

# The movie 'Henry V,' or, why the British elites despise Shakespeare

by Renée Sigerson

Over centuries, the literary legacy of William Shakespeare has successfully inspired exceptional qualities among persons who have helped to shape the political battle for the good. We are about to review a currently popular movie version of Shakespeare's play *Henry V*. Let us take this obvious fact—the influence of Shakespeare's method of composition in fostering the advancement of mankind—as the solid terrain, from which to judge this performance of a Shakespeare play.

*Henry V* was exported to the United States in 1989-1990 by the British production group headed by actor Kenneth Branagh, and in recent months has become a relatively popular household video item. Even those who have enjoyed the movie, to the extent that they have compared it with Shakespeare's original text, admit that the producers made limited efforts to present the composer Shakespeare's original intent. The film is—at best—an example of what is called "director's theater," in which the audience is treated not to a strict presentation of the composition, but overtly, to a *director's interpretation* of the work.

The movie makes King Henry V's development, and his military victory at Agincourt—that is, the *plot*—the focus of the play. How different that is from Shakespeare's method, in which the plot is rather a vehicle to render the processes of thinking of the viewer to the status of subject, we shall see in short order.

We take the view that, at best, the film is an artistic failure; and, at worst, something more pernicious, namely, an example of British cultural warfare aimed at English-speaking populations. Particularly dating from the 1963 U.S. debut of the Beatles, the British establishment has waged continuous cultural warfare on American territory. This effort has aimed at cementing bonds, both politically and emotionally, within the Anglo-American dominions. British cultural exports have targeted whatever inclinations might persist among Americans toward rigorous scientific method—for which Shakespeare's plays are such wonderful examples—to trigger instead romanticized biases, and muddled thinking.

Let us consider three things to situate criticism of this film. First, let us consider the *American* relationship to Shakespeare—as it might also potentially be viewed by high-level British circles. Then, let us review the *Henry V* play as

written by the author, Shakespeare. Finally, let us consider the method of presentation of the latest movie performance. The approach should suffice to show why it is in our interests to use the highest standards whenever judging performances of Shakespeare's works.

## Who is Shakespeare?

*Henry V* is one of a set of eight Histories, in which the intellectual giant William Shakespeare recounts England's political crises during a war with France that lasted 100 years. In these plays, Shakespeare poses what are clearly the most compelling questions facing mankind: What is meant by just war? How is history shaped to advance or devolve? What is the role of the human individual—that microcosm of the entire universe—in shaping the process of history? How does one build a lasting nation-state?

Now: what is occurring in the world today? The United States, and other nations, are entering into a time of unparalleled crisis. As the crisis advances full force, sections of the American population—for whom English is a primary language—suddenly exhibit a heightened interest in Shakespeare's plays. This should not be surprising. For Shakespeare, undoubtedly, is the greatest genius in the use of the English language—the Dante Alighieri of English—whose lasting spiritual influence upon English-speaking populations is potentially massive.

As was seen in the past 18 months in China, East Germany, Czechoslovakia, Lithuania, and other locations on this planet, when a nation is plunged into upheaval, its citizens will suddenly seek poets, philosophers, musicians, and talented intellects to step forward as their leaders. The "man on the street" will become somewhat less pragmatic and the troubled citizen will seek out from his nation's history, as well as from the people around him, figures of vision and spiritual fortitude, to help nurture strength within himself to combat the onrushing turmoil. The persons, alive or from his heritage, he will suddenly want to associate with, are precisely those he believes should be able to articulate the struggle he witnesses within his own heart, persons whom he earlier tended to brush off as mere "dreamers."

It is from this standpoint that William Shakespeare's gift to humanity in the form of his empyreal literary remains, is a strategic asset. What is the capacity of the American

population to overcome the flood of troubles which have erupted? Is there anything in Shakespeare's method of composition which might *enhance* the capacity of the American population to respond to this crisis?

This is what is important about the American view of Shakespeare. Now, the next level of the problem enters in: Unfortunately, there are *two* Shakespeares—the first is the true Shakespeare, the other is something else.

### What is Shakespeare?

The true Shakespeare is a Beethoven-like master of human creativity who survives in the form of the texts he left behind. In two life-or-death points in American history—the American Revolution and the Civil War—this true Shakespeare helped to inspire qualities of exceptional statesmanship in the ranks of America's political leaders.

The second Shakespeare is something else, a personality which never existed in real life. We might name this fellow "Brand X." Invented by the cultural mavens working for the British ruling elites, Brand X *borrow*s from Shakespeare's literary remains to appear credible. However, the texts presented in Brand X versions of Shakespeare are heavily edited, usually with large cuts, not only of scenes, but also of the flow of dialogue, entirely misrepresenting what Shakespeare is saying. Additionally, actors trained with Brand X scripts usually insist upon methods of enacting Shakespeare which are ridiculously at variance with the master's concept of beauty and the human mind.

Whether or not a dramatic performance is an honest attempt to present a great classical work of art, or a violation of the composer's intent, is almost never a matter of opinion. There are scientific criteria around which such judgments need to be formed, if classical art is to ever have any meaning at all.

### Socratic method and history

*Henry V* documents how one of the only English monarchs ever to be embraced by his people, wins a miraculous military defeat over French forces, despite massive French superiority. In respect to the rest of the historical plays, it is constructed much in the way Ludwig van Beethoven composed his late String Quartets. Conceptual and dramatic material introduced in earlier plays are picked up again and then developed from a different standpoint. The various elements of the drama relate as do the elements of a double fugue—each element working independently upon the totality, towards the end of a transfinite principle to which all the elements are subsumed. Though *Henry V* would hardly be viewed as ranking with Shakespeare's greatest plays, it is certainly no trivial work; there is no element of the composition which is arbitrary, or introduced simply to fill up space.

The play opens with a Chorus—a character who does not appear in that same way in any of the earlier plays. The Chorus appeals to the members of the audience to arouse

their powers of imagination. He aims to raise the audience above the individual elements of the play, to gain a unifying idea of the totality.

Then the play proper begins. Two officials of the Church come onto the stage. They are greatly troubled, for the Congress has reactivated a plan to expropriate most of the Church's holdings. The Archbishop has a plan. The young King Henry is a friend of the Church. Before his coronation, he had been a notorious rake, associating with lower class thieves and rowdies. But, Henry has matured since becoming King, and has also been betrothed to the princess of France. The plan is the following: Henry believes he has a strong claim to also become King of France, which France rejects. The Archbishop proposes that the way to protect the Church's holdings is to have Henry launch war against France, to win the neighboring throne, and at the same time, yank the momentum away from under the effort to seize the Church assets.

Is this plan evil? It would certainly seem so; but if that is the case, then Henry is evil for going along with it. So, let us consider: Is there anything legitimate about England's claim to the French throne? A lengthy presentation is given by the Archbishop to argue that to be the case.

Shakespeare deliberately fosters ambiguity on these questions, an ambiguity which should hang over the entire drama. The question will come up again: Does Henry have the right to do what he is doing? These questions then become the basis for lawful dramatic tension. To permit that, the dialogue of the Churchmen must be acted succinctly, perhaps a combination of fear and impotence rather than sinister power-wielding, since the question should go unanswered for the viewer.

War is irreversibly provoked when the French prince sends an insulting message to Henry by courier. Act II begins. The scenes are short, and different types of personalities enter in quick succession. The effect of the stark shifts is similar to that of musical counterpoint, a type of writing in which Shakespeare excels.

First, we meet some of the soldiers—none other than that group of bandits around Sir John Falstaff who were Henry's old friends. Then, Henry and some of his officers abort an assassination attempt on Henry's life. The assassins include one of his best friends. We also are directly introduced to the French court, where the arrogance of a declining royalty is shown by the contrast between the prince and his father. Three levels of human experience are established: the common people, who in some cases, are lovable, but very brutalized; the officials of the state from the Church and the court; and the kings.

The stage shifts to France. The French King refuses to enter the first battle, and throws the castle of Harfleur to Henry. Henry nobly orders his troops not to pillage—but we are reminded that his troops are not always so noble. A page to the soldiers becomes sick to his stomach when ordered by his masters to pickpocket from other soldiers.

Then, an entirely new musical element is introduced. The scene shifts to a room in the French palace, where the Princess Katherine, Henry's betrothed, is with her maid. Katherine does not yet know about the war; she and her maid are practicing English vocabulary in preparation for the move to England. The scene is truly witty; it makes us reflect that there may be more humor to be sought in the play than we may have first believed. The introduction of English-French dialogue sticks in the mind as a form of musical/poetic counterpoint. This device will return, and whenever we hear French and English in one dialogue, we will think back to the Princess.

More musical contrast: The next immediate scene shows the French command, which in contrast to the Princess, is crying for war following the defeat of Harfleur. The commanders know that the French are massively superior in number, and that Henry's ranks have been weakened by disease and bad weather, but the mood of revenge silences all thought of diplomacy. The countdown to Act IV, the highpoint of the drama is on.

Everything said until now about this play was necessary to properly situate what is about to occur. We are about to witness the unfolding of a miracle. It occurs—because Shakespeare was an extraordinary poet—through a series of dialogues that presage the way a double fugue functions in a musical composition. Following a kind of overture, a non-verse dialogue with the soldier Williams, Henry delivers in quick succession three addresses: a semi-monologue, a monologue, and then a speech before the troops, which in their unified totality are the double fugue towards which the entire composition has been directed.

Henry knows his troops are terrified, after months of attrition and faced with French forces 20 times their size. He shows no outward fear, but he must find a way to their hearts. The night before the battle, he dons a cape to hide his identity, and walks among the troops, inviting them to tell him what they are thinking. As an overture, the soldier Williams poses the question which brings us right back to the beginning of the play:

"But if the cause [of the war] 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'; . . . I am afeard there are few die well that die in a battle; . . . Now, if these men do not die well, it will be a black matter for the king that led them to it, whom to disobey were against all proportion of subjection."

The overture thus begins. Henry answers but when the soldiers leave, he is overtaken by the deepest anguish, and fear. This is not fear of his own death, it is terror of the burden. Why must he be accountable, when each of these men is individually accountable to God for his sins? What is the difference between a king and the other men, whom he refers to as slaves? He protests: Only ceremony makes him

different than ordinary men. There is a pause, he is interrupted in his thoughts by his officers. The second monologue then begins. He directs his words to God, whom he refers to as "God of battles!" He seeks a very personal atonement. He asks forgiveness again, for his father's murdering of the prior King. Following this atonement, as morning comes, he stands before the troops, delivering the address, the "feast of Crispin," where he puts them all into the hands of Providence, and rallies them: They require "not one man more" to stand up to the French; "We few, we happy few" will win the battle.

The miracle occurs: Ten thousand Frenchmen are killed, only 29 from Henry's army and he is declared the victor. There are many more scenes; but of those most important we cite the two remaining French-English dialogues. The only battle scene which Shakespeare incorporates is a dialogue between Henry's old tavern friend, Pistol and his captured French hostage. As usual, all that Pistol cares about is ransom money. And, at the close, the King formally proposes marriage to Katherine. Again, the scene is in French and English, and Katherine speaks what becomes later a very important question: "Is it possible dat I should love de enemy of France?" It is part of Shakespeare's genius that although his histories of England were tragedies, they were never humorless.

### Change and no-change

The genius of Shakespeare was his mastery of Socratic method. It is understandable why many think that the subject of the drama is Henry's development—particularly, if it is acted in the bombastic fashion characterized by the recent movie version. But, this is not really the case: for, although Henry changes, *England does not*. Shakespeare tells us that, again and again, using a contrapuntal approach to show us how the population can be aroused, but it is not being educated. The Chorus in fact says at the close, referencing Henry's marriage with Katherine:

Henry the Sixth, in infant bands crown'd King  
Of France and England, did this king succeed;  
Whose state so many had the managing,  
That they lost France and made his England bleed. . . .

The transfinite subject to which the play is addressed is something only hinted at in the play; namely: the Christianization of Europe. Shakespeare wants you to ask yourself: Are these Christian nations? If not, why not? Shakespeare is using the method of many dialogues of Plato; it is the method of posing the transfinite by showing, negatively, what it is not.

Henry changes, but in a way recently addressed by Lyndon LaRouche, in an extraordinary book on scientific method, written in prison, entitled *Project A*. (*Project A* appeared in full in *EIR*, Oct. 26, 1990.) Examining the problem of scientific warfare against the organized forces of tyranny, LaRouche writes:

"In both science and politics, the object is to increase the per capita power of society to exist and develop. . . . Which set of underlying political principles, notions of the nature of God, man, and nature in general, guide us to form some practice which corresponds to an increasing power of mankind over nature, and the increasing security of a society. . . . It is on the second level, of changes in axioms and postulates, at least implicitly, to the purpose of increasing the per capita power of man and society, that our attention ought to be primarily focused, rather than on the inferior level of the simple response to judging of simple experience. . . .

"This involves also, as we have already indicated, the case in which an event has occurred, which is anomalous, and which thereby would tend to require an overthrowing of existing sets of axioms and postulates, at least implicitly so. But . . . we refuse to recognize the aspect of the event which represents this challenge. . . . *So, even though a change might seem to be required by the anomalous event, no change occurs.*"

This is exactly the process Shakespeare illustrates. The beauty of the play is the "Mozartian" quality of the poetic counterpoint in which this is done, a quality which was tremendously violated by the recent movie production.

What is said here was perfectly understood on a very high level by Shakespeare's devoted admirer, Friedrich Schiller, the German 18th-century poet and dramatist. In his most mature period, Schiller wrote a sequel to *Henry V*, the drama *Joan of Arc, Virgin of Orleans*, which picks up chronologically exactly where *Henry V* ends. Joan of Arc accomplished for France what Henry did for England, a miracle, but of even greater miraculousness. It is in Joan of Arc that we find the transfinite principle of the Christianization of Europe addressed *positively*, for Joan is a commoner—namely, she is transforming the population—who models herself upon the Virgin Mary. The tie to Shakespeare's play is explicitly shown by the scene in which Joan momentarily falls in love with an English officer, and is plagued by her flaw in "loving the enemy of her country." That she does change the world in behalf of Christianity is shown by the fact that she—in contrast to Princess Katherine—rejects all carnal love for sainthood.

It is from the vantage point of these considerations that the movie version of *Henry V* is, put simply, a fraud. The worst aspect is the use of a cheap background soundtrack to create artificial emotional effects. If one simply reads the play while watching it, you find that the script is substantially chopped up from Shakespeare's original; and, the pornographically gory battle scene—a major part of the movie—is a substitute for the French-English dialogue between Pistol and his hostage, which is never shown.

Typical errors are the use of electronically amplified stage whispers in entire dialogues—such as the opening scene of the two Churchmen—to blur what is being said. And: The casting of the St. Crispin's Day address with a Wagnerian

*leitmotif* repetitiously droning in the background is unbearable. The real music is the *contrast* between the three statements of the "fugue"; the soundtrack overwhelms this musical poetry.

In sum, one is driven by the production to focus entirely upon Henry. This is a rigid linearity, which has nothing to do with the genius of Shakespeare. Even if one thinks that the movie conveys how a determined handful can shape history against great odds, such a view must still be compared to Shakespeare's—not the movie's—treatment of the Battle of Agincourt. Shakespeare is hard, very hard, on England's flaws; this is no "good guys vs. bad guys" presentation of reality. The Agincourt account is undoubtedly based on some chronicle of British history. It is invalid to judge Shakespeare's view of that until one has considered—in *Henry VI*, the *sequel* to this play—Shakespeare's scathing treatment of the miracle of Joan of Arc. Unlike his admirer Schiller, Shakespeare does *not* present Joan as a heroine, but rather painfully puts both British and French in a critical light, to force the viewer—who must now *become the statesman*—to conceptualize the solutions to the crisis presented.

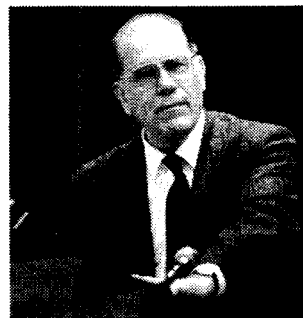
If the effect of this film is to arouse viewers to read the original Shakespeare histories, then the film will have done no harm. But, it must be recognized as another modernistic distortion of Shakespeare's method.

*'From the prison in which the politician's career expires, the influence of the statesman is raised toward the summits of his life's providential course. Since Solon, the Socratic method has become the mark of the great Western statesman. Without the reemergence of that leadership, our imperiled civilization will not survive this century's waning years.'*

—Lyndon H. LaRouche, Jr.

## IN DEFENSE OF COMMON SENSE

by Lyndon H. LaRouche, Jr.



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