

SHAKESPEARE'S *HENRY V* AND THE
MODERN WAR OF CONQUEST

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Abstract

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Since its production in 1599, Shakespeare's *Henry V* has been interpreted by many scholars, filmmakers and readers in ways that perpetuate leaders' ability to wage foreign wars of aggression. These conquests may go by other names than war or conquest but they are, in principle, very similar to the corrupt enterprise that Shakespeare chronicles in *Henry V*. A reading of the play in the light of recent literary criticism and twentieth-century western military action can expose the interest and investment that modern readers still have in viewing their leaders' rapacious actions as righteous and necessary.

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Part I Introduction

“Shakespeare is a powerful ideological weapon,” writes Terence Hawkes, “always available in periods of crisis, and used according to the exigencies of the time to resolve crucial areas of indeterminacy” (43). Exploring the prestigious career of Sir Walter



Raleigh, Hawkes investigates the ways in which English literature has long been involved in the fabrication of ideology, nationalism, and history. Referring to Raleigh’s celebrated 1907 edition of Shakespeare’s works as part of the authoritative *English Men of Letters* series, Hawkes describes how

The monumentalizing, coherence-generating, sense- and history-making activity of *English Men of Letters* simply *constitutes* the truth: the truth that the true heritage of British culture is written down, and in English, and by Men. (31)

Tracing the necessity of the English people and government to “make sense of the past in terms of the exigencies of the present” (30), Hawkes explains how and why Raleigh came to be chosen for the momentous task of writing the important Shakespeare volume of the series. The volume was to be “one of the great pinnacles of the enterprise,” and “the jewel in its crown,” and in this way Shakespeare was well on his way towards becoming a sort of “cultural superman,” used by Raleigh and many others in political and ideological rhetoric, to sculpt and solidify the British sense of nationhood and collective identity (30).

Shakespeare's spectacular portrayal of English conquest in his 1599 historical drama, *The Life of Henry the Fifth*, provides an ideal arena for the important discussion of how ideology, and its manifestations in a leader's stirring rhetoric, can indeed become a very powerful weapon, an abstract tool that creates some very concrete effects. *Henry V* has been used as an ideological weapon many times since its production. Lawrence Olivier's 1944 film version of the play, for example, was financed by the British government in hopes that it would boost morale during World War Two. A close inspection of twentieth-century readings and productions of the play will demonstrate the controversial nature of art's interpretation as well as the grave consequences of those interpretations. An examination of the overly simplistic ways in which this important play has been perennially interpreted reveals the extent of interest and investment that western audiences have in viewing the modern-day conquest of their national leaders as noble, valiant, and necessary. As Jonathan Baldo observed in his 1996 "Wars of Memory in *Henry V*," despite the play's ostensibly "historical theme of remembrance," throughout *Henry V* Shakespeare "makes it clear that England and Henry are just as interested in fostering a kind of cultural amnesia to help produce a union" (144). A study of some of the ways *Henry V* has been remembered, forgotten, and otherwise interpreted will demonstrate how deeply this same ideology of "cultural amnesia" pervades the world's most advanced societies today.

Norman Rabkin has declared that out of all of Shakespeare's renowned works of English drama, *Henry V* is unique in routinely provoking its audience into holding, often fiercely, only one of two tensely and diametrically opposed points of view. His influential 1977 *Shakespeare Quarterly* essay, "Rabbits,

Ducks, and *Henry V*,” from its very title onward, makes a humorous but compelling argument that draws attention to the tendency of theatergoers, literary critics, and filmmakers alike to get swept away by Shakespeare’s stirring language and baited into representing one of only two possible perspectives—in terms of Rabkin’s odd but useful metaphor, are we looking at a rabbit or a duck?

The metaphor of the Gestalt image is useful in the sense that it describes the often vehement polarity and tension between the camps of many twentieth-century interpretations—on the one hand, interpretations of specific events and social conditions, and on the other, interpretations of art and literature. Whether those interpretations involve the past or the present of a given audience, the volatile, incendiary tension always present in the political realm has usually caused interpretations of *Henry V* to coalesce into two discrete and mutually exclusive attitudes: either King Henry is an admirable hero or a ruthless Machiavellian manipulator. Rabkin’s endeavor makes important headway in understanding the process of the use of thrilling, patriotic rhetoric to mask destructive enterprises. Shakespeare is certainly useful in evoking, in an inimitably creative, vivid, and powerful manner, a single distinct emotion or perception in an audience. However, as Rabkin shows throughout his essay, many interpretations of *Henry V* have tended to see the shape they want to see in the play, failing to notice the important and even “dangerous” knowledge that the dual view holds regarding applications to the real world. Shakespeare’s work in general, and *Henry V* in particular, remain unparalleled examples of the power of literature to expose the danger and grim consequences of falling under the spell of black-or-white modes of thought.

Ironically, Rabkin finds that the historical figure of Henry V himself was someone “about whom there would seem to have been little reason for anything but the simplest of views” (289). What Rabkin means here is unclear—perhaps simply that Henry did not live or rule for very long—but his assertion happens to resemble quite well the affinity for many interpretations of the play to remain, as Rabkin himself illustrates, quite simple and straightforward. However, as in any age, there were certainly many complex dynamics present in Henry’s social and political world, and if we are to believe even half of the historical events in Shakespeare’s fictional account, it is hard to imagine how such a story could be told with only “the simplest of views” on King Henry. Finally, whether the historical Henry V’s story is simple or not, because the teller of Henry’s story is, in this case, Shakespeare, the likelihood of this fictional account to be rich in complexity and multiplicity of meaning is great.

That audiences (especially those with an extraordinary amount of formal education) have persisted for so long in viewing *Henry V* in simple terms is a mystery only partly explained by Rabkin. Rightly pointing out the flaws in the binary logic of many interpreters of *Henry V*, his analysis demonstrates that something as vital and ineffable as truth, justice, or Shakespeare is most constructively approached with a careful avoidance of binaries of any sort whatsoever. The idea of the rabbit-duck fittingly describes the tendency of many interpretations of literature, be they fervently against or judiciously tolerant of plurality, to remain sequestered within relatively precise and comforting confines of theory. As Rabkin and many others have noted, most interpretations of *Henry V*, even when they acknowledge the gruesome and wanton slaughter that likely accompanied the historical King Henry’s glorious and odds-defying endeavor in

the real world of fifteenth-century Europe, remain relatively unconcerned with the far messier world of real life and politics whose essence and lessons much of the greatest literature attempts to capture and chronicle.

Asserting that “in this deceptively simple play Shakespeare experiments, perhaps more shockingly than elsewhere, with a structure like the gestaltist’s familiar drawing of a rare beast” (279-80), Rabkin believes that this uniquely “shocking” work of art is “virtually daring us to choose one of the two opposed interpretations it requires of us” (279). According to Rabkin, *Henry V* evokes such simple or binary views because it induces its audience to latch onto one of two opposing extremes: either the auspicious and glorious adventure of an ideal monarch and admirable military hero, or a scathing satire of a murderous and hypocritical “mirror of all Christian kings” (*Henry V* 2.0.6). However, despite any perceived “daring” of the audience on Shakespeare’s part, it is important to remember that Shakespeare’s works are routinely quite adept in the portrayal of complexity, plurality, and multiplicity of meaning, and *Henry V* is no exception. Throughout my own analysis, I will examine how and why this play retains the power to not only shock, but more importantly develop, an audience’s delicate sensibilities regarding power, ideology, “good” leadership and conquest. Regardless of the amount of time present between a given audience’s response to *Henry V* and the actual fifteenth-century events the play describes, an analysis of Shakespeare’s 1599 historical fiction in conjunction with the ways it has been, and continues to be, classified in our ever-changing world can yield an important understanding of the work itself and of the social manipulation and bloody conquest it is concerned with.

In Rabkin's view, the ambiguity present in *Henry V* is a consequence of "a spiritual struggle" (296) burgeoning within Shakespeare personally, at a moment in the Bard's own life when he was "poised for the flight into the great tragedies with their profounder questions about the meaning of action and heroism" (296). The reasons for Rabkin's speculation on such a personal level about Shakespeare the writer are unclear. Although the nature of Shakespeare's later work does indeed raise "whether 'tis nobler to suffer" questions about the meaning (and consequences) of action, one would think that the continual study of Shakespeare has by now shown the specious nature of speculation about his personal life based solely on the dramatic situations and characters he created. Whether Shakespeare was angry, suicidal, or ecstatic while writing a particular play is something we can never know with certainty, and the tendency of interpreters of *Henry V* to find him feeling especially "patriotic" or anything else has made little real progress in understanding the play as a source for potentially invaluable insight regarding how and why audiences are duped by rhetoric into supporting extremely destructive and violent collective action.

"This aggression will not stand," George H. W. Bush proclaimed in response to the 1991 Iraqi invasion of Kuwait, a nation of miniscule size but of immense strategic and economic value to what American leaders describe to their citizens as "key national interests" and even "the stability of the region." Ten years later, Bush's son would even more easily garner support, "with right and conscience" (*Henry V* 1.2.96), for embarking on a seemingly limitless act of aggression of America's own, against an enemy that could remain far less defined because widespread fear and the painful need for vengeance were so much greater.

How much or little such interpretations and representations of reality are accurate is conveniently elided: the crucial element is that they disrupt the audience's sense of security, create a feeling of uneasy vertigo and quickly proffer a facile solution to restore equilibrium and maintain "our way of life." As Edward Said describes one of the few writers on Islam who, unlike the many negative interpretations of Islam pervasive throughout Western media, avoids resorting to a two-dimensional characterization:

The point about such accounts. . . is not whether in the end they are totally correct, or whether one should accept or reject them unconditionally, but the sense they give of a real interlocutor, with real arguments and real interests that have been ignored in most of the remorseless media coverage of Islam that dominates the picture today. (Said xxvii-xxix)

Similarly, the point about "accounts" of Henry V is that they tend to "safely reduce to a formula" (Rabkin 279) a play that, as Rabkin himself seems fairly aware, is hardly simply about either a heroic conquest or gruesome slaughter. Like Henry's success in justifying his conquest of France to a fifteenth-century populace, Western leaders today still enjoy great success in waging conquests of their own. As Said observes in 1997, "the tendency to consider the whole world as one country's imperium is very much in the ascendancy in today's United States" (xxix). This tendency is apparent in countless twentieth- and twenty-first century descriptors of "noble" military conquests (or "conflicts," for those who prefer the euphemism): the war on terrorism, regime change in Iraq, an imperial "United Kingdom" on which the sun never sets, defense against the Red Menace wherever it may rear its ugly head, and coming to a country's aid (whether out of Christian charity or out of desire for its natural resources), to name just a few.

The difference between *Henry V* and Shakespeare's other work seems to have much to do with this particular play's intimate and inexorable entanglement with the disturbingly stark, realistic, and wholly unpleasant parallels that can be drawn between its content and any given society or audience. Its direct application and relevance to most any populace invariably elicits a powerful response in literary critics and everyday citizens alike. The pronounced insecurity of Henry's many realms of everyday existence allows the play's audience to relate to Henry's character on a personal level, and the realization that Henry may well be responsible for the rape and slaughter of innocent civilians cannot help but provoke a vehement reaction. Particularly in societies who truly believe that rulers should and do exert their power and actions "for the people, by the people," an audience's sympathizing with King Henry (on any level at all) carries grave and harrowing implications, regarding what is at stake in how he is interpreted and what might be very similarly present in an audience's own lives and world.

In his 1983 study, *Literary Theory*, Terry Eagleton describes how "literary" language immediately asserts itself more boldly and forcefully than everyday speech, and in doing so can more powerfully elicit a disquieting response, throwing its audience both mentally and emotionally into an unaccustomed state of vulnerable insecurity:

Literature transforms and intensifies ordinary language, deviates systematically from everyday speech. If you approach me at a bus stop and murmur 'Thou still unravished bride of quietness,' then I am instantly aware that I am in the presence of the literary. . . . Your language draws attention to itself, flaunts its material being, as statements like 'Don't you know the drivers are on strike?' do not. (Eagleton 2)

Thus, when an audience experiences the force and appeal Shakespeare's unquestionably "literary" language, it is thrown for a loop outside of its normal expectation of the relatively dull and predictable routine of the language to which it is accustomed. Such language can certainly be employed to drum up support for the concerted, collective action of a group of people. What interpreters of Shakespeare such as Rabkin rarely take note of is how effectively and similarly such compelling language, presumably the purview of fictional literature only, has been used in their own countries and time periods, sometimes with the very non-fictional effect of the extermination of innocent human life. Incredibly passionate and effective public speakers of the twentieth century include Adolf Hitler and Martin Luther King, Fidel Castro and George W. Bush. Who is a rabbit and who is a duck? Perhaps a better question might be: Do these speakers encourage in their audience a reaction and thought process that is simplistic or complex? As Rabkin describes *Henry V*, such passionate rhetoric and compelling language taps in to "our deepest hopes and fears about the world of political action" (296). But the important difference between Shakespeare and other rhetors is that the effect his work encourages is careful and complex thought instead of merely visceral reaction.

Each of the above-named leaders has made as much use of such language in their stirring speeches to audiences of their own, but their purpose was individual and specific, whereas Shakespeare's is rarely so easily definable. Thus, what King Henry did and said some six hundred years ago matters today only in the sense that in his fictional account of Henry's life, Shakespeare effectively demonstrates important similarities between time periods and nations, perhaps even "shocking" similarities that demand thought and analysis rather than lock-step allegiance to

any particular nation, ideology, literary theory, or rabbit-duck image. Rabkin's agnostic conclusion to his rabbit-duck study grandly and enigmatically asserts that

The inscrutability of *Henry V* is the inscrutability of history. And for a unique moment in Shakespeare's work ambiguity is the heart of the matter, the single most important fact we must confront in plucking out the mystery of the world we live in. (Rabkin 296)

Thus the delight in resolutions that end without resolution, already a hallmark of a literary criticism, finds especially ample material to work with in Shakespeare.

Despite the ambiguous and anticlimatic feel of Rabkin's conclusion, his essay does demonstrate quite thoroughly the fairly modest claim that *Henry V*, so often viewed in two mutually exclusive ways, is actually extremely interested in ambiguity and the ways in which power impels obedience and submission through the careful construction of alluring, deceptively simple images. However, Rabkin seems fairly unconcerned with the hardly shocking idea that literary theory and criticism are not the only ways to view, discuss, and understand meaningful aspects of literature. Rabkin remains suspended in the fuzzy realm of uncertainty, poignantly mystified by the rabbit-duck structure he has found among his literary compatriots and their insistence on two polarized views. As Eagleton writes in *Literary Theory*, although critical discourse lacks a "determinate signified" to which arguments may be directed, "there are certainly a great many ways of talking about literature which it [critical discourse] excludes, and a great many discursive moves and strategies which it disqualifies as invalid, illicit, non-critical, nonsense" (203). A production of *Henry V*, for example, by someone like Kenneth Branagh or Lawrence Olivier who is very much a part of the traditional and "serious" or "respected" institution of Shakespearean theater, is far more

likely to be meticulously analyzed than, say, films such as *10 Things I Hate About You*, *She's the Man*, or Baz Luhrmann's *Romeo and Juliet*, which also capture and explore very interesting aspects of Shakespeare's work, but generally without being viewed as "literary," and thus serious or "great," works. Eagleton points out that

The power of critical discourse moves on several levels. It is the power of 'policing' language – of determining that certain statements must be excluded because they do not conform to what is acceptably sayable. It is the power of policing writing itself, classifying it into the 'literary' and 'non-literary', the enduringly great and the ephemerally popular. (203)

Further, he observes that the powerful "policing" roles of critical discourse also involve its definition and preservation by admitting some while excluding others, of "certificating" or making explicit value judgments regarding "who can speak the discourse better or worse, and especially of extending all this carefully controlled defining and policing into "society at large" and the serving of its ideological needs. After a careful and sustained analysis of "literary theory," Eagleton argues for its "death" as a hermetically sealed practice and its release into the realm of the everyday:

The objects of criticism, like the objects of the Freudian drive, are in a certain sense contingent and replaceable. Ironically, criticism only really became aware of this fact when, sensing that its own liberal humanism was running out of steam, it turned for aid to more ambitious or rigorous critical methods. . . . For you cannot engage in an historical analysis of literature without recognizing that literature itself is a recent historical invention; you cannot apply structuralist tools to *Paradise Lost* without acknowledging

that just the same tools can be applied to the *Daily Mirror*. Criticism can thus prop itself up only at the risk of losing its defining object; it has the unenviable choice of stifling or suffocating. If literary theory presses its own implications too far, then it has argued itself out of existence.

This, I would suggest, is the best possible thing for it to do.

(Eagleton 203-4)

Calling his own book “less an introduction than an obituary,” Eagleton exposes the fact that in their well-meaning but narrow endeavors, many academics in their unperceived insulation from reality have “ended by burying the object we sought to unearth” (204). In Eagleton’s view, the “theoretically limitless extendibility of critical discourse, the fact that it is only arbitrarily confined to ‘literature’, is or should be a source of embarrassment to the custodians of the canons” (203).

Furthermore, although he admits that he values Marxist and feminist literary theories more than other literary theories—presumably because they are often less strictly “theoretical”—he is careful to emphasize that such wrangling is not the point.

The point, for Eagleton, is that literature is anything but “a distinct, bounded object of knowledge,” and those that consider it as such are doing literature, themselves, and everyone else a disservice, when instead they could be devoting their time, energy, and erudition to more meaningful endeavors—for example, to “the practical consequences of the fact that literary theory can handle Bob Dylan just as well as John Milton” (205). Throughout the following chapters, I will show that the ways in which *Henry V* is interpreted have many real and practical consequences, and that it is an ideal venue through which to demonstrate

the importance of avoiding rigid, distinctly bound views, about literature as well as everyday politics.

Harold Goddard, shortly before his death in 1950, notes in his introduction to *The Meaning of Shakespeare* that “in stressing what Shakespeare meant to the Elizabethan age the historical critics have helped us forget what he might mean to ours” (Goddard viii-ix). Perhaps even more than Eagleton, Goddard is interested in considering literature’s value in terms of how much fiction written in the past can speak valuable truth about the very real present and future. Living comfortably as an academic scholar and university professor through both world wars, Goddard’s profound acquaintance with and love for Shakespeare’s work cannot be segregated from his concern for the harrowingly monumental loss of human life he witnessed throughout the early and mid-twentieth century. Using *Hamlet* rather than *Henry V* as an example, Goddard gravely observes that “twice within three decades our own time has called on its younger generation to avenge a wrong with the making of which it had nothing to do,” and wonders “for whom, then, if not for us, was *Hamlet* written?” (Goddard vii). Such poignant remarks leave much to be desired, in terms of a practical discussion of just how more attention to a play like *Hamlet* could have conceivably, if not averted disaster, at least explained its occurrence the first time so as to lessen its effect the second, but an important point to make is that he is starting the conversation, embarking on a path that may very well have substantially positive results for everyone. Failure to make extensive connections between any given “great” literature and any given society is certainly every reader and writer’s God-given right. However, in the words of Goddard which are hardly less descriptive today: “Ours is a time that

would have sent the Greeks to their oracles. We fail at our peril to consult our own” (vii).

English majors, poets, artists and academics thrive on finding complexity and nuance in the world and similarities in seemingly different people. As Eagleton observes, the academic community especially tends to encourage, as a perfectly acceptable end in itself, the act of “complicating” or “problematizing” a certain aspect of a particular literary work.

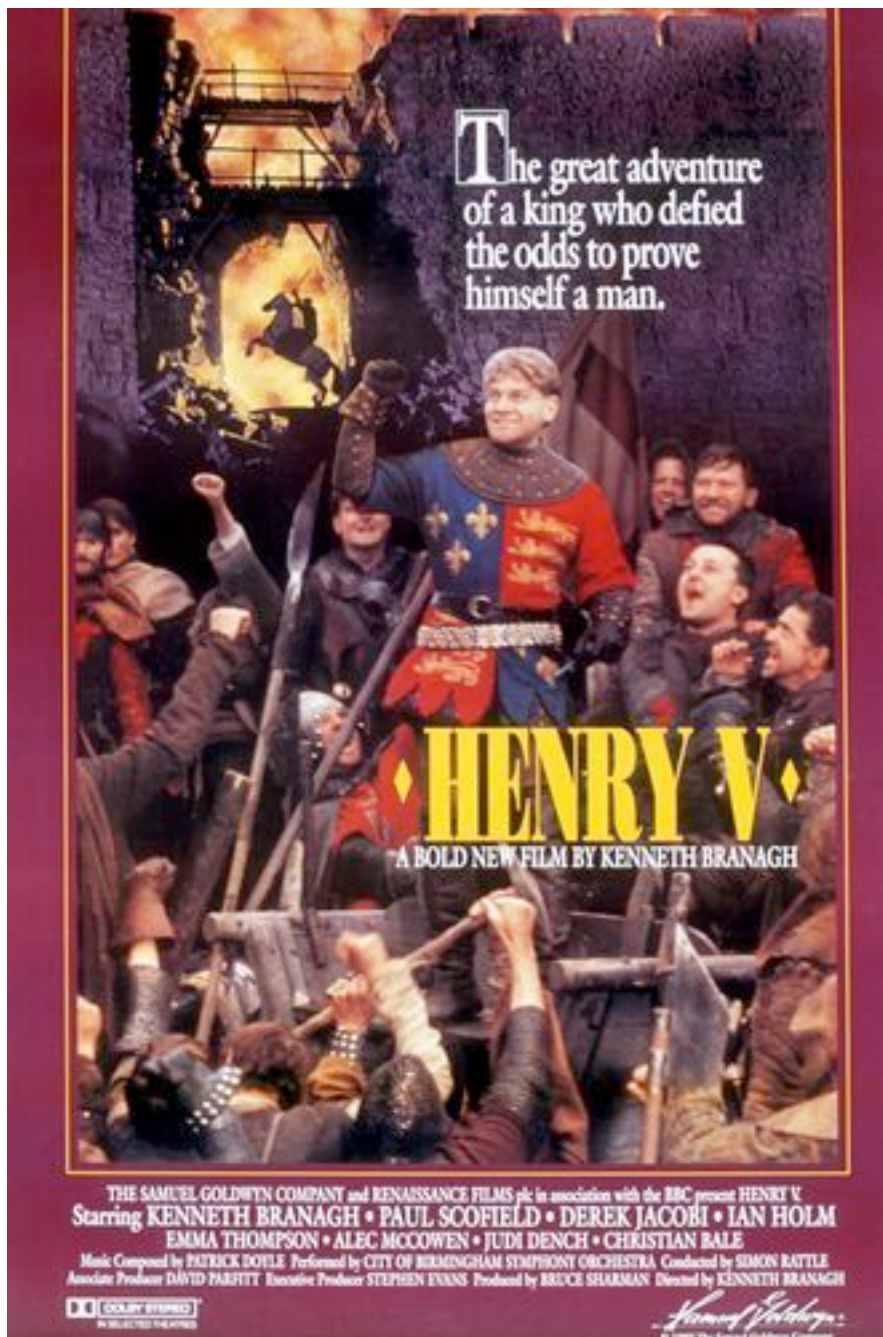
Politicians and military demagogues thrive on the opposite—on painting a certain nation or race as other, on dehumanization, on the fabrication of difference where, deep down, it hardly exists, and on seeing things in stark binaries instead of similarities or complexities.

Readings of *Henry V* that focus on Henry’s leadership or honorable qualities can tell us a lot about why we persist in being duped by such leaders today. Certainly such readings are hardly the only or even (perhaps) the most common, but they have remained common enough to warrant analysis of where and how we are charmed by propaganda.

Therefore, in the following chapters I will provide a brief overview of the variety of interpretations of Shakespeare’s creative and controversial vivification of a remarkable historical event, followed by my own personal reading of the play, and finally, a discussion of the very real consequences of this range of different “literary” exercises.

Part II

A selection of relevant *Henry V* criticism and productions



Our “Shakespeare” is our invention; to read him is to write him.

—Terence Hawkes, *That Shakespeherian Rag*

A brief survey of some of the most popular productions and most common readings of *Henry V* can demonstrate the various ways in which the play itself is viewed today. In addition to shedding light on the complex nature of the work itself, this study of the various categories, contentions, and overlappings of *Henry V* analysis reveals many important attributes of the play’s past and present audience. As the above epigraph by Terence Hawkes suggests, readers, throughout the twentieth century in particular, have explored the fertile landscape of potential meanings ever-present in Shakespeare’s complex works of art, and in doing so, these readers have necessarily “invented” Shakespeares of their own by forming interpretations unique to their own individual experiences and conceptions of reality.

Similarly, readings of the character of King Henry V can uncover a great deal about what the reader him- or herself is most interested in inventing. Is Henry a cunning despot or a valiant hero? Is he driven by a desire to prove his manhood (and thus his ability to rule), by some innate, even biologically inevitable, “manifest destiny,” or simply by the pressure of greedy and conniving clergymen? The beauty of Shakespeare, particularly evident our “inventions” over the centuries of people like Henry V, is how revealing an audience’s interpretation of Shakespearean characters is about the worldview or *ideology* of the audience itself. Like the complex matrix in which audiences have read, written about, produced, and otherwise invented Shakespeare’s plays, an analysis of the vast

array of meanings latent in the term ideology is paramount to an understanding of *Henry V* criticism.

Between the view that literature is always and necessarily political and the view that it is primarily aesthetic, the work of many intelligent writers fluctuates. Theater scholar Gerald Rabkin, in his 1988 essay, “Shakespeare Our Ideologist,” explores the tension between these two extremes. Like the assertion of Terence Hawkes above, Rabkin’s essay traces various eminent “inventions” of Shakespearean criticism and the ideology that accompanies such inventions. In two eminent scholars, Terry Eagleton and Geoffrey Hartman, Rabkin finds representatives of two opposing factions that, for him, exemplify two magnetic “poles”—the explicitly ideological critic in Eagleton and the “art for art’s sake” advocate in Hartman. According to Rabkin, however, both camps mistakenly “assume that the Revolution has been won, that the Ancien Régime as displaced religion and revealed truth has been irrevocably overthrown, never to return” (5). In Rabkin’s view, “it is clear” that these opposing schools, “which had previously joined in a popular front to subvert the common enemy of the essentialist text, now jostle and struggle for discursive preeminence” (5-6).

Rabkin himself seems to view himself rather squarely in the middle of these two extremes, although he appears more sympathetic to and interested in the political and ideological focus of critics such as Eagleton. Throughout the essay, Rabkin’s focus tends to remain centered upon

how deeply the canonization of Shakespeare—particularly in Britain—represents, in Terence Hawkes’ words, “a powerful ideological weapon, always available in periods of crisis,” [and the ways in which] Shakespeare’s centrality to the century-old discipline of “English,” with its

commitment to the “eternal” values of Literature, preserves and reinforces a “natural” social order. Perhaps *the* primary goal of the British critics has been to demystify the axioms of essentialist criticism in order to reveal it as a conservative ideological project. (Rabkin 11-12)

Rabkin’s essay, like Jonathan Baldo’s “Wars of Memory in *Henry V*,” is also interested in revealing “essentialist” interpretations of *Henry V* in particular. The tendency of interpretations of *Henry V* to be read as Shakespeare trafficking, in some way, in a “conservative ideological project” has led to the use of the language of weaponry as a way of describing non-physical warfare of ideology and power structures, in real life as well as in literature. The spectacle of the theater and the epic battles and language of *Henry V* are thus extraordinarily powerful venues for an exploration of the role of spectacle, appearance, ideology, and rhetoric in military conquest.

The view of Shakespeare as “a powerful ideological weapon” is what drives Rabkin’s argument, an idea that is incidentally quite common to most readings of *Henry V*, and Hawkes’ characterization typifies the interesting affinity for the language of violence with which Rabkin laces his entire exploration of Shakespeare as “Our Ideologist.” Whether discussing the written attacks between academics at Yale and Oxford, the power of “discursive radicality” (Rabkin 12) that pervades Shakespeare’s work itself, or the more literal conflict present in the real-world violence visited upon human beings in the name of right and necessary retaliation or conquest, Rabkin’s use of the terminology of warfare evokes a subtle but persistent reminder to the reader that what is at stake throughout all this discussion is not merely “discursive preeminence” but actual human lives. In

doing so, he highlights Karl Marx's importance not merely as a theorist but as a passionate believer in literature as a tool for real social and political change:

“The philosophers have only analyzed the world,” wrote Marx, “The point, however, is to change it.” (Rabkin 6)

The use of Marx provides Rabkin with a touchstone for valuable insight and a point of potentially common ground between the warring factions that he examines, and also serves as an interesting and effective lens through which to view ideology and its real-world consequences. Rabkin declares that Marxism is “the one modern tradition that has always foregrounded the intersection of culture and society” (Rabkin 8) and cites that valuable focus and intersection as the reason for scholars to return to *some* Marxist ideas. Rabkin is careful to provide certain caveats regarding the limitations of Marx's work, particularly regarding what Rabkin calls “the reductive, simplistic nature of Marxist cultural theory with all its obvious Gulagian repressiveness” (8), focusing instead of the more visibly positive elements of Marx's work that have made it endure in modern times. For example, Rabkin feels that Marx, from the 1930s on, was “vulgarized” in a way that “impeded real cultural analysis,” and that

The first task, then, was to rescue Marx from the Marxists, to show that his concept of culture—and the necessary corollary concept of ideology—was more complex than Marxists assumed. (Rabkin 8)

Tying Marx's notion of culture and ideology in to King Henry's use of rhetoric (Rabkin 9) with Henry's lower-class soldiers (and readers), Rabkin outlines the careful and studied use of language in warfare to inspire and garner support from a leader's constituents.

Similarly, Terence Hawkes has pointed out how such language of violence and vilification can effectively prepare a populace for righteous warfare. Referring to Sir Walter Raleigh's 1918 volume of lectures called *England and the War*, Hawkes examines the philosophy (or more appropriately, the dehumanizing propaganda) with which an intelligent, preeminent scholar, armed with a substantial knowledge of Shakespeare and government funding and knighthood, can purvey a particularly insidious and virulent racist ideology. Using choice passages of Raleigh's preface to *English and the War*, Hawkes illustrates the colorful ways in which the celebrated "first Professor of English" at Oxford University speaks of the filthiness of the savage Germans, compares them to "the lower animals," asks "who has ever fathomed the mind of a rhinoceros?", describes them as "like talking to an intelligent dog," and deplores "the explosive guttural sounds and the huddled deformed syntax of the speech in which they express their arrogance and their hate" (Hawkes 37-38). Occasionally indulging in a bit of sarcasm, Hawkes nonetheless unfolds a fairly precise and straightforward blueprint how the powerful leaders of a country can use flamboyant rhetoric with a straight face and be taken seriously:

On 4 July, 1918, then, the truth-bearing, civilizing and English-speaking representatives of humanity celebrated its confrontation with and certain defeat of its opposite, the savage, deformed, less than human representatives of the bestial and the depraved. (38)

Given the not-so-distant history of such racist ideology at work within government- and academy-backed institutions of English literature in general and Shakespeare in particular, the persistence of serious and educated interpretations of *Henry V* that prefer to shrug off Henry's stridently English and Christian

rhetoric of the conquest of the dehumanized Other is perhaps more understandable. In their unceasing delineation for the populace of precisely what does and doesn't qualify as humanity, of what language and race is savage and what one is civilized, of what qualifies as terrorism and what is necessary defense of "freedom" or vital "interests," leaders of political and academic institutions cleverly maintain the structure necessary for the justification of military conquest.

Comparing Raleigh's "megalomania" to that of Prospero in *The Tempest*, Hawkes demonstrates how a well-meaning, highly educated national celebrity—in this case, the second Sir Walter Raleigh as the valiant leader of Shakespeare's conquest of English literature—can advance racist and nationalist ideology. Particularly important to the discussion of ideology at work in *Henry V*, Hawkes shows how ideology can also be useful in the conquest and definition of a populace's perception of what constitutes good literature and good art:

That he [Shakespeare] should be thus presented in a context where his potency is diverted and channeled to a national educational drive to universal literacy may seem unduly restrictive, but, again, it is no more peculiar a formation than many. The pressures and compulsions of ideology are at work here. These are what seek to control the alarming plurality of all texts, and clearly there could be no more effective instrument for such a controlling, prophylactic function in Britain than the aptly named edifice of English letters. (Greenblatt 35)

The control of a text's potential meanings is a particularly salient issue in Shakespeare's *Henry V*. As many scholars have demonstrated, the expressly political discourse and analysis latent in the fabric of the play has tended to stifle plurality and complexity in favor of binary modes of thinking and interpretations.

Hawkes' tongue-in-cheek characterization of the text's plurality as "alarming" echoes Norman Rabkin's more credulous declaration of *Henry V*'s alleged attempt to incite only one of two possible responses in its audiences. "In this deceptively simple play," Rabkin writes, "Shakespeare experiments, perhaps more shockingly than elsewhere, with a structure like the gestaltist's familiar drawing of a rare beast. . . virtually daring us to choose one of the two opposed interpretations it requires of us" (Rabkin 279-80). The idea that plurality of meaning has the power to alarm or shock may surprise readers of Shakespeare's other plays, where the debates over meaning may have less obvious and direct repercussions. As long as a play like *Henry V* can be classified by experts on Shakespeare as containing only one or two set interpretations, the vast potential of meaning concerning the play's many levels of the interrogation of state power can remain stymied—in Hawkes' rather unsavory but vivid words, it is in this way that academic and governmental institutions retain their "controlling, prophylactic function."

In the view of some critics, it is this "alarming plurality" that Henry feels is necessary to control in his military conquest of France, in his somewhat linguistic "battle" for the hand of Catherine, and in his rhetorical battle for the minds and hearts of his fellow soldiers. Not unlike the "pressures and compulsions of ideology" in Raleigh's use of Shakespeare in attempt to unify and glorify the English and English-ness, in Henry's famous St. Crispin's Day speech he invokes an image of the glorious memory that awaits anyone who answers his appeal, promising not universal literacy but universal remembrance and accolade—immortality and even envy in the hearts and minds of every Englishman:

And gentlemen in England now abed

Shall think themselves accursed they were not here,
 And hold their manhoods cheap whiles any speaks
 That found with us upon Saint Crispin's day. (4.3.64-8)

In the words of Jonathan Baldo, “memory is the larger, moveable battlefield to which King Henry, England, and Elizabeth, England’s last Tudor monarch, were repeatedly called to arms” (Baldo 133). Moreover, as Baldo points out in his 1996 “Wars of Memory in *Henry V*,” the plurality of memory as well as the plurality of nations — “no king of England if not king of France” (2.2.190) — is also similar to the plurality that was constantly expunged as much as possible from the language, culture, and identity of the Irish, Scottish, and Welsh. Baldo demonstrates, through a detailed study of both twentieth- and seventeenth-century documents that “the subduing of local memory, either by absorption or by erasure, was an essential feature of Elizabethan policy toward Ireland” (134). Similarly, as Jonathan Dollimore and Alan Sinfield observe in “History and Ideology: The Instance of *Henry V*,” Irish resistance to English rule in Elizabethan times was a great problem for England, “despite or more probably because of the many atrocities committed against the people – such as the slaughter of all six hundred inhabitants of Rathlin Island by John Norris and Francis Drake in 1575” (224). Dollimore and Sinfield’s analysis, along with Baldo’s discussion of selective memory’s utility in warfare and nationhood, explores the similarities in English conquest of many different peoples. Whether the particular country being conquered is Ireland, Wales, or Scotland, France, India or others, *Henry V* holds many interesting lessons in regard to the way leaders use rhetoric, spectacle, and selective memory to either eradicate or forcibly assimilate another populace. In Ireland’s case, as Dollimore and Sinfield observe, the English felt especially

justified: “The assumption that the Irish were a barbarous and inferior people was so ingrained in Elizabethan England that it seemed only a natural duty to subdue them and destroy their culture” (224-5). While the two cases are by no means congruent, a twentieth-century parallel of this sense of superiority and the actions that accompany it can be found in the western world’s support of Israel and the consequent western portrayal of Muslims of most all stripes as a “barbarous and inferior people” with an affinity for terrorism and male chauvinism. And as yet another analogous example, the forced assimilation (following an even more forthright genocide) of Native Americans in the United States over the past few centuries holds similarities with Henry’s and England historical enterprises as well.

Many interpreters of Shakespeare’s work, such as Peter Erickson, continue to prefer to describe Henry’s conquest as the “anxious pursuit of fame,” to focus on the ways that “Henry V’s character is problematic” and comprised of “an exterior view and an interior view,” and to be quite comfortable with the fact that “*Henry V* has often been considered official art geared to patriotic ideology” (Erickson 13). On the other hand, some scholars, like Baldo, delineate the specific ways in which “the play quietly subverts Henry’s rhetoric of remembrance by building a case for Henry and his nation’s debt to forgetting” (Baldo 135). Erickson asserts that “the central thrust [of *Henry V*] is not an insistence on harsh parody, but rather a demonstration that Henry V is, in a poignant way, ordinary and fallible” (14). Erickson does note that Shakespeare purposely inflates Henry’s image and presence only to promptly undercut it with the play’s many “smaller-than-life characters”:

This context of peripheral characters affects our impression of Henry V by creating an uncertain relation between magnitude and pettiness: pronounced asymmetry make us feel uneasy about Henry V's ostensible grandeur. The external contrast between the king and the "clowns" is a technique for suggesting an internal dynamic of inflation and deflation within Henry's own rhetoric. (Erickson 14)

However, for Erickson and many other critics, it is Henry's hero journey and "character development," not his rhetoric and its many implications and consequences, that are of primary interest and importance. "The crucial point," he writes, "is that Henry V's identity is not already achieved, but is shown in the process of being formed" (17), and thus we can remain satisfied with readings that use Shakespeare's great skill for displaying complexity to merely promote their own anti-pluralism and "campaigns of forgetting" all else.

While Erickson is interested in the way in which "Henry V's language communicates a tense battle between the merciful and the punitive" and how "the king's anguish is genuine" (18-19), Baldo traces Queen Elizabeth's hopes for the repossession of Calais and draws parallels between *Henry V's* King Charles' comment on Crécy—"Our too-much-memorable shame" (2.4.53)—and Elizabeth's desire to either conquer non-English lands and people. "Toward the end of a long reign preoccupied with retrieving England's last Continental possession," according to Baldo, "Shakespeare's Henry fulfills Elizabeth's dream of repossession, accomplishing what Elizabeth and Essex failed to do by either political or martial means" (Baldo 137). Baldo's use of historical texts that are loosely contemporary with Shakespeare's life illustrates the investment that Shakespeare likely had in writing plays that, subversive or not, would remain

palatable to his financiers and the ruling power structure. In addition to alluding to the investment in, and desire and justification for, the imperialism and colonialism that England has long nurtured, Baldo's analysis is concerned with the particulars of how a nation-state repeatedly invents itself through selective memory:

That the formation of a national identity is at least as much based on forgetting as on remembering was articulated by nineteenth-century French historian Ernest Renan in a lecture title "What is a nation?" delivered at the Sorbonne in 1882. . . . Since unity is achieved only by coercion and bloodshed, according to Renan, a national narrative inevitably has its origins as much in the will to forget as in the will to preserve or remember. And it is largely what the collective consciousness of a nation has forgotten that binds it together . . . But a people must not only forget; they must also forget the very processes of forgetting that, according to Renan, make it a nation. *Henry V* continually reminds us of the communal amnesia that helps to produce and support the sense of nationhood. (Baldo 141)

It is perhaps a testament to Henry's (and Shakespeare's) rhetorical prowess that Henry, as Baldo notes, "is willing to jettison the entire public rhetoric of nationhood when it gets in his way politically, as it does at the moment of entry into a dynastic marriage with France" (142). In addition to outlining the ability to self-invent and impel "processes of forgetting," Baldo points out some of the many references in *Henry V* to controversial political events that would surely resonate in the memories of Elizabethan audiences. Going on to examine the duke of Burgundy's advice to Henry in Act V,

For maids, well summered and warm kept, are like flies at Bartholomew-tide: blind, though they have their eyes. And then they will endure handling, which before would not endure looking on. (5.2.296-300)

Throughout his analysis of the play's "national debt to forgetting," Baldo observes that the seemingly bizarre and anachronistic inclusion of the duke's reference (in a play set in 1415) to the massacre of Saint Bartholomew, "an event that took place in 1572" and "one of the most notorious bloodbaths in history," is particularly representative of *Henry V*'s utility and intention in exposing the "debt to forgetting" that leaders and nationalist ideologies require:

Its evocation in the midst of Shakespeare's greatest speech about peace seems far from accidental, especially given a wider pattern of memories surfacing at moments that seems politically inopportune, alternately for Henry and for Elizabeth. In 1599 a character's innocent reference to Bartholomewtide becomes a prophecy of slaughter and of war, calling on an Elizabethan audience to summon its powers of forgetting, challenging it to forget the unforgettable, but remind it of nothing so much as the very processes of forgetting. . . The play is a minefield of counter-memories prepared to detonate and to disrupt the appearance of a unified public memory. (Baldo 143)

Terence Hawkes' previous description of the British campaign in 1918 to encourage its people to feel allied with the United States against Germany is a particularly fitting illustration of Baldo's comments on the ways in which nations and leaders use memory as a "moveable battlefield" to ignore some memories (British-American wars and conflicts) while fixating upon other attributes (a common language and imperialist nature) that for the moment suit their purpose.

For Baldo, *Henry V* “confirms that power can usually get away with forgetting a great deal, suppressing any public memory that might challenge it, so long as it wears the cloak of remembrance, as Henry does throughout the play” (134). Janet Spencer likewise observes that Henry V shared key characteristics with Alexander the Great, and points to Henry’s characteristic penchant for flouting any and every rule as a matter of course:

Dear Kate, you and I cannot be confin’d within the weak list of a country’s fashion. We are the makers of manners, Kate. (5.2.269-271)

Spencer demonstrates, through *Henry V* itself as well as parallel examples of Alexander and King James I, that whether the thing being conquered, or shaped to fit powerful people’s desire, is a woman, a custom, a country, a law, or a race, Shakespeare’s *Henry V*, if looked at closely, speaks “a dangerous knowledge about the origins of power” (Spencer 177). The nature and history of these origins, for Spencer, closely resemble the fabrications of race and nation that are so insidiously embedded into collective consciousness, memory, and ideology, to the extent that they often become transparent. While she refrains from saying so explicitly, Spencer would seem to agree with Richard Levin’s assertion that Shakespeare’s portrayal of Henry as the “mirror of all Christian kings” (2.0.6)—a line critics sympathetic to Henry are fond of using, with or without irony—is intended by Shakespeare to serve as little more than “an apparent or surface meaning (usually explained as a sop to the less intelligent members of his audience)” (Levin 134).

Having had enough of exposing the fabrication of an English “man of letters” through Sir Walter Raleigh’s inimitable rhetoric, Terence Hawkes ends his essay on somewhat different note, emphasizing the importance of avoiding the

search for some “universal” meaning or identity, whether in Shakespeare or all literature, whether in a nation or a race. After examining various examples of Raleigh’s detractors, Hawkes cautions readers, interpreters, and “inventors” of Shakespeare against becoming like Raleigh ourselves: “for the truth. . . is that the world is not, shockingly, unitary or English in its meanings and does not always agree to be read as it were” (Greenblatt 42). Forging a path between the two poles of the politicization of literature and its isolation as purely aesthetic, Hawkes falls prey to neither absolutism, acknowledging the relevance of both while emphasizing the danger of falling into either one:

Nor should we allow any notion of an ‘essential’ or ‘stable’ Shakespearean text, which can only be read in a particular way, to mock Sir Walter’s shade. My point is not that he was engaged in any illicit importation into Shakespeare of extraneous political considerations in that, beyond those, there lies a comforting, unchanging, permanent Shakespearean play to which we can finally turn. Shakespeare’s texts always yield to, though they can never be reduced to, the readings we give them: their plurality makes Walter Raleighs of us all. As a result, his 1918 ‘politicized’ reading of *The Tempest* is no isolated aberration. We should remind ourselves of the propaganda function of Olivier’s film reading of *Henry V* (financed by government sources) which served as a prolegomenon to the D-Day landings in Normandy in 1944. (Greenblatt 42-43)

Part III

My own reading of *Henry V*

My own reading of *Henry V* will demonstrate areas in which the audience of *Henry V* is ardently implored to view neither a rabbit, a duck, nor a rabbit-duck, but rather a very complex situation that demands critical thought rather than the relatively simple, uncritical, visceral, and binary reaction that the play is often alleged to elicit.

The Chorus itself serves as an additional layer of depth and perspective to the play, and a unique venue for further interrogation of the “just cause” arguments employed by warlike leaders that is the primary “traffic” of *Henry V*’s stage. Robert Lane’s description of the commoners in the play—“as the king’s interlocutors (4.1) they articulate a probing skepticism” (Lane 27) that exposes Henry’s evasions—applies also to the Chorus. An interlocutor as well as a fellow audience member, the Chorus displays quite the opposite of the explicit skepticism of commoners like Williams and self-consciously encourages the audience members to use their imagination to view events in a specific way. Further, as Peter Erickson observes, the “regular alternation between the Chorus and the dramatic action formalizes the discrepancy between their perspectives” (12). This duality of explicit encouragement and subtle coercion cuts both ways: an audience member can share in the Chorus’ excitement, but the dialogue and action of the play’s actual characters often undermines any potential purity of emotion that the Chorus might inspire.

For example, when the Chorus refers to Henry as “the mirror of all Christian kings,” an audience can immediately read this dubious acclaim in

many ways. First of all, of course, this grandiose appellation can be ingenuously taken as many (likely Christian) readers and writers have in the past: that Henry really is a kind, just ruler and a virtuous Christian. He is acting by divine sanction: not only at the prompting of the Archbishop of Canterbury and the Bishop of Ely, but by the will of divine providence, as so many English and European conquerors, settlers and explorers had done before for him and would do after him, so that different nations might “cease their hatred” and “plant neighbourhood and Christian-like accord / In their bosoms” (5.2.337-9). As Ely declares, “The blood and courage that renowned” Henry’s noble ancestors “runs in [Henry’s] veins” (1.2.118-9), whereas France holds its land only “with opening titles miscreate” (1.2.16) that were “usurped” (1.2.95) from Henry’s family. As Exeter will later demand of King Charles, France must “lay apart / The borrowed glories that by gift of heaven, / By law of nature and of nations, ‘longs to him [Henry] and his heirs” (2.4.78-81). Thus, Henry is bringing unity and good Christian rule to the disrespectful and illegitimate French.

Secondly, the “mirror of all Christian kings” description could be taken pejoratively, based on the blood-drenched history of Christian conquest. Shakespeare and his audience were likely well aware of at least some of the ways in which rape, violence, and slaughter had been enacted in Christ’s name, in their recent and distant past. Moreover, it is hardly unthinkable that any audience, Elizabethan or otherwise, also possessed at least one or two real and personal experiences of some aspect of the often-deadly and rapacious nature of Christ’s followers—be they clergy, aristocracy or laymen. Whether subduing fellow humans of a different ethnicity or language, like the Welsh, Irish, and Scots,

burning witches, punishing criminals by whips, torture devices, or hanging, the name of Christ was often invoked as an endorsement of the given action.

Finally, then, the Chorus' famous appellation can conceivably be read at least two seemingly oppositional ways. However, like much of Shakespeare's language, both interpretations, taken by themselves, seem to be a gross oversimplification. Although very little about Shakespeare's personal life (not to mention identity) is agreed upon completely, it is at least clear that he was a writer who reveled in witty puns, clever wordplay and multiple meanings. Thus it is hardly surprising that even in rhetoric of the play's exuberant "narrator" we find a multiplicity of venues and directions available for further investigation. For now, let us end this admittedly very short and incomplete list of possibilities of meaning for the Chorus' "mirror of Christian kings" line by one more possibility: that in referring to Henry thus, the Chorus was being both serious and facetious, deliberately accosting the audience with words that defy facile categorization. As I hope to show elsewhere, if Shakespeare did indeed have a definite agenda common throughout *Henry V* and the rest of his work, political or otherwise, it was to provoke not just profound and complex feeling in his audience, but above all, profound and complex **thought**.

A second but related example of the multifaceted effect of the Chorus in *Henry V* is the word choice and tone that the Chorus employs. With a carefully calculated humility typical of not only Shakespeare but Plato, the Chorus highlights the "bending" author's "rough and all-unable pen" (5.0.1-3), the gross inadequacy of the stage to confine mighty men, and the vital importance of imagination to the unique multisensory experience that is theater. Conveniently including the possibility for theater to refer to leaders' rhetoric and political

actions as well as to the experience within the playhouse itself, the Chorus routinely presses the audience to use its imagination to the utmost. It describes battles as well as plots of treachery, and much has been said regarding its apparent patriotism, or at least fawning admiration, of Henry in particular. For example, in 4.0, on the night before Agincourt, the Chorus implores us to imagine Henry roaming his army camp, his bounteous cheer, goodness and majesty bringing light to all the fearful, suffering, and war-weary English:

Upon his royal face there is no note
 How dread an army hath enrounded him;
 Nor doth he dedicate one jot of colour
 Unto the weary and all-watchéd night,
 But freshly looks and overbears attaint
 With cheerful semblance and sweet majesty,
 That every wretch, pining and pale before,
 Beholding him, plucks comfort from his looks.
 A largess universal, like the sun,
 His liberal eye doth give to everyone,
 Thawing cold fear, that mean and gentle all
 Beholding him, as may unworthiness define,
 A touch of Harry in the night. (4.0.35-47)

Much has been made of the fact that the above imagery conveniently paints a ruthless, invading king and warlord, in effect, as a supernatural and infinitely beneficent being: like the sun, like divine providence, like a friend in time of need, like the beginning of spring, and like a deity—in particular, like Christ. Similar to much of Henry’s own language, “We are in God’s hand, brother, not in theirs”

(3.6.168), “We are no tyrant, but a Christian king” (1.2.241), and “I am coming on / To venge me as I may, and to put forth / My rightful hand in a well-hallowed cause” (1.2.291-3), the Chorus’ description of Henry does indeed liken him closely to a righteous and benevolent, if sometimes wrathful, deity.

However, interpreters of Shakespeare rarely note the irony and vast room for discussion provided by the Chorus in the few lines following the above much-discussed description of Henry. Directly after the seemingly affectionate elegy, the final lines of the Chorus threaten to undo its encomium altogether by imploring the audience to exercise its intelligence and careful discrimination in “minding true things by what their mock’ries be” (4.0.52-3). A reading of this line as a reference to the inadequacy of theatrical representation makes sense, but the statement also lends itself quite well to the themes of power, subversion, ceremony, violent rhetoric, and real violence that pervade the play. In addition to reminding the audience of Henry’s repeated use of the word “mock” in his pride-wounded, machismo-fueled threats to the Dauphin—in so many words, “this is what will be done to you and your land for insulting my masculine pride and youth with a gift of tennis balls”—the audience is also reminded of the initial reason for the war: the greed of the Church and the thirst for glory and legitimacy of the monarchy.

The audience is thus prepared for the forthcoming debate in 4.1 where Henry, like any effective politician, repeatedly provides the soldiers with dazzling but disingenuous evasions of responsibility. In response to the facile loyalty that Bates exhibits and believes will “[wipe] the crime of it out of us,” Williams, tapping in to the same Christian mythology that Henry himself capitalizes on,

paints for the audience one of the play's many disturbingly graphic portraits of what is at stake in any conquest:

But 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 a battle shall join together at the latter day, and cry all, 'We died at such a place' – some swearing, some crying for a surgeon, some upon their wives left poor behind them, some upon the debts they owe, some upon their children rawly left. I am afeard there are few die well that die in a battle, for how can they charitably dispose of anything, when blood is their argument? Now, if these men do not die well, it will be a black matter for the King that led them to it – who to disobey were against all proportion of subjection.
(4.1.129-40)

In response to such an excessively vivid and prolonged dwelling upon the gruesome specifics of war and responsibility, it is easily conceivable that King Henry could have responded by attempting to convince the soldiers of the justice and rightness a cause so noble that “we happy few, we band of brothers” (4.3.60) would so joyfully give their lives for it. Instead, Henry launches into series of explanations in which he assiduously tries to clear leadership of any responsibility whatsoever. This highly dishonorable, clever, and effective sort of discourse continues to refute, in the minds of many supporters of modern wars of conquest, most any present-day Williams who is brazen enough to give voice to his qualms, and has been concisely captured in Robert Lane's unusually forthright 1994 *ELH* essay on “Class, Character, and Historymaking”:

The king's initial response is disingenuous, comparing the innately murderous enterprise of war with accidental death while traveling. He then

deflects attention to the pre-existing, sinful condition of his soldiers, ignoring the moral cloud that hangs over war itself since, as Williams has pointed out, the conduct required of soldiers so squarely violates the ethical code for acceptable social behavior. Finally, Henry audaciously grafts his military enterprise onto a scheme of divine justice: “War is [God’s] beadle, war is his vengeance” (4.1.29). But the utopian picture of war as the instrument for meting out justice is contradicted both by the repeated incantations of the slaughter of innocents noted above, and by the outcome of this battle itself: the young (and unarmed) boys are treacherously killed. (Lane 29)

Thus the Chorus sets the stage for a scene in which the audience sees a leader employ alluring ingenuity and rhetoric in an elaborate attempt to elide responsibility for, and especially scrutiny of, a war that has been (as the audience knows), manufactured by the at-any-cost avarice of clergymen and an insecure young man with something to prove. Much has been made of the Chorus’ glowing praise of the Henry in 4.0, imploring the soldiers to cry “Praise and glory on his head!” (4.1.30-40) and claiming that Henry’s “cheerful semblance and sweet majesty” warms and comforts everyone who sees him. Less acknowledged, however, is the fact that only minutes after the audience experiences these grand words, they are promptly deflated by Williams’ blatantly subversive, almost treasonous challenges to the king himself—ironically, in disguise. And as Lane observes, the nagging discomfort that Williams’ words, and their close proximity to the Chorus’ praise, stir up in the audience continues on throughout the rest of the coming battle and afterwards, undercutting Henry’s rhetoric and making him hard to admire:

Anticipating Williams' understandable resentment, Henry then tries to buy him off with money (4.8.39-61). But this soiling of Henry's triumph persists with the presence of the bitter Williams on stage throughout the body count that certifies the English victory. (Lane 30)

While this is hardly the only way to read the scene, it should demonstrate the plurality of many possible readings and underline the simple and modest claim that Shakespeare is certainly not encouraging, through the Chorus or elsewhere, his audience to take anything simply or at face value. Whether Shakespeare was politically for or against a certain ruler, nation, or ideology is not only unknowable but immaterial. But he clearly is, at very least, an aficionado of the use of language to embody multiple meanings, and in *Henry V* he dramatizes and exposes to our view the ways that language is used to control and direct minds into supporting just causes as well as unjust ones.

In addition to a stunning exploration of how language and rhetoric are used to distract and deceive the masses during wars of conquest, *Henry V* vividly demonstrates how they can also be used to justify other common wartime behavior, such as the rape and pillage of a town and the vindictive execution of prisoners of war. Henry's blaming of the destruction of Harfleur on its own inhabitants is a prime example of the way leaders must displace responsibility onto those against whom they are waging their military attacks. Shakespeare makes clear the clever hypocrisy of Henry's rhetoric by making him appear beguilingly diplomatic and cool-headed in some scenes and utterly monstrous in others. To the French ambassador's fear of the consequence of "freely rendering" the unwelcome words he has been charged to deliver, Henry coolly and magnanimously replies "We are no tyrant, but a Christian king, / Unto whose

grace our passion is as subject / As is our wretches fettered in our prisons”

(1.2.241-3). Later, Henry will once again mask the bloodthirsty nature of his hostile enterprise with an appearance of leniency and noble restraint. In response to Fluellen’s report of the robbing of a church, Henry replies:

We would have all such offenders so cut off, and we here give express charge that in our marches through the country there be nothing compelled from the villages, nothing taken but paid for, none of the French upbraided or abused in disdainful language. For when lenity and cruelty play for a kingdom, the gentler gamester is the soonest winner. (3.6.108-14)

In a such a dazzling display of admirable Christian charity, genteel self-restraint, and almost Eastern wisdom—compare Taoist philosophy to the last line above—Henry does indeed seem to embody, as he has often been described over the four hundred years since the play’s production, an “ideal monarch,” even a “mirror” or paradigm of what a Christian king should be. However, once again Shakespeare takes great pains to prevent the audience from remaining comfortable in their admiration of Henry by interposing throughout each act just as many, if not more, examples of Henry’s ability to play the casually murderous tyrant as well as the clement Christian.

At the siege of Harfleur, for example, the audience learns that Henry, when it suits his purpose, can be equally poetic when laying out in painstaking detail what he will cause to be done to the town’s inhabitants if they refuse any longer to give themselves up to Henry’s “best mercy”:

For as I am a soldier,
A name that in my thoughts becomes me best,
If I begin the batt’ry once again

I will not leave the half-achievéd Harfleur

Till in her ashes she lie buriéd. (3.3.85-9)

If Shakespeare were truly at all interested, as many have alleged, in portraying an ideal, or even merely admirable, English monarch, it stands to reason that he might well have left Henry's threat at that. However, he devotes not one or two, but some **thirty-three** additional lines to an extensive, harrowing, detailed inventory of the full extent of the destruction that awaits Harfleur if it continues to resist the English army. A partial sampling of these lines will serve to illustrate the brain-splattering, maiden-raping, and infant-skewering that this Christian king will freely sanction when offended by a present of tennis balls (recall that "soldier" is the name that Henry feels becomes him best):

the fleshed soldier, rough and hard of heart,

With conscience wide as hell, mowing like grass

Your fresh fair virgins and your flow'ring infants.

What is't to me then if impious war

Arrayed in flames like to the prince of fiends

Do with his smirched complexion all fell feats

Enlinked to waste and desolation?

What is't to me, when you yourselves are cause,

If your pure maidens fall into the hand

Of hot and forcing violation?

What rein can hold licentious wickedness

When down the hill he holds his fierce career?

. . . look to see

The blind and bloody soldier with foul hand

Defile the locks of your shrill-shrieking daughters;
 Your fathers taken by the silver beards,
 And their most reverend heads dashed to the walls;
 Your naked infants spitted upon pikes,
 Whiles the mad mothers with their howls confused
 Do break the clouds, as did the wives of Jewry
 At Herod's bloody-hunting slaughtermen.

(Henry V 3.3.91-121)

To consider anyone capable of such a speech when their cause is actually solemn and just is discomfoting. But to witness such detailed threats directly after witnessing, as the audience has, the reasons for Henry's attack on France, is nothing short of appalling. However, many critics are less disturbed. Dollimore and Sinfield calmly characterize Henry's threats to Harfleur as a "disquietingly excessive evocation of suffering and violence" (226), while Erickson views Henry's "need to spin the verbal web which will justify and capture the heroic identity he is enjoined to possess" (Erickson 17) as understandable and even necessary.

Viewing Henry's brutal words as extending to the sexual realm as well, Norman Rabkin finds that the "sexual morbidity" of the speech "casts a disquieting light on the mute but unmistakable aggressiveness of his sexual assault on Katherine in the fifth act" (292). Be that as it may, the repeated example of Henry's charm *and* ruthless cruelty should at least demonstrate that Shakespeare is engaged in an endeavor slightly more complex and serious than portraying ideal monarchs, "mighty men" (5.0.3), or even rabbit-ducks. As Stephen Greenblatt observed in 1980, Shakespeare enjoyed using theater's privileged status as "a

primary expression of Renaissance power,” as a vehicle through which he could carefully provoke “radical doubt” (455). According to Greenblatt, the Henry plays “can be seen to confirm the Machiavellian hypothesis of the origin of princely power in force and fraud, even as they draw their audience irresistibly toward the celebration of that power” (436). While Greenblatt’s claim that the *Henriad* outlines the “force and fraud” is believable enough, his second assertion, like the work of many other critics, fails to acknowledge the probability that when experiencing Henry’s above monologue, for example, an audience would be filled with anything but “celebratory” feelings, and thus far from being “irresistibly drawn” to the celebration of Henry’s power or enterprise.

As all the above criticism has hopefully demonstrated, there are many diverse and conflicting views on *Henry V* despite the truth of Norman Rabkin’s (and many others’) observation that critics tend to fall into only two tensely-divided camps. The complexity and variation of *Henry V* criticism itself lends further support to the view that throughout the play Shakespeare is not merely trying to “dare” or “shock” his audience into thinking or feeling one particular way or supporting one particular ideology. Instead, as I will demonstrate in more detail in the next chapter, he continually sets the audience up to be possibly tempted toward one pole or view, and then directly undercuts that structure through stark differences in class, rhetoric, tone, and setting. In doing so, Shakespeare constantly prevents the possibility of the comfortable satisfaction that a particular ideology provides, encouraging an audience instead to carefully and critically think about the sophisticated rhetoric, “ceremony,” and spectacle that its leaders employ in order to wage and justify war and conquest.

Part IV

Conclusion

The fact that audiences have been reading *Henry V* so simplistically for so long is not unrelated to the fact that leaders like Henry continue to manipulate western countries into engaging in similar colonial wars of aggression. These seemingly innocuous readings diminish the play itself and minimize its many useful connections to the present. When Norman Rabkin coolly declares that *Henry V* “repeatedly elicits simple and wholehearted responses from its critics, interpretations that seem solidly based on total reading of a consistent whole” (279), he remains unconcerned with the possibility that these “simple and wholehearted responses” might have serious consequences in the real world. Even as he goes on to expose such responses as misguided or overly simplistic, he seems wholly oblivious to the effects of oversimplification, and the parallels that such simplified readings have in the realm of politics and the way modern leaders gain the support of their constituents. The sustained oversimplifying of a play like *Henry V* can expose the **interest** that western audiences continue to have in believing that their nations’ aggressive imperialism has really not been such a bad thing. The traditional, often fierce debate over whether Henry is a tyrant or a hero has consistently evaded the more crucial question of how closely the clever rhetoric he utilizes in his enterprise in France resembles the rhetoric used by western leaders today to wage their own imperial enterprises.

In order to garner support from his constituents, Shakespeare’s Henry declares two rationales for his invasion of France. First, there is the claim that by his noble birth Henry has the right and perhaps duty to claim what is rightfully his

(and thus England's). The historical England at the time of Henry V did have a long history of at least partial presence in France and ancestral claims to various territories such as Aquitaine and Calais. However, Shakespeare's fictional account highlights the very nonfictional occurrence of leaders waging war for three reasons that are far less justifiable: because corrupt clergy sold their careful manipulation of obscure Salic law to an insecure leader, because a young king's pride was wounded by a gift of tennis balls, and because there is nothing like war for unifying a nation and distracting attention from domestic troubles ("As Henry IV advised his son shortly before his death, "Be it thy course to busy giddy minds With foreign quarrels" (2 *Henry IV*, 4.4.344-5). That the territory in question contains a group of people with a completely different language, culture, and identity matters not at all. In fact, it may well make the endeavor that much easier, taking into account the ease with which a people's ignorance of something foreign can be exploited and turned into support for righteous aggression. Intoxicated by greed and desire, Europeans after Henry's time would soon either conquer, enslave or exterminate the inhabitants of the African and American continents with the same Manifest Destiny mentality.

Like readings of *Henry V* that promote the English fantasy of valiant taking-what's-rightfully-ours, the conveniently similar misreading of another complicated text, the Christian Bible, would aid in this endeavor by soothing any guilt by allowing Europeans to believe that they were merely doing God's work, nobly dispensing to savages the unquestionably good and basic human necessities of civilization and Christian salvation. As Shakespeare's Henry joyfully exclaims upon the massacre of some "ten thousand French" (4.8.78) at Agincourt, "O God, thy arm was here, / And not to us, but to thy arm alone / Ascribe we all" (4.8.104-

7). A Christian king is a mighty and fearful thing, not only in terms of brute force, but in his ideology and rhetoric as well. As Exeter describes Henry to King Charles, “in fierce tempest is he coming, / In thunder and in earthquake, like a Jove” (2.4.99-100). And as the Christian bishops wisely note at the outset of *Henry V*, their new young king is “a true lover of the holy Church” (1.1.24) and an expert at turning the terrible clamor of war into a stirring song:

List his discourse of war, and you shall hear

A fearful battle rendered you in music;

(1.1.44-5)

Thus, the official, divinely sanctioned “readers” of the Christian Bible are well aware that their new leader is ripe for the plucking, for the testing of his mettle in a Christian cause, an ideal vehicle through which to prevent their earthly treasures from being taken from them. In the words of Canterbury, Henry is “in the very May-morn of his youth,” and “ripe for **exploits** and mighty enterprises” (1.2.121, emphasis added). In addition to discrediting the church, *Henry V* thus outlines the ways in which leaders use “spiritual” language and ideology in their rhetoric to attempt to frame their endeavors as just and as natural as Christian order. As Dollimore and Sinfield have observed, “the Archbishop’s readiness to use the claim to France to protect the Church’s interests tends to discredit him and the Church, but this allows the King to appropriate their spiritual authority” (Drakakis 221).

Henry’s other reason for the French conquest is secondary but equally noteworthy—put simply, vengeance. While nowadays leaders often prefer to alert their citizens that something “constitutes a threat to our way of life” (e.g., traveling in our own individual cars), the utility of revenge is perennial in framing a war of

aggression as a war of self-defense. The thirst for revenge is one of the most base and visceral human urges, and conveniently, there are many alternative, more palatable labels to decorate the term for most any occasion: reprisal, retaliation, retribution, sanction or punishment, to name just a few. As Robert Lane has observed, it has always been important for western leaders to describe their wars not only as divinely just and sanctioned by Christianity, but “thrust upon the leadership by external circumstances” (29). Discussing the nighttime army camp scene in which Williams painfully details “all those legs and arms and heads chopp’d off in a battle” (4.1.135-6), Lane observes that

The task for political leaders who urge war is to sanction this carnage, and secure obedience to marching orders, while disclaiming personal responsibility: in official rhetoric war is never a private project, subjectively motivated, but thrust upon the leadership by the most compelling of external circumstances, typically the insupportable conduct of the enemy in violation of the rights of the nation or its allies. (Lane 29)

Thus, regardless of what little historical claims England may or may not have had for parts of France, Shakespeare’s explicit portrayal of the reasons for Henry’s invasion spotlights corruption, “private projects,” and subjectivity far more powerfully than any Congressional committee’s report has done in the United States. To highlight the hypocrisy of Lane’s “official rhetoric” in no uncertain terms, Shakespeare makes careful use of words like “mock,” “Christian,” and “vengeance,” having them spoken in two very different ways, and in different scenes and contexts throughout the play. His own King Henry, after an eloquent delivery of some forty lines of seething vituperation and copious threats of the

“wasteful vengeance” (1.2.282) that the French have brought upon themselves by their gift of tennis balls, adds, almost as an afterthought:

But this lies all within the will of God,
 To whom I do appeal, and in whose name
 Tell you the Dauphin I am coming on
 To venge me as I may, and to put forth
 My rightful hand in a well-hallowed cause. (1.2.289-93)

In this way a very obviously emotional, subjective reaction to a personal affront is dressed up as impartial, inexorable government policy. Well aware that force alone is never enough, and being the “true lover of the holy Church” (1.1.24) that he is, Henry wisely and repeatedly peppers his threats and rhetoric with carefully selected terminology that his Christian constituents will connect to. Henry must get his allies and enemies alike to believe something quite similar to Stephen Greenblatt’s account of the necessity of the “dawning Indian fear of the Christian God”:

As Machiavelli understood, physical compulsion is essential but never sufficient; the survival of the rulers depends upon a supplement of coercive belief. The Indians must be persuaded that the Christian God is all-powerful and committed to the survival of his chosen people, that he will wither the corn and destroy the lives of savages who displease him by disobeying or plotting against the English. We have then a strange paradox... (439)

Throughout “Invisible Bullets,” Greenblatt uses several examples to illustrate ways in which language, especially writing that professes to be historical, can pierce through human minds as deeply as a real bullet can tear into flesh and bone.

It is easy to deplore imperialism's more obviously physical and tangible manifestations: slavery, torture, police brutality, bloodshed. It is harder but equally crucial to locate the figurative bullets that are part and parcel to the physical damage, filling in holes with its cement.

The "strange paradox" for Greenblatt is that Harriot's endeavor was testing a hypothesis about the potential for governments or nation-states to control minds along with physical land and bodies:

Harriot tests and seems to confirm the most radically subversive hypothesis in his culture about the origin and function of religion by imposing his religion – with all of its most intense claims to transcendence, unique truth, and inescapable coercive force – upon others.

Not only the official purpose but the survival of the English colony depends upon this imposition. This crucial circumstance is what has licensed the testing in the first place. . . (Greenblatt 439)

Likewise, it is by professing the mere "doing of the will of God," who wants him rightly crowned and given a unified and English-governed France, that Henry can effect his conquest not merely of his physical, literal enemies, but more importantly, of the hearts and minds of his countrymen and of readers and interpreters of his life for centuries to come. As Henry to Kate, so Christ to his church, so the man to the woman, and the "I give you dominion over the earth and its creatures" speech of God to Adam in Genesis.

Greenblatt sees *Henry V* as containing a "genuine and radical" subversion that is actually "contained by the power it would appear to threaten" (McDonald 439). Similarly, critics who keep the play's power contained by their lukewarm language and associations prevent the (wholly positive) lessons it possesses from

breaking free of academic analysis into the world at large, remaining just subversive enough to be interesting but not enough to get messy or spill over into real life and real connections that would mean a lot to modern audiences. *Henry V* is not, like Harriot's *Brief and True Report*, "a continuation of the colonial enterprise" (Greenblatt 439). Greenblatt does not claim that it is, but the sequestering of his analysis within the realm of mere "paradox" prevents his extremely learned and powerful observations from finding purchase anywhere outside the isolated realm of academic, literary criticism—a puzzling anomaly to be wondered about but not applied to its many obvious modern parallels.

The Algerian theorist Louis Althusser has declared that many modern governments have little need for **physical** repression because they have slowly replaced it with mental, ideological repression. As in the case of the U.S. history, a government that professes to be for the people, by the people, has been incredibly successful in keeping its constituents entertained enough to secure their support for enterprises that coincide with "national interest" and are often brought to fruition by a modern aristocracy and clergy. For example, paradoxically, many American Christians today are proud to observe that their government is secular. Like Greenblatt's and Althusser's subversion asserting itself only to reaffirm and strengthen the original established powers, many modern Christian Americans do not even attend church regularly. However, they do vote, and understandably are quick to sympathize with what they are used to, the types of leaders brought up with good Christian values.

Furthermore, the ever-delicious sense of salvation around which Christian ideology revolves allows a *Henry V* audience to sympathize with Henry even more than usual due to his reputation for a prodigal and wayward youth. In addition to

the “ceremony” soliloquy in 4.1 where, not unlike Christ in the garden of Gethsemane, we poignantly witness “the king’s anguished experience of himself (Erickson 13), the bishops’ reminder of Henry’s previous human failings in Act I taps in to the affection for Henry that the audience recalls from the two parts of *Henry IV*. It is fitting that the two characters who remind the audience explicitly of Henry’s prodigal past are clergymen, whose business it is to grant absolution and redemption. Moreover, the idea of religion as a **business** or industry is deliberately highlighted by the bishops’ baldfaced demonstration to the audience of a deceitful duality not unlike Henry’s—publicly, their principal concern is helping people to attain salvation, virtuous living, and the Christian heaven, but privately, what worry them most are their material possessions and assets, “the temporal lands which men devout / By testament have given to the Church” (1.1.9-10). Further, that their intentions in causing Henry to invade France are monetary and materialistic is also intended to ground the rest of the play’s events for the audience right away. Thus, despite the hesitant and ambivalent readings of many interpreters of *Henry V* over the years, the play itself does not hesitate, from its very outset, in frankly criticizing the ideology and power structure that its own society has always revered and held most holy.

Drawing on imagery of the King’s body as a physical human and an entire encapsulation of nation-state, Canterbury observes that, fortunately for all of England, at Henry’s father’s death, “Consideration like an angel came / And whipped th’offending Adam out of him, / Leaving his body as a paradise / T’envelop and contain celestial spirits” (1.1.29-32). Not unlike the feelings of celebrity worship that modern Hollywood inspires, a *Henry V* audience can feel privileged to witness the touching intimacy of a royal sovereign pondering ideas of

justice, culpability, and the nature and utility of ceremony. The audience can forgive Henry's sanctioning of the killing of prisoners of war, the skewering of infants on pikes, the murder of the elderly and the rape of young girls by allowing themselves to be charmed by the aura of a most-of-the-time Christian that Henry continually embodies. Henry has sinned in his past, but his offenses have been whipped out of him by maturity or angels, and he is now a sanctified vessel through which "celestial spirits" can work their manifest destiny, their divine providence. In all the archbishop's years of experience with confession and Christian reform, he tells Ely, he has never witnessed such a rapid, complete and utter transformation (through God's grace):

Never was such a suddn scholar made;
 Neer came reformation in a flood
 With such a heady currance scouring faults;
 Nor never Hydra-headed wilfulness
 So soon did lose his seat – and all at once –
 As in this king. (1.1.33-8)

As Henry to the French, so conquerors to the wayward and less civilized: "this could be you!"

Shakespeare's *Henry V* holds such strong and urgent relevance to Americans today for many reasons. First and perhaps foremost, like the common soldier Bates' ingenuous assertion in 4.1 that "our obedience to the King wipes the crime of it out of us," many U.S. citizens console themselves by shrugging off responsibility for their leaders' actions. Heedless of the grim reality of what they are actually supporting, genuinely patriotic and well-meaning citizens daily

consume limited resources channeled directly from the countries over which their leaders maintain a careful and often brutal supremacy.¹

Many such citizens even proudly purchase and advertise symbols of their support—manufactured in China, of course—for the enterprises that their leaders tell them, despite whatever the cost, are vital to maintaining either world order or American interests, or both. Thus, for many of us, it is enough to know that our leaders, like Henry himself, share the same language, ethnicity and dreams of glory, and profess to share the same religion. As Bates declares before Henry and his fellow soldiers, whether a leader’s “quarrel [is] just and his quarrel honorable” is not only more than we know, but importantly, “more than we should seek after. For we know enough if we know we are the King’s subjects” (4.1.122-6).

Thus *Henry V* undermines the unquestioning ideology of submission found in Christianity, Islam, and many other religions. For critics such as Norman Rabkin of equal interest is Henry’s “effervescent young manhood” (285) and the way in which it manages to charm friends and foes alike. Others, like Lane, Dollimore and Sinfield are careful to point out the amount of bloodshed, terror, death and destruction (not to say rape and pillage) that resulted from that charming young manhood’s reaction to the Dauphin’s sophomoric, locker-room-style “mock.”

¹ In March of 2006, several U.S. soldiers, bored of whiling away time during the long and difficult “Operation Iraqi Freedom” by practicing their golf game, decided to rape a fourteen-year-old Iraqi girl they had seen at a local checkpoint and then murder her and her family. According to military reports, the soldiers took turns on the girl. The killing of the family was originally reported to be the work of insurgents. Elsewhere, abuse by the U.S. military of Iraqi prisoners at places like Abu Ghraib has similarly grotesque. While these are extreme examples, they are still fairly representative of some of the gruesome side effects to which the majority of Americans choose to turn a blind eye, preferring the solace and simplicity that the binary logic of their seemingly straightforward leaders provides.
<http://www.guardian.co.uk/Iraq/Story/0,,1839522,00.html>

Rabkin sees “the promise of a green world” at *Henry V*’s end, despite the Chorus’ final words and despite what audiences then and now knew about the actual history. Meanwhile, Dollimore and Sinfield observe that, unlike the sources he used such as Holinshed, Shakespeare omits from his version of the story the fact that Henry’s gruesome threats were indeed enacted historically. At the same time, they note that in omitting the sack of Harfleur, Shakespeare was not engaged merely in glorifying English machismo, in dressing up history to be more palatable for his audience and his financiers, or in perpetuating a British aristocracy with a “deluded and mystifying ideological fantasy” (225). Surely these reasons are not altogether absent, but Dollimore and Sinfield rightly highlight the power of Henry’s rhetoric in his threats to the citizens of Harfleur to be “disquietingly excessive.” It is unlikely that any audience, whether conservative or liberal, Elizabethan or modern-day, would hear the above speech with patriotism and relish in the idea of babies “spitted upon pikes” by the “blind and bloody soldiers” when they’re done “defil[ing] the locks of your shrill-shrieking daughters” (3.3.114-8).

Strangely, Dollimore and Sinfield observe this way in which “the play dwells upon imagery of slaughter to a degree which disrupts the harmonious unity towards which ideology strives” (226) in the same essay in which they proclaim that “it is easy for us to assume, reading *Henry V*, that foreign war was a straightforward ground upon which to establish and celebrate national unity” (215). Like Norman Rabkin, their analysis concludes with a not uncommon expression of interest primarily in Shakespeare’s ambivalence—“Shakespeare was wonderfully impartial on the question of politics”—as well as a slightly more novel assertion that “the ideology which saturates his texts, and their location in

history, are the most interesting things about them” (227). Meanwhile, current events throughout the world today continue to testify to the unsurpassed importance of a deeper, more intimate understanding of how ideology saturates not only Shakespeare’s texts, but the “texts” upon which modern military aggression is based. *Henry V* is one especially useful text that could, with more careful attention and analysis, expose the grave consequences of interpreting texts and current events alike in a single, homogeneous way.

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