

INTRODUCTION

First performed in 1599, and, according to its first appearance in print, ‘played sundry times’ by 1600, *Henry V* fell out of the theatrical repertoire after a single revival in 1605 until the eighteenth century. By the mid-twentieth century, however, a skit on Shakespeare in the theatre included a weary Henry alongside Hamlet and Juliet begging audiences to ‘give us a rest’.¹ Popularity and unpopularity both tell a story about the play and its audiences, and the fluctuating fortunes of *Henry V* in the theatre are instructive in reminding us that stage history can only be understood in a broader cultural and historical context. The political and emotional distance, for example, between George Rignold’s heroic Henry entering the stage in 1879 on a white horse called Crispin, and Michael Pennington leading a ragtag hooligan army with placards proclaiming ‘Fuck the Frogs’ (1986–9) is as much a measure of changing British attitudes to leadership as it is of the changing cultural role of Shakespeare, changing scholarly opinions or changing theatrical styles. It could be argued that the Napoleonic wars, the Festival of Britain and Vietnam have been at least as important to the history of *Henry V* in production as have Hazlitt, Kemble and Stanislavsky. Gary Taylor notes that the popularity of the play in the nineteenth century owes more to ‘English foreign policy than to English theatrical taste’,² and this association between stage and politics is a perennial feature of the play’s life in the theatre in other centuries too.

The play’s serial topicality emerges as one of the most pressing features of its life on the stage, as it reflects, recalls and participates in military conflicts from the Crimea to the Falklands. To stage the play has always been a political act, and most often consciously so. The politics to which the play has spoken have most commonly been British or, more specifically, English ones: no other Shakespeare play has been so ignored outside the English-speaking world, and it is both a cause and an effect of the insularity of its performance history that it has been seen to be so inescapably engaged with

- 1 Sandy Wilson, ‘Give Us A Rest’ from *See You Later* (1953), reprinted in *The Shakespeare Revue*, eds. Christopher Luscombe and Malcolm McKee, (London: Nick Hern Books, 1994), pp. 23–4.
- 2 Gary Taylor (ed.), *The Oxford Shakespeare: Henry V* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), p. 111.

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changing and contested definitions of English and British national identity.³ In addition there are, however, specifically theatrical questions in the history of the play on the stage: star versus ensemble playing, realism versus epic, historical pageant versus contemporary *realpolitik*, the issue of roles for women. The Introduction to this volume aims to discuss these in the chronology of *Henry V* in the theatre and to trace the interventions which have shaped this ongoing narrative.

All stage histories are inevitably structured around the necessary absence of their object: the director Richard Eyre has suggested that the theatrical performance has the same ephemeral beauty as the snowman sculpted by Michelangelo during rare wintry weather in Florence.⁴ All available sources of information – promptbooks, reviews, interviews or recollections or stated intentions of theatre practitioners, photographs, and, for the most recent productions, video recordings of live performances, are partial, sometimes contradictory, and often potentially misleading. Stage history is as much an account of reception as it is of production, and often audiences do not experience what directors intended them to experience – as when to the professed surprise of the cast, some audiences at the play in the new Globe theatre in 1997 cheered the English and booed the French. Of course neither productions nor audiences are homogeneous, although stage history has tended to prefer the pragmatic singular ‘production’ over the bewilderingly multiple ‘performances’. Sometimes a long-held assumption about a play can be sustained in the face of a production which attempts to dismantle it: a number of reviews of Terry Hands’ quizzical 1975 production maintained that the play was a patriotic epic despite the director’s attempt to interrogate, rather than reproduce, this dominant interpretation.⁵ In the Commentary I have preferred to quote from rather than paraphrase or interpret promptbooks and reviews so as to allow readers to reconstruct something of these performances and form their own judgements on their significance. Unless otherwise identified, commentary on the productions by Adrian Noble, Ron Daniels and Richard Olivier is based on my own experience as an audience member; so too are the comments on the filmed versions of the play directed by Laurence Olivier, Michael Hayes, David Giles, Michael Bogdanov and Kenneth Branagh. Because not all

3 See, for example, ‘What Ish My Nation’ in David Cairns and Shaun Richards, *Writing Ireland: Colonialism, Nationalism and Culture* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1988).

4 Richard Eyre, *Changing Stages: A View of the British Theatre in the Twentieth Century* (London: Bloomsbury, 2000), p. 10.

5 For example, the *Daily Express* review, quoted in Beauman: ‘This is a gutsy, reviving production at a time of national adversity. And boy, do we need it’ (p. 253).

productions of a play are radical reinterpretations, and because we misrepresent theatre history if we leave out the standard productions in favour of those which pioneer different approaches, I have tried to give space to periods when stage productions do not change as well as those when innovative practitioners transform the theatrical possibilities of the text. The Introduction takes a broadly chronological approach to the stage history of the play, although it will be clear that this does not imply a linear narrative of development.

I have also made extensive use of filmic examples, particularly from the films of Laurence Olivier and Kenneth Branagh, largely because these are still widely available for individual viewing and discussion unlike the melted snowmen discussed elsewhere in this book. There are, however, significant differences between stage and film versions of a play: not just the specific differences of interpretation for the different languages of the two media, which can be traced in the example of Branagh's very different stage and film versions of the play discussed below, but more fundamentally in the positioning of the audience. Plays do not control the focus of an audience in the ways that films must do: in the theatre, we always have the choice to look elsewhere. Sitting with other audience members in the theatre watching a live performance played out on a stage in front of you is very different from sitting in a cinema watching the constructed sequence of shots put together by the director, and both these are different again from the small-screen, often solitary, or domestic experience of watching Shakespeare on television or video. There are also methodological problems in this distinction: live performance exists, as Walter Benjamin put it, in 'time and space, its unique existence at the place where it happens to be',⁶ but film's material existence allows its repeated viewing and analysis by audiences far removed from the original viewers. For example, in an article first published in 1984, Graham Holderness proposes that to interpret Olivier's 1944 film as offering a "straight" patriotic version of *Henry V* is to interpret selected parts' and 'to seriously underestimate the subtlety of the film's aesthetic devices' by which, he argues, a traditional reading of Henry's character is seriously destabilised.⁷ This retrospective reinterpretation constructs meanings from the film text which do not seem to have been available to cinemagoers who saw the film in its historical context at the end of the war. I have tried to take account of film's original audiences and situation as well as recognising its

6 Walter Benjamin, 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction' in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt (London: Fontana Press, 1993), p. 214.

7 Graham Holderness, *Shakespeare Recycled: The Making of Historical Drama* (Brighton: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1992).

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particular and fruitful ongoing life in the pedagogy and scholarship of Shakespeare in production.

**RABBIT AND DUCK: THE PLAY'S
 INTRINSIC AMBIGUITIES**

The relationship between academic criticism of Shakespeare and the plays in performance often seems slight. One seminal article, however, Norman Rabkin's 'Either/Or: Responding to *Henry V*' can be used to frame the major dynamic of stage interpretations of the play. Rabkin argues that, like the familiar optical illusion showing a creature that can be perceived as either a rabbit or duck, *Henry V* is either a heroic play about a 'mirror of all Christian kings' (2.0.6) or a cynical play about a ruthless and hypocritical Machiavellian tyrant. The force of the analogy, however, is in that, like the rabbit-duck, it is both of these things at the same time. Rabkin thus identifies *Henry V*'s 'ultimate power [as] precisely the fact that it points in two opposed directions, virtually daring us to choose one of the two opposed interpretations it requires of us'. Rabkin describes Shakespeare's 'terrible subversiveness' in undermining the play's ostensible message, in a view of the play which has its theatrical counterpart in Trevor Nunn's account of the 1964 production at the Royal Shakespeare Theatre as an interpretation 'which saw a play-within-a-play, a hidden play which amounted to a passionate cry by the dramatist against war'.⁸

As Nunn's comment acknowledges, Rabkin's view of the interpretive dichotomy which animates the play's critical history – whether it is a celebration of Henry's rule or a scathing analysis of bellicose powermongering – has also been a dominant feature of *Henry V* on the stage, particularly during the twentieth century. The burden of these opposing interpretations tends to coalesce around a few key scenes and speeches in the play: the Archbishop's speeches about the young Prince's reformation on taking up the throne in 1.1, the reporting of the death of Falstaff in 2.3 and the King's implication in this in 2.1, the treatment of the conspirators in 2.2, Henry's threats before the Governor of Harfleur in 3.4, the execution of Bardolph in 3.7, and Henry's attitude to Williams during and after their meeting before Agincourt in 4.1 and 4.7. More recently, Henry's instruction that the French prisoners be executed (4.7.7) before the discovery of the butchered English boys has

⁸ Norman Rabkin, 'Either/Or: Responding to *Henry V*' in *Shakespeare and the Problem of Meaning* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press: 1981), p. 34; p. 49; Ralph Berry, *On Directing Shakespeare: Interviews with Contemporary Directors* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1989), p. 62.

been a focus of interest provoking one essay with the title, ‘Henry V, War Criminal?’⁹ The Prologue, Epilogue and Choruses have also served to locate distinct and often mutually exclusive attitudes to the play, as realist or stylised, as *actualité* or pageant. As the Commentary to this edition demonstrates, these loci of particular interpretive conflict highlight different approaches and assumptions about the play’s tone and its characterisation of its central protagonist.

Two brief examples, discussed in detail later in the Introduction, can serve as the rabbit and the duck to sketch out these poles. The first is Laurence Olivier’s 1944 film version of the play; the second is Michael Bogdanov’s touring production of the 1980s. Olivier’s Henry, thanks to the comic undermining of the episcopal conspiracy of 1.1 and extensive cuts to 2.2, 3.4, 3.7 and 4.7, is presented as an unproblematically heroic military leader. He avoids appearing inappropriately gung-ho and cuts a romantic dash in Act 5. The miraculous victory at Agincourt over effete and two-dimensional French enemies is notably bloodless and therefore sanctified. Olivier presents a Henry for a war-weary generation with victory in its sights and with its ethics of heroism fundamentally unchallenged. By contrast, Bogdanov’s production sought to undermine the last vestiges of patriotic chivalry for his late twentieth-century audiences. His Henry had an unnerving and unpredictable capacity for brutality, foregrounded in his behaviour in 2.2, 3.4 and 3.7, and his soldiers were rampaging, xenophobic jobs whose cause it was impossible for audience members to espouse without considerable discomfort. The French, by contrast, were dignified and civilised, with outdated weaponry and obsolete forms of courtesy. The war was dirty, both literally and metaphorically; the production unflinching in its iconoclasm.

At one level, these interpretive differences are attributable to historical moment – the difference between attitudes in 1944 and in the mid-1980s – but it is also important to recognise that the movement of productions of *Henry V* has not been a straightforward switch from heroic to cynical. To illustrate this, we might put the fulcrum of the rabbit-duck polarity at another recent production, Kenneth Branagh’s film of 1989. Branagh keeps much of the problematic textual material which would seem to cloud the presentation of Henry and the English cause, yet manages to maintain his ultimately sympathetic rendition of the eponymous hero, reinventing a modern version of masculine heroism deriving in part

9 See Taylor, *Henry V*, pp. 32–4; John Sutherland and Cedric Watts, *Henry V, War Criminal? And Other Shakespeare Puzzles* (Oxford: Oxford World’s Classics, 2000).

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from contemporary action films. In a suggestive reversal of the terms of the interpretive debate and a counterpoint to Trevor Nunn's description of the 1964 production, James Loehlin judges that Branagh's film is more conventional than it first appears, offering 'the official version of the play disguised as the secret one'.¹⁰ The play's deployment as part of these 'official' and 'secret' discourses is a recurrent theme of its history on the stage.

1599–1642: EARLY PERFORMANCES

Most critics agree that *Henry V* offers unusually specific internal evidence about the date and circumstances of its first performances. Firstly, the Prologue's reference to 'this wooden O' (1.0.13) and the choric stress on the inadequacy of theatrical representation, have been widely accepted as allusions either to the shortcomings of the old Curtain Theatre, which was about to be superseded by the new Globe, or as an emphatic mock-modest description of this new playhouse itself. Either interpretation fixes the date for the play some time in 1599, as the lease on the site of the Globe was signed by the Lord Chamberlain's Men in February 1599 and the new venue is known to have been operative by September of the same year. Secondly, the parenthetical comparison between the victorious Henry and 'the general of our gracious empress' 'from Ireland coming,/ Bringing rebellion broachèd on his sword' (5.0.30–2) seems to fix the date of the play to spring or summer 1599, before the ignominious conclusion of the Earl of Essex's much-vaunted expedition to Ireland to quell the rebellion against English rule was well known.

Both these pieces of evidence are, however, rendered problematic by the existence of the earliest text of *Henry V*, published in 1600 under the title *The Cronicle History of Henry the fift, With his battell fought at Agin Court in France. Together with Auntient Pistoll*. This text of the play differs in several crucial respects from the text published in the First Folio of 1623 as *The Life of King Henry the Fift*, the text on which this edition, like all other modern editions, is based. *The Cronicle History of Henry the fift* is, at a little over 1,600 lines, only half the length of the Folio text; it does not include the Folio's opening scene between Canterbury and Ely (1.1), nor the Scots and Irish captains (3.3), nor Henry's famous exhortation 'Once more unto the breach' (3.1), nor the second of the scenes featuring the French lords before the Battle of Agincourt (4.2). Most significantly, it does not include any of the

¹⁰ James N. Loehlin, *Shakespeare in Performance: Henry V* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1996), p. 145.

Chorus speeches nor the Prologue and Epilogue. Thus, the text as it was published in 1600 does not provide any of the evidence, detailed above, for dating the play to 1599.

Most accounts of the Quarto text have been concerned to demonstrate its limitations by contrast to the Folio, and, indeed, it has been used as a prime example of what the editors of the First Folio denigrated as those previously printed texts, ‘stolen and surreptitious copies, maimed and deformed’.¹¹ It has also been argued, however, that it represents a version of the play derived, in some way, from performance: cut for touring or for presentation by a reduced cast, or to make it more politically orthodox and therefore more acceptable.¹² Andrew Gurr suggests that the ‘Chorus was fitted to the play fairly early on, to strengthen a celebratory and patriotic reading, providing a means of coercing the audience into an emotionally undivided response’.¹³ by contrast, Annabel Patterson’s view is that the Quarto is the more politically orthodox text. More recently, Gurr has argued that it is the Quarto text, not the Folio, which uniquely represents the play as it was performed in 1599, suggesting that the Quarto moderates potentially hostile comments on Henry, cutting the dialogue in 2.1 about the King being to blame for Falstaff’s death.¹⁴ In their self-consciously revisionist edition of *The Cronicle*, Graham Holderness and Bryan Loughrey distinguish between the two texts of the play on generic grounds, finding the Folio ‘epic and heroic, realistic and historical’, and the tone of the Quarto ‘deflect[ed] . . . to the comic mode’, in which ‘the new historical style . . . interacted with older modes, with the conventions of romance and the manners of comedy’.¹⁵ Even at this early point in the play’s stage and textual history, therefore, the questions of genre, of realism and historical immediacy, and epic and comedy which were to engage, and sometimes vex, generations of directors and actors – the rabbit and duck, in fact – are apparently already in their

11 T.W. Craik (ed.), *The Arden Shakespeare: King Henry V* (London and New York: Routledge, 1995), pp. 11–19.

12 On these possibilities, see Gary Taylor, ‘We Happy Few: the 1600 Abridgement’ in Stanley Wells and Gary Taylor, *Modernising Shakespeare’s Spelling, with Three Studies in the Text of ‘Henry V’* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979); Taylor, *Henry V*, pp. 12–20; Annabel Patterson, *Shakespeare and the Popular Voice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989).

13 Andrew Gurr (ed.), *King Henry V* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), p. 7.

14 Andrew Gurr (ed.), *The First Quarto of Henry V* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), pp. 2–12.

15 Graham Holderness and Bryan Loughrey, *The Cronicle History of Henry the fift* (Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1993), pp. 24–6.

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frictive place. So too is that other constant in the play's varied history on the stage: its persistent topicality.

London in 1599 was certainly in need of a feel-good play, and the famous English victory at Agincourt, already familiar to Elizabethan playgoers from earlier plays on the subject, was the perfect scenario. Fears of foreign invasion, high food prices, the repeated musters for soldiers for campaigns in the Low Countries and in Ireland, the requisitioning of horses, food supplies and other commodities needed for the military, all took their toll on Londoners. The long military campaign in Ireland, memorably dubbed by one historian 'England's Vietnam',¹⁶ was a particularly insistent part of English metropolitan consciousness at the time of the play's first performances, and the play's reference to 'kern of Ireland' (3.8.49), Pistol's 'Colin o custure me' on hearing the French soldier speak (4.4.3), Henry's promise to Katherine 'England is thine, Ireland is thine, France is thine' (5.2.217), and Macmorris, Shakespeare's only Irish character, all register this preoccupation. It has been convincingly argued that for contemporaries Shakespeare's French represented a version – and an idealised, conquerable version – of the intractable Irish.¹⁷ Seen in this light, the play offers a highly topical fantasy: a vicarious stage-victory against overwhelming odds, achievable in the theatre and, as the Chorus to Act 5 makes clear, much longed-for, but elusive, outside it.

When it was performed in 1599, the play also featured as part of a serial dramatic *Bildungsroman* on the maturation of Prince Hal, already presented in *1 Henry IV* (performed in the early months of 1597) and *2 Henry IV* (performed in 1598). Audiences had had their appetite misleadingly whetted at the end of *2 Henry IV*, after the coronation of Hal as Henry V and his banishment of his erstwhile companion Falstaff, where the Epilogue promises a further play where 'our humble author will continue the story with Sir John in it, and make you merry with fair Katherine of France, where, for anything I know, Falstaff shall die of a sweat' (Epilogue, 21–3).¹⁸ Strikingly, this establishes the essentially comic material – Falstaff and Katherine – of the proposed *Henry V* as its major attraction, and this hint of the play's generic instability is highlighted in eighteenth-century adaptations discussed below.

16 C.G. Cruikshank, *Elizabeth's Army* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2nd edn, 1966), p. 16; R.B. Outhwaite, 'Dearth, the English Crown and the "Crisis of the 1590s"' in *The European Crisis of the 1590s: Essays in Comparative History*, ed. Peter Clark (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1985), pp. 22–43, p. 32.

17 Joel B. Altman, "'Vile Participation': The Amplification of Violence in the Theater of *Henry V*", *Shakespeare Quarterly* 42 (1991), p. 19.

18 Giorgio Melchiori (ed.), *The Second Part of King Henry IV* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989).

The sense, for contemporaries, of the play in an extended dialogue with previous plays was lost from virtually all performances up until the middle of the twentieth century, when the fashion for playing the history plays in sequence was invented.

Whichever theatre the play was written for, it requires relatively few props. One recent editor argues that ‘in other of Shakespeare’s plays battles have their exits and their entrances . . . but *Henry V* alone wholly dedicates itself to dramatizing this brutal, exhilarating, and depressingly persistent human activity’.¹⁹ While this may be true, it is worth stressing that this most martial of plays does not include any onstage fighting other than the dishonourable and often-cut scene between Pistol and the French soldier Le Fer (4.4). While it may indeed be impossible for ‘this cockpit [to] hold / The vasty fields of France’ (1.0.11–12), it is striking that the play does not make use of the short scenes of hand-to-hand combat, the established stage synecdoche to represent battles, as in the depiction of the Battle of Shrewsbury at the end of *1 Henry IV*. Thus, chief among the props required are some items of armour and armaments including a cannon (3.0.33), and the ‘four or five . . . ragged foils’ (4.0.50) mentioned by the Chorus would probably suffice. A single throne would be needed to serve for both the English and French courts thus stressing the visual parallels between 1.2 and 2.4, and some ‘scaling ladders’ (folio stage direction at 3.1) are called for at the siege of Harfleur, at which the *frons scenae* must have served for the city walls. The gallery over the stage would provide the platform for the Governor of the town to parley with Henry (3.4.43). Costumes would have been, as was the Elizabethan theatre norm, contemporary rather than historical. It is likely that the chief tragedian of the Lord Chamberlain’s Men, Richard Burbage, would have taken the part of Henry. The number of actors required to perform the play has been the subject of much debate, but doubling may have enabled a cast of fifteen or so players to put it on.²⁰ Both Quarto and Folio versions of the play are dominated by Henry’s character (549 or 34 per cent of 1,600 lines in the Quarto, and 1,056 or 31 per cent of 3,380 lines in the Folio²¹), with Llewellyn the next most vocal character in both versions.

19 Taylor, *Henry V*, p. 1.

20 See Thomas L. Berger, ‘Casting *Henry V*’, *Shakespeare Studies* 20 (1988), pp. 89–104; T.J. King, *Casting Shakespeare’s Plays: London Actors and their Roles 1590–1642* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), pp. 86–7; and also Pauline Kiernan, *Staging Shakespeare at the New Globe* (Basingstoke and London: Macmillan, 1999), on the 1997 New Globe production of *Henry V* with a cast of fifteen.

21 For comparative figures for principal characters in other plays, see King, *Casting Shakespeare’s Plays*.

Perhaps because of its very immediate topicality, the play does not seem to have been a runaway theatrical success. The only evidence for the play's production history in the seventeenth century suggests that it was revived for a single performance at court in January 1605, and then sank into obscurity. It is not known whether the text for this performance was closer to the Folio or Quarto: although 'we have to hope that the company was sensitive enough to their new patron's accent and ancestry'²² to cut the significantly named Scottish character Jamy when they performed before King James. While other of Shakespeare's plays continued to be reprinted and, occasionally performed, up to the 1630s, *Henry V* was largely neglected. The Quarto text was reprinted in 1602 and in 1619 (the title page of this third edition bears the false date '1608'): perhaps the play's apparent inscription in the political narrative of the summer of 1599 meant that it was quickly, and seemingly irrevocably, out of fashion.

ADAPTATIONS 1642–1738

Theatrical Shakespeare was restored to England along with the monarchy, as plays from the pre-Civil War theatre were adapted to the new theatrical and social climate. *Henry V* was not, however, one of the earliest rehabilitations. When Samuel Pepys records attending two performances of *Henry V* in 1664 and again in 1668 with Thomas Betterton in the central role, it seems likely that this was not Shakespeare's play, but the rhymed verse drama by Robert Boyle, Earl of Orrery. Boyle's play seems only to confirm the contemporary insignificance of Shakespeare's, in that it shows no discernable trace of the earlier dramatic account of Henry's reign. It begins almost where Shakespeare leaves off: the Battle of Agincourt is concluded, offstage, between Boyle's first and third scenes, leaving the rest of the play for a representation of Henry not as military leader but as victorious lover. A secondary love plot, between Anne of Burgundy and Henry's brother the Duke of Bedford, highlights the significance of the romance plot to this exercise in the Restoration heroic genre. It is not until the eighteenth century that Shakespeare's play begins its – literally – piecemeal return to the stage.

In 1700, Betterton's *The Sequel of Henry the Fourth* comprised most of Shakespeare's *Henry IV* with the addition, in its final act, of material from Acts 1 and 2 of *Henry V*, ending with Henry's 'No king of England if not king of France!' (2.2.188). In the same year, Colley Cibber also took some

²² Andrew Gurr, *The Shakespearian Playing Companies* (Oxford, Clarendon Press: 1996), p. 288.