

Shakespeare Embodied: “O for a Muse of Fire”



This activity can be used before viewing *Henry V* or after pause point 00:03:18.

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

- Embody Shakespeare’s language through speaking text aloud with their classmates
- Deepen comprehension of the opening speech of *Henry V*, which sets the scene for the play
- Investigate how language can be explored physically for dramatic effect
- Play and have fun with theatrical fundamentals

MATERIALS

- “O for a Muse of Fire” Handout (page 3)
- “O for a Muse of Fire” Glossary (page 4)

INTRODUCTION

Choruses are a very old form of theatrical storytelling, reaching back to the Greeks (and beyond). A chorus provides context, information and even foreshadowing for the audience. Often adding in commentary, the chorus can help shape the point of view of the audience, drawing on common fears and hopes. The chorus is the first voice we hear in *Henry V* and helps literally and figuratively set the stage for the action to come.

INSTRUCTIONS

Step One: Hand out copies of the prologue (“O for a Muse of Fire”).

Step Two: As a class, have the students take turns reading the speech line by line. If there is enough space in the classroom, it can be helpful to do this in a circle.

Step Three: Use the following questions as a guide for reflection about the text. You may want to give the students the questions and then read the speech for a second time.

- What words are new or unfamiliar to you?
- What clues did you pick up about what is going to happen in this play?
- What did you imagine while hearing these words?
- What events do you anticipate seeing?

Step Four: As a class, read the speech aloud again, going sentence by sentence this time, and stop between each thought to interpret the meaning. (**HINT:** Look for Shakespeare's punctuation: periods, colons, semicolons, etc.)

Step Five: Break into five small groups and assign parts of the speech. Together, brainstorm ways to physicalize the language. Give the groups 10 minutes to come up with an embodied presentation of their section of text. Encourage students to embody ideas by physicalizing as well as vocalizing the text (tableau could be an effective tactic). Once time is up, students will take turns presenting their sections in the order of the speech.

Step Six: Discuss the chorus with the class using the questions below.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- What is the chorus asking of the audience while watching this play?
- How does this speech call on the audience to use their imagination?
- What is the purpose of the chorus in this speech?
- How do poetic devices in this speech influence the way we see the imagery?
- What's the importance of imagination in theatermaking?

BONUS ACTIVITY

Watch Guthrie actors from years past deliver the speech using the link below (4:10).

RESOURCES

Guthrie Theater Alumni: "O for a Muse of Fire." Guthrie Theater.
Featuring Mark Rylance and Don Cheadle.
[youtube.com/watch?v=wSFw4oSJ498](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wSFw4oSJ498)



“O for a Muse of Fire”

SHAKESPEARE EMBODIED: “O FOR A MUSE OF FIRE”



ACT ONE, SCENE ONE

King Henry V

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, and 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.

“O for a Muse of Fire” Glossary



SHAKESPEARE EMBODIED: “O FOR A MUSE OF FIRE”

Terms are listed in the order they appear in the text and read from top to bottom by column.

Muse

A source of inspiration, often personified as a goddess in the arts

Ascend

To rise or climb

Heaven

In this context, refers to a realm of great beauty or creativity

Kingdom

A realm or domain, here used metaphorically for a stage

Monarchs

Sovereign rulers or kings and queens who hold the highest authority in a kingdom

Swelling

Growing; the dramatic and grand increase in intensity or significance of a scene

Assume

To take on or adopt a particular role, demeanor or appearance

Port

Demeanor or bearing; how one presents oneself

Mars

The Roman god of war, symbolizing military power and the spirit of battle

Leash'd

Tied or restrained, as one would keep dogs on a leash

Crouch

To bend down or hunch, often in a submissive way

Pardon

To forgive or excuse an offense or imperfection

Gentles

A term of respect for noble or genteel people

Flat unraised spirits

Low or uninspired emotions

Scaffold

A temporary structure or platform used for support; the stage/theater

Cockpit

A small, enclosed area; here used metaphorically for a stage

Vasty

Vast or immense

Casques

Helmets, particularly those used in battle

Affright

To cause fear or terror

Agincourt

The site of a significant battle fought on October 25, 1415, during the Hundred Years' War between England and France

Pardon

Forgiveness or excusing someone

Crooked figure

An imperfect representation; something that does not conform to the ideal shape

Attest

To provide evidence or proof of something

Ciphers

Symbols or figures; in this context, referring to people as mere representations

Accompt

An account or a reckoning; implies a record of events, experiences or characters

Girdle

A belt or boundary

Upreared

Raised high or lifted up; in this context, refers to the power of the two monarchies, England and France

“O FOR A MUSE OF FIRE” GLOSSARY (CONTINUED)

Abutting

Adjoining or next to

Perilous

Dangerous

Asunder

Apart or separated

Piece out

To complete or fill in

Puissance

Power or strength

Deck

To adorn or to decorate

Hour-glass

A device used to measure time; metaphorically, to condense time

Chorus

A group of performers who comment on the action of a play, or the person who introduces the story

Prologue

An introductory section of a play or literary work