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# HENRY THE FIFTH: SHAKESPEARE'S PORTRAIT OF THE PERFECT KING




NATKA JANKOVA \*



**Abstract:** The objective of this paper is to expose the Shakespeare's formula and portrait of the perfect king as part of the British Mythology. Because of the fact that *Henry the Fifth* is a historical play, it is confirmed that it deals with the rise of the English and especially their pride. The aim of this paper is to show that the play is full of noble speeches, heroic battles and valiant Englishmen who paved their way to victory no matter what the circumstances or consequences were back then. In addition, Henry the Fifth is portrayed by Shakespeare as a brave, modest and finally as a perfect Christian king. In the introduction, the genre of the popular Shakespeare's work is being discussed and also how Henry the Fifth is portrayed as a heroic imagery and quasi-divine figure in the English history. Afterwards, the religious side of the perfect king is being considered and in the conclusion the revelation of Shakespeare's formula of the perfect English gentlemen can be found.

**Key word:** English pride, victory, perfect king, mythology, Christianity.



## 1. Introduction

The play *Henry the Fifth* was written by Shakespeare as a culmination to his cycle of historical plays. This play is primarily about Henry's conquest of France. The play is patriotic homage to a heroic king mixed with honest thoughts that reveal the real war extending from boring moments to cruel ones. Being defined as a chronicle, *Henry the Fifth* is the only chronicle that could potentially cause confusion of its genre. The ending differs a lot from the truly happy end-

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ings of Shakespeare's comedies. It does end with the promise of a marriage between King Henry of England and the Princess of France. However, we know that the marriage is not going to bring lasting peace to the two hostile powers. Shakespeare's chronicles are rooted in history as a process and this expels the possibility of an unproblematic positive solution. *Henry the Fifth* is full of heroic imagery, at the centre of which we naturally find Henry. If we grant that Henry's deeds make him a "quasi-divine" figure of great national importance and on whose actions depends the fate of a certain nation, then we might even cast him as an epic hero:

'...We few, we happy few, we band of brothers.  
For he today that sheds his blood with me  
Shall be my brother; be he ne'er so vile,  
This day shall gentle his condition.  
And gentlemen in England now abed  
Shall think themselves accursed they were not here,  
And hold their manhoods cheap whiles any speaks  
That fought with us upon Saint Crispin's day...' (Shakespeare, 1994:95)

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These words, spoken by Henry the Fifth, reflect the pride of the English. The memory of a glorious victory and connecting the Battle of Agincourt with a Holy day helped reinforcement to the popular belief that Providence played a role in England's fortunes during that historic battle. The ensuing bloody and chaotic clash seemed a proof enough of divine intervention, because Henry's troops rose up to defeat the French army almost four times as large. However, the English are mirrored triumphant in a righteous cause, achieving victory even with God's blessing. Henry the Fifth stays as the ideal hero in contrast with the troubled John, the deposed Richard i.e. Henry the Fourth's rebel. Through a traditional conception Henry the Fifth was a hero-king and what really interested Shakespeare in these plays were the conditions of kingship, rather than the achieved results.

## 2. The Perfect Portrait

Shakespeare creates a very prevailing picture of Henry by using metaphorical imagery in the first prologue of the play:

'...Assume the port of Mars; and at his heels,  
 Leash'd in like hounds, should famine, sword and fire  
 Crouch for employment. But pardon, and gentles all,  
 The flat unraised spirits that have dared  
 On this unworthy scaffold to bring forth  
 So great an object: can this cockpit hold  
 The vasty fields of France?...'(Shakespeare,1994:447)

The usage of the technique which is imposed in this case describes Henry as a god-like figure, with great prerogative. Henry's description here resembles him as the God of war and illustrates him to be able to take on the position of the classical God of war. The impact of this context would be rather vast on the audience, in other words overwhelming, because of the comparison between King Henry and the God of war, portraying in an actual fact, the extraordinary power of Henry, not in physical terms but in authoritative terminology.

If Henry the Fifth conceived the concerns of being a heroic and ruthless figure at the same time, this does not mean that he achieved the concept of morality. The play proposes that the qualities that define a good ruler are not necessarily the same qualities that define a good person. Henry is an extraordinarily good leader: he is intelligent, focused, and inspiring to his men. He uses all different resources of his disposal to ensure that he achieves his goals. Shakespeare presents the charisma of Henry and his ability to connect with his subjects and encourage them to embrace their goals as the essential criterion of a good leadership. By inspiring his men to win the Battle of Agincourt despite the overwhelming difficulties, Henry achieves the ultimate heroic status. But in order to achieve all this, sometimes he acts in an immoral and unforgivable way. Henry backstabs close friends such as Falstaff, and he puts other friends to death in order to uphold the law. While it is hard to accuse Henry for killing Scrope because Scrope was plotting to assassinate him, his cruel punishment of Bardolph is less understandable, as is his wish to threaten the terrible murder of the children of Harfleur so to persuade the governor to surrender. Henry speaks about peace, but once his mind gets down to a course of action, he is eager to condone and create massive and unprovoked violence in order to achieve his aims.

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According to Una Ellis Fermor, what Shakespeare's profound interest was not the kind of person as Henry. There is no Henry for him, only the king. This king as Shakespeare portrays him is indeed a necessary man i.e. the keystone upon which the XVI century state depends and the figure of the perfect public man:

'...O God of battles! steel my soldiers' hearts;  
Possess them not with fear; take from them now  
The sense of reckoning, if the opposed numbers  
Pluck their hearts from them. Not today,  
O Lord,  
O, not today,  
think not upon the fault  
My father made in compassing the crown!...' (Shakespeare,1994:451)

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Within these lines from Act IV lies the image of Henry as a king, unrecognized, mingling with his common soldiers and exploring with them a fundamental problem. From J. H. Walter's point of view: 'It is assumed that the king is a Christian and supports the Christian Church. He should be learned and well versed in theology and justice should be established in his kingdom.' And it could not be otherwise. Henry the Fifth, the epic hero and the agent of God's plan must be dedicated to follow the divine plan of God. So the personality of the King has united England as never before and already the English are eager to follow the 'mirror of all Christian kings'. Throughout the play, Shakespeare portrayed Henry as the perfect model, Christian king. He achieved this by enhancing the image of Henry being all things: Christian, patriotic and wise. Representing a very Christian country, Henry as the king was a devoted Christian. He always put God before his country and himself: 'Save those to God that run before our business.' (Shakespeare,1994:94) He puts his thoughts to God before anything else that he does.

### 3. The British Mythology versus the British History

In Shakespeare's time, people had very different attitude towards history than today. The aim of history back then was to make a moral political conclusion rather than retelling the past activities of some important people. Historians and literature authors in those days often imported folklore hints in the historical stories. Henry the Fifth is one of these cases and of course it is part of the British mythology.



Henry the Fifth becomes mythological in the part where he is assumed as "the port of Mars" or has the same behaviour as the Roman God of war, Mars. Among those lines the accomplishment of Henry is described as something more than a simple victory or something real. My opinion is that this is Shakespeare's wistful revival of the past and the need for a new English gentleman who is at the same time the perfect king.

The real play of Shakespeare starts with the conversation of the two bishops who try to find a way to convince the king that he is rightfully the king of France. As a response to that the French Dauphin sends him barrel of tennis balls, in order to mock Henry's request. Of course, Henry makes a decision to invade France as a result of revenge for the insult. When he prepares for war at Southampton, he discovers another plot against him led by three of his nobles and afterwards they are arrested for treason. However, in France, there is another story: whether to take the English threat in a serious way. In the meantime, Henry conquers the town of Harfleur and threatens the local governor and the French mobilize a massive force.

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At that time, Henry's army is outnumbered, and rampaged by famine and diseases. Negotiating with the French herald, Mountjoy, Henry confirms his plan to come to the port of Calais, but he only reveals to Mountjoy that will not ask or make a battle with the French if they come against him. This is how the famous battle of Agincourt is being set. Henry the Fifth remains anonymous among the troops and the next morning on St. Crispin's Day Henry delivers the famous speech to inspire his soldiers. No matter what the odds were the English manage to defeat the French, moreover by the workmanship of their longbow archers.

There are two main events connected to the victory. At the time when the French seemed like they are regrouping, Henry decided to give orders to kill their prisoners. After that he receives news that the French plundered their camp and killed all the guards of it. In the meanwhile the French tried to arrange for peace and Henry has won the battle of Agincourt. And indeed, peace is accomplished by the conference for peace in France. The terms coming out from the negotiations are that Henry will marry Catherin – the daughter of King

Charles VI of France. No matter the fact that the play ends happily as Henry prepares for his wedding, the epilogue spoken by the Chorus is a grief for the rule of Henry's son, who lost France and made his England bleed (Shakespeare, 2008:503).

In spite of being difficult to comment on Shakespeare's portrayal of Henry as a character, the young Henry set about remaking his image following his ascension to the throne. He disremembers his "misruly mates of dissolute order and life" and evolves as a mythical and dull ruler. However, the tennis ball scene is pure fiction and the war with France more or less had to do with commercial interests and conflicts than anything else described in the play.

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The events that come after are compressed but prudently accurate. Henry sieged Harfleur for a long time and suffered a lot for it before the town consigned through negotiations. The town and the citizens were divided and only those who promised devotion to Henry were able to stay. Even the inhabitants who were taken away could take everything they want to carry and they were given money by the English for their travels. Actually these were the terms of Henry's general policy toward the French people during the campaign. Because he considered himself the king of France, he regarded them as his own subjects. There is even a part in the play when an English soldier is being hanged accused for robbing a church, mirroring Bar-dolph's crime and execution.

Agincourt happened more than a month after the fall of Harfleur. While history tells that Henry's army was indeed outnumbered and severely weakened, no one seems to agree on the correct number of the soldiers or the casualty participants in the war. Recent historians set the English army at a number between 6,000 and 9,000 men, facing a French army that ranges between 12,000 to 36,000 troops. Casualty numbers are even vaguer but the English certainly suffered fewer than 500 killed and wounded against thousands of French losses. Indeed, Henry ordered at some point in the battle that prisoners should be killed, and this tends to disgrace his reputation no matter what the battle situation was at the time. The baggage train attack happened also although the slaughter of the boys may be used as dramatic device do decrease the impact of Henry's execution of the

prisoners. Agincourt made the French inferior and this led to the Treaty of Troyes between England and France including the marriage of Henry and Catherine. However, the treaty was signed (and the royal couple wed) in 1420, some five years after Agincourt. The play of Shakespeare depicts it as more closely after the victory. Henry would die two short years later of dysentery while on campaign in 1422 once again in France—never being crowned as the French king.

### Conclusion

In contrast to the person Henry the Fifth described in the play, the real Henry the Fifth, who was actually the son of Henry IV, is described in many historical books as wise and mature king. In order not to bother the people with his legal right to the crown, he gives them the opportunity to go into war with France. He had chosen the right time to attack France, when they had minimum power of defence. It was because of the quarrel between the French royal family and the house of Burgundy that led to turmoil and resulted in defeat of the French army at the Battle of Agincourt.

As it was mentioned previously, Henry the Fifth is portrayed as a perfect Christian king and being accepted as such it is impossible to see his “dark” side. It is because of the fact that, people in those times were not privileged to go to school and they learned the history exactly from these folktales. No matter whether the readers are aware, it seems that most of the ordinary people learned the history from the stage and actors’ performance and probably accepted the stories in that mythological way. JSHS|51

I truly believe that Shakespeare used the character of Henry to show his patriotism and inspire it in others through appointing the great victory of Agincourt as well as inspiring patriotism in the common man. In my opinion, Shakespeare used his plays as means of creating messages to all Englishmen to strive and achieve their goals and by doing this, the result would be becoming a role model in reflection of Henry and becoming a perfect gentleman. Shakespeare’s message is clear and shows that if everyone were as honourable as King Henry ‘the things’ would be much more different. And yet, this was done in order to set the guidelines for a Utopian perfect gentleman. It would be partial to discuss Henry as a King without indicating how Shake-

Shakespeare has portrayed his character. Henry has always been seen to be politically correct in most of his speeches at all times. Shakespeare does not let a reader to see Henry's true self but as only an almost perfect noble king and this allows us to categorize this play as part of the British mythology. On the other hand, according to renaissance theory, the epic hero must be perfect above the common run of men and of royal blood, in effect, the ideal king, and in this case this 'ideal king' was in many ways very real conception. As Emile Legouis says, Shakespeare's art is essentially empiric, taking account only of realities, and refusing to build on the abstract. Speaking through Henry the Fifth, Shakespeare reveals his formula:

There is some soul of goodness in things evil,  
Would men observingly distil it out.  
For our bad neighbour makes us early stirrers,  
Which is both healthful and good husbandry:  
Besides, they are our outward consciences,  
And preachers to us all, admonishing  
That we should dress us fairly for our end. (Shakespeare, 1994:195)

- 52 | JSHS It is a little bit ironic that this play can be taken as a propaganda because the story is from one side relative and on the other side aligns so well with the historical events. Of course, Shakespeare created the image of the perfect king and maybe it was easier for him to create it because of Henry's relatively short reign. He did not have the chance to change or lose something he had acquired. The famous battle of Agincourt gave him a credible place in history. His early death at the height of his power was something worthy about him to be remembered well. However, Shakespeare's Henry must be taken as hero who is characterized as larger-than-life and solidly sealed in English history.

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