# Ideal Kingship in Shakespeare's Henry V

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THE FIRST TIME JOHN Dover Wilson saw Shakespeare's *Henry V* performed, in the fall of 1914 while tensions were brewing between England and Germany, it was enlightened to him as a story relevant to his own situation in history.[1] The insurmountable odds stacked against the English as they faced French troops at Agincourt manifested the same boiling-up of conflict experienced by the English in the second decade of the 20th century, and Shakespeare's play offered answers to the questions floating through the minds of many Englishmen approaching the First World War. What sort of person can bring an army to conquer such an insurmountable odds? Who will step up to lead and how will they do so? In *Henry V*, Wilson saw Henry as Shakespeare's argument of the ideal king in the already beloved historical King Henry, the perfect leader who can answer such questions in the face of certain danger. The trends of contemporary thought stand in opposition to this admiring gaze towards Henry, arguing that despite Shakespeare's attempts to assert him as a good king, he cannot abandon Henry's irresponsible use of military force, holy facade, feigned humility, needless brutality, and so on.[2] These arguments, however, do not grant the complexity of the argument Shakespeare is crafting in the play nearly as much credit as it deserves. Shakespeare's establishment of Henry as "the mirror of all Christian kings" (2.0.6) borrows from the epic tradition and external narratival supports to argue that ideal kingship emphasizes humanity as Henry is shown as most clearly human in the most crucial moments of the play.

From the opening plea of the Chorus for a "muse of fire" (1.0.1) to illuminate the play and cause it to "ascend the brightest heaven of invention" (1.0.2), Shakespeare invokes the epic tradition to establish the historical Henry V as the heroic and idealized king in the imagination of his Elizabethan audience. The Chorus's framing of the play is a quintessential epic convention which serves to preserve the familiar historical facts of the story[3] for the audience while bearing the epical tone throughout the play. Their call for "a muse of fire" to divinely inspire the play is reminiscent of Homer's opening "Tell me, O muse"[4] or "Sing, O goddess."[5] Their repeated requests for the audience "kindly to judge" (1.0.35) any inaccuracy or inadequacy that the play might have in its attempt to portray a story of such great importance are also epic in nature. Structurally, the play represents the narrative

[1] Dover Wilson, John. "Introduction." King Henry V. 1947.

[2] McCloskey, John C. "The Mirror of All Christian Kings." The Shakespeare Association Bulletin 19, no. 1 (1944): 36–40.

[3] Shakespeare, William, and J. H. Walter. *King Henry V.* London ;: Routledge, 1988.

[4] Homer., Samuel Butler, and Louise Ropes Loomis. *The Odyssey of Homer*. New York: Published for the Classics Club by W.J. Black, 1944.

[5] Homer., Samuel Butler, and Louise Ropes Loomis. *The Iliad of Homer*. New York: Published for the Classics Club by W.J. Black, 1942.

of an epic in its telling of a national hero at war who is favored by God with elevated style and impressive scale. Shakespeare borrows heavily from characteristics of epic poetry, including the beginning invocation to the muse as well as the glorification of warriors, the challenges and insults of war, its conclusion with the winning of Princess' Katherine's hand in marriage. Even the use of the epithet "the warlike Harry" (1.0.5)[6] as the first introduction of Henry is epic in nature by recreating the epic voice's naming of "the swift-footed Achilles" and so on. Each of these elements builds towards the overall impression that Shakespeare is presenting his own epic, rather than another drama, tragedy, or a typical historical play. This use of the epic tradition demonstrates Shakespeare's authority as a truly great writer, belonging in the company of Homer, Ovid, Virgil, and Dante while contributing to the case he will build for Henry as a hero. Thus, in Shakespeare's epic, Henry fills the role of the hero, placing him alongside Achilles, Odysseus, and Aeneas as a truly great man. These strategies support Henry as the ideal king from within the play.

The external situation of the play within Shakespeare's other works contributes to the satisfaction of Henry as the ideal king both in the narrative arch of Shakespeare's historical plays about English kings and through the story of Henry's life. As the conclusion of the second tetralogy, *Henry V* stands opposite of *Richard II*, which tells the story of the ill-fated reign of Richard II whose poor leadership saw him rely heavily on his divine right to the throne to establish his authority. His undoing was at the hand of his assumptions of kingship, that his kingship was due him by divine and hereditary right. *1* and *2 Henry IV* tell of Henry Bolingbroke's illegitimate claim of the crown. With the character arch of Hal after his introduction in *2 Henry IV*, Shakespeare lays more groundwork to build up the audience's anticipation to witness the misguided youth Hal become Henry V, the hero with whom they were already familiarized. They loved the charisma of Prince Hal and now long to see him come into his own. From the lovable rascal to the confident king who fulfills the presupposed plot of his victory at Agincourt, the audience knew the future ahead of the misfit and loved him all the more for having witnessed his growth throughout the journey. Once he has become King Henry, his kingship in *Henry V* serves as the good king against whom Richard II is measured.[7] The play itself finalizes the tetralogy and the character of Henry rises to fill the void of chaos with orderly kingship, to provide good leadership where Richard's reign was left wanting.

Neither the internal support of Henry as Shakespeare's epic hero nor the external establishment of Henry's leadership as the longed-for order of ideal kingship, however, are complete without a certain degree of fortitude proved by Henry's leadership itself. Unless Henry's character is able to hold their weight, these structures will crumble, and run the risk of disappointing an audience anticipating seeing their national hero step up to the throne. Critics have moved to propose a different view of Henry in the play, though, as a figment of over-glorified propaganda who is not held responsible for the bloody details of his kingship. In these readings, "the mirror of all Christian kings" is a false facade that obscures the messier parts of Henry's character. They capitalize on moments such as his threatening speech to Harfleur, his

[6] Berry, Edward I. "'True Things and Mock'ries': Epic and History in 'Henry V.'" Journal of English and Germanic Philology 78, no. 1 (1979): 1–16.

[7] Thayer, C. G. (Calvin Graham). *Shakespearean Politics : Government and Misgovernment in the Great Histories*. Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 1983.

command to kill French prisoners during the battle at Agincourt, and his unnecessary efforts to win over Princess Katherine to assert Henry as "a savage barbarian unrestrained by Christian ethics in his ruthless pursuit of victory" (37)[8] and emphasize the characteristics of Henry that reflect Machiavellian ideals, most notably deception and ruthlessness.[9] These interpretations, however, do not give due credit to the complex image of an ideal king that Shakespeare is proposing.

Henry is engagingly realistic as a character, largely due to the ways that he is realistically complex. In his "Preface to Shakespeare," Samuel Johnson wrote: "Shakespeare has no heroes; his scenes are occupied only by men, who act and speak as the reader thinks that he should himself have spoken or acted on the same occasion" (413-414).[10] In his hearty charisma, intensity, even in his moments of brutality, Henry is compelling as a character because he has significant depth. Part of this complexity is due to Shakespeare's incorporation of Machiavellian traits into Henry's character, as critics are correct to point out. Henry's dealings with the traitors in the second scene of Act 2 exemplify both Machiavellian deception and ruthlessness. The Chorus's prologue to the act provides the audience with the dramatic context beforehand; they enter the scene with the foreknowledge that Cambridge, Masham, and Northumberland have "confirmed conspiracy with fearful France" (2.0.27) for money, and Henry is likewise aware of their treachery. He carefully lays his trap for the traitors, posing the situation of a man who disparages the king, carefully using the royal "we" to invoke the significance of the king's position for England, and baiting them to respond to his apparent extension of mercy to the offender. Upon their insistence that he is too merciful, Henry presents his accusations of his three advisers and launches into a diatribe against their treachery. This psychologically deceptive game of cat and mouse appears as a flash of wrath from the idealized king Shakespeare had been so careful to present.[11] In his cruelty, Henry displays both Machiavellian qualities: the deception into which the three traitors fell and his ruthless condemnation of their crimes. His rhetorical brilliance is on full display in his colorful, varied language, a gift typically connected with Shakespeare's villains, not his heroes. His conviction of their crimes is thorough, slowly gaining momentum, leading to a full blast interrogation of their former virtues and landing in the slow presentation of the weight of their crime: "this revolt of thine, methinks, is like another fall of man" (2.2.139-40) and his deliverance of them over "to the answer of the law" (2.2.141). Henry's message here is that the natural consequences of their actions have arrived, not his personal wrath or cruelty. They have transgressed and they will answer for their own violation of English law. His response to them, although admittedly brutal, is justified by the severity of their conspiracy and the hypocrisy of their cries for mercy despite their previous counsel for Henry to withhold his mercy for the disparager in his trap. Even so, Henry tells them, "I will weep for thee" (2.2.137). These are some of the men closest to him in the world and Henry appropriately grieves for his friends,

[8] Ibid.

[9] Herbel, Jerry E. "Shakespeare's Machiavellian Moment: Discovering Ethics and Forming a Leadership Narrative in Henry V." Public Integrity 17, no. 3 (2015): 265–78. https://doi.org/10.1080/10999922.2015.1033914.

[10] Johnson, Samuel, and Edmund Fuller. *Selections from The Lives of the English Poets & Preface to Shakespeare*. New York: Avon Books, 1965.

[11] Richmond, Hugh M. *Shakespeare's Political Plays*. New York: Random House, 1967.

revealing an interior self that wrestles with personal feeling and duty. His actions in this scene reveal Henry's caliber as a king, his confidence in making decisions, his high appraisal of the responsibility he bears. Shakespeare's incorporation of these ideas into the character of Henry gives him the opportunity to look accurately at Henry as a human being who is admittedly imperfect, while also making a claim about the complex nature of kingship. The idealized king is clearly portrayed as being cunning, ruthless, and deceptive. Shakespeare acknowledges these as being true of Henry, accepts them, and even makes the argument that these too make Henry a good king because he uses them to the good end of protecting England. Henry's ruthlessness does not simply coexist with his responsibility to uphold the law—it supports it. His Machiavellian qualities lay claim to his commitment to protect England, in spite of their negative connotations.

Shakespeare's evidence for the humanity of the ideal king culminates in the beginning of the fourth act, as Henry approaches the climactic battle at Agincourt. He spends the night before the anticipated battle walking among the camp, visiting with his soldiers and encouraging them, then sitting alone contemplating the situation he has found himself in. Henry's humanity is emphasized in this scene through his fundamental longing to live in right relationship with other human beings and with God.

The previous scene concludes with the French, bragging to one another of the coming battle they feel sure to win, calling the English "foolish curs, that run winking into the mouth of a Russian bear" (3.7.37) and speculating at how "poor Harry" (3.8.18) must dread the dawn. These insults make the prologue to Act 4 more pivotal as it shifts to describe the English encampment. The Chorus, in their intermediary prologue, describes the eerie quiet and consuming darkness filled with tension as "the hum of either army stilly sounds" (4.0.5) while they await the rising of the sun. In this "foul womb of night" (4.0.4) the "poor condemnéd English" (4.0.22) sit by their fires contemplating the coming battle "like sacrifices" (4.0.23), while the Chorus shifts its attention to "the royal captain of this ruined band" (4.0.28) who walks through the camp to comfort and encourage the men with his presence. The first scene of the act then paradoxically rounds out Shakespeare's argument of the humanity of ideal kingship. It begins with Henry speaking to the dukes, admitting the gravity of their situation and asking to borrow Sir Erpingham's cloak. Henry puts it on in order to walk around the camp without revealing his identity to his men. Without ceremonial clothing to signify his kingship, Henry can be simply a man. He walks among his subjects as one of them, only enabled to do so through means of a deception. In contrast to other Machiavellian characters of Shakespeare's imagination, Henry appropriates the tools to his own purposes. Iago and Edmund deceive others for their own ambitions of power, Hamlet disguises his mental state in hopes of evading suspicion in his own plot to murder the king, but Henry uses deception for a common good.[12] His donning of the cloak coincides with moments that evidence Henry as a humble, deeply compassionate leader. Here Shakespeare's Christian context is inevitably influential. His faith provided the image of the ideal king in Jesus, who likewise descended from his royal position of power to walk among broken humanity. Henry descends from his position for the "poor condemnéd English," "every wretch, pining and pale" (4.0.41) whom he calls "brothers, friends, and countrymen"

[12] Ringwood, Frances. "Shakespeare's Mavericks and the Machiavellian Moment." Shakespeare in Southern Africa 32, no. 1 (2019): 38–48. https://doi.org/10.4314/sisa.v32i1.5.

(4.0.34), in actions that mirror the incarnation of Christ, the divinity who put on flesh to descend and dwell among men. In his actions that most reflect the idealized kingship of Jesus, Henry simultaneously engages in a deception, which contributes to Shakespeare's case that Machiavellian traits may be used for good.

Then, on the eve of the climactic day of pain and suffering, Henry goes off by himself to pray, echoing the solitude Jesus sought in the Garden of Gethsemane on the eve of his own suffering. Henry first monologues on the weight he feels leadership to be, responding to his men's claims that the king is responsible for the souls of each man that dies serving the king by fighting in his war, exclaiming first:

> Upon the King! "Let us our lives, our souls,
> Our debts, our careful wives,
> Our children, and our sins, lay on the King!"
> We must bear all. Oh, hard condition,
> Twin-born with greatness, subject to the breath
> Of every fool whose sense no more can feel
> But his own wringing (4.1.207-13).

Henry's struggle is against the part of himself that is not his natural existence, but the body politic, which Ernst Kantorowicz argued is the king's second personhood which consists "of Policy and Government, and constituted for the Direction of the People" (7).[13] In his kingly personhood, Henry bears the significance of every one of his subjects. This is illustrated well in his use of the 'royal we' in his exasperated "we must bear all." The hard condition of his life is the reality that he was "twin-born with greatness" and is unable to separate himself as an individual from his role as king. He twists "subject" to make himself the subject of his own subjects, which touches thematically on his chief frustration with his kingship: the separation it creates between himself and his people. Henry goes on to interrogate the ceremony that laid upon him the burden of the body politic and thus created this separation. He asks, "Art thou aught else but place, degree, and form, creating awe and fear in other men?" (4.1.34-5). What separates him from others while making him the subject of their expectations and criticism? His answer is in the question itself: only social rank makes him any different from his subjects. Yet these mere ceremonies form a chasm that isolates Henry from other people and leave him deeply longing for genuine human community.

Critics have called this soliloquy "strangely externalized and formal, in no sense a revelation of the private workings of a mind," (218)[14] which paints Henry as the stiff facade of Shakespeare's excessively idealized king, yet certainly this is the most vulnerable state in which the audience receives Henry throughout the entirety of the play and it characterizes him as warmly human in his longing to be in relationship with other people. This is the only place in the play that Henry is alone, making this speech the audience's glimpse into the inner workings of his mind and his true emotions. Despite his intense treatment of the traitors and his appalling threats to Harfleur, this soliloquy is more representative of Henry's emotions than any other scene because of his consciousness of the body politic and its absence in his solitude. His monologue is dripping with sarcasm, frustration, and despair. Look no further than "O be sick, great greatness" (4.1.228) to see the warm

[13] Kantorowicz, Ernst H. *The King's Two Bodies: a Study in Mediaeval Political Theology.* Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press, 1997.

[14] Barton, Anne. *Essays, Mainly Shakespearean*. Cambridge [England]; Cambridge University Press, 1994.

blood pumping through Henry's words. These are Henry's true feelings poured out, his contemplation of self, his frustration with his lot in life, his desire for connection with other people. At a base level, Henry is longing for human connection. The responsibility of kingship, the body politic places him on the throne high above his subjects. Rather than seeing this only as a privilege or an opportunity for control, he feels himself "subject to the breath of every fool." Only in solitude can Henry come to terms with the weight of this burden. Everything else he says in the play is said with the consideration of his audience, what the message will be to each witness through his diction, delivery, and deportment. His condemnation of the traitors is said to the offenders themselves, in addition to the rest of the country that will look at what Henry does and he communicates in no uncertain terms that the law will be upheld in Henry's reign. His speech to Harfleur directly tells them how confident he is in his soldiers, and indirectly reassures his men of the same thing. Here only in the entirety of the play, Henry is able to express his true thoughts and feelings, his frustration, isolation, even his hopelessness at the position he has come to occupy in life. The ceremonies that make Henry king isolate him from other people and he can only realize any sort of genuine connection, paradoxically, through deception. The incarnation is motivated by God's longing to dwell among humankind and Henry's disguise is aimed at the same goal. He deceives others in order to be able to connect with them. In this way, Henry is most human and most representative of the ideal king at this pivotal moment of the play.

Henry's monologue is interrupted, then he offers a prayer on behalf of his men, directly addressing God and consequently giving the audience a clear view into Henry's attitude towards God. He begins:

> O God of battles, steel my soldiers' hearts.
> Possess them not with fear. Take from them now
> The sense of reck'ning if th'opposed numbers
> Pluck their hearts from them (4.1.266-69).

He does not pretend to possess any righteousness that God ought to reward, does not make any appeal about the justice of the cause, nor does he even present any sort of plea for God to grant the English the victory. He humbly begs God to bestow courage upon his men, presumably already having the desire for them to fight honorably that he encourages them with in the next scene's famous Saint Crispin's Day speech. His prayer reveals Henry's care for his men. Even though he leads them into physical harm, his desire is for their moral character. Again, the audience ought to take Henry's words as genuine; here in his solitude, he has no one to impress or convince other than God. This speech can have one of two connotations given the gravity of the situation: as either a last-ditch petition made in desperation or a solemn surrender of that which Henry cares most about to the highest power he might entrust it to. Surely the tone of the prayer points to the latter. His sentences are remarkably short, particularly given the rambling paratactic syntax of his more impassioned speeches. In their lack of rhetorical complexity, the sentences of this prayer correspond with a king who is at his weakest moment. He is deferential and sincere before the "God of battles." in the face of the impending conflict. His second request is simple as well, that God might not punish the English soldiers for the misdeeds Henry's father made in "compassing the crown" (4.1.282).[15] This awareness of his sinfulness before God sees Henry

[15] Ibid.

participating in the appropriate human role in the created order. He does not conflate himself with God in his high rank in society or pose himself in any position of favor that might make him deserving of any divine gift. Indeed, the weight of guilt he feels is apparent in his list of penances he had done to atone for his father's sins: re-burying Richard's body and anointing it with "more contrite tears than from it issued forcèd drops of blood" (4.1.273-4), paying five hundred poor "who twice a day their withered hands hold up toward heaven to pardon blood" (4.1.276), and building two chantries where priests "sing still for Richard's soul" (4.1.279). His guilt communicates a longing to be restored to right standing with God and his pursuit of atonement through these penances reveal just how desperate he is for this reconciliation. Henry also occupies the state of humanity most fully in this moment in his guilt, on bended knee, and in his longing for a right relationship with God.

Shakespeare's efforts to establish Henry as the ideal of kingship are not undone by his human flaws, rather they contribute to the complexity of the argument. Henry's human-centered kingship fits neatly into the greater narrative of Shakespeare's histories. If Richard II's *undoing* was caused by his inaccurate view of kingship that conflated himself with the supernatural authority laid on him in that role, Henry's *making* is, antithetically, his accurate view of kingship that sees himself as "but a man" (4.1.99). If Richard represents unstable leadership by his reliance on the ceremonies of kingship that connect his physical self to the body politic and the authority of the divine, then surely Henry's insistence that beneath all the ceremonial garb the king is as human as any other man reflects also the stability of his kingship. In terms of Shakespeare's adoption of Henry as the hero of his epic, he represents the epic tradition while transporting it into his Christian context. Homer's heroes were "godlike" in their rage or cunning; Henry is like God in his abandonment of his high status in pursuit of a relationship with humankind.

This reading of *Henry V* that emphasizes the king at his best moment when he is most human challenges literary thought around the play by viewing Henry not as a hypocrite or a single-faceted figment of political propaganda, but as Shakespeare's argument for the complex nature of an ideal king. He establishes Henry as the ideal king, then at the pivotal moment of the play shows him to be most human instead of most godlike. He fills the role of hero when he is most godlike, but Shakespeare's God is found in human flesh through the incarnation of Christ, who humbled himself in the form of a human being because he longed to exist with men and for them to be reconciled to Him. Henry then is the human embodiment of ideal leadership who reflects God in his moments of greatest humanity as he dons a Machiavellian disguise to put off his body politic and be just another human being. Henry cannot justifiably be Shakespeare's shallow nationalist hero, rather he is a complex character who makes an argument that kingship is a pursuit of mirroring God not in his divinity, but in his humility and his desire for the redemption of humanity. In his human manifestation of kingly humility, Henry becomes "the mirror of all Christian kings" by mirroring the kingship of Jesus Christ.