The Shakespeare Handbooks

A Guide to HENRY V

by William Shakespeare

Alistair McCallum

"The Shakespeare Handbooks open the plays up admirably. Excellent for all levels of reader – everybody will get something from them." *Simon Callow*

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Setting the scene

Shakespeare wrote *Henry V* in 1598-9, when he was in his mid-thirties. Having started his career as an actor in his twenties, he was by now a member of London's leading theatre company, and had already made a name for himself as an outstanding playwright. He had produced hugely successful works in the fields of comedy, tragedy and history: *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *Romeo and Juliet* and *Richard II* had all been created in recent years.

In 1599 Shakespeare's theatre company, the Lord Chamberlain's Men, financed the building of a new theatre, the Globe, on the south bank of the Thames. Shakespeare's two preceding history plays, *Henry IV Part 1* and *Part 2*, had proved very popular; it is likely that *Henry V* was completed in time for the opening of the impressive new theatre, and was the first play to be staged there.

In *Henry V*, the young king leads an army into France in order to enforce England's claim to the French crown. With its stirring, patriotic speeches and its heroic warrior king, the play undoubtedly appealed to its initial audiences at the Globe, many of whom would remember the defeat of the Spanish Armada ten years earlier. After its initial popularity, however, *Henry V* seems to have faded into obscurity in the following years. Times were changing, and the long years of war with Spain and Ireland that marked Queen Elizabeth's reign had taken their toll. When Elizabeth died in 1603 she was succeeded by King James, who saw himself very much as a peacemaker. Although he was a great lover of the theatre, and an admirer of Shakespeare, the warlike subject-matter of *Henry V* may not have appealed to him.

It would be a mistake, however, to see the play as nothing more than patriotic propaganda. Despite its military theme, *Henry V* is a profoundly questioning play, a thoughtful study of leadership, politics and the power of language:

"Shakespeare does not simplify war. He never allows us to see heroism without forcing us to consider violence; he does not present pain, waste and slaughter without revealing moments of bravery, friendship and tenderness. In this, Henry V *demonstrates the expansive vision characteristic of Shakespeare's best work."*

Heather Lindsley, *The King Is But a Man: The Personal Epic of Henry V*, 1995

A fresh start

King Henry V is a young man, still in his late twenties. He has been on the throne for less than two years; and although he is gaining a reputation as a thoughtful, well-informed ruler, people still remember how wild and unruly he had been in his younger days.

As prince and heir to the throne, Henry – known informally as Harry or Hal – had been notorious for his reckless, even criminal behaviour, and for his disreputable companions, including the gluttonous, debauched, perpetually impoverished old knight Sir John Falstaff. To the dismay of his father, King Henry IV, prince Harry was more likely to be found in the Boar's Head tavern in Eastcheap, in the company of hangers-on, drunks and prostitutes, than in the royal palace. His accession to the throne, however, saw a transformation in the young man: he rejected his old acquaintances without hesitation, and devoted himself wholeheartedly to his new role as King of England.

The reign of Henry IV had been beset by conflict and rebellion, particularly because his right to the throne was disputed. He had deposed his cousin Richard II, who died soon afterwards at the hands of one of Henry's supporters; there was widespread unease and anger at Richard's murder, and Henry could never throw off the suspicion that he was personally to blame.

Henry IV had hoped to lead a crusade to the Holy Land to demonstrate his remorse over Richard's death. His wish was never fulfilled, but on his deathbed he revealed that there was a further motive. An overseas war would be an effective way of defusing opposition at home, he believed, and he recommended this course of action with his last words to the prince:

King Henry IV: Therefore, my Harry,
Be it thy course to busy giddy minds
With foreign quarrels,[1] that action hence borne out
May waste the memory of the former days.[2]

[1] *make it your policy to keep restless minds occupied with foreign wars*
[2] *so that military action undertaken abroad can erase memories of past concerns*

An unresolved question

The reign of Henry V promises to be much more stable and peaceful than that of his father. The rebellions of the old king's time have been put down, and the new king has been widely accepted as the nation's legitimate monarch. He has youth, vigour, eloquence and strength of character on his side.

There is a cloud on the horizon, however. For many years, English monarchs have claimed that the crown of France is rightfully theirs. The dispute has rumbled on for decades, erupting into outright war from time to time in a conflict that will come to be known as the Hundred Years' War.

When Henry came to the throne, an uneasy truce was in place between England and France. It seems, though, that the new king may have taken his father's deathbed advice to heart. There are rumours that he is considering reviving England's claim to the French throne; and he is ready to pursue his ambition with force if necessary.

In medieval England, many considered the ideal monarch to be one who engaged in triumphant wars abroad, while maintaining peace and order at home. This view persisted through to Tudor times, and is summed up by an eminent statesman of Shakespeare's day:

"No body can be healthful without exercise, neither natural body nor politic; and certainly, to a kingdom or estate, a just and honourable war is the true exercise. A civil war, indeed, is like the heat of a fever; but a foreign war is like the heat of exercise, and serveth to keep the body in health; for in a slothful peace, both courages will effeminate and manners will corrupt."

Francis Bacon, *Of the True Greatness of Kingdoms and Estates*, 1612

Curtain up

An appeal to the audience

A lone actor appears on stage. The subject-matter of the forthcoming play demands a far more majestic scene, he declares, than he and his fellow players can possibly create:

Chorus: O for a muse of fire, that would ascend
The brightest heaven of invention,[1]
A kingdom for a stage, princes to act,
And monarchs to behold the swelling[2] scene!

[1] *inspiration so fierce and passionate that it would raise us to the heights of creativity*
[2] *magnificent, impressive*

If the play could truly imitate reality, the audience would see the heroic King Henry V himself marching resolutely across the battlefields of France as he fights for the land which, he believes, is rightfully his:

Chorus: Then should the warlike Harry, like himself,
Assume the port of Mars,[1] and at his heels,
Leashed in like hounds, should famine, sword and fire
Crouch for employment.[2]

[1] *King Henry would appear with his characteristic vigour, resembling the god of War*
[2] *he would have the instruments of war under his control, ready to unleash upon the enemy*

The chorus requests our indulgence, admitting that the theatre in which he now stands could never do justice to the momentous events of Henry's military campaign:

Chorus: Can this cockpit[1] hold
The vasty fields of France? Or may we cram
Within this wooden O[2] the very casques
That did affright the air at Agincourt?[3]

[1] *little arena, cockfighting ring*
[2] *this simple circular structure; this theatre*
[3] *the helmets of all the ferocious soldiers who fought at Agincourt*

It is likely that *Henry V* was the opening production at the newly-built Globe theatre – the 'wooden O' – in 1599. The theatre was financed and managed by a company of actors, including Shakespeare, and was to prove a phenomenal and lasting success. According to a German tourist of the time, a visit to the London theatre was a lively, noisy experience:

"Without the city are some theatres, where English actors represent almost every day comedies and tragedies to very numerous audiences; these are concluded with a variety of dances, accompanied by excellent music and the excessive applause of those that are present ... At these spectacles and everywhere else, the English are constantly smoking the Nicotian weed which in America is called Tobaca ... *In these theatres, fruits, such as apples, pears and nuts, according to the season, are carried about to be sold, as well as wine and ale."*

Paul Hentzner, *Travels in England*, 1598

The chorus asks us to play our part, using our imaginations to conjure up scenes that the actors can only suggest:

Chorus: … let us, ciphers to this great account,[1]
On your imaginary forces work.
Suppose[2] within the girdle of these walls
Are now confined two mighty monarchies,
Whose high upreared and abutting fronts
The perilous narrow ocean parts asunder.[3]
Piece out[4] our imperfections with your thoughts …

[1] *let the actors, insignificant figures in comparison to the magnitude of the story*
[2] *imagine*
[3] *whose threatening forces, like horses rearing up, face one another across the narrow English Channel*
[4] *supplement, make up for*

It is up to us to imagine the vast size of the armies, the noise of battle, the splendour of the monarchs and their courts; we must accept, too, that the drama will jump from place to place, and condense the events of years into a couple of hours. With a final request for a sympathetic hearing, the chorus leaves the stage.

An anxious wait

Two senior churchmen, the Bishop of Ely and the Archbishop of Canterbury, are deep in conversation. The two men are worried about a proposed law that would drastically reduce the wealth of the church. The law, which would require the church to give large areas of land to the crown, was first discussed during the reign of the previous monarch, Henry IV; however, constant rebellions and wars prevented Henry's parliament from enacting the proposal.

The old king was known to favour the law, which would have compelled the church to surrender any land bequeathed to it by well-wishers. The resulting wealth could be used both to strengthen the monarchy and to set up charitable foundations for the sick, the poor and the old.

Ely and Canterbury are hopeful, however, that the new king will take a different view. Henry V, despite his notoriously debauched youth, has quickly matured into a wise, devout monarch. Indeed, the transformation seemed to happen almost instantaneously on the death of his father:

Canterbury: The king is full of grace and fair regard.[1]
Ely: And a true lover of the holy Church.
Canterbury: The courses [2] of his youth promised it not.
The breath no sooner left his father's body
But that his wildness, mortified in him,[3]
Seemed to die too.

[1] *virtue and respect*
[2] *actions, behaviour*
[3] *the young man's debauchery, suddenly suppressed*

The new king is scholarly and thoughtful in religious matters, the archbishop reflects, while also well versed in politics and warfare. Henry's maturity is all the more remarkable considering the company he used to keep before he became king. Ely suggests that the young prince may not have been as dissolute and wayward as he appeared:

Canterbury: … his addiction was to courses vain,[1]
His companies unlettered, rude, and shallow,[2]
His hours filled up with riots, banquets, sports,
And never noted in him any study,
Any retirement, any sequestration
From open haunts and popularity.[3]

Ely: The strawberry grows underneath the nettle,
And wholesome berries thrive and ripen best
Neighboured by fruit of baser quality.
And so the Prince obscured his contemplation
Under the veil of wildness[4] …

[1] *he wasted his time on idle pursuits*
[2] *his companions were ignorant, unsophisticated and foolish*
[3] *he was never known to devote time to quiet study or private contemplation, but was always out and about, mixing with common people*
[4] *hid his thoughtful nature behind a mask of unruliness*

Canterbury is confident that the devout new king will not give his approval to the proposed law which would be so costly to the church. Hoping to ensure the king's support, the archbishop reveals, he has already offered Henry a substantial sum to support any action that he decides to take against France.

For over seventy years, the kings of England have laid claim to the throne of France. There has been intermittent conflict between the two nations throughout the period, though an uneasy truce has been in place in recent years. Henry intends to revive England's claim to the French crown, using military force if necessary: and a meeting between Henry and the French ambassador is due to take place shortly.

A final decision I, ii

King Henry, seated on his throne, surrounded by his brothers, lords and attendants, is preparing for the visit of the French ambassador. He calls for the Archbishop of Canterbury, as there is an important matter he needs to discuss before meeting the ambassador.

England's right to the French crown depends on one crucial issue: whether the title can be inherited through the female line or only through the male line. Long ago, when the King of France had died childless, Henry's great-grandfather, King Edward III, believed that the crown was his: his mother Isabella was the dead king's sister, and Edward was the king's closest male relative. The French, however, were unwilling to accept an English ruler, and chose a more distant relative, a cousin of the dead king. The reason, they claimed, was that a woman could neither become a monarch nor pass on the royal title to her descendants.

King Henry is determined to establish whether the French law excluding women in this way, known as Salic law, is valid. If it is not, then Edward III's claim to the throne was legitimate, and his successors – including Henry – are the true Kings of France. The Archbishop of Canterbury is an authority on such matters, and when he enters the throne room the king asks for his judgement:

King: My learned lord, we pray you to proceed
And justly and religiously unfold[1]
Why the law Salic that they have in France
Or should or should not bar us in our claim.[2]

[1] *explain, demonstrate*
[2] *either should or should not invalidate my claim to the French throne*

This is a very serious matter, the king emphasises, and it is essential that the archbishop gives his honest, unbiased view. If he judges that the French crown rightly belongs to Henry, it may be necessary for the king to go to war with France, and many lives may be lost:

King: … God doth know how many now in health
Shall drop their blood in approbation
Of what your reverence shall incite us to.[1]
Therefore take heed how you impawn our person,[2]
How you awake our sleeping sword of war.

[1] *shall shed their blood in order to support my claim, if you consider it valid*
[2] *bear in mind what danger I shall be exposed to*

The archbishop declares, unequivocally, that King Henry's claim to the French crown is legitimate. Salic law, which stipulates that the crown can only be passed down through male relatives, is irrelevant; it was only in force centuries ago, in a small area of land which is now part of Germany, not France.

Besides, the archbishop points out, the French themselves have never applied this law. He describes the descent of the French royal family, demonstrating that the crown has passed down through daughters, wives and sisters as well as through male relatives. Salic law was simply used as a ruse to prevent the rightful successor, Edward III, from inheriting the French crown: and Henry, Edward's great-grandson, is the true King of France.

Henry, having listened to the archbishop's lengthy explanation, asks directly whether he would be justified in demanding the French throne. In response, the archbishop urges him to fight for what is rightly his, reminding him how his ancestors struggled for the same cause:

King: May I with right and conscience make this claim?
Canterbury: … Gracious lord,
Stand for your own,[1] unwind[2] your bloody flag,
Look back into your mighty ancestors.
Go, my dread lord, to your great-grandsire's tomb,
From whom you claim; invoke his warlike spirit …

[1] *uphold your birthright*
[2] *unfurl, fly*

> *"The archbishop will provide legal justification for the king's proposed invasion of France, and in return the crown will take the side of the church in their financial dispute with parliament. The whole apparatus of justification by precedent, descent and debate over the applicability of Salic law is a charade acted out for political ends. The king has a one-line question – 'May I with right and conscience make this claim?' – and he gets the answer he wants to hear: yes. He is not interested in the small print."*
>
> Jonathan Bate, Introduction to the RSC Shakespeare edition of *Henry V*, 2010

Ely joins the archbishop, exhorting the young king to take up arms. Two more noblemen, Exeter and Westmorland, add their voices to the chorus:

Ely: … my thrice-puissant liege[1]
Is in the very May-morn of his youth,
Ripe for exploits and mighty enterprises.
Exeter: Your brother kings and monarchs of the earth
Do all expect that you should rouse yourself
As did the former lions of your blood.
Westmorland: They know your grace hath cause, and means, and might;
So doth your highness.[2] Never king of England
Had nobles richer and more loyal subjects …

[1] *supremely powerful ruler*
[2] *all the world's rulers believe, rightly, that your cause is just, and that you have the ability and the power to fight for it*

Canterbury now announces publicly that he intends to donate a large sum of money to help fund any campaign that the king decides to undertake. Henry, though clearly in favour of military action, remains cautious. While English troops are fighting abroad, he believes, their old enemy the Scots may exploit the situation:

Canterbury: … we of the spirituality[1]
Will raise your highness such a mighty sum
As never did the clergy at one time
Bring in to any of your ancestors.
King: We must not only arm t'invade the French,
But lay down our proportions[2] to defend
Against the Scot, who will make road upon us
With all advantages.[3]

[1] *members of the church*
[2] *allocate sufficient troops*
[3] *who will invade our territory whenever the opportunity arises*

The king listens as the noblemen discuss the question of organising both an invasion of France and the defence of the northern border. The gathering soon comes to a consensus: England has the resources to do both. Henry declares, finally, that he will enforce his claim to the French throne:

King: Now are we well resolved; and by God's help
And yours, the noble sinews of our power,[1]
France being ours, we'll bend it to our awe[2]
Or break it all to pieces.

[1] *the noblemen who fight on my kingdom's behalf*
[2] *as France rightfully belongs to me, I'll force it to respect my authority*

The decision has been made. Henry calls for the French ambassador, who has been waiting outside; it is time to talk.

Adding insult to injury

The ambassador brings a message from the Dauphin, son of the King of France and heir to the French crown. Hinting that the message may not be to King Henry's liking, the ambassador asks whether he should deliver it bluntly and in full, or provide an inoffensive summary. Henry replies that he is perfectly capable of keeping his emotions in check, and will listen calmly to the Dauphin's argument:

Ambassador: May't please your majesty to give us leave
Freely to render what we have in charge,[1]
Or shall we sparingly show you far off
The Dauphin's meaning and our embassy?[2]
King: We are no tyrant, but a Christian king,
Unto whose grace our passion is as subject
As are our wretches fettered in our prisons:[3]
Therefore with frank and with uncurbed plainness
Tell us the Dauphin's mind.

[1] *to pass on openly the message entrusted to us*
[2] *sum up his thoughts discreetly and indirectly*
[3] *like a prisoner held in chains, my temper is firmly under control*

Word of King Henry's claim to the French crown has reached France, the ambassador confirms. Despite his diplomatic language, he makes it clear that the Dauphin regards Henry's claim as laughable. In his younger days, Henry was known for his wild, riotous behaviour. Perhaps, the Dauphin suggests, he has not yet left behind the folly of his youth:

Ambassador: … the Prince our master
Says that you savour too much of your youth [1]
And bids you be advised.[2] There's naught in France
That can be with a nimble galliard won; [3]
You cannot revel into dukedoms [4] there.

[1] *you retain a hint of your earlier irresponsibility*
[2] *take care; be warned*
[3] *that can be conquered with a fine, lively display of dancing*
[4] *you cannot capture territory by partying*

The ambassador has brought a gift from the Dauphin, which he now presents to the king. It is something more suitable for Henry than the French territory he claims, suggests the ambassador, and represents the Dauphin's last word on the matter. The king asks his uncle, the Duke of Exeter, to open the gift, and the insult becomes plain:

Ambassador: He therefore sends you, meeter for your spirit,[1]
This tun [2] of treasure, and in lieu of this [3]
Desires you let the dukedoms that you claim
Hear no more of you. This the Dauphin speaks.
King: What treasure, uncle?
Exeter: [*opens the casket*] Tennis-balls, my liege.

[1] *better suited to your nature*
[2] *box, casket*
[3] *in return for this gift*

Remaining calm and diplomatic, Henry formally thanks the ambassador for the gift. However, he makes it clear, continuing the theme of tennis, that he intends to pursue his claim until he is victorious:

King: When we have matched our rackets to these balls
We will in France, by God's grace, play a set
Shall strike his father's crown into the hazard.[1]
Tell him he hath made a match with such a wrangler[2]
That all the courts of France shall be disturbed
With chases.[3]

[1] *play a match that we will win, putting the French crown out of his reach*
[2] *competitive opponent*
[3] *players will be sent scurrying across all the courts in France*

… We will in France, by God's grace, play a set
Shall strike his father's crown into the hazard.

Tennis – the game that we now call 'real tennis' or 'royal tennis' – was a popular pastime among the nobility of Europe in Shakespeare's time. It was played indoors, and required a large, high-ceilinged hall with a roofed gallery around the perimeter. The Dauphin's gift of tennis balls is all the more insulting as it would have reminded Henry – a keen player of the game – that the sport had originated in France.

Tennis was one of the many physical activities recommended by Roger Ascham, an eminent educator whose pupils included the young Queen Elizabeth:

"To ride comely, to run fair at the tilt or ring, to play at all weapons, to shoot fair in bow or surely in gun, to vault lustily, to run, to leap, to wrestle, to swim, to dance comely, to sing and play of instruments cunningly, to hawk, to hunt, to play at tennis and all pastimes generally which be joined with labour, used in open place and on the daylight, containing either some fit exercise for war or some pleasant pastime for peace, be not only comely and decent, but also very necessary, for a courtly gentleman to use ..."

Roger Ascham, *The Schoolmaster*, 1570

Henry acknowledges that he was irresponsible as a prince, wasting time and neglecting life at court. Now that he is king, however, he is a changed man. He takes his role as monarch extremely seriously, and will do the same when he ascends to the throne of France. The Dauphin will come to regret his insulting gift and the suffering he will inflict on the people of France by denying Henry's right to the crown:

King: … I will rise there with so full a glory
That I will dazzle all the eyes of France,
Yea, strike the Dauphin blind to look on us.
And tell the pleasant prince this mock of his
Hath turned his balls to gun-stones,[1] and his soul
Shall stand sore charged for the wasteful vengeance
That shall fly with them[2] …

[1] *his flippant attitude means the tennis-balls will be returned as cannonballs*
[2] *his soul will be in peril for the dreadful destruction that my vengeance will bring*

Confident that his cause is just, and trusting that God will help him in his fight, Henry instructs the ambassador to warn his master of the coming vengeance. The Dauphin's mocking gift will not seem such a good idea, he predicts, when France is invaded. With that, the ambassador is dismissed:

King: … Tell you the Dauphin I am coming on
To venge me as I may, and to put forth
My rightful hand in a well-hallowed cause.[1]
So get you hence in peace. And tell the Dauphin
His jest will savour but of shallow wit[2]
When thousands weep more than did laugh at it.

[1] *to take action for a righteous, holy purpose*
[2] *his prank will not seem particularly amusing*

When the ambassador has left, Henry turns to his lords and urges them to prepare for war with France. Gaining the French crown is now his overriding priority, and he intends to pursue his goal relentlessly:

King: … let our proportions[1] for these wars
Be soon collected, and all things thought upon

That may with reasonable swiftness add
More feathers to our wings. For, God before,[2]
We'll chide this Dauphin at his father's door.[3]

[1] *resources, requirements*
[2] *with God leading us*
[3] *punish the young prince, even if we have to pursue him as far as his father's palace*

The enemy within

The chorus now appears. News of the planned invasion of France has spread swiftly, he tells us, and England is in a state of high excitement. Young men up and down the country are eager to seek glory on French battlefields:

Chorus: Now all the youth of England are on fire,
And silken dalliance in the wardrobe lies.[1]
Now thrive the armourers, and honour's thought
Reigns solely in the breast of every man.
They sell the pasture now to buy the horse …

[1] *idleness and luxury are abandoned*

The French, aware of Henry's intentions, are fearful. They have succeeded, however, in finding a group of English noblemen who are willing to assassinate the king, in return for a large reward, before he sets sail for France:

Chorus: O England, model to thy inward greatness,[1]
Like little body with a mighty heart,
What mightst thou do, that honour would thee do,
Were all thy children kind and natural! [2]
But see, thy fault France hath in thee found out,
A nest of hollow [3] bosoms, which he fills
With treacherous crowns [4] …

[1] *nobility of spirit in a tangible form*
[2] *what could you achieve, to demonstrate your honour, if only all your citizens were loving and loyal*
[3] *heartless, disloyal*
[4] *which France has filled with gold, inciting them to treason*

The chorus names the traitors as Richard, Earl of Cambridge, Lord Scroop and Sir Thomas Grey. The three men have already been paid, and are on their way to intercept the king before he embarks on his expedition:

Chorus:	… by their hands this grace of kings must die,[1] If hell and treason hold their promises, Ere[2] he take ship for France, and in Southampton.

[1] *this king, who so greatly honours the title, will die at their hands*
[2] *before*

Making peace II, i

The scene now moves to Eastcheap, in London. Nearby is the Boar's Head, the infamous tavern – which, unofficially, also operates as a brothel – favoured by Henry in his younger days. In the street outside the tavern, two regular customers, Bardolph and Nym, are in conversation.

There has been a quarrel, it emerges, between Nym and Pistol, another of their companions. Bardolph is keen to heal the rift between them, hoping that the three of them, all of whom have a military background, can set off together to fight in France.

The cause of the dispute is Pistol's marriage to Mistress Nell Quickly, the hostess of the Boar's Head; she had previously been engaged to Nym, who still bears a grudge. Nym, in his vague, rambling manner, hints darkly that he will take revenge on his old friend sooner or later:

Bardolph:	It is certain, Corporal, that he is married to Nell Quickly, and certainly she did you wrong, for you were troth-plight[1] to her.
Nym:	I cannot tell. Things must be as they may. Men may sleep, and they may have their throats about them at that time, and some say knives have edges. It must be as it may. Though patience be a tired mare, yet she will plod.[2] There must be conclusions. Well, I cannot tell.

[1] *betrothed, formally engaged*
[2] *patience, although slow, will press on and achieve its aim; my revenge will come eventually*

Pistol himself now appears, along with his wife Nell. An argument flares up immediately as Nym addresses Pistol as 'host' rather than by his military rank of ensign; Nym appears to be suggesting that Pistol is living off his wife's earnings, and only married her in order to get his hands on the Boar's Head tavern.

The two men draw their swords, but Bardolph and Nell manage to calm them down. A moment later, however, tempers flare again as Nym asks for a word in private. Pistol misunderstands, believing that he is being insulted in Latin:

Nym: I would have you *solus*.[1]
Pistol: *Solus*, egregious dog? O viper vile!
The *solus* in thy most marvailous face,[2]
The *solus* in thy teeth, and in thy throat,
And in thy hateful lungs …

[1] *on your own*
[2] *I throw the word back in your outlandish face*

Nym, in turn, responds threateningly, though he lacks Pistol's melodramatic turn of phrase:

Nym: I have an humour[1] to knock you indifferently well. If you grow foul with me, Pistol, I will scour you with my rapier, as I may, in fair terms[2] …
Pistol: O braggart vile and damned furious wight,[3]
The grave doth gape, and doting death[4] is near;
Therefore exhale.[5] [*they draw their swords*]

[1] *inclination*
[2] *to be blunt*
[3] *wretch*
[4] *death, which longs to possess you*
[5] *draw your sword*

The two men confront one another again, and again Bardolph orders them to sheathe their weapons. The volatile Pistol calms down as quickly as he was roused to anger, and offers to shake his opponent's hand. Nym remains defiant, though his threat is rather half-hearted:

Pistol: Give me thy fist, thy fore-foot[1] to me give.
Thy spirits are most tall.[2]
Nym: I will cut thy throat one time or other, in fair terms:
that is the humour of it.[3]

[1] *paw, hand*
[2] *brave*
[3] *that's the way it is; that's the way I feel*

Pistol suspects that Nym wishes to murder him and have the hostess Nell for himself. The idea is a hopeless fantasy, he assures Nym. He suggests that a more suitable wife for him would be Doll Tearsheet, a prostitute who used to work at the Boar's Head, who is now impoverished and diseased, and living in a poorhouse.

The men's squabbling is interrupted by the sudden arrival of a young boy. He is pageboy to Sir John Falstaff, a debauched old knight, another regular drinker at the Boar's Head. Falstaff used to be a close companion of the young prince; however, on ascending to the throne Henry rejected all his corrupt old associates, including Sir John, and Falstaff has been grieving ever since.

... that is the humour of it.

The 'comedy of humours', made popular by Shakespeare's friend and rival Ben Jonson, was a genre of dramatic comedy in which characters possessed a particular personality trait (or 'humour') that dominated their actions.

In the 1590s, the vogue for the comedy of humours was at its peak, and the word 'humour' was itself becoming the subject of ridicule. In the character of Nym, who uses the word so frequently and so randomly that it becomes almost meaningless, is Shakespeare gently making fun of his fellow playwright?

Falstaff is very ill, the boy reports, and has taken to his bed in the Boar's Head. The hostess, who has always been fond of the old rogue, hurries back to the tavern. She fears that the king's rejection has finally crushed his spirits:

Hostess: By my troth,[1] he'll yield the crow a pudding[2] one of these days. The King has killed his heart.

[1] *truly*
[2] *provide a feast for the birds; die*

Bardolph pleads with his two companions to be friends once more, but a furious quarrel erupts yet again when Pistol refuses to pay a gambling debt he owes Nym. Swords are drawn again and Bardolph, exasperated, threatens to kill the first man to strike a blow. He orders them to decide, once and for all, whether they intend to remain enemies or not.

Pistol, suddenly affable and generous, offers his hand. He reveals that, as a supplier of provisions to the army, he expects to do well out of the coming conflict, and will gladly pay Nym what he is owed, partly in cash and partly in drink:

Nym: I shall have my eight shillings?
Pistol: A noble[1] shalt thou have, and present pay,[2]
And liquor likewise will I give to thee,
And friendship shall combine and brotherhood.[3]
I'll live by[4] Nym and Nym shall live by me.
Is not this just? For I shall sutler[5] be
Unto the camp, and profits will accrue.
Give me thy hand.
Nym: I shall have my noble?
Pistol: In cash, most justly paid.
Nym: Well then, that's the humour of it. [*they shake hands*]

[1] *a gold coin worth between six and seven shillings*
[2] *paid at once*
[3] *friendship and brotherhood will bring us together*
[4] *rely on*
[5] *provider of food and drink*

Nell now returns. Her description is confused, but it is clear that Falstaff is at death's door. Nym believes that the king has treated the old knight badly, and Pistol, with his usual extravagant language, agrees:

Hostess: … come in quickly to Sir John. Ah, poor heart, he is so shaked of a burning quotidian tertian[1] that it is most lamentable to behold. Sweet men, come to him. [*she leaves*]

Nym: The king hath run bad humours[2] on the knight, that's the even of it.[3]

Pistol: Nym, thou hast spoke the right;
His heart is fracted and corroborate.[4]

[1] *a fever that recurs daily; and one that recurs every three days*
[2] *vented his ill-feeling*
[3] *that's the truth of the matter*
[4] *broken and reduced to rubble*

The three companions, Bardolph, Pistol and Nym, hurry after Nell to comfort Sir John as he lies on his deathbed in the Boar's Head.

The character of Falstaff had been introduced in Shakespeare's *Henry IV* plays, and was an immediate success with audiences. At the end of *Henry IV, Part 2* it was announced that the gross, irresponsible, disreputable old knight would return in *Henry V*, but for some reason Shakespeare seems to have changed his mind:

"The most insistent ghost haunting the play is that of Sir John Falstaff, Shakespeare's most enduring comic figure, who easily took top billing in the Henry IV *plays ... The first audiences of* Henry V *could well be forgiven for any disappointment they may have felt for a play with a gaping Falstaff-shaped hole in it."*

James D. Mardock, Introduction to the Broadview Internet Shakespeare edition of *Henry V*, 2014

Paying the price

King Henry has arrived in Southampton, where his fleet is harboured, ready to set sail across the Channel to France. Among his attendants are the three conspirators, paid by the French, who plan to kill the king.

Unbeknown to the traitors, Henry has discovered details of their plot. Henry's brother Beford is concerned that the king is taking a risk by keeping the men in his presence, but the others are confident that the situation is under control:

Bedford: 'Fore God, his grace is bold to trust these traitors.
Exeter: They shall be apprehended by and by.[1]
Westmorland: How smooth and even they do bear themselves,
As if allegiance in their bosoms sat,[2]
Crowned with faith and constant loyalty!
Bedford: The King hath note of all that they intend,
By interception,[3] which they dream not of.

[1] *arrested very soon*
[2] *as if they were they were models of devotion*
[3] *as their messages have been intercepted*

King Henry himself now arrives, with the conspirators – Lord Scroop, Sir Thomas Grey and the Earl of Cambridge – in his entourage. The wind is in England's favour, announces the king, and it is time to set sail for France. He addresses the would-be assassins courteously, asking them about the likely outcome of the expedition. They are lavish in their praise of the king:

Cambridge: Never was monarch better feared and loved
Than is your majesty; there's not, I think, a subject
That sits in heart-grief and uneasiness
Under the sweet shade of your government.
Grey: True: those that were your father's enemies
Have steeped their galls in honey,[1] and do serve you
With hearts create of [2] duty and of zeal.

[1] *have completely renounced their bitterness and resentment*
[2] *entirely composed of*