

"a little touch of
harry": intimacy and
"twin-born" kings



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

Though in the beginning of Kenneth Branagh's screen adaptation of Henry V Derek Jacobi implores that we try to "think" when the players speak of Agincourt that we "see" the commotion (Prologue. 27), we soon realize that pretending is not necessary. Surrounded on all sides by sleeping soldiers, a cloaked figure squats near the warmth of a dying fire, as moonbeams illuminate a half-covered yet familiar face in quiet darkness. This figure is Henry V, and this moment in the film most certainly does justice to its written counterpart—we hear the "creeping murmur fill the wide vessel of the universe" (4. 1. 2) through the haunting hum of violins, and feel "the poring dark" (4. 1. 2) envelop us as the fire wanes on the eve of the Battle at Agincourt. Indeed, that which Shakespeare wrote unfolds before us, clearer and more authentic perhaps than the playwright himself could have ever envisioned. The film's magic lies in its ability to make real Shakespeare's words and to fill them with a story of tears, breath, and blood. The film exposes the private secrets of a story that at first blush appears to be what Stephen Greenblatt calls "the celebration of Charismatic leadership and martial heroism" (223). Branagh's picture fascinates by showcasing with ease a power to transcend the obvious, examining delicate, intimate moments with the King and other monarchs, elucidating quiet truths about Henry that may otherwise evade casual readers. There are, for careful readers, powerful moments in the text that illuminate a realm of negative space, revealing a fundamental paradox in Henry's character, and delineating the dichotomy of spirit inherent to kingship. Branagh's interpretation proves its commitment to those moments as it seeks to unmask Henry, to get at his innermost content and the essential landscape of his existence as both man and monarch. In Act IV, Henry mingles with his

<https://assignbuster.com/a-little-touch-of-harry-intimacy-and-twin-born-kings/>

troops on the eve of battle and, in a fiery debate with one soldier in particular, discovers the near absurdity of his role as King of England. In Shakespeare's version, Michael Williams tells him that "if these men do not die well, it will be a black matter for the king that led them to it" (IV. i. 148-150). Henry replies by insisting that a king "is not bound to answer the particular endings of his soldiers" (IV. i. 159-60) with a quickness and resentment that hints at frustration. The film, though, fosters in us an appreciation of the painful anxiety he experiences in taking responsibility for his subject's lives, as well as his sore acceptance of the fact that he is as powerful and influential as a god, yet still only a man. Upon the king! Let us our lives, our souls, our debts, our careful wives, our children, and our sins, lay on the King! We must bear all. O hard condition, Twin-born with greatness, subject to the breath of every fool whose sense no more can feel But his own wringing. What infinite heart's ease Must kings neglect that private men enjoy?...O be sick, great greatness. (IV. i. 238-245) Branagh captures Henry's anxiety brilliantly: tears glisten in his eyes, and we hear the aggravation and unease with which he proclaims, "Every subject's soul is his own" (IV. i. 183). By dressing in disguise, he is at once a king and a commoner, and with subjects sleeping on either side of him, he is both in company, yet alone enough to speak as if no one might hear him. This scene is the first clear articulation of an irony that Shakespeare intended, but that Branagh's film makes real. As Henry searches within himself to reconcile the dual nature of his being, we realize the extent to which the play comments on the disquieting coalescence of mind and matter in human beings in general, and the confrontation between surface and substrata that is intrinsic to kings in particular. Though "in his nakedness he appears but a

<https://assignbuster.com/a-little-touch-of-harry-intimacy-and-twin-born-kings/>

man," (IV. i. 107) the King comes to learn that he is "twin born"; he bears the obligations of a king, yet is "subject to" the same "breath" as those who enjoy his protection. Indeed, what a "hard condition" to be at once royal and mortal. In scene two of Act V, after England has defeated France, the plot very suddenly, if not arbitrarily, reveals that he is in love with Princess Katherine of France. Henry's romantic determinations are an even more articulate example of this paradox. If "witchcraft" dwelled in the kiss of Katherine's lips, then the same can be said of Henry's courting techniques (V. ii. 287), a fact made evident in his declaring "in true English" that he loves her, calling her voice by the name of "music". The tenacity with which he woos her exposes his intention to conquer her just as he did her country. Where in Act IV he struggled to conduct both parts of himself (man and king) harmoniously, in Act V he struggles to detach them, to know the boundaries of his duties as a conqueror and a lover: But in loving me, you should love the friend of France, for I love France so well that I will not part with a village of it. I will have it all mine. And, Kate, when France is mine and I am yours, then yours is France and you are mine. (V. ii. 179-85, emphasis added) The irony is further unearthed when he admits to loving her "cruelly" (V. ii. 211). His use of the word cruel (one that conjures images of indifference, hardness, and lack of compassion), his unsuitably transactional language, and his claim that he loves her "truly-falsely" (V. i. 234) show that he is unable to separate the feelings he has about conquering France from those he has for its princess. Even under circumstances of tender intimacy, Henry wrestles with himself in order to relinquish kingly instincts. Katherine's facial expressions on film show her discontent with Henry's attitude. Her voice is void of the smiles and lightness one might expect after a proposal. Even her

<https://assignbuster.com/a-little-touch-of-harry-intimacy-and-twin-born-kings/>

kiss is that of someone conquered, subordinated. He will "have it all".

Henry's romantic and erotic yearnings are not untouched by the enduring difficulty of belonging to a "twin-born" king. Moreover, when Katherine tells Henry that their marriage "shall please de roi", her father, we begin to appreciate that she too must reckon with conflicting existences. Woman and princess, she too must negotiate a space between personal needs and familial expectation. When at the very end she and Henry raise their hands in celebration of a newly unified nation, we see in her eyes the same deadness and dissatisfaction we saw earlier in the scene; one part of her is far less than thrilled to be marrying the man responsible for the deaths of her countrymen, but her other self knows what she must do. This scene exhibits the tragedy of two figures lost within themselves; Katherine and Henry are of two minds, yet one body. The drama of both Shakespeare's Henry V and Branagh's Henry V lie in their tendency to vacillate. Now plain, now unseen, at once manifest and elusive, they function like sculptures etched in bas relief; carefully carved and three-dimensional descriptions of humanity, Henry V suggests that we look to the shadowy areas, beyond the action depicted on the raised stone, and to the often overlooked, sunken regions, for an authentic human narrative. It is possible that Henry's struggles with duality expose Shakespeare's fascination with the inevitable union of the spectacular and the everyday (a preoccupation that Branagh chose to recognize in his interpretation) in his characters. Many of Shakespeare's plays show the extent to which ordinary and extraordinary inform one another, to which the existence of one gives form and definition to the other. As Stephen Greenblatt suggests in *Will in the World*: Shakespeare's theatre is the equivocal space where conventional

explanations fall away...where the fantastic and the bodily touch...He who had imagined the lives of kings and rebels, Roman emperors and black warriors, he who had fashioned a place for himself in the wild world of the London stage, would embrace ordinariness...fascinated by exotic locations, archaic cultures, and larger-than-life figures...his imagination was closely bound to the familiar and the intimate. (386-388) To borrow from Hamlet, Henry "was a man", and in his play Shakespeare encourages us to "take him for all in all", to know him in ways both public and private. Even Hamlet, veiled by the classic vengeance tale, is the confrontation between human nature itself and certain transcendental facts that shape reality; to Hamlet humanity is a wonder, yet nothing but dust; on the surface even he was a royal prince committed to revenge, yet beneath a lonely philosopher incapable of action. Perhaps Shakespeare's fascination with paradox leads us to an important parallel in our scholarship of his own life: to be sure, a young boy from Stratford with a peculiar gift for making his world around him became a man whose legacy has evolved over the centuries into an institution that maintains unflinching influence. Shakespeare's life was indeed "larger than" most others, but our search for flesh in fable can be satisfied by coming to realize what Greenblatt calls the "nature of his whole magnificent achievement" (388): through close examination of his work, we find a "little touch" of Shakespeare in plays like *Henry V*, and in souls like our Harry's. Works Cited Greenblatt, Stephen. *Will in the World: How Shakespeare Became Shakespeare*. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2004. Shakespeare, William. *Hamlet*. Stephen Orgel ed. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998. Shakespeare, William. Mowat, Barbara A. and

Werstine, Paul eds. Henry V. Washington, D. C.: The Folger Shakespeare Library, 2005.