

SPEAK THE SPEECH

CHORUS: *HENRY THE FIFTH*

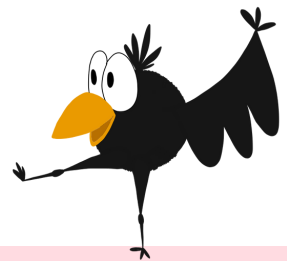
"O FOR A MUSE OF FIRE..."

WHO'S THE CHORUS?

The Chorus in Shakespeare's *Henry the Fifth* is an unusual character, speaking directly to the audience without interacting with the other characters in the play. The Chorus appears at several intervals throughout the play, setting the scene and giving context. This speech is the very first thing that happens in the play, setting the scene for everything that will follow.

THE SPEECH (UNCUT)

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,
Leash'd in like hounds, should famine, sword and fire
Crouch for employment. But pardon, gentles all,
The flat unraised 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?



O, 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.

NOTE: Shakespeare's text is often cut for performance, based on the needs of a specific production. Deciding what to cut and what to keep is another subjective process. What's lost when we cut the text? What are the advantages? Let's look at a cut version on the next page.

This resource has been shortened. View the full version at <https://bardonthebeach.org/education/discoveryzone/>

MAKING SENSE OF THE IMAGES

There are many complex images conjured by the Chorus. Here's one person's explanation of what the images might mean. What do you think?

THE SPEECH (ABRIDGED)

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!

But pardon, gentles all,
The flat unraised 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?

O, pardon! And let us, ciphers to this great accompt,
On your imaginary forces work.

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.

THE IMAGES

In the ancient Greek tradition, the Muses were the inspirational goddesses of the arts, literature, and science. They had specific names and disciplines, but none of them really covered the area of a history play. So, the Chorus wishes for a 'Muse of fire' to help.

The Chorus knows that this wish is impossible, and asks the audience to forgive the humble actors for daring to do something so bold on a simple stage.

The Chorus asks if the huge French battlefields could fit into this small theatre...

...or if this tiny building can fit all of the helmets that were so frightening in the decisive battle in the French field at Agincourt.

The Chorus again asks forgiveness, then equates the actors to zeroes, and uses a pun in the word 'accompt' (account) which can be the telling of a story or the adding up of money. The Chorus then asks the audience to let the actors work on their imaginations.

It's the audience's thoughts which will dress the kings, place them in England or France, and follow the passage of time – for events that took years that will unfold in just a few hours.

And to help in that process, the Chorus is there, just like military reinforcements in a battle, asking for the audience to be patient as they hear and judge the play.

What about the other images in the uncut speech on page one? Can you make sense of them? The glossary on the next page might help.



WORDS & PHRASES

(that might be new or have an unexpected meaning)

- **Muse** – a divine entity that inspires creativity
- **ascend** – move to a higher level
- **invention** – in this case, it means creativity and originality
- **monarchs** – the royal people who govern, such as kings and queens
- **swelling** – in this case it means magnificent
- **Harry** – a nickname for Henry, who is the King of the play's title
- **Assume the part** – take on the bearing, or personality
- **Mars** – the ancient Roman god of war
- **famine** – widespread scarcity of food
- **employment** – a task, or something to do
- **flat unraised spirits** – this is a self-deprecating way to describe the actors
- **scaffold** – a platform; in this case, the stage
- **cockpit** – before there were airplanes, the word was originally used to describe a literal pit where roosters fought; it was also used in a metaphoric sense to describe a battlefield; here it refers to the theatre
- **vasty** – vast or enormous
- **casques** – helmets or other military headpieces
- **Agincourt** – the name of the field where a decisive battle was fought in the year 1415
- **a crooked figure** – a figure is a number, and a round number is a zero
- **attest – be evidence of**
- **in little place a million** – if you add a zero at the end of a number, you multiply that number by 10
- **ciphers** – non-entities; nobodies; zeroes
- **account** – account, which has a double meaning for both accounting and storytelling
- **girdle** – for Shakespeare this was a belt worn around the waist; here it's figurative since the playhouse building was basically round
- **two mighty monarchies** – here it means two powerful kingdoms, namely England and France
- **upreared** – standing on end
- **abutting** – sticking out to the point of touching
- **fronts** – foreheads (here it's in a metaphorical sense)
- **asunder** – apart or separate
- **piece out** – add to or extend
- **puissance** – power, in this case a military power such as an army
- **supply** – reinforcement or support, often used in military context
- **admit** – give permission to be present



EXPLORE

Use your brain, your heart, your imagination, your voice and/or your movement to embody this character and express yourself through the words. Try it lots of different ways as you follow these prompts. What do you discover?

ACTIVITY #1: EXPLORE THE LANGUAGE

Explore the Words

- How would you characterize the words in the speech?
- Are they simple, everyday words, or are they more extraordinary?
- What kind of experience do you think the Chorus is trying to give the audience based on the choice of words?

Explore the Verse

Are you familiar with iambic pentameter? A lot of Shakespeare's language is in this verse form that features 10 beats, alternating weak then strong, like a heartbeat.

As you speak the speech, notice where the lines naturally fall into this rhythm, and notice where they don't.

Hint: the first line doesn't fit! What is the effect when the speech doesn't fit that regular rhythm?

ACTIVITY #2: EXPLORE THE IDEAS

The limitations and possibilities of theatre

Have you ever been to a live performance in a theatre? If so, how is the experience different from film or television? What happens when an audience comes together? How does the audience's role in a live performance differ from their role at a movie theatre? As you go through the speech, think about speaking to an actual audience and think about what you're asking them to do.

Humility & Deference

The Chorus asks for pardon twice, refers to the actors as 'flat unraised spirits' and describes the stage as an 'unworthy scaffold'.

- Why do you think the Chorus behaves this way?
- What do you think the effect is on the audience?

ACTIVITY #3: EXPLORE THE CHARACTER

There are many different ways to imagine the Chorus. It could be a single person, speaking simply. It could be a group of people, speaking and using complex movement to represent the images. Go through the speech again, thinking like a director

- How would you stage the Chorus?
- What kind of costuming would you choose?
- What about lighting? Music? Sound effects?
- What do you think would be an exciting way to begin the play?

