

This Happy Breed of Men, this Little World

In Shakespeare's play Henry IV, Part II, the old King Henry IV says: "Uneasy lies the head that wears the crown" (III.i.31). Kingship weighs heavy on him, not only because he is haunted by guilt for having seized the crown illegitimately from Richard II, but also because he knows that not only his head, but also his son's head will be burdened with the weight of a king's responsibility. Henry IV repeatedly had to thwart regional rebellions to maintain the English crown. By following his father's deathbed-advice, this essay will argue, Prince Hal, now King Henry V, manages to temporarily consolidate England as a nation by joining English, Welsh, Irish, and Scottish forces together to fight against a common enemy. By focusing on foreign enemies such as France and later the Ottoman Empire, Henry V keeps his subjects occupied and thus avoids internal friction in a fragmented nation where people's national identities are not clearly defined. While Henry V is successful at uniting his nation during his reign, the play also implies that the enemy within will always be a greater threat than the foreign enemy by exposing the underlying conflict within the English nation in the conversations between the English, Welsh, Irish and Scottish soldiers.

Shortly before his death, King Henry V's father, Henry IV, leaves him with the following advice: "Therefore, my Harry/ Be it thy course to busy giddy minds/ With foreign quarrels; that action, hence born out/ May waste the memory of the former days" (IV.iii.341-344). The old king had to live in constant fear of internal uprisings because the English nation was divided amongst its different peoples. He advises his son to make it his policy to redirect the people's minds away from civil unrest to a foreign enemy and thereby establish a national ethos. When his son Henry V is presented with the right circumstances to wage war on France at the beginning of Shakespeare's play of 1599 Henry V, he heeds his father's advice and decides to

unite his nation by waging war on France. The fact that Henry V uses pretexts to go to war with France and shifts the responsibility for it to others implies that this war is more of a political strategy to Henry than a war for a just cause. The English army is the aggressor and the manner in which Henry establishes a cause for the war with France appears dubious. Before Henry has heard the archbishop of Canterbury's full explanation of why England has a right to go to war, he tells his cousin that he wishes to "be resolved/ Before we hear him, of some things of weight/ That task our thoughts concerning us and France" (I.ii.5-7). Henry places 'us' before 'France,' suggesting that whatever course he takes with France will be based on what he is first and foremost concerned with, namely his throne. Henry's ensuing speech could be perceived as an overly cautious question that is phrased in a way that will place the burden of war on the person explaining the grounds for it: "And God forbid, my dear and faithful lord/ That you should fashion, wrest, or bow your reading/ Or nicely charge your understanding soul/ With opening titles miscreate, whose right/ Suits not in native colors with the truth (I.ii.15-19). To use words of deception such as 'fashion, wrest, or bow,' and 'miscreate [the truth]' are a suspicious choice for someone Henry has just greeted as "my gracious lord of Canterbury" (I.ii.1).

It sounds as if Henry has already decided in favor of war and is projecting his own justification and guilt for it unto Canterbury: "For god doth know how many now in health/ Shall drop their blood in approbation/ Of what your reverence shall incite us to" (I.ii.20-22). Henry claims that whatever Canterbury says will persuade him, which absolves him from all responsibility. The overly long and tedious explanation made by Canterbury sounds like a cryptic but necessary speech made to supply Henry with the official cause for war he is looking for disguised in legal terms. Once more, Henry's concise response sounds like an insurance against any accusations that could be made against his person in regards to deciding in favor of the war

with France: “May I with right and conscience make this claim” (I.ii.98). Canterbury promptly steps into Henry’s rhetorical trap and states that he will take all the blame in front of six witnesses: “The sin upon my head, dread sovereign” (I.ii.99). The first statement Henry makes after all the seven men in the room have advised him to go to war concerns not France, but Scotland: We “fear the main intendment of the Scot/ Who hath been still a giddy neighbor to us” (I.ii.146-147). Henry uses the same word his father used when he advised him to keep the home front busy by going to war with foreign forces: “giddy.” Henry is following his father’s strategy by the book: he is going to keep his nation’s mind busy by going to war with France, which will achieve two goals: unite and strengthen the English nation and adding another one to it with the help of the very people who usually cause internal strife. When Henry tells his advisors: “Now are we well resolved , and by God’s help/ And yours,” it could be argued that the strategic thinking behind his words is: now I have made up my mind for the second time in front of six witnesses, using religion and Canterbury’s counsel as an excuse for war. The fact that the Dauphin sends Henry the rude gift of tennis balls to mock the latter’s wild youth, is, under the circumstances, an additional fortuitous excuse for Henry to lay claim to a just cause for war with France.

The Chorus states what Henry is aware of, namely that England would be able to achieve any victory if its subjects were not divided: “O England [...] / What might’st thou do, that honor would thee do/ Were all thy children kind and natural” (II.Prologue.16-18). The Chorus reveals that France has found England’s weak spot, its “nest of hollow busoms,” the three traitors who have agreed to kill Henry V, and who also represent the general danger of insurgence within England (II.Prologue.21). Sir Thomas Grey, for instance, comes from a region with a history of rebellion against the English crown: Northumberland was home to Harry Hotspur who attacked

Henry V's father in Henry IV, Part II. Cambridge, another traitor, admits that he didn't agree to kill Henry for money, but most likely for political reasons. The three traitors illustrate how precarious the situation within the English nation is. To find common ground and unite the people of his fragmented nation, Harry employs a variety of skillful rhetorical techniques in his speech to his troops at Harfleur: First he addresses all of the soldiers as one and rallies them to once more engage in battle. He appeals to their common human inclination toward primal aggression and encourages them to fight as ferociously as a tiger. Consequently, he addresses the nobles and asks them to set an example due to their sense of honor and duty, and due to their descent from patriotic fathers who have already proven their mettle in the same regions under Henry's great-grandfather Edward, the Black Prince of Wales: "On, on, you noblest English/ Whose blood is fet from fathers of war-proof/ Fathers that, like so many Alexanders/ Have in these parts from morn till even fought/ And sheathed their swords for lack of argument. Dishonor not your mothers. Now attest/ That those whom you called fathers did beget you/ Be copy to men of grosser blood/ And teach them how to war" (III.i.17-25). By flattering the nobles with his comparison of their fathers to Alexander the Great, Henry sets them up to live up to their noble English bloodline by proving that they were actually conceived by their fathers; Henry then addresses the yeomen, "whose limbs were made in England," emphasizing their Englishness, and asking them to prove that they are worthy of their birth. Henry compares the yeomen to the nobles, saying that they have "noble luster in their eyes," even though they are low-born (III.i.30). With his final patriotic exclamation: "Cry 'God for Harry, England, and Saint George,'" Henry manages to make his troops feel as if they are all one united nation by making them share in the symbolic patron saint of England, St. George, even though Henry has just addressed them

as separate groups. Henry thus shrewdly makes believe that hierarchy and background do not matter, because all his soldiers share the same patriotic goal, to defeat a common enemy.

The tension between the different backgrounds of the soldiers soon reveals itself in Act III, Act ii: first, the Welsh captain Fluellen chastises the cowardly behavior of the English commoners. He goes on to criticize the Irish captain Macmorris's construction of the tunnels and calls him "an ass, as in the world" because he has no knowledge of military practice: "there is not many of his nation" (III.ii.65, 110). Fluellen is implying that the Irish don't know anything about war. The most telling sign of the underlying friction between the people of the English nation is illustrated when Macmorris retorts: "Of my nation? What ish my nation? Ish a villain and a basterd and a knave and a rascal. What ish my nation" (III.ii.111-113). Macmorris says that the English nation is corrupt (a knave) and illegitimate (a basterd). He then attacks the Welsh captain by claiming: "I do not know you so good a man as myself" and he threatens to kill him (III.ii.120-121). Gower, the English captain goes in between the two and tells both that they "mistake each other" (III.ii.122). The Scottish captain Jamy calls that misunderstanding between the two a grave failure of the so-called nation: "that's a foul fault" (III.ii.123). Act III, Scene ii demonstrates the conflicts within the English nation. Nationalism does not exist in the way Henry V has just described it in his speech. The play depicts the three soldiers from Ireland, Scotland and Wales as un-English to varying extents due to their exaggerated dialects. While their dialogue is exceedingly funny, it also divorces them from proper English pronunciations. In addition to their dialects, they are also portrayed as stereotypes: Macmorris has a vile temper and is described as incompetent; Jamy is bold, eager to fight, and concise in speech. Fluellen is long-winded and uses high-flown language, he is serious, and he is constantly explaining something or chastising someone about "the ancient prerogatives and laws of the wars" (IV.i.68). Unlike the

other two, Fluellen is also described as a great strategist, an honorable captain, and as very amiable: “there is much care and valor in this Welshman” says King Henry V (IV.i.83). The exchange of the four captains from different backgrounds illustrates the conflict between who shows allegiance to England: the Welsh do, but the Irish and Scots do not.

When King Henry V disguises himself as a common soldier during the night prior to the battle of Agincourt to listen to his troops’ opinions, he encounters two soldiers who question the king’s cause for war and the state of the nation. The soldier Bates claims that it is better not to know the cause, in case it is unjust. As long as he is a subject of the king’s nation, he is obligated to fight no matter what the cause. The soldier Michael Williams is very skeptical about the war and says: “if the cause be not good, the king himself hath a heavy reckoning to make” (IV.i.126-127). Williams is a common Welsh surname, and the play might imply-even though it doesn’t directly say so- that Michael Williams represents the people of Wales who do not wish to align themselves with the English as Fluellen does. Williams gives Henry a piece of his mind when he tells him that “’tis a foolish saying” to believe the king when he says he will not be ransomed (IV.i.186). Williams believes that Henry’s soldiers are mere cogs in the wheel of war for him that help him achieve his ends as a king. Williams therefore intuits that the war might be less about France than it is a political strategy. Bates, on the other hand, displays the unifying behavior that Henry is looking for in his soldiers: “Be friends, you English fools, be friends. We have French quarrels enough” (IV.i.204-205). Bates’ bonding statement and the fact that Fluellen, Macmorris, Jamy, and Gower reconcile right after their disagreement shows that Henry’s strategy is, for the most part, successful.

Henry exclaims in front of his men on the day of the battle: “We few, we happy few, we band of brothers/ For he today that sheds his blood with me/ Shall be my brother; be he ne’er so vile/ This day shall gentle his condition” (IV.iii.62-65). Henry once more asserts that by fighting together, all national and societal barriers will be broken; all men will be brothers in arms, no matter how low their birth. In fact, their military service for their nation will ennoble them. King Henry sends the French ambassador away with a threat: “Mark, then, abounding valor in our English” (IV.iii.107). He refers to his army as ‘English,’ but shortly thereafter he identifies with being Welsh when he tells Fluellen: “for I am Welsh, you know” (IV.vii.101). Fluellen affirms that “all the water in Wye cannot wash your Majesty’s Welsh plod out of your pody” (IV.vii.102-103). When Fluellen exclaims that “I am your Majesty’s countryman, I care not who know it. I will confess it to all the ‘orld” he hints that to be Welsh, Irish, or Scottish is not considered as respectable as being English. During their conversation, however, both Henry and Fluellen identify with being Welsh, not English. Their exchange demonstrates how complicated the relations within the English nation are and how blurred the lines. A moment later, the soldier Michael Williams arrives to find the man he pledged to duel with after their quarrel. Henry asks if he is looking for “an Englishman,” switching from having identified with being Welsh to giving his identity as English (IV.vii.119). Henry V himself is therefore the best example of a complicated national identity: he was Prince of Wales, inherited the English crown, was part of suppressing the Welsh insurgence led by Owain Glyn Dwr against his father, and he identifies himself as both Welsh and English. He and Fluellen seem to be able to reconcile both identities, but Henry’s insistence on being both at different times seems problematic.

Henry V explores the question of who is considered a legitimate member of the English nation and answers it in accordance to the foreign threat from Spain provoked by Irish rebels

under the Earl of Tyrone that the English crown was faced with in 1599, the year the play was written. For a war with the Irish and Spanish – that would take place two years after the play was written in the Battle of Kinsale- Elizabeth needed the Welsh to support the English crown. While Shakespeare took great liberty with historical facts in Henry V, he portrayed the distinguished loyalty of the Welsh captains to the English crown in Agincourt correctly through the character of Fluellen. The play implies that the Welsh should consider themselves legitimate subjects of the English crown. The English captain Gower exemplifies the latter when he defends Fluellen’s heritage in front of the English commoner Pistol who had mocked Fluellen’s Welsh customs and dialect: “I have seen you gleeking and galling at this gentleman twice/ or thrice. You thought because he could not speak English/ in the native garb, he could not therefore handle an English/ cudgel. You find it otherwise, and henceforth let a Welsh/ Correction teach you a good English condition” (V.i.66-69). Henry V can therefore be read as a call for unity amongst the various subjects of the English crown to support Elizabeth I, who was of Welsh heritage herself, against a common enemy. Out of the three characters that represent the Irish, Scottish, and Welsh soldiers, only the Irish Macmorris asks what his nation is and proves hostile toward having to fight for the English, suggesting that at the time Henry V was written, English-Irish relations were antagonistic. While King Henry V manages to temporarily unite his subjects against a common enemy, the epilogue reveals that, as opposed to keeping Henry IV’s consolidation strategy alive by conceiving “a boy, half French, half English, that shall go to Constantinople and take the Turk by the beard,” as Henry V suggests to his future wife Katherine, the complicated structure of the English nation would soon fall victim to its fragmentation again under Henry VI.