

Dossiê Shakespeare

The Portrayal of King Henry in Kenneth Branagh's Adaptation of *Henry V*

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Abstract: The issue of war is present in a number of Shakespeare's works, one of them being *Henry V*. The figure of King Henry, his motivations to go to war, and his behavior in the battlefield are among some of the elements that can be explored in theatrical and filmic productions. The aim of this article is to cinematically analyze the film adaptation of the play, directed by Kenneth Branagh in 1989, more specifically the portrayal of the complex figure of King Henry, as well as how war, violence, and their consequences are visually presented, mostly focusing on the battle of Agincourt.

Keywords: *Henry V*, Film adaptation, War, Violence

Resumo: O tema da guerra está presente em várias peças de Shakespeare, uma delas sendo a obra *Henrique V*. A figura do Rei Henrique, suas motivações para participar da guerra, e seu comportamento no campo de batalha são alguns elementos que podem ser explorados em produções teatrais e filmicas. O objetivo deste artigo é fazer uma análise cinemática da adaptação da peça dirigida por Kenneth Branagh em 1989, mais especificamente em relação à representação da figura complexa do Rei Henrique, além de investigar como a guerra, violência e suas consequências são visualmente apresentadas, focando na batalha de Agincourt.

Palavras-Chave: *Henry V*, Adaptação filmica, Guerra, Violência

The issue of war is present in a number of Shakespeare's works, one of them being *Henry V*. In fact, Barbara A. Mowat and Paul Werstine comment on the popularity of the play by saying that "*Henry V* is Shakespeare's most famous 'war play', perhaps because it represents war in such a variety of ways and thereby tests whatever understanding of

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war we may bring to it” (MOWAT; WERSTINE 2004:xiii). The figure of King Henry, his motivations to go to war, and his behavior in the battlefield are among some of the elements that can be explored in theatrical and filmic productions. The aim of this article is to cinematically analyze the film adaptation of the play, directed by Kenneth Branagh in 1989, more specifically the portrayal of the complex figure of King Henry, as well as how war, violence, and their consequences are visually presented, mostly focusing on the battle of Agincourt.

The historical and political context regarding the composition of *Henry V* was of military turmoil for England that involved, for instance, the conflict with the Spanish Armada. Andrew Gurr illustrates this historical moment by observing that:

Shakespeare’s play was written as the conclusion of his long series of plays about English history which he started near the beginning of the 1590s. It was a militaristic decade, starting with vivid memories of the Armada of 1588 heightened by a renewed Spanish attempt at invasion in 1592, and marked by the long campaigns that had begun across the North Sea in the 1580s, where English armies were aiding the Protestants of the Netherlands against their Spanish masters. London was full of news about these campaigns, and periodically full of soldiers discharged or on leave. (GURR 2005:1)

Therefore, this militaristic context can be perceived in the intense foregrounding of the war conflict during the play and its violent outcome.

The play itself suggests a sense of ambiguity regarding on the one hand the glorification of war and the conquests of King Henry, and on the other hand the demystification and criticism of the military grandeur. In the playtext, it is possible to perceive elements that address the exaltation of war and the figure of the king due to his brave engagement in the battlefield. Mowat and Werstine observe such aspects, more specifically in relation to the role of the Chorus and King Henry’s speeches associated with the siege of Harfleur and the battle of Agincourt:

Some of the play glorifies war, especially the play’s Choruses and Henry’s speeches urging his troops into battle: “Once more unto the breach, dear friends, once more, / Or close the wall up with our English dead!” During this first engagement between the invading English army and the French at Harfleur, Henry tells his men that they can never be more truly and gloriously the sons of their fathers than in making war. The play’s Chorus urges us to join the invasion by grappling our imaginations to the sterns of Henry’s ships as they set sail for France, and then to join with the Chorus in praise of Henry on the eve of his greatest battle, Agincourt: “Praise and glory on his head!” Repeatedly the Chorus glorifies the warlike king, calling him “the mirror,” or paragon, “of all Christian kings” and “this star of England”. (MOWAT; WERSTINE 2004:xiii)

As it can be perceived in Mowat and Werstine’s comment, war is portrayed as a very favorable circumstance to achieve a sense of honorable accomplishment. King Henry ap-

appears as a majestic figure, an image reinforced by the Chorus, who should be appreciated as the rightful leader of England.

As for the unmasking of the gruesome side of war and the criticism attached to it, the playtext offers references to greediness and atrocities. Mowat and Werstine point out the figures of the bishops scheming about war and taxes, the soldiers in search of their own financial advantage, and King Henry making allusions to the monstrosities of war:

But when the Chorus is offstage we hear other voices of war that are less alluring. We hear bishops conniving for war so that they can postpone a bill in Parliament that would heavily tax the Church's wealth. Then we hear soldiers in a tavern enthusiastic for war, not in the hope of winning glory, but in the expectation of reaping profits ("To suck, to suck, the very blood to suck"). Even in the impressive speeches of Henry and his nobles threatening the French, there are many chilling references to the human cost of war, to "the widows' tears, the orphans' cries, / ... the privèd maidens' groans" for dead combatants, as well as to the horrors awaiting the non-combatants: "the filthy and contagious clouds / Of heavy murder, spoil," rape, and infanticide. (MOWAT; WERSTINE 2004:xiii-xiv)

The circumstances around war, as it will be perceived in the film to be analyzed in this article, can be structured in a way that often involve petty machinations and physically violent acts as a stark opposition to the idealization of war.

Gurr also comments on the issue of ambiguity in the playtext regarding the role of the Chorus in praising Henry's patriotic achievements as opposed to the dubious outcomes of the battles. The critic states that "in some significant respects *Henry V* offers on its surface the patriotic triumphalism of a Chorus who glorifies Henry's conquests, while through the story itself runs a strong hint of scepticism about the terms and the nature of his victories" (GURR 2005:2). In relation to film and theatrical productions of this Shakespeare's play, the manner in which Henry's decisions are portrayed determine what kind of focus is given to his character, and also what approach is being offered to the understanding of war conflicts.

In 1944, Laurence Olivier directed and played the leading role in the filmic adaptation of *Henry V*, culturally immersed in a World War II context, which highlights the remembrance of England's triumphant cultural tradition. In order to portray an absolute heroic and fair King Henry, Olivier removes significant passages that emphasize the ambiguous nature of the character. As Samuel Crowl remarks:

Olivier cut all the darker underside of Shakespeare's conception of Henry V by eliminating his barely controlled anger at being mocked by the Dauphin and discarding the traitors' scene, the violent threats at Harfleur, the hanging of Bardolph, and the order to "Kill all the prisoners". The film made a stunning contrast with the World War II England, hammered from above by Hit-

ler's Luftwaffe and from below by the daily deprivations of wartime existence.
(CROWL 2006:20)

Such cutting of passages in Olivier's film endorses the patriotic view of King Henry, avoiding the criticism related to the abusive behavior and negligent mind frame of world leaders.

Branagh's filmic adaptation of *Henry V* offers a somber version of the king. It was released in a quite distinct historical context in comparison to Olivier's, that is, a post-Vietnam and The Falklands War environment. Crowl comments that while Olivier nurtures a feeling of going to war, as the invasion of France by the Allies was about to happen, Branagh, who also plays the title role, does the opposite by emphasizing the significance of returning home (CROWL 2006:32). In cinematic terms, Branagh's version makes use of darker colors, shadows, and the outdoor scenes are mostly shot while raining (CROWL 2006:22). Also, the film opts from the start to establish a claustrophobic atmosphere with a lack of establishing shots and extensive use of close-up shots. Crowl gives as an example one of the initial scenes of the film between the Archbishop of Canterbury (Charles Kay) and the Bishop of Ely (Alec McCowen) in which their conversation is depicted in a fast pace, with quick cuts to each character's reaction shots in close-up (CROWL 2006:23).

One scene in Branagh's *Henry V* that features the abusive and violent ways of the king is the depiction of his threatening speech when conquering Harfleur. With words filled with menacing intentions, Henry gives an ultimatum to the French Governor (David Lloyd Meredith). The portrayal of the following lines delivered by Branagh's Henry emphasizes his brutal and unforgiving stance:

KING HENRY.

Therefore, you men of Harfleur,
Take pity of your town and of your people
Whiles yet my soldiers are in my command,
Whiles yet the cool and temperate wind of grace
O'erblows the filthy and contagious clouds
Of heady murder, spoil, and villany.
If not, why, in a moment look to see
The blind and bloody soldier with foul hand
Desire the locks of your shrill-shrieking daughters,
Your fathers taken by the silver beards
And their most reverend heads dashed to the walls,
Your naked infants spitted upon pikes
Whiles the mad mothers, with their howls confused,
Do break the clouds (3.3.27-40)³

3 Excerpt extracted from the online Folger Shakespeare Library edition of *The Life of King Henry V*. In the film, Branagh's Henry's lines are equivalent to the aforementioned excerpt, apart from line

The cinematic depiction of the passage cited above starts with an extreme long shot in a high angle with Henry on his horse and positioned in the center of the image. The corners are dark while the center illuminates his figure (see fig. 1)⁴. Most of the speech is given in a medium shot of Henry in a low angle which produces the effect of empowering him (see fig. 2). His words are spoken in an angry and aggressive manner until the end of the speech which culminates in a close-up as he almost screams out the offenses (see fig. 3). The reaction of the Governor of Harfleur (David Lloyd Meredith) is of hopelessness as he is aware that he has no means of defending the town (see fig. 4). The townspeople are depicted as faceless shadows who move around the fog to listen to the terrifying speech (see fig. 5). Henry's wrath becomes visible in this sequence, which refers to one of the passages removed from Olivier's film, and reveals the cold-hearted nature of the king.

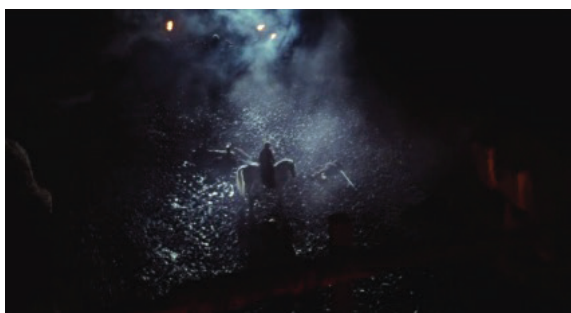


Fig. 1. Extreme long shot

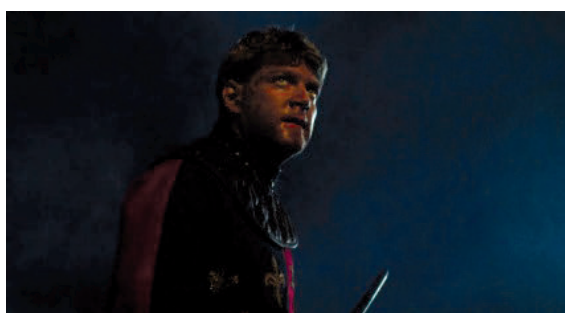


Fig. 2. Medium shot of Henry



Fig. 3. Henry's close-up



Fig. 4. French Governor's reaction

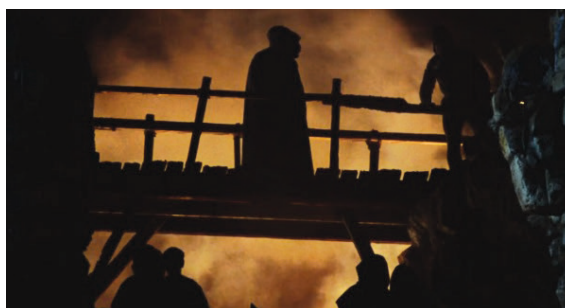


Fig. 5. The people of Harfleur

35 in which the word "Desire" is replaced by "defile".

4 All pictures in this article are taken from Branagh's *Henry V* (1989).

The patriotic flame of King Henry is certainly revealed during the portrayal of his speech before the battle of Agincourt,⁵ presenting a majestic and heroic leader who encourages his soldiers even against all the odds of the battle. The depiction of the speech starts as a tracking shot slowly approaches Henry surrounded by his soldiers. Among the trees and his men, Henry is calm and happy, delivering words of hope to the impending battle. The tracking shot stops as Henry climbs a wagon and confidently continues delivering his speech (see fig. 6). The next shot is a medium close-up of him, accompanied by a triumphant soundtrack, followed by a slightly high angle shot of the soldiers' reactions to the speech (see figs. 7 and 8). They seem pleased and encouraged by the bravery of their commander. Henry is then framed in a tighter shot, a close-up (see fig. 9), in the moment when he spiritedly delivers one of the most iconic passages of his speech:

KING HENRY

From this day to the ending of the world,
But we in it shall be remembered—
We few, we happy few, we band of brothers;
For he today that sheds his blood with me
Shall be my brother; (4.3.60-64)⁶

The climax of the scene is portrayed in a long shot in which Henry is centered and surrounded by his friendly soldiers. As the king proudly raises his arm and finishes his speech, the soldiers produce a loud and powerful cheer that echoes for a few seconds (see fig. 10). Such scene evokes a strong feeling of patriotism and exalts Henry as a majestic and trustworthy figure who defends the honor of his country.



Fig. 6. Henry gives his speech among the soldiers

5 In the online Folger Shakespeare Library edition of *The Life of King Henry V*, the aforementioned speech is located in 4.3.

6 Excerpt extracted from the online Folger Shakespeare Library edition of *The Life of King Henry V*. Branagh's Henry's lines are equivalent to the aforementioned excerpt.



Figs. 7 and 8. Henry in a middle close-up and the soldiers' reaction



Fig. 9. An emotional close-up



Fig. 10. The triumphant finale

There is a clash, however, between the patriotism of Henry's speech and the cruel portrayal of the battle of Agincourt. War is depicted in a very intimate way in the film. There are no establishing shots of the battlefield to locate the encounter of the armies. The tight framing of the battle sequence brings a claustrophobic feeling through close-ups. For instance, the French army cannot be seen approaching the English in the beginning of the battle. Only the apprehensive reaction shots of the English soldiers and the sounds of the incoming galloping horses can be heard. Once they meet, the encounter becomes bloody, as arrows rain from the sky, men are slain, stabbed in the back, and drown one another in the mud. In one of the most graphic deaths of the battle scene, the Duke of York (James Simmons) is killed by seven French soldiers who circle him. In a medium long shot, the Duke emerges from the middle of the French soldiers, centralized in the frame with blood spurting from his mouth, only to be complemented by a close-up of his face which highlights his despair and pain (see figs. 11 and 12). The display of merciless violence in the field contrasts with the cheerful and encouraging environment promoted by the king before the battle of Agincourt.



Figs. 11 and 12. The Duke of York is killed in battle

Another element that challenges the idea of glorifying war is the presence of mud as a recurrent adversity in the soldiers' daily life and battle circumstances. According to Santanu Das "mud confuses the categories of solid and liquid. Moreover, it clings to the human body defying its own inert nature and giving the impression of malevolent agency" (DAS 2008:35). In the film, mud stands for another layer of hardship, a sensorial difficulty that attaches itself to one's body, drags the soldiers down, and prevents full movement. The movie portrays a long walk to Agincourt in which the soldiers experience terrible weather, with constant rain and therefore abundant mud on the roads. In one of the shots, the English flag is dragged through the mud, and in another, a boy falls face down on the mud when trying to push a cart (see figs. 13 and 14). It is possible to observe that these images stand for the lack of glory for the soldiers who are involved in the war efforts. The slimy and viscous environment is extended to the battlefield which features multiple dead bodies disgracefully splashing on the mud (see fig. 15). These images are far from the idealized and patriotic view of sacrifice from Henry's words.



Figs. 13, 14, and 15. The mud on the roads and battlefield

At the end of the battle, the film displays a long take that evokes the somber consequences of war, that is, the destruction and death brought upon the participants of the conflict. The sequence starts with a close-up of one of the soldiers singing "*Non Nobis*" as the frame opens to disclose the wrecked battlefield and the figure of King Henry carrying a dead boy on his shoulder. The camera tracks along Henry and the soldiers whose path displays a catalogue of gruesome images (see fig. 16): a destroyed landscape, black smoke in the background, a battlefield littered with inert bodies, dead soldiers on trees and spikes, dead horses, pools of blood, and men looting dead bodies. The pitiful procession includes a group of desperate women who approach the dead body of the boy carried by the king (see fig. 17). Henry's facial expression throughout his path is not of heroic

contemplation for the victory (see fig. 18). His last image in the long take is a medium close-up with his eyes closed and head down, showing a battered king (see fig. 19). The lack of dignity and the insurmountable disrespect for human life displayed on the battlefield, suggested by the long take, also contrasts with the ideal of conquests and honorable fight. The palpable consequences of bloodshed shown in the film highlight the cost of war for those involved in the clashes.



Fig. 16. Henry walks along the destroyed field Fig. 17. Women trying to reach the boy



Fig. 18. Henry's expression Fig. 19. Henry's medium close-up

Thus, the complexity of the character King Henry in the film relies on the fact that he can be considered either a great leader and faithful patriot who confronts the French or a cold-hearted king who threatens others with violence and abuse. In the depiction of the siege of Harfleur, for instance, Henry demonstrates a menacing attitude towards the Governor and the people of the town, intimidating them with unimaginable horrors. This scene suggests the dark side of Henry's nature, emphasizing that as a conquering king he cannot always maintain his immaculate image. In the portrayal of the speech that precedes the battle of Agincourt, however, Henry personifies the figure of a majestic and encouraging king who claims to have a purposeful aim for his country and soldiers. The representation of the battle of Agincourt itself, on the other hand, seems to evoke the feeling of waste and destruction, both in material terms and number of casualties. The complexity of the figure of King Henry is constantly dealt with in the film, showing some moments in which he is portrayed as a heroic figure and others as a tyrant. However, the representation of war in the film strongly proposes the idea of massacre and severe consequences in which lives were lost in the name of England, that is, to please the greediness of high officers to conquer more land and power.

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