



*Henry V:  
The Conscience of a King*

**Malcom Vale**

New Haven, CT: Yale University Press,  
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**Review by: Alexander Brondarbit**

*Henry V: The Conscience of a King*. By Malcolm Vale. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2016. ISBN 978-0-300-148732. xvi + 308 pp. £17.

This book is not a biography,” Malcolm Vale proclaims in the opening sentence of his latest monograph (1). True to his word, Vale’s work is neither biography nor narrative, but rather a thematic examination of Henry V that largely eschews his military exploits, a topic that often dominates the discussion related to his reign: “We have become accustomed to seeing Henry V as, perhaps, the supreme English war leader of the Middle Ages, for whom war and waging war was an unparalleled way of life” (260). In an attempt to delve past the warrior-king image that has long been so tightly associated with the second Lancastrian king, thanks in no small part to Shakespeare’s play, the author instead outlines a clear vision in which Henry’s “personal rule, direct action, and exercise of power” are examined to better understand Henry as a late medieval monarch (9).

Through a variety of themes, Vale explores the king’s conscience and its role in his government, seeking to grasp Henry’s “thoughts, beliefs and actions” (2). A sample of the wide range of subjects Vale illuminates to achieve this end includes the use of royal seals and signs manual; evidence for the king’s personal initiative in policy; his sponsorship of the increased role of the English language; his piety, including his relationship to the papacy, the founding of religious foundations, and the suppression of heresy; and, finally, his wills. This work is a welcome addition to several studies from the 1980s that sought to broaden Henry’s reign by considering the nuances of his domestic policies and achievements. Vale specifically cites his reliance on *The Practice of Kingship*, edited by the late Gerald Harriss in 1985. Vale’s methodology is one almost entirely focused on the administrative records from Henry’s government. The surviving mass of warrants, memoranda, household accounts, endorsements, and royal correspondence receive painstaking analysis, whereas the chronicles and other narrative accounts are given short shrift, viewed as too subjective to be of meaningful use to the historian searching for the true personality of the historical subject (9-10).

Vale’s study thus turns up interesting new details of Henry’s tastes and personality. One example highlights the king’s strong passion for music. Henry played the harp, and insisted that one accompany him during his military campaign in France. Such a detail, minor though it may be, helps undermine the prevalent notion of a dour king whose court avoided all things deemed frivolous. Henry has long been viewed as wholly focused on military venture and tirelessly overseeing the business of kingship, but Vale demonstrates that the king enjoyed mummers’ plays in the park at Windsor. A remote summerhouse—reachable only by boat—was also constructed for

Henry and his associates in the marshland surrounding his favourite castle at Kenilworth. This private residence sets aside the image of Henry as a tireless and wholly business-minded monarch in favour of a more rounded portrait of a man in need of the occasional escape from the heavy burdens of his office.

Despite the new aspects of Henry's character brought to light, there remains a crucial problem with the study that the author acknowledges. Vale's work presents a tendency to assign Henry personal credit for developments that may have originated with those who gave him counsel, or helped oversee the administration of this regime, but are not easily viewed in the documents from the central government as these records were not interested in capturing their involvement. The first, and this is true for every reign, is that administrative evidence is not 'neutral.' It was produced by the state, and it was designed to show that the king, the head of state, had sanctified the action carried out in his name. It promotes a fiction of royal involvement that fails to account for the role the wider polity played. This serves to conceal the influence political powerbrokers had in shaping, or in some cases driving, royal policy. The king lent his authorization to all government action, which can often mislead the reader as to whose will was truly steering events.

Nevertheless, Vale's book is a clearly written study that does an admirable job providing new insights into Henry the man and the late-medieval ruler. This study builds upon earlier scholarship and challenges the stubborn obsession with Henry V's military career at the expense of a fuller portrayal of his kingship.

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