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***Henry V*: A Report on the Condition of the World**

Abstract: The central interest of the paper is concentrated on an online production of *Henry V* in 2020. The project is based on a new Polish translation by Piotr Kamiński and produced by Dariusz Rosiak, a journalist, as one of his regular Reports on the Condition of the World published on YouTube. Realised as a reading performance by three actors in front of an empty row of chairs, the production brings an innovative and revealing interpretation of the play, breaking new ground in the Polish reception of Shakespeare's histories.

The paper offers a brief review of the presence of history plays in Polish reception and introductory information on Rosiak's YouTube channel and Kamiński's translation as a background to a critical analysis of the production and its relevance to the here and now of our world

Keywords: *Henry V*, *Henry V* reception, Shakespeare in Polish Translation, Piotr Kamiński, Dariusz Rosiak.

Polish Reception of Shakespeare's Histories

Shakespeare's histories have never been very popular in Poland. Although all have been translated, some many times, their appearance in theatres was rare, with two exceptions: *Richard III*, according to the sources I have been able to consult (Michalik et al; Kujawińska Courtney et al; www.encyklopediateatru.pl), was produced 18 times, the first time in 1864, the last time in 2017. Similarly, ten translations of *Henry IV* seem to attest to the play's popularity, which had been produced 13 times since 1882. To compare: *Henry VI*, with five translations, appeared on the stage only once (1964); *Henry V*, with three translations, was shown three times (1979, 1984, and 1997; the last was a diploma production by the Polish Academy of Theatre Arts students). With five translations, *King John* was produced three times (1869, 1872, 1961). *Richard II* was translated six

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times and produced in 1871, 1962, twice in 1964, and 2004. In his excellent monograph *Polish Televised Shakespeares* (2005) Jacek Fabiszak draws on elements of theatrical and televisual semiotics and offers a vast panorama of a cultural phenomenon: the exceptionally vivid presence of Shakespeare's plays in what was termed in Polish "television theatre" (1959-2004). He, too, notices the absence of the histories. In his account, we find a discussion of a *Henry IV* production directed by Maciej Zenon Bordowicz (1975), which is "a rare attempt" (Fabiszak 116). He mentions only one earlier version of *Henry IV* taken over from a theatre stage (1969) and *Henry V* (1970), directed for television by the same director, Maciej Bordowicz, apart from *Richard III* (1968) and *Richard II* (1989).

The two history plays seem to get more attention and a livelier Polish reception for different reasons: *Richard III's* attraction is located in the main character and the allure of the figure of Vice; the attraction of *Henry IV* is centred on Falstaff mainly because he reminds Polish readers and spectators of the figure of Zagłoba, one of the main characters of the 19th-century trilogy of historical novels by Henryk Sienkiewicz. Otherwise, the interest in the intricacies of the dynastic wars of 15th-century England is definitely limited. The struggle for power and its political dimension, which could find reverberations in the Polish reception of the 19th and 20th centuries, was located in tragedies, in *Hamlet*, above all (cf. *Polska bibliografia szekspirowska 1980-2020*).

Critical reception of Shakespeare's histories explains to a certain extent the theatrical neglect of these plays. The earliest Polish scholars mainly commented on the relevance of the plays to British history, trying to explain to the readers the intricacies of the English dynastic relations and the history of the War of the Roses, as this was little known and indeed did not form part of the school curriculum of the country divided between three empires: the effort was directed at keeping Polish identity alive under the pressures of Russia, Prussia and Austria. Later commentaries and essays on Shakespeare's histories, particularly those of Polish literary historians Przemysław Mroczkowski (189-219) and Henryk Zbierski (256-353) concentrated on the literary qualities of the plays and on the transmission of (mostly) British and American scholarly interpretations to which access was difficult and limited by the iron curtain. Explanations of the dynastic complications and historical developments were also attached. This in no way encouraged wide readership, or was conducive to heightened theatrical interest in the histories with the exception of *Richard III* and *Richard II*. In *Richard III* Mroczkowski underlined a fascination with the mechanism of the game carried out by an evil man as well as the attraction of the role for an accomplished actor. In *Richard II* he stressed a series of painful episodes around the English throne. At the same time, the attraction of the story line, according to Mroczkowski, was located in the way Richard's dethronement and Henry Bolingbroke's accession to the throne were presented ironically in

terms of “a silly sheep who helps the tiger to triumph” (Mroczkowski, 1966: 201). Zbierski agrees with the opinion that *Richard III* is more of a psychological study of the mechanism of a drive for power rather than a presentation of historical facts, while the author locates the popularity of the play in theatres in the dramatic potential of Richard as an opportunity to shine for an actor. In *Richard II* Zbierski notes the importance of historiosophic underpinnings and political reverberations of the play in Shakespeare’s time. Jan Kott, the revolutionary Shakespearean critic, had chapters on tragedies and comedies, but not on histories. He does pay attention to what he calls historical tragedies in his “Introduction” (20-26), seeing in them a cyclical pattern of fighting for power, gaining and losing it. Such general patterns serve Kott as a necessary prelude to introducing the concept of the Great Mechanism. However, Kott then analysed the dramatic potential of the Great Mechanism in Shakespeare’s tragedies.

How did *Henry V* fare in Polish critical reception? Mroczkowski stresses its aspect of glorious national history in distinction to other histories, as well as the epic character of the play. King Henry in his eyes is presented in a sequence of episodes as seeking pious advice, relentless in the punishment of traitors, upright and noble towards the enemy, yet proud and clear in his contempt for the French King and Dauphin, able to keep balance between the responsibility for his decisions and his prerogative to take decisions, and finally, brave and charismatic in leading his army against the overwhelming numbers of the French army (Mroczkowski, 1966: 198-201). Zbierski finds the most characteristic feature of *Henry V* in its nationalist character, in the praise of an aggressive war which has always been negatively evaluated from the historical point of view (Zbierski, 1998: 335). But dramatic art need not present historical truth; therefore, as Zbierski concludes, *Henry V* will in the English eyes, stay a heroic king, while for Poles, “it does not constitute a sanctity which must not be slandered” (336) and, therefore, Zbierski concludes it is a mediocre play exactly because it contains too much of the zealous patriotic notes and chauvinistic aggressive feelings against the French. Nevertheless, Zbierski stresses the unique dynamism and heroic tone of poetry in this play, particularly in the opening lines of the Chorus that give the whole play a theatrical appeal. As is evident, the scholar does not like the play but can appreciate the power of the word. However, he does not elaborate on what he calls ‘theatrical appeal’. Juliusz Kydryński, a drama critic, translator, and lifelong admirer of Shakespeare’s dramatic and poetic output, published a book titled *Footnotes on Shakespeare (Przypisy do Szekspira)* (1993) with a chapter on *Henry V* (149-156). He, too, begins with the idea of the patriotic and heroic aspect of *Henry V*, this, however, he refers to Olivier’s film version of 1944 and the way the play was adapted to the context of World War II. However, referring to the opinions of M. C. Bradbrook and J. O. Hardison, he is careful to underline the anti-war aspect of the play. The chapter’s core contains information about dynastic

complications since the time of Henry IV and about the 100-year war. As for the artistic merits of the play, Kydryński finds it in “the study of the king’s soul” (155) and the structure of two parallel actions: internal, taking place in the king’s conscience, and external in which he proves himself to be an ambitious and victorious military leader.

This brief account of the critical reception of the play demonstrates that its primary interest seems located in the English past; comments on patriotism, chauvinism, pro- and anti-war aspects are connected with the past rather than with the application of the play to the here and now of the critics’ or scholars’ experience. The only exception here is Kydryński’s reference to Olivier’s film; this however narrows down the play’s applicability to one particular historical context.

Three years ago, in the confusion of the coronavirus pandemic, a production of *Henry V* at Gdańsk Festival (available on YouTube with a plethora of enthusiastic comments and opinions of the viewers) made a real breakthrough in appreciating Shakespeare’s histories as plays for all time.

About the Production

The Production of *Henry V* premiered in June 2020 and was shown at the 24th International Gdańsk Shakespeare Festival in November of the same year. Both occasions were highly unusual. The premiere took place on the YouTube channel of Dariusz Rosiak, a journalist who regularly publishes his “Report on the condition of the world” (online). *Henry V* was his idea of reporting on the condition of the world through poetry. The 24th Gdansk Festival took place in November instead of early August, all in streaming because of the pandemic. But the most outstanding and striking parameter was the production itself.

Before the production will be discussed, The “Report on the Condition of the World” must be introduced in a few words. In this regular programme, Dariusz Rosiak looks at various aspects of current issues and events worldwide. Being a genuine radio-journalist, Rosiak relies on words and sounds; sometimes he comments himself, often talks to artists, academics, journalists, politicians, and uses musical illustrations always connected with places and people who are at the centre of the report whether political, cultural, scientific, medical, etc. Literature is also a frequent subject of the Report. However, *Henry V* is a novelty: the Report is not **about** *Henry V*. It is the play which **is** the Report on the Condition of the World. Or, to be more precise, it is Piotr Kamiński’s new Polish translation and his selection of particular incidents which constitutes this unique Report.

The journalist and the translator talk about their friendship and project in an online interview (Rosiak and Kamiński). The first idea was of a radio-like

programme. Rosiak with an acute ear for sounds was enchanted by Kamiński's translation (indeed an outstanding work) and had an idea of recording a reading of selected passages from the play. The humble beginning developed into a much more ambitious, nevertheless, limited production engaging only three actors, standing in front of empty rows of chairs in a small auditorium, reading texts spread on pulpits. That reading, however, did not imprison them in any way: the actors expertly used their voices, body language, and specifically their eyes, to enter into relation with each other, with each incident a different one, to build suspense, create emotions, and, importantly, to construct a report on the condition of the world. One might ask which world, of course. Well, certainly the world of Henry and of Agincourt, but, as Rosiak pointedly said in the interview, "It's a play about power, a play about growing up to power, about loyalty, about politics, about everything that we live here, about everything no matter what time." (Rosiak and Kamiński, *it-is-a-play-about-modern-politics*). "Especially now, at the time of growing doubts, confusion and weakening hopes, great literature is needed, literature that knows everything about the human condition. And there is no better guide than Shakespeare." this is how Kamiński (*premiera-henryka-v*) represents the aim of their project.

Kamiński, in the interview (*it-is-a-play-about-modern-politics*), stresses the power of the word of Shakespeare's art, which opens up broad vistas of meaning and never imprisons or limits the actors, readers, or translators. So this minimal, confined presentation of the play did not limit the actors in any way; just the opposite, it created opportunities for the actors to fly—which they did on the wings of poetry. In this they were supported by the excellent direction of Vita Maria Drygas and expert work of the cameramen. Three men standing and reading—what might seem an extremely static proposition—was turned into an intense presentation of the turns of emotions and tensions by catching the simplest movements of feet, hands, heads, or exchange of looks which accompanied the words. Moments of silence, used with discretion, pointedly transmitted fear or fearful expectation of the "bloody execution" of war (e.g. scene 3).

The script for the production was the work of the translator. It is really a specific interpretation of the play built on the idea of a series of encounters of Henry with various characters punctuated by the Chorus. The information attached to the production on YouTube informs the viewers of the sequence of scenes and time duration including the preliminary shots.

Contents

00:00 Preliminaries

01:20 Chorus: O for a muse of fire...

04:30 Scene 1: Henry and Canterbury: God and his angels guard your sacred throne...

09:58 Chorus: Now all the youth of England are on fire...

- 12:32 Scene 2: Henry: Once more onto the breach, dear friends, once more...
- 14:20 Scene 3: Hand the Governor of Harfleur: How yet resolves the Governor of the town?
- 18:09 Scene 4: Henry and herald Montjoy: you know me by my habit...
- 22:37 Chorus: Now entertain conjecture of a time...
- 25:16 Scene 5: Henry and an English soldier: Who goes there?
- 33:42 Scene 6: Henry and Westmoreland: Of fighting men they have full threescore thousand...
- 36:47 Scene 7: Henry and Montjoy: Once more I come to know of thee, King Harry...
- 39:24 Scene 8: French Lord: O Seigneur! Le jour est perdu, tout est perdu!...
- 41:30 Scene 9: Henry and Montjoy: If they will fight with us, bid them come down...
- 44:10 Scene 10: Henry and Exeter: Here is the number of the slaughtered French...
- 46:58 Chorus: Vouchsafe to those that have not read the story...
- 49:11 Scene 11: King Henry and King Charles: Peace to this meeting...
- 52:52 Chorus: Thus far with rough and all-unable pen...

The beginning covers “the title page,” the presentation of the space in which the spectacle is presented, including empty chairs in the small auditorium and an incidental mask dropped on the floor: the pandemic situation. The actors move around the pulpits, adjusting the sheets from which they will read; a glass of water is placed on the floor.

The play proper begins as in Shakespeare’s text with Chorus. Piotr Fronczewski’s reading draws attention to “the wooden o, the unworthy cockpit” which we have just seen, and persuades us that it can hold vasty fields of France by the very force of the word: “Think, when we talk of horses, that you see them” (Prologue, 13-15; 27).¹ The positioning of emphasis in the actor’s voice harmonises with the idea of a radio play which has been turned into a reading performance. In what follows, the spoken word is the most important and most effective source of emerging meanings, while the visual side of the production is used to achieve a particularly effective representation of the people involved in the action: Henry is played by Grzegorz Damięcki, while his interlocutors are all played by Marcin Rogacewicz: Archbishop of Canterbury (Scene 1), Governor of Harfleur (Scene 3), the French Herald Montjoy (Scene 4, 7 and 9), an anonymous soldier of Henry’s army (Scene 5), Earl of Westmorland (Scene 6), a French commander/Orleans (Scene 8), Exeter (Scene 10), Charles VI, (Scene 11). The Chorus intervenes between scenes 1 and 2, 4 and 5, 10 and 11, and closes the whole production with the epilogue.

¹ All quotations from *Henry V* from <https://www.folger.edu/explore/shakespeares-works/henry-v>

What Do We Learn from the Report on the Condition of the World?

The scenario cuts the Pistol-Nym-Bardolph scenes, the story of traitors, the killing of the boys and French prisoners, as well as the wooing of Catherine and her lesson in English. Clearly, the interest of such a reading of the play concentrates on positioning Henry in the face of the Other, which in the situation of the war means a challenge not just to the power of the king, but also to the sense of responsibility, of the weight of decisions taken, of moral stance, of ruthlessness, of loyalty and patriotism. Each incident, each encounter multiplies questions and sheds light on the confusing ambiguity of the position of a political leader who may have the most honourable, rational and saintly motives in considering the war, but is unable to see through the manipulation of his councillors. Whose courage, valour and mettle are exemplary, but who readily agrees to atrocious acts and cruel execution of war. Who is a charismatic military leader leading his army to a victory against all odds, and celebrates it over ten thousand French that “in the field lie slain” (IV.8.84). But the focal point is the language, which in this reading performance is the strongest presence and, therefore, exposes its specific dual function: on the one hand, that of the creator of the world, the great tool of art; on the other, that of lies and manipulation, a tool used to hide the truth behind the mask of words, the tool of politicians. In the former function, the power of the word is efficient by appealing to human imagination and reason, makes art, especially literature, but also, emphatically, theatre, the indispensable handbook to understand life, the best tool in commenting on the condition of our world. In the latter function language works in the opposite sense; it is a tool used to create false reality, to manipulate, mislead, misrepresent, often for personal gain and glory. Through this specific *aporia* of the very nature of what we do with language, this particular production of Shakespeare’s history play becomes a pungent reading of the human condition now and at any time; Shakespeare’s art becomes the gate through which the authors of this unusual production were able to offer the report on the condition of our world.

What condition of the world emerges from the production? To answer this question, one must look critically into the selected incidents with a clear understanding that Piotr Kamiński is responsible for the narrative they form. In a way, one may conclude the report on the condition of the world is the joint effort of Shakespeare and his translator. However, one must also stress the performance of reading: the three actors open all possible ambiguities to perfection and help to diagnose the complexity and ambiguity of the report rather than offer a black-and-white commentary.

Kamiński has selected carefully those passages in which God is invoked: Scene 1 opens with Canterbury’s words, “God and his angels guard your sacred throne” (I.2.8). Henry’s initial gambit in the discussion of the Salic

law and the justification of starting the war with France is peppered with God: “God forbid,” “For God doth know, we charge you in the name of God” (I.2.15-26), etc. (Here the translator’s effort to keep the Polish version closely to Shakespeare’s words is clearly visible: *Bóg* appears in the Polish text as many times and in equivalent phrases). Since the King finishes the opening speech with the declaration that he will

...believe in heart
That what you speak is in your conscience washed
As pure as sin with baptism (I.2.35-36),

he is ready to make his claim “with right and conscience.” Much of the scene is cut, to make the King’s decision ring loud:

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. (I.2.231-232)

During the interview with the Archbishop, Henry holds a rosary, a prop that will appear in his hand again and again (Scene 1, 4.30-9.50). Characteristically, the dialogue with Montjoy (Scene 4) is punctuated with shots focused on Henry’s hand wrapped in the rosary; the movements of the hand punctuate, first, the threats of the King of France and then, Henry’s proud answer:

yet, God before, tell him we will come on, (...)
We shall your tawny ground with your red blood
Discolour. (III.6.160, 166-167)

The great speech delivered before the siege of Harfleur (Scene 2) ends with the words, “God for Harry! England and Saint George.” This is immediately contrasted with the ensuing dialogue of Henry with the commander of Harfleur (Scene 3) where the promise of the atrocities inflicted on the people of Harfleur if the town does not surrender, makes Henry’s promise of mercy sound particularly hollow and forces us to reinterpret the war cry “God for Harry.” It also reverberates strongly in Scene 4 with Montjoy in which the bloody consequences of war are accompanied by the convulsive movements of the fist holding the rosary. Henry’s promises of mercy for Harfleur sound in this context highly ironic; one cannot take them on face value, just as the rosary around his fist looks more like a weapon than a prayer.

Scene 5 centres on the exchange of Henry with Williams (as the essence of the King’s conversations with soldiers) and turns around the king’s responsibility for sending his soldiers to death. Henry’s argument rejecting the king’s responsibility rests on individual responsibility of each man: they should

be prepared for dying free of sins. This, delivered by the actor in an increasingly irritated voice is punctuated by an energetic vulgar Polish expletive. If, as Rosiak suggests, the play is, among other aspects, about growing to power, then this dialogue and Henry's argument mark the logical line of development in the production from adopted piety, to becoming a ruthless military leader, to reacting with irritation and anger to criticism which suggests a deep-seated conviction of one's right to decide about the fate of others. Another line of development which takes Henry from his initial anxiety about leading people to death if the war is decided, to being utterly disinterested and indifferent to his soldiers' fears. Later negotiations with Montjoy (Scenes 7 and 9) show Henry concentrated on victory to the extent in which the terrifying pictures of the theatre of war make no impression on him. The victory fills him with more power and more recognition of that power, which, repeatedly, Henry will officially disavow by ascribing the English victory to God—"Take it God, For it is none but thine." (IV.8.83)

Parallely to this representation of power and ruthlessness, we may watch the other face of war: courage, valour and patriotism. This theme appears in Scene 6, in the conversation with Westmoreland who stands here for the English lords who are aware that the French army far outnumbers the English forces. The initial exchange is a short introduction to Henry's declaration of courage and honour, finishing with the famous Saint Crispian passage. Delivered with great energy and obvious emotional engagement, Henry's words are reflected in the face of Westmoreland which from a worried, dispirited and subdued expression gradually changes to a hopeful, optimistically glowing expression of belief in the English spirit and hope for victory. The next encounter is with Montjoy (Scene 7) who comes to warn Henry "of his most assured overthrow" (IV.3.85). The king's answer is full of pride—"let me speak proudly" (IV.3.114)—and the pride is combined with contempt for the French and belief in the victory over the French. In the situation in which the French have an obvious advantage, such combative courage may inspire admiration for the unwavering patriotic stance and belief in one's own cause.

However, the war has other dimensions. Immediately after Henry's two great speeches, French voices in the battlefield are heard (Scene 8): "Le jour est perdu, tout est perdu!" (IV.5.2) The conflated voices of Orleans and Bourbon bring the despair of the defeated to the front: "Let life be short, else shame will be too long" (V.2.25). In the next encounter (scene 9) we first hear Henry sending his herald to the French with the expressive will to fight and defeat the enemy with no hope for mercy:

...we'll cut the throats of those we have,
And not a man of them that we shall take
Shall taste our mercy. (IV.7.64-66)

and then hear humbled Montjoy begging for the permission to bury the dead: “O give us leave great King,/ To view the field in safety and dispose Of their dead bodies” (*Henry V*, IV.7.84-86). The quick succession of these scenes is offered instead of the “vasty fields of France crammed in this wooden O” (Prologue). The discursive presentation of war, the exchange of arguments, emotions, and moods, the concentration on Henry against all French leaders in the person of Montjoy, strips the war of whatever appeal it might have in the sense of heroism, valour, or patriotic effort. Scene 10, the counting of the dead on both sides, sums up the war as a cold business: it is counting gains and losses, sealed with Henry’s triumphant exclamation, “Was ever known so great and little loss On one part and on th’other?” (IV.8.114-115) And in this moment God is remembered, the useful shield behind which Henry’s great pride in victory is hidden, regaining the pious posture of a good Christian.

The ironic coda to this grim business of war is the end of the scenario, a brief encounter between England and France:

Henry:

Peace to this meeting, wherefor we are met.

Unto our brother France, and to our sister,

Health and fair time of day. (V.2.1-3)

Charles:

Right joyous are we to behold your face,

Most worthy brother England, fairly met. (V.2.9-10)

The speech is a conflation of the words which in Shakespeare’s play belong to Queen Isabel and to Burgundy. The latter’s speech is particularly poignant here. The description of “this best garden of the world” (V.2.37), France, destroyed and damaged by the war is a description of utter calamity and catastrophe, the turning upside down of the fates of people and what they have achieved. The contrast of the civilities exchanged between the enemies and of the result of the war is the final and strongest comment in the report on the condition of our world. The absurdity and senselessness of war which people present as justified and fought with God on their side rings horrifyingly true at any time. When the war is over, the leaders will negotiate for peace and the best possible solution for each party involved. In the case of *Henry V* the winner gets the French royal princess for wife. Let us not forget that this peaceful solution will end in the further bloody years of the Hundred Years War.

Conclusion

The unique power of this production depended on several factors, which all were interwoven. First, Kamiński's translation with its lexical richness, powerful phrasing and rhythmic perfection made Shakespeare's text clear and resounding to the ear with a powerful effect. This, then, tied up to perfection with the actors' interpretations who were able to render all ironies in their voices, and, at the same time convey the characters' emotions, convictions and fears. Third, the director's approach of connecting the idea of "this wooden o" with the restrictions of life in the pandemic situation and the use of a severely restricted space for the production as well as the presentation of just three actors whose performance was restricted to reading (and at the same time, as was said above, not restricted at all) offered a vision of a truly liberating art of theatre for the audience, the members of which were all imprisoned in their own homes. Fourth, the concentration on the selected problems lifted from the play and their enacting with very limited means, with no pomp and circumstance to which most of the well known earlier productions (especially films, e.g., Olivier's and Branagh's) had made us accustomed, demanded great concentration in following the play; it was also an opportunity for reflection both on Shakespeare's play and our own experience of politics, for the production had a clear political edge. Naturally, the frame of Rosiak's Report on the Condition of the World strengthened the last point.

The production was finished and presented before Russia attacked Ukraine. However, working on this paper and going through the production several times, I have been painfully struck by the aptness and relevance of Rosiak's and Kamiński's report on the condition of the world. They did not play an oracle but simply extracted from *Henry V* all that referred to our human erroneous ambitions, mistaken notions and vicious acts, all connected with the struggle for power and with war under the too-well-known excuse that God is with us and not with them. The Russian attacks continue, the viciousness of the wars spreads in our world, and so many young lives are lost and discolour the tawny earth with their blood. Thus, one may also conclude that the production's strength lies in its creators' ability to read Shakespeare from the vantage point of their own experience of their world.

The director of the production, Vita Maria Drygas (premiera-henryka-v), confessed: "having worked on documentary films, I saw war with my own eyes. This time I had a chance to work on this theme with eminent actors. Shakespeare's play in the context of my own experience is horrifyingly actual." It is to be hoped that the neglected reception of history plays in Poland has been corrected. The production of Rosiak and Kamiński has strikingly shown the relevance of great art for understanding the human condition. It proves that *historia magistra vitae* may have a chance to teach us something if the power of

the poetic word, great acting and thorough understanding of what theatre art is about, come in succour. It is to be hoped that that is not an unduly optimistic statement.

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