

Looking Back to 1415 and AD 15 in *Henry V*: Shakespeare, Homer, Alexander,
and Tacitus

Next year 2015 marks the 600th anniversary of the tremendous English victory at the Battle of Agincourt, the centerpiece of Kenneth Braunagh's *Henry V*. In many places and from many sources, Shakespeare inserts classical references and allusions and reworks stories from antiquity just as Vergil so famously reworked Homeric originals with the result that *Henry V* is an epic in its right.

The play opens with the evocation to the muse, "Oh for a muse of fire that would ascend the brightest heaven of invention!" *in medias res* to tell us why Henry has reopened the Hundred Years War. The Dauphin, underestimating the young, new English monarch sends the insulting Paris tennis balls to reject Henry's claim to the French throne, and fails to heed the warning that the king's youth conceals his true nature like "the Roman Brutus" (II.iii.89-92). Harry, the English paladin of War is a new Achilles or better a new Alexander. The conspiracy of Cambridge, Scroop and Grey is foiled (II.ii), akin to that implicating Philotas (Diod. Sic. 17.79.1-80.2; Arr. 3.26.1-4; Plut. *Alex.* 48.1-49; QCR 6.7-11.40, 7.1.1-5). Once at war, "in fierce tempest is he coming, in thunder and in earthquake like a Jove," (II.iii.155-56). The nearly impregnable Harfleur falls to his army (see Alexander's siege of Tyre) and then when faced by overwhelming odds, Henry repeats Alexander's feat at the Battle of Arbela with a stunning victory at Agincourt. The marriage of Henry and Katherine resolves the conflict (V.ii) much like that of Alexander and Roxane, but the chorus warns us that Henry's early death will cause a bitter power struggle, which classicists can compare to the wars of the Diadochoi.

Shakespeare expected his audience to know these references; so did the real Henry V. For on the night before Agincourt, Henry, disguised as a common soldier, wandered through his

camp to see what his soldiers thought of him (IV.i), exactly as Germanicus had 1400 years before on the eve of the Battle of Idistavivus (Tac. *Ann.* 2.13). In Tacitus, soldier's high opinions of him set Germanicus at ease, and Henry received much the same at first. However, in a Shakespearean twist worthy of Vergil, a common soldier (Williams) unaware Harry is the king, insists the king will not live up to his pledge to fight to the end, and exchanges gloves to take up a feud with him if both outlive the battle, setting up a comic sequel.

This paper will examine five selections from *Henry V* to discuss Shakespeare's integration of Homer, Vergil, Plutarch, Caesar, Tacitus, and Herodotus to consider the popular reception in 1600 and today in Kenneth Branagh's adaptation: the prologue, the English embassy of Exeter to France, and the scenes before the Battle of Agincourt, which form a rich tapestry of classical motifs, expressions, and allusions set in Shakespeare's day about events 200 years before, written 400 years ago from our viewpoint.