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'A Little Touch of Harry in the Night': Mysteries of Kingship and the Stage in Shakespeare's The Life of King Henry the Fifth

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Author(s) Habermann, Ina

Author(s) at UniBasel [Habermann, Ina](#) ;

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This essay focuses on Henry V in order to refine our understanding of Shakespeare's distinctive contribution to the history play in the 1590s. In particular, I argue that Shakespeare enlists the imaginary powers of the audience to bring history to life, and that, to this end, he parallels the mystery of successful performance with the mysticism surrounding kingship. Just as the natural body of the king is transformed into the mystical body of the monarch, the stage action expands into historical events of epic proportions. This is predicated on the joint emphasis on play, performance and theatricality, which may have been suggested by the former Prince Hal's preference for games and gambles. The player thus plays a king who plays dangerous games. And if it is potentially treasonous to impersonate royalty on stage, the audience must take at least part of the blame, as history comes to life in their imagination. The result is dynamic, and even though the ultimate trajectory of the play may be an exploration, or even a celebration, of English history and national identity, its emotional centre is the playhouse, so that its political impact depends on performance.

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