



TIKVAH
ONLINE
ACADEMY

Leadership and Courage: Henry V's "St. Crispin's Day Speech"

Dr. Charles T. Rubin

Wednesday, Aug. 18 at 7:00 PM EDT

Course Description:

The speech that Shakespeare imagines Henry V gave to his nobles prior to the Battle of Agincourt, where British troops were badly outnumbered, is widely regarded as a masterpiece of rhetoric. But what does that mean? What kinds of arguments does Henry present, and what makes them effective? Is their effectiveness related to the truth? How does one motivate men to risk their lives under dire circumstances? In this seminar, we will explore these questions, among others, and draw lessons from this speech.

Guiding Questions:

1. What does it mean to be motivated by honor, as Henry claims he is? Is it a sin to "covet honour"? Why associate greater honor with the small size of his army? Why make it smaller by allowed all those who have "no stomach" for the fight to come to depart with pay?
2. What does Henry expect that those who survive the battle will remember on St. Crispin's day? (St. Crispin, by the way, is the patron saint of shoemakers...) Do you think he understands the priorities of his common soldiers?
3. In what sense will the battle create a "band of brothers"? How will it "gentle" the "condition" of those who are not gentlemen? Do Henry's representations about the "happy few" put any obligations on him? Why is this speech made to his nobles and not to the common soldiers?
4. What makes this speech so powerful? Aristotle speaks of rhetoric as telling the truth effectively. Is that what Henry is doing? Or is what he is doing more like a "noble lie"? Or is it even noble at all?

Background

Dr. Rubin: I urge you, if you have the time, to read the whole of *Henry V* yourselves, which can only enrich your understanding of the great speech from Act IV that we will focus on. But in any case, here is a brief summary of some of the relevant context.

As Shakespeare tells the story in the two previous *Henry IV* plays, while Prince of Wales the future Henry V lived a dissolute life; one of the main interpretative questions of *Henry V* is to what extent his character improves on becoming king, and to what extent it remains the same, but expressing itself in a new context. In any case, upon becoming king he is advised by the clerical hierarchy, who wish to distract him from a bill very unfavorable to their interests, that he has a claim to the kingdom of France. After an insulting encounter with the French ambassador, Henry sets out to make war against France to pursue this claim. While having initial success at the siege of Harfleur, his army is weakened by sickness and lack of supplies. Yet Henry presses on until the army reaches Agincourt, where it faces a well equipped French army that outnumbers the British five to one.

The night before the battle Henry disguises himself to mix with the common soldiers. He hears doubts about the justice of his cause from one soldier, and an inclination to blame the king for the terrible deaths in battle that are to be expected on the morrow. Henry rejects this claim, saying that the fate of each soldier is bound up with his own moral flaws. He then, in private, soliloquizes on the heavy burden placed on the shoulders of a king by his subjects, who make him responsible for everything. Yet a king is after all merely a human being, distinguished from his fellows only by “ceremony.” That hardly compensates, Henry suggests, for an otherwise unhappy condition of life.

On the day of battle, Henry, now among his nobles, answers one of them who expresses a wish that their army were larger with the speech we will be studying today.

“St. Crispin’s Day Speech”

William Shakespeare

King Henry V: What’s he that wishes so?
My cousin Westmoreland? No, my fair cousin:
If we are mark’d to die, we are enow
To do our country loss; and if to live,
The fewer men, the greater share of honour.
God’s will! I pray thee, wish not one man more.
By Jove, I am not covetous for gold,
Nor care I who doth feed upon my cost;
It yearns me not if men my garments wear;
Such outward things dwell not in my desires:
But if it be a sin to covet honour,
I am the most offending soul alive.
No, faith, my coz, wish not a man from England:
God’s peace! I would not lose so great an honour
As one man more, methinks, would share from me
For the best hope I have. O, do not wish one more!
Rather proclaim it, Westmoreland, through my host,
That he which hath no stomach to this fight,
Let him depart; his passport shall be made
And crowns for convoy put into his purse:
We would not die in that man’s company
That fears his fellowship to die with us.

This day is called the feast of Crispian:
He that outlives this day, and comes safe home,
Will stand a tip-toe when the day is named,
And rouse him at the name of Crispian.
He that shall live this day, and see old age,
Will yearly on the vigil feast his neighbours,
And say "To-morrow is Saint Crispian;"
Then will he strip his sleeve and show his scars.
And say "These wounds I had on Crispin's day."
Old men forget: yet all shall be forgot,
But he'll remember with advantages
What feats he did that day: then shall our names
Familiar in his mouth as household words
Harry the king, Bedford and Exeter,
Warwick and Talbot, Salisbury and Gloucester,
Be in their flowing cups freshly remember'd.
This story shall the good man teach his son;
And Crispin Crispian shall ne'er go by,
From this day to the ending of the world,
But we in it shall be remember'd;
We few, we happy few, we band of brothers;
For he to-day that sheds his blood with me
Shall be my brother; be he ne'er so vile,
This day shall gentle his condition:
And gentlemen in England now a-bed
Shall think themselves accursed they were not here,
And hold their manhoods cheap whiles any speaks
That fought with us upon Saint Crispin's day.

From *Henry V*, Act IV, Scene III