Class and War: Nobles and Commoners in Shakespeare's Henry V

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William Shakespeare’s historical play Henry V is the final work in his historical tetralogy and follows the trials of King Henry V at the beginning of his reign as he experiences a miraculous victory at the Battle of Agincourt. Throughout the play, the noblemen treat war with France as a performance and continuation of chivalry, mostly protected by their upper-class status as they are more likely to be captured and ransomed. At a stark contrast, the commoners are ultimately forced to fight in these wars, more likely to die at the hands of the enemy and therefore view war rationally. While the noblemen give flowering speeches of how their honor will shine through their battle scars, the commoners are left wondering if they will see tomorrow or will end up as dismembered bodies on the battlefield. This essay will focus on this differentiating class interpretation of war, one as a performance and one as a harsh reality. While this play is usually read as a patriotic work, often performed in times of war, this essay explores the ways in which Shakespeare appears to present these differing ideals as a way to critique the politics of war. The performativity of the nobility is presented as an extreme, and the despairing descriptions provided by the commoners are excessive. These opposing views create a space in-between, one that leaves the audience up to decide what is the true nature of war.