Shakespeare’s Kingly Mirror: Figuring the Chorus in Olivier’s and Branagh’s *Henry V*

Of all of Shakespeare’s histories, *The Life of King Henry the Fifth* is the only play to employ and sustain a chorus. Unlike the Rumor of *Henry IV* or the Prologue of *Henry VIII*, this choral figure functions not only as a dramatic proxy for the writer or a set to the scenes of action that will follow—although it performs these roles well—but also as an ongoing vehicle of theatrical direction and commentary that both foregrounds and problematizes the moral actions of the play’s protagonist. The Chorus places Henry in a realm far different from that of any of his dramatic predecessors. As David Bevington points out, the Chorus helps to mythologize Henry by turning him into an epic hero (874). He encourages the audience to imagine the king, the very “port of Mars,” in command of Famine, Sword, and Fire (Prologue.6), and surrounded by enthusiastic youth who follow him like “English Mercuries” with winged heels (2.Prologue.7). This is the much fabled “star of England” (Epilogue.6), the nationalistic encapsulation of Englishness that commands his place alongside fellow legends Robin Hood and King Arthur.

Yet just below the surface of this myth-in-the-making lies a more sinister figure that confounds epic expectations. The Henry that emerges from Shakespeare’s play is not the embodiment of a selfless majesty, but a Machiavellian mastermind adept at using a rhetoric of deceit to satisfy the appetite of his ambitions. Along with other elements in the play, the Chorus helps to highlight the darker side of Henry, but does so in a complex and rather devious way. Instead of directly challenging the audience to question the king’s motives, the Chorus undermines the heroic by way of example. The power of theater, like the political successes of Henry, rests upon a series of highly calculated falsifications. When the Chorus asks us to use our “imaginary puissance” (Prologue.25) to transform the limited stage performance into a panoramic movement of epic forces, he is underscoring the self-deception in which we are all too willing to engage. Parallel to this theatrical movement are the rhetorical posturings of Henry, who cloaks his personal ambitions in a language of ceremony and nationalism. Although he does not specifically refer to the role of the Chorus, Stephen Greenblatt makes clear the connection between the kingly project and the theater:

All kings are “decked” out by the imaginary forces of the spectators, and a sense of the limitations of king or theater only excites a more compelling exercise of those forces. . . . Power belongs to whoever can command and profit from this exercise of the imagination, hence the celebration of the charismatic ruler whose imperfections we are invited at once to register and to “piece out.” (64)
The king, in order to succeed in his political performance, must become a stage manager in his own right and carefully orchestrate the ways in which his audience—both common and courtly—perceives his actions. Seen in this light, the Chorus’s call for “a kingdom for a stage” (Prologue.3) and his description of Henry as “the mirror of all Christian kings” (2.Prologue.6) become highly ironic. The image of the mirror is particularly significant here, because as vehicle of reflection, the mirror gives the viewer an inverted image from that which actually presents itself. Not only does Henry present the image of a king (with the emphasis being on a surface presentation), but he reflects an image of power that is the reverse of any mythologized “Christian kings.” What is more, the mirror is given added significance in association with the Chorus. Henry (an ironic mirror) is mirrored by the Chorus, the metatheatrical space where power is equated with, or reflected in, drama. In other words, the very nature of the Chorus’s function underscores the performative underpinnings of Henry’s play for power.

This particular critique of the king never fully surfaces in either Laurence Olivier’s 1944 or Kenneth Branagh’s 1989 cinematic adaptations of Henry V. One may expect this omission in Olivier’s version. Coming as it did in the throes of the Second World War, its main purpose was to create in the beleaguered English public a sense of national hope in the face of a superior foe. But Branagh was not bound as Olivier was to suppress Shakespeare’s double readings of the king. Indeed, he consciously set out to create an anti-war film that would expose the less glorious side of Henry. Branagh reveals in the introduction to his published screenplay that on rereading the text “the play seemed darker, harsher, and the language more bloody and muscular than I remembered. Although I was aware of bringing a particular set of post-war sensibilities to bear on my reading, I sensed that a 1980s film version of such a piece would make for a profoundly different experience” (qtd. in Donaldson 60). However, as several critics have aptly pointed out, Branagh falls far short of his “profoundly different experience.” Sara Munson Deats, perhaps the most generous of these critics, sees in Branagh’s production a vacillation between the celebrated warrior-king and the dark and opportunistic monarch (what Norman Rabkin calls, as she points out, the gestalt phenomenon of rabbits and ducks). “Branagh’s film,” she concludes, “is thus not a complete rejection of Olivier’s film but a re-evaluation” (291). Other critics are less generous. Peter S. Donaldson views Branagh’s film as an avant garde critique of war that nonetheless slips into an acceptance of war’s tragic necessities. Similarly, Michael Purcell sees Branagh falling short of his radical promise because of idealized Olympic game metaphors along with sentimentalized images of camaraderie. Brilliantly focusing on the first two scenes of the play, William P. Shaw argues that Branagh (like Olivier) ultimately renders the king heroic by failing to consider Shakespeare’s textual hints of a political collusion between Canterbury and Henry. In a highly scathing critique, Curtis Bright concludes that Branagh’s “personal ambition [to become the next Olivier] has led him to construct a film ideologically conducive to Thatcherism.” What is more, he calls Branagh a royal “arselicker” who is more concerned with the tortured ennui of Prince Charles than with the layered ironies of Shakespeare’s text (96).

Despite the varying degrees of academic civility accorded their subject, all of these critics agree that Branagh’s Henry ends up a very human—and therefore largely sympathetic—figure whose rousing sense of brotherhood ultimately places him beyond the Machiavellian pale. Yet with the exception of Donaldson, what everyone neglects to mention is that part of this artistic “failure” is due to the figuration of the Chorus. If, as posited earlier, Shakespeare’s Chorus functions as a critical mirror to Henry’s political machinations, then any cinematic muting of the Chorus may significantly temper any possible radical critique. By failing to conceive of the Chorus in terms of its full critical potential, both Olivier’s and Branagh’s adaptations of Henry V are incomplete renderings that cannot account for the duplicitous potential that Shakespeare placed within the text.

It is easy to see in Olivier’s Chorus a mere lackey of seamless patriotism. Donaldson argues that the Chorus, the primary agent linking Olivier’s historical time to that of Elizabeth’s, clearly substantiates the English war effort: “The transitions between represen-
tational levels are as seamless as possible: dissolves, hidden cuts, and forward tracking through gauze backdrops all intimate continuity between Elizabethan theater and contemporary cinema, between the England of Agincourt (and Elizabeth) and the England of 1944” (62). He takes Shakespeare’s “a kingdom for a stage” literally. Not only does he help the viewer to “cram/Within this wooden O the very casques/That did affright the air at Agincourt” (Prologue.12-14), but he is instrumental in transforming the cinematic representation of Elizabethan drama into a contemporary analogy. This is accomplished most directly by costume. By donning Elizabethan garb along with the rest of the cast, the Chorus becomes the audience’s first and most immediate link to England’s glorious past. By presenting his Chorus thus, Olivier has made explicit his intentions to transcend time and place his audience in a position that will best ready it for the war task immediately at hand.

Audience awareness also plays into Olivier’s project. Throughout the movie, whenever the Chorus, played by Leslie Banks, is on stage, he is aware only of the Elizabethan audience that is itself part of the film and directs his attentions specifically at its members (and thereby addressing the intended 1944 cinematic audience only indirectly). The one exception to this comes almost at the beginning of his performance when Banks uncharacteristically approaches the camera, takes a long dramatic pause, and appeals directly to his contemporary viewer with the words:

On your imaginary forces work.
Suppose within the girdle of these walls
Are now confin’d two mighty monarchies,
Whose high upreared and abutting fronts
The perilous narrow ocean parts asunder. (Prologue.18-22)

Banks’s momentary appeal, much like the film’s costuming, allowed the war-weary viewer to temporarily suspend historical distance and replace the “air at Agincourt” with the airy battlefields over Great Britain where the RAF and Luftwaffe struggled over the fate of Western Europe. The stakes couldn’t be any higher. The Chorus aligns himself and his drama with the plight of Henry—whom Olivier plays as the mythic embodiment of the English spirit—and sustains this association throughout.

The same cannot be said of Branagh’s Chorus. Whereas the visual transitions in Olivier’s film are smooth and unjarring—tableaux that gently overlap, scenes that fade in and out through a foggy mist—Branagh’s begin as abrupt and discontinuous. As with Olivier’s film, costuming plays an important role in Branagh’s positioning of the Chorus, but unlike his cinematic predecessor Branagh uses it in ways that undercut the mythologizing of power. One of the first disruptions of dramatic expectation comes when Derek Jacobi becomes visible on the screen in dark contemporary garb. In contrast to Olivier’s Chorus, whose appearance helps him to bridge the gap between historical moments, Branagh’s confronts the viewer in ways (at least at first) that break and distance him—and by association his cinematic audience—from his dramatic subject matter. Whereas Olivier primarily provides his audience with a choral guide to the film’s action, Branagh places Jacobi in the position of a critical observer who will not only help guide the audience, but will also critique the moral action of the film’s central figure. Jacobi’s costuming also provides a metadramatic link between the critical role of the Chorus and that of Branagh the filmmaker. When Branagh as Henry first makes his entrance, we see him glide into the chambers draped in black, similar in many ways to the wardrobe of the Chorus. This link between Jacobi’s costume and that of Branagh’s helps to set the film in the dark and cynical tone that Branagh seems to have intended.1

Other disruptions accompany Branagh’s Chorus. Opening the film with a sudden and noisy striking of a match, Jacobi fills the screen with his dimly lit presence and appeals to the “Muse of fire” to ignite his scene. At the words “a kingdom for a stage,” he violently throws an electrical switch and immediately reveals to the viewer the fictitious underpinnings of the project on which he is about embark. Donaldson sees Jacobi’s performance as a metadramatic act of demystification “that makes a virtue of self-disclosure, that will try to be honest about its own relation to power” (63). Olivier sustains power and authority by
suppressing the very medium of his message (there is never a reference to cinema in the film); Branagh throws authority into question by exposing the constructed quality of his own work. This becomes particularly important in light of his intended critique of Thatcherism. (For American audiences, this association of drama and authority resonates greater when placed within the context of Thatcher’s most steadfast ally, former actor Ronald Reagan.) Here, Kenneth Branagh the filmmaker and Henry V become one and the same, and the obvious invitation is to conflate those two projects. Branagh’s underlying message is that both are staged performances that draw their power from sustained audience deception.

A vivid illustration of this occurs at the siege of Harfleur. Immediately before Henry’s call to plunge “once more unto the breach” (3.1.1), Jacobi appears at the scene of battle, and in a state of breathless excitement hastily invites us to imagine the events leading up to the siege. What is significant about this performance is that it is the first time we see Branagh’s Chorus literally caught up in the plot that he is contriving. Prior to this, Jacobi had stood aloof from all the action (much as Olivier’s Chorus does), appearing either outside the stage door, alone on the windswept cliffs of Dover, or as a disembodied voice guiding the viewer across the page of an Elizabethan map. Yet here, at the gates of Harfleur, the Chorus appeals to us with all the urgency of a wildly expectant warrior. This visually performative act of the Chorus is followed by two successful rhetorical performances of Henry. The first is his impassioned appeal to storm the gates of Harfleur. Branagh seems aware of the double meaning behind Shakespeare’s text, for his Henry appears both as the epic war hero leading his troops into battle and the nationalistic salesman manipulating images of land, breeding, and religion:

On, on you noblest English,
Whose blood is fet from fathers of war-proof!

Dishonor not your mothers; now attest
That those whom you call’d fathers did beget you.
Be copy now to men of grosser blood,
And teach them how to war. And you, good yeomen,
Whose limbs were made in England, show us here
The mettle of your pastyre. Let us swear
That you are worth your breeding, which I doubt not,

Follow your spirit, and upon this charge
Cry “God for Harry, England, and Saint George!” (3.1.17-28)

Henry’s speech achieves its desired effects, for as the camera cuts back and forth from Henry to his troops, the faces of the men undergo a most dramatic change. The excitement is reminiscent of Jacobi’s just a moment earlier. Maniacal smiles begin to break out, restlessness spreads along the troops, Williams violently unsheathes his sword on command, and Exeter has the look of a wild animal chomping at the bit. Branagh’s Henry now has everyone salivating in anticipation, ready to do his bidding.

Henry’s second rhetorical performance takes place in his address to the governor of Harfleur. This is perhaps Branagh’s most cynical representation of Henry, for he takes a scene with minimal textual cues as to Henry’s intentions and turns it into a dramatic performance of calculated deception. What is written as a parley in Shakespeare’s text (at the end of 3.2) appears as a retreat in the film. From atop his horse Henry watches his men pouring over the rubble and back across the trenches. Branagh deftly dictates the tenor of the scene with a combination of facial expressions and body movements that leave no doubt as to Henry’s mind: first overcome with disgust, Henry hesitates for a brief moment as if to assess the situation, and turning back toward the Harfleur gates, confronts the governor with a series of barbaric threats calculated to cow his besieged opponent:

in a moment look to see
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,
While the mad mothers with their howls confus’d
Do break the clouds... 
What say you? Will you yield, and this avoid,
Or, guilty in defense, be thus destroy’d? (3.3.33-43)

This violent bravado is intended not only for the audience behind the city walls, but also for the expectant audience standing behind its king in need of another dose of nationalistic fervor. We know that all of this is merely a rhetorical act for Henry, and not really a serious threat, for he had just previously witnessed the retreat of his own men and is still not sure if fresh French troops are around the corner. Furthermore, after the governor submits, Henry closes his eyes in relief—we can imagine him saying to himself, “Thank god they didn’t call my bluff”—and turns back to his troops in a state of utter exhaustion (he has to rely on Exeter to hold him up). It may have taken everything out of him, but Branagh’s Henry was able to lie his way into the gates of Harfleur. Where military might had failed, Machiavellian posturing meets with a resounding success.

However, the critical or subversive function of Branagh’s Chorus fails to sustain itself. As the film progresses Branagh’s Henry becomes less a figure of questionable moral intention and more a two-dimensional king of mythic quality. Earlier, Henry’s more manipulative side was foregrounded in the palace scene with the Archbishop; his accusations of the traitorous Scroop, Grey, and Cambridge; and, as discussed earlier, in his rhetoric assault at Harfleur. Branagh’s critique of Henry breaks down immediately after this when he is confronted with the hanging of Bardolph. Shakespeare places this event off stage, but Branagh brings it out for what seems like a display of Henry’s more emotional side. While such a spectacle would not necessarily preclude the darker side of the king—in fact, it could even help to highlight the Manichean nature of Henry that so drives Shakespeare’s play—Branagh uses the scene to begin his reconstruction of a more humanized Henry. In contrast to his confrontation with Scroop, where with a passionate mixture of rage and tears Branagh’s performance calls into question Henry’s affections—for his country, for his friend, and for his ambitions—here Henry’s attitude is far less problematic. He gives the command to hang Bardolph, not out of any Machiavellian posturings, but out of the heavy responsibility of his office. The tears that well up in Henry’s eyes are not accompanied with any textual hints that they are not genuine. Indeed, one senses in his confrontation with Bardolph the sheer weight under which Henry must bear his crown. It makes no matter that Henry cries for a figure from his past or because of the realization of his responsibility; either way, it makes Henry more a noble figure in that he appears more of victim than an instigator of the tragedy that surrounds him. This sense of “victimhood” is reinforced when, immediately after hanging Bardolph and reassuring his men that “We are in God’s hand, brother, not in [that of the French]” (3.6.169), it proceeds to thunder and rain. While such direction is not without its humorous side, it tends to undercut Henry’s duplicitous authority.

If such a display were problematized by subsequent scenes, then Branagh’s critique may remain in tact. However, from this moment on, Branagh’s Henry appears less villainized and more majestic. As several critics have noted, the filmmaker obviously sympathizes with his subject during the last part of the movie. Yet what is most important in terms of the scope of this study is that the role of the Chorus undergoes a similar transformation, albeit perhaps more subtle. The abrupt and jarring nature of Jacobi’s performance is replaced by one that more gently intrudes on the scenes upon which he comments. In this way, Branagh’s Chorus bears more of a striking similarity to that of Olivier’s, who, after first stepping on stage, never disruptively intrudes himself upon the sensibilities of the audience, but on the contrary, fades in and out of the action with an almost ethereal presence. It is significant to note the nature and frequency of each Chorus’s appearance (visual and audible) in the films. Olivier’s Chorus appears nine times, four of which are only voice-overs. Derek Jacobi too makes nine appearances, but only two are voice-overs. Branagh’s Chorus obviously is more of a visual presence in the film—with all of the critical potential that presence could bring—
but the tone of those appearances becomes far less cynical as the movie progresses.

For instance, one key choral moment comes at the English encampment at Agincourt. Here, Branagh’s Chorus readies the audience for the long evening of waiting and the battle that will ensue, and concludes his speech with the words,

A largess universal like the sun
His liberal eye doth give to every one,
Thawing cold fear, that mean and gentle all
Behold, as may unworthiness define,
A little touch of Harry in the night. (4.Prologue.43-47)

Shakespeare’s text, in light of his complex rendering of Henry, is ambiguous at best, but Branagh hints at none of this. Instead, he opts for a voice of compassion, if not admiration, which is borne out by the strong religious content which increases after this point. What is more, this compassion is underscored by the lines at the end of the prologue that Branagh curiously leaves out: “Yet sit and see,/Minding true things by what their mock’ries be” (4.Prologue.52-53). Olivier neglects them too, but one would expect him to do so for the same reasons that he cut out the treason scene with Scroop, Grey, and Cambridge. Branagh, by keeping them in, could have alluded back not only to the metadramatic content with which he opened the film, but more importantly, to Shakespeare’s ironic rendering of Henry that Branagh found so fascinating.

The Choruses of both films make their last appearances as does Shakespeare’s, in the closing moments of the play. As with the prologue of act four, the issue of omission here becomes an important part of the Choruses’ representations. Olivier cuts the reference to Henry the Sixth, but such an omission does not conflict with his ideological intent. Branagh, on the other hand, keeps the epilogue in its entirety, but the effect that it should have on the viewer is not at all clear. The reference to Henry’s heir is another means by which Shakespeare undercuts the whole idea of politically motivated authority by showing all of Henry’s exploits to be ultimately futile.

In Branagh’s film, that severe critique is lost upon the viewer after being inundated with unambiguous images of Henry kneeling in prayer before battle, carrying a dead child through the bloodied fields of Agincourt, and boyishly courting the all-too-willing Katherine. If anything, Jacobi’s reference to Henry the Sixth comes across as a condemnation of the son who could not live up to his father’s glory, not a solemn report on the state of English politics. If Branagh’s intentions had been otherwise, then one might overlook his growing and uncritical empathy for Henry. However, as his problematic handling of Shakespeare’s Chorus demonstrates, Branagh became a victim of that very disturbing ideological presence he set out to critique.

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Notes

1 For Michael Pursell, Henry’s “black” entrance immediately calls to mind the character of Darth Vader in the Star Wars films (269). While this, I believe, is a significant observation, one could take the image one step further and associate Branagh’s Henry with the other caped and dark cinematic figure of 1989, Batman. Not that Branagh was necessarily aware of Tim Burton’s film of the enigmatic crime fighter, but it is interesting to note the (coincidental?) prevalence during that year of dark-caped images of questionable character. At the risk of overextending these associations, one could even include the “sudden” appearance of the U.S. military’s Stealth Bomber around the time of Batman’s opening.

2 See, for instance, the essays of Breight, Donaldson, Pursell, and Shaw. These critics, in varying degrees, aptly highlight Branagh’s sympathetic rendering of Henry during the scenes at the English camp prior to Agincourt, the Saint Crispin’s Day speech, the battle at Agincourt and its aftermath, and “boyish” courting scene at the French palace.
Works Cited


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