



HISTORICAL CONTEXT
 READ ABOUT THE TRUE STORY OF HENRY V, THEN COMPARE IT TO THE TAKE SHAKESPEARE CHOOSES TO TELL.



QUIZZES & VOCAB
 FIND PRINTABLE QUOTES QUIZ (WITH TEACHER'S KEY) AND A VOCABULARY LIST WITH DEFINITIONS.



ACTOR INSIGHTS
 OSF ACTORS SPEAK ABOUT THEIR CHARACTERS COMING ALIVE THROUGH SHAKESPEARE'S TEXT.

KING HENRY V



Historical Context

Henry Bolingbroke was king, King Henry IV, first king of the line of Lancaster. His claim to the throne was hotly contested, with powerful noble families believing that Lord Mortimer, who Richard II named as his heir before his death, was the rightful king. The Percy's, led by Harry 'Hotspur' Percy, raised an army against Henry IV, meeting him in the famed battle of Shrewsbury. Here,

"We few, we happy few,
 we band of brothers..."

Henry Bolingbroke's son, Henry of Monmouth (the future Henry V), played a pivotal role in securing victory for the king and crushing the Percy rebellion. Henry of Monmouth continued to show his battlefield prowess by quelling a Welsh rebellion led by the mighty Owain Glydwr.

With the kingdom secured in the year 1408 and the king in ill health, Henry of Monmouth sought a more active role in politics. The king's illness gave Henry political control over the country, leaving him free to enact his own policies. These policies differed much from those of the king, who, in 1411 after a recovery from his illness, dismissed Henry from the court and reversed many of his policies. However, when Henry IV died on March 20, 1413, Henry ascended to the throne, becoming King Henry V, the second of the Lancaster kings.

Henry V ruled over a period of relative peace at home. He sought to heal the wounds of the countries many rebellions the preceded his reign. Richard II, whose legitimacy was challenged by Henry IV, was given a proper royal burial, and Lord Mortimer, the subject of the Percy rebellion, was brought back into favor. On the other hand, Henry was quick to act quickly and ruthlessly when he perceived a serious domestic threat, burning at the stake his old friend Sir John Oldcastle, who was fomenting discontent in 1414.

With his kingdom secure, Henry turned his attention to foreign affairs, particularly to France, where his true legacy was born. There is some debate among scholars about the true motives for Henry's French campaigns. King Charles VI of France was an ineffectual ruler, prone to mental illness (he is said to have believed at one point that his bones were made of glass), and his son and heir was not a promising royal prospect. Some attribute the French aid of Owain Glydwr as Henry's justification for war, but most historians believe that Henry was motivated by the claim that the throne of France rightfully belonged to England, a claim first pursued by Edward III.

Nevertheless, on August 11, 1415, Henry sailed for France. After besieging and capturing the French fortress at Harfleur, Henry, against the advice of his counselors, marched his armies toward Calais. On the 25 of October, the French forces intercepted Henry's armies near the village of Agincourt. Henry's men were

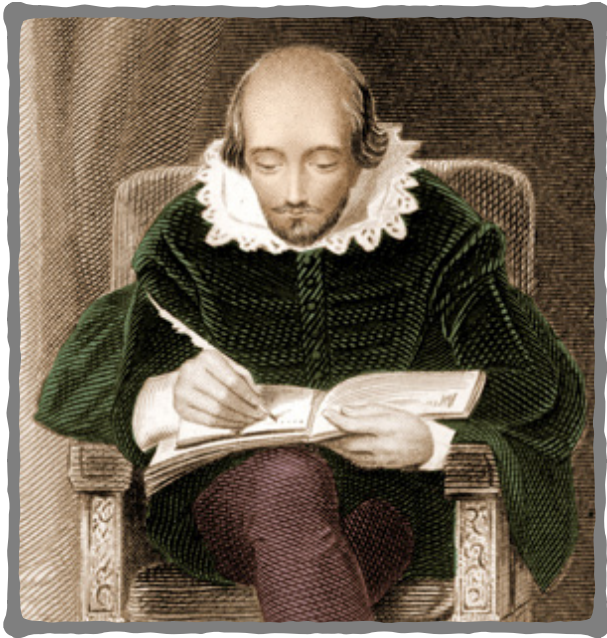
O!
for a Muse of
fire, that would
ascend the
brightest heaven
of invention!

A kingdom for a
stage, princes to
act

And monarchs
to behold the
swelling scene.

malnourished, exhausted, and completely outnumbered. Historians disagree on the exact numbers, but it is believed that the English forces numbered between 6,000 and 9,000 men, while the French numbered some 12,000 to as many as 36,000. Against seemingly insurmountable odds, on St. Crispin's Day, the armies clashed...

You will find no spoilers here. Watch the play to discover the thrilling conclusion to the Battle of Agincourt!



Shakespeare's Version

Henry V is perhaps Shakespeare's most beloved history. As with all of the history plays, Shakespeare was writing for the ruling Queen Elizabeth I, who was a direct descendant of John of Gaunt (father of Henry IV). As a result, his histories often vary with historical record in order to present the Elizabeth's ancestors in a favorable light. The clearest example of this embellishment is Shakespeare's monstrously villainous depiction of Richard III, who in life was neither monstrously deformed nor ruthlessly cruel. (But what fun is that?)

With his tendency to take theatrical license with historical events, it is perhaps surprising to discover that Henry V is relatively accurate. Even Shakespeare's depiction of Henry's wild youth, his gradual acceptance of responsibility, his new-found religious devotion, and growth into an honorable king have basis in reality. Though Shakespeare uses the fictional character Falstaff in Henry IV, Parts 1 and 2 as the lens through which we see Henry's conversion from wild youth to responsible ruler, the conversion itself is reasonably accurate.

The events of the play, largely concerned with Henry's campaign in France leading to the climactic Battle of Agincourt, have been compressed by Shakespeare into a tighter time frame; but again, the events themselves largely line up with history. In the play, Henry's armies sack the city of Harfleur ("Once more unto the breach!"), but in reality the siege of Harfleur lasted weeks, and the city eventually surrendered through negotiations. While the particulars of this siege differ from history, Henry's general policy of leniency toward French citizens as depicted in the play is consistent with the real Henry's actual policies. French citizens who swore allegiance to Henry were allowed to remain in the city, and

those who refused to accept Henry as their king were allowed to leave the city with whatever belongings they could carry, and were even given money by the English for their travels.

Agincourt occurred roughly a month after the siege of Harfleur, even though the play seems to suggest that these events were much closer. Again, Shakespeare's depiction of the battle is largely true to history, though Shakespeare, possibly for higher dramatic effect, inflated the numbers of the French and lessened the numbers of the English. Shakespeare even includes one of Henry's most controversial actions, the execution of French prisoners during the battle. However, there is no evidence to support the French slaughter of British boys, included by Shakespeare perhaps to lessen the impact of Henry's killing of prisoners.



Even the seemingly fairy tale romance in the play between Henry and Katherine, the French princess, is based in reality. Historians agree that Henry's marriage to Katherine was not simply a political move, but was in fact a marriage of love. Henry wanted Katherine near him always, even constructing lodging for her near towns he was besieging so that she would always be close by.

Some accuse the play of serving as British propaganda, glorifying an unjust, bloody military campaign. It cannot be argued that the play presents the British and Henry in particular, as heroes on a noble campaign. The St. Crispin's Day speech alone is enough to almost make viewers leap from their seats, grab a sword and join the fray. But the play also accurately depicts the moral ambiguity of war (showing Henry's killing of prisoners), the cruelty of battle, and the bond of soldiers. It also explores deep themes of kingship, responsibility, honor, justice, patriotism, and even love.

**Thus far, with rough and all-unable pen,
Our bending author hath pursued the story,
In little room confining mighty men,
Mangling by starts the full course of their glory.
Small time, but in that small most greatly lived
This star of England. Fortune made his sword,
By which the world's best garden he achieved,
And of it made his son imperial lord.**

Family Tree

Something to help you mentally organize all those Lancasters and Bolingbrokes as the action unfolds...



HOUSE OF LANCASTER.

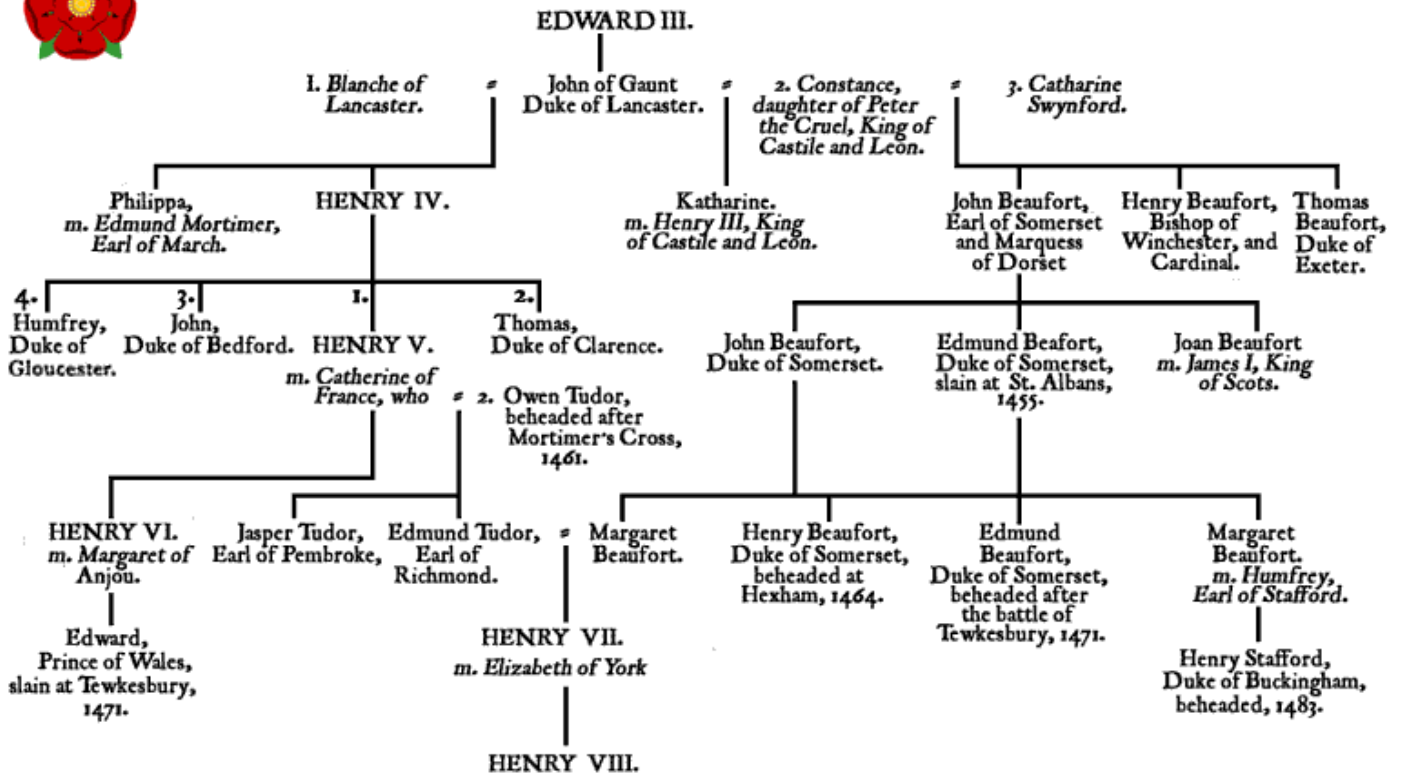


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Discussion Ideas

Introduce these questions to your class for an exciting socratic seminar, or use them as essay prompts or journaling exercises —what you will! (More on next page.)

1. Some critics accuse the play of serving as British propaganda and glorifying war. Using examples from the play (“Band of brothers” speech, “Once more unto the breach” etc.), discuss Shakespeare’s depiction of the glory of war. Does Shakespeare paint the British as heroes? Do you think Henry’s war with France was justified? Does Shakespeare balance the glory of war with a realistic depiction of the horrors of war?
2. The character of Henry V grows much over the course of the play. Discuss his journey as a character from irresponsible youth to honorable king. What are the qualities that make a good king? Why does Henry disguise himself and walk about his camp among his soldiers? How does he react to the death of his old friend Falstaff, and what does this reveal about his character?
3. Why does Henry order the execution of his old friend Bardolph? What does that decision say about Henry’s commitment to justice?

Vocabulary, quizzes, actor profiles, and more!

Check back soon for an updated study guide with even more content: quizzes, vocabulary, actor profiles, and more!
