Throughout history, King Henry has been rightly acknowledged as one of the greatest of the English monarchs, often held up next to bastions such as Alfred the Great, Edward I, Queen Elizabeth, Queen Victoria, and more (O’Connor). However, despite this credit given him for his success, each generation continues to debate his character. The question still asked today is whether Henry V was “‘the greatest man who ever ruled England’ [or]…one of the cruellest and most cold-hearted” (History Extra)? I would argue that his character is thus misunderstood and polarized because so often overlooked is one fundamental part of his character: his devotion to his crown and kingdom, which so often led him to acts that many have since called hypocritical. Yes, some of his actions were cruel and yes, he was an incredible leader. He was both; and it was the calculated balance of the two that made him great. His so-called hypocrisy, then – I would argue – is what makes Shakespeare’s King Henry such a capable king.

We are thus presented with two perspectives of the king – that of those who idealize him and those who don’t. But the two extremes each fail to give credit to the king’s character: on one side, he is seen as the fanciful hero of legend, “a peerless charismatic” (Bloom and Rolls, 232) guided by providence. Proponents of this do not recognize the complexity of his character, acknowledging only that he is “strong and intelligent… but not brilliant” (Martin, 157). The other side of the argument looks only at
his duplicity, without admitting its affects or cause. But a reconciliation of the two must take place to really begin to comprehend this important historical figure – and the key to this is, again, Henry’s deliberate hypocrisy. To understand this, we must first understand what form said hypocrisy takes. For anyone who is remotely familiar with Henry V’s young life, they know that he was less than morally upright and was, we might say, rather the opposite of the king he grew into. The shift from one to the other is seen almost immediately upon his ascension to the throne. Some critics, seeing this, have called it a “satirical exposure of vicious hypocrisy (Boyce and White, 261).” What these critics neglect, however, is the effort and sacrifice that such change – such “vicious hypocrisy” – cost the still-young man. He was hypocritical, yes, in that he gave up his previous life and actions in order to become not the man but the king that his country needed. He chose to sacrifice and take that mantle upon himself. The fact that he was so effective in doing so is commendable – and knowing that he did it in direct violation of his past shows just how much of an understanding he must have had of this kingly role and what would be required of him.

Evidence of this is prevalent in Shakespeare’s play, with each step forward in the story leading to a greater demonstration of the understanding and capability behind Henry’s hypocritical actions. In the very first scene of Act I, Shakespeare begins by highlighting what we’ve just discussed – this dramatic change that Henry has undergone upon ascension to the throne. As the Archbishop of Canterbury says, “The king is full of grace and fair regard… / The courses of his youth promised it not. / The breath no sooner left his father's body, / But that his wildness, mortified in him, / Seem'd to die too; yea, at that very moment / Consideration, like an angel, came / And whipp'd the offending Adam out of him, / Leaving his body as a paradise, / To envelop and
contain celestial spirits” (Henry V, I.1 59-68). As the Archbishop so eloquently says, Henry has (despite his wild youth) developed overnight the “grace and fair regard” needed for a king. His is now a ‘paradisiacal’ body, a change that is not only dramatic but fitting of a divinely appointed king. Thus, in this radical shift Henry gains the approval of this Archbishop and many others, with one scholar even describing him in relation to this speech as “a model of kingship” (Boyce and White, 261). What we must acknowledge, however, is that such an overnight shift is not natural, and does not happen without cause. As one scholar of this play wrote, “Henry V rejects...his first natural self, and takes on a ‘second nature’ that appears to be unified with the common good” (Bates, 205). However, no cause for such a change is yet hinted at in the play. Rather, it is up to us to move forward and to analyze Henry’s actions for their source – actions that, as we will demonstrate below, prove the young king’s dedication to his new responsibility. Indeed, the Archbishop’s summary of the ‘new’ Henry, though unsolicited, demonstrates what is soon visible to readers themselves as, in the next scenes, Shakespeare introduces the titular character himself.

Moving forward in the play, however, shows that one of the first concrete demonstrations of Henry’s commitment comes as he is preparing to invade France. A group of noblemen traitors are discovered, paid by France and plotting to assassinate the king before he can even set sail. One of these is his long-time friend, a lord by the name of Scroop. King Henry describes him as one who “didst bear the key of all my counsels, / That knew'st the very bottom of my soul,” (Henry V, II.2), so close was their bond. As he discusses this betrayal, Henry says that he wants to be merciful to them, especially to this close but wayward friend. But, as he himself also says to the traitors, “touching our
person seek we no revenge; / But we our kingdom's safety must so tender, /
Whose ruin you have sought, that to her laws / We do deliver you. Get you therefore hence, / Poor miserable wretches, to your death” (Henry V, II.2). Despite his own personal feelings, he does what is best for his country, though it costs him the life of a dear friend. For the young king this could not have been easy, but he knew and understood that his role and his responsibility to his kingdom came first.

Next, we follow Henry and his army across the ocean to the shores of France, where the invasion is begun. His moving rhetoric (another testament to his intelligence and his ability to lead) spurs his men forward. Their success on the battlefield gives Henry the chance he needs to parley with the governor of the now besieged town of Harfleur. This speech (given in front of his men, the governor of Harfleur, and the residents alike) is one of rather astonishing brutality that often mars the now-common view of Henry as an idealistic king. Here, the ‘charismatic leader’ of the previous scenes suddenly becomes scathingly callous as he addresses the governor of the soon-to-surrender town. Some readers have expressed their shock at his articulated cruelty here. However, if one accepts the premise that King Henry is cognizant and intelligently committed to his cause, one realizes the mastery of this speech. It is so much better to speak of rape and massacre and to so frighten the governor of the obstinate town into submission than to lose actual lives in less effective struggle. The king is intentionally using such harsh rhetoric to avoid further loss of life, though it may seem out of character.

The realization of the effect of this speech, then, proves it admirable in it’s efficacy. However, one critic of this surrender-inducing speech of Henry’s writes that this discourse demonstrates, instead, the king’s “savagery… by his threatening to use what
are obviously barbarities” (wordpress.com). However, it is not reasonable to use this one speech alone to indict Henry of cruelty. In fact, only a few scenes later, Henry gives a command to his captain, saying “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…” (Henry V, III.6). This unasked for command, in direct contrast to his earlier speech, shows his respect for those they are fighting and shows no sign of his earlier “savagery”. We must look elsewhere, then, for the motivation for his speech at Harfleur – and an understanding of the king’s awareness of his position and his commitment to his responsibility help to provide it.

Even after that battle is won, there comes still another trial for the young king. Two more of his friends, well-known characters from the play Henry IV and frequent companions of his youth, are caught looting, an act previously condemned by the young king. As with Scroop, Henry must again punish his friends in order to uphold his nation’s law that decrees that “all such offenders must be cut off” (Henry V, III.6) Again, his royal responsibility requires his personal sacrifice. But because he is committed to his kingdom, he makes a difficult choice and overrides his personal feelings, ‘hypocratically’ overseeing the hanging of friends for an act that, in his youth, he might very well have taken part in.

Despite his private loss, the king moves on unflinchingly, reaching the town of Agincourt, the site of Henry’s most famous battle. However, the young king cannot yet know of his success and, in an attempt to gauge the feelings of his men, he disguises himself and travels among them as one of their own. His ‘hypocritical’ ability to shift roles stands him in good stead here, helping him to empathize with the men. In fact, it is after this expedition among his men that he gives one of his most moving
soliloquys, in which he bemoans the responsibility – the “ceremony” – that weighs on him, separating him from the common man as it never did before his ascension to the throne. In this rare insight into the king’s private thoughts and emotions, we see that he views his mantle as a “hard condition” and that he wishes greatly to be “like a lackey… [a] slave, a member in the country’s peace /… [the does not know] / what watch the king keeps to maintain the peace” (Henry V, IV.1). This shows clearly the king’s true desires, which are in direct opposition to his reality. This does not stop him, however, from giving his all to his duty and to what he believes to be right.

After the war has been won, it only remains for the terms of the new peace to be set between King Henry and the conquered French king. One of the key components of this treaty is the marriage of Henry to Katharine, the French princess. An entire scene in the play is devoted to Henry’s determined wooing of the princess in order to gain her favor and cement the peace. However, just a few acts before in the play, the French king (in an attempt to stop the invasion), had offered him this same daughter’s hand in marriage: Shakespeare writes that “the [French] king doth offer [Henry] / Katharine his daughter, and with her, to dowry, / Some petty and unprofitable dukedoms. / [but] The offer likes not” (Henry III, Prologue) and the battle continues. We can presume, then, that it is not for personal reasons that Henry wishes to marry Katharine. If so, he would have taken the offer sooner. Instead, he chooses to sacrifice, again, his own emotion in favor of what is best for his nation – a political marriage that will strengthen and eventually unite both kingdoms. He acts, not like the man that he is, but rather as the king that he knows he needs to be.
Of course, despite the course of events, one might still question Henry’s ability to act so sincerely if he is indeed so ‘hypocritical’ – if he is truly acting out of character for the sake of his kingdom. How could one maintain so successfully such a split character? His ability to assume roles, however, is seen in not only his assumption of kingship but throughout the play. In multiple instances, he is able to effectively take on roles that are not his own, or to affect differing viewpoints – with traitors, with besieged governors, with his own soldiers, etc., as we’ve seen. Even in his youth, “Prince Hal,” as he was called, showed an aptitude for such role play. In one scene, Henry and his old friend, Falstaff act out a scene in which, as Hal says, “I'll play my father,” who is the king at the time (Henry IV, II.4). His ensuing dialogue is both eloquent and stately – and in keeping with the greatest of his speeches – and one needs no imagination to see that this still young and unruly Henry can act well the part of a king. Who, then, is to claim that he is incapable of once again acting in the later years of his life? If nothing else, each of these instances gives weight to his case and further proves his ability to act out his part well, however disingenuous.

Do not, however, let us accuse Henry of insincerity. Some readers have said that he, in many instances, “seems unfeeling, …a cynical politician” (Boyce, 207-208). Rather, in all of this, in the subsuming of his self to his kingly role, Henry’s own words (put into his mouth by Shakespeare) poignantly convey some of his deep emotion - the sacrifice and sense of loss that the young king surely felt in giving up his self for state. In his soliloquy on the role of a king in Scene 1 of Act V, he cries out loud, “What infinite heart's-ease / must kings neglect, that private men enjoy! / and what have kings, that privates have not too, / save ceremony…?” (Henry V, IV.1 204-207). He here laments all that he has forgone (and must forego) in order to live up to the ceremony, to
the role, of king. And yet his commitment, his devotion, was so great that he gave up all in what many cruelly term an act of hypocrisy. Truly, as one delves deeper into the motives of this iconic king, the image of a simply idealistic and larger-than-life character or even that of a cruel politician increasingly gives way to the clearer image of a man with understanding, intelligence, and love for his nation who made sacrifices to achieve success. As Shakespeare’s Henry says of himself and his “hard condition” (meaning his kingship), he “must bear all” (Henry V, IV.1) that is asked of him. And so he does, carrying this weighty mantle onward in such a way as to become one of the greatest kings that England has ever known, immortalized by the great bard’s pen.
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