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### Does His Majesty Please?

Within the Shakespeare canon, many roles typically rank ahead of Henry V on a list of the “best” roles Shakespeare wrote. A discussion on the subject will almost always produce Hamlet, Iago, Prospero, Lady Macbeth, Juliet, Viola and the like ahead of the historical king. Henry V, however, remains one of the most complex characters Shakespeare has penned. His complexities have sparked many debates over Shakespeare’s intent with the character, some seeing him as a heroic, honorable, ‘mirror of all Christian kings’ fearlessly leading his countrymen to their just destiny; others see a cold-hearted, calculating Machiavellian futilely bent on dynastic legitimacy. Both sides of this ongoing debate can find evidence in *Henry V* to support their claim. Some scholars even cite evidence from other plays in the tetralogy (*Richard II* and *Henry IV, Parts I&2*) in defense of their claims. Despite experiencing periods of popular belief in favor of their interpretation, no single point of view has proven correct in the four hundred plus years since the play was written. What has resulted from this dichotomy of popular perception are many distinct productions of *Henry V*, both on stage and screen. There are three film adaptations with very distinct portrayals of the character of King Henry V: *The Chronicle History of King Henry the Fifth with his Battell Fought at Agincourt in France* directed by Laurence Olivier in the 1940’s, *Henry V* directed by Kenneth Branagh in the late 1980’s, and *William Shakespeare’s Henry V* directed by Peter Babakitis in the early 2000’s. In each of these films, the director also starred in the title role. Each film can be seen to illustrate the evolution of popular thought about the character of Henry V and the wide-ranging motivations one can employ with the character.

For three-and-a-half centuries following *Henry V*'s initial release, the play was overwhelmingly interpreted as a play about heroism, English patriotism, and leadership. No acknowledgement of a possibility that Shakespeare wrote *Henry V* with anything but admiration for the great medieval king exists during this time. In his 1817 book *Characters of Shakespeare's Plays* William Hazlitt wrote the first anti-Henry V interpretation of the play of note. As he saw it, Henry is a character who can at best be described as an "amiable monster" (Hazlitt 133) and one whom Shakespeare "labours hard to apologise for" (Hazlitt 132). It is important that Hazlitt views *Henry V* as a "straightforward and very positive presentation of Henry that fails" (Levin 137). Hazlitt believes his own negative evaluation of Henry V directly contradicts Shakespeare's intent which this period will view as a model of everything good about the English character. This attitude would remain the predominant understanding of *Henry V* until the 1950's.

This long tradition of viewing *Henry V* in the light of heroics and his against-all-odds military victory is reflected in Laurence Olivier's 1944 film adaptation of *Henry V*. Olivier's film was met with universal critical acclaim in Great Britain and the United States. The *Time Magazine* review from 1946 tells of a screening of the film before an Oxford panel of Shakespeare experts. After the screening, the only criticism from the panel was that "all the war horses in the Battle of Agincourt should have been stallions" (Agee 348). This anecdote illustrates the overwhelmingly positive reception of the film in spite of Olivier's copious cutting – 3,199 lines to 1,505 lines. Why did a panel of Oxford Shakespeare pundits not feel it necessary to comment on the removal of the treason plot (Act II, Sc. ii), both orders to kill the French prisoners (Act IV, Sc. vi & vii), or the graphic threatening of Harfleur (Act III, Sc. iii)? Modern criticism of the film puts an increasing emphasis on the fact that the film was made as a piece of propaganda partially funded by the British government during World War II. This Oxford panel either understood the propaganda behind the film and chose not to draw

attention to the incongruent parts of the film and Shakespeare's play, or the anecdote was entirely fabricated for a post-World War II, mainstream American audience. If one looks past these rather simplistic explanations, though, it becomes apparent that Olivier's film was wholly in agreement with the common perception of *Henry V* at the time. Instead of growing angry, as some audiences might today, with the simpler, more fairy tale-like adaptation, an audience in the 1940's, at war or not, would have, like Hazlitt, been glad that Olivier had removed all of the bits which made *Henry V* "but one of Shakespeare's second-rate plays" (Hazlitt 137).

With the 1950's comes the advent of ironic readings of Shakespeare's *Henry V*, established most notably by Harold Goddard in *The Meaning of Shakespeare*, published in 1951. Goddard's essential premise is that "Shakespeare designed the play to convey two contradictory meanings—an apparent surface meaning (usually explained as a sop to the less intelligent members of his audience)...which is undercut by a pervasive and subversive irony (aimed at the wiser few)" (Levin 134). In the context of *Henry V*, this means that although on the surface the play paints Henry as a national hero, he is intended to be a cold-blooded political machine, a cynical hypocrite. Where Hazlitt would see a Shakespearean failure incidentally creating a dark picture of a not-so-chivalrous Hal, Goddard would see Shakespearean success. Although never mentioned, it is quite possible that Goddard's position was established in direct response to the 1946 U.S. release of Olivier's film. In the ensuing decades, much discussion in the form of scholarly essays would both endorse and refute an ironic meaning in *Henry V*, with neither viewpoint proving conclusively victorious to this day.

The films that have emerged during this 'modern period', those directed by and starring Kenneth Branagh and Peter Babakitis, encompass this understanding – one must either endorse one of these opposing interpretations or attempt to create a character with the

duality of both while not making King Henry V schizophrenic or bipolar. Babakitis chooses the former view with his post-millennium *Shakespeare's Henry V*, quite consciously choosing to make Henry V an inhuman Machiavellian. Considerably less popular than his blockbuster predecessors, the film incorporates many unconventional practices to establish a darker, exceedingly morbid view of Henry V. The shooting style and angles are especially important in this film. It is shot as a docudrama, seeking to merely document the events of the play and bear witness to them, not comment on them. Much of the film is concentrated on the character of Henry V, shot in close up, oftentimes addressing the camera directly and seldom interacting with the diegetic environment. Babakitis then makes heavy use of digital media in his presentation to comment on the action, often bending time and space with slow motion and editorial discontinuity, superimposing images that comment on the action, shooting scenes through color filters, framing scenes directly after medieval paintings, and having a disembodied voice for the Chorus. The resulting product is a "mixture of heterogeneous styles, isolating the character of Henry V within his own artificial dimension, within shots of his own and within colors of his own" (Hatchuel 146). Babakitis' creation is a wholly inhuman King Henry V, comparable only to that of Machiavelli's character in *The Prince*. Like Olivier and Branagh, Babakitis makes cuts to support his interpretation. For example, in Shakespeare's play, Henry makes two orders to kill their French prisoners. The first is a military response when he learns the French are still powerful:

For hearing this, I must perforce compound  
 With mixed-full eyes, or they will issue too.  
 But, hark, what new alarum is this same?  
 The French have reinforced their scattered men.  
 Then every soldier kill his prisoners.  
 Give the word through. (*H5* 4.6.34-39)

It is made with military strategy in mind as the English cannot be victorious if they cannot devote all of their men to the field. The second is made as an emotional response when he learns of the Boy's death:

I was not angry since I came to France  
 Until this instant...  
 ...we'll cut the throats of those we have,  
 And not a man of them that we shall take  
 Shall taste our mercy. Go and tell them so. (*H5* 4.7.37-38, 45-47)

Babakitis chooses to include the first order; the one made as a calculating military strategy but cut the second rash, emotional counter. This carefully ruthless interpretation is also manifest in Henry V's speech threatening Harfleur. Babakitis plays the lines with sobering, sociopathic frankness. They are not the words of a soldier 'in the moment'; they are those of someone entirely removed from reality and entirely in control. Through this film it becomes apparent why many are hesitant to align themselves with this perception of *Henry V*. The thought that Shakespeare wrote an epic play about a monster that succeeds does not sit well with many.

This may be the reason that Kenneth Branagh's *Henry V* is so successful and well-received. Branagh chose the latter of the two contemporary approaches in conceiving the character of Henry V, attempting to play him as an honorable hero who *must* do monstrous, Machiavellian things for the good of his country. He achieves this through a series of specific choices. More than the other film versions, Branagh harkens back to the previous plays of the tetralogy, linking King Henry V with the much more lovable Hal. He does this with flashback scenes from the previous *Henry IV* plays, showing Hal's growth and highlighting his newfound maturity. This helps guard against any potential outright hatred of Henry V's actions. The audience then explains away the threatening of Harfleur as a time when Henry got 'a little carried away', sees him fight back tears as he stoically watches his former friend

Bardolph be hanged, or feel the immense strain on Henry's conscience in his agonizing soliloquy "Upon the king!..." (*H5* 4.1.184-238) before the battle. Like Olivier and Babakitis, Branagh modifies Shakespeare's text to fit his interpretation. He makes significantly fewer cuts than Olivier, but still cuts both orders to kill all French prisoners. He does take advantage of the opportunity to react to the killing of the Boy, though. Instead of an impassioned order to "cut the throats of those we have" (*H5* 4.7.45), his rage is focused on Montjoy, shouting "How now?! What means this herald?!" (*H5* 4.7.50), pulling Montjoy from his horse and forcing him to his knees. The result of Branagh's portrayal is the feeling that the horrors portrayed in the film are necessary evils leaving a duly victorious King Henry "in a kind of communion with his men" (Donaldson 65).

Do these many decades of work, thousands of hours of reading and writing, and enormous production budgets cement Henry V as a picture of heroism and a paragon of virtue, or as an emotionless, inhuman beast? The answer has not yet been made clear. The evidence from these three film adaptations seems to favor an acknowledgement of the complexity of the character and a sincere attempt at authenticating him as much as possible. Perhaps in another four hundred years the literary, theatre, and film communities will have come to an agreement, but it is quite clear that audiences over the past fifty or sixty years do not feel comfortable endorsing one King Henry V or another. One view is an oversimplification and an appropriation of Shakespeare's text and the other is an unjust condemnation of an essentially good man. Maybe the fact that this character has eluded a concrete explanation for so many years is a testament to Shakespeare's writing. He allows the audience to grapple with the notions we have about Henry and allows one to decide who the character is and how one feels about him. This concept is more clearly illustrated in *The Merchant of Venice*. The modern audience's discomfort with the anti-Semitism in *The Merchant of Venice* causes each production to consider alternate interpretations to avoid

offending the audience through Shylock, Portia, and Antonio. Similarly, judgment of the character Henry V on the page must give way to the judgment of the character Henry V in performance. It allows the audience to approach each production, whether live or recorded, stage production or film, professional or amateur with an eye for a new Henry V, and not-yet-conceived Henry V that grows out of the hundreds of choices by actor and director, designer and dramaturg. Each film serves to illustrate the evolution of popular thought about the character of Henry V and the wide-ranging motivations one can employ with the character. Henry V is not a character to be definitively embraced or denounced for all time; he is one that will adapt as times change.

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