kind of prose in which repetition indicates senility but is interspersed with their own kind of "reality" ("How a score of ewes now?"). This is a situation which manages to be both funny and pathetic at the same time. Once he is king, Henry must reject Falstaff ("I know thee not, old man"), but in verse, indicating not only the public setting but his new public persona. Time has been redeemed.

Prose, however, is not done for yet, and I agree that it is in *Henry V* that Henry speaks his greatest prose (8). But the "every man's language" (6) of *Henry IV* in which Hal outplayed the other man now assumes a rather different style. There is no prose at all in Act 1, but Act 2 begins with the down-market style of Nym, Bardolph, Pistol, and Quickly—now lacking the rhetorical capabilities of Falstaff and Hal. The contrast between the opening line of 3.1: "Once more unto the breach, dear friends, once more" (King Henry in verse) and that of 3.2, Bardolph's prose "On, on, on, on! To the breach, to the breach!" is surely deliberate. Henry is above all concerned to show himself as the complete ruler, incisive yet conscious of his soldiers' feelings, firm yet sympathetic when the situation requires it. We may argue whether this is the miraculous transformation the Chorus assumes or instead the kind of role-playing Henry has seemed to affect in the past. If, as I believe, it is the latter, it manifests itself in a prose that is still under firm control, but pared down, taut and logical. It appears briefly in the decision to execute Bardolph. Henry does not refer by name to his former Eastcheap crony, although Fluellen has just spoken of "one Bardolph, if your majesty know the man":

We would have all such offenders so cut off, and we here give express charge that in our marches through the country there be nothing compelled from the villages, nothing taken but paid for, none of the French upbraided or abused in disdainful language. For when lenity and cruelty play for a kingdom, the gentler gamester is the soonest winner. (3.6.108-14)

But the key scene is clearly, as Crosman says, 4.1. On his walk round the English camp on the night before Agincourt, Henry first meets Pistol. The prose here is mostly single-line exchanges, not unlike a conversation—if any encounter with Pistol can result in a conversation. Bates, Court and Williams articulate something very different, the very real fears of ordinary soldiers before a battle, some of which Henry may himself share but which it is now his business to silence. His speeches to them are less conversational exchanges than a balanced, logical justification of his position:

Now, if these men have defeated the law and outrun native punishment, though they can outstrip men, they have no wings to fly from 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. Where they feared the death, they have borne life away; and where they would be safe, they perish. Then if they die unprovided, no more is the King guilty of their damnation than he was before guilty of those impieties for the which they are now visited. Every subject's duty is the King's, but every subject's soul is his own. 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. (4.1.165-80)

This is an important sense in which Henry does *not* "treat his troops as equals" (9). He may be in disguise but he has to play the king, and his prose must be the more convincing, even if it does not always convince the sceptical Williams. The situation is a world away from exchanging rhetorical pleasantries with Falstaff. The meeting with the soldiers is followed immediately by the soliloquy "Upon the King . . ." In his recent New Cambridge text, Andrew Gurr prints the beginning of this as prose, pointing out that the Folio compositor shows some difficulty with lineation here.³ He may well be right in suggesting that Henry starts by quoting the soldiers in prose and changes to verse to express his own thoughts. And if Shakespeare *wrote* it like that (and F1 shows signs of having been printed from the author's manuscript submitted to the company) it is evidence of the degree of modulation of which his style was now capable.

This play dabbles in the stage representation of language, from the dialects of Fluellen, Jamy and Macmorris to the Franglais of Katherine and Alice in the English lesson. I cannot share Crosman's enthusiasm for the wooing scene between Henry and Katherine, nor can I imagine her as yet capable of much beyond broken English. 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 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:

KING HARRY Therefore, queen of all, Catherine, break thy mind to me in broken
English: wilt thou have me?

CATHERINE Dat is as it shall please de *roi mon père*.

KING HARRY Nay, it will please him well, Kate. It shall please him, Kate.

CATHERINE Den it shall also content me. (5.2.242-47)

What Crosman has demonstrated is the suppleness of Shakespeare's prose and how he adapted syntactical patterns which we instinctively associate with comedy to the writing of histories. Prose in the histories is so much more than something for the plebs.

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NOTES

¹*The Artistry of Shakespeare's Prose* (London: Methuen, 1968) 90-95 *passim*.

²References are to the New Oxford Shakespeare (*The Complete Works*, gen. eds. Stanley Wells and Gary Taylor [Oxford: Clarendon P, 1986]).

³See his note to 4.1.203-10 in his edition of *King Henry V*, *The New Cambridge Shakespeare* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1992) 158.