

Henry V and the Significance Behind a Threat

King: And tell the pleasant Prince this mock of his hath turned his balls to gunstones, and his soul shall stand sore chargèd for the wasteful vengeance that shall fly with them (1.2.281-84).

The character of King Henry V has always appeared to walk a fine line between appearing immature and kingly. The transition from his earlier years spent in pubs with questionable company to his succession as the king of England creates the issue of how much authority people perceive he holds. On the one hand, he was King Henry IV's son, known for his lewd hangouts, and on the other, he is now the ruler of a country. France certainly fails to take Henry seriously, sending tennis balls as a dig to his less than pristine past. Even so, part of the speech Henry delivers in Act I, Scene II of Shakespeare's *Henry V* shows a turning point in his character; no more is he simply playing games, but he is beginning to think the way a king would, especially when under threat. This speech itself is particularly important because it reflects the first instance in the play where Henry asserts his position as king by presenting a threat not only to the Dauphin but also a reminder to those in his council of what he is capable of doing.

This long speech comes after receiving a letter from the Dauphin regarding Henry's claim to France. The Dauphin insults Henry, making note of his past by claiming "that you savor too much of your youth" (1.2.250). In other words, the Dauphin views him as an immature child, unfit to lay any claim to France. The significance in the speech thus comes from Henry taking these tennis balls the Dauphin has sent as an insult and crafting them into "gunstones." A simple mockery has turned into a full-on threat, as seemingly harmless tennis balls become transformed into weapons, capable of doing much more damage than a mere insult.

Another significant part of this speech is the way Henry also turns the blame back onto the Dauphin in no light terms. He claims the "vengeance" thrown with the gunstones will not only be destructive, but they will be the fault of the Dauphin. His strong language in this speech mirrors the forcefulness he intends to show France with his armies. To make a dig at his past before being crowned king is a wrong move on the Dauphin's part. Henry acknowledges his activities prior to being crowned king, but also comments that "...I will keep my state, be like a king, and show my sail of greatness when I do rouse me in my throne of France" (1.2.273-75). His promise of showing what true potential he has as king helps underscore his threat of turning tennis balls into cannonballs. The Dauphin is severely underestimating Henry in terms of power and ability.

These few lines out of Henry's speech are the first time he appears more threatening and forceful rather than boyish and immature. The insult from the Dauphin does not yield any humorous response from the king, but a menacing, carefully-worded threat instead. Though his background as a rogue-like figure may have cast some doubts before of his capabilities as a king to not only his enemies but his own country, the speech here shows he does not take his position lightly. Henry is officially acknowledging his new role as king in this speech, and by presenting it as a response to the Dauphin's letter and "gift" in front of his council, is establishing his authority.