The Brightest Heaven of Invention and the Dunnest Smoke of Hell: Religion in King Henry V and Macbeth

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Elements of a religious or supernatural order appear repeatedly throughout the dramatic works of Shakespeare, often helping to define the unfolding action of the play and serving to illuminate the varied strengths and weaknesses of a particular character. The role of the religious, though, is perhaps most interesting in the tragedy and history play, where these elements allow the playwright to truly explore and develop the intricacies of character rather than merely providing a means of moving the plot from one point to another -- as is often the case in Shakespeare's comedies. From the pagan images of the three wyrd sisters with their tales of murderous prophecy in *Macbeth* to the decidedly Christian god whose grace King Henry V says is at the heart of England's victory over the French (and is, moreover, at the heart of that play), the spiritual and divine are essential to our understanding of the motives and actions of the characters in tragedy and history drama. By examining the textual evidence in these two plays -- *Macbeth* and *Henry V* -- and briefly comparing the different role that the religious performs in each, I hope to show how any view of character is incomplete without such an examination, how character relies on, and is shaped by, these elements of the otherworldly.

This reliance can certainly be seen in *The Life of King Henry the Fifth*, a text positively brimming with religious imagery and whose main figure cannot be completely understood without also understanding -- or at least examining -- the importance he himself places on Christian reverence and worship. As Roy Battenhouse writes, "Whereas Henry IV conspicuously lacked gratitude and grace, his son presents himself as a 'Christian' king who relies on God's grace....Phrasings of piety abound" (Battenhouse, pg. 315). This can first be seen most notably in the opening act, wherein Henry accepts the counsel of the Church -- in the form of the bishops of Canterbury and Ely -- in his impending decision to invade France. Our first view of the king, therefore, suggests that he truly is, as the bishops say, "full of grace and fair regard" as well as "a true lover of the holy Church" (*King Henry V*, 1.1.23-24).

Indeed, the very first words that Henry speaks are to inquire after "my gracious lord of Canterbury," showing the importance that Shakespeare's king places on his church (1.2.1). That he does not use the royal "we" here is also perhaps quite telling; he has requested the bishops' presence and advice not only so that he may guide a nation in war but also so that he may guide his own soul and remain free of sin. "...take heed how you impawn our person," Henry tells them, "how you awake our sleeping sword of war. We charge you in the name of God take heed..." (1.2.21-23) He will follow the bishops' advice, heed their counsel and "believe in heart that which you speak is in your conscience washed as pure as sin with baptism" because he wholeheartedly believes that they speak on behalf of God (1.2.30-32).

Henry will not act without the blessing of his church -- neither as a king nor as a man. He asks his bishops, therefore, whether England's cause is just, whether "the Salic law that they have in France or should or should not bar us in our claim" (1.2.11-12). But even when he has been given an answer, when Canterbury has told him that England may indeed rightly invade France, Henry asks once more, "May I with right and conscience make this claim?" (1.2.96) Again, his use of the singular personal pronoun here, rather than the collective royal "we," suggests how terribly important reverence is to the king *personally.* This show of personal concern seems to indicate that Henry is not interested merely in obtaining an excuse to wage war, as some readers of the text have claimed, but that he genuinely wishes to make no offense toward his God or church. "...only when his cause has been 'well-hallowed,'" writes Battenhouse, "does he boldly proclaim his determination to pursue it in God's name and with the aid of God's grace" (315). Whether or not Canterbury and Ely have lied to Henry is a moot point; all that matters is what Henry *believes.* Only when he truly believes that both England and he are on the side of God does Henry commit himself and his nation to war.

Further religious images -- and further evidence of the significance that Henry sets upon them -- can be found throughout the many acts of the play that comprise that war. "For we have now no thought in us but France," Henry informs his court in the concluding scene of Act I, "save those to God, that run before our business" (1.2.302-303). Thus, rarely does the king say anything of note without uttering some praise to his deity and church. Shakespeare's King Henry is a pious man, his England a nation protected by the hand of God.

Henry thanks God, for instance, for revealing Cambridge, Scroop and Grey as traitors to the crown, proclaiming that "we doubt not a fair and lucky war, since God so graciously hath brought to light this dangerous treason lurking in our way to hinder our beginnings" (2.2.183-186). The conspirators themselves join Henry in his praise when they are faced with inevitable execution. "Our purposes God justly hath discovered," concedes Scroop, "and I repent my fault more than my death..." -- to which Cambridge adds, "But God be thankèd for prevention, which I in sufferance heartily will rejoice, beseeching God and you to pardon me" (2.2.151-160).

Some critics have argued that Shakespeare's monarch is more cruel than devout, more cunning than Christian -- that he simply uses God as a pretext for wiping his own conscience clean. Harold C. Goddard asks, "Can anyone believe that Shakespeare in his own person would have called Henry 'the mirror of all Christian kings' and then let him threaten to allow his soldiers to impale French babies on their pikes and dash the heads of old men against walls...?" (Goddard, 217) These critics should perhaps be reminded of the words of William Tecumseh Sherman: "War is hell." Henry does, in fact, threaten Harfleur with barbarous acts, warns that his soldiers will wreak destruction on the town "till in her ashes she lie burièd" if the citizens do not surrender to his armies, but when the town is his -- when the gates have been swung open -- he warns these very same soldiers to "use mercy to them all" and none of these threatened cruelties come to pass (3.3.1-58).

In truth, the only individual Henry orders put to death besides the three traitors is Bardolph, a man who "is like to be executed for robbing a church" (3.6.100-101). This hanging of a former tavern-mate has been viewed by many as hypocrisy on Henry's part, evidence that he is not as Christian a king as he might claim. Yet, as Henry himself says, "we 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" (3.6.107-113).

One might easily argue that all of Macbeth's troubles stem from his unwillingness to heed this advice, that his downfall comes about when cruelty *does* play for the Scottish kingdom and Macbeth's lenity is lost. Perhaps, as Robert Rentoul Reed, Jr., claims, "Macbeth has offended against the harmonized structure of nature and, losing the protection of God, has exposed himself to demonic intervention" (Reed, 166-167). Whereas Henry lacks mercy only when his conscience tells him he must, Macbeth's single, all-consuming goal seems to drive every vestige of "the milk of human kindness" from his soul (*Macbeth*, 1.5.16). Thus, *Macbeth* may be viewed as a denial of the same God that Henry so willingly and readily accepts, the tale of a man who forsakes kindness for the crown and suffers because of that choice.

By murdering Duncan and committing "the damnation of his taking-off," then, Macbeth distances himself from any merciful god and fulfills the prophecy made by the three witches (1.7.20). Ad the following lines illustrate, Macbeth is aware of this distance and understands the damnation his ambition has brought upon him:

> One cried "God bless us!" and "Amen!" the other,
> As they had seen me with these hangman's hands.
> List'ning their fear, I could not say "Amen"
> When they did say "God bless us!" (2.2.36-39)

Though Macbeth realizes he "had most need of blessing," he also realizes that he has removed all possibility of receiving such a blessing (2.2.42). As Harry Morris writes, "...in Macbeth the association of apocalypse with Duncan's death is...fitting since immediate damnation for the souls of Macbeth and Lady Macbeth is in reality their judgement day" (Morris, 168-196).

Whereas Henry does what he believes to be morally right, Macbeth ignores his conscience in order to gain the throne. His reign, however, is short-lived and full of suffering and brutality -- whereas Henry is victorious over the French at Agincourt, loses few of his soldiers in the final battle, and weds Katherine whom he professes to love. The difference is striking: Henry puts God above all things and emerges triumphant; Macbeth puts all things above God and dies a bloody death, a regicide punished for his crime.

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