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From CNN to YouTube: Henry V in the Digital Age

Seventy-five years after its initial release, Olivier's 1944 *Henry V* remains the template for filming Shakespeare's play.¹ So pervasive is Olivier's structure that not only was Orson Welles' 1966 *Falsaff* structured in the same way, making it a *noir* counterpoint to Olivier's technicolor extravaganza, the three subsequent adaptations also followed its basic structure, with the Battle of Agincourt at its core. Even Anne Curry's 2015 MOOC on Agincourt follows Olivier's film.

What has changed over the years are attitudes towards war and heroism. More ill at ease with *warlike Harry*, Branagh's 1989 version presents a darker Henry and the play becomes grittier: after Vietnam and the Falklands, war had become politically more questionable. Western Europe had not seen war on its soil since Olivier's day. The following twenty years only confirmed that trend, and when Peter Babakitis made his version of the film in 2004 wedged between the two Gulf Wars, the play again served as a metaphor for media manipulation. Finally, when the BBC adapted the play as part of the *Hollow Crown* series in 2012, the version explored the personal toll wars take on people.² The various films sum up the prevalent attitudes of the times.

Historically, Henry V is the only king not to have been locked in the power struggles that permeated English politics from his Father Henry IV's usurpation in 1399 until the death of Richard III at the battle of Bosworth in 1485. It is the cornerstone of G.L. Harriss' quasi-panegyric reassessment of Henry's reign, which he soberly sums up by stating that "[t]he simple record of Henry V's achievement is sufficient to establish him as a great king."³ It can be easily said that one can disagree with Henry's general policy *because he had one*: to claim his right to the crown of France. The political struggle still informed politics in Shakespeare's day, so it is not so surprising that he would explore that power struggle (not to mention that it made for great theater, just as World War Two still informs our political thinking today and makes for great movies). Shakespeare ending the second of two sets of four plays with his production of *King Henry V*. The play is surprisingly original in its own right, as it is not conceived like the other plays in the series as an Elizabethan tragedy, but more as a heroic comedy, complete with a happy ending (wedding and all). Moreover, it is structured as a memorial medieval pageant, with a Chorus serving as narrator⁴. The play becomes an exploration of private memory and public memorialization, one that is fraught with tensions, as seen in the disjunct

¹ The film received an entire chapter in the catalogue to the six hundredth anniversary retrospective exhibition on the Battle of Agincourt at the Royal Armouries in 2015. Curiously, the subsequent films were not addressed here. Yet their response both to the original template and to historical knowledge up to that date are equally revealing. Robert C. WOOSNAM-SAVAGE, "Olivier's Henry V. How a Movie Defined the Image of the Battle of Agincourt for Generations" *Agincourt*, edited by Anne CURRY and Malcolm MERCER (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, in association with the Royal Armouries, 2015), 250-262.

² Ramona WRAY, "Henry V after the War on Terror," *Shakespeare Survey Vol 72: Shakespeare and War*, edited by Emma SMITH (Cambridge: The Cambridge University Press, 2019) 1-15. Online: <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108588072.001>

³ G.L. HARRISS, "Conclusion," *Henry V: The Practice of Kingship*, edited by HARRISS, (Oxford, New York et al.: Oxford University Press, 1985), 201-210. 201.

⁴ Francis MICKUS, "'And what art thou, idle ceremony?': Pageantry, Spectacle and Henry V" The University of Edinburg LAMPS page <https://lampsedinburgh.wordpress.com/2021/02/14/and-what-art-thou-thou-idle-ceremonypageantry-spectacle-and-henry-v/>

between the Chorus' memorialization and the reality of the events, but further illustrated by the intrusions in the story of the remainder of Prince Hal's low life cronies led by Ancient Pistol.⁵

Henry V, both as an historical subject and as a stage play, becomes an effective barometer to measure not only attitudes toward current events, particularly wars, but also for the attitudes towards how media depict these events and the three-way relationship between media, audiences and the basic power structures that use the media for political ends. Shakespeare wrote his play as a warning against media manipulation, but it would seem that the very brilliance of his poetry undercuts that intent. Olivier's film adaptation shows how easily the play can be tailored to fit contemporary propaganda purposes, but the play's production history shows in turn that Olivier was hardly the first in doing so. The play returns – in highly edited form – in the eighteenth century at the height of political tensions between England and France. Even if the rivalry between France and England had subsided, British imperialism would also bolster the play's popularity, with a major production during the Crimea and two virtually concurrent offerings during the Boer Wars. Branagh's film expressed the disillusionment of the Falklands and Vietnam, but the subsequent film and television adaptation were shot under the cloud of both Gulf Wars. Productions of *Henry V* are made to reflect the current political climate.

Adapting a four-hour Shakespeare play into a two hour-movie requires substantial cutting, which implies editorial selection. *Henry V* is inevitably tailored to respond to current attitudes both consciously and unconsciously. Branagh acknowledges this; and even explores some of his editorial selections in the introduction to his published screenplay. "Plot repetitions and excessive flights of rhetorical fancy were ruthlessly excised," he explained.⁶ The introduction also stresses the thematic and narrative differences in approach his film had with Olivier's version. But what he obviously does not address is the fact that his film is structured as a remake of the Olivier original and is as biased an adaptation. While never openly acknowledged, the structural parallels between the two films help explain the comparative nature (whether explicit or implicit) that is found in most of the articles discussing Branagh's film.⁷

Any desire to control the media is met with an equal artistic as well as audience reaction. This is as true for the Hayes code as for government censorship. The twentieth century is the last century where informational and entertainment media flow predominantly from providers (the press, film, radio, and later broadcast or cable television) to audiences. With the advent of the internet, that single direction becomes less apparent: content providers are also content users and audience reactions, responses and conversations become an essential aspect of media input. This paper therefore spends as much time considering recent history as it does the way *King Henry V* illustrates the response to those events. The First Gulf War was the only time a single news outlet, CNN, was able to shape public perception of the conflict. The second Gulf War, as it became more protracted and difficult to explain, needed to implicate the journalist in the management of public perception. It is the war of the embedded journalist who was held under the sway of the political and

⁵ Jonathan BALDO, "Wars of Memory in Henry V," *Shakespeare Quarterly*, Vol. 47, N°2 (Summer, 1996), 132-159. Rebecca WARREN-HEYS, "[R]emember with advantages': Creating Memory in Shakespeare's *Henry V*," *Journal of the Northern Renaissance*, N°2 – Memory (2010). <https://northernrenaissance.org/remember-with-advantages-creating-memory-in-shakespeares-henry-v/>

⁶ Kenneth BRANAGH, *William Shakespeare's Henry V, Screenplay and Introduction*, (New York and London: W.W. Norton & Company, 1997), xv.

⁷ Sarah MUNSON DEATS even reprises Norman Rabkin's famous title regarding the Henry V paradox with her own article title "Rabbits and Ducks. Olivier, Branagh and 'Henry V'" in *Literature/Film Quarterly*, Vol. 20, N°4 (1992), 284-293.

military structures handling the war. The arrival of the internet would subvert that controlled experience, allowing the audience to bring their own interpretation of the events to their very presentation. Olivier's film stood virtually alone for nearly fifty years. Note how often Shakespeare's histories and *Henry V* in general have been filmed since Branagh's production. Since the First Gulf War, the play has been reexamined four times in the light of novel current events as well as these new media. As this paper will attempt to demonstrate, *Henry V* reflects the strengths and weaknesses of any medium and continues to stand as a metaphor for the role and responsibilities those in power have when the nation is in conflict, as well as how more generally they try to manage popular perception.

From Hollywood to CNN: Government and Media Management of Policy

It can be fairly argued, at least since Caesar wrote his *Commentaries on the Gallic Wars*, that wars have been fought on a cultural front, that is to say that a given war was always accompanied by its cultural apparatus to assert its moral and political justification. That apparatus however has expanded over the last few centuries. *Henry V* has been exploited to that effect. The nineteenth century saw elaborate stage productions (that often foreshadow Olivier's film production), as well as a proliferation of images in a variety of media, from stained glass to ceramic figurines. World War One attempted to control information, World War Two marshalled all of Hollywood to its cause, and Vietnam was the first 'television war'. Such management invariably met with opposition. Frank Capra produced the acclaimed *Why We Fight* series for the War office, while Preston Sturges lampooned patriotic attitudes with films like *Hail the Conquering Hero*.⁸ The Vietnam War may have dominated the evening news, but in the States, we remember it best through the television series *M*A*S*H*.

The century ended with what could be called the Golden Age of cable television, with a concurrent expansion of available channels, including, most interestingly, specialty channels, and most importantly, the advent of the all-news channel CNN (or Cable News Network). Radio had already undergone its period of specialization over the previous two decades, with a number of local and national news outlets, so the idea of an all-news television station was not that hard to imagine. It would merely follow the basic radio format of a series of rotating news pieces over a specified time frame ("give us 22 minutes and we'll give you the world"⁹ – over and over again). What was not expected was the serendipity of CNN's arrival and its impact on audiences. CNN got its major push forward with the events leading up to the first Gulf War, as well as the war itself. There were the dramatic congressional debates over the authorization to use force, which in turn fueled public debate (the 'no blood for oil' antiwar slogan versus the legitimacy of intervention against international aggression).¹⁰ The subsequent war was shockingly swift, short and decisive. It lasted in essence six

⁸ Such irreverence could also be semi-unintentional. Warner Bros.' *Private Snafu* series got into hot water with its last cartoon that depicted a bomb that was able to wipe out an entire island! See Mark David KAUFMAN, "Ignorant Armies: Private Snafu Goes to War," *The Public Domain Review* (March 25, 2015) <https://publicdomainreview.org/essay/ignorant-armies-private-snafu-goes-to-war>.

⁹ A curious marketing slogan from a Los Angeles radio station, one that still is troubling, according to columnist Steve HARVEY, "Radio Station Still Gets Some Static Over Slogan's Math Glitch," *Los Angeles Times*, (June 16, 2006). <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-2006-jun-16-me-only16-story.html>

¹⁰ It is, as one congressman put it at the time, the closest approximation to a declaration of war in recent history. The final tally was a very slim margin: 52 senators approved the authorization: 47 opposed and only 1, Alan Cranston from California, decided

weeks, and the whole affair ran about the length of a news cycle - an even greater boost to the news channel's prestige. CNN had both a clear playing field (as there was little or no competition) and an easily identifiable beginning, middle and end to a situation, which it could shape into a clear narrative.¹¹

New York Times columnist Richard Bernstein titles his editorial with the question "Will the Gulf War Produce Enduring Art?" For as he explained in the column, "It was a war so carefully scripted for television that it was in a way already a movie. It's hard to imagine what a film maker could do that the war itself, and previous movies, haven't done already."¹²

Since the war was so short, CNN was the *only* source of information, precluding any critical analysis. So, while there was strong debate leading up to the conflict, there was no subsequent critique of its actual existence and meaning. Oliver Stone offers the answer to Bernstein's question by pointing out that "Tom Cruise already did the Persian Gulf war in 'Top Gun.'"¹³ Wars seem to become so short that it is impossible to think about them, let alone criticize them. In years to come, we might remember the first Gulf War as well as we remember the action on the Barbary Coast of the early American Republic, of which we retain little more than "the shores of Tripoli" in the Marines' song.¹⁴ If we remember the First Gulf War at all, it will probably be as a prelude to the second Gulf War.

CNN's handling of the Gulf War reached levels of control that media managers had only dreamed of under Woodrow Wilson.¹⁵ Wilson's control remained limited. There was a strong labor based anti-war movement,¹⁶ and Chaplin would spoof wartime militarism and heroics in his comedy *Soldier Arms* (all the while selling war bonds). Such streamlined media management could only be effective in the short time span that the first Gulf War enjoyed. It turns out however that the Gulf War was something of an exception: a little more than a simple military response and less than a real war. While there was time to be aware of the United States' use of military force maintain its political dominance (especially in the years following the fall of the Berlin Wall and the end of the Cold War), there literally was not the time to mount an effective (or even meaningful) anti-war movement, nor was there any need to justify the war over the long term.

The closest we would come to a critique of the First Gulf War would be subsequently, in satires like Barry Levinson's *Wag the Dog* in 1997 or David O. Russell's 2000 *Three Kings*, which are

not to vote. All opposition was from the Democratic party, but a few broke ranks. United States Senate Roll call vote, 102nd congress, First Session. Decided January 12, 1991:

https://www.senate.gov/legislative/LIS/roll_call_lists/roll_call_vote_cfm.cfm?congress=102&session=1&vote=00002

¹¹ During a press conference, Then Joint Chief of Staff Colin Powell quipped that he got most his information from CNN. As an off-hand remark, that sounded like a good joke, but what does the comment actually mean? On the surface it would imply that CNN gets its information before the military high command would, and that is preposterous. So instead, it would mean that CNN served as a conduit for official policy, rather than a critically minded journalistic outlet. And it remained the principal source of public information.

¹² Richard BERNSTEIN, "Will the Gulf War Produce Enduring Art?" *New York Times*, (June 9, 1991).

<https://www.nytimes.com/1991/06/09/arts/will-the-gulf-war-produce-enduring-art.html>

¹³ *IBID.* The point is something of the realization of Tom Lehrer's 1965 novelty song *So Long Mom (a song for World War III)*.

¹⁴ The Barbary Coast expedition was the USMC's first overseas mission.

¹⁵ Christopher DALY "How Woodrow Wilson's Propaganda Machine Changed American Journalism." *The Conversation* (April 28, 2017) The most interesting aspect of the endeavor was its commercial nature. The entire operation was not so much seen as propaganda as it was seen as commercial, the idea of selling the War to America. <https://theconversation.com/how-woodrow-wilsons-propaganda-machine-changed-american-journalism-76270>

¹⁶ Rutger CEBALLOS, "Reds, Labor and the Great War: Anti-War Activism in the Northwest" *Anti-War and Radical History Project*, (University of Washington HSTAA, 498, Fall 2013 and 499, Spring 2014). https://depts.washington.edu/antiwar/WW1_reds.shtml

both essentially about media manipulation¹⁷. But they come after the fact, and don't call into question policy or practice while the crisis is under way, as was the case for Michael Powell's 1943 *Col. Blimp*, a film that Churchill despised so much that his personal involvement in the production of *Henry V* was intended to counter the effect of Powell's film. "Writing in November 1990", muses Ian Aitken, "one wonders whether Branagh's film might not have had more relevance if it had been released against the background of a possible war in the Gulf?"¹⁸ That is precisely what happened: Branagh's 1989 production is the *Henry V* for the First Gulf War: this version both illustrates and criticizes the 'finding a war we could win' atmosphere. The Gulf War was given its tidy little ending with people at home having tied a yellow ribbon (to the music of the 1973 song) and the troops being thanked for their job in the Gulf.¹⁹

Henry, the Second Gulf War and the Embedded Journalist

Criticism of the Gulf War, then, is essentially criticism of the *second* Gulf War, which began after the attack of the World Trade Center in 2001. Though nobody seems to notice anymore, this war is in fact still grinding on today, and it is as long, messy and unclear as the first war was swift and successful. Most of the criticism of the war was expressed in the first decade of the century.²⁰ Peter Babatikis' 2004 version of *Henry V* is a direct response to the CNN style of war reporting. Sarah Hatchuel even relays how he felt that the depiction of Agincourt "ought to look like CNN coverage of all the wars that go on today, with all the chaotic, unplanned shocks that appear in real documentary footage of the so-called 'embedded' video journalist."²¹

The notion of an 'embedded journalist' is nothing new. Derek P. Royal explores how the Chorus in Branagh's *Henry V* slips from a Brechtian distance to an admiring observer, the key swing happening during the siege of Harfleur, where we see the Chorus (much like television war correspondents) living the frenzied conditions of battle from the edges. From then on, his tone changes. "The abrupt and jarring nature of Jacobi's performance is replaced by one that more gently intrudes on the scenes upon which he comments."²² Derek Royal sees this a something of a missed opportunity to use the Chorus as a critique of the events of the play. But another, more troublesome, reading can be derived from this analysis, one that recalls the 'journalist' in Peter Watkins' 1964 *Culloden*. Branagh's Chorus initially appears as a distanced, neutral conveyor of information, but as

¹⁷ There have been since then a number of films that explore the effects of the Gulf War, including, paradoxically the destructive effect of *the lack of action*, as in the case of the film *Jarhead* in 2005 directed by Sam Mendes.

¹⁸ Ian AITKEN, Formalism and Realism: Henry V (Laurence Olivier, 1944; Kenneth Branagh, 198 9)" *Critical Survey: Text into Performance* Vol. 3, N°3 (1991), 260-268. 267.

¹⁹ The case of the Yellow Ribbon generated even at the time considerable consternation among social studies scholars, such as Linda PERSHING and Margaret R YOCOM, "The Yellow Ribboning of the USA: The Contested Meaning in the Construction of a Political Symbol," *Western Folklore*, Vol. 55, N°1 (Winter, 1996), pp. 41-85. A popular song was repurposed for the War in a manner that is not so different from the integration of pop songs into other films, such as classic musicals like the 1954 *White Christmas*.

²⁰ As the war continued, it faded into the background. How many people actually realize that it has lasted longer than any other sustained conflict in American history? That, of course is another topic...

²¹ Originally posted on the film's official website, which has since been taken down. Sarah HATCHUEL, "The Battle of Agincourt in Shakespeare's, Laurence Olivier's, Kenneth Branagh's and Peter Babatikis's *Henry V*," *Shakespeare on Screen: The Henriad*, edited by Sarah HATCHUEL and Nathalie VIENNE-GUERRIN (Mont Saint-Aignan: Publications des Universités de Rouen et du Havre, 2008), 193-208. 200.

²² Derek P. ROYAL, "Shakespeare's Kingly Mirror: Figuring the Chorus in Olivier's and Branagh's 'Henry V'," *Literature/Film Quarterly*, Vol. 25, N°2 (1997), 104-110. 108.

the film progresses, he is subtly “sucked into” Henry’s way of thinking: the unbiased journalist unwittingly becomes mouthpiece of official doctrine. This runs counter to Shakespeare’s own Chorus, who from the start, stands as that mouthpiece: it is his stance that is constantly undercut by the events in the play. Rather than being the unbiased conveyor of verifiable truth, it is the Chorus and not the play who for Shakespeare is the myth maker. “The Chorus is great painter of pictures”, Andrew Gurr drily notes, “but they are never the pictures shown on the stage.”²³

What then should be the nature and the degree of ‘mismatch’ between the Chorus and the play, and what is the Chorus’ role if it is considered akin to the modern-day journalist? If the Chorus is to be a journalist, then we have a problem, indeed. Capra’s films for instance show journalists as crass, opportunistic and insensitive. Their sense of self-importance leads them to believe their jaded world view as objectively accurate. Finally, journalism is terribly susceptible to political and corporate control. But for Capra *journalists do not lie*. The idea that Shakespeare suggests with his characterization of the Chorus, that journalists indeed lie – that they transmit as truth that which they patently know is false – is so unsettling for a democracy as to be inconceivable. Only Orson Welles, a careful reader of Shakespeare, confronted that possibility in *Citizen Kane*.

The New Media and the Centrality of the Individual Experience

The idea that lying is endemic to the use of power came to the fore just prior to the first Gulf War with the Iran-Contra Scandal a few years earlier.²⁴ The subsequent idea that wars and policy were the product of political manipulation in which journalists and journalism in general played a willing and active part, was one that was ready to take shape at the close of the last century. For at about that time, the earliest version of data transfer telecommunications, or the internet, began to take shape. Developed in the late sixties for NASA, commercial versions began appearing in the 1980’s. France had successfully launched its Minitel. The first internet powerhouse was America On Line. The internet was sufficiently sprawling in the early 1990’s for various search engines to emerge (Altavista, Netscape, and, of course, Yahoo). The internet came into its own with the new century, as access became simpler and more powerful. Information that could take hours to download would take minutes (and today need not be downloaded at all). It is a revolution whose impact cannot be over emphasized. Historians, and particularly art historians, have access to images and information at unprecedented levels. Virtually all the works as well as the entirety of the images consulted for this paper can be found on the internet; book encyclopedias are a thing of the past.

But is that actually such a good thing? Access to images and information is so massive and immediate that they become difficult to actually verify. There are well documented catalogues from sites like the British Library, but even they have difficulties keeping up. It is easy to forget how labor intensive such a task actually is, and the immediacy of access tends to hide labor: The British Library catalogue is quite complete, but since its creation (which is now well over ten years), certain collections have yet to be digitized; scanning errors have yet to be corrected, and most importantly, the bibliography needs to be brought up to date. For instance, the ‘select bibliography’ for the catalogue

²³ Andrew GURR, “Introduction”, William Shakespeare, *King Henry V*, (Cambridge: The Cambridge University Press New Cambridge Shakespeare, 1992) 1-55. 9.

²⁴ Bill MOYERS offered a very interesting documentary in the wake of that scandal *The Truth About Lies*, the last of a four-part documentary, *The Public Mind*, discussing the use of images in shaping public opinion, aired November 29, 1989.

entry of the Arundel 38 Manuscript of Hoccleve's *Regiment of Princes* ends in 2011.²⁵ Alongside the institutional are the commercial catalogues, such as Bridgman Images, which do not offer comprehensive entries to their images. Without further investigation, it is unwise to include in a catalogue of images of the king a given manuscript painting that is ostensibly of Henry V (or of any given subject for that matter).

There are a number of webpages that say virtually anything. Any search will run the entire gamut of sources and interpretations: newspapers, personal blogs, television downloads, MOOC's and YouTube free-form videos. All this information is placed on the same level. One could expect that such an ability to inform as well as be informed would be source of expanded knowledge and novel thinking, but in fact it is the opposite that is true. Rather than seek out information that challenges our assumptions and our knowledge, the very practices of the internet tend to reinforce our preconceptions. A form of planetary groupthink sets in. If one types *Battle of Agincourt* in a search engine, the resulting articles will say essentially the same thing: that English pluck, English longbowmen and good leadership helped them beat the odds and that, to this day, discussing Agincourt is good way to irritate the French. There is a surprising degree of flippancy when dealing with images. Usually, these articles will be illustrated by either a manuscript image or some equally unspecified nineteenth century engraving (preferably colored), a still from Olivier's *Henry V* and the National Portrait Gallery portrait of the King (or some generically unspecified variation). A good example of this can be found in Laurier Hampton's blog post "A Story of the Underdog: The Battle of Agincourt". The article gets the basic information right and then messes up the imagery: along with the expected list (which is neither explained nor identified), we get a picture of the wrong Charles VI, for instead of showing a picture of the late fourteenth-century French king, we have a portrait of the early eighteenth-century Hapsburg Emperor.²⁶ What does that say of the other images?

In short, while the internet offers great advances in conventional history, it more often than not becomes an echo chamber of redundant clichés, which lead to a surreal vision of history. David Michôd's *The King* is ostensibly a fusion between a biography of Henry V and a condensation of Shakespeare's *Henriad*. As a concession to historical advances, there is even a scar under Henry's left eye.²⁷ But why there should be one is anybody's guess: the Battle of Shrewsbury, where history tells us he sustained the arrow wound, is reduced a single combat between Hal and Hotspur. There is no bow shot to wound Henry in the first place! This, along with the recharacterization of Falstaff²⁸, is the most egregious example of the film's rewriting of History as well as of Shakespeare.

Finally, we have the internet's viral and highly emotional user-responses, one post is followed by hundreds of comments leading to another post. This creates not so much a conversation as a series of personal points of view – written shouting matches, if you will. The practice has obvious political fallout, turning partisan opinion into unquestionable doctrine and consequently shattering society as

²⁵ Detailed record of Arundel 38 (Hoccleve's *Regiment of Princes*). British Library online catalogue.

<http://www.bl.uk/catalogues/illuminatedmanuscripts/record.asp?MSID=8782&CollID=20&NStart=38>

²⁶ Laurier HAMPTON, "A study of the Underdog: The Battle of Agincourt," *Old Dirty History* (March 12, 2017). It should be added that the bibliography is surprisingly thin. <https://olddirtyhistory.wordpress.com/2017/03/12/a-story-of-the-underdog-the-battle-of-agincourt/>

²⁷ The problems surrounding Henry's arrow wound just under his eye suffered at Shrewsbury has come under considerable scrutiny these past few years.

²⁸ He becomes Henry's most trusted adviser, and eventually suffers the duke of York's fate of dying while taking the hardest onslaught of the French cavalry.

a cohesive whole the society as whole. It also spills over into subsequent representations of King Henry V and productions of the play. Thus, if one follows Ramona Wray's analysis of the 2012 *Hollow Crown* version of *Henry V*, the play no longer discusses the responsibility of those in power when waging war, but rather "a vision of war" that "embeds a human experience divorced from larger questions of political accountability."²⁹ Wray explores how the film discusses the issue of post-traumatic stress that is prevalent in contemporary Iraq war films, a stress that is felt by Henry himself. What Wray fails to point out is that to achieve such a reading one must throttle the very point of the play. It is a common practice to shift scenes in Shakespearean productions, but they are usually made for clarity; rarely do they subvert the play's intent. While there is a problematic tradition in the case of *Henry V*, as both previous film versions attest, director Thea Sharrock to prove her point makes editorial and staging decisions that tend to undermine the play as well as its tradition in favor of her own thesis. Henry's violent description of war at the gates of Harfleur are made *after* he has entered the gates of the city, in other words at a moment when they are no longer necessary. The Saint Crispan's day speech is made to small group of officers for whom such a speech is equally unnecessary. Finally, Henry's order to kill the prisoners is presented as a moment of spite: the order upon seeing York's body. Such an editorial choice is once again unnecessary, as the sense of stress could have been conveyed using Shakespeare own strategy: in the play, the order to kill the prisoners comes at a moment of panic when Henry fears the French are getting ready to regroup and launch a final offensive.³⁰

Internet Crowding and the collapse of History

The internet highlights a recurrent problem when dealing with Henry V and the Lancastrian dynasty in general: historians tend to read the era in a contemporary light. The term *propaganda* for instance is regularly used when discussing Lancastrian art. As early as 1981, Francis Woodman discusses the choir screen of Lancastrian kings at Canterbury Cathedral as a work of propaganda, in proposing that Edmond Beaufort, duke of Somerset (1406-55) and brother to cardinal Beaufort (c.1375-1447) was the choir screen's patron.³¹ Somerset had the money, the power and the political affiliations to back such a grandiose structure, but does the term *propaganda* apply? Such a term only has meaning in the context of mass-production and mass-dissemination of information. A printed book like John Foxe's *Actes and Monuments* can be perceived as propaganda. A statue in a church, no matter how important the church and impressive the statue, is limited in its reach.

Historians should know better: is Henry V a war criminal as Desmond Seward paints him, or a model king, following Malcolm Vale's presentation?³² What makes the first idea interesting is how his actions could be seen as controversial *in his own time*. "Indeed," notes Craig Taylor, "the example

²⁹ WRAY, "Henry V After the War on Terror," 3.

³⁰ What transpires is Sharrock's profound ignorance both of battle and of Henry. By the time he came to Agincourt, Henry was an old campaigner. In battle, you press on and try to survive. As Samuel Fuller put it, "All that phony heroism is a bunch of baloney when they're shooting at you." The stress comes after, sometimes times long after, the battle has settled. Roger EBERT, "All war stories are told by survivors': An interview with Samuel Fuller," (August 17, 1980). <https://www.rogerebert.com/interviews/all-war-stories-are-told-by-survivors-an-interview-with-samuel-fuller>

³¹ Francis Woodman *Canterbury Cathedral*, 192.

³² Desmond SEWARD, *Henry V as Warlord* (London: Sidgwick and Jackson, 1987); Malcolm VALE, *Henry V: The Conscience of a King* (New Haven and London, Yale University Press, 2016). It should be noted that there is a prominent either/or attitude towards Henry's character.

of Henry V demonstrates the problems caused by the romantic notions of chivalry that have come to dominate the modern imagination. [...] In the Middle Ages, the ideals of knighthood were much more complicated.”³³ The modern Oxford historian Felipe Fernandez-Armesto states that Henry “began, on the field of Agincourt, a career as a war criminal, massacring prisoners in defiance of the conventions.”³⁴ What conventions is Fernandez-Armesto referring to? For, as Taylor pointed out, “[c]rucially, Medieval commentators, even from the French side did not attack Henry V for his action.”³⁵ What should intrigue historians is the gap in perception between modern times and Henry’s times (or those of any historical figure).

The face of Henry is always presented in profile; it is only a question of point of view to say which side is placed forward. Internet crowding makes the Middle Ages seem darker, and in many ways more mysterious and complex today than they did seventy years ago, for rather than question perceptions, blogs and posts tend to reinforce commonplaces.

How to come to terms with such a mess? Perhaps by taking our time, logging off and rereading Shakespeare. Like its historical namesake, *King Henry V* is known for its ambivalence,³⁶ for it is play that is built along the lines of Medieval pageant, and as such is expected to be seen as an example of kingly greatness, the story of ‘this star of England’ as the Chorus calls him. Yet all the calls of greatness are undercut by the scenes themselves; even Agincourt is reduced to the vision of a Mountebank taking a coward prisoner. It is a play that demands the audience’s sustained attention, with various levels of information to work with at all times. No actor worth his salt ignored that fact. William Hazlitt famously called Henry an “amiable monster” – as viewed from the safety of the theater³⁷. Welles more bluntly called him a ‘most awful shit.’³⁸ Even Olivier knew that the play would have to be seriously reworked if it was to be a patriotic crowd pleaser.

Shakespeare wrote his play as a warning against media manipulation, but did he expect it to become so effective a participant in that manipulation?

³³ Craig TAYLOR, “Henry V, Flower of Chivalry,” *Henry V: New Interpretations*, edited by Gwilym DODD (Woodbridge, Suffolk: The York Medieval Press, 2013) 217-247. 220.

³⁴ Felipe Fernandez-Armesto, “The Myth of Henry V,” in *BBC History* webpage (February 17, 2011) http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/british/middle_ages/henry_v_01.shtml

³⁵ TAYLOR, op. cit. page 236.

³⁶ *Henry V* and *Hamlet* are near contemporary plays in the Shakespeare canon...

³⁷ William Hazlitt, *Characters of Shakespeare’s Plays*. Posted online: <https://beelyrics.net/music/53179-william-hazlitt/161337-characters-of-shakespeare-s-plays-henry-v-lyrics.html>

³⁸ Bridget GELLERT-LYONS, “Interview with Keith Baxter,” *Chimes at Midnight*, edited by Gellert-Lyons, (New Brunswick and London: Rutgers University Press, Films in Print Collection, 1988), 267-283. 275.