Royal Eloquentia in 2 and 3 Henry VI: Dramatic Uses of Scriptural Authority

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In assessing Henry's language, literary critics have, arguably, shown themselves to be neither sufficiently literary nor critical. To observe that Henry's speech contains Scriptural allusions without investigating their application and the operation of tone is critically disabling, since an incomplete acquaintance with the King's linguistic habit, linked to received opinions about his ineffectiveness as a governor, encourages - in my submission - a reduced understanding of royal *artificiosa eloquentia*.

Ethos and Kingly Compassion

King Henry's zeal in detecting and punishing the guilt of the Duke of Suffolk (2:III.ii) suggests that his habitual reluctance to condemn is not the expression of dull passivity and acceptance. But, in a cycle which resounds with denunciation (much of it manufactured), the King refrains from ready censure. Thus in 2:III.ii. he prays (136 - 140):

> O Thou that judgest all things, stay my thoughts,
> My thoughts that labour to persuade my soul,
> Some violent hands were laid on Humphrey's life.
> If my suspect be false, forgive me, God,
> For judgement only doth belong to thee.

Convinced though he is that Suffolk is guilty of Gloucester's death, Henry asks for forgiveness should his belief be false. The death-scene of the Cardinal (2:III.iii.) shows not only the terrors of "death's approach" (6) but also the largeness of soul which impels the King to offer the fervent prayer (19 - 23):

> O Thou eternal mover of the heavens,
> Look with a gentle eye upon this wretch!
> O beat away the busy meddling fiend,
> That lays strong siege unto this wretch's soul,
> And from his bosom purge this black despair!

Warwick's response is stony ("See how the pangs of death do make him grin"), Salisbury's, charitable and humane ("Disturbe him not, let him passe peaceably"); King Henry is neither hard-hearted nor ordinarily humane, but charitable in a truly urgent and active manner (27 - 29):

> Lord Cardinal, if thou thinkst on heaven's bliss,
> Hold up thy hand, make signal of thy hope -
> [Winchester dies]
> He dies and makes no sign. O God, forgive him.

One can hardly fail to be affected by this spectacle: the despair of the Cardinal contrasted with the agonised hope of the King that even at this hour a guilty soul can be rescued. Henry prayed eagerly to the "eternal mover" in 19 - 23; in 27 - 28 he uses all his urgency to reach the dying man himself, at the very point of death. The close of the scene shows us Henry's authoritative contradiction of Warwick's simple and unsparing verdict:

> WARWICK: So bad a death argues a monstrous life.
> KING HENRY: Forbear to judge, for we are sinners all.
> Close up his eyes, and draw the curtains close,
> And let us all to meditation.

Andrew Cairncross thinks that Henry's conclusion is "characteristically religious and ineffectual". David Daniell, surely, is nearer the mark. His description captures the painfulness and power of the scene – a scene which represents the climax to the dark sequence of episodes relating to the conspiracy against Gloucester:

> The line is at full power, a recognition that in this court, justice is dead: "Forbear to judge, for we are sinners all." The line and a half that follows lets us down on the interval. But that great cry reverberates on, quite against the traditional "religious and ineffectual" reading of the lines. Biblical it certainly is, but that gives it the greatest authority. This is a new Henry, demonstrably here, the son of his father (Daniell 1997:264).

By the phrase "a new Henry", Daniell is implying that the King has now recognised the ubiquity of treachery and deceit; and in proclaiming it, Henry reaches full stature and authority. We have just seen the education in evil

which Henry has undergone as he probes the English Court, shudders away from the Queen, and denounces Suffolk's hypocritical consolations. Suffolk, the chief conspirator, is banished. In 2:III.iii, the second main conspirator, the King's own great-uncle, dies in delirium, denying religion. The King strives to save his soul, is appalled to see Winchester dying "unhouseled, disappointed, unaneled"; but he forbids facile judgment by the onlooker Warwick. In these circumstances the command "Forbear to judge" (cf. Matthew, VII.i; Luke, VI.xxxvii) has a strong resonance; "we are sinners all" (cf. "for all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God": Romans, III.xxiii) is no inert continuation, but literal truth. Who, in this court, can assume the right to judge? The two succeeding lines say all that can be said; they are perfect in diction and movement. To criticize the King at this moment for being religious would seem unrealistic. Is there, one wonders, a suitably secular response or course of action available to the King which he has neglected to employ? In the dramatic context created by Shakespeare, it is, to say the least, difficult to envisage alternatives to what the King actually says and does. He attempts with all his eloquence to recall Winchester to contrition and hope; he has (in terms that constitute in themselves an indictment of human guilt) warned against the ready passing of judgment on this individual sinner; Winchester is dead; there is nothing left to do but go to meditation. And with this injunction, the characters exeunt. "And let us all to meditation" is not a pious afterthought, but a declaration. The conclusion is justifiably, and indeed inevitably, religious. If it is thought to be ineffectual, then justice requires us to admit the lack of alternative endings that could proclaim themselves effectual.

There are occasions when Henry's unillusioned compassion is not only admirable but demonstrably effectual. The pardoning of Cade's followers (2:IV.ix) is an example. Cade is detestable, but his followers are not grossly culpable. Buckingham has undertaken (2:IV.viii) to find a means of obtaining pardon for them. In the next scene the rebels are led into the King's presence:

> (Enter multitudes with halters about their necks):
> CLIFFORD: He is fled, my lord, and all his powers do yield,
> And humbly thus, with halters on their necks,
> Expect your highness' doom of life or death.
> KING HENRY: Then, heaven, set ope thy everlasting gates,
> To entertain my vows of thanks and praise.
> Soldiers, this day have you redeemed your lives,
> And showed how well you love your prince and country:
> Continue still in this so good a mind,
> And Henry, though he be infortunate,
> Assure yourselves will never be unkind.

> And so, with thanks and pardon to you all,
> I do dismiss you to your several countries.
> ALL: God save the King! God save the King! (10 - 22)

Incontestably, Henry's mercy is noble in itself. It is also well-judged. To these degraded men under threat of death he speaks no words of reproach; he confirms them in their loyalty by mildness and courtesy. The scene is founded on an episode given in Hall, Holinshed, and Grafton, which describes the King's sitting in judgment on the rebels after the death of Cade.

> After this commotion, the kyng himself came into Kent, & there sat in judgment upon the offenders, and if he had not mitigated his justice, with mercie and compassion, more than five C by the rigor of his lawe, had been justely put to execucion: but he considered, bother their fragilitie and innocencie, and how they with perverse people, were seduced and deceived: and so punished the stubburne heddes, and delivered the ignorant & miserable people, to the greate rejoysyng of all his subjectes.[1]

The King acts wisely and temperately, having regard to the 'fragilitie' of the offenders and the fact that they have been misled. The dramatic resources available to Shakespeare enable him to depict the King's compassion by means of the stage-picture and through the diction and rhythms employed by King Henry. The rebels' degradation is shown in the most graphic terms as they stand, haltered like beasts, awaiting the intimation of their punishment. The King's remarkable response is not to sentence or even censure them, but to offer a prayer of thanks. Dover Wilson intervenes to neutralise any favourable impression that might be created by the operation of the verse at this point:

> The wretched verse of 11. 1 - 22... seems imposs [ible] for Sh' [akespeare] and is even below Greene's usual level. The rest is nothing out of the way (Wilson 1952:190).

Examination of the text hardly bears out this Olympian dismissal. Perhaps the phrase "out of the way" supplies an explanation for the severity of the verdict. Intent on seeking something which is "out of the way" (i.e., strikingly 'original'), Dover Wilson cannot conceive that the King's apostrophe, unsurprising in diction and smooth in rhythm, can carry a dramatic charge. The parallel with the speech to Salisbury in 2:III.ii. ("Go, Salisbury...") is obvious. Lexical unadventurousness and smoothness of idiom, a lack of sharp edges and strenuous rhythms, do not necessarily denote dramatic failure. King Henry's mode in 2:IV.ix. is not exceptional in any approved Wilsonian manner; but in the context provided, Henry's free, fluent, and generous outpouring of gratitude communicates itself with unstrained eloquence. As always, we have to listen; if we do, we shall not find the King's speech lacking in command. Daniell com-

mented on "Forbear to judge" that its Biblical origin "gives it the greatest authority". Here I find the same authority – and the same effect of reverberation (13 – 14):

> Then, heaven, set ope thy everlasting gates,
> To entertain my vows of thanks and praise.

The allusion is to Psalms, XXIV.vii: "Lift up your heads, O ye gates; and be ye lift up, ye everlasting doors". Or perhaps it is more correct (since our concern is with aural experience and declamatory effect) to talk not of allusions but rather of a Scriptural background. The existence of this background lends a solemnity, a heightened fervour, to the King's speech. The speech consists of the vow of thanks and praise; the address to the rebels (15 – 19); and the valediction (20 – 21). The theme is gratitude; first to Heaven, then to the rebels themselves ("Soldiers"). The Biblical frame gives a largeness of dimension to the King's utterance, which maintains an exalted and princely tone. One notes the courteous use of "soldiers" (Buckingham has used the word at IV.viii.62); the assurance that they have acted well; the injunction to continue in their loyalty; and the farewell, with its expression of thanks and forgiveness. The speech has the effect of re-sealing the compact between King and subjects (17 – 19):

> Continue still in this so good a mind,
> And Henry, though he be infortunate,
> Assure yourselves will never be unkind.

The verse is of course 'undistinguished', in the sense that it presents no striking and readily detachable features. Indeed, the lines might well seem, to the 'close reader', to be merely jingling or even (Wilson's word) "wretched". But any such judgement would neglect the vitally important questions of tone and decorum. It is appropriate that Henry should adopt a mode of heightened simplicity; the artlessness of (for example) the rhyme on mind / unkind is not necessarily a lapse or fault. One can argue that a manner of high candour is entirely right; the moment requires the enunciating of precept and injunction.

Royal Sententia in 2:II.i

In 2:IV.ix. we find one variety of sententious language in operation. The effects are patent and lend themselves fairly readily to description. The Simpcox scene (2:II.i.) is less easily described. The effects are less simple and the language carries greater range of reference. The episode has been accounted for in schematic terms which define Gloucester as the good governor (or Good Governor), and the King as an unworldly, readily duped, commentator. I am not sure

that examination discloses such a pattern. I believe that the prime interest of the scene inheres in the King - but not simply in the King as holy innocent. If we can concentrate on the detailed life of the text, and overcome the rigidity of the Tillyardian schema (Henry as Pelican, Gloucester as Lion and Pelican) (Tillyard 1962:192) we shall see that the distribution of regal characteristics is not so neat (or distressingly formalised) as commentary might suggest. It is true that Shakespeare's source, Foxe's Acts and Monuments, presents Gloucester as the ideal governor:

> By this it may be seen how Duke Humphrey had not only a head, to discern and dissever truth from forged and feigned hypocrisy; but study also, and diligence, likewise, was in him, to reform that which was amiss (Cairncross 1957:179).

Arthur Freeman believes that the dramatic episode created from this account is itself to be considered as an exemplum (Freeman 1967:xxx). Clearly, Gloucester shows himself to be efficient: he takes charge of the case, exposes Simpcox, and prescribes sentence. But it is possible that Shakespeare went beyond the indications contained in his source. Perhaps he is not simply asserting that Gloucester has prudential virtues lacking in Henry. Of course the Protector is competent and decisive and can distinguish true from false. But Shakespeare has not, I think, been content to reproduce the assumptions of Foxe and provide merely an exposition of administrative virtues.

Analysis of the episode suggests that Shakespeare creates a more dense effect than an exemplum-reading would allow. One can imagine that the appearance of Simpcox and his Wife produces some scepticism among the lords. The Queen's brisk and interrogative manner contrasts with the King's tender exhortation (84 – 88):

> "KING HENRY: Poor soul, God's goodness hath been great to thee;
> Let never day nor night unhallowed pass,
> But still remember what the Lord hath done.
> MARGARET: Tell me, good fellow, cam'st thou here by chance,
> Or of devotion, to this holy shrine?

The King takes no part in the baiting of Simpcox, nor does he take any pleasure in the sequel to the unmasking. ("After the Beadle hath hit him once, he leaps over the stool and runs away; and they follow, and cry, 'A Miracle'"). There is general and callous merriment to which Henry gives no countenance (153 - 156):

KING HENRY: O God, seest thou this, and bearest so long?
MARGARET: It made me laugh to see the villain run.
GLOUCESTER [To the Beadle]:
Follow the knave, and take this drab away.
WIFE: Alas, sir, we did it for pure need.

These lines present, succinctly, four points of view. The Queen is frankly callous; Gloucester is the practical administrator. The Wife arouses no sympathy in Freeman, who tells us that she "appeals merely for pity, in a stoical sense" (Freeman 1967:xxx); less stoically inclined commentators (and spectators) may find that her appeal has a more vital force. The King's reaction is the least 'personal' and the most comprehensive. He is the only one of the speakers to widen the significance of the event and go beyond the immediate happening. Among the lords, the King stands out, since his is "the only face not laughing" (Daniell 1997:262).

If we are moved by the king's erotema, I believe it is because Henry demonstrates his gift for speaking not just for himself but also for the audience (the theatrical audience). He possesses something of the authority of a chorus, being the one man (apart, briefly, from Exeter) who can give authentic voice to communal feeling - which includes, in this case, questioning and puzzlement. The enrichment of the King's language with Biblical wisdom has an obvious significance in that it enhances the standing of his commentary on action and character.

His allusiveness is not a surface mannerism. Indeed, the word 'allusiveness' introduces an alien suggestion. The King's speech contains sayings and glosses but these are not grafted on externally. Occasions on which Shakespeare intended obvious and intrusive foregrounding of quotations can scarcely be missed. In Henry's case, the sententiousness is not intrusive or applied from without:

But what a point, my lord, your falcon made,
And what a pitch she flew above the rest!
To see how God in all his creatures works!
Yea, man and birds are fain of climbing high (5 - 8).

Now God be praised, that to believing souls
Gives light in darkness, comfort in despair. (65 - 66).

Great is his comfort in this earthly vale,
Although by sight his sin be multiplied (69 - 70).

These are some of Henry's words in this scene. Do they really indicate that the speaker is a "pietistic, unworldly figure"? (Freeman 1967:xxix). The first extract concludes in a manner that suggests the speaker is not quite so unworldly as his

critics maintain. "The religious attitude and allusions throughout the scene are typical of Henry," writes Cairncross (1957:38), a statement with which one agrees, making the caveat, however, that "the religious attitude" does not disable Henry from shrewd and effective utterance. We note the ease with which Henry slips into a generalising mode at line 7, thus permitting him to include the trenchant observation on human ambition. The tone is not one of overt criticism, as at 2:II.i.54: "The winds grow high; so do your stomachs, lords"; but there is a similarly aphoristic edge and keenness of utterance. Henry can impart a fresh vitality to familiar maxims. "Now God be praised" and "Great is his comfort..." are not just reproduced saws. The first, deriving from Luke I, lxxix ("to give light to them that sit in darkness") and Psalms, CXII.iv, ("Unto the upright there ariseth light in the darkness") has an unmistakably personal resonance. If anyone has authority for speaking of the consolations available to the believing soul, it is the King. The maxim is strengthened by the personal tinge. "Great is his comfort in this earthly vale" is not a declaration which flourishes allusions; rather, it makes use of the suggestive power of allusion. Psalms, LXXXIV.v - vi reads:

> Blessed is the man whose strength is in thee; in whose heart are the ways of them
> [scilicet: those who 'dwell in thy house']
> Who passing through the valley of Baca make it a well; the rain also filleth the pools.

The valley of Baca is a dry and unfruitful place on the road to Zion; but for the believer, this sterile place becomes fertile. The allusion is not paraded but, as it were, hovers behind the King's utterance. In the next line, a somewhat different technique is observable. The Biblical analogue (John, IX.xli) reads:

> If ye were blind, ye should have no sin: but now ye say,
> We see; therefore your sin remaineth.

Henry's multiplied verse imparts a darker tone, a graver warning, to the sense. The speaker is not reproducing a formula but giving his own gloss upon a familiar text. The King is the only character in the Simpcox episode who responds to the imposture in other than external and superficial terms; and this uniqueness of response suggests originality rather than impotence.

Denunciation and Defiance in 3:V.vi

3:V.vi depicts the King's death at the hands of Richard of Gloucester. But Shakespeare presents Henry not purely (or even primarily) as victim, but as powerful and trenchant accuser. Indeed he invites his death by the vigour of his

denunciations. Henry possesses here the double authority of accuser and prophet. And he has much of "high sentence" to deliver. For the scene brings, face to face, Henry and his antitype, Richard Crookback. The King is spokesman for (or embodiment of) the qualities of pity and love which Richard boastfully disclaims in himself (68). Richard knows nothing, he asserts, of "this word 'love', which greybeards call divine'". His denial of natural bonds finds ultimate expression in the chilling declaration (84):

> I am myself alone.

3:V.vi brings into stark opposition two interpretations of Nature (Danby 1949:58-67). The traditional understanding of an ordered society based on the operation of "pity, love [and] fear" is pitted against the Ricardian imperatives of the *lex talionis*. In denouncing the appetitive instinct that has reached its apogue in Richard, Henry employs a variety of devices including *ironia, icon* and *erotema*. Some of the King's imagery and allusion derives from classical sources – the 'Daedalus/Icarus' passage at 21 - 25 and the splendid defiance at 10 ("What scene of death hath Roscius now to act?"). Proverbial wisdom is another source of authority[2], but the principal contribution is Scriptural. Indeed, it seems likely that the "book" which Henry is studying "so hard" at the start of the scene is, as H.C. Hart suggested, 'the book', namely, the Bible.[3] In that case, the opening stage-picture would make visually explicit Henry's devotion to Scripture, emphasizing the sustenance he derives from the Word. The 'book' would be an emblematic property.

Certainly the Bible provides Henry with material for denunciation and defiance. Having first addressed Richard as "my good lord" he immediately deploys correctio, changing the appellation to "my lord". To use the epithet 'good' would be little better than flattery, and

> 'tis sin to flatter (3).

Editors have noted a Biblical analogue in Daniel, XI.xxxii:

> And such as do wickedly against the covenant shall he [the King of the North] corrupt by flatteries.

The King seizes on a verbal cue to carry the rhetorical assault into the enemy's camp. It is of relevance to quote the second, antithetically balanced part of the Daniel verse:

> But the people that do know their God shall be strong, and do exploits.

The King speaks as one who 'knows God' and derives strength from his trust.

It is noteworthy that Henry consistently takes the rhetorical initiative. We know from 3:V.v that Richard has come to the Tower for the purpose of despatching the King. But in the conduct of the discourse, it is the intended victim who 'leads' and the murderer who reacts. Having capitalized on Richard's "my lord" to provide an ethopoeia of his opponent, Henry next uses the departure of the Lieutenant as a rhetorical cue for depicting the 'scene of death' in terms of pathetic Scriptural allusion (7 – 9):

> So flies the reckless shepherd from the wolf;
> So first the harmless sheep doth yield his fleece
> And next his throat unto the butcher's knife.

While the speaker employs the register of pathos, one feels that the 'appropriate emotions' which are being summoned are not immediately definable. The scene depicted is that of the innocent victim abandoned to the ravening slayer; the tone is that of militant accusation. The relevant Scriptural passage (John, X.xi – xii) reads:

> The good shepherd giveth his life for the sheep.
> But he that is an hireling , and not the shepherd,
> whose own the sheep are not, seeth the wolf coming,
> and leaveth the sheep, and fleeth:
> and the wolf catcheth them, and scattereth the sheep.

King Henry's "reckless" captures the prime quality of the hireling - he has no care for his flock. But Henry's reworking of the homoeosis assigns two roles to Richard; he is not only wolf, but also butcher. The scene moves beyond the scattering to the slaughter, the King, as it were, inciting Richard to speedy performance of the deed.

Henry follows this Scripturally-derived delineation with proverbial (13–17) and classical (21– 25) versions of the doom of Lancaster, ascribing the guilt for Prince Edward's death not only to Richard but also to Edward IV and to their father, the Duke of York ("Minos" in the fable). Now, entreats the King, kill me; I would rather endure that than the recapitulation of my son's death (26-28). Richard's quasi-justification, "Thy son I killed for his presumption" (34) provides the occasion for the King's majestic death-speech (35–56). The oration depends upon inartificial argumentation, since it is constructed from two kinds of testimony. It is partly a prophecy (37– 43) and partly a recital of the portents accompanying Richard's birth (44–56). A dying prophet possesses a special ethos. One remembers John of Gaunt (Richard II, II.i. 31– 68) and Henry Percy, who is about to prophesy when death intervenes (Henry IV, V.iv.

82 –85). When Henry VI proclaims "And thus I prophesy" (37) he is investing his eloquentia with unanswerable authority. The substance of the prophecy, enriched with anaphora and parison and extended syntactically by hirmus, is that thousands will have cause to lament the birth of Richard – the orphans, widows and fathers who will be bereft as a result of Ricardian malignity.

Line 43 ("Shall rue the hour that ever thou wast born') provides the bridge between the prophecy and the enumeration of portents. The birds of ill omen announcing Richard's birth include the owl, the night-crow, and the raven. All of these carry a wealth of literary allusion. For our present purposes the owl is significant in that it recalls Isaiah, XXXIV.xiv – xv:

> The wild beasts of the desert shall also meet with the wild beasts
> of the island, and the satyr shall cry to his fellow;
> the screech owl also shall rest there, and find for herself a place of rest.
>
> There shall the great owl make her nest, and lay, and hatch, and gather under her shadow:
> there shall the vultures also be gathered, every one with her mate.

Such is the picture of the Idumaean desolation evoked by Isaiah. It is not surprising that the shrieking of the owl stands first among the "evil sign[s]". The effect of King Henry's recital is enhanced by anaphora and parison, which lend a remorseless quality of accumulation to the rehearsal of evidence. Michael Hattaway (1993:196) notes a Biblical echo in line 52 ("Not like the fruit of such a goodly tree"). This would indicate a creative reworking of Matthew, VII.xviii:

> A good tree cannot bring forth evil fruit, neither can a corrupt tree bring forth good fruit.

In fact, Henry supplies a reversal of the Scriptural sense here. For the tree of York is 'goodly', and yet it has produced a corrupt fruit.

The final line of the scene expresses Richard's exultation (he will "triumph" in Henry's death-day), and undeniably the soliloquy which it concludes is awesome in its fateful isolation, its chilling remoteness from the world of "men like one another". But the true victor is surely King Henry. He has braved Richard to his face; he has opposed the *lex talionis* by condemning its apologist in terms that are stern and unanswerable. Indeed, King Henry sets about his task with relish, and we feel that his words are given edge and force by the knowledge that he is

speaking not only on behalf of himself and his son, not only for his party, but on behalf of all those who are to suffer for Richard's ambition.

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Notes

1 Hall, E., p 222; Compare the account in Boswell, W.G., pp 281–2.

2 Cf the application of the proverb "Birds once limed fear all bushes" at 13-17.

3 Michael Hattaway suggests that Henry's "book" is his prayer-book, p 194.

I use the editions of 2 and 3 Henry VI prepared by Michael Hattaway for The New Cambridge Shakespeare (published in 1991 and 1993 respectively).

Biblical quotations are taken from the Authorised Version. This would not of course have been available at the time of the plays' composition. Shakespeare would have known the Bishops' Bible (1560) or the Geneva Bible (1569).

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