



ASIDES 1.1, *Henry V*, Unto the Breach

Date: April 23, 2020

Featuring: Beth Charlebois, Sara B.T. Thiel, Nicholas Harazin, Joe Flynn, Caleb Probst, Steve O’Connell, James Newcomb, Samuel Taylor, David Lively, Harry Judge, Stephen Bennett

Beth Charlebois: What is the nature and basis of political power? The question of what constitutes the basis for kingship itself—if it’s not divine right—if it’s not the clear right of succession--then what?

Sara B.T. Thiel: Hi everyone and welcome to our first episode of ASIDES from Chicago Shakespeare Theater. I’m Sara B.T. Thiel, Public Humanities Manager at CST; thanks for joining us.

It seemed appropriate to launch ASIDES today, April 23, because it’s the day we celebrate Shakespeare’s birthday. So, happy birthday, Shakespeare. You’re looking pretty good for 456.

In honor of Shakespeare’s birthday, we’ll listen in on Dr. Beth Charlebois as she introduces CST’s production of *Henry V*, directed by Christopher Luscombe in 2014.

What you’ll hear today is part of our Pre•Amble program, pre-show talks that take place at CST before most weekend matinees. This Pre•Amble was originally recorded on May 24, 2014.

We chose to kick off this new podcast with Beth’s *Henry V* PreAmble for a couple of reasons. *Henry V* features a lot of firsts, in our history at CST and in Shakespeare’s. You’ll hear Beth talk a little bit about that in just a few moments.

We also wanted to start with Beth because, together with Director of Education, Marilyn Halperin, Beth developed the PreAmble program more than twenty years ago when the Theater moved to its permanent home on Chicago’s Navy Pier. The Pre•Ambles continue to be one of CST’s most popular educational programs.

Dr. Beth Charlebois is an Associate Professor of English at St. Mary's College of Maryland, where she specializes in English Renaissance Drama and Shakespeare in performance pedagogy. So, without further ado, I'll turn it over to Beth.

BC: *Henry V*, the play that you're going to see this afternoon, is of course a history play. A history play that is deeply connected to Chicago Shakespeare's history. The first production that Chicago Shakespeare did of this play was 28 years ago, on the roof of the Red Lion Pub in Lincoln Park, not as grandiose a place as you'll see the play performed today. And I think that it's a great coincidence that the Red Lion is also the name of the first permanent public theater in Shakespeare's London which opened in 1567. So, there's this great convergence of firsts—both for Chicago Shakespeare and for the British stage.

Henry V is also the first play that Shakespeare wrote for the Globe Theatre, where he was a shareholder and the resident playwright, as you know. But it's the last of eight plays devoted to English history that Shakespeare wrote in the 1590's—largely based on Raphael Holinshed's *Chronicles*, and this was a history published during the time. It was enormously popular, and it served as fodder for English playwrights that wrote dramas derived from Holinshed's accounts of English history. And some of you may be familiar with Christopher Marlowe's *Edward II*, as a play that is largely indebted to Holinshed as well. This group of eight, scholars refer to as, "the first and the second tetralogy," there's two series of four plays.

The first tetralogy, which actually happened later in chronological time, involved *Henry VI Part 1*, *2*, and *3*, and ended with *Richard III*—his defeat at the Battle of Bosworth and the ascension of King Henry VII, who began the Tudor Dynasty. And so that's the first tetralogy, but it's more contemporary to Shakespeare's time than the second tetralogy, where he actually goes back further in time and tells a four-part prequel, actually, to the earlier plays. And these four plays are called, are commonly referred to as "The Henriad." As it involves *Richard II*, *Henry IV, Part 1*; *Henry IV, Part 2*, and the play that you're going to see this afternoon, *Henry V*. So, *Henry V* is the last play of this second tetralogy, this four-part series. That tells a story that begins with the reign of the medieval king, Richard II, whose legitimacy was never questioned. There was a clear line of succession for Richard. He's the son of Edward, The Black Prince, who actually died before assuming the throne, but the line of succession went straight from his grandfather, Edward III to Richard II, who assumed the throne when he was twelve.

Shakespeare's play devoted to Richard's reign is written entirely in verse. Shakespeare only wrote two plays that consisted entirely of verse, and *Richard II* is one of them. I always tell my students, it's this impenetrable vault of verse. And I think of it as being intimately tied to the world order that is represented in the world of the play of *Richard II*. As a result of his rash and poor decisions, Richard is ultimately deposed and murdered by his cousin, who assumes the throne as Henry IV in 1399. And I cannot overstate the ways that the deposition and the murder of Richard II constitute a complete change in the world order...

Battle Music

Cheering Crowd

God save the King! God save the King! God save the King

BC: ...a neat and tidy order, replaced with *realpolitik*. And it's not coincidental to me, in fact, that the English translation of Machiavelli's *The Prince* was published in 1585, a little bit before Shakespeare started writing English history; and so, part of the larger conversation going on in Shakespeare's England is, what is the nature and basis of political power?

The two plays that Shakespeare wrote after *Richard II*, *Henry IV, Parts 1 and 2*, are as much about his prodigal son, Prince Hal, the future Henry V, as they are about his father. And these plays, in contrast to *Richard II*, have an amazing amount of linguistic variety. It's like there's been an explosion after the, sort of rigors of iambic pentameter and heroic couplets in *Richard II*, all hell breaks loose in the *Henry IV* plays. There's this incredible...I always feel like it's like the story of Babel, where God has sort of made us all speak different languages and you get that, kind of, variety in the *Henry IV* plays. After Prince Harry spends a glorious time carousing with the fat knight, Sir John Falstaff and his crew of tavern dwellers, and participating in a whole lot of hardly royal escapades, the Prince proves himself at the *Henry IV, Part 1* and The Battle of Shrewsbury, defeating the valiant Hotspur. And at the end of *Henry IV, Part 2*, he inherits the crown from his father and publicly rejects Falstaff and his tavern companions and assumes the role of king. But the world that Harry inherits is very different than the one his uncle had reigned over, Richard II. Largely because of the way that his father seized the crown and assumed the throne. To be the son of a usurper, makes the head that wears the crown that much more uneasy.

This new king follows the advice of his dying father: to busy idle minds with foreign quarrels. And the new king begins his reign in 1413 at the young age of 25, by trying to unite a fractured kingdom that had been at civil war for twelve years, by reviving an ancient claim to the French throne and going to war with that old rival just across the English Channel, France. And this is the action that largely begins the play that you're going to see today. But the first scene doesn't feature the king himself, but rather, two very powerful bishops who are discussing Henry's radical transformation from misguided youth to impressive young monarch. And they are also discussing a bill that is coming through Parliament that threatens to significantly deplete the Church's lands and coffers. They will have the task of legitimizing Henry's claim to the French throne in the very next scene, but Shakespeare makes it clear from the beginning that they are not without self interest in doing so. They want Henry to support their cause in this Parliamentary bill.

By the time Shakespeare wrote *Henry V*, this was already...Henry was already the stuff of legend. There are 200 years between Richard's deposition and Shakespeare's writing of the story of it, and if Richard II is remembered for his deposition and murder and not-so-effective rule, Henry V is remembered for his miraculous transformation from miscreant youth, to awesome monarch and his victory over the French at the Battle of Agincourt, against nearly impossible odds. A few years before he wrote his own *Henry V*, Shakespeare undoubtedly saw a play that was very popular in England called, in London, called *The Famous*

Victories of Henry V, and he literally pilfered all sorts of episodes for his own version of the play which also focuses on Henry's victory at Agincourt and his youthful escapades in the tavern.

The play itself, Shakespeare's play, is an adaptation of course that we know of a well-known story about a well-known king. Perhaps the most celebrated king in English history. And Shakespeare's version of it is fixed forever—in the English imagination, in the literary imagination. And for centuries, probably up to this very day, English schoolboys and girls memorize some of Henry's speeches as examples of rhetorical brilliance and of course some good English patriotism on top of it. In America, this legend of Henry has largely been fixed for us in film. The films of Laurence Olivier in 1944 dedicated to the Ally troops, which many of you may be familiar with, and Kenneth Branagh's 1989, slightly darker adaptation. More recently, the *Hollow Crown* series, made for PBS has related the Henriad (*Richard II*; *Henry IV, Parts 1 and 2*; and *Henry V*). As much as film has left us with this incredibly rich legacy of interpretation of this story, I think this play is really about the capabilities and limitations of the stage, as much as it is of the capabilities and limitations of his titular character.

In live theater, the audience is charged to not only imagine the battle that will be represented by four or five, most vile and ragged foils, but the legendary king himself, who is and is not the actor on stage, playing his part. Shakespeare, in many ways suggests in this play that while there is this deep divide between the ways things really happened at the Battle of Agincourt and the paltry representations of these events of stage, there is a deep affinity as well. This is a reality imagined by the playwright and dependent upon the imagination of the spectators to make it real and true. In this scenario, the theatrical nature of kingship itself is emphasized. This is not an immutable identity conferred by God, as in *Richard II*. But rather, a role to be acted and played before internal and external audiences who variously confer upon the mere actor and this mere man with absolute power and authority.

In this play, the engine (the PR engine) for Henry comes in the form of a Chorus: a vestige of Greek drama, that serves as a theatricalized narrator, imposed on the action, who summarizes or anticipates what's going to happen, while presenting the legend of Henry, and serving as an apologist for the limitations of the stage. I always have my students read the play first without them. Critics think they might have actually been added somewhat later. And they do so much work for Henry in this play. It's really spectacular. And if you remove them, and sort of enjoy the play without them, you can recognize how vitally important they are.

In this production, the Chorus is not played as he usually is, by a designated individual performing the role, but by actors in the company who simultaneously articulate the lines of the Chorus at the same time that they will dissolve into their roles as characters in a particular scene. This dual role, when they are playing both, this meta-dramatic chorus and characters, serves to simultaneously naturalize and theatricalize the action, everything that we see and hear. So, there is this realism that is profoundly disrupted by the Chorus being articulated by the actors themselves.

Earl of Cambridge/Earl of Grandpré/Monsieur le Fer (Nicholas Harazin)

Thus with imagined wing our swift scene flies
In motion of no less celerity
Than that of thought.

Jamy/Duke of Gloucester (Joe Flynn)

Suppose that you have seen
The well-appointed king at Hampton pier
Embark his royalty; and his brave fleet
With silken streamers the young Phoebus fanning:

Duke of York/Herald (Caleb Probst)

Play with your fancies, and in them behold
Upon the hempen tackle ship-boys climbing;

Earl of Westmorland/Gower (Steve O'Connell)

Hear the shrill whistle which doth order give
To sounds confused;

Fluellen/French Ambassador (James Newcomb)

Behold the threaten sails,
Borne with the invisible and creeping wind...

BC: Within this highly theatricalized context, Henry himself is the quintessential performer. Of course, on one level he is (big surprise) an actor. In this case, an incredible talented actor, who is very confusingly named Harry...who's playing Harry. He has the enormous task of playing the part of Henry V, just as Henry himself, as a man with a dubious claim to the throne must *act* like a king in order to advance his objectives and maintain power. Unlike his predecessor, Richard II, this king has a keen awareness that he is just a man, but one with awful responsibilities.

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So the key question for every director, confronting this text is, what is the nature of Henry's performance? Is this a performance of artifice? Of guile? Or of just smart strategy? Every production will vary, and the production you will see today directed by Christopher Luscombe, will give you a distinctive take on Henry's character. From the moment you walk into the theatre this afternoon, you will see a bare stage, with the exception of the English flag hanging from the ceiling, racks of spotlights on either side of the stage that will illuminate eventually, an empty wooden throne with a red scarlet velvet seat and back. The red cross of the flag and the red blood of the throne remind us tacitly of the blood that is now on the throne of England in the wake of Richard II's deposition; as well as, it will anticipate the sacrifices to come, the blood that

will be spilled by the English and the French troops at war. And the prominent spotlights flanking the stage remind us that they will be relentlessly trained on the man that will assume that chair. The empty throne on this virtually barren stage also reminds us of the ways that the king is so isolated, and ultimately very much alone. The investment of so much power in one man is as overwhelming to the bearer of it as it is awe inspiring to us and his troops.

When Henry enters the scene with other nobles, you won't be able to easily distinguish him first, because he is dressed remarkably simply. In a simple leather jerkin and boots, he has no royal robe, not even a crown. It is only when he sits on the throne that he will become the King. It's an incredibly important set piece, so keep your eye on it. And this is the Henry who remains throughout this production. He never dons the accessories of kingship. Those that he lists in the famous idle ceremony speech: the balm, the scepter, the ball, the mace, the crown imperial, the intertissued robe of gold and pearl, these are not the accessories of the Henry you will see this afternoon. He remains a simply dressed man, who insists repeatedly that he is ordinary, a common man, finding himself in extraordinary circumstances. Even when he travels to the French court to negotiate with Charles VI, he wears the same black leather outfit in contrast to his French counterparts, who appear in these extravagantly, richly elaborate robes even in defeat. And watch for the ways that this production visually juxtaposes the English with the French court.

The dark and muted blacks and browns of England versus the brightly gilded furniture and fabrics of the French. The French prince, the Dauphin, is all bluster, he is dismissed even by his own peers. And this production gives him distinctly modern mannerisms and gestures that link him with a contemporary comic tradition. So, after the performance, I want you to compare notes and see who he reminds you of.

The Dauphin (Samuel Taylor)

My most redoubted father,
It is most meet we arm us 'gainst the foe.
But let us do it with no show of fear.
No, with no more than if we heard that England
Were busied with a Whitsun morris-dance:
For, my good liege, she is so idly king'd,
Her sceptre so fantastically borne
By a vain, giddy, shallow, humorous youth,
That fear attends her not.

Constable of France (David Lively)

O peace, Prince Dauphin!
You are too much mistaken in this king.

BC: Shakespeare in crafting the French...depicting the French this way is drawing on long existing stereotypes of the French as particularly courtly, overly mannered, sophisticated in a pointless way, versus the pragmatism and earthiness of the English. And this director adds a

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So, if Henry isn't costumed or accessorized in a particularly kingly way, how is he performing a role, as I have suggested? And I think he is very deliberately performing and assuming the role of the ordinary man, which is also an extraordinarily effective strategy, when the divine right of kings and the philosophy of the divine right of kings has fallen away. This, of course, is linked to his youthful identity as the tavern dweller, who boasts in *Henry IV, Part 1*, that he can drink with any tinker in his own language. While he spent the earlier days of the Henriad, mixing it up with the common folk, now he makes that part of the distinctive royal identity and appeal.

In his famous St. Crispin's Day speech, he claims that their shared mission as English soldiers, will bestow honor on them and will gentle their condition, or actually improve their social rank.

Henry V (Harry Judge)

The fewer men, the greater share of honor.

God's will! I pray thee, wish not one man more.

By Jove, I am not covetous for gold,

Nor care I who doth feed upon my cost.

It yearns me not if men my garments wear,

Such outward things dwell not in my desires.

But if it be a sin to covet honor,

I am the most offending soul alive.

O, do not wish one more!

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.

And gentlemen in England now a-bed

Shall think themselves accursed they were not here,

And hold their manhoods cheap.

BC: When Olivier's film, and Branagh's, actually depict this scene...when Henry is giving the St. Crispin's Day speech—Henry is literally elevated above his troops, looking down over them. This production will situate Henry on the *same* level as his soldiers, as if their loyalty and duty not only make him king, but ennoble them as well, they're all on the same ground.

And it is the power of these words, these unbelievably eloquent words that constitute Henry's most sublime power. One that he wields as mightily as his sword; although, this production is

going to make it very clear that Henry is a completely awesome sword fighter. So watch for ways in which that ability is very dramatically underscored with some special effects.

This production emphasizes repeatedly that Henry has the integrity to back up his lofty spectacular speeches with action. This distinguishes him both from the grandiose and bragging of the French Dauphin, whose military prowess is mocked repeatedly and ridiculed, and the braggart Pistol, an Englishman from the old tavern crew. In this production, for the first time, Pistol struck me as kind of foil for the King, because of all his preposterously affected language. He speaks in these outrageously overblown speeches, initially impresses the Welsh Captain Fluellen. The English captain Gower blows Pistol's cover and says, he's really like an actor who memorizes the commanders names by rote and the specifics of the battle strategy, only so he could go back to London, and over a few beers, brag about action that he never actually saw. He, unlike Henry, assumes the form of a soldier rather than the substance.

But that isn't to say that Henry doesn't put on a good show on occasion. His speech at the Gates of Harfleur, the French town of Harfleur, is one of the most graphic and disturbing speeches in the play and in the entire Shakespearean canon. The King will threaten rape, murder, execution of the elderly, of infants. It's really a horrifying speech. And when the Governor finally relents and surrenders, look for the ways that this Henry will react. He lets us know that this is one of the many ways that he will follow the advice he gives to his own men and "once more unto the breach" speech that it's best to imitate the action of the tiger, rather than essentially being the tiger itself.

Ensemble

The King!

Henry V (Harry Judge)

Once more unto the breach, dear friends, once more!

Or close the wall up with our English dead.

In peace there's nothing so becomes a man

As modest stillness and humility.

But when the blast of war blows in our ears,

Then imitate the action of the tiger:

Stiffen the sinews, summon up the blood,

Disguise fair nature with hard-favour'd rage.

The game's afoot:

Follow your spirit, and upon this charge

Cry "God for Harry, England, and Saint George!"

BC: But sometimes exactly the opposite is true. Henry can fain friendly appreciation for his own men, the nobles, Scroop, Grey, and Cambridge, as he gives them their wartime commissions before they depart across the Port of Southampton. But then he reveals that he knows of their treasonous plot to betray him to the French. Rather than the mercy they seek, it's sudden

execution. This Henry is constantly strategizing, anticipating, and always theatricalizing his power.

This role playing as the ordinary man extends to a scene where Henry literally disguises himself as a common soldier and goes among his troops to talk to them on the night before battle. He perhaps gets more than he bargained for. He finds out that his men doubt his cause and that they fear that he'll be ransomed while their own throats will be cut because they are just common men. His lengthy speech after this scene reveals how profoundly alone he feels in this critical moment, before the Battle of Agincourt.

In this production, it is this time, it is this moment after that scene with the common soldiers that he will appeal most directly to you as the audience. On this night before battle, where will your sympathies lie? Are you with the King? Are you a skeptical follower?

Henry knows how to play the role of the courtier too. With the French Princess Katherine, whom he will attempt to woo, even though their marriage is really just an itemized demand in the treaty between France and England at the end of their military contest. This is not a matter of romance, but a matter of diplomacy with the ultimate objective of solidifying Henry's claim to the throne and legitimizing his heirs. But he knows so well how to win her and us by feigning the deference of a suitor, who albeit charmingly makes it still clear that she is a spoil of war.

Just like Petruchio who tamed his shrew Kathrine by calling her Kate, against her wishes, Henry will literally translate the French princess's name by referring to her instead by the common English nickname, "Kate." Again, he adopts the persona of an ordinary man, one who can't court or woo because he is too much of a soldier. Distinguishing himself from the courtly pretensions of the French, while asserting his martial superiority, his quintessential masculinity, and his Englishness, always. While insisting on his inadequacy as a suitor and acting as though it is up to her to accept him or not, she really has no choice at all. But he can persuade her and us to believe that she does.

Role playing is nearly ubiquitous in this play, and quite literally the production you'll see this afternoon, you'll see, actually, actors actually playing more than one role. And this is a Shakespearean convention. In Shakespeare's time a company of 15 actors would play all of the parts, and in a history play like this, where there are over 40 speaking roles, that puts a burden on the company to play many different parts. Now there won't be as much doubling as there surely was in Shakespeare's original production, but you'll see it used in deliberate ways, and I want to call your attention to affinities and juxtapositions that are created by these actors playing more than one part. It's a practical choice, but with some interesting artistic implications.

This could provide an additional pleasure for those of you who are long-standing Chicago Shakespeare fans. You'll see actors from the last performance of the Henriad, performing here again. And actor Greg Vinkler's performance today of the roles of Pistol and King Charles from France, you'll see and hear the ghost of his Falstaff all the way back from 1999, a role that he reprised again here in 2006, and the Royal Shakespeare Theatre. In the actor Kevin Goudal's

performance of the gray-bearded Duke of Exeter, you may see a shadow of his youthful prince Hal. These are histories within histories and plays within plays.

Along with these layers upon layers of performance and theatricality, this is a play about a young man who decides to take his country to war, to unite a fractured country under one banner. English, Scots, Irish, and Welsh have their deep longstanding divisions, and Shakespeare in this production do not shy from revealing them. But, again, Henry's absolute spectacular ability is to unite them, to create in them this band of brothers despite these contentious differences. And he does this again through this amazing mastery of language. The beauty and power of this language that elevate him, and his men, and sometimes in spite of our very selves, us too.

And you'll hear at various points in this action, the song of a wood thrush in the background, a very ordinary looking bird [*wood thrushes sing in the background*]. And I think about this bird as an aviary complement to the elegance and eloquence of Henry, the ordinary man who can sing such magnificent songs. And listen to how that soundtrack of the wood thrush is occasionally punctuated by the cawing of crows... [*crows caw over the sound of wood thrushes singing*] these harsh cawing of crows, as almost to distinguish Henry's eloquence and the wood thrushes from the common man.

While the initial battles of the play are all verbal, the French Dauphin's mocking gift of tennis balls to the newly crowned Henry, do in fact turn to gun stones (or cannonballs). The time for games is over. The set itself will be transformed from court to battlefield and back again. The somber brown paneled wall of Henry's court, will first turn to the blue background of the French, but the tapestry of the *fleur-de-lis* is removed and the wall comes down and becomes a kind of drawbridge that connects the world of the court to the world of the battlefield. But the drawbridge isn't put down entirely, it remains in this kind of half-up/half-down position, creating this incredibly steep incline that serves as a visual reminder of the physical and psychic demands of going into battle. And it will be used by both the French and English troops as they head into the fighting.

There are other reminds of the Battle of Agincourt in the production. You'll see English soldiers carrying longbows, and the longbow is thought to be the strategic linchpin in the victory of the English over the French, and because given their vastly reduced numbers, having archers positioned throughout the field, shooting hundreds and hundreds of arrows, was a devastating blow to the French cavalry and really gave them a strategic advantage despite their disadvantage in sheer numbers. You'll see the wooden pickets will provide the background of the later scenes in the play, and those are also the pickets that protected the archers against the advancing French cavalry.

This is not just a war of words and strategy, however, there are real consequences. There is a character in this play simply named, Boy, who accompanies the tavern crew to France. In my mind, he serves as a sort of moral barometer. It is he who poignantly announces the death of Falstaff, the King's old companion. In the aftermath of Henry's rousing, once more to the breach

speech, during the assault on Harfleur, the Boy lags behind and honestly admits, “Would I were in an alehouse in London. I would give all my fame for a pot of ale and safety.” It is he who sees through the shallowness of his employers from the Eastcheap Tavern crew: Pistol, Bardolph, and Nym, and decides to leave this trio and seek some better service in King Henry’s army.

When we learn that the French have attacked the English supply tent and killed all the boys guarding the luggage, this production will create an extra-textual scene with the boy that personalizes and dramatizes that actor brutality that is only narrated in the script. It is this scene that provokes Henry’s most unguarded emotional moment, perhaps suggesting that in this boy, someone that Henry clearly knew in Eastcheap, he sees the death of his own youth and innocence.

There are crucial moral and ethical questions in this play about heroism, honor, and war, that require our judgment. The play and this production repeatedly ask for our imaginative engagement to make the play work, but ultimately it also asks for our assessment of this man, this actor, this Actor-King. For it will ultimately be your thoughts that will deck this King.

Sara B.T. Thiel: That’s all from me, Sara B.T. Thiel, and the ASIDES Team. We’ll be back next week with an introduction to our 2018-2019 *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* from Pre•Amble scholar Dr. Stephen Bennett.

Stephen Bennett: You may be wondering what a prairie vole has to do with *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*.

SBT: ASIDES is presented by the John W. and Jeanne M. Rowe Inquiry and Exploration Series.

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