

Henry V: Background and Journal Questions (the play explores the 3 questions below):

1. What makes an effective leader effective (in promoting and pursuing a nationalistic war)? In some ways, war allows a full display of desired “masculine” qualities, and effective leaders are adept in using these ideals to gain and maintain support for their goals. This play is therefore full of rhetoric—the kind on display in politics every day. Consider what makes Henry’s speeches so effective!
2. What is disturbing about the very things that are so effective? (Can a leader afford to act according to the ethical values we expect of a private individual? Would we judge a leader who acts on these values to be an effective leader? Does the public persona an effective leader must have deprive him of having any genuine “self”?)
3. What is the attractiveness of war and nationalism? What is its dark side?

Here is a quote from Machiavelli’s *The Prince* that might be helpful:

“It will be well for him [the prince] to seem, and actually, to be merciful, faithful, humane, frank, and religious. But he should preserve a disposition which will make a reversal of conduct possible in case the need arises. He must stick to the good as long as he can, but, being compelled by necessity, he must be ready to take the way of evil. . . . In general men judge more by the eyes. . . .Everybody sees what you appear to be, few feel what you are. ...In the actions of . . .princes. . .the end justifies the means [my underlining]. Let a prince therefore aim at conquering and maintaining the state, and the means will always be judged honorable and praised by everyone.” [from Chapter XVIII]

Journal Questions (Write each journal on any question below, drawing at least some of your evidence from an act assigned for that day’s reading and relating what you find to the big questions above.) There are 6 questions.

1. Consider how the sequencing of scenes provides differing perspectives on the “meaning” of actions. Such sequencing provides a kind of double vision— differing interpretations of decisions, actions, meanings. Examples of such pairs: the first scene (a private, “smoke-filled” back room?) vs. the second— a public scene (for public consumption); Henry’s “into the breach” scene vs. Bardolph’s “to the breach” scene; the scene of Henry threatening the rape of Harfleur vs. the scene with the French princess learning English by learning words for body parts. Write a journal on any pair.
2. Shakespeare’s use of traditional “types” further explores central issues in the play. For instance, Pistol is a traditional “miles gloriosus” (braggart soldier). He is used as a foil for Fluellen who is (in some ways) a foil for Henry (all are or seem “courageous” and “patriotic”; they talk a good game and promise to make good their talk through action; both Fluellen and Henry deal with “the codes” of war.). The contrasts provide insights concerning Questions 1 & 2 at the top. Write on insights gained (regarding 1 & 2) by comparing any two foils.
3. The play provides differing perspectives on how war appears to political leaders vs. how it appears to everyday people. Comment on how particulars accomplish this and on interesting “questions” produced by the contrasting perspectives (see the big 3 questions at the top).
4. Contrast the characteristics of the French with those of the English (as presented in this play). How do the distinctions influence our understanding of the relevance of Machiavelli’s quote (or how does this comparison provide insights into any of the major 3 questions at the top)?

5. Find evidence bearing on the following: how might moral individual behavior conflict with “effective” leadership. (See the Machiavelli quote.) Consider, for instance, Henry’s mercy to Harfleur: is it virtue or good tactics, and, if the former, why did he first threaten them with rape and pillage and say they would be to blame for these horrors?

6. Some earlier criticism labeled the wooing of Catherine in Act V as an excrescence not related to main themes in the play. Take a contrary stance and explain how elements in the scene relate to other elements in the play and to significant issues (e.g., the nature of masculine virtue– or public vs. private selves– or “effective” vs. “true/honest”).