

Prologue

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!
 Then should the warlike Harry, like himself,
 Assume the port of Mars; and at his heels,
 Leash'd in like hounds, should famine, sword and fire
 Crouch for employment. But pardon, gentles all,
 The flat unraised spirits that have dared
 On this unworthy scaffold to bring forth
 So great an object: can this cockpit hold
 The vasty fields of France? or may we cram
 Within this wooden O the very casques
 That did affright the air at Agincourt?
 O, pardon! since a crooked figure may
 Attest in little place a million;
 And let us, ciphers to this great accompt,
 On your imaginary forces work.
 Suppose within the girdle of these walls
 Are now confined two mighty monarchies,
 Whose high upreared and abutting fronts
 The perilous narrow ocean parts asunder:
 Piece out our imperfections with your thoughts;
 Into a thousand parts divide one man,
 And make imaginary puissance;
 Think when we talk of horses, that you see them
 Printing their proud hoofs i' the receiving earth;
 For 'tis your thoughts that now must deck our kings,
 Carry them here and there; jumping o'er times,
 Turning the accomplishment of many years
 Into an hour-glass: for the which supply,
 Admit me Chorus to this history;
 Who prologue-like your humble patience pray,
 Gently to hear, kindly to judge, our play.

Guided Commentary

- What longing is presented in the first eight lines? What is the tone of this introduction, and what effect must it have had on the audience?
- Why does the chorus beg pardon of the audience?
- How is the audience asked to "Piece out our imperfections with your thoughts"? How does the poetry help us to do so, by images, effects of sound, word choice...?
- In what ways has this prologue prepared the audience to watch the play?

"Once More unto the Breach," Act III, sc. 1

Once more unto the breach, dear friends, once more;
 Or close the wall up with our English dead.
 In peace there's nothing so becomes a man
 As modest stillness and humility:
 But when the blast of war blows in our ears,
 Then imitate the action of the tiger;
 Stiffen the sinews, summon up the blood,
 Disguise fair nature with hard-favour'd rage;
 Then lend the eye a terrible aspect;
 Let pry through the portage of the head
 Like the brass cannon; let the brow o'erwhelm it
 As fearfully as doth a galled rock
 O'erhang and jutty his confounded base,
 Swill'd with the wild and wasteful ocean.
 Now set the teeth and stretch the nostril wide,
 Hold hard the breath and bend up every spirit
 To his full height. On, on, you noblest English,
 ...Dishonour not your mothers; now attest
 That those whom you call'd fathers did beget you.
 Be copy now to men of grosser blood,
 And teach them how to war. And you, good yeoman,
 Whose limbs were made in England, show us here
 The mettle of your pasture; let us swear
 That you are worth your breeding; which I doubt not;
 For there is none of you so mean and base,
 That hath not noble lustre in your eyes.
 I see you stand like greyhounds in the slips,
 Straining upon the start. The game's afoot:
 Follow your spirit, and upon this charge
 Cry 'God for Harry, England, and Saint George!'

Guided Commentary

- ▶ Set the scene of this passage. What qualities in King Henry appear in his first two lines to his men?
- ▶ How does the poet create a contrast between the virtues of peace and of war? What image does he use to represent the virtues of war? What gives strength to his comparisons in the lines from "But when the blast... To his full height"?
- ▶ How does the King rally both nobles and yeomen, in the next lines?
- ▶ To what does King Henry compare his men, in the last four lines? What would have been the effect of his final words?

Act IV, Prologue

Now entertain conjecture of a time
 When creeping murmur and the poring dark
 Fills the wide vessel of the universe.
 From camp to camp through the foul womb of night
 The hum of either army stilly sounds,
 That the fixed sentinels almost receive
 The secret whispers of each other's watch:
 Fire answers fire, and through their paly flames
 Each battle sees the other's umber'd face;
 Steed threatens steed, in high and boastful neighs
 Piercing the night's dull ear, and from the tents
 The armourers, accomplishing the knights,
 With busy hammers closing rivets up,
 Give dreadful note of preparation:
 The country cocks do crow, the clocks do toll,
 And the third hour of drowsy morning name.
 Proud of their numbers and secure in soul,
 The confident and over-lusty French
 Do the low-rated English play at dice;
 And chide the cripple tardy-gaited night
 Who, like a foul and ugly witch, doth limp
 So tediously away. The poor condemned English,
 Like sacrifices, by their watchful fires
 Sit patiently and inly ruminate
 The morning's danger, and their gesture sad,
 Investing lank-lean cheeks and war-worn coats,
 Presenteth them unto the gazing moon
 So many horrid ghosts. O now, who will behold
 The royal captain of this ruin'd band
 Walking from watch to watch, from tent to tent,
 Let him cry 'Praise and glory on his head!'
 For forth he goes and visits all his host.
 Bids them good morrow with a modest smile
 And calls them brothers, friends and countrymen.
 Upon his royal face there is no note
 How dread an army hath enrounded him;
 Nor doth he dedicate one jot of colour
 Unto the weary and all-watched night,
 But freshly looks and over-bears attaint
 With cheerful semblance and sweet majesty;
 That every wretch, pining and pale before,
 Beholding him, plucks comfort from his looks:
 A largess universal like the sun
 His liberal eye doth give to every one,
 Thawing cold fear, that mean and gentle all,
 Behold, as may unworthiness define,
 A little touch of Harry in the night.

- What situation does the prologue evoke? What is the atmosphere of the first 16 lines? Why?
- How does the poet contrast the French and the English on the eve of the battle? With whom do we sympathize?
- What changes in the tone as the "royal captain of this ruin'd band" enters the scene?
- As Henry wanders through his camp, what new qualities does the poet reveal in him? How?
- How does this entire passage give us hope for the outcome of the battle?

The King Alone, Before the Battle, Act IV, sc. 1
[Appropriate for later 9th grade and up; too difficult for 8th]

Upon the king! let us our lives, our souls,
 Our debts, our careful wives,
 Our children and our sins lay on the king!
 We must bear all. O hard condition,
 Twin-born with greatness, subject to the breath
 Of every fool, whose sense no more can feel
 But his own wringing! What infinite heart's-ease
 Must kings neglect, that private men enjoy!
 And what have kings, that privates have not too,
 Save ceremony, save general ceremony?
 And what art thou, thou idle ceremony?
 What kind of god art thou, that suffer'st more
 Of mortal griefs than do thy worshippers?
 What are thy rents? what are thy comings in?
 O ceremony, show me but thy worth!
 What is thy soul of adoration?
 Art thou aught else but place, degree and form,
 Creating awe and fear in other men?
 Wherein thou art less happy being fear'd
 Than they in fearing.
 What drink'st thou oft, instead of homage sweet,
 But poison'd flattery?

... No, thou proud dream,
 That play'st so subtly with a king's repose;
 I am a king that find thee, and I know
 'Tis not the balm, the sceptre and the ball,
 The sword, the mace, the crown imperial,
 The intertissued robe of gold and pearl,
 The farced title running 'fore the king,
 The throne he sits on, nor the tide of pomp
 That beats upon the high shore of this world,
 No, not all these, thrice-gorgeous ceremony,
 Not all these, laid in bed majestical,
 Can sleep so soundly as the wretched slave,
 Who with a body fill'd and vacant mind
 Gets him to rest, cramm'd with distressful bread;
 Never sees horrid night, the child of hell,
 But, like a lackey, from the rise to set
 Sweats in the eye of Phoebus and all night
 Sleeps in Elysium; next day after dawn,
 Doth rise and help Hyperion to his horse,
 And follows so the ever-running year,
 With profitable labour, to his grave:
 And, but for ceremony, such a wretch,
 Winding up days with toil and nights with sleep,
 Had the fore-hand and vantage of a king.
 The slave, a member of the country's peace,
 Enjoys it; but in gross brain little wots
 What watch the king keeps to maintain the peace,
 Whose hours the peasant best advantages.

Guided Commentary (The King Alone, Before the Battle)
[Appropriate for late 9th grade and up; too difficult for 8th.]

- ▶ Explain the first eight lines which Henry speaks here. To what or whom is he responding? What is his "hard condition"?
- ▶ What is revealed in the questions which the king addresses to "Ceremony"? How do we see his mood in these lines?
- ▶ What does King Henry envy the "wretched slave"? How does the poet characterize the "lackey" and the "wretch," and give him "fore-hand and vantage of a king"?
- ▶ How do the last four lines give us more insight into the role of a king, and the personality of Henry?

Prayer Before Agincourt, Act IV, sc. 1

O God of battles! steel my soldiers' hearts;
Possess them not with fear; take from them now
The sense of reckoning, if the opposed numbers
Pluck their hearts from them. Not to-day, O Lord,
O, not to-day, think not upon the fault
My father made in compassing the crown!
I Richard's body have interred anew;
And on it have bestow'd more contrite tears
Than from it issued forced drops of blood:
Five hundred poor I have in yearly pay,
Who twice a-day their wither'd hands hold up
Toward heaven, to pardon blood; and I have built
Two chantries, where the sad and solemn priests
Sing still for Richard's soul. More will I do;
Though all that I can do is nothing worth,
Since that my penitence comes after all,
Imploring pardon.

Guided Commentary (Prayer Before Agincourt)

- ▶ What does King Henry ask for his soldiers?
- ▶ What fear is revealed in the king, in lines 4-6? Why might Henry, in his prayer, list out the actions of lines 7-14?
- ▶ What anguish is revealed in King Henry, in the last four lines?
- ▶ How might this passage offer the deepest insight into Henry's character?

Guided Commentary (We Band of Brothers)

- ▶ What is Westmoreland deploring? How does Henry turn that complaint into something else?
- ▶ Explain how the king is "the most offending soul alive." Why should Westmorland "wish not one man more"?
- ▶ What vision of the future does King Henry conjure up for Westmoreland, and his troops? What gives power to this vision?
- ▶ How does Henry's speech build to a final climax?

"We Band of Brothers," Act IV, sc. 3

WESTMORELAND

O that we now had here
 But one ten thousand of those men in England
 That do no work to-day!

KING HENRY V

What's he that wishes so?
 My cousin Westmoreland? No, my fair cousin:
 If we are mark'd to die, we are enow
 To do our country loss; and if to live,
 The fewer men, the greater share of honour.
 God's will! I pray thee, wish not one man more.
 By Jove, I am not covetous for gold,
 Nor care I who doth feed upon my cost;
 It yearns me not if men my garments wear;
 Such outward things dwell not in my desires:
 But if it be a sin to covet honour,
 I am the most offending soul alive.
 No, faith, my coz, wish not a man from England:
 God's peace! I would not lose so great an honour
 As one man more, methinks, would share from me
 For the best hope I have. O, do not wish one more!
 Rather proclaim it, Westmoreland, through my host,
 That he which hath no stomach to this fight,
 Let him depart; his passport shall be made
 And crowns for convoy put into his purse:
 We would not die in that man's company
 That fears his fellowship to die with us.
 This day is called the feast of Crispian:
 He that outlives this day, and comes safe home,
 Will stand a tip-toe when the day is named,
 And rouse him at the name of Crispian.
 He that shall live this day, and see old age,
 Will yearly on the vigil feast his neighbours,
 And say 'To-morrow is Saint Crispian:'
 Then will he strip his sleeve and show his scars.
 And say 'These wounds I had on Crispin's day.'
 Old men forget: yet all shall be forgot,
 But he'll remember with advantages
 What feats he did that day: then shall our names
 Familiar in his mouth as household words
 Harry the king, Bedford and Exeter,
 Warwick and Talbot, Salisbury and Gloucester,
 Be in their flowing cups freshly remember'd.
 This story shall the good man teach his son;
 And Crispin Crispian shall ne'er go by,
 From this day to the ending of the world,
 But we in it shall be remember'd;
 We few, we happy few, we band of brothers;
 For he to-day that sheds his blood with me
 Shall be my brother; be he ne'er so vile,
 This day shall gentle his condition:
 And gentlemen in England now a-bed
 Shall think themselves accursed they were not here,
 And hold their manhoods cheap whiles any speaks
 That fought with us upon Saint Crispin's day.

Composition Topics ~ Act I

Bishop of Ely: *Awake remembrance of these valiant dead
And with your puissant arm renew their feats.
You are their heir, you sit upon their throne,
The blood and courage that renownèd them
Runs in your veins; and my thrice-puissant liege
Is in the very May-morn of his youth,
Ripe for exploits and mighty enterprises.*

Exeter: *Your brother kings and monarchs of the earth
Do all expect that you should rouse yourself
As did the former lions of your blood.* *Act. I, sc. 2*

Show how Shakespeare presents the young King Henry to his audience and in the first few scenes gives us a glimpse of his personality and the challenges he is facing.

*Therefore doth heaven divide
The state of man in divers functions,
Setting endeavour in continual motion...
Creatures that by a rule in nature teach
The act of order to a peopled kingdom.
They have a king and officers of sorts;
Where some, like magistrates, correct at home,
Others, like merchants, venture trade abroad,
Others, like soldiers, armed in their stings,
Make boot upon the summer's velvet buds,
Which pillage they with merry march bring home
To the tent-royal of their emperor;
Who, busied in his majesty, surveys
The singing masons building roofs of gold,
The civil citizens kneading up the honey,
The poor mechanic porters crowding in
Their heavy burdens at his narrow gate,
The sad-eyed justice, with his surly hum,
Delivering o'er to executors pale
The lazy yawning drone.* *Act I, sc. 2, l. 191-212*

Celebrate the art of Shakespeare as he paints for us the bees' kingdom, from the "king and officers of sorts" to the "lazy yawning drone." **[Appropriate for later 9th grade and up; difficult for 8th.]**

or

In Shakespearean style, paint for us a portrait of something that mirrors a greater reality. **[Appropriate for 9th and older.]**

Composition Topics ~ Act II

Chorus: Now all the youth of England are on fire,
And silken dalliance in the wardrobe lies;
Now thrive the armorers, and honor's thought
Reigns solely in the breast of every man....
For now sits Expectation in the air...

Give us a glimpse of the "youth of England" on fire for honor, in expectation of King Henry's war on France.

Bedford: 'For God, his grace is bold to trust these traitors
Exeter: They shall be apprehended by and by.
Westmoreland: How smooth and even they do bear themselves,
As if allegiance in their bosoms sat,
Crowned with faith and constant loyalty!
Bedford: The king hath note of all that they intend,
By interception which they dream not of. Act II, sc. 2

How does Shakespeare build the drama of the three lords' treason, and reveal new facets of King Henry's character? **[Appropriate for 9th or 10th grade.]**

King of France: We think King Harry strong,
And, princes, look you strongly arm to meet him.
The kindred of him hath been flesh'd upon us,
And he is bred out of that bloody strain
That haunted us in our familiar paths. Act II, sc. 4

Explore how Shakespeare builds before us the character of Henry, by dramatic contrast between the English and the French, or between his old companions and his new nobles, or... **[9th or 10th]**

Composition Topics ~ Act III

Chorus: Suppose that you have seen
The well-appointed king at Hampton pier
Embark his royalty...
Play with your fancies, and in them behold
Upon the hempen tackle ship-boys climbing;
Hear the shrill whistle which doth order give
To sounds confused; behold the threaden sails,
Borne with the invisible and creeping wind,
Draw the huge bottoms through the furrow'd sea,
Breasting the lofty surge: O, do but think
You stand upon the rivage and behold
A city on the inconstant billows dancing...

"Do but think you stand upon the rivage and behold" the departure of King Henry. Continue the description in verse or prose.

or:

Suppose that you are one of the "ship-boys climbing" up the rigging of King Henry's flagship...

Composition Topics ~ Act IV

King Henry: *We would not seek a battle as we are,
Nor, as we are, we say we will not shun it....*

Gloucester: *I hope they will not come upon us now.*

King Henry: *We are in God's hand, brother, not in theirs.
March to the bridge. It now draws toward night.*

Act III, sc. 6

How does Shakespeare, [in Acts III and IV,] bring Henry's army to life for us, by the interaction and contrast of so many [minor] characters? **[9th or 10th; brackets optional.]**

Chorus: *From camp to camp, through the foul womb of night
The hum of either army stilly sounds,
That the fixed sentinels almost receive
The secret whispers of each other's watch.*

Act IV, Chorus

Contrast the English and French camps on the eve of the Battle of Agincourt.

Salisbury: *God's arm strike with us! 'tis a fearful odds.
God be wi' you, princes all; I'll to my charge:
If we no more meet till we meet in heaven,
Then, joyfully, my noble Lord of Bedford,
My dear Lord Gloucester, and my good Lord Exeter,
And my kind kinsman, warriors all, adieu!*

Bedford: *Farewell, good Salisbury; and good luck go with thee!*

Exeter: *Farewell, kind lord; fight valiantly to-day:
And yet I do thee wrong to mind thee of it,
For thou art framed of the firm truth of valour.*

Act IV, sc. 3

How do King Henry's noblemen echo and enhance the qualities in the king himself, and show us the meaning of "the firm truth of valour"? **[9th or 10th]**

King Henry: *He that outlives this day, and comes safe home,
Will stand a tip-toe when the day is named,
And rouse him at the name of Crispian.*

Act IV, sc. 7

Twenty or thirty years after the battle of Agincourt, King Henry VI, a young man of about 25, feasts his father's veteran warriors Bedford and Exeter, Salisbury and Gloucester on the vigil of Saint Crispian. Imagine the scene.

Composition Topics ~ Act IV

King Henry: ...I am Welsh, you know, good countryman.

Fluellen: By Jeshu, I am your majesty's countryman, I care not who know it! I will confess it to all the 'orld. I need not to be ashamed of your majesty, praised be God, so long as your majesty is an honest man.

Act IV, sc. 7

Choose one or more of the minor characters who interacts with King Henry in Act IV, and tell us how Shakespeare uses him to bring before our eyes new qualities in the King. **[9th or 10th]**

King Henry: Let there be sung 'Non nobis' and 'Te Deum;'
The dead with charity enclosed in clay:
And then to Calais; and to England then:
Where ne'er from France arrived more happy men.

Act IV, sc. 8

Imagine the arrival in London of King Henry's army.

or

Imagine the homecoming of one of these "happy men."

Composition Topics ~ Act V

Now we bear the king
Toward Calais: grant him there; there seen,
Heave him away upon your winged thoughts
Athwart the sea. Behold, the English beach
Pales in the flood with men, with wives and boys,
Whose shouts and claps out-voice the deep mouth'd sea,
Which like a mighty whiffler 'fore the king
Seems to prepare his way: so let him land,
And solemnly see him set on to London.

Act V, Chorus

Let us "solemnly see [King Henry] set on London," through the eyes of one who has long waited...

King Henry: Fair Katharine, and most fair,
Will you vouchsafe to teach a soldier terms
Such as will enter at a lady's ear
And plead his love-suit to her gentle heart?

Katharine: Your majesty shall mock at me; I cannot speak your England.

King Henry: O fair Katharine, if you will love me soundly with your French heart, I will be glad to hear you confess it brokenly with your English tongue. Do you like me, Kate?

Act V, sc. 2

What qualities does Princess Katharine bring out in the warrior king? **[Suitable for some 8th graders; more suitable for 9th and up.]**

Composition Topics ~ Act V

King Henry: A speaker is but a prater; a rhyme is but a ballad. A good leg will fall; a straight back will stoop; a black beard will turn white; a curled pate will grow bald; a fair face will wither; a full eye will wax hollow: but a good heart, Kate, is the sun and the moon; or, rather, the sun, and not the moon; for it shines bright and never changes, but keeps his course truly. If thou would have such a one, take me; and take me, take a soldier; take a soldier, take a king.

Act V, sc. 2

Does King Henry's portrait of himself in Act V as "a plain soldier" do him justice? Sketch a word portrait of King Henry, after all that you have seen of him through Shakespeare's art.

or

Listen as Katherine discusses with Alice the qualities of her future husband, creating an additional scene to Shakespeare's play.

*Queen Isabel: God, the best maker of all marriages,
Combine your hearts in one, your realms in one!
As man and wife, being two, are one in love,
So be there 'twixt your kingdoms such a spousal,
That never may ill office, or fell jealousy...
Thrust in between the paction of these kingdoms,
To make divorce of their incorporate league;
That English may as French, French Englishmen,
Receive each other. God speak this Amen!*

All: Amen!

Act V, sc. 2

Discuss all the depth of insight in the words of Queen Isabel to Henry and Katharine, using other literary marriages as contrast or illustration. **[10th grade and up.]**

General Composition Topics

The words of strong poetry are packed as tight and as solid as the stones of the arch. The lines of a good sonnet are like bridges of sound across the abysses of silence. The boast of the bridges is that you could march armies across them: that a man can rest his weight on every word.

G.K. Chesterton

In agreement with Chesterton, illustrate the statement with some of your favorite lines from Henry V.

One day in that good thirteenth century, when all was new, amid the new white buildings, upon the new ordered roads, when even the grass was new (for it was Pentecost), the king, ... with eighty of his knights...

Hilaire Belloc

In the good fifteenth century, follow King Henry and his knights in peace time.

Shakespeare's Henry V and the Spirit of the English

French wars were continuous. And the English tradition that followed after Agincourt was continuous also. It is embodied in rude and spirited ballads before the great Elizabethans. The Henry V of Shakespeare is not indeed the Henry V of history; yet he is more historic. He is not only a saner and more genial but a more important person.

For the tradition of the whole adventure was not that of Henry, but of the populace who turned Henry into Harry. There were a thousand Harries in the army at Agincourt, and not one. For the figure that Shakespeare framed out of the legends of the great victory is largely the figure that all men saw as the Englishman of the Middle Ages. He did not really talk in poetry, like Shakespeare's hero, but he would have liked to. Not being able to do so, he sang; and the English people principally appear in contemporary impressions as the singing people. They were evidently not only expansive but exaggerative; and perhaps it was not only in battle that they drew the long bow. That fine farcical imagery, which has descended to the comic songs and common speech of the English poor even to-day, had its happy infancy when England thus became a nation; though the modern poor, under the pressure of economic progress, have partly lost the gaiety and kept only the humour. But in that early April of patriotism the new unity of the State still sat lightly upon them; and a cobbler in Henry's army, who would at home have thought first that it was the day of St. Crispin of the Cobblers, might truly as well as sincerely have hailed the splintering of the French lances in a storm of arrows, and cried, "St. George for Merry England."

...And I do not believe there lives an Englishman now, who if he had the offer of being an Englishman then, would not discard his chance of riding as the crowned conqueror at the head of all the spears of Agincourt, if he could be that English common soldier of whom tradition tells that he broke his spear asunder to bind it into a cross for Joan of Arc.

G.K. Chesterton, "Nationality and the French Wars"

The Agincourt Carol

(early 15th century)

Deo gratias Anglia redde pro victoria!
[England, give thanks to God for victory!]

Owre Kynge went forth to Normandy
With grace and myght of chyvalry
Ther God for hym wrought mervelusly;
Wherefore Englonde may call and cry

Chorus

Deo gratias!

Deo gratias Anglia redde pro victoria!

He sette sege, forsothe to say,
To Harflu towne with ryal aray;
That toune he wan and made afray
That Fraunce shal rewe tyl domesday.

Chorus

Then went hym forth, owre king comely,
In Agincourt feld he faught manly;
Throw grace of God most marvelsuly,
He had both feld and victory.

Chorus

Ther lordys, erles and barone
Were slayne and taken and that full soon,
Ans summe were broght into Lundone
With joye and blisse and gret renone.

Chorus

Almighty God he keep owre kynge,
His peple, and alle his well-wyllynge,
And give them grace wythoute endyng;
Then may we call and savely syng:

Chorus