

Will To Power

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The different masks that Harry, Prince of Wales and later King of England, wears throughout the "Henriad" -- *I Henry IV*, *II Henry IV*, and *Henry V* -- display his ability to accomplish his ends through the manipulation of both language and people. While I don't necessarily believe that Hal's "Machiavellian strategies" compromise his authority as monarch -- after all, as *Henry V* closes he's the victorious ruler of both England and France -- I *do* think he is a King sorely lacking in personal integrity and obsessed with the acquisition of power at any cost.

The first solid evidence that Hal is not exactly who he pretends to be shows up in the early stages of *I Henry IV*. Our initial impression of the Prince of Wales is that of a bright, witty young ne'er do well very much at home in the company of common people. In fact, he spends most of his time engaged in drinking and inconsequential banter with the less than savory coterie of pals he's surrounded himself with, particularly Sir John Falstaff. Falstaff is a thief, a cynic, a glutton (be it food, drink or women), and a notorious liar; in short, a scoundrel. He's also got a sentimental streak and a poorly concealed desire for the love and kind regard of Prince Harry. Falstaff, in fact, is something of a father-figure to Hal, since his youthful excesses have proved a great disappointment to his real father, King Henry IV. The way they interact with each other, one assumes a very close bond exists between them. Indeed, it appears Harry is close to all his drinking companions. Yet, after one tavern scene ends with everyone but the Prince leaving the stage, he speaks in soliloquy for the first time in our acquaintance with him, and his words are an eye-opener:

I know you all, and will awhile uphold
The unyoked humor of your idleness.
Yet herein I will imitate the sun,
Who doth permit the base contagious clouds
To smother up his beauty from the world,
That when he please again to be himself,
Being wanted he may be more wondered at
By breaking through the foul and ugly mists
Of vapors that did seem to strangle him. (1.2, 189-197)

Though he appears to be a cheerful wastrel to those around him, it's apparent that under the skin our Harry is something else entirely. Whatever raucous good times he's had with Falstaff and the rest, it becomes clear in this passage that he is *using them*. It's uncertain whether this was his intent from the outset, but regardless, Hal's "friends" ultimately end up as a means to an end -- namely, power:

By so much shall I falsify men's hopes;
And like bright metal on a sullen ground,
My reformation, glittering o'er my fault,
Shall show more goodly and attract more eyes
Than that which hath no foil to set it off. (1.2 205-209)

If Hal is willing to wear a mask in the presence of the men he calls friends, and betray those friendships when it finally becomes politically expedient to do so -- which is precisely the case in Act 5, Scene 5 of *II Henry IV*, when he publicly repudiates and discards Falstaff with the words, "I know thee not, old man" (line 47) -- then what other cynically calculating actions might he be capable of?

In Act 4, Scene 5 of *II Henry IV*, Hal gets some useful advice from his father the King* on the art of maintaining monarchical power in a modern nation-state: "Therefore, my Harry, be it thy course to busy giddy minds with foreign quarrels." (212-213) In other words, the most efficient way to stifle political and social unrest at home is to distract the masses with a war abroad. Befuddled by the smoke and mirrors of patriotic rhetoric the "great unwashed" will be too carried away with mindless jingoism to question or complain. More than this, Hal seeks war for another, less sophisticated reason; again, simple, unadulterated *power*.

As *Henry V* opens, we see that young Harry, now King, has taken his father's advice very much to heart. In Act 1, Scene 1, he searches for the thinnest "legal" ground upon which to justify his invasion of France. He receives it from the Archbishop of Canterbury, who, because he wishes to prevent the enactment of a government decree which would strip the Church of money and property, proceeds with dubious logic to make the case for an English offensive. Invoking the uses and abuses of "Salic law" by the French King Charles VI, the Archbishop concludes that Harry is wholly within his rights as King of England to wage war against France. (33-95) The new King, quite aware of Canterbury's ulterior motives and in need of the Church's official endorsement to cover his political tracks, offers but one rejoinder for appearance sake -- "May I with right and conscience make this claim?" (96) -- knowing full well what the answer will be. Having thus dispensed with the formalities, Harry is prepared to attack a sovereign nation where he holds no legitimate title and to

sacrifice lives in the process. In one fell swoop he hopes to accomplish both practical ends by uniting his country behind a foreign war (which will "stop the mouth of dissent" on his own soil) and also satisfy his lust for power. There is little honor or personal integrity in these actions; they are the cynical machinations of a master politician.

One of Harry's shrewdest political instincts is the capacity to place the onus of responsibility for his actions squarely upon the shoulders of others. Having received a chest full of tennis balls in mocking reference to his idle youth as a "present" from the Dauphin (son of Charles VI), Hal coolly responds to France's ambassadors that every French castle, every French widow and mother, even those not yet conceived and unborn, "shall have cause to curse the Dauphin's scorn." (*Henry V*, 1.2, line 288) He seeks the moral and rhetorical high ground by effectively laying all possible blame at the feet of the French Prince -- never mind that it will be English soldiers doing the killing.

Similarly, after his invading army has rendered the besieged town of Harfleur defenseless, Harry demands entry through its gates. Once again he plays the blame game, though his purpose here is more utilitarian. He wants immediate capitulation and he isn't interested in negotiating the point. To wit:

If not, why, in a moment look to see
The blind and bloody soldier with foul hand
Defile the locks of your shrill-shrieking daughters,
Your fathers taken by the silver beards,
And their most reverend heads dashed to the walls
Your naked infants spitted upon pikes,
Whiles the mad mothers with their howls confused
Do break the clouds...
What say you? Will you yield, and this avoid,
Or, guilty in defense, be thus destroyed? (*Henry V*, 3.3, 33-40, 42-43)

Harry's graphic account of what may follow if he doesn't get his way produces the desired result. The Governor of Harfleur concedes defeat and opens the city's gates. Once again the English King has demonstrated his aptitude for the finer points of psychological warfare, shifting culpability from himself to another without batting an eyelash. Moreover, it's conceivable that had his ploy proved unsuccessful, Hal might well have made good on his threat. "I will not leave the half-achieved Harfleur till in her ashes she lie buried," (3.3, 8-9) he says, strongly implying that anything

less than total surrender will not do. It is an open question, then, how far Henry V is willing to go to accomplish his ends.

As adept at deceiving "friends" and manipulating nominal enemies as he has proved himself to be both before and during war, Harry is equally expert at lying to suit his purposes after its prosecution. Victorious over the French, he sets about courting Princess Katharine, daughter of the King of France. Actually, this is a mere technicality, since their marriage to join royal bloodlines and "seal the deal" is a forgone conclusion, part of the terms of French surrender. But Harry is not content to let it go at that; he wants not only the "booty" of Katharine's physical charms and child-bearing potential, but her heart and soul as well. So he pretends to be a "fellow of plain and uncoined constancy," (5.2, 154-155) a simple, homely soldier unlearned in the ways of wooing. Hal swears his undying love for the Princess (5.2, 151-153) despite the obvious fact that, presumably, he's never even *met* her before. When an incredulous Katharine inquires whether she should love "de *ennemi* of France," Harry responds:

... [I]n 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. (5.2, 172-176)

Disingenuous, to say the least... Everything Hal says to Katharine is in service of his ultimate objective: to conquer her as completely as he has France, whatever the veracity of his claims. Peripheral issues like factual truth and authentic love do not enter into the equation.

It's evident that the young man who used his so-called friends to political advantage as Prince of Wales has changed little since his ascent to the English throne. Honor and personal integrity are qualities of character feigned rather than sincerely expressed, and the ceaseless pursuit of power for its own sake remains the only constant. In the final analysis, Henry V is a King with a very precarious crown, for one thing can be said about the insatiably power-hungry: they seek to possess and control what they do not understand and fear.

If that is so, then too much power will never be enough. More, even with all the subjects of England and the whole of France to command, riches beyond measure and a wife to beget his heir, it's a fairly safe bet that Harry will die a lonely man nonetheless. No one really knows him, and thus

no one can truly love him. As the Bible says, "what profit a man if he gain the world and lose his soul?" Hal has sacrificed a great deal at the alter of power, and eventually, he must bear the cost.

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