Historical Authenticity Of Henry V In His Portrayal By Shakespeare

Shakespeare's "The Life of King Henry the Fifth"1, first performed in 1599, documents the life of the real life English king, mainly focusing on his pursuits in France. As part of Shakespeare's tertalogy of English history plays, deeply popular, (bit of context and other bits) Shakespeare's work in his historic tetralogy balances authenticity with artistic licence. His primary source for his second quartet of English history plays was the 'Chronicles of England, Scotland and Ireland (1577)'1by Raphael Holinshed. Another examined source was Edward Hall's 'The Union of the Two Noble and Illustre Families of Lancaster and York (1550)'2. In terms of differing accounts of history, 'Holinshed condenses what Hall amplifies'3although having been written after Hall's work, Holinshed's narration closely followed that of Hall. In terms of areas in which the narration of each work differs, Shakespeare's account is closer to that of Holinshed as opposed to Hall, choosing the more objective history as opposed to Hall's lively narrative, shown through his dramatic chapter headings such as 'The Victorious Acts of King Henry the Fifth'. Despite the historical action of Henry V coming mainly from Holinshed, much of Holinshed's chronicles are reshaped and manipulated for dramatic appeal. Shakespeare adhered to historical accuracy to an extent, however his plays were primarily motivated to entertain and provoke reflection on ideas rather than facts, further they had to be written with thought to their form in terms of staging. It is for this reason that Shakespeare compresses the time frame of the Siege of Harfleur as well as its proximity to the Battle of Agincourt. While Shakespeare gives only two scenes to the Siege of Harfleur before its surrender to the English and a further eight between the capture of Harfleur and the Battle of Agincourt, whereas the siege actually lasted for several months and the Battle of Agincourt began a month after the siege. Furthermore, the English victory at Agincourt and Henry's marriage to Catherine are conflated, as the battle happened in 1415, while the treaty and marriage occurred in1420, despite the two events occurring close together in the Shakespeare's portrayal. This is likely to have been a consciously editorial decision, Shakespeare's conflation and compression history is used for dramatic effect, so as not to bore the audience. Furthermore, Shakespeare was unable to recreate battle scenes onstage due to limitations in terms of staging, thus the chorus instead calls to the audience to let their 'imaginary forces work'4as the 'wooden O'5is unable to provide a staged interpretation of battle. Andrew Gurr explains that 'what Shakespeare sold his company in 1599 was . . . incapable of being fully realised on stage'2.

He compresses time (Hal & Hotspur's ages in Henry IV part 1), sanitizes details (the sanity of Charles VI in Henry V), fabricates events (the Dauphin's tennis balls in Henry V),

A key issue with regard to historical accuracy is the Dauphin's mocking gift of tennis balls to Henry. Tennis balls – anecdotal and did not happen, instead for economic reasons not honour, but instead serves as a benchmark from Henry to invade, his claims: salic laws

Since the time of Charlemagne, those who conquered an area of Germany called Meissen, found between the Saale and Elbe rivers, their became much distrust among the French for a king who claimed the throne through the female line. Thus, came the Salic law, which prohibited succession through the female line, 'Salic' coming from the River Saale. Henry's claim was through his great-great grandmother, Isabella, the daughter of Philip IV, the king of France, and

wife of King Edward I of England.

Furthermore, Shakespeare's manipulation of historical fact can, to some extent, be deemed as politically motivated. Playhouses in the Elizabethan era were treated with suspicion by the authorities , Erin M. McLaughlin explains that in '1580 there were requests to city magistrates for the expulsion of actors and the destruction of playhouses, posing the argument that theatre was sacrilegious'3, highlighting that playhouses in the Elizabethan era were treated with suspicion by the authorities.The character of Henry V is complicated by the fact that he was the son of a usurper, who had committed regicide to gain power. In reshaping certain aspects of history, Shakespeare was likely being pragmatic in his attempt to distance Henry V from the act of usurpation, as Shakespeare wanted to glorify him which would be difficult if tainting him with the ignoble act of having being part of a legacy that seized the throne, rather than acceding to it legally. Furthermore, Elizabeth I, ruler at the time of the play's conception, was a distant relative of Henry V, thus indicating her reign as illegitimate in any way could be deemed an act of treason.

In Act I Scene II, Henry describes himself as 'no tyrant but a Christian King'4, however, there is a fundamental blindness in his words that the two are not mutually exclusive, as we see that he embodies both. As shown by Shakespeare, being a Christian king is to be a tyrant due to the imposition of religion through claiming the divine right of kings. Therein lies the ethical concerns of Shakespeare within the context of his vision of kingship. In seeking guidance from the Archbishop of Canterbury into the matter of a French invasion, Henry inquires whether he has the 'right and conscience [to] make this claim'5 to the French throne. With his claim confirmed by the Archbishop, Henry's invasion of France no longer becomes a matter of gaining territory, but a Christian crusade, highlighting the depth of Henry's belief in the divine right of King's. This belief in his Christian crusade is further strengthened by his threats of terror including the impaling of infants, rape of virgins and razing of cities against the French; these threats taken from the Biblical old testament. Anita Pacheo posits that 'the chivalric ideal is put under pressure by dramatic impulses which call attention to the irreducible complexity of historical process and the problematic nature of kingship'6. Through his biblical crusade, Henry avoids an ethical conscience by crediting his crimes to God. One view is that Shakespeare has a 'fundamentally tragic view of kingship', reinforced by his nuanced portrayals of English Kings in both Henry V and in his previous English history plays. Richard II is presented as an appalling king, being both mendacious and vain coupled with timid, cowardly and indecisive. Richard realises his ways himself as he questions 'I had forgot myself; am I not king? Awake, thou coward majesty! thou sleepest.'7. Referring to himself as a 'coward'8, Richard's unsuitability for kingship is revealed further, as he does not live up to the idealised monarchical figure that Shakespeare creates, whose reign is one of stability and prosperity. This idea is strengthened by Richard's despair that 'so sighs and tears and groans show minutes, times, and hours'9. As Bollingbrooke previously states that Richard *could pass four years fast* previously in the play, Richard now measures time in units of distress, indicative his loss of hope. Richard then succeeeds...

The traitor scene once again brig up the question of succession rights, as the Earl of Cambridge had a legitimate claim to the throne of England, unlike the usurpation through which Henry V became King.

Through Shakespeare's vision of kingship, Henry V follows 'the mirror of all Christian kings'10. Henry is presented as an ambivalent figure.

Machiavelli: literary: Henry’s ruthlessness in the play harks to Niccolò Machiavelli’s philosophy on princes and kingship in ‘The Prince’11. Henry’s brutal murder of the French prisoners, dismissal of Falstaff and speech before Harfleur are all reminiscent of Machiavellian politics, being that ’it is far better to be feared than loved’12 In receiving the support of the Archbishop, Henry resolves to attack France, affirming the Machiavellian thought that ‘a prince must not worry if he incurs reproach for his cruelty as long as he keeps his subjects united and loyal’. During Henry’s speech pre-Harfleur, he asks his soldiers to ’imitate the action of a tiger’13, a tiger being a creature proverbial for brutality as well as describing the siege as ‘a game14’, rather than a bloodthirsty, barbaric attack. This ruthless yet rousing speech aligns Henry with Machiavelli’s ideal that a ruler ’finds it impossible to avoid a reputation for cruelty, because of the abundant dangers inherent in a newly won state’15. In the case of Shakespeare’s Henry V, these ’dangers’ are the constant taunts of France, which first appear in the form of tennis balls, sent from the Dauphin as a mocking gift, emblematic of Henry’s idle, debauched past. Henry confirms this past as he admits to giving himself 'to barbarous licence'16 yet distances himself from his past self through pontificating that he will ’rise there with so full a glory, that [he] will dazzle all the eyes of France’17. Shakespeare’s use of ’rise’18 and ’dazzle’19 create light imagery to convey re-birth and hope, with ’dazzle’ carrying a double meaning, of both blinding temporarily or impressing. In this case, it is likely that Henry refers to ’dazzle’20 as impressing France, through his rise from his past of immoral self-indulgence to heroic victor. However, despite Henry’s admittance of his past, the Dauphin’s mockery of it incites an aggression in Henry, through which he blames the Dauphin for trying to impinge on his pride, and declares that the tennis balls will be ’gun-stones’21 with which Henry will create widows and burn castles down all due to the ’Dauphin’s scorn’22. This threatening reaction paints Shakespeare’s Henry as somewhat of a war villain, instigating war to satisfy his pride rather than enacted for the interests of his own people.

Further, modern historians question whether Henry V can indeed be deemed a war criminal. The brutal murder of the French prisoners is at the heart of this argument, as Henry orders that for the English to ‘cut the throats of those we have, and not a man of them shall we take shall taste our mercy’. While Henry’s choice is cruel and merciless, it was not uncommon of the period and according to the chronicles from which Shakespeare consulted, a self-saving reason was provided for the killings: that Henry feared that a new French attack was imminent, unfeasible for Henry as his army was no longer in battle assemblage. Dan Spencer argues that ’The killing of prisoners is not unique to Agincourt. It is notable that no contemporary commentators criticised Henry for his action at Agincourt’23 and that ’it was seen at the time as an action generated by military necessity’24. Spencer’s argument highlights the contemporary normalcy of Henry’s actions, thus assigning Henry V the label of war criminal is seemingly anachronistic. However, Christopher N. Warren refutes the anachronism, through reference to ’De armis Romanis’ by Alberico Gentili, by displaying the philosophies of the early modern period which engaged with the past using law, such as Shakespeare. Therefore, through the usage of law by Shakespeare within his history plays, Henry V may be deemed a war criminal as he ignores the civilised rules of conflict.

In addition, there is the argument that for leaders to engage in war and violent practices are signs of powerlessness rather than power, as Hannah Arendt states that violence is the opposite of power, as violence is not part of the ‘essence of politics’. Arendt instead views violence as instrumental for political governments to resort to violence, working outside of their political frameworks, showing them to have insufficient power in the political sphere to achieve their aim, thus showing their regime to be weak and powerless. In the case of Henry V, this

could be a reasoning for why Henry sought war with France, to avoid the governance of his own country: glorifying war... at the cost of/instead of...

The theme of patriotism, in parts extending to jingoism which Shakespeare explores in Henry V has continued to resonate throughout history since its first performance in 1599. This is seen clearly in Laurence Olivier's 1944 film interpretation of the play which turned Shakespeare's history of the Battle of Agincourt into a morale-boosting tribute to soldiers fighting in World War Two. Accordingly, the film was partially funded by government, specifically the Ministry of Information, which was created to coordinate propaganda policy within the arts. The Films division of the Ministry commissioned Olivier's production, through the direct instruction of Winston Churchill, leading to Olivier's original dedication being to the 'Commandos and Airborne Troops of Great Britain, the spirit of whose ancestors it has been humbly attempted to recapture'. Furthermore, the release of the film coincided with the invasion of Normandy, in which the Allies pushed into France, thus mirroring Henry's invasion of France in the play. To portray Henry as a solely heroic, chivalrous leader, Olivier intentionally omitted much of Henry's ruthless actions in his adaptation, including the remorseless killing of French prisoners during Agincourt, the threats of rape and pillaging in Harfleur and the killing of noble traitors. The exclusion of this remorseless behaviour in Olivier's highly stylised adaptation allows Henry to be depicted as an infallible leader, inspiring to a nation at war: Olivier created an idealised play for an idealised figure of history. Furthermore, the chorus's woeful reference to Henry's legacy falling apart upon his death and the succession of his son, Henry VI is left out of Olivier's version, as he 'lost France and made his England bleed'25. Had these omittances not been made, Olivier would have compromised the patriotic ethos of the film. Douglas Brode confirms this, as he comments that Olivier's depiction of Henry 'is what Churchill requested: the fantasy hero figure England needed during its final hour. Olivier had fashioned the right film and Henry for that moment in time'26; the 1944 romanticised presentation of Henry V encouraged absolute loyalty among the mentally war torn. However, Olivier's depiction can also be criticised for promoting and glorifying war and imperialism. Albert Einstein argued against 'Heroism on command, senseless violence, and all the loathsome nonsense that goes by the name of patriotism' 27, and his thoughts were echoed by pacifists worldwide who saw Olivier's adaptation as deeply jingoistic, leading soldiers to supposedly noble pursuits, and almost inevitable death. The argument remains that war may be deplorable, but the death of soldiers is not. Olivier's film, being about the life of a historically revered figure, reinforces this heavy patriotism that death for your country is the most honourable cause, as Shakespeare describes in the St. Crispin's Day speech, with Henry remarking that any soldier who 'sheds his blood with [Henry] today, shall be [Henry's] brother'28. This comment reemphaises the historical belief that no death is greater than for one's country.

Modern revivals of Henry V come not only in the form of adaptations, but also through speech. Colonel Tim Collins's 2003 Iraq war speech, given to the Royal Irish Regiment prior to departing into combat, is widely regarded as one of history's greatest military speeches, reminiscent of Henry's speech prior to the Battle of Agincourt on St. Crispin's day. Collins spoke of how the soldier's 'deeds will follow [them] down through history'29, harking back to Henry describing how 'our names, familiar in his mouth as household words... be in their flowing cups freshly remembered'30, stressing the importance of remembrance post-war. Furthermore, Collins's speech is recorded only by the short-hand notation of a journalist present at the time of its oration, thus no recording exists, as with Shakespeare's play, thus readers of both are able to interpret the speech in whichever manner they choose, through productions of Henry V in terms of Shakespeare, and modern readers of Collins's speech.

Finally, Shakespeare’s words are shown to still have the power to resonate with people over four hundred years later, as the over time the phrase ‘once more unto the breach’31 has entered common parlance. Winston Churchill echoes the phrase in his war memoirs, in which he commented that “Once again Britain must fight for life and honour against all the might and fury of the valiant, disciplined, and ruthless German race. Once again. So be it.”32. This formerly rousing message, meant for the address to a body of soldiers is now used colloquially, said under breath, to motivate and encourage in moments of hesitancy or cowardice. The phrase has pervaded so deeply into modern society that many whom speak it know not its origin, only that it is capable to building morale and strength in one’s time of need. This modern usage differs from Shakespeare’s intended message, being aggressive and motivational, in the context of warfare.