An Introduction to Henry V

Upon completing Henry V in 1599, Shakespeare had written eighteen plays, and nine of them were histories. He was never to return to the genre again, with the exception of his possible collaboration on Henry VIII in 1613. The real hero of the histories, looked at collectively, is England. When political order triumphs in her ranks, she is sound and healthy. But when rebellion and unlawful claimants to the crown prevail, she weakens and falters.

Henry V is the most highly-charged, optimistic of all Shakespeare’s history plays. It dramatizes the political and personal triumphs that Hal, and indeed all England, enjoy during the reign of Henry V (1413-1422). At the end of Henry IV, Part Two, Prince Hal promises to “throw off” his “loose behavior,” and in Henry V he makes good on that vow by fully embracing the challenges and responsibilities of kingship.

According to Derek Traversi, Shakespeare’s theme in Henry V is “the establishment in England of an order based on consecrated authority and crowned by action against France.” In the words of Max M. Reese, Henry V is “an appointed symbol of majesty, and the action of the play is directed with the most elaborate care to show him doing everything that the age expected of the perfect king.” Simply put, Henry V is Hal’s success story.

This is not to say that Shakespeare portrays Henry V as less than fully human. From time to time the miserable realities of war unleash his passions. But his earnest concern for his subjects’ welfare, his reliance on God, his ability to lead a dispirited army to valorous action, and his awareness of the cost of the conflict overshadow his occasional all-too-human responses to ugly breaches of the chivalric code.

Henry V’s inspiring patriotic speeches would not have fallen on deaf ears at the Globe Theatre. Shakespeare’s original audience would have easily recognized elements in Henry V that parallel national concerns in their own day. Throughout the last decade of Elizabeth’s life, war was in the air. In 1599 England was on the threshold of a major military campaign to be led by the queen’s favorite, the Earl of Essex, against Ireland. Also like their compatriots at the beginning of Henry V’s reign, many Elizabethans at the end of Elizabeth I’s reign were eager to gain wealth and power by expanding England’s borders.

Henry V’s story was a favorite one for Elizabethans even before Shakespeare turned his hand to it. Playgoers would have known the outcome of the plot before they entered the theater. They would still have been delighted, however, with the English victory at Agincourt, the comic strains that run through the entire play, and the witty, romantic ending in which the English conqueror bluntly woos the elegant French princess.

Although some critics today undervalue heroism in general and Henry V in particular, the Chorus’s opening “O, for a muse of fire!” retains the power to ignite the imagination of a 21st-century audience. The play remains a poetic, passionate and thoroughly engaging rendering of one of England’s most stirring stories, penned by her greatest playwright at the height of his powers.
The Battle of Agincourt: The Historical Account

With only a small English army, Henry V utterly routed the French forces at Agincourt on October 25, 1415. The battle was one of the most famous in the Hundred Years' War.

In September Henry had captured the walled town of Harfleur in Normandy. He was returning to England, his men suffering from illness, when the French blocked his line of advance. Even though his men were tired and hungry from an 18-day march, Henry could not avoid the encounter.

The armies prepared to fight at dawn on St. Crispin's day in a field only about 1000 yards wide and enclosed on two sides by woods. The French army greatly outnumbered the English; the range of estimates suggests that it was between three and ten times as large. But it could not use its manpower to advantage at the chosen site.

Henry armed 3000 to 5000 of his troops with longbows, leaving fewer than 1000 of them with traditional hand weapons. An arrow shot from a longbow can pierce through an armored soldier from 500 yards away. At Crecy in 1346, Henry's great uncle the Black Prince had used an archer army to win another famous battle in the Hundred Years' War. Then as in 1415 at Agincourt, hundreds of Frenchmen were unable even to raise their lances.

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Henry also employed an ingenious configuration, placing longbowmen in the woods and between wings of armed men. He then provoked the French cavalry to action by hitting its men with arrows at long range. Besides poor military tactics, the French were hampered by a deep mud that covered the recently plowed field, heavy armor and artillery, and the small space in which thousands of men had to maneuver in mass formation against nimble enemy troops. As a result, many Frenchmen were unable even to raise their lances.

After defeating the French cavalry, Henry armed most of his forces with axes, knives and swords for the fight against the enemy on foot. This second contingent included French nobility, knights and mixed arms. In the space of three hours, the infantrymen were routed, their losses estimated at 10,000 men. English losses were very light, with estimates ranging from 14 men to 1600. The English victory completely discredited the Dauphin as a military leader. He died two months later. The brother who succeeded him, Jean, died in 1416, and the title “dauphin,” or “eldest son,” passed to a third brother, Charles.

Historically this single sensational victory did not actually bring Henry V any territorial gains. It took several years and several invasions for England to recapture Normandy. Henry at last reached the gates of Paris in August 1419 and signed the Treaty of Troyes in 1420 to become regent and heir to the French throne. He wed King Charles VI’s daughter Catherine in Paris on June 2, 1420.

Shakespeare’s presentation of the Battle of Agincourt involves little or no on-stage fighting. The details of the military action appear largely in speeches by Henry V and the Chorus. But one of the most effective features of the play is its depiction of two nations readying themselves for war. We are given glimpses of recruits, hired soldiers, noblemen, and even princes preparing for either victory or death.

In this manner, Shakespeare effectively portrays war as a series of individual sacrifices. The soldiers inspired by Henry’s command represent the entire British nation: the English, Welsh, Irish and Scots, commoners and nobility, the good and the bad. Taken collectively, the British characters in the main plot are quite affecting as they muse on life and death. So is Henry V’s talk, which fosters a deeply felt camaraderie among them, and his oratory, which places their enterprise in God’s hands.

On the other hand, the Boar’s Head set of the subplot—Pistol, Bardolph and Nym—have no ideals at all. They are intent on merely surviving and profiting. Sadly, both Bardolph and Nym are hanged for stealing. Bardolph’s despicable crime is looting a church vessel used to take Communion to the sick. Pistol also proves degenerate and cowardly. After the battle he purports to return home and remain a thief: “To England will I steal, and there I’ll steal.”

Shakespeare’s depiction of the French in Henry V is arguably just as negative. Louis the Dauphin, son of King Charles VI of France, is arrogant, boastful, overconfident and lax in his duties. On the eve of Agincourt while Henry walks incognito among his weary band, comforting the men as “brothers, friends, and countrymen,” the Dauphin frivolously talks of horses and mistresses. While Henry reverently acknowledges God, the Dauphin refers to Him only in swearing.

Shakespeare’s portrayal of the Dauphin and his courtly noblemen might be seen as a caricature of arrogant indifference, which culminates in the Dauphin’s terrible betrayal of his brother. The Dauphin is unfaithful to the Dauphin in the climactic moment of the battle, by abandoning his troops to save himself.

The Costumes

Costume and set designer Jeffrey Stegall created some 50 costume designs for the Classic Players production of Henry V. In addition to adapting the set he designed for the production of Henry IV.

From left to right: Mistress Quickly, Grey, Cambridge, Pistol, Bardolph, drummer, English soldier, French soldier, French page, Charles VI, and Alice.

Henry V died on August 31, 1422, and his father-in-law, Charles VI, died seven weeks later on October 21. Paris proclaimed Henry V’s infant son, Henry VI, king of France. The following month, however, the Dauphin was crowned Charles VII at Poitiers. The Hundred Years’ War between France and England raged sporadically until 1475, when Edward IV and Louis XI established a lasting truce.
The Chorus appears before each act of the play to set the scene, give the audience key plot details, and describe actions of too great magnitude to be realistically enacted onstage, such as the battle scenes.

The newly crowned Henry V has fully turned his back on his unwholesome cronies at the Boar’s Head Tavern and set his sights on the French throne. The vain, defiant Dauphin, heir to the French throne, mocks his rival by sending him tennis balls as reminders of Hal’s profligate youth. The insulting gift suggests that Henry is competent in sports and revelry but not in the pursuit of the courts of France. Henry responds by declaring war on France, intending to prove his mettle and claim sovereignty over certain French regions he is convinced are rightfully his.

When Henry arrives, Canterbury labels as unjust the Salic law, an old Germanic law that bars the passing down of the royal line through a female. Thus Henry V has a claim to the throne of France through his great-great-grandmother Isabella, daughter of Philip IV of France and wife of Edward II of England. When Henry agrees to a peace treaty during a meeting with the French king, Charles VI, Henry later proposes to Katherine and becomes heir to the throne of France.

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Crispinian's feast day came to be celebrated as the anniversary of For centuries members of French shoemaking guilds observed their pair to death. They were tortured and beheaded around 286. For their religious activity the Emperor Maximian condemned the Catholicism. There they engaged in shoemaking for their livelihood. Their trade According to 8th-century legend, these brothers from a noble Crispin and Crispinian are the patron saints of shoemakers. By Providence of the most high God, when He judges that the state of human affairs is worthy of such lords. "The [Bible] is clear on this matter. "By Me kings reign, and tyrants pass away the hand" (Prov. 8: 15)."

Eventually Richard III is defeated, and in the process God's judgment passes upon the wicked, rectifying wrongs committed over three or four generations. Richard's opponent, Richmond, on the eve of the pair's meeting at Bosworth field, appeals to God in a manner that underscores his role as a human instrument of divine punishment: "O Thou, whose captain I account myself, Look on my forces with gracious eye, Put in their hands thy beaying iron of wrath, That they may crush down with a heavy fall The shining helmets of our adversaries, Make us thy ministers of chastisements, That we may praise thee in the victory! To thee I commend my watchful soul Ere I let fall the windows of mine eyes. Sleeping and waking, O, defend me still!"

On the following day the Lancastrian Richmond kills the Yorkist usurper Richard III in hand-to-hand conflict. Thus he pronounces an end to the War of the Roses and becomes Henry VII, the first monarch in the Tudor line. His subsequent marriage to Elizabeth of York unites the Yorks and Lancasters, bringing to a close 35 years of civil war in England. The pair's most famous progeny is Shakespeare's queen, Elizabeth I.

In Henry V the doctrine of Providential history is clearly and simply carried through the play by the character Henry V. The historical Henry V (1387-1422) was a pious devotee to Roman Catholicism and a prosecutor of the Lollards, followers of the English reformer John Wycliffe. Shakespeare's Henry, however, voices the orthodox political doctrine of Protestant England under Elizabeth I. Audiences at the Globe Theatre would also have recognized Henry V's roasting patriotic rhetoric and reverent allusions to God as reflections of 16th-century orthodox political and religious thought. Such seeming discrepancy can be explained by two factors: Shakespeare's own artistic vision of history and the circumstances of his career. As a playwright, Shakespeare did not aim to report history accurately but to create dramatic entertainment. He had no scruples against taking liberties with historical materials. In the histories time is compressed, characters and events are altered and added, and every element is transformed by the playwright's rich dramatic language.

Second, writing some 65 years after Elizabeth I's father, King Henry VIII, removed England from the authority of Rome. Shakespeare was a Protestant who wrote for a predominantly Protestant audience and drew from Tudor drama and chronicle writings by Protestants. Elizabethans regarded the rise of the Lancastrian kings and the establishment of the Tudor dynasty through Henry VII as God's will for the good of their nation. Because of King Henry VIII's break with Rome in 1536, Protestants today still view 15th- and 16th-century British history as a saga of God's Providence. Shakespeare's Henry V submits himself to God's will in the scene of his very first appearance in the play. He believes that his cause is "well-hallowed" and recognizes that the outcome of his conflict with the Dauphin "lies all within the will of God." He recognizes the horrible human cost of war but at the same time views it as an instrument of God's judgment, "His beadle, His vengeance."
The play ends with the perfect fulfillment of Henry's confident expectations. At no point is the English king's poetry more majestic than when he gives God the glory for a seemingly miraculous victory over France:

Deo gracias. Anglia, redde pro victoria. *
Deo gracias. Anglia, redde pro victoria. *
Deo gracias. Anglia, redde pro victoria. *
Deo gracias. Anglia, redde pro victoria.*

The Agincourt Carol
Give back to God, England, the glory for our victory.

Henry the King

"This Henry was a king of life without a spot, a prince whom all men loved and of none distrusted, a captain against whom fortune never frustrated nor mischance once spared; whose people he so severe a justice both loved and obeyed, and so humane withal that he left no offense unpunished nor friendship unwarded, a terror to rebels and suppressor of sedition, his virtues notable, his qualities most praiseworthy."

Raphael Holinshed, The Chronicles of England (1587)
What is the **Chorus** in Shakespeare?

A Chorus is a group of characters or a single character in a drama who stands apart from the action and comments on it directly to the audience. The Chorus originated in Greek drama, where it was composed of 12 to 50 members who sang, danced and recited poetic commentary on the action and characters.

By Shakespeare’s day the Chorus had become a single actor who makes the same sort of lyrical commentary on the play. His point of view represents a knowledge of events and characters that is superior to that possessed by the actors in the plot.

Shakespeare uses the Chorus figure as a dramatic device in various ways. In only two plays does he designate a character Chorus: *Romeo and Juliet* and *Henry V*. In both plays the Chorus supplies facts and fills in narrative details. He also allows the playwright to confront the audience with a point of view that goes beyond that of the characters in the play.

Shakespeare employs three other categories of figures that serve choric functions. (1) In two romances an actor serves as Chorus but is not so named: the allegorical figure Time who appears once in *The Winter’s Tale* to bridge a 16-year gap in the action; and the character Gower, a medieval poet who makes eight appearances as a traditional Chorus in *Pericles*. (2) Two plays—*Troilus and Cressida* and *The Two Noble Kinsmen*—are introduced by an allegorical speaker designated as the prologue. In *Henry IV*, the same function is served by the allegorical figure Rumor. Both *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* and *Hamlet* embody a play-within-the-play that is introduced by a prologue. (3) In other plays a character in the plot may comment on a scene without actually stepping out of it. Such figures include the Bastard in *King John* and the Fool in *King Lear*.

The Chorus, especially in *Henry V*, is a metatheatrical device, or an element in the drama that calls attention to the artificial nature of the whole theatrical experience. The successive appearances of the Chorus in *Henry V* remind playgoers that the action before them is theatrical, not real. Thus spectators remain more detached psychologically than they otherwise would.

The characters Shakespeare uses in choric functions often announce that if playgoers do not engage their thoughts and imaginations with the actors, the play will fail as entertainment. The richly descriptive language of Renaissance drama, intended to compensate for the absence of physical scenery, required audience concentration.

In Shakespeare’s day theater was also more interactive than it usually is today. Audience members became so engaged in stage action that at times they responded verbally to lines and situations.

The Chorus in *Henry V* repeatedly admonishes the audience to do its part in shaping the story. In the prologue, for example, he says,

> Think when we talk of horses, that you see them<br>Printing their proud hoofs i’th’ earth;<br>For ‘tis your thoughts that now must deck our kings,<br>Carry them here and there, jumping o’er times.

At later appearances he insists, “Grapple your minds,” and “Work, work your thoughts” and invokes imaginary scenes which audience members must “piece out with their thoughts.” He also apologizes for the stage’s inadequacy to represent the great sweeping events of history, such as the Battle of Agincourt, and fills the audience in on necessary abridgements in the story.

One of the main functions of the *Henry V* Chorus is to describe and interpret events of the plot. His interpretations do not necessarily represent the playwright’s point of view. As in classical drama, the Chorus’s viewpoint may represent popular opinion of the day. He is a great admirer of the noble Henry, whom he hails as “the warlike Harry,” “the mirror of all Christian kings,” and “this star of England.” The Chorus leaves little doubt where audience sympathy should lie when he contrasts “the confident and overlusty French” with “the poor condemned English.”

The Chorus’s formal, stylized diction creates an epic mood for the play. The content of his speeches also elevates the action from the level of individuals to that of nations. The effect is that *Henry V* might be viewed as an epic poem celebrating the exploits of its hero rather than a drama that thrusts its protagonist into a significant conflict. By keeping the heroic side of Henry V in the forefront, the Chorus is integral in the creation of Shakespeare’s portrait of “the mirror of all Christian kings.”