

Tragical, Comical, Historical, Pastoral Monarchs to Behold: The Subversion of Shakespeare's Henry V in Education, Criticism and the Film Industry

A Monograph in Cultural Materialism



[Photo: Henry V 1989 Renaissance Films PLC]

Since the onset of the film as an artistic medium, the question of whether or not to transfer the works of William Shakespeare to the screen has plagued the film world for many years. After all it is classic entertainment but will it make money.

Henry V is one of those plays that has been in critical contention for years and always with such conflicting views that any consensus or compromise seems impossible. These two camps align themselves so rigidly that one might think they themselves were part of a Shakespearean tragedy. In one camp, Henry is viewed as the ideal Christian king and in the other he is a warmonger of epic proportions. What underlies this conflict is the obvious ambiguity of Shakespeare's text. Clearly, both sides find convincing evidence to support their opinions but compromise is rare. Any criticism in defense of Henry as the ideal is vehemently hostile. M.M. Reese remarks, "A formidable body of critical opinion is hostile to this view. In general it is held that, if this really was what Shakespeare was trying to do, he failed to bring it off. In all the canon only Isabella in Measure for Measure has stirred such personal distaste. (317)



[Photo: The Royal Shakespeare Production of Henry V 1984]

Although Shakespeare's works should be naturally conducive to film, the ties remain unresolved. The purpose of this essay then will be to examine this dissonance on several levels. It will examine the text of Henry V, the criticism of Shakespeare's treatment of the subject matter, and its existence in the realm of film production. But perhaps at the heart of the dissonance is a subversive tendency, on the part of the each camp, to service their own theories and on a larger scale, their elitism. This tendency has its roots firmly implanted in the educational system. Special attention will be paid to this at the onset. This will be done in order to expose the underlying cause of the conflict and bring about consensus rather than dissent.

It is ironic that Henry V has enjoyed more success than any other Shakespearean film; not once but twice. I refer of course to the Olivier and the Branagh versions. In an interview in 1989, Mr. Branagh echoes this same feeling of distaste at the lingering inaccessibility of Shakespeare's works. His feelings, though directed at English theatre, may include a kind of snobbery also found throughout the world. The English just have a better track record for it. Mr. Branagh comments, "In some ways, some people think, that's vulgar. It ought to be elitist. It ought to be boring and it ought to be the province of a very few people. When in fact, it is open to lots of people. (Personal Interview) "The attitude that allows elitism and cliques to develop - as if they are the only prerequisite by which a sophisticated method of thought or sophisticated art forms can emerge - can be very damaging. I've seen it; I've experienced it myself. There is this wholly English thing, the legacy of the empire, some kind of subconscious attitude that says 'We ruled the world once you bastards.' (46).

Lets take a moment to examine the larger question: why Shakespeare? Why does society constantly return to the works of Shakespeare as the oracle of culture and why have the works held such a high place in the educational system after four hundred years? The answers may be obvious but certainly no easy thing to swallow. First, as many have said before, Shakespeare's works hold a universal truth about them. They present the best qualities of humanity and the worst qualities of humanity. Alan Sinfield remarks, "...Shakespeare is the keystone which guarantees the ultimate stability and rightness of the category "literature" (135). Along with the tag of "literature also inevitably follows the term "elitism" and for some, outright

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boredom. Surely many can recall their first painful experience of being forced to read Shakespeare in an English literature class. Though many people feel this way, it cannot be argued that this feeling stems from ignorance, but rather an inappropriate, dated introduction to Shakespeare. The common student complaint still is, "I don't get it. Why do they talk so funny." However, those fortunate few, those happy few that do "get it" upon their initial exposure to Shakespeare seem destined to share in its lofty place in society. They have become "cultured", while those who don't understand it are relegated to the province of being "uncultured" or worse, ignorant. But are they really cultured or just manipulated by the larger social structure to think that they are? Shakespeare continues to be used as a tool of the dominant societal group in order to segregate itself from all other classes. The dominant group controls the society. The dominant group controls its people and its children. Further, it controls its educational system in order to perpetuate its legacy of dominance. This is Social Darwinism at work.

Alan Sinfield comments that "It is the task of the guardian class including the teacher to initiate the young into the mysteries of knowledge and the ways in which knowledge confers various kinds of social power on those who possess it. It is evidently an approach to train an elite. And above all, education sustains the extended division between mental and manual labor that characterises the capitalist mode of production in general; and within that and overlapping unevenly with it, education sustains the subordination of women and ethnic minorities." (143) This system of dominance must not appear to be one-sided and indeed, it is not. Rather, it should appear that education is for the good of all pupils. And we have seen this as our inner city educational programs shrink across the country. Here the dominant group, through its educational system manipulates the system by limiting funding, by limiting teacher variety, by lowering teaching standards and by the way sequestering Shakespeare to the realm of the elite. It follows then that the educational system manipulates both children of privilege as well as children of the working class. They are being trained to think and respond in a manner that is expected of them; trained to perpetuate the dominant group, trained to diminish the minority group by simply being "allowed" or privileged to study Shakespeare under the watchful patriarchal eye of the dominant group. The Newsome Report of 1963 endorses this sort of, "civilizing experience of contact with great literature to those children of predicted "limited attainments". (136)



[Photo: The Royal Shakespeare Production of Henry V 1984.]

Literature becomes a mark of differential "attainment" preparing pupils for the differential opportunities and rewards in society at large. But then again, I read Shakespeare and they all thought I was pretty mad for reading it. [I seem to bore my friends rigid these days so I have to thank God for the XFILES.] You see, I was interested in things, really, that I shouldn't be interested in...thinking back, what they said was, well look, we've told you what you can be, you've got this marvelous opportunity. You can be a shorthand typist or you can be a nursery nurse. A crucial ideological manipulation in education is this: that the allegedly universal culture to which equal access is apparently offered is, at the same time, a marker of "attainment" and hence privilege. Thus those who are discriminated against on the grounds of gender, class and ethnic origins come to believe it is their own fault (it serves them right). She or he will be respectful of Shakespeare and high culture and accustomed to being appreciative of the cultural production which is offered through established and presumably privileged institutions. She or she will be trained at giving opinions within certain prescribed limits; at collecting evidence though without questioning its status or the construction of the problem; at saying what is going on though not whether that is what ought to happen; at seeing effectiveness, coherence, purposes fulfilled - but not conflict. And because the purposeful individual is perceived as the autonomous origin and ground of meaning and event, success in these exercises will be accepted as just reason for certain economic and social privileges. However in Henry V we see both elements of subversion toward authority and subversion of the people.

Henry V performs service to two masters -- one, the radical minority and, two, the power base of the majority. The play itself is a celebration of jingoism -- the story of a boy king and his progression from the rakehell prince to the pious king. It is a commentary on the loss of youthful heroics and the continuance of a monarchical government. Henry V was performed in London before an audience of Queen's Elizabeth's subjects. The popularity of the play and its characters might be attributed to the fact that audiences of that time were athirst for glory. The noted Shakespeare scholar, Alfred Harbage reasons perhaps rudely, "Within the memory of most living men, the English had been ruled by a woman, and although loyal at heart to their Elizabeth, they had come to find something slightly dispiriting about an elderly woman and pacifist as the available royal image." (15)



[Photo: The Royal Shakespeare Production of Henry V 1984 program and photo]

Once before, theatrical commentary had been used to subvert the authority of Queen Elizabeth with the production of Richard II, the first installment of the Lancastrian tetralogy. The Queen had, as Dollimore comments, "...anxiously acknowledged the implied identification between her and Richard II..."(14). Richard II was to be performed on the eve of the Essex rebellion. However, Elizabeth banned the production and subsequently quelled the rebellion. The political subversive quality about many of Shakespeare's plays may have been why they were so successful in the first place.

This play focuses on the famous victories of Harry of Monmouth who reigned in England from 1413 until his death due to dysentery in 1422. The Chorus in Henry V plays a significant part in the play whereby the Chorus serves as guide, interpreter and disclaimer. The service as disclaimer is most interesting. It was an epic, after all, and Henry's exploits were common knowledge. How do you do service to a legend? You don't -- you simply apologize, which is exactly what Shakespeare does. For example, the apologetic Chorus speeches, serving as a disclaimer, appeal to the audiences' imaginative power to fill in any inconsistencies of a stage performance.



[Photo: Henry V Renaissance Films PLC 1989.]

Walter comments, "In consequence Henry V is daringly novel, nothing quite like it had been seen on stage before. No wonder Shakespeare, after the magnificent epic invocation of the Prologue, becomes apologetic... on the common stage he laid himself open to the scorn and censure of the learned and judicious. Although, as it is daringly novel, it follows a natural progression in the way that theatre of the time as well as today could still risk political commentary before the monarchy and aristocracy could be alerted to the real intent. The reliance on the Chorus allows this political commentary to take place by forcing the audience to take an active role in its production. Tennenhouse comments, "Given the abrupt shift in the strategies necessary for maintaining monarchical power between the reformation and the Interregnum, we cannot expect the literature which idealised that power to develop according either its own logic or that of an individual author. Quite the contrary: as the inherited prerogatives of the monarch were challenged, first by the contending faction within the aristocracy, but then later by dissenting voices outside the oligarchy, literature had to employ radically discontinuous political strategies for idealising political authority. (110)

However, there are inconsistencies, in Henry V in particular, that point to subversiveness. An example: Williams' initial blast at Henry V by the campfire and again at the glove exchange in the later act. Why would Shakespeare, if he were in fact authorizing political authority, insert the dissenting opinions of Gower, Williams and, in the final act, the Duke of Burgundy? The logical conclusion would then be that by presenting jingoistic pageantry as a main theme that subversive political commentary could take place by explaining it as counterpoint or a purely theatrical device when, in fact, the aim is otherwise. In the same moment it legitimizes theatrical presentation by its surface representation.

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The Chorus speeches, besides being an epic apology, serve another purpose in that as they recount details omitted of the well-know story they secure unity of action. But beyond that, by leaving the interpretation to the audience, perhaps serves a subversive purpose. Greenblatt explains Henry V's use of panopticism, "The play insists that we have all been both coloniser and colonised, king and subject. The play deftly registers every nuance of royal hypocrisy, ruthless and bad faith, but it does so in the context of a celebration, a collective panegyric to "This Star of England", the charismatic leader who purges the commonwealth of its incorrigibles and forges the martial national State... the play's enhancement of royal power is not only a matter of the deferral of doubt: the very doubts that Shakespeare raises serve not to rob the king of his charisma but to heighten it, precisely as they heighten the theatrical interest of the play; [and a monarchical government] the audience's tension then enhances its attention...the spectators are induced to make up the difference to invest the illusion of magnificence to be dazzled by their own imaginary identification with the conqueror...must be in large part the invention of the audience, the production of a will to conquer which is revealed to be identical to a need to submit." (43)



[Photo: The Royal Shakespeare Company Henry V | 1984.]

Therefore, as it was then so it is today. The 1989 film production of Henry V with Kenneth Branagh in the title role portrays Henry as a man of believable extremes. He gives an almost Hamletian quality to the character of Henry V. This production grew out of the 1984 Royal Shakespeare Company production, directed by Adrian Noble, that broke down the high-flying nationalistic interpretation that is often common to productions of Henry V. Adrian Noble comments on his approach to Henry V: You will feel, if it's done reasonably well, great jingoistic pride, that kind of hot feeling that politicians and warmongers try to encourage in you, to give you the courage to kill your fellow man. You will experience those feelings when Henry V inspires you to war. You will feel at one stage that Henry is the perfect king. If I was going to be led by anyone, I'd like to be led by him, because he's clear-headed, he's compassionate, he's robust, he's approachable. You will also hear him confessing privately that his

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father was wrong to steal the throne. And so there is a marvelous paradox there. Shakespeare isn't just saying that it's bad to kill kings, bad to steal thrones, he doesn't say that at all. The great highlight of English history was stage-managed by a man who had no right to be there at all, who was a usurper. That's complex, that's not just Shakespeare saying good old Henry V, he was a good fellow." (171)

One scene in the 1989 film typifies Mr. Branagh's approach, the gutsy three-minute diagonal tracking shot following the bloody battle of Agincourt displays the carnage of battle and the futility of war. Mr. Branagh comments on the work, "The greatest tracking shot in the world, that was my theory anyway. It certainly was bloody long. After the close-up carnage of Agincourt, I wanted to reveal as much of the devastation as possible...There would be no question about the statement this movie was making about war." (236) It truly is a moving piece of cinema. But, however noble the pursuit to present the foulness of war, it has been thwarted and subverted to serve the power of the dominant class by using it to justify a way and even to hint at the appeal of monarchical authority in a State based on the ideals of democracy and republicanism.



[Photo: [Henry V](#) 1989 Renaissance Films PLC]

In April 1991, Michael Novak, the noted journalist, former U.S. ambassador and author of *The Spirit of Democratic Capitalism*, wrote a commentary published in *Forbes* regarding what he implies as the striking similarities between George Bush's Gulf War and Shakespeare's *Henry V*. Mr. Novak begins by quoting the inscription on the seal of the United States: *Annuit coeptis* or "Providence smiles upon our undertakings", Mr. Novak continues: "Seldom more so than in the last week of February 1991, when U.S. Forces leading the Great Coalition threw half a million soldiers against a deeply entrenched Iraqis, and in four days emerged triumphant at the cost of but 29 Americans killed in the assault. There's been nothing like it since the Battle of Agincourt in 1415. Remember your Shakespeare? At Agincourt, Henry V's tiny band of brothers wearied by hard marching in heavy rains, awaited massacre

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by a French army ten times its size. And yet miraculously, at the end of that day the furious French assault lay broken with 1500 prisoners taken and 10,000 dead. "Where is the number of our English dead?" asked Henry then, and from the list he read: Edward the Duke of York, the Earl of Suffolk, Sir Richard Ketly, Davey Gam Esquire; None else of name and of all other men but five and twenty. O God they arm was here!...I have seen Kenneth Branagh's production of Henry V four times. It prepared me for what was to happen in Kuwait. Like Bush, Henry V was mocked by his foes as too weak. Like Bush, from August 2 until March Henry V grew in purpose and in stature from the first moments of his expedition until its bloody climax. Like Bush, Henry was fond of terms like "kind" and "gentle," but fiercely resolute for vindication of the right. Like Bush, before the battle Henry V prayed mightily -- know well the probability of slaughter, massacre and abject failure... the performance of George Bush was one of the greatest in the history of the U.S. presidency...The nation may well thank God for the President's inspired leadership...Above all though, this nation owes thanks to God, as England did under Henry V: And be it death proclaimed through our host to boast of this, or take that praise which is his only...God gave us our "St. Crispin's Day", and we should thank Him for it. That will strengthen us for generations hence, when dark times arise again.(92)



[Photo: [Henry V](#) 1989 Renaissance Films PLC.]

It appears that, although to Mr. Novak's credit, he has seen Mr. Branagh's production four times, if he had paid attention he might have read the blatant message of the foulness of war. His commentary is at best a fine example of poor research and at worst, epic fantasy. Novak refers to the "furious" French assault and 1500 prisoners taken by the English. However he fails to mention the fact that Henry V ordered the slaughter of the prisoners following the battle by forcing the prisoners whom could not be ransomed into straw huts and burned alive. Nor does Mr. Novak accurately describe the battle scene and the truly useless tactics of the French army. Cheney describes the ill-fated French army: "...though much superior in numbers, was so crowded, so deep in mud, so wearied by a long march and a night in the rain, so ill-fed and so inflamed with a futile bravery that left no place for caution of

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discipline, that it was hewn down by an English army of only a quarter of its size.
(164)

Mr. Novak also makes curious mistakes with dates. He states that "...like Bush from August 2 until March 2, Henry V grew in purpose and in stature from the first moments of his expedition until its bloody climax." (92) In truth, the "expedition" to which he refers actually was more of a campaign as it took several years and several different expeditions. The "bloody climax" took place if we refer to Shakespeare and St. Crispin's Day, not in March but on the 25th of October. Novak also refers to the terms, kind and gentle. I would hardly refer to Henry V using any of those terms specifically when he threatens the town and the governor of Harfleur with bloody retribution upon the residents with barbs like, "With conscience wide as hell, mowing like grass your fresh-fair virgins and your flow'ring infants. The blind and bloody soldier with foul hand defile the locks of your shrill-shrieking daughters; your fathers taken by the silver beards and their most reverend heads dash'd to the walls; your naked infants spitted upon pikes." (3.4. 6-34) One wonders if the republican party will now initiate legislation to reinstate a monarchical government. What Mr. Novak failed to point out, if we are to make a fair comparison, was how short-lived Henry V's victories actually were, as the Chorus tells us that, "Fortune made his sword. By which the world's best garden he achieved, and of left his son imperial lord. Henry the sixth, in infant bands crown'd king of France and England, did this king succeed; whose state so many had the managing, that they lost France and made his England bleed. (5.2 6-12) One need not point out that Hussein is still in power, yes, there are similarities after all. And Mr. Novak does not do any favors for Mr. Bush by comparing him to the medieval mind of Henry V. Following that, one questions just how far society has progressed in five hundred years if it is, in fact, an accurate comparison. Mr. Novak does not quote the Duke of Burgundy's speech in Act V that chastises the behavior of warring men. "Why that the poor and mangled Peace, should not in this best garden of the world ...put up her lovely visage? Alas! She hath...too long been chas'd and all her husbandry doth lie on heaps corrupting in it own fertility,...losing both beauty and utility...defective in their natures, grow to wildness, even so our house and ourselves and children have lost, or do not learn for want of time," (5.2. 34-145)



[Photo: [Henry V](#) 1989 Renaissance Films PLC]

This dangerous commentary is then an accurate example of how Shakespeare is manipulated by the powers of the dominant class to perpetuate their, dare I say, sovereignty over the minority. Its publication in Forbes attests to that fact since it would have been far more of a surprise if it had been published in The Village Voice or Jet. Forbes is geared to appeal to the upwardly mobile, educated, and "cultured" audience. It is clearly an attempt to subvert Shakespeare, to subvert the minority, and it subverts those who read it and believe it to be a responsible essay on the power of the U.S. government; all of this under the guise of what we believe to be high culture.



[Photo Renaissance Films PLC 1989]

Shakespeare made his works ambiguous and open to interpretation. Shakespeare wrote for the public, all of the public and not predominately the privileged. It follows

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then that as Shakespeare wrote for a predominately "common" class then would not his art speak to them as subversive political discourse? To that end, what more effective way would there be to achieve it than by raising such discourse up to the mirror of nature. Tennenhouse comments on this point, "If art and politics defined the same domain of truth when Shakespeare wrote, we must assume his art was always political and that it is our modern situation and not his strategies of displacement as political strategies...our critical tradition of reading does not let us see the politics of Renaissance writing because the contrary, that modern literature's attempt to produce transcendent truth is a terribly effective strategy for idealising political authority. given the panoptical nature of authority in order to idealise it. Thus art makes power invisible as it make the political language itself invisible as it make the political language itself invisible and locates that power both in the individuals subjectivity and in the object world which such language constitutes. (126)

To briefly recapitulate, if we are to believe that Shakespeare's only motive was idealize a monarchical authority, then we subvert ourselves in pure panoptic fashion. Furthermore, if we believe what wear taught to believe then the authority that Shakespeare attempted to subvert wins again. Neal Osherow comment succinctly on the simplicity of conformity, "External forces, in the form of power or persuasion, can exact compliance" (234). As theatrical presentation can inspire or provoke thought then literary criticism must also do the same. Therefore, if upon reading this you find this commentary to be "subversive" to what you have been taught then what I attempt succeeds. I do not claim to present the only answer -- my aim is only to inspire some level of gray matter activity. If I can succeed at that then I merely present the question what I believe Shakespeare was posing with Henry V, that being: what do you think? What was subversive then is not so today or is it?



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If any consensus on Henry V can be attained we should now turn our attention to what causes the two opposing camps to be so adamant about their views. But before moving on, let us take a moment to examine the play and its history.

Henry V was entered in the Stationers Register on August 4, 1600. Shakespeare included a clue in the text that approximates its date. J.H. Walter contends, "Henry V was almost certainly written in the spring or summer of 1599" (Walter11). He argues that in Act V, the Chorus refers to the Earl of Essex; aggressive campaign to Ireland. Walter expands his comments on this point, "The Earl of Essex, who led an expedition into Ireland to crush Tyrone's rebellion left London on 27 March 1599 and returned on 28 September in the same year having failed his task" (11). This event would then give evidence that the Earl of Essex had not yet returned from Ireland when Shakespeare took pen in hand and wrote, "Were now the general of our gracious empress, as in good time he may, from Ireland coming bring rebellion broached on his sword," (5.1. 30-32).

In conclusion upon this point, Walter asserts, "It is possible that the words of the Chorus were written nearer March than September, since long before the latter month it had become apparent to everybody that Essex would not be making a return in triumph." (11).



[Photo: Henry V 1989 Renaissance Films PLC]

The plot of Henry V revolves around the events that led to the victory at Agincourt. Historically, this victory was achieved over several years and several invasions. The battle for Harfleur took over a month. During this siege, the king named his cannons. He called them: The Messenger, The King's Daughter, and The London. He certainly had a sense of humor and this comic indifference to the French that prompted Shakespeare's Chorus to refer to him in the familiar and pronounce, "Suppose th' ambassador from the French comes back; Katherine his daughter; and with her, dowry, some petty and unprofitable dukedoms. The offer likes him not, and the nimble gunner with linstock now the devilish cannon touches, and down goes all before them. (3.1. 28-34)

Other references to historical fact and the pious nature of Henry are evident. Lady Fraser reports, "On the way to Agincourt he hanged a man for robbing a church. Henry's sense of justice was linked with strict adherence to the tenets of Catholic piety" (130). Pistol describes this event in act three following Bardolph's capture "Fortune is Bardolph's foe and frowns upon him;/ For he hath stol'n a pax and hanged/must a'be." 3.6. 40-41. Holinshed describes the stolen article as a pyx, a container for the Host.

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Henry V is one of Shakespeare's plays that is difficult to analyze on its own because it is a culmination of three other episodes. However each episode is fully formed. the reliance on sequels is not a paramount component to the understanding of each story. Rabkin comments on the structure of Henry V, "Henry V is of course, not only a freestanding epic but also the last part of a tetralogy. Some years earlier, when his talent was up to Titus Andronicus rather than to Hamlet, Shakespeare had had the nerve at the very beginning of his career, to shape the hopelessly episodic and unstructured materials of his chronicle sources not into the licensed formlessness of the history play his audience was use to -- one recalls shapeless domestic chronicles like Edward I and The Famous Victories of King Henry the Fifth and foreign histories like Tamburlaine and The Battle of Alcazar -- but rather into integrated series of plays each satisfying as a separate unit but all deriving a degree of added power and meaning from being part of a unified whole. (37)

It was the last installment of Shakespeare's Lancastrian tetralogy that began with Richard II and proceeds through Henry IV Part One and Henry IV Part Two. By the end of Henry IV Part Two, the development of principle characters is well established except for Prince Hal, now King Henry V. Some critics maintain that the reformation of Henry, now the ideal king converted from his wilder days is inconsistent. Thought the play seems inconsistent Norman Rabkin asserts that the apparent inconsistencies are intentional. "Shakespeare created a work whose ultimate power is precisely the fact that it points in two opposite directions, virtually daring us to choose one of the two opposed interventions it requires of us. In this deceptively simply play Shakespeare experimented, more shockingly than elsewhere, with a structure like the Gestaltist's familiar drawing of a rare beast. (36)



[Photo: The Royal Shakespeare Production of Henry V 1984]

Previously, in the other installments, young Henry responded to his turbulent relationship with his father by rebelling against his father's wishes. Henry takes up with the ruffians at the Boars head Tavern but eventually gives up his wayward life after his father dies. In Henry v, the Archbishop of Canterbury alludes to his

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sovereign's past exploits, "The course of his youth promised it not since his addiction was to courses vain, his hours filled up with riots, banquets sports and never noted in him any study, any retirement, any sequestration from open haunts and popularity. (1.1 24, 54-59)

cements this dramatic personality transformation during Henry V. This transformation, or rather his reformation, should not surprise anyone because Henry promises it in Henry IV Part One. Prince Hal declares in soliloquy, "So when this loose behavior I throw off and pay the debt I never promised, by how much better than my word I am, by so much shall I falsify men's hopes; and like bright metal on a sullen ground, my reformation glittering o'er my fault shall show more goodly, and attract more eyes than that which hat no foil to set it off. I'll so offend to make offense a skill redeeming time when men think least I will. (1.3. 202-211)



[Photo: [Henry V](#) 1989 Renaissance Films PLC]

He has lived and learned through his experience and observation the pitfalls and inconsistencies of royal office. He understands his responsibilities with an almost prescient awareness. If this be "ill-weaved" ambition so be it. However, it works, and as Reese remarks, " He realises what the 'polished perturbation, golden care' will mean in the denial of human instinct and the acceptance of loneliness and impersonality. Youth's warm impulses must be steeled into disciplined courage and dedicated to honourable ends. He will have to judge all causes with a 'bold, just, and impartial spirit' that despises the short cuts which authority always knows how to find. It is required of him also that he shall know his people in all their strength and weakness so that he and they may live together in the harmonious relationship that is the supreme condition of majesty. Hal understands all this; and with understanding he has the drive to success -- there is no harm in calling it ambition -- without which all these other qualities are only ornaments. (317)

Truly his reformation is inconsistent and at times, clumsy moving from calculating to pious servant. But, then again miracles are inconsistent and clumsy and Henry's turnabout conversion is heralded as such. It is on this point where critics of Henry love to dote. Chambers explains his view; "Here you have a Shakespeare playing on the surface of life, much occupied with externalities and the idols of the forum. And with the exception of a few unconsidered words that fall from the mouth of a woman of no reputation. There is nothing that is intimate, nothing that touches the depths. (318 qtd in Reese)

Chambers perhaps confuses [Richard II](#) with [Henry V](#); but no matter, the fact remains that if Shakespeare were preoccupied with making Henry's reformation superficial it was done to fill the requirement of epic. Reese comments, "Technically it is a considerable achievement, since Shakespeare was writing in a mode that he recognized (and he admits it often enough) to be extremely difficult "O for a Muse of fire." He decided that the noble deeds of Henry V, which were of a kind to inspire wonder and imitation, could not be fittingly celebrated except through the medium of epic; and epic and drama are not naturally congenial to one another. (320)



[Photo: The Royal Shakespeare Production of Henry V 1984]

That Chambers found nothing intimate in Henry is quite correct. Ruling monarchs have never, to my knowledge, been known for their intimacy; it defeats the purpose. Granville Barker found Henry V completely lacking in any kind of significance of a spiritual nature. Barker's comments, as Reese observes are, "...patently absurd, since in Shakespeare's time the wise government of states was one of the highest destinies to which God might call a man" (318). As evidence, take the historical record of *Vita et Gesta Henrici Quinti*, which chronicles Henry's life. Walter comments on the work, " Henry upon his father's death spent the day in profound grief and repentance, he shed bitter tears and admitted his errors, at night he went secretly to a man of perfect life at Westminster and received absolution." "felici miraculo convertitur". (20)



[Photo: Henry V 1989 Renaissance Films PLC]

This is historical proof leads credence to Shakespeare's interpretation, however clumsy, that Henry's reformation was, in fact, miraculous. Walter remarks on the clumsiness of this point whereby one is reminded of "St. Augustine's youthful prayer of repentance, 'Oh God, send me purity and continence -- but not yet'" (20).

It is not the fact that the reformation happens, but as Walter observes, "The heart of the matter is the nature of the change that came over Henry at this coronation" (18). Reese remarks on the presentation of Henry:

Henry is an appointed symbol of majesty, and the action of the play is directed with the most elaborate care to show him doing everything that the age expected of the perfect king. (321)

This is an important point because it is upon this point that I tend to differ with Mr. Reese. Henry is not the ideal Christian king. That realm is reserved for divinity. The

divine element is not found on Earth or at least not in England and certainly not in Henry. However, Henry is the ideal human king. It is important to make the distinction because skewed preconceptions of what personality characteristics the ideal king should or should not have is at the very heart of the conflicting views. It seems that the human element has been replaced by automatic divinity. For those critics on both sides who would label Henry as either the sadistic Machiavellian maniac or the immaculate king, as Hall does, must come to realize that the real cause of their dissonance lies within themselves and is no fault of Henry's or Shakespeare's. Reese catches himself later on and finally adds the human element. Reese comments, "Human virtue is always muddled, or it would not be human: epic is the art that on special occasions transforms it into the ideal" (322) -- the human ideal and not the ideal of divinity. Then you might ask, is not the human ideal a striving for perfection/divinity? Yes it is, however, it can never be attained on this Earth or else the concept of divinity would not be something so coveted. The human ideal is the actual. Shakespeare made Henry more human than we could possibly imagine and the mode of epic only makes Henry's human weaknesses and strengths more deliberate and distinct. Harold Bloom makes observations on this point:

Shakespeare knew better what he did than we tend to acknowledge, and his portrait of Henry V is both ironic and celebratory, but not in balance. If you are Rudyard Kipling, then Henry V is a demigod of war, victory, splendor, and British superiority, but if you are William Hazlitt, then the great warrior is "a very amiable monster." He is an exemplary Christian king, hard and shrewd, who murders prisoners with remorse and seems to see through everything and everyone himself presumably included. But that returns to one of Shakespeare's greatest powers, the representation of change in the psyche...So large and profound are Shakespeare's ironies that Henry V in the context of his own play could not be better as a hero. His play is anything but a critique of the hero. (3)



[Photo: Henry V 1989 Renaissance Films PLC]

As a modern example, President George Bush, a decidedly public figure, was labeled a weakling prior to the Gulf War. However, after the war broke out, he was touted as a menace and a warmonger of epic proportions. That is not to say that I sanction war; I merely present an example. One epic at a time. For that matter, let us take the more appropriate example of Prince Charles. His actions and opinions are under constant scrutiny. If he ever deviates from whatever preconceived notions we may have about the behavior of a royal, the whole world thrusts him under a microscope. Consequently, any forms of public intimacy go out the window. Even as they appear larger than life, then are not their deviations from "ideal" behavior only more pronounced? No one would disagree that these men are just as human as any of us and we forgive their occasional inadequacies as we should also forgive our own skewed preconceptions. Reese touches upon this point. However, his opinions were written at a time when the psychological theory of cognitive dissonance was still in its infancy.

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Let us take a moment to examine this theory and its relationship to Henry V in order that an alignment of perspective can be reasonably achieved before a move to other business can occur. The theory of cognitive dissonance, first purposed by Leon Festinger and later expanded by Elliot Aronson states that there is pressure to produce consistent relationships among one's attitudes or behaviors and to avoid inconsistency. Aronson expanded the concept further. Vander Zanden dissects Aronson's research explains:

Elliot Aronson, among others, has suggested a still further refinement in dissonance theory. He indicates that what Festinger overlooks, is the conflict between peoples self-conceptions and their cognitions about a behavior that violates these self-conceptions. According to this view dissonance does not arise between just any two cognitions; rather, it arises when one's behavior threatens to diminish the positive feelings one has about oneself. (192)

This concept is pervasive through out Henry V. It is also pervasive in the criticism of Henry V. Here the two opposing camps are so deeply entrenched in their opinions because Henry's inconsistencies have forced them, in the case of those who are pro Henry, to dismiss his barbarisms and realign their preconceptions to suit the ideal Christian king view. And in a very real sense, their own self concepts because opinions are the most personal of expressions. While those who are opposed to Henry completely embrace Henry's barbarisms as proof of the pudding, so to speak. The opposition refuses to realign their preconceptions of the ideal Christian king and they reject Henry completely. These are textbook examples of how humans deal with cognitive dissonance, either you add elements of consonance in order that balance can be restored, as those who are pro Henry exhibit, or you stick to your preconceptions and add nothing, as exhibited by the opposing camp. Shakespeare knew much more about human nature than we give him credit for or have even begun to explore.



[Photo: Henry V 1989 Renaissance Films PLC]

Cognitive dissonance is something we have to deal with on a day-to-day basis. If there is even an inkling that a decision we make may be wrong, we will seek cognitive refuge in what we believe to be right and just or ideal. Thereupon, we will rationalize our thoughts and actions to realign ourselves with our ideal self-concept. This concept is found throughout Henry V, throughout the events in Elizabethan England (or Shakespeare would never have written it in the first place), throughout the fluctuating criticism of Henry V and even the hesitance, on the part of the film industry, in bringing Shakespeare to the screen.

If Henry is attempting to realign his own self-concept by his sudden conversion then there is no better reference that the Archbishop of Canterbury's remarks on the event.

The breath no sooner left his father's body
But that his wildness, mortified in him,

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Seem'd to die too; yea, at that very moment,
 Consideration like an angel came,
And whipp'd th' offending Adam out of him,
 Leaving his body as a Paradise,
 T'envelop and contain celestial spirits
 Never was such a sudden scholar made;
With such a heady currance, scouring faults
 Nor never Hydra-headed wilfulness
So soon did lose his sear -- and all at once -
 As in this king.

(1.1 25-36)

As for Henry himself, besides being the walking, talking oxymoron incarnate, his position as a public figure only accentuates his own cognitive dissonance. One particular incident in the tetralogy which never ceases to get attention by critics is Henry's rejection of Falstaff.

It is prior to this tumultuous period in young Henry's life that he comes to be acquainted with the colorful characters at the Boars Head Tavern. The relationships he maintains with Pistol, Bardolph, Nym, Poins and Sir John Falstaff, his closest friend, provide comic relief from the heavy conflicts at court during both episodes of Henry IV. However, when young Henry's father dies at the end of Henry IV Part Two, the prince must now assume the throne. Thus the requirements of royal office require Henry to discard his old tavern friends.

Shakespeare solves this problem by dissolving the link between the court and the underworld of the tavern by Henry's rejection of Falstaff and his demise at the beginning of Henry V. Again we see cognitive dissonance. Henry has no choice but to reject his friends because he was Henry IV's son before he was a semi-permanent ornament at the tavern. For Henry, it is the only right way to deal with the problem, and for Henry it is his preconception of what is appropriate for the Christian king to do. How can he do otherwise? The sickness that infects both Falstaff and the body politic is the sickness of life itself, joyless and rushing to the grave. In such a world Prince Hal cannot play. He must do what he can for his kingdom, and that means casting Falstaff aside. The same may be said about Shakespeare's decision to kill off Falstaff that being, at the request of the company and in order to please the audience, Shakespeare genuinely tried to introduce Falstaff into Henry V but later abandoned the idea as alien to the spirit of the play. Shakespeare's eventual compromise is brilliant. Falstaff is present only to die one of the most moving deaths in all our literature. It is not just anyone who dies, and the emotion that this scene creates is born of our happier memories of him in his prime. It is a goodbye to youth itself.



[Photo: The Royal Shakespeare Production of Henry V 1984]

But there may be other reasons, as Alfred Harbage explains, why Falstaff is absent during Henry V., first being that it was an attempt to “placate the Brooke family which still resented the fact that he had originally been named for its revered Lollard ancestor Sir John Oldcastle” (15). However, Reese claims that the attempt to placate the family given too much influence and as he explains:

[The influence of the Cobhams in these matters tends to be overrated, and they were seemingly powerless to prevent the use of their family name of Brooke as a nom de gueere for the jealous Ford. Falstaff’s disappearance is also attributed to the departure of the comedian Will Kempe, who left the company at about this time. But it is by no means certain that Kempe ever played Falstaff; the part may have been created by Thomas Pope. (326)

Second, the character of Henry could not be the convincing pious hero that he is if he were still associating with the ruffians from the Boars Head Tavern. The play seems inconsistent because it switches from drama to comedy in alternate scenes. Harbage continues: These alternate scenes would seem mechanical were it not for their diversity. Their diversity, on the other hand, and their fragmentary character, make the episodes seem gratuitous... the comic episodes cannot be considered neatly “thematic”. (17) Thematic or not, the comic insertions serve a purpose, if not as contrast, then as a chance for the audience to catch its breath. Harbage contends, “No doubt Shakespeare considered fun its own excuse” (19). Criticism of Henry V fluctuates between high praise and, on the part of Johnson, contempt. Much of this criticism has to do with the anticlimax in Act V and as Johnson writes: I know not why Shakespeare now gives the king nearly such a character as he made him formerly ridicule in Percy.



[Photo: The Royal Shakespeare Production of Henry V 1984]

The truth is, that the poet's matter failed him in the fifth act, and he was glad to fill it up with whatever he could get. (qtd. in Walter 12) It is also important to mention that Johnson wasn't pleased with King Lear either, simply because he didn't like the ending. Reese contends that if the fifth act seems contrived it was only in keeping with the manner of the time. Reese continues on this point: Johnson believed that Shakespeare found himself short of material for the final Act, but Henry's wooing so often criticised as heavy-handed and hypocritical, was in the accepted manner of the light-hearted gallant. It is important to Shakespeare's purpose to have the righteous war crowned by a peace that unites the two countries, and of this new and wider unity Henry's marriage is the fitting symbol. (331) On the other end of the spectrum, Bradley calls Henry V Shakespeare's "most efficient character...Shakespeare's ideal man of action." (qtd. in Walter 13). Dover comments that the character of Henry V possesses "ultimate heroic faith, a faith which, like that of the martyrs, put him who holds it beyond reach of mortal man" (qtd. in Walter 14). High praise indeed, and if Henry's romantic entreaties to Katherine appears contrived one should be reminded that, however bright "this star of England" was, he certainly wasn't a handsome fellow with a giant scar marring his right cheek. The scene is supposed to be ironic; he just murdered a large part of her family. Mr. Branagh explains his approach to this scene. It's a strange episode to place at the end of such a play and needs playing of the utmost delicacy if it is to tell us anymore about this troubled monarch, and this strangely sensitive princess.

The scene is both funny and tremendously sad. The princess has no choice, but she is spirited and intelligent, and subtly challenges Henry, who is unusually vulnerable in the scene. (238) And beyond that, as Henry is England, after all, and if his threatening to the Governor of Harfleur or his whimsical romanticism to Katherine are overblown it must be stated that he is speaking as much for his kingdom, if not more so, as for himself. It fits in perfectly with the requirements of epic. Calderwood

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expands on this point: However artificial, as in the considered hysteria of exhortation before Harfleur, or bumbling as in the near antispeech of wooing of Katherine, Harry's speech accomplishes its rhetorical aims: it works. His stumbling French in the wooing scene reminds us that if he is not well-schooled in Katherine's language he most certainly is in his own. His studies of English in all its varieties and in all its classrooms, from Falstaff's taverns and highways to Hotspur's battlefields and Henry IV's court have of course been also a study of England herself. Through this self-imposed education Harry has made the King's English a composite of the speech of all England. As a result, the easy synecdoche by which the English king becomes "England" – as when King Charles command his nobles to "Bar Harry England, that sweeps through our land" (3.5. 48) – has in this king's case a more than usual claim to truth.



[Photo: The Royal Shakespeare Production of Henry V 1984]

Although Harry is careful to distinguish his ordinary self from his extraordinary office as in the speech on ceremony, the high office nevertheless confers its magnitude upon him. The play's almost obsessive concentration on the rhetorical figure of the king – on Harry's voice addressing his courtiers, his soldiers, the French, Katherine – presents us not with the self-singing Richard II nor with the multilingual name – trumpets of Falstaff, but with the self-transcending language of corporate majesty. (28) One particular passage exemplifies Henry's corporate majesty. When Henry explains to Katherine that although he loves her he will not die if she refuses his love and, for that matter neither will England be put off of France for all the world, no. I speak to thee plain soldier; if thou Can'st love me for this, take me; if not, to say To thee that I shall die is true; but for thy love, by the lord, no; (5.1. 152-155) Though to some Henry V may appear as the heroic and ideal king, while to others he is an overstuffed war-monger, the character of Henry V must remain one of the most complex characters in Shakespearean drama. Walter concludes by remarking on the irony factor, "It is strangely ironical that a play in which the virtue of unity is so held up for imitation should provoke so much disunity among its commentators" (Walter 14).

Disunity seems to be the hallmark of all criticism and for those who would even attempt to bring about consensus in saying that Henry combines both elements of good and bad are labeled as too sensitive because balance is not possible. Rabkin ends with such questions that perhaps cognitive dissonance theory cannot answer.

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However, that is not to say that they are unanswerable. Rabkin continues: A third response has been suggested by some writers of late: Henry V is a subtle and complex study, of a king who curiously combines strengths and weakness, virtues and vices. One is attracted to the possibility of regarding the play unpolemically. Shakespeare is not often polemical after all, and a balanced view allows for the inclusion of both positive and negative features in an analysis of the protagonist and the action. But sensitive as such analysis can be it is oddly unconvincing, for two strong reasons. First, the cycle has led us to expect stark answers to simple and urgent questions. Is a particular king good or bad for England? Can one be a successful public man and retain a healthy inner life? Has Hal lost or gained in the transformation through which he changes name and character? Does political action confer any genuine benefit on the polity? What is honor worth and who has it? The mixed view of Henry characteristically appears in critical essays that seem to fudge such questions, to see complication and subtlety where Shakespeare's art forces us to demand commitment, resolution, answers. Second no real compromise is possible between the extreme readings I claimed the play provokes.



[Photo: The Royal Shakespeare Production of Henry V 1984]

Our experience Gougeon claims for viewers of the trick drawing: "We can switch from, one reading to another with increasing rapidity; we will also "remember" the rabbit while we see the duck, but the more closely we watch ourselves, the more certainly we will discover that we cannot experience alternative readings at the same time. (57) Perhaps the answer is that there is no answer. That is what they believe. But let us leave that for the moment. Is a particular king good or bad for England? That answer rests with history and with the opinion of the people. Can one be a successful public man and retain a healthy inner life? That is a question for Henry to answer. If you asked him, his answer would probably depend on where he was at the moment. Henry at court would say yes. If asked around a campfire in the best garden of the world Hal would say no. Has Hal lost or gained from the transformation by which he changed name and character? Change is relative and in this case infers negativity.

Modify is a better term. Has he lost or gained anything? Clearly he has done both. He has lost his fathers, Henry and Falstaff and the man he truly knew as a father, Richard II. He has lost his friends. What he has gained are the lessons he has

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learned from them. It is an open-ended question with no black and white answers. Does political action confer any genuine benefit on the polity? That would also depend on the varying scope of opinion and the political climate. What is honor worth and who has it? Honor is not something that you garner for yourself, others must bestow it upon you. I may say that I am honorable – but deeds speak louder than words and what meaning does it have unless recognized by someone else and if we are self-effacing then honor is fleeting and meaningless either way. Falstaff might well agree.

If you ask rhetorical, sensitive questions you will get ambiguous answers. This stipulation implies chaos. We have established that Shakespeare is ambiguous and Henry's behavior can be categorized as chaotic. Then taken a step further we might then apply the theory of chaos and fractal geometry which in general terms says that random events may appear chaotic but also, to our dismay seem to follow an unmistakable pattern. This pattern is non-linear, seemingly chaotic and yet it remains an unpredictable force of nature much like Henry V. (321)



[Photo: The Royal Shakespeare Production of Henry V 1984]

If we cannot see the rabbit for the duck or vice versa then perhaps we should try a different picture, a new analogy; two sides of the same coin. Both are different and yet both are part of the whole. One cannot exist without the other and still have worth. If one tosses the coin then there are two possible results. In the case of Henry V, either the Machiavelle or the ideal Christian king. The random event of which side will manifest itself is chaotic. However, it will follow a pattern; either one or the other. If there is a butterfly effect then it comes from the critics battering their wings away or rather their heads against the wall in order to see one form of gestalt. The only gestalt is to take both views together and see Henry for what he is: The pious king, the soldier king. He says it himself and if we will, as Shakespeare entreats us, let this acceptance take. "If thou would have such a one, take me; and take me, take a soldier, take a soldier, take a king" (5.2. 170-172).

During the dark years of World War II the skies over Great Britain darkened. From behind the veil of desperation the star of England appeared once again. Henry, in contrast to the times, presented the image of eternal youth and warrior hero with a dash of youthful comedy thrown in for good measure.

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Sir Laurence Olivier believed this view of Henry's character. In 1944, he directed and starred in the first film version of the play. Bosley Crowther narrates the beginnings of Olivier's Henry V:

In the dismal fall and winter of 1943-44, when the people of Britain were enduring the screeching perils of the "little blitz" and their tight little island was sagging under the weight of the growing invasion force, there was quietly being made at Denham, on of London's badly battered studios, a film to which even its maker referred cautiously as "an experiment." This was the most that Laurence Olivier would permit himself to say for this war-born and problematic production of Shakespeare's Henry V. (57)



[Photo: The Royal Shakespeare Production of Henry V 1984]

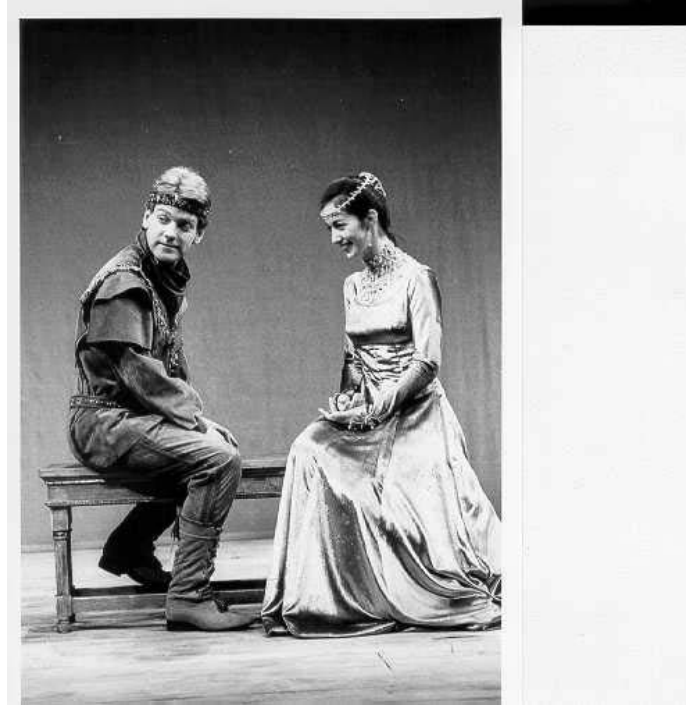
It was problematic indeed. The problem was how to bridge the communication gap and break down any skewed preconceptions that the general public might have toward Shakespeare. Mr. Crowther comments on Olivier's hesitance:

At first, Olivier was resistant. 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, as did others, that the public had ever shown a discouraging indifference to motion pictures made from plays of the bard. (57)

However, the indecision was quick to pass. A larger, more noble purpose presented itself as Olivier remembers:

The war cleared the head, but it was love of the medium -- my band of brothers mine, Shakespeare's Wylers the modern audience's -- which summoned most of the blood. (275)

This question, along with how to sway the studios in the process, was Olivier's primary concern. But beyond that, there was the very real danger of life in England during World War II. Olivier remember the feelings during that time:



[Photo: The Royal Shakespeare Production of Henry V 1984]

There we were, a band of artists and technicians, humble in our souls because Hitler was killing our countrymen...we were inspired by the warmth, humanity and Britishness, just beneath the surface of Shakespeare's brilliant jingoism. (274)

Today, upon view the film, one might be tempted to dismiss the Olivier version as a cartoon caricature of Shakespeare with its bright colors and surreal sets. But Olivier had to create absurdity in order to play the truth. In other words, he had to create a highly stylized storybook setting as far from reality as possible in order to serve the archaic language of Shakespeare as reality. Olivier comments, "I didn't want the eye to quarrel with the ear; what the eye saw had to bolster the seeming reality of the language" (273). The language or rather the delivery of the language was also a problem. Olivier remembers:

The main problem, of course, was to find a style which Shakespearean actors could act and yet which would be acceptable to the audience of the time, used to little other than the most obvious propaganda. (269)

Critics like James Agee remark on its brilliance and Olivier's capacity to serve the text.

The one great glory of the film is this language. The greatest credit I can assign to those who made the film is that they have loved and served the language so well. (54)

Looping in post-production corrects audio problems. However, the camera never lies. Performance in the theatre call for over extension in speaking and gesture particularly in Shakespearean epic. This is the tradition. Hitchcock told Olivier once,

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during the filming of *Rebecca*, that he overacted. He probably did. He had not yet learned how to behave for the camera instead of, as he was accustomed to, the back wall of the theatre. It's common enough for stage actors even today. There is no need to strenuously emote when the actors' faces are forty feet tall. Actors at that time, were not schooled in acting for film, still a relative novelty in the 1940's, Olivier knew this would be a problem and he solved the problem by not forcing the actors to underplay it either but as Olivier explains it is a case of *omne ignotum pro magnifico*.



[Photo: [Henry V](#) 1989 Renaissance Films PLC]

Time and time again I saw actors who had to come down on the big Shakespeare moments because of the proximity of the camera. More flexibility, poise and balance were needed between Shakespeare's words (and stage directions) and the actions of the camera. Coordination. Big discoveries creep up on you and later seem naive. They swirl out of the mist of half-forgotten words of advice -- Hamlet's "Suit the action to the word, the word to the action." If Shakespeare has a flourish and a big speech, bring the camera back; if he has moments of humour and poignancy, bring it forward. I first tested this out in *Henry V* with an early scene in which Henry, on receiving a gift from the French Dauphin of tennis balls,... I wanted a big climax on that, so from "We are glad" (I got a laugh on that), I crept the camera back and back until I stood up suddenly and said "crown in hazard" in a full theatrical climax which, to my utmost delight, I saw the camera could take. This was the way to do it. When all the big climax come along -- "Once more unto the breach, dear frrriends" -- I was at ease, I didn't have to throttle back. And what's more all the other Shakespearean actors, Robert Newton as Pistol included, didn't have to either. (281)

In contrast, Branagh chose to bring the action and by doing so was able to pull the attention of the audience right along. By pulling the camera in close, the audience was able to glimpse character lines in faces, mud on costumes and it is consistent with Branagh's gritty approach. Olivier chose a more flamboyant vein that would bring more attention to the language than to its surreal sets.

In choosing the highly stylized storybook approach, Olivier explains the reason why he chose a storybook castle instead of the very real Kenilworth Castle. He remembers with humor:



[Photo: The Royal Shakespeare Production of Henry V 1984]

Lovely. But all that stone, dust and patchy grass would seem too familiar, too real to a modern audience who'd be thinking: "Yes, nice, very real, absolutely real castle. And those tress, they're absolutely real and quite normal. But why are they talking so funny? The difficulty was the language, and my only hope was for the background to be more unreal than it was, so that the language would seem real... the language may be archaic, but it's not strange. It's charming. It's sincere (273).

Olivier has also been criticized on various occasions about the actual beauty of his Agincourt. However, Olivier knew exactly what he was doing as he explains:

To be true to the film's overall style the battle should have been fought on green velvet -- and that clearly was impracticable. Once again the play itself saved us. Between the pretty parts in the French palaces and the Battle of Agincourt, Shakespeare has a long and contemplative night sequence, which gave the screen neutral colors and tones to cushion the contrast between the artificiality of medieval picture-book castles and the earthiness of Irish fields, pretty and green though they were. (278)

Anyone who has been truly moved by the words of Shakespeare feels a certain passion, excitement if not a responsibility to pass the legacy on to those who have passed it off as the work of a dead playwright. His works were not meant, solely to be read on their own but to be experienced. Olivier was such a man who embodied this desire to pass on the legacy and perhaps that is why the film was so successful. Shakespeare was being given back to the people. Olivier remembers the experience:

The filmgoing public, many of whom had never been in a theatre in their lives, understood, enjoyed and were entertained. I appealed to a new public, to those who had thought that Shakespeare was not for the likes of them. When actor and audience communicate well, the sense of freedom is unbelievable. It is like flying together. Once the public had been wooed and won by Henry V, the critics and the studios came round to the idea that it was possible to put Shakespeare on the

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screen. Henry was box-office success. Shakespeare had been given to the people. He was no longer for a small band of the select...projecting a man's thoughts to millions of people who would never have had the opportunity to hear them had they simply remained upon stage. (268)



[Photo: [Henry V](#) 1989 Renaissance Films PLC]

Olivier comments, "I had a mission...to bring Shakespeare to the screen, to bring caviare to the general audience; not in a snobbish sense, but because I love caviar" (274).

But ambition and desire do not guarantee success. Would the confines of the "wooden O" work in the confines of the darkened movie house? The answer was in the text itself. Olivier explains his theory about Henry V:

In Henry V more than any other play, Shakespeare bemoans the confines of his Globe Theatre -- "Or may we cram/ Within this wooden O the casques/ that did afright the air at Agincourt?" -- and all those short battle scenes, in lots of his plays, are frustrated cinema. (269)

As Olivier pieced the script together, his inclination, at first, was to cut the Chorus speeches. However, he soon found a different approach to solving the problem. Olivier explains his enlightenment:

What sort of man was Shakespeare's Chorus to be, narrating and commenting his way through the play...get rid of him altogether? Have him as a voiceover? No voiceover, but if the Chorus at the end, why not at the beginning as well, where Shakespeare had him. And then I wouldn't have to cut his question: "Can this cockpit hold/ The vasty fields of France?" The goddamn play was telling me the style of the film. (270)



[Photo: [Henry V](#) 1989 Renaissance Films PLC]

During World War II, Henry V was the ticket that the people of the United Kingdom needed to reignite them at a time when patriotic spirit was a paramount component to their fight against Nazi Germany. However, while Olivier portrayed Henry as the brave, pious, national hero, he understandably omitted the darker characteristics of the boy king such as the threat to the governor of Harlfleur (87). Kenneth Branagh speculates on Olivier's omissions:

That speech [to the governor of Harlfleur] was cut out of Olivier's film along with the scene in which he deals with the traitors. I gather Olivier made those cuts at the behest of Winston Churchill, who didn't want any wartime mention of the possibility of English savagery and treachery. (78)

Kenneth Branagh, the adaptor, director and principal player of the 1989 film version took his cues directly from Shakespeare by presenting Henry V with dark edges. The British publication, *Commonweal* reports:

He rescues Shakespeare from teachers who reduce his audience by reading plays primarily as poetry -- a narrower more cerebral province, and one much harder to enter (hence classroom death). (116)



[Photo: [Henry V](#) 1989 Renaissance Films PLC]

He portrays the monarch as a man suffering deep, inner turmoil. On one hand, Henry is incredibly cruel. He rebukes his old friend, Sir John Falstaff with little more than a word. Henry then exudes extraordinary religious devotion. Mr. Branagh breaks down Olivier's lofty portrayal and make Henry much more palatable and believable to a modern audience. *Commonweal* reports that:

Fortunately, Branagh doesn't go to the opposite extreme of the shock addict modernizers who equate "relevance" and theatrical pizzazz with putting Mohawks on Mercutios. Instead, he finds new ways of transfiguring the riches of Shakespeare's stage and the rough and tumble of medieval politics to the screen. This Henry is new, through imaginative authenticity. (116)

Branagh brings together an excellent cast a portion of which is essentially the same as the 1984 Royal Shakespeare Company production. This 1984 production, directed by Adrian Noble, was the inspiration for the 1989 production. Noble's concept for the production was a complete opposite from Olivier's high-flying nationalistic

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interpretation. The Noble interpretation of the role of Henry was to pyramid the character, to focus on Henry's personality as an isolated, pious monarch and then tailor the portrayals of the rest of the cast to him. The guilt, honor and pious nature of Henry would be the cornerstone of Mr. Branagh's interpretation while down playing the jingoistic pageantry that tends to cloud the rich characterizations. By approaching it in this manner, more attention was paid to Shakespeare's commentary of kingship, honor, and Catholic piety all within a historical perspective. Mr. Branagh comments on this earlier production:

For so many people this play is dismissed as a crude glorification of militarism. I know many people questioned the wisdom of putting the play on so soon after the Falklands conflict. And so Day One we determined to throw aside the shackles of limiting preconceptions, remembering always to ask why those particular words are necessary to this king, and how they exist in a man whose capacity for extraordinary compassion and forgiveness are self-evident in the rest of the play. (98)



[Photo: [Henry V](#) 1989 Renaissance Films PLC]

However noble their pursuit, the production was not without its problems and this interpretation wasn't fully explored as Martin Hoyle asserts:

It struck me, through my irritation, that there might be method to this apparent madness. Neither a drama school exercise nor mere mannerism, the constant undercutting of high-flying sentiment is in keeping with Adrian Noble's fashionably down-beat concept of the Stratford season's opening production. The glum, anticlimax, even guilt felt after victory is a common enough phenomenon; but the muted air of sheepishness throughout this production is at such odds with the buoyancy that should inform the play that one wonders why the RSC didn't simply put on *Journey's End* and have done with it...and preproduction noises about this being a 'post-Falkland' interpretation was not noticeably pursued. I can only assume that 'Falklands' is uttered with resonance of a Pavlovian bell; and aimed at the same reaction. (23)



[Photo: [Henry V](#) 1989 Renaissance Films PLC]

Though it may sound something like a train wreck, press night in theatrical circles never fails to send chills through any cast. These things take time and nurturing, especially with such a young cast. In this case, it took the 1984 RSC production over two years. Mr. Branagh responds to this sort of criticism with characteristic humor:

The audience reaction to the preview was mixed. Some people wanted their warrior king in red, white and blue with no inner doubts, while others wanted the play to come firmly down on the anti-war ticket. Very few could ignore the emotional impact of our production which, if nothing else was distinguished by the sight of Branagh looking all of twelve in the title role. [Mr. Branagh was twenty three and the youngest actor to play the role for the RSC.] (149)

One must walk before one can run. Five years later, Renaissance Films plc under the direction of Stephen Evans, David Parfitt and Kenneth Branagh ran. Hugh Cruttwell, consultant to the 1989 production of *Henry V* and former principle at the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art remembers:

I only saw it once, [the 1984 RSC production] and I was not all that impressed. Whereas I was enormously impressed by the screen performance. I think that in the intervening years Ken had enormously matured as a person and his resources had hugely developed. It was the difference between callow youth and fully-matured man. No doubt the stage performance contained the germinating seed of the screen performance -- in that sense they came from the same source. But the screen actor had grown in power and range, almost unrecognizably, by comparison with the younger stage actor. (Cruttwell)

Upon the release of the film, many critics, mostly English, were aghast at Mr. Branagh. This attitude, tempered with poorly disguised jealousy is self-defeating and detrimental to youthful exploration and enthusiasm. Surely, neither Shakespeare nor Olivier would presume that *Henry V* should only be performed in one way for for that matter that it should speak to only one generation or social class. Shakespeare never put stage directions in his text. If he had, no doubt actors would not have to suffer endless fits of confusion. He left it ambiguous and thus open to interpretation.

Mr. Branagh's interpretation of Shakespeare makes a strong statement about the uselessness of war within the boundaries of epic political drama. Kenneth Fuller agrees, "It is a galvanizing and accessible version that explores the mournful disgust at the foulness of war" (2). But would an audience of today be able to accept a new version? Mr. Branagh comments on the problem of the preconceived expectations of a modern audience:

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For a modern audience, the abiding image of Henry V is provided by Sir Laurence Olivier's famous film version, but the powerful Elizabethan pageantry and chivalric splendor of the extraordinary movie did not accord with the impression I received as I read the text afresh. To me, the play seemed darker, harsher and the language more bloody and muscular than I remembered. Although I was aware of bring a particular set of post-war sensibilities to bear on my reading, I sensed that a 1980's film version of such a piece would make for a profoundly different experience. (9)

Henry V in performance runs well over three hours. Though portions are omitted, Mr. Branagh is true to the text of Shakespeare. This was done to appease the two hour time frame restriction placed on today's filmmakers.

In reference to the two hour time frame, Mr. Branagh's reasons for text deletions may appear elitist. But in the dollars and sense of the movie industry his view reveal pragmatism and not elitism. Mr. Branagh explains, "My own experience of cinema going convinced me that two hours was the maximum span of concentration that could be expected from an experience for a film of this kind" (11).

The most notable deletions, which Mr. Branagh explains as "tortuous" were removed to reveal the basic plot line which is sometimes clouded by Shakespeare's flair for rhetoric. It may also be noted that these deletions were prompted by the limitations of the almighty budget. Mr. Branagh explains his view:

I wanted there to be no fat on the film at all...the more tortuous aspects of the Fluellen/Pistol antagonism, culminating in the resoundingly unfunny leek scene, were first to go. The double-edged exchanges between Henry and Burgundy in Act V also for my purposes failed to advance the plot, and added little to the aspects of the play that we wanted to explore. Elsewhere, there were trimmings of Elizabethan obscurities, particularly in the language of the Boars Head scenes, with only the most delicious sounding phrases escaping sacrifice of instant understanding. Plot repetitions and excessive flights of rhetorical fancy were ruthlessly excised. (11)

Repetition of phrase is common in Shakespeare. C. Stivers relates comments on Paul Scofield's view of Shakespeare:

Paul Scofield -- once a Man for all Seasons and resident legend [on the set of Henry V] -- explains that since Shakespeare's audiences often could not see the actors' eyes or expression, the playwright tended to repeat key ideas. With the closeups of film there is no need. (54)

Kenneth Branagh's performance correctly includes the darker side of Henry's character that Olivier deleted. For example, in scenes I and II, which set up the entire premise of the play, the Archbishop of Canterbury and the Bishop of Ely seek to sway the king to wage war with France. The Salic Law is present to the king as an unlawful document proving Henry's lawful claim to France. However, their motives are based on the protection of Church lands and monies. Some critics maintain that the Salic Law was a mere ruse to divert Henry's attention from the Church. However, there is evidence that the claim is lawful as Reese explains:

Historically, Canterbury was quite right. The Salic Law had been in the particular instance a dishonest contrivance by French jurist to deny the claims of Edward III;

and in addition to these claims Henry had also inherited the rights of his own Angevin ancestors. (324)

In the Olivier version, these churchmen are comic foils for Henry's amusement. In the Branagh version, his churchmen are shrewd politicians. They try to manipulate the king into a dangerous foreign quarrel. Some Critics maintain that Henry is manipulated. However, it is Henry who requests the Salic Law to be read in the first place and Henry asks on several occasions where his right is justifiable. Mr. Branagh explains his approach to this particular speech:

Right from the start he attempts to make everyone genuinely aware of the same thing, of his vision of 'how to war'. Despite political and war-mongering intrigue, despite irresistible pressure from the Church and from the nobles, he insists on fighting an honourable campaign. I wanted the first speech to Canterbury to put this man of God very explicitly on the spot with an injunction directly at the wily archbishops. (138)

One shot exemplifies Branagh's interpretation perfectly. As he is being "counseled" on how to proceed, Henry quietly demands, for the last time, the bishops to answer if his claim to France is lawful. The camera holds Henry in close-up and very appropriately the conniving Archbishop enters the frame at stage right and the silent Bishop of Ely enters at stage left. The result is a visual confrontation that illustrates the bishops attempt to divert Henry's attention from confiscating Church lands. Mr. Branagh comments on his approach to this scene:

He flatters the Archbishop at the same time reminding this unholy of holy men of the price of perjury. In the middle section there is an almost soliloquised quality a moral gravita which suggested to me genuine emotional weight given to the thought of the deaths involved in what is being discussed. For Henry it is completely real. Having been fighting since the age of twelve in a world where combat and hand to hand -- bloody and savage -- knowledge of the realit of war must be seen to be with him from the beginning. The concern is great and suffused with his own tettle experience. He see further than the Archbishop will ever do, and yet he chooses to meet the Archbishop on his own terms and contain his vision and wisdom in language of polite precision. (100)

Yet Henry only wants a verbal confirmation that the Church will acknowledge his claim as lawful, knowing full well that if need be, he will take Church lands and monies to support his cause. How can they possibly deny him after they have sanctioned it. Jack Kroll comments on the differences between both films:

Branagh's film is a splendid piece of work, a Henry V for our time. Olivier's movie was thrilling trumpet call that made the 15th-century warrior king a symbol of the World War II spirit of Dunkirk. Branagh's film is more psychologically complex, exposing mixed motives in Henry's decision to invade and conquer France. (47)

Mr. Branagh includes strength as well as human indecision in his stage direction. He does not portray the king as merely a figurehead at the mercy of his court counselors. Rather, Mr. Branagh, as Henry, at hearing the Archbishops offer of subsidy take a moment to consider the effects of his decision then, sure of it, continues with:

Henry V

Now are we well resolved; and by God's help,

And yours, the noble sinews of our power,

France being ours, we'll bend it to our awe.

Then remotely, almost to himself, as he watches the large doors open,

Henry V

Or break it all to pieces. (24)

In reference to the importance of how Henry's character should be presented, Walter agrees somewhat:

Moreover, to portray Henry as the dupe of two scheming prelates, or as a crafty politician skillfully concealing his aims with the aid of an unscrupulous archbishop, is not consistent with claiming at the same time that he is the ideal king; indeed it is destructive of the moral epic purpose of the play. (14)

This may seem a bit contradictory, however, if Henry is being the crafty politician then he only does it for his England. He uses the royal "we" when he refers to himself as England. He uses "I" to refer to himself alone as in , "May I with right and conscience make this claim?" (22). Henry will do anything as Henry Alone that will benefit Henry as England. If that is not a moral epic purpose then I don't know what is.

Henry's reaction to the Dauphin's gift of the tennis balls is exceedingly important because it is Henry's test of self-control. Olivier portrays this well, however, the indifference that he displays (the hoop toss with his crown) is more reminiscent of the young Prince Hal than the newly converted King Henry. Some critics maintain that Henry's reaction to the gift is no more than a childish retaliation to an insult, which implies that the rest of the play is based on the impious desires of a spoiled child. If this were the case, the play itself would have fallen apart. Reese comments on this point:

It is absurd to pretend that the French war was a personal vendetta to avenge this trivial insult. That decision had already been made, and in his reply Henry leaves the French in no doubt of the real issues. (325)

Olivier plays the speech with a heavy dose of sarcasm and hence the spoiled child routine emerges. The only reason the rest of the film does not fall apart is because Olivier edited the text so heavily in order to fit his view. Reese comments on actors tendencies to play the reply melodramatically:

Actors of Henry tend to go through a certain amount of foot stamping during this speech, but the text does not seem to warrant it. Henry is sarcastic, masterful and icily determined; there is no evidence of lost control, and the chief impression given by the speech is that it is the Dauphin who is the irresponsible playboy now. (325)

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Branagh play the speech determined and unwavering while bringing the inward glance that all eyes are upon him waiting for his next move. This was Mr. Branagh's directorial debut in film and the Russian method may have materialized in full force, as this scene was one of the first to be shot (Jackson).

Whatever trepidation Mr. Branagh might have felt, Olivier felt much the same way. Olivier speaks of his discovery of pulling back the camera to accommodate big movement. He also mentions the dread he felt by way of being on the spot to produce work that the audience would accept. One might say that his preconceived expectations were the basis of his dissonant feelings.

I enjoyed being the director; I enjoy being the leading actor. The responsibility is a major challenge, and one's grown up to like challenges. But I didn't enjoy the act of acting a great part of the film. I don't think any actor does. I'm always haunted by anxiety, an underlying, constant dread. So when I say my "discovery" made me feel at ease acting Shakespeare to the camera (provided it coordinates its movements and angles and light and shades to my words and actions, sometimes drawing back to a responsive distance to avoid my spitting in its eye), that ease was relative, as it was to all the other Shakespearean actors too. I was so happy and relieved I'd found a way of lessening an actor's anxiety. On the state a tentative actor can hide behind his technique or the other actors, from which he regains his confidence. On film, a tentative actor looks haunted. (283)

However, Henry V is well aware that he has the talent to be a brilliant monarch, as he states in his first soliloquy in Henry IV Part One. But Henry would also just as soon be content to live the life of a common man. He reveals this in the 'Upon the king' soliloquy in Henry V. Branagh comments on his approach to this soliloquy:

Henry was haunted I felt, not just by his father and their troubled relationship but also by the ghost of Richard II whom he invokes at the end of his famous "Upon the King" soliloquy. This seemed to me to reveal a massively guilty man who was quite terrified, and the speech was not a perfunctory plea from a pious zealot certain of his own victory, but expressed the anguish fear of a young man whose mistake would cost thousands of lives. (137)

Thus there is a sense of confusion and helplessness that is the hallmark of the character of Hamlet. Branagh comments, "There is a lot of Hamlet in Henry V. But Henry is someone who at times captured a certain fineness of the human spirit and at other times was a really ruthless bastard. I wanted to get all of that" (222).

Branagh also includes the conspirators scene where, he entraps the three corrupted member of his council who have taken French gold as a price to assassinate their king. Mr. Branagh explains his decision to include the darker aspects of Henry's character:

I decided on including some significant scenes that Olivier's film for obvious reasons had let out: in particular, the conspirators' scene where Henry stage manages a public cashiering of the bosom friends who have been revealed as traitors. The violence and extremism of Henry's behaviour and its effect on a volatile war cabinet were elements that the Olivier version was not likely to spotlight. (12)

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This is a dark sequence. It is a lovely example of the use of shadow that enhances the political picture being lit from below the frame (Thomas). Henry is visibly cruel here, pleased with his triumph when he sends these men to be executed. He then switches to the role of the pious adventurer by invoking the name of God and asking for the chance to break France to pieces. This turnabout almost psychotic aspect of his character is not only visibly frightening but also comes directly from Shakespeare's text. Reese comments on Henry's conduct:

Many things in his conduct of the war have been disliked because they have not been understood. He is a man well versed in 'the disciplines of the wars' and Fluellen's praise of him is not to be taken lightly. Where he seems to modern ideas to have been quite astonishingly insensitive, he was in fact directing the campaign according to the recognised principles of his age. (328)

Another frightening moment comes as Henry threatens the Governor of Harfleur for the umpteenth time. Henry threatens the governor with a suicidal assault that he promises, will leave no one left alive. It is presented in the text with this flavor. It is truly moving and frightening. Some critics maintain that Henry's threatening to the governor is a valid example of the Machivelle. But as has been discussed earlier, Henry's extreme behavior is prompted by an increasing pressure to remain sedate and in control the result is the complete absence of the appropriate need to sublimate. Therefore, Henry's threatenings are merely the venting of weeks perhaps months of violent feelings that have been repressed. Mr. Branagh explains his view of Henry's concept of honor and his savage threats:

His own personal concept of honour seemed fuelled by tremendous repression. He was unable to release huge amounts of humour and indeed violence. The responsibility of kingship which he takes so profoundly seriously keeps all such human expressions contained, but all the more charged and dangerous. When such qualities are released we see them at their extremes...Here Henry [in the speech to the governor] is a desperate man in the midst of a siege gone terribly wrong. The lines are threatening, unforgiving and indicative I believe of an awesome personal capacity to violence. (101)



But Branagh uses the speech more as a bluff than as an actual threat. Let me explain, remember his soldiers have been chased out of Harfleur many times. They are tired and worn out. Henry see this and decides to bluff his way out of the situation. Branagh comments of the usefulness of this scene:

I reinstated the savage threat to the governor where the king talks of possible rape, infanticide, a speech which underlines the crueler aspects of an increasingly desperate English military campaign. (12)

After the governor surrenders, there is a visible sense of relief in Branagh's face. The bluff has worked. While the scene works with this interpretation, it also leaves no doubt in the mind of the audience that Henry is just as brave as he is shrewd. That is not to say that by presenting the threat in this way implies surrender; far

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from it. Henry surely would have attacked but now is he only to happy to show mercy to them. Olivier, for obvious reasons ignored this scene completely. As a final example, Mr. Branagh includes the concluding Chorus speech, also not found in the Olivier version. The Chorus ironically explains that after all the carnage and blood, Henry died and his son, Henry VI lost France. It leave the audience in a king of 'all for nothing' depression. But it makes a strong statement against war.

In film, perhaps the most essential element is the soundtrack. It is the key to the symmetry of the film by providing counterpoint to the dramatic representation. Branagh answers the question of how to make Henry V appeal to a wider audience.

In answer I would describe as best I could my belief in a modern view of the play' it emerges as a political thriller, a warts-and-all study in leadership, a complex debate about war, an uncompromising analysis of the English class system and of the gulf between male and female attitudes to this type of savage conflict. This tremendously rich mixture is wrapped up in a relentlessly gripping narrative. To convey this a strong visual style that could appeal to an audience on the edge of 1990's was vitally necessary. The crucial bonding agent in all this was the music...I intended the film to move people to every extreme of emotion. Great beauty, bravery and variety were required of the score. What he [Patrick Doyle] produced surpassed my wildest expectations. A score of immense variation, power and melodic beauty, it as much as any other element gives this film the chance of having a truly popular appeal. (5)



Undoubtedly, without an effective soundtrack a film falls flat. The Agincourt sequence must have rousing musical accompaniment or the effect of epic is lost. Both films accomplish this superbly. Olivier's Henry V was fortunate enough to have William Walton. Hutton comments on Walton's contribution:

The score is possibly the best, the most inventive he devised for Olivier's Shakespearean films. The music for the Agincourt sequence rose to a climax, merging the orchestra with the whirr of English arrows and the clangour and cries of battle. Other sequences which stay in the memory are the death of Falstaff with Mistress Quickly's homely lamentation, the speech of a common soldier on war spoken simply and sincerely in a West-country accent, the Chorus's speech descriptive of the armies preparing over-night for battle (pointed by Walton's subtly descriptive music), and the deeply emotional scene of the King himself, disguised and isolated, wandering through the camp at night and meditating on the responsibilities of the monarch in time of war. The camera becomes identified with the king, moving through the camp of sleeping soldiers, while Olivier's tense, thoughtful voice speaks Shakespeare's incomparable lines. (40)

The score for Branagh's film is often extraordinary as well. Patrick Doyle has succeeded in combining modern instruments with classical instruments in a effort that is seamless. The Death of Falstaff, featuring the bittersweetness of the horn, musically reveals the history between King Henry and Falstaff and the king's disgarded friends of the tavern. It is a musical sunset. In Upon The King, the always dramatic use of horn and flue in duet never ceases to produce the loneliest of

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sounds. This particular piece mirrors Branagh's concept of the scene as he comments:

I think I finally came to the conclusion that Henry answers no question in that scene and the 'Upon the King' soliloquy emerges because of terrible certainty of what Williams has said. There will never be any real contact between him or what he does. It's the confirmation that he will be forever utterly alone. (103)

St. Crispin's Day builds from a small flickering light of bravery to heroic fireworks ending with the dramatic pounding of the Agincourt war drums.

What Branagh's production does well is to present Henry as he is. There are no attempts to soften his exploits. As the initial concepts for the 1989 film grew out of the 1984 RSC production it seems only natural that Mr. Branagh would modify those concepts. Branagh remembers his discussions with Adrian Noble on how to present Henry.

Adrian and I both agreed that we should not try to explain this man but rather explore all these paradoxes and contradictions, with an awareness of his historical and social context. We wanted to be faithful to the complex inner debate that Shakespeare conducts on the subject of war, and as we discussed the play it seemed less like a historical pageant and more like a highly complicated and ambiguous discourse on the nature of leadership. (238)

There are some similarities between the two films, as an example, during the battle of Agincourt, arrows are seen and ominously heard flying through the air. Some critics have said that it is an obvious theft from Olivier. But, Olivier defends this type of "borrowing" as he himself was known to do it often enough.

If something is good then take it , borrow it as you will. When young actors copy my characterizations, I am flattered. It is not arrogance, it is understanding. (99)



[Photo: [Henry V](#) 1989 Renaissance Films PLC]

These films are two separate entitles. Olivier's version was geared to a war-time audience that needed a boost of morale. Branagh's version, still being true to Shakespeare gives a more somber view of the uselessness of war. Both films speak to their intended audience. They will always be compared with the debate that one is better than the other which is useless because they are not. Morsberger quiets any further debate as he explains:

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Both versions of Henry V, that of Branagh and that of Olivier, are superb films cast with some of Britain's greatest actors. Branagh calls Henry V "a political debate inside an adventure story." Olivier stressed the adventure; one critic even called Olivier's version "Robin Hood versus the Nazis." Branagh present the provocative political debate which is appropriate after Vietnam, Afghanistan, and the dismal wars of the Middle East and Latin America. Olivier's version is more colorful and exciting; Branagh's is more somber and thoughtful. Branagh's Henry V is a film for its time. (176)

It is a film for today that speaks to a generation with a collective experience of war as it did for Olivier's generation as well as Shakespeare's. Cruttwell comments on the continuing ambiguity that will ensure that Henry V will be produced again speaking to generations to come.

Differing "contemporary" attitudes determined the great differences between the Olivier and the Branagh versions; yet they are manifestly the same play, i.e. each a legitimate and understandable interpretation in their own day and in relation to contemporary...etc. I find Olivier's version to alien now that I can only watch it (or some of it) with impatience. (Cruttwell)



[Photo: Henry V 1989 Renaissance Films PLC]

The only fault I found in the presentation of this production was a lack of sufficient suspense in the moments prior to the battle. I was reminded of another film, Zulu, where prior to the battle as the warriors gathered at the top of every hill surrounding to English outpost there is a very sweaty-palmed moment when the audience realizes that the boys at the bottom of the hill are in a very serious predicament. I questioned Mr. Cruttwell on this point using the example I just mentioned. His answer was very revealing as it left on very important question discovered yet unanswered.

On reflection, I rather agree with you that the danger to the English was not very adequately stressed. It has been established previously in the text; and also visually in so far as we had seen a lot of the bedraggled English army in contrast to the richly compared French -- in other words, the inequality of the two sides had been clearly established implying the grave disadvantage the English suffered when the two armies confronted each other in battle. What Ken worked for in the battle itself was not so much suspense as the sheer horror and turmoil of the close in-fighting. I think Ken's decision to go primarily for the gruesome detail -- the mud, the blood, the chaos -- was legitimate. I must say that I never questioned it. Though, in retrospect, I concede that the suspense was perhaps underplayed. (Cruttwell)

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Whatever suspense was lacking must obviously be attributed to a tight production schedule and insufficient funding. It raises the larger question of : why can't films like this be properly funded?



[Photo: [Henry V](#) 1989 Renaissance Films PLC]

What sort of conclusions can one come to with a film like Henry V? First, it proves that Shakespeare is accessible and can be profitable. Shakespeare's work can be manipulated to speak to audiences for years to come. It's ambiguity and the elements of honor, lust, greed, friendship and war are the hallmark of successful theatrical presentation. It continues to ask those eternal and sensitive questions that reek of rhetorical idealisms. The audience is there and with the advancements of video and laser disks only propagate its feasibility. However, the industry is selling its customers short by assuming that their product is the best for the masses and the muse. In psycho-social terms, using the model of cognitive dissonance, their preconceptions dictate their actions or rather, their product. The audience, in turn are effectively trained to believe that what they see on screen is definitive or ideal entertainment. American audiences are, perhaps more susceptible to this than Europeans. It is a sad day in the film world when Ernest Saves Christmas has a bigger day at the box office than Cyrano De Bergerac. In a subtle way, the assumption that their actions reflect are, in essence, an insidious form of censorship. What does this say about the audience? Have they given up the capacity to think and still be entertained? The fault fall in the laps of both the audience and the industry. Whenever intelligent entertainment films that go against the grain, like Henry V, Cyrano De Bergerac or the recent Prospero's Books are released, critics are curiously quick to bash them. Is it any real surprise? These critics are only reinforcing what their preconceptions of ideal cultural entertainment should be and what they have been trained to believe by the educational system. Taken one step further, while that educational system grew out of the initial need to quell rebellion and subversive political discourse in the darkened Globe Theatre.

What I wish to present is an argument whereby it is, ultimately, the audience that must choose to think. To provoke controversy is not my aim though I must admit that is an inevitable conclusion. However this is an open challenge to the film industry and the audience who would sit there and accept formula entertainment season after season.

The customers of industry, the masses, have in the past, displayed and continue to display an insatiable thirst for their "product" be it entertainment or knowledge. But the consumers are limited to what the industry produces. It is unknown how limited the consumer is or will become as a result of that the industry does not produce or censors.



[Photo: [Henry V](#) 1989 Renaissance Films PLC]

Over the past ten years, the trend toward the global village marketplace has begun. The market has progressed from relative isolation in regard to the social, technical and financial fronts to the global arena. There is little indication that industry is effectively meeting the challenge. There will be in the future, (in the very near future), a thirst for continuing insight and knowledge that will swallow whatever the global, technical and financial war produces. It is a very real war; the financial technical war. The recent escalation of peace in Kuwait, the destruction of the Berlin Wall, the possibility of an effective Ruble, the market borders of Europe virtually open, and the end of the Cold War are signposts that point to its inevitability. In the light of all these factors, the industry will not fund Shakespeare properly. There seems not to be even a whisper from the industry that says that they are even planning for this new global society since they can't even deal with getting Shakespeare on the boards must less on the screen. In other words, industry is reneging on a responsibility to adjust to society; the film industry in particular.

There should no longer be any doubt that Shakespeare has a rightful place in the film world. It is this type of film that not only brings a certain respectability to the medium of the film as art, but also delivers the works of Shakespeare to the masses -- his primary audience.