

The First Quarto of Henry V as a "Problematic" Text

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The First Quarto of *Henry V* as a “Problematic” Text

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This paper questions Annabel Patterson’s notion of the Quarto text of *Henry V* (1600) as presenting “an almost unproblematic view of a highly popular monarch.” It argues that the ostensibly “patriotic” Quarto registers quite a few doubtful passages or “textual instabilities” that might contribute to undermining Henry V’s heroic stature, thus making the play less palatable to “patriotic” audiences.

The Quarto version is much shorter than the 1623 Folio (which Patterson suggests is “problematic”), about 1,600 lines as against some 3,380. The brevity of the Quarto text, which is almost certainly a memorial reconstruction of a text designed for performance, seems partly due to the forgetfulness of the actors who were involved in compiling the Quarto and partly due to the heavy cutting of the original text. Although it is an heavily cut version, the Quarto text retains many of the problematics found in the Folio.

Fluellen, one of the most problematic characters in the Quarto as in the Folio, utters lines full of disturbing implications as to Henry’s character and action. He says, “as Alexander is kill / His friend Clitus: so our King being in his ripe / Wits and iudgements, is turne away, the fat knite,” suggesting that Henry is no less (or perhaps more) ruthless than Alexander. Fluellen tells Henry that he does not care who knows that he is his “Maiesties countryman . . . so long as [his] maiesty is an honest man.” His implication may be that he is ashamed of Henry because he is not “an honest man.”

The second soldier (or Williams in the Folio) in the night-scene before Agincourt is another problematic figure. He interrogates the justice of Henry’s cause and the honesty of his disavowals about being ransomed and finally challenges the disguised king to a fight.

Gower comments upon Henry’s order to kill the defenceless French

prisoners: “The king caused euery prisoners / Throat to be cut. O he is a worthy king.” This speech sounds like a critique of Henry’s coldbloodedness.