

Reality and Mythology in *Henry V*

In 1588, King Philip of Spain deployed his recently finished armada to England in an attempt to overthrow Elizabeth I and restore Catholicism to England. The ensuing conflict resulted in catastrophic destruction of the Spanish fleet, and while it is tempting to argue that the English soundly defeated the Spanish, this conclusion idealizes the English impact on the victory. In reality, the English were only successful in driving the Spanish away from England, and it was a storm that caused the majority of the damage to the Spanish fleet. Despite this reality, the English were quick to argue that their victory was God's will because "God blew and [the Spanish] were scattered," and they even went so far as to have that slogan imprinted on medals for the sailors who defended England (Johnson). The English were unable to see the world as it was because they were too eager to mythologize their own strength, a theme that Shakespeare explores a decade later in *Henry V*.

In his play, Shakespeare tells the story of another English hero, King Henry V, but contradicts the equally mythological stance the English take to Henry by showing his struggle with doubts throughout the conflict with France. Henry's doubt is pervasive and he exhaustively questions his counselors, and his own actions, to be sure he is pursuing the correct course. Before his final victory at Agincourt, Henry demonstrates a pattern of real decision-making that ends in this victory, contradicting the mythological Henry, whom the English in Shakespeare's day believed God willed to win. The English misunderstood this subtle portrait of Henry, and turned the play into a celebration of yet another English hero's divine preordination for victory. Because this play was interpreted as a heroic mythology almost from the beginning, even when modern adaptations attempt to present Shakespeare's subtle line between myth and reality, their continued emphasis on the heroic myth prevents them from recapturing Henry's reality.

For instance, Kenneth Branagh's film adaptation of *Henry V* attempts to capture the angst Henry feels about justifying his actions, but it focuses too heavily on Henry's strength, honor, and courage for his worries to seem equally important. Because Henry's victory is overemphasized, Henry's doubt seems diminished and Branagh fails to effectively present Shakespeare's nuanced argument. Branagh's adaptation fails to argue that Henry's doubts, and the decisions he makes in response to them, lead to his victory at Agincourt, rather than divine preordination or some innate heroic characteristic. To illustrate Shakespeare's original argument against mythologizing human actions, it is helpful to focus on one particular message that gets lost in Branagh's adaptation: Shakespeare's exploration of what makes a war just.

Branagh's film idealizes Henry's victory, and suggests that it comes from a higher source or is somehow mythological because he fails to convey the concerns about whether his war is just that Henry struggles with. Instead, to ensure that King Henry appears heroic and chivalrous, Branagh takes moments from the text where Henry is concerned about the legitimacy of his actions and alters them to portray Henry as merely thoughtful or humble. Most problematically, Branagh adjusts the tone of the Crispin's day speech to portray Henry as mythologically heroic. Branagh presents Henry as a ruler granting courage to his men, and uses multiple filmic techniques to ensure the viewer interprets the scene that way. First, he adopts frequent low angle shots to present Henry as the ruler he is, above mere common men. Branagh reinforces this portrayal by consistently walking Henry higher and higher whilst ensuring that all those who are level with him vacate that equality by sitting down. Henry is solidly established as the voice of the scene not only because he is the speaker, but also because where he looks, the camera follows. When he addresses his nobles specifically (4.3.53-54) the camera views them from his point of view, and whenever there is a cut away shot, Henry looks to where the camera moves

before it moves there. When the camera is positioned closer to Henry's face as the speech draws to a close, the camera angle shifts to an eye-level view just as Henry calls those around him a "band of brothers" (4.3.60), reinforcing the notion that he is fighting for his people. When the camera shifts farther away from Henry, the low angle full body shot reinforces the powerful position he is in, and the posing of the king emphasizes the heroic nature of the rousing speech he has just given.

Branagh ties all of these elements together using an uplifting tune to emphasize the hope and honor that Henry is conveying to his people. The music is not based in the scene, but it is essential to the emotional build up Branagh uses to ensure that those watching his adaptation see Henry as the hero of the play by the end of the scene. This is because the music is synchronistic with the tone Branagh builds in the scene, and so it cooperates with the gradually building speech patterns Branagh adopts in his portrayal of Henry to reinforce the heroic posing, framing, and speaking that make this scene the highlight of the film. As the scene moves towards the Battle of Agincourt, Branagh even manipulates the actual text, removing lines which describe Henry's soldiers taking spoils from dead French soldiers. Branagh does transpose these lines into the battle scene wherein Corporal Nim and Ensign Pistol are shown thieving their way through the fight. However, because Branagh moves this information to the battle scene, he essentially argues that the English forces themselves are as heroic as Henry is. After all, those who act poorly are simply excised from the heroic main body by fate itself. This impression certainly suits the mythological implications of the Crispin's day speech as presented by Branagh, but Shakespeare takes a more realistic, and therefore less flattering, view.

Shakespeare uses the entirety of the play to attempt to explain what makes a war just, and explores just wars by evaluating the rationale and real circumstances that affect Henry's actions.

As the highlight of Branagh's film is a speech extolling the virtues of fighting in a war to portray the main character as a hero, any nuance about what makes a war worth fighting is inherently undermined, and it is for this reason that anyone wishing to explore Shakespeare's arguments on just wars in full must turn to the original text. From the first scene of the play, Shakespeare casts doubt on the justification that Henry uses for invading France. As the play opens, the Archbishop of Canterbury and the Bishop of Ely are discussing how they might preserve the property of the Church in England. Their solution is to persuade the king that he should invade France and take the desired land from the French. When they meet with Henry, he knows that their goal is to preserve their land, which is why he charges them not to "fashion, wrest, or bow [their] reading" (1.2.14), and explains that "[he] will hear, note, and believe in heart that what [Canterbury and Ely] speak is in [their] conscience washed as pure as sin with baptism" (1.2.30-32). Henry essentially lays before them the promise that if they mislead him, the sins of the coming fighting will fall on their head, not his, and then asks them to proceed with this understanding in mind.

Despite the Archbishop laying out his understanding of the law according to the charge Henry places on him before he speaks, when Henry responds to the Archbishop's explanation, his first question is "May I with right and conscience make this claim?" (1.2.96). Though he has already sworn the bishops to honesty, he immediately asks for another oath of that honesty. Interestingly, the Archbishop chooses to grant this second oath by claiming that if he has not been honest, he will take the sin upon his own head (1.2.97), as though he were, like Christ, capable of taking another's sin onto his own head. It is at this moment that Henry resolves to fight for France, in part because the Archbishop so strongly assures him that his cause is just and urges him to war. This moment begins Shakespeare's exploration of just wars because it enables readers to see that Henry is aware of the bishops' ulterior motives and that he therefore cannot

completely trust their proofs. However, Henry seems to acknowledge Canterbury's second oath as honest, and so declares that he will either rule France or die trying (1.2.222-233). This decision raises the question of whether Henry does fully understand that he is committing to a war on potentially faulty premises, perhaps suggesting Henry may simply wish to conquer France and is willing to overlook faulty arguments if they lend him the authority to do so.

Though Henry's youth is also a possible cause, it is more likely that Henry chooses to invade France because the Archbishop gives him enough license to move forward with preparations to invade France. This will be an offensive war designed to take lands, and Victor Tadros' essay entitled *Punitive Wars*, explains how one might justify such a war. According to Tadros, the best justification for a punitive war is deterrence, which he describes as using aggression to prevent further conflict, with the express condition that the threat of aggression is credible because it is possible the threat might be carried out in a timely fashion (20). This justification is problematic because it rarely qualifies as "sufficient just cause" on its own. This problem is resolved by Henry's delayed departure for France which gives the French time to discover several English noblemen they can turn into traitors. A development like this raises the question of why the king delayed, but as soon as he has caught the traitors, he leaves, doubting "not now but every rub is smoothed in [his] way" (2.2.184). According to Tadros, France's assassination attempt could signify an initial justification for war, but it is clear that Shakespeare also intends the delay to signify that there were doubts about the invasion prior to this point. This reality is not heroic, and even though later discussions make clear that Henry is likely concerned that his cause for making war is unjust, Branagh's adaptation glosses over these concerns as Henry leaves in a flurry of activity aligned with the myth of Henry's trust in his own righteousness.

Before the walls of Harfleur, Shakespeare makes it clear that the French are defending their homes from a foreign invader. Henry neatly sidesteps this reality by declaring that it was a sin to resist his invasion (3.3.120), as though he were God and could make those decisions. Here Henry is mythologizing himself purely out of his personal pride, and attempts to use the framework of deterrence to argue that his conflict is just. However, according to Tadros' explanation of deterrence, Henry lacks the credible ability to carry out his threat against the city, and so he cannot possibly claim to be deterring future conflict by attacking them. In contrast to the heroic tone of the Crispin's day speech, Branagh seems to reinforce the notion that Henry cannot hope to win Harfleur by force with his portrayal of Henry in that scene. Henry's language at Harfleur is so profane it does not bear repeating (3.3.80-118), and Henry approaches the walls filthy and alone. What is worth examining is Henry's claim that, if those abominable things happen to the French, it will be because they were "guilty in defense" (3.3.120). Shakespeare uses this scene to complicate the seemingly illustrious history of King Henry. Henry's speech indicates that he knows his victory is not credible, so instead he claims his will is so divine that only an act of God, summoning "the leviathan to come ashore" (3.3.103-4), can prevent it, a profanity that directly mars any heroic claims he may have.

Later, as Henry walks through the English encampment before the Battle of Agincourt to assess his army, he disguises himself and comes across three soldiers who discuss the coming battle with him without the knowledge that he is their king. These men explain to their visitor that they are not eager to fight, even going so far as to wish the king were there alone so that he would be ransomed and their lives saved (4.1.116-17). Henry responds that he would wish to be nowhere else because he knows the king's cause is "just" and his "quarrel honorable" (4.1.121-22). However, Henry is surprised when the soldier Bates claims that it doesn't matter because if

the "cause be wrong, [their] obedience to the King wipes the crime of it out of [them]" (4.1.126-27). Henry does not seem to object too strongly to this argument at first, but is driven to anger by the words of the soldier Williams, who claims that if the men die for a bad cause, their deaths will fall on the head of the king. It is important to note that Williams' speech is uniquely eloquent, relying on polysyndeton (repeated conjunctions as in "all those legs and arms and heads chopped off in battle"), asyndeton (removed conjunctions as in "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"), and even a strong perorative statement (an amplifying conclusion as in "if these men do not die well, it will be a black mark for the King that led them to it") to drive home the point that King Henry V is responsible should the English soldiers die for a bad cause (4.1.128-37). These rhetorical techniques are designed to elicit a strong emotional response, so it is little wonder that Williams is able to drive Henry to an angry rebuke. However, Williams uses these rhetorical devices in a careful and rational argument, so Henry's anger merely reinforces the argument that he is not completely comfortable claiming his war as just.

If the war were absolutely just, then Henry could explain in a rational manner how it was so. Instead, Henry launches into a speech of forty lines, only three of which contain non-fallacious argument. Henry begins by using a weak analogy that if a son sent to sea to trade or a servant sent to convey money are killed, the logic Bates and Williams have employed would place the sin of their death on the father or master that sent them (4.1.139-45). These comparisons are not inherently fallacious, but when Henry claims that because neither the father, nor the master, nor the king intend the death of those that serve them, the weak analogy he is making is revealed. While it is certain that travelling the ocean and carrying large sums of money

can be dangerous, there is a clear difference between those activities and waging war. The son and servant Henry cites may be exposed to natural disaster and lawlessness, but those have only a chance of striking. A soldier ordered to war by his king goes to war to put himself in harm's way. The king may "purpose not their deaths when [he] proposes their service" (4.1.148), but he is responsible for their circumstances, and when those circumstances are an inherent risk to life and limb it is clearly fallacious to argue that he is no more responsible for their deaths than a father who loses his son to a natural disaster.

Henry continues his rebuttal by resorting to *ad hominem* attacks on the honor and righteousness of his soldiers, implying that he cannot be responsible for their previous sins (4.1.161-64). In relying on *ad hominem* attacks to impugn the character of his soldiers, Henry fails to realize that he is responsible for these men, and if he knew that they were as bad as he claims, he could hardly have entered into a war expecting his cause to remain just when he must rely on soldiers as inherently evil as his. While it is true that the king cannot be held responsible for the murders, perjuries, robberies, or other sins that his soldiers committed outside of their role as soldiers, this does not mean that he cannot be held responsible for any sin his soldiers commit in his service whether they were committed under his orders or not (4.1.149-64). It is a hasty generalization to declare that, because he is not responsible for their personal sins, he is not responsible for the sins that he orders them to commit. By his own admission, murder is a sin, and any war of conquest is inherently a war of that involves some murdering of the innocent.

Henry continues his argument with Williams by claiming that every soldier's "soul is his own" (4.1.165), implying that it is not his fault that his soldiers are killers—it is their own. Although this claim has a certain sort of logic, that logic is countered by Henry's earlier decision to go to war based on the Archbishop's claim that he would take the sin of the war from Henry's

head if the war was not just. By arguing that every man's sin is his alone, Henry dirties his own hands with the blood from the archbishop's head while attempting to move blame to his soldiers, and also raises the question of what would have happened had the English actually taken Harfleur as Henry claimed they would. Henry's vile speech before Harfleur implies that his soldiers are capable of great evil, and if that is so, then by Henry's earlier admission (4.1.161-64), bringing them to France inherently means his cause cannot remain just. Shakespeare argues that, just as Henry relies on the Archbishop to absolve him of an unjust war, the soldiers rely on Henry to absolve them from the same fate.

Shakespeare is clearly playing with the power of words in this scene to illustrate the fact that Henry cannot possibly justify his war, a reality directly in conflict with the English mythology that surrounds him. First, he uses a common man to present an eloquent and rational argument that the war is not just, and then has the king, who should be better trained in rhetorical devices, use less eloquent and less rational language to attempt to counter that argument. Shakespeare is clearly indicating that Henry is flustered by Bates and Williams' claim that his head will bear their sins if the cause is not just, and though it seems that Bates agrees with him in the end, it is clear that Shakespeare has more to say on this subject. Shakespeare continues his exploration of the justness of Henry's war by using Bates' agreement that "every man that dies ill, the ill upon his own head. The King is not to answer it" (4.1.173-74), to condemn Henry further if his cause is not just. Shakespeare writes this as an agreement, but it means that Henry's sin cannot be visited upon Canterbury, and even though Shakespeare writes that the King is not to answer every man that dies ill, the implication is that he must still answer to God for his own sins. Compelling others to murder certainly seems to be a sin, so Henry is rendered as guilty by this "agreement" from Bates as he was by Williams' earlier dissent.

In his book, *Just Wars*, Alex J. Bellamy explores “Just War Doctrines” to reinforce this notion, and argues that Shakespeare himself presents *Henry V* as a play “imbued with nationalism and militarism,” but that in spite of this “Shakespeare portrayed [Henry] as being particularly concerned to prove the justice of his cause—even employing scholars to research and present his case in detail—and conduct himself with the utmost regard for chivalric values” (64). Bellamy specifically explores the cultural response to Shakespeare, and references John Colet’s argument against “the idea that one can kill without feeling hatred towards the enemy” and, “therefore, killing could not be considered an act of Christian charity” (Ibid). No matter how heroically Branagh portrays Henry, heroics do not mask Shakespeare’s message that killing without justification, even in war, should be described as murder.

On some level, Henry understands that killing requires solid justification to avoid being murder, and his conscience is apparently pricked by his conversation with Bates and Williams. As he prepares to return to his tent, Henry pleads with God that He will “think not upon the fault [Henry IV] made in compassing the crown” (4.1.275-76). Though it is unclear whether Henry IV murdered Richard II after deposing him, it is certain that his actions led to the young king’s death, and for the younger King Henry, this is close enough to murder that he must repent for his father’s actions by going so far as to pay people to pray and sing year-round for Richard’s soul (4.1.277-84). Henry couches his statements of hope in terms usually reserved for religion in this play, but that overuse of religion means that here, where he is actually practicing religion to repent, his religious language seems superficial by association. Henry has been using religious language as a rhetorical device to manipulate his subjects, and it means that when he actually needs religion to support him, he is left so insecure in his faith that he cannot truly believe in the justness of his war.

When King Henry gives his Crispin's day speech, Shakespeare makes it clear that Henry uses religious language to exploit his soldiers precisely because he is unsure of his cause. There are other rhetorical manipulations, and the most glaring of these instances comes right at the beginning as Henry challenges Warwick's desire for more soldiers saying "What's he that wishes so?" (4.3.18). This instance of epilexis (questioning to rebuke) is exceptional because rather than following the most traditional form of epilexis and implying Warwick is an idiot for not already understanding why they don't want more soldiers; Henry instead condescends to enlighten him. Though Branagh indicates Henry condescends in jest, it nevertheless sets a negative tone for the rest of the speech. In condescending to urge his men to heroics, Henry not only manipulates them, but does so in service to his own pride, which is problematic for a scene that ends with Henry stating "and how thou pleasest, God, dispose the day" (4.3.133). It is in this conflicting final statement that Henry's faith is fully portrayed as false. To blatantly speak the words of religion with pride at how well they serve a selfish purpose is wrong, but Henry goes farther, using these words to argue that whatever the outcome is, it is the will of God. In this way, Henry compounds his earlier sin of speaking for God before the walls of Harfleur, and essentially states that although he doesn't know if his cause is just, a victory for the English will be the same as God declaring that Henry has been fighting a just war.

This argument is fully confirmed after the boys in the English camp are killed by the retreating French army. Henry declares that he "was not angry since [he] came to France until this instant" (4.7.47) a claim that is true only because Henry's anger at the Dauphin's mock and the traitors' treason was aroused while he was in England. Henry commands his men to kill all their prisoners in retaliation so that no Frenchman may "taste [his] mercy" (4.7.57), an overzealous action that indicates Henry has little concern for maintaining a just war after that

point. To Henry, the French atrocity has justified the English cause. Bellamy specifically cites this moment when he argues that “In the vast majority of cases (if not all) . . . those involved in killing others 'hated' and wished harm upon those they were striking” (64). Henry certainly hates the cowardice of the French in this moment, but in what is could have been the most justifiable moment in Henry’s invasion, he chooses to kill soldiers who were not involved in the murder of the boys rather than seeking to justly pursue those who committed the atrocity. Shakespeare uses Henry’s disproportionate response to argue that wars are inherently unjust, and wars of conquest even more so. Not only is Henry’s mythology presented as falsified, but the reality that Henry kills unarmed men and so becomes only slightly better than those who slaughtered boys serves to damn any mythologizing of the entire Battle of Agincourt.

Shakespeare ends this exchange by reintroducing the herald Montjoy, who tells Henry that the English have won. Henry responds “Praised be God, and not our strength, for it” (4.7.78), but because of all the preparatory work Shakespeare has put into demonstrating how Henry sees himself nearly equal to God, it seems odd that Henry should invoke God’s support now. However, Henry is once again profaning the sanctity of God by arguing that no matter what he said or did to get there, victory serves as the ultimate argument that he fought with God’s support. Shakespeare wants those seeing this portion of his play to be uncomfortable when they realize that the essence of Henry’s argument is that his victory is his justification. This argument implies Henry was not justified until he was victorious, but Shakespeare is actually illustrating that when Henry claims the war is justified, he is really only attempt to mythologize himself.

By forcing readers to consider whether Henry’s victory justifies his actions, Shakespeare successfully draws attention to a simple reality: victory does not grant the victor God’s divine will. Shakespeare is specifically targeting the arguments that followed the Armada’s defeat in his

play *Henry V*, specifically because he knows how dangerous they are. By attributing God's will to his campaign, Henry legitimized the violence, sin, and anger he experienced as he fought the French, and laid the ground work for a mythology that he accomplished far more than he did in reality. Shakespeare spends the entire play undermining this conclusion by pointing out that Henry never knew if his cause was just, and attempted to act in whatever way he saw as being best for himself, his cause, and his men. The success Henry finds in his own actions is impressive, and the English should be proud of his achievement, but this play is explicitly warning them against taking the achievements of men and attributing them to God. When humanity bestows upon God their achievements, they profane the power of God, essentially assuming that He is as proud of their achievements as they are. Not only do they defy God's power to decide what He will ordain, they use their profane statements to mythologize themselves, an act that can only be described as utter hubris. To counteract this hubris, Shakespeare writes *Henry V* to ask for humility, both from the soldiers and the nation at large, because if they cannot remember to be humble, then their claim of God's support is really only an expression of their national pride. Pride like this leads future generations to attempt to match the mythology of their predecessors, but because mythology rarely expresses the reality of human effort, this pride results in attempts to regain more ideal achievements that can only end in one way: disaster.

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