



BRIGHTEST HEAVEN
OF
INVENTION

a Christian guide to six Shakespeare plays

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Introduction: **A Christian Approach to Literary Study**

On Reading Literature

Christians have often had a difficult time with the study of literature. Fiction has been seen as a seductive distraction from the serious business of holy living. Poetry's rich language has been viewed as a means of promoting beautiful falsehoods. Drama has been condemned for depicting immorality and violence, for tempting audiences to lust and anger. So, in writing a study guide to Shakespeare for Christians, I must first address the question, why study literature at all? Why should the Christian spend time with novels or plays or short stories? Shouldn't we be concerned with "real life," with edifying the Church and building God's kingdom, with witness and worship?

Christians who have warned of the dangers and seductions of literature have a point that ought not be ignored. Literature can indeed become a temptation and a distraction from true piety and service to God. Anything in this world can be abused, of course, but it does seem that language and literature are particularly susceptible to abuse and particularly suited to seduce. We are, after all, made in the image of the God whose name is Word. Since language is one of man's greatest glories, it is also potentially one of his most dangerous pitfalls. Having recognized the danger of abuse, however, we need not conclude that therefore literature has no proper use. For the same reason that language may be used to

commit evil, its use in speech and writing is near the heart of what it means to live as a creature in God's image.

In defending the study of literature, it is worth pointing out that Scripture itself is a literary work, and while it is a unique book in being divinely inspired, it also uses a variety of common literary types or genres: poetry, narrative, epistle, prophetic vision. C.S. Lewis rightly pointed out that understanding how literature works can lead to a better understanding of Scripture. Rather than follow this valuable line of thought, however, I want to challenge the assumption that there is a sharp distinction between literature and life. (Here, I am concentrating on narrative literature, literature that tells a story—novels, narrative poetry, drama.) Obviously, there are differences between studying history and studying literature. Far from being sharply opposed, however, humans have a natural tendency to think about our lives in narrative terms. Our lives are story-shaped. Let's think about this with a story, or a bit of one:

Will Lissen and Stuart Tistix met for the first time at a wedding reception. After introductions, Lissen took a sip of champagne and said, "So, Stu, tell me about yourself."

"I'm 5'10" and weigh 175 pounds buck-naked. I wear size 9 ½ shoes. My annual adjusted gross income is \$53,560. The mortgage on my house is \$69,890 with an interest rate of 7.5%. I own a 1992 Honda Accord with 57,906 miles on it—last I checked—Ha! Ha! I've forgotten the registration number. . . it'll come to me. Oh, and I have an unsightly hexagonal mole on my left shoulder blade that measures 3 cm by 2.65 cm."

Lissen shivered as some indescribable horror flitted through his brain, gulped down his champagne, and, excusing himself with all the grace he could muster, fled toward the cake table. Moments later, still sweating, he found himself at the punch bowl, where he met

Ann Terestin. They exchanged introductions, pleasantries, and found they had mutual friends in the wedding party. "So, tell me about yourself," Lissen said, wincing slightly.

"Well, I was an army brat," Ann said. "I was born in Germany, but my father was transferred every few years, so I've lived all over the place. That was hard, having to make new friends all the time, but it was exciting too. It got me hooked, so I majored in international finance and spent a few years working at the Tokyo stock exchange. When I got married and had kids, though, my husband and I decided we wanted a quieter life, so we settled in a little town in Vermont. My husband runs a local printing shop. Now that the kids are older, we're starting to do some traveling again. We love the Far East. Last summer, we went to China with a Christian mission and took in a crate full of Bibles."

Glancing across the room, Lissen saw Stu Tistix in an animated conversation with Congressman Ira Ess, the brains behind the National Survey of Shoe Sizes. With a feeling of satisfaction and intense gratitude for which he immediately felt guilty, Lissen settled into a long and engrossing conversation with Ann Terestin.

When you ask someone to describe himself, you are expecting to hear a story or a series of stories, not a collection of statistics. Individual identity is bound up with the stories we have lived. Stu Tistix may be Ira Ess's dream citizen, but he has never learned how civilized people answer the question, Who are you? For normal people, the question, Who am I? is inseparable from the question, What is my story?

Giving a narrative shape to the events in our lives is virtually inescapable. Historians are quite conscious that they have to select and arrange facts in order to make sense of a topic. It is literally impossible for them to know much less to record everything. In selecting and arranging the facts of history,

they give narrative shape to what they study. What is true for historians is true for each of us who tries to make sense of a complex world. The number of events in the real world is impossible for us to even think about, much less record. If you were prepared to go into enough detail and had a lifetime supply of #2 pencils, you could spend the rest of your life describing what is going on around you while you have been reading the first few pages of this introduction. You would have to record every electrochemical interaction in your brain, all your thoughts, every time you were distracted by recalling the bills that need paying or the pile of dirty clothes in the bathroom hamper. You would have to record every time one of the children came through and interrupted, every time you yawned, looked at your watch, scratched your ear, every time heard a passing car on the street or the borborygmi grumble in your abdomen. To make any sense of what seems to be the bloomin', buzzin' confusion that surrounds us, we need to select and arrange the facts of our existence into a manageable order. And this order turns out, frequently if not always, to be the order of a story.

Our understanding of the world typically takes the shape of a story because we are temporal creatures. That is, we exist in time. In a timeless universe, a painting or photograph would be able to picture the world as it is. But we live in a universe where time is constantly moving, where the present instantly fades into the past and the future becomes present. To depict the way the world is, we need some way to depict the flow of time that is so basic in all our experience. A picture cannot do it; it can give the illusion of movement, but in the end a painting gives a timeless slice of life. But a story is able to depict a temporal flow and change, as are those ways of depicting the world that have derived from literature—film and drama. Music too has a temporal dimension, but its language is too abstract and specialized for most people to use. So, if we want to describe the world, we are pretty much left with telling stories.

There are theological reasons why we think of life as

Introduction: History

Bertrand Evans has pointed out that history plays account for “nearly half the total of Shakespeare’s plays.” He wrote ten plays on English history, as well as a number of Roman dramas. Even *Macbeth* and *King Lear*, normally classified as tragedies, are based on historical persons and events.

Though they dramatize historical events, however, we should not expect Shakespeare’s histories to read like a high school history text. Shakespeare was a playwright, not a producer of historical documentaries. There are a bewildering number of people and events depicted, but Shakespeare was selective and he portrayed what would best highlight his particular themes. He sometimes made changes of detail for dramatic or thematic purposes. Julius Caesar is killed in the middle of the play that bears his name; the play is not at all a biography of Caesar, and it is about Caesar only in a subtle though very important sense. *Henry V* covers only a brief period of that king’s reign, but it is the portion that for Shakespeare best revealed his character and politics. As we look at these two history plays, therefore, we will be examining not only the historical events that lie in the background of the play, but also how Shakespeare selected and arranged events to illustrate important truths about mankind, politics, and history.

Not all the characters in Shakespeare’s histories are historical figures. A number of scenes in *Henry V* focus on the friends of the king’s youth, Pistol, Bardolph, and Nym. In

the two parts of *Henry IV*, Shakespeare created one of his most popular and memorable characters, Sir John Falstaff. The fictional characters in the histories often provide comic relief, but they play a serious role in the drama as well. We will see that the words and actions of the fictional characters in *Henry V* provide a commentary on the king and his French invasion.

The story lines of Shakespeare's histories have important similarities to his tragedies and comedies. *Julius Caesar* has been understood by many as the tragedy of Brutus, and depending on how you read it, *Henry V* can be understood as comedy or as tragedy. From a Christian perspective, as we saw in the Introduction, this similarity between fiction and history is not accidental, for Christianity teaches that God sovereignly shapes the events of history into a beginning, middle, and end. Shakespeare thus had ample warrant to write history in dramatic form, and we have ample warrant to believe that studying his histories will contribute to our understanding of His-story.

The Mirror of All Christian Kings: *Henry V*

Henry V focuses on a series of episodes during the Hundred Years' War, which lasted from 1337 to 1453 and involved England and France in a struggle over control of the French monarchy. England had been a major presence in France for several centuries prior to the war. King Henry II (1154-1189) was Count of Anjou, duke of Aquitaine, and also claimed Normandy. During his lifetime he controlled half of what we know as France, and at his death he was buried there. England's claim to the French throne was initiated in earnest by Edward III (1327-1377). Isabella, the daughter of Phillip IV (the Fair) of France, had married Edward II of England, and their son was Edward III of England. Edward III thus laid claim to the French throne through his mother and undertook a military action to make good his claim. During his war with France, Edward won famous victories at Crecy (1346) and Poitiers (1356).

After the death of Edward III, England faced not only war with France but also dynastic disputes at home. You may recall that Henry VIII's break with the Roman Church began because his first wife could not give him a son and he worried what would happen if he died without a male heir to the throne. Edward III had the opposite problem, leaving behind a troubled land because he had too many sons. The rules of succession were fairly fluid in Edward's time.

Normally, the crown passed to the oldest son, and, if he died, to the next oldest, and so on. Ambitious younger sons frequently sought, however, to push past their older brothers. Edward III's oldest son, and the heir to the throne, Edward the Black Prince, was killed fighting in France the year before his father died. Richard, son of the Black Prince, succeeded Edward III, but other parts of the family were ambitious to gain the throne.

Richard II (1377-1399) was only ten years old when Edward III died. For the first part of his reign, he was ruled by his relatives. As he came to maturity, he tried to free himself from the control of his family, and allied himself with certain favorites that gained power at court. Not surprisingly, this made his relatives angry, as they saw their own influence waning. Five Lords of the realm, among them Henry Bolingbroke, brought charges of treason against the favorites. In the event, the Lords Appellant, as they were called, won the case and were able to secure their influence at court. By 1397, however, Richard had regained enough power to move against three of the Lords Appellant. To protect himself, Henry Bolingbroke lodged charges of treason against his former ally, Mowbray. The conflict between these former allies nearly ended in trial by combat but Richard intervened and exiled both men. (This is the situation at the beginning of Shakespeare's *Richard II*.)

Two years later, in 1399, John of Gaunt, Henry Bolingbroke's father, died, and Richard seized his lands. Henry invaded England on the pretext of regaining control of his ancestral lands but in truth he intended to assert his claim to the crown. Later that same year, he was crowned as Henry IV, and Richard II died early the following year under suspicious circumstances. Henry IV's reign had supported battles against the nobles who had supported him in his effort to dethrone Richard. The Mortimers were a special problem. They were descended from Edward III's second son, Lionel, and believed their claim to the monarchy was greater than Henry IV's, whose father, John of Gaunt, was Edward's third son. The Percies, a powerful noble family, also revolted in

1403. Shakespeare's play *1 Henry IV* ends with the battle of Shrewsbury, where Henry Percy (Hotspur) was killed and the Percy rebellion squashed. This is important background to *Henry V*, for Henry V's crown was passed to him by a usurper who was also probably a murderer. At moments, Henry is aware that his claim on the throne of England is defiled with the blood of Richard II (4.1.310-323).

By the time Henry V came to the throne, there were no more serious challenges from rival families. (Edmund Mortimer, in fact, was still alive, but imprisoned throughout Henry V's reign, and his death is portrayed in Shakespeare's *1 Henry VI*.) In the two parts of *Henry IV*, Shakespeare presents the young "Hal" (who would become Henry V) as an idle young man loitering in taverns with drunkards and thieves and showing precious little interest in politics, war or the serious business of ruling. Contrary to Shakespeare's presentation, the real Henry V was highly experienced and ready to assume the throne: he fought with Henry IV against the noble rebels; he sat on the king's council from 1406-11; and he governed Wales and put down a Welsh rebellion. In the opinion of some historians, Henry V came to the throne as one of the best-trained kings in English history. Moreover, because his power was relatively secure at home, Henry V could turn his attention to renewing the English claim to the French crown, and this is what Shakespeare's play is about. Shakespeare compresses events that actually took place over a number of years: The wars described in *Henry V* are those of Henry's first French campaign of 1415, but the play ends with Henry's engagement to the French queen Catherine (spelled Katharine in the play), though this did not take place until 1420, when the Treaty of Troyes was concluded.

After Henry V died prematurely, his son, Henry VI (1422-1461/1470-1471) ascended the throne as king of England and France. Though a pious and good man, his inability to control his nobles led to disaster. During his lifetime, England lost the French crown, due in large part to the heroics of Joan of Arc, and the Wars of the Roses began

between two branches of Edward III's family, known as the houses of Lancaster and York. The civil wars finally ended when Henry Tudor, who had ancestors from both of the warring families, defeated King Richard III at Bosworth Field. Henry Tudor became Henry VII (1485-1509), and inaugurated the dynasty that included Henry VIII, Edward VI, Mary I, and Elizabeth I.

Shakespeare wrote a cycle of eight plays about this period of English history. The plays were written in something of a reverse order, beginning with three plays about Henry VI, followed by *Richard III*, whose reign began some years after Henry VI died. These plays cover the beginning and end of the Wars of the Roses. Having depicted the civil wars in the first "tetralogy" (set of four plays), Shakespeare went back to examine the events that led up to the Wars of the Roses. This background was presented in the second tetralogy: *Richard II*, the two parts of *Henry IV*, and *Henry V* (produced around 1598-99). Another English history play, *King John*, written shortly after *Richard III*, portrays an earlier period in English history. Though Shakespeare also wrote at least part of a later play on this period, *Henry VIII*, the play examined here is really the last and most mature of Shakespeare's investigations of English history.

Henry V is the main character not only of this play, but also, as Prince Hal, of the two parts of *Henry IV*. In one common interpretation of these plays, Henry V is the model of the true Christian prince, against whom the other royal characters of the plays are to be measured. Taken together, the second tetralogy depicts the education of the ideal prince. Prince Hal matures into the mean or balance between foolhardy bravery and cowardice; he combines the fun of the tavern with the exertions of the battlefield. This is brought out by his similarities and differences with other characters. On one extreme, Hal is contrasted with Henry Percy, called "Hotspur," and in fact *1 Henry IV* leads up to a duel between Hotspur and Hal. Like Hotspur, Hal is a courageous soldier who displays his mettle in the battle of Shrewsbury.

Hotspur, however, represents the foolhardy extreme; as his name implies, Hotspur is a man who throws caution to the wind, much like Laertes in *Hamlet*. Hotspur is also unbalanced because he hates both music and poetry and cares for nothing but war. He is impatient and he talks too much and too boldly. The Dauphin (Prince of France) in *Henry V* is a comic version of Hotspur, with all the bluster but none of the skill.

At the other extreme is Sir John Falstaff. An old soldier, Falstaff is one of Hal's tavern buddies, with whom he spends countless idle hours. While Hal shares with Falstaff a love of prankish fun, Falstaff is self-serving and cowardly and fights no longer than he sees reason to fight. Falstaff, for instance, pretends to be dead on the battlefield at Shrewsbury. When Hal leaves the scene, Falstaff gets up, finds the body of Hotspur lying on the field (where Hal left him), stabs him, and later claims to have killed Hotspur. By the time *Henry V* begins, Falstaff has fallen out of favor. Immediately after he was crowned, Henry said to Falstaff: "I know thee not, old man" and warned him "not to come near our person by ten mile." Henry's rejection of Falstaff may seem cruel, but, on this interpretation, it is essential if Hal is to grow up into Henry V. To be an effective king, Hal must overcome youthful brashness (represented by Hotspur) and also put aside childish pranks (represented by Falstaff). He must take a stand in the middle ground between cowardice and foolishness, the ground in which true courage is rooted.

Henry V provides evidence that Henry is to be taken as the ideal prince. Much of the evidence comes from the chorus, who calls Henry "The Mirror of all Christian kings" (Prol.2.6). As Henry makes the rounds of the camp on the night before the battle of Agincourt, the chorus describes him as a sun bringing cheer and encouragement to every soldier (Prol.4.28-47). As the play closes, the chorus laments the "small time" of Henry's life, adding "but in that small most greatly liv'd this star of England" (Epilogue, 5-6). Beyond that, Henry's meditations on the burdens of kingship

(4.1.248-302) and his rousing speech before the battle (4.3.18-67) display a man with both courage and sensitivity to the pitfalls and dangers of his position.

It is even possible to see in Henry something of a Christ figure. He is rightful king of France but has been denied the throne. So, he invades alien territory, conquers it, claims the throne, and marries the bride to seal the compact. So also Christ invaded “enemy territory” to bind Satan, to triumph over the principalities and powers, and to win His bride. From this viewpoint, the violence of Henry’s language begins to sound like the words of biblical prophets announcing the doom of ungodly kingdoms, or the psalms in which God’s victory over the wicked is celebrated: The righteous will bathe their feet in the blood of the wicked (Ps. 58:10). Henry becomes not merely a mirror of all Christian kings but virtually becomes Christ himself.

If Henry is the ideal prince, his exploits are material for English nationalist celebration. The climax of the play is the battle of Agincourt, in which Henry’s English army, though greatly outnumbered, won an almost miraculous victory. Henry is pious in triumph: “be it death proclaimed through our host to boast of this or take that praise from God which is His only” (4.8.121-123). The chorus reiterates this impression:

You may imagine him upon Blackheath,
 Where that his lords desire to have him borne
 His bruised helmet and his bended sword
 Before him through the city. He forbids it,
 Being free from vainness and self-glorious pride.
 Giving full trophy, signal and ostent
 Quite from himself to God. (Prologue.5.16-22)

Interpreters have often taken passages such as these at face value and understood *Henry V* as the most “flag-waving” of Shakespeare’s historical plays.

Perhaps, though, this is all too easy. Parallels there may be between Henry and Christ, but Henry is not Christ. And if

the play may be compared to a dramatic rendition of the English national anthem, there are more than a few wrong notes and dissonant chords. Even the words of the chorus, who is from head to toe a patriotic Englishman, raise some questions about Henry's character. In his first description of Henry, the chorus invites the audience to watch Henry "assume the port of Mars" (Prol.1.6). Mars! Not the Christian God but the pagan god of war. This makes us wonder to whom Henry is praying when later he calls upon the "God of battles" (4.1.307). The God of the Bible is no pacifist, but neither is He the bloodthirsty Mars of Greek mythology, who delights in sheer mayhem.

According to Harold Goddard's insightful discussion, the chorus in the main expresses the popular view of Henry, of the French invasion, of Agincourt; his descriptions present the Henry V of English mythology. There is no reason, however, to believe that Shakespeare accepted the mythology, and in fact, as Goddard points out, the chorus explicitly distinguishes himself from "our bending author" (Epilogue, 2). Far from joining wholeheartedly in the chorus's praise of Henry, Shakespeare wrote a play that continually raises doubts about Henry's character and the justice of his cause.

So, is Henry the "mirror of all Christian kings" or is he not? Instead of directly answering that question, let us take a moment to think about mirrors. What do you see when you look in the mirror? Your first answer is likely to be, "I see myself" or "I see an image of myself." If we take Shakespeare's image in this way, Henry is being presented as the model Christian king; Christian kings may look at Henry to discover what they are supposed to look like. If we think more about it, however, we realize that what we see in the mirror is precisely the *opposite* of ourselves. My right hand is the mirror-image's left, my left eye its right, and so on. Besides, it is possible to play tricks with mirrors. Mirrors can make things appear that are not really there. I am not suggesting that Shakespeare meant to use the "mirror" image in this

double-edged way, but thinking about the double nature of “mirrors” will help us to keep in mind the tensions in the play’s presentation of Henry. Shakespeare does not explicitly resolve the tensions that are thus raised but leaves both views before the reader or audience. The greatest interest of the play will be found in the area where the two pictures interact and conflict. And it is there that we shall find the play most profound in the questions it raises about national pride, military aggression, and the true nature of Christian politics.

Lesson One: Act 1

The chorus’s prologue that opens *Henry V* provides some insights into Shakespeare’s conception of his dramatic art. The chorus asks his audience to “pardon . . . the flat unraised spirits that have dar’d on this unworthy scaffold to bring forth so great an object” (Prol.1.8-11). He knows that the “cockpit” or “wooden O” of a stage cannot “hold the vasty fields of France.” How, then, can a play become believable to the audience? According to the chorus, a play requires not only actors on a stage but an audience of sufficient imagination to accept that the few actors on stage are really millions of soldiers and that the “cockpit” is really Agincourt. The gaps between the real events and what appears on stage must be filled in by the minds of the audience: “Piece out our imperfections with your thoughts” (Prol.1.23).

Even at this level, the Prologue is worth several attentive readings and a few moments of thought. The chorus provides some of the most beautiful poetry in the play. But the Prologue was not written as a separate poem about the nature of drama. It introduces an historical play, and it is worth pondering why Shakespeare chose to include it. Shakespeare is, after all, quite capable of getting along without a chorus. In most plays, he simply plunges into the middle of the action without introduction, leaving it to the characters themselves to provide whatever introductions are needed. Suggesting that Shakespeare needed a chorus to remind his readers of the

history is not convincing, since for his original audience the exploits of Henry V were neither ancient nor unfamiliar. To understand why Shakespeare used a chorus, we need to look at what the chorus actually says. And when we look, we find that the chorus does not say much of anything, at least nothing that we could not have figured out without his help. Let's look at a larger portion of the prologue to Act 1:

But pardon, gentles all,
 The flat unraised spirits that have dar'd
 On this unworthy scaffold to bring forth
 So great an object. Can this cockpit hold
 The vasty fields of France? Or may we cram
 Within this wooden O the very casques
 That did affright the air at Agincourt? . . .
 Suppose within the girdle of these walls
 Are now confin'd two mighty monarchies,
 Whose high upreared and abutting fronts
 The perilous narrow ocean parts asunder.
 Piece out our imperfections with your thoughts;
 Into a thousand parts divide one man,
 And make imaginary puissance.
 Think, when we talk of horses, that you see them,
 Printing their proud hoofs i' the receiving earth.
 (Prol. 1.8-27)

In short, "Since we can't fit a whole army into the theater, you're going to have to use your imagination." Nothing really profound here.

The chorus has much the same message at the beginning of Act 2:

. . . the scene
 Is now transported, gentles, to Southampton.
 There is the playhouse now; there must you sit.
 And thence to France shall we convey you safe
 And bring you back, charming the narrow seas
 To give you gentle pass; for, if we may,
 We'll not offend one stomach with our play.
 (Prol.2.34-40)

“Through the miracle of theater,” the chorus is saying, “we will take you across the English Channel, and not one will become seasick.” Cute, but neither original nor necessary.

The chorus keeps popping up to tell us, “It’s just a play! It’s just a play!” But we know that, and Shakespeare knew it, and Shakespeare knew we would know it. So, why does he insist on repeating such a trivial point? The reason, I suspect, is related to the tensions that we noted above. On the surface, Henry is being portrayed as the “mirror of all Christian kings” in the sense of being a model of Christian kingship. He is a king who prays at the beginning of battles and gives glory to God alone at the end. But then there is the chorus telling us over and over that it is, after all, only a play. We know that what we see on stage is an actor playing Henry V; the chorus’s insistence on the point suggests we should understand “It’s only a play” in another sense. The chorus protests too much, and we end up asking ourselves, Are Henry’s piety and sense of justice likewise only an act? Is he perhaps a mirror image of a Christian king in the second sense—in the sense that he portrays the opposite of a Christian king, everything a Christian king should *not* be? Perhaps what we are watching is not only an actor pretending to be Henry V. Perhaps we are watching an actor playing a Henry V who is in turn pretending to be a model for all Christian kings. Perhaps Shakespeare is pretending too, pretending to wave his flag and play the national anthem while exposing with all his warts the complex man beneath the thrice-gorgeous ceremony.

That Henry’s piety is at least partly pretense is suggested by the two scenes of Act 1. The play proper begins with a secretive conversation between the Archbishop of Canterbury and the Bishop of Ely. The Archbishop wants the church to support Henry’s invasion of France and his claim to the French crown, but the Archbishop’s motives are far from purely religious. As he explains to Ely, there is a bill before the House of Commons that would strip all “temporal lands” from the church, that is, lands that are not used for church

purposes directly but which provide income. Taking away these lands would remove half of the church's possessions; it would "drink deep" of the church's finances, indeed, as the Archbishop says, "'Twould drink the cup and all" (1.1.20). The two churchmen want Henry on their side in opposition to the bill. In itself, this is a good thing; the church should be protected from seizures by political authorities. Canterbury and Ely, however, protect the church not by righteous protest and opposition, but by playing a political game. In order to encourage Henry to be favorable to their position, they promise to give significant financial support for his French campaign, on the assumption that they stand to lose much more by not getting Henry's help. In short, the church leaders intend to buy Henry's favor by giving him money to invade France. The church's support for Henry's French invasion amounts to little more than a bribe.

In reflecting on Henry's character, Canterbury makes both classical and biblical allusions. He says that Henry can unloose the "Gordian knot" of even the most difficult political issue (1.1.45-47). The reference is to Gordius, king of Phrygia, who tied a knot and prophesied that whoever was able to untie it would be master of Asia. Alexander of Macedon untied it, and, as Gordius had predicted, conquered Asia. Canterbury evidently hopes Henry will be another conqueror like Alexander the Great. (Remember the comparison with Alexander, for it will come up again.) Henry is not only an Alexander, but he is also, in Canterbury's opinion, a new Adam. When he became king, the old Adam was kicked out of him and became a new man (1.1.29). Medieval political thought viewed the king as an image of Christ. Just as Christ is divine and human, so the king was believed to be a man with something like a divine nature. Since the king was anointed with sacred oil, he became in effect a clergyman, a representative of Christ; the man who was king (with a small "k") became linked to the eternal King. It was even possible, on this theory, for the king as man to be considered a traitor to the King as divine and immortal.

As King, he combined the whole realm in his person; the nation was the body of the king as the church is the body of Christ. As man, it was recognized that the king was weak and mortal. This duality will come up again in Henry's meditations on ceremony and kingship during the night before Agincourt.

As often in Shakespeare, a character is described by other characters before appearing himself. The chorus has compared Henry to Mars, and Canterbury has compared him to Alexander and, implicitly, to Christ. The audience therefore has certain expectations when Henry appears in person for the first time in scene 2. What we learn there gives some evidence that he is the ideal king of Canterbury's description. Henry consults the church before going to war because he knows that any war brings bloodshed, and that this blood would be a "sore complaint" against the one who initiates an unjust war. Blood cries out for vengeance, and kings are accountable to prevent the shedding of innocent blood (1.2.9-32). It is thus morally imperative that a king know his cause is right. Otherwise, he will put himself in grave moral danger. Henry seems sincere in asking for the church's opinion about his invasion of France (1.2.96).

Still, beneath the melody on the surface of the scene there is a contrary theme. A more careful reading suggests that in fact Henry is shifting responsibility onto the Archbishop. He tells Canterbury that God knows how many healthy men will die because of "what your reverence shall incite us to" (1.2.20); it is the Archbishop, Henry implies, who "impawns" or pledges Henry to war, and the Archbishop who "awakes our sleeping sword of war" (1.2.21-22). The deaths of soldiers will be the responsibility of "him whose wrongs give edge unto the swords that make such waste in brief mortality" (1.2.26-28), and Henry implies that it is Canterbury who has given edge to his sword. Canterbury takes the hint and accepts the responsibility: "The sin upon my head, dread sovereign" (1.2.97).

There is another false note in Henry's instructions to the Archbishop. He claims to believe that the Archbishop will