Background
On St. Crispin’s Day (October 25th) 1415, an English army led by King Henry V defeated a much larger French force in battle near the French town of Agincourt. Between seven and ten thousand French soldiers were reported to have been killed, with England’s losses estimated by some sources to be as few as two hundred men. As a result of the battle, Henry gained or retained control of large swathes of France. Agincourt is a foundational event in the development of English national identity and continues to resonate in our culture. However, the issues raised by the battle – heroism and the construction of celebrity, war and war crimes, abuse of power, social class and imperialism – make it ripe for poetic exploration.

Responses to the battle
The dazzling success of England’s armies under their dashing young king provoked an outpouring of national pride, as expressed in the ‘The Agincourt Carol’ (bit.ly/1OhoInU).

Almost two hundred years after the battle, England’s finest poets were still re-imagining the victory. William Shakespeare’s play Henry V (1600) is centred on Agincourt, and the rallying speech (bit.ly/1QSMLML) he puts into Henry’s mouth – “We few, we happy few, we band of brothers” – is one of the most iconic pieces of poetry in our language. Only five years later, another poet, Michael Drayton, wrote another triumphalist poem about the battle, simply entitled ‘The Ballad of Agincourt’ (bit.ly/1HZz78D).
Even five hundred years later, the resonance of Agincourt’s underdog spirit – as mediated through Shakespeare – was so powerful that the British Prime Minister, Winston Churchill, made a pointed reference to it in his speech in praise of the R.A.F. fighter pilots who had been defending England against Hitler’s Luftwaffe in 1940: “never in the field of human conflict was so much owed by so many to so few” (bit.ly/1YivZsj). Indeed, the very fact of the existence of Agincourt 600 and its associated poetry competition is proof of the battle’s enduring place in our national mythology.

**Talking point** Why have English poets and politicians seeking to inspire their audiences referred more frequently to Agincourt than any other battle in our history?

**Difficult issues and challenging questions**

There is no question the English won a memorable victory against overwhelming odds at Agincourt, that English soldiers fought bravely and with intelligence, creativity and demonstrated a real esprit de corps (team spirit) under the leadership of the young and charismatic warrior-king Henry V. However, a closer scrutiny of the facts surrounding the battle uncovers some surprising information and raises some challenging questions.

First of all, what was an English king doing fighting in France in the first place? Like all the members of the Plantagenet dynasty of English kings, Henry V claimed the kingship of France and further demanded the ‘restoration’ of lands his ancestors had formerly owned in the country, but which the French crown had seized. However, this apparently principled stand is undermined by the knowledge that in the negotiations leading up to his invasion of France, Henry seemed to be willing to give up his ‘rights’ if the French king, Charles VI, would pay him a huge cash ransom. Henry only decided to invade when negotiations didn’t go his way.

Perhaps the war was about Henry’s greed and pride rather than justice and glory. If this is the case, then thousands died to satisfy essentially base motives. In what sense then can Henry be regarded as a ‘hero’ or a ‘good king’?

Other evidence also points to Henry V’s flawed moral character and greed. For example, after winning the battle, he ordered the slaughter of thousands of unarmed prisoners. Of the thousands of prisoners he took, only fifteen hundred prisoners were spared – not out of mercy, but because Henry had worked out that their friends and relatives were rich enough to pay a ransom for their lives and they were worth more to him alive than dead.
Commemorating war

Is it ever right to celebrate victories in war? In wars, people are killed and injured; wives are widowed, children are orphaned, parents bereaved of their children. Some would say that crowing triumphalism after victory in war is a distasteful form of gloating that trivialises the enormous suffering and destruction caused by conflict, and reduces war to a bloody sporting contest.

The folk singer Maddy Prior illustrates this trivialising tendency in her introduction to a live performance of ‘The Agincourt Carol’ (bit.ly/1n1UtH):

“The sports results from 1415 read, England won, France lost. This is a song celebrating an English victory against overwhelming odds, which seem to the only way we can do it.”

These sentiments are similar in spirit to the boorish boasting of some England football fans when they taunt their German rivals with the infamous chant, ‘Two World Wars and One World Cup’. Surely war is not the same as a sporting contest, a decapitating sword equivalent to a free-kick curled into the top corner? Or maybe it is...

How can sporting or other significant rivalries be compared to the rivalries of war and the battlefield? How are the beliefs and emotions of the people involved similar, and how are they different?

‘Celebrating’ war?

For all these reasons – and more – many contemporary poets would be reluctant to write poems celebrating victory in this or any other battle. To do so might be seen as endorsing injustice, inequality, unnecessary killing, exploitation and greed. Indeed, war poetry in England is overwhelming associated with the poets of the First World War – Wilfred Owen, Isaac Rosenberg and Siegfried Sassoon, for example – who expose and condemn ‘the horrors of war’.

Organise a class debate on one or both of the following statements:
- ‘Henry V – national hero or self-aggrandising war criminal?’
- ‘Is celebratory war poetry ever appropriate?’

A ‘British’ or ‘English’ victory?

Finally, many of the English archers were actually Welsh – a country so dominated by England that it had lost its independence and whose people were humiliated in their very name – ‘Welsh’ is an Old English word meaning ‘foreigner’. How must it have felt for a proud Welshman to have played a key role in a battle that was seen as an English victory? How do Welsh people feel about celebrating the battle now?

Why should we celebrate an English victory – and not a British, Irish, Welsh or Scottish victory? Does celebrating the battle make any sense at all in these days of multi-culturalism and the European Union?
The meaning of Agincourt today

Despite the misgivings and reservations outlined above, it is important to note that English poetry has a long tradition of celebrating success in battle. ‘The Battle of Brunanburh’ (bit.ly/1XbaHKI) is a poem written in 937AD, translated here by Alfred, Lord Tennyson, which celebrates King Aethelstan’s victory over an invading army of Scots, Irish, Welsh and Vikings.

‘The Charge of the Light Brigade’ (see Workshop 1, page 5), also by Tennyson, celebrates a battle that took place in 1854. Here it is: (bit.ly/1i0Et6f), and you can watch poet and spoken word artists Hollie McNish perform ‘The Charge of the Light Brigade’ as part of the Poetry Society’s Page Fright project: bit.ly/1PCiq5x

Rudyard Kipling has written many poems sympathetic to the British military, including ‘For All We Have and Are’ (bit.ly/1ME7fDD).

These poems are about heroism in the face of overwhelming odds. To this day, the overwhelmingly dominant view of the Battle of Agincourt in England is of a valiant and charismatic young king – interpreted by the actors Kenneth Branagh or Laurence Olivier via the poetries of Shakespeare and film – leading a swaggering team of brave and brash young men to an underdog’s victory ‘away from home’.

The fact that six hundred years after the battle we are still talking about it makes many of the above considerations academic. The story of Agincourt has passed from history into myth, in the process becoming a pillar of English national identity. Every generation encounters this myth anew and makes of it what it will. The question we should all ask is, ‘What is the meaning of Agincourt for the English today?’

About the author

Steve Ely teaches creative writing at Huddersfield University and the Poetry School. His most recent book of poems is Englaland (Smokestack, 2015). His previous collection, Oswald's Book of Hours (Smokestack, 2013) was nominated for the Forward Prize for Best First Collection and the Ted Hughes Award for New Work in Poetry. His novel Ratmen was published by Blackheath in 2012. His biographical work about Ted Hughes’s neglected South Yorkshire period, Ted Hughes’s South Yorkshire; Made in Mexborough, was published by Palgrave Macmillan in 2015.

Agincourt 600 Poetry Competition

You can now enter your class’s poems in the Agincourt 600 Poetry Competition. Visit poetrysociety.org.uk/agincourt600 for the full rules, terms and conditions and prizes, and download a class set entry form. Send your poems to: Agincourt 600, The Poetry Society, 22 Betterton Street, London WC2H 9BX. You can also send them via email to educationadmin@poetrysociety.org.uk
Workshop 1
Read and discuss ‘The Charge of the Light Brigade’ with your class. Their task is to write a poem commemorating the Battle of Agincourt using a similar form (short-lines, stanzas, rhyming) to that adopted in this poem.

They might invent a main character – a knight, or an archer – and narrate the poem from his point of view. The poem might even be written from the point of view of a witness, perhaps the wife of one of the combatants. They might even write it from the viewpoint of the horse.

Alternatively, ask them to write a poem in any style from the point of view of someone bereaved by the battle – a parent, wife, girlfriend or child of a slain warrior, English or French. To be convincing, the poem needs to be vivid and concrete, so imagine the slain warrior in detail – the fondest memories of them, what they looked like/the clothes they’d typically wear, their ‘hobbies’, their last words, the activities they shared and how they died – before writing the poem.

Advice
Look at the stanza from the ‘The Charge of the Light Brigade’ (below) and encourage pupils to use similar form and techniques in their own poems. However, if they are really not comfortable writing in this style after trying it, ask them to interpret the task in your own way. They should try to write four verses.

Cannon to right of them,
Cannon to left of them,
Cannon in front of them
Volleyed and thundered;
Stormed at with shot and shell,
Boldly they rode and well,
Into the jaws of Death,
Into the mouth of hell
Rode the six hundred.

• Short urgent phrases – communicating the chaos and panic of battle
• Onomatopoeia – the repetition of ‘Cannon’ with the stress on the first syllable mimics the explosions of gunfire
• Rhyme – end-stopped lines
• Repetition – of key words/phrase
• Alliteration – ‘shot and shell’
• Rhythm – note how Tennyson’s rhythm evokes galloping horses)
• Imagery of violence – ‘jaws of Death’ ‘mouth of hell’
Workshop 2
The task is to write a poem written in the first person – a monologue – that expresses the thoughts and feelings of an English archer ordered to execute an unarmed French soldier.

The poem should be set in the moment the string of the bow is pulled back but before the arrow is released; the tension of the quivering bow-string reflects the emotions of both the archer and his victim. Ask your pupils to consider the following:

• What do you see and hear?
• What do you feel?
• What do you think?
• What do you do?
• Are you aware of what others are doing and saying around you?
• What are your feelings about Henry, who has led his army to a great victory, but is now executing unarmed men?
• What are your feelings about your victim/killer?

This archer might have no qualms whatsoever about killing his victim, or he might feel so appalled by the prospect of murdering an unarmed man that he wants to throw down his bow and run. The victim might be stoic and resigned to his fate or be in a state of absolute panicking terror. It’s up to them.

Advice
The poem can be written in any style, but they might want to look at the example from Wilfred Owen (‘Strange Meeting’ – extract right) and use that general style.

It seemed that out of battle I escaped
Down some profound dull tunnel, long since
scooped
Through granites which titanic wars had groined.
Yet also there encumbered sleepers groaned,
Too fast in thought or death to be bestirred.
Then, as I probed them, one sprang up, and stared
With piteous recognition in fixed eyes,
Lifting distressful hands, as if to bless.
And by his smile, I knew that sullen hall,–
By his dead smile I knew we stood in Hell.

• Ask your pupils to communicate emotion and the terror of the situation through language and imagery – think carefully about this and be as vivid as you can.
• The poem can be as long or as short as you like – the important thing is its impact.