

ARTICLE

# The Miraculous Victory: War and Ideology in *The Life of Henry The Fifth*

Xu Jingyin \*

Faculty of English Language and Culture, Guangdong University of Foreign Studies Guangzhou, China, 510420

---

ARTICLE INFO

*Article history*

Received: 25 October 2020

Accepted: 7 December 2020

Published: 31 December 2020

---

*Keywords:*

*The Life of Henry The Fifth*

Ideology

The Battle of Agincourt

Speech

---

ABSTRACT

In William Shakespeare's play *The Life of Henry The Fifth*, King Henry V is described as an excellent speaker whose speech becomes the key element of the Britain's miraculous victory in the Battle of Agincourt, and he attributes the victory to God. It is then worth to explore the reasons why Shakespeare highlights the power of the king's speech and why the king hands the victory to God. This essay argues that Shakespeare's emphasis on the power of Henry V's speech in the Battle of Agincourt exaggerates Britain's power and stirs the British's sense of glory, and Henry V's handing over the victory to God makes his colonial war seemingly rationalized, which strengthens the colonial dream and unites the Britons in the age of Elizabeth I.

## 1. Introduction

In the era of Elizabeth I, the concept of "divine right of kings" gradually lost its power, for which in William Shakespeare's play *The Life of Henry The Fifth*, Henry V claims that "the king is but a man" (IV. i. 93). Although the source of his power is unveiled, Henry V is described as a king who is shrouded in mystery and legend. For example, in the play, Henry V leads his soldiers to kill "ten thousand French" (IV. viii. 425) while the death toll in his side is only "five and twenty" (IV. viii. 426), which is possible because of his inspiring speech. In history, however, the miraculous victory, though with more death toll than the number written in the play, results from the tactics, the manning, and the geography advantage of the English side. Comparatively speaking, Henry V is more a successful commander than a great speaker in history. Henry V's speech delivered before the Battle of Agincourt does not exert its impact on all his soldiers. For instance,

the boy in his army does not want to gain the fame from the war but "a pot of ale, and safety" in "an alehouse in London" (III. ii. 62). In this case, it is natural for us to question why in Shakespeare's play Henry V's speech is the key element of the miraculous victory. Furthermore, Henry V attributes the victory to God, as he calls, "O God! Thy arm was here;/And not to us, but to thy arm alone,/Ascribe we all" (IV. viii. 426). This is contradictory with God's advocacy in the New Testament to "love (love) your enemies" (Matthew 5: 43). It is worth to question further why Henry attributes the victory to God and what the audience in the age of Elizabeth I would learn from this. There is ideology behind Shakespeare's writing on the war and Henry V's handing over the victory to God, which is closely related to the politics and the ideology in the time of Elizabeth I. This essay argues that Shakespeare's emphasis on the power of Henry V's speech in the Battle of Agincourt exaggerates Britain's power and stirs the British's sense of glory, and Henry V's

---

\*Corresponding Author:

Xu Jingyin, Faculty of English Language and Culture, Guangdong University of Foreign Studies Guangzhou, China, 510420;  
Email: [jingyinxu@163.com](mailto:jingyinxu@163.com).

handing over the victory to God makes his colonial war seemingly rationalized, which strengthens the colonial dream and unites the British people in the age of Elizabeth I. As Dollimore and Sinfield<sup>[1]</sup> explain, ideology discussed in this essay refers to “those beliefs, practices and institutions which work to legitimate the social order—especially by the process of representing sectional or class interest as universal ones” (210-11).

Previous studies have discussed the ideological dimension of the play to different extent. Stephen Greenblatt,<sup>[2]</sup> in his famous essay “Invisible Bullets: Renaissance Authority and Its Subversion, *Henry IV* and *Henry V*”, analyzes the functions of religious beliefs in colonial activity and the impact of atheism to such activity, and points out that Shakespeare’s Henry plays “confirm the Machiavellian hypothesis of the origin of princely power in force and fraud” (20). But his essay focus on how the religious beliefs function in the colonial experience. John S. Mebane (2007)<sup>[5]</sup> also examines the religion elements and the ideology in *Henry V*, but what he discusses is the ideology of warfare in the play, and he points out the the conquest of France is indeed an event that against both another nation and God, for which he reminds us to question Henry V’s use of religion. But he does not discuss the king in history and in the play and how is Henry V’s use of religion related to the ideology in Shakespeare’s age. Quite differently, Anja Müller-Wood (2012)<sup>[6]</sup> believes that the shift from political level to personal level in the play helps “ground the sphere of ideology in an individual emotional level” (362). This paper will continue to discuss the ideology in the play based on the previous studies. In the following discussion, this paper will first look at the details about Henry V’s speech to the soldier and how Shakespeare’s writing on the miraculous victory of the war expose the ideology. Then this paper will examine the conflict between the issue that Henry V attributes the victory to God and God’s embrace on peace. The last part of the analysis will focus on the relationship between the ideology in the play and the ideology in Shakespeare’s age.

## 2. Henry V’s Speech and The Miraculous Victory in War

In *The Life of Henry the Fifth*, Henry V’s army defeats the French army when the later contains much more soldiers than the former one, and Shakespeare emphasizes the impact of Henry V’s inspiring speech—drives the English soldiers to kill “ten thousand French” (IV. viii. 425) while loses “ five and twenty” soldiers (IV. viii. 426) . Shakespeare’s emphasis on the power of Henry V’s

speech in the Battle of Agincourt exaggerates Britain’s power and stirs the British’s sense of glory. Henry V in the play speaks as a king in the age of Elizabeth I, in which the concept of “divine rights of kings” gradually loses its power, as Henry V confesses, “the king is but a man” (IV. i. 93). Under such cognition, Henry V stirs his soldiers to fight passionately by saying that those who “sheds his blood with me/ Shall be my brother” (IV. iii. 106). However, the power of Henry V’s speech is overestimated if we attribute the miraculous victory to it. After all, his speech does not exert its power to all the soldiers. For example, after hearing the speech of Henry V, the soldiers go for war, during which when Bardolph calls “On, on, on, on, on! to the breach! To the breach” (III. ii. 61), Nym replies “Pay thee, corporal, stay: the knocks are too hot; and for mine own part, I have not a case of lives: the humour of it is too hot, that is the very plain-song of it” (III. ii. 61). Besides, the boy obviously does not care the fame from the war or to be the brother of the king, as he says, “Would I were in an alehouse in London! / I would give all my fame for a pot of ale, and safety” (III. ii. 62).

In history, the miraculous victory of Britain in the war due more to Henry V’s command than to his speech<sup>①</sup>. The tactics, the manning, and the experience of the soldiers in both the British side and the French side are not explained in the play, and the war scenes make up a minuscule part of the play. Though the British army has much less people than the French army, it gains advantage from the smaller-scale but more flexible army. As Jehan de Wavrin who once observed the battle recalls,

Thus they (the French knight) went forward a little, then made a little retreat, but before they could come to close quarters, many of the French were disabled and wounded by the arrows, and when they came quite up to the English, they were, as has been said, so closely pressed one against another that none of them could lift their arms to strike their enemies, except some that were in front. (Scarf 5)<sup>[7]</sup>

Strikingly, though the French side has larger-scale army, the queue is too dense that “none of them could life their arms to strike their enemies, except some that were in front”. Furthermore, the French army is composed of aristocrats to a large extent, and some of them are even inexperienced before they enter the battle, as Henry V calls, “yesterday dubb’d knights” (IV. viii.425). Henry V’s command also plays an essential role in the Battle of Agincourt. Before the battle, he ordered the soldiers to prepare and take stakes with them, which was proved

<sup>①</sup>For more information about Henry V’s army in the Battle of Agincourt, please see Paul Knight and Graham Turner. *Henry V and the Conquest of France 1416-53*. London: Osprey Publishing, 1998.

helpful, as Jehan de Wavrin tells us,

(The French knights) struck in to these English archers, who had their stakes fixed in front of them ... their horses stumbled among the stakes, and they were speedily slain by the archers, which was a great pity. (Scarf 5)<sup>[7]</sup>

In addition, “the French had arranged their battalions between two small thickets one lying close to Agincourt, and the other to Tramecourt” (Scarf 4)<sup>[7]</sup>, which is “very advantageous for the English” (Scarf 4)<sup>[7]</sup> as Jehan de Wavrin records. Therefore, the miraculous victory of Henry V’s army in the Battle of Agincourt does not merely due to Henry V’s powerful speech but results from multiple elements, and Shakespeare writes Henry V in a mysterious way not because Henry V in the play speaks to the audience in his age but because the Britain needs a war myth. Shakespeare’s emphasis on the power of Henry V’s speech in the Battle of Agincourt exaggerates Britain’s power and stirs the British’s sense of glory. The war to conquer France is indeed a colonial war, but in the play, Henry V claims that the army is led by God and the victory belongs to God, which rationalizes the war, but this discourse is questionable.

### **3. Henry V Attributes the Miraculous Victory to God**

When Henry V learns the death in his army contains merely “Edward the Duke of York, the Earl of Suffolk./ Sir Richard Ketly, Davy Gam” , and “None else of name: and of all other men/ But five and twenty” (IV. viii. 426). Henry claims that the victory belongs to God, as he says, “O God! Thy arm was here;/And not to us, but to thy arm alone;/Ascribe we all” (IV. viii. 426). What is more, he orders his soldiers not to “proclaimed through our host/ To boast of this or take the praise from God/Which is his only” (IV. viii. 426). Otherwise, they would be sentenced to death. God in the Matthew, however, advocates love and peace, and to love the neighbour is the duty of the Christians, as we can find in the New Testament, “Thou shalt loue thy neighbour, and hate thine enemy. But I say vnto you, Loue your enemies: blesse them that curse you” (Matthew 5: 43). When Henry V says “We are no tyrant, but a Christian King” (I. ii.29), he obviously knows what being a Christian King means. His worship to God also helps to justify the war, as he calls, “for, God before, / We’ll chide this Dauphin at his father’s door” (I. ii. 32). God leads them to fight, and “Therefore let every man now task his thought,/That this fair action may on foot be brought ” (I. ii. 32). The “fair action” led by God, as Henry V believes, will success. Nevertheless, as Mebane reminds us, “Henry V’s prayer on the eve of the battle

strongly suggests that the king knows that his public justifications for the invasion of France are Machiavellian fraud and that he fears not only that he will lose the battle” (258), Henry V is not sure whether God takes his side and supports his action to conquer France. Spiekerman<sup>[9]</sup> points out that Henry V’s handing over the victory to God makes “the most selfish things seem less selfish” (102), from which we can see the ideology——by attributing the victory to God, Henry V not only tries to rationalize the conquest of war but also inspires his soldier to continue the colonial wars. This is closely related to the colonial dream in the era of Elizabeth I.

### **4. The Play and The Ideology of War in Shakespeare’s Time**

Shakespeare’s writing on Henry V<sup>[8]</sup> and the Battle of Agincourt contains the ideology of war, the beliefs in the English people’s minds to conquer other nations, which not only against other nations, but also against God. In the play, the ideology is enveloped by Henry V’s powerful speech, which makes the conquest of France seemingly reasonable, as Hunt<sup>[4]</sup> states, “Shakespeare unconsciously participated in both crafting and advancing a nationalist imperialism” (134). Guo Fangyun<sup>[3]</sup> further elaborates that the playwright becomes the spokesman for the collective political unconscious in late 16th century England when he uses Fluellen’s metaphors of river and Henry V’s calling for war to insinuate Elizabeth I’s colonial dream (152). The play *The Life of Henry the Fifth* is a tool to stir the British patriotism in both war times and age of peace, as Jonathan Bate writes in the introduction to the play, “Henry the fifth has become synonymous with English patriotism. A dashing young king achieves a stunning military victory against all odds, stirring his men to impossible valour through sheer rhetoric force” (1). Though Britain and France are enemy in the Hundred Years’ War, they did not have sharp conflict during the reign of Elizabeth I. Elizabeth I reigned from 1558 to 1603, and France was mired in the Huguenot War from 1562 to 1594. For Britain, the conflict with Spain was the most intense instead. The memory about the glorious victory in the war and the ideal king in the England history is helpful to shape the English people’s sense of glory and sense of identity. Though the concept of “divine rights of kings” was fading in Shakespeare’s age, and Henry V confesses his commonness in the play, religion and France——the other for the British, still contribute to make his deed mysterious and the British united. Therefore, the play contains the ideology of war, the ideology drives the British to continue colonial activity,

and constantly shapes and reshapes the ideology of the British in both war times and age of peace.

## 5. Conclusion

All of these being said, this paper proves that Shakespeare's emphasis on the power of Henry V's speech in the Battle of Agincourt exaggerates Britain's power and stirs the British's sense of glory, and Henry V's handing over the victory to God makes his colonial war seemingly rationalized, which strengthens the colonial dream and unites the British in the age of Elizabeth I. This paper have analyzed Henry V in the play as well as in history, the contradiction between his handing over the miraculous victory to God and God's embracing on love and peace, and the ideology of colonial war in the age of Elizabeth I, hoping to contribute to the discussion on the war and ideology in William Shakespeare's *The Life of Henry the Fifth*.

## References

- [1] Dollimore, Jonathan and Alan Sinfield. "History and Ideology: The Instance of Henry V". See *Alternative Shakespeares*. Edited by John Drakakis. London and New York: Routledge. 1992. pp. 206-27.
- [2] Greenblatt, Stephen. "Invisible Bullets: Renaissance Authority and Its Subversion, *Henry IV* and *Henry V*". See *Political Shakespeare: Essays in Cultural Materialism*. Manchester University Press. 1985, pp.18-47.
- [3] Guo, Fangyun. "World Map, King Analogy, and the Theory of King's Two Bodies: The Metaphor of Power in *Henry V*". *Foreign Literature Review*, 2016, pp.142-158.
- [4] Hunt, Constance C. T. "The Origins of National Identity in Shakespeare's *Henry V*". *Perspectives on Political Science*, 2007, pp.133-140.
- [5] Mebane, John S. "'Imperious War': Religion and the Ideology of Warfare in *Henry V*". *Studies in Philology*, 2007, pp.250-266.
- [6] Müller-Wood, Anja. "No Ideology Without Psychology: The Emotional Effects of Shakespeare's *Henry V*". *Style*, 2012, pp.355-377.
- [7] Scarf, Wheeler. "The Record of The Famous Battle of Agincourt". Translated by i. Chen Yinan. *English Learning*, 2010, pp.1-5.
- [8] Shakespeare, William. *The Life of Henry the Fifth*. Edited by Jonathan Bate, Eric Rasmussen. Beijing: Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press.2014.
- [9] Spiekerman, Tim. "*Henry V* and the Legitimacy of A Political Regime". Translated by Huang Lanhua. *Cross-cultural Studies*, 2019, pp.79-106.