Metanarrative Functions of Film Genre in Kenneth Branagh's Shakespeare Films

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Strange Bedfellows

By

Jessica M. Maerz

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INTRODUCTION

"The best actors in the world, either for tragedy, comedy, history, pastoral, pastoral-comical, historical-pastoral, tragical-historical, tragical-comical-historical-pastoral, scene individable or poem unlimited" (Polonius, *Hamlet* 2.2.379-382).[1]

In Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, Polonius compliments the players who have come to Elsinore on their skill in performing a wide variety of popular dramatic genres. More deeply, though, his particular meta-dramatic comment serves to make a critical point about early modern playwriting and the range of generic experimentation it embraced. Shakespeare's approach to genre was extraordinarily fluid. While continental theatrical practice and playwriting idealized the Neoclassical style, a heavily regimented style that demanded, among other things, generic purity, early modern English writers were exploding dramatic form and exploring generic boundaries. Not limited by the classical dramatic genres of comedy and tragedy, the English playwrights combined these modes within their plays, and developed new genre styles like the chronicle/history play and the romance. Thus, the plays of the early modern English period, and those of Shakespeare in particular, are marked by a free approach to genre, a fluid style that expresses itself in genre mixing and new genre development. As Jean Howard writes:

The early modern period was one of intense generic theorization and experimentation. This was partly due to widespread interest in imitating and surpassing classical models. [. . .] But while writers within early modern culture were very aware of a literary system dominated by the rules of "kind" or genre, at first blush the public stage does not seem a very classically oriented or rule-governed institution. Any notion of a strict "system" of dramatic genres must, in the context of this particular stage and its practices, be modified to take account of the experimentation, the collaborative production, and the competitive commercial pressures fueling dramatic production. (300)

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[1] Throughout this text, quotations from Shakespeare's plays are from the 1997 Norton Shakespeare edition, a text based on the Oxford edition and edited by Stephen Greenblatt, Walter Cohen, Jean E. Howard, and Katharine Maus.

The generic freedom of this period's playwriting, particularly regarding plays written for the public stage, is, as Howard attests, inextricably linked to the commercial enterprise of the public stage. Shakespeare was not, as we have come to imagine, the solitary genius laboring in loneliness; the playwriting process of his period was more akin to that of contemporary screenwriting. The early modern playwright worked in an essentially commercial venture, often a collaborative one, and was governed by the conventions and strictures of the marketplace. Indeed, it is not merely the mode of production that links Shakespeare's writing to the work of the modern screenwriter, but also the dramaturgy his plays employ, as Corliss asserts: "Shakespeare, who laced his plays with big fight scenes, multiple murders, romantic bantering, and plenty of slapstick, was an ace screenwriter" (Rev. of *Much Ado* 65). That Shakespeare's plays could be considered filmic is unsurprising to contemporary critics; as Aitken claims, Shakespeare's plays are "fully concordant with [the] narrative model" of classical Hollywood cinema: [2] "They employed extensive psychological characterization, dramatic action, and forceful visual imagery. They also employed a narrative structure in which an initial harmony was first disrupted, then, through the progressive resolution of contradictions and dilemmas, finally (if not fully) resolved" (261). And as for non-critics, it is as a "screenwriter" that most contemporary audiences gain their first exposure to Shakespeare.

In recent years, the production of filmed Shakespeare has proved to be one of the most highly visible and volatile sites of Shakespearean negotiation, and Kenneth Branagh stands at the center of this trend as Shakespeare's most persistent and prominent adapter. Although his filmography as writer, director, and actor is substantial and varied, Branagh's Shakespeare adaptations have been the source of his primary reputation and success. To date, he has directed five of the plays as full-length film adaptations, ranging in a seemingly random pattern across the chronological and generic divides of Shakespeare's canon, with *Henry V* (1989), *Much Ado About Nothing* (1993), *Hamlet* (1996), *Love's Labour's*

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[2] Throughout this study, my use of the terms "classical cinema" and "classical Hollywood cinema" is influenced by David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson's theory of the dominant mode of narrative film production. It is classical "because of its lengthy, stable, and influential history"; it is Hollywood "because the mode assumed its definitive state in American studio films" (*Film Art* 108). As Bordwell and Thompson are quick to point out, however, this mode of production is not tied to specific geographies or chronologies; this is a mode of production employable by any country, at any time (*Film Art* 108).

Lost (2000), and *As You Like It* (2006).[3] Branagh has positioned himself as his generation's primary producer of "quality" filmed adaptations of the Bard's work, both leading and answering the call for such works in the film industry's marketplace. The explosion of filmed Shakespeare adaptations since 1989 is directly attributable to Branagh and the success of his *Henry V*, yet his particular formula for transposing the Shakespearean text into the film medium has not been copied by the adapters that have followed him.

Samuel Crowl remarks of Kenneth Branagh's adaptation style that "Branagh's route beyond Olivier, as a British-trained Shakespearean who makes films, lies in his fascination with popular film culture, with what we have come to call 'Hollywood'" ("Flamboyant" 224). While Crowl correctly asserts that Branagh's approach to the Shakespearean text is critically influenced by commercial modes of film production, he does not identify the particular *kind* of "Hollywood" that Branagh evokes. Through his Shakespeare films, Kenneth Branagh has outpaced Olivier, Welles, and Zeffirelli with the number of films he has produced. Branagh's conceptual approach to Shakespearean adaptation, however, as well as his style, differs substantially from that of even the myriad filmmakers he has inspired. It is precisely Branagh's reliance on primarily *classical* genre styles as metanarrative devices that contrasts his approach to that of his contemporaries in Shakespearean production. As we will see, the classical generic appeal in Branagh's films is one that grows progressively, becoming incrementally more critical to his Shakespearean adaptations as Branagh's career progresses.

In his article "We Are the Makers of Manners," Burnett proves that he is one of few theorists who realizes the evolutionary nature of Branagh's Shakespeare film career when he claims that the films "can only be properly understood when discussed as a corpus" (83). Burnett further asserts that

> As Branagh's Shakespeare films have progressed, they have developed in scope and crept steadily into the present. That is, they have taken on increasingly imaginative conceptual templates in the same moment as they have embraced more contemporaneous time frames. (89)

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[3] *As You Like It*, a coproduction with HBO that was screened principally on that TV network, functions as something of a coda—a reprise of the major four-film cycle—to Branagh's Shakespeare film career, and is therefore treated as such in this study.

Burnett (correctly, I think) appeals to a "progressive" understanding of Branagh's Shakespeare work, noting the increasing sophistication in Branagh's directorial concepts. Later in his article, however, Burnett claims that "Branagh has gravitated to the filmic examples of his own moment" (102). As we will see, the defining characteristic of Branagh's Shakespearean corpus is not that it appeals to contemporary film styles (i.e., those "of his own moment"), but rather to styles which predate his work by several decades. The films do indeed become more contemporaneous in their physical settings (a trajectory from *Henry V*'s vague medievalism to *Love's Labour's Lost* between-the-wars setting); however, as the films *progress* in the currency of their settings, they *regress* in the context of their generic influences (and, coincidentally, in their critical and financial success).

Alongside these progressions, certain patterns and tendencies are available across the films; among Branagh's "auteurist" traits are his refusal to "play Shakespeare" in a truly contemporary idiom, his insistence on multinational casts comprised of American film stars and classically-trained British actors, and his reliance on a core acting company and production team. Divergences and disunities in his canon are equally prevalent, however; his work shows no particular engagement with one Shakespearean genre over another, and his erstwhile reputation as a "straightforward" adapter of Shakespeare is complicated by the extra-textual additions that figure prominently in the films. His relationship to the "Shakespearean original" is in continual flux. Highly cut and reordered comedies (*Much Ado*) compete with (the simulacrum of) the full-text *Hamlet* for status as "the Branagh approach."

Critical response to Branagh has been similarly disunifed. Samuel Crowl, in *Shakespeare Observed*, makes the sort of statement that has become typical in discussions of Kenneth Branagh and his filmed Shakespeare:

> Branagh's film [*Henry V*], released in the autumn of 1989, ended the fallow period— stretching back to Roman Polanski's *Macbeth* (1971)—in large-scale English-language Shakespearean films. It was also the first Shakespearean film since Zeffirelli's *Romeo And Juliet* (1968) to reach and sustain a substantial audience and to more than recoup its production costs. It was quickly followed by Zeffirelli's *Hamlet* (1990) with Mel Gibson and Glenn Close, raising expectations that we might be approaching another fertile period in the release of Shakespeare films, perhaps one to rival the glories of the 1950s and 1960s. (166)

The critical commonplace at issue here is in Crowl's linking the success of *Henry V* to the spate of Shakespeare-inspired films that followed it. The implicit assertion that characterizes Crowl's statement, and many others like it, is that Branagh opened the door for similar endeavors, allowing new filmmakers and new audiences an opportunity to contend with the cultural legacy of Shakespeare. A mere five years after Crowl's initial observation, Lynda E. Boose and Richard Burt acknowledge that his wished-for "fertile period" had indeed arrived, noting a "sudden contemporary renaissance in filmed Shakespeare" ("Introduction," 12). In the several years since the release of *Henry V*, however, indications of the critical hesitancy with which many scholars regard Branagh's work also emerged. Boose and Burt attribute this hesitancy to the increasingly thin discursive line between mass art and high culture:

> The media in 1990s America—film, video, television, advertising— seemed suddenly prepared to embrace the Bard with all the enthusiasm (and potentially crushing effect) that such whole-hearted American embraces have come to harbinger for much of the world. Thus the question of potential diminishment that has always been raised about putting Shakespeare on film reappears, reinvigorated by the very technologies that make Shakespeare more accessible. ("Introduction" 10)

Taken together, these statements illuminate the critical dialectic that surrounds most discussion of Branagh's work; either he is responsible for making Shakespeare once again a marketable and bankable commodity, or he is viewed as the epitome of postmodern commercial excess, responsible for the large-scale dumbing-down of the English language's greatest cultural tradition. Both these views are reductive. The discussion of whether Branagh produces "good or bad Shakespeare" necessarily obscures the issue of whether or not he produces "good or bad film."

For many of the directors that we have come to regard as iconic figures in the production of filmed Shakespeare, Shakespeare's status as "high art" has led to "art film" adaptations. This has not been true of Branagh: "He is a child of his times in finding American popular culture— especially as seen on television—as familiar and appealing as British, and in not opposing Hollywood to Shakespeare, but seeing them equally as 'classics.'" (Light 18). In place of a "high art" / "art film" link, Branagh posits a connection between Shakespeare as a "classical" playwright and the "Classical Hollywood" style. This particular use of classical, non-contemporary genre styles, styles that are at a historical remove from a modern audience, ultimately reinforces an "othering" of the Shakespearean

source text, replicating the "foreign-ness" of the Shakespearean text by fostering a sense of temporal distancation in visual and narrative style.

Stephen Buhler seeks to mitigate critical ambivalence by viewing Branagh in the context of his filmic and theatrical forebears. Buhler persuasively locates Branagh within what he calls the "actor-manager" tradition of filmed Shakespeare, with Olivier and Welles, a label that places Branagh within the tradition of Garrick, Macready, Kean, and Irving at the same time that it places him within the Shakespeare on film tradition:

> Even as these actor-managers faded from the stage, their functions were appropriated by actors who were determined to bring Shakespeare successfully to film. Like those of their stage counterparts, the careers of these directors have often been marked by fierce competition (Macready's feud with Edwin Forrest led to the 1849 Astor Place Riots) and by an anxiety towards forebears. Laurence Olivier constantly looks back at the theater; Orson Welles constantly glances at Olivier as a rival claimant to the Shakespearean mantle. Kenneth Branagh attempts to negotiate a separate identity with these formidable predecessors and in opposition to them. [. . .] Branagh has attempted to establish a new order, to revive the actor-manager traditions, to reconcile high art with popular, mass-market audiences. (*Shakespeare in the Cinema* 96; 120)

Buhler's is a compelling and convincing label, placing Branagh in the context of other prominent Shakespeareans of stage and screen who tended to adapt, direct, and star in their own works. It also acknowledges the negotiations present in Branagh's films between those of Olivier and Welles, but ultimately Buhler's contextualization cannot mitigate completely the ambivalence surrounding Branagh. Welles and Olivier are *not* ambivalent figures. Welles is recognized historically as a brilliant filmmaker; Olivier as a brilliant Shakespearean interpreter and actor. Welles and Olivier embody the opposing poles that Branagh's work attempts to navigate.

Generic Shakespeare

One way to produce order from the disorder of Branagh's critical and theoretical reception is to examine Branagh's work in the context of classical commercial modes of film production. Branagh's Shakespeare films are culturally significant works because they attempt to bridge the gap between "high" and "low" culture. As I demonstrate throughout this study of Branagh's major Shakespeare films, this bridge, the link between

textual authority and audience appeal, is genre. Throughout his films, Branagh employs generic conventions as markers through the terrain of the Shakespearean text, terrain that is otherwise unfamiliar to the majority of his intended popular audience. These generic references and structures serve a meta-narrative function: as elements of the films' narrative discourse, they "frame" the source text, bringing with them a network of intertextual codes that render the source text easily assimilable, and thus help to direct audience response. The films, then, are critically intertextual in that the norms of generic production *mediate* the Shakespearean text; in this way, Branagh's Shakespeare films challenge traditional notions of adaptation in that they appeal to multiple (not merely textual) forms of authority. While this meta-narrative function of genre is most obviously apparent in a film like *Love's Labour's Lost*, which not only evokes the musical genre but actually co-opts its classical form and codes, this study seeks to prove that the appeal to generic codes is a prevalent discursive strategy in Branagh's work, even in a film as subtly generic as *Henry V*.

The notion of genre, however, is hardly monolithic. Contemporary film studies recognizes that genre fulfills a wide range of functions, both narrative and extra-narrative. This study will accord with recent film theory in assuming that genre is a multivalent notion. In *The Classical Hollywood Cinema*, David Bordwell, Janet Staiger, and Kristin Thompson discuss genre in terms of formal categories (with respect to their own theories about narrational logic in classical cinema): "Genres are in one respect *certain kinds of stories*, endowed with their own particular logic that does not contest psychological causality or goal-orientation" (20; emphasis mine). Todorov views genre as an interpretive function of audience, appealing to a notion not unlike Fish's "interpretive communities," in defining genre as a "horizon of expectation" (Neale, *Genre* 42). Tudor similarly identifies genre as an audience function, asserting that genre is, in the final analysis, a collection of "conceptions held by certain groups about certain films" (Neale, *Genre* 19). My study primarily follows the approaches of theorists like Rick Altman and Steve Neale, who acknowledge that genres are, on the one hand, a set of categories within which films are "governed" by sets of narrative, formal, and stylistic conventions. Genre is, on the other hand, an industry-determined condition of production, and therefore a *process* with continually contested and negotiated boundaries. As Neale writes, genre is a "multi-dimensional phenomenon, a phenomenon that encompasses systems of expectation, categories, labels and names, discourses, texts and groups or corpuses of texts, and the conventions that govern them all" (*Genre* 2). Genre, therefore, is not merely a quality of a particular film, or

a category in which to classify it. Genre is also a mode of narrative discourse and a frame for audience reception.

Strange Bedfellows, then, takes as its subject the most important contemporary figure in the production of filmed Shakespeare—Kenneth Branagh. With his five Shakespeare adaptations, Branagh has become the most prolific director of Shakespearean films in history, and his work ushered in a sort of "renaissance" in filmed Shakespeare adaptations that continued through the 2000s. Branagh's approach to his Shakespearean source texts, however, is singular in that Branagh's films seek to mitigate the perceived "foreignness" of the texts via cinematic genre. Further, the "classical appeal" of this generic approach separates him from his adapting contemporaries in one crucial way: Branagh is the only contemporary producer of filmed Shakespeare to appeal to wholly *classical* film genres as a metanarrative device. My intention is to examine the ways in which genre (and genres) work in and through Branagh's films.

Chapter One analyzes Branagh's debut film, *Henry V*. With respect to the genre mediation employed, *Henry V* is the most conservative of Branagh's films. Contemporary film practice really has no generic equivalent to the Renaissance history play, for which *Henry V* serves as an example, although Andrew Higson might argue that the category of the heritage film, while not exactly a generic descriptor, provides an appropriate pigeonhole. In some senses, Branagh addresses this generic instability by recasting the film as an "action" film (he presents a climactic battle scene, for instance, that Shakespeare does not). Cogent critical statements on *Henry V*'s generic forebears are, however, few; Chris Fitter's 1991 article "*Henry V*, Ideology, and the Mekong Agincourt" is the most serious attempt to link the film to other popular genres. *Henry V* provides, of all Branagh's Shakespeare films, the fewest overt connections to genre conventions; in place of a singular generic frame, however, Branagh instead reinforces viewer identification with the King through a set of devices common in classical filmmaking.

Much Ado About Nothing, the subject of Chapter Two, is somewhat less conservative, generically speaking. Here, Branagh gestures towards a generic hybridity inherited from his Shakespearean source text: both the play and the film are part romantic comedy, part domestic tragedy, and the endings (primarily in the play) are ideologically unsettling at best. The film does seem, as Crowl notes, to adhere most closely to a particular sub-genre of romantic comedy, theorized by Stanley Cavell as the "Hollywood comedy of remarriage" ("Flamboyant Realist" 230). Further, *Much Ado*

also features some extreme uses of intertextual allusion. Therefore, Chapter Two analyzes such instances as the visual homage to *The Magnificent Seven* (John Sturges, 1960) that opens the film, and the portrayals of the Constables Dogberry and Verges that have evoked, for Crowl, impressions of the Three Stooges in their slapstick comic interactions (Review 40), and for Lehmann, the more on-point allusion to Monty Python's coconut-shell horsemanship (*What 'Ish' an Auteur* 173).

Harry Keyishian's article, "Shakespeare and Movie Genre: The Case of *Hamlet*," examines three versions of *Hamlet* in an attempt to discern their generic forebears; while Keyishian convincingly asserts that Branagh's version exemplifies epic tendencies, the necessary brevity of his analysis does not allow him to address the film's generic tensions. In Chapter Three, I expand on Keyishian's instructive and illuminating discussion of Branagh's 1996 *Hamlet* as Hollywood-style epic. Keyishian points to the film's "epic" length, as well as to its episodic structure and pacing, to shore up his contentions. I also explore the working of generic hybridity in this film text, particularly in attending to the conventions of domestic melodrama that characterizes *Hamlet*'s family relationships.

Chapter Four analyzes *Love's Labour's Lost*; of all Branagh's films, this one presents not only the clearest but also the most fascinating use of genre conventions. With this film, Branagh does not merely recast Shakespeare's play in the form of a film musical, he actually co-opts the narrative conventions and visual style of the pre-World War II film musical. Branagh sets the story itself in the prewar era, yet he also recycles, for instance, the narrative device of the newsreel as an expository tool. The film presents deliberate homages to the visual style of directors like Busby Berkeley; however, it also mirrors the production conditions of that era by eschewing location shooting in favor of transparently obvious studio settings and by employing saturated, vibrant colors reminiscent of Technicolor's glory days.

Branagh's *As You Like It*, as a "straight-to-cable" production, breaks with the industrial practices common to his other Shakespeare films; it also interfaces with Hollywood conventions in an unusual way, which is the subject of this work's Conclusion. Branagh's film is a fairly straightforward adaptation of Shakespeare's play set in 19th Century Japan, a setting that motivates some stunning production design, and creates a well-developed contrast between the world of the court and the world of the Forest of Arden. In this way, the film employs a far less interventionist directorial concept than *Love's Labour's Lost*. Further, unlike its predecessor,

this film is not organized by a pervasive appeal to an individual film genre; rather, it functions as a sentimental coda to Branagh's Shakespearean career.

In his book *Genre and Hollywood*, Steve Neale writes:

> For the most part, intellectuals, critics and reviewers [have] been at best patronizing and at worst overtly hostile to Hollywood and its films—on the grounds that they were commercially produced, that they were aimed at a mass market, that they were ideologically or aesthetically conservative, or that they were imbued with the values of entertainment and fantasy rather than those of realism, art, or serious aesthetic stylization. (10)

Indeed, this is a pervasive criticism of genre films, as well as of the larger Classical Hollywood system which contains them. Such narratives tend to reflect and bolster relatively conservative ideologies; although genre films can indeed be "good," in many senses, they tend not to foster alternative stances. What is most remarkable about Neale's claim, however, is how it seems to mirror much of the available criticism of Branagh's work: replace Neale's terms "Hollywood and its films" with "Branagh and his films," and the result is a statement that might have appeared in any number of critical articles about the filmmaker.

Further, similar ideological criticisms have been leveled against many Shakespeare adaptations. It is striking how similar the rhetoric is against these fields of study, and significant that each field has been, historically, comparatively undervalued. These similarities also point to a larger notion of interconnectedness: all these discourses have been, in recent years, revitalized by various critics and theorists who seek to interrogate the traditional discourse, and to widen the modes of inquiry traditionally afforded by those fields of study. Just as genre theory has, as Neale asserts, undergone a contemporary renaissance (*Genre and Hollywood* 1), so has adaptation theory, as well as the study of Shakespeare on film; significantly, Branagh's work figures largely in nearly all these evolving discourses. *Strange Bedfellows* is designed to examine not only the singular role of genre in Branagh's films, but by extension, the role of film theory in the analysis of filmed Shakespeare.

HENRY V'S BODY GENERIC:
PICTURING THE KING

David Hofstede's book *Hollywood Heroes* catalogues a collection of popular hero figures, tracing their emergence in various, often literary, sources, and recounting their iterations in Hollywood film. Alongside such hero characters as Batman, Captain Kirk, Luke Skywalker, Dick Tracy, and Robin Hood, Hofstede makes an unlikely inclusion: Henry V. Initially unlikely, I should say, for at first glance it does seem incongruous that a great king of England, now better known as a character in Shakespeare's Henriad than as a historical personage, should occupy a space marked out by fictional, populist, largely American fantasy / sci-fi figures. As we shall see, however, Hofstede's categorization presages more than he likely expected. In this chapter, I examine Kenneth Branagh's directorial debut, 1989's *Henry V*, describing the myriad ways in which Branagh mobilizes intertextual and generic references, occasionally even to the above-listed hero figures, to link his King Henry to the Hollywood hero figure. In *Henry V*, Branagh transforms Shakespeare's ambiguous monarch into a familiar figure: a swashbuckling bad boy with a heart of gold, a type drawn directly from well-known generic sources like the Vietnam War film; in so doing, Branagh deploys story and style techniques that refocus the narrative away from Shakespeare's study of kingship as such and force an examination of a King's personal development.

Transmitting Shakespeare

In 1989, Kenneth Branagh's film directing career commenced with the release of his first feature, *Henry V*. For a directorial debut, the film made an impressive showing. A comparatively low-budget film, *Henry V*'s negative cost was $5 million (Jackson, "Introduction" 4); the payoff, however, was huge, both financially and in terms of Branagh's reputation. The film grossed $10.161 million in the US alone and garnered numerous

accolades for Branagh:[1] Oscar nominations for Branagh as best actor and director, as well as an Oscar for Phyllis Dalton's costumes; BAFTA nominations for cinematography, costume, production design, and sound categories, and an award for Best Direction were among the most prominent. The success and warm reception of the film, from both critics and filmgoers, heralded an auspicious beginning to Branagh's career as a film director. Of all Branagh's Shakespeare films, *Henry V* also has had the longest life in academic criticism; although his second Shakespeare film, *Much Ado About Nothing*, would prove to be far more commercially successful, it was Branagh's first film outing that cemented his reputation in the discipline of filmed Shakespeare. It is now by far the most written-about of all Branagh's Shakespeare films.

Branagh's source text, Shakespeare's 1599 *Henry V,* is also a much written-about play, and one of the more controversial of the history plays. The play interacts with history on several levels: it is not merely a recounting of the exploits of a popular king, but as is common with Shakespeare's plays, it references contemporary political history as well (notably, England's preparation for the ultimately disastrous Ireland campaign). Thus, much of the play's discourse about nationhood and ethnic identity reflects contemporaneous tensions about foreign war and foreign policy, as well as an increasing interest in colonial expansion. The controversial quality of the play stems largely from its destabilizing portrayal of one of England's most popular and legendary kings. As Edward Berry discusses in his article "Twentieth-century Shakespeare Criticism: The Histories," critical commentary on *Henry V* is radically divided and divisive: on the one hand, early Twentieth century critics like J. Dover Wilson tend to treat the play as a "great dramatic epic," featuring a rousing portrayal of an ideal king (255). Occupying the opposing front are critics who view the play as a satire; commentators like Harold Goddard observe that Henry is unconvincing both as a person and as a ruler. Contemporary critics tend to merge these positions, following the revolutionary observations articulated by Norman Rabkin in his seminal work *Shakespeare and the Problem of Meaning*. Rabkin explores *Henry V* as a stunning interplay of ambiguities; his reading neither valorizes Henry as a great king, nor excoriates him as a manipulative and cruel Machiavel, but acknowledges that the play simultaneously supports both of these positions (Berry 255). Critical awareness and acceptance of the

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[1] Information on the US gross of the film, as well as international awards, provided by the *Internet Movie Database* at imdb.com.

ambiguities in the Shakespearean text anticipates, in many ways, Branagh's approach to his source text.

Two significant precedents lurk beneath Branagh's treatment. The first, obviously, is the 1944 Laurence Olivier version of the film, regarded as the "definitive" film treatment of the play prior to Branagh's version. The legendary status of the Olivier version was, as Branagh notes in his 1989 autobiography *Beginning*, often cited by potential financiers and insurers in an attempt to dissuade Branagh from undertaking the project: "The film lawyer did not agree [with Branagh's intentions to make the film], and asked many of the questions that would plague us over the coming months—it's been done before, why do it again?" (204). Central, however, to Branagh's conception of his film was the impulse that the pageantry and pro-military propaganda of the Olivier version was somehow incommensurate with the zeitgeist of the postwar world. As Branagh notes:

> For a modern audience, the abiding image of Henry V is provided by Sir Laurence Olivier's famous film version, but the powerful Elizabethan pageantry and the chivalric splendour of that extraordinary movie did not accord with the impression I received as I read the text afresh. To me, the play seemed darker, harsher, and the language more bloody and muscular than I had remembered. Although I was aware of bringing a particular set of post-war sensibilities to bear on my reading, I sensed that a 1980s film version of such a piece would make for a profoundly different experience. (*HV Screenplay* xiii)

The major feature of this "different experience," as Branagh terms it, is his desire to retain a sense of moral equivocation in his portrayal of the King, an ambiguity that the text explores and that Olivier omits. As Branagh describes: "The text indicates a man of doubt who has to suppress his own inner violence [. . .]. I wanted to close in with the camera, to see the unsettled inner man, the flickers of uncertainty in his eyes" (Fuller 3). The uncertainty that Branagh describes here is in part a remnant of Branagh's other primary influence for this film version, the 1984 production of *Henry V* at the Royal Shakespeare Company, directed by Adrian Noble, in which Branagh played the title role (at age 23, the RSC's youngest-ever Henry).

Noble's production sought to be a complete re-visioning of this touchstone text of British nationalism. As Loehlin describes:

> Noble's treatment of war was much harsher and more explicit than previous English productions', emphasizing the brutality and misery of the soldiers, showing Bardolph's execution on the stage, and using an ironic, quasi-Brechtian chorus to undercut the glory. Nonetheless, Branagh's very

> young King remained an attractive figure, shown growing into maturity
> and nobility while learning a grave lesson about the costs of war. (*Henry V*
> 85)

This foundational production lent much to Branagh's interpretation of the
play, in its tonal quality as well as its focus on Henry not as an
unquestionable hero, but as a man as capable of ruthlessness as
magnanimity. Branagh's film version shares other similarities with the
Noble production: the cast, for instance (besides casting himself as Henry,
of course, Branagh imports Brian Blessed's Exeter, Christopher Ravenscroft's
Montjoy, and Richard Easton's Constable from the Noble production) as
well as some textual elements of the adaptation (the on-stage/onscreen
hanging of Bardolph in 3.6).[2] Also significant is the fact that, in addressing
his preparation as an actor for the Noble production, Branagh introduces
the epithet that haunts his own filmic conception of the play: "Dirty
Harry," a reference not only to King Henry's nickname, but, some critics
argue, an allusion to the series of Clint Eastwood films that inform the
tone of his own work, as later sections of this chapter will discuss in detail
(*Beginning* 148).

The story of *Henry V*, that is, the story of the making of Branagh's first
film, is closely aligned with his own entrepreneurial theatre-world
exploits, and is chronicled at length in his autobiography, *Beginning*. After
the creation of the Renaissance Theatre Company (Branagh's attempt to
fashion an "actor's theatre" to stand in direct contrast to what he saw as
the "director's theatre" style of the Royal Shakespeare Company), most of
Branagh's career efforts became wrapped up in the production of this film,
and the latter part of *Beginning* chronicles in great detail the construction
of the script. At least in its early stages, Branagh's film was meant to serve
as a large-scale corollary to the various philosophies about performing
Shakespeare espoused by the Renaissance Theatre Company. Thus, the
film was seen in part as a vehicle to further the Company's notions about
accessibility, popularity, and abiding faith in the innate directorial impulse
of the well-trained actor. Branagh's script attempts to satisfy both the
norms of commercial cinema and the goals of the Renaissance Theatre
Company's "life-enhancing populism" (*Beginning* 197). In some ways, the
film is not merely a corollary, but a logical outcome of the Company's

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[2] Noble, however, was not involved in Branagh's film version, and the only credit
he receives for the film is in a dedication in Branagh's published screenplay and
introduction: "Thanks also to Adrian Noble whose magnificent RSC production of
Henry V was an inspiration to this film version" (*HV Screenplay* vii).

growth; as Branagh notes in his autobiography, "How is intimate acting in Shakespeare shared by lots of people? By making a film of *Henry V*" (205).

Under the influences (overt and tacit) of contemporary criticism, a beloved filmic predecessor, and a celebrated production, Branagh approached his film project with a desire to mirror the ambiguity of the Shakespearean text, determined to fashion a production that revealed the challenges as well as the glories of kingship. Thus, his film, of necessity, gestures towards a polyvocality that is wholly absent from the Olivier version.[3] Freed from the constraints of preparing a text to satisfy propagandistic aims, Branagh's textual approach seeks to retain the overall shape of Shakespeare's text, while aiming for maximum clarity for the audience's sake. For instance, rather than omit entire scenes, Branagh tends to "shave" the text within scenes and attempts to retain meter at all costs. While Branagh does cut some of *Henry*'s more troubling lines (such as the order to kill the French prisoners), he nonetheless tends to incorporate the textual material excised by Olivier.

In general, Branagh privileges cuts that aid in comprehension, in instant audience understanding of the Shakespearean language. In preparing the script for the film version, Branagh notes that:

> [T]he cuts dictated themselves. The more tortuous aspects of the Fluellen/Pistol antagonism, culminating in the resoundingly unfunny leek scene, were the first to go. The double-edged exchanges between Henry and the duke of Burgundy in Act V also, for my purposes, failed to advance the plot, and added little to the aspects of the play that we wanted to explore. Elsewhere, there were trimmings of Elizabethan obscurities, particularly in the language of the Boar's Head scenes, with only the most delicious-sounding phrases escaping sacrifice on the altar of instant understanding. Plot repetitions and excessive flights of rhetorical fancy were ruthlessly excised. (*HV Screenplay* xv)

As this statement demonstrates, as early in his filmmaking career as *Henry V,* Branagh shows awareness of the need to subordinate the Shakespearean

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[3] Olivier's 1944 film version of *Henry V*, famously, was commissioned by the English wartime Ministry of Information. As a "war-time" film, it necessarily presents an unequivocally more heroic view of the King and of war than does Branagh's film. Even that film's dedication references the war cause: "To the commando and airborne troops of Great Britain, the spirit of whose ancestors it has been humbly attempted to recapture in some ensuing scenes, this film is dedicated."

text to the industrial demands of a commercial cinema—a nascent position at this point, but by 2000's *Love's Labour's Lost*, one which becomes the *raison d'être* of his filmmaking practice.

Extra-textual interpolations are another element of Branagh's interpretation that seems to signal a concern for the marketplace through audience familiarity. Such scenes, which are scenes without parallels in the Shakespearean text, are a common feature of Branagh films; the extra-textual interpolations in *Henry V*, however, are unique amongst Branagh's adaptations, as these are scenes culled primarily from other Shakespeare plays.[4] Two such notable scenes feature in this film, included in order to give the audience some understanding of Henry's past with the Boar's Head tavern crew that is so well-documented in earlier portions of the Henriad. As Branagh notes:

> It was important for an audience that might have no previous knowledge of the Henry IV plays to have an idea of the background to *Henry V*, and I wanted to achieve the greatest possible impact from Mistress Quickly's speech reporting the death of Falstaff, a character that the audience would not otherwise have encountered. I constructed this brief flashback from three separate scenes in the Henry IV plays. My intention was to give, in miniature, a sense of Falstaff's place among the surviving members of the Boar's Head crew, and to make clear his former relationship and estrangement from the young monarch. Both this scene and the flashback during Bardolph's on-screen execution help to illustrate the young king's intense isolation and his difficulty in rejecting his former tavern life. (*HV Screenplay* xvi)

While these flashbacks interrupt the overall causal linearity of the plot, they fulfill a larger purpose in service of Branagh's interpretive agenda; as Russell Jackson states, Branagh thought that the flashbacks were "essential to an audience's understanding of the film" ("From Play Script" 28).

Another extratextual addition was planned as a prologue for the film, but did not make the final cut. Jackson notes:

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[4] One technically might argue that Branagh's Agincourt scene is an extra-textual interpolation, since Shakespeare's play did not feature a staged battle. I exclude the battle scene from this discussion, however, since Shakespeare does in fact "plot around" the battle, and vignettes from it figure in the source text.

> [Branagh] decided against the prologue because it would not have been directly useful to the narrative. Included in the original script, this was to have shown a young man (subsequently identified as the King) gazing mournfully out to sea while a voice-over recited lines from *Richard II*: "For God's sake let us sit upon the ground / And tell sad stories of the death of kings…." Branagh felt that it indicated an attitude rather than helping to tell the story. ("From Play Script" 28)

Jackson's vignette about the doomed introductory interpolation intimates important details about Branagh's approach to text, as well as to adaptation. It suggests that Branagh prioritizes a narrative flow of information above textual literalism; plot linearity can easily be sacrificed via flashbacks and interpolations, so long as the information revealed in these interpolations sufficiently advances the narrative. The interpolations are meant to function as aids to audience understanding, and Branagh's statements suggest that he judges them on the basis of whether their service to the narrative warrants an interruption in the narrative flow. As I will discuss, however, many of the film's critics see these interpolations as working in service of Branagh's true agenda for the film, an agenda which ostensibly seeks to personalize the audience's connection with the king, at the expense of the polyvocality the original text offers.

While Branagh's text retains many of the events that were cut by Olivier (the traitors scene of 2.2, as well as Henry's threatening speech to the governor of Harfleur at 3.3), much critical attention has been brought to bear on Branagh's decision to omit Henry's order to his army to kill the prisoners (also an Olivier omission). In retrospect, Branagh regrets making that cut, but insists that it was influenced by his overall approach to textual cutting:

> I think I rather flunked and avoided [the issue], and although I make dramatic sense in the context of our picture, I could have possibly been braver about the way we pursued it and not, as I feared we would, lose the sympathy of the audience for the central character. We definitely embraced the contradictions inside the role, but to make a point in relation to the text (one of which is the cultural/political dimension in which an attitude to text in these films sits), there, I think, I was probably cautious / nervous / cowardly about doing something that might provoke the wrong kind of reaction to the character. (Wray and Burnett, "Horse's Mouth" 172)

Thus, while Branagh's film has been much lauded in criticism for "restor[ing] the cuts, and thus the honesty, giv[ing] us a credible, pained, demotic Henry, and an Agincourt that will not hide from us that war is

hell" (Fitter 259)[5], *Henry V* is not as "complete" an adaptation as one might want.

Documents related to the development of Branagh's film reveal that the metanarrative function of genre was always central to Branagh's conception of the project. Interviews conducted at the time, Branagh's autobiography and film journal, and the shooting script itself testify to the fact that Branagh conceived of the project, even in a nascent stage, in generic terms. Early in the development of the film version of *Henry V*, Branagh approached the project convinced of its filmic potential. His conversations with potential backers always focused upon the play (and script's) accordance with the norms of popular cinema:

> I sold [. . .] the concept as enthusiastically as I could—my (unsurprising) view of the play as being tremendously "filmic," with an exciting linear plot, short scenes, great structural variety and several different strains of narrative providing a rich mixture of low-life sleaze, foreign sophistication, romance, action, philosophy and humor. (*HV Screenplay* xiv)

Thus, Branagh not only approached the piece at an early stage confident of the text's adherence to the norms of Classical Hollywood Cinema; he also uses generic descriptors like "romance" and "action" to couch his perception of the piece.

Branagh states that he conceived of the film as a "political thriller, as a detailed analysis of leadership and a complex debate about war," a statement that links his treatment to three genres—the thriller, the hero-centered action film, and the war film. Further, as he notes in an interview, "I want people to feel that *Henry V* is of the same world as *Batman*—that it, too, is 1989" (Light 19), referring to the Tim Burton film released in the same year. Indeed, this reference may betray more about Branagh's strategy than even he realized, as both films depict ambiguous titular heroes whose desires organize the plot.

Branagh's screenplay for the film also reflects some of this generic consciousness, often revealing a desire to couch the Shakespearean action within a metanarrative generic framework. For instance, in the screenplay's first act, Branagh describes the atmosphere of the King's council room, wherein several gathered nobles accompany the King as they listen to the Archbishop's "briefing" about the Salic law, as "tense

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[5] This is not, however, Fitter's position, as I will discuss at length later in the chapter, but rather his analysis of preceding criticism.

and conspiratorial" (3), and like a "meeting of Mafia chiefs with the young King uneasily in charge but betraying little of his nervousness" (7). This brief generic reference to gangster films metanarrates the otherwise oblique discussion of Salic law, allowing the viewer to understand that the King is being "tested" in the presence of older warriors who may not always behave honorably. In the production diary for the film that accompanies Branagh's autobiography, he also describes the clerics' scene as being crucial for establishing the tone of the early part of the film. He aimed to present "a conspiratorial political mood; an unfriendly palace and a dark world beyond" (223). He notes also that he wanted the scene to "feel like a documentary" (223), a description which coincides with Branagh's general approach to Derek Jacobi's Chorus (at this early stage in the film, the only other central character we have seen).

While *Henry V* was pitched, developed, and marketed with generic correspondences in mind, Branagh's first film is the least fully generic of his Shakespeare adaptations. Rather, Branagh's practice in this film is more intertextual—borrowing visual allusions and making homages to films (and film types) that encapsulate the tone he intends to communicate in particular shots—than it is strictly generic, though the insistent focus on the King in Branagh's adaptation and visual style forces an identification with the "hero king" not unlike that of action-adventure films. The development of a monogeneric approach does not appear until later in the Branagh canon; at this early stage, as we will see, Branagh's use of genre as a metanarrative device is more inferential.

The Generic in Criticism

One of the central and most persistent features of critical writing on *Henry V* is the identification of Branagh's intertextual allusions and visual homages. As Samuel Crowl notes, Branagh's "imagination works like a magpie, stealing good ideas from others but linking them in surprising and original ways. [. . .] When it comes to film, Branagh has the courage of his conventions" ("Flamboyant" 222-223). Particularly with Branagh's first film, critics have taken great pleasure in identifying and theorizing these borrowings. Taking a cue from Branagh's much-quoted statement that "*Henry V* is of the same world as *Batman*," several critics have analyzed the film, in particular Henry's first entrance, in the context of this allusion (Seidenberg 62). For instance, as Shaw notes, "Branagh makes a grand shadowy entrance, silhouetted in an archway long shot with his cape extended like Batman—a latter-day heroic figure who similarly emerges

from the darkness to battle the enemies of his community" (123). Other critics, however, perhaps following Pauline Kael in her review of the film, see in the very same entrance the working of a different allusion: Darth Vader. Kael uses this image to support her assertion that Branagh is a "flamboyant realist" with an "appetite for theatrical excess" (105). This visual reference has had quite a life in criticism of Branagh's film, noted by such critics as James Loehlin, who uses it to support a similar claim about Branagh's flamboyance: "It's an audacious, even outrageous image, and it's impossible to tell whether Branagh intends it as ironic or not—he seems to dare the audience to take it seriously" (*Henry V* 134). Pursell suggests that the inclusion of this moment serves multiple purposes within the film. He argues first that the Vader allusion is emblematic of the film's "contemporary, popular visual literacy" (269), allowing the popular audience to use the metanarrative function of genre to understand the ambiguities the character is meant to represent: "A literary critic might argue that he is as yet a blank, a cipher in the great account, a mysterious and unknown force waiting to fill out into a king or a human being, or both. Someone who's been to the movies [. . .] will take one look and see Darth Vader" (269).

A pun combining the King's nickname with the persistent dirt that comprises much of the film's mise-en-scène—Dirty Harry—provides the initial link to Clint Eastwood films mentioned by several critics. In his article "War is Mud," Hedrick examines Branagh's film in the context of its generic forebears—at points war and gangster films, but primarily the films of Eastwood. Hedrick argues that Branagh's portrayal of the king in this film harks back to his performance at the RSC, where "the king became a distinctly Eastwood variant—a loner who is holy and just [. . .] but at the same time capable of ruthless enormity" (50). Hedrick also finds in the film an undercurrent of the glorification of "vigilantism," which he also links to the "Clint Eastwood mystique" (56; 49). Other allusions he points to, in the Eastwood vein, are the portrayal of Agincourt as a "western brawl" (51), and the concluding negotiation scene with the French, which plays out, he asserts, with "a stock Western attitude towards politicians and all Easterners, buckaroos among the slick" (53). The effect of all these intertextual references to Eastwood, Hedrick asserts, is to make the film seem "an importation of the American mud of *Dirty Harry* into the British text and film" (54).

The most fascinating critical linkage between Branagh's king and Hollywood hero vehicles, however, is provided by Curtis Breight in his article "Branagh and the Prince." Breight sees the film as a token instance

of a popular type of US-produced revenge film, asserting that *Henry V* shares with such films a wholehearted militarization:

> Branagh's film speaks to contemporary culture precisely because it follows a crude "Ramboesque" line of development, almost as though all the *Rambo* films were collapsed into *Henry V*: Johnny Rambo human and vulnerable, then insulted and attacked, hence violent; Rambo on the offensive against all odds; Rambo betrayed by his own side; Rambo killing huge numbers of Russians and Vietnamese, with the help of sickly POWs, and sustaining few casualties. The only element missing is Rambo (successfully) in love. (108)

Breight's central assertion is that the film appeals to a particularly right-wing ideology characteristic of the late 1980s and influenced by Reaganite and Thatcherite politics. His overall article attempts to serve as antidote to another critical stance towards the film, exemplified, in his opinion, by Donaldson and characterized by "leftist critique and liberal pacifism" (95); that is, the oft-repeated argument that Branagh's film accords with the contemporary zeitgeist in presenting a damning vision of the experience and outcome of warfare. Breight dismisses this assertion—that the film is basically "anti-war"—as facile, and instead details the myriad ways in which he reads conservative politics beneath the film's veneer. It is this ideological conservatism that leads Breight to link the film's narrative line to that of the Rambo films (*Rambo 3* was, like *Henry V*, also released in 1989), as, he asserts, they share a common link in their portrayals of combat and heroism. Breight's "Rambo" allusion is a powerful one, however, and useful to this discussion not for the conservative ideologies purportedly shared by the two films, but rather because Breight convincingly links *Henry V* to a generically coded film practice.

I also find the comparison instructive in that Breight connects Branagh's film not merely to a film practice that is generically coded (ie, the "action" film, or the Vietnam War film, or whichever category might comfortably seat the Rambo series), but more particularly to a film practice that is *serialized* (as is, in some senses, the character of Henry V, through the several Shakespearean plays that feature the character). In serials, audience interest in and alignment with the hero figure is so strong that the basic narrative line can withstand many iterations. Like the "Rambo" figure, many of the hero-figures that critics link to Henry— Vader, the Lone Ranger, Batman, as well as the character types played across many films by Eastwood and John Wayne—tend to be figures from serial-style franchises. And further, these are all dark-hero figures, characters and personas that eschew any unambiguous identification with

the hero-protagonist. In effect, these comparisons link the figure of the King not merely to the action cinema, but to the dark-hero figure, and to a specific variant of the dark-hero figure that seems to engender strong audience identification.

In the same way that criticism links Branagh's king to other action-hero protagonists, criticism of the film also abounds with the identification of intertextual references that seem to presage Branagh's story and style choices in *Henry V*. For instance, many critics note that Branagh's treatment of the Agincourt sequence, as well as his general visual treatment of the Falstaff figure, is inspired by Orson Welles's 1965 Shakespearean masterpiece, *Chimes at Midnight* (Griffin, Willson, Cartmell, Donaldson and Manheim all make this connection). Critics also frequently note the ways in which, consciously or unconsciously, Branagh's visual style seems to derive from a competitive evocation of Olivier's film. Manheim discusses the visual style of Branagh's film in the context of its intertextual influences:

> Using shots suggested by the Battle of Shrewsbury sequences in Welles's *Chimes at Midnight*, supplemented by American Vietnam war films of the 1970s and '80s—and one might also throw in the battle imagery of Jane Howell's excellent *Henry VI* series in the [BBC] Time Life Shakespeare series—Branagh turns all Olivier's primary colors and prettified sun-filled settings into dirty earthen colors and grimy-rainy settings, the glorious cloth and armor of Olivier's warriors into tattered rags and "rotten" armor. ("Battle Imagery" 132)

Here, Manheim notes the most commonly identified of the film's allusions to specific films, as well as more obscure ones. Among other, less-frequent comparisons that emerge in the criticism are Hedrick's assertion that Branagh's "Non Nobis" sequence (labeled for the chorale passage that accompanies the expansive tracking shot at the end of the battle at Agincourt) derives in part from "the corrosive cynicism of a fellow-Briton's Vietnam war movie, Stanley Kubrick's *Full Metal Jacket* (1987), whose conclusion portrays the trudging GIs, having just completed an atrocity, singing the Mickey Mouse Club hymn" (64). And Michael Friedman links the film, albeit retrospectively, to the sci-fi hit *Independence Day* (1996), asserting that the later film "represents an American revision of the myth of David inflected through an appropriation of Shakespeare's *Henry V*" and the two film versions of it (141). In discussing the intertextual borrowings of Branagh's *Henry V*, however, critics tend most often to link Branagh's film not to specific filmic predecessors, but rather *to other film genres*.

For instance, Hedrick links *Henry V* to the gangster/Mafia genre, as well as the film noir. Tatspaugh and Willson both point to the treatment of the Chorus figure as a device that links the film to a documentary tradition, as both critics compare him to a "TV news correspondent at the front" (Willson 29). Pursell asserts that the relationship between Henry and Fluellen, particularly after the battle, employs tropes that derive from the buddy movie (273). Michael Hattaway even notices some connections between the Non Nobis sequence and Nazi propaganda films of the World War II era: "At [a] conference in Sofia, a clip of this sequence was shown: it immediately reminded delegates from both 'Eastern' and 'Western' Europe of the fascist movies of their youth with its swooning melody accompanying a heroic leader who was glamorized by artful camera work" ("Shakespeare's Histories" 364). The most frequent generic connections, however, are made to war films: sometimes films of WWI, but most often to films about the Vietnam War.

While the observation is often made that the "mood" and "tone" of the film seem to be informed by a post-Vietnam, post-Falklands malaise and cynicism about war (see critics Friedman, Holderness, Kael, Kroll, Loehlin, Pursell, and Shaw)—and this attitude is most frequently the source of the assertion that *Henry V* is an anti-war film—such assertions are generally less productive than those that acknowledge that the film's true influences are other films about war. For instance, Marsland notes that the film incorporates a "First World War paradigm," employing such devices as "a close-up of an old map showing familiar place-names like Dieppe and the Somme, a decidedly trench-like setting for the "four captains" scene at Harfleur, and a long segment featuring soldiers trudging through rain and mud" (16).[6] Marsland also notices that Branagh's film uses a device characteristic of that era's film narratives by confining its depth of information to the "point-of-view of ordinary soldiers" (11). In his article "Playing the Game," Pursell makes similar observations, claiming that ultimately, "[p]resenting any event as the Great War is to construct it as negative and futile" (274). Branagh acknowledges that this evocation was deliberately placed, particularly in the Harfleur sequences; as he states after screening the rushes for the scene, "As I had hoped the whole sequence at times resembled other kinds of conflict, most notably the First World War and its trenches" (*Beginning* 229).

The most useful discussions of the treatment of war in Branagh's film assert that *Henry V* draws its primary inspiration not from twentieth

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[6] Branagh resurrects the map device in *Love's Labour's Lost*.

century wars themselves, but rather from the image of war as filtered
through the media. Two major critics, Fitter and Hedrick, analyze
Branagh's *Henry V* in the context of the contemporary war film. Both
critics proceed from Branagh's own assertions that he intended to
"deglamorize" the spectacle of war, counter to the pageantry that Olivier
presents in his 1944 version, and that he sought to capture the ambiguity in
the figure of the king. I have cited earlier Branagh's statements that he
suspected a post-war version of the play would be a "profoundly different
experience"; he claims that he wanted to "reveal as much of [war's]
devastation as possible [. . .]. There would be no question as to the
statement this movie was making about war" (*Beginning* 236). Ironically,
there has been much question about what *Henry V* says about war; both
Fitter and Hedrick seek to discover whether Branagh's film truly lives up
to the filmmaker's intentions. Central to each critic's argument is the
depiction of Agincourt. Here, the critics link the battle scenes to Vietnam
War films, which, as they argue, seem to posit a revisionist critique, but
instead "present a simultaneous fascination and contempt for war"
(Cartmell, "Flashback" 77). This stance, argue Fitter and Hedrick, is
ultimately not clearly anti-war.

    Fitter's lively and instructive (albeit less-than-complimentary) article
on the film, "Mekong Agincourt," posits that there are in fact two
"Branagh versions" of *Henry V*—the 1984 RSC production as well as the
1989 film—and that these productions are polar opposites. Fitter
strenuously denounces what he sees as the more bland ideological position
of the Branagh film: "Branagh, I suggest, like some literary Oliver North,
has deliberately shredded vital documentation, provided by the text and
the RSC production, and his hero therefore emerges as a familiar figure:
the handsome military hero and godly patriot at the heart of an
establishment coverup" (260). Fitter takes direct aim at proponents of the
now-familiar position that Branagh's version restores the moral and
political ambiguity of the source text, a position that Fitter denounces as
"unsupportable" (259). Ultimately, he asserts, what Branagh's film reflects
is the moral equivocation of the contemporary war film, which typically
makes the ambiguous political point that "war is hell, but it heroizes"
(270). Fitter analyzes Branagh's film, and its generic references, within the
context of the morally ambiguous war film:

> [*Henry V*] assimilates itself at many points to the mainstream lineage of
> Vietnam movies. The rendering of Branagh's Agincourt owes much, for
> example, to Kubrick's *Full Metal Jacket*: the slow-motion silence as
> trainee marines stagger, topple and founder on through heavy rain together