

ShakesDown Ep4

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Hi, I'm Bryn Boice, and this is The ShakesDown, a podcast where I explore meaning and hidden clues within Shakespeare's text in a fun and accessible way. The ShakesDown is for Shakespeare lovers and haters, students, teachers, aficionados, or really anyone who likes a little language puzzle from time to time. Let's get started!

This month's episode explores the opening chorus of *Henry V*, which you can find at Act I, Scene 1, lines 1-36. As mentioned on previous episodes, this podcast is most satisfying when you have the text in front of you, and it's even better if you have a pencil to mark that bit of text up. But thank you to some special fans who said that it works just fine without the paperwork. You do you, ShakesDown fans. This is all about joy. I'm here for however this podcast brings joy! I should also mention that you will probably hear me shuffling papers and grabbing books and stuff off of my bookshelf, because I'm doing some of this work live as we record, so forgive the shuffles once again.

So! Starting with a little history, *Henry V* the play is presumed to have been written around 1599, and there is some conjecture about its first performance, possibly being the first play performed in the new Globe Theatre. As I said, conjecture. I mention this for a little bit of a special context about a portion of the monologue that we'll break down, so just put a wee pin in that for now. *Henry V* is part of Shakespeare's epic series of history plays called the Henriad. There's also some conjecture here as well about which plays actually belong in the Henriad, but most consider the tetralogy—that is a series of four plays—from *Richard II* to *Henry IV, part one* to *Henry IV, part two* to *Henry V* as the Henriad, and the Henriad follows the downfall of Richard II to the ascension of Henry Bolingbroke to the throne as Henry IV, and then the sort of, maverick-style early carefree life of his son Prince Hal, who then in *Henry V*, Henry the Fifth, as the new king, goes to war with France and becomes the hero of the Battle of Agincourt. [1s](#)

It's also rumored that this Chorus monologue was originally performed by Shakespeare! And I mention this because, at the time, there was a convention of adding a prologue to a play to like...explain it, apologize for it, absolutely spoil it, all these...numbers of reasons! It could puff up or tear down the playwright or the character. It was a pretty common sort of self-flagellating. But this is one of the few plays of Shakespeare's that employs this device for real. This is a sort of non-diegetic character, meaning he is not a character in this play. He, or she, Chorus, is outside the world of the play. Even the characters, if they're on stage, don't hear him. He's— I've seen it called, like, a 'professional storyteller'. Contrast him, if you like, to say...the Chorus at the top of *Romeo and Juliet*. That chorus, that prologue, feels like...they feel like a member of the community of Verona, that is compelled to tell you this story about their experience. Plays like... Gower in *Pericles*. Gower in *Pericles* acts as a chorus, but is himself a character of sorts, though not in the play. And you might remember the prologue character in the play-within-a-play in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. That prologue does exactly as I was saying: apologizing—apologizing profusely, but for comic effect. They literally tell the whole story, apologize for it in advance, and then put on their play. It's hilarious. But THIS prologue, this chorus, is told by what feels like a real storyteller. And although there is a bit of an apology, he is special. He urges his audience to be all that they can be, to really use their imaginations. Which, if it was performed by Shakespeare itself, is a really

cool...like...a metatheatrical device, right? Considering that he, *what* he is asking of us, he's bringing the present moment into the past that we're about to view. I think you'll see what I mean! So let's give it a read. 2s

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, and gentles all, the flat, upraised spirits that have 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. Oh, pardon! Since a crooked figure may attest in little place a million, and let us, ciphers to this great accompt, on your imaginary forces work. Suppose within the girdle of these walls are now confined two mighty monarchies, whose high upreared 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' the receiving earth. For tis your thoughts that now must deck our kings. Carry them here and there, jumping o'er times, turning the accomplishment of many years into an hour-glass; 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. 1s

Cool! So, I think you probably hear that he's talking—direct address—to the audience. He's asking the audience to be his co-conspirator on this day. “Come with me. Hey, you guys, use your imagination!” But let's first, let's paraphrase it and work through it so you can really feel what he is asking of us. Okay, so:

O, for Muse of Fire. All right, let's stop right there. O. O. You see this lovely single “O” all over Shakespeare. And I don't want to skate past it as we do any of this because it's used so much, but it can be taken for granted. O— it's a vocal exclamation, and it can be used in a moment of sorrow or excitement or great love and passion—what have you. O, for a muse of fire. So the Chorus here is saying, oh, I wish I had the goddess made out of fire, to carry us all to the highest heights possible of our possible imagination. O man, I wish I had, I wish there was a goddess here to make our imaginations the most fabulous that they could be! And then he goes on, and that I had a whole kingdom to use as a stage! Real princes to act in the play that you're about to see! And monarchs to watch this awesome show! Then Henry V, Harry by nickname—um. there's a great play called “*Into the Breaches!*” by George Brandt that has a great scene about the confusing nature of this... bazillion nicknames!...but I love what his characters come up with that “Henry” is sort of his kingly formal name, while “Harry”, when they call him “Harry,” it's a step down in formality, his sort of official loving nickname. And when they call him “Hal,” that's like the name that Falstaff and friends use to bring him down to their level out at the tavern. You know? It's the most casual. I love that. So here, the chorus uses “Harry”— a loving, respectful nickname. So then Henry V, who's a great warrior, would look truly like himself, which is like Mars, the god of war.

This next section is really interesting. It's...”following him” like leashed doggies would be Starvation, Violence, and Fire. They'd just be waiting for his instructions. He's got that kind of power in leadership. But first I ask you to pardon! Forgive! All you gentle people, everybody. Everybody watching these plain old ordinary people who dare to act out such a great, great matter on this lowly,

unworthy stage. It's sort of appealing to our national pride for this hero. Can this stage, the size that's literally the size of a cockpit—meaning like a cockfighting ring, not a cockpit of a plane, there were no planes back then—but can this stage, the size of a cockpit hold the enormous fields of France? he asks. Or can we cram or stuff into this round-shaped theatre, this “wooden O”—remember we were just talking about the possibly, the first play that was ever performed inside the Globe Theatre? All the theaters at that point were sort of these round buildings. And so the “wooden O” would have been a *theater*. Can we, can we stuff into this round shaped theater, this wooden O, the headpieces, the helmets that frightened and terrified the air itself at the Battle of Agincourt? Can we even get those things in this, in this tiny little theatre?

Then he says. oh, forgive us. Since when you're writing...please just forgive us, just as when you're writing, you can abbreviate a million into a little squiggle. Let us (that are zeros in this huge bank account) work on your imagination. So think about that. That image is so interesting. It's a little...it feels like it's a little convoluted for our minds now, but, “Oh, pardon, since a crooked figure may attest in little place a million,” it takes, just as when you're writing, NO trouble at all to just add some more zeros to make a million! Let us zeros work like that squiggle! ^{1s} Um, imagine—going on—imagine, pretend that there are two powerful monarchies closed up or squeezed; think about that girdle image, squeeze! Girdled into these walls of the theatre, and they're threatening violence on each other, and they are separated only by a dangerous, narrow sea. Fill in with your minds, fill in what our version lacks, by making up the rest with your own thoughts! You see? Hear that? That feeling that this chorus is—is our contemporary. Right? For instance, this next part, “pretend that one man stands for a thousand” so that you can have a whole imaginary army. *Puissance* is such a great word. It literally means power, but sometimes power was literally what they called the *army*. There's a great line in, um, Henry IV, part two from Lady Percy (and she's actually talking about Hotspur, so when you hear the name Harry, that's who she's meaning in this particular moment.) But she says, “When your own Percy,” meaning Hotspur, “when my heart's dear Harry, threw many a northward look to see his father bring up his powers. But he did long in vain.” Again that, means, like” I was, *he* was waiting for your *army* to show up.” So. *Puissance*. Meaning your power. Meaning your army. So, for instance, um, we're going to pretend that one man is a thousand so that you can imagine this whole army. ^{2s}

And then going on with the paraphrase: another example of what you can do! When we talk about horses, pretend you see them stamping their proud hoofs into the receiving, the *soft* earth, like the earth is receiving their soft hoofs, and you can see their prints, right? *You* have to imagine that. And then it goes on: your minds, your imaginations have to dress our kings! Like you're going to have to make their costumes even better with your imagination. You're going to have to carry them from here to there. We're going to jump forward in time, and imagine that several years have passed in just an hour. So he's really, like, calling on us—you're, you're going to have to help us with this grand story! But to help you with this endeavor, allow me, Chorus!, to narrate the story. And like a prologue does—remember the context that we set before—like a prologue does, I ask you to be patient. To hear our play with gentleness and judge it kindly. All right. So I hope that gives yo., that paraphrase gives you an idea of that... ‘imagining’ Shakespeare coming out on to the stage before this epic, beautiful play—Henry V is a gorgeous play—and it does, it spans a lot of time, a lot of places. There are battles. There are all of these sort of wonderful happenings! And Shakespeare himself, or another amazing actor in the company, comes out and says, “You are a huge part of this!” I think that's like...the glory of theater in the first place. It's that the audience is the sort of last character that shows up to your rehearsal and makes the, makes the piece of theater work. Makes it

real and makes it potent. Without the audience, it isn't theater. So he's saying, "Come! Bring your imagination!" Suspend your disbelief and add to it with your mind. So it's...I think it's so beautiful.

So, let's now— I love, as I do on this podcast, I love to do the scanning of the text! You look at the scan and adjust for any clues that we might find. So let's beat this out. You'll probably hear me, beating it out on my heart. (If you don't know what I mean by "scanning the text" for iambic pentameter, I do [makes a heartbeat sound.] You probably will get it by the end of this, but, on the 1st episode, I go into it in great depth on the ShakesDown. So please refer to episode one if you want a deeper dive on that!)

Okay, so let's do this: o FOR a MUSE of FIRE that WOULD aSCEND. Generally that O is going to be in a stressed place. So if you think about, O, for a MUSE of fire— he's putting a trochee in the very first moment of the play. Right? O, for a muse of fire—you're literally like, sort of, cutting through the noise of the audience there with that exclamation of passion. O, for a muse of fire that would ascend the brightest heaven of invent-i-on. Do you see that? That's a great example of an elongated word that we wouldn't normally elongate. When I'm working with actors, I usually—and depending on the particular audience that we think we're going to get— if it's going to be youth, I usually don't have people say invent-i-on. We'll just revert to the more modern pronunciation because it's a little easier to understand. But if you want to, if you're doing this for a more adult audience, it's kind of fun to play with those words! The brightest heaven of invent-i-on, that lengthening it makes it almost more important. But it's not necessary. But what IS the thing that is necessary is to know that this is a perfect line. It's not a short line. The brightest heaven of invention, adding the syllable. A kingdom for a stage, prinCES to act. PrinCES. There's a place! There's a nice midline trochee: PRINces to act. Right. A kingdom for a stage, PRINces to act. The beautiful punctuation there with that trochee. And monarchs to behold the swelling scene. Perfect. Another perfect line.

Then should the warlike Harry like himself. Perfect line. Assume the port of Mars, and at his heels— perfect. Leashed in like hounds should famine, sword and fire. That's a fun one. Um, I wanted to just bring up the word...a couple of things. We have the trochee at the top, "leashed in like hounds should famine, sword and fire." *Fire* is one of those words that, in most of the American dialects, feels like it's a two syllable word: fi-yer. But in Shakespear,e and in really in British pronunciation, because they're not hitting the r so hard, it's one syllable. So this would be considered a perfect line leashed in like hounds should famine, sword and fire. *Is Fire*. Right? It's one: fire. One syllable. *Is*

Now, this next line is really interesting. Crouch FOR employment BUT parDON and GENTles ALL. Oh my God. How many, how many syllables are even there? Crouch for employment. But pardon and gentles all = 12. So there, we've talked in a couple of these about the *epic caesura*. If you find one of those lines that is long and wonky and has too many syllables and also has like a very prominent midline endpoint, we're going to think about that as an epic caesura. So it's a place for the actor to just be like... just a, just a pause is less than a pause, more of a *poise*. Right? If you think about what's happening in this sentence, it's really quite interesting. I'm just going to rewind just a little bit: "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." *Is* And it's like...it's literally like he has to take a step back because he has...he has worked himself up! "But pardon, and gentles all." So it's a moment for a breath like "I'm getting carried away before the story even starts because Harry is so awesome!" Does that make sense? So that epic caesura there, you literally just

imagine taking a deep breath in, maybe even taking a physical step back. “Whoa! But pardon and gentles all” and we get started back in a new rhythm with that particular line. So fun. Interesting line.

The next sentence. Let's look at it. The flat unraised spirits that have dared. Okay, so we...when we see a line like that, we look back through it. It's short. It feels like it has only nine syllables. But there's that lovely word “unraised” that we can, because it has an -ed ending, we can add a syllable there, “the flat un-raised spirits that have dared” –got it? So that now is a perfect line of iambic pentameter. As long as we elongate unraised to un-raised. On this unworthy scaffold to bring forth, perfect. So great an object can this cockpit hold—perfect. The vasyt fields of France? Or may we cram— perfect. Within this wooden O the very casques, that did affright the air of Agincourt. I just want you to take note that how...how perfectly regular those few lines are *after* the epic caesura. It's almost like the little sort of x in the middle of that sentence. He's like, I got to get back on track! I have a job to do, right?! And gets back on track with perfect iambic pentameter. 1s

O pardon since a crooked finger may. 1s Attest in little place a mill-i-on. There's a place where it is elongated. I want to...I'll do the difference, if you don't say mill-i-on, if you say million. AtTEST in LITtle PLACE a MILL-yen. or AtTEST in LITtle PLACE a MILL-i-ON. 1s It needs that third syllable to make that verse work. “And let us ciphers to this great accompt”/”on your imaginary forces work” okay? Perfect, perfect, perfect! Suppose within the girdle of these walls, perfect. Are now confined to mighty monarchies. Whose high upreared and abutting front—oooh hear that? So you probably are starting to notice, I'm doing those on purpose. Like, ”Whose high up-rear-ed and abutting fronts.” If you elongate that word, instead of upreared, we do up-rear-ed, it will make the verse work out; whose high up-rear-ed and abutting fronts.” 1s

Here's another one that has a word that needs to be elided. Let's let's do it full out. The perilous, narrow ocean parts asunder. What?! Okay, great. So we're going to take perilous, a word that can be shortened, we're going to elide that word. The perilous, narrow ocean parts asunder. We have a feminine ending! We have a word that needs to be elided *and* a feminine ending. And as we've talked before in other podcasts, the feminine ending is...it's not a weak ending, it's an ending that allows emotion. It's supposed to help carry the actor over, like an overflow into that 11th syllable. The perilous narrow ocean parts asunder! Right. And that makes perfect sense that THAT would be a place that the chorus would start to get emotional. Right? We have these two mighty, we have these two confined, mighty monarchies who have these two fronts of war, like people butting heads. It is an emotional thing for him! Let's keep going. Piece out our imperfections with your thoughts/into a thousand parts divide one man— two perfect beautiful lines after that feminine ending! So you think about getting back on track! 1s And make imaginary puissance—So we're going to take that beautiful French word, and we're going to go ahead and elongate it so that it gives us our ten syllables and make imaginary pu-i-ssance.. 1s Think when we talk of horses, that you see them, we're going to take that “them” at the end of that sentence, and we're going to make it a little less stressed, and I'm going to take the “th-” off of it just as we do. “Let's go see ‘em, guys.” You know, take the apostrophe ‘em so that we get this beautiful feminine ending. Think when we talk of horses that you see ‘em. Printing their proud hoofs i’ th’ receiving earth. Okay, so I want you to, um—you probably see this in Shakespeare and may or may not know, he just doesn't...when you see an “I-apostrophe,” “th apostrophe”...Printing their proud hoofs i’ th’ receiving earth. You really just doesn't want you to *hang on it too long*. It's not getting a full stress. And he puts those apostrophes there so that you'll know, “hey, this is not going to be a full syllable. This is still a perfect line!” So if you think about “in” and “the” in this sentence being shortened, almost as if they're like grace notes. I think of that— if, you know, um, any music terms— it's a grace note. It's like it's almost not there, but it's there! So

“printing” at the top of that lovely line is a beautiful trochee. So printing their proud hoofs i’ th’ receiving earth— it’s a perfect line with some fun sort of squishing going on, eliding going on.

For tis your thoughts that now must deck our kings —perfect. Carry them here and there jumping o’er times —okay. We got two trochees there. We’re starting to sort of get these fun little stabby moments. CARry them here and there, JUMPing o’er times— is getting us riled up with those lovely trochees. TurnING the AccomPLISHment OF maNY years. We...you see? The next one we’re going to just force it into iambic pentameter, “Turning th’ accomplishment of many years.” There’s another one of those th-postrophes. Th’accomplishment. We just don’t want to hang on that “the” too long. It’s not important in the sentence. 1s Into an hour-glass for the which supply. There’s another one of those fun ones, like fire! We in America love to say hour like it has two syllables, but it would not be used that way in the British dialect. Into an ow-er-glass right? Into an ow-er-glass for the which supply—that becomes another perfect line. As long as we don’t give hour two syllables. Listen to this: Into an hour glass for the which supply.” You see that ow-er doesn’t work. Into an hourglass for the which supply. But now it’s perfect.

Admit me Chorus to this history—perfect. Who prologue-like your humble patience pray— perfect GentLY to HEAR, kindLY to JUDGE our PLAY. Ooh, feel those those lovely trochees there. GENTLY to HEAR, KINDLY to JUDGE our PLAY. I love the sort of rolling, lilting feel of that. Of that final line: Gently to hear, kindly, to judge our play. It’s just as he’s sort of opening the scene so that we can see it and love it. He’s excited, bringing the present into the past and vice versa. Great! Okay, so let’s read this thing again with our discoveries:

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, and gentles all, the flat unraiséd spirits that have 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? Oh, pardon, since a crooked figure may attest in little place a million, let us ciphers to this great accompt, on your imaginary forces work. Suppose within the girdle of these walls are now confined two mighty monarchies, whose high uprearéd 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 the 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. 2s Ah, just love it. It’s such a great invitation. And it’s a great invitation to open your minds as you begin to watch this piece of art. Love it! Okay, well, that is it for this episode of The ShakesDown. As you can see, once again, there is so much to shake down in even one small passage in a Shakespeare play. This is Bryn Boice, thanks for joining me, and please remember to support this show by following or subscribing wherever you listen to podcasts. Stay tuned for our next episode where I’ll be breaking down a bit of “Romeo and Juliet”. Goodnight, Sweet Pod!