



Honor, Brotherhood, and
the Hundred Years' War in
Shakespeare's *Henry V*

Or, A Story of the Untold Dangers of Gifts of Sporting
Equipment

Just a Bit on Shakespeare

- 1564-1616
- Born in Stratford-upon-Avon and spent most of his professional life in London
- Married Anne Hathaway in 1582
- Achieved financial and professional success by the 1590s
- His company built The Globe theater in 1599, and many of his plays were presented there (until it burned down in 1613)
- Plays presented at the courts of Elizabeth I and James I

Shakespeare's History Plays

- In 1623 (7 years after the death of Shakespeare), editors John Heminges and Henry Condell grouped his plays into tragedies, comedies, and history plays, and they published them as the First Folio
- Lots of dissent among scholars about which play belongs to what genre (few generic similarities among the history plays)
- History plays derived from the chronicles of Edward Hall and Raphael Holinshed (16th Century); very loose, historically speaking
- Include political myths in addition to chronicled history
- All except *Henry VIII* written during Elizabeth I's reign

History Plays and the Epic Poem

- Both contain:
 - Magnitude of action
 - Grand style of language
 - Invocation of the deity
 - Suggestions of divine intervention
- However, the epic poem depicts fate overruling human will, while the history play depicts the will struggling with fate

Shakespeare's Audience

- Minimal knowledge of historical events
- They watched history being *made*—there was a sense of historical realism
- Packed into the open-air theater with 2-3 thousand others
- Unfortunately, personal hygiene was not all that could be desired
- Apparently, they really liked hazelnuts

The Hundred Years' War

- 1337-1453, between France and England
- Two apparent causes:
 - Duchy of Guyenne (Aquitaine), owned by the English but also a fief of the French crown
 - English monarchs claimed the crown of France due to a common ancestor
- Many battles, much trading back and forth of land via violence
- Charles VII of France defeated the English army in 1453; regained possession of Aquitaine
- No peace treaty; the English just stopped fighting when they realized that the French army was too strong to defeat

The Battle of Agincourt

- Friday, October 25, 1415
- The English army (roughly 8500 men including 7000 archers) was vastly outnumbered by the French (some accounts give their number as 50,000)
- English soldiers were also sick, tired, and physically exhausted from marching for the previous two weeks
- Thanks to the English longbow, the French suffered massive casualties while the English did not (a conservative estimate is 6 French deaths to every 1 English death)
- The French surrendered

Henry V

- First emerged in printed form in 1600 (Quarto)
- Unlike other history plays, ends with marriage (like a comedy) rather than a death or a conflict of man with his destiny (like a tragedy)
- Demonstrates the glory, moral expenditure, and physical costs of war
- Like all the history plays, informs the audience that the idea of a unified nation is a myth; this play depicts the collection of Welsh, Irish, English, and Scots that comprise Henry's army
- Also suggests that men engage in war for various reasons; Henry desires honor and glory, while Pistol is there to plunder

Enchanted and Disenchanted

- *Henry V* glorifies war and the heroism of the warlike king
- The chorus exhorts the audience to join Henry on his quest to conquer France
- But it is also disenchanted in that he demonstrates the costs—human and material—of war
- There are places where meaning simply can't be made (murder of prisoners)

Rough Plot of *Henry V*

- Afraid of a bill before parliament that might diminish Catholic coffers, naughty bishops attempt to convince Henry that he should go to war with France
- The Dauphin of France sends Henry some tennis balls in response to Henry's claims on several dukedoms in France
- Henry is not amused
- Henry finds traitors in his midst and executes them before embarking for France
- Lots of soldiers (including the rascal Pistol) embark for France
- Henry's army takes the city of Harfleur
- Henry's army decisively defeats the French army at Agincourt
- The French surrender; after a hilarious (albeit unnecessary) bilingual courtship scene, Henry becomes engaged to Katherine, the French princess and takes control of France

Honor and Tennis Balls

- Henry decides to pursue war with France after the Dauphin claims that Henry “savor[s] too much of [his] youth” and gives him a gift of tennis balls (“treasure”)
- This affronts Henry’s sense of honor; although he was wild in his youth, he now demands the respect due to a king
- He declares that, to avenge his honor, he will turn the Dauphin’s “balls to gun-stones”
- This play revolves around the vindication of Henry’s honor

St. Crispin's Day Speech

- An example of *prosopopeia* so beloved by Renaissance historians: writing speeches that an historical figure *might have* or *should have* given
- In this speech, Henry praises his army's valor, promises them glory, and asserts that they are his brothers
- Shakespeare commonly demystifies power in his history plays and seeks to establish the equality of all humans, but this is exemplary in that Henry claims all his soldiers as his peers

Bourbon: Shame, and eternal shame,
nothing but shame!/Let us die.

Constable: Disorder, that hath spoiled
us, friend us now./Let us on heaps go
offer up our lives.

Bourbon: The devil take order now! I'll
to the throng./Let life be short, else
shame will be too long.

Shame

- The French perceive their dramatic loss as a source of shame
- Loss in battle—particularly when the odds were so greatly in their favor—is the source of a never-dying shame
- Soldiers would rather die than feel the shame of defeat
- Shame is depicted as an enduring humiliation, as fresh after many years as it was at the time
- However, this is still an enchanted portion of the play; the shame—and the fury with which the French will reclaim their honor—gathers meaning from the violence enacted on the French body