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# Remembering Agincourt: An Analysis of King Henry V's Impact on English National Identity

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# CHARTING CURRENTS OF WESTERN THOUGHT

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*Remembering Agincourt: An Analysis of King Henry V's Impact on English National Identity*

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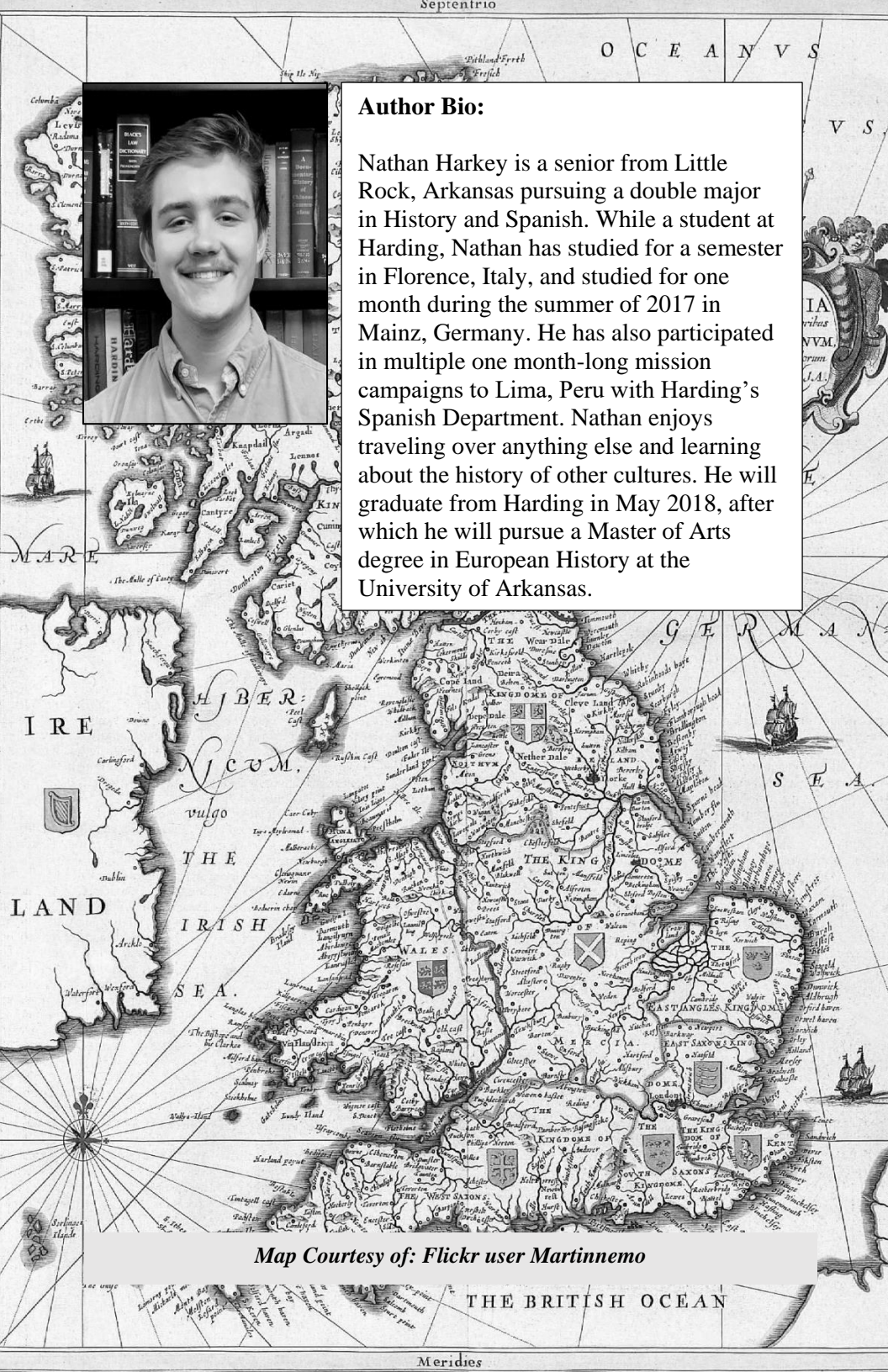
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Nathan Harkey is a senior from Little Rock, Arkansas pursuing a double major in History and Spanish. While a student at Harding, Nathan has studied for a semester in Florence, Italy, and studied for one month during the summer of 2017 in Mainz, Germany. He has also participated in multiple one month-long mission campaigns to Lima, Peru with Harding's Spanish Department. Nathan enjoys traveling over anything else and learning about the history of other cultures. He will graduate from Harding in May 2018, after which he will pursue a Master of Arts degree in European History at the University of Arkansas.



Map Courtesy of: Flickr user Martinemo

THE BRITISH OCEAN

# REMEMBERING AGINCOURT: AN ANALYSIS OF KING HENRY V'S IMPACT ON ENGLISH NATIONAL IDENTITY

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By Nathan Harkey

On June 6, 1944, the combined allied forces swarmed the beaches of Normandy in an attempt to break through the Nazi-controlled Atlantic Wall. The future of the free world was at stake, as an allied failure would solidify German control of continental Europe, and effectively kill any allied momentum. An unparalleled amount of soldiers were certain to die during the D-Day invasion, and the ensuing bombardment would test the mettle of the most fearless among them. However, a seaborne invasion of France was not an unprecedented approach for military tacticians, especially to those of the British Army. A famous speech sounded over the loudspeakers of many of the landing craft, reminding the soldiers of an English king who, five centuries before launched a daring campaign to win the French crown.<sup>1</sup> “Once more unto the breach dear friends, once more; Or close the wall up with our English dead.” These words, taken from Shakespeare’s *Henry V*, were used to embolden the terrified soldiers whose duty was to break through the German breach at Normandy, or else become the English dead of the Atlantic Wall.

This paper examines the Agincourt campaign of King Henry V, and the legacy that it has left on the people of England.<sup>2</sup> Henry ascended the throne as the second monarch of the House of Lancaster in 1413, in the middle of the Hundred Years War. Though his reign lasted only nine years, he would be continually celebrated for his accomplishments, both on and off of the field of battle. According to Churchill, Henry “was entirely national in his outlook” as he was the first king to advocate

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<sup>1</sup> Charles Carlton, *Royal Warriors: A Military History of the British Monarchy*, (New York: Routledge, 2014), 49.

<sup>2</sup> For the sake of this paper, any references to Henry V after 1707 Act of Union will still be treated as English national identity, in the sense that most people who consider themselves British still speak the English language, and the history of England is at the center of British History. From a national and historical point of view, there is no Britain as we know it without England.

exclusively English interests, which included using the English language in official correspondence, and English troops instead of foreign armies.<sup>3</sup> Because of Henry, by the fifteenth century “the English aristocracy [had] to learn the language of their Norman ancestors as a foreign tongue.”<sup>4</sup> England and France had been directly connected through the Duchies of Normandy and Aquitaine for hundreds of years, and through their rivalry with each other, both were pushing for more nationalistic states. Henry’s Agincourt campaign and the immense success that followed would directly influence the creation of a unified English identity: one that would never again consider itself subordinate to the likes of France, let alone any other European nation. This identity would be further cemented and embellished by influential figures who followed, who used Henry V as a symbol that embodies England as a nation consecrated by God through successful confrontation against a formidable rival.

At the beginning of the Hundred Years War, the English had lost many of their possessions in France, including Normandy. However, they still held Aquitaine and some other provinces as a vassal of the French king, for which they had to reluctantly pay homage.<sup>5</sup> This situation ensured that by the time Henry V ascended the throne, the sentiment of nationalism had enormously increased in both countries.<sup>6</sup> As a brief explanation, the English kings were reluctant to kneel to the French kings, and both sides desired to have their lands back. The fact that the English held French land threatened the national unity of both sides, because France would never be complete without it, and England would always be reminded of how large their holdings once were.

From the outset of Henry’s reign, he planned to assert his claim as ‘king of France.’<sup>7</sup> His was essentially a continuation of Edward III’s claim through the female line to the late Charles IV of France.<sup>8</sup> The

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<sup>3</sup> Sir Winston Churchill, *A History of the English-Speaking Peoples*, vol. 2, *The Birth of Britain*, (New York: Dodd, Mead, 1956), 409.

<sup>4</sup> A.L. Rowse, *The Spirit of English History*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1945), 39.

<sup>5</sup> Edward P. Cheyney, *A Short History of England*, (Boston: Ginn and Company, 1904), 230.

<sup>6</sup> Rowse, 39.

<sup>7</sup> Cheyney, 230.

<sup>8</sup> Anne Curry, *Agincourt: A New History*. (Stroud, United Kingdom: The History Press, 2005), 17.

House of Commons granted new taxes for him, which “was, in effect, a vote for the continuation of the war in France.”<sup>9</sup> Henry sailed with a massive fleet, “the finest task force ever seen in England before the age of the Tudors,”<sup>10</sup> from Portsmouth on August 11, 1415, and landed at the mouth of the Seine two days later.<sup>11</sup> From here, he promptly besieged the town of Harfleur, a drawn out affair which Shakespeare immortalized: “Follow your spirit, and upon this charge [c]ry ‘God for Harry, England, and St. George!’”<sup>12</sup>

Although Harfleur eventually capitulated to the English forces after six weeks of siege, Henry’s army grew smaller each day due to a disease that was spreading among his soldiers. After the losses sustained, and after he sent many of the sick home, Henry was left with around 15,000 men, half the number that he came with.<sup>13</sup> Therefore, Henry decided to leave a garrison in Harfleur and march quickly to Calais, another port town that was controlled by the English.<sup>14</sup> From there, Henry would have established a strong foothold, with control of two northern French ports. He could wait out the time that it took to replenish his army, and then use both Harfleur and Calais as staging points for a renewed invasion.

Whatever plan Henry had for his forces when he reached Calais, he was cut off by the Dauphin of France and his army. When asked by the French heralds to pick a day for the battle and which route he was taking to Calais, “Henry answered ‘by the straightest’ and that if his enemies sought him it would be at their peril.”<sup>15</sup> Such a brisk answer indicates that Henry was determined not to admit that he was in a perilous situation, for the English by all accounts were outnumbered, and the French army was fresh. Whether he was convinced that God

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<sup>9</sup> Juliet Barker, *Agincourt: Henry V and the Battle that Made England*, (New York: Little, Brown and Co), 341.

<sup>10</sup> Christopher Allmand, *Henry V*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), 221.

<sup>11</sup> James H. Wylie, *The Reign of Henry the Fifth*, vol. 2, (Cambridge: University of Cambridge Press, 1919), 5-7.

<sup>12</sup> William Shakespeare, *Henry V*, III.1.33-34.

<sup>13</sup> The Honorable Clive Bigham, *The Kings of England: 1066-1901*. (New York: E.P. Dutton and Co, 1929), 197.

<sup>14</sup> Curry, 119-124.

<sup>15</sup> Bigham, 197.

supported his claim, or that his English soldiers were simply up to the challenge, Henry was prepared to put them into the field of battle. Whatever his motives, the armies met at the field of Agincourt on October 25, 1415; the feast day of Saints Crispin and Crispinian.<sup>16</sup>

One of the most disputed issues of the battle, and one that has the greatest potential to be miscalculated, is the question of the sizes of the two armies that met at Agincourt. Most historians agree with James Wylie in his three-volume work on Henry V, when he asserts that “the chroniclers regard it as a fight between the giant and the dwarf.”<sup>17</sup> In Wylie’s own reckoning, while some of the numbers are astronomical, such as 200,000 French and 26,000 English, it is instead more prudent to believe the word the author of *Gesta Henrici Quinti* (*The Deeds of Henry V*), who would have been an eyewitness of the battle. He claimed to have numbered the English himself at 6,000 effective fighting men, with a French force of “at least ten times their superiors in number.”<sup>18</sup>

Most historians agree that the French vastly outnumbered the English. The Honorable Clive Bigham states that while the French had columns that were thirty men deep, the English were but four.<sup>19</sup> Shakespeare’s own propagandized version of the battle runs along the same lines, putting the number of French at 60,000, which outnumbered the English five to one.<sup>20</sup> On the other hand, there are historians that reject this disparity in number entirely, likely because they rely less on English sources. For instance, in her new history of the battle, Anne Curry insists that “[t]he English estimates, stretching from 60,000 to 160,000, are completely impossible.” Instead, her analysis of primarily French sources puts the French army at a manageable 12,000 men, while Henry’s army was “a few hundred either side of 9,000.”<sup>21</sup> While Curry’s conclusion is much more closely-matched than most other accounts, it is well-reasoned and provides a legitimate opposition to the astonishing reports that came from English chroniclers.

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<sup>16</sup> Bigham, 197.

<sup>17</sup> Wylie, 141.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>19</sup> Bigham, 198.

<sup>20</sup> Shakespeare, *Henry V*, IV.3.2-4.

<sup>21</sup> Curry, 225-28.

The differences in estimations of army sizes at Agincourt lead to a couple of conclusions regarding the nationalistic tendencies of both sides. Naturally, the English would have reported numbers ranging on the insurmountable to aid Henry's campaign, just as the French chroniclers would have downplayed their actual number in an effort to save face. Regardless of the actual numbers, it is safe to assume that the English were outnumbered from the start, and that on a normal day, the odds were stacked firmly in the favor of the French. According to Churchill, the resulting victory was "the most heroic of all the land battles England has ever fought."<sup>22</sup> On the other hand, the outcome of the battle must have been a slap in the face to the French, whose overconfidence was crushed as thoroughly as their army.<sup>23</sup>

The English had their own advantages that were crucial to their victory. The first of these is the use of the English longbow, which revolutionized medieval warfare.<sup>24</sup> While the French could by all accounts boast more numbers, "the weakness of the whole vast force lay undoubtedly in the paucity of its bowmen."<sup>25</sup> Even if the numbers were as close as Anne Curry suggests, she further explains that of her minimum estimation of 8,732 English, only 1,593 were men-at-arms, and the remaining 7,139 were archers.<sup>26</sup> This statistic, combined with the fact that the French heavily relied on their cavalry and men-at-arms proved a heavy English artillery advantage. Further, the few archers that the French had were merely crossbowmen. While the crossbow bolt had more penetrating power, the English archers "could fire 10 to 12 arrows a minute and had a maximum range of almost 400 yards," a return that the cumbersome crossbow could not equal.<sup>27</sup> Added to their ineffectiveness was the fact that many of the French nobles had pushed their crossbowmen to the back of the battle, or dismissed them entirely, to clear the way for the vanguard.<sup>28</sup> Therefore, the French archers that

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<sup>22</sup> Churchill, 404.

<sup>23</sup> Curry, 278-297.

<sup>24</sup> Brian L. Blakeley and Jacquelin Collins, *Documents in English History: Early Times to Present*. (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1975), 83.

<sup>25</sup> Wylie, 145.

<sup>26</sup> Curry, 228.

<sup>27</sup> Blakeley, 83.

<sup>28</sup> Curry, 249-250.



actually participated in the battle “were driven out of range by the swift and unerring skill of the English archer who never shot arrow amiss.”<sup>29</sup>

With the French archers out of range, the author of *Gesta* explains how the French cavalry, confident in their strength, descended upon the English but, “by God’s will, they were forced to fall back under showers of arrows and flee to their rearguard,” which effectively killed any momentum that the French hoped to build.<sup>30</sup> At this point, the English gained another advantage. The field had been freshly sown with wheat, and torrents of rain mixed with the trampling of the French cavalry had effectively turned the battlefield into a quagmire.<sup>31</sup> That first division of the attacking French was bogged down and grew tired in the mud, effectively trapping them and even further increasing the deadliness of the English arrows.<sup>32</sup> With between two and four dozen arrows apiece, the archers created an onslaught “so that the air was darkened as with a cloud.”<sup>33</sup> Hand-to-hand combat was eventually joined, but the French were so tightly packed that they began to fall upon their own dead, and they were trampled by both their own numbers and the English.<sup>34</sup> The numbers that originally gave the French confidence were now their source of panic, as the initial English success created a mass surrender. According to *Gesta*, “there were some of them, even of their more nobly born, who that day surrendered themselves more than ten times.”<sup>35</sup> King Henry had won the day.

Agincourt was similar in some regards to the victories of Crécy and Poitiers,<sup>36</sup> won by Edward III and his son, the Black Prince in the previous century. These three battles are the most famous military

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<sup>29</sup> Wylie, 159.

<sup>30</sup> Frank Taylor and John S. Roskell, trans, *Gesta Henrici Quinti: The Deeds of Henry the Fifth*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), 87.

<sup>31</sup> Curry, 254.

<sup>32</sup> Bigham, 198.

<sup>33</sup> Wylie, 152-153.

<sup>34</sup> Curry, 235.

<sup>35</sup> *Gesta Henrici Quinti*, 91.

<sup>36</sup> Crécy (1346) and Poitiers (1356) are generally considered to be two of the most important victories of the first half of the Hundred Years’ War.

engagements involving the French armies in the period 1300-1420.<sup>37</sup> Not only did the English win each of these battles, but they did so against considerably larger French forces. The numbers at Poitiers were considerably closer than the wild reports at Agincourt. The French army, at about 16,000 strong, reportedly had at least 10,000 more men-at-arms than the English.<sup>38</sup> All assertions of the numbers at Agincourt indicate a much more outnumbered English force, except for the claim by Anne Curry. Crécy, on the other hand, was more comparable to Agincourt regarding the overwhelming size of the French army. Of note here is the amount of Genoese crossbowmen, a hired mercenary force that amounted to as many as 15,000 according to Jean Froissart's *Chronicles*.<sup>39</sup> The amount of crossbowmen alone outnumbers the reported strength of 14,000 English, and the French still had a host of men-at-arms and infantry.

These three battles were helped to foster a growing hatred between France and England, and are drawn even closer in significance by the effectiveness of the English archers, who reportedly at Crécy "shot their arrows with such force and quickness that it seemed as if it snowed."<sup>40</sup> In each battle, the English longbow was more efficient than the burdensome crossbow. It was crucial in creating confusion and panic among the French forces, enabling the English to win at improbable odds against much larger armies. Even with the technological advancement of methods of artillery, the longbow remained central to England's tactical practice for the next couple of centuries. British army officer Charles Lee, through his correspondence with Benjamin Franklin would even recommend it as the more effective weapon over the flintlock musket as late as 1792.<sup>41</sup> Almost four-hundred years after Agincourt, the longbow

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<sup>37</sup> Chris Given-Wilson and Françoise Bériac, "Edward III's Prisoners of War: The Battle of Poitiers and Its Context," *The English Historical Review* 116, no. 468 (Sep 2001): 807.

<sup>38</sup> A.H. Burne, "The Battle of Poitiers," *The English Historical Review* 53, no. 209 (Jan 1938): 45.

<sup>39</sup> Jean Froissart, *The Chronicles of England, France, Spain and the Adjoining Countries*, translated by Thomas Johnes, rev. ed., (New York and London: The Cooperative Publication Society) 1901, pp. 39-41, 42, 44-45.

<sup>41</sup> Thomas Esper, "The Replacement of the Longbow by Firearms in the English Army," *Technology and Culture* 6, no. 3 (1965): 382.

was still considered one of the most efficient methods of artillery to some English tacticians, inextricably linking it to the national identity and military culture of England.

While these similarities between the battles of Crécy, Poitiers, and Agincourt help to demonstrate the strong cultural significance of the English longbow, there are differences in the outcomes that make Agincourt the more decisive victory. According to Curry, the number of French dead at Poitiers was around 2,500, while those at Crécy numbered from between 2,000 and 4,000.<sup>42</sup> The death toll at Agincourt was much more grievous for the French. According to *Gesta*, while the English army hardly exceeded 6,000 men, they had killed at least that many French. Among the slain were “the dukes of Bar, Brabant, and Alençon, five counts, [and] more than ninety barons and bannerets.”<sup>43</sup> As Shakespeare poetically describes it, “[h]ere was a royal fellowship of death.”<sup>44</sup> The implication of this was catastrophic for the French. While a large chunk of the French nobility had been decimated, Edward, Duke of York and Michael, Earl of Suffolk were the only significant English deaths.<sup>45</sup> In fact, while *Gesta* numbers only nine or ten other English dead, the contemporary ratio of between four to one and five to one French to English dead is more believable.<sup>46</sup> Regardless of the actual number, the important issue is that the French suffered a considerable blow to their leadership, which would take them decades to recover from.<sup>47</sup> The ability for a much smaller country to repeatedly defeat the massive numbers that the French could put on the field exposed the arrogance of the leaders of France, while England developed a reputation of prudence and discipline in warfare.

According to Churchill, “Henry’s victory at Agincourt made him the supreme figure in Europe.”<sup>48</sup> This attitude made evident the second significant difference between Agincourt and the English victories of the fourteenth century: The Treaty of Troyes in 1420. The Treaty, made

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<sup>42</sup> Curry, 295.

<sup>43</sup> *Gesta Henrici Quinti*, 95.

<sup>44</sup> Shakespeare, *Henry V*, IV.8.94.

<sup>45</sup> *Gesta Henrici Quinti*, 97.

<sup>46</sup> Given-Wilson, 806.

<sup>47</sup> Curry, 278-297.

<sup>48</sup> Churchill, 408.

possible by the Agincourt campaign and the subsequent infirmities of the French nobility, named Henry the regent of France, and promised him the crown upon the death of the French king, Charles VI.<sup>49</sup> With this accomplishment, Henry surpassed his ancestor, Edward III. While Edward declared himself king of France in 1340, his assertion was disputed at best. Edward made his way to Reims<sup>50</sup> in 1359 “with a crown in his baggage,” but “the following year he came to a treaty with the French king, John II.”<sup>51</sup> In contrast, Henry V’s claim was made legitimate by the Treaty of Troyes, and although his work would eventually be undone by his untimely death, the English rule of both kingdoms would prove to be the high water-mark of the Anglo-French rivalry.

Involvement in the battle made it possible for any person who fought, no matter the status of their birth, to achieve the aspirations that others could only dream of. After the battle, a new generation of heraldry emerged, almost exclusively comprised of Agincourt veterans. While most knights and esquires were too low-born or of too meager means to achieve higher status, Henry made a special provision for those who served at the battle. He proclaimed that no one should wear a coat of arms “to which he was not entitled either by ancestral right or official grant...[t]he sole exemption to this was for ‘those who bore arms with us at the Battle of Agincourt.’”<sup>52</sup> Shakespeare referenced this system of reward, showing a king who made good on his promises to trusty English yeomen: “For he today that sheds his blood with me, shall be my brother; be he ne’er so vile, [t]his day shall gentle his condition.”<sup>53</sup>

Many of those who fought at Agincourt certainly enjoyed a gentler condition thereafter. For instance, John de Wodehouse developed a coat of arms with a gold chevron, “scattered with drops of blood.” He also added the simple motto, “Agincourt,” a move imitated by Sir Roland de Lenthale.<sup>54</sup> Further, Richard Waller added the Orléans shield to his coat of arms to commemorate his capture of the Duke of Orleans at

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<sup>49</sup> Blakeley, “The Treaty of Troyes,” *Documents*, 105-107.

<sup>50</sup> Reims was the traditional place of coronation for French kings.

<sup>51</sup> Curry, 17.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 349.

<sup>53</sup> Shakespeare, *Henry V*, IV.3.61-3.

<sup>54</sup> Barker, 349.

Agincourt.<sup>55</sup> Finally, there was perhaps no greater honor for an Englishman than to be admitted into the Most Noble Order of the Garter, which was founded by Edward III in 1348 to support his claim to the throne of France.<sup>56</sup> In 1420, the year of the Treaty of Troyes, it was only fitting that of the twenty-six members of the Order, at least half were Agincourt veterans.<sup>57</sup> The promotion of English nationalism was central to all of this heraldic development. In a country that had been directly connected, and even subordinate, to France in the recent past, it was a wise move to reward those who had helped to break that yoke.

The lasting importance of the battle of Agincourt is its legacy, remembered both by contemporaries and by those who followed. King Henry V, while well-loved in his time, is most immortalized in the 1599 play by William Shakespeare. Shakespeare's Henry prophetically encourages his soldiers the moments before battle:

“Then shall our names, familiar in their names as household words...be in their flowing cups freshly remembered. This story shall the good man teach his son; and Crispin Crispian shall ne'er go by, from this day to the ending of the world, but we in it shall be remembered.”<sup>58</sup>

Although the actual Henry may not have anticipated such a remembrance, Shakespeare had the advantage of being almost two centuries removed from the battle. He was a witness to the fact that “Agincourt became a part of the English Church calendar and no one in England or Wales would be allowed to forget the anniversary of the battle or the part that God and his saints had played in securing their victory.”<sup>59</sup> Shakespeare would have had this in mind when he wrote that section of his famous “Crispin's Day Speech, as a testament to how successfully the battle had been remembered, or perhaps as a challenge for future generations to honor their English forefathers.

Shakespeare's contribution to the way scholars view Henry V cannot be underestimated from a historical point of view. Shakespeare's

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<sup>55</sup> Barker, 349.

<sup>56</sup> College of St George - Windsor Castle - The Order of the Garter.

<sup>57</sup> Barker, 348.

<sup>58</sup> Shakespeare, *Henry V*, IV.3.51-2,55-9.

<sup>59</sup> Barker, 342-43.

plays are not the factual records that historians usually rely on, but they can be interpreted as a form of creative history. In fact, John Churchill, the famous Duke of Marlborough and hero of the Battle of Blenheim (1704), admitted that “Shakespeare’s plays were the only English History I ever read,”<sup>60</sup> which is a testament to the ability of Shakespeare to turn a true story into a thrilling tale. It is also important to realize that Shakespeare had a purpose in mind as an author, and that purpose has greatly affected the overall opinion of the English kings that he chose as subjects. For instance, as he praises Henry V, Shakespeare just as effectively wields his talent to foster a universal hatred of Richard III. However, just because he writes to accomplish an agenda should not take away from the historical significance of his work. The author of *Gesta* also had a purpose when he wrote his chronicle. The account, although written by an eyewitness, is undoubtedly a work of propaganda for King Henry and the English nation. Therefore, while one must not take Shakespeare’s writing as entirely factual, it would be impossible to deny that it was historically significant in establishing the popular perception of Henry V and Agincourt today.

In his biography of the king, Christopher Allmand asserts that “Shakespeare was to create a Henry V destined to become part of England’s cultural heritage.”<sup>61</sup> He did this by invoking God’s favor at every turn, a propaganda device that is also found in *Gesta*. Shakespeare’s representation is so effective because it is “a remarkable study of how a nation remembers.”<sup>62</sup> In his article, “Wars of Memory in *Henry V*,” Jonathan Baldo explains that “[c]ontrol over how a nation remembers a momentous event like a war is almost as significant as the outcome of the war itself, given how crucial memory is for the legitimation and exercise of power.”<sup>63</sup> While the outcome of Agincourt was crucial in its own right, an extra appreciation of the events is owed to Shakespeare’s ability to eloquently tell a story that was designed to present the battle as an essential part of English culture.

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<sup>60</sup> Carlton, 48.

<sup>61</sup> Allmand, 435.

<sup>62</sup> Jonathan Baldo, “Wars of Memory in *Henry V*,” *Shakespeare Quarterly* 47, no. 2 (1996): 132.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, 133.

Shakespeare's principal theme in *Henry V*, according to Derek Traversi, "is the establishment in England of an order based on consecrated authority and crowned successfully by action against France."<sup>64</sup> During the religious turmoil that characterized the reign of Elizabeth I (1558-1603), many would have wanted assurance that England had God on her side. Shakespeare's attempt to provide this assurance is addressed in the article "Holy War in *Henry V*" by Stephen Marx, who claims that the victory at Agincourt follows "the model of all of God's interventions in human history." He compares the Agincourt story in Shakespeare's English history cycle with the Red Sea victory in the Bible, likening Henry V as a national hero to Moses, therefore denoting the intervention of God on the side of the English.<sup>65</sup> Textual examples help to demonstrate this form of propaganda. Shakespeare repeatedly invokes St. George, the patron saint of England, as the directly involved mediator between God and the English. Further, in act four of Shakespeare's play, Henry points to God as the victor: "Come, go we in procession to the village. And be it death proclaimed through our host [t]o boast of this or take that praise from God [w]hich is his only."<sup>66</sup> In the corresponding section of *Gesta*, the author expresses the same sentiment after the battle: "[F]ar be it from our people to ascribe the triumph to their own glory or strength; rather let it be ascribed to God alone, from Whom is every victory."<sup>67</sup> In each case, special attention is given to ensure that the reader understands that God was on the side of the English. In the 1590s, when tensions between Protestants and Catholics were certainly high, this language influenced the concept of religious war in England.<sup>68</sup> The Tudors wanted a united England, not bound to any religious or temporal authority of their own, and Shakespeare fulfilled this purpose by creating a memory that Elizabethan

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<sup>64</sup> Derek Traversi, *Shakespeare: From Richard II to Henry V*, (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1957), 166.

<sup>65</sup> Steven Marx, "Holy War in Henry Fifth" *Shakespeare Survey* 48 (1995) p. 85-86.

<sup>66</sup> Shakespeare, *Henry V*, IV.8.107-13.

<sup>67</sup> *Gesta Henrici Quinti*, 99.

<sup>68</sup> Allmand, 434-35.

England could look to as an example when, like Henry V, they were repeatedly called to arms.<sup>69</sup>

Reaching from the Tudor age, “the heroic view of Henry V has remained constant over the centuries,” notably the periods of the Victorian Era and in World War II.<sup>70</sup> The Victorians viewed Henry V as the epitomized Englishman. In the account of Bishop William Stubbs, “Henry was “religious, pure in life, temperate, liberal, careful and yet splendid, merciful, truthful, honourable, direct in word, provident in council, prudent in judgment, modest in looks, magnanimous in acts, a true Englishman.”<sup>71</sup> The Victorians aligned Henry to the values of their society. They portrayed him as a national hero who fit the romanticized mold of the perfect Christian gentleman; one who could serve as a role model to English schoolchildren.<sup>72</sup>

On the stage, Shakespeare’s *Henry V* was seldom performed in the nineteenth century, but was notably produced by Charles Kean in 1859.<sup>73</sup> At a time when the threat of a French invasion under Napoleon III was likely, Victorian society could identify on multiple levels with the themes of national unity and armed conflict against a rival that were prevalent in *Henry V*. In fact, many of the reviews of Kean’s rendition praised the importance that he placed on the battle scenes. The *Saturday Review* considered the Siege of Harfleur “the first genuine battle ever seen on theatrical boards,” which Gail Marshall views as a societal awareness of the language of war.<sup>74</sup> While Victorian society viewed Henry V as a true Englishman, the political climate echoed the conflict present during Henry’s Agincourt campaign, which made him an example of English national interest and integrity.

Shifting from the Victorian Age to the mid-twentieth century, the portrayal of Henry V changed in characterization from the epitome of virtue to a source of inspiration and national pride during the Second

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<sup>69</sup> Baldo, 133.

<sup>70</sup> Charles Carlton, 48.

<sup>71</sup> Desmond Seward, *Henry V as Warlord*, (London: Sedgewick and Jackson, 1987), xviii.

<sup>72</sup> Carlton, 48.

<sup>73</sup> Gail Marshall, "Patriotism and Charles Kean: Henry V in 1859," *Nineteenth Century Theatre & Film* 36, no. 1 (June 2009): 61.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, 65.



World War. Winston Churchill most notably used him as way to inspire heroism. A noted nationalist, Churchill labeled the English crown “[as] a sacred, mystical, almost metaphysical institution, which proclaimed the unity and identity of the nation.”<sup>75</sup> He believed in the monarchy as a unifying power, made more powerful considering that it had stood the test of over a thousand years, where others had capitulated along the way. His nationalistic tendencies could be further explained by the fact that he wrote a four volume *History of the English-Speaking Peoples*.

As much as he was an anglophile, Churchill was also a devoted Shakespearian to the extent that he almost won a prize as a schoolboy for reciting a thousand of his lines.<sup>76</sup> Especially during the war, he saw the value of Henry V as a patriarchal figure, one that could inspire both soldiers, and common citizens, all of whom were expected to contribute in any necessary way to the war effort. He accomplished this in 1943 by making sure that the few reels of precious technicolor film available in England were used to make Laurence Olivier’s version of Shakespeare’s play.<sup>77</sup> Olivier’s version is still considered one of the most successful renditions of the play, only rivalled in film by Kenneth Branagh’s version of 1989. Still to this day, according to Charles Carlton, “[a]sk anyone what they associate with Henry V, and they will most likely answer the Shakespearian view of the heroic warrior king, portrayed by Laurence Olivier...or by Kenneth Branagh.”<sup>78</sup> Of these renditions, Olivier’s especially was fundamental to the war effort, and would not have been made possible without Churchill’s love of Shakespeare. Olivier shared his own opinion on the impact of the movie: “Looking back, I don’t think we could have won the war without ‘Once more unto the breach...’ somewhere in our soldiers’ hearts.”<sup>79</sup> Through his involvement with Olivier’s movie, Churchill made it possible for every English citizen to envision a nation that stood firm in the face of

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<sup>75</sup> David Cannadine, “Churchill and the British Monarchy,” *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* 11, (2001): 251.

<sup>76</sup> Martin Gilbert, *Churchill: A Life* (New York: Holt, 1991), 21.

<sup>77</sup> Carlton, *Royal Warriors*, 48.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, 46.

<sup>79</sup> Kevin Ewert, *Henry V: A Guide to the Text and its Theatrical Life* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 118.

fearsome odds without surrender, emboldening them to do the same against the German threat.

There are several connections between Henry V's small "band of brothers" at Agincourt and the British forces in World War II. Some were situational, but most were methodically created to boost morale. Perhaps the most obvious of examples is that both the attacks on D-Day and the Agincourt campaign were launched in Normandy. Churchill was aware of most, if not all of these similarities. For instance, in his retelling of the Agincourt campaign in *A History of the English-Speaking Peoples*, Churchill says that "[Henry] had to ascend the Somme to above Amiens by Boves and Corbie, and could only cross at the ford of Béthencourt. All of these names are well known to our generation."<sup>80</sup> Here, Churchill hardly made any effort in connecting two English forces that, although only five-hundred years apart, could identify with each other through the trials of war, even in some of the same places. The promotion and success of Olivier's movie ensured that some of the soldiers would have had this significance in mind as they prepared to fight. As Shakespeare's famous "Once more unto the breach" speech sounded throughout the landing craft on D-Day, Churchill's desire to connect the two invasions was actualized, as the memory of Henry V was fresh on the minds of those who invaded Normandy in 1944.

Although many at the time may not have realized it, Shakespeare's dialogue in *Henry V* directly influenced some of Churchill's most important wartime speeches. The parallels are almost eerie, but understandable when one realizes that Churchill, like Henry, had the daunting task of encouraging his people to overcome the fear of death at a time when it was most critical to their survival. That, combined with the excellent knowledge of Shakespeare that Churchill possessed, made him the seemingly perfect candidate for the job. For example, in his *History of the English-Speaking Peoples*, Churchill chooses to highlight Shakespeare's "the fewer men, the greater share of honor."<sup>81</sup> In this instance, while discussing the real Henry and his actions, Churchill uses Shakespeare's Henry to provide dialogue that the

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<sup>80</sup> Churchill, 403.

<sup>81</sup> Shakespeare, *Henry V*, IV.3.22.

real Henry could not provide. He is encouraging his cousin not to wish more people from England, because it would lessen the share of honor that the victors would receive. Churchill echoes this idea when he praises the British airmen in one of his most famous speeches to the House of Commons: “Never in the field of human conflict was so much owed by so many to so few.”<sup>82</sup> In both cases, the few were merited more honor than they would have otherwise, due to the gravity of the situations that they faced, and their willingness to put their lives on the line for their nation.

In contrast with many other English kings, history has been kind to Henry V.<sup>83</sup> His reign only lasted nine years, from 1413 to his untimely death in 1422 at the age of thirty-six. In those short nine years, Henry managed to legitimize a claim to the French throne that had eluded his ancestors. Although his kingdom of England and France would not last to outlive his son, Henry V is still remembered as an advocate for English culture over all others. He championed the English language, pursued English dominance through his military, and rewarded those who were loyal to him. He was nothing if not a pious monarch, and contributed to the idea that England was divinely favored over her enemies. He inspired the people who followed as a strong and accomplished ruler, wedged into a period of weakness and imbalance. Because of the way he is remembered, King Henry V will mean something different to each generation, because the identity that he is associated with will change over time. In the Tudor age, he was lauded for his great achievements, while in the Victorian age, he was viewed as the model of integrity. In the time of the most recent World War, he was a patriarchal hero, who could identify with young soldiers looking for the bravery to fight. Henry V and the Battle of Agincourt have a place in the identity of every English generation, and although the way he is remembered may change to suit the mindset at the time, he will always remain a part of England’s cultural heritage.

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<sup>82</sup> Sir Winston Churchill, “The Few,” 20 August 1940 in *Complete Speeches* VI, 6261.

<sup>83</sup> C.T. Allmand, “Henry V (1386/7-1422),” in *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, ed. H.G.C. Matthew and Brian Harrison (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 874.