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Talbot and the Countess of Auvergne

JAMES A. RIDDELL

SOME CRITICS HAVE DIFFICULTY taking seriously the scene in *1 Henry VI* where Talbot, the "scourge of France," confronts the Countess of Auvergne and undermines her scheme to capture him. Tillyard thinks it irrelevant; Dover Wilson says that it "reflects the lighter side of life in Normandy."¹ Others, such as Hugh Richmond and Don Ricks, do take it seriously, seeing in it the glorification of Talbot (construed, however, as a rather simple heroic caricature), who is then contrasted with the schemers in the immediately following Temple Garden scene.² I agree that such a contrast does exist in the play, and that no more than this would be reason enough to challenge Tillyard's and Dover Wilson's evaluations, but beyond this it seems to me that essential qualities of Talbot's character have been overlooked, qualities which make him singularly appropriate as a figure to be set against the morally inferior schemers in the Temple Garden.

Sigurd Burckhardt, in the only extended treatment of the Countess of Auvergne scene of which I am aware, is concerned with a complexity in the character of Talbot, and his argument must be reckoned with here, even though I find his conclusions to be wrong. Burckhardt contends that Talbot possesses "self-effacement," which is the result of his "having learned the secret . . . of assertion through the larger design."³ Therefore Talbot becomes, uncharacteristically, a plotter in this one scene. To justify his contention Burckhardt is obliged to urge that "we must be clear that this is the Talbot of the episode, not that of the rest of the play" (p. 70).

Burckhardt's argument strikes me as both incorrect and unneces-

¹ E. M. W. Tillyard, *Shakespeare's History Plays* (New York: Macmillan, 1946), p. 158; J. Dover Wilson, ed., *1 Henry VI* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1952), p. xix.

² Richmond, *Shakespeare's Political Plays* (New York: Random House, 1967), pp. 21-22; Ricks, *Shakespeare's Emergent Form*, Utah State University Monograph Series, Vol. 15, No. 1 (Logan, Utah: Utah State Univ. Press, 1968), pp. 47-48.

³ *Shakespearean Meanings* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1968), p. 70. The chapter dealing with the Countess of Auvergne scene is a revised version of Burckhardt's article, "I am But Shadow of Myself: Ceremony and Design in *1 Henry IV*," *MLQ*, 28 (1967), 139-58.

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sary. There are two related virtues of the hero shown in this scene which are wholly consistent with the character of Talbot in the rest of the play. They are humility and disdain of vindictiveness, both aspects of magnanimity from a Renaissance point of view. Burckhardt writes thus of the "Talbot of the episode": "The 'character' Talbot does not essentially differ from the other characters. He is, to be sure, loyal to his king and country; he puts the common cause above personal gain if not always glory. But his *style* is ceremonial, and it is style that determines likeness" (p. 70). It seems to me that Burckhardt is right about Talbot's style being ceremonial, in this scene and elsewhere in the play, but that he is wrong in saying that Talbot's style is separable from his character. The issue can be resolved, I think, by examining some characteristics of magnanimity.

As Father Maurice B. McNamee points out, self-effacement for the benefit of the state is central to Cicero's conception of magnanimous man. Cicero reflects a kind of "modified Stoicism" common to Roman thought. He "takes it as much for granted as does Aristotle that the great-souled man deserves the highest honor, but he does not make personal glory the end-all and be-all of life. He insists, in fact, that self-interest is not the supreme good (I, ii, p. 5). There are times when one's own glory and reputation have to be sacrificed to a higher good, to the good of the commonweal."⁴ This is essentially the same notion that La Primaudaye expresses in the sixteenth century. In his chapter "Of Magnanimitie and Generositie" in *The French Academie* he says: "Heere we will propound *Aristides* onelie to be imitated, who was a woorthie man among the Athenians, whose opinion was that a good citizen ought to bee alwaies prepared alike to offer his bodie and minde unto the service of the common wealth, without hope or expectation of any hired and mercenarie reward either of money, honor, or glorie."⁵ To see himself as the instrument of higher good, then, is characteristic of the Christian magnanimous man.⁶ And when the ruler he is serving is Christian there is no distinction to be drawn between the politically-inspired or the spiritually-inspired humility of the magnanimous man.

But what is the magnanimous man's attitude toward plotting? Again Father McNamee is helpful. Pointing out the difference between the Aristotelian magnanimous man and the Ciceronian he says:

The most fundamental quality of all in the Greek hero was his intellectual acumen. The great stress on intelligence in all of Greek culture should make us expect that. Aristotle does not insist on the point in his definition of the magnanimous man, but rather takes it for granted. So highly regarded was intellectual sharpness by the Greeks that they considered it

⁴ Maurice B. McNamee, *Honor and the Epic Hero* (New York: Holt, 1960), pp. 40-41. The reference in the next is to Cicero's *De Officiis*, trans., Walter Miller, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1951).

⁵ Pierre La Primaudaye, *The French Academie*, trans. T[homas] B[owes], 4th ed. (1602), p. 281.

⁶ McNamee, pp. 77-80.

an admirable thing for their heroes to use trickery and deceit to gain their ends. In fact, this attitude prevailed so widely among the Greeks that the Romans came to think that all Greeks were liars. For the Romans, who put so much emphasis on social equity, such deceit was hateful, and many of them said so. In a famous passage of the *De Officiis*, Cicero condemns both force and fraud as means of gaining one's end. "While wrong may be done, then, in either of two ways, that is, by force or by fraud, both are bestial: fraud seems to belong to the cunning fox, force to the lion; both are wholly unworthy of man, but fraud is the more contemptible.— I, xiii, 41." Cicero is characteristically Roman here in considering deceit more hateful than force.

(p. 48)

This seems indeed to be the state of mind shared by Talbot, the Talbot who rails against La Pucelle for her treacherous attack on Rouen. It is crucial to the concept of magnanimity that nobility of mind enhance military exploit. Herauld says that magnanimity "differeth from valiantnesse or prowesse, in that prowesse respecteth chiefly the perils of warre, and magnanimity respecteth honour."⁷ Count Romei makes more explicit the distinctions between the kinds of military victories that can be obtained—and it is a moral distinction. He says, "magnanimite is no lesse an adjunct of military profession, then is whitnes of snowe: for that warrior who hath not a loftie and magnanimous minde, shall never accomplish glorious enterprises."⁸

Two concrete and closely related aspects of magnanimity are the hero's generosity of spirit and his indifference to petty insult and to revenge. Generosity is admirable particularly as it is manifested towards one's enemies. La Primaudaye, for instance, says: "The second [effect of magnanimity] respecteth duty towards enemies, against whom generositie will in no wise suffer a man to practise or to consent to any wickednes, under what pretence soever it bee, not for anie advantage which may be reaped thereby" (pp. 273–74). About revenge, Seneca says: "Many whilst they revenge themselves for every slight offence have made their injurie the greater. That man is great and noble, that after the manner of a mightie wilde beast, listneth securely the barking of lesser Dogges." Set next to this, in the margin, is the comment: "*What Magnanimitie is.*"⁹

There is no need to go about establishing two characters for Talbot, as Burckhardt does, nor to be faced with the question Burckhardt poses: "What is the real Talbot?" (p. 72). The apparent contradiction is puzzling only if we force it to be. For the Talbot who is angry for having been deceived at Rouen is the same one who can overcome the plot of the Countess of Auvergne and maintain a lofty indifference to any

⁷ Jacques Hurault, *Politike, Moral, and Martial Discourses*, trans. Arthur Golding (1595), p. 287.

⁸ Count Annibale Romei, *The Courtiers Academie*, trans. J[ohn] K[eeper] (1598), pp. 276–77.

⁹ *The Works of L. A. Seneca*, trans., Thomas Lodge (1614), p. 547.

thought of revenge. At the center of Talbot's success in undermining the Countess' plot is his humility. He explains to her (and to the audience):

I am but shadow of myself.
 You are deceived, my substance is not here;
 For what you see is but the smallest part
 And least proportion of humanity.
 I tell you, madam, were the whole frame here,
 It is of such a spacious lofty pitch
 Your roof were not sufficient to contain't.¹⁰

Just as the Countess's picture of Talbot is merely an image of his body, his body is merely an image of his soul, and the entire Talbot is merely a representation of his army, which in turn, with Talbot, is merely a representation of the King and commonwealth of England. He knows, after all, that he is God's agent and the agent of his land.

The straightforward, humble soldier both achieves and signals his victory in a characteristically martial way. Talbot winds his horn, whereupon drums strike up, and ordnance is heard. No hushed locking of doors, no sneaking about quietly surprising the surprisers.

The real Talbot is the magnanimous man, the hero who scorns to be valued at less than his worth. This latter aspect of Talbot's character may seem incompatible with the humility I have been claiming for him. It does so to Burckhardt, who sees Talbot's refusing, while a prisoner of the French, to be ransomed for a French soldier of no reputation as being merely Talbot's insistence on ceremony. Burckhardt says: "Ceremony is so much more important than function that Talbot refuses the bargain and, at risk of total loss, insists on a much worse one" (p. 70). But Talbot's different kinds of behavior under different circumstances are accounted for quite clearly by Hurault, who says:

There is not a thing more beseeming a noble minded man, than to be of great courage and loftie in adversitie, the which would ill-beseeme him in prosperitie. And as *Plutarch* saith, like as they that walke with a statelie gate, are accounted vain-glorious, and yet notwithstanding, that maner of marching is allowed and commended in them that goe to battell: even so he that advanceth his mind in adversitie, is deemed to be of excellent and unvanquishable courage, as having a brave port and stout countenance to encounter adversitie, which in prosperitie would ill beseeme him.

(pp. 288-89)

If in adversity we have seen Talbot demand due recognition, in triumph we see him demonstrate humility and an unwillingness to be

¹⁰ *1 Henry VI*, II. iii. 50-56, ed. David Bevington, in *William Shakespeare, The Complete Works* (The Pelican Shakespeare), ed., Alfred Harbage (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1969). All references to *1 Henry VI* are to this edition.

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troubled by petty matters—an unwillingness to exact trivial retribution. He tells the Countess:

Be not dismayed, fair lady, nor misconster
The mind of Talbot as you did mistake
The outward composition of his body.
What you have done hath not offended me;
Nor other satisfaction do I crave
But only, with your patience, that we may
Taste of your wine and see what cates you have.

(II. iii. 73-79)

Far from being incompatible with qualities of the hero of the battlefield, these qualities are part and parcel of him.

Burckhardt's thesis is dependent upon there being two Talbots. The one Talbot, who sees the importance of plotting, is a metaphorical representation of Shakespeare, who was himself learning to see the effectiveness of a "new style." "Drama wins over ceremony, self-effacement over self-assertion, the implicit over the explicit" (p. 74).

Such a reading also provides (for Burckhardt) an exemplary analogy for the English nation. For if function is not valued beyond ceremony there will be confusion and defeat. Shakespeare planted one scene, in *1 Henry VI*, therefore, to help us become aware that the poet was going to realize new powers, as was England. But Burckhardt's ingenious reading of the scene depends upon our seeing a contradiction in Talbot's character that would not, I believe, have seemed a contradiction either to Shakespeare or to his audience, who would have had little difficulty understanding the manifestations of Talbot's magnanimity.

Let us now consider the relation of Talbot to the Temple Garden schemers. Shakespeare has done more than merely present us with a contrast between simple patriotism and rank dissention; he has invited us to compare those qualities of mind to be found in a magnanimous man with those qualities of mind to be found in ambitious men. And it is precisely in the consideration of humility and lofty scorn of insult that the contrast between Talbot and the schemers can most clearly be seen. In the Temple Garden scene pride and vexed impotence in the face of insult are evinced by all of the characters, and by none more than by Richard Plantagenet. The following exchange illustrates the point; Somerset is speaking:

Was not thy father, Richard Earl of Cambridge,
For treason executed in our late king's days?
And by his treason stand'st not thou attainted,
Corrupted, and exempt from ancient gentry?
His trespass yet lives guilty in thy blood,

- And till thou be restored thou art a yeoman.
- Rich.* My father was attached, not attained;
 Condemned to die for treason, but no traitor;
 And that I'll prove on better men than Somerset,
 Were growing time once ripened to my will.
 For your partaker Pole, and you yourself,
 I'll note you in my book of memory
 To scourge you for this apprehension.
 Look to it well and say you are well warned.
- Som.* Ah, thou shalt find us ready for thee still;
 And know us by these colors for thy foes,
 For these my friends in spite of thee shall wear.
- Rich.* And, by my soul, this pale and angry rose,
 As cognizance of my blood-drinking hate,
 Will I for ever, and my faction, wear
 Until it wither with me to my grave
 Or flourish to the height of my degree.
- Suff[olk]* Go forward, and be choked with thy ambition!
 And so farewell until I meet thee next.
- Som.* Have with thee, Pole. Farewell, ambitious Richard.
- Rich.* How I am braved and must perforce endure it!
 (II. iv. 90-115)

Hugh Richmond and Don Ricks are surely correct to insist on the importance of the juxtaposition of the Countess of Auvergne scene and the Temple Garden scene. Just as surely, however, each comes short of explaining the essence of that juxtaposition. Ricks says: "The meaning of the scene is clear: the English army in France, officer and private soldier, is irrevocably knit into a dedicated unit under a self-effacing leader, while at home all is division" (p. 48). For Ricks all the contrast is in the action. His Talbot is not the embodiment of magnanimous man, but rather "an extremely flat character." For Ricks, Talbot's speeches consist of but two things: either noble and courageous sentiments or frustrated rage at the wiliness of an enemy that will not stand up to a fair fight" (p. 47).

Richmond is interested in the political manifestations of Talbot's character, not in the moral imperatives that are responsible for them. We do not know what we need to know about Talbot, in Richmond's opinion, until after the Countess of Auvergne has been confused by Talbot's insistence that he is but Talbot's shadow and she is impelled to complain:

This is a riddling merchant for the nonce!
 He will be here, and yet he is not here.
 How can these contrarities agree?
 (II. iii. 57-59)

“Only then,” says Richmond, “does Talbot cut through the ambiguities of meaning to call up his real strength in the form of his concealed army. The realities of power and the contrasting ambiguities of language and appearance are perfectly expressed in this scene” (p. 38).

But more is involved than the comparison of a noble and single-minded wielder of power with factious and ambitious schemers after power. The crucial question is what makes Talbot noble and single-minded. The answer is that he has those qualities of mind that insure he will stand apart from ordinary men. He is an example for us, to be sure, but much more than an example of patriotism or noble courage. In Talbot we can see *how* patriotism and noble courage are indeed moral virtues—not merely the expedient qualities necessary for wielding power. For it is precisely the two qualities of magnanimity exemplified by Talbot in the Countess of Auvergne scene that are most clearly wanting in the schemers we see in the next scene. Those qualities are, on the one hand, humility, and, on the other, indifference to insult and scorn to indulge in petty revenge.