

Oana-Alis Popescu

University of Bucharest

HENRY V: THE MACHIAVELLIAN PRODUCTION OF AN IDEAL KING

Keywords: *Honour. Identity. Justness (of war). Legitimizing power. Machiavellian politics. Obedience (to the king). Providential power. Realpolitik. Role-playing. Self-representation. Violence.*

Abstract: *The present paper aims to analyse the Machiavellian power strategy that Prince Hal, the new King Henry V, develops in Henry V in order to construct a legitimate self-image. We shall argue that Hal manages to become, by means of an extremely calculated technology of self-representation, the successful Machiavellian producer of his own hero-image.*

Shakespeare's play *Henry IV* ends with Prince Hal's cruel rejection of Falstaff, an act that has the function of rendering evident to the others Hal's complete and completed reformation. His juggling of identities and role-playing are nevertheless not brought to an end by his reformation. Actually, he is only shedding off one mask, that of the prodigal son, in order to put on another, that of "the ideal Christian ruler", the king who will redeem England.

The first step in fulfilling this new role consists in choosing a new father and a new companion in the Lord Chief Justice, who embodies loyalty, justice and order, the antithesis to both his real father and to Falstaff. Having perfected his education in Machiavellian politics, Hal is now ready to develop a more complex and subtler power strategy based, however, on the same Machiavellian precepts. The present paper aims to analyse this new strategy which consists in the construction of a legitimate self-image, in evading the responsibility for any controversial decisions or violent acts. This plan is remarkably applied in *Henry V*, a play in which, according to critic Hugh Grady, Hal, the new King Henry V, manages to become, by means of an extremely calculated technology of self-representation the successful Machiavellian producer of his own hero-image. (Grady 217)

A "Backstage" Machiavellian Plan

Henry IV ends with the words of Hal's younger brother, Prince John of Lancaster, who forecasts the main event that is going to take place in the following play, *Henry V*, namely war with France:

I will lay odds, that, ere this year expire,
We bear our civil swords and native fire
As far as France. I heard a bird so sing,
Whose music, to my thinking, pleas'd the king.
Come, will you hence? (5.5. 106-110)

After a chorus that predicts the approaching conflict, *Henry V* opens with a conversation between the Archbishop of Canterbury and the Bishop of Ely that takes war for granted, although Canterbury is cautiously using more ambiguous words: "causes now in hand...as touching France." (1.2.78, 80)

What the King's brother, the Chorus, and two Bishops agree in foreseeing is certainly coming. Following his father's advice to busy giddy minds with foreign quarrels, Henry is determined from the very beginning to attack France, a decision based on a Machiavellian understanding of the supremacy of

sheer power in political life, of the vital importance in the preservation of a successful government, of combining the arts of persuasion with the employment of effective military force. Henry is also fully aware that the war has to appear morally and religiously motivated, in accordance with Machiavelli's principles which held that the prince should seem to those who see and hear him "all compassion, all faith, all honesty, all humanity, all religion." (Machiavelli 64)

In Henry IV's reign a bill had been introduced to seize the church's wealth. Because of the troubled times it had never been put into practice, but now it has been reactivated; in order to evade a measure which "would drink deep", the Archbishop of Canterbury has offered a deal: if Henry (will) block the bill, the clergy will provide him with a great deal of money to support his proposed expedition to France.

Being a true Machiavellian, Henry knows that he has to seize every opportunity that is favourable to the attainment of his goals, and that is precisely what he does when rather than directly accepting the Archbishop's offer, he asks his opinion about the English king's rights to the throne of France.

Taking up the hint, the Archbishop realizes that the Church will have to supply not only treasure for the war chest but also a justification for making the war. However, all these subtle "negotiations" between the Archbishop and the king take place in the "backstage" and are not revealed to the public eye, Henry proving once more a keen understanding of Machiavelli's insistence on the primacy of appearance over reality in politics. Hence, when the king comes to speak in public he seems to be so sincere, so pious and so eager to find out the supposedly just and impartial opinion of the Archbishop on his claim that no one could ever suspect the Machiavellian plan that lies behind this façade. This kind of duality and ambiguity characterises most of Henry's actions and speeches, the play presenting both a heroic image of Henry assuming the role of a traditional Christian king and the contrivances and calculations whereby the image is created. Henry manages to be simultaneously on the one hand a popular hero king, the restorer of England's glory and on the other hand a cunning and cynical Machiavellian politician who knows exactly how to create this illusory image. However, according to Hugh Grady, the play is constructed so that the King's heroic rhetoric easily overwhelms the presentation of its Machiavellian origins. Rather than presenting King Harry as a Machiavellian prince, the play bids us to accept his Machiavellianism as the necessary pre-requisite of his heroism. (Grady 217)

Justifying warfare

Understanding the importance of having an irreproachable reason to make war, Henry manifestly insists that his claim to the French throne must be clear; but when the Archbishop goes on to expound that claim, clarity is the one thing missing from his discourse. To prove that Henry will not be a usurper if he seizes the crown of France in defiance of the Salic law – with its stipulation that succession through the female line is illegal – he cites the cases of three French kings who themselves inherited along the female line. The Archbishop's argument is self-defeating, because, as he will claim further on, all these kings were in fact usurpers whose titles were "corrupt and naught". These crooked titles are cited however as precedents in support of a claim supposed to be pure and substantial. The Archbishop seems not to remark this paradox and he goes even further with his exposition, claiming that in fact the French kings usurped the English one and that they want to bar Henry's title to their throne because of his inheritance through the female line, when all the while their own titles were usurped from Henry's progenitors, because they were inherited in precisely the same way. It seems that the very thing that proves the title of a French king to be crooked, namely inheritance through the female line, serves to prove the title of the English king good. (Goddard 221)

The argument is highly relevant to the act of legitimizing Henry's war since it authorizes the use of force against the "usurping" French. From this standpoint, Henry's war is one of defence, therefore just and legitimated, and not one of aggression, being meant to increase his power.

Canterbury's long argument and its conclusion, which he pronounces "as clear as is the summer's sun" (1.2. 86), bewilder Henry; or should we say that Henry pretends not to understand them so that the

whole responsibility of the war may rest on the Archbishop? After Canterbury's elaborate explanations, Henry merely reiterates his original question: May I with right and conscience make this claim? (1.2. 96)

To which the Archbishop answers:

The sin upon my head, dread sovereign
For in the Book of Numbers is it writ,
"When the son dies, let the inheritance
Descend unto the daughter (1.2. 97-100).

Consequently the Archbishop performs a second discursive action for legitimizing Henry's war: he introduces the religious argument. If all those tedious genealogical details were not convincing enough to authorize the war, then the Bible is a more venerable authority.

Ultimately, Henry's war is validated by reference to the authority of the past which represented an essential source of self-definition in early modern England when people would look to the past for roots capable of legitimizing their identities. Hence, by urging Henry to take the example of his ancestors, to rouse himself like the former lions of his blood and to forage in the blood of French nobility as did the Black Prince in his great-grandfather's days, the Bishops perform one last act of moral justification of Henry's war against France.

A theme of great significance has made itself felt in Henry's dealings with the Archbishop: the theme of the horrors of war and, by implication, of the responsibility that weighs upon the king who would embark upon it:

Therefore take heed how you impawn our person
How you awake our sleeping sword of war;
We charge you in the name of God take heed.
For never two such kingdoms did contend
Without much fall of blood... (1. 2. 21-25).

Henry is therefore acutely aware that his victories must be bought at a terrible price, in bloodshed and human suffering; however, by employing a shrewd and persuasive rhetoric he covertly refuses to assume the burden of his acts and decisions, always shifting the responsibility for his actions onto the others. As we have already noticed, he manages, by a cunning use of language and by his insistence that the Archbishop should tell the truth, to place the responsibility for starting the war and for the justness of his cause completely onto the Archbishop's shoulders. Although he has already made up his mind about going to war against France, Henry wants to appear to the public eye as undecided and eventually persuaded to take action only by the Archbishop's justifications:

Now are we well resolved, and by God's help
And yours, the noble sinews of our power,
France being ours, we'll bend it to our awe,
Or break it all to pieces (1. 2. 222-225).

This is not the only occasion when Henry acts as an unscrupulous politician shifting the responsibility for his violent actions on to other people. In Act 3, scene 3, Henry has brought his army across the sea to the walls of Harfleur. At first the town resists the siege, but afterwards the citizens decide that there is no hope and ask for a parley. As the parley begins, Henry, whose army is decimated, severely reprimands the citizens of Harfleur for defending their town for so long and for exposing their lives to such a risk. Furthermore, he goes on, if they continue to resist, the town will be burnt to ashes and destroyed while his soldiers, freed from restraint, will not hesitate to murder, rape and plunder the town. The images Henry uses to describe these atrocities are extremely powerful and violent:

And the flesht soldier,-rough and hard of heart,-

In liberty of bloody hand shall range
 With conscience wide as hell; mowing like grass
 Your fresh-fair virgins and your flowering infants (3.3. 11-14).

“What is it to me?” the king shouts again and again, if all these appalling things happen? Who is to blame if these beasts lusting for blood will kill and rape your youngsters, since it is you the citizens of Harfleur that endanger, by your stubbornness, your people? The implicit and self-evident answer to this repeated question “what is it to me?” is obviously “nothing”. The king seems to have forgotten that he was the one who got this army across the English Channel, to the walls of Harfleur, that he was the one who assembled and brought to France such characters as Pistol and Nym who only want “to suck, to suck, the very blood, to suck” (2.3.56). Conscious that he has to change the course of events to his own advantage by any possible means, Henry succeeds in persuading the citizens of Harfleur to surrender the town, making use of his skilful and deceitful rhetoric. Holding the French citizens responsible for the possible destruction of their city, Henry authorises at same time all those terrifying acts of violence.

One last attempt to avoid the responsibility of his actions occurs in act 4, scene 1, on the night before the battle of Agincourt. The king leaves aside his public role, wraps himself in a borrowed cloak and mingles incognito with the common soldiers. Wrapped in the obscurity of his cloak and of the night, the disguised king engages in a conversation with three of his soldiers, John Bates, Alexander Court and Michael Williams who, frightened about dying and worried about their families and their souls, come to wonder about certain fundamental problems.

Commenting on the dangers they will encounter on the battlefield, Bates declares, strikingly reminding of Falstaff’s famous speech on honour in *Henry IV*, that he feels no respect for noble reputation. Although he will fight devotedly for the king, he would rather not endanger his life for the love of honour. To his mind, if the king enjoys his present danger than he should be there alone; he could then be ransomed, and many poor men’s lives would be spared. When Henry answers him by stating that he would be glad to die in his king’s company “his cause being just and his quarrel honourable” (4.1.121-122), Williams breaks in rather abruptly with a keen reflection: “That’s more than we know” (4.1.127-129). The sense of the remark may be simply that such issues are not to be deemed by common people; but Henry can hardly avoid the suggestion that the problem of his moral right to invade France is being questioned again, in the form of a direct challenge. (Winny 284) Bates refuses to dwell upon the question considering that their obedience to the king will wipe off their guilt in the case of an unjust war. Williams, however, takes up this point and develops it: Is the cause for which they fight a just one? If it is not, what happens to the soul of a man who dies killing other men? How can a soldier reconcile his duty to his king and his duty as a Christian? His conclusion seems rather clear:

Now, if these men do not die well, it will be a black matter for the king that led them to it- who to disobey were against all proportion of subjection (4.1.138-140).

To obey the king in an unjust war means to disobey God and violate his rules. The question whether a soldier should obey above all God’s laws and whether the king could be disobeyed and resisted to if his causes were not just, was a matter of great interest in Elizabethan England. Such ideas of disobedience on religious grounds were generally associated with Popish and Jesuit plots of sedition against the queen. (Nicolaescu 160):

A major development of the Protestant political theory was the articulation of the right to resist the prince when the act of obeying him entailed breaking God’s law. The Huguenots rethought it as a duty to resist, legitimating their opposition to the Catholic king. In “Du droit des magistrates”, Beza claimed that God must be obeyed above all human authorities [...] He insists, however, that only magistrates, and never individuals (like Williams’ soldiers) could go beyond passive disobedience (Nicolaescu 160).

William’s argument resembles a lot the argument that Henry himself used when he warned the Archbishop of Canterbury that he will be the only one to blame if he incited Henry to an unjust war. But,

as in the other cases, Henry is willing to put the responsibility on others without agreeing to let his soldiers put the responsibility on him. Thus, instead of giving a straight answer about the justness of his war, he avoids the full question of responsibility by arguing that many of the soldiers carry mortal sins upon their souls and that therefore if they die in battle the King is not to be made accountable for their damnation:

...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 (4. 1. 160-164).

As if forgetting that the question is the justice of war, not the morals of the soldiers, Henry leaves Williams' fundamental and simple argument unanswered; however, Henry's evasive answer is particularly appropriate for a Machiavellian ruler. According to Hugh Grady, "one of the unstated propositions of Machiavelli's reification of power...is that it functions regardless of the end to which it is theoretically subordinated; Machiavellian power is instrumental, subversive of any end which would try to contain it...when we hear King Henry's casuistic reply to Michael Williams' trenchant comments, we note that the king ignores the question of the justice of his cause in line with the hidden logic of Machiavellianism." (Grady 235)

Is King Henry V a War Criminal?

One of the most controversial episodes of *Henry V* occurs in the fourth act of the play and it concerns the Battle of Agincourt and more precisely Henry's command that the French prisoners should be killed. The sixth scene of this act shows Henry receiving word of the deaths of the Duke of York and of the Earl of Suffolk. Exeter, who brings the report, draws a pathetic picture of their final moments, and declares that on the field he wept at the sight. The king is moved to tears by this report:

I blame you not;
For, hearing this, I must perforce compound
With mixed-full eyes, or they will issue too (4.6. 33-36).

The scene ends with a worrying development; an alarm sounds and the king cries:

But hark, what new alarm is this same?
The French have reinforced their scattered men.
Then every soldier kill his prisoners!
Give the word through (4.6. 36-39).

Juxtaposing sorrow with cruelty in this harsh way quickens the drama, but at the same time it calls Henry's humanity into question. (Roe 64) Passing from tears to orders for the death of the prisoners, Henry makes proof of the complete presence of mind and of the readiness to deal with the exigencies of circumstance that Machiavelli requested as necessary attributes of the ideal prince. This action is therefore an instance of *Realpolitik*, another example of necessity and the "good" use of cruelty.

The scene then shifts rapidly to another part of the field where we find Gower and Fluellen, two of the king's officers, who imply that the killing of the prisoners is an act of retaliation because French stragglers killed the English boys guarding the luggage. This is a false assumption because Henry could not have known at the point that he first ordered the massacre of the prisoners that the French cavalry was acting simultaneously in such a disgraceful manner. Only later, after the dialogue between Gower and Fluellen, does he try to justify his order by interpreting it as a retaliatory action:

I was not angry since I came to France
Until this instant. [...]

Besides, we'll cut the throats of those we have,
 And not a man of them that we shall take
 Shall taste our mercy. Go and tell them so (4.7.50-60).

Thus the announcement comes twice, first as illegitimate, secondly as if it were a spontaneous outburst of pardonable passion when it actually is not. The historical King Henry's order to slay the prisoners had been specifically condemned by the leading humanist writer Erasmus, as an unjustified act of cruelty, not representative of a Christian king. From the Machiavellian perspective, though, Henry seems to be a ruler who can combine *virtù* with *ferocità* as the occasion demands and who, according to critic John Roe, possesses *grandezza dello animo*, just like Machiavelli's favourite leader, Cesare Borgia. (Roe 64)

Shakespeare introduces in this scene a fragment which, depending on the manner we interpret it, has the role either to protect Henry from being accused as ruthless or, on the contrary, to subtly reinforce his cruelty. It regards the parallel Fluellen draws between Alexander the Great's killing, when drunk, of his best friend Cleitus, and Henry's rejection of Falstaff. John Roe argues that in this case as in the one when the killing of the boys by the French is implicitly compared to the killing of the prisoners, Shakespeare is in fact trying to mitigate Henry's cruelty by bringing forth an example of greater ruthlessness than that of Henry. (Roe 65) A different view is taken by David Quint who believes that the comparison between Alexander and Henry has the function of calling the latter's moral character in question and that Fluellen relies upon a humanistic tradition of negative reception of Alexander. He quotes Erasmus, Montaigne and Rabelais to prove that Alexander, on account of his extreme violence and cruelty, was not in fact regarded as a positive model to be followed by a Christian Prince. Augustine, whose just-war theories originated the archive of Christian writings on the subject, had specifically condemned the wars of Alexander the Great as unjustifiable. Shakespeare, therefore, ironically and subtly reinforces through Fluellen's voice Henry's ruthlessness. (Quint 58-61)

“Take it, God, for it is none but thine...”

The fourth act ends with one more Machiavellian pose. At the end of the battle, Henry plays, in front of his people, the role of the religious king who celebrates his royal victory by attributing his triumph wholly to God:

... O God, thy arm was here,
 And not to us, but to thy arm alone
 Ascribe we all. [...]
 ...Take it God,
 For it is none but thine! (4.8.104-110).

Claiming therefore to have acted as God's instrument allows Henry to reconstruct his royal authority and earn the legitimacy he could not inherit from his father. Phyllis Rackin argues that in fact Henry uses Agincourt as a huge trial by combat in order to establish the legitimacy of his rule and earn his place in providential history. (Rackin 81) Nonetheless, this seems to be just another Machiavellian scheme since Henry ascribes his victory to God only after the battle. Never before, neither in his public speeches nor in private, in his prayers, does Henry describe or understand himself as God's minister. (Sullivan 144)

To conclude, *Henry V* offers two images of King Henry: to the public eye he appears as a sincere, religious, law-abiding king, the mirror of all Christian kings and, at the same time it gives us insights into the Machiavellian means and strategies by which the above image had been created.

Works Cited

- Erasmus, Desiderius. *The Education of a Christian Prince* (1516). Translated by Lester K. Born [c.1936]. Columbia University Records of Civilization. New York: Octagon Books.
 Goddard, Harold C. *The Meaning of Shakespeare*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1951.

- Grady, Hugh. *Shakespeare, Machiavelli and Montaigne: Power and Subjectivity from Richard II to Hamlet*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002.
- Greenblatt, Stephen. *Shakespearean Negotiations. The Circulation of Social Energy in Renaissance England*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990.
- Machiavelli, Niccolo. *The Prince*, tr. by George Bull, Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1984.
- Nicolaescu, Madalina. *Meanings of Violence in Shakespeare's Plays*, Bucuresti: Editura Universitatii din Bucuresti, 2001.
- Quint, David. "Alexander the Pig: Shakespeare on History and Poetry", *Boundary 2*, (1982): 49-67
- Rackin Phyllis. *Stages of History*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990.
- Roe, John. *Shakespeare and Machiavelli*, Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2002
- Shakespeare, William. *The First Part of King Henry IV*, Herbert Weil and Judith Weil (eds.), Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997.
- . *The Second Part of King Henry IV*, Herbert Weil and Judith Weil (eds.), Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997.
- . *Henry V*, Ed. Gary Taylor, 4th ed. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008.
- Sullivan Vickie. "Princes to Act: Henry V as the Machiavellian Prince of Appearance " in *Shakespeare's Political Pageant*, ed. Aulis Joseph and Vickie Sullivan. Lanham MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 1996.
- Winny, James. "The True Inheritor", in *Shakespearean Criticism*, ed Mark W. Scott, Detroit, Michigan: Gale Research Company, 1987.