The Conflicting Nature of King Henry’s Power in *Henry V*

By: Alvin Hägerbäck

Supervisor: Roberto Del Valle Alcalá

Södertörn University | School of Culture and Education

Bachelor’s essay 15 credits

Department of English | Fall semester 2021
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Abstract

This essay will focus on *Henry V*, one of William Shakespeare’s historical plays. The protagonist, King Henry V, is a character who holds immense control and prominence in the play and is therefore central to most analyses of it. Previous research has explored how power is portrayed in the play, as well as various aspects of its power structures, such as the relationship between the soldiers and the king as well as the liability for the inevitable death that accompanies battle. Based on this earlier research, this study investigates Henry’s attempted unification of his army as well as the question of responsibility and how these aspects affect the king’s power. It argues that Henry’s dynamic and sometimes ambivalent approach to these aspects help him maintain and further his power, by doubling down on his powerful position while still avoiding any negative repercussions.
Introduction

During his lifetime, Shakespeare wrote many historical plays. One such play is *Henry V*, written and published in its First Quarto form at the end of the 16th century (Watts 11). The play depicts the newly crowned King Henry V’s action-filled venture into France, where he has been informed that, through ancient lineage, he is the rightful heir to the French throne. Accompanying the king are soldiers and noblemen, some having also appeared in the preceding plays of the Henriad (Shakespeare’s collection of historical plays depicting the house of Lancaster’s rise to power with Henry V as a central figure) leading up to *Henry V*. This army proceeds to defeat the French despite being heavily outnumbered, proving remarkable strength and determination in battles today famously known as the siege of Harfleur and the battle of Agincourt. At the center of both the play and the history it is based on stands King Henry V, a character perceived at first glance perhaps as a strong, charismatic, and inspirational leader figure.

This image of Henry has however been subject to much scrutiny by critics, who have revealed his character to be more questionable and ambiguous in nature. There are many aspects and moments in the play which seem to disturb the tenacious unity of the English endeavor, such as the attempted impeachment of King Henry in the Southampton plot, or the immoral nature of the king’s former companion Bardolph. As Jonathan Dollimore and Alan Sinfield point out, the play is in fact riddled with conflicts and contradictions. What at the surface level may be seen as a piece of nationalist propaganda, an illustration of a prominent figure leading their country to a spectacular victory, in reality contains cracks which threaten to undermine this perceived power at any moment. The cracks are, as Stephen Greenblatt argues in his seminal New Historicist essay “Invisible Bullets,” part of the fundamental dialectic between subversion and containment in Shakespeare’s plays (and Renaissance culture more broadly). This concept refers to the intentional production of subversive dynamics for the purpose of containing them, thereby simultaneously questioning and maintaining power.

How then, one might ask, can a character who seems so powerful exist in an environment which constantly threatens to challenge them? This essay will seek to explore that question, focusing primarily on King Henry’s contradictory approach regarding, especially, the unification of his army as well as the responsibility for actions committed during battle. These are central aspects of the play, aspects which are and have been discussed both by
critics but also by characters in the play itself. The goal of conducting such a study is to better understand how one agent can simultaneously assert steadfast control, in this instance over a large group leading them to an astounding victory, whilst at the same time appearing ambiguous in their actions and intentions. At the same time that King Henry seeks to raise the English banner and rally his troops around St. George, thereby attempting to establish a communal sense of national unity, his army consists of individuals separated by their conflicts and differences. Although the battle is won, the play may not only depict the plain fortunate English triumph that it has sometimes been thought to represent through use in propaganda, but a much more nuanced depiction of individual as well as structural power.

Even though one might expect Henry’s ambivalence to render him less powerful, proving not in control of several aspects of his position as king, his power, I argue, is only emphasized and further asserted by his contradictions. It enables Henry to pick and choose when to apply certain ideals, which in turn permits him to utilize his shifting principles to an advantage. From the start of the play where he pins any blood spilt on the Archbishop of Canterbury if the claim to the throne is not valid, to the night before battle where his soldiers question their responsibility if the cause is not good, Henry proves his power by controlling and turning these situations to his advantage.

Theoretical Framework and Previous Research

This essay focuses on power as well as ideologically motivated actions, and an influential essay which has a similar focus is Stephen Greenblatt’s “Invisible Bullets.” Greenblatt’s essay is included in Political Shakespeare, a collection of essays edited by Jonathan Dollimore and Alan Sinfield, important to the new historicist and cultural materialist literary theories within Shakespeare studies. “Invisible Bullets” proposes the idea of subversion and containment, indicating a conscious production of subversive dynamics with the intention of containing them, as a means to simultaneously question and maintain power. Greenblatt uses the example of Thomas Harriot’s Brief and True Report, an account of the 16th century British colonial expedition to Virginia to show how the English Christian belief both subverted and contained their power. Greenblatt states that “the power Harriot both serves and embodies not only produces its own subversion but is actively built upon it: that in the Virginia colony, the radical undermining of Christian order is not the negative limit but the positive condition for the establishment of that order” (24).
Essentially, by including this example, Greenblatt shows how the power structures of Shakespeare’s time might have been maintained and enforced by those in control of them. When analyzing a selection of plays out of the Henriad, including *Henry V*, Greenblatt comments on the idea of prince Henry as “an ideal of the potentialities of the English character,” and writes that “such an ideal image involves as its positive condition the constant production of its own radical subversion and the powerful containment of that subversion” (30). Greenblatt indicates that *Henry V* explores the workings of royal power and presents King Henry as a consolidated and saturated example, whilst still not excluding the discrepancies of that same power. As the play rehearses these discrepancies, they serve not only to increase the theatrical value of the play, but also to heighten the king’s presence.

Along similar lines, one may look to an essay written by the editors of *Political Shakespeare*, namely Jonathan Dollimore and Alan Sinfield. This essay is called “History and Ideology: The instance of *Henry V*,” and is included in another influential collection of essays from the 1980’s, namely *Alternative Shakespeares*, edited by John Drakakis. In this essay Dollimore and Sinfield explore the ideological aspects, significations, and implications of *Henry V*. They define ideology as “composed of those beliefs, practices and institutions which work to legitimate the social order” (215). By this, they also mean that ideology renders social orders as natural, and therefore subjection too. This in turn means that “oppression is experienced as a fate rather than an alterable condition” (216). Signifying subjection and oppression as definite and natural implies that the unequal distribution of wealth and power is also seen as natural. This can be viewed as an important aspect of King Henry’s power, which Dollimore and Sinfield state is “rooted in nature – blood, lineage and breeding … but also deriving ultimately from God’s law as it is encoded in nature and, by extension, society” (218). The justification for both the war with the French but also Henry’s position as King seems rooted in a higher power, which validates his actions as a natural course of events. It suggests that Henry is the rightful ruler and wields rightful power, therefore fighting a rightful war. Dollimore and Sinfield later in their essay state that it is easy to see how *Henry V* might be read to suggest that foreign war is a way to unite the nation, but in fact, the play is filled with conflicts and contradictions. It faces the King with “actual or threatened insurrection from almost every quarter: the Church, treacherous fractions within the ruling class, slanderous subjects and soldiers who undermine the war effort, either by exploiting it or skeptically interrogating the King’s motives” (221).
However, according to Dollimore and Sinfield, during the course of the play these antagonisms are reworked into subordination in the name of national unity. The one totally apparent insurrection, the Southampton plot, is quickly dealt with, even churning out the validation of Henry’s authority through the apologies of the traitors. The thought of insurrection does nevertheless still trouble Henry, who fears that he cannot ensure obedience and envies the subjects because they do not have to fear the prospect of being disobeyed. The same ceremony which ensures obedience in subjects also acts to masquerade real antagonism behind the veil of that obedience.

Further exploring Henry’s position as king, Dollimore and Sinfield argue that *Henry V*, in a distinctly Elizabethan way, indicates a single source of power in the state. No other character is constructed in as much detail as King Henry, who certainly stands at the center of both the play and the state he represents. Henry accepts the problematic nature of the church’s role in the war, and it leads to more power being concentrated in Henry’s hands, as he becomes the sole center of the ideologically charged use of religion as a justification for foreign war. His subjects, the soldiers of his war, are said to give their duty to the king, to lay all their sins and therefore their souls upon him, making Henry a sort of idol of both authoritarian and religious power. Dollimore and Sinfield claim that the Elizabethan state consolidated identification by the expulsion of others. An example of this found in *Henry V* is Pistol, who because of his flawed character is repeatedly reintroduced and discredited. In this fashion, what are deemed vices by the dominant and the powerful, is placed upon individuals or groups as a way to create unity by exclusion. However, this perceived unity can still be seen as frail. Dollimore and Sinfield point out how Henry at the seat of this power contradicts himself, often embracing his position as King and making the most of it, but at the same time complaining about being “an effect of the structure which he seemed to guarantee” (227). This connects to something which Dollimore and Sinfield write earlier in the essay, namely that in *Henry V*, “the construction of ideology is complex – even as it consolidates, it betrays inherent instability.” Dollimore and Sinfield seem to suggest that however much *Henry V* tries to balance and disentangle sources of insurrection, their existence and its prominence is so apparent that *Henry V* cannot be seen as a pure piece of Elizabethan state propaganda. The King may be the center of power, but even he has difficulty sustaining the responsibility and constant threats that come with his position. In the end, Dollimore and Sinfield conclude that “*Henry V* can be read to reveal not only the strategies of power but also the anxieties informing both them and their ideological representation” (231).
Undoubtedly, the concept of power in *Henry V* is a complex one, King Henry’s position being one of ambivalent nature. Dollimore and Sinfield, in a new historicist and cultural materialist spirit, argue that much of *Henry V* can be connected to the politics and ideology of Elizabethan England as the play, despite its complexity, showcases Henry’s goal of uniting an increasingly recalcitrant nation.

The idea of the nation and importantly what it means for its subjects is the topic of Arlene W. Saxonhouse’s essay called “Nation and Responsibility: The King and His Soldiers in Shakespeare’s *Henry V*,” where she argues that King Henry’s view of his soldiers is unstable, shifting from viewing them as members of a united whole to individuals depending on his end goals. When engaging in the subordination of antagonisms under national unity that Dollimore and Sinfield propose, Saxonhouse suggests that Henry views his army as a united whole, as acting on the part of the imagined nation of England, but that there are discrepancies in this constructed unity. Commenting on the king, she states,

> The England for whom he urges his men to fight in his great clarion call before the battle of Harfleur—“For Harry, England and St. George”—comes from his imagination as he joins those he leads and those he subdues. They create a unity out of many, a unity that can act to make war and/or peace. But when Henry tries to avoid the question of responsibility that Williams poses, he divides his nation into individuals, each one bearing his own private sins for which each must atone before salvation can be his. (19)

It seems, on the basis of this account by Saxonhouse, that Henry is both transforming every individual, regardless of accent or origin, into subjects fighting under the banner of his England, as well as regards them as individuals in the battlefield. Saxonhouse also discusses the question of responsibility in fighting a potentially unjust war. She uses the soldier named Williams as an example, a character who continually questions Henry’s role and responsibility in leading the battle. Just as there is a shifting perspective of the soldiers’ roles, as a common unified entity or as individuals, one may view King Henry in a similar way. On the one hand, by breaking the army into individuals when faced with the potential responsibility of an unjust war, “Henry avoids the common action of the army he leads as a body unified in its action in service to the King, as at one with his mystical body politic” (16). On the other hand, as Saxonhouse mentions, Henry’s speech on St. Crispin’s Day “illustrates Henry’s efforts to unify his followers with himself, his own body. Honor becomes the bond, while questions of responsibility divide” (17).
Just as Dollimore and Sinfield point out the ambivalent nature of Henry’s power and the frailty of his position, Saxonhouse also displays how Henry is ambivalent in deciding who is responsible for the actions committed during this war, as well as showing the frailty of what at surface level might be seen as a powerful band of brothers. This idea of brotherhood ties directly to Christopher Dowd’s essay “Polysemic Brotherhoods in Henry V.” In this essay, Dowd explores the polysemic use of the word “brother” and can be seen as furthering the discussion around identity and national unity in the play.

Dowd argues that Shakespeare has Henry use the term “brother” or “brotherhood” when referring to his army because “it implies a combination of closeness and strife that no other kinship term could” (340). Because of the fact that the eldest brother in the family inherited both the power and capital from his father in early modern England, Dowd implies that brothers developed a unique relationship of both antagonism and jealousy as well as bond and union. This connects directly to the idea explored by both Dollimore and Sinfield as well as Saxonhouse, that antagonisms are subordinated through the attempted imposition of national unity. In this sense, these antagonisms are a natural part of the brotherhood which Henry invokes before battle. Dowd proposes that when Henry’s army is faced with fear, the king instead imposes on them “a fear of being left out of the fellowship” (343). Inclusion through exclusion, the same concept explored by Dollimore and Sinfield, is used to stifle any possible uncertainties or regrets, instead producing soldiers with motivation to fight. Dowd also states that “[f]or a play that attempts to unify diverse peoples under one banner, Henry V repeatedly also presents the exact opposite -- the fracturing of internal unities” (345). To exemplify this, he mentions the case of Pistol, Bardolph and Nym, who according to Dowd do not inhabit the same brotherhood through national unity, but through the perhaps simpler common goal of profit. However, these different brotherhoods all contain conflict and contradiction, connecting them and showing the nuance of unity in the play. Another example of internal unities fracturing mentioned in this essay is the Southampton plot. The treachery committed by Scroop, Cambridge and Grey shows Henry that even his brotherhood is prone to insurrection. Dowd states that this example shows how the king defines who belongs in his brotherhood, and that “[t]he utter submission to his will that he requires is frightening. It belies that there will ever be equality in his brotherhood and suggests that what he truly wants is a band of sheep” (348).

Also important to the ideas of national unity and inclusion is the incorporation of characters from what Christopher Ivic calls the “Celtic fringe.” In the aforementioned
“Invisible Bullets,” Greenblatt writes that “Hal symbolically tames the last wild areas in the British isles, areas that in the sixteenth century represented, far more powerfully than any new world people, the doomed outposts of a vanishing tribalism” (42). Similarly, in an essay called “Our Inland: Shakespeare’s *Henry V* and the Celtic Fringe,” Ivic writes that “[p]erhaps more so than any of Shakespeare’s history plays, *Henry V* invites us to explore inscriptions of English identity in relation to an expanding English polity that included an ‘incorporated’ Wales, an intractable Ireland, and an encroaching Scotland” (86). When captain Macmorris, the play’s Irish character, is questioned about his nation by Fluellen, the Welsh character, the two seem at odds with each other. Ivic points out that this scene is “[f]ar from a moment of unity” (90), and that “[m]istaken identity – that is, the fluidity of collective identities in the British Isles – is precisely what this scene brings into play” (91). An unmistakable Englishness, an attempt at national unity, is attributed to Henry’s band of brothers, which seemingly inhibits individual differences, and Ivic maintains that, unlike Greenblatt’s previously mentioned view of Henry as taming the Celtic fringe, this Englishness is not applied with complete ease. Ivic states that the play includes many moments and factors which contradict Henry’s project of English national unification in the play, such as the fact that King Henry describes himself as a Welshman. This ultimately leads to the idea that “[t]he king’s body . . . serves as a conflicted site upon which anxiety about national and cultural identity is focused” (89). Just as Dollimore and Sinfield view *Henry V* as not suggesting that foreign war is a way to unite the nation because it is filled with conflicts and contradictions, Ivic could be seen as indicating that Englishness itself is contradictory. The essay also points to the fact that an important aspect of national identity, of national unity, is habitual linguistic consistency, something which is not present within Henry’s ranks. The Welsh captain Fluellen confuses the word “big” for “pig,” but at the same time that he embodies non-Englishness in speech, Ivic suggests that Fluellen is often read as a loyal English subject, which is especially evident in his disciplining of Macmorris and Pistol. The connection between Macmorris and Pistol acts as a link between the displaced, even if the characters are supposed to unite under the English flag. It seems that the attempt at creating national unity is discordant with the inclusion of characters from the Celtic fringe, yet another example of conflict and contradiction present in *Henry V*.

To conclude this theoretical framework, the essays by Dollimore and Sinfield as well as Stephen Greenblatt can be seen as a starting point for a reading of *Henry V*, one which questions the ideological implications as well as the process of power in the play. Their
essays indicate the conflicts and contradictions that permeate the play, problematizing the perception of Henry as an absolutely powerful character who unites the masses. Saxonhouse further develops the idea of Henry’s role and shows how the king shifts from viewing his army from a common unity to a collection of individuals, mainly when it comes to the question of responsibility. Henry also dodges the topic of his own responsibility for the war, by both at one point assimilating himself with his army, whilst at another point distancing himself from the soldiers’ individual actions. On the topic of unification in the play, Dowd explores the use of the terms “brother” and “brotherhood” to create unity amongst the soldiers, and states that because of their connection to the antagonism of brothers caused by inheritance laws in the early English modern period, the terms explain the combination of antagonism and unity displayed in the play. Henry unites the soldiers through the prospect of exclusion, but also by defining his brotherhood by those who will blindly follow him. Finally, Ivic problematizes the inclusion of characters from the Celtic fringe, displaying how they are not peacefully incorporated into Henry’s ranks as Greenblatt might suggest, but can instead be seen as disrupting his attempt to create national unity in the play.

The essays written by Greenblatt, Dollimore and Sinfield are both included in influential collections of essays on Shakespeare, important to the new historicist and cultural materialist literary theories and perspectives, and the evolution of Shakespeare studies in the 1980s in general. In the essence of these theories, the first two essays of the framework demonstrate that Henry is at the seat of power, both religious and ideological, by connecting the play to its historical and cultural contexts, such as Thomas Harriot’s depiction of the Virginia colony and the actions of the Elizabethan state. Building on this previous research, the essays by Saxonhouse, Dowd and Ivic display how Henry is also at the center of contradictions regarding both how to unify his soldiers, as well as who is responsible for the actions committed during this war. These essays have been chosen to create a theoretical framework which combines foundational ideas within Shakespeare studies, the notion of Henry’s power and the subversive elements that enables it, with new perspectives which develops them by focusing on two distinct aspects of the play, namely unification and responsibility. This leads to a research question: how does Henry’s contradictory approach to the unification of both his army as well as his responsibility for actions committed during battle affect the perception of and reality of his power? The answer to this question will be presented in the next section.
Analysis

As stated before, this essay aims to answer how Henry’s contradictions affect the consolidation of his power. In the following analysis, I intend to prove that King Henry consciously adopts a contradictory and erratic attitude towards the unity of his army as well as the responsibility for his soldiers’ actions, in order to preserve and further his power.

King Henry’s approach to responsibility

In the second scene of Act One, Henry displays the first example of deflecting responsibility, of ensuring that he cannot be blamed for any bloodshed later in the play. One of the first characters to enter the stage is the Bishop of Canterbury, who proposes the idea that Henry is entitled to the French crown according to ancient laws and lineage. However, before this suggestion can be made, Henry urges the Bishop to avoid distorting or falsely interpreting the ancient salic law to English favor. The King states, “We charge you in the name of God, take heed: / For never two such kingdoms did contend / Without much fall of blood, whose guiltless drops / Are every one a woe” (1.2.23-26). Henry does not want to incite a war which is based on false claims, because such a war would only lead to blood spilt over dishonorable intentions. The Bishop does however provide ample reasoning for his proposal, and urges Henry to “Stand for your own, unwind your bloody flag, / Look back into your mighty ancestors” (1.2.101-102). The Bishop of Ely, Duke of Exeter and Earl of Westmoreland are present and encourage the king to act on this proposal, and Henry does not immediately reject the idea. In the same scene, the king receives a gift from the Dauphin, the heir to the French throne. It consists of the message that Henry has no right to any dukedoms in France, alongside a casket full of tennis balls. This mocking gift, in combination with the encouragement from Henry’s followers in the room, incentivizes the king’s seizing of the French crown, saying that in God’s name “Tell you the Dolphin I am coming on / To venge me as I may and to put forth / My rightful hand in a well-hallowed cause” (1.2.292-294). It seems Henry, the only one in the position to launch an invasion of France, has been convinced by Canterbury’s declaration, and is ready to ship his troops over the English channel. However, there is already an ambivalence when it comes to who is responsible for the inevitable losses that will be suffered, regardless of their size. Henry warns Canterbury that the cause must be just, otherwise any blood spilt will be in vain. Answering to this, the Bishop states “The sin upon my head, dread sovereign” (1.2.97), meaning that he bears the responsibility for that bloodshed. Still, the king is the only one with the power to direct the
troops into France, which means the action and decision is his regardless of whether the Bishop’s claim is false or not. The immense power of the king indicates at least some responsibility for any actions committed or deaths suffered during the English expedition into France. He is the one who makes the final decision, and therefore he must surely bear some responsibility.

When it seems that Henry’s unified army is proving effective, he showcases the capabilities of his power by threats of acts which one could deem as quite extreme. After the English have almost achieved victory at Harfleur, only a few French remain in the city. Henry offers the governor of the city to admit defeat, and to save them. The king does this in a quite gruesome way, stating:

The blind and bloody soldier with foul hand
Defile the locks of your shrill-shrieking daughters;
Your fathers taken by the silver beards
And their most reverend heads dashed to the walls,
Your naked infants spitted upon pikes
While the mad mothers with their howls confused
Do break the clouds, as did the wives of Jewry
At Herod’s bloody-hunting slaytermen. (3.3.35-41)

This horrifying prospect is proposed by Henry, who dubs himself a soldier only moments before this passage. He has, as proposed earlier, aligned himself with his army as a united whole, labelling himself a soldier and therefore becoming increasingly equal to the other soldiers. In that sense, his incentivizing of these actions if the French do not surrender becomes all the grimmer, since it is the king himself who proposes it. It cannot be seen as an empty threat, since the king has the kind of power that would result in the soldier committing these actions. In that case, Henry would bear responsibility for them, because once again, he is the one making the final decision.

However, not all responsibility can be attributed to the king, and those who stray away from his orders are quickly dismissed from the brotherhood. After having defeated the French at Harfleur, the English forces push on towards Agincourt. However, before arriving at the
next camp, it is discovered that Bardolph, one of Henry’s old friends from before he was king, has been caught looting a church. Pistol, another one of the king’s old accomplices, pleads with captain Fluellen to spare the man, since he does not believe it an offence worthy of death. Fluellen, however, believes that even though Bardolph is Pistol’s “brother,” Pistol should instead wish Bardolph to be hanged, to maintain discipline within the ranks. Interestingly enough, pillaging and ravaging was part of the king’s speech to the French governor after the siege of Harfleur, where he mentioned offences perhaps deemed much more violent than stealing from a church. However, here there is a difference, because Bardolph is not stealing as someone a part of Henry’s army, but as an individual. It has not been ordered by Henry’s power, and therefore it cannot be forgiven. The same action that could well have been sanctioned by Henry and in that case deemed as natural, is now punished with death. Commenting on Bardolph’s offence, Henry condemns the actions, stating that nothing should be taken from the French that is not paid for. He says that “when lenity and cruelty play for a kingdom, the gentler gamester is the soonest winner” (3.6.107-109). However, this does not ring true with the threats King Henry made to the governor of Harfleur. Even though one might propose that Henry makes these threats knowing they will not be realized, that is never a certainty, meaning that his condemnation of Bardolph could be seen as a bit hypocritical. It does however display the king’s power, because not only can he order his soldiers to face death in battle, but he can also control when death is seen as a worthy punishment. Henry controls not only the actions of his soldiers, but their lives.

Before the battle of Agincourt, Henry borrows a cloak and disguises himself before speaking to several of his soldiers, temporarily removing their perception of him as king. During his disguised conversations, Henry presents his contradictory view of his soldiers’ responsibility in a clever way, disconnected from his position in order to avoid portraying himself as an inadequate ruler. After a quick visit by Gower and Fluellen, the king encounters three soldiers, called Bates, Courts and Williams. After introducing himself as a soldier under Erpingham, the king enters into conversation with the soldiers. First, the cloaked king is asked what Erpingham thinks of their situation, whereby he states that it is hopeless. When Bates asks if Erpingham has said this to the king, Henry in disguise answers, “No. Nor it is not meet he should, for, though I speak it to you, I think the king is but a man as I am” (4.1.98-99). In this passage, it seems Henry seeks to humanize himself, to remove the prominence of his structural power and instead portray himself to the soldiers as one of them. He says that the king feels the same fear they do, only he cannot show it as it would
dishearten the soldiers. In uniting himself with the other soldiers, he is stripping himself of the control and privilege of his position. When Bates exclaims that he believes even the king would wish to be somewhere else than the cold French field, Henry, in disguise, says that he believes the king would not wish to be anywhere else. Bates answers by saying that in that case, the king could fight the battle alone; however, Henry retorts by stating, “Methinks I could not die anywhere so contended as in the King’s company; his cause being just, and his quarrel honorable” (4.1.121-123). The soldiers believe this to be outside of their knowledge, and therefore they cannot know for sure. Of course, the audience understands that Henry is speaking of himself and might therefore believe that what he is saying is correct, however the fact that the soldiers do not buy the idea shows how Henry is perceived by others. Bates thinks that they should be content with knowing that the King is in a higher position than them, that they are his subjects and should therefore not explore further into the morality of this battle. Bates does however also state that “If his cause be wrong, our obedience to the King wipes the crime of it out of us” (4.1.126-128). Evidently considering the morality of the king’s orders, Williams follows Bates by noting that if the king’s cause is not good, the king also has a heavy burden on his shoulders. After all, it is then he who has led them to become nothing but remains on the battlefield, never able to have a say in their fate because they had to remain loyal subjects to the king. This is a moment where, as Saxonhouse points out, Henry turns from viewing his army as a collective mind with a unified cause, to a group of individuals for whose actions during battle he bears no responsibility. Henry states that “The King is not bound to answer the particular endings of his soldiers” (4.1.149-150), as well as that “Every subject’s duty is the King’s, but every subject’s soul is his own” (4.1.170-171). It seems that Henry wants to use his position to lead an army according to his will, but at the same time escape taking responsibility for any immoral wrongdoings committed by this army. Every man should take responsibility for their own death, even if it is Henry who has ordered them into the fight. Finally, Henry and Williams disagree when the king, of course knowing himself, says he would never trust the king if he saw him be ransomed. Williams suggests that this is a foolish saying, and that it is nothing else than an individual’s view of the king. This leads them to exchange gloves and challenge each other to a fight if they ever spot the other wearing them.

Further debating the implications of the King’s role, Henry turns inwards to question the actual meaning of his position as king as well as the vast responsibility he has to take on. Towards the end of this scene, Henry holds a monologue about the hardships of his position.
Initially, Henry exclaims “Upon the King! Let us our lives, our souls, our debts, our careful wives, our children, and our sins lay on the King! We must bear all” (4.1.220-223). It seems he feels that he bears too large a responsibility, a responsibility for every man and their entire beings. He questions what the actual difference between him and other men is, except for the title he has been given and the ceremonies that belong to it. Henry wonders if his title brings him anything else than “place, degree and form” (4.1.236), and states that his position creates fearing subjects, but he envies those fearing subjects because all they have to do is obey, whilst the king has to constantly be weary and control his fate. Henry then furthers his idea that the “wretched slave” enjoys a more pleasant and tranquil existence than him, because all they have to do is work during the day, eat and then sleep during the night. They do not have to worry about keeping the peace that they so savor. The king admits to struggling with his power, questioning whether it is really a curse or a blessing. This doubt and uncertainty of his own position and power may be what leads Henry to his contradictory approaches to unification and responsibility. He envies the peasant and the soldier, his loyal subjects, who have no other cause but to obey him, and ponders how he should approach their unbounded dedication to him. A soldier who has committed immoral acts or died in battle has had no other objective but to obey and stay loyal to Henry, and therefore their actions are attributed directly to the king. In this instance, understandably, Henry distances himself from their actions, stating that each man is responsible for his own death. In other instances, however, take Henry’s speech at Harfleur for example, the king wants the soldiers to fight for Henry, invoking their loyalty and obedience in order to gain an advantage on the battlefield.

However much Henry may grumble over the hardship of his position, he has still put himself in a spot where he can effectively avoid responsibility, and it proves to further his own position. Henry’s monologue before the battle of Agincourt may seem as a point of weakness for Henry, as a moment where he doubts himself and the power he possesses. However, one could argue that his contradictory approach to responsibility only favors him. When he receives Canterbury’s proposal at the very beginning of the play, Henry questions whether his claim is valid or not, and receives the answer that if it is not, the sin is upon the Bishop’s head. If one then looks at Henry's discussion with Bates and Williams, the two soldiers state that if the king’s cause is not good, they bear no responsibility. Essentially, if the cause is not good then the soldiers bear no responsibility, but neither does Henry since he has already pinned it on Canterbury. And further, if the cause is good, Henry bears no
responsibility for his soldiers’ actions, because then they are seen as individuals, just like Bardolph.

Evidently, the question of responsibility is of much relevance in this play. From the very beginning, responsibility is transferred away from Henry by his questioning of Canterbury’s reading of the old law enabling him to claim the French crown. The king makes threats of perhaps an excessively violent nature, threats which are deemed acceptable only because the king is the one proposing them. However, individuals who commit actions deemed immoral and which are not sanctioned by the king are swiftly punished, individuals such as Bardolph. Henry’s power rids him of responsibility when ordering his soldiers, but when his position as king is not visible to them, they question their own responsibility, just like Williams and Bates. They argue that if the king’s cause is not good, then they bear no responsibility for their bloodshed. Henry however argues that every man is responsible for their own death, and smartly enough he has already ensured that if the cause is not good, the blame is on the Archbishop. Pondering his position, the king envies the peasant who only has to obey the king and not worry about keeping peace, yet he is still contradictory in his position on responsibility. The ambivalence does however aid the king, since he can effectively escape responsibility and therefore avoid any negative perceptions of himself, maintaining his powerful character. Still, the king’s contradictory attitude towards responsibility is not his only method of sustaining and advancing his own power. He also displays many examples of trying to unify his army, in order to generate a larger force which follows his word. Just as his approach to responsibility, the question of unification is also one of ambivalent nature, as will now be explained.

The unification of Henry’s army
To further his position and ensure that his army will follow his cause, Henry swiftly and ostentatiously puts an end to an attempted plot against him. Before departing for France, Henry is informed that three characters, Cambridge, Scroop and Grey, are planning to betray and dethrone him for French payment. King Henry seizes this moment as an opportunity to display what happens to those who oppose him. Before confronting them with their treachery, Henry faces the conspirators with a question of morality. He mentions to Exeter that they should release a man, who may or may not exist, and who had previously opposed Henry on the basis that the man was most probably intoxicated. As a reaction to this, the traitors inform Henry that he should be merciful, but not release the man because that would encourage such behavior. They believe the man should still be punished. The king answers that “If little faults
proceeding on distemper / Shall not be winked at, how shall we stretch our eye / When capital
cries, chewed, swallowed and digested / Appear before us?” (2.2.54-57). In this instance,
Henry lets the conspirators have a taste of his power, to see how they would wield it. In a
sense, they decide their own fate as indicated by the quotation above, because if little
offenders such as the drunk man should be punished, so should they. When they understand
that Henry knows about their plot, the traitors instantly beg for the same mercy that they had
recently rejected they ask for forgiveness and show regret and shame for their actions. This is
a way in which Henry’s power is only reinforced, his cunning and knowledge being one step
ahead of them. Henry uses their rhetoric against them, in the process scorning them for an
attitude which he deems to be wrong. According to him, he would treat an opponent with
mercy, like the example of the drunkard, but “the mercy which was quick in us but late / By
your own counsel is suppressed and killed” (2.2.79-80). This example also illustrates the
concept of subversion and containment developed by Greenblatt, where Henry makes use of
opposing forces in order to consolidate his own position. The subversive element, the
existence of three characters who seek to undermine Henry’s power, is used by the king to his
advantage by publicly displaying the effective containment of it. Before apprehending the
conspirators, Henry states:

I doubt not that, since we are well-persuaded

We carry not a heart with us from hence

That grows not in a fair consent with ours;

Nor leave not one behind, that doth not wish

Success and conquest to attend on us. (2.2.20-24)

In this passage one can note how he clearly defines what he seeks in his followers,
attributes which the traitors clearly do not exhibit. Henry unifies his army by excluding and
defeating those that oppose it, showcasing his absolute power. He clearly declares that those
who are part of his army follow his word, unifying them under it but also reinforcing his own
position over them.

In another example of attempted unification, Henry urges his soldiers to fight for his
name, both elevating his own position but also uniting his soldiers under a common banner.
Arriving in France, the English army proceeds to Harfleur, attempting to besiege the town. In
an attempt to rally his troops, King Henry calls on them to “Stiffen the sinews, summon up
the blood, / Disguise fair nature with hard-favored rage” (3.1.7-8). It seems he wants his army to disregard their modesty and restraint, instead opting to release their utmost aggressiveness. He also calls on them to “Follow your spirit, and upon this charge / Cry ‘God for Harry, England and St. George!’“ (3.1.34). Henry urges his soldiers to ravage the enemy, and to do it in his name. They should release their inner rage, and as they do it, they should proclaim his name. Henry seemingly has the power to cause damage, and the defeat of Harfleur should be one attributed to his name. The actions committed are to be ascribed to him, and the soldiers are to be unified under Henry through their actions. Therefore, the king in this instance merges himself with his army, becoming one entity, one very powerful entity, at the center of which stands the king himself. Henry’s instigating of his troops, calling on them to fight in his name, indicates that he is responsible for whatever actions they may commit, and in this case it contributes to portraying him as a powerful leader. He becomes a leader who has the power to control a whole army of soldiers, who by his orders perform any actions he may wish them to. The fact that Henry urges them to fight under a common cause, “for Harry, England and St. George,” also indicates the wish for unification that the king seeks. It only furthers the powerful perception of his control and strength, because his soldiers will be equal in Henry’s unified army, hopefully meaning that they will strive to fulfill their purpose by whatever means necessary.

Further, Henry’s brotherhood shows its cracks once again when Pistol displays an apparent antipathy based on nationality. As mentioned earlier, Henry disguises himself prior to the battle of Agincourt, before conversation with several of his soldiers. First up is Pistol, who immediately asks the cloaked stranger about his position: “art thou officer, / Or art thou base, common and popular?” (4.1.37-38). Pistol says that he is as good a man as an emperor, and Henry answers that he then must be better than the king. To this Pistol proclaims his love and devotion to the king, who he describes as affectionate and strong. However, when the disguised king mentions that he is a Welshman, and therefore akin to Fluellen, Pistol immediately ends the conversation and gives him the finger. The national unity and idea of a band of brothers does not seem applicable here, since one member of the army, Pistol, is so quick to dismiss this stranger as soon as he discovers the link to Fluellen. Even though the link is only one of friendship and nationality, Pistol is so affected that he feels he cannot engage any more with this stranger because of it. Would this have changed if he knew the stranger was King Henry? Would Pistol still have dismissed him on the basis of his connection to Fluellen? Perhaps the band of brothers is in reality only realized when Henry is
present, when the king is at the center of the brotherhood. Perhaps everyone is the king’s brother, but not all are brothers to each other.

The discord in the army despite Henry’s attempts at unification may however act to the King’s advantage. As Ivic points out, the unification cannot be seen as a mere taming of the Gaelic fringe, as the non-English characters in Henry’s army do not simply take on an English identity and forget their origins. Throughout the play, Fluellen is loyal to Henry and is quick to execute his tasks just as Henry orders them. However, what binds them together in the end, is their common Welsh origin. After learning that Henry is his countryman, Fluellen states, “By Jeshu, I am your Majesty’s countryman, I care not who know it. I will confess it to all ‘orld” (4.7.104-105). He is prouder to share his Welshness with Henry than his Englishness, proving that the king’s attempted unification of his army as distinctly English is not effectual. That may however not only be negative for Henry because, as he has proven earlier in the play, some subversive elements are required in order to maintain power. Perhaps it proves sufficient for Henry to proclaim to his army to fight under a unified name, regardless of whether there are some who do not align with that name. Ivic made a connection between Pistol and Macmorris, especially regarding how they are both disciplined by Fluellen, and because Fluellen is so loyal to Henry, one could see it as an act on the behalf of the king himself. On the basis that they do not self-evidently belong to Henry’s unified army, to Englishness, Henry can, through Fluellen, successfully contain their subversiveness, thereby maintain and further his own power. Henry states during his speech to the governor of Harfleur that he is a soldier, but a soldier in an army holds no more power than any other. Unification is a powerful tool of ensuring that his army follows his orders, but to maintain his power Henry needs the occasional frictions, and as already demonstrated, frictions based on nationality occur multiple times in the play.

Not only does King Henry’s approach to responsibility ensure his power, but his approach to unification does too. He urges his followers to fight for his name and the English banner, uniting them under a common cause, and by showcasing the torment that follows anyone who disobeys him, he clearly sets the standards for belonging in this unified army. However, the play also contains moments which display how the apparent unity shows its cracks, which also seems to benefit Henry’s power. To ensure power and contain the subversive elements, there need to exist subversive elements, and therefore a perfectly unified army would not benefit the king as much as one of occasional discordance.
Conclusion

To conclude, King Henry in *Henry V* does work to maintain and further his power through some of his ambivalent views. The idea that Henry did not control a totally united army, an England-made one, proposed by both Greenblatt as well as Dollimore and Sinfield highlight that the play is riddled with insurrection. Henry must contain these subversive elements in order to reassert his power. As Saxonhouse, Dowd and Ivic indicate, the king is constantly reminded of the ideas of responsibility and nationhood, but I argue that Henry prevails in navigating any problems which might threaten his rule. He does not do this by being clear and consistent on the matters, but by deploying an ambivalence which proves effective in his ability to adapt. For example, the king questions his own responsibility for any damage if Canterbury’s proposal is not valid, and thereby covers his own back from the beginning of the play. This proves positive for him, since he can avoid any negative impact on his position if his claim to the French throne turns out to be invalid. When the soldiers inform Henry that they bear no responsibility if his cause is not good, he has already ensured that that responsibility is not attributed to him. However conscious the process may be, by deflecting negative backlash, Henry cements the image of himself as a successful and beloved ruler, one of power. In addition to his approach regarding responsibility, King Henry also deploys a dynamic approach to the unification of his army. In one instance, he urges his followers to fight for his name and for the English flag, seemingly wanting them all to rush into battle for him. However, in another instance he chooses to have one of his soldiers executed, one of the same soldiers who fought for him only moments ago. This is a moment where Henry defines who is accepted within this unified army, to ensure inclusion by exclusion. He advocates for the soldiers to see the army as a band of brothers, but to be defined as one in Henry’s brotherhood you need to conform to his standards. This partial unification only favors Henry, as he can be perceived as a compassionate ruler who sees all soldiers as his brothers, but still sets clear boundaries and therefore controls his subjects. Henry is not only a man of power, but he is also a man who continuously works to secure that power, by whatever means necessary.
Dollimore, Jonathan and Sinfield, Allan. “History and Ideology: the instance of *Henry V*”.
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