

Not an easy matter

Shakespeare as a tool for embracing complexity

Sometimes people look to Shakespeare for the answers to tough questions. However, he doesn't really provide any. Instead, Shakespeare's plays present us with complex, challenging questions that invite us to grapple with nuance and complexity, allowing us to find answers for ourselves. One such opportunity is in the play ***Henry the Fifth***, which offers two contrasting perspectives on war.

Speech #1

Spoken by the warrior monarch, Henry the Fifth of England in Act 3, Scene 1.

Henry is leading the English army as they attack the French town Harfleur. The English have broken through the wall that protects the town, but they are exhausted from the battle. Henry speaks this speech to rouse the soldiers and persuade them 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:
Then lend the eye a terrible aspect;
Let it pry through the portage of the head
Like the brass cannon; let the brow o'erwhelm it.
Now set the teeth and stretch the nostril wide,
Hold hard the breath and bend up every spirit
To his full height. On, on, you noblest English.
I see you stand like greyhounds in the slips,
Straining upon the start. 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, Henry's army has marched in the cold and rain for many days. They are exhausted, sick, and hungry. The night before the English face a large, healthy, well-equipped French army, Williams reflects on the costs of war.

...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 afeard 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 black matter for the king that led them to it.

Note: Both speeches have been abridged here for length. If you would like to see the full speeches in the context of the play, you can find them at these links (used with gratitude and in admiration for the Folger Shakespeare Library's free online editions):

King Henry's speech:
Act 3, Scene 1



Williams' speech:
Act 4, Scene 1



Challenge the language

In Shakespeare's texts, colour is sometimes associated with different qualities or values. Light colours, especially white, are often associated with health, beauty, success, and prosperity, while dark colours, especially black, are often associated with death, trouble, and hardship. The problem with this colour-association is that it's closely related to colourism, a form of discrimination that values lighter skin tones over darker ones.

So, what do you do when specific words or phrases in Shakespeare's text feel hurtful or offensive? Theatre is a living, responsive art form, and theatre makers often cut or adapt play texts to resonate with their cultural context and moment. This tradition goes right back to Shakespeare himself and offers us an excellent strategy when we encounter language that no longer serves our modern context.

For example, in the soldier Williams' speech, Shakespeare uses the word "black", here meaning terrible, awful, or horrible. To avoid the association of blackness with such negative concepts, you could substitute another word like "dire", which serves the meaning of the line and fits its rhythm. We chose to do this in our video introduction to Shakespeare, *A Shakesperience*.

| Shakespeare's text | A possible adaptation |
|--|---|
| "Now, if these men do not die well, it will be a black matter for the king that led them to it." | "Now, if these men do not die well, it will be a dire matter for the king that led them to it." |

Reflect

- How do you feel about Shakespeare's use of the word "black" in this speech?
- What alternate words might convey the line's meaning while fitting the rhythm of the speech? This speech is in prose rather than poetry, so metre is not a factor. However, a word of more than one syllable will change the rhythm of the speech. If you made a substitution, how does your chosen word affect the speech and your experience of it?

Make it yours

Follow the steps below as you explore these speeches and make them your own.

1. **Choose a speech** to try exploring first.
2. **Express the speech** with one of the suggested ways below. You are welcome to try the whole speech or to just focus on a section of it.
3. **Repeat steps 1 and 2** with the other speech. Consider the differences between the two experiences.

Perform

- **Speak or express the speech.** Notice the feelings that arise as you explore each thought.
- **Create a dance or movement piece** inspired by the speech.
- **Create a sculpture or statue** using your body to embody 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.

Reflect

- What does it feel like to express Henry's speech? What do these words and ideas inspire you to think, feel, or create?
- What does it feel like to express Williams's speech? What do these words and ideas inspire you to think, feel, or create?
- What words or phrases in either speech do you find especially powerful or difficult? Why do you think you have this response?
- As you look at the two speeches, you might notice a key difference. Henry's speech is written in verse: it has a specific metrical structure. On the other hand, Williams' speech is written in prose: there's no specific metre, and the speech pattern is closer to that of ordinary speech. What effect does this have for you as you experience each speech?
- How persuasive do you find each of these speeches? Do you find one more persuasive than the other?