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Outlooks on Honor in *Henry V* and *Julius Caesar*

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KING [...]
If we are marked to die, we are enough
To do our country loss, and if to live,
The fewer men, the greater share of honour.
God's will! I pray thee wish not one man more.
By Jove, I am not covetous for gold,
Nor care I who doth feed upon my cost;
It earns me not if men my garments wear:
Such outward things dwell not in my desires.
But if it be a sin to covet honour
I am the most offending soul alive. (*Henry V* 4.3.20-29)[1]

BRUTUS Remember March, the Ides of March remember:
Did not great Julius bleed for justice' sake?
What villain touched his body, that did stab
And not for justice? What, shall one of us,
That struck the foremost man of all this world
But for supporting robbers: shall we now
Contaminate our fingers with base bribes,
And sell the mighty space of our large honours
For so much trash as may be grasped thus?
I had rather be a dog and bay the moon
Than such a Roman. (*Julius Caesar* 4.3.18-28)[2]

For *Henry V*, Shakespeare drew on Holinshed's *The Chronicles of England, Scotland and Ireland*. When he began to write *Julius Caesar*, he switched to Plutarch, who wrote about the lives of famous Greek and Roman individuals in *Parallel Lives*. Holinshed and Plutarch address their respective topics with different levels of objectivity and accuracy, which we see mirrored in Shakespeare's consequent plays. The

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sources Shakespeare referred to when writing his history plays subtly influenced his portrayals of King Henry V and Brutus.

Henry V and *Julius Caesar* both deal with the issues of morality and honor in the main characters, but approach them in opposite ways; the two characters also approach the idea of honor in different ways. When we consider Henry V's concept of honor in modern literature, we can see it reflected in F. Scott Fitzgerald's portrayal of Jay Gatsby, who transforms himself to outwardly resemble a sophisticated, wealthy man-of-the-world, not caring that he engages in decidedly unrefined, underworld activities to achieve this. The narrator does not condemn Gatsby for his methods and neither do Holinshed or Shakespeare offer subjective criticism of Henry V.

Holinshed and the other authors of *The Chronicles* did their best to present an unbiased history, often including conflicting evidence or interpretations from different primary sources in their compilation.[3] When writing about Henry V, Holinshed says,

> This in effect dooth our English poet comprise in his report of the occasion, which Henrie the fift tooke to arrere battell against the French king: putting into the mouthes of the said king of Englands ambassadors an imagined speech, the conclusion whereof he maketh to be either restitution of that which the French had taken and deteined from the English, or else fier and sword.[4]

Holinshed makes an obvious effort to source all his material and to present an unprejudiced view of Henry V's life and actions. He cites an English poet as the source of this information and goes on to admit that although the King has many good qualities, which were listed previously, he does not always act with pure intentions, such as when he purposely misinterprets the ambassadors in order to declare war on France. Holinshed does not offer judgment on this deed, however, but lets the readers form their own opinions, something that we particularly see with his use of the words "in effect" at the beginning of the passage, which implies that the passage should not be taken as absolute truth.

We see Shakespeare offer a similar objective portrayal of the King in his play, *Henry V*. Harold Bloom writes, "Shakespeare has no single

attitude toward Henry V, in the play, which allows you to achieve your own perspective upon the rejecter of Falstaff."[5] Henry V is shown to be a heroic, masterly figure, but also one who is of dubious morality. Shakespeare does not condemn or praise him for this, but leaves the audience to judge for themselves. We see Henry V decide to invade France, justifying his claims to the throne with the Archbishop of Canterbury's dubious interpretation of Salique law. The king puts the consequences of his invasion in the Archbishop's lap when he says,

> And God forbid, my dear and faithful lord,
> That you should fashion, wrest, or bow your reading
> […]
> For God doth know how many now in health,
> Shall drop their blood in approbation
> Of what your reverence shall incite us to. (1.2.13-20)

Shakespeare does not show disdain for Henry V's refusal to hold himself accountable for his decision to invade France, nor does he prompt us to. Indeed, instead of disdain, Henry V's manipulations allow him to win everything: the French princess and the love of his country. When he similarly transfers responsibility for the unpleasantness of his actions on the Governor of Harfleur, whose town is one of the first he attacks, he gains victory over the town, which prefigures his greater victory over France at Agincourt.

Accordingly, he tells the Governor of Harfleur, "What is't to me, when you yourselves are cause, / If your pure maidens fall into the hand / Of hot and forcing violation?" (3.3.19-21). He assigns blame for the destruction he and his soldiers will cause to the Governor, who has the power to surrender to "yield and this avoid" (3.3.42), when it is obviously Henry V himself who controls his soldiers and their actions. This twisting of responsibility reveals his questionable ethics and integrity. At Agincourt, when he says, "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" (4.3.61-63), we see these ethics exposed again. Bloom comments on this as follows, "He is very stirred; and so

are we, but neither we nor he believes a word he says. The common soldiers fighting with their monarch are not going to become gentlemen."[6] Yet, even though the king is willing to lie to see his ends achieved, with his soliloquy in the first scene of Act 4 and disguised conversation with Michael Williams, Shakespeare shows that Henry V takes the role of kingship very seriously and has a genuine concern for the beneficial advancement of his kingdom and subjects. However, the route he takes to preserve his kingdom and claim France is not completely principled.

Unlike this balanced depiction of Henry V, in which both the noble and immoral are shown, the character of Brutus in *Julius Caesar* is portrayed as an entirely moral and upright citizen. This subjective representation may have something to do with the influence of Plutarch's works. *Parallel Lives*, one of Plutarch's most famous writings, does not endeavor to accurately record historical information, as Holinshed's *Chronicles* does, but to examine the impact of morality (or lack thereof) on the lives of famous Greek and Roman figures.[7]

Plutarch does this when examining the life of Brutus. He writes:

> Moreover, when Cassius sought to induce his friends to conspire against Caesar, they all agreed to do so if Brutus took the lead, arguing that the undertaking demanded, not violence nor daring, but the reputation of a man like him, who should consecrate the victim, as it were, and ensure by the mere face of his participation the justice of the sacrifice […] since men would say that Brutus would not have declined the task if the purpose of it had been dishonourable. (10.1-2)

In this passage, Plutarch idealizes Brutus as the personification of righteousness, with a spotless reputation. Brutus's honor causes no one to question his motives for Caesar's brutal murder and gives him an almost Christ-like aura, which is enhanced by the choice of the words "consecrate" and "sacrifice" in Perrin's translation.

Shakespeare also creates a Brutus ruled by virtue. He is given no moral flaws; he is not influenced by greed or ambition for power. In fact, his selflessness almost sets him above the other men in the play. Unlike Cassius or Antony, Brutus does not seek to gain power for

himself, but to honorably uphold the Roman Republic. After Brutus's death, Antony says,

> This was the noblest Roman of them all:
> All the conspirators save only he
> Did that they did in envy of great Caesar.
> He only, in a general honest thought
> And common good to all, made one of them. (5.5.68-72)

Although the play is called *Julius Caesar*, the true focus of the play is the honor of Brutus and how it shapes his destiny.

He is highly regarded by all Romans as being the epitome of morality and justice, yet his scrupulous actions still lead him to destruction and downfall, because he trusts too much in the honesty of others. When he addresses Cassius, he says, "Did not great Julius bleed for justice' sake? / What villain touched his body, that did stab / And not for justice?" (4.3.19-21). These lines show that he truly believed he was acting virtuously when he assassinated Caesar, whereas the other men entered into the pact without such wholesome motives.

Honor is of ultimate importance to both Brutus and Henry V, and is their chief concern throughout their respective plays. Both men talk of their thirst for honor, but their speeches showcase their drastically different methods of obtaining it. Brutus sees morality as indivisible from honor and refuses to engage himself in any venture without both, while Henry V (in true Machiavellian fashion) is willing to suspend his ethics to gain glory. When on the battlefield, Henry V corrects Westmoreland, who wishes that England had more soldiers in her camp. Henry V says, "No, my fair cousin: / If we are marked to die, we are enough / To do our country loss, and if to live, / The fewer men, the greater share of honour" (4.3.19-22). He acts as if honor is something that one must fight others to win. The words "The fewer men, the greater share of honour" give the impression that he is at an Easter egg hunt and is trying to collect the most prizes. We see him take this stance in *Henry IV, Part I*, as well, when he tells Hotspur: "And all the budding honours on thy crest / I'll crop to make a gar-

land for my head" (5.4.71-72).[8] For Henry V, honor is something to take from others and the method of taking does not matter.

Brutus, in contrast, does not share Henry V's outlook. He says to Cassius,

> What, shall one of us,
> That struck the foremost man of all this world
> But for supporting robbers: shall we now
> Contaminate our fingers with base bribes,
> And sell the mighty space of our large honours
> […]. (4.3.21-25)

His use of the word "contaminate" clearly shows that he does not approve of sacrificing his morality to garner glory. He goes on to say that he cannot alter his integrity without also forfeiting "the mighty space of our large honours." This phrase implies that honor is something that a man possesses inside of him. "Our" creates a personal relationship and presents the idea each man has individual honor that is his and his alone. This seems to make it all the more valuable for Brutus, since it is not something he can take from other men, but something he must maintain on his own. He displays his disgust at Cassius's words when he spits, "I had rather be a dog a bay the moon / Than such a Roman" (4.3.27-28).

Brutus feels an intimate connection with his honor, whereas Henry V treats it like a material possession to collect and hoard. He compares it to treasure, saying, "By Jove, I am not covetous for gold, / […] / But if it be a sin to covet honour / I am the most offending soul alive" (4.3.24-29). We can see from his language that Henry V sees no fault with relinquishing his morality to gain honor. The use of the words "sin" and "covet" brings Shakespeare's depiction of the King in direct opposition to Plutarch's Christ-like, pure image of Brutus. Henry V does not care what methods he must use to gain honor: sinful or ethical, whereas Brutus will only rigidly adhere to the straightforward, virtuous path.

Although these two renowned leaders have different interpretations of the relationship between morality and honor, they both set aside

their private emotions for public service. Henry V does not give leniency to his close acquaintances Lord Scroop or Bardolph, but punishes them to preserve English law, just as Brutus does not allow his friendship with Caesar to sway his decision about his assassination. We see this theme of the public versus the private self scrutinized in both plays, along with the connection between morality and honor. In fact, we can see evidence of *Henry V* leading into *Julius Caesar* from these themes, as well as from Shakespeare's use of a Greek Chorus and references to Roman figures, such as Marc Antony and Pompey, throughout the play. With *Henry V* and *Julius Caesar*, we are given a glimpse into Shakespeare's thought process and his creation of two parallel leaders who achieve glory and honor in distinct ways.

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NOTES

[1]References are to the Arden ed. of *King Henry V*, ed. T. W. Craik (1995; London: Thomson Learning, 2005).

[2]References are to the Arden ed. of *Julius Caesar*, ed. David Daniell (1998; London: Thomson Learning, 2006).

[3]Raphael Holinshed, *The Chronicles of England, Scotland and Ireland* (London: Printed by Henry Denham, at the expense of Iohn Harison, George Bishop, Rafe Newberie, Henrie Denham, and Thomas Woococke, [1587]) sceti: Schoenberg Center for Electronic Text & Image. 5 Aug. 2008 <http://dewey.library.upenn.edu/sceti/printedbooksNew/index.cfm?textID=holinshed_chronicle&PagePosition=1>.

[4]Holinshed 546-47.

[5]Harold Bloom, *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human* (New York: Riverhead Books, 1998) 321.

[6]Bloom 320.

[7]Plutarch, *Parallel Lives,* Loeb Classical Library trans. by Bernadotte Perrin (1923). 5 Aug. 2008 <http://penelope.uchicago.edu/Thayer/E/Roman/Texts/Plutarch/Lives/home.html>.

[8]Quoted from the Arden ed. of *King Henry IV, Part 1*, ed. David Scott Kastan (2002; London: Thomson Learning, 2006).