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**‘Interpreting the King: Analyzing Two Very Different Film Adaptations of Shakespeare's *King Henry V*’**

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**Lit 350: Shakespeare**

Every production of every Shakespeare play has been its own unique take on the original text- even the version written, directed and acted in by the Bard himself. Shakespeare's plays continue to be performed today, some 400 years after they were written, because they are constantly being adapted and changed by directors- who are able to breathe life into the ancient texts with their every alteration. Every decision on how to stage, set and light a scene, every choice made on how to communicate to one's audience- and thousands of other seemingly unimportant verdicts decreed by the director must be taken into account for every show, making for a new experience every time. This is no different for filmed adaptations of Shakespeare's work. Since J. Stuart Blackton's silent film based on *Romeo & Juliet* was released in 1908, the movie industry has brought Shakespeare's work to the silver screen over 250 times (including 61 different versions of Hamlet). After viewing two very different film versions of Shakespeare's *Henry V*, it is clear that the power held by a director to differ from Shakespeare's original intentions is just as, if not more so, powerful for movie directors.

The two films I studied were Sir Laurence Olivier's 1944 work “*The Chronicle History of King Henry the Fifth with His Battell Fought at Agincourt in France*” and Kenneth Branagh's 1989 production simply titled “*Henry V*.” These two films, despite being based upon the exact same text, having the same overall plot and story progression, and sharing more or less the same exact lines of dialog both end up having wildly different themes. Most interesting of all the differences that I will outline in this paper is perhaps in the one area where there is a decided lack of difference: quality. Both

films are great works of their time, each one receiving its share success not only at the box office but in the form of praise from critics. To better understand the differences of the films it is best to take a closer look at the men behind each one.

By the 1940s Laurence Olivier was regarded as the best Shakespearean stage actor in England. When he was tasked with the responsibility of bringing Shakespeare's *Henry V* to the silver screen he figured it would be successful because, his own words "(I) already had a bit of a following, so whatever I did was looked upon with curiosity." (Olivier 185) What he did was a tough task for any actor/director, to turn a Shakespeare play written for a small wooden stage into a high-budgeted movie production, with a cast of hundreds of soldiers fighting it out on the fields of Agincourt (which was actually filmed in Ireland because real war was going on in France). The most impressive thing about Olivier's success was not only did he make a film during World War II and all the real life distractions that come with that, but he did it all as a first time director.

Central to understanding the message of Olivier's movie is in following the trail of money that funded it, a trail that leads to Winston Churchill, who in addition to seeing Olivier perform as Henry V on stage in the 1930s had already used government money to fund other wartime propaganda films. Olivier needed no convincing that adapting Shakespeare's work to make itself a rallying cry for the troops was a noble cause. "From the beginning of England's war with Germany... I was being tuned up for the undreamt-of film of Henry V. As I flew over the country in my (plane) I kept seeing it as Shakespeare's sceptred (sic) isle." (Olivier 186) Olivier challenged himself to at least somewhat veil the film's basis in propaganda to the audience of the time, of whom he said "where used to little other than the most obvious propaganda." (Olivier 186) As we will discover in picking apart both films, the veil he used to attempt to cover the propaganda with when presenting the film to WWII-era audiences does not hold up well under a modern viewing.

Unlike Olivier, who was at the height of his fame and funded by his country's government, Kenneth Branagh started from less secure financial footing and had a lot to prove in his version of

*Henry V*. He began the project at the age of 29. He, like Olivier, wrote the screenplay, directed and starred in his production and received Oscar nominations in both the best actor and best director categories. It was his first film but not his first time taking up Henry's crown- he starred as the king on stage for the Royal Shakespeare Company in the mid-80s. His greatest challenge in making a successful film was in overcoming the shadow of propaganda and expectations cast by Olivier's *Henry V*. Like Olivier's World War II-stricken England of 1944, Branagh too was making his film about English glory on the battlefield at a time when real British soldiers were fighting and dying- not on the fields of Western Europe but on a chain of islands in the South Atlantic Ocean called the Falklands. On April 2<sup>nd</sup> 1982, Argentinean forces invaded and began occupying the contested islands, which Argentina saw as it merely re-occupying its old territory and the British saw as an invasion of one of their colonies. The Falklands War lasted just 72 days and ended in a British victory, the popularity of which was largely responsible for Prime Minister Thatcher's 1983 reelection. When the press found out that Branagh was making *Henry V* their expectations was that he would glorify the British victory over the Argentineans, something that Branagh denies in his own words. "It was a relief to me that we would not be burdened by the 'Post Falklands' tag that some of the press had already given the production. Our feelings about that conflict would inevitably inform our thoughts on the play but not to the point where the effect was reductive to the work." (Branagh 1988) If anything, Branagh's gritty, brutal portrayal of battle in his version of *Henry V* makes for an anti-war film. Shakespearian critic and professor of English at Kansas State University Donald K Hedrick argues in his paper "War is Mud," that even though Branagh goes so far away from Olivier's clean and tidy portrayal of British victory he is still able to muddy up Shakespeare's intended message by setting the movie in such dark, dirty tones. "Throughout the performance tradition of the play, one finds again and again a variety of means of whitewashing the war and character of the king, but an innovation in this production is Branagh's accomplishing whitewashing chiefly by the means of mud. The presence of dirt in the film – its overwhelming use on the battlefield, on the troops, and on the King himself – is certainly

overdetermined.” (Hedrick 47)

The best way to expose the messages of both films is by directly comparing them scene by scene. No one place is better to start off than the beginning, which in Shakespeare's original text is done the form of a monologue by the Chorus asking the audience to imagine that the confines of the Globe stage was in fact the French countryside and not a just “wooden O.” Olivier struggled with the problem of how to start his movie, writing in his book *On Acting* that he considered having the Chorus as a voice-over and then by eliminating him all together before coming with his rather unorthodox solution. “Play the first few scenes on the Globe stage in a highly, absolutely deliberate, theatrical style; get the film audience used to the language, and let them laugh its excesses out of their system before the story really begins.” (Olivier 187) So it is for the benefit of his audience, whom he has been tasked by Churchill to deliver a patriotic message to, that Olivier cites as his reason to start his play in a full-scale reproduction of the Globe in Elizabethan times.

The contemporary audience who has collectively endured hundreds of movie adaptations of Shakespeare's works between 1944 and 1989 that Branagh's movie was written for needs no introduction to the language of Shakespeare. It is for this reason the Chorus in the 1989 production is played by an actor in modern dress who delivers Shakespeare's lines word for word while walking through the actual sound stage on which much of the film was made. This choice of breaking the fourth wall in the opening seconds of the movie makes for a beginning almost equally bizarre as Olivier's. However odd the presentation, the Chorus is still pleading with the audience to use their imagination- just as Shakespeare intended him to. Instead of addressing the groundlings of days gone by at the Globe, Branagh's Chorus is focused directly on the popcorn eating, modern movie goer, who just like their 17 century counterparts know full well that what they are about to see was not real life. Branagh's intention is not to please the audience like Olivier admits to doing, but to challenge their expectations of the film they are about to see- to forget all they knew about other versions of *Henry V*.

The themes of the two films are well exposed in the decisions made by each director in the

famous “tennis ball speech” given by Henry in Act I Scene II. Olivier, dressed in full royal regalia, chose to deliver his lines whilst pacing dramatically about the Globe stage. He belts out the famous final lines of the speech, “So get you hence in peace; and tell the Dauphin/ His jest will savor but of shallow wit/ When thousands weep more than did laugh at it.” he points accusingly at the French messenger, seeming to condemn all of his kind. Olivier's decision to play up the lines this way may seem hammy to modern audiences, but was in line with what moviegoers of that time were used to. It also communicates Henry's power and unquestioning faith that what he is doing is right and that he is completely justified in declaring war on the French for their jest. It is done this way to remove any doubt that the audience might have regarding the moral justification of the invasion of France.

Branagh's film does not go to such great lengths to eliminate the area of moral dubiousness that surrounds Henry's intentions with going to war. Branagh delivers the full tennis ball speech as Shakespeare wrote it, but he keeps his body seated and his anger just below the surface. It is done this way because Branagh focuses less on the soaring patriotism that oozes from Olivier's work and more on the character development of Henry- namely how he goes from being the angry man in his English court in Act I, to a King risking his life on the battlefield of Agincourt in Act IV.

In Shakespeare's original text of *Henry V*, the character of Falstaff does not make an appearance other than Pistol announcing to his friends that he has died in Act II Scene III. This was done because the audience of the day would have seen Henry IV parts I & II and would have known all about the jovial knight and would be sad at his death. However, both Olivier and Branagh's film versions have Falstaff in a speaking role. Olivier includes Falstaff, whom he refers to as the “leader of the comics,” as purely a method of comic relief. “I was determined to bring in the comics, Falstaff and his friends Nym, Bardolph and Pistol, for without them; it would have been two and a half hours of Henry, Henry, Henry: the film cried out for light relief!” This decision to add comic relief to the movie is another example of Olivier doing his WWII audience a favor by easing them into the language of Shakespeare.

Branagh's reason for including Falstaff in his adaptations is not solely for comic relief. Falstaff

is used to tell the story of Henry's transition from rough and rowdy youth to a man in a series of flashbacks that reference heavily from Henry IV parts I & II. Branagh juxtaposes the flashbacks, which are lit with warm inviting light and set in cheery pubs, with the rough, cold reality that Henry finds himself a part of in France. The most effective such juxtaposition takes place when Henry is faced with the prospect of hanging his old friend Bardolph for stealing from a church in Act III Scene VI. Before the audience sees Henry make the decision to string up his former drinking buddy, Branagh shows a flashback of happier times that ends with the powerful image of Bardolph smiling at Hal with Falstaff's large arms draped around him and cuts right to a solemn, pleading Bardolph staring at Henry the executioner with a noose round his neck (see appendix). The decision to include snapshots of Hal's life from Henry IV Parts I & II in this grim way not only informs the audience on Henry's rough past, it also facilitates Branagh's overall theme of making the movie about Henry's path to becoming a great King.

The scene that is perhaps the most different in each of the two movies is Act III Scene III, the storming of the French fortress of Harfleur. In Shakespeare's original text the entire scene is just the exchange of three lines: Henry's demand to the Governor of the town to surrender lest they want their "naked infants spitted on pikes." This horrifying thought is followed by the Governor's reply that the town surrenders itself to the "Great King." The last line of the scene goes to Henry, who instructs Exeter to fortify the town and to be merciful to the surrendering French. Olivier's version of this scene is an example of the "whitewashing" the war that Hedrick talked about in his essay- it removes any chance of Henry showing any morally reprehensible behavior by cutting out his threats of ordering his soldiers to defile French girls and pull the beards of old men. Olivier chose to do this because any aforementioned morally reprehensible behavior might confuse his era of moviegoer into thinking that there is even the slightest possibility of the English being at fault in their invasion of France.

Branagh proves more loyal to Shakespeare's text, yelling the whole gory speech up to the hellfire-streaked battlements of Harfleur. Branagh's Henry is bleeding, angry and, above all else, dirty

when he gives his demands- far different than the clean, shiny Olivier (see appendix). Branagh adds something interesting to the scene- after the Governor of Harfleur gives his only line in the movie, Branagh includes a close up shot of Henry looking relieved, then a wide shot of him riding slowly back to his men and another close shot showing a big sigh of relief when he makes it to Exeter. This indicates to the audience that Henry was bluffing about ordering his soldiers to commit mass infanticide and that he is relieved that no one else had to die in battle. It doesn't seem like a big message to send but any addition to a scene as important as this one warrants mention.

Each film has one defining image that towards the end that symbolizes its message well. In Branagh's film it is the image of the victorious king carrying the dead boy (played by Christian Bale) across the steaming, dead-ridden fields of Agincourt. The scene signifies several important things- Henry's victory over the French, his ability to be gracious in victory, his willingness to do grim work like carrying dead bodies that most wouldn't think suited kings. Above all else, the image (which is figure 5 in the Appendix) shows Henry's completion of the journey that he began as Prince Hal in King Henry IV Part I, as a youth not unlike the one whose dead body the now fully-grown King carries with him. The image signifies that Hal and all of what he was in the past is gone and it has been replaced by the strong man who, though he could easily discard the memories of his youth, chooses to carry them with him through life. It is a powerful image fitting to a powerful message of growing into your role in the world and it is why Branagh makes the scene so long, to really get the point across.

The image that I feel defines Olivier's play is on screen for less time than Branagh's trip across the battlefield, but I feel it to be no less important (figure 6 in the appendix). It is a fleeting image of the flag of St. George that flashes just for a moment before the credits start- which may seem like a minor image, but I believe it to be strong support of the depth which the British Government was willing to sink to get their propaganda to the masses. What happens in the scene is Olivier has the camera pulled back from the model of the Globe Theatre slowly until the viewer gets a good admiring look at a sunny day in Elizabethan London. Then from the distance a special effects piece of paper comes whizzing

through the air containing the credits, but before it makes itself known as the credits sheet, the image that you see in the appendix flashes just for a moment. It is a sloppy attempt at subliminal messaging and it is definitive proof of the lengths that the English Government would go to get their patriotic symbolism across. It is a shame that Olivier's great film be marred by something as crude as subliminal messaging but as the director, he had the opportunity to control every aspect of the movie to better get his message across and that brief snippet of the flag could have been cut from the film if he wanted to, but he didn't.

These two versions of Shakespeare's *Henry V* show the power of interpretation that a clever director can wield to make a text say almost whatever the director wants it to. Olivier's intention with Shakespeare's play was to present it as an inspirational story of the people of England overcoming great odds to achieve victory on the battlefield. Branagh wanted to make a film that showed a man overcome great challenges in order to emerge a Great King. Both of them used the same text as the basis for their films and both were very successful with it, and if that doesn't speak to the innately interpretive nature of Shakespeare, then I don't know what does!

## Bibliography

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Laurence Olivier, *On Acting* (London, 1987).

### Films

Henry V. Dir. Kenneth Branagh. Perfs. Kenneth Branagh. 1989. DVD. Universal Studios, 2002.

The Chronicle History of King Henry the Fift with His Battell Fought at Agincourt in France. Dir. Laurence Olivier Perfs. Laurence Olivier. 1944. DVD. Carlton Video, 1999.

## Appendix



Figure 1: Bardolph in happier times being hugged around the neck by Falstaff

Appendix (cont.)



Figure 2: Bardolph, seconds before Henry gives the order to hang him for stealing. Note the rope around his neck replacing Falstaff's arms.

Appendix (cont.)



Figure 3: Olivier's Henry at the siege of Harfleur. Note the spotless soldiers.

Appendix (cont.)



Figure 4: Branagh's Henry spitting his demands for surrender at the fiery French fortress of Harfleur.

Appendix (cont.)



Figure 5: Branagh's Henry making the symbolic walk to true kingship, carrying a symbol of his lost youth with him.

Appendix (cont.)



Figure 6: The defining moment of Olivier's movie, a subliminal image of the flag of St. George over a model of Elizabethan London, symbolizing the patriotic undercurrent throughout the whole film.