

Is henry v an ideal  
christian king



**ASSIGN  
BUSTER**

Henry V is the last of the four Shakespearean plays dealing with the rise of the House of Lancaster but unlike any of its predecessors, this play focuses more on going to war rather than the issue of ruling over England. In the play Henry [V] is portrayed as being the ideal Christian king, but what made an ideal king? In this essay, I will examine four key speeches made by Henry in the play, analyse them and see what they reveal about his character and from that deduce what made an ideal Christian king.

The speeches that I will consider can be found in Act 1 Scene 2 [lines 259-298], Act 2 Scene 2 [lines 79-144], Act 3 Scene 1 [whole scene] and Act 3 Scene 3 [whole scene]. The first extract [Act 1 Scene 2] is Henry's reply to the Dauphin in response to the insult with the tennis balls. The purpose of this speech is very obvious from the start; to warn the Dauphin of the forthcoming invasion of France and the defeat of the French which Henry believes will come about as a result. He also tells the Dauphin that the whole country and its future citizens will hate him for this mockery of the king.

The speech starts with an ironic light hearted riposte when he says, " We are glad the Dauphin is so pleasant with us... " [line 260]. Then almost immediately the speech takes on a greater seriousness and we can feel the tension swell in the room as Henry is giving the state response to the insult. It ends with Henry launching a personal attack on the Dauphin and we can clearly see that this is his personal response to the insult. In terms of language and imagery there are two distinct sections within the extract itself.

In the first section [lines 259-267], Henry describes the retributive future war in the context of a game of tennis. During the speech Henry uses the metaphors of a game of tennis e. g. a set being played in France [line 263], the triple pun on the word court [line 266] where the meanings are a tennis court, regal court and law court and chases [line 267] which are part of tennis scoring system. Together these suggest that the war will almost be like a game of tennis in France where the English give the French a royal thrashing.

In the second part of the speech [lines 268-298] the language changes from that of a game of tennis to that of war and misery. Another thing which should be noted is that we can tell when Henry is giving the state response because he speaks using the pluralis majestatis (the royal we) e. g. “ When we have matched... ” [line 262] In terms of leadership qualities, the extract from Act 1 Scene 2 shows us that Henry has oratorical skills, he makes an eloquent and meaningful response to an insult to the state from the Dauphin, and his religious belief when says that the forthcoming war would be under God’s jurisdiction.

We also see some of his warrior instinct as he demands war in return for the political insult as well as his statesmanship. The next speech being considered is in Act 2 Scene 2 and this is Henry’s speech to the traitors Scroop, Cambridge and Grey following the unmasking of their treachery. The speech is in four distinct sections. It starts with Henry reproaching all three traitors for not being merciful to others before moving onto a light personal reproach to Cambridge and Grey. However, Scroop’s reproach is much more

severe and this is because Scroop is on the receiving end of two sorts of anger.

The first is the anger of the state for an almost successful act of treachery against the king. The second kind of anger is Henry's personal anger towards Scroop as "thou that did bear the key of all my counsels and knewst the very bottom of my soul" [lines 95-96]. The speech finally ends with the traitors' execution order. It should be noted that Henry gives the order for execution on the grounds that they were committing treason and were a serious threat to state security not out of spite or for personal revenge.

Throughout the speech we see the cleverness of Henry's elaborate trap as he first tricks them into denying clemency towards the drunken man who did not act against the state before turning their denial for clemency back against them. During the speech, especially when reproaching Scroop, Henry describes the actions of the traitors using language that reflects his shock and horror at the treason e. g. Bottom of my soul [line 95], coined me into gold [line 97] and extract one spark of evil [line 101].

These references suggest that the traitors are like some strange magical force from which evil and malevolence ooze out and seek to destroy God's chosen representative on Earth. When he moves on in his speech to question the motives of the traitors the imagery changes to the traitors becoming devils lured into performing malicious and treacherous acts by their temptation and greed. Parallels are also drawn to the fall of man in the Garden of Eden [lines 121-137].

In this speech we once again see Henry's excellent oratorical skills and his ability to maintain his eloquence and dignity despite the seriousness of the attempted act of treachery as well as the importance of loyalty to him. We also know from this speech that he is a religious believer as he makes biblical references to the Garden of Eden and Adam and that he is not spiteful as the traitors are only executed because they are such a large threat to state security. However, for the first time in the play we see the shrewd aspect of Henry as he tricks the traitors into signing their own death warrants.

The third speech appears in Act 3 Scene 1 [whole scene] and concerns itself with Henry's attempt to rouse his troops prior to the siege of Harfleur. Like the other speeches being considered, this also has various parts to it. It starts off with Henry telling his soldiers that "In peace there's nothing so becomes a Man as modest stillness and humility" [lines 4-5]. In other words, whilst being human is a good thing in times of peace, it is absolutely useless in times of difficult war and instead, they should attempt to imitate the actions of a tiger by divesting themselves of humanity and moral scruples.

He then goes on to say that by fighting and taking Harfleur, the soldiers will be honouring their families and be a fitting descendant to their ancestors. This is a key point as in medieval times it was often thought that immortality could be achieved by the actions of your children. "Dishonour not your mothers; now attest that those whom you called fathers did beget you". Henry moves on to talk about how anybody can be a hero like the king before finally reminding his troops that this is a battle for God, King and Country.

This shows his acknowledgement of his supposed divine right to rule the country. Divine right was a medieval and Elizabethan principle which gave the king absolute political power as he was seen as being God's chosen representative on Earth. In terms of the imagery conjured up by the language used it is fairly obvious. When Henry tells his men to "imitate the action of the tiger" we, the audience, expect imagery of the tiger to follow and it does with references to stiffened sinews [line 7], fair nature disguised by rage [line 8] and wide stretched nostrils [line 15].

The image of the tiger is used by Henry as it is believed to symbolise courage, strength and battle-spirit, all of which will be essential if Harfleur is to be captured. Henry also creates naval war imagery with the action of overwhelming Harfleur before taking it is compared to a raging battle at sea where the English are like canon balls firing into the French ships sinking them. So far in this play we have not seen Henry speak so simply and plainly to anyone else.

In this extract Henry purposefully speaks like this and in doing so shows us that he has the capacity to reach all the ranks of his soldiers, the majority of whom were yeomen and general low life and the speech takes the tone associated with a man to man conversation rather than superior to inferior. In Henry IV Part 1, Henry [V] openly reveals that his apparent 'wilder days' were merely a facade put on by him so that he could integrate with the common people and understand their frame of mind.

This shows us that Henry is not what he seems at face value and that he had for a long time anticipated the day when he would take the crown and have

to make such an important speech to commoners. In summarising the leadership qualities shown by Henry in this extract, we once again see Henry's masterful rhetoric as well as his religious belief. However, we also see more of Henry's warrior instinct, skills and thinking when he uses actions and the battle spirit of a tiger to rouse his army and his ability to inspire people to his advantage in times of need.

The final speech that I am going to consider is Act 3 Scene 3 [whole scene]. In this scene Henry verbally intimidates the Governor of Harfleur into submission and forces him to surrender Harfleur to the English. Unlike the other speeches that are being considered, this scene [being only 68 lines in length] doesn't really have much in the way of progression and only really has one theme. In this scene, Henry sends a threat to the governor of Harfleur telling to surrender or face the consequences of his army's actions which would be uncontrollable if they were ordered to attack again.

When the governor finally submits Henry tells Exeter to fortify the town but to show mercy to the townspeople. The imagery that is conjured up by Henry is very powerful. The way in which he talks about the total destruction of Harfleur is such that we can picture it burnt and razed to the ground with the woman being repeatedly raped and the children being tortured and beaten. We can imagine the bloodied decapitated heads of the Harfleur soldiers pierced on tall spikes left standing outside the city's boundaries and the howls of the mothers over the bodies of their dead/dying children.

Henry has also reverted from using the English he uses when addressing his common troops to the more dignified, eloquent and diplomatic language he

uses when speaking to the nobility. In this extract, a few more aspects of Henry's character are portrayed aside from the usual oratorical skills we can see that he is religious and scholarly as biblical references are made to people like Herod and has a warrior instinct because he threatens to raze Harfleur to the ground.

Another characteristic is his mercifulness which he asks to be shown after capturing of Harfleur. Having carefully looked at and analysed four of his key speeches we can see that Henry was religious, learned both generally and in state affairs and a good competent military leader. At the end of Act 5 Scene 2 we also know that he marries Katherine and has a son [Henry VI] and so matches Erasmus's definition of the ideal king very closely.

Erasmus was a Dutch philosopher who lived during the Elizabethan era and once said that an ideal king should be truly religious, learned, intellectually capable, a good competent military leader, someone who could advise and listen and eventually would become a husband and produce a male heir to the throne. I can therefore say that in this Shakespearean interpretation of Henry V and the Battle of Agincourt, Henry has been portrayed as many of the attributes which Erasmus describes that a medieval king should have.