

# The Interpretive Power of Context, or Why Henry V's "St. Crispin's Day" Monologue is Bullshit

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In his short book *On Bullshit* (2005), Harry Frankfurt develops an analytic theory of bullshit. Bullshit, as defined by Frankfurt, has two definitive conditions. First, its claims are neither deliberately true nor false. As Frankfurt notes, "[the bullshitter's] intention is neither to report the truth nor conceal it" (55). Second, its claims attempt to "convey a certain impression" (18) of the speaker. My paper will discuss the ways in which Frankfurt's definition of bullshit informs an understanding of Henry's "St. Crispin's Day" monologue in Shakespeare's *Henry V*. I will argue that Henry's language in this monologue satisfies Frankfurt's definition of bullshit insofar as it conveys an intentional impression of Henry that is neither deliberately honest nor false. Moreover, I will argue that the extra-dramatic audience's omniscient<sup>1</sup> knowledge of Henry's internal motivations and self-consciousness and the play's subplot provides necessary context within which to identify this monologue as bullshit.

Henry's "St. Crispin's Day" monologue is a clear act of bullshit, albeit a successful one. In this monologue, Henry notoriously appeals to abstract notions of "honor" (Shakespeare 4.3.28) and brotherhood (4.3.60). He constructs two hypothetical scenarios: in the first, he states that, if any soldier "hath no stomach for this fight, / Let him depart; his passport shall be made / And crowns for convoy put into his purse" (4.3.35-37). In the second, he imagines how his soldiers, if victorious, will each "remember with advantages / What feats he did that [this] day" in their old age (4.3.50-51). What are

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<sup>1</sup> In this essay, omniscientness is defined as the experience of unmediated spectatorship. The audience sees and/or hears of all plot events without discrepancy.

these hypothetical scenarios and appeals other than abstract, romantic musings irrelevant to the reality of warfare? Henry's monologue is, in essence, a response to Westmoreland's wish that "[Henry's troops] now had here / But one ten thousand of those men in England / That do not work today!" (4.3.16-18)—a wish grounded in the practical tactics and concerns of warfare. Instead of responding to Westmoreland's wish by discussing military strategy (as the situation warrants), Henry responds with bullshit. In this monologue, Henry uses language that is neither true nor untrue: for instance, one cannot prove or disprove the truth-value of whether or not Henry would actually pay for the safe return of a defecting soldier. Henry's monologue thus satisfies the first component of Frankfurt's definition of bullshit—that bullshit is neither true nor false. Henry's language, furthermore, seeks solely to convey an impression of himself as an honourable and valorous monarch; he speaks his monologue almost obsessively from the first-person point of view. Henry's monologue thus satisfies the second component of Frankfurt's definition of bullshit—that bullshit is primarily concerned with self-presentation.

Although Henry's monologue meets Frankfurt's definition of bullshit, the characters listening to Henry's monologue—his "intra-dramatic audience"—seem to unanimously believe in the truth-value of his language. Westmoreland notably responds by proclaiming "Perish the man whose mind is backwards now!" (Shakespeare 4.3.72-73). Similarly, in both the Olivier (1944) and Branagh (1989) film adaptations of *Henry V*, the soldiers respond to the "St. Crispin's Day" monologue with bombastic applause and cheer.<sup>2</sup> Clearly, there is discrepancy between the intra-dramatic audience's approval and the extra-dramatic audience's suspicion of Henry's mono-

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<sup>2</sup> I refer to film versions of the play here because none of the edited texts of *Henry V* that I consulted offered stage directions indicating how the other characters on stage respond to Henry's "St. Crispin's Day" monologue.

logue. Why is it that Henry's intra-dramatic audience cannot identify his monologue as bullshit? This discrepancy results from the play's extra-dramatic audience's omniscient knowledge of plot events of which the intra-dramatic audience is ironically unaware.

The extra-dramatic audience gains knowledge of Henry's self-consciousness via their omniscient view of 4.1, in which Henry disguises himself and walks unnoticed through his camp on the evening before battle. This scene is significantly positioned immediately before Henry's "St. Crispin's Day" monologue. This speech juxtaposes obviously false language with obviously honest language. In the first half of this scene, Henry's language is obviously false—he is, according to Frankfurt's definition of the term, lying. Consider, for instance, the exchange between King Henry (disguised as a common soldier) and Williams:

King: I myself heard the king say he would not  
be so ransomed.

Williams: Ay, he said so, to make us fight  
cheerfully: but when our throats are cut,  
he may be ransomed, and we ne'er the  
wiser.

King: If I live to see it, I will never trust his  
word after. (Shakespeare 4.1.195-201)

In this exchange, Henry consciously lies, while the reader knows that Henry has not actually "heard the king say he would not be ransomed." Williams ironically trusts that Henry is telling the truth but suggests the possibility that "the king" to whom Henry refers might himself be lying. The theme and, indeed, enactment of false language in this exchange is therefore made explicit to the extra-dramatic audience.

Henry's soliloquy at the end of 4.1, however, contrasts his false language at the beginning of the scene. In this soliloquy, Henry,

alone on stage, affords the extra-dramatic audience a rare opportunity to understand his unmediated self-consciousness. His language here is sober and honest—it has what Frankfurt would call “truth-value” (33) within the context of his consciousness. Quotes such as “what have kings that privates have not too, / Save ceremony, save general ceremony?” (4.1.243-244) reveal his insecurity regarding monarchical authority. He moreover suggests that monarchical authority is founded upon “titles blown from adulation” (4.1.259) rather than divine sovereignty. This honest soliloquy juxtaposes the false dialogue discussed previously. The two speeches foil each other: the dialogue highlights the truth-value of the soliloquy, whereas the soliloquy highlights the falsehood of the dialogue. In this statement, the two poles of honesty and falsehood are constantly implicated in one another. As Frankfurt puts it, “[s]omeone who lies and someone who tells the truth are playing in opposite sides, so to speak, in the same game” (60). Henry plays within Frankfurt’s game: firstly as someone who lies, and secondly as someone who tells the truth. The extra-dramatic audience’s omniscient perspective of 4.1 and, consequently, intimate knowledge of Frankfurt’s game, enables them to identify Henry’s “St. Crispin’s Day” monologue as playing both sides of the truth and falsehood game, thus being bullshit. Furthermore, Henry’s honest soliloquy in the latter half of 4.1 enables the extra-dramatic audience to dismiss his valorous, honourable, and monarchical self-representation in 4.3 as merely a motivated attempt to “convey a certain impression of himself” (Frankfurt 18).

The extra-dramatic audience also has an omniscient view of the play’s subplot and its significant protagonist, Ancient Pistol. Pistol serves as a foil to Henry, as obvious and important differences exist between the two characters. Unlike Henry, Pistol is a commoner who speaks in low diction and receives little respect from the other characters; Pistol, however, is significant as he is accused

multiple times by other characters of speaking bullshit. In 3.6, Pistol defends Bardolph, a man sentenced to be hanged, as “a soldier, firm and sound of heart, / And of buxom valour” (Shakespeare 3.6.25-26). Captain Gower, in response, dismisses Pistol as “a gull, a fool, a rogue, that now and then goes to the wars, to grace himself at this return into London under the form of a soldier” (3.6.69-71). A similar dialogue occurs in 4.4 (immediately following Henry’s “St. Crispin’s Day” monologue) in which the Boy soliloquizes that “[he] did never know so full a voice issue from so empty a heart” (4.4.70-71) upon witnessing Pistol boast to a captive Frenchman. In both instances, Gower and the Boy accuse Pistol of being uninterested in the truth-value of his own language when Pistol attempts to convey an impression of himself as a loyal friend and valorous gentleman—they accuse him of bullshit. Shakespeare, in providing the extra-dramatic audience with an omniscpective view of these scenes, explicitly introduces to them the possibility of language that is neither true nor false. Pistol, insofar as he serves as an ironic foil to Henry, further enables the extra-dramatic audience to identify Henry’s “St. Crispin’s Day” monologue as bullshit.

Frankfurt’s theory of bullshit provides a valuable framework with which to analyze Henry’s language in the “St. Crispin’s Day” monologue. My paper has argued that this famous monologue is, put crudely, utter bullshit. In this monologue, Henry embodies Frankfurt’s definition of the bullshitter because he uses language that is neither deliberately true nor false, and he does so in an attempt to convey an impression of himself as an honourable and valorous monarch to his intra-dramatic audience. I have, furthermore, argued that the extra-dramatic audience is able to identify his monologue as bullshit, or rather call his bluff, because they have omniscpective knowledge that the intra-dramatic audience does not have. This latter point reveals the importance of context in identi-

ying “[o]ne of the most salient features of our culture” (Frankfurt 1), and necessitates further investigation into the discrepancy between spectatorship and interpretation, both on and off the stage.

Works Cited

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