



Extended Review: William Shakespeare's *King Henry V*

Author: William Shakespeare
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In the age of UKIP, we look at a biography of one England's greatest medieval kings (and proto-Eurosceptics), written by England's greatest writer. So, what's wrong with patriotism?

Introduction

King Henry V is the final part of a four episode play about English/British/Royal history, a collection that together are known by literary boffins as the 'Second Tetralogy' (which is like a trilogy, but has four in it instead of three). It's a good honest story of the English fighting those pesky folks on the continent and winning a great victory at the battle of Ajincourt against incredible odds. But despite it being a really cool (true) story that's lasted centuries, lots of people wouldn't even consider reading it because it was written by Shakespeare... a word that strikes fear into school children and adults alike... and I think that's a real shame. So what I'm asking you to do now, is to ignore all the scary negative things you might think about Shakespeare and let me see if, over the next couple of pages, I can convince you as to the coolness of Mr. S.

The story so far...

Right, first up, and as I've already mentioned, *Henry V* is the fourth and final part of a wider story, and though there's certainly no problem at all with just reading it on its own (or watching the DVD or going to see the play) it's not a bad idea to have a quick look at what's been going on so far to warm things up.

Part One: *Richard II*. Henry V's dad, Henry Bolingbroke, goes to war with his cousin King Richard II, who is the rightful ruler but very bad at the job. Bolingbroke takes the throne in the end, but it triggers a massive civil war and lays the foundation for the 'Wars of the Roses' later on. At the end of the play, the new King Henry asks if anyone has seen his son, though young Prince Henry doesn't actually appear on stage. The best known part of the play is probably the speech by John of Gaunt (Bolingbroke's Dad) about the 'Sceptr'ed Isle' which is quoted practically every time somebody wants to make England sound cool, or nice, or both.

Part Two: Henry IV (Part One). This is the play where we meet the future Henry V (or 'Hal' to his mates) for the first time. Far from being a great king in the making though, he is a young drinking scallywag, hiding from responsibility in Taverns with his mates like the jolly (but rather dishonest) Sir John Falstaff, a drinking farting lazy clown who proved so popular in Shakespeare's history plays that he even got his own spin-off, *The Merry Wives of Windsor*. Hal does redeem himself at the end by winning a big fight against (and killing) 'Harry Hotspur', the 'baddie'.

Part Three: Henry IV (Part Two). Here we see old King Henry grow old and die, and young Prince Hal become the new King. The rebellion of the Nobles and Welsh is put down, largely with Hal's help, though he does still go off and drink. There's a really sad bit where he finally cuts ties with his friend Falstaff before stepping up to his new role. The most famous line in the play is spoken by the old king on his death bed... 'heavy lies the head that wears the crown'.

Part Four: Henry V. Now several years into his reign, the new King is persuaded by his lords that he is not just the rightful king of England, but also of France too. Unsurprisingly, his distant cousin, the *actual* king of France doesn't really like the idea of being put out of a job, so he sends his army to fight the English. The play builds to the explosive battle of Agincourt, where despite being greatly outnumbered; the English (with the help of Welsh bowmen) win the day. The play has several well-known bits, but two of the best are 1: Henry's rallying cry to his men 'Once more unto the breach dear friends, once more, or we'll choke up their wall with our English dead', and 2: his great speech before the final battle, which has been copied in battle scenes ever since, the most recent examples being Mel Gibson's *Braveheart* (1995), or Peter Jackson's 'The Return of The King' (2003).

How it's put together

Like all Shakespeare plays, *Henry V* is divided up into five sections called 'Acts'. Generally speaking, the ground work is laid in the first two Acts, with the action happening in Acts Three and Four and the aftermath being dealt with in Act Five, which is generally the shortest. True to form, that's what happens here:

Act One: The English bishops and lords discuss with the king the future of the country. To stop Henry's government taxing them, the clergy persuade Henry to go and invade France to gain wealth there. The Dauphin, the Crown Prince of France, sends Henry an insulting message and this settles the matter. Henry is going to war!

Act Two: As he prepares his invasion, Hal discovers that three of his most loyal men are actually French spies. Feeling betrayed, he orders their execution. His old drinking friends lament the passing of Sir John Falstaff, Hal's surrogate father, who doesn't actually appear on stage. Hal's Uncle, the Duke of Exeter, delivers his nephew's stern reply to the Dauphin and his father the French King.

Act Three: The Siege of Harfleur. Henry's army eventually win the city, but it depletes his army so much he decides to leave a Garrison behind and head back to Calais. However, the fresh and much larger French army move to block the English route of escape.

Act Four: The build-up to, battle of, and conclusion to Ajincourt, including Henry's 'Crispin's day' speech, where he calls his men his 'band of brothers'. For my money, this is

one of the best passages ever written by Shakespeare, if not the whole of English Literature.

Act Five: With the battle and the fate of the French succession seemingly won decided the two Kings settle down to peace talks. Hal courts and wins the hand of the French Princess, thus becoming his rival's heir. All seems well, but sadly things don't work out in the end. That, though, is another story.

I've got to admit, many of my friends who admit to just not 'getting it', think I'm a bit odd for liking stories that are 400 years old... They always ask me 'why does it have to be written in that awful old language...?' Or 'Why do the characters always dance around in tights, or the stories have to be so long and be so boring?' (I have a real problem with that last bit). Well, the fact is they don't. Many people over the years have taken Shakespeare's stories and put them in the modern day, or even taken the story line and put modern words to them, and they still work well, particularly the play we're looking at today.

Henry V, though, has an enemy far more powerful than simply being a bit old-fashioned. Henry's greatest fight is not against the French, but against Political Correctness. It's very un-PC to cheer for the English winning against their old enemy, it's probably even more un-PC to read such a book in school... after all, fighting (and chopping the other kids to bits with a big sword) is against the rules. As a result, teenaged boys are put through the torment of *Romeo and Juliet*, a good play, but probably the 'girliest' play Shakespeare ever wrote, and it puts them off of all of his work for life. That's a real shame. This aside, I love this *Henry V*, and I recommend it to everyone. It's one of the best stories, by the best writer we've ever had.

10 sausages out of 10

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