

Shakespeare's Characterization of Ideal Leadership through *Henry V* and *Richard III*

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In historical literature, some leaders are portrayed as controversial, while others are depicted as ideal or incompetent. Since characterization of leadership often reflects cultural values, personal interpretation, and portrayal by the media, audience perception often relies on the authorial classification of desirable and undesirable traits. Political tumult in early England led many to debate these traits, creating an opportunity for writers to instill their own ideologies. In his historical plays, William Shakespeare juxtaposes King Henry V to King Richard III to reflect his perception of an ideal leader: one who exhibits eloquence, a charismatic public persona, and a balance between tenacity and restraint. By comparing Henry's mastery of these traits to Richard's lack of them, Shakespeare combines historical accuracy and creative liberty to create entertaining productions while imposing his personal ideals about leadership.

Throughout *Henry V*, the title character illustrates the essential leadership quality of eloquence. His ability to speak fluently and persuasively allows him to gain public approval and succeed in the face of political and military opposition. One of the most significant instances of Henry's eloquence lies in his speech prior to the battle of Agincourt. Though outnumbered, Henry inspires his soldiers by saying, "The fewer the men, the greater the share of honor" (4.3.22), establishing a sense of unity and purpose. This quote convinces soldiers that their smaller army is a blessing rather than a disadvantage, which propels them into battle and leads to a shocking

victory. Henry also speaks of the legacy the men will leave through their honorable fight: “We in it shall be remembered, / We few, we happy few, we band of brothers— / For he today that sheds his blood with me shall be my brother” (4.3.59-63). This speech unifies his men by portraying each soldier, regardless of social rank, as a brother in arms. In the words of G. R. K. Murty, a good leader “inspires a vision...[and] enables others to act,” which is seen in King Henry’s speech.¹ During Shakespeare’s time, philosopher Justus Lipsius commented on the role of a leader before battle: “It helpeth...if before the battle...the general do cheerfully show the value of his mind...Thou attest to stir up their courage...to the end that there is least cause of fear.”² Therefore, Lipsius explains that a leader’s duty is to inspire, which Henry does through his eloquence.

Henry’s affinity for words is also shown before the Battle at Harfleur. He encourages soldiers to fight by calling again on honor, telling his men to, “Be copy now to men of grosser blood... / Follow your spirit and upon this charge / Cry ‘God for Harry! England and Saint George!’” (3.2.24-34) Clearly, Henry is using passionate speech to instill courage. Kristin Bezio’s article praising Henry V’s leadership expands on the work of S. M. Deats to explain that this speech “indicates Henry’s roles as a ‘virtuoso rhetorician whose words prove more puissant than swords [...] thus preventing many deaths on both sides.’”³ Bezio references Henry’s inspiration of soldiers, but also his dialogue with the mayor, which led to a surrender that prevented excess casualties. The king told his opponent to “take pity on your town and of your people” (3.4.28), asking him to “yield and this avoid” (3.4.42), which convinced him that further battle would only increase casualties without changing the outcome. In this scene, Henry uses his eloquence to rally his troops and to elicit surrender from the opposition, highlighting his abilities as a strong leader.

Another example of Henry’s way with words lies in his handling of political affairs. When childishly taunted by the Dauphin, he says, “tell the pleasant Prince this mockery of his / Hath turned his balls to gunstones, and his soul / Shall stand sore charged for wasteful vengeance” (1.2.284-86), then, “His jest will savor but of shallow wit / When thousands weep more than did laugh at it” (1.2.296-97). With such lines, he refuses to drop to the low-level humor of the Dauphin’s, using elevated language to convey maturity. The eloquence of King Henry’s message also inspires fear in the

French, an impact Murty describes as Henry using his “tremendous felicity with language to intimidate his enemies.”⁴ Throughout *Henry V*, the titular character is established as an ideal leader through his eloquence.

Richard III, depicted in Shakespeare’s plays as a villainous tyrant, fails to illustrate this trait. A prime example lies in Richard’s unmoving speech before battle, where, unlike King Henry, he does not call on honor or divine approval, instead saying, “If not to heaven, then hand and hand to hell!” (5.3.311). This statement elicits fear by acknowledging that the soldiers’ fight will not guarantee honor or a place in heaven and is even likely to lead to damnation. To convey Richard’s failure, Wheeler describes that “His speech before the troops the next day is an attempt to re-assert a power that is no longer his,” explaining that his words cannot bring back the hope and faith that soldiers have lost for his leadership.⁵ Furthermore, Richard’s pre-battle speech addresses violence and calls the horrors of war to his soldiers’ minds: “Spur your proud horses hard, and ride in blood” (5.4.338). His call to arms lacks valiant motivation and glorifies violence in a way that fails to inspire soldiers. In the words of Eric Pudney, Richard’s lackluster speech leaves citizens “completely unmoved,” ultimately resulting in a lost battle.⁶

To further illustrate his failures in eloquence, Richard’s speech is juxtaposed to his opponent’s inspirational words. The leader’s combatant, Richmond, much like Henry V, addresses his comrades as “Fellows in arms, and my most loving friends” (5.2.1), establishing unity among them. He proceeds by asking them to fight “in God’s name” (5.2.22), implying that the men will go to heaven to alleviate their fear. Upon victory, Richmond calls once again on God, a final allusion to Richard III’s failures as the new ruler brings peace: “The true successors... / By God’s fair ordinance conjoin together... Now evil wounds are stopped, peace lives again... God say ‘Amen’” (5.5.30-41). Through Richard’s juxtaposition to King Henry V and Richmond, Shakespeare uses his lack of eloquence to depict him as a poor leader.

Like eloquence, Shakespeare highlights a charismatic public persona as essential for good leadership. Throughout *Henry V*, the leader illustrates this trait by speaking with commoners, revealing self-doubt only to his closest advisors, and showing maturity. One of

the main instances of Henry's charisma is seen when he disguises himself as a commoner to hear their perspective on battle. He introduces himself as "a friend" (4.1.89) and speaks negatively of the king, saying, "I myself heard the king say he would not be ransomed" (4.1.174). The soldiers, however, stand up for their ruler and claim to serve him, which highlights the king's charisma and the faith his people have in him. Bates declares that he will "fight lustily for him" (4.1.173) (referring to the king), a statement that upsets the ruler as he later laments the burdens of kingship. An article on this interaction commends Henry and his "charismatic ability to step down from his position to talk with the common soldiers."⁷ This connection with the soldiers aligns with the political philosophy that "If the prince's subjects depend on him for welfare, he must rely on them for advice and counsel."⁸ While some argue that Henry's disguise was a deceitful attempt at spying, other critics such as Pudney agree that it is "more likely that Henry is in disguise to get a better idea of the morale of his men," putting himself among them rather than above them, and eliciting a sense of their emotion.⁹

Realizing his responsibility for his people, Henry calls out, "Upon the king! 'Let us our lives, our souls...lay on the King!'" (4.1.207-09), going on to explain that those in other roles are free of the burden of responsibility: "Not all these, laid in bed majestical / can sleep so soundly as the wretched slave / who...gets him to rest...never sees horrid night" (4.1.243-47). Despite feeling such weight, the king hides his struggles from the public to maintain a strong persona that evokes confidence in his rule. This aligns with the concept that good leaders are "expected to exhibit the traditional behaviors...and discourse associated with their rank," establishing Henry as a strong leader through his concealment of internal struggle.¹⁰

While Henry V's persona is shown through dialogue and action, a substantial portion of the public façade also lies in the structure of the play. For example, the chorus throughout *Henry V* directly addresses the audience, as if taking the role of King Henry, in their apology for the lack of an accurate portrayal. In her article on leadership depictions in literature, Bezio describes the play as a "microcosm" where "the audience becomes the populace," meaning that addresses to them mirror Henry's addresses to his subjects.¹¹ Much like the chorus asks the audience to "kindly judge our play"

(Prologue 34), Henry relies on his people to accept the persona he wears. When the chorus later commends Henry as “the star of England...By which the world’s best garden is made” (Epilogue.6-7), his public approval is confirmed. Using the stage and actors as a microcosm of leadership, Shakespeare establishes a charismatic public persona as an essential leadership trait.

Henry’s maintenance of his public image relies on the ruler hiding his self-doubt. Thoughtful and calculated, Henry goes to great lengths to ensure that war with France is justified. He is reluctant to “awake the sleeping sword of war” (1.2.22) and takes nearly two hundred lines in Scene Two to be convinced by advisors Canterbury and Westmoreland that he has a right to the throne. The king remains skeptical despite being assured through salic law, the opposition’s potential for violence, and the ability of his people to fight, before finally saying “Now we are resolved, and by God’s help...France being ours, we’ll bend it to our awe” (1.2.223-25). Though doubtful in deliberation, Henry’s decisiveness after choosing to go to war allows him to keep his reputation through a persona “designed for effect...an act of stagecraft performed to engender confidence.”¹² He finishes the scene by affirming, “Let every man now task his thought / That this fair action may on foot be brought” (1.2.310-11), never allowing his people to see doubt. His image “deliberately shows the world a false character in order to be free to act as a king despite a basic allegiance to moral standards,” a classification which allows for Henry’s thoughtful consideration while he maintains a confident façade.¹³

Though King Richard III is renowned for deceit and manipulation, he lacks the charismatic public persona that would make him a good leader. Henry uses charisma to speak with his subjects, while Richard relies on spies and his own, often unwarranted, suspicion to learn about his people. He decides to “play the eavesdropper” (5.3.219), fearing that people may be plotting against him. Due to suspicion, Richard “is rarely able to conceal his basic villainy.”¹⁴ This is most evident when some of the king’s loyal supporters turn against him when his disguise fails. Buckingham scorns him: “That high All-Seer that I dallied with / Hath turned my fated feigned prayer on my head... Thus doth He force the swords of wicked men” (5.1.20-23). As Pudney explains, Richard “cannot convince Buckingham to help him murder the princes...He is also

unable to persuade Hastings to support his claim to the throne,” showing how the king’s façade fails.¹⁵ Richard’s lack of a charismatic persona leads to others betraying him, highlighting his shortcomings as a leader.

Unable to maintain loyal advisors, Richard also fails to gain public support. He addresses his own inability to woo them: “Because I cannot flatter and speak fair / Smile in men’s faces, smooth, deceive, and cog...I must be held a rancorous enemy” (1.3.47-50). In scenes with characters such as the mayor, King Richard maintains power through fear rather than charisma: “He maintains a mask of piety, but no one is fooled. Those who remain silent, such as the mayor, do so through fear, not ignorance.”¹⁶ Of the one hundred and three lines of Act Three Scene Five, the mayor is limited to nine lines of brief dialogue such as “I’ll acquaint our duteous citizens / With all our just proceedings in this cause” (3.5.62-63). This brevity highlights that the mayor is submissive because he fears Richard’s reaction to dissent rather than having respect for him. Similarly, the public speaks of Richard fearfully, saying, “Oh, full of danger is the Duke of Gloucester” (2.3.27). While fear can be an important tactic for intimidating enemies as employed by Henry’s eloquence with the Dauphin, approval of subjects through charisma is essential for a successful ruler.

Shakespeare’s Richard III and King Henry V vary greatly in restraint. Studies have highlighted that, while tenacity is necessary for effective leadership, a balance of thoughtfulness is also required. Jerry Herbel Jr. explains how one “must take seriously the importance of self-awareness as essential to principled leadership...and must be prepared to change style as new conditions emerge.”¹⁷ He cites a scientific study that “identified seven basic traits of the effective leader, all of which involve introspective self-awareness,” supporting Shakespeare’s portrayal of the need for restraint.¹⁸ The playwright shows this by juxtaposing Henry’s introspection and limitations with Richard III’s merciless overtaking of opponents and former allies.

Henry V’s ideals as king lie not in conquering or furthering power, but in maintaining a just rule. In early scenes, he deliberates over a declaration of war on France. Canterbury informs him that “There is no bar / To make against your highness’ claim to France” (1.2.35-36) and proceeds with a lengthy speech on Salic law. This

proclamation is approved by Exeter and Westmoreland and combined with encouragement about the people's willingness to fight: "Never king of England / Had nobles richer and more loyal subjects" (1.2.126-27). Despite claims from trusted advisors, the king questions his authority: "May I with right conscience make this claim?" (1.2.96) before eventually choosing war. This dialogue illustrates that while Henry is forceful enough to fight, he requires just consideration to do so. The king "seeks justification for every action," exhibiting restraint and calculated tenacity.¹⁹

A further example of Henry's restraint is seen in his treatment of traitors. Henry exposes Grey, Scrope, and Cambridge after they say that he has given "mercy, but too much security" in his previous dealings (2.2.44). Henry's restraint in former affairs illustrates his lack of lust for power; however, his willingness to do what is necessary for his rule comes through when he sends the traitors to death and justifies the action by saying, "seek we no revenge, / But we our kingdom's safety must so tender" (2.2.173). This dialogue shows the king's perfect balance in harshness and leniency, as he "possesses the subtle skill of...abiding by the proper limits of power...(he) is moderate in appetites, aims, and methods."²⁰ Through his willingness to prosecute traitors for the good of his country and his consideration and mercy in doing so, Shakespeare characterizes Henry V's balance of tenacity and restraint.

Richard III, on the other hand, exhibits no restraint in his acquisition of power or in his rule. From the start of the play, the leader is determined to "Prove a villain" (1.1.30), laying out the beginnings of his plot to obtain power: "set my brother Clarence and the King / In dangerous hate the one against the other / And...Of Edward's heirs the murderer shall be" (1.1.33-40). By establishing in the opening soliloquy that Richard is willing to meddle with and murder members of his family, Shakespeare highlights his lack of limitations. The king has "a need for a feeling of omnipotence" as evident not only by his elimination of direct heirs to the throne, but also through his killing of anyone remotely suspicious throughout the play.²¹ The mercilessness of his orders is highlighted when even the brutal Tyrell, hired to kill the twins, shows remorse for the brutality of the deed: "The tyrannous and bloody deed is done: / The most arch act of piteous massacre...Thus both are gone with conscience and remorse" (4.3.1-20). Abbot describes how "the

murder of the princes illustrates Richard's drive for absolute power...That the princes are children is no more of a restraint on Richard than the fact that Clarence was his brother, that the earls were innocents, and that Hastings was executed without a trial."²² Not only are Richard's murders numerous, but they are enacted without due justice or consideration, establishing the leader's lack of restraint.

The final example of Richard's overzealous pursuit of power lies in the overall plot. While King Henry's thoughtful consideration leads to successful battles, Richard's excursions result in his death. The ruler takes on a battle larger than he can manage, evidenced by his dream in which those whom he has wronged visit him, reiterating, "despair and die" (5.3.124, 125, 133, 138, 142). This nightmare sows doubt into Richard's mind as evident when he says, "shadows tonight / Have struck more terror to the soul of Richard / Than can the substance of ten thousand soldiers" (5.3.214-16). Though believing the odds are against him, Richard pursues battle, explaining, "If we be conquered, let men conquer us" (5.4.330). The fact that the king proceeds despite his lack of belief in victory illustrates his lust for power regardless of consequences; he would rather die than shy from war. Abbot explains that "Richard is a bad king not because he is incompetent, but because he acknowledges no limitations on authority."²³ Through Richard's merciless murders, ruthless pursuit of traitors, and failure against the French, Shakespeare characterizes lack of restraint as a trait of a poor leader.

Aligning with political ideologies during his time, Shakespeare uses his plays to characterize good leaders as those with eloquence, a charismatic public persona, and a balance of tenacity and restraint. This is clear in his juxtaposition of the heroic Henry V to the villainous Richard III in their respective plays, as Henry exemplifies these traits while Richard lacks all three. Shakespeare's creative use of drama combined with historical knowledge highlights the power of media to instill political ideals, a concept that remains true, arguably with even greater prevalence, in modern times.

Notes

- ¹ Murty, 45.
- ² Wells, 99.
- ³ Bezio, 54.
- ⁴ Murty, 45.
- ⁵ Wheeler, 315.
- ⁶ Pudney, 165.
- ⁷ Murty, 53.
- ⁸ Wells, 92.
- ⁹ Pudney, 168.
- ¹⁰ Bezio, 48.
- ¹¹ Bezio, 48.
- ¹² Herbel, 266.
- ¹³ Herbel, 266.
- ¹⁴ Pudney, 164.
- ¹⁵ Pudney, 164.
- ¹⁶ Linn, 76.
- ¹⁷ Herbel, 266.
- ¹⁸ Herbel, 266.
- ¹⁹ Bezio, 55.
- ²⁰ Herbel, 271.
- ²¹ Wheeler, 313.
- ²² Abbot, 104.
- ²³ Abbot, 103.

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