

Henry V

Harold Goddard:

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The Choruses of *Henry I* are indeed full of a windy chauvinism. But who said they are Shakespeare? Who said, I mean, that they represent the author's ideas or attitude? A good many have said so, it is true, in the face of the fact that they are like nothing else in the poet's works that has ever been convincingly identified with his spirit.

The Chorus differentiates himself specifically from the author on his first appearance by asking the audience to

Admit me Chorus to this history,
Who prologue-like your humble patience pray....

"Me Chorus" is plainly not the author; and that the speaker of a prologue may be anything but the representative of the poet or the playwright is proved in the most specific fashion by the Chorus-prologue of *Troilus and Cressida*, who says:

hither am I come
A prologue arm'd, *but not in confidence*
Of author's pen or actor's voice, but suited
In like conditions as our argument,
To tell you fair beholders that our play
Leaps o'er the vaunt and firstlings of those broils,
Beginning in the middle.

And the words of the Chorus in the epilogue of *Henry V* confirm the distinction:

Thus far, with rough and all-unable pen,
Our ending author hath pursu'd the story.

The poet would not refer to himself as "*our ending author*." It is somebody else who is speaking.

Who, then, is the Chorus? He appears to be a mixture of several things. He is in part History filling in the gaps of the story by making abridgements of what is necessarily left out in the theater. He is in part the stage manager apologizing for that necessity and for the general inadequacy of the stage to the poet's theme. (The stage is incapable of doing justice to the storm in *King Lear*, but Shakespeare creates no Chorus to point it out.). And, in accordance with one of the traditional functions of the Chorus, he is in part an abstract of average public opinion.

This last point is the crucial one. A military hero at the top of this success is always elevated by the populace into something like a god. And that is just the note that is struck with regard to the warlike Harry throughout these Choruses. But can anyone believe that Shakespeare in his own person would have called Henry “the mirror of all Christian kings” and then let him threaten to allow his soldiers to impale French babies on their pikes and dash the heads of old men against the walls; or called him “this grace of kings” and then let him declare of the prisoners,

we'll cut the throats of those we have,
And not a man of them that we shall take
Shall taste our mercy;

that he would have pronounced Henry “free from vainness and self-glorious pride,” after dedicating a good part of two plays to showing how he wanted to imitate the sun and astound the world by emerging suddenly from behind clouds—and not only wanted to, but did?

Soldiers before battle are exposed to martial music and often given even stronger intoxicants, that when they begin to fight they may not be coldly aware of the exact nature of what is before them. Shakespeare offers the martial music of Chorus before each act of this play, possibly with a similar motive with regard to his auditors and readers. As word music and rhetoric, they are indeed intoxicating. But poetry in any high sense, except perhaps for a few touches, they are not. We have ourselves to blame if we let them put us in a condition in which we cannot see what is going on before us in the play. Shakespeare's procedure was quite justified. As playwright, he must get a hearing for his play. As poet, he must tell the truth. But to tell the truth about a great national hero at a time when patriotism is running high calls for courage. To tell it and to keep the piece in which you tell it popular calls for more than courage. Shakespeare did as life does. Life places both its facts and its intoxicants before us and bids us make out of the resulting clash what we can and will. So does the author of *Henry V*. Through the Choruses, the playwright gives us the popular idea of his hero. In the play, the poet tells the truth about him. We are free to accept whichever of the two we prefer. God does not indicate what we shall think of his world or of the men and women he has created. He puts them before us. But he does not compel us to see them as they are. Neither does Shakespeare.