

Eric Griffin
Millsaps College
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The Brightest Heaven of Invention: Shakespeare, History, and *Your Thoughts*

William Shakespeare, The Life of King Henry V (c. 1599)

Enter Chorus as Prologue.

O, for a muse of fire that would ascend
The brightest heaven of invention!
A kingdom for a stage, princes to act,
And monarchs to behold the swelling scene!
Then should the warlike Harry, like himself,
Assume the port of Mars, and at his heels,
Leashed in like hounds, should famine, sword, and fire
Crouch for employment. But **pardon**, gentles all,
The flat unraisèd spirits that hath dared
On this unworthy scaffold to bring forth
So great an object. Can this cockpit hold
The vasty fields of France? Or may we cram
Within this wooden O the very casques
That did affright the air at Agincourt?
O pardon, since a crookèd figure may
Attest in little place a million,
And let us, ciphers to this great account,
On your imaginary forces work.
Suppose within the girdle of these walls
Are now confined two mighty monarchies,
Whose high uprearèd and abutting fronts
The perilous narrow ocean parts asunder.
Piece out our imperfections with your thoughts.
Into a thousand parts **divide** one man,
And **make imaginary puissance.**
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, **jumping** o'er times,
Turning th' accomplishment of many years
Into an hourglass; for the which supply,
Admit me chorus to this history,
Who, prologue-like, your humble patience pray
Gently **to hear**, kindly **to judge** our play. *He exits.*

President Pearigen, Dean Dunn, members of the Honor Council, colleagues, friends, and students—especially the Millsaps College class of **twenty, twenty-one**—I humbly beg your

patience while I talk with you for a few minutes about three things for which I care deeply: Shakespeare, History, and the rhetorical principle known as Invention, the process of finding *your thoughts*.

With generations of readers and playgoers, I came to care deeply about Shakespeare's plays as it became evident to me that they offer us portals into virtually every corner of the human condition. Even Shakespeare's contemporaries recognized the universal quality of his art. As his great rival Ben Jonson, the second most successful writer in Renaissance England, observed in 1623, Shakespeare's dramas are "not of an age, but for all time."

You probably glimpsed something of this quality yourselves, however begrudgingly, in high school when your Freshman English teachers thrust The Tragedy of Romeo and Juliet upon you. Somehow, in spite of the 420 years that separate us from that play's composition, Shakespeare was able to portray young love in ways that still speak to us, just as his The Merchant of Venice and Othello revealed, way back then, how a society that countenanced demeaning ethnic and racial stereotypes could never truly represent the virtues we associate with republican principles of government.

There are ways in which The Life of Henry V, the first Chorus of which I have just attempted to recite—and which we have included in your program to help you follow what I'm about to say—does not measure up to the more thematically compelling dramas I've just mentioned. But several important features do recommend the play in our present context. For one, it is the closest thing we have to Shakespeare's vision of an ideal leader. Henry is, as you heard in the play's prologue, a fearsome presence in time of war. He is also a uniter rather than a divider. Five years before King James began the Stuart project of

unifying Great Britain, which was not accomplished until 1707, Shakespeare's Harry elevates the English Gower, Welsh Fluellen, Irish MacMorris, and the not accidentally named Scottish Jamy, as his four main Captains. And Henry V is a master of eloquently stirring oratory. It is difficult not to be moved by wartime speeches that feature such memorable lines as "once more into the breach," or "we few, we happy few, we band of brothers." And Harry is far from being made of talk and bluster. Shakespeare shows us a leader as willing to put his life on the line for his men as his men are to follow him. Movingly bucking up his outnumbered multi-national force, Harry says, "the fewer the men, the greater the honor," and "All things be ready if our minds be so."

This is not to say that Henry V does not present problems for many modern readers. As my seniors observed last year in a course on Shakespeare, Gender, and the Nation, the play is hopelessly patriarchal. Men are bound to an immovable social hierarchy, and the only opportunities for advancement women appear to have in the play are marriage and, to put it euphemistically, "inn-keeping." Although the play contains perhaps the most charming bi-lingual wooing scene ever written for the stage, the French princess Catherine really has no choice in the matter of her marriage to the English King. She is, from a certain perspective, just another spoil of war, like the maidens Henry threatens that his soldiers may rape if their French defenders do not yield. Furthermore, the play's glorification of conquest seems to predict the exploitations and atrocities of the coming age of Empire, in which England and France, like the rest of Europe's powers, did their utmost to remake the world in their own image.

But it is mainly for its inspiring rhetoric that Henry V continues to be remembered. Already in the play's Prologue, before we view its action, the Chorus telegraphs the

magnitude of Henry's victory. The muse he calls on is "a muse of fire," a word repeated a few lines later when the Chorus pictures Harry assuming the "Port of Mars," the Roman God of War, accompanied by "Famine, sword, and fire," the fearsome dogs of war he "leashes in like hounds." This is an image you may also be acquainted with from studying The Tragedy of Julius Caesar, a drama Shakespeare wrote in the same year that he was working on Henry V. Both plays draw inspiration from the Greco-Roman biographer Plutarch, with whose writing Shakespeare was well acquainted.

Vivid though the chorus's evocation of "the vasty fields of France" may be, what I most want to share with you are the rhetorical strategies Shakespeare's Prologue emphasizes as key to the meaning of his play. Notice that it is not a muse per se that the Chorus calls upon. As you know, or will soon find out in Heritage, the invocation of the muse is a feature of Classical epic. Shakespeare had studied this tradition closely and knew he had a number of muses to pick from. Given the subject matter of the play, he might have called on Calliope, the muse of History, or Urania, the muse of Astronomy, to explain the life of Henry V, who by the end of the play has become known as "England's star." But instead he calls upon an unnamed, somewhat ambiguously represented muse, not to reveal the literal "truth" of Henry's history; rather, he wants this muse of fire to help him, as playwright and rhetor, to ascend "the brightest heaven of INVENTION."

Indeed, while Invention is the governing principle of the Chorus's entire speech, it is also one that we moderns sometimes have difficulty getting our heads around. For us, "invention" implies a product, an innovation, a device, a gadget--the HDTV, the Smart Phone, the wireless microphone, whatever—the **thing** that we put to use. But in Shakespeare's day invention most commonly described one of the principal concepts of

rhetoric. “Invention” signifies the process of finding out, of devising your argument, of discovering the best way to present a topic. Often described as “finding the thought,” invention evokes that quasi-divine instant in which the powers of the imagination kick in, when thought coalesces in such a way to propel a writer forward. Invention is what you are waiting on at 3:00 in the morning, when you’re staring at your computer screen, and you’ve got a paper due in six hours, and then somehow, magically, mysteriously, an idea kicks in and the paper gets written. This process is invention.

But invention if invention means “finding the thought,” it does not mean relying on old habits of mind, or regurgitating what it is you think your professor wants to hear. To truly invent you need to make new connections by providing yourself with new things to think about, things worthy of invention’s power. For you, this will likely mean making an earnest attempt at your assigned readings—recall that even Shakespeare relied on his Plutarch. It will also mean giving yourself the time and space to think new thoughts—which may, horror of horrors, require, at least occasionally, that you power down your cell phones.

If this thought-finding is bound intimately with the purposes of writing and speaking, it is also bound to the affect or impression that we desire our words to make on our audiences. In Shakespeare’s play we see King Harry embodying this process. He wants his troops to relate to him personally, so over and over again he searches for and finds the just the right thoughts to move them to action. And as much as his Chorus evokes King Harry’s warlike qualities, the Prologue of the play is also about creating a bond of good will between Shakespeare’s players and their audience. That “unworthy scaffold,” that “wooden O,” and that “cockpit” are concrete references to the Globe Theater, the real scene of the

play's action. And yes, between performances Shakespeare's company covered their operating costs by featuring such spectacles as bear-baiting and cockfights. If he was a supremely talented dramatist, Shakespeare was also a savvy businessman.

To return a last time to our text, note that after twice begging "pardon," a convention of rhetoric known as the appeal to pathos, Shakespeare's chorus pleads "let us," that is, the actors, work on **your** "Imaginary forces." Next he asks the audience to "suppose," to "piece out," to "divide," and to "make imaginary puissance," employing a wonderfully evocative loan word from French that suggests both strength and horsemanship. Look at all of the verbs I've highlighted in your insert. He virtually orders his audience members to "think," to "deck," to "carry," to "jump," to "turn the accomplishment of many years into an hourglass," and finally, to "admit," "to hear" and "to judge." And the vehicle for all of these actions is not solely the product of the playwright's invention, the text of Henry V. Rather, the key variable in Shakespeare's formula is, in the words the Chorus repeats twice, "YOUR THOUGHTS." Here we have the greatest writer in the English Language saying to his audience, look folks, you're going to have to work with me here—do your bit, and meet the actors halfway!

I believe that the relationship Shakespeare envisions between his audience and his actors is analogous to the relationship that exists between yourselves and your Millsaps professors. Among this faculty and at your service are some of the finest teachers in American higher education. Collectively, they represent a repository of knowledge and expertise far beyond any you are likely to have encountered prior to entering our gates. They could, if they wished to do so, supply you with more information than you could possibly process. Granted, it is necessary to acquire baseline skill and information sets

whenever you begin a new field of study. But the University of Phoenix can give you those. In the Information Age, facts are cheap and everyone is suffering Google overload. Therefore, the retrieval of facts is not what most of us will ask of you. We want you to suppose, to imagine, to piece out, to divide, to think, to hear, and to judge. In other words, above all else, we want to fire YOUR THOUGHTS.

This is bound to make some of you uncomfortable. In the thirteen years of formal education many of you experienced to prior to coming to Millsaps, you were subjected to the perhaps well-intentioned follies of No Child Left Behind and Every Child Succeeds. In that world, you became sufficiently accomplished in taking standardized tests. But you have not regularly been asked to think and to imagine, to hear and to judge. Invention to many of you remains an object rather than a process, and to begin thinking about invention in a new way will require of you a lot of practice. Fortunately, our Liberal Arts curriculum has been designed to help you do precisely this: that is, PRACTICE.

Ventures will ask you to explore creative solutions to important problems. Connections will teach you the basic principles of rhetoric: how to direct your oral and written communication toward particular aims and audiences, and Heritage will paint for you the broad span of human history so that you can begin to make reasoned judgments about historical problems, to consider what aspects of the past are worth carrying forward, and which might be best consigned to History's proverbial dustbins. Through all of this you will be doing more writing than you've ever done in your life: it's true what they say, you know. We even make you write in Math class at Millsaps. But all of this work will have a singular purpose. If you are to attain the brightest heaven of invention, the process of getting there will require you to develop, more than anything else, YOUR THOUGHTS.

