

**The Rabbit That Quacked:  
Shakespeare's *Henry V* in Performance**

**By Kathryn S. Prince**

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**THE RABBIT THAT QUACKED: SHAKESPEARE'S  
HENRY V IN PERFORMANCE**

by

**KATHRYN S. PRINCE**

**A Thesis/Practicum submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies of The University  
of Manitoba in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the degree  
MASTER of ARTS**

**KATHRYN S. PRINCE 1997 (c)**

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## Introduction

*Now entertain conjecture of a time  
When creeping murmur and the poring dark  
Fills the wide vessel of the universe*

(IV.o.1-3).

Unlike most of Shakespeare's commentators, each of whom often works as a spokesperson for the themes and ideas in the play in addition to functioning as a character, the Chorus in *Henry V* is deliberately positioned as an extrinsic voice. His role, as he tells the audience at the end of his first speech, is similar to that of a prologue: similar, but not identical, because he will reappear throughout the play rather than retreating after he has fulfilled his introductory role. He differs, however, from choric characters like Margaret in *Richard III* or Gower in *Pericles*, because he has no proper name. Identified only by his function, the Chorus in theory remains immune to the personal interests which taint characters' interpretations. Before we can trust Margaret's version of history, for example, we must consider how her role in the events she addresses might colour her understanding of them.

The characterization of the Chorus becomes a defining feature in productions of *Henry V*. His relationship to the events he narrates, to the characters, and to the audience significantly affects the play's possible impact. His biases,

interests, and reliability have to be considered in relation to the director's overall vision. In performance, it becomes clear that he is not as separate from the action as his prologue-like function implies. Even small changes to his characterization have repercussions throughout the play. An epic version like Laurence Olivier's 1944 film relies on the Chorus as a faithful interpreter. In fact, his descriptions often take the place of the onstage action. The Olivier film shows the battle of Agincourt, for example, although in the text it is present only in the Chorus' introduction to the fourth act. Alternatively, when his fallibility is emphasized, as in Kenneth Branagh's 1988 film, the play becomes ironic.

The gap left by the corpulent Falstaff's absence is so significant that both Olivier and Branagh imported sequences from *Henry IV* in order to include him in their films. Critics have argued that one or several of the Boar's Head characters are meant to substitute for him, or that his absolute disappearance from the stage is the measure of Hal's genuine desire to renounce him. I would argue instead that the Chorus becomes Henry's new bosom companion. The clever use of doubling in the English Shakespeare Company's *The Wars of the Roses* (discussed in chapter three of this thesis) supports this reading, casting the second lead from both parts of *Henry IV* as the Chorus.

The Chorus' rhetoric is startlingly similar to Falstaff's own brand of argument. In both cases, nearly every sentence contains a figure of speech which neatly transforms a sometimes

harsh reality into something more desirable. Such turns of phrase are not in themselves remarkable: Shakespeare allows even the very un-Falstaffian Lord Chief Justice in *Henry IV* the occasional pun. What the Chorus inherits from Falstaff is the degree of control he has over his rhetoric. Like Falstaff's "smooth comforts false", the choric speeches are notably playful, using figurative language as a rhetorical tool. The pun in *Henry V* is Shakespeare's, put into the Lord Chief Justice's mouth but not under his control. The Chorus is, like Falstaff, a speaker in command of the language he uses.

The first choric speech begins with a compression of images and metaphors characteristic of Falstaff's vivid use of language: O for a muse of fire, which would (like fire, an element which naturally rises) ascend the brightest (another characteristic of fire) heaven of invention. If this were real life, in other words, rather than mere drama, that fire would be dominated by Henry, at whose heels fire would crouch for employment. However, because the spirits of the dead have not risen (as fire would) to take part in this production, actors will stand in for them.

Of course the argument is ridiculous. An audience would not likely expect to see Henry V rise from the dead, and the Chorus' apology for the inadequacy of the upcoming battle scenes is unnecessary. The only battle which takes place, a farcical single combat between Pistol and Le Fer, is uncomplicated to stage and requires fewer than even the "four or five ragged foils" noted in the prologue.

The Chorus' speeches clearly interrupt the action. Even when he speaks in voice-over, as in Branagh's film, his rhetoric contrasts awkwardly with the comparatively realistic events Shakespeare chooses to portray. The Chorus is often considered to be a reliable and unbiased interpreter as a consequence of his position outside the onstage events. Within the context of the play, however, and to a greater degree within the context of the tetralogy which culminates in *Henry V*, the Chorus' role becomes more complicated than it initially appears.

The shorter Quarto version of *Henry V* follows essentially the same plot as the Folio, but the Quarto omits all of the choric speeches. The Chorus' role as narrator is clearly not indispensable if Shakespeare manages without his assistance in the Quarto. He does indeed function at times as a convenience, filling in narrative and chronological gaps, but his absence in the Quarto implies that his role in the Folio need not be restricted to simple narrative. Indeed, the other differences between the two versions of the play suggest that, rather than simplifying Shakespeare's task, the Chorus' inclusion, like other revisions, deliberately complicates many of the issues which in the Quarto are more one-sided. In addition to the absence of choric speeches, including the epilogue, the Quarto omits many of the episodes which subvert the patriotic, celebratory reading typified by E.M.W. Tillyard's scholarship and Olivier's film.

Although recent editions of the play usually mention the existence of two texts, the implications of the textual



discrepancies as a whole are not part of a shared general discourse. Both Craik and Taylor focus on the single problem of the Dauphin's speeches in II.iv and III.v, which are given to Bourbon in the Quarto. Other textual differences are listed, but not discussed. Greenblatt's textual note in *The Norton Shakespeare* also focuses on character changes, while Gurr's edition ignores the issue completely, as does the Oxford *William Shakespeare: The Complete Works*.

Readers of Annabel Patterson are familiar with the textual discrepancies: the Quarto does not include I.i, in which the bishops discuss the church's pecuniary motivation for encouraging Henry to wage war against the French; their subsequent offer in I.ii to finance the war effort; the Hostess' claim in II.i that Henry is morally responsible for Falstaff's death; the suggestion in II.ii that the Scroop conspiracy was motivated by other than a desire for French "gilt"; the unsavoury aspects of Harfleur, particularly the most distasteful of Henry's threats towards its citizens in III.iii; Henry's doubts prior to Agincourt in IV.i; Burgundy's speech in V.ii about the damage done to France by Henry's soldiers; and a large part of Henry's (genuine or feigned) uncertainty during the wooing scene in V.ii. As a group, the Quarto's omissions contribute to a more straightforward, less analytical version of the events in the Folio. The two texts differ less in content than in contexts. The bishops support a war against France in both, but only the Folio explains why they do so. Similarly, Burgundy's speech in

V.ii of the Folio does not change the impact war has had on France's landscape and citizens, but it does make the audience aware of this impact as the Quarto does not.

Gary Taylor's introduction to the 1984 Oxford edition suggests that, because the speeches of Gower and Exeter, and the scenes in which they appear, are similar in the two texts, we can infer that the Quarto is their memorial reconstruction of the Folio or of a performance text (22-3). Like other "bad" Quartos, then, the *Henry V* Quarto text would become simply a faulty version of the more trustworthy Folio. The absence of a chorus could be accounted for by the simple "mechanical exigency" of a reduced cast for travelling purposes: nine or ten adults and two boy actors could comfortably fill all the roles in the Quarto, but the Chorus' exits and entrances occur too closely to those of other characters, precluding the possibility of doubling. While this explanation could account for some of the differences, it seems unlikely to me that such a large role would be cut solely because of a limited number of actors.

As Annabel Patterson rightly points out, Taylor's analysis fails to explain many of the variations, even with the corollary notion that the play was shortened for an ostensible touring production. The discrepancies between Quarto and Folio texts of *Henry V* are materially different from those usually associated with pirated Quartos. A more likely explanation is that the texts represent variations on a theme, directed to two very different audiences.

The problem is that each text seems in some respects to be the original play, yet in others appears to be a specially rewritten performance text. The Quarto's relatively more straightforward tone could conceivably correspond to a popular performance, while the Folio's ambiguity and several of the Chorus' references might imply an audience less kindly disposed towards the play's focus on patriotism and heroism. Alternatively, the Folio could be the original, with the Quarto corresponding to a performance for an audience less willing to entertain any notion of uncertainty. The politically dangerous reference to the Earl of Essex in the fifth chorus, for example, would likely have been excised for a royal performance, given Queen Elizabeth's documented antipathy towards him. Elizabeth perceived Essex as a political threat, a suspicion confirmed, as most Elizabethans would know, by his eventual rebellion in February 1601. The Chorus' reference to the rebellion broached on his sword thus offers contradictory readings. As an optimistic allusion to his as yet incomplete campaign to suppress Tyrone's rebellion, "broached" is synonymous with "spitted" or "impaled": the Chorus hopes that he will return triumphant. Alternatively, the rebellion could be something made available for discussion (as one "broaches" a sensitive topic), or actively started (as one "broaches" a container by opening and making use of its contents). Thus, *Henry V* does not necessarily support

Essex, as conventional glosses of the line suggest<sup>1</sup>.

As a group, the differences between the Quarto and Folio versions of *Henry V* demonstrate a change in purpose. Less clear is the impetus for such a change. G.P.Jones' persuasive article argues against the dominant theory that the Quarto represents a purposely shortened version of the Folio designed for a smaller travelling company. Although Jones lacks conclusive proof, historical evidence does support his theory that the Folio represents a rewritten text for a small court performance in 1605.

In addition to avoiding the pitfalls of Taylor's argument, Jones provides a literal significance to the Chorus' references to makeshift props in a limited acting space. If performed in the royal cockpit, these remarks would be witty as well as accurate. Most importantly, this explanation accepts the play as it exists. Rather than excusing Shakespeare's ambiguities as mistakes or practical necessities, Jones incorporates them into a dynamic and expansive vision.

The Folio offers ambiguity, complexity, and multiple perspectives where the Quarto seems designed to reflect a simplified version of the same story. As the largest component of the additions to the Folio, the Chorus thus becomes an agent of that complexity. Ironically, however, the Chorus himself

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<sup>1</sup>Graham Holderness discusses the ambiguity of Shakespeare's reference to Essex (141-4), and G.P. Jones refers to W.D. Smith's inconclusive (and I think unconvincing) argument that the lines allude to Essex's successor, Lord Mountjoy (96).

seems to support a Quarto-like reading of the play. His speeches reflect an uncompromisingly patriotic interpretation of events. Even when a less idealized view is suggested by the events themselves, the Chorus ignores alternative explanations. Thus, the Scroop conspiracy is declared to be motivated solely by greed, even though Cambridge (in direct opposition to his self-interest, one might suggest) asserts that money was merely a means to "sooner effect what [he] intended" (II.ii.157).

Although bringing historical fact into Shakespeare's histories is usually fruitless when he has chosen to deviate from his sources, it seems possible in this case to argue that he meant to allude to the historical basis for the conspiracy. Both Holinshed and Hall, as well as Shakespeare's own *Henry VI*, make clear that Henry was considered by some to be a usurper - although Richard II was forced to give up his crown to Henry IV, many supported Mortimer's competing claim to the crown. The Chorus seems to be familiar with the *Henry VI* plays, but he conveniently forgets about this explanation, and ignores Cambridge's allusion.

The Chorus is, however, merely one voice in a play explicitly concerned with polyphony. While he fails to mention the alternative views offered by the Boar's Head characters or Henry's non-English soldiers, the play itself highlights a Babel-like heterogeneity among Henry's compatriots and adversaries alike: Fluellen's notable mispronunciation resulting in an unflattering comparison between Henry and Alexander the "Pig" (IV.vii.13) and Katherine's scandalized reaction to the

similarities between common English words and bawdy French slang (III.iv,47-51) are memorable, though not isolated, examples. In fact, the issue of communication is one of the play's central ambiguities.

Initially, the Chorus seems a trustworthy narrator, guiding the audience between these conflicting perspectives. He respects the audience, speaks candidly about the shortcomings of the stage, and, as an extrinsic voice, seems unbiased. There is no reason to suspect him of dishonesty, and the play initially cooperates to support him. In contrast to subsequent speeches, the first and second acts coincide with rather than contradict their choric introductions.

In *Henry V*, the Chorus directs the audience toward both epic and ironic elements. At times he is a cheerleader or a spin doctor, emphasizing the glory of war, playing on the audience's patriotism, and explaining potentially negative events like Henry's execution of the traitors in a positive light. His repeated apologies for the inadequacies of the performance further bolster the notion that the play is an epic, arguing that the medium rather than the subject matter is responsible for any flaws. When the ensuing action immediately contradicts his reading of a situation, however, the Chorus' presence undermines the heroic and glorious elements, calling the myth of Henry V's triumph into question. How and at what point the audience loses faith in the Chorus becomes a crucial decision in any production. A predominantly ironic version relies on the audience's awareness

of the Chorus' misapprehensions, while an epic one would do well to minimize their impact.

Laurence Olivier's 1944 film of *Henry V* edits out most ironic aspects of the Chorus, as well as many incidents which undermine Henry's absolute control or question the themes of patriotism and the glory of war. The result is a production which was, without any overt ambiguity, dedicated to the soldiers of WWII. Kenneth Branagh's 1989 film, which exaggerates the irony through visual strategies and some rearranging, often diminishes where Olivier's glorifies. In both cases, the decision to downplay one aspect of the Chorus limits the play's meaning to a single dominant perspective.

The shortcomings of the BBC film of *Henry V* provide an example of why many directors feel compelled to simplify the Chorus' function. Although this version adheres to the Folio text and can be admired for its ambitious attempt to convey the complexity of the Chorus' speeches, many critics have responded to it without enthusiasm. Some stage productions which have been better received use non-conventional casting to highlight the Chorus' ambiguity, often by having multiple voices deliver the speeches or by dividing the lines between other characters, thus emphasizing the Chorus' connection to the rest of the play.

Adrian Noble's 1984 production for the RSC and Michael Bogdanov's touring production of the two tetralogies confront, often successfully, the play's contradictions. In both cases, the directors faced the same challenge: to convey a sense of

ambiguity to the audience without allowing the production itself to become ambivalent.

The case for an ambiguous interpretation rests first on the viability of both the epic and the ironic readings. Thus, the first two chapters of this thesis will examine the validity as well as the shortcomings of both approaches. Performance is, in drama, the true test of a theory. Consequently, I will be considering various productions, both epic and ironic, in order to assess the sometimes domino-like effect a small change in the interpretation of the Chorus has on the play.

Establishing an understanding of the Chorus' function is crucial because it determines the range of interpretations available for the play as a whole. If the Chorus is taken at face value, as a reliable narrator for a story too large to fit on stage without his assistance, then the play becomes the epic of Henry's victory at Agincourt. In Laurence Olivier's film version, for example, the rich imagery of the choric speeches dominates. Shakespeare's deviations from the epic mode are omitted, while scenes supporting the Chorus' version of events are invented.

The increasing discrepancy between the Chorus' interpretation and the audience's experience provides the space in which ambiguity can occur. For critics such as Linda Hutcheon and Gerald Gould, the gap produces irony, but others promote a strictly epic reading. This critical disagreement itself indicates the amorphous nature of the play. *Henry V* is not



unique in engendering debate, particularly in the current critical climate which promotes an emphasis on darkness in the comedies and optimism in the tragedies. Even the dramatic difference in tone of Quarto and Folio is not rare in Shakespeare. This play differs from others, however, because it achieves a resolution of these contradictions through a dynamic balance between them rather than a compromise or a choice. There is no other way to resolve the tetralogy's juxtaposed views of honour, kingship, and loyalty. If there were more common ground between Hotspur and Falstaff, or a way to choose between Richard II and Henry IV, the ambiguity of *Henry V* would not be necessary. This thesis will attempt to show how ambiguity functions as the ideal and only possible mechanism for reconciling the otherwise irreconcilable tendencies of both the play itself and the tetralogy which it concludes.

**"God for Harry! England and Saint George!":  
Henry V as epic drama**

*Vouchsafe to those that have not read the story,  
That I may prompt them: and of such as have,  
I humbly pray them to admit the excuse  
Of time, of numbers and due course of things,  
Which cannot in their huge and proper life  
Be here presented*

(V.o.1-6).

Gary Taylor begins his introduction to *Henry V* with the assertion that "No one bored by war will be interested in (it)" (1). The image of Henry's triumph at Agincourt, of a battle between two mighty monarchies, often dominates criticism of the play. Whether portrayed as the inspiring battle in Olivier's 1944 film, or the dirtier, bloodier version in Branagh, war is to many critics its central and defining concept. The prologue supports such a reading, focusing on the "warlike Harry" (5), the hounds of "famine, sword and fire" (6), and the "vast fields of France" (12). Such prominent critics as John Dover Wilson and Zdenek Stribrny are persuaded to read the play through the Chorus' eyes, the latter calling it a "realistic national epic" (186) as a concession to the contrast between the Chorus' speeches and the rather mundane goings-on which make up most of the action.

These critics can accommodate the fact that many of the Chorus' promises fail to materialize for an audience. A reader

may consider the play a glorious tribute to heroism and battle, but in the theatre it becomes apparent, unless the director deviates from the text, that even the insufficient number of ragged foils for which the Chorus apologizes (IV.o.50) are unnecessary. The rhetoric and preparation for war may perhaps convince or inspire, but there is no mighty battle scene in this ostensibly most militaristic play: the only combat between French and English soldiers is the comic interchange between Pistol and LeFer (Iv.iv). While the Chorus speaks of heroism and valour, the characters on stage argue and woo through the preparations and aftermath of a war which occurs only behind the scenes.

The stage in Shakespeare's time (and indeed in our own) was not equipped to portray a convincing simulation of Agincourt. This reason itself justifies the absence of a battle scene. A choric explanation of the practical difficulty of staging one would be appropriate, but his apology for the shortcomings of an episode that does not exist is problematic. Many of the Chorus' descriptions throughout the play usefully supplement the staged action, but the prologue differs materially. Rather than explaining offstage action or helping the audience to imagine the setting for a subsequent scene, the Chorus' apology prepares the audience for an event which does not take place. There are no four or five ragged foils, hence no reason to draw attention to them.

The continued discrepancies between what the Chorus says and what occurs on stage can be partially explained as Shakespeare's

acknowledgement that the full scope of this epic material cannot be adequately conveyed through drama. If we believe the Chorus, Shakespeare has intended to rely on the audience's imagination to supply elements which the play lacks. The Chorus' many references to the inadequacies of props and performers, and particularly his wish to have a kingdom for a stage and princes to act, support the argument that a cooperation between Chorus and audience is meant to achieve the epic tone that a Chorus-less drama cannot achieve. His vivid images and narrative function consistently attempt to help the audience imagine more of the story than the action shows. Furthermore, because the audience cannot know until the final act that the prologue has been misleading, for many spectators there is no reason to listen suspiciously to his speeches.

The presence of a commentator aligns *Henry V* with classic epic drama. In their efforts to combine two genres which are distinctly at odds, classical dramatists frequently included a chorus to fill in the aspects of a story which, respecting the constraints "of time, of numbers and due course of things" (V.o.4) could not be staged in their entirety. The epic, by definition a sprawling episodic narrative primarily representing important people and events, does not suit a medium which demands succinctness, character development, and focus. The chorus effects a compromise. Sophocles, for example, begins *Oedipus Rex* in *media res*, using a commentator to explain what has already happened. Thus, he sacrifices neither theatrical economy nor epic

sprawl. Rather than beginning with Oedipus' birth, Sophocles stages only the heart of the story, excluding neither its past nor its future.

Shakespeare's Chorus is a solitary figure, different from the collective voice typical of classical drama. Unlike the groups of citizens in *Agamemnon* or *Oedipus Rex*, who speak as the voice of a community, the Chorus in *Henry V* lacks a context. Without a frame of reference, we cannot deduce with whom he is allied, or whose views he represents. His perspective must be inferred from what he says. He is an unknown quantity whose motives can only be ascertained as the play progresses. Whether he is the objective, omniscient outsider of Olivier's film or a citizen carried away by his own patriotic pride must be somehow determined.

The epic reading relies on the Chorus as an interpreter, reliable as a mediator between the audience and the action and credible as a narrator. His solitude becomes an important aspect of his characterization. In performance, he often wears modern dress to distance him from the actors in period clothing, or he becomes the voice in Olivier's film who speaks from the clouds as if he has a God's eye view of the action. Alternatively, some assume he reflects the "popular" voice as the classical "citizen" chorus, or perhaps, as John Dover Wilson suggests, we can envision him as the voice of the playwright himself guiding the audience's response. In any case, he stands emphatically outside the main action of the play. At the same time, the Chorus'

structural isolation from the action must be minimized if his voice is to lend its tone to the play. The celebratory pageant promised by his rhetoric must somehow find its way into a matrix which offers very little to match these epic speeches.

The onstage action often contradicts or seriously undermines the Chorus' introduction to each act. To downplay this contrast becomes one of the main challenges for a director who chooses to present an epic *Henry V*. The first Chorus, for example, prepares us for a pageant of "two mighty monarchies" (I.o.20) yet two churchmen planning the war follow as the next scene begins. Indeed, the action that the Chorus has prepared us for is barely present. Dialogue almost overwhelms what does occur.

The second chorus, equally misleading, first tells the audience that "all the youth of England are on fire" (II.o.1) and that "honour's thought/Reigns solely in the breast of every man" (II.o.3-4), but contradicts itself some fifteen lines later with the "nest of hollow bosoms" of the Scroop conspiracy against Henry. The scene which ensues further complicates the chorus. Rather than Henry's confrontation with the traitors for which the speech has prepared us, we witness an argument between Pistol and Nym followed by the Boy's announcement that Falstaff is dying.

As Annabel Patterson suggests, only the Quarto text of *Henry V* supports an unreservedly epic reading of the play. The Folio remains epic-like in the choric speeches and in Henry's public orations, but its enthusiasm is elsewhere muted by a focus on the more mundane episodes in the lives of the less than aristocratic

characters and by the illumination of motives which the Quarto leaves unclear. Nevertheless, until recent years most studies of the play were primarily or even exclusively concerned with evaluating the degree to which it succeeds in epic terms. Discussions of Henry's suitability as a hero or the historical facts of Agincourt are common manifestations of this approach<sup>1</sup>. A.P. Rossiter's indictment of *Henry V* as "a propaganda-play on National Unity: heavily orchestrated for the brass" (57), perhaps the most frequently quoted assessment, is more accurate than most which praise its epic qualities while ignoring the moments at which Shakespeare deviates from the celebratory tone evident in the Chorus' rhetoric.

The Quarto is more epic than the Folio because it eliminates many of the incidents which can be interpreted as subversive to the play's main themes: both Henry's doubts before Agincourt at the end of IV.i and much of his uncertainty during the wooing scene (V.ii), for example, are omitted. Unlike the Folio, the Quarto does little to undermine Henry's control, charisma, and confidence. The Chorus' absence evidently circumvents the contrast between what he promises and what actually occurs. Even

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<sup>1</sup>See, for example, Tillyard's chapter on *Henry V*, which he devotes to an analysis of Shakespeare's reasons for constructing Henry's character as it appears. Campbell discusses the pertinent history from Holinshed and Hall as well as the Elizabethan context. Stribny speaks for an entire group of critics when he suggests that "(w)e may therefore illuminate the whole play by centring our critical attention on Henry's character and career as well as on his relations both to his friends and his enemies"(175).

the scenes which exist intact in the Quarto lose much of their irony without the false expectations he creates. Thus, the audience is not conditioned to perceive Henry's argument with Williams as the king's failure to cheer his soldiers. Furthermore, without these opportunities to consider Henry's character more closely, the Quarto allows him to remain a two-dimensional epic hero rather than the more complex character he becomes in the Folio.

Structurally, the Chorus serves an epic function by acquainting the audience with episodes and locations otherwise excluded from the play's main action. He can whisk the spectators from England to France and back again, or summarize the negotiations between the two countries, suggesting a breadth to the story which transcends the limitations of the stage. Without the linking effect of the Chorus, *Henry V* would exist much as it does in the earlier Quarto version: a collection of characters and events without the breadth and scope characteristic of an epic. Although the Chorus does not always succeed in convincingly linking the shreds and patches of the play, this narrative function at least partially accounts for his presence. The Folio becomes more expansive both in range and depth through his contribution. While the Quarto does not explain the negotiations which go on during Henry's campaign, for example, the knowledge that King Charles has attempted to buy peace with the offer of Katherine and several "petty and unprofitable dukedoms" (III.o.31) may affect an audience's



perception of the subsequent action.

The Folio, by virtue of its epilogue, is generally considered to be a darker version of the Quarto. At least in one respect, however, the Folio may be more optimistic in that it posits the survival of the English nation not only during times of strong leadership, but also in spite of weak or inept rulers. England ultimately transcends both Henry V and his son. Thus, the Quarto can be read as the epic of Henry V, while the Folio may become to patriotic readers something more like the epic of a nation.

Both Rossiter and Tillyard acknowledge the play's failure to transform the raw material of an epic into a dramatic format<sup>2</sup>. Even the epic intensity achieved by the Chorus is not sustained in the action between his speeches. Many of the episodes in the play fall flat for an audience expecting what Ralph Berry called "a straight-forward nationalist statement, the military epic of the English-speaking people" (in Leiter 213). Nevertheless, numerous critics and directors have continued to measure *Henry V* according to a model which relies heavily on the Chorus' explanations and which excludes all that contradicts or undermines the notion of a battle between two mighty monarchies led by the mirror of all Christian kings.

Directors, discovering that an epic *Henry V* works well as

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<sup>2</sup>See Richard David's article in Shakespeare Survey Vol.6 (1953) for a discussion of three 1951 productions which deal with the conflict of epic and dramatic elements throughout the tetralogy.

propaganda, have often used it as a persuasive tool. The British Ministry of Information sponsored Olivier's 1944 film in a bid to increase public support of the war effort. The film's consequent "valuable morale-building element" (McFarlane 46) was achieved through a concentration on its epic qualities. Dallas Bower, the initial screenwriter and associate producer of the Olivier film, emphasized that, as a project sponsored by the Ministry of Information, this *Henry V* was to have no dark undertones. In an interview for the *Shakespeare Bulletin*, Bower repeatedly referred to its "propaganda value" (McFarlane 46). Careful editing of the text suppressed the less savory aspects of Henry's character, of war, and of jingoism. Terry Hands chose *Henry V* to open the Royal Shakespeare Company's centennial season for similar reasons, seeking to inspire his audience to wage a battle against the threat of budget cuts to the RSC. As the Duke of Edinburgh suggests in his foreword to Sally Beauman's book about the RSC production, there is a parallel between Henry's army and the "band of supporters of the Theatre (fighting to overcome) the menace of rising costs and inflation" (3) . In both cases, the doubts and questions inherent in the text were downplayed in order to reshape the play into a confident and inspirational testament to what Hands called "improvisation, inter-dependence, and unity" (Beauman 14).

The main factor in creating a successfully epic *Henry V* seems to be the degree of credibility the Chorus achieves. If an audience can be convinced to rely on him, then the contrast

between his speeches and the action will be more easily dismissed or disregarded. By making him into a friendly, personable guide with an increasing authority, and by creating ironic focal points outside of his speeches to direct the audience's uncertainty away from him, Hands was able to integrate the Chorus' voice into the play. Olivier accomplished the same goal by dividing the speeches and using them within, rather than apart from, the main action. In both cases, the Chorus becomes a trusted rather than questionable voice.

In Olivier's film, Leslie Banks' Chorus gains credibility through visual images which coincide with his lines delivered in voice-over. Olivier often uses action shots to accompany Banks' lines: a cannon being fired and a wall crumbling on impact make the nimble gunner before whom all goes down (III.o.32-4 in the text) into a tangible reality. Thus, Olivier eliminates the sharp division in the text between the rhetoric of the Chorus and the staged action. The Chorus' speeches are no longer entirely separate from the play, allowing the epic tone normally contained in them to become associated more closely with the entire production.

Olivier further supports the Chorus' credibility by restructuring his speeches so that the lines occur intermittently throughout the film rather than being confined to introductions

before each act<sup>3</sup>. Instead of forming what Kristian Smidt calls "imperfect links" between episodes, the Chorus becomes an omnipresent as well as presumably omniscient narrator. The contrast between his speeches and the action is minimized, and the epic tone consequently becomes the dominant mode of the film. One result of this blending is a continuously shifting degree of realism. Though more realistic than the Elizabethan performance used in early scenes, the filmic mode is infiltrated by a highly artificial commentator.

In addition to the cuts he made in order to tighten the play into feature film format, Olivier reorganized the majority of the Chorus' lines. Banks' Chorus frequently achieves an effect which contrasts sharply with Shakespeare's technique, providing smooth transitions between scenes which, in both the text and the

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<sup>3</sup>The alterations made to the Chorus in Olivier's film include:  
Prologue: lines 15-17, 24-25 are omitted  
II.o is reduced to II.o.1-11 plus a conflation of part of II.o.31 and 39-40:

"Linger your patience on, for, if we may  
We'll not offend one stomach with our play"  
Following II.i is a "new" choric speech consisting of II.o.31-32 and 34-42 (with brief omissions)  
Following II.ii is a "new" choric speech consisting of III.o.1-5, 7-15, 17, 19-20, 22-24, and II.o.12-15  
III.o is reduced to lines 25-27  
Following III.ii.22 is a "new" choric speech consisting of III.o.32-34  
Following III.vi is a "new" choric speech consisting of IV.o.1-14, 17-22  
IV.o is reduced to 15-16, 23-24, 43-47  
V.o is omitted  
The final chorus is reduced to 1-6, 13-14 (from *Geduld*, 50).

screenplay, fit together awkwardly. Rather than serving the disruptive, divisive, and distancing function he has in the text, the Chorus in Olivier's film becomes a mechanism for reinforcing the film's unity. The majority of what has been left out would undermine the epic elements in the play. The episodes which detract from Henry's heroic character, from the glory of war, and from the main plot are all eliminated. Material referring to the background of the characters or of the battle, elaboration regarding characters' motivation, and most of the scenes involving the comic characters are cut. The internal threats to England represented by Scotland or by traitorous factions, Henry's less attractive traits, and details which individualize or ennoble the French are simply deleted. The result is a film which staunchly supports jingoism and war-mongering, appropriate to its role as allied propaganda.

Most critics seem confident that Olivier altered the text in order to create a one-sided, epic film which simplifies the ambiguity inherent in the play. It seems to have escaped general notice, however, that Olivier closely followed the Chorus' lead. In a film which cut almost fifty percent of the text<sup>4</sup>, most of the Chorus' lines remain intact, although they are reorganized. His proportionately larger and more pervasive role in the film text alters his effect considerably. Olivier's film presents a new version of the Chorus, one in which he appears often and thus

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<sup>4</sup>See Geduld 50-1 for a complete list of the cuts

seems to be omnipresent rather than isolated. What he says is confirmed by what the camera shows, and what he does not see or chooses to ignore disappears in this film. Thus, the comic characters who undermine his sweeping statements about honour all but fade out of sight, and Henry becomes something like the "star of England" promised in the epilogue. Many of the episodes relating to the subplots are replaced by images of battle which further support the Chorus' perspective.

Terry Hands' production, like Olivier's, imposed an artificial structure on the play. Hands envisioned *Henry V* as a progression from doubt to certainty<sup>5</sup>, and his manipulation of the Chorus reflects this reading. Emrys James' Chorus becomes an increasingly dominant voice as the play progresses. Initially, he mingles with the other characters, but they disregard him, interrupting his speeches with their action. Many of the early contradictions are allowed to stand. However, by casting James as both the Chorus and Burgundy, Hands allowed the Chorus to take control of the final scene. His certainty takes the place of doubt. Burgundy, the peacemaker whose final speech in the last scene is often cut because it threatens to upstage Henry, thus becomes identified with the Chorus. His potentially subversive focus on the consequences of Henry's victory from the French perspective is at least partially diminished by this doubling.

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<sup>5</sup>See Hands' introduction to Sally Beaman's book: he explains his reading of the play and the motivations behind this particular production (14-27).

Rather than eliminating ambiguity, Hands successfully used it to address the reservations that a modern audience might have about its themes without allowing them to dominate the production. The doubts which Hands acknowledges as an intrinsic part of the earlier scenes are resolved by the end of the production to the extent that one reviewer wrote a personal letter to Hands avowing that "I had the usual anti-jingo, anti-heroic hangups, but I came away convinced that I had not read the work with the kind of attention that it deserves" (Guy Butler in Beauman 261). Unlike Olivier, who smoothed over the play's ambivalence towards jingoism and heroism, Hands strategically used it to overcome the suspicion with which a contemporary audience might greet an epic *Henry V*.

In spite of the quite obvious errors in the Chorus' grasp of events, Emrys James considered his role in Terry Hands' 1975 RSC production to be that of a faithful guide. In an interview for Beauman's book, James explained that "the main relationship the Chorus has is with the audience. You are their guide; it's the duty of the Chorus to lure the audience into the play, to be friendly, to relax them" (62). Asked about the Chorus' bias towards the English, and the jingoistic tone which is evident in many of his lines, James asserted the veracity of the Chorus' assessments and declared that he was reporting "fairly accurately" (63). James' appreciation of his role fits with Terry Hands' conception of the play as the measure of a progression from "the doubts at the beginning to the confidence

of the wooing scene" (in Beauman, 26). Hands' was the most successful *Henry V* production of the seventies, and Leiter suggests that "many would call it the definitive *Henry V* of the postwar period" (215). Like Olivier's film, the Hands *Henry V* shaped the way subsequent performers and spectators interpreted the play. The tenacity of epic readings is due in part to productions like these which make such an interpretation seem convincing.

Hands' addition of two lines to V.i prepares his audience for the Chorus' eventual integration into the main action. The Chorus corrects Fluellen's mispronunciation of the word "ambiguities", and Fluellen responds directly to him with the line "Yes, ambiguities, yes". This is a turning point in the production. From this moment the Chorus' role changes from external commentator to character. Like his appropriation of Burgundy's speech, the Chorus' interaction with Fluellen allows his voice to literally change the play.

The critical response almost invariably remarked on the clever use of the Chorus' first speech, delivered as the cast, in street clothes, presumably prepares for their upcoming roles with warmup exercises. As Emrys James wishes for a muse of fire, the actors gradually assume their costumes and the play moves from an experimental to a more conventional tone. One critic interpreted this beginning as a warning that "cut-price Shakespeare simply doesn't work and if the Arts Council does not come up with a better cheque this is how we'll be getting our Bard in the



future" (Sheridan Morley in Beauman 256). From the beginning, then, Hands' audience was positioned to see the Chorus getting what he asked for, and to be pleased that he got it.

Unlike Olivier, Hands was able to retain the play's ambiguity as well as the audience's sympathy. Thus, the scenes which Olivier cuts were generally present in the RSC production, although somewhat distorted by Hands' insistence that they reflect a structure absent in the text. The epilogue consequently seems even more dissonant than usual, because it drastically changes the direction in which Hands has insisted the play move. By making slight changes to the order of the scenes following the choric speeches, Hands reduced the impact of the most obtrusive ironies without resorting to Olivier's wholesale cuts<sup>6</sup>.

During WWII, Olivier perhaps had no need to short-circuit such doubts. For an audience in the throes of war fever, a film which emphasized valour, solidarity, and victory would be welcome

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<sup>6</sup>Hands' changes to the Chorus are as follows:

I.o same as text

II.o 1-11, followed by II.i

12-31 following II.i (please see the following chapter, p.44, for a discussion of the irony generated when these lines are delivered prior to II.i as in the text)

III.o same as text

IV.o following III.vi rather than III.vii (with a consequent emphasis on the pettiness of the French)

1-22 followed by III.vii

22-47 followed by IV.i

48-end followed by IV.iv

V.o 29-41 omitted except "To welcome him"(34) and "Now in London place him"(35)(leaving out the topical allusion to Essex)

Epilogue same as text

rather than suspect. The early reviews of the film seem to support the belief that Olivier made the right decision, and the film succeeded at the box-office as well with critics. Although some reviewers did take exception to Olivier's changes, and particularly to the resulting oversimplifications, the general response was to praise Olivier for being "the first to achieve a film style amenable to film presentations of Shakespeare" (Peter Morris in *Geduld* 67). The Chorus' hortatory tone, rather than contrasting with the rest of the play, is maintained as the dominant one throughout. Olivier further supports the epic reading by reducing the epilogue to seven lines (1-6 and 13-14), omitting Shakespeare's reference to the brief reign of Henry VI and changing the thirteenth line so that it is for "his" sake, Henry V, rather than "their" sake that we should accept the play.

Olivier's film is not as one-sided as an analysis of the written performance text might suggest. Although he eliminated most of the subversive episodes, moments of comedy or farce added to the film often achieve a similar effect. The Salic Law speech, played for laughs to the annoyance of more than one critic, is typical of Olivier's approach. Without the earlier discussion between the bishops, Henry's attitude towards Canterbury's persuasion is unclear at the beginning of the scene. Olivier's half-hidden smile throughout the speech suggests that he looks on Canterbury's explanation as comical rather than convincing. His decision to wage war is thus separated from the bishops' influence.

A director who chooses to make the play into an epic must somehow make the Chorus' voice permeate the action as well as the commentary. As we have seen, Olivier divides the Chorus' speeches and includes them throughout the play rather than isolating them as in the text. Hands' solution becomes more problematic because it changes the Chorus' role significantly. Shakespeare's Chorus is a commentator rather than a character, but Hands allows him to move from his external position to one within the play. His relationship to the other characters thus becomes an issue which does not arise within the text. The audience, perhaps independent of the director, must decide how the Chorus' credibility is affected by his positioning within rather than outside events.

Both Olivier and Hands allow the laudatory, celebratory tone of the Chorus to dominate. Olivier divided the six choric speeches into eleven shorter ones, thereby altering the text's dramatic structure. Rather than causing the audience to pause and reevaluate, as in the text, Olivier's version of the Chorus mingles with the action, sustaining an intensity which is otherwise present only in Henry's main speeches.

A reading which considers the Chorus in isolation from the rest of the play will necessarily make judgements about Shakespeare's success or failure in creating an epic. The Chorus, after all, tells us that we will be seeing a play full of the drama and pageantry of battle. This narrator introduces each act, functioning as the choral commentator typical of classical

drama. Narrative gaps are filled in, explanations are offered, and his rhetoric lends glory to the otherwise largely mundane or comic events in the play. The contrasts, like that between the Boar's Head characters who open the second act and the youth of England all on fire promised by the Chorus seems to have escaped the notice of a large portion of Shakespeare's readers, as have the other instances where the action fails to measure up to the Chorus' interpretation.

The discrepancy between the Chorus' tone and the dominant one of the onstage action can be explained as Shakespeare's attempt to give his audience both realism and epic<sup>7</sup>. While this may provide a tempting solution to the play's complexities, it fails to account satisfactorily for either the reasons or the results of this strange pairing. Furthermore, without an adequate explanation for the prologue's focus on an absent battle scene, the conclusion that the Chorus draws attention to the play's failure as an epic becomes difficult to refute. Certainly his presence heightens some of the play's epic qualities, but his role cannot be wholly to promote them.

If we are to think of *Henry V* as an epic, it seems odd that Shakespeare would have worked against himself by repeatedly interrupting the action with scenes irrelevant to this purpose, particularly those involving the Boar's Head characters. The

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<sup>7</sup>See, for example, E.E.Stoll's suggestion that the play is a juxtaposition of "pictures of life, interspersed with poetry and elegance" (98).

Chorus would have us believe that their hearts too are reigned by thoughts of honour, yet Fluellen must beat them before they are willing to follow the other soldiers into the breach. Stranger still, Shakespeare follows the Chorus' speeches with scenes which call his interpretation into question. If a little touch of Harry in the night comforts the soldiers, why does Henry's visit to them in IV.i result in talk of death and culminate in Williams' challenge to fight him? Certainly Henry has serious matters in mind when he wanders off covered by Erpingham's cloak, but discussing them with his men does little to ready them for battle, except against his disguised self.

The final scene of *Henry V* further undermines the notion of the play as an epic because it includes so much material peripheral to the main plot. If Shakespeare had intended to write an epic, the end of the fourth act would be a more suitable conclusion, perhaps with the fifth chorus as the epilogue. Instead, the play ends with a scene more typical of comedy as talk of peace and marriage replaces the rhetoric of battle, followed by an epilogue which undermines the triumph considerably by reminding the audience of the historical truth that Henry died young, leaving his kingdom in the hands of an infant son of "Whose state so many had the managing/ That they lost France and made his England bleed" (Epilogue 11-12).

Leiter suggests that several recent productions of *Henry V* point towards a return to the epic reading of the play. In both cases that he cites, reviewers specifically criticized the

Chorus. Ian McDiarmid in Adrian Noble's 1984 RSC production was "too mannered and self-approving" (Leiter 228). George Martin in Wilford Leach's New York Shakespeare Festival production of the same year seems to have attempted to convey the idea of a "regular guy" within a production that demanded an omniscient Chorus, and his performance was "too flatly conversational" for the epic tone of Leach's interpretation (Leiter 229). Perhaps after decades of darkly ironic productions audiences are ready to see *Henry V* as an epic again. It will need to be a new kind of epic, however, one which takes into account the late twentieth century mistrust of heroism, history, and truth. Finding a Chorus who is both trustworthy and trusting will be one of the foremost challenges to a renaissance of *Henry V* as an epic.

### A little touch of irony in the night

*Now all the youth of England are on fire  
And silken dalliance in the wardrobe lies.  
Now thrive the armourers, and honour's thought  
Reigns solely in the breast of every man(...)*

*One, Richard Earl of Cambridge, and the second,  
Henry Lord Scroop of Masham, and the third,  
Sir Thomas Grey, knight, of Northumberland,  
Have, for the guilt of France -O guilt indeed!-  
Confirmed conspiracy with fearful France  
(II.o.1-4, 23-27).*

Unlike the primarily straightforward, less interpretive version of events offered in the Quarto of *Henry V*, the Folio contains lines and episodes which illuminate its characters' deeper motives and call into question Henry's role as epic hero/king, the justification of the French war, and the Chorus' reliability as an interpreter.<sup>1</sup> A comparison of the two texts suggests Shakespeare's deliberate inclusion of ironic, perhaps subversive, undertones in the Folio. Most critics acknowledge that at least some aspects of the Folio are ironic, particularly the portions of the text which complicate seemingly simple episodes in the Quarto<sup>2</sup>. The presence of irony does not,

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<sup>1</sup>These discrepancies, discussed in the introductory chapter, include, for example, the church's self-interest in promoting the French war, and Henry's doubts prior to Agincourt.

<sup>2</sup>The introduction discusses these revisions, which include the bishops' motivation for encouraging Henry to wage war against France (I.i) and their subsequent offer to finance it (I.ii),

however, itself indicate that the entire play is meant to be read ironically. Romeo and Juliet might have "lived happily ever after" had he received Friar Laurence's message, and there is irony in the miscommunication which results in Romeo's death seconds before his bride awakens. The irony, however, increases rather than undermines the pathos of the tragedy by showing how the outcome could have so easily been comic rather than tragic. Similarly, the instances of irony in *Henry V* may serve as a counterpoint rather than a counterargument to the play's dominant epic tone.

There is no consensus, even among theorists working with irony as a principle, regarding its definition. Generally speaking, the word refers to a discrepancy between denotation and connotation, generating meaning by language which indicates the opposite. Implicit in this definition is the ironist's intention, and the possibility of understanding his real meaning. However, as Linda Hutcheon explains, irony is not always a straightforward process. Though often seen as a playful or humorous figure of speech, irony can also function to ridicule, to trivialize, or to exclude. At what level and to what degree each of these variations come into play in *Henry V*

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Mistress Quickly's claim that Henry is morally responsible for Falstaff's death (II.i), the suggestion of non-pecuniary motives in the Scroop conspiracy (II.ii), the strongest of Henry's threats against the besieged citizens of Harfleur (III.iii), Henry's doubts prior to the battle of Agincourt (IV.i), Burgundy's speech about the damage done to France by Henry's soldiers (V.ii), and Henry's genuine or feigned uncertainty during the wooing scene (V.ii).



will be a primary concern of this chapter.

In the earliest critical essay focusing on this topic, Gerald Gould argues that "None of Shakespeare's plays is so persistently and thoroughly misunderstood as *Henry V*" (81). After more than three hundred years of performance and criticism which emphasized the play's epic elements, Gould felt that his was a new reading. The absence of published articles on the subject prior to Gould's in 1919 does suggest that his claim of originality is valid. Somehow, three centuries' worth of directors, critics, and audiences had failed to notice the pattern of unconformities which, according to Gould, are both evident and intentional.

Although the epic reading continued to dominate criticism and performance of *Henry V*, Gould's perspective eventually became the unacknowledged bedrock for a new way of thinking about the play's inconsistencies. Cultural materialists, feminists, Marxists, and directors looking for a fresh approach began to interpret *Henry V* as a subtle indictment of the very values with which it had been traditionally associated. With little else in common, they agreed that it had more to offer than the jingoism popularized by Olivier's 1944 film version. Kenneth Branagh, who wrote and directed his own ironic response to Olivier's film, discovered that the text was "darker, harsher, and the language more bloody and muscular" than he had first thought, and "sensed that a 1980s film version of such a piece would make for a profoundly different experience" (9). Maureen Shea's 1994 stage

production, though dramatically different from Branagh's in its focus on the female characters in the play, also found a complexity which Olivier's film had avoided. In both cases, the play becomes a statement of opposition towards the very ideals of heroism, chauvinism, and combativeness emphasized in the Olivier film.

An ironic reading depends on context. The secondary, contradictory interpretation necessary to irony can only be understood with reference to the conditions which shift the significance of a line or action out of the literal realm. On one level, the degree to which the Chorus' statements can be interpreted ironically depends on what happens before and after them - how their literal meaning is given a second, subversive meaning by their position in the play. At the same time, the conditions in which a performance takes place - the composition and attitudes of the audience, the political situation and history of the region - includes an unlimited number of variables which will shade a given speech. As Michael Bogdanov's touring production of *The Wars of the Roses*<sup>3</sup> demonstrates, performing the play within the series of the two Henriads gives rise to ironies often unnoticeable except in this combination. If we think of *Henry V* as the conclusion of a trilogy, it can become a triumph and a culmination. As a middle play, however, connected to the

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<sup>3</sup>Bogdanov's production belongs more appropriately to the following chapter because it adopts a dialectic approach. It is, however, relevant as an example because the ironic half of the dialectic is fully developed.

*Henry VI* plays which show the loss of all that has been won in *Henry V*, it takes on a darker and more ironic undertone.

When used at its most straightforward, as in Gould, irony becomes nearly a synonym for satire. Shakespeare says one thing but means the opposite, generating two contradictory levels of meaning. In *Henry V*, irony gives rise to what Gould interprets as a "satire on monarchical government, on imperialism, on the baser kinds of 'patriotism', and on war"(83). For the characters and the duller members of the audience, the play is serious, an epic. The secondary meaning is appreciated only by the astute spectator or critic, and of course by Shakespeare himself, who is able to comprehend the "real", deeper meaning of the play. In this case, the irony becomes subversive but not wholly destructive to the play's surface significance. The literal and the subversive coexist.

Alternatively, a contemporary audience's sceptical attitude towards war, heroism, and patriotism might instil its own irony in the play - an irony which, though present in the text, need not be deliberate. Shakespeare's perhaps sincere praise thus becomes ironic because the more sophisticated modern mind can appreciate the suggestive discrepancies in the play. As Hobday suggests, these unintentional inconsistencies may even be the workings of Shakespeare's subconscious, the result of a "division in Shakespeare's mind" because of which "his emotions may have rebelled against his conscious intentions" (107). A.R.Humphreys offers the similarly unconvincing argument that, though

Shakespeare's mind was "engaged at a brilliantly effective level for dramatic excitement; it was not engaged at the deeper levels of thoughtfulness of which he had already elsewhere shown himself capable" (in Craik 75). In other words, the irony results from a confusion or haste which caused Shakespeare to ignore his own contradictions and juxtapositions. This reading subverts not only the literal meaning of the play, but also the characters, the action, and the playwright himself. *Henry V* is reduced to a lesser work in the canon, weakened by Shakespeare's lack of conviction in the plot and characters he has chosen to shape into a play.

If we did not have the two versions of the text, Hobday and Humphreys would be virtually irrefutable - not necessarily correct, but difficult to prove wrong. The textual differences, however, provide evidence which weakens their position<sup>4</sup>. If we accept the argument that the Chorus' presence is the result of a conscious decision, then implicitly the resulting irony may also be deliberate.

The differences in the Quarto, combined with the pattern of inconsistencies in the play, suggest a Socratic rather than

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<sup>4</sup>The Quarto was published in 1600. The Folio of 1623 is the basis for most subsequent editions. It is usually accepted as an authoritative edition, based on an authorial manuscript draft ("foul papers"). There is a great deal of debate regarding the differences between the two versions. Not all can be explained as the result of memorial reconstruction: Laurie Maguire rejects the memorial reconstruction theory based on a close analysis of the Quarto text. Both Gary Taylor and T.W.Craik discuss the textual deviations at length, but Maguire and Annabel Patterson provide the clearest analysis.

accidental irony. This mode generally serves a didactic purpose, and is particularly suited to plays which include choric commentators - as Bertolt Brecht recognized, drawing on Shakespeare's technique for his own dialectical theatre<sup>5</sup>. Joel Altman suggests that Shakespeare often seems to be using a Socratic technique in *Henry V*, acting "Iago to a whole theatre, offering his 'scattering and unsure observance' to the collective wills of an audience primed for action upon their entrance" (27). In Altman's interpretation, Shakespeare appears to use the device to subtly disarm the assumptions with which an audience, already familiar with the historical facts, enters the theatre. The action they expect is repeatedly promised, but by a commentator whose credibility wears increasingly thin. As Robert Ornstein notes, Shakespeare's spectators implicitly become the targets of this irony. Their ostensible desire for a "realistic portrayal of patriotic gore" (187) is foiled by the Chorus' repeated pleas for their kindness, generosity, and indulgence. Without considering how the audience participates in the generation of irony, Altman positions the spectators as Shakespeare's victims.

Linda Hutcheon's chapter on *Henry V* reconsiders the significance of irony. Unlike satire and juxtaposition, which rely on the contradiction between the said and the unsaid, irony in Hutcheon's definition takes its meaning from both the stated and the implicit. Thus, she explains, it is inclusive rather

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<sup>5</sup>See Margot Heinemann's discussion of Shakespeare's influence on Brecht, particularly p.204.

than oppositional:

For me, it is less paradox than irony at work here: because of the simultaneous inclusiveness of Shakespeare's complex presentation of the king, I find myself flipping back and forth, from seeing the heroic duck<sup>6</sup> to seeing the Machiavellian rabbit (or would it be vice versa?) throughout the play, but at such a rate that I constantly perceive *both* the duck and the rabbit. And, while this image has also been used to characterize the "ambiguity" of Branagh's particular portrayal of Henry's character (...) my interest here -- in semantic terms -- is in irony, not ambiguity. Ambiguity does not depend on the simultaneous and edgy playing off of one meaning against another in a relational, inclusive, and differential way like this: irony does.

(69-70).

Hutcheon's emphasis on the relational, inclusive, and differential interplay of meaning suggests a definition of irony which focuses on the process by which it is generated rather than seeing it as a *fait accompli*. The spectator consequently becomes a participant in its creation - a role which depends on the Chorus' ability to make the audience at once a part of and apart from the action. The literal meaning of the Chorus' words is absorbed, as in the epic reading, by allowing him to act as a mediator between the audience and the action. At the same time, however, the Chorus also provides the distance required for irony, encouraging the audience to see the play from the outside

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<sup>6</sup>The rabbit/duck image and its application to *Henry V* are discussed at length in the following chapter.

in. As he interrupts the play at one-act intervals, asking the spectators to think about the realities of a stage production, the Chorus effects a Brecht-like distancing effect even as his explanations help the audience become absorbed in the action.

Unlike earlier critics who consider irony in implicit terms of victim and victimizer, Hutcheon focuses on the cooperative relationship between ironist and audience. This collaboration parallels the Chorus' emphasis on the spectators' complicity in creating the spectacle. He asks them to imagine their own illusion. While the Chorus suggests vivid images of army encampments and oceans, he depends on the audience to conjure them within their own minds. Irony depends on the same joint process, without which words revert to their single, literal denotation.

The Chorus' speeches gain a further degree of irony because of their complete disregard for the characters and action of the subplot. He makes no mention of Henry's former companions from the Boar's Head tavern, ignoring even Falstaff's death. His strange reticence is particularly remarkable in II.i: between his introduction to the Scroop conspiracy and the traitors' entrapment in II.ii, Pistol and Nym almost come to blows over "*quondam* Quickly" and the Boy announces that Falstaff is dying. There is no evident reason why the conspirators' scene should not immediately follow the choric speech. The fact that there is an intervening scene implies a deliberate focus on the selectivity of the Chorus' narration.

A subversive interpretation such as Branagh's benefits when it emphasizes the contrasting undertones of the subtext. Unlike the Chorus, who ignores the disenfranchised members of Henry's "band of brothers", a successful ironic reading focuses more strongly on those who do not benefit from Henry's triumph at Agincourt. The interests of a given director or critic often determine which of these background voices will be heard most clearly. In the 1994 *Company of Women* production, for example, Margaret Shea carefully conveys the motivations of the female characters. Katherine's French lesson becomes an episode more powerful than the comic relief it provides in Olivier's film. The words she is learning are, significantly, the names of body parts. Shea reminds the audience that Katherine is learning the language of the conqueror: she knows what territory Henry will be claiming as the victor's spoils. The scene resonates throughout Henry's wooing of Katherine, making her resistance to his proposal comprehensible. Katherine clearly accepts the fact that she will be marrying Henry. Only later, when he speaks of love, a word not on her vocabulary list and therefore not recognized as part of his claim, does she begin to balk. Olivier makes the scene into a coy flirtation, but Shea's subversive reading explains Katherine's shift from acquiescence to resistance much more satisfyingly.

In the *Company of Women* production, Shea emphasizes the subjugation and silencing of the female characters. One critic objected to the approach because it flattens class issues,



resulting in "a rather uniform picture of masculinity - appropriate to a modern commentary on the dehumanization of warfare, but perhaps made at the expense of a subtler, more textured social critique" (Henderson 25). Conversely, Branagh's film falters where the female characters are concerned, suggesting perhaps more depth than Olivier's version but failing to convey the motivations of Shakespeare's women. Branagh's working class background, however, has rather snobbishly but perhaps rightly been cited as the reason for his unusual sensitivity to the class issues in the play<sup>7</sup>.

Like Shea, Branagh achieves an increased degree of complexity through a closer focus on characters of the subplot, in his production the disenfranchised male characters among Henry's troops. The slaughter of the boys is graphic, shown as Fluellen and Gower discover the "pitiful pile of corpses" (Branagh 108). Fluellen sobs, his head cradled by the outstretched arm of the Boy. Henry carries the Boy's body through the muddy, bloodsoaked battlefield, as *Non Nobis* plays in the background. The scene is stretched out, overflowing with pathos. While emotion is generally considered counterproductive to irony, in this case Branagh uses it to achieve a sharp contrast between the rhetoric of the Chorus and the reality of war - a reality which

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<sup>7</sup>See, for example, Pauline Kael's eight lines devoted to Branagh's appearance, dwelling on his "Protestant working-class family in Belfast", or Peter Donaldson's observation that "Branagh's Irish working-class identity shows through his stage English royal persona".

includes soldiers and noncombatants alike.

In a post-Vietnam, post-Falklands era, that Branagh would have felt the need for a *Henry V* very different from Olivier's jingoistic version should not surprise. In his introduction to the screenplay, Branagh explains that his decision to make the film resulted from his realization that Olivier's version does not reflect the true spirit of the play. Arguing that Olivier's "seeming nationalistic and militaristic emphasis had created a great deal of suspicion and doubt about the value of *Henry V* for a late twentieth-century audience" (9), and working from a critical context which reexamined that interpretation, Branagh began to explore the subtext which Olivier all but eliminated. His decision to "bring out what some critics have referred to as 'the play within the play': an uncompromising view of politics and a deeply questioning, ever-relevant and compassionate survey of people and war" (12) results in a deeply ironic reading.

In both the Shea and Branagh productions, the Chorus helps to determine the relationship between the various participants in a production and the play's inconsistencies. The respective roles played by the actors, the audience, and the playwright are affected by their proximity to him, a proximity which shifts throughout the play. In the prologue, there is no textual basis for mistrusting him. He serves as a medium who helps the audience to enter into Henry's world. As participants, using their own "imaginary forces" to supplement those offered by the text, the spectators are probably not yet in a position to

appreciate the irony of his presence. Even with gestures and delivery designed to convey untrustworthiness, at this time his role is still unclear. Subsequently, the Chorus' intrusions effect a separation between the audience and the action, creating the distance necessary for the audience's ironic perception. His shifting alliance to both the audience and the action, however, raises doubts about his role. At times, he seems to be a spectator, who can only watch passively as the action unfolds. In a sceptical or subversive production, his continued enthusiasm may be used to indicate that he has been taken in by his own rhetoric. Possibly, then, the audience will begin to see him in an ironic light. Alternatively, he can be positioned above the action, acting as the audience's ironic commentator. Both the audience and the Chorus thus appreciate the irony, positioned above the characters as privileged observers.

The multiple levels of irony in the play are readily observed in the Chorus' introductions to the second and third acts. They embody numerous subversions, not all of them subtle. If the Chorus were indeed intended to be an infallible narrator, one should wonder how these "mistakes" could have survived even a cursory proofreading, much less rehearsal and performance. In II.o, the Chorus contradicts himself within the space of fifteen lines, telling us that honour's thought reign solely in every breast in II.o.3, but by line nineteen beginning to speak of the conspiracy against Henry's life. His subsequent misapprehensions suggest a pattern. Once warned by this error, the audience may

be prepared to question all of his remarks. His second mistake follows almost immediately: the "mirror of all Christian kings" (II.o.6) is, in the first scene of the second act, declared to be the direct cause of Falstaff's impending death. While there is some basis for the argument that Henry has indeed acted like a good king in rejecting Falstaff, the criticism of Henry's character in II.i contrasts sharply with the praise offered by the Chorus. In addition, sandwiching the scene involving the Boar's Head characters between the Chorus' indictment of the traitors and Henry's confrontation with them becomes ironic. Henry berates his friends for their personal betrayal of his esteem and trust, acting in this instance as the perfect hypocrite Gould accuses him of being (83). After all, if the plot had been successful, he would have died as a consequence of their betrayal just as Falstaff is reportedly dying from Henry's.

The further irony implicit in the Scroop plot is not immediately apparent, but bears scrutiny. The Chorus tells us that the conspirators are motivated by a desire for French gilt, but according to Holinshed the scheme was actually an attempt to put the rightful heir on the throne in Henry's place. Although neither Henry nor Shakespeare acknowledge this motivation, it undercuts Henry's claim to the French throne. The logic by which Canterbury has justified Henry's claim to France, if applied to England's case, implies that Mortimer was the rightful king of England. Although critics and historians debate the validity of Mortimer's actual claim to the throne, historically the

conspiracy against Henry's life was, like Henry's claim to France, at least potentially justified.

In the third chorus, our commentator's interpretation is again mistaken. His statement that England is being guarded by "grandsires, babies and old women" (20) is false as well as counter-productive, because the miracle of Henry's triumph depends on the small size of his army. As Henry tells his troops in IV.iii, better that the "ten thousand men" who have been left behind in England (surely not all grandsires and babies) are at home. The soldiers who do serve him "are enough/ To do our country loss, and if to live,/The fewer men, the greater share of honour" (IV.iii.20-22). Furthermore, the implication that Henry, in search of foreign spoils, would leave England unattended shows him in a negative light: his speech before the gates of Harfleur (III.iii.1-43) enumerates the threats to an unguarded town.

The rhetorical question "who is he, whose chin is but enriched/With one appearing hair, that will not follow/These culled and choice-drawn cavaliers to France" (22-4) is, unfortunately for the Chorus' credibility, answered in III.ii. The appearance of the Boar's Head characters, who are anything but "culled and choice-drawn", and who must be compelled with physical as well as verbal force towards the breach, seems specifically designed to undermine the heroics of the Chorus' opening speech and Henry's "Once more unto the breach" oratory. The Boy will follow Henry's decidedly unchivalrous Boar's Head soldiers, but not without wishing that he were in an alehouse in

London rather than a battlefield in France.

The strongest case for the validity of any ironic reading depends on the Chorus, whose presence becomes the vehicle for irony no matter which definition we use. Standing alone, the Chorus is perhaps the voice of an epic. When contrasted with the play's more mundane activity, he becomes a flawed character "too imbued with patriotic pride to criticize the great adventure or to recognize its tarnished edges" (Ornstein 185). Whether we see his role as instigator or victim of the irony, he acts as the catalyst for it.

Subversive productions reinforce the irony which does not come across sufficiently in performance. Branagh's decision to import lines plays part in an agenda which emphasizes every irony in the text and then creates some of its own. He achieves this heightening through a visual strategy which juxtaposes the Chorus' lines with the "reality" which his speeches misrepresent. Repeatedly, the Chorus speaks in voice-over while the camera contradicts what he says. He asserts that the youth of England are all on fire, for example, as the camera shows Bardolph "looking for scraps of food like some scavenging animal" (Branagh 27). Branagh's directions tell us that the Chorus' voice remains "gently ironic" (27) throughout the episode.

Derek Jacobi's Chorus does not always convey the same emotions Branagh's film text suggests. His tone during Bardolph's quest for food, for example, I initially interpreted as sympathetic or pitying rather than ironic. In this case, the

difference may be slight, but other instances become more problematic. The arrows flying all around Jacobi during the third chorus did not seem to me to put him in mortal danger, thus confirming his position as a privileged observer, but other spectators have reacted to the same episode as confirmation that he is involved in the action.

Branagh remains consistent in his integration of the play's darker elements. By importing lines from both parts of *Henry IV*, he shapes Falstaff into a recognizable character whose death, rather than being solely a symbolic reminder of Henry's past, engenders an emotional response. Mistress Quickly's speech describing his dying moments, delivered masterfully by Judi Dench, is relieved of its comic elements. Dench speaks in plain English rather than the slang indicated in the text, and delivers her final lines, which have often given rise to laughter in productions both before and since, without humour<sup>3</sup>.

Branagh similarly rehabilitates the other Boar's Head characters, making them into more or less upstanding soldiers. As Patricia Salomon observes, "the same tune that plays for Henry's other troops plays for Pistol, Bardolph, and Nym as they take leave of Nell to join Henry in Southampton" (35). They are as much a part of Henry's army as the commissioned officers. Further editing after Henry's "Once more unto the breach" oration

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<sup>3</sup>The final lines in the speech are often particularly humorous: the bawdy inherent in her hand's progress from Falstaff's feet to his knees and "so up'ard" is often the occasion for gesture or a suggestive pause which engenders laughter.

reinforces Branagh's message. He minimizes their resistance: although Fluellen must force them to the breach, the episode is shortened considerably in the film. Furthermore, Branagh excises the Boy's speech, eliminating references to their dishonesty and cowardice. The result, as Salomon indicates, is "the false impression that the Boar's Head characters are as much contributing members of Henry's community as anyone else, not simply during the Battle of Agincourt but throughout the entire film" (36).

Shea's production achieves a comparable effect mainly by recasting the Chorus as a group of women rather than the traditional solitary man. Concepts of community and femininity enter into the masculine world of the play through the Chorus. Not surprisingly, many of the "innocent" lines, both within and outside the choric speeches, take on layers of meaning not overtly present in the text. Queen Isabel's marital blessing in the final scene, for example, becomes a "poignant lament for all those defeated yet defiant voices marginalized by history" (Henderson 24).

Subversive productions of *Henry V* incorporate an irony which foregrounds the perspectives of the play's disenfranchised characters. Perhaps war to Henry really is as the Chorus would have us believe, but, as the Boar's Head characters remind us immediately following Henry's "once more unto the breach", a pot of ale and safety are worth more to them than immortal fame. The dominant perspective, however, is never wholly undermined in



Branagh's film, in Shea's stage production, or, I would argue, in the text itself. Shakespeare had all the ammunition necessary to successfully subvert any and all of the concepts for which the play stands, but he restrained the subversive elements even to the point of historical inaccuracy. The result, a little touch of irony in the night, complicates the play's literal meaning but never really eclipses it.

The irony of Henry's position becomes apparent when we consider the play in relation to others in its tetralogy. He is very much in Hotspur's role, fighting a battle with an inadequate number of soldiers, but ruled by thoughts of honour. Henry's St.Crispin's day speech echoes Hotspur's insistence on fighting what will be for Hotspur a losing battle after the armies of both his father and Glendower fail to join him in his rebellion. Are we to believe, then, that Henry really has assumed Hotspur's honours, and his view of honour, as promised in *Henry IV*?

Henry's prayer before battle, asking God not to punish him for his father's usurping of the crown, also becomes ironic in this context. Agincourt is the culmination of Shakespeare's exploration of the nature of kingship which begins in *Richard II* and continues through both parts of *Henry IV*. Henry's "miraculous" conversion in the first part of *Henry IV* has not necessarily expiated his father's crime against Richard II. Though he has perhaps managed to convince England that he is divinely chosen, his doubts surface in France. Henry VI in some sense continues to pay the price for his grandfather's crimes.

Henry's integrity, and thus his epic role as the mirror of all Christian kings, also comes into question in relation to the earlier plays. The end of *Henry IV, Part Two* already anticipates Henry's decision to go to war against France. According to Prince John, Henry will wage war within the year, with the implication that he is taking their father's advice to busy giddy minds with foreign quarrels. Thus, Henry's conversation with Canterbury and Ely can make him a Machiavel looking for nothing more than a stamp of approval and a moral scapegoat. Canterbury accepts this role, and answers not that the war is valid, but rather that he accepts the sin of it on his own head (I.ii.97).

The strongest evidence to support an ironic reading, Shakespeare's epilogue, reduces the finality of Henry's victories by placing them within the continuum of history. Branagh observes that "it was all for nothing, as the Chorus tells us right at the end"(in Coursen 175). In fact, Shakespeare makes quite clear that the result of Henry's war is worse than nothing: after all, Henry's son not only lost France, but "made his England bleed" (12). Thus, the dark subtext gains ascendancy, finally eclipsing perhaps even the Chorus' exuberant rhetoric.

One wonders, however, why Shakespeare would have been so subtle with his irony until the final lines, so delicate that Gould, writing some three hundred years after the play's publication, could have felt himself to be breaking new ground. Levin suggests that, in all ironic readings, we ask what a writer could have done if he had wanted to make us understand the irony

earlier or more completely. With the subversive elements already present in *Holinshed*, and with the same technique used in *Richard II* and *Henry IV*, Shakespeare was fully capable of crafting a convincingly ironic play. That he chose to diminish the impact of his irony, to the degree even of rejecting ironic material from his sources, suggests that subversion was not his primary concern.

Even ostensibly subversive productions fail to entirely negate the power of the play's epic elements. Branagh's *Henry*, in spite of the subtext, remains an appealing figure. In her review of the film, Pauline Kael notes that, although Branagh seems to be trying to turn the play into an anti-war film, "he can't quite dampen the play's rush of excitement - not with Henry delivering all those rousing words to his soldiers, calling them 'we few, we happy few, we band of brothers' " (216). Michael Manheim, too, not wholly convinced that Branagh wants to undermine the play's heroism, suggests that "the Henry who emerges from Branagh's production, especially when Patrick Doyle's now-famous 'Non Nobis' is considered, seems finally to demand admiration" (132). The St. Crispin's day speech inspires even after the images of blood on the battlefield have been forgotten.

Like an epic reading, a predominantly ironic interpretation applies to only part of *Henry V*. Clearly Shakespeare incorporates some irony throughout the play. One of the primary functions of the Chorus, a character of otherwise questionable

usefulness, is to act as the catalyst for this irony. The explanations offered by ironic critics, however, fail to account for the subtlety with which it is accomplished. Shakespeare allows space for both satire and seriousness to flourish. A reading which negates the value of either misses more than half the point. Somewhere in the space between irony and epic lies the text itself, which incorporates both readings but is limited by neither.

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**"Neither flesh nor fowl": Ambiguity in *Henry V***

*And so our scene must to the battle fly,  
Where - oh for pity! - we shall much disgrace  
With four or five most vile and ragged foils  
Right ill-disposed in brawl ridiculous  
The name of Agincourt. Yet sit and see,  
Minding true things by what their mockeries be.  
(IV.o.48-53)*

The Folio text of *Henry V*, as we have seen, supports two divergent interpretations. The Chorus' rhetoric, if trusted, makes the play into something approaching an epic. The same speeches, when contrasted with the action, contribute to a subversiveness which can give rise to irony. The change in tone resulting from the differences between its Quarto and Folio texts implies that this duality is intentional: while the epic elements in the Folio are consistent with those of the Quarto, they are undermined in the Folio by episodes and speeches which contradict or complicate them. Rather than indicating Shakespeare's failure to gain control over his material, the similarity in effect of these changes suggests that the Folio consciously and deliberately incorporates both readings.

Norman Rabkin argues in his seminal article on *Henry V* that ambivalence is the only possible way to make sense of the Folio's inconsistencies: for him, they point the spectator in two irreconcilable directions at once. He compares the play to the well-known drawing of a "mythological beast", which looks like

either a rabbit or a duck depending on the viewer's perspective<sup>1</sup>. Rabkin cites a paragraph from aesthetic theorist E.H.Gombrich's *Art and Illusion: A Study in the Psychology of Pictorial Representation* which summarizes the implications of the picture Rabkin uses as a metaphor. The paragraph, familiar to many, is crucial to an analysis of ambiguity in *Henry V*, and is worth including in its entirety:

We can see the picture as either a rabbit or a duck. It is easy to discover both readings. It is less easy to describe what happens when we switch from one interpretation to the other. Clearly we do not have the illusion that we are confronted with a "real" duck or rabbit. The shape on the paper resembles neither animal very closely. And yet there is no doubt that the shape transforms itself in some subtle way when the duck's beak becomes the rabbit's ears and brings an otherwise neglected spot into prominence as the rabbit's mouth. I say "neglected", but does it enter our experience at all when we switch back to reading "duck? To answer this question, we are compelled to look for what is "really there", to see the shape apart from its interpretation, and this, we soon discover, is not really possible. True, we can switch from one reading to another with increasing rapidity; we will also "remember" the rabbit while we see the duck, but the more closely we watch ourselves, the more certainly we will discover that we cannot experience alternative readings at the same time. Illusion, we find, is hard to describe or analyze, for though we may be intellectually aware of the fact that any given experience *must* be an illusion, we cannot, strictly speaking, watch ourselves having an illusion (Gombrich 5-6, also Rabkin 280).

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<sup>1</sup>Hutcheon reproduces the drawing on p.59 of her book, as does Gombrich on p.5.

Both Rabkin and Rossiter use the term "ambivalence" interchangeably with "ambiguity", although each has a different definition. Rabkin's ambiguity, which "points in two opposite directions, virtually daring us to choose one of the two opposed interpretations" (279) is more properly defined as ambivalence. Ambiguity, which Rossiter suggests is inherent in *Henry V*, refers in this thesis to a collaborative relationship between the two possibilities. The difference is more than mere semantics: ambivalence posits a central reality which points outwards toward two possible interpretations, while ambiguity moves from the polarized interpretations to a central unified meaning which incorporates both possibilities within itself. Thus, the difference becomes a matter of "either/or" versus "and". In *Henry V*, an ambivalent reading argues that Henry is either a Machiavel or a hero. Ambiguity means that he is simultaneously both.

As the previous two chapters demonstrate, both the "rabbit" and the "duck" are visible in the play. Critics often seem convinced that they have seen only one of the two. Rabkin, using Gombrich's theory, argues that one cannot experience both modes at the same time. Thus, though it is tempting to find a solution to the ambiguities by searching for some compromise between them, Rabkin asserts that they share no point of intersection.

Later critics, for example James H. Kavanaugh, use Rabkin's reading to support the theory that Shakespeare felt himself to be torn between two attitudes towards Henry's reign, either within



his own mind or as an acknowledgement of his divided audience. The pro-war, pro-Henry party line advocated by the censors who had the power to shut down a performance, he claims, is supported by the play's overt epic tone. The box office revenue generated by audiences comprised of a wide range of professions and classes, all with different loyalties and priorities, is more adequately reflected in the alternative perspectives offered by the subtext<sup>2</sup>.

There is no reason to assume that Shakespeare shared or supported any of the attitudes presumably held by his audience. *Henry V* has uncomfortable moments for militants and pacifists alike, enough to make even the most adamant in either camp pause to reflect. Often, as in Tillyard<sup>3</sup>, critics see this as a flaw in the design of the play or as Shakespeare's admission that he can no longer admire his own conception of the "ideal" monarch. Ambiguity may instead be the play's purpose and its great asset.

Adrian Noble's 1984 production for the Royal Shakespeare Company<sup>4</sup> reflected Rabkin's scholarship in its presentation of

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<sup>2</sup>See Kavanaugh's analysis of the class and patronage issues influencing Shakespeare's writing, p.151.

<sup>3</sup>Tillyard argues in his chapter on *Henry V* that Shakespeare was obligated to write a play about Henry for the sake of consistency and to please his audience. However, he could only do so by reinventing the character of Hal in a manner inconsistent with the *Henry IV* plays, resulting in a "great falling off of quality" (306).

<sup>4</sup>Kenneth Branagh played Henry in Noble's production. In his introduction to the screenplay of his own version, Branagh cites Noble's resistance to a "two-dimensional *Boy's Own* adventure" ((9) reading. Branagh's film borrows from Noble most notably in

the Folio's competing forces. Though the production acknowledged both the epic and the ironic elements, they were staged in deliberate contrast. Ian McDiarmid delivered the choric introduction to the fifth act, for example, as the curtain behind him was backlit to reveal a woman placing candles beside the bodies of dead soldiers. There was no interaction between the two characters on stage, but their simultaneous presence highlighted the production's concern with multiple perspectives. This juxtaposition is emblematic, suggesting that the reality of war can coexist alongside the Chorus' rhetoric. An audience must infer any relationship between the scenes, encouraging the ambiguity inherent in their coexistence.

In the text, as in Noble's production, the Chorus becomes a mechanism for achieving a connection between disparate perspectives. He presents the ideal vision, while the representation achieved through the action becomes more realistic in contrast. The Chorus' rhetoric characterizes Henry as the mirror of all Christian kings, but Henry's flaws make him a more believable character. His own doubts prior to Agincourt are vulnerable, complicating the Chorus' epic image of him cheering his troops. The contrast between admiration and empathy undermines a one-sided interpretation. If Henry fails to measure up to the Chorus' advance billing, the play becomes less epic. Conversely, an audience's empathy for Henry breaches the distance

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its superimposition of contrasting images.

necessary for irony.

Rabkin asserts that the text's dichotomies arise from competing tendencies in the two *Henry IV* plays. As he observes, each play in the tetralogy begins with an eruption of problems that have seemed resolved at the end of the previous one: Richard's legitimate but ineffectual power is overcome by Bolingbroke's charisma and leadership at the end of *Richard II*, but from the beginning of *Henry IV, Part One* Bolingbroke's usurpation has already given rise to new problems. Hal at the end of *Henry IV, Part One* seems able to integrate his private and public personae, but is acutely uncomfortable with his former companions throughout *Henry IV, Part Two*, eventually rejecting them.

The unresolved issues which persist throughout the tetralogy do not lend themselves to easy solutions. There seems to be little chance of compromise between Falstaff's vision of honour and Hotspur's, or between the kingship represented by Richard II and by Henry IV. The ongoing conflict between contrasting characters is one way of including divergent opinions. Hal's emblematic stance between Hotspur's corpse and an apparently dead Falstaff may imply that he will be able to effect a balance between them, but subsequent plays show him rejecting Falstaff and the other Boar's Head characters rather than integrating them into the aristocratic world. As the final play in the tetralogy, Rabkin asserts, *Henry V* is necessarily ambivalent to the tetralogy's dominant themes: with neither choice nor compromise

possible, ambivalence becomes the only resolution.

The internal questions raised in *Henry V* appear to support an ambivalent reading. Twice, the text belatedly gives Henry noble motives for expedient decisions he has already made. The Dauphin's insulting gift of tennis balls prompts Henry to blame him for the "wasteful vengeance" of the war on France (I.ii.260-98), although Henry's consent comes almost one hundred lines before the Dauphin's messengers are summoned. Henry's decision to kill all the French prisoners, similarly, is justified after the fact. Fluellen and Gower enter the scene immediately after Henry's command to slit the prisoners' throats, bearing the news that French have killed "the poys and luggage" (IV.vii.1). Gower interprets Henry's order as retribution for the slaughter of the English boys, an idea reinforced by Henry's reiteration of his order later in the scene(54). However, the initial command explicitly responds to the French alarm: Henry's lines "But hark, what new alarum is this same?/Then every soldier kill his prisoners!" (IV.vi.35-6) leave little room for interpretation.

These two instances show Henry most closely approximating the Machiavel some critics find. Are his actions really so Machiavellian, though? The killing of the prisoners is, arguably, more easily justified when it is done out of military necessity rather than anger. Similarly, some spectators would feel that Henry's decision to invade France based on a rational discussion with his advisors is more palatable than risking the wellbeing of his army and his country in order to avenge a

personal slight.

Henry's triumph at Agincourt is doubly ambiguous, calling both his motives and the reasons for his victory into question. Henry's repeated emphasis on God's role in the battle (IV.vii.86, IV.viii.107,112,116,121) may be genuine piety. Looking back to his vow in *Henry IV, Part One*, it can also be a ploy to solidify his power: without Richard II's hereditary right to the throne, Henry has become acutely aware that he needs to prove his status as God's chosen king. We know from *Henry IV, Part One* that he has orchestrated his own "miraculous" conversion from dilettante to hero. The prayer before Agincourt shows a continued uneasiness about the security of his position. God's support against the larger and better equipped French army would help to confirm Henry's right to rule.

Olivier's film highlights the practical reality which contributed to the French defeat. Bugged down by heavy armour, disorganized, and overconfident, the French soldiers are easy targets for the more mobile English army. However, the text remains inconclusive, and does not wholly support or refute such a pragmatic reading. The fourth chorus does develop a contrast between the English and the "confident and over-lusty French" (18) which is subsequently supported by Constable's battle speech (IV.ii.14-36). No evidence suggests, however, that the speech is dissimilar from Henry's own seemingly confident oration.

Although the most thorough analysis of the ambiguity of

*Henry V*, Rabkin's article ignores a crucial element in Gombrich's theory: although the spectator can see alternating images of the rabbit and the duck, as well as the complete picture, he can never see both the picture and the interpretation simultaneously. Elsewhere in his book (6), Gombrich explains the nature of illusion in terms of looking at oneself in the mirror: one can look at the image of oneself seemingly on the other side of the mirror, or one can look at the mirror as an object, but it is impossible to experience the mirror and the image at once. Through the use of a chorus, Shakespeare can achieve what Gombrich states to be impossible in visual art. By repeatedly shifting the audience's perspective, the Chorus encourages the spectators to watch themselves having an illusion. Rather than the oscillating images of rabbit and duck postulated by Rabkin, Shakespeare actually shows the audience the complex image of a "mythological beast" which integrates both the epic and the ironic modes within itself.

During the choric speeches, the Chorus repeatedly reminds the spectators that they are watching a play. However, as he distances them with his interruptions, his rich imagery and rhetoric work to deepen their involvement in the illusory spectacle. The audience consequently occupies two distinct positions, becoming both spectator and participant in the creation of their illusion.

As the play progresses, the Chorus' role changes. Initially, he behaves as a deferential and imploring master of

ceremony, bowing and scraping for the audience's approval. Although still respectful, he becomes a taskmaster in the third chorus, urging his spectators to "follow, follow!", to "grapple", and to "work". By the epilogue, he has become almost solely a narrator. First through flattery and then with the audience's complicity, the Chorus seems to have earned the right to interpret the play - an activity in which he invites the audience to participate.

While the Chorus ignores many of the spectators, those who do not agree with his politics or his patriotism, the play often seems directed specifically to them. Alternative perspectives, like Williams' direct challenge to a disguised Henry in IV.i, are never refuted. Henry's response to Williams' assertion that "if the cause be not good, the King himself hath a heavy reckoning to make when all those legs and arms and heads chopped off in battle shall join together at the latter day" (IV.i.134-7) is as evasive and convoluted as Canterbury's explanation of the Salic Law in I.ii. Henry argues that a king cannot take responsibility for the condition of his soldiers' souls prior to battle. If they have sinned, "they have no wings to fly from God. War is his beadle, war is his vengeance" (IV.i.68-9). Williams' point, however, relates only to the justice of the war itself, a question the argument leaves open to interpretation.

Henry V, then, encourages disparate readings. If we belong to the Chorus' audience of gentles, then it becomes an epic full of praise for heroism, patriotism, and for Henry himself. For

those the play excludes, the values for which the Folio seems to stand are subverted. Noble's production conveys a sense of this ambivalence by oscillating between two separate readings. The epic and the ironic are both represented, but even when they coexist on stage they are contrasted through superimposed but distinct scenes.

Rabkin and Kavanagh, among others, suggest that Shakespeare was either ambivalent towards the issues he dramatized in *Henry V* or willing to confirm the attitudes held unquestioningly by his audience. There is for them no possibility of a middle ground towards which the divergent opinions of an audience might be directed. They argue that a particular moment in the play can be either epic or ironic, but never both. Stephen Greenblatt suggests alternatively that the doubts raised intensify rather than diminish the glory of both Henry and his war by neutralizing the scepticism with which an audience might watch the play:

The shadows cast by the subversive elements are real enough, but they are deferred -- deferred until after Essex's campaign on Ireland, after Elizabeth's reign, after the monarchy itself as a political institution(...) 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.

(in Dollimore/Sinfield 43).



In Greenblatt's reading, the epic and ironic elements contribute to a collaborative reading which integrates the two modes. Ironic elements serve not as a contrast to or a subversion of the epic tone, but as an intrinsic part of a significance achieved jointly by both modes. The doubts strengthen rather than undermine Henry's appeal as a character and as a king.

Ornstein, too, sees the irony as a balancing force which allows Shakespeare to celebrate heroism while acknowledging both the human cost of the English victory and the vulnerable side of his epic characters. The play celebrates Henry's triumph, but also comments on the less positive aspects of war. Henry can be a strong king, doing what is best for his kingdom, without losing the weaknesses that make him a believable character.

David Giles' 1979 production of *Henry V* for BBC-TV was, at least in its initial conception, poised to convey the ambiguity expressed in the Folio. The BBC's directive for the Shakespeare Plays series was to produce versions with "maximum acceptability to the widest possible audience" (in Willis 11). An approach which refused to take sides, one neither patriotic nor subversive, would logically emphasize the diverse perspectives available in the text. Furthermore, directing a "straightforward" interpretation without anything "too sensational" or "arty-crafty" (all in Pilkington 26), as Cedric Messina described the first season of the series, obligated Giles to stick closely to the Folio, thus avoiding the

oversimplification evident in the productions discussed in earlier chapters.

Giles directed the BBC versions of the complete tetralogy. He therefore could position *Henry V* within the context both of Henry's past and of the themes of kingship and honour which recur throughout the four plays. Instead of clarifying the ambiguity inherent in the text, however, Giles achieves something closer to the ambivalence postulated by Rabkin and Kavanaugh.

Giles used the Chorus as a mechanism for differentiating between myth and reality. In the text, the Chorus is the main spokesperson for the epic elements which are noticeably lacking in the action itself. Giles emphasized this difference visually, making the production into what Susan Willis calls "a stylized frame in which smaller, more realistic scenes appear" (206). The prologue visibly shapes the play, as props emerge seemingly in response to the Chorus' exhortations to imagine them.

David Gwillim's Henry in Giles' production becomes far more realistically human than mythological hero or Machiavellian villain. His "compassion and understanding for his men"<sup>5</sup>, softness of tone and manner<sup>6</sup>, and strong emotional reactions<sup>7</sup> were all noted by the critics as dominant attributes of his portrayal.

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<sup>5</sup>Diana Loercher's review in the *Christian Science Monitor*, March 19, 1980, in Bulman/Coursen 260.

<sup>6</sup>Cecil Smith in the *Los Angeles Times*, April 23, 1980, in Bulman/Coursen 260.

<sup>7</sup>Noted, with contempt, by Mark Crispin Miller in *The Nation*, July 12, 1980, in Bulman/Coursen 262.

Henry's oration in III.i ("Once more unto the breach"), usually one of the epic moments even in a subversive production<sup>8</sup>, is delivered by Gwillim with breathlessness and hesitation, as though he is not quite comfortable speaking the language of militaristic inspiration. Although this Henry gains enough confidence to deliver his St. Crispin's day speech more convincingly, his awkwardness returns during the wooing scene. For Olivier's Henry, the self-deprecating lines during the episode seem to be jokes made to fill in the time until Katherine falls, coyly not unwillingly, into his arms. Gwillim, in contrast, conveys a sense of genuine unease, an earnestness which belies any notion either of evil or of swashbuckling charm in Henry's character.

Although some critics insist on reading *Henry V* in isolation, arguing that there is no trace of Prince Hal in Henry V<sup>9</sup>, Gwillim's portrayal convincingly shows his transition from youth to maturity - a process begun in *Henry IV, Part One* and continued through *Henry IV, Part Two* and *Henry V*. Henry's uncertainty in unfamiliar situations is contrasted with his increasing control as the action progresses. His composure and confidence, still shaky in early scenes, become more certain when

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<sup>8</sup>See, for example, Kenneth Branagh's version of the speech, delivered in a manner every bit as confident and stirring as Olivier's even in a production which claims to be showing the vulnerable side of Henry's character.

<sup>9</sup>See, for example, Tillyard's accusation that Shakespeare has "jettisoned his old creation" (306).

he delivers the St. Crispin's day speech with the command befitting a monarch.

Henry's evident awkwardness in this production makes sense as a further indication of his youth. Neither the heroic nor the Machiavellian Henry fits into this episode as it is written: Olivier had to alter it significantly, turning Katherine's resistance into flirtation in order to avoid undermining his portrayal of the heroic king of English mythology. In Giles' production, Henry's lack of confidence highlights the play's focus on Henry's vulnerable side.

Although at least one critic found Gwillim's Henry to be "mawkish" and false to the text<sup>10</sup>, Giles' decision to have him portray the king as an often uncertain or insecure young man is consistent with both the Folio and the entire tetralogy. In early scenes, Gwillim is soft-spoken, seeking reassurance from the clerics and allowing his emotions to show as he condemns the traitors. Even his "Once more unto the breach" is unsure: in fact, Gwillim's breathlessness is sometimes considered to be a flaw in the production<sup>11</sup>, as though Giles were too rushed to

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<sup>10</sup>Mark Crispin Miller argues that although the text seems to call for an angry diatribe against the conspirators, Gwillim "makes it mawkish, choking back the tears and sinking to a bitter whisper" (in Bulman/Coursen 262).

<sup>11</sup>Ace Pilkington uses Martin Banham's assessment of the BBC version as an example of how expectations can colour an interpretation. Banham attributes Henry's unease during the breach oration to Gwillim's awareness of the lack of troops, arguing that he was simply embarrassed as an actor because in this pared down production he "didn't have anyone to talk to" (in Pilkington 95).

order a retake of this crucial scene. As the play progresses, Gwillim's voice takes on the authority which rings through the Henries of Olivier and Branagh all along. By St. Crispin's day, after confronting traitorous friends and betraying some himself, after battle and soul-searching, Gwillim's Henry has become more secure both as a man and as a king, gaining a maturity which is reflected in his more confident rhetorical style.

The critical disagreement regarding the success of Giles' production seems to be based largely on conflicting readings of Henry's character. One, relying on the Chorus' vision of him as the "mirror of all Christian kings" or as the "warlike Harry", denies the vulnerable side which Gwillim repeatedly emphasizes. Alternatively, he is often seen as a Machiavel, relishing the cat and mouse game he plays with the conspirators and barely registering Bardolph's fate. In both cases, Gwillim's Henry is too quiet, too unsure of himself, to measure up to his image. However, in the context of Shakespeare's tetralogy, Gwillim's portrayal makes sense.

One reason the BBC production appears to falter is, ironically, because of its loyalty to the text. Like other videos in the series, Giles' *Henry V* has been criticized for its unwillingness to tamper with Shakespeare's words. Miller sees this as the series' biggest flaw, arguing that, had Shakespeare been offered the opportunity to rewrite his text for television, he would have made significant changes:

the text suffers most, paradoxically, from the BBC's pedantic treatment of it. If Shakespeare were still alive, he would delete the dead puns and topical references which only his contemporaries could grasp at first hearing. The BBC has left it all intact, cutting only to save a little time, but never to interpret or illuminate the plays. This indiscriminate retention is an expression of contempt, rather than "reverence", for Shakespeare. The BBC retained both good and bad, lasting and archaic, evidently figuring that the plays are all so great and hard and meaningless that it doesn't really matter if nobody understands them, as long as everybody buys them.

(in Bulman/Coursen 262).

Miller's complaint is one common to reviews of film and video productions of Shakespeare. Current critical thought emphasizes the similarity between putting a stage play on film or television and translating it into a foreign language. As Michele Willems points out, the semiotics of film, and, to an even greater extent, television, relies largely on visual cues, while the stage is primarily a verbal medium (92). Putting a stage play on television thus becomes a process much like translation: the BBC production suffers because it does not adequately take into account the subtleties of the language in which it is presented. The right words are there, but the ideas behind them are distorted.

The camera's role as choric figure becomes a further problem with the translation of *Henry V* onto film, one even more apparent on television. On stage and in the text, the Chorus tells the audience what to see and how to interpret it. Add a camera, and

the audience's position is further directed: the camera determines which characters will be visible in a scene, whose perspective will be favoured, and consequently to a great extent how the scene will be understood.

Unlike Olivier and Branagh, who make use of the camera as another Chorus<sup>12</sup>, Giles seems to ignore its interpretive function. Giles never uses the irony Branagh achieves by contrasting the Chorus' speeches with contradictory onscreen images, nor does Giles give us the sense, as does Oliver, that we are privileged spectators able to see both qualitatively and quantitatively more than a theatre audience would. Instead, the camera-work is straightforward and unobtrusive, giving us a second choric figure who, it seems, we really can trust. In contrast, the Chorus becomes less necessary, because the camera can show us what he only describes. Paul Cubeta likens the Chorus' diminished role to Alistair Cooke, "smugly providing exposition as though we couldn't enjoy the play without his presumably indispensable commentary" (in Bulman/Coursen 260). While not all spectators would agree that Alec McCowen's Chorus is smug, his superfluousness in this production can become a distraction. In the theatre, or in a minimalist production, the Chorus really does serve an important descriptive function. On film or television, his role is greatly lessened by the camera's choric function.

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<sup>12</sup>Sheldon P. Zitner discusses the camera as chorus on p.37 of his article in Bulman/Coursen.

Translation onto film or video complicates an audience's recognition of ambiguity. The shift between awareness and involvement, achieved in the text primarily through the Chorus' introduction to each act, can become on film a rapid oscillation as the camera's perspective shifts. Thus, for example, Branagh's contrast between rhetoric and reality is not limited to the early lines in each act as it is on stage, but continues throughout the film.

In spite of its problems, many of which could have been circumvented by a willingness to adapt the text for television, the BBC production does incorporate most of the complexities which detract from the more one-sided productions considered in previous chapters. Perhaps because Giles directed the complete tetralogy, *Henry V* becomes in this version the final stage in the process of Hal's transition from youth in *Henry IV* to manhood. In this light, the final scene and epilogue are natural and necessary: marriage, fatherhood, and death complete the trajectory of Hal's life.

Although the BBC version does succeed in conveying some ambiguity, the general tone is one of ambivalence. Without taking into account the effects television would have on the careful balance between rhetoric and realism, Giles' production oscillates between emotional identification with Henry and irony. In the end, like Noble, Giles presents alternating rabbits and ducks rather than the whole picture.

For some critics, Giles achieves a kind of dialectic.



Cubeta writes in *Shakespeare on Film Newsletter* that "Gwillim is most persuasive in creating a unity of the double reflecting self of Henry as king and man, in a play that holds all contradictions in equipoise" (in Bulman/ Coursen 261). For those critics expecting a different kind of Henry, however, the production is a disappointment. Miller accuses Giles of succumbing to pressure from the financial backers: "Exxon", he argues, "would surely prefer a hero with broad and immediate appeal. The BBC has therefore bowdlerized this difficult character, turning the 'warlike Harry' into a really nice person" (in Bulman/Coursen 262). As Gombrich suggests, what a viewer brings to the picture will determine whether he sees the rabbit or the duck.

Ambiguity is notoriously difficult to convey intact to an audience. Ben Kingsley noted in his preparation for the role of Brutus in *Julius Caesar* that an actor must somehow embody the conflicts in his character without resolving them:

Brutus' inconsistencies are only a microcosm of the whole play. If you try and iron out these inconsistencies in order to make the part playable, you will in fact anaesthetise the energy within the lines. The energy of the character and the predicament of the character are only available to the audience if the tension between the opposing forces is observed, relished and played. But of course that's all theory. It's very difficult to spread-eagle oneself inside the giant silhouette of Brutus and remain faithful to all these seemingly contradictory elements. Each one has to be played to the full.

(in Barton 141).

One reason for the lack of ambiguous productions of *Henry V* may be that remaining faithful to contradiction resembles, from a seat in the theatre, a failure to understand the role. For a director, Kingsley's dilemma becomes magnified. The challenge to present the play's ambiguities while giving the audience a satisfying production is more easily resolved by choosing one of the less complex alternatives *Henry V* offers.

The English Shakespeare Company's touring production of *The Wars of the Roses*<sup>13</sup>, one version which remains faithful to the inherent ambiguity of *Henry V*, succeeds partially because Bogdanov's decision to stage both tetralogies allows him to take full advantage of the subtleties visible in the play only as part of its context. As Barbara Hodgdon notes, the production's program emphasizes the possibility of dissent even among eyewitnesses: in addition to conflicting critical opinions, printed in columns headed "Scourge of God" and "Hero-King", the program includes excerpts from a priest who witnessed the battle of Agincourt. Thus, the Chorus' account is given a counterpart in the priest's description of the battle<sup>14</sup>. This framing device prepares the audience to question the characters, looking for the

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<sup>13</sup>The ESC began touring in 1986 with *The Henrys*, presenting *Henry IV, Part One*, *Henry IV, Part Two*, and *Henry V* both separately and, in a Saturday marathon matinee, as a series. In 1987, the playbill was expanded to include *Richard II* as the opening play and the three *Henry VI* reworked into two following *Henry V*. In 1989, the company's final performance of the tour was filmed.

<sup>14</sup>This explanation of the program notes is based on Barbara Hodgdon's description (p.198).

biases and limits of their interpretations

As a touring company, the ESC was able to take advantage of the suggestive possibilities of doubling. Most strikingly, the same actor who plays Falstaff in both parts of *Henry IV* becomes the Chorus in *Henry V*<sup>15</sup>. The audience response at one of the performances early in the tour suggests that John Woodvine was easily identified as the same actor in spite of his costuming changes: his entrance as the Chorus was greeted with a spontaneous ovation from an audience "still warmed by a morning and afternoon spent in the company of the Lord of Misrule" (Michael Pennington in Bogdanov 60).

The doubling, as Pennington observes, was indeed a canny one (61). The Chorus' rhetoric is often remarkably similar to Falstaff's. Both are the purveyors of "smooth comforts false", and of alternative perspectives which, though different in kind, achieve a similar effect. Like the program, this casting decision positions the audience to question the Chorus' motives throughout the production. He becomes a less impersonal spectator, perhaps even taking on Falstaff's vested interest in the onstage proceedings. Although the Bogdanov production does

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<sup>15</sup>John Woodvine played Falstaff and the Chorus during the first touring season; he was replaced by Barry Stanton who remained with the company until the end of the tour in 1989. Consequently, early reviews of the plays are often misleading in relation to the videotaped version. As Bogdanov observes, although the production remained similar in its main aspects throughout the tour, Stanton's portrayal of both roles was significantly different from Woodvine's. The taped version has proven popular among academics, and there are a number of scholarly articles which discuss it.

not overtly address the issue, a connection between the Chorus and Falstaff adds an interesting dimension to the omission of characters and events from the subplot in the choric speeches. One could imagine that Falstaff, eager to regain Henry's favour, has renounced his former companions. Alternatively, the deliberate absence of connection between the Chorus and the Boar's Head characters may be a clever device for downplaying the results of a necessary doubling of parts.

Norman Rabkin insists that, like Mistress Quickly, *Henry V* is something neither flesh nor fowl. I prefer to liken the play to another mistress, one whose eyes are "nothing like the sun". Sonnet 130 praises the mistress who, though inferior to the impossible ideals of Petrarchan love poetry, is "as rare/As any she belied with false compare". Much the same can be said for Shakespeare's treatment of the play's characters and plot<sup>16</sup>: although neither Agincourt nor Henry measure up to their mythologized status, we can admire them in more realistic terms.

The final effect of the play from a dialectic perspective is thus very different from either an epic or ironic starting point. True, Henry does not attain the standards of his own myth, and war is rarely if ever a matter of absolute right versus wrong. At the same time, some admiration and patriotism remain

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<sup>16</sup>I do not wish to imply a temporal link between the composition of the play and the sonnet. Although a comparison of ideas or turns of phrase has been used in an attempt to date the sonnets, this method is flawed. Shakespeare often reconsidered issues; similar ideas are not in themselves adequate evidence of any connection.

after the irony is over.

A dialectic reading helps to explain the Chorus' role as apologist. By emphasizing the artifice necessary to stage the "epic" of Henry's triumph at Agincourt, Shakespeare highlights the gap between imagination and reality. In showing us a play which does not always measure up to the audience's imagined drama, Shakespeare, like his Chorus, asks us to mind true things by what their mockeries be.

Ambiguity offers several advantages. Unlike the epic and ironic readings, which necessarily exclude or distort elements of the text in order to make it fit a one-sided interpretation, ambiguity embraces the play's complexity. Moreover, it explains that complexity more adequately than Rabkin's ambivalent reading. Rather than relying on biographical and historical information in order to claim that Shakespeare was, like Olivier's Hamlet, a man who could not make up his mind, an ambiguous reading credits Shakespeare with the ability to craft a play. While the alternative interpretations discussed in this thesis simplify the text in order to "improve" Shakespeare's art, an ambiguous reading can incorporate the play's many facets. The end result surpasses even the most fabulous epic pageant or witty satire because it can incorporate both.

### Conclusion: The rabbit that quacked

The Folio text of *Henry V* concludes, fittingly, with a suggestion of both the glory and the subversion which contrast throughout the play. The Chorus' emphasis on the success but also on the brevity of Henry's reign reinforces the ambiguity which leaves tantalizingly unresolved the themes of unity, heroism, and the justice of Henry's war. An audience's understanding of the ending is affected by the groundwork laid throughout, particularly by the Chorus' credibility and the consequent weight of his epilogue.

The final scene focuses on a proposed treaty between France and England, with marriage between Katherine and Henry as one of its demands. Throughout, marriage and accord repeatedly contrast with destruction and resistance. Burgundy's long speech powerfully enumerates France's devastation, but Henry's response asserts that France's agreement to his just demands will buy the peace which can remedy the ravages of war.

The scene can be a comedic episode, emphasizing reconciliation, or it may become a further example of Henry's conquest - an appropriate conclusion for the patriots in Shakespeare's audience, perhaps. Much of the meaning depends on gesture and expression, which contribute significance to lines that can be interpreted to support strongly divergent readings.

The French responses to Henry's terms, particularly Katherine's response to his proposal late in the scene, are ambiguous. Her acceptance and the French King and Queen's subsequent marital blessings can be spoken with hope or resignation.

The association between war and rape, established in Henry's threat to the governor of Harfleur, has disturbing echoes in the wooing episode. Henry's response to Katherine's "is it possible dat I sould love de ennemi of France" (V.ii.158), like the Harfleur speech, draws an explicit parallel between conquered towns and women. To the governor, Henry refers to Harfleur as "she", and speaks of "mowing like grass/Your fresh fair virgins"(III.iii.13-14), of "pure maidens fall into the hand of hot and forcing violation" (20-21), and the "blind and bloody soldier with foul hand/(who will)Defile the locks of your shrill-shrieking daughters" (34-5). In his response to Katherine's question in the final scene, Henry again feminizes France, arguing that, rather than being France's enemy, he loves his new possession so well that he "will not part with a village of it" (V.ii.161). If Henry's love for Katherine involves the same mixture of threats, aggression, and bloodshed that his ostensible love for her country has occasioned, she has reason to resist him - or to submit under duress for fear of reprisal. Henry himself associates his love with cruelty in the scene(200), and Katherine is, he tells her mother, his "capital demand" in the peace treaty(95).

Henry's response to Katherine's "Dat is as it sall please de

*roi mon pere*"(V.ii.225) is a crucial moment in the scene. There is no real reason for Henry to repeat himself, but the change in verb is telling. Although none of the productions discussed in this thesis emphasizes the difference in the two sentences, "It will please him well, Kate" differs materially from "it shall please him, Kate"(V.ii.225). Combined with his repeated recourse to images of conquest, both military and sexual, the second phrase can be quite ominous: *it shall* please him may imply that the King will be pleased whether he likes it or not. Alternatively, as the French king has already offered his daughter to Henry (III.o.30), Henry's assertion may indicate a certainty which makes her consent irrelevant.

Katherine's rejection of Henry's attempt to kiss her hand is also curious. Her self-abasing response seems out of place - the lady protests too much. When Henry offers to kiss her lips instead, her answer implicitly contradicts the first: he is a powerful lord too mighty to lower himself by kissing her hand, but apparently not mighty enough to overcome France's ostensible custom that a woman cannot kiss her fiance until after the wedding. The subsequent kiss can be a romantic moment symbolizing the harmony to come, but, given Katherine's resistance, it can also represent an attack which she has little power to resist.

Some humour remains nevertheless in the wooing scene, a humour possibly shared between its protagonists. Henry's attempts to speak to Katherine in her native tongue make him seem



vulnerable, contrasting positively with his emphasis on conquest and confidence. Alice's presence, too, contributes an element of comedy. Her diminishing role as interpreter, culminating in her response to Henry that "Your majesty entend bettre que moi" (V.ii.262) indicates that, in spite of their linguistic differences, Henry and Katherine understand each other. The harmony and resolution implied by their dialogue is dramatized with a kiss, endorsing a happy ending.

Each of the productions considered in this thesis resolves differently the problems inherent in the play's conclusion. Olivier's portrayal of the wooing scene is all smiles and laughter. Renee Asherson's coy Katherine seems charmed from the beginning, a portrayal supported by an episode early in the film during which Katherine gazes through her window at the dashing Henry on horseback. The reversion to an Elizabethan stage setting, with the sound of the theatre audience's applause, prompts the film spectators to respond as to a comedy. The dark undertones evident in the epilogue are banished, and the epilogue itself stripped of all reference to Henry's death and his son's reign. The Chorus asks us to accept this for "his" sake rather than "theirs", thus refocusing the play emphatically on Henry.

Branagh's conclusion remains more ambiguous. Emma Thompson's laughter stops abruptly when Henry asks, for a second time, whether Katherine can love him. She does not smile again. The epilogue, returning us to the "real" world of the film studio, implies that this second conclusion represents a reality

otherwise lacking in the play's ending. Jacobi's delivery of the lines suggest that "this" refers to the epilogue's emphasis on historical reality.

In the text, the final lines of the epilogue are vague, contributing to its ambiguity. The Chorus asks that we accept "this" for "their" sake: editors including Gurr (11), Craik (nEpilogue.14), and Greenblatt (nEpilogue.14) have asserted that the line certainly refers to the present play, which we should accept for the sake of the *Henry VI* plays which have preceded it in Shakespeare's repertoire. Grammatically, however, this interpretation is far from certain: not only are the plays never mentioned, but the clause, like the play, points to more than one possibility. In literal terms, "their" refers to the managers of Henry VI's kingdom. It could also logically mean France and England. The "certainty" that the phrase alludes to other Shakespeare plays is grammatically unsound.

Similarly, "this" remains difficult to pin down. Editors usually gloss it as "this play", but it refers more properly to the historical fact that Henry VI's reign was marked by civil war and the loss of Henry V's hard-won possessions in France. Alternatively, it could mean "this" epilogue, which may need to be justified because it runs counter to the play's trajectory towards a comedic conclusion. The most reasonable combination, then, is that the epilogue should remind us that play's ending is a temporary rather than permanent celebration of resolution, which we should accept for the sake of France and England.

In Bogdanov's *Wars of the Roses*, the epilogue becomes a bridge between *Henry V* and *Henry VI* - less a decisive conclusion than a connection between the reigns of Henry and his son. The slipperiness of the epilogue's final lines works appropriately to point forward to the coming play, asking the audience to accept the end of Henry's reign for the sake of a new king who, with his advisors, will soon take his place on stage.

The different strategies that directors use to deal with the final scene and epilogue are emblematic of approaches which emphasize the epic and ironic aspects either singly or as an unresolvable juxtaposition. More than any other episode in the play, the conclusion becomes the true test of a theory. That Renee Asherson can deliver Katherine's "I cannot tell" (V.ii.193) flirtatiously, while Emma Thompson speaks the same line with coldness and resistance, indicates drastically different readings of the play's tone.

While the examples selected from each production seem to paint a black and white picture, no production discussed in this thesis is exclusively epic or ironic. Even Olivier's predominantly epic film necessarily incorporates some subversion. However, the main emphasis in each production is demonstrated in the director's treatment of the conclusion and epilogue. Olivier's focus on a happy ending contrasts dramatically with the uncomfortable ambiguity in the BBC, ESC, and Branagh films, which, as an unexpected change in direction, jars. Where Olivier offers certainty, the other productions raise doubts which the

text never answers.

The editing necessary to make the play's conclusion fit with a predominantly one-sided interpretation strengthens the argument for an ambiguous reading. An emphasis on ambiguity is advantageous because it can exploit the implications of both the final scene and the epilogue without demanding simplification. Katherine can accept Henry's proposal of marriage while she resists his demand for love. The peace achieved through treaty and marriage cannot repair the damage to France Burgundy describes, but it can begin the process of rebuilding.

This is not to say that all perspectives are validated: Henry's St. Crispin's Day speech and his "Once more unto the breach" make a thoroughly ironic interpretation difficult, as Pauline Kael observes in her review of Branagh's film. At the same time, the ironies which cannot be avoided except by editing complicate a wholly epic reading.

Rabkin's assertion that the play points in two irreconcilable directions can be countered best by a production which highlights the inconsistencies which, he argues, necessarily remain unresolved. Does the play show us a "band of brothers", united in common cause, or a collection of competing classes and nations who never really unite? Is Henry a Machiavel or a hero? Is Katherine a willing or coerced bride? In all cases, the answer is both. As in real life, motives and consequences are rarely simple or straightforward.

This reading refutes the argument that the play is basically

flawed. *Henry V* does stand up to close and careful scrutiny. None of the details which contradict more simplified interpretations are superfluous or contradictory. They are not, I suggest, accidents or shortcomings.

Why, then, isn't this reading more prevalent? I return to the theory of E.H.Gombrich, who explains that one often sees what one expects rather than what is really there. *Henry V* has the rabbit ears of an ironic interpretation, but these ears easily become the duck's bill to a reader expecting heroism and glory. That it can give rise to equally strong belief in both readings testifies to its success in achieving ambiguity.

The play does not force us to choose between the alternative perspectives it offers. Rather, it emphasizes their validity. War results in some losses for the victors and some gains even for the vanquished. Unlike one-sided interpretations, ambiguity allows for the complexity which is part of reality.

Thus, in artistic terms, *Henry V* achieves a degree of truth which superseded the Chorus' apologies for its lack of mimetic reality. As Henry himself asserts:

A speaker is but a prater, a rhyme is but a  
ballad, a good leg will fall, a straight back  
will stoop, a black beard will turn white, a  
curled pate will grow bald, a fair face will  
wither, a full eye will wax hollow - but a  
good heart, Kate, is the sun and the moon, or  
rather the sun and not the moon, for it  
shines bright and never changes, but keeps  
his course truly.

(V.ii.149-55).

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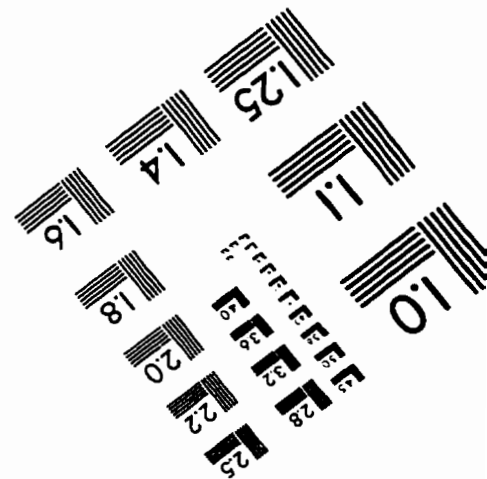
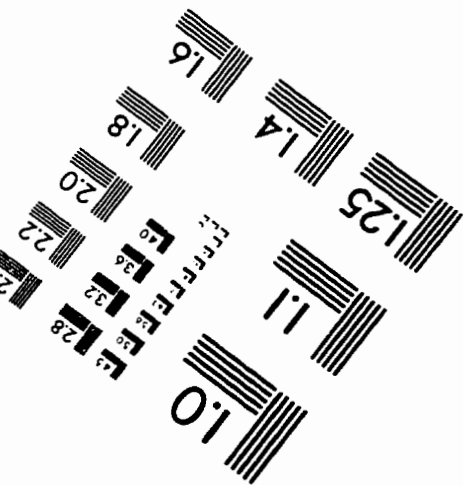
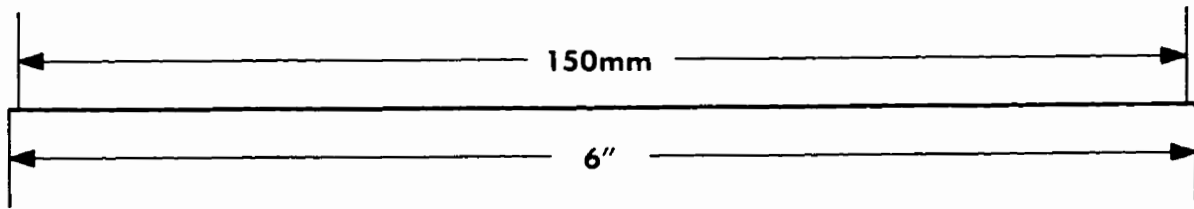
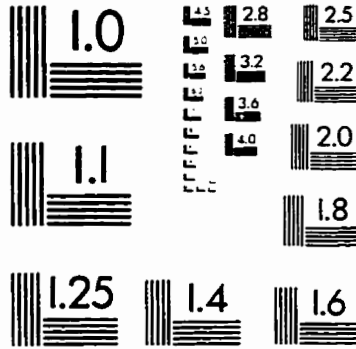
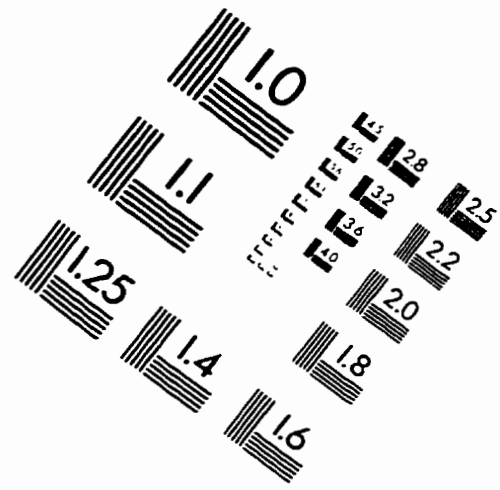
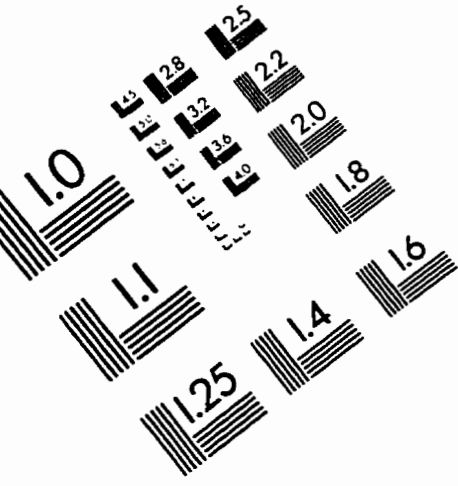


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