

King Henry's competence as a ruler in Henry V



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" King Henry's Competence as a Ruler in Henry V" Often remembered for his wild and boyish characteristics, King Henry assures his fellow English and those who oppose him that he has evolved from Prince Hal into a competent king. Although some of Henry's actions in battle carry immoral implications, he defines a " competent" king as one who fully exercises the responsibilities of a ruler, as seen by his response to the Dauphin's claim that Henry is still only a youth. Henry's composed demeanor and well-devised rhetoric when speaking to various characters reveals that he is confident in his abilities as a ruler. Therefore, Henry's rhetoric serves to convince the other characters and the audience, rather than himself, that he is capable of holding the throne of England, as he has grown from his past as Prince Hal and will " show [his] sail of greatness" upon the " throne of France" (I. ii. 275-276). Upon receiving the Dauphin's gift of tennis balls, which symbolizes Henry's image as a mere sportsman without governing capability, Henry responds with clever and serious rhetoric. The Dauphin's insults do not dismantle Henry's demeanor, revealing just how much the English King has matured: Henry says that he is " glad the Dauphin is so pleasant" and grateful for the Dauphin's " present" and " pains" (I. ii. 260-261). As Henry converts the imagery of a tennis game to that of a war, his words and attitude become very stern; he states that England " will in France, by God's grace, play a set" and " strike [King Charles'] crown into the hazard" (I. ii. 263-264). Henry acknowledges the Dauphin's references to the wild Prince Hal by arguing that he never valued his position in England. Henry does assert, however, that he has made use of his boyish past. " To be like a king," Henry states, he will " show [his] sail of greatness," and the Dauphin's mockery will " mock mothers from their sons, mock castles down" and leave the unborn cursing

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the Dauphin's ridicule. (I. ii. 275-288) Henry's rhetorical tactics carry a weight of severity that is somewhat masked by his earlier word play. As he compares war to a tennis match, Henry seems to be casually voicing threats, but, toward the end of his speech, he uses rhetorical manipulation to pin the cause of the impending war on the mockery of the Dauphin. The audience already knows that Henry has made the decision to wage war on France prior to his speaking with the ambassador, but Henry makes it seem as if the Dauphin's insults have caused him to declare war. Henry's manipulation also makes it seem as if he is quick to anger, thus providing the image of a serious ruler who is capable of overtaking the French empire. The primary function of the rhetorical manipulation, however, is to convince the Dauphin and France that Henry is a competent ruler; he could have simply stated that he has declared war, but his tactics place responsibility on the Dauphin, revealing hasty and clever decision-making. In his argument with Michael Williams, Henry's rhetoric serves to justify his duties as king and to convince his soldiers that a competent ruler is not responsible for his soldiers' deaths. Williams states that King Henry is responsible for the ungraceful deaths of his soldiers because those who die, since they were led in battle by Henry, could not disobey orders for they are the king's subjects. Henry objects with a set of analogies that focus on the structure of people dying in the process of following the orders of a superior. Henry argues that a king's duties do not require him "to answer [the] endings of his soldiers," just as the father and masters "purpose not their [subjects] death / when they purpose their services" (IV. i. 151-154). Although a soldier, son and servant are subjects to their superiors, Henry argues that a king demands the service of his men but does not order them to die. Henry's rejection of responsibility does not serve

to demean his power as king, but to assert that those who die in battle are suffering God's vengeance due to their own personal sins. A king, Henry argues, is not more "guilty of [his soldiers'] / damnation than he was before guilty of those impieties / for which [his soldiers] are now visited" because those who die should be prepared for God's justice. (IV. i. 169-171) By arguing that "every subject's duty / is the king's, but every subject's soul is his own," Henry transfers the responsibility of death back to the soldiers. (IV. i. 171-172) In addressing the soldiers' souls, Henry targets their most intrinsic parts; the soldiers are essentially forced to clear their consciences before battle in fear of suffering an unpromising afterlife. Henry is again clever in his rhetorical manipulation because the soldiers are both obligated to follow their king and also left with the responsibility of their own deaths. If a man dies without repenting his sins, he is deserving due to his lack of faith, and if he dies after he has repented, it is to his advantage for his conscience is clear before the judgment of God. If a soldier were to live after clearing his conscience, Henry argues, it would mean he has been blessed by God for his preparation, and should therefore advise others to prepare for death.

Henry's logic and manipulation convince the audience that he is a capable ruler by avoiding his soldiers' claims of conviction, and therefore avoiding the negativity of death produced by war. By transferring responsibility from himself to his soldiers, Henry creates a system that encourages his soldiers' obedience while also making their fate strictly a product of repentance and God's will. After his argument with Williams and Bates, Henry expresses, in a soliloquy, how he is burdened with the lives of all his people. The responsibilities placed upon Henry only bring him grief, for the only compensation he gains in being king is a ceremony, which holds no value for

Henry. In an attempt to find value in his ceremonies, Henry addresses "Ceremony" directly by asking for its worth and why he should admire it. Henry states that Ceremony only provides "place, degree and form," things which merely instill fear in others through "poisoned flattery" (IV. i. 236-243). Henry does not find satisfaction in the fame and glory that kingship supposedly brings because all that is produced from Ceremony is superficial and meaningless. Since Henry sees that Ceremony as all that separates him from an ordinary man, he argues that the lone reward of Ceremony cannot even cure him of sickness, thus stripping him of immunity to a danger common to all living beings. Henry's reference to sickness places him on a level equal to his people, thereby underlining Ceremony's fundamental uselessness. This rhetorical tactic proves effective because Ceremony is inanimate and therefore cannot object to Henry's argument. As Henry refutes each supposed benefit of Ceremony, his argument accumulates with clear reasoning, which later aids in convincing the audience of his competence as king. Henry even goes so far as to argue that all the material possessions of Ceremony fail to provide him the peace of mind of a slave - who, after all, endures gruesome treatment day and night only to labor until he dies. A slave has the pleasure of being "a member of the country's peace," while Henry is burdened with the constant maintenance of that peace. (IV. i. 273) These lamentations notwithstanding, however, Henry embraces his responsibilities as king and continues into battle. Rhetorically, Henry's words are honest, for no other characters are present on stage. This allows for the audience to first sympathize with Henry, and then realize that he is indeed a competent ruler because he rejects the materialistic and superficial qualities of ceremony that serve as the only supposed benefit of

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being a king. Without the presence of other characters, the audience cannot help but view Henry's lament as genuine because, if Henry rejects Ceremony, his motivation to rule must lie solely in a desire to preserve the safety of England. Assuming the throne of England provides Henry with an overwhelming task in itself, but his immature past as Prince Hal introduces an additional obstacle for him to surpass as king. Henry's manipulative rhetoric in placing the consequence of war on the mockery of the Dauphin constructs Henry's image as a competent ruler to the French because he employs initiative and responsibility in not only defending his character but in his willingness to take action. Henry's rhetorical ability to manipulate his soldiers into following his orders and assuming responsibility for their deaths proves to the audience that he is capable of leading an army without the conviction produced by death. Henry's humble rejection of " Ceremony" finalizes his attempt to prove his competence as a king to the audience. Not only is Henry disinterested in his only reward for being king, he accepts the responsibility of protecting England and marches forward into battle.