

# Henry V

---

---

## INTRODUCTION

THE Chorus to Act 5 of *Henry V* contains an uncharacteristic, direct topical reference:

Were now the General of our gracious Empress±±  
As in good time he may±±from Ireland coming,  
Bringing rebellion broacheÁd on his sword,  
How many would the peaceful city quit  
To welcome him!

`The General' must be the Earl of Essex, whose `Empress'±±Queen Elizabeth±±had sent him on an Irish campaign on 27 March 1599; he returned, disgraced, on 28 September. Plans for his campaign had been known at least since the previous November; the idea that he might return in triumph would have been meaningless after September 1599, and it seems likely that Shakespeare wrote his play during 1599, probably in the spring. It appeared in print, in a debased text, in (probably) August 1600, when it was said to have `been sundry times played by the Right Honourable the Lord Chamberlain his servants'. Although this text seems to have been put together from memory by actors playing in an abbreviated adaptation, the Shakespearian text behind it appears to have been in a later state than the generally superior text printed from Shakespeare's own papers in the 1623 Folio. Our edition draws on the 1600 quarto in the attempt to represent the play as acted by Shakespeare's company. The principal difference is the reversion to historical authenticity in the substitution at Agincourt of the Duke of Bourbon for the Dauphin.

As in the two plays about Henry IV, Shakespeare is indebted to *The Famous Victories of Henry the Fifth* (printed 1598). Other Elizabethan plays about Henry V, now lost, may have influenced him; he certainly used the chronicle histories of Edward Hall (1542) and Holinshed (1577, revised and enlarged in 1587).

From the 'civil broils' of the earlier history plays, Shakespeare turns to portray a country united in war against France. Each act is prefaced by a Chorus, speaking some of the play's finest poetry, and giving it an epic quality. Henry V, 'star of England', is Shakespeare's most heroic warrior king, but (like his predecessors) has an introspective side, and is aware of the crime by which his father came to the throne. We are reminded of his 'wilder days', and see that the transition from 'madcap prince' to the 'mirror of all Christian kings' involves loss: although the epilogue to 2 *Henry IV* had suggested that Sir John would reappear, he is only, though poignantly, an off-stage presence. Yet Shakespeare's infusion of comic form into historical narrative reaches its natural conclusion in this play. Sir John's cronies, Pistol, Bardolph, Nim, and Mistress Quickly, reappear to provide a counterpart to the heroic action, and Shakespeare invents comic episodes involving an Englishman (Gower), a Welshman (Fluellen), an Irishman (MacMorris), and a Scot (Jamy). The play also has romance elements, in the almost incredible extent of the English victory over the French and in the disguised Henry's comradely mingling with his soldiers, as well as in his courtship of the French princess. The play's romantic and heroic aspects have made it popular especially in times of war and have aroused accusations of jingoism, but the horrors of war are vividly depicted, and the Chorus's closing speech reminds us that Henry died young, and that his son's protector 'lost France and made his England bleed'.