

Tragical, Comical, Historical, Pastoral Monarchs to Behold: The Subversion of Shakespeare's Henry V in Education, Criticism and the Film Industry

A Monograph in Cultural Materialism



[Photo: Henry V 1989 Renaissance Films PLC]

Since the onset of the film as an artistic medium, the question of whether or not to transfer the works of William Shakespeare to the screen has plagued the film world for many years. After all it is classic entertainment but will it make money.

Henry V is one of those plays that has been in critical contention for years and always with such conflicting views that any consensus or compromise seems impossible. These two camps align themselves so rigidly that one might think they themselves were part of a Shakespearean tragedy. In one camp, Henry is viewed as the ideal Christian king and in the other he is a warmonger of epic proportions. What underlies this conflict is the obvious ambiguity of Shakespeare's text. Clearly, both sides find convincing evidence to support their opinions but compromise is rare. Any criticism in defense of Henry as the ideal is vehemently hostile. M.M. Reese remarks, "A formidable body of critical opinion is hostile to this view. In general it is held that, if this really was what Shakespeare was trying to do, he failed to bring it off. In all the canon only Isabella in Measure for Measure has stirred such personal distaste. (317)



[Photo: The Royal Shakespeare Production of Henry V 1984]

Although Shakespeare's works should be naturally conducive to film, the ties remain unresolved. The purpose of this essay then will be to examine this dissonance on several levels. It will examine the text of Henry V, the criticism of Shakespeare's treatment of the subject matter, and its existence in the realm of film production. But perhaps at the heart of the dissonance is a subversive tendency, on the part of the each camp, to service their own theories and on a larger scale, their elitism. This tendency has its roots firmly implanted in the educational system. Special attention will be paid to this at the onset. This will be done in order to expose the underlying cause of the conflict and bring about consensus rather than dissent.

It is ironic that Henry V has enjoyed more success than any other Shakespearean film; not once but twice. I refer of course to the Olivier and the Branagh versions. In an interview in 1989, Mr. Branagh echoes this same feeling of distaste at the lingering inaccessibility of Shakespeare's works. His feelings, though directed at English theatre, may include a kind of snobbery also found throughout the world. The English just have a better track record for it. Mr. Branagh comments, "In some ways, some people think, that's vulgar. It ought to be elitist. It ought to be boring and it ought to be the province of a very few people when in fact, it is open to lots of people." (Personal Interview) "The attitude that allows elitism and cliques to

develop - as if they are the only prerequisite by which a sophisticated method of thought or sophisticated art forms can emerge - can be very damaging. I've seen it; I've experienced it myself. There is this wholly English thing, the legacy of the empire, some kind of subconscious attitude that says 'We ruled the world once you bastards.' (46).

Let's take a moment to examine the larger question: why Shakespeare? Why does society constantly return to the works of Shakespeare as the oracle of culture and why have the works held such a high place in the educational system after four hundred years? The answers may be obvious but certainly no easy thing to swallow. First, as many have said before, Shakespeare's works hold a universal truth about them. They present the best qualities of humanity and the worst qualities of humanity. Alan Sinfield remarks, "...Shakespeare is the keystone which guarantees the ultimate stability and rightness of the category "literature" (135). Along with the tag of "literature" also inevitably follows the term "elitism" and for some, outright boredom as surely many can recall their first painful experience of being forced to read Shakespeare in an English literature class. Though many people feel this way, it cannot be argued that this feeling stems from ignorance, but rather an inappropriate, dated introduction to Shakespeare. The common student complaint still is, "I don't get it. Why do they talk so funny." However, those fortunate few, those happy few that do "get it" upon their initial exposure to Shakespeare seem destined to share in its lofty place in society. They have become "cultured", while those who don't understand it are relegated to the province of being "uncultured" or worse, ignorant. But are they really cultured or just manipulated by the larger social structure to think that they are? Shakespeare continues to be used as a tool of the dominant societal group in order to segregate itself from all other classes. The dominant group controls the society. The dominant group controls its people and its children. Further, it controls its educational system in order to perpetuate its legacy of dominance. This is Social Darwinism at work.

Alan Sinfield comments that "It is the task of the guardian class including the teacher to initiate the young into the mysteries of knowledge and the ways in which knowledge confers various kinds of social power on those who possess it. It is evidently an approach to train an elite. And above all, education sustains the extended division between mental and manual labor that characterises the capitalist mode of production in general; and within that and overlapping unevenly with it, education sustains the subordination of women and ethnic minorities." (143) This system of dominance must not appear to be one-sided and indeed, it is not. Rather, it should appear that education is for the good of all pupils. And we have seen this as our inner city educational programs shrink across the country. Here the dominant group, through its educational system manipulates the system by limiting funding, by limiting teacher variety, by lowering teaching standards and by the way sequestering Shakespeare to the realm of the elite. It follows then that the educational system manipulates both children of privilege as well as children of the working class. They are being trained to think and respond in a manner that is expected of them; trained to perpetuate the dominant group, trained to diminish the minority group by simply being "allowed" or privileged to study Shakespeare under the watchful patriarchal eye of the dominant group. The Newsome Report of

1963 endorses this sort of, "civilizing experience of contact with great literature to those children of predicted "limited attainments". (136)



[Photo: The Royal Shakespeare Production of Henry V 1984.]

Literature becomes a mark of differential "attainment" preparing pupils for the differential opportunities and rewards in society at large. But then again, I read Shakespeare and they all thought I was pretty mad for reading it. You see, I was interested in things, really, that I shouldn't be interested in...thinking back, what they said was, well look, we've told you what you can be, you've got this marvelous opportunity. You can be a shorthand typist or you can be a nursery nurse. A crucial ideological manipulation in education is this: that the allegedly universal culture to which equal access is apparently offered is, at the same time, a marker of "attainment" and hence privilege. Thus those who are discriminated against on the grounds of gender, class and ethnic origins come to believe it is their own fault (it serves them right). She or he will be respectful of Shakespeare and high culture and accustomed to being appreciative of the cultural production which is offered through established and presumably privileged institutions. She or she will be trained at giving opinions within certain prescribed limits; at collecting evidence though without questioning its status or the construction of the problem; at saying what is going on though not whether that is what ought to happen; at seeing effectiveness, coherence, purposes fulfilled - but not conflict. And because the

purposeful individual is perceived as the autonomous origin and ground of meaning and event, success in these exercises will be accepted as just reason for certain economic and social privileges. However in *Henry V* we see both elements of subversion toward authority and subversion of the people.

Henry V performs service to two masters -- one, the radical minority and, two, the power base of the majority. The play itself is a celebration of jingoism -- the story of a boy king and his progression from the rakehell prince to the pious king. It is a commentary on the loss of youthful heroics and the continuance of a monarchical government. Henry V was performed in London before an audience of Queen's Elizabeth's subjects. The popularity of the play and its characters might be attributed to the fact that audiences of that time were athirst for glory. The noted Shakespeare scholar, Alfred Harbage reasons perhaps rudely, "Within the memory of most living men, the English had been ruled by a woman, and although loyal at heart to their Elizabeth, they had come to find something slightly dispiriting about an elderly woman and pacifist as the available royal image." (15)



[Photo: The Royal Shakespeare Production of Henry V 1984 program and photo]

Once before, theatrical commentary had been used to subvert the authority of Queen Elizabeth with the production of Richard II, the first installment of the Lancastrian tetralogy. The Queen had, as Dollimore comments, "...anxiously

acknowledged the implied identification between her and Richard II..."(14). Richard II was to be performed on the eve of the Essex rebellion. However, Elizabeth banned the production and subsequently quelled the rebellion. The political subversive quality about many of Shakespeare's plays may have been why they were so successful in the first place.

This play focuses on the famous victories of Harry of Monmouth who reigned in England from 1413 until his death due to dysentery in 1422. The Chorus in Henry V plays a significant part in the play whereby the Chorus serves as guide, interpreter and disclaimer. The service as disclaimer is most interesting. It was an epic, after all, and Henry's exploits were common knowledge. How do you do service to a legend? You don't -- you simply apologize, which is exactly what Shakespeare does. For example, the apologetic Chorus speeches, serving as a disclaimer, appeal to the audiences' imaginative power to fill in any inconsistencies of a stage performance.



[Photo: Henry V Renaissance Films PLC 1989.]

Walter comments, "In consequence Henry V is daringly novel, nothing quite like it had been seen on stage before. No wonder Shakespeare, after the magnificent epic invocation of the Prologue, becomes apologetic... on the common stage he laid himself open to the scorn and censure of the learned and judicious. Although, as it is daringly novel, it follows a natural progression in the way that theatre of the time as well as today could still risk political commentary before the monarchy and aristocracy could be alerted to the real intent. The reliance on the Chorus allows this political commentary to take place by forcing the audience to take an active role in its production. Tennenhouse comments, "Given the abrupt shift in the strategies necessary for maintaining monarchical power between the reformation and the Interregnum, we cannot expect the literature which idealised that power to

develop according either its own logic or that of an individual author. Quite the contrary: as the inherited prerogatives of the monarch were challenged, first by the contending faction within the aristocracy, but then later by dissenting voices outside the oligarchy, literature had to employ radically discontinuous political strategies for idealising political authority. (110)

However, there are inconsistencies, in Henry V in particular, that point to subversiveness. An example: Williams' initial blast at Henry V by the campfire and again at the glove exchange in the later act. Why would Shakespeare, if he were in fact authorizing political authority, insert the dissenting opinions of Gower, Williams and, in the final act, the Duke of Burgundy? The logical conclusion would then be that by presenting jingoistic pageantry as a main theme that subversive political commentary could take place by explaining it as counterpoint or a purely theatrical device when, in fact, the aim is otherwise. In the same moment it legitimizes theatrical presentation by its surface representation.

The Chorus speeches, besides being an epic apology, serve another purpose in that as they recount details omitted of the well-know story they secure unity of action. But beyond that, by leaving the interpretation to the audience, perhaps serves a subversive purpose. Greenblatt explains Henry V's use of panopticism, "The play insists that we have all been both coloniser and colonised, king and subject. The play deftly registers every nuance of royal hypocrisy, ruthless and bad faith, but it does so in the context of a celebration, a collective panegyric to "This Star of England", the charismatic leader who purges the commonwealth of its incorrigibles and forges the martial national State... the play's enhancement of royal power is not only a matter of the deferral of doubt: the very doubts that Shakespeare raises serve not to rob the king of his charisma but to heighten it, precisely as they heighten the theatrical interest of the play; [and a monarchical government] the audience's tension then enhances its attention...the spectators are induced to make up the difference to invest the illusion of magnificence to be dazzled by their own imaginary identification with the conqueror...must be in large part the invention of the audience, the production of a will to conquer which is revealed to be identical to a need to submit." (43)



[Photo: The Royal Shakespeare Company Henry V 1984.]

Therefore, as it was then so it is today. The 1989 film production of Henry V with Kenneth Branagh in the title role portrays Henry as a man of believable extremes. He gives an almost Hamletian quality to the character of Henry V. This production grew out of the 1984 Royal Shakespeare Company production, directed by Adrian Noble, that broke down the high-flying nationalistic interpretation that is often common to productions of Henry V. Adrian Noble comments on his approach to Henry V: You will feel, if it's done reasonably well, great jingoistic pride, that kind of hot feeling that politicians and warmongers try to encourage in you, to give you the courage to kill your fellow man. You will experience those feelings when Henry V inspires you to war. You will feel at one stage that Henry is the perfect king. If I was going to be led by anyone, I'd like to be led by him, because he's clear-headed, he's compassionate, he's robust, he's approachable. You will also hear him confessing privately that his father was wrong to steal the throne. And so there is a marvelous paradox there. Shakespeare isn't just saying that it's bad to kill kings, bad to steal thrones, he doesn't say that at all. The great highlight of English history was stage-managed by a man who had no right to be there at all, who was a usurper. That's complex, that's not just Shakespeare saying good old Henry V, he was a good fellow." (171)

One scene in the 1989 film typifies Mr. Branagh's approach, the gutsy three-minute diagonal tracking shot following the bloody battle of Agincourt displays the carnage of battle and the futility of war. Mr. Branagh comments on the work, "The greatest tracking shot in the world, that was my theory anyway. It certainly was bloody long. After the close-up carnage of Agincourt, I wanted to reveal as much of the

devastation as possible...There would be no question about the statement this movie was making about war." (236) It truly is a moving piece of cinema. But, however noble the pursuit to present the foulness of war, it has been thwarted and subverted to serve the power of the dominant class by using it to justify a way and even to hint at the appeal of monarchical authority in a State based on the ideals of democracy and republicanism.

In April 1991, Michael Novak, the noted journalist, former U.S. ambassador and author of *The Spirit of Democratic Capitalism*, wrote a commentary published in *Forbes* regarding what he implies as the striking similarities between George Bush's Gulf War and Shakespeare's *Henry V*. Mr. Novak begins by quoting the inscription on the seal of the United States: *Annuit coeptis* or "Providence smiles upon our undertakings", Mr. Novak continues: "Seldom more so than in the last week of February 1991, when U.S. Forces leading the Great Coalition threw half a million soldiers against a deeply entrenched Iraqis, and in four days emerged triumphant at the cost of but 29 Americans killed in the assault. There's been nothing like it since the Battle of Agincourt in 1415. Remember your Shakespeare? At Agincourt, Henry V's tiny band of brothers wearied by hard marching in heavy rains, awaited massacre by a French army ten times its size. And yet miraculously, at the end of that day the furious French assault lay broken with 1500 prisoners taken and 10,000 dead. "Where is the number of our English dead?" asked Henry then, and from the list he read: Edward the Duke of York, the Earl of Suffolk, Sir Richard Ketly, Davey Gam Esquire; None else of name and of all other men but five and twenty. O God they arm was here!...I have seen Kenneth Branagh's production of *Henry V* four times. It prepared me for what was to happen in Kuwait. Like Bush, Henry V was mocked by his foes as too weak. Like Bush, from August 2 until March Henry V grew in purpose and in stature from the first moments of his expedition until its bloody climax. Like Bush, Henry was fond of terms like "kind" and "gentle," but fiercely resolute for vindication of the right. Like Bush, before the battle Henry V prayed mightily -- know well the probability of slaughter, massacre and abject failure... the performance of George Bush was one of the greatest in the history of the U.S. presidency...The nation may well thank God for the President's inspired leadership...Above all though, this nation owes thanks to God, as England did under Henry V: And be it death proclaimed through our host to boast of this, or take that praise which is his only...God gave us our "St. Crispin's Day", and we should thank Him for it. That will strengthen us for generations hence, when dark times arise again. (92)

It appears that, although to Mr. Novak's credit, he has seen Mr. Branagh's production four times, if he had paid attention he might have read the blatant message of the foulness of war. His commentary is at best a fine example of poor research and at worst, epic fantasy. Novak refers to the "furious" French assault and 1500 prisoners taken by the English. However he fails to mention the fact that Henry V ordered the slaughter of the prisoners following the battle by forcing the prisoners whom could not be ransomed into straw huts and burned alive. Nor does Mr. Novak accurately describe the battle scene and the truly useless tactics of the French army. Cheney describes the ill-fated French army: "...though much superior

in numbers, was so crowded, so deep in mud, so wearied by a long march and a night in the rain, so ill-fed and so inflamed with a futile bravery that left no place for caution or discipline, that it was hewn down by an English army of only a quarter of its size. (164)



[Photo: [Henry V](#) 1989 Renaissance Films PLC]

Mr. Novak also makes curious mistakes with dates. He states that "...like Bush from August 2 until March 2, Henry V grew in purpose and in stature from the first moments of his expedition until its bloody climax." (92) In truth, the "expedition" to which he refers actually was more of a campaign as it took several years and several different expeditions. The "bloody climax" took place if we refer to Shakespeare and St. Crispin's Day, not in March but on the 25th of October. Novak also refers to the terms, kind and gentle. I would hardly refer to Henry V using any of those terms specifically when he threatens the town and the governor of Harfleur with bloody retribution upon the residents with barbs like, "With conscience wide as hell, mowing like grass your fresh-fair virgins and your flow'ring infants. The blind and bloody soldier with foul hand defile the locks of your shrill-shrieking daughters; your fathers taken by the silver beards and their most reverend heads dash'd to the walls; your naked infants spitted upon pikes." (3.4. 6-34 One wonders if the republican party will now initiate legislation to reinstate a monarchical government.

What Mr. Novak failed to point out, if we are to make a fair comparison, was how short-lived Henry V's victories actually were, as the Chorus tells us that, "Fortune made his sword. By which the world's best garden he achieved, and of left his son imperial lord. Henry the sixth, in infant bands crown'd king of France and England, did this king succeed; whose state so many had the managing, that they lost France and made his England bleed. (5.2 6-12) One need not point out that Hussein is still in power, yes, there are similarities after all. And Mr. Novak does not do any favors for Mr. Bush by comparing him to the medieval mind of Henry V. Following that, one questions just how far society has progressed in five hundred years if it is, in fact, an accurate comparison. Mr. Novak does not quote the Duke of Burgundy's speech in Act V that chastises the behavior of warring men. "Why that the poor and mangled Peace, should not in this best garden of the world ...put up her lovely visage? Alas! She hath...too long been chas'd and all her husbandry doth lie on heaps corrupting in it own fertility,...losing both beauty and utility...defective in their natures, grow to wildness, even so our house and ourselves and children have lost, or do not learn for want of time," (5.2. 34-145)



[Photo: [Henry V](#) 1989 Renaissance Films PLC]

This dangerous commentary is then an accurate example of how Shakespeare is manipulated by the powers of the dominant class to perpetuate their, dare I say, sovereignty over the minority. Its publication in Forbes attests to that fact since it would have been far more of a surprise if it had been published in The Village Voice or Jet. Forbes is geared to appeal to the upwardly mobile, educated, and "cultured" audience. It is clearly an attempt to subvert Shakespeare, to subvert the minority, and it subverts those who read it and believe it to be a responsible essay on the power of the U.S. government; all of this under the guise of what we believe to be high culture.

Shakespeare made his works ambiguous and open to interpretation. Shakespeare wrote for the public, all of the public and not predominately the privileged. It

follows then that as Shakespeare wrote for a predominately "common" class then would not his art speak to them as subversive political discourse? To that end, what more effective way would there be to achieve it than by raising such discourse up to the mirror of nature. Tennenhouse comments on this point, "If art and politics defined the same domain of truth when Shakespeare wrote, we must assume his art was always political and that it is our modern situation and not his strategies of displacement as political strategies...our critical tradition of reading does not let us see the politics of Renaissance writing because the contrary, that modern literature's attempt to produce transcendent truth is a terribly effective strategy for idealising political authority. given the panoptical nature of authority in order to idealise it. Thus art makes power invisible as it make the political language itself invisible as it make the political language itself invisible and locates that power both in the individuals subjectivity and in the object world which such language constitutes. (126)

To briefly recapitulate, if we are to believe that Shakespeare's only motive was idealize a monarchical authority, then we subvert ourselves in pure panoptic fashion. Furthermore, if we believe what wear taught to believe then the authority that Shakespeare attempted to subvert wins again. Neal Osherow comment succinctly on the simplicity of conformity, "External forces, in the form of power or persuasion, can exact compliance" (234). As theatrical presentation can inspire or provoke thought then literary criticism must also do the same. Therefore, if upon reading this you find this commentary to be "subversive" to what you have been taught then what I attempt succeeds. I do not claim to present the only answer -- my aim is only to inspire some level of gray matter activity. If I can succeed at that then I merely present the question what I believe Shakespeare was posing with Henry V, that being: what do you think? What was subversive then is not so today or is it?

If any consensus on Henry V can be attained we should now turn our attention to what causes the two opposing camps to be so adamant about their views. Bur before moving on, let us take a moment to examine the play and its history.

Henry V was entered in the Stationers Register on August 4, 1600. Shakespeare included a clue in the text that approximates its date. J.H. Walter contends, "Henry V was almost certainly written in the spring or summer of 1599" (Walter11). He argues that in Act V, the Chorus refers to the Earl of Essex; aggressive campaign to Ireland. Walter expands his comments on this point, "The Earl of Essex, who led an expedition into Ireland to crush Tyrone's rebellion left London on 27 March 1599 and returned on 28 September in the same year having failed his task" (11). This event would then give evidence that the Earl of Essex had not yet returned from Ireland when Shakespeare took pen in hand and wrote, "Were now the general of our gracious empress, as in good time he may, from Ireland coming bring rebellion broached on his sword," (5.1. 30-32).

In conclusion upon this point, Walter asserts, "It is possible that the words of the Chorus were written nearer March than September, since ling before the latter

month it had become apparent to everybody that Essex would not be making a return in triumph." (11).

The plot of Henry V revolves around the events that led to the victory at Agincourt. Historically, this victory was achieved over several years and several invasions. The battle for Harfleur took over a month. During this siege, the king named his cannons. He called them: The Messenger, The King's Daughter, and The London. He certainly had a sense of humor and this comic indifference to the French that prompted Shakespeare's Chorus to refer to him in the familiar and pronounce, "Suppose th' ambassador from the French comes back; Katherine his daughter; and with her, dowry, some petty and unprofitable dukedoms. The offer likes him not, and the nimble gunner with linstock now the devilish cannon touches, and down goes all before them. (3.1. 28-34)

Other references to historical fact and the pious nature of Henry are evident. Lady Fraser reports, "On the way to Agincourt he hanged a man for robbing a church. Henry's sense of justice was linked with strict adherence to the tenets of Catholic piety" (130). Pistol describes this event in act three following Bardolph's capture "Fortune is Bardolph's foe and frowns upon him;/ For he hath stol'n a pax and hanged/must a'be." 3.6. 40-41. Holinshed describes the stolen article as a pyx, a container for the Host.

Henry V is one of Shakespeare's plays that is difficult to analyze on its own because it is a culmination of three other episodes. However each episode is fully formed. The reliance on sequels is not a paramount component to the understanding of each story. Rabkin comments on the structure of Henry V, "Henry V is of course, not only a freestanding epic but also the last part of a tetralogy. Some years earlier, when his talent was up to Titus Andronicus rather than to Hamlet, Shakespeare had had the nerve at the very beginning of his career, to shape the hopelessly episodic and unstructured materials of his chronicle sources not into the licensed formlessness of the history play his audience was use to -- one recalls shapeless domestic chronicles like Edward I and The Famous Victories of King Henry the Fifth and foreign histories like Tamburlaine and The Battle of Alcazar -- but rather into integrated series of plays each satisfying as a separate unit but all deriving a degree of added power and meaning from being part of a unified whole. (37)

It was the last installment of Shakespeare's Lancastrian tetralogy that began with Richard II and proceeds through Henry IV Part One and Henry IV Part Two. By the end of Henry IV Part Two, the development of principle characters is well established except for Prince Hal, now King Henry V. Some critics maintain that the reformation of Henry, now the ideal king converted from his wilder days is inconsistent. Thought the play seems inconsistent Norman Rabkin asserts that the apparent inconsistencies are intentional. "Shakespeare created a work whose ultimate power is precisely the fact that it points in two opposite directions, virtually daring us to choose one of the two opposed interventions it requires of us. In this deceptively simply play Shakespeare experimented, more shockingly than

elsewhere, with a structure like the Gestaltist's familiar drawing of a rare beast. (36)

Previously, in the other installments, young Henry responded to his turbulent relationship with his father by rebelling against his father's wishes. Henry takes up with the ruffians at the Boars head Tavern but eventually gives up his wayward life after his father dies. In Henry v, the Archbishop of Canterbury alludes to his sovereign's past exploits, "The course of his youth promised it not since his addiction was to courses vain, his hours filled up with riots, banquets sports and never noted in him any study, any retirement, any sequestration from open haunts and popularity. (1.1 24, 54-59)

This cements the dramatic personality transformation during Henry V. This transformation, or rather his reformation, should not surprise anyone because Henry promises it in Henry IV Part One. Prince Hal declares in soliloquy, "So when this loose behavior I throw off and pay the debt I never promised, by how much better than my word I am, by so much shall I falsify men's hopes; and like bright metal on a sullen ground, my reformation glittering o'er my fault shall show more goodly, and attract more eyes than that which hat no foil to set it off. I'll so offend to make offense a skill redeeming time when men think least I will. (1.3. 202-211)

He has lived and learned through his experience and observation, the pitfalls and inconsistencies of royal office. He understands his responsibilities with an almost prescient awareness. If this be "ill-weaved" ambition so be it. However, it works, and as Reese remarks, "He realises what the 'polished perturbation, golden care' will mean in the denial of human instinct and the acceptance of loneliness and impersonality. Youth's warm impulses must be steeled into disciplined courage and dedicated to honourable ends. He will have to judge all causes with a 'bold, just, and impartial spirit' that despises the short cuts which authority always knows how to find. It is required of him also that he shall know his people in all their strength and weakness so that he and they may live together in the harmonious relationship that is the supreme condition of majesty. Hal understands all this; and with understanding he has the drive to success -- there is no harm in calling it ambition -- without which all these other qualities are only ornaments. (317)

Truly his reformation is inconsistent and at times, clumsy moving from calculating to pious servant. But, then again miracles are inconsistent and clumsy and Henry's turnabout conversion is heralded as such. It is on this point where critics of Henry love to dote. Chambers explains his view; "Here you have a Shakespeare playing on the surface of life, much occupied with externalities and the idols of the forum. And with the exception of a few unconsidered words that fall from the mouth of a woman of no reputation. There is nothing that is intimate, nothing that touches the depths. (318 qtd in Reese)

Chambers perhaps confuses Richard II with Henry V; but no matter, the fact remains that if Shakespeare were preoccupied with making Henry's reformation superficial it was done to fill the requirement of epic. Reese comments, "Technically it is a considerable achievement, since Shakespeare was writing in a mode that he

recognized (and he admits it often enough) to be extremely difficult "O for a Muse of fire." He decided that the noble deeds of Henry V, which were of a kind to inspire wonder and imitation, could not be fittingly celebrated except through the medium of epic; and epic and drama are not naturally congenial to one another. (320)



[Photo: The Royal Shakespeare Production of Henry V 1984]

That Chambers found nothing intimate in Henry is quite correct. Ruling monarchs have never, to my knowledge, been known for their intimacy; it defeats the purpose. Granville Barker found Henry V completely lacking in any kind of significance of a spiritual nature. Barker's comments, as Reese observes are, "...patently absurd, since in Shakespeare's time the wise government of states was one of the highest destinies to which God might call a man" (318). As evidence, take the historical record of Vita et Gesta Henrici Quinti, which chronicles Henry's life. Walter comments on the work, "Henry upon his father's death spent the day in profound grief and repentance, he shed bitter tears and admitted his errors, at night he went secretly to a man of perfect life at Westminster and received absolution "felici miraculo convertitur". (20)

This is historical proof leads credence to Shakespeare's interpretation, however clumsy, that Henry's reformation was, in fact, miraculous. Walter remarks on the clumsiness of this point whereby one is reminded of "St. Augustine's youthful prayer of repentance, 'Oh God, send me purity and continence -- but not yet'" (20).

It is not the fact that the reformation happens, but as Walter observes, "The heart of the matter is the nature of the change that came over Henry at this coronation" (18). Reese remarks on the presentation of Henry:

Henry is an appointed symbol of majesty, and the action of the play is directed with the most elaborate care to show him doing everything that the age expected of the perfect king. (321)

This is an important point because it is upon this point that I tend to differ with Mr. Reese. Henry is not the ideal Christian king. That realm is reserved for divinity. The divine element is not found on Earth or at least not in England and certainly not in Henry. However, Henry is the ideal human king. It is important to make the distinction because skewed preconceptions of what personality characteristics the ideal king should or should not have is at the very heart of the conflicting views. It seems that the human element has been replaced by automatic divinity. For those critics on both sides who would label Henry as either the sadistic Machiavellian maniac or the immaculate king, as Hall does, must come to realize that the real cause of their dissonance lies within themselves and is no fault of Henry's or Shakespeare's. Reese catches himself later on and finally adds the human element. Reese comments, "Human virtue is always muddied, or it would not be human: epic is the art that on special occasions transforms it into the ideal" (322) -- the human ideal and not the ideal of divinity. Then you might ask, is not the human ideal a striving for perfection/divinity? Yes it is, however, it can never be attained on this Earth or else the concept of divinity would not be something so coveted. The human ideal is the actual. Shakespeare made Henry more human than we could possibly imagine and the mode of epic only makes Henry's human weaknesses and strengths more deliberate and distinct. Harold Bloom makes observations on this point:

Shakespeare knew better what he did than we tend to acknowledge, and his portrait of Henry V is both ironic and celebratory, but not in balance. If you are Rudyard Kipling, then Henry V is a demigod of war, victory, splendor, and British superiority, but if you are William Hazlitt, then the great warrior is "a very amiable monster." He is an exemplary Christian king, hard and shrewd, who murders prisoners with remorse and seems to see through everything and everyone himself presumably included. But that returns to one of Shakespeare's greatest powers, the representation of change in the psyche...So large and profound are Shakespeare's ironies that Henry V in the context of his own play could not be better as a hero. His play is anything but a critique of the hero. (3)

As a modern example, President George Bush, a decidedly public figure, was labeled a weakling prior to the Gulf War. However, after the war broke out, he was touted as a menace and a warmonger of epic proportions. That is not to say that I sanction war; I merely present an example. One epic at a time. For that matter, let us take the more appropriate example of Prince Charles. His actions and opinions are under constant scrutiny. If he ever deviates from whatever preconceived notions we may have about the behavior of a royal, the whole world thrusts him under a microscope. Consequently, any forms of public intimacy go out the window. Even as they appear larger than life, then are not their deviations from "ideal" behavior only more pronounced? No one would disagree that these men are just as human as any of us and we forgive their occasional inadequacies as we should also forgive our own skewed preconceptions. Reese touches upon this point. However, his opinions were written at a time when the psychological theory of cognitive dissonance was still in its infancy.

Let us take a moment to examine this theory and its relationship to Henry V in order that an alignment of perspective can be reasonably achieved before a move to other business can occur. The theory of cognitive dissonance first purposed by Leon Festinger and later expanded by Elliot Aronson states that there is pressure to produce consistent relationships among one's attitudes or behaviors and to avoid inconsistency. Aronson expanded the concept further. Vander Zanden dissects Aronson's research explains:

Elliot Aronson, among others, has suggested a still further refinement in dissonance theory. He indicates that what Festinger overlooks, is the conflict between peoples self-conceptions and their cognitions about a behavior that violates these self-conceptions. According to this view dissonance does not arise between just any two cognitions; rather, it arises when one's behavior threatens to diminish the positive feelings one has about oneself. (192)

This concept is pervasive through out Henry V. It is also pervasive in the criticism of Henry V. Here the two opposing camps are so deeply entrenched in their opinions because Henry's inconsistencies have forced them, in the case of those who are pro Henry, to dismiss his barbarisms and realign their preconceptions to suit the ideal Christian king view and in a very real sense, their own self concepts because opinions are the most personal of expressions. While those who are opposed to Henry, completely embrace Henry's barbarisms as proof of the pudding, so to speak. The opposition refuses to realign their preconceptions of the ideal Christian king and they reject Henry completely. These are textbook examples of how humans deal with cognitive dissonance, either you add elements of consonance in order that balance can be restored, as those who are pro Henry exhibit, or you stick to your preconceptions and add nothing, as exhibited by the opposing camp. Shakespeare knew much more about human nature than we give him credit for or have even begun to explore.

Cognitive dissonance is something we have to deal with on a day-to-day basis. If there is even inkling that a decision we make may be wrong, we will seek cognitive refuge in what we believe to be right and just or ideal. Thereupon, we will rationalize our thoughts and actions to realign ourselves with our ideal self-concept. This concept is found throughout Henry V, throughout the events in Elizabethan England (or Shakespeare would never have written it in the first place), throughout the fluctuating criticism of Henry V and even the hesitance, on the part of the film industry, in bringing Shakespeare to the screen.

If Henry is attempting to realign his own self-concept by his sudden conversion then there is no better reference that the Archbishop of Canterbury's remarks on the event.

The breath no sooner left his father's body
But that his wildness, mortified in him,
Seem'd to die too; yea, at that very moment,
Consideration like an angel came,