

Original Paper

## Shakespeare's *The Life of King Henry V*: Pistol's Personal Reasons for Joining in Henry's French Wars

Michael J. KREMENIK\*

(Accepted October 21, 1998)

Key words : Pistol, war, personal monetary gain

### Abstract

The character Pistol in William Shakespeare's *Henry V* will be examined. In particular, his reaction to Henry V's decision to make war on France will be looked at. Pistol consciously sets out for France with the hope that he will become rich from the war. Henry expects his soldiers to fight for the glory of England and for his rightful claim to the throne of France. But for Pistol the war is personal, and he expects Henry to provide him with a chance, through war, to enrich himself and uplift his own personal station. The focus of this paper will be how these two expectations conflict with one another.

### Introduction

William Shakespeare's history play *The Life of King Henry V* centers around Henry V's claim to the throne of France. His title to that throne ran through his great great grandfather Edward II of England (1307-27) whose wife Isabella was the daughter of Philip IV, King of France (1285-1314). Henry's deliberations over whether or not to attack France, his decision to make war on France and the subsequent war itself all reveal the differing war agendas of first Henry, then his clergy, his nobles and his soldiers. In the words of the play's Chorus and in King Henry V's speeches urging his troops into battle, there is a glorification of war. In other parts of the play we find bishops scheming for war so that they can postpone a bill in Parliament that would heavily tax the church's wealth. In parts of Henry's and his nobles' speeches there are remarks made about the human cost of war (The New Folger Library Shakespeare *Henry V* xiii & xiv). And then there are the war aims of Henry's old Eastcheap buddies Nym, Bardolph and Pistol.

---

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

Henry left them in Shakespeare's play, *The Second Part of King Henry the Fourth*, but the three have hung on into *The Life of King Henry the Fifth*. Shakespeare's purpose in keeping them is clearly seen in their collective response to Henry's decision to make war on France. They are not going for any kind of national glory or to make right Henry's claim to the French throne. They too are going for themselves.

Out of this Eastcheap group Shakespeare has chosen to focus most on Pistol. His hunger for personal monetary gain in France exposes the more base reasons men make war on each other. It also forces the reader to face the many indiscrepancies in human behavior that war brings about. Glory on the battlefield drove some but, as in the case of Pistol, just as many were looking for ways to enrich their lives in a different way.

I

Pistol first appears in Act II, scene i. He gets into a war of words with Nym over Pistol's recent marriage to Hostess Quickly. Nym had been engaged to her before Pistol won her hand and some bad blood between the two still exists. The two draw their swords against each other but Bardolph acts as peacemaker, threatening to kill them both if they don't stop. The two agree to put aside their differences when Pistol repays a gambling debt owed to Nym. This conversation over money leads Pistol to talk about what he plans to do as a member of Henry's army when the king leads them to war in France:

For I shall sutler be  
Unto the camp, and profits will accrue.  
Give me thy hand.

(II, i, 111-113)

Pistol sees the war as a chance to provision the army and at the same time grow rich from the enterprise. By asking Nym to "Give me thy hand" he's offering to bring him in too, thereby re-cementing their friendship through a promise of future wealth.

Earlier in this scene Bardolph had attempted a reconciliation amongst the two through a kind of peace breakfast where they could: "be all three sworn brothers to France" (II, i, 12). But the term "sworn brothers" implies a chivalric oath to share each other's good and bad fortunes (The Arden Shakespeare King Henry V 157). The Eastcheap group will never swear to this kind of oath. As their servant boy says later, the only oath they'll swear to is one where they are: "sworn brothers in filching" (III, ii, 44-45).

In Act II, scene iii, the Eastcheap group re-appears, ready to leave for France. Money is at the center of their conversation again. As Pistol departs from his wife he gives her some business advice. Hostess Quickly runs a tavern and also takes in boarders. He warns her to get cash from her boarders, "pitch and pay," and to, "trust none". He then turns to Bardolph and Nym

urging them to:

Let us to France, like horse-leeches, my boys  
To suck, to suck, the very blood to suck!

(II, iii, 53-54)

The word horse-leech can be used metaphorically to mean a rapacious person. From Pistol's words in scene i it is hard to believe he's not talking about anything else but going to France to bring back as much money or war booty as possible. A line Pistol said earlier to his wife in reference to her boarders' often habitual need to ask for credit when presented with the bill can also be interpreted to be about himself: "For oaths are straws, men's faiths are wafer-cakes" (II, iii, 49). Pistol is going to France to get *personally* rich. He is not going to fight for Henry or risk his life for anyone but himself. Later scenes in the play will bear this out.

Pistol's cowardice in war can be seen in his next appearance at the walls of Harfleur in Act II, scene ii. Pistol is urged to fight by of all people Bardolph. Pistol, however, runs away:

My purpose should not fail with me,  
But thither would I hie.

(III, ii, 16-17)

By "purpose" Pistol is referring to his real reason for coming to France, to get wealthy. Later in the scene the Boy elaborates. He says of Pistol's bravery:

...he hath a killing tongue and a quiet sword, by  
the means whereof 'a breaks words and keeps whole  
weapons.

(III, ii, 34-36)

And even more damaging are the Boy's comments about the Eastcheaper's plans for reaping riches together:

They will  
steal anything, and call it purchase. Bardolph stole a  
lute-case, bore it twelve leagues, and sold it for three-  
halfpence. Nym and Bardolph...  
in Calais they stole a fire-shovel. I knew  
by that piece of service the men would carry coals.  
They would have me as familiar with men's pockets as  
their gloves or their handkerchiefs,...

(III, ii, 41-48)

Bardolph is the first among the three to make a bolder effort at obtaining the wealth they all desire when he is caught stealing a pax. The Duke of Exeter sentences him to death by hanging and this leads to a confrontation in Act III, scene vi, between Pistol and Fluellen.

Fluellen, a captain in Henry's army, is a by-the-book soldier. So when Pistol asks him to intervene on Bardolph's behalf with the duke, Fluellen declines. He takes the side of the duke insisting that he is right to hang Bardolph for his transgression. This leads to some sharp words between the two. After Pistol leaves, Fluellen's fellow captain Gower has some words of advice about soldiers like Pistol.

At the beginning of the scene Gower had professed not to know who Pistol was. Fluellen had praised Pistol highly as performing "gallant service" on the bridge but Gower, after listening to this characterization, was unable to recognize it as Pistol. Only after watching Pistol's long winded performance in defense of his thief friend Bardolph did he recognize the man. Gower warns Fluellen, calling Pistol "a bawd" and "a cutpurse".

Fluellen protests, countering this unkind characterization with a description of the brave words he *heard* uttered by Pistol while he was on the bridge. This is interesting because earlier in Act III, scene ii, Fluellen had to beat Pistol because he *wouldn't* fight. Fluellen has either forgotten that incident or he didn't know who Pistol was at the time. In any case, Gower goes on to enlighten Fluellen about men like Pistol. They know everything about a battle but never take part in it. They make themselves look like heroes but in fact act like cowards. Fluellen, maybe now realizing the difference between Pistol's *words* and *actions*, promises to expose Pistol:

I do perceive  
he is not the man that he would gladly make show to  
the world he is. If I find a hole in his coat, I will tell  
him my mind.

(III, vi, 81-84)

In light of Fluellen's conclusions about Pistol's character, the action in which Pistol next appears must be viewed as one of the most ironic in the whole play. In Act IV, scene iv, Pistol, the exposed coward, the man of big words who runs from the breach and talks up a storm on the bridge, has taken a French soldier hostage at the battle of Agincourt. This is the only military action at Agincourt depicted in the whole play! Money, however, not gallantry, enters into the scene very quickly.

Pistol threatens to kill his French hostage, named Le Fer, unless he can ransom himself. A comedy of errors over money ensues caused by Pistol's inability to completely understand French. The Boy is called in to interpret and an agreement of two hundred crowns for the soldier's ransom is agreed to. Pistol's bravery then comes into question once again when the French soldier says he is gratified that two hundred crowns are enough to save his life from such a wonderful soldier:

...that he hath fallen into  
 the hands of one, as he thinks, the most brave,  
 valorous and thrice-worthy *seigneur* of England.

(IV, iv, 61-64)

So another man is fooled into believing Pistol has the qualities of a fighting, brave soldier. As the Boy relates soon after the soldier and Pistol exit, Pistol's gift of speech has tricked many before this soldier:

I did never know so full a voice issue from so empty  
 a heart; but the saying is true, "The empty vessel  
 makes the greatest sound."

(IV, iv, 67-69)

But at the end of this scene one is left to believe that Pistol has succeeded in his designs where his Eastcheap buddies have not. Bardolph and later Nym have both been hanged for stealing and Pistol has a promise of two hundred crowns from this French soldier. The Boy, at the end of the scene, can only wonder at the fortune of such an openly self-serving, cowardly man. Alas, Pistol's dreams of riches are not to be for Henry orders all prisoners killed for fear the French have reinforced their men for a new charge against the English.

We know that Pistol has lost his ransom when in Act V, scene i, Fluellen, upon meeting Pistol again, mercilessly beats him and offers a measly groat (four pence) for the injuries he's inflicted on him. Pistol's response is one of exasperation at his current condition: "Me a groat?" (V, i, 61).

## Conclusion

Pistol is a man who has gone from the two hundred crowns promised to a brave fighting soldier at Agincourt, to what he really is, a lying storyteller of tall tales about his military prowess still looking to hit it rich. Pistol's dream of becoming wealthy at the expense of Henry's war has failed miserably. Pistol in his poverty also represents all those who fought and schemed for Henry in the king's French wars. For in the end the only winner at Agincourt is King Henry V. England will gain nothing by this victory. Henry will die with an enlarged kingdom but his son Henry VI will lose everything, even the crown itself, as England plunges into the destructive Wars of the Roses. So Pistol is a representation of all of England. Led to France expecting the glory and riches associated with conquest, Henry does deliver. But his glory is only for a short time like that of Pistol and his two hundred crowns.

But Pistol, like England, will carry on. Financially and physically defeated in France Pistol receives the added blow of hearing of his wife's death and the loss of income that means. Pistol

doesn't change his ways, however. He pledges to return to England:

Old I do wax, and from my weary limbs  
Honour is cudgelled. Well, bawd I'll turn,  
And something lean to cutpurse of quick hand.  
To England will I steal, and there I'll steal;  
And patches will I get unto these cudgelled scars,  
And swear I got them in the Gallia wars.

(V, i, 85-90)

#### Works Cited

- Shakespeare, William. *The Arden Shakespeare King Henry V*. Ed. T.W. Craik. Routledge, 1995. (All references to lines in Shakespeare are from this edition of the play.)
- . *The New Folger Library Shakespeare Henry V*. Ed. Barbara A. Mowat and Paul Werstine. New York: Washington Square Press, 1995.