

DRAMATURG'S NOTE: *HENRY V*

Written in 1598 or 1599, *Henry V* is the final instalment in Shakespeare's cycle of History plays; started eight years earlier with what we now call *Henry VI Part II*, the full cycle is an extraordinary portrait of England negotiating its past and present, its transition from the medieval to the modern period, and its continual exploration of power, monarchy, and divinity. As the concluding play in the second tetralogy, *Henry V* is a mirror to *Richard III*, and prefigures the entire Wars of the Roses tetralogy, whilst simultaneously reflecting a change in attitudes towards nationhood and gender – *Henry V* anticipates England's transformation to colonial superpower in the modern period. *Henry V* is perhaps the decisive moment when history (the events) becomes History (the socio-cultural narrative) through *history* (the progression of ideological strategies).

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The England of Elizabeth I was by no means the picture-book 'Golden Age' we are commonly presented with. True, there was a degree of leniency and tolerance for different religious groups, as well as economic expansion, lower taxes, and a burgeoning in cultural products such as theatre, music, and literature; at the same time however, England was riddled with political dissent and social unrest, religious tensions (despite the tolerance), and economic unevenness. Following the victory over the Spanish Armada in 1588, harsh government policy meant English mariners themselves often went unpaid and hungry, and attempts to rectify this often ended in the implementing of periods of martial law. Bubonic plague was an almost annual recurrence throughout the 1590s, and the average life expectancy was barely more than thirty-five.

A lot of these tensions mirror the England of Henry V, less than two-hundred years before. Henry's England was also one of relative peace and stability – he restored lands to dispossessed nobles, and atoned for old injuries – but his reign was marked by a ruthless pragmatism, something which comes through in Shakespeare's play. Henry's claim to the throne of France, using (his great-grandfather)

Edward III's claim as justification for his own, was compounded by Charles VI of France's mental instability and the divided nature of the French state. Henry's claim on France climaxes in Shakespeare's play at the Siege of Harfleur and the battle of Agincourt (both waged in 1415); historically, they were the start of a much longer campaign against France, part of the Hundred Years' War. Where Henry's major political and militaristic test as a leader came at Agincourt in October 1415, Elizabeth's was in the form of the Spanish Armada in 1588; you only need to look at the state of the English army in both cases to see that Shakespeare's dramaturgy was both pertinent and justified.

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The role of women in Elizabeth's England is a complicated one, as there had been freedoms and hardships throughout the Middle Ages, but a multitude of socio-economic and cultural factors were contributing to a widening division between public and private life, placing women firmly in a domestic space separated from the realms of economic and political activity. This is the context which Shakespeare is writing in, and which he is contributing to through his plays. In Shakespeare's first cycle of History plays (the Wars of the Roses cycle – the *Henry VI* and *Richard III* plays), the women are queens, noblewomen, and warriors; women who are fiercely and decidedly independent of men (think of Queen Margaret and Queen Elizabeth in *Richard III*). In the second cycle (the Henriad or 'Hollow Crown' plays – *Richard II*, *Henry IV*, and *Henry V*) the women are wives, widows, spoils of war, prostitutes; women who are defined through their relationship with (and for) men. If viewed in the order they were written, we can see a distinct shift in attitudes towards women, one that corresponds with a larger paradigmatic shift towards the creation of gendered stereotypes with regards to societal roles and work. At the same time as dramatically exploring this shift in attitude, Shakespeare is directly playing into and cementing them, helping to establish the notion of gender we experience today.

This is the context in which our production sits. Quite early on in our conversations, director Leith McPherson was keen to explore the role of women in Shakespeare's play as in the broader context of Elizabethan England, and what it might mean for us today (we are, of course, 'Elizabethans' once again) – both the play, and to see a cast of women perform this otherwise masculine play; what might it look like if these words, normally spoken by men, were spoken by women? In doing so, McPherson seemed to be echoing Henry himself, when he asks, "May I with right and conscience make this claim?" [I.2]

Echoing Elizabethan political crises of succession as much as contemporary political campaigns both in Australia, New Zealand, the United States of America and elsewhere, McPherson says "the question of 'can a woman play the role [of Henry V]?' is the problem... In Shakespeare, it is not 'men and women,' but 'men and other.' Men are the norm, everything else is a question-mark." In our production we hope to explore this idea and start to reclaim these plays for women, put women back into Shakespeare's History plays so as to see them – the plays, characters, and situations – afresh, and re-evaluate them for the twenty-first century.

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