

HENRY V

Study Guide



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❖ Introduction ❖

Crowned when he was just 18 years old, Henry V is known by historians for his incredible military skills as a young prince and then later as king during the Hundred Years' War. His leadership during the Battle of Agincourt, when he was just 29 years old, and his successive negotiations with Charles VI of France nearly resolved the seemingly endless struggle between the two nations.

Mixing fantasy and legends with these known facts, William Shakespeare brought the historical figure of Henry V to the stage in a sequence of four historical plays — *Richard II*; *Henry IV, Part 1*; *Henry IV, Part 2*; and *Henry V*. He comes to life not as a monarch full grown, but as a young lad watching his father fight against the arguably legitimate but unpopular King Richard II for his claim to the English throne. Young Henry — or Hal, as he is more commonly known — doesn't care for his father's power struggle; he's an irresponsible youth, spending most of his time in the company of the roguish Sir John Falstaff, playing pranks on his friends and living a scandalous, licentious life.

Beneath Hal's raucous and often comedic behavior, however, lies something more. As Shakespeare says, "The play's the thing wherein I'll catch the conscience of the king." He does indeed capture the multifaceted conscience of Prince Hal, who only pretends to be rebellious in his early youth so that — after inheriting the crown — he can "repent" of his former ways and thus win the confidence of the English people. He needs their trust, for his ability to conquer France relies on his people's willingness to fight alongside their king. He proceeds to take up his father's fight, killing Henry Percy — a political enemy of his father — and thereby demonstrating his impressive abilities as a soldier and establishing that he will remain committed to politics and the care of his people.

It is with Henry's newfound role as warrior-king that Kenneth Branagh's 1989 film adaptation of *Henry V* begins. Released in United States just the day before the fall of the Berlin Wall, Branagh's unique and award-winning interpretation brought the nearly 300-year-old play to an audience not that different from Shakespeare's; the same complex questions about war and peace, brotherhood and leadership, manipulation and trust, or even politics and friendship still shape the world, determining the leaders we follow, the battles we fight and the people we become.

The Henry V of Shakespeare is not indeed the Henry V of history; yet he is more historic. He is not only a saner and more genial but a more important person. ... For the figure that Shakespeare framed out of the legends of the great victory is largely the figure that all men saw as the Englishman of the Middle Ages. He did not really talk in poetry, like Shakespeare's hero, but he would have liked to. Not being able to do so, he sang.

— G.K. Chesterton



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❖ Memorable Quotes ❖

Chorus: 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.

Jack Falstaff: Banish plump Jack, and banish all the world.

Henry: Oh, let us yet be merciful. ... If little faults proceeding on distemper shall not be winked at, how shall we stretch our eye when capital crimes — chewed, swallowed and digested — appear before us?

Henry: Once more unto the breach, dear friends! Once more, or close the wall up with our English dead! In peace there's nothing so becomes a man as modest stillness and humility, but when the blast of war blows in our ears, then imitate the action of the tiger. ... The game's afoot! Follow your spirit, and upon this charge, cry, "God for Harry, England and St. George!"

Williams: If the cause be not good, the king himself hath a heavy reckoning to make. ... I am afraid there are few that die well in a battle; for how can they charitably dispose of anything when blood is their argument?

Henry: And [the feast day of] Crispin Crispian shall ne'er go by from this day until the ending of the world, but we in it shall be remembered; we few, we happy few, we band of brothers!

❖ Thoughts for Discussion ❖

1. Early in the film, a herald brings a greeting from the French dauphin to King Henry. The dauphin's "gift" of tennis balls is an insulting reminder of Henry's rowdy and playful youth, goading Henry into declaring war.

What do you think motivates the dauphin's insult? As young rulers, Henry and the dauphin are much alike. Unlike Henry, however, the dauphin doesn't seem to be loved by his people. Could the dauphin be jealous of Henry, who has won the trust and love of his people?

2. Prior to engaging in war with France, Henry consults the archbishop of Canterbury and the bishop of Ely, who agree that he has a just claim to the French throne.

Why do you think it important to Henry that he fight for a "well-hallowed" cause? He later appeals to Divine Will, praying that he can successfully take revenge against the dauphin. Do you think it right for one to claim vengeance in the name of God?

3. Henry's famous "band of brothers" speech stirs up his men, inspiring them to overcome their doubts regarding the war and to together transform their fear into triumphant courage.

Recall the flashback scenes of Henry and Falstaff: How does knowing Henry's earlier rejection of Falstaff affect your view of his speech? To what degree are Henry's actions pretense? To what degree are they a result of his inner turmoil and a sincere need for brotherhood with his men?

4. **Appearances clearly affect King Henry's life; once he hides his royal uniform, his men don't recognize him. Believing Henry to be a Welsh officer, they instead speak openly, revealing their honest opinions and their deepest fears.**

Was Henry right to disguise himself, to become like his men, in order to better know them? Or is he simply playing the political game, common to men across the ages, in which truth is only discovered through deception?

5. **While Henry is disguised, one of the soldiers, Williams, speculates that the king only promises to fight alongside his men "to make us fight cheerfully, but when our throats are cut, he may be ransomed, and we ne'er the wiser." Although Williams doesn't see through Henry's disguise, the soldier does see the sharp difference between a man's true self and the manner in which he speaks to others.**

The discussion leads to a quarrel, with Williams casting his glove before Henry — the traditional manner of challenging someone to a duel. In Branagh's adaption, Henry returns the glove to Williams after the Battle of Agincourt, silently revealing his disguise and graciously forgiving the soldier's challenge. Why do you think Branagh directs the scene this way? Might he be illustrating that Henry has realized that honesty and transparency are essential to any true leadership?

6. **As the English soldiers prepare for battle, we see them confess their sins and receive a blessing. Branagh's staging highlights that England was then a Catholic country, whose people were loyal subjects steeped in the biblical concept of the Divine Right of Kings.**

For Henry's soldiers, their loyalty meant they had to fight against their brother Catholics from France. Think of this Catholic brotherhood in light of the standard bearers' deaths, which was expressively against the medieval law of arms. How should the concept of brotherhood affect our understanding of the conventions of war, particularly the humane treatment of prisoners and a country's obligations to practice just warfare?

7. **After Pistol, Nim and Bardolph join Henry's troops, Bardolph is caught robbing the fallen soldiers and looting the French churches. In response, Henry agrees that Bardolph be put to death.**

In what ways was Henry just in his punishment of Bardolph? In what ways was this simply another attempt by Henry to appear a just ruler? How can a ruler decide between justice for many or mercy for a few?

8. **Throughout the film, Henry shows himself to be a strong, arguably callous ruler, whose very entrance into a room magnifies his power and whose resolve to fight a war changes a nation. Yet his strength is not impervious, for he stumbles even as he discovers that he has achieved a victory.**

Knowing that Henry is always meticulous in crafting the right words and behavior, what is the significance of him exhibiting weakness here? Does he have reasons to put on a display in front of the French messenger? Or is the burden of leadership too heavy for him to hide anymore?

9. **At the battle's end, Henry declares that "God fought for us. ... Let there be sung *Non Nobis* and *Te Deum*!"**

How do these hymns reflect Henry's view of his victory? Henry earlier claimed that he was not responsible for the spiritual aspects of his men, saying, "Every subject's soul is his own." Yet here, as these religious hymns are intoned, Henry carries the body of a fallen boy draped across his shoulders, much like Christ carrying the cross. Do you think that Henry now embraces the Christ-like aspects of his reign? As leaders, what are our spiritual responsibilities?

10. **In Henry's opinion, a king is obligated to take upon himself all the burdens of his people. None of the commoners, he thinks, can understand this responsibility nor share in it in any way.**

How might Henry's isolation explain his desire to marry Princess Katherine? Why do you think it is only through a sacramental marriage, rather than through a friendship, that Henry can find a companion that truly understands his burden?