

GENDERED KINGS, EPIC CONTEXTS: SHAKESPEARE'S LANCASTRIAN TETRALOGY

Author:
Michael Coppola

Faculty Sponsor:
David Venturo
Department of English

ABSTRACT and INTRODUCTION

Nostalgia is a word often used to describe the tone of Shakespeare's Lancastrian tetralogy, which charts the troubling decline of the monarchy under Richard II through the restoration of patrilineal succession with Henry V. According to Jean Howard and Phyllis Rackin, these history plays specifically present "an idealized masculine past," which is woefully contrasted with "a degraded effeminate present" (147). This process of idealization recalls Mikhail Bakhtin's definition of the epic narrative, which "is given solely as tradition, sacred and sacrosanct, evaluated in the same way by all and demanding a pious attitude toward itself" (16). Clearly, the epic and the masculine have much in common: the kind of emotional restraint typically expected of the masculine figure mirrors the need of the epic figure to avoid the novelized "zone of direct and even crude contact" (Bakhtin 22-3). When the idealized masculine figure steps into the zone of crude contact, the result is a "degraded," "effeminate" – in Bakhtin's words, *novelized* character. When the King is revealed as a common man – when it is revealed that Oz is in fact the man behind the curtain – it is not difficult to imagine, in modern cultural terms, that a type of emasculation has occurred. Conversely, when a common man ascends to the kingship and assumes the epic status of authority, he changes from a man to a Man, moving from the crude literal creature to the abstract ideal. The two men I am referring to, of course, are the bookend monarchs of the second Henriad: Richard II and Henry V. Following the dichotomized relationships I hinted at above – masculine and epic vs. novelized and feminine – it would be tempting to label Richard "novelized" and King Hal "epic." However, to do so would ignore the dramatic contexts in which these characters appear. Upon considering the discrepancies between the plays' treatments of the characters and the characters' conceptions of themselves, I surmise that Richard is a novelized (effeminate) character in a play that upholds him as epic, while Henry V is an epic (masculine) character in a play that consistently attempts to novelize him. These clashes between character and dramatic context ultimately result in the destabilization of the epic sense of nostalgia that is otherwise the plays' ostensible goal.

In the interest of temporal propriety, I will begin with Shakespeare's epic treatment of the effeminate, novelized character, Richard II. There is little critical debate as to the effeminacy of Richard. Deborah Warner's 1995 production of *Richard II* featured the actress Fiona Shaw in the title role (Howard and Rackin 142). Howard and Rackin see Richard, with his decadent indulgences and consistently fickle, sullen temperament, as reminiscent of a familiar object of Renaissance ridicule, the "Italianated Englishman" (146). E. Pearlman does an excellent job of relating the modern reader's disgust with Richard's melodramatic utterances; one "lament [devolves] from self-indulgence into a shameless sentimentality" (80). Richard himself is not above punning on the destabilizing effects of his extreme subjectivity:

Cover your heads, and mock not flesh and blood
With solemn reverence. Throw away respect,
Tradition, form, and ceremonious duty.
For you have but mistook me all this while.
I live with bread, like you; feel want,

Taste grief, need friends. Subjected thus,
How can you say to me I am a king? (III.ii. 167-73)

Ironically enough, it is not Richard's need for "bread" and other human necessities that destabilizes his role as King, but rather that he is actually discussing this idea with his inferiors. In doing so, he embodies the novel's distinctive "ability...to criticize itself" (Bakhtin 6). By engaging in this self-criticism, Richard deconstructs the "fiction of the oneness of the double body" of the king (Kantorowicz 31). Howard and Rackin correctly interpret Richard's lamentations as effeminizing, because they reveal "the private emotional costs of men's public, political conflicts" – a function typically performed, in the ideal patriarchal world, by women (140). Richard thus blurs the distinctions between both king and King (Kantorowicz 39) and male and female. In this regard he is a novelized character; there is "no form that he could fill to the very brim, and yet at the same time not splash over the brim" (Bakhtin 37).

However, *Richard II* does not share the novelized characteristics of Richard II. That is, the self-criticizing character of Richard is not criticized or otherwise evaluated in the play. Central to this idea is the fact that Richard is completely transparent in the play; he wears his heart on his sleeve, such that his character is readily discerned by all of those around him. His soliloquies are virtually indistinguishable from his speeches to other characters; he needn't bother isolating himself in order to voice his true thoughts. Like Bakhtin's epic character, "there is nothing to seek for in him, nothing to guess at, he can neither be exposed or provoked; he is all of a piece, he has no shell, there is no nucleus within" (35). More importantly, "his view of himself coincides completely with others' views of him – the view of his society (his community), the epic singer and the audience also coincide" (34). There is never any doubt as to the genre of *The Tragedy of King Richard the Second*. Every character worth his or her salt (essentially, everyone but the reprehensible Northumberland) feels remorse at Richard's plight; there is no debate as to its tragic nature. Shakespeare's focus on generic unity reaches levels of epic absurdity in the usurping Bolingbroke, who is significantly stripped of agency in the play. In order to maintain consistency in the play's evaluation of Richard, Bolingbroke has to express remorse over the murder that he ordered:

Bolingbroke: They love not poison that do poison need;
Nor I do thee. Though I did wish him dead,
I hate the murderer, love him murdered.
The guilt of conscience take thou for thy labor,
But neither my good word nor princely favour. (V.vi. 38-42)

This repudiation of Exton, Richard's executor, is saved from logical inconceivability only by the faint (indeed, extra-textual) suggestion that the shrewd Bolingbroke is reluctant publicly to condone Richard's murder for fear of being painted as a villain. Bolingbroke is likewise spared the burden of soliloquizing his intentions anywhere in the play, in order to maintain the thematic focus on Richard's self-destruction. Richard conducts that deconstruction, which distinguishes him as a novelized character, using the "distanced plane" (Bakhtin 20) of epic speech:

With mine own tears I wash away my balm,
With mine own hands I give away my crown,
With mine own tongue deny my sacred state,
With mine own breath release all duteous oaths. (IV.i. 196-200)

The anaphoric construction reeks of the epic's "authority and privilege, all lofty significance and grandeur" (Bakhtin 20). Presumably, the aims of Richard and Shakespeare coincide here, in that they both contrive to grant Richard a degree of epic privilege. The fact that he is deposing himself certainly does not place him above a natural "contempt for his humble subjects" (Howard and Rackin 149), his self-deprecating speeches notwithstanding. Thus in terms of what actually happens to Richard (the story), he is a novelized character, while in terms of the play's presentation of him (the plot) – which is consistent with his presentation of himself – he appears epic.

With the advent of the Henrys – Bolingbroke and his son – comes a noticeable shift in Shakespeare’s style from the epic to the more novelized. This stylistic change is quite ironic, because the Henrys themselves are considerably less novelized characters than Richard. Indeed, Shakespeare needs to inject an ‘under-plot,’ led by such earthy rogues as Sir John Falstaff, in order to avoid alienating his audience with the kind of epic distance that Henry IV and his son would impose on their subjects. The novelized world of the under-plot is gendered, like Richard II, as female, as Howard and Rackin note: “The feminized, theatrical world of the tavern is set in clear opposition to the world of masculine power and duty symbolized by Henry IV and his court” (177). Prince Hal inhabits this novelized, feminized space for the first two parts of *Henry IV*, before he assumes his epic, masculine role as king. Sandra Fischer notes that one key aspect of this transition is Hal’s abandonment of punning and equivocal language for the true representation of his “name,” as he evokes it in his showdown with Hotspur, which restores his credibility and “pays all his debts” (134). Falstaff, quip-artist extraordinaire and the ringleader of this novelized space, is “not only feminized; he also threatens the virility of other men” (Howard and Rackin 166).¹ The repudiation of Falstaff at the end of *Henry IV Part 2* is thus crucial to Hal’s movement from the novelized/effeminate to the epic/masculine plane.

The most prominent signifier of Henry IV and Henry V as epic figures in a novelized landscape is their use of soliloquy to express their personal misgivings. Rather than confess their doubts and weaknesses to their subjects in the way of Richard II, they both elect to take the decidedly more masculine route of keeping that information to themselves. Thus as far as their subjects are concerned, they are epic figures, untouchables as it were, but to the audience they are novelized. Stephen Greenblatt explains a key difference between the contexts of Richard’s melodramatic speeches and the Henrys’ sobering soliloquies: although Richard’s musings on “the pathos of his creatural existence” have their place in his tragedy, for the Henrys such physical limitations have been absorbed into the ideological structure, and hence justification, of kingship. It is precisely because Prince Hal lives with bread that we can understand the sacrifice that he, and, for that matter, his father, have made. Unlike Richard II, Henry IV’s articulation of this sacrifice is rendered by Shakespeare not as a piece of histrionic rhetoric but as a private meditation, the innermost thoughts of a troubled, weary man. (40)

In other words, the Henrys operate in a more novelized dramatic atmosphere than Richard does; their plays are more sympathetic to the fact that the King is merely a king, even if they themselves are not. This discrepancy between Shakespeare’s novelized approach and his characters’ insistence on presenting an epic façade constitutes a type of the polyglossia that Bakhtin emphasizes as critical to the novelistic tradition (12).

In *Henry V*, this polyglossia continues despite the death of Falstaff and Shakespeare’s adoption of the epic-friendly chorus. Hal, now Henry V, continues in his endeavors to become the epic, masculine hero, but Shakespeare’s plot continues to get in his way. Pearlman describes Hal’s desire to become the fully externalized hero:

Henry’s obligation, unique among kings, is to give up the quest for self-knowledge in order to succeed at playing a role. Unlike the hero of tragedy, he has neither the obligation nor the compulsion to achieve self-discovery. Like the hero of a comedy, he seeks to end his isolation and find satisfaction in playing his part in the activities of the larger community. (161)

Pearlman is describing the duty of the epic hero, a completed being in whom there exists no “unrealized potential” (Bakhtin 37). Significantly, Pearlman indirectly contrasts King Hal with his counterpart Richard II, whose novelistic nature prompts him toward a journey of tragic “self-discovery” within the epic framework of *Richard II*. The epic structure that unequivocally affirmed and supported Richard’s novelized characterization is absent from *Henry V*, in which the monarch’s efforts to establish himself as an epic authority figure are constantly undermined by his novelized dramatic environment.

In a wonderfully polemical analysis, Jonathan Goldberg asserts that critics “who associate Falstaff’s loquacity with the female tongue are once again in Hotspur’s position in [*Henry IV Part I*] act 3, scene I, policing Kate” (172). He likewise suggests that those enamored of Hal’s masculine ascendancy are unwitting participants in “the patriarchal effacement of women” (148).

Although *Henry V* begins with the highly traditional choral invocation of the muse, this epic introduction is followed by the problematic first scene of the play. In the prologue, Henry V is compelled to “Assume the port of Mars” (6), a godlike, epic stature. Yet Shakespeare’s dramatic undermining of Henry’s epic authority commences immediately, as he is not granted an appearance in the first scene. Instead, the audience witnesses the political maneuverings of two clerics, the Archbishop of Canterbury and the Bishop of Ely. In similar fashion as Bakhtin’s novel, the play thus “devises various forms and methods for employing the surplus knowledge that the author has, that which the hero does not know or does not see” (32). When Henry does appear in the next scene, his status as a finalized epic hero is directly challenged by the representative of the Dauphin of France, who to Henry says “you savour too much of your youth” (I.ii. 250) and mocks him with a gift of tennis balls (I.ii. 258). Henry’s response to this assault on his epic status is appropriately epic and startlingly misogynistic:

And tell the pleasant Prince this mock of his
 Hath turned his balls to gunstones, and his soul
 Shall stand sore chargèd for the wasteful vengeance
 That shall fly from them – for many a thousand widows
 Shall this his mock mock out of their dear husbands,
 Mock mothers from their sons, mock castles down;
 Ay, some are yet ungotten and unborn
 That shall have cause to curse the Dauphin’s scorn. (I.ii. 281-9)

Henry’s recourse to charging the Dauphin with threatening the wives and mothers of France prefigures his later threat before the gates of Harfleur, where he absolves himself of responsibility for “the fleshed soldier, rough and hard of heart” who “In liberty of bloody hand shall range / With conscience wide as hell, mowing like grass / Your fresh fair virgins and your flow’ring infants” (III.iii. 88-91). The union of misogynistic and epic discourse suggests that Henry’s conceptions of his epic stature and masculinity are linked. Significantly, the scene at Harfleur is followed by an English lesson for Princess Catherine of France, who is eventually wooed by Henry in a scene Howard and Rackin view as no less than a euphemized rape (214). However, before Henry faces the female subject and its potentially novelizing effects, he must first deal with the problem of his own disillusioned troops.

Anne Barton’s analysis of *Henry V*’s “disguised king” scene provides a useful framework for understanding the scene as Shakespeare’s novelistic trap for the epic-minded Henry. Barton interprets the scene as a failure on Henry’s part “to produce a natural and unforced imitation of a private man” (103). He therefore fails to convince the soldiers, the salty Williams in particular, of the king’s noble commitment to the war. At first trying to novelize the king as “but a man” (IV.i. 99), Henry quickly abandons this tactic when he perceives that it suggests weakness:

King Harry: Yet, in reason, no man should possess him [the king] with any appearance of fear, lest he, by showing it, should dishearten his army.
 Bates: He may show what outward courage he will, but I believe, as cold a night as ‘tis, he could wish himself in Thames up to the neck. And so I would he were, and I by him, at all adventures, so we were quit here.
 King Harry: By my troth, I will speak my conscience of the King. I think he would not wish himself anywhere but where he is. (IV.i. 106-15)

Having thus denied his doubts to his men, Henry proceeds to enumerate them in soliloquy. Like his father, Henry laments his duties as king only in soliloquy and so does not compromise his epic image as Richard did with his speeches. However, Stephen Greenblatt reminds us of the novelizing effects of the soliloquy, during which the king’s “isolation only intensifies the sense that he is addressing a large audience: the audience of the theatre” (40). Henry’s epic self is safe from the scrutiny of his fellow characters but not from Shakespeare’s novelizing techniques. Therefore even Henry’s most pronouncedly epic moments—such as his famed Agincourt speech, which is in perfect epic mode in that

it is “externalized and formal, in no sense a revelation of the private workings of a mind” (Barton 102) – are tempered by the novelizing episodes that regularly intersperse them, not least of which is Henry’s courtship of the French princess, Catherine.

There are several ways to interpret *Henry V*’s wooing scene, and its identification as a novelizing scene depends on the one that regards Henry as sincerely flatfooted. The very existence of interpretations to the contrary underscores, I think, the discrepancies between Henry’s attempts to render himself epic and Shakespeare’s consistent interference in those efforts. Fischer’s interpretation of Henry’s awkward verbal acrobatics as a “comfortable and successful mastery of the language of contracting” (137) necessarily disregards Henry’s previous encounters with novelizing effects – most notably, his botched disguised encounter with his soldiers – and the unease with which he, who would paint himself epic, experienced those episodes. Similarly, Howard and Rackin’s interpretation of the scene as constituting “the focal point of Henry’s masculine authority” (207) contradicts their prior assertion that, for Shakespeare’s Elizabethan audience, “male heterosexual passion” was not “privileged...as an expression of virility” but was in fact associated with effeminacy (143). Taking Henry’s embarrassed rhetorical maneuvering at face value provides the play with a thematically coherent close, as Henry once again proves unable to descend comfortably into Shakespeare’s novelized world. Apart from fluctuating rapidly between the formal (“you”) and familiar (“thou”) pronoun forms, Henry engages in obtuse rhetorical constructions that conflate his military victory with his private struggle for Catherine’s affections, as he assures her that “in loving me, you should love the friend of France, for I love France so well that I will not part with a village of it, I will have it all mine; and Kate, when France is mine, and I am yours, then yours is France, and you are mine” (V.ii. 165-8). Later, in response to Catherine’s reluctance to kiss him, Henry resorts to an invocation of the exceptionality of the ruling class: “O Kate, nice customs curtsy to great kings.... We are the makers of manners, Kate, and the liberty that follows our places stops the mouths of all find-faults, as I will do yours, for upholding the nice fashion of your country in denying me a kiss” (V.ii. 250, 252-5). After Catherine is silenced by this kiss, Henry further discusses his confusion of his feelings as conquering King and lovelorn king:

King Harry: And you may, some of you, thank love for my blindness, who cannot see many a fair French city for one fair French maid that stands in my way.

King Charles: Yes, my lord, you see them perspectively, the cities turned into a maid – for they are all girdled with maiden walls that war hath never entered. (V.ii. 292-7)

This exchange hints at both Henry’s bewilderment (“blindness”) and emasculation, as his involvement with Catherine prevents his lusting after the “maiden” French cities. As his debasing encounter with the soldiers prompted a novelizing soliloquy, Henry’s self-effacing wooing of Catherine elicits an exposure of his novelized self, which in turn compels him to return to his high epic style of speech and attitude.

Just as the epic framework of *Richard II* provides its title character with an ironic degree of power, the novelistic tones of *Henry V* create a number of surprisingly troubling challenges for the grownup Hal. By constructing characters whose tendencies – self-effacing or self-aggrandizing, novelized or epic – are directly opposed by the dramatic contexts in which they appear, Shakespeare is able to produce such profound literary paradoxes as the triumphant tragic figure and the disillusioned epic hero. He also, I would argue, problematizes the reverent nostalgia, as well as the masculinized ideal, associated with the epic past. In an evaluation of the many different dramatic contexts in which Shakespeare’s Henry V appears, Leonard Tennenhouse notices that he “occupies the centre of every theatre of social action and in this way constitutes a State that to modern readers appears to have no centre at all, neither a continuous political policy nor an internally coherent self. To make sense to an Elizabethan audience, we must therefore assume, the king’s body did not have to behave as if it were that of the modern individual in either his self-enclosed or his abstract totalising form. That body had to behave, semiotically speaking, as if blood had conspired with the disruptive operations of Providence to produce it” (122).

I would add this to Tennenhouse’s assessment: if such behavior seemed too good to be true, then to Shakespeare it probably was.

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