



## A Closer Look at "O for a muse of fire..."

**This speech is spoken by the Chorus in Act 1, Scene 1 of *Henry the Fifth*.**

### Who's the Chorus?

In the early drama of ancient Greece, the Chorus was a group of people who would describe the main action of the story and comment on it, sometimes with singing and movement.

When Shakespeare and his contemporaries wrote plays, the Chorus was usually just a single person. The Chorus speaks directly to the audience in *Henry the Fifth* and doesn't interact with the other characters in the play. The Chorus appears at several intervals, setting the scene and giving context.

---

### What's happening when this speech is spoken?

This speech is the very first thing that happens in the play, setting the scene for everything that will follow.

*CHORUS:*

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.

## The speech: thought by thought

Shakespeare's language can be overwhelming, so it helps to break it down, thought by thought. Look at the speech again below, taking your time to make sense of each thought. This is a subjective process, so this example is just one way to break the speech down into thoughts. Would you do it differently?

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.

## Words and 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 port** – 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 airplanes were invented, the word was used to describe a 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 crooked (or curved) number refers to the number zero (its shape is literally curved)
- **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: add a zero to 100,000 and it becomes 1,000,000
- **ciphers** – zeroes; non-entities; nobodies
- **accompt** – account, which has a double meaning for both numbers and storytelling
- **girdle** – in Shakespeare's time, 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 upright
- **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

## Making sense of the images

The Chorus uses many complex images to set the scene. Here are some explanations of what the images might mean. Of course, other interpretations are also possible. What do you think?

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!

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 turn the stage into a kingdom, the actors into princes, and the audience into monarchs.

Then should the warlike Harry, like himself,  
Assume the port of Mars;

The Chorus imagines the warrior King Henry as the Roman god of war...

and at his heels,  
Leash'd in like hounds, should famine, sword and fire  
Crouch for employment.

...and this warrior king is ready to unleash widespread hunger, violence, and destruction, all of which wait to be released like dogs from a leash.

But pardon, gentles all,  
The flat unraised spirits that have dared  
On this unworthy scaffold to bring forth  
So great an object:

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.

can this cockpit hold  
The vasty fields of France?

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

or may we cram  
Within this wooden O the very casques  
That did affright the air at Agincourt?

...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.

O, pardon! since a crooked figure may  
Attest in little place a million;

The Chorus again asks forgiveness, and uses a complex analogy: when you add a zero at the end of a line of numbers, it can make a number much bigger – such as turning 100,000 into 1,000,000.

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

The Chorus 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.

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:

The Chorus asks the audience to imagine that two fighting kingdoms separated by an ocean can fit inside the theatre. In this case, it's England and France, separated by the English Channel.

## Making sense of the images (continued)

Piece out our imperfections with your thoughts;

The Chorus asks the audience to fill in the blanks in what the actors are able to present...

Into a thousand parts divide one man,  
And make imaginary puissance;

...asks them to imagine that one soldier can represent a thousand, so there's suddenly a powerful army on stage...

Think when we talk of horses, that you see them  
Printing their proud hoofs i' the receiving earth;

...asks them to see the horses that are mentioned in the dialogue, to even see the hoofprints in the dirt.

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:

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

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.

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.

## Explore the language

- Are the words short and simple, or long and complex?
- If you're a hearing person, what do the words sound like? Are there any sounds that repeat?
- What's the effect of this language?
- Are the thoughts short and direct, or long and complex? Do they ever change? What might this tell you about what's happening in the speech?

## Explore the ideas

### The limitations and possibilities of live 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. What are you asking them to do?

### Humility and 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 speaks in such a deferential way? What kind of effect do you think this way of speaking has on the audience?

## Explore the character

There are many ways to imagine the Chorus. It could be a single person or a group. The speaker(s) could simply be standing still and speaking, or they could include complex movement to represent the images they're speaking of. The possibilities are endless.

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?

## Make it your own

### Performance

**Learn some or all of the speech by heart and perform it, either by yourself or with a group.**

Discover what it all means, and what it means to you, so you can truly make it your own. If you like, think about staging, costuming, props, lighting, etc. and share your work with an audience of family and/or friends.

**Ask someone to film your performance** so you have a record of it. They can either film your live performance, or you can create a special opportunity for filming. Collaborate to find the best location, lighting, camera angles, sound, titles, etc. for what you'd like to create.

### Art

**Create** a drawing, painting, sculpture, still life, photograph, or film that expresses what the speech means to you. Decide how you would like to share your creation.

### Music

**Express what the speech means to you through music.** Choose a song or piece of music, build a playlist, or even compose an original piece that conveys your feelings about the speech. Decide how you'd like to share what you've created.

### Creative Writing

**Compose your own poem, speech, or story inspired by the speech.** Imagine a similar need to set a scene and welcome an audience into the experience of a story. How would you describe the setting and convey the tone and spirit of what's about to unfold?