

HENRY V | FOOD FOR THOUGHT

Shakespeare's language can seem scary, but give it a try! *Go at your own pace, and have fun!*



SHAKESPEARE IN PRISON

DETROIT PUBLIC THEATRE'S
SIGNATURE COMMUNITY PROGRAM

The Shakespeare

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 unrais'd spirits that hath dar'd
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 confin'd two mighty monarchies,
Whose high, uprear'd, 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 hooves i' th' receiving earth;
For 'tis your thoughts that now must deck our kings,
Carry them here and there, jumping o'er times,
Turning th' 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.

The Translation

Prologue

If only we had divine inspiration,
our play might rise to the
highest level of imagination. If
we had a stage as big as a
kingdom, real kings and queens
to act the part of kings and queens, and royalty to also
witness the glorious spectacle, then it would be as it really
was. Then valiant King Harry would resemble the god of war,
as he did in life, and famine, sword, and fire would sit like
dogs at his feet, waiting to be unleashed.
But, ladies and gentlemen, since that's not the case, you
must forgive us plain, ordinary men who dare to act out so
great a story on this humble stage. Can this theater seem to
contain the sweeping fields of France? Could we even
squeeze into this little theater the helmets that looked so
frightening at Agincourt? Hardly! But, pardon us, because just
as a few strokes of a pen, a few zeros, can signify a huge
number, we, who are zeros in this great story, can work on
your imagination. Pretend that within the confines of this
theater sit two great kingdoms divided by a narrow but
perilous ocean. Let your thoughts make up for our
imperfections. Divide each man into a thousand, and there
you will have an imaginary army. Imagine, when we talk of
horses, that you see them planting their proud hooves in the
soft earth. Because now it is your thoughts that must dress
up our kings and transport them from place to place. Your
thoughts must leap over huge spans of time, turning the
events of many years into the space of a few hours. To that
end, consider me a sort of chorus, here to help tell the story.
And, as the speaker of any prologue should, I ask you to hear
our play courteously and to judge it kindly.

At first glance, this speech is really straightforward. It says: "We're putting on an epic play about a war, but we haven't invented CGI yet, so you're going to need to use your imagination, folks!"

But on second glance, there's a lot of specific information here. It's like a movie trailer; it makes promises: you're gonna see *these* people do *these* things. What are those promises? Just based on this speech, what do you know will be in the play? (Look for places, names, events, anything!)

Just for fun, what story do you imagine following this speech? (Don't worry about getting it "right," but make sure that you follow through on all the promises made.)

You know the drill...

- 1 Read the Shakespeare.
- 2 Read the translation.
- 3 Read the Shakespeare again!

This speech is addressed to a Muse. In Greek mythology, the Muses were the goddesses who inspired artists and scientists. Do you have a Muse? How would you describe it?



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You can respond to these in any way you choose:

- Write
- Draw
- Act it out
- Talk about it
- Think about it

... up to you!



Remember the open vowel / clipped consonant exercise from our *The Winter's Tale* activity pack? To review:

Shakespeare gives us clues in the language to help us figure out a character's attitudes or emotions.

An "open" vowel is a vowel voiced with the mouth wide open and the tongue positioned low.

A "clipped" consonant is one that "closes in" a vowel, usually making it a short sound.

This monologue begins an entire play with the most open vowel there is: "O". What a great way of getting the audience's attention! The language continues to soar from there—but it's still important to speak the speech trippingly on the tongue. (Gotta make Hamlet proud.)

What happens when you allow yourself to "ride the wave" of the language—when you take a deep breath in, and then let it out on each vowel so you can sustain the sound for a good, long time? When you allow yourself to rest and take a breath on each consonant—and breathe out again on the next open vowel? How does that feel?

Telling stories is how we remember things—our lives, our past, our history. What true story would you want to put on stage? (It can be from your life or someone else's, or from history.)

How would you want to tell it? What would it look like? Would it be realistic or abstract? Big and epic or small and personal? (A musical??... woah there, Shakespeare!)

This speech has a lot to say about the power of imagination—it can make one person look like a thousand; make a simple wooden building feel like an open field in another country. What scenes do you imagine, when your mind wanders?

So Shakespeare grabs the audience's attention right off the bat with that big "O". What would a modern version of that be? How would you get the audience's attention?

