Insights
A Study Guide to the Utah Shakespeare Festival

Henry V
The articles in this study guide are not meant to mirror or interpret any productions at the Utah Shakespeare Festival. They are meant, instead, to be an educational jumping-off point to understanding and enjoying the plays (in any production at any theatre) a bit more thoroughly. Therefore the stories of the plays and the interpretative articles (and even characters, at times) may differ dramatically from what is ultimately produced on the Festival’s stages.

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Henry V

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Shakespeare: Words, Words, Words
By S. S. Moorty

“No household in the English-speaking world is properly furnished unless it contains copies of the Holy Bible and of The Works of William Shakespeare. It is not always thought that these books should be read in maturer years, but they must be present as symbols of Religion and Culture” (G.B. Harrison, *Introducing Shakespeare*. Rev. & Exp. [New York: Penguin Books, 1991], 11).

We, the Shakespearean-theater goers and lovers, devotedly and ritualistically watch and read the Bard’s plays not for exciting stories and complex plots. Rather, Shakespeare’s language is a vital source of our supreme pleasure in his plays. Contrary to ill-conceived notions, Shakespeare’s language is not an obstacle to appreciation, though it may prove to be difficult to understand. Instead, it is the communicative and evocative power of Shakespeare’s language that is astonishingly rich in vocabulary—about 29,000 words—strikingly presented through unforgettable characters such as Hamlet, Macbeth, Lear, Othello, Rosalind, Viola, Iago, Shylock, etc.

In the high school classroom, students perceive Shakespeare’s language as “Old English.” Actually Shakespeare's linguistic environment, experience, and exposure was, believe it or not, closer to our own times than to Chaucer’s, two hundred years earlier. Indeed, the history and development of the English language unfolds as follows: Old English, 449–1100; Middle English 1100–1500; and Modern English 1500-present. Shakespeare was firmly in the Modern English period.

At the time Shakespeare wrote, most of the grammatical changes from Old and Middle English had taken place; yet rigid notions about “correctness” had not yet been standardized in grammars. The past five centuries have advanced the cause of standardized positions for words; yet the flexible idiom of Elizabethan English offered abundant opportunities for Shakespeare’s linguistic inventiveness. Ideally it is rewarding to study several facets of Shakespeare’s English: pronunciation, grammar, vocabulary, wordplay, and imagery. The present overview will, however, be restricted to “vocabulary.”

To Polonius’s inquisitive question “What do you read, my lord?” (*Hamlet*, 2.2.191) Hamlet nonchalantly and intriguingly aptly replies: “Words, words, words” (2.2.192). This many-splendored creation of Shakespeare’s epitomizes the playwright’s own fascination with the dynamic aspect of English language, however troubling it may be to modern audiences and readers. Shakespeare added several thousand words to the language, apart from imparting new meanings to known words. At times Shakespeare could teasingly employ the same word for different shades of thought. Barowne’s single line, “Light, seeking light, doth light of light beguile” (*Love’s Labour’s Lost*, 1.1.77), as Harry Levin in his General Introduction to *The Riverside Shakespeare* (9) explains, “uses ‘light’ in four significations: intellect, seeking wisdom, cheats eyesight out of daylight.”

Another instance: Othello as he enters his bedroom with a light before he smothers his dear, innocent Desdemona soliloquizes: “Put out the light, and then put out the light” (*Othello*, 5.2.7) Here ‘light’ compares the light of Othello’s lamp or torch to Desdemona’s ‘light’ of life.

In both instances, the repeated simple ordinary word carries extraordinary shades of meaning. “Usually such a tendency in a Shakespeare play indicates a more or less conscious thematic intent.” (Paul A. Jorgensen, *Redeeming Shakespeare’s Words* [Berkeley and Los Angeles; University of California Press, 1962], 100).
Living in an age of the “grandiose humanistic confidence in the power of the word” (Levin 9), Shakespeare evidently felt exuberant that he had the license to experiment with the language, further blessed by the fact that “there were no English grammars to lay down rules or dictionaries to restrict word-formation. This was an immeasurable boon for writers” (Levin 10). Surely Shakespeare took full advantage of the unparalleled linguistic freedom to invent, to experiment with, and to indulge in lavishly.

However intriguing, captivating, mind-teasing, beguiling, and euphonious, Shakespeare’s vocabulary can be a stumbling block, especially for readers. “In the theater the speaking actor frequently relies on tone, semantic drive, narrative context, and body language to communicate the sense of utterly unfamiliar terms and phrases, but on the page such words become more noticeable and confusing” (Russ McDonald, The Bedford Companion to Shakespeare: An Introduction with Documents [Boston: Bedford Books of St. Martin’s Press, 1996], 184).

Unlocking the meaning of Shakespeare’s vocabulary can prove to be an interesting challenge. Such words include those which “have dropped from common use like ‘bisson’ (blind) or those that the playwright seems to have created from Latin roots . . . but that did not catch on, such as conspectuities’ (eyesight or vision) or ‘unplausible’ (doubtful or disapproving). Especially confusing are those words that have shifted meaning over the intervening centuries, such as ‘proper’ (handsome), ‘nice’ (squeamish or delicate), ‘silly’ (innocent), or ‘cousin’ (kinsman, that is, not necessarily the child of an aunt or uncle” (McDonald 184). Because of semantic change, when Shakespeare uses ‘conceit,’ he does not mean ‘vanity,’ as we might understand it to be. Strictly following etymology, Shakespeare means a ‘conception’ or ‘notion,’ or possibly the ‘imagination’ itself.

Perhaps several Shakespearean words “would have been strange to Shakespeare’s audience because they were the products of his invention or unique usage. Some words that probably originated with him include: ‘auspicious,’ ‘assassination,’ ‘disgraceful,’ ‘dwindle,’ ‘savagery.’” Certainly a brave soul, he was “a most audacious inventor of words.” To appreciate and understand Shakespeare’s English in contrast to ours, we ought to suspend our judgment and disbelief and allow respect for the “process of semantic change, which has been continually eroding or encrusting his original meaning” (Levin 8).

Shakespeare’s vocabulary has received greater attention that any other aspect of his language. Perhaps this is because it is the most accessible with no burdensome complications. Whatever the cause, Shakespeare’s language will forever be challenging and captivating.
Not of an Age, but for All Mankind

By Douglas A. Burger

After an enormous expenditure of money and effort, Shakespeare’s Globe Theater has risen again, four centuries later, on London’s south bank of the Thames. Designed as a faithful reconstruction of the original, it uses the building methods of the time and traditional materials (oak timbers, plaster walls, wooden pegs, water-reeds for thatching the roof). From above, the shape seems circular (actually, it is twenty-six sided) with three covered tiers of seats surrounding a central area which is open to the sky. There the “groundlings” may stand to see the action taking place on the stage, which occupies almost half of the inner space. There are no artificial lights, no conventional sets, no fancy rigging. Seeing a Shakespeare play in the afternoon sunlight at the new Globe must come very close to the experience of those early-day Londoners, except, of course, that we in the twentieth-century behave better. We don’t yell insults at the actors, spit, or toss orange peels on the ground. We also smell better: the seventeenth-century playwright, Thomas Dekker, calls the original audience “Stinkards . . . glewed together in crowds with the Steames of strong breath” (Shakespeare’s Globe: The Guide Book [London: International Globe Center, 1996], 42). And we are safer. The first Globe burned to the ground. The new theater has more exits, fire-retardant insulation concealed in the walls, and water-sprinklers that poke through the thatch of the roof.

That hard-headed capitalists and officials would be willing, even eager, to invest in the project shows that Shakespeare is good business. The new Globe is just one example. Cedar City’s own Utah Shakespearean Festival makes a significant contribution to the economy of southern Utah. A sizable percentage of all the tourist dollars spent in England goes to Shakespeare’s birthplace, Stratford-on-Avon, which would be a sleepy little agricultural town without its favorite son. The situation seems incredible. In our whole history, what other playwright could be called a major economic force? Who else—what single individual—could be listed along with agriculture, mining, and the like as an industry of a region? Why Shakespeare?

The explanation, of course, goes further than an attempt to preserve our cultural traditions. In an almost uncanny way, Shakespeare’s perceptions remain valuable for our own understandings of life, and probably no other writer remains so insightful, despite the constantly changing preoccupations of audiences over time.

The people of past centuries, for example, looked to the plays for nuggets of wisdom and quotable quotes, and many of Shakespeare’s lines have passed into common parlance. There is an old anecdote about the woman, who on first seeing Hamlet, was asked how she liked the play. She replied, “Oh, very nice, my dear, but so full of quotations.” She has it backwards of course. Only the King James Bible has lent more “quotations” to English than Shakespeare.

Citizens of the late nineteenth century sought in the plays for an understanding of human nature, valuing Shakespeare’s character for traits that they recognized in themselves and in others. The fascination continues to the present day as some of our best-known movie stars attempt to find new dimensions in the great characters: Mel Gibson and Kenneth Branagh in Hamlet, Lawrence Fishburn in Othello, Leonardo de Caprio in Romeo + Juliet, to name just a few.
Matters of gender, class, and race have preoccupied more recent audiences. Beatrice sounds a rather feminist note in *Much Ado about Nothing* in her advice to her cousin about choosing a husband: Curtsy to your father, but say “Father, as it please me.” *Coriolanus* presents a recurring dilemma about class relations in its explorations of the rights and wrongs involved in a great man’s attempt to control the masses. Racial attitudes are illuminated in *Othello*, where the European characters always mark the hero by his race, always identify him first as the “Moor,” are always aware of his difference. London’s new/old Globe is thus a potent symbol of the plays’ continuing worth to us. The very building demonstrates the utter accuracy of the lines written so long ago that Shakespeare is not “of an age” but “for all time.”
Elizabeth’s England

In his entire career, William Shakespeare never once set a play in Elizabethan England. His characters lived in medieval England (Richard II), France (As You Like It), Vienna (Measure for Measure), fifteenth-century Italy (Romeo and Juliet), the England ruled by Elizabeth’s father (Henry VIII) and elsewhere—anywhere and everywhere, in fact, except Shakespeare’s own time and place. But all Shakespeare’s plays—even when they were set in ancient Rome—reflected the life of Elizabeth’s England (and, after her death in 1603, that of her successor, James I). Thus, certain things about these extraordinary plays will be easier to understand if we know a little more about Elizabethan England.

Elizabeth’s reign was an age of exploration—exploration of the world, exploration of man’s nature, and exploration of the far reaches of the English language. This renaissance of the arts and sudden flowering of the spoken and written word gave us two great monuments—the King James Bible and the plays of Shakespeare—and many other treasures as well.

Shakespeare made full use of the adventurous Elizabethan attitude toward language. He employed more words than any other writer in history—more than 21,000 different words appear in the plays—and he never hesitated to try a new word, revive an old one, or make one up. Among the words which first appeared in print in his works are such everyday terms as “critic,” “assassinate,” “bump,” “gloomy,” “suspicious,” “and hurry;” and he invented literally dozens of phrases which we use today: such un-Shakespearean expressions as “catching a cold,” “the mind’s eye,” “elbow room,” and even “pomp and circumstance.”

Elizabethan England was a time for heroes. The ideal man was a courtier, an adventurer, a fencer with the skill of Tybalt, a poet no doubt better than Orlando, a conversationalist with the wit of Rosalind and the eloquence of Richard II, and a gentleman. In addition to all this, he was expected to take the time, like Brutus, to examine his own nature and the cause of his actions and (perhaps unlike Brutus) to make the right choices. The real heroes of the age did all these things and more.

Despite the greatness of some Elizabethan ideals, others seem small and undignified, to us; marriage, for example, was often arranged to bring wealth or prestige to the family, with little regard for the feelings of the bride. In fact, women were still relatively powerless under the law.

The idea that women were “lower” than men was one small part of a vast concern with order which was extremely important to many Elizabethans. Most people believed that everything, from the lowest grain of sand to the highest angel, had its proper position in the scheme of things. This concept was called “the great chain of being.” When things were in their proper place, harmony was the result; when order was violated, the entire structure was shaken.

This idea turns up again and again in Shakespeare. The rebellion against Richard II brings bloodshed to England for generations; Romeo and Juliet’s rebellion against their parents contributes to their tragedy; and the assassination in Julius Caesar throws Rome into civil war.

Many Elizabethans also perceived duplications in the chain of order. They believed, for example, that what the sun is to the heaves, the king is to the state. When something went wrong in the heavens, rulers worried: before Julius Caesar and Richard II were overthrown, comets and meteors appeared, the moon turned the color of blood, and other bizarre astronomical phenomena were reported. Richard himself compares his fall to a premature
setting of the sun; when he descends from the top of Flint Castle to meet the conquering Bolingbroke, he likens himself to the driver of the sun’s chariot in Greek mythology: “Down, down I come, like glist’ring Phaeton” (3.3.178).

All these ideas find expression in Shakespeare's plays, along with hundreds of others—most of them not as strange to our way of thinking. As dramatized by the greatest playwright in the history of the world, the plays offer us a fascinating glimpse of the thoughts and passions of a brilliant age. Elizabethan England was a brief skyrocket of art, adventure, and ideas which quickly burned out; but Shakespeare's plays keep the best parts of that time alight forever.

(Adapted from “The Shakespeare Plays,” educational materials made possible by Exxon, Metropolitan Life, Morgan Guaranty, and CPB.)
William Shakespeare wrote ten history plays chronicling English kings from the time of the Magna Carta (King John) to the beginning of England's first great civil war, the Wars of the Roses (Richard II) to the conclusion of the war and the reuniting of the two factions (Richard III), to the reign of Queen Elizabeth's father (Henry VIII). Between these plays, even though they were not written in chronological order, is much of the intervening history of England, in the six Henry IV, Henry V, and Henry VI plays.

In writing these plays, Shakespeare had nothing to help him except the standard history books of his day. The art of the historian was not very advanced in this period, and no serious attempt was made to get at the exact truth about a king and his reign. Instead, the general idea was that any nation that opposed England was wrong, and that any Englishman who opposed the winning side in a civil war was wrong also.

Since Shakespeare had no other sources, the slant that appears in the history books of his time also appears in his plays. Joan of Arc opposed the English and was not admired in Shakespeare's day, so she is portrayed as a comic character who wins her victories through witchcraft. Richard III fought against the first Tudor monarchs and was therefore labeled in the Tudor histories as a vicious usurper, and he duly appears in Shakespeare's plays as a murdering monster.

Shakespeare wrote nine of his history plays under Queen Elizabeth. She did not encourage historical truthfulness, but rather a patriotism, an exultant, intense conviction that England was the best of all possible countries and the home of the most favored of mortals. And this patriotism breathes through all the history plays and binds them together. England's enemy is not so much any individual king as the threat of civil war, and the history plays come to a triumphant conclusion when the threat of civil war is finally averted, and the great queen, Elizabeth, is born.

Shakespeare was a playwright, not a historian, and, even when his sources were correct, he would sometimes juggle his information for the sake of effective stagecraft. He was not interested in historical accuracy; he was interested in swiftly moving action and in people. Shakespeare's bloody and superb king seems more convincing than the real Richard III, merely because Shakespeare wrote so effectively about him. Shakespeare moved in a different world from that of the historical, a world of creation rather than of recorded fact, and it is in this world that he is so supreme a master.
Mr. Shakespeare, I Presume
by Diana Major Spencer From Insights, 1994

Could the plays known as Shakespeare's have been written by a rural, semi-literate, uneducated, wife-deserting, two-bit actor who spelled him name differently each of the six times he wrote it down? Could such a man know enough about Roman history, Italian geography, French grammar, and English court habits to create Antony and Cleopatra, The Comedy of Errors, and Henry V? Could he know enough about nobility and its tenuous relationship to royalty to create King Lear and Macbeth?

Are these questions even worth asking? Some very intelligent people think so. On the other hand, some very intelligent people think not. Never mind quibbles about how a line should be interpreted, or how many plays Shakespeare wrote and which ones, or which of the great tragedies reflected personal tragedies. The question of authorship is “The Shakespeare Controversy.”

Since Mr. Cowell, quoting the deceased Dr. Wilmot, cast the first doubt about William of Stratford in an 1805 speech before the Ipswich Philological Society, nominees for the “real author” have included philosopher Sir Francis Bacon, playwright Christopher Marlowe, Queen Elizabeth I, Sir Walter Raleigh, and the earls of Derby, Rutland, Essex, and Oxford—among others.

The arguments evoke two premises: first, that the proven facts about the William Shakespeare who was christened at Holy Trinity Church in Stratford-upon-Avon on April 26, 1564 do not configure a man of sufficient nobility of thought and language to have written the plays; and, second, that the man from Stratford is nowhere concretely identified as the author of the plays. The name “Shakespeare”—in one of its spellings—appears on early quartos, but the man represented by the name may not be the one from Stratford.

One group of objections to the Stratford man follows from the absence of any record that he ever attended school—in Stratford or anywhere else. If he were uneducated, the arguments go, how could his vocabulary be twice as large as the learned Milton’s? How could he know so much history, law, or philosophy? If he were a country bumpkin, how could he know so much of hawking, hounding, courtly manners, and daily habits of the nobility? How could he have traveled so much, learning about other nations of Europe in enough detail to make them the settings for his plays?

The assumptions of these arguments are that such rich and noble works as those attributed to a playwright using the name “Shakespeare” could have been written only by someone with certain characteristics, and that those characteristics could be distilled from the “facts” of his life. He would have to be noble; he would have to be well-educated; and so forth. On these grounds the strongest candidate to date is Edward de Vere, seventeenth earl of Oxford.

A debate that has endured its peaks and valleys, the controversy catapulted to center stage in 1984 with the publication of Charlton Ogburn's The Mysterious William Shakespeare. Ogburn, a former army intelligence officer, builds a strong case for Oxford—if one can hurdle the notions that the author wasn't Will Shakespeare, that literary works should be read autobiographically, and that literary creation is nothing more than reporting the facts of one's own life. “The Controversy” was laid to rest—temporarily, at least—by justices Blackmun, Brennan, and Stevens of the United States Supreme Court who, after hearing evidence from both sides in a mock trial conducted September 25, 1987 at American University in Washington, D.C., found in favor of the Bard of Avon.

Hooray for our side!
A Nest of Singing Birds
From Insights, 1992

Musical development was part of the intellectual and social movement that influenced all England during the Tudor Age. The same forces that produced writers like Sir Philip Sidney, Edmund Spenser, William Shakespeare, Ben Jonson, John Donne, and Francis Bacon also produced musicians of corresponding caliber. So numerous and prolific were these talented and imaginative men—men whose reputations were even in their own day firmly established and well founded—that they have been frequently and aptly referred to as a nest of singing birds.

One such figure was Thomas Tallis, whose music has officially accompanied the Anglican service since the days of Elizabeth I; another was his student, William Boyd, whose variety of religious and secular compositions won him international reputation.

Queen Elizabeth I, of course, provided an inspiration for the best efforts of Englishmen, whatever their aims and activities. For music, she was the ideal patroness. She was an accomplished performer on the virginal (forerunner to the piano), and she aided her favorite art immensely in every way possible, bestowing her favors on the singers in chapel and court and on the musicians in public and private theatrical performances. To the great composers of her time, she was particularly gracious and helpful.

Singing has been an integral part of English life for as long as we have any knowledge. Long before the music was written down, the timeless folk songs were a part of our Anglo-Saxon heritage. The madrigals and airs that are enjoyed each summer at the Utah Shakespearean Festival evolved from these traditions.

It was noted by Bishop Jewel in 1560 that sometimes at Paul's Cross there would be 6,000 people singing together, and before the sermon, the whole congregation always sang a psalm, together with the choir and organ. When that thundering unity of congregational chorus came in, “I was so transported there was no room left in my whole body, mind, or spirit for anything below divine and heavenly raptures.”

Religious expression was likely the dominant musical motif of the Elizabethan period; however, the period also saw development of English stage music, with Morley, John Wilson, and Robert Johnson setting much of their music to the plays of Shakespeare. The masque, a semi-musical entertainment, reached a high degree of perfection at the court of James I, where the courtiers themselves were sometimes participants. An educated person of the time was expected to perform music more than just fairly well, and an inability in this area might elicit whispered comments regarding lack of genteel upbringing, not only in the ability to take one’s part in a madrigal, but also in knowing the niceties of musical theory. Henry Peacham wrote in The Compleat Gentleman in 1662 that one of the fundamental qualities of a gentleman was to be able to “sing your part sure, and...to play the same upon your viol.”

Outside the walls of court could be heard street songs, lighthearted catches, and ballads, all of which indicates that music was not confined to the cathedrals or court. We still have extant literally hundreds of ballads, street songs, and vendors’ cries that were sung or hummed on the street and played with all their complicated variations on all levels of Elizabethan society.

Instruments of the period were as varied as the music and peoples, and the instrument and songbooks which remain in existence today are indicative of the high level of excellence enjoyed by the Elizabethans. Songbooks, mainly of part-songs for three, four, five, and six
voices exist today, as do books of dance music: correntos, pavans, and galliards. Records from one wealthy family indicate the family owned forty musical instruments, including twelve viols, seven recorders, four lutes, five virginals, various brasses and woodwinds, and two “great organs.” To have use for such a great number of instruments implies a fairly large group of players resident with the family or staying with them as invited guests, and the players of the most popular instruments (lutes, virginals, and viols) would be playing from long tradition, at least back to King Henry VIII. In short, music was as necessary to the public and private existence of a Renaissance Englishman as any of the basic elements of life.

The Utah Shakespearean Festival musicians perform each summer on authentic replicas of many of these Renaissance instruments. The music they perform is authentic from the Elizabethan period, and the instruments are made available for audience inspection and learning.
The status of the actor in society has never been entirely stable but has fluctuated from the beginnings of the theatre to the present day. The ancient Greeks often considered actors as servants of Dionysus, and their performances were a sort of religious rite. Roman actors, often slaves, were seen as the scraps of society, only one step above gladiators. In medieval Europe, both the theatre and the actor, suppressed by the Catholic Church, were almost non-existent but gradually re-emerged in the form of the liturgy and, later, the Mystery plays. The actors of Shakespeare’s age also saw fluctuations in reputation; actors were alternately classified as “vagabonds and sturdy beggars,” as an act of Parliament in 1572 defined them, and as servants of noblemen.

As early as 1482, noblemen such as Richard, duke of Gloucester (later Richard III), the earl of Essex, and Lord Arundel kept acting companies among their retainers. But other than these select groups protected by nobles, actors lived lives of danger and instability because when they abandoned their respectable trades, they also left behind the comfort and protection of the trade guilds.

However, life soon became much more difficult for both of these classes of actors. In 1572, Parliament passed two acts which damaged thespians’ social status. In the first one, the Queen forbade “the unlawful retaining of multitudes of unordinary servants by liveries, badges, and other signs and tokens (contrary to the good and ancient statutes and laws of this realm)” in order to “curb the power of local grandees” (Dennis Kay, Shakespeare: His Life, Work, and Era [New York: William Morrow and Company, Inc., 1992], 88). One result of this was that some of the actors, now considered superfluous, were turned away.

To make matters even worse, these actors faced yet another impediment: the “Acte for the punishment of Vacabondes” (Kay, 88), in which actors were declared “vagabonds and masterless men and hence were subject to arrest and imprisonment” (Thomas Marc Parrott and Robert Hamilton Ball, A Short View of Elizabethan Drama [New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1943], 46).

However, there were still nobles, such as the earl of Leicester and the earl of Sussex, who endorsed players; the protector would usually seek royal permission for these actors to perform in London or, less frequently, some other less prestigious town. Thus the actors were able to venture forth without fear of arrest. It is through these circumstances that Shakespeare ends up an actor in London.

There are many theories—guesses really—of how Shakespeare got into the theatre. He may have joined a group of strolling players, performed around the countryside, and eventually made it to London, the theatrical hub of Britain. Another theory suggests that he began as a schoolmaster, wrote a play (possibly The Comedy of Errors) and then decided to take it to London; or, alternately, he could have simply gone directly to that great city, with or without a play in hand, to try his luck.

An interesting speculation is that while he was young, Shakespeare might have participated in one of the cycles of Mystery plays in Stratford: “On one occasion the Stratford corporation laid out money for an entertainment at Pentecost. In 1583 they paid 13s 4d ‘to Davi Jones and his company for his pastime at Whitsuntide.’ Davi Jones had been married to Elizabeth, the daughter of Adrian Quiney, and after her death in 1579 he took as his wife a Hathaway, Frances. Was Shakespeare one of the youths who trimmed themselves for the Whitsun pastime?” (S. Schoenbaum, William Shakespeare: A Compact Documentary Life [New York: New American Library, 1977], 111).
But however he got into the theatre and to London, he had made a very definite impression on his competitors by 1592, when playwright Robert Greene attacked Shakespeare as both actor and author: “There is an upstart Crow, beautified with our feathers, that with his Tiger’s heart wrapt in a Player’s hide, supposes he is as well able to bombast out a blank verse as the best of you: and . . . is in his own conceit the only Shake-scene in a country” (G. B. Harrison, Introducing Shakespeare [New York: Penguin Books, Inc., 1947], 1).

We don’t often think of Shakespeare as primarily an actor, perhaps because most of what we know of him comes from the plays he wrote rather than the parts he played. Nevertheless, he made much of his money as an actor and sharer in his company: “At least to start with, his status, his security derived more from his acting skill and his eye for business than from his pen” (Kay, 95). Had he been only a playwright, he would likely have died a poor man, as did Robert Greene. “In the autumn of 1592, Robert Greene, the most popular author of his generation, lay penniless and dying. . . . The players had grown rich on the products of his brain, and now he was deserted and alone” (Harrison, 1).

While Shakespeare made a career of acting, there are critics who might dispute his acting talent. For instance, almost a century after Shakespeare’s death, “an anonymous enthusiast of the stage . . . remarked . . . that ‘Shakespear . . . was a much better poet, than player’” (Schoenbaum, 201). However, Shakespeare could have been quite a good actor, and this statement would still be true. One sign of his skill as an actor is that he is mentioned in the same breath with Burbage and Kemp: “The accounts of the royal household for Mar 15 [1595] record payments to ‘William Kempe William Shakespeare & Richarde Burbage servantes to the Lord Chamberlain’” (Kay, 174).

Another significant indication of his talent is the very fact that he played in London rather than touring other less lucrative towns. If players were to be legally retained by noblemen, they had to prove they could act, and one means of demonstrating their legitimacy was playing at court for Queen Elizabeth. The more skilled companies obtained the queen’s favor and were granted permission to remain in London.

Not all companies, however, were so fortunate: “Sussex’s men may not have been quite up to the transition from rural inn-yards to the more demanding circumstances of court performance. Just before the Christmas season of 1574, for example, they were inspected (‘perused’) by officials of the Revels Office, with a view to being permitted to perform before the queen; but they did not perform” (Kay, 90). Shakespeare and his company, on the other hand, performed successfully in London from the early 1590s until 1611. It would be a mistake to classify William Shakespeare as only a playwright, even the greatest playwright of the English-speaking world; he was also “an actor, a sharer, a member of a company” (Kay, 95), obligations that were extremely relevant to his plays. As a man of the theatre writing for a company, he knew what would work on stage and what would not and was able to make his plays practical as well as brilliant. And perhaps more importantly, his theatrical experience must have taught him much about the human experience, about everyday lives and roles, just as his plays show us that “All the world’s a stage, / And all the men and women merely players” (As You Like It, 2.7.149–50).
Shakespeare’s Audience:
A Very Motley Crowd

From Insights, 1992

When Shakespeare peeped through the curtain at the audience gathered to hear his first play, he looked upon a very motley crowd. The pit was filled with men and boys. The galleries contained a fair proportion of women, some not too respectable. In the boxes were a few gentlemen from the royal courts, and in the lords’ box or perhaps sitting on the stage was a group of extravagantly dressed gentlemen of fashion. Vendors of nuts and fruits moved about through the crowd. The gallants were smoking; the apprentices in the pit were exchanging rude witticisms with the painted ladies.

When Shakespeare addressed his audience directly, he did so in terms of gentle courtesy or pleasant raillery. In Hamlet, however, he does let fall the opinion that the groundlings (those on the ground, the cheapest seats) were “for the most part capable of nothing but dumb shows and noise.” His recollections of the pit of the Globe may have added vigor to his ridicule of the Roman mob in Julius Caesar.

On the other hand, the theatre was a popular institution, and the audience was representative of all classes of London life. Admission to standing room in the pit was a penny, and an additional penny or two secured a seat in the galleries. For seats in the boxes or for stools on the stage, still more was charged, up to sixpence or half a crown.

Attendance at the theatres was astonishingly large. There were often five or six theatres giving daily performances, which would mean that out of a city of one hundred thousand inhabitants, thirty thousand or more spectators each week attended the theatre. When we remember that a large class of the population disapproved of the theatre, and that women of respectability were not frequent patrons of the public playhouses, this attendance is remarkable.

Arrangements for the comfort of the spectators were meager, and spectators were often disorderly. Playbills seem to have been posted all about town and in the theatre, and the title of the piece was announced on the stage. These bills contained no lists of actors, and there were no programs, ushers, or tickets. There was usually one door for the audience, where the admission fee was deposited in a box carefully watched by the money taker, and additional sums were required at entrance to the galleries or boxes. When the three o’clock trumpets announced the beginning of a performance, the assembled audience had been amusing itself by eating, drinking, smoking, and playing cards, and they sometimes continued these occupations during a performance. Pickpockets were frequent, and, if caught, were tied to a post on the stage. Disturbances were not infrequent, sometimes resulting in general rioting.

The Elizabethan audience was fond of unusual spectacle and brutal physical suffering. They liked battles and murders, processions and fireworks, ghosts and insanity. They expected comedy to abound in beatings, and tragedy in deaths. While the audience at the Globe expected some of these sensations and physical horrors, they did not come primarily for these. (Real blood and torture were available nearby at the bear baitings, and public executions were not uncommon.) Actually, there were very few public entertainments offering as little brutality as did the theatre.

Elizabethans attended the public playhouses for learning. They attended for romance, imagination, idealism, and art; the audience was not without refinement, and those looking for food for the imagination had nowhere to go but to the playhouse. There were no newspapers, no
magazines, almost no novels, and only a few cheap books; theatre filled the desire for story
discussion among people lacking other educational and cultural opportunities.

The most remarkable case of Shakespeare’s theatre filling an educational need is probably that
of English history. The growth of national patriotism culminating in the English victory over the
Spanish Armada gave dramatists a chance to use the historical material, and for the fifteen years
from the Armada to the death of Elizabeth, the stage was deluged with plays based on the events
of English chronicles, and familiarity with English history became a cultural asset of the London
crowd,

Law was a second area where the Elizabethan public seems to have been fairly well informed,
and successful dramatists realized the influence that the great development of civil law in the
sixteenth century exercised upon the daily life of the London citizen. In this area, as in others,
the dramatists did not hesitate to cultivate the cultural background of their audience whenever
opportunity offered, and the ignorance of the multitude did not prevent it from taking an interest
in new information and from offering a receptive hearing to the accumulated lore of lawyers,
historians, humanists, and playwrights.
The audience was used to the spoken word, and soon became trained in blank verse, delighting
in monologues, debates, puns, metaphors, stump speakers, and sonorous declamation. The public
was accustomed to the acting of the old religious dramas, and the new acting in which the
spoken words were listened to caught on rapidly. The new poetry and the great actors who recited
it found a sensitive audience. There were many moments during a play when spectacle, brutality,
and action were all forgotten, and the audience fed only on the words. Shakespeare and his
contemporaries may be deemed fortunate in having an audience essentially attentive, eager for
the newly unlocked storehouse of secular story, and possessing the sophistication and interest to
be fed richly by the excitements and levities on the stage.
It is hard to get from the facts of Shakespeare's life to any sense of what it must have been like to have lived it. He was born in 1564 in Stratford-on-Avon and died there in 1616. The day of his birth is not certain, but it may have been the same as the day of his death—April 23—if he was baptized, as was usual at the time, three days after he was born. He married Anne Hathaway in the winter of 1582–83, when he was eighteen and she was twenty-six. He became the father of three children. The first was Susannah, who was born around May 23, close enough to the date of the wedding to suggest that the marriage was not entirely voluntary. Shakespeare's twins, Hamnet and Judith, were baptized on February 2, 1585. Hamnet died of unknown causes (at least unknown by us at this distance in time) in 1596. Shakespeare's career as actor, theatre owner, manager, and, of course, playwright began in the vicinity of 1590 and continued for the rest of his life, though there are clear indications that he spent more and more time in Stratford and less and less in London from 1611 on. His work in the theatre made him wealthy, and his extraordinary plays brought him a measure of fame, though nothing like what he deserved or would posthumously receive.

It's hard to get even the briefest sense of what Shakespeare's life was like from such information. It is probably impossible ever to know what Shakespeare thought or felt, but maybe we can get closer to what he saw and heard and even smelled. Perhaps some snapshots—little close-ups—might help to bring us nearer to the world in which Shakespeare lived if not quite to the life he lived in that world. In Shakespeare's youth, chimneys were a new thing. Before that, smoke was left to find its way out through a hole in the roof, often a thatched roof, and there were even some who maintained that this smoky atmosphere was better than the newfangled fresh air that chimneys made possible—along with a greater division of rooms and more privacy.

In the year of Shakespeare's birth, Stratford had more trees than houses—"upwards of 400 houses as well as 1,000 elms and forty ashes" (Peter Thomson, Shakespeare's Professional Career [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992], 1). Peter Levi says, "The town was so full of elm trees that it must have looked and sounded like a woodland settlement. For example, Mr. Gibbs's house on Rothermarket had twelve elms in the garden and six in front of the door. Thomas Attford on Ely Street had another twelve. The town boundaries were marked by elms or groups of elms (The Life and Times of William Shakespeare [New York: Wings Books, 1988], 7). Shakespeare's "Bare ruined choirs where late the sweet birds sang" becomes a far more majestic image with the picture of Stratford's elms in mind. And the birds themselves had a sound which modern ears no longer have a chance to enjoy. "We must realize that it was ordinary for . . . Shakespeare to hear a dawn chorus of many hundreds of birds at once. . . . as a young man thirty years ago I have heard a deafening dawn chorus in the wooded Chilterns, on Shakespeare's road to London" (Levi 10).

Exactly what Shakespeare's road to London may have been or at least how he first made his way there and became an actor is much debated. He might have been a schoolmaster or fifty other things, but he may well have started out as he ended up—as a player. We can then, in John Southworth's words, "Picture a sixteen-year-old lad on a cart, growing year by year into manhood, journeying out of the Arden of his childhood into ever more unfamiliar, distant regions, travelling ill-made roads in all weathers, sleeping in inns, hearing and memorising strange new dialects and forms of speech, meeting with every possible type and character of person; learning, most of all perhaps, from the audiences to which he played in guildhalls and inns" (Shakespeare the Player: A Life in the Theatre [Gloucestershire: Sutton Publishing Limited, 2000], 30). At some time in his life—in fact, many times—Shakespeare must have known theatrical tours very like that.
In London itself, the new Globe, the best theatre in (or rather just outside of) the city, was in an area with a large number of prisons and an unpleasant smell. “Garbage had preceded actors on the marshy land where the new playhouse was erected: ‘flanked with a ditch and forced out of a marsh’, according to Ben Jonson. Its cost . . . included the provision of heavy piles for the foundation, and a whole network of ditches in which the water rose and fell with the tidal Thames” (Garry O’Connor, *William Shakespeare: A Popular Life* [New York: Applause Books, 2000], 161). The playgoers came by water, and the Globe, the Rose, and the Swan “drew 3,000 or 4,000 people in boats across the Thames every day” (161). Peter Levi says of Shakespeare’s London, “The noise, the crowds, the animals and their droppings, the glimpses of grandeur and the amazing squalor of the poor, were beyond modern imagination” (49).

England was a place of fear and glory. Public executions were public entertainments. Severed heads decayed on city walls. Francis Bacon, whom Will Durant calls “the most powerful and influential intellect of his time” (*Heroes of History: A Brief History of Civilization from Ancient Times to the Dawn of the Modern Age* [New York: Simon & Schuster, 2001], 327), had been “one of the persons commissioned to question prisoners under torture” in the 1580s (Levi 4). The opportune moment when Shakespeare became the most successful of playwrights was the destruction of Thomas Kyd, “who broke under torture and was never the same again,” and the death of Christopher Marlowe in a tavern brawl which was the result of plot and counterplot—a struggle, very probably, between Lord Burghley and Walter Ralegh (Levi 48).

Shakespeare, who must have known the rumors and may have known the truth, cannot have helped shuddering at such monstrous good fortune. Still, all of the sights, smells, and terrors, from the birdsongs to the screams of torture, from the muddy tides to the ties of blood, became not only the textures and tonalities of Shakespeare’s life, but also the information and inspiration behind his plays.
Some time in the mid 1580s, young Will Shakespeare, for reasons not entirely clear to us, left his home, his wife, and his family in Stratford and set off for London. It was a time when Elizabeth, “la plus fine femme du monde,” as Henry III of France called her, had occupied the throne of England for over twenty-five years. The tragedy of Mary Stuart was past; the ordeal of Essex was in the future. Sir Francis Drake's neutralization of the Spanish Armada was pending and rumors of war or invasion blew in from all the great ports.

What could have been more exciting for a young man from the country, one who was already more than half in love with words, than to be headed for London!

It was an exciting and frightening time, when the seven gates of London led to a maze of streets, narrow and dirty, crowded with tradesmen, carts, coaches, and all manner of humanity. Young Will would have seen the moated Tower of London, looking almost like an island apart. There was London Bridge crowded with tenements and at the southern end a cluster of traitors’ heads impaled on poles. At Tyburn thieves and murderers dangled, at Limehouse pirates were trussed up at low tide and left to wait for the water to rise over them. At Tower Hill the headsman's axe flashed regularly, while for the vagabonds there were the whipping posts, and for the beggars there were the stocks. Such was the London of the workaday world, and young Will was undoubtedly mentally filing away details of what he saw, heard, and smelled.

Elizabethan people in general were an emotional lot and the ferocity of their entertainment reflected that fact. Bear-baiting, for example, was a highly popular spectator sport, and the structure where they were generally held was not unlike the theatres of the day. A bear was chained to a stake in the center of the pit, and a pack of large dogs was turned loose to bait, or fight, him. The bear eventually tired (fortunately for the remaining dogs!), and, well, you can figure the rest out for yourself. Then there were the public hangings, whippings, or drawing and quarterings for an afternoon's entertainment. So, the violence in some of Shakespeare's plays was clearly directed at an audience that reveled in it. Imagine the effect of having an actor pretend to bite off his own tongue and spit a chunk of raw liver that he had carefully packed in his jaw into the faces of the groundlings!

Despite the progressing enlightenment of the Renaissance, superstition was still rampant among Elizabethan Londoners, and a belief in such things as astrology was common (Ralph P. Boas and Barbara M. Hahna, “The Age of Shakespeare,” Social Backgrounds of English Literature, [Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1931] 93). Through the position of stars many Elizabethans believed that coming events could be foretold even to the extent of mapping out a person's entire life.

Where witches and ghosts were concerned, it was commonly accepted that they existed and the person who scoffed at them was considered foolish, or even likely to be cursed. Consider the fact that Shakespeare's Macbeth was supposedly cursed due to the playwright's having given away a few more of the secrets of witchcraft than the weird sisters may have approved of. For a time, productions experienced an uncanny assortment of mishaps and injuries. Even today, it is often considered bad luck for members of the cast and crew to mention the name of the production, simply referred to as the Scottish Play. In preaching a sermon, Bishop Jewel warned the Queen: “It may please your Grace to understand that witches and sorcerers within these last few years are marvelously increased. Your Grace's
subjects pine away, even unto death; their color fadeth; their flesh rotteth; their speech is benumbed; their senses bereft” (Walter Bromberg, “Witchcraft and Psychotherapy”, *The Mind of Man* [New York: Harper Torchbooks 1954], 54).

Ghosts were recognized by the Elizabethans in three basic varieties: the vision or purely subjective ghost, the authentic ghost who has died without opportunity of repentance, and the false ghost which is capable of many types of manifestations (Boas and Hahn). When a ghost was confronted, either in reality or in a Shakespearean play, some obvious discrimination was called for (and still is). Critics still do not always agree on which of these three types haunts the pages of *Julius Caesar, Macbeth, Richard III,* or *Hamlet,* or, in some cases, why they are necessary to the plot at all. After all, Shakespeare’s ghosts are a capricious lot, making themselves visible or invisible as they please. In *Richard III* there are no fewer than eleven ghosts on the stage who are visible only to Richard and Richmond. In *Macbeth* the ghost of Banquo repeatedly appears to Macbeth in crowded rooms but is visible only to him. In *Hamlet,* the ghost appears to several people on the castle battlements but only to Hamlet in his mother’s bedchamber. In the words of E.H. Seymour: “If we judge by sheer reason, no doubt we must banish ghosts from the stage altogether, but if we regulate our fancy by the laws of superstition, we shall find that spectres are privileged to be visible to whom they will (E.H. Seymour “Remarks, Critical, Conjectural, and Explanatory on Shakespeare” in *Macbeth A New Variorum Edition of Shakespeare* [New York: Dover Publications Inc., 1963] 211).

Shakespeare’s audiences, and his plays, were the products of their culture. Since the validity of any literary work can best be judged by its public acceptance, not to mention its lasting power, it seems that Shakespeare’s ghosts and witches were, and are, enormously popular. If modern audiences and critics find themselves a bit skeptical, then they might consider bringing along a supply of Coleridge’s “willing suspension of disbelief.” Elizabethans simply had no need of it.
Shakespeare’s Day: What They Wore

The clothing which actors wear to perform a play is called a costume, to distinguish it from everyday clothing. In Shakespeare’s time, acting companies spent almost as much on costumes as television series do today.

The costumes for shows in England were so expensive that visitors from France were a little envious. Kings and queens on the stage were almost as well dressed as kings and queens in real life.

Where did the acting companies get their clothes? Literally, “off the rack” and from used clothing sellers. Wealthy middle class people would often give their servants old clothes that they didn’t want to wear any more, or would leave their clothes to the servants when they died. Since clothing was very expensive, people wore it as long as possible and passed it on from one person to another without being ashamed of wearing hand-me-downs. However, since servants were of a lower class than their employers, they weren’t allowed to wear rich fabrics, and would sell these clothes to acting companies, who were allowed to wear what they wanted in performance.

A rich nobleman like Count Paris or a wealthy young man like Romeo would wear a doublet, possibly of velvet, and it might have gold embroidery. Juliet and Lady Capulet would have worn taffeta, silk, gold, or satin gowns, and everybody would have had hats, gloves, ruffs (an elaborate collar), gloves, stockings, and shoes equally elaborate.

For a play like Romeo and Juliet, which was set in a European country at about the same time Shakespeare wrote it, Elizabethan everyday clothes would have been fine—the audience would have been happy, and they would have been authentic for the play. However, since there were no costume shops who could make clothing suitable for, say, medieval Denmark for Hamlet, or ancient Rome for Julius Caesar, or Oberon and Titania’s forest for A Midsummer Night’s Dream, these productions often looked slightly strange—can you imagine fairies in full Elizabethan collars and skirts? How would they move?

Today’s audiences want costumes to be authentic, so that they can believe in the world of the play. However, Romeo and Juliet was recently set on Verona Beach, with very up-to-date clothes indeed; and about thirty years ago, West Side Story, an updated musical version of the Romeo and Juliet tale, was set in the Puerto Rican section of New York City.

Activity: Discuss what the affect of wearing “special” clothes is—to church, or to a party. Do you feel different? Do you act different? How many kinds of wardrobes do you have? School, play, best? Juliet and Romeo would have had only one type of clothing each, no matter how nice it was.

Activity: Perform a scene from the play in your everyday clothes, and then in more formal clothes. Ask the participants and the spectators to describe the differences between the two performances.
Synopsis: Henry V

Soon after his accession to the throne of England, Henry V decides to increase his popularity and keep his nobles busy by engaging in foreign conquest. Assured that according to ancient Salic law he is the rightful heir to the throne of France, the king provides for England’s defence against attack by Scotland and begins his campaign against France by demanding certain French domains. Lewis, the dauphin of France responds by sending Henry a gift of tennis balls, an insult referring to Henry’s wayward youth. Furious, the king dismisses the French emissary with the grim remark that the dauphin shall soon see his tennis balls turned into “gunstones.”

Meanwhile, in another part of London we learn that Pistol, the king’s friend in his younger and wilder days, has married Mistress Quickly; and Falstaff, another old friend and comrade, has died broken-hearted because the king has deserted him.

With great enthusiasm for their king and his cause, the English people prepare for the expedition to France. Simultaneously, Henry, learning of a plot to murder him as he embarks, has the three conspirators arrested and put to death. Then he hastens to France with his army, where he has already sent an ambassador to Charles VI, king of France, demanding his crown, under penalty of war. The king answers Henry’s demand with the offer of his daughter Katherine’s hand and a dowry so small as to be insulting. Arriving in France, the English set siege to and win surrender of the city of Harfleur and spend the night there before pressing on to Calais.

In the meantime, Princess Katherine prepares to meet King Henry by learning some English words from her attendant, Alice, who has lived in England.

Weakened by sickness and privations, and outnumbered five to one, the English army encamps at Agincourt and readies for battle. Henry, insisting that his soldiers respect property and the French people, orders Bardolph, another comrade from his tavern days, hanged for robbing a church. Meanwhile, the French, confident of success, boast of the victory that will be theirs on the morrow.

Realizing the disadvantaged position he and his army are in, Henry disguises himself in a long cloak and goes among his soldiers to ascertain their morale the night before battle. The next morning the courageous English king delivers his famous St. Crispin’s Day speech and so inspires his troops that they achieve an unexpected and overwhelming victory over the massive French forces, with little loss of English life.

After sailing home and giving thanks for his victory, Henry returns to the French court, where he is kindly welcomed. In an interview with Katherine, he manages to convey to her, despite their difficulties with each other’s language, the plain fact that he loves her, to which she responds so satisfactorily that he insists on sealing their compact with a kiss, even though doing so is contrary to French custom. His peace terms, which include the throne of France and the hand of Katherine, are granted, and the hard-won reign of Henry V, king of England and of France, begins.
Characters

Chorus: A single character that serves as narrator and commentator throughout the five-act play.

**English Characters**

King Henry V: The young, recently crowned kind of England is strong, determined, bold, and intelligent. Sometimes he is forced to submit his personal feelings and relationships to the requirements of being king. He relentlessly pursues his goal of conquering France.

Dukes of Clarence, Gloucester, and Bedford: Henry’s three younger brothers who are noblemen and fight in the Battle of Agincourt.

Duke of Exeter: Henry’s uncle, he carries important messages to the king of France.

Earls of Salisbury, Westmoreland, and Warwick: Leaders of Henry’s military and trusted advisors.

Archbishop of Canterbury and Bishop of Ely: Wealthy, powerful English clergymen, they do not fight in the battle, but their influence is important in Henry’s decision to invade France.

Cambridge, Scroop, and Grey: English conspirators who are bribed by the French to kill Henry before he sets sail for France.

York and Suffolk: Two of Henry’s noble cousins, they die together at the Battle of Agincourt.

Sir Thomas Erpingham: A wise, elderly veteran of many wars who serves with Henry’s campaign.

Captain Gower: An English army captain.

Captain Fluellen, Captain MacMorris, and Captain Jamy: The captains of Henry’s troops from Wales, Ireland, and Scotland, respectively.

Michael Williams, John Bates, and Alexander Court: Common English soldiers with whom a disguised Henry quarrels the night before the Battle of Agincourt.

Pistol: A London commoner, he is a friend of Bardolph and Nym, and is married to Hostess Quickly. He serves in the battle and tends to be melodramatic.

Bardolph: A London commoner and former friend from Henry’s wild youth, he is a friend of Pistol and Nym. He is hanged for violating Henry’s order to refrain from looting the conquered French towns.

Nym: A London commoner and friend of Pistol and Bardolph, he also serves in the battle and is hanged, like Bardolph, for looting conquered French towns.

Boy: This nameless boy leaves London after his master, Falstaff, dies. He goes with Pistol, Bardolph, and Nym to the war in France.

A Herald

Hostess Quickly: The hostess and keeper of the Boar’s Head Tavern in London, where Henry spent much of his reckless youth. She is married to Pistol and dies of venereal disease.

**French Characters**

King Charles VI of France: A competent leader who does not underestimate King Henry as his son, the Dauphin, does.

Lewis, the Dauphin: The son of King Charles and heir to the French throne, he is brash and obstinate and tends to mock the English more than prepare to fight them.

Duke of Burgundy, Duke of Orléans, Duke of Bourbon, Duke of Britaine, the Constable of France, Rambures, Grandpré, Beaumont, and the Governor of Harfleur: French noblemen and military leaders, most are killed or captured by the English at the Battle of Agincourt.
Montjoy: a French herald
Monsieur le Fer: A French soldier and gentleman captured by Pistol at the battle.
Ambassadors: From the French court to King Henry.
Isabel: Queen of France, married to Charles VI.
Katherine: The daughter of King Charles and Queen Isabel, she becomes Henry’s wife after the Battle of Agincourt in order to seal the peace between England and France. She speaks very little English.
Alice: Attendant to Katherine, she has spent time in England and teaches Katherine some English prior to her meeting Henry.
Lords, Ladies, Officers, Soldiers, Citizens, Messengers, and Attendants (both English and French)
Historical References in Shakespeare’s Henry V
By Kelli Allred

Shakespeare never claimed to be a historian, but he certainly relied on them to write ten historical plays about English monarchs. Both Henry IV Part One and Henry IV Part Two (written 1596–97) were hugely popular with audiences and financially successful for the playwright. In fact, Shakespeare promised audiences that he would follow up with another historical play, to feature Sir John Falstaff. He completed Henry V in 1599, in time for the opening of the newly built Globe Theater.

David Bevington, one of America’s finest Shakespearean scholars, has described the character of Henry (formerly the Duke of Monmouth) as “a perfect model of conduct according to Renaissance notions of statecraft and military leadership” and as “an epic hero defined in terms of mythic allusions and abstractions” (Introduction to Henry V, The Complete Works of Shakespeare, p.872). Shakespeare described his protagonist as “the mirror of all Christian kings.” His tribute to King Henry V was grounded in fact, and embellished for theatricality. Two of the most notable historical references in the play concern the Battle of Agincourt and the French Salique Laws, with which Elizabethan audiences were well-acquainted.

The Battle of Agincourt
The most profitable battle Henry V waged was probably fought in France on the field near Agincourt, on Friday, 25 October 1415. The battle was notable for two facts: the use of the English longbow, which Henry used in large numbers; and the outcome of the battle. While it may be hard to believe that an army of fewer than 6000 longbow-wielding English commoners defeated an army of over 20,000 French noblemen, it becomes incomprehensible when considering that the English, in fact, had marched 260 miles in less than three weeks with little food. Furthermore, they were dehydrated from rampant dysentery. Shakespeare highlights these facts in Henry V, as the young king meanders in cognito among his suffering troops, listening to their murmured complaints throughout the night. The following morning, the king rouses his soldiers with the famous “Crispian speech” that leads the English to victory (4.3). The spoils of war appear in the form of French lands, a beautiful princess bride, and large sums of money for the English monarchy.

Salique Laws
From the fifth century down to Charlemagne, the French employed a code of Teutonic laws that prohibited a female from inheriting land. “But of Salic land no portion of the inheritance shall come to a woman: but the whole inheritance of the land shall come to the male sex” (Halsall, Paul, “Medieval Sourcebook: The Law of the Salian Franks” [http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/sbook.html] 1996). Shakespeare’s young King Henry V treads lightly on foreign issues, as he negotiates with the King of France for the return of French lands and monies owed to the English crown. King Henry asks the Archbishop of Canterbury to “unfold/ why the law Salique, that they have in France/ Or should, or should not, bar us in our claim;/ . . . speak, my lord;/ For we will hear, note, and believe in heart/ That what you speak is in your conscience/ . . . May I with right and conscience make this claim?” (1.2.11–12, 29–31, 96). The young king is loath to shed English blood if his claim to French lands is unfounded. The greedy archbishop assures the king that his claim is lawful.
Shakespeare’s Prince Hal

In the two Henry IV plays, Shakespeare introduces audiences to Prince Hal, an irresponsible knave, whose father dares not entrust with court secrets or duties. The crown prince of England cavorts with a den of drunken, lecherous thieves—Falstaff, Bardolph, Pistol, Nym—who treat the prince as one of their own. Eventually Hal does the unthinkable: he grows up and reforms. In the first play (*Henry IV Part One*), Harry begins the process of redeeming himself by promising his father, King Henry IV, that “in the closing of some glorious day/ [I will] be bold to tell you that I am your son . . . / And I will die a hundred thousand deaths/ Ere break the smallest parcel of this vow.” (3.2.3–4, 158–159). Harry fights to preserve the crown, killing his father’s nemesis, Hotspur, and saving the king’s life. By the end of the second play, Prince Hal has gone from boy to man, from errant knave to a goodly king, proclaiming to his hedonistic cohorts that he is no longer “the thing I was/ For God doth know, so shall the world perceive/ that I have turned away my former self” (5.5.56–58). He establishes his rule by weeding out “the misrule in his kingdom” and establishing that he “no longer has friends, but only subjects” (Earley, Michael, and Philippa Keil, *Soliloquy!, Introduction & Commentaries* [Applause Publishing] 1988).

The Chorus in *Henry V*

The role of Chorus in ancient theater consisted of a group of actors, who spoke with the voice of reason and warning, articulating the societal mores of the day. In Elizabethan theatre, however, the Chorus often was played by a single actor, for the purpose of setting the stage in a prologue, or to tie up loose ends in an epilogue. In *Henry V*, Shakespeare employed the Chorus as an equivocator, offering apologies for the limitations of the simple “wooden O” (Prologue.13) that was the newly-constructed Globe Theater. The Chorus repeatedly entreats the audience to use their imaginations to visualize the fields of France (“can this cockpit hold he vasty fields of France?” [Prologue.11–12]) and the massive battles that were to take place upon the stage. The Chorus in *Henry V* implores the audience to exercise patience and forbearance (“your humble patience pray/ Gently to hear, kindly to judge, our play” [Prologue.33.34). Indeed, Shakespeare’s Chorus serves as an advocate for Henry’s hawkish rhetoric, but Elizabethan audiences allowed Henry “a special kind of morality pertaining to kingship” (Bevington, p. 872).

Cowardice and Heroism in *Henry V*

Sir John Falstaff represents for Elizabethan audiences an entertaining, if knavish, everyman, a veteran soldier turned opportunist. Shakespeare introduces his audiences to the character of Falstaff in *Henry IV Part One*, and provides reprisals of the character in *Henry IV Part Two*, *Henry V*, and finally in *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, where Falstaff is a missing presence—talked of but not seen. Falstaff represents the ignoble Elizabethan, diminished by his inability to conquer his cowardice and vices. By contrast, Prince Hal evolves into the heroic Elizabethan who harnesses his fears and follies to fulfill his honorable calling as heir to the throne. As king of England, Henry is obligated to hold himself up as a paragon of heroic virtue and courage. Nowhere is this more apparent and eloquent than in Henry’s “Crispian Speech”:

This day is call’d the feast of Crispian.  
He that outlives this day, and comes safe home,  
Will stand a tip-toe when this day is nam’d,  
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 Crispian'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 remembired.
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 remembered—
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 accurs’d they were not here,
And hold their manhoods cheap whiles any speaks
That fought with us upon Saint Crispin’s day (4.3.40–67).
Shakespeare's history is, of course, refashioned into drama—shortened, sharpened, and sometimes even shattered to suit the demands of his medium. In his Second Tetralogy (Richard II, Henry IV Part 1, Henry IV Part 2, and Henry V), he has two plays that are close to historical truth and two that have been distorted by the large shape and larger wit of Jack Falstaff: Richard II being entirely and Henry V comparatively Falstaff-free are correspondingly closer to accuracy. Indeed, the main plot and the major motivations in Shakespeare's Henry V are as true in the world of facts as they are to their own universe of fictions.

Even Henry's wild youth and clear conversion on his accession to kingship, distorted as they have been by legend and enlarged by Shakespeare's own Falstaffian magnifying glass, have some basis in reality. Thus, Christopher Hibbert says, “The gay, even foppish, youth had become a grave and thoughtful man” (Agincourt [Norwalk, Connecticut: The Easton Press, 1992], 19). His father's death had prompted Henry to withdraw by himself for prayer “and now as he was anointed... his devout and humble behavior impressed all who saw him” (Hibbert 19). As Christopher Allmand puts it, “Henry had gone through a moral and spiritual conversion” (Henry V [Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1992], 63).

The united England that Henry leaves behind him when he sails for France, so different from the angry factions that had haunted his father's reign, is also correct. In the words of Peter Saccio, “Although no group of real human beings could ever achieve such unanimity and uniformity as the magnates do in Shakespeare's version of Henry's court and Henry's camp, the dramatic effect constitutes, in its way, a reasonably accurate depiction of Henry's achievement in England” (Shakespeare's English Kings: History, Chronicle, and Drama [New York: Oxford University Press, 1977], 70). The plot of Scrope, Gray, and Cambridge, the only dynastic threat during Henry's reign, was undertaken on behalf of the earl of March, whom some considered the rightful heir to the throne. Henry's grip on his countrymen's hearts was so firm that the conspiracy was reported to Henry by the earl of March himself, who had earlier been released from house arrest and restored to a noble (if not regal) position on Henry's orders.

Regarding Harfleur, Shakespeare's history betters his instruction. His source told him that “The soldiours were ransomed, and the towne sacked” (Geoffrey Bullough, editor, Narrative and Dramatic Sources of Shakespeare, Vol. 4 [London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1962], 388), but, in fact, Harfleur surrendered as a result of negotiation. Though citizens of Harfleur who were not prepared to swear allegiance to Henry were expelled from their city, “Harfleur was not sacked—as the French expected it to be—and the deported women were not only allowed to take what possessions they could carry but were even provided with small sums of money to help them on their sad way” (Harold F. Hutchison, Henry V: A Biography [New York: Dorset Press, 1967], 114).

The policy of leniency which Shakespeare's Henry expounds is also true to history. The English king regarded himself as king of France as well, and he saw the French as his subjects. Henry's soldiers were ordered to behave with decency and punished brutally when they did not. “The hanging of Shakespeare's fictional Bardolph for robbing a church is based upon a historical incident: a nameless soldier was in fact executed for such a theft” (Saccio 82).
The central event of *Henry V*, the battle of Agincourt with a startling English victory against seemingly insuperable French odds, is also fact. “It has been calculated that the English casualties were only between 400 and 500, whereas the French were nearer 7,000” (Hutchison 125). Though Shakespeare’s numbers are higher for the French and lower for the English, his nearly unbelievable report of the duke of York and the earl of Suffolk as the only noble casualties the English suffered is correct (Hutchison 125). However, as Saccio points out, “York perished, not by the sword, but by suffocation or a heart attack after falling off his horse. He was quite fat” (84). It was, of course, the deadly impact of the British longbows and not the direct intervention of the Almighty that was responsible for Henry’s victory, but Shakespeare is again following history (and Henry) when he has
his hero ascribe the result of the battle to God. Henry was (in life as in Shakespeare) looking for divine sanction for his royal position. Many still believed that Henry IV had usurped the throne. Indeed, when the negotiations between Charles VI and Henry V had broken down and it was clear that war was coming, the French replied, “With respect to those things to which you say you have a right, you have no lordship, not even to the Kingdom of England, which belongs to the true heirs of the late King Richard” (cited in Hibbert 40). There was no better answer to such an argument than a victory which seemed beyond the unaided capacity of Henry’s mortal troops.

Even the fairy tale, romantic comedy elements in the play have their counterparts in reality. In spite of the politics swirling around them, Henry’s wooing of Katherine and their love for each other are also based on fact. Desmond Seward makes it sound as though Henry wanted marriage with Katherine as part of the peace treaty, not for political but personal reasons, “The king . . . was enchanted by the girl. He regarded her as the only possible bride for him, if contemporaries are to be believed” (Henry V as Warlord [London: Sidgwick & Jackson, 1987], 130 131). After their marriage, Henry wanted her with him even when he was involved in difficult siege operations and “had a house built for her and her damsels near his tents, which had been placed at some distance from the town so that the cannon might not disturb them” (Margaret Wade Lebarge, Henry V: The Cautious Conqueror [New York: Stein and Day, 1975], 161).

If Shakespeare’s Henry has more charm and less fanaticism than his real counterpart, if Shakespeare compresses a long and vicious campaign into a few glorious or humorous high points, he has still painted a remarkably true-to-life picture, complete with moral ambiguities and wartime cruelties. And the Chorus’s speech with which Shakespeare ends the play, telling of Henry’s death and his empire’s destruction, yet balancing that with his continuing glory in the memories of his countrymen, is as objective a judgment as could be expected from the most disinterested of historians.
For the majority of people in the world the phrase, “The game’s afoot,” would be credited to Sir Arthur Conan Doyle’s Sherlock Holmes. They might be surprised that Shakespeare not only coined the phrase but that King Henry V expressed it at the conclusion of his famous “Once more unto the breach” speech in Act 3 Scene 1. Another title for this article could easily be “Good Henry, Bad Henry,” or “Presume Not That I Am the Thing I Was” (Henry IV Part Two, 5.5.59).

Henry V, arguably the finest of the history plays, has also become controversial during the last century. It lends itself, primarily by selective directorial cutting, to be an extremely patriotic play or a demonstration in warmongering and Machiavellianism. “Shakespeare presses on us the inescapable truth that when someone asserts ‘The game’s afoot’ there are many who, for various reasons, are preoccupied with their own concerns” (Anthony Brennan, Twayne’s New Critical Introduction to Shakespeare, Henry V, p. 54). George Bernard Shaw has described Henry as “a priggish and complacent warmonger and imperialist” (David Bevington, The Double Bind of The Garden of Forking Paths, p. 849). Conversely, various critics counsel of the dangers of analyzing anachronistically from a modern standpoint and deem Henry a credible model of conduct, military leadership, and statecraft. All concur “that Henry is either a golden hero or a ruthless thug” (Brennan, xxxv). In this play, Shakespeare’s viewpoints are unquestionably balanced and intricate. The contrast between emblematic appearance and political veracity extends from the rationalization of Henry’s French campaign to the state marriage of Katharine of France, “She is our capital demand.” Ultimately, “In this play we have to consider whether Henry’s conquest is a hunger for territorial ambition or pursued for England’s right and good” (Brennan, 54). We also need to factor in his father’s advice, “busy giddy minds with foreign quarrels” (Henry IV Part Two, 4.5.213–214).

The Chorus, a character who addresses the audience at the beginning of every act, ignites our imagination with chosen images, furnishing one interpretation of the play. Chorus’s stage setting is extremely jingoistic and functions more as a modern-day press agent for Henry. Trevor Nunn believes that the exciting myths and fictions the Chorus presents are deliberately set in contrast to the harder, cooler, more ambiguous events we witness in the play. Ralph Berry, interviewing Nunn, calls the Chorus the “Official Version,” a public relations strategy of over-protection for Henry played off against the play’s mélange of official and unofficial events (Changing Styles in Shakespeare, p. 49–58).

“Henry is brutally shrewd and shrewdly brutal” (Harold Bloom, Shakespeare, The Invention of the Human, p. 321). We witness his political acumen during the first two scenes. He has two objectives: first to legitimize the pending French campaign and second to fund it. It seems the Archbishop of Canterbury, threatened with legislation in Commons designed to take away the better half of the Church’s possessions, elects to parry with a counter proposal, suggesting the Church underwrite the French war. His lecture on the English claim to France not only demonstrates a self-interest, but also gives a very public justification for the war. Henry’s role-playing questions lend credence to his concerns regarding the legitimacy of his claim with the added benefit of receiving the Church’s endorsement.

“On the surface this scene seems to show Henry being carried along to war by an irresistible tide. Underneath we are allowed to suspect that this tide may be one Henry has helped to create by his unobtrusive arrangement of the events it contains: his allowing the Church to dangle uncertain of his protection of their interests; his awareness that the Church will offer him financial support for the war; his ensuring that the dynastic issue is fully outlined in public council; his seeming worry about the Scots invasion, which drives his nobles and churchmen to a further urging of war; his probable anticipation of a French refusal of his demands; his delaying of the reception of that message until it can come to reinforce the decision collectively made; his leaping on the Dauphin’s insult to provide his climatic peroration promising war” (Brennan, 31).
Through the indelicate cutting by directors, “the full articulation of these details is rarely available on stage” (Brennan, 31).

Act 2 Scene 2 further exemplifies Henry’s role-playing and theatrics; all designed once again to astonish his noblemen. The opening of the scene clearly identifies the traitors mentioned by Chorus. Henry artfully manipulates the traitors into condemning themselves. The conspirators were known enemies of Henry IV and envisioned an assassination of Hal, thus placing the Earl of March on the throne. Outwardly, French gold is blamed for the treachery. In reality Cambridge has a stronger claim to the crown, ironically utilizing the same argument Henry employed—succession through the female line. “Shakespeare does not present Henry as a figure who has buried all awareness that his crown is subject to dispute” (Brennan, 41). The moment the traitors read of their discovered perfidy, it is not Henry who refuses mercy but they themselves.

“Those who see the play as a patriotic aria regard Henry’s famous speech ‘Once more unto the breach’ in 3.1 as a high C” (Brennan, 49). Henry implores his weary charges, calling them “dear friends,” to “imitate the action of a tiger.” The Chorus’s assurance that ”down goes all before them” is grossly inaccurate since the king is sorely challenging his disheartened troops who are retreating from battle. Though this speech has been used for centuries in war-time recruiting, it was only semi-effective for Henry. In comparing it to the more famous “band of brothers” St. Crispin Day Speech, many actors use the first as a stepping-stone to the second. Alan Howard thought this first speech closer to conventional battle rhetoric, a tell that Henry was still somewhat distant from his men, hectoring them as a leader rather than drawing near them as a fellow soldier. He recognized, in the intimacy of the later speech, with its assertions of brotherhood, something that was lacking at Harfleur. It was Henry’s ability to identity with the desperate plight of his men, endowing him with the ability to forge his army into a unit and make the difference at Agincourt (Directors Notes, Stratford England production, 1975).

Agincourt Eve, Henry, in disguise, debates with his men and cruelly learns his role-playing as common man is very much lacking. The internal pressures of public rhetoric and the shaping of everything for public consumption is manifest in disillusionment. “It is the confirmation that he is utterly alone” (Kenneth Branagh, Jackson and Small, p. 103). The play’s seminal moment comes when Henry, devoid of audience, ceases his role-playing and earnestly prays. He asks God to buoy his men and dispel their alarms. “He uncovers his deepest fear that his army may be slaughtered on the morrow in payment for ‘the fault/ My father made in compassing the crown’ ” (Brennan, 78). The prayer’s underlying plea is liberation from the many ghosts haunting him, reminiscent of Kerouac with his, “Something, someone, some spirit, was pursuing all of us across the desert of life, and was bound to catch us before we reached heaven” (On the Road, p. 184).

Is Henry the epic hero defined in terms of mythic illusion as Mars the god of war with famine, sword and fire leashed to his heels, and the “mirror of all Christian kings”? Or is he the Machiavellian, manipulating politician who executed his rivals and former drinking pals—the commander who threatened the citizens of Harfleur with rape and pillage and ordered the slaughter of thousands of French prisoners immediately after giving all credit and thanks to God for his Agincourt victory? Shakespeare portrays each in his play, but directors have a challenging time presenting both. Henry’s “the game’s afoot” exhibits how Shakespeare’s plays consistently reveal the labile nature of man and his capability to protract paradoxical perspectives.