Toxic Masculinity in Henry V

Abigail King
aik05907@sjfc.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://fisherpub.sjfc.edu/ur

Part of the Dramatic Literature, Criticism and Theory Commons, Feminist, Gender, and Sexuality Studies Commons, and the Literature in English, British Isles Commons

How has open access to Fisher Digital Publications benefited you?

Recommended Citation

This document is posted at https://fisherpub.sjfc.edu/ur/vol21/iss1/2 and is brought to you for free and open access by Fisher Digital Publications at St. John Fisher College. For more information, please contact fisherpub@sjfc.edu.
Toxic Masculinity in Henry V

Abstract
Toxic masculinity motivates the characters and plot of Henry V by William Shakespeare. The play revolves around King Henry V and how he is a model leader of England during the Hundred Years War. Henry uses what a “true” man should be to inspire his soldiers when morale is low. Further, manlihood is seen in the characters or lack thereof. Characters that fail to follow the high expectations of masculinity are killed. Audience members recognize the importance of masculinity throughout the play, although the outcomes of those stereotypes are dangerous seen in the superficial friendships and suppression of authentic self.

Keywords
toxic masculinity, Shakespeare, friendship

Cover Page Footnote
I would like to thank Dr. Deborah Uman for encouraging me to submit my work and always helping me develop my writing.
Toxic Masculinity in Henry V

Abigail King

Henry V is a story of brotherhood and victory. It is about the lengths of what men can achieve when they work together, no matter their background or status. However, when the audience analyzes each male character and how they interact with one another, it is obvious that their friendships are surface-level, revealing that toxic masculinity influences their every move. Toxic masculinity is the concept concerning how men act in order to maintain a positive image of themselves. This includes suppressing emotions with the exception of physical aggression. Men act dishonestly in order to be seen as a “true man.” The Boy is the only person in Henry V who identifies the insincere ways of men and shares his critical thoughts of masculinity with the audience. Others, including the Chorus and King Henry V, abide by toxic masculinity and preach it to the audience in implicit and explicit ways. Masculinity motivates the characters’ actions and functions as a central theme in Henry V. Most characters associate attributes of honor and bravery with masculinity, yet they neglect to recognize the consequences it has on them, such as superficial friendships and suppression of the authentic self.

Henry V is in a series of Shakespeare’s historical plays about the Kings in England and how their rule affected the culture and time period. The previous play, Henry IV, also followed Henry V while growing up and how he transitioned from being a rebellious adolescent to a respected royal. Henry V mainly follows England’s conflict with France and, therefore, England’s involvement with the Hundred Years War. King Henry has to make decisions for his country, his people, and the soldiers that are fighting for him and, eventually, with him.

Henry V uses the Chorus to instruct and warn the audience before each act, treating the audience like soldiers. Because of this, it is evident that a purpose of Henry V is to recognize the value of war and obedience. Susan Harlan in “Militant Prologues, Memory, and Models of Masculinity in Shakespeare’s Henry V and Troilus and Cressida,” discusses the role of the Chorus and other modes of paratext relating to masculinity. According to Harlan, the Chorus sets the stage of Henry V with the importance of “militant masculinity” and imposes how the audience themselves can benefit from acting masculine while watching or reading (24). The Chorus introduces the first act with what the audience should expect to come and how they should understand the events happening. He says:

Suppose within the girdle of these walls Are now confined 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. (Prologue 19-25)

If the audience gains nothing else from the Prologue, it is that “mighty” masculinity is to take place in the play. Even though the second monarch mentioned is the enemy in the play (King Charles of France), which would predict an insulting description, he is still referred to as “mighty,” showing that any military body of power is worth recognizing and acknowledging as an impressive man. Additionally, the Chorus is relaying to the audience that the confines of the stage are not able to portray the full glory of war, so readers or viewers will have to use their imagination. The real soldiers who fought in this war deserve recognition beyond what the stage and actors can offer. Furthermore, the Chorus believes that the men deserve the “perfect” memory because of how honorable being a soldier is, which is not able to be represented in the play (Harlan 30). Henry V functions as a patriotic celebration of England and its power through the reign of King Henry V. Toxic masculinity is reinforced before the play even starts, let alone any fighting since the Chorus is revering the men. All killing and fighting is
justified because they were doing it for their king and, more importantly, their people.

The Chorus is an example of how toxic masculinity affects *Henry V*. The Chorus also treats the audience as a masculine body (Harlan 28). Harlan suggests that “the Chorus attempts to arm his audience, to transform them into masculine bodies in war” (30). In many of his monologues, the Chorus is instructing readers or viewers to think a certain way. The Chorus treats the audience as his own soldiers. If the audience follows the Chorus’ orders, they will get the best experience from the play, at least that’s what the Chorus suggests. In the Act V Prologue, the Chorus says, “Then brook abridgment; and your eyes advance, / After your thoughts, straight back again to France” (Prologue 5.44-45). The phrase “straight back” is direct, like a military command. Furthermore, the verbs used in this excerpt are imperative, meaning that they are command-like. “Brook abridgment” and “Your eyes advance” are phrases with verbs that make it forceful upon the audience. The Chorus acts like the audience needs the instructions to follow along with the important plot. Since the only soldiers in the Hundred Years War would have been men, the Chorus associates soldiers with masculinity. Toxic masculinity is also known to be associated with violence and aggression, furthering the connection between the audience and men. Toxic masculinity influences the Chorus to find value in treating the audience as a masculine body to reinforce the audience’s ability to follow orders and, therefore, become more honorable.

King Henry’s character is fueled by toxic masculinity demonstrated in his many attempts to impress his subjects and appear as a strong front to France. Henry’s true self is juxtaposed with how he acts under these constraints in Act 4. Before the Battle of Agincourt, Henry disguises himself as a commoner in the war camp to see what his soldiers think of him. Three soldiers talk with Henry, who they believe to be another fellow soldier about how they do not really approve of his decision to go to war and that they blame him for the deaths that have happened on the battlefield. Henry is hurt by these statements when he laments: “Art thou aught else but place, degree, and form, / Creating awe and fear in other men? / Wherein thou art less happy, being feared, / Than they in fearing” (4.1.251-254). Even though he recognizes that his people fear him, he does not get true satisfaction and happiness through ruling like that. Toxic masculinity uses fear and violence as a motivator. However, Henry is obviously unhappy with the lifestyle of threatening and punishing his citizens because of his obligations as king meaning that he does not like to live under the confines of toxic masculinity. He does not work to make a change because he knows he will be rejected since toxic masculinity is so widely accepted. He holds what others see him as above his true identity. His masculinity reigns supreme as king and that image cannot be tarnished.

Henry embodies masculinity because of his role as king to his soldiers, even though he expressed disdain for what it means to be a man. Just two scenes after Henry contemplates the many disadvantages of being king, such as having to use fear as a motivator, he is forced into his role as king and has to perform once again. When morale is low, Henry knows that the best way to motivate his “crew” is to use masculinity as a rallying cry. These men may not have voluntarily signed up for the war, but they can leave with what is perceived as a man’s biggest goal in life: honor. Before he gives the famous “St. Crispian’s Day” speech, men start to feel sorry for themselves since they are so outnumbered compared to the opposing force. A concept within toxic masculinity is that men are not to express emotions, especially sorrow or fear. Henry uses their sorrow as ammunition: “That which hath no stomach to this fight, / Let him depart... / We would not die in that man’s company / That fears his fellowship to die with us” (4.3.35-39). Henry threatens what he knows men fear most—shame, especially from other men. Even if a man truly wanted to leave, he cannot after Henry says he would no longer consider the soldier a “brother” (4.3.60). The speech is meant to boost the spirits of the soldiers, but it also works to hold the men accountable for their masculinity. They get to fight and prove their masculinity to Henry, which is an opportunity most men do not get. A
commoner now has a chance to be deemed, by King Henry of England, the perfect model of a man. Not only does a higher ranking in class status drive citizens to become a soldier, but they now can be considered masculine by the king, which might be an even bigger motivator. Henry applies the pressure to his soldiers, yet is influenced by the pressures himself. He previously said that he does not like the fear he puts on his people, but he uses that tactic by threatening masculinity. Toxic masculinity is the influence in Henry’s thought process of ruling the nation and how he chooses to express himself as the king.

The “act-like-a-man box” is a direct component of toxic masculinity. In *Threshold Concepts in Women’s and Gender Studies: Ways of Seeing, Thinking, and Knowing*, the idea of masculinity and friendships are analyzed by Christie Launius and Holly Hassel through the “act-like-a-man box,” which references “masculine gender norms and expectations that men are socialized to adhere to” (233). The “act-like-a-man-box” also relates to the severe standards that men have to abide by to be socially accepted. If men go outside of this “box,” they will be shamed by other men, which is one of their biggest fears. The “act-like-a-man box” is reinforced through policing by friends and other adults that observe the embarrassing, unmanly acts (Launius et al. 55). Men put on this “show” for others, meaning that they are not acting authentically, but falsely, to abide by society’s rules. Launius and Hassel also say that “the qualities needed to extend and receive friendship are coded feminine in our culture, thus causing a gender role conflict for men” (56). It is attributes that seem so natural to women, like having empathy and “sharing insecurities,” that can be characterized as “girly,” and, therefore, need to be avoided (Launius et al. 56). This can lead us to believe that, since men are not being true, they are unable to make true friendships. If men cannot show emotions other than rage or violence, realistically, how can friendships be intimate?

The friendships and relationships in *Henry V* are surface-level and lack true connection because of gender expectations for men. In *Henry IV*, there is a focus on Henry V’s life before becoming a king; he was rebellious and immature, which did not help by the friends he was surrounded by. Corporal Nym, Lieutenant Bardolph, and Sir John Falstaff were partly responsible for his rambunctious upbringing, but they were his friends nonetheless. However, in Act 2 of *Henry V*, it is announced that Sir John Falstaff is dying because “the King has killed his heart” (2.1.91). King Henry V banished Sir John Falstaff at the end of *Henry IV* because he did not want to be associated with Falstaff’s criminal ways, which is why Falstaff had a “broken heart.” One of Hal’s (King Henry’s nickname in *Henry IV*) best friends, was Sir John Falstaff making it surprising that he would banish someone so close to him. However, he did this to maintain his image of being a strategic and powerful king. As a man, he needed to express dominance to his people. He was not going to excuse any crimes, including those of his friends. He is putting his image before his personal thoughts, which is a main element of toxic masculinity: expressing oneself in a way that will look better to others.

Although Falstaff is only briefly discussed in *Henry V*, his character fails to achieve masculinity, which could be a reason why his character dies. Falstaff is referenced to be defeated by a “broken heart.” A broken heart means that an event made someone emotionally distraught versus physical. According to Launius and Hassel, two stereotypically masculine traits are “emotionally unexpressive” and “invulnerable” (51). Falstaff contradicts these traits by letting his disagreement and conflict with Henry, that lacked any physical altercations, consume him. This is a rejection of toxic masculinity since Falstaff lets Henry’s disdain of him affect him emotionally. One might say that his death is a consequence of failing to adhere to the rigid laws of masculinity. Toxic masculinity creates unrealistic expectations for men to follow and pushes them away from one another if they are not following the “rules.”

The Boy is one of the only characters in *Henry V* that realizes the issues of toxic masculinity and speaks on it. He is in a unique position compared to the other characters in the play.
because he is undergoing adolescence while Henry comes to power and brings England to war. The concept that masculinity is taught not born is especially apparent in the Boy’s character. M. Tyler Sasser examines the Boy in “‘the boy that I gave Falstaff’: The Page Boy and Early Modern Manhood in 2 Henry IV and Henry V.” Sasser believes that “the Boy critically participates in ‘empty versions of honour’ in Shakespeare that depict ‘sarcasm for vain and excessive chivalry and exaggerated and dangerous notions of honour’” (148). A main motivator for men is to achieve the status of honor, but Sasser sees this as worthless considering the lengths one has to go to achieve that (148). The violence and fighting do not equate to any feeling of excellence, but Henry has to use honor as a motivator so that he has driven fighters. After Henry gives a motivating speech in Act 3, the Boy says “Would I were in an alehouse in London! I would give all my fame for a pot of ale, and safety” (3.2.12-13). By saying this, the Boy expresses that he does not understand why fighting is associated with honor since he would much rather be safe. This is pretty logical reasoning--why fight when there can be safety and peace? For a bunch of lower status soldiers, there is not a direct benefit for them. The King may be fighting for land, but that has little effect on the common people of England. The Boy is critiquing toxic masculinity and the desire for honor from violence (Hasser 157). The Boy, of all characters, is able to have this realization because he is still learning the ways of a man. In other words, toxic masculinity is not yet natural for him, so he can recognize the toxicity that goes with “becoming a man” from an outside perspective.

The Boy not only disproves of masculinity through the high man in power but through his “friends.” He is constantly surrounded by Nym, Pistol, and Bardolph who are supposed to be teaching him the ways of men, yet the Boy does not agree with their ways of manhood. The last thing the Boy says before his death is his critique of Pistol: “I did never know so full a voice issue from so empty a heart,” (4.4.70-71). He has had to learn about masculinity from a man that values money over genuine courage. This monologue happens right after the Boy translates for Pistol with a French soldier in which Pistol ends up swindling a lot of money from. However, Sasser observes that it is Pistol, that does not offer any judgment of toxic masculinity, that survives over the Boy (161). The Boy is “selfless” and true, yet was not able to grow into the man he “should” be, receiving death as the ultimate punishment.

The characters that defy toxic masculinity face severe consequences in Henry V. There is a parallel between Falstaff and the Boy’s character in that they both step out of the “man box” and both end up dead. The play demonstrates the ideals of the perfect man, represented through King Henry V. However, while on the surface Henry seems to exude masculinity, we know through his personal monologues that toxic masculinity forces him to be something he is not. The Chorus further practices masculinity by valuing the unrealistic standards of men through the treatment of the audience. Toxic masculinity controls the men in Henry V and transforms them into something they are not. Anyone who chooses to defy that is not worth being part of the story any longer.
References

