
King Henry V: Royal Dynasty

The character of Hal is a fascinating character in this play because of how he transforms from being a conniving and cruel youth to Shakespeare's ideal king. Hal as a young boy was very wayward. His choice of friends was not necessarily the best. He was always amid commoners, low-lives and bad company causing him to reflect such characters of theirs, involving him in terrible acts like stealing, heavy drinking, prostituting and doing most things that break the law. It must be included that we first see Prince Henry's metamorphosis in Henry IV.

Hal mentions during an aside in Act 1 Scene 2 that he will throw away his bad behavior and redeem himself by showing more "goodly". He says: "So, when this loose behavior I throw off, And pay the debt I never promised, By how much better than my word I am, By so much shall I falsify men's hopes; And like bright metal on a sullen ground, My reformation, glittering o'er my fault, Shall show more goodly and attract more eyes than that which hath no foil to set it off. I will so offend, to make offence a skill; Redeeming time when men think least I will." (Act 1 Scene 2) The death of King Henry IV was the wakeup call that makes Hal take a dramatic turn in his behavior as he soon realizes the importance of his responsibility as the new King of England. He immediately dismisses his old friends Poins and Falstaff as a result.

He publicly tells Falstaff "I know thee not old man" and from there on disowns him as a friend. Hal's public rejection of his old friend Falstaff connotes cutting the last thread of whatever attached him to his old lifestyle. King Henry realizes immediately that the only thing that matters to him is saving England and ruling his people the right way by sacrificing his old life and putting England's safety first before himself. Many of these qualities define King Henry as a successful leader. However, many scholars have their reservations about this portrayal of Henry V. Some believe that he was just as bad a king as many others, naming him a cruel and arrogant criminal mind. It is understandable that many would think of Henry V as a cruel King because of the wayward life he lived before being king.

Therefore, it can be argued that King Henry V was a ruthless king even with his religious beliefs because he declared war on France, but same can be said of the church because they offered to pay for the war. Critics of Henry V would also say that he displays cruelty when he executes his three friends, Scroop, Gray and Cambridge and also declaring death on his old friend Bardolf because he stole. In King Henry's defense, I would say King Henry takes his responsibility seriously and is sturdy enough to separate favoritism from leadership. After all, Cambridge, Scroop and Gray were traitors that planned to kill King Henry.

Different viewpoints have been taken, but the fact remains that Henry V was a wise and great King who eluded great success in leadership. He fully transformed from an ignorant youth to such a strong, charismatic and willing leader. After Henry became a King, things changed for the better. He metamorphosed into this responsible young man fit to rule England. The Leadership theme in "Henry V" carries much significance to the overall meaning of the play. Being a good king comes with burdens. In act 1 Scene 2 when Henry carries the burden of being a responsible and good king, he demands that things be done the right way in the eyes of God.

He says, "May I with right and conscience make this claim?" Henry had to make sure that when he wages war against a Christian country, his cause was just otherwise, he would have sinned. Canterbury, therefore, places the sin upon his head if cause is deemed unjust. King Henry transformed into a good and wise King that did the right thing and even applied the law to all persons regardless of their relationship to him. We see this when Bardolph, King Henry's friend from his youth stole from a French church. Bardolph being Hals childhood friend did not stop him from suggesting his execution because of his wrongful deed.

He said "We would 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 gamester is the soonest winner." (Act 3 Scene 6) In Act 3 Scene 1, King Henry carries the burden of his responsibility as he is the one the people rely on and hope to get through even when in battle and all seems lost, but he always stayed strong and inspired them to do the same with his words. Here Henry showed his exceptional quality of speaking.

He can change his style and rhetoric to suit the mood and atmosphere he is trying to create. He said "Once more unto the breach, dear friends, once more; Or close the wall up with our English dead. In peace there is nothing so becomes a man, as modest stillness and humility: But when the blast of war blows in our ears, Whose blood is fet from fathers of war-proof! Fathers that, like so many Alexanders, have in these parts from morn till even fought and sheathed their swords for lack of argument:" (Act 3 Scene 1) It is interesting that he addresses his men as "dear friends" in the quote above.

This technique is used by leaders in other to improve their relationship with their followers, empowering them and making them believe that they are friends of the King. He creates unity between them by calling them friends, addressing things as "our" . They know that unlike all other men in England, they are the Kings most loyal friends, they and they alone shall bask in the glory. Henry worried greatly about his decision to attack France and how it could affect his soldiers because they showed a lot of fear since they were outnumbered and were expecting to die. Henry showed a lot of care towards his men on the night before the battle of Agincourt.

Henry tries to make them summon some courage and reminds them that they are warriors and should be daring in battle. He asks them to have faith in God and also in him as he prays to God to harden the hearts of his men. He says: "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." (Act 4 scene 1) He is well spoken, shows love and kindness to his people, and remains fearless in decision making. All of these attributes put together made King Henry V the charismatic and effective leader that we speak of today.