

LB
1837

ADVANCE
READING COPY
HARDCOVER
PUBLICATION
JUNE 2006
NOT FOR SALE



HENRY V AND THE BATTLE
THAT MADE ENGLAND

AGINCOURT



JULIET BARKER

Author of The Brontës

Henry V before Shakespeare

by *Lori A. Davis Perry*

William Shakespeare's young Prince Hal famously spends his youth in less than princely pursuits, drinking in public houses, befriending members of the lower classes, and ignoring the sage advice of his ailing father. Upon ascending the throne, young Hal—transformed as charismatic King Henry V—both rejects the extravagances of his youth and mines those experiences to build personal relationships with his soldiers, while simultaneously surprising his enemies with unexpected military prowess, mature sensibilities and patriotic piety.

In *Agincourt: Henry V and the Battle that made England*, Juliet Barker's elegant masterpiece, however, we meet an altogether different Prince Hal. Here we discover a responsible, hard-working, pious young prince who develops strong leadership and administrative skills from an early age. Barker's compelling and engrossing account of his life and the battle of Agincourt takes us through every layer of fifteenth-century society—the intertwined lives of medieval families, the day-to-day workloads of male and female blacksmiths forging armor and weaponry, the detailed logistics of building an invasion force, and even the tension between the poet and intellectual Christine de Pisan and Henry IV, as the wily king held her only son hostage in hopes of bringing her to England as his poet laureate. Pisan's distrust and dislike of Henry IV is substantiated by Barker's account of his rule. For the “aging” King Henry IV was less wise and magisterial than suspicious and short-sighted when it came to his eldest son Henry. As Barker writes,

On 20 March 1413 Henry IV died at Westminster Abbey in the Jerusalem Chamber, thereby fulfilling (in the tenuous way of most medieval prophecies) the prediction that he would die “in the Holy Land.” The dazzling young hero, renowned for his personal prowess as a crusader and jousting and for his

lavish patronage of the arts, died a broken man, unlamented and unrespected, at the age of only forty-six. He had kept his stolen crown by a combination of luck, ruthlessness and success in battle. He had even succeeded in passing it on to his son. In almost every other respect he had failed. He left the government heavily in debt, the royal council and the wider nobility riven with faction and intrigue, the country plagued by violent disorder and the Church under threat at home from heresy and abroad from schism.

Far from the solemn figure we encounter in Shakespeare, Henry IV was not a figure his son would struggle to live up to.

If Henry IV falls short of Shakespearean depictions, his son Henry appears altogether alien to the figure readers and playgoers have come to expect. Responsibility marks the very earliest experiences of the young Prince Henry. He was a battle veteran at age thirteen, and in an age of political and military turmoil caused, in large part, by his own father's usurpation of the crown, Henry learned quickly the value of managing his assets shrewdly. Barker points out that "[i]n complete contrast to his father, financial prudence, economy and strategic planning were to be his watchwords." His responsible behavior led, in fact, to his appointment as overseer of his father's expenditures—a measure caused by the very real fear that the monarchy could go entirely bankrupt. Far from the drinking establishments of London, Barker's Henry spent his youth from the age of thirteen "sharing the burden of his father's crown" and "tak[ing] responsibility for the security and administration of his own domains. When he sought aid to recover Conwy Castle in North Wales from rebel hands, for instance, his father informed him in no uncertain terms that the castle had fallen through the negligence of one of the prince's officers and it was the prince's responsibility to recover it." Thus, as a teenager, Prince Henry was battling rebels, supervising military and civilian officials, and running the complex administration of large landed estates without significant guidance or support from his father.

Juliet Barker's fascinating portrait of Henry V and the battle of Agincourt cannot be read without an historical awareness of Shakespeare's interpretation hovering always behind the scene. The result does not distract from the pleasure of this book, but rather enriches the reading experience. Henry's strong religious piety, in an age lurching toward heresy, suggests a multitude of reasons for Shakespeare's unique portrayal. But Barker covers far more historical ground than could—or should—be attempted in a play.

Her historical analysis of Henry V and the battle of Agincourt spans both England and France, the upper and the lower classes, religious and secular divisions, family dynasties and personal feuds, strategic planning, tactics, logistics, maneuvers, and the shocking aftermath of Agincourt—the tremendous rolls of the dead, the thousands of naked and mutilated corpses, and later, the power vacuums created by the slaughter of so many political and military professionals. Barker is not shy about revealing the particularly gruesome realities of medieval warfare. For instance, armored knights were well armed against blows to their bodies. But the necessity for visors created a single weakness in their armor that combatants on both sides ferociously exploited. Thus, most of the knights killed on the battlefield were left with mutilated faces. All of their identifying personal effects—armor, shields, clothing—were stripped from the bodies by neighborhood foragers soon after the battle. As a result, bodies were soon impossible to identify, and families waited in agonized suspense for weeks or months without verifiable information. In many cases this meant that transfers of estates, property, titles, or even legal authority were left in limbo for months or years.

Barker's account of the battle and the personalities who fought it is conveyed with elegant precision and thoughtfulness, whether she is reconstructing medieval economies of warfare or describing the bloody filth of dysentery experienced by an armored knight. Her research into the money, machines, and men required to wage war is particularly interesting, marked as it is with Henry V's personal oversight in every detail and his command that "nothing was to be taken from Church property without paying a fair price." Henry V's sense of justice, more or less unique in his period, contributed significantly to the goodwill he created among himself and his subjects. Barker's reconstruction of his war preparations—numbers of ships on order in the shipyards, orders to blacksmiths, arrangements for the transfer of cattle, detailed descriptions of the two types of arrows required for the longbow (weighted and shaped differently for long versus short range tactics) and the technology of forging arrowheads associated with them, the construction of cannons, orders for carts, horses, and wheelwrights, skilled and semi-skilled fighters—demonstrates not only the masterful king and warrior at work, but also the masterful historian. In her hands, the medieval world comes vibrantly alive with the noise and bustle of war preparations. Through it all, she recreates both the intellectual study of warfare in the period, particularly in Christine de Pisan's and classical author's writings, and the daily work of actually implementing these plans.

The Agincourt campaign itself fills fully half of Barker's account.

On Sunday, 11 August 1415, at about three o'clock in the afternoon, Henry V gave the signal that launched the invasion of France. Fifteen hundred ships—a fleet twelve times the size of the Spanish Armada—now weighed anchor, hoisted sail and made their way into the Channel from the shelter of Southampton Water and the Solent.

The ships carried 25,000 horses and many thousands of soldiers—it took three full days to disembark. The first objective was Harfleur, “one of the most important ports in northern Europe” which “posed the greatest threat to English interests.” Not surprisingly, Harfleur was also heavily fortified, and the siege aimed at forcing the town into surrender took eighteen days rather than the eight Henry V had calculated. In the additional ten days, the English camp suffered a severe epidemic of dysentery, or, as the English called it, “the bloody flux,” the “scourge of every army on campaign.” Barker calculates that as many as 10-20% of Henry’s army died, perhaps 1200-2400 men. In addition, some five thousand were evacuated back to England so they would not hinder the army’s forward movement. She therefore concludes, based upon accounts of the sick and the dying, that “the king lost between a quarter and a third of his men to dysentery as a result of the seige” and “more men died from disease at Harfleur than from the fighting throughout the campaign.”

Henry’s march to Calais, which ultimately landed him in Agincourt, is handled with military precision in Barker’s account. In addition, however, she devotes considerable time to the state of French politics, which were far more tumultuous than commonly known to those familiar only with Shakespeare’s account of the battle:

So it happened that the thousands of Frenchmen who had willingly answered the call to arms in defense of their country found themselves in an army which, despite its overwhelming superiority in both numbers and armament, lacked the one thing that was absolutely essential. It had no commander. And it was about to face an enemy whose sole advantage was that it was supremely well led.

Barker displays a masterful touch at creating suspense—despite the known outcome of the battle—in her artistry and deeply chilling allusions to more familiar scenes of war. For instance, Henry’s surveying the scene of battle creates ominous parallels for modern readers:

As the scouts had discovered, the heavy rain that had created such miserable conditions for the men camping out overnight had created an unexpected opportunity. The fields where the battle was to take place had been newly ploughed and sown with winter cereals. The soil was not the fine, light loam of the vineyards of France, but the thick, heavy clay of the Somme, with its extraordinary capacity to retain water. Even before it became trampled and churned up by the feet of countless men and horses, it was already turning into a mud-bath. As Henry was quick to appreciate, this would slow down any attack by cavalry or infantry, creating easier targets for his archers.

Barker's account of the battle itself—and the near impossibility of identifying bodies afterward—reinforces the unspoken parallels with the first World War. But Agincourt's horrific toll of human life eliminated an entire ruling class in France, leaving a vacuum that even the survivors of the First World War could hardly appreciate. Not just one generation, but two and three generations in the same families were exterminated in a single day. The impact was stunning, and Barker's account does justice to the appalling consequences of this battle.

Perhaps most impressively, Barker displays a deep and thoughtful understanding of leadership, both in medieval society and among human beings in general. Her analysis of Henry V's leadership abilities—aside from the charisma that marked his reign and lasting reputation—offers substantial insights for modern scholars in the field. Barker establishes herself as a truly insightful scholar, not only of historical events, but the personal and public leadership qualities of the people who shaped those events.

Juliet Barker has written a scholarly and precise historical account that is equally accessible and enjoyable to both non-professional and professional academic readers. Her language is bright and lively, her analysis is always absorbing, and the myriad details she provides are always fascinating, never tedious. Possessing exquisite judgment as a writer and historian, Juliet Barker is a deeply gifted teller of an important tale.

LORI A. DAVIS PERRY is the Book Review Editor for *WLA*.