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Divine Right and Political Strategy: Examining the Complex Character of Shakespeare's King Henry V

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Abstract: The Life of Henry the Fifth the final play in Shakespeare's second tetralogy, centers around England's invasion of France and the English victory at the Battle of Agincourt in 1415. This pro-war play delves into themes of unified nationalism, the revered heritage of Plantagenet chivalry, patriotism, and the concept of an ideal Christian king. These elements support the notion of the "divine right" of the king, culminating in the character of the play's protagonist, King Henry V. Within this narrative, Henry emerges as a heroic national leader, radiating a brilliance comparable to a singular constellation in the medieval English sky. Shakespeare masterfully blends the martial ambition with theological allusions, resolutely establishing the idea that Henry's cause is blessed by God due to his status as a true Christian king. Throughout the play, King Henry V presents himself as both a commanding and fearsome figure, akin to God Himself for those who oppose his will, while also embodying God's mercy and forgiveness for those who acquiesce to his rule. Beneath the saintly facade of the king's devout Christian image, there are occasional glimpses of a Machiavellian disposition, prompting the audience to question the complete authenticity of his seemingly virtuous persona. This article aims to explore King Henry V's dual personality, as well as his astute leadership in governing both his kingdom and his people during the early 15th century.

Keywords: Shakespeare, King Henry V, Salic Law, Machiavellian strategy, Divine right, Plantagenet dynasty

In Shakespeare's The Life of Henry the Fifth, the eponymous monarch is portrayed as both a devout Christian king and a shrewd political leader, embodying the complexities of divine right and political strategy. As the final play in Shakespeare's second tetralogy, King Henry V explores England's invasion of France and the heroic victory at the Battle of Agincourt in 1415. Shakespeare presents Henry as a figure who commands unwavering loyalty and reverence, casting him as the ideal Christian king, divinely sanctioned to lead his people. Yet, beneath this saintly exterior, the play also unveils the more calculating and pragmatic aspects of Henry's character. His leadership is marked by both divine authority and a

Machiavellian aptitude for manipulation, raising questions about the authenticity of his virtuous persona. A critical analysis of the play reveals the dual nature of Henry V. Shakespeare masterfully blends themes of nationalism, chivalric heritage, and political maneuvering to create a complex portrait of monarchy that reflects the tensions between divine legitimacy and the ruthless realities of statecraft.

The play The Life of Henry the Fifth opens with ecclesiastical peers engaged in a discourse about the transformed character of King Henry V and his suitability to wage war against France, The archbishops of Canterbury and Ely, prominent figures in the Catholic hierarchy, bestow an elaborate encomium upon King Henry V for his evolution from an irresponsible, coarse, and rowdy prince who favored the company of the "…unlettered, rude, and shallow (I, i, 57)" to becoming a "true lover of holy church" (I, i, 24). Within the context of the play, this glorification is warranted, given the setting of Catholic England. However, for the audience of Queen Elizabeth, a Tudor monarch and a Protestant queen, such praise from Catholic bishops could not avoid raising controversy, easily deemed a product of "Machiavellian strategy". Though ostensibly the archbishops aim to stoke national sentiment in favor of invading France and to validate the English assault on the French, their true motive is more self-interested, centered around diverting the King's attention away from a recently reintroduced Bill of the Lollard Lords proposing the "expropriation" of church property.

Canterbury proposes offering a substantial sum of money to the king for war expenditures, contingent upon the Bill not being presented in the Parliament. This manoeuvre seeks to shield their material interests and is cloaked in an array of biblical references that buttress Henry's ambitious claim to the French throne through the female lineage. Consequently, not only does the king feel absolved of guilt in invading France, but he also perceives divine inspiration driving him to assert his ancestral rights. Henry's claim is founded on his assertion of inheritance to the French crown via the female descendant of France, Princess Isabel. She is the wife of King Henry V's great-great-grandfather, King Edward II, the progenitor of the British Plantagenet dynasty. Moreover, Isabel is the daughter of the French king, King Philip IV, whose three sons perish without producing male heirs. However, several historical factors conveniently disregarded in the play render the king's claim questionable. The Treaty of Bretigny (1360), signed by King Edward III, ceded England's claim to the French throne in exchange for specific territories. King Richard II's truce with France further eroded England's holdings, excluding Calais, Bayonne, and Bordeaux. These historical facts complicate the authenticity of the king's claim, a history absent from the archbishops' arguments that hinges on the concept of "Salic law". Nevertheless, Shakespeare's intent was not to scrutinize the legitimacy of the British claim, but to elevate Henry's image as a Spenserian "Redcross-knight-hero". This character is not only remarkably skilled and capable of vanquishing worthy adversaries but also vigilant in safeguarding the rights and well-being of the vulnerable.

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Henry's portrayal as a Christian king intensifies from the moment he enters the stage. His profound concern for the potential casualties resulting from war resonates as authentic. This concern serves to jog the audience's memory back to his heroic deeds showcased in the Battle of Shrewsbury, which Shakespeare previously presented in part 1 of King Henry IV where right before the battle Prince Henry prudently offered to fight a duel with Hotspur to stop the casualty of innocent lives of both the king's and the rebel's parties. This recollection underscores Henry's martial prowess as that of a seasoned and resolute super-soldier, solidifying his reputation as a man of action.

Before engaging with the French ambassador, Henry confides in the archbishops of Canterbury and Ely, expressing his genuine apprehensions regarding the impending bloodshed that both nations would endure should the war transpire:

> For God doth know how many now in health
> Shall drop their blood in approbation
> Of what your reverence shall incite us to,
> Therefore take heed how you impawn our person,
> How you awake our sleeping sword of war.
> We charge you in the name of God, take heed; (I. ii. 18-28)

These words uttered by Henry unequivocally establish King Henry beyond any shadow of doubt as a God-fearing and consequence-conscious individual. Despite his familiarity with biblical teachings, he exhibits sensibility and humility by seeking the counsel of theological experts on how God would address the issue at hand. His profound concern for the potential loss of human lives in both countries and his acute recognition of his culpability and responsibility for this potential loss present him to both the readers and the audience as a man of conscience—an authentically devout, honorable, and befitting head of state.

Even when Canterbury reassures him by presenting various examples that validate his claim through the line of female succession, the king once more inquires, "May I with right and conscience make this claim?" (I. ii. 96). The king's query reflects a complex interplay of factors within his thoughts. The pursuit of a legitimate claim may have stemmed from the bitter lessons of his father's usurpation, which incited opposition from subjects and nobles alike. The aspect of 'conscience' likely emerges from his earnest desire to avoid replicating the errors of his forebear. However, it is at this juncture that Canterbury initiates a misguided direction by quoting from the Bible. He refers to the Book of Numbers, chapter 28, verse 8: "If a man die and have no son, then ye shall turn his inheritance unto his daughter." Regrettably, Canterbury omits the phrase "and have no son," as he recites:

> For in the Book of Numbers is it writ,
> When the man dies, let the inheritance
> Descend unto the daughter.
> Stand for your own, unwind your bloody flag,
> Look back into your mighty ancestors. (I, ii, 98-102)

Unified, Ely and Canterbury conjure a vivid tableau before both the king and the audience: the comprehensive tapestry of Plantagenet legend, replete with triumphs and heroism. Their words are so fervent that by the time the king encounters the French envoy, his resolution for war is already cemented. Consequently, Henry refrains from initiating any discussion about the 'Salic law' or any treaties pertinent to his ancestral claim on the French monarchy. His disinterest in engaging in a philosophical discourse on the legitimacy of his claim underscores his astute sagacity. This aspect almost contradicts his earlier query regarding his rightful entitlement to the French throne. This nuanced contradiction in Henry's character runs throughout the play. However, Shakespeare is compelled to uphold his protagonist's public image as ethically upright and judicious, someone not prone to hasty, perilous undertakings unless unjustly provoked.

Consequently, Shakespeare strategically engineers the impetus for war to originate from the opposing party. The French ambassador's gesture of presenting tennis balls, dispatched by the Dauphin, the French prince, as a retort to Henry's territorial claims, creates an opening for the king to reciprocate the affront with his rhetorical prowess. Employing words that are impeccably controlled, elegantly measured, confidently poised, and yet brimming with courteous menace, Henry reveals his martial intentions:

> We are glad the Dauphin is so pleasant with us.
> His present, and your pains, we thank you for.
> When we have matched our rackets to these balls,
> We will in France, by God’s grace, play a set
> Shall strike his father’s crown into the hazard. (I, ii, 260-64)

Henry's every utterance aligns with his earlier revelation about his personal identity and political aspirations, as expressed in the well-debated soliloquy in Part I, Act I, Scene ii of King Henry IV In this soliloquy, he discloses his clandestine groundwork for emerging as an exceptionally illustrious king, likening his ascent to the sudden emergence of the sun from behind a cloud. This transformation transpires when no one anticipates his return to princely grandeur. Unlike the French royals, the audience and the readers possess the insight that the French are repeating the same fallacy committed by Hotspur, King Henry IV, Falstaff, and other characters in the previous plays. Recollecting the victorious duel he fought against the gallant Hotspur, the audience is certain that the king will deliver on his words with the French as well. Gupta (1964) underscores King Henry V's prior disposition: "Although the Prince is deficient both in emotion and imagination, he has a strong will and a cold, calculating intellect, which combines to give him exceptional practical ability" (p. 138). This 'calculating intellect' coupled with 'exceptional practical ability' constitutes King Henry V's fundamental nature. These traits also underpin his success and enable him to etch a legendary narrative of triumphant glory for his nation.

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Nonetheless, Shakespeare subtly alludes to the dual nature of Henry's character, revealing his potential for unrelenting cruelty when dealing with matters of state. This foreshadowing occurs at the close of the second part of King Henry IV when Prince Hal, now King Henry V, unhesitatingly disassociates himself from his friend Falstaff, effectively shedding Falstaff from his life like a discarded garment. In The Life of Henry the Fifth, this disposition for cruelty surfaces on several occasions: at Southampton, just before Henry's departure for the French coast; in his handling of traitors at home; in his speech to the commanders of Harfleur, where he threatens them with the dire consequences of brutal massacres; in his address to his own soldiers on the eve of the Battle of Agincourt, where he demands they either emerge victorious or prepare to perish; and finally, in his command to execute the French prisoners.

Cruelty is undeniably a crucial attribute that no medieval monarch can afford to be without. However, what distinguishes Henry and renders him an exemplar of desirable distinction is his melding of political ruthlessness with theology. He justifies all his self-driven words, strategies, and actions—whether embodying brutality, mercy, love, or patriotism—in the name of God. The Chorus, in Act II, hails him as 'The mirror of all Christian kings' (II. vi. Chorus), an image he consciously maintains to the extent that even random events and occurrences appear as manifestations of God's will. He consistently stays a step ahead of his adversaries. In Act II, he anticipates the treacherous plot of Cambridge, Scroop, and Grey to assassinate him before his departure for France.

However, Henry's handling of their betrayal underscores his political acumen. Acutely aware of the conspirators' intent to deliver him to the French, Henry adheres to his image of a Christian king in multiple ways. Initially, he offers them a chance for clemency instead of retribution. Subsequently, when the culprits realize their exposure, Henry insinuates that their actions were not borne of their free will, but rather an external malevolent force had possessed their otherwise virtuous souls. Henry's laudation of Scroop's noble lineage, immense wisdom, and angelic virtues is praiseworthy. He could have simply passed a sentence of execution after establishing their guilt. However, he refrains from doing so. He dispenses his judgment with an impartial, compassionate demeanour reminiscent of God Himself. He proposes pardoning a prisoner apprehended the previous night for insulting the king while inebriated. Yet, it is Scroop, Henry's most trusted and beloved associate, who advises against leniency, arguing that kindness could potentially breed further audacity. In the face of this counsel, the king passionately champions mercy, proclaiming: "O, let us yet be merciful" (II, ii, 27). Nevertheless, he is counselled against this course of action by Cambridge and Grey. Henry's management of high treason, as exemplified by these traitors, is characterized by precision and a keen sense of divine providence. Even the rebels concede that their exposure and thwarted rebellion are acts of God (151, 157). They admit to their "damned enterprise" (164). Furthermore, the rebels express not only remorse for their uprising but also jubilation over their defeat and even their impending deaths.

The audience is thus denied the opportunity to contemplate the rebels' fate, as their joy underscores the first instance of the protagonist's psychological ascendancy over his adversaries. This manipulation compels the guilty to implore forgiveness for their souls, rather than their lives:

> Never did faithful subject more rejoice
> At the discovery of most dangerous treason
> Than I do at this hour joy o'er myself,
> Prevented from a damned enterprise.
> My fault, but not my body, pardon, sovereign. (II, ii, 162-166)

Henry asserts that the death sentence he imposes upon them is not driven by personal vindictiveness but is executed in service of the nation and as an act of devotion to God. Earl of March, who, as the heir apparent of King Richard II, was unwittingly involved in the conspiracy's evolution. The plotters aimed to install March as king and reap benefits from his ascendancy, capitalizing on their familial relationship and political influence. Peter Saccio's research affirms that King Henry V was characterized by his piety, clemency, and uprightness. Saccio expounds:

> Throughout his reign he maintained an active piety, visiting shrines, founding new houses of religion, insisting on proper conduct in already established ones, personally attempting to convert heretics, and consistently attributing his military victories to God rather than his own prowess. (Saccio 2000, p. 67)

Shakespeare meticulously upholds the authenticity of King Henry V's devout persona throughout the play, evident in almost every speech attributed to the king. Following the momentous triumph at Agincourt, King Henry commences the somber task of reading aloud the names and count of casualties from both sides, a report presented by a herald. As he reads the account of English losses—consisting of merely three English nobles and twenty-two common soldiers—contrasted with the staggering ten thousand French casualties, including over eight thousand nobles of notable rank, his immediate response is one of relief: "...O God, thy arm was here, / And not to us but to thy arm alone / Ascribe we all!" (IV, viii, 98-100).

To underscore the theme of divine support favoring his homeland against foreign forces and to underscore the role of providence, Shakespeare intentionally crafts the English forces to be significantly outnumbered by the French. Moreover, he orchestrates the English troops to fall ill shortly after their initial victory on French soil at Harfleur, forcing them to endure daunting challenges, thereby presenting their triumph as almost miraculous. The victory emerges as a synthesis of King Henry's charismatic influence and the divine intervention of God's favor gently propelling the English side. In the wake of this victory, Henry exclaims, "Praised be God, and not our strength for it!" (IV.vii. 89). Subsequently, Henry avows that no mention should be made of the English death toll without acknowledging that "God fought for us" (IV.viii.122). This further solidifies the idea that divine providence was a pivotal force driving the English to triumph.

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Fascinatingly, King Henry V's treatment of various individuals—such as the defeated governor of Harfleur, his own troops before the Agincourt challenge, and the French prisoners after the Agincourt victory—varies in the degree of severity and mercilessness. When addressing the Harfleur governor following the city's capture, Henry employs a dual tone. He initially adopts the persona of a leader who is powerless to rein in his troops, conveying a sense of helplessness. Subsequently, he shifts into the role of a compassionate, considerate adviser, urging his vanquished adversary to opt for wisdom by surrendering. Henry paints a vivid picture of the potential brutalities that victorious British soldiers could inflict upon the innocent civilians of Harfleur—a scenario that, while abhorrent, is an unfortunate and almost inevitable aftermath of war initiated without scruples by any triumphant army. He emphasizes the choice between seeking mercy and protection through capitulation versus the recklessness of endangering thousands of innocents by continuing to fight. In contrast, Henry's tone toward his own troops is charged with intensity and menace. This aspect will be discussed in greater detail later in this paper. His demeanour when addressing the French prisoners is wrathful.

Notably, Henry's skill with words comes to the fore in his stern reprimand of his own men who engage in lawless conduct towards the defeated populace of Harfleur. Henry's words carry such weight that he doesn't hesitate to endorse Captain Fluellen's decision to execute Bardolph, a former comrade and old friend, for pillaging a church. Henry's musings on the concept of mercy may sound casual, yet they are profound, nuanced, and indicative of deep insight:

We should have all such offenders so cut off, and we give express charge that in our marches through the country there be nothing compelled from the villages, nothing taken but paid for, none of the French upbraided or abused in disdainful language; for when lenity and cruelty play for a kingdom, the gentler is the soonest winner. (III, vi, 96-101)

In the same scene, Shakespeare endows his warrior-hero with another immensely significant attribute of a true Christian: 'faith'. When Montjoy, the French herald, departs with Henry's proclamation that despite the English soldiers' illness, they will persist in advancing, Gloucester reacts with trepidation, expressing, "I hope they will not come upon us now" (155). In response, the king's unflinching reply is emblematic of a grand leader of a great nation, a genuine champion of his Christian faith, and a resolute martial hero. Standing on enemy terrain, Henry issues an assertion of unassailable faith in God's providence, casting aside all doubt and fear. He imparts this affirmation to his comrade with a resonant tone of unyielding finality: "We are in God’s hand, brother, not in theirs. / March to the bridge" (156-57). This unwavering trust in God's benevolence possesses the potency to transform any warrior into a fearless combatant, imbuing them with the velour and strength of a hundred.

Henry's consistent invocation of God in his public speeches serves to underscore his political sagacity. This practice is pivotal in substantiating the notion that the king is divinely ordained, the earthly agent of God's authority. Thus,

challenging the king's divine right is tantamount to heresy and sacrilege against God's will. This widely propagated concept of divine kingship was exploited by monarchs in the medieval, Tudor, and Stewart eras, endowing them with near-godlike autonomy. Yet, only a few, like King Henry V, managed to masterfully align this idea with personal and national triumph.

In The Tragedy of King Richard the Second, Shakespeare illustrates that the theory of the king's divine right, no matter how meticulously propagated, fails to safeguard the monarch's throne unless the king garners the support of the populace by living up to their expectations and aligning their actions with this theory. Richard, who consistently disregarded his subjects, staunchly believed in the king's exemption from public accountability on the premise that the monarch's authority derives not from the public, but directly from God. Hence, the Bishop of Carlisle challenges Bolingbroke:

> What subject can give sentence on his king?
> And who sits here who is not Richard's subject?
> (Richard II, IV, i, 112-13)

However, despite the general understanding of the king's 'divine right,' Richard could not escape his deposition. In The Life of Henry the Fifth Shakespeare masterfully intertwines a monarch's Christian spirit with the pragmatic foresight of a political visionary. This king possesses an acute awareness not only of the privileges intrinsic to his monarchy but also of the common people's lives, attitudes, coarse habits, and expectations. Even individuals as unassuming as waiters at a roadside tavern from his Eastcheap days are not beyond his understanding. From those early experiences, he has cultivated a ruthless political acumen. His long-standing habit of delving into the mindset of the commoners becomes evident as he traverses the camps of his soldiers, adopting his former moniker, 'Harry a la Roy,' and probing their thoughts on subjects ranging from the king himself to the war and their own involvement.

This king is profoundly attuned to the sentiments of his subjects and endeavours not only to ascertain their opinions but also to allay their tumultuous emotions concerning duty, warfare, safety, validation, recompense, retribution, homesickness, and more. His approach is not to exert authority but to offer extensive counsel from the perspective of an ordinary individual. Shakespeare crafts an astute and sagacious ruler who is not only unusually perceptive but also uniquely sensitive to the evolving political landscape. Through this portrayal, Shakespeare seems to offer contemporary monarchs a fresh paradigm of kingship. He conveys the message that a shift is underway in the British political milieu—a transformation that is inevitable and will compel future monarchs to heed public sentiment.

This new conception of kingship underscores the notion that relying solely on the medieval providential theory of kingship is no longer sufficient to ensure the

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unchallenged authority of a monarch. Instead, it necessitates a continuous connection with the lives and aspirations of the common populace. In essence, the king, as the head of the body politic comprising his people, must refrain from severing himself from his political body and attempting to govern in isolation. Henry's triumph stems from his ability to present his personal ambitions as aligned with the divine will and to persuade his people that his cause is intrinsically linked with their own.

Shakespeare's underlying motive to reenact the bridge between the medieval glory of Britain and the Tudor golden age is well articulated in Jorge Luis Bueno Alonso's analysis. In his essay titled "History, Patriotism, and Religion in Shakespeare's King Henry V, he writes:

The tetralogies show the breakdown of medieval society with the coming of new times, those of Tudor monarchs. But Henry V is more than the celebration of the "warlike Harry" (I, Chorus, 5.), and the English army which fought at Agincourt. It's the celebration of Tudor age, of the national aspirations and spirit of the society who lived in Shakespeare's times. Henry is the figure who can represent the Tudor aim: a strong king bringing order, a warrior king rousing national feelings (Alonso 1999, p. 272).

A significant motif in The Life of Henry the Fifth alongside the recurring theme of ancestral chivalry that courses through the English lineage from King Edward III, the Black Prince, Henry V, Tudor monarch Henry VIII, and extends to Queen Elizabeth I, is the concept of a resolute and consolidated state of power. This encompasses political, social, and cultural unity and heritage. Shakespeare conspicuously highlights the political, religious, and social cohesion that thrived in England during Queen Elizabeth's reign. This era fostered an environment of harmony, well-ordered discipline, tolerance, and mutual respect among various hierarchical ranks. Shakespeare underscores this aspect in the play, portraying Henry's commanders as hailing from diverse backgrounds such as Welsh, Irish, and Scottish, each possessing distinct languages, temperaments, and preferences. Moreover, these commanders had been adversaries of England in the preceding dramas of the tetralogy, as seen in The Tragedy of King Richard the Second and in King Henry IV. However, they now rally under the banner of Britain, united by King Henry V, to champion a British cause—an assertion of Henry's legitimate bloodline over the French claims to the French crown.

Yet, it's important to recognize that Shakespeare's contemporary audience, mindful of the thirty years' tumultuous Wars of the Roses that sought to settle disputes over rightful monarchy lineage—ultimately culminating in peaceful resolution under the Tudor dynasty, epitomized by Queen Elizabeth—might not have wholeheartedly endorsed a war instigated solely by ancestral claims. As the eve of the Battle of Agincourt approaches, the thoughts of a common soldier contemplating the potential outcome of a war that could shatter familial bonds, disrupt natural growth, and fracture the fabric of everyday life, must have mirrored the concerns of generations. These concerns persisted even in Shakespeare's own

time, questioning the moral justification for the extensive loss of civilian lives and the king's accountability for the destructive ramifications of war in the eyes of God.

When the king assumes a disguise and mingles with the soldiers, Shakespeare places him in a direct confrontation with the challenges posed by common soldiers. They demand transparency and accountability from their king, who has led them into the role of brutal instruments of death. Bates, one of the soldiers, conveys his perspective on the king and the war: "...for we know enough if we know we are the king's subjects. If his cause be wrong, our obedience to the king wipes the crime of it out of us" (IV, I, 123-125). However, Williams, a soldier who reflects more deeply, contemplates the nature of the unnatural demise that awaits war victims—a fate not of their own making but one dictated by the power politics of the aristocracy:

But if the cause be not good, the king himself hath a heavy reckoning to make, when all those legs and arms and heads, chopped off in a battle, shall join together at the latter day, and cry all, "We died at such a place," some swearing, some crying for a surgeon, some upon their wives left poor behind them, some upon the debts they owe, some upon their children rawly left. I am afeard there are few die well that die in a battle, for how can they charitably dispose of anything when blood is their argument? (IV, i, 133-142).

Williams' words indeed carry a multi-dimensional significance within the play. They serve as a poignant reminder of the grim realities endured by the English populace due to the civil wars waged for royal succession, particularly during the reign of Henry VI. Concurrently, they raise two profound challenges: firstly, questioning the king's rationale for subjecting his people's lives to uncertainty, and secondly, scrutinizing the moral justification for such ruthless bloodshed from the perspective of Christianity—a faith professed by a self-proclaimed Christian monarch. Katharine Eisaman Maus, in her introduction to The Life of Henry the Fifth astutely notes, "The process of proving Henry's family tree, in other words, may disrupt not only his enemies' but also his subordinates'. If infants are slaughtered, daughters raped, fathers torn from dependents, how can families be reconstituted? How can legitimate inheritance possibly be determined?" (Maus 1994, p. 720).

Yet, the elaborate response that Henry provides only serves to underline his deeply Machiavellian nature. His speech serves as a masterful demonstration of his attempt to meld his own martial ambitions with a divine imperative. Henry's argument contends that war functions as God's instrument to punish the guilty and reward the innocent. In this light, far from contravening biblical proscriptions against killing, a Christian ruler who wages war is, in essence, executing God's justice (IV.i.170-76). Moreover, Henry posits that those who perish innocently in war ascend to Heaven, where death becomes an "advantage" (185). In sum, a just war is equitable for all parties—both the guilty and the innocent.

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It is at this juncture, and in the subsequent actions that follow, that a fissure emerges in Shakespeare's meticulous portrayal of King Henry V as a paragon. The "Christian king" image projected in the play takes on an overtly ambivalent hue. Henry seemingly persuades his soldiers that the shared culpability they attribute to the king for the transgressions they commit—whether willingly or unwittingly—by obeying his command is, in reality, a self-fabricated illusion. The king is absolved of bearing the burden of their mass executions. However, when he requires unwavering allegiance from his army, he delivers an incredibly compelling St. Crispin's Day speech. This rousing oration teems with assurances of sharing the spoils of war and brotherhood with the king himself, employing mesmerizing language:

> This day is called the feast of Crispian.
> He that outlives this day and comes safe home,
> Will stand o' tiptoe when the day is named
> And rouse him at the name Crispian.
> …………………………………….
> This story shall the good man teach his son,
> And Crispin Crispian shall ne'er go by,
> From this day to the ending of the world,
> But we in it shall be remembered –
> 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; (IV, iii, 42-65)

The St. Crispin's Day speech delivered by Henry V is undeniably one of the most stirring and resonant addresses in the annals of history, speaking to diverse communities across time. Through the repeated use of pronouns like 'we' and 'few', Henry accentuates the dissolution of hierarchical divisions between subordinates and superiors, vassals and overlords. This linguistic choice brings those occupying lower ranks into the fold of the select 'few' at the highest echelons, thereby forging a sense of unified identity among the finest representatives of the English lineage. This imagery of unity, brotherhood, and grandeur seeps into the consciousness of ordinary individuals, kindling the flames of a patriotic fervor. It conjures an illusion of enduring significance, whether as martyrs or heroes. Phyllis Rackin, in her analysis of The Life of Henry the Fifth featured in An Oxford Guide to Shakespeare, astutely highlights:

Henry's promise to his soldiers denies social distinctions to identify England as a place where all men are brothers, united in their willingness to die for the national ideal. He identifies the decisive Battle of Agincourt as a communal enterprise, the triumph of a ragged band of Englishmen over a well-equipped French enemy obsessed with the accoutrements that mark their place in hierarchical culture. (Rackin, 209)

But the more interesting part of Rackin's observation follows right after this quoted extract. Quite subtly she points out that although Henry makes such big promises –

After the battle, however, when Henry reads the list of the dead, he gives the full names and titles of the gentlemen who were killed, but when he comes to the common soldiers, all he can offer is a body count:

> Edward the Duke of York, the Earl of Suffolk,
> Sir Richard Keighley, Davy Gam Esquire;
> None else of name, and of all other men
> But five-and-twenty. (4. 8. 97-100)

Rackin's analysis further delves into the complexities of Henry's portrayal, challenging the absolute credibility of his attempts to attribute all his actions to the will of God. In scene eight of Act four, Henry's proclamation "be it death proclaimed through our host / To boast of this, or take that praise from God / Which is his only" (108-10) is noted by Rackin to undermine his claim of divine endorsement through the exercise and mystification of earthly power.

By introducing ambiguity into Henry's actions, Shakespeare adds depth to his character and creates a space for critical engagement with the complexities of leadership, morality, and the human condition. The tension between Henry's idealized Christian image and his morally questionable decisions prompts audiences to consider the ethical dilemmas faced by those in power, as well as the broader themes of justice, mercy, and the true costs of warfare.

As modern critical perspectives continue to evolve, the nuanced portrayal of Henry V serves as a rich field for exploration, offering insights into the multifaceted nature of leadership, morality, and the interpretation of historical and literary characters. Shakespeare employs a narrative technique that Patrick Colm Hogan in his essay 'Narrative Universals, Heroic Tragi-Comedy, and Shakespeare's Political Ambivalence', Patrick Colm Hogan (2006) suggests that Shakespeare often employs killing as a dramatic tool to either initiate or pause the 'epilogue of suffering'. In the case of the prisoners' massacre, this act of brutality functions as a pivotal moment that challenges the simplistic portrayal of Henry's piety.

However, he most often attributes this killing to the enemy or "bad" side (insofar as this is precisely determinable, an issue we will discuss below). In keeping with this, Shakespeare's plays rarely involve an epilogue of suffering. Thus we find Macbeth murdering Macduff's son; King John ordering the murder of

Arthur (and causing his death, though in a somewhat more complex way than one might at first imagine); France killing all the youths who guard the luggage in Henry V (" 'Tis certain there's not a boy left alive" [IV.vii.5]); and Richard III killing his nephews (Hogan, 2006, p. 39).

The concept of portraying the English as God's chosen party, absolving them of sin and attributing the responsibility of death to their enemies, is indeed a significant theme in Shakespeare's portrayal of Henry V's leadership. This perspective emphasizes the notion that the English, led by Henry, are on a divine mission, and their actions are seen as just and righteous. This idea is intricately woven into the narrative to establish a sense of moral and legal legitimacy for the English cause.

By aligning Henry's violent acts with the collective identity of England, Shakespeare creates a powerful link between the actions of the ruler and the destiny of the nation. This not only bolsters Henry's image as a Christian king with a divine mandate but also aligns the interests of the state with the values and actions of its leader. The death of the French prisoners is framed as a consequence of their own actions, reinforcing the idea that divine justice is on the side of the English.

This aspect of Shakespeare's portrayal of Henry V and the broader political implications it carries demonstrate the playwright's skill in using both character and narrative to engage with complex issues of leadership, nationalism, and divine legitimacy. It invites audiences to reflect on the intricate connections between power, morality, and religious conviction, shedding light on the multifaceted nature of political representation and the construction of national identity.

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