

# “The Sin Upon My Head”: Shakespeare’s *Henry V* and the Book of Joshua

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To discern the character and virtues of Henry Monmouth, the titular character of Shakespeare’s *Henry the Fifth*, we must look at what he says and does. However, judging Henry’s true character has proven frustratingly difficult to readers and critics because Henry—Hal—possesses a singular talent for appearing other than he really is. We find evidence of this throughout both parts of Shakespeare’s *Henry IV*, where Hal’s great preoccupation is the simulation of vice,<sup>1</sup> and in the Bishops’ surprise in the first scene of *Henry V*, where we are told of the thoroughgoing nature of his “transformation” into the noblest of men: “Never,” the Bishops declare, “came reformation in a flood / With such a heady currance, scouring faults. . .”<sup>2</sup> Yet the man who donned the wolf’s clothing so well is hard to trust in his new, seeming goodness, and thus Henry’s virtue remains a difficulty. Indeed, for all of the learning, piety, nobility, and wisdom for which he has become renowned since

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<sup>1</sup> 1 *Henry IV* i.ii.196–217.

<sup>2</sup> *Henry V* I.i.33–4.

ascending the throne, is he truly pious, truly just?<sup>3</sup> This puzzle has divided critics of the play. Is Henry a paragon of Christian kings, as J.M. Walter presents the argument?<sup>4</sup> Or, is he one of the craftiest of Machiavels, which is the more popular opinion of scholars such as Steven Marx and Roy Battenhouse?<sup>5</sup> And yet others, such as Norman Rabkin, argue that Shakespeare wishes to encounter Henry as an enigma, forever impenetrable.<sup>6</sup> The perplexity set before us in the play is no doubt appropriate, being rooted in the perplexity of Henry V himself. Shakespeare, however, deigns to leave us with some resource in discerning his own judgment of this enigmatic king. In the bones of the play itself, which is to say, in the events and themes he dramatizes, Shakespeare cunningly establishes a parallel with the first half of the Book of Joshua; in fact, the events in Jos. 4–8 in particular parallel the events in Acts III and IV of *Henry V*, and there are numerous other resonances between texts.<sup>7</sup> As we consider the main action of the play and Henry’s reason for undertaking the invasion of France, we will begin to see his motives and the humane ends he has in mind; yet, in considering the Joshua parallel, we will see Shakespeare’s own comment on the compromised quality of this prudence.

Seeking to answer the question of *why* Henry invades France is perhaps the best place to begin to understand his prudence. Troubles plague the country that Henry inherited from his father, Henry Bolingbrook, or Henry IV, due in no small part to the fact that Bolingbrook had himself stolen the crown from Richard II. Just as with

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<sup>3</sup> *Henry V* li.37–59.

<sup>4</sup> J.H. Walter, “Introduction,” xvii–xviii.

<sup>5</sup> See especially Roy Battenhouse in “Henry V in Light of Erasmus.”

<sup>6</sup> Norman Rabkin, “Rabbits, Ducks, and Henry V.”

<sup>7</sup> Shakespeare makes several explicit biblical references in the play, most obviously to Numbers 27:8 (to prove the Salique Law) and to Psalm 115 (“*Non Nobis Domine*”), but the parallels with the book of Joshua are largely in the bones of the play, not on the surface. Indeed, there are no quotations or citations exclusive to the book of Joshua in the play, and there is only one paraphrase from Joshua throughout (“The sin upon my head”, li.97; cf. Jos. 2:19); even then, the phrase is common in biblical literature, being echoed both in the Old and New Testament, as Naseeb Shaheen points out (*Biblical References in Shakespeare’s Plays*, 453). One might be inclined to dismiss any serious interplay between *Henry V* and the book of Joshua, then, yet implicit parallels more than outman the lack of explicit references.

his father, Henry V's legitimacy remains a niggling question, various factions continue to rebel and to distress England, and Henry himself is plagued by the impossibility of satisfying both the church and the nobility. England is fractured. For this reason his father had counseled him to "busy giddy minds / With foreign quarrels,"<sup>8</sup> but distraction is no serious remedy for disunion. Henry is presented with two courses at the beginning of the play, one of which is a bill before Parliament that intends to strip the church of its lands, redistribute them, and thereby to create a new landed nobility.<sup>9</sup> This bill would effectively neutralize the political power of the church and naturally diminish the threat of the old nobility to Henry's reign, as fifteen new earls and fifteen hundred new knights watered down their ranks.<sup>10</sup> The Bishop of Canterbury, desperately wishing to avoid the bill and its consequences, presents an alternative, claiming to have knowledge, "Of Henry's true titles to some certain dukedoms, / and generally to the crown and seat of France."<sup>11</sup> This right, which the bishop lays out at length and in detail, and in an entirely inscrutable manner, appears to make no more sense to Henry than to most, if not all, of his readers. The King ultimately relies on Canterbury's assurances, not his own grasp of the matter,<sup>12</sup> and, ultimately, when Henry decides to lay his claim on the Salique lands—which is to say, when he decides for war—it is clear that he has more than land in mind, declaring that he will go to battle and "rise with so full a glory / That I will dazzle the eyes of France..."<sup>13</sup>

It is unclear at first whether this quest for glory is for Henry or for England, but the unfolding of the Battle of Agincourt reveals Henry gloriously unites his fractious subjects into a people. At Agincourt, the decisive battle in Henry's conquest in France, the glory of the victory of so few over so many seems to confirm Henry, not only as a good soldier, but as God's king and unifies the diverse "band of brothers" fighting with him.<sup>14</sup> This question of what unites men is a theme in the play, and we see that there are, in fact, three different "bands" or groups: one is the

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<sup>8</sup> 2 *Henry IV* IV.v.215.6

<sup>9</sup> See the discussion in I.i.

<sup>10</sup> I.i.1–15.

<sup>11</sup> I.i.86–7.

<sup>12</sup> I.iii.33–110. See especially Henry's uncertain question *after* Canterbury's long argument: "May I with right and conscience make this claim?"

<sup>13</sup> I.ii.279.

<sup>14</sup> IV.iii.60.

arrogant and ineffective group of French nobles; the second is made up of the “sworn brothers,”<sup>15</sup> Nym, Bardolph, and Pistol, whose ignoble principle of association is a shared interest in extensive and opportunistic thievery; and the third band is the group of English, Welsh, Irish, and Scots, who suffer and conquer against all odds for God, king, and country. The French group based on empty titles and vain aristocracy suffers defeat; the band defined by base self-interest dissolves, and at least two of its members die ignobly; but the third survives the refining fire against overwhelming odds, and in such glory they are confirmed in their unity as Englishmen. In other words, through the campaign in France and through the *glory* of the victory of Agincourt, Henry brings about a unity that had eluded his father for years and which had appeared impossible for him. This, however, was no accident. At Agincourt, Henry is intentionally creating a shared mythos and actually re-founding England in a sense, in that the unity and glory of Agincourt will become more than just the common memory of the English: it will serve as their reminder of God’s special favor and as a symbol of what it means to be of the stock of Harry Monmouth. By Henry’s own argument in his famous “St. Crispin’s Day” speech, the battle of Agincourt suggests that every common man who fights for God and for Harry can share in the bloodline and glory of the English kings, and we see illustrated in the play that the endeavor binds the Englishman Gower, the Welshman Fluellen, the Irishman Macmorris, and the Scotsman Jamy into one “band of brothers.” Henry insists that every man credit the victory to God, meaning, clearly, that the victory was a miracle and a sign of God’s favor on their endeavor, their king, and their country; no one from this band of brothers could thenceforth consider his place of origin to make a greater claim on him than his fellowship in Harry’s band, or, in England.<sup>16</sup> This success is much more ambitious than Bolingbrook seems to have fathomed possible in the advice he gave his son.

Consideration of the miracle at Agincourt is the best way to introduce the Joshua parallel, which, in this case, magnifies the glory of the victory. One stark parallel, on the factual level, is between the battle

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<sup>15</sup> II.i.12

<sup>16</sup> IV.vii.88, IV.viii.115–6.

of Agincourt and the battle of Ai, a central event in the book of Joshua. Joshua, who had at least 35,000 men at his disposal, sends away 30,000 in a stratagem to lure the enemy out of the city of Ai and then proceeds, with the remaining 5,000, to sack the city and kill 12,000 men and women.<sup>17</sup> Between this and a previous, failed action, he appears to have lost only 36 men.<sup>18</sup> Henry similarly brings only 5,000 men to battle, a quarter portion of England's army,<sup>19</sup> and he makes clear that 11,500 French have been killed or captured,<sup>20</sup> with the lives of only 25 Englishman lost.<sup>21</sup> Henry then declares that his army did this "without stratagem."<sup>22</sup> The general correspondence of these figures is remarkable, and made more strange by the fact that these are the figures as reported by Holinshed. In other words, Shakespeare did not manufacture the similarity but is certain to report the figures to suggest a literary parallel to the reader.

The striking similarity compels us to look for further resonance between Henry V and Joshua, and the argument preceding the text in the 1560/1599 Geneva Bible edition of the book of Joshua immediately provides it. Therein, the editors introduce Joshua as a new Moses who will maintain the harried tribes in unity as the people of God:

. . . and after the death of Moses his faithful servant, he raiseth up Joshua to be a ruler and governor over his people, that neither they should be discouraged for lack of a captain, nor have occasion to distrust God's promises hereafter.

And, as the Geneva Bible introduction continues, we must recall both Henry's desire to "rise with so full a glory/ That I will dazzle the eyes of France..."<sup>23</sup> and his aim to unite his sundered people:

And because that Joshua might be confirmed in his vocation, and the people also might have none occasion to grudge, as though he were not approved of God: he is adorned with most excellent gifts and graces of

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<sup>17</sup> Jos. 8:3, 12, 25.

<sup>18</sup> Jos. 7:5.

<sup>19</sup> IV.iii.79.

<sup>20</sup> IV.viii.70–1.

<sup>21</sup> IV.viii.97.

<sup>22</sup> IV.viii.99.

<sup>23</sup> I.ii.279.

God, both to govern the people with counsel, and to defend them with strength, that he lacketh nothing which either belongeth to a valiant captain, or a faithful minister. So he overcometh all difficulties, and bringeth them into the land of Canaan . . .<sup>24</sup>

This description of the book of Joshua bears more than a curious resemblance to the story of King Henry V as framed by Shakespeare, and this comparison proves instructive in our search to understand Henry. It is ironic that Henry IV, who longed to go on crusade to assuage his guilt over his illegitimate ascension to the throne, could not embark, but that his son, by going to war in France, in effect, fought a sort of holy war and brought something of the promised land to England. This is a great accomplishment, not an accidental one, and it is right that we credit it to Henry’s prudence.

Yet, the reader must ask, as Henry’s subject did, whether Henry himself is “approved by God” and a recipient of His favor. Even if Henry has accomplished something marvelous, the great difficulty for Henry on this score—and one of the great differences with Joshua—is the claim by the bishop of Canterbury in the first scene of the play that “miracles are ceas’d,” meaning that Agincourt cannot be a miracle.<sup>25</sup> In context, the bishop was referring to the marvelous transformation Henry had undergone from a scandalous dealer in vice to a paragon of virtue as king, thereby presuming a natural explanation for the king’s surprising transformation. Whether miracles have ceased or not, of course, makes a great deal of difference: Joshua’s reliance on God, in contrast to Henry, nearly nullified the need for prudence on his part; he needed simply to be faithful. God provided not only the ends—conquest of the promised land—but the means, down to a very specific stratagem for taking the city of Ai in Jos. 8. Henry, in contrast, does not have the benefit of this special revelation: how should he decide what is right? It is worthwhile recalling that Henry did not seem to understand the argument for England’s claim to French lands but that he took action on Canterbury’s word. This lack of moral clarity makes Henry’s actions morally questionable, yet moral matters are not always clear. If this is not clear,

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<sup>24</sup> The Geneva Bible, reproduced online at <http://www.genevabible.org/Geneva.html/>.

<sup>25</sup> I.i.67.

does prudence counsel one to carry out one's own stratagem anyway, or, rather, is it better to leave things to providence? Henry's decisive bent in the play, it would seem, is for action.

Following this observation, a flurry of parallels between the book of Joshua and the plot of *Henry V* present themselves. If miracles have ceased, as the Bishop of Canterbury states in no uncertain terms, then some practical arrangements must be made in lieu of God's special providence, at least insofar as priests and kings are concerned. For instance, while both Moses and Joshua held adamantly that the priestly tribe of Levi should own no property,<sup>26</sup> perhaps this restriction need not apply to the church of England, which is enormously wealthy in land. In Joshua 4, if Israel stopped the Jordan from flowing with the ark so that the people of Israel could cross over, in the prologue to Act III, the church's money<sup>27</sup> must float Harry's fleet across the English channel instead; similarly, in the three scenes immediately following, if the English cannot expect to bring down the walls of Harfleur with a trumpet blast as the Israelites brought down the walls of Jericho in Joshua 6, maybe it is permissible to crush the city with threats of evils more terrifying than death (III.iii). Or, on the contrary, in Act III, scene 6, when an English soldier by the name of Bardolph commits an impious theft, one reminiscent of the unholy crime of Achan son of Carmi in Joshua 7, Henry need not be worried that they will incur God's wrath if God no longer acts miraculously—and, in fact, he is not. The contrast of episodes in the biblical narrative and the bard's work show that, rather, his concern is the principle that "when [lenity] and cruelty play for a kingdom, the gentler gamester is the soonest winner...", so in order to curb vice among his soldiers, he enforces the penalty of hanging against his former friend.<sup>28</sup> Henry, it seems, is quite capable when it comes to practical accommodations. Indeed, this *effectiveness* leads critics such as Steven Marx to conclude that Henry is thoroughly Machiavellian in that he rules with "tricks" and deception (52). But this judgment, though tempting, is perhaps too hasty. After all, if miracles have ceased, are not practical accommodations both necessary and prudent?

To make a final judgment on the quality of Henry's prudence, we need to know something of the nature of his faith: is he serving God,

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<sup>26</sup> Jos. 13:33.

<sup>27</sup> I.ii.132–5.

<sup>28</sup> III.vi.112–3.

or is he using God? As in all things, the quality of Henry's faith is one significant point of dissension among critics. If miracles have ceased, then it seems that neither the church nor Henry could consider Agincourt to be a miracle, which means that Henry's claim to the contrary is simply a lie and, therefore, proof of his Machiavellianism, and this is the cynical position that Steven Marx takes and which Norman Rabkin considers to be one more face of Henry's complex inscrutability. Problematically, however, neither Marx nor Rabkin treat seriously the moment when Harry finds himself on his knees the night before Agincourt, begging the "God of Battles" to grant him victory: Rabkin hardly references it while Marx weakly characterizes it as Harry's "setting [his burden] down for a moment in private."<sup>29</sup> We must account for this prayer seriously, however, and grant that Henry is addressing a biblical, personal God. Yet, from his prayer, one might suppose that he has not read the Bible very well, for Harry pleads to a God of favors and not a Christian God of grace, at first suggesting that his own good deeds imply God's debt in some way.<sup>30</sup> Harry corrects his genuine prayer at the last moment with a self-conscious dose of Christian theology, but the content of his spontaneous prayer reveals something about the pale God he bears with him, which, in turn, compels certain doubts about his Christian conviction. He turns to God, it seems, only when he has reached the limits of his own power. If Henry doubts God's providence, however, it is sensible to ask whether he should not also doubt God's royal anointing of him, and, indeed, the Joshua parallel suggests that Shakespeare himself has doubts on this score.

Shakespeare addresses the status of Henry's anointing in the night scene before Agincourt, when the king has disguised himself to sound his troops out more honestly. "Qui vous la?" Pistol cries—who is there? "Discuss unto me, art thou officer, / Or art thou base, common, and popular?"<sup>31</sup> This scene and these words call to mind yet another encounter in the book of Joshua: "And when Joshua was by Jericho, he lifted up his eyes and looked: and behold, there stood a man against him,

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<sup>29</sup> Rabkin, 57.

<sup>30</sup> IV.i.288–305.

<sup>31</sup> IV.i.35–8.



having a sword drawn in his hand: and Joshua went unto him, and said unto him, Art thou on our side, or on our adversaries?"<sup>32</sup> In the book of Joshua, the man proceeds to make himself known as an angel and to declare, "Loose thy shoe of thy foot: for ye place whereon thou standest, is holy . . .," a typological scene confirming Joshua as the anointed one of God, as Moses was before him at the burning bush.<sup>33</sup> By comparison, as the scene with Pistol and the other English soldiers continues, the dialogue does not likewise confirm our conviction in Henry's calling but only casts into doubt the contention that Harry is specially anointed or that his war is "just and his quarrel honorable."<sup>34</sup> We recall again that Henry himself did not seem to fathom the rationale for his alleged claim by Salique right, and, as the soldier Michael Williams pointedly declares in response to the claim that they are fighting in a "just" and "honorable" war, "That's more than we know."<sup>35</sup> Thus, the Joshua parallel brings out a strong contrast since in consequence Shakespeare's scene is nearly its opposite. Whereas Joshua's anointing is explicitly confirmed, Henry's is emphatically not. Although, at the end of this same scene, Harry submits his needy prayer to God, it is only the very next day that Harry brazenly asserts that, "if it be a sin to covet honor, / I am the most offending soul alive . . ."<sup>36</sup> Henry, then, does not seek to submit his strength to God's service and he is not a faithful man, although he is human and believer enough to seek God's favors in his own weakness. This, of course, is not walking along God's way but, instead, is making his own way. Even though it is true that he declares plainly after the battle of Agincourt that God should be given the glory for the victory, it is a command that redounds glory on Henry; it is conveniently self-aggrandizing. It seems clear, in other words, that Henry's faith, ultimately, is more in himself than in God.

Let us return to the question of prudence: if Henry's "chief end" is not God, then how do we judge his endeavor in France? Henry has steadfastly relied on his own arms to accomplish ends, which bear no particular mark of piety. However, if Henry was not a pious Christian king, it is not necessarily the case that he was a bad king. On this point,

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<sup>32</sup> Jos. 5:13.

<sup>33</sup> Jos. 5:15.

<sup>34</sup> IV.i.128.

<sup>35</sup> IV.i.129.

<sup>36</sup> IV.iii.28–9.

too many critics abhor nuance, seeming to have been so struck by the cunning of Machiavelli that they can nevermore see cleverness without thinking it Machiavellian. That faith was not one of Henry’s virtues does not leave him deserving of the censure he receives from a number of critics. Rather, Thomas Aquinas provides us with a more helpful framework for judging Henry with his distinction of three kinds of prudence, found in the *Summa Theologia*.<sup>37</sup> He distinguishes “false prudence,” which is cleverness in service of an “evil end” (such as is the case with the “good robber”) from the “true and perfect” prudence, which considers things in light “of the good of man’s whole life,” namely, salvation. Just as it appears unlikely that Henry was concerned primarily with men’s salvation, it is hard to maintain that Henry did not accomplish a good thing for England and, moreover, that he wished to do so. So where does Henry fit? Aquinas identifies a “true prudence” between the evil and the perfect sorts of prudence that “devises fitting ways of obtaining a good end,” which we could identify as Henry’s concern as king with the wellbeing of his fractured nation. Even if it is hard to believe that Henry was a faithful Christian king, it is nevertheless right to recognize the extent of his virtue and to consider him in the company of Romulus, Numa, and other great founders of the pagan world.

Ultimately, what seems to prevent Henry from taking more seriously the question of moral responsibility—including his own—is a certain easiness in the face of the claim that he can have any moral responsibility for the spiritual condition of others. In the same nighttime scene before Agincourt, in which Henry’s anointing is brought strongly into question, a debate breaks out over whether English soldiers are morally culpable if the war is, indeed, unjust. Harry vociferously maintains that every man’s sin is on his own head: “Every subject’s duty is the King,” he declares, “but every subject’s soul is his own.”<sup>38</sup> This altercation ends with Henry exchanging gloves with Michael Williams, each promising to wear the glove in his hat so that they might recognize one another and settle their dispute the next time they meet. Henry’s politics, at any rate, holds questions of piety at arms’ length, but the

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<sup>37</sup> *Summa Theologica* II.ii.13.co.

<sup>38</sup> IV.i.176–7.

theological claim that miracles have ceased is not enough to account for this division. Henry is marked by a persistent habit of shifting responsibility away from himself in concerns both great and small. First, in the opening act, he repeatedly warns Canterbury not to mislead him on the question of the justification for war and thereby places the responsibility on Canterbury's head, though he knows perfectly well that Canterbury has a very strong and selfish interest in justifying the war. In Act II, with the three traitors, Scroop, Cambridge, and Gray, Henry snares them into pronouncing the merciless judgment of death on themselves before revealing that he is aware of their treason; later, in Act III, Henry batters down Harfleur's gates with the threat that the guilt for what brutal things his soldiers will do to their men, women, and children will be on the head of the mayor of town if he does not surrender. Lastly, in the immediate aftermath of Agincourt, Shakespeare brings about the altercation between Henry and Michael Williams mentioned before, but, in a bit of hard comedy, Henry has, once again, shirked responsibility by literally putting his glove on someone else's head, and the duel never transpires.

In this light, it is significant that the sole phrase from the book of Joshua in Shakespeare's play refers to "the sin upon my head," for this is the one principle which Henry affirms boldly of others and avoids recklessly himself.<sup>39</sup> In the end, by failing to confront the question of his own moral culpability, Henry separates the question of sin from the king's person, and, in doing so, avoids the challenge of needing to answer to God for his deeds as king. In this way, Shakespeare presents us with a final contrast between Henry and Joshua: whereas the Geneva Bible notes that Joshua "doth represent Jesus Christ the true Joshua, who leadeth us into eternal felicity," Henry, the virtuous pagan, sunders himself from both sin and savior. Nevertheless, in keeping with the subtlety of this king, we ultimately see through Shakespeare's eyes that Henry's ambition is humane, serving, not only himself, but his countrymen by leading them in newfound unity back to happy England.

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<sup>39</sup> Jos. 2:19.

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