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Peter S. Donaldson

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Shakespeare on Stage

Taking on Shakespeare: Kenneth Branagh's *Henry V*

PETER S. DONALDSON

Henry V. Presented by Renaissance Film Company, Ltd. Color, 35 mm., U.K., 1989. Executive Producer, Stephen Evans; Producer, Bruce Sharman; Director, Kenneth Branagh; Cinematography, Kenneth MacMillan; Composer, Patrick Doyle; Costume Design, Phyllis Dalton; Production Design, Tim Harvey. CAST: Chorus, Derek Jacobi; Henry V, Kenneth Branagh; Gloucester, Simon Shepherd; Bedford, James Larkin; Exeter, Brian Blessed; York, James Simmons; Westmoreland, Paul Gregory; Canterbury, Charles Kay; Ely, Alec McCowen; Cambridge, Fabian Cartwright; Scroop, Stephen Simms; Grey, Jay Villiers; Erpingham, Edward Jewesbury; Fluellen, Ian Holm; Gower, Daniel Webb; Jamy, Jimmy Yuill; Macmorris, John Sessions; Bates, Shaun Prendergast; Court, Pat Doyle; Williams, Michael Williams; Bardolph, Richard Briers; Nym, Geoffrey Hutchings; Pistol, Robert Stephens; Falstaff, Robbie Coltrane; Boy, Christian Bale; Mistress Quickly, Judi Dench; French King, Paul Scofield; Dauphin, Michael Maloney; Burgundy, Harold Innocent; Orleans, Richard Clifford; Grand-pré, Colin Hurley; Constable, Richard Easton; Mountjoy, Christopher Ravenscroft; Katherine, Emma Thompson; Alice, Geraldine McEwan; Governor of Harfleur, David Lloyd Meredith; Messenger, David Parfitt; Warwick, Nicholas Ferguson; Talbot, Tom Whitehouse; Berri, Nigel Greaves; Bretagne, Julian Gartside; 1st Soldier, Mark Inman; 2nd Soldier, Chris Armstrong; Child, Calum Yuill.

Branagh and Olivier

Kenneth Branagh's vital, intelligent, and psychologically rich film adaptation of *Henry V* has been widely compared to Laurence Olivier's 1944 film.¹ Branagh has been hailed as the "new Olivier," rival claimant to the title of premier Shakespearean actor-director. Though he has sometimes objected to such comparisons, Branagh himself has contributed to them. In the introduction to the published screenplay, he writes:

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 splendour of that 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 bringing a particular set of post-war sensibilities to bear on my reading, I sensed that a 1980s film version of such a piece would make for a profoundly different experience.

Branagh later calls the "traditional" interpretation a "two-dimensional *Boy's Own* adventure."² In interviews Branagh's remarks sometimes have overtones of class conflict ("I swear I'm not 'avin' a go at Mr. Olivier. I swear I'm not"³) but also express great respect: Branagh once received a note of encouragement from Olivier and

¹ See, for example, James Verniere, "Branagh Takes on Two Legendary Kings: Henry V and Laurence Olivier," *The Boston Herald*, 15 December 1989, S-6, S-7; Michael Billington, "A 'New Olivier,'" *The New York Times*, 8 January 1989, H-18; Bernice W. Kliman, "Branagh's *Henry V*: Allusion and Illusion," *Shakespeare on Film Newsletter*, 14, 1 (1989), 1, 9-10; Robert F. Willson, Jr., "Henry V/Branagh's and Olivier's Choruses," *SFN*, 14, 2 (1989), 1-2.

² *Henry V* by William Shakespeare: A screen adaptation by Kenneth Branagh (London: Chatto and Windus, 1989), p. 9.

³ Verniere, S-6.

keeps it framed in his office. This variously nuanced rivalry is part of the film's meaning: the young filmmaker's ambition is paralleled in the French campaign of the youthful Henry V, and, though Olivier himself does not appear in the film, Paul Scofield, in a magisterial performance as the French king, stands in for him, registering metaphorically the sorrow of an older generation of Shakespearean actors faced with the imperious claims of youth. Like one of Harold Bloom's "strong poets," Branagh achieves a measure of success in this intertextual rivalry: after watching Branagh's daring and strenuous film, it is difficult to return to the earlier version without feeling that the cuts it makes in the text are too costly and evasive, that its climaxes depend too heavily on the seductive charm of a matinee-idol performance.

This review will pursue the Branagh-Olivier connection in some detail, but there is a danger that such a procedure may obscure more immediate influences. Kenneth Branagh's *Henry V* brings to the surface a powerful current of doubt about the imperial premises of the play's action, which Olivier had, for the most part, ignored, excised, or suppressed. It embodies—probably without being directly indebted to—many of the insights of revisionist critics from Rabkin to Greenblatt and tacitly builds on a generation of work in the theater aiming at a demystified interpretation of the play, from the 1964 RSC production directed by John Barton and Peter Hall to Adrian Noble's 1984 version, in which Branagh played the leading role. It also belongs to a second tradition of Shakespearean filmmaking, more resolutely modernist than Olivier's, that includes *Chimes at Midnight*, Peter Brook's *Lear*, and Peter Hall's *Midsummer Night's Dream*.⁴ In Branagh's film the political, even cynical aspects of the decision to go to war are emphasized; there is little celebration of "England" as a sacrosanct community; many of the trenchant ironies that the text directs *against* the king and his conduct are allowed to stand, and are even extended, as when the king himself gives the order for Bardolph's execution and unflinchingly watches his death throes;⁵ the battles are unglamorous and brutal. Branagh's *Henry V* speaks to us in the idiom and in the imagery of leftist critique and liberal pacifism. Paradoxically, it is precisely the director's insistent, almost obsessive competition with Olivier that gives the film a more conservative meaning than the revisionist tradition it starts from. Taking his own success for theme, Branagh reads *Henry V* as a trial by combat of the young king's personality. If this *Henry V* is more politically aware, more deeply skeptical about wars of imperial conquest than Olivier's, it nevertheless presents the king as a great leader whose heroism depends, to a disturbing degree, on his capacity for self-suppression and whose personal growth is fostered by inward assent to the necessary evils of politics, war, and courtship.

If Branagh's film originated in a struggle with Olivier, Olivier's began as an attempt to appropriate Shakespeare for the War Effort. In Olivier's memoirs the emphasis falls not upon competition with a distinguished predecessor but on the attempt to restage England's heroic past in a new medium. Reading certain scenes in the text as "frustrated cinema," Olivier's role as adaptor was shaped by patriotic fervor and sanctioned by what he describes as an almost mystic identification with Shakespeare:

I had a mission; . . . my country was at war; I felt Shakespeare within me, I felt the cinema within him. I knew what I wanted to do, what he would have done.⁶

Olivier's attitude toward his precursor (Shakespeare) is *incorporative* rather than competitive, and tends toward an effacement of differences between historical periods and artistic media. Olivier's artistic practice aims at the incorporation or incarnation of the past, while for Branagh the making of a film enacts a struggle or

⁴ Hall's film, with its avant-garde opening followed by a muddy and unglamorous second movement and a conclusion that mediates between irony and celebration, anticipates, in broad outline, Branagh's mix of "alternative" and traditional Shakespeare.

⁵ Branagh does not include the king's most morally questionable act, however. I mean the order to kill the French prisoners.

⁶ *On Acting* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1986), p. 275.

competition for power. This distinction is crucial to understanding the differences between the two films and the divergent personal and cultural projects they instance. Branagh's treatment of politics, his portrayal of the king's search for trust and intimacy, even his treatment of the religious issues of the play are informed by his reading of *Henry V* as an agon.

The Chorus: Metatheater/Metacinema

The Chorus in *Henry V* initiates a contrast, sustained throughout the play, between actor and role, performance and representation, or, to adopt Robert Weimann's terminology, between *platea* and *locus*.⁷ When the king asserts, in disguise, that he is "but a man, as I am"; when he laments the emptiness of royal show; when the bare stage is celebrated as the site of epic victory, Shakespeare uses the disparity between theatrical representation and its historical referent to raise political questions: how much does the "unworthiness" and disrepute of the public theater contaminate its epic subject? How much better is the king—who orders the death of prisoners of war and confirms the order under which his old companion Bardolph suffers death for theft—than the middle- or lower-class actor who impersonates him or than the common soldiers who challenge the moral foundation of his conduct on the eve of the crucial battle? On this view—common in recent criticism of the play—the metatheatrical aspects of the play have a potentially subversive function.⁸

Laurence Olivier understood the function of the Chorus quite differently. Reading the Prologue's wish for "a kingdom for a stage" literally and unironically, Olivier concluded that "In *Henry V* more than in any other play, Shakespeare bemoans the confines of his Globe Theatre"⁹ and set out to remedy the limitations of Shakespeare's medium through the representational amplification film could provide. Olivier sets the opening scenes in an attempted recreation of the Globe Theater, and when the action shifts to Southhampton and the Boar's Head Tavern, the playhouse milieu drops away, and we enter "historical" space, filmed in the manner of cinematic epic, with moving camera, outdoor locations, and realistic battle scenes. At the end the process is reversed, and the film ends on the stage of the "Globe." Olivier thus improves or completes the text in accordance with indications for expansion latent within it. The transitions between representational levels are as seamless as possible: dissolves, hidden cuts, and forward tracking through gauze backdrops all intimate continuity between Elizabethan theater and contemporary cinema, between the England of Agincourt (and Elizabeth) and the England of 1944.

Olivier introduces his audience to the inner workings of Elizabethan theater, including a tour of its tiring-house and backstage, but does not include his own medium, that of film, in his account of the production of Shakespearean spectacle. Film retains its own, undemystified magic: a printed handbill, blown by the wind from sixteenth-century Bankside onto the screen of a twentieth-century movie theater, invites us to a performance of Shakespeare's play at the Globe Theater itself; the camera, replacing the "imagination" of theatrical spectators, digests the abuse of distance, and leaps o'er times and places effortlessly.

Taking Olivier's suppression of the medium of film as his own starting point, Branagh begins with a modern-dress, Brechtian Prologue set in an empty film studio containing the props and sets actually to be used in the film. Even the camera is briefly shown, allying the film to the cinema of Godard and other practitioners and theorists of the avant-garde, for whom "revealing the apparatus" is closely linked to unmasking the presumptions and ideological function of Hollywood or bourgeois film

⁷ *Shakespeare and the Popular Tradition in the Theater: Studies in the Social Dimension of Dramatic Form and Function* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1978), pp. 73–85, 215–86.

⁸ See, for example, Robert Weimann, "Bifold Authority in Shakespeare's Theatre," *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 39 (1988), 401–17. See also Joel Altman's "'Vile Participation': The Amplification of Violence in the Theater of *Henry V*" in this issue of *SQ*.

⁹ p. 269.

aesthetics.¹⁰ The “muse of fire” is suggested first by the lighting of a match in this dark space and then by the throwing of an immense electric switch.¹¹ This is a film that makes a virtue of self-disclosure, that will try to be honest about its own relation to power.

The transition from film studio to “our play” is, in contrast to Olivier’s elegant splice between playhouse and tavern, disconcerting and abrupt. At the words “gently to hear, kindly to judge our *play!*” the Chorus flings open great wooden double doors into utter darkness, with mad laughter in his voice. The ludic, here, has a touch of demonic “play” about it, and theatrical space opens upon a void.

The sense of *dis*-continuity between art and life, film and theater, medieval history and its successive reconstructions in Elizabethan and contemporary culture is underscored by subsequent appearances of Derek Jacobi as Chorus, dressed in a modern overcoat and muffler, on the cliffs of Dover, at the gates of Harfleur, on the road to Calais, with the troops at Agincourt, and just outside the door of the French council chamber at the end. However, Jacobi’s successive appearances gradually lose their critical edge and cease to serve the purposes of Brechtian distantiation as the film moves toward less-guarded approval of Henry and his cause. By the end the Chorus shares the war-weariness, even the healed scars of the English army;¹² his affection for the king (“this star of England”) is evident; and the ironies of the Epilogue are those of mortality and mutability, not social critique.

Doors, Mud, and “Bloody Gashes”: Branagh’s Materialism

In Branagh’s version *doors*, rather than invisible cuts or camera movements that track through backdrops from playhouse set to location, mark the boundary between artistic medium and referent, and, within the historical diegesis, serve as punctuation, marking transitions between scenes, indicating shifts in power relations. Branagh’s doors are massive, heavily hinged, portentous in their movements. If they seem, at moments, to close or open automatically in response to the king’s will, the illusion is dispelled when we are shown the soldiers who guard them. Branagh emphasizes effort, human agency, force. The king’s decisions may be conveyed with a nod of the head, but the carrying out of his understated commands is typically shown in dynamic tracking shots at close quarters, emphasizing the intimate, tangible character of his authority. The circuit from the throne to the door, from the royal glance to the battleaxe, is commanded by a physically active leader. The camera moves with him as he pins the disloyal Scroop on a tabletop, or wrestles Mountjoy, who has come once too often for ransom, onto the ground. (Olivier’s authority, in contrast, tends toward the charismatic and, as several commentators have noted, is typically exercised through the *voice*, with the king positioned at the vanishing point of the image and the camera pulling back to reveal a widening space filled with attentive subjects or soldiers.¹³)

At Southampton the room in which the traitors are condemned is first seen through what Branagh’s screenplay refers to as “a spy-hole in a partition” (p. 36). The king teases the conspirators with their own severe counsel, tricking them into uttering the very principles by which they will shortly be condemned. His power is evident in his cunning manipulation, his impressive stage management of the event. Yet it is also shown to depend, coarsely, on the power to lock the door and guard it, and on the

¹⁰ See *Narrative, Apparatus, Ideology: A Film Theory Reader*, Philip Rosen, ed. (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1986), pp. 281–374, esp. pp. 286–98; Jean-Louis Baudry, “Ideological Effects of the Basic Cinematographic Apparatus.”

¹¹ One of my seminar students, Rajiv Suri, has pointed out that the light switch (“quite literally an invention”) is thrown at the moment when the Chorus calls for the “muse of fire” to ascend “the brightest heaven of invention.”

¹² Willson (cited in n. 1, above), p. 2.

¹³ One of Olivier’s stylistic habits in *Henry V* was to keep the volume of the king’s oratory constant while dollying back—as if the royal oratory were equally (and magically) powerful at all distances.

brute strength of the burly duke of Exeter. At the crucial moment, when the traitors have read their "commissions" (actually their death warrants), an extreme close-up shows the door bolts sliding into place.

In a more subtle way the door of Princess Katherine's bedchamber also marks a boundary in a struggle for power. In her softly curtained room, decorated in pastels and whites, Katherine seems exempt from the rigors of war. The language lesson emphasizes her amusement at the crudity of English words and her delight at the license they afford for uttering forbidden French. As she gleefully repeats her vocabulary list, finishing with the naughty *foot* and *coun*, she opens the door of her chamber at the exact moment when her father, his face deeply etched with pain at the English invasion, is passing by with his retinue. The exchange of reaction shots juxtaposes her playful anticipation of contact with things English and the "bitter constraint" with which Henry has threatened her father. The bawdy French-English that has found its way into the bedroom is a harbinger of the forced marriage and the rough style of the victor.

The great doors that open to initiate the action reappear at the end: Jacobi speaks the Epilogue with one door closed and King Henry visible, out of focus, in the depths of the image, seated at the French council table. After reminding us of the brevity of Henry's glory and the collapse of the French-English union after his death, the door is shut. If the electric switch is an emblem of the social energy that cinema distills, the iron-bound doors suggest that artistic as well as political power entails human agency, requires effort, and is manifested in the enforcement of boundaries. Branagh's use of doors to frame the narrative and to delineate power relations contributes to the film's plain-style candor. The English conquest of France, like the accomplishments of the film's director, is in part a struggle for dominance and control, working at times through crudely material means. Branagh avoids (at least until the ambiguous choral hymn after Agincourt) appeal to "higher" values like patriotism or honor.

The battle scenes, considered from this point of view, crown the film's demystified account of the Agincourt myth. In places where Olivier had suggested that the king's presence or charisma affected the action, Branagh shows us weapons, or massed soldiers, or terrifyingly thick barrages of arrows, or explosions. The English campaign is conducted in the rain and in the mud; before the battle the king and his men kiss the ground, the earth of France for which they fight. In its down-to-earth imagery as well as in its realism about political motives, the film resists recourse to the transcendent. The Battle of Agincourt itself is shown as a densely physical struggle, with slow motion and close-up shots emphasizing the painful effort and heavy, dirty work of hand-to-hand combat. It had been Olivier's boast that he "showed no bloody gashes."¹⁴ Branagh's battle is bloody and dirty; it is punctuated by crude sword thrusts, maimings, and shots of heavy bodies splashing in the mud. Terror, pain, and savage determination show on the faces of the soldiers of both sides. Stylistically, the battle owes something to Welles's bitter, absurdist battle in *Chimes at Midnight*, with its steady rhythm of carnage; and it owes something too, perhaps, to the mildly erotic agon of *Chariots of Fire*, though at those moments when Branagh comes close to aestheticizing combat, as in his treatment of the Christ-like sacrifice of the young duke of York, a close-up (here of blood and black bile spewing from York's lips in his death throes) often deglamorizes the spectacle.

The earlier treatment of the Boar's Head characters prepares for the earthiness of Agincourt: close-ups of Pistol, Bardolph, Nym, and Mistress Quickly show unwashed faces and disorders of skin and teeth uncharacteristic of cinematic epic. Branagh displays the coarse realities of late medieval life. Bardolph wakes over a dirty table to find a cat nibbling the remains of last night's supper. Yet the earl of Westmoreland's teeth are bad, too; the manners of the aristocracy are sometimes nearly as crude as those of the "base" characters; and the grime of battle alludes, I think, to that of the tavern.

¹⁴ p. 277.

Like the avant-garde opening of the film, the dirtiness of Branagh's tavern scenes and battles is a departure from and a challenge to Olivier's glamorizing vision of the play. Yet there is a sense in which the mud—indeed, Branagh's whole investment in the unkempt and harsh side of physical life—is not debasing but provides an almost ritual immersion from which Henry emerges not only victorious but in a kind of communion with his men, including the common men, that he has sought throughout the action. It is as if, having rejected Falstaff and other “low” companions, he cannot form a new, more honorable community until he has returned voluntarily to baseness, to the dirt. *Henry V* deserved its Academy Award for costumes, not only because of their beauty but also because raiment fresh and dirty plays a symbolic role in the film. Seldom has a moral vision in Shakespeare production had so much to do with clean linen. When the king emerges from Agincourt to appear a trim and well-dressed suitor at the French court, his face clean, with only a token scratch to mark his long campaign, and his hair blown dry again, years of historical time have elapsed, but the abrupt cut from the battle makes his transformation seem miraculous, like the sudden “reformation,” scouring faults, that the clergy attributes to him at the start.¹⁵

Intimacy

Branagh uses the resources of cinema, its capacity to represent intensely private moments even in the midst of public events, to bring us far closer to his characters than Olivier had done. In Olivier's film there are many privileged close shots, but they often—brilliantly—disclose the actor, rather than the man, behind the royal facade. The little cough before Olivier's entrance onto the stage of the Globe; his pained assessment, behind the hood of Erpingham's cloak, of the effect of his words on the common people; the flush of the rouged performer hearing the applause of the audience at the end: for Olivier kingship is inescapably performative. Much of the pathos of his interpretation derives from the isolation this requires of the king and from the possibility that, even when he joins his men at the campfire, he remains inaccessible not only to them but also, in part, to us because of the disguise his office imposes.

Branagh's interpretation also accommodates some of the actorly possibilities of the part: in the scene in which the Salic law is expounded as a basis for his claim to France, he knows he has a role to play, and plays it; when he leads Cambridge, Scroop, and Grey on before condemning them to death, he skillfully stage-manages the occasion and controls his tone just enough to create the mix of tension and false security he wishes them to feel. Yet here and elsewhere, whenever the king acts or dissembles, he is under strain—variously bored, smoldering, or overcontrolled; Branagh's performance includes moments of great spontaneity and emotional release, and his Henry treasures the moments when, as after battle, he can discard the mask of office.

The Crispin speech is an example of his modulation from public rhetoric to “real” feeling. Branagh's Henry knows how absurd—even immoral—it would be for an outnumbered army to refuse additional troops, and how opportunistic it is to construct his battlefield oration around the theme of “not one man more.” As the young king imagines the “honor” that would accrue from the victory of a happy few, he reaches as if to grasp some invisible essence, like Prince Hal mocking Percy.

¹⁵ Perhaps Prince Hal's promise to his father in *1 Henry IV* inspired Branagh's work on this aspect of the film:

I will redeem all this on Percy's head,
And in the closing of some glorious day
Be bold to tell you that I am your son,
When I will wear a garment all of blood,
And stain my favors in a bloody mask,
Which wash'd away shall scour my shame with it.
(3.2.132–37)

"Honor," for Branagh, is a cliché, a mere scutcheon. But as the speech moves into its celebration of the army as a "band of brothers," Branagh's voice drops in register, the camera moves in, and self-caricature yields to seriousness and depth.¹⁶

The film's moments of interpersonal intimacy are structured around a sustained comparison between Henry's early, nurturant relationships among his tavern companions, including Falstaff, and the replacement of these bonds by those forged by comradeship in arms and subsequently by his affection for Katherine of France. The film is full of displays of male emotion—tears of grief or joy, angry confrontations, warm hugs and embraces.¹⁷ These direct our attention to the king's inner life, to the quality of his affective relationships, and to his attempt to balance the isolation of his role with the possibility of closeness to others.

Branagh supplies a number of flashbacks that make use of material from *1* and *2 Henry IV*. In the first of these, Pistol and Nym recall the old days at the tavern. Falstaff, in a russet turban, his portly girth draped in brown robes, is shot from a low angle and looks just enough like a Rembrandt self-portrait (with a touch of Frans Hals) to evoke in us a bit of the awe the young Hal may have felt in his presence. Yet, watching him in tight close-up as he waits for the reaction to his obvious jokes, we also perceive something petty and manipulative in his grandiose posturing. Henry enters to him, so close to the camera as to momentarily obscure the image, and they hug warmly. But at "Banish plump Jack and banish all the world," the prince moves away slightly and remains silent, his expression opaque. In voice-over we hear the words: "I do. I will." A hush falls over the assembly, registering the silent breach, and Falstaff reacts with lines pulled from *2 Henry IV* in an attempt to reclaim the prince's affection—"Jesus, the days that we have seen . . . we have heard the chimes at midnight, Master Harry." Despite the warmth of Falstaff's affection, Hal must free himself from this unconditional, morally undemanding embrace. This is a painful process; tears well up in Falstaff's eyes as he realizes the prince is lost to him.

Critics have noted Falstaff's maternal or quasi-maternal associations in recent criticism.¹⁸ Branagh's first line for Falstaff is the one in which he complains of his skin hanging "like an old lady's loose gown," and there are other indications in the sequence, and especially in Robbie Coltrane's performance, that Branagh understands Falstaff as a motherly, potentially engulfing figure. A maternal context is also suggested by an allusion to D. H. Lawrence at this point in Branagh's screenplay. Branagh describes Pistol, whose reminiscences of Falstaff initiate the flashback, as "caught in the flood of remembrance,"¹⁹ a phrase from Lawrence's "Piano," in which childhood memories of maternal intimacy render the speaker unable to respond to an attractive woman ("The glamour of childish days is upon me / My manhood is cast down in the flood of remembrance / I weep like a child for the past"). To remember Falstaff is to evoke a disabling symbiosis.

Another flashback to the tavern occurs when Bardolph is about to be hanged for

¹⁶ Branagh's emphasis on the "real" feelings of the king is impressive, but the film is here far less radical in its questioning of royal "character" than either Olivier's film or Shakespeare's text. The questions the text raises about the king's self-knowledge and even self-coincidence do not, for Branagh, open upon a *mise-en-abyme* as they do for Olivier. In the text the king's "real" identity is often difficult to locate in the rhetorical slippage between simile and tautology—"Then shall the warlike Harry, like himself . . ."; "I think the king is but a man, as I am." Henry may be a king who is never like himself and whose affirmations of likeness to others can only be uttered in disguise.

¹⁷ It is remarkable how confidently Branagh ignores cinematic stereotypes of the British in battle—there is hardly a stiff upper lip on the English side.

¹⁸ Two good examples are Coppélia Kahn (*Man's Estate: Masculine Identity in Shakespeare* [Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1981], pp. 72–73) and, more recently, Valerie Traub ("Prince Hal's Falstaff: Positioning Psychoanalysis and the Female Reproductive Body," *SQ*, 40 [1989], 456–74), who writes:

Falstaff represents to Hal not an alternative paternal image but rather a projected fantasy of the pre-oedipal *maternal* whose rejection is the basis upon which patriarchal subjectivity is predicated.

(p. 461)

¹⁹ p. 32.

theft. The execution is shown, not merely reported, in the Branagh film. Indeed, the king watches and with a nod gives the order for his former companion, his nose "split open as an intermediate punishment,"²⁰ to be hung on a tree branch by Exeter. As the hoist is effected, there is a match cut to the "hoist" of tavern glasses at Eastcheap. In this flashback sequence Bardolph appears in his former intimate joking relation with the prince, asking him not to hang a thief when he succeeds to the throne. Hal's answer, like his response to Falstaff, chills the crowd: "No, thou shalt." Bardolph's reaction is given in close-up. The arms of a companion, drawn around his neck in affectionate embrace, suddenly seem a prefiguring of the hangman's strangle, and there is a cut back to the French campaign, with Bardolph suffering his death throes at the end of a rope. A cut to Henry shows a tear forming, as the king bears unflinching witness to the consequence of his strict discipline.

Henry's condemnation of Cambridge, Scroop, and Grey—a scene powerfully linked to the death of Falstaff by nearly identical *mise-en-scène* and other stylistic congruences—also marks a painful personal loss. The king wrestles the disloyal Scroop onto a tabletop in a violent yet intimate scene of reproach, at one point tenderly caressing his brow while reciting the list of his treasons. The shot repeats the unusual arrangement of figures in the frame first seen when Mistress Quickly leans over Falstaff's deathbed, so close that her face and upper body almost touch his. The two scenes are linked by other formal repetitions—when Exeter strips the chains of office from each of the three traitors, the composition closely corresponds to the shot in which, after Falstaff's death, the three departing "soldiers," the Boy, Bardolph, and Nym, are each in turn offered a farewell embrace by Mistress Quickly. The king's relationships to early friends and companions are intense and mistrustful, charged with the emotional weight of tangled primary family dynamics. Falstaff dies, we know, because "the king hath killed his heart"; in the second of the two scenes, it is the beloved Scroop, "the man that was his bedfellow," who is the betrayer. One of the challenges afforded by the war with France is the possibility of creating a different kind of family from the one suggested by such scenes, and the king does this first in his successful transformation of his army into a "band of brothers" and then in his winning of Katherine. The transition from mourning for Falstaff to the active confrontation of the traitors—undertaken jointly by Henry and Exeter—is a step in this process.

In these scenes Branagh sketches the meaning that the harsh discipline of war has for the king and suggests that Hal's commitment to such discipline makes possible a reconstituted community that replaces the tavern. As Bardolph's body swings from a branch, Henry speaks his severest speech, setting his jaw against tears: "We would have all offenders so cut off. . . ." The final words of this passage, ". . . for when lenity and cruelty play for a kingdom, the gentler gamester is the soonest winner," state a central paradox of the play in its harshest terms: the "mercy" Henry had offered to the French at Harfleur, the "lenity" of a gentle gamester toward the civilian population, consists in a discipline so strict that it compels him to execute a friend for a minor offense. The king's integrity consists in not exempting himself from the strict standard he sets. He is firm in his commitment not to be ransomed and to suffer the hazards of war on an equal basis with his men. Branagh plays the scene of the French herald's first request for ransom with Henry still standing where he gave the order for Bardolph's death; indeed, in a moment of grim comedy, the herald glances up at the feet of the corpse. The juxtaposition shows us the source of the king's resolve in refusing to negotiate.

In a number of these key scenes, the duke of Exeter, played by Brian Blessed, replaces Falstaff as the king's mentor and companion. He is massive, genial, and very attached to the king. As with Falstaff, there is a touch of childhood glamor about him, though the underlying fantasy is that of unflinching fatherly *protection*, rather than

²⁰ Branagh, p. 71.

maternal merger. Henry draws strength from Exeter, often looking to him for approval and support in times of decision or crisis.

Olivier's film is psychologically *static*: the king's personality is complete at the start. This is not to say that it is without psychological interest or depth. I have argued elsewhere that in the subtle treatment of the boys who play female roles in the theatrical sections of the film, and in the betrothal of Katherine—played by a mature actress as well as by a boy—Olivier rehearses certain stages in his own development as an artist and as a person, drawing on his formative experiences in female Shakespearean roles and on the complex way those experiences provided a way of resolving his intense conflicts with his father while retaining a very close link to his mother.²¹ But, though the psychological subtext contributes to the richness of Olivier's treatment of the Elizabethan stage and of King Henry's attempt to "claim from the female," Olivier's *Henry V* does not show the king in the process of development, does not show him growing, but rather shows him performing, acting out of a well-established repertoire of skills and competences. Branagh's *Henry V* is a *bildungsroman*, and its view of the king is deeply developmental. The film enacts, through flashbacks, an early stage of primary nurturance, paternal by gender, but evoking the issue of engulfment and the need for separation more usually associated with the mother; it proceeds to an intermediate phase in which the king must struggle for his place in the world, for authenticity and integrity in a demanding and paradoxical public office aided by a fatherly figure who is protective, who acts in the interests of the king's developing assurance and sense of self, and who, as Henry's agent in the most difficult moments of all—the condemnation of Scroop and the execution of Bardolph—fosters the king's separation from the intimate but morally reprobate companions of his past; it concludes with the king on his own, negotiating a marriage (with a mixture of boyish charm and mature assertion) in such a way that his bride-to-be can exercise some degree of autonomy and choice despite the constraints of the situation, and in which his oedipal rival, Charles VI, retains a measure of respect and dignity despite his defeat.

Branagh's emphasis on the reconstitution of male bonds reaches one conclusion when Henry, exhausted by the trials of battle and the weight of his grief and responsibility for the loss of life sustained in it, affirms his kinship to Fluellen in a tearful embrace. This may be the emotional climax of the film and may also be read as a surfacing of its ethnic subtext. In Olivier's film the ethnicity of Fluellen, Jamy, and Macmorris is highly stereotyped. When Olivier says, in his best upper-class British accent, that he himself is "Welsh," this courtesy, like a New York mayor's speech on an ethnic holiday, entails no real recognition of another culture. Olivier's Irish, Welsh, and French are suppressed, incorporated, or presented in the stark stereotypes of racial joking. Branagh, however, is (Northern) Irish himself, as his Celtic name and the well-placed hints of another accent beneath his stage English suggest. In Branagh's early adolescence his working-class Belfast family moved to England, and he began a complex shift in class and ethnic allegiance that led to the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art and the Royal Shakespeare Company. When, at the gates of Harfleur, Gower complains that "the Duke of Gloucester . . . is altogether directed by an Irishman," one audience I was part of registered the double meaning with a laugh. Branagh's Irish working-class identity shows through his stage English royal persona at strategic moments, giving depth to the king's identification with the common soldiers, lending credence to his claim to be a work-a-day, plain-style king. Branagh's partly suppressed Irishness—which breaks through as catharsis in the scene with Fluellen—also adds a dimension to his exploration of the king's ambivalence toward his past self. Henry's emotional range, along with his deep, slightly mad "Welshness," can only be fully expressed when he has achieved success in his more self-controlled role as English warrior-king.

²¹ See my *Shakespearean Films/Shakespearean Directors* (Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1990), chap. 1: "Claiming from the Female: Gender and Representation in Laurence Olivier's *Henry V*."

Branagh's and Olivier's wooing scenes also differ in ways that reflect the basic divergence in artistic strategy: Olivier's is an incorporation or annexation of Katherine and of France. The French king, played throughout as an imbecile rather than as a worthy family or military rival, is hardly present in the image, and his grief is not resonant. Olivier plays the scene with a charm that, after Branagh, seems dandyish, thin, and evasive, and that poorly masks an imperious will. His Henry controls the situation with a nod of the head or, more often, a crook of the finger. In fact a number of shots are composed around apparent balances between Olivier and Renee Asherson (who plays Katherine) except that Olivier is holding Asherson in place, even in the midst of a kiss or an intimate conversation, with a firmly controlling index finger. As they kiss, the camera cuts to the tightest close-up of the sequence—not their lips but their hands firmly joined, the rings of state of France and England juxtaposed and Olivier's firm grip in evidence.

At the moment at which Henry and Katherine affirm their betrothal, hidden cuts and backward tracking movements return the audience from the French palace to the Globe Theater, and Katherine's image is blended with that of the boy performer who portrayed her there. Katherine is thus brought back not only to England, as she was in history, but to the stage of the Globe. Olivier supplements, incorporates, and corrects, perfecting Shakespearean practice through the augmented realism of film and the use of actresses in the women's parts. Katherine's transformation into the boy actor of the final tableau fuses history and representation, the heroic legacy of Agincourt and the artistic legacy of Elizabethan theater, assimilating both to the wartime image of England as repository of humane culture and courage.

Branagh's courtship is strenuous, active, risky. The king, cleaned up but still bearing on his face the scratches sustained in battle, works earnestly for Katherine's respect and affection, listening hard, thinking on his feet, struggling with French. Despite his power over the princess, he is convincing when he suggests that she still can choose, stressing the conditional in "thou hast me, *if* thou hast me, at the worst! And thou shalt wear me, *if* thou wear me, better and better." The princess stands off at first, but comes to like him because he tries so hard, because she can laugh at his false French, and because he can accept her laughter and even laugh at himself. The give and take between the two is reflected in *mise-en-scène*, camera work, and blocking that present the two as equal claimants to our attention and to the space they both are free to move in.

Henry's struggle with Katherine is also the final move in his struggle with her father, here played as oedipal comedy. Earlier in the film, Branagh had juxtaposed Scofield's sorrowful face with Katherine's gleeful recitation of her bawdy English lesson. Here, the French king mournfully accepts the loss of his daughter, taking her hand and holding it in grief before giving her up to Henry's wooing. But Henry's victory, a blend of respect for the father of his wife-to-be and boyish pleasure in his new position as dominant male in the family, is not cruel. Henry and Katherine first kiss when the rest of the court is absent. Though the idea of kissing is at first resisted verbally as an affront to French custom, by the time it actually happens, it has become a sign of mutual affection. As the French king and his retinue return, interrupting, Henry gulps out, like an embarrassed teenage suitor, "Here comes your father." Scofield is ready to sign the peace treaty whose terms have been dictated by Henry, but Henry makes sure to add, as if testing out his delicious triumph once more, "and thereupon give me your daughter." The king, in a reprise of his gesture at parting from Katherine, takes *both* their hands this time, and, though in grief for his losses, generously blesses the new couple and accepts Henry into the family: "Take her, fair son, and from her blood raise up / Issue to me. . . ." To seal this the couple kiss again, and, as with the king's second taking of his daughter's hand, the second kiss involves three characters. For the initial kiss Branagh and Thompson, each seated at the council table, had leaned toward one another to kiss across the throne. For the second kiss, shot in a tight close-up, the couple come together in profile directly in front of Scofield's impassive face, momentarily obscuring him.

Thus, Branagh's treatment of the end of the play, which, like Olivier's, cuts the demeaning sexual banter between Burgundy and Henry, emphasizes triangular, oedipal family dynamics, and if there is pungent interpersonal competition, there is also sensitivity. A balance is struck between the harsh realities of the father's situation and the vitality and affection of the young couple.

God of Battles

Olivier's clergymen are played in a broad, slapstick style. Their downstage clowning in the exposition of the Salic law is undignified and petty. Law books come apart, documents scatter on the floor, and the Bible itself almost becomes a prop for farce. The "Elizabethan" audience respond to their overly pious account of Henry's reformation with catcalls and laughter, and to Canterbury's mentioning of the banishment of Falstaff with boos. But though the clergy (at least the Pre-Reformation clergy) may be figures of fun for Olivier, religion is not: the king's sober, meditative prayer before the battle contributes to the sanctity of the English campaign (the more so because Olivier eliminates the text's reference to the murder of Richard II and Henry's continuing attempts to atone for it), as does the king's silent observation of the service of the Eucharist to the young soldiers. But Olivier ignores the powerful, persistent ironies that attend the frequent invocations of deity in *Henry V*, from the terrified French prisoner, dubbed "Signior Dew" by the Frenchless Pistol, to the way in which the king sometimes transfers not merely the credit for his victories but also the moral difficulties that he faces "quite from himself to God."

Branagh gives this aspect of the play brilliant treatment, subtle and varied. A few examples must suffice. Branagh can be sardonic: when, having accepted the French challenge to battle, Henry declares, "We are in God's hands, brother, not in theirs," distant thunder and soaking rain follow, and the king acknowledges them, half humorously, as a divine response. "How Thou pleasest, God, dispose the day" becomes "how thou pleasest God dispose the day," a more active exhortation addressed to his soldiers. Branagh's prayer before battle is intense and agonized, not confident, because the moral questions of the war are pressing and not easily answered. The king's relation to "God" is dynamic, unforeclosed. There may be a degree of cynicism in his appropriation of the name, in his use of religion as *instrumentum regni*, but how much this undercuts his apparently sincere piety elsewhere remains an interesting, open question in the film. And finally, Branagh understands that some of the irony of Shakespeare's references to religion is theodical. "God fought . . . for us" is spoken on a field littered with corpses, and, in Branagh's interpretation, God's responsibility for war may be in question. That is why the long tracking shot, when Henry carries the body of the murdered boy through the field while an elaborate choral and symphonic rescension of "*Non Nobis*" swells on the soundtrack, is so resonant and so ambiguous. It may be understood as the film's most conservative moment, a glorification of war, or, with equal validity, as the film's crowning irony, a bitter reversal of Olivier's piety, for the "glory" the hymn speaks of as belonging properly to God, like that of Marlowe's Tamburlaine, consists of shedding blood. Whether righteous or savage, Branagh's God cannot be taken for granted: as with other aspects of the play, the film's treatment of religion emphasizes both physical effort and anguished inner struggle.

In discussing Olivier's film I have focused on its appropriate, incorporating strategies. Medieval religion, the heroism of Agincourt, the riches of Shakespeare's stage are all made available for present uses. The text's ironies are minimized, as are the historical, cultural, and artistic differences that might problematize the relation of contemporary "England" to its past. Yet there is a sense in which Olivier's emphasis on the performative aspects of *Henry V* preserves the critical potential of the text. "Virile," logocentric, committed to transcendent values and to an almost mystical conception of England and of Shakespeare, Olivier's film, by showing us the king as primarily an actor, provides a way of seeing the values it embraces as social and artistic

constructions. Even gender, in Olivier's transitions from boy players to "real" women and back, may be seen as essentially performative in this persistently metatheatrical film. Olivier's declared intention—to serve the War Effort and to perfect Shakespearean practice by making use of the greater resources of realist cinema—was not realized without provision for a more skeptical reading of its imperial and illusionist premises.

Branagh's attempt at a "darker, harsher" *Henry V* is more modernizing on its surface, more politically and ideologically wary. Deeply cognizant of "political" and "alternative" Shakespeares, Branagh plumbs more of the play's ironies, more fully engages the dissonance beneath the surface of Shakespeare's epic history than Olivier does. But while Branagh is aware of the play's severe interrogation of its own political premises, he also responds to the more affirmative, optimistic side of *Henry V*. Branagh begins as an avant-garde film artist, unmasking the cinematic apparatus in a move that parallels Shakespeare's disjunctive treatment of the relation between epic history and its theatrical representation. But this critical stance undergoes a gradual *aphanisis*, or fading, in the course of the narrative, as Branagh moves from Brechtian counter-cinema to an affirmation of cinema's traditional claim to present real people with authentic feelings; from cynicism about the war to something like acceptance of its tragic necessities.

Olivier's *Henry V* moves from Agincourt to Elizabethan Bankside to the England of Churchill and the Battle of Britain. Branagh's film is less concerned with national destiny and with England's relation to a glorious past; as political allegory it spans the more modest distance from working-class Belfast to the milieu of the Royal Shakespeare Company. Yet, in negotiating that terrain, Branagh explores dimensions of Shakespeare's play that Olivier's version left relatively untouched—the myth of the king who is also one of his people, whose early experiences provide an intimate link to ordinary life, the king who, though he inherits a crown, must earn his success like a son of the artisan or merchant class making a go of the family business. Reading *Henry V* partly as an analogue to his own remarkable rise to a position in English theater rivalling that of Olivier, Branagh questions—but ultimately affirms—those aspects of the play that coincide with the values of professional competition and success.

Chimes from Morning till Midnight: Shakespeare's Henriad at the Guthrie

DOUGLAS E. GREEN

King Richard II, *King Henry IV*, and *King Henry V*. Directed by Garland Wright and Charles Newell. Guthrie Theater, Minneapolis. 23 June–2 September and 9–13 October 1990.

It has been a good year for Shakespeare in the States. Two phenomena are notable: Kenneth Branagh's popular film version of *Henry V*, and, despite its varying quality, Joseph Papp's ongoing series at the New York Shakespeare Festival. Franco Zeffirelli, moreover, is releasing a film version of *Hamlet* starring Mel Gibson, with Glenn Close as Gertrude. One wonders whether Shakespeare is regaining mass appeal—and if so, why.

Judging from its daring summer schedule, the Guthrie Theater in Minneapolis is banking on just such a hunger for Elizabethan fare. Whereas last summer artistic director Garland Wright paired Chekhov's heady *Uncle Vanya* with the crowd-pleasing *Harvey*, this year he and the company have mounted the second and greater of Shakespeare's historical tetralogies: *Richard II*, 1 and 2 *Henry IV*, and *Henry V* (with