The Role of Sympathy in Henry V's Rhetoric

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Intensive reading, discussion, and (in some sections) viewing of plays from the comedy, tragedy, romance, and history genres.

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In Shakespeare’s *Henry V*, Henry is often seen as a manipulative figure who uses his powerful rhetoric in order to accomplish a self-serving political agenda. Many critics question his motives for and methods of interacting with others. Arguably, Henry’s greatest power is his rhetoric, and critics often cite this as his most manipulative tool—the means through which he accomplishes his own selfish desires. Rather than praising his rhetorical abilities, critics question Henry’s motives and point to his rhetoric as the proof of his manipulation. His rhetorical strength is used as an explanation for his motives, and understandably, this presents Henry in an unfavorable light. His rhetoric is exceptionally powerful and effective and usually results in him “getting his way.” Thus, many regard the results of his rhetoric as evidence for his manipulation.

For example, in Hugh Grady’s book *Shakespeare, Machiavelli, and Montaigne: Power and Subjectivity from Richard II to Hamlet*, *Henry V* is analyzed according to Machiavelli’s political ideologies and how they played a role in Shakespeare’s play. In order to illustrate the struggle of the play to accept but also reject Machiavellian principles, Grady cites the first two scenes of the play. These scenes also show how Henry’s rhetoric plays a role in portraying this struggle. Grady claims that Henry’s reaction to the archbishops’ defense for claiming France represents this political problem. He claims that Henry’s “solemn tones . . . convey the impression that he is himself ‘above’ the political deal making that which we have just heard discussed by the two archbishops” (216). However, Henry’s words leave another possible
interpretation. Is Henry sincerely considering the moral dilemma of attacking France, or does his calm and collected manner reveal a studied and calculating political figure? This scene can certainly be interpreted either way, and Henry’s character is complicated by this fact.

Another scene in which Henry’s motives are analyzed through his rhetoric is in Act III Scene iii. In this scene, Henry boldly declares that:

I will not leave the half-achieved Harfleur
Till in her ashes she lie buried.

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The blind and bloody soldier with foul hand [has]
Defile[d] the locks of your shrill-shrieking daughters;
Your fathers taken by the silver beards,
And their most reverend heads dash’d to the walls,
Your naked infants spitted upon pikes, (3.3.8-9, 34-38)

Because of this speech and others like it, Malcom Pittock argues that it is hard to portray Henry as an acceptable war hero. Pittock says, “I think that, in particular, Henry’s threats of rape would rightly disgust any woman today. . . . She would regard even the threat of rape, irrespective of whether the threat were carried out, as completely unacceptable” (176). Pittock then asks if her Elizabethan counterpart would have a different attitude toward Henry’s threats. It is highly unlikely that she would. In this case, there can be no question of Henry’s powerful rhetoric as representative of his character. As Pittock states, regardless of whether the threat was actually carried out, the threat still remains and Henry’s rhetorical abilities have been used in a disgusting manner. Thus, once again, Henry’s motives are analyzed as negative, manipulative, and conniving because his rhetoric presents him in such a way.
By analyzing Henry’s motives through his rhetorical ability, Henry appears to be a one-dimensional character and is limited to the strict construct of being solely manipulative and calculating. When his rhetorical strength is used as an explanation for his motives instead of his motives being used as an explanation for his rhetoric, Henry is certain to be viewed as a conniving and self-serving individual. However, understanding his rhetorical foundation presents a different picture and interpretation of Henry’s character. Many have used Henry’s powerful rhetoric as the basis for his motives, whether good or evil. However, few have looked at the source for his rhetorical abilities. By doing this, Henry’s character changes in drastic ways. I argue that Henry’s rhetoric is based on Adam Smith’s concept of sympathy. Smith’s definition of sympathy explains Henry’s rhetorical power which further explains his motives when speaking to an audience.

Smith begins *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* by explaining sympathy and how individuals use it. According to Smith, sympathy is a universal feeling. He claims that “[t]he greatest ruffian, the most hardened violator of the laws of society, is not altogether without it” (2). He explains that while an individual can never truly understand the degree to which others suffer, he is able to imagine what or how he would feel in a similar situation. Only the imagination can create these feelings within the sympathizer because he has no method of truly understanding how another feels. Thus, the imagination is crucial for the sympathizer to be able to identify with another person. While the sympathizer may feel these sentiments more or less severely than the person who is actually affected, this does not eliminate the fact that in this instance, he is sympathizing with the other party. He is imagining himself in another’s position and is trying to feel how that person would feel. Smith says:
Our joy for the deliverance of those heroes of tragedy or romance who interest us, is as sincere as our grief for their distress, and our fellow-feeling with their misery is not more real than that with their happiness. We enter into their gratitude towards those faithful friends who did not desert them in their difficulties; and we heartily go along with their resentment against those perfidious traitors who injures, abandoned, or deceived them (4).

Part of Smith’s theory is that sympathy is not only limited to imagining or sympathizing with another’s misery or unhappiness. For Smith, sympathy can also be practiced with positive emotions as well. Happiness and excitement can also be exhibited by a sympathizer. All types of emotions can cause this fellow-feeling. After seeing another’s extreme emotions and imagining what this individual must feel, the sympathizer begins to imagine how he would feel in a similar situation whether positive or negative, and he looks upon the other person with sympathy.

From this point, Smith begins to discuss various aspects of sympathy that apply to general communication. He begins the second chapter of the “Of Propriety” section by saying, “But whatever may be the cause of sympathy, or however it may be excited, nothing please us more than to observe in other men a fellow-feeling with all the emotions of our own breast; nor are we ever so much shocked as by the appearance of the contrary” (10). Smith later explains how an individual could forgive a sympathizer for not expressing as much joy as he thinks the sympathizer should feel, but he becomes enraged when a sympathizer is not as afflicted when he tells of his troubles.

Then Smith discusses how in the process of sympathy, an individual will also go through a process of approval and disapproval. During this procedure, the sympathizer or the afflicted will approve or disapprove of the emotions exhibited by the other individual. For Smith, “[t]o
approve of another man’s opinions is to adopt those opinions, and to adopt them is to approve of
them” (17). If the sympathizer does not feel enough or if he feels too much on behalf of the
afflicted, the afflicted is likely to disapprove of the sympathizer’s sentiments because they
disagree with the afflicted’s own feelings. However, Smith also recognizes that even if the
sympathizer is in such a mood that is contrary to the present feelings of another, he can still
approve of the emotions displayed by that individual. In this case, the sympathizer recognizes
that if he was in a more fitting mood, he would heartily agree to the sentiments portrayed by the
other person. Therefore, he does not fault the other party because the sympathizer knows that in
any other state, he would approve of the individual’s emotions.

Smith then traces this idea through until it reaches its final stage, self-regulation. The
sympathizer practices approval or disapproval in another’s emotional state. However, the other
party practices self-regulation in order to obtain sympathy from the sympathizer. During the self-
regulation process, the other individual examines his emotions and adjusts them to reflect the
severity of the reaction he can reasonably expect from the sympathizer. Smith writes, “But he
can only hope to obtain this by lowering his passion to that pitch, in which the spectators are
capable of going along with him. He must flatten . . . the sharpness of its natural tone, in order to
reduce it to harmony and concord with the emotions of those who are about him” (27). The
individual seeking sympathy must only display the exact amount of emotion whether positive or
negative that will help him receive an adequate amount of sympathy. In order to adjust, he uses a
self-regulation method to analyze where his emotional state currently is. At this point, he then
adjusts his display of emotions to match the amount of sympathy that he can reasonably expect
from the sympathizer.
This regulation also relates to how an individual will conduct himself among different audiences. Smith claims that a friend can help compose a sufferer because the sufferer will place himself in the friend’s situation just as the friend will place himself in the sufferer’s situation. The sufferer is then able to compose himself as both the sympathizer and sufferer practice the perspective changing technique of sympathy. Generally, an individual expects less sympathy from those less familiar with himself. Individuals expect close relationships to be more sympathetic to their plights. However, Smith claims that when an individual expects less sympathy, he is more likely to regulate himself and his emotions. Thus, an individual is more likely to be composed among a room full of strangers than with close confidants. This occurs because generally speaking, individuals do not reasonably expect a large amount of sympathy from strangers.

While Smith’s work on sympathy does not directly refer to rhetoric, the two main principles he discusses, imagination and self-regulation, illustrate how speakers can be successful when addressing their audiences. By imagining how an audience feels, the speaker can understand and sympathize with their situation. Even if the speaker is in a mood contrary to the audience’s, he is still able to imagine their situation and try to feel what they are feeling. The next principle, self-regulation, also relates to rhetoric. The speaker adapts his emotions based on the amount of sympathy he can reasonably expect from the audience. Thus, he adjusts in order to better cater to his audience’s needs. Part of this self-regulation determines the type of composure or speech given according to the type of audience. Just as an individual is more composed in a room full of strangers than with close confidants, a speaker will present his case differently based on his audience type.
Because Henry’s motives can be analyzed through his rhetorical ability, many have concluded that his powerful rhetoric helped him achieve his self-serving political agenda. His rhetoric was the tool he used to practice this manipulation. However, understanding Smith’s concept of sympathy can contribute an exceptionally different analysis of Henry. If sympathy is in fact a source for rhetoric, Henry’s motives can be examined beyond the typical explanation of rhetoric. His motives can now be analyzed through the understanding of sympathy and how it plays a role in rhetoric. Because sympathy is a source for rhetoric, an individual’s perception of Henry’s character changes after knowing this. Henry moves from being solely manipulative and conniving to an individual who is able to sympathize with many different types of audiences. This is precisely why Henry’s rhetoric is so effective. He practices the essential principles of sympathy, imagination and self-regulation. Henry is a powerful rhetorician because he is able to imagine what his audience is feeling. Then he is able to self-regulate his own feelings to match the audience’s and ultimately, adapt his speech to be most effective based on their needs and feelings.

For example, one of Henry’s most powerful speeches occurs in Act II Scene ii. Henry speaks with the traitors, Scroop, Grey, and Cambridge, after acknowledging their betrayal. They appeal to him for mercy, but in his anger, he cries, “You must not dare, for shame, to talk of mercy” (2.2.81). He continues berating them for their treachery and reiterating to them the effects of such actions. They have deeply hurt Henry by their actions. They were some of his closest confidants, and they betrayed him. The interesting aspect about this speech, though, comes when Henry says, “I will weep for thee; / For this revolt of thine, methinks, is like / Another fall of man” (2.2.140-142). Henry is a highly patriotic individual. In his mind, any treachery against England is a deep wound and a serious sin comparable to the fall of Adam.
There is no doubt about his loyalty to his country. This raw display of emotion could easily be read as Henry playing a political game to gain the trust of his fellow Englishman, but what if Henry’s speech is based on the sympathy he feels for these men? Henry’s words reveal more than a simple political game. He takes their betrayal very personally, and his rhetoric cannot hide the pain he feels at such disloyalty. Because Henry feels this offence was a personal attack, he is likely to imagine how he would feel in a similar situation. Then his speech is adjusted to reflect the sympathetic feelings he is experiencing. His sympathy is guiding how he structures his sentences and phrases. Sympathy is how Henry speaks. His rhetoric is not manipulative; it is honest and based on his feelings of sympathy.

In Act II and many other scenes, Henry uses imagination which in turn, transfers to how he speaks with others. However, Henry also practices the self-regulation principle of sympathy in his St. Crispin’s Day speech. Henry’s men are understandably afraid of the approaching battle. They are vastly outnumbered. Westmoreland wishes for more men to help them, but Henry proclaims, “I pray thee, wish not one man more” (4.3.23). At this point, Henry begins to self-regulate his emotions and speech. Henry is most likely anxious about the coming battle. He is outnumbered. He and his men are in a foreign land, and it is unlikely that he will have success. However, Henry pushes aside his feelings and focuses on what his men must be experiencing. He checks his emotions and adjusts them accordingly in order to cater to his audience. He must regulate himself based on the amount of sympathy or understanding that he can reasonably expect from his audience. This adjustment transfers into his rhetoric, and he gives a powerful speech that rouses his troops to victory. Henry adjusts his feelings and speech patterns to increase the level of receptivity from his audience.
There are many examples of how sympathy pervades throughout Henry’s rhetoric. Henry’s St. Crispin’s Day speech and conversation with the traitors are a few examples of this, but perhaps the most striking example of how sympathy affects rhetoric is the lack of sympathy that Henry displays when speaking with Katherine. (Sympathy is used here according to Smith’s definition not the typical definition meaning pity.) Of all the scenes in Henry V, one of the most troubling for critics is Henry’s conversation with Katherine. Most do not know how to analyze it because it is so different and out of place from the rest of the play. In addition, Henry’s ineptness at wooing further complicates how critics feel about the awkward scene. Paul Jorgenson comments, “The very outset of wooing stresses the plain soldier’s inability to command the niceties of language” (180). Most, if not all, agree that this scene is very different from the rest of the play, and its awkwardness is only amplified by Henry’s odd courting.

While Henry’s wooing is eventually successful, it is much more inefficient than his other conversations. Henry’s inability to sympathize with Katherine contributes to this lack of efficiency. In this instance, Henry struggles to understand how his audience is feeling. He is unable to imagine and unable to self-regulate. His inability to imagine how she is feeling is exhibited by his constant asking if she loves him. Repeatedly, Henry asks her how she feels as opposed to his other conversations in which he automatically assumes how the audience feels. For example, he says, “And what / say'st thou then to my love?” (5.2.165-166) and “canst thou love / me? (5.1.191-192). He constantly has to ask Katherine about her feelings. This shows his inability to imagine how Katherine is feeling. Therefore, he is also unable to sympathize which leads to his inefficient rhetoric.

Not only is Henry unable to imagine, he is also unable to self-regulate. Imaging Katherine’s emotions are crucial to self-regulation and because Henry does not understand them,
he is then unable to self-regulate. Because of this, he is forced to adapt many different rhetorical styles haphazardly until he can find one that will help Katherine understand and sympathize with his feelings. He tries everything from complimenting her to insulting himself. At one point, he even attempts to speak French even though he knows that it “will hang upon [his] tongue like a new-married / wife about her husband's neck, hardly to be shook off” (178-179). In this scene, Henry clearly struggles to self-regulate. Because he cannot sympathize with Katherine, he is also unable to self-regulate. Self-regulation would help him establish a single rhetorical process, but instead, Henry is forced to try anything in order to help Katherine understand or sympathize with his feelings for her. While Henry is ultimately successful in wooing Katherine, his inability to imagine and self-regulate greatly increases the amount of time it takes for him to convey his feeling. When Henry is able to practice sympathy, his rhetoric is much more efficient than shown here.

Adam Smith’s concept of sympathy contributes a great deal to Henry’s rhetorical abilities. Sympathy is the foundation of rhetoric, and Henry’s most effective speeches occur when he is able to sympathize with his audience. The imagining of how his audience feels and the self-regulation principles of sympathy contribute to why Henry is so successful rhetorically. Henry’s motives have often been questioned based on his moving rhetoric. However, if sympathy is the source of Henry’s rhetoric, then Henry may not be as manipulative or conniving as many suspect him to be. More likely, his ability to sympathize contributes to his powerful rhetoric, and he is no longer forced into the traditional one-dimensional character analysis. The role that sympathy plays in Henry’s rhetoric changes Henry from a solely manipulative individual to a character able to feel and identify with his audiences. Understanding the role sympathy plays in rhetoric is crucial to understanding Henry.
Works Cited


