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Notes & Commentary on Shakespeare's Henry V

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Introduction

William Shakespeare's *Henry V* stands as one of the most celebrated plays in the canon of English literature, revered for its stirring speeches, complex portrayals of leadership, and exploration of national identity. Set against the backdrop of the Hundred Years' War, the play weaves together historical fact and dramatic invention, offering audiences a compelling narrative of heroism, conquest, and the burdens of kingship. For students encountering *Henry V* for the first time, the text presents both an exciting opportunity and a formidable challenge, rich as it is in historical detail, linguistic innovation, and nuanced characterisation.

This book, *Notes & Commentary on Shakespeare's Henry V: A Guide for Students*, has been written specifically to support students of English literature as they study the play. With accessible commentary, clear explanations, and targeted analysis, it aims to demystify the intricacies of Shakespeare's language and illuminate the layers of meaning embedded within the text. Each chapter offers focused notes on significant scenes, characters, themes, and literary devices, while also providing the broader historical and social context necessary to fully appreciate the play's impact.

Whether you are reading *Henry V* as part of your coursework, preparing for an examination, or simply seeking a deeper understanding of Shakespeare's artistry, this guide is intended to be both an informative companion and an invaluable resource. The chapters have been organized to follow the principal concerns and areas of study commonly encountered in classrooms and examinations. Emphasis is placed on connecting scenes and speeches to the central themes of the play, such as leadership, honor, and national identity.

Furthermore, this guide offers commentary that bridges the gap between Shakespeare's own time and today, acknowledging not only the ways in which *Henry V* reflected the political climate of Elizabethan England, but also its enduring relevance in the modern world. The diversity of interpretations — from rousing patriotism to sharp critiques of power — will be explored to encourage you to form your own informed responses to the text.

Above all, the purpose of this book is to equip you with the tools and insights needed to engage confidently with Shakespeare's work. By breaking down complex passages, providing historical background, and prompting critical thinking, it is our hope that *Henry V* will come alive as a vibrant and thought-provoking play, inviting you to question, reflect, and ultimately enjoy the richness of Shakespearean drama.

We invite you to approach this guide as a companion on your journey through *Henry*

V, to make notes, ask questions, and immerse yourself in the world of the play. Through careful reading and thoughtful analysis, the text will reveal its depth and artistry — showing why, even centuries after it was written, Shakespeare's work continues to inspire and challenge new generations of students and readers.

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CHAPTER ONE: The Historical Context of Henry V

To truly appreciate Shakespeare's *Henry V*, one must first understand the turbulent historical landscape from which it emerged. The play is set during a period of protracted conflict between England and France known as the Hundred Years' War, a dynastic struggle that spanned over a century, beginning in the mid-fourteenth century and rumbling on into the mid-fifteenth. This wasn't a single, continuous war, but rather a series of interconnected conflicts punctuated by truces and uneasy peaces.

The root of this enduring enmity lay in the complex feudal relationship between the English monarchy and the French crown. English kings, as dukes of Normandy and later Aquitaine (or Gascony), held vast territories in France, for which they were technically vassals to the French king. This created an untenable situation: the King of England was a sovereign ruler in his own right at home, but owed homage to another king on the continent for his French lands.

Matters came to a head in 1337 when King Edward III of England, whose mother was the daughter of the late French king Philip IV, formally laid claim to the French throne itself. The direct line of Capetian kings had ended with Philip IV's three sons dying without surviving male heirs. The French nobility, however, passed over Edward III, who was Philip IV's grandson through the female line, citing ancient Frankish Salic Law (or rather, a convenient interpretation of it that barred female succession and transmission of claims through females) to crown a cousin, Philip VI, of the House of Valois. Edward III's assertion of his own claim ignited the conflict.

Over the following decades, the war saw phases of English success, most notably at the battles of Crécy (1346) and Poitiers (1356), where English longbowmen proved devastatingly effective against French heavy cavalry. These victories led to significant territorial gains for England and even the capture of a French king, John II. However, the French gradually recovered ground, particularly under the skilled leadership of Charles V, pushing back English influence by the late 14th century.

By the time Henry V ascended the throne in 1413, the English position in France had significantly weakened compared to its high points under Edward III and the Black Prince. England still held Calais and a portion of Aquitaine around Bordeaux, but the vast Gascon territories of old were much reduced. The grand claims to the French throne felt somewhat distant, more a historical grievance than an immediate goal for many.

Moreover, England itself had been far from stable in the preceding years. Henry V's

father, Henry IV, had seized the throne from his cousin Richard II in 1399, an act of usurpation that plunged the country into a period of unrest. Henry IV faced numerous rebellions throughout his reign, from figures like Owain Glyndŵr in Wales, the Percy family in the north, and various other disaffected nobles.

This internal instability meant that Henry IV could not fully commit to prosecuting the war in France. He spent much of his reign consolidating his power and defending his crown, constantly wary of plots and challenges to the Lancastrian dynasty's legitimacy. His health also failed him in his later years, adding to the uncertainty.

Upon Henry V's accession, he inherited not just the throne but also the legacy of usurpation and a still somewhat fragile peace at home. While the major rebellions had been suppressed, underlying tensions remained. The legitimacy of the Lancastrian line was not universally accepted, particularly among those who felt the Mortimer line had a stronger claim through descent from Lionel of Antwerp, an older son of Edward III than Henry IV's father, John of Gaunt.

Thus, one historical motivation often cited for Henry V's decision to renew the war in France was to solidify his position at home. A foreign war, especially one framed around a legitimate dynastic claim, could serve to unite disparate factions within England, provide opportunities for restless nobles, and perhaps most importantly, validate the Lancastrian right to rule through martial success and divine favour – God, after all, would surely not grant victory to an unjust cause.

Across the Channel, the political situation in France was, if anything, even more fractured and conducive to an English invasion. The French king, Charles VI, suffered from severe bouts of mental illness, often leaving him incapacitated and incapable of ruling effectively. This power vacuum led to bitter rivalry and open conflict between competing factions within the French court.

The most prominent of these factions were the Armagnacs and the Burgundians. These were powerful noble houses headed by the King's uncles: Louis, Duke of Orléans (father of the Count of Armagnac), and Philip the Bold, Duke of Burgundy (later his son John the Fearless). Their rivalry escalated into civil war, marked by assassinations, shifting alliances, and a general breakdown of central authority.

This internal French chaos provided a golden opportunity for an English king with ambitions on the continent. France was divided, its government weakened, and its military resources often turned inward rather than focused on external defence. Henry V could exploit these divisions, finding potential allies (or at least neutral parties) among the disaffected French nobility, particularly the Burgundians, who at times actively opposed the Armagnac-controlled royal court.

Henry V's own character, even before his reign, is a subject of historical and literary

debate. While Shakespeare famously depicts him as a wild youth sowing his wild oats, historical accounts suggest a young man who, while perhaps not entirely conventional, was already showing signs of significant military and administrative talent. He had experience fighting in Wales against Glyndŵr's rebellion from a young age. His transformation upon becoming king, as portrayed by Shakespeare, is more dramatic than strictly historical fact might suggest, but the transition to a highly focused and devout ruler is consistent with contemporary records.

The historical basis for Henry V's claim to the French throne rested on his descent from Edward III. The arguments, while perhaps legally complex and based on interpretations of inheritance laws going back centuries, were framed by the English as a legitimate dynastic right, unjustly denied by the French. The English view was that even if Salic Law prevented a woman (Isabella, Edward III's mother) from reigning herself, it did not prevent her from transmitting the claim to her male heir (Edward III). The French, naturally, disagreed vehemently.

Henry V, after securing domestic stability early in his reign, began pressing his claim through diplomatic channels. Embassies were exchanged, and demands were made, including vast sums of money for arrears from past treaties and the restoration of extensive lands in France. While historical records differ on the exact nature of the exchanges, they underscore Henry's initial attempt to achieve his goals through negotiation, albeit from a position of strength and backed by the clear threat of invasion.

The infamous story of the Dauphin sending Henry a chest of tennis balls as a mocking response to his demands is a legendary element of the narrative. While Shakespeare includes this detail, its historical accuracy is highly dubious. It appears in sources written after the events, likely invented to serve as a simple, potent symbol of French contempt and English resolve. Historically, the diplomatic exchanges were far more complex, though ultimately unsuccessful.

With negotiations failing in the English view, Henry V committed to war in 1415. He assembled a substantial invasion force, reported to be around 10,000-12,000 men, including knights, men-at-arms, and the crucial English longbowmen, who formed the backbone of his army. This was a significant undertaking, requiring immense logistical and financial effort.

The fleet departed from Portsmouth and landed near Harfleur, a strategically important port town on the mouth of the Seine. The initial objective of the campaign was to capture Harfleur, establishing a secure base for further operations. The siege began swiftly, but it proved to be a difficult and costly affair.

The French garrison defended the town stubbornly, and the siege dragged on for over a month during the late summer heat. The English army suffered heavily not from

enemy action alone, but from disease, particularly dysentery, which was rampant in the besieging camps. This decimated Henry's forces, significantly reducing his fighting strength.

After the town finally surrendered in late September, Henry faced a difficult decision. His army was significantly weakened, the campaigning season was drawing to a close, and taking further major objectives was impractical. Rather than returning directly to England, he decided on a daring and historically significant march across northern France to the English-held port of Calais, a distance of about 150 miles.

This march was partly intended as a calculated provocation – a challenge to the French to meet him in open battle, where his smaller but disciplined army might stand a chance against their numerically superior forces, especially if the French were compelled to fight on ground favourable to the English. It was also a risky manoeuvre, exposing his depleted army to harassment and potentially forcing an engagement on unfavourable terms.

As Henry's army marched north, they followed a route similar to the one taken by Edward III before Crécy, seeking to cross the river Somme. The French forces, having finally united under the Constable Charles d'Albret and Marshal Jean le Maingre (known as Boucicaut), shadowed the English, blocking potential crossing points. Henry was forced to march further inland, seeking a ford.

Eventually, the English managed to cross the Somme near Péronne, after a tense period where they were effectively trapped between the river and the larger French army. Having successfully crossed, they continued their march towards Calais, but the French army positioned itself to block their path near the village of Agincourt.

The Battle of Agincourt took place on October 25, 1415, the feast day of St. Crispin and St. Crispinian. Historical accounts of the battle are the subject of some debate, particularly regarding the exact numbers involved, but it is generally accepted that the French army was considerably larger than the English, perhaps outnumbering them by four or six to one, though some estimates are lower.

The English army drew up their lines in a narrow defile between two woods, which negated the French advantage in cavalry and numbers, forcing them to attack uphill through recently ploughed, muddy fields. Henry placed his dismounted men-at-arms in the centre, with the massed ranks of his longbowmen positioned on the flanks, behind sharpened stakes driven into the ground to impede cavalry charges.

The French, confident in their numbers and their heavily armoured knights and men-at-arms, launched a series of charges. However, the narrow terrain, the thick mud, and the devastating volleys of arrows from the English longbowmen disrupted their formations and funnelled them into a chaotic mass. The French vanguard, weighed

down by armour and struggling through the mud, became an easy target for the English archers and dismounted soldiers.

As the French ranks became disordered and piled up, they were unable to effectively deploy their forces. The English, lighter armoured and more mobile, were able to exploit the chaos. Many French knights and nobles were killed or captured. The battle was a decisive victory for the English, a stunning and unexpected triumph that echoed the earlier glories of Crécy and Poitiers.

A controversial historical event during the battle was Henry's order to kill the French prisoners. Historical sources offer differing reasons for this brutal command. Some suggest it was a reaction to a reported attack on the English baggage train by a small group of French peasants or soldiers, fearing the prisoners would seize the opportunity to re-arm themselves and rejoin the fight as another French force was rumoured to be approaching. Others point to the sheer number of prisoners and the inability of the depleted English guard to control them, especially as another French attack seemed imminent. Regardless of the exact cause, it remains a stark and often debated aspect of the battle's history.

The historical casualties at Agincourt were enormously lopsided. Thousands of French soldiers and a significant portion of the French nobility were killed, while English losses were comparatively light. The battle was a catastrophe for France, decapitating much of its military and political leadership and further exacerbating the internal divisions between the Armagnacs and Burgundians.

Agincourt did not immediately win Henry the French throne, but it significantly strengthened his position. He returned to England a hero, his victory seen as a sign of God's favour and a vindication of his claim. The period between 1415 and 1420 saw Henry consolidate his gains. He did not immediately launch another major invasion but spent time rebuilding his army and finances.

He returned to France in 1417, launching a more systematic campaign of conquest in Normandy, laying siege to and capturing towns and castles. The ongoing civil war between the Armagnacs and Burgundians continued to cripple effective French resistance, and Henry skillfully played one faction against the other.

The political landscape shifted dramatically in 1419 with the assassination of John the Fearless, Duke of Burgundy, by agents of the Dauphin (the future Charles VII). This event drove the Burgundian faction firmly into an alliance with the English. This alliance proved crucial, isolating the Dauphin's faction and opening the door for a diplomatic resolution dictated largely on English terms.

The result was the Treaty of Troyes, signed in 1420. This landmark agreement, which Shakespeare does not depict in detail but sets the stage for in his final act, was a

triumph for Henry V. It arranged his marriage to Catherine of Valois, the daughter of King Charles VI. More significantly, it disinherited the Dauphin and declared Henry V the Regent of France and heir to the French throne upon Charles VI's death.

This treaty, facilitated by the Queen of France and the Duke of Burgundy, essentially created a 'dual monarchy', uniting the crowns of England and France under Henry V. For a brief period, it seemed as though Edward III's claim had finally been realised, not just through conquest, but through a legal, albeit highly politically motivated, agreement.

Henry V continued campaigns in France to enforce the treaty and suppress resistance from the Dauphin's faction. He faced ongoing challenges and had to continually fight to maintain control over the newly conquered territories. Despite his successes, ruling France proved to be a complex and demanding task.

Tragically for the English cause, Henry V died in 1422 at the age of only 35, likely from dysentery contracted during a siege. His death occurred just weeks before that of the mad French King Charles VI. Henry was succeeded by his infant son, Henry VI, who was then proclaimed King of France according to the Treaty of Troyes, but who lacked the personal leadership and military prowess of his father.

Henry V's early death meant that the difficult task of maintaining control over France fell to his regents, notably his brothers John, Duke of Bedford, and Humphrey, Duke of Gloucester. The English position in France, while strong at Henry's death, gradually eroded over the subsequent decades, particularly after the emergence of Joan of Arc and the resurgence of French national identity under the Dauphin (Charles VII). The Hundred Years' War would ultimately end with the English losing almost all their continental possessions, save for Calais, but that lies far beyond the scope of Henry V's story.

Understanding this historical background – the deep-seated dynastic conflict, the instability in England, the chaos in France, the specific events of the 1415 campaign, and the ultimate, albeit temporary, triumph enshrined in the Treaty of Troyes – is essential. It provides the factual scaffolding upon which Shakespeare builds his drama, offering context for the characters' motivations, the play's central conflicts, and the profound questions it raises about leadership, war, and national identity in the early 15th century. While Shakespeare takes liberties with historical events and timelines for dramatic effect, the core narrative of a young king asserting his claim, achieving a miraculous victory, and uniting two kingdoms is firmly rooted in the history of this extraordinary period.

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