

And what art thou, thou idle ceremony?

Pageantry, Spectacle and Henry V

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As the world becomes increasingly visual, the invisibility of the past becomes increasingly unsettling. The proliferation of images develops a need to *see* the past. Reconstruction and visualisations help, but when an image from the past exists, it achieves an iconic status. Contemporary audiences *see* Henry V in the famed profile portrait, or in manuscript images. But when these images were created, they were limited to the specific owners of the works and their immediate *entourage*. Public images, such as the choir screen at York minster, were restricted to the local church-going audience. For the general population, the king, although a public figure, was effectively invisible, a fact which makes Henry's disguised tour of the camp in Shakespeare plausible: up close, Williams would not recognize the king.

That physical recognition would have been limited to a select few. The king otherwise is visible under controlled circumstances: the protocol of court for the elite and for the general public, displays: pageants. Such public displays were organized events: the triumphant return to London after Agincourt, or the tour of England after Henry's wedding.

The London chronicles wrote enthusiastically about the number of prisoners taken, but noted the arrival of the king to London in one perfunctory sentence: "And xxiiij day of nouembre, oure kyng come to London, hoole and sounde, with his prisoners¹." There is no mention of *any* pageant! One would expect the London craftsmen to have recorded their achievement with a certain amount of artistic pride. The celebrations, which attribute the work to the Londoners, are for the most part recorded in a *court* chronicle, particularly the anonymous *Gesta Henrici Quinti*. The facts left out appear in other *aristocratic* records.² It would stand to reason that the pageant was produced under royal specifications (and most likely with royal funds)³. The very sources of information reinforce the sense of image management at work.

That the royal entry was a royal undertaking emphasizes the political aspect of the event. The pageant strikes a balance between self-deprecation and self-aggrandizement, with Henry at the heroic centre of the grandiose spectacle, but then withdrawing with dignity, giving grace to God for his triumph⁴. Agincourt is a pyrrhic victory: a stroke of incredibly good luck at the close of what was a disastrous campaign⁵. Henry needed to generate enthusiasm in order to secure the meagre foothold the campaign afforded him. He would not return to France for another two years.

It is a significant stretch of the imagination to link the victory at Agincourt to the binding of the crowns of France and England. Shakespeare glibly does so by structuring his play like

¹ Charles Lethbridge KINGSFORD, *The Chronicles of London*, Oxford, The Clarendon Press, 1905, page 71. The omission is obviously intentional, as the burghers' careful list of prisoners taken as well as English losses - aspects that do not directly concern city matters, but that do probably point to the hope of recuperating their loans.

² Frank TAYLOR and John S. ROSKELL (eds.) *Gesta Henrici Quinti*, Oxford, the Clarendon Press, 1975. Introduction, page xxxvii. Chapter fifteen is dedicated to the description of the London Pageant.

³ But with such detail that it can not only be retraced but illustrated. See Nicola COLDSTREAM, "Pavilion'd in Splendour': Henry V's Agincourt Pageant" in *The Journal of the British Archaeological Association*, Vol. 165, N°1, pp. 153-171.

⁴ *Gesta Henrici Quinti*, pp.112/113.

⁵ Gwilym DODD, "Henry's Hollow Victory", in *History Today*, Oct. 2015, pp. 19-26. Dodd notes here how the victory eventually set Henry and England up for the ultimate defeat thirty years later.

a static Medieval pageant, girdled on a static stage. The play progresses through a series of pageant-like scenes from London on to Southampton, Harfleur, Agincourt and finally Paris.⁶ Like a Medieval Pageant Narrator, the Chorus leads the audience from one stage to the next, exhorting them, in a tone that is at once epic and performative⁷, to bind together the scenes as a coherent whole. But these attempts are constantly thwarted, as the action is interrupted, side tracked and belittled at every turn. In many ways, the play is best described as an epic comedy: despite all the setbacks, squabbling and detours, Henry prevails - and incidentally gets the girl in the end!

King Henry V has constantly been pressed into patriotic action when England is faced with a foe to defeat. The play was cherry-picked for quotable passages in the seventeenth century, simplified (principally by removing the Chorus) in the eighteenth century and magnified in the nineteenth, where producers like Charles Kean injected tableaux of the Battle and the subsequent London pageant between acts - effectively fusing historical imagery and the stage play⁸. Today the play remains dominated by Olivier's 1944 film production, which has little to do with the play itself.⁹

What remains from this chaotic production history is that Henry prevails because through it all, he maintains his poise, or should we say his pose as *the model of kingship*. There lies the very problem of Henry's character. Both the real Henry and the fictional Henry are so prone to the manipulation of self-representation, with all the ambiguous paradoxes such an expression entails, it becomes impossible to grasp the real Henry. Speaking of Frank Capra's John Doe, Raymond Carney observes that under the layers of visual packaging, wrapping and merchandising, "it becomes bizarrely possible that there may be *no* John, *no* self at all underneath to break free."¹⁰ Such an assessment is surprisingly apt in considering Henry. For while Henry's life is well documented, all that information is geared towards his political project. There is no personal Henry. It is through our considerations of his political achievement that we arrive at any conclusion as to his character. Which is inconclusive. G; L Harris and Malcolm Vale present him as a model of kingship, while Desmond Seward sees him as a monstrous warlord. Both readings can be sustained in his attitude during the London Pageant. Just as in Shakespeare he is Hazlitt's amiable monster.

So who is he?

⁶ Kenneth Brannagh's 1989 film production of the play makes the link visually, with a battle scratch next to his left ear.

⁷ For the sense of the epic and classically tragic nature of the play, see Maria José ALVAREZ FAEDO, "The Epic Tone in Shakespeare's *Henry V*" in *Sederi*, (1996), pp. 249-252. The diversity of levels and types of Language in *Henry V* has regularly been explored.

⁸ See James D. MARDOCK, "Stage And Screen," *Internet Shakespeare Editions*, (Accessed Jan. 28, 2021): https://internetshakespeare.uvic.ca/doc/H5_StageHistory/complete/

⁹ See Robert C. WOOSNAM-SAVAGE, "Olivier's Henry V: How a Movie Defined the image of the Battle of Agincourt for Generations" in *The Battle of Agincourt*, Anne CURRY and Malcolm MERCER, eds. London and New Haven, Yale University Press, in Assn. with The Royal Armouries, 2015, pp. 235-249. Historian Helen CASTOR considers that the battle's fame can be reduced to one word: Shakespeare. Is it not rather Olivier? See "Agincourt or Azincourt? Victory and defeat in the War of 1415", Lecture at Gresham College (accessed Jan 28, 2021): <https://www.gresham.ac.uk/lectures-and-events/agincourt-or-azincourt-victory-defeat-and-the-war-of-1415>

¹⁰ Raymond CARNEY, *American Vision: The Films of Frank Capra*, Cambridge, New York And Melbourne, Cambridge University Press, 1986. Page 360.