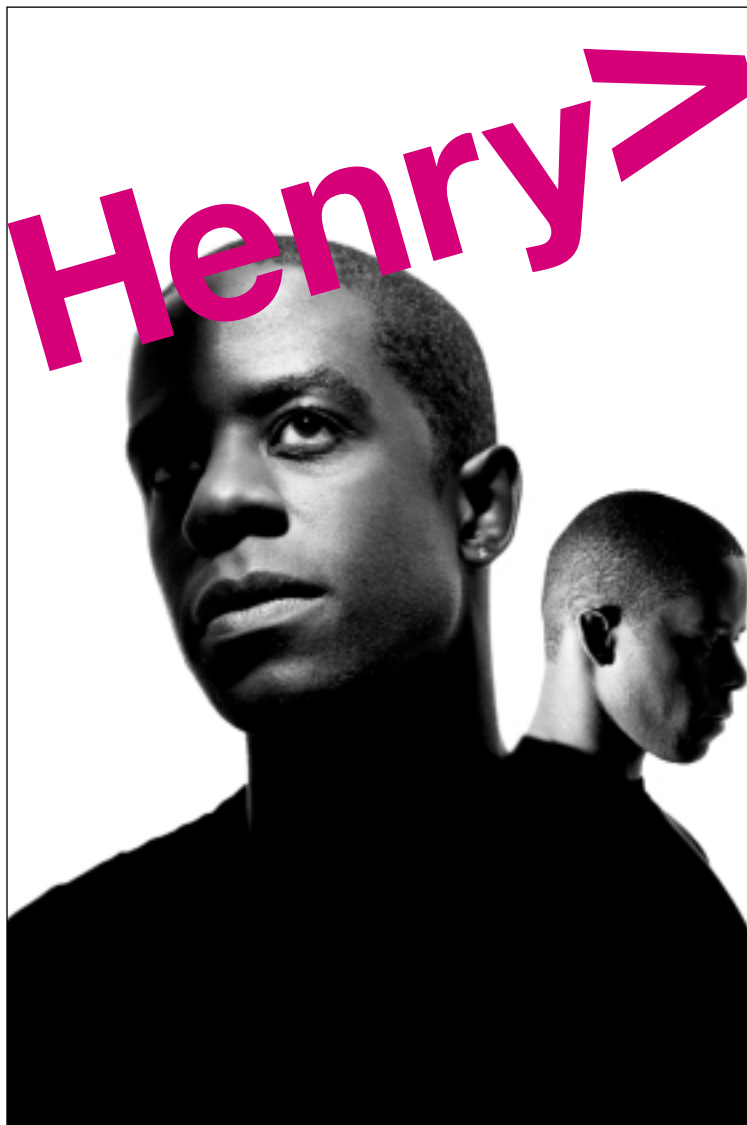


## Workpack

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**Henry V**  
by William Shakespeare  
**Further production details:**  
[www.nationaltheatre.org.uk](http://www.nationaltheatre.org.uk)

**Director**  
Nicholas Hytner  
**Designer**  
Tim Hatley  
**Lighting Designer**  
Mark Henderson

**Music**  
Simon Webb  
**Music Consultant**  
Martin Russel  
**Sound Designer**  
Paul Groothuis

**NT Education**  
National Theatre  
South Bank  
London SE1 9PX  
T 020 7452 3388  
F 020 7452 3380  
E education@  
nationaltheatre.org.uk

**Workpack written by**  
Peter Reynolds  
**Editor**  
Dinah Wood  
**Design**  
Alexis Bailey  
Patrick Eley

# The play

## Henry V background pack

A scene-by-scene account of Nicholas Hytner's production of *Henry V* at the National Theatre, May – August 2003, including references to concept, realisation and production values, as well as exercises for exploring key elements of the play in the classroom.

*"Work, work your thoughts..."* (Chorus, Act 3)

Nicholas Hytner's production of *Henry V* at the National began with the Chorus, Penny Downie, a slight figure, picked out by a follow-spot and dressed in a dark calf-length skirt, red shoes and blood red cardigan, walking down the "vasty fields" of the matt-black Olivier stage towards the audience. She carried several books, and, pausing briefly, sat down at one of the dozen or so chairs arranged round a very long oval table and began leafing through one of the volumes on her lap. Suddenly, looking up with an air of dissatisfaction, she snapped the book shut, apparently having failed to find what she was



Adrian Lester  
photo Ivan Kyncl

looking for, and spoke the famous opening lines of the play, *"Oh for a muse of fire..."*

What was she looking for? What were the books? Perhaps they were histories of medieval England, where, despite her research, she failed to find her legendary King, and perhaps, she, suspects, she will fail to find him on the Olivier stage over the coming three hours. And so, uniquely in Shakespeare, the first words of the play are an apology to the audience, asking them to suspend their disbelief and enter into a pact in which they must agree to use their imaginations to make up for the deficiencies of the stage and actors. *"Think, when we talk of horses, that you see them..."* Of course, *Henry V* isn't about horses or even battles (Shakespeare didn't attempt to show them), it's about something far more complex and interesting. If the Chorus is looking for Henry, who or what is the Henry the audience expects to find? Most of us trail memories of past productions of the play, like Kenneth Branagh's 1989 film, or the film made by the National's first director, Laurence Olivier, on the eve of the Normandy landings in 1944. Both contain vivid portraits of the King as national hero, overcoming apparently insurmountable odds to reach both a military and personal triumph. But was this the King created by Shakespeare? Partially perhaps, but both Branagh and Olivier contributed to the mythologizing of Henry by cutting cut key parts of the text.

Nicholas Hytner's production opened on 13 May 2003 in the immediate aftermath of the war with Iraq. How would the play work now? Would the legendary war-time rhetoric of Henry seem quite so stirring to an audience over familiar with pontificating retired generals, and tired of accounts of "collateral damage" and the squalid realities of fighting brought to their living rooms nightly on 'live' television? Would they see in this production a pro- or anti-war play? Would they discover a stirring portrait of heroic individuals undergoing the greatest test of their lives and emerging stronger and wiser as a result, or might they instead find a play that undermines the

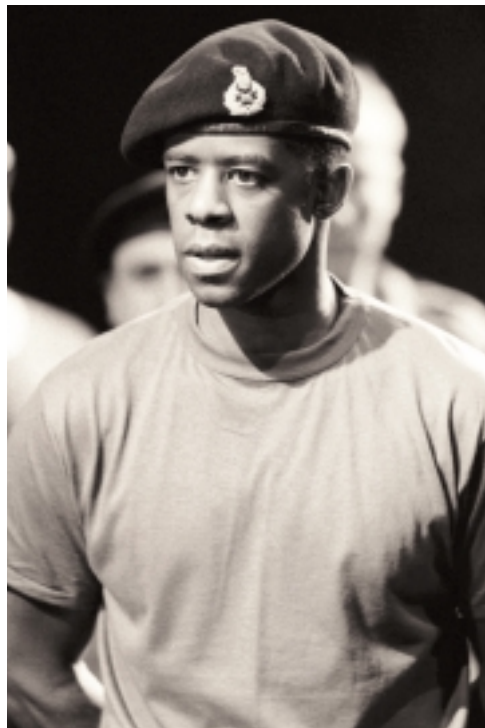
# The play

legendary leadership qualities of one of the great characters of English history?

The actors, “*ciphers to this great account*”, began their exploration of these and other questions not with an action scene but with a complicated wordy political episode involving the clergy, the young king, and a lot of spin-doctors.

## **The Cabinet Room (Act 1 scenes i and ii)**

The location is the cabinet room at 10 Downing Street; the time, the present. Enter two senior clerics, the Archbishop of Canterbury and the Bishop of Ely. Canterbury has a thick dossier of evidence to support Henry’s claim to the throne of France, which he distributes around the table to members of the gradually assembling cabinet. It is a lengthy document of the kind familiar to those who have had to make (or listen to) presentations of complex arguments and includes a coloured foldout map of France. The Church, we learn, is prepared to financially back a war with France and to provide



Adrian Lester  
photo Ivan Kyncl

theological justification from the Book of Numbers. As the King enters in readiness to receive the French ambassador, he listens with increasing impatience, to the detailed (and for many of the ‘cabinet’, impossible to follow) case regarding the interpretation of the Salic law. The familiar tactic of the Archbishop is to use information-overload in the hope that his audience will grow tired of the detail and accept his guidance. All Henry really wants to know is the answer to the question: “*May I with right and conscience make this claim?*” The Church of England tells him that he can, and that he should.

“Henry is going to have his war,” said Hytner, in the early days of rehearsals. “He’s in the second year of his reign and looking for something to mark his arrival in power.” It seems that the war could be justified – it will help to avoid civil war between the Scots and the English. The older members of Henry’s cabinet, like his uncle, the Duke of Exeter, want something bold from this young and inexperienced king. Considerable pressure is placed on him to “*unwind [his] bloody flag*”, but what tips him from diplomacy to war isn’t just the Archbishop’s argument; it’s also the personal insult of his young French rival, King Charles’ son, the Dauphin, who sends his embarrassed ambassador with a gift of tennis balls, a reference to Henry’s wayward youth. This childish insult provokes a hot-headed response from the king, suggesting similarities between the two young men:

*And tell the pleasant Prince this mock of his  
Hath turned his balls to gun–stones, and his soul  
Shall stand sore charged for the wasteful vengeance  
That shall fly with them; for many a thousand widows  
Shall this mock mock out of their dear husbands;  
Mock mothers from their sons, mock castles down  
And some are yet ungotten and unborn  
That shall have cause to curse the Dauphin’s scorn.*

King Henry bursts into the controlled atmosphere of a cabinet meeting with language that is almost visceral, crude, belonging to the chaos of the battle-field rather than the civilised choreography of diplomacy. It

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is a shocking early demonstration of Henry's ability to use words as powerful weapons.

## The Pub (Act 2 scene i)

*"Now all the youth of England are on fire,/And silken dalliance in the wardrobe lies."* says the Chorus, as the lights go up on a very different scene. *The "base, common and popular"*, has replaced the privileged elite and warmongers. Hytner set the scene in a pub where Nym sits alone, casually dressed in jeans and trainers, staring morosely into his glass of beer. He flicks a television remote, rapidly changing channels between Henry making a broadcast to the nation, snooker, the Archbishop of Canterbury justifying the invasion and football. Bardolph enters wearing an England football shirt. His first words touch on another unresolved quarrel: *"What, are Ensign Pistol and you friends yet?"* In this scene, a deliberate parallel and mirror to the one just witnessed in the cabinet office, simmering violence is ever-present. It is only the brute force of Bardolph, not his attempted diplomacy, that stops Nym and Pistol from cutting one another's throats. They are *"on fire"*, but not because of anything the King of England may have said! Their concern is with personal rather than global politics.

## The Embarkation (Act 2 Scene ii)

*"...and the scene/Is now transported, gentles, to Southampton."* At the start of this scene in

the National's production, soldiers carry boxes of ammunition and supplies across the stage, whilst a small group of officers stand by a tea urn, observing. Several of the characters from the cabinet room scene are present, including the Earl of Exeter and the King. All are now dressed in military uniform except the three traitors, Scrope, Cambridge, and Grey. They have come to ask the King for their commissions, and pay sycophantic homage to Henry, who already knows of their treachery. Nick Hytner staged the revelation of their crimes in such a way as to emphasise its inherent theatricality. The King asks, *"Who were of late entrusted with commissions?"* to which the traitors all respond in the affirmative. Henry gives each of them a piece of paper saying as he does so:

*Then, Richard Earl of Cambridge, there is yours;  
There yours, Lord Scrope of Masham; and, sir knight,  
Grey of Northumberland, this same is yours.*

The three men fold the papers as if to place them in their briefcases to read later, little suspecting that what is actually written is their death warrants. There is a pause; Henry and the English officers watch before Henry commands: *"Read them [slight pause] and know I know thy worthiness"*. As he then turns to his uncle Exeter, the traitors read the documents and, as they do so, the realisation that they are caught out gradually spreads over their faces. Grey attempts to make an escape, but is immediately arrested together with the other two, and made to lie face down with hands behind his back; one soldier cuffs him whilst another stands behind, rifle at the ready. This 'business' of the briefcases, the pause before *"read them"* and the attempt to run away were all added by the director as part of his staging, thereby increasing the scene's theatrical impact. Betrayal by supposed friends, especially by Lord Scrope, is a reminder of Henry's ultimate isolation. Scrope's behaviour, the former friend who *"dids't bear the key to all my counsels,/That knew'st the very bottom of my soul"* is perhaps one of the things on Henry's mind when, much later in the play, before the battle of Agincourt

Adrian Lester  
photo Ivan Kyncl



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(Act 4 scene i), he reflects on the loneliness of office: *“What infinite heart’s ease/Must Kings neglect that private men enjoy.”*

## **The Pub (Act 2 Scene iii)**

Having shown the betrayal of the King by a former friend, the play returns to those old friends of Prince Hal: Pistol, Bardolph, Nym and the Boy. They too are preparing for France. Before they go, they watch a home video in which Hal (in dreadlocks) clowns before Falstaff and friends in a scene taken from *Henry IV part 1*. This reminds the audience of the historic involvement of the young and inexperienced King with a group of ordinary citizens, including those friends now preparing to risk their lives on his behalf. It shows them looking back on happier, pre-war times. What really matters to them is not the politics or legality of the coming war, but the loss of their old friend and protector, Sir John Falstaff. Mistress Quickly describes his death, and in a play in which the deaths of hundreds are reported, none is recounted more movingly. This is as near as the play gets to showing a family, complete with joys, tensions and quarrels. Henry, when he was Prince Hal, was part of this family and what inescapably mattered to them all were the relationships and history they shared. As Pistol says just before he leaves for France, *“oaths are straws”*; what counts are the lives men actually lead, their deeds rather than their words.

## **The French Court (Act 2 scene iv)**

The King of France, the Dauphin, the Constable of France and other French nobles watch a television broadcast of Henry’s speech, recorded at Southampton:

*Then forth, dear countrymen. Let us deliver  
Our puissance into the hand of God,  
Putting it straight in expedition.  
Cheerly to sea; The signs of war advance.  
No King of England, if not King of France!*

The French King is obviously ill at ease, and so too are his Court, but the Dauphin is simply angry. He wants an immediate confrontation with his rival; the man whom he insists is a

*“vain, giddy, shallow [and] humorous youth.”*

Shakespeare creates a contrasting picture of two young aristocrats. Henry who, following the death of his father, has had to grow up quickly, is compelled by circumstances to assume responsibility for the fate of his nation. He is the calmer of the two, more measured in his speech and actions. The Dauphin in this production is a playboy Prince, dressed in Armani, with heavy gold jewellery and dark glasses.

When the English ambassador enters (a role undertaken by the Earl of Exeter), coffee is served in delicate china cups. For a moment, conventional, social and diplomatic niceties obscure the real purpose of the mission and the threat of force that lies behind it. Following Exeter’s communication of Henry’s insults – *“Scorn and defiance, slight regard, contempt”* – the Dauphin throws off his jacket and makes as if to lunge at his adversary. He is restrained by some of the less impetuous members of the French Court.

## **Harfleur (Act 3 scenes i-iii)**

The military campaign in France begins not with victory, but with something that looks at first sight like defeat. Henry’s army has been driven back from the walls of Harfleur; they are exhausted, wounded, frightened. When Henry asks them to risk their lives *“Once more”* the production considers their reactions, showing the troops groaning audibly, trying to avoid eye contact with their leader as he uses rhetoric to urge them to do what their bodies resist. Henry finally manages to persuade most of them into another assault. Pistol, Nym, Bardolph and the Boy hang back; the heroic rhetoric counter-balanced by their very human concern for self-preservation above glory: *“Would I were in an alehouse in London! I would give all my fame for a pot of ale, and safety.”* Only after the intervention of Llewellyn do they reluctantly join the fight, with his gun pointing at their backs.

The war is not going well. Llewellyn re-enters with Captains Gower, Macmorris, and Jamy; the Welsh, English, Irish and Scottish share the

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stage, symbolically representing the unified kingdom of Britain, but what they say reveals more schisms and flaws in the campaign. According to Macmorris, the mines, which should have been laid under the walls of Harfleur, have been “*ill done*” and the comrades, Llewellyn and Macmorris are at odds and almost come to blows. Only the news that “*the town sounds a parley*” temporarily defuses the situation.

## An English Lesson (Act 3 Scene iv)

Henry’s speech to the besieged citizens of the town is filmed by an embedded camera crew and, as part of his propaganda war, it is broadcast in France. There, in their ornate palace, flanked by vases of beautiful flowers, it is nervously watched by the Princess Katherine and her companion, Alice. Katherine’s faltering attempts to learn some English words is often performed, for example in both the Olivier (1944) and Branagh (1989) films, to underscore the comic potential of the situation. But comedy is here displaced by the threat of tragedy – the women have just

watched Henry’s address, sub-titled in French. The menace of his words land like grenades and shatter the superficial security of their gilded cage, threatening mass destruction. The Princess hears the conqueror declaim:

*If I begin the battery once again,  
I will not leave the half-achieved Harfleur  
Till in her ashes she lie buried.  
The gates of mercy shall be all shut up,  
And the fleshed soldier, rough and hard of heart,  
In liberty of bloody hand shall rage  
With conscience wide as hell, mowing like grass  
Your fresh fair virgins, and your flowering infants.*

This speech motivates Katherine to learn English: she does so not out of playfulness, or because she is attracted to Henry, but because she has no choice – she has witnessed the power and potential for cruelty of her country’s oppressors. English is the language of the occupying power and she has to learn it. It is to her a hateful language and having to listen to it with the knowledge that her fate is already inexorably linked to that of Henry (as the Chorus explains at the start of Act 3), transforms the scene from a comic interlude to a central moment in Hytner’s production. Katherine’s faltering attempts to learn Henry’s language (contrast the words for parts of the human body she chooses to learn with those he uses) becomes a moving portrait of a young woman and her friend clutching at straws, clutching at the discipline of memorising unfamiliar words in order to blot out the memory of the terrible images conjured up by Henry. Katherine perhaps initiates her language lesson to avoid being swept into despair by what is happening to her country and its people.

Again, a comparison with modern media coverage of war: reporters today invariably offer insights into the lives and experiences of ordinary civilians who become the victims of war and show how the aggressors – ourselves in the recent war with Iraq for instance – are perceived.



Adrian Lester  
photo Ivan Kyncl



# The play

## **The French King broadcasts to his nation (Act 3 Scene v)**

At the start of Act 3 scene 5 the National's production shows the King of France preparing to make a television broadcast to his nation.

Some 50 years previous to the scene, the English army was victorious in France under Henry's ancestor, Edward the Black Prince. Word is reaching the French that Henry is no longer a dissolute youth, and might just turn out to be another Black Prince. The tennis balls were a massive miscalculation.

The French King sits in a director's chair, surrounded by his nobles, including the Dauphin and the Constable of France, whilst a make-up artist prepares him for the camera. Modern wars, like the recently concluded war in Iraq, are fought not only on the battlefield, but also via the airwaves. The podium wheeled out for the King reminds the audience of countless political broadcasts by leaders of state. The King's broadcast, beginning "*'Tis certain he hath passed the river Somme*" and continuing "*Up, princes, and with spirit of honour edged/More sharper than your swords hie to the field!*", down to "*Bring him our prisoner*" was projected 'live' onto a huge up-stage screen. This attempt to rouse a nation in response to the threat posed by an external aggressor carries with it the ironic evocation of the names of those French knights – Charles Delabreth, Jaques Chatillon, the Dukes of Alençon, Brabant and Burgundy – among others, soon to be listed in the post-Agincourt roll call of the dead. Their names would subsequently be chiselled on the war memorials of France.

## **Henry's wobble (Act 3 Scene vi)**

Despite the heroics of Exeter at the bridge, the campaign is still not going well for Henry and his army. Pistol brings the news that Henry's old drinking companion, Bardolph, has been arrested for robbing a church. Pistol's attempts to bribe Llewellyn in order to get his friend released predictably fail; the latter is a man who lives by the rules of war and will not listen to special pleading. Henry enters to hear the

news of Exeter's stirring deeds. The unfortunate Bardolph is brought onto the stage closely guarded. The King looks at him – does he recognise him? Bardolph smiles nervously as his crime is expounded. Without warning, Henry draws his pistol and shoots Bardolph in the head at point blank range, in front of his men. (In the playtext, Henry orders his execution but does not carry it out.) The shock is immediate and profound. What does it say of Henry's state of mind? Before there is time to react, the French herald, Montjoy, comes with his message of defiance. Henry and his men listen in silence, and at the end of his speech, Henry responds "*My army [is] but a weak and sickly guard.../We would not seek a battle as we are.*" His soldiers are surprised and alarmed. Is this a tactical misrepresentation or a frank admission?

## **The French prepare for battle (Act 3 Scene vii)**

The action of the play shifts to another location on the same battlefield: the French officers are waiting for dawn to herald the start of the fighting. The Constable, the Duke of Orleans, the Duke of Bourbon, and the Dauphin are sitting at a small table, drinking and playing dice. Their talk focuses not on the enemy, but on the Dauphin's extravagant praise for his horse. Shakespeare may here be inviting another comparison between the two leaders, but as the scene develops, the Dauphin's obsession does not obscure the fact that he is a genuine rival to Henry. The characters are more than mere stereotypes. They have been up all night drinking, and whatever confidence they may have in their troops, they must be aware that death may face them in the morning.

## **Henry prepares for battle (Act 4 Scene i)**

There is considerable irony in the Chorus's attempts to build up the image of Henry's "*ruined band*" by claiming that all the soldiers "*pluck comfort from his looks*" as he passes amongst them crying "*Praise and glory on his head.*" The following scene shows the disguised Henry, far from inspiring his men, falling into a bitter argument with three of

# The play

them. The King's disguise allows the opportunity for ordinary men to display both their fear and their deep scepticism. Michael Williams, the ordinary soldier, reminds his commanding officer and King (and the audience) what war usually means for ordinary men: "*I am afeard there are few die well that die in battle.*" In confronting Williams, the King's anger almost gets the better of him, and he behaves like the Hal of old, indulging in an egotistical testosterone-fuelled struggle, inappropriate to both his station and the situation.

Henry is unable to mix with his men without a quarrel breaking out, and he is more isolated than ever at the end of this scene as he makes his impassioned cry "*What infinite heart's ease/Must kings neglect that private men enjoy.*" Before he took on the burden of his office he had friends, and even, in Falstaff, perhaps a surrogate father. Now Falstaff and many of the friends are dead, Bardolph shot by Henry himself. On the eve of the greatest test he has faced in his life he appears to have no friends.

## The Battle of Agincourt (Act 4 scene iii)

And yet, as he addresses his bedraggled army before the final battle in the most famous speech of the play, he speaks not of friends (as he did in the speech before Harfleur) but of his "*band of brothers*". That suggestion of

intimacy with his troops may not simply be a rhetorical trick, but the result of his youth, when he spent many hours in the company of his friends, enjoying jokes, and sharing stories, and was, if only temporarily, "Hal" rather than Harry the King. Living with other men in combat – men who have to live, eat, sleep, wash, and move their bowels, in continuous sight and sound of one another for weeks on end – produces comradeship, and indeed, temporary brotherhood.

The National's production stages episodes that aren't actually in the play. The Chorus asks the audience to "*think, when we talk of horses, that you see them*", but, in this modern dress production, the audience see two military Land Rovers (one French, one English) that drive on and off the stage at various stages during the battle of Agincourt. The actors who form the armies of England and France are also equipped with highly realistic weapons, rifles for the men, pistols for officers. These guns have electronic triggers that, when pulled, send a signal to the sound box at the rear of the Olivier stalls so that the sound of firing rings out across the space. The stage is at times filled with military spectacle that is filmic in its intensity and realism. Guns are fired, grenades thrown, mines exploded. Smoke becomes the literal "*fog*" of war as the actors perform their highly choreographed moves in the form of advances, skirmishes, and retreats with added dialogue of the "*incoming!*" "*skirmish!*" "*Throw grenades*" variety.

Why go to these lengths? The Olivier stage, stripped back to what Hytner called its "*bare bones*", is a huge space, and spectacle undoubtedly helps to fill it in a way that engages the eye of the spectator. But the production uses spectacle not simply because many in the audience are familiar with fictional wars fought on film (and during the pre-production real war on live television). The director wanted the audience to see for themselves a little of the circumstances that made Henry V a successful leader of men, someone able to keep his head in desperately difficult and dangerous circumstances,

Faz Singhatheh, Adrian Lester,  
Tom McKay  
photo Ivan Kyncl





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someone prepared to shed his own blood as well as that of his soldiers. Watching the man in the heat of battle illustrates that at times he is able to live up to his own rhetoric, and that of the Chorus: *“The warlike Harry, like himself, assume the port of Mars”* and becomes the *“noble Harry”* rather than the sometimes petulant, volatile young man we have also seen. Showing Harry in battle with his men shows us a man with a surrogate family, shows us a man comfortable and relaxed in the company of other men. In contrast with the political Harry, the sharp-suited premier figure of the first scene, or the elegant young man in military dress uniform who takes the stage in the last act, the uniform of battle – the fatigues and the steel helmets – dissolves differences of rank. The shared peril democratises the company, making them, if only temporarily, *“family”*, the band of brothers. Within this king there is a divided self; Hal/Harry, the impetuous, funny, loving young man who was able to lose himself as the drinking companion of Jack Falstaff, versus the lonely and often angry king struggling to come to terms with his fate, who rages against the accusations made by Michael Williams. The two sides of the same person are fused in the heat of battle; Henry finds himself at last at ease with himself and the role he has been born to play.

## **Monsieur le Fer (Act 4 Scene iv)**

The spectacle of battle can appear like the terrible thing it doubtless is, but Shakespeare suggests the moral ambiguity that times of extreme tension and mortal danger reveal. The fighting demonstrates Henry’s better qualities as a leader, but it also shows the mock-heroic action of grubby but realistic intensity. Just as *“brave York”* on his knee begs to take the lead in the coming final battle, Pistol is about to, as the Chorus puts it, *“much disgrace /The name of Agincourt”* by forcing a French soldier to his knees and threatening to rob him or slit his throat. The scene undercuts the linguistic flourishes and idealism of his old friend Hal: *“Except, O/Signeur, thou do give to me egregious ransom, I will fetch thy rim out at thy throat in drops of crimson blood.”* Only the discovery that the man can ransom himself

saves him. Pistol’s self-interest overrides any other, but he is only performing a common ritual of the battlefield where, as the ordinary soldiers like Michael Williams know all too well, the wealthy can buy their lives from the poor.

## **The Killing Fields (Act 4 Scene vi)**

In the next scene a line of hooded French prisoners (the image came from press photographs of hooded Iraqi prisoners) was pulled in a line across the back of the stage and made to sit, guarded by armed English soldiers. The previous scene showed Pistol sparing the life of a French prisoner, but undermining the ideal of disinterested heroic action by proclaiming naked and aggressive self-interest. It is now followed by a speech that narrates a classically heroic chivalric story from the battle: the deaths of York and Suffolk. The story is told by the King’s uncle, Exeter, and stresses not the pain and suffering of their dying, but the way in which the two men shared an intimate, bloody, and passionate union in the fellowship of death:

*So did he turn, and over Suffolk’s neck  
He threw his wounded arm, and kissed his lips,  
And so espoused to death, with blood he  
sealed  
A testament of noble-ending love.*

Who can say whether or not what Exeter says is true? It may be, but it may also be a statement of what Exeter, Henry IV’s brother, would like to believe. But as the actor tells the story, everything else on the previously busy and noisy Olivier stage goes quiet. The evocative language creates a vivid picture of the scene in the theatre of the mind’s eye. Having heard his uncle’s homo-erotic tale *“with mistful eyes”*, the King’s attention is abruptly drawn back to the battlefield – *“the French have reinforced their scattered men.”* Striding purposefully upstage, Henry looks at Llewellyn and gives him the command: *“Then every soldier kill his prisoners!”*, an instruction omitted from both Branagh’s and Olivier’s films. With the age of chivalry already a dusty memory, Henry now commits a war crime. His decision, however barbaric, does obey the

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remorseless logic of war: the French are staging a counter-attack; the English soldiers guarding the prisoners are needed to help repel it. The soldiers are ordered to shoot but they refuse, and as one or two prisoners make a run for their lives, Llewellyn massacres them all in a burst of semi-automatic fire.

## **Killing Boys (Act 4 Scene vii)**

Ironically, it is the same soldier, Llewellyn, who voices concern over the French killing of “the boys” because “it is expressly against the law of arms”. So too is the killing of unarmed prisoners. Llewellyn’s obedience to his king makes him a war criminal, a great irony in one who makes so much of the importance of playing by the “rules of war”. The exchange between himself and Gower that follows the discovery of the body of the Boy, killed on stage in this production by pursuing French, is often played for laughs because of Llewellyn’s confusion of Macedon and Monmouth. But since in this performance it was enacted in the knowledge that Llewellyn has himself committed a gross breach of the rules of war, and that his beloved leader has ordered him to do so, the words of the Welshman take on tragic rather than comic overtones. He is confused because the events of the past few minutes have thrown his whole moral world into chaos. The code he lived by has been breached by himself and by his sovereign.

Peter Blythe, Adrian Lester,  
Tom Mckay  
photo Ivan Kyncl



In this same scene, Montjoy brings the news that the “day is yours” and asks for the mutual observance of conventions of war: “O give us leave great King, / To view the field in safety, and dispose of their dead bodies!” The request granted, the King’s eye lights upon Michael Williams, the soldier who challenged him on the eve of battle and who is now displaying the King’s glove in his helmet. Henry sets up a trap. He orders Williams to fetch his commanding officer and, when he leaves to do so, calls Llewellyn and asks the unfortunate man to “wear thou this favour for me, and stick it in thy cap” thus setting Michael Williams on a collision course with a senior officer. This is an extraordinarily petty and personal act of vanity taken at the height of Henry’s triumph, and Hytner has him, after explaining what he has done to the incredulous Warwick and Gloucester, make a gesture of apology to Exeter by holding up both hands, palms facing out, with a sheepish grin on his face, as if to say, “sorry, mea culpa.” Clearly Hal still inhabits Henry.

## **Another kind of battle (Act 4 Scene viii)**

In the next scene, post-Agincourt, the director introduced an episode showing the English army relaxing – they are attending a party with beer, loud music and some wild cavorting. As the soldiers lose themselves in the noise of Heavy Metal, Llewellyn sees Williams and confronts him. The result is a pitched battle that draws in all the men until the entrance of Warwick breaks up the fight. Henry follows and in the exchange with Williams reveals the truth that the glove is his, and that Williams was the ordinary soldier who had dared (unknowingly) to challenge the king of England. In this production, on hearing Williams’ brave and direct response “Your majesty came not like yourself...” Henry moves as if to throw a punch at him, but in the split second before he can do so, Exeter takes a small step between them, looks his nephew in the eye, and with a slight shake of the head signals that this is not the action of a king. So, instead of fighting, as Hal might have done, Henry takes the glove and makes the necessary public gesture of generosity: “Here, uncle Exeter, fill this glove

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*with crowns, / And give it to this fellow...*” This is another lesson in self-fashioning that the experiences of the war offer the young King.

## None else of name

The scene concludes with Montjoy’s entrance with the list of those killed in battle, French and English. The French have lost ten thousand men, the English twenty-nine. In Olivier’s 1944 film, released to coincide with the invasion of Normandy by the allied forces, the number of English dead was multiplied because Olivier thought no one who had actually lived through a war would believe it. The names of the French dead listed by Henry echo the French king’s broadcast, lauding these same men.

## The final act (Act 5 Scene i-ii)

The director cut the episode in which Llewellyn confronts Pistol and makes him eat a leek. Instead, the performance moves from the dirt and grime of the Agincourt battlefield to the suggested baroque splendour of the French Court. On the stage is an ornate sofa flanked by two elaborate gilded armchairs. To stage-right, a dozen smaller chairs in neat rows are set out, and a smaller number on the left. The former are for the ranks of the English nobility, the latter an eloquent reminder of the few now required to accommodate the post-war depleted ranks of the French nobility.

Adrian Lester  
photo Ivan Kyncl



In the National’s production the direction of the final act of the play makes clear that the presence of Henry and his commanders is humiliating to the French. Although the French King speaks words of welcome, *“Right joyous are we to behold your face, / Most worthy brother of England”*, the way he delivers them, still seated, shows that the opposite is true. Burgundy’s speech recounts in stark terms the catastrophe that the war has been to France:

*And as our vineyards, fallows, meads, and hedges,  
Defective in their natures, grow to wildness,  
Even so our houses and our selves and our children  
Have lost, or do not learn from want of time,  
The sciences that should become our country,  
But grow like savages, as soldiers will  
That nothing do but meditate on blood  
To swearing and stern looks, diffused attire  
And everything that seems unnatural.*

The King of France has not yet agreed to the terms of surrender, and Henry says to him bluntly, *“you must buy that peace...”* Negotiations commence with the French King, his few remaining courtiers, and the English party led by Exeter, leaving Henry alone on stage with the Princess Katherine and her companion, Alice. Henry must conquer Katherine and make her his trophy bride, and through this marriage cement an alliance with the old enemy. The confrontation between the two is usually played as a conventional romantic wooing scene with plenty of comedy thrown in. In Hytner’s production however, the scene has a different, darker, tone. Henry is amusing in his attempts to woo a stonewalling Katherine, who fails to respond to his overtures. This is the man, after all, who is ultimately responsible for the rape of her country, and the death of many of her countrymen. Henry’s action in insisting that he be allowed to kiss her, first her hand, then her lips, despite the protestations of both Katherine and Alice that to do so will violate the customs of France, signifies the supremacy of his culture over that of the French. Henry casually dismisses her objections *“O Kate, nice customs curtsy to great kings”*.

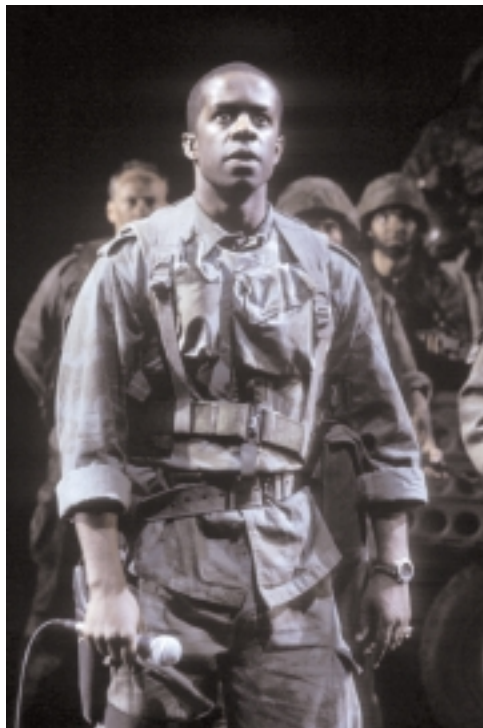
# The play

The defeated French now re-enter, having given the concessions that will result in peace. The scene ends with Henry's final act of cultural imperialism when, before her father and mother and all the assembled French, he takes Katherine, and kisses her "as my sovereign Queen." The performance, however, did not end on a note of conquest; after drinking the toast proposed by Queen Isabel, Henry holds out his arm to Katherine to escort her off. She, however, refuses the gesture; silently turning on her elegant heel, she walks off stage leaving Henry awkwardly marooned and able only to follow her lead.

The last word is that of the Chorus. She once more apologises for the inadequacy of the story we have watched. Her "*star of England*" may not have been eclipsed, but he has been shown to be something much more than the one-dimensional super hero, the "*warlike Harry*" described at the start of the play. We have seen Hal struggling to learn how to play the role of Henry, seen Henry both as "*noble Harry*" and as a war criminal. The answers to

the questions posed at the start of this commentary are not straightforward, this is a man and a play full of moral complexity and ambiguity in which war is capable of bringing out the best and worst in men. A modern dress production of a history play inevitably foregrounds the scepticism and ambivalence of our times.

Adrian Lester  
photo Ivan Kyncl



# Teaching the play

1. Both Olivier's 1944 film and Kenneth Branagh's 1989 version are available on video. Comparisons between the two teach us a lot about the play and the historical context in which the films were made. Screen extracts from them side-by-side, asking the students to compare and contrast, for example, the episode showing Henry's speech before Harfleur. How is this staged in Nicholas Hytner's production? .

2. Have some large pieces of blank paper and felt-tip pens ready. Ask the students to work in groups of 4 – 6 and make two lists of words that, to them, suggest the positive and the negative qualities in Henry. Give them five minutes or so and then ask them: are the lists roughly equal in length, i.e. in their minds do his positive and negative qualities balance, or is there a distinct leaning to one? Which words appear most often on all the lists?

3. Ask the students to think about the ways in which war is represented in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, on television and in newspapers and magazines. In the recent war with Iraq, what were the main stories from that conflict that have remained in the students' memories, and why? Looking back on productions of *Henry V*, which episodes from the play or film are recalled most clearly and why is that?

Adrian Lester  
photo Ivan Kyncl



4. How are the wars of the past represented in the present? Ask the students to find two (or more if possible) war memorials in their town or city. They should describe the memorial, what it looks like, how large or small it is, whether it has any pieces of sculpture, and, if so, what are they like, figurative or abstract? What is engraved on the memorial, what kind of words are used?

5. Design a post-Iraq war memorial. Design a war memorial commemorating the battle of Agincourt – include words from the play.

6. Visit a local art gallery and look at paintings and drawings of conflict. How has the artist composed the picture? If you had only three words to sum up the image which would you use, e.g. bold, bloody, brave, or dark, despair, destruction?

7. Work in small groups using “sculpting” techniques and get the students to create images from the play using the language as their inspiration. For example, give each group a word or phrase from the text such as “*imitate the action of the tiger*” or, “*Now set the teeth, and stretch the nostril wide, / Hold hard the breath, and bend up every spirit / To his full height!*” (3.i). Give them a few minutes to work on the task and then select two or three images and have the rest of the group look at them and comment.

8. Nicholas Hytner's production was in modern dress. Ask the students to research in magazines and/or newspapers for photographs of people that might serve as the inspiration for a costume designer working on a new film of *Henry V* set in the present day.

9. Henry V is often held up as a model of leadership, even featuring in management training courses. List Henry's leadership skills/qualities.

10. How does Henry manage to persuade men to risk their lives, for example, before the walls of Harfleur and before the battle of Agincourt? Look at the language of those two famous

# Teaching the play

speeches, have them reproduced in large print or on an OHP and ask the students, working in groups of 4–6, to highlight no more than 6 key words. How much agreement is there in the class as a whole on what constitutes the most significant words?

11. Status is very important in *Henry V*. Using a list of all the named characters, organise a line in which the character with the highest status is first and so on down to the one with the lowest status of all. Obviously Henry will be first in line, but there is plenty of scope for productive argument about the order of the rest of the characters. Who, for example, has the higher status amongst Bardolph, Pistol, Nym, and Mistress Quickly?

12. Make a status line representing the situation at the start of a performance (on film or on stage) and then make another for the end. Are they different? Who is missing at the end? Whose status has risen, whose status has dropped?

13. One of the benefits of mass media coverage in the West of recent conflicts has been to make us more aware of the suffering of innocent victims. In the case of Iraq, it has also offered us an insight into what it might be like to be occupied by a foreign power. Try this simple exercise that reveals how important territory is. Ask the students to work in pairs. One imagines a circle in which they stand, and calls it their territorial space. They experiment with their partner signalling him or her to approach in silence. Ask both to stop at the point when one or other feels uncomfortable, or too close. Where is the invisible line that marks the circumference of territorial space? Does it change with different people?