

Shakespeare's Archbishop of Canterbury: Henry V's Imaginary War Counselor

Michael J. KREMENIK

Department of Medical Social Work Faculty of Medical Welfare Kurashiki, Okayama, 701-0193, Japan

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Abstract

How does historical inaccuracy affect the late 16th century London audience's perception of the Archbishop of Canterbury in William Shakespeare's history play Henry V? Shakespeare's Henry V portrays the Archbishop of Canterbury as a man who will do anything to save his Catholic churchlands from a proposed bill in Parliament that would seize them for the English crown. He persuades Henry V to invade France in the hope this will keep Henry's and his Parliament's minds on something else besides the bill. This characterization of the archbishop is a false one but Shakespeare was unaware of the lack of historical accuracy in the main source he used to write the play. He did know, however, that an unfavorable picture of his character, the Catholic Canterbury, would go over well with his late 16th century Protestant London audience.
