

‘England is you!’ –
Comparing the Production of English Identity
in *Henry V* (1989) and *The King* (2019)

Judit Baranyai

Henry V as a play is concerned with the question of national identity. This, according to Baldo, is more reflective of Shakespearean England than the historical England of Henry V, because it was in Shakespeare’s time when the concept of a nation, similar to our terms, emerged (Baldo 133). Movie adaptations of the play necessarily have to deal with the question of identity, as Salomon points out, ‘[...] patriotism and the nation, a universe that, as we have seen, seems to be demanded by the play itself and its production history and by the special historical context in which the film was released’ (Salomon 68). Although Salomon is talking about the 1989 adaptation of *Henry V*, the fact that it is the play itself that focuses on national identity makes Salomon’s observation relevant to a newer adaptation, *The King*. Examining the question of national identity by comparing Branagh’s *Henry V* with the 2019 movie *The King*, in this paper I shall argue that English identity in *Henry V* (1989) is anchored in memory, while in *The King* (2019), it is produced by the present experience of the battle. The broader question of national identity is outside the scope of this paper, my focus will be on the production of this identity. I will present my arguments by comparing the two speeches King Henry V gave in the two movies. The speeches are different, but both speeches aim to inspire the English soldiers to fight by emphasizing the importance of unity, which can be achieved by finding a common English identity. For this reason, comparing the two scenes shows how the two adaptations of the same play deal with the question of the production of English identity.

The main difference between the two adaptations is that while in *Henry V*, some elements remind the viewer that the source is a play, *The King* poses itself as a historical movie. *The King* is a 2019 adaptation focusing on the character Henry V, not just as he appears in the play titled after him, but also as he appears in the rest of the *Henriad*. The 1989 movie, *Henry V*, is a more direct adaptation of Shakespeare’s *Henry V* than *The King*, both the narrative and the dialogue being closer to Shakespeare’s play. The Chorus, which Branagh also kept, serves as a further reminder that *Henry V*, the movie, is an adaptation of *Henry V*, the play. On the other hand, *The King* as an adaptation aims at the kind of realism 21st century audiences might perceive as authentic: all characters are dirty, there is plenty of blood spilled, the lighting is

natural, and most costumes draw from the dull brown-black colour palette associated with medieval times. While Branagh's adaptation does not shy away from showing the battle of Agincourt as a violent affair either, this movie's battle is still far away from the muddy and bloody mess of the battle in *The King*.

The character of Henry is different in the two movies as well. Branagh's Henry is a charismatic, confident leader. He is tall, he often smiles and jokes with his soldiers. The Henry Timothée Chalamet portrays in *The King*, however, seems younger than Branagh's. This Henry is not very tall, he is thin and appears more anxious rather than confident. In this movie, the question whether he can inspire and entire army to fight for him is more prevalent than in *Henry V*. The burden of being king is heavier on his shoulders as well. In this adaptation, including other parts of the *Henriad* makes Henry appear as an incompetent child at the beginning, who never wanted the crown for himself. After his brother and father die, he must become king, even though most of the people at court know him as a drunken and irresponsible boy. The insult of the French king gifting Henry tennis balls plays out differently in the two movies as well. In *Henry V*, the balls are part of a baseless insult. Henry matches the insult with a threat that seems serious – he appears to be capable of taking the army to France and winning the French crown for himself. However, in *The King*, the balls further undermine Henry's already unstable position at court. The balls in this adaptation were not gifted by the French king, but by William, one of Henry's advisors, who manipulates Henry to go to France and take the crown. Although the war against the French turns out to be unjustified, which angers Henry, this war is the reason for the stabilization of his position as king. Winning the war makes a king out of the boy. This version of *Henry V* gives a different dimension to Henry than Branagh's. Branagh's Henry is a charismatic leader who always knows what to say to people to make them loyal to him. Chalamet's Henry is a deeply conflicted man, one who is not naturally charismatic, and has to find other ways to establish himself as a leader of a nation. This difference in character is one of the reasons why they both take different approaches when it comes to the speech before the battle.

In both movies, Henry wants to win the battle, but they differ in how they want to achieve this victory. In *Henry V*, this triumph is only achievable when the king and the men present as a unified army. In *The King*, Henry initially hopes to defeat the French alone, appropriating English identity. The speech scene in *The King* starts with King Henry riding back towards his army after trying to convince the Dauphin to decide the outcome of the battle in a duel, where they fight instead of their armies. In this scene, Henry identifies himself as the whole of England, assuming responsibility for all the men in his army. Riding back to his men

and telling them they are England is only the second, worse option in Henry's eyes. In *Henry V*, the king spends the night before the battle talking to his soldiers in disguise, discovering they are afraid of the coming battle. They are not united as an army, and this discord jeopardizes their chances of winning the battle. Trying to avoid defeat, Henry gives his speech to inspire his soldiers to unite against the French. He does not try to spare his men as Henry does in *The King*, but he knows that the key to winning the battle is an army unified, which can be achieved by giving his soldiers a common identity.

In *The King*, identity is given by the king, while in *Henry V*, identity is discovered with the help of the king. In *The King*, having been refused by the Dauphin, Henry has to tell his men that they must fight. Now he has to justify bringing his soldiers to a foreign land, coming to terms with the fact that some of them will never go home. Identifying himself as England in the previous scene, he now tells his men: 'England is you!' (*The King*). He is symbolically giving away this identity to his soldiers. In contrast to this, in *Henry V*, Henry is already among his soldiers when the scene begins. The soldiers must discover that Henry was one of them all along. All Henry does in this speech is remind them of this fact; the soldiers were English before, but they did not know it yet.

The differing functions of identity in the two movies is further emphasized by the movement of the camera. In *The King*, the camera follows Henry riding back. The camera moves between the concerned faces of the soldiers and Henry himself. Henry arrives in front of them, his mouth moving, as if he was searching for the right words. Then, after starting his speech, he jumps off his horse, walking to the soldiers. We see the king from behind the army, from below eye-level, showing Henry among the soldiers. Our view of Henry is obstructed by the forest of spears. At first as he is riding, he is easily distinguishable from his soldiers, but when he dismounts his horse, it is increasingly harder to tell him apart from the rest of the men. The only one moving in this scene is the king, his soldiers remain standing. In *Henry V*, Henry is standing among his soldiers, but the camera shows him from below, giving the impression that even though they stand at equal height, Henry is still above his soldiers. When Henry moves, his soldiers follow him. In both movies, Henry wants to show his men that he is in some way, one of them, not just their king. While in *Henry V* the king comes from among the men to lead them, in *The King*, Henry descends to the level of his soldiers. In *The King*, when the Dauphin refuses Henry, the situation changes, requiring a re-examination of Englishness. English identity is dictated by the present situation: the movie shows Henry as an individual first, but as the need arises for the army to unify and fight, Henry gives this identity to the soldiers. The camera moves to show this progression of how Henry is at first the sole holder of

English identity, but as he rides back and walks between his soldiers, the camera gets behind his men, showing him as one of them.

In *Henry V*, Henry has to convince the soldiers of his competence as their military leader, while in *The King*, Henry wants to make his soldiers believe triumph is dependent on them, not their leader. Henry's delivery of the speech in *Henry V* is confident and almost cheerful, as if he was trying to convince his soldiers that the coming battle will be a glorious adventure. In *The King*, Henry's delivery is much more solemn. As the scene is set on a field, – unlike the relatively enclosed part of the forest in *Henry V* – the king has to raise his voice so that the sound can travel to the soldiers at the back. Here, the soldiers seem afraid, in contrast to their counterparts in *Henry V*, where the dominating emotion is uncertainty, not just fear of the coming battle. In *The King* the soldiers followed a newly crowned king to a foreign country, to possibly die for him, even though most of them know him still as the drunken boy.

National identity is formed differently in the two movies: in *Henry V*, focus is on common memory, while in *The King*, focus is on the immediate experience of the army. In *Henry V*, Henry mentions some of his soldiers by name, focusing on the individuals in the context of group identity: 'Familiar in his mouth as household words; Harry the king, Bedford and Exeter; Warwick and Talbot, Salisbury and Gloucester [...]' (Henry V). Henry names his soldiers, showing them that on the one hand, he knows them personally, and on the other, that even in unity, there is room for individuality. The camera cuts to the smiling faces of the soldiers Henry named. Even the soldiers who were not named can draw strength from the prospect of them having a common memory with their king. Dowd writes: 'In response to anxiety about defeat and death, he substitutes a fear of being left out of the fellowship. The implication is clear: if you are afraid of dying, go home, but you will no longer be a part of the group.' (Dowd 343). Being forgotten is worse than death, Henry implies. Dying or suffering from injuries is the favourable fate over the shame of having to go home in one piece, but entirely forgotten. In contrast to this, Henry in *The King* does not name people. He, too, implies that being a soldier in this battle brings a soldier closer to his king: 'It is the same [speech] I'd give were we to meet on the street by chance' (The King). Henry suggests that even though he is a king, he walks the same streets as his soldiers, that he is a man just like the rest of them, although he does not offer the same type of brotherhood Henry does in *Henry V*. Henry's implication in *Henry V* is that his soldiers might become famous along with their king, and by participating in the battle, they will become more like Henry, the king, and less like the people who stayed home.

In *The King*, Henry focuses only on the present, while Henry's speech in *Henry V* focuses on the prospect of a common memory: 'And Crispin, Crispian shall ne'er go by, from

this day to the ending of the world, but we in it shall be remember'd; we few, we happy few, we band of brothers [...]’ (Henry V). This battle is not only important in the context of the present, but also because of what it might mean after they go home. According to Donaldson, this movie’s focus is the brotherhood between the soldiers and the king, in addition to their identity as English (Donaldson 66). This brotherhood is forged in the battle of Agincourt, and it is preserved after it by memory. Being one with the army, being English is on the condition that every one of them remembers this day. Running away as a coward or dying will prevent a soldier from that, so taking part in the battle and surviving it are equally important. English identity is under formation in this battle, and after it, the people participating will have the power to determine what it means to be English by telling their sons and grandsons about this day. Henry has another goal with equating memory with national identity: ‘Control over how a nation remembers a momentous event like a war is almost as significant as the outcome of the war itself, given how crucial memory is for the legitimation and exercise of power’ (Baldo 133). Henry, the new king of England, solidifies his power with the help of memory. In *The King*, Henry is only concerned by the current situation. He does not mention memory, he uses the present tense: ‘[T]oday, you are that kingdom united’ (The King). In this movie, English identity is already formed, the soldiers only need a reminder: ‘England is you. And it is the space between you. Fight not for yourselves, fight for that space!’ (The King). The scene ends with an abrupt cut to the soldiers standing in line, wearing helmets that hide their whole faces. They disappear into the army, their individuality gone. What remains is a steady line of a unified army. These soldiers, instead of the ones in *Henry V*, fight for each other in the present, not for the sake of having a piece of the collective memory or control over the question of identity. They have to fight not to become English, they fight because they are already English.

There is a question about the future of the two imaginary Englands. The England in *Henry V* is united, and the soldiers and the king have the memory to keep it united even after the battle. Henry won the battle, and thus won the control over the nation’s memory and identity. He will be known as the leader who defeated the French. His union with Katherine, the French princess offers a chance of reconciliation to the two countries. The reveal of William’s plot at the end of *The King* renders Henry’s battle for France an unnecessary venture that cost the lives of many of his soldiers, including his friend’s, Falstaff’s. He united England, but this union is fragile, based on a plot to convince him to go to France. Henry’s marriage to Katherine will not be as happy as Baranagh’s Henry’s. The Katherine in *The King* blames Henry for waging an unnecessary war against the French, and she is the one who reveals to him that there was no French plot to assassinate him. Henry’s momentary triumph is crushed as he discovers

William's treachery. As he based the unity of his soldiers on the experience of the battle, now that it is over, the unity is fragile. He made it clear that being English is to fight. This raises the question as to what the basis for identity will be in the future. This shift from a relatively straightforward story about triumph in *Henry V* to the uncertainty about the future in *The King* might represent a shifting attitude towards the kind of national identity the play *Henry V* represents. In the 2019 adaptation, the unity of the English nation is based on a plot for financial gain. Henry V, maybe a little bit anachronistically, clearly regrets his decision to fight a battle which cost so many lives, even if this battle is what strengthens him as king.

In conclusion, the two movies handle English identity differently. In Kenneth Branagh's *Henry V*, English unity is forged through common memory. Henry as a king is a competent leader who inspires unity by his presence. Henry offers his soldiers a piece of history and brotherhood, focusing not just on the present battle, but also on the future of the nation. Henry draws strength for his soldiers from the possibility of a unified England. In *The King*, however, this unity was already present at the start of the battle, Henry only reminds his soldiers that they are one army. He has no chance to base loyalty solely on his presence, as the memory of the drunken boy is still strong among his soldiers. He offers instead the shared experience of the battle as a unifying force. Individuality is subordinated to the common cause, which is shown by Henry walking among his soldiers as one of them, and also by the soldiers' faces disappearing in the helmets at the end of the scene.

Works Cited

Baldo, Jonathan. "Wars of Memory in Henry V." *Shakespeare Quarterly*, vol. 47, no. 2, 1996, pp. 132–59.

Donaldson, Peter S. "Taking on Shakespeare: Kenneth Branagh's 'Henry V.'" *Shakespeare Quarterly*, vol. 42, no. 1, 1991, pp. 60–71.

Dowd, Christopher. "Polysemic Brotherhoods in Henry V." *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900*, vol. 50, no. 2, 2010, pp. 337–53.

Henry V. dir. Kenneth Branagh, 1989.

Salomon, Brownell. "Thematic Contraries and the Dramaturgy of *Henry V*." *Shakespeare Quarterly*, vol. 31, no. 3, 1980, pp. 343–56.

The King. dir. David Michôd, 2019.