

## Poetryclass Fresh Ideas for Learning from the Poetry Society

### Power and representation

#### The Battle of Agincourt in Shakespeare's *Henry V*

By Richard O'Brien

This resource has been created to accompany the **Agincourt 600 Poetry Competition**, a collaboration between Agincourt 600 and The Poetry Society. You can find workshop ideas for creating poems with your class on pages 3,4 and 5 of this resource. You can also find more details about the competition and how to enter your class's poems on the Poetry Society's Agincourt 600 webpage: [poetrysociety.org.uk/competitions/agincourt-600](http://poetrysociety.org.uk/competitions/agincourt-600)

Quotations in this resource are taken from the Arden Shakespeare third edition of *Henry V*.

#### Background

Probably the most famous version of the story of Agincourt is Shakespeare's play *Henry V*, published in 1600. It was written nearly two hundred years after the actual battle, as a piece of both entertainment and, arguably, propaganda, but it still remains the lens through which many of us see that period of history. In order to present an artistically compelling account of what happened in 1415, Shakespeare makes choices about which aspects of historical events the play should present, and which should be left out.

KS3

KS4

KS5

#### Topics at a glance

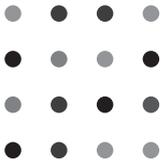
- Agincourt 600
- National identity
- Language and power
- Descriptive language



Illustration by Alex Foster.

#### Talking points

- When writers create work based on true stories, do you think they have a responsibility to stick to the facts?
- Can you think of any examples of films or TV shows based on historical events, or biographies of real people, which make significant changes to 'what really happened'? (Some relevant examples dependent on age of students might include: *The Tudors*, *The Social Network*, *Anonymous*, *Braveheart*...)
- Why might a writer only give one side of the story, or choose to focus on some aspects over others?



## Different perspectives

With something as complicated as a war, everyone will have their own perspective on the events that happened. The English army are viewed by the French as “yon poor and starved band” (4.2.15); their own king encourages them to see themselves as “we few, we happy few, we band of brothers” (4.3.60). Can you imagine studying this play in a French classroom? Or performing it in a French theatre?

In another military engagement, Henry threatens the women of the town of Harfleur: “in a moment look to see / The blind and bloody soldier with foul hand / Defile the locks of your shrill-shrieking daughters” (3.3.33-35). These French women are likely to take a much less favourable view of the man later described as the “star of England” (Epilogue. 6). We don’t hear this judgement from their lips, however, because none of the daughters of Harfleur are given speaking parts by Shakespeare.

This is one of many decisions made by the playwright about who and what to represent, and as a result, *Henry V* takes place in quite a ‘macho’, male-dominated world, in which, as Henry tells the French Princess Katherine who doesn’t want to kiss him before their marriage, “nice customs curtsy to great kings” (5.2.266). This is a bias which can feel frustrating today.



*Henry V at the Globe Theatre, London.*

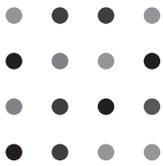
## Talking points

- Shakespeare is often described as a ‘universal’ writer. Can you see yourself in this play? Do the ideas it explores, about heroism in the face of adversity, speak equally to all readers? Or is the play less accessible to, for example, female readers, or non-British readers?
- This list ([bit.ly/1RUUYbY](http://bit.ly/1RUUYbY)) of parts in the play (arranged by ‘Play’) shows Henry himself speaking 1031 lines, more than five times that of the next largest part. The largest female part, Princess Katherine of France, speaks only 61 lines. Invite students to imagine a play in which Katherine speaks 1031 lines, or the common soldier, or the Messenger. What would this play look like? How would it change our view of the battle, or the period?

## Problems of representation

Shakespeare uses a Chorus in *Henry V* to comment on the difficulty of making these creative choices about who and what to show. The Chorus describes how hard it is – almost impossible – to portray a battle onstage: “may we cram / Within this wooden O the very casques / That did affright the air at Agincourt?” (Prologue. 12-14). Swords are clanging and arrows are flying in all directions – in the midst of the fighting, it might be hard to tell friend from foe. How could anyone convey such a crowded, dangerous, confusing atmosphere to an audience who wasn’t there? How could we, as readers or spectators, possibly be made to understand what it felt like to be on the field that day?

People thinking about theatre in the sixteenth century had serious doubts about this kind of representation. Showing such large events with such limited resources could risk being totally ludicrous. In *The Defence of Poesy*, ([bit.ly/1RbyQDc](http://bit.ly/1RbyQDc)), the Elizabethan poet Philip Sidney mocked the very idea that just four actors could convince us we were watching a whole battle: wasn’t it laughable to see “two armies fly in, represented with four swords and bucklers”?



Shakespeare's answer to this problem is to emphasise imagination, on the part of both the writer and the audience. The play is going to work on "your imaginary forces" (Prologue. 18), the Chorus says. Rather than show something impossible to show, *Henry V* will use words to help us imagine it in our minds:

Think, when we talk of horses, that you see  
them  
Printing their proud hoofs i'th' receiving earth.  
For 'tis your thoughts that now must deck our  
kings,  
Carry them here and there [...]  
(Prologue. 26-29).

## Workshop 1

### *Reconstructing the Battle*

If you were a soldier at the Battle of Agincourt, you might have faced a similar dilemma to the one Shakespeare's Chorus describes. How are you going to explain to the people you know what it was like, fighting out there in the cold and the mud for a cause you might not even believe in?

Imagine you are a soldier who has just landed back on British shores, and someone – a partner, a sibling, a child, a friend – has come to greet you off the ship. Alternatively, you could imagine you are that person, and you want to tell them what your life has been like since they went to France. How can you make them see, or hear, or smell what it was like? You can't tell them everything at once, so you'll also want to be selective.

Shakespeare's Chorus chooses a few key objects and moments to stand in for the whole of the fighting, a poetic technique called synecdoche. An example from modern warfare might be the term 'boots on the ground', often used by politicians to describe soldiers sent into a combat location. The Chorus uses "proud hoofs" (Prologue. 27) as a concrete image that opens out into a more abstract sense of the armies' horses, and 'casques' (helmets) to stand in for the thousands



*Illustration by Alex Foster.*

of fighting men. Which examples could you use to tell the story of the battle, to show your listener something they couldn't see with their own eyes?

To help you get started, you might want to imagine what kinds of questions you, or the person who meets you, would want to ask. After all, you haven't seen each other in months, and one of you has been through a very difficult experience. Do you/they look different? Have you/they grown a beard, or sustained an injury? Do you/they smell different? Do they already know anything about what's happened? And are there some things you don't want to tell them? You could make a list of five of these questions, imagining what a person who hasn't been in the war might want to know about a person who has. For example:

- What did the French army look like?
- How did you get that scar?
- Did you see the King in his armour?
- How did it feel to win?
- Was it all worth it?

Alternatively, what does the soldier want to ask you: how have things changed at home? You could then try to write answers to this person's questions, devoting a stanza to each one, and remembering that you're trying to make someone who wasn't there on the battlefield, or back in England, feel as if they were.

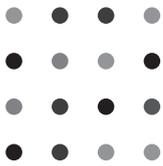


Illustration by Alex Foster.

To do this, you can use any style of poetry you like – long lines, short lines, rhymed or unrhymed – the only important thing is that you keep in mind that your listener is having to imagine the events, and like Shakespeare’s Chorus, you need to do your best to make it feel like they were there with words and images alone. This is a kind of persuasive writing – you are trying to convince them to share your version of events, to see what you saw. In the lines below, I’ve tried to answer the first of my five questions myself:

High on our hill, you have to believe me,  
All you could see was the shine of armour.  
They were huddled together like an iron  
    hedgehog.  
Seeing them like that, us bunched in our  
    blankets,  
I think we were all scared to shoot.

See if you can create a more vivid description, putting the listener in your shoes.

## Workshop 2

### *Language and power*

Earlier in the lesson, we explored how Katherine’s voice is rarely heard within the play. In a basic way, her story is not communicated, and part of this is because of her own difficulties in communication as Shakespeare writes them. She speaks a kind of broken English which makes her ripe for comic portrayals: “Your majesty ‘ave fausse French enough to deceive de most sage demoiselle dat is en France” (5.2.216-217); “I cannot speak your England” (5.2.102-103). In a play very concerned with what language is able to do, she has a different relationship to both language and power than a fluent native English speaker like *Henry V*.

Other characters speak non-standard versions of English: the Scottish soldier Jamy, the Irish soldier MacMorris, and the Welsh soldier Fluellen are all given verbal tics which have been used to make them figures of fun onstage. Actors have exploited exaggerated accents to get laughs from lines such as Jamy’s “I owe God a death, and I’ll pay’t as valorously as I may, that sall I surely do” (3.2.117-118), or MacMorris’s “what ish my nation?” (3.2.124).

When thinking about power and representation in the play, language is therefore a key question, and one that provides opportunities for a poet today. Though deviations from ‘the King’s English’ can serve to mock or marginalise a character, they can also be disruptive, surreal, and help portray a radically different version of experience.

Listen to Liz Lochhead’s ‘Kidspoem/Bairnsang’ ([bbc.in/1SvfQi3](http://bbc.in/1SvfQi3)), another piece of writing about how language changes our understanding of a character’s experience. Now, choosing any character from *Henry V*, or anyone who you feel ought to have been in the play (a woman in Harfleur perhaps), see if you can write a poem that messes around with language to kick back at some of the play’s assumptions.

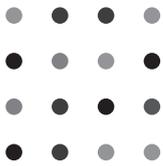


Illustration by  
Alex Foster.

You could do this in lots of different ways. If you're confident with languages, you could explore a French character's worldview by throwing in some French words: there are lots of mean things Katherine could say to Henry that he wouldn't be able to understand!

You could replace some of the words in a famous speech with ones that have more meaning to your character: Henry's "Once more unto the breach, dear friends, once more" (3.1.1) refers to "you noble English" (3.1.17), but what about the Welsh, or the Scottish soldiers? You could take as your starting point the final line of this rallying cry: what if, instead of "Harry! England, and Saint George!" (3.1.34), you wanted your soldiers to 'Cry, 'God for Fluellen! Wales, and Saint David!?' What would this speech sound like, and what could you replace in the original lines to make them more personal to your character?

Whatever you want to say about Agincourt, or Henry's war, you can express it however you choose, so long as it feels authentic to your character. As a starting point, I've tried to reimagine the play's opening speech in the voice of the French Queen Isabel, thinking about what she might want more than the famous "muse of fire" (Prologue. 1).

O for a storm of rain, that would descend  
And wash *les rosbifs* far from our French fields:  
A queendom for myself, a warm safe bed,  
Archery lessons for my daughter Kate...

Your character might want some of the same things, or something different entirely. They might choose to re-use and alter Shakespeare's language, or write original words with a creative twist. Shakespeare blames his "rough and all-unable pen" (Epilogue.1) for any distortions in his version of the Agincourt story: "In little room confining mighty men, / Mangling by starts the full course of their glory" (Epilogue 3-4). What will your pen do differently?

### About the author

Richard O'Brien's most recent pamphlet is *A Bloody Mess* (Valley Press). He was a winner of the inaugural London Book Fair Poetry Prize (Sonnet category) and recently toured the UK with the *Myths and Monsters* poetry tour, visiting schools and libraries with children's poems from the Emma Press anthology *Falling Out of the Sky*. He is writing a PhD on the development of verse drama. His verse play, *Free for All*, tours venues in Leicester, Birmingham and Nottingham in late January 2016.

### Agincourt 600 Poetry Competition

You can now enter your class's poems in the Agincourt 600 Poetry Competition. Visit [poetrysociety.org.uk/agincourt600](http://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](mailto:educationadmin@poetrysociety.org.uk)