

NOT AN EASY MATTER

A STUDY OF TWO SPEECHES



Embracing Complexity

Although a lot of people look to Shakespeare for the answers, he really doesn't provide any. Instead, his plays present us with complex, challenging questions that are ours to grapple with and answer for ourselves. One example of this involves two contrasting perspectives on war in the play *Henry the Fifth*.

Speech #1

(Spoken by the warrior monarch, Henry the Fifth of England in act 3, scene 1 of the play)
Henry is leading the English army as they attack the French town of Harfleur. The English have broken through the wall that protects the town, but they are exhausted from the battle. Henry uses this speech to persuade the soldiers to continue the fight.

**Once more unto the breach, dear friends, once more;
Or close the wall up with our English dead:
In peace, there's nothing so becomes a man
As modest stillness, and humility:
But when the blast of war blows in our ears,
Then imitate the action of the tiger:
Stiffen the sinews, summon up the blood,
Disguise fair nature with hard-favour'd rage:
Now set the teeth and stretch the nostril wide,
Hold hard the breath and bend up every spirit
To his full height. The game's afoot:
Follow your spirit; and upon this charge,
Cry God for Harry, England, and Saint George.**

Speech #2

(Spoken by one of the English soldiers, Williams, in act 4, scene 1)
After victory at Harfleur, the English army has marched in the cold and rain for many days. They are exhausted, sick, and hungry. During a scene around a campfire the night before they face a large, healthy, well-equipped French army, one of the soldiers wonders what it's all for.

...The king himself hath a heavy reckoning to make, when all those legs and arms and heads, chopped off in battle, shall join together at the latter day and cry all 'We died at such a place;' some swearing, some crying for a surgeon, some upon their wives left poor behind them, some upon the debts they owe, some upon their children rawly left. I am afraid there are few die well that die in a battle; for how can they charitably dispose of any thing, when blood is their argument? Now, if these men do not die well, it will be a dire matter for the king that led them to it.

Note: Both speeches have been abridged for length. If you would like to see the whole speech or scene, you can find the first one [here](#) and the second one [here](#). (With gratitude and admiration for the Folger Shakespeare Library.)



ACTIVITY: MAKE IT YOURS

Now it's your turn! Follow the steps below as you explore these speeches and make them your own.



STEP 1

Choose a speech to try exploring first.



STEP 2

Express the speech (or a section of it) with one or more of the suggestions below. Remember: there are plenty of ways to express a speech without necessarily speaking!



STEP 3

Try the other speech and consider the differences.

PERFORM



Speak the speech in whichever way you decide.

Create a dance or movement piece inspired by the speech.

Create a sculpture or statue using your body that embodies part of the speech.

CREATE



Draw or paint something inspired by the speech.

Write a poem or short story, using the speech as your inspiration.

Make a playlist of songs that remind you of the speech.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

- What does it feel like to express **Henry's** speech? Do these words and ideas inspire you to think, feel, or move in certain ways?
- What does it feel like to express **Williams's** speech? Do these words and ideas inspire you to think, feel, or move in certain ways?
- Are there any particular words or phrases in either speech that you find especially powerful or especially difficult? Why do you think you have this response?

- As you look at the two speeches, you might notice a key fundamental difference. **Henry's** speech is written in verse: it has a specific metrical structure. On the other hand, **Williams's** speech is written in prose: there's no specific metre in this more-ordinary speech pattern. What effect does this have for you as you experience each speech?
- How persuasive do you find each of these speeches? Is one more persuasive than the other for you?

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