

***Henry V* in Shakespeare and in Film**

The great conquest is the conquest of reality. It is not to present life, for a moment, as it might have been.

—Wallace Stevens, *Adagia*

Historical sources that Shakespeare used to write *Henry V* portray the play's title character as a valiant and exemplary ruler, capable of military heroics, competent leadership and personal charm. Raphael Holinshed's *Chronicles*, Edward Hall's *Two Noble and Illustre Families of Lancaster and York*, Samuel Daniel's *The First Four Books of the Civil Wars*, and the anonymously written *The Famous Victories of Henry the Fifth* praise the king "in encomiastic terms" (Bevington and Kastan, 231), and Shakespeare's *Henry V* arguably does much to confirm the king's legend, gilding Henry V's image and conduct in poetic language that mythologizes his courage and character.

However, Shakespeare departs from one-dimensional representations of Henry V and of his invasion of France. He gives us a more complex and ironic study of a fondly remembered monarch. No single description of Henry V—heroic or Machiavellian—dominates the play, but Shakespeare's deliberate presentation of contrasting sides of Henry V demands a different set of responses from his audience, responses that couple with, and qualify, feelings of patriotism and nationalistic fervor.

The delicate and complex chemistry of the character that Shakespeare created is difficult to keep intact, especially in film adaptations that, almost by necessity, cut language. This presents a serious challenge for any attempt to develop as full a character study as Shakespeare's text provides. Given the variance of historical attitudes that either favor or oppose aggressive military intervention, it has also proven tempting for film directors to cherry pick from Shakespeare's profound meditation on the nature of warfare, and a king's role in conducting it,

to emphasize one element of Shakespeare's many-faceted character. Such emphasis comes at the expense of other qualities of Henry V's personality and acts of leadership that do not serve to confirm a director's thesis or an audience's popular mood.

Thus, in the past century of Shakespeare on film, disparate versions of Henry V have appeared on screen. Near the climax of World War II, Laurence Olivier's *Henry V* launched the first major motion picture version of Shakespeare on film. His *Henry V* spoke to an embattled English public that had suffered through waves of blitzkrieg bombings from Nazi Germany. Drawing on the prime figure of England's proud literary heritage, Olivier gave his Allied audience an unambiguous hero for the West to cheer and to emulate. Over four decades later, Kenneth Branagh's *Henry V* introduced elements of Shakespeare's play that Olivier had deliberately omitted. Branagh's 1989 film spoke to a war-weary audience that had begun to process the murky legacy of the Viet Nam War and the British conflict in the Falkland Islands.

Branagh's film came closer to conveying the irony that pervades Shakespeare's original version. Specifically, his more complex portrait of Henry V evokes skepticism about the sincerity of the king's virtue, wariness of his moral claim to the right of conquest, questions about his integrity, and doubt concerning the enduring value of his accomplishments in France. However, Olivier's version may come closer to conveying the aura of mystique that, to this day, surrounds the image of Henry V, the true historical figure. He is regarded as one of Britain's greatest kings: a military hero, a uniter and defender of the nation, and a model of stately royal conduct. Despite its subtleties, or perhaps because of the exuberance of the passages that celebrate Henry V's valor, Shakespeare's play has served a role in the making of this national hero's popular profile.

Nevertheless, any serious reading of *Henry V* reveals that Shakespeare prompts his audience to critical perspectives on Henry V by depicting the king's capacity for malice at the gates of Harfleur, and more emphatically by putting the whole of Henry's conquest of France in a very large set of parentheses: *Henry V* begins with clear suggestions of the king's political guile and grandiose imperial ambition, and it ends with acknowledgement that his war brought ephemeral gains at the cost of tens of thousands of lives, perpetuating the cycle of chaos: the Chorus tells us that Henry V's descendants "lost France and made his England bleed" (Epilogue, line 12).

Such caveats to Henry's otherwise glowing legend occupy a far smaller proportion of the text than do the passages that enlarge his might, charm and intelligence. However, it is Shakespeare's placement of these caveats—at the beginning and end, and otherwise right before or right after displays of heroism or triumph—that makes the play's iconoclastic effect palpable. Shakespeare affirms the might and charisma of this king. He searches deeper, too, to subtly explore truths that puncture the myth and prompt moral doubt.

Shakespeare would have had to be very careful in rendering such a morally complicated and unstable portrait of this famous and revered king. The Shakespeare scholar Harold Bloom notes that anyone who questioned the British state's exercise of power risked his freedom or even his life: "When Shakespeare thought of the state, he remembered first that it had murdered Christopher Marlowe, tortured and broken Thomas Kyd, and branded the unbreakable Ben Jonson. All that and more underlies the great lament in Sonnet 66: 'And right perfection wrongfully disgraced, / And strength by limping sway disabled, / And art made tongue-tied by authority'" (Bloom, 321). Olivier's and Branagh's politically motivated interpretations thus

recall Shakespeare's own effort to handle the pressing historical and social realities that circumscribed his life as an artist.

Shakespeare's artistic decisions, though, were driven by a fiercely independent intellect that would inevitably clash with the social and political bodies that he sought to entertain and to educate. He, too, wrote in times of great instability and fear. In light of this, the fact that his portrait of regal power is ambiguous shows that his art lies not only in his language and in his seminal examination of human personality, but in how effective he was in negotiating the dangerous and mercurial politics of his time. Thus, a full adaptation of Shakespeare's *Henry V*, one that is not strictly bound by the temporary, exigent circumstances of its creation, would preserve Shakespeare's achievement of complexity: its depth and range of inquiry in the face of fear.

The legacy of his writing then, is one of artistic and moral achievement. He does not identify himself with any simple ideology of peace, nor does he unqualifiedly glamorize military might. Shakespeare's aesthetic ethos may be well described by Wallace Stevens's aphorism about the role of the poet of the imagination: "The great conquest is the conquest of reality. It is not to present life, for a moment, as it might have been" (Stevens, 907). Shakespeare was too smart to let sentimental longing rule his work, and too smart to let political power trap him or flatter him into obsequious patriotism. He also trusted his audience to draw its own conclusions from a fuller depiction of the nature of power. His plays present conflicting moral truths that unsettle, rather than affirm, the political mind.

To this picture of Shakespeare, at work on the vital moral and social issues of his day, we must add another layer, again calling on Stevens's aphorisms: "The aesthetic order includes all other orders but is not limited to them" (Stevens, 905). Shakespeare is an ironist, eluding—or

perhaps *exceeding*—any consistent ideology that might be read into his work; but he is also a Socratic gadfly who challenged himself, his audiences, his characters and, to a notable extent, the political authorities of his day.

His method is to draw together the materials of history, philosophy, and religion and to transmute them into a poetic vision that captivates the intellect, rouses emotion, and challenges the conscience. These standards of artistic risk, integrity and intelligence then, must be considered to evaluate Shakespeare's cinematic spokespersons. And by these standards, future adaptations of his work should be gauged.

Laurence Olivier's *Henry V* (1944) is the first film to test itself against such difficult standards: it marked the advent of the Shakespeare film as a major motion picture. As such, it holds a special place, not only in any discussion of *Henry V* on film, but in discussions of all Shakespeare films that have followed it, for Olivier's film is the first major case study in the dilemmas that future directors of Shakespeare films would have to embrace and negotiate.

Given the technological, political and practical challenges that made an already difficult artistic challenge even more daunting, Olivier's film is, in many ways, a success. The first major motion picture of *Henry V* would necessarily stretch or abandon many guiding concepts of Shakespearean drama, acting and sense of audience to break into completely new territory. For this reason, Olivier was wary of attempting a *Henry V* film at all. "He felt the film would be too great a risk, that the dramatic verse of Shakespeare was suited only for performance on the stage. Furthermore, he recalled...that the public had ever shown a discouraging indifference to motion pictures made from plays of the Bard" (Crowther, 57). However, Olivier was assured of the film's bright prospects: he would get the lead role and the director's chair, and he would have a

hefty budget and ample time to develop his ideas. This was enough to convince Olivier to dive headlong into the project.

Examining the buildup to that decision suggests that making a patriotic film of *Henry V* was not such an unthinkable stretch for Olivier after all. Filippo del Giudice, who persuaded Olivier to pursue the film project, “had heard Olivier deliver some speeches from the play on BBC, on one of those patriotic broadcasts that were so popular in Britain during the war.... What, thought he, could be more appropriate to the British mood and condition at the time than this grandly heroic and triumphant *Chronicle Historie of Henry the Fifth* [?]” (Crowther, 57). The focus of these well received radio speeches, which emphasized the valorous aspect of Henry V’s character, set the tone and the central thesis of the film: it would be a film that modeled political integrity and just warfare in the face of tyranny.

The overwhelming presence of World War II left its mark on every decision in the process of making *Henry V*. Even the costumes were shaped by the war’s economic and material realities: “Suits of mail were made from heavy wrapping twine, knit and crocheted by a surprisingly eager group of Irish nuns, then sprayed with aluminum paint to simulate metal. Cheap blankets were dyed splendid colors and used for the hundreds of horse trappings in the great battle scene. Spears, swords, and maces were cut from wood and coated with aluminum paint. Even King Henry’s delicate crown was made from papier mâché” (Crowther, 58).

Given the relative simplicity of the film’s thesis, Olivier, who also co-edited the script with Alan Dent¹, decided to cut any references to Henry V’s capacity for ruthlessness, cold legalistic judgment or, as the play has it, savage war crimes. Olivier also made the opening scenes of Act One into a festive, circus-like affair devoid of any implications that backroom

¹ Olivier and Dent collaborated again in 1948 when they made *Hamlet*, also a popular success. Similar to *Henry V*, they fashioned *Hamlet* into a film that would speak to its mainstream audience’s popular mood, which had by then turned to anxiety and unrest in the years following World War II.

dealing and Machiavellian plotting had anything to do with the invasion of France. Planning for the war is depicted as an open and celebrated public event. These editorial actions profoundly change the story from Shakespeare's original version, which presented its audience with all of the king's unpredictable motives and behaviors to contemplate.

However, Olivier's radical changes did not bother a war-weary audience with its mind on recovering from the blitz bombings and waging its effort to defeat Nazi Germany. The uncertainty that Shakespeare created and examined in *Henry V* might have appealed to Shakespeare purists or to detached ethicists; Olivier evidently decided that it would have depressed and alienated people. His estimation of the public mood helped the film to popular success, even in the months after the war had ended.

The film was such an enormous success that it would inspire a wave of Shakespeare films in the following years and decades, including Olivier's own "essay in *Hamlet*" from 1948, an even more successful endeavor that won four Academy Awards. Panegyric reviews for Olivier's *Henry V* were not uncommon. Passages from an essay by James Agee give the flavor of this enthusiasm:

I cannot compare it with many stage productions of Shakespeare; but so far as I can they were, by comparison, just so many slightly tired cultural summer-salads, now and then livened, thanks to an unkillable talent or an unkillable line, by an unexpected rose petal or the sudden spasm of a rattlesnake: whereas this, down to the last fleeting bit of first-rate poetry in a minor character's mouth, was close to solid gold, almost every word given its own and its largest contextual value.... It is tantalizing to be able to mention so few of the dozens of large and hundreds of small excellences which Mr. Olivier and his associates have developed to sustain Shakespeare's poem. They have done somewhere near all that talent, cultivation, taste, knowledgeability, love of one's work—every excellence in fact, short of genius—can be expected to do; and that, the picture testifies, is a very great deal (Agee, 55-56).

Three decades later, one could find critics raving that the film is "a miracle of lucidity, order and harmony" (Jorgens, 123). Thus, the popular conception of *Henry V* for twentieth century audiences would remain uncomplicatedly heroic for decades to come.

More than half a century later, the urgency and even the memory of World War Two have faded in intensity; consequently, Olivier's *Henry V* no longer translates with the same ring of emotional rightness. The global existential crisis that shaped Olivier's euphemized *Henry V* has given way to different (yet derivative) crises that call for the irony and complexity of Shakespeare's text, qualities that offer modern war-weary audiences a different kind of counsel and wisdom, if not comfort.

Still, even the scholastically oriented BBC version (1979), which gives more emphasis to textual fidelity, glosses or omits the most severe and problematic features of Henry V's character, rendering the warrior king as a mostly likable leader, though somewhat more conflicted than Olivier's. The BBC *Henry V* was never aimed at as large an audience, either. It would take a full 45 years from the release of Olivier's film for a more emotionally and politically complex *Henry V* to come to the big screen.

Kenneth Branagh's *Henry V* (1989) returns to the more nuanced study of King Henry that we find in Shakespeare's full text. For this, the film deserves credit and praise. Olivier's king was not so much the dual, inner-dueling self that Shakespeare created. Branagh's, though, is full of inner conflict: "From the start Branagh saw Henry as 'a massively guilty man' haunted by the ghosts of both his father and Richard II, and as the production progressed Bardolph...grew to be included in that equation" (Crowl, 167). Thus Branagh's version restores the crucial tension that exists in Shakespeare's play, tension arising from the anguish of a young king under enormous pressure, divided between his past and his proscribed future as the nations' leader.

Branagh's central thesis for the part of Henry V was honed in the years preceding the film's development, during which he played the king in a stage production. In those formative years, Branagh decided "that we should not try to explain this man but rather explore all [his]

paradoxes and contradictions” (Crowl, 167). The film’s thesis, then, is that King Henry is a conflicted personality, called to fulfill a king’s duties, though they make unnatural strains upon his private nature.

Branagh explores this thesis by changing the colors of scenes and costumes from dark to bright, clean to muddy and gray, to show the alternating moods and modalities that define the play and its main character. The full range of Henry’s speeches, from his savvy wooing of Katherine to his vicious threats of rape and infanticide at Harfleur, is present in the film to complete the dizzying effect of Henry’s multiple, divided self that is emphasized in Shakespeare’s text.

Branagh’s portrayal of Henry V features an added layer of human interest. As Samuel Crowl aptly notes in *Shakespeare Observed*, Henry V, the upstart king, is played by a young actor who is taking over where great Shakespearean actors left off decades ago. Further, many of these great actors and actresses are present in the film, symbolically giving way to a new artist just as the elders of France and England yield to the vision of the young king. Paul Scofield, Judi Dench, Ian Holm, Derek Jacobi and still many others represent a roll call of a generation of renowned Shakespeareans. Branagh’s film, Crowl writes, is “a work that celebrates the return of filmed Shakespeare after a twenty-year drought” (173).

The warm public reception of this film marked the first major success for a Shakespeare film in decades, establishing another connection to the *Henry V* of the World War II generation: it revived the notion of the Shakespearean major motion picture that Olivier’s film launched, and it crowned a new, dominant Shakespearean leading man, the role that Olivier had pioneered on the big screen.

Perhaps the most significant achievement of Branagh's film is that, compared to every preceding version of the film, it comes closest to articulating the caveats of Shakespeare's play that qualify Henry V's military and political successes by examination of the invasion's dubious origins and tragic outcomes. In doing so, Branagh introduced a different kind of political consciousness into the movie character of Henry V—finally catching up to Shakespeare's own fuller appreciation of the king's ironic character flaws. Nevertheless, some critics argue that Branagh's film did not fully depict Henry V's villainous side.

Whether one favors or faults the film for its nuanced take on the king's valor and ambition, most viewers can agree that most of the film's doubtful portrayals come in the first half of the film. In the latter half, the story switches into a different mode, as though it were trying to catch up with Olivier's horses charging through the hillsides, giving itself over to the scintillating emotions of daring, patriotic sacrifice and euphoric victory.

The battle scene tempers this feeling of glorification, with its gray weather and muddy battlefield full of corpses, including those of children, one of which Branagh's Henry V carries solemnly to his burial. Still, these losses are framed as necessary costs of a just war, underscoring the emotional poignancy of Henry V's rousing Saint Crispian speech rather than disqualifying its authenticity. One could rightly interpret the film's transition to confidence and brashness as a parallel of King Henry's development from an untested king into a commanding leader.

Among the disapproving critics of Branagh's murderous king is Curtis Breight, whose essay in *Shakespeare on Film* (1998) castigates Branagh for perpetuating the idea of a just Christian invasion, an idea that he finds far more excusable in Olivier's film, given the context of World War II. Breight states:

Divinely endorsed militarism is probably the most potent defense for a culture's unwillingness to acknowledge its complicity.... Young American men who constitute a large percentage of cinema audiences (and British too, I suspect) do not flee in horror from representations of gratuitous butchery. They revel in it. By choosing to emulate the young Olivier through a male-dominated militaristic play...Branagh makes a film that appeals to American and British citizens, the majority of whom subsequently supported techno-slaughter in the Middle East (Breight, 142-143).

Breight's analysis challenges the notion that Branagh's more emotionally complex film actually achieves an anti-war effect. In fairness to Branagh, his film plays up the vein of militarism already present in Shakespeare's play. Concerning the film's qualifying ironies that attach themselves to Henry V's image as a valiant king, Breight seems to want a different version of what World War II audiences wanted from *Henry V*: an uncomplicated portrait, only this time a portrait of masquerading villainy, not of divinely guided enforcement of justice.

Written after the first Gulf War, Breight's comments, like the laudatory praise heaped on Olivier's *Henry V*, boldly underscore how any film is subject to criticism rooted in immediate socio-political circumstances. In light of what the United States and Britain have done in Iraq in the beginning of the 21st century, Branagh's film would probably be treated with more of Breight's brand of criticism.

Can an adaptation of Shakespeare's *Henry V* escape such criticisms by sticking to a conservative, text-based approach that strives to represent his play as a period piece? The BBC version of *Henry V* (1979) gives us a test of that hypothetical possibility. In the 1970's, the BBC network set out to make a catalogue of all 37 plays, largely eschewing experimental theses drawn from Shakespeare's raw materials. The network pursued this ambitious project with an extremely limited budget and a crammed time schedule. Whereas Olivier's 1944 production of *Henry V* took over a year and cost \$2,000,000—a record expense at the time for films made in England—the entire set of 37 BBC productions was produced with a budget of only “\$13.6

million. That works out to...\$367,000” (Pilkington, 27-28) per film! In addition, casts would have only six days to shoot an entire film, which precluded revision and integration of useful feedback once filming began.

Considering these stark financial and scheduling limitations, the BBC production of *Henry V* does a fine job of fulfilling its goals. This *Henry V* version, starring David Gwillim, who also plays Prince Hal in *Henry IV 1* and *2*, does more than the Olivier film to develop the theme of the young king’s gradual adaptation to his role. It also brings more of Henry V’s personal complexity into the film. The emphasis is on the play’s language and less on its potential for spectacle. Moreover, it does not make overt attempts to comment on major social events of the 1970’s.

Still, this recording of the full text does not amount to a transcendent ‘view from nowhere’ of Shakespeare’s play. It is necessarily defined by its particular interpretations of the text, such as when Katherine (played by a gorgeous Jocelyne Boisseau) mysteriously fails to show any “witchcraft” at all in her lips as Henry kisses her. Hadn’t she fancied being wooed? This version suggests that she is merely acquiescent or ambivalent toward Henry at best. Further, the film softens Henry’s graphic, fierce threats at Harfleur, committing the film to the kind of editorial changes that the BBC productions were supposed to avoid.

Some creative additions help the film achieve an intelligent visual realization of the play, such as when the French King’s gracious speech at the end of the play shows the King framed by lush burgundy curtains, emphasizing his affirmation of the eloquent plea for peace by the Duke of Burgundy, or when Gwillim’s King Henry, wandering in the night, actually comes close to brawling with Williams as the soldier’s criticisms prick his conscience and aggravate his guilt

and anxiety. Of the three films I have considered here, this BBC version offers the most convincing and satisfying portrayal of this nighttime scene in Act 4, scene 1.

The film is successful as a close, approximate reading of the text, running nearly three hours, and the BBC producers can stake a claim to coming nearest to ‘what Shakespeare actually did’ in terms of textual fidelity. However, this raises an important question about what it means to reenact ‘what Shakespeare created’ in his time. Shakespeare used existing elements of Henry V’s story and then *reinvented* them to engage an English society mired in decades of war. That is, his work is infused with purposeful invention that pushed his audience to think in the most progressive and complex way he could have managed. The BBC version does not proceed in this spirit as much as Branagh’s film manages to do.

This underscores the fact that experimentation, while it risks running away from Shakespeare’s ideas, is ultimately necessary to enact a Shakespearean vision more fully. The BBC film’s intentions are to show us what Shakespeare did by adhering mostly to his text, and by reconstructing the period’s costumes and historical settings. These are worthwhile goals, but they mean that the film necessarily lacks a central, but oft overlooked, part of Shakespeare’s writing: its active moral and political probing, its ability to push boundaries with the audience of his time. In light of the fact that this version appeared just five years after the end of the Viet Nam War, we must acknowledge that the BBC film fails to mirror and advance Shakespeare’s questioning spirit.

Henry V needs to be revisited again, and in the spirit of Shakespeare, a new *Henry V* film must ask new questions that would not have been possible to highlight, politically or practically, in Shakespeare’s time. Specifically, France and England are no longer warring kingdoms at each other’s doorstep. They are leading, cooperative members of a modern European Union in a time

of longstanding peace on the Continent. Therefore, a filmmaker could and certainly should consider Henry V's invasion from a realistic French perspective, too. This would mean integrating Shakespeare's text with new writing and new roles, and this act of invention, too, is in the true, creative Shakespearean vein.

Being true to Shakespeare is not as easy—difficult as it may be!—as embracing textual fidelity. One must also consider the inventive element and the detached but earnest moral investigation at work in Shakespeare's plays. Thus, the challenge of bringing Shakespeare to film, specifically *Henry V* to film, is to take Shakespeare's enduring work and follow his example of moral innovation, synthesizing a new vision that speaks in an original, current form while retaining the moral and philosophical complexity of Shakespeare's vision.

If I were to write the screenplay for this new *Henry V* film, I would use Shakespeare's text as the core of my script, but I would transpose much of it to imagery and action while integrating key lines, events and ideas with poetry from several ages and cultures that addresses issues of war and peace. Akira Kurosawa's synthesis of Shakespeare's texts with Japanese history provides an excellent example of how I could go about this; and like in Kurosawa's films, I would not use Shakespeare's titles, though I would use his characters' names, along with significant portions of the core of his text. I would title the film *The King's Invasion*, or perhaps just *The Invasion*. Along with my title, my script would draw visual and verbal connections to the events and the initiators of the Iraq War.²

I would, by Shakespeare's model, eschew wistfulness for a better world that does not exist. However, I would advance conflicting moral questions, as Shakespeare himself does in his plays. Shakespeare does not preach, but he plants seeds of conscience and wisdom by creating moral questions for his audience, by presenting evidence of evil in presumably good or

² Please see my current provisional outline for this screenplay in the appendix of this essay.

trustworthy people, and by presenting arguments for mercy, virtue, thoughtfulness, and art in the presence of malice and fear.

Shakespeare sought to present the world in fuller detail and depth than any writer had previously endeavored or achieved. He also gave himself room to invent a world that was relevant, and remains relevant, to how people understand their lives. In bringing his plays to modern film audiences, we can follow his example—not only by bringing his text and his imagined worlds to the screen, but by showing his spirit of exploration and his form of detached, earnest intellect to tell stories that help us discover who we are and how we live.

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