

Original Paper

Shakespeare's Archbishop of Canterbury: Henry V's Imaginary War Counselor

Michael J. KREMENIK*

(Accepted May 20, 1998)

Key words : Catholic unpopularity, character, historical inaccuracy

Abstract

How does historical inaccuracy affect the late 16th century London audience's perception of the Archbishop of Canterbury in William Shakespeare's history play *Henry V*? Shakespeare's *Henry V* portrays the Archbishop of Canterbury as a man who will do anything to save his Catholic churchlands from a proposed bill in Parliament that would seize them for the English crown. He persuades Henry V to invade France in the hope this will keep Henry's and his Parliament's minds on something else besides the bill. This characterization of the archbishop is a false one but Shakespeare was unaware of the lack of historical accuracy in the main source he used to write the play. He did know, however, that an unfavorable picture of his character, the Catholic Canterbury, would go over well with his late 16th century Protestant London audience.

Introduction

In the two opening scenes of William Shakespeare's history play *The Life Of King Henry The Fifth* the Archbishop of Canterbury is portrayed as a man more concerned for the wealth of the Catholic church he presides over than the lives of his fellow Englishmen. A bill before Parliament threatens the church with seizure of its lands by the English crown. Canterbury urges his lord Henry V to invade France by explaining to him in numbing detail his hereditary right to the French crown. By doing this he hopes to thwart the bill or at the very least delay its debate in Parliament. But none of this is true. Why then does Shakespeare portray Canterbury in this way? Two hypotheses will be discussed: First, a Catholic archbishop trying to undermine Parliamentary proceedings and unconcerned about the welfare of the average Englishman would liven up any play in a Protestant England threatened by Catholic Spain and the Papacy. Second, Shakespeare unknowingly used a flawed historical source as the basis for

* Department of Medical Social Work, Faculty of Medical Welfare, Kawasaki University of Medical Welfare Kurashiki, Okayama, 701-0193, Japan

the Canterbury character in his play.

It is well known to today's historians that Henry V, not the Archbishop of Canterbury, wanted to invade France. He needed to legitimize the weak claim his father Henry IV had to the crown of England, and the best way to do that in early 15th century England was by victory on the battlefield. The March family claim had been recognized twice by Parliament during Richard II's reign and it had played a key part in Henry V's father Henry IV's usurpation of Richard II's throne in 1399 (Seward 37). The March claim ran through Henry IV's uncle Lionel, the Duke of Clarence. He was the older brother of Henry IV's father John, the Duke of Lancaster. Thus the March claim, by virtue of Lionel being older than John, held precedence.

Shakespeare does not follow this history, however. He relies for his play's historical background on Raphael Holinshed's *Chronicle Of England, Scotland, And Ireland*. Holinshed's history claims that Canterbury, worried over a bill in Parliament that would seize churchlands for the English crown, exhorted Henry V to war with France by explaining the legal shortcomings of the Salic law in order to divert attention from the bill and thus save his church's purse. England is a Catholic country at this time. By the late 16th century, however, when Shakespeare wrote *Henry V*, England had gone through the Reformation initiated by Henry VIII in 1534 and separated from Rome.

Late 16th century England's enemies are Catholic. Catholic Spain is her greatest rival. She has been involved in plots to overthrow the English Queen Elizabeth I. Meanwhile in Ireland, rebellion against English sovereignty, backed by Spain and the Pope, is in full force at the time of the play. Is Shakespeare using Canterbury as a symbol of the corrupt Catholic church, embodied in the 16th century form of Spain and the Papacy? This would surely go over well with his London audience. Or is he merely following the history of Holinshed's chronicle, oblivious to the real reasons Henry invaded France?

Shakespeare can't be accused of making his own history. Holinshed's chronicle, "underlies the whole historical action of *Henry V*" (Craik 7). It is full of historical errors that Shakespeare incorporates into his play. Authenticity didn't matter, however; what mattered was that the Catholic Canterbury would be a popular character of scorn among London theatre goers of 1599.

|

Most Shakespeare scholars agree that *Henry V* debuted in 1599. The proof comes from lines spoken in the Chorus of Act V (Craik 1-2). The Chorus, while proclaiming Henry V's triumphant return to London after his smashing victory at the battle of Agincourt against the French in 1415, also refers to events of 1599:

As, by a lower but as loving likelihood,
Were now the General of our gracious Empress,
As in good time he may, from Ireland coming,

Bringing rebellion broached on his sword,

(V, 0, 29-32)

The 'General' is Robert Devereux, Earl of Essex. He is both a popular figure and a favorite of Elizabeth I thanks to his successful assault on Cadiz, Spain in 1596. On 25 March 1599 Elizabeth made him lieutenant and governor-general of Ireland in the hopes that he would quash a rebellion led by Hugh O'Neill, second Earl of Tyrone.

Ireland had been in general rebellion against English rule since 1565. In that year Elizabeth's Privy Council declared that it would no longer recognize the language, customs and laws of the Irish and instead would enforce the language, laws and systems of local administration in use in England.

Outside of the Pale, a strip of coast in Ireland stretching northwards from Dublin fifty miles and extending twenty miles inland, Protestantism had never found a following. And now Catholicism took on additional importance as it began to represent a defense of Irish values against English rule.

Before Devereux's arrival the Earl of Tyrone had defeated the English at the battle of the Yellow Ford. The earl had been receiving Spanish aid and the prospect of an Irish-Spanish Catholic alliance led Elizabeth to step up her efforts in Ireland. Devereux was sent to Ireland with 20,000 men, the largest Tudor army ever to go there.

Shakespeare's reference to Devereux in his chorus of Act V was written in the expectation of a resounding English victory. Devereux, however, agreed in September 1599 to a truce with Tyrone that left the earl with control of the area of Ulster in North Ireland. Elizabeth refused to recognize the truce and replaced Devereux with Charles Blount, Lord Mountjoy (Lockyer 136-138).

Spain's king Philip II perceived England as his main rival in Europe and the Americas. The countries had been in conflict for many years before 1599. Toward the end of the 16th century English naval power was beginning to challenge Spanish supremacy in the Americas. Sir Francis Drake's privateering in the West Indies had hurt Spanish trade immensely.

The English supported the Netherlands' autonomy against the Spanish re-imposition of direct rule. In 1585 Elizabeth had sent the Earl of Leicester with an English army to aid the Dutch rebels.

The Spanish involved themselves in plots to overthrow Elizabeth and install the Catholic Mary Queen of Scots in her place. Mary had been forced to abdicate her crown in 1560 in favor of her baby son James VI when the Earl of Moray led a rebellion of Scottish Protestant lords against her. Mary fled to England. Because Elizabeth was childless and Mary, as the great granddaughter of Henry VII, was next in line to the English throne, plots to overthrow the queen of England always used her as a rallying cry. A plot uncovered in 1586, backed by the Spanish Army, proposed to murder Elizabeth and replace her with Mary. When Mary's complicity was documented in a seized letter Elizabeth had no choice but to put her on trial.

She was executed on 8 February 1587 (Lockyer 178-179).

His murder plots a failure, Philip decided to invade England. His plan was to sweep the English Channel clear with his Armada leaving it open for the Duke of Parma and his Spanish infantry to cross over into England from the Netherlands. By July of 1588 the Armada was in the Channel with 130 ships and 20,000 soldiers and sailors. It anchored off Calais and awaited attack orders. The English, however, had about the same number of ships and they were more maneuverable and better armed. The English seized the initiative. On 28 July they sent fire boats at night into the Armada. The Spanish cut anchor and drifted helplessly into the open sea where the more mobile English ships easily destroyed them. Only half of the vaunted Spanish Armada made it home (Lockyer 180-181).

II

All of this conflict between English and Catholic interests could only help lead Shakespeare to incorporate Canterbury into his history play and depict him as he did. A critical look at Shakespeare's opening two scenes will reveal two points, however. Shakespeare followed Holinshed's history, which jelled nicely with the current animosity toward Catholics. And Holinshed's portrayal of Canterbury is filled with untrue depictions of historical events. Specifically, Canterbury's worry over the bill in Henry V's Parliament and his use of the Salic law to justify Henry's invasion of France are not historically accurate.

Act I, scene i, opens with Canterbury discussing the Catholic church's financial troubles with the Bishop of Ely. The church will come to ruin if Parliament is allowed to pass a bill confiscating churchlands and turning them over to the crown. A way must be found to keep hold of these lands or, as Canterbury says about the projected loss of revenue from seized church land: "Twould drink the cup and all." (I, i, 20).

Canterbury comes up with the idea of explaining to Henry his rightful claim to the French throne. He urges Henry to act on it and offers to help him by providing a large financial contribution from the church towards any war with France that will reclaim Henry's just title to that country from the Valois usurper:

For I have made an offer to his majesty,
Upon our spiritual convocation,
And in regard of causes now in hand,
Which I have opened to his grace at large,
As touching France, to give a greater sum
Than ever at one time the clergy yet
Did to his predecessors part withal.

(I, i, 75-81)

The historical fact is that the bill in question never came up. Such a bill threatening seizure of churchlands was put forward for debate in the Parliament of Henry IV but it failed to be implemented and was not revived during any Parliament of Henry V before he went to war with France. The English bishops did give financial support to Henry for his wars in France but not as much as Canterbury leads us to believe in the play (Saccio 80).

As for the Salic law, Canterbury almost certainly never made a speech to Henry about it. Canterbury was probably not even present at the Parliament on which the scene is based (Saccio 79).

Henry's claim to the French throne was real, however. The inheritance of property by the correct bloodlines was an extremely serious matter in the Middle Ages. It legitimized the whole social organization. Richard II had confiscated Henry IV's whole inheritance after the death of his father John, the Duke of Lancaster. Richard's reckless act led the English nobles to support Henry when he overthrew Richard in 1399 (Saccio 78).

Henry V's claim to France ran through his great grandfather the English king Edward III (1327-77), whose mother was Isabella, the only daughter of Philip IV of France (1285-1314). Philip IV's three sons succeeded him but all died without producing any male heirs. Philip, Count of Valois, whose father Charles was Philip IV's brother, was chosen king based on a 14th century resurrection of the Salic belief that the crown must descend through the male line. The Count of Valois' lawyers dug it up from an old penal code of the 6th century hoping it would justify their anti-feminist ruling (Saccio 79). The real motive, however, was to exclude Edward III.

Shakespeare has Canterbury shred the legitimacy of the Salic law. In doing so he is writing almost entirely a versified version of Holinshed (Holinshed Vol. 3 65-66). Canterbury explains how Salic law is intended for an area outside of France, in Germany, between the Sala (Saale) and Elbe rivers. After proving that the area of Salic jurisdiction is outside France, Canterbury goes on to attack the French Monarchy itself with examples of succession through the female line.

He reaches back to the 8th century and King Pepin of the Franks. Pepin declared himself heir by descent to the Frankish crown even though his claim was through Blithild, the mythical daughter of king Clothair (511-61) (Saccio 78).

Obstacles to war swept away, Henry can say towards the end of Act I, scene ii:

Now are we well resolved; and by God's help
 And yours, the noble sinews of our power,
 France being ours, we'll bend it to our awe
 Or break it all to pieces.

(I, ii, 223-226)

In reality, Henry V appointed Henry Chichele Archbishop of Canterbury during the second

year of his reign. The former bishop of St. Davids, Chichele distinguished himself as an ecclesiastical lawyer, diplomat, and university man having served with Henry on the council during the reign of Henry IV. He was quite different from the Archbishop in Shakespeare's play. *Henry V* shows the importance of the word *drama* in any discussion about historical drama. The unpopularity of Catholicism and Catholic Spain, and the flawed historical source Shakespeare relied on provided the genesis of the Canterbury character in *Henry V*. Those of us who take historical drama as real history are either naive or too lazy to find out for ourselves the truth behind any fictional interpretation of an historical event or character. Shakespeare's Canterbury is entertaining, the storyline even plausible, but any rudimentary investigation will show him to be a fictional character, not an historical interpretation of a real man.

Works Cited

- Craik, T. W., Ed., Introduction. *The Arden Shakespeare King Henry V*. London: Routledge, 1995.
- Holinshed, Raphael, *Holinshed's Chronicle*. 1807-08 Ed. Vol. 3. New York: AMS Press Inc., 1976.
- Lockyer, Roger, *Tudor and Stuart Britain 1471-1714*. London: Longman Group Ltd., 1985.
- Saccio, Peter, *Shakespeare's English Kings History, Chronicle, And Drama*. London: Oxford University Press, 1977.
- Seward, Desmond, *Henry V The Scourge Of God*. New York: Viking, 1988.