CHAPTER SEVEN

Henry V:
Patterning after Perfection

The thesis of this chapter, that in Henry V Shakespeare portrayed what was for him at the time an ideal or nearly ideal character—that is, a man and a king who thoroughly knows himself—is by no means revolutionary; but in view of the coldness and even hostility with which in particular twentieth-century critics have considered Henry, it is not a mere statement of the obvious. And even if my main argument is not new, I believe some of the reasons I shall give in its support are; and, I hope, they will help to restore a badly needed objectivity about a character who is not as simple as some have thought but hardly deserves to be as controversial as he has become.

It is eminently reasonable to assume that Shakespeare, who in agreement with tradition had laid out the character of the future Henry V as developing from profligacy to reform in the two parts of Henry IV, wished to dramatize the triumph of this evolution in his new play. It is equally apparent that all of Shakespeare's previous history plays lead up to Henry V, which forms their culmination and, except for the afterthought of Henry VIII, their conclusion. So far, Shakespeare had dramatized the lives and reigns of kings who were, at best, partial successes as rulers and some of whom were unmitigated disasters for England: the saintly but ineffective Henry VI; the sardonic Machiavellian and killer Richard III; the willful and larmoyant Richard II; the strong but guilty Henry IV, whose reign was troubled by the conflicts arising from his usurpation of the throne. In King John, Shakespeare depicted another ruler whose title was flawed by broken succession and who brought misfortune to his country. But in this play, there also appears a popular hero, Faulconbridge, who becomes, in troubled times, the pillar and hope of England. A drama about a strong and victorious king who pos-
essed Faulconbridge's popular virtues and who had not incurred guilt by obtaining the crown illegally, as had John and Henry IV, was the logical capstone of Shakespeare's history plays.

It is surely also plausible that, after depicting such conspicuous exemplars of lack of humanistic self-knowledge as Tarquin, Richard III, and Richard II, Shakespeare wished to dramatize the life of a king who was what the moralists considered to be an ideal man, a "pattern of perfection," as Levinus Lemnius called it in *The Touchstone of Complexions* (trans. 1565). Lemnius devoted a whole chapter to portraying just such a man, one who was, as he said in the physicians' terminology, "of a complexion perfectly and exactly temperate." This ideal man has a body "featly framed" and a mind "well settled and perfectly stayed"; he is balanced, quick-witted, industrious, cheerful, constant, but yet humane and gentle. In other words, he possesses both a Galenic *crasis* and a humanistic moral temperance. Lemnius admitted that absolute perfection existed only in Christ, but mortal men might at least approach the ideal. Other theorists claimed that kings could come closest to it; their office, as Huarte said in *Examen de Ingenios* (trans. 1594), made possible the greatest wisdom and knowledge in the world, an assertion he exemplified by Solomon and by Christ, the "King of the Jews"—both were physiologically and morally temperate according to Huarte.

As we have noted earlier, there was a substantial humanistic literature on the subject of how princes could imitate these patterns of perfection, a literature given direction by Erasmus's influential *Institutio Principis Christiani* (1516). Its premise was that the good king must be a good man and a good Christian. Erasmus said it was quite possible to find a good man who would not make a good prince, but there could be no good prince who was not also a good man. The excellences of a king therefore derived largely from the excellences of man. Just as a man needed to possess the four cardinal virtues of fortitude, justice, prudence, and, in particular, temperance—the virtue central to self-knowledge—so did the king, and to a higher degree.

In portraying Henry, Shakespeare showed himself cognizant of these humanistic requirements, as did the chroniclers on whom he based the play. Both Hall and Holinshed conspicuously praised Henry as a pattern of perfection. Edward Hall, whose history of the
War of the Roses Shakespeare appears to have consulted, called Henry “a blazing comet and apparent lantern in his days . . . the mirror of Christendom and the glory of his country, . . . the flower of kings past, and a glass of them that would succeed” 6—from which series of laudatory epithets Shakespeare probably derived the Chorus’s praise of Henry as “the mirror of all Christian kings” (II.6). Like Hall, and borrowing from him, Raphael Holinshed appended to his account of Henry’s reign a formal praise, a laus in terms of humanistic classical rhetoric, which emphasized the King’s possession of the four cardinal virtues. Henry, said Holinshed, was “a justicer both loved and obeyed, . . . a terror to rebels and a suppressor to sedition. . . .” He was “so manful of mind as never seen to flinch at a wound or to smart at a pain. . . . Of courage invincible, of purpose immutable. . . .” No man was “more moderate in eating and drinking. . . . Wantonness of life and thirst in avarice he had quite quenched in him.” He possessed “such wit, such prudence, and such policy withall, that he never enterprised anything before he had fully debated and forecast all the main chances that might happen, which done, with all diligence and courage he set his purpose forward.” 7

Instances in which Shakespeare’s Henry exemplifies these four cardinal virtues come easily to mind. He demonstrates his sense of justice through restraint as well as, when necessary, through severity: he pardons the drunken man who scorns him, and, in the same scene, he suppresses sedition by condemning the traitorous Scroop, Cambridge, and Grey to death—a punishment that they themselves unwittingly have declared appropriate for their crimes. In meting out this judgment, Shakespeare’s Henry emphasizes that “Touching our person seek we no revenge; / But we our kingdom’s safety must so tender, / . . . that to her laws / We do deliver you” (II.ii.174–77). Henry dispenses justice in the way Erasmus thought a prince should: he forgives most readily those crimes that affect him alone, and he seeks to punish rather than to take revenge. 8

The fortitude of the victor of Agincourt hardly needs proof. Neither does his temperance, which is so strong as to have irritated some critics who have called it priggishness. Henry’s plea to the French ambassadors not to fear that he might take a personal vengeance on them for any insult contained in their official messages proves temperance to be central to his ideal of kingship:
We are no tyrant, but a Christian king,  
Unto whose grace our passion is as subject  
As are our wretches fettered in our prisons.  
(I.ii.241-43)

It is remarkable how technically accurate Shakespeare's portrayal of Henry's temperance is in terms of the humor physiology. Henry's appearance and behavior in the morning just before the battle of Agincourt approach so closely the description of the pattern of perfection in Levinus Lemnius's chapter "Of a Complexion Perfectly and Exactly Temperate" as to raise the suspicion of being modeled on it. Shakespeare had no warrant for this incident in his sources; in these, Henry had no need to show himself to his troops in the way he does in the play: the English, though outnumbered, were described as in good spirits. In the play, they sorely require the encouragement of the radiant king that walks among them:

For forth he goes and visits all his host;  
Bids them good morrow with a modest smile,  
And calls them brothers, friends, and countrymen.  
Upon his royal face there is no note  
How dread an army hath encrounded him;  
Nor doth he dedicate one jot of colour  
Unto the weary and all-watched night;  
But freshly looks, and over-bears attaint  
With cheerful semblance and sweet majesty.  
(IV. Prol. 32-40)

Henry here looks and acts quite like Lemnius's temperate man, who

hath all his senses fresh and perfect, every of the faculties natural duly doing his office and function. . . . For in him plentifully appeareth, and is evidently descried: humanity, gentleness, frugality, equity, modesty, and a continent moderation of all affections. . . . [He] suffereth all the discommodities of life with a mind stout, cheerful, and invincible, and such a one as will not at any hand be drawn away from his constancy and settled determination. . . . For in the countenance, which is the image of the mind, in the eyes, which are the bewrayers and token-tellers of the inward conceits, in the color, lineaments, proportion and feature of the whole body, there appeareth a kind of heroical grace and amiableness in so much that the very view and sight thereof allureth and draweth everyone by a certain secret sympathy or consent of nature to love it without
any hope or profit or commodity thereby to be reaped or received. The body is decently made and fealty framed, containing an absolute construction and comely frame of all the parts together. . . . The head . . . [is] greatly honored with a pair of amiable eyes, . . . the color fresh, sweet, and pleasant.

Henry has the magnetic attraction of Lemnius's ideal; he becomes, therefore, a pattern for imitation by his troops, who, pining and pale before, "pluck comfort from his looks." In a "largess universal, like the sun," Henry gives "his liberal eye . . . to every one, / Thawing cold fear." As is true for Lemnius's ideal man, the temperance of Henry rubs off on all, low and high, who behold "a little touch of Harry in the night" (41 ff.).

Henry also possesses an extraordinary prudence, which manifests itself both in peace and war. Before embarking on the invasion of France, he assures himself circumspectly of the justice of his claim to the French crown, and he takes the necessary precautions to protect his kingdom from the rapacious Scots. The initiative to these measures comes from him, not, as in the sources, from his counselors. He can say justly that he has "all things thought upon / That may with reasonable swiftness add / More feathers to our wings" (I.ii.305-7). In warfare, Henry's prudence shows itself in stern words when he convinces the people of Harfleur that they must surrender; at other times, it proves itself in stern actions and at least once in an order that appears to be so severe as to be cruel, that of cutting the French prisoners' throats during the battle of Agincourt. This action—adopted by Shakespeare from Holinshed, who explained it as absolutely necessary—has cost Henry some sympathies; but we should note that it is not occasioned by willful ferocity: it comes at the moment of greatest peril, when the endangered and outnumbered English are threatened by a new attack just after the French, as Fluellen puts it, have "killed the poys and luggage." Both Gower and Fluellen think this action a cowardly violation of the law of arms, as did Holinshed and, one must assume, Shakespeare. At other times, when prudence permits it, Henry shows himself lenient, as when he forbids Harfleur to be sacked and pillaged—Shakespeare here directly contradicted Holinshed. Shakespeare's Henry, to say the least, is not unnecessarily cruel; he knows that "when lenity and cruelty play for a kingdom the gentler gamester is the soonest winner" (III.vi.108).

Henry's practical calculations in politics and strategy have created
the suspicion that he is, at heart, a "Machiavellian." One might say, of course, that in Shakespeare's time, as well as before and after, every successful absolutist ruler, including so seemingly gentle and certainly popular a monarch as Queen Elizabeth, was something of a Machiavellian. But the epithet is as inappropriate for Henry as it is for Elizabeth if it is taken in the Elizabethan sense. For ordinary Elizabethans, although not for some advanced spirits, a Machiavellian prince was not merely shrewd, sometimes severe, and occasionally devious; he was a monster in human shape. That Shakespeare did not belong to the coterie of Machiavelli's admirers, I have argued elsewhere. And a comparison of some essential features of Henry's portrait with what the Elizabethans considered the key chapters in The Prince shows that if Shakespeare read this book at all—and I incline to think that he knew at least the argument of these key chapters—he was motivated by it to make his Henry different from Machiavelli's standard.

For Machiavelli, prudence was the only one of the conventional humanistic virtues a prince needed to possess; he might, it is true, outwardly display others as long as they did not impede his success. In the famous eighteenth chapter of The Prince, Machiavelli contended that what mattered for a ruler was not that he should be good but that he should be thought to be good—actual goodness could even be harmful. Machiavelli reacted adversely to the stereotyped praises of princes' virtues, such as their temperance, clemency, and justice, which in another famous chapter, the fifteenth, he criticized as irrelevant. This chapter is entitled (in the seventeenth-century translation of Edward Dacres) "Of Those Things in Respect Whereof Man, and Especially Princes, Are Praised or Dispraised." Qualities of this kind, Machiavelli argued, were apt to bring about the ruin rather than the success of princes. But Henry V contains, as I shall show, a number of elaborate rhetorical praises of Henry's humanistic virtues. To assume that they are insincere would make the play a huge effort in irony—an irony that no Elizabethan could have understood. If rhetoric is to be equated with insincerity, Renaissance literature as a whole is insincere.

But surely the conventional laudes in Henry V serve the function of delineating an ideal man and king; praise and dispraise were, after all, the traditional ways of rhetorical characterization. It has been demonstrated that Shakespeare modeled his praises of Henry closely on patterns in Aphthonius's Progymnasmata, the standard
schoolbook for such exercises—an indication that he was intent on creating a correct rhetorical frame for his portrait of perfection. The several Aphthonian praises in the play specify Henry’s nobility, courage, temperance, knowledge, and piety, and they are not shown to be inappropriate by the action that they introduce or on which they comment.

The most significant formal praises are: the bishops’ accolade of Henry, preceding his first appearance; the Chorus’s introduction to the climactic battle of Agincourt, which praise we have noted as primarily lauding Henry’s temperance (IV.Prol.28 ff.); and Fluellen’s comparison of Henry to Alexander (IV.vii.21), which is both a military compliment and, as we shall see, another testimony to Henry’s temperance.

The first of these, the most elaborate laus and the one most revealing for Shakespeare’s conception of Henry, warrants detailed analysis. The bishops’ conversation deals with “how things are perfected” (68) in the character of Henry; it is a praise in the Aphthonian form of narratio. Understandably, the bishops are concerned primarily with Henry’s religious development into a “lover of the holy Church”; they approve of his acquisition of “grace,” but they also acclaim his secular accomplishment, his “fair regard” (22-23).

This introduction to the person and his attainment (persona faciens, in Aphthonian terms) is followed by an account of the time in which it occurred (24-27, Aphthonius’s tempus circa quod), of the way in which it came about (28-37, modus quo pacto), and of the specific qualities of mind acquired (38-52, res gestas animi); the laus is concluded by a statement on the reason why this development occurred (53-66, causa propter quam). The Bishop of Canterbury determines the tempus circa quod as the time of Henry IV’s death and stresses the suddenness of the modus quo pacto: “The breath no sooner left his father’s body / But that his wildness, mortified in him, / Seem’d to die too” (25-27). Henry’s transformation was a “reformation”; “consideration” came like an angel and whipped the “offending Adam” out of him. A listing of his res gestae animi shows the comprehensiveness of the change: the king is as good a debater in theology as he is in commonwealth affairs and discourses of war. Only on the causa propter quam do the bishops differ. The Bishop of Canterbury considers Henry’s sudden scholarship miraculous, although he cannot call it a miracle because theology has established that miracles have ceased; the Bishop of Ely thinks of it
as a hidden growth—and a typically English one at that: "The strawberry grows underneath the nettle . . ." (60 ff.). Thus Shakespeare glanced at the chronicler's claim that Henry's change partook of the nature of a religious conversion; but he also reinforced the impression he created in the *Henry IV* plays that under the veil of wildness the prince prepared himself for his future role as king. The praises of the bishops form an important link between the earlier plays and *Henry V* and testify to Shakespeare's consistent view of Henry's development.

The second elaborate *laus* is in the form of a strange *comparatio* between Henry and Alexander perpetrated by the brave, if long-winded and somewhat illogical, Fluellen (IV.vii.11 ff.). After finding much relevance in the fact that both conquerors were born in cities with rivers, Fluellen mentions a famous episode: "Alexander . . . in his rages, and his furies, and his wraths, and his choler, and his moods, and his displeasures, and his indignations, and also being a little intoxicates in the prains, did, in his ales and his anger, look you, kill his best friend, Cleitus." On the protest of Gower that "our king is not like him in that," Fluellen continues with his "figures and comparisons": "As Alexander kill'd his friend Cleitus, being in his ales and his cups, so also Harry Monmouth, being in his right wits and his good judgments, turn'd away the fat knight with the great belly doublet. . . ." But, ironically, what Fluellen conceives as *similitudo* serves to underline the *dissimilitudo* of Henry and Alexander. Fluellen, although unwittingly, brings out the feature of Alexander the humanists thought objectionable, his intemperance, a feature which Henry does not share—witness his turning out that lovable embodiment of intemperance, Falstaff! Erasmus had admonished Christian kings to imitate the Macedonian conqueror's commendable valor but not to slide back to his deplorable intemperance.

Only superficially does the situation in which Fluellen compares Henry and Alexander warrant the parallel. It is true that Henry has just given orders to kill the French prisoners and that he is about to enter the stage in fiery spirit: "I was not angry . . . / Until this instant" (IV.vii.52). As we noted before, the king's behavior is quite in accord with military prudence, Renaissance (and, deplorably, even modern) style, and his anger transfers itself to his troops as an incitement for renewed attack. Whenever Henry appears angry, as at Harfleur, it is to incite his countrymen. Whenever
Henry boasts, as before the battle of Agincourt, it is not to aggrandize himself but to glorify England. Outwardly, he may seem as obsessed with honor as Hotspur: “But if it be a sin to covet honour, / I am the most offending soul alive” (IV.iii.28–29). Henry’s sense of honor, however, is not egotistic like that of Hotspur, nor does it demand the ostentatious reverence Richard II sought of his subjects. Henry rejects the idea of having his sword carried before him during his triumphal return to London; he is “free from vainness and self-glorious pride,” as the Chorus says (V.20). For him, the greatest glory is that of heaven, attained in the flight of man’s better part, his soul, upward; he tells Mountjoy that the fallen English will be “fam’d; for there the sun shall greet them / And draw their honours reeking up to heaven, / Leaving their earthly parts to choke your clime” (IV.iii.100–102). Whatever one may think of Henry’s warrior spirit—he would be doomed without it—it is not an illusion based on a glamorous view of war. For him as for the humanists, war is a fearful thing, and the greatest honor is not of the earth but of heaven.

Whenever Shakespeare compares Henry to Alexander, he suggests, sometimes quite subtly, a difference between the two. At the beginning of the play, the bishops say in their praises that Henry knows how to untie the “Gordian knot” of policy; but what they have in mind requires the word rather than the sword. And when at Harfleur Henry evokes the name of Alexander, it is not to identify himself with the Macedonian conqueror but with his and his soldiers’ ancestors:

On, on, you noblest English,
Whose blood is fet from fathers of warproof—
Fathers that like so many Alexanders
Have in these parts from morn till even fought,
And sheath’d their swords for lack of argument.

(III.i.17–21)

Monmouth and Macedonia may be similar in that they have rivers, as Fluellen observes, but Henry and Alexander have little in common besides courage and soldiership. To have said “we few, we happy few” would have been quite out of character for the Alexander described by Plutarch or Erasmus.

Shakespeare, who is likely to have read Plutarch’s Life of Alexander while composing Henry V, also appears to have glanced at
the *Life of Caesar*, set in parallel to that of the Macedonian conqueror. When the Chorus of the fifth act describes Henry as returning triumphantly to London, the mayor and the citizens are said to swarm around him like the senators and plebeians of Rome, who "go forth and fetch their conqu'ring Caesar in." But here again Shakespeare was concerned with emphasizing contrast as well as likeness: the Chorus's immediately preceding observation on Henry's modesty in refusing to have his helmet and sword carried before him offsets any suspicion that he shares the burning ambition that Plutarch and general tradition associated with Caesar.

Why is it then that this glorious and yet modest king whom Shakespeare extolled above all others—"praise and glory on his head" (IV.31)—has been so little admired by modern critics? An accolade like that of Hudson is a rare phenomenon indeed:

Henry is the most complex and many-sided of all Shakespeare's heroes with the one exception of Hamlet, if indeed Hamlet ought to be excepted. . . . The character of Shakespeare's Henry may almost be said to consist of piety, honesty, and modesty. He embodies these qualities in their simplest form. He is honest in his piety, pious and modest in his honesty.24

The scarcity of such wholehearted eulogies of Henry's character is, I believe, in large part due to the nature of the pattern of perfection Shakespeare embodied in him. An appreciation of any idealization depends on the viewer's sympathy with the ideals portrayed or at least demands his willingness to respond to them aesthetically, and we have grown far away from the ideals portrayed in Henry, those of moderation and balance, which the humanists derived from Christian ideas of sobriety as well as from classical concepts of harmony and self-control. Also, there are dramatic limitations to the portrayal of a perfectly stable temperament. The king is in equilibrium; unlike the dauphin's horse, to which the owner devotes an unusual laus (III.vii.11 ff.). Henry is not just fire and air; but the "duller elements," earth and water, drag him, at times, down. (Henry's fire, it must be said, also has proved bothersome to critics.) Even before attaining his later perfection, in the *Henry IV* plays, Hal already is weighed down somewhat by the duller elements when, for instance, his moderate attitude toward honor makes him look a little pale compared to the gloriously obsessed Hotspur and the funnily "discreet" Falstaff. There are elements of dullness in all moderation
even when it comes about, as in Henry's case, by control over a strong temperament. But to find fault with Shakespeare's portrait of him because he is not mad or insane or inspired with a divine afflatus is as foolish as to criticize a Holbein figure for not writhing in the agonies of El Greco's "Laocoon."

In order to account for their discomfort with Henry, critics have been driven to contradictory explanations and, in the process, have furnished proof that his character cannot be summarized in a simple formula. One critic dislikes him for being too formal—"he is never off the platform"—and another finds him too brisk and folksy—"a hearty undergraduate with enormous initials on his chest." The truth is that Henry can be either formal or folksy, and always at the right time. Generally, in speeches from the throne and in addresses to his troops, he speaks in a ceremonial and almost ritualistic language; but, as the Williams episode shows, he has not forgotten the idiom of the people he learned in the taverns of Eastcheap.

The formal aspects of Henry's character are enhanced by Shakespeare's casting him—in particular, through the praises of the choruses—in the role of a kind of epic hero. Henry is given some of the traits Virgil lauds in his *vir perfectus*, Aeneas—fortitudo, constantia, justitia, religio, pietas, industria, celeritas, prudentia, and ratio—traits that are not apt to warm modern hearts for either hero. Yet Henry is certainly much less priggish than Aeneas; his self-awareness has dimensions and subtleties with which Virgil did not endow his Roman pattern of perfection. Henry knows the hollowness of his crown and reflects on it in a great soliloquy. He realizes that the paraphernalia of kingship are nothing but "place, degree, and form, / Creating awe and fear in other men" (IV.i.242 ff.). Unlike Richard II, he is not blinded by the glitter of his robe; he has the self-knowledge that, as Sir Thomas Elyot said, makes a man of authority realize that he has a body and soul like any other man.

When, incognito, he explains to the soldier that the king is but a man, his words have the concreteness of experience: "The violet smells to him as it doth to me; the element shows to him as it doth to me; all his senses have but human conditions; his ceremonies laid by, in his nakedness he appears but a man; and though his affections are higher mounted than ours, yet, when they stoop, they stoop with the like wing." Like Lemnius's pattern of perfection, Henry is a man of feeling, not a monument of stone and marble. He even knows fear; yet he will never show it, "lest he, by showing it,
should dishearten his army" (IV.i.102 ff.). In this sense of total outward control, Henry is always on a platform; by accepting his position and his duties as obligatory, he remains on a platform.

Because the king's public persona is prominent, some critics have insisted that there is nothing left of the sophisticated and courtly irony that marked the prince. But I do not think this is a totally fair appraisal. The king betrays—just at the moments when he is most optimistic and approaches outwardly Mr. Van Doren's expansive undergraduate—a certain detachment from his role or, at least, an engaging lack of illusion about it. So he does when, before his troops on the morning of Agincourt, he breathes an infectious self-confidence:

There is some soul of goodness in things evil,
Would men observingly distil it out;
For our bad neighbour makes us early stirrers,
Which is both healthful and good husbandry.
Besides, they are our outward consciences
And preachers to us all, admonishing
That we should dress us fairly for our end.
Thus may we gather honey from the weed,
And make a moral of the devil himself.

(IV.i.4-12)

Henry expresses what must be one of the oldest of human consolations, that nothing is so bad but some good can be found in it; he does so, however, in a way that points up the absurdity to which a rationalizing optimism can be driven and sometimes was driven in Shakespeare's time. Henry identifies the "outward consciences" not merely with the "preachers" but also with the "bad neighbour" who is responsible for making one rise early; thus, in effect, he identifies the outward consciences with the enemy. Indeed, by the quirk of the figure, the consciences—or, if one prefers, the preachers—become the devil. Shakespeare must have heard similar oratorical gems from the pulpit. Shakespeare-Henry continues, I think, this subtle parody into the immediately following "proof" that "'Tis good for men to love their present pains":

Upon example; so the spirit is eased;
And when the mind is quick'ned, out of doubt
The organs, though defunct and dead before,
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Break up their drowsy grave and newly move
With casted slough and fresh legerity.
(IV.i.19-23)

These words form an odd echo to Renaissance doctors’ recommendations of “reasonable exercise and convenient motion.” This latter phrase is Lemnius’s, whose proof very much resembles Henry’s: “For by it [the exercise] the quickness and vigor of his mind is revived, the faint, drowsy spirits stirred up and awakened, the soul and mind cheered and exhilarated, all the parts of the body and all the senses both within and without made nimble, active, perfect, and ready to do their proper functions.” Henry’s words, which resemble Lemnius’s jargon, parody such advice on physical fitness. By applying it to readiness for deadly battles, the king demonstrates not only that he knows what is expected of patterns of perfection but also that he can detach himself ironically from the means he must employ as a leader.

He stops short of the frivolity he indulged as a prince; he feels too keenly his responsibility. He remains the shepherd and protector of his people that the Christian humanists demanded a king should be. But he does so in full awareness of the sacrifices his position entails. Erasmus said abstractly that a king must watch and spend sleepless nights over the welfare of his subjects, but Henry knows concretely what it means to face “horrid night, the child of hell.” The man who cheerfully greets his troops on the morning of the battle of Agincourt has slept little. Henry is, of course, not neurotic; to expect him to be so is to wish him to be less effective and more imperfect—an understandable wish. Even though Henry knows the abyss of the soul, he does not probe it lest he plunge his nation into it.

How simple is that Henry, then, who calls himself a “plain king” when he woos the French princess in terms that are indeed prosaic and artless? In this role, Henry does appear to come close to the blunt and somewhat coarse king of the popular tradition and of Shakespeare’s source play, The Famous Victories of Henry V. But what is one to think when one critic finds him guilty here of “military grossness” while another castigates him for his clever “Machiavellian” scheme of obtaining the inheritance of France through the hand of her princess? The truth of the matter is surely that Henry’s wooing has both a human and a political purpose and that
for him the two purposes are not at variance; he pursues them with his usual ingenuity, sobriety, and success.

Henry's firm and unproblematic marriage to success is perhaps his greatest handicap for receiving sympathetic appreciation. Who could read without some uneasiness a statement such as that of H. A. Evans in the Old Arden Edition: "Conscientious, brave, just, capable, and tenacious, Henry stands before us as the embodiment of worldly success, and as such he is entitled to our unreserved admiration." Evans may have felt some discomfort with his own boldness, for he continued with a slight lapse in logic, "Such a character he [the reader] will accept with its inseparable limitations as Shakespeare intended it to be accepted; he will not look for those finer touches of the intellect or of the emotions which mark the hero of another sort; he will miss, as has been well said, the light that is upon the brow of a Hamlet or an Othello." Henry surely does have some of these finer touches; if he lacks a "light upon his brow," whatever that exactly means, is it not because he is gloriously successful rather than radiantly doomed as are Hamlet and Othello?

Of course, Henry does not have the tragic heroes' penchant for passion; the very keys to his success are sobriety and temperance. When Shakespeare wrote Henry V, he is likely to have thought of these traits not only as fundamental for a pattern of perfection but also as conducive to success. So, for that matter, did the Puritans. But this Puritan ideal of a combination of morality and success, which after Shakespeare dominated the English middle class, owed something not only to Calvin but also to Christian humanism, which was the more powerful in its influence on life as it merged with a native piety. One can think of none better to exemplify these pre-Puritan virtues than Sir Thomas More. Henry has them too: he is sober, temperate, prudent, self-controlled, pious, and practical. He thus embodies features that historically have been associated with the English national character. He appears, perhaps even more to a non-English observer, eminently English—and, after all, Shakespeare conceived him as such. There is surely every reason to believe that it is a sympathetic portrait. Indeed, that side of Shakespeare's own character which led to his business success as a shareholder of the Globe and landowner of Stratford must have had something in common with Henry.

The dissatisfaction of some modern critics who declare Henry to
be simple-minded derives not so much from the king's character as from his situation: he is not in the kind of problematic predicament we generally like our heroes to be in. But in Shakespeare's conception of the interplay of character and history, which underlay his Henry V as well as his other history plays, Henry could not be in such a predicament. Because he and England are in harmony, he cannot suffer the anguish of a Richard II that comes from disharmony. Henry expresses the spirit of England somewhat as Tolstoy's Marshall Kutuzov expresses that of Russia; he cannot, like a Dostoevskian character, plumb the depth of his mysterious soul. He is a pattern of perfection put in a perfect frame; but, unfortunately, we are not well attuned to the pattern and the frame. Henry is an authentic hero who challenges us in our age of anti-heroes; he is a military leader, whose acceptance of the conditions of war offends our pacifist leanings; he is a man of success, who makes us uneasy because we have come to distrust success. We are not used to plays that celebrate public figures of his kind. But it certainly will not do to make the play into something that it is not and cannot be, such as an accusation against war (it is, of course, not a defense) or an exposure of Machiavellian scheming.

In the context of this study, Henry V and the portrait of its hero indicate a culmination of one phase of Shakespeare's development. If clear placement, compositional perspective, and a system of proportions and balances that brings about a unified design can be taken to be characteristic principles of Renaissance art, as art historians say they can be, Henry V is a play that is most characteristic of the Renaissance. The principles are evident in the texture and the structure of the play, such as in the careful gradation of language and style according to the principles of artistic decorum, in the oratorical patterns of speeches suitable for the occasion, and in the clear act divisions, marked by choruses whose epic tone sets the mood for the particular dramatic action that follows. The play has the kind of "multiple unity" art historians discern in Renaissance paintings.

It celebrates the providential synthesis of character, nation, and destiny at an ideal moment of English history. Henry V is placed in the structural and ideological center of this play comparable to the way Renaissance painters placed the human figure on their canvases and the Christian humanists described man as the significant center of the harmonious cosmic circles. Henry is an ideal king according
to the design that makes him the soul of his nation; he is himself symmetrically constructed, a balanced man, a pattern of perfection, the ideal creator and beneficiary of the ideal historical moment.

But *Henry V*, which marks a kind of culmination of one phase of Shakespeare's developing patterns of self-knowledge, is also near the end of this phase. The high comedies seem still to belong to this phase, to continue and perfect it in another genre. But when Shakespeare turned away from English histories and romantic comedies, he was subjected to the influence of different models and, at about this time, appears also to have felt the effect of new currents of thought, as I shall argue in the next chapter. It is possible that he was already in doubt whether the pattern he adopted in *Henry V* and brought to a successful conclusion was really relevant to his own time. I do not think one should read an uneasiness or dissatisfaction of Shakespeare with his subject into the apologies of the choruses for the inadequacies of the stage; the lines are poetic helps to give the viewer the feeling that he is watching what we like to call an event of epic proportions, for the presentation of which we moderns have technically more adequate but less poetic means. Perhaps more remarkable, because not conditioned by artistic requirements, is the way Henry distances himself psychologically from the role he superbly fills. And there is a small note at the very end, in the epilogue, that draws attention to the precarious nature of the synthesis celebrated in the play. This is the passing reference to Henry's son, the child-king Henry VI, under whom "the world's best garden" was brought again into disorder. This is not an orchestral movement that disturbs the present celebration; it is not comparable to the stronger and reverse effect noted in the discussion of *Richard II*: there a movement of joy in the form of the pardon of Aumerle and of the promise of hope in Hal preceded the finale of grief and provided some comfort. The celebration does not turn into anxious questioning; we are only reminded of fortune and the course of history. But the brittleness of all earthly achievements is at least implied. Perhaps for Shakespeare, too, the glory of kings had passed. In his work, at any rate, it was never again to shine as radiantly as it does in *Henry V*. 