A MONG the history plays, *Henry V* is something of a paradox. It is good without being great, and that is not at all what one would predict following the *Henry IV* plays. One might expect to see the triumph of Shakespeare's historical vision, the capstone of his second tetralogy, with the ideal king appearing in action against France, England's traditional enemy. Or one would not have been surprised by a daring failure, a play that starts off in a new direction with only partial success, like *Measure for Measure*. Some critics, including Derek Traversi, have seen just such experimentation in *Henry V*; but the foreshadowings of a new Shakespeare are of the faintest even in his account. Besides, *Henry V* is preeminently a successful play; significantly, it has produced one of the best of the Shakespearean films, Sir Laurence Olivier's spectacle.

Clearly *Henry V* is the last of Shakespeare's series of history plays in the 1590s. One can with some confidence date it in the spring or summer of 1599, though it is possible that there was an earlier form or even that it was later revised. In this last of the series, Shakespeare turns to epic drama in order to glorify his ideal
king, Henry V, a national hero of legendary proportions and the product of Hal's education in the Henry IV plays. Since Renaissance epic is not characteristically strong in dramatic power, there is peril in such handling. Both the idealized type-characters and the high decorum of language could cripple the stage-worthiness of the play. In particular, overemphasis on Shakespeare's lofty manner could have brought back much of the stiffness of the first tetralogy as he tried to duplicate in dramatic verse the stateliness and pictorial richness of The Faerie Queene and Chapman's Homer. Such a play might have been all too like Richard III without the villain.

However, Shakespeare is too professional a dramatist to leave his hero merely a stiff epic figure. Once again he explores the man behind the public role, the kind of study that yields such rich results in the Henry IV plays. What is difficult to explain is why this approach is less rewarding in Henry V than in the two previous plays. Somehow the two sides of this king, public and private, exist parallel to each other but without much interaction. We see a Henry V who relaxes as a man among men, but when he takes on his regal authority, it is as though in gathering his robes about him he becomes a different person. Only in IV.i, perhaps the finest scene in the play, does Henry seem to be trying to define himself, to find some reconciliation of these two sides, as Henry IV and Prince Hal are constantly doing. As a result Henry V does not really seem like Hal grown older. The pressure of Hal's questing intellect is for the most part absent in this confident monarch, and so his intelligence is not so dramatically con-
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vincing. Hal is equal to Falstaff's wit—in a sense more than equal, for he can spar with the knight while holding part of himself in reserve. He is not subdued to the quality of his environment, whether in the tavern or on the battlefield at Shrewsbury.

Henry never faces an antagonist of Falstaff's brilliance, and he shows Hal's intellectual detachment only occasionally. Thus he is harder to see apart from the moral ambiguities of his environment. In I.ii he listens to his counselors' advice and makes his decision to invade France, but Shakespeare does little to suggest the thought processes by which he does so. Hence one is left wondering about his motives. Is he a noble patriot being duped by the clergy with their interested motive in supporting a French war? Is he unconcerned with the moral issue of his title as long as it is plausible, since what he wants is a war to unify the English after their long civil strife? Or does he allow for the clergy's bias even while being genuinely concerned with the validity of his title? Though Shakespeare may well have intended the last of these possibilities, one wishes that he had dramatized it more clearly. Perhaps he was overwhelmed by a sense of pervasive evil and corruption in even the noblest undertaking when he wrote Henry V. Hence he could not afford to make his king quite so aware of unpleasant reality as Hal is and still have him a patriotic man of action. If so, there is only a short step from this epic-comic history to the tragedy of Brutus, who can be moral only at the cost of willful blindness. (Shakespeare probably wrote Julius Caesar at about this time.)

Through most of the play we perceive King Henry
V much more clearly than Harry LeRoy. This unresolved public-private duality spreads out from him to affect the whole play, including the use of the family. Throughout, the family is prominent as a public symbol. Although rhetorical allusions to the family are characteristic of all the history plays, Henry V relies more on this device than any other play since the first tetralogy. Woven into the public speeches of the English and French leaders are the traditional themes: the inheritance of virtue, the family as a symbol of unity, and political disorder as a threat to the family. Henry’s reliance on his brothers’ counsel and support is appropriate to his position as the leader of a unified and vigorous nation. The ideal king depends on his family, not on favorites, and Henry follows his father’s advice in doing this (2 Henry IV, IV.iv.20-48).

Likewise Henry V progresses toward a marriage that both effects and symbolizes union (a momentary one) between the two ancient rivals, France and England. Queen Isabel makes this symbolism explicit at the end of the play:

God, the best maker of all marriages,
Combine your hearts in one, your realms in one!
As man and wife, being two, are one in love,
So be there ’twixt your kingdoms such a spousal
That never may ill office, or fell jealousy,
Which troubles oft the bed of blessed marriage,
Thrust in between the paction of these kingdoms,
To make divorce of their incorporate league.

(V.ii.377-84)
This is a formal speech in the old vein, based on the system of correspondences. But this speech has the effect of gratuitous embroidery after the lively comedy of the wooing scene and the cynical realism of the negotiations. Whereas Richard III points with solemn inevitability toward the marriage that unites the two warring houses, Henry V modulates from a military victory to a playful courtship that suddenly turns out to have symbolic significance.

Similarly, the few episodes of family life in the comic plot lack any thematic connection with the serious plot, unlike the Henry IV plays. Even if one reads Henry V as a satire on militarism and hence emphasizes the parodic side of the comic plot, it remains all too directionless and only partly relevant. Pistol arrives on-stage in II.i as a bridegroom and promptly engages in a thrasonical quarrel with Nym, a rejected suitor. Their squabbles begin a burlesque of soldierly heroism that runs through the comic episodes, but Shakespeare makes no attempt to parody Henry V's marriage in advance as he had parodied the interview between Hal and his father in 1 Henry IV.

Perhaps the lack of organic connection comes from the absence of a character like Prince Hal to mediate between the comic and serious plots. A Henry V who can comment without emotion or even wit on Bardolph's execution has lost touch with Falstaff's world, whether or not he finds some community with the tidier low life of Williams and the other common soldiers. Still, though the role of the family may be simpler and less developed than in the Henry IV plays, it is of
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genuine significance both in general and specifically in developing Henry's character.

One of the Renaissance doctrines on which Shakespeare relies in Henry V is moral inheritance. The English and the French agree that breeding should reveal itself in courage and military skill, but the French are puzzled to explain the tenacity of these “Norman bastards” (III.v.10). The Dauphin puts their attitude with vigorous contempt:

O Dieu vivant! shall a few sprays of us,
The emptying of our fathers’ luxury,
Our scions, put in wild and savage stock,
Spirit up so suddenly into the clouds,
And overlook their grafters?

(III.v.5-9)

In this commonplace imagery even his association of birth with growing plants is traditional. Both son and father have to admit the inbred strength and courage of the English. Weightier because less flippant than this speech is the French king's fearful awareness that Henry descends from Edward III, the victor of Crécy. The grandiloquent mouthings of the French nobles express their decadence and their unwilling admiration for English valor and tenacity. In spite of themselves they praise the breeding of these “mastiffs in robustious and rough coming on” (III.vii.148).

Meanwhile the English proclaim their duty to uphold a noble heritage. The point at issue is whether Henry has a better title to the French crown than its present holder. For all Shakespeare's consciousness of the mixed
motives that lead men to war, there seems to be no doubt in the play that the English title to France is valid. The French themselves never question it, and the extraordinary triumph at Agincourt is a sign of God's support for the righteous claims of a united England. However, Shakespeare does raise the question of Henry's title to his own crown, vaguely at first in the conspiracy scene and then explicitly in the king's prayer the night before Agincourt. Even though the English heritage is superior in law and virtue to the French, it has within it a flaw that will lead to the collapse of order and civil war, "Which oft our stage hath shown" (Closing Chorus, 13). The warrior son that Henry and Katherine are to breed is the weakling Henry VI. Nevertheless, the primary contrast is between degenerate chivalry in the French and hereditary valor in the English under their warrior king.

In its rhetoric Henry V derives England's glory from its mighty heritage. All of Henry's counselors incite him by means of this heritage when he nears the decision to invade France. In words that foreshadow the French king's reference to Edward III, the Archbishop of Canterbury caps an appeal to Henry's forebears with a picture of that king smiling while his son defeats the French with only half the English forces. The Bishop of Ely and the Duke of Exeter are quick to second this appeal to the warrior blood in Henry's veins. The doctrines of inheritance are woven into Henry's own speech as well. In his grief at the betrayal by Lord Scroop, he includes with Scroop's apparent virtues the noble birth that should have guaranteed them.

As a warrior rallying his troops Henry places special
emphasis on the doctrine of inherited virtue. At Harfleur the climax of his speech is a reminder of his men's heroic ancestry, first to the nobles and then to the common soldiers:

On, on, you noblest English!
Whose blood is set from fathers of war-proof;
Fathers that, like so many Alexanders,
Have in these parts from morn till even fought,
And sheath'd their swords for lack of argument.
Dishonour not your mothers; now attest
That those whom you call'd fathers did beget you.
Be copy now to men of grosser blood,
And teach them how to war. And you, good yeomen,
Whose limbs were made in England, show us here
The mettle of your pasture; let us swear
That you are worth your breeding; which I doubt not;
For there is none of you so mean and base
That hath not noble lustre in your eyes.

(III.1.17-30)

If Traversi is right in finding unconscious irony suggested by the language just before this, a powerful suggestion that war is unnatural to man, this passage is a curious reversal. Here the warrior is a natural product of his birth. Surely this effect is where the primary emphasis of the speech, and the play, lies. If the appeal to inheritance in Henry's oration has a leanness and vigor beyond Shakespeare's early style, still it is traditional in content and in its abstractness of phrasing.

Related to the doctrine of inheritance is the conception of patriotic unity, symbolized by the bonds of family, as a precondition of political and military success.
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When Henry makes a decision, he gives due consideration to the counsels of his brothers and uncle, while in the French court the king engages in unseemly and fruitless squabbles with his son. The movement toward temporary harmony at the end is decorated by the two kings' constant references to each other as “brother France” and “brother England.” This rhetoric of diplomacy is entirely hollow, as is clear from the fact that Charles invokes the bonds of kinship while agreeing to disinherit his son so that he may keep the throne during his lifetime, just as Henry VI does. Henry V never pretends to take this diplomatic rhetoric seriously. All through Act V he shows a playfulness that reminds one of Faulconbridge laughing at the false language of diplomacy. Even the French king catches this spirit long enough to exchange hard-headed appraisals of the bargaining under the veil of a joke about virginity.

Such formal language need not be a cloak for the realities of power politics, however. After the moving revelation in IV.i of his personal affection for his men, Henry’s celebrated lines at Agincourt ring true:

We few, we happy few, we band of brothers;
For he to-day that sheds his blood with me
Shall be my brother; be he ne’er so vile
This day shall gentle his condition.

(IV.iii.60-63)

Shedding blood together becomes a figurative union of bloods. Under such a king the terrible chain of hereditary enmity that has bound England is for the moment broken.
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Facing the task of a righteous war, England draws together like one family. There are both truth and irony in the traitor Grey's words:

Those that were your father's enemies
Have steep'd their galls in honey, and do serve you
With hearts create of duty and of zeal.
(II.ii.29-31)

The treachery by Grey and his companions is not enough to prevent the triumph at Agincourt, though it foreshadows developments that will eventually lose the fruits of victory. The chorus uses the language of correspondences to describe this imperfect unity:

O England! model to thy inward greatness,
Like little body with a mighty heart,
What might'st thou do, that honour would thee do,
Were all thy children kind and natural!
(Chorus to Act II, 16-19)

In the happy ending of victory in battle and a marriage that combines love and political union, we have only a vague consciousness that there will be unnatural, "kindless" disorder in the family of England, that this precarious unity will collapse.

Nearly as prominent as these two themes is a darker use of the family to express the horrors of war. In the first tetralogy civil war destroys not only love and family loyalty but also wives and children, innocent victims of the conflict. If Henry V glorifies the victory at Agincourt, it does so without concealing any of the vio-
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tence and corruption that taint the English triumph. In contrast with the jesting Dauphin, Henry is deter­mined to assure the justice of his cause before pursuing it into battle because he knows the evils that he will unleash, even on the innocent. At the French court Exeter proclaims Henry’s guiltlessness in the war:

on your head
Turning the widow’s tears, the orphans’ cries,
The dead men’s blood, the prived maidens’ groans.
For husbands, fathers, and betrothed lovers,
That shall be swallow’d in this controversy.'

(Il.iv.105-109)

Though Shakespeare may well be paraphrasing Hall, the sentiments are an Elizabethan commonplace. He gives a striking visual quality to another such passage when Henry warns the citizens of Harfleur that continued resistance will expose them and their families to violence. Although this theme does not go beyond the language to permeate the dramatic structure as the other two do and as it did in the plays of civil war, it is still an important part of the imagery of Henry V.

Insofar as the family theme goes beyond this essentially public and traditional handling, it does so through Henry himself. Because he is in part an epic figure, the ideal king and warrior, the public language of the family with all its severe dignity is appropriate to him. After all, he represents in the state the moral values that the family stands for in private life. But if Henry is an epic hero, he has more in common with Odysseus than with Achilles. He is the balanced hero, the pru-
dent man, and his story moves toward reconciliation and marriage rather than toward tragedy. Such a hero can be more at his ease than his sterner counterpart, and he is seen in a broader environment, one that includes his personal relationships. Tamburlaine, the Achilles of the English stage, cannot stoop to prose comedy or to wandering among his men in disguise; he is too unitary a character for either. At least in flashes Henry shows a broader, more Odyssean nature.

What is most effectively human about Henry is his desire for companionship. He refuses to accept the isolation involved in royalty. When he does for a moment break through the forms of his office, in the comradeship of battle or in wooing Katherine, he shows a gaiety reminiscent of Prince Hal escaped from the court. When something makes him newly conscious of his isolation, his spirits fall. This side of him is hidden during the formal ceremonies of Act I, but even in his public reproof of the treacherous Scroop something of his personal feeling comes through. He voices the grief of betrayed friendship, a powerful theme in many of the plays and sonnets. As Henry goes to France, he seems entirely alone, there being no hint that he is personally close to any of his brothers.

In the communal effort that leads to Agincourt, he finds the contact with other men that he desires. His spirits rise as the battle nears, especially during the previous night. Although the companionship that he finds is mostly that of brothers in arms rather than actual kin, the family does play some part in the language of IV.i, and in the first few lines he appears among his blood brothers. Now they talk without the solemn for-
mality of the scene in the English court. Henry's moralizing is playful as he shuffles off his kingly distance, first with them and then with the men while he wanders around the camp. Episodes involving the king in disguise are a favorite device of Elizabethan drama, in part because they emphasize his humanity and community with the people. Thus Henry whimsically identifies himself to Pistol as a kinsman to Fluellen, that embodiment of the commonplace virtues.

Henry's debate with the common soldiers implicitly defines the king's similarities and differences from other men. They talk of the king as a man with fears and hopes like theirs, and the disguised Henry is one of them both in physical presence and in manner. The point at issue is how far he is differentiated by his office, especially by responsibility for the individual fates of his soldiers. Both Williams and he think of the family in their dispute. Williams recalls with graphic literalness the effects of war on widows and children, and Henry argues by analogy to a father and son: "So, if a son that is by his father sent about merchandise do sinfully miscarry upon the sea, the imputation of his wickedness, by your rule, should be imposed upon his father that sent him" (IV.i.150-53). Here the fatherhood of the king, a traditional figure of speech, implies what Henry himself illustrates, the combination of authority and personal affection in an ideal king. One thinks of the autocratic Elizabeth and her love for her countrymen. During a scene in which Henry escapes from his formal role, Shakespeare gives these stock references to the family a new immediacy. Henry and Williams argue in the same terms because they are men
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with the same concerns and values, yet this sameness can emerge only because the king is disguised.

In his soliloquy on ceremony and his prayer, Henry's isolation becomes all the more poignant because for a moment he has been just a man among men. He is left to himself with the responsibilities of kingship and his father's guilt. As king and father to all England, he has to be inhumanly strong and wise; alone before the God whose magistrate he is, he must bear the responsibility that ordinary men escape.

Henry's gaiety and sense of community return with the rising sun. The experience of the past night colors his words to his companions. The high rhetoric of Harfleur mixes with the plain manliness of phrases like "Good God! why should they mock poor fellows thus?" (IV.iii.92). In this way a bridge is made between the formal king of I.ii and the lusty wooer, the plain-speaking man, of V.ii. Henry V is both man and king; his royalty is personal virtue expanded to the larger sphere of public affairs. If this bridge between the private and public man is not so strong as in the Henry IV plays, if it is fully apparent in only one scene, still it is there as an indication of the relationship between man and office.

In the courtship itself we see the man Henry clearly enough, but Shakespeare makes little effort to show the epic king. Johnson remarks discontentedly, "I know not why Shakespeare now gives the king nearly such a character as he made him formerly ridicule in Percy." That is not quite fair, since presumably Henry is playing a part out of sheer exuberance. In one way like Richard III, he exults in the strength that lets him win
a lady's love under the most adverse circumstances. Still Johnson's discontent is justified. Ingratiating though the scene may be, it is not really a part of the epic story. Henry plays the farmer seeking a wife, and the game sheds little light on the nature of kingship and on the precarious union between France and England. Hence the ending with its use of the coming marriage as a symbol seems perfunctory, neither triumphant nor effectively ironic.

The excellence of Henry V has little to do with the family, partly because Henry's isolation, unlike that of the two Richards, has no moral significance. Despite its traditional role in the language, the family has no broader dramatic role. Henry V carries out the pattern of making the family an echo of political themes, but it does not deepen this function.

1 Shakespeare from Richard II to Henry V (London, 1957), chap. 5.
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5 Traversi, pp. 181-82.

6 Shakespeare does not refer to the historical fact that this conspiracy grew out of Henry's questionable title. Whether or not the audience might infer such a motive from Cambridge's cryptic speech at II.ii.155-57, Shakespeare is careful to keep this issue subordinate in a play of foreign wars.

7 Although the Folio text is ambiguous, Walter's reading "widow's" in line 106 is presumably a misprint for "widows'" since the context demands a series of plurals with "widows'" to match "husbands."

8 See Walter's note at II.iv.106-9.

9 Shakespeare does not develop the fondness for Clarence suggested by Henry IV's words (2HIV, IV.iv.20-48).