

A little touch of Branagh: *Henry V*

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Abstract

Taking as a starting point the illuminating similarity between the critical reception of Kenneth Branagh's film of *Henry V* (1989) and the liberal humanist reading of the Shakespearean play-text, this article highlights a series of significant stress-points in the play-text and looks at the way they are dealt with in the Branagh film. It is claimed that the film is riven by one central contradiction: namely, that between a political (critical, detached) and a personal (emotional) representation of the action. Ultimately, it is argued that the film's promotion of the spectator's identification with the psychology of power makes of Branagh's Henry a leader for our politically muddled times.

Key words: Identification, English History Play, Naturalism, Representation.

Kenneth Branagh's film of *Henry V*, released in 1989, was greeted with wide critical acclaim of a kind which repays close attention. The film, as is well known, was inspired by a 1984 RSC production directed by Adrian Noble, where Branagh also played the leading role. A paradigmatic reaction to that production, of a kind that was reproduced five years later in the film's reception, was that of the theatre critic of the *Daily Mail*, Jack Tinker, who, after describing the «young Mr Kenneth Branagh» as a «patriotic poet», reflects:

Offhand I can't remember a day when it seemed so marvellous or mad to be English. Suddenly the chronic inconvenience of London's transport strike and the continuing horrors of the mining dispute were put into the merciful perspective of history [...] here at Stratford, with a young, brave and poetic Henry bridging the centuries between by reminding us of the unlikely spirit which won Agincourt [...] (On hearing) Harry's Harfleur spirit [...] it did not, after all, seem improbable that there are still good reasons to be in England now that April's almost here. (Quoted in Holder-ness, 1992: 191)

In short, both the 1984 RSC production of the play and Branagh's 1989 film tapped into an emotion of patriotism as well as into a deep nostalgia for an imagined unity of the nation, anchored in the past (i.e. the spirit of Harfleur

and Agincourt), which serve as consolation for the conflicts, divisions and negations of the present (i.e. the transport strike and the mining dispute).

This kind of reception of the RSC production and the Branagh film runs along the same tracks as the traditional, liberal humanist approach to the play-text of *Henry V*, most clearly and influentially embodied in E.M.W. Tillyard's *Shakespeare's history plays*, published in 1944, in the midst of Britain's war effort. A crucial aspect of the liberal humanist approach to the English history plays at large is the consolidation of Shakespeare as a national poet, as a symbol of a lost organic harmony in British society — precisely the kind of myth of national unity which was invoked throughout the Second World War, not least in Tillyard's own book, with the joint aims of defeating fascism and trying to forge the unification of the bitterly divided Britain of the 1930s (Holderness, 1992: 178-79; 183). In the liberal humanist reading of *Henry V*, the play becomes the story of a Christian king and warrior who led a united nation to foreign conquest — that is, the kind of leader and the kind of national unity which was perceived to be required in the 1940s and, *pace* Tinker, in the 1980s.¹ In particular, Tillyard reads the sequence of history plays from *Richard II* to *Henry V*, the so-called second tetralogy or *Henriad*, as a national epic by means of which the Tudor state legitimised its own power, that is, as a loyal celebration of Tudor order culminating precisely in *Henry V*.²

In sum, Tillyard and other liberal humanist critics of the play of *Henry V*, like Tinker and other reviewers of the 1984 RSC production and/or the 1989 Branagh film, can see no irony, ambiguity or contradiction at all in the play-text/production/film. In a characteristic way, they read for coherence and thus efface conflict and contradiction. And yet there do seem to be a number of significant stress-points in the play-text of *Henry V*, as more recent, historically-oriented critics have claimed (e.g. Cairns and Richards, 1988; Dollimore and Sinfield, 1985, 1992; Holderness, 1992). At the same time, I would argue that if attention is paid to the ways in which Branagh's film deals with such breaking-points, it becomes obvious that the film itself is riven by one central contradiction, different in kind from those found in the play-text.

As mentioned above, the Tillyardian reading sees *Henry V* as the culminating point in Shakespeare's celebration and legitimisation of Tudor power. And

1. In addition to Tillyard, critics such as Lily B. Campbell, G. Wilson Knight, D.A. Traversi and J. Dover Wilson also found in Shakespeare's English histories a sense of order and national unity to compensate for the crisis of their contemporary Britain.
2. Shakespeare's English history plays are customarily grouped into the first tetralogy (*Henry VI*, part 1 c. 1588-90; *Henry VI*, parts 2 & 3 c. 1590-91; and *Richard III* c. 1592-94), the second tetralogy (*Richard II* c. 1595-96; *Henry IV*, parts 1 & 2 c. 1597-98; and *Henry V* c. 1599) and *King John* (c. 1596-97). The plays that make up the second tetralogy were written after those that compose the first, yet they deal with historical material previous to that dramatized in the first tetralogy.

yet the very fact that Tudor power needed legitimising would seem to indicate the existence of fissures in what Tillyard would have us believe was a monolithic, unquestioned, harmonious order. But legitimisation was necessary, among other reasons, because the Tudors' accession to power in 1485 (Henry VII) and their whole claim to the crown was inseparable from a long period of feudal warfare, the Wars of the Roses, which may be traced back to the murder of Richard II by Henry Bolingbroke (Henry IV) in 1399.³ This troubled century of English history gave rise to three bodies of legitimating myth:

- (a) The Lancastrian myth, according to which Richard II's reign was corrupt and it was providentially overthrown by his cousin Henry Bolingbroke of the House of Lancaster. His kingdom, as Henry IV, as well as that of his son, Henry V, was always smiled upon by God.
- (b) The Yorkist myth, according to which the Lancastrians were usurpers who overthrew the rightful king, Richard II; they were providentially deprived of their stolen crown by the divinely supported claim of the true heirs, the Yorkists (Edward IV, Richard III).
- (c) The Tudor myth, which saw the Tudor house as the divine instrument for restoring harmony and forging a united nation, since the Lancastrian line was restored in the person of Henry VII and the Yorkist royal pretensions appeased with the Yorkist heiress Elizabeth (Edward IV's daughter) joined in marriage to Henry VII.

In Shakespeare's text, the Lancastrian myth that formed the basis of the subsequent Tudor myth is to some extent consolidated, particularly the idea that Henry V's kingdom, including his war with France, was providentially sanctioned. In I, ii, Henry's paramount concern is whether «with right and conscience» he may make his claim upon France; he is not satisfied until the Archbishop of Canterbury and the Bishop of Ely assure him that God does indeed support his claim. And throughout the play-text, as is well known, the victories of Henry's army are repeatedly attributed to God —«God fought for us» is Henry's comment after Agincourt (IV, viii).

However, it may indeed be claimed that the play-text also betrays the inherent instability of the Lancastrian myth and hence of Tudor power (Dollimore and Sinfield, 1985: 211). I, ii, where Henry seeks and finds divine legitimisation for his foreign warfare, is preceded by I, i, which clearly shows war with France to be instigated by the Church so as to prevent a bill from being passed which would take away much of their property. Branagh's film shortens both I, i and I, ii considerably, but the idea of the war being sanctioned by the Church rather than God, i.e. a matter of politics rather than a

3. Shakespeare's two tetralogies are precisely about the century that goes from Richard II's accession in 1377 to Richard III's death in 1485, followed by the accession of Henry VII, the first of the Tudors.

divine one, is clearly preserved and even emphasised as far as these two scenes go: witness the close-up on Canterbury's and Ely's conspiratorial faces at the close of I, ii; or, also in I, ii, the close-up on Henry (in the middle), Canterbury (on Henry's right) and Ely (on his left), as Canterbury, serpent-like, promises Henry that if he goes to war, «... we of the spirituality / Will raise your highness such a mighty sum / As never did the clergy at one time / Bring in to any of your ancestors». Nevertheless, the film's principal internal contradiction begins to emerge here: in this case, the fact that even as it highlights the politics of war, it also, at the same time, focuses on the psychological strains of rule and authority as experienced by Henry. More so as it develops, the film's emphasis is on Henry's individual emotion, with the recurrent device of close-up and the film's dominant naturalism ensuring that the spectator engages with the action at the level of individual identification; more precisely, of identification with the psychology of power embodied by Henry/Branagh (Holderness, 1992: 201). The film works hard at preventing any critical distance between the spectator and the main character from emerging, a distance which might give rise to an awareness of the king's duplicity and role-playing.⁴

The same contradiction between the political and the psychological emphases comes to the surface whenever other stress-points in the play-text are considered together with their treatment in Branagh's film. Thus, if *Henry V* is viewed as the last play in Shakespeare's second tetralogy, attention must be paid to the closing Chorus in the play-text. It is a speech which glorifies the kingdom of Henry V —«This star of England»— and his achievements. But it also mentions his son, Henry VI, who, as an infant, succeeded him as king of both England and France: «Whose state so many had the managing,/That they lost France and made his England bleed». That is, Henry V is clearly cut down to size here: he is presented not as the monarch who forged national unity, but as one who diverted internal conflict for a while through foreign war, for the conflict to come alive again in his son's reign. Moreover, Shakespeare's own previous dramatisation of the reign of Henry VI in the first tetralogy — as the closing Chorus in *Henry V* recalls, «Which oft our stage has shown»— provides an ironic perspective on the «achievements» of Henry V. What does the film make of all this instability? The Chorus (Derek Jacobi) blocks out the final scene of diplomatic reconciliation between England and France and he delivers, intact, the speech which undermines Henry V's entire achievement as the maker of national unity. At this point, then, the film chooses to highlight the political and historical dimension of the action.

4. A frequent critical procedure has been to compare Branagh's with Laurence Olivier's *Henry V* (1944). While traditionally the Olivier film has been seen as a straightforward piece of war-time propaganda, Michael Mannheim (1994: 121-128) persuasively argues that Olivier's *Henry V* is a thoroughly duplicitous, Machiavellian king.

However, a more complex instance has to do with IV, i, the night before the decisive battle at Agincourt, when Henry walks around his camp in disguise. Henry's well-known prayer, preserved in the Branagh film, begins with an invocation to the God who supposedly sanctioned his reign («O God of battles, steel my soldiers' hearts!»), but goes on to an acknowledgement of his father's fault in obtaining the crown (a reference to the murder of Richard II by Henry IV) and hence of the guilt and lack of legitimisation that weighs heavily on the power he has inherited — and, by implication, on Lancastrian/Tudor power at large. In addition, Henry's prayer links back to the advice his father gives him near the close (IV, v) of 2 *Henry IV*, in a speech that, again, delegitimises his own rule («God knows, my son, / By what by-paths and indirect crook'd ways / I met this crown») and, interestingly enough, presents foreign war not as part of a divine plan but, again, as a political strategy, in this case, as the only alternative to bitter internal conflict («Therefore, my Harry, / Be it thy course to busy giddy minds / With foreign quarrels»). In going to war against France, then, Henry V is directly following his father's advice, and an awareness of this complicates any simple view of the king as a pawn of the Church's machinations, a complication (i.e. the king as appropriating the Church's spiritual authority) that is not captured in Branagh's film.

However, it may be claimed that in the play-text of *Henry V* such a view of war, as aiming to distract from troubles at home *and* from the deeply questionable legitimacy of the king's rule (and hence of Tudor power at large) and to forge a national unity that was in fact far from existing, is also suppressed. And yet it surfaces obliquely at diverse points. As Dollimore and Sinfield have pointed out, this is a play whose almost obsessive preoccupation is insurrection (1985, 216). Internal betrayal from within the ruling class, which Henry IV warns his son against in the speech mentioned above, is embodied in the play by Richard Earl of Cambridge, Lord Scroop of Masham and Sir Thomas Grey of Northumberland (II, ii), who represent the cause of the deposed Richard II and hence the Yorkist cause.⁵ The play enacts their full confession and acknowledgement of Henry's rule, which is, by extension, an acknowledgement of Tudor power. And yet, the fact that the play registers such an instance of «high treason», as it is called, witnesses to the fact that Lancastrian/Tudor power was never so uncontested and that the nation was not so gloriously unified as liberal humanist critics would contend.

Branagh's treatment of the betrayal scene is clearly personal and emotional rather than political. The speech in which Cambridge hints at his true motive, the restoration of the Yorkist line («For me, the gold of France did not seduce»), is cut. What is emphasised is the shocking treachery of Henry's

5. The historical Richard Earl of Cambridge, Henry IV's cousin, was executed in 1415, two years after Henry V's accession.

friends, with a king/Branagh truly shaken, on the point of tears, throwing Scroop over a table «with an almost sexual intensity, violently enacting the pain of *personal* betrayal» (Holderness, 1992: 199; emphasis added).

But insurrection in Shakespeare's England could come from two other sources, and the play-text has something to say about each of them: the «Celtic» territories of Ireland, Wales and Scotland, and the «lower orders», heavily weighed down by taxation, especially during war-time. In the play-text, the famous act III, scene iii, during the siege of Harfleur, offers an idealised dramatisation of national unity under English rule as discord between the pugnacious «Celtic» captains Fluellen (Welsh), MacMorris (Irish) and Jamy (Scottish) is appeased by the English Captain Gower. These marginal Celts, with their linguistic oddities which are so carefully recorded in the play-text, are united in their service and willing subservience to the English crown —MacMorris's famous question «What ish my nation?» amounts to a (confused) denial of any separate status for Ireland (Cairns and Richards, 1988: 9-11). Thus the real existence in Shakespeare's England of threats to the pretended unity of the nation, coming particularly from Ireland, is effaced in fiction. In addition, it should be borne in mind that Shakespeare's patron, the Earl of Southampton, embarked in the Earl of Essex's expedition against the rebellious Hugh O'Neill, Earl of Tyrone, in April 1599, and it seems that *Henry V* was written in the months of hope between April and September, when Essex returned alone, in ignominious defeat (Cairns and Richards, 1988: 9; Taylor, 1994: 4-5). The Chorus's prologue to Act V contains a direct allusion to Essex's expected triumph, comparing it to Henry's at Agincourt.⁶ In this respect, then, the play-text does seem to function as a piece of Tudor propaganda.⁷

Branagh's film omits the Chorus's prologue to Act V and thus the direct reference to Essex's expedition to Ireland and to his expected triumph in subduing the rebels. Next, it shortens the dialogue between the captains at III, iii and tones down considerably their regional accents, particularly that of the Irish Captain MacMorris, who in the play-text is indeed the very embodiment of the stage Irishman, a figure fit for mockery and scorn (Cairns and Richards, 1988: 10). Nevertheless, MacMorris's question, «What is(h) my nation?», is preserved. Finally, at the end of III, iii, the English captain Gower does not function as arbitrator of the dispute between the Celtic captains; they are simply interrupted by the reality of the war in the form of a group of soldiers coming down from the walls of Harfleur. These options, and the tension between their political overtones and the film's recurrent encouragement of the spectator's identification with the psychology of

6. According to Gary Taylor, this is «the only explicit, extra-dramatic, incontestable reference to a contemporary event anywhere in the canon» (1994: 7). Taylor adds that the play-text's preoccupation with Irish affairs can hardly be doubted, and that Captain MacMorris is Shakespeare's only Irish character (1994: 7).

7. For a different interpretation, see Holderness, 1992: 111-14.

power, seem to strongly suggest the need to consider Branagh's own Irishness. In this respect, Holderness claims that *Henry V*'s treatment of the «Irish question» bespeaks Branagh's own divided culture: he is both «a compatriot of Captain MacMorris», the product of working-class Protestant Belfast, and also the inheritor of that «English» self-help culture which has led him to become an audacious theatrical/cinematic entrepreneur, a development that has been as enthusiastically acclaimed by some as it has been decried by others (Holderness, 1992: 203-206).⁸

Not only nationality, but also class, form the main focus of Holderness's comments. And, as has been pointed out earlier, Shakespeare's play-text is acutely aware of that other source of social instability in his contemporary England: the so-called «lower orders», the common people. For them war meant increased taxation and hence poverty, but also opportunities for pillage, rather than calling forth the ideal of a shared national purpose (Dollimore and Sinfield, 1985: 216). In *Henry IV*, especially in its first part, prince Henry (Hal) is shown frolicking about in taverns and ale-houses with the lower-order characters Nym, Bardolph, Pistol and particularly Falstaff. What 2 *Henry IV* begins to dramatise is confirmed in *Henry V*, namely, that in order to become a monarch, Henry must shed those improper, disputatious friends — Falstaff particularly, who is conveniently reported to have died in *Henry V* (II, iii). Bardolph is also disposed of at III, vi when news reaches the king that he has been stealing French property against his express orders. The king's «We would have all such offenders so cut off» seals Bardolph's fate: execution. But in spite of everything, these low-life characters will insist on being troublesome and, hence, on destabilising the ideology of national unity in wartime and the glorification of Tudor power that the play-text simultaneously endorses. Thus, at Harfleur, immediately after Henry's patriotic appeal to his men, «Once more unto the breach, dear friends, once more», culminating in the well-known rallying cry, «Cry "God for Harry, England, and Saint George!"» (III, i), we hear Nym, Bardolph and Pistol undermining such high-flown rhetoric and wishing they were all safe in an alehouse in London —until they are finally driven forward onto the breach by the king's loyal subject captain Fluellen. Equally, on the battlefield at Agincourt (IV, iv), we see Pistol, in a tragi-comic scene, exchanging a French soldier's life for a ransom of two hundred crowns, a reminder of the only kind of benefit common men could expect to derive from war.

Again, in dealing with this aspect of the play-text the emphasis in Branagh's film is personal rather than social or political, falling as it does on the

8. It is rather tempting to see Branagh's three cinematic engagements as director and main actor with England's «national poet» in terms of his own fluctuating relationship with English/entrepreneurial culture: as a budding impresario fighting hard to get to the top (*Henry V*, 1989); as a mild sceptic learning to enthusiastically embrace/be embraced by it (*Much Ado about Nothing*, 1992); as a more experienced man anxiously reflecting on his complex relationship with the dominant culture (*Hamlet*, 1996).

stressful emotions Henry has to undergo in his shedding of his former friends. The film uses two devices very efficiently here: flashback and close-up. This is particularly clear in the scene of Bardolph's hanging. While the play-text does not dramatise the execution itself, the film famously does, and as it does, a flashback takes the spectator to a tavern in the good old days, where Bardolph jokingly tells the prince: «Do not, when thou art king, hang a thief». Simultaneously, the close-up on the king's face as he supervises the hanging shows him deeply shaken, with tears in his eyes —yet as soon as the execution is over, he displays the military leader's command of himself in being able to bracket off the emotion and pursue the business of warfare. Surely this is a scene that seems calculated to arouse the sort of uncritical identification with the psychology of power which has been mentioned earlier. And yet when the Chorus comes in at the end of the scene — a point where he does not appear in the play-text —, looks up at the hanged Bardolph and shakes his head, the gesture may just about destabilise the above reading and cast the whole episode in a different light: one more instance of the film's split nature between politics and individual psychology. In a similar way, the film diminishes Nym, Bardolph's and Pistol's resistance to go onto the breach at Harfleur by cutting their dialogue at this point, but they are still shown trying to make their escape and being intercepted by the efficient Fluellen. Again, the scene between Pistol and the French soldier is cut, but in the middle of the battle scenes we witness Pistol's grief for Nym's death — the socio-economic implications of war reduced to the personal. Yet Pistol's speech about his plan to go back to England and live by stealing is moved forward in the film from the end of V, i (which is cut) to IV, vii, immediately after the battle of Agincourt has ended: a significant change bearing in mind this is a speech which undermines the play-text's/film's patriotic rhetoric of the glory of war to be found elsewhere.

Apart from his former drinking companions, Henry has other encounters with the common people in the play-text, especially on the eve of Agincourt when he wanders around his camp disguised in a borrowed cloak (IV, i). On that night, the soldiers Bates and Williams, unaware that they are speaking to the king himself, undermine the rhetoric of war and national unity by claiming that (a) they are sure the king wishes he were safe in England as they themselves do; (b) they do not even know whether the king's cause is just and honourable, and that they are in France only because they are the king's subjects and hence must obey him; and (c) if the king's cause is wrong, but also if it is right, he is responsible for what will happen to his soldiers, and he will have «... a heavy reckoning to make, when all those legs and arms and heads, chopped off in battle, shall join together at the latter day and cry all «We died at such a place»; some swearing, some crying for a surgeon, some upon their wives left poor behind them, some upon the debts they owe, some upon their children rawly left», in Williams's powerful imagery. These are obviously weighty arguments, and Henry is shown to have serious difficulties in answering them. He seeks to disclaim the question of kingly responsibility by

reducing it to the case of soldiers who have committed serious crimes before coming to war, crimes for which he can then refuse responsibility. «Every subject's duty is the king's; but every subject's soul is his own», he concludes, thus claiming all power for himself and disclaiming all responsibility in the same breath. Another favourite strategy, here as at other points in the play-text, is Henry's insistence that the king is «but a man» (IV, i), a fantasy of equality which seeks to erase the reality of power. Moreover, the king is «but a man» who is weighed down by worries that private men know nothing of: ceremony and adulation make him more of a slave than the lowest, most wretched of his subjects. Such at least are Henry's arguments at IV, i, after his uncomfortable encounter with Bates and Williams —again, an obvious attempt at effacing the very material reality of power.

As regards the Branagh film, it may be considered significant that in Henry's long speech where he claims all power and rejects all responsibility, the reference to soldiers who have committed crimes previous to joining the army is cut —perhaps a decision that makes Henry's arguments, particularly his claim that «Every subject's duty is the king's; but every subject's soul is his own», even weaker than they appear in the play-text. On the other hand, the film goes a long way towards endorsing the illusion of equality between the king and his subjects and, hence, the effacement of the reality of power, in the memorable «Non Nobis» scene after Agincourt, where the camera and the spectator follow Henry through the corpse-strewn battlefield as he carries a dead boy on his shoulders and is protected from the attack of a grieving French mother by his former enemy, the now-admiring herald Montjoy.

The corpse-strewn battlefield at Agincourt is the culminating point of a much-debated aspect of Branagh's film: its tough «realistic» portrayal, so it has been claimed, of the brutality of war; this is a film that will not hide from us that war is hell (Fitter, 1991: 259). While the play-text does not dramatise the battle scenes, it does dwell on imagery of slaughter. The cinematic medium allows for the actualisation of such imagery, and Branagh's film makes the most of it, using slow motion and music deftly to heighten the effect of the battle scenes. But what is their effect? Is it to undercut the patriotic, egalitarian rhetoric of war in, for example, Henry's rallying Saint Crispin's speech before Agincourt («We few, we happy few, we band of brothers/For he to-day that sheds his blood with me/Shall be my brother ...» (IV, iii) —in the film, Henry delivers the speech standing on a cart with his adoring, fully roused men looking up at him and acclaiming him at the end) by showing the terrible carnage of war? Or, alternatively, do the battle scenes betray an ambiguous fascination with the experience of war and with military leadership which has been seen as characteristic of post-Falklands British culture (Holderness, 1992: 201)? This remains, in my view, an open question; one more point where the film displays an unresolvable ambiguity.

The play-text's and the film's sexual politics also repay close attention. As Dollimore and Sinfield point out:

[...] Princess Katharine is planted in the play as [...] the symbol of enforced French submission. She is reported to be on offer to the English in the act 3 Chorus —directly before Henry's rape speech at Harfleur. Immediately after the entering of Harfleur, she is shown learning how to translate her body into language accessible to the English. (1992: 137)

The so-called wooing-scene (V, ii) is crucial in this respect. At no point does Henry disguise the fact that she is has no option but to yield and that power lies with him. And yet he persists in seeking Katharine's acquiescence by repeatedly asking her to admit that she loves him and, at the same time, making it clear that she has no choice but to love him: «a sadistic exercise of power over her», indeed (Dollimore and Sinfield, 1992: 137). When, in reply to his «Wilt thou have me?», she says, «Dat is as it shall please de *roi mon père*», Henry concludes, «Nay, it will please him well, Kate. It shall please him, Kate», with all the assurance that power and a deal struck between kings may give. Katharine's behaviour in the scene is complex: she is overwhelmed by the power/language of England, but her submissiveness is questionable. In fact, she declines to join in the pretence that her wishes matter at all through a strategy of minimalist replies and through never saying that she will marry Henry willingly (Dollimore and Sinfield, 1992: 138). Her objecting to the king's kissing her lips forces Henry once more into an open admission that she has no other option but submission to his power («Therefore, patiently and yielding»). In addition, when the others return, the conversation between Henry, Burgundy and the King of France makes it plain that Katharine is no more than a convenient object of exchange between the two kingdoms/kings, compared as she is to the maiden cities of France which «war hath never entered».

As Dollimore and Sinfield point out, «Whether the betrothal of Katharine appears delightful or oppressive depends on the framework of assumptions readers and audiences bring to it» (1992: 139). But it also depends, of course, on the way V, ii (including the wooing-scene) and also III, iv (Katharine's French lesson) are played. In Branagh's film there may be little doubt that, in both cases, the oppressiveness, the reality of power, is downplayed, while the delightfulness and playfulness are emphasised. Branagh's and Emma Thompson's acting consistently create this impression —surely reinforced by the spectator's knowledge that at the time they were husband and wife—, and the cutting of the political conversation between Henry, Burgundy and the French King after the wooing clearly reinforces it. Once more, the film opts for a personal reading of the play-text: romance rather than politics. And yet, at the end of the English lesson scene (III, iv), the reality of power does intrude abruptly upon Katharine's/Emma Thompson's playful repetition of the words she has learnt: as she opens the door, she comes up against the impregnable faces of the King her father, the Dauphin and the rest of the councillors.

Last, but certainly not least, the Chorus. As far as the play-text is concerned, the traditional liberal humanist view of the Chorus is that its function is to give the drama an epic character. By urging the audience to supply, through imaginative participation («On your imaginary forces work», Act I Prologue), the grand scale proper to the epic, the Chorus, so it is claimed, holds up the hero and his actions for undiluted admiration (Holderness, 1992: 107-108). However, the Chorus's speeches in the play-text may be argued to have an ambivalent function, i.e. even as they conjure up an epic dimension («Then should the warlike Harry, like himself,/ Assume the port of Mars; and at his heels,/ Leashed in like hounds, should famine, sword and fire/ Crouch for employment» (Act I Prologue); see also Act IV Prologue), they also, in an almost Brechtian manner, draw attention to the theatricality and artificiality of the dramatic event, to the fact that what the audience are witnessing is no more, after all, than a performance in which history is reshaped by actors on a stage (Holderness, 1992: 108). Indeed, the Choruses do continually insist on the illusory nature of the representation, and they do so by calling attention to the stage (e.g. «this unworthy scaffold», «this cockpit», «this wooden O», «the girdle of these walls»; Act I Prologue) and to the acting/actors and the audience (e.g. «For 'tis your thoughts that now must deck our kings»; Act I Prologue). In sum, the Chorus's speeches have a paradoxical effect in the play-text as a whole: they promote admiration for the epic grandeur of the hero/action, yet at the same time they hinder spontaneous identification by way of insisting on the illusory nature of the dramatic representation. They induce both «empathy *and* objectivity, but not in a mutually cancelling relationship, since the objectivity is a way of self-consciously perceiving the empathy» (Holderness, 1992: 111).

Branagh's treatment of the Chorus bespeaks the same ambiguity as has been traced so far in the film: i.e. the split between the film's promotion of the spectator's identification with Henry's/Branagh's emotions and with the psychology of power, and its enabling, at certain points, a more detached, critical, political reading of the dramatic action. The latter may be detected, for instance, in the Chorus's above-mentioned appearance after Bardolph's hanging; in the preservation of the Chorus's undercutting closing speech, also commented on above; in the film's opening shots, which show the Chorus in an empty film studio, opening a pair of set doors onto the dramatic action; or in the fact that the Chorus, unlike the characters who are involved in the dramatic action, does not wear period clothes —surely all attempts at capturing the play-text's «Brechtian» use of the Chorus. However, the film's pull towards emotional identification with and empathy for the heroic individual and the psychology of power is never seriously questioned by its Chorus. The dominant note in the film is struck by the Act IV Prologue, when the Chorus memorably describes the English camp on the eve of Agincourt, dwelling on Henry in terms that stress his supposed fraternity and equality with his men, as the camera follows Branagh/Henry V:

O now, who will behold
 The royal captain of this ruined band
 Walking from watch to watch, from tent to tent,
 Let him cry «Praise and glory on his head!»
 For forth he goes and visits all his host,
 Bids them good morrow with a modest smile
 And calls them brothers, friends and countrymen.

[...] A largess universal like the sun
 His liberal eye doth give to every one,
 Thawing cold fear, that mean and gentle all,
 Behold, as may unworthiness define,
 A little touch of Harry in the night.

Michael Mannheim claims that while Laurence Olivier created a duplicitous, Machiavellian Henry V,⁹ Branagh creates a complex Henry for the 1990s, one who «radically divides our sympathies», since he «focuses our eternal schizophrenia about wars and heroes» (1994: 129-130). I would argue, however, that it is the film's uneasy fluctuation between the personal and the political and its promotion of the spectator's identification with the psychology of power that makes of Branagh's king a Henry for our politically muddle-headed times.

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9. See note 4 above.