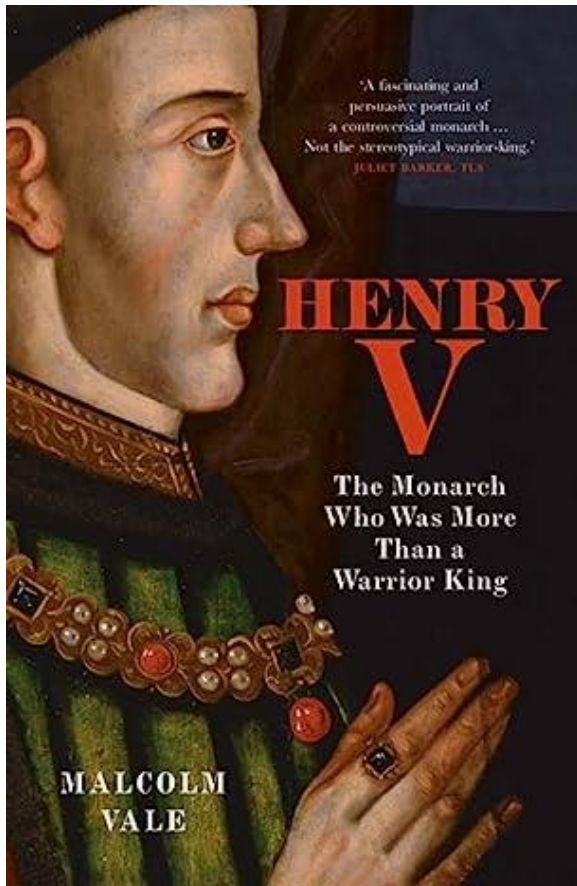


## Book Review

### **The Monarch Who Was More Than a Warrior-King**

#### “Henry V” by Malcom Vale

By Eric Martone



Each summer, various free Shakespeare in the Park performances are held in countless towns throughout the United States as part of efforts to educate and entertain the masses. Among them are performances of the bard’s *King Henry V*, which has been featured by such acting companies as the Hudson Valley

Shakespeare Company of New York in 2023 and Shakesperience of Connecticut in 2010. The play, based on the life of King Henry V of England (1386-1422), has been filmed on three memorable occasions—with the lead played by such laudable actors as Sir Lawrence Olivier (1944), Sir Kenneth Branagh (1989), and Tom Hiddleston (2012). Its enduring popularity and success have led to the indelible image of the monarch as one of England’s greatest medieval warrior-kings. Even a 2019 “historical” film (*The King*) based on Henry V’s life starring Timothée Chalamet drew from Shakespeare’s story.

Although Henry V reigned for only a relatively short amount of time, his underdog military success in the Hundred Years’ War against France propelled England’s status as a European military power. This success, especially at the Battle of Agincourt (1415), is the focus of Shakespeare’s play, which is part of the writer’s tetralogy covering the successive reigns of Richard II, Henry IV, and Henry V.

During the reign of his father, Henry IV, Henry had the opportunity to cultivate his military skills by suppressing a Welsh revolt (led by Owain Glyndŵr) and against the upstart aristocratic Percy family of Northumberland (at the Battle of Shrewsbury). As Henry IV’s health continued to decline, Henry began taking on an ever-increasing role in English governmental affairs. However, father and son did not always see eye-to-eye, leading to political conflict between them.

Henry ascended to the English throne as Henry V in 1413 upon his father's death. He resumed pending English claims to the French throne by virtue of his descent from the French royalty dynasty. In 1415, Henry V embarked on war with France. His first campaign concluded with his famous victory at Agincourt. Taking advantage of political divisions in France, Henry V managed to conquer and occupy large portions of northern France, particularly Normandy. By 1420, his armies had conquered Paris and nearly most of medieval France.

After lengthy negotiations with Charles VI of France, the Treaty of Troyes (1420) recognized Henry V as regent and heir apparent to the French throne. He subsequently married Charles's daughter, Catherine of Valois. However, at the point where it seemed destined that there would be a union between the English and French crowns, Henry V died in 1422. His son, Henry VI, was only a child, which led to a period of political instability and the English loss of its claim to the French throne.

Analyses of Henry V's reign are varied. He is often praised for his military prowess and bravery, with his militaristic pursuits during the Hundred Years' War receiving credit for forging English nationalism and setting the stage for England (and then later Britain) to prominence as a global power. However, despite his military genius and personal piety, Henry V could on occasion be cruel in temperament. Further, he has sometimes been criticized for largely ignoring English domestic affairs.

Targeted more toward an academic audience than casual readers, Malcolm Vale's book (originally published in 2016, but now reissued in paperback) is not a straight biography; instead, it is more a critical analysis of Henry V's reign. Or, rather, certain aspects of it. The Henry V that emerges from Vale's book is not the stereotypical warrior-king immortalized by Shakespeare. The reader is instead presented

with a king no longer primarily a soldier, but a much more rounded, multifaceted figure who leads his country. In so doing, Vale reveals "another Henry V."

Vale clearly sets out his agenda in his prelude and introduction. As he notes,

This book seeks to explore aspects of Henry V's character, personality, and behaviour which lie outside the traditional and stereotypical depiction of him as a soldier, a warrior-king par excellence. It is largely based on the evidence for the king's direct, personal involvement and intervention in the wide range of matters with which he was obliged, or chose, to deal. It also attempts to uncover, as far as it is ever possible to do so, the workings of his mind and their translation into political behaviour, religious observance, and patronage of the peaceful arts...Although some of these are certainly present in Shakespeare's *King Henry V*, his great play is essentially a work of fiction...[that] has, however, set the tone for much subsequent interpretation of the "real" Henry V and...continues to inform the popular image of the king as warrior, if not warmonger (xv-xvi).

Thus, Vale suggests that Henry V's reputation as a warrior-king shows only one aspect of his character, and not necessarily the most important one in letting us understand the man. Giving greater authority to the archival record than many historians, Vale adopts a thematic, rather than a chronological, approach to his subject.

Each chapter covers one aspect of Henry Vs reign. Chapter one, "The Everyday Business of Kingship," examines how the daily business of government was carried out, revealing Henry's high level of personal involvement in decisions, both large and small. Vale suggests a system of bureaucracy developed around the king to streamline some of this process, as well as to govern England with consistency while the king

was away in France. He depicts Henry V as a man who took his position as monarch quite seriously, and who attempted to be just and work closely with his council. Vale claims that Henry's direct signature, more so than previous kings, often appears on documents. He argues that this was done to assert his will in certain matters.

Unusually for the time, Henry V typically wrote letters in his own hand. Consequently, in chapter two, "In mine own hand": the Personalisation of Kingship," Vale suggests that for the first time we get to hear the actual "voice" of the person in power. Vale attempts to penetrate the mind and intentions of Henry V through his letters and writings.

The third chapter, "The King and the English Language," explores Henry V's increasing use and promotion of the English language during his reign. When he came to power, Norman French and Latin were still the languages of government. However, about midway through his reign, English appears with greater frequency and Henry V began to write letters in that language. Vale argues that the king did this to demonstrate that should he succeed in gaining the French throne, the two countries would remain separate, distinct entities with their own laws and identities. Henry V is, therefore, shown as occupying a crucial role in the developing and spreading of the English language, which was viewed as unsophisticated at the time. Some of the phrases put into use in Henry's era are still used in formal Parliamentary documents. Moreover, Vale discusses the literary development of English, as Henry V's era included such writers as Chaucer.

Vale's fourth and fifth chapters, "The King and the Church," parts I and II, address Henry V's involvement in Church matters. Vale presents the king as genuinely religious, with a desire to support and protect religious

establishments. Henry expected such establishments to act as they should, and ultimately sought to reform certain areas of abuse and impropriety. As a result of a decrease in papal authority following the Schism, Henry V was able to exert substantial authority over appointments. Consequently, Vale argues that the king was the *de facto* head of the Church within his own territories, two centuries before Henry VIII and the Protestant Reformation in England.

In chapter six, "The King and the Peaceful Arts," we learn about Henry V's direct involvement in encouraging and even participating in the peaceful arts. Henry V may have composed music himself, as well as played the harp. He was well-read in both religious and imaginative works, and even commissioned several translations. He also commissioned artistic works that reinforced his authority (such as tapestries and textiles, ornamental and military metalwork, etc.).

In the final chapter, "Last Will and Legacy," Vale examines Henry V's initial and revised wills. He suggests that these documents are of particular interest, not only for what they reveal about his "intentions for the salvation of his soul and the disposal of his worldly goods, but also for the evidence they offer of changes in those intentions over time (241-242).

Vale's focus on the non-militaristic aspects of Henry V's reign is both his book's greatest asset and weakness. While an extremely detailed look at various aspects of Henry V's reign, it nevertheless makes no attempt to tell his whole "story." Because of its focus on Henry's peaceful activities, it only touches on his wars in passing. By illuminating these other aspects, it helps create a more complex, richer portrait of the monarch. However, without devoting detail to the military aspect of his reign, Vale is only telling half the story. As it stands, his book serves as a valuable supplement to existing

studies of Henry V's reign, rather than a definitive study on its own. Nevertheless, Vale's enjoyable book is well-researched and written, and it is an excellent addition to studies of medieval England and Henry V.

**“Henry V: The Monarch Who Was More Than a Warrior-King.”** By Malcolm Vale. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2022. ISBN: 978-0300270075

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