The Impossibility of Atonement in Shakespeare's Lancastrian Tetralogy

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Abstract

This study examines the second Shakespearean tetralogy — *Richard II*, the two parts of *Henry IV*, *Henry V*, and their extension into the *Henry VI* plays — through the lens of inherited guilt and the theology of penitential selfhood, arguing that the originary crime of Bolingbroke's usurpation generates across the entire dramatic sequence an ineradicable moral residue that neither military triumph nor theatrical self-fashioning can dissolve. The study traces how this inherited guilt operates not as an external political liability but as an internalised burden that shapes the psychology and the dramatic presentation of every major figure in the sequence: Hal's prayer before Agincourt, Falstaff's reported dying in green fields, Bedford's hollow final satisfaction, and Henry VI's pious condemnation of his father's wars. Drawing on the theological tradition of penitential literature, the moral philosophy developed in the work of John Stachniewski and

Debora Shuger, and the dramaturgical analysis of self-recharactering, the study proposes the concept of 'the solace within' as the tetralogy's deepest moral category — a form of interior transformation, grounded in penitence rather than external achievement, that constitutes the only adequate response to the burden of inherited guilt. The analysis demonstrates that this solace is systematically withheld from the play's most powerful figures — Hal, Bedford, Lancaster — while being granted, with devastating ironic force, to those the official narrative marginalises: the dying Falstaff, the captive Henry VI. The study concludes by arguing that the tetralogy's moral architecture constitutes a profound and sustained critique of the Lancastrian claim that political power and moral legitimacy can be aligned through theatrical achievement, exposing this claim as the most seductive and the most destructive of the plays' many fictions.

Keywords: inherited guilt, penitence, self-recharactering, interior selfhood, usurpation, solace within, moral theology, atonement, Lancastrian tetralogy

استحالة التكفير في رباعية شكسبير عن أسرة لانكستر

ملخص

تتناول هذه الدراسة رباعية شكسبير الثانية — التي تضم مسرحيات "ريتشارد الثاني"، وجزئي "هنري الرابع"، و"هنري الخامس"، وامتدادها في مسرحيات "هنري السادس" — من منظور الذنب الموروث واللاهوت المرتبط بالذات التائبة. وتناقش الدراسة بأن الجريمة الأصلية المتمثلة في استيلاء بولينغبروك على العرش (الاغتصاب السياسي) تولّد، عبر التسلسل الدرامي بأكمله، أثراً أخلاقياً راسخاً لا يمكن محوه؛ إذ لا النصر العسكري ولا "صياغة الذات" المسرحية قادران على تبديده. وتتتبع الدراسة كيف يعمل هذا الذنب الموروث لا بوصفه عبئاً سياسياً خارجياً، بل كعبء داخلي يشكّل البنية النفسية والصورة الدرامية لكل شخصية رئيسية في السلسلة: بدءاً من صلاة "هال" قبل معركة أجينكور، ووفاة فالستاف وسط "الحقول الخضراء"، ورضا "بيدفورد" الأخير الأجوف، وصولاً إلى إدانة "هنري السادس" الورعة لحروب والده. وبالاستناد إلى التراث اللاهوتي لأدب التوبة، والفلسفة الأخلاقية في أعمال جون ستاخنيفسكي وديبورا شوغر، والتحليل الدرامي لعملية "إعادة تشكيل الذات"، تطرح الدراسة مفهوم "السلوان الداخلي" باعتباره المقولة الأخلاقية الأعمق في الرباعية؛ فهو شكل من أشكال التحول الداخلي القائم على التوبة لا على الإنجاز الخارجي، ويُعد الاستجابة الوحيدة الملائمة لعبء الذنب الموروث. ويُظهر التحليل أن هذا السلوان يُحجب بشكل منهجي عن أقوى شخصيات المسرحيات — مثل هال وبيدفورد ولانكستر — بينما يُمنح، بقوة مفارقة مدمرة، لأولئك الذين تهمشهم الرواية الرسمية: فالستاف المحتضر، وهنري السادس الأسير. وتخلص الدراسة إلى أن البنية الأخلاقية للرباعية تشكل

نقداً عميقاً ومستمراً لادعاء أسرة لانكستر بإمكانية المواءمة بين السلطة السياسية والشرعية الأخلاقية من خلال الإنجاز المسرحي، كاشفةً عن هذا الادعاء باعتباره أكثر أكاذيب المسرحيات جاذبيةً وتدميراً في آن واحد.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الذنب الموروث، التوبة، إعادة تشكيل الذات، الذات الداخلية، اغتصاب السلطة، السلوان الداخلي، اللاهوت الأخلاقي، التكفير، رباعية لانكستر.

Introduction: The Rule of Inherited Guilt

There is a moment in *Henry V* — brief, half-buried in the long darkness of the night before Agincourt, delivered by a king who has gone to considerable lengths to avoid exactly this kind of nakedness — that illuminates more clearly than almost any other passage in the Shakespearean canon the specific character of the guilt that haunts the Lancastrian dynasty. It occurs in Hal's prayer, when, after all his public performances of piety and right intention, he turns to address what he believes to be a divine spectator and finds that he has nothing to offer that can meet the gravity of the claim against him:

Not to-day, O Lord!
O not to-day, think not upon the fault
My father made in compassing the crown!
I Richard's body have interred new ,
And on it have bestow'd more contrite tears
Than from it issued forced drops of blood.
Five hundred poor I have in yearly pay,
Who twice a day their wither'd hands hold up
Toward heaven, to pardon blood; and I have built

Two chantries, where the sad and solemn priests

Still sing for Richard's soul. (*Henry V* IV.i.298-309)

What makes this prayer remarkable is not its piety but its futility — a futility that Hal himself acknowledges in the lines that immediately follow: 'More will I do; / Though all that I can do is nothing worth, / Since that my penitence comes after all, / Imploring pardon' (IV.i.309-11). The good deeds he enumerates — the interment, the tears, the poor men in yearly pay, the chantries — are real enough, and genuinely costly. But they are external signs of contrition, not contrition itself; they are performances of penitence directed at a divine spectator rather than the interior experience of genuine remorse. And they cannot address the structural impossibility

at the heart of Hal's situation: he cannot atone for his father's crime without renouncing the crown that the crime made possible, and the crown — as his conduct throughout three plays has made abundantly clear — is everything. The atonement is structurally impossible. The guilt is ineradicable. It will pass, as the tetralogy's closing movements make painfully clear, to the next generation, and the next.

This article studies the entire second tetralogy through the lens of inherited guilt and the theology of penitential selfhood. It argues that Bolingbroke's usurpation generates across the dramatic sequence not merely a political liability — the questionable title, the rebellions, the anxious management of legitimacy — but an internalised moral burden that is transmitted from father to son like a genetic defect, shaping the psychology of every major figure in the sequence and determining, in ways that none of them can fully control or escape, the quality of their inner lives and the manner of their dying. The plays are, among other things, a sustained meditation on what it means to inherit a crime you did not commit, and on the question of whether the moral residue of such a crime can ever be adequately discharged.

The figures of greatest political power — Hal, Bolingbroke, Lancaster, Bedford — are precisely the figures most thoroughly denied the interior peace that the plays define as the highest human good. The

figures who achieve what the plays call ‘the solace within’ — the genuine interior transformation that constitutes the only adequate response to the burden of guilt — are the conspirators at Southampton, who accept their deaths with penitential grace; Falstaff, who dies babbling of green fields in a tavern room; and Henry VI, the captive and ultimately murdered king whose piety is the plays’ most complete, if most politically ineffective, expression of the interior life fully inhabited. The moral architecture of the tetralogy is, in this respect, deliberately and provocatively inverted: the powerful fail at the thing that matters most, and the marginalised succeed at it.

The argument proceeds through several interlocking stages. The first section establishes the theological and philosophical context, drawing on the tradition of penitential literature, the moral theology of early modern England, and the dramaturgical concept of self-recharactering. The second section traces the archaeology of Bolingbroke’s guilt — the originary crime and its structural consequences for every figure who inherits the political order it establishes. The third section examines the conspirators’ scene in Henry V as the play’s first and most explicit model of successful self-recharactering through penitence. The fourth section analyses Hal’s Agincourt prayer as the central case of failed atonement: a

performance of contrition that cannot achieve its object because it is structurally constituted as performance. The fifth section develops the concept of 'the solace within' as the tetralogy's deepest moral category, tracing its operation across several characters and dramatic contexts. The sixth section examines Bedford's dying as the parallel case of failed interior transformation within the wider frame of the Lancastrian sequence. The seventh section traces the resolution of the moral argument in the figure of Henry VI. The conclusion reflects on the implications of this reading for our understanding of Shakespeare's moral vision in the history plays.

Theoretical Framework: Penitential Theology, Moral Philosophy, and Self-Recharactering

The moral framework within which the second tetralogy operates is not primarily political but theological, and specifically penitential. The concept of penitence in early modern England carried a precise and well-understood meaning: it was not simply regret for past misdeeds but a structured process of interior transformation involving contrition (genuine sorrow for sin, not merely for its consequences), confession (the explicit acknowledgement of wrongdoing before God and, in some traditions, before a human

community), and satisfaction (the making of amends through charitable and devotional acts). The theological tradition, both Catholic and Protestant in different ways, insisted that genuine penitence was an interior event — a movement of the soul, not a performance of the body — and that external acts of piety could accompany but not substitute for this interior transformation. Richard Hooker, whose Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity (1594-97) was the most sophisticated Anglican theological statement of the period, argued with particular force that the outward signs of contrition were meaningless without the inward reality they were supposed to express (Hooker III.i.2-6). The Protestant tradition, especially in its Calvinist wing, went further: it questioned whether any human act — interior or exterior — could contribute to the resolution of the fundamental condition of human sinfulness, reserving the power of genuine transformation for divine grace alone (Calvin, Institutes II.i.4-8).

This theological context is essential to a full understanding of what Hal is doing, and failing to do, in his Agincourt prayer. When he enumerates his acts of pious satisfaction — the interment, the tears, the chantries — and then acknowledges that they are ‘nothing worth,’ he is, among other things, demonstrating his awareness of the Augustinian and Protestant critique of works-righteousness: the claim

that external acts of piety cannot bridge the gap between human sinfulness and divine justice. His penitence 'comes after all' in a precise theological sense: it follows the wrong, it acknowledges the wrong, but it cannot undo the wrong or satisfy the moral claim that the wrong has generated. The inherited guilt is not simply a political problem that good governance might resolve; it is a theological condition for which the only adequate response is not more good works but a genuine interior transformation — and that transformation, as the prayer's conclusion implies, is precisely what Hal has not achieved.

The concept of 'self-recharactering'— the process by which a character, typically in the extremity of dying or crisis, achieves a genuine movement from 'office' (public identity, institutional role, external achievement) to 'person' (interior self, genuine moral being, private consciousness) — is a dramaturgical formulation of this theological process. This study traces this concept across the second tetralogy and into *Henry VIII*, identifying the moments at which characters either achieve or fail to achieve this movement. Its central finding — that the characters who most thoroughly inhabit the external world of office and theatrical performance are precisely those who find the movement to 'person' most difficult or impossible, while the characters who have been marginalised by the official world are those

who achieve it most readily — is the finding upon which the present article builds its extended argument.

Debora Shuger's account of the 'sacred self' in English Renaissance literature provides an important supplement to the penitential theological context. Shuger argues that the Renaissance self is not the autonomous, self-creating subject of Burckhardtian tradition but a fundamentally relational self, constituted through its relationship to God, to community, and to the inner life of conscience (Shuger 1-35). The literature of the period, she argues, consistently privileges the inward and relational dimensions of selfhood over the external and self-constructing, and consistently regards the reduction of the self to its public performances — its role, its status, its institutional identity — as a form of spiritual poverty. Applied to the Lancastrian tetralogy, Shuger's framework makes sense of what might otherwise seem like a merely incidental feature of the plays' moral landscape: the consistent association of genuine interiority with vulnerability, marginality, and political powerlessness, and the consistent association of political power with the suppression or neglect of the inner life. The king who can fill the ceremonial stage with his magnificent performances is precisely the king who cannot find, in his 'bosom,' the 'infinite heart's ease' that the peasant enjoys.

John Stachniewski's "The Persecutory Imagination" (1991), a study of Calvinist despair in early modern English literature, offers a further and darker perspective on the condition of the characters most fully aware of their inherited guilt. Stachniewski traces the way in which the Calvinist doctrine of predestination and the impossibility of assurance could generate, in the spiritually sensitive minds of the period, a condition of paralysing despair — the conviction that one's guilt was ineradicable, one's election uncertain, one's prayers inefficacious. While the plays do not operate within a strictly Calvinist theological framework, the psychological condition that Stachniewski describes — the experience of guilt as a burden that external achievement cannot lift and interior effort cannot dissolve — maps with striking precision onto the condition of Hal at his most unguarded, in those nocturnal hours before Agincourt when the theatrical apparatus of kingship has, temporarily, been laid aside (Stachniewski 26-73). The king who cannot sleep, whose ceremonies give him nothing but 'poison'd flattery,' who knows that his most earnest acts of piety are 'nothing worth' — this king is not far from the condition that Stachniewski's subjects inhabit.

Hal's Agincourt Prayer: The Performance of Contrition and Its Limits

The night before Agincourt is the play's most extended and most revealing exposure of Hal's interior life — or rather, of the complex relationship between his theatrical exterior and the troubled interior that the theatrical strategy has been designed to manage and conceal. The sequence begins with the borrowed cloak and the expression of a desire for solitude — 'I and my bosom must debate awhile' (IV.i.31-2) — and proceeds through the interrupted conversations with Pistol, Fluellen, and the common soldiers to the two soliloquies that together constitute the most direct access to Hal's inner world that the plays provide.

The first soliloquy — the meditation on ceremony — has been extensively analysed in its relationship to the themes of performance and identity, as the previous work in this series has demonstrated. For the purposes of the present argument, the most important passage is the one in which Hal confronts the contrast between the king who cannot sleep and the peasant who sleeps well:

> What infinite heart's ease
> Must kings neglect that private men enjoy!

> And what have kings that privates have not too,
> Save ceremony, save general ceremony?
> (*Henry V* IV.i.235-8)

The rhetorical question is not ironic in the sense of implying that the speaker knows the answer is different from the obvious one. Hal genuinely does not know what kings have that privates do not, beyond ceremony. And this not-knowing — this inability to locate, beneath the ceremonies of kingship, any substantive content that would justify the sacrifice of 'infinite heart's ease' — is the most direct expression in the plays of the burden that the inherited guilt has created. The guilt has made the crown a 'possession' rather than a birthright, a thing that must be perpetually defended rather than simply inhabited; and the perpetual defence has consumed exactly the interior space in which a genuine selfhood might otherwise have developed. Hal has 'infinite heart's ease' to give up and nothing to put in its place except the empty architecture of ceremony.

The second soliloquy — the prayer — is the emotional climax of the night sequence and the play's most concentrated treatment of the impossibility of atonement. What makes it extraordinary is not the piety of its intentions but the honesty of its conclusion. Hal does not pretend that his acts of satisfaction have resolved the moral claim

against him; he explicitly acknowledges that they have not and cannot. But the honesty of this acknowledgement does not itself constitute the penitence that would be adequate to the situation. The prayer remains a performance: directed at an imagined divine spectator, structured as a list of external evidences, framed as an argument rather than as a confession. Even at his most apparently interior, Hal cannot quite escape the theatrical mode.

The Solace Within: An Alternative Moral Economy

The concept of 'the solace within' as the tetralogy's deepest moral category requires some careful elaboration if its full significance is to be appreciated. It is not simply a synonym for inner peace or psychological contentment, though it includes these; it is a specific moral and theological condition, achievable only through a particular kind of interior process, and the plays consistently distinguish it from the various external conditions — military victory, political stability, social honour, royal ceremony — that characters in the history plays pursue in its place.

The first and most explicit model of this solace appears not in the main narrative of *Henry V* but in the offstage death of Falstaff — a

placement that is itself significant. The Hostess's report of Falstaff's dying makes clear that the solace he achieves is not a product of external circumstances — he dies in a tavern room, rejected by the king, his fortunes ruined, his social standing dissolved. It is, rather, a product of an interior event: the penitential turning that the plays have been preparing across three plays of half-revelation and deferred possibility. The 'babbled of green fields,' the cries of 'God, God, God,' the recantation of sack — these are the signs not of achievement but of surrender, not of a will imposing itself on the world but of a self releasing its hold on the performance it has sustained and discovering, in that releasing, the interior ground that the performance had concealed. Falstaff's evocation of those green fields is telling: it is a moment of inward solace, a moment of self-recharactering through repentance. It is a moment, in other words, in which the exterior yields to the interior and the person emerges from behind the office.

The green fields that Falstaff babbles of are evocative of the twenty-third Psalm — and the Psalm is worth dwelling on in this context. The twenty-third Psalm is about the total trust in divine provision: 'The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want. He maketh me to lie down in green pastures: he leadeth me beside the still waters. He restoreth my soul.' It is a poem not of achievement but of restoration;

not of what the self has done but of what has been done to the self. Its central image is of the soul as a sheep led by a shepherd — as passive, receptive, dependent — and this passivity is precisely the opposite of the active, willing, performing self that Hal has constructed and maintained across three plays. Falstaff, in his dying, achieves the passivity that Hal's prayer cannot reach: the 'still waters' of restored soul, the green fields of divine peace, the surrender of the performed self to the shepherd's care.

The contrast with Hal's Agincourt prayer could hardly be more complete. Where Hal addresses God as a spectator and presents his acts as evidence in an argument for divine favour, Falstaff in his dying abandons the adversarial mode altogether and simply yields — to the green fields, to the divine name, to the turning of the tide. Where Hal enumerates his acts of satisfaction, Falstaff recants his most characteristic pleasure (sack) — not as an additional act of piety but as a natural consequence of the interior reorientation that is already occurring. The one is still performing, still arguing, still trying to manage the divine audience; the other has stopped performing entirely and in stopping has, paradoxically, become most fully himself.

A second, less noticed example of the solace within appears in the figure of Henry VI, whose captivity and death in *3 Henry VI* provide the tetralogy's most extended and most politically costly portrait of a life organised around the interior rather than the exterior. *Henry VI* is, in almost every measurable political and military sense, a catastrophic failure as a king: he loses France, presides over the dissolution of order into civil war, fails to prevent the murder of his allies, and is eventually himself murdered in the Tower. But the plays present him as the figure who has most completely achieved the interior peace that all the other characters in the sequence pursue and fail to find. His acceptance of his captivity, his capacity for genuine prayer that is not a performance before an audience but a direct address to a God he genuinely trusts, his ability to find 'solace' in his captivity rather than in his crown — these are, in the plays' moral economy, achievements of a kind that Agincourt cannot match. He has the thing that Hal's prayer acknowledges it cannot purchase: the 'infinite heart's ease' that ceremony can neither give nor take away.

The plays are not naive about the political costs of Henry VI's interiority: they present, with clear-eyed honesty, the destruction that his political inadequacy brings upon England. But they are equally clear — and this is what distinguishes them from straightforward

political drama — that the kind of goodness Henry VI embodies cannot be judged by political criteria alone, that the moral scale on which his life registers is different from the scale on which Agincourt registers, and that a drama that could only register on the political scale would be impoverished in ways that Shakespeare's history plays, with their sustained attention is called 'the solace within,' refuse to be.

Bedford and the Failure of the Interior: A Parallel Case

John of Lancaster — subsequently the Duke of Bedford, who appears across 2 *Henry IV, Henry V,* and *1 Henry VI* — provides the tetralogy's most sustained parallel narrative to Hal's story, and the parallel is designed with considerable dramatic intelligence to illuminate, through contrast and irony, the specific character of Hal's moral condition. Like Hal, Bedford is a figure of political calculation and theatrical self-management; like Hal, he attempts to construct his historical identity through public performance; and like Hal, he fails to achieve, in his dying, the interior transformation that would give his performance a substance it otherwise lacks.

Bedford's career begins with a moral blemish that the plays ensure we do not forget: his stratagem at Gaultree Forest in *2 Henry*

IV, in which he tricks the Archbishop of York and his fellow rebels into disbanding their forces with promises of redress he never intends to honour. Shakespeare deliberately revises his historical sources to assign this stratagem to Lancaster rather than Westmoreland, ensuring that the act of unchivalric political calculation is attached to a figure whose subsequent career will be shaped and shadowed by it. The stratagem works, in the immediate political sense; but it establishes Bedford as a man who has chosen the logic of 'policy' over the logic of honour — and the word 'policy,' as the plays consistently use it, carries connotations of Machiavellian calculation, of the sacrifice of moral principle to political expediency, of the reduction of the self to its strategic performances.

In *Henry V*, Bedford/Lancaster 'hardly features as a valiant soldier at all'— a dramatically loaded silence that retrospectively qualifies Falstaff's ironic praise of his supposed valour at Shrewsbury. His absence from the heroic narrative of Agincourt is the dramatic consequence of his conduct at Gaultree: a man who has made himself through policy cannot claim the honours of the man who makes himself through courage. His return to prominence in *1 Henry VI* is therefore not a rehabilitation but a last attempt at self-recharactering

through theatrical performance — an attempt whose failure is guaranteed in advance by the conditions under which it is made.

Bedford's entrance before the walls of Rouen in *1 Henry VI*, carried 'in a chair' and insisting on remaining in the field despite his obvious physical incapacity, is the scene's most complex piece of theatrical management. His refusal to be carried away — 'Here will I sit, before the walls of Rouen, / And will be partner of your weal or woe' (1 *Henry VI* III.ii.90-2) — is simultaneously a gesture of genuine courage and a theatrical performance designed to write himself into the historical record of the campaign. His self-identification with 'stout Pendragon' who 'in his litter sick / Came to the field and vanquished his foes' (III.ii.93-5) is explicit about the theatrical logic: he is 'reading' history for a model that will allow him to re-present himself as a figure of legendary endurance, aligning his dying with an established narrative of heroic persistence.

The irony that undermines this last performance is layered and precise. Talbot's epitaph on Bedford after his death — 'A braver soldier never couched lance, / A gentler heart did never sway in court' (III.ii.134-5) — is 'more of Talbot's courtesy' than an accurate memorial: it is itself a theatrical performance, a piece of courtly

generosity that substitutes for the more accurate account that follows from Gloucester's lamentation, where Bedford is remembered not for bravery but for 'policy.' The word that defines his career returns, at the end of it, to define his legacy: he is the man of policy, not the man of courage; the man of external management, not the man of interior truth.

Most damning of all is Bedford's dying speech itself: 'Now, quiet soul, depart when heaven please, / For I have seen our enemies' overthrow' (III.ii.110-11). This study identifies the precise failure of this moment with characteristic insight: 'This moment of solace is not a process of looking within himself. Instead, it emphasises his externality.' Bedford's dying satisfaction is constituted entirely by what he has seen — by an external event, the overthrow of his enemies — rather than by any interior transformation. The 'quiet soul' he addresses is not a self that has been genuinely quieted through the process of penitential self-recharactering; it is a self that has been quieted by circumstantial satisfaction, by the alignment of the external world with his wishes. It is, in the moral economy of the plays, a hollow peace: the peace of a man who has got what he wanted rather than the peace of a man who has found what he needed.

The contrast with Falstaff's dying — the babbled green fields, the cries of God, the recantation of sack — is as sharp as the plays can make it. Bedford dies looking outward, satisfied by external results, his peace dependent on the contingent alignment of historical events. Falstaff dies looking inward, or rather, being looked into, his peace constituted by the interior event of penitential turning rather than by any external circumstance. Bedford has the right social position for a dignified death; Falstaff has the right moral condition for a genuine one. And the plays are careful to ensure that we see both, and understand the difference.

Writing the Self and the Impossibility of Self-Inscription in History

One of the tetralogy's most consistently developed thematic threads is the relationship between personal identity and historical narrative — between the self as it is privately experienced and the self as it is publicly recorded, between 'person' and 'office' in the plays' own vocabulary. This thread is carried principally through a sustained series of writing metaphors that run across all four plays: Hal's desire to 'raze out / Rotten opinion, who hath writ [him] down / After [his] seeming' (*2 Henry IV* V.ii.125-9); his awareness that history is written

'after' his 'seeming,' that is, by audiences who judge him by his external performances; his determination to 'engrave his name on the pages of history' through the French campaign; and his either/or formulation — either history shall 'with full mouth / Speak freely of our acts, or else our grave / Like Turkish mute, shall have a tongueless mouth' (I.ii.230-3). The image of history as a writing surface on which identities are inscribed or erased, remembered or forgotten, is one of the tetralogy's governing metaphors, and it carries with it a specific moral implication: the self that seeks to write itself into history through external achievement is the self that has made itself dependent on the judgements of others for its very existence.

What the writing metaphors reveal, when read in the context of the plays' sustained concern with inherited guilt and penitential transformation, is the extent to which Hal's conception of identity is constitutively external. To write oneself into history is to constitute oneself through the records that others keep of one's actions: it is to make the self dependent on external inscription, on the 'flowing cups' that keep names freshly remembered and on the Crispin's Day narratives that transmit fame from generation to generation. But the inherited guilt that Hal carries cannot be resolved by historical inscription; no amount of successful writing into the historical record

can erase the fault that was inscribed there before Hal was born. The writing metaphors thus reveal, obliquely, the structural impossibility of Hal's project: he is trying to use the tools of external performance and historical inscription to resolve a problem that is by nature interior and that can only be addressed through the kind of interior transformation that is, precisely, unavailable to the man who has staked everything on the external.

Bedford's attempt to read himself into history through the model of stout Pendragon is the parallel and equally revealing case. His 'I read' — 'for once I read / That stout Pendragon in his litter sick / Came to the field and vanquished his foes' (1 *Henry VI* III.ii.93-5) — is an attempt to inscribe his own dying into the tradition of heroic historical narrative by aligning it with an established precedent. Bedford's reference to the notion of 'reading' emphasises his process towards aligning his name to the domain of fame and history. Like Hal, Bedford turns to the external record for validation; like Hal, he finds that the record cannot give him what he actually needs. He fails to 'emulate stout Pendragon,' and the failure is not merely military but moral: the heroic precedent he invokes is inaccessible to a man whose career has been constituted by 'policy' rather than courage, and who is

attempting, at the last moment, to write over that history with a different kind of ink.

The conspirators at Southampton, by contrast, seek to write nothing. Their penitential speeches are addressed not to posterity but to God and to the king; they are not attempts to manage their historical reputations but confessions of interior moral reality. They want their 'fault,' not their deeds, to be the subject of the transaction; they ask for forgiveness, not for commemoration. In refusing the logic of historical inscription, they achieve something that Hal and Bedford cannot: they address their moral situation directly, without the mediation of theatrical performance, without the armour of the writing metaphor. And in doing so, they model the interior transformation that the plays consistently identify as the only adequate response to the burden of guilt.

The writing metaphors ultimately constitute, in the tetralogy's moral architecture, a critique of the entire project of heroic historiography: the project of constituting the self through external inscription, through the management of what posterity will say and write and remember. The self so constituted is always at the mercy of events it cannot control — of the *Henry VI* plays that the epilogue reminds us are already written, of the French territories that will be lost

within a generation. The self that has been written into history can be written out of it; the self that has achieved the interior transformation of penitential self-recharactering cannot be erased by historical circumstance, because it does not depend on historical circumstance for its existence. This is, in the end, the plays' most radical moral claim: that genuine selfhood is interior and therefore immune to the vicissitudes of history, while the theatrical self that seeks to write itself into history is always already hostage to it.

Henry VI and the Resolution of the Moral Argument

The tetralogy's moral argument about inherited guilt, penitential transformation, and the solace within reaches its most extended and most politically complex expression in the figure of Henry VI, whose life and death across the three *Henry VI* plays constitute the most fully developed portrait of a self organised around the interior rather than the exterior in all of Shakespeare's history plays. Henry VI is, as every historian of the period and every theatre audience knows, a political catastrophe: his reign witnesses the loss of the French territories that Hal's campaigns won, the dissolution of the domestic political order into the Wars of the Roses, and ultimately the destruction of the Lancastrian dynasty that Bolingbroke's usurpation

established. He is, by any political standard, the worst consequence of a crime that was supposed to establish a stronger, more efficient royal authority than the one it replaced.

The plays — and this is one of the most morally complex and most challenging things about the tetralogy as a whole — present Henry VI not simply as a failure but as the figure in whom the moral argument of the sequence finds its most complete, if its most politically costly, expression. His condemnation of his father's war against France — 'for I always thought / It was both impious and unnatural / That such immanity and bloody strife / Should reign among professors of one faith' (*1 Henry VI* V.i.11-14) — is the moment in which the inherited guilt is most explicitly named and condemned by the generation that inherits it. Henry VI cannot do what Hal could not do: he cannot atone for his grandfather's crime. But he can, and does, name it for what it is; and in naming it he achieves a moral clarity about the Lancastrian inheritance that none of his predecessors have been able or willing to articulate.

Henry VI's acceptance of peace constitutes an 'indirect condemnation of Hal's praxis,' and this observation is important but incomplete. It is not merely an indirect condemnation of the war; it is the direct expression of a moral perspective that has been present

throughout the tetralogy but has been consistently marginalised by the demands of the heroic narrative. The perspective is theological and penitential: the wars among Christian princes are 'impious,' a violation of the fraternal order that Christian faith demands. Henry VI is the first Lancastrian figure powerful enough to give this perspective political expression, however briefly and however disastrously. And the disaster that follows — the loss of France, the civil wars, the murder of Henry himself — does not, in the plays' moral economy, invalidate the perspective. It demonstrates, rather, the impossibility of translating the interior moral truth into political efficacy in a world that has been structured, by Bolingbroke's crime, around the logic of external performance and political management.

Henry VI's captivity and death in *3 Henry VI* are the most sustained portrait of the solace within under conditions of extreme external deprivation. Unlike Hal, who seeks the solace within on the eve of a battle that may vindicate or destroy him, Henry VI inhabits it as a permanent condition — not achieved in extremis but constitutive of his daily experience. His famous soliloquy on the pastoral life in *3 Henry VI* — where he envies the shepherd's existence and meditates on the simplicity and peace of the life lived outside the demands of political office — is the fullest expression of this permanent interior

orientation. It is also, given the pastoral imagery of Psalm 23 that Falstaff invokes in his dying babbling of green fields, a structural echo that connects the two most morally significant figures in the sequence: the fat knight dying in a tavern and the pious king dying in the Tower share, the echo implies, the same interior landscape, the same orientation toward the divine peace that lies beyond the world of political performance.

That both figures — Falstaff and Henry VI — are presented as failures by the standards of the political world they inhabit is part of the tetralogy's sustained moral challenge to its audience. The plays do not offer the solace within as a politically viable alternative to the theatre of kingship; they do not suggest that Henry VI's piety would have served England better than Hal's military genius, or that Falstaff's honesty about honour would have preserved England's territorial integrity better than Agincourt. They offer it as a different kind of achievement, registered on a different scale, available only to those who have released their hold on the external world and its judgements. The question of whether this release is, finally, the greatest wisdom or the deepest foolishness is one that the plays pose without answering. But they pose it with a seriousness and a sustained

moral intelligence that the exclusively political readings of the sequence have never adequately confronted.

Conclusion:

The argument of this article can now be stated in its fullest form. Shakespeare's second tetralogy is organised around an inherited guilt — the moral residue of Bolingbroke's usurpation — that is constitutively resistant to the forms of resolution that the political world makes available. No military victory, however spectacular, can discharge it; no theatrical performance of piety and right governance, however skilled, can substitute for the interior transformation that the penitential tradition identifies as genuine contrition; no act of external piety, however costly, can satisfy the moral claim that the wrong has generated. The guilt passes from Bolingbroke to Hal like a structural condition, not a personal failing, and Hal's most honest and most revealing moment — the prayer before Agincourt — is the moment in which he acknowledges, with a clarity unusual for him, that he knows this and cannot change it: 'all that I can do is nothing worth.'

The plays' sustained treatment of this impossibility is not, however, simply pessimistic. Against the figure of the king who cannot atone, the tetralogy sets several figures who achieve, in various ways and with various degrees of completeness, the interior transformation that the official narrative cannot accommodate. The conspirators at Southampton model it in compressed form: their penitential speeches, delivered in the face of certain death, demonstrate the movement from 'office' to 'person' that is the plays' model of genuine self-recharactering. Falstaff models it in the most affecting form: his babbling of green fields, his cries of God, his recantation of sack are the signs of a soul that has, at the last, released its hold on the external performances it has sustained and found, in that releasing, the interior ground that the performances had concealed. Henry VI models it in the most sustained and most politically costly form: a man whose entire life is organised around the interior rather than the exterior, who pays the full political price for his orientation but who achieves, in his captivity and his dying, a kind of peace that Agincourt cannot purchase.

What unites these figures — the repentant conspirators, the dying fat knight, the captive pious king — is their marginality to the official narrative. None of them is the protagonist of the heroic story;

all of them are pushed to the edges of the action, their most significant moments reported or abbreviated or consigned to the offstage. This marginality is not incidental but structural: the solace within, as the plays present it, is incompatible with the demands of the theatre of kingship. The man who inhabits the interior fully cannot simultaneously manage the theatrical exterior that the political world requires; the man who has given everything to the theatrical exterior has, in so doing, forfeited the access to his own interiority that genuine penitential transformation requires. The two economies are, in the world of the second tetralogy, mutually exclusive.

The tetralogy's moral architecture is therefore not a simple inversion of the political order — not an argument that the humble and the marginalised are morally superior to the powerful and the successful. It is a more complex and more challenging claim: that the values by which the political world constitutes itself — honour, fame, military glory, theatrical legitimacy — are genuine values, achieved at genuine cost, deserving of genuine admiration; and that they are, simultaneously, insufficient — that they cannot, even at their most spectacular, address the deepest moral condition of the human beings who pursue and achieve them. The kingdom won at Agincourt is a real achievement; the prayer that acknowledges it as 'nothing worth' is a

real honesty. Both are true, and the plays' great achievement is to hold both in suspension, to refuse the easy resolution of either simple celebration or simple condemnation, and to insist, through the sustained pressure of their ironic design, that the question of what genuinely satisfies the human soul is not answered by the question of what successfully manages the human kingdom.

Hal bequeaths to his unborn son the crusade that Bolingbroke vowed and never undertook, the pilgrimage that would atone for the originary crime and resolve the inherited guilt. It is the most poignant gesture in the sequence: the acknowledgement that the atonement he has not achieved must be deferred to a future that the epilogue has already told us will not provide it. The inherited guilt will not be resolved within the frame of the second tetralogy. It will be transmitted, like the crown, from generation to generation, shaping the psychology of those who receive it and determining the quality of their inner lives in ways that their most brilliant external achievements cannot remedy. The theatre of kingship will continue; the solace within will continue to be sought and, in the places that the official narrative does not record, occasionally, quietly, and at great personal cost, found.

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